Beyond the Music: The Contemporary Operatic Scenography of Robert Wilson, Achim Freyer and Karl-Ernst Herrmann

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ABSTRACT

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Contemporary operatic scenography has been undergoing broad aesthetic, theatrical and technological transformations. My dissertation analyzes the work of three key designer-directors—Robert Wilson, Achim Freyer, and Karl-Ernst Herrmann—in order to investigate the changing relationship between the visual and the theatrical in contemporary opera, as well as opera’s place within current trends in theatrical design and broader visual culture. Combining an analysis of current productions with wide-ranging archival research, I reconstruct and explore these artists’ individual stylistic development and their mutual influence. Through this focus on the hybrid figure of the contemporary designer-director, I address two key historical changes in operatic culture: first, the greatly increased importance of scenography and visuality in global opera and second, the emergence of new scenographic idioms, which have rapidly displaced the dominance of historicist and realist conventions in staging. Throughout, I show how Wilson, Freyer, and Herrmann’s work has been central to the development of a “new international style” in operatic scenography. Combining close visual analysis with historical contextualization, I examine how this style—characterized by abstraction, rich colors, striking lighting and radical theatrical effects—has transformed the look of opera, while also framing these developments within the longer history of modernist scenography, and the long-standing tensions between stylistic innovation and aesthetic traditionalism.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOTE ON TITLES, NAMES, AND USE OF TRANSLATION</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEDICATION PAGE</td>
<td>xiv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>INTRODUCTION</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOWARDS A NEW OPERATIC VISUALITY</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ONE</strong></td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEW SCENOGRAPHY FOR OPERA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TWO</strong></td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LISTENING TO THE IMAGES: ROBERT WILSON’S WORK FOR OPERA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>THREE</strong></td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE COOL BEAUTY: KARL-ERNST HERRMANN’S OPERATIC SCENOGRAPHY</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>FOUR</strong></td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE DISRUPTION OF ORDER: ACHIM FREYER’S SCENOGRAPHY FOR OPERA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CONCLUSION</strong></td>
<td>286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BIBLIOGRAPHY</strong></td>
<td>301</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

1.1. Alfred Roller’s design for Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, Act I, scene 4, at the Hofoper in Vienna in 1905. The multifunctional towers remained on both sides of the stage throughout the performance, becoming thus the first modern, functional unit set.

1.2. Vladimir Tatlin, “Sketch for Glinka’s Opera *A Life for the Tsar*,” 1913. Tatlin’s design combined both folk motifs and abstract forms.

1.3. Robert Edmond Jones, “The Fountain,” 1921. Design for Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Act IV, scene 3. The curvilinear and volumetric forms suggest arches without extraneous ornamentation, only their organic shape can be seen as decorative.

1.4. Viktor Vasnetsov, “Stage Design for Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov’s Opera *The Snow Maiden*,” 1883. Originally created for Alexander Ostrovsky’s play in Abramtsevo during the winter 1882-83. The opera—intended as the first Slavic example of Gesamtkunstwerk and visually departing from dominant realistic conventions—premiered in Moscow on October 8, 1885. For Act II, Vasnetsov designed Tsar’s Berendey’s wooden palace as both monumental and pan-aesthetic architecture, ornamental and neo-nationalistic.

1.5. Alexandr Golovin, “In the Kremlin,” 1908. Scene from Mussorgsky’s opera *Boris Godunov* in Paris in 1908. From the very beginning Diaghilev intended to use the Coronation scene as an opportunity for a lavish spectacle, which Golovin entirely delivered.

1.6. Nicholas Roerich, “*Prince Igor*: Set Design,” 1909. The production was emphatically oriental and ornamental, stunning the Parisian audience.

1.7. Cast of “Polovtsian Dances” in Act II from *Prince Igor*, with choreography by Michel Fokine, in Monte Carlo in 1923. Here we can see how Roerich’s design was actually executed in a three-dimensional space.


1.9. Ewald Dülberg’s set model for Stravinsky’s *Oedipus Rex* at the Krolloper in Berlin, 1928. Austere rectilinear forms are softened with the warm yellow color of the building’s walls, creating striking contrasts between light and shadow. It was an unusual setting even for Arnold Schönberg.

1.10. Giorgio de Chirico, curtain for Krenek’s *Leben des Orest* at the Krolloper in Berlin in 1930. As in his design for Diaghilev’s *Le Bal* (1929), in this piece de
Chirico extended his interrogation of classicism to the opera. This later work is frequently overlooked in accounts of his work.


1.14. Wieland Wagner’s second staging of Tristan und Isolde at the Bayreuther Festspiele in 1962. For this classical Oedipal drama, each act had a different monolithic sculpture, a symbolic totem of the destructive force of love. Here for Act I, Wieland placed a gigantic stylized ship’s prow at the back of the stage.

1.15. Filippo Sanjust’s production of Donizetti’s Lucia di Lammermoor at the Deutsche Oper Berlin in 1980. The design recreates traditional romantic scenic design with painted backdrops, wings, borders, and only a couple of pieces of furniture.

1.16. Verdi’s La bohème, Act III, Metropolitan Opera in New York, 1981, directed and sets by Franco Zeffirelli, costumes by Peter J. Hall. Zeffirelli’s three-leveled set shows the crowds at the Latin Quartet with its infamous Café Momus. The curtain-rise for this set still evokes a round of applause.

1.17. Ming Cho Lee’s set for Act I, scene 1 of Bellini’s I puritani at the Metropolitan Opera, 1976. Lee created sets with basic units that recreated romantic landscape; these decorations were ideal for operagoers.


1.20. Ezio Frigerio’s set for Giorgio Sterhler’s production of Simon Boccanegra at La Scala in Milan in 1971. In Act I he employed a floating boat as the iconic image upstage center.

1.21. Andreas Reinhardt’s set for Ruth Berghaus’ production of Rossini’s Il barbiere di Siviglia at the Bayerische Staatsoper, Munich in 1974. The scandalous iconographic image became conceptually central to the staging itself, allowing the image to direct the interpretation.
1.22. Schönberg’s *Erwartung* at the Staatsoper Unten den Linden in Berlin in 1997, directed and designed by Robert Wilson, costumes by Frida Parmeggiani. A striking image, very simple and minimal, but designed down to the last detail.


2.2. Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly*, Opéra national de Paris, 1992, directed and sets by Robert Wilson, costumes by Frida Parmeggiani. With the exception of *Einstein on the Beach*, this production of Puccini’s opera is perhaps Wilson’s most traveled work: originating in Paris, it was also staged in Bologna (1996), Hamamatsu (1999), Venice (2001), Los Angeles (2008), and Moscow (2009).

2.3. Charpentier’s *Médée* at Opéra de Lyon in 1984, directed and designed by Robert Wilson, costumes by Franca Squarciapino. Instead of the traditional prelude, Wilson inserted an episode from his *CIVILwarS* depicting General Lee on his charger, Traveller.

2.4. *Médée*. Two contemporary women picnicking downstage while the tragedy takes place in the background.

2.5. Gianni Versace’s dress for Salome-Alice, silk organza, satin and tulle, 1987. A fashionable version, in off-white with a contrasting edge in black silk (with Roberto Capucci’s box sleeves), of a dress worn by Alice Pleasance Liddell, the inspiration for Lewis Carroll’s original.

2.6. Strauss’ *Salome*, Dance of Seven Veils, at La Scala, Milan in 1987, directed and designed by Robert Wilson, sets by Wilson and Giorgio Cristini, costumes by Gianni Versace. A visually abstract version of the opera’s notorious scene with angel and devil. Movement here was limited to the bare minimum.

2.7. *Salome*, 1987. The set co-designed by Giorgio Cristini included: a platform for the singers on the left, two hamami (one across and the second extended over the orchestra pit), a scrim with Wilson’s expressive drawings, and mobile rock formations.

2.8. Gluck’s *Alceste* at the Théâtre Châtelet in Paris in 1999, directed and designed by Robert Wilson, costumes by Frida Parmeggiani. This is a revised version of Stuttgart production from 1986. Here: the curtain-down overture with abstract projections and mimed action by Alceste’s double.
2.9. *Alceste*, 1999. Scene in the temple after the Oracle—perched on the ladder at the top of the altar—announces Admeté’s fate, while the offerings—the glass panels reflecting the light—to the god hang above.


2.12. Wagner’s *Lohengrin* at the Opernhaus Zürich in 1991, directed and designed by Robert Wilson, costumes by Susanne Raschig.


2.14. Piombino Apollo. Greek bronze statuette (115 cm high) of a disputed origin and dating. Ex-voto dedicated to Athena, but it stands in a pose typical of kouroi.


3.1. Mozart’s *La clemenza di Tito* at the Salzburger Festspiele in 1992, directed by Ursel and Karl-Ernst Herrmann, designed by Karl-Ernst Herrmann. This controversial but ultimately triumphant production combined simple white cubic space with fashionable costumes.

3.2. Verdi’s *La traviata*, directed by Ursel and Karl-Ernst Herrmann, designed by Karl-Ernst Herrmann. Originally produced for La Monnaie, Brussels in 1987. The visual and spatial *horror vacui* corresponds to Violetta’s emotional states.

3.3. Mozart’s *Così fan tutte* at the Salzburger Festspiele in 2006, directed by Ursel and Karl-Ernst Herrmann, designed by Karl-Ernst Herrmann. The controversial positioning of continuo player on the stage caused the conductor’s withdrawal from the production.

3.4. Gluck’s *Orfeo ed Eurydice* at Halles de Schaerbeek in Brussels in 1988, directed by Ursel and Karl-Ernst Herrmann, designed by Karl-Ernst Herrmann. A site-specific production with Cynthia Haymon as Amor ascending on the wires.

3.5. Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* at La Monnaie in 1984, directed by Ursel and Karl-Ernst Herrmann, designed by Karl-Ernst Herrmann. Simple spatial solutions combined with illusionistically painted backdrops.

3.7. Handel’s *Giulio Cesare in Egitto* at La Monnaie, Brussels, in 2008, directed by Ursel and Karl-Ernst Herrmann, designed by Karl-Ernst Herrmann. For Egypt Herrmann designed a stylized and kinetic landscape with paper reeds. Notice also how the catwalks extend over the orchestra pit.

3.8. Mozart’s *Così fan tutte* at the Salzburger Festspiele in 2006, directed by Ursel and Karl-Ernst Herrmann, designed by Karl-Ernst Herrmann. Vertical panorama with green forest and stone egg.

3.9. *Così*. The green landscape subsumed the entire stage.

3.10. Mozart’s *La clemenza di Tito* at the Opéra national de Paris in 2005, directed by Ursel and Karl-Ernst Herrmann, designed by Karl-Ernst Herrmann. Typically intense imagery: the throne as a funeral stall, Tito in a mask, Berenice pulled across the stage into a golden niche in the monolithic rock, and torn fresh flowers on the floor, all suffused in blue light that transforms the otherwise aseptic white space.

3.11. *Clemenza di Tito*, a scene from Act I, at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, directed and designed by Jean-Pierre Ponnelle in 1984. Stylized essence of antiquity signified by decay of monumental architecture with neutral central concave semi-circular play area and eighteenth-century costumes.

3.12. *Clemenza di Tito* at La Monnaie, Brussels, directed and designed by Karl-Ernst Herrmann in 1982. An opened set for the chorus scene with the painted backdrop and Constantine’s Hand on a pedestal.


3.16. Salzburg *Clemenza*. Notice Herrmann’s set, now made even simpler, without architectural detail.

3.17. Herrmann’s new design for Tito’s costume.

3.18. Mozart’s *Idomeneo* at the Salzburger Festspiele in 2000, directed by Ursel and Karl-Ernst Herrmann, designed by Karl-Ernst Herrmann. Ultra-modern set of two distinct spaces and symbolic imagery: the beaches of Crete are engulfed by a monstrous oil spill.

3.20. *Idomeneo*. The eclipse of the sun with Elettra walking away.

3.21. *Idomeneo*. Notice the yellow-black costumes of the “new” Cretans as well as the dramatic lighting, also designed by Herrmann.

3.22. Herrmann’s fashionable costume for Elettra, featured in Nestlé advertising.


3.25. Prague *Giardiniera*. The coup de theater remained the same: the swaying of the trees during the tempest.

4.1. Weber’s *Der Freischütz* at the Staatsoper Stuttgart, directed and designed by Achim Freyer in 1980.

4.2. Wagner’s *Walküre* at the Los Angeles Opera in 2010, directed and designed by Achim Freyer, costumes co-designed with Amanda Freyer. Any discussion of its aesthetic qualities has been overshadowed by economics, as a multitude of headlines announced its $32 million budget.

4.3. Verdi’s *La traviata* at the National Theater Mannheim in 2008, directed and sets by Achim Freyer, costumes by Amanda Freyer. A strikingly Wilsonian production.

4.4. Verdi’s *Messa da Requiem* at the Deutsche Oper Berlin in 2003, directed and designed by Achim Freyer. This non-operatic work received a striking visual transposition of metaphorical imagery.

4.5. Strauss’ *Salome* at the Deutsche Oper in Berlin in 2003, directed and designed by Achim Freyer. All of the singers are performing the Dance of Seven Veils, which has nothing to do with a typically seductive performance of the lead singer.

4.6. *Salome*. Freyer symbolically transformed Salome’s necrophiliac desire into pathological consumerist desire, without attempting to shock the audience with realistic violence on stage. Susan Anthony as Salome.

4.8. *Freischütz*. The *Wolfsschlucht* scene with grotesque figures of debasement and deformity, monstrosity and licentiousness.


4.10. Mozart’s *Zauberflöte* at the Hamburgische Staatsoper, directed and designed by Achim Freyer in 1982. Papageno eats a large plate of spaghetti with beer. Notice also the head of a prompter with the score – visible to the audience, incorporated into production and dressed accordingly.

4.11. Zemlinsky’s *Die Zauberflöte für 20 Finger* at the Nationaltheater Mannheim Oper, 2005. Zemlinsky’s short version, in combination with the clownish characters made this production a perfect vehicle for a very young audience.

4.12. Tchaikovsky’s *Eugene Onegin* at the Berliner Staatsoper in 2008, directed, sets and lighting by Achim Freyer, costumes by Lena Lukjanova and Amanda Freyer. The singers and the members of the Freyer Ensemble perform complex choreography during Act I.


4.14. *Onegin*. Freyer here designed a simple white picture frame placed upstage of the apron, creating a mini-trust stage. Shortly after posing for the “wedding photo” during the duel between Onegin and Lensky; Tatyana still wears the white veil. The stage is suffused in red light unmistakably symbolizing Lensky’s death.


4.18. Glass/Wilson’s *Einstein on the Beach* at the Württembergische Staatstheater in Stuttgart in 1988, directed and designed by Achim Freyer. Freyer combined a formalist aesthetic with grotesque characters which are a surprise addition to Glass’s minimalist opera.


4.20. *Einstein*. The Table of the Pioneers of the Twentieth Century.

4.21. Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte* at the Semper Oper in Dresden, directed and designed by Achim Freyer. Originally staged at the Schwetzinger Festspiele in 2002. A boldly foreshortened perspective is both a comic and an angst-inducing device.
4.22. Bach’s *Mass B-minor* at the Schwetzinger Festspiele in 1996, directed and designed by Achim Freyer. For a performative version of the Latin mass, Freyer combined perspectival order and cubic space populated by the members of his Ensemble.


4.24. Hans Vredeman de Vries’ perspective drawing of a stairwell in his treatise on perspective.

4.25. Sciarrino’s *Macbeth*. A stunning theatrical move—Freyer uses wires and winches to have his singers perform horizontally.

5.1. Glass/Wilson’s *Einstein on the Beach*, directed and designed by Robert Wilson, originally premiered at the Festival d’Avignon, France in 1976. Wilson’s *coup de théâtre* for the penultimate scene of the opera: a single bar of light is lifted off the floor at a glacial pace until it disappears into the void.

5.2. Verdi’s *Macbeth* at La Scala in Milan in 1997, directed by Graham Vick, designed by Maria Björnson. The abstract geometry of design and colors was supplemented by stylized and fashionable costumes.

5.3. Strauss’ *Elektra* at the Bayerische Staatsoper in Munich in 1997, directed and designed by Herbert Wernicke.

5.4. Humberdinck’s *Hänsel und Gretel* at the Komische Oper in Berlin in 2013, directed and designed by Reinhard von der Thannen.

5.5. Tchaikovsky’s *Eugene Onegin* at the Staatsoper Unten den Linden in Berlin, 2008, directed, sets and lighting by Achim Freyer, costumes by Lena Lukjanova and Amanda Freyer. Clownish grotesque meets cool beauty.

5.6. Handel’s *Tamerlano*, directed by Graham Vick, designed by Richard Hudson. The design—which won awards at PQ ’03—was heavily criticized by music critics.

5.7. Borodin’s *Prince Igor* at the Metropolitan Opera, 2014, directed and sets by Dmitri Tcherniakov, costume by Elena Zaitseva, choreography by Itzik Galili, projections by S. Katy Tucker. Ildar Abdrazakov in the title role during the Polovtsian dance scene. With this boldly designed poppy field Tcherniakov eliminated the exotic and folkloric references typical for this opera.
Above all, I am profoundly indebted to my dissertation advisor, Arnold Aronson. This is first of all for inspiration from his thoughts on scenography and theatre, in both verbal and written form. This dissertation would have not come to germination if he had not suggested, even before I came to study at Columbia University, looking up George Tsypin and Robert Israel. This was only the beginning of his enormously valuable advice. I benefited throughout the long history of this project from his learning, and from his patience, support and guidance. I am also very grateful to Julie Peters, for her unfailing encouragement and great faith in this project, as well as to Martin Puchner, who gave support in its early stages. Thanks also to the other members of the committee: Professors Bill Worthen, Lydia Goehr, and Noam Elcott.

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This investigation of contemporary operatic scenography has combined archival research with direct performance analysis. I could not have been able to develop it without great assistance from the opera houses and archives. I am grateful for help in locating materials and documents to Johannes Ehmann from the Staatsoper Unter den Linden in Berlin, Helen Hosefelder and Anne-Kathrin Peitz from the Staatsoper Stuttgart, Barbara Neumann and Bettina Bermbach from the Hamburgische Staatsoper, Jan Van Goethem, Katrien Dobbelaere, and Frederic Delmotte from La Monnaine, Brussels, Moritz Weisskopf from Theater Basel, Anastasie Tsangary-Payen from Opéra de Lyon, Barbara Hingsamer from the Bregenzer Festspiele, Dr. Gerald Köhler, Christine Werner, and Verena Schmidt from the theatrical archives at the Schloss Wahn in Cologne, Mag. Franziska-M. Lettowsky from the Salzburger Festspiele Archiv, Susanne Lutz from the Bayerische Staatsoper in Munich, Dr. Jochen Zulauf from Nationaltheater Mannheim and Felix Schnieder-Henninger from the Deutsche Oper Berlin, Kathrin Brunner from the Opernhaus Zürich. Last but not the least I had invaluable help from Clifford Allen, the archivist from the Byrd Hoffman Water Mill Foundation, and John Pennino from the Metropolitan Opera Archives in New York.
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Without Brian Hanrahan’s help not a single word would exist on these pages, a great help, which I truly appreciate. Special thanks are also due to Jana and Seth Rogoff in Berlin, for being more than friends, for their enthusiasm, support, and love. And from the bottom of my heart, Amra, thank you for tolerating me and for being there for me always, though so far away!

To my mom and my brother for enduring me in the past years and for their unstinting help with raising my daughter Matylda, who has been my source of happiness.
A NOTE ON THE USE OF TITLES AND TRANSLATIONS

Throughout the dissertation, I have used original titles and thus followed the grammatical rules of a given language (e.g. retaining lower case). However, often after a first use I omit articles; for example La traviata becomes Traviata, La finta giardiniera becomes Giardiniera (not Finta to avoid confusion with La finta semplice), or Der Freischütz just Freischütz. With Slavic operas, I use only English titles.

Similarly, for names I have generally used use the standard English transliteration, so for example, Meyerhold rather than the various alternatives: “Meierkhol’d,” or “Mejerchol’d.” Occasionally I have used a version that is more popular, even if it is not properly transliterated. Therefore, unlike the Metropolitan Opera, I refer to Meyerhold’s longest collaborator as Aleksandr Golovin, not Alexander Golovine, and to the designer of the sets for Borodin’s Prince Igor as Nicholas Roerich (not Nikolai Rerikh).

All translations are mine unless otherwise noted. The original text appears in the footnotes.
To My Mother

and to the Memory of My Father
INTRODUCTION

TOWARDS A NEW OPERATIC VISUALITY

“Theatre must be alive at every instant.”
Tyrone Guthrie

When Peter Brook wrote *The Empty Space* in 1968, he consigned opera to the category of “deadly theatre.” Opera, for Brook, is an example of theatre that stifles innovation:

Opera is a nightmare of vast feuds over tiny details; of surrealist anecdotes that all turn round the same assertion: nothing needs to change. Everything in opera must change, but in opera change is blocked.2

When Brook wrote these words in 1968, he was still deeply wounded after his two theatrically innovative, unconventional productions at the Royal Opera House in London caused uproar among critics and audience members at the end of 1940s. The outcry was so vociferous that both stagings—*Boris Godunov* designed by film designer Georges Wakhévitch (1948) and *Salome* with Salvador Dalí’s sets and costumes (1949)—were instantly taken out of the repertoire.

However, despite Brook’s pessimistic proclamation, and seen from the point of view of the present, far-reaching changes have occurred in staging opera in the last decades, a time in which demanding reinterpretations of operatic works with a radically new visuality have appeared. At first fairly gradual, this process has quickened since the turn of the millennium, and its impact can now be felt in most of the world’s leading opera houses. Nevertheless, Brook’s statement captures accurately the cultural and


institutional dynamics of the operatic world, which has—even now—deep-rooted tendencies towards stasis, conservatism, traditionalism, and the picturesque. The coexistence of these contradictory forces—opera’s movement towards new forms of visuality and its deep conservatism—can be clearly seen above all in operatic scenography.

**Reaction and renewal**

Because of opera’s institutional, economic, social, and artistic conditions—and unlike the majority of theatrical design—operatic scenography is a thoroughly spectacular art form. From its inception, opera took pride in fostering visual delight and wonder. This visual delight has in part been an architectural phenomenon: the opera house is itself a kind of spectacular phenomenon, designed to thrill those permitted to inhabit it momentarily and gaze on themselves within it. But operatic spectacle also, crucially, includes the stage: the theatrical space, in which the design forms the ground, the backdrop and the frame for the music and dramatic action that unfolds in operatic performance. Historically, operatic designers have chosen to create elaborate scenery that would impress spectators with splendor, attention to detail, and technical wonders. For centuries, grandeur and magnificence, luxury and opulence, lavishness and extravagance, delight and wonder, pleasure and enchantment, awe and surprise have continued to be key elements in staging operas. This centrality of the spectacular is highlighted by a simple and yet striking phenomenon, known to any regular attender of operas: like a brilliantly performed aria, magnificent stage design frequently elicits ovations from the

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3 On the hybridity of the opera as art form see Paul Thom, “Aesthetics of Opera,” *Philosophy Compass* 6, no. 9 (September 2011): 575-584.
audience, even many years after the premiere of the production.\textsuperscript{4} For decades, thus, audiences at the Metropolitan Opera have greeted Franco Zeffirelli’s opulent sets for \textit{La bohème} (1981) and \textit{Turandot} (1987) with applause. Likewise, the settings created more recently by Douglas W. Schmidt for \textit{Il trittico}, directed by Jack O’Brien (2007), have been showered—at curtain up—with vigorous audience approval.

While particularly striking and popular, Zeffirelli’s and Schmidt’s designs followed what was long the house design style of the Metropolitan Opera, and what has been in fact more or less the dominant design paradigm of operatic scenography for the last century or so: a kind of late nineteenth-century pictorial realism, combining illusionist architectural and landscape painting techniques with three-dimensional elements and a high degree of attention to detail. Such physically concrete settings provide the spectators with a picture at once vaguely realistic but also larger-than-life, and thus tinged with the sense of an idyllic dream world.\textsuperscript{5} They are seductive displays, which—as evidenced in the applause mentioned above—delight audiences, who appreciate both the designer’s technical skill and the art of illusion.\textsuperscript{6} But the prominence and palpability of these designs tend to be focused on that moment of first appearance: once applauded and accepted, these settings settle into a half-perceived background, albeit an attractive one. In this paradigm, all applause notwithstanding, scenography is demoted to a fundamentally docile function of providing a milieu for the action.

\textsuperscript{4} Such reverence for stage design also occurs in staging of musicals, including \textit{Les Misérables}, \textit{The Phantom of the Opera}, or \textit{Man of La Mancha}.

\textsuperscript{5} Denis Bablet made a similar argument about the success of Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, which provided “the spectator with a momentary escape from his civilization,” while presenting “vast, dreamy visions of distant or unknown worlds…with richness and sumptuosit.y.” Denis Bablet, \textit{Revolutions in Stage Design of the 20th Century} (Paris, New York: Leon Amiel, 1977), 35.

One other key aspect of this operatic visuality, crucial in the long-entrenched position of pictorial realism as a prevailing scenographic idiom, is quite simply the longevity of stage design for opera. Operatic scenography has a life span that is unparalleled in the theatre world. In theatre, as Brook argued in *The Empty Space*, design for a theatrical production must remain ephemeral:

...about five years...is the most a particular staging can live. It is not only the hairstyles, costumes and make-ups that look dated. All the different elements of staging—the shorthands of behavior that stand for certain emotions; gestures, gesticulations and tones of voice—are all fluctuating on an invisible stock exchange all the time. Life is moving, influences are playing on actor and audience and other plays, other arts, the cinema, television, current events, join in the constant rewriting of history and the amending of the daily truth.\(^7\)

But opera does not have the same kind of stock exchange dynamic that Brook prescribes for theatre: frequently, once an operatic production becomes successful among audiences, it remains in the house’s repertoire for decades to come. Even today, whether at large repertory houses such as the Bolshoi in Moscow, the Wiener Staatsoper in Vienna, the Bayerische Staatsoper in Munich, and the Metropolitan Opera, or at smaller houses like the Hamburgische Staatsoper or the Stuttgart Oper, the spectator can regularly see designs created twenty or even thirty years ago (in some cases older still).\(^8\)

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\(^7\) Brook, *Empty Space*, 16.

Of course, this is not to completely dismiss the old: as David Levin correctly observes, “Productions that look new are not necessarily strong; conversely, a traditional-looking production is not necessarily reactionary.”9 If we go beyond single productions, and grasp the historical contours of opera’s visual culture, then it is fair to say that for many decades mainstream opera houses have doggedly championed conventions of historicism and quasi-realism, promoting passive spectatorship.

Nevertheless, this is not the only story. As well as this stagnating conservatism, there have long been more radical visual tendencies at work in opera too. Opera, as a form, has cyclically undergone avant-garde challenges and re-appropriations. Since the nineteenth century, in a variety of ways—which I discuss in considerable detail in Chapter One—modernist operatic scenography has sought to renew the medium’s visuality. This desire has—as Brook’s quote suggests—often led to tension and even uproar. Probably nowhere else can a visual interpretation excite such strong emotional responses as it does when operatic productions radically diverge from entrenched notions of verisimilitude and decorative historicism of operatic orthodoxy.10 Whether *Der

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9 David J. Levin, “Reading a Staging/Staging a Reading,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 9, no. 1 (March 1997): 52. One of the most notable exceptions to this rule in the theatre is a timeless staging of Carlo Goldoni’s *Harlequin, Servant of Two Masters*, directed by Giorgio Strehler with sets and costumes by Ezio Frigerio and its operatic equivalent: Rossini’s *La barbier de Seviglia* directed by Ruth Berghaus with Achim Freyer’s sets and costumes (1968, Berliner Staatsoper).

10 The management of the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg has found an attractive alternative for its spectators: it offers both traditional and ultra-modern interpretations. For example, an old-fashioned *Boris Godunov* (dir. Andrei Tarkovsky, des. Nikolai Dvigubsky), originally from 1983 at the Royal Opera House in London, is offered simultaneously with a contemporary reading of Mussorgsky’s opera (dir. Graham Vick, des. Stuart Nunn) from 2012. Similar options are for *Eugene Onegin* (1982 and 2014), *Aida* (1998 and 2011), and *War and Peace* (2000 and 2014). Nevertheless, the Mariinsky exceeds in the revivals of historical scenographies for Russian operas—such as Glinka’s *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, Tchaikovsky’s *Mazepa*, Borodin’s *Prince Igor*, Rimsky-Korsakov’s *The Tale of Tsar Sultan*, *Sadko*, and *The Maid of Pskov*—that received canonical designs either in 1900s, 1920s or 1950s.
fliegende Holländer at the Krolloper in Berlin in the 1920s, Salome at the Covent Garden in London in the 1940s, Der Ring des Nibelungen at Bayreuth in the 1970s, Le nozze di Figaro at the PepsiCo SummerFare in the 1980s, or Lohengrin at the Metropolitan Opera in the 1990s, productions that openly transgress the conventionalized norms of operatic staging have often been excoriated as artistic vandalism or even cultural terrorism.\(^\text{11}\)

Today we are seeing a new renewal and contestation of older visual models, but it is not clear that this change represents a contestatory avant-gardism in the historical form. As I argue throughout this dissertation, scenography is changing the very nature of contemporary opera, altering the relation of music to staging, singers to stage, designers to directors, and stage to audience. Without reducing a complex and multifaceted development simply to the aesthetic choices of a select few agents, it is nonetheless possible to identify leading figures in this aesthetic movement. Vital names include here Richard Peduzzi, Stefanos Lazaridis, Richard Hudson, Achim Freyer, Karl-Ernst Herrmann, Robert Wilson, Axel Manthey, Georg Tsypin, Paul Steinberg, and Dmitri Tcheniakov, all of whom have become central to the new operatic scenography. The Regieoper movement, which parallels and is oriented in large part around the primacy of a new operatic scenography, has aimed to rehabilitate works, which traditional productions had turned into over-familiarized and clichéd stagings or which had become politically dubious, like Wagner’s œuvre.\(^\text{12}\) These two trends in directing and


\(^{12}\) Regieoper or Regietheater in opera is commonly translated into English as “director’s theatre.” As Peter Boenisch argues, the English translation is inadequate since this is not Regisseurstheater, more accurately it should be translated as “theatre of direction.” Rather Regietheater rests on the concept of mise-en-scène
Beyond the music

My dissertation concentrates on contemporary operatic scenography. It is not a survey of modern opera or any kind of a comprehensive account. Rather, it focuses on a specific strand of operatic scenography that features uncluttered designs and leans towards simplicity and abstraction. For the purposes of this dissertation, which predominantly emphasizes the aesthetics of operatic productions, scenography is defined as “an art of time, motion, action, and space.”¹³ This definition clearly delineates the essentials of scenography and concentrates on the artistic and aesthetic elements of staging. Since the spatiality of this art—“creation of the stage space”¹⁴—is its quintessential component, I focus chiefly on the aesthetics of theatrical space, supplementing it with analysis of costume, light, gesture and movement. I demonstrate how operatic scenography evolves from being “merely décor,” a supplemental or ancillary aspect of the operatic spectacle, to becoming a central creative nexus of the operatic work, a defining factor for individual productions and for opera as a whole.


To do so, I analyze above all the operatic oeuvre of three renowned designer-directors: Achim Freyer (1934-), Karl-Ernst Herrmann (1936-), and Robert Wilson (1941-), whose names have become synonyms for a new aesthetic in the last thirty years. For them, scenography is no longer simply a matter of props and costumes but a central part of the operatic stage-work. Collectively, their work represents the interrelation of developments in theatrical design, high fashion, contemporary visual design, popular culture, and technology. Among contemporary operatic designers and directors, all three have most clearly and consistently traversed the border between designing and directorial work, combining the two roles in very significant ways.

In addition to the functional aspect of combining the roles of designer and director, Freyer, Herrmann and Wilson also have an overarching stylistic coherence, which justifies considering them together. This coherence does not amount to one shared visual vocabulary but rather encompasses a number of key aspects. First, they break with the traditionalist décor understood as conventional theatrical illusionism, i.e., representational, illustrative, detail-oriented, historic, and opulent sets, which closely follow stage directions. Second, they take another step further away from the presentational form of either evocative, fragmented, or structural stage designs, which traditionally have been based on a metaphorical or a symbolic interpretation of the opera. Third, they favor rigorously austere, spacious sets saturated with strongly defined and dramatically distinctive lighting. In this way, they continue the modernist tradition, dating from Appia onwards, of abstract space defined by light instead of fabricated scenery. Fourth, they endow the stage with new aesthetics. Elements of these aesthetics include a re-theatricalized space created according to their vivid artistic vision, an emphasis on the
expressive value of colors and contrasting hues, juxtaposition of shadows and light, use of color-coded imagery and abstracted, geometrical props, and a preference for simple architectonic structures of the stage, often with a raked floor that furthers stylized movements.

The three director-designers are also closely connected by the concept of the “Theatre of Images” or Bildtheater, a richly imagistic notion of the theatre, which was very influential in the 1970s and 1980s. Although the term has limitations, nonetheless it parallels the collapse of the hegemony of the text in the theatre and signals broader developments in visual culture: the paradigm shift that W.J.T. Mitchell called “pictorial turn,” which relinquishes the duality of image and text and recognizes the powerful presence of visuality in a world saturated by images. Now visual imagery in operatic staging turns out to be more than just an entertaining factor, it becomes a communicative tool, in which the pictorial interpretation depends on the spectator’s aptitude. As these three designer-directors continue to insist throughout their careers, the images are put on stage for the audience to decode them. They famously refuse to give a dominant interpretation, if not any interpretation at all, purposefully making their images incongruous and ambiguous. The spectator must complete the work. This emphasis on the spectator’s involvement marks another stage of maintaining an active audience, which

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15 I address this issue in Chapter 2.


17 See Klaus Sach-Hombach, Das Bild als kommunikatives Medium: Elemente einer allgemeinen Bildwissenschaft (Köln: Halem, 2005).
is no longer only involved in the image interpretation, but also in the production of the images.

The emphasis on visuality in the productions of Freyer, Herrmann and Wilson became a key feature in their work on both sides of the Atlantic, which is symptomatic for the age of globalized opera. With their productions appearing on stages from Los Angeles to Moscow, they closely interlace this field with a new visuality that violates previously preferred perceptual models of experiencing the opera. While the opera houses in German-speaking countries have been hiring avant-garde directors and designers for decades, the recent presence of these three designer-directors in other countries around the globe may suggest that their neo-avant-garde aesthetics have been appropriated into the legitimate operatic mainstream and thus fully institutionalized, becoming synonymous with the new culture of fashionable consumption and/or the death of the avant-garde.18

Operatic transgressions

Freyer, Herrmann and Wilson all have strong ties with a slightly different theatrical phenomenon: Regietheater, which has come to stand for a director’s highly conceptual interpretative vision that significantly and often provocatively diverges from the original text.19 It is an approach that profoundly changed the German-speaking theatre

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19 Yale theatre scholar A.M. Nagler wrote the first survey of such stagings diverging from the score and libretto in his book Misdirection (1980), which focuses on problematic productions of ten canonical operas, going back to the Mahler/Roller productions at the Wiener Hofoper at the beginning of the twentieth century. His anti-modernist perspective echoed music critics including Henry Pleasants in his book Opera in Crisis (1989) and David Littlejohn in his The Ultimate Art (1992). The only notable exception to this rule is Believing in Opera, written by British music critic Tom Sutcliffe. The bemoaning of music critics
and provoked strong reactions in the late 1960s and 1970s, when Herrmann and Freyer were directly involved in its development, collaborating with such Regietheater directors of an older generation as Peter Stein and Claus Peymann. This phenomenon did not remain confined to Germany; many directors around the globe have been employing this method.

Regietheater/Regieoper as a concept is quite amorphous and difficult to define since it encompasses a variety of directorial approaches: from Max Reinhardt to Stefan Herheim, from Wieland Wagner to Katharina Wagner. Clemens Risi’s definition of Regietheater in opera is directly connected to operatic praxis:

This practice retains the musical dramaturgy of the work while at the same time radically questioning, re-examining and recontextualizing the layers of meaning of an opera—layers that are conveyed by all the available texts: the libretto, the full score, and discourses about the work’s staging practice.

The interrogation and recontextualization of the different layers exposes the gaps within the various texts and cultivates a production that defamiliarizes, desentimentalizes, and

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20 Boenisch goes even further and claims that Regietheater is “a very specific cultural product of the 1960s’ Federal Republic, when directors…rebelled against prevailing directorial practices affirming eternal values of German art and culture unblemished by the very recent past, as well as against a remoteness from the boiling topical affairs of the time.” The movement’s political interpretations were and are still the most palpable, but political relevance alone does not define Regietheater. Boenisch, “Exposing the Classics,” 32.

destabilizes opera as an individual work and as a medium.22 The production team
(director, designers and dramaturgs) extends this approach, resulting typically either in
reinterpretation or deconstruction, to all operatic pieces old and new, not just to the works
of the Austro-German canon. The proponents of the Regietheater apply the principle of
critical staging that patently upsets the opera’s “culinary character,” as Bertolt Brecht
notoriously asserted.23 This attempt to recontextualize opera forces the audience to
activate perceptual modes of seeing and to think analytically instead of being passive
observers of an entertaining, spectacular operatic production. Circumventing the pleasure
of spectatorship, but never denying it, the Regietheater attempts to undermine “the
triumphal bourgeois intoxication” of the medium, a threat detected by Theodor Adorno in
1932.24 By interpreting the opera from the vantage point of the present moment, the
directors of Regieoper show the dialogue of the past and present, manifesting
simultaneously the contemporary relevance of these works.

Despite its sociopolitical relevance, elaborate psychologization, updated settings,
topical imagery, and its questioning operatic conventions, Regieoper (including the works
of Freyer, Herrmann and Wilson) has on the whole treated musical dramaturgy itself far
less radically, although undermining it visually in order to emphasize the ambiguity of

22 See also Clemens Risi, “The Gestures of the Dutchman: Wagner’s Staging Instructions, 1852 and Today,”
The Opera Quarterly 28, no. 3-4 (March 2013): 159-171.

23 Bertolt Brecht, “The Modern Theatre Is the Epic Theatre,” in Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an

opera. In its search for new meaningful operatic productions, instead of concealing the inconsistencies between the score and the text that the genre or the historical praxis and conventions previously obscured, Regietheatre openly stages these discrepancies, revealing tensions that the text suggests. Although the production team does not directly interfere with the musical interpretation of the score, frequently the departure from the straightforward storytelling causes frictions with the music direction, which often result in either a conductor’s dissent or the audience’s protest during and/or after the performance. Thus, a visually radicalized scenography can—although it does not have to—serve as a kind of institutional critique of opera, revealing cultural, institutional, political and intellectual tensions, and even working to deconstruct the medium by making its inherent layers appear. In other words, at its most actualized, Regietheater emphasizes dialectical reactions to past and current styles and conventions, effectively subverting the medium and de-mythologizing the works together with the conventional staging practices.

**Reheatricalizing opera**

Seen as a whole, the visual aesthetics of Herrmann, Freyer and Wilson—although each has his own specific stylistic quality—contrast sharply with previously dominant concepts of staging opera and has frequently proved disruptive to entrenched attitudes.

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25 As exceptions come to mind: Peter Brook’s *Carmen* (1981) that actually was not billed as Bizet’s opera, but as *La tragédie de Carmen*, lasting only 80 minutes without intermission, Robert Wilson’s *Médée*, and Karl-Ernst Herrmann’s pasticcio *Ombra Felice* (1994), a Mozart-based scenic sequence. This approach is more acceptable in the music theatre; symptomatic here is the work of Christoph Marthaler, who closely collaborates with the designer Anna Viebrock.

These scenographers reject traditionalist operatic scenography with Romantic notions of beauty based on the harmony and wholeness of Nature. Instead, they furnish the opera with a radical visual aesthetic. This rupture should not, however, be understood in simplistic terms as the belated arrival of a subversive avant-garde: opera remains a well-funded, well-established spectacle. Indeed, the scenographers’ new aesthetic preferences have a paradoxical relationship with the traditionalist and wealthy institution of opera, which needs to counteract its own inclinations to act like a cultural institution tasked with preserving operatic artifacts. They need the opera’s economic support, since the spectacular scale of their theatrical visions requires the assistance of sophisticated techniques and advanced technologies beyond the financial reach of the traditional theatre.

As Freyer, Herrman and Wilson move away from text-oriented and representational style, they focus on the sensuous artifice of theatre by emphasizing form, color, image, light, and movement. In so doing, they return to a deeply modernist experiment of retheatricalization of the stage and again bring attention to the aesthetics of the visual experience. As overt application of theatricality becomes their key strategy; they are forcing the audience to see operatic works anew. In their stagings, we can see how they enable the opera as a theatrical genre to direct attention towards its theatricality, exposing its conventions and emphasizing stylization. In traditional opera, a production’s theatricality is a transparent notion: it is present, but basically inert. It is

27 The paradox of this situation lies in the fact that the historical avant-garde was against the commodity of the work of art, the institutionalization of art and the tradition itself, while the neo-avant-garde scenographers seek the support of the opera houses.

28 Here I am not interested in sociological, anthropological, poststructuralist and medial meanings of theatricality.
there just to enthrall the audience. Theatricality is a condition specific to theatre, similar to what the Russian formalists suggested about literature. To paraphrase Viktor Shklovsky’s definition, we might define theatricality as the qualities intrinsic to theatre that make theatre uniquely autonomous. Theatricality is thus the irreducible essence of theatre that is not, and cannot be, a copy of life.

In recent scholarship, theatricality has received renewed attention. Since the summary of this would exceed the framework of this dissertation, here I concentrate on the meaning of this term expounded in the historical avant-garde, in particular in Vsevolod Meyerhold’s praxis. Meyerhold’s appraisal of overt or “pure” theatricality was one of the most important theoretical and practical innovations in theatre at the turn of the twentieth century. Looking to renew theatre through stylization, improvisation and grotesque, he insisted on constantly reminding his audience about the ontology of the theatrical situation. To reinforce the conditions of theatricality, Meyerhold also used

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elements of other theatrical forms, including puppet theatre and *commedia dell’arte*, Far Eastern theatre (mainly Japanese Kabuki and Noh), vaudeville and other forms of popular culture. Wilson, Herrmann and Freyer draw upon similar sources in order to expose the tension between form and materials and to estrange the subject matter of opera, forcing the audience to interpret it anew. In their oeuvre, we can observe the clustering of modern concepts of estrangement—the formalist *ostranienie* (or defamiliarization) and Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* (or alienation)—that became essential for new scenography in opera and for *Regietheater*. Such works eschew *Gesamtkunstwerk* as a means of creating enticingly phantasmagorical productions, discarding the notions of aesthetic absorption, absolute illusion and consumption. Although in fact *Regieoper* rejects Wagner’s seamless unity and coherence of various art forms in favor of Brechtian “separation of the elements,” the idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* returns here again but mainly as a reminder that live opera is both multimedial – the eye and the ear are addressed by different material media – and multimodal, engaging voice and music, but also language, gesture, visual architectural form, color, and many other semiotic resources.34

The notion of “pure theatricality” became central to the development of a new type of scenography, which Meyerhold used ostentatiously to demonstrate to the spectator that *s/he is in the theatre* while still allowing the audience to imagine. This retheatricalization of modernist theatre ultimately meant, as Erika Fischer-Lichte asserts, “a theatre which did not imitate a reality which actually existed, but which created its


34 Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, “Prima la musica, poi le parole?: Operatic Challenges to Word-Music Relations,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 79, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 878.
own reality” and “implied the development of a wholly new, determinedly anti-illusionist, theatrical code.” In their stagings, Wilson, Herrmann and Freyer ceaselessly create this anti-illusionist, highly theatrical code that emphasizes its own artificiality.

Theatricality is an inherent element of opera. As Herbert Lindenberger points out, “The term operatic implies the exaggeration of a theatrical stance already assumed to be exaggerated.” Theatricality is a part of the widely accepted convention that no one denies, or to be more precise, no one previously questioned: opera is extravagantly theatrical and exaggeratedly histrionic. The newly accentuated theatricality of Regietheater with its unexpected effects, drastic changes in the scenic decorations that relocate the opera into completely new geographical location and/or totally different temporality, highly stylized movements and gestures “destabilized and retheatricalized works whose unselfconscious theatricality had never before been in doubt,” as Linderberger asserts. For Wilson, Freyer, Herrmann and many other designers, theatricality is now a consciously applied device, which underscores opera as a distinctly theatrical medium.

Reciprocal relationships

Current scholarship on opera scenography in some ways reflects a more general neglect of the reciprocal relationship of theatre and opera. Although opera maintains a significant position within the performing arts and is undeniably a form of theater, paradoxically, in theatre studies it occupies a very marginal position. It appears in passim

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36 Herbert Lindenberger, Situating Opera: Period, Genre, Reception (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 196.

37 Ibid., 217-218.
in the historical accounts mainly in the sections devoted to stage design and staging, as in Denis Bablet’s *Revolutions in Stage Design of the 20th Century* (1977) and Oscar Brockett’s *Making the Scene* (2010).38 The most recent publication that addresses the issue of operatic staging is *From the Score to the Stage* (2013); however, Evan Baker basically stops his account with the 1976 production of *Ring* by Patrice Chéreau and Richard Peduzzi.39 The only source that attempts to summarize operatic scenography after 1976 is the subject entry in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, which surveys productions created until 1991.40 In more historical approaches, scenography is granted some significance (above all in Wagner and Italian opera), most notably in Nino Pirrotta and Elena Povoledo’s *Music and Theatre from Poliziano to Monteverdi* (1982, originally published in Italian in 1969) and Patrick Carnegy’s seminal work *Wagner and the Art of Theatre* (2006).41 In theories and histories of theatre, Richard Wagner’s notion of *Gesamtkunswerk* and his reform of theatre/opera play a pivotal role. For example, Martin Puchner starts his book *Stage Fright* with a discussion of the Wagnerian invention of

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theatricality. Wagner’s concept is also central in Matthew Smith’s book *The Total Work of Art: From Bayreuth to Cyberspace*. In the last decade, scenography has become not only a fashionable word applied eagerly by scholars in theatre studies and other disciplines, but a potent concept that addresses the visuality of theatre, going well beyond the stage and costume design. Initially, this term was championed in European practice and scholarship. Since the 1970s, American scholars associated with *The Drama Review* have strived to adopt the term, but only at the end of the 1990s did concentration on scenography finally begin to take off and lead to the most recent expansion of the field, overcoming a hybrid status—partly a theatrical phenomenon, partly falling under the fine arts—that previously led to neglect, antiquarianism, or a concentration on the craft aspects of stage, costume and light design. More broadly, this re-focus within the field responds to a more general rise of


47 See Natalie Rewa, *Scenography in Canada: Selected Designers* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2004); Christopher Baugh, *Theatre, Performance and Technology: The Development of Scenography in the*
visual studies, which concentrate on images and visual experience. Consequently, the meaning of scenography and its application has evolved into a discipline “in its own right…[with] its own logic, its own distinctive rules.” Reinterpreted and reinvented scenography has become a wider cultural phenomenon, appearing in many aspects of art and life.

In order to understand the wider significance of the shifts in scenographic paradigms, I use theories of contemporary visuality in art history and visual studies. Despite the fact that modern scenography rejected the constructed and artificial nature of illusion embodied in the perspectival rendering of the environment, contemporary opera has been dominated by images that either toy with or retain the major tenets of the rationally reproduced space. In that respect, combining contemporary art-historical and cultural-historical theories, especially the scholarship of Jonathan Crary, Martin Jay, and W.J.T. Mitchell, which address the major shifts in visual culture, visual representation and scopic regimes, will help frame the tensions between the verbal and visual that continue to alter the contemporary staging of opera.

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For many years, opera largely remained the domain of musicologists, who demonstrated a strong musicological bias, reducing opera’s significance largely to the score, the libretto and their interaction. As the new opera studies emerged with Herbert Lindenberger and “new musicologists” like Carolyn Abbate, Roger Parker, and Gary Tomlinson in the mid-1980s, emphasis shifted to singers and staging, but the scholars’ scope, although highly interdisciplinary, was mainly historical.51 Until recently, no serious attempts were made to grasp the aesthetic significance of opera staging in contemporary practice. Currently, in the work of such scholars as David Levin, Gundula Kreuzer, and Nicholas Till we can observe a new development within opera studies, which is enriching the constellation of this greatly expanding field.52 Particularly important for the research on the contemporary operatic practice has been a momentous “performative turn” when in 2005 Levin took over the editorship of The Opera Quarterly, putting focus on performance, literary and cultural theories.

In general, German scholarship regarding opera staging handles the field more extensively than American or British scholarship, focusing typically more on directors than designers. Instead there are many books devoted to the designers, either in form of memoires, catalogues, and coffee-table volumes that illustrate the artists’ work.53 This is


not surprising, since the greater part of global output in opera is done in German-speaking countries. In Germany alone, there were 7,230 performances of opera (including concert versions) during the 2012/13 season. On account of these trends, German scholarship and journalism dominate the discussion of contemporary operatic design, whether in newspaper reviews or in the coverage of operatic magazines.

In this context my approach to visual analysis combines the rigorous methods and historicist stylistics of traditional art history and theatre studies with the broader approach—cultural and contextualizing—that characterizes the more recent visual studies. The very heterogeneity of its primary object—contemporary operatic scenography—means my dissertation is interdisciplinary, situated at the intersection of art history, theatre studies and musicology. It investigates deep currents of cultural change as they manifest themselves in the most “superficial” of things—the changing nature of the visual surfaces of the operatic spectacle. By mapping in detail the rapidly shifting terrain of contemporary operatic representation, my research helps revealing some of the cultural, political and intellectual tensions gathered tightly on the operatic stage. The figure of the designer-director, by virtue of his or her creative practice, is of course a hybrid role working with music and text, movement and visuality. Beyond this, however, the fact that the visual styles I document are now rapidly becoming an operatic norm has interesting things to tell us about what is seen as “conventional” and “new,” as “mainstream” or “radical” in contemporary culture.

Operatic scenographers: Wilson, Herrmann, and Freyer

In my analysis, I trace significant shifts in operatic scenography during the past forty years, focusing on the specific stylistic developments in the oeuvres of Robert Wilson, Karl-Ernst Herrmann and Achim Freyer. Despite the three director-designers’ prominent presence on the operatic stage and distinct contribution to the way we think about opera, their work in opera has been considerably less documented and less well understood than their work in theatre. Through an analysis of these scenographers’ stagings, I want to suggest that opera, facing its possible decline, has embraced theatricality and a new visuality in an attempt to reinvent itself.

My first chapter introduces the concept of the new international style that Wilson, Freyer, and Herrmann embody. It also provides a broad survey of modern operatic scenography, focusing on tendencies in theatrical scenography from Adolphe Appia’s radical reform at the end of nineteenth century that would contextualize the work of these scenographers. Looking back at the historical developments this chapter not only investigates the specificity of operatic scenography, but also the particular place of opera as genre in twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It argues that we should see operatic scenography as a perpetual cycle of renewals and reversals, modernization and conservatism, freedom of interpretation and being true or faithful to a work (Werktreue).⁵⁴

The three subsequent chapters on Freyer, Wilson, and Herrmann trace the individual stylistic features of these designers, their development over time, their mutual

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influence, and the extent to which their work can be seen to embody a coherent contemporary style in operatic stage design. A key thesis of the dissertation is that visual style alone is not enough to explain the structure and dynamics of contemporary operatic scenography. Specific changes to the visual culture of opera, opera’s relation to theater, and the wider social and historical significance of operatic design cannot be grasped with a purely aesthetic or visual approach. Opera today is a site rich in tensions and a purely stylistic approach would inevitably overemphasize the visual and reduce social and cultural complexity to individual aesthetic choices. My empirical approach is supplemented throughout with attention to these scenographers’ historical and institutional place within opera’s rich field of tensions.

The second chapter—the first of the case studies—focuses on the vivid and distinctive style of the American auteur Robert Wilson, whose aesthetics influenced many directors and designers, contributing enormously towards a new international style of “(sceno)graphic chic.” In this chapter, I investigate how Wilson’s scenography simultaneously pushes the limits and tests the norms of opera while beautifying it with a formalist approach. Building on suggestions by Andrzej Wirth and David Levin, I argue that Wilson’s presence in opera history represents a radical reforming tendency, on a par with Chéreau’s centennial Ring. Wilson’s rejection of realistic representation does not eschew the principles of grand spectacle and visual astonishment. For these reasons, and because of the general critical and scholarly dismissal of its aestheticism and formalism, his radical notion of operatic stage has been generally disregarded. This critical reaction, I argue, stems from a more wide-ranging mistrust towards visuality. Thus, in examining his productions I seek to elucidate how Wilson’s reformist avant-gardism of the

separation and recombination of vision and music teaches the audiences how to listen to images.

The next chapter is devoted to the operatic scenography of Karl-Ernst Herrmann, a German designer-director who since 1982, together with his wife Ursel, has been a central figure in the renewal of opera’s visual and spatial aspects. The chapter analyzes the evolution of Herrmann’s operatic scenography, in particular his stagings of Mozart’s operas, which gradually depart from his previous styles and assume a new aesthetics of the cool beauty. The cool beauty—a style that is reminiscent of Wilson’s aesthetics—combines abstraction and high fashion, mixing theatricality and spectacle while simultaneously aestheticizing them. Fundamental for Herrmann in both theatre and opera were the concept of Raum and the underlining emphasis on Schaulust. I assert the historical importance of Herrmann’s work despite its cool formalism.

The third case chapter focuses on Achim Freyer, whose strongly unorthodox visuality—signifying the presence of Regietheater in opera—has profoundly shocked audiences and critics. Freyer’s aesthetic, dominated by low-tech materiality and the grotesque body, contrasts sharply with the aforementioned mentioned paradigms of beauty and fashion so strongly present in Wilson’s and Herrmann’s oeuvres. After his defection from East Germany, Freyer—a former student of Bertolt Brecht—became well known for his acute sense of theatrical visuality anchored in the painterly technique and the contemporary art trends; however, his topsy-turvy style explicitly challenges the predominant high cultural bias of the opera, mixing the elitist culture of opera with lowbrow elements. The grotesque becomes a tool not only for demoting entrenched

56 The Herrmanns’ collaboration has been very tight; nonetheless, one in which division of labor gives Karl-Ernst the dominant role in the originating the visuality of the production, with responsibility for sets, costumes, and lighting. See Chapter 3.
operatic aesthetics, but also as a device for the retheatricalization of the opera. Freyer not only tackles the specific challenges of existing theatrical spaces, he also, I argue, stages much larger confrontations and dynamics in the history of looking and visuality, displaying and subverting the Renaissance scopic regime, which can be described as a key example of contemporary postoperatic music theatre.
CHAPTER ONE

NEW SCENOGRAPHY FOR OPERA

“Productions should emphasize, I believe, the connection between an operatic work and its immediate context, as well as the self-conscious endeavor of restoring an older work to a late-twentieth century audience. Both of these approaches contain a good deal more ‘authenticity’ than clumsy naturalistic approximations done with little self-awareness or intelligence.”
Edward Said, Music at the Limits

Contemporary operatic scenography is undergoing broad aesthetic and theatrical transformations. In concept-driven staging, which has become a key strategy for innovation since the 1970s, directors and designers use more complex visual strategies, provoking narratives that move beyond the original text. Such a transition is but the latest stage in a century of challenges to the dominant paradigms of opera staging, including those to the recurring assertion of a conservative pictorial realism. In this chapter, I investigate the historical relationship between the visual and the spectacular in opera in order to contextualize the genealogies and the development of a “new international style” in operatic scenography, characterized by the work of Robert Wilson, Karl-Ernst Herrmann and Achim Freyer, as it has emerged out of complex visual strategies in postmodern design. As I discuss in the following three chapters, what identifies this new international scenographic style are simply defined spaces with razor-edge geometric forms, isolated bodies and objects, luminous environments where light is used for dramatic effect with strong contrasts between light and dark (especially through the use of intense backlighting), saturated colors, stylization of gestures, movements and

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costuming that combine to create a re-theatricalization of the medium.\textsuperscript{2} Since the interlocking of stylization and theatricalization with abstraction and minimalism is so powerful, perhaps it would be appropriate to call this style “theatricalized abstraction.” Thus this survey emphasizes the significant transformations in the twentieth century that helped to redefine operatic scenography, focusing on innovation and cyclical renewal.\textsuperscript{3}

Throughout the last century, scenography in operatic productions has exhibited a strong polarization between two main tendencies. The first is towards pictorial realism (or romantic historicism), which was firmly established during the nineteenth century (and epitomized in more recent times by the productions of Franco Zeffirelli).\textsuperscript{4} The second tendency is towards modernism of abstracted spaces, which rejects perspectival illusion in favor of stylization and simplification beginning with Adolphe Appia’s radically iconoclastic revolution, and continuing in the later twentieth century most notably by Wieland Wagner and Robert Wilson. These two tendencies—traditional and reformist—transcend political, ideological and economic confines. Their co-occurrence results in tensions, which can be antagonistic, despite contemporary pluralities of style.

\textsuperscript{2} Voluminous space also leaves room for choreographed operas as well as for the use of multi-media, which are slowly settling into operatic productions.

\textsuperscript{3} Disclaimer: This survey cannot address all aspects of design for opera and it focuses predominately on the particular transformations on operatic stages, only occasionally referring to the broader theatrical context. In addition, since scholarship on Wagner productions is extensive, I have tried to show examples outside of Wagner’s oeuvre.

\textsuperscript{4} There is no consensus among scholars about which term to use to describe nineteenth-century stage design. In his text on operatic staging, when addressing its current reincarnations in contemporary opera, Manfred Boetzkes uses interchangeably “neo-romantic scenery,” “nostalgic historicism,” “decorative historicism,” and “neo-historical movement.” See Manfred Boetzkes and Paul Sheren, “Staging,” in History of Opera, ed. Stanley Sadie, New Grove Handbooks in Music (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 343-353.
Operatic scenography differs from theatre due to opera’s institutional conditions—economic, social, and artistic. The institutional structure of opera as a high and very well-funded art form supports a star system, not only of singers and conductors, but now increasingly also of directors and designers. This generous funding has long maintained an old spectacular idiom of operatic stage aesthetics: operatic design and its elements have a lifespan unparalleled in the theatre world. In opera, the spectator frequently views designs that are twenty, thirty, even fifty years old, with once-in-vogue styles preserved, as if in a museum. This is first a result of a century-long development that sought to improve the quality of performance and the staging practices. Second, this

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6 As early as the nineteenth century, French staging manuals were created to ensure that the staging was not altered, so the production of, for example, Halévy’s La Juive at the Paris Opera at the end of nineteenth century corresponded with the original from 1835. See H. Robert Cohen, The Original Staging Manuals for Twelve Parisian Operatic Premières (Stuyvesant: Pendragon P, 1991).
situation has been conditioned by economic necessities and the logistics of a repertory opera that allows sixty and more works to be kept in a roster. Third, one should also take into the account the specificity of operatic audiences that have continued demanding quasi-realistic conventions. The fascinating aspect of contemporary operatic stage design lies in its challenge to this archaizing tendency.

**Diachronic perspective**

In many respects, Richard Wagner was the first key figure around which aesthetic tensions in regards to operatic scenography played out. Any detailed account of Wagner or the Wagner reception goes beyond the scope of this chapter and dissertation; however, it is important to remember that stagings of Wagner’s operas have continued to be a major driving force in evolutions of operatic scenography, as well as the exemplar of and the key argument in discussion about *Werktreue* productions in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Wagner’s holistic approach aspired to drive opera as a spectacular form beyond entertainment or even art as it was generally understood; it intended to renew and revise an ossified genre. Ever since, his theories and practice, above all the idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk*—the total work of art—has been crucial for scenography and operatic staging. But Wagner is and was a highly ambivalent figure—his work, his writing and his

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7 Some opera houses like the Royal Opera House and many American companies have abandoned that structure, favoring the economics of the Stagione, the Italian system.

example serve as an inspiration both for innovative staging, radically divergent from existing practices, but also for ultra-conservative designs. His writings and his annual festival in Bayreuth attest to his clear intentions to re-make opera as a genre and in Bayreuth to create a new social site, where, as Jonathan Crary has emphasized, “music drama is performed and produced as a ritual communal event.” Wagner’s scenographic ideas of theatre as an immersive, totalizing experience had both revolutionary and reactionary elements. Riddled with endless contradictions, he was simultaneously constrained by the visual concepts of grand romantic opera and in the end deeply disappointed with the results he achieved during his first festival in 1876.

In response to operatic music, Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig developed their radical scenographic modernism, innovative ideas which—in both theory and practice—had a profound effect on both theatre and opera since the turn of the twentieth century. Their ideas resonate deeply even today. Both of these figures drastically eschewed illustrative and painterly décor, in this respect breaking with Bayreuth orthodoxy. Appia and Craig, in different ways, were iconoclasts, not in rejecting visuality per se of course, but by proselytizing for simplified and stylized designs in which performer, light, movement and gesture could achieve new prominence and significance.

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9 Crary, Suspensions of Perception, 248. See also Koss, Modernism after Wagner.


For the Swiss designer Adolphe Appia it was a visit to the Bayreuth Festspiele in 1882, which prompted a radical reconfiguration of scenic art and staging conventions. Appia considered Wagner’s designs to be antithetical to his sublime music. The singers’ three-dimensional bodies, moving in the midst of the illusionistic, painted, and thus lifeless flats, he thought, could only be a source of disappointment. In his visual scenarios for Wagner’s dramas, Appia eschewed décor and pictorialism, replacing these with abstract, interpretive designs of space and light in order to allow Wagner’s music to live.

In a comparable way, the English actor, director, designer and theoretician of theatre Edward Gordon Craig wanted to “do away with the means by which a debased stage-realism is produced and flourishes.”12 Craig rejected any verisimilar reproduction of nature in favor of artistic creation and was against scenic illusion because it “cheat[ed] the audience into a sense of reality.”13 Appia argued even more strongly that there should be no such thing as scenic illusion, whose conventionalized representations merely pandered to the worst popular preferences; it served only, he said, “to satisfy the tastes of the average audience” who “will always asks to be deceived.”14

The two figures developed a new concept of theatrical space, no longer the two-dimensional pictorial space of scenic painting but a volumetrical space appropriate for dynamic performance. As Craig would say, the most valuable means at the disposal of

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14 Appia, *Music and the Art of the Theatre*, 33-34.
the artist of the theatre are the scene and the movement of the figures.\textsuperscript{15} For the audience, the presentation was intended to be not a passive spectacle, but a powerful aesthetically unified experience guided by shapes and structures in addition to simplicity and symbolism that left room for the audience to imagine. As Appia emphasized in one of his treatises,

\begin{quote}
Visual deception has no place in art; the illusion which a work of art produces is not to deceive us about the nature of emotions or objects in relation to reality, but rather to draw us so ably into another’s vision that it seems to be our own. This demands a certain degree of refinement in us, otherwise our need for illusion is displaced and the crass appearance of reality becomes for us the goal of art…\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

With limited technology at their disposal, Appia and Craig could only dream about theatre with abstract and symbolic scenography, but as the capacities available to theatre and opera practitioners have expanded, their ideas have proven highly influential, both prophetic and productive. The liberation of design from historical representation and from the dead weight of realism—the central idea of Appia and Craig—meant a greatly expanded place for the designer. He or she could finally leave off the servile work of passively rendering the author’s description; instead, s/he could articulate his or her own thoughtful, significant and creative designs, enhancing the overall impact of the work. However, for decades the operatic stage was reluctant—more so than the theatre—to embrace these ideas fully.\textsuperscript{17} Appia’s productions in professional theatres—\textit{Tristan und Isolde} at La Scala (1923) and his stagings of two first operas from Wagner’s tetralogy in Basel: \textit{Das Rheingold} (1924) and \textit{Die Walküre} (1925)—were basically rejected. This had


\textsuperscript{16} Appia, “Music and the Art of the Theatre” (1899), in \textit{Adolphe Appia: Artist and Visionary}, 50.

\textsuperscript{17} Although the classical Appian model from Hellerau—the neutral design with steps and platforms, where the stage is very simply articulated with use of the flights of stairs, flats, simple shapes and structures—was widespread in the German-speaking countries in the 1920s and 1930. See Stiftung Schoss Neuhardenberg, \textit{Das “Dritte Reich” und die Musik}, exh. cat. (Berlin: Nicolai, 2006).
partly to do with the limitations of available stage technology, which lagged behind Appia’s ingenious scenographic imagination, leaving a certain conspicuous crudeness in execution.\(^{18}\) On the other hand, the hostility of the reaction underscored the fact that the operatic audience (including critics) was unprepared for the visual reform that his stagings advanced.

Appia’s ideas reverberated most strongly in the operatic productions of the German-speaking countries. Here Peter Behrens and Georg Fuchs also championed similar approaches to scenography, which in German scholarship is usually described as \textit{Stilbühne}, or the stylized stage, typical for symbolism, expressionism, and constructivism.\(^{19}\) The first figure to change distinctly the approach to operatic scenography by using Appia’s concepts was Alfred Roller, a graphic designer and co-founder of the new artistic movement called \textit{Sezession}. Together with Gustav Mahler, Roller set out to break with the operatic staging traditions of \textit{trompe l’oeil} decorations at the Hofoper in Vienna, while promoting the ideas of \textit{Gesamtkunstwerk}.\(^{20}\) In their key productions such as \textit{Tristan und Isolde} (1903) and \textit{Don Giovanni} (1905; see Fig. 1.1), which they both de facto co-directed, Roller moved operatic scenography away from pictorial realism towards aesthetic harmony, simplification, stylization, and color-coding,

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\(^{18}\) See Carnegy’s chapter on Appia, where he juxtaposes Appia’s sketch with the production photo, displaying, what he calls, “the painful discrepancy between [Appia’s] vision and the early attempts to realize it…with the reality.” Carnegy, \textit{Wagner and the Art of the Theatre}, 186-189.

\(^{19}\) Peter Behrens, “Die Dekoration der Bühne,” \textit{Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration}, 6 (1900): 401-405. Fuchs, \textit{Die Schaubühne der Zukunft}.

and radically changed the approach to lighting. The latter not only illuminated sets, but also became a significant tool in creating the dramaturgy of the opera.

Fig. 1.1. Alfred Roller’s design for Mozart’s Don Giovanni, Act I, scene 4, at the Hofoper in Vienna in 1905. The multifunctional towers remained on both sides of the stage throughout the performance, becoming thus the first modern, functional unit set. © Österreichisches Theatermuseum.

Simplified scenography based largely on Appia and Craig’s ideas spread across Europe and arrived in the US promoted as the New Stagecraft in the theatre, and directly in opera through the work of Joseph Urban, who had experienced Roller’s productions first hand.²¹ During the first two decades of the twentieth century, designers implemented

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²¹ Nevertheless, the other New Stagecraft designers were underrepresented at the Met. Norman Bel Geddes designed sets only for three new one-act operas (1918-1920) that didn’t enter the repertory. Robert Edmond Jones designed only a ballet in 1930, but Charles Elson based his sets for Der fliegende Holländer (1950) on Jones’ sketches. Jo Mielziner created sets for two operas, including Gruenberg’s The Emperor Jones in 1933, which he had to modify accordingly to satisfy the taste of the audience. Lee Simonson’s debut took place in 1948, when he created sets for Wagner’s Ring Cycle that belatedly introduced Appian ideas for Wagnerian tetralogy. Donald Oenslager had more luck in designing Strauss’ Salome (1934) and Verdi’s Othello (1937) since they were in repertory for over two decades, but he was much less fortunate with Menotti’s Amelia Goes to the Ball and Die Entführung aus dem Serail. Much later Boris Aronson designed two sets: Mourning Becomes Electra (1967) and Fidelio (1970). See Arnold Aronson, Architect of Dreams:
this new approach predominantly in small opera houses and art theatres, creating new scenography mainly for Wagner’s works, newly composed pieces, such as Schreker’s *Der ferne Klang*, as well as for pre-classical or recondite operas like Lully’s *Thésée*.

Generally, the application of innovative scenographic solutions to these groupings of works would continue throughout the whole of the twentieth century, but the trend never made substantial headway with productions of the dominant canon: Italian and late eighteenth- and the nineteenth-century repertoire. In many cases, radical scenographic projects from the early twentieth century never came to fruition, as in the case of Vladimir Tatlin’s pre-Constructivist designs for Glinka’s *A Life for the Tsar* (1913; see Fig. 1.2) and Robert Edmond Jones’ operatic projects, including a poetically abstract set for Debussy’s *Pélleas et Mélisande* (1921; see Fig. 1.3).

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Fig. 1.2. Vladimir Tatlin, “Sketch for Glinka’s Opera *A Life for the Tsar*,” 1913. Tatlin’s design combined both folk motifs and abstract forms. © Bridgeman Art Library / Bakhrushin Theatrical Museum, Moscow, Russia.

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22 There are exceptions, of course, such as the Kroll productions, but these are significantly less often. The most recent Regietheater is generally credited with having moved into the Italian repertory decisively.
Russian easel painters were perhaps just as important as Appia and Craig in fundamental changes to operatic scenography. Like Wagner in his attempt to renew nineteenth-century stagecraft, Russian railway tycoon and entrepreneur Savva Mamontov employed in his Private Opera not artisans but painters, who were stylistically closer to modern trends of impressionism and symbolism than the historical style of Jan Matejko or Hans Makart with their muted colors and disguised technique of *trompe l’oeil*. As Olga Haldey has shown, for these artists—including Viktor Vasnetsov, Vasily Polenov, Konstantin Korovin, and Mikhail Vrubel—the principal significance of scenography for operatic production rested in a unified visual impression that emphasized decorative and formal aspects of the new aesthetics they championed (see Fig. 1.4). For them, the idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*—the synthesis of the arts—was crucial (their own relation to

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23 Mamontov’s group was first called the Krotkov Theatre; from 1896 officially as the Moscow Private Russian Opera Company. At the very beginning, since 1870s the productions were staged in his estate Abramtsevo; after the imperial monopoly on theatre was lifted—from 1885 till 1904—in Moscow, but the company traveled to St. Petersburg as well.
Wagner is an important one, although too complex a genealogy to sketch here in any detail).\footnote{Olga Haldey, Mamontov’s Private Opera: The Search for Modernism in Russian Theatre (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2010), 88-128. For a discussion of Mamontov’s role in Russian culture see also John E. Bowlt, The Silver Age: Russian Art of the Early Twentieth Century and the “World of Art” Group, 2nd ed. (Newtonville: Oriental Research Partners, 1982).} They often jointly worked on all the aspects of the production, including direction, and collaborated closely with the singers. Mamontov’s practice preceded and influenced not just Sergei Diaghilev and the artists grouped around his journal Mir iskusstva (World of Art), but also Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, and the imperial theatres and opera houses in Moscow and St. Petersburg.\footnote{See Edward Braun, Meyerhold: A Revolution in the Theatre, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1995); Majorie L. Hoover, Meyerhold and His Set Designers (New York: Lang, 1988).}
Continuing the trajectory that Mamontov’s Opera established, Diaghilev’s entrepreneurial endeavors—best known with the BalletsRusses—drastically challenged the traditional art of stage design. Yet, their innovations have not been as radical as those of Appia and Craig since they continued to paint scenery of wings, flats, and prospects. Once again, in a series of bravura coups-de-théâtre, the easel painters broke with staging conventions and techniques, affecting scenography on an international scale. The role of Diaghilev’s painters in modern scenography is primarily recognized in terms of design for the dance; however, before he launched his ballet company he first produced opera,
which he later continued to stage albeit less frequently.\textsuperscript{26} The most famous of these productions is Diaghilev’s epochal staging of Mussorgsky’s \textit{Boris Godunov} with the celebrated Russian bass Feodor Chaliapin in Paris in 1908. \textit{Godunov’s mise-en-scène} (the design is generally attributed to Aleksandr Golovin) was sumptuously lavish (see Fig. 1.5).\textsuperscript{27}

In their operatic stagings, Diaghilev’s key painters/designers—such as Konstantin Korovin, Nicholas Roerich, and Natalia Goncharova—used vibrant and contrasting colors, strong line and dynamic forms, and looked for the integrity and consistency of style, simultaneously presenting imaginative interpretations while retaining historical credibility. The use of color and ornament affected the way scenic space was articulated, freeing it from the constraints of romantic realism. In the majority of scenography for Diaghilev’s operatic productions, the stage space continues to be treated like a two-dimensional pictorial space, but no longer as an illusionistic pictorial space. The painterly design produced as a modernist—optically flattened and indeterminate—space that eschews the three-dimensional effects of academic painting and redefines the spectator’s status without redefining the audience/actor relationship (see Fig. 1.6 and Fig. 1.7).\textsuperscript{28}


\textsuperscript{28} See David Wiles, \textit{A Short History of Western Performance Space} (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge UP, 2003), 259.
Fig. 1.6. Nicholas Roerich, “Prince Igor: Set Design,” 1909. The production was emphatically oriental and ornamental, stunning the Parisian audience. © Bridgeman Art Library/ Victoria & Albert Museum, London, UK.

Fig. 1.7. Cast of “Polovtsian Dances” in Act II from Prince Igor, with choreography by Michel Fokine, in Monte Carlo in 1923. Here we can see how Roerich’s design was actually executed in a three-dimensional space. Bronislava Nijinska Collection. © Music Division, Library of Congress.
In order to accentuate the formal elements of their art, Diaghilev’s painters destabilized perspectival literacy, creating, as Juliet Bellow argues in her book *Modernism on Stage*, “a sense of spatial compression typical of much modernist painting from this period.” As the disruption of perceptual modes and patterns was crucial in devising new sets, his designers continued to create sets of great visual appeal, thus providing décors that appealed aesthetically to operagoers in a variety of international contexts. This combination of aesthetic allure with the treatment of the compressed and flattened picture plane fostered a scenography that, on one hand, resonated with contemporary artistic movements, but on the other, did not alienate the spectators. Even when decorative, ornament had a completely different purpose here, mainly formal. Such

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modern stage designs with strongly appealing visual aesthetics have continued to appear on operatic stages, from Urban’s productions for the Boston and Metropolitan Operas (see Fig. 1.8) to David Hockney’s sets for the Glyndebourne Festival.

The Ballets Russes not only validated the use of new movements in arts on the stage, such as Symbolism and Art Nouveau, but also opened the stage to contemporary artists whose aesthetic style proved to be indispensable in revolutionizing scenography. Since that time, visual artists in the theatre have been an important force. However, as the critic David Littlejohn suggests, in most cases the painters’ signature style dominated the music without engaging with it on a deeper level: “Perhaps the incarnated dreams of genuinely visionary artists are too personal, too uniquely expressive of their own needs and impulses to represent or even comment usefully on the special visions of composers.” Unlike Littlejohn, who focuses on the interpretative aspects of the individual style’s relevance, Arnold Aronson posits that painters fail to address the three-dimensionality of theatrical space, repeatedly treating it as another picture plane that in effect causes the optical flattening of the stage. On the whole, modern painters have not been able to engage profoundly with theatre as a different medium.

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33 Since the beginning of the twentieth century, opera designs have been created by such painters as André Derain, Maurice Utrillo, Natalia Goncharova, Oskar Kokoschka, Oskar Schlemmer, Giorgio de Chirico, László Moholy-Nagy, André Masson, Pavel Tchelitchev, Salvador Dali, Balthus, and Marc Chagall, but
the main point of contention in many of the approaches to operatic scenography created by celebrated painters like Chagall and Hockney, artists who are not involved in the theatre on a daily basis, but only occasionally work in theatre and/or opera. Despite these shortcomings, it is vital to recognize that emphasizing two-dimensionality in scenography can be a powerful tool, one that goes beyond the perceptual shock value of dispelling clichéd and predictable perceptual patterns. Consider, for example, Achim Freyer’s first operatic design for Ruth Berghaus’ production of Rossini’s Il barbiere di Seviglia (1968) at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden in Berlin.

As I have indicated, much of the early twentieth-century innovation in operatic scenography took place in pre-revolutionary Russia/Soviet Union and in the German speaking countries before respective totalitarian regimes put an end to experimentation in the early 1930s. German designers were unquestionably influenced by the developments in Soviet art and theatre; however, a proliferation of styles was more apparent in the decentralized Germany than in the Soviet Union. Historically in German culture, theatre and opera have been considered the highest cultural institutions. Each city, even this list could be at least twice as long. More recently Georg Baselitz, Eduardo Arroyo, Jörg Immendorf, Guillermo Kuitca, and Daniel Richter have collaborated with various directors on operatic stages. Only a few artists—like William Kentridge and Anselm Kiefer—have decided to take on direction as well. But not only painters have tried their luck with scenography; contemporary sculptors like Jaume Plensa, Alexander Polzin, and Jun Kaneko, as well as architects, including Zaha Hadid, Frank Gehry, Daniel Libeskind, Rafael Viñoly, Ryuji Nakamura, and the architecture team Herzog and de Meuron, have created sets for opera. As the modern categories of the fine arts are blurred and transmuted, other visual artists like Jannis Kounellis, the Quay Brothers, Anish Kapoor, Olafur Eliasson, Bill Viola, the artist duo Elmgreen and Dragset, Zhang Huan, and Jonathan Meese, have also become interested in designing for opera. House managers and/or directors have hired these artists in the search for new scenic approaches and distinct conceptions for theatrical space, reacting to a continuous need to change current methods.

34 In addition, the majority of scholarship on the Soviet Union focuses on the developments in theatrical scenography rather than in the staging of opera. What actually has transpired is that the notion of scenography developed in the early 1900s continued—like in Korovin’s designs for opera—paradoxically with only a few innovative productions, such as Malevich’s Victory over the Sun (1913), Lentulov’s Demon (1919), Yakulov’s Princess Brambilla (1920) and Giroflé-Girofla (1923), Lissitzky’s Victory over the Sun (1923), Dmitriev’s Love for Three Oranges (1926), brothers Stenberg’s Day and Night (1926) and The Beggar’s Opera (1930), Khostenko-Khostov’s designs for Kharkov or Kiev that were not realized like Love for Three Oranges (c. 1926) and Walküre (1929), as well as Eisenstein’s Walküre (1940).
provincial ones, owns at least one building devoted to the high arts, which in keeping with its symbolic capital, is located centrally. This profusion of theatres, where opera is also performed, has created a unique cultural situation, which still affects operatic production today, not only in the amount of works staged or the premieres of the newly written pieces, but in the placing of opera in the society that directly manifests the importance of the genre.

While never displacing the dominant staging tradition, which was especially strong in the big cities like Munich and Hamburg, the gestures towards modern works and modern staging transpired throughout German speaking countries. The Dresden and Leipzig opera houses were prominent in the production of new works, but with traditional décors. The provincial towns were more open to the experimentation than the big cities. For example, in Frankfurt am Main, Ludwig Sievert translated Expressionism in music into bleak and melancholic sets. In Münster and Göttingen, Hein Heckroth created monumentally abstract designs for Handel’s operas and oratorios that continued Appia’s scenography from Hellerau with the imaginative use of platforms, ramps and steps, on which, in mass scenes, chorus members performed expressive gestures and dynamic movements; Heckroth juxtaposed them with monumental back panels arranged pictorially or architecturally. In the meantime, Lothar Schenk von Trapp—another

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35 Sievert staged the first expressionist opera Die ersten Menschen by Rudi Stephan (1920) and created memorable designs for Korngold’s Die tote Stadt (1920) and Hindemith’s operatic triptych (1922), which included the famous design for the first one-act opera Mörder, Hoffnung der Frauen.

36 These radically updated Handel’s operas and oratorios for Oskar Hagen’s revivals of long forgotten works (dir. by Hanns Niedecken-Gebhard, Hercules and Radamisto, 1927), were dismissed as inauthentic parody of the original work in post-1945 musicologist scholarship as it favors historically informed performance practices (previously termed simply as “authentic”). See Winton Dean, “Production Style in Handel’s Operas,” 249-261, The Cambridge Companion to Handel, ed. Donald Burrows (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997).
important figure for modernist operatic stagings—designed in Darmstadt an
expressionistic Don Giovanni (1926). In Essen, Caspar Neher, Brecht’s designer,
provided the sets for repertory and new operas like Idomeneo (1927) and Wozzeck (1929)
in a new “realist” style, loosely grouped with the general trend of Neue Sachlichkeit
(New Objectivity), an aesthetics which so upset Alban Berg that he wrote a special text
addressing the mise-en-scène of this work and rejecting the main features of Neher’s
scenography, including lack of illusion and harsh lighting.\(^{37}\)

The institution most notorious for its aesthetic radicalism, which “epitomized the
iconoclastic operatic climate of the Weimar Republic,”\(^{38}\) was the short-lived Krolloper in
Berlin (1927-31). Gerhard Köhler captures the essence of the Kroll Opera in operatic
staging, stressing

> The iconoclastic impetus of the project, however, is unique in the history of opera
of the twentieth century. The unconventional modernity was part of the
programmatic orientation of the Kroll Opera House; their aim was to purge the
opera and recover a musical purity. Neue Sachlichkeit interpretations were already
familiar of the so-called Zeitopern, but not of the canonized traditional operas.\(^{39}\)

Under the aegis of the conductor and composer Otto Klemperer, the artist and designer
Ewald Dülberg, and the dramaturg (as well as art historian) Hans Curjel, the Kroll Opera
set an example for a systematically innovative approach to repertoire, acting, and staging

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for current and future opera productions. At first, Dülberg was responsible for the aesthetics of the new opera house. He designed—and sometimes also directed⁴⁰—eight operatic productions, creating several visually diverse stagings. These included a cubist Fidelio (1927) and Oedipus Rex (1928; see Fig. 1.9), an expressionistic Freischütz (1928), an architecturally structured unit set with a mobile middle section for Don Giovanni (1928), which combined elements of baroque with modernism and symbolism,⁴¹ as well as an architecturally rigorous Die Zauberflöte (1929) and Rigoletto (1930). Dülberg’s most controversial design was for Wagner’s Der fliegende Holländer (1929), which Klemperer intended as a return to the Werktreue: instead of the 1860 revision he chose to perform the Dresden score. The scenography was based on strictly abstract forms—or as Ashman sees it, a “Bauhaus-influenced set shorn of any architectural reality”⁴²—mixed with realistic costumes in a contemporary style.⁴³ One can only imagine how large a scandal a planned anti-romantic, abstract Tristan und Isolde would have caused. Dülberg

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⁴⁰Officially, Dülberg directed Zauberflöte (1929) and Rigoletto (1930), but Heyworth suggests that he frequently collaborated on the direction with Klemperer, even on Fliegende Holländer, for which Jürgen Fehling, a theatre director, who had little experience in opera, was formally responsible. Peter Heyworth, Otto Klemperer, His Life and Times, vol. 1: 1885-1933 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983), 276.

⁴¹This solution for this set was influenced by Roller’s design for the same work. See Peter W. Marx, ed., Dülberg meets Wagner (Köln: Weinand, 2013); and Nikolaus Bacht, “Adorno and the Don,” in The Don Giovanni Moment: Essays on the Legacy of an Opera, eds. Lydia Goehr and Daniel Herwitz (New York: Columbia UP, 2006), 225-238.


⁴³Heyworth claims that this choice of costuming was dictated by economic necessity since the Kroll did not receive additional funds for costumes. See Heyworth, Klemperer I, 272-281; Levin, “Reading a Staging,” 47-71.
worked on the production at the end of 1930, but it was eventually abandoned due to problems with casting.\textsuperscript{44}

Dülberg’s abstract and rigorous designs came to signify the Kroll’s aesthetics of precision, clarity, and simplicity, but he was not the only designer to invent remarkable scenography on the operatic stage that, on one hand, proved to be proficient in alienating spectators or modern composers, but on the other, capable of appealing to the general audience.\textsuperscript{45} As well as Dülberg’s former student (and in the future Brecht designer), Teo

\textsuperscript{44} According to Heyworth, Dülberg dismissed these designs as a “misappropriation” of his talent; however, “paradoxically they stand among his most fascinating achievements in the subtlety of color and romantic aura that here pervades his severe, linear style.” Ibid., 358.

\textsuperscript{45} Similarly to Neher, Schlemmer’s designs for Schönberg’s \textit{Die glückliche Hand} (1930) were able to alienate the composer. See Evan Baker, “Arnold Schönberg als Regisseur?: \textit{Erwartung} und \textit{Die glückliche Hand}...
Otto, who was responsible for settings for twelve operas and for executing de Chirico’s designs for Křenek’s Leben des Orest (1930; see Fig. 1.10), Curjel also hired young and imaginative designers and artists such as Caspar Neher, Oskar Strand, Traugott Müller, Oskar Schlemmer, Wilhelm Reinking, and László Moholy-Nagy. They used the new aesthetics of Neue Sachlichkeit, Bauhaus’ principles of functionalism as well as applied various anti-illusionistic techniques to subvert the “culinary form” of opera, as Brecht once infamously affirmed, a form that “was a means of pleasure long before it turned into merchandise.” These radical solutions were aimed to salvage the dying genre, both aesthetically and interpretatively. The practices at the Kroll also gave the rise to what now is generally known as Opernregie, or Regietheater in opera.

No other opera house exceeded in the visual aesthetics that favored modernism, opting for anti-illusionistic settings, as did the Kroll Opera during the first half of the twentieth century. For example, for Stravinsky’s L’histoire du soldat (1928) Müller, Piscator’s designer, constructed an open stage that shocked the audience. He boldly confronted spectators with the anti-illusionistic technique of a stage crew changing the set in the open view, a practice otherwise becoming familiar in the theatre. The openness with which illusion was negated and the lack of pretense in attempting to recreate reality contradicted operatic staging traditions that the audience expected. Instead of typically lavish décor for Offenbach’s Les contes d’Hoffmann (1929) Moholy-Nagy created a

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radically innovative scenography, in which the constructivist sets coalesced the tenets of modernist spatiality: light, spaciousness, geometrical forms, along with projections appropriate for a modernist dream world (see Fig. 1.11). Like Holländer, it was an extremely controversial production since it “included film clips, a moving stage and ‘the first pieces of steel furniture on the opera stage,’” in the attempt to create a total theatre in an operatic context.48

Fig. 1.10. Giorgio de Chirico, curtain for Křenek’s Leben des Orest at the Krolloper in Berlin in 1930. As in his design for Diaghilev’s Le Bal (1929), in this piece de Chirico extended his interrogation of classicism to the opera. This later work is frequently overlooked in accounts of his work. Der Querschnitt 10, no. 3 (March 1930): 96.

Similarly estranging was a modern dress production of Rossini’s Il barbiere di Siviglia (1930), which Reinking devised together with the director Arthur Maria Rabenalt,

his notorious collaborator from Darmstadt. All these innovative strategies were too radical and predominately interpreted as a sacrilegious, which steered the rising conservative political factions towards accusations of cultural bolshevism and demands to close the opera. To this day Klemperer’s Kroll Opera—arguably the most adventurous house in operatic history—remains a unique site, where opera as a whole was subjected to systematic innovations that challenged traditional conventions of the medium.

As it is discernible from the discussion above, my synopsis of opera-scenographic history focuses on innovations, emphasizing new styles, key designers and essential productions, in order to trace the shifting number of key visual devices and approaches, including abstraction, light and color fields as well as variant dimensionality. However, it

49 Besides Barbiere there were few modern dress productions: Fledermaus (directed and designed by Franz Gross, 1928) and Falstaff (1931). There was also a plan for modern dress Handel’s Alcina, but it fell through.
is crucial to bear in mind that, even with these innovative threads of development, operatic scenography has continued to lag significantly behind theatrical developments and the dominant current has remained a representational and historicist one. This can even be seen in sets created by designers otherwise considered innovative, like Alfred Roller, Alexandre Benois, and Joseph Urban, who after a period of innovation settled into normative styles. The fate of becoming “academic” befell many designers, who continued his or her visual idiom without radical reinvention or choosing eclectic approaches to design. The majority of opera houses cultivated nostalgic historicism, like Galileo Chini’s sets for the world premiere of Puccini’s Turandot at La Scala in 1927, which continued the nineteenth-century pictorial scenic décors. Likewise, they often encouraged more decorative stylization, such as Urban’s Parsifal (1920; see Fig. 1.8) at the Metropolitan Opera. In addition, it is worth remembering that till the 1930s, and in some cases till the 1950s, the practice of assembling sets from a wide variety of stock settings in storage was widespread. Despite the occasional work of innovative designers

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50 Roller’s collaboration with Strauss’ librettist Hugo von Hofmannstahl resulted in one of the cherished, but of highly limiting creativity, designs for the premiere of Strauss’ Der Rosenkavalier (1911). By 1924 Benois’ style became basically academic, like his designs for Gounod’s Le médecin malgré lui and Phédon et Baucis (1924) for the Ballets Russes in Monte Carlo. Similarly Urban’s designs for the Metropolitan Opera can be seen as conservative. For example, Urban’s set for 1932 Elektra at the Met repeated Roller’s designs from 1909. As Dizikes states, “Urban’s work for the company was always facile, often charming, but no longer challenging.” John Dizikes, Opera in America: A Cultural History (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993), 367.

51 Compare with Teo Otto’s statements that influenced designers after 1945. Bablet, “Twenty years of scenography,” 37.

52 This production set the tone for Turandot’s staging. Alfred Roller’s sets at the Wiener Staatsoper, had a similar look and almost exactly the same looked the production in Covent Garden in 1927.

53 The practice of assembling sets for a new production from various sources (usually previous productions) was not only widespread in the early years of the twentieth century, but persisted well into the second half of last century. For example, at the Metropolitan Opera in 1953 Mstislav Dobujinsky created the settings for a new production of Boris Godunov using his previous sets from Khovanshchina (1950) and Un ballo in maschera (1940), while many designers in the 1950s utilized elements from the previous productions. Also
and contemporary painters, operatic staging remained traditional in its emphasis on the representational and maintaining an air of historicist accuracy.

Since the 1920s, scenography has been notorious for its dynamic proliferation of styles. This wide diversity is routinely described as eclecticism, but since this term has pejorative connotations, it is perhaps better to consider scenography as an unrestricted concomitance of infinite choices. The French theatre scholar Denis Bablet, who specialized in the contemporary stage design, once pinpointed its profuse heterogeneity as “the extraordinary diversity of contradictory styles,” coexisting and at times competing for the dominant place. Among others he listed the major styles such as monumental constructivism, aerial functionalism, selective realism, illustrative surrealism, abstract symbolism, etc. Bablet explained this inclination towards visual plurality of styles as being affected by the diversity of playwriting and directorial styles, the developments in the art sphere, and, frequently, by the economics. As designers generally create three types of sets—painterly, sculptural or architectural—they usually start with basic interpretative strategies that determine use of theatrical convention.

The situation on operatic stages after WWII is complex, since various styles co-exist together in equilibrium that now and then is put out of balance. At the outset, this plurality can be divided into three broad categories. First, there has been a continuation of a traditional illustrative décor whether directly historical or with stylized tendencies, especially for works deeply fixed in a distinctive milieu and period. This strand of design at first favored simple painted solutions and furnishings, but then moved into detailed sets,

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Peter Brook, when he revived *La bohème* at Covent Garden in 1948, had to use sets from stock scenery, dating from the turn of the twentieth century.

rich in historical and artistic references, often using painted scenery with three-dimensional elements. The examples of this rather traditional approach we can see in Alexandre Benois’ sets for *Macbeth* at La Scala in 1952 and Oliver Smith’s for *La traviata* at the Met in 1957. In effect, this quasi-realistic décor would dominate the key opera houses for a majority of the twentieth century as Zeffirelli gained recognition and popularity with his productions at Covent Garden in London (*Lucia di Lammermoor*, 1959) and at La Scala in Milan (*La bohème*, 1963).

Fig. 1.12. Jean-Pierre Ponnelle’s set for the world premiere of Hans Werner Henze’s *Boulevard Solitude* in Hannover in 1952. Ponnelle’s early design exhibits influences of French scenography with its lightness and wit. © Theatermuseum Hannover. Photograph: Kurt Julius.

Second, since totalitarian regimes put an abrupt end to experimentation in theatre and opera, affecting the development of arts and cultures across the spectrum, the return to these previously rejected scenic solutions or those deemed too radical and formalist was quite palpable. Although the conception of the theatrical space was highly
imaginative, scenography was not completely dissociated from historical reality. These sets are discernibly simple, neutral, spacious, but also dainty and witty. For example, at the Wiener Staatsoper Stefan Hlawa designed a constructivist set for Verdi’s *Troubadour* (1951), while Jean-Pierre Ponnelle’s sets for the world premiere of Henze’s *Boulevard Solitude* (1952) in Hannover were wittily spacious and functional with panels and frames suggesting sport equipment and furniture (see Fig. 1.12). Equally interesting but not as popular with the audiences were Rolf Gérard’s designs at the Met, including *Aida* (dir. Margaret Webster) and *Cosi fan tutte* (both 1951). At both the Met (designed by Lee Simonson, 1948) and La Scala (designed by Nicola Benois, 1950) Wagner’s *Ring Cycle* received a scenography belatedly informed by Appia’s renderings for Wagnerian operas. However, as we will see, in the context of Wieland Wagner’s innovations Simonson and Benois’ versions of Wagner’s tetralogy became epigonic, if not aesthetically obsolete. Nevertheless, this situation suggests that modernist ideas regarding operatic scenography had been only temporarily dormant and that designers continued to resurrect them, aided by advancing technologies, in particular famously so in daring designs of Josef Svoboda, Ralph Koltai, and John Bury, to name a few designers who persevered in modernist principles. In contrast to other types of operatic scenographies, modernist designs have encouraged unrestricted spatiality with constrained means of expressions, while often inviting or retaining some historical references.

Third, with anti-pictorial settings that clearly borrowed from Appia, Wieland Wagner offered a powerful transformation of operatic scenography that focused on the

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essential elements of an opera. Although not without its own complex relation to modernism, Wieland’s spatio-temporal ambiguity, contained within austere and monochromatic abstractions, defied the historical-aesthetic conventions that the audiences doggedly continued to uphold. Acting as both director and designer, Wieland Wagner became opera’s fundamental modernizer. His scenography for the New Bayreuth marks a clear caesura between representational and abstract settings.\(^{57}\) The composer’s grandson re-opened the Bayreuth Festival that had been closed since the summer of 1944 with a minimalist production of *Parsifal* (1951), in which no remnants of traditional Wagnerian scenery and props were left; instead he used lighting to create suggestive and symbolic abstract patterns as well as textural effects. He gave *Der Ring des Nibelungen* a similarly stripped-down aesthetic, totally purging the stage of any literalist trappings by 1954 (see Fig. 1.13). The use of ingenious lighting became another Wieland trademark, with which he was able to create very different abstract environments: evocative, suggestive, and symbolic. On one level, the asceticism of his sets matched post-war everyday austerity, in particular in the countries decimated by World War II.\(^{58}\) On another level, the New Bayreuth abstract version of scenography expounded a decisive break with tradition and an attempt at the de-politicization of Wagner’s oeuvre, which had been compromised by Wagner’s anti-Semitism, his musical associations with nationalism and Nazism, especially in his productions of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*,


in addition to a highly compromising close relationship between the Wagner family and Hitler himself.\textsuperscript{59}

![Fig. 1.13. Wieland Wagner’s abstract version of Der Ring des Nibelungen in Bayreuth in 1953. Here: quintessentially “dematerialized” scenery for Siegfried, Act III. © Bildarchiv Bayreuther Festspiele.](image)

Of his various stylistic phases, Wieland’s early 1950s ethereal abstraction is the most canonical; anchored in symbolism and built mainly with lighting—or, as Carnegy eloquently puts it, “uncompromising in its visual economy.”\textsuperscript{60} In his later productions, instead of suggestive indications, Wieland overtly employed symbolic images and forms, moving through the use of the stage as an imaginary space with simple sets and post-


\textsuperscript{60} Carnegy, Wagner and Art of the Theatre, 292.
modernist realism towards a more archetypal, primordial scenography, with sculpturally heavy sets and costumes (see Fig. 1.14).

Fig. 1.14. Wieland Wagner’s second staging of _Tristan und Isolde_ at the Bayreuther Festspiele in 1962. For this classical Oedipal drama, each act had a different monolithic sculpture, a symbolic totem of the destructive force of love. Here for Act I, Wieland placed a gigantic stylized ship’s prow at the back of the stage. © Bildarchiv Bayreuther Festspiele. Photograph: Siegfried Lauterwasser.

By the time of his untimely death in 1966, his abstract style was widely distributed and imitated, resulting in “a virtually uniform series of designs,” as notes Oswald Bauer, in the case of Wieland’s _Parsifal._61 However, as some claim, “his productions had lost their iconoclastic edge,”62 which the audiences had felt so strongly in the early 1950s in Bayreuth. The de-historicization of Wagner’s oeuvre that initially radicalized opera production under Wieland ultimately became a limitation. The entire

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trend toward anti-pictorial scenography that advances interpretative universalism through visual abstraction had the effect of eliding or negating the political and ideological underpinnings of an operatic work.⁶³

The resurgence of the pictorial realism, starting in the mid-1950s, is often seen as a reaction to the simplification of stage design after 1945; nevertheless, painted scenery had been continuously utilized in the staging of opera everywhere. This neo-historical movement, represented mainly by Italian designers such as Lila de Nobili, Franco Zeffirelli, Pier Luigi Samaritani, Beni Montresor, and Filippo Sanjust (see Fig. 1.15), many of whom also crossed over into directing, is in direct opposition to the practice in operatic scenography, discussed above, that emphasizes abstraction and symbolism and

⁶³ Carnegy, Wagner and Art of the Theatre, 292.
the elimination of history from operatic staging. This, however, seems too reductive, since in fact historicism never fully left the operatic stage; even when the sets were neutral, costumes frequently continued to have a strong historical basis even in innovative modern stagings.64

This traditional approach to recreating a physical milieu is related in various ways to trends in staging, in particular authenticity. For some, such lavish set design was intended to be “a deliberate evocation of a fantastic bygone era of opera.”65 Unlike painters working in the theatre and opera, neo-pictorial designers were more interested in resurrecting the traditional theatrical craft of illusionistic scenery painting than in treating the stage as a vast canvas. But that does not mean that all sets were just painted; on the contrary, designers used three-dimensional elements, which made the scene changes extremely difficult and time-consuming, like Zeffirelli’s Rigoletto with sets by Lila de Nobili at Covent Garden in 1964.66

However, the main proponents of this exact re-creation of stage directions for a production came from Italy, where this style had a long tradition that had been preserved without interruption since the nineteenth century. There were stylistic disparities, but the basic difference between Aleksandre Benois’ Traviata (dir. Mario Frigerio, 1951) or his son, Nicola’s, Macbeth (dir. Carl Ebert, 1952) and 1955 Nobili’s Traviata (dir. Luchino Visconti, 1955) and almost all of Zeffirelli’s productions whether in Milan, New York or

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64 For example, two productions of Verdi’s Macbeth at La Scala: 1964 (dir. Jean Vilar, sets Vilar & Mario Prassinos, cost. Prassinos) and 1975 (dir. Giorgio Strehler, des. Luciano Damiani) had medieval costumes and minimal settings.


66 See John Tooley, In House: Covent Garden, 50 Years of Opera and Ballet (London: Faber and Faber, 1999).
London, is one of an intensification focused on detail (see also Fig. 1.16). As William Weaver asserts, Visconti—who actually launched that style—helped to resurrect operas from the by-then forgotten repertory of bel canto, giving them unrivalled authenticity. His influence on opera production in Italy and elsewhere was vast. Before him, most Italian opera houses were content with routine productions, in a tired tradition; with his insistence on the individual character of each work, he renewed, indeed revolutionized, the approach to opera staging.

Fig. 1.16. Verdi’s La bohème, Act III, Metropolitan Opera in New York, 1981, directed and sets by Franco Zeffirelli, costumes by Peter J. Hall. Zeffirelli’s three-leveled set shows the crowds at the Latin Quartet with its infamous Café Momus. The curtain-raise for this set still evokes a round of applause. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera Archives. Photograph: Ken Howard, 2006.

Indeed, one has to recognize Visconti’s vast contribution to staging practices, in particular to acting, as well as to reviving forgotten works; however, Weaver, in his

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67 According to Guccini, Visconti’s “dilated form of naturalism” postdated the setting for this production by thirty years in order to avoid anachronisms and a distance from Verdi’s operatic practices. Ibid., 161.

hagiographical zeal to assess Visconti’s stimulus, perhaps overstates his case. A more
critical consideration suggests instead that Visconti’s need to re-create the atmosphere of
the early nineteenth century for the stage at the same level of detail as cinema—most
notably in his Senso (1954)—led to the petrification of staging conventions on operatic
stages. The grandiose productions that celebrate the picturesque conveyed to most people
a general sense of “operatic” by staging the excess of details. Although oriented and
informed by history, these staging were not able to provide a radical reinterpretation of
history or at least to put history into critical perspective. Neither were these
conventionalized settings able to reinterpret the medium of opera; they succeeded only in
fossilizing operatic performance. Nevertheless, these neo-historical sets for many years
dominated on operatic stages with audiences treasuring such settings.

Fig. 1.17. Ming Cho Lee’s set for Act I, scene 1 of Bellini’s I puritani at the Metropolitan Opera, 1976.
Lee created sets with basic units that recreated romantic landscape; these decorations were ideal for
The 1970s brought yet another wave of variety to operatic scenography, but a very prominent historicism lingered on in different forms. This historicism was quite palpable in early East German theatrical realism, most vividly advocated by Walter Felsenstein, but also at the Metropolitan Opera, where Zeffirelli set the tone for many years. For example, although well known for his collaboration with Joachim Herz, in particular for the radical interpretation of *The Ring* in Leipzig (1973-76), Rudolf Heinrich’s designs for the Metropolitan Opera and the Bayerische Staatsoper in Munich closely adhered to the traditional forms of operatic staging. Even Ming Cho Lee’s sets for Bellini’s *I puritani* (1976, dir. Sandro Sequi, costumes Peter J. Hall) were conventional (see Fig. 1.17). Similarly, Jean-Pierre Ponnelle’s productions have been frequently immersed in historical styles, although modified by his own interpretation that removes the sets from direct re-creation of a specific milieu. One could argue that the elements of the entrenched historicism remained visible also in Karl-Ernst Herrmann’s early operatic staging (in his fascination with the baroque technology and painted backdrops and costumes) as well as in the costuming for Robert Wilson’s first three operatic productions in the 1980s.

More significantly during the 1970s re-politicized and/or re-socialized stagings presented a challenge to both modernist and traditional stage design, a political turn which Ashman terms, “anti-Appian revolution.” The re-engagement with politics was visually conveyed in updated and modern-dress productions that used fragmented

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70 Ashman, “Producing Wagner,” 42.
elements of sets/scenery, concrete structures in combination with other anti-illusionistic techniques. In general, a majority of innovative stage designs created since the 1970s can be described broadly as postmodern design, which Aronson has defined as “the juxtaposition of contrasting and contradictory images, very conscious quotations of historical references, anachronistic uses of images from contemporary culture, and a disruption of aesthetically pleasing and unified designs.” The debates about postmodernism have led to the term being used by many critics as a catchall phrase to label or categorize non-traditional and unconventional designs. Although it precisely describes the variety of strategies used by designers, the term does not illuminate the aesthetics of operatic scenography or the shifts in the visuality within the past forty years. To this issue I will return shortly.

Generally, postmodern designers were frequent users of composite images, direct quotations, pastiche, and frequent anachronisms. This can be seen in the hallmark production of postmodern design: the Peduzzi/Chéreau centennial Ring at Bayreuth in 1976 (see Fig.1.18). Although the Bayreuth audience had witnessed a major evolution in staging Wagnerian operas with Wieland Wagner’s New Bayreuth from 1951, spectators were still heavily invested in more familiar aesthetics. With Chéreau’s Ring, the audience proved that its preconceptions and aesthetic tastes were deeply entrenched, and showed a willingness to police operatic conventions, but this time they were preserving Wieland’s symbolic abstractionism that since his death has been institutionalized at Bayreuth. It was not only the audience that was interested in preserving the status quo. Numerous musicians followed suit. One opera historian relates the scene:

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On opening night there were bloody brawls, Wolfgang Wagner's new wife had her dress ripped and another woman had her earring torn off—and the earlobe with it. There were death threats and bomb threats; friendships and marriages were said to have been broken. On many evenings that summer the shouting and catcalls followed Boulez and Chéreau into restaurants after the performance. Some of the big contributors, such as Siemens, were said to have threatened to withhold future support; the Friends of Bayreuth offered to bankroll entirely new production if Chéreau’s were scrapped. Wagner fundamentalists formed yet another group, the Aktionkreis für das Werk Richard Wagners, to fight the latest apostasy. And there was an open insurrection by the orchestra.  

Fig. 1.19. Richard Peduzzi’s set for Die Walküre at the Bayreuther Festspiele (1976-1980). The Valkyrie Rock is a variation on Arnold Böcklin’s famous painting The Isle of the Dead. Donald McIntyre as Wotan center-stage leaving Brünnhilde enveloped in the ring of fire. Screen capture.

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The clash between conservative and progressive factions in opera was again strongly manifested. The staging of Chéreau’s *Ring* once more highlighted the tension between modernization and conservatism that Wagner’s legacy continues to symbolize. However, over the next five years the shock subsided and Chéreau’s *Ring* had achieved the status of a work of genius with over an hour-long standing ovation and 100 curtain calls at the end of its run. It was also first televised *Ring* ever, as Carnegy notes, “opening up the *Ring* to millions when shown on television, when unprejudiced neophyte viewers discovered in it an almost *Dallas*-like appeal.” Eventually it was fully co-opted into mainstream opera, converted into a masterwork, a principal example of successful *Regietheater*.

Chéreau and his French team revolutionized the staging of a canonical masterpiece, which emphasized a political reading and introduced a new style of acting that is usually described—perhaps for lack of a better word—as naturalistic/realistic. The stage designer Richard Peduzzi did not settle for conventionally mythical settings, with singers wearing horn helmets and fur-skins, and he jettisoned symbolically abstract ambiances *à la* Wieland Wagner; instead his scenography suggested a modern world, which diachronically bridged Wagner’s era of the later first Industrial Revolution with our times through ingeniously anachronistic use of the setting’s elements, props and costumes, the final effect of which is sometimes described as anti-romantic.

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74 The team included Richard Peduzzi (stage designer), Jacques Schmidt (costume designer) and André Diot (lighting designer), with whom Chéreau had previously collaborated in the theatre.

In addition to the clear postmodern traits, Peduzzi’s scenography also exhibits strong tendencies to visual classicism and monumentalism, typical of productions directed by Giorgio Strehler at La Scala. Both of his designers—Ezio Frigerio and Luciano Damiani, with whom Strehler had collaborated previously in the theatre—created simple sets that retained elements of history either in architecture and/or in costumes, but which had particularly striking visual imagery. For example, within the medieval monumental architecture for the first Act of Verdi’s *Simon Boccanegra* (1971), Frigerio used a large image of a floating sailboat upstage center, to which two flights of

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*Fig. 1.20.* Ezio Frigerio’s set for Giorgio Strehler’s production of *Simon Boccanegra* at La Scala in Milan in 1971. In Act I he employed a floating boat as the iconic image upstage center. Screen capture.

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76 Ashman suggests that Peduzzi was influenced by the neo-Romantic work of the team Strehler/Frigerio in Milan, contradicting the label of anti-romanticism of the Chéreau/Peduzzi *Ring*. Ashman, “Producing Wagner,” 44.
broad stairs led. The set was lit in a soft and warm yellow light with no blue sky or sea to be seen, giving the scene a nostalgic atmosphere (see Fig. 1.20). Damiani used similarly poetic and metaphoric imagery for Verdi’s *Macbeth* (1975), creating empty spaces reminiscent of his theatrical oeuvre, with simple, but highly theatrical effects. For interior scenes he enclosed the stage with soaring copper walls, while the scenes in the phantasmagoric world were set up under a reddish-orange billowing veil suspended in the stalls. Underneath the silk fabric squatted the chorus of witches, living mounds covered in the same fabric. All three productions featured a typical 1970s predilection toward a limited palette of muted hues with sonorous color harmonies, and a preference to earthy tones, similar to late Titian’s paintings.

As we can see, the postmodern design for opera emphasizes the use of striking images with a certain degree of visual austerity. The images used in the productions moved from simpler symbols in the direction of images that visually interpreted the work. Although vaguely poetic and metaphorical images were acceptable, any more concrete and dramaturgically intense imagery (particularly prominent in the theatrical milieu of the German-speaking countries) could still cause a scandal, as with Andreas Reinhardt’s audacious set for Ruth Berghaus’ production of Rossini’s *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (1974) in Munich. As we can see, the postmodern design for opera emphasizes the use of striking images with a certain degree of visual austerity. The images used in the productions moved from simpler symbols in the direction of images that visually interpreted the work. Although vaguely poetic and metaphorical images were acceptable, any more concrete and dramaturgically intense imagery (particularly prominent in the theatrical milieu of the German-speaking countries) could still cause a scandal, as with Andreas Reinhardt’s audacious set for Ruth Berghaus’ production of Rossini’s *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (1974) in Munich. Reinhardt’s stage was dominated by a colossal female torso—a fragmented nude “brick” sculpture/tower where Rosina was kept captive in Rapunzel-like conditions. It was devised as a symbol of entrapped femininity, which the public found shockingly indecent, especially when during the overture Count Almaviva, singing a serenade to his beloved one, climbs it and ostentatiously touches the statue’s pubis, while Rosina opens

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the window located in the heart, but strategically positioned in the left breast (see Fig. 1.21). Reinhardt’s image was both concrete and symbolic. His scenographic concept was directly connected with the dramaturgy of the opera, but unlike the designs for Strehler’s productions, the iconographic image became conceptually central to the staging itself, allowing the image to direct the interpretation.

The associative functioning of such imagery is both quite concrete and polysemantic. Hans Belting’s concept of the anthropology of the image can elucidate the new function of images, whereby “…an ‘image’ is more than a product of perception. It is formed as the result of a personal or collective symbolization. Everything that occurs in the view or in the front of the inner eye, can be cleared in this way to an image or turn
into an image.” Consequently, by situating image production and reception within the changing social and cultural spheres, the responsibility of creating meaning is transferred to the spectator, fostering symbolic and metaphoric unequivocality, ambiguous multiplicity, and indeterminacy of meanings. The effect is often quite playful, in particular since the repository of iconographic imagery derives from dominant visual (mass medial) culture.

Alongside (and despite) these long-lasting tendencies towards historicism and pictorial realism that have continued to appear on operatic stages, key developments in contemporary operatic scenography have redefined the parameters of spectacular. As scenography for the opera has once again changed, so have the choices of the designers who have often foregone sumptuousness, opulence and lavishness; however, their designs still retain elements of grandeur and magnificence, and even extravagance. They still seek to delight and wonder, to enchant and to awe the spectators with inventive visual metaphors; but these tend to be aesthetically and iconographically bold, but often very simple, visual concepts within predominantly ascetic and undefined theatrical space rather than looking to overwhelm the audience with a plethora of detail. Through these concepts and using the symbolism of colors they visually and metaphorically express tensions and internal conflicts of opera, while reflecting transience and instability of the present reality.


Consequently, postmodernism that favors more concept-oriented imagery took center stage in the 1980s in operatic houses of the German speaking countries when designers such as Achim Freyer, Axel Manthey, Hans Dieter Schaal, Erich Wonder, and Hans Schavernoch rejected traditional forms of operatic scenography and allowed their visual concepts to define the production more effectively. However, the beginning of the 1990s marked a more definite, and more geographically dispersed departure from the older historicist idiom, as British, American and Canadian designers including Richard Hudson, Stefanos Lazardis, Maria Björnson, David Fielding, Antony McDonald, Alison Chitty, Nigel Lowery, Michael Levine, Robert Israel, George Tsypin and Paul Steinberg, to name a few, became associated with a new visuality. This moment is particularly important to recognize, since it is arguably the moment when designers finally discontinued fidelity to authentic places, and began to treat theatrical space as a manifestation of emotional energy.

The shift can be seen differently in various countries. For the United Kingdom—as Sutcliff argues—it was the retirement of an old fashion.80 In Austria, the change was above all a reaction against a post-war restoration: a distinctly fashionable staging of La clemenza di Tito directed by Ursel and Karl-Ernst Herrmann inaugurated the new Salzburger Festspiele in 1992, successfully departing from von Karajan’s festival and ethos. The Herrmanns’ production moved away from the standardized directorial style in staging opera seria and offered a coherent world with fashionable styled costumes. Robert Wilson’s three productions from 1991—Lohengrin, Parsifal, and Zauberflöte, created in Switzerland, Germany, France, and the US—in one decisive move established

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80 Sutcliff, Believing in Opera, 62.
his mature aesthetics in the opera, coalescing a visual style, as I will argue, that now sprawls globally in opera houses from Los Angeles to Moscow.

Nevertheless, this change was only partially visible in the key American opera house—one of the most important in the world—the Metropolitan Opera. Unlike other American opera companies—including Houston Opera House where Wilson’s Parsifal was co-produced—that were presenting daring productions (and similar to the situation in the 1920s and 1930s when the New Stagecraft was basically absent in New York, while, for example, Jones designed sets for the Philadelphia Opera Association), the Met has been a bastion of operatic conservatism. Only at the end of the 1990s, when the new international style was at its height, did productions such as Tim Albery’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream (1996), with its vividly bold aesthetic designed by Antony McDonald, Robert Carsen’s Eugene Onegin (1997), with simple sets by Michael Levine, and Wilson’s Lohengrin (1998) challenge traditional expectations of the American audience.

Still, it is essential to point out economic differences: the majority of European opera houses are state or locally subsidized while American opera is predominantly supported through individual endowments and run as a profitable business, not a cultural institution. Hence the catering to the audience’s tastes in the States is a more vital obligation. European houses can challenge audience tastes even at the price of scandal, without worrying about losing spectators. This recently became an even more tangible threat to the existence of many opera houses in the US, in particular with the closing of the New York City Opera in 2013. Although the Metropolitan Opera under Peter Gelb finally

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joined other top opera houses in fostering the new visual style with such key productions as Anthony Minghella’s *Madama Butterfly* (sets Michael Levine, costumes Han Feng, 2006), Willy Decker’s *La traviata* (designed by Wolfgang Gussmann, 2010; originally in Salzburg in 2005), William Kentridge’s *The Nose* (sets Kentridge & Sabine Theunissen, costumes Greta Goiris, 2010), and Dmitri Tcherniakov’s *Prince Igor* (2014), there has been a palpable backlash against that approach among more conservative audiences.  

In addition, this shift cannot be separated from global infrastructures of opera production. 1992 saw the first major transatlantic operatic co-production, Wilson’s *Parsifal*, presented in Hamburg and Houston. Before that there had been only occasional operatic productions, which travelled as a guest stagings at festivals or in other cities. Previously, the dominant model had been that of a revival: after a successful staging, a director—such as Wieland Wagner, Franco Zeffirelli, Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, and Otto Schenk—was invited to re-create that triumphant production. During the 1990s, this model changed to a new standard wherein co-productions are favored in order to share the costs of the staging, with performances planned just a few months apart, not several years.  

Recent decades have seen a shift in operatic visuality, culminating in a trend that could be described broadly as a new international style in operatic scenography—austere

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82 There are few surprisingly traditional productions stage at the Met; for example, the 2013 Tchaikovsky’s *Eugene Onegin* (dir. Deborah Warner, set Tom Pye, cost. Chloé Obolensky) and the 2012 Donizetti’s *L’elisir d’amore* (dir. Bartlett Sher, sets Michael Yeargan, cost. Catherine Zuber).

83 For example, Wilson’s *Parsifal* was staged first in March 1991 at the Hamburgische Staatsoper in Hamburg, and then presented in February 1992 at Houston Grand Opera. Similarly with Minghella’s *Butterfly*, where the official premiere took place at the English National Opera in London in November 2005, but which was also presented in Vilnius in March 2006, before it was staged at the Met in September 2006.
and monumental in the articulation of the theatrical space, but aesthetically bold in the use of color and light, stylizing and mixing elements of oriental and popular theatre in order to achieve greater theatricalization of the performative elements in a given production—a prominent if not hegemonic trend, associated in particular with a select group of designer-directors. For these scenographers, the stage is an autonomous space, not simply an environment or a décor, but an active element of operatic expression. But if the materials, lighting design, and palette of colors allow their scenography to move away from decorative realism and an emblematic approach to design, this is not to say that their scenography becomes detached from the production as a whole. On the contrary, their design can be even less separated from acting and singing: costume and movement is entirely incorporated into overall design and singers are frequently immobilized or their gestures highly stylized. Actors and singers, in other words, become one of the available scenic elements. On one level, this allows a greater visual coherence and flexibility. On another, however, it is a radical move in opera history, since it shifts the balance decisively from the musical to the theatrical elements of opera.

This visual and production style—epitomized by Robert Wilson’s aesthetic style (see Fig. 1.22), refined over a long career, which I analyze in the following chapter—might also be broadly understood in the context of the scenographic phenomenon that Arnold Aronson has identified and criticized in terms of “international chic.” His judgment of this globalized style points toward a particular contemporary combination of superficiality and formalism, a sheen of abstraction and color, leading to a place-less, non-specific and ultimately rather empty style. Originating in “the neo-formalist theatre of Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson,” Aronson argues that this style resonates
philosophically and culturally with notions of postmodern pastiche (Jameson) and simulacrum (Baudrillard). Instead of re-creating an identifiable or idealized place it presents “collages of form and image that signify without meaning,” engendering a futuristic, fictional world of disintegrated coherence, which is “sleek and beautiful, evocative and mysterious, yet ultimately shallow and unknowable and totally unenlightening.”

Fig. 1.22. Schönberg’s Erwartung at the Staatsoper Unten den Linden in Berlin in 1997, directed and designed by Robert Wilson, costumes by Frida Parmeggiani. A striking image, very simple and minimal, but designed down to the last detail. Photo © Monika Rittershaus.

Aronson’s astute observation of this new style and his ultimately negative assessment raise important questions about the epistemological weight and political orientation of such abstraction and aestheticism. However, while not shying away from

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84 Arnold Aronson, “(Sceno)Graphic Style,” in Looking into the Abyss, 83, 85.

85 This style marks a general shift in contemporary visuality that coincides with the Digital Revolution. Compare, for example, Hal Foster, Design and Crime: And Other Diatribes (London: Verso, 2002) and
evaluative questions—of individual works and designers, as well as the “movement” as a whole—I want first and foremost in this dissertation to investigate and analyze the oeuvres in which this international style came to the fore and gestated, adding nuance and detail to the analysis of this scenography and to the historical picture of its emergence. On one hand, this can be seen as a continuation of existing traditions, above all Appia’s ideas from the end of nineteenth century and Wieland Wagner’s operatic productions (rudimentary representation, symbolism, light, simplicity, open spaces). But, this style can be related as well to extra-operatic traditions, in particular in photography, hard-edged painting of the 1950s (Kenneth Noland, Ellsworth Kelly, and Frank Stella), sculptural minimalism of the 1960s (Donald Judd, Tony Smith, etc.), West Coast abstraction (Clyfford Still, Morris Louis, Edward Corbett, and James Turrell), and conceptual art. In addition, the other important inspirations that are most evident and most emphasized are surrealism and expressionism, but one could consider also the articulation of space in Francis Bacon’s painting and pop art experiments with color (Andy Warhol’s Marilyn). Similarly distinctive and mutually influential is contemporary architecture with such iconic artists as Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, and Rem Koolhaas. However, unlike the majority of postmodern architecture, this scenographic style does not repudiate modernism; rather, in the specific operatic context of its emergence, it renews modernism by giving it a new quality—the oneiric and ephemeral dimension of the images combined with the higher levels of abstraction—while rejecting the long-dominant historicist paradigm.

“You don’t have to listen to the words, because the words don't mean anything. You just enjoy the scenery, the architectural arrangements in time and space, the music, the feelings they all evoke. Listen to the pictures.”
Robert Wilson

“Space is the greatest enemy of all efforts at abstraction, and must therefore be the first thing to be suppressed in the representation.”
Wilhelm Worringer, Abstraction and Empathy

When Einstein on the Beach was performed at the Metropolitan Opera for two nights in November 1976, the house was sold out. The range of critical and audience responses to Robert Wilson and Philip Glass’s groundbreaking collaboration are notorious: many were irritated or annoyed, others found it utterly compelling. In the long run, with this performance Wilson and Glass’s careers and their cult status in contemporary cultural history were secured. However, what is often forgotten is that Einstein was not in fact a Met production. To present this revolutionary work at the Metropolitan Opera—to make operatic and performance history—Wilson and Glass had to rent the space, leading both artists into huge debt and severely straining their relationship. Not until 22 years later, in 1998, when Joseph Volpe presented Wilson’s version of Wagner’s Lohengrin (see Fig. 2.1), would Wilson return to the Met under its

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3 The amount of debt varies from source to source, ranging from $100,000 to $150,000. See Shyer, Robert Wilson and His Collaborators, 229; and Margery Arent Safir, ed., Robert Wilson: From Within (Paris: The Arts Arena, The American University in Paris, 2011), 104-106.
actual patronage.\textsuperscript{4} By then, Wilson’s name was firmly established and his minimalist aesthetics on the way to canonical status. In opera, by the late 1990s, his visual style remained central in challenging still-dominant historicist practices and paradigms, while also enabling him to play a key role—and often helping to consolidate—the new networks of a globalized opera business. However, at this point, there was a trans-Atlantic distinction: if in Europe his aesthetics had been assimilated for a long period of time, known and accepted by elite spectators in European houses, his productions in the US and Great Britain were—and to a degree still are—notorious for the reaction they still cause among the critics and the audiences as well as the singers.

It is in this broader context that Wilson’s official debut at the Metropolitan Opera must be regarded as a conscious attempt to re-import Wilson into the American operatic mainstream, as a figure—a force, even—combining cultural cachet with a still-effective shock value. Volpe’s hiring of Wilson was aimed at catching up with other operatic centers that were more advanced in a project of revitalization with renewed contemporary aesthetic approaches and controversial stagings. The management no doubt embraced the idea of Wilson as—by now—only a somewhat controversial auteur who would enable them to stir up its highly conservative audience. The production had been assiduously planned, with Ben Heppner, Deborah Voigt and Deborah Polaski cast as the principal

\textsuperscript{4} At the Met Wilson also presented Debussy’s oratorio \textit{Le martyre de Saint Sébastien (The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian)} in 1988 as part of the Paris Opera Ballet summer season during the Met off-season. Glass waited 16 years; the Metropolitan Opera commissioned a new opera—\textit{The Voyage}—to commemorate 500\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the (re)discovery of America that unlike \textit{Einstein} turned out to be conventional. Till the early 1980s \textit{Lohengrin} was a staple in the Met’s repertory, performed every year or every other season. In 1966 Met presented the unfinished production by Wieland Wagner that was interrupted by his untimely death. Then \textit{Lohengrin} was redone in 1976 (dir. August Everding, sets Ming Cho Lee, cost. Peter J. Hall) and performed for the last time during the 1985/86 season. Wilson’s \textit{Lohengrin} was a revised version of his Zürich production. Tickets for this now rarely performed opera—as \textit{The Playbill} reported—were hard to get and several shows were sold out. There were seven performances in the 1997-1998 season, and another seven the following season (all together fourteen during just 1998), and only six in 2006.
stars, and it is very unlikely they expected quite the vehement reaction to Lohengrin’s premiere. The vivid description of Alex Ross—then a young music critic of The New Yorker—is worth quoting at length:

A remarkable sound came from the audience during a recent curtain call at the Metropolitan Opera. To call it booing doesn’t do it justice: this was a penetrating moan, a wailing of mostly male Wagnerites in spiritual pain. It descended on Robert Wilson, the director of a new production of Lohengrin, as he took a bow with the visibly shell-shocked singers who had moon-walked and baby-stepped across the stage all evening, in accordance with his designs. The noise was unearthly enough to sound like the reawakened and newly articulate spirit of the late Sir Rudolf Bing, who had planned the modern Met more as a showcase for big voices than as a showcase for big ideas. A change has come over the Met in the last few years: the house that made a cliché of the phrase “bastion of conservatism” has become, if not a hotbed of radicalism, then a place that gets an occasional thrill out of risk.5

Fig. 2.1. Wagner’s Lohengrin, Act III at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, 1998, directed and sets by Robert Wilson, costumes by Frida Parmeggiani. A stripped-down version with Ben Heppner (Lohengrin) on the left, and Deborah Voigt (Elsa) on the far left. 1998. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera Archives (Photograph Winnie Klotz).

The vigorous chorus of disapproval was not just orchestrated by spectators dismayed with Wilson’s interpretation but organized by a clique of orthodox Wagnerites on opening night. But the fate of Wilson’s Lohengrin was quite different from other “unorthodox” productions at the Met, which were booed at the premiere and rapidly removed from the repertoire. Rather than oblivion, canonization awaited Wilson’s staging. Soon, during the subsequent performances, the audience started to applaud rather than boo, and during its revival in 2006 the production actually received ovations, entirely dispelling, it seemed, the initial suspicion and ambivalence. In a rapid turn-around, his high-concept Lohengrin had become a masterpiece.

On one level, this passage from outsider to insider, from disruptive innovation to revered classic, describes a familiar trajectory: the shock of the new wears off, and becomes, in turn, an aesthetic norm, even a model. The vanguard is assimilated. In Wilson’s case, the sheer speed of his acceptance is significant, as well as the specifics of his style and its route into the mainstream of global opera-scenographic aesthetics. He is not simply one example of an important shift in operatic scenography; his aesthetic has

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7 In recent years booing at the Met has been occurring more often due to the distinctly theatrical artistic approach of the new general manager Peter Gelb, but was at the time a rarity. Previously the boos and bad press put out of the repertory Francesca Zambello’s Lucia di Lammermoor (1992, sets John Conklin, cost. Martin Pakledinaz) and Mark Lamos’ I Lombardi alla prima crociata (1993, sets John Conklin, cost. Dunya Ramicova). The audience and critics were divided regarding Robert Carsen’s Eugene Onegin (1997, des. Michael Levine), although over the years they started to warm up to it—as they did towards Wilson’s Lohengrin. (In 2013 it has been replaced by a more traditional production—dir. Deborah Warner, sets Tom Pye, cost. Chloé Obolensky.) See also Erick Neher, “On the Booing of La sonnambula,” The Hudson Review 62, no. 2 (Summer 2009).

8 This rather late debut of an American director famous abroad only partially amended the highly problematic personal politics at the Met during the 1980s and 1990s. For many years, the Met has refused to present productions directed by the most famous American opera directors like Robert Wilson, Peter Sellars and David and Christopher Alden. For his Met debut Sellars had to wait till 2011 (Nixon in China) and David Alden till 2012 for his original production Un ballo in maschera (debuted as a stage director in a revival of Otto Schenk’s production of Fidelio in 1980).
been a driving force in that shift, a key influence as well as a quintessential example.

Wilson, a student at the Pratt Institute in the early 1960s, has to be seen as the major influence and promulgator of a new scenographic style around the world, contesting conventional operatic practice of pseudo-realistic and plot-driven representation, while still embracing opera’s emphasis on grand spectacle, striking images and visual astonishment. In more specifically scenographic terms, a number of the defining elements of his style have percolated into the work of other designers, contributing to a distinct and identifiable stylistic tendency within contemporary operatic staging practice.

As the plurality of styles continues to proliferate, Wilson’s scenography stands out for its singularly unified visual orthodoxy. His formalist tendencies have not only challenged an opera industry hitherto dominated by realism, they have also had a broad effect on the way in which visual artists—in the broadest sense of that category—think about opera as a medium. His scenographic disruptions mirror the discontinuity of the process of modernization that was left unfinished in the operatic world. Consequently, for me, Wilson’s role in opera is that of a devil’s advocate. What is significant above all with Wilson as an operatic director-designer is his particular relation to the American avant-garde: while he emerged from the 1960s avant-garde, he helped to define the 1970s American avant-garde theatre. His approach to design neither represents a straightforward rejection of the frame (as so often in modern/avant-garde design) nor does it approach a postmodern folie du voir of an endless eclecticism. His visual aesthetic is, of course, far removed from realistic referentiality, tending rather to a formalist and geometric abstraction. On the other hand, he has consciously searched for large theatres with proscenium frames, although he never really breaks the frame; in fact, he does the
opposite, deliberately embracing a quite traditional theatrical shape and form. In terms of operatic visuality, he most closely continues Wieland Wagner’s scenography, with its emphasis on quiet, hieratically constrained emotions played in abstract spaces defined by light rather than built scenery. His refusal to endow any text with a definite interpretation and the deliberately acting against the emotional aspect of music posit the opera in a productive discourse.

In general, despite his prolific output and his global reach, Wilson’s role in opera has not yet been adequately dealt with in either theatre studies or opera studies, with the most notable exception of Einstein on the Beach. With some exceptions, scholarship on Wilson’s theatrical work has continued to overshadow his operatic output. Theatre scholars are far less interested in opera and musicologists have only recently started to pay attention to staging and current performance history. Although many are now available on DVD, Wilson’s operatic productions continue to be comparatively little known or at best mentioned only briefly by theatre and opera scholars. Therefore, in this chapter, I focus on opera within Wilson’s oeuvre, examining the particularities of his style, its development over time—including changes in scale and ambition—and its relation to broader developments in the operatic medium. I argue that Wilson’s stylistic innovation in opera represents a radical reforming tendency, on a par with Chéreau’s

centennial *Ring* (1976). The word “radicalism” is not inappropriate: Wilson’s significance within operatic design has been underestimated, not least because of the critical backlash against his visual formalism, now often criticized as having dissipated into an empty aestheticism. This has occluded the innovative aspects of his approach to the opera and its impact on the aesthetics of global opera.

To make this case in this chapter, I undertake a close analysis of Wilson’s work as an operatic designer-director. I consider first the place and function of opera in Wilson’s own oeuvre, while also mapping out his how his choice of productions contributed to a reform of the medium, not least through a revision and enlargement of the canon. In the subsequent section, I analyze his early productions from the 1980s, centering on his interpretation of Charpentier’s *Médée* (1984), the first staging of the work since 1700, and Strauss’ *Salome* at La Scala (1987), which quite radically unsettled the medium from within. Here I emphasize the reformist avant-gardism of Wilson’s separation and recombination of vision and music, which, I argue, not only recalibrates the audience experience of the visual presentation before them, but also of the music itself. These productions, however, are not yet typically Wilsonian. Therefore, in the subsequent section I turn to a selected taxonomy of Wilson’s abstract operatic scenography and its specific lexicon of customary effects, in particular the question of geometry and the role of the light in articulating space. His abstract aesthetics and different devices, which Wilson supplies repeatedly in his operatic *mise-en-scène*, offer an alternative approach that allows discovering opera anew, and in particular the classic repertoire pieces,

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affecting the spectators’ attitudes and approaches to viewing. More precisely, I argue, his aesthetic idiom of geometric abstraction revises practices of looking: limiting the amount of visual stimuli compels the spectators to hear music, affecting the relationships between seeing and hearing. Wilson, in creating a hallmark visual style, I suggest, frequently sanctions new space for the music itself.

PART I: Turning to Opera

No other American theatre director in the past forty years has received more worldwide recognition than Robert Wilson. He has been notorious mainly as an avant-garde theatre auteur and as such his career and achievements are renowned. But he has also been a highly committed opera designer-director, with a very large body of work, engaging both classical and modern operas (so far he has produced over 45 different works, not counting revivals). In fact, since the 1990s, opera has been his preferred medium. Moreover, Wilson’s operatic output has been global in reach and scope. It is not simply that his operatic productions have been seen all over the world, but in almost every important opera house on the globe: in France, Germany, Italy, but also the US, Russia, Japan, Brazil, and many more. The very conception of these productions has been international and global in new ways—ways that are, as I will explore in detail in the course of this chapter—inseparable from the specifics of his aesthetic style. Thus, his

11 The scholarship on Wilson is extensive, but quite patchy and strongly affected by Wilson’s penchant for automythologization. The basic source about Wilson’s early career is Stefan Brecht’s The Theatre of Visions: Robert Wilson (1978), but Laurence Shyer’s seminal work Robert Wilson and His Collaborators (1989) is so far the only volume which objectively attempts to assess Wilson’s work through a series of interviews with his various collaborators presenting both the assets and shortcomings of his work as well as his personality. Arthur Holmberg’s eloquent but still hagiographic The Theatre of Robert Wilson (1996) offers behind-the-scenes insights into Wilson’s directing style but lacks scholarly rigor. Maria Shevtsova’s Robert Wilson (2007) is largely confined to an analysis of Einstein on the Beach. All this is supplemented by many articles and book chapters, including coffee-table-books with some insightful essays by Franco Quardi and Robert Stearns (1998), as well as Miguel Morey and Carmen Pardo (2003), and, recently, in Robert Wilson: From Within (2011).
Parsifal was among the first transatlantic co-productions, with the expenses shared between the Hamburgische Staatsoper and the Houston Grand Opera (1991-1992), which Plácido Domingo championed at the Los Angeles Opera since 2005.

Unlike most opera directors, Wilson stages a given opera only once, creating a single definitive version, which changes very little from one revival to the next. This makes them a more easily transportable product, offering investors a reliable out-of-the-box product. Stagings like his Madama Butterfly (1992), initially produced for the Opéra national de Paris, continue to “travel”—they can be seen in a variety of houses, from Paris to Los Angeles (see Fig. 2.2). Indeed, sometimes a Wilson production is conceived from the very beginning specifically as a touring piece—as the newly updated Einstein
on the Beach, which recently (2012-2014) went on a global odyssey from Montpellier and London through Toronto, New York, and Mexico City, then to Hong Kong and Melbourne with its final performances in Paris and Berlin. The financial demands of producing Wilson’s stagings are notoriously high; still opera managers want to present the widely acclaimed director (or perhaps the Wilson “brand”) to their audiences. Unlike most theatres in the US, the subsidized European theatres and opera houses can afford it. Contemporary institutional conditions of the opera thus provide Wilson with a network that effectively disseminates his aesthetics. This network serves Wilson, but as his work is one of the factors that forms the network, the relationship is mutual and reciprocal.

**Wilson and opera**

Given Wilson’s penchant for the total work of art and his interest in theatre as an acoustic space, it is unsurprising that he should have turned so emphatically toward opera. For Erika Fischer-Lichte such a turn of events was highly foreshadowed in his previous work.¹² Andrzej Wirth implies that when Wilson started to work in the opera in the early 1980s he was not interested in text-oriented theatre; rather he was, perhaps paradoxically, more attracted to the words being sung than spoken, in particular to the operatic arias as a form of communication without feedback, where the meaning is communicated through music.¹³ However, in parallel to his attitude to mainstream theatre, Wilson refused to accept the aesthetics of conventional opera.¹⁴ Despite this aversion, he chose to stage

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¹⁴ As he reminisces, “It was not until my early 20s that I first got to go to the theatre. … I went to Broadway plays and I didn’t like them and still don’t for the most part, and I went to the opera and I didn’t like that either, and I still don’t for the most part.” Wilson. Quoted in Arent Safir, *RW Within*, 317.
operas in opera houses, even in the most traditional like Milan’s La Scala and New York’s Metropolitan Opera, but he has rejected reactionary historicism and psychologism.

We can identify two phases of Wilson’s opera productions, distinguished by his relationship to the operatic canon. In his earlier phase, Wilson was instrumental in developing and producing new operas including, of course, Einstein on the Beach, a jazz opera, Cosmopolitan Greetings (1988), with Allen Ginsberg’s text, and the first version of Louis Andriessen’s De Materie (1989), collaborating with such composers as Gavin Bryars, Luigi Nono and Tania León. His production of Giacomo Manzoni’s Doktor Faustus, based on Thomas Mann’s novel, at La Scala in Milan in 1989, was crucial in asserting Wilson’s position in European opera. Thus, his engagement with new opera is particularly important considering the extensive reduction in the production of new works for opera since the turn of the twentieth-first century. However, since 2000 Wilson has shifted his focus and has largely ceased creating and staging new works per se.\(^\text{15}\) Instead he has been engaged in enlarging of the operatic canon, first by reviving works previously considered marginal, including early operas by Monteverdi, and, second by staging works regarded as unstageable, including Janáček’s rarely staged Osud (2002) and Strauss’ underperformed work Die Frau ohne Schatten (2003). Third, he has been producing non-theatrical music compositions such as Bach’s oratorio St. John’s Passion (2007).

Resistance against opera’s conventions, in particular its performative conventions, has driven Wilson to recast it in his own aesthetics, reaching towards a more and more

\(^{15}\) With the exception of The Life and Death f Marina Abramović (2011). Recently Wilson has been working with Phil Kline and Jim Jarmusch on a new opera entitled Tesla (or The Life and Times of Nikola Tesla). Helmut Lachenmann’s Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern (The Match Girl, 2013) was his first contemporary opera that was previously staged by someone else; its world premiere directed and designed Achim Freyer in 1997 in Hamburg.
diverse canon. As Holmberg explains, “opera helped [Wilson] to make the transition to
the classics.” Unfortunately, Holmberg neglects to notice that besides learning to work
with the Aristotelian model of drama, Wilson was challenging and changing the medium
and its aesthetics. In choosing operas from the canon, Wilson was at first carefully
selective, tending to opt for works that are poetic, static, and not plot-driven. A few key
works came to embody the quintessence of his aesthetic style of heightened abstract
formalism: Gluck’s *Alceste* and *Orphée et Eurydice*, Wagner’s *Parsifal* and *Lohengrin*,
Puccini’s much-loved lyrical opera *Madama Butterfly*, and Debussy’s *Pelléas et
Mélisande*. However, recently Wilson has extended this style more broadly in the
operatic canon, producing more action oriented works, including an ambitious staging of
Wagner’s *Ring*, as well as Verdi’s operatic staples *Aida* (2002) and *Macbeth* (2012), the
most famous French grand opera, Gounod’s *Faust* (2008), Weber’s intrepid masterpiece
*Der Freischütz* (2009), and Bellini’s most popular *bel canto* piece, *Norma* (2011).

A broad consensus of scholars and critics argues that the first important group of
Wilson’s most original works came in the first decade of his career, a time when he
created new works, mostly his own. The second nucleus of Wilson’s highly praised
output involves his close collaboration with the German playwright Heiner Müller. As
with Wilson’s early productions, this collaboration has been extensively studied in the
academic scholarship. The general tendency among scholars, in particular American

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17 There are several dissertations written primarily on his collaboration with German playwright Heiner Müller, probably the most challenging and fruitful work of Wilson’s later period. For example, Dean Robert Wilcox, “The Language of Visual Theatre: Sign and Context in Josef Svoboda, Meredith Monk, and Robert Wilson” (University of Washington, 1994), Matthew Brett Griffin, “Text and Image in Heiner Müller’s theater collaborations with Robert Wilson” (New York University, 1999), Shahida Manzoor, “Chaos Theory and Robert Wilson: A Critical Analysis of Wilson’s Visual Arts and Theatrical
and British ones, has been to acknowledge Wilson’s groundbreaking approach to theatre, above all from the 1970s through the mid-1980s, but then to claim that his later productions border on mannerism. Conversely, German scholarship on Wilson is in general positive and much more approving. In his influential book *Postdramatic Theatre*, Hans-Thies Lehmann emphasizes Wilson’s significance in the theatre (while, significantly, leaving out Wilson’s contribution in reforming opera):

> Over the last thirty years hardly any theatre practitioner has changed the theatre and the scope of its means and at the same time influenced the possibilities of reimagining theatre as much as Robert Wilson. Certainly, he has not been spared the common fate whereby in his later works the theatrical means that had once, in their freshness, revealed an epochal theatre dream lose much of their magic, as they become predictable and are employed, at times, in a merely craftsman-like, slightly mannerist fashion. But this does not detract from the fact that it was Wilson who in many ways invented the most far-reaching “response” to the question of theatre in the age of media and who simultaneously radically broadened the scope for changed conceptions of what theatre can be. In the meantime the subterraneous as well as the obvious influence of his aesthetic has filtered through everywhere, and one can say that theatre at the turn of the century owes him more than any other individual theatre practitioner.\(^\text{18}\)

Like other avant-garde American directors or groups, Wilson’s style has been elevated from “experimental” to the mainstream, considered still innovative but domesticated enough that it can appeal to the mass audiences.\(^\text{19}\) Wilson’s “symbolic capital” has become almost mass-produced leading to its conspicuous consumption and consequently frequent critique of his aesthetics as abstract essentialism of pretty but “hollow images,” as, for example, the Marxist scholar Colin Counsell suggests in his

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seminal book *Signs of Performance*.\(^{20}\) Wilson’s apolitical approach, eclecticism, and ultimate focus on the visual pleasure of images he conjures onstage have frequently left theatre critics and scholars questioning the quality of his theater.\(^{21}\) Music journalism frequently shares that view. According to the British music critic Andrew Clark, Wilson uses “the same vocabulary of hieratic gestures, the same artful lighting, the same pseudo-oriental atmosphere, the same mixture of naiveté and sophistication. As each production unfolds it is hard to discern any sense of engagement with a new or different set of ideas.”\(^{22}\) Consequently, in terms of theatrical criticism, Wilson’s visual aesthetics are frequently dismissed as vacuous ritual.\(^{23}\)

Although music and theatre criticism argues that Wilson’s recent productions, both in the theatre and the opera, are failures, close analysis does not support such a conclusion. His first opera stagings—from Charpentier's *Medea* (1984) to Strauss' *Salome* (1987)—gesture toward a process of radical reform of operatic performance. Like Wieland Wagner in the early 1950s, Wilson compellingly reintroduced pure geometrical abstraction on the operatic stage, most notably starting with the key productions in 1991: Mozart’s *Zauberflöte* and Wagner’s *Lohengrin* and *Parsifal*. He does this in a specific

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historical moment when abstract painting had been pronounced dead.\textsuperscript{24} Abstraction is thus a “residual cultural form”—to use Raymond Williams—in contrast to dominant and emergent forms and/or works.\textsuperscript{25} The residual form is still available and significant and can be absorbed into the dominant practices, as happened with abstraction on the operatic stages in the 1990s and 2000s. Moreover, Wilson’s insistence on recurrent casting of different works from the operatic repertoire according to his stylistic aesthetics, in which he promulgates his approach to the performative arts, can be seen as a persistent form of modernist aesthetic, refusing to succumb to the realistic conventions reinforced by cinema, television, and Broadway theatres.

**PART II: Reforming Opera**

Beginning with the groundbreaking five-hour long *Einstein on the Beach* in 1976, Wilson set out to reform opera radically, but since the mid-1980s he has instead done it systematically. The main features of his reform were anti-naturalistic settings; an immobilization of the singers; the formalization of the performers’ gestures, which do not illustrate the words but respond selectively to specific moments in the music; the transferring of the protagonists’ movement to the mobile chorus or actors/dancers; a complete removal of the chorus from the stage; incorporation of non-musical elements; and, separating the audible from the visual. These devices were intended to enhance what the audience sees and hears. In addition, Wilson unsettled the sanctity of the operatic text (score and libretto), supplementing the original texts with new ones, while seeking to


subvert the key aspect of live performance by using pre-recorded music. His reforms can be called a deconstruction of operatic practices.

**Restraining Baroque Extravaganza: Charpentier’s *Médée***

Wilson’s official operatic debut in 1984 at the Opéra de Lyon consisted of two different productions dealing with the Greek myth of Medea, the foreign sorcerer who, betrayed by her husband, kills her own children in revenge. This issue—a Medea complex—had interested him before, most distinctly in *Deafman Glance*. Wilson paired a recently rediscovered eighteenth-century opera *Médée* by Marc-Antoine Charpentier, with a newly composed opera *Medea* by Gavin Bryars, which were performed on alternate evenings. Both productions had simple sets and historic costumes, which perpetuated a distinct sense of antiquity. However, the design for *Médée* was more abstract: just a bare stage and drops painted like Wilson’s drawings (a practice that he continues throughout his career), while for Bryars’ *Medea* it contained realistic elements: a house, four columns and a tree.

Wilson’s *Medée* was the first staging of Charpentier’s opera since 1700 and the first text of a person other than himself that he produced. He replaced the prologue—an allegorical paean to a seemingly peace-loving Louis XIV that he saw as inhibiting music

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26 Before actually staging an opera *per se*, Wilson produced “a dramatization of Negro spirituals”—*Great Day in the Morning*—a musical arrangement of gospel songs with an American soprano Jessye Norman, at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris in 1982. That music event staged to the texts written by someone other than Wilson predates all the other non-Wilsonian productions.

27 Looking for broader spectrum of reference, Wilson often paired a classical operatic work with a contemporary opera or an operatic piece with a theatre play that were based on the same myth but presented it from a different perspective. Holmberg, *Theatre of Robert Wilson*, 51.

28 After its Parisian premiere in 1693, *Médée* was staged in Lille in 1700; however, the run was cancelled because a fire destroyed the scenery. Afterwards the opera fell into negligence for centuries. A few months before Wilson’s staging, William Christie, American conductor and artistic director of Les Floriantes, recorded it, but he was unable to stage it until much later—in 1993 in Paris.
and libretto from conveying human passions and emotions—with an episode from the 
*CIVILwarS* and relegated the original music to the background.\(^2^9\) Moreover, instead of 
the music being performed live from the orchestra pit, it was prerecorded and transmitted 
through the speakers accompanied by other sounds and noises, which do not normally 
appear in the opera.\(^3^0\) During this new prologue the changes in the light signified the time 
of the day as well as places and main events in life. For example, the olive tree 
epitomized everyday life in Colchis, while the canopy of the funeral procession denoted 
death. The prologue ended with a farewell symbolized by the ship from which Medea 
throws the ashes of her brother into the sea.

The spectacular staged parade included Louis XIV, General Lee, the steamroller, 
the first automobile, the triumphant Medea and her dragon wagon, and children with 
machine guns (see Fig. 2.3). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Wilson’s innovations caused uproar 
among the spectators. Nonetheless, some commentators welcomed the innovation, as 
John Rockwell from *The New York Times* in his review:

> …this was one of Mr. Wilson’s more riveting exercises, capped by such images as Medea bursting through a jagged fissure, her hair in wild disarray and surrounded by swirling smoke and turquoise lighting; or by one of Mr. Wilson’s favorite recent characters, Robert E. Lee (his appearance provoked the malcontents to their most frenzied outbursts) seated like a statue on a charger that gradually began to glow from within, X-ray fashion, the skeleton eerily outlined.\(^3^1\)

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\(^2^9\) The project coordinator Robert Applegarth recalls that Wilson adapted a scene from the French section of *the CIVILwarS* (Act II, scene b) in which Robert E. Lee appears astride his horse Traveller. For the purposes of the French opera the Confederate general was remodeled after an equestrian statue of Louis XIV in Lyon. Lee is the ultimate symbol of the Southern aristocracy and especially Southern chivalry and as such a figure in the interesting relationship between the Sun King and the French court of Charpentier’s era. See Wirth, “Wilsons Weg,” 17; Shyer, *Robert Wilson and His Collaborators*, 278.

\(^3^0\) Similar extra sounds were used by Freyer in *Freischütz* (1980) and Herrmann in *La finta giardinera* (1986), but they didn’t use pre-recorded music to replace live music.

Fig. 2.3. Charpentier’s Médee at Opéra de Lyon in 1984, directed and designed by Robert Wilson, costumes by Franca Squarciapino. Instead of the traditional prelude, Wilson inserted an episode from his CIVILwars depicting General Lee on his charger, Traveller. Courtesy of The Byrd Hoffman Water Mill Foundation (Photograph Gérard Amsellem).

Here we see Wilson exposing the limits of opera as a medium as well as his use of incongruous images drawn from a wide array of cultural memory. As a counterpoint to the core of the opera, the prologue signals the larger issues at stake here: ideology, history and memory.\(^{32}\) Although Wilson attempted to draw parallels between Charpentier’s Médee and the modern world, presenting possible visual adjustments to the contemporary sensibility, the audience found the producer’s interference with the original libretto, in particular the new prologue, unsettling—as noted above—both visually and musically. In his review Wirth suggests that in the staging of Charpentier’s opera,

“Wilson accepted the primacy of the libretto sung as plain text and the accompanying

role of music…but the figures are understood not as characters, rather as singers, who convey their vocal qualities in the text.”

Nevertheless, in this staging of Charpentier’s Médée we have a precedent, in which the director alters the sacrosanct score, something that Clemens Risi and Gundula Kreuzer—building on Barbara Beyer’s observations—see as a recent transition within the Regietheater.

In sharp contrast to other versions of the myth, in Thomas Corneille’s libretto Medea is more human. She is furious and vengeful, but also full of pain. Only when everything else fails does she retreat to sorcery. Building on Corneille’s humanization of Medea, Wilson framed the action from a contemporaneous perspective as if seen by two women dressed in modern clothes. Cindy Lubar and the French actress Evelyne Didi were having a picnic on a white platform downstage left (see Fig. 2.4). They played cards, knitted, read, peeled vegetables, and plucked a dead bird, similar to what a baroque audience might have done, but they executed these actions in slow motion. As Wilson recalls, “Near the end of the first act, they left the platform and a black-hooded mystery man appeared and went through the motions of stabbing these two people who weren’t there. And it was never clear who the two performers were. Were they the children? Were they the public watching the performance?”

As with the new prologue, spectators

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33 Wirth, “Wilsons Weg,” 17. Original text: “Wilson akzeptiert in der alten Oper das Primat des Librettos als gesungener Klartext und die begleitende Rolle der Musik. …die Figuren sind aber nicht als Charaktere, sondern als Sänger begriffen, die ihre stimmlichen Qualitäten im Text vermitteln.”


and critics found this temporal intrusion and extraneous mimed action objectionable, considering it out of place, incomprehensible and lacking any connections with the major theme, but the actresses’ performances received ample applause at the end.37

Fig. 2.4. Médée. Two contemporary women picnicking downstage while the tragedy takes place in the background. Courtesy of The Byrd Hoffman Water Mill Foundation (Photograph Gérard Amsellem).

In addition, Wilson removed the ballet scenes and instead of standard blocking and gesticulation he used slow-motion choreography, supplemented with gestures based on antique sculpture. This typically Wilsonian strategy resulted in a production conceived as a series of tableaux with a dominant classic look of antiquity, underscored by Herzog’s costuming. In the final scene of Wilson’s production, Medea raises above the stage, eventually becoming “a 30-foot-tall totem, her robe stretched symmetrically below her like a pyramid,” engulfed by water and fire on a painting instead of projection.38


38 Rockwell, “Médée Paired with Medea.”
Consequently, the staging was restrained, leaning more towards Gluck’s tradition of solemn and meditative works than towards a grand baroque operatic tragedy with its excess of visual extravaganza and stage machinery. Instead of recreating the decorative surplus typical for the seventeenth century Wilson complicated and subverted the opera with images that had greater but simultaneously more nuanced cultural and historical analogies which would resonate with contemporary audiences, even though the new temporal axes that framed the production in the new prologue and in the core of Charpentier’s work unsettled the spectators. As with Einstein, Wilson attempted to change the image of the classical opera and broadened its definition, inviting a direct cross-pollination with the theatre and consequently inducing a hybridization of the genre.

**Subverting the Mainstream: Strauss’ Salome**

In Richard Strauss’ Salome at La Scala, Milan, in 1987, Wilson went even further in reforming the medium. This was his first mainstream opera, but there was nothing mainstream about his staging. Although it is frequently cited as successful and remarkable, the immediate audience’s reaction was still extremely violent, similar to the protests that were incited by Luca Ronconi’s interpretation of Wagner’s Ring at La Scala (1973-74, design Pier Luigi Pizzi). The radical difference with traditional opera aesthetics was the separation of music from acting literally and visually. Wilson’s intentions were so unusual that soprano Eva Marton, contracted to sing the title role, withdrew from the production when she heard about the staging concept. Replacing Marton, the Spanish

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39 In fact this was supposed to be a concert performance, but in its final version the staging came to take precedence over the pure musical performance.
soprano Montserrat Caballé, famous for her *bel canto* parts, sung the title role. Wilson split the role of Salome—and other parts too—into multiple doubles and intertwined the opera’s action with the one from *Alice in Wonderland*, a familiar symbol of the loss of childhood innocence. Hence, Salome was intended not only to be portrayed by a singer but also by four additional actresses depicting her different personalities, including an Alice in a girlish white Victorian dress (see Fig. 2.5), a sexually provocative temptress in lingerie, a clairvoyant mad woman, and a threatening cannibal. Highlighting the presence of Salome-Alice on stage, Wilson suggested a different reading of Wilde/Strauss heroine than just that of a castrating *femme fatale*. Similar to his production of Müller’s *Hamletmachine*, this device emphasized the instability and multiplicity of identity, while simultaneously providing a multiplicity of perspectives in a grand gesture of rejecting a single point of view.

Wilson separated the music from the action and had two casts. The professional singers played the musical parts, while the NYU students with whom Wilson had worked previously on Müller’s *Hamletmachine* performed the acting roles. As in *Médée* he layered different temporalities, signaled by costuming: the singers were dressed in stylized and highly theatrical evening costumes, “paying homage to Elsa Schiaparelli

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40 The singers were engaged just for a four-day-rehearsal period. Originally Wilson planned that the events would be seen through the mind of King Herod and that “The Dance of the Seven Veils” would be scandalous because he would not use veils or dancing. This was similar to the approach used Jean Pierre Ponnelle in his scandalous 1975 *Holländer* at the San Francisco Opera, later staged at the Met (1979), framed as the Steerman’s dream. Shortly afterwards, Caballé sang this role in Jochen Ulrich’s production at the Gran Teatro del Liceo in Barcelona (1988) and was again equally immobilized. See David J. Baker, “Problem Child: David J. Baker Ponders the Dilemma of Finding an Ideal Salome,” *Opera News* 60, no. 14 (March 30, 1996), 14-17.

with the 1940s shapes and to Roberto Capucci’s box sleeves,“42 while the rest of the
performers wore contemporary and ostensibly decadent and flamboyant clothes created
by Gianni Versace, the Milan high-fashion designer. This vividly portrayed Wilson’s
interpretation of the original opera as being set amidst “a decadent society, a society that
has lost speech, a society approaching a catastrophe.”43

This scenographic concept visually emphasized the separation of music from
acting. The singers were placed on a platform, extended over the orchestra pit stage right,
and onto a connecting path—hanamichi—running along the stage. The second hanamichi


protruded into the orchestra pit stage left. This was the primary stage for the actress playing Salome as Alice in Wonderland. For example, she stood there dreamingly during “Dance of the Seven Veils”:

Mr. Wilson and his lighting collaborator, Beverly Emmons, begin by illuminating the now-empty stage with glowing bands of light moving deeper and deeper into the dark recesses at the rear. This gradual banishment of the darkness is Mr. Wilson’s equivalent of Salome dropping her veils. (…) An angel appears, suspended in the sky, and later a writhing, twisting devil in red. Finally a crazed old religious haranguer—one of the aspects of Jokanaan—lurches out from the wings as the dance ends. Instead of overt erotic display, we’ve seen a conflict between heaven and hell within Salome’s subconscious.44

In Wilson’s interpretation Salome is no longer a pure object of masculine desire; her sexualized body is dematerialized. As Peter Conrad noted about Strauss’ opera,

Fig. 2.6. Strauss’ Salome, Dance of Seven Veils, at La Scala, Milan in 1987, directed and designed by Robert Wilson, sets by Wilson and Giorgio Cristini, costumes by Gianni Versace. A visually abstract version of the opera’s notorious scene with angel and devil. Movement here was limited to the bare minimum. Photo © Lelli & Masotti.

during that scene “Salome ceases to be a character and becomes an image, an opera turns simultaneously into a symphonic poem, into a ballet, and into a painting.” This particular scene was typically Wilsonian: minimalistic and abstract with bold color accents. Against the cerulean blue of the backdrop the spotlights highlighted the whiteness of Alice’s dress, the whiteness of the angel’s body with its Indigo structured wings (including visible ribs and spars), and the redness of the devil, lying in repose on the floor. The image with the angel looking like Icarus or one of Leonardo da Vinci’s flying machines hovering in the midair over the stage is also visually arresting (see Fig. 2.6).

Fig. 2.7. Salome, 1987. The set co-designed by Giorgio Cristini included: a platform for the singers on the left, two hanamichi (one across and the second extended over the orchestra pit), a scrim with Wilson’s expressive drawings, and mobile rock formations. Photo © Lelli & Masotti.

However, unlike the settings for Médée, Salome’s set was not fully abstract and minimal. Co-designed by Giorgio Cristini it continued the style of previous sets, in which elements of reality contribute to the surrealist imagery, with which Wilson’s earlier oeuvre is notoriously associated (see Fig. 2.7). Similarly to Alcestis (designed by Tom Kamm in 1986), the engulfing but desolate landscape consisted of mobile grandiose rock formations and the peripatetic moon (including a crescent and the imposing full moon), suggesting a strange primordial three-dimensional environment. Landscape in Wilson’s productions suggests not just a presentation of the natural scenery, but perhaps, in this case, also a more concrete vision than in his other operatic productions, which have a propensity towards simplicity of purified forms, emphasizing formal structure and composition. More strategically, landscape refers here to Gertrude Stein’s understanding of landscape play, of which Wilson is generally considered a direct heir.46

The intermediate phase between these two separate styles of the abstract space and the representational elements are the transparent scrims, on which were reprinted Wilson’s sketches that he prepared while working on the production. With these expressive drawings, Wilson typically structured the entire scenography of a future staging. As Robert Stearns says,

Drawings manifest his thinking process and provide a means of structuring his internal vision... The drawings are idealizations which reveal the relationship of forms which will appear at the picture plane of his stage. (...) Blocks of light and dark, volume and void are visual “libretti.” Horizontal and vertical lines structure his space and diagonal masses offer counterpoint to the geometry. It is not

Wilson regards the stage not only as a flat picture space, but also as a sculptural volume to be composed.47 These painted scrims faithfully rendered the strokes of the artist’s hand in charcoal, graphite or ink, looking at times like Clifford Still’s abstract expressionist paintings. They are a stepping-stone to the pure abstraction that dominates the majority of his productions, but they also reaffirm the existence of physical, psychic and emotional content, where the gestural is strongly palpable as opposed to the cool and detached geometrical abstraction of the scenography in the “Dance of the Seven Veils” scene.

Wilson’s Salome is his most conceptually radical operatic production. In an extreme gesture Wilson separates drama from singing, the audible from the visual, creating parallel events, in which music, acting and set changes could reinforce each other, instead of simply illustrating what is heard as is repeatedly reinforced in traditional staging. This is a direct application of John Cage and Merce Cunningham’s principles that have been crucial to Wilson’s theatre from the very beginning. By totally immobilizing singers Wilson departs drastically from operatic conventions. However, the key radicalism here is the employment of his theatrical practice into the operatic context, manifested most profoundly in splitting the character of Salome into five different performers. This strategy allowed the introduction of postmodern concepts of space, time, subjectivity, agency, historiography and narrative strategies as well as the quintessentially Wilsonian cultivation of simultaneity and collage, irony, paradox and aporia, as Cordula Quint argues in her comprehensive analysis of Wilson’s production of Hamletmachine.48

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Wilson has continued this deconstruction of operatic practices ever since but in a more conceptually comprehensive way and in an absolute aesthetic coherence. In subsequent productions, starting with Wagner’s *Lohengrin* and *Parsifal* (both 1991), Wilson combined radicalism with an aesthetic rigor that became highly recognizable. He invented an absolutely distinct personal style, as unmistakable as fingerprints, generating his own unique vision of the world, to paraphrase Fredric Jameson’s words about modernist artists.49

**PART III: Geometry of Passions: Defining Wilson’s Aesthetics**

> “Seeing comes before words. To look is an act of choice”
> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* 50

As I have illustrated in the capsule analyses above, as an operatic designer-director, Wilson tears opera away from realistic and imposing ideas of décor within theatrical space, instead offering a simple but powerful articulation of space. He creates theatrical spaces based on formal aesthetics, using a limited number of planes, structures, and a restricted palette of colors. His extremely meticulous and exact stagings are abstract and spacious, generally with an almost monochromatic palette, but with no shortage of saturated contrasts. They employ artful lighting and are rigorously choreographed with slow-paced, inter-culturally stylized movement and hieratic gestures. The power of Wilson’s designs is embedded in the beauty of the materials used as well as in a simple, abstract, yet sophisticated composition. This formal combination has its own internal rules of course; nonetheless, above all, in an operatic context, it must be understood in


terms of its coexistence and interaction with the music. As Wilson describes the relation embedded in his *modus operandi*:

I often stage works mute, with no music or text… When I did *Bluebeard’s Castle* at Salzburg last summer, I had the singers do the movement without the singing, so I figured out the architecture and space. I listen to the music, but then I put it away and figure out what the space is going to look like. And then I put the music with it. I’m afraid that if I start with the music, I’ll illustrate too much. I want a kind of architectural tension between what I’m hearing and what I’m seeing. What I see in most operas is too close to the text or music. The visual needs its own integrity, its own structure, its own law. Then it can reinforce the music and make it stronger. When I use colors, sometimes I go with the music, sometimes I go against it.

The primary effect Wilson strives for, one similar to that achieved by Cage, Cunningham, and Rauschenberg in their collaborations, is to go beyond a relation of illustration, with music and staging moving in parallel paths. Nonetheless, he starts thinking about the production as a visual artist would: he begins his work with images of the stage.

Unlike the majority of avant-garde theatre artists, Wilson has maintained the established spatial relationship between audience and stage. Although he has persevered with creating the incongruous images so praised in the early 1970s, his aesthetics have shifted from nineteenth-century illusionism towards modernist, geometrical minimalist abstraction. This proclivity was signaled in the scenographic elements of *A Letter to Queen Victoria* (1974) and *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), while the first full minimalist staging was the double-monologue *I Was Sitting on My Patio…* (1977). Nevertheless, he did not fully commit to this aesthetic till the late 1980s, which coincided with the beginning of his long-term collaboration with the Italian costume designer Frida

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Parmeggiani, who was responsible for co-authoring his aesthetic style.\(^5^3\) Her timeless, but at the same time fashionably sophisticated costumes enhanced the almost classical simplicity of Wilson’s scenography, endowing it with highly idiosyncratic visual idiom.

As a theatre auteur Wilson created avant-garde theatre in the form of a highly imagistic scenography, abolishing the supremacy of language. His theatre emphasizes spectacle and celebrates the visual. As a quintessential postmodern artist, Wilson borrows from a multitude of styles and trends, including expressionism, surrealism, minimalism, vaudeville, Noh and Kabuki theatre, etc. While he was and still is against the aesthetics of the “poor theatre,” and more generally stands removed from 1960s radical and politically involved theatre, his theoretical foundations and the mode of production are not dissimilar. The influences of Antonin Artaud, Gertrude Stein, Bertolt Brecht, Martha Graham, John Cage and Jack Smith blend in his stagings, with an emphasis on the collective, collaborative effort of putting on theatrical productions, in particular in his early oeuvre.\(^5^4\) Another aspect that connects him with the 1960s generation is the emphasis that Wilson put on a “kind of (pre)consciousness-raising through performance,” to use Michael Vanden Heuvel’s phrase.\(^5^5\)

Describing American avant-garde theater in 1977, Bonnie Marranca categorized Wilson’s theatre as a “theatre of images,” which discards language as an inadequate tool

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for expressing or assessing reality, while emphasizing performative aspects of the theatre. While this kind of labeling of course risks reductionism, it does effectively define the theatre where visuality is the prime force. Marranca’s term became widely popular and while it applies to certain aspects of Wilson’s work, it tends to minimalize or even ignore other aspects, despite that she emphasized that theatre auteurs such as Richard Foreman, Robert Wilson and Lee Breuer favored “aural, visual and verbal imagery that calls for alternative modes of perception.”

Wirth also recognizes Wilson’s iconophilia, claiming that it is “capable of transforming any material into an object of aesthetic contemplation.” He argues that Wilson “overcomes the danger of eclecticism through the fusion of iconophila with iconoclasm,” which manifests itself in his refusal to endow his theatre with any rhetoric or interpretation, or “his unwillingness to draw a distinction between culture and nature, between man and animal, between ancient and modern, between holy and secular.”

Although Wilson experimented with various tenets of theatrical production, challenging traditional understandings, he put emphasis on neglected principles of form: design, light, movement, and gesture. This emphasis on these elements centralizes most discussions about his theatre primarily on its formalist qualities. The term formalism is often employed in a derogatory sense, treating form as an empty play of lines and shapes. However, Wilson’s highly formalized style requires reevaluation. Relationships between form and content are complex and abstract art is not bereft of content. This is particularly

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58 Ibid., 185.
important since the tendency to play form off against content has become a widespread phenomenon. As in his theatrical works, Wilson refuses to provide spectators with a clear, univocal interpretation. His stagings of operas are open works of art where the audience completes the work.

Space

Wilson's sets have their individual configurations, but a general pattern is usually clear. The main elements of the stage are a luminous back screen (a light box) and the dark leveled stage. The set verges almost on the monochromatic with a predominant arctic grayish-blue scale. Such basic arrangement creates an impression that the Wilsonian space is empty and as a rule the stage in his productions remains and connotes—at least at first glance—emptiness in its visual conception. As he explains, “There's nothing more beautiful than an empty space.” However, as Freddie Rokem indicates

Wilson seems to be challenging the notion of the empty space as articulated by Peter Brook, questioning the idea that such a thing is possible at all in the theatre. For the brand of postmodernism developed by Wilson, as opposed to the modernist theatre heralded by Brook, the theatrical space, whether it is “white” or “black,” and even if it seems vacuous, is a priori never completely empty or void. There is no totally empty space.

What Rokem is referring to is the fact that the space in Wilson's stagings is never absolutely empty because of the light that creates the space. His cold abstract aesthetic

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60 See Holmberg, Theatre of Robert Wilson, 62.


resembles that of Appia, Craig and Wieland Wagner. Their approach to operatic production centered on simplicity, suggestion, and an appeal to the audience’s imagination. Although not new, this seemingly empty space of Wilson’s abstract arrangements, I would argue, has become one of the greatest challenges to operatic staging as well as being the most visually distinctive approach since Chéreau’s iconoclastic *Ring* in 1976.

Because of its austere set up, the stage appears to be a “flat space.” I use here this phrase directly relating to Euclidean space deliberately to allude to the affinity between Wilsonian space and an abstract art based on Euclidean geometry with line, planes and shapes as its main components. This flat space differs substantially from the deep, illusionist space invented in the Renaissance and circulated still through representational media such as realistic theatre and opera, film and television and photography. As in his seminal work *Abstraction and Empathy* (1908) Wilhelm Worringer asserts, “Space is the greatest enemy of all efforts at abstraction, and must therefore be the first thing to be suppressed in the representation.”63 He goes on, avowing that this must be followed with a denial of the third dimension—the depth—as “the authentic dimension of space.”64 Suppressing the space and minimalizing the depth, Wilson refuses to appeal to the spectator’s subjective experience with the object, upsetting the audience’s habituation and familiarity of seeing. His articulation of the three-dimensional theatrical space resembles the articulation of the surface with very limited references to nature or the world of the spectator, forcing the audience to look attentively at it instead of looking into


64 Ibid., 39.
it or through it. As Wilson asserts, “What I try to do is create a space for music and a balance of hearing and seeing—visions independent of the music but balanced with it.” The formal logic of spatially purist forms is premised on the elimination of visual interference with the music.

Two fundamental, interacting forces of Cartesian grid mark Wilson’s space: two axes and the tensions between verticality and horizontality. As he explains, “For me a horizontal line is space, and a vertical line is time. It is this cross of time and space that is the basic architecture of everything.” He articulates this intersection by means of sliding planes and structures that glide in and out smoothly, as well as props and performers placed high above the stage floor sharply delineated against the incandescent milieu. The back screen functions as the background; Wilson sets the performers’ bodies and predominantly flat props of simple geometrical shapes against it. More specifically, space in his productions is designed using basic elements of creating depth in abstract art, using overlapping and shading so it appears as shallow space, although in reality he uses the full depth of operatic stages (which, unlike American Broadway theatres, tend to be very deep). With this choice of flat space and a minimal use of geometrical perspective in constructing the theatrical space, for which he uses simple black borders and legs, Wilson transcends the dominant and familiar forms of pictorial representation, the calcified perspectival construction of the operatic space. Instead his scenography implies spaces beyond the theatres’ physical limits.

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66 Robert Wilson, “From a Distance,” interview with Margery Arent Safir, in Balanchine Then and Now, ed. Anne Hogan (Lewes: The Arts Arena and Sylph Editions, 2008), 115.
The scenography for *Alceste* (1986),\(^{67}\) which was the second historical opera staged by Wilson but the first that belongs to the operatic canon, albeit a less-performed canonical piece,\(^{68}\) is emphatically abstract. It is very simple, but that does not mean it is unsophisticated. The basic set up is essentially minimalistic: a raked black stage and the prominent light box in the background. Only occasionally are other elements introduced, like props and side panels. They are similarly minimalistic and abstract; however, all elements can be related directly to the libretto’s stage directions. They define the place of action, suggesting the mood and emotions, but they also severely restrict them. His

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67 My analysis is based on the resources available for the original production with the costumes designed by Joachim Herz in Stuttgart (1986), the revised staging at the Théâtre Châtelet in Paris (1999) and its revival at La Monnaie (2004).

68 Gluck was infrequently performed in the USA. The Met staged *Alceste* in 1941, 1952 and 1961, the NYCO in 1982 and the last Gluck’s opera staged at the Met was in 1972. This changed in 2007 with new productions of *Orfeo ed Euridice* (dir./chor. Mark Morris, set Allen Moyer, cost. Isaac Mizrahi) and *Iphigénie en Tauride* (dir. Stephen Wadsworth, set Thomas Lynch, cost. Martin Pakledinaz).
scenography is created with predominantly monochromatic blue hues introduced during the overture, for which Wilson designed a stylish light show of transforming triangles and a small gyratory cube on the front translucent scrim. He juxtaposed this cube with a massive antique statue of Kouros of Tenea\textsuperscript{69} stage left and a mysterious Figure, Alceste’s double, who, like the cube, continues to appear onstage (see Fig. 2.8).

Thus, after the translucent screen is lifted an imposing black wall first appears placed transversely stage right. This windowless smooth wall signifies the palace of Admeté with a public square in front of it. High up on that wall on a narrow platform stands Herald, perilously suspended in the midair, who with the signal of the trumpet announces the woeful news about the health of the king. The temple of Apollo, where the next two scenes take place, is constructed gradually in front of the audience: first appears the sculpture of Apollo, then the altar—a huge dark blue hexahedron—descends down center-stage. Finally, after the pantomime for sacrifice, a precarious staircase/ladder resembling a stylized tree or arrow, a typically Wilsonian highly aesthetic object, is pushed from downstage until it reaches a point upstage of the altar—which is topped with flames. The Oracle, positioned on the ladder above the altar, announces the verdict on Admeté’s life. As each prop in Wilson’s theatre has symbolic significance, the sacrifice for the god is presented symbolically and aesthetically at the same time: the glass panels brought in by the ballet chorus eventually fly up and remain suspended in the air reflecting the lights until the end of Act I (see Fig. 2.9).

\textsuperscript{69} This Greek statue—now called Kouros of Tenea (previously Apollo of Tenea)—with a section of his arm missing is a marble free-standing sculpture of a young male figure in the Glyptothek in Munich, which dates to 560 B.C.
Fig. 2.9. *Alceste*, 1999. Scene in the temple after the Oracle—perched on the ladder at the top of the altar—announces Admeté’s fate, while the offerings—the glass panels reflecting the light—to the god hang above. Courtesy of Archives of La Monnaie – Brussels. (Photograph Johan Jacobs, 2004.)

Fig. 2.10. *Alceste*, 1999. The signature set for Act II, with receding colonnade. Screen capture.
The signature image of *Alceste* is the main set for Act II, which is supposed to denote a large hall in the palace of Admeté. It is important for its visual organization, form and arresting design (see Fig. 2.9). Here the iconic image amounts to the six trunks of columns\(^70\)—simple panels—diminishing in size and in-between distance on a diagonal line. According to Holmberg, this set “is an elegant, refined version of *Poles* (a site-specific, environmental sculpture that Wilson created in Loveland, Ohio, in 1968). By reducing the height of the receding columns, the director forces the perspective. Wilsonland is rectilinear.”\(^71\) Rarely does Wilson arrange elements on the stage in such a way that it suggests the depth of the space with geometrical perspective. Typically his designs resist a purely perspectival understanding of the space, since perspective posits a subject, but creates instead a completely artificial monocular image that is not true to three-dimensional space. The ominous events are also kinetically expressed as a huge black cube slowly descends from the stage left and proceeds to the stage right, blocking off the blue screen.

The major departures from this minimalistic, sleek aesthetic are moments when the transparent scrims, on which Wilson’s expressive drawings that he prepared while working on the production are reprinted—as we have already seen in *Salome*. These scrims transform the stage space in yet another fashion: they suggest thematic ghostliness and emphasize the ambiguity about the return of the dead.\(^72\) Visually they help to fuse an abstract and gestural aesthetic offering expressively visceral, but more intimately

\(^{70}\) In the Stuttgart version there were only five columns. In his sketch Wilson drew seven columns.

\(^{71}\) Holmberg, *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, 83.

articulated space, capable of drawing the spectator deeper. A set of such scrims is superimposed on the set with the colonnade after the first celebrations of Admeté’s return to health and shortly before Alceste’s moving lament “O dieux! soutenez mon courage!” in Act 2, scene 3. It separates her from the entire court, creating a private space for her where she can express her profound sorrow and pain while the others rejoice (see Fig. 2.11). The translucent scrims act as a firm border and as a subtle frame diffusing the physicality of the space behind.

Unquestionably, an understanding of Wilson’s articulation of space requires an intimate knowledge of Gluck’s opera. Wilson clears the stage and focuses attention on just few elements in the space. His entire scenography for *Alceste* corresponds to the music, which is completely suffused in sorrow, grief, and tragedy. However, in generic
terms this is still *opera seria* with a happy ending: Alceste returns from the Underworld to her husband. Despite the triumph over the death, Wilson ends the opera ambiguously, rejecting the superficial satisfaction of a happy ending. He resists this simplistic interpretation, which the genre enforced on Gluck, and takes this myth further than the composer was able.  

As Hercules and Admeté rush to celebrate the life—symbolized by the great volume of bright blue light backstage—the side panels slide in to close off, leaving just a narrow opening, a visual passageway between the two worlds. Alceste’s double—the Figure in the white dress—stands on the proscenium as at the very beginning of the opera.  

Alceste slowly proceeds after the men behind her, but she looks back at the world left behind. With this ambiguous ending, staging the return of the repressed, Wilson challenges the traditional Christian reading of the myth, which made it into a pre-telling in medieval theological debate of the resurrection of the dead.

Wilson usually divides the stage into different zones for acting. This division has both spatial and temporal aspects, both producing and signifying a multiplicity of spaces within one physical space. In *Doktor Faustus* he used a description of the action’s place directly from Thomas Mann’s novel, on which Manzoni’s opera was based. Wilson

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74 This actually isn’t shown in the Paris videorecording, because the camera zooms onto Sophie von Otter’s face.

75 According to Bayerdörfer, the ending of a Noh play *Sumidagawa*, which also was the basis for Britten’s *Curlew River*, inspired the final scene of the opera. Hans-Peter Bayerdörfer, “*Nô* in Disguise: Robert Wilson’s Adaptation of Nô Elements in His Production of *Alkestis/Alceste*,” in *Japanese Theatre and the International Stage*, eds. Stanca Scholz-Cionca and Samuel L. Leiter (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 371.

converted a Bavarian villa with five rooms and a yard, where the action was taking place, correspondingly into six autonomous zones, where different actions occurred: sometimes simultaneously, sometimes differing chronologically. For example, in the scene of Echo’s death a personified Death—a woman dressed in black with a long black veil over her head—stands at the top of a tilted bed, where Adrian Leverkühn’s six-year-old nephew Nepomuk (an angelic boy called Echo) lies dying, while above him hangs—from the flies—a child on swing. Arthur Holmberg, who was at that time Wilson’s dramaturg, comments on this scene as follows: “Death, like life, is strange. Death passes like a dream, and the little life of Echo is ‘rounded with a sleep.’ Visually, the child in the swing draws the eye upwards. Symbolically, he represents Echo’s shadow self.”

That poignant moment of the tragic loss of life, which would fill Adrian with unparalleled anguish, Wilson juxtaposed with a mundane activity: in a different corner of the stage Frau Schweigestill efficiently chops celery and carrots.

The stage is visually spatialized as a landscape with a clearly defined horizon line in the luminous backdrop, metonymically standing in for the sky, but landscape in Wilson’s productions not only suggests presentation of natural scenery. The notion can also be seen as referring to a more general formation of aesthetics in Wilson’s work, namely the influence of Gertrude Stein. Resisting conventional theatre’s sequencing of dramatic tension and the emphasis on cause and effect, in her third lecture entitled “Plays” Stein proposed to structure plays and thus performance as landscape. That would allow focusing on the stage picture but also an appreciation of the relationships between the various, equally important elements of the composition. Writing about Wilson as a postdramatic artist, Lehmann suggests that the stage space in Wilson’s productions is

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77 Holmberg, ibid., 163.
being transformed into landscape in this sense, with the theatrical event approximating painting. Wilson’s de-hierarchization of theatrical means corresponds to the “defocalization” advocated by Stein.\(^{78}\) Lehmann points out the immediate correlations between Wilson and Stein:

> Indeed the elective affinity between Wilson’s theatre and Gertrude Stein’s texts, her notion of “Landscape Play,” is immediately evident. In both there is minimal progression, the “continuous present,” no identifiable identities, a peculiar rhythm that wins out over all semantics and in which anything fixable passes into variations and shadings.\(^{79}\)

The concept of landscape thus introduces temporal and spatial relationships and juxtapositions that are simultaneously static and in flux. Consequently, it suggests self-referentiality and self-thematization of the medium, emphasizing the metatheatrical character of Wilson’s theatre.\(^{80}\) Finally, landscape reintroduces the spectator into that equation. It presupposes the existence of an aware viewer who frames the scenery, giving him or her a sense of power.\(^{81}\)

While Wilson’s sets are in fact visually complex, they can appear to be extremely simple. His formal design can be intimidating or off-putting for the audience, who must face an overwhelmingly abstract space where normally is placed an opulent cornucopia of historicist detail. However, in his review of *Parsifal* (1991), Johannes Birringer concedes that “the severe minimalism of [Wilson’s] *Parsifal* came as a welcome shock

\(^{78}\) Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 78.

\(^{79}\) Ibid., 81.


since it allowed me to listen to Wagner’s unending melody without the distracting clutter and kitsch that is normally piled onto the mythic realism of opera staging conventions.\textsuperscript{82}

As in his early theatre productions, Wilson provided opera with a physical space, in which the spectator was able to experience uninhibited, alternate ways of hearing and looking. The set was again very simple, but rather than a flat floor three quarters of the stage was covered by a slightly raked metallic platform with texture that resembles the shimmering surface of a golden lake (reminiscent of crumpled metal foil).

Wilson used here several props with residual representational aspects that were crucial for the opera and his staging. By limiting the number of props he aimed to prevent the \textit{horror vacui} that has again dominated operatic stages. For instance, a swan’s wing of an enormous size (simplified graphically, looking almost like a paper cutout or a blow-up origami), a few strategically placed similarly abstracted exotic flowers of Strelitzia (also known as the bird of paradise), and one enormous Strelitzia as gigantic as the swan wing. He also added a tower, a gigantic rock dangerously slanted to the left, a huge light box in the shape of a disc that could be either black or filled with white light, an iceberg, in which the Grail—as a black box, not a chalice— is stored and which at the very end turns into an open flame. However, all those props were unfamiliar and not able to indicate a definite locale, which Wagner’s libretto specifies as a forest, castle, flower garden, and Grail Hall. As Katherine Syer summarizes her analysis of Wilson’s production, his refusal to “use traditional symbols, or to use symbols in traditional ways” on one hand sets him apart, but on the other, “can leave some audience feeling ungrounded or

\textsuperscript{82} Birringer, “Wilson/Wagner”: 63.
To judge from many contemporary reviews, Wilson’s *Parsifal* was still too radical for the majority of spectators holding antiquated notions of operatic scenography who could not project their feelings onto this abstract version of Wagner’s opera. His abstract iciness corresponded with the emotional restraint of the staging. As Jonathan Kalb confirms in his review, “Wilson offers no pathetically wailing Kundry, no boo-hooing youths beside the dying Titurel, no soft-porn titillation by Klingsor’s magic maidens.” Denying the melodramatic emotionality, projection, identification, and visual excess on stage, Wilson created a new space for music appreciation while continuing to subvert the conventions of operatic staging.

The production was, nonetheless, absolutely compatible with a metaphysical and aestheticist reception. In last pages of his seminal book *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*, Patrick Carnegy devotes a paragraph to Wilson’s *Parsifal*, emphasizing how abstraction enables Wagner’s “timeless values” to resound all the more clearly:

Wilson rejected the imagery of Grail and spear as too explicit, too reminiscent of the Christianity that had inspired it. He wanted to break through to a deeper layer of abstraction in order to complete what Nike Wagner has called the “desanctifying, depersonalizing and [even] desexualization” of the opera. Thus no spear, no Kundry kiss and the Grail as a black box retrieved from a glowing pyramid of ice. All problems over the identity of the knights were solved by banishing them from the stage, leaving their voices to sound unseen from the theatre’s highest balcony. The principal characters were lost souls wandering in a

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84 Half of the publications—with *Die Zeit* containing the most polemic one—printed negative reviews, while the other half of the reviews were in general positive; for example, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Frankfurter Rundschau*. There was also a correlation between the length and the evaluation: the longer review, the more positive it was. See Gerd Albrecht, ed., *Der Hamburger Parsifal Eine Provokation? Robert Wilsons Inszenierung von Richard Wagners Bühnenweihfestspiel an der Hamburgischen Staatsoper im Streit der Meinungen* (Hamburg: Christians, 1992).

stage space that was an image of their imaginations. Wilson’s staging was cold, austerely beautiful in its lighting and its stylized choreography. It was a vision into which every spectator could project his or her feelings about primeval wounds, about an unhealable, aching pain at the heart of human existence.\textsuperscript{86}

Although pointing to key aspects of many of Wilson’s operatic stagings—i.e., desanctification, depsychologization, and desexualization—and their importance, Carnegy here makes a sweeping statement regarding the audience’s response to Wilson’s aesthetics. Perhaps one of reasons Carnegy emphasizes “every spectator” is a general consensus that abstract art refers to deeply primordial responses in humans.\textsuperscript{87}

\textit{Parsifal}’s staging is an epitome of Wilsonian abstract space and formalism, which have been and are dominant in his operatic oeuvre since its premiere in 1991. Such a categorical return of abstract geometry in operatic scenography links the historical avant-garde with contemporary movements and attests to the presence of abstraction as a residual tradition, which was repressed in the 1970s in a form of anti-Appian tradition. Although generally people react more positively to figurative art, abstract art frees the viewer from restrictions imposed by our visual system which are necessary for coding and decoding the external world around us, and that are involved in generalizations and decision-making. In viewing abstract art the spectator engages a homogeneous gaze, whereas when looking at pictorial art his or her eyes scan the images, focusing on the most relevant features and fixating on them for a longer period of time, but ignoring the rest. In this context it is not surprising that Wilson chose the slow motion and highly stylized gestures to complement his scenography of abstract spaces defined by light.


Color and light

As in the works of comparable visual artists like Mark Rothko or James Turrell, Wilson’s formalism pays particular attention to surfaces, forms, colors and light. Rothko is generally associated with large canvases filled with unprecedented vibrancy and luminosity of color, with flat rectangular shapes or forms suspended one above the other in a floating space. He expected his paintings to be viewed from a close distance to allow intimacy. In order to achieve a feeling of closeness he used large canvases, drawing in the viewer. As Rothko created luminous abstract paintings, for forty years Turrell has been creating installations in which light, space and time are the main components. “Light,” as Turrell emphasizes, “is not so much something that reveals as it is itself the revelation.”

Similar to Rothko and Turrell, Wilson achieves transcendence, epiphany, and spirituality in his productions in theatre and opera. The sublime aspect in his designs rests mainly in his use of light. As he often says, “There is no space without light.” And light does not play only a supporting role in his scenography; it is an essential element in the staging, as autonomous as an actor, as important as text, music and stage. With light Wilson manipulates spatial conditions, which are linked to the spectators’ visual perceptions of materials and surfaces. The light signifies the vulnerability of the spectators’ perceptions in time and in space, which they cannot fully control like natural light. Using light as a key medium Wilson controls the space, staging moments of transcendence.

Wilson used this sublime light directly in the Prelude to Lohengrin, which can be seen as a variation on the grandiose coup de théâtre from Einstein on the Beach, in which a white beam of light ascends from a totally empty stage for almost twenty minutes,

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changing position from horizontal to vertical, floating very slowly up. Marc Robinson has carefully analyzed Wilson’s light show in the Metropolitan Opera production of *Lohengrin*. Robinson’s account, worth quoting at length, gives a richly detailed account of Wilsonian light-theatre:

> When the curtain rises, a long band of hazy white light, spanning the width of the proscenium, glows at the foot of a blue cyclorama. The stage is otherwise empty, sunk in shadow. It looks frosted, as if by an Arctic dawn. The stage awakens into unease as the light band shines brighter, trembles, and then detaches from the horizon and inches upward. As it continues its ascent, the stage seems to undergo a series of climate changes. One half of the screen blushes a pale rose, then blanches, then hardens to blue once again; the other half meanwhile shifts from white to pale green to gray. (…) Having done justice to Wagner’s vision, Wilson now marks its limits. Toward the end of the prelude, another bar of light appears: This one is an illuminated box rather than a projected glow. It is vertical, almost as high as the stage itself, its white light unclouded. As the box descends from the flies, it restores gravity to the hitherto weightless stage; it also crops the ever expanding screen of light and color, changing an open field into a measured plot. It’s as if Wilson were planting the flag with his pole of light, staking his claim to the stage. (In fact, the box represents Wagner’s Judgment Oak.) We’re forced to look back down at the ground for the first time since the opera began, and thus to register deliberately what we take for granted in all theater. But Wilson emphasizes more than the floor in this sequence: With the lightbox’s descent, the air itself suddenly seems thick, resistant, a substance to be tested, the way one takes the temperature of water or measures the acidity of soil. When the box lands, Wilson has sounded his space.  

The arrangement of beams and a square light box—called “Bed”—changed depending on the scene, but the Prelude served as an indication of how rigorous and austere this production would be, eschewing any notion of naturalism, psychologism and emotionalism. For the third Act Wilson used six different light boxes of different sizes and lengths, which were flown, suspended on a track, or appeared through the trap door like the Bed and the short light box (see Fig. 2.12). In his recent book, *The Provocation*  

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90 Robinson, “Robert Wilson, Nicolas Poussin, and *Lohengrin*,” 178.
of the Senses in Contemporary Theatre, Stephen Di Benedetto claims that in the Zürich Lohengrin “a shallow stage pushes all the action to the front of the stage, allowing us the same planar view of the stage space as we have of a flat painting.”

However, the effect of a shallow stage is constructed by our perception and is additionally misconstrued by the production photographs, because the Opernhaus stage is 34 meters wide, 11 meters high and 23 meters deep. The proscenium frame is 12.5 meters long and 8 meters high. This is the same way Wilson’s stage looked in 1998 and 2006 at the Metropolitan Opera, which is only slightly deeper (24.3 meters / 80 feet). The distance between the light boxes during Act III spanned approximately 8 meters (c. 27 feet). Here we can see how Wilson fragments the space, but the grid that he uses

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91 Di Benedetto, The Provocation of the Senses, 52.
disappears from a distance. The greater the distance from the stage, the more the space appears to be flat. Thus the space can only be read as spatial from the middle or close viewing distance. This image of a flat space is what the photographs from Wilson’s productions register, document, and disseminate. However, with such simple elements as light beams Wilson, on the one hand, suppresses the traditional representation of the space, and on the other, dematerializes the operatic stage.

The transcendence of the space is inscribed onto the back screen, which huge field of color is predominantly blue, but with unremittingly changing shades it indicates infinite depth. These transformations can be quite dramatic; for example, in Der Freischütz when the backdrop turns orange-red during the shooting competition, and later deep red when Max meets Samiel in the Wolf’s Glen. However, for the untrained eyes of most spectators, the majority of the changes occur indiscernibly. The light is permanently in flux, so the screen never appears to be exactly the same. Color fields are thus utterly atmospheric and seemingly detached. The color blue, having the shorter wavelength and being scattered more efficiently in the atmosphere, seems to recede in theatrical space like the sky.92 The blue screen color field seems to have no visual limit, no palpable materiality, and appears to be infinitely deep and special. This choice ensures a peaceful and relaxing viewing, allowing the spectators to contemplate the opera.

Although Wilson himself often speaks about the blue Texan sky, his choice of color seems to be deeply conditioned by our visual culture. Traditionally, ultramarine was the most precious and expensive of pigments, obtained for centuries from the semi-precious stone, lapis lazuli, which was quarried at a mine in Afghanistan. From the late

92 The sky looks blue because our eyes are more sensitive to the blue light than violet, which has the shortest wavelength visible to the human eye.
Middle Ages it was reserved for the robes of Virgin Mary and angels. In contemporary art the most famous shade is International Klein Blue, a deep ultramarine hue that Yves Klein invented, patented and used exclusively in his series of monochrome blue works. Max Heindel, a philosopher, who influenced Klein, claimed that blue was the highest of the colors, a spirit freed from material form. In 1993 while dealing with his blindness and impending death, Derek Jarman made his final film, entitled *Blue*, comprising a single image of saturated blue that lasted 79 minutes. The same year, Krzysztof Kieślowski released his most famous film from the trilogy *Three Colors*, entitled also *Blue*, that was a reflection on the emotional liberty. More broadly speaking our contemporary society relates blue closely to psychological states such as melancholy, gloominess, in addition to tranquility and boundlessness, although in Chinese culture blue also denotes hope and optimism. Interestingly, we are more commonly faced with a blue screen of a blank soundless television, or with Microsoft software that opens the computer with a blue screen. In all these cases, the blue color signals the meditative qualities, spacelessness and infinity so important for Wilson’s aesthetics.

In terms of color, the overall effect of the stage is monochromatic because the basic colors that Wilson uses are blue, grey and white. For dramatic effects he uses red, green and yellow. He changes the color of the back screen, floods the stage, or uses a radically different color in the pin-spot to emphasize the incongruity of an image. Recently, however, Wilson has been expanding his palette of colors (magenta and orange), as well as changing the colors of the back screen more often, dividing the back screen and differentiating the colors in the field. With light he can paint the set. For
example, the first Act of *Freischütz* is overall surprisingly cheerful and colorful, overtly signaling the fairy tale aspect of this opera (see Fig. 2.13).

![Image](image.png)

**Fig. 2.13. Weber’s *Der Freischütz* in Baden-Baden in 2009, directed and designed by Robert Wilson, costumes by Viktor & Rolf. Color extravaganza combined with distorted perspective. Photo © Lesley Leslie-Spinks.**

At the Thalia Theater in Hamburg, Wilson had previously created a highly successful musical, *The Black Rider*, based on Weber’s opera (a collaboration with Tom Waits and William S. Burroughs). *Freischütz*’s sets use similar motifs. As usual the abstract space in Weber’s opera was articulated with simple cutout elements (of trees and a house) and simple benches diagonally set on the both sides of the stage, all designed in a distorted perspective, typical for Expressionism, as *Black Rider* was inspired by the aesthetics of first silent horror movie, the Expressionistic *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920, dir. Robert Wiene). Initially in *Der Freischütz* blue-lit trees were differentiated into violet, yellow and teal, then altered into magenta, orange, red and blue, while the
house changed from grey to yellow and then to green. Even the benches transformed
color from blue to green, while the backdrop changed from blue to red and light green.
Finally, in the last transformation the cutout elements were set first red then black against
the red background. Of all of Wilson’s previous productions, only *Die Zauberflöte* (1991)
had been this colorful.

In Wilson’s hands light has plastic qualities. He can model it and manipulate to
suggest various moods. As he himself suggests:

Everyone experiences light in a personal way. It arouses emotions, and you
cannot accurately predict what effect it has in each case. On the other hand, one
can play all over the world Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata* in blue light and thus
calm people. Strong colors usually evoke strong emotions and change the state of
mind.93

The light is capable of becoming solid and able to have a formal volume. The triangular
rays can construct concrete spaces in a generally empty space. With light Wilson models
the performers into a statuesque relief-like sculptures. Also when using light, he can give
the space volume, but can also completely flatten it, which became his hallmark image
with the black silhouettes of the performers sharply delineated against a background of
distinct colors. However, ever-changing light conditions require a highly controlled
environment. Hence, it is essential for Wilson to work in proscenium theatres. Unlike
most avant-garde artists who have sought to abolish the proscenium theatre, he has, as I
noted at the beginning of this chapter, consciously searched for big theatres with
proscenium frames. This is not simply for institutional reasons—in his design, he has

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93 Robert Wilson, “Ein vollständige Theatersprache,” interview with Jan Linders, in Richard C. Beacham,
*Adolphe Appia: Künstler und Visionär des modernen Theaters*, German trans. Petra Schreyer and Dieter
Es weckt Gefühle, und man kann nicht genau voraussagen, welche Wirkung es jeweils hat. Andererseits
kann man überall auf der Welt Beethovens Mondscheinsonate in blauem Licht abspielen und damit
Menschen beruhigen. Starke Farben rufen meist starke Emotionen hervor und ändern den Geisteszustand.”
always maintained the frame within these theatres, not abolishing it, but rather the opposite, deliberately embracing it. Wilson’s espousal of Cartesian perspectivalism, as Hal Foster asserts, “privileges the purely optical in visual arts.”

Arnold Aronson situates him next to Richard Foreman as another example of a backlash against the environmental scenography so popular in the 1960s, “The frame gives the artist total control over both the image and the spectator by keeping them within carefully delineated spaces on either side of the mediating window.” Unlike Freyer and Herrmann, Wilson never engages in dialogue with the frame, he simply accepts its existence. Still, the use of proscenium suggests the existence, at some level, of symbolic unity, which is typical for modernist, not postmodernist artists.

**Movement and gestures**

In Wilson’s stagings all movement is meticulously choreographed: the poses, gestures and blocking. His famously glacial movements and the general slow motion of the performance continues to allude to that “Einsteinian” sense of time that he explored in his early theatrical productions. The singers’ highly stylized poses, static movement and symbolic gestures are designed mainly for emotional constraint and against reducing the characters to psychological motivations. By virtue of this slow movement in Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* (1992), Wilson was able to move the dramatic emphasis from the melodramatic death of Butterfly to a drama of a little boy whose mother is going to die: Cio-Cio-San and Pinkerton’s son walked extremely slowly around the stage, collecting

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stones which he then put into his mouth. Writing about semiotics of performance British scholar Colin Counsell suggests, “Slow motion renders the performance perceptually discontinuous through time.” By purposefully disconnecting the boy’s movement from his mother’s actions, Wilson here restrains the emotional impact of the story. As he emphasizes, “In my view, with a work that is already full of overwhelming emotions, a [staging] that is equally moving and emotional makes no sense.”

This slowing down the visual pace in certain operas parallels the music, which, for example, in case of Wagner’s Lohengrin, Ring, and Parsifal, does not correspond to normally perceived time since Wagnerian symphonic music is already excruciatingly slow. Something similar might also be said of the fluid music of Pelléas et Mélisande; Debussy’s opera is more Wagnerian than anti-Wagnerian as it was intentionally composed. The seriousness and solemnity of both Gluck’s operas made them clear candidates for such Wilsonian temporal treatment. Di Benedetto sums it up well when he writes, “[This] technique asks us to linger visually more than we might normally in a single moment.” He continues, “In this way, when change does occur, it takes on significance. Also, as a figure or object moves slowly across the stage, the attendant [spectator] is drawn to the motion and is allowed to scrutinize the lines and shapes of the object.” In operatic staging Wilson’s gestures and movements are very closely timed to the score. As Markee Rambo-Hood notices, Wilson links the action with the music by starting the movements and gestures with the beat, but afterwards not necessarily

97 Counsell, Signs of Performance, 199.
99 Di Benedetto, 45.
following the tempo and the rhythm of the music. This disrupts the flow of the narrative and resynchronizes perceptual habits. Instead of focusing on the story the Wilsonian parataxis of theatrical elements allows the spectator to listen to the music. Nevertheless, the reading of slow movement in abstract space continues to present difficulties for the majority of audience and music critics.

If critics never questioned the enigmatic interpretation of Alcestis myth, some were perplexed with aesthetic decisions implemented in this production. Already in Alceste’s overture Wilson introduced a small cube floating and spinning along its axis on the front scrim while a triangle of light was altering its contour. To emphasize the structural analogy and reversed symmetry among the elements of the design, Wilson used the cube again later in the production. It was visible during first two scenes of Act I, and at the beginning of scene three, when normally a dance—pantomime, sacred dance, “danse sacrée”—should take place. In Wilson’s production no one danced, instead there was another projection with a spinning die on a scrim. Consequently, as Hedy Law contends, “Gluck’s pantomime becomes literally disembodied.” During Act II, scene three, when Alceste and Admeté meet after his miraculous recovery, a huge black cube that loomed behind the columns, a visual symbol of fear and foreboding, replaces the gyrating die. If one critic, who, while finding the production quite noteworthy, complained that “throughout the performance boxes and rectangles of various sizes and colors dangled over the singers or rotated slowly across the stage, their Orphic meaning,

if any, the director’s secret,” another noticed more perceptively—despite an overall negative opinion about this production—that Wilson “presented a visual metaphor for impending doom, an airborne, slowly twisting, slowly growing cube that eventually dwarfed the people of Greece, when a conventional director might have just darkened the lights.”

Di Benedetto’s argument about movement on stage affecting attention and stimulating the brain, although well argued, does not take into consideration the fact that by completely rewriting the kinetic codes in movement, Wilson disturbs existing processes of decoding. In other words, dealing with novel movement the spectator encounters problems in comprehending it. This is particularly important for the opera, where quasi-realistic conventions are deeply petrified, because as Counsell declares, “…for our perception of stage movement entails consciously or unconsciously comparing it with extant performances.”

Wilson devises the sequencing of movement and gestures with mathematical precision. As in Bryars’ Medea, in Alceste Wilson put the chorus in the orchestra pit. A female ballet chorus executed simple movements, which were originally choreographed by Japanese choreographer Suzushi Hanayagi, with whom Wilson had previously worked on The Knee Plays from the CIVIL wars. Like before, Wilson restrained the mobility and

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104 Counsell, Signs of Performance, 181.

the gestures of the singers. But in *Salome* he was even more radical, completely immobilizing the singers by placing them on chairs on the proscenium while the group of young actors enacted the opera behind them. The singers’ highly stylized poses, static movement and symbolic gestures were again designed for emotional constraint. Wilson devises the sequencing of movement and gestures with mathematical precision, basing them on ancient sculptures and Japanese theatre.

![Piombino Apollo](image)

*Fig. 2.14. Piombino Apollo.*

Greek bronze statuette (115 cm high) of a disputed origin and dating. Ex-voto dedicated to Athena, but it stands in a pose typical of kouroi. © Louvre Museum, Paris.

Often the idiosyncratic gestures and movements seem to defy comprehension. The gestures in *Alceste* are intentionally abstract. For example, the hand is stretched out at an angle of 45° or 22°. More specifically, they recall the gestures of ancient sculptures, which were used as a form of funeral art, commemorative tombstones of the deceased, like the bronze statuette of the Piombino Apollo from the Louvre (see Fig. 2.14). Its hieratic posture with arms close to the body and bent at the hips but extended forward
from the elbow became a basic pose for this production. Like Pina Bausch and Jan Fabre, Wilson uses endless repetition of a series of movements. Most frequently he gradually transforms them over time or contrasts the sequences of repetitive movement performed in “normal time” with those in slow motion. Because of that technique, as Fischer-Lichte asserts, “The gestures and movements of the body lose their sign character—they appear as nothing more than gestures and movements,” which, like the space, are abstracted and do not interfere with the music.

The stylized gesticulations also resemble Noh acting patterns (kata). As Hans-Peter Bayerdörfer asserts, “the relationship between space and movement, gesture and expression, was fundamentally inspired by Noh aesthetics,” in particular in the slow motion and stylized movements, suggestive of solemn funeral rituals. For example, the Noh gesture is particularly evident in Alceste’s aria “Ô Dieux! Soutenez mon courage” (“O gods! Sustain my courage,” Act II, scene three). During Alceste’s lament the singer performs the Noh gesture of weeping (see Fig. 2.15). In the 1986 production, the singer had her head bowed slightly and with her right palm she reached towards her face while

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106 The left palm of the Piombino Apollo is open and originally held an offering—probably a phial—that now is missing. The left hand is closed in a fist but originally held an object with a vertical shaft, such as a bow. Without those missing elements, the statuette still looks peculiar, but Wilson has the performers replicated similarly unusual gestures in a live performance, estranging them even further. See Brunhilde Sismondo Ridgway, *Hellenistic Sculpture: The Styles of ca. 100-31 B.C.* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2002), 147-148.


109 Bayerdörfer argues that this gesture of weeping does not exist in Western eighteenth-century opera, but it is granted by Alceste’s words “Ah, in spite of myself, tears are springing from my eyes and bathing my face.” (Original text: “Ah! malgré moi des pleures s’échappent des mes yeux et baignent mon visage.”) Bayerdörfer, “Nô in Disguise,” 375.
“the left arm and hand stretched down and backwards, with spread fingers which seems to freeze: hand and fingers pointed backwards and suggested what had to be left behind on the way to Acheron.” In the 1999 Paris version, Sophie von Otter slightly modifies that gesture: she basically remains upright, while touching her right cheek with her right palm, sometimes rotating her hand and on occasion only very gently nodding her head. Her left arm is stretched to the back and away from her as if walking in profile. To a majority of critics and the audience members the idiosyncratic gestures and movements seemed cryptic, almost incomprehensible, as if lacking any apparent sense. Nevertheless, Bayerdörfer emphasizes, “The connection between sound and gesture offers the possibility of symbolic meaning…[but]…the lack of realistic motivation challenges the spectator’s own imaginative search for the meaning.”

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Fig. 2.15. Alceste’s Noh gesture in 1999. Sophie von Otter as Alceste. Screen capture.

110 Ibid., 375-376.

111 For example, for Kurt Honolka, the singers’ gestures were esoteric, bordering on mannerism, far from truth simplicity and naturalness. Kurt Honolka, “Des Kaisers neue Marionetten: Robert Wilson inszenierte Glucks Alceste in Stuttgart,” Opernwelt 28, no. 2 (February 1987), 33.
The collaboration with Hanayagi resulted in a more distinct investigation of theatre and acting through an intercultural approach. In his essay “Interculturalism and Iconophilia in the New Theatre,” Wirth argues that unlike Peter Brook or Ariane Mnouchkine, Wilson is not interested in promoting cultural understanding between various cultures. Instead, through a strategy of estrangement, which is more radical than Brecht’s, Wilson attempts to provide the spectator with a meditative stage picture of displayed cultural diversity in order to induce appreciation of arbitrary aesthetic synthesis of cultural differences. Using these methods, Wilson offsets the traditional role of the theatre, where the image is espoused with a message: “Wilson’s optics ignores the transparency of the signifier, and views it as opaque, denying its function of pointing toward the signified.”

In contrast, the Paris version of choreography is not absolutely static since Giuseppe Frigeni—Wilson’s assistant and collaborator—revised it. The Italian-French choreographer kept Hanayagi’s gesture and movement for the main characters but created his own dance routines with bold speeds and quick twirls. His task was difficult because the dancers’ movements were limited by long tubular strapless dresses made of a slightly stiff pleated fabric, which gracefully extended to the sides in the middle when the dancers were bending. The repetitive arm movements were the main source of dancers’ expression, keeping in style with the gestures of the main characters, but they were also agile and fluid. Frigeni’s choreography contributed to the hypnotic and strikingly beautiful images of Wilson’s production.

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113 They also wore black hats that were variation on Nefertiti’s cap crown, but not as tall.
Performers

If Wilson transformed the singers into stylized performers, he simultaneously de-hierarchized their position, a move affecting star singers in particular. The singer becomes an equal element of the work as a chorus member, set, costume, and music. Even when Wilson stopped using non-professional performers in favor of highly skilled professionals, often very famous actors and singers, the performers continued to be treated as objects, icons, or Craig’s Übermarionetten, for which there is little resemblance to naturalism or any psychologism. With his choreography of movement and gestures Wilson transforms acting for opera, moving away from attempts towards naturalism and psychologism, and thus away from the achievements of Chéreau’s Ring. Although he admired Chéreau’s production—one summer he even sat through two full cycles—his idea for opera was to do “the opposite of what Chéreau did with the Ring. I never understood why they called that naturalistic acting. It’s the most artificial, unnatural way of behaving on stage that I’ve ever seen in my life. But they all said that Chéreau has reinvented naturalistic acting. It’s just too much for me. I’m not interested in that kind of thing.” Consequently Wilson refuses to give any motivational or psychological explanations to the singers, or to cite interpretations of this kind regarding the work itself. Nonetheless, just as Craig’s call for the Übermarionette is generally misconstrued as his wish to replace the actor with a marionette, whereas in fact his search for the Übermarionette meant a perfect actor, capable of performing with mechanical perfection. Likewise Wilson’s use of his singers became a form of highly specialized and

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effective training.\footnote{115} The operatic audience, however, is normally focused on following relationships between characters, not objects, or the relationships between a figure and a space, or the abstract tensions between verticality and horizontality.

His performers have to assume a static position and be able to control their movements with extreme precision and self-control, in particular hand gestures, which they have to hold for extended periods of time. There is no space for any spontaneous movement. The singer never has the chance to step out of the form—or as in conventional productions step out of the role—and just stand on the proscenium and sing as frequently happens in opera. How challenging that can be was revealed in the experience of the Finnish soprano Karita Mattila, the second Elsa in the Metropolitan Opera production of \textit{Lohengrin}. Deborah Voigt, acclaimed soprano, was considered to be a failure in performing Wilson’s choreography despite her familiarity with his style of directing.\footnote{116} Conversely, her replacement—Mattila—successfully executed it. Despite her celebrated performance in \textit{Lohengrin}, Mattila found Wilson’s production disconcerting and frustrating. She even had to hire a personal trainer in order to help her cope with the physical demands of Wilson’s choreography—which she and other singers decided to simplify.

\footnote{115} As the South African tenor Johan Botha attests, it had results: “Well, at first it was strange to execute these abstract movements, to get it together with the music and the sung words. But if you rehearse eight hours a day, it becomes some sort of mechanism—you do it without thinking about it.” Jochen Breiholz, “Botha’s Bow,” \textit{Opera News} 61, no. 9 (January 25, 1997): 26-27.

\footnote{116} Voigt had already performed in a Wilson production: in 1992 she sang the title role, replacing Jessye Norman, in \textit{Alceste} in Chicago. For her, it was one of the most rewarding experiences of her career, in spite the fact that most reviewers saw her struggling with Wilson’s elaborate choreography that he originally devised for the premiere of \textit{Lohengrin}. Anthony Tommasini, “A Soprano Takes a Dramatic Turn,” \textit{New York Times}, October 13, 2000, Section E, Part 1, 1. Brian Kellow, “Her Brilliant Career: [Deborah Voigt],” \textit{Opera News} 67, no. 8 (February 2003), 14-20.
Wilson’s performer becomes a three-dimensional figure sculpted by the costume and the light. His or her body gives a sense of scale to otherwise scale-less space. The costume not only shapes the body but also limits the movement. Their bodies are devoid of sexuality, in particular female performers whose bodies are often covered with fabric from the neck to the toe. (There are some exceptions like Aida and Cio-Cio-San, who wear strapless dresses.) Similarly distancing is the makeup (and recently the frequently-used body stockings) that covers the exposed parts of the body and inhibits displays of emotions, becoming a mask. Although being another visual element of the scenography, the performers are never confined to the background: their position in the space can create a perspectively perceived visual depth in a typically abstract Wilsonian space. In contrast to the other, mostly two-dimensional elements on stage, the body of the performer appears to be unique through its stereoscopic qualities, but with light Wilson continually threatens it with “disappearance,” as Fischer-Lichte argues. Wilson either fragments or flattens it, turning it into just a shadow, a sharply delineated flat silhouette against the backdrop. Fischer-Lichte sees this moment of “the corporeality of the actor melt[ing] into the flatness of the picture” as a key point in staging the medium’s spatial materiality.\footnote{Fischer-Lichte, “Aesthetics of Disruption,” 18.}

Wilson does not use blocking that illustrates the text. This fact and his usually abstract space mean that singers have often complained of feeling lost in the vast space where there are none of the typical orientation landmarks. His performers rarely face each other and often do not see each other at all. Further, they are often denied any physical contact. At times the singers seem to be floating above the ground, their costuming—typically very long dresses, covering their feet, similar to the female Bunraku puppets—
enhances this effect. They are ethereal and disorienting, as, for example, the three Rheinmaidens in Der Rheingold. Performers seem to be dehumanized, becoming yet another type of an object in space, an effect which the costume often highlights.

“Through being exposed on the stage,” as Fischer-Lichte suggests—using Arthur Danto’s concept of the transfiguration of the commonplace—“the actor’s bodies are transfigured into works of art. In this way, the emphasis on corporeality as the sine qua non of all theatrical communication is pushed to its furthest limits.”  

**Conclusion**

Seen in historical terms of “scopic regimes,” Wilson’s visuality in opera cannot be seen as either a simply avant-garde rejection of the frame, or a postmodern version of the baroque folie du voir (“madness of vision”), which would privilege the ecstatic or the disruptive. On one hand, his visual aesthetics, far removed from realistic referentiality, are formalist and geometric, relying very frequently on abstract patterns in a fixed space, very much an aesthetic of control. This aesthetic of control admits the presence of close collaborators, allowing Wilson to work closely while giving great freedom to a certain degree to actors, musicians, sound designers, costume designers, etc. Consequently, the role of Wilson’s visuality in opera might be seen as a double and ambivalent one. On the surface, his is a radical break with “realist representation” on the level of sets, costumes and mimetic representations. On the other hand, his controlled visual spaces may seem to restore a kind of very ordered visuality. The severely minimalist style of his productions, highlighting deliberate ambiguity, offers suggestive stagings rather than definitive ones. Particularly in an opera, this rather abstract rationalism is complicated by other aspects of

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118 Ibid.
his scenography, which have more to do with direction as it is traditionally understood. Wilson’s refusal to endow any text with a definite interpretation and his deliberate stance against the emotional aspect of music seem to take this to a point which challenges the traditional role of emotions in opera. Through his strict adherence to the abstracted articulation of the space, combined with the emphasis on beauty of the composition and the form, he teaches the spectators how to see and hear, how to resynchronize perceptual habits.

Denying empathy to the characters, Wilson removes emotion, leaving instead a pure space for contemplation. His radicalism may not seem revolutionary in the context of Appia’s ideas and Wieland Wagner’s productions; however, in the context of opera since the late 1970s (discussed in the previous chapter), we must still consider Wilson to be an avant-garde auteur of operatic production. Although Wilson is now in vogue within the opera management circles, it is important to remember that it took him over thirty years to achieve that position as discussed early in this chapter with the anecdotal introduction about his debut at the Metropolitan Opera. Initially highly revolutionary, transgressive and provocative, his mature aesthetical style resurrected classical beauty and simplicity without replicating an image of traditional conservative classicism. Moreover, his abstract formalism has become the preferred model, replacing the neo-pictorialism of Zeffirelli or Ponnelle, but moving away from the conceptual stagings of Chéreau and Peduzzi.

Scholars’ ambivalence regarding Wilson’s post-Heiner Müller output echoes general criticism and commonly expressed sentiments of various audiences, including the spectators at an opera. The requirement of unrelenting reinvention from theatre
practitioners stands in direct opposition to what is commonly expected of artists whose works a little-trained eye can recognize instantly. No one complains about seeing yet another Rembrandt landscape, or Cezanne still life, Rothko abstract painting, or Andy Warhol portrait. Wilson’s style is so distinct that no one has difficulty recognizing it. His aesthetic is so powerful that frequently his collaborators claim that their work for him bears very little of their personal style.\textsuperscript{119} Wilson not only continuously refines his visual aesthetics but also insists on employing the same rules over and over again, such as an incessant refusal to provide the audience with interpretation, supplemented with a rejection of realism and psychologism. And he finds even more works—theatrical, operatic or ballet—in which he could apply them. As Lehmann says of Wilson, “In Wilson’s work the phenomenon has priority over the narrative, the effect of the image precedence over the individual actor, and contemplation over interpretation.”\textsuperscript{120} Separated image and text converge not on stage but in the mind of the spectator. Thus, the refusal to provide interpretation suggests that Wilson wants to strengthen phenomenological elements of the theatre and thus those that pertain to a pure experience and reception.

Even when he is staging a classical text like opera, the text itself is rarely in the center of his focus; rather, he is more broadly interested in the particular themes of the texts. As Counsell suggests, “With no cultural logic available to interpret [the movement] the spectator must respond subjectively.”\textsuperscript{121} Counsell asserts that Wilson thus both


\textsuperscript{120} Lehmann, ibid. 80.

\textsuperscript{121} Counsell, \textit{Signs of Performance}, 182.
encourages interpretation, and ultimately denies it, because the audience does not possess the tools to decode the meaning. The audience struggles with the meaning and that leads to frustration, as the spectator is caught between disappointment and the beauty of the images, which in Counsell’s Marxist reading is pure consumerism: “It is spectacle that Wilson’s theatre offers most of all. …stripped of given meaning, his theatre consists of the pure expression of its own expense. It becomes the theatrical equivalent of gratuitous consumption, its expenditure of real material resources for the generation of images made more emphatic because those images are hollow.”

In opera, in particular, the productions must be spectacular, so each time Wilson offers the audiences a marvelous staging, which he supplies with astonishing, sophisticated images.

In contrast to Counsell and many other critics and scholars, I would emphasize that Wilson leaves his images purposefully void—“stripped of given meaning”—so the spectators fill them with their own meanings. He gives a form, which then both the performer and the spectator must recast as their own form and/or they must shift their analytical focus from meaning to sheer presence. This is one of the most difficult tasks for an audience since we are accustomed to being provided with concrete interpretations. In Wilson’s operatic stagings the coexistence of music and images is notably pertinent since it offers yet another level of meaning, which is frequently ignored or overlooked. As David Levin asserts, in Wilsonian productions, “Dramatic meaning was located in the space between the pieces’ conventional referential world and Wilson’s own non- or poly-referential world of ritual gesture, idiosyncratic movement, and abstracted space.”

Wilson has not only revived abstract scenography, but he has elevated it into a major

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122 Ibid., 206.

paradigm at the time when abstraction has been reduced to a minor role, not only in the theatre and opera, but in the fine arts as well, where abstraction has been displaced by a wave of new figurative style. Revealingly, the opera as an institution was for many years lagging in embracing the changing of aesthetics (as we saw with Wilson’s *Lohengrin* at the Metropolitan Opera). The abstraction is crucial, however, for developing a concentrated form of seeing, an antidote to the aesthetics of distraction. Wilson’s insistence on recasting the various operatic pieces in his highly idiosyncratic style continues to contest the realistic tendencies, which are quite strongly embedded in the staging practices, in particular since Chéreau’s *Ring* renewed the interests in pictorialism in the middle of 1970s.

My dissertation also investigates the effects of Wilson’s influence—the impact of the Wilsonian aesthetics on other designers. In particular, recent productions of Karl-Ernst Herrmann belong to the Wilsonian brand of neo-surrealist abstract visuality. Herrmann designs seemingly disconnected but precisely constructed images appealing to the subliminal. As we will see in the next chapter, his scenography moves away from neo-historicism and in the end achieves a striking aesthetic consistency—reminiscent of Wilson’s—marked by commercially understood beauty that Aronson observes in contemporary fashion and advertising industries.
CHAPTER THREE

THE COOL BEAUTY:
KARL-ERNST HERRMANN’S OPERATIC SCENOGRAPHY

“Opera cannot successfully compete with cinematographic images as long as operatic imagery is limited to clumsy artistic transposition of reality.”
Gérard Mortier

In the summer of 1992, a sudden departure of the conductor Riccardo Muti, who left the production team barely a week before the premiere of the opening production of Gérard Mortier’s first season, sensationalized the takeover of the Salzburger Festspiele, one of the most important European operatic festivals, after Herbert von Karajan’s death. The reason was Mozart’s opera seria—La clemenza di Tito—directed by a husband-and-wife team, Ursel and Karl-Ernst Herrmann, who had staged it successfully during Mortier’s management at Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels ten years earlier. Muti cited differences in the interpretation of the opera and disagreement with the directorial choices. News and rumors spread quickly, revealing tensions within the opera world. However, rather than an experimental flop, the scandalous production became a success, a perfect vehicle of artistic statement both for the Herrmanns and for Mortier. Clemenza marked a clear break from a theatre of aggrandizement with elaborate crowd scenes and the conventionally schematic direction of the characters that had


2 Later in the chapter I address the issue of collaboration between Karl-Ernst and Ursel Herrmann and why this chapter is devoted more to his contribution than to hers or theirs collectively.

3 In 1988 in Salzburg, Muti had conducted a very conservative Clemenza (dir. Peter Brenner, des. Enrico Job and Benito Persico). In terms of opera world politics, Edward Rothstein presents a larger view: “…the withdrawal was also widely seen as a vote of no confidence in Gérard A. Mortier.” Muti’s animosity towards Mortier continued throughout his management at Salzburg. Edward Rothstein, “In Salzburg, an Original Clemenza that Takes Opera Seria Seriously,” New York Times, July 29, 1992, C15.
defined Karajan’s festival. It opened a new era of operatic performance in Salzburg characterized by visually daring and interpretatively controversial productions (see Fig. 3.1).

Fig. 3.1. Mozart’s *La clemenza di Tito* at the Salzburger Festspiele in 1992, directed by Ursel and Karl-Ernst Herrmann, designed by Karl-Ernst Herrmann. This controversial but ultimately triumphant production combined simple white cubic space with fashionable costumes. Courtesy of the Archiv der Salzburger Festspiele. Photograph: Oliver Herrmann.

The production history of *Clemenza* is emblematic of developments in Karl-Ernst Herrmann’s scenographic style and of the visual development of opera as a whole in the last three decades. This pivotal staging underscores his position within the changing role of scenography, which disrupts traditional approaches to producing opera while simultaneously renewing modernist paradigms of its staging. Famous for his collaboration with Peter Stein and Claus Peymann in the 1970s, Herrmann has been a key stage designer in German theatre. Together with Wilfried Minks and Achim Freyer,
Herrmann has creatively molded a Bildertheater—a designer’s theatre that can also be described as the German version of the theatre of images. Herrmann’s transition to directing opera is symbolic not only of trends within the German theatre, but also of the operatic world where he has been a central figure in the repatterning of opera’s visual and spatial aspects. Moreover, the trajectory of his scenographic styles represents a barometer of contemporary approaches towards staging opera. Along side Robert Wilson and Achim Freyer, Herrmann is a key designer-director whose contribution to contemporary opera includes its visual reimagining, the renewal of the operatic repertoire, and the interpretation of newly canonized works. Unlike Wilson and Freyer, however, Herrmann does not have a single, easily discernible visual aesthetic. His scenography is more protean, versatile, and dramaturgically malleable. He is not interested in prescriptive choreography or costumes that would severely impinge on the performers. Rather his aestheticized scenography actively contributes to the interpretation of the text, forcing the audience to participate in its performance.

By examining Herrmann’s operatic oeuvre, we can see not only how his individual style has evolved, but also how the specific function of director-designer has influenced, challenged and reshaped the operatic canon. His role in scenography and opera has not been analyzed in detail by any rigorous work in either English or German scholarship; my chapter aims to fill that gap. It connects Herrmann’s operatic output to his theatrical oeuvre, not only because it is an important aspect of his work, but also because his crossing of the boundaries between theatre and opera makes significant contributions to broader changes in the theatricality of opera and the relation of theatre to opera. His use of theatrical language, exemplified in his emphasis on the text as translated
into sets, costumes, lighting, positioning of singers, gestures, etc., as well as in a centrality of Schaulust—the pleasure of seeing—can be traced back to his praxis at the Berliner Schaubühne during the 1970s.\(^4\) The trajectory of Herrmann’s stylistic development from realism to allusive abstractionism shows how styles are introduced in contemporary scenography as environmental staging and realism, then modified and recycled.

As I demonstrate by focusing on key opera productions, Herrmann’s style moves toward scenographic abstraction and what I refer to as cool beauty in opera, a formalist type of beauty that generates a paramount feeling of aesthetic pleasure and harmony in which even discordance and ugliness are aestheticized. This type of beauty, although often contested, is an overriding concept in Herrmann’s aesthetics as well as in fashion. The adjective cool indicates abstraction and formalism as well as affinity to Wilson’s aesthetics and his inclination towards cool hues. In this light, we can see Herrmann’s purification of the scenography as aiming towards fully abstracted space as detached, demanding the spectator’s concentrated attention and intellectual participation. Instead, the audience feels removed from the drama enacted onstage. Traditionally, opera has been providing the “opulent cornucopia showering the spectator with golden illusions not to be found at home.”\(^5\) However, as we will see in this chapter, Herrmann’s recent

\(^4\) On the role of Schaulust in Stein’s work see Ramona Franziska Mosse, “Between Tragedy and Utopia: Revolution and the Political Stage after 1945” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2008), 139-143. Herrmann’s work at the Schaubühne in the 1970s is essential for understanding the origins and evolution of his scenography at large, but its analysis is beyond the scope of this chapter. See Marvin Carlson, *Theatre Is More Beautiful than War: German Stage Directing in the Late Twentieth Century* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2009); Michael Patterson, *Peter Stein, Germany’s Leading Theatre Director* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981); Peter Iden, *Die Schaubühne am Halleschen Ufer 1970-1979* (München: Hanser, 1979).

scenography is simple yet demanding, creating uneasiness for a spectator trapped between the beauty of the theatrical images and the coolness of the abstract design.

PART I: Mapping Herrmann’s operatic oeuvre

Karl-Ernst Herrmann has shaped the visual modes of German theatre, transforming theatre architecture, scenography and the scenic image. His fame and influence among German designers can be traced back to his work with one of the most innovative directors in German theatre, Peter Stein, who came to be regarded as “Germany greatest living director.” Working with Stein at the Schaubühne in Berlin allowed Herrmann to conduct experiments with space, theatre machinery, different techniques and styles almost without any constraints, either economic or temporal. The highly successful collaboration with Stein at the Schaubühne established Herrmann’s position in German speaking countries; however, as is so often the case with designers, he still remained in Stein’s shadow. The opera offered Herrmann opportunities not only to expand his artistic vision into costume and lighting design, but also to combine design with direction. As collaboration with Stein was crucial for his theatrical career, so was meeting Gérard Mortier central to his career within opera. Mortier engaged him to work at the Théâtre de la Monnaie, Brussels, and gave him an opportunity to direct. In fact, Mortier—a Schaubühne enthusiast and an advocate of opera as theatrical form—opened

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6 Herrmann collaborated also with Claus Peymann, Luc Bondy, Klaus Michael Grüber, Goeorge Tabori, Christof Nel, Thomas Langhoff, and Matthias Hartmann. Michael Patterson, Peter Stein, Germany’s Leading Theatre Director (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge UP 1981), xiv.

7 They met in the 1970s in Frankfurt and Hamburg, where they both worked together, while Herrmann was creating designs for Nono’s Al gran sole carico d’amore (1978, dir. Jürgen Flimm, Frankfurt) and Tchaikovsky’s Eugen Onegin (1979, dir. Adolf Dresen, Hamburg).
the doors for Herrmann to the most important European opera houses: Salzburger Festspiele and Opéra de Paris.

In Brussels Herrmann directed his two first operas—Mozart’s *La clemenza di Tito* (1982) and *Don Giovanni* (1984). His debut and subsequent productions at La Monnaie showed the importance of the director in operatic production. Continuing the tradition of the great operatic producers of the second half of the twentieth century, he transposed his own theatrical experience and theatrical innovations onto the operatic stage. Herrmann staged not just operas themselves but a new relationship between theatre and opera, translating text and music into a highly theatrical language while employing new theatrical-dramaturgical concepts that strengthened the staging of opera and engendered new interpretations of operatic works. In due course, he chose to work exclusively with his wife Ursel Herrmann as a co-director. After the success of *La finta giardiniera* (1986) they became known mainly for their interpretations of Mozart’s operas, forming a highly productive directorial team, inevitably known as “the Herrmanns.”

His more structured and permanent pattern of collaboration lends Herrmann’s authorship a more interesting shape, but also perhaps a more problematic one for the historian of opera scenography. The Herrmanns’ collaboration has been tight and fruitful; nonetheless, it is reputed that his is the last word in decision-making. I will not attempt to disentangle their collaboration, which obviously is a cross-pollination of their various ideas and sensibilities. Details on the precise collaboration are scarce; interviews...
with the two are rare. In one such conversation, the theatre scholar Silvia Kronberger asked about their partnership at work. Ursel outlined a close collaborative process, but one in which division of labor clearly gave Karl-Ernst the dominant role in the visual look of the production, with responsibility for sets and costumes, and Ursel’s role associated above all with the work with performers:

> It can be hard to separate. It evolves; one cannot describe it theoretically. We are very different. Herrmann makes sets and costumes, which I know very little about, and together we direct. Together we listen to the music, together we deal with it, then both sides have different ideas and something emerges. That’s also the case with the rehearsals. 

Because my focus is on the visuality of opera and Ursel clearly attributes that side of the production to Karl-Ernst, I will address exclusively his role in developing the scenography for their productions.

Music critics considered the Herrmanns’ early Mozart productions to be fresh and elegant, insightful and witty, sophisticated and emotional. Interestingly, they achieved the greatest success with the composer’s lesser-known pieces such as the rediscovered adolescent work (La finta giardiniera) and opera seria (La clemenza di Tito and Idomeneo), in which Herrmann presented a highly aestheticized image of Mozart’s worlds. Similarly, when they staged Mozart’s Entführung aus dem Serail in 1989, Singspiel was generally not considered as meaningful as the other Mozart operas like Don Giovanni and Le nozze di Figaro. Aside from Mozart, the Herrmanns—unlike

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Freyer and Wilson—produced a comparatively small number of operas (19 during 32 years) in various European opera houses. They focused on rarely performed operas, carefully staging works by Handel, Rameau, Gluck, Mysliveček, Cherubini, and Rossini, analyzing them through the lenses of literature and fine art. The only “mainstream” exception—not counting Mozart’s *Zauberflöte*—has been a popular production of Verdi’s *La traviata*, while the only contemporary opera they staged—*La Dispute* by a Belgian composer Benoît Mernier’s—had its world premiere at La Monnaie in March 2013.

The Herrmanns’ methodical stagings and meticulous approach demonstrated the vitality of operatic works that had been previously deemed inferior and flawed. These productions went beyond the standard constraints of the form, and featured impassioned characters and frequently added elements of aesthetized burlesque. The Herrmanns’ operatic productions followed the Schaubühne work ethos—marked by intense preparations, a comprehensive dramaturgy, long rehearsals and an emphasis on ensemble work—have had a notably long life. However, unlike in the case of co-productions, the revivals have been adapted and modified. As we will see later in the chapter, while Karl-Ernst Herrmann’s main concept for the design, in particular the model for the stage space, remains intact in the revivals, the novelty of their props, architectonic details and costumes attest to their new visual sensitivity and clearly reflect changes in the visual culture.

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10 In addition to Belgium, his productions were staged in France, Austria, Great Britain, Czech Republic, Germany, and Spain.

11 This production has been frequently revived in a few European cites: 1987-8, 1994 and 2006 Brussels, 1998, 2004, 2008 at Deutsche Oper am Rhein Duisburg-Düsseldorf, and 2007 in Parma at Verdi’s Festival. It also has been recorded on DVD.
PART II: Herrmann’s scenographic style(s)

Herrmann belongs to a generation of directors and designers that revolutionized German theatre in the 1970s, creating a “theatre of new imagery.”\footnote{Fischer-Lichte’s term—“Theater einer neuen Bildlichkeit”—corresponds directly with Marranca’s coinage of “The Theatre of Images.” David Hughes goes even further and calls this trend a “tyranny of the designer equal to that of the director,” where a domineering mise-en-scène is capable of masking an uninspired director.” See Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Semiotik des Theaters*, vol. 3, “Die Aufführung als Text” (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1983), 187-188; David Ashley Hughes, “German Theatre in Crisis,” *TDR* 51:4 (Winter 2007): 142.} Starting with the Schaubühne designs, we can see the proliferation of diversity and the continuities and discontinuities in Herrmann’s scenography at large. In particular, his designs for *Peer Gynt, Prinz Friedrich von Homburg, Sommergäste, Shakespeare’s Memory, As You Like It, Oresteia, and Three Sisters* illustrate his theatrical scenography and point to a variety of approaches to design. In these productions, he refined his use of pictorialism, symbolism, realism, and theatricality, all of which he would later employ in his operatic scenography. These designs were aesthetically eclectic, but they grew organically from close collaboration with a director, playwright and/or dramaturg. Rooted in the 1960s avant-garde, these collaborations yielded the most important experiments with theatrical spaces in the German theatre, leading to what Fischer-Lichte declares as the completion of a process that began at the beginning of the twentieth century.\footnote{Fischer-Lichte, *The Show and the Gaze of Theatre*, 57, 94.} Herrmann’s sets for Stein were spatially innovative, spectacular in scale and frequently technically complex, something that is very important in designing for opera. His theatrical environments emphasized sensual pleasure in vision (*Schaulust*), especially where the visuals seemed to override the text. The evolving aestheticism later became the key visual factor in his operatic scenography.
In his monograph on the Schaubühne, German critic Peter Iden discerns two contrasting methods that Herrmann employed in his designs. The first was a concretization of the play’s reality; the second was a conceptualized counter-image in form of an illusionary, ideal background image rendered either as a painted prospect or a “real” landscape mounted on stage.  

The simultaneous presence of both juxtaposing elements in effect shifted the meaning of the “reality.” Instead of reproducing the textual stage directions, Herrmann’s theatrical scenography offered visual interpretation of the text and provided new understanding of theatrical space that had its own independent laws. He used a variety of means: architectural, painterly, sculptural, symbolic, or realistic, often blending them together to create a new space for a performance. He molded all spaces available to him, creating an environment that was occupied by both the actors and the spectators arranged in a constantly varying set up. Audience seating locations changed from one production to the next, becoming a variable but stimulating element for the public. The innovation went further than simply creating environments encompassing spectators. His spatial designs—as Ramona Mosse asserts—“fundamentally restructur[ed] the relationship between set, action, and audience.”

Notwithstanding the imperative to control the spectator’s gaze, Herrmann sought to foster an active spectator. His scenographic creations combined a broad vision of theatrical space with an adroit deployment of details, for which he eventually became notorious, as well as for his creative use of older theatrical techniques, devices and aesthetics that he combined with a modern awareness of spectatorship.

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14 Iden’s short section on the Schaubühne’s stage design is perhaps the most insightful reflection on the role of scenography and the thorough assessment of Herrmann’s design although pertaining only to his work there. Iden, *Die Schaubühne*, 61-67.

15 Mosse, “Between Tragedy and Utopia,” 143.
Of all his stylistic qualities, it is for striking stage images that Herrmann is best known. While this aspect of his style is often associated with a decorative cornucopia of details, this is something of a deceptive simplification. Rather, the aestheticism of his scenography is based on simple and clear scenic solutions, augmented by significant props with substantial symbolic meaning. Only occasionally has he opted for decorative surplus. This visual and spatial *horror vacui* occurred only in the first *Giardiniera* and in

Fig. 3.2. Verdi’s *La traviata*, directed by Ursel and Karl-Ernst Herrmann, designed by Karl-Ernst Herrmann. Originally produced for *La Monnaie*, Brussels in 1987. The visual and spatial *horror vacui* corresponds to Violetta’s emotional states. Photo © Bernd Uhlig, 2007.
Traviata (see Fig. 3.2)—all other productions were visually stylized with a tendency towards simplification and geometrification. Optically, his more recent stagings are fashionably modern and aesthetically committed, emphasizing the treatment of space, costumes and lighting.

Beyond the frame

Herrmann’s oeuvre addresses two central aspects of performance that have become acutely important since the turn of the twentieth century, namely the significance of scenography and the relationship between stage and audience. His spatial reconfigurations of auditorium and stage affected how the audience perceived performance, forcing the spectators to be active viewers and thus fostering individual receptions of the play. Continuing the achievements of Craig and Appia and the historical avant-garde, Herrmann liberated scenography from being a subservient element of the production when working in opera. Here, too, he advanced the parameters of Raum, a key concept of contemporary German stage design that he helped to establish during the 1970s, which distinctly moved stage design beyond the descriptive scenery. Raum—a German word distinctly combining the meanings of place and space—has been described as a hybrid, independent art form at the crossroads of theatre and contemporary art.16 It is an enclosed environment of a great depth, an autonomous three-dimensional visual composition, determining the action and directly interpreting the text. In his Räume,

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Herrmann aimed to create a total Raum: a total spatial composition that would also encompass the spectators.¹⁷

Unlike modern theatres, opera houses have limited options of varying the relationship between audience and performer—the majority of them are proscenium theatres and they also require an orchestra pit. Nonetheless, Herrmann has never ceased to bridge the two spaces, which he has done in various ways. First of all, he sought to change the space structurally, moving the action closer to the audience with special runways around or into the orchestra pit. The most elaborate version of this was Giulio

¹⁷ One particular interesting development in his career was the exhibition “Inszenierte Räume” in Hamburg in 1979. Together with the Austrian designer Eric Wonder, Herrmann created immersive spectatorial environments, through which the spectators could walk, spaces in which a viewer/spectator became an actor. Karl-Ernst Herrmann, Erich Wonde, Inszenierte Räume, exh. cat. (Hamburg: Kunstverein in Hamburg, 1979).
*Cesare in Egitto*, where Herrmann placed three wide paths over the orchestra pit. As a contemporary adaptation of Kabuki’s *hanamichi*, these runways allow the singers to come closer to the spectators, creating a greater intimacy.

In putting musicians directly on stage, Herrmann found another solution for bridging the traditionally separated spaces in the theatre and opera house. For example, in *Semele* (1996), a lesser-known Handel’s oratorio, he placed instrumentalists playing different continuo instruments, such as guitar and viola da gamba, directly on the stage, which was filled entirely with a giant, three-tier wedding cake with kinetic parts. As a result, the musicians, sitting on black chairs on both sides of the stage, were visible throughout. Similarly, in *Così*, Herrmann placed a fortepiano on stage proper (see Fig. 3.3). The continuo player was dressed in a specially designed tailcoat with extra long tails and thus ultimately became another actor on stage, entering the stage with the sisters and engaging in the action, reacting to ongoing events, providing comic relief or occasionally interacting with the female singers, who could find refuge on her piano bench. This simple solution of engaging the musicians in the stagings created the possibility of interaction—frequently witty—between the musicians and the singers, where both constituted a complete picture, reinforcing the idea of unity between music and scenic action. This solution also suggested that all space was available to the spectators, reinforcing Herrmann’s concept of environmental scenography.

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18 This idea caused a serious friction with the conductor Philippe Jordan, who cancelled his engagement during Salzburg Festival in 2005. He conducted the production in the summer of 2004, but in 2005 he wanted also to play harpsichord from the orchestra pit according to early music standards. The management solved the impasse with finding a new conductor, Adam Fischer.
Perhaps the most spatially creative and radical approach was Herrmann’s set for Gluck’s *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1988) in Brussels. For this project, he left the opera house entirely, moving into a different space. This practice—although quite common in contemporary theatre—has rarely been used in opera, mainly due to acoustic problems.
with site-specific spaces. The production was staged in Halles de Schaerbeek, a former covered market hall with metal structure that had been undergoing renovations for some years. As with his earlier work with Stein, in Orfeo Herrmann redesigned the entire space, reconfiguring the spatial relations between the stage, audience, singers and the orchestra.

The audience sat on the 700-seat amphitheatrical tubular steel grandstand, looking down at the singers as they performed in the midst of a vast open space. The set was complex symbolically, visually and technically, its basic details here described by a contemporary critic:

Herrmann’s set reveals its bewildering complexity as Orfeo’s tragedy unfolds. In the foreground is a circular islet surrounded by a moat. The underworld, behind the water, is shaped like a labyrinth, from the depths of which monsters and furies rise eerily to confront Orfeo. Further back, a vertiginous staircase leads to Elysium. Wandering here and there, or perched on a tribune, the gods, dressed like chic revelers of the Belle Époque, watch the action with ironic nonchalance. The production is constantly spiced by visual surprises or tricks.

During the performance, in Act 2, the musicians, dressed in specially designed tailcoats, moved from the front of the spectator to a distant platform constructed upstage left. The whiteness of the set’s elements and costumes complemented the linear

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19 With the advanced contemporary technology this becomes less of a problem since operas are now staged at train stations and airports. For example, Opera Theatre Company presented Beethoven’s Fidelio in a former prison (Kilmainham Gaol) in Dublin in 2006; in Switzerland Verdi’s Traviata was staged at the main train station (La traviata im Bahnhof) in Zürich in 2008 and Puccini’s Bohème in a high-rise (La bohème im Hochhaus) in Bern in 2009 (both televised). In 2015 in London the Royal Opera House presented Monteverdi’s Orfeo (dir. Michael Boyd, des. Tom Piper, lights Jean Kalman) at the Roundhouse and a widely successful staging of the modern opera Invisible Cities by Christopher Cerrone was presented at Union Station in Los Angeles, but it is an opera for headphones (2014). See Sinéad O’Neill, “Getting out of the House: Unorthodox Performance Spaces in Recent British and Irish Productions,” Opera Quarterly 25, no. 3-4: 284-298, accessed January 18, 2014 doi: 10.1093/oq/kbp045.

20 The production was infinitely more complex than expected. Due to a technical accident that occurred during the dress rehearsal, Herrmann had to change the way the gods appeared; initially they were supposed arrive in an airship. This caused significant delays and cancelations. The premiere was postponed and the first performances were canceled.

simplicity of architectural structures. However, the visual minimalism of the main design components were supplemented with a painted backdrop of sky and clouds with atmospheric effects as well as realistic details, such as a stone, trees, flowing water, fields of golden wheat and turtles crawling across a grassy meadow.\textsuperscript{22} To increase the spectacular aspects of this production—as always when dealing with so-called baroque theatre—Herrmann included tricks and special effects, such as Amor ascending on the wires (see Fig. 3.4).

In sum, Herrmann here combined the incongruity of aesthetically diverse elements by constructing a spatially open vast stage unlike anything opera spectators were accustomed to, in order to create something close to an immersive visual experience for a contemporary audience. By creating that physical environment in a “non-operatic” space, Herrmann not only emphasized the dichotomy between nature and the constructedness of the theatrical space, but also aimed to restructure the system of communication in opera. As Fischer-Lichte suggests, in the context of theatre, this new emphasis on the relationship between stage and auditorium allowed for opening new spaces and new types of the audience’s involvement. Herrmann provided the spectators with strategies of deconstruction by allowing them to see what is really on stage: singers, musicians, scenery, objects and even theatrical machinery. Instead of presenting a coherent world represented on the operatic stage, Herrmann exposed its theatricality, simultaneously giving back the spectators their “right to spectate.”\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{22} In this the production was similar to the scenographic solutions for Stein’s \textit{As You Like It} (1976).

\textsuperscript{23} For Fischer-Lichte, discovering the spectator the avant-garde brought about this most fundamental change in the structure of theatrical communication. The postmodern theatre developed these strategies further, moving them to a different level. Now the spectators were granted freedom to see and attribute the meaning. Fischer-Lichte, \textit{The Show and the Gaze}, 57.
Realistic details

Although Herrmann was never interested in the illusionistic practices of the fourth-wall naturalism and considered the attempt to reproduce reality to be an inherently flawed endeavor, in a different way the accretion of realistic detail, so typical for the naturalistic stage, became one of his signature approaches. At first, he used a few realistic details in his designs to set off juxtaposing elements, emphasizing their character as both authentic and artificial. With time the combination of realistic details and the exploration of the scenographic potential of theatrical spaces resulted in more defined and detail-oriented sets. Eventually the role of realistic detail was gradually intensified until reaching its apogee in *As You Like It* (1976) and later in *Giardiniera* (1986). The tension between the aestheticism and radicalization of the scenography was the most palpable in Herrmann’s man-made, spectacularly sensual landscapes that he created for both theatre and opera.

The goal of these sets, painstakingly recreating reality on stage, has rarely been done in the late twentieth century, and theatre scholarship has often discredited the approach. Once a force for renewal in the theatre, naturalism eventually became a sign of a defunct aesthetics.\(^2\) Although realism as such has never left the Western theatre,

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\(^2\) The basic terminology realism/naturalism has not been precise, has been loosely applied, and the terms are frequently used interchangeably. Although both terms reflect an aspiration to understanding, they have been misconstrued continuously—in particular, in their general usage, blurred by the shifting basic meanings of the real/reality and nature. Additionally, naturalism’s associative meaning with the natural world has augmented the confusion; the adjective “naturalistic” usually refers to the imitating or producing the effect or appearance of nature. The concept of realism is considered to be broader than naturalism, evolving through the decades and thus requiring additional specification that would indicate various permutations of realism such as suggestive realism, poetic realism, photo realism, etc. It has been appearing in the theatre intermittently, mentioned even in Aristotle’s *Poetics* (in his concept of mimesis). Similarly, naturalism as a phenomenon was not just isolated to the end of the nineteenth century. Growing out of romantic excess and escapism, realism became a major trend after the 1870s. Naturalism in theatre generally is considered to be a historical trend that occurred between 1880s-early 1900s. It was an extreme form of realism that presented a slice of life on the stage, usually through the lens of scientific determinism.
realistic sets have not been academically acclaimed. Nonetheless, here I want to complicate Marvin Carlson’s reading of Herrmann’s “extreme realism” onstage and suggest that his designs are not simply picturesque, although they seem at the first glance to be illusionistically pleasing décors.

Herrmann’s realistic designs are more complex than simple iconicity and should be understood as having a greater aesthetic complexity. His goal is not just simply “stylized realism,” “poetic realism,” or “intensified naturalism,” as some scholars and critics have described his sets. According to Herrmann, “The stage design likes to give the impression of being naturalistic at first glance, but it is a form of a composition.” He insists here on something often overlooked when talking about set design: scenography as composition or form. This is true of his entire oeuvre, but his artistic approach to design, stressing the formal aspects of composition, becomes more palpable and central in his later scenography. Additionally, the use of realistic elements only emphasizes the theatricality of the setting. Trying to explain his approach to Finta, he pointed out, “The effect is not naturalistic. If you place a stone on the stage it has a heightened sense of artificiality.” The keen awareness of the artificiality of the stage built into his designs

Eventually it turned into the first modernist movement. Soon, however, the detailed excess of naturalism led to its rejection and a reform of the theatre. See William W. Demastes, _Beyond Naturalism: A New Realism in American Theatre_, Contributions in Drama and Theatre no. 27 (New York: Greenwood P, 1988); Lilian R. Furst and Peter N. Skrine, _Naturalism_ (London: Methuen, 1971).

Carlson, “The Iconic Stage”: 8.

Laurence Senelick calls it a “poetic naturalism taken to the nth degree.” Laurence Senelick, _The Chekhov Theatre: A Century of the Plays in Performance_ (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), 342. Herrmann himself absolutely refuses to be called a naturalistic designer and adamantly contests such opinions.


forms the bedrock of his scenography. For Herrmann, the semiotics of a sign is complicated in a theatre context. Placing a realistic element on stage does not imply that the entire production must be realistic. It is taken out of its original context and framed differently in a production, depending on a director or designer’s concept. This heightened sense of artificiality—a key element of postmodern design and theatricality—engenders a paradox that constitutes a powerful theatrical ambiguity. Thus, Herrmann provocatively used realistic elements that were undeniably authentic, yet they contained a disturbing sense of unreality. In particular, the trees he used in Sommergäste, As You Like It and, in 1986, Giardiniera were so incongruously real that they challenged the audience’s very perception of the real. Realistic details allowed Herrmann to make the world of the play or opera seem more real, while simultaneously making it less real. The paradox created is something quite different than the verisimilar reproduction of “real life.”

Besides seeking the audience’s pleasure, Herrmann’s spectacular scenography is highly intellectual. In her reevaluation of Stein’s work, Ramona Mosse emphasizes the principle of pleasure in seeing—Schaulust as a key element of Schaubühne’s legacy and consequently Herrmann’s “visual and atmospheric innovations…as the most important effects of the Schaulust at the Schaubühne.” She argues that the images presented on

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29 Stein and Herrmann started quoting from reality much earlier. For example, in Peer Gynt they used taxidermy animals: a real horse and a real pig were also stuffed animals. See debate on realism/reality in Stein’s oeuvre: Patterson, Peter Stein, 74-75.


31 Mosse, “Between Tragedy and Utopia,” 143. Here we can think about linking the Schaubühne’s Schaulust to Fischer-Lichte’s idea of giving back the spectators “the right to spectate,” so crucial for the postmodern structure of theatrical communication.
stage were there to be understood, not just simply ostended for visual consumption. They required an active audience since, “The perfect picture crumbles and necessitates the audience to work to decode the images, initially beautiful, then puzzling.” Consequently, Herrmann’s aim in painstakingly recreating charming nature was rather a visual equivalent of an alternative reality. He gives—as Mosse suggests—“a holistic image of another world,” whose existence is immediately questioned. In Giardiniera—as when working with Stein at the Schaubühne—Herrmann was again engaged in creating spectacular images, marking the Schaulust anew.

Towards abstracted landscape

In addition to Herrmann’s attention to details, in particular quasi-realistic ones, we can discern in his oeuvre an inclination towards open and vast spaces sculpted by light and animated by actors, a direction which gradually has become his dominant aesthetic mode. His theatrical environments have often been described as landscapes.

He showed that propensity even when working with Stein at the Schaubühne. The significant presence—if not pervasiveness—of landscapes in his stagings became a trope, analysis of which requires more a critical approach. Herrmann’s landscapes went beyond

32 Ibid., 141.

33 Ibid., 142.

34 In spite of its multivalence across various disciplines, I use the word “environment” because of its direct connotations with environmental theatre/scenography and, broadly speaking, environmental art (and derivative trends such as Arte Povera, Land Art, etc.) popular since the 1970s, while it simultaneously implicates the natural world. In combination with “theatrical” the term emphasizes the compositional aspect of design, which is a key aspect of Herrmann’s work, along and in combination with his use of realistic elements.
simple theatrical scenery.\textsuperscript{35} He spatially created and recreated landscapes as well as directly used images of landscapes, often toying with the conventions of theatre and the genre of traditional landscape painting. This strategy exposed the constructedness of the theatrical space that Herrmann has emphasized throughout his career.

The background landscapes also featured three-dimensional elements. For example, in *Traviata*’s second set (Act 2, scene 1) Herrmann designed a broad room with a very large window revealing an expansive wintery landscape, with cropped willows and an abandoned rowboat in the background, all in a painterly mood more Dutch or Russian.

than French (see Fig. 3.6). It spoke of the isolation of the main character and it contrasted greatly with a foregoing sumptuous and lavish set, representing an opulent, claustrophobically nauseating, decadently Parisian oval saloon that included an authentic crystal chandelier and wooden floor. *Traviata* was a rather traditional staging albeit without the excessiveness of, say, a Zefferelli production. However, the wintery garden landscape suggested monumental elegance, giving also a visual relief. These landscapes were emotive, but also fused the whole scenography into a distinctly articulated stage picture.

![Image of Traviata staging](image.png)

*Fig. 3.6. Traviata. A highly unusual staging for this opera: a wintery and desolate landscape. Photo © Bernd Uhlig 2007.*

The most elaborate sets—theatrical environments for the first *Giardinera* and *Orfeo*—presented landscapes as physical and material realities. Herrmann created these

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36 Neither Piave’s libretto or Dumas’ novel and play—*The Lady of Camellias* (1848), on which Verdi’s opera is based—indicate that particular season. The novel suggests the end of summer for that scene.
landscapes by sculpting the floor and using realistic details—grass, trees or sheaves of wheat—to create the verisimilitude effect of a natural landscape. The highly aestheticized space combined articulation of space with attention to detail and an evocation of beauty and picturesqueness. These physical environments did not represent the self-contained world within the proscenium frame; on the contrary, they worked towards annihilating that frame literally or figuratively.

Fig. 3.7. Handel’s Giulio Cesare in Egitto at La Monnaie, Brussels, in 2008, directed by Ursel and Karl-Ernst Herrmann, designed by Karl-Ernst Herrmann. For Egypt Herrmann designed a stylized and kinetic landscape with paper reeds. Notice also how the catwalks extend over the orchestra pit. Courtesy of Archives of La Monnaie – Brussels. (Photograph Bernd Uhlig.)

Ultimately, Herrmann moved from realistic details to more formal aestheticized landscapes. First, he eliminated detailed landscapes, leaving just tangible landmarks like

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37 The 1970s saw the materialization of the stage. The designers started to use earth, sand, stones, wood, water, etc. This went along with contemporary trends in fine arts such as Arte Povera, Environmental art and Land art. Compare also Aronson’s opinion on the circumventing perceptual mechanisms in postmodern design. Aronson, “Postmodern Design,” 20-21.
a stone or a tree, often suggestively stylized elements. To suggest a landscape in *Semele* he used real flowers and sheaves of wheat, but this was far from suggesting naturalism. The wheat appeared within a highly artificial stage design: it was placed within a maze on the top ring of a multi-cylindrical structure with movable parts—resembling a wedding cake—which dominated the design and filled almost the entire stage. In *Giulio Cesare*, the main visual attraction of the artificial landscape was a stylized, kinetic labyrinth of white reed-beds—with paper cutouts of reeds’ simplified silhouettes—on the banks along the Nile that filled the entire white stage (see Fig. 3.7).

Since the 1990s, Herrmann has been abstracting operatic space. He used neutral dioramas to create the illusion of volumetric space, accentuating the external parameters of the back stage as infinite. In due course he deployed the architecture of the stage itself,
often by means of raking. The spatiality effect of the stage was thus immense. For Cosi, Herrmann used a raked floor and a vertical panorama that contained three images: seascape and, the forest in the winter, and a growing forest in the summer (see Fig. 3.8). In place of a detailed maritime landscape, Herrmann used minimalist, shimmering, and luminous expansive fields of color that indicated the sky and the sea. Often the vertical panorama remained neutral, allowing for careful and atmospheric lighting that supplemented the set’s spaciousness, but simultaneously adding to the sparseness of the design (see Fig. 3.9).

Fig. 3.9. Cosi. The green landscape subsumed the entire stage. Photo © Bernd Uhlig.

As Glenn Loney commented on that aspect of the set:

…it became clear that this long, long rising and falling horizon of bushes, trees, skies, and seas was the Visual Link that made the immensely wide Grosses Festspielhaus stage look like an Abstract Scenic-Unity, an Open-Spaces
Environment, rather than a huge **Empty Space** that was in danger of really looking Empty indeed. Loney identifies one general trend in Herrmann’s scenography, namely a propensity towards creating vast artificial and abstract environments. In other contexts, this mode of abstraction was hardly new; however, in the culturally restricted confines of opera it defied entrenched traditionalism, and frequently presenting a challenge to the singers.

We can trace this tendency towards abstraction back to the abstracted white box sets of late 1970s and early 1980s: Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, Botho Strauss’ *Trilogies des Wiedersehens* (both 1977) and eventually the 1982 *Clemenza*. The all-white set has been fairly popular in the theatrical scenography since Peter Brook’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1970, designed by Sally Jacobs), a landmark in contemporary theatre history, perhaps the most influential Shakespearean staging in the twentieth century. Antithetical to the black box, the all-white space perhaps has its source in contemporary exhibiting practices initiated by the Museum of Modern Art exhibition in 1930. In *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, American critic Brian O’Doherty argues that the white cube—an architectural modernist display—is effectively an ideal space with symbolically annulled spatio-temporality, where objects become sacred items or aesthetic conundrums. However, while Herrmann goes in this direction, the key distinction is that his white spaces are almost never *pure* white. Rather than present sterile whiteness,

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Herrmann uses lighting to color the walls a very pale blue or pastel aqua, as in 2005’s *Clemenza* when he saturated the entire space in artificial blue light (see Fig. 3.10).

![Fig. 3.10. Mozart’s *La clemenza di Tito* at the Opéra national de Paris in 2005, directed by Ursel and Karl-Ernst Herrmann, designed by Karl-Ernst Herrmann. Typically intense imagery: the throne as a funeral stall, Tito in a mask, Berenice pulled across the stage into a golden niche in the monolithic rock, and torn fresh flowers on the floor, all suffused in blue light that transforms the otherwise aseptic white space. Photo © Bernd Uhlig.](image)

**PART III: The key works**

Herrmann’s early operatic productions exhibit two main strands of his old style—picturesque and “naturalistic” designs—that grew out of his theatrical productions from the Schaubühne. The turning point in Herrmann’s scenography is the 1992 *Clemenza*, signaling forthcoming changes and a shift to a style of the *cool beauty*. It indicates a metamorphosis towards minimalism and the glamorized fashion, which define two productions: *Idomeneo* (2000) and the revival of *La finta Giardiniera* (2008). His scenography shifts towards smoothness and abstraction in order to achieve *cool beauty*, a type of contemporary visual aesthetic that favors glamorous clothes and makeup, finely designed furniture and other props, submerging everything in saturated lights. Within this
trajectory he moves in favor of an ambiguous chrono-topography with abstracted sets, carefully lit with saturated lights, and populated with singers in fashionable costumes and distinctive hairstyles.

**Debut in opera: La clemenza di Tito 1982**

When Gérard Mortier took over the management of the Brussels opera, among his first actions was to ask Herrmann to design a new production of Mozart’s *La clemenza di Tito*. Mortier also left him the option of suggesting a director with whom he would like to collaborate. Herrmann proposed himself as the producer of *Clemenza* and Mortier agreed, since he was seeking innovative and daring reinterpretations. Mortier’s ambition was to attain a level of opera appropriate for a European capital. Unable to afford big stars like Pavarotti or Domingo and with only a moderate budget (approximately one third of the one for the Opéra national de Paris), he focused on what precedes the performance, i.e., paying attention to preparations that would ensure carefully perfected realizations and to a programming philosophy which would champion neglected or new operas. In particular, one of his aims when taking over La Monnaie was to develop a new style of directing Mozart as well as focusing on the composer’s less performed works. *Clemenza* was the first production of a complete Mozart cycle during his leadership in Brussels.

Herrmann’s approach to *Clemenza* fits into the post-WWII trend of proving vitality of Mozart’s last *opera seria*, which for decades was deemed hastily written, beneath Mozart’s capabilities, and eventually dismissed as a museum piece unsuitable for

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40 Namenwirth considers this decision as the single the most important and substantial choice Mortier made during his management at the Monnaie. Namenwirth, *Gerard Mortier*, 176.
modern sensibility.\textsuperscript{41} A production team of Herrmann, Mortier and conductor Sylvain Cambreling methodically prepared the premiere. This new style of work, with dramaturgy at the center, was championed by Mortier, whose experience came from German opera companies, which had favored dramaturgical input for decades, taking into consideration the dramatic implications of the written words. For example, the production team staged \textit{Clemenza} with all recitatives intact when usually they were casually cut; this restoration has been essential for proving the stage-worthiness of the piece.\textsuperscript{42} Herrmann read the libretto with similarly themed artworks in mind, both literary and fine arts, resulting in a multilayered intertextuality. The production alluded to over 75 texts and images that were collected in the opera’s program (also designed by Herrmann).\textsuperscript{43} The dominant intertextual framework was one of other literary works of the era, such as Lessing’s \textit{Nathan der Weise} and Goethe’s \textit{Iphigenie auf Tauris}. This eighteenth-century neoclassical context found visual expression in Herrmann’s set and in the opera’s props and costumes. This meticulous dramaturgic assistance and collaboration led to a rehabilitation of Mozart’s opera. Previously considered tedious, \textit{Clemenza} was now viewed as full of dramatic potential.

\textsuperscript{41} After years of obscurity after 1945, \textit{Clemenza} again started slowly to achieve some recognition, mainly in Europe where it was championed by conductors such as Karl Böhm and István Kertész, as well as directors including Jean-Pierre Ponnelle and Ruth Berghaus, who helped to reestablish its position in the repertory and thereby extended the Mozatian canon. John A. Rice, \textit{W. A. Mozart: \textquotedblright La clemenza di Tito,	extquotedblright} Cambridge Opera Handbooks (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991), 137-159.

\textsuperscript{42} However, at a time when no supertitles were available, the production could have been daunting for some spectators.

\textsuperscript{43} The authors included a range from Suetonius through Casanova, Lavater, Andersen to Mallarmé, Kafka and Thomas Mann.
For his *Clemenza*, Herrmann eliminated the clutter of historical production, simplified multiple scene changes, and cleared the stage. Instead of imposing Roman sites like in Ponnelle’s 1984 Metropolitan production (see Fig. 3.11), Herrmann provided *Clemenza* with only one set: an all-white cube with a narrow thrust in the center of the proscenium and with steps on both sides of the platform leading down to the orchestra pit. He had already used the white set in the court scenes for Stein’s *As You Like It* (1977). The design for *Clemenza* was purposefully and distinctly different from La Monnaie’s lavishly eclectic auditorium. In order to limit the separation between actors and the public, Herrmann expanded the stage into the pit so that the singers could be closer to the audience. Lower sections of the walls—approximately two meters high—were covered with a smooth and reflecting surface, in which the characters could view themselves, efficiently enhancing the cold clinical aspect of the space. The empty room emphasized the emotional void of its inhabitants. Each wall had two different sizes of doors, sort of doors-within-doors: smaller ones for the individual exits and entries and bigger ones that opened to disclose external spaces such as a seascape, a spring-green bower and perspectival arches of the Capitol. Above the doors and centrally in the ceiling, Herrmann placed *oculi* with detachable centers through which the chorus members could be visible. For the two scenes with the chorus, the back wall was removed to reveal the painterly executed prospects of landscapes that Herrmann often employed in his theatrical designs (see Fig. 3.12). Here he used the seascape backdrop, the first set in the

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44 The libretto calls for seven set changes: Vitellia’s apartments, before the Roman forum, a garden in the Imperial palace on the Palatine, a portico before the Capitol, palace gardens, large room with a writing desk, and a public place, before a temple. Thus historically magnificent sets and costumes were the opera’s staging norm for decades and were to compensate for the dramaturgical weaknesses often amended with extensive cuts of recitative, the omission of arias and adding excerpts from other works.

early morning light, and the second presented at the final curtain with dark and threatening clouds and a turbulent sea. The color accents yielded only lighting, costumes or props. Austere and formal but concrete and enclosed architectonic space, which symbolized a private space for the individual dilemmas, was juxtaposed with an open idealistic landscape that stood for the formal space of official public events. The set was simultaneously claustrophobic, voluminous and spacious—even when enclosed the indoor space was ultimately empty.

Fig. 3.11. *Clemenza di Tito*, a scene from Act I, at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, directed and designed by Jean-Pierre Ponnelle in 1984. Stylized essence of antiquity signified by decay of monumental architecture with neutral central concave semi-circular play area and eighteenth-century costumes. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera Archives. Photograph Marty Sohl, 2005.

Inside the simple white cube, Herrmann situated a few classical props, such as a broken column center stage or Constantine’s Hand on a pedestal, to denote the antiquity of the opera’s action. Herrmann also placed the action in Mozart’s own time, which allowed him to go beyond the action of the text and incorporate elements from the time in
which the opera was written. This strategy became quite popular in operatic stagings during the 1980s.\textsuperscript{46} The eighteenth century was reflected in architectonic details, an empire style chair and a floor covered with strict geometrical line patterns. This, together with eighteenth-century costumes, gave the production a distinctly neoclassical style.\textsuperscript{47}

![Image of operatic stage design]

**Fig. 3.12. Clemenza di Tito at La Monnaie, Brussels, directed and designed by Karl-Ernst Herrmann in 1982. An opened set for the chorus scene with the painted backdrop and Constantine’s Hand on a pedestal. Courtesy of Archives of La Monnaie – Brussels. (Photograph Oliver Herrmann.)**

Herrmann’s scenography was loaded with symbols, which disrupted the audience’s expectations and forced spectators to question the meaning of the image. The

\textsuperscript{46} Since the 1960s designers have started to place the action within the period of the time when the work was written, often to emphasize staging practices that were standard at that time. For example, Rudolf Heinrich in *Der fliegende Holländer* (1962, Berlin, dir. Joachim Herz) and Richard Peduzzi in the centennial *Ring* in Bayreuth. In the 1980s a series of stagings of Gluck, Haydn, Handel and Mozart’s operas was produced at the Drottningholm Palace Theatre in Stockholm, Sweden, which also emphasized the authenticity of historical performance, not only musically but also in staging practices. Rice, *Mozart: “La clemenza di Tito.”*

\textsuperscript{47} There are some exceptions. For example, Tito’s costume is based on Napoleon’s coronation robe, the female costumes, in particular those for Vitellia, had distinctive colors and were consciously glamorous.
simplified space provided a background where each gesture, prop, costume and detail stood out, allowing for precisely composed images, each of which had a keenly symbolic resonance. With just a candle, skull and book, Herrmann alluded metaphorically and visually to Tito’s melancholy, interpreted simultaneously as a *memento mori*. When the curtain rose, the stage image was visually unsettling: women’s shoes and a cut-up watermelon casually tossed on the floor disturbed the viewers. Vitellia’s tossed pumps transmit the dramatic significance of a tempestuous lovers’ quarrel that happened just before the curtain was raised. Later during her most beautiful aria “Non piu di fiori,” she takes them off again and, as a symbol of complete submission, places them neatly beside each other at the edge of the proscenium. A halved watermelon—a symbol of the earth’s fertility and/or a representation of the female sex—is lying on the floor. Mobilizing this connotation, Herrmann juxtaposes it with Tito’s armor—a symbol of militant masculinity—also lying forsaken on the floor. As the other props reiterated this symbolism, a visual theme in this production thus became the transience of all worldly things.

Herrmann’s production played a key role in repudiating a hostile Romantic critique of Mozart’s opera, which remained firmly entrenched until the 1970s. Instead of the long and boring *opera seria*—as this genre had frequently been deemed—the audience could experience an interesting production with credible characters and their plausible emotions. In thematic and plot terms, the production concentrated on two themes, love and death, and on three main characters: the emperor Titus, his assassin

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48 Many critics complained that there were too many additional props that were ultimately distracting or confusing, such as the appearance of Berenice—Tito’s lover that he sends back to Israel—on a huge papier-mâché ram, Servilla’s carrying a yo-yo in her first entrance, a Rococo page, or Vitellia putting on a war-like makeup during her famous mad aria “Non più di fiori.”
Sesto and the vindictive Vitellia.\textsuperscript{49} Rather than concentrating on the magnanimity of the emperor, the center of directorial focus was now Sesto, the link between Tito and Vitellia, between two extremes, between masculinity and femininity. Herrmann shifted the interpretation from the political play to the psychological drama enacted in what is now a private and intimate space, contrasted with the public and open spaces that he indicated in his set sporadically. Within the schematic libretto he found a realistic story of loyalty, love, friendship, ambition, and betrayal. By focusing on those issues and their accompanying emotions, Herrmann was able to depict human characters instead of just one-dimensional types. This more “realistic approach with the focus on the internal drama” made the opera more palpably dramatic for the contemporary audience. Hence, Herrmann kept the chorus either offstage or on the peripheries of the set, composing few distinctly memorable tableaux. During the chorus’s first entrance, the back wall disappeared revealing a sunny seascape. The choristers were dressed in off-white eighteenth-century garments and had white painted faces. By the second entrance, the sky was overcast and their faces were painted black. As one critic summarized these two tableaux, “The chorus constitutes of white lemurs, in the end they have their faces blackened, darkness, pale stage light—were previously inundated white—are the metaphors of the sorrow’s adversity.”\textsuperscript{50} Clemenza’s visually daring set defined the opera as an internal drama of the main characters with Herrmann showing, as he commented,

\textsuperscript{49} The second couple—Annio, Sesto’s close friend, and his sister, Servilia—together with Tito’s advisor, Publio, are subsidiary characters.

“[t]he loneliness and desperation of the characters in space. (…) The room: an arena for the fears and the passions of the characters.”

Critics, when trying to understand Clemenza, looked into Herrmann’s theatrical work, largely into his collaboration with Stein. Similarities with productions such as Prinz von Homburg and even the failed Parisian Ring became significant reference points in the critique, as well as a testimony to theatre’s impact on the opera. For example, a German reviewer pointed out the following theatrical intertextuality:

When towards the end Sesto has to think that he is led to the execution—the reminiscence of Peter Stein’s staging of Prince von Homburg, which also Herrmann designed, transpires at that moment—blindfolded he staggers onto the stage. He pulls himself together, but falls back into the old way of behaving when he hears the pardon that does not bring him the salvation.

Like Stein, Herrmann questioned here the moment of forgiveness as implausible, emphasizing the bitterness of Mozart’s ending. Seeing the parallel only between Sesto and Homburg’s acquittal, critics overlooked Herrmann’s reference to the irony of the conclusion in Stein’s Prinz von Homburg. Instead of a traditionally staged happy end, announced by the final chorus, Herrmann chose a darker, more complex and ambiguous conclusion. He alienated the characters and emphasized the bitter end of the events, as in

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Prinz von Homburg, showing, with subtle irony, the ambivalence of Mozart’s finale.

With his team, Herrmann was able to reinterpret Clemenza and discredit entrenched attitudes about its genre. Mortier’s bold move of hiring a famous theatre designer as a director helped the Brussels Opera gain a firm position in the operatic world, often ahead of Vienna, Munich or Salzburg. His invitations to unconventional directors and designers, in particular the collaboration between Luc Bondy and Herrmann, prompted the German press to dub the Théâtre de la Monnaie the “opera’s Schaubühne.”

Picturesque landscape: La finta giardiniera 1986

Herrmann’s third operatic production (and the first of the husband-and-wife directing tandem) in Brussels—La finta giardiniera—has been singled out as his most memorable opera staging. Its success was based, first, on a set that included an entire forest of birch-trees tilting sideways during a night storm scene, and second, on a coherent interpretation of Mozart’s recently rediscovered juvenile opera. In fact, the Herrmanns’ production was its first full staging since the eighteenth century. Although the opera does not belong to the Mozartian canon, it is nowadays frequently performed. Aesthetically, the production manifested strong links to the Schaubühne strand of style in

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55 See Namenwirth, Gerard Mortier, 250-251.


57 Mozart wrote Giardiniera when he was 18 years old and rewrote it as a German Singspiel—Die Gärtnerin aus Liebe—in 1780, which was popular till the end of 18th century and was rediscovered again at the end of 19th century. The first Act of Italian version was long missing only to be discovered in 1978.


59 In past five years, it has been performed in Berlin, Paris, Oslo, Luxemburg, Amsterdam, Bonn, Glyndebourne, Santa Fe and other cities. Also there are four recordings available on DVDs.
Herrmann’s theatrical oeuvre and the set’s seeming naturalism was its great asset (see Fig. 3.13).

The Herrmanns success was based not only on the set with its visual charm and utopian allusions, but also on the dramaturgical reinterpretation of what had been considered an opera of confusing action, weak libretto, and just a series of arias. As in the case of Clemenza’s reception, Giardiniera’s libretto was dismissed and its music considered inferior. Its plot is convoluted, full of inconsistencies and implausibilities; however, the final result—as Jessica Waldoff asserts—was “a compelling portrait of an unusual sentimental heroine and a recognition drama in which identity is more closely allied with feeling and experience than birth-right, position, or title.”

Fig. 3.13. Mozart’s La finta giardiniera at La Monnaie, Brussels in 1986, directed by Ursel and Karl-Ernst Herrmann, designed by Karl-Ernst Herrmann. Nature on the operatic stage: an idyllic environment of theatrically heightened artificiality. Courtesy of Archives of La Monnaie—Brussels. (Photograph Olivier Herrmann.)

In Giardiniera, the action took place on a single set: a raked stage with the birch grove on the Podestà’s property.61 The enchanted forest occupies center stage with a stream and reeds downstage. The set preserved the opera’s bucolic and idyllic atmosphere, underscored by the eighteenth-century costuming. However, minute attention to the realism of the details, like tiny clumps of grass growing between slabs of pavement, generated an additional, contrasting aesthetic (see Fig. 3.14). As in his design for Sommergäste, the floor was covered with real soil on which real grass and weeds grow amidst trees that swayed during the thunderstorm at night. At dawn fog enveloped the stage. Otherwise, only a few pieces of light garden furniture and a bust of an antique

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61 The libretto calls for seven set changes of several locations divided between two types: interior or exterior such as a hall of the Podestà’s house and another room or the Podesta’s garden with a wide staircase leading to the house, plus Hanging Gardens, as well as a dark wood, and rocks and caves.
poet were to be seen. To create a multisensory environment—as he did at the Schaubühne—Herrmann added the sounds of peacocks and bullfrogs.\textsuperscript{62}

Herrmann’s set was riddled with tensions between its realistic means of artistic creation, its aggregated theatricality and the aesthetic beauty of the nature recreated onstage. According to \textit{Giardiniera}'s program, Herrmann’s artistic aim was to create a landscape of pleasure and desire with “a sublime beauty in the wildness of these groves.”\textsuperscript{63} His key reference point in this was Diderot, whose fascination with the beauty of natural phenomena Herrmann rendered with the help of authentic materials and props. Paradoxically, the space behind the proscenium frame simulated an illusionistic environment similar to \textit{Sommergäste}. The accretion and the minute attention to detail produced sets famous for their highly aestheticized designs, for which “beauty” was a watchword of the reviews. However, as with Diderot, the landscape Herrmann deployed onstage does not imitate nature but rather translates it, inducing emotions and sensations that affect the spectator. Here beauty is based on an internal tension between the ideal version of the natural landscape and realistic details, perhaps achieving what Diderot postulated: a perfect illusion that does not deceive the eye but touches the heart.\textsuperscript{64} As Mortier observed of the production, it was a “representation rooted in contemporary rococo aesthetic. Sets and costumes do not tend to a pure realism, but are translated into

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{62} Freyer created a similar aural environment for his \textit{Freischütz} in Stuttgart in 1981.
\item \textsuperscript{63} Denis Diderot qtd. in \textit{Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: “La finta giradiniera”: Librettto by Giuseppe Petrosellini}, program (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Academy of Music, 1990), Program, 5.
\item \textsuperscript{64} See Louise Pelletier, \textit{Architecture in Words: Theatre, Language and the Sensuous Space of Architecture} (London, New York: Routledge 2006), 40-51.
\end{itemize}
the reality of the theater. So the trees do not constitute a realistic natural setting. They say instead that the characters live.”

Mortier mentions here an aspect of opera that has often been neglected—the tangibility of theatre, or theatricality. With Giardiniera, although created with apparently realistic details, Herrmann’s scenography is always an expression of such theatricality, culminating in the production’s single most memorable moment: the swaying of the trees. During Act II, when everyone is looking in the wilderness for Sandrina, darkness envelopes the stage and the storm begins; all of the trees start to move from side to side, eventually remaining tilted to the right side. The kinetic set enhances the general confusion and madness that engulfs the characters. Nature is not neutral. It is threatening, hostile and disturbing. The idyllic landscape—or “pastoral paradise,” as Waldoff calls the settings inscribed in the libretto—becomes a significant force that cannot be ignored. The theatricality of the effect was striking and at the same time undermined the realistic aesthetics.

As with Clemenza, Herrmann’s reinterpretation of Giardiniera resulted in the piece being seen not just as performable, but as a worthy predecessor of Mozart’s great operas and even a precursor of verismo operas. In developing this dramaturgical reworking, Herrmann’s main inspirations came from commedia dell’arte and Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream; he also drew on Pierre Marivaux, Denis Diderot, the brothers Grimm, and Salvador Dali. By very specific staging devices,

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66 Waldoff, 162.
Herrmann reconceived the apparent irrationality of the libretto, adding elements to make the piece more thematically coherent and, above all, providing a central place for magic and the uncanny within the dramaturgical scene. The major innovation was an introduction of a silent character: a hairy impish creature, Amor, a half-Puck, half-Papageno, half-Amor—played in all productions by the dwarf actress Mireille Mossé—who performed magic tricks. The character was responsible for the emotional confusions, madness and happy endings of the other characters, as well as functioning as a device to solve dramaturgical problems with the logical implausibilities of the libretto. Using mime, Amor commented on the actions, thereby reinforcing the comic aspects of opera buffa. Sometimes he was just mischievous, at other times maliciously sinister, but eventually he—the prestidigitator of this show—was the figure and the force that restored order and reunited the couples. Amor added to the confusion of oppositional feelings in the magic garden of love where desire and terror, eroticism and violence, passion and perversion intermingled.\textsuperscript{67} That confusion was presented with psychological insightfulness combined with ambiguity, charm and jokes that required perfect acting from the singers.\textsuperscript{68}

Herrmann’s aim in painstakingly recreating the charm of nature in Mozart’s opera was a visual alternative reality. In \textit{Giardiniera}, the lost world of Mozartian opera buffa

\textsuperscript{67} A critic for the \textit{Los Angeles Times} pointed out Herrmann’s visualization and the simultaneous balancing of oppositions that are so crucial for Mozart’s blending of two genres: buffa and seria. For another American critic Herrmann’s \textit{Giardiniera} needed a lighter touch since despite a plentitude of moments with slapstick comedy, they interpreted it as “a painful psychodrama about seven desperate human beings deeply wounded by love.” Martin Bernheimer, “Brussels Brings Mozart’s \textit{La finta giardiniera} to Brooklyn,” \textit{Los Angeles Times}, March 19, 1990, 2; Peter G. Davis, “Garden Party,” \textit{New York Magazine} 23, no. 13 (April 2, 1990), 85.

\textsuperscript{68} Singers were also challenged since they had to sing while acting (running, lying, undressing, splashing water, tripping over, etc.)
was placed in the fenced up birch grove that was simultaneously magnified and minimized. In addition to the full-scale birch grove in the center stage, Herrmann placed a miniature forest identical to the primary one far up stage just left of center. That visual demarcation of the absolutely irrational world is crucial both for the action and its meaning. Herrmann gave—as Mosse elsewhere suggests—“a holistic image of another world,” whose existence is immediately questioned.69 Here—as when working with Stein at the Schaubühne—Herrmann was engaged in creating spectacular images marking the Schaulust and thus a “Theatre of Images” par excellence similar to that of Wilson and Freyer.

*Giardiniera* was a tour de force for Mozart, Mortier, Herrmann, and the Brussels opera. The production was shown in Vienna, Salzburg, Berlin, Antwerp, Amsterdam, and at the Brooklyn Academy of Music Festival in 1990. Herrmann’s emphasis on images and theatricality, as well the noted ensemble acting led to a prominently positive reception. During its second presentation at Salzburg in 1992, however, *Giardiniera* seemed to show signs of wear. Critics complained about its visual style being passé in comparison with the new *Clemenza* that was staged there barely ten days before. Among critics and audiences, *Giardiniera* became a site of artistic, economic, and political tensions; some loved it, some hated it.70 Nonetheless, the quick aging of *Finta’s*

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69 Mosse, “Between Tragedy and Utopia,” 142.

70 Most German critics pointed out the changes in the direction that seemed to lighten the approach and lean towards opera buffa. Generally Austrian critics were dismissive, contending that it was a relic from a former epoch, an example of an old trend, overloaded with slapstick gags, etc. Both audience and critics seem to be divided along the support for Mortier. Boos heard at the premier were ascribed to the anti-Mortier claque. See Wolfgang Schreiber, “Mozart der Wilde. *La finta giardiniera* aus Brüssel im Landestheater,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, August 20, 1992; Lothar Sträter, “Verfallsdatum abgelaufen: Salzburg übernimmt *La finta giardiniera* aus Brussels,” *Schwäbische Zeitung*, August 21, 1992; Franz Endler, “Alten Trends hinterher: Salzburger Reprise von Wolfgang Amadeus Mozarts *La finta giardiniera*,” *Kurier*, August 20, 1992; Reinhard Kriechbaum, “Eine legendäre Regie sechs Jahre später: Mozarts *La
scenography—deemed old-fashioned after barely six years—and the great success of a revamped *Clemenza* suggest significant changes in the audience’s visual sensitivity.

**Paradigm shift: *La clemenza di Tito* 1992**

Herrmann’s Brussels *Clemenza* was so successful that when Mortier moved to the Salzburger Festspiele he decided to present it as his opening production. Again in Salzburg, Herrmann’s *Clemenza*, with its minimalist neo-classical aesthetics, glamorous costumes and refined visual symbolism, became a benchmark in contemporary opera production, a distinct point of departure from von Karajan’s conservative regime. It heralded a new age in opera staging, advocating a new visuality and theatricality along with innovative and controversial interpretations, the epitome of Mortier’s management. Rather than focus simply on this moment, however, I want to look more closely at how this revival developed from the original staging ten years earlier, concentrating on changes to the set’s details, with the emphasis on the directing and the new costumes.

The alterations in the details of *Clemenza*’s visual aspects—space, costumes, props and lightning—underscore its neo-classical aesthetics. However, the cumulative effect of the various and sometimes minute changes that Herrmann implemented is significant for the revival’s aesthetic break and marks the shift into a new visual paradigm. The minimal and ahistorical *Clemenza* became fashionably conscious, but unlike Brussels’ *Giardiniera* the design was powerfully aestheticized as a kind of modern neoclassicism: clean, crisp and minimalistic. In comparison, Nicolas Hytner’s production from the Glyndebourne Festival in 1991 has been labeled as stylish (see Fig. 3.15).

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Partially this is an accurate term since David Fielding’s inventive set has all the attributes of postmodern architectural chic; however, the costumes are a mixture of fashionable dresses that female characters wear and variations on Roman togas for male characters that in the end truly undermine the visual stylishness of Hytner’s Clemenza. Otherwise it could be seen as Herrmann’s contender, whose new visual paradigm that his scenography clearly articulates is glamorous and chic, endorsing the cool beauty.\textsuperscript{71}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Clemenza_di_Tito_1991_Glyndebourne_Stage_Screenshot.jpg}
\caption{Clemenza di Tito at the Glyndebourne Festival in 1991, directed by Nicolas Hytner, designed by David Fielding. Observe the strikingly post-modern architecture of Fiedling’s set. Screen capture.}
\end{figure}

For the 1992 Salzburg revival Herrmann designed a visually modern space that eschewed basic architectonic details like baseboard and crown moldings, making the

\textsuperscript{71} Tom Sutcliffe, “Manners Maketh a Fine Romp,” \textit{The Evening Standard}, January 24, 2000, 63.
theatrical space yet more abstract. Confining the set to a single room was even more important for creating a constricted space in which feelings, emotions and fates were examined. There were no more open spaces for the scenes with chorus; whenever the doors are opened they reveal either vague gaps or architecturally defined places. For example, before the chorus’ first entrance a set of four additional doors opened in different directions blocking the view of the backstage, creating an enclosure more inhibiting, even inescapable. Such clean uncluttered spaces have been quite in vogue since the 1990s, when minimalism in fashion and architecture was at its height.

Herrmann added, replaced, amended, or discarded props including the boat for the first meeting of Annio and Servilia, the sculpture of Nike whose wings are on fire in the Capitol scene, and a concaved side of the broken column. The production’s symbolism was also reworked, although it still puzzled many critics and spectators. For example, Berenice’s appearance now nested inside of a huge egg-shaped stone dragged across the stage by a Christ-like figure became more abstract and formal, but equally baffling.

Costume design underwent the most crucial metamorphosis, completely changing a previously careful layering of temporalities into more amorphous temporality that favored modern glamour. Stephen Gundle defines glamour as a modern phenomenon, which “is best seen as an alluring image that is closely related to consumption. It is an enticing and seductive vision that is designed to draw the eye of an audience. It consists of a retouched or perfected representation of someone or something whose purpose it is to dazzle and seduce whoever gazes on it.”72 In this new production, Herrmann applied to costume the pleasure of seeing, lending the costumes a consumption quality. The aura of

luxury and perfection conditioned by visual culture glamour as idealized and alluring was perfectly suited for Herrmann’s visual concepts. His new style was bold but elegant and chic, dazzling and seducing, emphasizing the visual spectacle, while at the same time complementing the highbrow culture of opera (see Fig. 3.16).

Fig. 3.16. Salzburg Clemenza. Notice Herrmann’s set, now made even simpler, without architectural detail. Courtesy of the Salzburger Festspiele Archives. Photograph Bernd Uhlig.

On one level, the changes can be seen as accommodating the host theatre: the new visual emphasis on glamour and fashion mirrors Salzburg’s audience. Perhaps nowhere in the opera world does dressing up matter as much as it does at Salzburg. But these changes can also be read as having a more substantial significance, shifting from a detailed deployment of historical detail to a much vaguer kind of historicizing allusion within a largely smooth and pleasurable visual aesthetic. The costumes from the eighteenth-century become a stylish allusion to Romantic clothing (without the specific
historical references of the typical cinched waist or ruffles) while at the same time remaining contemporary (meaning: twentieth century) in shape and style, in particular for male characters’ and chorus’s costumes. Hence no more wigs, stockings, breeches, long waistcoats and closely cut coats. Instead the male characters wore wide straight trousers, widely spread collars, short vests, very long coats, etc. Tito’s costume, originally based on Napoleonic’s coronation clothing, was totally redesigned. From the bright wide red robe with ermine collar, only the collar remained with the robe morphing into a chic, stylized version of the royal coat (see Fig. 3.17). Publio’s costume underwent a similar transformation, while the costumes’ color scheme remained basic: Herrmann contrasted brilliantly colored dresses with a formality of black-and-white reserved for men. He used simple elegant forms with clearly defined lines, fine fabrics and perfect cut, tailoring and finishing using, when necessary, stiff materials to hold the garments’ shapes. Hence, the costumes were luxuriously glamorous, presenting the cool splendor of Tito’s court and mirroring the fashionable Salzburg audience.

Freed from its strict historical references and articulated form with distinctions and identifiable elements, Clemenza moved towards a much more vague and non-specific chrono-topography. Eventually, with all changes implemented, Herrmann created a production where elements from different eras coalesce seamlessly. In historical terms Clemenza is thus a pastiche of styles, periods, and references, a perfect visual example of postmodern design. Conceivably, that was the reason why the much acclaimed Riccardo Muti—whose musical conservatism stresses fidelity to the composer—refused to conduct Mozart’s work. He considered Herrmann’s ideas to be impudent and claimed that the
production did not leave room for music to breathe. In visual terms, the new Clemenza preserved little of traditionally staged opera seria. This deconstructive interpretation was quite extreme, but it suggested “neuroses and contradictions behind the libretto’s confidently black-and-white moral façade,” as the British opera critic Rupert Christiansen maintains.

Fig. 3.17. Herrmann’s new design for Tito’s costume. In the La clemenza di Tito program. Courtesy of the Archiv der Salzburger Festspiele.

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Herrmann did not update Mozart’s opera to modern times as did Peter Sellars daringly in the 1980s and later. Herrmann chose a less antagonistic approach, although still disruptive. His scenography for Clemenza opts for more universal chrono-topology, similarly enigmatic to Wilson’s stagings. This strong tendency towards abstraction looked forward to Herrmann’s abstract sets in the twenty first century. As his sets become more abstract, costumes and lighting become more significant. The more general implications of abstract sets are far-reaching since they place more emphasis on language—in opera the words are obviously combined with music—and the performer. With this production, Herrmann redefined and enclosed the space to focus attention even more than before on the main characters. Nonetheless, in opera abstract settings still keep on challenging performers and audiences. Although highly acclaimed, Clemenza continues to divide critics and audiences in London, Paris, Prague and Madrid. These revivals of Clemenza throughout Europe, on one hand, epitomize the role of the economics in the producing contemporary opera allowing sharing or minimalizing the costs, but, on the other, exemplify the contemporary circulation of the visual style that Herrmann propagates in addition to the new approach in interpreting opera.

75 For example, Sellars’ Idomeneo at Glyndebourne Festival in 2003. The set designed by artist Anish Kapoor with costumes by Mark Bouman, lights by James F. Ingalls, and choreography by Mark Morris. The production was conducted by Simon Rattle. Sellars updated the action to the contemporary Iraq with the main characters dressed in the US military uniforms. The set was as abstract as Kapoor’s art, inducing the feelings of vertigo and claustrophobia.

76 London’s production 2000 received bad press, with the local music critics not only disapproving of the directorial approach, but also the design. Even conductor Colin Davis rejected the Herrmanns’ production, describing it as “looking like inside of a fridge.” Moving to Paris Opera, Mortier also presented Clemenza in 2005, which was recorded on DVD. In an even more simplified design Clemenza has been shown at the Prague National Opera, in the opera house where the Mozart work received its premiere. Since then Mortier has moved to Real Opera in Madrid, Spain, where it appeared in 2012. Michael White, “Titus groans, and so do we,” The Independent, January 30, 2000, 8.
Cool beauty: *Idomeneo, re di Creta*

Herrmann’s production of Mozart’s *Idomeneo, re di Creta*, presented in Salzburg for the first time in 2000, was a continuation of Clemenza’s stylistic path with its minimalistic, crisp and fashionable scenography of the cool beauty. Idomeneo’s scenography had simplicity and stylization as its governing principles, which resulted in a remarkable visual spectacle filled with images that manifested a type of theatricality reliant on visual symbolism and highly reduced gestures, as in the use of the piece of cloth to suggest the billowing sea. By juxtaposing the abstracted space with the fashionable and conceptual costumes, Herrmann created scenography that is quintessentially modern in its visuality. If he previously based the Schaulust on the spectator’s immersion in a spectacular cornucopia of details, with *Idomeneo* he completely moved—like Wilson—towards the pleasure of seeing based on simplicity of visual astonishment.

*Idomeneo*’s set was sparse, evocatively lit and filled with striking but visually and conceptually demanding images. Moreover, Herrmann pushed further towards pure abstraction, combining refined geometry with abstracted organic figuration. This was perhaps his most abstract set, which consisted of two different spaces separated by a scrim. The first space was a perspectival box similar to Clemenza’s design. Herrmann

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77 The premiere was planned for the Salzburger Pfingstfestspiele, but it was cancel due to financial problems. Eventually it was coproduced with Baden-Baden Festspielhaus and first presented at the Whitsun Festival in Baden-Baden with Michael Gielen. Its premiere had to be postponed due to malfunction of the sprinkler system that drenched the set and the auditorium. *Idomeneo* was staged again during the summer festival in Salzburg in 2000 and in 2006. Plácido Domingo intended to present it at the Los Angeles Opera in 2004, but it turned out to be too expensive for the transfer. It was staged in Geneva and Amsterdam in 2004 and revived in Amsterdam in 2011. The second revival in Salzburg in 2006 during 250-anniversary of Mozart’s birth was filmed and is available on DVD.

78 The perspectival box is also one of the favorite elements frequently appearing in Freyer’s scenography. See Chapter 4.
achieved this effect by enveloping or squaring the entire orchestra pit with a wide fluorescent catwalk and closing off the space with grey perspectival walls and ceiling. As one critic noticed, praising Herrmann’s inventiveness, it was “a magically lit space, which serves the introspection of characters in Mozart’s arias and ensembles. An ingenious construct, the Baroque rake tradition combined with the ideas of the modern musical theatre”\textsuperscript{79} (see Fig. 3.18).

![Figure 3.18. Mozart’s Idomeneo at the Salzburger Festspiele in 2000, directed by Ursel and Karl-Ernst Herrmann, designed by Karl-Ernst Herrmann. Ultra-modern set of two distinct spaces and symbolic imagery: the beaches of Crete are engulfed by a monstrous oil spill. Courtesy of the Archiv der Salzburger Festspiele. Photo © Bernd Uhlig.](image)

As previously in \textit{Il turco in Italia} (1995, Brussels), Herrmann broke the proscenium frame and extended the stage beyond it. Here, however, his design was based

on the geometrical perspective with a single vanishing point. Similarly to Freyer and unlike Wilson, Herrmann continued to interrogate the existence of the frame in the theatre. If earlier in Clemenza he designed stairs that led to the orchestra from the center of the proscenium, extending the acting space to the pit, in Idomeneo this move attempted to erase the division between the stage and the auditorium, bridging these two spaces by annexing the orchestra and bringing the action close to the spectators. The orchestra pit remained the black void or the foreboding abyss of the angry god that was present continuously onstage in his anthropomorphic incarnation. As in Giardiniera, Herrmann employed a silent character: Neptune—played by an actor—with long hair and a green wreath on his head, dressed in a green suit and a nude color top covered with three-dimensional shells. He is on stage almost all the time, climbing from the orchestra pit, jumping off the back stage, and mocking Idomeneus. His menacing presence makes the sea god’s wrath more palpable. However, in Herrmann’s interpretation—although the sea god is personified—the danger comes from within and not from the outside.

Beyond the perspectival box was a second space: the stage proper with a raked floor asymmetrically slicing the space. This part was shaped like the leaf of a water lily, with a midrib and veins moving up and down, its warm light yellow coloring indicating the West Crete seacoast (sandy beaches near the port of Kydonia/Sidon). Beyond it was the sea—mostly a black void with a luminescent semicircular line of the horizon that

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80 The spectators and critics have divided opinions on the effectiveness of such spatial solutions. Some complained that the acoustics of the theatre simply did not bear this spatial set up, others were bothered by the musicians’ presence there suggesting that it affected the singers’ performance as they were unable to see and follow the conductor’s guidance. Kristina Maidt-Zinke, “Experimentierkasten. Norringtons Neueinstudierung des Idomeneo,” Süddeutsche Zeitung, August 29, 2006, 13.

81 Comparatively, Ponnelle used in his Metropolitan Opera staging a sculpted face of Neptune as an ominous presence of the god. Also controversial director Olivier Py (set & cost. Pierre André Weitz) uses a silent Neptune in his 2009 Aix-en-Provence Festival thoroughly modern staging: Idomeneus on two occasions violently wrestles with the silver god (his has a silver makeup and is dressed in silver clothes).
added depth and spaciousness to upstage. Within both spaces, Herrmann placed thin tall poles with symbolic components, including a paper boat, golden wheat stalks, a bird feather, a spearhead, a black mask, and a skull. The scrim that separated these spaces was both an opaque partition and a transparent wall, when lit from the back it became a screen animated by shadows (see Fig. 3.19). It was paper-thin and in the last act Idamante pierced it with a spear and walked through to the frontal space, symbolically killing the sea monster and destroying illusion. Such division of the performative space had additional dramaturgical consequences, since that first space was used for the reflexive arias while the second space was employed mainly for action and scenes with the chorus.

Fig. 3.19. Idomeneo. Shadow theatre behind Ilia (Ekaterina Siurina). Courtesy of the Archiv der Salzburger Festspiele. Photo: © Bernd Uhlig.

Herrmann’s images were set against the pure abstracted space as well as aestheticized and deeply embedded in theatricality and symbolism. The audience had to
yield to the beauty of the images, but Herrmann compelled the spectators to decode them within an adverse setting of geometric abstraction. The images were no longer figurative and literary as in *Clemenza* or immersed in the verisimilitude of details as in *Giardiniera*. Rather, *Idomeneo*’s symbolic effectiveness was based on emblematic meaning. For example, the turbulent and stormy sea was an animated fabric billowing ominously on both sides of the leaf blade or, as a sign of transgression, black leaves fell down on stage. Similarly, the lighting—also designed by Herrmann—was refined and used for dramatic effect, but was nuanced and subtle. The second act finished with Neptune’s trident puncturing the stage floor, while the black sun rose above Crete. An eclipse of the sun occurred when the oracle was delivered (see Fig. 3.20). The sea monster that plagued the Cretans after Idomeneus’ procrastination was rendered as a dark stain: a cut-out black cloth inching its way like a foreboding black oil spill slowly taking over the coast of Crete until it consumed the majority of the raked stage. 82 Instead of an animalistic representation of a horrible sea creature, Herrmann found a very sophisticated imagery that would convey a contemporary representation of one of the gravest modern threats to a community that lives off the sea—industrial pollution. Symbolically loaded images are his favored device, but here he turned to very simple and basic imagery for maximally refined theatrical effect.

82 In 2000, the sea monster was a long elaborate Chinese puppet dragon that the chorus members animated, wrapping the king, but in later revivals it was replaced by an abstracted option. This change towards minimalism and abstraction matches more with the overall design for *Idomeneo*. In the Amsterdam production Herrmann used black balloons, some with tails and fins.
Costuming also carried clear symbolic freight, as well as forming part of the more direct and palpable impact of the production, notably in its color scheme. The color-coding was simple, yet symbolic. Royalty and court were dressed in white or black, occasionally punctuated by grey/silver and or red. Initially, Cretans were dressed in yellow, while Trojans were clad in black. After Idamante set the Trojans free, the chorus was clad in yellow-and-black costumes, first more yellow and then more black (see Fig. 3.21), but at the end they were fully in black, denoting alliance during the country’s distress caused by Neptune’s wrath. If in Clemenza only one costume—Publio’s—was a partially conceptual fashionable design similar to Wilson’s style, in Idomeneo such
costuming prevails and each character’s costume, often including hairstyling, was designed in such a way.\footnote{Prior to \textit{Idomeneo} Herrmann designed extravagant costumes in Wilson’s style for \textit{Les Boreades}, staged in Salzburg in 1999. Of course Wilson does not design the costumes, but employs costume designers who play a very significant role in the recognition of his distinctive style, in particular Italian designer Frida Parmeggiani. See Shevtsova, \textit{Robert Wilson}, 78-80.}

![Fig. 3.21. Idomeneo. Notice the yellow-black costumes of the “new” Cretans as well as the dramatic lighting, also designed by Herrmann. Courtesy of the Archiv der Salzburger Festspiele. Photo © Bernd Uhlig.](image)

The male costumes, in particular for Idomeneus and Idamante, were similar in style to the male costumes from the second \textit{Clemenza}: elegant in the cut and choice of the fabrics, reminiscent of the 1920s. Herrmann stylized only a couple of elements in the costumes of these two main male characters. For Idomeneus, he designed a reversible coat: on one side quilted white fabric with an ornament spiral rhomb on the back, the other side covered with black feathers, a theatrically impressive costume. Idamante’s costume was simpler still; Herrmann dressed him in white wide-leg pants and shirt with a
vest and occasionally only one smooth silver pauldron on his right shoulder. Idomeneus’ confidant—Arbace’s—costume was more stylized, even his hairdo was carefully designed with asymmetrical curly bangs parted to the right, a slick left side, and a white strip of hair creating yet another fancy parting. He donned striped black trousers and a black velvet jacket with one sleeve. Sporadically, he wore a breastplate with just one spaulder over the white shirtsleeve. Similarly conceptually fashionable were the costumes of the priests, who sat immobile on barstools in yellow-black suits with matching yellow gloves and tall white hats and black eye-masks.

Elettra wore the most fashionable costume in the production. It looked straight from an *haute couture* show: the strapless bodice was contrasted with multilayered stiff skirts that were supplemented with same color pants (visible only when she sported the broad skirt), shoes (the only performer who wore them on stage) and occasionally with a matching jacket. That stiffness of the fabric and the elaborate design contrasted with Idamante’s clothing: light, thin, soft and airy. Ilia’s costume, on the other hand, was quite simple: an off-white strapless A-shaped dress with matching Capri pants. Herrmann also used a stiff fabric to maintain its shape. The contrast between the two women competing for the heart of young Idamante was thus more unyielding.

The beauty and finesse obviously denoted Elettra’s noble status, but its *haute couture* style indicated her strangeness among the Cretans. Here Herrmann was again using effectively glamorous costume as a defining element. Glamour for Elettra was—as Gundle suggests—“uniquely appealing as a source of self definition and even

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84 Electra’s costume evolved over time as well. The basic concept Herrmann established for the first production 2000, when Luba Orgonasova sang Electra. For the 2004 production in Amsterdam and Geneva, the dress and the hat were redesigned and in the 2006 Salzburg revival Electra had a new, although much more traditional hat though still looking as one of Philip Treacy.
empowerment...a weapon and a protective coating, a screen on which an exterior personality can be built to deceive, delight, and bewitch. ¹⁸⁵ This tantalizing costume with a matching hat and jewelry was supposed to dazzle and seduce. Perhaps not surprising, a photograph from *Idomeneo* with Elettra wearing her full regal costume (with a hat and jewelry) was used in an advertising campaign by Nestlé, the sponsor of the festival (see Fig. 3.22).

Unquestionably Herrmann’s scenography of *Idomeneo* is highly spectacular. The aesthetics used here promote the spectacle effectively, but such display is created for a particularly high society class. Instead of political revolution—shocking bourgeois—as the historical abstraction was set up to do, Herrmann’s abstraction with the *cool beauty* aesthetic appeals to the elite class gathered for the event. Even more, the fashionably

stylized costumes as fetishized commodities feed into the spectators’ desires and mold them, in particular those to consume. Instead of rich and opulent historical attire Herrmann created highly attractive glamorous costumes that resemble \textit{haute couture} garments from the contemporary fashion magazines. The parallels between the fashion onslaught among the Salzburg audience members and the fashionable world presented on stage are striking. Despite the efforts to democratize the audience, one comes to Salzburg not only to see but also to be seen. Consequently, Herrmann’s scenography could be seen as serving corporate branding, supplying a type of “brand equity, in the global marketplace…which sells on to corporations and governments,” as Hal Foster implies about Frank Gehry’s architecture.\footnote{Hal Foster, “Why all the hoopla?,” \textit{London Review of Books} 23, no. 16 (August 23, 2001): 24-26, accessed July 18, 2014, http://www.lrb.co.uk/v23/n16/hal-foster/why-all-the-hoopla.}

Initially Herrmann’s \textit{Idomeneo} met with a very warm reception that was important for staging this particular Mozart’s opera, which—as musicologist Julian Rushton asserts—has not been well settled in the Mozartian canon and is therefore “in need of perpetual revival.”\footnote{Julian Rushton, \textit{The New Grove Guide to Mozart and His Operas} (New York: Oxford UP, 2007), 58.} Critics saw it as a continuation of Herrmann’s Mozart style already established in Brussels:

Juxtaposing the abstracted space with the fashionable and conceptual costumes, Herrmann created scenography that is quintessentially contemporaneous in its visuality. In contrast to Giardiniera, the spectacular images were very simple and the symbolic imagery employed was refined but not as monumental as in Clemenza. Unlike in the previous productions that were easily accessible with their representational character, in Idomeneo Herrmann emphasized the symbolic character of the opera with the abstracted imagery, and the anesthetized and dematerialized space.

The production’s 2006 revival, on the other hand, was received with mixed feelings. Although most critics noticed and praised changes in the design and interpretation, many reiterated that the staging left them “cold,” suggesting that the inner fire and passion or dramatic energy were missing. The fusion of the abstracted set and the production’s aesthetics of cool beauty can be seen as the source of this estrangement. For decades, Herrmann has been labeled among some critics as an aesthete and his designs as “window-dressing.” This clearly indicates that the appealing visuality of the production threatens the critical reception of the piece. Emphasis on aesthetic qualities produces a multifaceted anxiety in the spectators. The pure abstraction is autonomous and less emotionally effective, and consequently less appealing. The cool beauty allows the audience to immerse in the purely aesthetical dimensions of the spectacle, which attenuates connection with the opera’s ideas and dramatic tensions and thus raises questions about uncritical spectating. Herrmann’s abstraction, with its crispiness and

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89 For Charles Parsons, for example, not only is the musical performance extraordinary but also the stage production. Charles H. Parsons, “Videos – Mozart: Lesser-Known Operas,” American Record Guide 70, no. 4 (July 2007): 246-247.

stylishness, is dangerously close to the pleasure principle, risking ornamentality and prettiness. From *Idomeneo* on—as frequently happens with abstract art—the critics equate his scenography with formalism and decorative tendencies. Seen through this prism abstraction seems to suggest a superficial and supercilious approach, lack of any social and political concerns, anachronism, solipsism, and elitism. In addition, by 2006 *Idomeneo*’s style is recognized as a recycled convention, and the *cool beauty* is quickly dethroned as passé, exposing a deeper emotional emptiness, disconnected from any reality and any historical context.

However, as in Wilson’s operatic stagings, I argue that *Idomeneo*’s sparsely designed, minimalist set worked to eradicate typical emotional responses from the audience and to initiate a self-reflexive process of perception and a heightened level of self-awareness. Herrmann uses the formalist abstraction as means of achieving simultaneously intimacy and concentration on the complex visual imagery and associations. Despite this altered mode of perception, Herrmann’s move from hot to *cool beauty* met with resistance, since all previous strategies of perception disappeared. *Idomeneo*’s spectacular theatricality with its *cool beauty* aesthetics tried to amend that perception but, as in Wilson’s productions, not sufficiently, and therefore alienated the audience. As Paul Crowther indicates “Postmodern abstraction does not have the radical innovative power of early modernism, but it does find new and aesthetically largely rewarding ways of engaging with the technology of its own times.”

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Landscape space: *La finta giardiniera* 2008

After twenty-two years, Herrmann revisited and revamped Mozart’s *La finta giardiniera* for the Czech National Opera in Prague in 2008. This makeover is crucial for understanding the drastic changes that Herrmann’s style has undergone. If in the 1986 *Giardiniera*’s the heightened sense of artificiality of the space was still tentative for the audience because of the use of the real birch trees, in Prague Herrmann openly emphasized the set’s artificiality and spaciousness, reshaping the pleasure of seeing in new terms (see Fig. 3.23).

Similarly to *Clemenza*, the main design concept for the new *Giardiniera* remained intact. However, unlike in *Clemenza*, the aesthetics of scenography was totally reworked; it was simplified, stripped down to the minimal iconic signs. The action now took place in a clearly isolated site—an island perhaps like in Shakespeare’s *Tempest*—where the irrational events occur. The smooth stage, covered in light colored wooden parquet, was raked, surrounded by a white cyclorama with a black strip around denoting the black waters of Lago Nero. Herrmann changed the spatial solution to the set, expanding it towards the audience. As in *Turco* and *Idomeneo*, the stage continued beyond the proscenium frame: a narrow catwalk encircled the orchestra pit extending the acting space and putting the singers directly into the auditorium, minimalizing the distance between the singers and spectators. Breaking the proscenium frame has been Herrmann’s objective for decades, though perhaps it has not been as spectacular and groundbreaking in the opera as in his theatrical scenography.

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92 The production was also staged in Brussels in 2011.
The simplicity of geometry became the new elegance once again. The stage is totally uncluttered from the previous excess of details and verisimilitude typical of Herrmann’s earlier scenography of the 1970s and 1980s. As in a postmodern pastiche, nature and humans coexist together: the 1950s refrigerator, a leather tub chair, a white wicker chair and a bench with matching collapsible chairs are placed among the rows of birch trees with one tilted to the left decoratively as an arrow dropped by the absent-
minded Amor from the sky. This time the trees had thin, perfectly straight and smooth white trunks with ink black spots and identical crowns with green and pink leaves, indicating the serenity of a spring day. In front, instead of a pond was just a narrow strip filled with water: a minimalist version of the previous stream with reeds. In the back, a miniature white house with a tall roof stood at the edge of the lake. Off to the left Herrmann placed a tiny birch forest. These elements were now more visible than in the original production. As a replacement for the carriage, he designed a white rowboat that brought over other characters. The materials used also changed drastically; for example, instead of grass and soil just a light wooden floor or instead of down feathers in a pillow, rustling pieces of paper. He combined the geometrical precision of the design with a picturesque environment where tranquility was interwoven with formal simplicity.

In addition, Herrmann redesigned the costumes, making them contemporary chic. Instead of *haute couture*, Herrmann reached for *prêt-à-porter*, classic, comfortable clothing, but overtly eroticized, always emphasizing the singer’s slim silhouette. Armida wore a cocktail dress, which accentuated the singer’s figure. Its witty print referred to the birches’ black patches and was definitely of a comic providence since it was simultaneously a cow’s pattern. Count Belfiore, ready for the approaching wedding, had on a black tuxedo. Before becoming Sandrina dressed in linen white shirt and Capri pants with a broad-brimmed straw hat, Violante wore high heels and a fitted coat with a fur collar. Even Amor—renamed in this production as an unnamed character of “***” and played by the same dwarf actress—was now substantially sophisticated. His or her role greatly expanded visually, aurally and intellectually: at the beginning of each act s/he

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93 There are six trees across the stage and five deep. During the tempest scene, this one tree will be the only one straight while the others sway from one side to the other. In the Brussels *Giardiniera*, the one birch was slightly tilted to right, while in Prague to the left with a 45-degree angle.
recited Heinrich Heine’s poems in German. Here Herrmann took another audacious step in bringing theatre into the opera. Amor, instead of the previous hairy outfit suitable for this impish figure, sported a black tuxedo for most of the opera and for part a light green tux with a wittily applied snakeskin pattern on one of the leg-sleeves. However, one should not be fooled by this cultivated urban makeover, Herrmann indicated, since the perfectly pressed white shirt concealed the real Puckish self of an impish furry spirit that cannot be extinguished by the formal clothing. The costumes for male characters were formal, for females simple and stylish. Herrmann’s elegant and tantalizing costumes veiled (Amor/Puck or Sandrina) and unveiled (Serpetta; see Fig.3.24), depending on the character’s function, concealed and revealed desire, but pleased the eye of spectator.

Fig. 3.24. Prague Giardiniera. Herrmann’s new revealing costume for Serpetta (Katerina Kneziková). Courtesy of Národní Divadlo in Prague. Photo: © Hana Smejkalová.
The final result of this 2008 revamping is a sleek, clean, airy and minimalist environment. Herrmann supplemented this modern space with contemporaneously stylish costumes as in his previous productions in Salzburg, namely Idomeneo and Così (although not so much abstracted and glamorized). Applying the same principles of modernization but remaining visibly representational, he achieved the same overall result that maintained theatricality (see Fig. 3.25). The work pleased the audience without being accused of pure aestheticism or epigonism. Unlike in the 1986 Giardiniera, he was not interested in reconstructing the picturesque past through historical costumes. Conversely, by updating and eroticizing costumes, he created sophisticated and visually attractive
characters in a modern landscape, to which the audience could swiftly relate. Herrmann delivered a vernacular version of his cool beauty style. The pleasure of seeing had resonance not in the recognition of the realistic elements and the beauty of nature but in the stylish design reflecting minimalistic preferences. Here we clearly perceive how advertising (mainly fashion and interior design) and other aspects of visual culture condition scenography. In addition, the new Giardiniera proved that this dramaturgical interpretation of early Mozart opera could be successful with audiences even 25 years later, something only seen with a few productions such as the 1968 Berghaus/Freyer Il barbiere di Seviglia at the Berliner Staatsoper Unter den Linden. The juxtaposition of Herrmann’s two productions of Giardiniera clearly exemplifies the evolution of his scenographic style as well as the leap that visuality of stagings made from the 1980s.\(^{94}\)

**Conclusion**

Before his visual style crystallized, Herrmann’s work reflected considerable eclecticism and a resistance to the idea of a single authorial style. Many observers of his work, stressing this diversity of his approaches, have noted that Herrmann’s prolific output is difficult to define.\(^{95}\) Aesthetically, his theatrical and early operatic designs were highly heterogeneous, ranging from pictorialism through realism to minimalism.

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\(^{95}\) For example, in her book on the twentieth-century stage design Nora Eckert asserts that “Herrmann’s scenographic work is actually free from so-called trends; it documents independence that appreciates a diversity of the means of expressions.” Nora Eckert, Bühnenbild im 20. Jahrhundert (Berlin: Henschel, 1998), 143. Original text: “Herrmanns bühnenbildnerische Arbeit ist in der Tat frei von sogenannten Tendenzen, sie dokumentiert Unabhängigkeit, die die Vielfalt an Ausdrucksmöglichkeiten schatzt.”
Herrmann also emphasized the need for an artist’s aesthetic productivity never to remain stagnant, “There are set designers, who have found a style, and then all their work looks the same. Such a thing does not interest me.” His comment is highly indicative of the general apprehension towards the concept of style: style was mistrusted and considered to be limiting in particular since the 1970s. That distrust towards style was one of the tenets of the postmodern era, a departure from modernist grand ideologies and theories, manifesting in the deliberate mixing of different styles, conventions, and media.

One consistency throughout his career has been Herrmann’s avoidance of obvious design and staging solutions. His early operatic scenography leaned towards historically grounded designs. We saw how he initially emulated and borrowed solutions and aesthetics from his theatrical designs, as in 1982 Clemenza and 1986 Finta, before his operatic scenography gained autonomy. His sets were lavish, detail-oriented and nostalgic. He preferred full sets with traditionally painted backdrops, historical and realistic elements. His penchant for old theatrical techniques found its way into productions in forms of painted backdrops, rolled-on prospect-panoramas, and theatrical machines. The illusionistic backdrops in Peer Gynt, 1982 Clemenza and 1984 Così and the machinery in Die Zauberflöte visually asserted melancholic nostalgia for the theatrical past. Those elements broadly defined this historical period of production. Nevertheless, this nostalgic predilection and the stylized settings can be seen as bearing a qualified affinity with the neo-historical movement in scenography in the 1970s and 1980s. Although Herrmann was not interested at that time in achieving scenic authenticity like Zeffirelli, Samaritani, and Sanjust, he always started his research in the

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historical background of the text. He opted for interpretations through the lens of the epoch, in which the opera was written, occasionally adding contemporary references.

Herrmann’s turn towards a certain abstraction is not without precedent. The renewal of abstraction as a modernist style—the professed death of opera notwithstanding—can be seen as following the steps of Appia and Wieland Wagner. Nonetheless, at the same time this aesthetic mode is contemporary with broader developments in visual culture, for which the best indicator I find is in Robert Wilson’s style. Of course, there are crucial differences between the two designer-directors. Herrmann’s scenography does not just emulate Wilsonian aesthetics. However, the receptiveness to Wilson is the most striking development in Herrmann’s oeuvre as well as, I would suggest, a marker of broader aesthetic developments, not simply attributable to imitation. In the overall argument of this dissertation, Wilson serves as a distinctive and identifiable guide that allows me to draw a thread in the visual aesthetics of contemporary scenography. Consequently, we can see that like Wilson’s, Herrmann’s later visual aesthetics are not only very much an aesthetic of visual control, but they tended to the formalist and geometric, and to a removal from realistic referentiality, even the qualified and paradoxical referentiality previously practiced by Herrmann. By tracing these parallels with Wilson, I have endeavored to underline the move towards the abstracting technique of the cool beauty as one of the most significant general trends within contemporary scenography, a trend, which is at same time specific to opera staging, but which is also connected with much broader changes in contemporary visual culture.
In terms of general aesthetics of operatic scenography, it was striking how much Herrmann’s approach since 2000 resembles Wilson’s spatial designs, with the constant deployment of the luminous scrim as backdrop. More specifically, *Cosi fan tutte*, of all Herrmann’s work, has perhaps the most striking affinity with Wilsonian aesthetics. Nonetheless, the set was not abstracted as strictly as in *Idomeneo* and the tangibility of the expansive vistas, in particular the forests, confirmed the tension between abstraction and representation in Herrmann’s scenography. In addition, in *Cosi* costumes dynamically complemented the *cool beauty* aesthetic. Typically for the new version of his style, Herrmann designed modern clothes for the characters, moving freely within the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. The costumes were fashionable and theatrical, in particular Guglielmo and Ferrando, who were dressed up as the Albanians in Japanese long black skirts-pants, cloth cleverly folded as modern turbans, and white broad quilted coats. For their wedding, Dorabella and Fiordiligi—who kept changing their clothes throughout the entire opera—wore wittily designed, but simply made quasi-rococo dresses with decisively cut geometrical shapes, triangular for Fiordiligi and trapezoidal for Dorabella. The theatricality of their costuming was here particularly striking, but perhaps Despina’s costume—a whimsical version of a maid uniform—was the most acutely Wilsonian (or to be more precise in style of Jacques Reynaud or Frida Parmeggiani). It was a brownish-purple costume sculpted for its shape, or as Tommasini

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97 *Guilio Cesare in Egitto*—staged for the first time in Amsterdam in 2001 (revived in Brussels in 2008)—is another production with similar aesthetics.

98 *Cosi’s* first modern clothes production in Salzburg was the 2000 scandalous production (dir. Hans Neuenfels, des. Reinhard von der Thannen).

99 Other costumes for Fiordiligi and Dorabella are more restrained, emphasizing their adolescence.
remarked, a “dress with little platforms sticking out from each hip, like serving trays.”

This design allowed the formation of something akin to Wilson’s hieratical body, with a distinctive silhouette that stands out against a backdrop lit with saturated lights. Despina’s coutured body was contained in a corset-tubular dress with strict sexual prohibition but with a revealing rhomboid décolleté showing off her full bosoms. It limited and prescribed the singer’s movements as costumes do in Wilson’s productions, although never quite to the same degree. However, Herrmann imprints on the costumes an unequivocal sexual innuendo that stands in contrast to the almost asexual clothing in Wilson’s opera.

This turn in style is not without risks. Similar to Wilson, Herrmann’s late style, marked by smoothness, abstraction, stylization, and a kind of commercialized beauty, at times runs close to contemporary fashion and advertising. This combination of commodification and pure abstraction could suggest trivialization of the abstract art. Similarly, the emphasis on spectacle—and thus entertainment—could impend Herrmann’s scenography and eventually lead to the commodification of his images, which in several instances has happened. The return to abstraction is a response, on one hand, to the kitsch, which encroached into the aesthetic of art since the 1960s, and, on the other, to the multimedia experiments of postmodernism. The prominence of the universal chrono-topology, timelessness and deliberate de-historicizing, which could

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100 Tommasini, “A Light Mozart Opera…”

101 Couturiers create “body” with a special fabric, cut, and an “upholstery of bones, wires, hoops and related support” that gives a highly sculptured silhouette. Shevtsova, Robert Wilson, 80.

102 For example, German critic Manuel Brug regards Herrmann as cool analyst, who, despite seemingly beautiful images, sophisticated psychologizing, and interesting details, presents works that are devoid of emotions. According to him, over time his productions became pretentious. See Manuel Brug, Opernregisseur heute (Hamburg: Henschel Verlag, 2006), 219-221.
vigorously assert themselves as unassailable absolutes, suggest escapism that puts in question modern culture’s relationship to history itself. Like Wilson, Herrmann’s scenography could seem to be a totally depoliticized, sanitized art, reflecting, on one level, the high European cultural and intellectual elite and, on another, the materialism in a society increasingly dominated by the super rich. Although risking capitulation to empty spectacle, any judgment on Herrmann’s late style must nonetheless recognize the intellectual and formal complexity of these images, which must be seen as a bulwark against the worst excesses of the contemporary international style in scenography.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE DISRUPTION OF ORDER: ACHIM FREYER’S SCENOGRAPHY FOR OPERA

“Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war. (…) And art exists so that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important. (…) Art removes objects from the automatism of perception…”

Viktor Shklovsky, “Isskustvo kak priem”

“The disruption of order is a new order.”

Achim Freyer

On October 12, 1980, at the premiere of Carl Maria von Weber’s Der Freischütz at the Württembergische Staatstheater in Stuttgart, a majority of audience members reacted viscerally to designer-director Achim Freyer’s radical staging. His re-versioning of Romantic aesthetics—at once dark but playful, kitschy and grotesquely suggestive—transgressed the conventional operatic ideal of Romantic realism, radically confounding the spectators’ expectations (see Fig. 4.1). The audience showed its disapproval immediately, booing the staging loudly, while still acknowledging musical and vocal performance with warm applause. Two weeks later, in a similar way, the West German television audience of a live broadcast in Sunday evening primetime protested Freyer’s

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production in an outpouring of letters to both the opera house management and the press.\(^3\)

These passionate letters—collected in a thick folder in the Stuttgart opera’s archive, condemning the production as a “cultural disgrace”—indicate the degree to which Freyer’s *Freischütz* diverged from the aesthetic norms of the day.\(^4\)

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\(^3\) *Der Freischütz* was broadcast on October 26, 1980, on the public television channel ZDF 2 at 7:30 pm. The transmission was also available for the Austrian television audience.

\(^4\) A letter from an audience member. Archive of the Oper Stuttgart. Original text: “…eine Kulturschande...”
recordings helped to further establish the classical status of Chéreau’s staging. In the case of Freyer’s *Freischütz*, audience outrage was only repeated and amplified by the national screening. The reaction of a larger televisual audience revealed just how deeply its spectators were attached to their entrenched preconceptions and aesthetic tastes, and how some of the audience members were eager to police operatic conventions. This strong reaction of German and Austrian television viewers disproves Paul Heyer’s recent claim that “opera on television, live or recorded, has attracted little notice.”

We can, however, see that the mass audience was more inclined to embrace Chereau’s radical interpretation rendered in a basically “realistic” operatic scenography and supported with strong psychological character motivation than it was to accept Freyer’s grotesque revision of Weber’s opera. Although this production also achieved iconic status, remaining in the Stuttgart Oper repertoire for over thirty years, Freyer has continued to shake the audience out of its comfortable routine of perception by disrupting the familiar order of operatic conventions, transgressing taboos—moral, social, and cultural—while fundamentally reconfiguring the mimetic conventions of traditional opera. Like Robert Wilson, but with a drastically different aesthetic, Freyer has been offering his audience open-ended works with alternative modes of visual representation and distinct, highly evocative personal interpretations, which the spectators eventually have to re-discover on

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6 See Treadwell, “Reading and Staging again,” in particular 215-16.

7 Still in the repertory of the Stuttgarter Oper. Last performed in November 2014.
their own. To paraphrase his words: the theatre reflects back on us as it presents a space for our thoughts.8

In this chapter, I investigate how Freyer’s new and unorthodox visuality strongly distinguishes itself from previously dominant—and still entrenched—concepts of staging opera as well as from more recent scenographic trends.9 His aesthetics of the grotesque explicitly challenge the prevalent “high” cultural bias of opera by combining it with elements of “low” culture. This fusion of elite culture with lowbrow elements allows him to endow his operatic staging with a strong and unique visual style of low-tech materiality and the grotesque body. The cult of ugliness sharply distinguishes his work from the types of operatic beauty privileged by Herrmann and Wilson. This grotesque does more than simply create a demotic opera aesthetic. The lowbrow and the grotesque function in close collaboration with metatheatricality and abstraction, permitting Freyer to emphasize visually that what spectators are seeing is a theatrical performance. Thus, his grotesque not only revitalizes and recontextualizes opera; in fact, it retheatricalizes it.

In this context, theatricality is the mode of presenting theatre-as-theatre. It directs the audience’s attention emphatically toward the mode of presentation, a model created by early twentieth-century avant-garde, above all by Vsevolod Meyerhold, whose praxis, along with that of Bertolt Brecht, I see as a key reference and inspiration for Freyer.


9 A number of Freyer’s productions are available as video recordings; some are offered commercially (Der Freischütz, Satyagraha, Alice in Wonderland), others from German television channels if they were broadcast, as with the Salzburg Zauberflöte (1997). As in case of Herrmann the English scholarship is quiet limited. In addition to Neumann’s text there are articles written on German scenography at the beginning of 1980s, which are the main sources for Freyer: Riddell, “The German ‘Raum,’” Martin Graue, “West German Scenography,” and Klaus van den Berg, “Contemporary German Scenography: Surging Images and Spaces for Action,” Contemporary Theatre Review 18, no. 1 (2008): 6-19, accessed February 8, 2010, doi: 10.1080/10486800701749553.
Through his emphasis on the theatricality and metatheatricality of operatic performance—a fundamental of opera often disregarded or even disavowed by audiences—we can understand Freyer’s specific deployment of movement and gesture, as well as his many different constructions of stage spatiality. It is crucial to recognize the importance of theatricality as an umbrella model for the analyses I am applying to Freyer’s aesthetic devices in operatic contexts. As can be seen throughout his oeuvre, scenography, for Freyer, evolved to become an ever more visual statement as he developed an imagistic form that emphasized both the inherent tensions in the work and his personal interpretation; the entire structure of his staging is based on the theatricality of each piece.

This chapter concentrates on a number of stylistic tropes and key works in order to examine Freyer’s highly complex repertoire of spatial gestures. In particular, I focus on the fact that Freyer is a painter, a creator of two-dimensional forms, although in theatre and opera he constantly engages with different modes of three-dimensionality. As a visual artist creating complex dimensional relations, filling and texturing his surfaces and populating the spaces thus created, Freyer not only tackles the specific challenges of existing theatrical spaces, but also, I suggest, uses his staging to illustrate in large scale the confrontations and dynamics of the history of looking and visuality. As he seeks equilibrium between abstract formalism and multidimensionality, his productions often foreground key fault lines in visual modernity. In doing so, the proscenium frame—as for Karl-Ernst Herrmann—becomes a crucial element, and this is closely linked to how he both deploys and subverts the Renaissance scopic regime in scenographic form, which we can see most clearly in his astonishing “cubic” production of Sciarrino’s *Macbeth*.
In mapping Freyer’s visual style, my analysis centers on a number of selected productions, which exemplify key aspects of his visual style and/or key turning points or coalescence moments in his development as a designer-director: Der Freischütz (1980), Hamburg’s Zauberflöte (1982) and Einstein on the Beach (1988). These must be seen alongside more recent productions, including Macbeth (2002), Salome (2003), and Eugene Onegin (2008), which continue to push and provoke traditional models of operatic performance. Not least, Freyer’s particular modes of abstraction, his deployment of flatness, frames and strange versions of geometric perspective, and his use of bodies and embodied performance all exist in a shifting operatic-scenographic landscape. This inevitably means, whether directly or indirectly, an encounter with and sometimes an absorption of the now almost ubiquitous Wilsonian color fields and frontal aesthetics.

PART I: Designing and directing opera: Freyer’s career & its context

Born in Berlin in 1934, Freyer has been among the most important German theatre and opera directors and designers since the mid-1970s. After his defection to the FRG in 1972, he distinguished himself in a close collaboration with Claus Peymann in Stuttgart before he turned to directing opera. His official operatic directorial debut—Gluck’s Iphigénie en Tauride—took place at the Bayerische Staatsoper in Munich in 1979. His work in the theatre is important as well, but he is known primarily for his work in opera. In over fifty of the more than sixty opera productions he has designed, he has served as both set designer and director. Perhaps more than anyone else, he exemplifies the figure of the contemporary European operatic designer-turned-director.

10 With Christoph von Dohnanyi Freyer co-directed Beethoven’s Fidelio at the Oper Frankfurt in 1976.

with a distinctly palpable personal visual aesthetic, positioned in direct binary opposition to Robert Wilson.

![Wagner's Walküre at the Los Angeles Opera in 2010, directed and designed by Achim Freyer, costumes co-designed with Amanda Freyer. Any discussion of its aesthetic qualities has been overshadowed by economics, as a multitude of headlines announced its $32 million budget. Photo © Monika Rittershaus.](image)

While Freyer remains predominantly a German designer-director, his works became more widely known abroad in the 1990s, when he started to produce operas outside of Germany: in Vienna, Salzburg, Venice and Brussels. Especially fêted are his unconventional productions of Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte*, a work for which over the last thirty years he has created no less than six different versions based around the idea of clownery.\(^{12}\) In the new millennium, his name became still better known, now on a global scale, as his productions were staged in Los Angeles, New York, Warsaw, Moscow, and

as far afield as Seoul. It was in this context, that, at the age of 75, Freyer reached perhaps
the peak of his notoriety, thanks to the Los Angeles Opera’s first full production of
Richard Wagner’s cycle Der Ring des Nibelungen (2009-2010) that he designed and
directed (see Fig. 4.2).¹³

With Freyer, given his commitment to reportorial renewal, as well as to a
coherence of dramaturgical and visual reimagining, the choice of operas is very important.
He has often steered away from the nineteenth-century Italian standard diet of operatic
repertoire, championing the rare and the new. Unlike many directors, who are principally
interested in restaging canonical works, Freyer has had a long commitment to the little-
known and even the abstruse, putting on rarely performed works such as Ferrucio
Busoni’s Turandot (1994) and Robert Schumann’s Genoveva (1999). Like Wilson, he has
been instrumental in producing works of contemporary composers, including Philip Glass,
Dieter Schnebel, and Salvatore Sciarrino. In addition, early opera composers such as
Monteverdi, Handel, and Gluck have been central in his repertoire. More recently, he has
turned towards the standard operatic canon, extending his challenging reinterpretations to
such works as Strauss’ Salome (2003) and Verdi’s La traviata (2007; see Fig. 4.3). A
further significant aspect has been his tendency to stage, within opera houses, non-scenic
music works such as J.S. Bach’s Missa in B Minor and Verdi’s Messa da Requiem, for
which he has often provided striking metaphorical worlds of imagery, a visual
transposition, often shocking the audiences (see Fig. 4.4).

¹³ Samuel Adams, “Blasting Wagner out of the Continuum of History: Deutschtum Transposed in the Los
Angeles Ring,” in Representations of German Identity, eds. Deborah Ascher Barnstone and Thomas O.
In the broadest sense, Freyer’s aesthetics can be understood in terms of an increasing importance of the visual and the corporeal in theatrical culture, forming a strand of theatre, which in the last century has decentered text and narrative storytelling in favor of powerful visuality. Seen within this framework, like Wilson, Freyer emphasizes the non-verbal, visual and physical elements in performance, moving away from the sacrosanctity of the libretto. In the German context of the 1970s, the theatre was particularly opened up to a theatre of images (Bildertheater). This initially meant an experimental theatre, where the images constituted the interpretation of the text. This perspective was particularly important for the new style of directing that emphasized the conceptual approach and interpretative freedom over fidelity to the text. The Regietheater emphasis on visuality allowed the designers to become the directors’ partners and eventually to take on the overall direction. Like Karl-Ernst Herrmann, Wilfried Minks
and Axel Manthey, Freyer helped to raise stage design from a subservient role and to free it from its illustrative character.\textsuperscript{14} This substantial presence of designers in the theatre and opera in the 1980s, it is frequently argued, led to the dominance of the image and a preference for proscenium theatres, both of which pushed the acting into the background.\textsuperscript{15}

Fig. 4.4. Verdi’s \textit{Messa da Requiem} at the Deutsche Oper Berlin in 2003, directed and designed by Achim Freyer. This non-operatic work received a striking visual transposition of metaphorical imagery. Photo © Monika Rittershaus.

**PART II: Disruption of order: \textit{lowbrow} and \textit{grotesque}**

What unites Freyer’s operatic scenography is his highly unusual imagery. His stagings display a particularly strong and unifying aesthetic vision derived from an amalgam of puppet theatre, circus, choreography of slow motion and amplified gestures

\textsuperscript{14} These designers eventually moved on to direct their own productions, mainly in opera houses. See Riddell, “The German ‘Raum’”; Graue, “West German Scenography”; and Wilhelm Hortmann, “Revolutions in Scenography on the German Stage,” 275-304.

as well as the grotesque, emphasized by costume, makeup and masks. On operatic stages, he creates almost surreal worlds that often bewilder the audience. As Nora Eckert concludes, “Nothing on Freyer’s stage looks like in real life.”\textsuperscript{16} Like Wilson, Freyer could be said to evoke “the strangeness of the familiar and the odd familiarity of the strange.”\textsuperscript{17} However, has for the most part resisted an appeal to visual pleasure, favoring more aesthetically disruptive elements. These elements are not simply disruptive – they are grotesque. With topsy-turvy characters who have exaggerated features and grotesquely misshapen bodies populating his theatre, everything seems crude and amplified. Their comic violence is often paired with forms of ritual. The grotesque imagery can be both explicitly sexual and scatological. Whiteface makeup functioning like a mask and his recent frequent use of proper masks exaggerate the grotesque deformation of the body still further. This lowbrow aesthetic is dominant in the solutions Freyer devises for theatrical space; it also affects performers’ gestures and movements and the overall choreography of the staging. Transparently, his scenography stands against the image of opera as elitist and glamorous.

Freyer’s scenography contests the place of opera as an elitist genre. This is done in a double gesture: combining a commitment to vernacular and lowbrow forms with modes of reflexive metatheatricality. (I address this latter element in the next section.) As Sven Neumann, Freyer’s dramaturg, has emphasized, deconstruction of established patterns and forms are one of the central themes of Freyer’s art. Or to use Freyer’s own

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 152. Original text: “Nichts auf Freyers Bühne sieht wie im wirklichen Leben aus.”

words: “The disruption of order is a new order.”¹⁸ Here, he facilitates the compression of “low” culture with “high,” collapsing the forced distinctions between these two categories. Through the radicalism of his gestures, he stages a disruption of the established operatic order. Nevertheless, because of his coherent aesthetic vision, it is a controlled disruption: he creates a new order, an order that reconstitutes theatricality but only after first stripping away existing operatic-theatrical conventions.

**Salome’s “lowbrow” aesthetics**

One key point of this low/high culture short-circuiting is in the area of costuming, which, as Adorno pointed out, is “essential to opera: in contrast to a play, an opera without costume would be a paradox.”¹⁹ Typically, operatic costumes have a state-of-the-art quality and function as historical reference. In contrast, in Freyer’s productions the costumes, makeup, masks and even wigs often appear crude or made with poor quality materials, looking hastily and carelessly executed. For example, *Salome’s* costumes—which in this case he designed himself²⁰—are a particularly good example of this approach. All characters wear the same plain suits: a striped jacket with baggy pants. Although the costumes evoke prisoners’ garments (or just striped pajamas), they are not made from commercially available black-and-white striped fabric. Instead, they are *painted over*: first with a thick layer of white paint, which makes the fabric stiffer, then each stripe is individually painted in black, in uneven lines that are sometimes thicker, sometimes thinner, and in places even partly rubbed away. While on one level, the

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²⁰ Since 1991 Freyer has largely used other costume and mask designers, mainly Maria-Elena Amos (first for *Vergänglichkeit*, 1991) and his daughter Amanda (first for *Genoveva*, 1999).
pattern for the costumes signifies the characters’ situation (imprisonment), it also introduces elements of burlesque and expands and challenges the aesthetics of formalism. Just as the predominance of the saturated yellow in the set indicates jealousy and covetousness, the black-and-white color scheme reiterates some of the main themes of the opera, like foreboding and death. But the costumes are not simply the bearers of symbolic value. The very materiality, rough and hand-done, of the paint and the fabric contains its own signification beyond the contents of the play itself, a small but significant part of a more general metatheatrical movement of generic re-situation away from opera’s normal quality of quality.

The materiality—the look and feel—of Freyer’s staging here is not entirely or even primarily an artisanal one. He appropriates imagery from contemporary consumer and visual culture, creating costumes that point to larger themes in his reading of Salome, which conflates sexual desire and religious fervor with the ubiquitous power of consumerism, the projection of desires, and the omnipresence of commodity. In designing the costumes for Salome Freyer turned to cheap, ordinary and mass-produced articles of daily use, as well as to sentimental artifacts and cultural symbols. Herod is made to appear like a pathetically-aged celebrity wrestler, wearing a thick, quilted yellow cloak with white stars and stripes and a matching yellow T-shirt with enormous letter “A.” Herodias has a black blanket with black-and-white fringes as her royal coat, as well as a pink free-flying top layer of fabric, which matches her pink balloon breasts. Salome—with her blond hair suggestive of Marilyn Monroe—comes onstage with a very large stuffed toy tiger. She wears a pink chemise, with extra large rubber cones as red nipples
that she throws at Herod at the end of her “Dance of Seven Veils”\textsuperscript{21} (see Fig. 4.5 and Fig. 4.6).

![Image of Salome performance](image)

**Fig. 4.5 Strauss’ *Salome* at the Deutsche Oper in Berlin in 2003, directed and designed by Achim Freyer. All of the singers are performing the Dance of Seven Veils, which has nothing to do with a typically seductive performance of the lead singer. Photo © Monika Rittershaus.**

In designing the less prominent characters, Freyer used mass-produced plastic goods of a kind commonly seen in the kitchen. For example, Narraboth—infatuated with Salome and Captain of the Guard—sports a toy lion’s head over his neck as a trophy, a bicycle tire across his chest and a green plastic bowl on top of his head. The group of five Jews—rendered as a quirky birthday party group—wears plastic funnels of different colors and sizes on top of their heads. The soldiers have a similarly frivolous appearance:

\footnote{Sexuality in Freyer’s productions is strongly present, but it does not conform to traditional canons of the sensuous. The famous dance scene in his interpretation has nothing to do with the seduction—subtle or orgiastic, depending on the interpretation—suggested in the work. Provocatively, he staged the dance as a morning group gymnastic or a graceless version of contemporary pop dance full of awkwardness, clumsiness and repetitions, with some sado-masochist movements. Though Salome took off her jacket voluntarily, in the end she was stripped of her pants, suggesting a group rape.}
one dons a plastic blue colander and the other a tall purple plastic bucket. The use of balloons and kitchen utensils in costume design is whimsical and incongruous, shocking and inventive, kitschy and transgressive.

Unlike Wilson and Herrmann, who are attracted to the elegant, refined, and sophisticated, Freyer prefers the grotesque: fantastically extravagant, bizarrely shaped bodies. He does not beautify the body through clothing or fashionably re-stylize the body with the means of haute couture. On the contrary, he purposefully makes it ugly and strange by creating disturbingly bizarre creatures, deforming the body with uncanny masks and makeup (see Fig. 4.7). The grotesque as an aesthetic category not only

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22 This tendency towards fashionable costumes is closer to the designs created by Amanda Freyer, as most visibly palpable in the Freyer’s version of La traviata (2007).
indicates strange and surprising events, and seemingly improbable bodies, but also paradoxical contrasts within the work, combining seriousness with humor and foolishness, creating an excellent vector of genre and style hybridization. Here the grotesque is more nuanced, a means of exposing dissonances and paradoxes within the work itself.

Fig. 4.7. Salome. Ghoulish double-faced servant. Screen capture.

**The grotesque transgressions in *Der Freischütz***

In his scandalous production of *Der Freischütz*, Freyer applied grotesque aesthetics to Weber’s romantic opera, giving free rein to his delight in the ugly and malformed. He populated the *Wolfsschlucht*—the Wolf’s Glen—with grotesquely horrifying figures of debasement and deformity, monstrosity and licentiousness, where typically “apparitions, incantations, and lightning combine to create a quintessentially (and melodramatically) eerie romantic scene.”\(^{23}\) In turning to *Freischütz*, Freyer was

\(^{23}\) Levin, *Opera through Other Eyes*, 243.
addressing the work’s status as the first masterpiece of national German opera and as an archetypal product of German romanticism. Weber’s dark elements are usually transformed into a picturesque vision of Heimat—populated with huntsmen and peasants and benevolent local monarchs—with the sexuality and violence toned down into symbol. Traditionally, the stagings of the opera were and still often are emphatically romantic. This began to change in the mid-twentieth century with a series of new productions that introduced more innovations in interpretations, stagings that ultimately betray our “deep distrust of the romantic,” as A. M. Nagler suggested. The fairy-tale qualities of Weber’s opera can no longer convince the audience. As with Die Zauberflöte and Il trovatore, Der Freischütz paradoxically becomes a “victim to intellectualization,” in Adorno words.

In his Freischütz, Freyer pairs a parody of presentation and convention with the deliberate emulation of “primitive” in the set to produce a distinct reinterpretation of the opera. Inversion of hierarchies and norms through the burlesque and grotesque enabled Freyer to transgress the boundaries of operatic conventions. His breaking with the specific conventions of the piece has been audacious, but it is also a careful and strategic rupture. As musicologist Donald G. Henderson asserts, “While violating the spirit and meaning of the opera, Freyer approached the music with veneration.” In fact, Freyer does not depart from the libretto; he does not leave things out. Rather, if anything, he

24 Unlike the original folk fairy tale from the Gespensterbuch, the libretto was given a happy ending, with the triumph of good over evil.

25 Nagler, Misdirection, 68.

26 In his essay “Bourgeois Opera” Adorno suggests that the contemporary spectator is no longer capable of understanding the pictorial language of Weber’s opera—one of the most authentic operas— because its improbable story of a fairy tale openly abdicates rationality. Adorno, “Bourgeois Opera,” 26.

27 Freyer also prepared his version of the score based on the original musical notation. Like Wilson, Freyer reinstated the prologue that Weber cut out from Kind’s libretto. Donald G. Henderson, The Freischütz Phenomenon: Opera as Cultural Mirror (Bloomington: Xlibris, 2011), 172.
closely adheres to the original idea of Romanticism as nightmare, but in doing so he strikes out violently against the conventionalized nature of operatic Romantic-realism.

For the musical and theatrical climax of the *Wolfsschlucht*, during which the powers of the devil are summoned, Freyer retains everything called for by the libretto: a black boar (as a puppet), owls’ fiery eyes (red bulbs), rings of fire (wooden wheels with red fluorescent tubes), and so on. At the beginning of the scene, a series of transgressive ghostly apparitions appear on stage, entering the performance space through windows and trap doors, from under the walls, etc. The bestiary of figures include a fat naked woman, a soldier incessantly impaling a baby on a bayonet, a man with a face from Munch’s *The Scream*, a humanoid centipede, a cripple on a rolling platform, a masked
leather-clad flagellant with a bullwhip, a young maid with a short apron and enlarged buttocks, as well as a white rabbit with a huge phallus. This six-foot-tall masturbating bunny even now continues to shock the contemporary spectators who promptly call this production an artistic disaster.\textsuperscript{28}

As the above scene demonstrates, the grotesque in Freyer is also a sexual grotesque. Unlike Wilson, who de-eroticizes and de-sexualizes the operas he stages, and unlike Herrmann, whose costumes are sexually suggestive and alluring in a more conventional manner, Freyer inverts conventional codes of masculine and feminine appeal and glamour. He ostentatiously stages a disturbing sexuality that threatens moral taboos. Embracing licentiousness and at times gesturing towards obscenity, Freyer subverts the sublime concept of beauty, so pervasive in the sentimental version of Romanticism. He also uses sex both literally and metaphorically. Crucially, moreover, his eroticism is figuratively altered—both theatricalized and aestheticized—through the grotesque. He presents, often at unexpected moments, anatomically explicit figures with odd physiques and radiant sensuality; he delights in the phallus, buttocks, and breasts, which he exposes and exaggerates (see Fig. 4.8).

Freyer translates desire towards the female body into a praise of the deformed and grotesque body that he often embellishes visually, rendering it even more ambiguous.\textsuperscript{29}

As the feminist scholar Mary Russo has pointed out, the grotesque image of the woman is ambivalent: loaded with fear and loathing, but it also suggests spiritual empowerment,

\textsuperscript{28} Quite symptomatic are the comments on Amazon.com, Amazon.de, and YouTube.

\textsuperscript{29} For example, the Three Ladies, attendants to the Queen of the Night, in three of \textit{Die Zauberflöte’s} productions, have enlarged, exposed breasts.
political resistance and civic action. Freyer’s grotesque representations of the feminine are paired with the grotesque representations of the masculine, both which seem to offer amusement and fear, defiance and suppression. Yet humor becomes a defense mechanism against an anxiety-provoking, uneasy and uncanny female body, which is frequently a site of erotic consumption.

Although in the *Wolfsschlucht* scene Freyer presents a festival of genuinely disturbing transgressions, he leavens the shock with humor. Moreover, everything in *Freischütz* is blatantly artificial and mechanical: set, acting, speech patterns (in the spoken parts), gestures and movements, etc. However, this is live theatre performed by real singers moving and behaving like puppets, so the tension between the “live” and the “mechanical” complicates the viewing, making it distinctly uneasy (see Fig. 4.9). In many respects, these aspects of the production—obscenity mingling with a deliberate pointing to the artificiality of theatrical conventions—are similar to Alfred Jarry’s innovative rejection of nineteenth-century illusionistic realism. Nothing of the dreadful forest is grave or serious, but rather is presented in terms of naïve puppet theatre and humor, a ghoulish fairy tale that aims toward pleasure and the release from the social restraint. However, as Christopher Innes pointed out about Jarry’s *Ubu roi*, such a patent parody conceals “a sophisticated manipulation of vision.”

Similar to Jarry and Wilson, Freyer’s actor/singer becomes an equal element, a part of an overall theatrical composition. The performer with his or her costume and

mask becomes a new corporeality that is unsettling and disturbing, but also captivating. Treating singers as puppets transpires also in the gesticulation and movements shifting the production further away from the “realistic” style of acting onstage. This counteracts the audience’s habit of suspending disbelief and thwarts possibilities of empathy. The puppet-like treatment results in gestures and movements that are limited, angular and mechanic. Early in his career as a director-designer, Freyer explained his choices by referring to the conventionality of operatic gesture:

Musical language is one of the most elaborate and the most theatrical of all theater; it is the most artificial and the most specific form of our language... The gesticulation grows out of existing musical language, and becomes an eclectic, but visually essential composition.\footnote{Freyer, “Notizen zur Arbeit,” 84. Original text: “Die musikalische Sprache auf dem Theater ist eine der kunstvollsten und theatralisiertesten; die künstlichste spezifischste Form unserer Sprache... Das Gestische erwächst aus der bestehenden musikalischen Sprache, ist die vom Regisseur und Bildner zu schöpfende visuelle inhaltliche Komposition.”}

Fig. 4.9. Der Freischütz. Exaggerated visual vocabulary of schematically emotive gestures. Courtesy of the Oper Stuttgart. Photo © A.T. Schaefer, 2014.
In a production, on one hand, Freyer sustains and affirms the operatic conventions by his continued use of codified gestures. On the other, he contests and resists them through exaggeration and new contextualization within a transformed visual whole. In *Der Freischütz*, deploying the naïve imagery of traditional Bavarian folklore, inspired by the baroque and nineteenth century Austrian-Bavarian votive painting, he choreographed simplified movements and conventionally recognizable gestures denoting basic emotional states such as despair, sadness, love, desire, etc.\(^{34}\)

As in Wilson’s productions, Freyer’s choreography of gestures has been prescriptive, but he also seems to contrast normal gesticulation with emotive gesture. This juxtaposition, often accompanied with repetition, actually makes the Freyeran gesture appear more forceful because it does not simply illustrate or advance the words and action, but demonstratively stresses the emotive situation. Such a display dispels spectators’ habitual patterns of viewing opera, as they come more and more to expect naturalist gesticulation—paradoxically this anticipation can be credited as a direct effect of Chéreau’s reform as well as opera’s mediatization. In short, although the gestures are originally natural or realistic, Freyer simplifies and alienates them, taking them out of an everyday context. The final effect is that of more formal and stylized gestures.

Both a literalization and an exaggeration of the nightmarish aspects of Romanticism—in Freyer’s words—“portray the chaos of incompatibility, the dark, the strange, the unresolved.”\(^{35}\) His evocation of irrationalism highlights his programmatic

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\(^{34}\) For example, Agathe’s palms are crossed on her bosoms, Kilian is thumbing his nose in jeering and Max or the girls mock him with “Rübchen schaben.” This is a peculiar gesticulation, not common in the Anglo-Saxon world, but endemic to Central Europe, in which one index finger rubs against another in a mockery or out of mischievousness. The closest translation would be “to snap fingers at someone.”

deployment both of transgression and of the aesthetics of the indeterminate. This deployment collides with audience expectation, which first awaits the familiarity of conventionalized representation—with its genre and medium-specific codes of beauty and realism—but also, second, the clear demarcation of generic boundaries, the comfort of the known. Thus, if taken at face value, with such a grotesquely rendered *Wolfsschlucht*, Freyer oversteps the boundaries of convention and good taste of the dominant and elite culture of the opera.

According to Bakhtin, the carnivalesque is supposed “to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted.”36 In his program notes, Freyer stated his intention to render a “fantastic picture of our German soul.”37 It could be categorized as grotesque which, as Bakhtin suggests, is always ambivalent: “It is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, buries and revives.”38 The regenerative power of laughter is thus crucial for representations of grotesque and for Freyer as well. With this production, he returned to the place of his first employment within the theatre—the puppet theatre—in order not only to transgress against the content of conventionalized

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37 Freyer, “Notizen zur Arbeit,” 84. Original text: “Der Freischütz wird als ein fantastisches Bild unserer deutschen Seele betrachtet.“
38 Bakhtin, 11-12.
representations of *Heimat* and Germany, but also to manipulate visually the elements of these conventions.

**Circus and the clown**

Laughter can obliterate true meaning since it can appear harmless and suggest a lack of seriousness. However, laughter, according to Bakhtin, boldly exposes the truth about the world and power; it also liberates from the fear of “the scared, of prohibitions, of the past, of power.”

Besides the grotesque body, Freyer introduces other sources of laughter from popular entertainment, above all from the circus. Freyer locates the symbolic source of laughter in the figure of the clown, who, similarly to a fool, is also a key figure of the carnivalesque. The clown is a symbolic figure of rule breaking, transgressing the codes and norms, which Freyer uses to undermine the visual aesthetics

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39 Bakhtin, 92, 94.
of the opera. The clowns appear in almost every *Zauberflöte* (see Fig. 4.10) as well as in *Salome*, as we have already seen.

![Image of clowns in a theatrical production](image)

**Fig. 4.11. Zemlinsky’s *Die Zauberflöte* für 20 Finger at the Nationaltheater Mannheim Oper, 2005, directed and designed by Achim Freyer. Zemlinsky’s short version, in combination with the clownish characters made this production a perfect vehicle for a very young audience. Courtesy of the Nationaltheater Mannheim. Photo © Monika Rittershaus.**

The grotesque, clowns and *commedia dell’arte* were, of course, exceptionally important for many branches of the theatrical avant-garde from the early twentieth century onward. As Silvija Jestrovic asserts, the circus, like *commedia dell’arte*, Oriental and puppet theatre “have at least two things in common—the dominance of theatricality and artificiality over illusionist elements, and the dominance of performance over written text.”

In his recent reappraisal of the circus spectacle as secular ritual and theatrical discourse, French-Canadian scholar Paul Bouissac points out that in common opinion clownery is based on pure slapstick routine aiming at transgression of social norms, and

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thus the clown’s nonsensical behavior is often seen as meaningless and his antics senseless. In fact, Bouissac, who is regarded as the pioneer of circus studies, argues, the clowns’ role is not just to keep spectators laughing, but also keep them physically involved and stimulated. Therefore, clowning is not pointless chaos but carefully staged choreography. This reading of clownery illuminates a key aspect of Freyer’s work: he uses clownery specifically to subvert the operatic genre with this form of popular entertainment. His clowns directly involve the spectators in the action on-stage and off-stage and usually make the audience laugh. The privileged relationship that clowns have with the audience grants an affirmative rapport almost instantaneously (see Fig. 4.11).

Fig. 4.12. Tchaikovsky’s *Eugene Onegin* at the Berliner Staatsoper in 2008, directed, sets and lighting by Achim Freyer, costumes by Lena Lukjanova and Amanda Freyer. The singers and the members of the Freyer Ensemble perform complex choreography during Act I. Courtesy of the Staatsoper Unter den Linden in Berlin. Photo © Monika Rittershaus.

Although the clowns frequently evoke laughter, Freyer employs them not just to entertain but also to enhance the visual discourse. His clowns can also be sad or melancholic. It was this gloomy version that Freyer chose for his melancholic productions of *Eugene Onegin* (2008), where all performers wore black-and-white costumes and makeup. The black-and-white color scheme could also evoke other emotions like anxiety, hate, and envy, as Gerd Rienäcker suggests. The sophistication of the clownery emerges here not only in the thematic variation, which disposes of typical buffoonery, but also in the precision of gestures and movements that form the
opera’s essential choreography, developed by Freyer with his Ensemble.\textsuperscript{43} The precise and detailed choreography of repeated gestures and patterns organizes both the theatrical space and the dramatic trajectory of the opera. These choreographic recurrences suggest controlled emotions and refer to the cycles of life on one hand and to the everyday monotony on the other. What typically is perceived as an anarchic aspect of the clownery, Freyer contains in a very strict choreography (compare Fig. 4.12 and Fig 4.13).

Mixing the lowbrow with the highbrow has other, equally important effects, which Pierre Bourdieu identifies in his seminal book on taste:

…Popular entertainment secures the spectator’s participation in the show and collective participation in the festivity which it occasions. If circus and melodrama…are more “popular” than entertainments like dancing or theatre, this is not merely because, being less formalized (compare, for example, acrobatics with dancing) and less euphemized, they offer more direct, more immediate satisfactions. It is also because, through the collective festivity they give rise to and the array of spectacular delights they offer… fabulous sets, glittering costumes, exciting music, lively action, enthusiastic actors… they satisfy the taste for and sense of revelry, the plain speaking and hearty laughter which liberate by setting the social world head over heels, overturning conventions and proprieties.\textsuperscript{44}

Though the clown’s acts and \textit{commedia dell’arte} are highly formalized genres, in the context of opera they collide with audience expectations, especially when Freyer applies them to non-comedic works like \textit{Salome} and \textit{Onegin}. In these cases, laughter does not reassure the spectators. Although typically in the circus the clown has a privileged relationship with the audience, here their \textit{pluralized} antics cause negative responses. In

\textsuperscript{43} In 1988 Freyer established the Freyer Ensemble, bringing together artists from various disciplines, including actors, singers, dancers, choreographers, acrobats, poets, and musicians with whom he collectively develops and realizes many of his theatrical and operatic projects, including Verdi’s \textit{Missa da Requiem} at the Deutsche Oper in Berlin (2001) and Tchaikovsky’s \textit{Eugene Onegin} at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden in Berlin (2008).

the various *Zauberflöte* productions, the audiences reveled in seeing Papageno as clown, but when Freyer extended the notion of clownery from one character onto the entire production concept—as in *Salome* and *Onegin*—a majority of the spectators responded with vehement boos and the critics with severe criticism. Freyer’s hybridization of the genre confuses audience members, who do not know how to “read” it. The clown—acting out the human impulse to anarchy—seems to be excluded from serious opera, again marginalized as irrelevant, out of place and hence unacceptable. The iconoclastic imagery centered in the lowbrow and the grotesque that Freyer supplies, although radically transforming opera staging, often becomes in the eyes of the audience aesthetically unattractive, repulsive, and/or offensive, especially because it does not conform to the highbrow character of opera.

**PART III: Metareferential turn**

To this point, my focus has been on the general aesthetics and strategies that Freyer employs in his operatic scenography, stressing the dissenting use of the *lowbrow* in presentations of grotesque imagery, in particular through elements of clownery, low-tech quality, mass culture and popular entertainment. It is important, however, to recognize here that Freyer’s overarching approach to the theatre and opera must be considered within the horizon of twentieth-century theatre’s realization of its own medium-specificity through its own analytical tendencies and reflexivity. In short, as

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the Russian formalist Yuri Lotman put it, “Art presents art, attempting to reach the boundaries of its own possibilities.” In Freyer’s scenography this meta-referentiality is particularly strongly emphasized: the self-reflexive, self-referential, and self-aware—metatheatrical—medium breaks into diverse components.

In the context of Freyer’s anti-illusionist oeuvre, we cannot understand metatheatre simply as a dramatic device of theatre-within-theatre or a play-within-the-play; nor is it simply the presentation of reality in a theatricalized form as in the metaphor of life as theatre (theatrum mundi). Rather, it is a mechanism, which more broadly denotes theatre analyzing its own language and forms. Freyer is not alone in this, of course. In late twentieth-century theatrical productions, which are closer to performance than to a drama construed as a traditional, dramatically structured play presented on a stage, we can observe the emergence of new kinds of metatheatricality. As Hans-Ties Lehmann notices,

In postdramatic theatre, the theatre situation is not simply added to the autonomous reality of the dramatic fiction to animate it. Rather, the theatre situation as such becomes a matrix within whose energy lines the elements of the scenic fictions inscribe themselves. Theatre is emphasized as a situation, not as a fiction.

In this encapsulation of metatheatre in postdramatic theatre, Lehmann points to something important about Freyer’s theatrical/operatic practice: the way in which his experiments with gestures and movement, the stage as the performance site, and the proscenium frame resituate the theatrical (and the operatic) event within a new performative practice.

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48 Lehmann, Postdramatic Theatre, 128.
Estrangement: Brecht, Shklovsky and Meyerhold

Indeed, the influence of Brecht is here important—the exposure of conventions, elements of stage design (curtains, backdrops, and lighting) and, to a degree, the emphasis on playfulness in Freyer’s scenography could be seen as Brechtian in an operatic context, as he deliberately draws attention to the production’s theatrical status. However, with the exception of two early set designs, none of Freyer’s scenography has anything remotely similar in visual terms to motifs in Brechtian design.  

Thus, I do not want to exaggerate the link between the two theatre artists, but rather to point to those of Brecht’s ideas that fertilize Freyer’s scenographic practice. If anything, Freyer seems to take Brechtian concepts to a different level in order to achieve aesthetically different results. Peter Simhandl claims that Brecht’s “‘ordinariness, his sense of the meaning and the weight of all things in the work of art,’ [and] his view that the set cannot be a ‘decoration or fixture,’ but rather must serve the idea” were, for Freyer, absolutely crucial. Freyer appears to adapt not only Brechtian ideas regarding scenography, but also the general notion of the epic theatre that “incessantly derives a lively and productive consciousness from the fact that it is theatre,” as Walter Benjamin described Brecht’s work.

49 Sean O’Casey’s The Moon Shines on Kylenamoe, directed by Adolf Dresen, 1965, and Brecht’s Der gute Mensch von Sezuan, directed by Benno Besson, 1970.

50 For a detailed discussion on Brecht’s influence see Michaela Brinkmeier, Die Bühnenwelt des Achim Freyer: Ansatz und Umfeld seines Theaters der Langsamkeit (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1997), 28-36.


Hence, the *Verfremdungseffekt*—the estrangement effect, a key concept in Brecht’s theatrical theory and practice—can be seen as a metatheatrical device since its intention is to expose the artistic status of the performance. The politics of the concept and of Brecht cannot be simply overlooked here. Brecht coined the term in his essay “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting” in 1936 and always employed it within his “Marxist rhetoric of the estrangement or distanciation of ideology.” For him, theatre is determined by politics and since it cannot escape politics, it must unambiguously reveal them and thereby neutralize the dominant ideology. Ostentatiously using his political agenda, Brecht was interested in the broader social role of the individual and his/her political consciousness. However, according to Elizabeth Wright, postmodernism’s overuse of the *Verfremdungseffekt* rendered it basically ineffective. It is therefore preferable to contextualize Freyer’s work instead with the Russian formalists, who much earlier considered estrangement as a key element in demystifying theatre. In particular, for Viktor Shklovsky, who coined the term *ostranenie*, the function of art was to draw attention to its own artistic devices by making strange the subject matter, consequently forcing it to be seen in a completely new light. As Silvija Jestrovic argues, *ostranenie* relates more to the technical and aesthetic aspects of estrangement and its emphasis on structure and system, devices and techniques rather than on its political and ideological


54 Wright asserts “In postmodernist art everything is subject to a V-effect and so the concept becomes redundant. A perennial V-effect is the result of the mismatch between signifier and signified, the uncanniness of the concrete, which itself resists the attempt to name and define it.” Elizabeth Wright, *Postmodern Brecht: A Re-Presentation* (London: Routledge, 1989), 96.

55 As a term and aesthetic principle *ostraniene* is more frequently associated with literature, avant-garde art and early cinema than with theater. On the issue of translation of the both terms see Douglas Robinson, *Estrangement and the Somatics of Literature: Tolstoy, Shklovsky, Brecht* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2008).
aspects as it did with Brecht’s Verfremdungseffekt.\textsuperscript{56} The pure essence of theatre (\textit{teatral’nost‘}) expressed in the formal qualities of the artwork, while downplaying content, was supposed to prevent the automatized perception that the spectators developed through habitualization. Both the Verfremdungseffekt in Brecht’s theatre and ostraniene in Meyerhold’s theatre aimed at anti-illusion in the theatre, which is, according to Inge Zappenfeld, the key feature of Freyer’s theatre, but Freyer uses a completely different aesthetics than Brecht, namely that of surrealism, symbolism and abstraction.\textsuperscript{57} In addition, Freyer’s use of improvisation, stylization, and non-traditional theater aligns him closer to Meyerhold and Shklovsky. With those drastically different aesthetics, Freyer’s scenography communicates to the spectator that s/he is in the theatre, instead of telling him that s/he is in Aulis or Bohemia.

\textbf{Stage as a special site}

To communicate to the spectators that they are in the theatre, Freyer pays attention to perhaps the least noticeable element of the stage: the floor, once again redefining its role. His use of the stage floor in his broader identification of the stage as a special site becomes the hallmark of his designs. The further he moves away from the painterly sets and the less architecturally concrete his theatrical space becomes, the more emphasis he puts on the treatment of stage floor: its color, texture, and shape. The staging area becomes a geometrical plane where the action unfolds. His attention to the stage


floor becomes a basic metatheatrical device that manifests itself as a visual emphasis on its own texture and shape. There are a number of specific ways in which this happens.

The most common way by which Freyer redefines the role of the stage floor is in the use of painted cloth, frequently painted just with lines. These can be either straight, denoting perspectival depth, as in Der Freischütz, circular as in Salzburg’s Zauberflöte, or labyrinthine, as in Siegfried. Second, in some productions he specifically delineates the acting area: the stage floor becomes a framed plane as in L’Orfeo, where white fluorescent tubes outline the rectangular shape of the stage floor, which is also slightly shifted so that the left corner hangs over the orchestra pit. Third, in terms of the space’s angle and volume, Freyer frequently rakes the floor at a severe angle. In Salome, one of his most architectonically sculpted sets, the raking makes the floor precariously steep for the singers to walk on, challenging their vocal abilities and forcing unfamiliar movements, which are then incorporated into the overall choreography. A dangerously upright floor suggests also an extreme closeness of the imaginary world. Fourth, he changes the size and the shape of the floor. For example, in Tristan und Isolde the stage floor is semi-circular, in Don Giovanni it is shaped like an oval, while in Ring it is circular. Finally, in some situations Freyer creates a stage-within-the-stage: he sets up an additional playing area on the main stage—as in Hamburg’s Zauberflöte—a point at which his visual design directly feeds into the creation of metatheatrical effects. In these simple but effective ways, the stage floor is not just a floor in Freyer’s theatre, but an acting area, a special

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58 Most often these lines are rather thick and Freyer deliberately leaves traces of the brush’s bristles and the trace of an erratic hand.

visually and semantically designated zone where the performance occurs. The operatic stage once again becomes a theatricalized space.

**Redefining the proscenium frame**

Among the fundamental elements of most opera theatres is the proscenium frame with the architectural space of the stage and beyond. Of course, for a certain conventionally mimetic or illusionist idea of theatre, this frame is both invisible—never referred to and with its fragile position at the border of real and illusory space never “broken.” But it is also categorically central, the absolute dividing line between theatrical representation and the audience, the group for whom the play is performed, but which is never directly acknowledged from within the play or performance. Additionally of course, in *scène à l’italienne*—the proscenium theatre—the frame goes beyond the symbolic and is also a physical, architectural fixture, most often in the form of the proscenium arch, the more or less elaborate portal that frames the scenic picture.⁶⁰

As with painting, so in the theatre is the frame or edge the marginal device, which is nonetheless constitutive. Arguably, the frame—proscenium or not—is fundamental. According to Freyer, behind the proscenium arch, on the other side of the viewer exist entirely different space and time. What happens in that specific spatio-temporal zone occurs according to the laws that do not obey the natural sciences. The spectator in return processes and moves mentally within the parameters of “his own time and space in which he finds himself, lost for those hours.”⁶¹ The proscenium frame becomes for Freyer a

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⁶⁰ Most traditional theatres contain this feature, since almost all of them in the western hemisphere, starting from the Teatro Farnese in Parma (1617) are built as a *scène à l’italienne*.

license for creative output that goes beyond constructing illusionistic worlds. As a result, by returning to the scène à l’italienne Freyer, has been engaged with reestablishing ontological theatricality in the opera.

Freyer does not simply take for granted the existing division between the stage and the auditorium, but each time manipulates it, either bringing it consciously to the fore, or abolishing the existing architectonic frame in order to re-frame it on his own terms. As Arnold Aronson asserts, “The frame gives the artist (the director) total control over both the image and the spectator, by keeping them within carefully delineated spaces on either side of the mediating window.”

Freyer’s tendency to reframe his productions can be seen as a painterly device of redefining the picture plane, but alternatively, it might be seen in a more Brechtian sense: instead of eliminating the frame as many avant-garde artists strived for, Freyer, like Brecht, foregrounds the proscenium frame, even though he does not redesign the arch. The foregrounding of the frame in Brecht’s theatre, as Aronson contends, “forc[es] the audience to be aware of the theatrical devices employed by the drama. In doing so, the audience could reframe, or resituate the content so as to respond actively.” Although typically metatheatre inspires and thrives on breaking the frame, in this case the re-establishing of the proscenium frame in multiple forms becomes a metareferential strategy that Freyer uses repeatedly to emphasize that the spectators are in the theatre.

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63 See Ackerman and Puchner, “Modernism and Antitheatricality,” in Against Theatre, 9.

As Aronson asserts, some postmodern and postdramatic uses of the frame can be seen as a backlash that serves a reconstitution of control on the part of the creative artist.65 For Freyer, like Wilson, the proscenium theatre is used to facilitate a highly controlled scenography, where each heterogeneous element becomes equally significant. But unlike Wilson, for whom the portal frame is visually unimportant in the overall design, in Freyer’s case the proscenium portal is a constitutive element of his scenography. Neumann argues that

[Freyer’s] theory of theatre presupposes a constitutive barrier between the stage and the auditorium, a barrier, which separates two different timescales. This dividing line is defined not only by the horizontal boundary, but also by the two verticals of the proscenium arch, which make it entirely two-dimensional.66 Freyer not only theoretically presumes the existence of this barrier between the real world of the spectator and the fictive world of the stage, he physically marks it out. In his works, the lines constituting the stage picture are never fixed features of the house. On the contrary, they seem to be always provisional, like a kind of suggestion. Just as the more diverse spatiality of Freyer’s productions is markedly different from Wilson’s more obvious controlled spaces, Freyer’s use of the proscenium frame is more complex and, at least on the surface, less controlling and more flexible and layered than Wilson’s. Paradoxically this interrogation of theatre architecture’s constitutive elements results in a) reinstating the horizontal line, b) redesigning the vertical division of the two spaces separating the audience and the singers/actors, or c) dissolving the controlled space of the stage (the beginning of the 1980s).

65 Ibid., 36. Italics mine.

The least elaborate of Freyer’s spatial gestures is his deliberate, highly visual emphasis of the edge of the stage (something also present in Wilson’s more recent work). As if to declare the border between the two worlds with greater force, he paints the bottom horizontal line of the proscenium in different colors: red, green, and white, as in *Messiah*. In addition, Freyer has incorporated specially designed proscenium frames. This stylistic gesture was the first of his gestures of spatial demarcation, initially present in almost all his productions. It then disappeared for some time, only to reappear somewhat recently. More specifically: in his earliest work in operatic set design, Freyer recreated proscenium portals and frames that were in keeping with the particular interpretation of the opera in production. However, the new proscenium arch was not just a simple decorative element. Rather, using it even then as a metatheatrical device, Freyer reframed the production visually in strict theatrical terms with the new proscenium arch.

In *Onegin*, he moved back the portal frame, leaving part of the stage resembling a raked thrust stage, with its apron protruding into the audience (still separated by the orchestra pit). Reinforced by the wings and borders a very simple white portal frame creates an impression of frames within frames, particularly appropriate for his reading of Tchaikovsky’s opera, interpreted through Marc Chagall’s painting and through the banal aesthetic of wedding photographs (see Fig. 4.14). The redesigned proscenium arch defines the production’s visual aesthetics, reaffirming the spatial divisions between the audience and the stage. By reframing the stage in such manner, Freyer calls attention to the ontological status of the stage as a stage, ultimately emphasizing the theatricality of the entire production.

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67 Cyclically, everyone is forced to pose for the wedding photo, thus Tatyana’s (un)happiness is constantly staged and questioned.
Nevertheless, for a short time around the beginning of his design-direction double duties in the early 1980s, Freyer comes close to the historical avant-garde practice of breaking the proscenium frame, an attempt at bridging and connecting—although only partially, in different constellations—the separate spaces of audience and performers. In his early operatic productions—*Der Freischütz* and Hamburg’s *Zauberflöte*—Freyer radically subverted the proscenium frame, extending the action or the presence of the props beyond typically assigned spaces of the stage. They are his most radical and avant-garde stagings, aiming at the “total Raum” (see Chapter Three). They can be seen as radical experiments with the theatrical spaces of opera houses, echoing developments in environmental scenography.
In Freischütz, he completely dismounted the proscenium arch (see Fig. 4.15). Instead, he used a large green canopy rolled-up above the stage, featuring a target with deer antlers, flanked by an angel with a trumpet and a cupid with bow and arrow, all painted, in keeping with the overall production’s naïve or primitive style. Moreover, the wings of the set stretch over both sides of the orchestra pit, with garlands of greenery and colorful bulbs sprawling onto the first balcony. Elsewhere in the opera house a variety of props are on display, in something akin to environmental and installation art: Agatha’s ghostly mannequin, a deer in white gown, and a platform with three strange chairs. This environmentalism (in a double sense) is continued in the realm of sound, or rather sound-space: when the house doors are first opened and again during the intermission, the house was filled with the sound of chirping birds and screeching owls.

Fig. 4.15. Freischütz. A view during intermission: dismounted proscenium arch. Photo private, 2009.
Hamburg's *Zauberflöte* continues these developments but in a more comprehensive way. Here even the action is transferred beyond the stage: to the foyer, auditorium and balconies. Before the performance begins, bizarre Freyerian animals roam around those normally public and non-theatrical spaces, moving amidst the audience, shortly prior to a symbolic staging of the mythological splitting of androgyny with the singers who will momentarily appear in the proper opera (see Fig. 4.16).\(^6\) The basic set

\(^6\) Freyer stages Tamino’s search of his other half as Zeus’ splitting of the androgyny—a primordial being combining female and male into one organism, a perfect unity equal to the gods—before the opera’s proper overture. The central place in the opera’s foyer occupies an expressively painted large-scale prospect (a wall-pictogram) with a celestial body and two ideograms of lightning, while in front of it stands a similarly painted tall wooden totem resembling a human figure. With accompany of drums an enormous hand with an ax splits the totem, from which emerges Tamino—an adolescent, half-man and half-child. Behind, an immobile Pamina stays in the shell. Freyer sees her name as an anagram of “amina” in Latin meaning “a living being,” which in Carl Jung’s analytical psychology signifies the soul, the unconscious part of the

**Fig. 4.16. Hamburg *Zauberflöte*. Splitting of androgyny in the opera foyer. Private photo, 2008.**
for this production of _Zauberflöte_ is a raked performance platform more typical of fairgrounds or improvisational companies like _commedia dell’arte_. To increase the proximity of action and singers to the audience, Freyer also takes advantage of the side doors, extending the already wide stage opening. The line between fiction and reality is blurred in the contents of the stage and in the radical architectonic of the staging. This fundamental move against the frame suggests that even if his theory is deeply rooted in maintaining the barrier between the stage and the auditorium, his practice is in a constant dialogue with the theatre’s spatiality.

**PART IV: Painter in the opera**

As framing and reframing developed into a key strategy in emphasizing metatheatricality, Freyer’s training and practice as a visual artist grew to be more apparent. When, shortly after the premiere of _Einstein on the Beach_, the German author and director Wolfgang Veit asked Freyer, “Professor Freyer you are a painter, director, stage designer. Which role do you feel takes the first place?” He answered frankly: “I am just a painter. This is how I started as a child, and all my thoughts on how space relates to time are based on a vision, on a visual process.” Of course, Freyer is a painter, but not just a painter, rather a multifaceted multimedial auteur with an acute sense of theatre’s spatiality. Seeing the text and music in visual terms is quite heightened in his work, but psyche in a male that manifest inner feminine personality. Thus, Tamino’s search for Pamina becomes a symbol for reclaiming true identity consisting of both feminine and masculine ingredients. Achim Freyer, “Durch die Brüche ins Innere sehen. Zur Hamburger Inszenierung der Zauberflöte. Ein Gespräch mit Achim Freyer.” in _Die Zauberflöte_. Programmheft zur Premiere _Die Zauberflöte_ am 20. Mai 1982 (Hamburg: Hamburgische Staatsoper, 1982), 68.

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that does not mean that he refrains from interpretation of the work. Freyer’s self-identification as a painter might help to contextualize the spatial conventions that he uses to define the spatiality in the opera house, while simultaneously emphasizing the metareferential aspects of his total work of art, a *Gesamtkunstwerk* as a multimedial and multimodal genre. The basic polarities that arise in his aesthetic—painterly and abstract, three-dimensional and flat—suggest coexistence of two strands of modernism in his scenography: on one hand, powerful and multisensory appeal to the audience; on the other, a more abstract and formal approach.

**Painterly scenography**

Perhaps unsurprisingly for a painter, the majority of Freyer’s scenography has a particularly strong painterly quality. In his sets, he has painted huge planes of walls, cycloramas, and prospects, which frequently look like large-scale canvas paintings, overtly revealing the trade in acutely palpable textures and visible broad brush-strokes. That explicit exposure of the painter’s trade announces its metareferentiality and also suggests the seemingly low-tech quality of the stage design. In particular in the opera, the stage design strives to acquire high-end status and, as typically used, *trompe l’oeil* painted scenery gestures towards a kind of transparency, a most convincingly conventionalized representation of a locale. Freyer’s painterly theatricality advocates the opposite. There is not much discrepancy between his drawings and finished sets, which often retain the quality of his sketches, vacillating between abstraction and figuration with an ample dose of surrealism and a penchant for the expressive use of color, texture and light.
With this quite distinctive quality, far from any straightforward representationalism, Freyer’s painterly scenography distinguishes itself from the majority of other opera designers and designer-directors. Moreover, unlike other painters who designed sets for theatre (e.g. Picasso, Dalí, Chagall, Bernard Buffet, and Victor Vasarély), Freyer was not bound by the limits of a highly personal and visibibly recognizable pictorial style. Of course, in Freyer’s scenography one can find the echoes of the brush movements or perhaps motifs or styles that are similar to those in some of his paintings; however, his paintings do not look like his set designs and vice versa. His scenographic style is not purely pictorial but a synthesis of various elements, with visuality, broadly understood, as the primary force.

Freyer’s treatment of theatrical space goes beyond the creation of a background painting for the performers that is typical of painters. While his style developed in its coherent deployment of consistent elements, it was increasingly a movement towards a complete and coherent creation of a stage space, emphatically not just a painting of a backdrop. He moved—to put it simply—from the last residues of set designer to become a scenographer. Like Tadeusz Kantor, Freyer was able to create for the stage an absolutely unique personal style, quite different from his painting; however, in developing his aesthetics he did take advantage of his training and vocation. Although he insists that within proscenium frame only surfaces exist not space, his scenographic visions are transferred onto a three-dimensional space of the stage without being

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70 Similarly important are these qualities in the stagings of Axel Mathey and Nigel Lowery. Another designer whose stylistic trajectory and aesthetics are somewhat similar is Wolfgang Gussmann, frequent collaborator of Willy Decker.

71 Perhaps the only exception from this is Freyer’s first Zauberflöte.
theatrically lifeless. He consciously denotes the status of space through unmistakable texture, presentational styles and spatial volume (even as a monochromatically painted surfaces).

In this context, it is worth looking more closely at the controversial Freischütz, which Freyer conceived as a “total[en] Raum,” an encompassing environmental setting surrounding and immersing the spectators. The main set consists of a three wall painting representing a landscape with mountains, which demarcate and distinctly narrow the theatrical space. In addition, two thin and two large side panels presenting a dark forest are placed on both sides of the orchestra pit; they are decorated with garlands and supported by wooden beams. The set almost looks like an open altar, which during the intermission was blocked by a backdrop with an almost identical image of the stage, but here executed on a single plane. Above, Freyer placed panels with sculpted dark pine trees, among which the ill-omened creatures reside: a spooky owl with eyes made of red bulbs and equally uncanny skeletons, openly parodying the supernatural aspects of this opera. To fully cover the original proscenium arch he suspended from the auditorium a greenish painted drop, on which he placed a hunter’s shooting target with deer antlers flanked by an angel blowing a trumpet and a cupid with a bow and an arrow.

It is important to emphasize that the painterliness of Freyer’s set for Freischütz is not representational. It is very much presentational, and in fact it makes present

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73 See section above on metatheatricality and the proscenium frame.

74 The opera was once described as “the most expressive rendering of the gruesome that is to be found in a musical score.” Gustav Kobbé, The New Kobbé’s Opera Book, eds. the Earl of Harewood and Antony Peattie (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1997), 958.
everything that Johann Friedrich Kind’s libretto calls for: high mountains, a waterfall, the German forest and the moon in Agathe’s room. He even included the religious underpinnings of Weber’s opera: painted centrally on the back wall “the Eye of God” overlooks the Earth, while the phantasmagoric world of the evil forest with the disturbing—three-dimensional and sinisterly elongated—red hands of Samiel, the Black Huntsman, hovers above. But, crucially, there is no attempt to give an illusion of a realistic world with depth. It is painted in a highly (faux-)naïve style—everything here is flat, two-dimensional and clearly demarcated, only the windows and doors with their precise woodwork resist the smooth surface, indicating the multiplicity of spaces.

This is perhaps best described as a composite setting, depicting both the indoors and outdoors, as did the original set for Jarry’s Ubu roi. The set—in particular its aforementioned visual style (painterly and faux-naïve to the point of kitsch) and its kinetic qualities—reframed the entire production within the mode of popular entertainment, undermining the sacrosanct attributes of Weber’s opera. Using a set painted in a presentational style, Freyer consciously heightened the theatricality of the performance. Furthermore, this was also a kinesthetic set. In particular, in the Wolfsschlucht scene, during the casting of the magic bullets, the set was not stable and fixed, but also enlivened. It trembled and moved: parts of it flew up, the trap doors were released, the windows and doors were shutting and opening, even entire walls tilted precariously. The set became—alongside the puppet-singers—another animated object

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75 Inspired by the baroque and nineteenth century Austrian-Bavarian votive painting, this style has often been described as fairy-tale painting. See Henderson, The Freischütz Phenomenon.

with its artificiality exposed. Like in Jarry’s *Ubu roi*, by exposing his set’s mechanical contrivances, Freyer makes the artificiality transparent. In other words, Freyer canceled terror with parody and blatant theatricality, underlining the artificiality of the entire performance. Space executed in this manner immediately reworked norms of realistic opera convention, emphasizing the medium’s artificiality and thus turning opera into a self-reflective medium.

Around 1988 Freyer moved away from fully painted sets, but he occasionally returns to them, although he never repeats the earlier visual style. Instead of painted settings, he uses simpler and more neutral spaces, in which the volume of the stage space is de-emphasized through the use of a cyclorama that can be painted in neutral and/or vivid colors, or of black walls, which create the sense of a dark void, an infinite space. The emphasis on colors shifts from the set to the lighting as the sets are becoming more neutral and less defined. The lighting scheme dramatically articulates the space with strong contrasting colors. Here as well as elsewhere in his oeuvre, his language of colors is clearly defined as a vast palette of hues and shades. It is pronounced and garish, symbolic and monochromatic, strongly informing the aesthetics of the production. To this preference for strongly saturated colors in the lighting design is added a general simplification of the sets and costumes. By 1999, initial painterly nuances and often monochromatic but visibly haptic textures are replaced by more clean and bold designs with almost kitschy colors that become daring visual statements.

77 Freyer did not stop creating sets that are entirely painted, but they seldom appear. Even those of his sets that are not entirely painted often contain significant painted elements, including costumes. Instead of a quasi-representational style in his designs, he used the atmospheric/abstract paintings; for example, in *Alceste* and *Tristan und Isolde*. He continues to retain the painterly quality in some sets to emphasize the monochromatic use of color and the visible painterly texture as in Moscow’s *Zauberflöte*. 
Abstracted space

In all the productions mentioned above, Freyer has been interested in shaping the three-dimensionality of the stage, attesting to Oskar Schlemmer’s famous words, “The art of the stage is a spatial art.”78 Ironically, he also produces flatness in an actual, physical space, as if denying the stage its spatiality. At the same time, as a painter, he responds to the modernist imperatives of form and of canon. In this context, he creates the abstract sets only for certain type of operas: contemporary and/or very rarely performed operas, and non-operatic works. In his “modernist” staging, the design functions like a flat surface of a modernist painting on which a painter has arranged points, lines and planes of various colors. These sets have a strong superficial resemblance to Wilson’s productions, in the use of “screens” of color, grid lines and basic geometrical figures.

Fig. 4.17. Messa da Requiem. Abstract space of wide black and white stripes. Photo © Monika Rittershaus.

Freyer approaches a modernist aesthetic space of pure geometry, investigating the phenomenon of the stage imagined as a plane juxtaposed on real space. The grid he often projects on the front scrim emphasizes the geometrics of that world, underlining the significance of formalist aesthetics in his visual repertoire. Aesthetically, it seems to be a predictable progression since the creation of perspective is bounded with the field of squares—the grid—with which an artist creates the image of depth on a flat surface. The abstract, truly modernist style is exemplified by productions such as *Einstein on the Beach* and *Messa da Requiem* (see Fig. 4.17). In these sets, Freyer composed an abstract scenic picture; by eschewing the third dimension of the space, he negated the very depth of the stage.

Although Freyer claims that he treats the theatrical space first and foremost as a two-dimensional surface, until *Einstein* he did not reject the third dimension of the stage. Having demarcated a surface with the proscenium frame, he arranges various elements upon it: “The screen is like the surface of a sheet of paper on which letters and symbols can create wondrous spaces within us.”

In those abstract designs, the constellations of Freyer’s aesthetics come closest to Wilson’s abstraction and formalism, although Freyer prefers quadrilaterals to the triangles favored by Wilson. For both artists, abstraction perhaps serves to counter a general cultural-sensory overload, heightening the senses in order to create a clearer background space for vision and hearing. Both are interested in abstraction as the means of creating images that stimulate the spectator’s internal imaging process. Freyer radically continues here with the contortion and re-figuration of abstract space, parallel to but quite different from Wilson’s.

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This relationship comes out clearly in Freyer’s staging of the Wilson/Glass opera

*Einstein on the Beach* (see Fig. 4.18). This is, so far, the only well-known non-Wilsonian production of this opera, made originally for the Oper Stuttgart in 1988, twelve years after the original production. Paradoxically, however, Freyer’s *Einstein* might be seen as a response not directly to Wilson’s original, but rather an anticipation of Wilson’s future abstract style as he was developing his signature use of theatrical space. This abstract and formal space, created with large planes of luminescent color, creates a similar effect to what in Wilson’s productions Arthur Holmberg called “deep surface.” Freyer complicates Wilson’s formalist aesthetics, using many Wilsonian spatial motifs and strategies such as planes of light and abstract and geometric elements, but he

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fundamentally reconfigures them, populating this space with *lowbrow grotesque* motifs. Freyer seems to be more interested in exposing the flatness of the space as in abstract painting. He favors intertextuality, as well as direct theatrical and art-historian associations and quotation. Here, it is worth mentioning again the influence of Oskar Schlemmer on Freyer. Wilson, too, could cite Schlemmer’s words as motto:

> We are primarily visually oriented beings and can therefore take pleasure in the purely optical; we can manipulate forms and discover mysterious and surprising effects in mechanical motion from concealed sources; we can convert and transfigure space through form, color, and light.”

Following Schlemmer’s suggestion, in *Einstein* Freyer emphasizes pleasure in the purely optical, more than Wilson had done previously. Freyer transforms the space of the opera with forms, colors and lights, the formalist ideal of optical purity, accentuating some of the same elements as Wilson but incorporating them into his “theater of decomposition.” “Zerlegung” is the word Freyer constantly uses in a text written to accompany the performance, which provides insight into his scenographic choices for his *Einstein*. He focuses on the figure of Einstein as a way of understanding the twentieth century and a process of progressive deconstruction of forms. In a multifaceted formal and temporal vision, Freyer suggests three broadly parallel processes—first, the “penetration into the miniscule microworlds” of ever smaller atomic particles. Second, he alludes to the “de-composition of the human figure” in processes of rationalization and new work practices, stressing the importance of 1920s aesthetics, especially Bauhaus. Finally, he outlines the “de-composition” of theater into its constituent elements of

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81 Schlemmer, “Theatre (Bühne),” 85, 88.
language, sound, noise, color, points, lines, surfaces, figures, space, movement, and time (see Fig. 4.19).  

For Freyer, there is no final language of simple forms, but a continuous process of decomposition. Although his grandiose view of the “history of forms” might seem in some way schematic and overblown, it does offer insight into the interplay of abstraction and the other visual elements in his production, as well as into the complex relationship of Freyer and Wilson’s aesthetics. For Freyer, the cool formalism of the signature spatial aesthetic, which Wilson started to work out in the early 1980s, is not an end in itself. Abstract space has a place within the production, but it is not the defining place of the production, as it would be for Wilson.

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Freyer’s use of abstract space in *Einstein* is a double one. First, he uses a black box theatre space that constitutes the ground for the eclectic, decomposed elements of the opera’s scenography. He separates that black and flat stage space from the audience with a scrim, on which he projects a grid. The central visual and symbolic form is the Table, the “Table of the Pioneers of the Twentieth Century” (see Fig. 4.20), a huge quadrilateral, almost an Isosceles trapezoid with very long side legs, seemingly precariously suspended on one of its top corners. The Table changes color—from white, to blue, red, yellow, and green—and also shape—it warps, expands, and shrinks, eventually becomes a triangle. This form can be seen as a miniaturized version of Wilson’s abstract space, removed from its role as the visual master element and instead placed within the stage; an element like any other.
In visual terms, the Table is a flat plane, illuminated with Freyer’s distinctive saturated lighting, but it is placed on a diagonal, slicing through the black void, adding a formal tension as the third dimension of the otherwise flat stage space. Onto this space, which abstraction is underscored by a projection of a grid, Freyer adds more motifs of abstraction—the projection of a clock and of mathematical numerals. However, the Table is not simply a visual figure (or more exactly, a visual figure that is also a visual background). It is also the Table of a *Tischgespräch* (table talk), a social stage, where Freyer re-imagines Wilson’s drama as a salon conversation. Freyer mocks here the contemporary rites and rituals that the television generations developed. Around this table are gathered grotesque figures: a man with a “head” of a pair of talking buttocks (Bakhtin’s symbolic inversion of the grotesque body with its privileging of the lower parts), a dismembered ear, a character with grossly over-sized head, and the elongated figures on stilts. These figures are actually composites of elements from paintings of Oskar Schlemmer, Paul Klee, Salvador Dalí, René Magritte, Chirico, Picasso, Giacometti and Henri Matisse.83 Their presence here, in another iteration of his favored dimensional play, introduces spatial dimensionality to the otherwise emphasized flatness. Act Two becomes an incarnation of Bauhaus theatre with its abstract, defragmented, deconstructed and dehumanized figures, while later in Act Three the entire stage becomes a flat space, on which is projected a spectrum of chromatic colors; a total dissolution of form and color into small particles.84 Hence, in Freyer’s *Einstein on the Beach*, we see, in a


84 In Act Two Freyer re-stages Oscar Schlemmer’s ballets *Formentanz (Form Dance, c. 1926)*, which presents a method of dismembering and fragmenting the dancer.
concentrated and vivid form, one central tension in his visual aesthetic: between abstract space and the grotesque with distorted or de-composed forms and bodies. Nevertheless, these two elements do not stand opposed. Unlike much of Wilson’s production, it is not that a language of theatricality overlays a pure space, but rather the two are intermingled and interconnected.

**Perspective and the cube**

There is a general consensus that most visual artists who are not trained in stage design, but who attempt to work in the theatre or the opera, fail to address the spatiality of these genres. As Aronson argues,

> Although there is a strong tradition in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries of fine and plastic artists designing for the stage… these artists have shown, for the most part, a surprising inability to transpose their radical ideas onto the three-dimensional space of the stage in a manner as innovative as their art. (…) It is an ironic testament to the overwhelming strength of the stage space that it can dominate and subjugate anything put upon it and create a more or less homogeneous look. The frontal relationship of spectator and performer in most presentations, the usual need for visibility and audibility, and the “reality” imparted by the presence of human beings in most stage productions exert a tremendous pressure on the shape and format of design, thereby limiting innovation.\(^{85}\)

This is not to say that Freyer succumbs to frontal spatiality. Most of his productions, however, are based in frontal spatiality, which he channels through the proscenium frame. But it is crucial to grasp that this frontalism is only one surface—and one dimension and one relationship—in a continually shifting, fully conceived three-dimensional theatrical space, highly populated with human figures and material objects. This complicates superficial judgments of the kind made by Neumann, who argues that Freyer’s creations are hermetically *contained* within that picture frame, allowing him to confront his

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\(^{85}\) Arnold Aronson, “Postmodern Design,” 15.
audience with his artistic visions, “a picture with which there is no possibility of physical contact.”\textsuperscript{86} Thus, I would agree that Freyer deals with the space first and foremost as a painter, but a painter with an acute sense of spatiality. The spatiality of the stage is the most daring aspect in any scenography. Although quite specific, Freyer’s productions are aesthetically diverse. Similarly varied are the ways in which he manages theatrical spatiality. Freyer does not only “produc[e] effects of spatial depth on the imaginary surface with the theatre’s proscenium arch as its frame,”\textsuperscript{87} but he also subverts the rationality of the space defined as a cube.

Again, however, Freyer must be understood—literally—in all his facets. While there are depthless moments to his scenographic work, depth plays a crucial, if different, role. Primarily, he inscribes the spatial depth using perspective. Here his translation of the Brechtian maxim “show that you are showing”\textsuperscript{88} into visual vocabulary may be quite strongly connected to the historical conjunction of scenography and opera, namely to the historical development of the \textit{scène à l’italienne} and the Cartesian perspective. Perspective in various forms and stages becomes the most effective device in developing his design, in his ironical use of scenographic conventions, as well as in pointing to the constructedness of the space in metatheatrical terms. Freyer’s perspectival renderings of the stage space manipulate the totalizing Renaissance imagination of space (or perhaps our totalizing imagination of Renaissance ideas of space): fully rationalized, logical, mathematically constructed, and unified. Although the Italian stage—and effectively

\textsuperscript{86} Neumann, “Achim Freyer,” 16.

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 16.

traditional Western visual scenography as well—was invented as a result of the discovery of perspective, for Freyer, a personalized version of perspective, distorted, is a tool, as Erwin Panofsky claims, for presenting one’s conception of the world and one’s sense of the world.\(^89\)

Certainly, Cartesian perspective is present in most of Freyer’s designs. Fully rendered or fragmented perspective is one of his most frequently and consciously used historical and visual quotations. The rules imposed by linear perspective denote the order of the material world, but he constantly plays with those rules by offering varied and multiple points of view; and thus, along with everything else, he emphasizes the visual constructedness of the worlds presented on stage. Sometimes the perspective is rendered in the form of the classic Renaissance “scopic regime,” with its grid of “lucid, linear, solid, fixed, planimetric, closed form,”\(^90\) as in Missa B-Minor and Moscow’s Zauberflöte. In other designs, celebrating the three-dimensionality of the stage, perspective becomes more like something emerging from a Baroque scopic regime with its “painterly, recessional, soft-focused, multiple, and open [form],”\(^91\) as in Freischütz and Schwetzinger’s Zauberflöte. Freyer frequently uses a deliberately foreshortened perspective for direct theatrical effect. For example, perspective sometimes visually underlines discrepancies between two different worlds, as when a severely foreshortened fictive space clashes with the real size of the actor/singer, an effect used for comic effect in Il barbiere di Seviglia and Freischütz. In a different vein, he created similar visual

\(^89\) Panofsky, Perspectives as Symbolic Form, 41.


\(^91\) Ibid.
structures to underline the angst of the opera’s characters, as in *Wozzeck* and in the Schwetzinger *Zauberflöte* (see Fig. 4.21).

![Mozart’s Die Zauberflöte at the Semper Oper in Dresden, directed and designed by Achim Freyer. Originally staged at the Schwetzinger Festspiele in 2002. A boldly foreshortened perspective is both a comic and an angst-inducing device. Photo © Matthias Creutziger, 2006.](image)

Freyer never uses the Cartesian perspective simply to announce the classical regime of visuality or his privileged position as a designer-director. On the contrary, he deploys it in order to subvert its essential objectivity and rationality. He almost never designs a space in correctly constructed perspective, and when he does—in particular his cubed spaces—he proceeds to destroy the illusion using actors and projections that distort and juxtapose other possible spaces. In other words, he might be read as using perspective to stage “the loss of any permanent or unconditional guarantees of mental unity and synthesis,” as Jonathan Crary identifies the collapse of the Cartesian world’s
rationalism in his book on nineteenth-century perception. A centering on the human being in a unified and homogenous world was replaced by an unfocused and unlimited world within a modern regime of visuality, as the implications echoed in the simultaneously occurring shift from a heliocentric to a geocentric, from a feudal to a modern world.

Fig. 4.22. Bach’s Mass B-minor at the Schwetzinger Festspiele in 1996, directed and designed by Achim Freyer. For a performative version of the Latin mass, Freyer combined perspectival order and cubic space populated by the members of his Ensemble. Photo © Monika Rittershaus.

This is manifested best in the cubed spaces that Freyer uses to suggest the existence of fixed spaces. He recurrently deploys a cubed space on stage—a simple basic cube, a geometric box with its stable, secured and finite dimensions visible to the audience. That space, however, remains predominantly empty. In theatre-historical terms, although it had been present and used in the theatre since the Renaissance, the

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92 Crary, Suspensions of Perception, 20.
rediscovery of cubed space is generally ascribed to Adolphe Appia. Reacting against two-dimensional realistic designs of the nineteenth century, Appia proposed a completely new scenographic solution, based on three-dimensional abstract space with simple but symbolically suggestive forms, a space filled with light that gave the cubic space a desired plasticity. Unlike Appia, Freyer prefers his cubic spaces empty, and more emphatically geometrized: he emphasizes the three-dimensionality of the space through the perspectival lines, as in Macbeth or the Moscow Zauberflöte, or by the planar projections, as in Missa B-Minor (see Fig. 4.22). These cubed sets are enclosed spaces—often even enclosed on top by a scrim—which visibly entrap the characters. Thus, though perhaps not quite in the overarching sense meant by Panofsky’s reference to perspective, the cube is for Freyer a symbolic form.

Fig. 4.23. Sciarrino’s Macbeth: Three Nameless Acts after Shakespeare at the Schwetzinger Festspiele in 2002, directed and sets by Achim Freyer, costumes by Amanda Freyer. Perspective here becomes a tool of feudal power. The cube – a microcosm of absolutist space. Photo © Monika Rittershaus.
As cubed space continues to suggest unchanging and homogenous spatiality, for Freyer linear perspective becomes a tool to present a conception of modern visuality. Paradoxically, in using Cartesian perspective Freyer demonstrates that the vision is faulty, unreliable and arbitrary.93 This epistemological uncertainty is the best exemplified in his production of Macbeth: Three Nameless Acts (after Shakespeare).94 Here he directly engages with the tradition of perspective and a unitary point of observation. From the audience’s point of view, perspective—in particular the direct focal point—suggests and affirms man’s central position in the world, giving in return a desired coherence in a geocentric world. However, Freyer’s changing configurations affirm that—along the lines of Crary’s argument—“vision, or any of the other senses, could no longer claim an essential objectivity or certainty.”95 The cube is in a state of perpetual transformation, as is Macbeth’s spiritually and geographically de-centered world with its displaced characters.

Sciarrino’s libretto is a distillation of Shakespeare's Macbeth, resulting in the end in a fragmented text and music that “concentrat[e] on the eternal cycle in which evil begets evil through power-lust.”96 For the composer, as one German critic emphasizes, “Macbeth is only an element in the long chain that is forged in the heat of the power. This murderer did not invent the terror, but rather the reverse. He is incorporated from the

93 For more on models of visuality see Crary’s unparalleled work Suspensions of Perception.

94 Seen during Lincoln Festival 2003.

95 Crary, 12.

beginning into the murdering."

The unreal proceedings onstage are not only mirrored in the eerie music and vocal performance, but also in the detail of the stage design. Continuing his engagement with the visual traditions of perspective, Freyer seems to imply that perspective can be seen as a tool of feudal power, and the cube as a microcosm of an absolutist space; a perfect visualization of Macbeth’s problematic.

Fig. 4.24. Hans Vredeman de Vries’ perspective drawing of a courtyard in his treatise on perspective. In Hans Vredeman de Vries, Perspective (New York: Dover Publications, 1968), 39.

Macbeth’s set is geometrically defined as an ideal space. Its “cubic” spatial form directly reworks the perspective drawing of a courtyard by the Dutch Renaissance architect Hans Vredeman de Vries (1527-1604), whose initial sketch played with the clearly defined and enclosed space with multiple vanishing points (see Fig. 4.24). In this

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drawing, the rules of perspective were applied in a particular way: the “vanishing point has nothing to do with eye level, but depends only on the position of the viewer below or above, and the direction in which he is looking.” Freyer’s version of Vredeman de Vries’ image in a sense parodies the supposed objectivity and certainty of the Renaissance visual regime.

With a series of spectacular projections and back-paintings, Freyer reduces Vredeman de Vries’ fine drawing to its main components: lines and arches that first are projected on the scrim of the show curtain and later rendered in three-dimensional space, a black box. The white chalk lines, while serving as parts of a geometric model, retain a hand-drawn and expressive quality: not perfect, deliberately uneven, in places stronger, in others lighter. This calls attention to the constructedness of the space, adding a discreet materiality that works to counteract its abstraction, reducing its cool aspects of geometrical perfectness. The juxtaposition and combination of projected lines with those actually drawn out on the surface create the uncanny effects of ghostly transparency of the singers. In addition, whenever necessary, Freyer narrows the physical space with projections.

The abstractions necessary to create the “realistic” space of perspectively oriented theatrical design are here performed as a kind of virtuoso parody. Freyer doubly complicates the relation of horizontal and vertical spaces. He does this first by setting some of the arches at 90 degrees to their expected position. Then—in a stunning

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99 A tension and interplay between abstract space and the grotesque is retained mainly in the props such as gigantic white sword of Macbeth or a three-blade dagger, as well as in the make-up and the quasi-Baroque rusted gold color costumes (designed by Amanda Freyer). The white makeup of the main characters is juxtaposed with the black makeup of the chorus.
theatrical move—he uses wires and winches to have his singers perform horizontally, either emerging on the vertical wall or from under the floor. They conform to some of the local lines and arches, while visibly defying the logic of gravity and the “up” and “down” of a unitary observer. For example, the witches appear upside-down in the arched windows placed in the wall traditionally called the ceiling, indicated by their hair (or rather head pieces: common laws of gravity would have made their hair hang down vertically, while the their “hair” hangs horizontally), but Macbeth and Banquo are placed horizontally at the top of the side wall (see Fig. 4.25).

Fig. 4.25. Sciarrino’s Macbeth. A stunning theatrical move—Freyer uses wires and winches to have his singers perform horizontally. Photo © Monika Rittershaus.

This twisting of three-dimensional space gave the production its nightmarish and surreal effect. The stylized costumes and makeup—designed by Amanda Freyer—support a reading of the *mise-en-scène* as a depiction of the internal psychic turmoil of Macbeth, or Lady Macbeth, or both, but not of an external reality. Here again, a
comparison between “scopic regimes” may seem simplistic and yet it remains illustrative: although Freyer uses Renaissance perspective with its lucidly linear grid, the effects he actually achieves by his re-formation of this form can be seen as closer to the baroque, presenting a *folie-de-voir* of endless refolding of the visual fields with the cube as a dynamic space.

**Conclusion**

Seen in hindsight, the centrality of Freyer’s scenography can be read as a harbinger of a new phenomenon in theatre, and eventually as well in opera, whereby the position of the designer grows in relative significance *vis-à-vis* the director, with some—like those examined in this dissertation—taking on both roles. Combining design with direction remains a comparatively unusual double-function in both theatre and opera, but in Freyer’s case it was arguably a necessity because of the radicalism of his visual and performative concepts, and consequently their practical inseparability.100 This fused “authorial” position allowed the particularly close combination of the aesthetic, interpretative and dramaturgical aspects, perhaps even enabling a stronger transgression of operatic conventions.

For Hans-Thies Lehmann, the author of the seminal *Postdramatic Theatre*, Freyer is an example of a postdramatic director who deconstructs the text through theatrical means; he de-emphasizes the action while promoting “the peculiar temporality and spatiality of the scenic process itself.”101 Lehmann’s distinction is perhaps the most important in pinpointing the priorities in Freyer’s practice although naturally


deconstruction in opera does not mean the deconstruction of the score and libretto *per se*, as in the theatre, but rather can be found within non-textual aspects of the performance. Freyer does not often use historical references; however, he treats contemporary culture as a repository of images which he can transform into aesthetically subversive designs, disruptive and displeasing through the deformed body, distorted makeup, scatological gestures, obscene movements, etc. This is far from traditionally understood operatic beauty or the sometimes-bland visuality of the formalist aestheticism of Wilson and Herrmann. On the contrary, Freyer favors aesthetically unattractive images, often repulsive if not actually offensive, in the creation of his iconoclastic operatic performances.

It should be emphasized, however, that this visuality does not mean that Freyer’s productions pay no attention to narration, interpretation or, put in general terms, the text. Rather, the visual upheavals form part of a recognizable challenge to opera audiences. In his distinctly subjective interpretations of canonical works—such as *Salome* and *Eugene Onegin*—Freyer refuses to provide the audience with the simplistic story-telling that connects the events onstage, but forces it instead to struggle with finding new meanings of the once familiar opera. However, unlike Wilson, who refuses to endow any text with a definite interpretation and deliberately directs his singers to act against the emotional aspect of music, Freyer is interested in presenting his personal interpretations of the libretti. Each of his productions is accompanied by an explanatory note (written in the more or less poetic form of an artistic manifesto) or interview in which he explains his visions as well as directorial and scenographic choices. These interpretations—in contrast to Wilson’s—are often engaged in political and social critique, as well as being grounded
In contemporary visual culture. In his stagings we can find—not directly quoted but stylistically transformed by his aesthetics—such iconic images as Marilyn Monroe, Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*, the Smurfs, clowns, Lindt’s Gold Bunny, as well as references to the Columbine school shooting. Like David Alden, Richard Jones and Nigel Lowery, Freyer uses images from high culture, which through widespread dissemination achieved iconic status, and icons of popular culture to undermine the dominant, hegemonic culture. In the age of mass consumption, he turns the popular culture into a subversive component that undermines the elitism of opera while simultaneously mixing the sacred space of the theatre with the profane sphere of the spectators’ reality. Employing such images becomes a viable strategy for a medium that seeks to reinvent itself and helps to attract a new, younger audience. That is not to say that his readings of operas are removed from the musical scores, but he endows his stagings with a subjective and visual vocabulary that has a source in our contemporary universe. As a result, the final product is rather heterogeneous, as Peter Simhandl tried to capture in his description of Freyer’s aesthetic diversity:

> [His] works combine perspicacity and childlike naivety, simplicity and extreme opulence, formal rigor and rampant imagination. Freyer’s theater refuses ostensible “messages,” aims to facilitate existential encounter with the viewer himself. This produces the opposition, with which his stage works often met, but also their power to permanently bake into the memory. His productions do not interpret their originals, but search to make experiential their inner imagery.

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102 Critics and the audience, who primarily react to Freyer’s childish naïveté, his seeming external simplicity, and rampant iconography of the puppet theatre, often overlook Freyer’s acuteness of thought.

103 One of the examples of the direct engagement with the score is *Yevgeny Onegin* at the Staatsoper UDL in Berlin (2008), where the entire black-and-white color scheme responds to Tchaikovsky’s melancholy underlying that opera. See Gerd Rienäcker, “La Melancholia – Einkreisungen, Umkreisungen des lyrischen Dramas Eugen Onegin,” in *Eugen Onegin: Lyrische Szenen in drei Aufzügen nach Alexander Puschkin*, ed. Staatsoper Unter den Linden (Berlin: Staatsoper Unter den Linden, 2008), 29-35.

In his operatic productions, Freyer explores theatre’s language through usually non-dramatic means, challenging traditional operatic conventions, entrenched by the canonized conventional style that dominates in opera houses. He treats the stage and everything that constitutes it as an object of a double status. Freyer’s painterly style and his playing with perspective, his architectonic of space and the interaction of this spatial structure with the set design emphasize theatricality, reframing the theatrical situation in metatheatrical terms. With elements from highly conventional forms of popular theatre and the grotesque, Freyer reworks conventions in opera, while emphasizing the importance of visuality in our culture.

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Theater verweigert sich vordergründigen »Botschaften«, zielt auf die existentielle Begegnung des Zuschauers mit sich selbst. Daraus resultiert die Opposition, die seinen Bühnenwerken oft entgegengebracht wird, aber auch deren Kraft, sich dauerhaft in das Gedächtnis einzubrennen. Seine Inszenierungen interpretieren ihre Vorlagen nicht, sondern suchen deren innere Bildwelt erfahrbar zu machen.”
CONCLUSION

“Everyone’s influenced by Robert Wilson, just like everyone’s influenced by Walt Disney.”
John Moran

Four decades removed, the summer of 1976 stands out as a pivotal moment in the history of contemporary operatic staging. Just a few days and only 523 miles apart, two eminent European summer festivals staged two landmark productions. These productions, although rarely linked, should be considered together in order to understand recent transformations in the staging of the opera and in operatic visuality. The two productions were Patrice Chéreau’s staging of the centennial Der Ring des Nibelungen in Bayreuth and the world premiere of Robert Wilson and Philip Glass’s Einstein on the Beach in Avignon. Although drastically different in scope and approach, these two productions mark a genealogical break in opera’s visual culture. Despite its realistic tendencies, the scenography of the Chéreau/Peduzzi Ring offered a powerfully complex, multi-layered concept, in which a demanding intertextuality was meant to enhance the audience’s understanding of the richness of the Wagnerian music drama. Conversely, Einstein was more visually radical. It can be seen to mark the emergence—not as a germinating point of origin but as a coalescent point of retrospective understanding—of a new aesthetic in opera scenography. While the significance of Chéreau’s Ring on the operatic staging was grasped almost immediately, the new visuality initiated by Einstein has been less


2 Chéreau was in fact not Wolfgang Wagner’s first choice; Peter Brook and Peter Stein turned down the offer and Wolfgang consented to Pierre Boulez’ recommendation.
comprehensively studied and understood. And yet *Einstein* prefigured a sea change in the
visuality of opera that gradually took over the opera houses two decades later following
its premiere.

In broad terms, this dissertation has attempted to examine this epochal shift in
visuality on operatic stages, carefully reconstructing the aesthetics of three key designer-
directors. More specifically, I have investigated the emergence and development of a
particular scenographic style, a set of scenic elements and gestures which, while always
in complex relation to opera as a whole and never displacing other approaches, has
become central to the visual appearance and spectacular impact of opera in the late
twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Echoing Arnold Aronson—and endorsing an
earlier mid-twentieth century coalescence of an international architectural style—I have
generally termed this the “new international style.”

It is impossible to define and analyze this style without considering the figure of
Robert Wilson. As director and designer, both in his influential theatrical work and in his
increasingly prolific operatic scenography, Wilson deploys a visual sharpness and clarity,
simple geometric forms, and de-naturalized lighting that suffuses the stage in saturated
colors. These elements are enhanced by fashionable and/or theatrically stylized costumes
that sculpt the body of the performer, both restricting and informing the carefully
choreographed movements and gestures. As I have shown, in some respects Wilson’s
undermining of conventional operatic staging practice recalls the revolutionary theatrical
reforms at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Wilson’s operatic
scenography continues the tradition of modernist abstraction, stylization, simplicity and
visual minimalism that can be traced to Appia and Craig, as well as to Wieland Wagner’s scenography for the New Bayreuth.

Fig. 5.1. Glass/Wilson’s *Einstein on the Beach*, directed and designed by Robert Wilson, originally premiered at the Festival d’Avignon, France in 1976. Wilson’s *coup de théâtre* for the penultimate scene of the opera: a single bar of light is lifted off the floor at a glacial pace until it disappears into the void. Photo © Lucie Jansch, 2012.

It is not enough to think of Wilson as a scenic minimalist or the maker of shimmering surfaces. The black void with a slowly moving beam of light in *Einstein* has become Wilson’s visual hallmark (see Fig. 5.1), representing an aesthetic of perfection combined with self-referential images. Nevertheless, as I have demonstrated, this summation does not fully capture the aesthetic scope of Wilson’s highly idiosyncratic experiment in opera staging. Wilson does not simply reform conventional historicism as a scenographic paradigm; he goes beyond that denunciation to interrogate operatic conventions and forms, exposing and problematizing the tensions inherent to the medium itself.
Fig. 5.2. Verdi’s *Macbeth* at La Scala in Milan in 1997, directed by Graham Vick, designed by Maria Björnson. The abstract geometry of design and colors was supplemented by stylized and fashionable costumes. © Teatro alla Scala.

Fig. 5.3. Strauss’ *Elektra* at the Bayerische Staatsoper in Munich in 1997, directed and designed by Herbert Wernicke. Screen capture.
The specific aesthetic traits discernable in Wilson’s work can be seen across the map of contemporary scenographic design, appearing in heterogeneous variations and hybridizations, yet palpably part of the same development. Many examples could be given in which designers and designer-directors use various modes of abstraction, singers thoroughly integrated into the mise-en-scène, swathes and fields of striking color, de-naturalized lighting, and fashionably stylized costumes as key visual elements. Maria Björnson’s design for Verdi’s *Macbeth* (dir. Graham Vick) at La Scala in 1997 juxtaposes strong colors with the pure form of a hollow cube (see Fig. 5.2).\(^3\) Herbert Wernicke’s production of Strauss’ *Elektra* at the Bayerische Staatsoper, also staged in 1997, contains an extraordinary geometry of red and black (see Fig. 5.3). More recently,

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\(^3\) See Björnson’s profile and the photographs from this production in Tony Davis, *Stage Design* (Crans-Près-Céligny: RotoVision, 2001), 90-101; and Mike Clark, “Milanese Macbeth,” *TCI* 32, no. 7 (July 1998): 10-11.
Humperdinck’s 2013 production of *Hänsel und Gretel*, directed and designed by Reinhard von der Thannen at the Komische Oper in Berlin, deploys cool beauty and utilizes the singers’ bodies and costumes as design elements in a way that might be classified as palpably Wilsonian (see Fig. 5.4).

The ubiquity of Wilsonian aesthetics has particular nodes of concentration, which allow us to look more closely at the new international scenographic style. Alongside Wilson, this dissertation has focused above all on two other designer-directors—Achim Freyer and Karl-Ernst Herrmann. For a number of key reasons, their bodies of work offer particularly fertile ground for tracing developments in contemporary scenography. First, their work has a complex relationship with Wilson and the new international style. Second, seen as a whole their work is rich and reflexive enough to investigate opera as a medium. Finally, Herrmann’s and Freyer’s long careers allow us to fully investigate the emergence of the new aesthetic paradigm and the global scale of the contemporary opera business which sustains and nourishes it.

The transformational role of these three designer-directors also includes canon reformation. Since the 1980s, Wilson, Freyer and Herrmann have been at the forefront of the revival or introduction of works that were largely unknown or unfamiliar to opera audiences, neglected or even stigmatized by scholarship, and sometimes pronounced unstageable by previous generations of designers and directors. In addition, they have been instrumental in staging the works of contemporary composers such as Philip Glass, Luigi Nono, Louis Andriessen, Dieter Schnebel, Salvatore Sciarrino, Luca Francesconi, Helmut Lachenmann, Unsuk Chin, and Benoît Mernier. Wilson and Freyer have also staged non-scenic musical works—J.S. Bach’s *Missa in B Minor* and *St. John’s Passion*,


as well as Verdi’s *Messa da Requiem*—endowing these works with a strong visual interpretation.

In addition to retrieving elements from opera’s past and encouraging the continued development of the medium’s particularly narrow and entrenched canon, these designer-directors have performed a crucial role in the new global infrastructure of opera. Although they have been beneficiaries of the change, they have also been its instigators. In this respect, Wilson’s ubiquitous presence and constant mobility is particularly significant. While not the only director (or designer-director) to become an international star, Wilson’s career trajectory is remarkable for two reasons. First, Wilson has inhabited opera as a *global* cultural field, blazing a trail for new kinds of operatic co-productions and business models. Key examples of this are his first transatlantic coproduction of *Parsifal* in 1991/92 and his *Madama Butterfly*, produced on stages in the US, France, Italy, Russia, and Japan. Second, Wilson has largely defined the new international style, which is now the characteristic visual idiom of modern opera scenography, uniting aesthetically what is an increasingly integrated cultural business.

Like Wilson, Achim Freyer and Karl-Ernst Herrmann have helped shape opera’s increasingly globalized aesthetics. Freyer first emerged as a German director-designer (both East and West: the pupil of Brecht, a defector to the FRG). He gained wider European fame after his 1997 triumph at Salzburg with an esoteric and clownish *Zauberflöte*. During the last fifteen years, he has become a global director in a comparable way to Wilson in the formal traits of his visual idiom and in the opera infrastructure he inhabits. Herrmann—or the Herrmann duo—shows a comparable trajectory in moving to a transcontinental scale: he emerged from a pan-European world
of well-funded public theatre and opera and their 1986 production of *La finta giardiniera* was invited to the BAM Festival in New York in 1990. Beginning in Brussels, Herrmann’s scenography of *cool beauty* developed primarily and initially all through the Salzburger Festspiele, Austria, and then has been staged throughout Europe, emphasizing the international character of his work.

In the specific context of opera, Wilson, Herrmann and Freyer shaped contemporary visual presentation as it turned away from decorative realisms and conventionalized historicism and toward a new visual paradigm. Considered in terms of broader theatre history, they could be understood as extending the “theatre of images” to opera. Their work on operatic stages forms part of the broad development—among the most important in the history of modern theatre—of theatrical sensibilities and styles which emphasize the visual and the corporeal, approaches that decenter and complicate the traditionally dominant place of text and narrative.

Wilson, Herrmann and Freyer’s status as *designer-directors* has been crucial in crossing between theatre and opera. This role was not a new one in operatic scenography: as a figure the designer-director has a complex genealogy, as yet inadequately described in the scholarship. In fact, the historicism and “realism” of twentieth century opera staging was in part also the product of designer-directors. But where Zeffirelli, Samaritani, Sanjust, and even Ponnelle looked to create picturesque settings which delighted the spectators, the scenography of the new generation—including Wilson, Freyer and Herrmann—has used the capacities of the designer-director to challenge the audiences’ perceptual habits and staging conventions on multiple levels.
While examining a broad historical shift—whereby an opera of historical representation and verisimilitude is displaced by the opera of images and abstraction—I have tried, in closer analyses of individual productions and oeuvres, to draw distinctions and note differences between the three directors as well as to traits common of their work. In aesthetic terms, Wilson and Herrmann share an aesthetic of smoothness and a kind of applied abstraction, tending toward a cool beauty, which can shade into a kind of modern aestheticism, a sheen of wealth and good design that appeals all too easily to opera’s wealthy spectatorship. Much of Freyer’s work, however, is less easily assimilated into this aesthetic of perfection. With his emphasis on the grotesque and the lowbrow, he is better positioned to subvert the reassuring elitist aura of opera, as I have established in my reconstruction and analysis of his Freischütz (1980), Salome (2003), and Eugene Onegin (2008). Nevertheless, Freyer’s oeuvre’s is also indebted to the new international style; indeed, it forms part of it. As a designer-director, Freyer comes closer to Wilson and Herrmann in the whole production aesthetic of works like La traviata (2007), but also, more occasionally, in specific design elements, as in the saturated and artificial lighting design for Onegin (2008; see Fig. 5.5).

As I have presented, specific constellations and deployments of space and light are crucial for understanding the individual aesthetics of these designer-directors, as well as their relation to each other. While Wilson famously favors flat spaces, Freyer moves freely between flat and cubic spaces. Unlike Herrmann, both Wilson and Freyer retain more traditional relations with the frame: both use the proscenium, on the whole, to create self-contained worlds. Wilson rarely does away with the proscenium entirely, and even Freyer tends to revise the frame in myriad creative ways in order to reaffirm its
existence. By contrast, Herrmann frequently engages with the frame, working towards its annihilation, literally or figuratively, in this sense continuing the dismantling of traditional theatrical space undertaken by the neo avant-garde of the 1960s.

![Figure 5.5. Tchaikovsky’s *Eugene Onegin* at the Staatsoper Unten den Linden in Berlin, 2008, directed, sets and lighting by Achim Freyer, costumes by Lena Lukjanova and Amanda Freyer. Clownish grotesque meets cool beauty. Photo © Monika Rittershaus.](image)

Of the three directors, Herrmann is the most visually and interpretatively diverse, which makes his style the most difficult to summarize. This variety also means, in practice, that he can serve as an indicator of scenographic approaches. There is something satisfying, from the point of view of scenographic historiography, about the way Herrmann’s styles evolve over the decades. They move from perspectival representations, featuring interiors, painterly prospects and realistic details, to an increasingly abstracted space, with his progress towards an aesthetic of *cool beauty* eventually making him a key representative of the new international style. Herrmann’s tendency to revisit productions
makes this trajectory even more revealing. As he revises his stagings, his scenography is particularly receptive to changes within current visual culture.

The historical movement of opera scenography operates on different levels of “the visual.” In a way, the shift in contemporary operatic spectacle is at its most striking in its superficiality, in its often breathtaking surface appearance: the shocking *emptiness* of the contemporary operatic stage, the great fields of color interjected with angular strips, the marked or unmarked spaces which are inhabited, in a visually compelling way, by moving bodies in color-coded costumes and integrated scenic elements. But the new visuality can also be traced in more subtle ways, above all in the use of images, metaphors, and symbols that are not necessarily embedded in the text. Wilson, Herrmann and Freyer have created striking individual images within their productions. That aesthetic, rich in contrasts, discloses a penchant for the surrealistic founded on simple and clear scenic solutions, augmented with significant, but unusual props that have symbolic meanings.⁴ These meanings are not absolute, fixed, or bequeathed. On the contrary, they have to be determined by the spectators. The detachment of these images from the “original” work is echoed, on the scale of the overall production, in the creation of a visual spectacle, which no longer pays tribute to a notional historicist referentiality.

This dissertation has focused on an epoch of change, but as I have emphasized throughout, this is also a story of re-visiting many of the questions of modernism and the avant-garde, now re-posed and re-contextualized in the fluid conditions of contemporary opera. The emergence of a new international style might perhaps be seen as a

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⁴ Although surrealism introduces another type of aesthetics and could possibly muddle the understanding of that visual style, the way they created fantastic imagery and incongruous juxtapositions in their stagings would permit use of this adjective. However, surrealism alone does not explain fully this aesthetics. As with many postmodern artists, we can determine the aesthetics through its composite elements.
continuation of an anti-referential and anti-pictorial lineage. This move towards anti-pictorialism, which goes along with a tendency towards symbol and abstraction, has, as I have outlined, its own coherent tradition in operatic scenography. This propensity—as Appia, Dülberg and Wieland Wagner could attest—has often been unpopular among critics, audiences and performers. For performers, the problems have been practical.\(^5\) Traditionally-minded audiences, unaware of the reasons for new styles of scenography, have often seen the changes as restricting rather than expanding opera’s possibilities, or simply as an affront to well-loved styles. For audiences, displacing or ignoring the libretto’s geography can be distracting, frustrating or worse.

But the opposition may perhaps have a basis beyond an outraged attachment to convention or a frustrated confusion about the *mise-en-scène*. The high aestheticism redefines the metaphysical context of opera (abstraction, color fields and volumetric space can suggest infinity, timelessness and universalism) restricting and—for some in the audience—even negating the emotionality of the piece and music. Rather than visually locating affect and pleasure within the horizon of a reassuring referentiality, the designer-directors whose work I have reconstructed and analyzed in this dissertation prefer suggestion, allusion, and indeterminacy, creating a new visual situation for operatic music. This habitat for the music demands a reorientation of spectatorial attention. The austere spaces, rigorously articulated and defined with light, tend to reach towards symbolic use of figures and shapes that the spectator has to interpret in order to construe a meaning or even to orient his or her listening. However, abstraction—

\(^5\) For performers, the challenge is performatively problematic for at least two basic reasons: on one hand, empty space is vocally and acoustically challenging; on the other, it creates problems with blocking since singers often feel lost on the empty stage and thus prefer traditional stage design.
especially pure or geometrical—is often considered as cold, sterile, emotionless, dehumanized.\footnote{This critique was applied over and over again in scenographic history: towards Meyerhold and Schlemmer, but also to Dülberg, Wieland Wagner, Wilson, and Herrmann.}

Scenographic tactics that combine abstraction with symbolism continue to re-emerge and be praised in the most important forums of scenographic experimentation and judgment. Highly indicative of this tendency are the Prague Quadrennials: in the last decade, juries in Prague have repeatedly given awards to productions which emphasize the hybridization of symbolic or imagistic content with the key elements of the new international style. For example, at the PQ ’03 Richard Hudson’s \textit{Tamerlano} was awarded the Gold Medal for Best Set Design, recognizing the particular combination of
simple, minimalistic and monumental aesthetics. But looking closely at Hudson’s work, we can see that his monumentally devised space, suggestive of classical architecture, is in fact dominated by a symbolic sculpture: a sphere with a foot on top of it (see Fig. 5.6). Within this white space, color plays a significant role: the sphere’s other side is inlaid with gold, and the elephants are rendered in ultramarine.

Fig. 5.7. Borodin’s Prince Igor at the Metropolitan Opera, 2014, directed and sets by Dmitri Tcherniakov, costume by Elena Zaitseva, choreography by Itzik Gallili, projections by S. Katy Tucker. Ildar Abdrazakov in the title role during the Polovtsian dance scene. With this boldly designed poppy field Tcherniakov eliminated the exotic and folkloric references typical for this opera. Courtesy of Metropolitan Opera Archives. Photo © Cory Weaver.

7 Tamerlano was directed by Graham Vick and designed by Richard Hudson. First created for the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, annual music festival in Florence, in 2001. Also staged and recorded at Teatro Real, Madrid (2008) and at the Royal Opera House, London (2010).


9 Similarly, the operatic scenography of Boris Kudlička—which received recognition of his peers at the PQ ’07—is premised on the same tenets.
It is instructive, given the dominance of versions of the new international style at the PQ—in other words, at one key locus of aesthetic taste-making in scenography—to see how the same developments filter through to mainstream productions and the dominant institutions of the operatic world. One key example of this could be seen in 2014 at the Metropolitan Opera, where Dmitri Tcheniakov achieved a similar effect in his production of Borodin’s *Prince Igor*, using representational and symbolic elements as well as abstracted space. For the Polovtsian scene (Act II), Tcheniakov designed a special set—a poppy field—consisting of a bright blue cyclorama, a raked semi-circular stage covered with larger-than-life poppies (see Fig 5.7). The deeply saturated and strongly contrasted colors, along with the dancers dressed in light brown costumes, construct an ideal dreamscape—seductive and unreal—that the injured Igor projects.10 In a production like Tcheniakov’s, the new international style—whose point of emergence might be seen to be the 1976 production of *Einstein on the Beach* also staged at the Met—might be seen to have come full circle. It indicates a new dialectic of abstraction and referentiality that develops a refined new referentiality adequate to contemporary visual culture, displacing the old historicism for—so to speak—the children and grandchildren of those who booed its genealogical predecessor.

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ABBREVIATIONS


_____. “George Tsypin.” TD&T 27, no. 3 (Summer 1991): 9-19.


_____. “Philippe de Loutherbourg: Technology-Driven Entertainment and Spectacle in the Late Eighteenth Century.” Huntington Library Quarterly 70, no. 2 (June 2007): 251-268.


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_____. “Prima la musica, poi le parole?: Operatic Challenges to Word-Music Relations.” University of Toronto Quarterly 79, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 869-880.


VIDEORECORDINGS


