

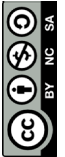
Technology, Audio-visual Adaptation and Cultural Re-education of Opera

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Considering the various uses that cinema has made of opera, this paper focusses on the new exhibitive and distributive mediums of musical theatre on the big screen today. This ranges from live broadcasts to the use of the screen in contemporary opera stagings. The paper raises several challenges, but particularly analyses the common market shared between opera and the audio-visual industry, from the perspective of the opera business in theatres. After defining the technological and commercial features that transform these broadcasts into sustainable film products, the focus is on ascertaining the audio-visual properties that establish opera simulcasts as a new media event in sociological terms.

Once the technological perspective has been explored, the paper goes on to an aesthetic analysis of the audio-visual formats offered by combining opera and cinema. This analysis also offers an explanation of some of the sociological behaviours adopted by people attending films in theatres. Determining the characteristic narrative quality of opera enjoyed by audiences can facilitate a new exploration in the film industry of the future relations between these traditional art forms.

Keywords: mass media, screen, opera, new technologies, new literacies, multimedia.

AUDIO-VISUAL OPERA

Cinema originated as a scientific experiment but soon became a popular pastime. Opera went through a similar process, it being born as an experience

and academic discussion around the re-emergence of classic theatre and soon becoming something popular and the standard of what would be later called mass culture. Over the years, both opera and cinema developed production systems of their own (Wright, 1957: 8) and a particular star system, as well as groups of devotees (fans) (Bordwell and Thompson, 1993: 15; Citron, 2000: 2). It was a matter of logic that they met, and that they did so when one of them (opera) was beginning to experience decay in terms of creativity, while the other was becoming strongly rooted in public life (Tambling, 1987: 1-10). Opera and cinema share more than one could imagine at first glance. To begin with, neither is an art in itself, but a synthesis of other arts (Bordwell and Thompson, 1993; Smith, 1993). Proof of this lies in the difficult definition of each of them from an essentialist perspective. According to Youssef Ishaghpour, opera is music in motion (Ishaghpour, 1995: 30), whereas, we could add, cinema is action in and with music. In any case, these definitions are not satisfactory for understanding each of these art forms. In fact, the defining concept of opera is the mediation of feeling through singing.

In films, on the other hand, such mediation can be found in the relation between time and movement, as Gilles Deleuze would put it. Bearing in mind all of the above, the concept of intermediality is becoming increasingly central when referring to the opera show (Chapple, 2006). Indeed, opera is in itself an intermedial and intermedia artistic form (Scemama and Roussel, 2007). The music medium (vocal and instrumental/orchestral) converges with dramatic literature (libretto), so that the operatic performer becomes the mediator of such intermediality (Chapple, 2006: 81).

In previous articles we established the relations between opera and cinema taking into account the existing bibliography. It is worth noting, however, that such relations sometimes exploit opera as a narrative excuse in cinema when we refer to:

- A. Diegetic resources: using music that “can be seen” by means of a visible sound agent, such as a singer or a sound reproduction device.
- B. Narrative purposes: using opera music as a narrative basis for a parallel action to the one that is being told.
- C. Opera as a world: narrating a story based on the staging of an opera, a biopic, etc.
- D. Opera films

An extensive survey of opera films is beyond the scope of this article, though it does merit further study. Nevertheless, we will provide some directions based on work we have done on previous occasions, and what other authors have addressed with greater or lesser success (Radigales and Villanueva, 2019). We define opera films as any film which displays an operatic staged title with the means one would associate with cinema (discontinuous editing, different shots, camera movement, special effects, among others) and with the singers or actors lip syncing on a soundtrack that has been previously recorded.

It is well known that opera has been filmed since the era of silent films. However, it is the producer Daniel Toscan du Plantier who, ever since Gaumont,

must be acknowledged as the father of Film Opera in its modern sense (Chion, 1997: 169-170). Needless to say other names should be mentioned, such as the Italian Carmine Gallone or Clemente Fracassi, who over three decades (1940s-1960s) marked a turning point in the effort to bring opera to the big screen.

Nevertheless, opera film is complex and full of difficulties, which explains why there are so few adaptations of opera into cinema in comparison with those of canonical musicals (Villanueva-Benito and Lacasa-Mas, 2017). The high production costs and the relative minority to whom these products are targeted means that film opera is not produced abundantly. Yet when one trawls through film archives or through the annals of cinema history, one can find many more productions than what might be expected.

In this category we shall also mention the so-called *documented opera*, which includes recordings at opera houses during performances or taking advantage of a production that has already been edited. These are often films with a limited distribution and mainly regarded as testimonial documentaries; a clear precedent of live stream for TV.

Filming an opera is a complicated process, although there are some products of undeniable quality which arose in the 1970s, such as *The Magic Flute* from Ingmar Bergman (1974), among many others. These have been analysed in depth in recent studies (Radigales and Villanueva, 2019).

Leaving aside that the operatic show must be seen and enjoyed in a room (theatre) with the visual and acoustic conditions of any artistic event which has been conceived as a live performance, nowadays another sort of audio-visual format linked to opera seems to have become very fashionable: live streaming from opera theatres, which can also be seen and enjoyed from cinemas. This has only taken off in the last decade, so there is a lack of material from which to define the genre, although others have begun to do so (Radigales, 2013; Radigales and Villanueva, 2019).

Opera in cinemas has led to new challenges for both languages. It offers not only a new way of broadcasting but a new form of literacy, so that what was traditionally labelled as an elitist art form is transformed into one which belongs to mass culture. All in all, the challenge is set. And what is most significant is the fact that opera and cinema are inextricably linked; a union which keeps growing and transforming thanks to new technologies and the many possibilities they offer.

PARADIGM SHIFT AFTER DIGITALISATION

Since the beginning of satellite broadcasting or since Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT from 1999 onwards, at least in Spain) was established, the role of passive viewers sat in front of a television medium has changed, although television “involves primarily a lifestyle—a room in a middle-class apartment and a frozen dinner, which the TV set symbolizes and facilitates” (Danto, 2003: 203).

The possibilities of digital technology make on-demand television available and repurpose cinemas into broadcasting spaces for music or sport events, either

live or deferred. Thus, that hybrid and metamorphosed art, which does not belong to a sole technical discipline, looks for and finds interactions to reach a better informed and more demanding audience. However, the question we ask ourselves in this paper should make us decide whether this information and these demands are directly congruent with passive consumption or whether, conversely, they encourage participation.

In any case, the situation necessitates further study into the new reality of art and culture, as it undoubtedly modifies the programme. Analysis of the application of new technologies to classic arts—which, significantly, share scenic and narrative resources typically associated with audio-visual codes—can give way to new forms of expression.

It is in this framework that opera, synthesis art because of its narrative and representative capacity and potentiality (Smith, 1993), offers perception experiences close to audio-visual products like cinema, television or the internet. It is therefore not surprising that during the first two decades of the 21st century opera has embraced an audio visualization process not only to try and reach new audiences but also to ensure its survival. This is why it is exploring artistic stagings and markets associated with cinema or theatre, in which there is similarly active emotional participation expected from the audience, despite physical passivity (Morris, 2010).

We live in an era of change and transformations. Today opera consumption is not limited to attending a theatre, let alone listening to a phonographic recording; it is enjoyed in many different ways, regardless of the format. Instead, the undisputedly audiovisual quality of opera engenders a continuity between the theatre room, the cinema and the living room. In this context it is worth highlighting the five characteristics intrinsic to multimedia mentioned by Ken Jordan and Randall Packer in their study (Packer and Jordan, 2001: 30):

- Integration
- Interactivity
- Hypermedia
- Immersion
- Narrativity

All of these characteristics correlate with the new parameters within which the ritual of opera consumption takes place: integration and immersion of the new media, interaction with the possibilities and opportunities of such media, first contact with the new methods of the format (hypermedia), immersion in the world of digital image and high quality sound systems, and alignment of the narrative concept belonging to the work of art (opera) with the format supporting it.

Thus opera on screen functions according to the same codes emerging out of postdramatic theatre, which uses the projection of images in motion to portray a multiform discourse (Klich and Scheer, 2012: 12). This discourse manifests both in some stagings of contemporary operas with the use of a screen and outside operatic theatres. Therefore, what has been staged and what has been screened

lead to a first conclusion: media enhances a new conception of live shows (Klich and Scheer, 2012: 67).

A variety of factors lead us to surmise that we are in a crossroads era, as a result of technology changes, which derive from the audio-visual industry. Some thirty years ago, the compact revolutionized music thanks both to its portability and the potential to choose track order. Such portability also characterised DVDs a little later, which enabled interaction with the extra material; viewers were now allowed to choose subtitles, little documentaries or even, in some cases, to watch the audio-visual product from different viewing angles (Villanueva-Benito, 2014). An interesting example, no longer available, is the DQ (*Don Quijote en Barcelona*) DVD. It contains the recording at the Gran Teatre del Liceu of this opera from José Luis Turina, with Josep Pons as the conductor and directed by Carlus Padrissa and Àlex Ollé from Fura dels Baus (2000).

Computer science and the internet have equally contributed to making opera much more accessible, cheaper and customised, even with the booming of social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram). These initiatives have been promoted by some theatres in order to broadcast performances which could be seen from any connection point on the planet.

As if conforming to Marshall McLuhan's theory by which the medium is the message, opera is nowadays becoming more self-aware and is conscious of the medium through which it is performed. Theories of Media Literacy (Potter, 2005: 18) support the idea that media informs, educates and entertains. When an artistic discipline develops into an agent or object of this literacy, it becomes conscious of the medium itself. In the case of opera, understanding this can be difficult, if we look at the genre from a static and anachronic perspective. Yet if we accept that all art evolves both in form and content, it will have to be acknowledged that opera has entered the 21st century in conjunction with the development of audio-visualisation. Theatres are equipped with sophisticated image and sound systems, which not only record DVDs or images distributed via computer or virtual media but also take advantage of an internal system which allows, for instance, that viewers who are late can follow a performance with good sound and image quality (even when there is a TV director). Furthermore, operas which are released to be commercialised for a domestic audience seem to have replaced accompanying CDs with DVDs. The CD still exists in pirate editions there for illegal recordings or for re-editions of phonograph classics, as well as for those new releases which cater for repertoire rarities, for instance, opera. Also worth mentioning are the Open Opera experiences at universities, or cinema screenings of operas which are being staged in the main theatres of the world.

Hence the beginning of a new technological era has engendered a change in both the production and consumption of scenic arts. Such change responds to the sociological phenomenon of the new global user; educated in information technologies, which are based on the assumption of future realities of cultural business and new forms of expression which combine art and technology together with various aesthetic tastes. Consequently, we are not far from seeing opera displayed in cinemas, although things have started to change.

The International Workshop on Opera and Video, held in the University Politècnica of Valencia / Institut Valencià de la Música on 22nd-23rd March 2011 and organised by Wenceslao García and Héctor P. Pérez, prioritised mainly technical aspects of opera screening. The workshop explored mediations between the stage and the screen in live streaming, space and time in opera videos, the “making of” on DVDs from the perspective of new communicative strategies in opera or the production criteria for opera in digital formats. In addition to professors in Europe and the US, the conversations and lectures were co-hosted by heads of the audio and video departments in different opera theatres, such as María Ferrando Montalva (Palau de les Arts in Valencia) or Pietro D’Agostino (Gran Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona). The topics addressed during the workshop were, among others, the consequences and social impact of audio-visual technologies in opera recordings and broadcasting, the influence of technology dissemination in the context of opera stagings and also the analysis of new aesthetic factors associated with technology. Hence, the technical aspects prevailed over the artistic ones, which proves that form arouses greater interest than content in this aforementioned crossroad era.

This crossroads has to do with the new practicalities of opera in its audio and video formats. Isabel Villanueva defines these as the televisual logic and the cinematic logic (Villanueva, 2014: 33s.). The former refers to the legacy of TV, not as a broadcasting device but rather taking into account its own language and production system, which present a mediated reality (Villanueva, 2014: 34). The cinematic logic, on the other hand, refers to a narrative concept in which aspects such as time construction, continuity, authenticity and even subjective aesthetics are key (Villanueva, 2014: 50).

However, in this so-called crossroads upon which it is worth insisting, a communicative element takes place, one of interaction between the transmitter (the product) and the receiver (the viewer). And clearly the latter plays its own role, which has contributed to the process of switching from the analog audio and video consumption of cinema and television to the revolution of digital contents and consumption online. The physical spaces devoted to audio-visual display still need to turn a profit and do so thanks to audiences who maintain an interest in cinema, while others prefer individual and cheap consumption offered on the net and therefore do not visit actual cinemas. Yet, opera being offered there has reversed this situation.

In this sense, musical and audio-visual markets look for new audiences and users to educate and cater for in this changing social context. The experiences held in the last decade show that an artistic convergence is possible. Additionally, the fusion of art forms has produced new markets to experiment with; opera can be considered to be an act of discovery for those new sectors of the public who are now alert to new releases that link opera with a traditional cinematic experience. Hence an obvious change of scenery:

The present invades the past, updates it, makes it immediately perceptible to the eyes of an audience, essentially young, which does not need to be greatly historically educated (Lipovetsky and Serroy, 2009: 168).

AUDIO-VISUALISATION OF PERFORMING ARTS, A MEDIUM FOR CULTURAL RE-EDUCATION

These days the use of digital images produces new cultural experiences, such as performances which involve internet streaming and the collaboration of various theatre and musical companies working on the same text. Digital image enables the broadcast of material from any given place, and even recreates any world in real time, so that the possibilities of performing arts are multiple.

Not surprisingly, the main countries promoting culture like the UK, Germany, the US or Italy see in the fusion of music, image and new technologies a source of creative possibility. It is worth adding that this shift in mindset has accelerated in 2020 due to the circumstances of home consumption imposed by the global COVID-19 pandemic. The power of merging music-image-virtualisation has become a priority for most cultural institutions which have closed their doors this past year. These can only emulate authentic experiences of artistic perception out of their natural spaces. Nevertheless, the rise in this cultural practice has become a global phenomenon which has not only involved big TV platforms or music streaming services but also traditional cultural facilities. Access to their institutional websites and social media grew exponentially thanks to a “reinvention and renovation” of their digital content.

In the Report on Museums Around the World in the Face of COVID-19, UNESCO confirmed that European and US museums had undertaken 30% of new digital activity, as in Museo del Prado (Madrid), which counted about 130,000 visits, whereas the average previous to the pandemic was around 20,000 daily visits. Figures show that resilience is one of the main features of cultural organisations. One of the most recent examples of this is the digital “resurrection” of the master in the Salvador Dalí Museum in St Petersburg, Florida. Thanks to the AI app created by Goodby Silverstein, which includes more than 6000 pictures and historical documents related to the painter’s life, visitors can interact with him in real time from their mobile devices. Another example is *Tertulia en Casa*, created by Tertulia Cinema in Cuenca, Ecuador. This mobile cinema organisation creates an interactive room guided by a cinema critic in which screenings are linked to other virtual experiences happening around the country, all of them artistically connected with the content of such films. Last but not least, the *Museo en Casa*, which was released early in 2020 by the Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires (MALBA), stands out as an example of one of the first complete virtual tours which, now from home and for a fee, offers the chance to access a detailed explanation of the recreated works of art. This translates into an easy way of offering education through art in order to upgrade the online experience.

Evidently, the current climate for this field is innovative and creative, which opera is contributing to by opening up to new audiences. It does so by using a wide range of platforms, for instance the popularity of videos in which the singers (many of whom are amateurs) surprise people in a market, train station or shopping centre, or playing live music and uploading the reaction of fellow citizens on the net). Additionally, opera houses and festivals have organised

live broadcasts or performances from public squares, parks or beaches with big screens. The market of audio-visual communication is significant precisely in this process of social re-education or cultural democratisation.

On another note, cinema is also facing both a re-thinking process and format changes; from HD to 3D. Not to mention that, during the first decade of the 21st century, the internet has revolutionised its delivery system and the markets continue to analyse social uses and possible educational opportunities when it comes to culture consumption. Notwithstanding, viewers remain interested in visiting museums, which preserve the records of human memory that cannot be supported by audio-visual or phonographic material. And here is where opera and audio-visual supports stand. They transform the resulting product into an ontological object, even if the viewer's interpretation is influenced by what they are obliged to see: the producer's perspective imposes a selective representation of what is being staged (Morris, 2010: 96). The recording, regardless of the medium through which it is shown, or the television or film broadcast, are witnesses of a particular way of looking at the operatic staging, not the staging itself (Cenciarelli, 2013: 203-223).

In any case, who knows if we are witnessing the birth of a new artistic form, which consists of using image projected in motion (film, video, television) in stagings of opera houses all over the world. Video artists such as Bill Viola work with directors like Peter Sellars in productions like *Tristan und Isolde*, première in Paris during the 2004-2005 season. The same opera, seen in 2008 in the Metropolitan, included parallel videos from Patricia Sweete, so that the performance became more of an experimental film rather than a conventional opera staging (Heyer, 2008: 593). Another example is the production of Rossini's *La Pietra del Paragone* recorded in the Theatre du Châtelet (Paris, 2007), conducted by Christophe Spinosi and directed by Giorgio Barberio Corsetti and video-artist Pierrick Sorin. Using blue screen technology, the singers were filmed with 15 digital cameras and different scenes were projected live, showing the different stories happening on the stage. It was released on DVD (Naïve). The format through which these parallel stories are shown make Peter Sellars' and Bill Viola's production of *Tristan und Isolde* broadcast on TV or release on DVD impossible. The performance must be seen live, regardless of the video-graphic discourse being incorporated, parallel to the staging.

Often, the use of images as another form of disseminating opera in audio-visual media becomes a "third channel" partly because of the challenges posed by certain audio-visualisations. Live performances, which will be recorded and later stored and distributed are not just going to be lost forever but, according to Christopher Morris when referring to Philip Auslander, "a reaction to mediatized culture, a gesture toward a recovery of what now appears to be lost" (Morris, 2010: 100). Hence a new format emerges, and one which can result in show and post-show, if one bears in mind that some of these products even include bonus contents such as the "making of", documentaries or interviews with the artists on stage during intermissions, as in an auto-documentary. Nothing else but "the postmodern emphasis on the production process itself" (Heyer, 2008: 596).

Yet one thing is for the audio-visual product to be consumed in a private space and quite another for opera film to be shared in a cinema, which makes it exceptional:

Simulcasts to cinemas involve spectatorship within an explicit audience setting (Morris, 2010: 106).

There are more and more viewers who enjoy opera without going to the opera house. Even if the spectator feels curious about the operatic element, whatever the reasons (laziness, social prejudice, etc.), they do not set foot in Liceu, Real, Met or Scala. The chances of watching and listening to lyric at a reasonable price without sacrificing a live performance, or going out without the need of entering a theatre where some still think there is a dress code, is a global reality which affects a good number of the main western cities that engage in the so-called democratisation of opera. Living the emotions of a live performance is made possible by means of an act that Cees Hamelink calls *cultural synchronization* (Morris, 2010: 107). The reasons, as stated above, are diverse, but other than economic factors, social prejudice or travelling time, they can also include the desire to enjoy the performance in a theatre via hypermediation and therefore the wish to experience the audio-visualisation of an opera as such.

With the image projected on the big screen, in the dark, production and sound turn what otherwise would be a mere broadcast into a true audio-visual show. A show in which digital technology offers the chance to go beyond the established convention, not only regarding the connection between opera and cinema, but also within opera itself. One might question the extent to which digital image and sound (although always heard through speakers) can capture the authenticity of the real-life musical act, particularly the operatic one. This is especially relevant when opera, which is a dramatic genre, cannot edit or select frames from a live performance as would a film production. These are questions we will not address at this point, but which raise new ones. Could opera become an art consumed throughout the 21st century thanks to this audio-visualisation process? Is opera in cinemas the solution to the physical decentralisation all artistic shows must accomplish today? Will new and complete virtual experiences tested by the cultural industry in the past months allow immersive and interactive solutions for the operatic show in cinemas?

The live national broadcast, on 30th December 2006, of *The Magic Flute* from the Metropolitan in New York, in high definition, was a milestone for broadcasting from the New York theatre (Heyer, 2008: 592). Following the concern about its dissemination including the film version, a new way of understanding opera was born, first in the US and later all over the world, in the context of what the opera house itself called DBC (Digital Broadcast Cinema). The Live from the Met programme is just one example of this initiative, which is sponsored by the New Yorker giant and offered in around 50 countries, with a benefit of 8 million dollars. The production is stunning, with thirteen cameras used in every show, not just for the broadcast but also for its later DVD distribution (Busquets, 2010: 44-45). Inspired by this initiative, more and more cinemas around the globe, most

particularly in 2020, rent their premises with adapted spaces to keep the economic source of opera alive. They broadcast both live and previous performances from opera houses such as the Metropolitan, but also Scala in Milano, Gran Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona or Covent Garden in London, among others.

The impact of opera in cinemas (yet not in films) is a fact since less than a decade ago (Cenciarelli, 2013: 203-223). In Spain, the exhibitors Cinesa and Yelmo schedule programmes which broadcast operas from Italy, Belgium, Germany or from Spanish opera houses such as Real in Madrid or Liceu in Barcelona. The programming criteria can be as artistic as those from colosseums. As José Batlle, Chief Operating Officer in Continental Europe for Cinesa, puts it:

We carry out a similar job to that of an artistic director in a theatre. From the list of titles available through the companies in charge of selling the broadcast rights, we choose those we think can work better. We tend to prioritise the most popular ones (Sánchez, 2008: 37).

CONCLUSIONS

The musical leisure and entertaining field is facing an unprecedented change, which should be explored further and analysed in depth in other studies so that new guidelines can be set for new cultural education initiatives. This is why one of the main objectives of this paper is to describe the reality of opera today: a reality that involves the audio-visualisation of opera as a tool for art information, entertainment and education. Additionally, the birth of new formats, prompted both by distributors of audio-visual products (especially DVDs) and opera houses, has led to the dissemination of shows through more advanced means, such as DBC (Digital Broadcast Cinema). The portrait described here opens the door to reflection upon the emergence, consolidation and presence of a new way of understanding entertainment in the long term. A key part of this understanding is the relationship between the high culture element of opera and the new format through which it is shown; two mediums which have not previously been linked. Furthermore, a new relationship between media and the viewer/receiver is observed.

Opera consumption must be mediated so that new conceptions and ways of receiving (and even enjoying) quintessentially live operatic performances are enhanced: the screen has now become part of the scenic discourse at the service of any given title within its repertoire.

After the global paradigm shift in 2020, the effects of new consumption habits will have to be analysed. This will provide insight on new ways of broadening the remit of opera thanks to audio-visual platforms as well as new patterns of audience empowerment in terms of knowledge, awareness and reflection. This will allow opera houses to schedule their future activities, keep a traditional performing art alive and make way for social education measures in the convergence of languages and expressions that could have an impact on the cultural excellence of certain communities.

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