

# the future of SCENO

by Arnold Aronson

**A**niversaries are a time to look back, but they are also a time to look forward. What will the next fifty years bring? Predicting the future, of course, is a fool's game. Perhaps actors will be beamed onto the stage by transporters; all tangible scenery will be replaced by holograms; lighting and sound control will be achieved through brainwaves; and opera singers will never miss a performance because of laryngitis or petulance because their clones will be waiting in the wings. Who knows? So, while it is not possible to say what the future of scenography holds, it is possible to consider what factors might shape scenic art in the next half century.

To look forward requires a look back. The history of scenography in its simplest terms can be described as a pendulum swinging between space and image. Space, in this case, refers to stage *qua* stage. It is a delineated area in which its theatrical function is acknowledged and emphasized; it is a protean device that is constantly mutable and transformable, and as

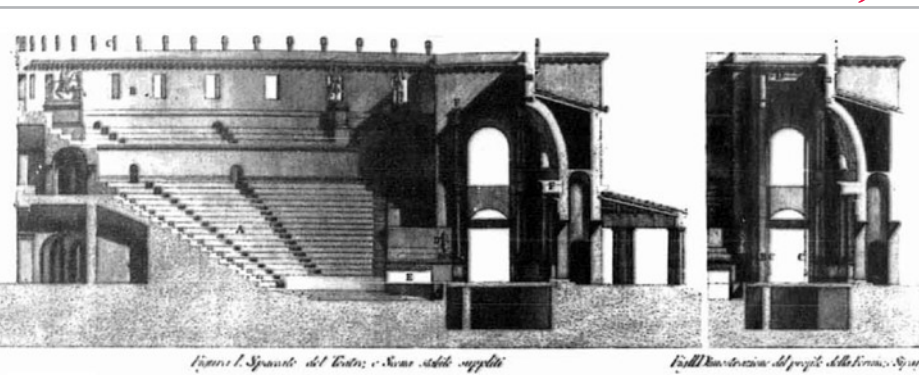
such—despite the often concrete architectural nature of such stages—it is ephemeral. In the case of the ancient Greek theatre or the market squares of medieval farces and commedia performances, the very locale of the stage connects it, and thus the spectators, to the surrounding world. It is enveloped by a greater environment which in turn envelops the spectator, at least implicitly, and thus places the theatrical event in the context of the cosmos. More often, these architectural stages are partially or fully enclosed (cf. Roman theatres, the Teatro Olimpico, the Globe, the Sanskrit stage, et al.), thereby isolating the spectators and eliminating quotidian distractions in order to create a fully contained theatrical world. Of course these architectural or space stages sometimes employed scenic pieces or painted scenery. As the pendulum swings between two points it traverses an arc, a continuum; only at the extreme points is anything absolute.

The image, on the other hand, aims to create a particular locale, whether it is allegorical and fanciful, generic, or specific. It can be a

forest, heaven, a palace, or a kitchen in a tenement. Since the Renaissance this has usually involved painted illusion, and since the late eighteenth century it has also meant the creation of an increasingly detailed environment in which the actors move—interiors with practical furniture, doors, windows, etc.; a simulacrum of the experiential world of the spectators. But regardless of detail it was still an image, as the very name “picture-frame proscenium” suggests.

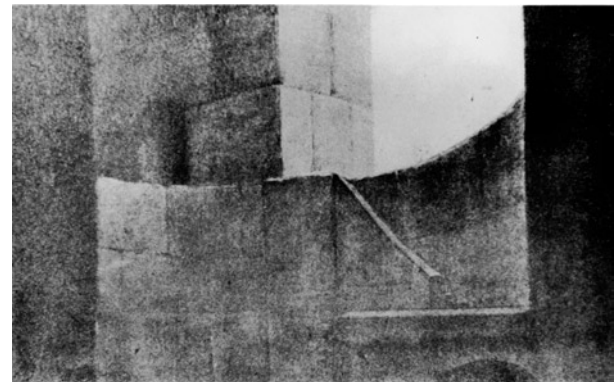
It was Appia, of course, who sought to redeem the stage as a three-dimensional volumetric space, a place whose plasticity could be shaped by light. The rejection of naturalism and its scenographic representation, the emerging conceptions of the interior world of the mind fostered by psychiatry, and Kandinsky's notion of the spiritual in art all meshed well with this new Appian regime. The great French historian of scenography, Denis Bablet, characterized a primary impulse of twentieth-century scenography as “the battle with space.” It might equally be described as the battle with the image. The fragmentary settings typical of much

## SCENOGRAPHY *of the past from*



The ancient Roman theatre at Herculaneum as envisioned by Francesco Piranesi (1758-1810).

Rein Adolphe Appia's design for *Parsifal*, 1896, a few moody, abstract, stone-textured forms stand for an entire castle.



# GRAPHY

twentieth-century décor could be understood almost in terms of Lacanian desire, a longing for the unfulfilled or for that which is lacking. But whether the window frame hanging in space or the isolated door was yearning for the complete wall or, conversely, its own elimination in order to achieve an open stage is debatable. To stick with my metaphor, it was as if the pendulum were impeded, unable to reach the farthest ends of its arc.

Postmodern design has reasserted the dominance of the image, albeit an image of disparate juxtaposed elements, dislocations, jumbled aesthetics, and a rejection of the sublime.

If this brief overview of some two-and-a-half millennia of scenographic history suggests oscillation between two points, won't it simply swing back again (and again and again) over the next fifty years? I think not, or at least not in the same way. Periodically there are developments in history that result in radical shifts in perception and understanding of the world. The development of mathematically precise perspective in combination with the emergence of

a mercantile society in the fifteenth century, for instance, or the development of photography in the nineteenth serve as such examples. The late-twentieth-century evolution of digital technology and electronic communication is clearly another such moment. But just as certainly as the perception and organization of time and space was radically altered between the middle ages and Renaissance, and just as what Jonathan Crary calls the "phenomenon of the observer," was challenged in the nineteenth century, the scopic regime of the modern era is undergoing a rigorous re-examination now.

Although the stage has always been a site for the changeable, the mutable, it achieved its transformations via the tangible. The painted pots and pans and the shaking walls that Strindberg railed against, were nonetheless composed of actual material—paint and canvas—that existed in real space. They could be touched. They could transform only by mechanical means: someone had to paint them and someone had to move them. Even the locales conjured by language as in Shakespeare's plays ("words

deploy a visibility that can be blinding" French philosopher Jacques Rancière reminds us), were brought to life on an actual stage; and actors still entered through a real door. The theatre is perhaps the best embodiment of what Rancière calls the "commonest regime of the image ... one that presents a relationship between the sayable and the visible." But in this age of digital media, we are more in the realm of Baudrillard's simulacra. Images are divorced from identifiable sources with no obligation to the real world; they refer only to themselves,

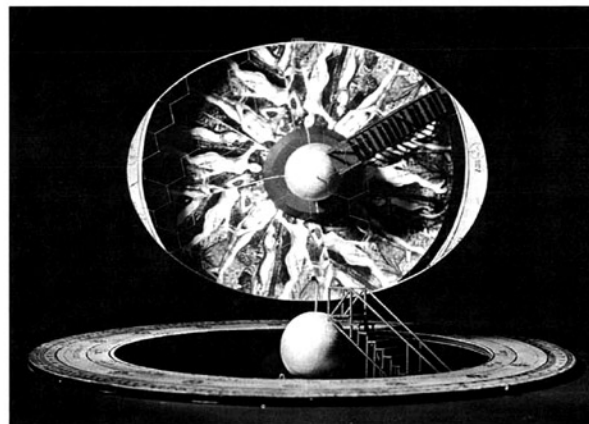
It is a truism that we live in a world of images, and the ubiquity of images has been exponentially expanded through electronic dissemination.

## articles in TD&T



The open stage preferred by Tyrone Guthrie, as expressed in the original Guthrie Theatre (1963).

Josef Svoboda's setting for Prokofiev's opera *Fiery Angel* which incorporates large mirrored surfaces designed to reflect and distort whatever images or objects are on the stage.





Another vision of *Fiery Angel* (2004) by Geroge Tsybin, which he describes as “an aggressive deconstructivist nightmare full of jagged lines, a flaming sky, and a bloody floor.”

*Pay Up* (2005), designed by Anna Kiraly for the Pig Iron Theatre Company in Philadelphia, takes place in a large warehouse in which the audience is herded to various location as the play progresses.



“undefined simulacra of each other.” And, of course, in this age of electronic communication, they do not exist in any tangible, visible, or inhabitable space; they exist, of course, in cyberspace.

It is a truism that we live in a world of images, and the ubiquity of images has been exponentially expanded through electronic dissemination. (Anyone who began using PCs or the internet in the pre-Apple days may remember a world composed almost entirely of type, not images.) Of incidental interest is the fact that much of the imagery we confront today is created or conveyed by devices that function as their own light source. That is, we do not perceive the image because it is projected or because light is reflected off it; the image radiates its own light. One critic has suggested that because such an image contains its own light source it is perceived as its own cause, which

is the Spinozist definition of God. This begs the question as to whether the aesthetic qualities of the image are determined by its technical manifestation. Is an image just an image?

One might argue that the Middle Ages and the Baroque, for instance, were also visual ages, but these, and any other visual regimes prior to the twentieth century, required the image to be present in space and to possess some degree of dimensionality. But today image and space are not only divorced, the image has been dematerialized. Where do the images seen on the computer screen, the billboard or stadium scoreboard, and related devices exist? Yes, the image appears momentarily on (in? through?) some sort of apparatus that makes it visible, yet it cannot be said to exist in space. And the images themselves have little stability—they have the ability to appear, disappear, transform, dissolve, morph with no regard to quotidian realities or the physics of everyday life. Moreover, while images were, historically, created by experts and artisans for the consumption of others, today, within a certain segment of this new scopic regime, the images are created, called into existence, transformed, and erased at will by the individual viewer.

Most people today have a greater or lesser degree of experience with electronic media and digital imagery; few have experience of the theatre. (Actually, there is a form of theatre that is familiar to a wide audience: sporting events and stadium concerts. These satisfy the human need

for communal presence in shared space. Not surprisingly, some of the accompanying imagery is created and displayed in the familiar digital form.) Inevitably, placing a contemporary spectator in a darkened theatre to view performers at some distance, and who seem static compared to the frenetic pace of digital media, and on a stage that, no matter how brightly lit, will seem dim in comparison to quantity of light in the external world, is problematic. I am still haunted by the audience response (or actually lack of response) to the scenography of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *The Woman in White* I saw on Broadway a few years ago. The scenery was entirely created and projected by digital technology and was probably the most technically sophisticated example of such work to that time. While audiences will regularly applaud the detailed realism or delightful extravagance of “old-fashioned” scenery when it is revealed onstage, the digital wonders of William Dudley’s digital scenery elicited no apparent response at all. It would seem that the look of the digital imagery, and the dissolving and transforming locales were so commonplace for this audience that it bordered on the invisible, whereas a 3-D simulacrum of the real world is a wondrous novelty that bears little resemblance to the imagistic and spatial expectations of a modern popular audience.

So where does this leave us? Live theatre will never disappear; the performer-spectator dyad, in real space and time, seems to be hardwired into human behavior. And live theatre demands

Most people today have a greater or lesser degree of experience with electronic media and digital imagery; few have experience of the theatre.





Marianne Weems co-founder of the performance group, the Builder Association, and co-director of *Alladeen* (2003), says, "The 'delivery system' for these productions is complex, and sometimes causes static between us and the audience."

*Amerika, or the Disappearance* (2006), is based on Franz Kafka's unfinished utopian fantasy about America.



that the audience confront and experience actual space and image. At the same time, an increasing segment of the potential audience no longer reads—perhaps is no longer capable of reading—space and image as it has been understood for the past several hundred years. The problem, therefore, will be how to accommodate the conflicting needs of these two forces. The answer may, in fact, reside in the concept of projections and soon-to-be-feasible large-scale holograms—but not as such technologies are typically used at present. With a few exceptions the history of projections for the past 100 years has been as a substitute for plastic scenery (while still treating it as if it functioned in an identical way), or as a complementary image system to create mood, convey information, enhance thematic concerns, and the like. But if the aesthetic and cognitive vocabularies of such technology were better understood it could be better translated to the stage in such a way as to be accessible and meaningful to the contemporary audience: the audience of the immaterial image and immanent space. Until that divide is bridged, theatrical design will remain mired in an increasingly anachronistic form.

As an historian I can demonstrate that scenographic space and imagery has always reflected the sensibilities and technology of its time. Therefore it is probably safe to say that scenography fifty years hence will equally reflect its time and technology. As an observer of the present I can simply note that the experience

and understanding of space and image is undergoing a radical change, perhaps a profound one. As a prognosticator, if I resort to some not-yet-identified form of projections as the future of scenography, it is only because I am trapped in the world I know. I feel safe in predicting the

factors that must be addressed. I am at a loss to suggest how to address them. ❖

**Arnold Aronson** is chair of the theatre program at Columbia University and writes frequently on scenography.

department of theatre & cinema  
at Virginia Tech

---

We will surprise you.

[www.theatre.vt.edu](http://www.theatre.vt.edu)

B.A. in Theatre | 3-year M.F.A. programs  
Uncommon Experiences • Unexpected Opportunities

 **VirginiaTech**  
Invent the Future™

Copyright of TD&T: Theatre Design & Technology is the property of United States Institute for Theatre Technology, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.