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## SCENOGRAPHY STUDIES – ON THE MARGIN OF ART HISTORY AND THEATER STUDIES

**Abstract:** Scenography as a domain of artistic activity has always been a liminal art, placed between the visual arts and theater, with the latter being treated as a chiefly literary domain. The history of scenography to date has recorded two moments when it rose to prominence, becoming the “queen” of the spectacle: the Renaissance and modern times. The article will briefly discuss its history, to show the main reasons for the exclusion of scenography from the domain of academic research. The author will survey some recent publications on set design written by practitioners and academics.

**Keywords:** set design – scenography – history of theater – theater.

Scenography as a domain of artistic activity has always been a liminal art, placed between the visual arts and theater, with the latter being treated as a chiefly literary domain. Its roots reach back to the theater of ancient Greece. Even during that period, it was already a marginalized discipline. Aristotle noted in his *Poetics*, which can be partly regarded as representative for the ideas of his time, that although a spectacle is the work of the *skenograph*, its significance depends on the craftsmanship of the playwright. Therefore, he acknowledges the quality that scenography contributes to the spectacle, but in order to achieve *catharsis*, that ancient category associated with the reception of a work of art, a work of great literary value is needed. According to this approach to the theater, the appearance of the stage is of secondary importance. Furthermore, the term *skenographia*, which probably meant “stage painting”, or more accurately “painted on the *skene*”, also referred to all the painting of that era which used linear perspective. It seems that the idea originating from Aristotle contributed to the dismissive view of

scenography, a refusal to see it as a discipline of art that requires specific knowledge and artistic skills. There is an anecdote about Anaxarchus of Abdera (6<sup>th</sup> century BC), a philosopher and a companion of Alexander the Great's during his expedition to India. He used to compare human life to painted images. He thought that matters of everyday life are just as illusory as dreams or the painted façade of the *skene*.

The history of scenography to date has recorded two moments when it rose to prominence, becoming the "queen" of the spectacle: the Renaissance and modern times. During the first period of its glory it enjoyed admiration as a discipline of art, whereas in the second one it has to actually demand that its rights be respected, although it governs the imagination of a large audience: the viewers of theater performances, the attendees of outdoor events, political party voters, the participants of rock concerts, the viewers of television programs and films, and even the fans of computer games. Some of the reasons for its long-time marginalization include the absence of a developed method of description, critical discourse, and methods of research, but most of all its inability to secure itself a place in the pantheon of the arts. This is another reason why it is a discipline linked to a greater extent with fine arts rather than theater. Even a cursory examination of the history of scenography gives an idea of its importance and a fairly significant marginalization of the study of its development.

The first era of its prominence is associated with the invention of convergent perspective. Decorators become the main arrangers of performances. Zbigniew Raszewski, theater historian, even went so far as to describe that mathematical-technical solution as a "cuckoo's egg" that was planted in theater. Indeed, the domination of painted panoramas and wings became a fixture in theater for over 200 years. It is debatable whether the large canvases have always guaranteed the artistic mastery of their authors. Of course, some of them were important names, such as the Galli da Bibiena family, whose members worked for major theaters (mostly court) of Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Their work was characterized by extraordinary mastery of composition and attention to detail associated with the desire to preserve at all costs the illusion of perspective on stage. In the seventeenth century England, Inigo Jones perfected the art of painting on canvas, using the ancient system of painted *periaktos* for his stage designs. In the late eighteenth century, Philip James de Loutherbourg introduced three-dimensional stage decor closing the visual layout. Paradoxically, neither the history of theater, nor art history is party to the debate on the transformations of scenography, so we know very little about the entirety of the theatre aesthetics of that time. It should be expected that apart from a small number

of artists, the vast majority of the painted stage decor were produced by random craftsmen.

Another factor that certainly contributed to the marginalization of scenography as a discipline of art was not only the incompetence of the artists, but also the limited scope of the themes depicted on the large canvases, closely linked to the dramatic genre. One of those responsible for such state of affairs was Sebastian Serlio, who in 1545 published his work *Trattato de architettura*. Drawing on Vitruvius, his Roman predecessor, the author offers not only valuable advice on the shape of a theater building, but also guidelines for decorators, relevant for the issue discussed here. He introduced three kinds of painted canvases. The first one was *scena tragica*, or tragic background, whose purpose was to depict palatial architecture; it featured numerous columns, decorative façades, and all the accoutrements associated with a royal court. The second one was *scena comica*, intended for comedic performances; it featured a depiction of private houses with bay windows and visible window frames. The third type was dedicated to the so-called pastoral plays, known as *scena satirica* – it was to represent forest, caves, mountains, and other elements of rural landscape, based on the model of landscape painting.

The subject-matter of those canvases followed strictly defined rules, binding the dramatic genre with the mode of decoration. It was the overthrow of this system that started the revolution in scenography. In Paris, in the late seventeenth century, Molière was the first to challenge Serlio's rules by setting his farce plays in the space of a drawing room. Setting the play in an interior, and no longer just in the street or the square in front of a house, infused the intrigue with new possibilities of interpretation. For the first time in its history, scenography was considered not only in the context of the spectacle, but predominantly with respect to the effect the artist wanted to achieve in terms of the reception of the literary work. Decoration served to underscore the intrigue, and thus it had to provide adequate setting. Molière began to furnish his drawing rooms with real furniture, which also contributed to the emergence of a new catalogue of stage props. One of them in particular came to be associated with its owner. It was the armchair in which the playwright was seated on stage on 17 February 1673, during the world premiere of *The Imaginary Invalid*, a comedy which he also wrote. He fell off the chair as he was leaving the stage and died a few hours later. Today, the armchair is on display in the foyer of the Comédie Française building in Paris. It became not only an element of decoration, but also a national treasure. It is now even proudly brought on stage every 15 January to celebrate the anniversary of Molière's birth, thus becoming a permanent sign of the playwright's presence.

It is hard to believe that the rules of scenography in theater remained unchanged until the mid-nineteenth century. With the emergence of new dramatic genres in the Romantic era, the artists began to seek appropriate decorative solutions. It was then that some new categories of painted canvases were introduced: street and urban scenery was reserved for bourgeois drama. Melodrama was dominated by two types of setting: romantic and idyllic landscape. The former, otherwise known as *pittoresque* (i.e. picturesque), displayed poetic ruins of castles and mansions, wild mountains, forests, dangerous precipices, and windy moors. It was designed to emphasize the horror behind the events, lending the whole plot a subtly melancholy character. Also significant were the lighting effects and music. The latter category usually featured a farmhouse and fields of grain, with a church tower visible in the background. The entire setting had to be illuminated by sunlight or the bright rays of the full moon. The sentimental setting was supposed to express the charm of a happy life. It was a wonderful backdrop for the extremely complex vicissitudes experienced by the characters of the play. The stage decor of the Romantic period was closely related to the emotions of the characters/recipients, stretched between two opposing poles: terror and peace, which were then regarded as the only possible options.

It should be noted that the decorator had the technical support of carpenters and machine operators. Performances of the *à grand spectacle* variety required hundreds of such men. The scenography still consisted of a carefully painted panorama and rows of wings arranged to form a perspectival view. Pretty soon it turned out that painted decoration was not sufficient for the new drama. Thus, three-dimensional elements were introduced onto the picture-frame (proscenium) stage, with the results often rather different from those intended, and sometimes comical. A perfect example is the spectacle of *Kordian* by Juliusz Słowacki, staged in Kraków in 1899, with the main character climbing the “summit of Mont Blanc”, made of wooden racks, his hat touching the overhanging clouds.

The next stage of the revolution in scenography was the change in lighting. In the 1820s, gas lamps were introduced, replaced by electricity by the end of the nineteenth century. Certainly, the change of the light source was the factor that spurred a complete reconstruction of stage decoration. Brighter lighting revealed the whole aesthetic misery of the painted canvases. The reform of the theater initiated – on the one hand – by Richard Wagner and the theater in Bayreuth built for his operas (1876), and on the other – by the theater company called Meiningen Ensemble (1860-1908), a court group under the leadership of Prince George II of Sachsenhausen-Meiningen, focused primarily on transforming the aesthetic qualities of the spectacle.

The artists' notes from the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries evidence the changes in the attention given to scenography. In Poland, this was clearly visible in the works of Stanisław Wyspiański, who experimented with light and sound (e.g. in his *Wedding*, 1901), props, colors, and their meanings (*The Wedding*, *Varsavian Anthem*, 1898; *Boleslaus the Bold*, 1903). Wyspiański was honored by having the entire Polish pavilion dedicated to him at the International Theatre Exhibition, held in 1926 in New York and curated by Frederick Kiesler, Austrian architect and stage designer, associated with the group *Der Stijl*. A similar trend can be observed in all avant-garde currents that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century. The list of publications addressing this issue includes texts by Wassily Kandinsky, Oskar Schlemmer, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, and Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz. Other artists that dabbled in scenography include Paul Klee, Piet Mondrian, Oskar Kokoschka, and Pablo Picasso. For these artists, scenography was just as important as their other activities.

Unfortunately, in the field of critical discourse over the past century, the pressure for change in theater shifted from the visual sphere towards the plot. As a consequence, it was much easier to interest the researchers working in the emerging theater studies in the literary aspect of theater. Of course, the studies did not ignore the important role of the director, who became the main artist responsible for the spectacle. Scenography, while still remembered by the avant-garde, quickly disappeared from the field of interest of academic researchers. This was probably due to the transience of the material, which exists only within the space of the spectacle, and once its run is finished, it goes to the storeroom, often becoming material for a completely different set of decorations. Another problem is the fact that since the late twentieth century, we have seen a gradual abstention of artists from writing manifestos and commentaries to their own activities. Some signs of a return to self-reflection can be seen today, as evidenced by the growing number of albums and books written by stage designers, to mention just two of them: Pamela Howard's *What is Scenography?* (2007), and the book by Allan Starski and Irena A. Stanisławska's *Scenografia* [Scenography], published in Warsaw in 2013. These publications are different in character from the avant-garde manifestos, as the latter focused on the description of new technical possibilities that emerged with the introduction of cinema or photography on stage, or the new approach to props or costumes lending sculptural form to the human body. Currently, scenographers do show their work, but the accompanying commentary takes the form of an academic lecture, addressing also the technical and administrative aspects of the profession.

The view of scenography adopted in such publications include mostly its theatrical aspect, connected with the spectacle performed on the proscenium

stage in a theater. Researchers have completely failed to notice that since the last century scenography has become an important part of spectacles played out in other media. The most important technical invention, namely cinema, was quickly followed by the emergent television shows. The twentieth century showed the power of visual setting in another dimension, that of politics. It became an important tool of propaganda in the totalitarian systems which shaped the history of societies in the era of two world wars. The experience gained by the creators of political spectacles is still used to design the settings of election campaigns by successive generations of activists representing different political groups. It is a paradox that the study of the socio-political function of the visual setting is conducted by sociologists and psychologists. After all, scenography calls for an academic discourse discussing its aesthetic aspect, not only analyzing the mental manipulation it may be used for. Perhaps the reason for the reluctance to conduct in-depth research in the former field is some creators' entanglement in building the background for the latter, in the complex political context of the twentieth century.

In 2009, an academic conference was held in Paris under the title *Qu'est-ce que la scénographie?*, inspired by Howard's book (discussed in "Art Inquiry. Recherches sur les arts" 2012, vol. XIV, p. 221–235). The seemingly trivial question is in fact quite justified, because currently there is no clear definition of the concept. The activity of the scenographers contributes to the continuous expansion of its range. The program of the French session yielded two volumes of papers<sup>1</sup>. They present primarily the scenographers' perspective, pointing out the missionary nature of the profession, which involves familiarity with space as well as the ability to select objects present on stage and to build metaphors. The editors of those volumes introduced a clear dividing line, since they date the development of modern scenography to the 1960s. Thus, the earlier achievements of the avant-garde are located within the context of historical analysis. A valuable addition to the book is a map of scenography departments in France and the description of their teaching methods. The publication indicated some significant problems of scenography as a subject of research within the system of artistic education.

The question posed earlier by the British production designer and picked up by the French academics points to an obvious problem, namely the fact that the abandonment of the academic study of the visual setting of performances has created a gap, which has been filled by artists through their actions. At the same time, academic analysis serves as a method of structur-

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<sup>1</sup> *Qu'est-ce que la scénographie?*, vol. I, *Processus et paroles de scénographes*, textes réunis par Daniel Lesage et Véronique Lemaire, "Études Théâtral", issue 53/2012; vol. II, *Pratiques et enseignements*, ouvrage dirigé par Luc Boucris, Marcel Freydefont, Véronique Lemaire, Raymoand Sarti, "Études Théâtral", issue 54-55/2012.

ing objectives and tasks – its absence creates chaos. Which brings us to the next question in this argument: what does it mean to study scenography? What kind of researcher is able to examine scenography in terms of both historical and contemporary documentation? Is he a theater scholar, an art historian, or just an archivist? In his book *Einführung in die Theaterwissenschaft* [The Introduction to Theatre Studies], Christopher Balme, German theater scholar, addresses this issue in rather ambiguous terms: “Since the design of the appearance of the stage is often, historically speaking, placed in the hands of established artists-painters, their works are the focus of both theater studies and art history. The exact division of tasks between the two disciplines of research would be difficult to establish. It is known, however, that theater decorations and costumes are not preferred areas of research within the history of art. Scenographers’ work used to be labelled as applied arts. The most important studies on scenography have been, therefore (with few exceptions) penned by theater scholars. The knowledge of the history of art, however, has always played an important role in these studies”<sup>2</sup>. In her lecture on contemporary theater studies, Erika Fischer-Lichte notes, quoting Wolfgang Goethe, that theater studies should be free to use knowledge from other disciplines, such as literature studies, art history, etc., because theatrical works are a sum of various arts. At the same time she believes that the form of the setting determines how a spectacle will be recorded in memory. The researcher notes that the props and the costumes used in the spectacle are an important direct source in the study of the history of theater.

The sale of the costumes and elements of stage décor which took place at the Opera at the Castle in Szczecin in August 2013 can be seen as a digression illustrating a certain paradox. Everything was sold there for the same price of 7 PLN, regardless of its artistic value or the name of the costume designer. At the same time, one of the hundreds of jackets made for Harrison Ford for the role of Indiana Jones, was to be sold at an auction held to raise funds for the Poznan theatre *Scena na Piętrze* [Upstairs Theatre]. Probably neither the actor nor the filmmakers knew anything about that particular auction, as the Tęspis foundation running the theater received the jacket from the clothing company that produced it for the film. This particular juxtaposition shows the problem which clearly eludes theater researchers. Scenography has entered the economic system governing culture. It is the material element of the spectacle which undergoes the process of commodification. This should spur a debate on the potential collectors value of such items, the character of the

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<sup>2</sup> Ch. Balme, *Einführung in die Theaterwissenschaft*, quoted from the Polish edition: *Wprowadzenie do nauki o teatrze*, transl. and ed. by W. Dudzik and M. Leyko, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw 2002, p. 209.

museums of scenography in Poland and in the world, etc. One specific illustration of this issue was the Stanley Kubrick exhibition, organized in 2014 at the National Museum in Krakow. It showcased the filmmaker and his work, and scenography was an essential part of the exhibition. Such individual objects as the famous knife or the typewriter from *Shining* (1980) together made up the dramatic setting of the whole presentation. The props originally used on the set created a new discourse about the artist and his work, which, due to the presence of real objects, has become more tangible for Kubrick's fans. Another valuable element was the documentary screened in Krakow. It addressed the history of the costumes and headwear made for *2001 – A Space Odyssey* (1968). The director entrusted the task of creating futuristic dresses to Hardy Amies, who had previously worked only for Queen Elizabeth II. The designer created a new style and boldly experimented with new fabrics. Freddie Fox, owner of a famous hat salon in London, designed the headwear for the stewardess in Kubrick's film, inspired by the shape of an egg. Both the headwear and the costumes went down in the history of scenography, even if the designers regarded their work on the film set as just an adventure, a challenge, and a temporary escape from their regular responsibilities. The director, famous for his pedantry, entrusted them with that task due to their perfectionism, which turned out to be an excellent choice for the film meant to show the future.

A researcher of scenography is therefore not only a theater scholar, not only an art historian, and not only an archivist. He must have extensive knowledge of the history of architecture, culture, etc. It becomes even more confusing when one considers film set design, which requires familiarity with film production. As the research field expands, more and more scientists begin to notice the problem of the lack of language to talk about the phenomena of scenography. In recent years, a number of authors have sought a method of describing visual settings. Particularly noteworthy is *Theater and Performance Design. A Reader in Scenography*, edited by Jane Collins and Andrew Nisbet, which points to the links between the function and the form of scenography, and the theories of vision or rather perception of reality. It addresses the ideas of Plato, Bernard Russell, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Ernst Gombrich, and Walter Benjamin, along with the concepts proposed by the aforementioned Craig, Kantor, Jerzy Grotowski, Oskar Schlemmer, Robert Wilson, and Josef Svoboda. The eclecticism of thought and this particular – somewhat risky – selection of authors, makes the collection in question a worthy guidebook to the ideas in scenography. Their versatility and diversity has been treated as a challenge to solve the charade of the meanings engendered by the concept. An interesting approach to historical issues has been offered by Christin Essin in her book *Stage*



*Designers in Early Twentieth-Century America*. In the discussion on the scenographers active in the United States in the early twentieth century, the publication clearly differentiates between their individual functions of author, critic of culture, social activist, entrepreneur, and even global cartographer. The researcher focused mainly on the artists who were immigrants from different parts of the world. Multi-ethnicity has become the starting point for a more extensive reflection on scenography, which shaped America's idea of the outside world. It also contributed to the discourse of representation, and the presence of European culture in the United States, laying ground for its new myths. An interesting series of publications have recently been released by Palgrave MacMillan. Their purpose is to present scenography from several points of view: through the function of costume, light, the role of the director. The authors commissioned to edit the books are scholars who are also practitioners. Particularly noteworthy is Scott Palmer, British researcher and lighting designer, whose book *Light* is part of the series. The author presents this element of the spectacle in a historical perspective, but also discusses the contemporary situation. He also demonstrates how technical innovations that contributed to the growing importance of the role of artificial light in a spectacle changed the perceptions of not only the audience but also, and above all, theater artists themselves.

In all the examples discussed here (only briefly because of the spatial constraints), scenography is regarded as an extremely important part of the spectacle, and an essential key to changing the mentality of the public or expanding the aesthetics of the performance.

The history of Polish scenography owes the most not so much to theater scholars or art historians, but to a single production designer – Zenobiusz Strzelecki. In his books: *Polska Plastyka Teatralna* [Visual arts in Polish theatre] (1963); *Kierunki scenografii współczesnej* [Trends in contemporary scenography] (1970), and *Współczesna scenografia polska* [Polish contemporary scenography] (1984), he describes both the historical roots of Polish scenography, and the work of the eminent scenographers in the twentieth century, including Stanisław Wyspiański, Karol Frycz, Andrzej Pronaszko, Zofia Wierchowicz, Krystyna Zachwatowicz, Tadeusz Kantor, Józef Szajna, or Leszek Mądzik. The final result is an impressive work. I would venture to say that no other European country can boast of such excellent monographs prepared by a single author. What is impressive is both his descriptive style, reminiscent in its literary quality of the masters of traditional literature, and his attempts to categorize the artists, assigning them to the corresponding trends in art. Over the last fifty years, no one has managed to match Strzelecki's achievements. Theater scholars are more likely to focus their efforts on the development of extensive, extremely valuable, individual

monographs rather than a comprehensive look at the history of Polish scenography. However, since its publication, Strzelecki's work has become somewhat outdated, and the history of Polish scenography has become a white spot in theater studies in Poland.

This issue is extremely important because theater scholars have overlooked their native aesthetic thought, unlike theater artists. The last fifty years has seen a great triumph of the aesthetics of Polish theater. Jerzy Grotowski and Tadeusz Kantor have laid the foundations of modern European theater, yet Polish academics seem to have forgotten about all that. Theater scholars and critics are reluctant to examine scenography. They lack the research methodology and language to describe the phenomena taking place on stage. Despite the existing body of theoretical work, we still do not know how to evaluate the material objects in the spectacle, we cannot interpret the changes of meaning taking place on the stage. This illustrates perfectly the whole problem of misunderstanding Jerzy Grzegorzewski's endeavors. I am not referring here to his work as a director, but to the artistic vision of his spectacles. Some people still find it objectionable that he re-composed objects and constructed theater installations. This is in part due to the theater education which ignores the questions of scenography and aesthetics. This results in turn from combining theater studies with literary studies and philology. It is easier to investigate and analyze the literary aspect of a theatrical performance, as there is a specific reference in the form of a printed work.

Meanwhile, history of art has not provided methods of analyzing scenography, either. Turning to it was a natural reflex among the researchers, including Strzelecki. However, no appropriate methodology has developed in this field, as in most cases history of art is a descriptive, not an analytical discipline. Set design, which involves an ephemeral spectacle, non-existent in terms of history, seems to be calling for some separate methodology. As has been already demonstrated, scenography is a challenge because of its eclecticism. It seems that the most appropriate method of studying it is by presenting the changing forms, showing how scenographers evaluate space, objects, or costumes. Building a problem-based discourse gives a greater scope to demonstrate the changes in historical terms; it also shows the scenographers' choices being duplicated in other fields of art. In this context, the most useful research instrument is cultural anthropology, which examines the contexts of phenomena against the broad background of artistic and social activity. The methodology was used e.g. by Hans Belting to describe the problems of the existence of art in the modern world. This view is supported by the currently popular performativity, which, particularly in the version of Ian McKenzie, gives a researcher freedom to use cognitive tools to describe the phenomena that he wants to explore. It also states that objects should not be studied using

a single methodology, because it significantly limits their interpretation. In this context, another useful instrument can be found in the anthropology of things, which uses social knowledge to demonstrate the uniqueness of the phenomena taking place in modern society, as intended, inter alia, by Jean Baudrillard, who said that the age of the subject has given way to the age of the object. The deformation of objects and their existence in space is an excellent question which can be used to access the world of scenography.

The study of scenography has become both a problem and an extraordinary challenge for contemporary humanities. At the threshold of the twenty-first century, the visual setting of spectacles is one of the most important elements that have social, political, and artistic functions. It seems that scenography has begun to rule the imagination of the viewer to a far greater extent than the accompanying literary content. The evolution of the discipline, presented only briefly here due to limited space, shows its extraordinary ability to transform and redefine aesthetic value. Tadeusz Kantor called it a despised discipline of art. Although decidedly pejorative, the expression is not entirely unfounded. However, placing scenography in the margins of attention has not only failed to disrupt its development, but even contributed to its dynamic progress. The history of theater as the development of spatial forms has not been written as yet. Thus, the return of the academic scholars to the abandoned, once empty field of scenography studies can become the beginning of a new revolution both in terms of historical analysis and contemporary exegesis. Its unpredictable results may generate a new quality of spectacles and other artistic forms of expression.

*Translated by  
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### **BADANIE SCENOGRAFII – MARGINES HISTORII SZTUKI I TEATROLOGII (streszczenie)**

Scenografia jako sfera działań artystycznych była i jest sztuką pogranicza. Sytuowano ją zawsze pomiędzy sztukami plastycznymi, a teatrem, traktowanym jako obszar głównie zajmowany przez literaturę. W dotychczasowej historii scenografii widoczne są dwa momenty, kiedy zaważadnęła ona widowiskiem, stając się „królową” przedstawienia: renesans i czasy współczesne. Artykuł poprzez skrótowe omówienie jej dziejów chce wykazać głównie przyczyny marginalizacji czy wręcz wyrzucenia scenografii ze sfery badań naukowych. Autorka odwołuje się do publikacji autorstwa zarówno praktyków, jak i naukowców, jakie ukazały się w ostatnim czasie na temat scenografii.

**Słowa kluczowe:** scenografia – historia teatru – teatr.