The Yellow Sound An unstageable composition? Technology, modernism and spaces that should-not-be.

Abstract

This paper shows how the 'magic-box' aesthetics of nineteenth century stage technology were utilized by modern scenographic and technological approaches to realise Wassily Kandinsky's rarely performed abstract stage composition *The Yellow Sound* at Tate Modern in 2011. Performed in a glass room overlooking London, technology and scenographic approaches to space were successful in producing a complete version: with yellow giants, miniature people, flying heads, *et al*. This paper explores what the magic-box aesthetic was and how it was created by manipulating space through mechanical technologies in a proscenium-framed space. It explains how modern projection technologies and innovative scenographic approaches to performance in this case study can recreate its affect in a space that is very unlike a proscenium arch theatre but can still be magic.

The Yellow Sound at Tate Modern. (Photo: Adrian Curtain)

Wassily Kandinsky's *Der Gelbe Klang*

Kandinsky considered the theatre of the early twentieth century to be an aesthetically fractured art form in that its component parts of ballet, opera and drama (Kandinsky, 1974a: 190) had been estranged and enhanced separately until they appeared to be art forms in their own right. He thought that as a consequence of materialistic gravities they had become 'petrified, separated by high walls' (Kandinsky, 1974a: 193) and one dimensional with no depth and no internal resonance (Kandinsky, 1974a: 199). Kandinsky saw the drama, opera and ballet of the early twentieth century as deeply flawed products of a nineteenth century materialism. His response was to write *Der Gelbe Klang* (*The Yellow Sound*), a stage composition that reunited the theatrical forms to serve the inner values and the souls of those who watched it. The composition and therefore Kandinsky's vision of theatrical art should contain three elements:

1. The musical sound and its movement,
2. The physical-psychical sound and its movement, expressed through people and object,
3. The coloured tone and its movement (a special possibility for the stage). The Drama finally consists of the complex of inner experiences (soul = vibrations) of the audience (Kandinsky, 1974a: 201-205).

These three elements can be very clearly seen in *The Yellow Sound*, though the 'complex of inner experiences of the audience' during performance are a little harder to pin-point. *The Yellow Sound* is very precise in its textual demands - at times the text reads like an extended stage direction, at other moments it focuses very specifically on choreographic or sonic nuances. It resists a linear narrative structure, preferring to present a series of stage pictures rather than dramatic scenes. The score of colours is of equal importance to the score of sounds, choric voice and physical movement. These demands 'play equally important roles; they remain externally independent and are treated equally' (Kandinsky, 1974a: 206) in order to enhance their inner value, that which enriches the souls of the audience. Even so *The Yellow Sound* is as difficult to access for an audience today as it was in 1912. Even when viewed as a kinetic painting or a study in synaesthesia, the content of that painting is unusual: figures in brightly coloured costumes, five yellow giants with indistinct faces, red flying creatures that flitter about the stage, shaking flowers that vibrate in sympathy with different shrill notes and tiny people who walk across a colour-changing hill. All of the visuals are underpinned by an aural score in which sounds contract and shrink in towards themselves, single notes sound shrilly from the orchestra and voices cry loudly single sounds and odd words. Despite these often bizarre visual and sonic requests, there is something very conventional about *The Yellow Sound*: it is clearly written for a proscenium arch theatre.

The first indication of the use of a familiar proscenium space is the inclusion of the only non-diegetic stage direction '*Curtain*' in the Prelude (Kandinsky, 1974b: 210). The lack of any other such directions could suggest that this is merely a convention of scriptwriting and production where the expression 'curtain' is often used to indicate the opening and closing of a performance. However, Kandinsky uses several other directions of a similar nature diegetically which indicate the use of a proscenium stage. He makes references to the colour of back drops used in the first descriptions

of each Picture; there are several references to back-stage and to the appearance of figures from the left or the right of the stage which also indicate, at the very least, the use of proscenium type wings leading to an off-stage or back-stage space. Perhaps the most telling descriptions in the text are those requesting the transformation of scenes such as when 'the backdrop turns suddenly brown. The hill becomes a dirty green' (Kandinsky, 1974b: 210). The apparition and disappearance of rocks and the entrance of yellow giants and figures in coloured robes also indicate production demands most easily achieved in a well masked theatre with a fly tower and under-stage machinery. In fact most of the staging requests made by Kandinsky that seem the most difficult to stage can be easily achieved by mechanical means. A particularly good example of this is the action centred on a 'completely round hill, intensely green and as large as possible' (Kandinsky, 1974b: 216) which shrinks and grows, then sprouts a gigantic dancing flower before '[g]oing from right to left, tiny, imprecise figures, vaguely grey-green in hue, walk very slowly over the hill.' (Kandinsky, 1974b: 217-218). The theatre of the nineteenth century was familiar with spectacle in proscenium arch theatres which could produce any thing of wonder, from fairy presentations (Fitzgerald, 1881: 26) to entire train wrecks (Brewster, 1997: 201-202). Even the demands on the rapidly changing colour and focus of lights were not impossible for the early twentieth century theatre. Even if the request for 'dazzlingly coloured rays [...] alternating rapidly several times' (Kandinsky, 1974b: 219) would have been expensive and difficult to achieve, it would have still been technologically possible.

Of course this is determinist supposition: it is easy to find out what technology was at Kandinsky's disposal, but Kandinsky may not have been aware of it or may have been merely playful: the request, for example, that 'the dazzling white light by jerks becomes progressively greyer' (Kandinsky, 1974b: 217) is simply impossible without rewriting the laws of physics. Nevertheless, however determined Kandinsky was to push the conventions of content and of the art form of theatre, he, like the general public, may not have been fully aware of the capabilities of the proscenium arch stage the wood stage and of nineteenth century production of spectacle.

The Wood Stage

The English wood stage was, in many ways, the crowning theatrical achievement of the nineteenth-century theatre. It was installed in most of the Victorian theatres and used to support the drama that took place on the stage in the most efficient way it could. Its main aim was to support the fashionable drama by presenting a stage picture to an audience, who according to Percy Fitzgerald were ignorant to what is happening backstage: 'For the audience there is but the great arch, the curtain, the drop-scene that shuts off the mystic world from vulgar eyes' (Fitzgerald, 1881: 25). The audience were only aware of a small section of the theatre structure, the fragment that they could see, 'one eighth part of the whole' with no inkling of 'the extraordinary complex elements, the vast expanses, the machinery, the "hands" that are at work to produce what seem simple results' (Fitzgerald, 1881:25).

The stage inside the proscenium arch as viewed by the audience is an ordinary thing, it is a commonplace object, and yet we know that under that object, or rather 'inside' that thing, there must be a mechanism at work which causes the

commonplace wood stage to open up and produce fairies, daemons, choirs, graves, cauldrons and all the wonderful spectacles we have seen from trap doors and mechanisms of various sizes and shapes and ingenious contrivances. If these things are contained inside the stage, the stage then is similar to a closed chest or box, appearing commonplace from outside, but we know, as Gaston Bachelard says: 'it opens!' (1994: 85). Gaston Bachelard points out in his *Poetics of Space* the phenomenological opposition of inside and outside, that they are separate but actually intimate: 'they are always ready to be reversed, to exchange their hostilities' and their opposing definitions (Bachelard, 1994: 218). In the theatre, the cabinet-like stage floor and what lies beneath it concealed in the sub-stage is ready to be reversed; the stage is invaded by an inside/outside space whenever a trap is used to make something appear or disappear.

The Proscenium Arch

The proscenium arch masks the workings of the wood stage, but it also creates tensions in spatial audience / performance relationships. The proscenium arch frames the stage space and makes the action within that frame a world apart from the world of the audience. The audience of the early twentieth century popular theatre, sitting in the stalls of a proscenium theatre, look into a stage picture that is physically separated from them architecturally and, in some ways, dramatically. The stage picture in this instance is a self-contained place or *locus* of heightened action divorced from the transitionary performance / audience space that was present in earlier performance spaces. In Robert Weimann's exploration of the spaces of the Shakespearean performance, for example, there is a

> distinction between the *locus* as a fairly specific imaginary locale or self-contained space in the world of the play and the *platea* as an opening in the *mise-en-scène* through which the place and time of the stage-as-stage and the cultural occasion itself are made either to assist or resist the [...] remote representation (Weimann, 2000: 180).

The *locus* was the playing space where heightened dramatic action took place, away from the audience; it was an area of domination over the rest of the space. Here the audience was meant to watch the action unfold. The *platea* was accessible to an audience, it being, as it were, at 'ground level'; it was the transitionary space between the audience and the *locus* of heightened action. Consequently movements between these spaces were very important 'for such a crossing assumes [...] the functions of a dramatic effect' (Weimann, 1978: 107). While the Shakespearean stage operated with tacit unmarked boundaries of *locus* and *platea*, in contrast the 'Italian Renaissance stage [...was...] more nearly unified, representational and localized' (Weimann, 2000: 190), situated as it was in perspectivally-based scenographic practices. The performance space in Italianate proscenium arch theatre is entirely *locus,* there is no blurred border with the audience's *platea*, no section of transition between audience and play, where the mimetic realities meet, there is only the break: the *locus*, the beginning of the stage and the start of the auditorium. When the wood stage functions, the actor or the scenery appears to penetrate through not just the solid matter of the stage floor, but into the *locus* of the stage. They do not come from the *platea* but from a different third space, and if Fitzgerald's assertion that the audience may not know what is beyond the eighth that

they see is taken into account it is not necessarily a 'back-stage' space where the actors go after they have left the scene but instead it is a space that should not really exist. This is not like when a performer exits the stage, and their body leaves via the wings: then their character is 'off' stage and the physical body of the actor is 'back-stage'. When an actor vanishes via a vampyre trap or appears using a daemon trap or a more complex device like the Corsican trap, their character comes and goes from a space that is 'off' but the performer's physicality occupies a space that does not strictly exist in the same way that back-stage does (Fitzgerald, 1881; D'Arcy, 2011). It is an extra space, a surprising space that does not quite make sense, and for it to be effective and believable in an illusory space it must seem that the performers have come from nowhere and disappeared into thin air as if by magic.

The Magic-Box Aesthetic

We may currently be talking about stage devices and performers in a stage space, but the appearance of things from out of thin air, or at least from spaces unseen, is more commonly found in the sleight-of-hand or presdigitations of the magician. Henry Hay said that conjuring was the art of 'entertaining by tempting a particular audience to accept, temporarily, minor infractions of natural law' (Mangan, 2007: 17), something that is crucial to the efficient functioning of a stage illusion. Arthur C. Clarke, a science fiction author, science writer and technologist, developed a set of three 'laws' governing the acceptance of the fantastic science in fiction. His third law states that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic (Clarke, 2000: 2); that is to say any new piece of never before seen technology shown to a layperson will give the impression of being magical even though it is technological. In the context of science fiction this is often used to show how technologically young the human race are compared to more advanced aliens. The truism that lies within this law, though, is far from science fiction: ask a child how the radio works and they are likely to answer fancifully. A mainstay of Victorian spectacle is the magic-box aesthetic of the proscenium theatre in combination with a willing suspension of disbelief (Coleridge, 1905: 145) and a kind of cognitive estrangement (Suvin, 1972: 372-382) associated with aspects of magic and science fiction. Kandinsky was not just writing his composition for an audience that needed to reconnect with the art form of theatre; he was deliberately writing the composition for a conventional theatre more than capable of staging it. Hugo Ball (the Dadaist responsible for sound poetry) began to stage *The Yellow Sound* in the Müncher Kammerspeile, one of the most successful German theatres of the time (Hal-Koch, 1984: 159). Due to the outbreak of the First World War the production never opened, though there is little doubt that he would have managed to stage it because the Kammerspeile is a rather fetching art-nouveau theatre with a proscenium stage.

***The Yellow Sound* at Tate Modern**

The Yellow Sound (D'Arcy and Hand: Nov 24, 2011) was performed at Tate Modern to celebrate the centenary of the *The Blaue Reiter Almanac* - the collection of essays and art works in which *Der Gelbe Klang* first appeared. The Almanac was a work of modernist art in itself: comprising collections of writings, compositions and pictures from Kandinsky and Marc as well as some of their peers, including the atonal composer Arnold Schoenberg and fellow artist Thomas von Hartmann, it was intended to support the new forms of two exhibitions (Hal-Koch, 1984: 44) that

Kandinsky was organising, but also as a 'spiritual treasure', (Marc, 1974: 55) a gift to be presented to their contemporaries for the modernist reason that: 'New ideas are hard to understand only because they are unfamiliar. How often must this sentence be repeated before even one in a hundred will draw the most obvious conclusions from it?' (Marc, 1974: 60). Repetitions of *The Yellow Sound* are rare (Hal-Koch, 1974: 159; D'Arcy and Hand, 2012: 56) and the performance at Tate Modern was not staged in a space similar to that of Hugo Ball's. The east conference suite on the seventh floor of the Tate Modern is a space with three glass walls overlooking London, the Globe Theatre, the Millennium Bridge, St Paul's Cathedral and The Spire. It is a large, bare, dark floored space with fragments of original architecture displayed in the exposed supporting girders at intervals around the perimeter of the room. Its current purpose, as a conference and meeting (and sometimes banqueting) space is, however, more clearly indicated by the choice of lighting installed into the suspended ceiling: sixteen large, spherical fixtures. Even though the room is huge (nearly seventeen metres by nine) the ceilings which should be at more than 3.5 metres are reduced by these fixtures to around the 2.6 metres, creating an immovable technical obstacle making the space almost impossible to light theatrically. This space is far removed from the art-nouveau proscenium cavern of the Kammerspeile, in which Hugo Ball attempted but never succeeded in staging the composition.

The challenge was to stage an 'unstageable' modernist stage composition without a stage in what was, in effect, a gallery space. The scenography had to affect the aesthetic that Kandinsky was basing his work upon: the aesthetic of the proscenium theatre, the type of stage that could produce all of the magical things necessary for the production. The production could not begin in any one place, so it was conceived as a kinetic painting where every aspect of the work was to resonate with its audience: the movements, the sounds, the voice and the action had to come together at the same time as the set, the costume and the lights. The approach was holistic and addressed the visual and the sonic as inextricable. Due to the length of the piece and tensions of curation, time and production of performance art (D'Arcy and Hand, 2012: 56-60) the audience entered a space that was active, with performance already underway.

Colouring in the sound

The space was lit with a deep blue light, from six 3-in-1 RGB LED foot lights. With these units a range of colours could easily be produced which would maintain their colour tone as evenly at high intensities as they would at very low intensities. LED lights, though limited in other respects, produce light without the amber shift in the light spectrum associated with incandescent lighting fixtures working at lower intensities. It was therefore possible not only to affordably light a non-theatre space with fixtures that ran on domestic power, but also to light the space with a good deal of artistic control not often available in found-space or site-specific performances. Consequently textual requests for coloured light to vanish to white, become more intense or for the blue light of the Prelude to become 'brighter as the colour deepens' were possible (Kandinsky, 1974b: 210). The lights coloured the whole performing space and physically created a divide between the audience space and the space of the composition. This divide could be crossed by the performers easily, but also aesthetically: the lights lit a small and immediate performing space and, much more

dimly, the back of the room, another space of performing, but not a space of immediate attention. When the audience entered during the Prelude, figures moved in the shadows of this end of the room, where hulking creatures also stood motionless, but the focus was on the constructions in the centre of the space.

In the centre of the room was a free-standing, white proscenium arch, with curved sides and accentuated architectural features that were reminiscent of the modernist architecture of the Tate Modern building. The arch stood in front of a black-bordered half cloth. Just in front of the cloth, so that it was centre-stage within the arch, was a small, white, roughly-textured quarter sphere a little under two metres in diameter. These constructions dominated the space, as the figures moved in the gloom behind them. Everything was coloured blue by the light, and as the blue became more intense, the quarter sphere and the cloth changed colour. The sphere became the 'broad green hill' and the cloth the colour changing back cloth (Kandinsky, 1974b: 213) of Picture One. To match the intensity and versatility of the footlights, the cloth and the sphere were both used as projection surfaces throughout the performance. The sphere was projected onto using a short throw projector hidden behind the key-stone of the arch, the half cloth was projected onto from behind. The colour intensity and quality of data projectors means that they can be used as quite effective light sources if used to produce blocks of colour rather than moving images. From a theatre lamp, a white colour which becomes 'progressively greyer' cannot be produced (Kandinsky, 1974b: 217). Grey is only possible with paint where colour mixing is additive: white pigment mixes with black pigment to produce grey. In optics, light is only white and the absence of light is darkness, there is no black light that can be added. However, with projection a grey image can be projected onto a surface which gives the impression of grey light without actually being grey. This projected light can change fluidly and expressively and, of course, also be used to project video images.

If the footlights demarcated the *platea* of the performance space, then the arch framed the projected *loci*. The bi-directional projections meant that the colour of the quarter sphere could remain independent from the half cloth: both projections were unable to wash each other out or overlap so that any image projected only affected the object onto which it was intended to affect. Because the projections didn't meet, there was an area devoid of light between the hill and the backdrop and in this space a puppeteer could stand to operate the dancing flower of Picture Two. The quarter sphere was hollow and large enough for the puppeteer to hide during the first stages of the performance, the flower could then 'grow' at the appropriate cue. The soffits of the arch were also hollow and large enough again for the puppeteer to hide before stepping out and pulling from inside the arch the bell pull to toll the ominous knell that sounds throughout Picture Four (Kandinsky, 1974b: 220). These hollow spaces, then, behaved as the 'back-stage' space - the convenient place to put the physicality of a performer who is ready to come on-stage but who should not really be seen by the audience. Separately from this, the 'off-stage' space existed in the gloom at the drop-off point of the lights where the figures and giants lurked, present but not the focus of the action. These off-stage figures were just installed as part of the performance and allowed to move freely through space and around the fixed apparatus of the quarter sphere, backcloth and arch. When the 'intensely yellow giants' from Picture One (Kandinsky, 1974b: 213) entered, the figures moved aside to allow them passage and the giants stomped their way out of the gloom to form a

line in front of the arch. Here they fluttered and twitched in the colour changing light before lumbering further forward, past the footlights into the gloom of the audience space, a further reinforcement of the *platea*.

Inside the frame of the free standing proscenium, the *locus* of the space was also shifting: it was located in two physical areas - in the projections onto the back cloth and the quarter sphere. The scenographic and technologic *locus* that was created for the Tate was for the most part created by projections of intense blocks of colour meeting the shifting tones of the composition and the directions of the text. The projections were also used to affect the moments of spectacle that were required.

The technologic *Loci*

The rapid 'left to right' flight of 'vague red creatures, *somewhat* suggesting birds, with large heads that are remotely similar to human heads' (Kandinsky, 1974b: 214) of Picture One were animated creatures which flew across the projection on the half cloth, while the sound of their frantic flapping panned between the speakers situated in the corners of the installation space. The effect was that the flapping moved over a pervasive soundscape flowing constantly from the one speaker to another so that it sounded as if the creatures were flying around the room. They flew through the sonic environment invisibly and became visible only through the framed projection where you could see them animated in the *locus* of the screen.

In Picture Two, the *locus* was situated on the quarter sphere while physical figures moved through the *platea* in coloured robes, holding flowers. Kandinsky's hill in Picture Two changes colour, grows a blurry spot and eventually produces a flower which dances to shrill notes of A and B and B flat (Kandinsky, 1974b: 216-218). In performance, when the flower collapsed back into the hill a line of tiny off-white animated figures walked across it until the end of the picture but in the confusion of the scene (the figures were dancing in front of the arch by this point and the soundscape was cacophonous), the figures on the hill were part of a much larger kinetic painting; although still in the physical *locus* of the space, the attention of the audience was drawn throughout the space.

The space that should-not-be

It was staging the final scene, Picture Six, which presented the greatest challenge, and it is this staging which brings into use the magic-box aesthetic of the proscenium stage most clearly as well as the distinctions between *locus* and *platea* in this case study. In the text of Picture Six, a final giant is left standing on stage. This one has a pale face with 'round, black eyes'; it turns and walks up stage to stand behind the hill where it becomes impossibly tall, extending 'to the full height of the stage' and its arms grow until it makes the shape of a cross, '[t]he music is as expressive as the action on the stage' (Kandinsky, 1974b: 225). One of the issues with the giants, who are meant to be very tall indeed, was that they had to be gargantuan but could not be taller than the light fittings of the room at Tate Modern for obvious practical reasons. In order to increase this perception of them being gargantuan, they were the same height as the free standing proscenium arch and already the same height as the stage. The only way to realise Picture Six was to place the Giant into the

mediatised *locus* of the performance as was done with the animated figures on the hill and the winged creatures.

The giant walked up stage and turned its head to look back across the *platea* to the audience. The figures and the other giants had already moved into the gloomy unlit part of the space, effectively and aesthetically they had moved 'off-stage'. From the point of view of the audience, the giant's final in-*platea* action was to walk slowly and deliberately into the side of the screen just as an image of the giant walked onto a red and black, Cartesian-gridded landscape. In this mediatised *locus*, the Giant became animated, its face became pale and its eyes dark. As it stretched out its arms it became thinner and taller, the landscape shrinking away until it achieved its final cruciform shape and the music became 'as expressive as the action' in the screen.

The dramatic action of movement from the social *platea* to the heightened *locus* was not possible physically in this situation only technologically, because the *locus* of the space was technologically and scenographically locked. The only manner in which live performers can be granted access to the physical *locus* of this performance is via the projection technologies, because the heightened 'specific imaginary locale or self-contained space' (Weimann, 2000: 181) of the *locus* was the space of the mediatised image projected onto the screen and onto the quarter sphere. The technology also presents a physical barrier between the audience and what is apparently the *locus* in a similar way to the physical barrier of the proscenium arch of the nineteenth and early twentieth century theatre. When the giant moved from the *platea* of the live performance into the mediatised representation of the projection image via technological means that movement was dramatic: it was a movement from the *platea* to the *locus.* What makes it similar to the magic-box aesthetic is that only the representation of the giant has been mediatised, the physical performer/puppet that moved behind the screen has not gone 'off-stage' to join its comrades in the gloom and it has not gone 'back-stage' behind the hill or into the soffit of the arch. The physical giant has gone somewhere else: at the same time that it has appeared in the *locus* of the screen, it has physically disappeared from the *platea* of the performance space.

The magic-box aesthetic borrowed from the proscenium arch theatre space and the wood stage becomes particularly clear when a character enters the *locus* of a screen via a hypersurface transfer. This effect is achieved by appearing to walk into a mediatised image through a ribbon screen or through the side of the screen to appear virtually on screen simultaneously, 'both alive and live' in an 'exchange between inside and outside' (Giannachi, 2004: 103). In the performance at Tate Modern, the hypersurface transfer used to realise Picture Six highlights an aspect of this effect that bears significant similarities to the use of traps and stage devices on the Victorian wood stage where the inside and the outside have also 'exchange[d] their hostilities' (Bachelard, 1994: 218). When the giant entered the screen in Picture Six, the character and a representation of the performer entered the *locus* of the screen, but the physical body of the performer through simple visual elision had disappeared to a space that should not be: it was not off-stage and it was not backstage. In keeping with Weimann's *locus* and *platea*, we can call this space the *nusquam*, Latin for nowhere. Without this space there is no tempting an audience to believe that the natural law has been adjusted slightly and because it is a space

which is technologically achieved but unseen, it is indistinguishable from magic. The *nusquam* is the space LePlanche's Vampire, Lord Ruthven, disappears into, where Boucicault's ghost of Louis dei Franchi appears from, where the magician secretes the rabbit or the extra card. It is the magic space that should-not-be in the proscenium theatre and it is the technological space in the hypersurface that was essential to the staging of Kandinsky's unstageable composition.

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Biography

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