

Pop Art to PopMart: Gendered Stadium Stardom Aesthetics and Stage Designer Mark Fisher's Creative Work Process

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Introduction

Rock performances have changed just like the world has changed, from a 1960s hippie utopia to a bleak pessimism that followed, and finally towards the unquestionable triumph of contemporary spectacular entertainment. In stadium-scale rock shows lights are flashing, huge video screens repeat and magnify the actions of the stars, gigantic puppets march, golden arches glitter, PA-towers reach the skies above. Does it get any bigger than the spectacles produced by bands such as Pink Floyd (UK), the Rolling Stones (UK), and U2 (Ireland)? Stadium performances reveal and celebrate the bombastic nature of our rapidly changing audiovisual culture, our desire for grandeur and for memorable experiences, as well as our hunger for live 'authenticity' which paradoxically takes place in such exaggerated surroundings.



(Image source: Studio Fisher, <http://www.stufish.com/>)

It is evident that rock music performance has undergone massive change since its modest beginnings in Anglo-American clubs. In the 1960s and 1970s, cultural changes, combined with growing technological possibilities, brought strong visual and theatrical elements to the live performance of rock music. Rock spectacles grew along with audience capacities at performing venues. A mass audience's potential as rock music consumers – the Beatles at Shea Stadium in 1965 and the Woodstock Festival in 1969 are good examples – was gradually realised by the recording industry.

Stadium rock performances are excellent examples of audiovisual 'Gesamtkunstwerk' (Macan, 1997: 11), a unified work of art, in which the music and visual presentations are intertwined. An important unifying link between the three aforementioned 'stadium groups' is British stage designer and architectural engineer Mark Fisher (*The Mark Fisher Studio*, see <http://www.stufish.com/>). He is one of the most experienced and in-demand stadium spectacle designers, working with acts like Pink Floyd, the Rolling Stones, U2, R.E.M., Cher and Jean-Michael Jarre. Fisher also designed the Millennium Dome opening spectacle *OVO* with Peter Gabriel, as well as the opening ceremonies of the Olympic Winter Games in Turin, Italy, in February 2006.

For this chapter, I will analyse one case study of live performance, namely U2's PopMart spectacle as the joint creation between the band and architect-designer Mark Fisher. That particular tour, with its gigantic measures – including 'the largest TV ever seen' – has remained an extreme example of the usage of non-musical stage equipment: Gargantuan LED-screens, ambitious videos and media art, and exaggerated architectural surroundings, such as a giant mirror ball lemon, and a huge olive pierced by a 'toothpick'. My idea is to analyse these technological innovations and changes in audiovisual stardom from two points of view. First, from the group's and the designer's notable contributions to stadium rock aesthetics; second, from the band's performance in this live environment, especially from a gender perspective, as U2 have been perceived both as the embodiment of masculine stadium superstardom and as critics of modern mass media culture, which paradoxically has created such stardom.

Mark Fisher and stadium rock aesthetics

In Mark Fisher's ephemeral and transportable architecture there can be seen a distinctive style. In order to be easily moved from one stage to the next, Fisher's designs mix elements of popular cultural narratives with innovative uses of technology and light. Fisher's career in stage design began in the mid-1970s, through his work with Pink Floyd. The venues Pink Floyd played in America in 1975 were so large the show needed something very extreme to keep the audience's attention. To achieve this Pink Floyd hired two professional architectural designers, Fisher and Jonathan Park, who had experience of advanced inflatable and mobile pneumatic structures. As their first assignment Fisher and Park planned a huge pyramid that would float above the stage and radiate light beams in a way that was close to the famous cover design of *The Dark Side of the Moon* album¹. Fisher has been involved in many of the biggest arena tours throughout the 1980s, 1990s and into the 21st century. These include for example the Rolling Stones' Steel Wheels, Voodoo Lounge and Bridges to Babylon tours, U2's Zoo TV and PopMart tours and Pink Floyd's Division Bell tour.

Although these gargantuan shows utilised similar architectural structures, they embraced very different stylistic aesthetics. U2's PopMart stage, for example, featured many bespoke solutions. Everything was big: the tour, with production costs of more than \$50 million (USD), consisted of more than 100 shows around the world between April 1997 to February 1998 (Cunningham, 1999: 147-148) and thus becomes a primary example of both the challenges and opportunities associated with innovative and transportable stadium-scale stage design.

Stage architecture as spectacular disposable aesthetics

Instead of discussing technical features, so often the focus of most stage design analysis, here I would like to consider its cultural implications. Every touring rock spectacle has been, in my opinion, unique: the same stage designs rarely tour twice. This practice presents two clear challenges to stage designers. First, portable stages are used normally only for a maximum of 18 months. They need to be durable, to last throughout the lengthy tour schedule, but still as light as possible and easy to take down after each show (as well as permanently dismantled and recycled after the tour is over). Second, the challenges associated with transporting elaborate stages compel designers to continually seek out newer, more innovative materials to meet the artistic, financial and logistical requirements of a full-scale rock tour. For example, one solution utilised by Fisher and others has been to cover big, multi-purpose spaces with inexpensive, reflective fabrics – similar to the kinds used in cinema screens. But are these kinds of specifications a limitation or an advantage for designers? I would like to argue that it is an advantage to work with light and such easily transforming materials as an integral part of the designs. For these reasons, I use the term 'disposable aesthetics' to define my understanding of the complexities and innovations of stage design and stage architecture. Furthermore, I'd like to call rock-spectacle stage design 'the architecture of light and sound', where space transforms into performance worlds that are easily transformed to meet the demands of each song performance, as well as the general narrative of the tour.

It is in my opinion very self evident that the usage of light is one of the key elements in modern architecture. In rock spectacles use of light is second only to sound. But is it then justified to call these spectacles the architecture of sound and light? Or should we just say that designing stages is all about designing the material stage and the lighting, and let the musicians worry about the music itself? I would like to argue that it is as important for the designer to be aware of acoustics as it is to be aware of theatrical structures when designing a stadium spectacle. The sound itself is a creator of spatial illusion sometimes very central to the intended concert experience.

U2 have released a successful stream of studio and live albums, around 20 in all, and through heavy touring in the early 1980s they were able to establish the USA as their biggest market. U2 has continued to base their popularity on heavy touring, with their live performance staging developed around each new album release and its themes. Their most notable and influential stadium rock tours in terms of technological spectacle are two from the 1990s, namely the Zoo TV/Zooropa Tour (1992-1993) and PopMart (1997-1998).

I decided to take a different turn from the most obvious argument, which would have been observing U2 mainly as a live masculine and heterosexual rock spectacle, as 'superstars'. They are very much both indeed, but they have also tried to be ironic about their success, by making parodies of huge stadium events, especially as evidenced in their Zoo TV and PopMart concepts. The paradox, however, is that they are still producing huge stadium events and earning a substantial amount of money from them.

Journalist and rock staging expert Mark Cunningham described U2's PopMart stage as an over-the-top extravaganza, starting, in all places, Las Vegas:

On 25 April, 1997 at the Sam Boyd Stadium in Las Vegas, U2 performed the first show of their first tour since 1993: PopMart. The world's hedonistic capital of gambling provided an appropriate location for the tour's launch, for it was here that U2 committed millions to rewriting the text book on the staging of live shows...They said that the "sci-fi supermarket set" would carry the world's biggest video screen. Oh yeah? A 35' high motorised mirrorball lemon will be transporting the band from the A to B stage. And the whole set would be topped by a 100' golden arch. Were these the same scruffs as seen at a Canning Town boozier back in 1979? Was this *Spinal Tap* revisited? (Cunningham, 1999: 147).

Certainly one could see the Spinal Tap elements in PopMart, but also the parody of consumer society. PopMart comes extremely close to Jean Baudrillard's *America* (1986), and it is no accident that the tour started in Las Vegas, the place Baudrillard famously associated with Death Valley. Baudrillard continued to explore the dichotomies between art and consumption by reading some of his own poetry near the city whilst wearing a gold lamé suit with mirrored lapels. (Baudrillard, 1989: 67; MacFarquhar, 2005.) Later Baudrillard commented on *America* as hyperreality, where art vanishes and gives way to confused aesthetic reality:

We say that Disneyland is not, of course, the sanctuary of the imagination, but Disneyland as hyperreal world masks the fact that all America is hyperreal, all America is Disneyland...Now the banal reality has become aestheticized, all reality is trans-aestheticized, and that is the very problem. Art was a form, and then it became more and more no more a form but a value, an aesthetic value, and so we come from art to aesthetics—it's something very, very different. And as art becomes aesthetics it joins with reality, it joins with the banality of reality. (Baudrillard, in MacFarquhar, 2005).

The rock concert, especially as it has been conceived within PopMart, does have a resemblance to Disneyland, escaping from pop art towards entertainment. Certainly a show like U2's hyper-commercial 'honest' spectacle emphasises this relation between everyday consumer culture and spectacular entertainment. But there are even darker aspects in this hyperreality. The use of gigantic venues changed rock performances into total or even totalitarian (in the Riefenstahlian sense) mass-art, in which rock stardom was preserved and created by technological means. Aesthetics of the stadium spectacle have exaggerated and fortified audiovisual gestures through technology. Without this cultural technology there wouldn't be any stadium stardom: by showing close-ups of facial expressions of artists on a video screen it is possible – even if this happens only partly – to restore the intimacy that has been lost in the huge scale of events. In this way, this kind of powerful use of technology could be seen as a potential form of propaganda.

The idea of a unified work of art was criticised for example by philosophers Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger and Theodor Adorno, as Finnish philosopher Reijo Kupiainen (1997) notes. He combines and re-invents the critique given by these three German thinkers by applying it to some newer forms of unified works of art. Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* is, by Heidegger's (1982) definition, religious fever or the ecstasy of masses, where music is central to an experience. The stage is thus where music becomes the core of an event, and the accelerator of emotions. A unified work of art is for all three philosophers, conventionality, the fake art of the masses. (Kupiainen, 1997: 80-82; Nietzsche, 1963: 225; Heidegger, 1982: 102-103; Adorno, 1989: 22). For example National Socialist propaganda and global entertainment industry mass culture can be analysed through a similar reading. Kupiainen summarises this well:

Wagnerism is condensed into bombastic images, where the work and crowds have been subjected to rhythmic decoration. This certainly refers directly to Nazism's way of presenting politics in an aesthetic way. Furthermore, these images have been exploited both in Hollywood entertainment (such as the *Star Wars* series) and in modern music videos. (Kupiainen, 1997: 82, translated from Finnish by the author).

This description by Kupiainen (1997) refers to the Wagnerian and theatrical gestures of Fritz Lang's 1927 movie *Metropolis*, but it also applies perfectly to rock stadium spectacle in all its hyperbole. The fact that Kupiainen mentions music video is certainly important. Queen, for instance, used images from *Metropolis* in their video 'Radio Gaga' from the early 1980s. An even more compelling comparison can be made to the Riefenstahlian aesthetics of Third Reich propaganda films in the 1930s, specifically films like *The Triumph of the Will* (1935) and *Olympia* (1938). Further, Alan Parker's film production of Pink Floyd's *The Wall* (1980) also seems to be in parts direct commentary on Fascist-like conventions. Thus PopMart is essentially epitomising what could be called techno-spectacle in its most Debordian way, revealing a hollow 'Society of Spectacle' (Debord, 1995), by using the spectacular to produce thoughtful and, indeed, even critical rock theatre.

The Design Process: From an Audiovisual Bunker to A Mirrorball Lemon

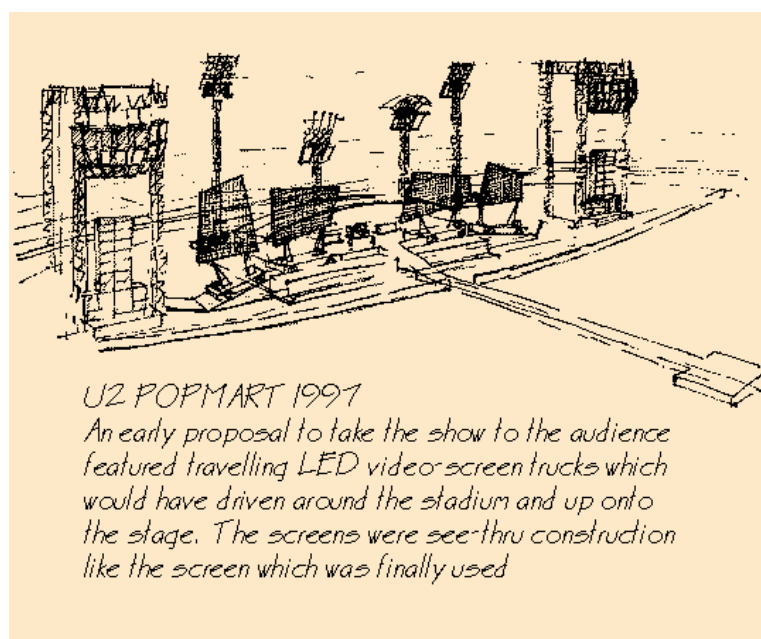
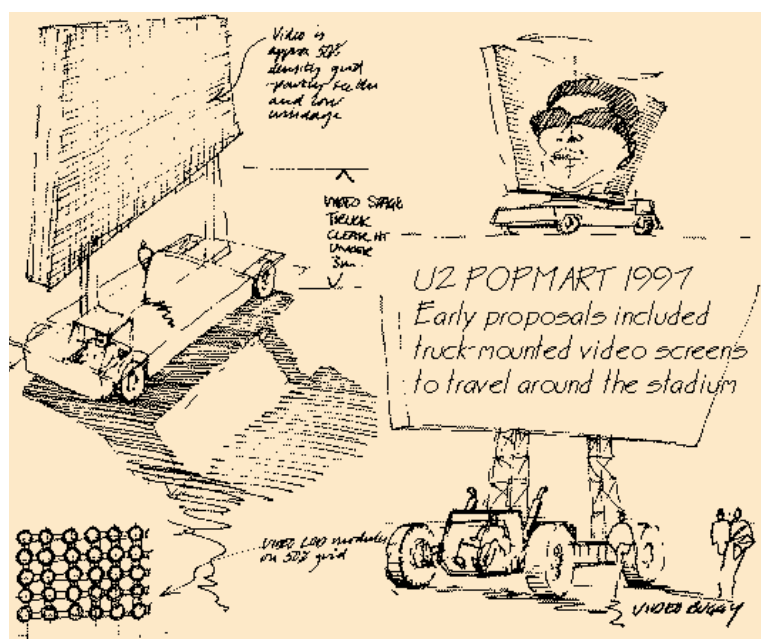
In this section of the chapter, I intend to trace the evolution of Fisher's design aesthetic for the PopMart stage, supported by discussion of a number of images detailing each step of the creative process, from some very raw sketches to a 3D computer model and finally the finished show.

(Image source for the following pictures: Studio Fisher, <http://www.stufish.com/>)

Willie Williams, the primary lighting and conceptual designer for U2, has stated in an interview to Mark Cunningham, that the band had significant input into the creation of various design elements for the stage show. Amongst Williams' early ideas for the PopMart stage was 'The Bunker', a huge construction resembling a military installation which would have opened during the performance to reveal a contrasting interior that used video or soft visual elements and stood in stark contrast to its coarse exterior. (Cunningham, 1999: 150; Holding 2000: 103). Building on these early concepts, Fisher eventually produced the final PopMart stage design and architecture.

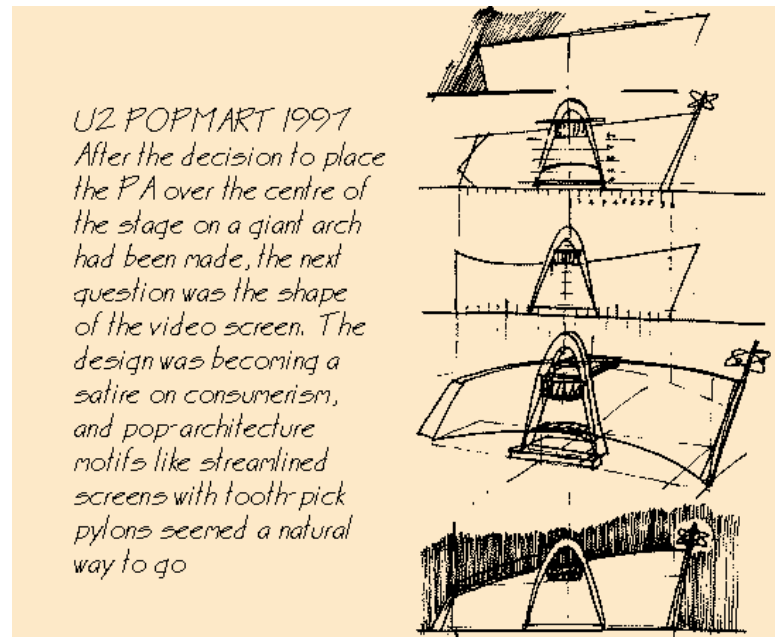
It is fascinating to observe how wide-ranging these early ideas were. As indicated in the pictures above, there are some of Fisher's initial sketches for the show, which included a response to William's idea for a mobile discotheque. These consisted of a traditional stage inhabited by eight vehicles, four of which supported video screens and the rest lighting towers (Holding, 2000: 103).

To emphasise their critique of commercial culture, U2 used a wealth of kitsch and camp symbols. The golden arch is meant to strongly remind us of McDonald's. Central to Fisher's design aesthetic was the innovative placement of the PA-speakers on the arch, a setup that came to be known as 'the Flying Pumpkin'. Yet this part of the design proved to be the biggest target of criticism from professional audio producers, as a centrally placed PA system would contribute to decreased sound quality. Nevertheless,



Fisher's aesthetic vision won out over more technological concerns (Cunningham, 1999: 166-168). With the finished pop-disco-supermarket parody, Fisher and U2 had moved a long way from the 'authentic' culture of 'sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll', seeking to be more open about their role in society. Tour Director Jake Kennedy, who has worked with U2 since 1979, stated:

The supermarket is an honest reflection of the rock 'n' roll business because what we are doing is selling enjoyment, selling albums, T-shirts or whatever. So why not be open about it and play in front of something that resembles a supermarket? (in Cunningham, 1999: 152).



Body and Bono: Challenging masculinities in PopMart

One aspect usually neglected in stadium architecture design analysis is gender, despite the growing amount of gender research done in popular music studies. (c.f. McClary, 1991, Whiteley, 2000). But where and how does gender enter into discourses of stadium architecture design? In her book about Led Zeppelin, Susan Fast problematised how academics react to gender issues in music:

My own gendered experience with the music and visual imagery, as well as responses to the fan questionnaire, point to the enormous gap that exists between how enthusiastic consumers of the music respond to issues of gender and sexuality and how disengaged academics and journalists [are]. (Fast, 2001: 184).

Indeed, traditionally, music has been studied as an abstract form with limited reference to its social functions and roles. In popular music studies, however, a central idea is that musical understanding very much comes from social and spatial settings, through the identification of specific localities where popular music is consumed and created. (Whiteley, 1997: xiv). Here, I am focussing on live performance, where historically there has been much debate on the contested relationship between gender roles and technology.

Following on from Michel Foucault's famous ideas on technology as a set of institutionalised social techniques, Nina E. Lerman, Ruth Oldenziel, and Arwen P. Mohun (2003) state that technology is not only a material but also a social construction, conceived by people making decisions and creating meanings (c.f. Lerman et al., 2003: 2-4). Here is where the issue of gender indeed comes into play. There is no space in this chapter to theorise the notion of gender any further than to say that it is, like technology, socially constructed, extending into more complex cultural settings than just the female/male dichotomy. These cultural settings are obviously subject to historical change. We can analyse the dynamics between gender and technology by observing peoples' choices, creativity, knowledge, ideologies, assumptions and values, which are related to objects and machines resulting from peoples' technological activities.

The performing styles of artists like Mick Jagger, the Pet Shop Boys, Madonna, and, as we shall closely observe, Bono of U2, are evident examples of popular musicians who have challenged the boundaries of traditional gender roles. Male performance acts like cross-dressing and the wearing of make-up during a rock performance, as U2 did in their 'Even Better than the Real Thing' promo shots (1991) for example, have become noted expressions of reshuffled gender roles, generating models for new kinds of social constructions. At the same time, however, technological and industrial mechanisms of popular music production have been gendered in many common ways, especially in positions of power, such as producers, managers, executives, technicians, which are still male-dominated fields. (Whiteley, 1997: xvi; Whiteley, 2000: 4).

The gendered dichotomy of masculine rock and feminine pop, which has been well analysed by Matthew Bannister in his article about Pink Floyd audiences and white masculinity (2005: 44), was echoed by U2, as

they named their album *Pop* (1997). According to this popular cultural stereotype rock is 'masculine', 'deep', 'categorized', and 'dynamic'. Pop, by contrast, is 'feminine' and 'superficial'. U2's *Pop* was a nod to pop art, but also to carnivals, a satire about consumer culture. Jennifer McClinton and Abigail Myers, in their article 'U2, Feminism, and Ethics of Care' (2006: 111), argue that U2 should be considered feminists, not perhaps so much in the political sense but certainly in the philosophical.

Even if the PopMart show moved away from much of the usual rock symbolism, it also re-contextualised some old symbols, mainly from the pop art scene of the 1960s, including Andy Warhol's and Roy Lichtenstein's works. Lichtenstein's aircraft missile launch worked especially well from the LED screen in 'Bullet



(Image Source:
<http://luminous-times.blogspot.com/2008/09/1997-popmart-leeds.html>)

the the Blue Sky', on which Bono was dressed in a kind of military uniform, holding an umbrella. He first theatrically uses the umbrella as a mock-weapon, marching around the stage in soldier-fashion. He then inserts the umbrella between his legs, to simulate a penis, and finally, when the umbrella opens, it is revealed to be a flag of the USA, with which he then chases his band mates. (*U2 PopMart Live From Mexico City* 1998, 10400-10800). Even if this rather obvious imagery, just like the 'muscular' appearance in the picture above, reinforces ideas of stadium spectacles as highly masculine, I turn next to U2's use of the 'lemon' as a contrasting example of the band's gendered stage performance, one that seems to have stayed with them throughout the 1990s.

One of the most interesting debates about gender and popular music is the relation of masculinity and heavy metal (c.f. Walser, 1993: 108-136), but masculine exaggeration goes obviously further back to Delta blues and beyond. In his classic lyric line, Blues artist Robert Johnson, in his 'Travelling Riverside Blues', later covered by Led Zeppelin, sang this famous sexual metaphor: 'Now you can squeeze my lemon, till the juice run down my leg, baby, you know what I'm talkin' 'bout' (Johnson, 1937).

Adapting Johnson's metaphor, Bono, wrote very different lyrics for U2's song, 'Lemon', featured on their 1993 album *Zooropa*:

Lemon
 See through in the sunlight
 She wore lemon
 But never in the daylight

 She's gonna make you cry
 She's gonna make you whisper and moan
 And when you're dry
 She draws her water from the stone. (U2, 1993).

Bono has said he wrote the song about his mother, who had died years earlier, after watching old home movies featuring her in a yellow maid of honour dress, younger than Bono himself at the time. The song is dominated by the presence of technology and lyrical memories about his mother. The lemon works as a metaphor, symbolic of all the material things we have today. Yet despite all our modern technology, we cannot bring a dead person back to life. Bono calls his vocals on this song his 'Fat lady voice', and that is, interestingly enough, a high falsetto. (McCormick et. al., 2006: 248-249; <http://www.muorji.se/U2MoL/Zooropa/lemon.html>).

During the PopMart tour, the lemon became one of the very evident symbols for the commercial extremes of rock industry. Designer Mark Fisher commented on this innovation:

We think we have designed the world's largest lemon. If not, then it's certainly the world's largest mirror ball lemon that can carry four people inside it, and open and shut (in Cunningham, 1999: 153).

The part of the show which featured the lemon was a classical *Deus Ex Machina* moment: the rock gods – or rather the *pop* gods in Village People-style outfits and in silent pose – arrived for their encore after 'Where the Streets

Have No Name' to the sounds of a club remix of 'Lemon', ready to start their next song, 'Discotheque' (U2, *PopMart Live From Mexico City*, 1998: 12400-12600). But at the same time it was, indeed, also a classical *Spinal Tap* (1984) moment. The show's main designer Willie Williams, who collaborated with Fisher and the band, had decided already at an early stage that the group should emerge from a giant lemon. Asked what inspired the idea, Williams replied:

Spinal Tap, actually. We needed a pod-like object for the band to come out of like they did in the movie. We felt that the more smoke there was the better, because it was the pure Spinal Tap moment. Just then Las Vegas decided to have the stillest wind ever. So The Edge comes down from the stairs, and to start his guitar he has to kick a switch on his foot-pedal. Well, he ended up on his hands and knees, feeling around for the pedal. Later he said to me, 'There I was at the debut, the premiere opening night, and this voice came into my head: I'm Derek Smalls' (<http://books.guardian.co.uk/extracts/story/0,,371343,00.html>).

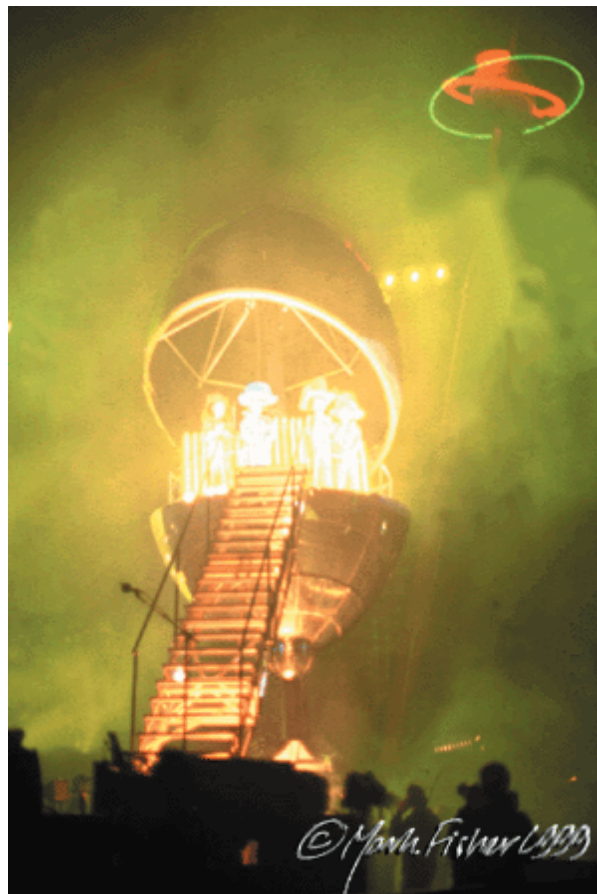
In my opinion, by sharing such stories, U2 and their organisation actually emphasised their masculinity. The technological problems, such as the one described, were the result of expanding the limits of technology and constantly working with prototypes. (Scrimgeour, 2004: 128). Thus, despite going into the territory of 'feminine' pop, superficiality and shopping, they actually were innovative pioneers and fearless experts in masculine technological realms, though admittedly with some self-irony.

Despite such evident toying with gender identities and cultural symbols, rock music continues to be associated with masculinity, which is then seen as naturally heterosexual in films, TV programmes, press, advertising, and the like. The flirtation with elastic gender roles and even masculine-femininity is still seen as camp, different, 'other' and sometimes threatening. (Whiteley, 2005: 132-133). Quite tellingly, *PopMart* was U2's weakest performance in terms of sales, and the following album *All That You Can't Leave Behind* was greeted by many as a return to form: a 1980s-styled U2 without post-modern irony and strange theatrical identity plays.

The technological existence of U2 live shows has taken a new step via the Internet, as some members of U2inSL.com started to arrange virtual U2 concerts in *Second Life*. (Totilo, 2006). Here I draw on ideas presented by Philip Auslander in his book *Liveness* (1999). Specifically, he claims most large scale live events in general are hardly live anymore because they are so heavily mediated. (Auslander, 1999: 27, 38, 83-85). Film scholar Steve Wurtzler offered similar striking philosophical commentary on the simultaneous existence of the live and the recorded:

The apparent collapsing of distinctions between live and recorded, and the difficulty of theorizing a subject effect for the popular music concert, result from the simultaneous presence of two, by definition, mutually exclusive categories: the live and the recorded. Even though the live concert struggles to reinstate a notion of the fully present original event in popular music, the co-presence of the live and the recorded contribute to a potential crisis in our notions of a real that exists prior to representation. (Wurtzler, 1992: 94).

To radicalise this notion even further, on U2inSL.com, a U2 and virtual reality server *Second Life* fan site, it becomes apparent that the totally mediated virtual 'Second Life U2' characters are played 'live' by other people. Also audiences would have no idea about the gender identities of the people playing these characters.



(Image source: Studio Fisher, <http://www.stufish.com/>)



(Image source: <http://u2insl.com/index2.html>)

Conclusion

In the late 1990s there was some discussion in the rock press that the time of bombastic stadium rock was over², and the next trend would be to strip it all down altogether, or at least scale it back. Instead, despite these dire predictions, it seems to be clear that arena rock hasn't died. Stadium scale shows keep on selling. The Rolling Stones and U2 are on the road with big spectacles as often as they ever have been. If it all depends on something, it depends on money. As long as there are tens of thousands of people all around the world waiting to spend a small fortune on tickets to see their favourite 'superstars', there will be ever more massive stadium spectacles, always utilising the latest technology and different forms of popular nostalgia. With the record industry suffering from the effects of piracy, artists are more and more focusing on live shows as the provider of their income. Hopefully this will result in a variety of interesting critical elements, identity plays and new innovations within the shows themselves, instead of bland and non-imaginative mass entertainment without any deeper substance.

Mark Fisher's work is based on the successful use of his surroundings, with quick reactions to the sounds and images of popular culture, and also through compelling use of striking and instantly recognisable historical images. To be successful, he has to be able to visualise three-dimensional thematic environments, use powerful visual images to the point of exaggeration, and, maybe as the most important factor, he has to have a clear vision of the timing and choreography of events. Unlike conventional 'static' architecture, his designs have to transform to meet the narrative demands of each sequence in a show. Eric Holding captures this process perfectly by stating: 'In this respect they are fugitive architectures which, like a circus or a fairground, magically arrive, recontextualise their surroundings and then disappear quite literally into the night.' (Holding, 2000: 11)

Endnotes

¹ The beginning of Fisher's career in stage design got off to an inauspicious start, as the pyramid structure collapsed during Pink Floyd's performance at Pittsburgh's Three Rivers Stadium, 20th June 1975 (Povey and Russell 1997: 139).

²For more information on this and on PopMart, see Beaumont & Helmore 1997: 11.

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Discography and Filmography

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