

Life is Serious; **ART SERENE**

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SCENOGRAPHY AND INTERMEDIALITY. A STUDY OF MACHINE BODIES AND ATMOSPHERES IN STAGING: EL VIAJE A LA LUNA O VIAJE A LA X (DE LA LUNA A LA TIERRA)

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Abstract

The paper is part of my research carried out in the speciality of Art History at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, in the 2022 year. In this project I propose to analyse the visual and spatial narrative of the notion “human-machine” in Alejandro Luna’s scenographic design for the dance piece, *El viaje a la luna o viaje a la X (De la luna a la tierra)* premiered in 2002. The staging is a free version of *Le Voyage dans La Lune* by Georges Méliès, directed by Raúl Parrao as part of the homage that the *Compañía Nacional de Danza* paid to the feature film.

The concept of the “human-machine” was first described in the 18th century by the philosopher René Descartes, who compared the complexity of the functioning of the human body to the machine. For the play, Alejandro Luna designed atmospheres that from my perspective establish an analogy between the body and the machine. To study this phenomenon, I focused on the scenographic elements and the multimedia, which was made with stereoscopic images that recall the cinematographic trickery of Georges Méliès. The script consists of digital images, combining flat and stereoscopic images. To describe the different atmospheres, I chose three images. The first, the stereoscopic image of the Golconda; the second, a photographic impression of the biomechanised movements of the dancers among the scenographic elements, which allude to machines. Finally, the flat image of the architecture of the factories. The choice of different types of images helps us to understand the role that atmospheres play in an immersive experience. The importance of this staging from the beginning of the 21st century lies precisely in the fact that for the first time, the spectators were part of a Mexican production that integrated multimedia into the language of the stage.

Keywords: human machine, scenography, stereoscopic images, atmospheres, *mise-en-scène*, cinematic trickery.

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout their history, cinema and theatre have shared a set of tricks, skills and technical discoveries that have contributed to the development of illusionism; it is possible to draw parallels between the spectacular scene of the Roman circus to the special effects cinema and 3D virtual theatre (Bradley, 2020) of the 21st century. Even before the invention of the camera and the cinematograph, trickery played an important role in the development of stage machinery. Since the 18th century, various mechanical devices were created, such as the image projector and the stereoscope, which gradually fostered the formation of audiovisual language and new atmospheres in magicians' shows, cinema and later, theatre, a language that paved the way for immersive experiences. In this research, I will analyze Alejandro Luna's scenographic design for the dance piece *El viaje a la luna o viaje a la X (de la luna a la tierra)*, premiered in 2002 at the Teatro de las Artes del Centro Nacional de las Artes in Mexico City, under the direction of the choreographer Raúl Parrao. I will concentrate on the scenography and the multimedia proposal that Raúl Luna developed with digital images. Also, with the costume designers María and Tolita Figueroa, Marcelo Gaete as musical compositor and Víctor Flores as the executive producer. This production was part of the international tribute to the centenary of the film *Le Voyage dans La Lune*, by Georges Méliès, presented by the Compañía Nacional de Danza in Mexico City and Lyon, France.

As will be observed, this study considers scenography as a piece in itself that integrates or enters into dialogue with the other elements of the staging, in a parallel way to how one can contemplate a part of a whole, how a sculptural ensemble or a mural integrated into the architecture can be study separate. In this essay I will only try to outline the way in which Luna used certain resources, atmospheres, and languages to pay homage to the film by Georges Méliès. Due to the scope of this research and the intrinsic complexity of studying a montage, especially when there is no access to the audiovisual records of the play, I will focus on outlining Alejandro Luna's visual homage to Méliès' tricks through scenographic and multimedia design. The innovative proposal combined visual narrative with the technological resources of cinema, as well as integrating the languages of theatre and dance. The piece invited the spectator to take a journey through the history of cinema through Méliès; it was based on the cyclorama as a projection screen, and included optical games, atmospheres, light effects and scenographic objects that brought the spectators' senses into play. The multimedia proposal functioned as a reference to trickery and the beginning of special effects in cinema, which permeated the living arts throughout the 20th century.

It should be noted that, although this staging is very relevant because it introduced virtual reality into Mexican dance and theatre, no video record has been located. This research was based on the analysis of photographic material, some sketches, and other available images. Although a version of the story board was located, it is not known if it is complete, if there were modifications for the staging, the time that each projection lasted, the characteristics of the musical script, the relationship between the choreographic design and the multimedia. All of these are very important elements for the aesthetic experience of the scenic phenomenon.

2. *EL VIAJE A LA LUNA O VIAJE A LA X (DE LA LUNA A LA TIERRA)*: STEREOSCOPIC IMAGES AS A REPLACEMENT FOR THE TRICKERY OF GEORGES MÉLIÈS

El viaje a la luna o viaje a la X (De la luna a la tierra) is inspired by Jules Verne's 1865 literary work *From the Earth to the Moon* and the 1902 feature film *Le Voyage dans la Lune*. The choreography is based on the bizarre dance concept of Raúl Parrao. Where the bizarre is the unusual terror that beats underneath everyday life. It is influenced by theatre, comic art, and special effects to explore the unknown of everyday life and the body. The choreographic piece includes the letter X, which alludes to the group U.X. Onodanza, founded by the choreographer, represents the network of meanings implied in this letter: '[...] a connotation of unknown, mathematical and genetic, even a prohibition, rejection, danger and even death' (Correa & Vasconcelos). (Correa & Vasconcelos, 1996). Based on Parrao's proposal, the production design delves into the illusory possibilities of stereoscopic images, the magic of trickery and the special effects that more than a century ago materialised man's dream of travelling to the moon with stop motion and photomontage. These are simple effects, but potentially important for cinema and the living arts of the 20th century. The choreography takes elements from contemporary ballet and bizarre dance to create scenes full of illusionism and trickery in the manner of Méliès, who conceived the cinema as a 'magical artefact' capable of combining different

artistic disciplines. Optical illusions, image substitution, animated photography and film photomontage were replaced by stereoscopic images, special effects, and lighting with the intention of bringing viewers closer to an immersive experience.

In this dance and theatre production, the success of the multimedia work lies in the fact that it provided a new way of telling a story visually and corporeally. Twenty years ago, the technology that made it possible to create images and simulated spaces by visual devices were not interesting to stage creators, because they were considered languages made for the visual arts, cinema, video games, and above all for science. In fact, Raúl Luna's professional experience was based on animation productions for television and film; it was Alejandro Luna who, from his theatrical and cinematographic experience, created the narrative and the visual script of the project. In the case of the choreography, the multimedia work mainly influenced the way in which the dancers inhabited the space and related to that other materiality that was generated from the back of the stage, with two projectors with DLP technology and a cyclorama as a projection screen in Italian format. As for the reception, the spectator not only concentrated on the bodies in movement, the music, the sounds, the objects, the lighting, the costumes, but also on the illusionism produced by the movement of the images. For the multimedia design, original scenes were taken from the film, such as the meeting of the astronomers, the construction of the rocket, the chimneys on the roof of the laboratory, the take-off platform, the impact of the rocket on the space station, the impact of the rocket on the moon, the arrival of the astronomers, the dream of the stars, the dream of Phoebus and Saturn, the journey to earth of the Selenites, the Selenites and the palace, the fall of the rocket to earth, underwater scenes, the steamship, the arrival and reception of the astronomers on earth. (Fig.1)

Over the course of 60 minutes, 29 representative shots of the feature film were projected, 23 of which were a combination of flat and stereoscopic images influenced by the plastic art of Méliès. The anaglyph technique was used, which consists of a single image containing two mixed images corresponding to the points of view of each eye, but printed in different colors, such as red and blue, or red and green. For this production, the first color combination was used. This effect can only be seen with glasses or 3D viewers; their lenses or filters must be of the same colors as the images produced, in this case red and blue. The effect of the glasses is to hide one of the mixed images from one of the eyes. That is, the red lens hides the red part of the image from your eye and the blue lens does the same with its respective eye and image. The result is that each eye sees a different image. The fact that the stereoscopic images are slightly displaced is so that each eye sees them independently and the brain processes them by joining them together to obtain a three-dimensional image, like a real image (Navarro & Martínez, 2018, pp.18). In the end, the projection hosted three-dimensional static images through stereography and moving images with an immersive experience. The immersive experience was similar to 3D cinema with stereoscopic projections in colour accompanied by the orchestra.

Considering that the concept of the virtual was still unnamed in Mexican theatre, the trick (or effect) of bringing the spectator closer to virtual reality (VR) through stereoscopic images was remarkably innovative for the stage at the beginning of the 21st century. Once the spectator agreed to put on the 3D glasses, the sensorial experience became immersive and for a few seconds, their body forgot the frontality of their seat to enter an artificial 3D scenario.

What is interesting about this experience is the relationship that the spectator established with his or her body and the stage space. On the one hand, the Italian-style distribution of the scenographic space and its theatrical elements (objects) reaffirmed the theatrical convention of the black box in conjunction with the bodies of the dancers. On the other hand, the experience of cinema and virtual reality adapted to the staging questioned the place of bodies or non-bodies in a kind of mixed experience, which started from presentiality and conviviality, and culminated in the immersion into an artificial 3D stage. In this way, the spectator's experience approached the experience of special effects cinema.



Fig.1. Sequence of images from the film *Le Voyage dans la Lune*. Collage of images: The meeting of the astronomers; the construction of the rocket; the chimneys on the roof of the laboratory; the launch pad; the impact of the rocket on the moon; the arrival of the astronomers. Note. By Mahatma Ordaz, 2022.

3. ANALYSIS OF THE SCENOGRAPHIC AND MULTIMEDIA SPACE

In the darkness of the third call, the musical accompaniment of the orchestra can be heard. The musicians are placed concentrically on the stage and are surrounded by a dim, warm overhead light that helps to highlight the projection of the title of the work, the image is present from the back of the cyclorama. Meanwhile, the dancers move around the stage. Gloom and haze take over the scene until it gradually becomes empty. The stillness of the stage is interrupted by the entrance of a dancer, who turns his back to the audience and stands at the centre of the stage while staring at the cyclorama. The screen is illuminated by a collage of six images of 19th century toys: a locomotive, a drum, a horse statuette, a rag doll, a clown and a caricatured image of Méliès in his youth. The images fade away and two characters take centre stage, with taciturn movements they invite the rest of the dancers to occupy the rest of the space. From stillness to chaos. A stereoscopic image of René Magritte's *Golconda* (1953) is projected onto the cyclorama. The static bodies in the painting appear to fall slowly onto the stage while the bodies that inhabit the stage become agile, repetitive to the point of becoming mechanical. (Fig.2) The *Golconda* becomes part of the playful space. As a trick, the performer invites the spectators to reflect about the play of realities (virtual and real reality) that coexist on stage.

The relationship of similarities between the bodies of the dancers and the character of René Magritte is suggested by the costumes: white shirt, black suit, and bowler hat with which the artist often photographed or painted himself. This play of projected images and bodies in movement makes us think of stage reality as a trick or a game of perceptions that at times makes us notice the 'physical I' and at others, the 'virtual I' of the dancers. Let us understand the 'virtual self' as the expression and extension of the 'physical self' within the plane of virtual existence that functions as, '[...] the active principle, that which reveals the split potency of the real [...]' (Diodato Roberto, 2011, pp. 19). In the case of the spectator, his or her attention is divided between the two planes, the physical one that happens in the frame of the black box and the stage, and the virtual one that happens on the projection on the cyclorama. The projections take influence from futurist architecture to place the spectator in the technical progress of the 20th century and in the surrealism of Magritte.

One of the questions that arises in this reflection is how does Magritte's pictorial play relate to the film *Le Voyage dans la Lune* and the choreography of *Journey to the Moon*? It is possible to think that the three works problematize from their resources the place of the material body and the body as metaphor. That is to say, a body exists, relates, has limits and in contrast, creates extensions and imaginaries, and at times, thinks itself as the imagination of an existence. However, the action of imagining other bodies imperiously needs the body itself in order to feel and perceive other materialities.

From the discourse of technical progress, the dreamed journey to the moon had already been glimpsed by Galileo, Copernicus and of course reflected upon by the enlightened, such as René Descartes and his concept of the 'human machine' (Aguilar, 2010, pp. 764). However, it was literature that appealed to the reader's imagination to make the journey to the moon a reality.



Fig. 2. *El viaje a la luna o viaje a la X (De la luna a la tierra)* [Photograph]. Centro Nacional de investigación, Documentación e Información Teatral Rodolfo Usigli (2002).



Fig. 3. *El viaje a la luna o viaje a la X (De la luna a la tierra)* [Photograph]. Centro Nacional de investigación, Documentación e Información Teatral Rodolfo Usigli (2002).

In Figure 3, Méliès presents a frontal space, with a background scenography made of canvas painted frames that simulate a construction workshop. The scene is saturated with workers at work. The metal building dominates the scene; the repetition in perspective of the roof gives a sense of enclosure and solidity to the space. The seriality of the industrial structure and the objects in the warehouse match the sensation of the constant movement of the machines and the dynamism of the workers' bodies banging against the

metal structures. The actions of the men emphasize the importance of the body, the strength and precision of the workers in the mechanization of the tools. In contrast, in the scenography, Luna proposes a stage in *chiaroscuro*, inhabited by the bodies of the dancers in movement, bodies that seem biomechanised and referenced by coordinates. The position and movement of the six dancers ambiguously draw the axes of the Cartesian plane (perpendicular movements that evoke two axes: the horizontal x-axis and a vertical y-axis). A path from 'x' to 'y' defines the direction of the dancers, two perpendicular axes that intersect, intersected by the lighting, and approaching the center of the stage. According to Luna, 'X' refers to the illusion of travelling to the third dimension, but also represents the rocket's return journey to earth.

There are three representations that do not escape Descartes' orthogonal axes: the cylinder, represented by the vibrant wooden bowl that houses the founding fuel of homo machine; the sphere that functions as the propellant of the slightest movement and takes the form of the cold gears of the machine; and finally, the rectangle materialized on the projection screen and placed at the back of the stage. The sepia-colored smoke completely envelops the space and the outlines of the orthogonal projection on the cyclorama.

Luna visualizes the choreographic sequence as the detonator, the founding fuel of the machine. The circle is present in the form of the moon, the rocket, and the gear in the choreographic piece. In the film, Méliès makes a general shot of a giant gear, which occupies half the frame; he repeats the formula with the rocket, but now from the center of the frame. In the choreography, the gear is replicated in space; first, it is projected onto the cyclorama as an isometric projection, then it is presented as a break in front of the audience, and finally, it takes the form of a boiling cauldron. The scenographic design is conceived as an analogy of the human body and the machine. The scenographic objects such as the cauldron and the gear are understood as a metaphor for biomechanising bodies: the dancers enveloped by lights and smoke. The stereoscopic projections of the gears and the roofs of the industrial buildings are repeated cyclically, others are transformed, such as the rocket reaching the moon, which acts as a telescope and the lens of George Méliès' camera.

4. CONCLUSION

With this brief reflection we are interested, on the one hand, in rescuing an innovative stage project and precursor of audiovisual media in the Mexican performing arts of the 20th century, and on the other, in recovering Alejandro Luna's homage to the feature film *Le Voyage dans la Lune*, and to the technical and artistic legacy of the filmmaker George Méliès. In an effort not to forget both creators and their contributions to 20th century theatre and cinema, we sought to understand a multidisciplinary project from the influence of the French director, but also from the complexity of cinematographic language, the performativity of visual discourses, theatricality, theatrical atmospheres, lighting and stage space.

The re-signification of the body and gestuality in *Journey to the Moon* recalls what for Antonin Artaud was truly theatrical: corporeality, gestuality and glossolalia in substitution of the word, what it meant for cinema at the end of the 19th century: the possibility of substituting verbal expression for gesture. In the 'theatre of cruelty', Artaud describes the concrete language of the theatre as a language that satisfies all the senses and not the word. This language is the gesture recovered from oriental theatre, expressed on stage by the actor, who is the possessor of gestural, bodily, and visual language. Visual language is the poetry of space that creates images with bodies, with the vibratory quality of sound (Artaud, 1978, pp. 94) and light, which not only colors the scene, but also brings suggestion, movement, and dynamism. What Artaud did not foresee at the time was that, in the last forty years of the twentieth century, technology and the relations of technical production would penetrate the experience of socio-cultural and artistic relations, bringing about an imminent change in human and artistic interactions.

The 20th century theatre experience not only involved the experience of ephemerality and cruelty, but also the search for other means of expression, audiovisual technologies and multi-sensory experiences that would motivate audiences to go to theatres. The trip to the moon happened 20 years ago, the details and the experience remained only in the minds of those who attended. However, the photographic record and the story board allow us to outline the creative richness of an *avant-garde* production that broke with artistic frontiers and opted for the hybridisation of media on stage. In this sense, Luna made two great contributions to the 21st century stage: first, he transformed the stage space into a place for new artistic and technological relations

and intersections. Second, through the visual language and the atmospheres of the spaces, he constructed an idea of scene, body and spectator that was totally different from that used in 20th century staging.

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