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Modular settings and ‘Creative Light’: The legacy of Adolphe Appia in the digital age

ABSTRACT

Adolphe Appia is one of the main protagonists, whose work – at the turn of the nineteenth/twentieth century – mark the beginning of modern scenography. This article discusses the main features and artistic strategies of his innovations, in particular: (a) modularity, i.e. the replacement of the co-ordinations of linear perspective by a modular concept of space (the use of practicables, staircases, screens and other moveable elements that became active parts of the performance) and (b) an innovative use of light, based on a new electrical lightening system. The principle of modular composition and – for the first time in theatre history – the use of light as a co-player and active agent in Appia’s scenography seem to precede what we today explore as characteristics of the digital. Contemporary scenographers still refer to Appia’s heritage. My example here is Operation: Orfeo by the Danish Artist Group Hotel Pro Forma. This production, as the article suggests, can be analysed as an artistic re-interpretation and re-envisioning of what Appia in his time had developed as a modular, pre-digital aesthetics.

KEYWORDS

digital performance,
 digital images
 media archaeology
 iconoclasm
 light; electric light,
 light as an
 artistic element
 material movability
 modularity
 scenic modules
 perception; shifts
 of visual
 perception
 scenic experience

- 1 Adolphe Appia: 'Monumentalité' (1922), cited in Beacham 1994: 286.
- 2 'Modulus' describes a unit in the subdivision of the whole; when measuring spaces and bodies in the search for the ideal proportions (e. g. anthropometry) the term gained significance in Antiquity. Modularisation is a cultural technique that became first relevant in architecture; a module, as an element, is part of a system that is based on specific rules. After the 'Digital Turn', modularization was applied to the non-linear structures of information architecture; also, the pixels of digital images and the 'windows' of visual interfaces relate to the modular concept (Shani 2006: 209).
- 3 'Performative Spaces', as opposed to architectural-geometric spaces – are 'events': they are transitory and fleeting and are created through process-oriented actions under the conditions of performance (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 75-137); the same can be said with regard to the visibility of these spaces (Bantinaki: 213-216).

'I shall bear in mind all the different possibilities for expansion and transformation that modern technology can supply . . .'

*Adolphe Appia*¹

Appia's legacy and the digital age: An introduction

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, there have been numerous inventions of technology and new media at almost regular intervals: cinema, radio, television and video, followed by the almost global triumphant success of the computer and the digital turn around the new millennium. One of the key innovations for the theatre has been that taking place with regard to lighting technology. Its significance for modern and contemporary theatre scenography cannot be overrated: over the centuries, stages were lit using candles, oil lamps or gaslights. Then, at the start of the twentieth century, electric lighting technologies and, in the second half of the century, the new electronic lighting systems have opened up possibilities that were not achievable before. With the new technologies, the aesthetics and artistic ways of expressing theatre – and especially the visual concepts of the theatre – have been changed radically.

The beginnings of modern theatre in its dialogue with new technology – hand-in-hand with the emergence of modern scenography – are prominently connected with the name of Adolphe Appia. The collaboration of this Swiss-born theatre reformer with his artistic partner Émile Jaques-Dalcroze at the festival theatre of Dresden-Hellerau (Festspielhaus Hellerau), only a few years before the First World War, signals a turning point in theatre history. The history of modern scenography begins with an iconoclasm and a change of how we see images. From this point on, the linear perspective of the traditional stage was rejected as an optical illusion – as a two-dimensional concept of visual representation, which does not support but hinder the living presence of the performer. Appia replaced the co-ordination of linear perspective with a modular concept of space (using practicables); in other words, he created dynamic spaces that could interact with the movements of the performer ('rhythmic space')². Another key innovation was his novel use of light, based on a new electric lighting system. This system, invented by Alexander von Salzmann, for the first time allowed an indirect (and steerable) lighting. Based on this innovation, and according to Appia's artistic demands, light could used in a 'creative' manner and became visible as an expressive element and a 'co-player'. The use of lighting, as it was rehearsed and presented in Hellerau, did not just light framed pictures but created complex and dynamic visual phenomena based on modular composition. This implied a new concept of visibility, an early shift from representational aesthetics to more performative concepts of art³. In the eyes of their contemporaries, the aesthetic effect must have been overwhelming. The two Hellerau performances of *Orpheus* (1912 and 1913, based on the opera by Christoph Willibald Gluck) caused a furore; in these performances, the space of the stage, as one observer reported, became 'something unnameable' (Buber 1970: 81). In front of the audience's eyes, the performers' bodies and the material elements onstage were transformed (and almost virtualized) by the atmospheres and movements of an ever-changing 'performing' light.

Appia's new formulation of theatre lighting has been highly influential, and is one that theatre artists such as Robert Wilson still draw on today (Beacham 2006: 333–67). Despite the lasting importance of Appia's ideas, the place that he worked at – the Festival Theatre in Hellerau – became more and more a ruin in the decades following this notable period in the history of

01 theatre. Only recently was the building renovated and, in 2006, it was reopened
 02 as a theatre where one can perform. Since then, it has hosted such artists
 03 and companies as the Forsythe Company, Anne Teresa de Keersmaker/Rosas,
 04 Heiner Goebbels and many others. In the recent theatre history of the
 05 Festspielhaus, one of the highlights, though, was perhaps the guest perform-
 06 ance by the Danish artistic group Hotel Pro Forma. The group performed
 07 their production *Operation: Orfeo* – a variation of the Orpheus theme – which
 08 premiered in 1993 and has been touring worldwide since. The distinctive fea-
 09 ture of this production is that – although many artists refer to Appia in one
 10 way or another – there is an almost explicit reference to his legacy. When the
 11 production that was worked out in 2007 was staged at Hellerau in 2009, the per-
 12 formance became a homage to Appia's and Dalcroze's legendary *Orpheus und*
 13 *Eurydike* production nearly a century before. Then, the rigorously poetic light
 14 images were presented for the first time to a fascinated audience and, with this,
 15 the mediatisation of the theatre was thereby promoted in a quite long-term and
 16 sustainable manner. Hotel Pro Forma's production, created many years later
 17 at the group's studio in Copenhagen, at this historical site also turned into a
 18 reflection – and revision – of the artistic legacy left behind by Appia.

19 This article uses the Hotel Pro Forma production *Operation: Orfeo* in order
 20 to pursue the matter of Appia's legacy. In this context, it is significant, in my
 21 opinion, to have a look at the hypothesis formulated by, amongst others, Steve
 22 Dixon that art in the age of electronic media does in no way operate without any
 23 historical prerequisites (Dixon 2007: 40). According to Dixon, the beginnings of
 24 a 'genealogy of digital performance', with reference to the Bauhaus and the
 25 Futurists as well as Appia, are located in the so-called historic avant-garde in
 26 Europe of the early twentieth century:

28 Digital performance is an extension of a continuing history of the adop-
 29 tion and adaptation of technologies to increase performance and visual
 30 art's aesthetic effect and sense of spectacle, its emotional and sensorial
 31 impact, its play of meanings and symbolic associations, and its intellectual
 32 power'

33 (Dixon 2007: 40).

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 36 As a consequence, in order to discuss theatre practice in the (supposedly global)
 37 media age, it is not only necessary to have an interest in the new, but also
 38 in the 'media archaeology', within which one can research and clearly label
 39 which technical structures and aesthetic figurations from earlier times our digi-
 40 tal culture has already taken on and updated under new conditions. With
 41 regard to such 'media archaeology', this article aims to do two things: Firstly, I
 42 briefly summarize the most important formal solutions with which Appia in his
 43 day revolutionized scenography. These are (1) the modularization of the stage
 44 regarding all material elements of the production, and (2) the introduction of
 45 'creative' light. In the second part of the article, I argue that these principles
 46 are also constitutive in Hotel Pro Forma's *Operation: Orfeo*. Still, the production
 47 is not so much an Appia reminiscence as a critical reinterpretation and artistic
 48 commentary on his legacy with the experiences of our current media culture.
 49 What, then, are the prerequisites that Appia created in relation to the ever
 50 increasing mediatisation of theatre in the twentieth century, and what value
 51 do his – at the time – innovative reforms and visions have today, in the theatre
 52 of the digital age?

A BRIEF LOOK AT HISTORY: MODERN SCENOGRAPHY AND PRE-DIGITAL PERFORMANCE

Looking back at the performance of *Orpheus* in the summer of 1913, the American author Upton Sinclair remembered many years later how deeply impressed he was by this production, during which – within the interplay of the flowing, atmospheric light of the room and the rhythmic movements of the protagonists – ‘they wove patterns as intricate as the music (. . .). Beautiful designs were brought before the eye’ (Sinclair 1940: 5). Numerous further statements by members of the audience – contained in letters, essays and critical reviews – underscored that Appia’s productions – which he worked on together with the rhythm and movement teacher Jaques-Dalcroze as well as students of his institute – were perceived as being a new form of theatre, evoking completely new experiences for the senses. ‘It is an amalgamation of music, of the plastic senses and light as I have never experienced it before’, wrote Paul Claudel in a letter to a friend living in France, ‘the painted canvases, the props, all of the laughable weight of the old theatre are swept away’ (in Beacham 2006: 152).

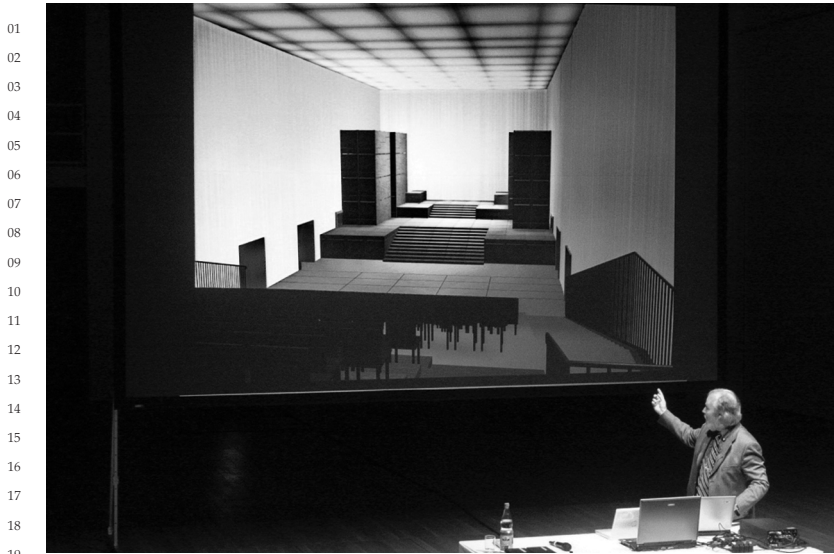
Adolphe Appia’s reforms were directed first against the ‘visual fraud’ of the perspective illusion of the scenic stage with its painted decoration. In his theatre experiments as well as in a series of theoretical theatre-related essays, he was looking for new solutions, and, we might say that his work started with an iconoclasm. By rejecting the traditional proscenium stage theatre with its rake and portal frame, he aimed at reorganizing not only the acoustic, but also – and particularly – the visual elements of theatre.

‘A living space for living beings’: Visual concept and scenic principles

In his programme of reform, Appia insisted that a new concept of space was necessary for the theatre. In critical examinations of the static, two-dimensional representation of the traditional proscenium stage, he comprehended space as being – in line with the scientific insights of his time – a multidimensional and dynamic phenomenon and not as ‘given’. With this in mind, Appia strived for ‘a living space for living beings’ and dreamed that its ‘material movability’ could become as dynamic – ‘fluid’, as he called it – as the score of a musical composition. All of this, for Appia, is possible,

only through the renunciation of the so-called scenic delusion (. . .). As the borders of the images and paintings do not have to conform to their demands anymore, they can now do justice to demands of a much higher level (. . .) and, if necessary, can develop a material mobility which can keep up with the score. (in Beacham 2006: 96)

The key to this concept, as he clearly pointed out in his essay ‘Die Musik und die Inszenierung’ (1899 – ‘Music and Production’), are (1) rhythmicity, i.e. music and rhythm are elevated to a ‘principle of order’ (ibid., 71), that organizes all participating elements and actors within the spatial and temporal process, and (2) the light that Appia explicitly elevated to an ‘element of expression’ (ibid., 97); systematically he analysed its ‘shaping power’ that dynamizes the space and the staging process. In tune with this new understanding, Appia designed theatre not as a representation but rather as a process. The ground-breaking development for the theatre was therefore a performative



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4 'In order to use digital technology to evoke some suggestion of 'Living Light', we designed a virtual lighting interface which enabled us to create and manipulate the lighting of the virtual Hellerau hall and stage sets in a manner based directly upon the technical capacities and quality of the original lighting rig', Beacham: 'Thinking with Things, Speaking with Spaces: The Enduring Legacy and Lessons of Appia's 'Expressive Elements' in the Digital Age', in: Brandstetter, Wiens (in press).

20 *Figure 1: Richard Beacham presenting his 3-D reconstruction of the Festival*
21 *Theatre's Great Hall at the Conference 'Theatre without Vanishing Points', Hellerau*
22 *(2007). © Gabriele Gorgas, Dresden.*

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aesthetic that combined mobile stage elements, spatially rhythmic movement and, above all, an innovative and deliberate design-oriented use of light in 'scenic modules'.

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Light in performance: Hellerau innovations

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When the building of the Festspielhaus Hellerau was designed in the early 1910s (by Heinrich Tessenow), Adolphe Appia was closely involved. The most significant innovation of the festival theatre was perhaps the unprecedented lighting system that Alexander von Salzmann developed for the large hall (Heinold and Großer 2007: 281–84). This installation, which has been described numerous times in research undertaken (and recently virtually reconstructed by the British Appia specialist Richard Beacham at the Visualization Lab of King's College London, see Figure 1), allowed, for the first time, an indirect (and at the same time ingeniously steerable) lighting. On the ceiling of the hall and the walls there were thousands of light bulbs and spotlights hidden behind large translucent white canvases; as von Salzmann noted, the hall was transformed into a single huge 'body of lighting' (Heinold and Großer 2007: 283)⁴.

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It was the German-Jewish philosopher Martin Buber who, in an article in a Hellerau programme booklet, described the new light and its effects on space, its materiality and atmosphere as follows:

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This space [the Hellerau Great Hall] is technically constructed out of two elements: the substrata underlying the transformations and the changing agent. The substrata are a few simple grey planes and paths of material that border and articulate the stage. The agent is the diffuse light that does not stream forth sporadically, like the usual spot-light, but spreads uniformly over great surfaces through great periods of time.

5 Martin Buber: 'Das Raumproblem der Bühne' (1913); engl. transl. cited from Friedmann (1970), 81f. For an insightful discussion and historic contextualization of Buber's article see Freddie Rokem's upcoming article: 'Continuity and Disruption: Martin Buber, Hellerau and "The Space Problem in the Theatre"', in: Brandstetter, Wiens (in press).

6 For Hotel Pro Forma's work, the space (not a dramatic text) is always the starting point: 'The spaces exist. Or we find them. Or they are given to us. Here the performances begins, or the idea of performance', Kirsten Dehlholm, cited from Theil et al. (2003), 11.

Through the variability of the lighting, the substrata can be conducted through all grades of materiality. The material can appear now soft, now hard, now flat, now round. With its change changes the image of the space that alters the light from a narrow one to one that opens into the infinite, from one clear in all points to one mysteriously vibrating, from one signifying only itself to one intimating the unnameable. But it is itself something unnameable, this space. It is shaped by a principle whose name we do not yet know and of which we know only a symbol drawn from the senses: the creative light.⁵

All through Appia's own writings, one can see that for him light – specifically the new possibilities that electric light allowed – was not just something purely technical but rather, and foremost, a key function in an aesthetic manner. Almost systematically, he explored the performativity of light: 'The light must be just as active as the actors are' (in Lazarowiz and Balme 1991: 439). In his theoretical drafts, Appia differentiated between two types of light: the 'distributed light' that brings about a general brightness and the – much more important than this – 'creating light' (in Beacham 2006: 98). Appia assigns light, as already mentioned, a 'capability of showing expression'. So that it can unfold its potential, even though invisible, it needs to have 'obstacles': not painted canvases and screens, but rather bodies and objects, in the sense of building blocks, moveable modules, with which the light can write at the same time – *Sceno-Graphy*. The result is a modular space, which becomes visible within the waves of the electric light. During Appia's and Jaques-Dalcroze's milestone productions of *Orpheus* (1912/13) these spaces emerged as luminous events, or – to use the sorts of terms adopted in theatre studies – 'performative spaces' (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 24ff.).

Hotel Pro Forma: staging Orpheus in the digital age

'Appia gave me the courage to do what I have done. For all of us in the modern theatre he is very important', Robert Wilson once said (Linders 2006: 7) – and this statement may be just as true for Hotel Pro Forma. The artistic director of this group, Kirsten Dehlholm, was quite bluntly coined the 'Danish twin' of the renowned American director, stage and light artist during the early phase of the group at the start of the 1980s (Theil et al. 2003: 10). In contrast to Wilson, though, Dehlholm always looks for new and different venues and places of performance, which can be theatre spaces, museums, factory buildings or other public spaces of all kinds. 'Hotel Pro Forma', the name of the artistic group, stands for a theatre that defines itself as 'nomadic' – that means it is always on the move, even when it comes to its forms and means. This work corresponds to basic scenographic research; it explores – almost in a systematic manner – how spatial image questions the possibilities and potentials that open up under the conditions of electronic media, digitization and globally connected communication.⁶ In a few projects, Hotel Pro Forma goes above and beyond the European scenographic tradition in that it delves into the comprehension of images and space of other cultures (for example, Asian or Arabic understandings). The motto 'Performance as investigation of the world' is hereby programmatic (Dehlholm in Theil et al. 2003: 99–171). *Operation : Orfeo*, on the other hand, is one of the few works of the group that has been created for the traditional proscenium theatre, or – as Kirsten Dehlholm has formulated it – for the 'enemy camp' (Dehlholm in Theil et al. 2003: 22). It

01 was here – the premiere was in the Aarhus Concert Hall in 1993 – of all places
 02 that Dehlholm staged a reflection on Appia. Not that a revival of the traditional
 03 stage setting and the 'scenic illusion' was intended, and the production also did
 04 not end up providing a simple tribute to the spaces of Appia. What resulted, as
 05 I want to point out in the following, was something more – the third aspect so
 06 to speak: a production that confronts theatre, in revision of both traditional as
 07 well as modern scenography, with the new visual cultures of the digital image
 08 and electronic communication.

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 11 **'Operation: Orfeo' – a modular composition**

12 *Operation: Orfeo*, following of the Appia production, adopts the Orpheus theme:
 13 the love for a dead person, the path into the underworld. However, as one can
 14 already deduce from the title, the theatregoer should not expect a conventional
 15 complete staging of the opera by Monteverdi or Gluck. Dehlholm's Orpheus
 16 variation – conceptually seen a 'Visual Opera in Three Movements' – can be
 17 best described form-wise as a visual and musical mesh. This special construc-
 18 tion as a 'meshwork' pertains firstly to the production's musical aspect: The
 19 predominant part of the composition – presented by a vocal ensemble and a
 20 soloist as a capella singing throughout – encompasses in an alternating manner
 21 composition pieces by John Cage and Bo Holten with a libretto by Ib Michael.
 22 Only at one point of the entire eighty minutes of this theatre evening can one
 23 hear an aria from Gluck's *Orpheus and Eurydice*. Most notable, though, is what
 24 the visual aspect of the production presents itself as during the performance: as
 25 a flowing, a constantly transforming mesh. The stage, designed by Maja Ravn
 26 and with Jesper Kongshaug's elaborate light concept, shows clear references
 27 to Appia's stairs and abstract basic forms as well as the even more significant
 28 'creative light' for the modulation of plasticity and atmosphere. With Appia's
 29 production, though, the scenic event was the dance of the bodies and the
 30 dynamic elements that took place within open space that was only framed by
 31 the boundaries of the stage itself and 'through the way in which it takes place'
 32 (Buber). In contrast, Dehlholm, Ravn and Kongshaug, in their version, place it
 33 decidedly on a single visual plane: *Operation: Orfeo*, composed of 'scenic mod-
 34 ules', takes place on a stage that reminds one of a flat, upfront computer screen:
 35 This screen becomes the operating table and a precarious system where figures
 36 and things appear, disappear, come to life but stay out of reach: Eurydice's evo-
 37 cation, so to speak, takes place in front of a computer. The surface of the screen
 38 turns into the space of a passage, the supposed screen becomes a threshold on
 39 which the story of Orpheus and Eurydice takes place in an ever-changing flow
 40 of images. The images that appear and disappear remind one of low-resolution
 41 digital images. In fact, they are composed of physical materials that, through
 42 the light, obtain an almost virtual quality. A moving mosaic is what this nar-
 43 rative technique could be called – presenting a modularized story, and what is
 44 told is 'not a story, but precisely a movement' (Dehlholm in Theil 2003: 118).

45 The movement, at just that threshold between life and death, between vis-
 46 ibility and invisibility, takes place in three phases: (1) 'Darkness – Descent',
 47 the descent into the underworld; (2) 'Clair Obscur – Ascent', return journey
 48 through the land of shadow; and (3) 'Light – Remembrance', awareness of the
 49 loss and the setting in of remembering. In the first phase, at the beginning of
 50 Orpheus' search, the passage space in which the action starts is framed by a
 51 brightly lit frame (Figure 2). The choir, consisting of thirteen singers as well as
 52 a dancer, starts to group itself in changing formations on the steeply inclined



Figure 2: *Hotel Pro Forma*, scene from *Operation: Orfeo*. © *Hotel Pro Forma*, Copenhagen/Photographer: Roberto Fortuna, Reprint by kind permission.

white steps that go up and up; seemingly these steps lead into eternity. All of the figures wear dark blue uniform costumes without any gender features. Even by the way in which they act and perform, one cannot tell the choir and the dancer apart. Each and every one is Orpheus and also Eurydice. Their movements are extremely formalized – the changing constellations and placements are carried into one’s view as, so to speak, graphisms, as patterns and pictorial signs that in the very next moment are covered by others. Sometimes, in an almost camouflage-like manner, figures seem to nearly disappear before they reappear and, differently again, become visible.

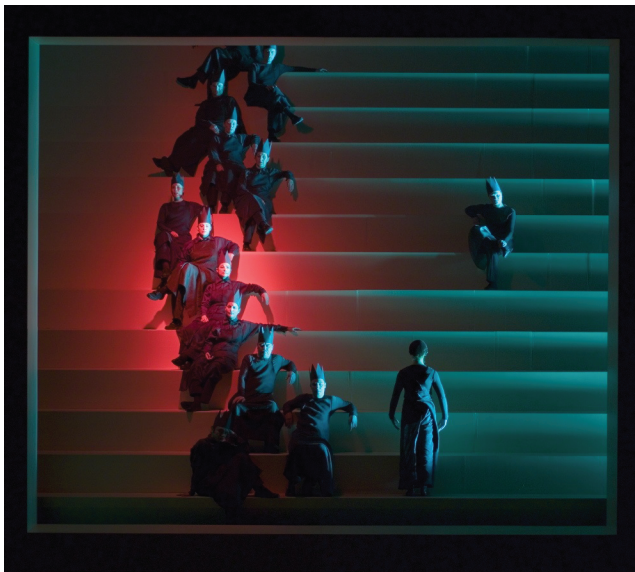
The light takes on a variety of functions here. As already mentioned, it marks the ‘screen’ at the very start by using a lit frame – a demarcation that soon fades after the opening scenes. The picture is opened up on the sides and it now becomes a type of ‘screen’ on which the interplay between the figures, things, light movements and the view of the audience – the image as a lit-up, moving process, now appears. In addition, the performativity of the light then allows the now appearing visual ‘meshwork’ to be modelled – almost like a moving mosaic – and in this way it is kept flowing (Figure 3). Thereby light brings forth, with the help of its spectrum of colours, a variety of atmospheres and emotional values (Figure 4). Changing intensities of light and dark also evoke distances and shadowy depth effects. In one moment, the image can appear to be spatially open, that there is never-ending space to the rear, and, in the next moment, it is flat and two-dimensional: an optical trick (Figure 5). It is a fragile game between visibility and invisibility, presence and absence, with which ‘Orfeo’ appears on this seemingly opaque surface. As already mentioned, a motion, not a story, is recounted. In addition, this flow of visual elements, gestures, light and sounds remains deliberately manifold as these are coordinated but not based on each other: ‘coordinated but not synchronized’

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21 *Figure 3: Scenes from Operation: Orfeo. © Hotel Pro Forma,*
22 *Copenhagen/Photographer: Roberto Fortuna, Reprint by kind permission.*

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44 *Figure 4: Scenes from Operation: Orfeo. © Hotel Pro Forma,*
45 *Copenhagen/Photographer: Roberto Fortuna, Reprint by kind permission.*

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48 as Dehlholm remarks (ibid.). In summary, one can say that Dehlholm, Ravn
49 and Kongshaug evoke this 'digital' effect through theatric means – and with
50 the described usage of light – and a nearly virtual space is thereby created. The
51 materiality of the theatric modules is almost completely transcended so that
52 the images which appear seem to be as virtual as a computer image on which

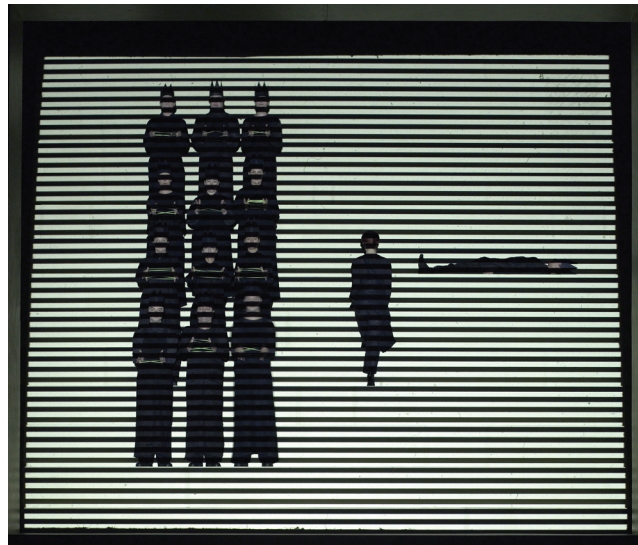


Figure 5: *Scenes from Operation: Orfeo*. © Hotel Pro Forma, Copenhagen/Photographer: Roberto Fortuna, Reprint by kind permission.

Eurydike, and her husband Orpheus, appear and disappear in constant motion. In a very abstract manner, the story of constant searching, finding but also loss is being told through these image sequences.

Appearing/disappearing: the stage as a space of passage

... She is just a drowned dancer/among many who have forsaken choreography/and have entered into silence where the sunlight sails/on a film of mineral salts

(...)

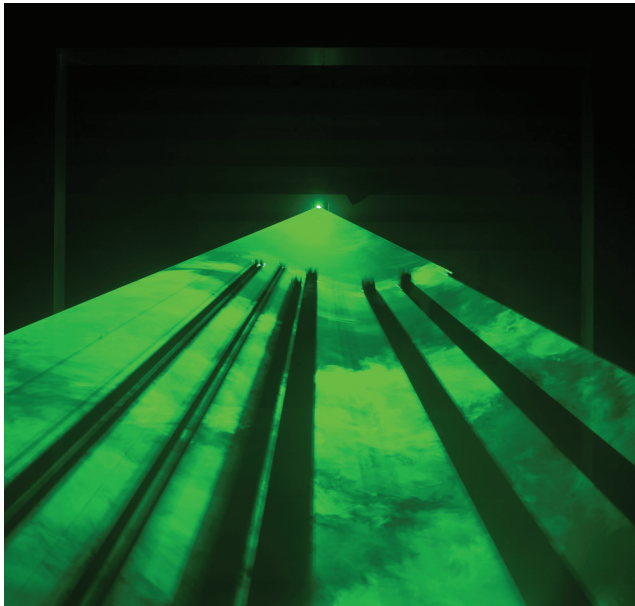
You can see her face/submerged in the mirror's silvering once more the drowned one turns away from you sinking to a point of darkness...'

(Michael 1993)

Hotel Pro Forma's visual narration comes close to an evocation – to be more exact: an evocation of something or someone who is absent, the dead Eurydice, not only through music, but primarily through the desire to see, through viewing (an act that the Orpheus saga actually forbids). Towards the finale of the production, this whole process culminates in the experience of image loss: here, there is a moment when the images leave the screen, when suddenly a green laser light is beamed into the last rows of the audience area, encompassing those seated and immersing them under an undulant surface of light (Figure 6). Then everything goes dark; what remains after this moment is only fog; what is left is only memory.

'(...) eternal this die is/heavy with eyes and dumbness/your body a stone/thrown after her image/as the circles reach the outermost ring', goes the libretto (Michael 1993). In fact, it is not only the light – in its playfulness with

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22 *Figure 6: Operation: Orfeo, final scene. © Hotel Pro Forma,*
23 *Copenhagen/Photographer: Roberto Fortuna, Reprint by kind permission.*

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the physical elements – that brings forth the images in wave motion. It is also the perception of the onlooker, their desire to view and the views that they emanate, that they 'throw out', that brings these forth. They are as images that appear as silhouettes on a glittery surface 'where the sunlight sails/on a film of mineral salts'. One could say that the images have, to a large extent, lost their portrayal as well as their referential functions: 'the work has no meaning, without that necessarily implying that the work is meaningless', wrote the theatre critic Per Theil about *Operation: Orfeo* (Theil et al. 2003: 23). However, this much the work does express: light and our active perception are necessary so that images are remembered and also appear as such. In addition – and this carries the production to its extremes – the living image in the theatre is, as Auslander (1999) points out in his contribution to the intensive debate on the differentiation between 'live performance' and mediatised phenomena, not only 'live' but always already mediatised within the play of the life-giving 'creative light'. This image culture that culminates with the virtual, completely disembodied images of digital media contains not only life but also – as told in a different manner by the story of Orpheus – always moments of uncatchability and loss.

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SCENOGRAPHY AND THE PERFORMATIVITY OF LIGHT – CLOSING REMARKS

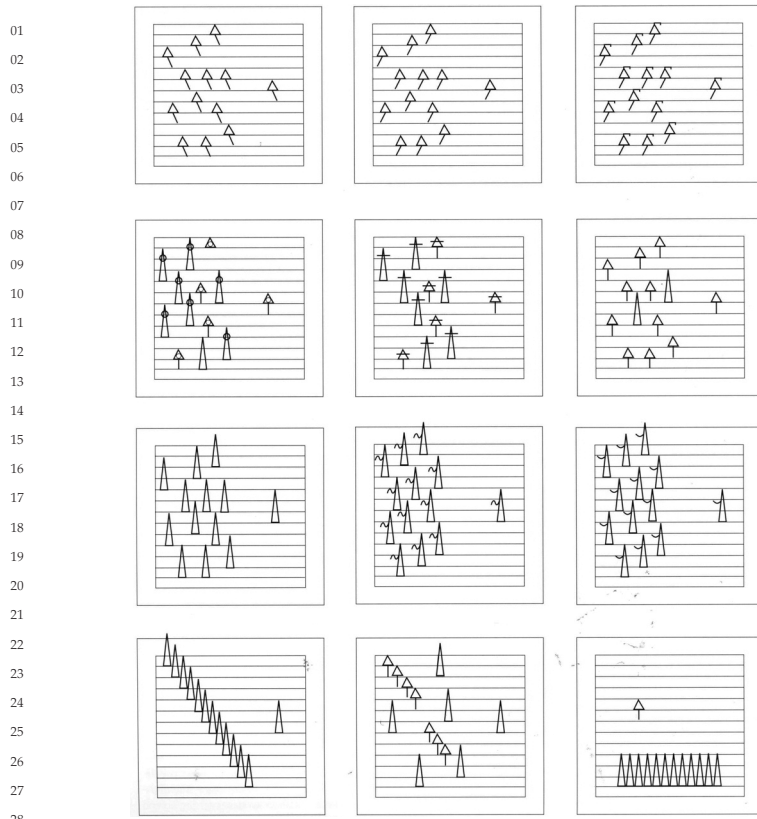
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For Appia, as we have seen in the first part of this article, 'creative light', in his sense, was an artistic means to create 'a living space for living beings'. He enthusiastically celebrated the new potentials and possibilities of technical innovation during his day and age – electric light. Hotel Pro Forma, as discussed

in the second part of the article, proposes something different: that the interpretation of light – the lights of the electronic and digital media – has become a phenomenon that is much more ambivalent. Whereas the moving images of the Hellerau *Orpheus* celebrated ‘living art’, the visual concept of Hotel Pro Forma’s *Operation : Orfeo* seems much more to express a conflict by shifting between ‘live’ and ‘mediatised’, between life and death, which – according to their interpretation – are mutually dependant.

As the analyses in this article have furthermore shown, in both examples, there is a certain tendency to delegate the responsibility of what he/she sees to the viewer. Appia, in the time he was actively working, already proclaimed the ‘liberation’ of the audience from passive viewing and called for ‘a new kind of seeing’ and for active participation: ‘The staging as such is nothing. It is the audience that creates it and thereby stimulates and determines the dramatic production’ (in Beacham 2006: 324). In the age of digital media, active participation (or even ‘interactivity’) has become a well-established new paradigm. The notions of active participation and interactivity, with regard to theatre, are widely debated (Dixon 2007: 559ff.). Without a doubt, though, the experiences that artists and audiences make with the computer or with digital media on an everyday level also forms their behaviour and visual perception within the context of theatre. Whether we want to or not, we make many decisions and choices every day in front of the computer and we often forget that in the electronic light one can only see that what can be digitized and saved. Before images, text and signs appear on a surface, numerous operations must be made: We choose and select which images or content should be called up (and so remembered and kept alive in the virtual sense). Digital images, as they have become omnipresent in our culture and are globally disseminated at this stage, change our perception and view on things – and possibly, also our way of thinking – this also being a topic in *Operation: Orfeo*. Even if we have become used to it, there is (still) a certain unease as these images are immaterial and adhere to codes. The digital image is troublesome because it ‘does not represent the real, it simulates it. It does not leave any visual traces, one cannot view a recording of something (...), rather it produces a logical, mathematical model that does to a lesser extent describe the phenomenal side of reality but rather the laws that it is subject to’ (Edmond Couchot in Schwarz 2004: 168). Certainly not all phenomena of human life – and definitely not dying and death – adhere to this logic: The dancing atoms and components that make up life cannot be translated into digital codes and control panels.

Hotel Pro Forma’s production *Operation: Orfeo*, as we have seen, uses the theatre to highlight the ambiguities of digital images. In addition to this, it also seems to reflect the historical prerequisites of the digital in a media archaeological manner by referring to the ‘discovery’ of the cultural technique of modularization. In Appia’s time, in the wake of the new scientific insights and findings, and before the gruesome and disillusioning experiences that will be made in both world wars, there was hope for progress, democratization and social change, which was celebrated in the glow of the just invented electric light. Appia’s concept must be seen in this context. Different to this are the scenographic works of Hotel Pro Forma almost a hundred years later: the modular principle, which in the meantime became fully implemented in many artistic and social fields, is reflected in *Operation: Orfeo* – as an ambiguous principle, that, on the one hand, organizes the ‘living space for living beings’ and, on the other, makes them calculable (Figure 7). In the electronic light of a computerized world – as Hotel Pro Forma has shown us – the shortcomings of this



29 *Figure 7: Operation: Orfeo, control panel (excerpt). © Hotel Pro Forma,*
 30 *Copenhagen/Photographer: Roberto Fortuna, Reprint by kind permission.*

33 principle can also be experienced, at the very end of the production – at that
 34 moment when Eurydice's image is lost and the 'operating table' implodes so
 35 that only fog remains. Appia's legacy, with all that he achieved for our contem-
 36 porary theatre, also – and with this I will conclude – at the same time contains
 37 ambivalent aspects whose problems are only becoming clear and recognizable
 38 in the current digital culture.

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