

ALEKSANDAR DENIĆ'S SET-DESIGNS AS A METASPECTACLE

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Abstract: Aleksandar Denić's set designs are characterized by monumental constructions, erected mainly on the stages of German theatres. Arguing that a stage-designer's task was to "set a theme for a play", he dubbed himself a "dramaturge-set designer". In his work, Denić develops a peculiar visual narrative, a unique semiotic system pervaded with trans-semiotic quotes adopted from everyday life and popular culture. This paper focuses on the Coca-Cola, Pepsi-Cola and McDonald's advertising signs as distinctive elements of his idiosyncratic visual vocabulary, in which the society of the spectacle plays a prominent role. The position of this paper is that by introducing media spectacle to theatre spectacle, the author creates a *metaspectacle*, which self-reflexively investigates the nature of the spectacle itself. To demonstrate this, the paper examines the author's treatment of the above mentioned motifs within set designs which use the avant-garde techniques of montage juxtaposition and defamiliarization of form, whose purpose is to accomplish semiotization of signs and thus communicate political messages to the spectators. The paper further investigates the social and political connotation of Denić's trans-semiotic quotes, and observes his designs within the context of the theories of *metapicture* and *metatheatre* in order to clarify the concept of *metaspectacle*. The paper concludes that Denić's set designs impart the plays with a new visual dramaturgy, which critically reflects on the present-day reality shaped by post-modern media, underpinning the author's view of himself as a "dramaturge-set designer".

Keywords: stage design, Aleksandar Denić, defamiliarization of form, metapicture, metaspectacle, visual dramaturgy

Aleksandar Denić once said that his task as a stage designer was to "set a theme for a play". On the same occasion, he called himself a "dramaturge-set designer" in the absence of a better term that would describe his contribution to the realisation of a theatrical performance.¹ Talking about the collaboration with acclaimed theatre

¹ From the panel discussion held at the opening of the exhibition *Stage Designs by Aleksandar Denić*, where teatrologist Thomas Irmer interviewed Aleksandar Denić, 15 November 2016, Goethe Institute, Belgrade.

director Frank Castorf, which engendered some of his most acclaimed stage designs, the scenographer stressed that in this process he was given complete autonomy to create visual identities of the plays. Such manner of collaborative work presumes that a theatre director imbeds his/her interpretation of the dramatic text only *after* a stage design has been set.

A theatrical production that calls for autonomy of all its constitutive elements is one of the tendencies championed by Bertolt Brecht, whose theories saw theatre as an aggregate of independent arts in provocative tension.² Brecht developed this approach arguing against the Wagnerian idea of *Gestamkunstwerk*, and insisted that the intention behind the concept of disparate aesthetic components of a play was not attaining the aesthetic totality, but rather inducing a state of intellectual tension in the viewer by means of separate and autonomous entities that comment on each other. Curiously enough, dramaturge Heiner Müller, in his writing from 1970, claimed that precisely this approach—that which requires autonomous formation of different theatre segments as a prerequisite for their intercommunication – is a proven device for accomplishing an even more complex *Gestamkunstwerk*.³ The two opposing viewpoints on the spectator's final experience of the play's aesthetic totality demonstrate how revolutionary Brecht's ideas were for their time, and how much, over a couple of decades, they broadened the expectation boundaries and changed the aesthetic perception of both theatre audiences and its creators.

Denić's collaboration with Castorf relies heavily on the aforementioned Brechtian technique; it enabled Denić to freely express his own unique perception of the dramatic text, which would give birth to some of his most successful stage designs and make him one of the most acclaimed European scenographers. His monumental scenic designs, akin to architectural structures, comprise sceneries into which the artist inserts details adopted from everyday life and popular culture: Coca-cola and Pepsi-Cola vending machines, commercials for all kinds of merchandise, photographs of historical events, movie posters, historical monuments, logos of fashion brands and other objects and phenomena. These legacies of contemporary culture played pivotal roles in the scenographies made for the plays, today considered classics: *The Good Soldier Schweik* by Jaroslav Hašek, *Hunger* by Knut Hamsun, *The Life of Monsieur de Moliere* by Mikhail Bulgakov (Михаил Афанасьевич Булгаков), *The Raw Youth* by Fyodor Dostoevsky (Фёдор Михайлович Достоевский), and others.

The purpose of this paper's contribution is dual: on the one hand, it emerged from the wish to establish a theoretical position toward Aleksandar Denić's artwork which, in spite of the numerous accolades it has received, still has not been given a deserved recognition within the scientific contributions to stage design; on the other, the intention was to demonstrate in what way the author forms a new interpretation of the *mise-en-scène*, thus assuming the role of "dramaturge-set designer". The paper focuses on the Coca-Cola, Pepsi-Cola and McDonald's logos, and their treatment within some of the artist's scenographies designed for German theatres. The advertising signs represent elements of Denić's idiosyncratic visual narrative, in which the society of the spectacle plays a rather prominent role, while their introduction to a theatrical performance, renders it self-referential, turning it into a *metaspectacle*, which investigates the nature of the spectacle itself. In order to demonstrate this, the author's stage design techniques and his treatment of the aforementioned motifs, as well as

2 D. Kelner, „Brechtova marksistička estetika“. *Polja – časopis za književnost i teoriju* 514 (Novi Sad), 2018, 120.

3 H. Miler, *Pozorište je kontrolisano ludilo*, prev. B. Denić, Beograd, 2017, 24.

their social implications will be examined. Finally, the paper will observe the scenic designs within the framework of the theories of *metapicture* and *metatheatre* in order to explicate the notion of the *metaspectacle*, which is achieved by means of visual devices that Denić employs to introduce a new dramaturgy to the theatre performance.

THE COCA-COLA AND PEPSI-COLA MOTIFS IN THE GOOD SOLDIER SCHWEIK IN WORLD WAR

During a theatre performance, the stage itself represents a field where an array of diverse signs is being formed; it is a battlefield of interpretations. According to Patrice Pavis, the stage itself has the property of a sign, as it “oscillates constantly between tangibly perceptible *signifying* space and the external *signified* space to which the spectator must refer in the abstract in order to enter the fiction”.⁴ Denić’s set designs display the author’s premeditated intention to create a fictional dramatic space by semiotization of certain elements of the stage décor.

Denić’s approach to stage design, with its distinctive elements, is akin to collage editing in that it heavily relies on trans-semiotic quotation, where quotes originate from life itself, from history and civilisation.⁵ Trans-semiotic quotation saw its rise in the avant-garde art, while in post-modern art, whose peculiarity lies in its relationship to the modernist legacies⁶, it has been regarded as one of the key art concepts. Jameson linked the phenomenon of postmodernism to the advent of multinational capitalism, arguing that its formal features in many ways express deeper logic of this particular social system.⁷ A rather interesting remark of his is aimed precisely at the postmodernist understanding of heritage and pastiche quotation, which Jameson interpreted as the search of historical past “through our own pop images and stereotypes about the past, which itself remains forever out of reach”.⁸

Most of the trans-semiotic quotes found in Denić’s sets have been appropriated precisely from pop culture. One of the finest examples of the author’s quotation procedure is the scenography for the play based on Jaroslav Hašek’s book *The Good Soldier Schweik*, staged at the Munich Residence Theatre [*Die Abenteuer des guten Soldaten Svejk im Weltkrieg*, Residenztheater Munich, 2016, Frank Castorf] and directed by Frank Castorf. The unfinished Hašek’s work is an anti-war, satirical novel that follows the adventures of Josef Schweik – a simple man who, after the assassination of the crown prince Franz Ferdinand, decides to volunteer for the war. His daftness leads him into a plethora of unpleasant situations, so he misses the train to the battlefield, has himself arrested for high treason, ends up locked in a mental hospital, and is imprisoned several times on the accusations of being a deserter and spy. Castorf’s Schweik is presented standing in some unspecified place at the Battlefield, next to a train carrying soldiers.

For the purpose of the play, Denić mounted a multilevel labyrinth-like wooden construction, consisting of small spaces that represent typical war scenes: a mili-

4 P. Patrice, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*, trans. C. Shantz, Toronto, 1998, 360.

5 The definition of trans-semiotic quotation as found in cf. D. Oraić – Tolić, *Teorija citatnosti*, Zagreb, 1990, 110.

6 A. Bužinjska et M. P. Markovski, *Književne teorije XX veka*, trans. I. Đokić, Beograd, 2009, 367.

7 F. Jameson, *The cultural turn – Selected writings on the Postmodern 1983–1998*, London/ New York, 1998, 20.

8 *Idem.*, 10.



Fig. 1

tary barrack, a wagon, war trenches, a watch tower and a brothel whose architectural imitates the facade of the Berlin theatre Volksbühne. The main architectural wooden construction is complemented with conspicuous Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola advertising signs and vending machines dispensing the popular beverages. The automated machines stand in stark juxtaposition, placed on the opposite sides of the construction. Next to the Pepsi-Cola vending machine, there is a photograph featuring former vice president of the USA, Richard Nixon, accompanied by former Premier of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev, who is taking a sip from a plastic cup that reads Pepsi (Fig. 1). On the opposite side of the construction, there stands a Coca-Cola vending machine in conjunction with an advertising poster featuring soldiers drinking the beverage (Fig. 2), designed during the Second World War, when the company was one of the sponsors of the American armed forces.

The 1959 photograph of Nikita Khrushchev drinking Pepsi, placed next to the company's vending machine, was taken during Nixon's visit to the American National



Fig. 2

Exhibition in Moscow.⁹ During the visit, popularly known as “The Kitchen Debate”, Nixon and Khrushchev stopped at the Pepsi stand and toasted with cups filled with the beverage. The photo of the toast was a well-designed propaganda manoeuvre for Pepsi-Cola, which soon flooded the eastern market. What is more, after losing the race for the governor of California in 1962, Nixon himself was appointed the PepsiCo ambassador in Europe. This is how Pepsi became *the* drink in Eastern Europe and the alternative to Coca-Cola, which PepsiCo’s Director Robert Woodruff referred to as “the essence of capitalism”.¹⁰

The photo of Khrushchev and Nixon is vital for interpreting the set. As Pavis observed, dramatic space and structure based on conflict and confrontation require a space that will make the most of that opposition.¹¹ Denić defines this divide visually, by semiotization of the scenic décor, thus physically and metaphorically creating two social and ideological spaces: the East and the West, signified by Pepsi-Cola and Coca-Cola respectively. The vending machines thus take on the properties of Peirce’s symbolic signs.¹² The scenery resulting from a prefabricated juxtaposition, where the signifiers are placed opposite one another for comparison, imparts new interpretational contexts to the dramatic text and prompts the viewer to ask a slew of questions: What is war? Why are wars fought? What does war feel like? Who are

9 This topic is covered in detail in cf. R. Alexander, “American fast food as culture and politics: the introduction of Pepsi and Mc Donald’s into the USSR” (master thesis), Oregon, 2013. <https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/handle/1794/13299>

10 T. Stendidž, *Istorija sveta u 6 pića*, trans. M. Todoskov, Beograd, 197.

11 P. Pavis, *op. cit.*, 118.

12 For the definition of symbolic signs cf. Buchler, Justus (ed.), *Philosophical writings of Peirce*, New York, 1955, 112–115.

the victors in war? Is this war over? Which war is this? Who is fighting this war? The scenic details allow for a vast number of possible readings.

MCDONALD'S IN THE STAGE DESIGN FOR HUNGER

Another example of Denić's trans-semiotic quote is McDonald's, which is treated differently than Cola vending machines. It is featured in the set design devised for staging Knut Hamsun's novel *Hunger* [*Hunger*, Knut Hamsun, Salzburger festspiele 2018, Frank Castorf], which questions human existence within the contemporary consumer society. Hamsun's autobiographical novel depicts a period in his life when he, tormented by hunger, wandered about Kristiania (Oslo). The novel addresses the paradox of existence – the fact that people must work so they could afford food, while at the same time, they need food to be mentally and physically fit to work.

Hamsun's wanderings in the novel encompass a slew of concrete physical spaces: the accommodations he stays at, the city dock, park, squares, streets, graveyard, shops, the houses of his acquaintances, the newspaper office where he tries to sell his articles. Denić's design, however, focuses only on the places which possess the semiotic capacity to demonstrate the ideas represented by the locations depicted in the novel's plot.

The cubical four-sided stage construction comprises four distinct spaces: the writer's room, the newspaper office, the bench on which he sleeps when unable to afford accommodation, and the McDonald's kiosk (Fig. 3). These four physical spaces are vital for creating the dramatic atmosphere necessary for expressing the ideas that these places convey. The protagonist's room tells us about his identity: his social status, profession and personal beliefs. It is cramped and modestly equipped with



Fig. 3

run-down furniture and a clothes line suspended from the ceiling, while a few books on the table indicate his line of work. The sleeping area features a poster of the Norwegian SS division, which alludes to the political viewpoints of the novel's author, Knut Hamsun, known to be a sympathizer of the German national-socialist party.¹³

The space representing the newspaper office, which the protagonist visits hoping to have his articles published in exchange for money, embodies his material accomplishments—his ticket to well-being. Correspondingly, the shop window of the office is adorned with flamboyant objects that symbolise luxury. The bench where he squats represents the space of ultimate poverty – the moments when the writer is left without a roof above his head. On this bench, the hero is tormented by apparitions in the shape of a large bag of French fries and a hot dog.

McDonald's, which plays a pivotal role in the protagonist's struggle to survive, takes up a privileged position on the stage, representing the place where his basic needs are fulfilled. Within the cubical stage construction, the McDonald's kiosk is placed opposite the entrance to the obscure writer's room, which is marked by number 88 – the numerical code for the Nazi salute, "Heil Hitler". The two spaces, the private and the public one, both communicate a certain ideology, each in its own peculiar way. As opposed to the protagonist's personal ideology indicated by the poster in his room—which, at the same time, alludes to Hamsun's past and his political views – stands the ideology of consumerism. According to Douglas Kellner, McDonald's owes its great success to the fact that "it came to represent the major trends and values of mass society in the United States in the 1950s, including conformity, uniformity, standardization, efficiency, instrumental rationality, and technology".¹⁴ Today, these terms are synonymous with McDonald's, and if analyzed more closely, we realize these were the very same values proclaimed by the German Nazi army. With that in mind, it is doubtless that Denić's intent behind linking these two ideologies was to emphasize their similarities rather than differences. The stage design also includes the poster of the food manufacturer Dr Oetker, one of the financiers of the German Nazi armed forces, along with a Carlsberg beer advertising sign featuring swastika, which was specifically designed for a series of bottles produced during the Second World War, while in the play, the selfsame label is seen on the beer cans served at the McDonald's stand (Fig. 4).

The rationale behind linking McDonald's to these ideas lies in the company's advertising campaign, which promotes it as an idyllic family place, the place for get-togethers and fun. When describing the architectural concept of McDonald's, Kellner remarks that, it is a space that allows a person to retreat from the real space and step inside a mythologized cultural and food facility.¹⁵ In Denić's design, this "mythologized space" is juxtaposed against the misery and solitude of the private space, and represents a promise of happiness and accomplishment of the protagonist's needs.

Once more, Denić raises the question of war victors, but also that of human existence: Do consumerism and conformism fill the void in human life—our hunger?

13 This is not an isolated example of Denić's scenic details alluding to the political orientations of the playwright. We find similar allusions in the scenery for staging Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night* [ReiseAnsEnde der Nacht, L.F. Celine, Residenztheater Munich 2013, F. Castorf].

14 D. Kellner, *Media spectacle*, London, 2002, 35.

15 *Ibid.*



Fig. 4

STAGE DESIGN TECHNIQUES – DEFAMILIARIZATION OF FORM AND ISOLATION OF THE POLITICAL MOTIVE

Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola logos are the top of Denić's scenic designs – his authorial signature. Pepsi-Cola is included in the scenography for the play *Raw Youth* by F.M. Dostoyevsky [*Eingruner Junge*, F.M. Dostoyevsky, Schauspiel Köln 2018, F. Castorf], where it can be interpreted, first and foremost, as a geopolitical signifier of the East—just like in the aforementioned scenography for *The Good Soldier Schweik*.

Coca-Cola logotype is used in the opera *Faustus* [*Faust*, Gounod, Opera Stuttgart, 2016, F. Castorf], where the author mounts it above a burned Jewish store (Fig. 5). What is more, before it was included to the scenography, the sign was subjected to the author's intervention: the result was a duplicated, mirror image of the logotype, with its reversed form placed above the original. The logo thus acquired a new diabolical look, and yet its recognisability remained undisturbed. This particular intervention, and the one the author made on the Coca-Cola logo included in the



Fig. 5

scenography for *Baal* [*Baal*, B. Brecht, Residenztheater Munich 2015, Frank Castorf], are possibly the finest examples of his scenographic polysemy.

Denić's design for Castorf's *Baal*, clearly influenced by the movie *Apocalypse Now*, depicts the city of Saigon, where Castorf's adaptation takes place. The noticeable Coca-Cola logo, which dominates the back of the stage, is written in Chinese (Fig. 6). As an integral part of the sign, just above the Chinese characters, there is a portrait of a male visage stylized so as to resemble the logo of Kentucky Fried Chicken, which features the face of the company's founder, Colonel Sanders. However, on a closer inspection, we see that the visage is actually the portrait of Hô Chí Minh, former president of Vietnam. How are we to interpret this? We may understand it as a comment on the Indochina war against colonisation, which eventually ended in another kind of colonisation – *coca-colonisation*. On the other hand, we may observe it in the context of the Chinese-Vietnamese political relationship, especially if we consider the fact that the performance of *Baal* coincided with the heightened tensions between the two countries, resulting in the Council of Foreign Relations' report on an increased risk of confrontation.¹⁶ Denić's Coca-Cola sign with Hô Chí Minh's portrait can also be interpreted as the author's critical commentary on the personality cult. There can be as many interpretations as the spectators.

What Coca-Cola signs in the opera *Faustus* and the play *Baal* have in common is *defamiliarization of form* (Russian: *оси́рание*) – an approach, pioneered by Russian formalists, which entails dismantling of automatic perception by means of a new form.¹⁷ Having been subjected to interventions before their inclusion into the

¹⁶ cf. J. Kurlintzick, "A China-Vietnam Military Clash", *Council of Foreign Relation*, <https://www.cfr.org/report/china-vietnam-military-clash>.

¹⁷ A. Bužinjska et P. Markovski, *op.cit.*, 129.



Fig. 6

stage design, the aforementioned two examples represent the author's most interesting creations, which may as well be regarded as separate art installations and as such interpreted in many different ways, regardless of their initial purpose. Denić's defamiliarized signs retain their inscrutability and polysemic communicativity even when displaced from the scenographic context.

Denić's ample and intentional semiotization of scenographic signs creates the *estrangement effect*. However, while Brecht's term *Verfremdungseffekt* refers to the overall impression of a dramatic space shaped by the disparity between scenographic elements and the dramatic text¹⁸, in Denić's set designs the estrangement effect is already achieved by means of the visual content, independently of the dramatic text. The estrangement is accomplished by means of artistic expression; in particular, when Denić introduces anachronistic soda machines into the war setting for *The Good Soldier Schweik*, in doing so he couples concrete objects from everyday life with an abstract ethical category. Similar method is found in the emblem theory, where it is known as *admiratio*.¹⁹ The purpose of such emblematic estrangement is to find an analogy between the two juxtaposed notions, which is exactly what Denić does when he links the two corporations' symbols with the notion of war. The goal of the emblematic estrangement is to trigger intellectual curiosity.²⁰

18 P. Bruker, „Ključne reči u Brehtovoj pozorišnoj teoriji i praksi“, *Polja – časopis za književnost i teoriju* 514 (NoviSad), 2018, 134–137.

19 B. Vuksan, *Humanističke osnove amblematske literature (XVI – XVII vek)*, Београд, 2008, 9–10.

20 *Idem.*, 42–45.



Fig. 7

Time and again, Denić employs emblem-based details, with the intention of conveying isolated political messages to the spectator.²¹ One such instance is again found in the set design for *The Good Soldier Schweik*, which includes a wagon with a Coca-Cola Zero logo accompanied by the inscription that reads *Migrants free* (Fig. 7). Just beneath, there is the coat of arms of Austro-Hungarian Monarchy with the inscription *No Pasaran*. The whole scene is an emblematic structure, and is comprised of *inscriptio, pictura* and a short slogan–*motto*.²² The illustration and text comment on each other and achieve their full meaning only when observed as a whole. In addition to that, Denić introduces an intrasemiotic quote²³: the inscription “Serbiene einmal

²¹ It should be noted that at least two of the author’s scenic designs comprise monumental inscriptions, in the form of emblematic *inscriptio*: central part of the scenography for Celine’s *Journey to the End of Night* [Reise Ans Ende der Nacht, L.F. Celine, Residenztheater Munich 2013, F. Castorf] is a gate featuring words *Liberté, égalité, fraternité*, shaped in such a way as to replicate the inscription on the entrance of Auschwitz, while the inscription *Да! Немцы* dominates the scenography for Chekhov’s *Duel* [Das Duell, A. Chekhov, Volksbühne, Berlin, 2013, F. Castorf]. These designs, quite expressive of Denić’s quotation approach to scenography, have their counterparts in the Avant-garde collage technique, especially Heartfield’s engaged collage emblems. By introducing *inscriptio* to the scenography, the entire *mise-en-scène* acquires an emblematic quality, while *subscriptio*, in the form of the dramatic text, becomes open to new interpretations, which arise from mutual interpretation of the set design and acting.

²² B. Vuksan, *op.cit.*, 36.

²³ Intrasemiotic quote denotes citation correlation within one artistic form. cf. D. Oraić-Tolić, *op.cit.*, 21.

musst du sterbien“ [Serbia, once you must die]²⁴, which stylistically resembles the most well-known dramatisation of Hashek’s novel, directed by Erwin Piscator in 1927. The stage design for the Piscator’s play was entrusted to the famous German expressionist painter, Georg Grosz, who for this purpose made over 300 drawings and used a movie screen as a backdrop, onto which the combination of animated and naturalistic images was back-projected.²⁵ In Denić’s set, the inscription on the train quotes a segment of Grosz’s scenography, taking the form of an emblematic *explicatio*. The quote also displays a dose of witticism, given the fact that the stage designer is of Serbian origin. The result is an enigmatic image which opens up a myriad of possible interpretations: in light of the contemporary migrant crisis it may be observed as a criticism of Western xenophobia, but also as a critical commentary on capitalist society.

These isolated political details indicate that Denić stage designs rely on Brecht’s ideas, which hold that a stage designer’s principle task is to show others the world in which they live.²⁶ Just the same, the method which entails autonomous scenic segments and openly displays the political motif seeking to directly confront the spectator with the realities of life is likewise influenced by Brecht’s dramatic theories.²⁷ Denić’s dramatic spaces trigger the estrangement effect, while his scenic signs, which convey their own politically engaged messages and comment on each other, induce the spectators’ intellectual engagement which results in interpretation.

ICONS OF CAPITALIST SOCIETY

By utilization of corporate logos – the icons of contemporary consumerist society – Denić seeks to generate new interpretations of the dramatic space, relying on the signs’ recognisability. The spectators’ interpretation of the seen “presupposes the context of experience of aesthetic perception”.²⁸ For the Renaissance man, an image of a wheel symbolized *Luck*, while a pair of scales signified *Justice*. The identity of the contemporary man is formed through commodities – we *are* the clothing brand we wear, the food we eat and the music we listen to. Correspondingly, the logos of certain companies are synonyms for quality, success, efficiency or uniformity. In the stage design for *The Life of Monsieur de Moliere* [M. Bulgakov, *Die Kabale der Scheinheiligen. Das Leben des Herrn de Molière*, Volksbuehne Berlin, 2016, Frank Castorf], the canopy above the royal bed of Louis XIV is made of fabric with the Louis Vuitton print, with a Versace sign rotating on its top (Fig. 8). Each of the spectators will interpret this image based on their personal value judgements, but what it unequivocally communicates is the notion of luxury and wealth. According to Pierce’s definition, “brands are icons that function as status symbols”.²⁹

Denić’s scenic motifs can be regarded as some of the finest examples of what Guy Debord, in his influential work *The Society Of The Spectacle*, referred to as *the com-*

24 It is a modified version of the propaganda slogan *Serbien muss sterbien!* [Serbia must die] coined in Austro-Hungary during the First World War. A postcard with this motto is exhibited within the virtual exhibition *The First World War and the End of the Habsburg Monarchy* [Erster Weltkrieg und das Ende der Habsburger monarchie], cf. <https://www1.habsburger.net/en/node/739> (accessed February 2, 2021).

25 E. Piscator, *Političko kazalište*, trans. N. Popović, 1985, 144.

26 B. Brecht, *Dijalektika u teatru*, trans. D. Suvin, Beograd, 1979, 90.

27 Cf. P. Birger, *Teorija avangarde*, trans. Z. Milutinović, Beograd, 1998, 144–145.

28 H.R. Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic Reception*, transl. T. Bahti, Minneapolis, 1982, 23.

29 A. Berger, “The Branded Self: On the Semiotics of Identity”, *The American Sociologist* Vol. 42 2/3 (New Jersey), 2011, 232.



Fig. 8

modernity as spectacle. Debord argued that “the spectacle is the stage at which the commodity has succeeded in *totally* colonizing social life”, and that “commodification is not only noticeable; we no longer see anything else. The world we see is the world of the commodity”.³⁰ With carefully devised advertising campaigns, the brands and logos of the companies which dominate their respective markets have imposed themselves as universally recognisable symbols. Coca-Cola, Pepsi-Cola and McDonald’s are not just the names of the top-tier brands of today, but also the visual epitomes of capitalist society. These logos represent what Mitchell called “living pictures”³¹, given that they are not only the products but also the insignia of capitalism – they are equated with its very *idea*. George Ritzer dedicated one chapter of his book *The McDonaldization of Society* to the examples that serve to confirm how this company imposed itself as the icon of the American and global popular culture.³² He ascribes this influence to the media spectacle: “These ever-present commercials, combined with the fact that people cannot drive or walk very far without having a McDonald’s pop into view, have embedded McDonald’s deep in popular consciousness”.³³ Denić’s aspiration to shape his designs as a visual critique of consumerist society is demonstrated by his utilization of the signs that represent the most prominent symbols of consumerism, brought to prominence precisely by the media spectacle. By introducing such details into his stage

30 G. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, transl. K. Knabb, Berkley, 2014, 16.

31 W. J. T. Mitchell’s term “living pictures” is introduced in relation to the photograph of the sheep Dolly and the World Trade Centre, which the author interprets as the revived icons, emphasizing “both signs and symptoms of what they signify (biotechnology and global capitalism)”, cf. V. Dž. T. Mišel, *Šta slike žele? Život i ljubav i slika*, transl. A. Milosavljević, Beograd, 2016, 32–33.

32 G. Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society*, Los Angeles, 2019, 40–41.

33 *Ibid.*, 41.

designs, the artist creates a new level of interpretation that auto-reflexively poses the question about the very nature of the spectacle. In order to examine the self-reflexivity of his scenography, the theories of *metapicture* and *metatheatre* will be observed.

DENIĆ'S STAGE-DESIGNS AS METAPICTURES

If scenography is treated solely through the premises of the picture theory, we run the risk of overlooking the *mise-en-scène* itself, reducing it to a mere static construction. To that end, W. T. J. Mitchell's theory of *metapictures*³⁴ could be used outside the context of the picture theory, for its detailed classification of metapictures provided by the author, which can easily be applied to other meta-referential works of art.³⁵ Given the fact that a scenography is a collection of images, a semiotic system that visually conveys the ideas of a play, the author of this paper takes the liberty of treating scenic design as a picture.

The term metapicture, in its most basic sense, presumes "any picture that is used for reflecting on the nature of the pictures".³⁶ According to Mitchell, the meta-picture in a strict and formal sense is a self-referential picture – a picture that represents itself and refers to its own making, the one that "dissolves the boundary between inside and outside, first and second order of representation on which the metapictorial structure depends".³⁷ This is most evident in the pictures within pictures that create a referential circle – *mise enabîme*. The other type of the meta-picture is the "generically self-referential picture",³⁸ which does not refer to itself but to other pictures that are generally believed to be of another kind. The third category includes "discursive or contextual self-reference", which reflects on the nature of the visual representation.³⁹ The example of this category would be "dialectic pictures", which are ambiguous and have multi-stability⁴⁰; that is, they illustrate the existence of opposite or disparate interpretations within one picture – like the rabbit-duck illusion from the cognitive psychology textbooks.

Denić's scenic metapictures belong to Mitchell's second category of the "generic self-referential picture", given that it introduces to the theatre performance another form of spectacle – the media spectacle.

Observing Alain's cartoon *Egyptian Life Class* as the example of the second type of the metapicture – the "generically self-referential pictures" – Mitchell denounced Ernst Gombrich's understanding of the cartoon. Gombrich held that ancient Egyptians used to perceive nature differently, merely replicating the formulas they knew. Conversely, Mitchell argued that the Egyptians in the picture are by no means "different", and that they behave in the same way as today's art students from the West, during a traditional life drawing class. According to Mitchell, the humour of this cartoon comes from the perspective of the contemporary viewer, who expects

34 Metapictures are examined in the second chapter of Mitchell's book cf. W.T.J. Mitchell, *Picture theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago, 1994, 35–82.

35 Krešimir Purgar in fact identifies the terms of metapicture and metareferential picture cf. K. Purgar, "Modalities of Pictorial Appearing", *Phainomena* 26 100/101, 2017, 219, <https://www.bib.irb.hr/884875> (accessed February 2, 2021).

36 W. J. T. Mitchell, *op. cit.*, 57.

37 *Idem.*, 42.

38 *Idem.*, 56.

39 *Ibid.*

40 *Idem.*, 45, *et passim*.

to see some unfamiliar and exotic method of drawing, only to realize that it is just a picture of the way people create pictures.⁴¹

A similar remark applies to Denić's stage designs that include easily identifiable images of the media spectacle. By introducing the media spectacle into the scenography, the theatre performance takes on the characteristics of the media spectacle. The author's ingenuity is manifested by his capacity to show the *sameness* instead of *differences* between these two types of spectacles. Just like Alain's cartoon, Denić's stage designs teach us that today there is no spectacle without the commodities spectacle, while at the same time they question the complex relationship between the spectacle and society.

METATHEATRE AS A METASPECTACLE

Denić's stage design, accomplished through the synergy between his work and the dramatic text directed by Castorf, is hard to accurately define by the aforementioned concept provided by the picture theory. However, the theatre theory proposes another conceptual framework within which Denić's stage designs can be observed: that of *metatheatre*.

According to Lionel Abel, who formulated the term, metatheatre defines self-conscious plays about "life seen as already theatricalized".⁴² Abel's thesis derived from the analysis of Shakespeare's and Calderon's plays in the context of their metatheatrical elements. His notion of metatheatricality rests on two basic postulates: (1) the world is a stage and (2) life is a dream.⁴³ A playwright, having acknowledged these two premises, loses his ability to distinguish between the reality and illusion and is left with nothing to represent but the ineluctable theatricalization of all human endeavour.⁴⁴ Taking into account all of the above-mentioned theoretical explanations of the concept, it is clear that the term metatheatre is not limited to denoting "an autonomous play contained within another, as in the 'play within the play'", but it rather implies broader forms of self-reference and advanced self-consciousness of the *mise-en-scène*: "All that is required is that the represented reality appears to be one that is already theatrical, as in plays in which the main theme is life as theatre."⁴⁵

The novelty of Castorf's metatheatre, in relation to that of Shakespeare, lies in the way he re-examines the reality—the present time, shaped by the media spectacle. In her thesis on Castorf's political theatre Bargna has stated that: "Castorf's merit lies in the recognition that if the ubiquity of mass media in postmodern society has important political and social implications, it must also have a determining cultural/artistic influence".⁴⁶ Castorf has been recognized as one of those contemporary creators who "have challenged the traditional forms of drama",⁴⁷ by introducing a new outlook on

41 *Idem.*, 44–45.

42 L. Abel, as cited in C. Thumiger, "On ancient and modern (meta)theatres: definitions and practices", *Materiali e discussioni per l'analisi dei testi classici* 63 (Pisa-Roma), 2009, 10.

43 L. Abel, as cited in R. Fly, "The Evolution of Shakespearean Metadrama: Abel, Burckhardt, and Calderwood". *Comparative Drama* 20/ 2 (Michigan), 1986, 125.

44 *Idem.*, 126.

45 P. Pavis, as cited in M. Keshavarz, "Beckett's Metatheatrical Philosophy: A postmodern Tendency Regarding Waiting for Godot and Endgame". *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 3/3 (Rome), 2012, 138.

46 K. Bargna, 'Ter Wegistnicht zu Ende, wenn das Ziel explodiert'. Frank Castorf and the Survival of Political Theatre in the Postmodern Age (PhD thesis), Sheffield, 2000, 255–256.

47 H.T. Lehmann includes Castorf among the representatives of the postdramatic theatre cf. H.T. Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, transl. K. Jürs-Munby, London, 2006, 24.

the theatre practice and experience. In his influential work *Postdramatic Theater*, Hans Thies Lehmann subsumes these diverse contemporary performing phenomena as a *paradigm of postdramatic theatre*.⁴⁸ Although the idea of uniting these contemporary theatrical expressions under one paradigm has since been disputed,⁴⁹ Castorf's productions are congruent with those stylistic traits that Lehmann singled out as characteristics of the notion of postdramatic theatre.⁵⁰ Undoubtedly the most important of those traits, in the context of Denić's scenographies, are the density of signs and visual dramaturgy. Lehmann notes that Castorf's plethoric aesthetics, which presupposes scenic over abundance and chaotic arrangement, has become a stylistic feature that prominently influenced German directors.⁵¹ Denić's set designs are constructions characterised by a plenitude of signs, with trans-semiotic quotes as visual elements that demonstrate apparent independence from the written original.

Castorf is famous for his permissive attitude towards altering the written material, as well as for his "tendency to depersonalise and re-personalise the contents of the texts put on stage".⁵² One noted incident regarding Castorf's adaptation was the 2015 lawsuit filed by B. Brecht's heirs who accused the director of taking too much liberty with the original text for his staging of "Baal" in Munich Residenztheater.⁵³ The case demonstrates that for Castorf the texts provide a topic to examine; they are a "suitable material for the realization of a theatrical project"⁵⁴, which serves as a point of departure that the director freely adapts and inserts into the scenography, which then becomes an additional layer of meaning.⁵⁵ It has been noted that in Castorf's directing "the physical actions of the actors are often primary to the text"⁵⁶, and that he "uses the reality on stage as *Machinarium* and actual working environment in order to avoid illusion, so that the problems, destinies and states of the characters are always understood as states, destinies and problems of the actors".⁵⁷ The *mise-en-scène* is thus conditioned both by Castorf's artistic direction and Denić's scenic labyrinthine structures, in which the director ruthlessly tails the actors with a camera that projects their actions on on stage screens, included in the

48 *Ibidem*.

49 A. Vujanović as cited in I. Medenica, "Postdramatic Theatre – Global dilemmas and local reception", *Dramatic and postdramatic theatre: Ten years after*, *Zbornik radova Fakulteta dramskih umetnosti* 20 (Beograd), 2011, 21.

50 These traits are: parataxis, simultaneity, play with the density of signs, musicalization, visual dramaturgy, physicality, irruption of the real, situation/event; cf. H.T. Lehmann, *op.cit.*, 86.

51 *Idem.*, 91.

52 K. Bargna, *op.cit.*, 55.

53 The case was thoroughly covered by the media cf. Anonymous, *How much creative liberty can a theater director take?*, Deutsche Welle, <https://www.dw.com/en/how-much-creative-liberty-can-a-theater-director-take/a-18233268>; Anonymous, *German court limits performances of Brecht play*, Deutsche Welle, <https://www.dw.com/en/german-court-limits-performances-of-brecht-play/a-18268295>; Castorf's adaptation of *Baal* was also discussed within the 15th Symposium of the International Brecht Society held under the title "Recycling Brecht" at the Oxford University, June 25–29, 2016, <https://brecht.mml.ox.ac.uk/ibs-day2>

54 H.T. Lehmann, *op. cit.*, 56.

55 Denić often refers to his sets as "layers" of meaning to the plays. His conversation with Birgit E. Wiens entitled 'I am trying to add more layers to the story' is published in B. E. Wiens (ed.), *Contemporary scenography – Practices and Aesthetics in German Theatre, Arts and Design*, London / New York, Bloomsbury / Methuen Drama, 2019, 33–45.

56 E. Stempler, *Theatrical body or The embodiment of the word. Analyzation of Embodiment in Frank Castorf's work* (master's thesis), Zürich, 2019, 7.

57 *Eadem.*, 37.

set-designs. In Castorf-Denić collaborations the scenography becomes the “actual working environment”, a playground to test the actors’ bodies. According to Denić, Castorf himself has at times expressed how difficult for him it is to direct in sets constructed by the scenographer, adding that he, nonetheless, appreciates such a challenge.⁵⁸ The fact that actors do not act but rather experience different states on stage is another metatheatrical element of Castorf’s staging.

The scenic props play an important role in the on stage action, transforming the meaning of the messages communicated to the spectator. This is particularly true of trans-semiotic quotes – the commodities. One such example is found in Castorf’s adaptations of *The Good soldier Schweik* and *Hunger*, where they are not just passive elements of the décor, but take up rather prominent positions in the plot: the soldiers in *Schweik* enjoy the beverages on stage and, in a commercial-like tone, speak highly of their refreshing taste.

This inclusion of the commodities spectacle into the theatre spectacle further elaborates on Debord’s theses that “the fetishism of the commodity– the domination of society by ‘imperceptible as well as perceptible things’ – attains its ultimate fulfilment in the spectacle, where the perceptible world is replaced by a selection of images which is projected above it [...]”.⁵⁹ The result of the scenographer’s choice of elements of scenic décor can be referred to as the *metaspectacle*, for it theatricalizes our postmodern every-day life. The fact that the media spectacle is an inextricable part of every-day postmodern life makes scenography expressive of some aspects of the reality: “The spectacle presents itself simultaneously as all of society, a part of society, and as instrument of unification”.⁶⁰

The above mentioned example of the commercial-like elements in *The Good Soldier Schweik* may be the finest example of how a play acquires the quality of the *metaspectacle* through the synergy between the scenography and the dramatic text. By employing the features of media spectacle – whose flagrant example is the photo of Khrushchev drinking a Pepsi in *Schweik* – the author raises the question of the spectacle’s very nature. The political/ideological potential of the spectacle is one of the key issues examined in Castorf’s staging: “Castorf’s aim was not to make political theatre entertaining, but to practice the political dimension immanently present within entertainment.”⁶¹

Denić’s set designs point to yet another self-reflexive problem: the question of monetary capital as a prerequisite for the production of the spectacle– even that which criticizes the capitalist society. What is more, the fact that these particular stage designs were created in one of the countries which allocates a substantial budget for the production of the spectacle is not entirely devoid of irony. Frederic Jameson observed: “The point is that we are *within* the culture of postmodernism to the point where its facile repudiation is as impossible as any equally facile celebration of it is complacent and corrupt. Ideological judgment on postmodernism today necessarily implies, one would think, a judgment on ourselves as well as of the artefacts in question”.⁶²

58 B. E. Weis, *op.cit.*, 40.

59 G. Debord, *op.cit.*, 14.

60 *Idem.*, 2.

61 K. Bargna, *op. cit.*, 192.

62 F. Jameson, *The cultural turn – Selected writings on the Postmodern 1983–1998*, London/New York, 1998, 29.

VISUAL DRAMATURGY

The artist's statement that he sees himself as a "dramaturge-scenographer" provided a point of departure for this paper. By examining the three trans-semiotic quotes in his scenographies– Coca-Cola, Pepsi Cola and McDonald's, it was demonstrated that they assume the role of symbolic signs. The paper further reviewed the artist's stage design techniques, which rely on avant-garde methods of montage and defamiliarization of form. In addition to that, it was shown that the artist's choice of motifs from popular culture, due to their recognizability and connotation, serves as the foundation for the premeditated creation of a new text within a piece of drama, and is as such the most recognizable feature of Denić's authorship. Patrice Pavis regards dramaturgy as a work that consists of assembling textual and stage materials, bringing out complex meanings of the text by choosing a particular interpretation, and the performance in the desired direction.⁶³ This is exactly what Denić does when he implements pieces of the media-shaped reality in his stage designs: the author creates a new visual dramaturgy, a frame for the dramatic text which adapts to the scenography, thus transforming the meaning of the play.

It is clear that Denić's stage-designs serve as a critical commentary on our present day media-dominated reality. What is less obvious, and precisely what this paper sought to demonstrate, are self-reflexive questions of Denić's set-designs, where the scenery becomes a platform on which meta-spectacle unfolds – spectacle that speaks about the spectacle and which self-reflexively examines its own position within society. In this context, it is interesting to mention that Umberto Eco regarded Brecht's plays as *open work* due to their focus on the ambiguity of social existence, which he perceived as the clash of unsolved problems that need to be resolved through the audience's conscious participation.⁶⁴ By introducing media spectacle to stage design, the artist points to the ambiguity of spectacle and questioning its potency to transform the society, which is both its originator and product. In his practice, Aleksandar Denić seeks to point toward the clash of the unresolved problems by employing visual and artistic devices so as to create scenographies which invite us to critically reflect upon our reality.

ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Aleksandar Denić, "The Eastern Front" Pepsi vending machine and commercial with R. Nixon and N. Khrushchev – detail of *Die Abenteuer des guten Soldaten Svejk im Weltkrieg*, 2016, set-design, Residenztheater Munich (photo: A. Denić, personal archive of the artist)
2. Aleksandar Denić, "The Western Front" Coca-Cola vending machine and commercials – detail of *Die Abenteuer des guten Soldaten Svejk im Weltkrieg* – detail, 2016, set-design, Residenztheater Munich (photo: A. Denić, personal archive of the artist)
3. Aleksandar Denić, *Hunger*, 2018, set-design, Salzburger festspiele (photo: A. Denić, personal archive of the artist)
4. Aleksandar Denić, McDonald's interior – detail of *Hunger*, 2018, set-design, Salzburger festspiele (photo: A. Denić, personal archive of the artist)
5. Aleksandar Denić, Defamiliarization of the Coca-Cola logo – detail of *Faustus*, 2016, set-design, Opera Stuttgart (photo: A. Denić, personal archive of the artist)
6. Aleksandar Denić, Defamiliarization of the Coca-Cola logo – detail of *Baal*, 2015, set-design, Residenztheater Munich (photo: A. Denić, personal archive of the artist)
7. Aleksandar Denić, The wagon with a Coca-Cola Zero logo – detail of *Die Abenteuer des guten Soldaten Svejk im Weltkrieg*, 2016, set-design, Residenztheater Munich (photo: A. Denić, personal archive of the artist)
8. Aleksandar Denić, The royal bed of Louis XIV – detail of *Die Kabale der Scheinheiligen. Das Leben des Herrn de Molière*, 2016, set-design, Volksbuehne Berlin (photo: A. Denić, personal archive of the artist)

63 P. Pavis, *op.cit.*, 125.

64 U. Eco, *Otvoreno djelo*, transl. N. Milićević, Sarajevo, 1965, 43.

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Јована Р. ПИКУЛИЋ

СЦЕНОГРАФИЈЕ АЛЕКСАНДРА ДЕНИЋА КАО МЕТАСПЕКТАКЛ

Сценски дизајн Александра Денића одликују монументалне архитектонско – сценографске конструкције, реализоване првенствено на сценама многобројних немачких позоришта. Овај аутор је једном приликом изјавио да је његов задатак као сценографа да *йосџави йџему* позоришног дела, означивши себе том приликом као „драматурга сценографа”. Денић у својим радовима развија специфичан визуелни наратив, особен семиотички систем, прожет транссемиотичким цитатима преузетим из свакодневног живота и популарне културе. Овај рад испитује три транссемиотичка цитата сценографија Александра Денића: рекламе Кока-коле, Пепси-коле и Мекдоналдса; који представљају његове препознатљиве мотиве и специфичан визуелни наратив у оквиру ког друштво спектакла има истакнуто место. Циљ овог рада је показати како увођењем ова три мотива у позоришни спектакл, аутор мизансцену даје карактер *мејасџекџакла*, који аутореклексивно испитује сопствену природу самог спектакла. У циљу доказивања ове тезе, у раду се осврћемо на ауторов третман горепомнутих детаља у појединим сценографијама, као и на методе ауторовог стварања сцене и њених значења. Кока-кола и Пепси-кола у представи „Добри војник Швејк у Светском рату” семиотизацијом попримају одлике симболичких знакова, чиме аутор физички и метафорички ствара два друштвена и идеолошка простора – Пепси-кола постаје означитељ Истока, а Кока-Кола Запада. Мекдоналдс у представи „Глад” је симбол потрошачког друштва, док аутор посредством детаља декора поистовећује капиталистичку и национал-социјалистичку идеологију. Семиотизација робних марки које у сценографијама попримају одлике симболичких знакова, постигнута је посредством авангардних техника монтажне јукстапозиције и очуђења форме у циљу изоловања политичких мотива. Посебно занимљиви примери су логотипи Кока-коле у представама „Фауст” и „Баал”, који су претрпели ауторову интервенцију пре укључења у сценографију и представљају ауторове најполисемичније детаље, који своје поруке саопштавају и ван контекста сценографије. Посебан осврт у раду је начињен на друштвено и политичко значење ових представника друштва спектакла. Ови логотипи су препознатљивост стекли захваљујући медијском спектаклу, а њиховим увођењем у сценографије позоришни спектакл добија одлике медијског, мизансцен постаје спектакл о спектаклу. У циљу јасног дефинисања појма *мејасџекџакла*, Денићеве сценографије су испитане са позиција теорија *мејаслике* и *мејашеаџра*, посредством којих је објашњена аутореклексивна димензија саме сценографске инсталације, као и мизансцена који се добија увођењем драмског текста у сценографску конструкцију. Закључак ово града је да Денићеве сценографије постављају визуелну драматургију, нову интерпретацију драмског текста која се критички поставља према постмодерној медијски обликованој свакодневици, а будући да је медијски спектакл њен неодојив део, аутор поставља још један проблем – питање могућности спектакла да мења друштво чији је истовремено творац и производ. Денићеве сценографије су платформе на којима се развија нова интерпретација позоришног спектакла који аутореклексивно промишља о сопственом месту у друштву, чиме се потврђује ауторово виђење себе као „драматурга – сценографа”.

Кључне речи: сценографија, Александар Денић, очуђење форме, метаслика, метаспектакл, визуелна драматургија