Opera as hypermedium

Meaning-making, immediacy, and the politics of perception

Havelková, T.

Citation for published version (APA):
Havelková, T. (2017). Opera as hypermedium: Meaning-making, immediacy, and the politics of perception.

S<small>UMMARY</small>

Opera as Hypermedium: Meaning-Making, Immediacy, and the Politics of Perception

In this study, Bolter and Grusin's (1999) concept of hypermediacy serves as a starting point for an enquiry into contemporary encounters between opera and the media. The concept was primarily developed in relation to new media, yet it has also resonated in theorizations of intermediality that deal with the use of film, video and digital technologies in theatre and performance (e.g. Chapple and Kattenbelt 2006). Hypermediacy has been defined in terms of multiplicity, awareness and enjoyment of mediation and representation, and a "windowed" quality, with windows opening onto other representations and other media. In Bolter and Grusin's conception, it is one part of the double logic of remediation, according to which new media present themselves as refashioned and improved versions of older media. The other part of the logic is "transparent immediacy," driven by the desire to let the medium disappear in favor of the thing represented. I draw on the concept of hypermediacy to approach contemporary opera on both stage and screen (and in between). I work with three case studies that all epitomize the characteristics of hypermediacy within the operatic context: the operas *Rosa* (1994) and *Writing to Vermeer* (1999) by Dutch composer Louis Andriessen and British filmmaker Peter Greenaway that were first staged at De Nederlandse Opera in Amsterdam, and a film version of the opera *Rosa* made in 1999 for Dutch television.

Bolter and Grusin emphasize the interplay of hypermediacy and transparent immediacy, but they also endow hypermediacy with a critical potential *vis-à-vis* the representational media that strive for transparency, and theatre theory has paralleled this by pointing up the media-conscious and critical aspect of intermediality. My discussion of opera as hypermedium has been motivated by an interest in how contemporary opera participates in the critique of what has been perceived as the dominant modes of representation in Western media and, more generally, the larger artistic and theoretical discourse on the politics of representation and perception. In the course of this study I examine several critical claims that have been made with respect to hypermediacy, intermedial theatre and opera, before offering my own take

on what the politics of hypermedial opera may consist of. I am intent on distinguishing between what I understand as effects of immediacy, and those aspects of hypermedial opera that, under specific circumstances, harbor potential for a critical intervention.

Unlike some theorizations of new media that emphasize their newness, as well as terms such as "digital opera" (Sheil and Vear 2012) or "postopera" (Novak 2012, 2015) that foreground the novel aspects of contemporary opera, the concept of hypermediacy, with the pertaining notion of remediation, makes it possible to recognize the continuity of mechanisms that cater to the "desire for immediacy" (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 34) across different art forms and media, old and new. Conceptualizing opera as hypermedium involves a particular understanding of its relationship to the operatic past, and situating it within a specific media genealogy, which involves, among other things, Dutch seventeenth-century painting, modernist collage and photomontage, and the "cinema of attractions" (Gunning 1990). And, in turn, the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* may be understood as part of the genealogy of contemporary hypermedia. In this sense, hypermedial opera may be perceived as a "preposterous" cultural practice (Bal 1999), which (re)thinks opera in and for the present.

I approach the operas I analyze as "theoretical objects" that engage with past and present cultural practices, and may also be said to converse with the theoretical discourses of scholarship. I suggest that, by actively relating to the operatic past within the context of hypermediacy, they draw attention to aspects of the operatic genre that may have been overlooked or suppressed in its earlier theorizations. I am particularly attentive to how hypermedial opera resists the conception of opera as drama (Kerman 1988, Dahlhaus 1989a), foregrounding what Till (2012) has termed, after Nietzsche, the Dionysian elements of opera. Insofar as I am concerned with thinking beyond the dramatic concept, my understanding of opera as hypermedium is related to theorizations that have posited a historical turn away from drama towards contemporary forms of theatre and performance, the most prominent among which is Hans-Thies Lehmann's (1999, 2006) notion of "postdramatic theatre." The conceptual shift of focus from opera as drama to opera as hypermedium has three interrelated theoretical consequences. First, it is opera on stage or screen, rather than the operatic score that becomes the center of analytical attention. Second, the shift from page to stage and screen also entails a change of focus from word-music relationships to sound-image relationships, which is why in

this study, I approach opera as an audio-visual event or object. And third, rather than searching for dramatic totality under the auspices of music, approaching opera as hypermedium highlights the multiplicity of its modes of expression, without granting any of them primacy over the others. It thus allows opera to become a "vehicle for a critique of discursive homogeneity and stability" (Levin 1993, 10).

My concern with effects of immediacy that contemporary multimedia, theatre and opera are able to produce stems from the observation that the desire to let the medium "disappear and leave us in the presence of the thing represented" (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 6) is in operation not only in the modes of representation associated with transparent immediacy but also in many of the contemporary cultural practices and theorizations that are presented as alternatives to these modes of representation. It may also be discerned in theorizations of theatre and opera, which often evoke the notions of "liveness" and "presence" to get at the (unmediated) materiality of the stage event, usually with reference to the bodies and voices of the performers. As Bleeker (2008) has pointed out, while the ontological foundation of oppositions such as representation and presence, meaning and materiality has become deeply problematic after Derrida, they continue to be played out on the contemporary theatrical stage, and "as effects they are most present and most impressive" (21). In this study, I am intent on these and other effects of immediacy as they are produced in hypermedial opera by both the media of reproduction and the "live" elements of performance, and in their various interactions. In other words, I pay attention to how the "desire for immediacy" identified by Bolter and Grusin (1999, 34) is present in both contemporary operatic practice and the pertaining theorizations of opera, theatre and performance. If hypermediacy and intermedial theatre have been associated with the ability to expose acts of mediation and the effect of media transparency, I am also concerned with how, in the operas I discuss, strategies of immediacy are exposed (as well as exploited) that are characteristic of hypermediacy and "postdramatic" theatre.

I approach the effects of immediacy, and conceptualize opera as hypermedium more generally, in terms of how the relationship between the spectator-auditors and the audio-visual event is established and shaped. In this regard, Fried's (1968) discussion of theatricality and "presentness" has been instrumental in my understanding of the role of temporality in forming this relationship and producing effects of immediacy. Where meaning-making is concerned, I draw on the concept of allegory as it was formulated by Owens (1984), Benjamin (1977), and de Man (1979),

which draws attention to the temporal aspects of the meaning-making process, and foregrounds the role of the perceiver in the act of meaning production. It allows for approaching the relationship between the spectator-auditor and the audio-visual event through a particular conception of reading (Bal 1999), informed by speech-act theory and the linguistic concept of deixis (Benveniste 1966). Speech-act theory and deixis have also proved pertinent where the relationship between the spectator-auditor and the audio-visual event has been theorized from within the framework of visuality. I rely on Bleeker (2002, 2008) to analyze acts of positioning in hypermedial opera in terms of an address by means of which the spectator-auditor is offered a "point of experience" (Gorbman 1987, 2) on what is presented on stage. I demonstrate that, where multimedia events such as opera are understood as speech-acts, reading and positioning necessarily involve music, and sound more generally.

Overall, my discussion often starts from concepts developed in literary theory and the theory of visuality, where the issues I am concerned with have been explored the most thoroughly, and which I then rethink in terms of audio-vision within the operatic context. While increased attention has recently been paid to music and sound in the theatre, as well as the operatic voice, these have often been considered relatively independently of, or even in opposition to, the other elements of performance. In this study, I have been committed to approaching opera as a multimedia experience, not least because, in the operas that I discuss, the visual (as well as textual) component is particularly striking. Moreover, the stress on the alterity of sound often obscures ways in which it produces effects similar to those associated with vision, which is why I am intent on how sound participates in mechanisms that have primarily been theorized in relation to text and image. Yet, I also demonstrate how attention to music and sound may subvert claims made in relation to the image alone.

The political potential of contemporary multimedia, theatre and opera has often been related to a critique of the Western representational regime, which has mainly been theorized in terms of visuality, with reference to the concepts of perspective and the gaze. This critique has inspired the search for alternatives in terms of sound, as well as an advocacy of liveness. The latter was the most famously formulated by Phelan (1993), who has been criticized for positing an "ontology of performance" separate and independent from the "economy of reproduction" (146). On the one hand, I rely on Auslander's (1999) critique of this position to approach liveness as a particular effect of immediacy produced by hypermedial opera. On the other hand,

like Phelan, I locate the political potential of hypermedial opera in the possibility to reconfigure the relationship between the perceiver and the perceived, self and other. And like Blau (2007), another advocate of the "difference in liveness" (542), I associate it with a particular physiological sensibility to the body (or thing) perceived, bound up with awareness of the body's vulnerability, of temporality and mortality. I suggest, however, that such sensibility is not contingent on an encounter with a live body on stage. Following Miriam Hansen's (1987) illuminating reading of Benjamin's "Artwork Essay" (1969), I rather concentrate on how it may be incited by the media of reproduction.

Within the conceptual framework that I have just outlined, each of the four chapters engages with different strategies and theoretical claims pertaining to immediacy. In chapter one, I deal with the suggestion that opera's material effects may be associated with the embodied singing voice, which has the ability to operate "beyond signification." In such theorizations, interpretation or reading of opera is contrasted with listening to opera in performance, and opera's material effects are opposed to its processes of meaning-making. A draw on Shoshana Felman's (2003) reading of Austin's theory of performativity to suggest that opera's material effects may be ascribed to the excess produced in the dialogic situation of meaning-making, which involves not only language but also opera's other systems of signification. I argue that hypermedial opera's tendency towards allegory, and in particular the way it is employed in *Rosa*, draws attention to the dialogical nature of operatic meaning-making, as well as opera's inability to produce "a coherent, monological message" (Owens 1984, 225). To put it differently, if, as Levin (2007) has suggested, opera is characterized by a "constitutive representational unruliness," a "discursive surfeit" that leaves opera "always in excess of itself" (26), it may be argued that it is this surfeit, this unruliness that is responsible for opera's material effects. By contrast, I interpret the perception that the singing voice operates "beyond signification" as an effect of immediacy, with the help of Kramer's (2002) notion of the "musical remainder."

In chapter two, I engage with the contention that hypermediacy offers a multiplicity of viewing positions (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 84), and that intermedial theatre invites its observers "to find their own paths through the pluri-focal networks of sings, worlds, messages, and meanings" (Boenisch 2006, 115). What tends to become obscured in such formulations is the way the spectator-auditors' attention is guided through the multiplicity of media. Moreover, where intermedial

theatre is concerned, there is the implication that, while perspectives presented by the incorporated media are played out on stage, theatre itself remains perspective-less. Such theorizations witness to the fact that, as Bleeker (2002, 2008) has recognized, multiplicity of perspectives may create an effect equal to the absence of perspective, appearing to grant a more direct access to what is presented on stage. Following Bleeker's theorization of looking in the theatre, I concentrate on the position that mediates in the relationship between the spectator-auditor and the audio-visual event, and analyze how it is established and how it may become obscured within the context of hypermedial opera. Bleeker's approach, and in particular the concept of "absorption" that she develops based on Fried (1980), makes it possible to identify an effect of immediacy that works beyond the notion of transparency of the medium, the distinction between dramatic and postdramatic theatre, as well as the opposition between theatre and the media of reproduction that it incorporates. I concentrate on the stage production of *Rosa* to demonstrate, in particular, how the effect of absorption may be achieved by way of music (and by means derived from traditional operatic dramaturgy) within the multiplicity of visual representations typical of intermedial theatre and hypermediacy more generally.

In chapter three, I address the opposition between liveness and mediatization, which runs the risk of equating mediatization with mediation, and understanding theatre and performance in terms of a lack of both. I analyze how the difference between the live and the mediatized is constructed within the context of hypermedial opera, calling on *Writing to Vermeer* as my case study. I demonstrate how oppositions such as original and copy, material presence and representation, which have been dismantled in theory, are productive as analytical tools in approaching the effect of liveness. Relying, among others, on some classic film sound theory (Lastra 1992, Doane 1980), I show how the effect of liveness may be a function of a particular relationship between sound and its source, and especially voice and body, in intermedial theatre and opera in particular. Where some opera scholars have played up the discrepancy between the voice heard and the body seen in opera (Abbate 1993, 2001; Novak 2012, 2015), I am attentive to how an apparent unity of voice and body is maintained within the context of hypermediacy, and to what ends. My discussion in this chapter clearly illustrates how attention to music and sound, or more precisely to audio-vision, may undermine observations based on the image alone. I show that, in *Writing to Vermeer*, the critical distance in the visual

representation of women is undercut by the perceived unity of their voice and body. This helps me interpret the alignment of liveness with women and domesticity in the opera. I conclude that the association of liveness with femininity and an "organic" unity of voice and body supports a traditional configuration of gender difference, and thus subverts critical claims made with respect to liveness as well as the embodied singing voice.

Chapter four pays attention to the feeling of fullness and satiety of sensory experience that, according to Bolter and Grusin (1999), hypermediacy achieves by multiplying the signs of mediation. I am intent on distinguishing this "immediacy that comes through hypermediacy" (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 81) from a bodily, intersubjective relationship between the perceiver and the perceived with which I associate the critical potential of hypermedial opera. To articulate this distinction, I evoke Susan Buck-Morss' (1992) reading of Benjamin's "Artwork Essay" (1969), which she contextualizes with the help of the twin notions of synaesthetics and anaesthetics. The latter makes it possible to connect the immediacy of hypermediacy to the critique of manipulation of the sensorium in modernity encapsulated in the concept of phantasmagoria, which I address, specifically, through Adorno's (2005) critique of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*. This connection offers a critical perspective on theorizations of new media and new forms of opera in terms of immersion and embodiment, as it draws attention to how specific effects of immediacy are remediated within the contemporary context. The idea of synaesthetics gestures towards the potential, recognized by Benjamin, of a renewed sensibility to the perceived, which I approach through the notion of "sensory mimesis" (Buck-Morss 1992) or "mimetic embodiment" (Marks 2002). Following Hansen's (1987) interpretation of Benjamin, I suggest that this sensibility may be attained through a particular mode of reading related to the concept of allegory, and that it may only be experienced in a fragmentary fashion. The possibility of bringing about such sensibility by way of hypermedial opera is exemplified by particular moments from *Writing to Vermeer* and the film version of *Rosa*, which inform my reading of theory in this chapter. While it may be argued that, in the age of digital media, "new aggregations of the visual, auditory, haptic and olfactory senses" are being created (Connor 1997, 221), a multisensory, embodied mode of experience that would carry a critical potential may remain a rare occurrence.