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‘Vacker som *faux*’ –The Drottningholm Theatre Aesthetic

Snart denna lund förbyts, et prägtigt fält man ser;
De tjocka granars hvalf i jorden sjunka ner;
Det mörka berget syns uti en rök försvinna,
Och kärleks gudens thron uti des rum uprinna.

(Gustaf Philip Creutz, *Atis och Camilla*)¹

Du fasar, ler och gläds och brinner,
Och på Theatern skyndar opp –
Der du, bedragen i dit hopp,
För alt ett måladt papper finner.

(Johan Henric Kellgren, “Våra villor”)²

At the time of the building of the Drottningholm Court Theatre – designed by Carl Fredrik Adelcrantz and essentially finished in 1766, but completed by Louis Jean Desprez’ “Déjeuner salon” on the west side in 1791 – the title of this essay might have been puzzling to a Swedish reader, for two reasons. First, through its choice of languages and the italicized *faux*, it implies a Swede who also speaks – or at least reads – English as well as French, but from whose Swedish vantage point French, not English, is considered a ‘foreign’ language. But 18th century edu-

¹ Beijer, *Slottsteatrarna på Drottningholm och Gripsholm*, 1937, p. 152.

² Beijer, p. 154.

cated Swedes (except for sea captains on the west coast) did not speak English, and preferred French over Swedish. So not only would the overall use of English have struck a crude mercantile note, reverse typography in the main title might have been more appropriate – i.e., “*Vacker som faux*” – treating the Swedish instead of the French as the ‘foreign’ tongue. *Årans och hjältarnas språk* was not yet *comme il faut* in Sweden, in spite of royal pressure to the contrary.

No matter. The pun *faux/fä* would presumably not have escaped our hypothetical 18th century Swedish reader. Today it is a triple pun, if we include the current use of the term *faux* in the international world of fashion and interior decoration, in reports about fake fur from the runways of *haute couture* and a plethora of do-it-yourself books on “country” furniture.

The second reason the title would have been puzzling to an 18th century Swede lies in its implied claim, the claim that there is such a thing as a Drottningholm Theatre aesthetic. “A ‘Drottningholm Theatre aesthetic?’” he would have wondered. “Are we setting out to be different or unique? I thought we were trying hard to be like the trendsetting court theatres on the continent, like Versailles...” Sideways glances at continental models bespoke the aspiration of the Swedish cultural elite to “belong” to a European international sphere in theatre architecture, design, technology, and repertoire, no matter how far any Swedish theatre, including the theatre at Drottningholm, may have been fated to fall short of that goal.

If – by design, default, or accident – there was a distinctive DT aesthetic when the theatre was built, after the assassination in 1792 of its patron, King Gustaf III, this aesthetic was neither recognized nor prized as the theatre gradually fell into disuse.³ And to speak of

³ In the following, the abbreviation DT will be used for the Drottningholm Theatre.

a “DT Aesthetic” during the theatre’s Sleeping Beauty period (early 1800s to 1921) as a storage barn is of course absurd, when for all practical purposes there was no DT. (Indeed, it was so non-existent that court records in 1809 failed to list the building.⁴)

The perspective on the DT has certainly shifted over the last 200 years. The initial reaction to Adelcrantz’ building was predictable delight. A well-equipped playhouse! Ten steps away! According to the courtier Claes Julius Ekeblad: “It must be admitted that here Adelcrantz has created a masterpiece.”⁵

Whether or not the theatre was seen as representing a distinctive and wholly satisfying aesthetic when it was built and during the years of Gustav III, by the early 1800s it had become a smallish, *pauvre*, uncomfortable, disused exemplar of an old-fashioned, reactionary kind of playhouse (court theatre, Baroque proscenium stage, with chariot-and-pole scene changing technology and undemocratic princely perspective), one of several of its outmoded kind in Europe.

Today, the DT can claim a distinct aesthetic merely by virtue of its uniqueness. From being conceived and built as one of a long line of private European court theatres with a general Renaissance/Baroque theatre aesthetic, it is today the only surviving fully operational and used Baroque playhouse in the world.⁶

⁴ When the theatre first sought operating funds from the state in the 1920s, the fact that it was not listed in the 1809 inventory rendered it non-existent and “illegal,” according to the Ministry of Education. The funds were denied. (Hilleström, *Dramatik på Drottningholm*, 1975, p. 66.)

⁵ Hilleström, *Drottningholmsteatern förr och nu*, 1956, p. 10.

⁶ The only other similarly scaled and equipped operational Baroque court theatre, the theatre at Český Krumlov, Czechoslovakia (built in 1765-66 by the Viennese carpenter Lorenz Makh), was closed 1966-97 for restoration. Though it is now open to visitors it is not used as a theatre, only occasionally housing a special performance for a select audience. Also Sweden’s Gripsholm Castle houses a well-preserved 18th-century theatre in one of its towers, but this theatre is much smaller and is normally not used for public

It can claim to embody a distinctive aesthetic also in that it appears to be striking an increasingly responsive chord in modern and postmodern man. It is since 1991 on UNESCO's list of World Heritage sites, internationally famous and treasured as "one of the most valuable building environments in the world."⁷

So what is the special DT appeal which is finding such resonance today? Can we really speak of a "DT aesthetic"? I think we can. And though in part inspired by the same wood, paint, muslin, and plaster which anchored and embodied the vision of Gustaf III and his contemporaries, the DT aesthetic today is not the same aesthetic as that which inspired Adelcrantz and his royal patron.

The following is an exploration of some key factors contributing to what we may call today's DT aesthetic. How does it differ from the original in inspiration, intent, features and values?

Some of the DT aesthetic today appears to have sprung from nothing but the passage of time itself. Thus the DT has undergone remarkable changes merely by remaining essentially unchanged. By being "forgotten" for over a century it effectively escaped gradual modification. The theatre has always had its own profile; what has changed is the vision/aspiration/perspective of its stewards. In the 18th century, the theatre may have failed to be like Versailles; in the 21st century, it is very successfully being itself.

The passage of time has also wrought tangible physical change. During its Gustavian heyday the unavoidable accumulating effects

performances.

⁷ Westerlund, 'A building's skin is scratched', in Hidemark, Edström, Schyberg et al., *The Drottningholm Court Theatre: Its advent, fate and preservation*, 1993, p. 8. – The disgraceful fact that the Swedish government is reluctant to commit adequate state funds to the maintenance and operation of the DT only demonstrates how provincial and "democratic" that government is. 'All Swedes cannot physically visit the DT, hence it is only for the privileged, hence it does not deserve state support, ergo: let private sponsors pay,' seems to be the reasoning.

of daily wear and tear hardly had an aesthetic dimension. Today, the patina, smoothness and smudges conferred on stone, wood, and metal by the use and abuse of two centuries have a strong appeal, so much so that, instead of having the walls cleaned and painted, care is now taken to preserve smudges around handles and doorknobs.⁸

One clue to the unique aesthetic of the DT is no doubt, as Agne Beijer suggests, “Swedish poverty.”⁹ At the time when the theatre was built, its simplicity and austerity was not necessarily desired or admired, rather a by-product of the limited Swedish treasury. Adelcrantz had to cover some of the building costs himself and was limited to domestically produced materials. If he wanted Italian marble, he had to paint it.¹⁰ The result was a plain exterior, limited color scheme in ochre and *grisaille*, plaster masquerading as marble, wood masquerading as gold, simplicity of line and functionality of form. Today, this original “poverty,” combined with the wear and tear of two centuries, is infinitely appealing.

One aspect of the theatre deliberately planned by Adelcrantz and effectively contributing to the audience experience, then as now, is the layout of the theatre as two raked spaces – the stage and the rear of the auditorium – mirroring each other, extending from a central, oval area. This area, referred to as the Royal box,¹¹ is the heart of the theatre, architectonically and symbolically. Floor plan, pilaster design, color scheme, building materials, painting techniques: all serve to unite the two worlds, performers and audience, in their focus on the princely patron. With members of the court,

⁸ For initiated discussions of conservation issues at the Drottningholm, see Hidemark et al., particularly Edberg, ‘Surveying wear-and-tear’, pp. 127-137, and Hidemark, ‘The sounds of an elderly building’, pp. 138-143.

⁹ Beijer, p. 11. (All translations from the Swedish in this article are mine, unless otherwise indicated.)

¹⁰ Lindqvist, *Drottningholms Slottsteater*, n.d. [1998], p. 20.

¹¹ Hilleström, *Drottningholmsteatern*, p. 9.

including the King's brother and sister, sometimes appearing on stage, it is easy to see the 18th century stage world as an extension of the court. Whatever the original intention, today the effect is the reverse: the virtual world of the performance extends to encompass the actual world of the audience.

Nowhere is the unity of stage and salon more consciously noted by a modern audience than in the shared ambient light. Originally the theatre auditorium and the stage were illuminated by identical chandeliers, all remaining lit during the performance. In the Baroque theatre, an illuminated auditorium was taken for granted, accepted though not always preferred.¹² Thus, although light poles behind each wing could change the light level on stage, the same basic illumination, in quantity and quality, enveloped both worlds. Twentieth-century productions at the DT generally augment the original candlepower on stage with small low-voltage spots, but the result is still far from the modern theatre practise of an unseen audience in a darkened auditorium looking at a brightly lit stage. The general golden glow, produced by fiber optics (on stage) and specially designed flickering "Drottningholm candles" of one candlepower each, bathes stage and audience alike and plays a key role in creating the DT ambience today. In other words, what was once partly a practical necessity today has a purely aesthetic function.

A number of modern homages to the DT speak of it as a vehicle for time travel, "the experience of being transported back to a living 18th century for a few hours. For that journey, the theatre at Drottningholm is the preeminent time machine of our day."¹³

¹² It may have had its advantages to be able to clearly see the court in attendance, but illumination of the audience throughout was also the default. A darkened auditorium was sometimes desired, e.g., to heighten tragic tension, but laborious to achieve since each candle in the auditorium had to be snuffed and then could not be relit until next intermission – if there was one.

¹³ Lindqvist, p. 24.

(That such travel is desirable and rewarding is in itself an interesting assumption.) To the 21st century, the 18th century is a foreign country. We use the DT to travel to that country. The theatre's original audience used it for its own travels in space and time, escaping into the mythic landscapes of their stage fiction.

Elisabeth Söderström, Artistic Director of the DT 1993-96, goes one step further and argues for the theatre as a unique space for connecting with living performances of the past:

When it fills with life, when the stage is peopled by characters who through their body language and costumes complement movement and colour in the scenery, when tones vibrate and resonate in floors and walls and the ingenious machinery performs its magic – then we obtain a knowledge of the light and sound of the 18th century that no other theatre in the world can give us.¹⁴

And the sound is glorious, the acoustics superb. Downstage center is the perfect spot to produce a gorgeously resonating, unmediated, unforced human voice.¹⁵

Another remarkable aspect of the DT which adds to its appeal as a total experience today is the combination of conservative Renaissance-Baroque theatre features with progressive late 18th century classicistic architecture. The result is an intriguing contrast between exterior and theatre space, made even more striking by the unusual austerity and simplicity of the exterior. Was this contrast motivated by aesthetics or economics?

There is no doubt that the focus from the very beginning was on the equipment of the stage and the interior of the auditorium, at the expense of the exterior. Cost-saving measures affected the exterior, the backstage areas, and the auditorium, in that order. On the

¹⁴ 'A magical tone,' in Hidemark et al., p. 6.

¹⁵ Rangström, *Drottningholms Slottsteater*, 1985, p. 29.

other hand, no expense was spared for the “ingenious machinery” principally executed by the Italian Donato Stopani. The difference between the austere exterior and the theatre within no doubt echoed the contrast between drab, cold Swedish reality and the glowing, seductive realm of the stage. Not only would this contrast have encouraged Gustaf III’s escape from meagre actuality into a virtual world of lavish fantasy, it may have boosted the attraction of that fantasy world enough to lure even reluctant courtiers to forget, at least temporarily, the physical discomfort of hard wooden benches and raw drafts¹⁶ during command performances. (And what performances at the DT were not command performances?)

Whether that striking contrast between forbidding exterior and magical interior was a deliberate aesthetic choice or the result of uneven allocation of limited resources, we do not know, but opening the doors from the surrounding anterooms to the candle-lit auditorium does resemble seeing the front curtain rise on a splendid scene – both are invitations to enter a magical realm.

The contrast between exterior and theatre salon remains powerful to this day, although the magic realm may now be seen to extend to include the English park and the entire palace milieu. To some, it extends all the way to the Town Hall dock in Stockholm where you may embark for your steamer voyage out to Drottningholm. (“This must be the only opera house in the world that is best

¹⁶ There are no fireplaces in the auditorium walls, i.e., the stage and audience areas were unheated. (The rest of the building has some 20 fireplaces or tiled stoves.) The theatre was built for warm weather usage – the exterior walls are thin and the windows single-glazed. Although the building was not used in mid-winter, cool Swedish summers and inclement weather at other times of the year made courtiers complain of long and cold sessions. Gustaf III himself was reportedly impervious to physical discomfort in the theatre. (Harvey, *The History of the Gripsholm Court Theatre During the Reign of King Gustaf III of Sweden*, 1969, p. 82.)

arrived at by ship...”¹⁷) Still, within this general magic, there is a definite escalation of enchantment as you cross the threshold of the theatre auditorium. Photographs and descriptions can hardly capture the effect; film can – and does. In the 1966 documentary about the theatre, the grey-painted non-committal double doors to the auditorium are thrown open, revealing a wonderland of candle-lit golden ochres, greys and blues, inviting us to enter. This moment in the film rarely fails to elicit a gasp of surprise and delight.¹⁸

In addition to these features of the DT, which all contribute to an understanding of its unique atmosphere and appeal, there is one other aspect which strongly colors and enhances the aesthetic dimension of the theatre, namely the usage of *faux* expertly realized in the service of a lavishly employed *trompe l'œil*. The quality and characteristics of this particular *faux* constitute, I believe, a primary clue to the magic of the DT, and may be best understood by being compared with the usage of *faux* in two other historic contexts.

Although the building's exterior and anterooms certainly are worth attention, for the purpose of discussing the *faux* aspect of the DT my focus is on the interior of the performance space, for the following reasons: First, no matter how appealing the exterior may be to a 21st century viewer, it did not represent a decided preference of either Adelcrantz or Desprez, rather a compromise with necessity. The final (1791) exterior appearance was reluctantly accepted by the King and Desprez as an inevitable result of the chronic lack of building funds. Grander plans, projected magnificence, ended up as architect's ink-and-pen plans, at best.¹⁹ Second,

¹⁷ James, 'The Swedish Versailles', *Vogue*, May 1988, p. 210.

¹⁸ *The Drottningholm Court Theatre*, Svensk Filmindustri, 1966. The film has been used in theatre history seminars at San Diego State University since the 1970s.

¹⁹ Preliminary plans for the DT facade and exterior walls show ornate relief decor. The eventually executed facade and walls are plain (Beijer, p. 192). Cf. the grandiose plans for Haga Palace north of Stockholm, never executed

the exterior is notably plain, even austere. Within the manorial building tradition of the day, pure utilitarian concerns dictated the plain plaster walls and the black Mansard roof. Whatever the changing fates of the interior, the exterior was never *outré* enough to be either a notable delight or a blight on the palace grounds. Its very plainness may have been what saved it from “improvement” during the 19th century. (We can only be thankful that – unlike Ulriksdal Palace Theatre – it was not converted to an Oscarian hunting lodge.) Third, the exterior is reserved and non-committal. It does not trumpet the building’s function. There is nothing of “playhouse” about the exterior, nothing of theatre, nothing of *faux*. It is what it is. The *faux* of the title of this essay applies only to the interior.

While the exterior of the building, and to some extent the rooms surrounding the auditorium, murmur of utility and necessity, the performance space sings of illusion and pleasure. It adheres to an accepted Baroque theatre aesthetic of interplay between appearance and reality, of transformation and magic, enchantment and transport to an idealized world of fiction, patterned on classical models. And it does so by a liberal use of *faux*, of *trompe l’œil*.

Beijer was the first to remark on the use of *faux* in making a theatrical unit of stage and salon:

The auditorium with its original and elegantly inserted balconies – resting on consoles of papier-mâché! – becomes in itself a stage set, executed in the same painting technique as the wings on stage and, like them, appealing to our imagination as much as to our sense of beauty.²⁰

The “painting technique” referred to – *faux* – transforms two dimensions into three, shallow into deep, pine and muslin into gold

beyond the vast cellars, or the plans for a royal avenue to run north from the Royal Palace in Stockholm to the northern city gate at Norrtull.

²⁰ Beijer, p. 11.

and marble. This very theatricality adds an “artistic cachet” which would have eluded the most ostentatious display of princely wealth.

So what does the DT aesthetic really consist of? It is tempting to locate its source in the theatre’s forced perspective scenery and perfectly functioning “machines” (chariot-and-pole, thunder, traps, waves, cloud formations filling the stage), which so strikingly set it apart from subsequent playhouse types. Modern audiences, brought up on a main diet of realism in the theatre, tend to view these “machines” with both bemused wonder and slight condescension, belittling their original audiences for being “taken in” by the illusion created. This attitude stems from the erroneous assumption that verisimilitude, “realism”, lifelikeness, is the ultimate good and goal in theatrical performance. If Baroque playhouses actually were effective, the argument goes, it must have been because the illusion presented was naively accepted as “real.” Nothing can be farther from the truth. Gustaf III and his contemporaries were not “taken in,” no more than we are.

The machines are merely a mechanism in the service of a principle, and they affect only the stage world. The core of the DT aesthetic is rather to seek in the pervasive idea of *trompe l’œil* and *faux* – as compelling today as it was when first entertained. It permeates all, from wall treatment and architectural features to the perspective scenery on stage, and unites stage and salon, even to the point that the *faux* pilasters of the auditorium are continued in the first pair of proscenium pilasters on stage. What is the result? *Faux*-ness? Falsehood? Fakery? Illusion? Trickery? Deception? Imitation? Play-acting? Performance? Make-believe? Pretense? Appearance vs. reality? All these terms refer to a double-ness, some of them condemning, others neutral or appreciative. (Interestingly, the majority of terms used to describe the production of virtual images are negatively loaded – a late legacy of Tertullian’s prejudice against the theatre, that institution of systematized double-ness?).

When *faux* and *trompe l’œil* were used at the DT – not only on

stage where you would expect it but also in the auditorium and the Déjeuner salon – was it by reluctant default? Both Beijer and Lindqvist suggest that lack of funds motivated the use of *papier mâché* instead of marble, *trompe l'œil* painting instead of carved reliefs, *faux* painting instead of precious woods.²¹ Or could it have been a deliberate choice of the time-honored tricking of the eye for an exclusive circle of art connoisseurs?²²

I suggest that the DT *faux* in essence relies on and implies a sophisticated way of seeing, which, once the rule in elite Renaissance/Baroque circles (including their theatres), today is generally gone. It has been replaced by other ways of seeing, other modes of *faux*, at least two of which – the “19th century fake mahogany”-mode and the 20-21st century “trendy faux”-mode – are still with us.

The difference between different modes of *faux* lies in how *les choses faux* are seen, which in turn determines how they are produced and appreciated. To take a concrete example: Assume we have a surface of pine painted to look like marble... or mahogany... or anything other than pine. Show it to a viewer from c. 1600, one from c. 1880, and one from the year 2000. Each viewer will see what he/she wants to see, expects to see, or is capable of seeing, i.e., trained to see.

The Renaissance/Baroque viewer will want to see the marble and simultaneously the wood. He delights in having his eye tricked, he wants to see “marble” with his eyes but at the same time perceive the “woodness” of that “marble” (with his eye/ear/finger/mind). If the painting is executed in perfect imitation of marble –

²¹ Lindqvist, p. 20; Beijer, p. 11.

²² The DT has always been exclusive. Although open to the public since the mid 1900s, it has never become a truly popular theatre, due to its location, ticket prices, repertoire, and limited number of performances each season. (With an average of 10 performances a season and an auditorium of 450 seats, the total number able to enjoy the DT each year is a mere 4,500.)

if it absolutely cheats not only the eye but all the senses – it fails as *trompe l'œil*. There is no double perception, no pay-off, no appreciation for the skill of the artist. Marble playing marble is no feat; wood playing marble is.²³ The primary goal of Renaissance/Baroque *faux* and *trompe l'œil* is aesthetic and intellectual delight, the secondary goal sumptuous display.

Now let us move to the 19th century. The viewer sees a chest of drawers made of pine, painted to look like, say, mahogany. The more skilled the artist, the more mahogany-like the imitation. If the *faux* surface is completely convincing to the eye, the object is successful, since the express aim is deception. The motivation of 19th century *faux* is social climbing, the objective ostentation. We are dealing with an expression of lower class envy of upper class privilege, lower class imitation of upper class status symbols – in other words, *gesunkenes Kulturgut*.

Since the intention is to pass the chest off as mahogany, politeness requires that the imitation, no matter how crude, be accepted as “mahogany” – it would be a social *faux pas* [no pun] to draw attention to how poorly (or well!) it was done. The eye chooses not to see the “pineness” of the piece, only the surface interpreted as “mahogany.” And what of the artist? Since no one is supposed to see the artifice, no one can applaud it either. The artist disappears from view. (On a purely commercial plane there may of course have been appreciation of the workmanlike skill displayed in imitating mahogany, making carpenter/painter X more sought after than his fellow craftsman Y.) But, no matter how it was executed, the *faux* was seen only as “mahogany.” Double vision was not encouraged.

If “imitation” did not have a bad reputation already, it certainly

²³ One recognizes the same argument from Restoration debates surrounding the introduction of women on the public stage: Where’s the art in a woman playing a woman? That is no feat, a man playing a woman is! – It is interesting to note that the argument was never used against male actors...

acquired it in the 19th century. Bourgeois jockeying for social position through material possessions proved a fertile ground for a whole industry of imitations. The negative attitude to these fakes found expression in the literature and debate of the day.

In his chamber play *The Burnt Lot* (1907) August Strindberg voices his disgust both with the falsehood of imitation and the deception required to keep up the appearance of wealth. The just returned Stranger looks closely at the old family dining table, salvaged from his burnt childhood home:

Item: the foot of a dining table – the old family heirloom – yes!
It was said to be made of ebony, was admired as such, and is now revealed by me, fifty years later, as being made of dyed maple . . . Humbug! Ebony!

At the end of the play, the imitation ebony table crowns the Stranger's list of indignities suffered:

STRANGER. ... but do you know that the dining table was not made of ebony?

DYER. Wasn't it?

STRANGER. It was made of maple!

DYER. Maple?

STRANGER. The pride and joy of the household, valued at 2,000 crowns!

DYER. So that, too? Humbug, like the rest!

STRANGER. Yes!²⁴

Ellen Key, a strong voice in the aesthetic debate around 1900, speaks out against imitation mahogany furniture designed to make people believe that its owners have wealth and taste. The people thus impressed were of the lower classes, striving to rise in the world, who would have had less experience of real mahogany and

²⁴ Strindberg, *Brända tomten*, in *Kammerspel*, vol. 58 of *August Strindbergs Samlade Verk*, 1991, pp. 126 and 156.

therefore could be more easily duped. Since it was also rude to question somebody's "mahogany," Key assumes that imitations will succeed, though she herself never expects to be taken in – she would instantly spot fake mahogany. To her, the double vision of *faux* results not in aesthetic pleasure, but pain. Whether it is well executed or not, imitation mahogany is ugly because it is untruthful. She deplores

the chairs [...] made of imitation mahogany; the table of imitation walnut with silly curved feet and the chest of drawers of imitation oak; [...] and a couple of painted china vases with artificial flowers "decorate" the chest of drawers!

It is all these things – factory-cheap, imitation, garish, disparate – which make most homes of our times so lacking in style.²⁵

Key's aesthetics are heavily indebted to the brilliant Gustavian critic Carl August Ehrensvärd (1745-1800), whose central concepts of clear function, simplicity and honesty of material represent a precursor of "form follows function."²⁶ Anything *faux* was ugly to Ehrensvärd. Why then was he not critical of the DT which he experienced personally?

The answer lies in the fact that his observations and "rules" are based on the "real" world, defining beauty in everyday life and objects. He is not speaking about the world of the theatre, illusion, fantasy, and magic. In that world, "honesty" is no prerequisite for beauty – on the contrary. One might say that Ehrensvärd's "real world" aesthetic requirements are satisfied by the exterior of the DT while they have little to do with the world of escape conjured

²⁵ Key, 'Skönhet i hemmen,' in *Skönhet för alla*, 1897, p. 13.

²⁶ Ehrensvärd's vision was based on contrasting southern with northern European forms. His account of travels to Italy 1780-84, including Gustaf III's visit to Italy 1783-84, influenced his *De fria konstens filosofi*, Stockholm 1786, and has acquired the status of a classic.

within.

Moving on to the 20-21st century, the viewer looking at a piece of “marble” or “mahogany” is dealing with both concepts, imitation and *faux*. A piece of “marble” or “mahogany” is often made of plastic or other synthetics. The aim may originally have been deception, although many early synthetics were proudly promoted as such (nylon shirts, Formica tables, bakelite phones). The first excitement about new materials tends to fade into indifference and acceptance. Today there are so many plastics trying to look like so many other materials that we either accept them as plastic or truly do not notice. In either case, when we touch a plastic object looking like marble or mahogany, its plastic-ness is revealed (if we care to notice). But are we ever asked to appreciate the skill with which the manufacturer in Taiwan or China has imitated marble or mahogany? And are we ever asked to appreciate simultaneously the plastic-ness of the object and its marble/mahogany-likeness?

Then there is today’s ubiquitous *faux*. It is crude, obvious, and pervasive. It is not intended to really trick anybody’s eyes, rather it is a “new” surface treatment calling attention to itself and its own post-modern cleverness. No technical expertise or long apprenticeship is required to master the craft. It appeals to anybody:

One of the trendiest looks in home decor these days is faux finishing, the practise of using paint to simulate materials such as fabric or stone. [...] paint makers now are raising the stakes with sophisticated finishes, tools and methods that promise to make walls mimic everything from metal, silk and denim to antiqued leather. [...] this corner of the \$133 billion home-improvement market is pushing the notion that even artistically challenged do-it-yourselfers can [...] replicate the look of aged European plaster without a pro’s seasoned hand.²⁷

²⁷ Bounds, ‘The New Face of Paint,’ *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 12-13, 2005, p. 7.

Today's *faux* is often intended to evoke vague nostalgia for "other" locales and past centuries. Here we find "peasant" furniture, poorly designed, roughly made and crudely painted, with machine-sanded "worn" corners – all to evoke for wealthy urbanites the never-neverland of rural Tuscany or Provence or Carl Larsson's Sundborn. The massive nostalgia epidemic sweeping the United States, which enables mail order firms to charge \$2,500 for a new, imitation "country Italian" cheap wood cupboard with weak hinges, rough boards, ill-fitting doors, "antique" paint, and fake "wear" marks, might make an interesting topic for another inquiry – a dissertation even.

Summing up the essence of the three different uses of *faux*, I suggest the following shifts in focus, expressed in percentages:

The Renaissance/Baroque (aristocratic, educated) response:

- delight in illusion vs. reality, 65%
- delight in artistry and skill displayed, 15%
- delight in cost saving, 5%
- delight in ostentation (display of wealth=power), 15%

The 19th c (bourgeois, commercially driven) response:

- delight in illusion vs. reality, 5%
- delight in artistry and skill displayed, 10%
- delight in cost saving, 35%
- delight in ostentation (imitation luxury), 50%

The 20th c (eclectic, post-modern, ironic) response:

- delight in illusion vs. reality, 1%
- delight in artistry and skill displayed, 3%
- delight in cost saving, 32%
- delight in faux-ness (trendy, cool), 32%
- delight in faux-ness=imitation folk art (nostalgia), 32%

Let us now look more closely at the specific Renaissance/Baroque way of seeing, the simultaneous perception of or rapid oscillation

between two realities: It is marble, but it is wood. It is both marble and wood. This double vision requires a certain sophistication, a certain mental effort – it may even be an acquired taste.

The DT is fundamentally Renaissance in nature. There is delight in the success of the artifice as precisely that, artifice – never for a moment does the viewer believe the object to be what it imitates/mimics/impersonates. The educated Renaissance mind derives more delight from the artfully crafted object than from its natural counterpart. Why? Possibly because the former affirms the god-like aspect of man, the creator; also because it costs more, thus demonstrating the largesse of the noble patron paying for the object; but certainly because it gives rise to the simultaneous double perception of appearance and reality.

In his description of the three types of scenes (tragic, comical, satirical) mentioned by Vitruvius as the only ones required to stage any classical play, the Renaissance architect Sebastiano Serlio states that although in the summertime one might make use of real trees and flowers to create the outdoor “rude and rustical” satyric scene, in the wintertime

you must make these things of Silke, which will be more commendable then [sic] the naturall things themselves; and [...] the more such things cost, the more they are esteemed, for they are things which stately and great persons doe, which are enemies to nigardlinesse. This have I seene in some Scenes made by Ieronimo Genga, for the pleasure and delight of his patron Francisco Maria, Duke of Urbin.²⁸

The ducal patron derives pleasure from demonstrating his wealth (power) and from the double vision of the virtual trees and the actual silk.

²⁸ *Regole generali di architettura*, II (1545), trans. and published in London 1611, quoted in A.M. Nagler, *A Source Book in Theatrical History*, New York 1959, p. 77.

In 1513, Castiglione, serving as one of the directors of Cardinal Bernardo Bibbiena's comedy *La Calandria* at the court of Urbino, sees the scenery with double vision [*italics mine*]:

The stage represented a very beautiful city [...] Among other things there was an octagonal temple [...] The windows *seemed to be made of alabaster*, while all the architraves and cornices *gave the impression of having been made of fine gold and ultramarine blue*. At certain points were pieces of *glass used in imitation of jewels, which looked like genuine gems*. Round the temple were carved pillars and statues that *simulated marble*. [...] Between the architrave and the vault the story of the three Horatii had been *painted* though it *looked like a marble frieze*.²⁹

Castiglione accounts for each spectacular effect by describing its virtual aspect (e.g., jewels) and its actual identity (glass). Beyond the technical recipe nature of his report, Castiglione's delight is characteristic of the Renaissance. The conceit succeeds when the "deception" is seen as precisely that, i.e., not taken for truth. A tree is an object of art and delight if the leaves are made of silk, dull and uninteresting if the leaves are real. And – this is the point – the tree with silk leaves makes a dull impression also if it so skillfully imitates nature that it is mistaken for real.

In other words, if we look at a tree with silk leaves or a painted flat and believe in the illusion 100%, we see a leafed twig or a marble wall. Though they may be more or less attractively formed, there is nothing remarkable about a twig with leaves or a wall of marble. But if we see the wall and the tree, take in their "marbleness" and "treeness," and at the same time see the muslin and silk so skillfully and patiently transformed as to capture the essence of marble and foliage, we have double vision or a rapid back and forth

²⁹ Letter from Baldassare Castiglione to his friend Lodovico Canossa, 1513; trans. and quoted in Nagler, p. 71.

oscillation between the two modes of seeing. The Renaissance “reporters” are not blind to the added benefit of cost-saving (glass playing jewels), but the emphasis is on evoking delight and projecting opulence and splendor linked with munificence and generosity. Admiration for the artisan/artist responsible for the execution of the artifice is freely expressed though often formulaic – it is not at the core of the aesthetic experience.

The Baroque theatre incorporates yet another major source of aesthetic delight, added to the Renaissance magic created by the doubleness of vision. Whereas the Renaissance theatre created basically static pictures (scenes),³⁰ the fully developed Baroque theatre created series of pictures and, instead of hiding the transitions from one scene to the next, featured the changes between them. Complete, practically instantaneous, and soundless changes from locale to locale, made possible by “Il Gran Stregone” Giacomo Torelli’s ingenious chariot-and-pole mechanism, introduced not only variety and visual progression but the magic of total transformation into a performance. In contrast to other features of the fully developed Baroque stage, Torelli’s invention can be exactly dated (Venice, 1642). The gargantuan 17th century Venetian appetite for opera and intense competition between companies seeking a technological and artistic edge over their rivals quickly resulted in spectacular applications of Torelli’s machines, added to already existing stage equipment.³¹ Detailed treatises and technical descriptions prolifer-

³⁰ The seminal intermezzi of Buontalenti in Florence 1589 incorporated spectacular scenic effects requiring massive machinery, and fed directly into the later Baroque stage. The major difference lies in the speed, precision, and noiselessness with which entire locales were routinely changed in the fully developed Baroque theatre using Giacomo Torelli’s elegant chariot-and-pole system introduced in 1642.

³¹ Two main sources of theatre technology before Torelli are the works of Nicola Sabbattini (1638) and Joseph Furtttenbach (1645) (both excerpted in Nagler).

ated.

And the public was insatiable. Eyewitness descriptions – letters by amazed visitors “doing” Venice on their Grand Tour – show an interesting new twist shortly after Torelli had begun working his magic. To truly enjoy a theatrical event, it was no longer enough to see a temple of gold and aquamarine, studded with gems, and know that it was really painted wood and glass. (“We’ve seen that...”) It was no longer enough to see a temple split in half and glide to the sides, revealing a seated goddess within. (“We’ve seen that, too; heavens, we’ve had shutter-and-groove scene changing since long before Sabbattini wrote about it in ‘38...”) What was now required to titillate the spectators – or recipients of their eyewitness reports – was not just a description of the spectacular transformations and effects to be enjoyed in production X at theatre Y but speculation *how* these were achieved. The double vision was, as it were, taken one step further. (“I know this gold and marble altar is really a flat piece of painted wood but I also want to know how Orlando made it shatter like that...”)

Though a rival theatre manager’s curiosity probably was financially motivated, there was indeed a strong general desire to penetrate the veil of illusion. Since the spectacular effects were often technically cutting-edge and the object was to create magic, not to reveal the workings of the theatre, eyewitnesses were fascinated to the point of vexation at not being able to “figure it out.” *Il Bellerofonte*, performed in 1642 in Venice with machines by Torelli, was a spectacular challenge:

[In the Prologue] a shining machine appeared [...] out of a few rent-opened clouds [...] and breaking away completely from the sky, it came to the ground *without permitting the eye to penetrate to its supports*.

At his [Neptune’s] command a most exquisite and life-like model of Venice arose from the sea which everyone confessed to be a *tour de force*. The eye was deceived by the Piazza

and public buildings which were imitated to the life and it rejoiced more hourly as it forgot that the entertainment came from a concealment of the truth...³²

In Act I, Scene 3, a cloud descended and split. The two parts slowly bore two goddesses to the ground on either side of the stage “with a movement both unexpected and marvellous, *without showing how it was arranged*, and straightway scattered [...] *without the means being understood by the amazed audience*.” In Act II, Scene 3, Venus appeared in the air in a gold car drawn by two doves with her son Amore as coachman. “When the deities had descended, the car *without showing any of the mechanism* moved to the other side.” In the next scene, Amore flew in from the left with great speed and wounded Anthea, then “rising again, he flew to the right drawing the eyes of the theatre who, astonished, *tried in vain to penetrate the machinery and discover the artifice*.”³³

In the DT, the point of the *faux* and the *trompe l'œil* – for example, in the marble pilasters in the Royal box – was not to remind you of “Swedish poverty” and economy; nor, except incidentally, to focus on the artistry.³⁴ The point was the artifice, the double vision: to see the “marble” yet also see the wood. Or, if your *eye* was wholly deceived, to see the “marble” and hear the wood. Any sound in the DT, even the mere sound of your footsteps, reveals the theatre as a space constructed of wood. The term is, after all,

³² Description by Guilio del Colle of *Il Bellerofonte*, musical drama by Vincenzo Nolfi given in the Teatro Novissimo, Venice, 1642, with machines invented by Giacomo Torelli. In Simon Towneley Worsthorne, *Venetian Opera in the Seventeenth Century*, 1984 (1968), p. 177.

³³ Worsthorne, pp. 178, 180, 181.

³⁴ Aside from Johan Pasch, who painted the front curtain, and Jacques Adrien Masreliez, who painted the relief panels in the auditorium, we do not know the names of the craftsmen executing the DT *faux* finishes and *trompe l'œil* designed by Adelcrantz and later (in the Déjeuner salon) Desprez.

trompe l'œil, not *trompe l'oreille*...³⁵

Subsequent *faux* has downplayed the double vision. The 19th century *faux* mahogany chest of drawers succeeded or it did not. (Today we may find 19th century *faux*-ness appealing. At the time, it was not a source of aesthetic pleasure, just a potential source of satisfaction – if the imitation succeeded, i.e., if the deception was complete.) Either way, there was no back-and-forth oscillation between two ways of seeing; no intrinsic value in seeing the “pine-ness” of the wood at the same time as the “mahogany.” To do so would have been rude and challenged the status of the owner. The polite way was to tacitly accept the pine as mahogany: hypocrisy over rudeness.

In our current “*faux*” craze – *faux* fur, *faux* painted furniture, *faux* pearls, *faux* gems – the point is rather the opposite: not to trick anyone. Today’s imitation fur can quite successfully impersonate the real thing. *Faux* fur, on the other hand, trumpets its *faux*-ness by its color: pink “leopard”, purple “mink”, and so on. With jewelry it is often the outlandish size that says ‘not genuine’ – who would believe a 4-carat stone on the finger of a drug store clerk? An exception is the huge “bling” of black hip-hop stars, which looks fake but is very real – in other words, huge shapeless pieces of jewelry of 18K gold, imitating huge shapeless pieces of custom jewelry of yellow metal. Today’s fake gems are proudly “imitation”: “blue diamonds,” “Zonite,” “Cubic Zirconia.” Today’s *faux* is blatantly *faux*. Even potentially convincing *faux* is carefully exhibited so as to be “betrayed” by its context. It is not the skill level of the creator that counts but the “charm” of his/her naive mindset.

We have, by and large, lost the Renaissance/Baroque way of

³⁵ A similar effect is produced in Teatro Olimpico, Vicenza, a theatre built 1580-85 by Andrea Palladio and Vincenzo Scamozzi in imitation of what was believed to be an authentic Roman theatre. The entire theatre is constructed of wood and plaster, painted to look like marble. The sound, smell, and air in the room immediately deny the ubiquitous marble.

seeing. On a monumental scale, there are isolated examples of true *trompe l'œil*, usually painted on urban building facades, like the Hollywood streetscape in Disney's "California Adventure" in Anaheim, California. But the subtle oscillation between marble and painted wood seen in the DT is rarely produced or appreciated today. Our plastics, vinyls, naugahydes, ultrasuedes, and blue diamonds either aim to deceive (and it is impolite to point out when they fail) or are frankly, proudly themselves: plastic, vinyl, etc.

Where, then, except in the DT itself, can we still savor the delicious frisson of being in a *trompe l'œil*? There are places, there are spaces (the anteroom, auditorium and stage of the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza), there are times...

But the question is misleading. The oscillation between two ways of seeing, between illusion and "reality", is and has always been alive – in the theatre. The essence of theatre is *faux* finishes and *trompe l'œil*. Though it is commonly taken for granted that theatre aims for *belief* in the illusion – instead of, as Coleridge so rightly saw, a 'willing suspension of disbelief'³⁶ – and this misunderstanding still colors much of American modern (thankfully, not post-modern) theatre criticism, theatre does rely on a recognition of actuality for the virtual action to be properly appreciated. In other words, theatre does rely on a double vision. To deny this is to align yourself with the child or savage to whom the play is either irrelevant hocus-pocus or literal truth. The Venetians seeing Venice rise out of the sea in *Il Bellerofonte* in 1642 were not truly "deceived." They did not have to "forget" that they saw a "concealment of the truth" in order to enjoy themselves. They knew very well they were

³⁶ Though this phrase has come to represent Coleridge's statement, what he really said was: "The true stage illusion [...] consists – not in the mind's judging it to be a forest, but, in its remission of the judgment that it is not a forest." Elsewhere he expands on the willingness of the mind to suspend judgment. *Progress of the Drama* (1818), in Dukore, *Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, 1974, p. 588.

sitting in Teatro Novissimo seats, not across the water from the real life Piazza. Their vision was indeed double – a concept simply foreign to the dutiful reporter of the event. The difference between the DT experience and a modern theatre experience is that in a modern theatre, the world of oscillation between actual and virtual exists only during the time and in the physical space of the actual performance, whereas at the DT this world extends in concentric circles to include the auditorium with its dry wood smell, flickering lights, narrow linen-covered benches, *trompe l'œil* reliefs, period instruments, and orchestra and ushers in 18th century garb; the entire building; yes, to the susceptible mind, the whole palace complex with park and environs, even the steamer trip out to Drottningholm.

Interestingly, the one modern theatre practitioner who has explored and theorized deliberate and systematic use of the oscillation between virtual and actual is Bertolt Brecht. But while Brecht confronts us with political actuality by disrupting the virtual, the DT's hypertheatrical interplay of actual and virtual offers eyes and soul the highest calibre of experience, "gratitude and pleasure at being able to rest in something so perfectly beautiful," in the words of Elisabeth Söderström.³⁷ The DT offers escape from the multiple assaults on the senses we daily face: mediated, amplified, incessant, mercenary, massive, excessive, fragmented, shapeless, scattered, automated, supersized, massproduced, and simultaneous. Assaults which seem inescapable – except in the world of the DT. The DT aesthetic cannot be defined by what the theatre is, in terms of a number of beauties – the "poverty," the patina, the color scheme, the lighting, the *faux*, the *trompe l'œil* – but as a heightened reaction to its antithesis, to what it is not. And perhaps therein lies its deepest appeal – not as a romantic time machine for escape into the past but as a powerful antidote to the present.

³⁷ Hidemark et al., p. 6.

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