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The New Space of Authenticity

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Scenography and the Authenticity of Theatrical Experience

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“But only in order to know if you, as you really are now, see yourself as you once were with all the illusions that were yours then, with all the things both inside and out of you as they seemed to you- as they were then indeed for you ...if you think of all those illusions that mean nothing to you now...don’t you feel that- I won’t say these boards- but the very earth under your feet is sinking away from you when you reflect that in the same way this *you* as you feel it today –all this present reality of yours- is fated to seem a mere illusion to you tomorrow.”¹ [From *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Pirandello]

One’s initial reaction the use of the word “authenticity” in relation to theatrical design usually conjures up notions of “verisimilitude” and the propensity to get the environment and the details of props and costumes “right”. This “rightness” need not be from the point of view of historical (or “period”) correctness, although that is often what is implied by the use of the term “authentic” in relation to scenography. Non-period pieces can flout their authenticity through their attention to details and how they “convince” the audience of the “reality” of the environment that is created. *King Lear* could be conceived on an ice sheet-like plenum that we sense captures the essence of the

piece visually though it has no literal correspondence to how we normally read the play's details. A design conceived through abstract representation can also have a sense of authenticity, though it has no pretensions of an historical sensibility and may even willfully contradict such notions in its presentation. The design of a play may stretch the notion of authenticity even further, and seem convincing though its design has no aspect of fulfilling any kind of specificity or detail in its realization. How can all these disparate approaches be authentic?

Increasingly it is my notion that we are approaching the question of what is authentic not so much incorrectly, as not as completely as we might be capable of. As with many concepts dependant on the use of realized details we cannot see the proverbial forest for the trees, and our cognitive dispositions (or prejudices, if you prefer), perpetually take us to the place we were always going to anyway because of how we had framed the question to begin with. This is not so much blindness to the scope of the forest as an epicurean relish of the trees. Unsurprisingly, because our discipline deals with concretizations, actual structures and objects (even if they purport to be illusions of structures and objects), we orient our mental analysis to the actual physical constructs of our field, miring ourselves in the signs and significations of the worlds created for the world of the stage. Nothing could be more natural. We analyze the use of materials, techniques and technologies, and ponder the repetition of taste that conveys a sense of style. These approaches are all important; they add to our debate about our discipline, but they don't enlarge it, or take it to a different level, and they have the disadvantage of narrowing the discussion to a certain comfortable familiarity.

So how can we accomplish an enlarged scope of dialogue? What I am thinking of here is an avenue that might take us beyond praxis to the psychological and philosophical underpinnings of our art. We need to eschew the comfortable ground of ignoring the vagaries of the psychological states that contribute to the experience of the arts. These are the states (types of consciousness, self, etc.) that are *created by the use* of materials and techniques; the end sub-consciously aimed for, difficult to quantify and yet the aspect without which the arts cannot create a sense of lifelike experience.

In my last paper (at the Amsterdam Scenography Conference in 2005), I suggested “*Being* is...the ineffable sensation of awareness we humans experience when we sense our own consciousness.”² Since then some of my research has given me greater confidence in this notion (as a worthy destination outside our usual comfort zone of inquiry), as well as helping me to refine some of my positions based on corrections to my naïve preliminary ruminations. If scenography is ever to approach the standing of other visual and design art disciplines, it will be because it is thought to contribute to the creation in theatre of the semblance of *being* that is indicative of the highest orders of *consciousness*.

When I posited a similar opinion at the Amsterdam Conference, my presentation was based mostly on personal intuition, with the confession that this was an area in need of more specific exploration. One mistake I must correct early here is my use of the term *being*. I have used it too loosely, as a kind of synonym for consciousness (which I will also refine later) with philosophical overtones. In order to now more accurately reflect my sense of what “mind” is (for my purpose), I need to use the term *being* in a more

conventional sense, so that consciousness and self are the mechanisms and necessary conditions for us to know that we “are”; i.e., that we possess being.

What qualities does theatre design have that might intrinsically convey the phenomenon of consciousness as an attribute of performance? Hopefully without sounding too pretentious, or deflecting a lack of comprehensive understanding with careful vagueness, I wish to propose that the effectiveness of the performing arts in creating the semblance of authenticity lies in their potential to mimic, engage and enhance the mental state that we call *consciousness* without which we would have no sense of our own self or being. But I am not sure that “semblance” is a good word choice for describing the effects I will be discussing. There is no doubt that what we do is to create fictions, symbols and “semblances” on a display, framed or set-off to varying degrees, but the impact of the arts may lie in the fact that these semblances and concoctions produce the same (or authentic) emotional effects as we experience in consciousness, yet perhaps amplified in impact by their artifice. Theatre spaces are both things and things created with artifice, and scenery forms may indeed *denote* (as when a painting in perspective denotes a specific place). I believe however, that it is *connotation* that conjures up a greater sense of the experiential by suggesting, or ‘feeling’ like the feelings and associations that go with the experience of being in the denoted place and action.³ This is a scenario more conversant with the spawning of consciousness. Rational activities alone do not convey a sense of self.

So my approach goes something like this: What makes us unique among animals is the level of consciousness (not mere consciousness, which we probably share with several other species) we are capable of; what makes art effective (indeed what makes art “art”), is its ability to amplify experiential qualities, especially consciousness, through its use of forms. These are qualities beyond literal significations, or the “being” of things (as they are). I infer an ability of creative forms to invoke the diverse texture of experience, conveying as an integral aspect of human existence the qualities of ambiguity, contrast and ambivalence. If the experience of art demands consciousness, and consciousness demands a “self”, and the phenomenon of self requires feeling, then how does theatre design contribute to amplifying the presence of feeling? I am more interested in how the way we inhabit a theatre space makes us *feel* than how we might empirically define the objects of design per se. Is there some fundamental model of perception that supports the sense of experience that theatre space naturally provides for us?

In *Rome*⁴, HBO’s popularized version of history from Caesar to Augustus, the death of Cicero is set in the garden of his villa outside the city. Cicero asks his assassin, the story’s everyman Titus Pulo, for a few minutes to himself. It was already established how much he loved his villa, especially the garden. Cicero gazes at the sun, the cloudless sky, and the birds crossing it. He then gazes around the garden, sun-drenched, with the sound of birds and the smell of the fruit and flowers, seeming to drink in every aspect of the experience of consciousness he can in what he knows are his last moments.

One would imagine that his first impulse is to flee (certainly his mind would wander over that possibility as he watches the birds flying above him); his body would be filled with adrenaline and emotional reactions of innumerable sorts would be cascading through his mind. All his sensory modalities would be scanning the environment for information that could help him escape. Then he realizes it is useless, or on the rarefied level of rational thought, he accepts what is about to happen with stoic fatalism. As he tries to drink in what life feels like, he sees, hears, smells, feels (tactilely), and remembers, his mind racing on as the many paths of thought intersect and his attention wavers between the ambient phenomena around him and the awareness of his own emotions. He is feeling that he “feel[s] his emotions”; he is *conscious* because he is aware that there is a relationship between his self and the knowledge of his feelings.⁵

From our point of view, watching the scene, we share his first low-level sense of disquiet, his sense that something threatening is developing. We have an assumption of how it will turn out, but we can't be sure (even if we do know our history), and we certainly don't yet know the course that things will follow to the final event. As we watch Cicero we too have multiple paths of neural-psychological activity intertwined with themselves and our physical selves, feeding off of our emotions and feelings. Perhaps we swallow hard, experience foreboding or sadness. We wonder what it would be like to be in such a terrible situation and feel that familiar hollow behind our sternum that indicates we are upset and filled with the sickening suspense of the impending realization of a terrible outcome.

We are aware that Cicero is feeling at the height of potential acuteness because he knows that his self will cease to exist even as his consciousness has been ratcheted up to

what must be its highest potential. But is our feeling, as spectators more complex, richer in images and the neural self-reference that creates consciousness?

Both situations produce the ambient phenomena that qualify as creating *background feelings*.⁶ This is a fluid primordial awareness of our surroundings, based on the body's awareness of the "noise" from the *sensa* that are registering with our somatosensory⁷ systems. It is an image created by both external stimuli, (like the observation of the birds flying by, their songs, and the warmth of the sun) and the body's "reports" on the perceptions of those *sensa*, and the reports on its internal states; e.g., its viscera and musculoskeletal system. The more internally directed aspects, created by background emotions, may have more to do with the temporal and spatial "shape" of the body determined by chemical and smooth musculature "reports". Together these background body states create a continuous frame of reference against which other levels of emotion and feeling can be measured, accounting for such sustained low levels of feeling as moods. All the things that would normally have been background stimuli in Cicero's consciousness (the birds, their sound, the sun, etc.) creating his *background feelings*, are abruptly thrown into intense focus by his situation. Suddenly, his conscious thought is overwhelmed by objects competing for saliency.

The spectator can hear and see the same visual and auditory stimuli that Cicero and Pulo experience, but not with the same immediacy. These images are perhaps best described as "removed", because they are taking place within the space the movie was shot, which is not actually present on our screen, but is an illusionistic image. It is a sign, consisting of signs, for all the things and their *qualia*⁸ comprising the scene. If the event were located in a theatre rather than on a screen, the audience and performers would

share the immediacy of certain sensory modalities and the objects they experienced. Visual and auditory percepts are registered by the actors and audience in the same (general) space, depending in degree on the extent to which the auditorium and the stage interpenetrate. We assume smell would be in one sense negligible, because the stage flowers and fruit, for example, would be fabrications. We could not literally feel the warmth of the sunlight, but smell and feel would still exist (as would sight and sound) for the audience in regard to the theatre as a whole: the patron's perfume in the next seat, the texture of our clothes against our skin, even the taste, or dryness of our mouths. Though we might not have any sense of food or drink, the taste of our saliva is always present.

These things may be important to the complete measure of our consciousness because as we watch this affecting scene we are not only forming and modifying new neural images, but we are also recalling from our *extended memory*⁹ images that are amplifying "our" participation by coloring the events we see with the unique perspective of our own selves and our histories. Do we recall the image of visiting a dying friend or relative and our wonder about their thoughts as they knowingly faced their end? Does it make us re-examine our own thoughts on death and bring on memories of personal musings, beliefs or philosophical doubts? Do any of our sensory feelings, like the taste in our mouth or our an increased awareness of our gut (like a so-called "emptiness") seem vaguely familiar, creating a presence that makes the scene more powerful? From another viewpoint, we might engage our social and cultural memory; as it becomes clear that Cicero will not try to escape or to defend himself perhaps we wonder about the concepts of fate and honor in Roman society as well as compared to our own. Maybe we will ponder the measure of his actions as a politician versus those politicians of our own time,

or recent history. Perhaps we will compare the ethics of the society we see in the scenes to what we know of the historical civilization, and hold both in our mind in comparison to the ethics of our own time.

There is another sense in which watching this scene can enter our consciousness. As we observe the details of the scene, the action and the actors' expressions, the space and its atmosphere, we are creating in our minds more neural images associated with the emotions and feelings we are experiencing at the time, which will be available for recall, to cause feelings and augment our consciousness in the future. The constellations of these images (made up of people, places, events, situations, etc.) add to the libraries of our selves. Though they may seem removed from our physical selves because they will exist as memories, as we shall see they cannot help but be physically connected to those whose biographies they form.

If what makes art effective (or art at all) is a sense of consciousness, and if the richness of consciousness can be conveyed by some of the examples I have suggested above; then what aspects in the present theories of consciousness seem to support the theatrical experience (as a provider of such authentic consciousness augmenting experiences), and what aspects of the visual disciplines of theatre might specifically increase our sense of consciousness in those experiences? Consciousness depends on a “sense of the self in the act of knowing”¹⁰; we know we “are” because we feel our selves “in the process of feeling”. The process is irrevocably woven in to our physiology, not a removed mental construct following a Cartesian model.¹¹

In the hypothesis of consciousness (developed by Dr. Damasio) that I use as my principal guide, three main tiers are posited: a *proto-self*, *core self* and *extended self*. The first two are necessary to achieve *core consciousness*, or knowing that we know we “are” because we feel ourselves feel.¹² The level of a *proto-self* is not unique to humans; it is a system of systems that allows the body to regulate itself in the narrow homeostatic range it needs to sustain life. It is necessary for the organism to “represent itself”: to form images (not necessarily literal) of its self, so the brain can unconsciously regulate the myriad functions it needs to control by homeostasis. It unconsciously “maps” the physical structure of the organism in its many dimensions, moment by moment. It is a forerunner of the *core self*, and necessary for *core consciousness*, because the sense of self needs a solid representation of the body to discriminate outside (environmental) objects against.

We are constantly receiving sensory data on objects (which can be literal objects, i.e., things), events or any phenomena we observe and process. When we observe and “map” an object through sensory representation, we add another level of experience; our minds re-represent our *proto-self* and the object in a temporal relationship.¹³ We then get the images of the object enhanced and our *proto-self* as modified by the object in time. These are second –order neural patterns that can make us conscious of feeling their presence. It is this persistent process of being aware that we are aware of objects in relation to ourselves, happening in a incessant renewal of “pulses”, that gives us *core consciousness*.¹⁴ It is continually renewing in the present, as we absorb the waves of stuff of experience every moment. But these “pulses” are momentary; they are transient

in the sense of their fleeting lifespan, yet continuous in that they are in a state of persistent rebirth, as the present must be.

At this point I have only discussed the lowest level of consciousness and self. What most of us normally think of in terms of these concepts are the higher (and more evolutionarily recent) aspects of mind, the *autobiographical self* and *extended consciousness*.¹⁵ What is crucial about these concepts, which subsume all the higher human mental activities, is that they are still tied to (or built upon) the earlier *core* and *proto-self*. They cannot function without the primordial sense of the self as related to the body in time and space. As conjured in *King Lear* with darker overtones, “But to the girdle do the gods inherit,/ Beneath is all the fiends”. [IV, 6, ll.142/3] The main point is that the rational and animalistic traits of humans are rendered as physically connected. *Extended consciousness* goes backward in time with the use of memory, and forward in time with the use of “memories of an anticipated future”.¹⁶ It engages a myriad of experience learned and retained from the personal past, the autobiographical memories that have defined our selves over the history of our existence. *Extended consciousness* enables human organisms to reach the apex of creative achievement, including the awareness of the dissonance between ideas that leads to pondering the veracity of truth. It also allows us to step beyond the dictates of survival-based genetics toward cultural ideas, and to develop and exercise *conscience*.¹⁷

Our basic awareness of consciousness depends on our processing of objects in relation to our self, and then the awareness of the relationship between the two in time. This all takes place as neural maps and images (which are not virtual representations).

Because the process is entwined with the body our awareness is tied to emotions and their private references, feelings. The necessity of a strong value of the relationship between subject (the self) and object (the multiplicity of phenomena that make up the environment) may be a clue to the power of the arts, and especially the theatrical performing arts, (or scenographic arts), to provoke a strong sense of our being. Consciousness requires a firmly grounded self, and the self needs to be engaged with objects in order to complete the neurological sequence that verifies the self in “the act of knowing”.¹⁸ All the arts demand the engagement of our selves with objects that we “map” and “image”. The theatrical performing arts may be able to claim credit for further intensifying the connection between the subject and the object because of the “constructed” audience-performer relationship that can manipulate the feeling of observing on several levels.

The audience member is a dual observer: he or she is a bounded self within the general audience as well as witnessing the action of the performance as a member of the society it is representative of. (The implications of being part of socio-cultural group have already been alluded to in the Cicero scenario and will be examined again later.) One of the ways the theatre experience may provide for an intensified level of consciousness is through the degree of wakefulness and alertness a performance demands.¹⁹ We always have a background of stimuli with us. It can contribute to the general mood experience creating a *background emotion*. Such a background sensation can also be sustained by the surrounding audience itself, making attentiveness to the stage action more prominent. Our consciousness is embedded in a “background”, and we are never aware of all the many sensory and thought images in the multi-part “streams” available to our minds.

Consciousness is enhanced by focused alertness and attention (like we would find in a theatre-viewing situation). Objects engaged in sharper focus with an elevated quality of image processing have greater sensorial detail. These parallel some of the functions of staging and design; maintaining alertness and focus through the manipulation of image quality and detail. The processes of dramatic art, dance, music and literature manipulate focus and detail, giving what could have been marginal ephemeral moments greater salience, just like the processes of consciousness. The performing arts do this with an inescapable causality (since you cannot take a break from a performance) that emphasizes our temporal connection to consciousness. The theatrical performing arts (theatre, dance and opera) may be able to intensify the experience of consciousness yet again because they happen in real space, shared as part of the environment to be experienced, sensed and imaged, with the performers whose story is grounded in that unique space, created to present that particular story. It is difficult to imagine imagining anything bereft of space; experience requires a spatial mode to perceive it, whether the object of perception is invented or encountered.²⁰ [132-138] “The poet’s eye,.. / Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven, / And as imagination bodies forth / The forms of things unknown, the poet’s pen / Turns them into shapes, and gives to airy nothing / A local habitation and a name,..” [A *Midsummer Night’s Dream*; V,1, ll.12-17]

Consciousness depends on the feeling that references emotions. This is perhaps a clue to the arts and the theatre’s efficacy in creating a powerful sense of consciousness; not only does the theatre portray situations that reference our emotional library (genetic and cultural), but the use of space, movement and time engages our visceral sensibilities.

An emotion is a multivalent collection of responses to an object (which includes situations as well as physical things) that form a pattern when we process the object with our sensory capabilities. A feeling (according to Damasio) is our private sense of the emotion when we “image” it.²¹ But this in itself is not enough for *consciousness*; we still must know that we have had the feeling, or “feel the feeling”, which is a second-order image map that “tracks” the relationship of the changes of the body images due to the emotion.²² This happens in time. To me it does not seem to be able to occur without the impact of the environment’s changes to the organism over some period of time, so the awareness of time is a key aspect of consciousness. Though I have just discussed this as happening at the lower level nearer to core consciousness, the sense of time I am alluding to must be experienced at the higher levels of *extended consciousness*, in relation to human thinking on science and art. I am going to guess that such awareness can only happen as the “library” of images from our *autobiographical selves* becomes available for our intelligence to manipulate.

Our emotions and feelings are connected to our most transcendent thoughts and seemingly least materialistic processes, like when we ponder religious and philosophical ideas, in the realm of what we may have misnamed as “pure reason”. Therefore, emotions and feelings, which arise from our *internal milieu* of connections between viscera, musculoskeletal systems, nerves and chemicals, “connect to” the seemingly rarefied notions of language, reason and ethics, all aspects of *extended consciousness*: perhaps this is one of the reasons the (supposed) mind-body dichotomy has such a prominent place in discussions of human experience? Except that I am asking the question not as an

acolyte of Cartesian *Dualism*, the neuroscientist's bane, but in the sense that humans are obsessed with the notion of our god-like reason trapped in our animalistic physical selves. Many decry this as a cheapening of the sublime achievement of the human mind, but isn't it really the opposite? I think of T.S. Eliot's admiration for the Metaphysical poets ability to create "...a direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling..."²³ The mind's achievement more impressive in its ability to build beyond the exigencies of primitive survival to create such institutions as science, art and religion, even if we believe we can attribute aspects of increased evolutionary survival to that development.

In recent theories of consciousness the relationship between the subject and object which requires a strong delineation between the boundaries of the self, (the subject), and our environment, (the object), is crucial. This still holds in what Damasio calls the "as if body-loop", in which neural images re-activate in the memory, without sensory input directly from the body.²⁴ These images still contain the spatial-temporal memories from when they were engendered, and therefore still are connected to the physical organism, causing a 'pulse' of *core consciousness* when recalled. They also retain their relationship to the subject organism's physical space, whose imagery is controlled by the *proto-self*. Essential here is that though creative activities (things that have not yet occurred, but are being imagined in the form of "memories of an anticipated future") skirt the body-loop, they are still related to its sense of spatial-temporal awareness. Even when we dream, don't we place our dreams in space?

I will guess that because consciousness is grounded in the images of the body (even when the images come from the “as if” loop), and the body is perceptually anchored to its environment, there is an affinity to the visceral aspects of dimensional space as powerful conveyances of consciousness. Emotion, feeling and consciousness, and by extension *extended consciousness*, depend on their shared connection to the body responding to the environment in time. Emotions are fixed in the material world of the body and its relationship to its environment, but these most primal aspects of our being are interwoven with such complex cognitive notions as reasoning, principles and judgment. Intellectual ideas are important, but it is the connection to feeling and emotion, rooted in the mind's integration to the body, that gives mental activity its expressive power. That power is the potential to evoke the feelings of consciousness; the feelings that make us aware of our being.

Of course movies and television also are dramatic mediums that enhance causality and manipulate the intensity and focus of detail we observe, probably more intensively than theatre based mediums. But the enormous impact of sharing the same literal space as the performers cannot be quantified; it is an expressive reward intrinsic to the performing arts that seems to bind them to the hub of conscious experience.

I have mentioned many times the terms “images”, “maps”, “representations” and “patterns” when discussing the neural references created by our minds in the course of making references to the objects we absorb in through consciousness.²⁴ These are not literal visual “pictures” somehow projected on the insides of our brains, but neural and chemical arrangements of sensorial experiences that let our brains understand the objects

and recreate them in memory when it is useful or appropriate. In addition to not being literal images, the information is also nonverbal. Even when it is a “narrative” of our conscious life, the third-order translation into a language format is preceded by non-language representations. Language is a higher order means of communicating what has already been experienced in a more elemental way. Damasio states “Consciousness feels like some kind of pattern built with the nonverbal signs of body states.”²⁵ There seems to be a great strength of “feeling”, ineffable, ephemeral, yet always present, that we are mindful of as the apex of conscious beings in our world. It just seems to make sense that the more proximate the vehicle of engendering feeling is to the origin of the feeling itself, the more it will be. Such vehicles conjure up primal sensibilities, like the sensation of life’s pulse, our inkling of our being, and although we can translate our sense of what that feels like into language it seems more immediate, closer to its visceral origin, when the medium is nonverbal. Connotative power may reside in music, the abstract qualities of literature, and the imagery of the visual arts, but it also makes sense that it would be very strong in the spatial imagery of the theatre. In the theatre the audience inhabits the same space that becomes the platform for agency. The more palpable the space becomes, the more powerfully it raises the emotions that raise feelings, that raise the “feeling of feeling”, and augment our inklings of consciousness.

The forms of theatrical space, its architecture and images, are vehicles for triggering feeling. They are objects we “map” and can carry the emotional connotations implicit in our consciousness, or they can evoke emotions and feelings from symbolic connections to the environments they construct. But it is important that I do not mean symbolic in the sense of signification;²⁵ though important it is a process too removed

from the visceral associations on which consciousness is based. Creative forms may begin as such traditional symbols, but if they are effective in connoting the experiential it is because they recreate the emotions that we associate with experience with emblematic artifice. Successful creative forms are “objects” that contain the ability to convey the emotional power of the “images” entangled in consciousness. “Consciousness *feels* like a feeling”²⁶ and that is something that cannot be directed intellectually, “not a sign pointed as an indicator”.²⁷ It has to have an intuitive aspect, but that is harder to discuss than tangible associations. Though based in concrete constructions, what is the most “authentic” about the experience of art has a dubious relationship to its material composition. That is not because the encounters are not palpable or based on experience with objects (in the neuro-scientific sense), but because the key aspect of the experience is the feeling evoked. “Assigned meaning” is not what life feels like.

Works of art are *symbolic forms*. My original adoption of the use of this term came through the philosopher Susanne Langer, whose book on aesthetics, *Feeling and Form*, has always felt to me to come the closest to describing the experience of creating as familiar to my sensibility as a practicing artist. The term *symbolic form*, which originally comes from the phenomenological aesthetics of Ernst Cassirer, encapsulates the disjuncture between works of art as concrete objects and the experiential sensibilities invoked by those forms. Formulated over fifty years ago, Langer’s ideas seem prescient when compared to contemporary trends in neuroscience. Ideas such as the purpose of art being to “objectify the life of feeling” with forms “transformed” into sensual feelings, so intellect and emotion are unopposed to each other²⁸, sounds analogous to Damasio’s description of consciousness, in which the sensory apprehension of objects eventually

leads to knowing the presence of feeling. A successful artistic form works according to [Damasio's] paradigm of consciousness: its audience feels the emotion latent in the objectified structure of expression, but not because meaning is assigned to it by intellectual process (although that can augment its power at a different level later on).

Until now I have been using the term “image” mostly to refer to the neural representations that coalesce in our brains and some how are re-represented in our minds. Now I will be referring to actual visual images; my use of the term will encompass the totality of (visual) image vehicles available for potential use in the theatre; pictorial imagery (which can also be projected) as well as architectural (spatial) imagery and dimensional, or sculptural imagery. We humans seem to rely most heavily on vision for perceptual knowledge. Even when we hear, smell or touch something first, we instinctually try to verify and enhance the experience by looking at whatever percept first caught the attention of our other senses. (I am assuming that if we taste something we usually have seen it first.) This is the potential power of the theatre; even an “empty space” is space, and its *intentionality* is always luxuriantly fecund. We remember images more than we remember words.²⁹ Though most of us have probably read or seen *The Cherry Orchard* many times, and might remember a line or two, how do such memories compare to the image of Firs being left alone onstage, forgotten in that huge empty house?

I have copied a newspaper photograph below that appeared on Memorial Day in The New York Times.³⁰ (Memorial Day is the U.S. day of remembrance for those killed in service to their country. It was started after the American Civil War of 1860-1864,

which was perhaps the first modern war, in the sense that technology in warfare produced an enormity of horrific carnage.) It is a compelling “image”. I’d like us to go through an exercise and reconstruct the content in different ways and try to imagine the differences in its experiential impact.



John Moore/Getty Images

In Memoriam

At Arlington National Cemetery, Mary McHugh visited the grave of her fiancé, Sgt. James J. Regan, who was killed in Iraq in February. Marking Memorial Day weekend, groups for and against the Iraq war met in Lewes, Del. At Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, 1,200 new headstones are being installed for Civil War soldiers. PAGES A9 AND B1

If I had shown no image, but described the photograph verbally would it be as powerful? If it was a gallery sized photo, roughly 8” x 12” (about 20 x 30 cm), would it have as much impact as a full-stage image projected or painted on a screen or drop on stage? Does a full-stage two-dimensional image have the impact of a fully realized spatial “setting” of this scene in three-dimensions? (Such a setting would have the graves and grass as a three-dimensional floor-piece changing to a two-dimensional image at the

horizon.) Is this exercise valuable in assessing the underlying capacity of theatrical design to contribute to the emotional impact of a scene, for we go from the emotion of the object's apprehension to the feeling that it is felt, to consciousness and beyond?

If I can be indulged one more imaginary exercise, think about how diminished the power of this image would be if the figure of the young woman was absent, or if she was merely standing to the side, rather than prone on a grave? To indulge in an imaginary stagecraft for one more example, imagine a tightly focused light that first shows us only her, seeming to be lying on the grass. Slowly the pool of light creeps out revealing the headstone in front of her, and then the light slowly seems to radiate further from her, the center of focus, until we see row after row of sad headstones, that seemingly go on without end.

Earlier I alluded to the presence of a cultural and sociological impact on consciousness. Specifically I mentioned the possibility of Cicero and the observers of his death scene pondering such issues as honor and courage, or the audience in a theatre observing itself as a community as well as an individual. These concepts are *memes*; they are units of cultural transmission, as opposed to genetic transmission. Coined by Richard Dawkins, the term refers to the distinctly human capability of transmitting ideas and improvements (and some less positive attributes) from generation to generation through means other than genetic or phenotypic evolution. They travel through our consciousness because our brains have evolved in a way that lets them. *Memes* are remarkably diverse, embracing concepts like good and truth, the wheel, curing prosciutto, the value of education, or icons like a Mozart opera or the *sfumato* of a Leonardo background landscape. They have perhaps taken the lead in human evolution because of the speed of

change they have acquired in the last 100,000 years or so; they seem to be denizens of *extended consciousness*, relying on the capabilities of *working memory* to make cultural memory effective.³¹

In my little picture exercise, I started with the suggestion of the nonverbal quality of images that create forms of art whose comprehension parallels the process of making us aware of our being, and activating the concomitant consciousness that accompanies the representation of objects in our minds. I have also alluded to the aspects of language, reason, memory and time in *extended consciousness*, including the socio-cultural concepts of *memes*, as providing the potential for ever-increasing robustness in the saliency of our conscious lives. This is a model for how forms of art affect us: first they draw us in almost unconsciously by the effectiveness of their structures; then they allow the level of engagement they are capable of to expand in our mental life. In the picture above, as thinking beings we would naturally move from our initial emotional connection to the consideration of other issues from memory and culture. Would we know someone who was a veteran, or someone who had lost a loved one (civilian or soldier) in war? (How much more poignant does this image become when we find out that the young woman is visiting the grave of her fiancé?) Will our mind wander to the sense of waste and cynicism, or deliberate on issues of sacrifice and honor? Will we contemplate the relation of this form to Picasso's *Guernica*, Brecht's *Mother Courage*, or Britten's *War Requiem*, or any of the many things within the purview of our experience that remind us of feelings we have felt, coursing back through our neural and chemical circuitry to the feeling of an emotion anchored in the frailness of a body bound to time.

The hypothetical progression I described of seeing first the young woman lying in (what looks like) the grass, then seeing her fiancé 's headstone, and then the "unending" rows of graves in the surrounding space, mimics the temporal quality of consciousness, as "objects" are defined and then redefined in relationship to the self in time. "The entire construction of knowledge, from the simple to the complex... depends on the ability to map what happens over time, inside our organism, around our organism, and with our organism..."³²[189] Perhaps our sensitivity to time makes us most conscious of our being, with the inherent implication of the awareness of the inevitability of our own time's end. Such bittersweet awareness of our limited possession of the space life is revealed in, repeats itself movingly in theatres through the act of performance. Each performance is a microcosmic causal entity from the first moment the presentational space becomes animated, to the "loss" of that experiential dynamism when the space darkens at the end of its time. The theatre and its space mark with acuity our consciousness of the inevitable that joins us all. That is authentic, for we are all emotionally affected by many of time's connotations, the most so by our knowledge of our inevitable death.

The quality of *suffering* unites in the theatre through consciousness and time. It does not do so through the glorification of suffering, but in the sense that the imagery of awareness necessary to suffer (as opposed to feel pain) demands a highly evolved sense of self that is sensitive our knowledge of our own finiteness.³³ So does the empathy that allows us to experience a high level of consciousness when seeing the suffering of others, and of course our idea of suffering is related to our ability to experience pleasure, enjoyment and happiness.

Much of dramatic literature has stories in which many of the characters suffer, often terribly. (Ironically we experience enjoyment when seeing plays which contain so much suffering.) I am not suggesting that theatre indulges in morbidity; we all know that the suffering of protagonists is also based in ritual symbolism. I don't think most of us enjoy seeing suffering; the important point is that one cannot be aware of suffering in oneself or others without consciousness. The emotions of anguish, fear, sadness and disgust constitute suffering, but it is knowledge of the response, the feeling of what it feels like, that allows one of our greatest conscious reactions to events, empathy. And perhaps empathy is the process by which forms of art are invested with their power to invoke consciousness. So if I may be indulged one last return to Cicero's demise, the intensity of the felt consciousness of that scene derives from the convergence of the different perceptions of suffering of Cicero, Pulo, and the audience; an intensity made palpable by the rich vivaciousness of that space and its imminent loss.

Endnotes

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