

Scenic appropriation of representation systems from the past and its ideological dimension

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In 2013, when *mala voadora* – the theatre company I belong to – reached its 10th year of existence, I published a catalogue with a few sets and gave it the title *ways of doing nothing*. I'm more fond of manipulating things that already exist than designing new things from scratch. As an example, in 2012 I used the external image of a theatre to create the set for a play taking place inside that same theatre. In 2014, for *Hamlet*, I designed a set based on the image of the stage's proscenium, reproduced over and over in a progressively smaller scale, in the same way baroque scenographers used to do.

I was accused of plagiarism because of this set. It happened immediately after the play was presented at the *Theatre de la Cité Internationale* in Paris. I was accused of copying the set designed by Michael Levine in 2011 for a staging of the opera *Don Giovanni* at *La Scala*, in Milan. Since the accusation was anonymous, I made it public myself through social media, taking the opportunity to explain (as I had before, at the time of the play's premiere) that my design for *Hamlet* was indeed a copy, but of Český Krumlov castle's baroque theatre, in Czech Republic, from 1765/66.

Despite its insignificance, this episode made me think about the implications of *appropriation* of History in the context of artistic practice. History is not itself an unbiased practice. In the words of architecture historiographer Panayotis Tournikiotis, "stories are not innocent texts." And he's right. Even when methodology is rigorous and efforts are actually directed towards understanding *how things were seen from a particular historical context* (which has nothing to do with *how things from that particular context are seen today*), ultimately all we are able to cogitate falls within our present culture, our relationship with the world, our epistemology. Now, this may apply to the science we call "History", but in artistic practice the paradigm of "fidelity" is not even an issue. The past is a matter of invention.

Let's get back to *Hamlet* and *Don Giovanni's* sets. Not long ago, I became aware of the work of a family of scenographers – the *Galli da Bibiena* – and, more specifically, with the sets designed by *Giovanni Carlo Galli da Bibiena*, who worked in Lisbon. This is how I found a scenic design from the 18th Century that was closer to *Don Giovanni's* scenario than Český Krumlov castle's baroque theatre. I don't know

Michael Levine and I don't know what may have inspired him to design his beautiful *Don Giovanni* set but, when I found this Bibiena set, I was particularly interested in the difference between finite and infinite replication. The representation of a finite space and the representation of an infinite space are very different things, even more so in a historical context in which the possibility of an infinite space was not just a pictorial theme, but also a cosmogonic one.

Given this difference, my set for *Hamlet* would have little to do with Levine's set for *Don Giovanni*. But I don't see it that way. I look at the four sets and, despite this issue regarding their "content", I think the similarities between both the 18th Century designs or both the 21st Century designs are more relevant than whatever may establish transhistorical bridges. In the two contemporary sets, the same contrast between baroque illusionism and the current appearance of image stands out. Contemporary appropriation superimposes the evocation of a historical representation system – perspective. The sets simultaneously evoke and draw attention to the very act of evoking. They create a distance between them and the past they evoke. In this sense, these sets are not historical; they are *historiographical*. Although it may seem somewhat bizarre, because it's baroque sets we're addressing, I'd like to refer to Bertolt Brecht – the grand master of the "distancing effect" and historicisation in particular.

From the seven strategies for dramaturgical historicising Meg Mumford identifies in Brecht's theatre (2009), I would like to consider two:

- Showing the differences between the past and the present, highlighting the changes;
- Showing the Similarities between the past and the present, promoting change.

In both sets I have been making reference to, the past and the present are effectively placed in opposition. However, at this point in the argument it seems relevant to ask: if it's clear that the past we're referring to is baroque illusionism (or by induction, scenic illusionism in general), which present is it that is involved in such opposition? What are the contemporary traits of these sets?

In Brecht's shows, set design was used also as a means to produce a distancing effect. The sets created by Brecht's accomplice, Caspar Neher, were designed to not be believed: they were meant to act as visual notations of places and circumstances, but not to be verisimilar. In order to achieve this, it was common that figurative representations of places were limited to a restricted area of the stage,

around which there would be an empty space, similarly to a set in the middle of a photography or filming studio. No attempt was made to create the illusion that the stage "was" someplace else; the stage was understood as the stage on which reference to some other place was made, circumscribed to a limited area, without any intent of verisimilitude. This is the same approach adopted today by, for example, Philippe Quesne in *Western Caspar Friedrich* (2016). A set that is very similar in all aspects to the scenarios of the 19th Century (in fact, a replica of a Caspar David Friedrich painting) is assembled in only a portion of the stage.

In *Hamlet*, as in *Don Giovanni*, the distancing is not achieved that way. These two sets have other ways of departing from verisimilitude.

Firstly, repeating several times the proscenium arch of a theatre – of which there is only one in each theatre – is obviously an oddity in itself. But there's more. One other reason these sets are not believable is because there is a discrepancy between the baroque effect of replication (the evoked historical thing) and the contemporary appearance of the appropriation, which stems from the *expressive rhetoric* of image. Baroque replication resulted from the actual repetition of the manual representation procedures for each repeated element, producing a unitary and coherent image. Contemporary replication, on the other hand, starts off from a photograph and is inseparable from the computer-assisted manipulation of images, so common in our daily lives. Replication is achieved through the use of commands in a computer program. The resulting image implies, in its expression, the operating universe of copy/paste.

In line with the theme of this manipulation, I would like to show you another set I designed for *The Best Fastest Worst Saddest Longest Most Complex Hardest Funniest*, a play with a text by Tim Etchells that was staged in a collaboration between *Companhia Maior* and *mala voadora*. This time I did not use something that was already there and, instead, moved a room – the *Hall of Mirrors* – from its place in a Lisbon palace, to the stage. I used a photo of that room, not just as background and floor to the set, but also to camouflage the furniture needed for the show. In order to determine which part of the image should line every part of every piece of furniture, I built a model and established a point of view based on which I could fine-tune the overlay. I was in fact establishing the point of perspective of the "observer". A specific place in the theatre room would correspond to that point, a single place from which the perspectival illusion would be perfect, similarly to what happens with the "prince's seat" in Italian theatres. In this show, each day the "prince" was any

given person who unknowingly bought the ticket for that seat – something I felt was quite democratic.

In the final scene of the show, however, all the furniture had to be turned backwards to the audience – which posed a problem. What could be placed in a location for which there was no image? A white surface? A black surface? The solution involved a literal "absence of image" such as it is represented in Photoshop: with gray and white squares. The solution ended up being what was already there, but this time what was already in the software interface, or its *rhetoric*.

Again I use the word "rhetoric" because I feel it defines well the subject at hand. It is the rhetoric of image that distinguishes baroque sets from the recreations we now make of them, even when the perspectival construction involved is exactly the same. It is this rhetoric that produces a *specific* type of de-historicisation – specific to *its* historical time. If the theatre scene never ceased to be an image and, as an image, it is still largely determined by the "window" device invented in the Renaissance, it seems only natural that this image is confronted with the production of images of our time – images we also see through windows which we call "monitors". Now, one of the most striking features of these images is the immediacy with which they can be manipulated, through such basic commands as *copy* and *paste*.

If I am about to conclude regarding the centrality of the rhetoric of image in the contemporary appropriation of perspectival illusion, it must be asked why I chose the adjective "ideological" for the title of this short essay. The adjective suggests the existence of an *ideological* value in the *rhetoric* of images. And those are exactly my thoughts. That which becomes apparent from the confrontation with historical time is a major change in the image production system – a change with implications that are, first and foremost, of a *labour* scope. Production of images as *work* changed; that which is actually done has changed. Instead of painting, you take and print pictures. Instead of repeating the representation of a same form, you use copy/paste. You don't make physical effort, you click. You don't create an image from scratch, you decide what to do with images. Work consists in deciding, rather than manufacturing. Image production shifted from the scope of physical action to an *administrative* scope.

Moreover, since these procedures are apparent in the images resulting from them, we are also talking about a particular *visual culture*. Images are perceived in light of the editing work they involve, and as this editing changes, so does our form of

relating to them. There is a specific knowledge necessary in order for us to relate to their reading – something which ultimately falls within the scope of the *epistemological*.

Finally, I will show you one last set that resulted from my collaboration with *Teatro Praga*, another Portuguese theatre company. Here, verisimilitude is compromised from the start due to the adoption of an orthogonal system of representation – a system that is foreign to the scenic context. This is a representation system that does not take a point of view into account. What I did was disguise a beach shed as a roman temple. Once again, the image editing was performed in Photoshop. And it lies. The temple is a convenient blend of two temples: the Temple of Portunus in Rome and the *Maison Carée* in Nimes. The fact that the image is a photo may bring it closer to verisimilitude than if I had chosen, for example, to use a drawing, as did Franco Raggi in his *Red Tent of Architecture* (1975). But all this is rhetoric. Raggi seems to use image to make a reference to the origins of the classical language of architecture, which dates back to construction with wood. I just limited myself to using the *photoshopic* cheating through which the world is permanently shown to us.

Mumford, M. (2009). *Bertolt Brecht*. London/New York: Routledge.

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