PAMIĘTNIK TEATRALNY 74, 2 (2025)
ISSN 0031-0522, e-ISSN 2658-2899

DOI: 10.36744/pt.2674

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Acting Near and Far

Abstract

A key question for the success of a dramatic scene is where the actor's attention is directed because this influences the audience's point of attention. Attention is discussed in terms of the Construal Level Theory of Yacov and Liberman, in which events, including mental events like dreams and recollections, are construed by the mind in terms of near and far. An example is given of how near/far mode construal influenced my rehearsal of a scene from a recent British play. It is further suggested that near/far mode construal applies not only to non-verbal behavior but to speech itself. A core function of speech is far mode referential displacement, which is facilitated by predictive processing for action. This displacement function is linked to the Regret Prediction Theory of Frith and Metzinger. The far mode is thus a matter of top-down semantic processing, while bottom-up sensory processing is near mode. I suggest that attentional shifting between near and far modes is exemplified in Stanislavski's productions of the plays of Chekhov. I propose that the capacity to switch efficiently between near and far modes in both movement and speech is seen as a reliable indicator of (an actor's) intelligence.

Keywords

attention, near/far mode, Construal Level Theory, referential displacement, Regret Prediction Theory

Abstrakt

Aktorstwo z daleka i z bliska

Kwestią kluczową dla powodzenia sceny dramatycznej jest ukierunkowanie uwagi aktora, ponieważ ono wpływa na punkt skupienia uwagi widzów. Autor artykułu rozpatruje zagadnienie uwagi, sięgając po teorię poziomów interpretacji (*Construal Level Theory*) Yacova i Libermana, w myśl której zdarzenia, również mentalne, takie jak sny i wspomnienia, są przez umysł interpretowane jako bliskie lub dalekie. Omawia znaczenie interpretacji w trybie bliskim/dalekim, przytaczając przykład swojej próby pewnej sceny ze współczesnego brytyjskiego dramatu. Dowodzi przy tym, że tryb bliski/daleki odnosi się nie tylko do zachowań niewerbalnych, lecz także do samej mowy. Jedną z podstawowych funkcji mowy jest przemieszczenie desygnatu w trybie dalekim, ułatwione przez przetwarzanie predykcyjne działania. Funkcja ta powiązana jest z teorią predykcji żalu Fritha i Metzingera. Tryb daleki jest zatem kwestią zstępującego przetwarzania semantycznego, podczas gdy wstępujące przetwarzanie sensoryczne wiąże się trybem bliskim. Przesunięcie uwagi między trybami bliskim i dalekim można zaobserwować na przykład w inscenizacjach dramatów Czechowa przygotowanych przez Stanisławskiego. Autor postuluje uznanie umiejętności skutecznego przełączania się między trybami bliskim i dalekim, zarówno w ruchu, jak i mowie, za wiarygodny wskaźnik inteligencji aktorskiej.

Słowa kluczowe

uwaga, tryb daleki/bliski, teoria poziomów interpretacji, przemieszczenie desygnatu, teoria predykcji żalu

Directing Attention

I recently directed some short two-hander scenes from contemporary plays with my acting students. The scenes were filmed for a digital showcase intended to display the cohort to agents, casting directors, and so on. While I was rehearsing the scenes I noticed something about my own thought process—not for the first time, but when you work on a play, it can feel like you have forgotten everything you ever learned, and you have to start again from first principles. And one of these first principles is: what is the actor's attention directed towards?

This matters because I am trying to control the attention of the audience so that they will understand the story, and the audience's attention will tend to follow the actor's attention. That relates to a basic point about social cognition: see for instance the work of Michael Tomasello on joint attention.[1] Recent research has demonstrated how observers track dynamic gaze shifting by using information in the visual periphery, in particular the moment to moment changes in the gazer's head movement.[2] The movement of an actor's body, their head, or just their eyes shift as they put their attention onto something else, and you follow that because you assume that is where the most relevant information is about the actor's intention.

What I was noticing was that a dramatic scene often brings the audience's attention towards the subject of the scene bit by bit. It might begin at a distance with the characters talking about something else, or the characters might come into the scene from elsewhere and so on; we are *far* from the subject; in the language of classical cinema, we are in *establishing shot* mode. Then the subject is introduced, and that is a kind of closing in. The subject is usually what the characters fight over in the scene; in a way they are fighting over what the scene should be about, what matters to them the most at that point. There is a feeling that we are getting nearer to what really matters. The actors' eyelines may well change, for instance, and become more focused on each other. The context around them becomes less important. The camera may well move in to tighter two-shots, over the shoulder shots, and close-ups. But this movement can also happen in a stage play. We move in towards what matters most gradually. And then, when the scene has completed its main business, we pull out again. We regain a certain distance from the people. So the overall movement is usually

[1] Michael Tomasello, *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjsf4jc.

[2] Nicole Xiao Han and Miguel Patricio Eckstein, "Inferential Eye Movement Control While Following Dynamic Gaze," *eLife* 12 (2023): e83187, accessed September 5, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1101/2022.09.25.508620.

far to near to far again. Not always, of course; there are always counterexamples that will come to mind. But there is something satisfying to me about that basic movement, perhaps because it reflects a basic dynamic of interactions in our own lives—Elizabeth Stokoe has articulated this dynamic in her work on conversational structure.[3]

What is happening in my brain when I am thinking about things being further away, and things being near? The first thing to say is that the individual must make *decisions*. It is widely recognized in cognitive psychology that making decisions is the basis of most of our mental life, and the need to make good decisions drives most of our thinking: it is simply unavoidable. So I want to understand space in terms of how it facilitates decision-making.

A number of studies on monkeys and humans have revealed that space is not represented in the brain in a homogenous way. There is extrapersonal (far) space and peripersonal (near) space, and these are defined respectively as outside or inside hand-reaching distance. Far space representation (according to Rizzolatti and Gallese) recruits area eight of the frontal lobe.[4] Colby, Duhamel and Goldberg have demonstrated that neurons in the LIP (lateral intraparietal cortex)—an area closely connected to and physiologically similar to area eight—may also provide a substrate for far space coding.[5] Near space appears to be coded in area six and in the rostral part of the inferior parietal lobe as well as in the VIP (ventral intraparietal cortex). There are neurons in the VIP that seem to represent a very near space around the mouth; peripersonal space in these areas is apparently coded in relation to the position of a tactile stimulus or a visual stimulus that is close to the tactile field.

My point is that near and far are not coded in the exact same part of the brain, which suggests to me that a kind of switching between them takes place in my attention. I will return to this point later; for now, I want to add that I am thinking about attention in terms of the individual making a decision about the value of the information they are oriented towards, in order that they can choose an appropriate action to take. It is the evaluation of that information—better still, of the source of that information—that determines the decision.[6]

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[3] Elizabeth Stokoe, *Talk: The Science of Conversation* (London: Robinson, 2018).

[4] Giacomo Rizzolatti and Vittorio Gallese, "Mechanisms and Theories of Spatial Neglect," in the *Handbook of Neuropsychology*, vol. 1, ed. François Boller and Jordan Grafman (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1988), 223–246.

[5] Carol L. Colby, Jean-René Duhamel, and Michael E. Goldberg, "Ventral Intraparietal Area of the Macaque: Anatomic Location and Visual Response Properties," *Journal of Neurophysiology* 69, no. 3 (1993): 902–914, https://doi.org/10.1152/jn.1993.69.3.902.

[6] Jacqueline Gottlieb and Puiu Balan, "Attention as a Decision in Information Space," *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 14, no. 6 (2010): 240–248, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2010.03.001.

Most of the progress in research on this topic has been on eye movements—in other words, visuo-spatial attention has tended to dominate the research field. Research has revealed the importance of the LIP, which lies at the junction of visual and oculomotor input, in offering a clue to how people make decisions; for now, recall above we noted that the LIP is associated with far space coding.

A Word on Proxemics

Proxemics can be broadly defined as the study of how people structure the space around them. Within the field some cultural variations have been identified, but I think some of these claims about cultural differences should be handled with caution since they have tended to rely on material that dates back to the early 1960s, material that may well be in need of re-examination. Nonetheless there are concepts within proxemics that are in principle verifiable from the viewpoint of cognitive science. In his classic work, Edward T. Hall classified proxemics in terms of four zones: the intimate space of direct contact which extends about 18 inches from the body; personal space between 18 inches and 4 feet; social space from 4 to 12 feet within which formal business and social discourse takes place; and public space of 12 feet onwards, at which distance direct eye contact is minimal.[7]

While I think Hall's is a classification that still holds up fairly well—at least in my own cultural environment—the interesting point for me is that although it complicates the discussion, it does not destroy the near/far distinction: a critical boundary is four feet, just at the extent of reaching, where the intimate/personal turns into the social/public. We can admit that there are always fuzzy boundaries when we discuss human behavior; nonetheless, the most significant characteristic as far as proxemics goes is *control* over what decision to make, that is to say the degree to which a person can maximize their freedom of choice, particularly with regard to others—and the bottom line as far as freedom of choice goes is physical contact implied by reaching distance.

The definition of space in terms of what the hand can reach suggests that we think of space both in terms of sectors in which things occur and of actions required for the achievement of a task. An interesting paper by Berti and Frassinetti adds another complexity in arguing that coding space as near or far depends not only on hand-reaching distance but on how the brain represents

[7] Edward Twitchell Hall, *The Hidden Dimension* (New York: Doubleday, 1966).

the extension of the body space.[8] One aspect of this is that body space can be extended in the brain's representation to include objects used by the subject such as tools. Use of a tool, the authors show through the discussion of a stroke patient, can remap far as near in the brain. Thus, the business of coding spatial positions is somewhat more dynamic than a hand-reaching definition alone might imply; it can be influenced by the use of objects. In extending the reaching space, the tool becomes as it were part of both hand and mind, and far becomes near(er). This seems to accord with the Extended Mind hypothesis expounded by Clark and Chalmers.[9]

To summarise so far: I am interested in how the audience's attention on a scene can be directed (with the help of the actor's attention) from far to near to far again; far and near spaces recruit different brain areas, supporting the idea of attentional shift; visuospatial attention (including attentional shift) is for decision-making; a boundary for decision-making appears to be hand-reaching distance, an idea further supported by proxemics.

Construal Level Theory

Now I would like to bring in Construal Level Theory (CLT). CLT was developed by Yaacov Trope and Nira Liberman.[10] They argue that it is impossible to experience the past, the future, memories, dreams, other places, other people, alternative realities, etc., yet these things nevertheless populate our minds, and they appear to transcend the here and now. They do so as psychological *construals* of distant objects. Something appears in our subjective experience as closer to or further away from the reference point of the self in the here and now. And this construal has different dimensions—social, hypothetical, temporal, and spatial.

What they are saying is that if you wish to transcend your immediate bodily self, because you want to refer to things that are not part of your immediate experience like dreams or memories, then you make use of this construal of psychological distance. The point to be made here is: the more abstract, the further away.

[8] Anna Berti and Francesca Frassinetti, "When Far Becomes Near: Remapping of Space by Tool Use," *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience* 12, no. 3 (2000): 415–420, https://doi.org/10.1162/089892900562237.

[9] Andy Clark and David Chalmers, "The Extended Mind," *Analysis* 58, no. 1 (1998): 7–19, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8284.00096.

[10] Yaacov Trope and Nira Liberman, "Construal-Level Theory of Psychological Distance," *Psychological Review* 117, no. 2 (2010): 440–463, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0018963.

In their presentation of the theory, Trope and Liberman refer to higher and lower levels. At the higher level, we put our attention on the more general, essential idea; and at the lower level, we zero in on the small things, the granular detail. Such mental construal allows us to move freely between the general idea and the specific thing and to connect the two. CLT resonates with what is arguably the most widely accepted unifying theory of cognition at this time, the Predictive Processing Framework (PPF).[11] The premise of PPF is that prediction is fundamental to cognition. The brain, in effect, is deeply involved in prediction, using top-down (semantic memory-based) processing to generate a model of the flow of stimuli from the environment, with each layer of the cortex attempting to predict the activity of the layer that projects to it. This model must be continually updated as new stimuli arrive through bottom-up (sensory memory-based) processing. Thus, a bidirectional feedback mechanism acts to minimize any mismatches between expectation and experience, between prediction and reality. CLT, in adopting a near/far mode construal model, can thus be accommodated within a Predictive Processing Framework.

The Icarus Moment in *Mayfly*

It is time to consider an example that I hope will illustrate how I rehearse a scene with actors while CLT is humming in the background. I worked on a scene from a British play by Joe White called *Mayfly*. In the scene, two young people are on a hill above a village looking over fields with sheep. And one of them says how the sheep are quite boring because they just stand there and stare at you. Her scene partner then remembers how this is like a painting he has seen in which someone falls from the sky into the sea while there are sheep just standing around in a field as if they are not interested. You may know the painting he means: "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus," attributed to Pieter Brueghel the Elder.

The character is trying to plant a picture in the mind of the other person, mainly because he likes her and wants to impress her, and he doesn't want her to feel bored. The actor can do this picturing moment in near mode, with his focus directly on the other person. But when the actor did this moment in near mode it did not conjure up a vivid picture in *my* mind, and I tend to view my mind in

[11] Andy Clark, *Surfing Uncertainty: Prediction, Action, and the Embodied Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190217013.001.0001; Philip R. Corlett, Aprajita Mohanty, and Angus W. MacDonald III, "What We Think About When We Think About Predictive Processing", *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 129, no. 6 (2020): 529–533, https://doi.org/10.1037/abn0000632.

that situation as a proxy for the collective mind of the audience; it came across as a private moment from which I was excluded. So I asked the actor to look out towards the audience as if into the distance, to imagine seeing Icarus falling into the sea (far mode), and maybe, in order to help his partner understand what he is imagining, to make a general picture with his hand of a little figure falling from the sky (a near mode gesture evoking a far mode idea), and then to see the sheep closer to him on the hill (near mode), so he blends the sheep in the painting (far mode) with the sheep in the scene (near mode). In fact, I was cheating a little bit because one of the more surprising things about the painting is that Icarus is not falling into the sea away in the distance, but rather he has already dropped into the water quite close to the land, and still no one apparently notices or cares. Thus, we have two seemingly insignificant people sitting around in a field, with their feeling of being rather small and distanced from where life is continuing its daily round, paralleled in the painting's recognition that tragedies happen to individuals, and everyone else just carries on.

To Be a Good Psychologist

The Icarus moment in the scene is an example of how important it is to people to be a good psychologist—further, to be *seen to be* a good psychologist. A good psychologist is able to make smart predictive guesses about what others are thinking and feeling, an ability that surely applies to fictional characters as well as real people. Nicholas Humphrey, who put this insight at the center of his book *Consciousness Regained*, outlined two aspects to it: The first was that it is biologically adaptive to be a good psychologist, because (to put it crudely) our ancestors who were good psychologists were more likely than the bad ones to pass on their genes.[12] The second aspect was that a good psychologist is someone who has garnered a large amount of experience. From this follows Humphrey's key point: if to survive means to be a good psychologist, and to be a good psychologist means to have a large well of experience to draw from, then what must also be adaptive is what he calls *the extension of inner experience*.[13] Note the spatial metaphor at work here: near meets far. Humphrey's argument is that receptivity to a conceptual education of the kind needed to turn someone into a good psychologist—someone who comes to know about the states of mind

[12] Nicholas Humphrey, *Consciousness Regained: Chapters in the Development of Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

[13] Humphrey, *Consciousness Regained*, 69.

one will probably encounter in others—is adaptive. Humphrey proposed three mechanisms for such an education, in which we are exposed to experiences that we might otherwise not have had: play, manipulation by one's family, and dreaming—dreaming because, in Humphrey's suggestive words: "by dreaming of what he is not, the dreamer gains insight into what other people are."[14] Is fiction play, manipulation, or dreaming—or is it all three?

To summarise: Construal Level Theory, which can be placed within a unifying Predictive Processing Framework, proposes that we make decisions according to how abstracted from sensory reality they are; the more abstract, the further away we think of them as being. Thus, we construe memories, dreams, plans, and so on in a far mode, and physical objects in front of us in a near mode. In a dramatic scene, attending to construal levels—tuning in to how close or distant something appears to the characters—offers a way of exploring how those characters communicate their beliefs, feelings and desires and, following Nicholas Humphrey, how they try both to be, and to show others that they are, a good psychologist.

Speech in the Far Mode—Displacement

Drama, among other things, is a kind of playing with words. How does the near/far distinction affect the words we use? Essentially, I think the extension of inner experience is likely to be a reason why humans evolved sophisticated speech—not the only reason, but a very important one. Attempting to answer the questions of how and why humans evolved speech is of course a fool's game. But, to play the fool, what I have noticed is that when people talk, the speech content is often in what I think of as the far mode. What I mean is that speech much of the time refers to things not immediately present to the senses. After all, why bother talking about things that are right there in front of you? Obviously, there may be a reason to discuss an object that is present to our senses. But I submit that we are far more inclined to talk about what that object *means*—that is, to draw upon semantic memory ("inner experience") to add information to what our bottom-up sensory processing is already telling us; the point about words is to communicate information that will benefit us by improving our decision--making, and such information is usually not present in our sensorium.

When I suggest this idea about speech to some people, their reaction is often quite frosty: "Well, I for one live in the present moment, and I am always

[14] Humphrey, 90.

talking about the importance of being present in the moment!" To some acting teachers, in my experience, the very idea that a person does not fully live in the present moment is like a red rag to a bull: good acting, it is held, is the kind of behavior that seeks to live *only* in the moment; in other words, it is nothing more than reacting to what is happening. But reacting is not simply an intuitive, physical response to the stimuli that hit you; one reacts to one's own inner world of thoughts, dreams, fears and so on even when one is interacting with another person; one uses this internal information to make predictions. This is not a bug in the system—it is a feature. We do it in order to compare what is with what we already know; in this way, we learn to improve our capacity to predict things—more precisely, to predict the *causes* of things that have not yet happened—so as to make better decisions about them when the time comes. Speech is far more about communicating the results of one's semantic processing than it is a mere translation of one's sensorium, which for the most part would be redundant.

What people are fooled by is the fact that predictive processing takes place under the radar of conscious awareness, which is a more metabolically efficient way to operate. Behavioral innovations, like the development of complex speech, are usually driven by the need to solve an ecological problem. It has been noted (e.g., by Day et al.) that humans have usually responded to ecological problems by creating new niches.[15] In order to fashion a new niche, it would be advantageous to make use of *referential displacement*, by which (following the linguist Derek Bickerton) I mean the ability to transfer information about things outside of the range of one's senses.[16] From there, as Bickerton argues, given a sufficiently complex cognitive structure like a human brain, it is just a matter of time and continued usage before displacement leads to analogical reasoning and starts to deliver symbolic units in language like concepts.

The brain is predictive, and prediction errors come with metabolic costs that are better avoided prospectively. Since we are social creatures, speech is also exquisitely geared to deliver far mode concepts regarding norms and expectations—in other words, to reduce unpredictability by manipulating behavior through social pressure, what has been called *the sense of should*.[17] Humans

[15] Rachel L. Day, Kevin N. Laland, and F. John Odling-Smee, "Rethinking Adaptation: The Niche-Construction Perspective," *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 46, no. 1 (2003): 80–95, https://doi.org/10.1353/pbm.2003.0003.

[16] Derek Bickerton, *More than Nature Needs: Language, Mind and Evolution* (London: Harvard University Press, 2014), https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674728523.

[17] Jordan E. Theriault, Liane Young, and Lisa Feldman Barrett, "The Sense of Should: A Biologically-Based Framework for Modeling Social Pressure," *Physics of Life Reviews* 36 (2021): 100–136, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.plrev.2020.01.004.

do not just react to stimuli—they also think in modals: can, may, might, must, could, would, should, will, etc.; they think of what is past and what is ahead, and they think of what is beyond, and their speech is geared to what is past, ahead, and beyond.

It is this analogical reasoning or inference process that makes possible the construction of embodied metaphors such as those that deploy near/far perception. The near mode relates to the immediate texture of direct experience. It is within one's sensory range and recruits sensory memory processes. Speech is very often for other things—plans, predictions, memories, dreams, norms, and expectations, things that are happening somewhere else, and so on; it draws upon semantic memory processing. Of course, language has sensory properties—poetic language especially, which speaks about a rose, an apple, a red wheelbarrow. But even in that instance, the moment we encounter poetic language, we do not tend to just take it as we find it: we apply mental *construal*, and we start wondering what unspoken, even unsayable thing these words are pointing to over there on the other side of the real.

Speech as Regret Prediction

Referential displacement is an essential function of speech for survival. Following both that train of thought and the *sense of should* leads me to a theory developed by Chris Frith and Thomas Metzinger: that consciousness plays a causal role in optimizing human behavior through the anticipating of feelings of regret.[18] The mind, as Rodolfo Llinás said, is a machine for making predictions: those minds that are able to make predictions are able to take precautions, to make plans, and to translate such plans into motor actions, and as a result are more likely to survive and pass on their genes to the next generation: "From the earliest dawning of biological evolution it was this governing, this leading, this pulling by predictive drive, *intention*, that brought sensorimotor images—indeed, the mind itself—to us in the first place."[19]

By regret is meant a sense of responsibility for the negative outcomes of choices, a recognition that one could and should have acted otherwise (as opposed to disappointment, which decouples the unexpected negative outcome

[18] Chris D. Frith and Thomas Metzinger, "What's the Use of Consciousness? How the Stab of Conscience Made Us Really Conscious," in *The Pragmatic Turn: Towards Action-Oriented Views in Cognitive Science*, ed. Andreas K. Engel et al. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016), 193–214, https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262034326.003.0012.

[19] Rodolfo R. Llinás, *I of the Vortex: From Neurons to Self* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001), 3.

from an obligatory sense of responsibility).[20] I think regret prediction is a big reason why we evolved speech. Regret is, after all, a form of suffering. A huge amount of world drama is about people doing or not doing things that they then express regret about.

I suspect that regret also has a near and a far mode. The immediate feeling—the interoceptive components—of regret are highly stressful; one enters into a kind of panic state at the realization that one has made a bad mistake. It is an acutely self-aware experience: we temporarily lose control over our personal narrative, which appears to be irrevocably damaged, and in the process we attain a painful self-knowledge. With the softening distance of time, the regret alters its character; we rewrite the personal narrative to try and get some distance from it, and (one hopes) to incorporate the painful lesson we have learned. But it is not all that easy to soften the edges of regret. I confess that in my own case certain regrettable mistakes, that at the time led me to feel publicly humiliated, can still summon up echoes of that original panic many years later. This is because regret affects our future as well as our current inner life; as Frith and Metzinger write: "regret is something that can overshadow or 'color' all other phenomenal experiences that a human being can have."[21] Thinking it through, I suspect I sensed in those moments of painful self-realization that the damage done was to my reputation as a good psychologist.

To summarise the previous section: from considering CLT in terms of visuospatial attention, we moved on to discuss how speech can be seen as referential displacement, and thus as operating to a significant extent in the far mode. Being *in the moment* is not a matter of near mode sensory response only, but is driven by predictive processing, which requires semantic memory. Speech as referential displacement can then be seen as an adaptive strategy to minimize the metabolic costs of prediction errors—that is, to predict and thus avoid regret—by sharing information.

Back to CLT

To return to the main theme, Construal Level Theory offers a simple but suggestive framework that helps me direct the scene: start with distance, move in, then move out again. This would be quite typical of Hollywood film-making of

[20] Giorgio Coricelli, Hugo D. Critchley, Mateus Joffily, John P. O'Doherty, Angela Sirigu, and Raymond J. Dolan, "Regret and Its Avoidance: A Neuroimaging Study of Choice Behavior," *Nature Neuroscience* 8, no. 9 (2005): 1255–1262, https://doi.org/10.1038/nn1514.

[21] Frith and Metzinger, "What's the Use of Consciousness?," 203.

course. But also: balance near and far against each other in the scene, and work on how and when you modulate between them. If the character feels close to another person, I look at how their speech is construing mental distance. I think that people will sometimes distance themselves with their words in close-up situations—it is like a shield you use to protect yourself in vulnerable moments. For instance, it can give you plausible deniability: you can quote your own words back and say, "That's not what I meant!" because there was sufficient ambiguity in what you said; you did not tie your words down to a near mode experience, to a *this here now,* too tightly. Thus, a person will use mental construal either to avoid feelings of regret or to repair the situation after a regrettable moment, and this involves a kind of dancing between near and far.

Chekhov in Near/Far Mode

I have noticed how often drama shows us a person wanting to get closer to another or a person wanting to push someone away or separate from them. This leads me to one of the basic procedures for staging a scene: you go towards what you want, you go away from what you do not want, and if you do not know yet, you stay still until you do know, then you move. And in the drama what you want is almost always tied to another person. You can see from this how near mode/far mode construal bears upon one of the central questions of acting, that of what Konstantin Stanislavski called *zadacha*. The word *objective* is the most common English translation but it is not quite right. In fact, it is too distant. A better word is *task*, which is nearer to hand. It suggests taking small steps towards what you want, as the theatre scholar Isaac Butler pointed out.[22] Stanislavski insisted that characters must have a task they are looking to accomplish. He demanded from his actors that everyone had their *zadacha* and played it to the hilt.

That said, I think it is interesting that Stanislavski's reputation as a director rests to a large extent on his productions of the plays of Anton Chekhov, who was arguably the greatest genius ever at representing people who often do not seem to have a clue what they want; at least, not in the sense of longer term goals. Chekhov was a doctor, with a doctor's sometimes amused, sometimes despairing, sometimes enraged perspective on human purposelessness. Don't these people realize that there's a typhoid epidemic, that there's a war going on, that a gigantic revolutionary upheaval is about to steamroller through their lives?

[22] Isaac Butler, *The Method: How the Twentieth Century Learned to Act* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2022), 77.

But when they do talk about these things, the characters construe them as being far away on the horizon. They talk about how a time will come when all of this will be gone, but they do not see that such a time is really very near. While they are engaged in this far mode talk, their actions reveal them to be slaves to the near mode: they are eating dinner and drinking vodka and tea from the shiny samovar, they are smoking and playing with objects like toys, and they are next to each other, hugging and kissing and petting. Stanislavski overloaded the stage with a sensory atmosphere of textured objects because that would also provoke someone to feel suffocated by the nearness of bodies and objects, and thus to speak about making plans to leave for Moscow.

What is it that Chekhov's characters want—what are they searching for? Something that is not in fact present to their senses—a *phantasia sensibile*:

> No animal can desire something of which it has no representation, unless of course that something is (for example) directly present in its immediate perceptual context. That said, not all wishes and desires are present in the immediate context; animals often have to look for what they want, whether it be food, water, or a mate. The search for something that is not immediately present implies a representation of that something. Its absence, that which is not or which is not yet, becomes the paradigm of the representation. Aristotle defined this level of representation, deeply rooted in our senses, as *phantasia sensibile*, *sensitive phantasy* (*Aisthetiché*). In fact, being endowed with sensitive phantasy means to live a certain type of experience in the absence of what normally triggers the experience. This Aristotelian concept of *phantasia sensibile* brings to mind the phenomenon of mental imagery we talked about earlier. Imagining or representing something really does activate the areas of our brain linked to the related experience. [23]

Near mode and far mode coding, let us recall, recruit separate areas of the cortex. And yet this passage from Gallese and Guerra reminds us that the *phantasy* is *sensitive*: that the semantic and the sensory, the far and the near, rely upon each other. This brings me finally to a concluding paradox: the near mode, which amplifies bodily self-awareness, often seems to summon up a far mode speech content. I use that idea when I am reading scenes, when I am directing them, and when, as a teacher, I am helping an actor navigate their journey. Good scenes seem to me to hold both near and far mental modes in a tension that is

[23] Vittorio Gallese and Michele Guerra, *The Empathic Screen: Cinema and Neuroscience*, trans. Frances Anderson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 41, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198793533.001.0001.

dynamic, energized, and tactful: the near implies the far, and vice versa. By doing this, a good scene will persuade me that I am in the presence of an attentive intelligence—that is to say, a good psychologist.

■

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