Singing corporeality: reinventing the vocalic body in postopera
Novak, J.

Citation for published version (APA):
Novak, J. (2012). Singing corporeality: reinventing the vocalic body in postopera

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
Chapter 4
Operatizing the Film: Body without Voice and Voice without Body

In part 2 I am interested in the ventriloquial relationship between bodies and voices that appears as the result of purposely obtained de-synchronization. My theoretical objects are two postoperas in which de-synchronization between what is seen and what is heard on stage plays a central role: La Belle et la Bête by Philip Glass and Writing to Vermeer by Louis Andriessen, Peter Greenaway, Saskia Boddeke, and Michel van der Aa. In both of those pieces several bodies refer to a single singing voice simultaneously. In La Belle et la Bête the live singing voice ‘belongs’ at the same time both to live singers on stage and projected film characters. In Writing to Vermeer triplicated acting characters on stage ‘share’ the same voice. A similar situation happens to the live singing body and its simultaneous video projection in Scene 2, when the character of Saskia first appears, singing live and video-projected at the same time.

Philip Glass’s opera for ensemble and film La Belle et la Bête was composed for his own Ensemble alongside Jean Cocteau’s film of the same title (1946), which itself is based upon Jeanne-Marie Le Prince de Beaumont's 18th-century fairy tale. The film in this situation resembles a ventriloquist’s dummy: muted, all sound from the film removed (including the music originally composed by Georges Auric), but with a sound whose source is elsewhere – synchronised through the singers and the live playing of the Philip Glass Ensemble. Glass synchronises the singing voice and instrumental music to the film image of the speaking body, and he achieves an unusual operatic result that relies on the logic of synchronization and its multiple embodiments, between what is seen and what is heard, opera and film, live and reproduced, human and animal. It is not in the singing style that a significant change is marked in Glass’s piece compared with, for example, French neoclassic operas; what has changed is the status of the vocalic body and its function in the opera. It reveals a new methodology in the creation of an operatic work that might expose the voice as a replaceable object, reinventable, and possibly ‘transplantable’ to another body.

245 La Belle et la Bête is the second part of the operatic trilogy that Glass made using Jean Cocteau’s movies, a trilogy in which he is concerned with the relationship between opera and film. It includes: Orphée, “a chamber opera in two acts for ensemble and soloists” (1993) and Les Enfants Terribles, “a dance opera for soloists, ensemble and dancers” (1996).
My investigation of how the reinvention of the singing body has been done in this case and what its consequences might be will rely on the body–voice relationship purposely obtained through (de)synchronization. I will show that the body-voice relationship is central to this as it reworks the opera and its world. The (de)synchronization of the singing body and the voice in this case indexes the power of this opera to examine representational mechanisms of both film and opera, while using them to change its own status and economy.
I will first show what it means to operatize the film, to reveal the concept and procedures on which *La Belle et la Bête* is based and which affect the body–voice relationship. This will be followed by a discussion of synchronization in relation to dubbing and playback: I focus on questions on the looseness of synchronization between the operatic singing bodies and their (dis)embodied voices in this case, and the ventriloquial dimension that exists between them. I explore (de)synchronous relations between the presence of the body and of the voice in *La Belle et la Bête*, and the implications that a reinvented body-voice construct produces. I also demonstrate, with the help of Giorgio Agamben’s theory, how the relationship between man and animal embodied in the Beast is represented vocally, and that despite all the efforts to synchronise image and sound the gap between the body and the voice remains. I discuss this gap in opera in the context of ventriloquism. I use Michel Chion’s theory of the acousmatic voice to show how estrangement of the voice that appears to come from elsewhere than its apparent source produces meaning, and questions opera’s potential to use other media and their mechanisms of representation. Finally, I postulate a new model for the conceptualization of the body-voice relationship in this piece through analogy to how Rick Altman uses the concept of ventriloquism in film theory: the operatic music composed by Philip Glass is a ventriloquist who takes someone else’s ‘dummy’ (moving images of Cocteau’s film in this case). Glass’s music is attached to Cocteau’s film in synchronization to create the illusion that the singing is produced by the characters of silent film.

Before proceeding to the analysis, here is the plot of this fairy tale. A merchant father has three daughters, of whom the two elder are mean, but the youngest one, La Belle, is beautiful and lovable. On a journey home the father gets lost in the woods, enters the enchanted Beast’s castle, and picks up a rose for La Belle there; however, the rose belongs to the Beast who becomes enraged when he discovers that the flower is missing. The father is set free, but under the condition that one of his daughters will come to take his place, as a sacrifice in his stead. It follows that La Belle arrives at the enchanted castle, first horrified by, but gradually falling in love with the Beast. Her love saves him from his curse, the spells which have trapped him in beastly form, allowing him to be transformed back into a prince; and as often happens in fairytales, they continue to live happily ever after.

246 I understand the term ‘operatized’ in analogy to the term filmed. The opera could be filmed, made into the medium of film. In analogy, the film, or the painting could be ‘operatized’ - made into the medium of opera.
Operatizing the Film

There have been many examples of filmed operas, where the film has been based upon the story of an already existing opera, and with the existing operatic music. Normally after the film has been shot and edited, music and singing are synchronised to it. So, there is a ‘new’ film to which ‘old’ music is attached. The reverse of this, making an opera of a film, is presented by La Belle et la Bête. The procedure of operatizing a film goes in the opposite direction to filming operas. In this case Glass took an extant film and composed new operatic music for it. Although at first sight the final result of these two procedures might look similar – in both cases we see moving images synchronised with music and singing – there are striking differences, since moving images that are being made to match the sound (filmed operas) carry different meanings from the inverse, where sound has been made to match the image (operatized film). I would even claim that filmed operas primarily question the medium of film and its ability to explore different relationships between sound and image, while operatized film rather belongs to the world of opera and its reinvention. Glass himself underlines that La Belle is the piece of music theatre:

There are moments when Beauty is on the screen and our [the Ensemble’s] Beauty is looking up at her, and I could almost cry. Then there’s the scene where the Beast is dying and our Beast is singing, and the two of them together make you realize that this is a music-theater experience, not just a film. There will never be a film of the final, synchronized version of this production. There already is a soundtrack to the original film by Georges Auric, whereas mine is a music-theater work with a film. And I think that the counterpoint between performer and image is wonderful.

In relation to this work, Kramer’s comment that “whereas the movies subsume the vocal under the visual, opera does the reverse”, becomes irrelevant. The vocal and visual elements in La Belle et la Bête do not exist in a relationship of subordination; rather they co-exist in a synchronicity of audiovisual ‘polyphony’.

Glass synchronised the sung text to the unchanged original dialogues (in French) that the silent actors in the film enunciate. Here is how he explains his procedure:

I took the film and put a time code on it, timed every line in it, wrote down the libretto (which is not the same as the published one, since

---

250 Some famous examples of filmed operas are: W.A. Mozart’s Magic Flute (1975) directed by Ingmar Bergman; Bizet’s Carmen (1984) directed by Francesco Rossi; and Verdi’s Otello (1986) and Mascagni’s Cavaleria Rusticana (1982) directed by Franco Zeffirelli.


I wanted the words that were in the film, I timed every word, I placed it mathematically in the score (...) and then when I got done, Michael Riesman and I recorded it and put it up against the film and discovered it wasn't accurate enough. So we began using computers to move the vocal line around until it synched with the lips, and then I had to rewrite the music in order to achieve a better synchronization. Then Michael had to teach it all to the singers and they had to learn to do it live. 253

Glass describes how he ‘transplanted’ his operatic music to Cocteau’s film, and that ‘transplantation’ is heavily reliant on a synchronization process. The frequency of occurrence and the speed of dialogue to be synchronised seems to be crucial for successful operatizing in the manner that Glass deployed: dialogue should not be too frequent nor rapid, because that can make synchronization of music and singing to the filmic images hard to achieve. Since the velocity of speech in general is often higher than the velocity of singing, it might easily make singing too quick to perform, and perhaps grotesque at the same time. For these reasons, it is difficult to imagine that many films could be operatized in this way.

Glass might have chosen this particular movie for his ‘experiment’ since it already has operatic potential, as Joe reflected: “(…) it has little dialogue. Moreover, Cocteau’s dialogue is stylized rather than naturalistic without much simultaneous talking by more than one character. This is an advantage for an operatic adaptation in terms of the clarity of the text”. 254 The enunciation time of the spoken dialogue, especially between the principal characters, seems closer in their rapidity to the enunciation time of singing than to that of speech, allowing the composer to bridge the gap between the sung and spoken body more easily. Moreover, this fairy-tale film resembles conventional opera productions in the slow movements of the actors and the puppet-like appearance of the characters, especially both Beauty and the Beast, who are heavily made-up, with wigs and voluminous costumes. Finally, the plot of La Belle et la Bête is widely known, an archetype that enables the audience to follow it easily, even if does not understand the sung words, which can often be the case in opera.

This piece exists in two modalities: 1) when it is performed live, and 2) when it is played from DVD. When it is performed live by the ensemble and singers (from here I will designate this version of the piece as the ‘live synchronised version’), Cocteau’s film is projected onto a screen forming the backdrop of the stage, while onstage the score is simultaneously performed by the singers and the ensemble. Operatic characters lend their musical identity to their cinematic ‘doubles’


and film characters share the text of the words they enunciate with opera characters. The singers’
‘non-mimetic’ bodies, bodies “that do not point to anything beyond themselves”, are on stage just
to produce the voice that is to be synchronised with the film. Each voice sings simultaneously as
an operatic and cinematic character.

The postopera La Belle et la Bête, however, is not necessarily meant to be experienced live. Viewed via DVD format, the live performance of vocal soloists and instrumental ensemble is absent and the singing voices have been synchronised with the film in the studio. The synchronization is in this case recorded and permanent (from here I designate this version of the opera as ‘invariantly synchronised’). In both modalities the synchronization is loose, but what differs is the method of synchronization. This second modality of the work functions also as a film/sound inscription reproduced in an operatic context, an operatic spectacle that can be endlessly repeated outside the specific institutions of opera. In this case there is no live performance, but still this modality is not reducible to just a recording of the opera. It resembles the filmed opera, but it differs significantly from it as well. The liveness of the operatic experience, and the social rituals of visiting the opera house, are excluded by this version.

The situation created by Glass in La Belle et la Bête produces an unusual ‘visible’ acousmêtre. Writing on the implications of the voice in film, Chion specifies the term acousmatic as being “said of a sound that is heard without its cause or source being seen.” Chion also claims that “(...) it turns out that the mute, the body without a voice, displays many attributes of his counterpart, the voice without body, the acousmatic voice, the voice of one we do not see.” Although the process of synchronization is stressed in La Belle et la Bête, especially through loose synchronization, the position of the voice insists on ‘becoming acousmatic’. In this case, when considering the Cocteau film characters, the acousmatic voice becomes paradoxically, to paraphrase Chion, ‘the voice of one we do not hear’. When watching/listening to this opera from a DVD recording, the situation is a bit different. In this invariantly synchronised version, a voice without

---

256 According to Chion, acousmêtre is the one that produces acousmatic sound, the sound whose origin is unknown. Michel Chion, The Voice in Cinema, New York, Columbia University Press, 1999, p. 21.
257 The acousmatic voice is another concept that deals with the relation of voice-body gap. It is defined as “a voice in search of an origin, in search of a body”, a voice without a visible source, according to. Mladen Dolar, A Voice and Nothing More, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, MIT Press, 2006, p. 60. The term acousmatic was first introduced by French composer Pierre Schaeffer, and later used by composer and theorist Michel Chion. Underlining that Chion “compares the de-acousmatisation to striptease” (Mladen Dolar, A Voice and Nothing More, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, The MIT Press, 2006, p. 68), Dolar comes to the conclusion that “there is no such thing as de-acousmatisation” because “the source of the voice can never be seen, it stems from an undisclosed and structurally concealed interior, it cannot possibly match that we can see” (Dolar, 2006, p. 70).
visible origin is attached to the body of the movie character, and the acousmatic dimension of the voice is multiplied. At the same time it is a voice of one I cannot hear (a movie character) and I cannot see (a recorded singer/performer); and, paradoxically, I can still hear (recorded singers) and see (movie characters) but without their bodies and voices, respectively.

By placing Cocteau's film on the opera stage, and reinventing the relationship between body and voice in this piece, Glass problematizes both film and opera. The merging of the two media, in the case of both filmed opera and operatized film, presents technical and representational difficulties. In *La Belle et la Bête* it is exactly those difficulties that might be seen as the basic conceptual motors of the piece. These difficulties are diffracted through the key aspect of the piece - synchronization - which is crucial for both the concept of this piece and its realization. In what follows I will elaborate the ways in which this procedure takes place, and how it influences the relationship between body and voice.

**Synchronization, Dubbing and Playback**

In *La Belle et la Bête* not only is the voice synchronised to lip movements, but also the voice which belongs to a visible person singing live is synchronised with a speaking film character. One voice points to two bodies at the same time, and this ‘game’ is a remarkable feature of the piece. In the tradition of dubbing film actors, if the voice of a person other than that of the original actor is used, that whole person becomes contained in his or her voice. This is also the case in the invariently synchronised version of *La Belle et la Bête*. In the live synchronised version, the process of synchronization is executed live and is thus variable.

A loose type of synchronization is present in both these versions of *La Belle et la Bête*; however, the absence of an image of the singing body is accentuated in the invariently synchronised version. This constructed symbiosis of images of the speaking body and the singing voice highlights the distanced, dream-like atmosphere of Cocteau’s film. Michel Chion explains the intentions of the synchronization process: “It allows us by reading a speaker’s lips to verify whether the articulation of the words heard accords with the movement of the mouth”.

Chion points to the core of its function in terms of representational procedure: “We take this temporal co-incidence of words and lips as sort of guarantee that we’re in the real world, where hearing a sound usually coincides with seeing its source (...)”. Hearing the singing voices in the live synchronised version of *La Belle et la Bête* coincides with seeing the singers who sing on stage, but although we see the singers singing live, we still attach the singing voice to the bodies of the actors in the film.

---

259 Ibid., p. 128.
260 Ibid., p. 128-129.
The loose synchronization that is inevitable in this process reminds us that we are not in the ‘real’ world, but in the fictitious world of opera, and such performed singing has a certain distancing effect that John Richardson suggests challenges the norms of mainstream cinema:

Audiences in the Northern Europe and America typically have low tolerance for loose synchronisation. Instances that diverge from the norm of tight synchronisation are perceived as either unacceptably poor quality or in some way challenging the norms of mainstream cinema. An example of the latter is the approach of spaghetti Western director Sergio Leone, in which slightly dis-synchronous overdubbing of the actors’ voices is employed as a kind of distancing effect.²⁶¹

The same could be said of Glass’s approach in this piece, although here the looseness of the synchronization points to the composer’s engagement with an existing historical artefact and its audiovisual transformation.²⁶²

In case of La Belle et la Bête loose synchronization challenges the norms of conventional opera, but also evokes certain procedures based on synchronization such as dubbing and playback. The body-voice relation here problematizes both the tradition of dubbing and the tradition of playback. Chion highlights the differences between body-voice relations in these two procedures:

In dubbing someone is hiding in order to stick his voice onto a body that has already acted for the camera. In playback there is someone before us whose entire effort is to attach his face and body to the voice we hear. We’re witnessing a performance whose risks and failures become inscribed on the film. No emotion arises from dubbing as such. Since its work is unseen it produces only indirect effects, although they’re occasionally beautiful. Playback is a source of a direct, even physical emotion. (…) Playback marshals the image in the effort to embody.²⁶³

The procedure used in La Belle et la Bête is neither dubbing, nor playback. As in dubbing, there is a body that has already acted for the camera, but that body has had its own voice removed from the film; but if one of the intentions of dubbing is to help movie characters to appear more realistic, more comprehensible, then this procedure in Glass’ opera sits at the opposite end of the spectrum. The time that could be called ‘speaking time’ becomes ‘singing time’; the speaking voice is erased and to its empty space/time, the singing voice is attached; the singing voice is attributed to the speaking body, and this formalises the division of body and voice in La Belle et la Bête.

²⁶² John Richardson, “Resisting the sublime: strategies of convergence and divergence in Glass’s La Belle et la Bête”, conference paper from the First International Conference on Minimalism in Music, University of Wales, Bangor, 2007, manuscript.
Comprehending *La Belle et la Bête* through the playback technique, where there is a recorded voice and miming body on stage, the situation is more complex, and to some extent reverses expectation. There is a ‘recorded body’ and a voice that tries to attach to it. In the case of the invariantly synchronised version of *La Belle et la Bête*, both the body and the voice are recorded, and still there is the effect of loose synchronization since it is impossible to perfectly synchronize the singing voice and the image of the talking body. Even if this could be done perfectly in terms of temporal measurement, in terms of expression it would be unlikely to fit – the image of the speaking body does not match the singing voice and vice versa.

The process of synchronization that constantly happens between bodies and voices in film only creates the illusion of ‘wholeness’ between image and sound and/or the desire to obtain it. Creating the illusion of wholeness, synchronization actually creates a gap, and here it maintains it between bodies and voices, human and animal, images and sounds, live and projected, opera and film.

**The Knot of Tight Synchronization: The Roaring Voice between Man and Animal**

The looseness of synchronization that appears to be at the core of assembling the piece is replaced by tight synchronization only at one point in the opera – the moment when the diegetic sound of the roar from the original film appears. This moment appears to be significant both in showing how Glass might treat diegetic sounds, “sounds that issue from a source within the filmic narrative”, and also to show how it is possible to mark the vocal difference between human and animal in the opera. When the father gets lost in the woods he finds the Beast’s castle, enters it and falls asleep. He is awakened from a sleep by the terrible sound of the roar suggesting that the Beast is there. Although at that moment the Beast is not yet visible, his voice proves his presence. The Beast first appears as the monstrous sound/voice, and at the same time the eye of the camera shows the lion head curved in the armchair on which the father sits.

---

Only a few minutes later is the spectator allowed to see the image of the Beast – when a monstrous and at the same time puppet-like creature appears for the first time, outside of his castle, reprehending the Father for stealing his rose. The relationship between man and animal in *La Belle et la Bête* evokes the theory of Giorgio Agamben, and thus I will first read aspects of the plot of the opera against the backdrop of Agamben’s theory to show how the division between man and animal exists on several levels in *La Belle et la Bête*: in the plot itself, on the level of the voices (voice – roar), and on the level of the music, through contrast in musical materials.

One of Agamben’s assumptions is that “in our culture, the decisive political conflict, which governs every other conflict, is that between the animality and the humanity of man”. He sees *homo sapiens* as “machine or device for producing the recognition of the human” and proposes that this caesura, the fluctuating border between human and animal, is rather *within* the human, than outside. The animal is a constitutive part of the human. Agamben investigates how the distinction between man and animal has been produced, and this has been reflected in different fields of culture.

The *La Belle et la Bête* story/film invokes human-animal relationships, the dynamics of the plot deriving from differences between the human and her world (Beauty), and the monster/animal and its castle domain (The Beast). Beauty is profoundly scared by the Beast’s enchanted world when she gets there. She does not know its laws, and therefore at first appears powerless, but as she

---

becomes acquainted with that world, she becomes the key for its recognition back to the world of the human. In the film, the most obvious difference between the ‘real’ world and the castle is that common objects in the Beast’s domain, for example, candlesticks, are anthropomorphic. They have the shape of human body parts, and act in human ways, but are not human. “Man has to recognize itself to become human” writes Agamben. 267 The mechanism of recognition in La Belle et la Bête lies in the power of Beauty to see The Beast as human, and not as an animal.

![Image of arm-shaped candlesticks in La Belle et la Bête](image)

Figure 7 - Jean Cocteau, La Belle et la Bête, arm-shaped candle sticks, film still

The axis of the plot is based on this conflict between the animality and humanity of man. In the film, Beauty several times secretly witnesses habits that reveal the Beast’s animal nature: drinking the water from the spring, killing the deer and sucking its blood, and making roaring noises. The Beast, who is represented as a kind of animal/monster, is a former man who is put under a spell which makes him animal-like, non-man until a human (a woman) manages to remove the spell through her love. To love appears in this case to be recognised as human: The Beast will recognise himself as a man only when someone else recognises him as such. The humanisation of animal and animalisation of man about which Agamben writes is, in Cocteau’s film, emphasised by the fact that the Beast, Avenant (Beauty’s boyfriend in the human world), and the Prince (who appears only at the end as a kind of super-human) are played by the same actor. The same happens in Glass’s score in which he gives the same voice to the three characters.

267 Ibid.
The Beast’s castle shows relations between animals and humans that are different from those in the human world. The animal rules, but both the Beast and ‘the inhabitants’ of his castle are anthropomorphic; they are ‘within’ the human domain. Those anthropomorphic creatures demonstrate synchronization between the human and the non-human, and the anthropomorphic beast/monster demonstrates this too. Agamben argues that language is often offered as the locus of distinction between the human and the animal; however, the Beast talks as human, and in Glass’s version sings with a human voice, but he still is not human.

The division between human and animal is also portrayed by musical language. The Beast’s domain is represented by chromaticism and the whole-tone scale. The ambivalent, animal, inhuman, enchanted world is represented here by the whole-tone scale, which Glass uses to invoke its long history in picturing sorcerers, enchanted worlds, and mysterious happenings and personas – in short, the ‘unreal’.

When we first see the Beast, we do so in E major and C major - we hear E major triads ringing on the top, followed by C major triads below - and when you put them together you have the whole tone scale and an augmented triad. If you analyze the augmented triad out into its parts, you have two harmonies a major third apart that give you one of the more distant key relationships. Within the world of tonality we’re taking two of the more distant relationships and unifying them in a whole tone scale. The reason my music for La Belle sounds different from Debussy, I think, is because of my way of going through the augmented triad to what I think are its sources. For Debussy, tonality was redefined by music free from traditional root movement.268

The intriguing moment in relation to the man-animal construct arises through the voice of the Beast, interpreted through a male voice, the voice of the same actor/singer that sings the roles of Avenant and the Prince. One interesting exception to this pattern of giving the male voice to the Beast appears in the opera, with a connection to the diegetic sounds of the film. As Joe comments, diegetic sounds are interestingly used in Cocteau’s movie:

Diegetic noises also differentiate the real world scenes from those of the magical domain: the former are filled with diegetic noises for the details of the visuals, while diegetic noises are almost entirely avoided in the scenes at the Beast’s domain.269

When Glass decided to remove the existing soundtrack of the movie, diegetic sound left the soundtrack, too; however, the unique roar of the Beast from the film was kept in Glass’s opera, and it unexpectedly shows a sound rupture between human and inhuman sound. The monstrous is here

---


restaged from film to opera, from speaking to singing, and the roaring voice is kept as a proof of the non-human, animal, monster within the human.

Michel Chion describes synchresis as the “(...) spontaneous and irresistible weld produced between a particular auditory phenomenon and visual phenomenon when they occur at the same time in film”. 270 He previously elaborates about the punch sound as an emblematic knot of synchronization, as “(...) the audiovisual point toward which everything converges and out of which all radiates”. 272 When the diegetic roar of the Beast appears in the opera, it functions as a kind of ‘punch’ that changes the co ordinates of the meaning system. It shows the contrast between the roar of the animal and the human voice. Chion notices that “in general, loose synch gives a less naturalistic, more readily poetic effect, and a very tight synch stretches the audiovisual canvas more (...)”. 272 This roar appears in tight synch, and as diegetic sound, in contrast to the loose synchronization and composed sound for the rest of the opera. It is the only moment in the opera where the monstrous voice is attributed to the Beast. It could be said that the whole audiovisual dramaturgy of opera converges to this point and radiates from it, a point that unveils the non-voice of the monster. And if indeed sound film could be considered as ventriloquism, 273 this roar scene would be the point where the dummy (moving image) in that process gets different ventriloquist (one who provides sound and/or voice) – from operatic music and singing to the sound of the roar.

A certain degree of ‘ventriloquism’ is maintained between bodies and voices, no matter how tight or loose synchronization might be. This is confirmed both by the loose synchronization through the prism of dubbing and playback, and by the tight synchronization in the case of roaring sound. In what follows I will discuss how the methodology of ventriloquism works within La Belle et la Bête.

**Postopera as Ventriloquism**

Rick Altman undermines the conventional view that “(...) the sound track in classical narrative films is by and large redundant”. 274 Instead, he postulates a new model for the conceptualisation of sound-image relationships in the cinema that I would like to use to illuminate the ventriloquial dimension of La Belle et la Bête. In the new model he advocates that

“(...) the sound track is a ventriloquist who, by moving his dummy (the image) in time with the words he secretly speaks, creates the illusion that the words are produced by the dummy/image whereas in fact the dummy/image is actually created in order to disguise the source of the sound. Far from being subservient to the image, the

---

271 Ibid., p. 61.
272 Ibid., p. 65.
274 Ibid., p. 67.
sound track uses the illusion of subservience to serve its own ends".  

For Altman, the film sound track is the ventriloquist, and in this light the remediation of *La Belle et la Bête* from film to opera is a situation in which only the ‘dummy’ (the film) changes the ventriloquist from Auric/Cocteau to Glass. In a different way from Auric’s soundtrack, the operatic ‘soundtrack’ Glass produces shows his awareness of the ventriloquial dimension of the film. Moreover, in the live synchronized version, Glass is not even interested in concealing the real source of the sound as ventriloquists usually do. He superimposes ensemble playing and singers singing live to the projected film. What Altman proposes in theory, Glass conducts in *La Belle et la Bête*.

Glass ‘confirmed’ not only that the sound track in narrative film is not and should not be redundant, but that the sound/music/voice is the one that ‘makes’ the image look in a particular way. Moreover, although *La Belle et la Bête* displays clear connections with ventriloquism, there is an important point that makes it ‘outgrow’ this ventriloquist principle, and that is that the Glass ‘soundtrack’ is not meant to be ‘concealed’ behind the image, at least in the live synchronized version. “Unless the ventriloquist can produce a believable ‘redundant’ lip movement in the dummy, he cannot induce us to transfer our allegiance from the aural to the visual witness within us”, states Altman.  

And that allegiance seems not to be an issue for Glass. The mechanism of his ventriloquist opera is wide open for both our eyes and ears. It does not persuade us to believe that Cocteau’s characters really sing in the film, but invites us to enjoy the transparency of the body-voice game in the film and in the opera.

Recently Glass’s *La Belle et la Bête* was further developed, pseudonymously, in a form that confirms both the composer’s and Altman’s intentions in a somewhat unexpected way. An author using the name ‘barkingbartok’ has made a new version of *La Belle et la Bête* in which Cocteau’s previously silent film is further eroded to the point of its almost total removal. Glass’s music has been roughly played back over a new video where all the characters are made of LEGO bricks. Thus, Glass’s operatized film is now made into a filmed opera, where the film is based upon LEGO animation.

---

275 Ibid.
276 Ibid., p. 77.
This puppet-like version keeps only the timelines of dialogue pronunciation in the original film, measurements that Philip Glass used while composing the music. What might have been called ‘puppetry’ in Cocteau’s characters within the film, in this version becomes tautologically obvious, suggesting that there is no ‘natural’ relation between the shown body and the singing voice. The synchronous principle becomes irrelevant, since, among other things, this ‘LEGO reality’ has distanced any trace of realism from the previous visuals; and paradoxically, the singing body has almost completely vanished, now only heard through the music.

There are ventriloquial features in La Belle et la Bête’s tendency to attach music and singing voices to film characters. The perception of a puppet body with a voice changes our perception of the body, and the same principle functions with Cocteau’s film characters. Although already puppet-like in Cocteau’s fairytale film, these characters become even more artificial and even more puppet-like when made to sing. The singing body in postopera remains ventriloquial. The body-voice gap not only persists but also develops in this piece. It itself is based on creative reinvention of that gap.

This gap reveals that ideal, complete synchronization of a body-voice construct is impossible in general, and consequently in postopera, too. Bearing in mind those features of the body-voice gap in opera that I wrote about earlier, the ‘deafness’ of the operatic characters, the different demands on body and voice while instrumentalising dramatic representation in opera, this body-voice gap appears as a specificity of the opera genre. As such, it becomes the main motor of Glass’s piece: it is precisely this impossibility of synchronization between body and voice that becomes manifest in La Belle et la Bête. The relationship between music and dramatic text, the subject of various operatic reforms in the past, appears obsolete when compared to the immediacy of the body – voice relation...
in this postopera for ensemble and film. Glass reinvents the body-voice relationship in *La Belle et la Bête*, and at the same time questions the relationship between opera and film, and opera and ventriloquism. By doing all that, he reworks the whole opera genre while pursuing its specificities in the age of media.