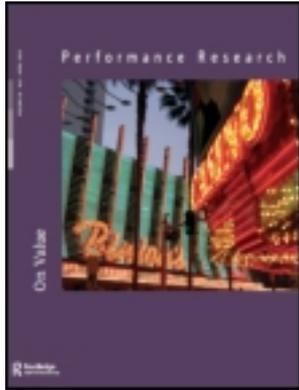


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On: 24 September 2013, At: 12:11

Publisher: Routledge

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## Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rprs20>

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Published online: 24 Sep 2013.

To cite this article: Anita Gonzalez (2013) Maritime Scenography and the Spectacle of Cruising, Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts, 18:3, 27-31, DOI: [10.1080/13528165.2013.818310](https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2013.818310)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2013.818310>

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# Maritime Scenography and the Spectacle of Cruising

ANITA GONZALEZ

Five horn blasts announce departure from a cruise port where a mega-ship abandons dock, leaving behind a team of harbour workers hired for the day. The opening act of the sea drama starts when a passenger steps on board; costumed stewards serve chilled champagne to initiate a journey into a theatrical space of oceanic wonder. Even as the cruise ship embraces seascapes, navigational perceptions of the infinite are reduced to staged interiors on self-contained mega-liners. Propelled by computer-driven engines, cruise ships navigate through endless circular journeys of conspicuous scenography.



■ Passengers boarding the ship. Photo John R Diehl

The ship leaves the shore, and middle-class passengers seeking moments of identification with the upper crust begin their cruise. Scenography, with its manipulation of the environmental space predominates in commercial journeys designed to create a spectacle of luxury for passengers at a multiplicity of on-board sites. The ocean once managed by sail, steam, submersibles and at times the human body now exists as a backdrop for ocean liners transporting passengers to not-so-distant destinations. The vessels actualize human efforts to immerse themselves in the environment of the sea and, at the same time, indulge in terrestrial delights. While the reality of the sea appears as an immense background for passengers crossing spatial boundaries of Caribbean and Atlantic waters, more tangible earthly domains populate interior spaces of vessels. Scenography on cruise ships creates for the underclass an imagined possibility of endless journeys, magnificent wealth and continual adulation.

■ Lobster staircase on the Royal Caribbean Explorer  
Photo by John R. Diehl Jr.

Cruising the Caribbean has been popular since the United Fruit Company introduced the Great White Fleet in 1907. The Tropical Fruit Steamship Company innovatively transported both bananas and passengers aboard their air-conditioned Caribbean vessels. Earlier, during the second half of the nineteenth century, Liverpool packets and steamships cornered the market on transatlantic voyages moving travellers from one destination to another; however, the notion of cruising through warm waters for the experience of the ocean was a unique innovation of the banana industry (Doyle 2004). Industrialization fuelled a burgeoning middle class that had interests in navigating ocean waters for the experience of the natural world. 'Between 1840 and 1880, the ocean ceased being a wasteland and a highway and was transformed into a destination, a frontier, an uncivilized place ripe for conquest and exploration' (Rozwadowski 2005: 62). Open water and nautical thoroughfares accommodated late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century leisure travellers who could afford free time and transport fees. The deep blue ocean unfolded as a backdrop for scales of human desires and potentialities. Ted Arison, capitalizing on consumer urges for uncomplicated travel experiences, founded Norwegian Cruise lines in 1966. By 1972 he

■ Photographers pose passengers before the evening meal.  
Photo John R. Diehl



acquired Carnival Cruises, whose empire of corporate subsidiaries expanded and merged into clusters of cruise ship ownership that consists of Costa Cruises, Royal Caribbean and Celebrity enterprises (Garin 2005; Roland, Bolster and Keyssar 2008).

Today's ocean travellers, following patterns of nineteenth-century transatlantic journeying, immerse themselves in Victorian traditions of basking in visual spectacles. Scenographic spaces populate every aspect of the cruise ships. Lowbrow and highbrow cruises reach different audiences and both depend upon the maintenance of a series of spectacles: art, dining, land simulations and performance events. Each of these elaborations materialize spectacle in acts that mirror prevailing theatrical trends. Ten years of journeying as a 'destination lecturer' have introduced me to some of the scenic spaces that create the cruiseship experience for voyagers. As a temporary, voyage-specific, traveller, I work in a borderline space between passenger and crewmember. Destination lecturer routes are defined as Eastern Caribbean, Western Caribbean or Southern Caribbean. Often, my performance of the destination will be the only passenger contact with the land cultures that they journey through. For passengers who desire knowledge of history and culture, my 'destination lectures' provide context.

Once at sea, passengers experience the rolling motion of the open waters from elaborate interior spaces. Decorative art embellishes cruise ship architecture. Curved lines, high ceilings and majestic arches characterize the décor. Furnishings, often nautical, remind viewers of oceanic histories. Ships and anchors mark public passageways. Prominent displays of each ship's layout guide passengers through labyrinths of corridors as they move from dining to shopping to cabaret clubs. Ship plans help to locate passengers in the interior spaces even as they remind each voyager that they are part of a nautical world. Perspective is necessarily limited on-board. Nevertheless height is often used to compensate for narrow passages. The cruise ship rocks in response to wave action.

Carpets reduce the slip and slide that could become dangerous should drinks spill or water infiltrate the mechanized exterior doorways. Pictures punctuate corridors generating a sense of decorative detail. Decorative elements serve two purposes: they aesthetically alter the steel interiors of a functional maritime vessel, and they suggest a state of luxury. A passenger can enjoy moments of contemplative reflection as he or she examines details of sometimes-quirky modern art; in the process they forget that being at sea once meant boredom associated with the labour of arriving at the destination. This process of gazing differs markedly from earlier 'days of sail' when activities of embroidery or journal writing occupied travellers' time.

Art is also commerce on the cruise ship. Carefully orchestrated sale events offer contemporary art-for-sale. Auctions and art shows increase corporate income; passengers are encouraged to bid and buy. Another important money-maker for the cruise lines is the photo shop. In this space the passengers are the scenic art. While there is a photo shop on board to purchase pictures, the spectacle lies in the fake scenic backdrops that appear during the evening dinner and show hours. Crewmembers hired as photographers unroll seamless background paper painted with idealized vistas of the ship, the shore or the nighttime sky. Voyagers stand in front of these cruise-scapes with their lovers and family members to create touching mementos of their journeys. Prints, not negatives, are later offered for purchase in the photo shop. If, perhaps, the spectacle of standing in front of the backdrop does not entice passengers, then the ship offers roving photo options. Photographers pass through the sun decks and dining rooms waiting to capture moments of romance or play with their cameras. They function as personal paparazzi allowing customers to enjoy moments of celebrity fame. Photographic imagery captures every aspect of the voyage, underscoring the importance of each individual experience.

Eating is a primary activity in leisure cruising, and a primary goal of the chef's staff



■ Staff musician plays steel pans for guests.  
Photo John R Diehl

is the exquisite staging of food. Dining rooms aesthetics embody the grandeur of French and English aristocracy. Gilded staircases wind through the main dining room guiding well-dressed passengers through their entrances. Large tables are social gathering spots. While meticulous table service and over abundant food entice guests to eat grandly, it is the servile and pleasing attitudes of the staff that complete the atmospheric formula. Each waiter ensures that his or her guests receive excellent service. Indeed, they are severely penalized with loss of privilege should anyone complain. Management encourages crew staff to consistently repeat a key dialogue phrase in public spaces: 'my pleasure'. This expression places the guest at the pinnacle of a role-playing hierarchy where all of the theatrical elements centre on the paying passenger. Decorative dining does not end in the dinner plate. Food spectacles are an important component of each and every public space. Most cruise lines offer a 'grand buffet' during some part of the journey. This is an ostentatious presentation of carved ice statues,

elaborately crafted appetizers and sumptuous dessert trays. Chocolate fountains spew sweets, a salmon lays open its smoked cavity and happy chefs part loins of lamb or beef or pork in a choreographed demonstration of articulate butchery. The grand buffet is often themed with motifs like Caribbean Barbecue or Midnight Magic. For the cruise line the artistry of the buffet is a 'signature' event.

Even as the ship plies the waters, passengers expect to be able to participate in land-based activities. Cruise lines specialize in the variety and scope of these types of pastimes. Highbrow cruises tend to replicate activities of the upper class by incorporating golfing greens or croquet or bocce courts. In contrast, lowbrow cruises tend to be more sports-oriented. In an audacious tilt towards cold weather sports, Royal Caribbean's monster-size ships offer ice-skating and mountain rock wall climbing. Evoking the land while in the middle of the sea serves two purposes. It provides entertainment, assuring travellers that any leisure activity is possible at sea, and it creates a sense of familiar landscape within what could be considered a fraught and dangerous open water site. Another landed entertainment is shopping. Large vessels contain shopping malls that

■ Passengers play croquet on the lawn green of the top deck. Photo John R Diehl

simulate the infamous 'Main Street' of United States reminiscences. Stores appeal to a range of tastes with an emphasis on jewelry, cosmetics and fashion accessories. Functional items of this ilk are ideal for use on 'formal nights', cruise evenings designated by the activities staff as full-dress-up occasions. On formal nights all of the stores are open. Families and couples celebrate by shopping before dining and seeing the evening show.

Live performance acts saturate every corner of the cruise ship, and after 4:00 p.m. entertainment is particularly dense. Entertainment staff includes dancers, acrobats, musicians, singers, audio and video technicians, comedians and novelty groups. The Cruise Director, the ship's master of ceremonies, orchestrates when and where activities occur. Assisting the director is a team of at least a dozen activities staff members who set up spaces, remove equipment, and lead sideshow activities such as 'line dancing' or 'sing-a-longs'. Most cruise ships have dozens of venues available for programming, and keeping them filled requires careful scheduling. From the perspective of the entertainment staff, the pleasure of their job is to manage and fill each venue with sensorial entertainment. A three



story, well-equipped main theatre hosts large-scale musical events that range from 'cirque du soleil' spectacles to Las Vegas musical revues. Technicians enhance main stage acts with light shows, video screenings and moving risers. During the day, activities staff members play bingo and sell products within this same venue. Architecture shapes other spectacular spaces. Clubs and bars tend to resemble caverns or dens where passengers immerse themselves in the anonymity of dark spaces. Coffee shops replicate Italian cafes, and the most elevated lounges (14th Floor) contain spacious cloth chairs for observing musical ensembles in a casual environment. The pool deck hosts fun and active shows like belly-flop water contests or Caribbean dance lines. Near the pool, an almost ever-present Caribbean ensemble plays upbeat island tunes whenever passengers are likely to be sunning outside. Collectively, the entertainment staff activities deliver core cruise experiences to audiences. Manipulating architectural venues and then animating them with live acts keeps cruise ship guests believing that the cruise and not the ocean is the desired product for their journey.

While large spectacles loom over any description of contemporary cruising, details of private service augment the scenography. Some service activities are maintenance-oriented, for example, grooming of the floors, banisters and carpets. Passenger eyes are drawn to continual acts of cleaning so that they can appreciate the pristine upkeep of the vessel. Other service acts happen within personal settings that emphasize privacy and elegance. Bedroom suites conform to passenger expectations of five-star hotel elegance. Even crowded, windowless suites are designed to exude a sense of personal attention. The cabin environment lends itself to smaller moments of scenographic detail: flowers on tables, folded animal towels or frosty steel ice buckets that indicate careful butler service. For those with balconies or windows, the endless seascape outside contrasts with the comfortable delight of relaxing within elegance as the sea rages on. The interior private environmental spectacle of the room serves as



a respite from the more public scenographic backgrounds that define the shopping, dining and entertainment venues.

Spectacles, from the sublime to the mundane, characterize commercial cruising. Even though scenography cannot rescue a badly written play, scenography has indeed revitalized rituals of ocean voyaging. Spectacle and service tease passenger eyes and mesmerize guest senses within contained mega-liner space. Cruise ships, lit up like architectural wonders, blithely navigate across hazardous maritime passages once fraught with perils. Scenography enables boat passengers travelling within the cavity of the ship to marvel at continuously unfolding displays of crafted theatrical acts.

■ Folded towel art from a guest cabin.  
Photo John R Diehl

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