Concerning The Opera Houses

The comments that follow concern an architectural type, the European opera house, a form that reached its zenith in the middle of the nineteenth century. I'm going to consider two aspects. One is social, perhaps historical, and has to do with the way opera houses, as they emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries, embraced and, in a sense, advertised through their form, new hierarchies based on wealth (of the emerging bourgeoisie) rather than birthright (of the disappearing aristocracy). This second aspect is more difficult to describe because it is abstract, perhaps more intuitive and subconscious in nature. I will get to this in the second part of the essay.

The first opera house to admit a paying public was Teatro S. Cassiano, built in Venice in 1637. Before that opera had been performed in small halls as entertainment for royalty. By 1700 large public opera houses had been built in Venice (which had nine) and in other centers throughout Europe. They became necessary because a wealthy middle class was becoming more prominent and demanded a cultural presence and possible because this same class had the capitol to fund their construction as well as the increasingly elaborate productions taking place within them. The unique horseshoe plan of the 18th and 19th century opera houses consisted of tiered boxes and balconies arranged around and above an open seating area and the stage beyond. The function of this design was two-fold. On the one hand it permitted the audience seated in the boxes to be closer to the action on stage; in addition it allowed for deader acoustics than was possible in the earlier rectangular or fan-shaped halls and, therefore, less reverberation and better vocal clarity. The most prestigious seats were those along the curve of the horseshoe directly opposite the stage. The Royal Box, the most important location of all, was situated on the second tier in the center of the curve and directly opposite the stage. It was the place from which the occupant could see everyone in the hall and be seen in turn and, of course, have full view of the stage. It was, however, not the best location for hearing the opera. The social importance of the

individual boxes diminished in direct relationship to their visibility as measured by their occupants' ability to see and be seen. This visibility diminished, of course, as the boxes moved away from the center and toward the edges overlooking the stage.

In Italian, the word for the stage, the location where the opera or play takes place is *palcoscenico*. The word for the box containing seats in a theater is *palco*. Etymologically, both words, *palcoscenico* and *palco*, imply the idea of a stage. In the former it is the stage upon which the central action occurs and is observed; in the latter it is the stage from which the social drama of class and status is acted out and observed. The latter is a drama in which members of the audience are simultaneously performers and audience: those looking out and imagining are the same as those being looked at and imagined. It is this concurrently exhilarating and disquieting sense that Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina* describes as Natasha enters her box at the opera:

> An attendant deferentially and quickly slipped before the ladies and opened the door of their box. The music sounded louder and through the door rows of brightly lit boxes in which ladies sat with bare arms and shoulders, and noisy stalls brilliant with uniforms, glittered before their eyes. A lady entering the next box shot a glance of feminine envy at Natasha. The curtain had not yet risen and the overture was being played. Natasha, smoothing her gown, went in with Sonya and sat down, scanning the brilliant tiers of boxes opposite. A sensation she had not experienced for a long time–that of hundreds of eyes looking at her bare arms and neck–suddenly affected her both agreeably and disagreeably and called up a whole crowd of memories, desires and emotions associated with that feeling.[1]

If you've ever been seated in a European opera house you might have felt, as I have, that you were situated within a giant jewel box in which the groups and individuals occupying the boxes along the surrounding walls were the precious stones. One can easily imagine how much greater this sensation would have been two hundreds years ago when the attire of the audience was nearly as elaborate as that of the performers. Wealthy individuals would enter their boxes much as a prima donna might enter the stage and like her, each would look out from a lavishly draped and cushioned interior of bright silks and velvet, framed by an ornate arch. Along the sweeping wall of the opera house were arranged tiers of small individual stages, each one displaying its unique drama of gesture and expression, tableau vivant that signified ones position within a dynamic social hierarchy. It was within these opera houses that two aristocracies met. One was new and in its ascendancy; the other old and decaying. One was based on the accumulation of wealth, drew

[1] Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, p 617, Simon and Schuster, 1958, Trans. Louise and Aylmer Maude

its power from the market place and was the future. The other based its privilege on heredity and was the past. Opera as a public spectacle arose together with the new moneyed class and provided a theater in which it could perform its rituals of ascendancy and display its power and wealth. Similarly to how the palcoscenico framed and exhibited the performance, the palci framed the other performances, those of the families whose social aspirations and standing within the community were being architecturally inscribed.

What I've been describing above are some of the thoughts – the rationale – I pursued and the initial source of my interest in the Italian opera houses. Now I want to move to more speculative areas – those that I identified above as being psychological. I'm referring to impressions that began to materialize while I was doing the actual photography and following; and have become more palpable, although no easier to describe, since completing the project and living with the images. It's what the photographs have come to mean to me – a kind of after image that rebounds from within them – and, curiously, these meanings are quite distant from the original inspiration. Maybe it's even misleading to call them *meanings* because the word is too rational for what I'm trying to convey.

I will start by describing an experience I had when standing on the stage and photographing the empty halls. On more than one occasion, the ornate spaces seemed to be staring back at me. I felt as if I was caught in the gaze from a source I couldn't identify and that what I was actually photographing was not just a room, but the act of looking itself. I understand that on the surface this is completely logical: that center stage where I was standing (and where the viewer of the photographs also stands) is the optical and perspectival hub to and from which all vision radiates. The result is that I, the photographer, and you, the viewer of the photograph, find ourselves at the center of the world at least as it is defined by this interior. With the empty seats and vacant tiers of boxes arrayed before us, we are aware of ourselves as both the ones seeing and the ones being seen. Perhaps the sensation that I found unsettling, and had

certainly not expected, was the impression of being caught in the act of looking. It's similar to the embarrassment one might feel if caught while staring at someone – a stranger – on the bus, perhaps, or at an adjoining table in a restaurant. My tentative explanation is that this being caught-in-the-act produces a self-consciousness that turns looking, a kind of objectless seeing, into watching – a looking that locates an object, almost possessing it, at the end of its gaze. Although I have difficulty explaining this, my intuition tells me that there is something erotic – something primitive and biological – at the root of this sort of visual possession.

The final twist to this and the thing that made it all a little unsettling was the distinct impression that I had been caught looking at myself by a presence that I can now only identify as being both myself and other than myself. An odd equation emerges: I see myself looking at myself looking at myself and the result is a real and perceptible unease. In the chapter "The Existence of Others" in *Being and Nohingness*, Sartre accounts for this sensation as a product of ones becoming aware of "myself-as-object", of myself-as-other. It is an awareness of oneself as the object of another's gaze, which needn't be occupied in a human body but can also be detected in inanimate objects, like the furnishings in a room. "I shall feel my heart beat fast and I shall detect the slightest noise, the slightest creaking of the stairs. Far from disappearing with my first alarm, the Other is present everywhere, below me, above me, in the neighboring rooms, and I continue to feel profoundly my being-for-others."[2] In this situation the Other becomes "subject-to-me" and the anxiety that results is due to a momentary loss of self as one becomes the subject-to-other. If carried to an extreme, this loss of self could, I suppose, lead to psychosis, particularly if one experiences the Other as not *out there* but as *in here* with (and inseparable from) the Self, which could no longer be the self but some sort of hybrid – the-self-that-is-not-the-self, perhaps.

[2] Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, Washington Square Press, p. 370