



Operation: Orfeo 1993 (Roberto Fortuna)

Operation:Orfeo - its Act of Enunciation

By Morten Kyndrup

Operation:Orfeo is a theatrical spectacle of a very particular nature, lasting some 80 minutes. It unfolds in a separate scenic space mounted on the stage. This scenic space is comprised of a thick picture frame surrounding a square space, measuring 6x6 meters, inside which a staircase is mounted, across the entire width of the square, from top to bottom. The stairs are lit in such a way that the space does not unfold unambiguously both horizontally and vertically (as staircases usually do). It primarily appears vertical, as a surface provided with a horizontal grid, fastened in a picture frame. In this room, on these stairs, a total of 14 players sing in different positions all through the performance. This means that during the first twenty minutes (the first of the three parts of the performance), the image space is simply dark, that is we cannot see, only hear the actors. From the staircase, the performers sing partly solo, partly as a choir throughout the performance. In effect, playback is also included, i.e. recorded sound, which is woven into the live singing, but at any rate it is intentionally hidden from the audience. The music is designed to be perceived as presented live on stage. The composer is Bo Holten, who also conducted several of the first many performances, but the music also contains pieces composed by John Cage, and von Gluck's famous Orpheus aria *Che farò senza Euridice* is contained in its entirety, approx. from the onset of the last of the three parts of the play. Furthermore, lyrics are performed, originally written by the Danish author, Ib Michael, parts of them for this occasion, parts of them not.

The lyrics play no particular semantic role in the sense that generally they cannot be heard, much less understood, in detail. Nor are the lyrics, in themselves, particularly coherent, so it would not have made much difference, if they had been audible.

The 14 performers, who are dressed in robes similar to monks' habits, then carry through the performance by way of movements on the stairs/in the picture frame.

Most of the time, there is a certain separation between the performers: A chorus of twelve, a soloist and a dancer. Through their location in the picture frame, they present a series of images, each of which constitutes a pattern, horizontal, vertical or diagonal lines. Whether the performers stand, sit, face sideways to the audience, lie, and although one obviously sees them move every now and then, their movements mostly appear as switching between frozen tableaux, i.e. not like moving pictures. All in all, nothing much happens throughout the performance; yet a whole lot does happen. But what does happen has its own, very slowly pace. During the first movement, we only meet the soundtrack and a dark crater inside the dimly lit frame. For a couple of minutes, towards the end, the presentation of images is replaced by a laser light to create the illusion of a green undulating fabric that folds out of the picture frame, facing the audience. But in the last tableau, we are left with the image again.

On an overall level, a first descent into hell and since a (re)ascent according to the legend is vaguely suggested. A lying person, separated from the other performers, painfully slowly rolls down the staircase, towards the bottom, from which he/she later ascends towards one of the top steps. But, as mentioned, the cadence of action is very slow, and no dramatic tensions and expansions appear, which could provide a sensuous plot, just like the lyrics are not particularly audible or otherwise offer any plot. The music is also more repetitive in its form rather than a linear evolving form. On the whole, the performance thus appears as a willful stasis, a cubicle with its own time and its own cadence, where something is outplayed that, in principle, is not consistent with the rest of the world. Not that nothing happens: Colours and lighting change dramatically throughout the composition and in long sequences, the music is dramatic in its expression with mighty tone leaps and insistent discords. But everything remains in its own calm, remains literally within the frame, remains a colossal, monstrous, sensory composite and complex *image*. Well, quite literally an image of six by six meters, very much alive and completely stationary, at the same time. But the questions of course are: *Whose* image? And *what* image? Who is actually addressing us in this way, and how? What does it want to tell us, and who is telling us this?

First and foremost, the enunciation of *Operation: Orfeo* is complex and multi-layered as in all other kinds of theater, but the complexity is more radical in this case, since the single elements and levels of enunciation are not even mutually pulling in one and the same semantic direction on the detail level. In addition, *Operation: Orfeo* is also medially confronting traditional genre performances. One level of enunciation is the music. It has in itself a composite character. In an overall sense, it is composed by Bo Holten, but there are a number of selected fragments of musical pieces, composed by John Cage and in addition, the embedded piece of von Gluck, as mentioned before. The music thus overall signed “Bo Holten” as the enunciator (except for the Gluck piece), appears as contemporary art music with everything that this involves of ruptures, discords and violent tone jumps. Against this is the libretto by Ib Michael. Even though it is quite hard to hear, (the libretto can be read above the frame) the text appears with a completely different semantic character than the music. The lyrics are almost pompous and pathos filled, marked by a recurrent lyrical ‘you’. The form is almost a reminiscence of what was once referred to as crack prose. But in the final version of the performance (Holten 2010) the lyrics are allegedly not solely signed “Ib Michael”. By request, Ib Michael drafted the lyrics for the libretto, which Kirsten Dehlholm edited to include another one of Ib Michael’s existing poems, *Sky Burial*. Consequently, she took on the responsibility of interweaving the two text bodies in a form of unmarked montage so each line indeed offers significance, but in a way so that a continuous course between the lines/line blocks, and in the text as a whole, is not shown. Accordingly, in terms of the sender of the text, “Ib Michael” is twice part of an intertwined text result, signed by “Kirsten Dehlholm”. On the next level of enunciation, we then have the actors/singers/dancers, who act out the music and the text (including the pre-recorded parts of the music). The players are of course bound by the textual and musical script, but they also improvise. The choreography, in which they perform, is a further part of the enunciation structure and this includes, last but not least, the unusual construction of the scenography. With its large frame and the mentioned play taking place on a two-dimensional, vertical picture surface, it conveys the message that this is also an image. The distinct character of the image in a way naturally unifies the disparate levels of enunciation and the sending bodies in one gesture of significance;

but only just as a framing of determination ‘on the outside’ of something, which on the inside, is swarming different, bordering on the contradictory.

Something similar can be observed on the level of mediality. *Operation:Orfeo* presents itself as belonging to the genre of opera, i.e. something which is scenically conveyed. The character and status of the text, the character of the music, the absence of plot-driven systems of progression and of dramatic tensioning altogether – all of this, however, positions the work itself in the periphery of normal genres. Add to this the mentioned character of image that contradicts the usual genre expectations for an opera.

The stage space is tendentiously reduced to a surface inside a giant frame. The image certainly consists of different images of motion pictures, one could say, but conveyed in such a slow cadence that this large number of single ‘stills’ appear as the true visual bearers of meaning. Consequently, a distinct triangular contrast exists between: (1) the fundamental three-dimensionality of the scenic expression in a ‘community’ space with the audience, (2) the general sequential composition of the musical expression and (3) the emphasis of visual expression of single images presenting themselves as (approximately) two-dimensional. *Operation:Orfeo* wants to be ‘opera’, but is basically not an opera. And wants to be a ‘picture’, but is basically not that either. One could say that the work presents itself, as if it were a picture (or an opera, respectively) – knowing that it is not. But this ‘as-if’ in the case of *Operation:Orfeo* definitely does not appear as a weakness, nor as a semantic spread of movement in the sense of something which is falling apart or pointing in very different directions. No, just as the levels of complexity in the enunciation are contained by the ostensive gesture of the frame, the medial composite character appears as tightly concentrated and accurate; as completely determined in its indeterminacy. No kind of either revocation, relativism or irony/parabasis is suggested here. The theatrical expression appears – in all its complex, almost monstrously comprehensive complexity – as an action of significance, entirely serious. No one laughs, either on stage or amongst the audience. Neither does the scenic expression ‘point back’ to any sort of privileged referent or reason. The Orpheus myth seems almost just like a pretext or perhaps as a stochastically chosen base. *Operation:Orfeo* ‘represents’ no myth, as if it would renegotiate, reinterpret or just be in a commenting dialogue with the myth. *Operation:Orfeo* is an action of significance, a gesture which above all is pointing to itself, to what it daringly does, rebelliously – without a shaking hand or without at all affecting its many different levels of enunciation involved.

Consequently, *Operation:Orfeo* has positioned itself in a thought-provoking and a non-obvious way as a modernist work après la lettre, a characterization generally applicable to most of the artistic works signed by Kirsten Delholm, back from *Billedstofteater* (1977-1985). The work appears with a timbre of something which is both outdated and oriented towards genesis. It acknowledges being (only) a portion of the space. But a non-negotiable portion, for it is itself, it unfolds and constitutes, so to speak, its own territory, in which the work actually barely “is” or “exists” as a finite entity, but rather is about to come into existence as an image: speaking, singing, dancing. Therefore, time and place of *Operation:Orfeo* represent a chronically displaced otherness, both when looking down towards that of which it is rounded – and when looking up towards that which it is about to become, right there, in front of our eyes.