

THE FACE AND THE DIVINE SPACE: - ABOUT JESUS_C_ODD_SIZE BY HOTEL PRO FORMA

By Christian Pagh

*Above all is the integrity of the face, its straightforward, defenceless way of showing it. The skin of the face is the most naked skin, the most uncovered one. The face is exposed, threatened, as if it invited to acts of violence. At the same time it is the face, which forbids us from killing. [Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 1982]*

The temple - in its appearance - firstly gives things their looks and then human beings their views of themselves. This sight remains open as long as works work, as long as divinity has not left it behind. It is the same thing with the statue of divinity. It is not a portrait whose most important task is to make it easier to comprehend what the god looks like; rather it is the work itself, which lets divinity become apparent and thus is divinity itself.

[Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, 1927]

The word *face* originates from the German *an-sehen* - to look at something. The face is what you see when you meet another person, if you meet the person as a human being and not just as an object, as a body, as a mean to a goal beyond this person itself. Hence, the face is therefore the most vulnerable, or as Emmanuel Levinas puts it: *The skin of the face is the most naked skin, the most uncovered one.*

To stand *face-to-face* with something, means to be facing something naked and honest - not to imagine, not to perform. We talk of a double exposure: Your own face and the face of who or what you are looking at, are both considered as *open*, as something not yet decided. It is an image of two people looking at each other in a special way, where the face is not judged but is just *looked at*.

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Faces meet in *jesus_c_odd_size* by Hotel Pro Forma: Old furrowed women faces, young faces, tattooed faces, disfigured faces, classical beautiful faces. And you face them *face-to-face*. Because in the striking universe of *jesus_c_odd_size*, you are not a spectator of a performance, but rather an ignorant guest, who moves while exploring the world - a quietly

buzzing, biblical market square - together with the performers. You cannot hide in the soberly lit hallways and rooms - but have to participate all along - with your face just as exposed as the ones of the people you see. As the leprous girls on small boards on wheels - who ride among the audience while they are singing. As the disciples' grandmothers who invite you for coffee at their coffee party - while they look you in your eyes and talk about their grandchildren, the disciples - or of just any matter. Or as the 13th disciple, the disfigured Matthew - who meets you in the dimness with the clearest blue eyes - and offers you a cup of beef tee while he talks about love and faith.

In *jesus_c_odd_size* you become part of tableaux where you and the one you are facing are both exposed with the face. The performers are both themselves and performers at the same time. They perform as mythic figures - but their personal stories appear in the same web as that of the myths. The spectators and the observed people drift in indeterminable space, in the tension between the personal and the mythical.

Because of your own participation in these meetings - the peculiar feature of many of the performers never becomes object to poor voyeurism. They are there. You are there. And that is it. You are exposed during these encounters, but at the same time you feel secure because the scenes are staged. They are offered in only specific rooms. They have been initiated as something not to be changed - and hence the meeting seems peculiarly free, detached from firm logic manifesting itself in encounters of the real world. The encounters are wonderful, as they are provided with a special form of the order of space and time. An order which does not manifest itself - but which can be felt like the Holy Spirit: A breath of air, a rumbling in the floor - which hits us and lets the things and the faces appear.

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The face of Virgin Mary is projected as icon in a small room with a window. At some point Virgin Mary appears *in persona* and puts herself in her own image. Her face appears, as person and as a physical image simultaneously. And later, when you meet the Virgin Mary in the Virgin Mary's room in the basement, in a red-illuminated sterile room - where sheets are hanging quietly on a clothes-line and small icons are placed on a steel-bookcase - she is not Virgin Mary but Helle Rafn, the person - with whom you can talk to about anything.

The room trembles with a curious excitement between the staged and the obvious. It is not a meeting with the Virgin Mary - where you can rest unproblematically in a vision of the divine. Because she is not there as a figure - on the contrary, a person is created in relation to you. However, it is not just any meeting. The room creates the meeting - or rather: It enables a meeting of special character. A meeting which seems easy and plain at the same time, but which is reciprocal as far as it involves a commitment to one another.

The peculiar thing about Virgin Mary in *jesus_c_odd_size* is perhaps the fact that she withdraws as an icon, but that her light continues to illuminate the faces. That she, like the Holy Spirit, is present as a spatial figure who makes it possible for people to look at each other in a meeting outside the human determinable - by letting mankind become enlightened of some kind of divinity, which is not explicable - but which floats as something impervious in the middle of the familiar and comprehensible.

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It is not just any art that lets faces appear in a meeting - in a time where you stop yourself from seeing the mass-cultural field as a theatre of distance, where nobody faces anything, but instead relates to the polished, unattainable norm - you are presented with in the Hollywood productions, music videos and advertisements.

In modern times it is easy to avoid the meeting with the face of the other person. You can hide in the anonymity of the masses and instead look each other over the shoulder, like in the television productions of *Big Brother*. Faces of ordinary people as well as of actors can be seen from the living rooms or from the safe darkness of theatres or cinemas. Or meetings can take place in the non-committal cyber space - where one is free to pick a face.

While you, to a still lesser degree, are obliged to look each other in the eyes on the street or in public space, you are plastered with specific valued faces at every bus-stop that express the beauty ideal of the present. And the faces you meet in 'real life' are measured against this norm in order to value the adequacy of the aesthetic.

Perhaps it is a surmounting of the aesthetic fixing for which Jesus sacrifices himself in *jesus_c_odd_size* - when he hangs in vacuum, at Golgotha - together with the criminals. Their faces appear deformed, fastened against the transparent plastic, immovable, paralysed. Like meat in the super market - and yet the people are still breathing.

The modern representation of the love message of *jesus_c_odd_size* lets the human being appear before it is expostulated with perfect faces (of the idols). The message of love is not pleasantly charming. It is empty of illusions; it faces the world instead of wrapping it in artificial, glittered paper. It also sees horrible things - like the gigantic, stretched image from a Russian hospital ward - which meets you in the basement - with faces that are so lost that it seems unbearable. Yet it includes what you call love.

jesus_c_odd_size lets the frailty of mankind appear, lets it appear in an objective ceremony. A ceremony of reality. Without background music, smooth surfaces and trendy light, without the aesthetics in which you are used to having presented 'the reality'.

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jesus_c_odd_size is the consequence of reality as a theatre of distance: If reality has become theatre, then the theatre should become real. In order to remind us that reality - as it appears in the optics of theatrical distance - is not true. That theatre has to become real does not mean it should become 'realistic'; that it has to represent reality with known categories. To get real means to let something appear which exceeds worn explanations. To leave reality.

Reality is often reduced unwittingly to *what works* - we regard people and things in relation to their functions, and make them equivalent to other people and things in order to value them. You measure what you see from our human, *much too human*, parameters (recognition, beauty, power). But you sometimes experience that you are torn from this *real(ity)* perspective, and that you are allowed to stand in an interval, a free space, where you do not judge or evaluate or tantamount something to something else. You just see it as something, which just *is*. This happens. In front of the greatest works of art. At birth and death. In love.

Such space can be called divine. Divine because something greater than humanity takes over, something inexplicably superhuman manifests itself. Something which detaches humanity from its own horizon, from its practical, exerting use of one another and of the world, opening for other views. A look which, for a moment, sets free human being from the judgement, which it uses as navigation in daily life - in order not to succumb its whirlpool of possibilities. A view, which avoids deciding the contemplated, the incomprehensible which life fundamentally is.

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The paradox is that the superhuman, the divine, by exceeding humanity, gives space for human being. Because the human being forgets itself, its scales and its mercenary instincts. The divine is the possibility of including the other person as other than an object.

In a video-projected lecture, Erik A. Nielsen speaks about seeing with the heart and addresses *that the most profound, the most insightful faculty of vision people possess is the ability that stems from being able to see with their hearts.*

The divine about *jesus_c_odd_size* is perhaps that it actually creates a space where one sees with the heart. The performance splits the spatial figures, who make us appear as objects, as instruments, as competitors. Divinity here is not something, which is

represented but rather something, which lies behind what we actually see. It is a way of seeing. It is not a performance. It is the bare account itself. Divinity here is not an abstraction, a meta-physics. The divine thing is that we in specific rooms, at specific times, are able to see with the eyes of God. That we are able to see other people and the world as something else than merely an empty function, but as something which in itself is invaluable.

This is what can be found in the word *love* – as it is simply illuminated on small balls in the water, in the dim room where Matthew is. The people in this room are quiet and look pensively ahead and at each other. The word exists. It says so. As a possibility, a hope. The word becomes an opening, just like Matthew's blue eyes, his deformed face. Impervious. Present.

Heidegger writes that it is *the work itself, which lets the divinity itself become apparent and thus is divinity itself*. In *jesus_c_odd_size* divinity manifests itself as the space which offers room for the appearance of the human face. Like a space, which offers people a different view on each other.