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Scenographic Void: Aerial Street Performances and the Urban Space

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Abstract

Street performance scenography engages the material and spatial conditions of urban life, often through built structures and site-based installations. This research expands that field by investigating how aerial scenography activates the negative space above the city. Referring to *Pedaleando al Cielo* (Cycling to Heaven) by Theater Tol (Antwerp, Belgium), performed at Festival Internacional Santiago a Mil (FITAM), this paper explores how the vertical void of the sky becomes a scenographic commons — a space of aesthetic rupture, political contestation, and collective imagination.

The central research question is as follows: how can aerial scenography create meaning in public space by reconfiguring the sky as a performative site? Drawing on the concepts of expanded scenography, ecoscenography, and spatial theory, this paper examines how suspended, kinetic objects can transform audience perspectives and generate ephemeral architectures that challenge the dominance of surveillance, militarisation, and environmental precarity in aerial space.

Findings suggest that the upward gaze, mobilised through scenographic design, activates a counter-gesture of poetic resistance. By suspending bodies and imagery above eye level, the performance interrupts spatial hierarchies and reveals the sky as a charged, geopolitical terrain for temporary world-making.

Keywords: Aerial performance, scenography, urban space, street theatre, atmospheric design

Scenographic Void

In contemporary scenography, the urban environment is understood as an active spatial and social agent that participates in the creation of a performance's meaning. Street performance design, in particular, challenges the boundaries of the theatrical stage by engaging directly with the material and atmospheric dynamics of public space and the cityscape. While considerable attention has been given to grounded interventions — temporary stages, mobile sets, and installations — this paper turns its gaze upward to explore the scenographic potential of aerial space. What happens when the sky itself becomes the performance space?

Investigating the case study of the Theatre Tol production *Pedaleando al Cielo* (Cycling to Heaven¹), presented at the Festival Internacional Santiago a Mil in Chile, I ask whether the sky can function as a charged non-site, akin to the scenographic abstraction of the black box theatre. The black box is often considered to be simultaneously neutral and contextual: neutral because it provides a "canvas space" where composition can be created, designed, and transformed within a defined architectural volume; contextual because theatre and performance always emerge from specific sociopolitical and temporal conditions, thus bearing an inherent degree of site-specificity.

Here, I propose thinking about these two notions — neutral abstraction and sociopolitical specificity — together, in order to consider the sky as both an abstract and contextual scenographic space. It is a space in which a composition can be created independently of place, yet inevitably oriented towards specific audiences. But more importantly, the sky, as a globally shared yet individually experienced space, becomes a porous membrane that connects and envelops us. In aerial street performance, the charged sky becomes a site of contestation — no longer neutral, but thick with memory, surveillance, spectacle, and resistance.

Pedaleando al Cielo

Performed at the 2015 Festival Internacional Santiago a Mil (FITAM) in the Metropolitan Region of Chile, the Belgian company Theater Tol's *Pedaleando al Cielo* is a spectacular example of an aerial operatic circus.

Founded in 1998 by Lot Seuntjens, and since 2023 led by a collaborative team composed of Talitha De Decker, Benjamien Lycke, and Lukas Proot, Theater Tol is known for its large-scale, site-responsive spectacles.

¹Translated by the author. Cielo in Spanish means sky, but also heaven.

Their interdisciplinary approach blends aerial choreography, live music, visual storytelling, and cinematic imagery, often staged in public or non-traditional urban spaces. Their productions transform urban spaces into poetic dreamworlds, drawing from opera, street theatre, and visual art to craft emotionally rich narratives centered on themes of love, memory, and transcendence. (Theater Tol, n.d., para. 1).

The scenographic composition of *Pedaleando al Cielo* is defined by its vertical axis and aerial suspension, which transform the night sky into a charged sky. A large circular truss structure is suspended mid-air by a crane or rigging apparatus, from which multiple bicycles and performers are lifted and hung — forming a kinetic aerial tableau. The performers, dressed in brightly coloured costumes, are integrated into sculptural bicycle apparatuses. The performers evoke a Western European aesthetic tradition, drawing on celestial motifs, angelic figures, and symbolic ascension to stage a mythic journey between Earth and heaven. The actors/acrobats pedal while rotating high above the street, animating the charged sky with movement, song, lights, and video; effectively imprinting the charged space regardless of their actual location.

Lighting is located strategically to sculpt both the bodies and the metal bicycles against the backdrop of night. The design integrates the negative space, light, and the human form in motion, crafting a fleeting composition that elevates from eye level to hovering above the city. The sky itself becomes the scenographic field — a charged sky activated through visual composition and collective spectatorship.

The dramaturgy of the performance unfolds as a visual and kinetic narrative that privileges spectacle, fantasy, and transformation. Rather than following a linear or text-based script, it is composed of a series of aerial vignettes that evoke ascension, dreams, and communal wonder. The performers embody figures of flight — angelic or celestial travellers — enacting a metaphorical journey "toward heaven." Accompanied by music and synchronized movement, the dramaturgy is driven by visual images and sound.

Ultimately, *Pedaleando al Cielo* invites the audience to look upward — both physically and metaphorically—activating the vertical dimension of the city as a site of poetic encounter.

Analysis

During the early seventies, Smithson (1972) discussed the distinction between “site” and “non-site”. Non-site referring to the abstract nature of the non-place of the gallery or museum — similar, in a way, to an empty canvas, a white page, or the black box of the theatre. In his writing, the non-site has specific characteristics, such as closed limits, inner coordinates, addition, centre, non-place (abstraction), and singularity, which are set in opposition to the characteristics of the site: open limits, outside coordinates, subtraction, edge, some place

(physical)D, and multiplicity. Smithson's definition of the non-site suggests a space devoid of context and meaning — a space that, in the contemporary understanding of site-specific work, might not even exist.

Figure 1

Theater Tol Pedaleando al Cielo, Santiago 2015. (Photography from footage Santiago(en) Vivo by the Author, Marcela Oteíza Silva).



In contrast, Kwon (2002) proposed that site-oriented work refers to artistic practices that engage with a site not only as a physical space, but also as a network of meanings, identities, and relations — which are often mobile, temporary, and informed by research or community interaction. The extension of Kwon's site-specificity beyond its original formalist constraints, emphasizing contextual responsiveness rather than fixed emplacement, alongside Smithson's notion of the non-site, help us to understand the kind of charged space utilised by aerial performance companies — spaces where the void of the sky, the non-place, becomes a scenographically responsive and contextually driven space. I argue that this is the charged space of *Pedaleando al Cielo* by Theater Tol.

Drawing on Smithson's "site/non-site" definition and Kwon's reconceptualisation of site-specificity as a network of mobile meanings and relations, I propose that the sky in *Pedaleando al Cielo* functions as a scenographically charged non-site — an abstract yet responsive space. To understand further this idea, I turn to Foucault's (1997) notion of heterotopia, where real, interstitial spaces simultaneously reflect, invert, and unsettle the normative order of society. The sky is thus a real space, yet stands apart from and can even invert or represent all the other sites within a culture. It can be seen as a contemporary

example of a heterotopia, showcasing the complex and evolving relationship between world technology, international political space, and our society.

In addition, the audience's act of looking upwards in aerial street performance renders the audience physically and affectively vulnerable. Unlike in the controlled conditions of a proscenium stage, where spectators remain grounded and shielded, the upward gaze exposes the neck, the chest, and the breath, uncovering a posture of openness and receptivity. In *Pedaleando al Cielo*, this spectatorial position invites a surrender to both wonder and risk: the risk of a certain imbalance, a kind of disorientation, or maybe emotional exposure. Simultaneously, the performance unfolds in a sky that is both local and global: charged and abstract. This sky is shared across borders, yet is shaped by specific political, climatic, and cultural conditions. It becomes a scenographic void that holds multiple meanings. This apparent non-site is charged with multiple entanglements and histories of surveillance, migration, climate change, and political power.

Conclusion

The charged sky activated in *Pedaleando al Cielo* is not simply an aesthetic space: it is a rupture in the fabric of urban life. In Foucault's terms, it is a space that reflects and distorts the order of things. The sky is not a neutral expanse: it is a contested territory charged with the weight of surveillance technologies, migratory routes, military airspace, and environmental collapse. When Theatre Tol lifts bodies into this void, it reclaims the sky from these notions, transforming it into a site of poetic occupation and collective imagination.

The scenographic objects suspended above the eye level of the audiences do not merely create a composition against the backdrop of the sky; they also challenge the structural hierarchies embedded in who has the right to visibility, to safety, and to movement in public space. The performance stages a counter-gesture to sky domination, proposing a visual alternative rooted in performative aesthetics and collectivity against drones, satellites, and national borders.

As Ferdman's (2013) scholarship suggests, scenographic practices that operate at the edges — flexible, mobile and participatory — can disrupt dominant spatial logics. In *Pedaleando al Cielo*, the upward gaze is a gesture not only of wonder, but one of exposure and vulnerability. It activates the body in space — uncovers the chest, the breath and the risk of imbalance — producing a spectatorial posture that resists the norm often inscribed by architectural or proscenium-based theatre.

This paper argues that the sky in aerial street performance is not an abstract backdrop but a charged, geopolitical non-site — a space inscribed with histories of domination and potential for resistance. By inhabiting the charged sky, *Pedaleando al Cielo*

transforms the void above the city into a scenographic commons — a space where suspended bodies, atmospheric effects, and collective attention produce a temporary world. In this ephemeral moment, scenography asserts itself as a political practice: one capable of reorienting our relationship to place, to each other, and to the systems that shape how and where we transit, gather, and live.

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