# Identity, Loss, and Singing Transcendence after the End of the World

Jelena Novak

Review-essay of the film opera *Upload* and the chamber music theater piece *The Book of Water* by Michel van der Aa*

*Upload* (2019–20), film opera, 85'. Stopera (Dutch National Opera, Opera Forward Festival), October 1, 2021, Amsterdam.

Cast, stage
Julia Bullock—daughter
Roderick Williams—father
Ensemble MusikFabrik,
cond. Otto Tausk

Cast, film
Katja Herbers
Ashley Zukerman
Esther Mugambi
Samuel West
Claron McFadden
David Eeles
Tessa Stephenson

Team
Michel van der Aa—Composer, director, librettist
Otto Tausk—Musical director
Theun Mosk—Scenography & lighting
Elske van Buuren—Costume design
Madelon Kooijman, Niels Nuijten—Dramaturgs

***The Book of Water*** (2021–22), chamber music theater piece for actor, string quartet, and film, 60'. Dutch premiere: Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ, November 11, 2022, Amsterdam. Rotterdam performance: De Doelen, November 14, 2022. Video recording: live performance, November 16, 2022, Tivoli Vredenburg, Utrecht.

Cast and team
Samuel West—Narrator/Geiser (live)
Timothy West—Geiser (film)
Mary Bevan—Corinne (soprano, film)
Amsterdam Sinfonietta Kamermuziek
Michel van der Aa—Composition, director, script
Madelon Kooijman—Dramaturgy

Fergus McAllpine—Play out operator
Bart van den Heuvel—Light design
Judith de Zwart—Costume design
Joost Rietdijk nsc—Director of Photography
Film producer—Arjen Oosterbaan | Eastbound Films

*I dedicate this text to the memory of my father Tomislav Novak*
*(1951–2022)*

The father, without his daughter's knowledge, and unable to bear the emptiness caused by the loss of his wife, decided to end his biological life and continue his existence in digital form. In a special clinic, he scheduled the process of uploading, which meant transferring his entire physical and mental being into a computer file. He then underwent a brief training designed to prepare him for the (im)possibilities of a potentially infinite digital existence. After the data transfer command was given, the father became an intangible being in perpetuity. He turned into a kind of avatar, a peculiar video entity that continues to live (so-to-speak) in a transparent screen two-dimensionality. The cognitive functions and emotional make-up of the father are preserved in this new variant, which continues to develop and "live." In the father's understanding of the world, everything remains the same even though his body no longer exists. However, his rejection of the body still led to some fractures, especially in his relationship with his daughter. She did not know about her father's intention to move permanently to the digital sphere and resents him for not consulting her on such an important decision. She suffers greatly and is confused by her relationship with a father she will never be able to hug again.

This is a brief plot summary of the film opera *Upload*, composed and directed by Michel van der Aa. Due to COVID-19, the performance of the

opera was postponed several times. However, after the abolition of almost all social distancing measures in the Netherlands, it was finally possible to once again present concerts, as well as theater and opera performances; and on Friday, October 1, 2021, the performance of *Upload* took place at the Dutch National Opera in Amsterdam. It was a full house with an electric atmosphere, since we were all deeply moved and excited to be able to return to attending live performances. At a reception following the première of *Upload*, the director of the Dutch Opera Sophie de Lint spoke in a trembling voice about the damage done to the performing arts world during the period of pandemic isolation. It turned out to be the first reception held in this opera house in six hundred and thirteen days. The turbulent emotions in the air felt like a kind of epilogue to the performance itself: a feverish proof of the necessity of physical communication and togetherness.

During the period when the performance was postponed, a film version of the opera was made, available on medici.tv. It serves a useful documentary purpose, but it is no substitute for a live performance, given that the work rests on a questioning of different media, and explores peculiar perspectives on, and relations between, these media on stage. All this is largely lost in the medium of film.

Van der Aa is one of the most prominent European creators of opera and music theater. He is a composer and director, and often also the librettist for his works. For *Upload* he wrote the libretto, composed the music, and directed the piece. He assumed the same responsibilities for *The Book of Water*, though in this case he wrote the script, not the libretto, since most of this music theater piece is not sung, though it involves music throughout. Van der Aa is interested in topics related to identity and technology. Thus, for example, in his opera *One* (2003), he explored the boundaries between a human performer and a vocal/visual cyborg to the point where it became impossible to distinguish who was actually singing on stage and where the boundaries of that person were drawn. Likewise, in the opera *After Life* (2005–06) the protagonists are deceased people situated in a kind of purgatory. They stay there for a short period as they search for their most decisive memory, since they have the right to take only one memory with them into eternity. The drama of this work is rooted in the difficulties of choice that the characters face, and in defining their new identity in relation to a single event/person/relationship. In the opera *Eight* (2019), which only one audience member at a time could experience in any one session, the boundaries between performers, audience, and technology are

porous. With full VR gaming gear on, I experienced *Eight* guided by different female characters. Journeying from inaccessible mountain peaks and precipices, through caves and encounters with ghostly voices, I eventually found myself under the table with a virtual girl who sang while blinking with transparent, scary eyes. At some point, I realized that it was the decision of the artist that I should become myself one of the opera's protagonists.[1] *Upload* arises from a science fiction world similar to the ones that informed these pieces.

In *The book of Water*, however, there is no science fiction context, only "rain … pouring down."[2] What happens on the level of the intimate human drama associated with the main character is superimposed, and with growing tension, on what happens outside, in nature, as the flood caused by extended periods of heavy rain creates the framework and the atmosphere within which the seven chapters/scenes of this piece unfold. *The book of Water* is based on the novel *Man in the Holocene* (1979) by Max Frisch. The erosion of the mind (dementia) in the case of *The Book of Water* takes place in parallel with the erosion of the planet and the climate, a topic that resonates with contemporary environmental debates. In both operas there is a precondition of sorrow, depression, loss, and melancholy. Dementia, which eventually overwhelms any sense of identity, is often preceded by depression. And maybe the fiction of *Upload* is a kind of future dementia, a dementia of the body, where it is the body itself rather than memory and cognitive functions that destroys a sense of individual identity.

The main character of *The Book of Water* is an elderly widower called Geiser. He appears as an old man, played by Timothy West in the film, whose image is projected on various screens on stage. The character of Geiser as a younger (middle-aged) man, played by West's son Samuel, is also featured in the live performance. An intriguing dialogue is established between past and present, old age and middle age. Since the actors are father and son, the physical resemblance between them is considerable, and this adds a particular piquancy to the basic concept, in which we observe them on film and on stage at the same time.

Like the father from *Upload*, Geiser has lost his wife. He slowly sinks into the chasm created by grief, dementia, and a stroke, while the water lev-

---

1  For more details about *Eight*, see Jelena Novak, "*Eight, aus Licht*, and The Unbearable Lightness of Being Immersed in Opera," *The Opera Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (2019), 358–71, https://doi.org/10.1093/oq/kbaa003.

2  Quote from the unpublished libretto of *The Book of Water* by Michel van der Aa.

els at his house and everywhere else steadily rise. Conscious of his memory loss, the main character tries to keep an encyclopedic record of the ideas, images, and situations that are of special importance for him. As the water level rises, he slowly moves his important belongings from the ground floor to the attic. He is alone, although we see his daughter visiting him at the end of the piece. It appears that his only company at the time of the flood is a salamander that has sneaked into his bathroom. Symbolically, it suggests that the relationship with nature is fundamental—a given—on this planet. It is impossible to escape from it. We are never alone. Nature, the planet, climate change, and other global phenomena (hyperobjects) are always with us.[3]

In the film we see an old Geiser, engaged in domestic activities, in his detached house, cutting up parts of the books, remembering his wife, watching TV, putting out the water, making pagodas of crisp bread in the kitchen, gardening, moving stuff upstairs, going out for a walk, and so on. It is only towards the end of the film that his daughter arrives, concerned that she had not been able to make contact with her father. The younger version of Geiser talks about his older self, comments on his behavior, complains about the weather, thinks about the golden section, amongst other things. At the beginning he shares with the audience a poetic typology of thunder:

The twelve-volume encyclopedia explains what causes lightning, but there is little to be learned about thunder; yet in the course of a single night, unable to sleep, one can distinguish at least sixteen types of thunder:

1. The simple thunder crack.
2. Stuttering or tottering thunder: this usually comes after a lengthy silence, spreads across the whole countryside, and can go on for minutes on end.
3. Echo thunder: shrill as a hammer striking on loose metal and setting up a whirring, fluttering echo which is louder than the peal itself.
4. Roll or bump thunder: relatively unfrightening, for it is reminiscent of rolling barrels bumping against one another.
5. Drum thunder.

3 Hyperobjects, according to Timothy Morton, are "entities of such vast temporal and spatial dimensions that they defeat traditional ideas about what a thing is in the first place." Some of them are global warming, climate, evolution, planets, capital, nuclear radiation. See *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), summary.

6. Hissing or gravel thunder: this begins with a hiss, like a truck tipping a load of wet gravel, and ends with a thud.
7. Bowling-pin thunder: like a bowling pin that, struck by the rolling ball, cannons into the other pins and knocks them all down; this causes a confused echo.
8. Hesitant or tittering thunder (no flash of lightning through the windows): this indicates that the storm is retreating.
9. Blast thunder (immediately following a flash of lightning through the windows (…)
10. Groaning or lath thunder: a short, high-pitched crack, as if one were snapping a lath, then a groan, short or prolonged (…)
11. Chatter thunder.
12. Cushion thunder: this sounds exactly like beating a cushion with flat hands.
13. Skid thunder: this leads one to expect either bump or drum thunder, but before the windows begin to rattle, the noise slips over to the other side of the countryside (…)
14. Crackle thunder.
15. Screech or bottle thunder, often more frightening than blast thunder, though it does not make the windows rattle (…)
16. Whispering thunder.[4]

The text of the script is rambling and prolix, and it sometimes approaches the absurd, as in this example. Its length and density also carry meaning, arguably expressing the trauma of memory loss, of the loss of the house, and indeed the loss of the whole planet/world as we know it. The text intersects with various situations in the film and on the stage itself, and it is that intertwining of different realities, quite different from a conventional narrative, that actually tells the story. Just as in our daily lives, we jump from analogous (we might say old-fashioned) activities such as cooking to all kinds of screens, mediated meetings, typed talks, delegated tasks, projected gatherings, transmitted performances, postponed presences, delayed intimacies, resulting in a radical reinvention of what used to be called "togetherness." And this fractalization of life, its transmission to all kinds of screens acting together and performing togetherness on our behalf, is actually the central theme of both pieces.

---

4  Michel van der Aa, *The Book of Water*, libretto, unpublished document.

*On Transcendence*

*Upload* begins in a darkened hall. Only the voices of a daughter and her father are heard, almost whispering (in English) the names of body parts and the stereotypes associated with them:

<table>
<tr><td>(…)</td><td>**Daughter**</td></tr>
<tr><td>**Daughter**</td><td>Sweat - fever</td></tr>
<tr><td>Expand - lungs</td><td>**Father**</td></tr>
<tr><td>Support - bones</td><td>Race - thoughts</td></tr>
<tr><td>(…)</td><td>Aim - view</td></tr>
<tr><td>Taste - tongue</td><td>Pick up - scent</td></tr>
<tr><td>Sprain - ankle</td><td>(…)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Grab - wrist</td><td>**Daughter**</td></tr>
<tr><td>Shake - heart</td><td>Tingle - cheek</td></tr>
<tr><td>Bash - fist</td><td>(…)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Carry - weight</td><td>**Father**</td></tr>
<tr><td>Reach - arm</td><td>See - crimson</td></tr>
<tr><td>**Father**</td><td>Hear - chirping</td></tr>
<tr><td>Spread - fingers</td><td>Relish - memory</td></tr>
<tr><td>Blink - eyes</td><td>**Daughter**</td></tr>
<tr><td>Light - smile</td><td>Hug - shoulders</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td>(…)[5]</td></tr>
</table>

Physical and emotional intimacy and tenderness are displayed in this remembrance of body parts and of the memories associated with them. The scene gradually lights up and we see the daughter and the silhouette of the father. She remembers growing up with her father and the closeness they built. That closeness is deeply grounded in bodily reciprocity. She remembers her father's shoulders carrying her when she was tired, his hands holding her as she learned to walk, the prickle of his unshaven beard when he kissed her. We also see the father-avatar on stage. Although it exists as a projection on the screen, this projection is larger than the natural size of the human body and is prone to "wasting," a pixelation of the image, and some other distortions that make it dynamic and create the illusion of some special "living" entity (see figure 1). Physically, the projected father looks like, and does not look like, himself, but his voice remains un-

5  Michel van der Aa, *Upload*, libretto, unpublished document.

Fig. 1 – Roderick Williams and Julia Bullock as father and daughter. Michel van der Aa, *Upload*, still frame.

changed and his thoughts and feelings are intended to remain true to the "original." During the opera, we sometimes see the singing father (Roderick Williams, baritone) only as a projection, but at other times we see Williams on stage, albeit with his singing voice synchronized with a projection of the digital father.

In this multi-layered performance—shifting between the performer singing live, interacting directly with the character of his daughter (Julia Bullock, soprano), and their more complicated interaction through the introduction of screen projections—van der Aa literally performs the drama of postponed and displaced realities on stage, while at the same time "talking" about them in connection to the father's and daughter's new virtual relationality. The drama between father and daughter is punctuated by parts of the story that unfold in the upload clinic. Through these encounters, the audience is confronted with the true implications of the father's decision—legal, moral, and other. These scenes, unlike the family dialogue, are cinematic, and are spoken rather than sung. They convey a Lynchian aesthetic marked by both absurdity and humor. One candidate for upload, for example, is a researcher who has received a grant to digitize himself because it is allegedly in the interest of the status quo to preserve his invaluable knowledge of the Holocene in this way. Here, and elsewhere, van der Aa represents humor as one means of refuting the absurdity caused by the

Fig. 2 – Roderick Williams and Julia Bullock as father and daughter. Michel van der Aa, *Upload*, still frame.

tendency of Homo sapiens to complicate both its individual existence and life on the planet in general.

In the key scene of the opera, the final one, all the vertical screens and splintered perspectives are turned off and suddenly, in a darkened hall, a huge, partly stretched canvas is lifted like a sail over the audience. On it, we see the original, pre-digitized father and daughter in close-up, lying facing each other, singing again those words depicting parts of the body, as at the beginning of the opera (see figure 2). The size and intimacy of the image and the abrupt shift of perspective come as a sobering blow. Stripped down in form, and conveying an almost painful melancholy, this scene conveyed to me a sense of the characters as almost palpable in their intimacy. It was as if members of the audience had sneaked in like voyeurs. Many questions related to the new relationships and new circumstances caused by physical distancing are raised by this move, not least those relating to the warmest moments of *The Book of Water*, when Corrine, the daughter of Geiser, finally finds him, towards the end of the opera.

The interrogation of identity, fear, memory, loss, nature, knowledge, erosion, and singing all takes place in *The Book of Water* in dialogue with an unexpected extension of the performance into a fluent 3D illusion created on stage. On the right side of the stage, we see the string quartet and the sound technician, while on the left we see an angular structure with

Fig. 3 – Timothy West and Samuel West, as old and young Geiser. Michel van der Aa, *The Book of Water*, still frame.

translucent glass forming a kind of cabin. That structure provides tridi-
mensionality with the film projection. It gives the projected image profun-
dity, drawing the spectator and the live protagonist on stage, into the reality
of the film. This intriguing game between different spaces and realities is
seductive, and in many ways it is the motor of this piece. The game of in-
volvement and in/dependency between all of them becomes palpable while
making us part of the simulacra.

Among the impressive, hyper-realistic moments is the one when Samuel
West as young Geiser enters the angular glass structure and initiates the
projection of the rain storm. At that moment, he starts talking about vari-
ous types of thunder (as in the text quoted earlier). This illusion of a storm
appears to be so accurate in its faithfulness to the original natural spectacle
of the rainstorm that it conveys a sense of Kantian sublime. It is not the
audiovisual theme, the rain storm itself, but the way it is performed—its
efficiency, sharpness, elegance, velocity—that produces this effect of tran-
scendence.

The forcefields in *Upload*—between simultaneous screens, projected and
living entities, father and daughter, technology and art, speech and singing—
are resolved through music. The ensemble Musikfabrik, placed on stage
and led by the conductor Otto Tausk, presented a convincing and finessed
reading of a musical score that oscillates between electronic and symphonic

sound. In recent works, the musical language of van der Aa have slipped into various non-classical environments. Here he makes reference to techno music, which, by sharpening the edges and the volume of the sound, excitingly conveys the psychological state of the characters. The daughter's slow aria is touching and reminiscent of Henryk Górecki's melancholic gestures, notably in his *Symphony of Sorrowful Songs* (1977). It is as though all the sorrow and loneliness that the protagonists might feel is somehow absorbed by the music, in gestures of melancholy but not of pathos.

In recalling those performances—trying not to be influenced by the recordings of *Upload* and *The Book of Water* that have since become available—I clearly remember that actual singing appeared only twice in *The Book of Water*. And I remember, too, the special atmosphere of those arias—typical of Van der Aa's vocal writing—with their combination of sustained notes sung non-vibrato, their sometimes considerable leaps in melodic line, and their quasi-improvised, non-directional rhythms, all informing and seemingly hovering over the ever-present feeling of melancholy. However, and not to my surprise, I did not immediately remember if both arias were sung from the screen or if it was just one of them. Actually, in my memory I had started to doubt whether there was any live singing in the piece at all.

In fact, we hear both arias coming from the screen. In the first, we do not see who is singing. The singing comes from the film, and the song appears as a memory, as it occurs in Geiser's head while he comes across the photo of his deceased wife (Scene 3). In the second, the singer is Geiser's daughter Corrine. We see her in the house in the film, while at the same time we hear her voice (Scene 7). She is sometimes synchronized with her voice, so that she appears to be singing in the house of her father. At other times we hear her singing, but we only see her silent image, with closed mouth, going around the house. The figure of the daughter was incorporated so smoothly into the whole experience that I became indifferent to whether she was projected on screen or performing live on stage. In my memory *she was there*, although I was not sure how exactly. Her presence and the aria she sang constituted the most tender moment of the performance and embodied the warm hug she gave to her father when she finally found him.

My difficulty in remembering the media and protocol of singing is telling. The world we live in has changed, it seems to tell us. The notion of *liveness* still keeps evolving, even as the modes of re/mediation changes. We all learn the new rules and adapt as we evolve. Both *Upload* and *The Book of Water* are about loss—loss as a learning process. They are about how we learn to lose (father, memory, home, body, planet) while at the same time

entering new worlds. The final verses sung by Corrine are optimistic, although they introduce the pain of loss. Despite the rays of divergent light (between digital and analog, life and death, memory and loss) the generosity of the sun is sustained:[6]

My father,
smiles at me in an unknown language.
My father smiles at me.
You diverge here,
your intuitive gaze,
imagined, understood, and lost.
You diverge here,
in shifting shadows,
between sleep and dream.
Eternity,
the sea fled away with the sun,
between sleep and dream.[7]

**Jelena Novak** works as a researcher at CESEM, FCSH, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa. Her fields of interests are modern and contemporary music, recent opera, singing and new media, capitalist realism, voice studies, and feminine identities in music. Exploring those fields she works as researcher, lecturer, writer, dramaturg, music critic, editor, and curator focused on bringing together critical theory and contemporary art. Her most recent books are *Postopera: Reinventing the Voice-Body* (2015), *Operofilia* (2018) and *Einstein on the Beach: Opera beyond Drama* (co-edited with John Richardson, 2019). Most recently she collaborated as a dramaturg at the opera in 17 songs *Deca* (*Children*, 2022) by Irena Popović at the National Theatre in Belgrade. Currently she works on a book *Opera in the Expanded Field* and researches about what it means and what it takes to sing beyond human.

6　This reading of the generosity of a sun that is always giving, and not asking anything in return, is inspired by Oxana Timofeeva's book *Solar Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022).

7　Michel van der Aa, *The Book of Water*, script, unpublished document.