

## Playing with blends. Theatre studies and cognitive science

### Absztrakt

The purpose of this paper is to take a closer look at the relationship between cognitive sciences and theatre studies. First of all I examine if it is justified to speak about a “cognitive turn” in the discourse on theatricality. By examining the major works that are being labelled as “Cognitive Theatre Studies”, I discuss the new methods and theories dealing with theatrical phenomena. I also discuss the relationship these theories have with former studies. One of the most disturbing problems of theatre studies is that despite all the efforts, no sufficient definition has been offered for the term theatre. Using the means of cognitive studies, the paper argues that theatre researchers had an opportunity to examine this problem from another aspect. According to them the real question is not what theatre is, but rather what happens to the audience while perceiving a theatrical event, or what processes of the mind make us be able to indulge in a fictional scene. Certain researches try to use neurobiological answers, but these, in my view, have not been able to achieve a real breakthrough. I rather focus on studies that were developed from cognitive linguistics, and try to define theatricality by using Giles Fauconnier’s theory on conceptual blending. This theory not only gives us a good explanation about theatre, but it also opens up the opportunity to examine a certain hybridity of the theatrical medium: productions and dramatic texts that are blending film, theatre and radio.

### Szerző

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In his famous article David Bordwell points at the major problem of works focusing on cognitive sciences. <sup>[1]</sup> He writes the following: “The literature on cognitivism in psychology, philosophy, social theory, linguistics, anthropology, and even aesthetics has become so vast that no introduction can do justice to it. Indeed, nobody can keep track of it.” <sup>[2]</sup> That is the reason why I am not even trying to discuss cognitive science in general here. I will follow Bordwell’s strategy instead, and, by narrowing my purpose, I would like to discuss those attempts that in some ways managed to apply the results of cognitive sciences in the field of theatre studies.

We might say that the field of cognitive theatre studies emerged around the turn of the millennium, with two major works: Mary Thomas Crain’s book on Shakespeare, *Shakespeare’s Brain – Reading with Cognitive Theory* <sup>[3]</sup> and Bruce McConachie’s paper presented in *Theatre Journal*, “Doing things with image schemas: the cognitive turn in theatre studies and the problem of experience for historians.” <sup>[4]</sup> It is of great importance to make it clear that neither Crane nor McConachie announces a theoretical shift of theatre studies (hence the title: cognitive turn in theatre studies and not cognitive turn of theatre studies); rather, they are making suggestions for the application of cognitive theories in the research of the theatre. After more than ten years, it seems we can highlight two theories here: the conceptual metaphor theory of Lakoff and Johnson, and the conceptual integration theory of Fauconnier and Turner. The former inspired drama and theatre history, while the latter – and that is the topic of this particular paper – occurred in the discourse of theatre theory.

One of the major challenges for theatre studies in general has always been to find a proper definition of theatricality. According to one possible explanation theatre is a special kind of activity. Let me quote Eric Bentley here: “The theatrical situation, reduced to a minimum, is that A impersonates B while C looks on”. <sup>[5]</sup> Bentley handles the theatrical perception as an unproblematic and self-explanatory process, therefore, despite its simplicity, his sentence leaves many questions unanswered. For example: what does it exactly mean to perceive A while playing B? Is C aware of the presence of the actor (A)? If he or she is, what does it mean for her/him to “see” a fictional character (B)? Bentley’s explanation proved to be insufficient when facing contemporary or postdramatic theatre, the purpose of which was to mix A with B, and by doing so, to deconstruct the position of C. Poststructuralist theory therefore tried to solve this problem with the use of the term *frame*. According to Umberto Eco theatricality is the question of framing; theatre is that particular part of the world which is being framed as theatre. <sup>[6]</sup> It is easy to see that

Eco's purpose was not to give a definition of theatre. If we read his theory that way, we find ourselves in the middle of a tautology. To say that we use something as theatre means that we already, a priori have the definition of theatre. So the theory of framing will not give the proper answer for the question what theatre is. It rather forced theatre studies to give up ontology and, instead, investigate different questions, for example, how we recognize something as theatre in a certain historical moment.

Cognitive science proved to be useful in that very point. Besides the examination of the historical, political, economical, etc. context, we have the opportunity to examine the audience's perception. Cognitive theatre science tries to explain the perception of the audience in theatre, and the cognitive conditions that make it possible to perceive theatre. That is, the main question for cognitive theatre studies can be formulated in the following way: what does it mean to perceive theatre? What happens and how does it happen when we recognize something as theatre?

Some researches have tried to give an answer to that question by turning towards neurobiology and evolutionary biology. A good example for this is Gordon Scott Armstrong's book *Theatre and Consciousness – The Nature of Bio-Evolutionary Complexity in Arts*.<sup>[7]</sup> In his work the author undertakes no lesser task than to explain the evolutionary process of theatrical consciousness. That is to say, he approaches theatricality from the perspective of the biological mechanism of the brain, and by summarizing the results of certain neurobiological researches, he tries to explain those processes that are – according to him – necessary for perceiving an event or phenomena as theatre. For example, Armstrong asks the following question: how do certain parts of the production become memories, more precisely, how do we preserve those things in our memories?

According to Armstrong, "the answer would appear, in part, to be based on chemical responses. The *amygdala* and the *hippocampus* have connections to the *basal forebrain*, which has the ability to send acetylcholine-containing fibers back to the *limbic* structure and to the *cortex*. This chemical release initiates a series of cellular steps that can modify synapses in sensory tissue, strengthening neural connections and transforming the sensory perception into a physical memory trace."<sup>[8]</sup>

Armstrong maintains a biologist point of view, but it is of crucial importance for me to make it clear at this point that his philosophy is not at all commonly shared by other researchers in the field of cognitive theatre studies. These theatre researchers agree with Daniel C. Dennett that the old Cartesian separation of mind and body is empirically invalid, but they do not believe in the obligatory validity of the materialist answers. As the author of one of the founding books of Cognitive Theatre Science, Mary Thomas Crane points out in *Shakespeare's Brain*, "If we are able to view discourse and embodiment, representation and experience, as mutually constitutive aspects of performance rather than assuming that discourse and representation subsume the other two, a way is cleared for a broader view of the evolving concepts of theatre and performance."<sup>[9]</sup>

In sum, according to cognitive theatre studies, embodiment and discourse are not subsuming each other, but work in mutual relationship. That is the reason why I wouldn't call Armstrong's research cognitivist – nor a successful one. Neither of the two scientific fields can gain profit from

this kind of combination of theatre studies and neurobiology. Armstrong uses the fundamental knowledge of brain research to explain the nature of theatricality, therefore for a neuroscientist, there is nothing novel in Armstrong's study; on the other hand, viewing from the other perspective, the success of these explanations remains doubtful. It is not at all clear how neuroscience proves to be useful for theatre studies. Just by being familiar with the mechanisms of our brain, we won't be able to examine or interpret a theatrical event from another perspective; mostly because these mechanisms work the same way under different influences, that is, regarding acetylcholine there is no difference between a play or a math homework.

The objective to examine the cognitive state of the audience tightened the relationship between theatre studies and philosophy. A good example for this is the volume edited by David Saltz and David Krasner, *Staging Philosophy- Intersections of Theater, Performance and Philosophy*,<sup>[10]</sup> containing articles on theatre written by well-known representatives of cognitive science like, for example, Noel Carroll. David Saltz's paper in this book deals with the problem of the perception of theatrical fiction. According to the author, theatre semioticians and phenomenologists maintain a "fundamental dichotomy between the reality of the performance event and the fictional world those events represent, and by doing this, their theory harkens back to Coleridge's notion that spectators willingly suspend their 'disbelief' when they encounter works of fiction."<sup>[11]</sup> It is important to notice here (Saltz fails to do so), that the poet was writing about our disbelief regarding the supernatural, or even romantic characters. According to him, we suspend that very disbelief, thus creating a poetic faith, so that we would be able to accept the ghosts and witches on stage. Only by misinterpreting Coleridge can we say that the theatre is a place where one sees the actor as Hamlet and the stage as the land of Denmark. But, of course, the main problem is not misinterpretation. According to this notion, the real is being subdued and transcended as Bert O. States puts it, therefore the audience undergoes a strange shift of perspective or aspect, as a result of which she will see the fiction as real. We cannot accept this position because, as László Tarnay points out, "reality is not an aspect, just like existence is not a predicate. If there is an alternation like in the case of the rabbit-duck picture, that is not happening between the fictional duck and the real rabbit. We don't perceive something to be real or fictional in the same sense that we perceive it to be a duck or a rabbit or anything else."<sup>[12]</sup>

In his work on the fiction of theatricality, David Saltz points out that Wittgenstein – whose aspect-theory Tarnay is relying on – used a riddle to demonstrate that the rabbit-duck picture cannot be understood as the alternation of reality and fiction. He gives the following riddle in *Philosophical Investigations*: "a game played by children: they say that a box, for example, is a house; and thereupon it is interpreted as a house in every detail." Wittgenstein then asks: "does the child now *see* the box as a house?"<sup>[13]</sup> Here, the question remains rhetorical, but in his other example Wittgenstein gives us the answer: "if you see [a] leaf as a sample of 'leaf shape in general' you *see* it differently from someone who regards it as, say, a sample of this particular shape. Now this might well be so – though it is not so – for it would only be to say that, as a matter of experience, if you *see* the leaf in a particular way, you use it in such-and-such a way or according to such-and-such

rules.” [14] That is to say, it is not the gestalt of the visual object that changes, but, as Saltz argues, “what it will undergo is a shift in the *rules* that dictate the object’s *use*.” [15]



*Portrait of Laurence Olivier as  
Hamlet*

By establishing that thought, Saltz tries to develop a relevant theory. He builds this theory on the presumption that we don’t see the actor as a character, but we imagine him. Saltz mixes Wittgenstein’s philosophy with Kendall Walton’s theory (according to which we use drawings and paintings as props in the game of make believe), by saying that the audience has to accept the rules of the performance to perceive the fictional scene. These rules are provided by the narrative that functions as *inflection*. This term, created by Saltz, means a cognitive sample, providing the norms that guide the process of imagination.

Saltz’s argumentation becomes problematic in two ways; first, he pays too much attention to the narrative which leaves certain theatrical events, like Grotowski’s and Barba’s productions, out from his theoretical perspective. Second, and that is a much more difficult issue, Saltz does not explain the difference between seeing the actor as someone, and imagining the actor as someone. More precisely, it remains doubtful whether – regarding the relationship of reality and fiction – imagination has that *as-structure* which seeing does not. According to Coleridge, *poesis* forces imagination to produce pictures in the mind; therefore, we could say that we have an image of the actor, and a fictive aspect of him as well (the character). The statement that we imagine someone as something could take us back to the shifting of aspects Saltz tried to avoid; it seems that, after all, Saltz shares a similar opinion as that of States’: theatre is a place where imagination subdues reality, and the audience sees the rabbit as a duck.

Though Saltz fails to develop a relevant theory of the theatrical perception, he makes an important argument against the common thought that brings us back to Coleridge’s theory. According to my point of view, Gilles Fauconnier’ and Mark Turner’s theory on the conceptual integration, presented in their book *The Way We Think*, enables us to avoid that trap, and at the same time it can provide us with productive answers about the audience’s cognition. In my understanding of conceptual integration I rely on Fauconnier’ and Turner’s example, which is a re-reading of Koestler’s riddle.

“A Buddhist Monk begins at dawn one day walking up a mountain, reaches the top at sunset, meditates at the top for several days until one dawn when he begins to walk back to the foot of the mountain, which he reaches at sunset.. Riddle: Is there a place on the path that the monk occupies at the same hour of the day on the two separate journeys?”

The answer is: yes. To quote the authors, “rather than envisioning the Buddhist Monk strolling up one day and strolling down several days later, imagine that he is taking both walks on the same day. There must be a place where he meets himself, and that place is the one we are looking for.” [16]

Now, according to the authors, to solve this riddle we had to develop two separate mental spaces. Mental spaces are conceptual packets that we use to understand stories. In this story, we have two mental spaces. In the Buddhist Monk network, we have a mental space for the ascent and another mental space for the descent. From these, we build up a generic space, which maps onto each of the inputs, and contains what the inputs have in common (the moving monk, the path, the mountain, etc.). Finally, we have the fourth space, the blend, that develops an emergent structure containing two monks heading towards each other. From this structure we know that the individuals have to meet somewhere, so when we run the blend to the original story, we are able to solve it.

According to the authors we use blends in various occasions in our every day life, for example when working with a computer’s operation system. But the experience of theatre itself is a special kind of blend. As Fauconnier and Turner argue,

“Dramatic performances are deliberate blends of a living person with an identity. They give us a living person in one input and a different living person, an actor, in another. The person on stage is a blend of these two. The character portrayed may of course be entirely fictional, but there is still a space, a fictional one, in which that person is alive. In the blend, the person sounds and moves like the actor and is where the actor is, but the actor in her performance tries to accept projections from the character portrayed, and so modifies her language, appearance, dress, attitudes, and gestures. For the spectator, the perceived living, moving, and speaking body is a supreme material anchor. The outer-space relation is one of Representation. Typically, Representation is supported by outer-space Analogy, so that, for example, a middle-aged female character will be played by a middle-aged female actress. In the blend, these outer-space relations ‘are compressed into uniqueness. (...) While we perceive a single scene, we are simultaneously aware of the actor moving and talking on a stage in front of an audience, and of the corresponding character moving and talking within the represented story world. (...) In this sense, in each particular

theatrical representation, there will be rich shared generic structure between ‘reality’ and ‘fiction’.” [17]

Being language theorists rather than theatre researchers, Fauconnier and Turner fail to apply their blending theory on theatre sufficiently. To be more precise, blending theory, at least in the way they use it in the quoted paragraph, says nothing significant about our main problem: the relationship of fiction and reality in theatre. The main problem with their argument is that the authors did not make any reflection on the difference between theatrical blending and the process what we have seen in the case of the Buddhist Monk. It should be noticed that we had to create two mental spaces in the riddle; we had to imagine the mountain and the monk twice, and blending comes after the creation of mental spaces. What happens in theatre should be described as a much more difficult process, for there is only one imagined mental space there, the other component of the blend is the “moving, speaking, living” body of the actress/actor. Now following the logic known from the riddle, we should develop an equation, such as the following: 1, there is the material space of the actress/actor, the wooden stage, the props, paintings etc.; + 2, we (the audience) have a mental space, the fictional scene of the drama; = 3, by alloying these two, we get the blend, the generic structure described by Fauconnier and Turner. The problem with this idea is that it presupposes the existence of a mental space (for example the existence of a fictional Hamlet and his world) before the actual performance. As if we arrived in the theatre with a fictive image of the characters in our head, and after seeing the actress/actor, we blend this image with her/him. But that would explain only those occasions where we not only have a mental space before the theatrical event (since we have already read the dramatic text), but the performance is also similar to what we have imagined before. If we are not familiar with the story and have no clue about what we will see, or if the performance differs from our previous expectations, this process cannot take place. In the former situation, we do not have a mental space, therefore we are not able to blend it, in the latter, the mental space dissolves, since we cannot find the “material anchors”, necessary for blending.

I would like to suggest another solution that can make the blending theory work for theatre studies. According to my point of view, blending in theatre shouldn't be described as a mechanical process at the beginning of the performance. Moreover, what we actually do is not creating the blend, rather, *presupposing* it. First of all, in order to partake in the sensation of the theatrical event, each member of the audience has to accept that what s/he actually sees is *standing for something else*, or *denotes* something else; [18] hence it is a part of a possible blend. S/he has to presuppose the existence of a particular blend, one component of which is the material body, stage, props etc. In this regard we may accept the use of the Coleridgean theory. There *is* a necessary pact of theatre, just this covenant is not about the suspension of disbelief. For being capable of perceiving theatricality, we have to agree that from what we see, we have to *deduce* something else. From what Fauconnier and Turner call “material anchors”, we are deducing the mental space, not creating it.

This leads us to the following conclusions: a, in theatre, there is no single blend, rather the process of blending that lasts till the end of the play; b, the theatrical mental space does not exist outside

the blend. It cannot be separated from it, nor can it be separated from the other component, the “material anchor”, that we actually see. From the scene, the props, the gestures, we can deduce a fictional character, and the imaginary world s/he is living in. On the other hand, the props, the gestures etc. gain their sense from that world. Or to be more precise, they have sense, because as being a component of the blend, they are referring to that world. This all means that on the receivers’ side, theatricality has nothing to do with imagination, nor belief. It is not our capability to produce mental pictures that makes us capable of interpreting, and enjoying a performance. Rather, following Nelson Goodman’s thought, we can say that *deducing* is the core of understanding a theatrical representation. Therefore, Bentley’s sentence should be restructured like this: in the theatrical blend, A stands for, or denotes B of a mental space, while C is deducing.

Let me use my master-example here, the *Hamlet*. The opening scene should start with two frightened guards; in order to understand that, we have to presuppose that the gestures of the actors refer to the emotions of certain characters of a mental space. Failing to do so, one would think that it is the actors who are frightened, and there might be some source of real danger. Entering the theatre, we have to accept that we will see *denoting agents*, blended with a mental space, what we have to deduce. Fear has its material anchors on the face and body of the actors, but the emotion (and the dreadful creature that generated it) remains in the blend.

All this means that the representation could never close in as it was suggested in the discourse of the modern/realist drama. The stage world was never equal to what we call or experience as “reality”. It seems as if Pirandello realized that problem; in his *Six Roles* the father argues that the Character always has a life that is outlined clearly, therefore he/she is always someone, while a human subject is constantly changing, therefore he/she can be nobody. Therefore the character is more real, and has much more truth in its existence than the flesh and blood person. But when the Actress starts to play the Stepdaughter, this reality and truth remain in a dimension that can never be perceived by the audience. That is the very reason why Pirandello condemns theater. In the blend of theatricality the text-world has to open up, and the Role cannot be perceived in its clean form; the audience sees that representation always as representation.



*Peter Brook: Marat/Sade (1967)*

*Michael Williams (on the right) and  
Ian Richardson (middle)*

Should we accept this position, we have to modify the theory according to which postmodern drama differs from the modernist tradition in opening up representation. In Peter Weiss’s play, *Marat/Sade*



, one of the characters points at Marat, and addresses the audience in an ironic monologue:

“If our performance causes aggravation  
We hope you would swallow down your indignation.  
And please remember that we show  
Only those things that happened long ago.  
Remember: things were very different then,  
Of course, today, we are all god-fearing man.” [19]

According to the Hungarian theatre theorist Árpád Kékesi Kun, by doing so, the play opens up representation so that the border between presence and acting evaporates, therefore the receiver cannot decide whom he/she sees: the mental patient, the character from the Marat-story or the actual actor. [20] From the perspective of cognitive science, it seems that Kékesi makes a mistake here. In the blend we cannot perceive the actual actor as him or herself, just like we cannot perceive the Role. In Pirandello’s play the Actress is not turning into the Stepdaughter, but in this scene we no longer see her as we did before, but as someone who stands for the Stepdaughter. The blend (and therefore theatricality) brakes off at the very point when we see the actual actor as him or herself. That happens, for example, when we see a weak impersonation on stage, where the actor in our perception is not a substitute, nor does he stand for someone else, just makes endless efforts in order to do so. In sum, my thesis is this: if there is no blend, there is no theatricality. [21]

Therefore we can say that in Marat/Sade we see an actor, who stands for an actor, who stands for a character of an insane person, who stands for a character in the Marat-story. What we are dealing with here is the multiplication of mental spaces, as a result of which the deducing process in itself becomes problematic. While in the modernist tradition the theatrical pact was about presupposing only one blend and mental space, Peter Weiss’s play makes us reconsider, or reject our former decisions about the performance, or to choose between several possible blends. When the Bellman addresses the audience, there is a possibility for us to presuppose a blend, where we also play a role, by substituting for the actual audience from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this process the play becomes fragmented, it disseminates to several blends which inclines the reader/audience to a constant re-blending while perceiving the play.

## Jegyzetek

1. I would like to express my thanks to Attila Kiss, for his invaluable help in finishing the English version of this paper.
2. David Bordwell, “A Case for Cognitivism,” *IRIS* (1989): 11
3. Mary Thomas Crayne, *Shakespeare’s Brain-Reading with Cognitive Theory*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001.
4. Bruce McConachie, “Doing Things with Image Schemas: The Cognitive Turn in Theatre Studies and the Problem of Experience for Historians,” *Theatre Journal* (2001): 569-94.

5. Eric Bentley, *The Life of the Drama* (London: Methuen, 1965), 150.
6. Zoltán Imre, "Színház, történet, alternatívák – A színháztörténet-írás és -kutatás lehetőségei és problémái," in Zoltán Imre, *A színház színpadra állításai* (Budapest: Ráció Kiadó, 2009), 17-18.
7. Gordon Scott Armstrong, *Theatre and Consciousness – The Nature of Bio-Evolutionary Complexity in Arts*. New York: Peter Lang, 2003.
8. Armstrong, 15.
9. Craine, 171.
10. David Krasner and David Saltz (eds.), *Staging Philosophy: Intersections of Theater, Performance and Philosophy*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2006.
11. David Saltz, "Inflection and Outfiction. The Role of Fiction in Theatrical Performance", in Saltz and Krasner, 221.
12. László Tarnay, "Mi az, ami látható, és mi az, ami nem? A filmi befogadás kognitív szintjei," *Metropolis* (1998) (<http://emc.elte.hu/~metropolis/9804/TAR1.html>, Accessed September 30 2012)
13. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 2nd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Basil Blackwell and Mott, 1958), 206.
14. Wittgenstein, 35.
15. Saltz, 209.
16. Giles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think Conceptual Blending and The Mind's Hidden Complexities* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 40.
17. Fauconnier and Turner, 266-267.
18. I think Nelson Goodman's philosophy on pictorial representation can be applied on theater. According to Goodman "[t]he plain fact is that a picture, to represent an object, must be a symbol for it, refer to it; and that no degree of resemblance is sufficient to establish the requisite relationship of reference. Nor is resemblance necessary for reference; almost anything may stand for almost anything else. A picture that represents – like a passage that describes – an object refers to and, more particularly, *denotes* it. Denotation is the core of representation (...)." Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art. An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (New York: The Bobbs-Merill Company, 1968), 5.
19. Since I couldn't find the English version of the text, I had to rely on Brooks' film version.
20. Árpád Kékesi Kun, "Textualitás és teatralitás: A modern és posztmodern dráma horizontválása," in Árpád Kékesi Kun, *Tükörképek lázadása* (Budapest: Kijarat Kiadó, 1998), 141.
21. I am well aware of the fact that there is a possible counterargument against my statement, namely, what shall we do with those phenomena of the theater that are apparently without a blend (for example stand-up comedy or singing performance)? I think it is possible to say that theatre can contain performances, experiments, symptoms that are without theatricality. These are no less valuable than others, they just work in a different way. In theater history we can find certain movements that were against the process that I describe in the blending theory. For example The Poor Theater of Jerzy Grotowski was about turning the performance into a ritual: the actor was not at all standing for, but *changing* into someone else, namely the "holy actor". The purpose was to reveal the inner essence of the human being, and making the members of the audience active participants, and witnesses. There was no blend, no mental space here, therefore Grotowski's art should be understood as an experiment, that wanted to change theater by eliminating theatricality. On the other hand, we should notice that the theatrical blend can in many occasions take place outside of the theater; this happens every time when we see denoting agents on the streets (pantomime artists, street actors etc.).

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