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STEVE DIXON
 Brunel University

The philosophy and psychology of the scenographic house in multimedia theatre

ABSTRACT

The full-scale house has a long history in theatrical set design, and the addition of video projections and digital effects in recent multimedia theatre has resulted in some extraordinary productions that compress or reconfigure ideas of time, space and place, and interrogate the close interrelationships between the macro and micro, and the real and the unreal. Digitally enhanced house sets and façades in works by Heiner Goebbels, Keith Armstrong, the Builders Association, Uninvited Guests and La Fura Dels Baus/ENO are analysed in relation both to their psychological effects on audiences and to philosophical readings, from Gaston Bachelard's notions of childhood memory and 'intimate immensity' to Sigmund Freud's theories of the uncanny [unheimlich]. Heiner Goebbel's Eraritjaritjaka (2004) provides a central case study, where the initial familiarity and beauty of the white house façade draws the audience in with a wondrous, childlike anticipation that gives way to a vertiginous sense of haunting and the uncanny as a series of live and recorded projections seemingly

KEYWORDS

house set
 house scenography
 Heiner Goebbels
 Gaston Bachelard
 uncanny
 unheimlich

stretch time, space and media, and theatrically conjoin notions of the conscious and the unconscious, the inside and the outside, the real and the unreal.

INTRODUCTION

Just as a nasty virus resists the body's immune system so... the house resists interpretation.

(Danielewski 2000: 356)

The life-size house constructed as a theatre set has long been used by scenographers, directors and playwrights to achieve a powerful visual impact and dramatic statement, whether used as a backdrop to action played in front of a house frontage façade or with the walls cut away to expose the domestic interiors inhabited by the characters. In recent multimedia theatre productions, projection systems and media effects have been combined with life-size house sets to reinvigorate the paradigm and to create fascinating new theatrical and, I will argue, psychological and philosophical effects.

In his essay 'Building Dwelling Thinking' the philosopher Martin Heidegger argued that 'the way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans *are* on the earth is *Buan*, dwelling' (1971: 147) and in 1957 he discussed the world as 'the house in which mortals dwell' (1957: 13). The following year, Gaston Bachelard reconceived and reversed the metaphor to propose a more concrete notion: the house as *a world in itself*; and he devoted most of the first two chapters of his seminal book *The Poetics of Space* (1958) to the subject of the house.

For Bachelard, the house constitutes a fundamental philosophical paradigm, which extends beyond a mere physical dwelling space to be its own



Figure 1: A miniature house, illuminated from the inside, in Heiner Goebbels' Eraritjaritjaka (2004). Photo: Krzytsof Bielinski.

01 poetic place-world, and a space of memory and dream. He argues that in philo-
 02 sophical and psychological terms, the house and its interior can be considered
 03 more resonant and important to humans than the entire universe outside. This
 04 is because it is the primary space experienced around our births and through-
 05 out the formative stages of childhood: a house is 'our first universe . . . [our] first
 06 world' (1958: 4, 7). Our first childhood house teaches the intense and 'intimate
 07 values of inside space' (1958: 31) and we inherit it bodily (through our continu-
 08 ation of physical habits and feelings being first developed there), like a piece of
 09 genetic makeup, and then take it with us to all subsequent houses we inhabit
 10 or visit:

12 Over and beyond our memories, the house we were born in is physically
 13 inscribed in us. It is a group of organic habits. . . . We are the diagram
 14 of the functions of inhabiting that particular house, and all the other
 15 houses are but variations on a fundamental theme. . . . The house, the
 16 bedroom, the garret in which we are alone, furnishes the framework for
 17 an indeterminable dream.

(1958: 14–15)

20 These ideas have been taken up by many writers and psychologists includ-
 21 ing Clare Cooper Marcus, whose *House as a Mirror of Self: Exploring the Deeper*
 22 *Meaning of Home* (2006) argues that our psychological development is as much
 23 guided by our affinities with our childhood physical environment as it is with
 24 our relationships with people.

27 THE DIGITAL HOUSE AND CHILDHOOD MEMORY: KEITH 28 ARMSTRONG

30 Bachelard's ideas of the house as an evocation of dream and early mem-
 31 ory provide a perspective on why, in theatrical terms, the image of a house
 32 on stage often stirs in the audience personal memories and powerfully res-
 33 onant, childlike feelings. The house presented in a larger interior space (the
 34 theatre auditorium), this building-within-a-building microcosm and macro-
 35 cosm (a type of play-within-a-play) also evokes the image of a dolls' house,
 36 which further compounds its childlike appearance and visual and mnemonic
 37 appeal that may act to trigger Proustian memories. The dolls' house, through-
 38 out the centuries, has represented an ideal and an idyll; a miniature world for
 39 the child to explore and to enact fantasies in, once the hinged façade has been
 40 opened out, like a theatrical curtain being drawn back, to voyeuristically reveal
 41 its hidden, secret, interior world.

42 In digital performance practice, Keith Armstrong's *Hacking a Private Space in*
 43 *Cyberspace* (1995) takes the staged house directly back to childhood memory by
 44 use of a giant child's play-house on stage, scaled so large that it approaches the
 45 size of a small domestic house. During the one-man performance, Armstrong
 46 uses sensor-tracked physical gestures to activate and manipulate VRML (Vir-
 47 tual Reality Modelling Language) menus and to project graphical 3D shapes
 48 onto the physical house. He works furiously to correct their many (deliberate
 49 and often comic) misalignments until he finally succeeds in mapping them all
 50 accurately onto the physical house structure, and the picture of a composite
 51 physical and virtual house is complete. He sings 'I Want to Be Like You' from
 52 the children's film *Jungle Book* (Disney, 1967) as he walks along a catwalk above

the audience, and finally steps off the platform and crashes through the physical roof of the house – an act he calls ‘virtual inhabitation’. As the house collapses, the projections of the digital house remain and hover in space like some ghostly apparition or fading memory of a house, and the lights fade slowly to black.

When the house in this performance (as well as the other technological theatre productions discussed here) is created or ‘dressed’ using digital effects, I would argue that its poetic and dreamlike quality is intensified and enhanced by virtue of its ‘unreal’ electronic quality: its artificial pixels and colours, its hazy, projected shimmers. It becomes, in Bachelard’s terms, the fundamental and originary house that is dreamed, imagined and remembered: an ‘oneiric house, a house of dream memory... we “write a room”, “read a room”, or “read a house” ’ (1958: 14, 15).

What the life-size scenographic house often achieves in digital performance is the at once pleasurable and unnerving experience of *the uncanny*. This ancient idea was given renewed prominence following Sigmund Freud’s long essay ‘Das Unheimlich’ (The Uncanny) published in 1919, and it is significant that the literal translation of the German word ‘unheimlich’ is ‘un-homelike’. Freud discusses the uncanny as a peculiar, foreboding feeling when the safe and familiar (as epitomized by the home) suddenly becomes strange, alien or sinister: ‘the unheimlich is what was once heimisch, home-like, familiar; the prefix ‘un’ is the token of repression’ (1985: 366).

Freud’s essay marked a turning point in his thought when, according to Fredrik Svenaeus, he would later connect our primal sensitivity to the uncanny, to trauma and birth anxiety whereby the loss of the mother suffered by the child transforms the child into an ego: ‘what is not at home in itself in an uncanny sense, according to Freud, is precisely the human ego’ (Svenaeus 1999: 239). Bachelard’s notion of the house and Freud’s conception of the uncanny are closely interrelated as both focus on philosophical ideas of what ‘home’ represents, as well as on the psychological/psychoanalytical notions of returns to childhood, with Freud’s understanding of the uncanny centring on the resurfacing of repressed and infantile complexes and fears.

In *The Architectural Uncanny* (1992) Anthony Vidler relates Freud’s notion of the uncanny to the house which, ‘haunted or not’, appears or ‘pretends to afford the utmost security while opening itself to the secret intrusion of terror’ (1992: 11); there is a ‘general drift of the uncanny movement from homely to unhomely, a movement in most ghost stories where an apparently homely house turns gradually into a site of horror’ (1992: 32).

THE HOUSE AS A HUMAN BODY: LA FURA DELS BAUS

In *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (1997), Edward S. Casey (following Bachelard) relates the house to a human body, arguing that: ‘To return to an inhabited room, whether in fact or in fantasy, is to return to an organic part of a house that is itself experienced as a megabody, with windows for eyes and a front door for mouth’ (1997: 291). This notion of the house as a body is explored to spectacular effect in La Fura Dels Baus’ acclaimed collaboration with English National Opera of György Ligeti’s opera *Le Grand Macabre* (2009), which opens with a gigantic video projection across the entire stage front-cloth of a woman crawling towards camera in the throes of a violent heart attack. The image freezes, and in a breathtaking *coup de theatre*, the curtain rises suddenly to reveal the same image, in the same position and to the same huge scale, on stage: a giant 3D fibreglass sculpture around 35 feet high, of the entire naked



Figure 2: The human body set which operates like a house in *La Fura Dels Baus* and English National Opera's production of Ligeti's opera *Le Grand Macabre* (2009). Photo: Bernd Uhlig.

woman on all fours, staring out in pain and towering over the audience, caught with realist precision in the same anguished physical position (Figure 2).

Her body fills the vast opera stage, and as the performance develops and the body is covered in projections and rotates (on the stage revolve), singers and actors inhabit and come out of it, like it is a house. Inside the body structure, people appear and sing arias from inside the eyes, as if they are windows, and its mouth and anus act as doors from which people emerge onto the stage. Different parts of the body (the stomach, a nipple, a thigh, a buttock, part of the head) are then opened up and exposed to reveal rooms where scenes take place (Figure 3).

These rooms and the events within them closely reflect Bachelard's ideas of how the axis of a house (from basement to attic) links to the physical (and particularly, spinal) axis of a human being. When a portion of the scenic head in *Le Grand Macabre* is opened up, it reveals a study, which, like Bachelard's attic, represents 'the rational zone of intellectualized projects' (1958: 18), whereas when a buttock is opened up, a devilish nightclub appears, complete with scantily-clad women, flashing red lights and a glitter-ball, representing the dark, libidinal subconscious. Like Bachelard's bodily metaphor, the house's attic is the space of day and physical and spiritual illumination, whereas the cellar is a place of perpetual night, murk and repression: 'In the attic, the day's experiences can always efface the fears of night. In the cellar, darkness prevails' (1958: 19).

THE HOUSE DECONSTRUCTED: BUILDERS ASSOCIATION AND UNINVITED GUESTS

For their radical adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's *Master Builder* (1994), the Builders Association worked with architect John Cleater to construct the open façade



Figure 3: Characters appear in the eyes as though they are house windows, and sing a duet as digital projections render the face a skull in *Le Grand Macabre*. Photo: Bernd Uhlig.

of a life-size three-storey wooden house in a 17,000-square-foot New York warehouse. The dilapidated house was inspired by a photographic collage by Gordon Matta-Clark, an artist who explores what he terms the 'architecture of the abject'. The house is also a kind of musical instrument, with MIDI triggers wired all around it, which the actors activate to prompt video clips, musical phrases and sound effects (Figure 4).

As the performance progresses and the lives and secrets of an American family are painfully unravelled, the house set too become unravelled in



Figure 4: The full-size house set, inspired by a Gordon Matta-Clark photographic collage, in the Builders Association's *Master Builder* (1994). Photo: courtesy of the Builders Association.

01 a gradual demolition that acts as a type of double-reveal: to expose the house's
02 skeletal structure (which is all that remains at the end) and to expose intimate
03 revelations, as the 'skeletons' of the characters' pasts are unearthed. The dis-
04 integration of the set thus mirrors the disintegration of the family, and the
05 crumbling away of the architectural set becomes a vividly physical dramati-
06 zation of the gradual breakdown and collapse of the family's security, trust
07 and love.

08 The scenographic house in such productions excites a particular sense of the
09 uncanny because a home, a ubiquitous place of solidity, shelter, tranquillity and
10 security, is suddenly positioned entirely out of its context on a theatre stage, an
11 essentially ephemeral space where drama, intrigue, surprise and (nowadays)
12 deconstruction reign. When a curtain rises and a house set is revealed, we feel
13 fond (and in Bachelard's terms, childlike) recognition and pleasurable yearn-
14 ing, but also a disquieting sense of the uncanny since the house is also boldly
15 unreal and vulnerably out of place; a temporary structure, not a real house built
16 for permanence. The uncanny effect of the house in the Builders Association's
17 *Master Builder* is particularly heightened by virtue of its scenographic grandeur
18 and scale (as is the case too with the giant body 'house' in *Le Grand Macabre*).
19 In German, when *unheimlich* (uncanny) is used as an adverb it translates as
20 'dreadfully', 'awfully', 'heaps of', and 'an awful lot of', and as Nele Bemong
21 points out in relation to the uncanny: 'Largeness has always been a condition
22 to the weird and unsafe; it is overwhelming, too much or too big' (2003).

23 But despite the vast scale and dramaturgical centrality of the three-storey
24 house in *Master Builder*, Builders Association director Marianne Weems sug-
25 gests interestingly that her production:

26
27 has very little to do with actual buildings and much more to do with
28 bodies and the perception and manipulation of space and how space is
29 a system that is ideologically configured. . . . It was a dream-like, super-
30 voyeuristic experience. . . . After that, and in each succeeding project since
31 then, my interest in physical edifices has receded, and what has emerged
32 is an interest in the electronic network and how that too is a kind of
33 architecture.

(in Kaye 2008)

35
36 In *Uninvited Guests'* theatre performance *Guest House* (1999), six separate
37 white wooden 'walls' on wheels are moved around the stage to form differ-
38 ent rooms and parts of houses. 3D computer-generated VRML projections of
39 house exteriors and interiors are projected onto them by an onstage computer
40 operator who navigates the virtual spaces, rotating and exploring them around
41 360°, while actors move in and out of the screen 'rooms' recounting stories and
42 memories about them.

43 In one sequence, a VRML image of a room being described by a female
44 actor is projected onto the wall of a screened off 'room' on stage in which a
45 male actor is sitting, hidden from audience view by the screen walls. As the
46 virtual room is navigated around, we see his reactions on live video relay, the
47 image integrated into the centre of the projected VRML image using a picture-
48 in-picture effect. The woman describes the room as if from a point of view:
49 how 'turning to the right' one will see certain furniture and features and how
50 'turning to the left' will reveal others. As she does so, the man inside the room,
51 shown in video close-up within the VRML image, turns his head in precise
52 synchronization with the pans and movements of the computer model room to

'see' and react to the different things described. As I have discussed in *Digital Performance* (2007):

This simple and effective composite image both locates him inside the VRML room and makes it seem as if the room is part of his mind, or his body. Such moments of physical/spatial separation, which are digitally united, as well as bouts of onstage hiding, which are electronically revealed, work to unify the disparate physical and virtual spaces that make up the *mise-en-scene* – open stage space, screen configurations, walled rooms, computer monitors, 3D computer-generated projections, and 2D live video relay.

(Dixon 2007: 401)

In this scene, digital effects are used to unite the interior with the exterior through the creation of a new type of 'window' (the picture-in-picture effect). As Bachelard has emphasized in relation to houses, 'in' and 'out' are not binary opposites, rather they communicate, interrelate and co-exist fluidly, since windows mean that those inside can continually observe the events and changes of the outside world, while those on the outside can look within. The outside world is therefore part of 'being within' a house, there is a continuity between inside and outside, and 'an osmosis between intimate and undetermined space' (1958: 230). Although walls may mark particular boundaries, they do not mark limits, or as Casey puts it, houses are:

un(de)limited albeit bounded . . . To inhabit a room is for *it to be in us*, and for us to be in an entire house and world *through it*. . . . inhabitation itself is two-way. Just as I am in the dwelling that is also inside me, so I feel *centred* by being within the dwelling in which I reside – orienting myself by what is around me.

(1997: 293)

THE HOUSE AS PSYCHE: HEINER GOEBBELS

Eraritjaritjaka (2004) is the final part of a trilogy of production collaborations between director Heiner Goebbels and actor André Wilms following *Or the Hapless Landing* (1993) and *Max Black* (1998). They share the theme and metaphor of existence as a series of text fragments and diary notes that we both write and appropriate from other authors; and they particularly focus on the moment when one faces and confronts oneself. *Eraritjaritjaka* (an archaic Aboriginal word meaning 'full of longing for something lost') is based on short texts and autobiographical fragments by Nobel Laureate Elias Canetti that reflect on 'man's territory' (the title of a Canetti anthology) and particularly his habits and vanities, the places he goes and dwells, his sense of order, and his relationships to other people and to animals. As Goebbels puts it:

Whenever I work with André Wilms I find I use texts that are not dramatic, which are not written for the stage, because those tend to concentrate on relationships and emotions rather than on the thoughts behind the words. . . . I'm looking for words or images or music that open up perspectives, not narrow them.

(in Clements 2004)



Figure 5: André Wilms stands in front of a miniature house and interacts with a robot in Heiner Goebbels' *Eraritjaritjaka* (2004). Photo: Krzytsof Bielinski.

The performance begins as if it is a music concert, with a string quartet (the Mondriaan Quartet from the Netherlands) dressed in formal black sitting centrally on a bare stage playing the slow, melancholy overture of Shostakovich's Opus 110 quartet. They suddenly stop playing and stand up, but eerily the music continues (a recording) as they pick up their chairs and music stands and take up new positions upstage. It is the first time that a pleasurable surprise and illusion is created through a skilful, seamless segue between the live and the recorded, and later there is a quite unforgettable and uncanny moment that will operate in reverse, moving from the recorded to the live.

André Wilms enters, and a projected line appears on the stage floor, which gradually grows into a rectangle of light, and Wilms interacts with it; and wherever he moves, it follows him and illuminates his path. As Wilms speaks a Canetti text about human relationship with animals, a remote-controlled, insect-like robot with antennae appears which Wilms begins to play with as if it is a pet, saying: 'every time you observe an animal attentively, you have the feeling that a human is hidden inside and is laughing at you.' (Figure 5)

Wilms brings on a miniature house, places it centre stage and lies down. As he rests his head on its roof, the windows brighten gradually as the house is illuminated from inside. The image, with Wilms resting his head on the miniature house as though sleeping as its interior light builds and spills out of the windows, conjures the sense that the house not only symbolizes a place of rest, sleep and dreams, but that it is also a metaphor for the mind and the psyche. The miniature house in *Eraritjaritjaka* relates to Bachelard's argument that the miniature is 'vast in its way' (1958: 215) and, as Casey puts it:

To be in a house . . . is not only to feel protected from a hostile outer world; it is to experience oneself in a larger world *in miniature*. Not only the house, then, but even the most minute part of it is capable of containing

a world – of *being a world* and not just being-in-a-world. . . . To feel such immensity is to feel *infinity in intimacy*, a universe in a grain of sand – one's own grain on one's own beach. I feel at one with the universe not because I am extended out into it, or can merely project myself there, but because I experience its full extent *from within* my discrete place in the house. . . . I connect the tiny and the enormous in one stroke.

(1997: 294)

To connect the tiny and enormous in one stroke is a fundamental aim of great theatre: to offer images, events and interactions on a tiny stage as a much grander metaphor for our lives and psyches – a microcosm of both our experience and our world.

Wilms stirs and then gets up, as a smoke effect billows from the house, and the black drapes at the rear of the stage are pulled back to reveal the miniature house's 'double': a flat, life-size exterior façade of a white, two-storey house. A live camera shot of Wilms is then projected onto the entire house, taken by cameraman Bruno Deville sitting in the third row of the stalls. As the musicians take up new positions and begin another piece (which they do repeatedly throughout the performance), Wilms steps off the stage and walks up the aisle, and Deville and his camera follows him.

The live video projection continues to play on the house set in real time, showing Wilms leaving the auditorium, walking through the theatre foyer, going down in a lift and exiting the building. He gets into the back seat of a waiting taxi (as does Deville) and talks to camera as the car drives off and weaves through the streets and lights of the city which we see through the taxi's windows behind him - Budapest, in the performance I saw (Figure 6). After several minutes and miles, the taxi stops in a busy city centre street and Wilms gets out and the camera follows him as he walks, pushing by pedestrians, and then stops in front of a building and goes inside.



Figure 6: A live video image of André Wilms travelling in a taxi through busy city streets is relayed onto the house façade in Eraritjaritjaka. Photo: Krzysztof Bielinski.

01 There is a real sense of pleasure, even 'magic' in this sequence. We, the
 02 audience, still seem somehow to be *with* him, just as we were when he was
 03 in the theatre. The explicit connection between audience and live performer
 04 so much discussed in performance theory still seems to hold true even though
 05 he is not physically present. Just as we were voyeurs of him on stage, now we
 06 vicariously become the camera or cameraman following him, continuing his
 07 surveillance. The direct sense of connection with him would not be there if this
 08 were a recording, the key is that he is still live, albeit elsewhere, and we *know* it.

09 But perhaps the real sense of 'magic' – and the uncanny – is that we can
 10 journey with him outside the artifice of the theatre and into the real, and real-
 11 time, world outside. In a very *real* sense, we are still palpably there with him,
 12 and are entranced. As we watch the video projection on stage, there is a strange,
 13 uncanny sense of what one might term *doubled-liveness* brought about through
 14 the simultaneity of Wilms 'live' presences in different, and now very distant,
 15 spaces. This is enhanced both because he continues to speak and converse with
 16 the audience just as he did while on stage (and his tie microphone continues to
 17 amplify his voice with an equal clarity as in the theatre), and also because the
 18 video shot is clearly one continuous take that began when he was co-present
 19 with the audience in the theatre (and there is thus a sense that a trace of him
 20 is still there), and we are certain that his journey, the traffic and the crowds of
 21 pedestrians he hurries past on foot, are absolutely real and absolutely live.

22 As he walks upstairs, unlocks a door and enters an apartment, the concern
 23 with live authenticity is emphasized when he picks up some letters from the
 24 doormat together with a newspaper, which the audience recognize and confirm
 25 with approving laughter as 'today's'. He then rips off a page saying '28th' from a
 26 day-by-day calendar to reveal the correct date: '29th'. He goes to a bookshelf-
 27 lined study, sits at a desk and writes, reads a book and holds it open to the
 28 camera, and then goes to the kitchen and opens the fridge (Figure 7).



49 *Figure 7: As musicians play on stage, the live video projection shows Wilms*
 50 *presenting a book to camera in an apartment several miles away. Photo: Krzytsof*
 51 *Bielinski.*
 52

At this point, as a film-maker and editor, I was aware of the possibility of a 'hidden cut', as Hitchcock does in the film *Rope* (1948) to enable an edit without the audience realizing so as to maintain the illusion of his entire film being shot in one continuous take. As the camera moves close in to the fridge door, it blacks the screen for a moment (where a shot which repeats that moment of blackness and continues the preceding action can be cut in) before the door opens fully and Wilms takes a bottle out. Later, it became clear that this was indeed likely to be the 'cheat' moment when the video shot was mixed into pre-recorded footage, although few in the audience would have realized it.

But the sense of authentic real-time video is cleverly maintained by a clock in the background which continues to show the correct time (the performance started exactly 10 min late to ensure this accuracy). Wilms prepares an omelette, and in a wonderful piece of simulated liveness between the two spaces, he chops an onion in exact rhythmical synchronization with a piece of music by Ravel that the string quartet are playing on stage in the theatre. He cooks and eats the omelette and the camera pulls back from the kitchen (Wilms is still in shot in the background) to reveal a darkened chessboard with a tiny miniature house on it, illuminated from inside. Meanwhile on the stage, the miniature house has been placed upside down and skewed (because of its angled roof), and is later moved to the back of stage to sit directly and centrally in front of the main house set, like a tiny child in front of its parent.

The video continues playing on the main house façade, and the string quartet play throughout. Wilms answers a knock on the door, and the shot cuts to a black-and-white POV shot as it is opened to reveal Wilms. An unseen child's voice talks to him (redolent of, and perhaps a homage to, the Boy character in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952)) and, once the conversation ends, Wilms returns to the study, and the video returns to colour. He opens a music score book and begins to hum the tune – in precise synchronization with the live music the quartet is playing in the theatre – and he and they unite as the piece climaxes and ends with a decisive musical 'stab' that Wilms marks in time by loudly slamming shut his book. The quartet then moves offstage and begins another piece of music, unseen.

On the video projection on the house, we see Wilms walk to another 'room' where he looks into a wall mirror, but the reflection reveals the 'bathroom' he appears to be in as a miniature set. He has an agitated conversation with the disembodied voice of a woman, and as he talks to her, he moves from room to room as if to locate her ghost-like form. He opens a door into a loft-like space, and there is a miniature cathedral, and a miniature bed. The camera follows him from behind as he goes to a window and opens a curtain.

In a sublime *coup de theatre*, at that precise moment an upstairs window within the house set is illuminated and the live, flesh-and-blood Wilms pulls back its curtain and stares out at the audience, while his video 'reverse angle' in the city centre flat continues as a huge projection on the house set. The surprise (or trick) brings loud and amazed gasps and then applause from the audience, who, by virtue of the apparently continuous real-time video, genuinely believe Wilms to be miles away. One theatre reviewer has described it as a piece of 'dramatic alchemy' (Clements 2004) and another notes how the whole performance hinges on this moment, 'causing us to doubt whether we are in a play or a film, and confusing us about where exactly fiction ends and reality begins.' (Klaeui 2004)

01 Wilms then goes downstairs (seen both live through the windows of the
02 house set and on video), and we realize the camera is now relaying his actions
03 live in the theatre, and are unsure how long this has been the case. As he
04 walks around the house, the video image shows him passing the musicians
05 who continue to play, and the two downstairs windows at either side of the
06 house illuminate to allow us to see them live, three in the Stage Left room,
07 one in the Stage Right room. We also see the cameraman through the windows
08 in the set as he moves around them, providing giant close ups on the exterior
09 house projection, and we realize that the inside of the set being explored is an
10 exact match of the city centre apartment, down to the last detail (Figure 8).

11 Wilms climbs the stairs and goes into a bedroom to water plants and put
12 an iron away, then returns to a downstairs room where he types on an old-
13 fashioned typewriter, with all four musicians playing around him. The quartet
14 then come out onto the stage and play J. S. Bach's Contrapunctus from the
15 Art of the Fugue, while Wilms delivers a final monologue while the live video
16 projection mixes into a greyscale montage of still images of the rooms hidden
17 behind the façade within the stage set: a full neo-realist *mise-en-scene*.

18 According to German philosophy from Hegel to Heidegger, homesickness
19 (*heimweh*) is a fundamental existential condition: a sense of never quite feeling
20 at home wherever one is, yet desperately yearning for an unattainable (primor-
21 dial or womb-like) home. This, perhaps, provides a clue to why the sight of
22 a house on a stage has such uncanny power. Its initial familiarity and beauty
23 draws us in with a wondrous anticipation, but this gives way almost immedi-
24 ately to a sense of dark foreboding, because it is simultaneously unfamiliar and
25 strange: a spectre house. Video projections and digital overlays increase this
26 sense of an uncanny ghostliness: the digitally enhanced scenographic house is



48 Figure 8: The live images from a video camera moving around the performers
49 within the house interior are projected onto the house façade. Wilms sits in one room
50 (seen in the bottom left window) and two musicians can be seen through another
51 window (bottom right). Photo: Krzytsof Bielinski.
52

quintessentially a *haunted house*. As Nicholas Royle has noted in his lengthy study of *The Uncanny* (2003):

As a theory of the ghostly (the ghostliness of machines but also of feelings, concepts and beliefs), the uncanny is as much concerned with the question of computers and 'new technology' as it is with questions of religion. Spectrally affective and conceptual, demanding rationalisation yet uncertainly exceeding or falling short of it, the uncanny offers new ways of thinking about the contemporary 'return to the religious' ... as well as about the strangeness of 'programming' in general.

(2003: 23–24)

As performance actions and events unfold, as skeletons are revealed and the house disintegrates in front of our eyes (as in The Builders Association's *Master Builder*) or is pulled apart (as in Uninvited Guests' *Guest House*) or is demolished entirely (as in Armstrong's *Hacking a Private Space in Cyberspace*), the sense of the uncanny and the ghostly intensifies. In Goebbels' *Eraritjaritjaka*, the uncanny reaches sublime heights whereby our very perception of what is real and what is not, what is video and what is theatre, what is a house and what is a set becomes so elastic that something genuinely profound and extraordinary takes place. As Jacques Derrida has written in relation to Freud's 'The Uncanny', something utterly compelling and extraordinary happens when the uncanny emerges, opening up an acute awareness of 'paradoxes of the double and of repetition, the blurring of boundaries between "imagination" and "reality", between the "symbol" and the "thing it symbolises"' (1981: 220).

In *Eraritjaritjaka*, the house is not only a theatrical symbol, but also a psychological and philosophical one. Through the vertiginous play of space, place, time, media, music and text; and through the enigmatic interactions of people, robots and ghosts; the house becomes elevated to a philosophical representation of the human psyche and 'soul'. As Sabine Haupt has put it, in *Eraritjaritjaka*:

women's and children's voices haunt the house: we are at the heart of the film, surrounded by associations of images and words, dazed by collages of text and music organized in counterpoints. But where are we really? Have we been transported to the hallucinated hell of a Jean Cocteau, or is it the grotesque meticulousness à la Jacques Tati which gives each gesture its worrying distance? From stage to film, from film to stage: characters, voices and sounds change place and vector as if their initial aim was to transgress limits. And it all takes place so lightly with an almost somnambulistic virtuosity, nothing is predictable but, nevertheless, it is all entirely convincing. If the word 'genius' did not have such pompous connotations, it would, with this production, be more than ever appropriate.

(Haupt 2004)

CONCLUSION

In recent digital performance, the philosophical and psychological aspects of the house have been staged and explored with scenographic and dramaturgical power, locating the theatrical house as a site of memory, dream, the

unconscious and the uncanny. The productions discussed also vividly encapsulate, and indeed 'enact' Bachelard's ideas about the house as a place that has been 'physically inscribed' on us since childhood and a building that is itself, like us, a type of 'body' with its own 'physical and moral energy' (1958: 46).

In Keith Armstrong's *Hacking a Private Space in Cyberspace*, the house represents a literal return to childhood, a Freudian infantilization climaxing in its 'virtual habitation' as Armstrong's dramatic leap into it from above collapses the physical structure yet leaves its ghostly digital afterimages hanging eerily and uncannily in the air. In La Fura Del Baus and the English National Opera's *Le Grand Macabre*, the house becomes a literal Bachelardian body, populated by characters that look out from its eyes as if they are windows, and emerge from its orifices as though they are doors. Like a child's dolls house, the body's façade is also opened up to reveal rooms that are mapped to psychological states, and to draw us in to a secret, interior world. In both productions, a sense of the uncanny emerges through the devices of surprise and the unexpected, and the spectacularly sized and continually dissected body in *Le Grand Macabre* encapsulates Freud's notion of the uncanny coming forth through images of 'phantasmagoria' (discussed in his consideration of E.T.A. Hoffman's story 'The Sandman').

The scenic house is theatrically and physically deconstructed in both Uninvited Guests' *Guest House* and the Builders Association's *Master Builder*. In *Guest House*, kinetic screens, live video and 3D projections are conjoined and disassembled to render the house(s) uncanny through a play of disorienting effects which are, to quote Mark Z. Danielewski's reading of the uncanny: 'alien, exposed, and unsettling' (2000: 28). Bemong characterizes Freud's interpretation of the uncanny as 'everything that should have remained secret and concealed, and has nonetheless come to light' (2003), and this is encapsulated vividly in *Master Builder* where the characters are metaphorically, and the set is quite literally, 'laid bare'. The emotional destruction of the characters and the revelations of the skeletons in their pasts are mirrored scenographically as the house is stripped apart leaving only its skeletal structure.

Bachelard's central philosophical conception of the house equates precisely with the Aboriginal title of Heiner Goebbels' *Eraritjaritjaka*, which translates as 'full of longing for something lost'. The simple flat house shape of Goebbel's set reflects and psychologically evokes Bachelard's image of a child's longing for return to their originary house, while the production's complex investigations of time and space mirror Bachelard's own epic philosophical considerations of what a house constitutes and represents. The production also invokes the uncanny in numerous ways, hovering between increasingly thin borders of reality, memory and media until the homelike and familiar 'turn[s] on its owners, suddenly to become defamiliarized, derealized, as if in a dream.' (Vidler 1992: 7)

According to Bachelard, the house is a place where the concrete and the poetic combine, where inside and outside are co-present and where we both become a world and experience the world in miniature. These conjunctions lead to what he terms 'intimate immensity' (1958: 193). For Casey, the intimate immensity of the house connects place with space, where the dichotomy between finite (place) and the infinite (space) is overcome:

In intimate immensity I enter space from place itself. I come to the immense from within rather than on the basis of exteriority . . . the in/out dyad has lost its divisive and diremptive character . . . In this situation, we enter 'the

entire space-time of ambiguous being' [Bachelard]. Such being is at once *virtual* (i.e. not simply real) and *general* (i.e. not strictly universal). Place and space shed their usual differentia: the clarity and distinctness of the near and small in one case, the emptiness of the far and enormous in the other. They coalesce in a common *intensity*.

(1997: 294–95)

For Bachelard, 'Immensity in the intimate domain is intensity, an intensity of being, the intensity of a being evolving in a vast perspective of intimate immensity' (1958: 193) and the scenographic houses in the productions discussed can serve to excite and awaken in us an intensity of being that is not only immense and intimate, but also both 'universal' and personal. Simultaneously emotional and cerebral, these productions fuse the analogue and the digital to present the scenographic house as an intense and uncanny representation of the world, and of conscious and unconscious human thought, memory, action and desire.

The initial sight of the stage house calls up childlike longing and reverie, which then gives way to foreboding feelings of haunting and the uncanny as the house façade gradually becomes a metaphor not of the exterior, but the interior – filled both with dark secrets and with joyous light. In the case of *Eraritjaritjaka*, the house becomes simultaneously and uncannily real and unreal, like the most powerful things we ever experience in life – like love and like death. The uncanny and the sublime are closely interconnected whereby, in Edmund Burke's sense, the sublime is instigated through ideas or feelings of the unknown, darkness and even terror (1990 [1757]). As Vidler puts it in relation to architectural spaces, the uncanny is an:

outgrowth of the Burkean sublime . . . its favourite motif was precisely the contrast between a secure and homely interior and the fearful invasion of an alien presence; on a psychological level, its play was one of doubling, where the other is, strangely enough, experienced as a replica of the self, all the more fearsome because apparently the same. . . . the 'uncanny' is not a property of the space itself nor can it be provoked by any particular spatial confirmation; it is, in its aesthetic dimension, a representation of a mental state of projection that precisely elides the boundaries of the real and the unreal in order to provoke a disturbing ambiguity, a slippage between waking and dreaming.

(Vidler 1992: 3, 11)

The scenographic houses in these digital theatre productions reach heights of the sublime, the liminal and the uncanny, and particularly great ones in the case of Goebbel's *Eraritjaritjaka*, where the house becomes what Casey would term a place of 'psychical paradise' (1997: 296). Its rich temporal and aesthetic transformations also dramatically and quintessentially encapsulate Bachelard's philosophical understanding of the house as being 'one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind' (1958: 6).

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40 CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

41 Steve Dixon is Professor of Digital Performance and Pro-Vice Chancellor
 42 (Strategy & Development) at Brunel University in West London, and a Vis-
 43 iting Professor at the University of Ulster. He is an Associate Editor of *The*
 44 *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media* and has published
 45 extensively on subjects including digital arts, performance studies, cultural the-
 46 ory, robotics and artificial intelligence. His 800 page book *Digital Performance: A*
 47 *History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art and Installation* (2007,
 48 MIT Press) is the most comprehensive study of the field to date, and has
 49 won two international book awards including the Association of American
 50 Publishers Award for Excellence in Music and Performing Arts 2007. His cre-
 51 ative practice-as-research includes international multimedia theatre tours as
 52

director of *The Chameleons Group* (since 1994), two award winning CD-ROMs, interactive internet performances and telematic arts events.

Contact: Professor Steve Dixon, Pro-Vice Chancellor, Brunel University, Uxbridge, Middlesex UB8 3PH, UK.

E-mail: steve.dixon@brunel.ac.uk
