Journal of Modern Education Review, ISSN 2155-7993, USA
December 2019, Volume 9, No. 12, pp. 731–736
Doi: 10.15341/jmer(2155-7993)/12.09.2019/001

http://www.academicstar.us

Artistic Strategies for Scenography Training — A Study Case: The Course on Scenography at the Universidad de Málaga's Fine Arts School, Spain

Silvia López Rodríguez, José M.ª Alonso Calero
(Department of Art and Architecture, Universidad de Málaga, Spain)

Abstract: This paper deals with some training approaches on the course on Scenography taught at the Universidad de Málaga's Fine Arts School, Spain. The course, included in the Sculpture course of study, aims at exploring the artistic creation process involved in scenography design and caters for some active participation of students to enhance their creativity and research-based artistic and experimental thinking, both formally and conceptually, as defined in Julio Cortázar's short story book Cronopios and famas. The main course objective is to set up a training time and space where students can research, create and develop new expressive and symbolic alternatives to further design and provide their own scenography proposals. The paper further reviews some theories published on creativity in the artistic arena and on the creation process itself by using Cortázar's literature as a starting point.

Key words: scenography, teaching, experimenting space, Julio Cortazar

1. Introduction: Research and Creativity Needs

The recent cultural transformation undergone by most performing arts — including the increasing use of new technologies and communication platforms — is providing scenography professionals with a variety of experimentation possibilities and research fields that are used to solve virtually any issue arising from reality-fiction perspectives. We could well assert that all scenography fields — be they conceptual, formal or material — are expanding due to the sustained quest for new spatial compositions and to the integration of new languages, plastic elements and technological supports. These altogether provide for a more complex, fascinating experience and for the evolution of elements, given the fact that they enhance scenographers' creativity.

Scenography has traditionally been considered as a performance space designed for theaters, though lately it has expanded and now includes new multidisciplinary and global dimensions. Its scope of application has reached such domains as cinema, television, advertising, events, and other cultural exhibitions too, due to cross-links established with other fields. We believe this new tendency to be of importance for students' training and their further creativity, since it will help them develop cross-disciplinary integration skills.

Generally speaking, we could assert that anybody working in an artistic area is naturally creative because creation is an unavoidable part of the artistic medium. However, this is not always the case in Fine Arts Schools today, which is why students need to develop and improve their creative competencies and gain motivation during

Silvia Lopez Rodriguez, Professor, Department of Art and Architecture, University of Malaga; research areas/interests: sculpture, contemporary art, scenography, situationism. E-mail: silvialopez@uma.es.

their apprenticeship by becoming more active and participative thanks to their renewed critical attitude. This is the main objective of the present research, as detailed below.

2. A Training Project for Our *Scenography* Course

The course on Scenography at the Universidad de Málaga's Fine Arts School is an elective subject for third-year students and is included in the *Sculpture* course of study. Since there are no other scenography-related courses included in the curriculum, our course is actually presented and delivered as an introduction to scenography as a whole. The main objective of the course is, therefore, to present students with scenography issues. Some particular emphasis on the role played by scenographers and the interdisciplinary character of performance stage designers is put on the course content. This is why motivation is critical for students to perform some field research.

Our course design is based upon the methodological approach used in all art practices and introduces students with non-conventional stage designs. It also provides them with a conceptual perspective departing from a scenographer's creativity, maturity and personal style as a creator. The main purpose of the course is to address the issue of experimentation and innovation in stage design, which is why students are asked to work with models. As with a palimpsest made up of reality and fiction, they are then able to develop their own creativity in both morphology and composition of stage spaces. The whole course is underpinned by theoretical references to historical issues and critical experiences of artists working with scenographers, as well as to such references as the Italian structural design, the modification of theater sets, the modern perspectives in the twentieth century, theater anthropology reviews, outdoor events trends, etc.

2.1 A New Challenge: How to Draw a Swallow According to Cortazar

> Now it happens that turtles are, of course, great speed enthusiasts. The *esperanzas* know that and don't bother about it. The *famas* know it and make fun of it. The *cronopios* know it, and every time they meet a turtle they haul out the box of colored chalks and draw a swallow on the rounded blackboard of the turtle's shell (Cortazar, 1962, p. 88).

Our course approach to scenography is based upon Julio Cortázar's short story book *Cronopios and Famas*. We seek to provide for some training time and space where students get motivated to do some research and create their own works and also where the search for new expressive and symbolic alternatives is fostered. *Cronopios and Famas* was first published in 1962, just a year before *Rayuela*, a dazzling and fascinating novel that actually consigned *Cronopios and Famas* to a quite unfair oblivion. Throughout his *Cronopios and Famas*, Cortázar teaches us to see through with new eyes, takes us to explore unexpected spaces created in ordinary situations, and helps us get out of the perceptive inertia we are compelled to live in by today's society. We consider *Cronopios and Famas* to be some kind of individual guide for self-fulfillment and a wonderful adventure that allows readers to reflect upon philosophy, comedy, chronicles and fantasy themes in their daily lives. The book is divided into four sections: (i) *Instruction Manual* is a guide meant to relieve the tedium and limitations of daily life; (ii) *Unusual Occupations* presents the unusual beauty of a different and unconventional family; (iii) *Unstable Stuff* shows varied suggestions for approaching inanimate objects surrounding us; and, finally, (iv) *Cronopios and Famas*, makes readers feel the need to experience the unexpected and step into superficial settings. In this masterpiece, Cortázar, a master of unveiling, follows the path led by the Greek *aletheia* and leaves aside the modern and pervasive scientific approach. The writer and professor Félix de Azúa employs the term

Unverborgenheit in his *Diccionario de las artes* (1995) to explain how art pieces are, according to Heidegger, like a "primary phenomenon through which truth of things (or people or cosmos) is revealed provided the word 'truth' is considered as some unveiling or unconcealment" (p. 128). This is our main objective when we first get immersed into some artistic project — into some performance staging, for instance. Cortázar helps us unveil the authenticity of things, and we are able to show it through art because art pieces

> […] allow for the destruction of outer covers and concealments, under which entities remain forgotten, to get to the truth. When art gets to the truth, the unconcealed entities can shine in day light […] and get to the whole world where they finally achieve a specific "objectivity". Only the blind are unable to see them […]. Taking into consideration that any artistic process is to be considered as an unveiling moment, artistic objects cannot merely be seen as "objects", but rather as "art pieces" […]. A stone is considered an object until a Buddhist monk selects it between ten other thousand stones to examine it during years and try to discover its basis and apex, its good and bad edges, before he finally decides to place it in the garden of a monastery in its very exact, perfect and unmovable place, where it is meant to be contemplated and reflected upon. During such a process, the object has turned into an art piece […]. And the monk himself cannot be considered as an artist but rather as an intermediary between concealment and light (De Azua, 1995, pp. 128–134).

The main objectives of our course on scenography are to reflect upon our world and our relationship with our surroundings. We also seek to train students' perception and break out their inertia of perspective for them to get outdoors and experience all kinds of phenomena. We endeavor to make them grasp how the world itself operates and the way we perceive it, for them to be able to draw a swallow on a turtle's shell, like in any art course.

After performing some text analysis and a few drawings, and after building some models too, students have the opportunity to review and oversee the most important elements and composition trends employed in set staging (space, lighting, bodies, color and movements) to develop their own personal projects. Some students actually choose to construct their own interpretation of Cortázar's book or elaborate on any other issue after working on a detailed model where they present some conceptual, technical or aesthetic perspectives.

The first models and drawings are usually for entertainment purposes, and students can then express ideas that are closely linked to scenography itself. They can explore different avenues and analyze or provide conceptual notions that are applied to the aforementioned staging elements. Through this drill we seek to motivate students and help them find new expressive and essential features.

The final project presented by students entails a deeper research where both the synthesis and conception are valued, together with the originality and results. Students are tested on their capacity to become authors and scenographers. Throughout the training, teachers help student delve into their own ideas and concepts and then develop them to their full potential, with a particular insight on the structural division of space and on both the conceptual and morphological synthesis of their project, where "less is often more".

Our final goal is for students to acquire some reflexive knowledge on scenography itself so they can apprehend every set as if it were their own projection space. Students gradually learn to look upon things differently, to understand, to interpret, to construct, to express, to contextualize, to link coherent conditions and, eventually, to draw swallows on turtles' shells.

3. Developing Spaces for Imagination by Way of Models

> The only other object in the room was an enormous platform that stood in the center of the floor, covered with what seemed to be a miniature scale model rendering of a city. It was a marvelous thing to behold, with its crazy spires and lifelike buildings, its narrow streets and microscopic human figures […].

> "It is called the City of the World," Stone said modestly, almost struggling to get the words out of his mouth.
>
> "[…] Willie's city is more than just a toy," said Flower. It is an artistic vision of mankind. In one way, it's an autobiography, but in another way, it's what you might call a utopia — a place where the past and future come together […]. If you look carefully, you'll see that many of the figures actually represent Willie himself. There, in the playground, you see him as a child. Over there, you see him grinding lenses in his shop as a grown man […]. But these things are set in a larger context. They're merely an example, an illustration of one man's journey through the City of the World. Look at the Hall of Justice, the Library, the Bank, and the prison. […]. It's an imaginary place, but it's also realistic" (Auster, 1990, pp. 95–96).

In this excerpt from *The Music of Chance* book, Paul Auster vividly presents the building up of a modeled city space. Stone, the leading character of the story, names it the *City of the World* to demonstrate his intention to construct a reality-based space where a whole universe is represented. This is an example of boundaries between utopia and reality coalescing during scale model construction.

> In scale modeling, utopia and reality coalesce, and utopia is achieved, as a volumetric image at least, while reality fades away, leading to some kind of hyper-reality based on mock models (Maderuelo, 2008, p. 384).

The construction of scale models entails the intrinsic intention to cause some realistic effect, meant to be one of the main primary axes for any model structure — that of impact, both from a constructive and artistic point of view. Utopia indeed, but only in as much as we take scale models as major works, as reduced representations of some reality, which is not our case. We, as scenographers, actually work with blurred limits, where models have their own identity are do possess a kind of independent reality, a real sculpture. A linguistic search on the origin of the Spanish term *maqueta* (model) in the *Diccionario crítico etimologico castellano e hispanico* shows the following finding:

> *Maqueta* (Academy, 1936), derived from the French term *maquette* (1752), and from the Italian *machietta* "a sketch (of some drawing)", short for *macchia*, which is the Italian corresponding form of the Spanish *mancha*, and normally used with the same meaning (Corominas & Pascual, 1981, p. 798).

According to this, a scale model is but a simple sketch, without any aesthetic value whatsoever. However, under the contemporary plastic and aesthetic framework, scale models are considered as one among many other traditional artistic expressions and as valid as any others. Etienne Souriau attaches a qualitative meaning to scale modeling in his philosophical work *Vocabulaire d'esthétique* and shows that scale modeling cannot be just contemplated as a sketch or as some kind of intermediate stage during the creation process, but rather as a ready-made object fit for aesthetic contemplation since

> Scale modeling is often also an artwork as such. Miniature landscapes and gardens or dolls' houses are works that can be better contemplated when we mentally dwarf ourselves to get into its microcosm (Souriau, 1990, pp. 976–977).

As a matter of fact, some artists, like the German Thomas Schütte, actually do use scale models as an artistic expression. He defines his works as *projects* and affirms their artistic status because, in his view, their plastic volume occupies a specific space and place. Scale models require some kinds of placement designed and built sometimes by the very same artist too (Maderuelo, 2008, p. 375). Other very tiny models, like the ones made by Ann and Patrick Poirier, represent quite extended sculptures-models requiring whole exhibition rooms to be showed. Model-cities like those made by Miquel Navarro claim that colossal quality is also linked to smallness.

In scale modelling, physical and psychologically perceptive aspects are interwoven. Imaginary aspects also

play their part in all their fictitious commutations, since space is never apprehended the same way by the observer. The existing dialogue between place, space and scale is defined by some anthropic principle, the human scale, which determines both the space and time between the very small and the very big:

> But sometimes transactions between the small and the large multiply, have consequences. Then, when a familiar image grows up to reach the dimensions of the sky, one is suddenly struck by the impression that, correlatively, familiar objects become the miniatures of a world. Macrocosm and microcosm are correlated (Bachelard, 1957, p. 220).

Actually, to achieve a monumental work there is no need to build up oversized artworks, as illustrated by sculptures produced by Joel Shapiro. In 1973, Shapiro created and artwork consisting of a small sculpture representing a cast iron "tiny house" (measuring 14×17×12.7 cm only) that was located in the very middle of a huge showroom. He then magnified the quality of his presentation by isolating visually this object from others and by avoiding any possible size reference.

The construction of scenographic stages is at the very basis of every scale model included in our course. All students reflect upon space, light and matter. They ponder over life and the world and interpret them by using minimal hints or influences from such prominent 20th and 21st scenography figures as Gordon Craig, Adolphe Appia, Antonin Artaud, Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, Andrei Tarkovsky, Popova, Gaston Breyer, Joseph Svoboda, Bob Wilson, Jaume Plensa, La Fura dels Baus, or from some renowned contemporary sculpture artists as Olafur Eliasson, Ann Hamilton, Marina Abramovic, Oskar Schlemmer, Rebecca Horn or Diana Thater, to name just a few. They seek to demonstrate the consistency of their theoretic training and their poetic expressive skills. They use scale models ideally used to unveil different light combinations and space usage and to give credit to their game of scales.

Scale models furnish students with a work method that enables them to manipulate, experiment, understand and construct space, while allowing them to change it and exchange it without any huge physical or material requirements. Scale models are also an instrument and an artistic object that they may use for their final presentation at the end of the course. They are made of different materials, some of them ad-lib or *found*, which makes them even more interesting, not only because they do allow for a better understanding of the creation process and space construction, but also because they are objects as such and represent peculiar suggestions and connotations.

4. Conclusions

The interdisciplinary study of existing coincidences, parallelisms, encounters, intersections or axes between scenography and contemporary art, writing and construction, artists and writers is certainly a privileged laboratory when testing the fruitful intellectual cooperation and juxtaposition of different fields and disciplines. In our course we have decided to make visible what is only known by way of words (and is commonly known by the Greek term of *ekphrasis*)[1]. Examples of this are found throughout the history of Fine Arts, like in Botticelli's *Calumny of Apelles*, asdescribed by Luciano de Samosata. Every solution given to a scenographic space by artists provides for a different type of *ekphrasis* because the artists' visual approaches are usually tridimensional in modelling, like Cortázar's worlds. The existing relationship between art and literature, words and scenography, help materialize this recurrent metaphorical exchange. Art provides writers with descriptive images and metaphors to be used in their work. On the other hand, literature raises issues in a variety of contexts and controversial fields derived from

[1] Umberto Eco considers that "when a verbal text describes a work of visual art, classic tradition spoke of *ekphrasis*" (2003, p. 10).

the complex relationship between artwork and texts. Artists may benefit from them if they want to.

Julio Cortázar's *Cronopios and famas* opens up an endless world of constructive and metaphorical possibilities for students to probe and bring together in a personal artwork at the end of their course.

References

Auster P. (1990). *La música del azar*, Barcelona: Anagrama.
Bachelard G. (1957). "La miniatura", en *La Poetica del Espacio*, Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
Corominas J. and Pascual J. A. (1981). *Diccionario Critico Etimologico Castellano e Hispanico*, Vol. III, Madrid: Gredos.
Cortázar J. (1962). *Historias de Cronopios de Famas*, Madrid: Alfaguara.
De Azúa F. (1995). *Diccionario de Las Artes*, Barcelona: Planeta.
Eco U. (2003). *Mouse or Rat? Translation as Negotiation*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.
Maderuelo J. (2008). *La idea de Espacio en la Arquitectura y el Arte Contemporaneos 1960–1989*, Madrid: Akal.
Moriente D. (2010). *Póeticas Arquitectonicas en el Arte Contemporaneo, 1970–2008*, Ensayos Arte Cátedra.
Soriau E. (1990). *Vocabulaire d'esthetique*, París: Presses Universitaires de France.