

Postmodern Design

Arnold Aronson

Seventeenth-century court society meets Bela Lugosi and George Lucas. . . .
—Michael Hunter, description of Anne Bogart's production of *Life is a Dream*

Bob Wilson . . . used to say, "Your work is so good but oh, it's so ugly all the time." And I thought so too. The imagery that I was dealing with was not making pretty pictures, it was a dialectical examination of the problematics of seeing.

—Richard Foreman on Richard Foreman, *An Interview*

The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot readily be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently.

—Umberto Eco, *Postscript to The Name of the Rose*

Although western drama from Ibsen and Strindberg to the late twentieth century is often lumped together under the rubric of "modern drama," it is rare to come across a mention of "modern design." If design styles are discussed at all, it is usually when they are plainly related to identifiable art movements such as Constructivism or Surrealism or various branches of realism—suggestive realism, poetic realism, photorealism, etc. In the absence of any clear-cut movement known as modern design it may be difficult to talk about "postmodern design." Nonetheless, certain design characteristics definable as "modern" may be discerned across a broad spectrum of performances throughout the twentieth century, and over the 1970s and 1980s a new style has emerged, which is fundamentally different in approach and aesthetic values, has certain similarities to postmodern architecture, and challenges the standard ways of seeing conditioned by the design characteristics that held the stage for nearly a century. This new style can be called, rightfully, "postmodern."

Modern stage design has been characterized by the presence of a strong metaphorical or presentational image or related series of images—the "pretty pictures" that Richard Foreman saw as absent from his own work.¹ There was a singular quality,

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¹Richard Schechner, "Richard Foreman on Richard Foreman: An Interview," *The Drama Review* 31:4 (1987): 126.

a unity, even a monolithic aspect to these images, what Adolphe Appia termed an "organic unity." Moreover, the image often became identified with the style of a designer, thus allowing the elevation of the designer/artist to a position of equality, if not dominance, among the theater's creative personnel. Fredric Jameson, one of the leading theoreticians of postmodernism, could have been referring to this when he identified a key characteristic of modernism as "the invention of a personal, private style, as unmistakable as your fingerprint . . . which can be expected to generate its own unique vision of the world."² Similarly, Jean-François Lyotard's definition of modernism, though intended for a broader sociopolitical context, can encompass this sense of organic unity: "A metadiscourse . . . making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative. . . ."³ Modern design functions by visually and metaphorically placing the specific world of the play within some sort of broader context of the world of the audience; it is a kind of metanarrative that attempts to encompass the world within a unified image. But Appia's organic unity seems impossible to grasp in the postmodern world. A kind of pan-historical, omni-stylistic view has come to dominate stage design; the world is seen as a multiplicity of competing, often incongruous and conflicting elements and images, and stage design reflects this perspective.

If modern design moved the stage picture away from the specific, tangible, illusionistic world of Romanticism and Realism into a generalized, theatrical, and poetic realm in which the pictorial image functioned as an extension of the playwright's themes and structures (a metanarrative), then postmodern design is a dissonant reminder that no single point of view can predominate, even within a single image. Late twentieth-century audiences are confronted with what Charles Russell has called "an art of shifting perspective, of double self-consciousness, of local and extended meaning."⁴ Through the use of discordance, ugliness, and juxtaposition—what postmodernists would call rupture, discontinuity, disjuncture, etc.⁵—the spectator of postmodern design is constantly made aware of the experience of viewing and, at the same time, in the most successful examples, made aware of the whole history, context, and reverberations of an image in the contemporary world. It should also be noted that modernism assumes the presence of a single viewer or reader whose perceptual mechanisms are shared by all viewers within the society. Moreover, the object is still central in modernism. Postmodernism shifts the basis of the work of art from the object to the transaction between the spectator and the object and further deconstructs this by negating the presence of a representative objective viewer.

If one tries to describe modern design by looking at all that has been associated with "modern drama," the result will be confusing at best. The hodge-podge of

²Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," *Postmodernism and Its Discontents*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London, New York: Verso, 1988), 17.

³Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) xxiii.

⁴Charles Russell, "The Context of the Concept," in *Romanticism, Modernism, Postmodernism*, ed. Harry R. Garvin (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1980) 192.

⁵See, among others, "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism" in Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987), 84–96.

design styles associated with modern drama ranges from detailed realism to total abstraction, and thus there is little apparent stylistic consistency or theoretical basis. Moreover, except in a few notable instances, design is not easily correlated with specific developments or movements within modern art. Although there has been a strong tradition from the late nineteenth through the twentieth century of fine and plastic artists designing for the stage—from Paul Sérusier and Picasso to David Hockney and David Salle—these artists have, for the most part, shown a surprising inability to transpose their radical ideas onto the three-dimensional space of the stage in a manner as equally innovative as their art. Modern art on the stage has tended toward flat representation of the superficial stylistic qualities of particular artists. 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. The collaborative nature of theater, the architecture of theater spaces, and the economic pressures felt by both commercial and noncommercial theater further contribute to the essentially conservative nature of the art. These reasons help explain why avant-garde artists have had little impact on the development of stage design and why evolution in the art of stage design must be measured in fairly subtle ways. A stage set is still a stage set; there are limited ways in which the visual elements of a production can relate to the performers and the spectators.

For all intents and purposes modern design began with the theoretical writings of Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig, starting with Appia’s work in the 1890s. In response to the scientific realism that typified the naturalistic drama of the 1870s and 1880s and the two-dimensional but detailed realism of painted sets typical of nineteenth-century romantic realism, Appia and Craig called for a theatricality characterized by simplicity, suggestion, abstraction, and grandeur within the context of a three-dimensional sculptural setting that would unify the performer and the stage space. Important in this modern concept was the plasticity or transformability of the stage through light and, in some cases, movable scenic elements such as Craig’s famous screens. Paramount in all this was the sense of aesthetic pleasure and harmony as expressed by Craig in his essay, “The Artists of the Theatre of the Future.” “It is idle to talk about the distraction of scenery,” Craig wrote, “because the question here is not how to create some distracting scenery, but rather how to create a place which harmonizes with the thoughts of the poet.”⁶ Craig went on to talk about the image proceeding from the “mind’s eye.” In other words, the scenic artist responds intuitively to the ideas evoked by the playwright; the result is a visual image at one with the playwright’s thoughts. This idea was well summarized by the French scenographic scholar and critic Denis Bablet:

In [Craig’s] view, the presentation of a drama must reveal to us the inner life, the very essence of this drama. The complete picture offered to us by the production must at each

⁶Edward Gordon Craig, *The Art of the Theatre* (London: William Heinemann, 1911) 22.

moment correspond to the various phases of the dramatic action. The décor is not an autonomous frame, the objective presentation of a place in which the action would be as if projected after the event. . . . By being directly in harmony with the movements of the actors, with the suggestions of the play, and possibly with the music, it becomes integrated with the life of the drama and participates in its revelation. The interplay of line, color, objects, and lighting effects produces in the public a visual emotion which is in harmony with its auditory emotion and which strengthens it.⁷

This description, which could easily apply to Appia's approach as well as Craig's, was echoed in the United States in the writings of Robert Edmond Jones, who is generally considered the father of modern American design. Like Craig, Jones referred to the "mind's eye" (attributing the phrase to Hamlet) and went on to explain:

Stage-designing should be addressed to this eye of the mind. . . . A setting is not just a beautiful thing, a collection of beautiful things. It is a presence, a mood, a symphonic accompaniment to the drama, a great wind fanning the drama to flame. It echoes, it enhances, it animates. It is an expectancy, a foreboding, a tension. It says nothing, but it gives everything.⁸

Recurring motifs of musicality (including harmony and unity) and spirituality suffuse the writings on design by these artists, and, by and large, these themes have pervaded modern design. In the modern *mise en scène* the text, the performance, and the scenography unite, ideally, into a seamless, beautiful whole.

Other basic principles of modern design also can be discerned in these writings and works. First of all, the stage was not illusionistic—it was identified as a stage or a space for acting, not as some other place, such as a room, a forest, etc. On the occasions when the stage space was to be identified with another location, that was to be established through dialogue, action, reference, or through suggestive rather than explicit scenery. Scenery consisted of platforms, ramps, steps, screens, walls, and curtains. It also might include three-dimensional elements that *suggested* objectified places such as castles, landscapes, or rooms but were in and of themselves nonspecific. While a naturalistic set was a physical representation of psychological or sociological theory, the new, modern décor conveyed the spiritual essence of an object—scenery as Platonic shadows. Three-dimensional space, which was essential since the performer was three-dimensional, was created or enhanced by sculpting the stage with light. This was especially true for Appia.

Another characteristic was a visual and conceptual unity. The design embodied a fundamental concept or metaphor of the production, and, through the use of a single or unit set, or the use of transcendent motifs, the design provided a structural unity to the whole production. The idea of unity was a reaction to the fragmentary character of much nineteenth-century romantic design, in which coordination among the visual elements was sporadic and haphazard. The disunity of design in the nineteenth century, however, was simply the result of contemporary stage practice rather than of any consciously conceived aesthetic. Performers, for example, generally provided

⁷Denis Bablet, "Edward Gordon Craig and Scenography," *Theatre Research* 11:1 (1971): 11.

⁸Quoted in Mordecai Gorelik, *New Theatres for Old* (New York: Samuel French, 1949) 179–80.

their own costumes; theaters relied upon stock scenery. Without the intention of any designer, then, the costume and décor of the nineteenth century provided a peculiar kind of continuity with the experiential world of the spectator, whereas modern design has functioned not as a representation of the world but as a *metaphor* for something other. In the postmodern practice, in Hassan's schemata, this becomes metonymy.⁹ With the new emphasis on stage-as-stage or the dominance of a visual motif typical of modern design, the set, in fact, could become the dominant element of a production, establishing the whole tone and shaping the interpretation of the script as well as determining the rhythm and movement of the performers.

These principles have dominated the work of modern designers from Appia and Craig through Josef Svoboda and Ming Cho Lee. During the latter part of the twentieth century, however, the modern approach has come to seem insufficient or inappropriate for revivals of opera and classical theater. The attempt to embrace the classics on the modern stage, indeed the perceived need to "save the theater," as costume designer Laura Crow has put it, requires theater artists to "make them of today"¹⁰ or, as director Peter Sellars has said, people can speak only of what they have seen in their own lifetimes and thus employ a "system of contemporary references."¹¹ The result is often a seemingly vulgar and alienating collage of styles, periods, and references—a very conscious lack of unity among the visual elements of a production. This intentionally radical disruption of pleasing aesthetic synergy is a cornerstone of postmodern design. One definition of postmodern design, then, is the juxtaposition of seemingly incongruous elements within the unifying structure of the stage frame, the purpose of which is to create a referential network within the mind of the viewer that extends beyond the immediately apparent world of the play. A postmodern design often makes reference to other productions, to other works of art, and to an extradramatic or nondramatic world. Unity derives from the very presence of a stage, a theater, and performers and, perhaps, the visual style of the designer.

This, of course, is central to virtually all postmodern art—the "presence of the past," or what Ihab Hassan calls "present-ification"¹² and Jameson calls "pastiche." The latter is defined as: "the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language."¹³ Postmodern design virtually reeks with the presence of the past, and it often pastes together a collage of stylistic imitations that function not as style but as semiotic code. Whether or not this is a "dead language," though, is certainly debatable.

Certain developments in modern scenography can be dated from landmark productions that heralded a new approach: one thinks of Robert Edmond Jones's *The Man*

⁹Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn*, 91.

¹⁰Laura Crow, personal interview, 28 June 1989.

¹¹Will Crutchfield, "The Triumphs and Defeats in Sellars's Mozart," *New York Times*, 25 July 1989, national ed., 11.

¹²Quoted in Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), 20.

¹³Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism and Its Discontents*, 16.

Who Married a Dumb Wife (1914) or Ming Cho Lee's *Electra* (1964). Postmodernism has not produced such a work, though an almost textbook example of this approach—albeit not a very radical one—can be found in John Conklin's designs for Wagner's Ring Cycle at the San Francisco Opera (1983–84).¹⁴ In a way, Conklin is closest in spirit to the architects generally associated with the postmodern movement. Charles Jencks, in his book *What Is Post-Modernism?* noted that the "enjoyment of difference," which is so typical of the postmodern sensibility, leads to a style whose content "is the past seen with irony or displacement. . . . We now have the luxury of inhabiting successive worlds as we tire of each one's qualities."¹⁵ This could describe Conklin's 1983 setting of Valhalla in *Das Rheingold*. The facade of Valhalla was depicted as an amalgam of four eighteenth- and nineteenth-century architectural sources. The base was modeled after a section of a women's prison; above this was a re-creation of an eighteenth-century idealistic project by Étienne-Louis Boulée; the midsection was based on Leo von Klenze's Königstor—a neoclassical version of the Propylæa; and the whole thing was topped off by a copy of Gottfried Semper's Dresden Opera House. The implications and repercussions were stunning. First of all, the collection of architecture was an anthology of sorts of nineteenth-century German sensibility—in other words, the environment in which Wagner worked and created the opera—so the production was immediately rooted in historical ground without any attempt at a "historically accurate" setting. Semper was not only an architect, he played a crucial role in saving Wagner's career after the Revolution of 1848, so the reference to Semper has connections to Wagner the man as well as to the opera. The Dresden Opera house was destroyed in World War II, and thus the representation makes reference to Germany's more recent history and the appropriation of Wagner by the Nazis while at the same time providing an obvious image for the destruction of Valhalla. The references to prisons, visionary architecture, and the classical world, of course, reverberate within the context of the Ring Cycle. Finally, Conklin's arrangement of architectural elements results in an opera house sitting atop a fort. "The gods," explained Conklin, "live over a fort in an 'opera house' because they are 'opera singers.' Valhalla symbolically is a set!"¹⁶ So the gods, who were depicted through opera and, of course, impersonated by opera singers, were placed within a replica of an opera house that resembled a heavenly palace, all set within a real

¹⁴The work of Robert Wilson is sometimes classified as postmodern, and his production of *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) is sometimes cited as a cross-over work, which introduced a wider audience to his style. But Wilson's scenography, more than most, is a true theater of images. The pictures, though sometimes bizarre or surreal (he was acclaimed by former Surrealists as the heir to that tradition), are strikingly beautiful. They are, furthermore, self-contained and generally self-referential. Moreover, rather than alienating, the work is mesmerizing, often inducing a trance-like state in the audience. The image within the frame of a Wilson production is highly structured and complete and rarely refers overtly to any other work of theater or art. His productions, in fact, can be seen as a culmination of the theories of Edward Gordon Craig. Even Wilson's recent work with Heiner Müller might be viewed more as the creation of a container in which a postmodern play sits (surprisingly comfortably) than as an example of postmodern design.

¹⁵Charles Jencks, *What is Post-Modernism?* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 56.

¹⁶Arnold Aronson, *American Set Design* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985), 19–20.

opera house. The set reverberated with references to opera-as-opera, stage-as-stage, to the historical and social context of the work and the composer, and so on. Ironically, these references may have escaped viewers since the unity and style of Conklin's setting may have appeared to many simply as an unidentifiable classical facade of some kind. Even those who may have recognized the Dresden Opera were unlikely to recognize all the other references. But the quotations and connections were important to Conklin and, he claimed, gave the work an enhanced "power." Just as no one can see a Wagnerian opera (or any historical theatrical work, for that matter) in a sociopolitical or cultural vacuum, the designer cannot present a "pure" or virginal setting.

A more blatant juxtaposition of images and references occurred in Robert Israel's design for the same opera cycle three years later at the Seattle Opera. In his *Siegfried*, the forest was painted on flats, and as Fafner strode through the forest, the flats fell over. Israel believes that a central theme in theater today is the tension between illusion and reality (which he sees as an implicit metaphor for moral struggle), and this concept was fully exploited in this conceit. Israel's design for this nineteenth-century opera used the nineteenth-century technique of painted scenery. In the contemporary world it is virtually impossible to fool anyone through scenography; even the most cleverly done trees are perceived as signs for trees. Nonetheless, the audience can delight in the illusion or at the naivete of illusion. The effect of the falling flats is like the magician showing how the trick is done or like the puppeteer removing the screen to expose the strings; the mechanics once exposed only serve to reinforce the illusion while seemingly admitting the spectator into the world of the manipulator. Everyone acknowledges the illusion; everyone knows that everyone knows. Yet, in this case, the falling trees/flats functioned as metaphor. Fafner is powerful, and in the midst of theatrical delight there was a real sense of danger. While Conklin's set could be seen as postmodern in its careful amalgamation of architectural and scenic styles and periods, Israel's was postmodern in its blend of illusion with the destruction of illusion.

An alternative approach can be seen in the work of the West German choreographer Pina Bausch, who imports "real" objects into the stage world, thereby reducing them to signs.¹⁷ In *1980*, for instance, the large stage floor was covered with sod, which actually was watered during the course of the performance, filling the auditorium with the damp smell of suburban lawns. In *Arien* Bausch covered the entire stage with two inches of water. Such elements affect movement and rhythm no less than Appia's rhythmic steps. At the same time, of course, the semiotic understanding of the elements is thrown askew; the phrase "organic unity" takes on mind-boggling repercussions in such a context. The water and the grass are "real"; the performers do not act *as if* they were walking through these elements—they *are* walking through them. Yet, the settings do not represent a lawn or a river; they represent a stage covered with "found" objects that may evoke any number of associations in the

¹⁷German design has been a major influence on postmodern design, just as the designs of the Berliner Ensemble were a major influence on American design in the 1960s.

minds of the spectators. Historically, stage design has asked the spectator either to suspend disbelief (in post-Renaissance illusionistic theater) or to accept the stage as an essentially neutral, though perhaps emblematic and special, place. Certain modern designs have tried to combine the two demands, but much postmodern design seems to thwart both processes. Found (i. e., real) objects are placed onstage, yet the framing device of the stage does not permit the spectator to view the object as object or the stage as stage. Normal perceptual mechanisms are circumvented. The stage is stripped of its vocabulary (or at least its conventional western vocabulary) so that a reading of signs consistent with an understanding of the concrete world outside the stage becomes difficult, if not impossible. The result is akin to what Jameson calls "the waning of affect," in which "all feeling or emotion, all subjectivity, has vanished."¹⁸

The historical roots of postmodern design can be traced back at least to the production of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in 1896. In his pre-show speech to the audience, Jarry described the set they were about to see. "We have a perfect décor," he stated,

for just as one good way of setting a play in Eternity is to have revolvers shot off in the year 1000, you will see doors open on fields of snow under blue skies, fireplaces furnished with clocks and swinging wide to serve as doors, and palm trees growing at the foot of a bed so that little elephants standing on bookshelves can browse on them.¹⁹

The scenery, painted by Jarry, Pierre Bonnard, Édouard Vuillard, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Sérusier was further described by Arthur Symons:

The scenery was painted to represent, by a child's conventions, indoors and out of doors, and even the torrid, temperate, and arctic zones at once. Opposite you, at the back of the stage, you saw apple trees in bloom, under a blue sky, and against the sky a small closed window and a fireplace . . . through the very midst of which . . . trooped in and out the clamorous and sanguinary persons of the drama. On the left was painted a bed, and at the foot of the bed a bare tree and snow falling. On the right there were palm trees . . . a door opened against the sky, and beside the door a skeleton dangled.²⁰

The grotesqueness of the imagery, the juxtapositions of objects, and the collage of chronological periods would seem to qualify this famous production as the first postmodern design, a mere three years after Appia's first published work. Perhaps all that denies this status to "Ubu" is the use, primarily, of painted scenery in an essentially illusionistic, if illogical, manner, just as the story line of the play, though grotesque, is a fairly straightforward narrative. Both plot and décor preserved, in their own fantastic ways, the essential unity, harmony, and moral structure of nineteenth-century drama and production.

Foretastes of postmodernism can also be found in the work of the Dadas. Although much of their work involves incongruity and juxtaposition, a particularly coherent

¹⁸Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (July-August 1984): 61.

¹⁹Quoted in Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years*, revised edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 206.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 207.

example is the late Dada ballet *Rêlâche*. The Erik Satie-Francis Picabia piece, performed by the Ballets Suédois, included, among other things, a wall of silver disks functioning as reflectors for light bulbs, a *tableau vivant* re-creation of Lucas Cranach's "Adam and Eve," and René Clair's film *Entr'acte*.

A more theoretical framework, however, can be found in the work of Bertolt Brecht, whose maxim, "show that you are showing," articulated the scenographic approach to his alienation effect.²¹ While Brecht acknowledged and even emphasized the need for aesthetic beauty on the stage, and he often stated his love for particular images and objects, the basic aim of his alienation technique was to distance the spectator from the event in order that the viewer might reach decisions about the problems raised in the play. "It's more important these days," wrote Brecht in the mid-1920s, "for the set to tell the spectator he's in a theatre than to tell him he's in, say, Aulis."²² Scenographically, this was achieved through techniques that would prevent the spectator from becoming enmeshed in the illusionistic world. The lighting instruments, the scenic elements, and the structures were to be shown. Furthermore, there was a mixture of detailed realism in props and costumes with emblematic settings. In an essay on the pictures of Brueghel, Brecht noted how Brueghel combined incongruous and contradictory elements but in so doing was able to reinforce the themes of the painting, not distract from them:

Whenever an Alpine peak is set down in a Flemish landscape or old Asiatic costumes confront modern European ones, then the one denounces the other and sets off its oddness, while at the same time we get landscape as such, people all over the place. Such pictures don't just give off an atmosphere but a variety of atmospheres. Even though Brueghel manages to balance his contrasts he never merges them into one another. . . .²³

The desirability, even necessity, of conflating images is reinforced in a later essay by Brecht, in which he noted that modern knowledge forced his contemporaries to see history differently than their predecessors did:

The farmer was not aware throughout the centuries of his need or potential need for a Ford car. The rapid social and economic development of our period alters the audience swiftly and radically, demanding and facilitating ever new modes of thought, feeling and behavior.²⁴

Here seems to be justification for a major aspect of postmodernism—the juxtaposition of historical periods, achieved in this case through the introduction of icons of contemporary society into the world of the classical production.

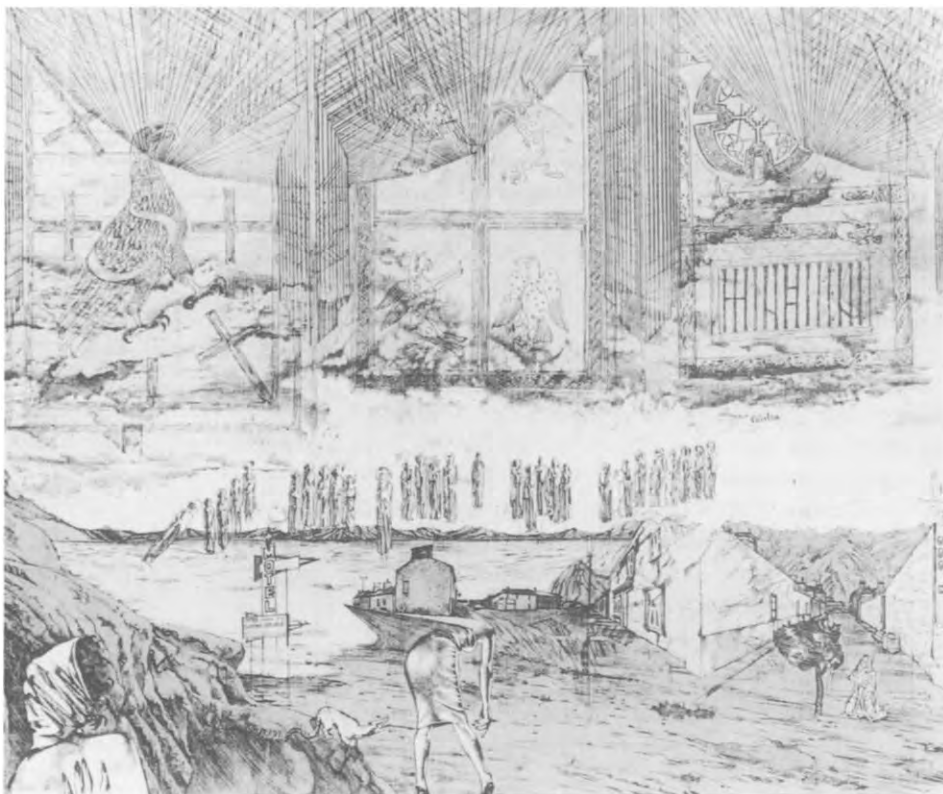
Russian-born designer George Tsypin reinforced this view. "Straightforward updating offends me," he explained, but

²¹Bertolt Brecht, "Showing has to be shown," trans. John Willett. *Bertolt Brecht Poems 1913–1956*, ed. John Willett and Ralph Manheim with the cooperation of Erich Fried (New York: Methuen, 1976), 341.

²²John Willett, *Caspar Neher: Brecht's Designer* (London: Methuen, 196), 98.

²³John Willett, ed. and trans., *Brecht on Theatre* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 157.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 159–60.



George Tsypin's sketch for Richard Wagner's *Tannhauser* at the Chicago Lyric Opera, 1988, directed by Peter Sellars. The second act was to take place in evangelist Jimmy Swaggart's Crystal Cathedral. It used 70 projectors and constantly shifting plexiglass panels. The preacher drifted in and out in a sort of glass podium.

when we look at paintings from the Renaissance period we see all the Biblical characters painted in Renaissance clothes; in medieval manuscripts you can see all the characters wearing medieval clothes. We live in a period in which all the myths and all classical literature is treated that way—as if it is happening right now. That is partially the reason that design seems to be a mix of different languages. In my designs I try to achieve a certain fusion of different elements. It's not just a juxtaposition of different styles.²⁵

This was illustrated in Tsypin's design for JoAnne Akalaitis's production of *Leon and Lena (and Lenz)*, adapted from Georg Buchner's play *Leonce and Lena* and his story *Lenz*, at Minneapolis's Guthrie Theatre. The early-nineteenth-century story was re-conceived in terms of a young man from a rich family "on the road." The place

²⁵George Tsypin, personal interview, 22 June 1989.

became the Midwest, and a highway jutting out from the back of the stage and projecting over the auditorium was a dominant image. German Romanticism became entangled with images of American loneliness—the classic open highway (complete with a sunset) and Jack Kerouac. In a similar vein, Tsypin created a mysterious setting for Peter Sellars's production of *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Strange black objects that continually moved about the stage spewing out and swallowing up performers and later combining to form a ship actually were Napoleonic armoires.

Further influences on the development of postmodern design can be found in the works of John Cage and Richard Foreman. In a 1965 interview Cage was asked how he would present classical theater today. He responded that he thought of "past literature as material rather than as art."

Our situation as artists is that we have all this work that was done before we came along. We have the opportunity to do work now. I would not present things from the past, but I would approach them as materials available to something else which we were going to do now. They could enter, in terms of collage, into any play. . . . Now as material it can be put together with other things. They could be things that don't connect with art as we conventionally understand it.²⁶

Cage had been using this approach of quoting past art in a collage-like framework long before this statement. His musical compositions and his theoretical writings and teachings were crucial for the development of Happenings in the late 1950s, and his work with choreographer Merce Cunningham had a profound effect on developments in modern and postmodern dance. For the Cunningham dances, Cage's music and Robert Rauschenberg's designs were generally created with no reference to the choreography—the three elements were combined in performance. Consequently, the methodology and the final results were as far from the Appia-Craig model as possible. The Cage-inspired Happenings (also influenced by Dada, Bauhaus, and Antonin Artaud, among others) frequently used found objects for their scenography and action, with the result often being a collage-like rendering of contemporary culture, though generally without any ostensible social, political, or literary intention. Nonetheless, the technique had profound effects on both art and theater and helped to release theatrical design from a single-minded, metaphor-bound, imagistic approach.

An example of this kind of use of quotation (though one that Cage undoubtedly would find too contrived and self-consciously artistic) can be seen in the concept for a 1989 production of Brecht's *Mahagonny* directed by Jonathan Miller. As described by the designer, Robert Israel, the boxing ring walls were to have murals based on Giotto's "Massacre of the Innocents." While the image of dead babies in the Renaissance mural clearly related to the death in the boxing ring in Brecht's play, quotation of the Giotto, Israel believed, "is also, on some level, a defacing of the Giotto, because it is placed in the boxing ring." The mural was "defaced" even further through the tracing of compositional diagrams—such as the ones found in art books—over the

²⁶Michael Kirby and Richard Schechner, "An Interview with John Cage," *Tulane Drama Review* 10:2 (1965): 53.

figures and, in some cases, the overlaying of new diagrams on top of this. "It becomes a real defacing of the art in every way," continued Israel, "and a defacing of the illusion because it is a wall décoration. At one point part of it is replaced by an upside down picture of Chairman Mao which is also defaced."²⁷ The production was not a quote in the sense of a décor created "in the style of. . . ." It was a reverberant reference to styles of art, periods of history, and human events, which still functioned as scenic decoration. Furthermore, it forced the audience to be aware of technique (i.e., presentation) as well as content.

Richard Foreman, who was one of the most innovative and influential avant-garde theater artists of the late 1960s and 1970s, embodied most of the concepts of post-modern design in his original works, staged in his loft and similar off-off-Broadway spaces. On a basic level, Foreman's scenography was "ugly." This is not meant facetiously. The homemade quality of his sets and the generally somber colors were a conscious attempt to thwart the usual slickness of commercial production, which, he felt, lulled the audience into a complacency. In true Brechtian fashion this "showing" of the techniques and materials of the setting distanced the spectator by not allowing the viewer to engage with the scene and by opposing traditional aesthetic pleasures. A notable element of Foreman's scenography was the juxtaposition of incongruous elements and the mixture of objects of wildly differing scales. Also, contained within a particular setting there were often smaller versions of the set (or sets already seen or soon to be seen). These might be painted on walls, or they might be models placed at points within the set. Thus, the spectator was allowed to view the same image from various perspectives and in different ways and even in a sense to move through time, not by narrative device but through visual manipulations and juxtapositions, all while remaining in a fixed location. Scenographic techniques were borrowed from the Renaissance and Baroque theater, notably the use of a sort of wing-and-groove scenery, and reference to historic theater was reinforced by the use of a print of the Mnemonic Theatre of 1617 in Foreman's advertising posters. Finally, Foreman employed framing devices. While sound, light, and gesture were often used to frame an action, object, or image, the stage was often filled with literal frames that evoked Renaissance paintings while at the same time segmenting and focusing spectator attention. The proscenium-style arrangement of most of his productions allowed an amazing control and manipulation of space, depth, and focus. Foreman set out to accomplish no less than a nearly total revision of the modes of perception learned by most audiences through the whole modern tradition of western theater.

When Foreman began creating his own theater in 1968, the reaction against the proscenium that had been brewing for nearly a century was reaching its apex. Much of the most significant and innovative theater of the twentieth century had involved explorations of nonproscenium space: thrust, arena, annular, and environmental. The twentieth-century *metteur en scène* has attempted to create a three-dimensional environment that would replicate the "real" world or would physically implicate the spectator in the stage experience. Foreman's aggressively frontal *mise en scène* thus

²⁷Robert Israel, personal interview, 23 June 1989.

was seen in its early days as almost reactionary (though nothing else about his productions was). However, virtually all postmodern design has been frontal, if not actually proscenium. (Several postmodern productions have been mounted by Liviu Ciulei, Andre Serban, and Foreman, among others, at the thrust-stage Guthrie Theatre and the theater-in-the-round of Washington, D.C.'s Arena Stage.) Postmodern design, at least so far, has been pictorial design. Nonproscenium production tends to suggest a connection between the world of the stage and the world of the auditorium and, by implication, the world beyond. Such staging implies continuity and sameness between image and viewer. Postmodern design is discontinuous and requires a perceptual interruption. In order for the image/design to have an impact, however, the contrasting elements must be connected in the mind of the viewer. Thus, somewhat like the Brueghel pictures that Brecht described, it needs the unity and cohesion of a frame to encompass it.

It is no coincidence that many of the postmodern designers frequently refer back to the Renaissance, a period in which the scientific desire for unity clashed with an appetite for diversity and a delight in incongruity. The single frame of the late-Renaissance proscenium arch sequentially enclosed the world of neoclassical tragedy and the multiplicity of fantastic images of mythological and allegorical intermezzi within an evening's performance. But while Renaissance stage design was suffused with a contemporary sensibility, multiple periods, styles, or genres were relatively discrete, though ultimately unified and encompassed by a single frame; postmodern design tends to blend all periods, styles, and genres in a momentary image within a single frame. (A costume with a period silhouette made of contemporary fabrics is a common device; anachronistic props are employed; contemporary expressions or gestures enter into classical dialogue, etc.)

Nonetheless, postmodern design keeps a certain distance; it requires a viewer, not a participant; it is often ironic. It may be possible to achieve this distance in a nonproscenium environment, but postmodernism is inherently theatrical, and the proscenium (or proscenium-like arrangement) remains the prime semiotic embodiment of theatricality in the visual vocabulary of the West. It provides the best forum for "the dialectical examination of the problematics of seeing,"²⁸ as Foreman stated. What remains unclear, however, is whether these postmodern characteristics constitute a style of design. Jameson claims that in pastiche "stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles."²⁹ The bold designs of Israel Tsypin, Adrienne Lobel, Michael Yeargan, and others are certainly more than mere imitations and pastiche, but it is difficult to state categorically what their style is. It is, though, most definitely *different* from what has constituted modern design.

²⁸Richard Schechner, "Richard Foreman on Richard Foreman," 126.

²⁹Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," 18.