Space Art on Stage: The Cosmo-Aesthetic Challenge

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This research project investigates staged events that explore and convey experiences of outer space and the cosmos. The project has three dimensions:
1. The establishment of space art on stage as a genre at the intersection of visual arts and performing arts;
2. The writing of a history of the genre;
3. And the study of the genre’s philosophical, spiritual, and political implications, what shall be known as “the cosmo-aesthetic challenge.”

The project takes as its point of departure the visual arts genre space art, also known as astronomical art, or even astronautical art (Malina 1970; Hardy 1989; Woods 2017). Hitherto stage arts have been at the margins of space art, only recognised by a few practitioners and curators. As connections between performance and outer space, however, become more frequent (Cervera 2016), there is a need for paying closer attention to stage arts as an extension of space art.

Space art on stage is to be understood as space art that, in some sense, takes place on a stage. Here “stage” is used in its broadest sense. In the theatre, actors and spectators typically share the same space and time, but with the introduction of video technology and the internet this is not necessarily a requirement; the stage may be mediated, the performance transmitted, and distances overcome – indeed, even gravity may be transcended. In principle, any space can be declared a stage.

Therefore, the stage does not have to be bound to the earth; it might just as well be on board a plane or a space station. Launching their art off the ground is what some space artists already have achieved.

Space art is often conceived of as reliant on space activities for its implementation (Malina 1991). By and large the genre seems to have been influenced by an instrumental mindset aimed at serving the exposition of astronomy and astronautics as well as promoting the conquest of space and the expansion of human civilisation. Thus, the genre has a built-in risk of retaining practitioners as mediators of scientific and technological achievements, and geopolitical aspirations, rather than allowing the art to fully unfold its creative and critical potentials.

By cosmo-aesthetics is meant a science-based celestial or cosmological aesthetics that may capture the paradoxical experience of the cosmos between a “sense of otherness, distance, abyss, disinterest, lostness”, and a “sense of participation, of the beholder’s celestial ancestry” (Rolston III 2011). A cosmo-aesthetics of performance reflects these conflicting sentiments and they are the impetus for seeking ways of facilitating self-transcendence (Garcia-Romeu 2010) for the spectator.

Blomdahl and Erik Lindgren, who based it on the Nobel Prize-winning epic poem Aniara by Harry Martinson (1936). The opera renders Man’s ill-fated attempt to migrate to Mars in the wake of environmental disaster and nuclear war. The spaceship Aniara is thrown off course and the survivors are doomed to die in interstellar space. While constructing a history of space art on stage, this project explores the philosophical, spiritual, and political challenges this genre offers. The genre is defined by these challenges from the very beginning. The leitmotif from Aniara, “a small bubble of air in the glass bowl of God’s spirit”, captures the fragility of Man’s existence in the immensity of the Cosmos. The cosmo-aesthetic challenge of space art on stage is not only to convey through performance the experience of outer space but also to find aesthetics that may help us to come to terms with the cosmic conditions of human existence.

By placing spectators on balconies looking straight down on the stage, Hotel Pro Forma explored perspective and gravity in Why Does Night Come, Mother (Aarhus Town Hall 1989). When the performers lay down on the floor they appeared to be floating weightlessly in space. Photos: Roberto Fortuna.


Allowing space art on stage to unfold its artistic promise, there is a need for a genre concept, which is not narrowly understood as dependent on space technology and space programmes. As access to orbit currently is difficult to obtain for artists, terrestrial performances have much more creative and critical manoeuvrability (Triscott 2016).

Space art on stage may be traced back to the beginning of the Space Age and the pinnacle of the Cold War. Thus, the first sci-fi opera ever premiered at the Royal Opera in Stockholm 1959: Aniara – A Revue about Man in Space and Time by Karl-After

Scene from the Danish performance theatre company Hotel Pro Forma’s Cosmos+, which premiered at the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre 2014. Photo: Roberto Fortuna. Courtesy: Hotel Pro Forma

Scene from Aniara at the Royal Opera, Stockholm 1959. Photo: Enar Merkel Rydberg. Courtesy: Royal Opera

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