Book Reviews

Tereza Havelková. *Opera as Hypermedium: Meaning-Making, Immediacy, and the Politics of Perception*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. 186 pp. ISBN 9780190091262 (hardback).

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Conceptualizing opera today means not only to engage with a complex texture of arts and media, but also to look into the contributions offered by several approaches to the genre, from those inherited by performance and media theory, to the ones fostered by voice and sound studies, without forgetting contemporary art and film studies. Tereza Havelková's *Opera as Hypermedium* moves exactly in this direction, challenging several theoretical frameworks emerging from the controversial debate around opera and media. Her discussion is driven by the underlying question about the politics of representation and perception, which opera performs within the current audiovisual culture dominated by digital technologies.

Bolter and Grusin's concept of hypermediacy—i.e., the logic that makes us aware of mediation and reminds us "of our desire for immediacy"[1]—is the starting point for an approach to opera as audiovisual event, on both stage and screen. Rather than a text or a work, opera is here considered as a theoretical object which can "'think' or 'theorize' in [its] own right and by [its] own means" (23). In this sense, the aim of this book is "to chart the theoretical terrain of opera as hypermedium" (23), highlighting the effects of immediacy it produces and the political potential of its hypermediacy.

The case studies at the core of Havelková's exploration are two operas by Dutch composer Louis Andriessen and British director and screen-

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1 Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 34.

writer Peter Greenaway, works which were both staged for the first time in Amsterdam, "openly hypermedial" and "directly linked to the conception of intermediality in theatre and performance" (18). *Rosa* (1994) is an investigation into the murder of Juan Manuel de Rosa, a fictitious composer of music for Western films whose love for his horse is deeper than the affection for his fiancée Esmeralda. *Writing to Vermeer* (1999) is built around a series of eighteen letters written by three women—the artist's wife, his mother-in-law, and an imaginary model—to the painter (who never appears on stage) during the spring of 1672, also known in Dutch history as the *Rampjaar* (Disaster Year). While *Rosa* thematizes the use of film music on stage through the figure of the Argentinian composer, *Writing to Vermeer* projects, deconstructs, and reenacts Vermeer's art. Both combine stage action and live singing with sound technology—audible amplification in the former case, and electronic inserts by Michel van der Aa in the latter.

Before tackling the core of the discussion, the author clarifies how the issues at stake concern opera and contemporary staging by comparing two productions of Wagner's *Ring*: Robert Lepage's at the Met (2010–12) and La Fura dels Baus's in Valencia (2007–09). In particular, the opening scene of *Das Rheingold* works as a mean to measure the relationship between technology and the human body: in Lepage's production, technology functions as role characterization, beautifying the bodies which are in control of it, while the visual interpretation of Wagner's music is "straightforward" (5) and transparent; conversely, La Fura depicts this relation as "precarious" (5), introducing multiple "layers of signification that may be immediately decipherable to the audience" (5).

These examples outline a solid overview of the theoretical debate which involves, on one hand, Greg Giesekam's notion of "multimedial/intermedial" performances,[2] and on the other hand the relationship between illusionism and media transparency as discussed by Gundula Kreuzer and Nicholas Ridout.[3] In this regard, the audio-viewers' sensory engagement is one of the main characteristics of contemporary audiovisuality, as explained by

2 See Greg Giesekam, *Staging the Screen: The Use of Film and Video in Theatre* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 8–9.

3 See Gundula Kreuzer, *Curtain, Gong, Steam: Wagnerian Technologies of Nineteenth-Century Opera* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018); Nicholas Ridout, "Opera and the Technologies of Theatrical Production," in *The Cambridge Companion to Opera Studies*, ed. Nicholas Till (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 159–76.

John Richardson and Claudia Gorbman.[4] It is in this cultural frame that Havelková's concept of opera as hypermedium acts as part of the performative and material turns in opera studies and their related debates, of which she offers a survey of the major figures and theories. Moreover, feelings usually described as *presence*, *absorption*, *immersion*, and *liveness* are experienced not only through live performances, but also through opera on screen—the hypermedial transpositions that Christopher Morris defines as "'videoistic' productions."[5] The author is here interested in how such effects are produced in a multimedia context, but—due to the importance of a "continuity between contemporary operatic practices and various aspects of the operatic past" (23)—her understanding of opera as hypermedium differs from notions such as "digital opera" and "postopera" (which imply a clear distinction with the previous tradition).[6]

Another reference for Havelková is the work of cultural theorist Mieke Bal, from which she takes the notion of "preposterous history" to elaborate on opera's afterwardness ("how opera as hypermedium is (re)though[t] in and for the present," 24).[7] The use of speech-act theory for the analysis of multimedia—following Bal, but also Maaike Bleeker—represents a turning point in discussing "the role of temporality in shaping the relationship between an audiovisual event and its audio-viewers" (25). Moreover, "at stake in this theorization is the problem of how to formulate theoretical and artistic alternatives to a regime of representation that one is always already entangled in" (29). Thus, reconfiguring the relationship between perceiver and perceived constitutes a challenging part of the study of opera as hypermedium.

Rosa's two subtitles—*A Horse Drama* for the theatrical productions (1994, 1998); *The Death of a Composer* for both the screen version (1999) and the audio recording (2000)—is a glimpse into the issue, highlighted by Greenaway and Andriessen's work, at the core of chapter 1—i.e., the desire

4 John Richardson, Claudia Gorbman, "Introduction," in *The Oxford Handbook of New Audiovisual Aesthetics*, ed. John Richardson, Claudia Gorbman, and Carol Vernallis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3–35.

5 Christopher Morris, "Digital Diva: Opera on Video," *Opera Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (2010): 111.

6 The reference is to Áine Sheil and Craig Vear, "Digital Opera, New Means and New Meanings: An Introduction in Two Voices," *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media* 8, no.1 (2012): 3–9; and Jelena Novak, *Postopera: Reinventing the Voice-Body* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).

7 See Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

for knowledge. The reflection around *Rosa* explores two features which hypermedial opera commonly deploys: "Allegory and Excess" (38-68). Albeit at odds with opera's narrative and alleged meanings, the excess of the operatic experience (mainly produced by "the physical, material effects of the singing voice," 35) is approached here as the result of "a dialogic situation of meaning-making" (35). Following Craig Owen's work on allegory and postmodernism, Havelková argues that allegory "complicates the reading of the opera's signs" (39).[8] Shoshana Felman's analysis of J.L. Austin's theory of performativity is then key to understanding the search for knowledge that, in *Rosa*, is pursued in a seductive way through the character of The Investigatrix—a dominatrix/seductress, whom the audio-viewers had already seen, first as Madame de Vries, advocating for the unveiling of the truth, then as The Texan Whore.[9] To shed light on the working of allegory, the study examines the striking scene in which an already-dead Rosa sings in falsetto. Crucified, the protagonist sits on his horse, whose corpse is stuffed with Esmeralda and the money earned by the composer throughout his life. All the visual and aural ambiguities triggered by the scene are an allegory of the opera's "unreadability" (59), and the whole theatrical frame becomes a part of the dramatic illusion. By treating opera allegorically, *Rosa* makes the stage a "crime scene of opera itself" (60): a dead object whose mortification is the condition of possibility for its rebirth, a "rescue from … oblivion," in Owens's words.[10] Participating in the allegorical structure and in the process of meaning-making, voice becomes the vehicle of redemptive power. Its symbolic unity of sign and referent (in contrast to the "body–voice gap" identified by Novak)[11] operates beyond both music and libretto, as an "effect of immediacy" (63).

Rosa proves also useful for an in-depth analysis of the concepts of perspective, focalization, theatricality, and absorption. Chapter 2 draws also on narratology to test how hypermedial opera "positions its audio-viewers toward what there is to be seen and heard on stage or screen" (71). After Bleeker (and Hans-Thies Lehmann), Havelková explains how postdramat-

8 See Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," in *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 203–35.

9 The reference is to Shoshana Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body: Don Juan with J.L. Austin or Seduction in Two Languages*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

10 Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," 203.

11 Novak, *Postopera*, 7.

ic theater offers a multiplication of perspectives which, while seemingly bringing attention to the act of framing, it paradoxically produces "an effect equal to the absence of frames" (70).[12] Perspective is still at work, though it has become obscured. In *Rosa*, it represents the principle that organizes the physical and virtual space: Madame de Vries, who is named after a Dutch specialist in perspective, is the "internal focalizor" (80) bringing the audio-viewers' attention to the agency behind the multiplicity of media—her Brechtian beginning being "Let me describe the stage." Using Gorbman's notion of "point of experience" to identify the position mediating perceiver and perceived, this section of the book shows how in *Rosa* the positioning acts "may become obscured" (71).[13]

Absorption, following Michael Fried's definition of it as "a strategy to obliterate the relationship between the observer and a work of art" (75),[14] the "supreme fiction" used to "persuade the beholder of its truthfulness" (76), is here also considered as the result of the interaction between a work of art and a specific viewer, both historically and culturally determined. *Rosa* deliberately invites to step inside the drama ("We are to leave the opera house and go to the cinema"): a warning of absorption. Music is the mean that enables "the transition from the theatrical frame to the inner drama" (83): on the one hand, music (primarily derived from Andriessen's previous work, *Hout*) that "run[s] its course" (84) from a small motif into a steady rhythm full of tension and alertness; on the other, the music of the inner drama, vocal and melodic, is mostly made of quotations from classical and film music (especially Hollywood Westerns). This continuous split between the two dimensions threatens the absorption dynamic, while "the open theatricality of the descriptions and enumerations constantly reminds us of our 'desire for immediacy'" (86).[15] The analysis of Rosa's and Esmeralda's arias, the former becoming a soundtrack for the cinematic projections offered to the audience, the latter being traditionally operatic and deeply intimate, demonstrates how the position suggested by the music de-

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12 The reference is to Maaike Bleeker, *Visuality in the Theatre: The Locus of Looking* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), and Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (London: Routledge, 2006).

13 The reference is to Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

14 See Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 66, 71.

15 The reference is to Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 34.

pends on the actual audio-viewer's freedom to choose among a multiplicity of positions.

In chapter 3 ("Liveness and Mediatization. (De)constructing Dichotomies"), Andriessen's and Greenaway's opera *Writing to Vermeer* prompts a discussion on how liveness is constructed "as an effect of immediacy within the overall context of hypermediacy" (31). The scenes from the domestic life of Vermeer's women are visual and sonic theatrical "windows" enlivened by Andriessen's live music and singing; the historical events of the outside world are represented instead by projections and by van der Aa's electronic inserts. By drawing on classic writing on film sound, Havelková demonstrates how oppositions such as original vs. copy, presence vs. representation—allegedly "dismantled in theory" (36)—are instead productive as analytical tools. In this analysis, James Lastra's notion of the effect of sound recording as an "'original' independent of its representation,"[16] and Jonathan Burston's idea of "quasi-live aesthetics" as a symptom of standardization of live theater,[17] contribute to identify liveness with a theatrical experience where a "shared acoustic space" and a "perceived unity of the singing voice and the performing body" (106) coexist:

> It is crucially the singing voice (and the operatic music) that foregrounds the performing bodies. As long as the performers sing and dance, they elicit a theatrical mode of audiovision. The women on stage appear as incarnations of the women from the paintings; they give them both bodies and voices (111).

The relationship between sound and source is here reconfigured with respect to gender. Mary Ann Doane's theorization of the masquerade in narrative cinema—according to which masking allows women to attain distance from their image and to reconfigure the relationship with its female spectator—is key to understanding the relationships among the women on stage and the projections of Vermeer's paintings they represent. In this sense, *Writing to Vermeer* reveals a sense of "nostalgia for the live within the economy of reproduction" (125).

The starting point of the book's fourth and last chapter is a comparison

16 James Lastra, "Reading, Writing, and Representing Sound," in *Sound Theory, Sound Practice*, ed. Rick Altman (New York: Routledge, 1992), 70.

17 Jonathan Burston, "Theatre Space as Virtual Place: Audio Technology, the Reconfigured Singing Body, and the Megamusical," *Popular Music* 17, no. 2 (1998): 208.

between Bolter and Grusin's critique of hypermediacy and Laura Marks's concept of "haptic visuality" as a mode of perception and fruition that encourages a bodily, intersubjective experience of art.[18] Several scenes in *Rosa*'s screen version (for instance, when Esmeralda is stripped naked) and *Writing to Vermeer* (e.g., the killing of the De Witt brothers marked by evocative sounds) demonstrate how "hypermediacy elicits an embodied, multisensory mode of perception" (36). The author refers here to Susan Buck-Morss's discussion of Walter Benjamin's "Artwork" essay, exploring the twin systems of "(syn)aesthetics and anaesthetics" (133). While the former is a physiological connection between the external sense-perceptions and "the internal images of memory and anticipation" (134), the latter is its technical manipulation of environmental stimuli called phantasmagoria, "anaesthetizing the organism … through flooding the senses" and altering consciousness (135).[19] The social control produced by these dynamics in the second half of the nineteenth century is what prompted Benjamin's famous call for "politicizing art."[20]

Not by chance, the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a common reference both in Bolter and Grusin's notion of hypermediacy and in Buck-Morss's account of phantasmagoria, opened Havelkova's enquiry. This convergence is a signal that "modes of perception … may not be as divergent as they seem" (150); also, as foreseen by Theodor W. Adorno, the notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk* highlights the immediacy of hypermediacy in a particularly effective way.[21] It is thus significant that the "excess of media and … stimuli" offered by hypermediacy, with its sensory impact, can be compared to the legacy of the Wagnerian model (152). In this sense, music works as a powerful tool for "managing attention" against a general background of distraction (153).

As Havelková argues towards the end of the chapter, "new forms of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* are being devised" (161) in the digital age; still, the tools offered by theorists such as Benjamin or Adorno prove productive in identifying mechanisms of remediation. In the Conclusion, the author focuses on the fact that operas as cultural objects tend to resist theorization "while inviting, illuminating, and modifying others. … Understanding the operas

18 See Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

19 See Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October* 62 (1992): 3–41.

20 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 242.

21 See Theodor W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 2005), esp. ch. 6 "Phantasmagoria."

as being in dialogue with the theorizations of scholarship involves concentrating on what they do rather than what they say" (164).

Though Havelková's full immersion in theory, with its constant chain of references, runs the occasional risk of putting the reader's attention under some strain, the premises and argumentation are explicit and never disorienting. Without labelling contemporary genres and practices, *Opera as Hypermedium* is a book whose strength lies not only in its focus on Northern European scholarship and artistic production—often regrettably overlooked—but also in a constant effort to create continuity between present and past, both in theoretical and practical terms. By questioning important notions commonly accepted in current theories on opera and media, Tereza Havelková suggests a way to analyze contemporary productions through the multiple lenses offered by different research fields, and her meticulous testing and mapping of theory over performance takes stock of a problematic state of the art. How to approach a series of operatic practices that are hard to confine under one suitable category? (Digital opera? Post-opera? Hypermedial opera?) How to overcome the deadlock of trite prejudices and tired preconceptions, while holding them as still essential for the interpretation of such a loaded cultural phenomenon? Understanding opera as a hypermedial object may prove to offer an all-encompassing analysis while at the same time provide a way out of such an impasse. It might be a tortuous path, but one that certainly will be useful to better understand the nature of the genre which, far from being dead and buried, is constantly changing and reinventing itself, challenging all sorts of media to reach its audiences and produce meaning.

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