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# The Theology of Performance and the Vedic Rituals
# Rethinking Theatricality and Performativity as a Discourse

SUMMARY: While the debate on the relationship between ritual and theatre goes back decades, the most recent speculation can be fully understood in the framework of the mutual influences between the social sciences and performance studies. In retrospect, the spreading of structuralism to anthropology, sociology, and history (among other fields) and the absorption of theory-oriented terms in theatre studies' terminology have facilitated a linguistic and conceptual ambiguity (or simply a confusion). Such ambiguity arises especially from the attempt to outline the borders between the religious and the aesthetic. In this paper, I will focus on the crucial role of conventional terms such as 'performance' and 'performative', the increased use of which in different fields has given rise to new dichotomies, such as performativity vs theatricality, self vs role. I will discuss some theoretical issues that allow us to define a ritual text as 'religious' instead of 'theatrical', focusing on the performative effect of recitation, more specifically on the Vedic texts on ritual prescriptions and their aim to display the officiants' skills and authoritativeness.

KEYWORDS: rite, praxis, theatricality, performativity, Vedic recitation.

## Prologue

In 2009, at the beginning of the summer, in the courtyard of the Fondazione Merz in Turin (Italy), the conceptual artist Wolfgang Laib offered an extraordinary exhibition: for the first seven days of June, thirty-three

Brahmans[1]—from the great temples of South India—offered, chanted, and prayed at thirty-three altars for the celebration of the Vedic fire ritual (*mahāyajña*), in order to put "man at the heart of creation as the finest expression of the Creator, at the same time as a simple element of an All into which he must, by listening and respecting diversity, integrate harmoniously" (Laib et al. 2009: 131). Nicknamed "der lachende Brahmane" (Gärtner 2013), Laib has become famous for employing organic materials, such as milk, rice, pollen, beeswax, marble, ashes, wood, and his capacity, by means of powdered materials, to "create a kind of aesthetics of interpenetrable dimension" (Jeffery 2013: 57). However, with the fire ritual exhibition—it has been written—Laib "takes a step towards the redefinition of the position of the work of art within the context of contemporary three-dimensional creation" (Tosatto 2009: 18). The key idea which runs throughout the words of Laib and his admirers is that the boundary between 'art' and 'life', 'sacred' and 'profane' has no grounds if the visitor stops to ask themselves if s/he is witness of "a religious ceremony or an art event" and communes with the environment "by becoming himself pure essence" (*ibid.*). Laib is convinced that the sharp distinction between art and religion is a burden of the European past that must be overcome by challenging the value of the aesthetic experience and the possibility of making it "a veritable existential adventure" (*ibid.*). Such consideration gives rise to two crucial questions. First, reading Laib's interviews one has the impression that many European contemporary artists feel the weight of a secular conception of the artist, that is, the notion of artist as the cumbersome creator of his oeuvre. In Laib's conception of art, there is a clear invitation to not consider the aesthetic

[1] Actually, forty-five Brahmans took part in this exhibition: thirty-three officiants at the fire altars and twelve for the assistance during the ritual. This art event was a continuation of the performance carried out a few months earlier in Tamil Nadu, near Madurai, where nine Brahmans, devoted to the goddess Mīnākṣī, were invited to perform the Vedic fire ritual at five altars.

experience as *merely* aesthetic, rather as an evocation of the 'creation', the 'sustenance', the 'destruction', the 'renewal of the world' in the same manner as other cultures—that "are totally different and see the individual as part of the universe" (Ottmann 2009: 44)—did. Second, in order to guarantee the 'veritable' meaning of this art event, Laib pointed out that he wanted "the pure Vedic ritual as it was done 1000 or 2000 years ago" (Ottmann 2009: 52). To this end, he was careful in 'reducing' and 'avoiding' "the folklore and commotion which tends to result in the normal Indian accumulation of movement" and recreating the sacred space "in accordance with the Vedic rules" (*ibid.*).

Laib's fire ritual exhibition is a notable occasion to theoretically reconsider the border between the fictional standardisation and the religious experience involved in the rituals. This question has been crucial in anthropological studies as well as in theatrical studies arising out of Europe. The problematic distinction between the religious and the aesthetic arises when one has to interpret 'totally different' cultures for which such a relationship shifts away from a paradigm of preserving the difference between ritual and theatre, religious performance and entertainment, and so on. In the same way that a script regulates a theatrical oeuvre, in this paper I posit that the Vedic rules about ritual regulate the religious performance. To illustrate this interpretative hypothesis, I will focus on the necessity by the ritual authority of displaying his skills as the main goal of the Vedic prescriptions.

## 1. Performativity and authority in textuality

Before addressing the question of how the link between theatre and ritual should be discussed, I should clarify what notion of theatre and ritual one is *prepared* to accept. I place emphasis on the term 'prepared' because during my research I felt that scholars of theatre studies were less keen to rethink their notion of *performance* than scholars of religions their notion of ritual. The differing understanding of theatre and ritual respectively challenges the dialogue between these two positions. From my side, I will support Rappaport's stance on ritual in this regard:

> The performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers logically entails the establishment of convention, the sealing of social contract, the construction of the integrated conventional orders we shall call *Logoi* […], the investment of whatever it encodes with morality, the construction of time and eternity; the representation of a paradigm of creation, the generation of the concept of the sacred and the sanctification of conventional order, the generation of theories of the occult, the evocation of numinous experience, the awareness of the divine, the grasp of the holy, and the construction of orders of meaning transcending the semantic. (Rappaport 1999: 27)

What about theatre? The most recent studies show that this question is rooted in the different ways the social sciences have impacted the conception of performance and *vice versa* (cf. Grammatas 2012; Wegley 2007; Bell 1992; Alexander 2004; Magnat 2002; Carlson 2002; Hall 2002; Taylor 2002). The terms 'performativity' and 'theatricality' in the title of this essay are, indeed, intended to suggest the two points of view from which I will focus on the action as it is encoded in the Vedic language on authority, transcendence, and power. The discourse around skills allows me to illustrate the link between ritual and theatre, not merely as two modalities of acting, but as powerful and efficient vehicles used to express, embody or nurture an idea. Ritual and theatre communicate and transmit meanings, beliefs, prejudices, conventions, dogmas, essentially, how the world ought to be.

The main point that I will try to explore is the use of theatricality as a category to revise the common idea that ritual is merely a standard behaviour. Theatricality is a heuristic category to rethink the performative power of ritual as a codified behaviour or, as Bell puts it, "those activities that form part of a tradition or canon of rites, be it religious or secular". Bell also exemplifies ritual as "[t]he stylized behaviour demanded by conventions of social etiquette, sports, or political spectacle" (Bell 1997: 93). Similarly, performance has been highly re-qualified in the field of social sciences, and functions as a sociosemiotic category by which we can rethink the normative capacity of aesthetic production.

Before going to the heart of my argument, it is critical to overview some of the most crucial stages of the complex issues involved

in conceptualizing the analogies between ritual and theatre and their differences.

The first point is provided by the words of Herrmann, one of the founding fathers of German theatre studies, who rethought the stage as a polyfocalised space: "Theaterkunst ist eine Raumkunst" (Herrmann 1914: 6). Herrmann showed that "the most important aspect of theatre art is the performance" (Fischer-Lichte 2005: 19). With these words, Herrmann was calling for a new discipline to be founded: a discipline which was devoted to 'performance' (*Aufführung*), here intended as a space independent from dramatic literature, into which the audience was called to take part for the success of communication (Fischer-Lichte, Wihstutz 2013). The specificity of this new academic discipline was supported by the idea that performance and text are irreducible elements. An analogy to this relationship between text and performance is also found in research on ritual between the 19th and the 20th centuries, dominated to a great extent by the idea of a strict hierarchy between myth and ritual. In 1899 Robertson Smith, one of the most representative among the so-called Cambridge Ritualists, stated that:

> So far as myths consist of explanations of ritual, their value is altogether secondary, and it may be affirmed with confidence that in almost every case the myth was derived from the ritual, and not the ritual from the myth; for the ritual was fixed and the myth was variable, the ritual was obligatory and faith in the myth was at the discretion of the worshipper. (Robertson Smith 1899: 19)[2]

[2] In the following pages, Robertson Smith better clarifies his statements and adds: "there are certain myths which are not mere explanations of traditional practices, but exhibit the beginnings of larger religious speculation, or of an attempt to systematise and reduce to order the motley variety of local worships and beliefs. For in this case the secondary character of the myths is still more dearly marked. They are either products of early philosophy, reflecting on the nature of the universe; or they are political in scope, being designed to supply a thread of union between the various worships of groups, originally distinct, which have been united into one social or political organism; or, finally, they are due to the free play of epic imagination. But philosophy politics and poetry are something more, or something less, than religion pure and simple" (Robertson Smith 1989: 20).

As a result, in the following decades, this dichotomy provided the theoretical framework that differentiates 'textual cultures'—mainly European and writing cultures—and 'performative cultures'—mainly non-Western and ethnographic cultures. For the latter, performance—both theatrical and religious—was overemphasized and very impressive (Fischer-Lichte 2005: 19ff). After the so-called 'performative turn'—which occurred in the 1940s and 1950s, but which was systematically theorized in the proceeding decades—the boundaries of such a split have come to be widely reconsidered.

The point at stake was the difference between *text* and *performance*; these categories were supposed to concern strictly the *reading* and the *doing*, respectively. Still in the 1960s a 'text'—especially a dramatic text—was conceived as a 'written text on the stage'. Therefore, it was considered to be closed and confined to the writing and its systematic rules. Within these formal boundaries there was no place for improvisation—while improvisation itself was conceived as a purely creative act. From this point of view, the field of performance was envisioned as the ultimate space open to improvisation. The basic idea was not that performance was lacking in rules, but there was an attempt at stressing how the conceptual boundaries of performance were not marked by the shaped and uniform rules that until then had regulated the field of writing. It was Barthes who openly tried to show how it was not a matter of form but rather of content and language (Barthes 1971).

In a word, the concept of 'textuality'—the condition in which the reader and the writer share the same cultural *texture*—was interpreted as embracing content and language. From the same starting point, some years later, Foucault coined the notion of 'discourse' as a concept that opened the possibility of overcoming the formal barriers that distinguish a text from a performance (Foucault 1971). The new ways to consider textuality allowed scholars and critics to 'read' a text as well as a performance as two modalities of the same 'discourse' (Wilson 2004).

Actually, the epistemological turn aimed by the 'discoursive approaches' (cf. Taylor 2013) is even more challenging if one considers 'form'—the logical and linguistic construction of a speech act—as content

as well. From this perspective, the act of reading as well as that of writing must not be reduced to a physical, psychological or cognitive act. Rather, the writing and the reading appear as two parts of the same act for the achievement of communication: an act which is fulfilled through the sender–receiver (or author–reader) interaction. The topic of interaction between the sender and receiver, as well as between the performer and audience was crucial in Herrmann's challenge, but it came to be even more central in the later works of the performance theorists.

To better focus on this conception of performance, Barthes stresses the difference between a text and a work. The very issue at stake was to distinguish the written text for the reader's use from the author writing it. The former would be useable across the generations, whereas the latter was unequivocally linked to his time, society, conventions, beliefs, and prejudices. In Barthesian terms, only the work is the real voice of the author since it encapsulates his way of thinking, living, being, his intentions and tasks in a historical time and in a conditioned society. As being historically based and as a creative act, the 'work' was conceived by Barthes as closed (i.e. achieved) because it was the author's creation in that time, situated in that society, addressing that audience. As a historically based product, this work would be read and interpreted, but it could not be performed twice as if it were the first time. It could be just reproduced as a copy or reduplication, notwithstanding how close to the 'original' the reproduction was.

A further step after Barthes was the formulation of the speech act theory by Austin and Searle as a theoretical development for the analysis of communicative intent (Austin 1962; Searle 1969). The performative turn achieved by Austin and Searle was most definably a *turn* because it overpassed the difference between word and action, between the said and the done. A performative utterance, for Austin, refers to cases in which "the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action" (Austin 1962: 6), while Searle has then showed, more specifically, that the performative utterances are always self-guaranteeing "performances of the act named by the main verb (or other performative expression) in the sentence" (Searle 1989: 543). This new direction created a new way of conceiving language and its capacity to impact or to produce effects

(i.e. the syntactical arrangement produces and mediates the meanings). The closer attention on efficacy in the speech act theory provided a new way to look at the powerful but apparently silent action involved in any language or any communicative code. In particular, it was Butler who highlighted how the social acceptance of conduct is based on arbitrarily codified behaviour which appears as 'natural':

> If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style. (Butler 1988: 520)

From the debate on work *and* text urged by Barthes, then restored by performative theorists such as Butler, arose a new approach towards the role of subjectivity in textuality. The term *textuality* came to indicate the condition of belonging to the semantic and semiotic network.

In the field of religious studies several questions arise when one tries to consider textuality and the role of subjectivity—a concept that overcomes the difference between text and work, expressing the author's ability to orient the reader's reception of textuality.

On the basis of these theoretical premises, performance and performativity, as categories, allow us to identify the agency—thus, subjectivity—behind symbols and words. The 'performative speech act' is thus a heuristic notion for the study of texts on ritual procedures, because it provides a critical instrument to focus on the efficacy of words. Words themselves are aimed to promote or preserve the authorized language. The performative as a category helps to focus on the authoritative power of reception. The audience, not only the performers, takes a central role in legitimizing a language or a discourse, while the interpreters, one by one, begin a vital closing, re-opening and re-closing of a group of texts, doctrines, dogmas that serve as the foundation stones for what one usually calls 'tradition'.

## 2. Theatricality and stylisation as a display of skills and canons

While the concept of performance impacted literary theories, the post-structuralist reading of performance as an independent text was

advocated to take into account "the other pole of the transcoding of the theatrical event" (De Marinis 1993: 47). The reading of performance as such encouraged scholars and theatre critics to revise the complex interplay between a canon and its interpretations, the apparent fixity of the former and the exegetical activity underlying its apparent timelessness, between the authority and the allowable—all the most crucial dichotomies advocated by literary criticism.

Despite the "death of the author" announced by Barthes in 1967 (Barthes 1977), as far as it is concerned with the performative reading of utterances, the notion of authority had remained "an apparently indispensable category for preparing, interpreting, and evaluating theatrical performance" (Worthen 1997: 3; cf. also Worthen 2003) until the 1990s. Though the performance's independence from the script was advocated by Herrmann even in the 1930s, the paradigm of the author's authority impacted Western theatre studies through the backdoor. Evidence can be found in the way theatricality has been conceptualized for a long time: as the lack of spontaneity, or worse, as a rigid following of the rules (Burns 1972) opposed to the ability to conform the performance to the original script (cf. Egginton 2003).

The separation of 'self' from 'role' (Burns 1972; cf. Carlson 2002: 240), perceived as *an indispensable category for preparing, interpreting, and evaluating theatrical performance*, actually legitimized the status of authenticity of the self in contrast with the status of inauthenticity of the role; as to say, with Plato, that the theatrical can just *imitate* but not *be* what is true. This separation, as Zarrilli has pointed out, "has contributed to the Western confusion over performance in non-Western cultures" (Zarrilli 1990: 146).

Despite the negative shadow cast on the notion of theatricality from Plato until today, the most recent debate in the field of performance studies has arisen for a re-qualification of theatricality as a heuristic category (Egginton 2003; Magnat 2002; Carlson 2002; Fischer-Lichte 1995: 99ff). The issues that the critics put at the centre of the debate concern the interrelationship between theatre and ritual as two modalities through which a performer presents the self and/or

represents a role or a character. The theorist of theatre studies De Marinis has tried to define borders between different degrees of self-displaying, from the complete absence of self-reflection (representational theatre) to a total display of the self (presentational theatre) (De Marinis 1993: 47–59). The problem in separating the presentational and the representational aspects does not merely concern the differences among cultures—i.e. Western/non-Western (Bauman, Briggs 1990), or *the West and the rest of the world* (White 2002)—but it primarily deals with the evidence that this separation is never real, rather just ideal. Even in Turner's experimental sessions on the enactment of tribal rituals with his students, the representational components do not prevent the self-reflexivity to be enacted. In his sessions, the audience often appear to be impressed even when its components did not share the symbols, meanings, and beliefs that underlay the enacted ritual (Turner 1982: 89ff).

De Marinis notes that in a performance the presentational aspects cannot be definitively distinguished from the representational ones because the self-reflexivity is always enacted in the performance, even when the performer clearly acts *as if* he was the character of the story (De Marinis 1993: 49ff). The intent, advocated by some scholarship, to stress the lack of presentational aspects in all the non-canonical performative arts suggests a rather conservative attempt to draw a demarcation line between dramatic theatre and what, in their view, *should* not be considered as such, i.e. the traditional genres of performance, the contemporary avant-garde phenomena, parades, circus, and so on.

As far as my theoretical position is concerned, I consider that a great contribution came from the French theatre semiotician Alter, who in 1990 elaborated the 'sociosemiotics of theatre', or in his words a "socially oriented examination of signs in theatre" (Alter 1990: 13). Actually, Alter was interested in scrutinizing a specifically historical theatre—i.e. the Western theatre—, defined by him as "the set of past, present and perhaps future public performances that are based on fixed verbal texts essentially composed by dialogues and during which live actors present the actions of characters involved in a fictional story"

(*ibid*.: 12). His examination was devoted to "the impact of social factors on those features of theatre that involve semiotics: production of fixed verbal signs, transition between text and stage, production of stage signs, codes and references of signs, actors as signs, and reception of signs by the audience" (*ibid.*). Alter's work provides a heuristic re-evaluation of the 'performative function' of signs and elevates the role of the audience as paramount for any theory of performance. In his study it is the real audience, not a model, which comes at the centre of the examination. The real audience's role urges semiotics to interact with sociology, psychology, anthropology, and cognitive science, inherent in the discourse.

The multidisciplinary approach advocated by Alter is relevant in the great collaboration between the theatrologist Schechner and the anthropologist Turner: within this theoretical combination the notion of performance has been re-qualified as an exceptional achievement, while theatricality has been rethought from a positive perspective. Instead of saying what theatricality is not, they showed what theatricality is: namely, the display of an achievement. In other words: what performativity does, theatricality shows. From this perspective, it is a matter of fact that theatre and ritual have a common interest for action and all of its permutations (i.e. codified actions, dialogues, gestures, postures, etc.). However, a specific interpretation of action as a codified action is involved when it is said that ritual differs from theatre because the former, as an expression of the religious experience, is more authentic than the latter.

The presumed inauthenticity of theatre in comparison with ritual has a long history rooted in the ancient Greek debate on *mimesis*; the negative history of the notion of theatricality in performative studies suggests how difficult it has been for Western scholars to (re)think the link between self and role, identity and character, authority and replication. The same issue arose from an opposite perspective in Artaud's approach to non-Western theatre. In his appreciation of a different way to play theatre, Artaud was persuaded to find the *authenticity* and the *essence* of theatre. But his idea of authenticity is deeply rooted in his

rejection of "the word at the stage" imposed in the long Western history of theatre.[3] Also Zarrilli supports the same view when he stresses how, for the Asian performer, the training and the procedure are at the very basis of the accomplishment "in which the doer and the done are one" (Zarrilli 1990: 131). Again, the topic that separates Western and non-Western theatre is still identified with the latter's ability to re-join self and character, performer and performed.

It is clear that the concept of authenticity is highly problematic. It must be clarified what authenticity is or how one expects it to be. Moreover, it must be clarified *where* authenticity is expected to be exhibited.

## 3. Religious versus aesthetic?

In 1997, the anthropologist Bell wrote that "[i]n modern Western society, we tend to think of ritual as a matter of special activities inherently different from daily routine action and closely linked to the sacralities of tradition and organised religion" (Bell 1997: 138). In a structuralist and post-structuralist vein, some scholars have avoided the dichotomy religious versus aesthetic. Stressing the communicative nature of ritual,[4] they responded to the Western tendency to consider ritual as *more* authentic than the other ritual-like activities because of its link with the sacredness of the religious experience. It is obvious that the question depends on how one considers the religious and the aesthetic. A shaped opposition would support, again, the opposition between ritual and theatre. However, the performative and the theatrical as categories allow us to consider the relation as the interrelationship between them.

[3] In *Le Théâtre et les dieux* (1936), he writes: "Ecrire c'est empêcher l'esprit de bouger au milieu des formes comme une vaste respiration. Puisque l'écriture fixe l'esprit et le cristallise dans une forme, et, de la forme, naît l'idolâtrie. Le vrai théâtre comme la culture n'a jamais été écrit" (Artaud 1971: 43).

[4] Among the theorists of the communicative nature of ritual are Douglas, Tambiah, Leach and Turner. The pivotal idea is that ritual is authentic in itself for its capacity to communicate or because it expresses the transformation and the transition as a crucial passage from one state to another. Cf. Leach 1968; Douglas 1970; Tambiah 1979; Turner 1982.

From my part, as clarified at the outset, I agree with Rappaport in considering rituals as "sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers", which 'logically' entail "the establishment of convention" (Rappaport 1999: 27), and I stress the involvement of the sacred, not as an ontological entity, but as the human (social, political, cultural) attempt to shift the world of normativity in a transcendent dimension with an equally transcendent authority (cf. Lincoln 1996). I stress this aspect while some scholars of ritual have tried to eliminate altogether the religious component (cf. Leach 1966 and 1968; Staal 1990).

In the 1982-volume *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*, Turner distanced himself from Leach, who advocated the notion of ritual as a stereotyped behaviour "which is potent in itself in terms of the cultural conventions of the actors, though *not* potent in a rational-technical sense" (Leach 1966: 403, emphasis in the text). Turner disagreed with the idea that ritual might be reduced to the communication mechanism between sender and receiver. In the same work, he clarified, "I like to think of ritual essentially as *performance, enactment*, not primarily as rules or rubrics. The rules 'frame' the ritual process, but the ritual process transcends its frame" (*ibid.*, emphasis in the text). Ritual as a performance, in Turner's words, *transcends* the social frame[5] within which it is produced because of its deep connection with a dimension of liminality, i.e. a condition of marginality and the persons that "elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space" (Turner 1969: 95); the "in betwixt and between" state (Turner 1964) "where the crises of transitions are dramatically rendered, overcome, and reconciled through symbolic actions" (Wegley 2007: 57).

Leach, for his part, was interested in the communicative aspects of ritual that he conceived as a 'communicative behaviour',[6] as "the rules

[5] As Wegley points out, "Turner wants to show that ritual operates according to its own formal logic and in this sense he can be considered structuralist. But he also holds that ritual is not reducible to the conceptual tyranny of religious or mythic thought and in this sense he deviates from structuralism" (Wegley 2007: 58).

[6] Leach 1966: 403: "Behaviour which forms part of a signaling system

of grammar and syntax of an unknown language" (Leach 1968: 524). From this perspective, he has come to define ritual as a social activity independent from any involvement of religion as a *sui generis* experience. In fact, Leach conceived ritual as a non-instrumental component of action, here intended as an expressive component that primarily communicates symbolically. It is just a small step from ritual to ritual-like activity. In the light of this closeness, he employed the expression 'rational technical behaviour' in order to distinguish ritual from any behaviour "which is directed towards specific ends and which, *judged by our standards of verification*, produces observable results in a strictly mechanical way" (Leach 1966: 403, emphasis in the text).

However, if one takes a close look, Turner and Leach shared the same discourse on ritual despite their different arguments to avoid the opposition religious versus aesthetic. Distancing himself from Leach's statement on ritual as a stereotyped behaviour "potent in itself in terms of the cultural conventions of the actors" (*ibid.*), Turner advocated the transcendence of the ritual process, while Leach distinguished the instrumental (i.e. syntactic, functional) from the non-instrumental (i.e. semantic, communicative) to stress the expressive nature of ritual behaviours. Let us recall that these scholars are writing under the premises of structuralism in anthropology. The idea of rule as a mechanic or meaningless action is at stake. It disturbed Leach as well as Turner insofar as the echo of the Saussurean dichotomy between *langue* and *parole* might have evoked, among scholars dealing with language, the idea that a rule is merely the physical element of the communication, an element 'passively' recorded by the individuals, an execution, against the opposite idea that the *parole* expresses the creative act of the linguistic process.[7]

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and which serves to 'communicate information' not because of any mechanical link between means and ends but because of the existence of a culturally defined communication code". Cf. Leach's response to Meyer Fortes *infra*.

[7] Cf. Saussure 1985 [1916]: 30 and the critic by Bourdieu in: Bourdieu 2000 [1972]: 247–248.

To say, with Turner, that "the ritual process transcends its frame" is like admitting that there is an ontological level—authentic, more meaningful, qualitatively deeper or higher, in Turner's words "liminal"—that transcends the immanence of rules. The meaningfulness of the ritual process stated by Turner suggests that the ritual process is qualitatively more appreciable than any rubric (i.e. repetitive action lacking meaning or merely functional to a goal) because of its connection with liminality.[8] The underlying idea is that ritual is something *more specific* than the merely repetitive behaviours.

In a different way, Leach claimed for the *specificity* of ritual when he claimed for the positive meaning of ritual behaviour outside the religious experience. In stating that the meaningfulness of the ritual process is not exclusively a magical (i.e. *religiously* other) affair (cf. Leach 1966: 403), Leach reacted to the idea that ritual must be coupled only with religion in order to be distinguished from the other compulsory behaviours whose communicative nature is guaranteed by the redundancy factor (*ibid*.: 404). However, in eliminating the religious component, Leach avoided the opposition religious versus aesthetic, but he implemented/reinforced the one between ritual and religious.

This point deserves close attention for our understanding of the boundaries between ritual and theatre. What should be recognised in such insight is that one must be aware that any attempt to fix the boundaries between religious and aesthetic in the view of the observer is historically contingent.

The risk is the misunderstanding of performance as a specific category intended as just a sequence of rules or a pure enactment. As observers, but also as observed, one must indeed be aware that the boundaries between religious and aesthetic—or any attempt to reduce one of them to the bare essential—are historically based even in the perspective of religious studies.

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[8] In this vein, the scholar of South Asian studies Staal gave a great contribution between the 1980s and the 1990s throughout a series of works on ritual as a behaviour "without meaning." Cf., for instance, Staal 1990.

Therefore, while I agree with Leach's definition of ritual as a stereotyped and communicative behaviour that is not exclusively confined to the discourse on 'transcendent things' (i.e. religion) (cf. Lincoln 1996), I disagree with any theoretical attempt to eliminate the 'transcendent element' for claiming a fine demarcation between religious and aesthetic. Going back to Laib's minimalist installations, his oeuvres strive for transcendence despite his claim that his art is not religious (Ottmann 1986; Lodermeyer 2008: 26; Jeffery 2013: 59, note 1). However, the claim for transcendence is a *mode* through which the religious discourse reproduces itself. If one agrees with Lincoln's thesis that religion is "that discourse whose defining characteristic is its desire to speak of things eternal and transcendent with an authority equally transcendent and eternal" (Lincoln 1996), it will be clear that 'religious' can be the subtext of a supposedly non-religious text or the interest of a supposedly non-religious practice, like art. The religious, intended as the discourse on transcendent things, offers many elements to rethink the normative nature of religion, its communicative nature, and the "regression of 'religious belief' *vis-à-vis* 'aesthetic belief'" (Dianteill 2003: 542)—all elements that help us to construct a wide definition of ritual, that encompasses the aesthetic re-production of religious beliefs.

While the religious element is a necessary component to operate the shift from the human to the transcendent, the ritual process, i.e. the transcendence of the sacred, operates within the normative level too. Ritual is therefore the human attempt to mark the boundaries between the transcendent and the human; consequently, the hermeneutists of ritual represent themselves as those who are qualified to connect the boundaries between the human, the ritual and the trascendent. This mark provides us—as observer and scholars of religions—with the terms for arguing how entertainment has been historically separated from the transcendent to delimit its field of action. A critical-historical reconstruction of the history of religious studies should provide a new point of view to re-think how the notion of transcendence came to be the criterion to distinguish a religious enactment, i.e. a ritual, from a non-religious one, i.e. aesthetic entertainment. A well-shaped separation between ritual and theatre,

as well as between religion and art, serves as an academic discourse to mark the 'sacred' nature of ritual. In that respect, Schechner noted that the "attention paid to the procedures of making theatre are attempts at ritualising performance, of finding in the theatre itself authenticating acts" (Schechner 1974: 467).

The question is not if a theoretician is right or wrong in eliminating the religious components from the ritual; rather, one should ask what is the argument to distinguish ritual from theatre or the religious from the aesthetic. Schechner proposes a different taxonomy polarising efficacy and entertainment. He writes, "Whether one calls a specific performance ritual or theatre depends on the degree to which the performance tends toward efficacy or entertainment" (Schechner 1974: 467). These two poles—efficacy and entertainment—are not intended as definitively excluding one another, but just as an operational basic dyad. This polarisation provides the parameters to evaluate the degree of efficacy and of entertainment, respectively, for the purpose of a theatrical or ritual performance.

Though Schechner clarifies that these two poles are not mutually exclusive, he identifies efficacy with ritual and entertainment with theatre. According to Rozik, "Schechner's considerations reflect a general tendency in the 1960s and the 1970s for performance artists to 'recreate' the ritual quality of primitive theatre by creating 'actuals', 'homemade rituals'" (Rozik 2005: 172). These associations remind me of Laib's concern for the application of the Vedic rules in his oeuvre and the words of Turner and Leach, who stated that a ritual is first of all procedure and authenticity. This leads us back to the starting point, with the equation *ritual: theatre = authenticity: inauthenticity...*

However, in a later essay, Schechner (Schechner 1990: 28ff), on the basis of Goffman's theory of 'unaware performers', develops his parameters of performance taking into account the emic/etic gap involved in the framework where presentational and representational aspects are inserted. He distinguishes three classes of framed performances:

> 1) actions framed as a performance: the frame is imposed from the outside and performers are not aware of it (such as animals in circus or when TV crews arrive at the scene of a tragedy);

2) frame hidden: they know they are performing, but audience should not know (such as during the oration of a politician);

3) frame there and acknowledged by all (such as professional actors).

This further classification is useful to evaluate the role of the frame into which a performance is achieved. In other words, it seems to be linked with the place—real and/or symbolical—where the performance is exhibited. In this regard, Laib's fire ritual exhibition—where many Brahmans were hosted to perform the *mahāyajña*—and his concern to faithfully apply Vedic rules, raise important points to outline the 'theoretical frame' into which the border between awareness and unawareness of the performance is negotiated. "Where are we?" (Tosatto 2009: 17–18) is the question, intentionally posed by Laib's oeuvre, that only the visitor, as an aware observer, is called to answer. However, the question of contextualization is not only a matter of aesthetical pole—where the actor/audience relationship is given—nor of existential location—'Where are we?'. The contextualization approach problematizes also "the power structures in which participants, performers, and observers are entangled" (cf. Hüsken, Neubert 2011: 7). On this point, Bourdieu's theory of fields shows that also the 'artistic field' as well as the 'religious field'—even when they generate an autonomous pole (i.e., 'art for art's sake', the cure of souls and the creation of repositories of a secret knowledge)—are socially constructed arenas within which agents and groups take positions according to the law of supply and demand (Bourdieu 1971, 1975, 1979: 59ff).

The frame—context or field—into which a performance is achieved goes through a systematic tension between change and stability, as well as subversion and transgression (Hüsken, Neubert 2011: 6). Rituals are expected to control such tension and build a negotiated form of order through formality and repetition (Bell 1997; Rappaport 1999). It should also be noted that the contextualization approach enlarges the notion of ritual to other fields of action and blends the differences between religious and aesthetic, while instead the artistic claim by Laib for authenticity through the application of the 'ancient' instructions

attempts to draw, again, a clear line between a holistic conception of art—inspired by a religious idea of changelessness—and the classical concept of the individual artist (Ottmann 2009: 46). Laib postulates that the adherence of the praxis to form—i.e. to the traditional and 'unchanged' rules—gives authenticity to his performance, while instead ritual studies stress how dynamic, innovative, and free the character of rituals is, continuously on the border between form and practice, norm and usage (Michaels 2016: 21ff; Hüsken, Neubert 2011).

To better argue these statements, I will illustrate how normativity, stylised behaviour, transcendental aims, performativity, and creative acts are interlaced in the Vedic texts on ritual rules. I will discuss some theoretical issues that allow us to define a ritual text as 'religious' instead of 'theatrical'. Specifically, I will deal with the performative effect of recitation.

## 4. Vedic texts as scripts and Vedic ritualists as performers: a methodological approach

To better argue what has been outlined in the previous paragraphs, I will focus on Vedic texts about ritual, specifically the Brāhmaṇas. My proposition is to consider Vedic textual prescriptions codified in the Brāhmaṇas as scripts and prescribed behaviours as performances. Certainly the second item will be dependent on the former because the rule, as a script, is aimed to represent the authority. Despite the fact that the need for a rule suggests a conventional and repetitive behaviour, in the Brāhmaṇas the performance is codified as a unique event, not as a simple application of the rule or merely a repetition. The ritual performance, similarly to the theatrical performance, is regulated by the display of skills as its aim. As an athlete or an actor, the Vedic officiant displays his skills in achieving an exceptional performance (cf. Larios 2017; Michaels 2016; Knipe 2015; Hüsken 2007; Patton 2005; Gonda 1980). He is aware of the exceptional frame, and the audience expects it to be such.

To argue this comparison, I will examine three aspects involved in the ritual as the possible frames into which the awareness of the performance and the aim of efficacy are involved to a major degree:

1) training: the recitation, as a script, is aimed to furnish the way to do things and to achieve the performance;

2) display: the ritual, as a theatrical performance, is aimed to display a skill;

3) self-consciousness: the ritualists, as the aesthetic performers, are aware of their doing highly symbolic actions in front of a public.

### 4.1. Training

According to most Brāhmaṇa-texts, there is a common way to establish normative behaviour: by means of repetition, memorisation, and transmission (Scharfe 1989: 15ff). The rule is preserved through the repetition of recitation. In the most authoritative collection of religious texts it is declared that only "the one who recites following (his teacher) learns, not the one who sleeps" (*'nubruvāṇó ádhy eti ná svapán*).[9] The evocation of the same motif resounds in a late text on *dharma* and the socio-religious behaviour where it is stated that "[w]hen someone has studied one branch from each of the Vedas in accordance with the Law, he is called a 'vedic scholar'" (*śākhām adhītya śrotriyo bhavati*).[10] It means that the rigid sequences of actions involved in Vedic recitation was learned through a well-established training accompanied by a developed mnemonic technique. The frame into which the ritual learning was legitimised is the recitation as an authorised (and authorizing) language. Currently only the crystallized version of the Vedic recitation is well known in the form definitively fixed in the manuscripts. However, it is presumable that the recitation was not as rigid as the texts lead us to believe. The enemies of memory, such as corruption, forgiveness, and mistakes, had probably affected the contents, and one may speculate that the development of mnemonic techniques had been utilised also—but not only—in order to fight and prevent the 'ritual failure' (cf. Schieffelin 2007).

[9] *Ṛgveda* 5.44.13 (tr. Brereton, Jamison 2014: 717).

[10] *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra* 2.3.6.4 (tr. Olivelle 1999: 49). Cf. also *Manusmṛti* 3.145.

Among the earliest texts of the Vedic canon, the prose-texts such as the Brāhmaṇas served as commentaries (cf. Lubin forthcoming) and were demanded to display, advocate, and preserve the ritual procedure. To this end the Brāhmaṇa-texts show a great creative ability in constructing the tradition, clarifying the meanings and the purpose of the mantras and their ritual functions. While the ritual as a sequence of words and actions serves as a display of the rule, the exegesis shows how to understand its meanings and functions. Only through the reiteration of a well-established sequence of words and actions a rule could be exhibited and, therefore, legitimized, accepted, recognised, shared, and eventually applied.

The rule is within the ritual but it is the need of regulation that urges a stylised behaviour, not the contrary (cf. Squarcini 2012). The arrangement of the ritual, as a stylised behaviour, is always demanded by the need to reiterate a specific normative arrangement of social, economic, and political relationships.

In Vedic texts the recitation, as a script, regulates and directs the ritual performance. As a script in the eyes of its reproducers, the recitation of stylised speeches aims to be received as *the* authority. In that case, its efficacy lies in the reiteration of the rule as faithfully to the original as possible. Deviation is not accepted, or else the performer has to demonstrate his skill by enacting a remedy, aimed to deprive a mistake of its negative action. Needless to say, the appropriation of 'origins' and 'foundations' and the claim 'to act according to tradition' are the subtext in the exegesis about rituals.

### 4.2. Display

The 'performance function', as suggested by Alter, is accomplished only if the communication between the performer and the audience is persuasive and convincing (Alexander 2004, 2011), only if the verbal interaction between speaker and hearer produces a conventional effect (Sbisà 2001, 2009). To secure a successful communication, the Vedic officiant puts in action what the Vedic composer of the text organised in standardised formulations. As a performer who faithfully

re-enacts the script's composer, the officiant should be able to satisfy all the requests of his patron. These requests usually regard prosperity, cattle, long life, progeny, and a good harvest. Therefore, the Vedic instructions collected in the Brāhmaṇas provide the officiants with a 'grammar of rituals' (Michaels 2016: 73), which will secure the success of communication, the merits of patronage, and the established order. The theatricalization of a stereotyped sequence of actions helps displaying the officiant's skills. A successful ritual is one during which the officiant is capable of demonstrating his skills in attaining prosperity, cattle, or long life for his patron or in taking danger and ruin far from him. The more a ritual performance is spectacular, the more the officiant's labour looks skilful.

*Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* 8.10:

> […] If, when two armies meet, a Kṣatriya **runs up to him (saying)** "So do for me that I shall conquer that army", and if reply "Be it so", **he must touch the body of his chariot** with "O tree, be thou strong limbed" **and then say to him** "Do you mount, to this quarter for you let the chariot, well tied, advance, to the north (let it advance), to the west, to the south, to the east, against the foe". With "With the attacking oblation" **he must make him turn; then he must look at him** with the Apratiratha, Śāsa, and Sauparṇa hymns. He conquers that army. If again he runs up to him when about to engage in battle (saying) "So do for me that I shall conquer in this battle", he should make him contend in this quarter; he conquers in this battle. […] After the paying of reverence, **he goes to the house saying (the verse)** for the driving away of foes […]. **Having gone to the house he sits down** behind the household fire and holds on the priest who at the end offers three butter libations to Indra, in four portions, with the bowl, in the Prapad way, for freedom from distress, injury, loss and danger. (tr. Keith 1920: 327, bold mine)

*Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa* 16.8

> […] **He recites** the Akṣarapaṅktis; the Akṣarapaṅktis are cattle; verily (they serve) to obtain cattle; moreover, the Akṣarapaṅktis are expiration and inspiration; thereby **then he places** expiration and inspiration in himself; moreover (they serve) to secure the presence of Indra in the praise. **He recites** (verses) to the fathers and to Yama; verily thus **he accompanies**

> the Nārāśaṃsa cups; moreover the fathers have their portion at the end; therefore **he recites** these (verses) in the end praise. **He recites** (the verses) "Sweet indeed is he"; verily with them **he makes** sweet the Soma for Indra; moreover, Indra is the world of the gods, Yama the world of the fathers; verily thus **he arises** from the world of the fathers to the world of the gods. To them **the Adhvaryu responds** with (a formula containing the word) *mad*, for the third pressing is connected with 'be drunk'. **He recites** (a verse) to Viṣṇu and Varuṇa; the sacrifice is connected with Viṣṇu and Varuṇa; whatever mistake or error there is in the sacrifice, that with this **he remedies**; verily this is medicine. (tr. Keith 1920: 436–437, bold mine)

In Brāhmaṇa-texts the ritual language for prescriptions is rich but is always shaped by the warrior imagery about races and competition for the prize. In some cases, the ritual sequence involves a race between the officiant and the ritual's patron that is clearly learned from the warrior's life experience. It may be argued that the warrior-like features were due to the royal function of these rituals, or that the competitive aspects were merely formal in nature (Heesterman 1993: 65ff). Both observations do not change the performative value of the ritual. The efficacy of ritual, regardless how aesthetic or entertaining its achievement, and the motif of the skilled officiant are two faces of the same coin: the display of power.

Starting from Bloch's approach to ritual as a coercive communication, Laidlaw and Humphrey notice that:

> The formalisation of language in ritual—speech-making, chanting, singing—reduce semantic content, because possibilities of alternative utterances are closed off, and at the same time increase the illocutionary force of those utterances. […] It therefore becomes difficult for participants to resist authoritative utterances made in ritual contexts by any means other than repudiation of the whole ritual order. (Laidlaw, Humphrey 2006: 269)

If persuasiveness is maximised through a formalised language, then ritual serves as "an extreme form, indeed it is the most important legitimating device" (*ibid.*), able to preserve traditional authority from any form of rebellion.

However, another practical aspect deserves attention: the participants' familiarity with gestures (Wulf 2006). As the anthropologist Wulf

illustrates (Wulf 2006 and 2001; Wulf, Göhlich, Zirfas 2001), in accompanying linguistic utterances, the bodily movements serve as silent vehicles of meaning. Even when gestures have no direct reference to speech, they are a means of expression and signification insofar as they transmit messages, express social relationships and embody a given idea of order. The understanding of ritual action as a bodily-based communication (cf. Wulf 2006: 400–402; Wulf, Zirfas 2001: 339) allows us to consider the ritual arrangement as a part of a historically-based praxis, conditioned by the social, historical, and cultural context but enabling to shape social and religious fields, institutions and organizations.

### 4.3. Self-consciousness

In order to preserve the rule and to reiterate the authoritativeness of the sequence of actions (i.e. the ritual), reciters employed a performative class of utterances, such as: *ity āhuḥ, āhuḥ*, "So they say"; *atho āhuḥ*, "Thus they say"; *tad u hovāca*, "With reference to this he said". Sometimes the verb referring to the main action appears in the gerundive form, suggesting that it is a customary action. Despite the common language employed to achieve the rituals' purposes, I found many conflicting prescriptions that lead to the possibility of acting in different ways. Amongst the various ways of expressing a customary action, some passages suggest that it was recommendable to act one way or the other; others, on the contrary, definitively establish how to consider the mistaken customs promoted by other Vedic schools (cf. Brereton, Deshpande, Jamison 1991):

> –*tan na sūrkṣyam* (*Maitrayānī Saṃhitā*): "this must not be kept into account";
>
> –*tan naivaṃ kartavai* (*Maitrayānī Saṃhitā*): "indeed, this must not be done";
>
> –*avidyayaiva tad āhur* (*Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*): "they said that because of ignorance";
>
> –*tat tathā na kuryāt* (*Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*); *tad u tathā na kuryāt* (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*): "however, he should not do it";

–*tad u tathā na brūyād* (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*): "indeed, he should not pronounce it";

–*tat tan nādṛtyam* (*Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, *Aitareya Āraṇyaka*): "it must not be kept into account";

–*na tad ādriyate* (*Kāṭhaka Brāhmaṇa*, *Kāṭhaka Āraṇyaka*); *api tan nādriyeta* (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*): "this must not be followed".

If one considers the utterances expressing ordering, duties or prohibitions as speech acts (of Austinian inspiration) characterised by a particular illocutionary force, a prescriptive reading of the ritual codification *through words* gives rise to fruitful speculations on praxis (Sbisà 2009). The use of deontic modalities, i.e. verbs indicating how the world ought to be according to certain rules, suggests (1) a strong intentional level—the speaker's intention in producing an act which appears as more and more necessary, efficient, unquestionable—, (2) a performative level—words express actions that produce effects,[11] and (3) is connected with a different degree of status and power, institutionalized rank and authority (Sbisà 2001; Diamond 1996). More conceptual thinking is provided by Agamben (Agamben 1995, 2003), who has dealt widely with the question of the rule and its application. Speaking about the juridical rule, Agamben notes (Agamben 1998: 19ff) that a rule "does not coincide with its application to the individual case" but that, on the contrary, it must "be valid independent of the individual case"; from such perspective, he concludes that "a word acquires its ability to denote a segment of reality only insofar as it is also meaningful in its own not-denoting". In other words, no prescription has in itself the guarantee that it will be achieved because there is a gap between the rule and its

[11] As Sbisà (2001, 2009) has clarified in her recent rethinking of the speech act theory, in Austin's conception of 'act' more attention is put on the relationship between the speech act and the action than between the speech act and the activity (as it is in Searle's approach). In such relationship what really matters is the production of a conventional effect that contributes to the action's result or that coincides with it (Sbisà 2009: 30).

application that only power (and status and authority) can fill. If power and authority express their force in the verbal interaction, one can rethink the efficacy of ritual utterances in view of their syntactic form. The verbal modes and the syntactic form of utterances indicate the illocutionary force of ritual prescriptions through which the authorized speakers and hearers (poets, theologians, commentators) tried to qualify identities through the ghost of tradition or to create a legitimising support for its acceptance. While recitation as a script was transmitted in order to legitimise an idea of faithfulness (to a hypothetical original version), recitation as a 'written text on the stage' was aimed to enshrine the original commandment and to promote the maintenance of faithfulness. The public dimension of recitation suggests that any attempt to direct the symbolic actions was deliberate.

To evaluate the subjective aspect in the 'verbal doing', the idea of self-consciousness provides a useful device to compare ritual and theatre. In Schechner's dyad between efficacy and entertainment, he places the major degree of self-consciousness on the item entertainment/theatre. Actually, performers and audiences, as well as officiants and patrons, ought to be aware of their role to fulfil their relationships and communication. Subjectivity and intentionality are two aspects of performativity and theatricality as well. Any attempt to preserve the tradition or to orient its reception should be rethought as creative acts. As theologians, the commentators served as 'voices' of the tradition; however, as performers of a specific branch of the tradition, they achieved a creative act whenever their voices were addressed to a specific audience. A vital tradition is based on the capacity of its interpreters to close the canon, and then to re-open and re-close it without undermining its timelessness, transcendence, and authorlessness (Smith 1982: 36–52; Patton 1994).

Similarly, during a theatrical spectacle a spectator is always aware that the performance is a fiction, but s/he is tacitly called to forget that it is a fiction, in order to appreciate the history and its characters. At the same time, to appreciate the performer as an artist a spectator must remind himself that he is in front of a show. By examining

the character, a spectator will be able to appreciate the performance as a display of skills. From the performer's perspective, the actor will conclude the same pact as well. It means that there is a silent agreement that the performance will be *as if* it were the real world. On the stage, this is possible/allowed on the condition that the performer is a learned and skilled actor. On the ritual platform—real and/or symbolical—it is achievable on condition that the performer is a learned and skilled officiant. In both cases the condition is to be recognised by the audience and likewise by the authorised performer.

## 5. Conclusion

At the beginning of the 20th century, Burns suggested that theatre has been a vehicle for the "transmission of specific beliefs, attitudes, and feelings in terms of organized social behaviour" (Burns 1972: 33). But she distinguished this kind of communication from a less spontaneous behaviour, "composed according to this grammar of rhetorical and authenticating conventions" (*ibid.*) in order to achieve some particular effect on its viewers. Burns defined the less spontaneous behaviour as 'theatricality'. In Burns' words, performativity and theatricality are given in opposition to one another: self vs role. The notion of authenticity has widely impacted theatrical theories until 'performance' as a category was absorbed and re-qualified in the field of social sciences, and social scientists began to examine the ritual as a drama or a 'serious play'. Despite a common aim towards comparing ritual and theatre, the differences surpassed all analogies. Turner the anthropologist advocated the notion of liminality, Zarrilli as a theatrologist advocated the training for reuniting the self and the character. More subtly, Schechner noted that the "attention paid to the procedures of making theatre are attempts at ritualizing performance, of finding in the theatre itself authenticating acts" (Schechner 1974: 467).

From my side, I consider liminality as a functional notion, a conceptual way—maybe more convincing than others, but not the only way—to mark a boundary. Since ancient times mankind has always invested a lot of time and effort in marking boundaries. To justify,

legitimise, and preserve them, they have developed a great semiotic ability and a semantic creativity; furthermore, they have come to treat as natural something that was definitively arbitrary. The concept of nature too, as a social and historical construction, oriented human behaviour and cognitive activity in naming, separating, and classifying things and beings, the human and the extra-human.

In this theoretical framework, the difference between ritual and theatre should be rethought as arbitrary as well. Historically based are, however, the ways and the meanings through which men have justified, legitimised, preserved, and defended their boundaries and classifications. That is the matter. The reasons why, in the eyes of Artaud, "le théâtre Oriental" (Artaud 1964 [1938]: IV, 82ff.) looked more authentic than "le théâtre Occidental" (that is, the Elizabethan theatre) (cf. Bansat-Boudon 2012a and 2012b; Inoue 2000) should be searched for in the reasons why some Western theatrologists reacted to the monopoly of the discourse on the authenticity of performance: "c'est que le théâtre, art indépendant et autonome, se doit pour ressusciter, ou simplement pour vivre, de bien marquer ce qui le différencie d'avec le texte, d'avec la parole pure, d'avec la littérature, et tous autres moyens écrits et fixés", cried Artaud in *Le Théâtre et son Double* (Artaud 1964 [1938]: IV, 126). Similarly, the reasons why the ritual as a category has been often conceived as a more religious than aesthetic performance should be found in the long Western history of entertainment.

The high degree of performativity and theatricality in Vedic rituals suggests that the separation of entertainment from religious activity in ancient Vedic theology should be rethought from a perspective that focuses on the reasons why theatrical activity was displaced from the ritual space.

In the study of Vedic ritual, theatricality as a display of power, and performativity as an achievement of that power, are two relevant categories to focus on the sociosemiotic function of signs. In this sense, religious labour satisfied the Vedic audience for a long time.

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