

## THEATRICAL METAMORPHOSIS: NATURALISM'S LEGACY IN SHAPING SCENIC DESIGN NARRATIVES

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### ABSTRACT

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were periods of global transformation, marked by significant scientific, political, and economic breakthroughs. These changes profoundly influenced various aspects of society. This article examines the shifts in theatrical presentation during this era, focusing specifically on the role and impact of Naturalism in scenic design. The objective was to explore the origins, components, and impact of Naturalism on set design. In tracing the history of scenic design from classical to modern times, this paper highlights the influence of Naturalism on modern theatre. The paper adopts a historical and analytical approach, examining the works and theories of renowned designers. Through the analysis of primary and secondary sources, the study explores the evolution of scenic design, focusing on the contributions of prominent figures of the period. The findings reveal that Naturalism significantly shaped scenic design by emphasizing a meticulous portrayal of everyday life. It challenged romantic and idealistic styles, advocating for realistic representation. The study highlights how Naturalist designers strived to create set designs that mirrored reality with high fidelity evident in the works of figures such as Emile Zola, who championed a return to nature and humanity through direct observation and accurate representation. The article underscores the impact of Naturalism on modern scenic design. By bridging the gap between evolving theatrical trends and the broader socio-scientific landscape, Naturalism transformed the aesthetic dimensions of theatre and enhanced its capacity to reflect and critique contemporary life and the legacy continues to influence theatrical practices today.

**Keywords:** Modern Theatre, Naturalism, Scenic Design, Theatrical Transformation.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This article is inspired by our experience as theatre arts educators having noticed a gradual fading of relevant scenic design histories, often obscured within extensive history books that students find challenging to engage with. Our goal is to condense these historical narratives into a concise and accessible format for students. Furthermore, acknowledging that budding scenic designers, observingly, present their works without a robust philosophical or theoretical foundation, this article serves as a valuable resource to enhance their comprehension and theoretical underpinning of creative pursuits. In addressing these gaps, our aim is to not only preserve the richness of scenic design history but also to offer practical insights for current practitioners.

The roots of theatrical scenery trace back to the classical Greek era, where the *skene*, a backdrop structure connected to the stage, played a central role. Complementing the *skene* were *periaktoi*, triangular wooden panels intricately painted to represent distinct backgrounds for productions.

Each panel, when rotated, would unveil a new scene, allowing for seamless transitions. Another device employed by the Greeks was the *pinake*, a flat with wooden frames covered by stretched fabric, serving a similar purpose to the *periaktoi* (Brockett, Mitchell, & Hardberger, 2010). Notably, the *pinake* differed in its structure, lacking hinges and featuring a covered surface. While some scholars argue that scenic design in classical Greek theatre did not receive the same emphasis as architectural designs, play development, or acting, others contend that the focus was intentional, with only subtle hints of changing settings conveyed through dialogue. Wilson and Godfarb (2017) suggest that the impracticality of creating unique environments for each play in the vast outdoor theatres further contributed to this restrained approach to scenic design in ancient Greek theatre.

The transition from classical Greek theatre saw a notable shift during the Elizabethan period, marked by the introduction of two-dimensional canvas-covered flats depicting three-dimensional settings. This departure from ancient forms of scenic representation, which prioritised conveying action and mood over realistic settings, was a significant innovation. Designers during the Elizabethan era sought to move beyond the limitations of neutral platforms seen in the mediaeval period (Boardman, 2005). The introduction of perspective drawings on canvas-covered flats was a breakthrough, as these paintings, despite being on flat surfaces, skilfully created the illusion of three-dimensional depth. This departure from traditional scenic representation techniques laid the foundation for a more visually immersive theatrical experience during the Elizabethan era (Walton, 2010).

The trajectory of theatre, marked by its continuous evolution across different historical periods, reflects the dynamic nature of artistic expression. Among these epochs, the modern period, as identified by Wilson and Godfarb, spanning from 1875, stands out for its profound impact on various facets of intellectual life, extending its influence to literature, philosophy, art, music, politics, science, and religion. The shift during this period was not confined to any specific domain; it reshaped the very foundations of how the universe was perceived and the methodologies employed to understand natural phenomena. This overarching influence on intellectual thought set the foundation for significant changes in the style and approach to theatrical presentations, prompting a re-evaluation of traditional norms (Wilson & Goldfarb, 2008).

### Objective

The primary objective of this study is to provide an in-depth examination of the origins, components, and lasting impact of Naturalism on scenic design in theatre. It highlights the enduring influence of Naturalism on modern theatre and intends to illustrate how the principles of Naturalism were integrated into scenic design, transforming the way theatrical productions were staged and perceived. This includes examining how Naturalist designers drew inspiration from contemporary scientific and cultural developments to create more realistic and immersive environments on stage. The objective extends to analysing the contributions of key figures in the Naturalist movement, such as Emile Zola, who advocated for a return to nature and humanity through meticulous observation and representation. Their theories and practical implementations will offer a comprehensive understanding of how these pioneers influenced the visual storytelling of their time and set the stage for future innovations in scenic design. Also, the paper seeks to connect these historical developments with current practices in theatre design, demonstrating the relevance and application of Naturalist principles in today's theatrical productions. The study aims to provide both a historical perspective and practical insights for current practitioners, educators, and students of theatre arts. This dual focus ensures that the research not only contributes to

academic discourse but also offers valuable guidance for those engaged in the creation and appreciation of theatre.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This paper focused on historical and contextual analysis. It involved review of works, theories, and practices of influential figures in the field of scenic design during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, such as Emile Zola, Edward Gordon Craig, and Adolphe Appia. Selected writings, sketches, and designs by these prominent scenic designers were studied to provide firsthand insights into their creative processes and artistic visions. The analysis of these sources involved an examination on of the texts, visual materials, and historical accounts to identify key themes, patterns, and trends in the development of scenic design under the influence of Naturalism. This approach allowed for an understanding of how Naturalism's principles, such as the emphasis on realism, authenticity, and the reflection of social realities, were translated into the visual language of the stage. The historical and contextual analysis enabled the researchers to trace the trajectory of scenic design from its classical origins to its modern manifestations, highlighting the enduring impact of Naturalism on contemporary theatrical practices. The study also incorporated a comparative analysis of different scenic designs across various time periods to discern the stylistic and conceptual shifts that occurred as a result of the naturalistic movement.

## 3. DISCUSSIONS AND KEY FINDINGS

A pivotal development during the modern period was the paradigm shift in scientific methods, emphasising empirical evidence and rejecting Aristotelian theories. This transformative approach led to groundbreaking contributions across various disciplines, including astronomy, physics, biology, and the arts. As scientific insights advanced, attention increasingly turned to objective observations of life, challenging established beliefs. Visionaries like Charles Darwin presented evolution theories that questioned traditional concepts, while Karl Marx challenged political and economic ideologies (Balme, 2008). Albert Einstein's theory of relativity questioned previously unassailable aspects of the universe. This era also deeply impacted contemporary theology, reshaping perceptions of the relationship between God and humanity. Consequently, individuals began focusing on self-improvement rather than relying solely on spirituality. Technological advancements, such as computers and televisions, emerged, replacing outdated technologies and reshaping societal thinking (Gary Jay, 2010).

In response to these multifaceted revolutions, the field of theatre adapted by generating theories that mirrored these societal evolutions. Creative writers and playwrights embarked on demystifying societal perceptions, exploring intricate details of life with reduced emphasis on religious and spiritual connotations. Characters in plays, during the period reflected ordinary individuals rather than exclusively featuring kings and royals. Themes delved into everyday life situations, departing from the fictional and mythical elements characteristic of earlier stories or plays. This shift in focus aligned with the broader transformations unfolding in society during the period (Balme, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies*, 2008).

The fervent desire for a radical departure from established norms in theatrical presentation gave rise to various innovative theories, prominently among them, Naturalism. Developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Naturalism emerged as a stylistic approach aiming to authentically portray true, real, and everyday life situations. This form of presentation deliberately sought to

create a flawless illusion of reality, consciously rebelling against the prevailing romantic form of drama during this period (Styan, 2018).

As societal perspectives were increasingly challenged and questioned, a realisation emerged that existing scientific works were not always verifiable and did not always align with new observations. This realisation fostered an environment conducive to questioning established doctrines and theories, marking a shift from Aristotelian philosophies to a focus on chemistry and the biological sciences. Naturalism, aligning with this intellectual revolution, coincided with the scientific advancements that undermined prevailing intellectual optimism. The works of Naturalists were significantly influenced by contemporary scientific findings, particularly those of Charles Darwin, reflecting a deliberate effort to mirror the evolving understanding of the world in their artistic endeavours (Brown, 2016).

Emile Zola, a prominent French novelist and chief literary theorist of Naturalism, emerged as a driving force behind the movement, aiming to convince readers of a revolutionary approach to fiction-writing. Zola asserted that the essence of Naturalism lay in the return to nature and humanity, emphasising direct observation, accurate anatomy, and the portrayal of reality. For both scientists and writers, the challenge was to move away from abstract concepts toward rigorous analysis and a departure from ready-made formulas. Zola adamantly advocated for a fresh start, urging an understanding of humanity from its very core, rejecting the idealist approach of inventing character types without grounding them in the authentic human experience (Zarrilli, 2010).

According to Naturalist dramatists, the stage should present a *slice of life*, depicting events as they naturally unfold without imposed selection or restriction. Their argument was rooted in the belief that drama must closely adhere to the laws of nature, emphasising objectivity without moderation. Essentially, naturalists sought to align theatrical productions with the parallel developments seen in fiction. Beyond this, their objectives encompassed a broader vision for the transformative power of their ideas, aiming to bring about a profound realignment of drama with the evolving perspectives and discoveries of their time (Styan, 2018).

The naturalists passionately advocated for a direct incorporation of everyday life elements into their plays, from characters and language to properties, settings, and costumes. Their commitment to authenticity was unwavering, aiming to avoid false representations on stage. Even in challenging situations where replicating exact details proved difficult, they preferred alternatives so closely resembling reality that the audience would be convincingly immersed in the *illusion of its reality* (Styan, 2018).

Moreover, naturalistic plays deliberately focused exclusively on contemporary and indigenous subjects, with a particular emphasis on the lower class of society. They believed that addressing the most critical aspects of life required a concentrated exploration of the lower class. Steering away from conventional plotting, naturalists sought to present everyday situations that shed light on the distasteful and unpleasant aspects of society. Their objective was clear—to use their plays as a means to draw attention to social problems and advocate for reforms. This approach rejected the inclusion of ghosts, spirits, or gods intervening in human action, as well as exotic, historical, or mythic locales. According to Wilson and Godfarb, many naturalists believed that the most fitting subject matter for drama was the lower class, enabling them to spotlight the gritty realities of society and initiate meaningful societal reforms (Wilson & Goldfarb, 2017).

Similar to the realists, naturalist plays employed language that resonated with the common people—a language that was both spoken and readily understood by this demographic. Driven by a commitment to objectivity, naturalists aimed to eliminate the stage of what they considered

majestic speech and noble sentiments. However, the rigid constraints of state censorship presented a formidable obstacle for many naturalist playwrights, as authorities objected to the perceived offensive language in their dialogue and feared potential political implications inherent in the dramas.

In terms of characterization, naturalists intentionally departed from the aristocratic figures of kings and royals, opting instead to portray ordinary individuals in their natural settings. The focus was on examining the physical and social influences that shaped these characters. Naturalists advocated for a style of acting that sought to create the impression of reality through the complete identification of actors with their roles. This form of role playing within theatrical performances aimed to vividly demonstrate to the audience the exigencies of real life, contributing to the overall objective of bringing genuine, unfiltered experiences to the stage.

In alignment with realists, naturalists chose to set their plays in real-life environments such as markets, hospitals, churches, living rooms, and more. The role of set designers in naturalist plays became crucial, as they were tasked with ensuring that windows, doors, furniture, and all other stage properties closely resembled their natural counterparts. For naturalists, an accurate representation of external realities was not merely a requirement but the necessary starting point for delving into materialist causation. Consequently, their scenic presentations and stage materials were meticulously chosen to align with the principles of naturalism, emphasising authenticity and a genuine reflection of the world (Brockett et al. 2010).

In the pursuit of extreme realism, naturalists went beyond symbolic representations, insisting on the inclusion of the exact elements required. If a tree was needed on stage, for instance, they would go to great lengths to bring an actual tree onto the stage. The underlying philosophy was that drama, as a powerful tool, should not lie but rather present an unvarnished, true-to-life depiction. Emile Zola, as quoted by Styan, encapsulates this perspective, asserting that art, including drama, and literature should serve the inquiring mind by investigating, analysing, and reporting on human life and society, seeking the facts and logic behind the human experience. Naturalism, with its commitment to realism, emerged as a potent vehicle for portraying life in its unadorned reality (Styan, 2018).

During this period, one of the most influential figures in theatrical design was Edward Henry Gordon Craig. A versatile English modernist, Craig wore multiple hats as an actor, director, and scenic designer, but it was his fervent passion for theatrical designs that set him apart. Craig's innovative perspective challenged the strict adherence to realism and embraced the idea that design elements could transcend reality to function as symbols. According to Craig, these symbols could communicate deeper meanings rather than simply reflecting the real world. This departure from strict naturalism allowed for a more abstract and symbolic interpretation of theatrical design, reflecting the evolving artistic landscape of the modern period.

Edward Henry Gordon Craig's observations on set design provided instrumental insights that intersected with the principles of naturalist plays. Craig asserted that set design should *transcend reality*, urging a departure from the ordinary and encouraging a careful examination of the set to glean information about the natural environment. This notion aligned with the naturalists' commitment to presenting a true-to-life representation but also allowed for an interpretative depth that went beyond immediate visual perception (Beacham, 2015).

Furthermore, Craig emphasised the capacity of design elements to function as symbols. This perspective echoed the naturalists' inclination toward realism but also introduced a layer of



abstraction. The use of symbolic elements in the set design could convey meanings beyond the literal, adding depth and nuance to the audience's experience.

Lastly, Craig highlighted the importance of the design's ability to communicate with the audience, with this communication ideally complementing the plot of the play. This resonated with the naturalists' objective of using drama as a tool to present a true picture of life. The set, therefore, became a dynamic component, not merely mirroring reality but actively contributing to the narrative and engaging the audience in a meaningful dialogue that extended beyond the literal confines of the stage. Craig's insights played a crucial role in shaping set design during the modern period, offering a nuanced approach that bridged the gap between naturalism and symbolic expression (Carlson, 2012).

Another notable designer during the modern period was Adolphe Appia, a Swiss architect and theorist renowned for his contributions to stage lighting and décor. Appia boldly rejected the conventional use of two-dimensional painted sets, advocating instead for three-dimensional 'living' sets. In doing so, he challenged the prevalent reliance on flat, painted backgrounds, introducing a new dimension to set design that aligned with the evolving artistic trends of the time (Aronson, 2018).

Appia contended that the use of two-dimensional set painting created a disunity in production dynamics. His rejection of this traditional approach was rooted in the belief that artistic unity should be the paramount focus for both directors and designers. Appia's central principle emphasised the need for cohesion and harmony in theatrical productions, positioning the director and designer as pivotal figures responsible for achieving this unity. By championing three-dimensional sets, Appia sought to move beyond the limitations of painted backdrops, aiming to create a more immersive and unified theatrical experience for both performers and audiences. His innovative ideas left an indelible mark on stage design, contributing to the broader transformation of theatrical aesthetics during the modern period (Beacham, 2015 & Brockett & Hildy, 2005).

Both Gordon Craig and Adolphe Appia were trailblazers advocating for realistic set designs, recognizing the paramount importance of maximum communication between the stage and the audience. Their visionary approach aimed to leverage theatre as a powerful tool for stirring audiences to engage in dispassionate dialogues about issues profoundly relevant to their daily lives. In this endeavour, they emphasised the pivotal role of set design in achieving this communicative and transformative potential.

For these designers, set design extended beyond a mere portrayal of the physical surroundings of the play. It became a dynamic element capable of creating mood and atmosphere, suggesting the style and tone of the entire production. Moreover, they believed that set design should provide essential clues regarding the specific time and place of the action, anchoring the audience in the contextual details of the narrative. Beyond these functional aspects, both designers envisioned set design as offering creative possibilities for the movement and grouping of actors, enriching the overall visual and emotional experience for the audience. In essence, Gordon Craig and Adolphe Appia were pioneers in redefining the role of set design, recognizing its potential not only to depict realism but also to enhance the theatrical experience by weaving together multiple elements that collectively engaged and stirred the audience on a profound level.

A brief exploration of scenic history reveals that, historically, more attention was directed toward the architectural designs of theatre buildings than the scenic designs. This emphasis was largely driven by the dominance of a specific genre, tragedy, in theatrical productions before the advent of the modern period. The prevalence of tragedy allowed for a standardised architectural design

that could accommodate the staging requirements of this genre as well as other forms of drama, such as comedy and melodrama (Brockett & Hildy, 2005).

However, with the emergence and increasing popularity of various genres during the modern period, there arose a demand for diverse scenic designs to cater to the unique needs of each genre. This shift marked a significant paradigm change, as theatre practitioners recognized the necessity of adapting the physical and visual aspects of the stage to suit the distinct requirements of different dramatic forms. The evolution of theatre during the modern period witnessed heightened awareness of the importance of scenic designs, as they became instrumental in enhancing the overall theatrical experience and aligning with the diverse narratives and moods presented on stage (Williams, 2010).

As the timeline progressed, stage designs underwent a transformation, becoming more realistic, possibly in parallel with the contemporaneous trends favouring abstractions and symbolism. However, a perennial question that arises concerns the differentiation between realism and naturalism in set design. Some argue that achieving naturalism on stage may be an impractical aspiration, and the more attainable goal is to pursue a realistic play or set design.

According to Wilson and Godfarb, naturalism is considered an extreme form of realism, and they emphasise that naturalism in theatre is a more stringent and demanding form. One distinguishing factor is its insistence on depicting the stark and unembellished side of life. Additionally, naturalism strives to emulate a documentary-like approach, implying that its actions cannot be shaped by the same artistic techniques commonly employed in realism. This nuanced distinction between realism and naturalism in set design underscores the rigorous commitment of naturalism to faithfully representing life, even if it means delving into the raw and unfiltered aspects, pushing the boundaries of theatrical representation beyond what is commonly associated with realism (Wilson & Goldfarb, 2008).

Appia and Craig played pivotal roles by rejecting the use of two-dimensional painted pictorial abstract backgrounds. This rejection marked a departure from the traditional relationship between perception and representation, a move that is considered indicative of the beginning of Modernism. By eschewing the flat, painted backdrops of the past, these scenic designers embraced a more three-dimensional and dynamic approach, setting the stage for a new era in theatrical aesthetics. The rejection of the old norms and the pursuit of innovative designs by Appia and Craig reflected the broader spirit of Modernism, challenging established artistic conventions and paving the way for a fresh, forward-looking perspective in theatre (Brockett & Hildy, 2005).

During the Modern period, designers in the realm of theatre laid the foundation for modern non-illusionistic practices. They established a new set of premises regarding the nature of truth and the world we inhabit, employing distinct conventions to portray this truth on stage. This marked a departure from the traditional reliance on illusionistic representations.

In this transformative period, scenic designers were no longer confined to strict representation. Instead, their works were esteemed for their experimentation and accurate novelty. Designers gained recognition for their imaginative perception and innovation, moving away from mere renditions of subjective backgrounds that might bear little relevance to the plot of the play. The emphasis shifted towards creating visual elements that contribute meaningfully to the narrative, aligning with the evolving artistic spirit of the Modern period. The newfound freedom from rigid representation allowed designers to explore innovative ways of conveying truth and enhancing the overall theatrical experience (Klingelhofer, 2017).

Contemporary scenic designers continue to push the boundaries by creating awe-inspiring, naturalistic structures on stage, drawing inspiration from the pioneering work of earlier designers like Adolph Appia and Edward Craig. A notable example is Paul Brown, a designer associated with the Royal Theatre in London, whose innovative designs bring the natural world vividly onto the stage. In Brown's design for *The Tempest* in 2000, he transformed the Gainsborough studios into a lush, grassy landscape and cultivated a field of sunflowers in an old coach station. His creativity extended to where he crafted a spectacular watery landscape. A giant lake flooded the Almeida stage, bordered by rocks and debris, while Prospero brooded over the action in his study at the back. A hole in the roof added a dynamic element, allowing Ariel to dangle from on high, transcending earthly constraints. Brown's design created a visual spectacle where the action seamlessly transitioned from one captivating image to another, showcasing the evolution and continued impact of naturalistic set design in contemporary theatre.

Jonathan Miller, a prominent British theatre and opera director, provided insightful commentary on the set design for that particular production, noting that it had a transformative impact on the way things could be staged. Miller emphasised that the design liberated the creative process from the constraints of literal representation, offering a newfound freedom, primarily on a visual level. This sentiment echoes the broader influence of the modern period on scenic design, which indeed ushered in a significant departure from traditional norms. The modern period, with its emphasis on experimentation, innovation, and a break from illusionistic practices, left an indelible mark on the field of scenic design. The intricacies and novel approaches introduced during this period continue to shape contemporary theatrical aesthetics, highlighting the enduring impact of the modern era on the evolution of stagecraft.

#### 4. THE IMPLICATIONS

The implications of this study are far-reaching and extend to various facets of theatrical practice and scholarship. First, the study provides valuable insights for contemporary scenic designers, directors, and other theatre practitioners. Understanding the historical context and theoretical underpinnings of Naturalism allows practitioners and budding scholars to make more informed decisions about their own artistic choices. The emphasis on realism, authenticity, and social relevance can inspire new approaches to set design, lighting, and overall production aesthetics. Additionally, the study offers a valuable resource for theatre educators; incorporating the findings into their curricula can provide students with a deeper understanding of the evolution of scenic design and the enduring influence of Naturalism, equipping future generations of theatre artists with the tools to create meaningful and impactful productions. The study contributes to the ongoing scholarly discourse on the history and theory of theatre by examining the specific ways in which Naturalism shaped scenic design, adding a new layer of understanding to the broader narrative of theatrical development. This research can serve as a foundation for further investigations into the relationship between art, science, and society. Highlighting the importance of realism and authenticity in scenic design can enhance audience appreciation of theatrical productions, encouraging viewers to engage with the visual elements of a performance on a deeper level and recognizing the intentional choices made by designers to create meaningful and immersive experiences.



## 5. CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the transformative impact of Naturalism on scenic design during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In examining the works and theories of Emile Zola, Edward Gordon Craig, and Adolphe Appia, we have traced the evolution of scenic design from its classical origins to its modern manifestations. The findings underscore the pivotal role that Naturalism played in shaping modern theatre by emphasizing realism, authenticity, and the reflection of social realities on stage. The movement's rejection of traditional romantic and idealistic styles in favour of a more scientifically informed and socially conscious approach revolutionized the visual language of theatre.

Naturalist designers, inspired by contemporary scientific advancements and a desire to portray the unvarnished truth of human existence, sought to create set designs that mirrored the complexities and nuances of everyday life. This commitment to authenticity led to the development of innovative techniques and approaches, such as the use of three-dimensional sets, symbolic elements, and a focus on the psychological and social dimensions of characters. The legacy of Naturalism continues to resonate in contemporary theatre, where scenic designers strive to create immersive and thought-provoking environments that engage audiences on both an emotional and intellectual level.

## 6. RECOMMENDATION

Further research could look into the specific ways in which Naturalism continues to influence contemporary scenic design. This could involve examining the works of modern designers who draw inspiration from naturalistic principles, as well as analysing the use of technology and multimedia in creating realistic and immersive stage environments. Encouraging collaboration between scenic designers, historians, and social scientists could lead to a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between theatrical aesthetics and broader social and cultural contexts. This interdisciplinary approach could yield valuable insights into the ways in which scenic design reflects and shapes societal values and beliefs. Incorporating the study of Naturalism and its impact on scenic design into theatre education curricula could equip aspiring designers with a deeper understanding of the historical and theoretical foundations of their craft. This could foster a more informed and critical approach to design, encouraging experimentation and innovation while remaining grounded in the principles of realism and authenticity. Efforts should be made to preserve and digitize historical documents, sketches, and designs related to naturalistic scenic design. Making these resources readily accessible to researchers, practitioners, and the general public would contribute to a broader appreciation of the movement's significance and its enduring legacy in the world of theatre.

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