Unity, Contrast and Typography as the
Three Coordinates of Scenography

Michael Smalley

University of Southern Queensland

Unity, contrast and topology can be viewed as coordinates helpful in mapping out scenographic meaning-making, analogous to (using the central metaphor of this conference) latitude, longitude and elevation. This model of scenography emphasises the role that these three key relationships between the multi-faceted layers of semiotics in a performance text have in shaping this text's reception by audience members, over and above the semiotics of any particular scenographic decision considered in isolation. Just as to describe the position of an object on the planet we need to know the longitude, latitude and elevation, any scenographic element is located within these three dimensions of unity, contrast and topology simultaneously. While admittedly a reductionist model and a gross simplification, this model has been proven to be useful in both the educational and professional practice of scenographers. Some of the model's utility comes from these flaws: in its attempt to simplify the vast array of scenographic techniques to the dimensions through which they operate dramaturgically it is hoped that collaboration between different theatre artists is enhanced through a common non-technical language. This paper will examine some of the theoretical grounding which informed the model's development, a brief overview of the model itself, and how it has proven useful as an educative and scenographic tool to date.

Keywords: scenography,pedagogy, tertiary training

Michael Smalley is currently the Stage Management and Technical Production Lecturer at the University of Southern Queensland. He graduated from a BA (Theatre - Technical Production and Management) from QUT with distinction in 1999. Before becoming an academic, his professional theatre practice included freelance roles as a stage manager, lighting designer, director, and actor in Australia, England and Canada. He is currently developing an artistic-based pedagogy for technical theatre suitable for enhancing scenographic literacy among high school students and teachers as part of his Masters of Arts research project entitled *Artistically Relevant Technical Theatre: Escaping an Equipment-Based Pedagogy*.

Unity, contrast and topology can be viewed as coordinates helpful in mapping out scenographic meaning-making, analogous to (using the central metaphor of this conference) latitude, longitude and elevation. This model has been proven to be useful in both the educational and professional practice of scenographers. Some of the model's utility comes from its attempt to simplify the vast array of scenographic techniques to the dimensions through which they operate dramaturgically which hopefully enhances collaboration between different theatre artists through providing a common non-technical language. This paper will examine some of the theoretical grounding which informed the model's development, a brief overview of the model itself, and how it has proven useful as an educative and scenographic tool to date.

The first time I attempted to share this model of scenography, I was surprised by the responses. To introduce myself and my approach to technical theatre training the first lecture I gave to both third year technical theatre and first year drama undergraduates at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) in 2011 was substantially the same: outlining that scenographers can use these three coordinates to create meaning for their audiences. Without stating it explicitly, the lecture proposed unity, contrast and topology as key examples of what Lehmann refers to as "sequences and correspondences, nodal and condensation points of perception."[1] While I was expecting that the terminology would be new for most of the students, and that they might even be surprised by an academic and artistic approach to technical theatre, I was not prepared for the fact that almost all found it novel that technical theatre might have meaning for audiences. The first years

seemed to think that acting was everything, and that any technical elements simply functioned as realisations of the text, lending a production some professional polish. Thankfully, the third years had already worked out that there were reasons why their instincts as technical theatre artists led them to make the choices they did, but the concept of scenography and the idea that their practice might involve the deliberate "orchestration and manipulation of the performance environment"[2] so as to have an impact on spectators had eluded them.

It seemed that my approach using unity, contrast, and topology as key coordinates for scenographic reception could be useful to all of these students in providing a common language and framework, helping them to understand scenography and promoting more effective collaboration. This approach was developed in response to existing literature on scenography, as well as reflections on my own drama and theatre education, and my professional theatrical experience which has largely been as a stage manager and a director. Ultimately the goal of the approach is to propose an introductory scenographic model that enhances the ability of all theatre-makers to collaborate effectively and to answer some of the challenges to effective collaboration posed by the increased specialisation of the contemporary theatre industry.

The technological advances that have led to the creation and subsequent fragmentation of technical theatre specialists is comprehensively described by Baugh, who comments that

> as the desire to utilize every conceivable aspect of the scenographic landscape has grown, and the concomitant technologies and workshop skills became more complex and sophisticated, the twentieth century saw an enlargement and a gradual fragmentation of the scenographic team.[3]

This fragmentation has had a major impact on technical theatre pedagogy, leading to what I call an equipment-based pedagogy.

Equipment-based pedagogy holds the equipment, skills and techniques peculiar to the specialisation as fundamental to the teaching and learning, sometimes to the exclusion of all other material. In short, it concentrates on the technical aspects of technical theatre training. While my experience as an undergraduate is over ten years old it serves to illustrate the point. I was enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts (Theatre – Technical Production and Management) and, as the title of the degree suggests, the theatre major was split into strands or specialisations. This meant that most of my classes were spent with the other 'techies' and those few classes spent with the students from the theatre studies or acting specialisations were derided by the technical theatre lecturers as 'theory'. The aesthetic potential of technical theatre was never explicitly taught apart from some references to 'supporting the acting.' This is resonant with the responses of my current students.

A cursory review of the websites of Australian universities offering vocational theatre programs suggests that this conservatory model is still the predominant paradigm for technical theatre training. It was certainly the philosophy of the curriculum I inherited in my current position as the stage management and technical production lecturer at USQ. This approach to scenographic training also seems prevalent overseas. Aronson points out that in America both the theatre education and the economic model of producing theatre results in scholars and practitioners in the fields of drama education, acting, technical theatre, and directing, learning and practising largely in isolation of each other.[4] It is important to note that while this distinction between vocational and analytical approaches to theatre education is apparent in their respective privileging of practice and theory, it is not absolute. Since at least Brown's argument for a balanced approach between the two,[5] academics have sought to blend the two approaches. This is most common in Europe where a stronger tradition of scenography exists, and increasingly in North America. Perhaps significantly, in North America a Bachelors degree usually takes four years. Here, in Australia, vocational technical theatre programs have come to scenography only very recently, if at all, and an equipment-based pedagogy still seems to predominate.

If theatre works best as a collaborative art form, I argue that a more beneficial approach would be an artistic-based model of scenographic practice. Payne seems to agree when he describes his increasingly artistic-based pedagogy of scenography (writing at a time when the term was still largely associated solely with set design) by stating 'the mechanical skills of design still must be taught, but the emphases in the classroom now rest more in showing how these serve the highest aims of the theatre and drama."[6] A model that concentrates on the theatrical aspect of technical theatre and is concerned with its dramatic functions, first and foremost, which can then inform the equipment or processes involved not only has pedagogical benefits, but could aid practicing theatre artists in collaborating more effectively and help develop theatre technicians into scenographers.

Others share this view that concentrating on the theatrical element rather than the technical element is a key distinction between theatre technicians or designers and scenographers. Aronson says design "refers to a very specific and limited aspect of the spatiovisual experience of performance."[7] Svoboda claims, "[s]cenography must draw its inspiration from the play, its author, all of theatre. The scenographer must be in command of the theatre, its master. The average designer is simply not that concerned with theatre."[8] An introductory model of scenography that can be understood by all theatre artists and emphasises its aesthetic and dramaturgical functions may enhance their ability to collaborate effectively making it potentially useful to practicing theatre artists and not solely a pedagogical tool.

The coordinates model of scenography

This search for such a model has resulted in me developing one of my own. It was partially conceived as a stepping stone, both for me and my students, to what I consider are much more academically rigorous, precise, and well-developed approaches to theatre analysis. Particularly influential here have been Gay McAuley's work on how space itself makes meaning in the theatre;[9] theatre semiotics, particularly work by Keir Elam[10] and Patrice Pavis;[11] and Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre*.[12] My model seeks to address some of the criticisms of semiotics (that Elam and Pavis themselves identify, and to some extent address), be equally applicable to dramatic and postdramatic theatre, encapsulate some of the meaning-making potential of space, and synthesise scenography with some of the aesthetic theories I have found most influential. These include the work of John Dewey,[13] Susanne Langer,[14] and Alan Goldman.[15] Above all this, it must provide a useful conception of scenography that is easily explainable to practitioners, and emerging theatre artists, rather than one aimed at academics in performance studies departments, who, it is hoped, will be familiar with the work of these and other writers whose detail, precision, and academic rigour make them more appropriate in that context.

This model, then, casts scenography as relational semiotics. It is the *relationships* of the sign systems that lead to what Pavis calls "integrated semiology,"[16] provide Lehmann's "condensation points,"[17] are the source of Goldman's complete engagement[18] and Langer's "pattern of sentience."[19] A final influence, in terms of the overall shape of this model, both in terms of content and form, is Peter Brook's *The Empty Space*.[20] The three key relationships of unity, contrast and topology I propose were developed from a reflection of my practice and reading about the work of influential scenographers. This model of scenography emphasises the role that these three key relationships between the multi-faceted layers of semiotics in a performance text have in shaping this text's reception by audience members, over and above the semiotics of any particular scenographic decision considered in isolation. Just as to describe the position of an object on the planet we need to know the longitude, latitude and elevation, any scenographic element is located within these three dimensions of unity, contrast and topology simultaneously. While admittedly a reductionist model and a gross simplification, this model has been proven to be useful in both the education and professional practice of scenographers. Indeed, some of the model's utility comes from these flaws: in its attempt to simplify the vast

array of scenographic techniques and theoretical approaches to the dimensions through which they operate dramaturgically, it is hoped that collaboration between different theatre artists is enhanced through a common non-technical language.

The work and theories of Appia, Craig and Svoboda have had the most lasting influence in helping me to articulate this model of how scenographers can create dramatic meaning and thus engage an audience. Appia[21] seemed to me to be searching for unity. By drawing all of the elements together and using them to interpret and express the 'text' (which in his world of Wagnerian opera was the music), he sought to create a performance text where the various elements were part of a whole and not discrete elements in conflict with each other. Craig[22] too seemed to be arguing for integration of all of the elements into a unified whole. Like me, they seem to have been concerned with the problems that occur when the distinct art-forms that make up theatre do not inter-relate and how a theatrical work can be more engaging for an audience when these distinct art-forms are designed to be read in concert for their dramatic meaning, rather than meanings in their own fields. For example, a backdrop in theatre should not be valued as a painting in the gallery is, but for how it contributes to the dramatic meanings created by its interaction with all of the other elements of the production and the audience. This sense of unity is one dimension by which different scenographic decisions can create relational dramatic meanings.

The second dimension I believe scenographers (and other theatre artists) use to create relational dramatic meanings is contrast. While implicitly understanding this in both theory and practice it was not until reading William Ball's example of an anachronistic prop (related in Payne)[23] that I understood it explicitly. While Ball's point was described in terms of unity and the dangers of breaking this once established, I could see that when used for effect inserting such an incongruous element would immediately grab the attention of the audience and, if appropriate, highlight that scenographic choice as a sign-post of important dramatic meaning. Symbols, comments on sub-textual layers of meaning, distinct changes from the production's orthodoxy, and other forms of dramatic meaning are often created in this way. How strongly a scenographic choice contrasts from a production's unifying elements is the second dimension of creating relational dramatic meaning.

On first glance, unity and contrast may appear to be just the flip side of each other, but they are not. Dramaturgically, unity serves to establish the conventions of the performance text, laying out the limits of what is to be explored and the production's internal logic (or lack thereof). Contrast is a relationship scenographers and other theatre artists use to identify departures from these conventions and/or variations within the limits established. Often, the difference is in the sign system chosen. For example, a production set in a particular period, will usually use this period as a unifying relationship (the sets, props, and costumes will largely conform to this period, and this conformity will create meaning for the audience), but the costume designer may use contrasting materials, colours, and patterns of dress to signify the characters' different social statuses, for example. Ball's example of an anachronistic prop would be highly contrasting in this circumstance because it breaks the convention and unless used precisely (that is it should also be highly significant for the audience), could disturb the spatial and temporal relationships of the production, which is precisely the third dimension of this model: topology.

Although many scenographers and scenographic theorists understand that their influence involves manipulating issues of space and time, one of the most eloquent in both theory and practice for me is Josef Svoboda. Svoboda's concept is usually translated into English as "polyscenic-ness" [24] harnessing the potential of a stage space to represent multiple places over multiple times. I have borrowed the term 'topology' from mathematics where it is regarded as the study of continuous distortions of space over time that do not result in breaking or tearing. In terms of scenography this distortion of space and time has two aspects: the internal and external topology of a production. Internal topology relates to any distortions of space and time contained within the fictional world being presented; external topology is the distortion of space and time between the

audience's world and the fictional world. This, I am fully aware, reduces McAuley's very useful taxonomy of spatial function in the theatre to two categories, despite her well-reasoned advice that there needs to be at least three.[25] In my defence, this model was designed to be simplistic and a generalisation in order to start conversations and thought, leading to more detailed analysis and other problematisations later. In our context, as opposed to mathematics, what represents breaking or tearing is the production losing control of whether or not they can engage an audience. For example, in a realistic play the external topology is represented by the audience's willing suspension of disbelief that enables them to be engaged with the fictional world as real. If, through a comedy of scenographic errors, the fireplace façade unintentionally falls apart revealing all its theatricality, members of the audience may find it impossible to remain engaged in the desired way: the external topology has been distorted so much it has been torn. Of course, such a device may be fully intended in a self-referential farce or epic styles to amuse or alienate the audience and thus demonstrate their continued control of audience engagement.

Unity, contrast and topology are for me the three dimensions of scenographic possibility. I see each as a spectrum: from full to an absence of unity, contrast or distortion of space and time. Scenographic possibility exists within this three-dimensional space: each scenographic decision has a certain potential to unify, contrast and to distort the spatial and temporal relationships of the elements of the production at the same time. For example, the choice of a particular period in a realistic style serves to unify a lot of scenographic elements by this period (that is it should be significant: the choice of that specific time should mean something to an audience); limits the extent to which contrast can be used (a production set in a specific time period may use sets, costumes and props that appear to be manufactured before this period to signify the extent to which things are run-down, or old-fashioned, for example, but, unless seeking to break the realistic style for dramatic purposes, should not use sets, costumes, or props that appear to be manufactured after that time period); and implies the external topological distance that scenographers will seek to negotiate (that is how do we 'transport' the audience of the production from the real period in which it is being produced to the time period in which it is set. This often leads scenographers to, for example, choose props with iconic designs from this period, even if these are outside of what those characters would 'actually' own because of their lack of wealth or interest to keep up with the times.). Importantly the choice of time period in this example operates along all three of these dimensions at once, and can only be precisely located in this model of scenographic meaning-making by knowing all three coordinates. Further, it is the relationship any scenographic decision has with every other scenographic decision (each one of which can only be located by knowing *all* three of their coordinates as well) that shapes an audience's attendance to specific aspects of the overwhelming and dynamic nature of the vast array of the performance text's components at any time. In other words, (and to repeat myself and run the risk of protesting too much) this model is intentionally deceptively simple, allowing it to be problematised as people grow more familiar with it.

The Model's Utility

In further defence of the model's simplicity and over-generalisation of much seminal work in the fields of performance analysis, scenography, and aesthetics, it is precisely this simplicity that has rendered it useful in a wide variety of contexts. It has been helpful in describing various theatrical styles; enhancing my ability to talk about and practice scenography; and to emphasise the theatrical inherent in technical theatre in my teaching to many different sets of students.

In this model different theatrical styles can be defined in terms of being restricted to specific parts of this three-dimensional space. For example, naturalistic styles can be seen as constricted to that space represented by the highly unified (everything must belong to the real world being portrayed); low contrast (scenographic distinctions must be made subtly and must be confined by the strong unity); and a strong divide between

external and internal topology (the fourth wall), with the internal topology brooking no distortions (the fictional world presented usually contains only one space with events occurring over 'real' time). This application of the model has been useful for students at USQ by reciprocally developing their understanding of different theatrical styles throughout history, and of how scenography creates meaning for audiences, and, most importantly, that the two things are related.

By using the framework and the language of this scenographic model, my own practice has been enhanced. This enhancement has occurred as a result of making explicit those things which had largely been driven by instinct before. This has had the dual effect of helping me diagnose scenographic issues on more than one occasion, and enabling me to communicate more effectively with the other artists collaborating on the production. I also believe my scenographic practice has become more engaging to audiences as my awareness of, and competency using, this model has grown. The most rewarding signs of the model's potential, though, have been discovered by using it as the basis of my pedagogical practice.

During the short period in which I have been able to share this model with students in various guises it has proven useful in a variety of contexts. I have found it instrumental in helping emerging scenographers transform their practice from instinctive to understanding their place in creating dramatic meanings; awakening an interest in and understanding of scenography amongst high school students and first year university students who have generally had very limited exposure to technical theatre; demonstrating to drama educators that the artistry of technical theatre is fundamentally the artistry of theatre as a whole and that they are therefore equipped to teach it even with limited resources or knowledge of equipment; and helping practicing scenographers understand their instincts and find new ways of sharing their knowledge. By rendering our scenographic decisions able to be described by three coordinates that can be defined in a non-technical, artistic language, it seems there is potential for us to collaborate more effectively with theatre artists outside of our own specialisation, enabling us to find each other when we get lost.

NOTES

[1] Hans-Thies Lehmann, Postdramatic Theatre, trans. Kearen Jürs-Munby (London: Routledge, 2006) 93.

[2] Joslin McKinney and Philip Butterworth, The Cambridge Introduction to Scenography, Cambridge Introductions to Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 4.

[3] Christopher Baugh, Theatre, Performance and Technology : The Development of Scenography in the Twentieth Century, Theatre and Performance Practices (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 214.

[4] Arnold Aronson, Looking into the Abyss: Essays on Scenography (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005) 7.

[5] Firman Brown, "A Rededication to the Great Profession of Teaching," Design for Arts in Education 92.4 (1991).

[6] Darwin Reid Payne, Scenographic Imagination, 3rd ed. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993).

[7] Aronson 7.

[8] Jarka Burian, The Scenography of Josef Svoboda, 1st ed. (Middletown, Conn.,: Wesleyan University Press, 1971) 20.

[9] Gay McAuley, Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1999).

[10] Keir Elam, The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2002).

[11] Patrice Pavis, Analyzing Performance: Theater, Dance, and Film, trans. D. Williams (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003) 311-319.

[12] Lehmann.

[13] John Dewey, Art as Experience (New York: Capricorn Books, 1959).

[14] Susanne Langer, Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953).

[15] See Alan Goldman, 'The Aesthetic', in Dominic Lopes and Berys Gaut, ed., The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics (London: Routledge, 2001) 181-192 and 'Evaluating Art', in Peter Kivy, ed., The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004) 93-108.

[16] Pavis 314.

[17] Lehmann 93.

[18] Goldman, in Kivy, 101.

[19] Langer 31.

[20] Peter Brook, The Empty Space (New York: Atheneum, 1968).

[21] Adolphe Appia, Adolphe Appia: Texts on Theatre, trans. Richard Beacham (London: Routledge, 1993).

[22] Edward Gordon Craig, On the Art of the Theatre (London: Heinemann, 1924).

[23] Payne 68-69.

[24] Josef Svoboda, 'The Secret of Theatrical Space', trans. J. M. Burian, in Jane Collins and Andrew Nisbet, ed., Theatre and Performance Design: A Reader in Scenography (London: Routledge, 2010) 390-394.

[25] McAuley 25.