

WITS SCHOOL OF ARTS  
INTERDISCIPLINARY ARTS & CULTURE STUDIES (IACS)

**STUDENT NAME:** Thandolwethu Promise Ngeno

**STUDENT NO:** 2805260

**COURSE NAME:** FILM, VISUAL AND PERFORMING ARTS (FVPA 2A) STORYTELLING  
ACROSS MEDIA AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS

**COURSE CODE:** IACS2000A

**TASK:** Research Essay (TOPIC 4)

**TITLE /TOPIC:** STORYTELLING THROUGH VISUAL COMMUNICATION:  
SCENOGRAPHIC DESIGN

**TUTOR/LECTURER:** Dr Alex Halligey

**DUE DATE:** 12 May 2025

**WORD COUNT:** 1 226 WORDS

**PLAGIARISM DECLARATION**

1. The work I have submitted is my own unaided work; I acknowledge that Academic Misconduct is unacceptable behaviour and that I have not engaged in any form of Academic Misconduct in the submission of this work.

2. I know that plagiarism is wrong. Plagiarism is to use another's work to pretend that it is one's.

own. I also acknowledge that I have not submitted this work for assessment in any other Course.

3. I have used author-date convention for citation and referencing. Each significant contribution to and quotation in this essay from the work, or works, of other people has been acknowledged through citation and reference.

4. I have not allowed and will not allow anyone to copy my work with the intention of passing it off as his or her own.

5. I have done the word processing and formatting of this assignment myself. I understand that the correct formatting is part of the mark for this assignment and that it is therefore wrong for another person to do it for me.

**Signature:**

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a series of loops and a final flourish.

**Date:** 08 May 2025

# **Storytelling Through Visual Communication: An Analysis of Es Devlin's Stage Design in Beyoncé'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 Beyoncé'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 Beyoncé'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 Beyoncé 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 Beyoncé'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 Beyoncé'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. Beyoncé'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. Devlin's use of movement, light and scale to elicit strong feelings is what distinguishes his minimalist yet powerful aesthetic choices. The rotating cube serves as a primary storytelling tool with its surfaces showcasing a variety of images that complement the performance's themes, from poignant imagery to abstract patterns. A fluid visual experience is produced by the smooth transitions between scenes made possible by LED technology/lights.

### **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 and soft blues for sensitivity. Beyoncé'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 Beyoncé'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.

Grodal's theory of embodied cognition, which holds that the audience's effect is directly influenced by visual and spatial design, lends additional authority to this emotional layering. An essential component of immersive performance design, which is Devlin's use of lighting and projection, produced a tangible experience that made the political themes more than just visible (Grodal, 2009). Furthermore, the tour's aesthetic decisions are in line with what Dyer refers to as spectacular resistance, in which Black artists take back visual narratives in popular culture.

### **Point of View (POV) and Audience Perspective**

Devlin 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**

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. The spatial dynamics of the stage, such as height, rotation and catwalk, produce a narrative development. Beyoncé'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.

Especially via its structural and performative components, Devlin's design exemplifies the fundamental idea of visual storytelling. With its changes signifying changes in the story and emotional tone as the rotating cube adds a temporal aspect to the performance. Devlin underlines time as a basic element of stage design, therefore supporting this view; she observes, "The things I create are not the things. They are the time the people at the show spend in the company of the things. They are the time the attendees of the event spent with the items. Show attendees spend time in the company of the items."

## **Socio-Cultural and Socio-Political Impact**

Beyond just being aesthetically pleasing, Devlin's work on the Formation Tour included socio political commentary. The stage was turned into an activist platform by the monolith's projections of Black Southern culture, police brutality and female empowerment. Devlin and Beyoncé reinterpreted concert experiences as a forum for cultural dialogue by creating a physiological space that inspired pride and resistance. The tour's visual language resonated around the world, reinforcing feminist solidarity and Black identity (Spinogatti, 2017).

This supports 'Burns and Burns' (1973) claim that theatre and performance venues in general act as microcosms of social conflicts. Devlin's scenography turned the concert into a platform for group catharsis and resistance by highlighting Beyoncé's activism. Deliberate use of provocative images like the sinking police car in "Formation" challenged viewers to face systematic injustice and showed how stage design could be a kind of visual activism.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Devlin's stage design for Beyoncé's *Formation World Tour* shows how visual communication in live performance goes beyond spectacle to become narrative. Devlin created a multisensory narrative that emphasised Beyoncé's cultural message by means of aesthetic decisions, spatial dynamics and audience participation. Her work shows the need for scenography in influencing emotional and sociopolitical discussion, therefore providing that stage design is not only floral but also a crucial medium of modern narrative.

**(1 226 Words)**

### **Reference List:**

Burns, E. and Burns, T. (1973) *Sociology of Literature and Drama: Selected Readings*. London: Penguin Books.

Lidwell, W., Holden, K. and Butler, J. (2010) *Universal Principles of Design, Revised and Update: 125 Ways to Enhance Usability, Influence Perception, Increase Appeal, Make Better Design Decisions and Teach Through Design*. Rockport: Rockport Pub.

Spinogatti, J. (2017) *Storytelling within the Theatre: How the Work of the Projection Designer Pushes the Boundaries of Art, Collaboration and Technology*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Pittsburgh.

Wolf, C.R. And Block, D. (2014) *Scene Design and Stage Lighting: Chapter 12 Projection in the Theatre*. Wadsworth: Cengage Learning.

Devlin, E. (2017) *Abstract: The Art of Design*. Netflix. Season 1, Episode 3: Es Devlin: Stage Design [Online] Available at: <https://www.netflix.com/> [Accessed 05 May 2025].

Grodal, T. (2009) *Embodied Visions: Evolution, Emotion, Culture and Film*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dyer, S. (2017) *Spectacular Resistance: Black Feminist Performance in Pop Culture*. New York: NYU Press.