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SURROUNDED BY SCENERY. WHAT DISNEY CAN TEACH US ABOUT VISUAL IMMERSION IN THE DRAMMA PER MUSICA

by Bruno Forment

In the 1930s, Walt Disney and his competitors grappled with a deficiency endemic to the very medium with which they had conquered the silver screen. How, they wondered, could convincing illusions of depth be acquired from flat surfaces made up of cellophane and paper? The issue, long rendered obsolete by digital graphics, seriously troubled the animation industry in the years predating *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937).[1] For now that Disney had taken the perilous decision to go feature-length, new technology was required to keep up with live-action cinema and its ever-heightening realism. Unfortunately, Hollywood's classical trickery was not to be transferred to the animated picture as such. Long shots with zoom lenses, for instance, produced proportional bloopers when applied to static backgrounds: Thus, when zooming in on a nocturnal landscape, the moon grew unintentionally larger together with the remainder of the setting.[2]

A solution was found in multiplane, the principle of breaking down backgrounds to various layers according to their implied distance from the viewer. No later than 1926, the German animator Lotte Reiniger had experimented with this method when separating animated silhouettes from drawn backgrounds in her silent feature *Die Abenteuer des Prinzen Achmed*. In 1933, two multiplane configurations were tested almost simultaneously by Willis O'Brien and Ub Iwerks. O'Brien's so-called miniature rear projection enabled directors to mingle pre-shot footage, stop-motion elements (which are modified before each shot), and painted scenery into thrilling science-fiction scenes, typically starring oversized animals (e.g., *King Kong*, 1933). Ub Iwerks obtained awkward panning and rotation effects from four horizontal planes of animation positioned in front of a mobile camera.[3]

The most versatile multiplane setup was patented in 1937 by the head of Disney's camera department, William E. Garity.[4] Garity hung up the camera

[1] See David R. Smith, „New Dimensions. Beginnings of the Disney Multiplane Camera", in: Charles Solomon (Ed.), *The Art of the Animated Image. An Anthology*, Los Angeles 1987, 37–49; Donald Crafton, „Planes Crazy. Transformations of Pictorial Space in 1930s Cartoons", *Cinémas* 15 (2005), 147–180; Jay P. Telotte, *The Mouse Machine. Disney and Technology*, Urbana 2008, 56–67.

[2] Walt Disney himself demonstrated this problem in „Tricks of Our Trade", an episode of the *Disneyland* television series aired on 13 February 1957, see *Behind the Scenes at the Walt Disney Studio. A Glimpse Behind the Studio Magic* (2002) DVD, 240 Minutes, USA, Walt Disney.

[3] Iwerks first applied the technique in his ‚ComiColor' cartoon *The Headless Horseman* (1934), see Jay P. Telotte, „Ub Iwerks' (Multi)plain Camera", *Animation* 1 (2006), 9–24.

[4] US patent no. 2,198,006 („Control device for animation").

vertically above a mastodontic crane holding as many as seven sheets of scenery painted in oils on glass. As both the horizontal and vertical position of each individual plane could be modified along with its lighting, an infinite array of hitherto impossible shots came within reach of Disney's personnel. Speaking to its impact and endurance, Garity's system, which garnered an Academy Award on its first appearance in the 'Silly Symphony' *The Old Mill* (1937), continued to inspire memorable episodes up to *The Little Mermaid* (1989).

Multiplane would eventually do more for Disney than just enhance the optical quality of its pictures, however. What it optimized above all was the viewer's immersion in the picture, being the „experience through which a fictional world acquires the presence of an autonomous [...] reality populated with live human [and non-human, we may add in Disney's case] beings."[5] Multiplane shots enveloped the animated characters in such sophisticated surroundings that audiences worldwide were lured into the realms they inhabited – *Bambi*'s forest (1942; fig. 1), *Pinocchio*'s Italian village (1940), but also the bald mountain of the horrific creatures in *Fantasia* (1940). Perhaps it was only from the introduction of multiplane on that animation began to approach the ultimate target of virtual art: namely, to „offer a completely alternative reality that gives the viewer the strongest impression possible of being at the location where the images are".[6]

fig. 1: Still from Walt Disney's animated feature *Bambi* (1942), exemplifying the intricate perspective accomplished through the superposition of planes with oil-painted scenery.

[5] Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality. Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*, Baltimore 2001, 14; see also pages 14–15, where the author argues that „For a text to be immersive [...] it must create a space to which the reader, spectator, or user can relate, and it must populate this space with individuated objects. It must, in other words, construct the setting for a potential narrative action".

[6] Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art. From Illusion to Immersion*, trans. Gloria Custance, Cambridge etc. 2003, 14.

While we may think of the multiplane principle as a purely cinematic, hence twentieth-century, phenomenon, Walt Disney himself considered it no different from photographing the scale-model of a theatrical set, the distances between the animated cels and scenery being roughly equivalent to those between the actors and backdrops in the theater.[7] The illusionistic stage had indeed been constructing such pseudo-three-dimensional views from painted flats in plans – rather than planes – since the very seventeenth century.[8] Given that opera cultivated the latter tradition to no mean degree, it might be wondered what can be learned about the immersive ideals of the musical drama of the Baroque... from watching cartoons.

Our modest contribution aims to tackle that question in two chronological steps. First, we will reconsider the narrative function of early operatic scenography by taking a closer look at the legacy of Giacomo Torelli (1608–1678). Acclaimed for his scenic wizardry in his own day, Torelli was arguably the first set designer of European note to cultivate a form of scenic montage that framed the plot in dramaturgically effective fashion. But how exactly did his scenarios support and mediate the operatic narratives at the time? Second, we will pay attention to the scenic technologies endorsed by opera seria, the eighteenth-century brand of Italian opera brought to fruition by Pietro Metastasio (1698–1782). Against the background of the breathtaking developments in set design during Metastasio's lifetime, we shall again investigate the ways in which theatrical scenery helped viewers become absorbed in the operatic action and clear up a number of misunderstandings in the course of matters.

Perspective as narrative disclosure

Giacomo Torelli constitutes the logical point of departure for almost any inquiry on the role of stage design in opera.[9] Already in his first documented scenario, for Giulio Strozzi and Francesco Sacrati's *La finta pazza* (Venice 1641), Torelli enchanted his audience by disclosing the plot's pivotal regions in one fluent motion, uninterrupted by curtain drops: the harbor, courtyard,

[7] Walt Disney, „Mickey Mouse présente...", in: Nancy Naumburg (ed.), *Silence! On tourne. Comment nous faisons les films*, trans. Jean George Auriol, Paris 1938, 267–284, here 280: „le principe de base en [of the multiplane camera] est simple: les arrières-plans et les cellulos sont espacés les uns des autres de sorte que lorsque l'appareil photographie un cadre de film dessiné, c'est comme s'il photographiait une maquette dans laquelle il y a une distance réelle entre les objects, – de même qu'il y a une distance entre l'acteur sur un plateau, les autres interprètes de la scène et la toile de fond." See also page 279, where one reads that „Nos [Disney's] décorateurs sont en général des artistes qui ont une grande expérience de la couleur, du paysage, du décor et de l'éclairage de théâtre."

[8] Telotte, *The Mouse Machine* (see n. 1), 62.

[9] Important volumes on Torelli are Anton Giulio Bragaglia, *Nicola Sabbatini e Giacomo Torelli, scenotecnici marchigiani*, Pesaro 1952; Per Bjurström, *Giacomo Torelli and Baroque Stage Design*, Stockholm 1961; Massimo Puliani (ed.), *Giacomo Torelli (1604–1678). Scenografo e architetto dell'antico Teatro della Fortuna di Fano. Atti del convegno tenuto a Fano nel 1996*, Fano 1998; Francesco Milesi (ed.), *Giacomo Torelli. L'invenzione scenica nell'Europa barocca*, Fano 2000.

grand square, garden, and so forth. His newly-invented machinery, which allowed for swift, coordinated shifts of the symmetrical flats, overhangs, and backdrops, exerted an immersive power – a *meraviglia* – by itself, puzzling the beholder for a number of seconds, and then imbuing him or her with new expectations as to the upcoming incidents.

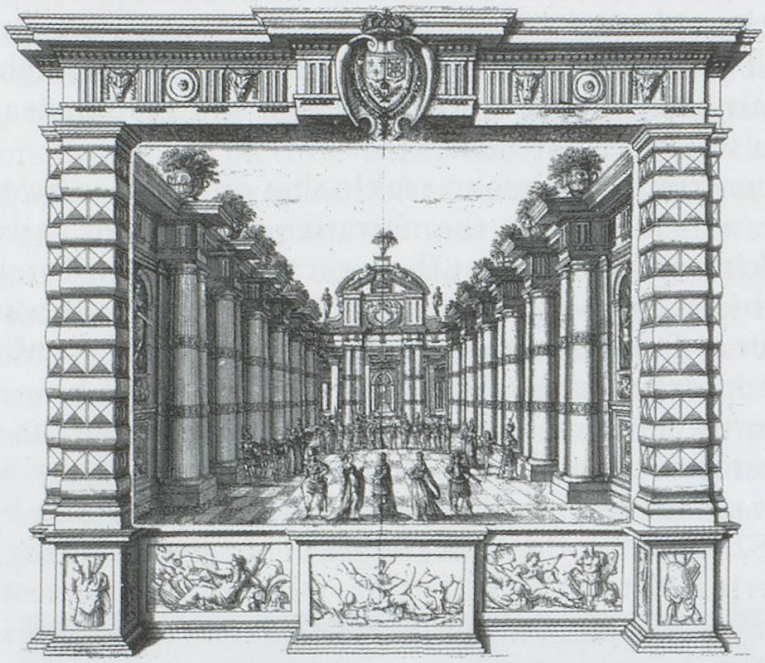

fig. 2a: Giacomo Torelli, *Corte della reggia del Re di Sciro* for the Parisian revival of *La finta pazza* (1645), I.3.

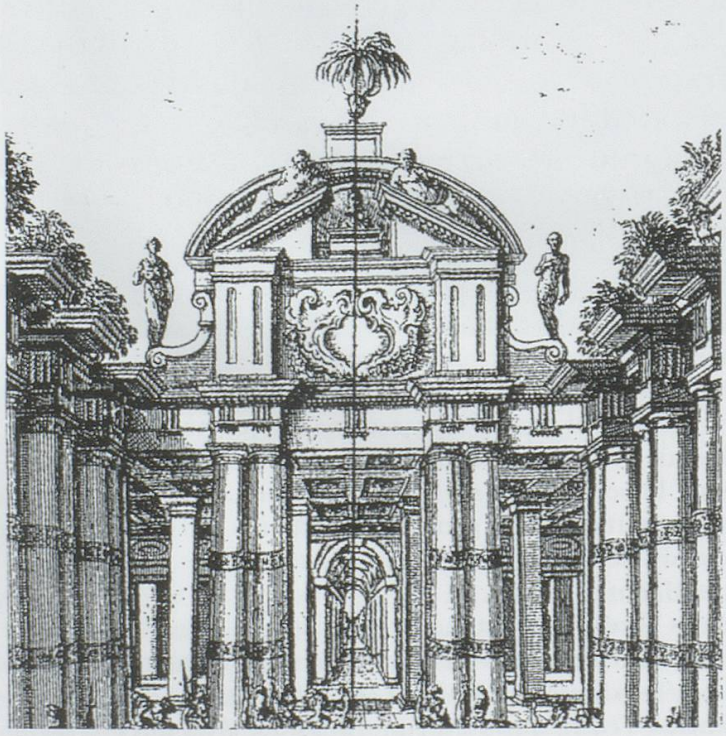

fig. 2b: detail of figure 2a showing the prospetto.

However, it was not the mere succession of *loci* that embodied the visual magic of Torelli's scenography; each individual pictorial space appears to have caught the viewer's attention, through its cunning use of perspective. Let us immediately clarify this point by taking a look at the „Corte della reggia del Re di Sciro" for *La finta pazza*, Act I, scene 3 (fig. 2a). The inner space behind the majestic portico at the back of this symmetrical setting in central perspective was initially hidden from sight by a curtain: it is the area where the travestied Achilles has his amorous encounters with King Lycomedes' daughter, Deidamia. The relevant *locus amœnus* (fig. 2b), on which Torelli lavished extraordinary care,[10] is itself comprised of a pillared atrium introducing, next to Deidamia's labyrinthine apartments, an archway that leads straight into the gardens – a typical spot for making love in opera. By having the lines of perspective drag the beholder's sight from the forestage, where the 'official' action with King Lycomedes takes place, towards the vanishing-point, where Achilles' amorous affairs are confined to a (deceptively) deep physical shelter behind the royal façade, Torelli juxtaposed the two poetic realms of Strozzi's libretto – the royal-heroic / public versus the amorous / private – within one and the same set.

Torelli's portfolio abounds with such 'discovery spaces' and *prospetti*, competing for attention with the symmetrical architectures in front. One specific multiplane setting – if we are allowed to apply the term in this context – even became a signature design of himself and of illusionistic stage design in general: the arched tunnel,[11] the deep perspective and rustic texture of which were

[10] Witness Giulio Cesare Bianchi's „Descrittione delle presenti feste theatrali", in: Giulio Strozzi et al., *Feste theatrali per la Finta pazza*, Paris 1645, 12–13: „Chiudeva quest[']ordine [of columns] in faccia un portico, o passaggio [...] questo passaggio venia chiuso da una superbissima cortina di broccato d'oro come, che dentro quella stessero riposte cose pretiose, & non a tutti mostrabili. [...] Chiesero gl'Ambasciatori al Re che loro mostrasse le Donzelle; ond'egli fatte svelare le cortine apparve il Paradiso terreno; poiche sotto una soffittata loggia adorna al possibile si viddero Deidamia figlia del sudetto Rè, Achille in habito feminile, & un Coro di otto Damigelle con quattro paggi [...] Al partir, che fecero dal Cortile questi personnaggi si scoperse (cosa non prima osservata dalle parti) un longhissimo ordine di cammere, che con regolato traforo terminava in un più lontano giardino, & nell arco di mezzo si scorgevano le porte, che sul muro concorrente del portico situate stavano, che ancor egli alla medema veduta terminava del giardino, e qui talmente era osservata la regola di prospetiva; che l'occhio ingannato la misurava per una distanza veramente esistente". The original Venetian libretto published in 1641 does not give descriptions for the settings.

[11] See his „La grotta dei venti nell'Eolie" for *Bellerofonte* (Venice 1642), the „Orrido e spaventoso inferno" for *Venere gelosa* (Venice 1643), the „Paysage" for *Andromède* (Paris 1650), and the „Grotte du centaure Chiron" for *Les noces de Pelée et de Thetis* (Paris 1654). The former two are included in Giacomo Torelli's *Apparati scenici per lo Teatro Novissimo*, Venice 1644, the third in some copies of Pierre Corneille's tragedy as published by Lauren Maurry (Paris 1651), and the fourth in Giacomo Torelli's *Scene e Machine preparate alle Nozze di Teti*, Paris 1654. For modern publications featuring reproductions of these engravings, see note 9.

rehearsed in countless sets.[12] Curiously, a sequence in *Snow White* plays with this very motif, zooming in on the protagonist to guide us through arches of trees and mushrooms, shot in multiplane (fig. 3). In the latter episode, too, the viewer's gaze is steered to a secret, protective place that is normally hidden from view, and in particular from the eyes of the evil Queen: the dwarfs' cottage in the deep forest.

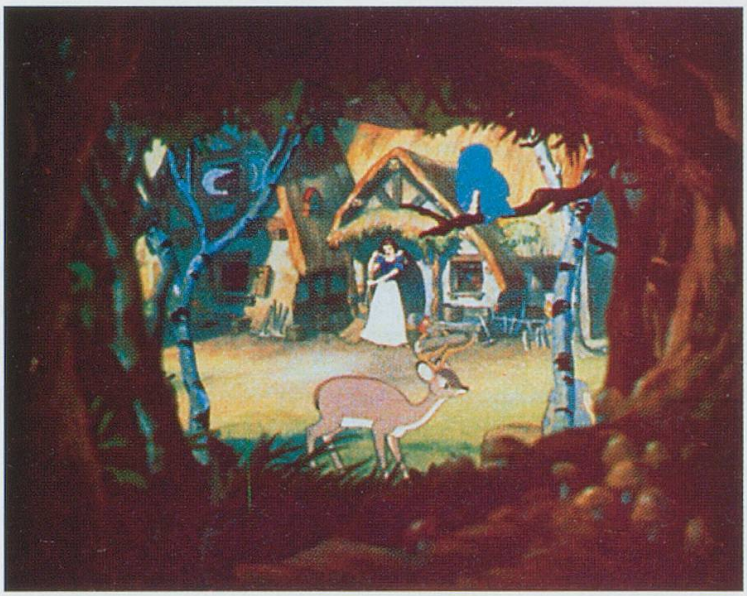

fig. 3: Still from the ‚housecleaning' sequence in Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), one of the many multiplane shots in the movie.

A basic tenet of such deep scenes (*scene lunghe*) is their immersive alternation of penetrable and impenetrable zones. In many designs by Torelli, for instance, the vista *al infinito* is actually limited to a number of sections in the picture plane, each offering a supplementary glimpse of an inner space.[13] By thus restricting, rather than extending, the illusionary space, Torelli appears to have paid tribute to the etymological roots of 'perspective' in the Latin verb *per-spicere* (to look through) and to the earliest demonstrations of geometric perspective, in the Quattrocento. Between 1416 and 1425, for example, Filippo Brunelleschi startled the Florentines by having them gaze at the mirrored reflection of a drawing through a tiny hole in the back of the image.[14] Generations of *trompe l'œil* painters, *quadraturisti*, and theater deco-

[12] See, for instance, Jean Bérain's „Jardin, grotte et la mer" for *Phaëton* (Paris 1682) in one of the *Recueils des Menus Plaisirs du Roi* (Paris, Archives nationales, Maison du roi, O/1/*/3239/48), or Ugo Gheduzzi's „La grotta di Mime" for *Sigfrido* (Turin 1905) in Alberto Basso, *Il teatro della città dal 1788 al 1936*, Turin 1976, (= Storia del Teatro Regio di Torino 2), tav. XXXI.

[13] On the endurance of the inner stage in illusionist scenography, see George Riley Kernodle, *From Art to Theatre: Form and Convention in the Renaissance*, Chicago 1944, in particular 103–108 and 189–191.

[14] The relevant passage from Antonio Manetti's biography of Brunelleschi is offered in Lawrence Wright, *Perspective in Perspective*, London etc. 1983, 56–57.

rators followed suit, each in their own way teasing the public with peepshows of intimate activities and rooms.[15] The voyeuristic pleasure of leering upon forbidden tableaux became equally characteristic of the illusionistic theater, whose proscenia, archways, and tunnels offered incomplete views of spaces and incidents that were ordinarily impenetrable – Achilles' and Deidamia's illicit flirting behind a curtain in *La finta pazza*, but also Snow White's sheltered existence in the forest.[16]

Seeing the forest through the trees

A tenacious misapprehension about the eighteenth-century stage is that it continued to confine the pictorial illusion to a mechanized and symmetrical ensemble of wings (*telari*), overheads (*cieli* or *soffitti*), and backdrops (*fondali*). The floor plans of stage settings would thus have remained open and trapezoid, as a small number of surviving theaters on the European periphery seems to imply. This overtly simplistic idea is contradicted by the technical solutions for stage designs that have come down to us, in particular from the Italian peninsula (fig. 4). They indicate that freestanding set pieces and practicables could be applied at every imaginable position, not simply as extensions of the lateral wings to the rear (in which case they were called *lontani*),[17] but equally to block off large areas of the stage floor. Second, heavy reliance was made on large canvases with cutouts and transparencies, which could be illuminated from behind.[18] Depending on their shape and size, these transverse screens

[15] Typical examples are Antonello da Messina's *Saint Hieronymus in his study* (c. 1474), Samuel van Hoogstraten's *Peepshow with views of the interior of a Dutch house* (1655–60), and Giambattista Tiepolo's *Banquet of Cleopatra and Anthony* (1747–50), all London, National Gallery.

[16] Tellingly, a contemporary of Torelli termed Act I, Scene 3 of *La finta pazza* the „Scena del Palazzo col prospetto serrato" (Scene of the Palace with the shut view), thus underscoring the surprise sparked by the revelation of a warrior's hidden passions. See the handwritten annotation in the third edition of *La finta pazza* (Venice 1644) preserved at the Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense, Milan, Racc. dramm. 725, p. 15.

[17] See Beth Lise Glixon and Jonathan Emmanuel Glixon, *Inventing the Business of Opera. The Impresario and his World in Seventeenth-Century Venice*, New York 2006, 227–276; Nicodemus Tessin, *Travel Notes, 1673–77 and 1687–88*, ed. Merit Laine and Börge Magnusson, Stockholm 2002 (= Nicodemus the Younger: Sources, Works, Collections 3), 365, which mentions „gewisse kleine höltzer" that were „auf dem palco überall eingeschlagen [...] worzwischen man die scenen [i. e., the *lontani*] hineinsetzt".

[18] For descriptions of backlit, transparent decors, see Gösta M. Bergman, *Lighting in the Theatre*, trans. N. Stedt, Stockholm etc. 1977, (= Stockholm Studies in Theatrical History 2), 39 on Leonardo's use of stained glass in *Il paradiso* (Milan 1490); Per Bjurström, *Giacomo Torelli and Baroque Stage Design*, Stockholm 1961, (= Nationalmusei skriftserie 7, Figura. New Series 2), 57 on Sebastiano Serlio's discussion of „lumi artificiali della scena" in the *Secondo libro di prospettiva* (1618); Romain Rolland, *Les origines du théâtre lyrique moderne. Histoire de l'opéra en Europe avant Lully et Scarlatti*, Paris 1931, 134, on transparencies in *Il Sant'Alessio* (Rome 1634); Luigi Riccoboni, *Réflexions historiques et critiques sur les différens théâtres de l'Europe, avec les pensées sur la declamation*, Paris 1738, 45, on ‚windows' in *Il Gordiano* (Venice 1688); Louis Schneider, *Geschichte der Oper und des königlichen Opernhauses in Berlin*, Berlin 1852, 132, on the ‚glass temple' in *Fetonte* (Berlin 1750).

were dropped (in which case they were referred to as *fondali*, i. e. backdrops), divided and slid from the sides in continuous grooves (*spezzati*, i. e. shutters), or even hoisted from the understage.[19] Authentic models offer a rare glimpse of the striking multiplanes created from these contrivances.[20]

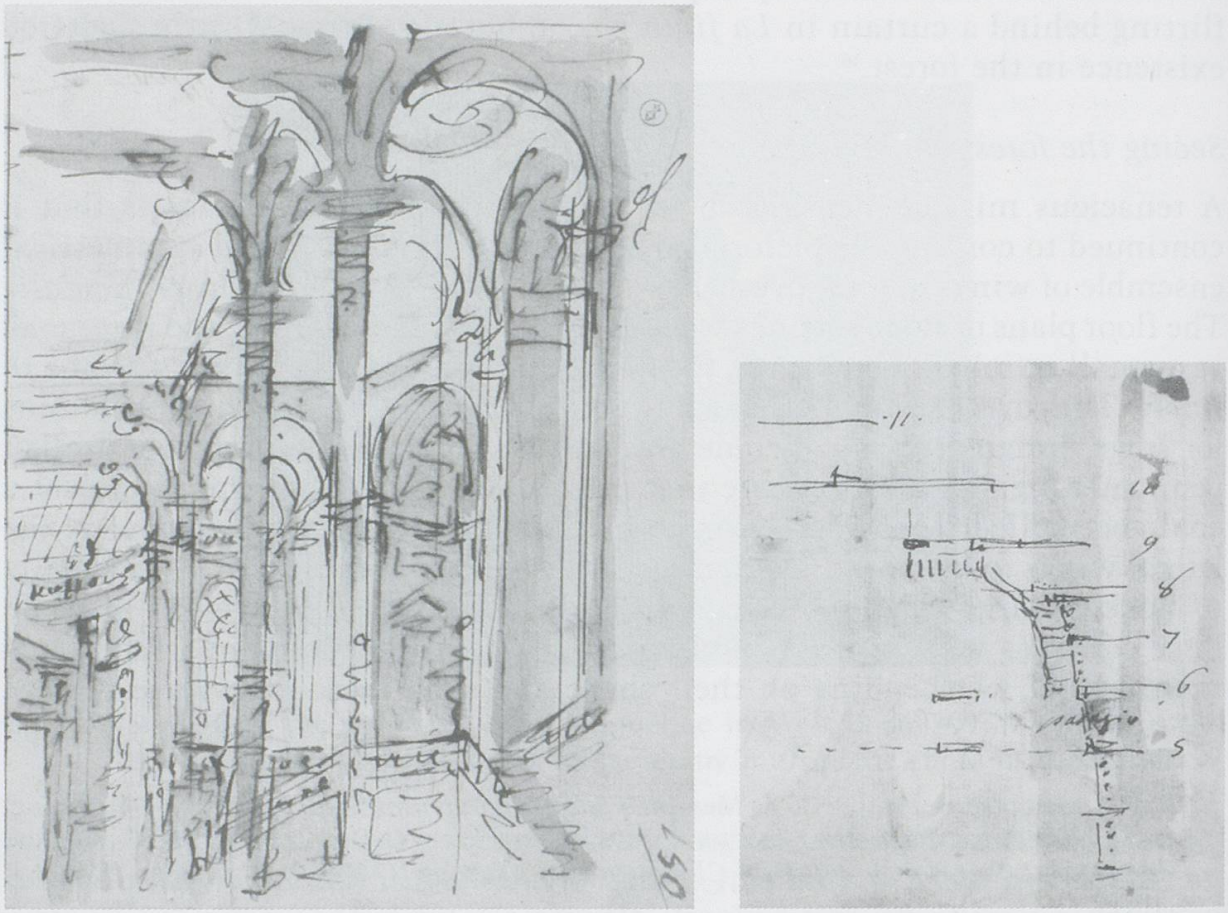

fig. 4: Fabrizio Galliari, *Gran Sala del Reale Consiglio tutto circondata da Tribune praticabile per il Popolo* for *Artaserse* (Turin 1760), II.8. While conceived in symmetrical perspective, this design demonstrates the use of freestanding flats, practicable elements (stairs) and overlapping traforati for deep ‚see-through' effects. Sketch and solution preserved at the Biblioteca Reale, Turin, Ms. Varia 327, fol. 149v–150r.

With growing numbers of flats appearing all over the stage floor, it became impossible for designers to assign every piece of scenery to a trolley in a groove, attached with ropes to a winch. Even so, scene changes (*mutazioni*) continued

[19] See Mercedes Viale Ferrero, *La scenografia dalle origini al 1936*, Turin 1980 (= Storia del Teatro regio di Torino 3), 143–146, which discusses the increased use of „decorazioni pendenti [...] con uso prevalente di spezzati traforati e fondali, in luogo dei telari laterali" at the Teatro Regio in Turin.

[20] E.g., Lorenzo Sacchetti's „Reggia d'Apollo" (Venice 1781) as reproduced in the exhibition catalogue Oskar Pausch (ed.), *Vom Bild zum Raum. Bühnenmodelle 1781–1987*, Grossebersdorf 1993, cat. no. 12.

to be performed in full sight, and often in a far more disorderly way than we tend to imagine. Not coincidentally, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who in 1728–9 witnessed operatic performances at Turin, deployed the image of the Italian scene change as a metaphor for his chaotic writing process in the *Confessions* (1769; first published 1782):

> Have you never seen an opera in Italy? During the scene changes, a disagreeable disorder rules over these grand theaters which lasts for a pretty long time; all decorations are intermingled; a painful commotion is witnessed from all sides, and one believes that everything will be overthrown; yet we feel surprised to see the tumult succeeded by a delightful spectacle.[21]

All the more disconcerting details as regards operatic staging in eighteenth-century Italy can be glossed from travel accounts and correspondence. Thus, during the 1730–1731 carnival season, Karl Ludwig, Baron von Pöllnitz, noted that the scenic transformations at the Roman Teatro delle Dame were „by no means done with the diligence customary in our [German] Spectacles," for „every [stagehand] puts down a piece", and only „when everything is in order", the result „has its merit."[22] On witnessing the inaugural production at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan (Antonio Salieri and Mattia Verazi's *Europa riconosciuta*, 1778), furthermore, Pietro Verri expressed his genuine amazement in a letter to his brother Alessandro (5 August 1778) about the fact that Fabrizio and Bernardino Galliari's sets appeared on stage „without the carpenters having to come in bearing the columns and the light boxes", suggesting that the opposite was the norm.[23] And in the years 1778–80, the Swedish architect Erik Palmstedt commented that there were

> no machines at any of these [Roman] theaters, so the wings are pulled out manually, one by one, and the change is going on all through that scene. It is not agreeable to see the stagehands carrying candles and pieces of decorations across the stage while the actors are engaged in reciting.[24]

[21] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Les Confessions*, vol. 1, Paris 1973, 159: „N'avez-vous point vu quelquefois l'opéra en Italie? Dans les changements de scènes il règne sur ces grands théâtres un désordre désagréable et qui dure assez longtemps; toutes les décorations sont entremêlées; on voit de toutes parts un tiraillement qui fait peine, on croit que tout va renverser: cependant, l'on est tout surpris de voir succéder à ce long tumulte un spectacle ravissant." (transl. B. F.)

[22] Karl Ludwig von Pöllnitz, *Mémoires du Baron de Pollnitz contenant les observations qu'il a faites dans ses voyages et le caractere des personnes qui composent les principales cours de l'Europe*, vol. 3, Amsterdam 1734–1735, 13: „les changemens de scène ne se font point avec la diligence usitée dans nos Spectacles; chacun y place une piece: néanmoins, quand tout est rangé, cela a son mérite." (transl. B. F.)

[23] Cited from Mercedes Viale Ferrero, „Stage and Set", in: Lorenzo Bianconi and Giorgio Pestelli (Eds.), *Opera on Stage*, trans. Kate Singleton, Chicago 2002 (= The History of Opera 5), 1–124, here 31.

[24] Cited from Bergman, *Lighting* (see n. 18), 116.

What must have been agreeable, by contrast, was the substitution of settings in symmetrical, one-point perspective with constructions conceived in oblique, multiple-point perspective.[25] The *scena per angolo* enhanced the viewer's immersive pleasure by no mean degree, and in two particular ways. First, as suggested above, it extended the spatial impenetrability of the setting to the concrete, physical disposition of the flats, not just restricting the (deep) vista towards the back, but also imposing limits on the *per-spective* in front. As the gateways to the infinite became increasingly narrow, and mere glimpses were offered of architectural spaces whose implied dimensions were arresting, audiences delighted in adding imaginatively what was blocked from view.[26] A second innovation consisted in saturating the pictorial space with multiple points of attraction (leafage, flowers, fountains, statues, columns, etc.), dispersed over the various plans – rather than concentrated in the center or to the sides, as had been the case in earlier times. Already from the 1710s onwards, Filippo Juvarra pioneered a ‚picturesque'[27] style of composition with a proliferation of visual attractions that paradoxically worked towards the viewer's immersion in the picture.[28] In keeping with the mid-eighteenth-century concept of pastoral painting, such varied and asymmetrical settings promoted a „part-by-part and implicitly temporal reading of the scene", endowing the viewer with the sense of magically entering the scenery.[29]

Perhaps no poet has better understood both possibilities of the *scena per angolo* than Pietro Metastasio, the leading librettist of opera seria. Metastasio's stage directions are effectively rife with multi-layered vistas and off-centered props. The opening scene of *Didone abbandonata* (Naples 1724), for example,

[25] See my article „Trimming Scenic Invention: Oblique Perspective as Poetics of Discipline", *Music in Art. International Journal for Music Iconography* 34 (2009), 41–53.

[26] See Esteban de Arteaga, *Le rivoluzioni del teatro musicale italiano dalla sua origine fino al presente*, vol. 1, Bologna 1783, 332–333, where he contends that: „Come il gran segreto delle belle arti è quello di presentar gli oggetti in maniera, che la fantasia non finisca dove finiscono i sensi, ma che resti pur sempre qualche cosa da immaginare allo spettatore allorchè l'occhio più non vede, e l'orecchio non sente, così il discostarsi talvolta dalle prospettive che corrono al punto di mezzo, che sono, per così dire, il termine della potenza visiva, e della immaginativa, fu lo stesso che aprire una carriera immensa alla immaginazione industriosa, e inquieta di coloro, che guardano da lontano le scene."

[27] Francesco Algarotti would associate this style with Chinese gardening, see „Saggio sopra l'opera in musica", in: *Opere del Conte Algarotti*, vol. 2, Livorno 1764, 251–390 at 307–308: „La Cina ancora [...] fornir ne potria di bellissime scene. [...] I giardinieri della Cina sono come altrettanti pittori, i quali non piantano mica un giardino con quella regolarità, ch'è propria dell'arte dell'edificar le case; ma, presa la Natura come esemplare, fanno quanto sanno d'imitarla nella irregolarità e varietà sua. Loro costume è di scegliere quegli oggetti, che nel genere loro piacciono il più alla vista, disporgli in maniera, che l'uno sia all'altro di contrapposto, e ne risuti dall'insieme un non so che di peregrino, e d'insolito."

[28] I firmly disagree with Darwin Reid Payne's classical tract *The Scenographic Imagination*, Carbondale etc. 1984, 184, which maintains – without argument whatsoever – that a „minuteness of detail" in stagecraft leads automatically to a greater focus on the setting rather than on the performer.

[29] Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality. Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, Chicago 1988, 132–135, here 134.

calls for a „Magnificent place designed for the public audiences, *with a throne to one side*" („Luogo magnifico destinato per le pubbliche udienze, con trono da un lato") and a „View in perspective of the city of Carthage under construction" to the back („Veduta in prospetta della città di Cartagine che sta edificandosi"). More importantly, the relevant set no longer forced the singing actor to perform all his acting business on the forestage; quite the contrary, Queen Dido and her following were explicitly summoned to appear „Dal fondo della scena" (an action to which Metastasio allotted seven lines of recitative), while King Iarba's Ethiopian army was to enter, in *Aïda*-like fashion, „da lontano", that is, over a practicable bridge or staircase, as can be seen in Giovanni Carlo Sicinio Galli Bibiena's rendering of this setting for Barcelona (1753).[30]

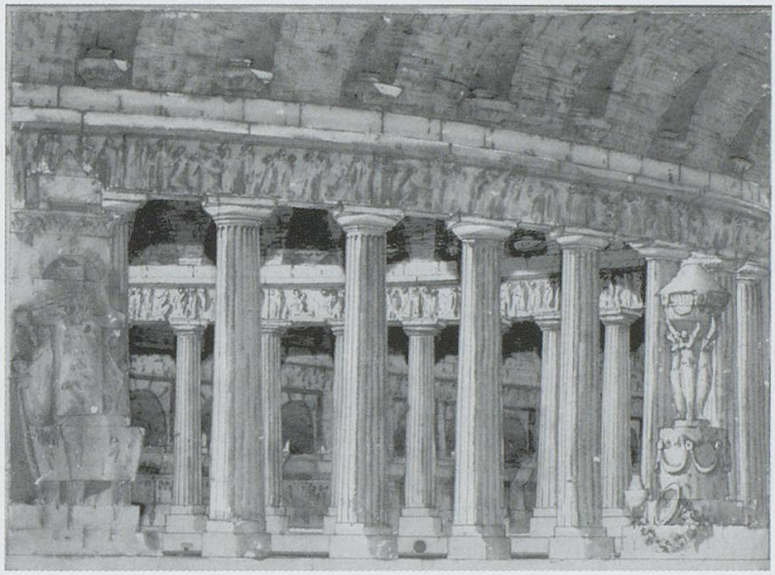

fig. 5: Ignazio Fontanesi, *Vasto tempio sotteraneo destinato pei sepolchri dei Re di Babilonia, i quali tra molti ordini di colonne si scorgono sull'indietro illuminati da lugubri fiaccole* for *La vendetta di Nino* (1793), II.10. This model is comprised of three layers: two transverse screens with cutouts and a backdrop. Civici Musei, Reggio Emilia, inv. C 121.

By the end of the eighteenth century, scenic artists superposed vast, pierced screens of scenery with increasing effect (fig. 5). The call for backgrounds that merely decorated the action was transcended through settings with intricate, *claire-obscure* scenery that surrounded the singers and mediated their gestures – if not physically barring their way. Disney's multiplanes came to be anticipated in most direct fashion when sets began to be illuminated

[30] See Maria Alice Beaumont, *Eighteenth-Century Scenic and Architectural Design. Drawings by the Galli Bibiena Family from Collections in Portugal*, Alexandria 1990, 74 (drawing), 88 (model). Other instances in which Metastasian characters appear from or withdraw to the back are *Catone in Utica* (Rome 1728), III.12 („Si vedono venir Cesare e Fulvio dal fondo") and *Il Ruggiero o vero L'eroica gratitudine* (Milan 1771), I.8 („Le guardie si ritirano al fondo della scena").

using independent light boxes (candles and oil lamps in movable reflectors) and when they were shifted in layers, if only during a short lapse of time in the eighteenth century – and during a much longer one from Wagner's era onwards (think of the moving panorama and cyclorama: immense backloths enveloping the entire stage). The multiplane principle, in other words, was not so much the product of modern cinematography than a forgotten, visionary instrument of the Italian Baroque. The media deployed to achieve its effect might have changed throughout the centuries, yet its central target remained essentially the same: to absorb the viewer by surrounding acting bodies with virtual realities.