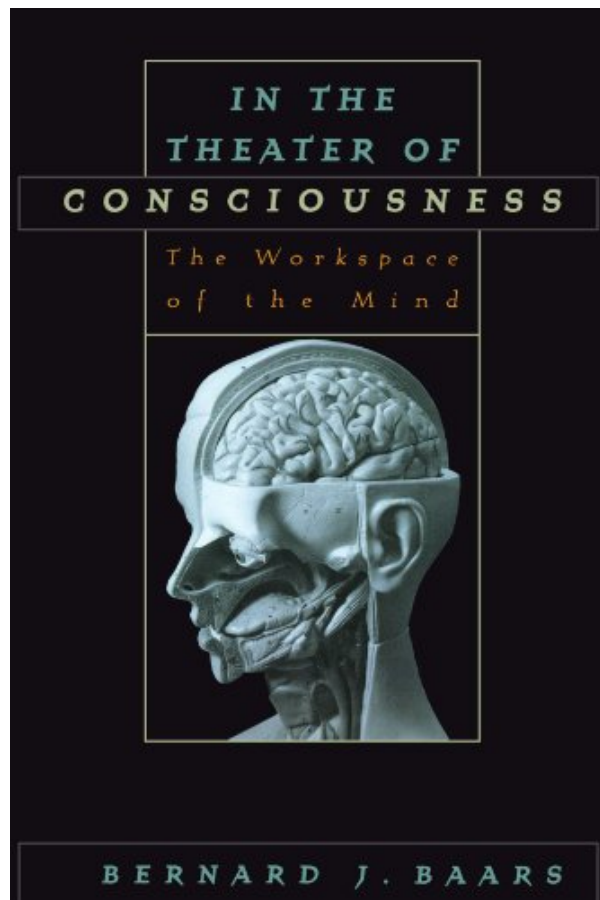
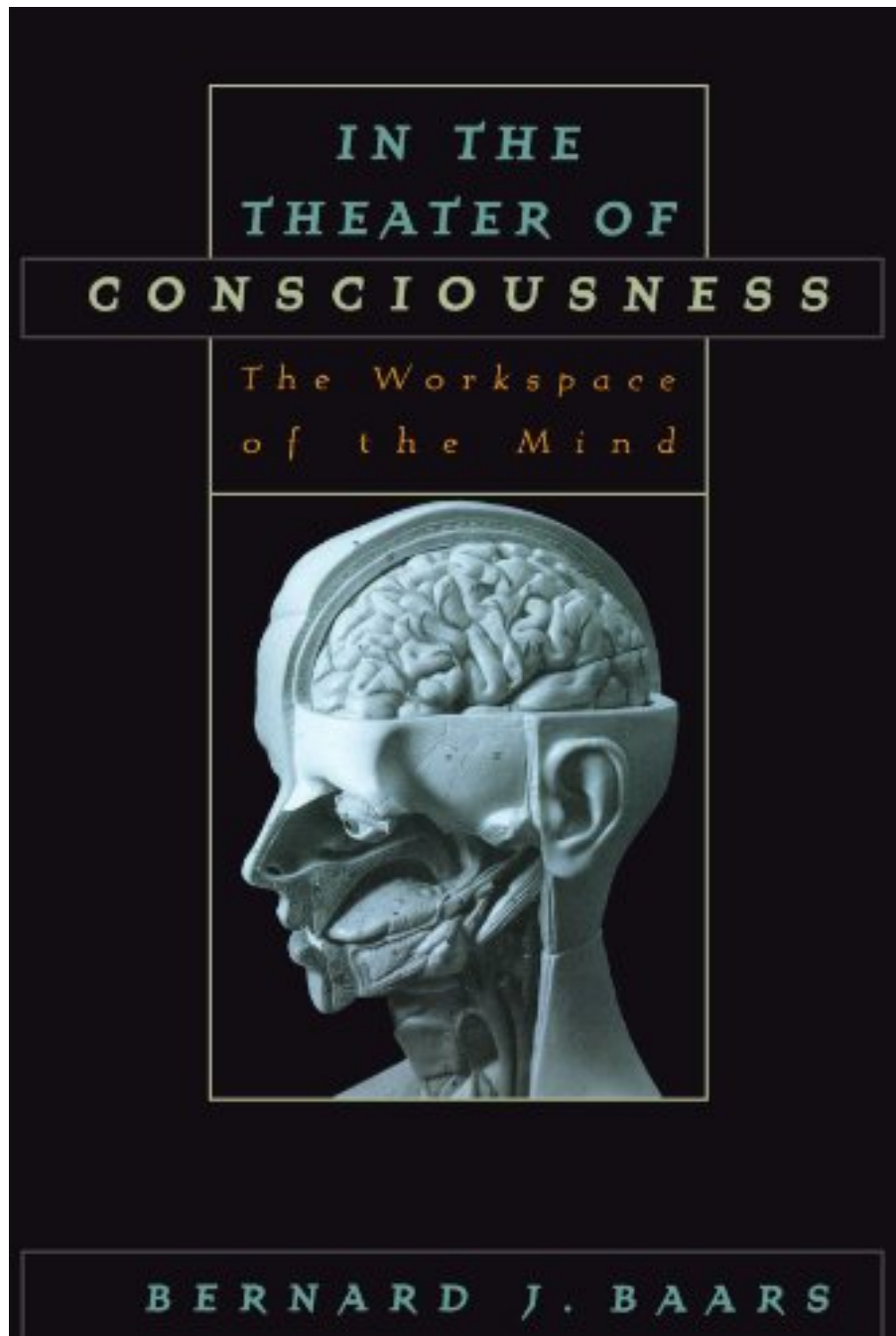


**IN THE THEATER OF CONSCIOUSNESS:
THE WORKSPACE OF THE MIND BY
BERNARD J. BAARS**



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Review

"An impressive tour, centered around the question of what we might be able to discover scientifically regarding the role played by conscious experience in the functioning of the mind."--Brian D. Josephson, Nobel Laureate in Physics

From the Back Cover

Combining psychology with brain science, Baars brilliantly brings his subject to life with a metaphor that has been used to understand consciousness since the time of Plato and Aristotle: the mind as theater. Here consciousness is seen as a "stage" on which our sensations, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings play to a vast, silent audience (the immensely complicated inner-workings of the brain's unconscious processes). Behind the scenes, silent context operators shape conscious experience; they include implicit expectations, self systems, and scene setters. Using this framework, Baars presents compelling evidence that human consciousness rides on top of biologically ancient mechanisms. In humans it manifests itself in inner speech, imagery, perception, and voluntary control of thought and action. Topics like hypnosis, absorbed states of mind, adaptation to trauma, and the human propensity to project expectations on uncertainty, all fit into the expanded theater metaphor. As Baars explores our present understanding of the mind, he takes us to the top laboratories around the world, where we witness some of the field's most exciting breakthroughs and discoveries. And throughout the book, Baars has sprinkled numerous and often highly amusing on-the-spot demonstrations that illuminate the ideas under discussion.

About the Author

Bernard J. Baars is at the Wright Institute, in Berkeley, California. He is co-editor of the journal *Consciousness and Cognition* and author of *A Cognitive Theory of Consciousness*, of which Daniel C. Dennett wrote, "For those who want to join the race to model consciousness, this is the starting line."

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IN THE THEATER OF CONSCIOUSNESS: THE WORKSPACE OF THE MIND BY BERNARD J. BAARS PDF

Written by eminent psychologist Bernard J. Baars, this book brings us to the frontlines of the consciousness debate, offering the general reader a fascinating overview of how top scientists currently understand the processes underlying conscious experience. The study of conscious experience has seen remarkable strides in the last ten years, reflecting important technological breakthroughs and the enormous efforts of researchers in disciplines as varied as neuroscience, cognitive science, and philosophy. Scientists are just now beginning to find common ground in their understanding of consciousness, which may pave the way for a unified explanation of how and why we experience and understand the world around us. This book offers an invaluable introduction to the field, brilliantly weaving together the various theories that have emerged as scientists continue their quest to uncover the profound mysteries of the mind--and of human nature itself.

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Most helpful customer reviews

16 of 16 people found the following review helpful.

Highly readable

By Amazon Customer

Bernard Baars presents a highly readable account of his Global Workspace (GW) theory of consciousness. The GW is a cognitive architecture model that is based on a simple, theater metaphor. Briefly, it imagines that consciousness occurs on a center stage. The stage is equivalent to a working memory buffer. Conscious experience consists of a spotlight area on this stage. The spotlight is shifted, to illuminate various contents, according to both involuntary and voluntary forms of attentional control. The players that compete (and cooperate) for access to the stage include the variety of exteroceptive senses, interoceptive senses, and more abstract ideas. The theater stage has a limited capacity, but it creates vast access, by broadcasting information to a variety of unconscious routines and effectors (the audience). A variety of context operators also work 'behind the scenes' to provide the necessary stage backdrops.

In this short and concise book, Baars devotes a chapter to each of the components of the theater metaphor. While the GW theory of consciousness is a cognitive model, Baars also delves a little into brain anatomy. He pays some attention, for example, to the Extended Reticular-Thalamic Activating System (ERTAS).

One of the things not fully addressed by Baars in his model is the subjective nature of consciousness. For example, with any conscious experience, there is a sense of self in the act of knowing. Baars makes no mention of the work of Damasio on the primitive self-representational mechanisms in the brain, though he does develop to some extent, his own idea of 'self as deep context'.

Baars believes that the way to make progress on the issue of consciousness is by gathering empirical evidence. Once consciousness can be treated as a variable, we can begin to make some headway in understanding it. One way of treating consciousness as a variable is through the method of contrastive phenomenology in which a single experimental task is performed under both conscious and unconscious conditions, with the differences between the two being closely tracked.

Overall, the theater metaphor has considerable heuristic value - it allows for a considerable amount of information to be packaged in a very simple manner. It turns out that the general mechanism (a limited-capacity center stage which creates vast access to specialized control systems) is a sound design solution for complex nervous systems.

9 of 9 people found the following review helpful.

Thank You, Dr. Baars

By James Gerofsky

I became interested in "philosophy of mind" several years ago and have since read a variety of books dealing with the mind-body-consciousness problem. "In The Theater of Consciousness" was my first read from the field of cognitive psychology. And a good read it was. It provides a concise yet comprehensive review of what can be said about human consciousness from the empirical perspective. This book is ten years old now and obviously misses a decade of new research. But I suspect that most of what Bernard Baars presents is still relevant, and provides a good foundation for what cognitive psychology is doing these days. It also helps

to enhance one's understanding of what the neuroscientists and artificial intelligence people are up to.

In evaluating a technical book intended for a lay audience, the author's attitude towards his or her readership is very important to me. Dr. Baars displays a very considerate attitude. He provides a lot of drawings, conceptual diagrams, try-it-yourself exercises, and even a few brain scan photos (quite impressive for 1997; were the book to be re-issued today, it could include a lot more of these, given the progress made in neuro-scanning since then). In the Epilogue, Dr. Baars expresses his gratitude "to the reader who has come this far on our shared journey". My goodness, an academic doyen who actually thanks the layman for reading his book! That's quite rare (and quite refreshing).

Dr. Baars' "theater spotlight" and "global workspace" metaphors for consciousness and its relationship to unconscious processes (and even to neuron-level workings) are indeed very useful and thought-provoking. This book will indeed help you to understand why your mind does what it does. For example, the section on "attention" as the funnel of consciousness and "absorption" as the mind's focus upon a subject absorbing all of its limited capacity to be conscious, helps to explain how we often "suspend our disbelief" when watching TV or a movie. It also helps to explain how commercials and sales pitches work - if someone wants to sell you something and they can absorb all of your attention through entertainment, there's not enough room left for your skeptical facilities to operate. So you buy, and only later on does your critical/analytical component get back "on stage" within your conscious mind - "gee, I wonder if that was really worth the money?" (But then the ego-rationalization "actor" appears, saying "of course it was worth it, we don't make mistakes, it's gonna be great").

Another important concept is "mental contexts". Dr. Baars gives a much better explanation than I can, but in a nutshell, mental contexts are sub-conscious tendencies or "primers" that shape one's interpretations of sensory inputs. They basically help you decide just what it is that you are seeing or hearing or smelling or feeling or reading. They are changeable -- think about how you interpret the word "flies" in the lines "time flies like an arrow" and "fruit flies like a banana". Time and fruit change the contexts here. Contexts can be applied on a higher level too, and help to explain how great intellectual discoveries come about. E.g., Einstein managed to derive and apply a unique context regarding what was widely known about space, time, motion and gravity. As a result, relativity was born.

This book and its like do not close the "explanatory gap" regarding the nature of consciousness. That will require a major, high-level "context shift" akin to what Einstein did with physics. But Dr. Baars does provide a good summary of what will certainly need to be accounted for if and when that context-shift does arise. In the mean time, I feel obliged to return Dr. Baar's gratitude for reading his book. Thank you, Dr. Baars, for writing a very good summary of what cognitive psychology offers to the field of consciousness studies. Your book clearly does help the non-specialist to understand what cognitive researchers are up to, and indeed to help the layman better understand her or his own conscious mind. Your book was very much worth the money and time that I invested into it.

14 of 16 people found the following review helpful.

Seminal work.

By Carlos Camara

I think it is fair to say that Baar's global workspace model is the most influential cognitive model of consciousness out there. The theoretical work is simply outstanding. Few would today contest the main idea behind the model -that the function of consciousness is to broadcast information to separate functional modules all around the brain-. Some recent papers by Baars, available on line, summarize all the emirical evidence that has appeared the last decade in favour of the model. Baars is currently at the neurosciences institute, headed by Gerald Edelman, and it is no surprise his latest views seem to include reentrant

connectivity and Edelman and Tononi's concept of complexity. However, although this is clearly a step forward, it is far from being a THE answer consciousness studies is looking for. Baars himself sees a gap between the cognitive model and the neurophysiological mechanisms involved. He has presented the ERTAS model, but it is not clear how it has stood to recent neuroscience. I'm not saying it's been falsified, but it has been deprived of supremacy. However, the global workspace is still a brilliant contribution to the study of consciousness. Some philosophical nuances are still roaming, however. There is no qualia in the theater, and it is not clear how the audience could be conscious..how would they enjoy the show?.

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