
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Book Review of a Theory of Performativity: New Direction in Literary and Art Studies by He Chengzhou

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ABSTRACT

Performativity, a new theory for cross-subject study to enrich and refresh the criticism of literature and arts by borrowing other subjects' knowledge, referred by Professor He Chengzhou in his new book "A Theory of Performativity: New Direction in Literary and Art Studies" that is aimed to solve the problem of fossilization and simplification of leading criticism under the history and culture contexts, which brings new vividness and perspective to the humanities. This book discusses three features of the theory of performativity: rationality, feasibility, and utility by way of tracing the history of the concept, summarizing how it works in distinct subjects, and testing its effects in practical criticism.

KEYWORDS

Performativity, book review, arts and literature, He Chengzhou, literature theory.

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1. Introduction

A Theory of Performativity consists of nineteen chapters within four sections. In the first section (from 1 to 5) a, titled "The Transformation of Performativity and Critical Paradigm", the theory of performativity is presented. How could performativity be used in specific reading and critical practices, and what new perspectives and methods could it explore as a new concept of literary and art studies? In the rest of the sections (from section 2 to section 4), some case analyses are presented involving Chinese and foreign novels, comparative literature and world literature, theater and the art of film and TV, and cross-media literature and art. To be more specific, the first part is the description of the theory, and the other part is the case study.

Initially, the author shows the concept of performativity and summarizes the features of it. As a cross-border theory, it is difficult to define what performativity is, for its meaning is diverse and self-contradictory (Chapter 1). Chapter two mainly talks about the relationship between Judith Butler and performativity theory; for one thing, she was inspired by the theory in her distinct study stages impressively; for the other thing, she boosted the theory to be the core word in the humanities study. Performativity brings new viewpoints, concepts, and methods for literary study by expanding the study objects, stressing productivity, behavior, current time of literature, and interdisciplinarity (Chapter 3). In chapter four, literary performativity with the core of speech act and event promotes the transformation of literary study for the literature is a dynamic, interactive, and open process. The author presents his view that focuses on the performativity of literature should make full use of the Chinese traditional and modern cultural resources in order to enable more scholars to accept the construction of performativity, enhancing its interpretive effects. Chapter Five summarizes the new trend of cross-culture theater study manifesting the utility of aesthetics and social view. Section one describes the theory's performativity, and the analysis of the cases will unfold in the readers' eyes in the next sections.

In the second section, the theory of performativity is applied to literature. Mo Yan, born in the small countryside of Shandong, China, provides homeland feelings for the audience (in his Nobel Prize Address for Literature) and continues to construct his literary

identity with China's homeland characteristics (Chapter 6). *White Sandalwood Punishment* is a work of hallucinatory realism that expands the post-modern aesthetic features based on realism, specific homeland color in narration, and local polyphonic narrative by re-imagining and constructing traumatic historical events (Chapter 7). *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out* adopts the narration of animals with carnival characteristics and fable features, revealing the irrationality and absurdity of some political events and expressing a revolting critical spirit (Chapter 8). *A Doll's House* arouses the awareness of liberation and contributed to the updating of modern drama in China in the 20th (Chapter 9). Re-eventualization of Cao Yu under the influence of Henric Ibsen causes the power to interrupt the real world (Chapters 10-11). In the rest of section two, the ecological literature part comprises the animal narrative and appropriation and re-construction of *troll* embodying critical thinking towards nature (Chapter 12 and Chapter 13).

As for the art performativity, three topics in distinct fields are chosen: theater, cinema, and TV (Section 3 from Chapter 14 to Chapter 16). The forerunner of pioneer theater in contemporary Europe, Jerzy Grotowski, puts emphasis on the presence of actors' bodies, the interaction between actors and audience, and theater events and tests his thoughts in the practical world under the situation of the Cold War in Europe (Chapter 14). Through cross-gender phenomena in the films *Farewell to My Concubine* and *Hua Mulan*, the transition of Chinese society and politics is discovered (Chapter 15). Li Yugang, the phenomenal figure of television and popular culture in the new century, has success in cross-dressing performance, which shows the inclusiveness of society and performative culture could lead to the conversion of popular notions, motivating the emergence of diverse culture (Chapter 16).

From the viewpoint of comparative media, cross-media performativity discusses cross-media literature, artistic phenomena, or events concerning the relation among literature, theater, and film (Section 4). The adaptation of *Red Sorghum* is a response to the preceding parts, and the ritual performance contexts are adapted to influence the culture and politics in the 1980s (Chapter 17). Pioneer Kunqu Opera broke the traditional form and showed actors' reflection and criticism of life, art, and period (Chapter 18). Chinese and Western theater-novel, from the perspective of cross media, discusses how art skills affect readers' aesthetic habits and re-imagination and re-construction in some classical works with concepts of contemporary theater and performance (Chapter 19).

The theory is presented in the first section and then applied in research of classical works. Professor He has traced the origin of the word *performativity*, first presented by J. L Austin in his linguistic work, and the evolution from the linguistic term, feature of literary language, and social construction to the core concept of literary and art studies for literature criticism and study of theater and performance in the western development. The introduction of the concept and application of the theory could shed new light on both of the two fields in particular, and the book is the integration of new liberal arts, introducing theory to cross-subject studies and using it based on traditional Chinese works. The combination of theory and practice enables readers to focus on the extension of performativity in the field of literature and arts by attaching the importance of enhancing new critical dimensions, standing, and viewpoint with new study methods like ANT(Actor-Network-Theory). Testing the effects of one theory requires applying it in practice. The task of critique theory is not just to do creative academic research but also to teach how to read and analyze critically.

When reading the book, readers can learn how the professor He exemplify with specific examples, proves the arguments, and sorts the examples to support his conclusion. For example, several works of Nobel Prize winner in literature *Mo Yan*, like *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out* and *White Sandalwood Punishment*, are regarded as events and analyzed from the perspective of performativity, attracting people who haven't seen the works to read them thoroughly to have a look and bringing new inspiration for readers who have read the works of Mo. It is remarkable that the works Professor He has chosen to analyze with the performativity theory are classical and impressive. In other words, the argumentation strictly follows the structure of argument-example-conclusion. Thus, for readers, it is a readable book that is beneficial for theory studying, text analyzing, and article writing.

Reference

- [1] He, C. (2022). *A Theory of Performativity: New Direction in Literary and Art Studies*. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing Company.