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## Tales of a Technologically Mediated Passion: Re-reading Beineix's *Diva* (1981), Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), and Fellini's *È la nave va* (1983)

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**Abstract:** This essay focuses on three movies from the early 1980s—Beineix's *Diva* (1981), Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), and Fellini's *E la nave va* (1983)—in which the technological reproduction of opera is immanent to the films themselves. That is, the main characters in these movies are portrayed as obsessive fans, who not only attend opera performances or recitals but also listen to operatic music thanks to a technological device, whether a gramophone or a tape player. Does the contrast between the two modalities of experience involve any qualitative change in Jules's, Fitzcarraldo's, or Count of Bassano's passionate engagement with opera? And what is, to begin with, the role played by opera in their lives? Does technological mediation confirm, or does it displace, such a role? In the light of Benjamin's insight into the emancipatory potential of technological reproduction, this article will address the above-mentioned questions while engaging in a dialogue with three recent readings of these very three films (by David J. Levin, Richard Leppert and Michal Grover-Friedlander). In doing so, particular attention will be paid to how far each of the films—and the same can be asked about each of the readings—goes in suggesting that the technological reproducibility of opera may broaden the scope and alter the nature of the operatic experience, thereby challenging the understanding of opera as an art form that might otherwise adhere to an ossified tradition.

### I.

The encounter between opera and cinema represents a challenge for both genres. This assumption, to judge by the state of the art in cinema and opera studies, pervades the work of a growing array of scholars, whom the same question seems both to perplex and to stimulate: how can we make sense of the fact that each of these art forms questions its own fate in the mirror of the other? Significant as this question might be, it goes without saying that the histories of opera and cinema are quite different. The challenge is thus

inevitably twofold. As far as opera is concerned—taking into account that “the death of opera” has long since become a tediously recurrent truism—the encounter with cinema could even be seen as an opportunity of survival for opera. Is this not, by the way, the implicit claim of Marcia Citron's *Opera and Cinema* with regard to “screen opera,” which she construes as “an independent genre that combines opera and technology”<sup>1</sup>?

Be that as it may, the encounter between opera and cinema is a multi-layered issue. As a result, it would be misleading to assume that the task of giving filmic shape to an opera is essentially what it is about. In other words, the various attempts to re-create an opera *as* a film (I am referring to that peculiar object that has been labeled as “screen opera” or “opera-film”) are as relevant, when it comes to pondering the extent to which the medium of film may displace or enrich our understanding of opera in a media-saturated world, as the myriad of movies in which opera features as a crucial theme. Recent work on the interplay of opera and film bears witness precisely to this awareness.<sup>2</sup>

Mediation, to be sure, is a keyword in either case, since opera is a genre whose very existence as a prominent instance of “great art” has relied since the beginning of the seventeenth century upon the prestige associated with attending a performance in an opera house. Seen from such a perspective, “mediation” emblemizes the very possibility of displacing opera within what might be called, borrowing from Rancière, the current “aesthetic regime of arts,”<sup>3</sup> one in which technological reproducibility has multiplied the occasions where a non-operagoer may come across an operatic object (whether in full or in a fragmented form).

Today, such a cultural displacement—which might be interpreted either as bringing about the fall of opera's aura or, in less drastic a fashion, as entailing the acknowledgment that opera, its erudite origin notwithstanding, is capable of various, often conflicting, appropriations—is possible *de jure*. *De facto*, however, this possibility has not been done justice, at least as stimulatingly as it could. Indeed, a huge amount of opera-films have definitely fallen short of expectations, if only because they limited themselves to highlighting the spectacular dimension of opera rather than questioning it (not to mention how literally they often re-represent the plot). The exceptions—a full hand of somewhat experimental opera-films including Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's *Moses und Aaron* (1973), Losey's *Don Giovanni* (1979), or Syberberg's *Parsifal* (1982), among others—, however significant, proved insufficient to contradict the rule.

The situation, in this regard, has not changed that much since Jeremy Tambling commented that though “[o]pera performed live has lost its innocence, since for most operagoers now their primary awareness of the music is not through performance but

through reproduction,”<sup>4</sup> the fact remains that “[v]ideos try to imitate the excitement and the aura generated by a live performance: in that sense they are parasitic, not taking over. They simply mean another manifestation of opera.”<sup>5</sup> Though Tambling has in mind, in this specific passage, films of stage performances, the same would apply to actual opera-films,<sup>6</sup> and, for similar reasons, to a great many operatic films, which remain hostages to the same sort of fascination.

Harking back to the 1980s, when the golden age of opera-film was still far from coming to a close, it is possible to see three films from the beginning of that decade as instances of how opera appears in cinema as an obsessive *Leitmotif* rather than one among other themes. I am thinking of Beineix's *Diva* (1981), Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), and Fellini's *E la nave va* (1983). Indeed, their striking differences notwithstanding, these three films have in common not only that their main characters embody cinema's attraction to opera, but also that technological mediation (taking on the form of a tape player or a gramophone) plays a crucial role in the actual unfolding of their operatic phantasies. This is highly significant for a debate on cinema's representation of opera—not only, let me stress, of opera as an artistic practice, but also of opera as prompting an aesthetic experience (as it is seen and/or heard from the view of the spectator/listener). Hence the question: how does each of these films represent, not only opera as such, but, indeed, the passionate, even obsessive, commitment to it that brings together the main characters of *Diva*, *Fitzcarraldo*, and *E la nave va* into an esoteric, meta-filmic community?

Depending on the film at issue, the answer will certainly differ. Nevertheless, the simple fact of opening up a discussion with that question in mind may lead to new insights into how cinema challenges, and consequently displaces, our perception of opera. By the same token, we should withhold our enthusiasm—at least for now. In fact, if we take a closer look at the scenes showing a technologically mediated experience of opera (or, to be more precise, of operatic singing), it soon becomes apparent that these three films lend themselves likewise to the not so exciting realization that filming technological mediation does not necessarily entail showcasing its potential for displacement. A brief recapitulation of Benjamin's views on the technological reproducibility of art may shed some light on the matter.<sup>7</sup>

According to Benjamin, the technological (in contrast to manual) reproduction of artworks ineluctably brings about the decline of their *aura*—a concept that Benjamin associated with the sense that the authentic experience of an artwork consists first and foremost in an unmediated face-to-face encounter between the spectator and the

original. In other words, as the technological reproducibility of images and sounds allowed for the massification of aesthetic experience in mediated forms, the confrontation with the original artwork became less relevant, due to the independence and mobility of technically reproduced copies.

[W]hereas the authentic work retains its full authority in the face of a reproduction made by hand, which it generally brands a forgery, this is not the case with technological reproduction. The reason is twofold. First, technological reproduction is more independent of the original than is manual reproduction. For example, in photography it can bring out aspects of the original that are accessible only to the lens (which is adjustable and can easily change viewpoint) but not to the human eye; or it can use certain processes, such as enlargement or slow motion, to record images which escape natural optics altogether. This is the first reason. Second, technological reproduction can place the copy of the original in situations, which the original itself cannot attain. Above all, it enables the original to meet the recipient halfway, whether in the form of a photograph or in that of a gramophone record. The cathedral leaves its site to be received in the studio of an art lover; the choral work performed in an auditorium or in the open air is enjoyed in a private room.

The situations into which the product of technological reproduction can be brought may leave the artwork's other properties untouched, but they certainly devalue the here and now of the artwork.<sup>8</sup>

Benjamin saw this as a positive change. He associated it with the possibility of pulling art out of the sphere of tradition and conservatism, of meeting the masses' desire to get closer to things, of replacing “cult value” with “exhibition value” as a framework for aesthetic experience so as to enhance the emancipatory potential of art. Though the very meaning of the “original” is far more ambiguous when it comes to music, theatre, or opera—in fact, there is no “original object” in the case of performative arts, as there is in painting, sculpture, or architecture—the sense of authenticity associated with the concept of aura subsists in the assumption that the co-presence of performers and spectators is a condition *sine qua non* for a fully rewarding aesthetic experience. A Benjaminian approach to opera's technical reproduction would then amount to the exploration of the hypothesis that such a technological twist, rather than leading to the loss of authenticity, might provide a valuable opportunity to tear opera from the sphere of cultural conservatism and foster a democratization (in both quantitative and qualitative terms) of its experience.

The three movies dealt with in this article include scenes in which operatic music is heard thanks to the technical reproduction of sound (the fact that, accordingly, music

takes the lead at the expense of dramatic, scenic or linguistic aspects of opera shall be discussed below). The question thus arises whether or not the trace of a democratizing process is made apparent in those scenes. Our first answer must be rather skeptical, if only because, as I noted above, there seems to be no obvious link in these films between showing a technologically mediated experience of opera and intimating a change in the attitude of the listener toward the object of his/her passion. The fascination for the enthralling power of operatic voice seems to prevail, whatever the circumstances, in the lived experience of the main characters of *Diva*, *Fitzcarraldo*, and *E la nave va*.

A contradiction thus emerges. On the one hand, the mediation of technology is stressed: it provides the device (a gramophone or a tape player) thanks to which Jules enjoys Cynthia Hawkins's recorded performance in private (in *Diva*), the natives of Peruvian Amazon hear an aria sung by Caruso for the first time (in *Fitzcarraldo*), or Edmea Tetua's admirers can still rejoice at the voice of the "greatest singer of all time" after her death (in *E la nave va*). On the other hand, in all these cases, the importance of this technological device ends up being reduced to its instrumentality. The gramophone seems to be exclusively at the service of the very same phenomenon whose aural (and auratic) presence it is supposed to replace: the *unique* voice of the singer. It is as if technological mediation is stressed only to the extent that it conveys the wonder inherent in listening to opera, to the extent that it underlines the ecstatic, magic, or evocative powers of operatic voice.

## II.

Three prominent musicologists, David J. Levin, Richard Leppert, and Michal Grover-Friedlander, have each analyzed one of these movies.<sup>9</sup> Despite the coincidence that they all decided to do so about twenty years after their respective productions, the underlying contexts, motivations, and outcomes of their readings are far from being shared. They interest us here, not in spite, but thanks to their heterogeneity.

### DAVID J. LEVIN'S *DIVA*

Although both Richard Leppert and Michal Grover-Friedlander discuss the filmic representation of the reproducibility of music, David J. Levin's article, "Is There a Text in This Libido? *Diva* and the Rhetoric of Contemporary Opera Criticism," is where the contradictions linked to this representation are more directly considered. Taking into

account that throughout the film Jules (a young French postman, who is also an opera lover and a fervent admirer of the soprano Cynthia Hawkins) is frequently filmed while listening to recordings of operatic music, be it at home or while driving his motorcycle (with headphones), David Levin draws attention to the irony of the “politics of mediation” at play in *Diva*.

In *Diva*, we hear the same aria repeatedly, albeit without any dramatic anchoring. That seems to be part of the point: operatic music, here, is inflected as producing affect *an sich*, something distinct from language. This only underscores the irony of the film's politics of mediation, noted earlier, because it takes mediation (in this case, the tape player) to disavow mediation (in this case, the language of the aria). The tape player, we might say, offers the means by which language is evacuated from the aria.<sup>10</sup>

Apart from analyzing *Diva*, Levin intends to make a broader, meta-critical point. In fact, the scene in which Jules listens to the pirate recording<sup>11</sup> of Hawkins's interpretation of the aria “Ebben? Ne andrò lontana” [“Well, then? I'll go far away”] from Catalani's *La Wally* at his improvised studio, provides Levin with a touchstone to counter what he considers to be the “neo-lyricist” trend in opera criticism and scholarship: the tendency, apparent in the work of authors such as Wayne Koestenbaum and Sam Abel,<sup>12</sup> to favor a highly idiosyncratic, “explicitly lyrical, intensely personal”<sup>13</sup> approach to the genre, focused on the lived experience of the subject rather than on the critical analysis of the object. Such an attitude, or so those who indulge in it would claim, prevents the enthusiasm for opera from being demystified, and ultimately suppressed, by academic rigor. According to Levin, however, “little is gained by purchasing the legitimation of enthusiasm at the cost of nuanced textual analysis.”<sup>14</sup>

Levin is certainly right when he stresses that the decision to focus on the joys and pains of the spectator rather than on the complexity of the operatic text—as if such a move could provide immediate access to the core of the spectacle—is based on a “logophobic” misconception of the link between dramaturgy, spectatorship, and criticism. Nevertheless, in the present context, his views are of particular interest for another reason. Following in the steps of Levin's analysis, one is led to realize that the emphasis on music—the winking at the experience of “losing oneself in music”—may actually serve as an excuse to indulge in a neo-lyricist attitude and neglect critical analysis. After all, if music were the core of the operatic “thing itself,” would not those who obsessively care about the words miss the best part of it? According to Levin, this unsaid

thought is what brings *Diva* close to New Lyricism, and makes of Jules a kind of neo-lyricist *avant la lettre*. Jules, apparently, is mainly interested in opera as music; and Beineix, for his part, seems to take Jules's preference as a motto for the film: somehow, the disappearance of images of opera (in the film) echoes the dismissal of language (in the fields of theory and criticism); the floor is open for music to take the lead, be it at the opera house or at home.

Though I would tend to question whether Jules fully embodies the neo-lyricist attitude towards opera (he strikes me as far too unpretentious a character for that), I concur that the status of mediation in *Diva* turns out to be, to say the least, deeply ambivalent. For Jules, at least at first sight, listening to the pirate recording in private is just a way of prolonging the thrilling experience of attending the recital (as if mediation were unfit, admitting the desirability of such a change, to alter the sense of devotion to the immediate presence of the diva, let alone pave the way for a different, cult-value-free, experience of opera). In short, rather than suggesting new ways of experiencing, interpreting, or appropriating opera, the filmic representation of Jules's technologically mediated experience seems to reiterate the image of opera as an extravagant art dominated by the intoxicating power of music.

Jules holding the diva's robe while listening to a pirate recording of her recital.



All in all, according to Levin, the emphasis on—let alone the claim for supremacy of—music in opera is reprehensible, for it may serve to vindicate the dismissal of criticism. If only for this reason, his article on Beineix's *Diva* contrasts with those written



on Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* and Fellini's *E la nave va* by Richard Leppert and Michal Grover-Friedlander. Comparatively speaking, the latter are less interested in denouncing a certain theoretical trend in opera studies, whatever its flaws, than in fostering a discussion on the place of opera within modernity, namely in relation to cinema—a discussion in which the tension between music, on the one hand, and language, image, spectacle, on the other, plays a rather crucial role.

#### RICHARD LEPPERT'S *FITZCARRALDO*

The technical reproduction of opera (in its aural dimension) is also the issue in focus in *Fitzcarraldo*. A gramophone appears in many sequences of Herzog's film, notably in those shot in the Amazon jungle. What is more, only thanks to the dissemination of music allowed by the gramophone does Fitzcarraldo's dream—building an opera house in Iquitos—come close to coming true.<sup>15</sup> In other words, the possibility of bringing music (incidentally, opera) to people totally unaccustomed to it plays a strategic role in Fitzcarraldo's adventurous enterprise. As Richard Leppert states in the beginning of “Opera, Aesthetic Violence, and the Imposition of Modernity: Fitzcarraldo,” “[t]he *raison d'être* of the endeavor is opera, and the means to this end is opera as well.”<sup>16</sup> The equation is simple. Opera is an end because Fitzcarraldo's goal is the erection of an opera house (where he expects to welcome as many people as possible, especially children from that region). On the other hand, opera is also a means, one rendered operative by the possibility of playing it on a gramophone, insofar as only thanks to the persuasive, not to say manipulative, power of operatic music—to the awe and terror it prompts among the indigenous—is an intermediary stage of his plan surmountable.

The ends—one is used to hearing—justify the means. But this, incidentally, does not prevent Fitzcarraldo from embodying the plainest colonial cynicism, where the natives are colonized “for their own good.”<sup>17</sup> Given that “good,” in this context, means “culture,” we would be not far from hitting the nail on the head if we were to claim that the dialectic between “nature” and “culture,” in relation to the paradoxes of “coercive” modernization, finds itself at the core of this film. It is precisely this dialectic that Leppert tries to shed light on, notably with regard to the role played by music in rendering it cinematically apparent.

To understand how the use of music shapes this dialectic, two aspects are especially noteworthy. First, the fact that “two sound masses, radically different from

one another [Popol Vuh's music, as a non-diegetic background, on the one hand; excerpts of opera, mostly heard diegetically, on the other], establish an acoustic binary that in turn underscores the design of the film's nature/culture narrative."<sup>18</sup> Second, the fact that a tension emerges within the diegetic appearances of opera between it being performed live (in Manaus opera house, at the beginning, or aboard Molly Aida, at the very end), or simply played on a gramophone (in Iquitos and in the jungle). Yet the tension dissolves as soon as we look at the film as a whole. Ultimately, it is as if the opening scenes in Manaus, in which "[t]he opera house sits high like a gigantic altar, a site of art worship, whereupon the sacrifice of nature to culture will be celebrated"<sup>19</sup> somehow sets the stage for the sequences in the jungle, where, as Leppert suggestively points out, "[m]elody and harmony conquer rhythm,"<sup>20</sup> that is to say, where "[c]ulture, serviced by technology, trumps nature."<sup>21</sup>



The gramophone as a means to “appease” and “persuade” the dreadful inhabitants of the jungle.

Eventually, however, the triumph of culture over nature will turn out to be fragile (precisely when seeming definite). Early in the morning of the day following the passage of the boat over the hill, when Fitzcarraldo and the remaining members of his crew are still sleeping after the previous night's celebration, the natives unfasten the boat from the bank of Ucayali River. The Indians, in Leppert's words, “have their own dream, namely, the sacrifice of the riverboat to the gods of the rapids,”<sup>22</sup> a dream embedded in their animistic beliefs that prompts Fitzcarraldo's own dream to fall drastically apart in a premature descent through the “Pongo das Mortes” into Iquitos. Despite the fiasco, Fitzcarraldo still manages to sell Molly Aida back to Don Aquilino, so as to pay for a last

performance of Bellini's *I Puritani* aboard the steamboat—a feat he joyfully commemorates with the help of the “biggest cigar in the world”...

Crucial, if we are to understand Leppert's reading, is his sense that the final scene represents far more than a minor success against the backdrop of a major failure: indeed, the realization of this “substitutive dream in the form of live opera on water”<sup>23</sup> also displays the image of a precarious reconciliation between nature and culture by means of opera—yet not of opera in its spectacular, helplessly kitsch dimension, but of opera in its purely aural aspect. Here is how he describes the sequences that lead to the end of the film:

The fakery is as obvious as the castle scenery is low budget. Nothing is what it seems, apart from the sublime happiness apparent everywhere, including on the faces of the large crowd on the shore hearing opera for the first time. . . . And then the screen goes black. The music continues for a few seconds, after which the volume is cut quickly to silence at a cadence. We're at a full stop, but not at a closure. We have the sense, however momentary, of an ending—indeed, an insistence on it, since the film is literally over at this point, for which reason Herzog placed the credits at the beginning. The reality of the dream meets the alternate reality of the film's end: the house lights return us to the here and now. The dream is kept going only so long as music, which exceeds reality, plays against the perverted rationalities embedded in the film's visual narrative.<sup>24</sup>

According to Leppert, Herzog's emphasis on the aural side of opera—the true one, which Herzog himself could admittedly identify with as an artist—is noticeable at many other points of the film. The scene showing the descent through the Pongo das Mortes—when the torrential harmonies of *Lucia's* sextet gradually silence the thundering roars of the rapids—provides just another example.<sup>25</sup> It is as if Herzog has the gramophone play the role once assigned to the lyre of Orpheus: to appease nature, or if not our fears towards it. *In nuce*: against the threats of nature (as with those of civilization...), the appeasing power of music is still apt. As Leppert puts it, in relation to this very scene, “the sublime visuality of the riverboat in the rapids demands the acoustic hermeneutics of opera for sense to be made of it.”<sup>26</sup>

In a way, the same ambivalence pervades both the film and the essay. Thus, if Leppert, on the one hand, does not shy away from denouncing the entwinement between opera (as the noblest representative of Western “great art”) and domination, whereby he goes as far as to say that “[t]he claim of music—of Western variety—as the

universal 'language' plays out here, if only in Fitzcarraldo's lunatic dream, as acoustic conquistador,"<sup>27</sup> on the other hand, it is the possibility of removing opera from such an equation between beauty and violence, of highlighting "the truth . . . in the evanescent reality of music"<sup>28</sup> that is foregrounded. This presupposes that it is possible to get rid of the "myriad instrumentalities of opera's own material-institutional foundations"<sup>29</sup> so as to decant, as it were, the musical essence of opera.

Herzog's point, in a way, is to mark the fallibility of seeing in order to make audible the truths of hearing: hearing music. The advantage of opera is that it accomplishes both tasks at once. All of its fallibilities and, indeed, its absurdities do not overwhelm the truths of the singing voice, the simple fact that people literally *need* to sing. One might say, I suppose, that it's precisely in opera's lie through which its truth is revealed: that truth is at once acoustic, sublime, and in part utopian. Herzog's film, in tension with its own visually determined documentary excess, points to this alternative—and it's there for the hearing.<sup>30</sup>

In fact, following on the steps of *Fitzcarraldo*, it is as if in order to rescue opera—at least part of it—from instrumental rationality one could do nothing else but resort to the dichotomy between opera *qua* spectacle and opera *qua* music, and side with the latter. Only as music (as a sonic manifestation rather than as an institutional practice) could opera stand for the grandiose uselessness of art. If anywhere, the core of cinema's affinity with opera would lie in the *promesse du bonheur* kept safe within this uselessness, a major trait of beauty at least since the first paragraphs of Kant's third *Critique*. Is this not, by the way, the implicit message behind the title of Herzog's book *The Conquest of the Usefulness*, and, right from the start, the key to understanding why Herzog decided to literally pull a boat over a hill—thus identifying himself as an artist with Fitzcarraldo's megalomaniac fervor—rather than suggesting that same feat in the process of montage?

Irrespective of whether one follows Leppert in claiming that in *Fitzcarraldo* "the 'visual turn' of modern culture is called into question by the aural, not as a supplement of the image, but as the foundation for the insight by which to critique it,"<sup>31</sup> there is nonetheless a detail, concerning the role of music in the film, that is worth further meditation: the fact that the means for subduing the natives consists, not in the visual-spectacular-institutional dimension of opera, but indeed in the purely aural power of operatic singing.

MICHAL GROVER-FRIEDLANDER'S *E LA NAVE VA*

*E la nave va* has, besides the operatic motif, at least one further aspect in common with *Fitzcarraldo*: it narrates a no less adventurous aquatic journey, for which, however, the historically laden waters of the Mediterranean, rather than the primordial flows of the Amazon, appear to provide a privileged background. The journey has a precise purpose, to disperse the mortal remains of the deceased soprano Edmea Tetua near the island of Erimo (her birthplace), which is why an improbable, superbly eccentric crew is to be found aboard the ship *Gloria N(azionale)*, including singers, directors, producers, a wide array of aristocrats, politicians, even the Grand Duke of Harzock, and, last but not least, a journalist, who addresses the spectator, as if in a documentary, and comments on the events aboard.<sup>32</sup> Metaphorically put—the death of the diva standing for the death of the operatic genre—it is the end of opera as an art form that is at issue. But not only of opera; of cinema itself, too. Indeed, as Michal Grover-Friedlander pertinently points out in the last chapter, “Fellini’s Ashes,” of the book *Vocal Apparitions: The Attraction of Cinema to Opera*, the topic of opera’s death provides cinema with an allegory with which to exorcize the thought of its own death.

*E la nave va* is about the death of the carrier of the operatic voice: the death of a mythical prima donna, ‘Edmea Tetua,’ the greatest singer ever. The film allegorizes the death of the singing voice as, in effect, the end of opera. In contemplating the threat of cinema’s end, the film shows this terminal point in another medium. As a funeral procession for the voice, the film manages to place the historically prior event, opera’s own end, alongside its anxiety over the death of cinema.<sup>33</sup>

Grover-Friedlander will end up concluding that in *E la nave va*, “film, without allowing opera to die in its place, rises from the ashes of opera.” The claim raises lots of questions, but what interests me here is how—that is, thanks to which features of opera—the somehow faked emulation of the latter occurs.

As a reminder, it should be noted that a voice singing beyond the death of the body is possible thanks to mechanical reproduction alone. However, the scene in which the ceremony of scattering the diva’s ashes in the sea unfolds, and the travellers, like the spectators (the latter, surprisingly enough, for the first and last time in the film), listen to a recording of the diva’s voice from a gramophone, may turn out to be disappointing. Despite the meaningfulness of the scene, there seems to be nothing particularly

outstanding in that voice; “what *is* striking [on the other hand] is the juxtaposition of the recorded sound with the image of the ashes.”<sup>34</sup> Differently put, “the voice is *made* astonishing through its *mise-en-scène*: it is as though the ashes bring out something inherent in the voice and stand for something acoustic that the spectator is not able to perceive.”<sup>35</sup> There is, Grover-Friedlander maintains, a link between the image of the ashes and the (imageless) sounding of the (dead) voice—a link that is crucial to understanding Fellini’s film in relation to his insights into the alleged deaths of opera and cinema.

The crew of *Gloria N* listening to the Edmea Tetua’s voice in the gramophone during the scattering of her ashes in the sea



Although this scene conveys but a pale hint of the magnificence of the diva’s voice, the fact remains that the power of singing is underlined throughout the film in various, tendentiously anecdotal ways. To cite two instances, the lowest register of a bass proves to be as capable of hypnotizing a chicken as the highest notes of both sopranos and tenors in astonishing the workers (in the boiler room) of the ship. As these examples aptly suggest, the power of the singing voice emerges as just another declination of opera’s spectacular nature. In other words, even though *E la nave va* turns around the myth of Edmea Tetua’s voice, it is the baroque, visually grotesque side of opera that arouses Fellini’s interest and comes to the fore in his film. One could even say that “reducing the operatic body to ashes and emitting a technically reproduced voice is the goal of the film insofar as it allows for everything essentially operatic to happen *around it*.”<sup>36</sup> Crucially, according to Grover-Friedlander, “this is the way in which Fellini’s film takes its power and life from those ashes.”<sup>37</sup> So if cinema (at least Fellini’s) owes to opera

the possibility of coming to terms with the fears of its own death, it is because “[i]n the loss of that divine or mythical world the faces of humanity come to gather and provide the spectacle to which Fellini's cinema is attracted.”<sup>38</sup>

Grover-Friedlander interprets Fellini's obsession with the visual side of opera in a particularly precise way. Her thoughts, incidentally, also imply a certain view of the role of music in opera. This is particularly apparent when she analyses the scenes showing the Count of Bassano watching the projections of a few silent films of the diva.

These short films are not performances but the aftermath of performances or shots of the leisure time between them: sailing on a boat, sending the audience kisses from afar. Receiving flowers, thanking her audience, as if hinting that film can represent those moments belonging to opera, yet not part of an operatic performance, that it can show us *more* than what is shown within the frame of performance. And that happiness lies outside the victimization brought about onstage, with death being the fate of song. . . .

In the process of transposing the operatic singer onto the screen, she had lost her voice. In the move from stage to screen, the image of happiness has come to depend on leaving the voice behind.<sup>39</sup>

Bearing this passage in mind, I would hazard that the projector is at least as important as the gramophone in Grover-Friedlander's reading of *E la nave va*. In these and others points of her book, she follows the path of Catherine Clément in drawing attention to the sacrificial role—both in art and in life—asccribed to the diva. The exploration of the parallel between Maria Callas and Edmea Tetua goes in that direction as well. This fact is crucial, because it shows that there is no contradiction between identifying Fellini's obsession with the visual/spectacular dimension of opera—or even intimating that rescuing the diva from death depends on siding for the image against the song—and endorsing a representation of opera marked by the power of music.

All in all, singing is no less evident in the representation of opera emerging from Grover-Friedlander's reading of *E la nave va* than from Leppert's reflections on *Fitzcarraldo*. And yet, the difference between the two essays is obvious: it consists, as far as music is concerned, in the tension between “favorable” and “unfavorable” appraisals of the musical/vocal dimension of opera. For Leppert, the very possibility for opera to elude, however precariously, the contradictions of modernity, in which image has long taken the upper hand, lies solely upon music. It is to the “aural” component, not to the “iconic” dimension, that opera owes its utopian character—the promise of a life freed from fear, as from the threat of violence that perennially engenders it.



The Count of Bassano watching silent films of the diva in his cabin.

Now this sounds quite optimistic in the light of Grover-Friedlander's analysis, in which music/song is thought of as engendering death, rather than life. Indeed, in “Fellini's ashes,” the voice seems to embody the menacing incommensurability of an “other.” Singing thus appears, less as a *promesse du bonheur*, than as a testimony (not only) of the devastating power of that “other” (but also) of an obscure debt toward it. Whether we associate that “other” (in *Fitzcarraldo*) with the indigenous, or (in *E la nave va*) with women (the diva, i.e. the high coloratura soprano), or even, more generally speaking, with both inner and outer nature, music, or so one is led to surmise, appears to be inseparable from the spiral of violence, coercion, and sacrifice, in which modernity is embedded.<sup>40</sup> So, perhaps, only thanks to image—or rather, more persuasively, to its reincarnation in film—could opera, emblemized by the diva, be rescued. . .

Both readings, I believe, are worth a counterpoint. In that sense, I would maintain that the link between opera and the darker side of modernity is hardly less apparent when it comes to music than when any other aspect of opera is at stake, as keenly as I would avoid equating the power of the image with an antidote against the mortal fate associated with song. Neither music nor image could arguably rescue opera from the clutches of modernity. But, before making such a claim, I would probably be willing to question, too, the extent to which it is fair to assume that opera should be “rescued,” or, in other words, the extent to which the dialectic between guilt and expiation is the best framework with which to put the relationship between opera and modernity into perspective.

Perhaps—and now I am elaborating on a point beyond Levin's, Leppert's and Grover-Friedlander's reflections—one should refrain from binding the fate of opera, as



with any other genre, to a univocal, no matter whether optimistic (progressive) or pessimistic (catastrophic), narrative about modernity. In this regard, one may follow Rancière's claim that both modernist (optimistic, if one thinks of Greenberg), and post-modernist (pessimistic, not celebratory at all, if one thinks of Lyotard) views of art are worthy of being criticized, for they invariably hang on the assumption that the unfolding of the arts follows and somehow reflects the allegedly ineluctable course of history. Against this assumption, it is never too late to brush history—notably opera's—against the grain. Whether, and the extent to which, technical reproduction may relate to this challenge is also what is at stake.

### III.

A comment is needed on the reasons why I decided to *re-read* three films in the light of three readings, instead of *reading* the latter as it were directly, without mediation. At first sight, this theoretical strategy might seem a less obvious, or at least a less common one. This may indeed be so. And yet, it purportedly responds to the necessity of acknowledging the interplay of practices and discourses, of bridging the supposed gap between them, of stressing that certain ways of thinking are no less effective in terms of their consequences—considering the views they promote on this or that issue—than certain ways of doing. Along this line of thinking, there is no reason to consider the reading of a film, in contrast to the film itself, a less pertinent object of inquiry. This strikes me as particularly advantageous in the context of the reflection carried out in this article insofar as both films and readings alike clearly display a set of interpretative assumptions about what opera and operatic experience are ultimately about. To clarify this general point, however, does not exempt me from spelling out what this method has accomplished, as far as the specific subject of this article—the filmic representations of opera—is concerned.

Taken individually, each essay-film pair provided an occasion for a different reflection. Levin-Beineix's allowed for the deconstruction of the myth of immediacy in relation to the question of mediation (in its technological, performative, and interpretative dimensions). Leppert's paved the way for discussing the extent to which opera, especially regarding the technological reproducibility of operatic music, is—or could be said to avoid being—taken as an instrument of coercive modernization. Grover-Friedlander's led us to ponder the ways in which cinema may take opera as a *Doppelgänger* with which to tackle the threat of its own death against the background of modernity's political disintegration.

Taken together, on the other hand, the three readings allowed me to critically discuss the assumptions behind focusing either on the aural/vocal or on the visual/spectacular dimensions of opera. This issue is inextricably linked to the encounter between opera and cinema, and should be discussed, I would argue, in relation to the hypothesis that the filmic representations of operatic experience may provide an occasion to rethink the genre and the modalities of reception associated with it. As hinted in the introduction, the results of my analysis may be deemed modest in view precisely of this hypothesis. And yet, the ultimate, if tentative, conclusion of this article, considering both the films and the readings, is not as homogeneous as it may appear at first sight.

Broadly speaking, in Leppert's reading of Herzog's film, opera seems to have a chance to survive the denunciation of the link between culture and barbarism, because it lends cinema the allegory of an art that, thanks to *music*, resists the spectacular dialectics of modernity. Grover-Friedlander, conversely, intimates that opera provides cinema with the *image* of a phoenix-like rebirth from the ashes, which seems to amount to cinema's own renewal—a thought by which she engages not only with Cavell's sense that cinema inherits from opera, but also with the slightly different idea that cinema renews itself in the light of opera's ever-deferred death. Levin, finally, eschews binding opera to either its *aural* or *iconic* sides, thereby suggesting that focusing on just one of opera's components, in this case music, will inevitably impoverish our view of the genre.

In fact, how would we be able to displace the representation of opera—as I suggested the filming of technologically mediated experiences of opera could enable us to—if we were to essentialize the importance of either music or spectacle in opera? In contrast, it is admittedly the task of the reader of a film either to follow or to reject whatever the actual film might suggest. So the question is not simply: What do cinema's representations of opera amount to in themselves? But rather: What are we to do—as spectators, as readers—with these representations?

As I admitted above, the filming of technical reproduction seems to change very little in the representation of opera's spectatorship in these three films. At least at first sight, the same pattern is reproduced: whatever the circumstances, listening to opera through the gramophone or through the tape player ends up reiterating the sense (seemingly shared by the main characters of the three films) that opera, particularly in its aural dimension, is worthy of passionate devotion. But does this general point amount to implying that the experience of Fitzcarraldo, the Count of Bassano, and Jules are essentially univocal? I would like to give a reluctant answer to this question as a way of

bringing my own reflections to a close. Beineix's—I will not deny it—is probably the most fragile among our trio of films from the early 1980s. In *Diva*, operatic strangeness seems to take on the form of cinematic kitsch with, perhaps, a post-modern flavor. Its plot, by the way, is as intricate as the most confusing *grand opéra*. In fact, meaningless diversions, arbitrary scenes, and stereotyped characters punctuate it. But still, all this notwithstanding, *Diva* is likely to be the film in which the love for opera has less to do with a nostalgic feeling for a vanished and idealized past. This becomes particularly apparent when one considers the manifold characters of the movies. For that matter, Jules is by far the most unexpected of all champions of opera. Whereas *E la nave va* features *la crème de la crème* of the operatic world, and Fitzcarraldo represents a more or less paradigmatic opera lover (more to the extent that he as no other believes in the great virtues of the genre, and less due to his disdain for the philistinism of typical operagoers), Jules, as he timidly steps into the diva's dressing room, strikes me as the truest outsider.

It is nonetheless true that he could hardly be considered less fetishist than the Count of Bassano, or Fitzcarraldo. In this regard, it suffices to recall him gathering the poster and the stolen dress of Cynthia Hawkins together with the pirate recording of her last performance. But, to be sure, his obsession unfolded in slightly different a manner: if the love for opera of Herzog's and Fellini's characters is likely to have its origin in the opera house, Jules is clearly an opera lover, whose encounter with the genre has admittedly been rendered possible by the technical reproduction of sound and image. Further and most crucially, he appears to be the only one who is able to induce his love for opera in someone close to him, incidentally in someone he has quite recently met. In contrast to the inhabitants of the Peruvian Amazon, or to the Italian workers or the Serbian refugees aboard *Gloria N.* (who seem more astonished at the strange manners of the singers than fascinated with the object of their love), the sequences showing Jules and Alba in his studio appears to me as a very persuasive allusion as to how human friendship and enjoyment of art build upon and foster each other.

For brief moments, after giving Alba a quite shortened version of the plot of Catalani's *La Wally*, Jules looks, not at the diva in the poster above them, but at his new friend right in front of him (as he could not, by the way, if sat at her side in a concert house). The viewer will probably lose track of this scene through the complexities of what follows in the film. And yet, the paths it might open up under different circumstances, whether in another film or in life, could not be anticipated, let alone described, in all of their consequences. It may nonetheless be said that the scene

suggests the sense of every spectator being a translator—a translator of the spectacle, incidentally operatic, into the language of a community of spectators. Far from pointing towards a “confessional” view of spectatorship, this conclusive remark means that the role opera might come to play once appropriated, as well as the social identity of the subject of such an appropriation, are not—and could not be—decided in advance.

Jules sharing his passion  
for opera with Alba



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In this essay, I focused on three readings of three movies (Beineix's *Diva*, Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo*, and Fellini's *E la nave va*), in which opera is contemplated, so to speak, through the eyes of cinema. Three movies in which, moreover, the technological mediation of operatic experience is immanent to the film itself. My aim in considering these films together with these readings, it should be clear by now, has been to discuss the extent to which those readings grasp and enlighten—or else miss and overlook—what in those films may be perceived as corresponding to Benjamin's insight into the emancipatory potential of the technological reproduction of art.

Which feelings, ideas, or assumptions do both the films and the readings instil in the spectator/reader regarding opera and its experience? Does it make any difference when the latter is technologically mediated? Is opera, for better or worse, essentially a musical phenomenon? Does any of this have to do with opera's political valences? In bringing these questions together, I have tried to shed light on their interconnections

rather than provide them with a peremptory answer. One suggestion, however, is left reverberating: that, especially thanks to technological mediation, the ways in which opera might be appropriated—no matter how definite the identification of opera as an elitist genre might seem—are anything but settled. In other words, the politics of opera remain undecidable—at least, or above all, when it comes to the modalities of its reception.

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1. Marcia Citron, *Opera on Screen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 6.

2. On cinema's attraction to opera, in addition to various essays, see Jeremy Tambling, *Opera, Ideology and Film* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), especially chapter 2: “Film aspiring to the condition of opera” (41-67), Michal Grover-Friedlander, *Vocal Apparitions: The Attraction of Cinema to Opera* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), Marcia Citron, *When Opera Meets Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), and Jeongwon Joe, *Opera as Soundtrack* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

3. See, for example, Jacques Rancière, *Le Partage du sensible. Esthétique et politique* (Paris: La fabrique, 2000); *Malaise dans l'esthétique* (Paris: Galilée, 2004); and, more recently, *Aisthesis. Scènes du régime esthétique de l'art* (Paris: Galilée, 2011).

4. Jeremy Tambling, “Introduction: Opera in the Distraction Culture,” in Jeremy Tambling (ed.), *A Night in at the Opera*. Media Representations of Opera (London, John Libbey & Company, 1994), 11.

5. Ibid.

6. The ultimate—one might say anecdotal—example of this fascination with opera's *hic et nunc* is admittedly Giuseppe P. Griffi's production of *Tosca* (1992), which was not only performed and filmed at the “authentic” locations in Rome, but also broadcasted at the “right” times of the day.

7. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” [third version], trans. Harry Zohn, and Edmund Jephcott, in Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland, and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 251-283.

8. Ibid., 253-254.

9. See David J. Levin, “Is There a Text in This

Libido? *Diva* and the Rhetoric of Contemporary Opera Criticism,” in *Between Opera and Cinema*, ed. Jeongwon Joe, and Rose Theresa (New York: Routledge, 2002), 121-132; Richard Leppert, “Opera, Aesthetic Violence, and the Imposition of Modernity: Fitzcarraldo,” in *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema*, ed. Daniel Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer, and Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 99-119; Michal Grover-Friedlander, “Fellini’s Ashes,” in *Vocal Apparitions: The Attraction of Cinema to Opera* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 131-152.

10. Levin, 127.

11. The plot partially turns around this tape, which is accidentally exchanged *media in res* with a very similar-looking tape (containing the audio register of a phone call between a police detective, who is involved in a prostitution scheme, and one of his “employees,” who has just been murdered by a member of the gang). As a consequence, Jules finds himself being persecuted (by both policemen and criminals) for having this tape in his possession, as he is for possessing the actual recording of Cynthia Hawkins’ recital... The reason is simple: another group of “gangsters” is planning to make big money with what they expect to be the “unique” pirate copy of that very recital. The plot, based on Delacorta’s novel, is rather complicated, and involves, last but not least, Jules meeting Cynthia Hawkins, as well as their brief, though reciprocally meaningful, love affair. The centrality of opera notwithstanding (the passion for opera is both the main trait of Jules, who characterizes himself as a “lyric,” and the common interest between him and two eccentric characters, an Asian “Lolita” and her French mentor, who come to help Jules escape the risky situations he finds himself in), the film actually constitutes crime fiction.

12. See Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen’s Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Poseidon, 1993); Sam Abel, *Opera in the Flesh: Sexuality in Operatic Performance* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996). For Levin’s discussion of their views, see Levin, 123-124.

13. Levin, 122.

14. *Ibid.*, 129.

15. As the reader might recall, *Fitzcarraldo* accompanies an Irishman (Brian Sweeney “Fitzcarraldo” Fitzgerald) living in Peru at the dawn of the twentieth-century, who passionately loves opera and, especially after listening to Caruso in Manaus, dreams of building an opera house in Iquitos. To render this eccentric ambition financially achievable, he decides to enter the rubber business and therefore buys a steamboat, with the support of his friend and lover Molly (a brothel owner who partially shares his love for opera), which he christens, not by chance, “Molly Aida.” His plan is as logically simple as practically megalomaniac: in order to reach an unexplored region with plenty of rubber trees in the margins of the Ucayali River (an Amazon tributary) and, by the same token, to avoid the rapids (the so-called “Pongo das Mortes”) that stand in the middle of the river’s course, he decides to follow instead the Pachitea River upstream up to the point where the two tributary rivers almost meet. There, after convincing the natives to help him, his intention is to pull the 320-ton steamboat over the hillside from one river to the other. From there on, everything would go smoothly: he would collect rubber, descend the river, and wait for the money to roll in.

16. Leppert, 99.

17. *Ibid.*, 103.

18. *Ibid.*, 100.

19. *Ibid.*, 101.

20. *Ibid.*, 105.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*, 107.

23. *Ibid.*, 109.

24. *Ibid.*, 110.

25. Here is how Leppert describes the latter scene: “Our eyes inform us of disaster and the violent triumph of nature; the soundtrack, however, describes the triumph of culture by means of the harmonies of intertwined voices, never mind the crisis that brought these voices together in song. As if to make the matter clear, Herzog gradually eliminates all sound except that of the sextet. The now-silenced

diegesis, visually dramatic, demands acoustics, but hardly opera, except of course in the illusory reality of a film about dreams. The beauty of Donizetti's acoustic wave, undisturbed by the chaos and turbulence surrounding it, is in fact matched by the sublime visual beauty of the riverboat rebounding helplessly from one side to the other of the roaring river (ibid., 107-8).

26. Ibid., 108.

27. Ibid., 105. The following comment is also meaningful: "Fitzcarraldo's gramophone shares a functional relation with the stereo system onboard Kilgore's attack helicopter in *Apocalypse Now*, except that Caruso attracts, whereas the acoustic blasts of *Die Walküre* repel and terrify." (Ibid., 105).

28. Ibid., 111.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid., 113.

31. Ibid., 112.

32. The action takes place in 1914, immediately before World War I. This is not a meaningless chronological detail, given that a link is suggested between the circumstances of this journey and the outbreak of the war. In fact, in the middle part of the film, a group of Serbian refugees, which appears to have been floating along in the sea, is given shelter aboard *Gloria N.*, although, as it is being tracked down by Austrian authorities, it is not allowed to remain aboard until the end of the journey. Eventually, right after the funeral ceremony of scattering Edmea Tetua's ashes in the sea, the transfer of these unattended travelers from the Italian ship to the Austrian navy occurs. This is precisely the point when everything goes vertiginously wrong, for a young Serbian throws a grenade (out of indignation against Austrian authoritarianism, or else just to impress the young lady he has fallen in love with, who also happens to be in the boat transporting the two of them), which causes an Austrian canon to fire automatically, leading to the battle between the two navies, and – as suggested in the film—to World War I itself.

33. Grover-Friedlander, 132.

34. Ibid., 136.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid., 152.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid., 145.

40. *La Haine de la musique* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1996), by Pascal Quignard, takes this perspective to its final consequences. Not only does the French writer propose a broad, historically suggestive periodization of Romanticism, in which he includes music composed between 1789 and 1914 (see Quignard, 266), but he also delineates a long term genealogy of music from its ancestral uses in hunting to its occurrences in Auschwitz (see, especially, ibid. 215-256). Here is how Quignard puts it more generally: "Music rapes the human body. It forces anyone to stand up. Musical rhythms fascinate bodily rhythms. The ear cannot close itself to music. Being a power, music associates itself with any power. It is essentially inegalitarian. Audition and obedience are bound together" (ibid., 221 [my translation]).