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Sublime Voices, Tragic Identifications. On Two Opera Re-enactments in cinema

Abstract: This essay explores the intersection of opera and film, focusing on the cinematic transcodification of opera and its emotional effects on the audience. Specifically, it examines the phenomenon of "tragic re-enactment," where a character relives and performs an opera scene in an intensely personal and emotional way, often identifying with a female role and voice. Through a close analysis of two film examples, Jonathan Demme's *Philadelphia* (1993) and David Cronenberg's *M. Butterfly* (1993), this essay reveals how opera re-enactments can disrupt predictable schemes and ideological constraints, creating a unique bond between characters and audiences. It also explores the cultural and political implications of these re-enactments, particularly in relation to gender stereotypes, colonialist domination, and sexual fantasies.

Keywords: Opera, re-enactment, cinema, transcodification, tragedy

Transcodifications of opera and cinema

Being a hybrid and mixed genre, opera is characterized by continuous and multifarious transcodifications, which involve its conception, realization, and reception. A first and more obvious level is the adaptation of a literary text to the musical score: a significant example of "intermedial combination,"[1] which gave birth to legendary artistic collaborations (Da Ponte/Mozart; Hofmannsthal/Strauss) and to equally legendary double talents (Richard Wagner). A second level, the ultimate realization of an opera in a performance, operates in the synergy of different arts and creative approaches involved (conduction, direction, acting, scenography). Finally, the operatic performance as a whole, this "total work of art", can be rewritten and transcoded by several arts and media, such as literature, cinema, theatre, and video art.

Film and opera have an ambivalent relationship: they have a common multimodal structure, they played a similar social and cultural role as popular genres (we cannot forget that cinema begun only twelve years after Wagner's death), and they may often share an aesthetic based on strong emotionality and polarized

1 Rajewski 2005, 51–53.

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conflicts: the "melodramatic imagination,"[2] which was a crucial element in the birth of cinema. On the other hand, filmic adaptations of operas are often unsuccessful or unsatisfactory, because the two media have radically different narrative rhythms and the final product is likely to underplay the visual level (with several significant exceptions, of course). The most interesting intersection lies in what David Schroeder calls "the operatic impulse in film:"[3] a series of stylistic and thematic strategies, which include a wide range of operatic modeling, images, borrowing and quotations.

We will deal with a very specific kind of cinematic transcodification of opera, which I call "tragic re-enactment": a character re-lives and performs, in an extremely personal way, an opera scene which we hear in the soundtrack, in an excited emotional dimension dominated by death. In the two examples we will examine (Jonathan Demme's *Philadelphia* and David Cronenberg's *M. Butterfly*), a male character strongly identifies with a female role and voice, bringing together issues of gender, aesthetic response, and emotional involvement.

Since our two cases deal with operatic reception and identification, I would like to mention first a topical scene in literature and movies: the main character attending opera for the first time; a widespread motif which often highlights an aesthetic response of overwhelming empathy. We find a canonical and effective example in Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary:* in the second part of the novel, after the traumatic end of her first extra marital affair, Emma goes to Rouen to attend a performance of Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor.* Two dense pages depict her immersive and multi-sensory reception, focused on every detail of the intermedial performance:

> She gave herself up to the lullaby of the melodies, and felt all her being vibrate as if the violin bows were drawn over her nerves. She had not eyes enough to look at the costumes, the scenery, the actors, the painted trees that shook when anyone walked, and the velvet caps, cloaks, swords – all those imaginary things that floated amid the harmony as in the atmosphere of another world.[4]

After the entrance of the tenor, Flaubert then highlights Emma's total identification with love suffering: "She recognised all the intoxication and the anguish that had almost killed her."[5] This visceral and intense reaction abolishes any border between fiction and reality, bringing her to an even more regressive aesthetic expe-

2 See Brooks 1995.
3 See Schroeder 2016.
4 Flaubert 1919, 230.
5 Flaubert 1919, 231.

rience of the opera, compared to her previous experience with sentimental novels. She "gave a sharp cry that mingled with the vibrations of the last chords", and finally "the mad idea seized her that he [the tenor] was looking at her; it was certain. She longed to run to his arms, to take refuge in his strength, as in the incarnation of love itself, and to say to him, to cry out, "Take me away! carry me with you! let us go! Thine, thine! all my ardour and all my dreams!""[6]

Flaubert's pattern of literary transcodification of opera and its emotional effects recurs in a very successful romantic comedy, the film *Pretty Woman* by Garry Marshal (USA 1990). In this case the identification is more direct and precise: the protagonist, Vivian Ward, a Hollywood sex worker (Julia Roberts), attends, together with the wealthy businessman who hired her (Richard Gere), the most iconic opera about a redeemed prostitute, Verdi's *La Traviata.* This famous cinematic opera scene is, as a matter of fact, a summary: it alternates three moments of the three acts with shots and close-ups on Vivian's face, first in a radiant smile, then deeply moved, and finally openly crying. After this operatic experience she will break her "no kissing" rule and will allow herself to fall in love.

Opera as catharsis: Callas' voice

This passionate, intense, and empathetic reception of opera is the perfect background to understand our transcodifications, which radicalize this pattern, transforming it from a passive spectatorship to an active performance: a re-enactment (not by chance a term at the core of contemporary studies on empathy).[7] Released in 1993, Jonathan Demme's *Philadelphia* was the first mainstream Hollywood movie to deal with the AIDS pandemic and with the related theme of homophobia. Its historical value for the visibility of the gay community is hard to deny; nevertheless, the movie appears somehow too didactic and edifying, especially since it describes in a quite Manichean way the legal struggle of the protagonist Andy Beckett (Tom Hanks) against the large corporate law firm which fired him; a struggle unanimously supported by his family, friends, and the family of his Latino partner (Antonio Banderas). With its sublime, emotional tragic force, the opera scene disrupts any predictable scheme and any ideological constraint, creating a unique bond between Andrew and his Afro-American lawyer, Joe Miller (Denzel Washington): an "operatic tutelage", according to Charles I. Nero.[8]

6 Flaubert 1919, 234.

7 See Stueber 2006.

8 See Nero 2004.

At the beginning the scene shows Andrew and Joe discussing their strategy for a Q&A session at the court. After asking Joe about his familiarity with opera, and receiving a negative answer, Andrew begins to explain and comment a well-known aria from Umberto Giordano's *Andrea Chenier, La mamma morta* (act 3), sung by Maria Callas, walking and trembling around the room. Through most part of the scene, the camera is roosted on his shoulders, close to the drip: we do not follow his point of view (the so called "ocularization"), but the subjective effect is even stronger, because we are so close to his body, that we really feel his trembling, while we perceive his facial expression, his crying, his broken words, and his explosions. Andrew starts by roughly translating the words of the aria for Joe ("this is Madelaine who's saying now during the French Revolution the mob set fire to her house and the mother died…"), but soon deviates, highlighting more and more the emotional situation of the character and so involving his listener, ("Do you hear the heartache of her voice, do you feel it, Joe?"), describes a precious detail of the music ("Ah, this single cello.."), and exalts the passage of the text from personal suffering to transfiguration into oblivion and universal love, which is at the core of his identification ("It was during this sorrow that love came to me. It said live, still. I am life […] I am oblivion, I am divine […] I am love. I am love"). This thematic and expressive change is amplified by the visual style and by chromatic effects: at the beginning the scene is grey and realistic, but it changes gradually into a dark, dramatic red, that comes from the fire in the background. Andrew moves hence from "commentary to ventriloquism:"[9] from a passionate explication to a full emotional re-enactment; in the vocal climax, "he becomes too physically engulfed in the aria, pacing, throwing his head back, gesturing and grimacing."[10] The identification derives from a certain parallelism: in the opera Maddalena is a young aristocrat, who pleads for the life of the revolutionary poet Andrea Chenier, the title role, evoking her suffering during the revolution and celebrating the cathartic, regenerating force of love. Andrew is a wealthy and successful lawyer, devastated by AIDS, but convinced that this last legal struggle against homophobia can give an ultimate sense to his life.

In two dramatic moments the basic focalization on Andrew alternates with two shots on Joe's moved face, in a bluish tonality the first one, in a dark red the second one, as if he were at the end totally assimilated into Andrew's glowing passion. Joe's reception of Andrew's operatic re-enactment is a key point: it plays an important role in the semantic system of the movie. Joe stands in for the average spectator of this mainstream movie, who is not an opera fan: at the begin-

9 Schroeder 2016, 242.

10 Schroeder 2016, 246.

ning he is slightly homophobic, accepts the case after a long hesitation, and then changes gradually, becoming more and more involved in Andrew's suffering. To watch a dying person who acts and sings "I am life.... I am love" has inevitably a strong psychological impact. As in *Pretty Woman*, the opera scene reverberates on the following narration: Joe appears more emotional and empathetic with his family, and the bond with Andrew provoked by the opera re-enactment will increase, till the participation to the final mourning; a moving and beautiful closure, dominated by some home movies from Andrew's childhood.

Philadelphia exploits a widespread stereotype, which, as usually, was transformed into an identity symbol, profoundly interwoven with camp aesthetics: the gay opera lover, or opera queen. This complex connection was brilliantly studied by Wayne Koestenbaum in a book appeared for the first time in the same year as our movie, 1993: *The Queen's Throat. Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire.*[11] Moreover, the movie uses as soundtrack an iconic singer, Maria Callas, whose life still fascinates various artists (suffice it to mention Marina Abramovich's recent performance *The Seven Deaths of Maria Callas*). Koestenbaum devotes a chapter to Callas as a gay icon:[12] a theme at the core of a 1985 drama by a Terrence McNally, *The Lisbon Traviata* (1992). In the case of *Philadelphia*'s peculiar operatic transcodification, Callas' vocal style perfectly embodies its extraordinary tragic potential: her sublime, expressive voice is full of contrasts and dissonances, and is able to exploit and transfigure even the technical imperfections (a typical feature of the sublime aesthetics).

A masquerade of femininity

The opera scene in *Philadelphia* is a splendid microcosm which enlightens the entire movie but remains isolated as an autonomous episode. On the contrary, David Cronenberg's *M. Butterfly* (USA 1993, again the same year) can be defined as a movie on opera transcodification, especially if we truly exploit the multilayered nature of this term, which involves expressive and communicational levels, as well as cultural and political ones. On the expressive level, it is a movie on operatic performance between East and West, which culminates in a tragic re-enactment of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*; on the cultural level, it is a movie on gender stereotypes, colonialist domination, and sexual phantasies: the transcodification of opera on stage and into film goes along then with complex cultural and political

11 Koestenbaum 1994. See also Robinson 2002, 157–169; Emanuele 2006, 12–15.

12 See Koestenbaum 1994: 134–153.

transcodifications. Based on a play by the Chinese American playwright David Hwang, also author of the screenplay, *M. Butterfly* retells a true story which took place in 1986: a treason trial of a French embassy attaché and his partner, a Beijing opera singer. Bernard Boursicot, the French diplomat (who in the movie bears a quintessentially French name, René Gallimard, if we think of the rationalist philosophy of Descartes and of the most canonical French publisher) declared that he wasn't aware that his partner was a man and explained the scarce likelihood of this situation with a classic orientalist stereotype: the shy and remissive nature of Chinese women. The ignorance about the sex of the Chinese singer (Song Liling in Hwang-Cronenberg) is maintained for a long part of the movie as well, although the Chinese theatrical praxis, which prescribes exclusively male actors, could be well-known. The stereotype of the oriental remissive woman has been the starting point for Hwang's play, which does not deal intensively with opera. On the contrary, Cronenberg's movie exploits Puccini's music throughout its soundtrack, and thematizes the psychological mechanism of operatic reception. One could say that the process performed by Andrew Beckett in the perfect microcosm of *Philadelphia*'s opera scene, from the role of listener and commentator to the full re-enactment, is the same that is performed by René Gallimard in the macrocosm of *M. Butterfly.*

At the beginning of the movie, set in Beijing in 1966, we watch Gallimard who attends an opera recital devoted to *Madama Butterfly:* his first contact with the uncanny Other who will disrupt his life, Song Liling. As Joe in *Philadelphia,* Gallimard admits his total ignorance of the opera; during the first lines of the dialogue with Frau Baden (Gallimard's friend who gives him the basic information about Puccini's plot), we begin to listen to Butterfly's voice; as a matter of fact, it is a recorded version of a European soprano, Marcelle Couture: as Serena Guarracino points out, the seductive voice exceeds the gender binarism.[13] During the filmic summary of the opera recital (a sampling of the three most famous arias, as in *Pretty Woman*), the camera fluctuates around the audience and pans left to right on the stage where Song Liling is singing; after three shots and reverse shots, it finally zooms from a medium distance on Gallimard's face: we see what the protagonist sees (song from a long distance). The culminating shot of this crucial scene shows Gallimard that moves his body forward to see better, immersed into a profilmic light, that creates a dramatic contrast. This body movement and Jeremy Irons' intensive glance condense and proleptically anticipate the metamorphosis (Cronenberg's obsessive theme, by the way) at the core of the movie. René Gallimard is not only transformed from a superficial spectator to a passionate listener and

13 See Guarracino 2011, 195.

viewer, like Emma and Vivian; the scene also depicts the awakening of a disruptive desire towards the image of an oriental woman; a desire which will become more and more obsessive, bringing him at the end to a re-enactment of Butterfly's destiny, which is also a reversal of ethnic and sexual roles. The final, true metamorphosis will transform Gallimard in Madama Butterfly. Teresa De Lauretis synthetizes this scene in a very effective way: "he is transfixed, for the light that shines in his eyes seems to come from inside him, as if he were suddenly lit up by an internal source – desire."[14]

There are two other key scene, in which Gallimard appears as opera spectator: the first one, still in Beijing at the Chinese opera, where he can finally discover a different theatrical tradition, characterized by a popular participation, emphasized by several shots and close ups; the filmic style is very simple and traditional: it alternates distant static shots of the stage, and reverse medium shots of Gallimard, whose face is a peculiar mixture of emotional involvement, curiosity, surprise, fascination. The second one takes place in one of the most famous Western opera houses, Palais Garnier in Paris in 1968: this time the camera is more mobile, pans slowly along the sumptuous architecture, the very different audience, and finally from Gallimard to the stage; this time his face is openly crying, because he is living the melancholy phase of the lost object. After the reunification of the couple and its arrest, a theatrical trial, and a violent confrontation with Song's male gay desire (Gallimard denies every other involvement: "I am a man who loved a woman created by a man. Anything else falls short"), the finale of the movie is the culminating point of a radical deconstruction of Gallimard's sexual fantasies. It is a very effective parallel editing, which alternates Gallimard's last performance in the prison and Song's flight back to China (the very last shot will be devoted to this elusive male Butterfly); an alternation in the visual track, while the soundtrack is characterized by the continuity of Madama Butterfly's most famous aria, *Un bel dì vedremo,* the aria that expresses her monomaniac fantasy of eternal love and her infinite, tragic longing for an inadequate American husband.

Gallimard prepares very carefully his re-enactment in front of a mesmerized homosocial male audience: kimono, wig, and a complex make up (red, black, and white); at the end he will look very similar to the heavily rigged Western soprano in Palais Garnier, and to the canonical Italian soprano who sings in the recorded version we hear in the soundtrack, Mirella Freni. The make-up of the face is put in relief, in a long close up: Gallimard does it in front of a small mirror, an object with a strong meta-cinematographic and psychanalytic value. Using a shard from a mirror, which takes the place of the traditional *seppuku* used by Butterfly, Gallimard

14 De Lauretis 1999, 317.

will commit suicide in a particularly pathetic moment of the aria by Puccini, after a long monologue which shows his total identification with Butterfly as a colonialist fantasy. The reversal is now total: "The once mighty Western man is reduced to a pathetic figure in drag slumped on the prison floor in a heap of colored rags, without even the homage of a majestic panorama paid by Visconti to the protagonist of *Death in Venice.*"[15]

Gallimard's opera re-enactment shows the phantasmatic and fetishist nature of his erotic passion: a masquerade of femininity created by two men, deconstructed by the disruptive and seductive power of the female voice and by the empathic force of musical performance transcoded by the multiple gazes of cinema.

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15 De Lauretis 1999, 324.