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Pavel Drábek

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Playing, viewing, touching, modelling, mentalizing: theoretical reflections on PQ 2023

Pavel Drábek

University of Hull, UK

> A cube of dark grey polystyrene approximately 4 metres tall, 4 metres wide and deep. In this cube live and work three creatures: humans reminiscent of grey mice (is it because of the makeup, costume and hairstyle?). As if it were a huge cube of grey cheese, they furtively dig and delve inside the cube, making passages and openings to the outside world. The 'mice' watch the people who pass by and they observe them, expressionless, with focused eye contact. What are they doing? What do they think of us? What do we and what should we think of them? No words are spoken, only the cube is consumed from within, bit by bit, dig by dig.

This was *Home is Warmth*, the performative installation of Slovakia at the Prague Quadrennial's (PQ) 2023 Exhibition of Countries and Regions.[1] By proxy, the installation was tactile, full of action and effort, and filled with a metaphorical sense of purpose. It certainly was strange and even uncomfortable in the eye contact with the cube's inhabitants who are certainly not like us, humans. How can one approach such an artefact?[2] Its essence did not reside in the costume and the makeup, or in the grey block of polystyrene, and probably not even in the spatial formations made by its mouse-like inhabitants. There was no story and no clear sense of intentionality, and yet it did draw one's attention. What is more, spending time at the Slovak exhibition was worthwhile: the reflections prompted by the action were rewarding and aesthetic. But in what way could one speak of scenography or performance design here?[3]

Artefacts exhibited at PQ 2023 challenge our disciplinary heritage in several ways. After four exceptional years, crucially marked by the Covid-19 pandemic, scenography practitioners and theorists are confronted with major questions that have acquired great urgency, about the core practices and the identity of scenography as such. On critical reflection in retrospect, PQ 2023 combined exhibitions of playful, sensory artefacts; museum-like displays of (archival) artefacts; and a sharing of performative and/or theatrical scenographies. The fluctuation between the three loose and often overlapping categories has raised curatorial questions but it has also challenged our current conceptualizations of what theatre, performance, and scenography are.

In this essay, I build on the theories of relational aesthetics (Bourriaud 2002), of performative and scenographic models (Brejzek and Wallen 2018; Hann 2018; McKinney and Palmer 2017), and of ostension as an act of showing performed interaction (Osolsobě

CONTACT Pavel Drábek p.drabek@hull.ac.uk

1986; Zich 2024).[4] I propose a reconceptualization of the three troubled concepts – sensory artefacts, museum artefacts, and performative scenographies – with the help of Robin Dunbar's anthropological and evolutionary psychological notion of *mentalizing* (Dunbar 2022). I elaborate on Dunbar's concept to expand it beyond a narrow theory of the mind and its linguistic origins (i.e., as an ability to read intentions). I use *mentalizing* as the mind's capacity to think through and with others, and deploy the concept for my analysis and theoretical reflection on selected artefacts presented at PQ 2023.[5]

This proposed theory of mentalizing, I argue, allows for a novel functional understanding of scenographies of theatre (in a broad, inclusive sense), and reconceptualizes theatre as an act not only of performing, showing, and viewing, but of cultivating high-level *mentalization* as a social, collective act – thinking in the aggregate. It also helps conceptualize the otherwise liquid concept of *expanded scenography* and the helpfully inclusive yet abstract concept of *scenographics* and *scenographic worlding*. While every artefact has the potential to create its own worlds (cf. *worlding*, *cosmopoiesis*) and while scenographies are increasingly more relational in requiring proactive involvement from the viewer/spectator/participant, I argue that the loop needs to close. For scenography to have a recognizable identity as an artistic discipline it should feature an element of self-referentiality – an awareness of itself – that signals its own self-contained creation. I use the theoretical framework of mentalizing as a novel conceptualization of scenography and apply it to selected case studies from the artefacts presented at PQ 2023. On these case studies I analyse how the scenographic work engages the participants' senses and activates complex, self-referential models of the mind.

Urgent questions about scenography

The artistic concept of the 15th edition of PQ 2023, formulated by the PQ's artistic director Markéta Fantová, opens with a question: 'How do we see performance design/scenography?' Writing in the middle of the pandemic, in Spring 2021, Fantová invites participants to respond to the current concerns, from our newly rediscovered vulnerability, through the importance of physical encounters, to the need for renegotiating the relationships to our sensory organs (Artistic Concept, https://pq.cz/pq-2023-info/artistic-concept/). The event, in June 2023, confirmed the topicality and urgency of Fantová's artistic concept and enhanced the questions even further:

What is scenography now?

Scenography has transformed and evolved far beyond theatre design and performance design (in the narrow sense of *performance* as the art of performers). Leading critics in a trend-defining collection (McKinney and Palmer 2017) have called the practices *expanded scenography*. One of the theorists in the collection, Rachel Hann, promotes the term *scenographics*, to distinguish it from the specific concept of scenography as an artistic discipline that cooperates in the theatre and performing arts; building on Heideggerian ontology, Hann goes on to conceptualize *scenographics* as the creative activity operative in the acts of *worlding* (Hann 2018, 28–32).

I would argue that scenography needs further reconceptualization to respond to the cultural and even anthropological changes that have happened since. The distancing

measures during the Covid-19 pandemic have disrupted habitual ways of engagement: many people are much more cautious of what they touch, how close they are to others and how they congregate, especially in closed spaces. All these aspects have an impact on scenography, especially of the expanded and participatory kinds. There is an additional associated phenomenon: a growing proportion of our social life and interactions takes place on digital media and through technology. This is arguably reconfiguring our sensorium: what weight and importance we place on sight, hearing, touch and spatial awareness. This ongoing media change in turn leads to redefinitions of our identity and personhood. It has brought about nothing short of a revolution in how we shape our material and social worlds and in how we relate to the world through our senses.[6]

How does scenography engage the viewer/spectator/participant?

The emptying of auditoria during the pandemic has combined with the long-lasting drift of public attention from the performing arts to media, broadcasts and digital content – in other words, from practices that require complex social coordination and cooperation at a great expense (attending theatres, transport, dressing up, entrance fees, time constraints …), towards entertainment and artistic activity that can be enjoyed in the comfort of one's own space and time. Scenography thus faces the challenge of re-engaging its addressees – whether theatre spectators, exhibition viewers, or interactive participants – and can no longer continue to adopt established conventions and techniques. To do so would be almost to make an ideological statement of looking back to the lost past, ignoring the emergencies we have experienced as humanity and refusing to accept the necessary exigencies, media and technologies we live with now.

How do the modes of engagement change our conceptions of theatre, performance, and scenography?

If we are experiencing a revolution in our media and in our social life, it is necessary to come up with new concepts of what theatre, performance and scenography (or scenic arts, in short) are now. This is not unlike the media change that scenic arts had to adapt to after the dissemination of silent film in the early 1900s, and again, at the turn of the 1920s, with the arrival of sound in film. These early twentieth-century media changes have been thoroughly theorized by theatre and scenography scholars (Aronson 2005, 44–66; Balme 2008; Bernátek 2015; McKinney and Butterworth 2008, 53ff. and 132–136; and recently in Kosiński, Świątkowska and Jarząbek-Wasyl 2020). As for the ongoing media change, complicated by the sensory disruptions of the recent pandemic, we have yet to come to terms with the state of the art and reconceptualize what scenic arts and their ontologies are.

There are a number of other, subsequent questions that press themselves upon the discipline. The tectonic shift in the tissue of the scenic arts will necessitate a change in its practices. In regard to its core practices, of scenic arts' unique position at the threshold of the audiovisual; the tactile and olfactory; and the imaginary – all of which have been affected by the combined tectonic shift – we need to ask: *How can we re-engage the sensorium after the distancing measures of the Covid-19 pandemic?* In relation to the Prague Quadrennial and its allied festivals, such as The São Paulo Biennial, World Stage Design

or the Tbilisi Biennale of Stage Design, another question emerges: *How should we exhibit and experience scenographic artefacts?*

Before I start addressing these pragmatic concerns, let me essay to theorize on the core issue: the ontology of the scenic arts – theatre, performance and scenography – and offer a theoretical framework that is fit for purpose. I will then use the theory to reflect on selected artefacts presented at PQ 2023.

Beyond relational aesthetics

In 1998, in his *Esthétique relationelle*, Nicolas Bourriaud created a conceptual framework for a tendency in modern art to present the 'work of art as partial object' (Bourriaud 2002, 99), establishing an active relation with the spectator/viewer/user and inviting them to complete the work with their own effort, attention and creativity. While his theory is of its time and cannot be held to account for the diversity of modern performance, relational aesthetics has played a decisive role in the theories of audiences and participation (Reason et al. 2022) and helped conceptualize artistic practices that bridge the clear divide between the artefact and the spectator/viewer, common in some conventional art forms.

For the purpose of my critical reflection on PQ 2023, let me start with a case study discussed by Bourriaud. One of his chapters opens with a description of Rirkrit Tiravanija's artefact *Aperto 93* presented at the Venice Biennale:

> A metal gondola encloses a gas ring that is lit, keeping a large bowl of water on the boil. Camping gear is scattered around the gondola in no particular order. Stacked against the wall are cardboard boxes, most of them open, containing dehydrated Chinese soups which visitors are free to add the boiling water to and eat. (25)

Bourriaud is reflecting theoretically on this artefact – what we might call a scenographic performance – and asks: 'is it a sculpture? an installation? a performance? an example of social activism?' (25).

And he observes that: 'In the last few years, pieces such as this have increased considerably' (25), calling for audience active participation, setting parameters for 'the receiver's field of activity', and inducing 'a culture of interactivity' (25).

His ensuing historical contextualization and the theoretical framework he offers have been decisive in describing and reflecting on such relational practices. Yet I would argue that our recent concerns – the ongoing media change, with the shift of our social interaction and even social identities into the digital sphere, and the paralysing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic – and, very specifically, the new artefacts of scenic arts – of theatre, performance and scenography – call for a more nuanced theoretical tool to reflect on its practices. I would like to highlight the specifics of the scenic arts – as opposed to visual arts, media or design – in that they engage their audiences, spectators, viewers and participants in a fundamentally different way. While a scuplture, an installation or a fashion design may invite the viewer's engagement and even require them to complete the 'art work', this simple relationality is not in itself theatrical, performative or scenographic. Similarly, an example of social activism – to reflect on another of Bourriaud's suggestions – may activate the public and call them to social action, but that in itself is not an artefact of scenic arts. Or, to paraphrase an elegant observation by Rachel

Hann, who makes a distinction between *scenography* and *scenographics*, I could say: While there is no relational art without scenographics, there is no equating of the two. Scenic arts have their unique qualities and though many are relational, relational aesthetics does not exhaust and sufficiently define them.[7]

In order to come up with a fit definition of the scenic arts, it is necessary to move beyond relational aesthetics. A theory that goes much further in addressing the uniqueness of the discipline is the theory of performative models as developed recently in a number of studies, by Thea Brejzek and Lawrence Wallen (Brejzek and Wallen 2018), who theorize models as performance, and in several of my studies on words of play and physical fictions (Drábek 2021a, 2021b, 2022). The crucial contribution of these theories is the ability of models to engage their users not only in creative and heuristic activities, but also in their capacity of world-making: *cosmopoiesis* (Brejzek and Wallen 2018, 3, 24–39). Performative models, through their affordances – their own rules, their potential and the speculative uses they may be put to (see Drábek 2021b, 401) – create a world of their own. Very importantly, this world does not sit outside of the real world and does not create fictions as such, but is co-existent with the real world, adding a layer of possible interaction to it. I have argued elsewhere (Drábek 2022) that these performative models offer *physical fictions* that bear directly on reality and are able to heighten our awareness of it.

In this sense, Bourriaud's cited artefact, Tiravanija's *Aperto 93*, does not create fiction, but certainly induces a world with a social dimension: of cooking, eating, and its associated intimacy – and allowing those activities to foster and cultivate social interactions. The theory of performative models goes a long way towards elucidating performative interactions within the newly made worlds, but it does not touch the core of what performance is, let alone what theatre and scenography are.

The theory of mentalizing

The evolutionary psychologist and anthropologist Robin Dunbar, in a recent book *How Religion Evolved: And Why It Endures* (Dunbar 2022), develops the notion of mentalizing, adopted from Paul Grice's theory of intentionality in linguistic communication and from Daniel Dennett's theory of mind. Dunbar uses the concept to make an argument about the evolution and continuing efficacy of religion, and does not consider the arts, let alone the theatre or the performing arts. I need to make this disclaimer before proceeding to clarify in advance that applying mentalizing to the scenic arts is entirely my initiative and does not in any way comment on the validity of Dunbar's argument.

What is mentalizing for Dunbar?

> Also known variously as theory of mind, mentalizing is the ability to understand someone else's intentions. The concept was originally proposed by the English philosopher of language Paul Grice, who in the 1950s suggested that much of the work in conversational exchanges was done by the listener rather than the speaker: the listener has to work out what the speaker is *intending* to mean, not least because the actual words uttered by the speaker are often ambiguous – we often find it difficult to express in words our inner feelings and emotions. […]
>
> In the 1980s, these ideas were developed by the philosopher Daniel Dennett in his concept of the *intentional stance*, the suggestion that evolution has designed the human mind to

> interpret the world in intentional terms – mainly, of course, because both the core to that world and our interface with it is through interactions with other people. (Dunbar 2022, 112)

Although Dunbar adopts the concept and develops it further, his objective is a study of the religious mind and its evolution. In other words, his object of study is in the immaterial, mental realm – just like Grice's concept of mentalizing in linguistic study and Dennett's *intentional stance* in his philosophy of verbal communication – rather than incorporating experience of the material worlds and sensory perception. That, for our purposes, is too narrow and too logocentric as it ignores mental processes in their complexity and extricates the theory of speech from a broader theory of action.[8] Nonetheless, Dunbar uses mentalizing to address complex social interaction and culture, and that is a useful theoretical impulse for analysing scenic arts:

> Being able to reflect on your own mindstate is defined as having first-order intentionality (I *know* the contents of my own mind). Formal theory of mind is defined as the capacity to reflect on someone else's mindstate. Doing so enables us to realize that others have minds of their own and hence might have a view about the world that is different from the one we believe to be true (a so-called false belief). It is the equivalent, in the philosopher's schema, of having second-order intentionality ('I *know* that you *know* … '). (113)

And he adds, crucially for play and theatre:

> Children acquire this capacity at around the age of four to five, having previously assumed that other people believe exactly the same as whatever they happen to believe (they are first-order intentional). Acquiring theory of mind has a dramatic impact on on what children can do, since once they have crossed this particular Rubicon they can engage in imaginary play (knowing that it is only pretence), construct fictional stories and lie convincingly (because they understand how you will interpret what they say and so how to manipulate that). (113)

This observation is central for an understanding of more elaborate plays that involve propositional statements (a more appropriate term to plain *lies*). I would argue that what is missing here is the possibility of verifying the propositions that children and other fabricators make in confrontation with the real world. While a four- or five-year-old may well 'lie' to us about one thing or another, this understanding of mentalization is incomplete without a recourse to the real world that checks the validity and power of the child's fabrication. That in itself is a heuristic, cognitive play that is closely related to the theatre – a simple version of a *what if* scenario that has a shorter lifespan and complexity than a theatrical play.

Dunbar reports on his and his colleagues' extended empirical research with subjects to ascertain 'how many orders of intentionality a normal adult could cope with' (114). The findings and their cultural implications are remarkable:

> the upper limit on intentionality is typically around fifth order, meaning I can manage four other people's mindstates at any given time in addition to my own. In other words, we can manage to keep track of a sentence as complicated as 'I *think* that Bill *supposes* that Jennifer *wants to know* whether Peter *intends* to ask Susan whether she *believes* that the meeting was arranged for two o'clock', where the italicized verbs identify the successive mindstates. (114)[9]

And he continues:

> But that's the upper limit for most of us. There is, inevitably perhaps, considerable individual variation in this capacity, with normal (or 'neurotypical') adults ranging between third

> and sixth order. Only about 20 per cent of the adult population can do better than fifth order, however. We have also shown that our mindreading capacity (how many mind-states we can handle at any given moment) determines a number of crucial aspects of our social behaviour. These include the complexity of language we can use (in terms of the grammatical structure of its sentences), *the complexity of the fictional stories we enjoy most*, the typical size of conversation groups and the number of close friends we have. (114; emphasis mine)

Dunbar clearly observes that the mind's mentalizing capacity directly correlates with the complexity of our fictional stories, and not only that: it relates to our *enjoyment* of them and the greatest pleasure we gain from fictions. In other words, mentalizing is directly linked with *aesthetic pleasure*.

Before I return to aesthetics and the arts, let me quote Dunbar once more, at length. In this passage he articulates the connection between mentalizing and the evolution of religion. This has far-reaching implications for my argument:

> [Mentalizing] was fundamental for the appearance of religion for at least four reasons. First, without the capacity to imagine that there is another, transcendental, parallel universe inhabited by spirit beings, it is not possible to have a religion of any kind. To do that, I have to be able to step back from the world in which we live and ask whether such a world could even exist. Mentalizing is what makes this possible. Second, without the ability to understand that other organisms have mental states, it is impossible to imagine that there might be intentional beings that live in that alternative spirit world. With second-order intentionality, I might be able to imagine that such a spirit exists just as I can imagine that the world of your mind exists. But at the moment, it is still only a belief I think you have; I haven't yet agreed with you. Nonetheless, for me even to begin to imagine that you hold such a belief requires, at an absolute minimum, third-order intentionality. Third, our ability to unpack grammatical structure of sentences, or propositions, turns out to be directly related to our mentalizing competences. In other words, someone limited to third-order intentionality can only understand propositions of the form 'A → B → C' (where A, B and C are clauses in a proposition), whereas someone able to achieve fifth-order intentionality can manage one with the structure 'A → B → C → D → E'. Fourth, most importantly, without the ability to communicate my ideas about this to someone else it is not possible to have any kind of formal religion. I might well believe in the existence of God, but that on its own doesn't equate to a religion; it is simply a belief. A belief becomes a religion only when at least two of us agree about its tenets. To do so, we both have to agree that a proposition about a religious fact is true. (116–117)[10]

While I find Dunbar's theory of religion and his argumentation convincing, I would argue that his theory works smoothly only in the context of Western religions that have gone through the purgatory of disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) – to use Max Weber's notion. This view sees religion moving almost perfectly transversally to our day-to-day life, only as a mere 'superstructure' of sorts. Other, embodied religions that perform and manifest themselves in the physical world would hardly comply with this logocentric theory so profoundly rooted in intentionality.

I propose an expanded concept of mentalizing that includes an empirical bond with the real world: Dunbar adopts mentalizing as a theory of mind based on humans' capacity to read mindstates, but this concept is too narrowly linked to intentionality and the concept's linguistic heritage. A broader definition would be more useful in practical settings. Computer scientist Michael Wooldridge conceives of the ability to mentalize in a broader sense: he uses it to refer to our capacity 'to put ourselves in the place of others and see

things from their perspective, and to reason about the future' (2024, 3). Let me define mentalizing even more broadly:

> *mentalizing is the mind's capacity to recognize* (i.e., become aware of) *the existence of something, create a mental image of it* (i.e., acknowledge its thingness)*, and realize its autonomy* (i.e., have some appreciation for its qualities and potential, including intentions).

In short, mentalizing is the ability to see something as a thing and realizing it can do something. Surely, this definition includes Dunbar's (as well as Grice's and Dennett's) theory of mind based on intentionality, but incorporates the real world. Additionally, it allows non-human sentient beings certain levels of mentalizing too. A cat certainly operates on first-level mentalizing: it can see other beings and things, even remember them in their sensory absence, and behave in response to the things' *give* (affordance). A cat – certainly not my cat Šelma – does not operate on second-level mentalizing as it doesn't recognize my (very different) recognition of other things. My cat is entirely self-centred. I cannot comment on other animals and their mentalizing capacities. But that is moot for the present purpose. What matters is that this expanded conception of mentalizing includes not only linguistic minds and the narrow focus on intentionality, towards affordance (in J.J. Gibson's sense).[11]

This expanded theory of mentalizing also includes the real world – that is, the world we experience directly through our senses and in which we are able to create and confirm our mental images of real things.[12] This concept of first-order of mentalizing is fundamental: it does not only include the ability to read one's (my own) mindstate, but crucially involves empirical confirmation. I may hold a mental image of an object – say, a knife – and its affordance (its properties, from what it looks like, through how sharp it is, to what it allows me to do), but it is in the nature of mentalizing that I constantly and repeatedly verify my mental images and reassure myself of their validity. In that way, I am capable of retaining a grip on reality. First-order mentalizing is particularly important for resensitizing and keeping our being in time fresh. It also entails the self-referential awareness of self – the awareness of its own entity and aesthetics.

If Dunbar argues that personal religion operates on the fourth level of intentionality and communal religion on the fifth level, on what level of mentalizing in my expanded theory does theatre operate? How could this theory apply to scenic arts? I would argue that the theatre requires a similar level of complexity as religion – depending on the kind of theatre and production and its aesthetics.

Theatrical mentalizing

I am certainly not the first to conceive of the theatre as an art form that substantially operates on mental images. In his seminal book of 1931, the Czech opera composer and professor of aesthetics Otakar Zich (1879–1934) published his *Aesthetics of the Dramatic Art: Theoretical Dramaturgy* (*Estetika dramatického umění: Teoretická dramaturgie*), the first systematic theory of theatre. In his introduction to our forthcoming translation, David Drozd sums up Zich's concept of the *mental image* that the spectator creates in their mind when watching a theatrical performance:

> Zich distinguishes between the spectator's percept – which has objective causes in the action on stage but is perceived subjectively – and the ideas or thoughts that arise in consequence –

> and these exist solely subjectively in the spectator's mind. In order to do so effectively, Zich introduces the term *conceptual image* (or image, for short; *významová představa*). This image is what arises in our mind in response to the question 'What is it that we are perceiving?'. In the case of art, the question also can be: 'What does the thing we perceive represent?'. (Drozd 2024, 18)

This is a crucial definition that establishes a bond between the *percept* – what our senses take in during a performance – and the *mental image* – what our imagination and experience make of the percept in our minds. Zich observes that in mimetic arts, like the theatre, this mental image is dual: we create a mental image of what we perceive, imagine what it is referring to (this is the *referential image*) and are also aware how it is done (this is the *technical image*). So for instance, we see Helen Mirren on stage acting Cleopatra and on the basis of that perception we create a mental image of two kinds: the *referential image* (which is the dramatic persona of Cleopatra, an imagined entity) and the *technical image* of how the actor (Helen Mirren) achieves that creation. This duality is very important because in the theatre we as spectators don't only enjoy the fiction (the referential images) but also the art of making, the artifice (the technical image).

In his book, Zich develops a detailed analytical theory of the theatre as an empirical artwork that is experienced through the senses – audiovisually as well as through tactile means – and that therefore builds on *ostensive* action: that is, action that is available to the senses: it can be heard, seen or physically sensed (see Drozd's introduction and afterword in Zich 2024). For this ostensive action to be *dramatic*, Zich requires that it is 'an intentional (purposeful) activity, ostensive action in drama, that has an effect on another dramatic persona' (Zich 2024, 452). In other words, for Zich theatre is based on human interaction that is performed on stage through the actors' interplay.

The similarities between Zich's emphasis on intentional action and Dunbar's higher-order intentionality levels is remarkable. While Zich posits that dramatic interaction necessitates at least two personas viewed by a spectator (that is, three subjects) in order for it to be theatre, Dunbar requires third-order mentalizing for religious facts to emerge. Of course, their two thought systems are widely different, but the aggregate complexity required for aesthetic pleasure is comparable. Hypothetically combining my expanded version of Dunbar's theory of mentalizing with Zich's theory of mental images, I could reformulate the definition of mentalizing for the purposes of the theatre and other scenic arts:

> *mentalizing is the mind's capacity to create mental images of ostensive action*.

Building on Zich's necessary, existential condition for the emergence of theatre and on Dunbar's observation about the aesthetic pleasure we have from high-order mentalizing, I would argue that:

> *scenic arts* (theatre, performance and scenography) *seek the aesthetic pleasure of creating complex mental images* (mentalizing) *based on ostensive action, and these mental images in turn cultivate our social skills*.

I would argue even more: that this definition of scenic arts is specific and unique to them. Unlike sculptures, museum installations or social activism as such, scenic arts are crucially based on *cosmopoiesis* – or what I have called above *physical fictions* – and of a kind that engenders higher-order mentalizing processes: the recognition of the mentalizing of

others in direct, sensory (ostensive) confrontation with empirical realities.[13] It is in their capacity to close the loop back to the participants' social interaction that scenic arts become laboratories of real-world life – a virtue that the theatre has held and practised since the start of its recorded history, and that non-scenic arts like sculpture, painting or different branches of non-scenic design (graphic arts, media, fashion) lack.

Scenographic mentalizing at PQ 2023

In this final section, I analyse a few selected artefacts presented at the 15th edition of Prague Quadrennial (8–18 June 2023). My selection is not entirely random: I have opted for a diversity of approaches, including artefacts that are more explicitly theatrical and those that are public performance art, and also those that I have been able to experience myself. This latter proviso needs emphasizing: with the rich programme that ran simultaneously in several venues and in different locations, it would have required six bodies to be able to experience PQ 2023 in its entirety. The selected case studies don't aspire to be representative of the festival as a whole, but serve to reflect theoretically on some trends as well as *desiderata* that I perceived during and after the event.

The Infra-Ordinary Lab (Tereza Stehlíková, Czech Republic), part of the PQ Performance programme

You are invited on a walking tour of the Holešovice Market, the main site of PQ 2023, a former slaughterhouse, now a post-industrial hub of commerce, services, arts, gendrification and dereliction. There is an audioguide and for some of the tour you are blindfolded and led and looked after by a personal guide. The audioguide (available on https://linktr.ee/infraordinary_lab) navigates one's attention, prompts, tells stories from the history of sites the tour visits or views, as well as explains and provides a theoretical framing for the activities. The artist Tereza Stehlíková introduces *The Infra-Ordinary Lab* as follows:

> a site-specific performance that invited audiences on a multi-sensory exploration of the Holešovice Market, framing perception and peeling the skin of the everyday to reveal hidden narratives […] engaging with and experiencing place through all the sense and all the seasons. (PQ 2023 Catalogue 2024, 319)[14]

From a mentalizing point of view, *The Infra-Ordinary Lab* centres on the re-engagement of the senses (first-order mentalizing) and prompts the participants to see the places, buildings, things and happenings in a de-automated way, with a fresh pair of eyes, while the narrative in the audioguide also adds layers of meaning from history, hinting at past intentions that led to the current state as well as at 'imagined cities' that never were.

While this performance does not directly engender complex, higher-order mentalizing, its core lies in an aesthetizing response to sensory experiences and works with fundamental social interaction – in the trust that participants give to their guides while they walk blindfolded: as participants, we are forming mental images of the reality we sense, add to them the imaginary layers from history and from poetic imagery, while we are also tangibly aware of our guides – the one speaking in the headphones and the one leading us – and their awareness of us and of what we are experiencing together.

winterreise.box (Hungary), part of the PQ Exhibition of Countries and Regions

A cold, white and nearly empty cubicle, mounted about a metre above the ground, lit with three tube light bulbs on a pinkish ceiling, with a man dressed in blue trainers, a white refrigerator that shines brightly, a white mattress bed, a banana box, and a black TV set

mounted on the wall. Around the cubicle from the outside are smaller display screens with headsets that show video examples from the production of Franz Schubert's 1827 song cycle for baritone and piano with lyrics by Wilhelm Müller.[15] The artists' description states:

> *winterreise.box* an installation adapted from a performance based on Schubert-Müller's *Winterreise*, premiered at the Örkény Theatre, Budapest, directed by Jakab Tarnóczi and designed by Botond Devich. The audience could follow the stages of the protagonist's solitary journey through a twelve-part video installation. From time to time, Máté Borsi-Balogh, the performer, would appear in the box and sing pieces from Schubert. (PQ 2023 Catalogue 2024, 65)

This installation went far beyond a mere display of its scenography, which in itself is minimalistic and not particularly remarkable. The videos bring a layer of time-based action and allow the audience to see the displayed cubicle (or box) come to life in performance. Throughout the day, the man in blue trainers, the outstanding baritone Máté Borsi-Balogh, occupies the space, killing time. Several times a day, the piano music starts play and he delivers the songs beautifully, ingnoring the presence of audiences entirely.

I found this artefact very thought-provoking: not only for its heightened and yet subdued theatricality – that is, heightened in its ostensiveness, yet subdued in its expression – but also for the strikingly beautiful and unexpected singing. It all added to a sense of unanswered mystery and longing: Who is this man? Why is he locked in this bleak room? How does he relate to the beautiful music he performs, almost unwillingly? How does the vocal mastery relate to the strikingly contrasting bleakness and mundane shabbiness of the space? Is there any relationship between his present situation and the world of Schubert's song cycle? Should we as audiences settle down and just enjoy this metaphorical bird locked in a cage? Is this how we display art and performative mastery?

The richness of mentalizing that *winterreise.box* solicited stood out in comparison to other displays that presented art frozen in time, in vitrines and frames, or in bespoke aesthetic arrangements that were enhancing the artefacts. The Hungarian installation presented scenography in action, both in the video recordings and in the live performance – and that layering of views and possible engagements brought this white and mundane scenography into vibrant life.

Home Box Theatre (Denmark), part of the PQ Exhibition of Countries and Regions

Denmark's installation was responding to the Covid-19 pandemic and opened with a question:

> Imagine a future where the performing arts no longer take place in public venues, but in the comfort of your own home. *Home Box Theatre* is a visionary concept for the future of performing arts, combining community with a unique theatre experience using an everyday object. (PQ 2023 Catalogue 2024, 51)[16]

There is a dark black box with a tiny chest of drawers in the middle and two low blocks around it to sit on. The set-up looks like a small campfire arrangement with the chest of drawers in the place of the fire. When you open a drawer, sound and projection comes on, bit by bit, transforming the space into an imaginary world.

The creators explain:

> By simply opening a drawer, you can immerse yourself in the universe of six Shakespeare plays. You choose the order and pace. You are at the centre of the experience.

Is this how the performing arts of the future are to emerge: In the corners of your everyday life, far from a stage, with you at the centre? (51)

However, this is not how I experienced the installation. While the sound and projection that I launched by opening a drawer was beautiful in its own right and I could immerse myself in the universe, I didn't realize these were Shakespeare plays and never felt in control of the order and pace, let alone to be at the centre of the experience. There were always other people around me, and I was very conscious that this show wasn't *mine* or *for me*, but that I set it off and everyone else around could have done that too: my own agency was almost random. In this – but also in many other experiential installations with limited seating or available equipment – I couldn't lose myself in the world: What if someone else wants to experience it? How much time am I allocated in this experience? How many times can each drawer be pulled?

This installation worked with established, conventional techniques and modes, and despite its creators' intentions, it didn't solicit the questions they were pursuing, but rather invoked mentalizing that stemmed from the shared spaces and the shared experiencing of the installation.

What Do Astronauts Do? (Complejo Conejo, Chile), part of the PQ Performance programme

In the near-tropical heat of Prague in June 2023, a group of five astronauts in full gear walk through the city. You cannot see their faces under the helmets, nor a single sliver of their skins. Their individual identities are entirely hidden from view and they only make contact with others by acknowledging your existence, waving at everyone, making movements and sounds, imitating your movements and when necessary gesticulating at each other. There are no words, only physical, ostensive action. They are driven by one intention: to find an answer to the question 'What is a human?' And that is everything.

This playful and often funny performance solicits responses from the public (it is truly *relational art*) and it creates its own world that adds a layer on to reality. But thanks to the lack of words, all of the mental images that the performance evokes are no more than propositions, possibilities and playful maybes: Who are these astronauts? (That is, I have a clear referential image in our minds: astronauts and everything that this summons by association.) Why are they here? Clearly they are human. (That is, I have a clear technical image of how they were made, which frees me to be playful without fear.) What are they trying to tell us as humans and terrestrials? Why are they imitating me? What are they thinking of me? How do they see us? What are they thinking of us?

It is this deluge of such probing questions that crops up during the performance. But since they are not confrontational and don't induce fear, this playfulness encourages the participants to venture into more questions. The play of mentalizing that follows freely activates in higher-order images: We look at the astronauts, who are looking back at us, while we are also aware that others are watching our interaction and judging it against the mores and customs of where we are, not only here and now, but also here, in Prague, in the Czech Republic, in Europe, in the world, on Earth, in the universe. A passerby offers an astronaut a cigarette, but the astronaut doesn't know how to use it, so the astronaut pulls out a piece of paper and starts using it as a pen, but it doesn't write, so they use it to emboss an inscription on a mural on to the paper. One thinks of Craig Raine's 1979 poem 'A Martian Sends a Postcard Home' and its power to make us see our everyday reality and its things in a fresh, strange light – only this time in our social reality.

Conclusion

It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss at a greater length how mentalizing operates in all mimetic arts – in sculpture, painting and others. A portrait painting with an

evocative expression, or a statue, will trigger high-order mentalizing processes. This is true in the referential images mimetic art evokes and the reverberations of those images – e.g., What is Mona Lisa thinking of? What is she looking at? What is she responding to? Is she stylizing herself in reference to another painting or a classical image? Our higher-order mentalizing runs wild also on the technical front, thinking about the creator's contexts, inspirations, and allusions as well as about the judgements of the artefact made by others. Very importantly, the viewer's technical focus on the skill and the sensory qualities of the artefact further cultivate his or her first-order mentalizing.

To reflect on the relevance of mentalizing for image replication and creation through computer-generated (artificial intelligence?) content would be a subject for a separate study. Let me only point out that AI is incapable of first-order mentalizing, only of the higher orders that can be defined as image replication. AI doesn't (yet?) have the capacity to experience the real world outside the predefined input channels – 'statistically rearranging text that already exists' (Wooldridge 2024, 3). It is unlikely that it would have the capacity to create mental images of ostensive action and objects without first having the concept in its database. Could it, say, conceive of the less conspicuous observed objects or realities, such as the enamel on a cup, a fidget spinner or sagging beam of a house, if those realities hadn't first been defined by the programmer? Would AI be capable of the sensory cognition that gives them their identity, their affordance and significance? Wooldridge doubts it, stating: 'we aren't anywhere close to having AI tools that can tidy our home or clear the dinner table and load the dishwasher' (3). It could be argued that it is the playful nature of art – like the projects of Tangible Territories (*The Infra-Ordinary Lab* among them) and other artefacts that invited sensory engagement – that cultivates the fundamentally human capacity to empirically renew and verify the meaning of realities, without the mechanical reliance on databases – whether predefined by content-creators (e.g., the categories of the Monopoly table game), by programmers (computer databases that AI mines for its algorithms), or the stereotypes we create by routine in our daily effort to economize with cognitive and physical energies, delegating the lower-order mentalizing onto interpassive technologies.[17]

PQ 2023 presented a wide range of artefacts of different kinds. Many of them could be theorized within four categories:

(1) *Experiments at the frontiers of scenic arts*

Numerous interventions and exhibitions at the PQ 2023 were installations that tested new ground and new ways of seeing, but it wasn't obvious whether there was any aspect of the *scenic* in them. They clearly were not scenographies in the theatrical sense of the word, nor performances in the sense of performers' action for an audience. They would not be misplaced at a Venice Biennale or in an exhibition of design. Among such instances were the Czech Republic's *Limbo Hardware*; Cyprus's *Spectators in a Ghost City*; France's *Gut City Punch*; or Romania's *The Bridge* – perhaps more closely aligned with interior design, architecture or urbanism than to the scenic arts.

(2) *Established scenographic conventions*

A significant group of artefacts used conventional or established scenographic practices to reflect on current concerns. The aforementioned Denmark's *Home Box Theatre* or Thailand's award-winning *Theatre To Go* would fall into this group, as would those exhibits that presented scenic work from their countries, often framing them in an engaging format or

interaction – such as Canada's *A Carrying Vessel*, China's *Between*; Israel's *WondeRare Women*; Japan's *RARE – 希 – MARE*; or Taiwan's *The Rare Ship*. In a sense, several alternative or alternative-looking artefacts built on well-established practices and conventions, among them Belgium's *Traffic Island*.

(3) *Resensitizing simulators and stimulators*

Artefacts in this category directly stimulated sense –more than just sight and hearing; often also touch, smell and taste – and in so doing invited the participants to renew their relationship to the world. In this sense they are simulators, or training tools, for our resensitization. Some of them were politically or environmentally motivated (such as Armenia's *I see, I cannot see* or Australia's *Country*), or playful and performative (Brazil's *ENCRUZILHADAS: We believe in crossroads*). Some of them included live performers and 'enchanters' (such as Bulgaria's *Late Anthropocene Findings*; Colombia's *Pragatá*; or Hong Kong's *Re-hear*), while others involved human 'relics' with audioguides (such as the textile heaps in Catalonia's *CROP* or the archive of objects in Singapore's *Renewed Vision*). Some allowed the spectator to feel their way through on their own (Portugal's tactile *Half the Minutes*). Others incorporated technology – be it Estonia's VR-based *Eternity*; Finland's *Bee Company – Mehiläisten seura*; Georgia's *Rare Memories of the Future*; Macau's *Home Staycation*; or Mongolia's *Horizon – Sight Level*.

(4) *Scenic laboratories*

This category operates in close vicinity to the first (Experiments at the frontiers of scenic arts) in that it experiments with the new and probes the boundaries of the disciplines. I would distinguish between the two for the very apparent reason that this category is firmly rooted in scenic arts and aims to revisit, refine, reflect on and renegotiate the theatricality, the performative qualities and/or the role and function of scenography (not scenographics) here and now. This category includes two of my case studies: *winterreise.box* and *What Do Astronauts Do?* There were several such experimental scenographic laboratories, and many of them opened direct dialogue with the visitors/participants, and were more explicitly discursive and actively engaged in cultivating the social bonds here and now – sometimes playfully, as in Chile's *Memento Mori: Animitas of Chilean Theater Design* or Croatia's *But I am alive*; at other times more conventionally, as in United Kingdom's *hello stranger*; Ireland's *The Next Four Years*; or Greece's *A Rare Gathering*, many of which thematized the rare, once-in-four-years encounters at PQ.

These four categories are mere *essays* (attempts) at theorizing the wealth of experience from PQ 2023 with the help of the outlined theory of mentalizing. I have intentionally stayed clear of deploying the terms in the four categories above, to avoid narrowing them down to an idiosyncratic conceptual system. The preceding longer analyses of the four selected case studies suggest how the theory of mentalizing could help in processing complex experiences in scenic arts and in public settings, while making it possible to retain the link to the emotional, social and sensory sensitivity that underlies the experience.

I propose that my concept of theatrical or scenographic mentalizing could be applied to other artefacts as well. As a theoretical tool, it doesn't prescribe values and doesn't prioritize certain art forms over others. It allows, however, an analysis that identifies and articulates the uniquely scenic – that which also self-referentially points to its own performative qualities in their social complexity. The capacity of scenic arts – of theatre, performance and scenography – to engender high-order mentalizing while retaining the closed loop to sensory verification is a unique quality. This theory, unlike

earlier theories of theatre that worked with *mimesis* or storytelling, does not require fiction or even semiotic action – and in that it does not separate theatre from performance art. At the same time, it centres on what has always been crucial in theatre – the act of *seeing* and *watching*, and cultivating our views of that experience. As the great French director and playwright Roger Planchon used to say, there are only four ideas in the theatre:

> Where do people come from? What do they do in the space? Where do they go? And what do we think about it? (quoted in Howard 2022, 81)

Notes

1. I thank my colleagues for their intellectual company and for discussing ideas for this essay with me: David Drozd (Masaryk University), Peter W. Marx (University of Cologne), Hana Pavelková (University of Chemistry and Technology in Prague), Martin Procházka (Charles University), my students (namely Kira Curtis, Luke Dankoff, Russell Gilbert, Adam Railton and Ryan Wilson) and my colleagues at the University of Hull: Cat Fergusson Baugh, Khairul Kamsani, Amy Skinner and other members of our Centre for Performance, Technology and Aesthetics, School of the Arts, University of Hull. I also thank the two anonymous peer reviewers for carefully reading my submission and making valuable suggestions.
2. Throughout this essay, I use the term *artefact* to refer to any artwork, object, performance or installation on display.
3. For more information on *Home is Warmth*, see https://pq.cz/pq-2023-info/projects-2023/exhibition-of-countries-and-regions/slovakia-home-is-warmth/.
4. It should be emphasized that *ostension* is not primarily a semiotic act. It is the act of showing and Osolsobě, in his dictionary entry 'Ostension' (Osolsobě 1986), discusses it at length as a non-sign process that involves the display of originals.
5. For information about the artefacts presented at PQ 2023, I am working with the PQ 2023 *Digital Archive* (2024) and the PQ 2023 *Catalogue* (2024).
6. For a recent discussion of media change in relation the evolution of media, see Scolari (2023). Some of the cultural implications of the Covid-era media change have been touched upon by philosophers. The exploration that I find most relevant to scenography is, seemingly paradoxically, Amitav Ghosh's *The Nutmeg's Curse* (Ghosh 2021).
7. For a discussion of the link between Bourriaud's relational aesthetics and scenography, see also Hann's book (Hann 2018, 73).
8. For a reasoned critique of the logocentric narrowness of Speech Act Theory, see my 'Heterotelic Models as Performatives' (Drábek 2021a). I also elaborate on my criticism of logocentric concepts of performance and action in my essay 'Performative Models and Physical Fictions' (Drábek 2022).
9. It is worth mentioning that Dunbar's findings agree with the assertions of the anonymous mystic, the author of the fourteenth-century treatise *The Cloud of Unknowing*, who claims that the mind can hold as many as, and no more than, five thoughts at once.
10. Dunbar goes on to elaborate on the theory and illustrates in a diagram (Dunbar 2022, 119) that religious facts ('I *believe* that you *think* that God *exists* [in a transcendental world]') operate on third-level mentalizing; personal religion ('I *believe* that you *think* that God *exists* and *intends* to punish us') engages fourth-level mentalizing; and communal religion ('I *believe* that you *think* that we both *know* that God *exists* and *intends* to punish us') works with fifth-level intentionality.
11. For more on the humans' and cats' mental processes, see John Gray's remarkable *Feline Philosophy: Cats and the Meaning of Life* (Gray 2020).
12. It is beyond the scope of this essay to critique Dunbar's concept, but surely in second-level intentionality – if 'I *believe* that you *think* [rain is falling]' – this does not suggest that religion

is 'not possible' (Dunbar 2022, 119), but your and my agreement about the sensory experience of rain and what good it does can well serve as a basis for a rain god.

13. I am conscious that with the ongoing media change, the ontology of the real world in social terms is in flux. My colleague Cat Fergusson Baugh, with whom I have discussed a number of ideas, is contributing an article to this issue in which she reflects on the social training that takes plays in and by means of extended reality media. While these are, strictly speaking, not 'real-world', they are certainly empirical and offer ostensive action – often in an extremely enhanced way. I am very grateful for her intellectual company in refining my thoughts.
14. For additional information and documentation on the project, see https://pq.cz/pq-2023-info/projects-2023/pq-performance-rare-experiences/the-infra-ordinary-lab-tereza-stehlikova/.
15. For more information on *winterreise.box*, see https://pq.cz/pq-2023-info/projects-2023/exhibition-of-countries-and-regions/hungary-winterreise-box/.
16. For more information on *Home Box Theatre*, see https://pq.cz/pq-2023-info/projects-2023/exhibition-of-countries-and-regions/denmark-home-box-theatre/.
17. For the concept of *interpassivity* and *delegated pleasure*, see Pfaller (2014). Pfaller does not, however, go too far into computer technologies. For a recent discussion of *mentalizing* in relation to AI, see Michael Wooldridge's (2024) review of Max Bennett's *A Brief History of Intelligence* (William Collins: October 2023) and George Musser's *Putting Ourselves Back in the Equation* (Oneworld: November 2023) in *The TLS* (16 February 2024).

ORCID

Pavel Drábek http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8470-722X

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