

Mediatization Of The Nation: The Role of Technology in Nationhood at Prague Quadrennial 2019

Introduction

Our project sought to explore the question: 'What is the relationship between scenography and nation?' The focus of the research was to document, analyse and engage with the variety of work showcased at the Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space (PQ) in 2019. As researchers, we both engage with the 'lived experiences' of performers and audiences, and the impact media technologies have upon this. Individually, Thomas Cansdale specialises in environmental scenography whilst Joseph Carter examines identity politics in body and performance. The PQ is the world's largest festival of theatre design, occurring once every four years. It embodies the contemporary scenographic scene and offers its visitors a chance to engage with prominent work from over 79 countries. The festival has been taking place since 1967 and has consistently been a pilgrimage for those interested in the latest trends in performance design. The value we saw in the festival was in the opportunity to have access to a unique environment with such diversity in one site: the Art Nouveau Industrial Palace Prague. It became apparent that the festival would work as the perfect microcosm for our research as it gave us a wide variety of pieces that, whilst intrinsically representing their country, conjured notions of both in a conscious and subconscious way.



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Context

When dealing with the research found on this journey it was apparent that we must first make our readers aware of some of the key terms used in this piece of research. Some of the most common terms talked about in this paper will be the terms 'traditional materialist', 'revolutionary' and 'scenography' itself. Whilst these are terms that are frequently used in a regular lexis, they change meaning when used alongside performance design. Revolutionary in our paper will describe a piece of art that seeks a divergent path, a piece that truly aims to move into new artistic territories not before seen. Traditional materialist, however, applies to art that maintains and preserves a sense of tradition rather than moving into a new practice that casts aside the old. Despite the often right-wing associations with this terminology, we feel that the refusal of technology is a bold enough statement for it to warrant this term. **Scenography** refers to the entire stage-image, in its full sensorial and 3-dimensional being.

Findings

On a more complex level these examples of conscious and sub-conscious manifestations translated into a political reaction through their methods of presentation. At the PQ there were both traditional materialist and revolutionary pieces in the sense of the digital *and* the traditional methods of performance. Against-Again Troupe's *Dictionary of Chaos: Addendum*, for example, used live music, outside spaces, live actors and minimal recordings. This created a traditional materialist performance that identified and explored Taiwan's turbulent past. Bulgaria's *Conglomerate*, on the other hand, was more revolutionary, seen through their use of technology to create an interactive mediatized space to display selected digitized set designs using Augmented and Virtual reality. Utilizing this mediatized space creates a disconnect between the piece and the country's sense of nation. So much of nation is reliant upon physical reinforcement; in the everyday this is the architecture and landscape of the culture, and in the theatre, this is reflected through the environment created on stage.

With this in mind, we identified the need to clarify this relationship between these digital technologies and scenography. Digitisation is the process of converting information from a physical format, or from the physical plane, into a digital one, or virtual plane. Mediatization, then, is the act of digitising material through a media, using technological advancements such as projections, recordings etc. Traditionally, this can be seen to ease and improve communication, such as television broadcasts; however, in a theatrical setting, mediatization can be used to influence our scenographic interpretation of the environment. In *Conglomerate* we noted that two technological practices were prominent: Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR). VR currently isolates the aural and visual senses to create an immersive experience where the intention is for the individual to perceive purely in a virtual plane. Due to the other senses experiencing the physical environment, there exists a disconnect, so total immersion isn't achieved. Alternatively, AR operates to create a virtual aspect to the physical environment, and can be considered inter-media, as it is entirely reliant on the oscillating relationship between the physical and virtual plane.

Applying this method of digitisation to the works of the PQ allowed us to understand how nation can be conveyed through performance. On our travel to the PQ we spent time in the capital cities of the Czech Republic and the United Kingdom. The overwhelming sense of nation one discerns from standing among these buildings and citizens are perceived through the senses and as such can be considered in scenographic terms. In the current frontier of performance design, technology is being used in a way that establishes a disconnect between identity and Nation. If a company were able to digitise the scenographic elements of a nation such as flags, buildings, culture and people then a more somaesthetic approach could be achieved that establishes a full body engagement with the Nation of choice.

Conclusions

Whilst our original question asked us what the relationship between scenography and nation entailed, our documenting of the PQ revealed a fracture between nationhood and a person's perception of the current world. The current world is being reflected in a multitude of technological advancements moving us further and further away from our scenographic interpretation. This was directly addressed in the Lebanese entry that spoke heavily about technology's impact on the individual and how this may interact with the concept of Nationhood. The current generation of young people exist in a symbiosis between the mediated space and the physical environment. Where one permeates the other to an extent that the individual becomes reliant upon the interplay between the two. Events that happen in the physical space serve to generate identity in the virtual plane and the virtual plane serves to offer confirmation for a fulfilled reality. The impact that this has on a person's reality in their nation is that an integrated person may have a greater tie to the illusion they have created online rather than that of the physical plane. This disturbs the connection between the scenography of a nation in the streets with the multiple 'imagined communities' online. The term 'imagined communities' comes from the title of Benedict Anderson's famous 1983 book, in which Anderson discusses the role of imagination as integral to the concept of nationhood itself. The PQ functions and will continue to function as a frontier for experiences such as these: experiences that will disturb the natural boundaries of regions and countries, interrogating traditional forms of performance through reimagined traditional materialist and new revolutionary practices.



Student: Thomas Cansdale & Joseph Carter

Supervisor: Dr Siobhán O'Gorman