Images' Hypertrophy in Contemporary Scenic Design. From Imagination Transcendence to New *Media* Immanence in Scenic Performances †

Santi Centineo

ICAR/16 Interior and Exhibit Design, Department of Architectural Engineering and Architecture, Polytechnic of Bari, via Orabona, 4 (Campus), 70126 Bari, Italy; santi.centineo@poliba.it; Tel.: +39-3294480324 or +39-0805963367

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Abstract: The evolution of the descriptive codes (overlooking writing, as it is worth a dedicated dissertation, while paying particular attention to images) presents a very complex situation, which is essentially due to images' productive hypertrophy, with all the consequences resulting from it, and first of all the need for proper reading codes. However, the return to a two-dimensional world ensures that the evocative power of images (together with its transcendence and the faith in that intrinsic artistic value) gives way to a descriptive and immanent continuum, which deprives image of its artistic potential, rather classifying it as mere technological product.

Keywords: contemporary scenic design; virtual scenic design; performativity; imagination loss; new catharses

1. Introduction and Method

In the Italian definition of representation—with particular reference to its application to the field of scenic design—the primary meaning of "re-ad-praesentare", literally "make something present again", provides a double interpretative possibility.

On the one hand, according to the Vitruvian theory, scenic design is a graphic/pictorial/sculptural method which uses perspective rules, combining them with the technical contribution of stagecraft. On the other hand, in Italian the same word indicates the results of this descriptive process, which end in a performative aspect: the scenic performance. This ambivalence is not perceived in English, but here it is interesting to understand the reasons and the results of this single semantic root, as it has determined the development of a millenary phenomenon, which originated in the Classical World.

Therefore, scenic design can be considered as the link between cognitive image, which is rooted in reality, and the one represented on a projected space, whose definition is quite heteroclite.

The experimental character and the innovation elements of the discipline match the contemporary situation, in which setup-related topics are strongly relevant today.

After having defined this point, it is necessary to reflect on how the communicative and synesthetic modes give increasing importance to images, up to cause a decisive change in the aesthetic and performative process. Finally, it will be possible to think about the fact that representation parameters need—or are subject to—a review of the classical reference criteria.

In addressing the topic, some basic definitions will be provided. Starting from them, a series of corollaries and philosophical implications will be deduced, which have determined the development rules of the representation, interpreted according to the two above mentioned aspects.

At the beginning of the Twentieth Century, on the basis of a series of historical, social, economical and technological phenomena, a dense sequence of events changed the perception of the world and thus, unavoidably, its representation possibility.

This process decisively sped up during the second half of that century and, precisely for this reason, the comparison with some scholars—who perceived the rapid change in progress and tried to extrapolate some study categories—is useful. This comparison permits not only to verify the truthfulness of their theoretical hypotheses, but also to understand the feasibility of these postulates in relation to the outlining futurable scenarios.

2. Preliminary Arguments

Already in the Vitruvian definition, it is clear that scenic design is a perspective representation which, using projective rules, identifies an alternative projection to the two-dimensional one on the picture plane (perspective) [1]. Between the object and its projection on the perspective picture, all the projecting visual rays produce infinite points which satisfy the alignment to the subject's point of view. One of these points sets is scenic design.

In representing the product of this process according to graphic convention, it is evident that its perspective is identical to the one of the object, while the "deformation" parameters emerge only from its orthogonal projections (particularly, the top view and the longitudinal ones). This is the reason why scenic design is sometimes defined as "deceptive".

Also built architecture made use of this expedient (Bramante's apse of Santa Maria presso San Satiro, Figure 1c, Bernini in the Scala Regia in Vatican, Figure 2, Borromini in the Galleria Spada in Rome, Figure 1a,b, etc.). Perhaps, precisely this "deception" has rather revealed itself to be among the causes of the success of these buildings.
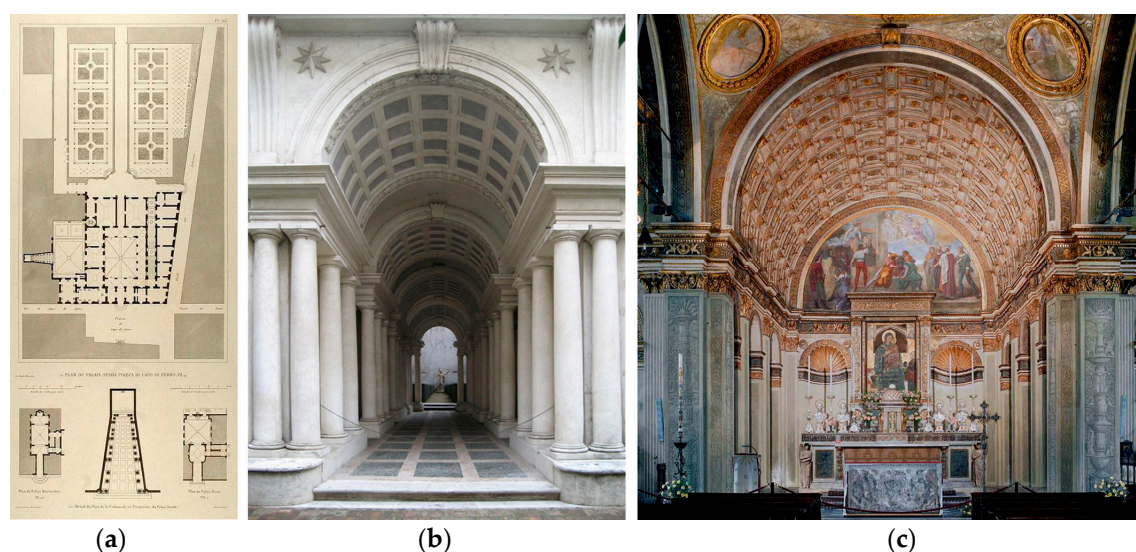

(**a**)　　　　　　　　　　　　　(**b**)　　　　　　　　　　　　　(**c**)

Figure 1. The perspective deception as scientifically controllable expedient: Francesco Borromini's Galleria at Palazzo Spada, Roma, 1653. (**a**) Drawings; (**b**) Photograph; (**c**) Donato Bramante's apse in Santa Maria presso San Satiro, Milano, 1480, photograph.

However, in scenic design, the word *representation* is referred not only to the type of geometric construction of this system, but also to the results of this process, expanding its primary scientific meaning—that of planning requirement (the graphical representation)—to that of realization effect (the theatrical representation). The first meaning includes all the disciplinary issues (*re-ad-praesentare* = make something present again) in which, through graphic convention (and thus a codifiable image) the objectification process of the idea can be observed, together with all the deriving implications: from prefiguration to scientific control, from technical implementation to documental memory. The second meaning extends the terms of the question: *re-ad-praesentando*, once again, through a second convention (the theatrical one, this time differently codifiable), reality becomes

image according to a subjective interpretation process, which delegates each recipient to create an individual narrative path, that draws from all the matrixes: the cerebral, the cognitive, the emotional, the archetypical, the cultural, the collective, and the spiritual one [2,3].

This double coding leads the three-dimensional object—primary reality—to a first two-dimensional preliminary interpretation (one of the many possible ones), and to a second interpretative and cognitive process, in which the subject evokes one of the many possible imageries.

Every time technological progress expanded the limits of imagination (from telescope to press, from photography to cinema), depriving arts of their eidetic monopoly, a break was observed. Therefore, art, in a defensive position, sought refuge in what is oneiric, subconscious, visionary, cryptic [4]. Its role of metaphysical and virtual engine is more and more undermined by technology, which has become competitive in this duty [5]. Its task, today, is making metaphysical prefiguration immanent, while, in the past, its function was to objectify the subjective vision.

In accordance with the introductive considerations, from the first meaning of the term representation—that of planning requirement—emerges its progressive giving up of its prefigurative potential. Instead, the second meaning—that of projecting process—highlights the user's tendency to deviate from any cognitive result, as today there is no space for imagination, since everything becomes image [6].
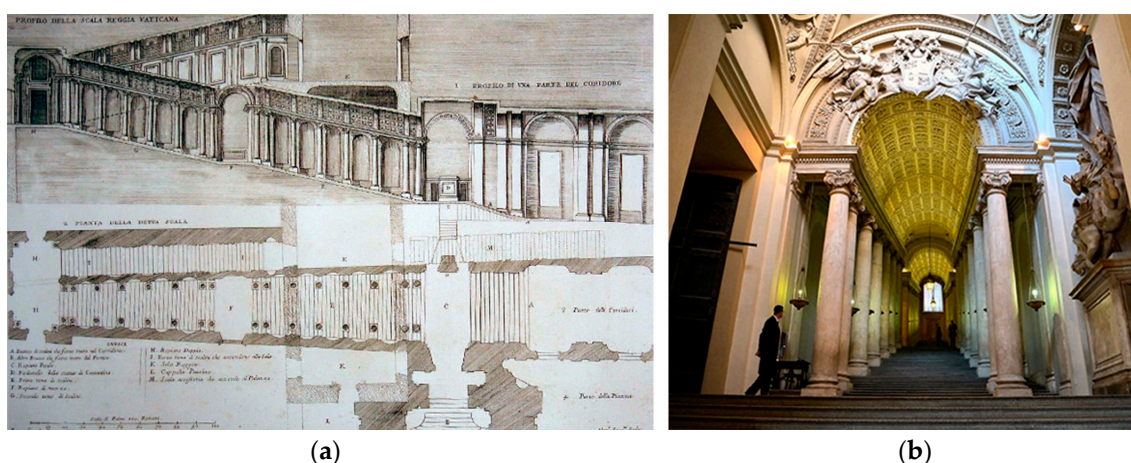

(**a**)   (**b**)

Figure 2. The perspective deception as a scientifically controllable expedient: Gian Lorenzo Bernini's Scala Regia in Vatican, 1663–1666. (**a**) Drawings; (**b**) Photograph.

3. From Image to Photographic Image

The exhibition which took place in the atelier of the photographer Nadar in Paris in 1874—conventionally marking the birth of Impressionism—can be considered a divide in the history of figurativeness. This event ratifies the official birth of a fundamental movement concerning images, even if, over ten years before, artists had already started a review process of the way of conceiving representation. The event is crucial because it marks an acquisition of consciousness, a point of no return, but, above all, it connects the possibility of shape reproducibility to technology and to the concept of seriality. Essentially, it could be considered as an application of the industrial results to the world of images at a first stage, and of art as immediate consequence.

The understandable reaction of the artistic world to photography is immediate. On one side, artists see their mastership frustrated by technology. The loss of the monopoly of imagination leads them to demonize the new images production tool, or, oppositely, to progressively reconsider their style. It is not a (losing) battle anymore against who is able to better describe reality, but an introspective flight, almost a defense on the strength of the artistic power which will still permit them to interpret reality for a long time.

On the other side, photography slowly starts to become art. The photographer begins to combine merely technical aspects with artistic creativity, which, decades later, will be analyzed for their strong semiotic effect.

However, photographic eye is progressively destroying the concept of artistic autography, introducing the allographic matrix in the creative process.

As keenly analyzed by Wunenburger [6] (pp. 147–148), at a first stage, image arises the problem of *mimesis*, together with everything derives from it: if the image is a subject reproduction, it partly reproduces its completeness, but it also loses something, compared to the original. This concept is repeatedly used by Barthes [7,8], who, because of this, frequently connects this process to the idea of death.

At a second stage, a numerical scientific image codification follows. Probably, it is an epistemological category the subject implements as a reassurance, although it actually ends up incorporating the eidetic information into the matter. An interior space is generated, a place in a context created by the imaginative power: the *Gestell* that—according to Heidegger [9,10]—allows technique to become prevailing tool of truth.

So far, there is an analogy between what could constitute the perspective image of scenic design and the photographic image.

The third stage introduces the theme of image reproducibility. Here the two processes differentiate, because in the case of scenery, its potential reproducibility to infinity is—from time to time—subject to a performance mastership. On the contrary, in the case of images reproducibility, not only there is a process of reality objectification, but also—without entering either the four subjectivity levels indicated by Barthes [8] or the extraordinary Walter Benjamin's intuitions [11,12]—the finding of a meaning or a classification category for this representation is transferred to the users.

Besides, it is Abi Warburg [13] who realizes the extent of the phenomenon range, through a revolutionary approach aimed at finding the essential matrix of the image, differently from (or complementarily to) Barthes' approach, which is focused not only on the essential sphere of the image, but also on the existential one.

Moreover, while in scenic design the image is shared by a community of users, who—precisely thanks to it—identify themselves as such, in the second case a group of images are thought for the single subject, who does not have to share the eidetic experience anymore, being free to give it a meaning.

According to Heidegger, this process—which for semiologists corresponds to the passage from intersubjectivity to interobjectivity [14]—actually binds the subject existence to "intraworldly beings", that are objects which cannot exist independently of the subject. The freedom coming from transcendence (from art, for instance), in the case of the photographic image is bound—as a matter of fact—to the acceptance of the conditions in which it takes place, that is to its immanence.

In the case of theatrical representation, a convention univocally accepted by the spectator—although its quite complex codification—drives the subject to assimilate constructed reality and imagination.

For the moment, scenic design progressive giving up of the deceptive and *vedutista* naturalism will not be considered. It is no coincidence that, with the proliferation of images, scenic design sought refuge in synthetic forms, which are abstract, evocative and less and less descriptive, exactly as previously said regarding painting. Therefore, all the more so it is incredible how theatre is able of making people accept that an image (which, from an objective point of view, is not referable to a specific object) can become—and thus be—a house, an object, or a place. The key of this process is not deception (in fact, today, scenic design is not deceptive anymore), but precisely acceptance. If the convention is accepted, reality becomes image and, oppositely, image becomes reality.

It is not only a wordplay. This extraordinary process had already been foreseen by René Magritte in *La trahison des images* (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1928–1929), Figure 3a. Under a pipe—a banal object—a writing stands out: "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*". The sentence, other than producing the extraordinary ambiguity between reality and imagination, delegates each recipient to create an individual narrative path, according to a process of subjective interpretation which draws from all the matrixes: the cerebral, the cognitive, the emotional, the archetypical, the cultural, the collective, and the spiritual one.

|(**a**)|(**b**)|

Figure 3. Is it truer an avowedly false image or a virtual one that pretends to be true? (**a**) René Magritte, *La trahison des images*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1928–1929; (**b**) Advertising image of *Microsoft Hololens*.

At the end of this process, the Magritte's image creates a paradox: self-denouncing its own falsity, does it continue being false or does it become truthful?

It may seem a strange or foolish question, but why Bramante in Santa Maria presso San Satiro, Bernini in the Scala Regia in Vatican, or Borromini in the Galleria Spada did not use any writings similar to the Magrittian one?

4. From Photographic to Dynamic Image

The issue further complicates when, during the early decades of the Twentieth Century, the experiments which has long been conducted to create moving pictures reach such a perfection level that the advent of cinema is ratified.

Compared to photography and theatrical performance, cinema has got remarkable new and also more pervasive elements. Some of this innovations are macroscopic and evident: now the picture moves and lies outside of the miniaturization process; the synchronization of the sound with the pictures—realized and added a few decades later—introduces a fundamental completing synaesthesia; editing and the different framing techniques select the type of narrative, dramaturgical and emotional effect for the spectator, but also his involving level (a panoramic framing means something, a subjective one something else); finally, a concrete device—fundamental element in Roland Barthes' semiotics—extemporaneously composes the picture in the presence of the spectator, giving the performative role to the technological power of the machine.

The progressive assimilation of some aesthetic mechanisms of cinema and theatre is evident since the birth of the moving picture. Background music is added from the beginning and its live performance—despite its crucial role—moves to the background compared to the significance of the visual message. Some of these incipient moving pictures forms (puppetry, shadow play, phantasmagorias, magic lanterns) are born as theatrical performances even before using theatres as projection places, combining them with the same ritual and behavioral code (dark theatre, curtain).

Film camera gives rise to a further relevant difference with respect to photography: previously any photogram of a subject was contextualized by the user, as relation between the given image and an imagery generated by experience, memory, but also fantasy; now, oppositely, the path is entirely created by a demiurge.

It would be possible to further talk about the aesthetic results of moving picture at length, but about this, it is better to refer to the specific studies of the sector. On the contrary, it is necessary to focus on the mentioned demiurge's creation work.

As partly mentioned above, being a representation process which is strongly anchored in perspective rules, scenic design uses graphic construction since the design stage. That is, it draws from the figurative code of drawing, which—as it is known—is a graphic convention. In scenic design, the cross-checking between resultative and objective image takes place entirely within the

graphic process. The first is visual perception's product, the latter is the real form of what has to be realized for the resultative image to be compliant with the desired effect. Starting from the visual result, through a work of perspective reconstruction, it is possible to determine the real form of the element composing the visual frame. It is clear that, in this operation, a series of planning and technical elements defined by stagecraft are taken into account. Therefore, scenic design is compulsorily objectifying.

Thus, in the case of the scenography project, the above mentioned interpretation—considered by Wunenburger to be the second reading level of the image (the one in which the subject objectifies it)—is assigned to the designer. He defines the objective existence sphere of only one of all the possible and plausible objectifications of the final image, which, in consequence, are not assigned to the spectator.

The second side of scenic design corresponds to theatrical performance: an image is placed in front of the spectator, who, this time, can do that kind of reading. However, he is accompanied by the co-presence of what the designer has staged. Hence, a double image-reading process and a double representation are observed. It is no coincidence that the word *double* or the concepts of *mirror* or *reflection* are often associated with theatre. It is evident that the joining link between these two parts of the process is precisely scenic design, that is the object (Figure 4). It assembles different subjects and makes them interact. Since each subject refers to a linguistic and meanings convention, their interaction has to find a shared area, an intersubjectivity.
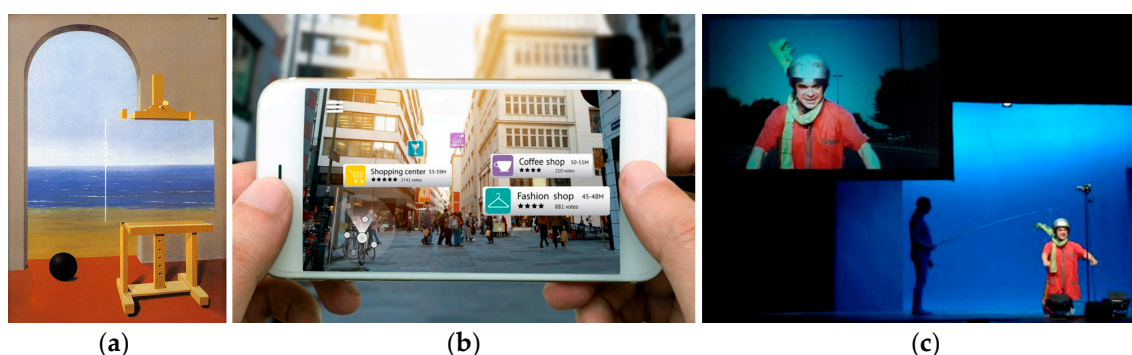

(**a**)　　　　　　　　　　(**b**)　　　　　　　　　　(**c**)

Figure 4. Some examples of images that duplicate other images accenting their original meanings. (**a**) René Magritte, *La condition humaine*, Geneve, Simon Spierer Collection, 1935; (**b**) Example of augmented reality app for mobile phone; (**c**) Giorgio Barberio Corsetti, *Tra la terra e il cielo*, Teatro Sangiorgi, Catania, 2008 (Fattore K and Teatro Massimo Bellini, co-producers).

In the case of the photographic or cinematographic picture, the first part of the process—that of image construction—does not involve the spectator at all. It is surely the product of a technological mastership too, but this feature is veiled. In the theatre too, backstage is concealed from the spectator, but the fact of being in front of performing actors triggers a cathartic and transcendent mirroring mechanism—which has been studied since Aristotle's times—as rejoining the actor causes a passage from the objective to the subjective sphere and, finally, to the intersubjective one.

The pivotal role of the technological or "cybernetic" image (Figures 1b, 3b and 5) and the problem of re-writing the writing/reading codes are brilliantly analyzed by Flusser [15], when he talks about *images revolution* and about a return to the predominance of the two-dimensional perspective, which had already been envisaged by sci-fi or dystopian literature [16].

With regard to the spread of the technological image, an opposite process takes place. Excluding any prefiguration possibility (rather, the fact that the production mechanism is concealed allows to assimilate that technology's owners to authentic ministers), but also any post-figuration possibilities (since having to sequence or interrelate all the images, the results of the aesthetic process are prearranged), the spectator stands in front an immanent intersubjective process, in which he is assigned the responsibility to act as a glue within a system of objects, ending up objectifying himself.
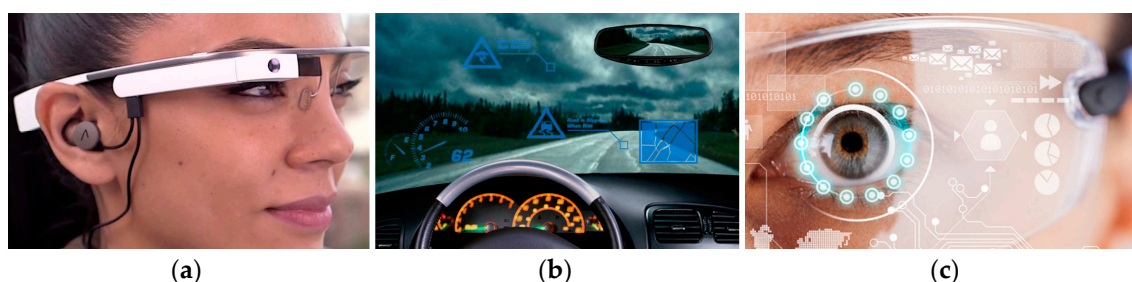
(**a**)　　　　　　　　　　　(**b**)　　　　　　　　　　　(**c**)

Figure 5. As Roland Barthes wrote [7,8], the device itself is so crucial for cognitive aspects of the sight, to generate a techno-human hybrid, such as: (**a**) *Google glass*; (**b**) 'Heads-up display' (HUD) in a car; (**c**) *Microsoft Hololens*, controlled by eye's movement.

5. From Moving Picture to Images Augmentation

One last step is crucial before trying to draw any conclusion.

What happens today, when the essential contribution of technique is progressively pervading representation, starting from both its limits, that is not only concerning new graphic expression modes of the project, but also the gradual replacement of scenoplastic equipments with multimedia technologies?

Beyond the fact that interobjective processes have progressively replaced some shared aesthetic parameters, last technological frontiers have definitively fostered the pervasiveness of images in every sphere of human life. The consequences are not only an evident acceleration of the spread process (today, the concept of "images flow" is used), but also two important radical changes, with as many considerations deriving from them. The first is that today everyone can produce and spread images, chiefly because the widespread diffusion of IT *media* of any technological level fosters these processes: there is no device without a camera, an image processing software, or a sharing application. Everyone is photographer, director and editor of his own images gallery, accessing a part of images production process which has long been off-limits, being prerogative of few elected people. Needless to say, social networks become the new territory of the previously precluded intersubjectivity, a new theatre where to obtain the applause of the audience through approval ratings and "likes". The second consideration is that image—perhaps involved in a devaluation process—is going to undergo a process of information thickening. Augmented reality—which has been foreseen by science fiction—is going to become a pervasive tool, as image—used as information vehicle—turns into a new rapid and immediate language. Unrelated as it was to time dimension, now it even comes to distort time perception, giving birth to a new cognitive system, which is not based on memory and collection anymore, but on spread and access. If Saint Peter was previously the only key holder, who among us, today, does not have at least a dozen passwords? If this were only a sociological dissertation, it could be concluded that man, although deluded to be in communion with other individuals, is going towards an unprecedented existential loneliness. However, this dissertation rather deals with representation, in relation to which the topic of this discourse had already been foreseen by some utopias.

Firstly, it is interesting to notice that utopias use images and create new specific ones. They are the analogue of the horizon line in descriptive geometry, that is the concrete image of a set of concepts which, taken singularly, would elude the cognitive possibilities of the individual.

Traditionally, in theatre, static image was made dynamic by a technique in which human effort was noticeable and represented a mastership, a performance generated by the performative action and controlled by the representation code. Oppositely, today, modern technologies are progressively turning the figurative mastership into a process—or even a product—in which performance is demanded to machine or to the interaction between this and man (Figures 4c, 6 and 7). In this sense, some experiences have been prophetic: from Walter Gropius and Maurizio Sacripanti's total theatre utopias, to *Studio Azzurro* and Giorgio Barberio Crosetti's setups, Figure 6a, up to more recent experimentations, such as those of *La Fura dels Baus*, Figure 6b, Emiliano Pellisari's *No Gravity Dance*, Figure 6c, or Merzouki, Mondot and Bardainne, Figure 7.
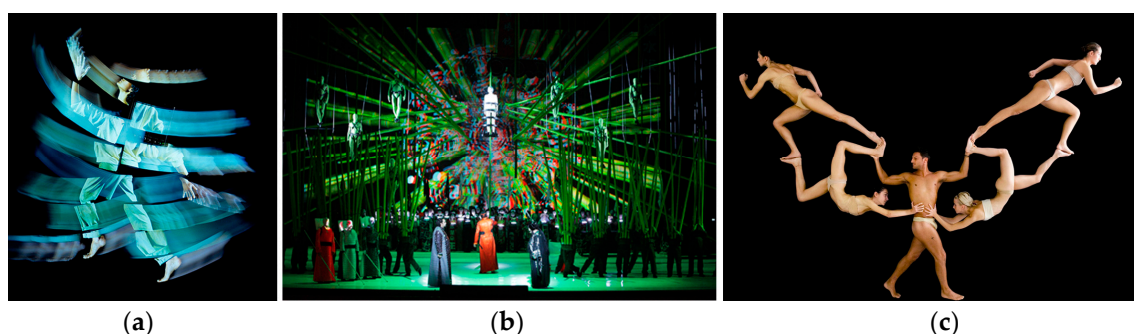
(**a**)　　　　　　　　　　　　　(**b**)　　　　　　　　　　　　　(**c**)

Figure 6. The scenic bozzetto is both a work of art and a technical drawing who reflects the reality, such as in this example: (**a**) Studio Azzurro (with G. Barberio Corsetti), *Camera Astratta*, *Documenta 8*, Kassel, UBU Prize 1988 for research thetre; (**b**) La Fura dels Baus, a photograph of Puccini's *Turandot*, Bavarian State Opera, Munich, 2012; (**c**) Emiliano Pellisari's *Inferno*, 2010–2011.

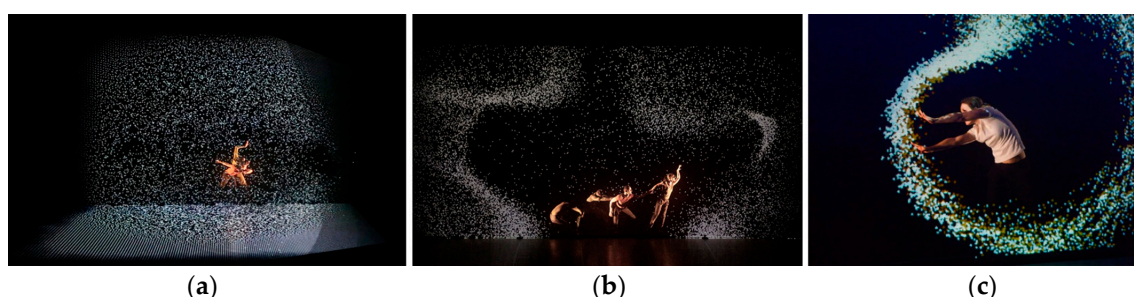(**a**)　　　　　　　　　　　　　(**b**)　　　　　　　　　　　　　(**c**)

Figure 7. An amazing interaction between technical device and artists: the ballet *Pixel*, 2016 (Armand Amar, composer; Mourad Merzouki, choreograph; Adrien Mondot & Claire Bardainne, videomapping; Käfig and Centre Chorégraphique National de Créteil et du Val-de-Marne, co-producers).

6. Conclusions

The considerations made so far cannot be thoroughly discussed here, since they highlight many other really stimulating issues to be treated in the appropriate scientific venues. An attempt to summarize the results of the reasoning conducted so far is reported above.

If not a reflection on theatre and scenic design, a reasoning is due about how representation, and particularly scenic design—which today seems a really interesting discipline, being based on visual aspects—are progressively losing importance within the sector, getting new and pervading relevance relating in many other spheres of life.

The fact that what is constructed focuses more and more on setup aspects [17,18] deprives theatre of the stable sacredness of representation. From tribal primitive rites to Greek tragedy and sacred representations, the whole theatre production has always been permeated with mysticism (the mentioned sense of transcendence) which, today, is replaced by some sort of (immanent and materialistic) image secularism.

A second issue is therefore opened: the spread and prevailing of technology up to technological hypertrophy, do not allow to recognize the *a priori* and *a posteriori* terms of the representation anymore by reducing images interpretational possibilities.

Image is merging with its project, the *hic et nunc* of the *eidos* destroys the allographic value of the visual project, which, conversely, was essential in theatre, music, photography, cinema and industrial design. In this rewriting of the pre- and postfiguration possibilities, the only hypothesis to be taken into consideration is, in fact, the autograph figuration, above all because—though theatre was previously among the few endlessly reproducible arts—today its value is dependent on (or rather possible thanks to) technique, sharing this new status with other "arts", particularly *industrial design* (in its broadest sense: videographics, *augmented reality*, *industry 4.0*). This implies the predominance of image, which has to necessarily prevail over imagination, and of technology,

that—in order to replace art—has to inevitably assume that appearance (it is no coincidence that, today, it is more and more frequently autographic).

As musician turns into sound engineer, so artist becomes *visual performer*, a hybrid role consisting in programming and controlling a highly technological process, which is legitimized by a figurativity that tries to establish new aesthetic parameters (Figure 7).

This leads to a third question: nowadays, a return to nature is wished—under many points of view—probably in order to face a moral debt and a still unsolved ethic issue. It is surprising, however, that the attempt to recover the relationship with nature is being made through technology, whose excessive use has recently been the main enemy of nature itself. Perhaps, it is an attempt to absolve and legitimize technology, or to optimistically turn the offensive weapon into defense tool. As a matter of fact, though, one should think about how many interaction objects are available for environmental control, farming, production of materials which imitate or include natural ones. Foreseen by science fiction and recently studied by many semiologists and sufficiently explained here, the reference is to the semiotic concept of hybrid, where a single figurativity makes pre- and post-figurative aspects of the visual project coexist.

The fourth consideration starts from some worrisome questions: while machines previously showed their power in order to (also visually) replace human effort [19], today are silent and apparently inoffensive machines going to be enabled to take decisions, determine some human behaviors, or—in an apocalyptic hypothesis—deprive individuals of their more intimate freedom, which is that of imagination [20]? Are the parameters of a new aesthetic classification going to be rewritten, which—in order to be able to assume a scientific status—should refer to a renewed representation theory? Thus, the pivotal point is: which consequences can these arguments have on scientific research, but, above all, on didactics, where the review of the discipline contents is intertwined with transmissibility?

Since image becomes picture thanks to the three variables (support, *media* and device), today it is necessary to reconsider the role of these three terms [21] (p. 137). Architecture drawings are continuously enhanced and completed through rendering and 3D animations (contribution of photography and cinema, respectively, to traditional graphic representation), while students have more and more trouble using orthogonal projections properly. Moreover, teachers request tables in which assisted drawing is a mere graphic-instrumental substitution of the manual one, and its vectorial nature does not allow to reflect on the opportunities of the representation scale.

There is no intention to demonize this essential tool, but rather to stimulate a scrupulous reflection on the need to update some representation theories. In this sense, if the control over all the visual aspects linked to the project is returned to representation, a new connection can develop, between two always intertwined concepts that today seem to split. On one side, the world of shapes, images and objects, towards which architecture and industrial design in its broadest sense head; on the other side, the world of engineering, where technological aspects prevail to the point that they unavoidably lead to use them.

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