

Ildebrando Clemente
The other montage.
Architecture as an epiphany of the world.

Author: *Laura Scala*

Title: *Theater and urban scene*

Subtitle: *Research and spatial experimentation of the Russian avant-garde*

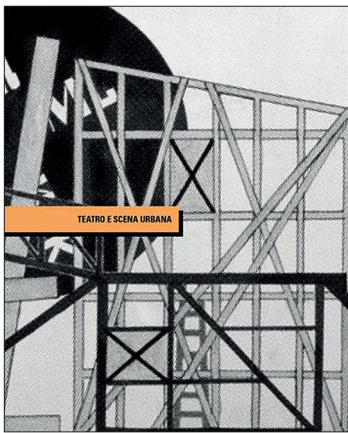
Language: *Italian*

Publisher: *LetteraVentidue, Siracuse*

Characteristic: *format 19,5x24,5 cm, 272 pages, paperback, colors*

ISBN: *978-8862424974*

Year: *2021*



Theater and urban scene, Research and spatial experimentation of the Russian avant-garde is the title of the beautiful book composed by Laura Scala after having finished her research in preparation for her doctorate in architectural composition at the IUAV of Venice. During her studies, Laura Scala was fortunate to have compared and discussed compositional issues and matters relating to her research with Luciano Semerani and Antonella Gallo, who respectively wrote two important introductory texts to the book. Equally relevant is the translation, as an appendix to the book, of *Elements of Architectural-Spatial Composition* by Vladimir Krinskij, Ivan Lamcov and Mikhail Turkus, first edition of 1934. This is a fundamental text for understanding the teaching of Vchutemas, the Russian State Institute of Higher Art with its art-technical workshops offered in Moscow between 1920 and 1930.

The book is divided into two main parts, with a short concluding chapter and an addition at the end of the book which contains, as mentioned, the translation of *Elements of Architectural-Spatial Composition*.

The first part includes an interpretation of the *syntax of the scenic space* and is essentially dedicated to an analysis of the sets of two theatrical works of the Russian avant-garde: *Victory over the Sun* and *The Magnificent Cuckold*. *Pobeda nad solncem (Victory over the Sun)* is a real theatrical masterpiece that was staged for the first time in St. Petersburg in 1913 and is the result of the collaboration between Michail Matjušin who composed the music, Aleksej Kručėnych who wrote the text, and Kazimir Malevich who designed the sets and costumes. Ljubov Sergeevna Popova's drawings and scenographies from *Le Cocu Magnifique (The Magnificent Cuckold)*, a work written by Fernand Crommelynck in 1921 and staged in Moscow in 1922, were additionally analyzed.

The second part focusing on the *syntax of architectural and urban space* instead deals with the interpretation of urban space as the daily theater of the perception and revealing power of the human condition. This discussion is further enriched through the analysis of the design for the *Palazzo del Lavoro* of the brothers Leonid, Viktor, and Aleksandr Vesnin of 1922-23.

As the title implies, the author's first move pushes us directly to the essential core of the book: the not entirely obvious relationship between theater and architecture. What do the pages of this book tell us about this relation-

ship starting with the Russian Avant-garde? Firstly, they tell us that there is an *artistic experience* and that this experience is what makes us authentic: authentic in what we are, in what we do. Above all, they reiterate that the *artistic experience* defines the horizon of the architect's sense of doing that which is beyond, and before the satisfaction of needs unfolds its banal ruthlessness and stifles the desire to transcend the world of needs into an expressive world, into a new world of ideas and passions.

Not coincidentally, the last chapter of the book is titled *Fragments and the reconfiguration of a new world*. A chapter in which *constructivism*, *cubo-futurism* and *suprematism* are compared with experiences and experiments of contemporary architecture. As always, the influences and references between the old and the new, between the ancient and the present return. Even the latter "characters" - the old, the new - always at the mercy of offering us a shift in experience whose first characteristic obliges us to take greater account of the relationship between language and imagination and consequently, as it emerges from reading this book, commits us to taking the torment and search to be true into greater consideration, the hope of remaining free and the desire of every conscience to make itself visible to itself and to others.

Through the aforementioned works, *theater and urban scene* speak to us of the compositional techniques and modes we can use to imagine and stage - before putting into practice - a new world that is simultaneously also ancient, and which nevertheless is so paradoxical as to require a progressive change of our consciousness. Thus following the arguments of the book, the relationship between theater and architecture teaches us, or could teach us, a change in the level of *being*.

In fact, as developed by Laura Scala, the theater/architecture hendiadys shows us that it is easy for deceptive or phantasmagoric relationships to exist and develop between *body* and *space*, as happens in everyday life, even before that at the theater, but above all she tells us that there is, by contrast, the concrete and authentic possibility of conceiving what we are, what we do, in a poetic way. As we know, the Avant-garde has accustomed us to thinking of a new world as the result of a *revolution*, as the result of the subversion of ancient roles and old beliefs. Even if in reality, we know that the overthrow of customs has always been present in Western culture, as testified by the traditional utopian figure of the "world upside down". The myth of the "world upside down", as Michail Bakhtin has shown, expresses the profound aspiration to re-make the world in order to give it a new meaning and a regenerated order. A prefigured world in which the poor give alms to the rich, the saint becomes a sinner, fish fly and sheep shear the shepherd. We can put a world thus conceived into an image, and starting from this new image we can hope for a real subversion of injustices and an authentic social revolution.

The theme of the "world upside down" occupies only a small paragraph of the book, but likely represents the authentic "foundation" of the interpretations developed by Laura Scala. We can briefly recall that the greatest and most distressing upheaval that the Russian Avant-garde has considered is that of the defeat of time. The death of time: the apocalyptic moment. After a new world, a new world of salvation and regeneration of the human condition and its expressiveness. It is however important to note, as the author does, that destroying is necessary for building, and that, as Nietzsche wrote, the cosmic force of life is expressed in "becoming and passing away, building and destroying, without any moral additive, in forever equal inno-

cence - and above all - they find themselves in this world only through the play of the artist and the child". To *put the old present order to death* with its tyranny of facts and to rediscover the original emotion of being there, we must, as the theater teaches us, play like an artist, like a child. This is what theater teaches us, and the author reaffirms this with her invitation to reconsider the *artistic experience*, the experience of scenographic fiction, as consubstantial with the destiny of architecture.

Now Laura Scala's arguments raise some extreme questions. Will there come a day when even theater will be destroyed and overcome? Will a day arrive when theater will also die? No! I don't think so. Theater will never die. Certainly like everything else, even theater itself can die in fiction to rise again in reality like a new world. Who knows? Perhaps one day cinema will die, or if it doesn't die it will become something different than the cinema we know today and certainly something profoundly different from the cinema of its origins. But theater no, I don't think that theater will die as long as man, alas, is involved in calamities, falls into disgrace, suffers, hates or loves himself and others. Perhaps cinema will die because it is essentially a technological art, it is primarily a *téchne*. And as we know, technologies change, they change quickly and radically. Theater will never die because in the end it requires little *téchne*, almost nothing is needed to do theater: a place, a precise moment, a chair or a random piece of fabric, a story or a legend to literally *fall into*, conflicts or jealousies, the desire for justice, a dead man and so many, many whys, and above all an interminable desire for freedom. Men also unconsciously love theater. Theater is a very ancient and very important thing, perhaps even too important to be, as it were, the object of a definitive disappearance. This is because deep down, every time man feels the need to question himself, his actions and his achievements, he sees himself projected into another, he imagines his experience in the experience of another. Man always sees himself, he sees the man he was, he sees the man he is, in the moment in which he sees himself represented. And so he starts saying, he starts thinking: am I like him? Do I do as he does? And this thinking, this doing that "I desire" is always an extreme and decisive doing and thinking. A doing and thinking of a new and hopefully fairer world. Doing and thinking freedom.

And architecture? Is architecture in danger? Will architecture die? We can console ourselves by considering that if theater cannot die, then architecture will not die. Even if the different importance that the technical aspect plays in the construction of architecture is certainly greater and more intense than what is necessary to implement a theatrical piece. So let us ask ourselves once again, as this book suggests: is an architecture that relies exclusively on *téchne*, and hides its *archè*, its original power, destined to sooner or later succumb?

I mentioned that it takes little to do theater, but this little is truly vital, as Laura Scala emphasizes, because it manages to animate precisely that original power capable of strongly centering reality full of indolence and apathy, in which man gestures and fumbles without *pathos*. This original power is emotion. There is an emotion at the beginning of thinking, at the beginning of doing that testifies to the truth of what we are doing, the truth of our experiences. Often this emotion, in some ways *subtle* and *impalpable*, is called *thauma*, an original power, something pre-objective, pre-representative. Kazimir Malevič's suprematism has pushed itself into the secrets of reality until it reaches the pre-objective, to precisely grasp the founding and symbolic emotion that builds/destroys a new world. It is

known that in his speculative texts, Malevič constantly refers to the dimension of emotion. And the work of the Russian artist plays an important role in Laura Scala's arguments.

But the author also discusses the power of editing with great simplicity and clarity. An important theme for the Russian Avant-gardes. And the meaning that editing takes on in her interpretations goes so far as to show the "emotional source" that presides over the birth of forms: the struggle; the struggle of images with each other. In editing we almost unconsciously experience the struggle of images with each other for the first time. And we are called to make sense of this struggle, first of all a compositional sense. With editing, an original experience is reactivated in our consciousness, as if it were the first time, so that we feel an emotion that arises from the contrast between the forms and events in which the forms appear, even before that from the forms themselves.

In this struggle of images with each other there is also the struggle of *architecture-as-theater* and *theater-as-urban scene*. Two images that simultaneously attract and conflict because they cannot immediately coincide and anchor themselves to reality according to sensible order. And it is precisely the sensible order - of the alogical sensible, of supremacist painting or of the *zaum*' language - the trans-mental and trans-rational asemantic language of the Russian futurists - that allows us, according to Laura Scala, to place a conscious distance from the rigid schemes of *logos* in the direction of *artistic experience*. Experience that we have indicated, on the basis of the pages of this book, as necessary for the change in the level of *being*. An increase in *being* present, as the author points out, also among the theological postulates of Piotr Demianovich Ouspenskij's *Tertium Organum*. After all, the world we see is nothing more than a reflection of our way of being, that is, of our way of thinking. And this way of thinking, as Ouspenskij wrote, requires *work on oneself* in order to improve. The *work on oneself*, an essential prelude to staging the desire for a better world of ours, must be reaffirmed with passion, with argumentative and analytical force, as it is told in the pages of this book.

To improve this world of ours, as Luciano Semerani wrote in the introduction to the book, drawing on the symbolism of Kabbalah, it is necessary to "realize oneself". In conclusion, I would like to recall the *incipit* with which Semerani himself opens the book: this book "for everything it shows, will give you the same joy and happiness as when you meet an old friend". Surely we can add that it will give great joy, like the affirmation of an unexpected emotion, every time it helps us remember a Friend or a Maestro like Luciano Semerani.