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SCENOGRAPHIC DESIGN

TUTOR/LECTURER: Dr Alex Halligey

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Storytelling Through Visual Communication: An Analysis of Es Devlin's Stage Design in Beyonce's *Formation World Tour*

Introduction

Stage design is a powerful narrative tool that can turn live performances into multisensory, immersive events. Renowned scenographer Es Devlin has revolutionised modern stage design by fusing technology, architecture, and storytelling to produce emotionally stirring settings. The stage design for Beyonce's *Formation World Tour* (2016) is among her best-known pieces and exemplifies her ability to blend cultural storytelling with visual communication. This essay analyses Devlin's *Formation Tour* design, emphasising its socio-political significance as well as aesthetic decisions, tone, and audience viewpoint. The argument centres on how Devlin's work transcends simple spectacle and immerses viewers in a profoundly cultural and physiological experience, drawing on scenographic theory and visual communication.

Description of the Stage Design

Devlin's concept for Beyonce's *Formation World Tour* included a massive rotating rectangular monolith that served as a screen and stage. The structure which resembled a modern day obelisk, had dynamic projections and allowed Beyonce to perform both atop and within it. The monolith's reflecting surfaces reflected the crowd resulting in a duality between performer and viewer. The stage expanded into a lengthy catwalk while highlighting Beyonce's imposing presence while allowing for personal audience engagement. Lighting was key with strong contrasts between darkness and brilliant projections that heightened the emotional tone of each song.

Analysis of Story Elements

Aesthetic Choices in Set, Lighting and Stage Layout

Devlin's aesthetic selections for the *Formation Tour* were highly meaningful. The monolith's intimidating construction invoked concepts of power and legacy, which complemented Beyonce's celebration of Black culture and feminism (Wolf & Block, 2014). The revolving mechanism enabled dynamic adjustments of viewpoint, guaranteeing that no audience member had a static view. The lighting design which used high contrast spotlights and synchronised projections increased dramatic tension. For example, during *Freedom*, red lights and water images (a reference to *Hurricane Katrina* and *Black Resistance*) emphasised the song's socio-political meaning.

The stage layout with its elongated catwalk allowed for a participatory experience. Beyonce's mobility between the main stage and the long walkway produced an intimate atmosphere despite the stadium environment. This spatial design adheres to Lidwell et al's (2010) idea of accessibility, ensuring visibility and emotional connection regardless of seat position.

Tone, Atmosphere and Mood

With each song, the mood changed in the physiological realm that Devlin's design created. The audience was taken on an emotional journey by the monolith's projections, which changed from private home videos to politically charged images (during Formation). These shifts were highlighted by the way light and shadow interacted: bright whites for defiance, soft blues for sensitivity. Beyonce's narrative of individual and collective Black identity was reflected in the atmosphere's oscillation between vulnerability and empowerment (Spinogatti, 2017).

Devlin's method is consistent with the aesthetic usability effect (Lidwell et al., 2010) in which visually appealing designs increase perceived utility. The stage's austere, monochrome style served more than just beauty as it also intensified the emotional impact of Beyonce's remarks. The interplay of light and shadow also helped to set the mood with silhouettes and high contrast graphics emphasising the tour's fundamental theme of struggle and triumph.

Point of View (POV) and Audience Perspective

Devlin's thought about new audience involvement notably through mobile phone lenses. The monolith's mirrored surfaces made the stage photogenic from all angles boosting social media sharing. This purposeful design decision expanded the tour's reach, transforming live audience members into digital storytellers. The aesthetic usability effect (Lidwell et al., 2010) is obvious here as visually appealing designs are seen as more functional, increasing audience pleasure and digital propagation.

This method mirrors today's participatory culture in which live acts are not only viewed but also shared digitally. Spinogatti contends that projection design in theatre (and, by extension, live music) must account for mediated viewership. Devlin's design welcomed this "Riot" that was instantly iconic and shareable, extending the performance's reach well beyond the actual audience.

Structural and Participatory Characteristics of Visual Storytelling

Performative Participation

Devlin's stage design promoted performative participation while allowing the audience to co-create the experience. The reflective monolith literally mirrored the viewers breaching the fourth wall and creating a sensation of inclusion. This supports 'Burns and Burns' (1973) claim that live performance is a collective act in which meaning is co-constructed.

Spatial Narrative

The Spatial dynamics of the stage such as height, rotation and catwalk produce a narrative development. Beyonce's transition from the towering monolith to the audience level

represented a shift from symbolism to relatability. This spatial storytelling supports 'Wolf and Block's' (2014) claim that the stage design must direct emotional and narrative flow.