

Re-imagining Scenography in relation to Art History: Contact zones and crossroads

AAH2017 43rd Annual Conference & Art Book Fair Loughborough University 6th - 8th April 2017

Carmen González-Román
Art History Department. University of Málaga (Spain)
romancg@uma.es

Title:

Appropriations and Hybridizations between Visual Arts and Performing Arts in the Early Modern Age: A transdisciplinary research project and a methodological proposal.

I'd like to start by giving thanks to the whole organization of this important event and, especially, to the convenors of this panel: Doctors Astrid von Rosen and Viveka Kjellmer for accepting my paper and for all their kind guidelines.

Besides, I must say I'm glad because of the content of the papers presented here today, mainly focused on contemporary arts, which proves how the studies on scenography in relation to Art History are expanding.

However, my paper is focused on Early Modern Age, because from my point of view, the influence exerted by the performing arts on the Visual Arts during the Early Modern Age constitutes a fundamental aspect of the history of European art that has not been studied in all its dimensions. To date, studies undertaken from the field of the history of art have focused mainly on the analysis of drawings of scenery or costumes preserved, or have put the focus

on the role played by well-known artists in the design of ephemeral architecture, scenography and costumes.

In recent decades, we have been witnessing a growing interest by historians of art toward the study of festivals in the Early Modern Age, an interest that has been directed mainly towards the analysis of iconography and ephemeral architecture built on occasion of such events.

On the other hand, it has to be taken into account that research on the Theatre developed from the area of Philology doesn't elaborate on the analysis of all elements or agents who intervene and give meaning to the complex system which is a spectacle in the Early Modern Age, let alone contemplate correspondences with Visual Arts or architecture from the formal, critical or aesthetic point of view. Something similar, in terms of a methodological approach, is reflected in proposals addressed exclusively from the field of History.

In short, to establish the reciprocal influence between performative manifestations, such as theatre or dance, but also the ceremonies, rituals, etc. and the Visual Arts in the context of the Early Modern Age, we consider it necessary to have a transdisciplinary perspective.

The development of the project presented here implies, therefore, the collaboration of several disciplines, such as Art History, History of Spectacle and Musicology. On the one hand, we consider that the interconnection between disciplines is necessary to advance in the knowledge on the hybridization of the plastic and scenic languages in early modernity. On the

other hand, given that this research involves a contrasted analysis between "future-minded" art objects and ephemeral creations known through descriptions, stories, drawings, etc., we also propose to implement virtual visualization systems that facilitate the understanding of the artistic manifestations analyzed.

As a starting point to assess the progress that this research project represents I think it is necessary to briefly review historiography.

Background research on the relationship between fine arts and performing arts

The precursor most directly related to the chronological scope of this project is Aby Warburg, who, throughout his research around the image in the Renaissance, wrote two essays on the relationship between art and spectacle.

In 1904, Émile Mâle published an influential essay on the relations between the theatrical Mysteries of the Low Middle Ages and the revolution toward naturalism in plastic arts in the 15th century.¹ Although his way of dealing with the relationship between figurative arts and theatre has been considered too radical, undoubtedly E. Mâle also contributed to the development of this line of research.²

¹ "Le renouvellement de l'art par les Mystères a la fin du Moyen Age", 1904.

² Sobre la aportación de Émile Malé al estudio de la influencia ejercida por el teatro en la pintura, véase recientemente, Rosé-Marie Ferré, "Émile Malé, l'art et le Théâtre au Moyen Âge: jalons et résonances", en *Le théâtre de l'Église (XIIe -XVIIe siècles)*. Paris, Lamop, 2011, pp. 3-24.

In the 1930s (**nineteen thirties**) and 1940s (**nineteen forties**), Oskar Fischel, George R. Kernolde and Hans Tintelnot carried out important contributions.³

From the second half of the twentieth century, the investigations of Pierre Francastel, André Chastel, Robert Klein, Irvin Lavin, Arthur R. Blumenthal, Manfredo Tafuri, Eugenio Battisti, M. Fagiolo del Arco among others are essential.

Broadly speaking, from the 1980s (**nineteen eighties**), the research conducted by art historians about the relationships between performing arts and visual arts during the Early Modern Age could materialize in the following thematic areas:

- a. Firstly, the study on festivals: royal entries, funerals, marriages, canonizations, etc. This line is the most numerous and has been interested mainly, as I said before, in analyzing the iconography and the ephemeral architecture in the context of each celebration, with the help of texts preserved on these events.
- b. As part, occasionally, of the former line is research based on the analysis of drawings on sets and costumes.
- c. Another trend is that directed toward the study of theatricality in arts. From this perspective is set the involvement in the arts of purely theatrical elements such as the stage, the actor, the theatrical space and audience.
- d. Lastly, and more recently, a theoretical -aesthetic analysis of the artistic objects from the concept of performativity is being carried out.

³ Oskar Fischel, en "Art and the Theatre" (*Burlington Magazine*, 66, 1935) reparó igualmente en la presencia de motivos de origen teatral en la pintura. George R. Kernolde, *From Art to Theatre. Form and convention in the Renaissance* (University of Chicago Press, 1944), amplía el ámbito de las manifestaciones performativas y se tenía en cuenta la influencia de los *tableaux vivants* y del "teatro callejero" en las artes plásticas del Renacimiento. H. Tintelnot, *Barocktheater und barocke Kunst* (Verlag, 1939).

Having said this, I will proceed to explain what our project brings to the current scenario of research, that is, its objectives, the methodology used and the lines that we are developing.

Objectives and methodology

In order to carry out a comparative study between scenic manifestations and plastic or visual arts in the Early Modern Age, we start from the basic idea that all of them are part of the same context of material and visual culture.

Therefore, we propose a type of transdisciplinary research that allows going beyond the boundaries between disciplines with similar scientific interests, in particular, History of Art, History of Spectacle and Musicology. In this sense, we share with Mieke Bal the idea included in his essay *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities*. I quote: "Interdisciplinarity should seek its heuristic and methodological base on concepts rather than on methods" (M. Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities*, 2002).

From this approach, we have recently held a first International Seminar in which, surpassing the traditional dichotomy "Theatre and Festival", the concepts of theatricality and performativity have been established. Starting from these concepts we have sought to develop an analysis that allows us to confirm the appropriations and hybridizations between the performing and visual Arts in those centuries. ("Theatricality and performativity in the arts during the Early Modern Period").

The review of the semantic and conceptual dimension of the term "theatricality" applied to the study of Visual Arts, as well as its use in the respective fields of

study for this project, has provided the opportunity to also reflect on the applicability of the concept of "performativity".

Performativity is a key concept in the most recent European cultural studies,⁴ although it has still developed little in the field of the History of Art, especially in the period of the Early Modern Age. The concept of performativity has nonetheless opened new possibilities for the aesthetic analysis of artistic phenomena or objects, and has allowed us to rethink and evaluate the limits and applicability of the term theatricality in defining certain traits of the artistic creations of this period.

In this regard, I should mention here ground-breaking studies collected in the volume titled "Performativity and Performance in Baroque Rome" edited by Peter Gillgren and Marten Snickare (published by Ashgate in 2012). In this volume, in addition to studying examples of performances in the strict sense, I mean: " "certain people acting before an audience within a limited place and time frame", in the last section of this volume, there is a focus on the interpretative act being executed by an individual beholder before a single work of art – a beholder in seventeenth-century Rome as well as the scholar of today.

Research lines

The issues on which we are currently carrying out our research are the following ones:

⁴ Peter Burke, "Performative Turn in Recent Cultural History", 2014. Peter Burke, "The Performative Turn in Recent Cultural History", in *Medieval and Early Modern Performance in Eastern Mediterranean*, ed. Arzu Öztürkmen & Evelyn Birge Vitz [Turnhout: Brepols, 2014], 541–62).

- a. **The Court environment:** from this perspective, we study spaces for the celebration of different events: theater, ballet, ceremonies, etc., as well as the implication of the various agents involved in the design of these celebrations (patrons, painters, engineers, the audience, etc.). Starting from there, the aim is to establish which elements of those stagings are present in the visual arts.

For example, among the scenery drawings done by the painter and set designer of the Court of Philip the Fourth, Francisco Rizi, is included this fantastic specimen of the National Library of Spain which, besides a suggestive use of the "Solomonic columns", includes details that we find in other creations made by the same artist for several churches in Madrid, as it is the illusionistic architecture painting on the dome of the Church San Antonio of the Germans in Madrid, or the details for the caryatids with baskets of fruit on their heads which we observe in a sketch for the Madrid Church of San Ginés.

- b. **The urban space** is focused on the analysis of the theatrical and performative aspects of the celebrations which had as a scenic frame the city in the 16th - 18th centuries. Not only does it study the sets used in the royal entries, processions, parades or ceremonies of diverse nature, and their relationship with the visual arts or architecture, but it also points to the confirmation of how certain festive events actually modified the urban network. On the other hand, connections are established between the image of the city displayed on the stages and certain contemporary urban projects.

As an example, the study presented last November of 20-16 in the *International Conference: Lost and transformed cities*, entitled: *Reconstructing the image of the ideal city in Renaissance painting and theatre: Its influence in specific urban environments. Digital technology and visual culture*. There, we approached the influence exerted by the image of the ideal city present in painting and on the stages of the Renaissance on certain urban environments, as we can also observe in this other reconstruction which shows how Tintoretto was strongly inspired by the Serlian stage to set the background of this and other similar paintings.

- c. **Hybridization of arts:** This line is a more generic space which frames the research around other cultural materials or aesthetic aspects, reflecting the exchanges or hybridizations with the performing arts.

For example, the role played by the military engineer in the design of spectacles and the resulting hybridization between theatrical performance and mechanical invention.

- d. **Virtual animation and reconstruction of the performance:**

This line is aimed to implement a visualization system that facilitates understanding of the artistic manifestations analysed. The virtual reconstruction of the festive polychromy or the virtual animation of the spectacle are part of it.

To conclude, let me show you the animation made by two members of the research team:

Andrea Sommer-Mathis and Rudi Risatti in the context of the *Spettacolo Barroco* exhibition, which took place in Vienna between March 2016 and January 2017. It is the equestrian ballet *La contesa dell'Aria e dell'Acqua*, one of the most

spectacular festivals of the imperial court of Vienna in the 17th century. The animation stemmed from the Festival Book written by Francesco Sbarra which includes a large number of prints: the longitudinal and transverse section of the courtyard, the triumphal carts, the formations of fake combat, twelve choreographic figures, etc. The printed score of the music of Johann Heinrich Schmelzer was also added.