



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

THINKING THROUGH TRAGEDY AND COMEDY: SOME PROVOCATIONS ON GENRE MATTERS

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In December 2014, “Genres of Dramatic Thought”—a working group within the Performance Philosophy network—held its inaugural symposium entitled *Thinking Through Tragedy and Comedy - Performance Philosophy and the Future of Genre* at the Institute for Cultural Inquiry ICI Berlin. The symposium gathered 35 participants and around 200 audience members over two days to explore the role that genre might play in the new field of Performance Philosophy. Comedy and tragedy became the exemplary sites for such an encounter. What we shared: an impetus to expand and investigate both the terminology and the experience of these terms—tragedy and comedy. Yet we differed in the direction in which we were willing or eager to take such a reframing of aesthetic terms. The question was and remains how to recuperate genre as a meaningful locus and indeed why such a salvage might be desirable or necessary. One purpose. Many questions. What follows is a series of attempts to both recapture the debates of the symposium and stake out the field of inquiry for our working group’s engagement within Performance Philosophy.

Countering Genre—The Present Moment

As soon as the word “genre” is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. (Derrida 1980, 56)

Why genre? Any overview of the development of Genre Studies reveals that concepts of genre are integral to the structures of Western thought (see Dowd et al 2006). As most commonly understood, genre theory offers a set of taxonomies that shape the fictive universe that (dramatic) literature creates. Genre draws limits, as Derrida puts it. Such acts of categorization are by their nature political, and even ideological because they rely on the creation of hierarchies and boundaries. Beyond the literary, genre lies at the historical core of disciplinary distinctions, most famously pitting poetry against philosophy.

But does genre still matter today? Early modernity had mobilized genre theory. With the 16th century and the rise of the printing press, notions of genre gained in fluidity, and laid the groundwork for new literary forms (such as the novel) to emerge. By intermingling high and low as well as tragic and comic, Shakespeare’s plays also speak to such a boundless and fluid understanding of genre terms. Needless to say, his work has endlessly fascinated philosophers and abounds with genre considerations that cannot be extracted from their simultaneous references to philosophy. Even more intriguingly, however, the ways in which these works are considered to resonate philosophically follow different paths in relation to where their interpretations fall on the spectrum of genre. Each line that is drawn by genre also offers an opening for contestation.

This complicates philosophy’s relationship to art as a vehicle of thought, given that the philosophy of art, or aesthetics, has often been defined through its engagement with genre terms – most prominently tragedy and comedy. With its origin in Aristotle’s *Poetics* and the dialogues of Plato, aesthetic debates are frequently based in genre theory, expanding its formal questions into one of worldview. The death-of-tragedy-debate in the 20th century, most famously held by George Steiner in his 1961 book of the same title but with other important contributions such as Lionel Abel’s *Metatheatre* (1963) and Raymond Williams’ *Modern Tragedy* (1966), can speak to the persisting political and philosophical dimension of genre. Recognizing the affinities between philosophy and poetry, Steiner explores tragedy’s disappearance as a sign of metaphysical crisis. His argument exemplifies how an originally formal category of both texts and oratory has turned into a much more broadly-conceived term that employs the imagination to (re-)structure the universe according to a given set of principles. Historically, such an understanding of genre as worldview or ideology had entered the debates particularly fervently since the 19th century with Hegelian and Marxist uses of the concept of genre. It was a move from metatheatres and -narratives to metahistories (see White 1975).

The crisis of metaphysics that Steiner explores through the history of tragedy expands into a crisis of the notion of genre itself. Genre’s drawing of limits is, as Derrida puts it, replaced by the idea of liminality: the moment of overcoming a limit, of stepping over the threshold. It is a change of acts,

from the building of structures to exploding structuration itself. Although genre seems purely formal, it actually contains the struggle between embodiment and abstraction. Derrida, in his essay "The Law of Genre," points to the double nature of genre that is both *nomos* and *physis* through its dual meaning in French as both 'gender' and 'genre':

But the whole enigma of genre springs perhaps most closely from within this limit between the two genres of genre which, neither separable nor inseparable, form an odd couple of one without the other.... (Derrida 1980, 56)

The "odd couple" of embodiment and form is one that has been underprivileged in genre theory. If literary genre is seen to consist purely of formal requisites, then the affective force through which genre needs to operate in order to make itself known and arrive at its destination is lost. Bakhtin ([1979] 1986) has talked about the expansion of the genre term to include the speech acts of the everyday instead of only aesthetically organized material. Utterance itself is not only gendered but has a genre—in the act of speaking, genre is connected to the voice and becomes embodied. How physical such an utterance can be is exemplified in Philoctetes, the tragic hero left behind, whose "ayayayaya" rings over the deserted island.

More recently, the interrelationship between embodiment and abstraction has become reversed. Instead of tending toward the idea and abstracted forms, the body and the entanglements of the body in the here and now increasingly take centre-stage. The cultural memory accumulated in genre theory becomes challenged. Resistance to qualifying assessments and defiance of the need for conceptual categories or genre considerations of any kind are at the core of post-structuralism with its challenge to the philosophical as well as the literary tradition.¹ Attention to genre distinctions correspondingly wanes especially in the field of theatre where experimentation with performance practices and the rise of performance art and postdramatic theatre imply that genre may be a thing of the past. The spontaneity and immediacy of the singular, shared experience in performance is pitted against the sense of a cultural memory based on a generically-structured set of written texts. In this context, genre exists only to be undone. The performative turn from 1960s onwards indicates a radical shift in the relevance of drama within theatrical practice, repositioning and redefining drama in order to highlight that it can operate without text altogether. Textual analyses that had been associated with drama, such as genre, were also left by the wayside.

From most accounts, therefore, it seems we at least aspire to live in a post-genre world. However, simply doing away with our conceptual categories has proven impossible to implement as it becomes more and more apparent that generic categories form the very bases of our cultures, ideologies, and semiotics.² Instead of diminishing, Genre Studies has expanded to include the fields of linguistics, anthropology, rhetoric, and gender studies, and today can be found in basically every aspect of the social sciences.³ If genre is no longer a useful locus for the traditional categorization of literary or dramatic works, it has become highly instrumental in revealing the patterns and biases of our social structures at large, shifting literary and dramatic interpretation into the domain of rhetoric (see Bitzer 1968; Miller 1984). Privileging approach over content, genre is now widely understood as cognitive and cultural rather than merely literary.⁴ This evolution

might entail re-engaging with older traditions of genre criticism (e.g. Ancient Rhetoric) as well as recent scholarship in order to redefine its field of operation and demonstrate its relevance to emerging forms of performative ethics. The rhetorical heritage of genre theory marks how much genre is not merely an extraneous structure imposed after the fact but a core layer of aesthetic memory embedded into any given performance or text that expands the level of communication from the present to the past and future. Genre allows one to talk across the centuries and disciplines. As such a versatile and cross-disciplinary place of encounter, the prolific expansion of Genre Studies seems to provide a particularly fruitful forum in which to pursue the relations between philosophy and performance.

Acts Comic and Tragic—Revisiting the Berlin Symposium

Investigating theories of genre today involves challenging systems of aesthetics, ethics, and our approach to thought *per se*. The impetus for the Berlin symposium “Thinking Through Tragedy and Comedy” was to tackle these challenges from multiple angles. We wanted to come together from philosophical, literary, and performative backgrounds in order to find answers to the over-arching question: Does genre have a role to play in Performance Philosophy? This was reflected in the format of the symposium. We started out by parsing down tragedy and comedy to their most basic expressions: suffering and laughter. From this physical articulation of affect, the different contributions to the symposium rebuild tragedy and comedy within the complex conceptual network of universal vs. particular, laughter vs. suffering, ethics vs. violence, which also functioned as individual session topics. A shared dialogue between disciplines, methodologies, and genres lay at the core of two concurrently running seminars that pre-circulated papers in order to be discussion- rather than presentation-based and the larger roundtable discussions that brought tragedians and comedians together. Contributors and audiences had the chance to intermingle in their search for the continuing relevance of comedy and tragedy and to offer up their redefinitions and performative reinventions. Throughout, philosophical dialogue, dramatic dialogue, and a performative dialogue with the audience overlapped.

To offer a glimpse back onto the event itself, we have gathered some of the wide-ranging answers proposed during the two conference days we shared in Berlin:

Opinions diverged greatly in the interviews, panel discussions, and seminar sessions during the symposium. Jennifer Wallace’s proposition of tragedy as being grounded in a “shared precariousness”

countered Simon Critchley’s drastic conclusion that “mute violence always wins” and his characterization of tragic philosophy as the recognition that untruth provides the condition of life. Meanwhile, in a full-blown rejection of the tragic, Russell Ford asserted that comedy brings thought back to the body as a positive force, implying that “it might be possible to learn really important things [...] without anybody dying.” Such divergence might speak to Nikolaus Müller-Schöll’s radical historicising of genre, which would make an eternal plural out of tragedy and comedy: “to talk about hundreds, thousands, millions of tragedies and comedies.” He furthermore conceptualizes

Watch highlights from the conference:

 <http://vimeo.com/147381501>

comedy's interruption as the basis for the historical experience of modernity. In turn, Freddie Rokem moves from interruption to the distancing effect of eavesdropping that highlights the volatility of any given genre which fluctuates under pressure, so that under the auspices of the eavesdropper tragic characters turn comic and vice versa.

This sense of fluctuation and border-crossing pervaded the presentations throughout, which spanned readings of plays from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* to Javanese puppet theatre, and dealt with performance events from Romeo Castellucci to Rococo laughter and Cricot2 theater. On the level of theory, Artaud's biography was as much a topic as Marx's rage over an ill-fitting coat, and contemplations of semblance, figuration, and dialectics. Locating genre at the intersection of ethics and politics, Alice Koubová posited ludic modes of thinking as an ethically viable alternative to sacrificial demise. In turn, James Corby depicted tragic suffering as the event of a loss that suspends law. Preciosa de Joya explored why comedy embraces ugliness and deformity, upending traditional aesthetics while presenting the philosopher as clown. Rupert Glasgow drew upon the common fondness for paradox shared by both comedy and philosophy, comparing joke structures with philosophical theorems.

Despite the many divergences, it was striking to discover how much comedy and tragedy depend upon each other for their own articulations. While their formulations of and responses to suffering differ radically, a certain sense of fluidity between comedy and tragedy seems to feed their mutual opposition. To Erika Fischer-Lichte, the difference between genres shifted entirely to a question of performance, while Hans-Thies Lehmann moved tragedy away from a staged artwork to the experiential realm: tragic action turned into tragic experience. In Kate Katafiasz's exploration of Edward Bond's *Under Room*, tragedy and comedy even became an entirely simultaneous experience that split the audience in their reception of the play during the performance: some watching it as tragedy, some as comedy. Tragedy and comedy must then be thought together. These discoveries were reinforced in Simon Critchley's closing lecture by his evocation of the theatrical machine that throws a spotlight on our existential ambiguity but also implies that, for philosophy, "theatre is the answer, in a very important way."

Genre's Task—An Ethical Act

The burial of a literary form is a moral act. (Sontag [1963] 1966, 132)

One general consensus that emerged from the symposium is that at the heart of the question of genre lies the problem of ethics. This discovery particularly resonates with scholarship that advocates genre's importance in spanning the divide between philosophy and poetic forms. Martha Nussbaum, for one, has argued that Plato's attack upon the poets was a disagreement as much about content as about form. Plato straightforwardly disagreed with the view of human life as portrayed in the tragedies, namely, the importance given to happenings that are completely beyond the control of the characters. In other words, he refused to accommodate the profoundly arbitrary nature of contingency. In the universe Plato constructed, the good life was within the reach of any truly earnest person, and one's integrity inviolable by outside forces. Whereas in the

tragedies, human existence is depicted as permanently exposed to inconsolable loss. Within such a view, it is sensible and ethical to care about things one cannot control, and to love people who will surely die. There is no self-sufficiency of the good in this view (see Nussbaum, 1990).

A number of scholars have convincingly demonstrated that Plato's writing holds more affinity to poetry than most historical interpretations have been willing to admit (see Puchner 2010). Nevertheless, the fact remains that in the development of Western thought, the resounding influence of Plato's vision has articulated the terms of the ancient quarrel as philosophy versus poetry, or ethics versus aesthetics. Any idea of the good as inherently vulnerable was simply banished from the realm of ethics, and with it, the possibility that the chaos of contingency could convey ethical truths that are deeper and stronger than pure and unadulterated contemplation. Yet this hospitality towards the particular is precisely the poetic form. Philosophy thus needs poetic forms in order to engage in reflections that accommodate the radically contingent nature of our humanity. And these forms are not empty structures, but ways of seeing and being in which ethics and aesthetics intertwine.

In particular, Hegel and Nietzsche's reframing of philosophical discourse offers an important turning point in this context. Hegel's mapping of aesthetic form onto historical progress opens up philosophical discourse to formal innovation, to which the rise of Performance Philosophy continues to bear witness. In the 19th century, when the traditional absolutes began to flounder, not only philosophy's central premises but, more importantly, its *medium* suddenly became inadequate. Once the contingent was no longer dominated by absolutes, philosophy had to turn to new forms of elusive articulation. Thus by the time Nietzsche had declared that the gods had died laughing, contingency had won out over universality.⁵ As a result, pseudonyms, allegories, and many other dramatic devices begin appearing in philosophical writings, and structures gave way to language games.⁶ By situating this development within evolving genre considerations, new horizons find articulation: how genre enables philosophical reflection to engage with empathy, negation, the unethical and the absurd.

We might sketch some of these horizons by looking at the transformation of the two principal genres. Tragedy, in particular, has been a generic cornerstone in the philosophical debates that champion aesthetics; particularly individual Greek tragedies have become core philosophical material, be it for Schelling, Hegel, Hölderlin, Nietzsche or beyond. Given tragedy's dominant position in philosophical concerns, it is also worth investigating why comedy has not enjoyed the same privileged place. Tragedy depicts a world in which knowledge comes at the price of intense suffering. Its world is one of contradiction, confrontation and destruction. Governed by necessity and inevitability, tragedy's road gives voice to the pathos we encounter in the face of death, exploring our encounter with an experience that lies at the limit of reflection. Here thinking cannot take place in the distancing gesture of laughter, as the advent of violence requires a moment of approximation and marks the need for intervention. Empathy is not set in contrast to but rather as an element of the processes of reflection and thought. And so empathy, rather than self-reflection, allows for commitment to become a part of our thought processes and thereby influence our response, reception, and action in the face of what we have witnessed. At the same

time, tragedy offers a laboratory in which to dissect the violence entangled in these ethical encounters. Coming face to face with tragedy today shows us both the precarity of our ethical frameworks and the threatening pervasiveness with which violence itself eradicates any other commitment than to itself.

Philosophy's traditional dismissal of comedy has been explained by the ethically suspect qualities that philosophy has typically attributed to laughter and humour. Yet, a closer look at the art of comedy shows that it cannot be characterized by simple ethical dualism or exclusion (i.e. good or bad or neither) but by ethical inclusion (i.e. inextricably and simultaneously good-and-bad). Depicting a world in juxtaposition, comedy constantly teeters between binary oppositions that are both irrevocably contaminated. Comedy's ethical interplay implies a vision of the self as a collaborative process of constant becoming and rejects identity as a core essence to be protectively hedged from external influences.⁷ Its ethics calls for near-constant adjustment and balancing of one's behaviour by way of welcome exposure to outside forces, replacing ethical and social norms with character traits such as flexibility and adaptation as the sole indicators of value. Comedy does not reject values *per se* but deliberately rejects traits that encourage intransigence, such as purity, integrity, and loyalty. It is only because such traits have traditionally characterized Western moral codes that comedy has historically been seen as ethically lacking. However, comedy contains its own complex system of values, one that Joseph Meeker (1974) likens to what he calls environmental ethics. According to him, these values respect biological, ecological, and environmental realities rather than abstract principles based on symbolic reasoning. Comedy's characters recognize that they are part of the world and thus not in a position to stand in judgment over it. The comic rule of thumb is to adapt to one's environment in every possible way. Thus comedy translates ethics into a kind of play that purposefully supersedes principle. In consequence, comedy and its values are profoundly site-specific. None of its ethical guidelines can be extracted from any precise context and be made to apply generally. Plural instead of polar, comic solutions revolve around compromise and balance between opposing values, without ascribing to any as absolutely binding.

While tragedy and comedy may build radically different worlds, both their proposed universes consistently call for intense ethical contemplation. And the reinvention of the ethics/aesthetics pair is what allows thought and action, philosophy and poetry, to coincide. In other words, what we intend by our generic categories inevitably reflects a much larger network of meanings as well as avenues of engagement. Ultimately, tragedy and comedy both highlight that knowledge is not always liberating. Indeed, in an alarming number of cases, consciously articulating unconscious forces rather has the undesired effect of encouraging pathologies to flourish uninhibited. Oppression does not germinate solely in the dark recess of irrationality but is often chanted as a clever slogan in the public square. Reason does not offer a path to resolve violent conflict. Likewise, detachment does not seem a viable stance in the face of ever-rising cycles of violence and the instrumentalization of entire populations. To what, then, should we aspire?

Acts of the Future—Toward a Working Group Manifesto

The genre of the manifesto stands out by a doing, not an undoing. It goes beyond mere critique because its critique comes in the form of propositions, of alternatives. The manifesto dares to imagine a future: not the future that *will* be, but the future that *could* be. Its appeal lies in its potentiality.

How might a manifesto of genre begin? Maybe something like this...

1

Let us reinvent genre as force. Genre is more than a category, more than a hierarchy. It might be less than a worldview, but it carries the power of transformation onto the objects it touches and the stories it tells. Genres articulate how we behave and form the values to which we subscribe. No instance of social organization is genre-neutral. From sexual politics and economics to philosophy and ethics, the so-called literary categories of genre provide the underlying framework for our thought processes as well as our performance practices. Genre is a mode of rhetoric: it offers ways of seeing, being, and performing the world.

2

When genre speaks, it flirts, it persuades, it titillates. It calls upon our gut reactions, our physical affects, and our bodily empathy as a basis for any understanding, logical and otherwise. Genre reminds us that reflection and affect are far from polar opposites but join forces. The world that genre evokes comes along in the dark shrouds of tragedy or the garish colours of the comedic clown. To speak with comedy: comedy is dangerous; it mocks and parodies and fails to acknowledge any overarching, lasting system. Tragedy's world, in turn, is dominated by the inevitability of collapse which reinforces suffering as the most fundamental shared experience.

3

Genre is not merely divisive, it enables. It forges the encounter between thinking and acting, philosophy and performance.⁸ Let's acknowledge that philosophy was never genre-neutral. Philosophy has been thinking dramatically, poetically, anecdotally from the very beginning. Genre shapes how we know, which means it ultimately determines what we know.

4

Why argue for genre in a post-generic world? Because genre, with its proposition of structures and its empathic force, demands that we think and act beyond the theoretical practice of critique that has come to exist only for its own sake. Universalizing criticism is a hijacking of philosophy that

leaves it devoid of imagination. Criticism perpetuates undoing as the only valid intellectual activity. Philosophy instead may do more by proposing alternatives, divergences, the new, even the impossible. Thus, acts of thinking may go beyond critique and become acts of creation, calls to action.

5

Genre's call to action does more than relegate the faculty of judgment to the realm of aesthetics; it shapes the encounter between life and death, from heroic resignation to the will to survive. It negotiates the terms between abstract principles and concrete situations ("to be or not to be"). Looking back onto the writing and voices of the past, genre loses its hierarchical edge. Instead, it becomes the looking glass that mirrors our own suffering and laughter. The line it draws is no longer an interdiction but an act of communication across centuries, across socio-symbolic orders. Genre's role in Performance Philosophy, then, turns into a question of ethical commitment.

Notes

¹ At the same time, poststructuralist critiques of genre categories, such as Gérard Genette's *The Architext* ([1979] 1992) or Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy's *The Literary Absolute* ([1978] 1988) continue to be deeply engaged in the history of genre theory and may also be said as marking yet another iteration and transformation of genre as it oscillates between literature and philosophy.

² These recognitions have lead linguists such as Michael Halliday (1978; 2014) to focus on what he dubs the "social semiotic" (cf. Systemic Functional Linguistics).

³ These developments are notably thanks to the scholarship of Northrop Frye, Mikhail Bakhtin, Adena Rosmarin, Raymond Gibbs, and Mark Turner, among many others.

⁴ See the discoveries in neuroscience indicating that our brains are hardwired in figurative patterns characteristic of genre as discussed in Gibbs (1994) and Turner (1997).

⁵ "For the old gods, after all, things came to an end long ago; and verily, they had a good gay godlike end. They did not end in a 'twilight,' though this lie is told. Instead: one day they *laughed* themselves to death" (Nietzsche [1891] 1995, 182).

⁶ Kierkegaard, Nietzsche's contemporary, wrote exclusively with the use of pseudonyms, recognizing that truth could no longer be situated as a universal but was inextricably tied to a particular (and indirect) point of view. Nietzsche himself used allegory in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and Wittgenstein soon demonstrated how the playful use of language upstaged all claims to its inherent *meaning*. The shift from content to medium had infiltrated and irreparably contaminated philosophy's sacred practice.

⁷ Historically speaking, Demastes (2008) suggests a strong corollary between popular concepts of the self and the prevalence of dramatic genres: "We may have here a reason why tragedy remained basically dormant throughout the Middle Ages and then arose with a vengeance in the Renaissance. The ascendancy of post-medieval idealistic perfectionism led to increased recognition of and respect for tragedy as it revealed the humanist idealist's conclusion that the human condition is a tragic condition involving (nearly) impossible aspiration. Wanting to disconnect ourselves from a once much-needed materially explanatory scaffolding, we became reacquainted with tragic independence from and resistance to externality" (57).

⁸ In fact, this might be an infinitely suitable place to announce a book publication emerging from the fruits of our Berlin Symposium debates. In other words: TBA.

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