

**ACT** zeitschrift für musik & performance

**Making Sense of Performance. A New Approach to Performance Analysis**

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*ACT - Zeitschrift für Musik und Performance (2021), Nr. 10*

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### **Making Sense of Performance. A New Approach to Performance Analysis**

Attending the theatre – be it to see drama, music-theatre, dance or any other mode of performance – we enter into a complex and ‘messy’ process of making sense of what we see, hear, feel and think. This process is very personal, but not arbitrary, and it is influenced and guided by a lot of factors, many of which are neither intended nor controlled by the theatre makers themselves. In borrowing a well-established tool from organisational studies, the “sensemaking perspective” – most prominently introduced by Karl E. Weick – this paper seeks to provide a framework to guide our reflection on how we make sense of performances, what social, cognitive and perceptive factors and biases influence our understanding and how we indeed ‘enact’ a personal version of the performance, rather than being able to observe it as a reified event. The paper does this by at first distinguishing “sensemaking” from “interpretation” and by introducing sensemaking as a process that is characterized by seven characteristics: according to Weick, 1) sensemaking is grounded in identity construction; 2) it is retrospective; 3) enactive of sensible environments; 4) social; 5) ongoing; 6) focused on and by extracted cues; and 7) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. The paper discusses how these characteristics can be applied to analyses of attending theatre performance, using the experimental, site-specific music-theatre production *Maya* (Mathis Nitschke, 2017) as a case study to substantiate and test the arguments.

Sensemaking, therefore, is not offered as a new method of performance analysis *per se* but suggested as an overall way of looking at, thinking about, and accounting for how we attend the theatre. It is a frame of mind which provides a kind of overarching structure that addresses the theatre performance in its wider context and negotiates the individual and collective agency of the audience.

### **Making Sense of Performance. Ein neuer Ansatz der Aufführungsanalyse**

Wenn wir ins Theater gehen – sei es, um Drama, Musiktheater, Tanz oder irgendeine andere Form der Aufführung zu sehen – treten wir in einen komplexen und "unordentlichen" Prozess ein, in dem wir dem, was wir sehen, hören, fühlen und denken, einen Sinn geben. Dieser Prozess ist sehr persönlich, aber nicht willkürlich, und er wird von vielen Faktoren beeinflusst und gelenkt, von denen viele von den Theatermachern selbst weder beabsichtigt noch kontrolliert werden. In Anlehnung an ein bewährtes Instrument aus der Organisationsforschung, der "Sensemaking-Perspektive" - die vor allem von Karl E. Weick eingeführt wurde – versucht dieser Beitrag, einen Rahmen zu schaffen, der unsere Reflexion darüber leitet, wie wir Aufführungen verstehen, welche sozialen, kognitiven und wahrnehmenden Faktoren und Vorurteile unser Verständnis beeinflussen und wie wir tatsächlich eine persönliche Version der Aufführung "inszenieren", anstatt sie als verdinglichtes Ereignis zu beobachten. Der Beitrag tut dies, indem er zunächst "Sensemaking" von "Interpretation" unterscheidet und Sensemaking als einen Prozess einführt, der durch sieben Merkmale charakterisiert ist: Nach Weick ist 1) Sensemaking in der Identitätskonstruktion begründet; 2) es ist retrospektiv; 3) enaktiv von sensiblen Umgebungen; 4) sozial; 5) fortlaufend; 6) auf und durch extrahierte Hinweise fokussiert; und 7) eher durch Plausibilität als durch Genauigkeit angetrieben. Der Beitrag diskutiert, wie diese Charakteristika auf Analysen des Besuchs von Theateraufführungen angewendet werden können, wobei die experimentelle, ortsspezifische Musiktheaterproduktion *Maya* (Mathis Nitschke, 2017) als Fallstudie zur Untermauerung und Prüfung der Argumente dient.

Sensemaking wird daher nicht als eine neue Methode der Aufführungsanalyse *per se* angeboten, sondern als eine allgemeine Art und Weise vorgeschlagen, wie wir das Theater betrachten, darüber nachdenken und Rechenschaft ablegen. Es ist eine Denkweise, die eine Art übergreifende Struktur bietet, die die Theateraufführung in ihrem weiteren Kontext betrachtet und die individuelle und kollektive Handlungsfähigkeit des Publikums verhandelt.

## Making Sense of Performance. A New Approach to Performance Analysis

### *Coming to one's senses*

I was first introduced to the framework of 'sensemaking' as a prominent model in organizational studies<sup>1</sup> when co-supervising a PhD student with Prof. Annie Pye from Exeter University's Business School. The student, Sue Kay, worked in organizational sciences but her case studies were small-scale theatres.<sup>2</sup> In brief, sensemaking "refers generally to those processes by which people seek plausibly to understand ambiguous, equivocal or confusing issues or events"<sup>3</sup>. At the time I wondered if, on closer inspection, the seven properties of sensemaking proposed most prominently by Karl E. Weick in 1995<sup>4</sup> were not in fact a very apposite approach to describe how we attend<sup>5</sup> a theatre, dance or music-theatre performance. Re-reading about sensemaking as a perspective now under the influence of both an intensive symposium on methodology in theatre studies (Munich, 2017)<sup>6</sup> and the recent publication of Christel Weiler and Jens Roselt's introduction to *Aufführungsanalyse [Performance analysis]*, it struck me how well the concept could be applied to theatrical events and perhaps solve some of the problems and questions still riddling performance analysis: How to deal with an ephemeral event as an 'object' for analysis? How to account for the elusive

<sup>1</sup> See Andrew D. Brown, Ian Colville, and Annie Pye, "Making Sense of Sensemaking in Organization Studies", in: *Organization Studies* vol. 36, no. 2 (2014), pp. 265–277 on the history and impact of this concept.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Kay, *Organising, Sensemaking, Devising: Understanding What Cultural Managers Do in Micro-scale Theatre Organisations*, Phil. Diss. Exeter 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Brown, Colville, and Pye, "Making Sense of Sensemaking" (see nt. 1), p. 266.

<sup>4</sup> See also Annie Pye's more recent re-evaluation of sensemaking in the context of leadership studies and Sandberg and Tsoukas' critical review of the sensemaking perspective. Annie Pye, "Leadership and Organizing: Sensemaking in Action", in: *Leadership* vol. 1, no. 1 (2005), pp. 31–49; Jörgen Sandberg and Haridimos Tsoukas, "Making Sense of the Sensemaking Perspective: Its Constituents, Limitations, and Opportunities for Further Development", in: *Journal of Organizational Behavior* vol. 36 (2015), pp. 6–32.

<sup>5</sup> I am using this term here in the sense that George Home-Cook outlines it: "First and foremost, the idea of 'attending theatre' implies far more than the simple fact of being physically present at a given performance event. Importantly, there is a collective, as well as an individual, sense of commitment, discipline and responsibility engendered by the act of attending theatrical performance. [...] Audiences acknowledge their attendance by adhering (or not, as the case may be) to certain protocols, by offering applause, by making the theatre sound with the chatter and rumble of pre-show conversation, and, most of all, by engaging in particular acts of attention. [...] When attending the theatre we are called upon to make an effort, to do something, to 'stretch ourselves'". George Home-Cook, *Theatre and Aural Attention*, Houndmills, Basingstoke 2015.

<sup>6</sup> The proceedings of this symposiums have been published as *Methoden der Theaterwissenschaft*, ed. Christopher B. Balme, and Berenika Szymanski-Düll, Tübingen 2019.

audience and its role? How to handle subjectivity? How to talk about performances that do not seem to make any sense?

Weiler and Roselt present two major methodological strands in their book: the semiotics of performance on the one hand and its phenomenology on the other hand.<sup>7</sup> The former, starting in the 1970s, considers the performance as a text to be read, understood and interpreted.<sup>8</sup> It focuses on the meaning(s) generated by the performance, particularly through the use of signs. The latter privileges the experiential aspect of theatre-going and seeks to investigate how we perceive with our senses and how we become part of a process of a cultural performance which we – as the audience – co-create.<sup>9</sup>

Both approaches are beautifully encapsulated by the double meaning of ‘sense’ in sensemaking. ‘To sense’ is to experience with one’s sensual faculties, and ‘sense’ is also the meaning we extract, construct, infer or even force upon the event we witness and participate in. In the context of theatre studies, making ‘sense’ of a performance will usually include aspects of cognitive understanding (which may include arriving at discursive meaning, but also behavioral, attentional or judgment decisions) and making a sensory connection to what we see and hear.<sup>10</sup> As I will seek to demonstrate, the sensemaking perspective fuses the semiotic ‘interpretative’ activities and the ‘construction’ of the phenomena of a live performance into one “frame of mind about frames of mind that is best

<sup>7</sup> They make it clear, however, that these need to be seen as complementary rather than mutually exclusive approaches (Christel Weiler and Jens Roselt, *Aufführungsanalyse. Eine Einführung*, Tübingen 2017, p. 102). This resonates with Bert O. States idea of a “binocular vision” we need to employ when watching theatre: “one eye enables us to see the world phenomenally; the other eye enables us to see it significatively. These are the abnormal extremes of our normal vision. Lose the sight of your phenomenal eye and you become a Don Quixote (everything is something else); lose the sight of your significative eye and you become Satre’s Roquentin (everything is nothing but itself).” Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater*, Berkeley 1985, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> See Weiler and Roselt, *Aufführungsanalyse* (see nt. 7), p. 41 and further: Marco De Marinis, *Semiotica del teatro: l’analisi testuale dello spettacolo*, Milano 1982; Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, London 1980; Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Semiotik des Theaters*, 3 Bände, Tübingen 1983.

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Stanton B. Garner, *Bodied Spaces. Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama*, Ithaca 1994; Jens Roselt, *Phänomenologie des Theaters*, München 2008; States, *Great Reckonings* (see nt. 7).

<sup>10</sup> Sandberg and Tsoukas have pointed out that the sensemaking perspective “finds it difficult to incorporate the body in its accounts” (“Making Sense of the Sensemaking Perspective” [see nt. 4], p. 25). They suggest that the sensemaking perspective needs to be developed “from a phenomenological perspective” – given that theatre studies have engaged with phenomenology for some time now, this would almost be inevitable in the application of the sensemaking perspective in performance analysis.

treated as a set of heuristics rather than as an algorithm”<sup>11</sup>. As I will argue, it thus expands the existing literature on a kind of “binocular” performance analysis by providing additional perspectives on how we as audiences make sense of going to the theatre.

### *Against (mere) interpretation*

Before outlining its seven properties and applying them to theatre, it is worthwhile to start with Weick’s core distinction between ‘interpretation’ and ‘sensemaking,’ as it resonates so strongly with a particular shift in perspective in the humanities: the gradual abandonment of the idea that artworks can be (and should be) reified, should be considered ‘objects’ we can study objectively. This idea is perhaps strongest and most persistent where the artwork is connected ontologically with a material presence of some permanence: a painting or sculpture, a printed poem or novel, an autograph of a symphony or opera score, a printed play text or drama. Theatre studies as an academic discipline has long questioned the idea that the printed drama is the artwork,<sup>12</sup> and there are tendencies also in musicology to focus on music as an ephemeral practice rather than a thing.<sup>13</sup>

In his very different context of organizational practice, Weick arrives at a similar distinction: he makes a point of contrasting sensemaking with interpretation (against those who use them synonymously): the idea of interpreting presupposes “some kind of text”<sup>14</sup>, which can be read and understood. The act of interpreting, he then suggests, were an “acceptable and approximating translation”<sup>15</sup>, a rendering “in which one word is explained by another”<sup>16</sup>. In her famous essay “Against interpretation,” Susan Sontag defines

<sup>11</sup> Karl E. Weick, *Sensemaking in Organisations*, Thousand Oaks 1995, p. xxii.

<sup>12</sup> In Germany, Max Hermann, who has often been credited with being the initiator of theatre studies as a discipline in this country in the 1920s, abandoned the dramatic text as the foremost object of study for theatre scholars and put ephemeral event of the performance at its centre. See: Christopher B. Balme, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies*, Cambridge 2008, p. 1-12.

<sup>13</sup> Lydia Goehr’s *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (Oxford 1992) is one of the starting points for this school of thought and has influenced many of the subsequent writings, such as Christopher Small’s 1998 book *Musicking. The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover 1998), for which he coined this neologism to capture music as a verb rather than a noun. See also Nicholas Cook’s book from 2013, the title of which, *Beyond the Score* (New York 2013), points in a very similar direction and focuses on performance in music.

<sup>14</sup> Weick, *Sensemaking in Organisations* (see nt. 11), p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> *Webster’s Dictionary of Synonyms*, cit. in *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

interpretation in a similar vein: “The task of interpretation is virtually one of translation. The interpreter says, Look, don’t you see that X is really— or, really means – A? That Y is really B? That Z is really C?”.<sup>17</sup> This comes with an implication of authority: someone of superior knowledge translates a text for “an audience presumed to be in need of the interpretation”<sup>18</sup>. Sensemaking, for Weick, differs in that it takes neither the text nor the audience as a given:

The process of sensemaking is intended to include the construction and bracketing of the textlike cues that are interpreted, as well as the revision of those interpretations [...]. Sensemaking is about authoring as well as interpretation, creation as well as discovery.<sup>19</sup>

Weick continues: “In real-world practice, problems do not present themselves to the practitioners as givens, they must be constructed from the material of problematic situations which are puzzling, troubling and uncertain”.<sup>20</sup> If we replace ‘problems’ with ‘theatrical performances,’ we have a very good definition of an understanding that the theatrical event is not an objective thing, but something that is co-constructed and co-authored every night anew and in as many parallel versions as there are audience members in attendance: “Sensemaking is about the ways people generate what they interpret. [...] Sensemaking is about an activity or a process, whereas interpretation can be a process but is just as likely to describe a product”.<sup>21</sup> Sontag has an even more pronounced view on this: “to interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world — in order to set up a shadow world of ‘meanings’”.<sup>22</sup>

A similar problem, one might add, arises with regard to the notion of an ‘analysis’, which also comes with an indefinite article, whereas speaking of ‘a sensemaking’ makes no sense. The idea of ‘analysis’ as ‘taking something apart to understand better’, while less burdened with the authoritative and translative expectation toward interpretation, is still wedded to metaphors like that of an engine to be taken apart in order to analyze what each part does. A performance

<sup>17</sup> Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation”, in: *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, ed. by Susan Sontag, London 2009 [1964], p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Weick, *Sensemaking in Organisations* (see nt. 11), p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>22</sup> Sontag, “Against Interpretation”, p. 7.

is no such thing, and by taking ‘it’ apart, one actually already makes crucial interpretive decisions on what constitutes a part or sensible segment of it, of what pertains to it and what does not: is the emergency light part of the set design? Is the actor’s cough the character’s affliction or his private cold? Is the low rumble a passing subway penetrating the theatre’s sound insulation or a subtle sound effect? “Sensemaking suggests the construction of that which then becomes sensible”<sup>23</sup>, or in other words: “to engage in sensemaking is to construct, filter, frame, create facticity [...] and render the subjective into something more tangible”.<sup>24</sup> This is not just something we *do* in the theatre, but actually cannot *help* doing: I attended a staging of *Hamlet* recently in Munich (Kammerspiele 2017), for example, before the beginning of which the audience were told that one of the actors (Nils Kahnwald) had injured his knee in rehearsals and would play in a wheelchair. This, we were told, was not part of the directorial concept, and we were asked to discount or ignore this change. Naturally, this proved impossible: the significance of seeing the actor in this multi-roled production first as an incapacitated Hamlet and later as an immobile, disabled Ophelia in a wheelchair, with a wedding gown merely draped over his/her front, created plenty of imagery and symbolism, which could in no way be neatly disentangled from how the audience made sense of director Christopher Rüping’s interpretation of the drama.

Finally, ‘sensemaking’ is a more apt term than interpretation or analysis, not only but especially when the ‘object’ of study is particularly problematic or ‘slippery,’ as is often the case in contemporary performance:

When people discuss interpretation, it is usually assumed that an interpretation is necessary and that the object to be interpreted is evident. No such presumptions are implied by sensemaking. Instead, sensemaking begins with the basic question, is it still possible to take things for granted?<sup>25</sup>

In the following exploration of how sensemaking applies to performance, I will seek to substantiate my findings with examples and will draw in particular on my recent experience of a music-theatre performance, which played specifically with the audience’s expectations by withholding clear frames (in the sense of Erving

<sup>23</sup> Weick, *Sensemaking in Organisations* (see nt. 11), p. 14.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

Goffman<sup>26</sup>) with regard to what to take for granted, how to watch, understand or even judge it. The performance was called *Maya. A Mixed-Reality-Techno-Opera in the ruins of the heating plant Munich-Aubing*, conceived and composed by Mathis Nitschke.<sup>27</sup> As the title suggests playfully (and the performance confirmed), this was an event that defied stylistic coherence, genre conventions, and clear target audiences, making it a challenge to come to terms with. It did, however, invite sensemaking, and I will use it as a reference point throughout.

### *Sensemaking in performance(s)*

“Sensemaking describes the negotiation and creation of meaning, or understanding, or the construction of a coherent account of the world”<sup>28</sup>. If we take ‘the world’ to mean ‘a performance,’ this is a good summary of what we do, when we attend a piece of theatre, opera, dance or performance. We experience it not as an amorphous stream of impressions in time, but discover and/or impose meaning and coherence: both need not be discursive and can also be quite unstable. How this process is characterized, what factors play into it, is captured by the “seven distinguishing characteristics that set sensemaking apart from other explanatory processes, such as understanding, interpretation, and attribution”<sup>29</sup>. In summarizing much of the preceding literature on sensemaking, Weick defines:

Sensemaking is understood as a process that is:

1. Grounded in identity construction
2. Retrospective
3. Enactive of sensible environments
4. Social
5. Ongoing

<sup>26</sup> With reference to Goffman’s original definition of frames, Todd Gitlin explains: “Frames are principles of selection, emphasis and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters”. Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*, Berkeley (CA), Los Angeles (CA) and London 1980, p. 6. Oliver Seibt calls them even more succinctly “culturally acquired schemata of interpretation” (“kulturell erlernte Interpretationsschemata”). Oliver Seibt, *Der Sinn des Augenblicks. Überlegungen zu einer Musikwissenschaft im Alltäglichen*, Bielefeld 2010, p. 185.

<sup>27</sup> For details see: <https://mathis-nitschke.com/wp/en/maya/> [accessed: 21 June 2021] and <https://mayaoper.de/english/> [accessed: 6 November 2017] and also David Roesner, “Found and Framed. A Conversation with Composer and Designer Mathis Nitschke”, in: *Theatre & Performance Design, Special Issue: Design for Opera*, ed. Jane Collins and Arnold Aronson (2018) vol. 4, no. 3/4, pp. 204–221.

<sup>28</sup> McNamara 2015

<sup>29</sup> Weick, *Sensemaking in Organisations* (see nt. 11), p. 17.

6. Focused on and by extracted cues
7. Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy<sup>30</sup>

Using these seven properties as headings I will seek to discuss their application to how we attend theatre performances.

### *Grounded in identity construction*

Sensemaking begins with a sensemaker. “How can I know what I think until I see what I say?” has pronouns, all four of which point to the person doing the sensemaking. Obvious as that assertion may seem, it contains a trap. The trap is that the *sensemaker* is singular and no individual ever acts like a single sensemaker. Instead, any one sensemaker is, in Mead’s words, “a parliament of selves.”<sup>31</sup>

We are never ‘neutral’ spectators in the theatre, but even as theatre scholars we rarely seem to consciously acknowledge how we construct our identity (or for that matter, our “cultural capital”<sup>32</sup> in Bourdieu’s terms) in relation to attending particular venues, particular genres of performance and how we check our surroundings – physical and social – to position ourselves in relation to them. When we see other spectators do we feel we ‘fit’ in? Are they our age group? Our socio-economic class? Are they a specialist audience? Are they fans (of a performer or director)? Our experience of a performance is also hugely influenced by those with whom we attend it: are we going as a group of students with their professor anxious to ‘understand’ the show and be able to say something original afterwards? Are we going with our children and are mainly concerned whether they are enjoying it?

In the case of *Maya*, I noticed a number of things that would inevitably have an impact on my appreciation of the piece: the audience was mixed in terms of age, gender, and ethnicity. People were casually or rather functionally dressed, as we had been instructed on the flyers and websites: we would, after all, be standing in an unheated industrial ruin. From front of house conversations I overheard, it

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>32</sup> See e.g. Bourdieu, Pierre, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge (MA) 1984.

also became evident that many spectators, at least on this first-night performance, knew the creator of the piece and/or some of the performers – I myself have met Mathis Nitschke on a handful of occasions where we had conversations due to our shared interest in contemporary music-theatre. I was surprised by the high turnout, because this was going to be a very niche piece in a slightly remote and unwelcoming location. I attended alone but quickly recognized a few people: a theatre maker I had previously collaborated with academically, a PhD student from our department, who had assisted on the production, a linguistics professor who turned out to be married to one member of the performing string trio. As a music-theatre professor myself I felt very much the target audience – but also under some pressure to ‘get’ the piece and be able to perhaps comment on it intelligently afterwards. All this had an impact on how I constructed my identity – as a specialist viewer with a personal connection amongst likeminded co-spectators.

This idea of identity construction resonates strongly with the sociological theory of Erving Goffman in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). Goffman uses theatre metaphors throughout and his ideas have been widely integrated into theatre studies itself. Weick indirectly refers to Goffman’s theory, which is inverted here. The question is less about which self I present to the world, but which self/selves I adopt in perceiving the world presented to me in the theatre – both on stage and through the manifold framing devices: location, architecture, ticket prices, seating arrangements, dress codes, program notes and many more.

It is the very associating and disassociating with what come to be seen as threats to images as well as identities, or opportunities to repair and reaffirm them, that affects a person’s view of what is out there and what it means.<sup>33</sup>

Naturally, the sense I make of a performance and what it means to me is highly influenced, if not ‘dictated’, by the identity I adopt when attending it.<sup>34</sup> Acknowledging and reflecting this seems a vital step in our approach to performances.

<sup>33</sup> Weick, *Sensemaking in Organisations* (see nt. 11), p. 21.

<sup>34</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 24.

### *Retrospective*

Weick makes it clear that although we often think of time as a stream of pure duration, we actually experience it in discrete segments. A significant function of theatrical or musical dramaturgy is precisely to aid and suggest this segmentation in our experience of a performance. Usually, a clear beginning and end are demarcated by rising or falling curtains or the dimming up and down of the houselights. Acts, scenes or simply sequences of the show are distinguishable through narrative, personage, lighting, use of music, changes of costume or stage design etc. Detecting or superimposing structure, deciding on what are intelligible units and how they relate, however, is retrospective. Therefore, “the creation of meaning is an attentional process, but it is that which has already occurred”.<sup>35</sup> Performances, not unlike real-life situations, provide us with multiple possible meanings, multiple focus points and thus the “problem faced by the sensemaker is one of equivocality, not one of uncertainty. The problem is confusion, not ignorance”.<sup>36</sup> When people leave the theatre apologetic that they did not understand the piece, they rarely mean that they did not speak the language or were completely unfamiliar with the gestural, musical, visual or other codes used. They are confused by the multiplicity of possible meanings and distrust their instincts and abilities to retrospectively make sense of it in fear that they might miss the piece’s ‘actual’ and ‘intended’ meaning. In fact, our capacity and desire to construct meaning is so strong, that our “backward glance” is regularly influenced by “hindsight bias”<sup>37</sup>, which means that rather than using e.g. the clues available in a performance to determine its meaning, we decide on a meaning and revisit and remember the performance in a way that fits our verdict. This is particularly true in relationship to our aesthetic judgment: if at some point we decide that we like or dislike a performance, we will often selectively remember and/or evaluate what we have seen so far as confirming our judgment.

Sensemaking as a retrospective activity, however, is not limited to a single performance: as audience members, most of us draw on previous theatre

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 25–26.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

experiences: having seen the same piece in a different production, another piece by the same director, the actor in a previous role or just another performance in a similar genre or venue will lead us to attend with certain expectations, make comparisons, and will aid or confuse our process of understanding. In attending a recent performance of veteran director Christoph Marthaler<sup>38</sup> (*Tiefer Schweb*, Munich 2017), I had a distinct impression that you could detect from audience reactions whether individuals were seasoned fans of the director and familiar with his unique theatrical language or novices on their first encounter with his style. The intensity and type of laughter (surprised/knowingly) as well as audible reactions (groans and sighs vs. chuckles) to durational scenes and taxing repetitions, which Marthaler is known for, varied audibly.

Another nuance should be added, therefore, to Weick's understanding of sensemaking as a retrospective process: it is also a prospective process. Following Edmund Husserl, the German literary theorist Wolfgang Iser calls this the "dialectic of protention and retention"<sup>39</sup>, i.e. an activity oscillating between reviewing and making sense of what we have just experienced against the expectations we are continuously forming and renewing, or: our sensing of what's to come. In our attempts to make sense of a performance, we therefore have to address the ways in which we individually or intersubjectively – when we can plausibly make such a claim – have employed "interpretive scheme[s]"<sup>40</sup> through acts of retrospectively adjusting our perception or prospectively building certain expectations.

<sup>38</sup> Christoph Marthaler is one of the most unique European theatre makers with a career spanning nearly 30 years now. He has received numerous prizes for his work and his productions have entertained, puzzled and annoying audiences all over the world. He combines a deeply analytic perspective on the Swiss and German psyche, the professional, regional and national deformations of its predominantly male protagonists, those in power, and those on the sidelines, in the waiting rooms, in limbo. He has made his name with quirky and entirely original 'projects,' which in Britain would fall under the label of 'devised theatre', fusing absurdist texts and scenarios with music and a kind of slapstick in slow-motion. Characteristics of his signature style are the enclosed, exit-less spaces in which his characters are placed, the deliberate slowness and proneness to repetition of their actions, the scepticism toward our neo-liberal world of efficiency and self-marketing, the absurd sense of humour and the central role of music.

<sup>39</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *Der Akt des Lesens: Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung*, München 1976, p. 182, my translation. This dichotomy is based on Edmund Husserl's *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*, Dordrecht 1990 [1928], p. 41.

<sup>40</sup> Weick, *Sensemaking in Organisations* (see nt. 11), p. 28.

### *Enactive of sensible environments*

If we think of a performance as ‘the environment,’ which we make sense of at that moment, Weick’s following warning is highly relevant: “The word *the* suggests something that is singular and fixed; the word *environment* suggests that this singular, fixed something is set apart from the individual. Both implications are nonsense”.<sup>41</sup>

What this means is that we do not simply sense our environment but play an active part in setting it up: we “produce the environment [we] face” and “construct reality through authoritative acts”<sup>42</sup>. Any actor will attest to making the experience that performances of the same piece feel considerably different and seem to take on different meanings depending on each individual show’s selection of spectators. This is true for all performances and all genres, but becomes more significant and more transformative when the scope for active involvement of audiences is greater: improv theatre, immersive theatre, promenade theatre, theatre with audience participation, stand-up comedy, sing-along musicals etc. are all instances where sensemaking highly depends on how audiences members – individually and collectively – enact the performance as a sensible environment.<sup>43</sup>

But it is also a cognitive sense<sup>44</sup> in which Weick refers to enactment with reference to Barbara Czarniawska-Joerges’s work:

A stone exists independently of our cognition; but we enact it by a *cognitive bracketing*, by concentrating our attention on it. Thus ‘called to life’, or to attention, the stone must be socially constructed with the help of the concept of stone, its properties and uses.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., pp. 31–32, original emphases.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Weiler and Roselt, who in their suggestion of first steps towards performance analysis remind the reader to “consider oneself to be part of the event and to abandon the idea, that there was an objective result of an analysis, which could hold true against all objections” (*Aufführungsanalyse* [see nt. 7], p. 27).

<sup>44</sup> On yet another level, which can only be referred to in passing in this article, the idea of enactive perception has been discussed in depth and controversially with regard to its psychophysical dimension. See e.g. Alva Noë, *Action in Perception*. Cambridge (MA), 2004 and Jesse Prinz, “Putting the Brakes on Enactive Perception”, in: *Psyche* 12 no. 1 (2006), pp. 1–19.

<sup>45</sup> Czarniawska-Joerges, cit. in Weick, *Sensemaking in Organisations* (see nt. 11), pp. 35–36.

This clearly relates to what theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte calls the polyfunctionality of semiotic signs:<sup>46</sup> a stone in a performance – depending on context, relationship to other signs, and its use – can mean a plethora of things: the proverbial ‘first stone,’ the foundational rock on which to build a house, St Peter, an archaeological sensation, a clue in a crime investigation, a treasured memory of a holiday, or simply: a stone, to be appreciated for its ‘stoniness’ and therefore its texture, colour, weight etc. in and of itself.

Sensemaking as a framework takes this further: we are not merely enactive of individual signs and shape their meaning, but co-create the environment as a whole: in *Maya*, audience members could not simply rely on a – potentially – familiar performance environment, the rules of which they would be conversant with. Here, there was no seating, no clearly defined performance area and not even a clear demarcation of where the performance space ended, since there was a virtual element to it, too: spectators navigated the impressive interior of the defunct heating plant (see Fig. 1) with their mobile devices using an especially designed augmented reality app, which superimposed the graffiti-covered three heating blocks with cryptic written text, signs and drawings (see Fig. 2).

Many decisions of each individual, then, enacted the environment for themselves and for others: where to go and stand in the space, if and when to use the smartphone app, whether or not to talk to others during sections of the performance that resembled a club atmosphere more than a performance. I found that particularly the explicit encouragement to use one’s smartphones in the performance was then further enacted by many audience members by taking pictures and videos. In combination with the music, which was at times clearly in the vein of popular dance tracks, this created an environment resembling a club gig rather than a piece of experimental avant-garde performance. Filming live performance is strictly forbidden and socially frowned upon in opera or musical theatre, but entirely common at rock or pop concerts. Aside from light spillage being an annoying distraction in a darkened auditorium, copyright issues forbid the use of the phone in most theatre buildings: here, however, audience members

<sup>46</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte, “Die Zeichensprache des Theaters. Zum Problem theatralischer Bedeutungsgenerierung”, in: *Theaterwissenschaft heute*, ed. Renate Möhrmann, Berlin 1990, p. 238, my translation.

were even sent a message through their *Maya* App in a particular section of the piece specifically asking them to use the torchlight-function on their phones to illuminate the main character, who would otherwise have remained in relative obscurity. We literally and figuratively cast a collective spotlight on one aspect of the performance, thus enacting it for us – and others.



Figure 1: Ruins of the heating plant Munich-Aubing, performance venue of *Maya*.  
© Mathis Nitschke.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>47</sup> I am grateful to Mathis Nitschke, Ingolf Hatz and Julia Hildebrand for granting me permission to use their photos in this article.

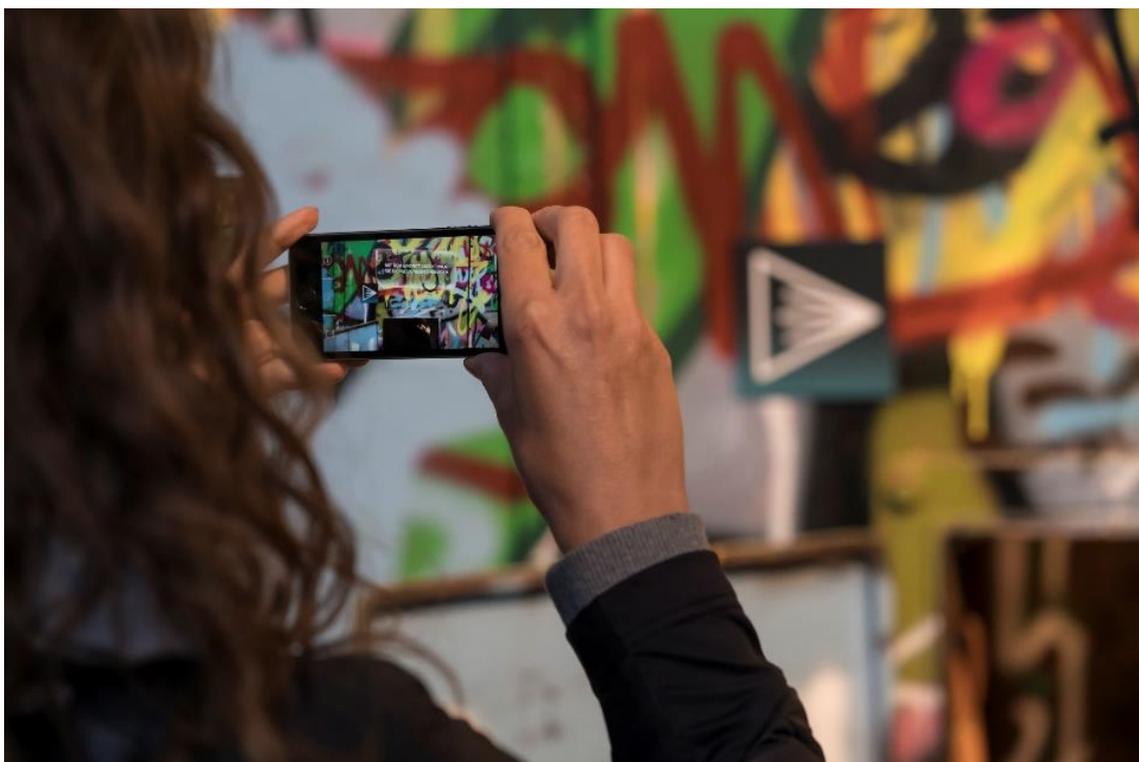


Figure 2: Augmented reality in *Maya*. © Ingolf Hatz and Julia Hildebrand.

### *Social*

Three concert sections were embedded in *Maya*, during which the nature of the performance and our attention shifted from the theatrical performance of the costumed singer (Martina Koppelstetter) towards the string trio (TrioCoriolis) playing pre-existing compositions by composers other than Nitschke.<sup>48</sup> While the trio's position on top of the approx. 15ft tall heating blocks (see Fig. 3) and the evocative lighting were already unusual (see Fig. 4), we still, as an audience, seemed to accept a different perceptive frame for these sections: that of a concert audience.

<sup>48</sup> These are by Domenico Gabrielli (*Ricercare Nr. 7*, 16th century), Steve Reich (*Violin Phase*, 1967) and KP Werani (*3. Raum*, 2017).



Fig. 3: TrioCoriolis in *Maya*. © Mathis Nitschke.

During the last of these three sections, however, a new ‘performer’ was introduced: a single laser beam (later followed by several others, designed by Karl-Heinz Käs), which appeared to ‘dance’ to the music. In the performance I saw it was at first the younger audience members who engaged physically with the laser beam, moving to catch its light, seeking to predict its repetitive movement patterns (Fig. 5).



Figure 4: Trio Coriolis in *Maya*. © Julia Hildebrand and Ingolf Hatz.

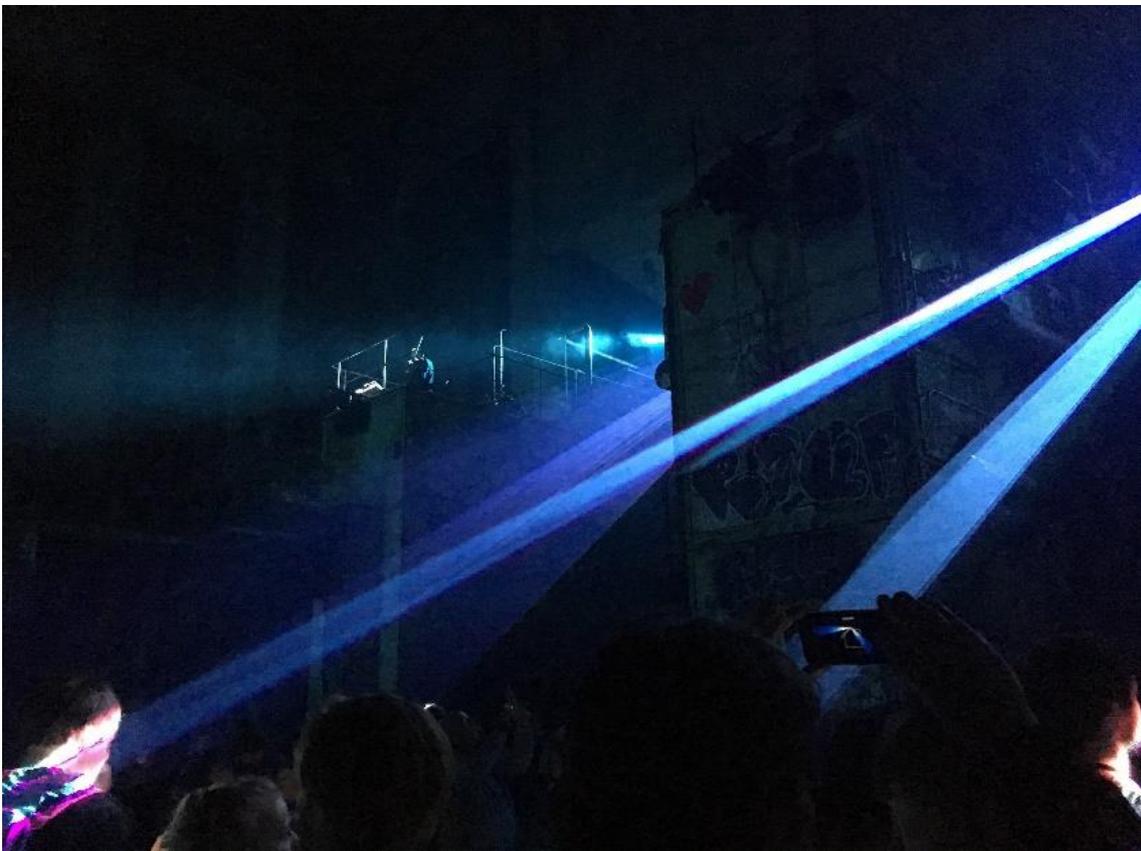


Figure 5: Engaging lasers in *Maya*. Photo by the author.



Figure 6: Engaging lasers in *Maya*. © Julia Hildebrand and Ingolf Hatz.

When a grid of laser beams across the whole space appeared later at ankle height, many of the adults also abandoned their concert audience habitus and played freely with the lasers (Fig. 6): stepping in and out of the grid, blocking individual beams, taking pictures and using their smartphone screens to deflect the lasers to the ceiling or elsewhere.

This observation<sup>49</sup> not only further underlines the previous point about sensemaking being “enactive of sensible environments”<sup>50</sup>, but also its social nature: “Those who forget that sensemaking is a social process miss a constant substrate that shapes interpretations and interpreting. Conduct is contingent on the conduct of others, whether those others are imagined or physically present”.<sup>51</sup> In performance analysis this aspect is not always explored in detail.<sup>52</sup> The impact of social aspects on how we perceive and interpret performance is sometimes

<sup>49</sup> Nitschke confirmed in conversation with me that the behaviour I describe here was present throughout all performances.

<sup>50</sup> Weick, *Sensemaking in Organisations* (see nt. 11), p. 17.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>52</sup> Weiler and Roselt do, however, mention, that “perception in theatre is an exceptionally difficult, culturally entrained and learnable process” (*Aufführungsanalyse* [see nt. 7], p. 24, my translation) and Susan Bennett’s seminal work *Theatre Audiences. A Theory of Production and Reception*, London 1990, established the notion of the confluence of interactive and interpretive dimensions of spectatorship.

even presupposed as a unified perspective. Fischer-Lichte, for example, writes about experiencing a performance of Einar Schleef's *Ein Sportstück* (by Elfriede Jelinek):

The techniques used by the members of Schleef's choirs to bring forth their phenomenal body as an energetic body, consisted in rhythmic physical movement and rhythmical speech. They thus created an enormous energy, which was sensed by the spectators and prompted them to constitute themselves as an energetic body.<sup>53</sup>

Fischer-Lichte provides no evidence to substantiate this claim about whether (or even how) "the spectators" constituted themselves "as an energetic body"<sup>54</sup> but it seems highly unlikely that the several hundred audience members could plausibly be seen to (re-)act as one in this respect. Although it is important, in Weick's words,

to conceptualize sensemaking as a social activity, it is also important to maintain a differentiated view of the forms social influence may take. This sounds obvious, but it is striking how often people discuss "shared meaning" or "social construction," as if that exhausts what there is to say about social sensemaking.<sup>55</sup>

Recognizing the social impact on how we 'read' performances is not to construct a collective with a shared understanding, but to observe and reflect upon reactions<sup>56</sup> and reflections (in reviews, surveys, interviews) by audience members – including one's own – and to undertake a nuanced "attempt to understand how the thought, feeling and behavior of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others".<sup>57</sup>

Christopher Small has provided good models for this kind of approach with regard to sensemaking in music. In his monograph *Musicking. The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (1998) he writes:

<sup>53</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen*, Frankfurt am Main 2004, p. 170, my translation.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Weick, *Sensemaking in Organisations* (see nt. 11), p. 41–42.

<sup>56</sup> See for example Marie-Madeleine Mervant-Roux's study on audience 'noises,' ("The Sound of Hearing", in: *Theatre Noise. The Sound of Performance*, ed. Lynne Kendrick and David Roesner, Newcastle 2011, pp. 189–197) or more generally the emerging literature on (qualitative) audience research, e.g. Bennett, *Theatre Audiences* (see nt. 52); Dennis Kennedy, *The Spectator and the Spectacle. Audiences in Modernity and Post-modernity*, Cambridge 2009; or Patrice Pavis, "Zum aktuellen Stand der Zuschauerforschung", in: *Forum Modernes Theater* 26 (2011), no. 1–2, pp. 73–97.

<sup>57</sup> Allport, cit. in *ibid.*, p. 39.

The act of musicking establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies. They are to be found not only between those organized sounds which are conventionally thought of as being the stuff of musical meaning but also between the people who are taking part, in whatever capacity, in the performance.<sup>58</sup>

In the laser episode in *Maya* described above, it was the relationship of the venue (which – while being historically charged as an industrial ruin – was relatively free of established *social* conventions), the mode of performance (which defied traditions of theatre or concert events), and the observable variety of audience behavior (which led to a shift in my sensemaking: from an appreciative, concentrated listener of a piece of music to a playful part of an interactive audio-visual installation). Nitschke's expressed aspirations for the piece resonate with this more fluid notion of oscillating forms of sensemaking:

I make an effort to avoid that one does not have to slavishly notice, understand and “work through” every detail, in order to comprehend and enjoy the performance. But the more you give yourself over to it, the more richly you will be rewarded. This can happen on different levels. From hanging out with a beer to dancing, from pondering the philosophical discourses to listening to the contrapuntal intricacies, from enjoying musical expression to marveling at lasers, lights and virtual worlds – everything is possible.<sup>59</sup>

At the risk of stating the obvious, sensemaking as a social process can also form *in opposition* of what I or others may perceive as “the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others”<sup>60</sup>. We feel strongly in favor of a performance, *because* others have dismissed it – by reviewing it, reacting to it or failing to show up, we may feel reinforced in our distaste, or confusion, or rejection of a piece precisely *due* to the social pressure of a roomful of spectators audibly enjoying it.

### *Ongoing*

At first sight, the assertion that sensemaking is ongoing makes more sense for contexts of work than for attending performances. Weick argues, that “sensemaking never starts. The reason it never starts is that pure duration never

<sup>58</sup> Small, *Musicking* (see nt. 13), p. 13.

<sup>59</sup> Mathis Nitschke, *Presskit for Maya. A Mixed-Reality-Techno-Opera in the Ruins of the Heating Plant Munich-Aubing*. <https://mayaoper.de/presse/> (accessed: 13 November 2017), 2017, p. 11, my translation.

<sup>60</sup> Allport, cit. in Weick, *Sensemaking in Organisations* (see nt. 11), p. 39.

stops” – most performances, however, have a clearly defined beginning and end. But if we look at how we make sense of performances it is very sensible to acknowledge that while the event is most often clearly confined in time and space, say: 8pm-9.15pm at the defunct heating plant in Aubing, the sensemaking process is not. Weeks before the event we may read an announcement in the press, prompting the decision to buy a ticket, already based on certain expectations with regard to the nature of the performance. We may speak to other audience members before the show starts or during the interval, and we may think, talk, read about it afterwards and transform the experience of a past event into part of the horizon of expectation for the next show by the same director or composer, in the same venue, or by the same performers. We are after all in a “situation of thrownness”<sup>61</sup> as Winograd and Flores call it – since even the most self-contained performance is merely an occurrence in an ongoing cultural, economical, political and societal context which plays a major part in our understanding.

Winograd and Flores introduce six properties for being thrown into ongoing situations, not all of which translate exactly to our field of enquiry, but some do so strikingly: “You cannot avoid acting: Your actions affect the situation and yourself, often against your will”.<sup>62</sup> This reminds us that even as mere spectators, we are never entirely passive, and however we act in a performance will transform the phenomenon we perceive and how we perceive it. Consequently, we “do not have a stable representation of the situation: Patterns may be evident after the fact, but at the time the flow unfolds there is nothing but arbitrary fragments capable of being organized into a host of different patterns or possibly no pattern whatsoever”.<sup>63</sup> The performance is not an object to be studied, but an ongoing situation we can reflect on from within. As has been discussed numerous times<sup>64</sup>, this also applies to the documentation of performance: in Winograd and Flores’s words, “every representation is an interpretation: There is no way to settle that any interpretation is right or wrong, which means an ‘objective analysis’ of that

<sup>61</sup> Terry Winograd and Carlos Fernando Flores, *Understanding Computers and Cognition: A New Foundation For Design*, Norwood (N.J.) 1986, p. 36.

<sup>62</sup> Cit. in Weick, *Sensemaking in Organisations* (see nt. 11), p. 44.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> See e.g. Matthew Reason, “Archive or Memory? The Detritus of Live Performance”, in. *New Theatre Quarterly* vol. 19, no. 1 (2003), pp. 82–89; Caroline Rye, “How to shoot live performance”, <http://www.bris.ac.uk/parip/howtoshoot.htm> (accessed: 12 August 2019) 2005; Weiler and Roselt, *Aufführungsanalyse* (see nt. 7), p. 59–62.

into which one was thrown, is impossible”.<sup>65</sup> When using reified objects that relate to a performance (director’s notes, a costume, a video documentation, a sound clip, a press photograph) we should keep this firmly in mind: none of these is an objective, true ‘fact,’ but already selected, preserved, presented in a particular way that will inevitably interpret and influence our sensemaking.

‘Ongoing’ as a term should not, however, suggest that performances (and their precursors and aftermaths) are experienced as an uninterrupted stream. Weick stresses this: “Interruption is a signal that important changes have occurred in the environment. Thus a key event for emotion is the ‘interruption of an expectation’”.<sup>66</sup> Interruptions – and how we identify them as such – are therefore a key feature within an ongoing situation and will play a significant role in our sensemaking.

#### *Focused on and by extracted cues*

Sensemaking as a framework poses as a fact that we do not perceive and understand situations as a whole, but by focusing and extracting certain cues from our environment:

What an extracted cue will become depends on context [...] in two important ways. First, context affects what is extracted as a cue in the first place, a process that has variously been described in the organizational literature as search (Cyert & March, 1963), scanning (Daft & Weick, 1984), and noticing (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988). The concept of frame (e.g. Goffman 1974) is used as shorthand for the structure of context. Second, context also affects how the extracted cue is interpreted, a stage that has been a primary focus of ethnomethodologists in their discussions of “indexicals” (Leiter, 1980; see also Ring & van der Veen, 1989, p. 181).<sup>67</sup>

It is important to be aware that we do not actually see ‘the’ performance – we select by our gaze, our directed aural attention, even by our feet if it is a promenade piece or performance environment. We may, for example, focus on an individual key scene, a formative character or performance within a production, or a striking aspect of set design, which will then act as our ‘key’ to the performance. We do so partly of our free volition, partly guided by context.

<sup>65</sup> Cit. in Weick, *Sensemaking in Organisations* (see nt. 11), p. 44.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>67</sup> Weick, *Sensemaking in Organisations* (see nt. 11), p. 51.

In a famous experiment by psychologists Daniel J. Simons and Christopher F. Chabris, participants were asked to watch a video, in which a ball game is played, and to concentrate on the number of passes that were made by one team. When asked afterwards who had noticed the performer in a gorilla suit who crossed the screen entirely visibly, only a small proportion had. A gorilla! We can try to compensate, as film scholars do, by re-watching the live performance numerous times or by watching a video recording to complement our selective first viewing. But both methods are flawed and problematic and also transform the experience for us and will result in a substantially altered experience compared to that of most audience members.

Not only do we make sense of a performance by a *selection of cues*, however, but also by using a selection from the range of *possible meanings* of any given cue. This is what Leiter (1980) describes as ‘indexicality’:

Indexicality refers to the contextual nature of objects and events. That is to say, without a supplied context, objects and events have equivocal or multiple meanings. The indexical property of talk is the fact that people routinely do not state the intended meaning of the expressions they use. The expressions are vague and equivocal, lending themselves to several meanings. The sense or meaning of these expressions cannot be decided unless a context is supplied.<sup>68</sup>

This, of course, is not news in theatre studies. Since the formative studies on theatre semiotics<sup>69</sup> the specific nature of signs, their mobility and polyfunctionality in performance have been studied and their dependence on context has been explored in great detail. What the sensemaking perspective adds to this, I would argue, are a few nuances: it emphasizes the active role of the audience: we are not, as it is called in Charles Sander Peirce’s triadic semiotic model<sup>70</sup> merely “destinations” (Eco) or “receivers” (Lotman)<sup>71</sup> of signs, but actively (and also highly selectively) ‘extract’ cues, which we then also use to make assumptions about what is to come: Weick calls them “seeds from which people

<sup>68</sup> Leiter cit. in Weick, *Sensemaking in Organisations* (see nt. 11), pp. 53–54.

<sup>69</sup> Marinis, *Semiotica*; Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre*; Fischer-Lichte, *Semiotik des Theaters*, (see nt. 8).

<sup>70</sup> See Albert Atkin, “Peirce’s Theory of Signs”, in: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2013 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/peirce-semiotics/> (accessed: 21 June 2021).

<sup>71</sup> See *Theories of Information, Communication and Knowledge: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, ed. Fidelia Ibekwe-SanJuan and Thomas M. Dousa, Dordrecht 2014, p. 109.

develop a larger sense of what may be occurring”<sup>72</sup>, chiming with the abovementioned Husserlian notion of protention. I would also argue, that they color or bias the way we actually continue to perceive a performance, which further cues we actually pay attention to. On a semantic level, this may mean that if we read an early cue in a particular way, we will continue to seek affirmation of our early theory on the story or characterization, which can lead to us actively ignoring evidence to the contrary. On an aesthetic level, we also tend to try to gauge from very early on, what kind of performance we will be watching, what to expect in terms of style of design and performance, rhythm, or atmosphere. Part of the appeal of *Maya* was that it kept us guessing where to pigeonhole it as a performance: avant-garde concert or club dance act? Installation or theatre? Highbrow or lowdown?<sup>73</sup>

This may even lead to successful forms of sensemaking that in the seemingly more objective framework of semiotics would perhaps be deemed to be misreadings. Weick retells an anecdote of a military detachment which got lost in the Alps. When they realized they had a map they felt reassured and extracted this cue and made sense of it in the context of their surroundings and subsequently found their way home to the base. Their lieutenant had a look at the map on their return and realized it was a map of the Pyrenees.<sup>74</sup> Based on this anecdote, we can easily imagine a performance – particularly when characters, locations, narrative etc. are not clearly identified or at all presented – in which someone uses the wrong cue to make sense of what they see. Do we simply dismiss this as a mistake? Sensemaking can account for and make productive how navigating a performance with the wrong ‘map’ may still result in having a ‘successful’ and meaningful experience which makes sense to the spectator in question, both semantically and sensually.

The strength of the sensemaking model as a perspective derives from the fact that it does not rely on accuracy and its model is not object perception. Instead,

<sup>72</sup> Weick, *Sensemaking in Organisations* (see nt. 11), p. 50.

<sup>73</sup> This is borrowed from David Savran’s book title *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theater, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class*, Ann Arbor 2009, which discusses similarly hybrid performances, albeit in a very different historical setting and genre.

<sup>74</sup> Weick, *Sensemaking in Organisations* (see nt. 11), p. 54.

sensemaking is about plausibility, pragmatics, coherence, reasonableness, creation, invention, and instrumentality.<sup>75</sup>

This assertion strikes me as quite central as it bridges a gap between semiotics and phenomenology as two major approaches to performance:<sup>76</sup> while semiotic seems to highlight the ‘objective’ and phenomenology the ‘subjective’, sensemaking introduces the notion of ‘plausibility’ as a bridge: while sensemaking is by no means objective or based on an absolute notion of ‘truth’ (which in performance is even more problematic than in the real world of business and organizations), it is also not randomly personal, but – by being social and contextual – strives for shared understandings.

### *Driven by plausibility rather than accuracy*

Sensemaking draws our attention to the fact that our attendance of performances follows both a “realist ontology, as in the suggestion that something is out there to be registered and sensed accurately, and idealist ontology, as in the suggestion that something out there needs to be agreed on and constructed plausibly”.<sup>77</sup>

Weick describes that even in real-world situations, such as organizations, accuracy is not crucial in an absolute sense for successful sensemaking:

If accuracy is nice but not necessary in sensemaking, then what is necessary? The answer is, something that preserved plausibility and coherence, something that is reasonable and memorable, something that embodies past experience and expectations, something that resonates with other people, something that can be constructed retrospectively but also can be used prospectively, something that capture both feeling and thought, something that allows for embellishment to fit current oddities, something that is fun to construct. In short, what is necessary in sensemaking is a good story.<sup>78</sup>

I have in the past admired performance analyses, which sought very hard to achieve accuracy: I myself made attempts in this direction by taking on the onerous task of notating long passages of performances in elaborate notational

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Weiler and Roselt, who also characterize these as complementary rather than mutually exclusive approaches (*Aufführungsanalyse* [see nt. 7], p. 102).

<sup>77</sup> Weick, *Sensemaking in Organisations* (see nt. 11), p. 55.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., pp. 60–61.

systems to better understand and account for their precise musical shape.<sup>79</sup> In order to do so, I had to rely on videotapes, of course, and to rewind sections many, many times. In other words: I found out things about a performance only by experiencing it in ways no audience member ever would. This was perhaps justified as I was interested in the logic of its construction, but it is not a very sensible method to find out about the performance as a singular event. Sensemaking is a perspective that allows us to speak about a performance based on the attendance of one or two performances acknowledging that “sufficiency and plausibility take precedence over accuracy”<sup>80</sup>. It is about the attempt to tell a convincing story, which should be sufficiently accurate and told plausibly, while being transparent about how we arrived at this story and while accepting that other readings could well also be available and might not necessarily be less plausible.

### *Conclusion*

I hope it has become evident, that even though I argue for employing sensemaking as a perspective in performance analysis, I do not suggest this to be the method to end all methods. Instead, it is an attempt to widen and supplement our view on live performance, to add frames and terms to our tool drawer, or to add a few additional drawers to our workshop.

The strengths of the framework can be summarized in that it allows us to integrate our semiotic activities and experiential qualities in watching theatre, to acknowledge how constructive and enactive a part we play in co-authoring the performance retrospectively, how formative identity construction, social factors and ongoing thrownness are for how we read the single event of a performance, hoping for plausibility over accuracy. Sensemaking as a tool prompts us to look at how we *actually* experience live cultural events and takes us closer to what they mean to *us* instead of employing an idealized abstract spectator. It gives us guidance and structure for taking stock of the complicated and messy process of attending and remembering performances – here, it bears some similarity to

<sup>79</sup> See David Roesner, *Theater als Musik. Verfahren der Musikalisierung in chorischen Theaterformen bei Christoph Marthaler, Einar Schlegel und Robert Wilson*, Tübingen 2003.

<sup>80</sup> Weick, *Sensemaking in Organisations* (see nt. 11), p. 62.

Patrice Pavis's often cited questionnaire<sup>81</sup>: it is an exercise to help us realize what we have seen and how we have made sense of it – it is a prompt, not an exhaustive checklist, which must be fully completed every time. Not all seven properties of sensemaking will be equally relevant for all performances – but addressing, why some aspects may take a back seat for certain performances is already a way of making sense of it and should be conscious.

Sensemaking, therefore, is not so much a method as an overall way of looking at, thinking about, and accounting for<sup>82</sup> how we attend the theatre. Individual properties can and will (as I have occasionally sought to flag up) be complemented or fleshed out with existing theoretical methods.<sup>83</sup> Sensemaking provides a kind of overarching structure that a) addresses the theatre performance in its wider context (i.e. the analysis is not confined to the time and space between the proverbial rising and falling of the curtain) and b) negotiates the individual and collective agency of the audience.

Its name, as mentioned above, is often a more accurate reflection of what we do when we claim to 'analyze' or 'interpret' performance. 'Making sense' of performances does not result in a lack of rigor or depth but describes our relationship to the material and process of watching a performance perhaps more truthfully and does not obscure our sensemaking process behind a veil of analytic jargon.

And finally, sensemaking allows us and/or prompts us to address our various biases. We tend to feign objectivity when approaching performance, whereas – if we are honest – a great many factors influence how we make sense of a performance: some more permanent (say: our race, age, gender, etc.), some more fleeting (personal state of mind, current news cycle, who we attend the performance with, etc.). The properties of sensemaking bring these to the fore and may hopefully stimulate transparent and reflective scholarship in future.

<sup>81</sup> Patrice Pavis, "Theatre Analysis: Some Questions and a Questionnaire", in: *New Theatre Quarterly* vol. 1, no. 2 (1985), pp. 208–212, p. 209.

<sup>82</sup> Brown, Caville and Pye emphasize the discursive aspects of sensemaking and the role that language plays in how we "author versions of [our] 'realities' and identities" ("Making Sense of Sensemaking" [see nt. 1], p. 268).

<sup>83</sup> See e.g. Mark Fortier, *Theory/Theatre: An Introduction*, London 2002.