
**The Emergence of a New Genre of Cultural Performance**

One might ask, what causes this pervading need to act out art which used to suffice by itself on the page or the museum wall? What is this new presence, and how has it replaced the presence which poems and pictures silently proffered before? Has everything from politics to poetics become theatrical?

Michel Benamou,

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Many people regard Plimoth Plantation as a museum. It calls itself a museum—The Living Museum of 17th Century Plymouth. The English word "museum" derives from the Greek *mouseion*, which means "of the muses." In a literal sense, then, a museum is a "place of the muses," and one of the nine sisters is Clio, the muse of history. Pilgrim history has until recent times been portrayed in poetry and paintings. Today, Clio has bounded off the printed page and down from the museum wall in order to frolic with her sisters in the performing arts. History at Plimoth Plantation is now expressed through performance…. 
During the 1960s, many theatres, in many different ways, incorporated audience participation into their performances. The Living Theatre, the Bread & Puppet Theatre, the Open Theatre, and Schechner's own Performance Group are some of the most famous American examples. Audience participation was vitally important in each of these theatres. Schechner defined a new kind of theatre that was diametrically opposed to the traditional separation of audience and performers. He called it "environmental theater":

Environmental theater encourages give-and-take throughout a globally organized space in which the areas occupied by the audience are a kind of sea through which the performers swim; and the performance areas are kinds of islands or continents in the midst of the audience. The audience does not sit in regularly arranged rows; there is one whole space rather than two opposing spaces. The environmental use of space is fundamentally collaborative; the action flows in many directions sustained only by the cooperation of performers and spectators. Environmental theater design is a reflection of the communal nature of this kind of theater. The design encourages participation; it is also a reflection of the wish for participation. There are no settled sides automatically dividing the audience off against the performers. (Schechner 1973, 39)

I have quoted Schechner at length because his conception of environmental theater fits so well with the way in which Plimoth Plantation actually functions. In the Pilgrim Village, the performers and the audience share the space, and the "action flows in many directions
sustained only by the cooperation of performers and spectators" (figure 5). Although in the 1970s, this kind of theatre was called "new," "experimental," and "avant-garde," it is, in fact, rooted in the ritual processes and performative patterns of traditional and oral cultures. During the 1970s, Schechner did fieldwork in New Guinea, Indonesia, and India, where he saw models of and for performance that validated his own theoretical definition of theatre.

So here, then, is another concept of theatre: one in which the intermingling of performers and spectators during the performance is considered a genuine theatrical activity. Such a theatre is "a middle world where actual group interaction can happen—not only through audience participation but by subtler means of audience inclusion and environmental staging" (Schechner 1977, 94). When one thinks of the variety of environmental staging techniques employed at Plimoth Plantation and the variety of ways in which the audience is integrated into the performance, it is apparent that this living history performance fulfills Schechner's definition of theatre.

It should be clear, by this point, that the living history performance at Plimoth transcends the scope of a tourist production. That is only one frame through which to view it. Combining Cole's definition of theatre with Schechner's, we can see how this performance reflects the ritual roots of the theatre in that it reactualizes the *illud tempus* of a tribal origin myth. The images of the Pilgrims are brought into the present by the actor/historians in the same way that ritual actors all over the world have enacted and made manifest their mythic ancestors. The interpreters undergo the same kind of rounding experience that Cole has described for actors in a play. Highly influenced by the cultural transformations of the 1960s and 1970s, the living museum at Plimoth has taken
the shape of a large environmental theater, utilizing several types of environmental staging including traditionally presented dramatic scenes. Produced by the management of the plantation at a cost of $14,247 per day (Ingram 1987), it is mostly directed by the supervisors in the interpretation department (although much of the general action is created by the actor/historians themselves). It has an audience of around seven hundred thousand people a year. And, although highly theatrical, the living museum is also responsible for the dispensing of accurate ethnohistorical information about the culture of the Pilgrims. It is a complex, multileveled performance that appeals to tourists, scholars and ancestor-worshipers alike. In contemporary America, it represents a new liminoid genre of performance that has been shaped by several cultural factors in our postmodern society. …

…The presentation of history in the Pilgrim Village has been shaped in a society that has been profoundly transformed by the medium of television.

Peoples' expectations have been conditioned by the omnipresence of television in contemporary culture. One of the questions visitors frequently ask upon entering a re-created Pilgrim house is: "Where's your television?" One inventive actor/historian used to respond "Oh, indeed, our elders ofttimes 'tells a vision.' Is that what you mean, sir?" On a less literal level, most visitors today are oriented toward a multi-channeled, cool-media approach to experience. They expect to be able to switch back and forth among channels easily, to experience a rapid transformation of frames, to enjoy an interplay of contradictory categories. Schechner has noted that: "historical restoration is actually a version of the postmodern. It assumes that spectators, and restorers, can shift temporal
channels. Moving through a restored environment involves swift adjustments of frame and accurate processing of multiplex signals" (1979, 20). The cultural climate conducive to such experiences has been fostered by television.

This kind of simultaneous cognition of contradictory categories is a mark of the postmodern; it is in essence the pleasure of postmodern consciousness. Schechner has called it the "maya/lila" perspective (1979, II). These Sanskrit words mean "illusion" and "play," respectively. Television has nurtured a cultural attitude of viewing contradictory frames of experience as the "play" of "illusion." Just as one can switch from the news (real events) to soap operas (fictional events) on television, so, in the Pilgrim Village, one can focus on either the illusory historical scene or the twentieth-century contradictions (such as visitors with their video equipment and Polaroids) or both simultaneously. This paradoxical experience, which provides the majority of visitors with a sense of play and fun, is what makes the village so attractive to the postmodern spectator. The ironic interplay of frames is heightened at Thanksgiving when real television crews and media stars like Tom Brokaw enter the illusory Pilgrim Village. At this time of the year, Pilgrim interpreters have even appeared on major network talk shows.

It is my thesis that, regarding Plimoth, people have become more fascinated with the interplay of contradictory categories than with the narrative delineation of Pilgrim history, and that the predominant place of television in popular culture is responsible for this attitude. As Ihab Hassan has written: "Postmodernism derives from the technological extension of consciousness, a kind of twentieth-century gnosis, to which contribute the computer and all our various media (including the mongoloid medium we call television). The result is a paradoxical view of consciousness as information and history as
happening" (1981, 35). Television has precipitated the "You Are There" history-as-happening perspective of postmodern culture, conditioning its mass audience to expect a multi-channeled experience. It is no surprise then that in the 1980s history has been transformed into play and performance, and that such an experience has great mass appeal. Surely the representation of the Pilgrims at Plimoth today owes as much to television as to the history textbook….

The plantation of the early 1960s was without a doubt an outdoor museum. The costumed staff were essentially museum guides who directed the visitors' attention to various static exhibits (the wax mannequins set up in tableaux) and answered the visitors' questions concerning Pilgrim history. At this time, the representation of the Pilgrims was becoming what Abrahams calls a "conversational" genre. In this most interactive of the genres, the audience comes face to face with the performer. The performer, in turn, "directs his expression in an interpersonal fashion to a limited number of others as part of everyday discourse" (Abrahams 1976, 200). Of course, the museum experience is not really everyday discourse; it is framed in many special ways. Although the guides and hostesses at Plimoth were not role-playing per se, they were dressed in seventeenth-century costumes. The performative representation at this point was a mixture of the play and conversational genres, pregnant with possibilities and ripe for a major transformation.

Dell Hymes has provided us with a term to designate that moment of transition when, in the course of performance, performers switch from one genre to another. He calls this a "metaphrasis," "a technical term for interpretive transformation of genre" (Ben-Amos 1975, 20). Although Hymes, in his article "Breakthrough into Performance,"
is discussing the styles of presentation in the oral tradition of Chinookan narrative cycles and basically focuses on the value of philological analysis to the ethnographic study of verbal performance traditions, I think his terminology can be applied to that major transition in the styles of presentation at Plimoth that began taking place in the early 1970s: the switch from third-person narration of the teaching-style interpretation to the first-person role-playing called living history….

…The counterculture’s questioning of authority, the grassroots “Greening of America,” and the populist movement in history museums were all indicators of the major ideological shift that catalyzed the metathesis of Pilgrim representation at Plimoth. In the words of Carolyn Travers, whose father was the museum director at Plimoth during the 1960s, the Pilgrims were interpretively transformed from "sainted ancestors" to "real people" (1985).

In retrospect, it is easy to see that the next step was inevitable. The plantation had completely furnished (as in parfournir) the Pilgrim environment. Unlike the guides and hostesses of the early days of the museum village, the interpreters of the early 1970s walked about in replicated historical costumes and spent time in the re-created houses reenacting the daily routines of the historical characters. As Deetz (1987) has suggested, it was becoming almost impossible for them not to speak in the first person in such a complete simulation of the historical daily lives of the Pilgrims.

By 1978, Plimoth existed in a kind of ludic field. The cultural milieu of the late 1970s, the convergence of theatre and anthropology, the maya/lila perspective that Schechner has described, all created just the right conditions for a momentous
performative transformation of Pilgrim representation. The step into first-person role-playing defined the presentation at Plimoth as a whole new genre of cultural performance.

Plimoth fits into the context of what Jay Anderson has called the "living history movement." This movement attained such popularity that in his most recent work Anderson identifies "a total of about ten thousand outdoor museums, historic sites, events, publications, organizations, suppliers, games and films [that] use historical simulation” (1985, 440). The movement may be described as one in which various methods of simulation to re-create the past are used. More and more museums are taking such an approach….

In "inscribing" the total living history performance at contemporary Plimoth Plantation in all its multiple dimensions, I have attempted what Clifford Geertz calls a "thick description" (1973, 27). Figure 6 is meant to illustrate the various frames in which the audience can experience this cultural performance. On the top line of each frame are labels for the fundamental categories of performance: Tourist Production, Environmental Theatre, Ethnohistorical Role-Playing Performance and Ritual Reactualization. On the left-hand side are listed the types of phenomena that produce the experience: Tourist Attractions, Illusory Scenes, Historical Data, and Mythic Imagery. On the right-hand side are designations that categorize the result of each type of experience: Recreation, Entertainment, Education, and Religion. From the bottom up, in the brackets, are the four fundamental types of audience members: Tourists, General Visitors (who are not
necessarily tourists), Students, and Modern Pilgrims, or individuals who are on a genuine pilgrimage to this site.

In the widest frame, dimension A, the performance at Plimoth is experienced as a tourist production that is part of a very large network of such productions. This frame is filled with all kinds of tourist attractions that relate to the Pilgrim image, from the Pilgrim Gift Shop to the wax museum, "Where your Pilgrim heritage comes alive." The plethora of businesses devoted to the tourist trade inspires visitors to tag Plymouth as a "tourist trap."…

The second major category of experience at Plimoth, dimension B, occurs after the visitor has actually entered the Pilgrim Village; it encompasses the whole theatrical aspect of the Plimoth experience. Schechner (1981), among others, has indicated that Plimoth is effective theatre. Once the visitors are inside the stage setting of the recreated village, they experience something like Stanislavski's natural-istic theatre, because the living museum presents its historical characters in reenactments that take place as if real life were happening in the here and now…. 

It is also theatrical according to MacCannell's term "staged authenticity." The Pilgrim Village is a front region that simulates a back region. Everything is staged to provide the illusion that the audience is observing people exposed in their daily routine. Of course, it is a well choreographed performance that creates this false back region. The audience is never permitted into the real back region. One of the purposes of this study has been to reveal and explicate the true back region of this cultural production, so as to make the total living history performance more understandable…. 
For me, dimension C is the most significant category of experience because it embodies Plimoth's central educational mission: to render, insofar as possible, an accurate portrayal of the cultural life of the real Pilgrims. This ideal is constantly in jeopardy because of the caesuras in the ethnohistorical data and the sometimes incorrect interpretations of the information that is available. Still, Plimoth has made great strides in the direction of historical accuracy because of the protocols established by James Deetz and the subsequent removal of the Pilgrims from their pedestals to become objects of honest and rigorous ethnographic scrutiny.

Dimension D of figure 6 focuses on the mythological and religious realm of the Plimoth experience. At the core of this is dimension E, what Eliade called an *illud tempus*: a "that time," when the founders of a culture—gods, heroes, or sacred ancestors—were present on the earth. It represents the sacred time of origins, what the Australian aborigines call the dream time (Eliade 1973). Within dimension D, the audience member experiences the performance as a ritual reactualization of the time of origins. The rite is effective because it "participates in the completeness of the sacred primordial time" (Eliade 1965, 6). So, at the heart of this experience is dimension E, which represents mythic time and space. It transcends the frames of historical reality and defines a domain of the deep, archetypal, mythic imagery that produces religious experience.
Figure 6. The multidimensional Cultural Performance at Plimoth Plantation