

A DIZZY PERSPECTIVE

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In the performance *Hvorfor bli'r det nat, mor* ("Why does night come, Mother") by Hotel Pro Forma, the spectator's perspectivist view is the main actor. The eye is seldom allowed to rest in a sure sensing of all that is seen. The spectator's feelings are not agitated; neither can the pictures generated shock anyone. The spectator is dizzy because the condition of delineation itself is shaken. The performance sets the scene architecturally for the eye's unremitting oscillation between conceiving what is seen in a pictorial flat framework or in a spatial depth perspective.

Hotel Pro Forma builds on choreographic experience from the Theatre of Images (Billedstofteatret), led by Kirsten Dehlholm from 1977 –1985. With the addition of Tomas Lahoda's conceptual pictorial element, the performance becomes less expressive, but – especially as regards spatial scenography – much more audience-orientated and philosophically binding. The various visual experiments with perspectivist depth-surface effects have their scientific pendant in newer neurobiology and cognitive psychology; but on the artistic level it is a question of the eye's relationship to the seen.

One might think that the riddle of the eye's ability had been solved (or rather, had outplayed its role) as a result of the expansion of the visual technologies: film, photography and the electronic media; but it appears that art, on the contrary, is resuming its dialogue with philosophy and science on the relationship between sensing and consciousness. Since modern, avant-garde art has so markedly decentred the linear perspective and dissolved or distorted the idiom, attention is now concentrated on forms (images) and their minimal shifts. When a form's change in time (measured via movement) is investigated, it means, e.g. in Hotel Pro Forma's performance *Hvorfor bli'r det nat, mor*, that it is exposed to a perspectivist transformation. A sculpture is transformed into a surface or a space, or the reverse. When the linear perspective makes the surface dynamic by introducing a spatial depth-effect, the performance proves that a change in the spectator's position and sensation of weight can make the scenario asymmetric and unstable. The visual descriptive methods that invisibly and structurally have determined the development of the visual technologies become clearly visible.

The performance describes among other things the field of perception before representation depicts space and describes a fully conceived objectivity. Hotel Pro Forma carries out a visual experiment with the primary processes of sight, in that the world is deposited as an optical visual impression before objective knowledge (identification) registers. The performance shows how small shifts in perspective in the relationship between the visible and the seen produce optical illusions and dizziness in the spectator.

Zoom

Hvorfor bli'r det nat, mor was performed for the first time in Aarhus in the spring of 1989. The interior of the city hall was shaped by architects Arne Jacobsen and Erik Møller at the end of the 1930s. Here, we find a plain rectangular hall, whose walls are fitted with five balcony landings, connected by stairways, just as in a "classic" modern prison interior. The landings have identical railings and balustrades, which are

the hall's only decoration. The horizontal repetition paradoxically supports the vertical dimensions of the hall as soon as one or more persons are present in the room. Depending on where you are, you are forced to either look up or down to find out if you are alone or are being watched. The floor in this hall constituted the extended surface of the stage, which the spectator could view from the balcony height of choice.

One could move from balcony to balcony during the piece, but had to take care not to drop anything "down" on the stage. The perspective was rotated 180°, so that "over there on stage" became "down there", thus including the spectator's physical weight in the visual experience. This perspectivist effect, turning horizontal into vertical and up to down, delayed the motorically and topographically learned registration of the visual impression via the eye's lens and the pupil's motility. The spectator shifted inevitably between seeing the stage's "screen"/"canvas" as either flat or endlessly deep, and it was this uncertainty as to the dimensions of the seen that caused the eye's zoom-effect. One became unsure: was it a question of surfaces or sculptural forms?

The depth we see in the surface of a picture is shaped by the subjective distance we, as spectators, invariably assume in relation to what we see. When the performance makes the dimensions uncertain and fluid, the spectator's experience of distance in relation to the seen is automatically manipulated with. The eyes oscillate between conceiving of the stage as the entrance to an elongated, brightly white infinity of space, where the actors lie down or are seen as if floating in the air – and as a flat surface, with stage-settings and human figures in intimate interaction, like graphics on a computer screen.

2 + D

Hvorfor bli'r det nat, mor effectively mixed two-dimensional visual impressions with three-dimensional. The performance's main idea was to display things as if they were shaped just as the photograph and the eye depict them: as geometrical patterns, trapezes and parallelograms. The human body here became a part of a series of things; it shaped new choreographic patterns of images. The space between the primary processes of sight and the representation of the object's forms has a scientific name, given to it by neurobiology and cognitive psychology. We speak of the 2+D dimension, lying between the retina's two-dimensional registration of reality and the brain's three-dimensional correction. 2+D designates the last step in pure perception – an inner representation of the physical reality of recognition. The first organisation of primary visual processes provides information on the visible's surface: geometry, reflections, lighting conditions, perspective. It aims at shaping a more orderly representation of the visible surface's geometry, adapted to the viewer. But this is an order that only touches the visible in its capacity of being an image (that is, of something two-dimensional). The extra half dimension concerns a depth perceived by the viewer.

Structure and figure

Three independently conceived art forms, painting, music and poetry, functioned side by side inside the architectural- scenographic framework. First came the light, delineating an outstretched canvas - the painting. Then came the tones, doubling the chromatic variations, so that the melodic frame was erased in the variations of the voices. Next the words, chanting repetitive figures. Finally the human marionettes, moving in different patterns. The stage props consisted of bars, robes, nets, mirrors, and perspectivist masking frames, lengthening and shortening the field of vision of the spectator. Added to this was the use of neon light, which casts no shadows, and thus reduced the sculptural expression. The visual conditions of the hall composed the frame of the piece - or rather: the performance composed the hall's introvert "frame", its fractal variation in an endless choreographic redoubling. The performance's "shaft of vision" sharpened the visual distance, so the images of the figures were joined together in a common structure, in a thought point far beyond the screen - at once dizzily far and near as a zoom-in. It dealt with a scenography on the other side of the theatre's or the pantomime's narrative and symbolic safety net. One might perhaps call it the self-reflection of the pictorial medium.

Two details among the stage props, two chairs, each placed at an end of the extended stage, distilled the performance's idea of form and perception as genesis and *mise-en-abîme*. One of the chairs was blown up into a transparent form in the course of the performance. In the beginning it lay there as a flat spot of colour, and even though a few spectators could see its broken sculpturality, it was about 20 minutes before the surface took on a usable shape as a chair. The chair "takes shape" in time, which shows that the visual genesis - even in its most elementary forms- is processional. The other chair was shown as a shape, as a two-dimensional axiomatic depiction of a chair, shortening and lengthening the horizontal and vertical lines so that they did not meet in a central perspectivist point. This principle was maintained in the three-dimensional execution of a "real chair", where the plane dimension was retained in the sculpturality. The "flat" chair, existing in a real space, hindered the visual impression's normal correction from plane to depth. One was forced to ask oneself: was it a plane, or an object one could walk around? From directly above one could only see a displaced square - a parallelogram, although one expected to find a square. From the side or the front, one saw a distorted figure, where the chair seemed to "melt into" the floor.

The chairs acted as the junction of the piece, through which the disturbed relationship between depth and plane, between verticality and horizontality could be maintained. By shifts in perspective, the movable figures and props continuously shaped new images, revolving around the creation and disappearance of the forms. Following this required concentrated attention by the spectator. The shapes of the bodies formed diminutive patterns and positions in relation to one another. Certain parts were improvised, but they nevertheless built on choreographic rules: first one part of the body was moved, then two and three...

In the midst of these unknown shapings of figures, there was, however, something recognisable: halfway through the piece, the lights were dimmed, and the soprano, lying prone, sang in the dark the melodic and wistful children's song "Solen er så rød, mor" (The Sun is so red, Mother), in its entirety. After that the choreographic images were expanded, they were extended in time and became more complex, but

all the while without psychological or symbolical charging. Kirsten Dehlholm, in an interview after the performance, expressed it thus: " We do not aim at imageless space. We shape material images. They must be so luminously bright and pure that they are blinding. They can only become symbols by virtue of the signs the figures send forth while we watch them. We have, above all, avoided thinking symbolically and have excised any pantomimic or anecdotal effect. Feelings must only be found in the experience"

The symbols come into being in the act of sight, but in an idiom that renders the visual's own operation visible in fleeting glimpses. Suddenly, the principles of camera obscura were illustrated: in the centre there was a black square, whose corners were extended horizontally through black bars, where two bodies were placed, each on its side of the square, and as mirror images – one with its head up, the other head down – as reproductions of each other.

In *Hvorfor bli'r det nat, mor* the conditions for visual orientation are investigated in the field of tension between presence and absence – in form, time and space. Joseph Kosuth's conceptual chair is the model which, transferred to the data-technological images of fractals, shapes new forms instead of dissolving them in structures. Hotel Pro Forma's chairs illustrate an uncertainty in the relationship between two-dimensionality and three-dimensional spatial correction. It treats the inconclusiveness of the creation of form, where the perspectivist shifts generate a new kind of minimalism: the patterns not only illustrate structures – they let the structures themselves form figures. The corrective process of the eye is woven in a priori, and commented on in the choreographic shaping of an image in this graphic formation.

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