Singing corporeality: reinventing the vocalic body in postopera
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Chapter 5

Singing Letters, Multiplied Bodies and Dissociated Voice

The straightforward synchronization processes that have led to a ventriloquial relationship between the live singing voice and the movie characters in La Belle et la Bête are followed by more complex body-voice de-synchronization procedures used in Writing to Vermeer. Applying ‘new’ voices and music to ready-made existing images (in the case of Glass’s piece to the moving images of Cocteau’s film) is a procedure that plays an important role in Writing to Vermeer, too. In this postopera, the images that are being operatized are Johannes Vermeer’s (1632-75) paintings. They get their fictional textual, sonorous, musical and vocal dimensions when the situations that Vermeer painted are re-enacted, envoiced and multiplied on stage. The silent world of baroque painting becomes a Vermeerian multimedia singing tableau vivant - the site of a projected written text, female singing voices, triplicate singing/dancing figures, and music in which video, dance and opera have been put together in dynamic co-existence, framed by the simulation of female figures and the situations represented in Vermeer’s paintings.

Ventriloquial relationships between singing female voices and the bodies of the triplicate identical-looking figures on stage (of which one sings and all three have the same movements) reinvent the vocalic body while raising the issue of woman as subject and/or object in the opera. De-synchronization involving singing bodies and voices ‘speaks’ about the disruption between public and private, men and women (the private sphere of women and the public sphere of men), subject and object (man as subject – composer, director, painter, and woman as object – performer, painting model), past and present (baroque vs. today’s media society), reality and fiction (Vermeer’s paintings as ‘reality’ and opera as ‘fiction’, or the other way round). These oppositions are

278 The version of this chapter is going to be published as: Jelena Novak, “Postopera and De/Synchronous Narrating: Singing Letters, Multiplied Bodies and Dissociated Voice in Andriessen/Greenaway’s Writing to Vermeer”, in Isolde Schmid-Reiter, Mario Vieira de Carvalho (eds.), Opera Staging: Erzählweisen, Europäische Musiktheater-Akademie, CESEM, Vienna, 2012 (forthcoming).

279 The world premiere of Writing to Vermeer took place at De Nederlandse Opera, Amsterdam, in 1999. The author of the electronic music interludes is Michel van der Aa. Saskia Boddeke directed the piece together with Peter Greenaway, who was also the author of the libretto. Louis Andriessen wrote the music.

280 The words ‘envoice’ and ‘envoicing’ do not appear in the OED, but I understand them here in accordance with Carolyn Abbate’s text “Opera; or, the Envoicing of Women”, in Ruth A. Solie (ed.), Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, University of California Press, 1993, pp. 221-258. The meaning of ‘voicing’, according to the OED, is “the action or fact of uttering with the voice” or, in phonetics “the action or process of producing or uttering with voice or sonancy; the change of a sound from unvoiced to voiced”. According to the Oxford English Dictionary Second Edition on CD-ROM (v. 4.0.0.2) © Oxford University Press 2009. Keeping in mind the common meaning of the prefix ‘en’ in English: “to make into, to put into, to get into”, envoicing would mean to make women in the action of uttering with the voice. Thus, in this case I understand envoicing as both giving the voice to the women, and putting the women into the voice, hearing the feminine through the women’s voices.
performed and mediated in the cultural context of late capitalism, while examining what it means to
envoice women in opera today.

My analysis of the relationship between singing body and voice in *Writing to Vermeer* will
examine how strategies of staging (a visual triplication of characters), music (a musical dramaturgy
that does not follow the dramaturgy of the libretto), writing (questioning of *écriture féminine* and
the adultery motive in relation to the subject/object position of woman), and mediation (simulation
and close-up procedure in Scene 2) interfere in the connection between bodies and voices on stage.
The staging shows Vermeerian women, embodied in the triplicate characters of Vermeer’s wife
Catharina, his mother in law Maria and the model Saskia, that, unlike women in Vermeer’s paintings,
have voices. I read those strategies of envoicing against the backdrop of the concept of envoicing
the women in opera by Carolyn Abbate.281 I do that in order to show how attributing and de-
synchronizing the singing voice to triplicate women figures generates meaning about the status of
woman as subject/object in postopera, and how that affects the vocalic body. While analysing the
procedures applied in music, my concern is with Andriessen’s intention to maintain the musical
dramaturgy independent from the dramaturgy of the libretto. I investigate how this independence
relates to the body-voice relationship.

In relation to strategies of writing and their interfering in the connection between bodies
and voices on stage, I read Greenaway’s libretto against the backdrop of the concept of *écriture féminine* as defined by Hélène Cixous.282 That helps me to reveal the simulation strategies that he
uses when he plays with this concept, but also to show how he questions it. The adultery motive
that appears in the libretto, together with questioning of *écriture féminine*, demonstrates how the
female characters function as objects in a masculine discourse, and how they appear to strive to
become subjects. The ambivalent position of woman between subject and object reflects the de-
synchronous relation between the singing body and the voice.

Concerning mediation and how it affects the relationship between body and voice, I offer a
close reading of the scene in which the character of Saskia sings live on stage, while at the same time
her close-up is projected on the big screen, so that it looks as if her voice is dubbed to her projected
image. This scene exemplifies how the dissociated voice is problematized in *Writing to Vermeer*.283 A


283 Steven Connor describes the voice in ventriloquism as sourceless, dissociated or displaced. He uses those three adjectives as synonyms. Thus, I use the term ‘dissociated voice’ in accordance with Connor’s writing, as a voice that “appears to proceed from elsewhere”. See: Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck, Cultural History of Ventriloquism*, [http://www.stevenconnor.com/dumbstruck/](http://www.stevenconnor.com/dumbstruck/), Accessed: March 31, 2012.
consideration of the interplay of all the above-mentioned strategies will demonstrate why singing in Writing to Vermeer reveals a specific dissociation between bodies and voices and how that particular relation establishes meanings.

Between Absence and Presence: Men and Women in Writing to Vermeer

I will now map a few significant points in connection with the contrasted ways female and male characters are represented in the piece in order to provide coordinates that will help us to follow the rest of the analysis. The contrast between the domestic, private world inhabited by women and the outer, public world governed by men is transposed from Vermeer’s paintings to this postopera. The atmosphere of the 34 paintings of the artist we know of appears to be in contrast to the chaotic outer world in which they were painted – it is often stated that they emanate domestic serenity and harmony, and Greenaway used ‘the calm atmosphere’ of the paintings as an ideal that “(...) will be set against the activities of the world outside Vermeer’s front door (...).” In Writing to Vermeer the events from the outer world governed by men are represented in interludes. Masculine figures appear on video in scenes that depict the gunpowder factory explosion, riots in The Hague, the tulip market crash, the French invasion etc. Aided by electronic music by Michel Van der Aa, the brutality of the outer, men’s world does indeed provide a great contrast to the chamber atmosphere and delicate ensemble of women’s voices in the six scenes. The gap between the world of men and the world of women is emphasized and present throughout the piece and that should be kept in mind during analysis of all its different aspects.

The female figures from Vermeer’s paintings became operatic heroines in Writing to Vermeer. The three principal singing characters, two sopranos (Catharina Bolnes, Vermeer’s wife; Saskia de Vries, his model) and a mezzo soprano (Maria Thins, Vermeer’s mother in law), dancing characters (Vermeer’s famous Milkmaid, the Servant and visual ‘doubles’ of Saskia, Maria and Catharina), four children, as well as the female choir members who often accompany the singers are all dressed as figures from Vermeer’s paintings and on the operatic stage they occasionally ‘freeze’ in a certain pose, which simulates the pose of the figure from the painting.

The staging of the opera implies that the figures from the opera are at the same time representations of the figures from Vermeer’s paintings and representations of real women in Vermeer’s life. This conflation of meanings that happens between the women on stage, the women in Vermeer’s life and representations of women in his paintings is the vehicle for the creation of fiction. The ambivalent denotation of who the women on stage represent allows Greenaway to play

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285 Saskia is a fictional character, while Catharina and Maria are historical characters.
constantly with the positions of the women as subjects/objects - on stage, in Vermeer’s paintings and in the ‘real’ life of Vermeer’s family. It denies the difference between the ‘real’ and the fictitious, and on the other hand it fortifies the differences between how the spheres of women and the spheres of men are represented.

The women are writing letters to Vermeer. The writing of private letters is usually an intimate occupation. When the letters of the women are turned into a libretto, they cease to be private and become public. Brooks has shown the mechanism of the invasion of the private in literature: "The novel, then, can make private life the object of its concern only through invading the private sphere by opening it up to the irrevocable publicity of writing - imaged so often in the eighteenth-century novel by the publication of a private correspondence." 286 Although the letters are part of staging of the private sphere in this postopera, the fact that letters or their fragments are constantly projected, multiplied and magnified on the opera stage makes them public addresses rather than intimate thoughts. "So we know privacy by way of its invasion, just as we know innocence by way of its loss, and indeed could not know it otherwise." 287 Invading what was represented as private is in this case also the way to emphasize the contrast between the worlds of women and men.

Adriana Cavarero reflects upon the stereotypes of operatic narratives: “The libretto in opera obeys the misogynistic laws of the western canon – it tells a story in which the women are the victims and men the victimizers. We would be surprised if it were otherwise”. 288 Cavarero’s conclusions were based upon the conventional opera repertory. Greenaway and Andriessen, however, criticize the victim-position of female characters in opera in general. They did that already in their first operatic collaboration, Rosa the Death of a Composer (1993–94), where they purposely exaggerated the victim-role of the principal female character Esmeralda who was grotesquely represented as a sexual object subordinated to the desire of her macho cowboy lover, the composer Rosa. In their second common opera Writing to Vermeer, Greenaway and Andriessen continue to question operatic conventions: unusually for the opera tradition, they exclude any singing male role, so that Writing to Vermeer appears as a kind of female piece.

“In general, the heroine of the drama embodies a female figure who is somewhat anomalous or out of place”, writes Cavarero on opera heroines, and concludes: “Carmen is a gipsy, Butterfly and Turandot are exotic women. Tosca is a singer, Violeta is a ne’er-do-well. As women who live outside familiar roles, as transgressive figures who are often quite capable of

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287 Ibid., p. 37.
independence, they do not just die - they must die so that everything can go back to normal". 289

Women represented in *Writing to Vermeer* are not those who live outside familiar roles; on the contrary, they appear as the stereotypes of these roles – the wife, the mother, the servant, the painting model, all ruled by masculine discourse. Certain parts of the libretto, however, show a tendency to question those roles. Even so, the very end of the opera, when all women characters disappear (wiped out by the flood caused by bringing down the floodwalls – an act performed in order to defend the country against the enemy of war), confirms that the outer, public, men’s world still governs the private world of women. The ‘outer world’ reflected in Greenaway’s videos and Van der Aa’s interludes penetrates the domestic atmosphere in which the women live. Interruptions from ‘the outside’ can be compared to the situation when the painter Lucio Fontana slashed his paintings with a knife, to which Andriessen made reference. 290

The title character, Johannes Vermeer, does not appear in this opera. There is no single scene in which his figure, image, letter, voice, or physical representation can be seen. The father, the husband, the son-in-law and the painter are absent from the stage, but still, Vermeer is the one who holds the power to objectify the women. They are the objects of his paintings, and he is the subject who regulates their existence in the painting, but also in ‘real’ life. They all long for him, seemingly not only because they love him, but because they seem to become lost, meaningless, without him.

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Unlike Vermeer himself, a number of anonymous male characters appear in Writing to Vermeer. They are, however, not singing characters. Male figures only show up in film/video fragments directed by Greenaway and projected between the scenes, in instrumental interludes. They represent the outer, public, male world that determines the private feminine singing world. The most striking representation of the dominance of the masculine appears towards the end of the opera where a video features French soldiers marching into Holland. That video shows only huge military boots marching through the water. In front of the video are the figures of Vermeer’s (singing) women that appear tiny and hopeless in relation to the marching boots behind them.

The reinvention of the body-voice relationship in this postopera takes place in context of the position of the singing woman being both subject (of singing, of writing) and object (of painting, and of masculine discourse). The frame in which women characters sing underlines differences between the spheres of feminine and masculine. The rest of the analysis relies on that fact.

**Between Subject and Object: The Singing Voice and Triplicate characters**

Carolyn Abbate reaches the core of the problem of disruption between body and voice in the opera by elaborating the antagonism between the singing woman being simultaneously subject and object. She addresses the reasons that initiate the split between visible and audible in opera from a subject-object perspective involving the woman performer and the listening spectator. She claims that a singing female in opera is usually already perceived as engendered:

> For opera the question is: What happens when we watch and hear a female performer? We are observing her, yet we are also doing something for which there’s no word: the aural version of staring. And looking and listening are not simply equivalent activities in different sensory realms. Seeing a female figure may well more or less automatically invoke our culture’s opposition of male (active subject) and female (passive object), as Mulvey describes it. But listening to the female singing voice is a more complicated phenomenon. Visually, the character singing is the passive object of our gaze. But aurally, she is resonant; her musical speech drowns out everything in range, and we sit as passive objects, battered by that voice.291

Abbate’s claims, at least regarding the examples she offers, have been made in accordance to her experience of conventional opera. In Writing to Vermeer, however, the position of the singing woman on stage is more complex because of the staging procedures that favor triplicate characters. There are two types of triplicate figures. First there are triplicate dancing figures such as the Milkmaid or Servant characters. Another type are triplicate singing/dancing figures, where one of them - Catharina, Maria, or Saskia - is both singing and dancing. The singers’ movements and

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291 Carolyn Abbate, “Opera; or, the Envoicing of Women”, p. 254.
gestures are the same as those of the dancers. The voice does not get ‘confirmation’ by the simultaneous support of mimicry, gestures or bodily movements. This singing is rather visually ‘cancelled’ by the body that does not ‘recognize’ it in a manner typical for conventional opera. The result of this strategy is that often it is not possible to determine who is actually singing on stage. Sometimes (but not often), the singing character is emphasized by the stage light. The voice often appears dissociated since it is not supported by gestures and mimicry typically used by opera singers. Moreover, the stage often contains much more than three characters, and is crowded with choir members, children, screen projections. This procedure forces the listening spectators to look for the origin of the singing voice, an impulse originating in a kind of ‘natural’ reflex.

When what is seen is de-synchronized with what is heard at the same time (triplicate figures look and move in the same way, but only one of them sings, and it is not always easy to determine which one), tensions appear between body and voice that act as passive/object and active/subject respectively. When the origin of the voice is made unclear by visual procedures that accompany the singing, the processes of objectification Abbate discusses are further developed. This aspect of the opera is elaborated from the perspective of “opera’s capacity to disrupt male authority”, in Abbate’s words.

In light of the subject-object relation, an intriguing game takes place here. The woman should be visually objectified, but that objectification is destabilized, if not actually denied by the fact that the object is multiplied. And the singing voice objectifies the listening spectator, putting him/her in the position, in Abbate’s terms, of “passive objects, battered by that voice”. In order to be able to perceive the singing, the listening spectator must put him/herself in the attentive position of listening that allows the singing to be ‘executed’ for him/her. But this process of objectification brings instability because, at least at first sight, it is not possible to realize who is actually objectifying the listening spectator, since in the game of triplication a concealing of the origin of the voice is taking place. Thus, the voice becomes dissociated. What Abbate claims in connection to the body-voice relation in opera is questioned, since it is not possible to completely objectify the woman for the gaze of spectator; nor is it possible that the voice, whose corporeal origin is masked, completely objectifies the listener.

What happens instead is a dissociation of the voice from the body that involves the listening spectator on various levels. There is a constant fluctuation of the attention and production of new layers of relations between bodies singing, dancing, listening, hearing, visible and invisible, audible

292 This is anecdotally confirmed by the video recording of the piece I used for analysis that was being made on one of the dress rehearsals. It is obvious that the person who filmed the performance wasn’t familiar with the piece; the result is that in some parts where it is particularly difficult to discover who sings, the eye of the camera goes from one to another performer to check who ‘throws the voice’.

293 Carolyn Abbate, “Opera; or, the Envoicing of Women”, p. 258.
and inaudible. The distribution of the visible and the audible happens between multiplied women bodies, voices, video screens, listening spectators, and the dynamic of that distribution provokes constant shifts of attention and problematizes the conventional positions of the singing body and voice in opera. The ways music is involved in the structure of Writing to Vermeer reinvents that distribution further.

Music, Libretto, Body, Voice: De/Synchronization

In order to analyze how strategies used in the music interfere in the relationship between the bodies and the voices in Writing to Vermeer I concentrate on how and what the music represents in this piece. Abbate discusses the role of music in opera and the conventional interpretation of that role: “Interpreting operatic music as an elaboration of plot is, after all, a conventional opera-analytical habit. What has not been remarked, however, is that it involves an automatic sexing of operatic music as the voice of a male observer, and an accompanying transformation of libretto drama and characters into a female body, gazed upon and elaborated upon by that music”. She adds: “Because traditional, this analytical assumption has seemed both neutral and natural. It is not.”

Abbate arrives at a point where she is preoccupied with “music’s male gendered role in opera – to speak as the observer-commentator who gives a secret clue to the action onstage” and explains how “Strauss rejects the notion of operatic music as an objectifying gaze”.

Andriessen, too, rejects “the notion of operatic music as objectifying gaze”. This is how he explains the way he envisaged his music to function in this postopera:

I wish to introduce a state of opposition between the sung text and the underlying emotions. What the characters sing is not what they write about in their letters. The women sing about matters that they do not dare write about, for example, that a child may die or that Vermeer will be assaulted during his travels. There is communication at two levels: what you hear and what I will tell you as a composer.

And indeed, the musical dramaturgy has its own dynamic, independent of what happens in the libretto. Andriessen further explains this strategy by commenting on the second part of the piece, in which the emotional tensions of the characters appear to be stronger, in accordance with more and more turbulent events from the outside world (religious riots, French invasion, flooding):

295 Ibid., p. 239.
296 Ibid., p. 247.
Gradually you hear that the negative emotion comes forth in the music and in the singing; it does not manifest itself in the written text because the text is strictly domestic and simple. It is clear that what happens, or what could happen outside their home, gradually enters the women’s consciousness. Their voices and their manner of singing are permeated by anxiety while they still sing the words of their happy letters to Vermeer.  

Andriessen’s music is not an elaboration of what happens in the opera, if arguably anything happens there in conventional terms (there are only minor events such as Vermeer’s daughter Cornelia’s birthday and her sickness after she swallowed varnish). Instead, it is an elaboration of the composer’s view of ‘the story’ that happens in the sphere of women’s emotional life. Thus, as will be shown in Chapter 6 (which deals with the relation between body and voice in La Commedia), Writing to Vermeer, too, seems to have two plot lines – one written by the librettist, the other by the composer.

In the domestic world of Vermeer’s women there are no significant events, compared to the external men’s world of trade, wars, politics, travel and art. The staging tells us that things are ‘really’ happening in the outer world, represented by the interludes. Andriessen is consistent about his music not illustrating what happens on stage. Paradoxically, it illustrates what does not happen there, but supposedly happens in the sphere of women’s emotional life, and those are unspoken concerns, anxieties, fears and unexpressed feelings. Thus, the music actually avoids the common operatic convention of commenting on or illustrating the libretto. The fact that the relation between the dramaturgies of the music and the libretto is unconventional supports the status of the dissociated voice. The emphasis on the independence between the libretto and the music corresponds to the independence between body and voice; since what listening spectators hear is not complementary to what they see on stage, the dissociation between body and voice comes as a kind of expected consequence.

At the end of the opera the French invasion is represented – on the big screen the feet of soldiers are marching through the water, and on the stage Vermeer’s women are dressed in cage-like dresses. Water first appears only in the video, but gradually huge amounts of water literally flood the stage. First, choir members are ‘wiped out’, and then gradually Maria, Catharina and Saskia disappear, too. The stage is empty; only water runs over it. In the last moments of the performance first Saskia and Catharina sing in unison “Yours, with every sign of love”, and then Maria joins in, and the three of them sing in homophony “for ever and ever, and ever and ever...”. When the women’s voices stop singing, we continue to hear them for a short time gradually ‘dissolved’ in

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electronic music by Van der Aa until they totally disappear. At this point in the opera there is no
masking of the origin of the voice; it is easily recognizable who emits the voice, since the female
figures are not triplicate any more. Body and voice are finally synchronized, and the unison singing of
Saskia and Catharina stands for their union in their love for Vermeer, also confirmed by Maria a few
bars later in homophony.\textsuperscript{300} Music at this point enlightens what happens in the opera – despite
disasters, all the women are united in their love for Vermeer. At the end, a moment of synchronicity
takes place: the public and the private becomes the same, all engulfed by a disastrous flood. The
image of the body and the sound of the voice are not dissociated anymore. Previously the singing
voice was typically associated with the three bodies that acted the same on stage, and at the end the
three singers sing with what could be metaphorically taken as one voice (unison and homophony).

\textbf{Writing Women and \textit{Écriture Féminine}}

A considerable number of Vermeer’s paintings show women receiving, reading or writing letters.\textsuperscript{301}
That triggered Greenaway’s imagination when writing the libretto, which consists of eighteen
fictional letters to Johannes Vermeer who appears to be on trip to The Hague, where he is allegedly
invited to check the authenticity of certain paintings. The year is 1672.\textsuperscript{302} Letters appear to be
written by Vermeer’s wife, his model and his mother-in-law. Catharina and Maria write from Delft,
and Saskia writes from Dordrecht. Each of them sends six letters. They write about domestic things,
children, longing and love (Catharina), troubles with an arranged marriage (Saskia), and matters
regarding the painting business (Maria).

The fragmentary structure of the letters, their intersection in the libretto, and the
independence of the libretto text from the musical dramaturgy create a specific postdramatic
condition in which the texts involved (libretto, music, dance, video) tend to be independent. While
examining the meaning of what was written in the letters I will concentrate on how Greenaway uses
the ‘Dear John’ letter motive to suggest the adultery, and what the adultery motive could mean in

\textsuperscript{300} In Andriessen’s music unison was often used as the sign of ideological like-mindedness. Here is the quote by
Andriessen that tackles the questions of unison and failed unison: “Originally I saw unison as a political matter
and I ascribed a Marxist interpretation to it. Now that I see failed unison more as something philosophical, I’d

\textsuperscript{301} For example: \textit{Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window} (c. 1657), \textit{Woman in Blue Reading a Letter} (c. 1662-
64), \textit{Lady Writing a Letter} (c. 1665-70), \textit{Lady with Her Maid servant} (c. 1667-68), \textit{The Love-Letter} (c. 1669-70),
\textit{Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid} (c. 1670).

\textsuperscript{302} The year 1672 is known in the Netherlands as the ‘rampjaar’, the year of disaster. Greenaway highlights
that this year “saw military disintegration, the largest financial crash in the Republic’s short history, and a great
public demoralisation. The overthrow of the Republic itself seemed very possible. It certainly was the year that
marked the end of the Dutch golden Age”. According to: Peter Greenaway, “The Text”, \textit{Writing to Vermeer}
program booklet, Amsterdam, De Nederlandse Opera, 1999, p. 21. And indeed, it was a year in which the
Dutch war (1672-78) started, the same year, leading Dutch politician of the time, Johan de Witt was brutally
killed by an angry mob. French invasion followed after: the country was flooded, since the dykes were brought
down in order to defend from the French army.
relation to the subject/object position of the woman in this piece. I will also explore how Greenaway questions *écriture féminine* showing the ambivalence between women seen as subjects (of writing) or as objects (of painting).

Greenaway seems to be particularly intrigued by the meaning of the letters on Vermeer’s paintings, the mystery concerning the addressees with whom women corresponded. The beginning of each letter is announced by the children’s voices that sing the precise date, and full name of the sender, for example “The second letter from Catharina Bolnes to Johannes Vermeer in The Hague. 18 may 1672”. Moreover, all the letters start with “Dear Johannes”. Andriessen remembers that initially all the letters were addressed as “Dear John”, revealing Greenaway’s interest in what he describes as “twentieth century significance of Second World War wartime female correspondence in what were called Dear John letters”: letters written to servicemen by their unfaithful girlfriends or wives, to announce the end of the relationship. Greenaway’s interest in letters that reveal adultery coincides with Schneider’s interpretation of the semiotics of Vermeer’s paintings and suggests that Greenaway’s reading of the position of women in Vermeer’s paintings does not imply only domestic harmony, but also women’s adultery, insinuations of which can also be found in various symbols used in the paintings. During the course of the work, “Dear John” was changed to “Dear Johannes” in light of the need to improve ‘the asymmetry’ between the English language and the Dutch subject of the opera. Hence the reference to “Dear John letters” stays concealed in the definitive version of the opera, although it is important as an indication of Greenaway’s reading of the letter motive in Vermeer’s paintings.

The allusion to adultery previously discussed is confirmed by the implication that the relationship between Vermeer and Saskia turns into more than a working relationship between painter and model. The affection Saskia demonstrates through her letters, various remarks about Saskia in Catharina’s letters (“She has a pretty face and a kissable neck. And such kissable lips. I could kiss her myself. And I know you have thought the same”), the apparently close relation that Saskia has with Vermeer: all these generate suspicion regarding the nature of their relationship, and generate thoughts about Vermeer’s adultery. Moreover, by alluding to the adultery motive, Greenaway also interrogates the object position of women. Thus, Saskia is not only an object for the painter. She becomes a subject by transgressing the position of model to be seen as potential lover.

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In an analysis of the literary motives, the form of the texts, the represented atmosphere, it is suggestive that Greenaway simulates *écriture féminine* defined as "(...) the inscription of the female body and female difference in language and text (...)". In her search for the ways that women should express themselves through writing, the foundational theorist of *écriture féminine*, Hélène Cixous, manifestly opened up her text on the subject by these words:

> Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement.

Cixous had also insisted on a connection between women’s writing and their bodies: “Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth.” And that is precisely what the female characters in *Writing to Vermeer* do; they write letters, and it appears as if they write themselves through these letters.

Writing themselves is manifested through writing about their bodies, among other things. Writing the feminine body could be seen in connection with female sexuality and motherhood. Catharina’s pregnancy and related issues are recurring subjects of the letter texts in this postopera.

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311 Ibid., p. 880.
In addition Greenaway’s explanation of the synopsis in relation to the five liquids also relates it to *écriture féminine*, not least because the endless pouring of milk is mentioned: “Whilst Vermeer is absent, the women defend their household against the potential erosion of five liquids: ink, from an excess of writing; varnish, which threatens the life of a child; milk, which endlessly pours from the milkmaid’s jug; blood, which demonstrates the violence of political assassination; and, finally, water, which ultimately sweeps them, their household, their children, and the stage, away”.312 The ‘household’ here could also be perceived as subjecthood (the state or condition of being a subject) in the light of the previous discussion.

And in a specific way ‘writing themselves’ is underlined by the fact that as well as being sung, the text of the letters is often projected onto different parts of stage (floor, back wall, screens, transparent net), so that it becomes a significant part of the staging’s visual identity. An insistence on performing writing in the opera constantly acts as a reminder of the corporeal side of handwriting, the fact that the written text is produced by a performance of the body, and thus is a kind of imprint that has a corporeal origin. So the Vermeerian women ‘write themselves’ in that way, too. The action of ‘writing themselves’ is in contradiction with the position of the women only as objects. In order to write themselves they must become the subjects of writing.

Greenaway not only simulates *écriture féminine*, but problematizes it. The ‘authors’ of the letters are Catharina, Maria and Saskia, and they all perform a function as (some heterosexual) men’s typical objects of desire – the wife, the mother (Maria keeps a mother-son dimension in her relation with Vermeer), and the virgin (Saskia). Those women ‘write’ about typical ‘feminine subjects’ - love, affection, sexuality, pregnancy, children, marriage, longing, home, and the texts are supposedly written from a woman’s angle, without privileging the masculine in the construction of meaning. However, this whole strategy is staged by Greenaway himself and that brings the text to certain ‘deformations’ in some parts.

The position of woman only within the discourse of man has been described by Cixous:

> If woman has always functioned “within” the discourse of man, a signifier that has always referred back to the opposite signifier which annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very different sounds, it is time for her to dislocate this “within”, to explode it, turn it around, and seize it; to make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of.313

And this ‘explosion’ of the ‘within status’, becoming the subject, is precisely what the Catharina character suggests when she suddenly announces her need for a mirror in Scene 6: “I would buy

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myself a mirror, silver-backed, to really see myself, and not have to rely on seeing myself only in your paintings (...)". In a mirror, or in the painting, she sees the image that represents her, and that image makes the essential part of her ‘myself’. The character of Catharina expresses the need to exit the realm of Vermeer’s world; she views the mirror as the vehicle that will enable her to create her own subject, instead of only accepting herself as the object of Vermeer’s view. But, while still without the mirror, Catharina has her writing. Her writing enables her to understand herself as the subject, to reflect the image of herself as she sees it.

While the previous example shows women expressing the need to exit the stereotypes of how they are represented in masculine discourses, another example from the same libretto confirms the opposite. It shows Catharina as a wife who expresses her own (traditionally suppressed) body and sexuality in an explicit manner that only confirms her as the object of desire in masculine discourse:

“Hurry home and come and put your ear
To my belly, masterpainter,
And hear all the kicking of another life.
At least we cannot make another
Whilst there is one in the making.
Though I would not put it past you.
Because I miss your cock-eyed,
Slippery, rednosed, jumping,
Long purple-headed prick of a paintbrush.”

When, in the conventional opera tradition, one of the principal heroines moves towards the dramatic climax of the opera, she typically sings about love or about death. In this case Catharina sings about her and Vermeer’s sexual relationship. The position of Catharina in that relationship could have been seen as objectified through the eyes of her husband: she is the caring mother of their children, his faithful wife and sexual object. On the other hand, Catharina sees Vermeer as sexual object, too, and she writes/sings about that. Thus, Greenaway’s ambivalence towards the female characters invests the representation of women simultaneously with both object and subject positions.

To conclude, strategies that Greenaway uses in the libretto show that although he depicts only female characters in singing roles, the world that those characters belong to is still in large part regulated by what happens in men’s world. At the same time, however, women’s need to exit the objectified position is given significant attention. This ambivalence is present. For example, with the content of the letters Greenaway both simulates écriture féminine, ‘stepping on women’s side’, and

315 Ibid., p. 85.
questions écriture féminine by writing text parts that again could be seen as a proof of a conventionally objectified women’s role. On one hand, that ambivalence confirms the position of woman as object, but at the same time it shows that Greenaway is aware of the women’s need to exit that status. That ambivalence - is the woman subject or object? - is congruent with the creation of an illusion of the dissociated voice, a voice that fluctuates between the different bodies of triplicate characters introduced by the staging procedures.

Mediation, Postopera and Close-up
All the above-mentioned procedures - triplicate characters, a dramaturgy of music that is independent from the dramaturgy of the libretto, the libretto equivocating between women as subject and object - change the vocalic body in Writing to Vermeer. There is, however, another procedure that manifestly problematized the body-voice relation in this piece. It occurs with the first appearance of the Saskia character in Scene 2. I find this scene particularly intriguing in that it shows how the reinvention of the singing body was done. This is because the relationship between the performer’s body on stage, the reproduced image of her body on the screen and the live singing voice is intentionally and manifestly reinvented on this occasion. While examining the ways in which the media of film and opera could work together, Greenaway expressed his view of the problem of filming opera. He implies that the medium of opera is destroyed by filming. He argues that opera is not suitable for filming at all, emphasizing the different dramaturgies of time in the two media:

I believe that opera cannot be filmed. There is something about the idea of one continuous long wide shot with no cuts, no interruptions in order, a particular experience. The whole phenomenon of watching an opera is one single long, wide shot. The frustration, from sitting in an old opera house, using little opera glasses, no close-ups, no changes of perspective. Of course, many, many films have been made about operas which I would say were a good transference of the operatic experience onto film - as soon as you make a cut, of course, you interrupt the continuity, you interrupt the attention span and you break the membrane of that particular relationship which the audience has with one continuous wide shot. (...) Real opera is unfilmable because of its own characteristics, and as soon you introduce the notion of the cut it is already an interruption in space and time. I think if you want to make some manufactured product which will involve the notion of music theater you have to find another way doing it. Opera itself is the wrong material, it is not suited to application for all those things
which in some peculiar way are often desired in an opera, like close-ups or comprehensible lyrics.  

One of the most intriguing moments of *Writing to Vermeer* regarding the relationship between body and voice - Scene 2, the first appearance of Saskia - seems to be exactly the breaking of membrane that Greenaway mentions - a close-up in the opera. This is how Andriessen describes the scene:

Because Saskia is not in Delft, Greenaway shows her for the first time on a large video screen. There are all sorts of film screens with pre-made films but Saskia, sung by Barbara Hannigan, appears live. It looks as though she is miming to her own voice. Because of the other film screens, you don’t immediately realize that she is really there. It works very well.

This is the important point in the piece where the very structure of its media, through the relation between body and voice, is examined. The issue of live performance is problematized by simulating reproduced video projections of singing, with live singing that is at the same time projected on the screen on stage.

Although he regarded opera as the ‘wrong medium’ for changes in the spectator’s perspective, Greenaway experiments precisely with the possibility of a close-up in this art form, in this Scene 2. Saskia is objectified for the spectator’s gaze on the big screen, and her voice objectifies the listening spectators. The image of the body that produces the voice is projected live on the video. The presence of the performer is emphasized, since the visual close-up accompanied by the live singing makes the performance look more personally authored, as in a performance-art piece. At the same time, this singing looks like dubbing thanks to the dissociation between the video close-up and live singing voice.

Paradoxically, singing live in this scene appears as a simulation of the pre-recorded singing: the staging procedure that involves a live projection of Hannigan’s live singing manages to create a distance between the listening spectators and the performance, as if the situation were projected. What is affected is the representation of Hannigan’s presence; although she is present live on stage, her presence is mediated and looks as though it has been reproduced. And the listening spectators are not (at least at first) aware of the live presence of Hannigan on stage in this scene. The gap between body and voice that I was writing about in the Introduction and in Chapter 1 is magnified here by zooming in on a singer’s face where the mouth is clearly visible, and showing that, in accordance with claims by Dolar and Žižek quoted in the Introduction, even when we clearly see who

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is emitting the voice, the relationship between body and voice remains ventriloquial. That was
underlined in this scene that shows the author’s consciousness of the ventriloquial dimension of
singing in opera, and an attempt to rework it

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Before I move to the conclusion of this chapter, I will now make a short overview of the
findings I have made while examining how strategies used in the staging, the music, the libretto and
the mediation interfere in the connection between bodies and voices on stage in Writing to
Vermeer. Strategies used in the staging influence the relationship between body and voice in the
most obvious way. The fact that singing characters appear as triplicate interrogates the way in which
female characters are conventionally objectified in opera according to Abbate. Triplication creates
the conditions for dissociation of the voice from the body that produces it. Furthermore, independent
dramaturgies of the libretto and of the music support dissociation of the voice, too. The way Greenaway questions the concept of écriture féminine is reflected in the way he makes his female characters exit the masculine discourse. Women figures thus fluctuate between object and subject status. That ambivalence goes along with the postdramatic condition of the piece, in which the independence of the texts (libretto, music, staging) is promoted. That independence contribute to a reinvention of the relation between the voice and the body. Finally, mediation in Scene 2 emphasizes the asynchronous, dissociated relation between body and voice, and the scene of Saskia’s close-up seems to be Greenaway’s manifest statement about the subject. All these strategies together significantly affect the conventional relation between body and voice, making it desynchronous, ventriloquial.

An important point that Connor raises about ventriloquism is connected to what he calls
“the cultural sensorium” – “the system of relations, interimplications, and exchanges between the
senses”. He initiates a discussion about “(...) construction and transformation of the sensorium
because the relationship between the arousing ear and the interpreting eye are a cultural
achievement, rather than a biological given”. Of all postoperas I analyze in this dissertation, Writing to Vermeer seems to elaborate this in the most obvious way. This is because it started its ‘life’ as a painting i.e. as the object of vision. In this postopera, what was previously an object of vision becomes an object of hearing, too, since the voice was attributed to the figures that ‘originate’ from the painting. This transformation is emphasized, and it reinvents the relationship between vision and hearing in the opera, and consequently between singing body and sung voice.

319 Ibid.
Writing to Vermeer, unusually for an opera, started its ‘life’ as a painting. ‘Singing pictures’ were born and Vermeer’s embodied women started to sing for us, but also ‘for themselves’. The complex transfer from the ‘real’ woman-model, through the two-dimensional painting motive, and finally to the singing character was accompanied by a de/synchronization process that most typically relates to the subject/object of the vision/hearing relation as it was previously discussed. The situations that Vermeer painted were reenacted, envoiced and multiplied. Reenacting Vermeer’s women, multiplying their figures and envoicing them problematizes the relation of what and how we see and hear simultaneously in opera and produces new meanings. The authors reinvent the conventional body-voice construct. This reinvented relationship between the singing body and the sung voice in this case produces questions about at least three issues: the painting in the age of new media, the status of women struggling between being subject and/or object, and the function of opera in today’s Western world.

The main cause of de-synchronization in both La Belle et la Bête and Writing to Vermeer is the fact that a single singing voice simultaneously refers to more than one body. In La Belle et la Bête the singing voice ‘belongs’ both to the singer on stage and to the film character, while in Writing to Vermeer a singing voice refers to triplicated identical figures on stage, or, as in Scene 2, is ‘divided’ between the singer’s body on stage and her simultaneous video projection. These procedures confirm Grover-Friedlander’s claims that the unity between body and voice is merely a ‘trick’. That ‘trick’ is manifestly thematized in La Belle et la Bête, where it becomes the conceptual motor of the piece, while an awareness of that ‘trick’ is embedded in the representational mechanism of Writing to Vermeer. The ‘impossible synchronization’ in both postoperas speaks of different divisions: between opera and film, man and animal, image and sound, live and reproduced, subject and object. The problematization of those divisions and the reinvention of the body-voice relationship in these pieces effectively reinvent the medium of opera. Moreover, the reinvention of the vocalic body in postopera confirms opera’s adaptation to an age in which “(...) a range of technologies for synthesizing speech makes the ventriloquial condition a prevalent one”.

320 Connor writes about “fundamentally ventriloquial medium of cinema” and discusses the moment of synchronization when the sound was added to a film. “(...) ‘Talking picture’ is both a picture to which talking has been added, and a picture that has started to talk for itself”, he writes. 320 Connor, Dumbstruck, p. 411-2.
321 Steven Connor, Dumbstruck, p. 398.