

Scenographic Dematerialization in Contemporary Indian Performance: Lighting, Corporeality, and Digital Media

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Abstract: Contemporary stage practice increasingly allows a theatrical environment to be made without building very much of it. Light can establish a wall, a change of time, a boundary, or a field of attention. Projection can turn an otherwise ordinary surface into another place. A responsive digital image can alter its behaviour when a performer moves. These possibilities have encouraged a shift from scenery understood mainly as an object towards scenography understood as a changing relationship among body, light, image, sound, architecture, and audience perception [1]–[3]. This paper examines that shift through the idea of scenographic dematerialization. The term is used here in a specific sense: not the disappearance of material technology, but the reduced dependence of scenic meaning on fixed physical objects. The discussion brings lighting, corporeality, and digital media into the same analytical frame. It also considers selected Indian examples, including Amitesh Grover's *The Last Poet* and Girish Karnad's *Broken Images*, alongside the wider arts-and-technologies context identified by the British Council [4]–[6]. The article is a practice-informed qualitative conceptual study. It does not claim audience measurements, interviews, experimental results, or unpublished production data. Instead, it reads documented practices through scenographic theory and through questions that arise naturally in theatre making: what happens to the performer when the environment becomes responsive, when does light begin to function as scenery, and when does technology cease to support dramaturgy and start competing with it? The paper proposes four connected movements for understanding dematerialized scenography: object to field, illumination to spatial construction, predetermined cue to responsive environment, and isolated technology to dramaturgical integration. The argument is not that digital media should replace physical stagecraft. Rather, its value lies in the degree to which material, luminous, digital, and embodied elements work together to produce a coherent theatrical space.

Keywords: Scenographic Dematerialization; Digital Scenography; Chromatic Dramaturgy; Corporeality;

Contemporary Indian Performance.

I. INTRODUCTION

A stage does not have to look like a place in order to make an audience experience one. A shaft of light can isolate a performer as if a room has suddenly narrowed around the body. A projection can make a wall appear to recede, move, or remember. A change in colour can alter the apparent temperature of a space without moving a single object. These are familiar theatrical effects, but digital technologies have made their relationships considerably more complex. Contemporary scenography can now be built through combinations of light, projection, screens, sensors, sound, software, architecture, and live movement [1]–[3].

This article approaches that change through the idea of scenographic dematerialization. The phrase is useful only if it is handled carefully. The stage does not become literally immaterial when a projector replaces a painted flat. There are still projectors, cables, computers, lenses, screens, lighting fixtures, control systems, and a building around the performance. What changes is the way scenic meaning reaches the spectator. An object that once had to be constructed can sometimes be suggested, projected, illuminated, animated, or made responsive. Scenography therefore begins to operate less through the accumulation of objects and more through relationships among elements that may appear and disappear within the duration of a performance [3].

This distinction matters in the Indian context. The British Council's study of arts and technologies in India describes a field in which artists, cultural organisations, independent practitioners, and technical specialists increasingly work across disciplinary boundaries [4]. That does not describe a single Indian aesthetic, nor does it suggest that technology is developing in a uniform way across the country. It does, however, provide a useful context for asking how contemporary theatre and performance negotiate new media while retaining their concern with the live body, spatial encounter, narrative, and spectatorship.

From the viewpoint of theatre practice, the interesting question is rarely whether a production has used an LED wall, projection mapping, tracking system, or sophisticated lighting console. The more useful question is what the system is doing. Is it creating a spatial condition that physical scenery could not create? Is it changing how the performer is seen? Does it produce a relation between movement and environment? Does it alter the rhythm or structure of the scene? Or is it simply making the stage look busy? Technology becomes scenographic when it changes the organisation of theatrical perception, not merely when it increases the number of technical devices on stage.

The paper has three related aims. First, it defines scenographic dematerialization as a shift in scenic agency from fixed objects towards luminous, projected, digital, responsive, and relational forms. Second, it considers lighting and corporeality together, because a dematerialized environment still needs the performer's body to acquire scale, rhythm, focus, and dramatic presence. Third, it examines selected Indian examples to consider how digital mediation can extend the performance space. Methodologically, this is a practice-informed qualitative conceptual analysis based on published studies and publicly documented performance material. No audience survey, interview study, experiment, or unpublished production record is presented as evidence.

II. CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

A. Scenographic Dematerialization

The expression "dematerialization of the stage" is discussed by Liu and Chen through Arnold Aronson's account of the changing stage environment [3], [7]. Their use of the concept is especially relevant to digital scenography because it moves the discussion away from the simple replacement of one scenic technology by another. The issue is not whether wood has been replaced by pixels. It is whether the scenic environment is being conceived as something fixed and representational, or as something that can be continuously produced through image, light, movement, sound, and technological response.

For this paper, scenographic dematerialization therefore means a change in the location of scenic agency. A physical wall may remain, but it no longer has to carry the whole burden of representing a wall. Light may establish its boundary. Projection may give it depth. Sound may change its perceived distance. A performer's movement may activate an image upon it. The scenic event is distributed across these elements. Dematerialization is consequently a

perceptual and dramaturgical condition rather than a claim that the technological infrastructure has ceased to be material.

Liu and Chen's four-order framework helps explain why this matters. Their discussion moves from visual communication and objects towards actions, processes, environments, and systems [3]. In digital stage design, this corresponds with a movement away from treating each department as an isolated specialist function. Lighting, projection, sound, mechanical systems, tracking, and interaction can become parts of one design problem. The stage is then less a collection of scenic components and more a system whose elements affect one another in performance time [3].

B. Lighting as Scenographic Agency

Lighting is often introduced as the means by which the audience sees the performance. That description is technically correct but theatrically incomplete. Wu and colleagues discuss lighting in relation to colour, shadow, intensity, stage arrangement, music, actors, atmosphere, characterisation, and changes in time and space [1]. Light can therefore do spatial work without adding a physical object to the stage. It can separate one area from another, flatten a surface, deepen it, conceal the edges of a room, or bring a particular part of the body into prominence.

This is where chromatic dramaturgy becomes useful. The term in this paper refers to the dramaturgical organisation of colour and light rather than to colour as decoration. A change from a cold blue field to a warmer, denser light can alter the spectator's reading of the same architecture. A narrow side light can make a moving body appear fragmented, while a broad front light may produce a more conventional sense of visibility. The physical stage has not changed, but its perceived geometry has. In that sense, lighting participates directly in scenographic construction [1].

The distinction between illumination and scenographic lighting can be tested through a simple question: if the light cue is removed, what happens to the spatial meaning of the scene? When nothing significant changes except visibility, the lighting is primarily functional. When the removal of the cue alters the perceived boundary, scale, atmosphere, rhythm, or relation between bodies, lighting has become part of the scenographic structure. This does not make functional lighting unimportant. It simply distinguishes two different levels of theatrical work.

C. Corporeality and the Scenographic Body

Dematerialized scenography does not make the performer less important. In many cases it makes the body more

exposed because the body becomes one of the few stable reference points within a changing environment. The performer gives the spectator scale. A projected landscape may be visually expansive, but the body tells us how large that landscape feels. A moving light may divide the stage into zones, but the performer's movement tells us whether those zones feel restrictive, open, dangerous, intimate, or unstable.

I use the phrase corporeal geometry to describe this relationship between body and spatial composition. It refers to the positions, levels, directions, distances, rhythms, and movement pathways through which the performer becomes part of the scenic structure. The idea is particularly important in a minimal stage because the absence of physical scenery places greater responsibility on the body, light, and sound to establish spatial relationships. A performer crossing a field of light is not simply moving through scenery. The crossing itself can create the scenic event.

This is also why digital scenography should not be designed as if the performer were an afterthought. A projection may look impressive on a test surface and behave very differently once a human body enters the field. The body blocks light, catches projection, changes shadows, interrupts tracking, and redirects audience attention. In a responsive environment, movement can also become an input. The performer is therefore not merely positioned inside the digital environment. The performer can help produce it.

III. DIGITAL MEDIA AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF STAGE SPACE

A. From Scenic Object to Mediated Environment

Zhang's discussion of digital media on the theatre stage brings together projection mapping, advanced screens, virtual reality, artificial intelligence, and other forms of digital mediation [2]. The examples he considers show that the digital image can do more than provide a backdrop. It can become an environment, a visual partner, or a means of extending the apparent limits of the stage. At the same time, Zhang notes a problem that is easy to recognise in practice: when digital effects are used without sufficient relation to the central artistic narrative, technical display can distract from the performance [2].

Projection mapping is particularly revealing because the image is no longer independent of the architecture on which it appears. A wall, floor, object, or performer can become part of the projected composition. The physical surface remains, but its visual identity is temporarily rewritten. This is a clear example of dematerialization as a perceptual

process. The audience still sees a material object, yet the object no longer determines the whole of what the object means within the theatrical moment.

Screens create a different condition. They can introduce another plane of theatrical presence, sometimes showing a location that cannot physically exist in the performance space and sometimes placing an image of the performer beside the performer. The result can be productive precisely because the audience must negotiate between two kinds of presence. The live body occupies one spatial register; the mediated body occupies another. Digital scenography becomes dramaturgically interesting when the relationship between those registers has a reason to exist.

B. Interaction, Tracking, and Real-Time Scenography

The next step is not simply to display a digital image but to allow the environment to respond. Liu and Chen describe the use of radar, infrared systems, motion capture, audio frequency, sensors, and mechanical control as ways of moving digital stage design towards real-time interaction [3]. This changes the status of the scenic cue. Instead of a sequence determined entirely in advance, part of the scenic event can be produced by what happens during performance.

For the performer, that change is substantial. A conventional cue can be timed to an action, but a responsive system can make the action itself part of the cue. A gesture may trigger a change in light or image. A body entering a particular area may alter the projected field. The performer is then working with an environment that has behaviour of its own. This introduces possibilities for improvisation, but it also demands greater precision because the relationship between action and system has to be rehearsed.

The rehearsal process consequently becomes part of the design problem. A digital environment cannot always be tested adequately by checking the equipment separately from the actors. The system needs to be observed with bodies moving at performance speed, in the actual spatial relationships that the scene requires. Timing, sightlines, shadows, tracking accuracy, brightness, sound spill, and technical failure all become scenographic concerns. Interactivity therefore increases artistic possibility while also increasing the need for disciplined collaboration [3].

C. Narrative Space and the Digital Image

Digital media can also alter how narrative space is organised. Liu and Chen connect contemporary digital stage practice with movement from atmospheric use towards stronger narrative expression [3]. An image may represent a place, but it may also represent memory, imagination, a subjective mental state, a parallel location, or a fragment of another time. Once the image is allowed to carry dramaturgical information, scenography begins to participate in narrative construction rather than merely illustrating it.

This possibility is important because theatrical space has never been only geographical. A stage can contain remembered places, imagined spaces, symbolic territories, and simultaneous realities. Digital media adds another set of tools for making those layers visible. The danger, however, is that an image can explain too much. If every emotional or narrative condition is translated into a spectacular visual, the audience may be left with fewer gaps in which imagination can work.

The useful question is therefore not whether an image is beautiful or technically complex. It is whether the image changes the dramaturgical situation. If removing it makes the scene conceptually poorer, the image is doing meaningful theatrical work. If its removal changes little beyond the visual surface, its function may be primarily decorative. This distinction becomes particularly important in contemporary performance because the availability of sophisticated digital tools can make visual addition very easy.

IV. CONTEMPORARY INDIAN PERFORMANCE: CONTEXTS AND CASES

A. The Indian Arts-and-Technologies Ecosystem

The Indian field of arts and technology is too varied to be described through one model of digital performance. The British Council's report, *Arts and Technologies in India: Reimagining the Future*, maps a broader ecosystem involving practitioners, organisations, cultural spaces, technical expertise, and interdisciplinary activity [4]. The report also draws attention to questions of infrastructure, access, cultural aesthetics, audience engagement, and the social dimensions of technological practice. For scenography, these concerns are not external to design. The available equipment, venue, technical labour, budget, and local knowledge directly affect what can be built and sustained.

This point is worth emphasising because digital scenography is sometimes discussed as if technological sophistication were automatically equivalent to artistic sophistication. It is not. A small performance using carefully placed side light, shadow, sound, and one projected surface may produce a more coherent environment than a technically elaborate installation whose elements have no clear dramaturgical relationship. The Indian context, with its uneven infrastructure and wide range of production conditions, makes this distinction especially visible [4].

The report's emphasis on collaboration is equally relevant. Digital performance often requires knowledge that does not belong to one conventional theatre department. The director may need to understand the logic of interaction. The performer may need to understand tracking. The

lighting designer may need to work with projection. The programmer may need to understand timing and dramatic intention. The scenographer becomes a mediator among these forms of knowledge. That is one of the more important professional changes introduced by digital practice [3], [4].

B. The Last Poet: Digital Scenography Beyond the Physical Stage

Amitesh Grover's *The Last Poet* provides a documented Indian example of what Grover describes as "Digital Live Theatre." The project combines theatre with film, sound art, creative coding, digital scenography, and live performance, and its 2020 presentation was developed for an online and interactive performance context [5]. The significance of the work for the present argument is not that it represents all digital Indian theatre. It does not. Its value is that it makes visible a shift in which the performance environment itself is partly produced through digital means.

The case also complicates the usual distinction between stage and screen. Once live performance, filmic material, sound, coding, and digital scenography are brought into the same event, the performer is no longer working within a single stable scenic frame. The audience may encounter different spatial layers, and the meaning of presence is distributed across live and mediated elements. This is close to the condition described by scenographic dematerialization: the performance environment is assembled through relations rather than through a single physical scenic object [5].

At the same time, the case should not be read as evidence that digital mediation has solved the problem of theatrical space. Its importance is methodological. It shows why contemporary scenographic analysis must look beyond the built stage and consider the interface among performer, image, sound, code, audience position, and mode of access. In other words, the "where" of performance becomes part of the dramaturgical question.

C. Broken Images and the Digital Other

Girish Karnad's *Broken Images* offers a different but historically useful Indian example. The published play contains stage directions for a television studio and includes a large plasma screen and several television sets as part of the performance environment [6]. Here, mediated image is not an optional visual layer added to an otherwise complete stage. It is embedded in the dramatic situation itself. The screen has a structural role in the relationship between the characters and the audience.

This example is significant because it predates the current vocabulary of projection mapping, immersive media, and interactive digital scenography. It demonstrates that the theatrical problem of mediated presence is not new. What has changed is the range of technologies available for producing and manipulating that presence. The screen in *Broken Images* can therefore be read alongside

contemporary digital practice without treating the earlier work as if it were technologically identical to present-day systems [6].

Read in relation to Liu and Chen's four-order framework, the example also raises a broader question about the difference between an object and a system [3]. A television screen is a physical object, but its dramatic importance lies in what passes through it and how the characters respond to that mediated presence. The scenic object becomes meaningful through action, perception, and relationship. That is precisely the direction in which dematerialized scenography moves.

V. CONTEMPORARY INDIAN PERFORMANCE: CONTEXTS AND CASES

A. When Technology Becomes Spectacle

The attraction of digital media is obvious. It can enlarge the visual field, create rapid transformations, introduce impossible locations, and produce forms of interaction that conventional scenery cannot easily achieve. Yet the same qualities can become a weakness. Zhang's discussion warns that excessive or poorly integrated digital media can draw attention away from the central artistic narrative [2]. The problem is not technology itself. The problem begins when the means of production becomes more visible than the theatrical reason for using it.

A practical way of thinking about this is to ask what remains after the effect is removed. If removing a projection, animation, or interactive layer destroys an important spatial or dramaturgical relation, the technology has a strong reason to be there. If the scene remains essentially unchanged, except that it looks less impressive, the device may be functioning as decoration. This is not an absolute rule, because spectacle can itself be a legitimate theatrical intention. The point is that spectacle should be understood as a dramaturgical choice rather than mistaken for dramaturgy.

The same test can be applied to the performer. If the digital composition could continue almost unchanged without the actor, the relationship between body and technology may be weak. A stronger scenographic relationship occurs when the presence, movement, scale, or action of the performer changes what the digital environment means. In such cases, the body is not competing with the technology for attention. Both are helping to construct the same theatrical event.

B. The Performer as Co-Designer of Space

The most interesting digital environments treat the performer as a participant in spatial design. Light reveals and conceals bodily form. Projection can follow or oppose movement. Sound can extend the perceived direction of a gesture. Tracking can turn physical movement into a digital

response. These relationships make the performer a co-producer of the scenic environment rather than an actor placed in front of a technological display [3].

This has consequences for actor training and rehearsal. Performers working with responsive media need an awareness of the technical conditions that shape their movement. A slight change in position can alter a projection. A body crossing a beam can change a shadow. A delayed sensor response can affect timing. The performer therefore needs to develop a spatial awareness that includes both physical and mediated environments. Such awareness does not replace conventional performance skills. It adds another layer to them.

C. From Interdisciplinary Collaboration to Integrated Dramaturgy

Digital scenography also changes the timing of collaboration. In a conventional production, certain technical decisions may arrive after the director and performers have established much of the scene. With interactive media, late integration can be expensive artistically as well as technically. The logic of the system may influence blocking, rhythm, sightlines, sound, lighting, and even the structure of a scene. Liu and Chen's emphasis on interdisciplinarity and integrated systems makes this point directly [3].

The British Council's account of India's arts-and-technologies ecosystem reinforces the importance of collaboration across forms of expertise [4]. For theatre practitioners, this suggests that programmers, projection designers, lighting designers, sound designers, scenographers, performers, and directors should be involved early enough to negotiate a common dramaturgical language. The aim is not for everyone to become an expert in everyone else's discipline. It is to ensure that the different systems are designed to support the same theatrical intention.

The material realities of production remain decisive. Venue dimensions, sightlines, surface colour, costume reflectivity, projector brightness, fixture positions, available power, network reliability, and technical staffing can all affect the final image. A concept that works in a controlled demonstration may fail in a real theatre. This is one reason a practice-informed understanding of scenography cannot stop at the conceptual level. The design has to survive rehearsal, bodies, architecture, equipment, and time.

VI. TOWARDS A PRACTICE-BASED MODEL OF SCENOGRAPHIC DEMATERIALIZATION

The discussion can now be condensed into four movements. The first is a movement from object to field. Instead of relying on a constructed scenic object to establish place, the

production distributes that work among light, image, sound, architecture, and bodies. The second is a movement from illumination to spatial construction. Light is no longer treated only as a means of seeing; it becomes one of the means by which the audience understands where it is and where the performer is within that space.

The third movement is from predetermined cue to responsive environment. Sensors, tracking, motion capture, or other interactive systems allow part of the scenic event to be generated in relation to performance action [3]. The fourth is from isolated technology to dramaturgical integration. At this point, technology is no longer an added layer. It is woven into the organisation of movement, narrative, character, time, or thematic meaning.

These four movements are not a universal sequence, and a production does not have to pass through all of them. They are better understood as analytical categories. They also correspond, in a broad sense, with Liu and Chen's movement from individual design orders towards actions, experiences, and systems [3]. The value of the comparison is not to force Buchanan's design theory into theatre, but to recognise a similar shift from isolated components towards relationships among components.

For contemporary Indian performance, one further qualification is necessary. The model must remain sensitive to material conditions. A technically modest production may have a highly developed scenographic language. Conversely, an expensive digital system may remain artistically superficial. The British Council's discussion of infrastructure and interdisciplinary practice makes this caution particularly relevant [4]. Dematerialization should therefore not be measured by the quantity of technology present. It should be examined through what the technology makes possible in the relation among body, space, image, and dramaturgy.

VII. CONCLUSION

Scenographic dematerialization describes a change in how theatrical space can be made, not the disappearance of material stagecraft. The physical stage remains, but its scenic authority can be redistributed. Light can construct a boundary without building a wall. Projection can produce an environment without constructing an entire landscape. A responsive system can allow the performer's movement to participate in the formation of the scenic event. Digital media can also place more than one version of presence within the same performance space [1]–[3].

The Indian examples considered here show different points along this wider development. The British Council report places digital practice within a diverse and uneven arts-and-technology ecosystem [4]. The Last Poet demonstrates an Indian form of digital live theatre in which performance, film, sound, coding, and digital scenography are brought

into one event [5]. Broken Images, in a different technological period, places television screens inside the dramatic structure and reminds us that mediated presence has a longer history in Indian theatre than current digital terminology might suggest [6].

The main argument is therefore deliberately modest. Digital technology should not be treated as a replacement for physical scenography, and technological complexity should not be mistaken for artistic innovation. What matters is integration. Lighting, image, sound, architecture, technology, and the performer become scenographically powerful when their relationships are dramaturgically intelligible. A nearly empty stage can consequently become spatially rich, but only when the emptiness has been designed rather than merely left unfilled.

Further research can take this argument into production-based study. Detailed rehearsal observation, interviews with directors and designers, audience research, production documentation, and comparative analysis of specific Indian performances could test how spectators actually perceive these changing relationships. Such work would complement the conceptual approach taken here. For the present study, the more immediate conclusion is that the dematerialized stage is best understood as a field of negotiation among material infrastructure, ephemeral light, digital image, and the live body. Its future lies not in making the stage less material, but in making the relationships among its materials more responsive, precise, and theatrically meaningful.

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