

# Cutting the Moss with Laser Beams: The Uses of History in The Rolling Stones *Bridges To Babylon* Stadium Tour

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European palatial and ecclesiastical architecture is very triumphalist in the way it records the earthy power of Divinity: in religion, in the idea of immensely wealthy people, and in events like building the Versailles. By combining that visual language with the High Baroque in Mexico – these incredible Catholic churches with carved decorations and saints with bleeding hearts – we could make the space very operatic and extravagantly over-the-top. (McHugh 1998, 54-55.)

Clearly, British architectural designer Mark Fisher revealed here that he had interesting reference points for his huge designs for The Rolling Stones' *Bridges To Babylon* concert (1997-1998). The show seems to have been built on the most evident symbols of Divinity and wealth. The event begins in an equally astounding way: the opening silvery curtain reveals a circular video screen, which shows a comet coming directly towards the audience. Once the comet arrives a huge explosion throws flames, sparks and smoke above the audience, and, as the tongue-in-cheek zenith, guitar player Keith Richards appears from the middle of the resulting flash and thunder, playing "Satisfaction" intro riff. Simultaneously singer Mick Jagger appeared on a horn riser. (Cunningham 1999, 257-258.) Surely over the top, but it's certainly supposed to be. Such gigantic concert events have produced a new kind of technological stardom, where the special effects and music are intertwined and sequenced to produce a breathtaking popular cultural spectacle. But some of these spectacles have a rich connection to the past as well – certainly this "Operatic High Baroque" spectacle had.



## Satisfaction guaranteed

What's bigger in life if not stadium rock? In the world of live arena rock events British rock group The Rolling Stones is probably as big, quite as old, and certainly as well known as it gets. Their 1997-1998 *Bridges To Babylon*

tour introduced us, besides to a few new live songs, to massive visual elements which sequenced their mostly nostalgic hit parade and transformed the concert into an audiovisual techno-spectacle.

The show was designed by Mark Fisher, known by his work for most of the biggest bands in the world. He is one of the most experienced and utilized stadium spectacle designers who has planned stages for Pink Floyd, The Rolling Stones, U2, R.E.M., Cher, Jean-Michael Jarre, among others, and the Millennium Dome opening spectacle in London. Another central figure in creating the Rolling Stones spectacle was lighting designer Patrick Woodroffe. (Cunningham 1999, 259-260; Holding 2000, *passim*.)

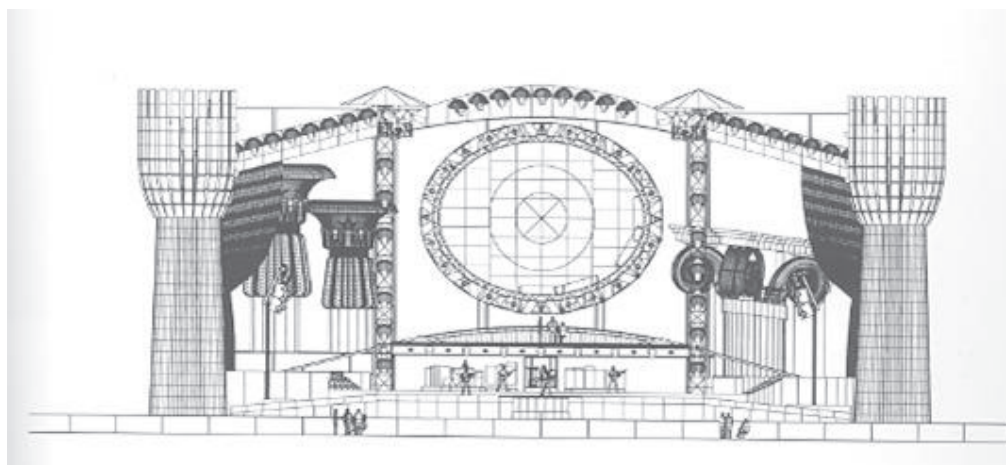
The Rolling Stones members have been seen both as the embodiment of corporeal stadium superstardom and also as the ultimate rock dinosaurs who embrace the rock myths they created in the 1960s, appearing on a nostalgic hit parade tour after another. They can be seen as a stagnant jukebox who mostly play the old “classic” catalogue, and are also expected to do so. As they keep getting older, their legendary live event superstardom is being maintained and enhanced but also suffocated by the surrounding Industrial Light and Magic. I will analyse Fisher’s ideas and the popular images he used to design the event. I will especially focus on the use of historical imagery, and ask in what ways Fisher uses past as a resource. Paradoxically, the clever use of stadium space created a surprisingly fresh technological background to the most famous “rock mummies” in the world.

The use of gigantic venues changed rock performances into total or rather totalitarian mass-art, in which rock stardom was preserved and created by technological means and clever use of nostalgic elements. Aesthetics of the stadium spectacle has developed from this need to exaggerate and fortify audiovisual gestures and narratives through technology. This need is evident as the live event is hardly a rewarding experience to begin with.

The Rolling Stones are one of the first bands to try and break away from this dilemma by increasing the scale of the performances to the ultimate heights of megalomania. Their 1989 *Steel Wheels* tour was seen as one of the truly pioneering stadium shows, as it first time included fully integrated lighting fixtures built in the actual stage designs instead of the separate lighting rigs, and thus made them an important part of the actual set. This quite revolutionary idea came from the collaboration between Fisher and Patrick Woodroffe, who was involved in the number of other shows with Fisher, including other Rolling Stones megastages. (Holding 2000, *passim*.) This kind of close collaboration has led to the situation where their individual roles during the development of a performance environment has become increasingly blurred.

Having explored alternative visions of technological future for the staging of the mentioned *Steel Wheels* and *Voodoo Lounge*, Fisher and The Rolling Stones decided to look to the past and exploit the popular images from history for the *Bridges To Babylon* show.

Popular music is intertwined with both the culture of its time and the conventions inherited from the past. Tradition is something that partly defines The Rolling Stones and binds them to their past and also to different histories of Rock’n’Roll. German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer has noted that the tradition has a firm grip of people as historical beings (Gadamer 1999, *passim*; Juntunen & Mehtonen 1982, 116-117), but at the same time, I believe, people tend to try to widen their historical horizon by innovating something unexpected. This dialogue between the past and the future has also been emphasized by a German historian influenced by Gadamer’s thinking, Reinhart Koselleck, who in his book *Verkangene Zukunft*, in English *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time* (1979) argued that the mental images we have on past and future events depend on each other and are in constant dialogical change. I’d like to argue that the multi-linear stage spectacle of *Bridges To Babylon* can be seen as an audiovisual manifestation of such history culture (or *Geschichtskultur* as the original notion by Koselleck goes).



## The Bridge to... B-Stage!

The staging of *Bridges To Babylon* in fact embraces many time periods simultaneously in the exaggerated and overblown, decadent and even Kitch way.

Extravagant and hyper Baroque design included over-scaled architectural motifs. They were used as symbols for a mythical place synonymous with luxury and vice – the conditions appropriate to fin-de-siècle decadence. (<http://www.stufish.com/>)

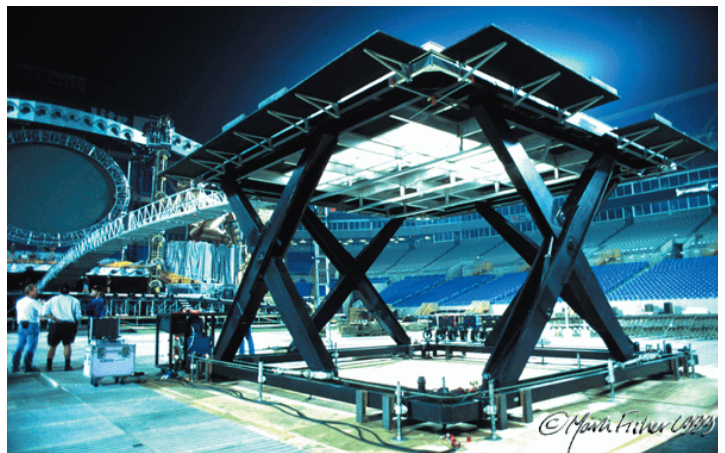
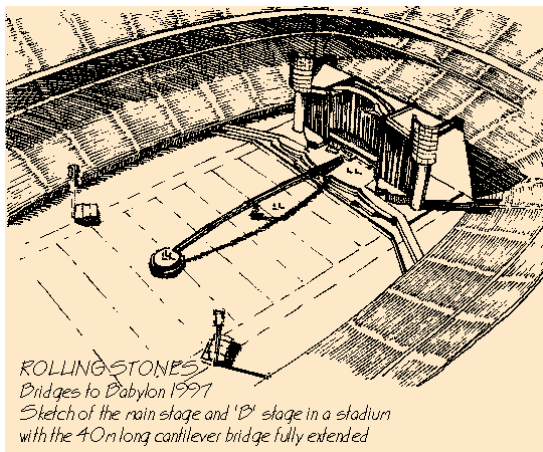
Here Fisher obviously means then still upcoming Millennium as the spectacular height of The Rolling Stones' famous rock'n'roll decadence. He first created a big amount of production drawings which portrayed the decadent figures such as woman called "Ms. Gluttony". Another female figure spreads her legs to allow Jagger to sing between them – perhaps the infamous Whore of Babylon? No, rather "Ms. Sloth". These female figures were lying on both sides of video screen, on gigantic "Abyssinian" columns. Furthermore, "Lust" and "Anger" were depicted in Futurist, Neo-Bocchiniesque art sculptures, and thus the stage presented no more than four of the Seven Deadly Sins. The symmetrical PA-towers were modelled as gigantic golden torches. As all this was still hardly referring to Babylon, Fisher included a pair of "neo-Egyptian Baroque towers" which were called "Magic Mushrooms". (McHugh 1998, 56-57.) This kind of excessive architectural ornamentation was obviously meant to signify "historical" power and wealth. Since 1995, when digital video technology became affordable even for small studios, Fisher has used three-dimensional animation to make complete and working models of the staging. This helps him to actually design and even direct the timing, sequencing, and rhythm of the events and show them in real time.

One of the central gimmicks of the event was the bridge that appeared from the main stage and connected it to another, a more intimate stage. Mark Fisher describes the telescoping bridge in his studios web-pages:

It extended 40 meters from the main stage to a "B" stage in the middle of stadium. The steel and carbon-fibre composite structure was mounted on a self-propelled 12 meters long chassis which travelled on a low-loader. The machine was driven off the low-loader straight into the venue, where it reversed into a slot in the stage, and was anchored by attachments to the video-screen towers. (<http://www.stufish.com/>)

Besides a steel construction, this was meant to be a mental bridge to the past of the band, somewhat trying to invoke a nostalgic moment, at least for those remembering the intimate beginnings of The Rolling Stones at the small London venues in the early 1960s. When they hit the B-stage they tellingly launch into "It's Only Rock'n'Roll (But I like It)", and after that a cover of "Like a Rolling Stone". Thus, as Fisher later noted, the bridge was visible for about 40 seconds and cost more than \$1 million, if the B-stage setup is included in the calculations. (McHugh 1998, 87.)

At the same time, however, the big inflatable puppets and constructions were silently dismantled from the main stage, so that when the band returned there after these two numbers to launch "Sympathy for the Devil", they had a more bare bones stage which gave more possibilities for the extravagant lighting towards the end of the event. It is one very distinctive feature of *Bridges To Babylon* event that the whole stage environment is reconfigured for each section of the show. These kind of metamorphoses of the stage were the dramatic key moments of the show, even if in addition to these big revealing moments the individual songs had separate gags to enhance their dramatic operatic power.





## Special Effects and *Simulacrum*

So, I am dealing with the industrial light and magic if anything, the special effects that make saint miracle legends pale. One central feature of technical and technological world is indeed spectacle itself. Cultural theorist and leader of the Situationist movement, Guy Debord, has discussed the spectacle-like nature of the western world in his influential and polemic book *La Societe du Spectacle*, translated in English as *The Society of the Spectacle*. For him the spectacle means social human relation, which is mediated through pictures. However, it has nothing to do with communication, this phenomenon is disrupting the world and emphasising the autonomy of the visual. So, spectacle for Debord is definitely something negative in its nature. As we live in the society of spectacle, everything appears as visual surface without any deeper substance. Spectacle demands passive approving: everything that appears is good, and everything good appears. Here we have an obvious tautology, which is no accident.

I feel these originally Marxian ideas resonating with my work. Spectacle feeds on itself, and the technological dimension of the most seminal stadium bands only brings new levels to the ritualistic visual quality of their performances. Debord claims that spectacle is a direct continuation of religion, a materialistic reconstruction of a religious illusion. (Debord 1995, 12-15, 17-18.) With the kinds of spectacular stadium examples that The Rolling Stones machine has produced it is hard to say no to the idea.

Stadium technology was innovated to provide means for modern *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a complete work of art. The technology connects the performer's theatrical gestures to wider, well beforehand planned thematic structures. This is what large venues and their disposable architecture are all about: connecting sound, light and material surfaces with popular imagery, and also with popular nostalgia, sometimes irony (not in The Rolling Stones show, though), and the historical references of the audiovisual narratives. But also with shock and awe in front of overpowering technology. Here I come close to Philip Auslander's ideas in his excellent book *Liveness*. He claims that live events are hardly live anymore because they are so heavily mediated. (Auslander 2005, *passim*.) In the case of The Rolling Stones I couldn't say it better than Eric Holding in his book on Mark Fisher:

With video cameras on stage constantly moving around and a live editing process taking place, the images on the screen above the stage do not actually represent what is happening below. Rather, they are intensified media constructions, which use technological effects to heighten the experience of the audience. This makes watching the show a more complex exercise involving a constant switching between the physicality of the 'live' performance and the mediated or 'relayed' images on the screen. This blurring of reality and representation serves ultimately as useful reminder of the nature of stardom or celebrity itself, as the archetypal 'rock-god' is, after all, part physical presence and part media construction. (Holding 2000, 87.)

This kind of superstar media construction can be perceived as a *Simulacrum*, to use Jean Baudrillard's notion. It connects the Debordian "spectacle" and Walter Benjamin's ideas about the disappearance of "Aura". Simulated image is just a forged copy, existing only to deceive us. This is deeply rooted to cultural criticism, again directed against the western world and as its most extreme manifestation, The USA. Baudrillard sees the whole idea of "America" as a post-orgastic and tragic utopia. The tragedy follows from the fact that the utopia has indeed been realised – in "America" everything is always available. (Baudrillard 1991, *passim*.; Youngblood 1995, 225.) Stadium concert is like Baurillard's vision of sublime and passionate but at the same time superficial Las Vegas glowing powerfully in the night, just another version of the tragic utopia which portrays and reflects the vanity of the glittering western dreams.

The huge stadium scale events such as *Bridges To Babylon* are indeed some of the most significant versions of "Las Vegas on wheels". But this show by Fisher, Woodroffe, and The Stones somewhat highlight the ethical problems which are connected to the use of past styles and events. Historian Raphael Samuel claims that past has become a metafiction of the present, a *plaything*. As an example he talks about design, how the new items are made to look old to give them special appeal. But he also talks about literature and arts as fields for experimenting with such themes and narratives. Samuel is irritated by this. Playing with history – lighthearted use of historical periods, recreation or re-enactment of historical events, and historical theme parks with their "Disneyland mechanics" – insults him as a historian. He claims this kind of phenomena are "phantasmagoric", they deceive the people like a modern day Chimeira. (Samuel 1994, 429-430.)

## Conclusion

History is constantly defined and redefined in the various cultural products which negotiate with the past, be it an article, a TV-program, a film or indeed a rock concert. This kind of history culture and the narratives which concern the uses of history, is a battlefield. I tend to agree with Rafael Samuel that professional historians should be alarmed by such phenomena, and that we should furthermore offer a critical look and listen to such events. By analysing the events, and here I assume I disagree with Samuel, we can still learn more from the historical meta-fictions that are used to decorate modern spectacles. Not only about the periods used, but also about our own time and the people who shape it. Whether we like it or not, peoples perception of the past is mostly defined by popular cultural products, not the academia, and that is the real challenge.

Stadium spectacle is like a huge mirror which shows the excesses of our culture. Mark Fisher's work is based on the successful use of his surroundings, fast reacting to the sounds and popular cultural images of contemporary world. 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 clear vision on the timing of the events. Unlike conventional "static" architecture, his designs have to transform and alter to meet the narrative demands of each show. And sometimes he has to make an effort to revitalize some old English rock-aristocrats by giving them larger than life technological surroundings to play with. All this concerned Fisher's architecture is a great target for analysing the past-present relations.

The way in which The Rolling Stones and the organization behind the shows played with historical imagery in the *Bridges To Babylon* stadium shows is slightly superficial and all too predictable. A famously decadent rock band invoking the Kitch version of Babylonian vices – not the most original idea in the world perhaps. But when you are supposed to entertain 60,000 people I guess not everyone there will react like a professional historian certainly does. I assume The Rolling Stones had a good time on those massive and "decadent" stages, and that they laughed all the way to the bank.

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## Pictures

Mark Fisher Studios. <http://www.stufish.com/>.

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