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Adaptation and Twentieth-Century Opera

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Abstract

Combining critical theory and dramaturgical analysis, this thesis considers twentieth-century English-language opera adaptations from a structural and cultural perspective, with particular focus on the increasing complexity of relationships between different types of literary text and the position of contemporary opera within national literary cultures. Employing the strategies of new musicology, particularly the examination of the ways the experience and interpretation of music is shaped by gender and sexuality, this argument forms a rebuttal of conventional opera analysis which frames theoretical consideration of the genre as primarily a negotiation of the comparative representative power of the libretto and the score.

This thesis consists of three parts: the first develops a theoretical framework for the consideration of adaptation, combining analysis of adaptation theory, opera studies and a thematic reading of the prominence of psychological narratives in twentieth-century drama. The second part suggests a framework for narrative analysis of opera, beginning with a discussion of how several critics have approached the thematic and structural expression of femininity in opera and a discussion of the representative function played by the sung voice in narrative music, identifying non-naturalistic dramaturgical analogues to opera, and considering the aesthetic implications of extravagant stage artifice. The final part outlines the changing cultural position of opera in contemporary society through discussion of the position of the genre in relation to broader stage and literary culture in the United States and Australia, with particular focus on the impact of broadcast and recording technology on opera production, closing with a consideration of how the complex relationship between technology and live acoustic performance might come to shape the composition of new work.

This thesis concludes with the contention that while the specific conventions and cultural status of opera make it an ideal media for atypical interpretations of canonical texts, the intricacy of the relationship between adapted operas and their source material is a reflection of the expansive creative and critical potential of all textual adaptations, rather than an exception based on the particular stylistic specifications of opera.
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Sections of this thesis have been presented at conferences and in publication elsewhere during my candidature: parts of Chapter Four appeared in the paper ‘The Representation of Reason and Desire in Adaptations of Thomas Mann’s Death in Venice’ presented at the 2012 Australian Modernist Studies Network Symposium: ‘Modernism, Intimacy and Emotion’ as part of the panel ‘Modernism and Performance;’ comments on The Habit of Art, Alan Bennett’s imagined history of W.H. Auden and Benjamin Britten collaborating on composing Death in Venice in Chapter Two, were presented at the 2011 Australasian Universities Literature and Languages Association conference at the University of Auckland and published as ‘The Audience Will Expect Me to Leave the Stage: Literary Biography in Recent British Drama’ in the associations’ journal AUMLA; parts of Chapter Three suggesting puppetry as a dramaturgical model for opera were presented during a lecture in Advanced Performance History for postgraduate students in directing and writing for performance at the National Institute of Dramatic Art on February 25, 2013; and comments relating to the distinction between the narrative use of time in opera and musical theatre in Chapter Eight appeared in the article ‘Lyric Time and the Imprisoned Woman: Sweeney Todd and Il Barbiere di Siviglia,’ published in Philament 18, ‘Time.’

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With fondest thanks to my family.
Adaptation and Twentieth-Century Opera

Opera occupies a precarious position within contemporary performance and literary culture: it is considered, by virtue of audience demographics and the high level of institutional support it receives, to represent a level of national cultural accomplishment and refinement; but is equally often framed as an outdated, inaccessible, and semantically unsophisticated art form. A similarly uneasy relationship exists between the stylistic particularities of the form and opera’s representative aims: the relationship between words and music is frequently conceived of as a structural expression of the broader division in aesthetic theory between narrative expression and the representation of the world, and as an illustration of the differences between the Aristotelian poetic modes of diegesis and mimesis. This representative tension is also echoed at many levels within the analysis of opera: in the relationship between the structural elements of the libretto and the music, between the score’s representative and expressive aims, and in the relationship between emotionally imitative and virtuosic performance on stage.

While these critical issues are often discussed in opera studies in relation to the work of canonical nineteenth century composers, they prove particularly contentious in discussion of contemporary opera, where the literary material adapted into the text varies considerably from the archetypal mythical and Romance plots typical of earlier compositions. Structural developments in contemporary music have also challenged the idea that music plays a mimetic function to the libretto’s diegesis. Tom Sutcliffe, for example, argues that trends in modern music pose significant challenges to the narrative requirements of opera as a dramatic art: “The through-composed opera has been far harder to write and to listen to – because the kind of musical language found among respected and worthwhile serious modern composers has provided no structural assistance to listeners or to the composer struggling to honour some kind of graspable shape in the narrative.”

Consideration of twentieth-century opera requires recognition of the significant narrative role played by music, often overlooked in analysis that sets the narrative and representative functions of different components against one another, while acknowledging, as Sutcliffe does here, that much contemporary music does not follow the conventions of narrative program music.

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Adaptation theory, in considering the relationship between two (or more) texts, is a useful complement to consideration of how different expressive elements of opera combine in performance. It is also a necessary theoretical consideration given the prevalence of adapted opera within the canon and in programs of new work, although the types of texts adapted to opera has changed significantly over time, reflecting shifts in the theme and content of contemporary opera and of the position of opera within broader culture. At the same time, the consideration of music drama as a medium of adaptation is also constructive for the discussion of adaptation studies, as opera does not carry with it the assumptions of fidelity of content and tone that are often present in discussions of adaptations between prose and film or theatre where it assumed that performance can more closely emulate the experience of reading. While readers often express concern about how closely adapted films resemble their experience of a novel as a reader, it would be very unusual for someone to read a novel and imagine the dialogue sung with a full orchestral accompaniment.

Writing just prior to the publication of her landmark study *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon identifies a number of theoretical issues that justify consideration of adaptation to music drama beyond assessing the similarity between the source and adapted text:

> Since it takes longer to sing than to speak (much less read) a line of text, operas and musicals must necessarily distil, often radically, the narrative of a novel or play. The necessary compression means the tripping of expansive plot lines, the removal of much psychological analysis, and the loss of stylistic texture. Characters and events are omitted; colorful slang and expletives are deleted. With literature, we start in the realm of imagination, which is simultaneously controlled, directing words of the text and unconstrained by the limits of the visual or aural. We can stop reading at any point; we can reread or skip ahead; we can hold the book in our hands and feel (as well as see) how much of the story remains to be read. But with film and stage adaptations, we are caught in an unrelenting, forward driving story.²

The issues listed here are important to isolate when comparing operatic adaptation to adaptation in other genres, however where Hutcheon uses these points to primarily question and dismantle cultural perceptions relating to fidelity and intertextuality, I wish to apply this critical breadth to an examination of contemporary compositions – with their psychological themes, self-referentiality, complex and unconventional narrative structures, and frequently explicit content – and the culture surrounding twentieth-century opera within this critical framework. Hutcheon’s identification here of the difference between the narrative interpretation of stories when read and when observed in

performance also points toward some of the interesting dramaturgical issues surrounding live performance, which I will consider with specific emphasis on the dramatic significance of elite performers inhabiting character roles on stage before an audience.

This thesis combines an overview of current adaptation and narrative musical theory with archival research on significant twentieth-century opera adaptations, and aims to gesture toward future potential for research on contemporary opera at the intersection of musicology and literary theory. While there has been some excellent cultural criticism on opera and several in-depth literary analyses of specific operas and opera adaptations, in examining the process of adaptation, this thesis aims to place textual analysis and cultural criticism alongside one another in order to suggest resonances between the development of the form and literary trends in the twentieth century. Methodologically, I have aimed to acknowledge that opera, and particularly opera adaptation, is a fundamentally collaborative art form, and I have worked extensively in archives to examine some of the ways that composers and librettists share ideas during the composition process, as revealed by the correspondence between Benjamin Britten and Myfanwy Piper, and between George Gershwin and DuBose Heyward: letters which have been published in part elsewhere but not before applied specifically to analysis of opera adaptation.

Frequently discussions of opera are limited to musical analysis of the score, occasionally supplemented by textual analysis of the libretto. The challenges of this type of reading are acknowledged by Paul Robinson in ‘A Deconstructive Postscript: Reading Libretti and Misreading Opera,’ his rebuttal to Groos & Parker’s compilation of literary opera analysis Reading Opera. Robinson argues that it is impossible to read opera meaningfully because libretti are generally close to unintelligible in performance and while libretti may be interesting texts in themselves, frequently the words of opera become most difficult to understand at the most crucial dramatic moments: “the crucial thing about high notes is that these altitudinous, incomprehensible tones occur precisely at the moments of greatest dramatic significance, when the text, in theory, ought to matter most […]. Opera, in other words, grows inarticulate just when it seeks to say the most important things.”

Considering the many components of operatic performance, it is necessary to acknowledge the specific critical perspective from which the text is being interpreted: either what Robinson calls a

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“house reading,” where the words are interpreted as heard during performance, or a “supertitle reading,” where the performance is interpreted with reference to the libretto. This thesis will primarily follow Robinson’s “house reading” model, as musical components and staging decisions can contradict or emphasise the verbal content of an opera, and accordingly any comprehensive study of dramatic trends in twentieth-century opera can only be satisfactorily conducted when considering specific productions.

Beyond the difficulty in deciphering words as they are sung, understanding opera additionally depends on the representational power of the symbols on stage, and consequently I have paid particular attention in my research to the different ways in which modern work is produced and performed. Opera Australia kindly permitted me to attend working stage rehearsals at the Sydney Opera House for productions several of the works discussed in this thesis: A Streetcar Named Desire (2007), Bliss (2010), and Of Mice and Men (2011). Events hosted by Opera Australia, including a panel discussion with composer Carlisle Floyd prior to the Australian premiere of Of Mice and Men, have provided another source of original primary research. Given the limitations of assessing opera outside the opera house, in discussing live work this thesis focuses primarily on Australian productions (in addition to video recordings and live broadcasts). While this decision was informed by practical considerations, opera’s place within Australia’s cultural environment and institutions is also a useful illustration of the contested space occupied by English-language opera in contemporary society, as I identify in Chapter Eleven. I also discuss recordings and live broadcasts of opera, with consideration of how the increased availability of opera on film has influenced the development of operatic aesthetics.

Opera is also necessarily ephemeral, and in order to avoid sole reliance on the score and libretto material in analysing performances (and to supplement accounts of performances attended), this thesis also relies on reviews and reporting from the popular press. While subject to some critical limitations relating to the requirements of mass media publication, reviews are particularly crucial when contemplating the cultural context of individual works: Gerald Rabkin describes theatre press coverage accordingly as “the journalist consumer reporting demanded of criticism of the popular

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4 Ibid., 342.
5 Ibid., 343.
arts in our culture.” This thesis will provide operatic production histories, and, where available, will discuss particular productions in order to clarify the representational and affective value of stage drama. Selected texts are not intended to be representative of all developments in modern opera, or to be an indication of all significant operas adaptations, but rather intended to function as illustrations of the theoretical developments discussed.

This thesis is explicitly grounded in the strategies of new musicology, as an approach to opera that corresponds with the demands of studying adaptation, and as one that provides contemporaneous insight into some of the thematic concerns of twentieth-century opera. Borrowing widely from twentieth-century critical theory, the theoretical strategies united under new musicology are contemporaneous with the cultural developments discussed and support my consideration of opera within the scope of literary studies. New musicology also acknowledges the social complexities of analysing opera as a performance genre, such as the way gender and sexuality inflect narrative music, factors frequently overlooked due to uncertainty about how music conveys meaning, as Susan McClary argues:

> Literature and visual art are almost always concerned (at least in part) with the organisation of sexuality, the construction of gender, the arousal and channelling of desire. So is music, except that music may perform these functions even more effectively than other media. Since few listeners know how to explain how it creates its effects, music gives the illusion of operating independently of cultural mediation. It is often received (and not only by the musically untutored) as a mysterious medium within which we seem to encounter our “own” most private feelings. Thus music is able to contribute heavily (if surreptitiously) to the shaping of individual identities: along with other influential media such as film, music teaches us how to experience our own bodies. For better or for worse, it socializes us.⁷

In acknowledgement of these complexities, this thesis deliberately avoids in-depth consideration of the musical structure of specific operas, focusing primarily on illustrating broader consideration of issues in critical theory and cultural history through the discussion of several case studies, with close analysis of specific elements of both operas and scores where relevant.

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Approaching twentieth-century opera from several critical standpoints, including adaptation theory, musicology and the aesthetics of narrative music, and the cultural analysis of contemporary opera within national and institutional contexts, I relate specific discussions of particular interpretive issues to existing critical work on opera, drawing out how the arguments of several authors engage with issues relating to intertextuality, adaptation, and new work, particularly Jeremy Tambling’s *Opera, Ideology and Film*; Linda Hutcheon’s *A Theory of Adaptation* and *Opera: Desire, Disease, Death* (with Michael Hutcheon), and Ethan Mordden’s *Opera in the Twentieth Century*.

This thesis consists of three parts, each examining a different approach to dramatic analysis of opera: thematic, structural, and cultural. Part one begins with an account of the simultaneous development of adaptation theory and opera studies in the second half of the twentieth century, illustrated by a discussion of the composition process of Benjamin Britten’s *Death in Venice* (Chapter One). I then frame the process of adaptation in relation to reception and aesthetic response theory, discussing the specific questions about authorship raised by multi-author texts and how these complications are compounded in the case of dramatic works where performers and producing artists are also considered to play an authorial role, and each new production can be considered a new interpretation of the original text (Chapter Two). From this point I move on to discuss structural specificities relating to the adaptation of texts to visual literary genres, discussing film and the graphic novel as potential analogues for stage adaptation, and suggest that the increasing interrelation between different narrative media has led to changes in the typical subject matter of adapted music drama (Chapter Three). Expanding this examination of style and theme to take into account the semantic implications of the performing body and following developments in critical theory relating to affect, I then return to read *Death in Venice* through the lens of Queer musicology, discussing the varied ways that critics have engaged with issues of camp, voice fetishism, and explicit sexual content in opera (Chapter Four).

The second part of this thesis sketches a potential framework for a poetics of contemporary opera, suggesting areas of correspondence between dramaturgy and narrative musicology. Beginning with an outline of existing theory on the semiotic role of voice in music drama, I then discuss the theoretical work of Julia Kristeva and Catherine Clément in this area and outline the productive debate between the two theorists on the thematic implications of the prominence of the female voice in opera (Chapter Five). Acknowledging the limited applicability of the conventions of spoken
drama to musical theatre, I consider possible non-naturalistic dramaturgical models for opera, identifying relevant areas of comparison with the aesthetics of puppetry and dance, and discussing the contentious topic of the importance of singers’ acting skills, the limitations of naturalistic acting training and practices for elite musicians, and the significance of the role of the audience in live drama (Chapter Six). Examining the political aesthetics of opera outside of the institutional factors that associate the genre with bourgeois sensibility, I then discuss how critical theorists including Theodor Adorno, Roland Barthes, and Bertolt Brecht have envisaged the limitations of the structural and thematic conventions of opera (Chapter Seven).

The final part of this thesis considers how the cultural position of opera has changed over the twentieth century, beginning with an account of how the conventions of opera have developed alongside the conventions of musical theatre in the United States. Here I describe the structural and thematic differences between the two genres and the way genre classifications shape audience expectations about adapted work (Chapter Eight), as illustrated by the production history of George Gershwin’s Porgy and Bess, identifying how genre classifications have been informed in this case by perspectives on modernism and race in America (Chapter Nine). Returning to the issue of the relationship between film aesthetics and contemporary opera, I then discuss several American opera adaptations that are closely related to film adaptations of the same text, and, with reference to the relevant twentieth-century cultural commentary of Susan Sontag, suggest that opera can be seen to offer alternative interpretations of definitive works in the national literary canon by virtue of its aesthetic specificity (Chapter Ten). In Australia, the dramatic excess of opera seems compounded by the dissonance between the Australian accent and the operatic voice, and between the history of the form and national aversions to cultural pretension. With particular reference to two recent compositions – Brett Dean’s Bliss after the novel by Peter Carey and Graeme Koehne’s The Ringtone Cycle, with a libretto by Peter Goldsworthy – I examine how Australian composers and librettists have utilised the unsettling qualities of the Australian accent and Australian vernacular language to explore violent and sexually explicit subject matter, while deliberately highlighting the incongruity inherent in employing orchestral music to tell narratives about the commercialisation and technological mediation of contemporary life (Chapter Eleven). I then consider the friction between the required virtuosity of singers to project their voice without technological intervention and the increasing prominence of opera recording and broadcast programs, and discuss what implications this conflict has for the composition of new work (Chapter Twelve), concluding with remarks about
how the complicated relationship between technology and acoustic performance might impact the development of opera in the future
PART A

Opera and Adaptation Theory
1. Adaptation Theory, from Film to Stage

From Life to Art by painstaking adaptation,
Relying on us to cover the rift:
Only your notes are pure contraption,
Only your song is an absolute gift.

‘The Composer,’ W.H. Auden

Ten years before Benjamin Britten began composing his last opera, an adaptation of Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*, librettist Myfanwy Piper wrote to the composer to propose a “large opera” about Greek god Hermes, which would chart the god’s progression from his mythological origins to the modern world: “I want to write about him as the first brilliant, cultivated, appreciative, materialist […] the god like success man who sold out to power, the First Act would be the childhood as told in the Homeric Hymn […] A breakdown of the material success story and a revision of the nude pagan atmosphere of the first childhood – its speed and its transparent egotism open instead of wrapped up in civilised dishonesty but I see the finale as a tremendous hymn to Apollo.” 2 Britten did not take up Piper’s idea for an opera about Hermes immediately, but the two revisited the idea of a modern retelling of mythological narratives when they came to adapt Thomas Mann’s novella *Death in Venice* between 1970 and 1973: where Aschenbach’s brief daydreams of Greek philosophy and mythology from the novel 3 are developed into a symbolic battle between Apollo and Dionysus, a thematic tension maintained throughout the opera by the cast doubling of the countertenor and baritone who play these roles. In light of the influence of film theory on the emergence of adaptation studies and Luchino Visconti’s near simultaneous film adaptation of the novella (1971), Britten’s *Death in Venice* provides a fitting introduction to an investigation of twentieth-century opera adaptation.

This chapter will identify ways in which opera studies might contribute to a rebuttal of the assumption that fidelity to the original text should be a primary concern when considering literary adaptation, while suggesting that, as an acknowledgement of the complexity of the relationship between features of associated texts, adaptation theory also compliments the dramatic analysis of

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2 Letter, January 28 [no year, archive date supplied 1956], item number 9401101, Britten-Pears Foundation.
opera. When assumptions of the authority of the original text are set aside, adaptation studies can shed light on how the authors of different texts approach the same narrative, and in this respect shares relevant similarities with structural analysis of opera, which examines the way narrative is expressed through the use of several representational methods by a number of contributing authors. *Death in Venice* here also serves as a symbolic illustration of the tension between the segregated elements in opera of the Dionysian visceral expression of music and the Apollonian order of words and plot, and as in the mythological struggle between Apollo and Dionysus, more is revealed through consideration of the conflict than in adjudication of the triumph of either expressive element. Just as adaptation criticism often takes a problematically piecemeal approach to texts, opera criticism often fails to acknowledge how pieces are constructed dramatically in favour of providing isolated criticism of the music or libretto. In order to argue for the significance of this similarity between the two disciplines over the next several chapters, I will begin with a brief summary of relevant opera criticism.

While some adaptation critics have examined issues surrounding the adaptation of literary works to opera specifically, the majority of studies of opera adaptation tend to discuss only the efficacy of the operatic work in accurately presenting the plot and themes of the adapted text, and, as in opera criticism more generally, tend to focus on operas composed prior to World War II (and nineteenth-century grand opera in particular). Awareness of the potential for the adaptor to provide commentary on the original text is less common in writing about opera adaptation than it is in analysis of film adaptation, and this is unfortunate, as the very act of adapting a literary text to opera can be seen as an argument for the ongoing relevance of the source, regardless of how the specific material from the original text is handled, due to the cultural connotations of the genre, and simultaneously an assertion of the continued cultural vitality of opera.

Examination of trends in twentieth-century and contemporary compositions is relatively uncommon in critical analysis of opera, with literary and dramaturgical analysis of opera focusing on the adaptation of particular authors or the work of specific (and most often pre-twentieth-century) composers. Gary Schmidgall has substantially mapped opera adaptation through specific case studies in *Literature as Opera* and *Shakespeare and Opera*. Typically of much opera analysis *Literature as Opera* focuses on nineteenth-century work, with only three case studies dating from the twentieth century
(Strauss’ *Salome*, Berg’s *Wozzeck* and Britten’s *Death in Venice*), while in *Shakespeare and Opera* Schmidgall places a greater emphasis post-WWII work and provides a comprehensive analysis of the adaptation of spoken plays to lyric drama under three categories: style, dramaturgy and performance. Leonard Rosmarin’s *When Literature Becomes Opera* exclusively examines operas adapted from French texts, with Poulenc’s midcentury *Dialogues des Carmélites* the most recent work featured, but the two-part strategy he outlines for understanding literary adaptation is applicable more broadly. Rosmarin suggests the process of operatic adaptation as having two primary aims: firstly to “reinforce the centre of gravity” of the text (a similar argument to those relating to maintaining the ‘spirit of the text’ common in discussions of film adaptation), frequently a centre of gravity relating to the themes of death and love; and secondly to create “exemplary figures” through music’s ability to assist dramatic characterization, the additional semantic weight that characters in opera bear by virtue of singing, a point of dramaturgical complexity in the dramatic analysis of opera to which I will return in later chapters.

In a similar vein to Schmidgall’s survey of Shakespearian adaptations, Michael Halliwell’s *Opera and the Novel: The Case of Henry James* examines adapted work through consideration of the way several composers have approached the work of the same author, focusing specifically on several compositions from the twentieth century. Halliwell’s approach to adaptation is clearly informed by film criticism, and like film critics unconvinced by fidelity criticism (an approach that I will discuss in more detail shortly) he considers excessive adherence to the original text as detrimental to the composition of successful adaptions. Beyond the obvious fundamental shift in genre adaptation requires, Halliwell considers opera composition to be a radically interpretive process: “[opera] can be said to be the adaptive and collaborative medium *par excellence*, and an essential aspect of the adaptive process is the radical transformation of its source, even if this source is an original libretto and not a prior-existing work.” In light of his enthusiasm for the interpretive and imaginative aspects of adaption, Halliwell expresses scepticism about operas adapted from plays, arguing that it can be difficult for adaptors to escape the original text: “spoken drama appears to place a straight-jacket on potential operatic adaptors because it already has a ‘dramatic’ contour and structure, and musical

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7 Ibid., 80.
amplification and dramatization might be seen as superfluous.”9 Here Halliwell specifically mentions two historically significant literature operas (plays set without significant alteration to music): Pelleas et Melisande and Wozzeck.10 While the dramatic weakness of some operas adapted from plays may support Halliwell’s argument, there is no practical reason why the text of a play should necessarily prove any more restrictive than the plot of a novel as the basis for a new adapted work, or indeed any reason (aside from the necessity of a greater degree of abbreviation) why the dialogue of a novel should be transposed with any less reverence than the dialogue of a play, as while individual lines of dialogue can become iconically associated with plays, these lines might not be immediately recognisable when sung, and may not carry the same dramatic weight. Requirements relating to abbreviation and prosody pose similar challenges for the adaptation of both prose and dramatic texts: it has been noted, for example, that in Britten and Pears’ adaptation of A Midsummer Night’s Dream (1960), the libretto uses almost exactly half the lines of dialogue from the play;11 and in Thomas Adès’ The Tempest (2004) librettist Meredith Oakes abbreviated the original play text similarly and converted Shakespeare’s iambic pentameter to loosely rhyming verse (“CALIBAN: Who was here? / Have they disappeared? / Were there others? / Were we brothers? / Did we feast? / And give gifts? / Were there fires / And ships? / They were human seeming / I was dreaming / In the gleam of the sand”).12 The process of adaptation between stage texts does present a number of specific dramaturgical questions that I will return to address; particularly as contemporary composers have come to embrace less conventional literary sources, and often material without traditional narrative structure, accounting for the differences between adaptations of various types of source text requires further consideration.

Beyond criticism specific to opera studies, this thesis will be theoretically grounded in the broader consideration of the adaptation of literary texts between genres. This body of criticism offers insight into broader critical debates about the roles of form and content in informing textual meaning, issues of interpretation, the literary relationship between authors, and the reception and post-publication cultural life of texts. In the analysis of dramatic culture, discussion of adaptation provides a relevant point of comparison when entering discussions of staging and directorial

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9 Ibid., 48.
10 Ibid., 28.
11 Cooke notes that this frequently made observation, that the libretto contains half the lines of the play and only one additional line, reveals little about how the drama was translated to a cohesive opera. Mervyn Cooke, “Britten and Shakespeare: Dramatic and Musical Cohesion in ‘a Midsummer Night’s Dream’,” Music & Letters 72, no. 2 (1993): 246.
interpretation of the dramatic text on stage. One of the first studies to assert the validity of cinematic adaptation as a subject of academic consideration was George Bluestone’s *Novels into Film* (1957),\(^\text{13}\) which identifies the different stylistic characteristics of novels and films and suggests that each favours different kinds of expression, arguing that successful adaptations take account of these differences between forms. From this starting point, the field of film adaptation criticism largely followed Bluestone’s method of close textual comparison, often devising categories of adaptation defined according to degree of correspondence to the original text. Geoffrey Wagner’s *The Novel and the Cinema* (1975), distinguishes three categories of adaptation: transposition, commentary and analogy.\(^\text{14}\) Intention is not a central consideration in Wagner’s analysis; even inadvertent divergences from the source text are classified in the ‘commentary’ category. Later discussions of the adaptation of novels to film frequently begin, and occasionally become entrenched in, concerns about how closely the adapted work adheres to the primary text. Many of the authors writing on film adaptation after Bluestone and Wagner frame their work as a response to fidelity criticism: Brian McFarlane in *Novel to Film*,\(^\text{15}\) Jay Gould Boyum in *Double Exposure: Fiction into Film*,\(^\text{16}\) Cartmell & Whelehan in *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text*\(^\text{17}\) and Neil Sinyard in *Filming Literature*.\(^\text{18}\)

Focusing on the structural and formal requirements for adapting a text, as many of these conventional studies do, has the tendency to endorse a view of adaptation as primarily a process of compromise. Although the way in which these challenges of form and content are approached can point towards the critical perspective of the adaptor, theories of adaptation that focus on the challenge of maintaining the ‘essence’ or ‘spirit’ of the original work unavoidably reinforce the assumption of that work’s supremacy. Fidelity criticism of this kind colours Hans Rudolf Vaget’s analysis of Visconti’s *Death in Venice*, where he questions the director’s transplanting of scenes from Mann’s later novel *Doctor Faustus* into the film,\(^\text{19}\) and criticises Visconti for not matching “the complexity of Mann’s narrative.”\(^\text{20}\) When less emphasis is placed on judging the fidelity of the adaptation several more compelling issues regarding adaptation come into focus. Particularly when

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\(^{14}\) Wagner, 222-6
\(^{17}\) Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan, eds., *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text* (London: Routledge, 1999).
\(^{20}\) Ibid., 172.
the original author and the author interpreting the text are separated significantly in time, the choice of text and the approach taken to the material can illuminate both the original text and highlight its relevance to a new cultural environment. This is not to say that the concerns of adherence to the adapted work are entirely irrelevant to operatic adaptation.

While considerable changes can be required for a narrative to be presented on stage, the question of what is considered a significant omission does arise in discussion of opera, particularly when the adapted text is well-entrenched in the canon. In fact, Lawrence Kramer suggests in ‘The Great American Opera’ that the cultural status and unique stylistic features of opera can occasionally make it more susceptible to fidelity criticism: “Unlike movies, the operas are expected to do justice to the works they adapt […] They are not imitations that make their originals better; who could improve on Streetcar or The Great Gatsby? They are, rather supposed to give something familiar and well loved a fitting house in a new medium.”

A Streetcar Named Desire and The Great Gatsby have both been adapted into opera, Andre Previn’s Streetcar (1997) and John Harbison’s Gatsby (1997), and in adapting such iconic works of American literature, these composers are not only finding a home for the familiar narrative in a new medium, but are also using the cultural status of the adapted work to assert the cultural relevance of contemporary opera in America. I will return to discuss the development of American opera during the twentieth century and how it elucidates the cultural debates surrounding English-language opera in the third part of this thesis.

The most interesting critical work on adaptation looks at the adapted work as more than just a simple translation of the original. One of the best of these studies concerning cinema is Filming Literature: The Art of Screen Adaptation, where Neil Sinyard argues that good film adaptations share some of the characteristics of a critical analysis, and can be therefore thought of as something like a critical essay on the original text: “The best adaptations of books for film can often best be approached as an activity of literary criticism, not a pictorialisation of the complete novel, but a critical essay which stresses what it sees as the main theme. Like a critical essay, the film adaptation selects some episodes, excludes others, offers preferred alternatives.”

Kamilla Elliott similarly recognises the critical potential of adaptation, while acknowledging the challenges posed to

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22 Sinyard, Filming Literature: The Art of Screen Adaptation, 117.
adaptation studies by post-structuralist approaches to the content of texts in her *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*. Elliott differentiates six concepts of adaptation corresponding to different intentions on the part of the adapting author, ordered roughly from least interpretive to most, from the benign ‘psychic concept’ which attempts to maintain the spirit of the original work to the ‘trumping concept,’ which (similarly to Sinyard’s ‘adaptation as criticism’) asserts a new point of view while commenting, positively or negatively, on the original text.

A more complex taxonomy of adaptation is provided in Thomas Leitch’s *Film Adaptation and its Discontents*, provocatively titled after Freud, along with a more aggressive rebuttal of fidelity criticism, starting with a very convincing summation of the flaws of the approach: “After all, no matter how clever or audacious an adaptation is, the book will always be better than any adaptation because it is better at being itself. […] Fidelity as a touchstone of adaptations will always give their source texts, which are always faithful to themselves, an advantage so enormous and unfair that it renders the comparison meaningless.” Leitch expands on Elliott’s six categories of adaptation, enveloping them into his own ten categories defining various levels of dependency on the text adapted: celebrations, adjustment, neoclassic imitation, revisions, colonization, (meta)commentary/deconstruction, analogue, parody/pastiche, secondary/tertiary/quaternary imitations, and allusion. While these categories are more specific than Elliott’s, this schema suffers from similar difficulties, as adapted texts (and particularly multi-author works such as film and opera) frequently present several interpretations of the original material, and often refer to more than one source text. Here Leitch acknowledges that even his own ten categories are “embarrassingly fluid.”

Leitch’s approach to literary practices in particular suggests interesting possible directions to be taken in incorporating literary theory into adaptation studies: “adaptation study has drastically limited its horizons by its insistence on treating source texts as canonical authoritative discourse or readerly works rather than internally persuasive discourse or writerly texts, refusing in consequence to learn what one might have expected to be the primary lesson of film adaptation: the texts remain alive only to the extent that they can be rewritten and that to experience a text in all its power

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24 Ibid., 173.
26 Ibid., 96-121.
27 Ibid., 123.
requires each reader to rewrite it.”

This approach of paring reader response criticism with adaptation studies is particularly useful when considering texts that have been adapted and re-adapted into opera many times, such as Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher.*

By opening up his study to adaptations beyond those typically given much consideration in conventional side-by-side adaptation studies like pastiche, pornography and consciously multi-reference works like Baz Luhrmann’s *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet,* Leitch, while tightly focused on adaptation in cinema, indicates toward interesting theoretical issues brought up by cross-genre adaptation. In reference to Luhrmann, after outlining how all ten of his defined adaptation strategies are used at various points in *Romeo + Juliet,* operatic aesthetics are suggested as a stylistic model for his distinctively baroque film work: “The result of this heavily overdetermined intertextual bricolage ought to be chaos or reductive irony. But many viewers report a paradoxical effect associated with the grand opera that provides Luhrmann’s truest generic model: the very artifice of the conventions recognized and discounted as conventions deepens these viewer’s emotional response. One reason for this response is surely that audiences are not so easily confused by logically incompatible modes of intertextuality.”

The description of Luhrmann’s films as following an operatic model is appropriate considering Luhrmann began his career directing innovative productions of Puccini’s *La Bohème* and Britten’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* for Opera Australia and his aesthetic has been widely recognised as one informed by the style and structure of opera. Similarly A. O. Scott’s *New York Times* review of Luhrmann’s 2013 film adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* identifies both the director’s operatic aesthetic and how the extravagance of his film is sympathetic to the thematic preoccupations of the adapted novel: “The result is less a conventional movie adaptation than a splashy, trashy opera, a wayward, lavishly theatrical celebration of the emotional and material extravagance that Fitzgerald surveyed with fascinated ambivalence.”

In *Filming Literature,* Sinyard takes the film adaptation of *Death in Venice* as a case study, with Visconti’s association of the character of Aschenbach with Gustav Mahler cited as evidence of his effective use of adaptation as a mode of textual criticism. He describes the film as representing “a

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28 Ibid., 13.
29 *The Fall of the House of Usher* has been adapted to opera by Claude Debussy (incomplete on his death in 1918), Philip Glass (1987) and prog-rock musician Peter Hammill (first recording 1991); *The Tempest* has been adapted to opera many times, most notably by John Christopher Smith (1756) and Thomas Adès (2004), and has additionally been the subject of incidental music by many composers including Sibelius, Berlioz and Purcell.
30 Leitch, *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents,* 125.
meeting of minds of three of the great European artists of the twentieth century”: Mahler, Visconti and Mann. In rewriting Aschenbach as a composer and alluding clearly to Mahler through the use of his third and fifth symphonies in the soundtrack, Visconti opens the basis of textual and historical reference of the film to include Mahler’s musical catalogue, the position of this work between late Romanticism and Modernism, and the composer’s relationship with Nazi Germany. Looking at adaptation as critical commentary, as Sinyard does in his discussion of Death in Venice, is complicated by the commodification of cultural products and creation of the culture industry. Adorno and Horkheimer express concerns about adaptation on these grounds:

If one branch of art follows the same formula as one with a very different medium and content; if the dramatic intrigue of broadcast soap operas becomes no more than useful material for showing how to master technical problems at both ends of the scale of musical experience – real jazz or cheap imitation; or if a movement from a Beethoven symphony is crudely “adapted” for a film sound-track in the same way as a Tolstoy novel is garbled in a film script: then the claim that this is done to satisfy the spontaneous wishes of the public is no more than hot air.  

The scepticism expressed by Adorno and Horkheimer about the potential for adaptation to be used to provide critical commentary on canonical literary works and their period of construction reflects their ongoing concern about the historicity of artistic work. Even in the adaptations that adhere closely to the original text fidelity is not achieved through inaction, and the material context of the adaptive process cannot be discounted in considering the historical context of adapted work.

Viewing adaptation as an act of literary criticism also implies that adaptation can be subject to similar criticisms to those levelled at the interpretation of texts more generally, where, as Susan Sontag suggests in ‘Against Interpretation’, the interpreter “without actually erasing or rewriting the text, is altering it,” but in the case of adaptation this alteration of the text is obviously apparent and the author does not necessarily conceal his/her revisionist motives. Notably, Sontag cites Thomas Mann as an example of the type of “overcooperative” author “so uneasy before the naked power of his art that he will install within the work itself – albeit with a little shyness, a touch of the good taste of

32 Sinyard, Filming Literature: The Art of Screen Adaptation, 126.
irony – the clear and explicit interpretation of it,” but as can be seen from the different ways that *Death in Venice* has been adapted, Mann clearly cannot prevent additional interpretations from being applied to his work, and the potential ambiguity of irony can also attract further interpretative attention.

Both Visconti’s film and Britten’s opera adaptation of *Death in Venice* illustrate different responses to the challenges of adapting a symbolic and significantly psychological novella with little direct dialogue to the stage and screen. Although it seems unlikely that the experience of reading a novel is especially similar to the visual and auditory experience of watching a film, it is surely even more unlikely that a reader imagines any character’s soliloquy as an aria soaring above a full orchestral accompaniment. In Mann’s *Death in Venice*, the events of Aschenbach’s trip to Italy are thematically undercut with his dreams of Plato’s *Phaedrus* dialogue. In Britten’s opera, Tadzio, the young object of Aschenbach’s obsession, is explicitly cast as Socrates’ interlocutor in *Phaedrus*, a role he acts out through dance in a number of Grecian athletic tournaments narrated by the Voice of Apollo, a counter-tenor, and the Voice of Dionysus, sung by the same bass-baritone who also doubles as many of the secondary male roles in the piece (including the Elderly Fop, the Old Gondolier, the Hotel Manager, the Hotel Barber, and the Leader of the Players). The connection between the erotic and creative impulses that concerns Mann is foregrounded by Britten in using these philosophical dialogues as explicit commentary on the largely internal narrative action of the novella. In a letter sent to the composer early in February 1972, Myfanwy Piper jokes that they should make the references to Socrates more explicit: “I begin to wish we could get Peter [who performed the role of Aschenbach in the first production] to chant ‘Please refer to page 16 of the Socratic dialogues.’” In a subsequent letter she suggests ways to structurally interweave the opera’s literal and philosophical plots, writing: “There is no doubt in my mind that Aschenbach was a devotee of Apollo – that Apollo is the God whom he put up against Dionysus and that Tadzio therefore also can and does represent Apollo in his mind so that in his distraught state a voice that could be Tadzio’s would be dramatically right if you think we can get away with it.”

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35 Ibid., 8.  
36 Letter, no catalogue date, item number 9401050, Britten-Pears Foundation.  
37 Letter, January 28, 1972, no reference number, Britten-Pears Foundation.
Clifford Hindley argues that the changes made in Britten’s adaptation of the novella, particularly shifting the turning point from the misdirected luggage sequence to the aftermath of the games of Apollo, changes the thematic conclusions of the story: “Britten intended to show not only the obsession which destroyed Aschenbach but also the positive possibility of a sublimated love of youthful male beauty along the lines of Platonic philosophy, a theme which in Mann is treated with the utmost ambivalence.”38 In particular, Hindley cites how at the end of Act I, Scene 6, when Aschenbach’s luggage is misdirected, Piper’s libretto quotes Mann’s personal correspondence: “Often what is called disruptive is not directed against life, but is invigorating, a renewal”39 - suggesting a sense of optimism about his continued stay, as opposed to the suggestion of a sense of mounting dread as established in this sequence of the novel.

The intellectual register of the narrative events of the opera can be further emphasised by staging decisions, as in the Gran Teatre del Liceu production of 2008,40 where Aschenbach’s reflections on the artistic progress - “My mind beats on, my mind beats on and no words come […] taxing, tiring, unyielding, unproductive”41 - were underscored by the singer playing Aschenbach typing fitfully on a typewriter before collapsing on a stage empty but for abandoned sheets of paper and a large illustration of Leonardo Di Vinci’s Vitruvian Man, emphasising the reflective, internalised and psychological tone of the plot. In this production Aschenbach remained on stage from this theatrical prologue onward as the other characters moved about him, creating the impression that the events of the opera are part of his dream. By explicitly establishing that the action that follows is occurring within the fitful mind of Aschenbach, this production suggested an interpretive orientation for the performance that resembles the first person narrative mode. While not always so explicitly achieved through production designs and blocking, in the context of the interiority that came to define twentieth-century opera, music is often interpreted as the score of the emotional narrative of the protagonist.

As suggested by consideration of this production of Death in Venice, there is a useful methodological similarity between the adaptation of texts and the staging of dramatic texts, in that each production

39 Ibid., 513.
40 Benjamin Britten, Death in Venice, directed by Willy Decker (Video recording; Barcelona: Gran Teatre del Liceu, 25 May, 2008).
transposes the written text into a live event, with a range of different intentions and motivations for production decisions that either correspond with or deviate from the staging arrangements indicated by the directions provided in the text, and, beyond these specific stage directions, the dominant cultural assumptions of how the text should be performed. In the case of director’s theatre (a term used to describe dramatic work where the director takes a departure from the text, or conventional staging of the text, in order to present his or her specific dramatic vision) this analogy between adaptation and staging is even more applicable.

The idea that the director may assume an authorial role over stage texts is a relatively recent one, and the extent to which director’s theatre differs from the otherwise conventional staging of dramatic texts is the subject of some debate. According to David Bradby and David Williams, for a piece of performance to be considered director’s theatre “the director must reformulate the author’s work in terms of a fresh and living stage idiom.” The authors track the origin of director’s theatre to the work of three directors working in Germany during the first half of the twentieth century: Max Reinhardt, who pioneered a trademark dramatic style that fully exploited newly developed stage technologies; Erwin Piscator, who created multi-media cabaret for working class audiences; and Bertolt Brecht, whose idiosyncratically unpolished staging and deliberately conspicuous dramaturgical strategies have had lasting impact on the politics of dramatic writing and direction.

While Bradby and Williams acknowledge that some work that falls under the banner of director’s theatre is not derived from previously existing texts for stage (such as group-devised work), it is productions that substantially reframe canonical works that attract the most criticism and discussion about authorship in the context of drama.

Peter Brook was one of the most active post-WWII theatre makers working to define the broad new role for directors in stage production (accordingly Brook is one of several definitive director’s theatre figures profiled by Bradby and Williams along with Joan Littlewood, Roger Planchon, Ariane Mnouchkine, Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Stein and Robert Wilson). In his theatrical manifesto The Empty Space, Brook distinguishes four diagnostic categories of modern theatre practice: the Deadly Theatre, staid performances held hostage by theatrical convention and the expectations of conservative (and

43 Ibid., 16-20.
44 Ibid., 1.
frequently commercial) audiences;\textsuperscript{45} the Holy Theatre, drama that creates the illusion of transcendental experience and universal meaning;\textsuperscript{46} the Rough Theatre, described as popular, crude and energetic;\textsuperscript{47} and the Immediate Theatre, the category of performance advocated by Brook, as that is produced organically and spontaneously through the collaboration of artists (actors, designers and director) and spectators.\textsuperscript{48} According to Brook these categories (including, significantly, his own Immediate Theatre, itself inseparable from the culture of its conception)\textsuperscript{49} are implicated in several limiting cultural assumptions about what theatre is and what it can achieve due to a reverence for theatrical expertise and tradition,\textsuperscript{50} whether due to the exuberance of the Rough Theatre or the adherence to received protocol of the Holy and Deadly Theatres.

Despite what is described by Bradby and Williams as Brook’s “grail-like quest for totality in theatrical expression,”\textsuperscript{51} which would seem to be compatible with operatic aesthetics, his enthusiasm for regeneration leads Brook to be skeptical about the potential of opera to achieve such totality, classifying opera within the category of Deadly Theatre notwithstanding the best attempts of directors to revive the conventional repertoire. He describes contemporary opera production as problematically conservative, and is particularly concerned the drama and music of opera are treated with a similar reverence even as the context of performance significantly changes:

The deadly trap is to divide the eternal truths from the superficial variations; this is a subtle form of snobbery and it is fatal. For instance, it is accepted that scenery, costumes, music are fair game for directors and designers, and must in fact be renewed. When it comes to attitudes and behaviour we are much more confused, and tend to believe that these elements if true in the writing can continue to express themselves in similar ways. Closely related to this is the conflict between theatre directors and musicians in opera productions where two totally different forms, drama and music, are treated as though they were one. [...] Because the musician’s experience is so different, he finds it hard to follow why the traditional bits of business that made Verdi laugh and Puccini slap his thighs seem neither funny nor illuminating today. Grand opera, of course, is Deadly Theatre carried to absurdity. Opera is a nightmare of vast feuds over tiny details; of surrealist anecdotes that all

\textsuperscript{45} Peter Brook, \textit{The Empty Space}, Penguin Modern Classics (London: Penguin, 2008), 12-5.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 47-51.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 74-5.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 112-9.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 157.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 45-7.
\textsuperscript{51} Bradby and Williams, \textit{Directors’ Theatre}, 146.
turn round the same assertion: nothing needs to change. Everything in opera must change, but in opera change is blocked.52

Brook’s enthusiasm for theatre that reflects the concerns of contemporary culture reveals the rationale behind his calls for periodic theatrical rejuvenation and leads to his skepticism about the potential for opera, and particularly historical opera, to be successfully staged for modern audiences. Given that opera cannot escape the determination of emotional narratives through music, there is a fundamental incompatibility between the type of responsive theatre Brook advocates and the formal demands of the genre. Discussion of opera in The Empty Space is the theoretical outcome of Brook’s own work as an opera director, which, as described by Tom Sutcliffe in Believing in Opera, approached these challenges during an advantageous period of innovative new opera compositions and freshly instituted public arts subsidies in Britain.53 Only twenty-three-years-old and without prior experience in opera, Brook directed Boris Godunov and Salome for Covent Garden opera during the 1940s, establishing a dramatic style that challenged the assumed superiority of music through the use of ambitious stagecraft (designs for Salome by Salvador Dali included an impractically heavy head-dress for Herodias and sparked conflict with the company’s long-serving wardrobe mistress).54 His experimental approach was not however warmly received, with the outraged audience response to his production of Salome in particular causing the board of Covent Garden opera to bar his future engagement by the company.55 Brook rarely directed opera thereafter.56

Following Brook, several directors have translated the strategies of director’s theatre to operatic performance, including Rupert Goold (Puccini’s Turandot set in the nightmarish kitchen of a Chinese restaurant for the English National Opera),57 Peter Sellars (Mozart’s operas set in contemporary New York),58 Christopher Alden (Britten’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream set in a British comprehensive

52 Brook, The Empty Space, 19-20.
53 Sutcliffe, Believing in Opera, 19.
54 Ibid., 20-2.
55 Ibid., 26-7.
56 Ibid., 27.
58 Locke describes Sellars’ work in the context of assigning different time and geographical settings to Classical-era opera to highlight themes related to class potentially overlooked in traditional productions, see Ralph P Locke, “What Are These Women Doing in Opera,” in En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera, ed. Corinne E. Blackmer and Patricia Julianna Smith (New York: Columbia Universiy Press, 1995), 77., see also Sutcliffe’s chapter ‘Peter Sellars: Americanizing Everything’ in Sutcliffe, Believing in Opera, 195-226.
high school with Puck cast as the spurned victim of Oberon’s paedophilic attentions), David Alden, and Benedict Andrews (a sexually explicit production of Mozart’s Marriage of Figaro set in a modern gated estate for Opera Australia). In reworking existing dramatic writing for new productions, director’s theatre simultaneously asserts the cultural value of the work in performance while discounting the sovereignty of the text.

Given these similarities between director’s theatre and adaptation, the potential strategies of director’s theatre in interpreting texts are substantially similar to those used in the type of adaptation that Leitch describes as the colonisation of the source text, where “[adaptors], like ventriloquists, see progenitor texts as vessels to be filled with new meanings,” and as such director’s theatre productions tend to follow the same three potential paths as colonisation adaptations: they can develop tacit themes in the original text, suggest an appraisal of the original, or use the original text as a point of departure. In the case of Death in Venice, as we have seen, Britten’s opera places the conflict between rationality and abandon suggested by Aschenbach’s reflections on Greek philosophy as a central point of the narrative progression, where in the film, flashbacks to Aschenbach’s previous life frame his mid-life malaise as a symptom of the ills of artistic decadence more generally conceived. Also in Adaptation and its Discontents, Leitch approaches this resemblance from another direction, discussing the establishment of the convention of considering the director as the author of a film generally traced to François Truffaut’s essay ‘A Certain Tendency of French Cinema’, noting that while Truffaut originated the term ‘auteur theory,’ now widely used in relation to film directors, he was actually writing more specifically about the work of screenwriters. Here Leitch describes the strategies that film directors have used to attain the status of primary author of their texts - in the case of Alfred Hitchcock, for example, adapting only obscure works and working within a single distinctive Hollywood genre - and this discussion has obvious relevance to discussions of opera as a multi-author work.

As both adaptation and stage production share such central concerns, discussions about theatre production often refer to the same conflict between the potential of texts representing some eternal

61 Leitch, Film Adaptation and Its Discontents, 109.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid., 236.
truth and their relevance to contemporary audiences that emerges from Leitch’s discussion of adaptation theory, but this conflict occurs at a more fundamental level, as while there is no essential methodological motivation to adapt pre-existing works to different media, dramatic works come into existence through being staged. In the case of both adaptation and director’s theatre, the choice of a text to adapt or stage indicates the relevance of the work to contemporary audiences but also the limitations of its applicability to those audiences in its original form. This paradox between the need to update the work and assert its value is insufficiently addressed in much discussion of adaptation, but is particularly productive to contemplate when considering conceptual resonance between the processes of staging and adaptation.

Linda Hutcheon recognises this similarity in her discussion of stage texts in *A Theory of Adaptation*:

“In a very real sense, every staging of a printed play could theoretically be considered an adaptation in its performance […] A visual and aural world is physically shown on stage – be it in a play, a musical, an opera, or any other performance piece – created from verbal and notational signs on the page.”

Hutcheon’s extensive body of work in both adaptation theory and opera studies suggests possible productive grounds of enquiry when attempting to consider the two fields together. Throughout her work on adaptation Hutcheon questions the assumption that the intention of adaptation is to replicate the source material, highlighting the impossibility of fidelity by including in her categorisation of adaptations literary translations and musical transcriptions; works where fidelity is “a theoretical ideal, even if a practical impossibility.”

In her collaboration with biologist Gary Bortolotti, ‘The Origin of Adaptations: Rethinking Discourse and “Success” – Biologically,’ Hutcheon suggests that in order to escape the purview of fidelity criticism, adaptation can be considered as a type of cultural transmission homologous to evolution. This argument is described as an “adaptation” of Richard Dawkins’ theory of cultural transmission through memes, where the unit of transmission is the considered to be the narrative rather than the idea. Successful adaptations here are ones which recognisably reproduce the narrative of the original text. This use evolutionary language when describing the cultural life of texts is not unprecedented in studies of adaptation; in *The Novel and the Cinema* Wagner distinguishes the

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65 Ibid., 171.
literature from cinema on the basis of biological function, where “[literature] is written in language which is a uniquely human method of organising knowledge and surviving an environment” but cinema is experienced differently because of the number of technologies and techniques it employs; “film is an industrial technique for communicating experience.” Adequately framing staged drama within Wagner’s framework may be problematic; surely drama shares significant characteristics of both ‘organic’ literature and ‘technological’ film.

In *A Theory of Adaptation* Hutcheon examines adaptation broadly as a method of authorship, acknowledging some of the structural issues that limit existing models of adaptation criticism and focusing on how we experience adapted texts in different genres and media through different modes of engagement. Hutcheon identifies the often subtle narrative differences between methods of engaging with stories as told (as when reading written texts), observed (as when observing performed texts) or participated in (as when interacting with games, theme parks or immersive theatre), and in this light identifies that in some cases these dramaturgical elements can lead to weaknesses in the consideration of specific types of stage adaptation: “opera […] has been singled out as particularly guilty on both the loss of quality and quantity counts, given its extremes of compression; again, it takes much longer to sing than to say a line of text, much less to read one.” By taking this multifaceted approach to adapted texts based on audience engagement, Hutcheon avoids creating the restrictive taxonomy of varieties of adaptation typical of much prior adaptation criticism that tends to structurally support the assumption that fidelity is an attribute of adaptation that can be easily or productively evaluated.

In acknowledging that assessing individual adaptations is complicated by the specific pragmatic requirements of composing performed and interactive texts, and also by the differences between viewing and reading, Hutcheon suggests that while the correspondence of narrative is the feature of adaptations that allows us to identify the relationship between texts, the extent of this similarity is not the most interesting feature to consider when analysing adaptations and their sources, but rather the difference in experience between different modes of engagement with stories:

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We can stop reading at any point; we can re-read or skip ahead; we hold the book in our hands and feel, as well as see, how much of the story remains to be read. But with the move to the mode of showing, as in film and stage adaptations, we are caught in an unrelenting, forward-driving story. And we have moved from the imagination to the realm of direct perception - with its mix of both detail and broad focus. The performance mode teaches us that language is not the only way to express meaning or to relate stories. Visual and gestural representations are rich in complex associations; music offers aural “equivalents” for characters’ emotions and, in turn, provokes affective responses in the audience; sound, in general, can enhance, reinforce, or even contradict the visual and verbal aspects. On the other hand, however, a *shown* dramatization cannot approximate the complicated verbal play of told poetry or the interlinking of description, narration, and explanation that is so easy for prose to accomplish. Telling a story in words, either orally or on paper, is never the same as showing it visually and aurally in the many performance media available.69

Intertextuality is often discussed in relation to written texts that can be interrogated at leisure for allusions and more direct references to other literary works, but understanding live performance as a source of similarly fleeting references to other texts is challenging for a number of reasons: the ephemerality of performance; the consideration of the contributions of multiple producing authors; variations between shows during the run of a single production; and the meaning that comes to be associated with individual performers and their body of work, which has the potential to link widely divergent texts by means of gestures and other personal signifiers of the performer, including features of performer’s physical body. Hutcheon’s discussion of music in her analysis is also of obvious relevance when considering the process of adapting written and spoken stage texts to opera. The idea that music can function as an explicit representation of, or, to borrow Hutcheon’s term, ‘equivalents’ for the emotions of characters is frequently discussed in dramatic analysis of opera and I will discuss these issues further in the second part of this thesis, which links a study of operatic dramaturgy and aesthetics with issues of textual adaptation. I will also return to Hutcheon’s analysis of multimedia adaptation when considering the increasingly diverse range of material used as the basis for new opera compositions and what implications this has for the cultural status of the performance form. But first I will consider the available critical frameworks outside of adaptation studies relevant to consideration of the adaptation of prose and dramatic texts to opera.

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69 Ibid., 23.
2. Reception, Aesthetic Response and Authorship

“[…]. Don’t worry about tigers and backstabbing. They’ll only destroy themselves in the end. […] I really believe indifference is the most fatal thing that can happen to a work of art. Hatred is much better.”

Correspondence between Myfanwy Piper and Benjamin Britten, October 4, 1952.

While many conventional accounts of adaptation downplay the creative role of the authors of adaptations by judging their work primarily on the basis of their adherence to the original text, when considered in the light of recent literary debates about textuality and readership, the study of adaptation can be seen to raise several interesting questions relating to both how texts are created and how the process of composing adaptations is similar to the way these primary texts are received by readers and audiences. As every author of an adaptation is also a reader of the work they are adapting, consideration of adaptation can be usefully considered in the critical context of readership and an understanding of the complexities of readership also helps account for the response of an audience familiar with the textual precursors of the adapted work. As all texts rely to some extent on the acquired literary knowledge of readers, adaptations need not necessarily be considered as a special class of texts that depend on a specific previous literary work, but rather as a type of text that overtly acknowledge their indebtedness to literary history. If adaptation studies can equally address a television costume drama like the BBC’s miniseries adaptation of Jane Austen’s Emma (2009) and a purposefully disguised adaptation like Amy Heckerling’s Clueless (1995), then the step between Clueless and a film that alludes to several literary sources (to take Mina Yang’s example, Moulin Rouge! [2001], in which Baz Luhrmann incorporated operatic motifs from Puccini’s La Bohème, Verdi’s La Traviata as well as stylistic references to classic back-stage Hollywood musicals like 42nd Street) is not such a big leap. This chapter will investigate what a consideration of aesthetic response theory and reception theory might lend to a discussion of adaptation theory, with particular reference to issues relating to the staging of performance texts.

1 Letter, item number 9401010, Britten-Pears Foundation. Britten and Piper used the term ‘tigers’ as a coded term for Britten’s conservative critics, as in letter from Piper twenty years later: “I hope the migraine has not developed and that you are not being too much worried by tigers and other wild beasts - don’t worry about it my dear - I’m quite sure the intention is to worry you and that therefore it is not as serious as if it were unintentional.” Letter, February 28, 1972, no reference number, Britten-Pears Foundation.

Hans Robert Jauss frames reader response theory as an extrapolation of the different, but roughly contemporaneous, accounts of literary criticism provided by Marxism and formalism: where, according to formalism, movements in literature are seen as the result of the formation and decay of genres, and according to Marxist accounts literature is understood as embedded entirely in the changing economic conditions and technologies of production. Through focusing on the understanding of literary texts on the experience of the reader, reception theory provides an explanation of literary history that allows for the interaction between the author, the work and the public to be taken into account. Orienting the study of literature around the reader does not require assumptions to be made about the psychological impact of the text on the individual subject, but rather takes into account the likely aesthetic precedents to the text known to the reader. It is this focus on the established literary knowledge of the audience that makes reader response theory particularly relevant to consideration of adaptation, as it suggests that the reading of adapted works differs very little from the reading of original works:

A literary work, even when it appears to be new, does not present itself as something absolutely new in an informational vacuum, but predisposes its audience to a very specific kind of reception by announcements, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics or implicit allusions. It awakens memories of that which was already read, brings the reader to a specific emotional attitude, and with its beginning arouses expectations for the “middle and end,” which can then be maintained in tact or altered, reoriented, or even fulfilled ironically in the course of the reading according to specific rules of the genre or type of text.

Audiences of adapted texts are specifically aware of their pre-established expectations, structurally and thematically, and their frame of reference is specifically set on the adapted text and texts related to that work. This does not however prevent references from being made to other texts, or prevent the use of textual associations related specifically to the genre of the new work.

In *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, Jauss suggests two implications of the consideration of reader response: the aesthetic, where the work is assessed by the reader in relation to what they have read in the past; and historical, where the understanding of the text is enhanced by the reception of the text

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4 Ibid., 23.
by subsequent audiences over time. Adaptation, a process firmly grounded in readership, draws out both of these implications, requiring from the reader an understanding of both the original work and genre precedents while also acting as an indication of the evolving cultural significance of the adapted work. This is the same experiential collage that Hutcheon acknowledges when she borrows Michael Alexander’s term “palimpsestuous,” when discussing the complex way that readers and audiences reconcile different experiences of related texts, suggesting that readers and audiences are not simply aware of the omissions made in adapting the primary work but also that while reading and watching people oscillate between their remembered understandings of previous versions of the same narrative and any contradictions between the two.

Relevant to consideration of the adaptation of texts between genres and literary forms are Jauss’s observations about the different national and historical contexts of Goethe’s and Valéry’s interpretations of the Faust legend. Here where Jauss identifies the “present abundance of comparatist production,” he is referring to the increasing prominence of world literature scholarship, and the necessity of such evaluative work to address the difficulty of comparing national and world accounts of history, despite the discipline’s apparent universalising impulses. He argues that such analyses create a false dialogue between independent works:

Who ever would thus compare Goethe’s and Valéry’s Faust directly with one another places their works on a timeless level of comparison, as if it were a matter of two variations of one and the same substance. Or, to use the metaphorics of literary history, as if it were a matter of high-level dialogue between illustrious spirits, with the philologist only needing to eavesdrop in order to understand voice and countervoice and to interpret them comparatively. But on closer examination, it would soon be shown that the direct comparison remains exterior, that no overarching significance can be determined from shared and distinguishing features alone, indeed, that Goethe’s voice and Valéry’s voice clearly do not speak to one another at all: they remain two monologues as long as one only compares them.

In the case of adaptation (as opposed to this example of two stories based on the same myth), the author of the adaptation willingly enters into a situation of comparison with the earlier work, but understanding this situation of comparison as a dialogue presents similar logical problems.

5 Ibid., 20.
6 Hutcheon, A Theory of Adaptation, 6.
7 Jauss, Toward an Aesthetic of Reception, 110.
8 Ibid., 112-3.
As a substantially demonstrative act of readership, the process of creating an adaptation also engages significantly with aesthetic response theory, which, much like reception theory, provides an alternative to modes of critique that aim to uncover the hidden meaning of the text. Wolfgang Iser’s theory of aesthetic response differs from reception theory in that where reception theory looks at the perception of the text over time through assessing available documentation of the ways the text has been understood in different specific historical circumstances; aesthetic response theory examines the relationship between the text and the reader. Like Sontag in ‘Against Interpretation’, Iser argues that conventional interpretation of a text can diminish the work, by implying that art is valued solely for encoding meaning: “So long as it was a mystery, one could search for it, but now there is nothing to arouse interest except for the skill of the searcher.” While considering adaptation as a form of criticism is one strategy for engaging with adapted texts (and the capacity for authors of adaptations to engage with texts in this way is one possible impetus in the selection of primary works to be adapted), the process of adaptation can also be considered as a way of creating an entirely new text with its own meanings, not just commenting on the themes of the original text but expanding upon the original in both form and content.

While consideration of how the adaptor has experienced and responded to the primary text can suggest non-reductive interpretive strategies for critics, according to Iser’s aesthetic response theory, conventional film adaptations of written texts can diminish the engagement of the reader with the work:

The feeling that the film version is not what we had imagined is not the real reason for our disappointment; it is more of an epiphenomenon. The real reason is that we have been excluded, and we resent not being allowed to retain the images which we had produced and which enabled us to be in the presence of our products as if they were real possessions. [...] The paradox that optical enrichment, as in the film version of a narrative, should be felt as an impoverishment of the mental image, arises out of the nature of ideation, which makes conceivable that which has not been formulated.11

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10 Ibid., 4.
11 Ibid., 139.
Here Iser considers film adaptation as an expression of how the adaptor has read the text (and as a violation of the audience’s prior experience of reading the original text), including images that may correspond quite closely with how he or she has imagined the narrative events, described as a collection of mental images. The emphasis on the visual image here is limiting, given that sound is another substantial element of film (to remain with the form of adaptation discussed by Iser), and one that does not necessarily correspond with the experience of imaginatively interpreting a novel, which is also not necessarily a primarily visual one. While misrepresenting the experience of reading as analogous to watching a film in one’s mind, this interpretation of adaptation as the replication of an interior mental experience also underestimates the semantic value of spectatorship, embodiment and performance, and non-diegetic music (with implications for both film and lyric theatre).

In ‘Drama, Performativity, and Performance,’ W.B. Worthen discusses the different issues surrounding textual authority in the case of performed literature, arguing against the way that “both literary studies and performance studies have misconceived dramatic performance […] by taking it merely as a reiteration of texts, a citation that imported literary or textual authority into performance,”12 suggesting that the staging of performance texts is a fundamentally constructive process, the complexities of which are frequently overlooked in critical work on drama. For the structural reasons identified earlier, these criticisms resonate with those frequently levelled at fidelity-based adaptation theory, and accordingly Worthen takes Baz Luhrmann’s 1996 film adaptation William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet as an example of how performance enhances the text it is derived from: “As a surrogate, the film memorializes a past (that it partly invents) and constitutes a new work. Romeo ‘+’ Juliet makes visible what most performances work to conceal: that dramatic performance, like all other performance, far from originating the text, can only cite its textual ‘origins’ with an additive gesture, a kind of ‘+.’”13 Worthen notes that the film displays its own stylistic features and cultural referents without deviating far from Shakespeare’s text: “The film’s dense, vivid palette, its florid Catholicism, and its hyped-up gang culture resonate against the Baroque complexity of Shakespeare’s language.”14 As such, Romeo + Juliet is unlikely to cause the “impoverishment of the mental image” described in Iser’s discussion of film adaptation, and the

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13 Ibid., 1104.
14 Ibid., 1103.
additional formal components of opera go even further in challenging such an understanding of reading (and viewing) adaptation.

In ‘Is There a Text on This Stage?: Theatre/Authorship/Interpretation,’ Gerald Rabkin considers how debates surrounding authorship and reader response apply to stage drama, taking into account the way that the literary theory of Barthes, Fish and de Saussure has shaped the way that the relationship between the author and the work is conceived in fiction. Rabkin’s argument here addresses conflicts between authors and producers of stage work as exemplified by two legal disputes over late twentieth-century theatrical productions: one between the Beckett estate and the American Repertory Theatre over their 1984 performance of _Endgame_ set in a subway tunnel (directed by Joanne Akalaitis), and one relating to the Wooster Group’s use of sections of Arthur Miller’s _The Crucible_ in their play _L.S.D._ (…just the high points…). In theatre, Rabkin argues, modern textuality debates are intensified because of the conflict that arises between the author’s interest in controlling the perception of their work and the existing expectation that directors should be able create their own distinctive interpretations of theatrical texts.\(^\text{15}\) In the case of the infamous ART _Endgame_, Natka Bianchini alternatively suggests that Beckett’s extreme response in trying to stop the ART production (the ART and Beckett reached the compromise of amending the program with a statement from Beckett and his American publisher, Barney Rosset, expressing their disapproval) related to his emotional state at the time, following the death of two of his great friends and collaborators, Robert Blin and Alan Schneider.\(^\text{16}\)

For theatre more generally, Rabkin identifies several implications of this expected flexibility in staging texts for considerations of authorship: “Unlike critics, most actors and directors rarely talk about the text; they talk of the script which they hold in their hands as they rehearse. The script is inscribed, it may indeed be published, but it carries a provisional authority. The script is something to be used and discarded as its textuality is corporealized in performance.”\(^\text{17}\) While the limits of conventional interpretation of texts has been a central concern of literary theory since the mid-twentieth century, for plays and stage work where typically, as Rabkin identifies, “the director’s job


\(^{17}\) Rabkin, “Is There a Text on This Stage? Theatre/Authorship/Interpretation,” 150.
[is] to interpret the playwright correctly,”¹⁸ these assumptions are additionally restrictive, as texts for stage production, unlike prose and poetry, require the contributions of multiple artists in order to reach an audience:

If, in Barthes’ phrase, the text is a “methodological field,” the theatre text is doubly so. It interjects an intermediary layer between the non-performance text [i.e. the play text/score and libretto read independently of a production] and its final destination: its audience, the readers of the theatre event. Performance, in its non-metaphorical sense, by its very nature denies the logocentric impulse - the body transcends the word. But the logocentric authority of the word has indeed been sustained by the evanescence of performance and the survivability of the dramatic text.”¹⁹

Here Rabkin identifies that the erasure of the embodied performance is not purely a consequence of the logocentric impulse but actually one of the causes of the prioritisation of the static performance text and conventional interpretations of that text; while experientially the physical performance transcends the text, this contribution is difficult to describe or record, and as a consequence is not fully recognised or theorised in critical commentary. The hermeneutic process of interpreting performance texts occurs on two levels: through the work of the directors and performers, and then again through the audience who interpret this performance as they view it.²⁰ As an adaptation of the written text, the production in itself is a work subject to interpretation, complicating consideration of the staging of texts that have been themselves adapted from other sources.

In the case of opera, audience expectations relating to the close correspondence of performance and text are complicated by the prevalence of a relatively small number of conventional works within the repertoire, where the ongoing popularity of particular pieces might relate more to the strength of the score rather than the ongoing relevance of the dramatic content. In his discussion of the performance history of Mozart’s Don Giovanni, James Parakilas describes the work as having been “roughly treated”²¹ in performance with the frequent addition and removal of musical material and significant alterations to the plot in production, suggesting that as an opera concerning courtly manners that are not just outdated but largely incomprehensible to modern audiences, Don Giovanni

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¹⁹ Ibid.
²⁰ Ibid., 55.
only retains its incredible popularity due to this manhandling, and owes its “astonishingly successful afterlife to being emptied almost immediately of its original meaning.” In discussions of contemporary opera production these type of interventions are frequently described as falling under the remit of director’s theatre, described by Rabkin as a development that “mirrors literary criticism’s movement from the emphasis upon the immanent ‘meaning’ of literary texts to the acceptance of the processes of reading and interpretation which determine meaning.” In accordance with Parakilas’ historical discussion of *Don Giovanni*, Tom Sutcliffe suggests that unconventional interpretations of classic works pose a possible solution to the problem of opera being increasingly viewed as a museum art form, “for theatre can always do the impossible, even if some of its audience find that experience too stretching. Every production is in a sense a living edition of the work concerned;” however Sutcliffe’s interpretation of staging as an *editorial* process does imply a less revisionary role for the director than understanding staging as analogous to adaptation.

Given the assumed conservatism of opera audiences, director’s theatre is a contentious issue in opera production, as exemplified by the arguments surrounding Christopher Alden’s 2011 production of Britten’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* for the English National Opera (Christopher Alden is the twin brother of another prominent experimental opera director David Alden, and described by Sutcliffe as the “less original” of the two). Set in a British comprehensive school, with Puck cast as the spurned victim of a school master Oberon’s pedophilic interests, the direction was both praised and condemned, particularly on account of what the production could be seen to imply about the life of the composer. Peter Sellers’ Americanisation of operas in the conventional

\[\text{\footnotesize\textit{Ibid.}, 261.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize\textit{Ibid.}, 155.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize\textit{Sutcliffe, Believing in Opera, 10.}}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize\textit{Ibid.}, 169.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize\textit{“[Puck] is, of course, Britten, later Theseus (Paul Whelan), and in a stroke of genius on Alden’s part the boy whose lost innocence he carries with him through life – his younger self - is none other than the much-abused and put-upon Puck (Jamie Manton), plaything and fag of the manipulative Oberon whose affections are now diverted to a still younger and fresher ‘changeling boy’” see Edward Seckerson, ‘Britten - A Midsummer Night’s Dream, English National Opera, London Coliseum’ The Independent (May 20, 2011), see also Andrew Clements, ‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream – Review’ The Guardian (May 20, 2011), and also Rupert Christiansen ‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream, English National Opera, London Coliseum, review’ The Telegraph (May 23, 2011).}}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize\textit{“The vicarious, armchair thrill of picking over evidence of his (no longer hidden) sexuality in the minutiae of his work goes ever on; and I’ve rarely seen a nastier, more gratuitous example than the new A Midsummer Night’s Dream that opened last night at ENO.” Michael White, ‘ENO’s shocking new paedophile Midsummer Night’s Dream is brilliant, and I hated it’ The Telegraph (May 20, 2011), see also Richard Morrison, ‘Midsummer nightmare has too much depravity, too little Britten’ The Times (May 21, 2011).}}\]
European repertoire in the 1980s and 1990s, discussed at length by Sutcliffe\textsuperscript{28} and also by Blackmer & Smith in their discussion of Verdi’s Shakespeare adaptations,\textsuperscript{29} has been subject to similar criticism. The considerable similarities between the process of developing production of a dramatic work following the practices of director’s theatre and the process of adaptation is complicated by the fact that the adapted work is also frequently subject to the same interpretive process when staged, occasionally with similar levels of interpretation and departure from more conventional previous productions of the same work.

The concept of authorship becomes particularly nebulous in the context of multi-author dramatic work. A full account of authors for Death in Venice would include composer Benjamin Britten, conventionally considered primary author in opera studies, following Joseph Kerman in Opera as Drama (just as directors are commonly considered primary authors of films according to auteur theory); Myfanwy Piper, as librettist and author of the majority of dialogue in the adaptation of a text devoid of direct speech; and, naturally, Thomas Mann himself. Here the opera has three authors even before the significant (if ephemeral) task of casting and producing the work. Looking at Britten’s annotated copies of the novella (of which he owned five, both in German and in the Lowe-Porter translation) evidence can be seen of the composer identifying relevant themes and potential dramatic images over repeated readings. In reviewing the adaptation process, the co-authors display awareness of the challenges presented in negotiating the work of an absent prior author, as can be seen from Britten’s correspondence, where the composer writes to Piper regarding the incorporation of specific aspects of Mann’s text:

The telephone is a very useful method of communication – for some things (for instance last night, when I think the cast list was finally settled) – but for things needing deep thought, and time for deep thought, it really doesn’t work. I think that this moment before the all-important Phaedrus monologue is one of them. I have been sweating over it this morning, thinking I could easily knock it off before leaving for Germany, but it isn’t any good. I must have your help – and I think we need Thomas Mann’s too. I must obviously take more (musical) time over it; I think we need more of Mann’s rather vicious attack on Aschenbach (only put into the first person), bitter, disappointed, frightened ‘O help me’ doesn’t do – ‘Is there no help for me’ isn’t explicit

\textsuperscript{28} Sutcliffe, Believing in Opera, 197-226.
\textsuperscript{29} Corinne E. Blackmer and Patricia Julianna Smith, eds., En Travesti: Women, Gender, Subversion, Opera (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 77.
enough. The passage is at the bottom of p.152 in Reed’s edition. We’ve already used the beginning of it, and we want to add the reference to Socrates, of course.\(^3^0\)

Similarly, in a letter from earlier in their collaborative relationship, Britten defers Piper’s praise regarding their earlier adaptation *The Turn of the Screw*: “you must remember that if the piece moves you, it’s partly your fault, and (I suppose) old H. James!”\(^3^1\) *The Turn of the Screw*, which premiered in Venice in 1954, was the first of Britten’s operas on which Myfanwy Piper worked as librettist. Her husband, John Piper, frequently worked as production designer for Britten’s operas both in London and the Snape Maltings, and Britten and Peter Pears frequently stayed in Oxfordshire with the Pipers and hosted the Pipers several times a year at their home in Aldeburgh. Britten’s letters to Piper illustrate an awareness of the practical considerations of timing, as well a firm understanding of the dramatic impact of musical and non-musical elements:

I have been through it carefully from a musical point of view only – and I think that in my excitement I have been too generous, and I have made lots of little cuts (some rather distressing ones – but right, I think), and also played it again (this time to Peter). I may have saved two or three minutes, but not more, and I think we must look at it all again, very closely. I know, very sweetly, you’ve always said that you deliberately find me too much in each section, and don’t mind me cutting, but now I feel we must look at it all formally, and see what isn’t absolutely necessary. I feel that the Guests’ conversation may have to go, some of the Gondola perhaps, and I feel now that some of the ‘spoken’ comments will have to be shorter, and some even to go all together. In playing the Prologue last night I was immensely struck by how the first comment (‘spoken’) reduces the dramatic tension. I think we must discuss each point to see if it is dramatically essential, to see if we haven’t already made it another way.\(^3^2\)

Here, alongside evidence of an intimate and fruitful relationship between coauthors, are suggestions of tension between musical and dramatic ideas, the negotiation of disagreements, and the awareness of the possibility of using more than one textual and musical tool to achieve the same dramatic outcome.

When looking at the adaptation of a consciously literary and symbolic novella like Mann’s *Death in Venice*, the desire to closely analyse specific decisions about how the novel’s prose is turned into sung speech is curtailed by the difficulty of understanding speech when sung operatically. On these

\(^{3^0}\) Letter, March 16, 1973, item number 154MP33, Britten-Pears Foundation.

\(^{3^1}\) Letter, July 8, 1954, item number 154MP17, Britten-Pears Foundation.

\(^{3^2}\) Letter, February 6, 1972, no reference number, Britten-Pears Foundation.
grounds Paul Robinson argues “[any] interpretation of opera derived exclusively, or even primarily, from the libretto is likely to result in a misreading,” and identifies four specific reasons that libretti should not be given too much weight when considering opera in performance: this difficulty in comprehending sung speech, difficulties with language (referring to the predominance of non-English language operas in the repertoire of English speaking companies), the difficulty in comprehending words sung by an ensemble, and the difficulty in hearing voices with precision over the prominence of the orchestra, and these areas of formal dependence on the score arise in addition to the limitations of reading the dramatic text outside the context of performance discussed previously. The temptation to read libretti independently can also arise out of looking at the contributions of different co-authors individually and also comes partially from the prevalence of adaptation in opera composition, as Arthur Groos acknowledges: “As adaptations of pre-existing literary works, libretti pose questions of intertextuality, transposition of genre, and reception history; as verbal artefacts, they invite the broad spectrum of contemporary reading strategies ranging from the formalistic to the feminists; and as texts for musical realization, they raise issues in the relation between the two media and their respective traditions.”

Through negotiating these different interpretive intuitions, consideration of opera adaptation provides an illuminating, if on occasion anachronistic, example of the complications of post-Barthesian authorship. In ‘The Death of the Author’ Barthes identifies that “the explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author ‘confiding’ in us.” This conception is complicated by the multiple authors of adapted works, but is an approach that continues to haunt analyses of Benjamin Britten’s work, as can be seen by the way that studies foregrounding his sexuality dominate the criticism of his oeuvre. Stephen McClatchie and Philip Brett follow this method of searching for personal psychological motivations behind Britten’s selection of works and interpretation of adapted texts. These studies understate the multi-author nature of these works, by implying that Britten’s sexuality caused him to exclusively choose

34 Ibid., 329.
38 Philip Brett, Music and Sexuality in Britten (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
texts that feature homosexual themes or to consistently isolate subversive strands in the works adapted, ignoring that in a collaborative composition like opera the themes of the work have also significantly engaged his collaborators, including Myfanwy Piper, who collaborated on two of his operas based on literary works where homosexual desire is a relatively explicit thematic feature. 

Looking into the composition history of Death in Venice, Myfanwy Piper was the one to suggest the beach ballet be performed naked, an idea to which Britten was interested, but cautious: “Your idea of the naked Ballet II section is excellent, v. cold and wonderfully beautiful, Hellenically evocative. There may be some objections – Fred Ashton [Death in Venice choreographer Fredrick Aston] may raise some – and I am worried lest the work might cause a certain interest that none of us really wants! Thank God the permissive society exists already, because it solves completely my worry about Hyacinthus in a long striped bathing dress!”

Few that have perused Britten’s carefully catalogued diaries, juvenilia, workbooks, and correspondence in the Britten-Pears Foundation archives could dispute certain similarities of temperament between Britten and the Aschenbach of Mann’s novella: “Almost before he was out of high school he had a name. Ten years later he had learned to sit at his desk and sustain and live up to his growing reputation, to write gracious and pregnant phrases in letters that must needs be brief, for many claims press upon the solid and successful man.” Indeed, the view that Britten’s narrative music is often largely autobiographical is prominent in many surveys of his work, and particularly, in light of his unorthodox relationships with children, in analysis of Billy Budd, Turn of the Screw and Death in Venice. While Britten’s relationships with children were frequently unorthodox (as comprehensively investigated by John Bridcut in Britten’s Children), and may be of some biographical interest in suggesting why Britten was so interested in the dark themes of isolation and social judgement that feature in these texts, his position as one of many authors (along with the librettist, director, and author of the adapted text) means that any such identification with the adapted material should be significantly qualified.

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39 “I think the way to deal with the beach scenes is to have the first beach ballet, as I have already suggested, much more clothed and to have the second one, as far as the boys are concerned, nearly naked so as to remove the whole thing slightly from reality. It is a vision as well as an experience.” Letter, February 28, 1972, no reference number, Britten-Pears Foundation.

40 Letter, February 6, 1972, no reference number, Britten-Pears Foundation.

41 Mann, Death in Venice, 9.

42 John Bridcut, Britten’s Children (London: Faber and Faber, 2006).
The widespread fascination with Britten’s sexual biography dominates perceptions of him as a twentieth-century cultural figure, as reflected by Alan Bennett’s significantly fictionalised biographical play *The Habit of Art* (2009), concerning an imagined meeting between W.H Auden and the composer in 1972. In Bennett’s play Myfanwy Piper’s suggestion that the ballet in *Death in Venice* might be performed nude is referenced as evidence of her naïveté towards Britten’s sexuality:

Britten: [The opera] touches on stuff I can’t really talk to Myfanwy about. Though she’s a nice woman. To do with me, obviously. Though she probably knows.

Auden: I’m sure she does.

Britten: I don’t mean she’s a prude. The reverse, really. The boys’ beach games, for instance. She wants Tadzio and his friends to dance naked. I think there might be problems about that.43

This part of Bennett’s play is interesting not only as a rare example of the fictionalisation of collaborative authorship, but also in the way it dramatises a common perception that fiction can be understood as a direct translation of the author’s personal interests, even when the author is adapting the work of another author, who by the same reasoning presumably created the work as a expression of their own personal concerns. This specific description of the relationship between the composer and his librettist provided by Bennett seems implausible however, not only because of Britten’s optimistic acknowledgement of the existence of the new “permissive society” in his own correspondence with Piper, but also because the fictional Britten’s dismissive description of her as a “nice woman” does not correspond with the intimacy suggested by the long-standing relationship between John and Myfanwy Piper and Britten and Pears. If intended to suggest that Piper was unaware of Britten’s reputed sexual interest in adolescent boys, this dialogue still overlooks the more interesting implication suggested in Britten’s correspondence, as cited above, that part his reluctance to have the dance performed naked was due to anticipated objections from Fredrick Ashton, the choreographer of the premiere production,44 and if intended to suggest that Piper was unaware that Britten was homosexual, it is entirely misleading. This is not to suggest that adaptors of non-fictional

44 Letter, February 6, 1972, no reference number, Britten-Pears Foundation
events and characters have any more duty to fidelity than adaptors of fictional work, an issue I will discuss in more detail later.

Given the dramaturgical specificity of genre and the added complication of considering dramatic work where interpretation requires consideration of the text through multiple productions, accounting for the complexity of operatic adaptation with regard to audience response is a difficult task. In the next chapter I will consider potential models for opera adaptation from other genres of performance and literature, focusing particularly on the nuances of visual media, with view to providing a more comprehensive account of how these complications influence stage adaptation.
3. Visual Narratives in Opera, the Graphic Novel, and Film

One of the great limitations of fidelity theory is the assumption that scenes imagined by a reader can be translated directly into the dramatic representation of the same events. This assumption often arises in discussions in popular culture about the film adaptations of popular novels, and the consideration of the adaptation of written texts to other visual media is useful in understanding the complexities of transforming narrative and conceptual material between forms of work overlooked in these analyses.

When attempting to develop a model of adaptation by considering the simultaneous adaptation of significant texts to opera and film, an interesting comparison can be made with the graphic novel, which, while not a performance genre or subject to the same level of practical constraints as adaptations produced for stage and screen, is a genre frequently adapted from written texts that shares with performance writing the concern of visual representation of textual elements and also requires a significant amount of collaboration between contributing artists; as in opera and film, graphic novels are created by the combined efforts of many creative specialists (illustrators, graphic designers and writers). The graphic novel also has structural similarities to both film and opera: in the division of text into visual scenes which can occur in settings not constricted by possible constructions of the performance space (or the ongoing presence of actors over time), the graphic novel resembles film; while on a symbolic level the repetition of visual references in subsequent frames of the graphic novel structurally mirrors the repetition of musical and lyrical phrases in opera.

Just as adaptation theory developed as a separate area of academic study at a time where literary critics wished to turn their attention to film, the recent popularity and increasing critical legitimacy of graphic novels promises a new range of scholarship on intertextuality and the intersection of visual and literary culture. Linda Hutcheon discusses graphic novels in her comments about the cultural bias which favours words over images in assessments of the literary merit of works in different genres: “The story is somehow seen as the creation in words; the images are support, mere illustration. But, in fact, in the graphic novel the two dimensions are much harder to separate: our sense of the story’s “heterocosm” - its visible world, its characters, even its action - is totally determined by the visual, not the literary (which is usually reduced to dialogue and some
information). Some of the most powerful adaptations in the form of graphic novels use “silent” panels - no words.”¹ Similarly opera analysis tends to overlook the visual and dramaturgical components of staging in favour of focusing predominantly on the musical content of works, a reflection of the same cultural bias against visual images, but also the precarious position such compositions have between critical disciplines.

In ‘Postmodernism, Criticism and the Graphic Novel’ David Punter suggests that as collaboratively produced texts that engage the reader in distinctive practices of imagining and re-reading, graphic novels illuminate questions of authorship and intertextuality central to postmodern literary analysis. Among other examples Punter discusses Martin Rowson’s *The Waste Land* (1990), after T.S. Eliot’s poem, a graphic novel that takes considerable liberties in adaptation, imposing a discernible film noir narrative over the settings and motifs of Eliot’s landmark modernist poem. The freedom that can be taken by authors of graphic novels in adapting texts into visually and verbally constructed worlds is similar to that granted to adaptors to other visual forms including texts for performance, but what is particularly relevant in Punter’s account of the graphic novel here in relation to stage drama is his suggestion that the visual dimension of the adaptation can be used to create a dialogue with the original text: “In the case of Rowson, it seems to me that what is presented visually provides a counterpoint, a counter-voice, to the ‘original’ poem; but it seems to me also that it provides evidence that one could argue that the graphic novel has a specific relationship to the postmodern which can bear comparison to the relationship between the postmodern and high modernism; or perhaps one could say that it represents a further stage in a general trajectory of fragmentation. In particular, I would want to describe this as a process of ruin.”²

In Rowson’s graphic novel, London becomes a visual character in a manner that mirrors the allusions to the city that emerge from Eliot’s *Waste Land* but with significant points of departure from both the city of the poem and the city as it exists in the real world: in the graphic novel the distinctive smoke stacks of Battersea power station (not built until several years after the publication of Eliot’s poem in 1922) are attached to a fudge factory;³ Californian palm trees sprout off the

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Thames; the offices of Marlowe and Fisher sit beside Faber and Faber; and a poster is plastered on the wall beside an illustration of Lauren Bacall advertising “LOOVEY LITRICHER, PONCEY POETRY: ‘The Waste Land’. See The Sacred Cows Laugh at The Brahmin Bull.” Punter considers the central addition to Rowson’s *Waste Land* not to be the noir detective narrative but these playful visual references: “The principal point, however, would be to do with the visual imagery. What is attempted here is a gallery of grotesques that simultaneously bind themselves inexorably to a literary history […] The language of Eliot’s poem and the language of Raymond Chandler and Humphrey Bogart are fused in a sequence of images that present a city seeping decay.” In adapting a poem already packed with quotations and allusions, Rowson’s graphic novel is a kaleidoscope of twentieth-century literary and popular culture motifs.

Not all graphic novel adaptations of iconic twentieth-century poems take quite such a free approach to the original text. In Eric Drooker’s graphic novel adaptation of Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* the text of the poem is reproduced in full, with what in some instances are disconcertingly literal illustrations of the metaphorical content of the work (as where a naked figure crawls along a shadowy street to illustrate the lines: “…starving hysterical naked, / dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix”), and occasionally introducing Drooker’s own unambiguous symbolism (the author figure rides into a forest of phalli: “who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy, / who blew and were blown by those human seraphim, / the sailors, caresses of Atlantic and Caribbean love”). In Drooker’s *Howl* the repetition of near-identical progressive frames – a characteristic feature of the graphic novel - is comparatively rare (with the exception of a reoccurring typewriter motif, the distinctively spectacled Ginsburg figure the only feature that unites the discontinuous images), marking a departure from the conventions of the graphic novel and suggesting a resemblance to the conventions of the illuminated poem.

While Eric Drooker’s *Howl* does not approach the experimental narrative complexity of Rowson’s *Waste Land*, it is an example of the increased fluidity of adapted works between textual forms: the

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4 Ibid., 57.
5 Ibid., 2.
6 Ibid., 43.
7 Punter, “Postmodernism, Criticism and the Graphic Novel,” 140.
publication of the graphic novel coincided with the release of a companion film directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Frirdman which combined illustrations from the graphic novel (animated by Oscilloscope Laboratories) with sections of biographical content about the young Allen Ginsberg (played by James Franco), united within the framing narrative of the 1957 California State Superior Court obscenity trial against Howl’s publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti. The film is narrated by Ginsberg’s character speaking directly to camera during a recorded interview, interspersed with a dramatic recreation of the obscenity trial and other autobiographical scenes shot in black and white, including Ginsberg’s early performances of his work, the shock treatment of Carl Solomon, and Ginsberg’s relationships with Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassidy and Peter Orlovsky. The film’s animated sequences are frequently introduced with a shot of Ginsberg typing, the carriage of the typewriter flying over the illustration as if the images were a direct visual representation of the author’s words. The recitation of the poem performed in the film by Franco frequently omits stanzas and reorders and repeats references to different friends of Ginsberg to create a more comprehensible biographical narrative. At one point the film’s fictionalised Ginsberg repeats a quotation from Thomas Clark’s interview with the author in the Paris Review: “At the moment of composition I don’t necessarily know what it means; it comes to mean something later. After a year or two I come to realise it meant something clear, unconsciously, which takes on a meaning in time, like a photograph developing slowly,” which, juxtaposed in the film with assertions of the literary merit of the text and discussions of the relevance of the use of obscenities in the poem during the trial, provides a conflicted account of the merit of ambiguity in poetic language, with a dramatisation of Mark Schorer’s famous response to questioning from the prosecution on the exact meaning of various passages of the poem: “Sir, you can’t translate poetry into prose. That’s why it is poetry.”

Before this adaptation of Howl, Allen Ginsberg had worked with Drooker on a book of illustrated poetry, Illuminated Poems (1996), and although he died well before the production of the corresponding film, in his frontispiece to the graphic novel he acknowledged the pressure of creating work in a multimedia cultural environment: “I was also curious to see how [Eric Drooker] would interpret my work. And I thought that with today’s lowered attention span TV consciousness,

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9 Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, “Howl,” (Oscilloscope Laboritories: Madmen, 2010).
this would be a kind of updating of the presentation of my work.”12 This semi-biographical film, and the graphic novel, both make a rather strong claim about the possibility of translating the work with accuracy and authenticity between mediums, while simultaneously documenting how claims of the stand-alone validity and untranslatability of poetic texts justifies their protection from censorship.

All adaptations are to some extent critical reflections on the possibility of the translation of a literary work between media, but in the case of a multi-form adaptation like this one, different answers are suggested by each iteration of the work and the collaborators who created them. Taking into account the multiple sources and artists involved in the creation of adapted graphic novels requires similar strategies to the analysis of opera adaptation and is similarly useful when considering the merits of non-fidelity-based critical approaches to adaptation. Consideration of opera does however complicate Punter’s view that the authorial challenges of the graphic novel are characteristically postmodern, in that graphic novels “break apart further the assumption of narrative completeness,”13 and operatic adaptations present very similar conceptual challenges but have a much longer history. What makes these challenges appear distinct for critics of the graphic novel is the particular cultural status of this literary form and the kinds of primary texts most typically chosen for adaptation.

In his introduction to Spain Rodriguez’s graphic novel adaptation of William Lindsay Gresham’s Nightmare Alley, Gary Groth states of the pulp fiction source text: “Nightmare Alley is quintessentially American, vaguely disreputable, a product of the 1930s and ‘40s hard-boiled, pulp, and noir fiction; William Lindsay Gresham is as far from Dickens or Mann as comic books are from opera.”14 Here Groth uses opera to fill the rhetorical role of the generically highbrow cultural object, but in describing Charles Dickens alongside opera as the polar opposite to populist fiction of the 1930s, he inadvertently gestures toward the legitimising power of adaptation, considering Dickens’ frequently adapted novels were originally serialised in newspapers long before his critical reputation came to reflect the broader cultural significance and popularity of his work. The cultural status texts achieve relies on many factors and is incredibly malleable: in The Rake’s Progress, an opera with the high-culture credentials of a score by Stravinsky and a libretto by W.H. Auden, protagonist Nick Shadow marries a bearded lady and then smothers her with a pillow, a set of events largely

12 Fontispiece, Drooker and Ginsberg, Howl: A Graphic Novel.
13 Punter, “Postmodernism, Criticism and the Graphic Novel,” 141.
indistinguishable from those of *Nightmare Alley*. Gresham’s novel is also not so different thematically from *Death in Venice*, where Mann similarly exposes the weakness of a society through the fall of one man at the outskirts of society.

The graphic novel adaptation of *Nightmare Alley* had a troubled path to publication: originally commissioned to be included in a series of comic book adaptations of crime novels by Bob Callahan and Art Spiegelman, the text of the adaptation was originally written by Tom DeHaven and illustrations were begun by Mark Zingarelli before the title was taken over by Rodriguez. In describing these conflicts during the commissioning process Groth asserts incorrectly that “more artists have worked on *Nightmare Alley*, adapting it into more media, than just about any other piece of fiction,” an assumption that, while common to many non-specialist discussions of adaptation that posit a direct relationship between an auteurist adaptor and the primary text, overlooks the complexity of authorship and the cultural life of all texts.

In 2010 *Nightmare Alley* was adapted into a stage musical with lyrics, book and music by Jonathan Brielle. I will examine the structural differences between opera and musical theatre later in this thesis when discussing the evolution of both dramatic forms in the United States, but one significant feature the two forms share relevant to this discussion is a nuanced relationship between narrative progression and the presentation of the emotional states of characters through music. In his review of the musical, Reed Jonson’s poetic description of a scene where Stan and his love interest Molly fight touches upon this complexity: “The scene requires actors to occupy separate psychological spaces but maintain their connection, like the interlocked spheres of a binary star.” The question of how fully realised characters can and must be in lyric theatre continues to occupy opera and musical theatre critics; in contrast to Jonson’s optimistic account of character complexity Charlotte Stoudt suggests in her review of the musical that “carnival stories are notoriously tricky to pull off […] performers tend to be more fun as fakes than human beings with real problems.” While musical theatre and opera developed their own conventions and aesthetic principles as the twentieth century progressed, the way that musical theatre is able to address psychological drama has become a

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15 Ibid., unpaginated.
common concern in discussions of twentieth-century operatic compositions, particularly as the handling of such themes is often considered an indication of aesthetic consequence.

While operas and graphic novels are read in very different ways by their audiences, when produced as adaptations they both require considerable abbreviation, the distilling of a narrative into dialogue and the creating a visual world for the work, and generally require multiple authors to do this. There are also structural similarities in the way narrative is presented in both art forms, such as how the repetition of background images is successive frames of a graphic novel can be seen to resemble the repetition of musical phrases and libretto lines in opera. Producing opera for the stage also requires a creation of a visual world for a written text that can potentially be as divergent from the primary text as the visual world of any graphic novel. However this structural repetition is experienced differently in each form: in the case of stage drama, the time of reading is strictly determined by performance time, and re-viewing is uncommon, whereas in the graphic novel, as Punter identifies, the experience of reading “invites browsing, the taking time to form multiple connections, time to re-read and see new depths in the connections between pictures, time to allow visual relationships to sink in.”

In the light of the continuing processes of legitimisation of the graphic novel, it is worth considering the relationship between opera adaptations and film adaptations once more, particularly in relation to the way that the relationships between various iterations of texts validate the cultural status of the original text. In ‘Bourgeois Opera’ Adorno suggests that opera “shares with film […] many of its functions: among them, the presentation of the body of common knowledge to the masses; as well as the massiveness of the means, employed teleologically in the material of opera as in film, which lent opera […] a similarity to the modern culture industry.” Adapting a literary work to opera, while rarely accompanied by the same commercial motives as the adaptation of a popular novel to film, simultaneously asserts the significance of the adapted work and makes a claim to the significance of the work of the composer.

Looking beyond narrow definitions of adaptation, it is necessary to acknowledge the influence of film on opera, particularly in relation to later twentieth-century works. This is a burgeoning field

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18 Punter, “Postmodernism, Criticism and the Graphic Novel,” 132.
covering a wide range of material, from Richard Fawkes’ study on opera adapted specifically to film (that is, excluding recorded performances and broadcasts) Opera on Film,20 to Jeongwon Joe & Rose Theresa’s Between Opera and Cinema, which explores the symbolic use of opera in conventional film.21 Here again, Visconti’s film provides an interesting point of comparison to Britten’s later opera adaptation of the same novel: like Britten, Visconti transferred the subtle emotional framework through a range of nuanced musical references, but in Visconti’s film these musical references carry with them the cultural weight of the composers they were borrowed from. Georgio Bertellini argues that music in Death in Venice provides: “[…] a horizon of convergent cultural references (Mahler, and the post-Romantic antinomies art/life, artist/community); a narrative function (through the repetition of the adagietto of the fifth symphony as leit motif during the crucial moments of the plot); and the symphonic structure of the fifth (where the movements and tempi seem to replace scenes and sequences, and determine the rhythm and signification of the visual unfolding).22” Bertellini’s use of operatic terms, such as leit motif, to describe Visconti’s use of music here is appropriate, given both the near-operatic style of the film and the controversies that arose over the intended implied identity of the Aschenbach character in both Mann’s novella and Visconti’s film, as identified by Ernest Wolf. In an interview with the Saturday Review, Dirk Bogarde (who played Aschenbach in the film) reported that Visconti had heard a story from Mann about being inspired to write the novella after chancing upon Mahler on a train from Venice, heartbroken about a young boy he had met there.23 Accordingly, the score of the film, significantly composed of Gustav Mahler’s symphonies alongside other incidental works and folk music, is attributed solely to Mahler in the film’s opening credits.

For Adorno, the influence of film on opera is damning: “Neither from the musical nor from the esthetic point of view can we avoid the impression that the operatic form is obsolete […] To the human intellect trained to watch at the movies for the authenticity of each uniform and telephone set, the improbabilities served up in each opera, even if the hero was a machinist, could not but
appear absurd."²⁴ For an audience familiar with film, the traditional performance style of opera does have the potential to be alienating. In recent decades however, film conventions have undeniably come to influence opera production, just as they have come to change the style and language of theatre staging more broadly: Sontag describes in ‘Film and Theatre’ that it is common to see theatrical effects such as stage revolves described by reviewers as attempts to recreate the effect of a panning camera.²⁵ The influence of film aesthetics of on opera production is relevant when considering adaptation, as many twentieth-century opera adaptations have followed successful film versions of the same text; not only did Britten’s Death in Venice (1972) premiere a year after Visconti’s film (1971), Previn’s A Streetcar Named Desire (1997) struggled under the burden of comparisons to Elia Kazan’s early film adaptation (1951) of Tennessee Williams’ 1947 play, and even Peter Eötvös’ Angels in America (2004) had to contend with an almost unabridged television miniseries adaptation by HBO (2003).

These increasingly complicated relationships between different adaptations of the same narrative between high and low cultural forms have implications for the way that opera is composed and produced: as exemplified by Stephen Schwartz’s Séance on a Wet Afternoon, commissioned by New York City Opera and adapted from Bryan Forbes’ 1964 film adaptation of a 1961 pulp novel by Mark McShane - a chain of relationships between source texts that resists attempts to track fidelity, and suggests the kind of lateral intertextuality discussed in Linda Hutcheon’s work. Schwartz is best known for his spectacularly successful Broadway musical Wicked, adapted from the novel Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West by Gregory Maguire, itself an alternative account of the life of a character from L. Frank Baum’s The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, with additional references to MGM’s 1939 film adaptation The Wizard of Oz. Reviews for Séance on a Wet Afternoon were mixed: in Variety, Bob Verini stated of the premiere 2009 at Opera Santa Barbara that “Shwartz isn’t exactly breaking new ground here, [but] his assured, evocative melodies are worthy of the tradition in which he’s working;”²⁶ in The Los Angeles Times, Josef Woodard suggested that “Séance is an opera for people who don’t like opera […] presented in a too-soft, palatable musical package;”²⁷ and of the 2011 revival at New York City Opera, Anthony Tommasini of the New York Times similarly concluded

that “The problem is Mr. Schwartz’s easygoing and harmonically tame score, which at every opportunity breaks into cloying lyrical flights and set-piece arias, fortified by swelling strings and sonorous brasses.”

New York City Opera also commissioned an adaptation of Annie Proulx’s short story ‘Brokeback Mountain,’ following Ang Lee’s acclaimed film adaptation, composed by Charles Wourinen and with a libretto by the author, although following financial difficulties that forced the company to cut programs and move out of its former venue the Lincoln Center the commission was taken up by Gerard Mortier at his new post as artistic director of Teatro Real in Madrid. Other horror films have also been adapted to opera, including David Lynch’s cult film Lost Highway (1997), adapted by Olga Neuwirth and librettist Elfriede Jelinek and described by Independent reviewer Anna Picard as “ultra-faithful.”

In explaining the recent proliferation of these adaptations of multifarious origins, Jan Baetens cites John Storey’s work on Jameson’s theory of late capitalism, suggesting that postmodernism does not mark a break with mass culture but is rather a response to the cultural appetites of the industrial revolution:

New cultural objects must be circulated continuously for a public in constant search or new stimuli that wants to (or must) consume in order to fill up a leisure time now radically separated from working time; those objects that are well received by the public are serially reproduced for a greater return on investment and to the extent possible exploited in a different media. Adaptation, in this view, represents the culminating logic of the combination of novelty and seriality; it is a product that is new and serialized at the same time and can be considered profitable for just this double reason.

In this article Baetens is specifically describing novelisation (the adaptation of a film or video game to a novel) in the context of contemporary culture’s visual turn, suggesting that in adapting from visual narrative to prose, novelisation can be considered as anti-adaptation and anti-literature. There are implications for the way these texts are read that are inherent to the creation of an associated text for the express purposes of profiting from the popularity of the original work: “while

32 Ibid., 45-6, 55.
the reader of course retains a certain liberty to read the text differently than the peritext suggests, the default reading of a novelization is not at all one that valorizes the work’s literary or aesthetic dimension.” Baetens also suggests that the ubiquity of film adaptation has come to influence the way that contemporary novels are received: “the contemporary novel tends to be read as if itself already a novelization, albeit an imaginary one […] the book is read in relation to the cinema, from which it now derives its status and its legitimation, both in the case of a novel already adapted and in the case of a book that only has the potential of being adapted.” In this sense it is confounding that opera should come to not only emulate the aesthetics of cinema but to also use films as the basis of theatrical adaptations, as opera rarely (if ever) provides a marketable compliment to a commercial text, and cinema is often described by psychoanalytic theorists as defined by absence in comparison to theatre’s immediate presence (as Tambling has identified, among others).

Opera adaptations will unavoidably create a different aural and visual world to that of a film of the same narrative, and as such direct textual relationships between film and opera provide a strong rebuttal of fidelity theory. As is particularly evident from the example of the changes made to Mann’s work by its various adapters, film and opera are capable of achieving very different outcomes with the same material. Returning to Britten’s adaptation of Death in Venice, the following chapter will examine how the stylistic characteristics of opera have come to influence the selection of texts for adaptation and inflect the thematic content of work adapted.

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33 Ibid., 55.
34 Ibid., 56.
4. Style, Theme and Twentieth-Century Opera

so I pull the shadows around me like a puff
and crinkle my eyes as if at the most exquisite moment

of a very long opera, and then we are off!
without reproach and without hope that our delicate feet

will touch the earth again, let alone “very soon”.
It is the law of my own voice I shall investigate.

Frank ‘O Hara, ‘Homosexuality.’

In Death in Venice Aschenbach’s visit to Venice during a cholera outbreak is the setting for the exploration of the distinguished novelist’s internal emotional turmoil, aestheticised as a symbolic struggle between Apollo, god of reason, and Dionysus, god of madness and ecstasy, in evocation of Plato’s Phaedrus dialogue. In Mann’s novella desire and the creative impulse are entwined and thematically linked to disease and fatigue: “[…] the source of the unexpected contagion was known to him only too well. This yearning for new and distant scenes, this craving for freedom, release, forgetfulness – they were, he admitted to himself, an impulse toward flight, flight from the spot which was the daily theatre of a rigid, cold, and passionate service. That service he loved, had even almost come to love the enervating daily struggle between a proud, tenacious, well-trained will and this growing fatigue.” In Illness as Metaphor, Susan Sontag suggests that culturally, illness has shifted from being viewed as the consequence of excess emotion to being viewed as occurring as the result of the suppression of intense feelings: “Illness reveals desires of which the patient probably was unaware. Diseases – and patients – become subjects for decipherment. And these hidden passions are now considered a source of illness.” The focus on the mental interior, in addition to the symbolic use of illness as a representation of divergent sexuality in Death in Venice are both features typical of twentieth-century operatic adaptations of psychological novels, with their interest in intense emotional states and human fallibility.

2 Mann, Death in Venice, 6-7.
In *Opera, Disease and Death*, Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon argue that the presentation of disease in opera can be recognised as a double event – one that occurs to individual bodies and as one that can take on various meanings as a social event depending on society’s response to it: “Through a disease that affects individual people, plague also affects the whole society: rich and poor, evil and good, all can die from it. Social hierarchies are ignored, transgressed, and then abolished; political and religious authority collapses. The physical breakdown of the body becomes the model for the pathological breakdown of the culture.” They also differentiate between the symbolic implications of different types of diseases, with cholera in particular being typically associated with sexual deviance. In *Death in Venice* cholera performs just such a function, with the progression of the physically overpowering illness entwined in the narrative with Aschenbach’s overwhelming sexual desire for Tadzio. Appropriately, Sontag describes Thomas Mann’s work as “a storehouse of early twentieth-century disease myths,” and the variety of ways these myths are exploited by Mann are evident in comparing Aschenbach to his counterpart in *The Magic Mountain*, Hans Castorp, who feels liberated by his isolation from society when infected with tuberculosis - an association that complicates the thematic connotations of disease in Visconti’s film, which makes several allusions to Mann’s other novels. Visconti and Britten both use music to express the extremes of otherwise private desire, and through specific use of vocal music (throughout the opera, and sporadically in the film), associate these emotions with the physical bodies of performers, emphasising the corporeal foundations of extreme emotion.

Hutcheon and Hutcheon’s acknowledgement of the symbolic function of disease in society also brings to mind Artaud’s use of a similarly inflected Dionysian plague analogy in *Theatre and its Double*, where theatre is compared to the maniacal behaviour of survivors of a brutal plague: “The plague takes images that are dormant, a latent disorder, and suddenly extends them into the most extreme gestures; the theater also takes gestures and pushes them as far as they will go: like the plague it reforges the chain between what is and what is not, between the virtuality of the possible and what already exists in materialized nature. It recovers the notion of symbols and archetypes which act like silent blows, rests, leaps out of the heart, summons of the lymph, inflammatory images thrust into

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4 Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, *Opera, Disease and Death* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 15.
5 Ibid., 23.
our abruptly wakened heads.” While the delirium of one character might not immediately appear to be the fertile subject of stage drama, this image of theatrical visions in battle with reality reflects the conflict between desire and intellect in Mann’s novella, and suggests why the themes of his novel are so successfully realised in performance. Accordingly, the theme of mental and physical breakdown as a response to social, economic and political change is common to modernist drama, notably in Alban Berg’s adaptation of Georg Büchner’s Woyzeck, and in much of Samuel Beckett’s writing for stage.

In ‘On Being Ill,’ Virginia Woolf questions why sickness is not a more prominent theme in literature, considering both the inherent tragedy in illness and its potential to transform mental states. In Woolf’s description of the inability of language to capture the urgency of suffering and its emotional nuances she makes an interesting statement about language that throws light on the question of why this theme has become popular in opera: “The merest schoolgirl, when she falls in love, has Shakespeare or Keats to speak her mind for her, but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry. There is nothing ready made for him. He is forced to coin words himself, and, taking his pain in one hand, and a lump of pure sound in the other (as perhaps the people of Babel did in the beginning), so to crush them together that a brand new word in the end drops out.” Opera provides a medium for the manipulation of this ‘lump of pure sound’ - the literal yawp of despair that cannot be so viscerally articulated in literature - and as the conventional home of interpersonal historical tragedies, the form also resonates with personal battles with the treacherous body; accordingly the trope of illness, physical and mental, is one that recurs in twentieth-century opera, and often in concert with sexual themes.

Unlike the romanticised and intellectualised deaths of those suffering tuberculosis, like Hans Castorp in The Magic Mountain, those infected with cholera suffered the unglamorous and decidedly visceral death by dehydration caused by uncontrollable vomiting and diarrhoea. Metaphorically, cholera has been considered to be spread by a different kind of contagion than tuberculosis, as Hutcheon and Hutcheon argue: “it was the sign of some secret vice, some dishonourable and ‘polluting’ personal habit that might not be known but manifestly existed,” and the authors suggest that both Mann and

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9 Sontag, Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors, 128.
Piper draw upon the more glamorous disease of tuberculosis “to aestheticize – but also implicitly to sexualise their protagonist’s condition.”

In *Death in Venice*, desire is pathologised, with cholera linking the corporeal basis of emotion with the medical failures of human bodies. Additionally, music, and particularly vocal music, is utilised as an intensely physical expression of repressed emotion and desires in different ways in each work – in Britten’s opera, Aschenbach is a novelist portrayed through song, but in the film Aschenbach is a composer, like Adrian in Mann’s other disease novel, *Doctor Faustus*, in the first of many references Visconti makes to that work.

Tadzio’s function as a representation of beauty is clearly drawn in Visconti’s film by the use of flashbacks to Aschenbach’s discussions about aesthetics with his companion Alfred. The exploration of the theme of desire is signposted in the film by melodic cues, used more liberally in scenes of the film where Aschenbach gazes upon Tadzio, and during discussions about aesthetic values during flashback sequences, some quite explicit about the sexual associations of disease, as when Alfred encourages him to compose more passionately: “Think of what a dry and arid thing good health is – especially if it’s of the soul no less than the body.” These flashbacks underscore the film with a more specific personal back-story for Aschenbach: he is fleeing the scornful reception of a daring new work.

With the exception of these flashbacks to Aschenbach’s earlier life, the film is curiously non-verbal, starting with a long overture and with another full three minutes between the first diegetic sound (the blast of a steam boat horn) and the first line of dialogue. Instead it is music that fills the expressive role of dialogue in several parts of the film, mainly orchestral, but also, significantly in parts, vocal music. Prominent vocal pieces are used in the soundtrack to signpost the progression of Aschenbach’s love for Tadzio – in the first instance with the contralto parts of Mahler’s Third Symphony in D Minor in the scene where Aschenbach is inspired to compose by the sight of Tadzio draped in a white towel like a toga, and in the final moments, where a woman sings the Mussorgsky lullaby as Aschenbach makes his way to the beach, where, after watching Tadzio wrestle with another boy, he dies. As Alexander Hutchinson identifies, vocal music also comes to represent sexual desire in another episode in the film where a troupe of travelling entertainers arrive to perform and then mock Aschenbach: “[…] at first sight (and sound) of them we know the plague has penetrated the grounds of the hotel, and the singer’s assault on Aschenbach, which combines

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10 Ibid., 135.
ridicule with sexual menace, is heightened by Visconti’s careful manipulation of the distance between them.”

Music also links Tadzio to the only explicit sexual act implied in the film, where Aschenbach comes across the boy picking out Mozart’s *Für Elise* on a piano at his hotel and the film cuts directly to Aschenbach approaching a young female prostitute playing the same piece in a brothel.

In the opera, Tadzio is explicitly both the object of Aschenbach’s desire and the physical representation of Apollo on stage. In early drafts of the opera Britten and Piper considered having a boy soprano sing as Apollo, but in Britten’s letter to Piper dated February 6, 1972, he suggests another option, writing: “I am still worried by a possible confusion in the audience’s mind. I still like the idea of a boy’s voice there; but Peter has had a stranger idea, but possibly a better one – why not a counter tenor – colder, not manly or womanly, and a sound that hasn’t been used before.”

As previously mentioned, in Britten’s final work the three lead vocal roles are this voice, a counter-tenor as Apollo (conventionally sung off-stage); Aschenbach, a tenor; and ‘the Traveller’, a bass-baritone who plays the voice of Dionysus (also doubling for all the other adult male characters: the fop, the gondolier, the hotel manager and the leader of the travelling players). Without a vocal part, Britten casts Tadzio as a dancer. In the score it is specified of these dances that “from the outset the composer envisaged a style of movement that requires for its materialization the collaboration of a choreographer […] it is essential to avoid a completely naturalistic style of movement for the boy and his family,” suggesting the intention of these dance sequences was to “suggest the ‘other’ and different world of action” inhibited by these characters as viewed through Aschenbach’s eyes.

Setting Aschenbach’s counterpart as a dancer throws the two characters into stark contrast: the able-bodied young man with the ageing (and frequently sleeping) writer, played by performers with bodies trained in considerably different ways. The presence of the bodies of dancers on stage performs a narrative function but also a symbolic one, framing Britten’s opera a relatively explicit statement of homosexual desire, particularly considering the common associations of dance with eroticism and male dancers specifically with same-sex desire and travesty.

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12 Letter, no reference number, Britten-Pears Foundation.
13 Performance and Production Notes, front matter to Britten, *Death in Venice*.
In ‘Bourgeois Opera: Death in Venice and the Aesthetics of Sublimation’ Christopher Chowrimootoo discusses Britten’s opera alongside Iris Murdoch’s novel The Black Prince in an examination of the uncomfortable cultural position opera has occupied since beginning of the twentieth century. He argues that the reception of Death in Venice has overlooked some of the piece’s most significant themes, and that for “all that early critics warned of the likelihood of narrowly sexual interpretations, such readings have remained conspicuous by their absence, especially as the tendency to sublate the more immediate ‘levels’ of the drama into abstract maxims appears to have prevailed.”\(^{15}\) In focusing on how the work operates as an allegory on the conflict between Apollonian and Dionysian impulses, critics have frequently ignored the Dionysian energy central to the piece itself. Chowrimootoo suggests the dominance of this interpretation is due to the different ways high art and popular culture works are received, following Andreas Huyssen’s discussion of the “great divide”\(^{16}\) between these perceived cultural levels, suggesting the during the twentieth century opera was seen occupy a precarious position between the two: “The reception of Death in Venice is indelibly marked by the anti-operatic context from which it hails, especially as spirited defences of the opera’s aesthetic value drew on a range of aesthetic oppositions - between the abstract and the immediate, the intellectual and the visceral, form and rhetoric - that underpinned the great divide.”\(^{17}\) Critics who ignore the sexual content of Death in Venice, Chowrimootoo argues, do so in attempt to secure the opera’s place on the high art side of this division.

In considering the opera and correspondence between Britten and Piper, Chowrimootoo identifies several attempts from the authors to anticipate and prevent literal interpretations of the plot. In staging the characters of Tadzio and his family as silent dancers, for example, Britten and Piper are able to draw upon the abstraction of the language of dance, but Chowrimootoo suggests even this strategy is made blunt by the characteristic tension between the visceral and the erotic in opera: “In turning to ballet, Britten and Piper could rely on a long tradition of abstracting bodies - of seeing through them to concepts of form, movement and beauty. However, in transplanting ballet into opera - a genre that sublimates its voyeurism through emphasis on voice - they risked exposing dance’s physical sources of pleasure.”\(^{18}\) The centrality of dance to the piece has thematic resonances relating

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\(^{16}\) Ibid.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 180.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 192.
to the social and cultural associations of the art form, recognisable among those identified by Judith Lynn Hanna in ‘Patterns of Dominance: Men, Women, and Homosexuality in Dance’: “On the fringe of society and receptive to the unconventional, the art world offers them an opportunity to express an aesthetic sensibility that is emotional and erotic, an insulation from a rejecting society, an overture of courtship, and an arena in which to deal with homosexual concerns.”19 The way dance combines aesthetics and eroticism, as Hanna identifies here, allows Britten’s opera to be a more explicit expression of the philosophical questions raised in Mann’s novella than in Visconti’s film, while the erotic themes remain similarly omnipresent, even without Visconti’s unflinching cinematic focus Björn Andrésen’s youthful face and body.

While the operatic register is associated with the expression of heightened emotional states, specific musical motifs also emphasise themes of sensuality within Death in Venice. As Philip Rupprecht identifies, while Britten was broadly interested in Eastern music and did associate gamelan music with other characters in his other operas (Peter Quint in Turn of the Screw, Oberon in A Midsummer’s Night Dream), in Death in Venice the style is used to establish Aschenbach’s personal subjectivity and state of mind:

> The Venice gamelan belongs to Tadzio only “as seen through Aschenbach’s eyes.” [Here Rupprecht cites the ‘Performance and Production Notes’ published with the vocal score.] Operatically, Tadzio is all object, without a subjective presence. The gamelan, a symbol of sensory perception, is another manifestation of Aschenbach’s perceiving self. In what I term the opera’s sonic gaze, one hears an exotic musical idiom attuned, in its mesmerizing harmonic stasis, to the physical fixity of Aschenbach’s sight of the boy. (In an abstract sense, too, the sonic gaze evokes orientalist discourse, in privileging an observer’s vision over the reciprocal interaction of oral encounter.)20

Rupprecht argues that the distinctive feature of Britten’s composition style is the way he uses specific styles of music to construct the point of view of particular characters within the operatic narrative; in Death in Venice, the gamelan motif used to denote the Aschenbach’s feelings towards Tadzio carries with it particular metaphorical connotations, corresponding with the way that Mann conceptualises the south as a place of sensuality, as when Aschenbach describes travelling south for

pleasure, providing an Orientalist description of Asia as a place of freedom and sensuality: “Desire projected itself visually: his fancy, not quite lulled since morning, imagined the marvels and terrors of the manifold earth. He saw. He beheld a landscape, a tropical marshland, beneath a reeking sky, steaming, monstrous, rank – a kind of primeval wilderness-world of islands, morasses, and alluvial channels. […] Among the knotted joints of a bamboo thicket the eyes of a crouching tiger gleamed – and he felt his heart throb with terror, yet with a longing inexplicable.”

Questions surrounding the dramatic representation of internally experienced emotion in modern opera are reflected even in contemporaneous commentary on the piece, including Mollie Panter-Downes’ review of the 1973 Covent Garden production of Death in Venice in The New Yorker. “One of the problems that Britten and his sensitive librettist, Myfanwy Piper, clearly had to get around was that everything in Mann’s story takes place inside Aschenbach’s feverish, collapsing brain. They have done this by having Aschenbach, between great lyric passages, deliver stretches of recitative, accompanied by piano only, that serve as a sort of personal journal of his gradual fall from scholarly pursuit of the classical ideal of truth and beauty to abject enslavement by one human form.” Here Panter-Downes’ links the interiority of the narrative in the novel with the expression of the competing themes of embodied desire and constructions of reason and desire in classical aesthetics.

This is not the only way that the influence of the corporeality of performers was acknowledged by early audiences of the opera. Britten’s partner Peter Pears performed the role of Aschenbach in both the Aldeburgh Festival production and in the Covent Garden production later that year, and Lawrence Malkin identified in his review of the Aldeburgh premiere that having a late-career performer play the role had interesting connotations:

Pears, at 63, is fading of voice, but nevertheless holds the stage for virtually the entire opera. It is a remarkable feat of endurance. In white suit and panama, he unifies the performance completely, whether in recitatives of improvised rhythm chanted to the plink of a single piano or sitting silently in a canvas chair as an observer. Gone are the Pears-shaped tones of the young lyric tenor. In their place now emerge dramatic powers of characterization. As a noted German author captivated by a winsome Polish boy in Venice, Pears’ body seems literally to disintegrate with frustration.

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21 Mann, Death in Venice, 5-6.
The feat of endurance required for Pears’ performance is described in similar terms in Panter-Downes’ review: “The tremendously long, exacting role of Aschenbach was sung by Peter Pears, who gave the performance of his life. His tall, still, Teutonic figure is on stage practically all the time.”24 Both of these reviews specifically emphasise the importance of the visceral body on stage, acknowledging that Aschenbach’s desire for the youth and what he represents is offset by the very presence of his failing body, and that the failing body of the character is not just represented by Pears but is also a body shared with the performer. This focus on the performing body - underscored by features of Death in Venice where the symbolic association between disease and sex conveniently dovetails the theatrical association between sex and the performing body - has been widely noted in opera criticism, particularly studies in Queer musicology such as Wayne Koestenbaum’s The Queen’s Throat: Opera, Homosexuality and the Mystery of Desire and Sam Abel’s Opera in the Flesh: Sexuality in Operatic Performance.

In The Queen’s Throat, Koestenbaum focuses on the embodied nature of performance with regard to the experience of spectatorship, arguing that “Opera has the power to warn you that you’ve wasted your life. You haven’t acted on your desires. You’ve suffered a stunted, vicarious existence. You’ve silenced your passions. The volume, height, depth, lushness, and excess of operatic utterance reveal, by contrast, how small your gestures have been until now, how impoverished your physicality; you have used only a fraction of your bodily endowment, and your throat is closed.”25 This rather pessimistic reading of sexual investment in opera spectatorship does compliment the thematic concerns of Death in Venice, but it also downplays opera’s celebration of theatrical sexuality. In Opera in the Flesh, Sam Abel rejects Kostenbaum’s suggestion that the eroticism of opera reflects a repressed homosexual identity based on “disjuncture, loneliness and failure,”26 and providing a more forceful account of the body’s physical and erotic response to performance by directly comparing opera spectatorship to sex. In the last moments of Death in Venice, the voiceless dancer summons Aschenbach to his orgasmically symbolic death, and along similar lines Sam Abel sees particular sexual resonance in the endings of operas: “Beyond the obvious climax of the narrative, the final notes are the most thrilling of the evening specifically because they are the final notes [...] The

fictional narrative disappears, leaving only the underlying sexual narrative.” Abel makes an expansive move, examining cultural practice through the lens of non-normative sexuality and suggesting that opera spectatorship is in itself fetishistic. Here again the conflict between Apollonian and Dionysian themes resonates: the positioning of sexuality within opera simultaneously engaging with both Kostenbaum’s conception of opera as a momentary escape from self-censure and Abel’s celebration of opera’s divergent sensuality.

While some critics such as Richard Dyer and John Clum continue to read opera and musical theatre as codes of homosexual experience (and typically male, with the exception of Stacy Wolf’s work on lesbian musical theatre audiences), there are more critical expansive approaches to lyric theatre within queer theory, significantly though the use of ‘diva worship’ as a method of reading musical theatre, opera, and other camp texts. Clum describes diva worship as a “mythology of performance as a fierce act of will in the face of physical limitations and personal unhappiness,” and the archetypal diva as Judy Garland as “the wreck who went on – brilliantly,” suggesting that gay male audiences identify with damaged women who die tragically. Edward O’Neil has a slightly more optimistic reading of the diva, suggesting that rather than identifying directly with her, gay men can view the diva as a maternal cheerleader: “a theoretical fantasy - a fantasy that [Laura] Mulvey [cultural theorist who has written about diva worship with reference to Marlene Dietrich], like Mama Rose in Gypsy, might be the one who shouts to me, “Sing out, Louise!” thereby demanding that I express myself while also causing me to shrink back into my own mute incapacity for self-expression.”

27 Ibid., 179.
28 This conflict in queer musicology also runs parallel to the split that occurred in GLBT Studies during the 1990s, as described by Berlant and Warner in What Does Queer Theory Teach Us About X?, when GLBT Studies, which focused critically on the documentation of queer culture through interpreting historical ambiguities and documenting cultural codes relating to sexuality, became enveloped by Queer Theory, which uses ‘queering’ as a strategy of theoretical enquiry closely aligned with the strategies of postmodernism. In this context the work of Kosstenbaum aligns most closely pre-1990 GLBT studies while Abel’s work, with its focus on how the erotic nature of opera spectatorship influences text reception, aligns with what Berlant and Warner describe as “queer commentary,” as opposed to “queer theory.” See Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “What does Queer Theory Teach Us About ‘X’?” PMLA 110 (1995).
31 Ibid., 151.
Dyer describes diva worship within the myths about the relationship between women and gay men in ‘Gay Misogyny’: “Queers Adore women. For starters, every single one of us loves his mother. There is nothing we like more than than dishing with women friends. We worship Judy, Liza and Kylie.”

This description of the stereotype of diva worship, with specific reference to camp popular culture icons Judy Garland, Liza Minnelli and Kylie Minogue, suggests another interesting tension in the thematic analysis of opera that emerges from traditional GLBT studies: the ambiguous cultural status of camp art. Dyer discusses this tension in ‘The Politics of Gay Culture’ (with Derek Cohen), suggesting that the highbrow pretensions of camp culture are a consequence of the earliest gay publications emerging in cosmopolitan centres where opera, ballet, classical music and short-form literary fiction were popular and accessible, and that as a result these types of art are only “narrowly rooted” in gay culture and, similarly, artificially associated together within high culture: “These arts have, like that of the minor literati, an ambiguous place in bourgeois high culture. Recognised as Art, and subsidised as such, there is still a strong current of opinion that does not quite take them seriously as Art - not compared to the kind of non-musical theatre subsidised by the Arts Council or the kinds of art hung and displayed in national and municipal galleries.”

The more flamboyant components of popular culture, such as Judy Garland, become camp by association with these theatrical cultural modes. As O’Neil identifies, “[the] gay man and the diva thus work together to transgress boundaries while staying within them. This is gay taste as a symbolic boundary mark, transgressing limits while staying within the bounds of mainstream taste.”

These discussions resonate strongly with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s discussions of camp in the context of reparative and paranoid reading strategies. While Britten’s operas are certainly less identifiably camp than many productions of grand opera of the nineteenth century, there is a undeniable focus on artifice and the body, which in combination with the work’s blatant homoeroticism, identify the work as explicitly concerned with homosexual themes despite the blind eye turned by many of Britten’s contemporaries in reviewing the work. In Sedgwick’s introduction to Novel Gazing, were she discusses the weaknesses of paranoid reading - a politically invested approach to literary analysis that investigates texts for evidence of oppressive power structures -

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35 O’Neil, “The M-M-Mama of Us All: Divas and the Cultural Logic of Late Ca(M)Pitalism,” 19.
camp is discussed as a method of engaging with culture in a constructive and subversive way, described as the strategy ‘reparative reading’:

The queer identified practice of camp, for example, may be seriously misrecognized when it is viewed, as Butler and others view it, through paranoid lenses. As we’ve seen, camp is currently understood as uniquely appropriate to the projects of parody, denaturalization, demystification, and mocking exposure of the elements and assumptions of a dominant culture; and the degree to which camp is motivated by love seems often to be understood mainly as the degree of its self-hating complicity with an oppressive status quo. [...] To view camp as, among other things, the communal, historically dense exploration of a variety of reparative practices is to be able to do better justice to many of the defining elements of classic camp performance: the startling, juicy displays of excess erudition, for example; the passionate, often hilarious antiquarianism, the prodigal production of alternate historiographies; the “over”-attachment to fragmentary, marginal, waste, or leftover products; the rich, highly interruptive affective variety; the irrepressible fascination with ventriloquistic experimentation; the disorienting juxtapositions of present with past, and popular with high culture.\textsuperscript{36}

The term ‘camp’ is used in several different ways, and some of Sedgwick’s observations may be more relevant to brasher expressions of the practice, but camp in opera can follow a similar trajectory to camp as a strategy of reparative reading, while additionally providing a useful complement to adaptation studies due to the referentiality (through parody and hyperbole) that defines camp as an aesthetic mode.

Piper concludes her early letter to Britten proposing the Hermes-themed project by reflecting on the ability of opera to communicate ideas inexpressible in other media: “The thing I quite like about it from my point of view is that it is an idea that really can only be fully expressed in opera.”\textsuperscript{37} This can be considered not just as a statement about the representative power of music, but also, as a statement from a librettist, an assertion of how the many grounds of representation available to those composing and staging opera. The restructuring of any prose text to stage and any non-musical text to music drama must take into account the symbolic power of music and staging, and many of the texts chosen by composers and librettists can be seen as including a space for embodied performance or music to operate.


\textsuperscript{37} Letter, January 28 [no year, archive date supplied 1956], item number 9401101, Britten-Pears Foundation.
The stylistic and thematic specificity of twentieth-century opera brings rise to its own particular technical issues, especially when considering the aesthetics of opera adaptation alongside film, as I have discussed. Specific narrative elements such as the presentation of time can be seen to present particular opportunities and challenges for adapting the psychological literature that became an increasingly popular subject for opera in the twentieth century. Discussing Visconti’s *Death in Venice*, Hutcheon identifies some of the implications the presentation of time has for cinematography:

Thomas Mann has and takes much time in his novella of *Der Tod in Venedig* to allow a young boy’s beauty to insinuate itself into the mind of both his protagonist, Aschenbach, and his reader. In the film adaptation, Visconti has to “throw the image at us, via the handsome Björn Andresen” to get the story going. Rather than gradually learning to see Tadzio through the learned Aschenbach’s idealizing (indeed Hellenizing) eyes in the novella, we instead watch him and the boy “exchange lengthy glances, whose sexual explicitness turns Aschenbach into a foolish dirty old man, and the boy into a pretty little tease” (Paul Zimmerman, qtd. In Wagner 1975:343). Time and timing clearly present a real challenge for the adapter to a different medium.\(^{38}\)

In their respective adaptations of *Death in Venice*, specific types of music are used by Visconti and Britten to create the sense of sinister decadence evoked by Mann’s prose, while also creating musical motifs that suggest the experience of reminiscence and the passing of time. In the context of the contributions of queer musicology these extended sequences of musically-expressed lust in Britten’s opera trap the audience in the unrelenting and uncontrollable progression of the score, implicating them in Aschenbach’s flights of desire.

As can be seen from this consideration of *Death in Venice*, not only does the complexity of the multi-author staged text strongly suggest the limitations of conventional adaptation theory, but the specificity of opera with regard to stylistic conventions, audience demographics and cultural position has the potential to indicate toward areas of contention otherwise overlooked in adaptation theory that views both narrative and audiences as immediately transferrable between texts. The majority of adaption theory fails to fully account for the complexities of opera adaptation due to the fact that strategies like fidelity theory and even Sinyard’s ‘adaptation as criticism’ approach rely on a conception of the text that is largely incompatible with operatic aesthetics, and in identifying this weakness in existing theory, consideration of the adaptation processes of modern opera has

relevance beyond dramatic musicology and opera studies. In the next section I will outline critical theory relating to operatic aesthetics, with specific focus on twentieth-century developments in the genre.
PART B

A Poetics of Opera
As existing models used in examining film adaptation are inadequate for the analysis of modern opera adaptation, it is first necessary to provide an overview of how opera functions dramaturgically in order to create a theoretical model for the discussion of adapted twentieth-century operas in relation to their source texts. Having addressed the theoretical issues concerning the adaptation of narratives between types of text in general terms, the specific structural features of opera raise additional questions about the relationship between texts and their adaptations. Aside from the content of the libretto, subject to the enunciative limitations the singing voice and yet often still indecipherable in performance, accounting for the expression of meaning in opera requires consideration of two factors: the use of music to convey meaning and methods of stage representation. These two factors are inseparable in dramaturgical discussion of the genre, as the omnipresence of music, produced by collaboration between the orchestra in the pit and the performers on stage, sets opera apart structurally from other forms of theatre. The centrality of music to opera raises questions about the role of the orchestral voice within drama and the meaning that the act of singing confers to dialogue transposed into song.

While the apparent silliness of expressing passion through song has been criticised in discussions of opera from as early as the eighteenth century, with Rousseau stating “it is the height of absurdity that at the instant of passion we should change voices to speak a song”1 – when considering the thematic dominance of tragedy and drama over comedy and romance in twentieth-century opera, the very absurdity of communicating via song during moments of crisis remains one of the most immediate problems in addressing opera dramaturgically. Once the representative value of the act of singing has been accounted for, more utilitarian questions about stage representation similarly arise: does the volume and expressive capacity of singer’s voice necessarily represent the expression of the character? What does failure of voice mean in opera? Given the significant number of naturalistic plays and novels that have come to be adapted into opera, the relationship between naturalist narrative construction and opera’s florid pomp also requires consideration. Some of these questions, particularly those relating to the particular characteristics of the singing voice or the singer’s acting abilities might be considered quirks of convention as opposed to theatrical techniques intended to achieve dramaturgical aims, but it is the aesthetic connotations of these seemingly inconsequential stylistic features that have prompted several eminent cultural critics to engage with opera.

Opera is a genre of performance with particularly strong associations with privilege if not unjustifiable excess, and given these thorny class connotations, the political concerns raised by the logistics of opera production are largely inseparable from the genre’s aesthetic features. Opera has a complicated relationship with critical theory, as many significant twentieth-century theorists have written about their enthusiasm for opera while at the same time deriding it as a guilty pleasure, and this section will consider these confessions in light of literary theory and musicology to form a more complete picture of the current position of opera within contemporary culture. This section will also address some of the more specific political dimensions of opera criticism: specifically Kristeva and Clément’s debates about the thematic position of femininity in opera; psychoanalytic criticism relating to the thematic preoccupations of opera; and Marxist criticism relating to the possibility of authentic art emerging from the financially privileged institutions that support the commissioning, development and staging of new work.

A significant consideration in all of these debates is the central role of affect in experiencing opera, a consideration introduced in the previous section in relation to the contributions of Queer Theory to the discipline, and in this section I will suggest that acknowledging the embodied nature of spectatorship has the potential to counter arguments that opera’s dramatic aesthetic is problematically apolitical. This part will consist of three chapters: firstly, an account of existing critical theory concerning the general aesthetic framework of opera, and twentieth-century opera in particular; secondly, a dramaturgical discussion of how the various structural and stylistic elements of opera (the libretto, staging, movement, music, and so on) are employed to convey meaning within individual works; and finally, a more specific discussion of the political consequences of operatic poetics.
5. Aesthetic Principles of Opera

I think we write opera because we are all human beings; we like studying human beings. Music expresses the emotions of a human being, and what more wonderful than to have a person on stage singing and to be able to accompany that person with musical noises? But in this simple, stylized form, which music also is, because after all it is - it's a made-up language; it doesn't mean anything, but it can convey to us the whole drama of human life in very few notes if you're clever enough to find the right notes.

_Benjamin Britten_1

In this 1968 interview, Britten reflects on the representational foundation of opera: the ability of music to communicate emotion. In analysis of staged adaptations the text adapted carries with it a range of associations and interpretations, the representative function played by music is a vital consideration when analysing the work in performance. Some of the necessary consideration of music in opera criticism relates directly to dramaturgical issues: how the structural requirements of the drama are met or negotiated by the composer and librettist in writing the score, for instance. However, it is not just the contribution of music to drama that complicates opera but the way that music relates to language: what does the act of singing mean?

In _Osmin's Rage_, Peter Kivy begins his discussion of the philosophical foundations of opera by quoting the entry for opera in Dr Johnson's dictionary, where it is described as “irrational entertainment,”2 and agrees that opera can be considered irrational because it deviates widely from the aesthetic principles of naturalistic literature and drama. Kivy however rejects the notion that singing is unnatural, suggesting that the act of singing is in fact a great cultural constant, while acknowledging that the precision and stylisation of the voice required in opera distinguishes it from natural song: “Normal people don't sing very well; normal people sing out of tune; indeed, normal people don't sing much at all […] Clearly, then, the answer must be: [in opera, characters] sing the way normal people *speak._”3 Here Kivy's argument begins with his identification that song is not intended to represent singing within opera, but speech,4 and this basic convention suggests within it

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3 Ibid., 6.
4 Ibid.
the tension that is tracked through Osmin’s Rage: the question of what representational role is played by music when it is paired with spoken drama.

Kivy traces the philosophical foundations of opera back through early Christian aesthetics to Platonic and Aristotelian theories of mimesis, and suggests that choral music first introduced this aesthetic framework to the realm of music: “it was only when music presented a possible object of “representation” - in this case, human utterance - that the theory could gain a foothold on musical turf,”5 and from this developed into the “tension between the demands of a pure musical syntax and those of Aristotelian mimesis.”6 In Plato’s Republic and Aristotle’s Poetics, music was not simply viewed as capable of imitating emotional states, but also of shaping the emotional states and therefore the character of the members of the audience,7 and this view influenced the composers of the early operas in the mid-sixteenth century. Kivy suggests that this historical understanding of musical aesthetics is flawed: sad music does not universally make listeners feel sad as everyone can have different associations with different pieces and styles of composition. Here he argues that music has syntactic properties but no real semantic properties:

It has, of course, at any given period, what comes very close to a grammar, to the extent that grammar can be separated off entirely from meaning in natural languages (as opposed to formal ones), which it cannot. The only ultimate test of grammatical error, as opposed to metaphorical extension of language, is appeal to meaning, [...] Such an appeal is not possible in music, where there is no semantic component. It is therefore not possible, in principle, to tell, apart from musical aesthetics, whether parallel fifths (say) or a “mistake” in harmonic progression is a slip of the pen, a result of ignorance or ineptitude, or a conscious attempt at some daring musical effect.8

This conflict between musical expression and the syntactic properties of music is neatly addressed in a letter between Mozart and his librettist Gottlieb Stephanie for Die Entführung aus dem Serail (The Abduction from Serail) discussing how best to capture the anger of the harem-keeper Osmin, from which Kivy derives the title of his study: “For just as a man in such a towering rage oversteps the bounds of order, moderation and propriety and completely forgets himself, so must the music too forget itself. But as passions, whether violent or not, most never be expressed in such a way as to

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5 Ibid., 14.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 37.
8 Ibid., 57-8
excite disgust, and as music, even in the most terrible situations, must never offend the ear, but must please the hearer, or in other words must never cease to be music, I have gone from F [to A minor].” For Kivy, the “problem of opera” is the critical impossibility of reconciling the music’s function in representing emotions within the stylistic demands of musical drama, and as such, his analysis provides a useful point of departure when considering the contributions of musicology and dramaturgy in the study of opera.

Ideas about how universally music can be used to represent emotion differ widely between critics, and as contemporary classical music has developed over the twentieth century, so to have critical perspectives on how music communicates meaning. In a 1950 article about the semantic difficulties involved in the discussion of Baroque music, Glen Haydon argues that emotions within music can be deciphered through consideration of three aspects of feeling: sensory fusions, instinctive drives, and moods. Here sensory fusions refer to the feelings evoked by particular musical tones individually and in combination, considered to act externally on the listener; whereas instinctive drives, such as desire for food and sex, relate to the mental bearing of the individual. Instinctive drives allow music to act internally on the listener, as musical stimulus acts on these preexisting mental states creating emotions such as jealousy, pity, and grief: “drive emotions have a special significance in art, for they are the dynamic sources of the suspense and dramatic conflict that provide the material of art fields like the novel and the drama.” According to Haydon, moods are mental states that relate only to the immediate conditions that formed them, existing on a continuum between two poles; the psychological movement between the moods of calm and excitement, for example, is influenced musically by compositional elements including pace, volume, rhythm, balance and symmetry.

While Haydon acknowledges the difficulties of emotional analysis – the inseparability of emotion and intellect, the fact that features of form are more tangible than those of a work’s emotional content – he also argues that social perceptions of feeling are evident in the music of the culture that shares those perceptions. In this vein he cites Manfred Bukofzer’s argument that the expression of emotion

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9 Ibid., 59-60.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
in baroque music was significantly influenced by the era’s pre-psychology understanding of emotion, where feelings were classified within a set of affections intended to represent unchanging mental states: “According to the lucid rationalism of the time, the composer had at his disposal a set of musical figures which were pigeonholed like the affections themselves and were designed to represent these affections as music.”\(^{13}\) By this rationale, the audience faces the challenge of acknowledging the psychological characteristics they share with original audiences of the work in order to understand the mechanisms used within that work to convey emotion, a perspective that resonates to some extent with the strategies of reception theory but carries with it considerable risk of anachronistic error.

Even considering how social and cultural accounts of emotional states influence the way that emotion is perceived, it is difficult to accept a model of feeling in art that distinguishes between emotions evoked internally and externally; while Haydon considers composers capable of painting emotions with sound for the audience through the manipulation of external stimulus, as “the novel and the drama” simultaneously play internally on the instinctual drives of the audience. The distinction here between internal and external artistic techniques is arbitrary and counterintuitive, particularly in the light of Haydon’s comments on Baroque opera:

> With the rise of the opera the problem of extrinsic expression becomes paramount. The new viewpoints brought radical changes in musical style […] In the recitative intrinsic musical expression is probably at its lowest ebb, for the musical means are almost entirely given over to the extrinsic expression of the instinctive drive emotions in their more complex forms of sadness, love, hate, wonder, and the like. Sensory fusion emotions deriving from the exploitation of melody, harmony and form in all its complexity are at a minimum. The absence of these values points the way to the gradual abandonment of the monotonous forms of musical means of greater intrinsic expressive significance.\(^{14}\)

In this brief discussion of the way music is used to communicate emotion in opera specifically, Haydon suggests that the emotions evoked by the verbal content of opera are both stronger and more complex than the emotions evoked by the music. Haydon’s suggestion that the manipulation of instinctive drive emotions dominates over the evocation of sensory fusion emotions by melody and harmony is a contentious one; particularly considering Baroque opera, which his argument

\(^{13}\) Bukofzer cited in ibid.
\(^{14}\) Ibid., 118.
directly refers to, is comparatively static and stylised, often structured around a number of long virtuosic arias of predominantly melodic rather than verbal content. His suggestion that the emotions evoked by musical means are less complex and therefore more easily interpreted than those evoked by language is also counterintuitive: the emotive immediacy of music does not necessarily imply a lack of complexity. While the emotional content of music might appear less complicated than that of the verbal content in that it can trigger an affective response, Kivy would take issue with Haydon’s conception of the operation of external stimulus to communicate emotion, as he argues firmly against the concept of universal meaning in music.

Kivy does however allow that sound operates within music to provide pleasure and also arouse particular emotions in its audience - tracking this theory from Descartes’ *Compendium of Music*, through the work of Kant and Leibniz, suggesting that this philosophical grounding influenced the composition of Baroque and Classical era opera, such as the way opera reform in Italy in the early eighteenth century produced the semi-staged *opera seria* as a way of prioritising musical expression over dramatic expression. Ultimately Kivy suggests that there are two approaches theorists and composers can adopt in confronting the problem of opera: that it is possible to embrace the irrational nature of the genre, citing the extravagance of Handel; or by acknowledging that music is not innately comprehensible, firmly grounding opera within the structural conventions of stage drama. Alongside arguments about the role of music and language, this choice between understanding opera as uniquely extravagant stage practice or a form that largely follows the conventions of spoken drama is repeated throughout much critical work on opera.

While the distinction between natural song and the way words are sung in opera is useful for broader discussions about stage representation, it seems that the framing of the conflict as between comprehensible words and irrational music relies on the problematic assumption that naturalistic dialogue is a more accurate reflection of human behaviour than song in performance, even when presented with all the artifice attendant to stage drama. Dialogue, even when directly transcribed from natural speech, is necessarily stylised as the intonation and inflection of spoken language is recorded as words and punctuation on the page. As the written text created by the author reflects his or her understanding of the representational and aesthetic requirements of drama, the staged work reflects the director and performers’ understanding of the requirements of language as performed. While words that constitute dialogue have both syntactic and semantic properties, the wide variety
of ways language is inflected in spoken performance - through pace of delivery, intonation, volume, and how these facets of speech are negotiated by individual voices with distinct tonal qualities - defies the neatness of an appeal to meaning, as music does. Just as there is speech in singing, there is singing in speech, even if it is not as tightly orchestrated as the score attached to a libretto.

Consideration of the distinction between speech and singing here recalls Julia Kristeva’s discussion of the relationship between the symbolic and the semiotic in *Revolution and Poetic Language*. The term “the semiotic” has a specific meaning in this theory, referring to the relationship between signifier and signified within the context of the body of the subject, understood as the pre-Oedipal subject of Freudian psychoanalysis. On the other side of the linguistic spectrum, “the symbolic” relates to the categories and structures of language that govern communication between subjects, defined phenomenologically. For Kristeva the symbolic and the semiotic are not however discrete categories of language, but rather modalities negotiated within the broader operation of language:

These two modalities are inseparable within the *signifying process* that constitutes language, and the dialectic between them determines the type of discourse (narrative, metalanguage, theory, poetry, etc.) involved; in other words, so-called “natural” language allows for different modes of articulation of the semiotic and the symbolic. On the other hand, there are nonverbal signifying systems that are constructed exclusively on the basis of the semiotic (music, for example). [...] this exclusivity is relative, precisely because of the necessary dialectic between the two modalities of the signifying process, which is constitutive of the subject. Because the subject is always both semiotic and symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either “exclusively” semiotic or “exclusively” symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both.15

Kristeva’s model of signifying systems which operate with reference to these two modalities does not necessarily explain the prevalence of unproductive debates within opera criticism over the precedence of words or music, but it does illuminate these discussions with regard to consideration of singing as type of language. Opera singing - often rendering verbal content near unintelligible while it stages a non-verbal appeal to evoke emotion in the (pre-Oedipal) subject - is a type of discourse that clearly illustrates a negotiation between the semiotic and the symbolic. More broadly defined, opera performance is also an example of language use that clearly elucidates the movement between the semantic and symbolic as a consequence of its over-determined narrative styling, where a character will sing about being sad, accompanied by sad music, while acting (with often dubious

skill) sadly, in a similar manner to symbolic sacrifice as positioned by Kristeva in opposition to symbolism: “By reproducing signifiers - vocal, gestural, verbal - the subject crosses the border of the symbolic and reaches the semantic chora, which is on the other side of the social frontier.” Kristeva suggests not opera but festival performance in ancient Greece as an example of this crossing from the symbolic to the semantic: “Dionysian festivals in Greece are the most striking example of this deluge of the signifier, which so inundates the symbolic order that it portends the latter’s dissolution in a dancing, singing, and poetic animality.” The operation of the symbolic within language can be seen to replicate the relationship between music and language in opera, particularly the porous boundaries between the different expressive components.

Understanding the semiotic with reference to the pre-Oedipal subject and affect theory has implications for the consideration of the relationship between gender and language, and significantly, between femininity and music. In discussion of the work of Stephané Mallarmé, Kristeva explicitly identifies a link between the feminine and the semiotic, also musical but restrained, as informed by the biologically determined pre-Oedipal link to the mother: “Indifferent to language, enigmatic and feminine, this space underlying the written is rhythmic, unfettered, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation; it is musical, anterior to judgement, but restrained by a single guarantee: syntax.” In The Feminine and the Sacred, a series of letters between Kristeva and Catherine Clément on the subject of women and religion, this connection between music and the feminine is debated with explicit reference to opera, revealing a point of contention between the two theorists about the rhetorical function of femininity. Clément begins by discussing the historical connection between music, women and witchcraft:

Half-nature, half-music, such is witchcraft. […] Music and women, as we know, are always the first to be targeted. And it is not just recently that music has become bewitching: the Protestants also banned it, and, in The Republic, Plato proscribed certain musical modes as being too emotive for his liking.

Maria Callas - “the Voice” - of popular origin like Evita, underwent that transformation of the poor woman dressed up in chic clothes, the object of a persecutory adoration. Hence her tomb was profaned. Callas was a diva; everyone knows that. But only the specialists use the word diva, in the masculine, for a singer. “Diva” equals divine, nothing could be more pagan. It must be said that opera seems purposely designed to escape the maneuvers of the Inquisition: with setting, illusion, machinery, pagantry, music, and voice, everything is set in

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16 Ibid., 79.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 29.
place to cast a spell over the soul, in defiance of the Church’s rules. […] In the courts of Italy, opera was born, relief for the powerful… In the countryside, witches were still hunted down; two million of them would be burned at the stake in Europe.\textsuperscript{19}

The tension between the conservatism of the institutions sponsoring the performance of opera and the transgressive potential of the music itself is one that arises frequently in critical writing on opera, although never with such specific association between femininity and repression as Clément suggests here. Clément has written extensively on gender an opera, with her foundational feminist polemic \textit{Opera, or the Undoing of Women} (1979) focusing on similar thematic concerns, relating her personal history as opera enthusiast to her feelings of betrayal at the realisation that the female characters central to opera are offered in sacrifice to the pleasure of the audience. In analysing the plots of popular nineteenth- and early twentieth-century operas Clément lists scores of mistreated women, their suffering overshadowed and trivialised by the bombast of operatic style. Clément and Kristeva have widely differing opinions on women and devotional sacrifice, a conflict that Clément relates at one point to the influence of their differing perspectives as culturally Jewish (Clément) and Christian (Kristeva) atheists, \textsuperscript{20} an assumption that Kristeva rejects.

In \textit{Opera, or the Undoing of Women} Clément describes opera as the product of two gendered components: the music as the masculine, and the story as the feminine. The way that the music of an opera can come to overshadow the story is compared by Clément to aggressive male sexual dominance: “in opera, the forgetting of words, the forgetting of women, have the same deep roots.”\textsuperscript{21} Here the occasional intelligibility of words in opera is read as a symptom of the mistreatment of women, where the extravagance of music soothes the conscious mind while a more violent plot is registered by the subconscious:

The unconscious, however, does not hear [opera] with a deaf ear. It drills deep; it grasps the story’s deep structure for the spectator; it finds the phrase, the word, or the gesture that provokes tears of joy, that is to say, exultation in a make-believe, pointless pain. The music makes one forget the plot, but the plot sets traps for the imaginary. The plot works quietly, plainly visible to all, but outside the code of the pleasures of opera. It is totally dull, always setting in play the vague philosophical premises, ordinary banalities, life-love-death; it is all

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 105.
\textsuperscript{21} Catherine Clement, \textit{Opera, or the Undoing of Women}, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 22.
familiar and forgettable. But, beyond the romantic ideology lines are being woven, tying up the characters and leading them to death for transgression - for transgressions of familial rules, political rules, the things at stake in sexual and authoritarian power.\(^\text{22}\)

Clément’s examples of this mistreatment of women at the hands of opera include the heroines of Wagner’s epic *Ring Cycle*, metaphorically drowned by the inescapable flood of musical progression;\(^\text{23}\) Puccini’s fearsome Chinese princess, Turandot, defeated by the song and blood-sacrifice of the lowly slave-girl Liu;\(^\text{24}\) and the victims of Mozart’s roving philanderer Don Giovanni.\(^\text{25}\) Structural features of opera, such as the emotionally expressive but wordless coloratura that decorates the melodic lines of many soprano roles in Classic and Romantic era opera, such as the Queen of the Night in Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*, also support Clément’s argument here, but suggest that pure music’s gender associations are ambiguous, expressing women’s guttural distress in addition to signifying masculine progression through the score: “Coloratura is repetition stretched out on a flashy melody, in a register where the voice can do no more than emit - meaningless syllables, note after note. […] she sings in [children’s] babbling language, hard to recognise, transformed into rage and tenderness. It is a losing song; it is femininity’s song.”\(^\text{26}\)

So while the domineering force of music is classified as masculine, Clément does allow that certain types of music are associated with femininity: coloratura, as above; and also chromatic music. Clément interrogates the connection between the use of chromaticism in modern opera and the theme of subversive female sexuality in her discussion of Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*,\(^\text{27}\) in analysis that more closely belies the Fruedian/Lacanian framework her argument shares with Kristeva’s:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{…} & \text{chromaticism, whether that of the rainbow or of music, is always associated with affliction, with suffering, with mourning and death. […] Chromaticism is too intermediate; its rises, its descents, its imperceptible sliding are profoundly seductive. This, then, explains Isolde’s character: her profound seduction, her ambivalence as an Irish sorceress, her capacity to provide good and evil, and the impossibility men have of controlling the powers}\end{align*}\]

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 10.  
\(^{23}\) Ibid., 169.  
\(^{24}\) Ibid., 96-102.  
\(^{25}\) Ibid., 34-6.  
\(^{26}\) Ibid., 73.  
\(^{27}\) Ibid., 57.
that she embodies - odors that are both stinking and attractive, potions that are murderous of beneficial, a deadly love, poison troubling the soul.28

In *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality* Susan McClary similarly identifies specific types of music with women and sexuality, such as how Bizet’s title character Carmen is distinguished by the “chromatic excesses”29 of her vocal part: “Her melodic lines tease and taunt, forcing attention to dwell on the moment - on the erogenous zones of her inflicted melodies.”30 Here McClary’s work incidentally corresponds with Clément’s suggestion that musical momentum is a masculine drive that women struggle against. However the distinction these critics imply between chromatic music and tonal music is artificial, and sells short the complexity and depth of music’s cultural content, particularly as listening to all music, not just chromatic music, is an embodied experience, and the relation of chromatic music to women specifically contradicts her later assertion that, through its music, opera “comes at me from the womb,”31 associating the uncontrollable women of opera with Freudian notions of hysteria as an affliction of the uterus: “an organ where the thought of beings is conceived, a place where powerful rhythms are elaborated; a musical beat that is peculiar to women, the source of their voice, their breathing, their spasmodic way of thinking.”32 When considering these associations between madness, the psychoanalytical and opera, it is particularly significant that Clément discusses only the heroines of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century opera, as I will return to the influence of these psychoanalytical readings of opera when discussing Žižek and Dolar’s thesis about opera’s metaphorical death at the beginning of the twentieth century.

While both Clément and Kristeva agree that music communicates enigmatically, the contrast between Clément’s assertion that music works subversively to assert masculine power over the forgotten feminine plot and Kristeva’s connection between music and the psychoanalytic subject is stark. Responding to Clément’s argument linking music and feminine sacrifice in their correspondence, Kristeva, rather than agreeing with Clément’s analysis of music as a site of cultural subjugation of women in aid of transcendent emotion, suggests that music’s expressive power relies on the corporeality of bodies, male and female, reflecting her earlier classification of music as operating on the far border of the semantic mode: “Of all the arts, music is no doubt the closest to

28 Ibid., 56-7.
29 McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality*, 57.
30 Ibid.
31 Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, 176.
32 Ibid.
that elevation without words, beyond words, the passion made voice, sound, rhythm, melody, and silence that the sacred communicates. From Kathleen Ferrier to Billie Holiday, the vibrating bodies of the great women singers incarnate absolute perfection and mystery. And music, all music, Monteverdi, Mozart, Bach, Armstrong, whomever you like. Human, transhuman precision, you can’t go beyond that, it is the beyond, it is sacred.”

Reading Clément’s work on the symbolic position of women in opera in the context of her critical relationship with Kristeva documented in *The Feminine and the Sacred*, Kristeva’s comments relating to the grammar of sacrifice are also relevant here, particularly in light of the connections the two theorists establish between the feminine and the symbolic. In her chapter ‘Poetry That Is Not a Form of Murder,’ Kristeva defines the sacrificial as a system of ordered substitution (against the totemic, which, following Lévi-Strauss, is defined as operating in manner of a language, homomorphic in opposition to the sacrificial’s metonymy),34 “simultaneously violent and regulatory,” which establishes both a symbol and symbolic order. Here following the work of Hubert and Mauss on sacrifice, she identifies the structure of this symbolic order: “Murder itself is only one of the phantasmatic and mythic realizations of the logical phase inherent in any socio-symbolic order […] All of them reiterate the structure of the symbol: the reserving of substance, of the self, or of the ‘referent’; the setting up of a contract; a ‘play of images’; the establishment of an ideal community; the introduction of the object of jouissance into the ‘social norm.’”35 Violence toward women is structurally necessary in opera for the female characters to play the culturally significant symbolic roles that Kristeva’s psychoanalytic framing narrative requires.

Ultimately femininity comes to be associated with sacrifice for both theorists: structurally for Kristeva and thematically for Clément; although this connection is identified as complicated by both. Despite the important role that sacrifice plays in establishing symbolic order, for Kristeva art (defined as including “poetry, music, dance, theater,”36 and presumably also opera) functions differently to devotional sacrifice:

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35 Ibid., 75.
36 Ibid., 80.
Art - the semiotization of the symbolic - thus represents the flow of jouissance into language. Whereas sacrifice assigns jouissance its productive limit in the social and symbolic order, arts specifies the means - the only means - that jouissance harbors for infiltrating that order. In cracking the socio-symbolic order, splitting it open, changing the socio-symbolic order, splitting it open, changing vocabulary, syntax, the word itself and releasing from beneath them the drives borne by vocalic or kinetic differences, jouissance works its way into the social and symbolic. In contrast to sacrifice, poetry shows us that language lends itself to the penetration of the socio-symbolic by jouissance, and that the thetic does not necessarily imply theological sacrifice.37

Kristeva’s repetition of the word ‘jouissance’ in defining art as the flow of pleasure into language resonates with the embodied response to opera reported by Queer musicologists and also relevant when considering structural feminist and psychoanalytical approaches to music criticism. But first it is worth taking into account the distance between feminist narrative analysis and the contributions of feminist critical theory to linguistics and musicology: while both approaches are productive in consideration of opera, the conclusions drawn from each are not necessarily complementary. Clément’s understanding of music acting as the domineering masculine component of opera is at odds with Kristeva’s connection between the music and the female body, and Clément’s conception of sacrifice is not entirely complimentary to thematic consideration of the grammatical operation of feminine sacrifice within opera narrative. Ideally feminist musicology moves beyond acknowledging the harmonic role of female voices and the narrative position of female characters to establish a critical framework that reflects the historical discoveries of the movement and the political goal of asserting the worth of all members of the human community.

Considering the theoretical perspectives of Clément and Kristeva together, a feminist methodology for considering opera adaptation can be tangentially constructed: considering genetic inheritance as a model for adaptation (as Linda Hutcheon and Bortolotti do in their collaboration,38 introduced in the previous chapter) it is possible to consider this process a collaboration ruled by semantic order, the cultural status of the original text affirmed by the adaptation; whereas the operation of music, itself a exemplar of the symbolic in Kristeva’s analysis, closely tracks the operation of the symbolic in language more broadly. In the case of adapted opera the narrative structure provided by the adapted text provides an alternative source of authority to the order imposed by the progression of the score. There is also a sacrifice analogue in this extra-textual symbolic order: where the authority

37 Ibid., 79-80.
38 Hutcheon and Bortolotti, “The Origin of Adaptations: Rethinking Discourse and “Success” – Biologically..”
of the author of the original text must be over-rulled in order to enhance the cultural status of that text through adaptation. I don’t intend here to confuse the use of the categories of the semantic and symbolic in more conventional linguistic analysis, but these structural features clearly have consequences for the presentation of gender in opera, and as we will see, consideration of the use of verbal, musical and dramatic languages in opera is central to the way that various critical theorists have engaged with the genre in recent work. At very least, understanding the relationship between the process of adaptation and the structure of the final work allows for consideration of a model of authorship that moves away from masculine models of artistic creation focused on the solitary genius.

In *Purple Passages* Rachel Blau DuPlessis suggests that the gender implications of poetic authorship are complex and paradoxical, particularly in the twentieth century:

The eros of poesis - the ruthless and desirous bonds involved in poetry as a social and cultural practice - is a powerful obliterator of fixed and normative gender ideas; and yet, at the same time, conventional sex-gender ideas and practices are hegemonic and empathetically policed […] Many male strategies in the artistic world result from this contradiction - aggressive macho behaviours, homosocial bonding in artistic groups, the claiming and hoarding of cultural power, problematic sexual exploitation, seductive behaviours in the aura of poetic groups, and insistence on women as culturally weak, as static ideals or static degradations (both being historically immobile roles).

Even in the collaboration examined in the first part of this thesis between Benjamin Britten and Myfanwy Piper, these tensions surrounding gender and authorship described by Blau DuPlessis are clearly identifiable: from the holding of Piper’s notebooks (complete with her recipes and housekeeping notes jotted beside libretti drafts) at the Britten-Pears Foundation archives, to the cultural construction of the two artists’ authorial relationship in Bennett’s *The Habit of Art*, where Piper is portrayed as a naive helpmeet beside the closeted but libidinous Britten. While Clément argues that the forgetting of words and the forgetting of women have the same roots in *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, her exultation of the genius of the male composer and the eroticised destruction

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40 ‘Myfanwy Piper Material - Death in Venice Notebooks, Drafts of ‘Working or Britten’ Article,’ Item Number 506.1, NOTEBOOK 1 (5066.1/2-990006), Britten-Pears Foundation.
of female heroines in the operatic repertoire are simultaneously involves the erasure of the female artists who help construct and perform operatic work.

Clément’s thematic focus on the fall of female characters is not unconnected to opera’s relationship with camp culture and Queer aesthetics. In his article ‘Love on the March’ music critic Alex Ross describes the decline of a specifically camp-coded culture through the lens of David Halperin’s endorsement of shared Queer culture in How to be Gay, suggesting that the destruction of women in texts adopted by gay male community is a metaphorical response to their own personal vulnerability:

The trickiest component of gay-male culture is the role of women in its midst. Feminist critics have long detected misogynist mockery in drag acts and in gay men’s howling response to melodramatic scenes that were not intended to be funny, such as Joan Crawford’s “Mildred Pierce.” Halperin, like many before him, sees a more complex identification at work. Crawford maintains a flawlessly high pitch as she gyrates between “feminine glamour” and “feminine abjection,” and the typical gay male viewer may feel at home at both extremes: so many gay kids work at presenting a perfected surface to the world, and so many are hounded by the fear that some grotesque exposure will tear it down.41

Audiences of opera are less likely to laugh at the tragic demise of female characters, but the prominence of these tragic plots in opera suggests a similar emotional investment in the demise of the opera diva (here Ross quite conveniently describes Joan Crawford’s performance as “a flawlessly high pitch”), the cinematic diva’s display of defiant glamour in the face of impending and grotesque obscurity resonates with the similar tightrope performance of virtuosity achieved through the discipline of the imperfect body of the opera singer (with women at the height of their careers often playing much younger characters).

Claire Detels provides a useful exploration of some of concepts discussed by Clément and Kristeva alongside discussion of other debates in postmodern aesthetic theory in her article ‘Soft Boundaries and Relatedness: Paradigm for a Postmodern Feminist Musical Aesthetics,’ where she argues for a feminist schema of musical aesthetics structurally based on Heidegger’s reconceptualisation of boundaries as the edges of a process of unfolding, rejecting the ‘hard’ boundaries defining genre, musical structure, high/low cultural status and performer hierarchies, focusing criticism on “the

whole musical experience rather than any particularized musical entities.”  

Detels suggests the softening of many boundaries conventionally maintained in the performance and criticism of music: the relatedness of musical experience to the body; relatedness between “constituencies of musical experience,” such as the audience, musicians, and composers; and the relatedness of music to broader culture.  

Detels queries the conventional separation of musicology and recent critical theory, and establishes her approach as an alternative to assumptions of the autonomous composition taken from formalist theory. Following Clément, she suggests that these formalist assumptions are particularly problematic in the field of music, where “the greater ambiguity of aesthetic content has tended to give freer rein to masculinist denial and projections, especially since the rise of the romantic ‘aesthetic ideology’ in the nineteenth century.”

Detels identifies a particular type of circular reasoning as prevalent in music criticism - where the structural features of musical works of high cultural status are identified to explain why these works are rated above musical works of lower cultural status - a fault she finds in Kivy’s Osmin’s Rage, where he compares his theory of ‘drama-made-music’ to Kerman’s ‘opera as drama’ and comes to the strange conclusion that Mozart’s Cosi fan Tutti is the perfect opera, but Marriage of Figaro is the better work of art.  

The conflict here between Detels and Kivy is understandable, given how Kivy’s work relies on the philosophical grounding in the aesthetics of Aristotle and Kant that Detels explicitly rejects.  

Feminist opera criticism is particularly useful in questioning these assumptions about the operatic repertoire and also in identifying areas of engagement with the embodied experience of opera spectatorship: while Clément distinguishes between masculine and feminine expression within music and Kristeva relates embodied musical experience to the Dionysian in her discussion of art that bridges the distance between the symbolic and the semantic, both see critical value in embodied experiences of music that corresponds with what would later come to be recounted in the more personal explorations of opera by Queer theorists discussed in the previous chapter.

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43 Ibid., 191.
44 Ibid., 188.
45 Ibid., 190-1.
46 Ibid., 188.
Detels also refers to the Dionysian mode in her theory, but in relation to Nietzsche’s work in *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, suggesting that along with the psychoanalytic work of Kristeva, Carl Jung and Donald Winnicott, the assertion of the significance of the body to the experience of music marks a movement away from musicology based on the Cartesian mind/body distinction and the projection of the sensual onto the feminine other. Part of the way music is understood in relation to these two models of criticism relates to the institutional framework music is composed and performed within; Detels argues that formalist musicology rose to prominence as music moved from church settings and chamber performances to the formal and academic setting of the concert hall, and subsequently suggests that the movement of music performance out of conventional institutions and into public settings might again change the way music is culturally perceived.

Understanding the appreciation of music as grounded in the bodies of the members of the audience also has implications for understandings of authorship, an implication Detels relates to Barthes’ declaration of the death of the author, suggesting that understanding the score as a text rather than a work of art softens the boundaries between the author and the community of reception. The limited control a composer has over the way their work is perceived is particularly apparent when one considers the freedom performers, conductors, directors, and producers are granted when developing a performance from the written score, and the characteristics of the score as a technical and historical document also come into play here. As Detels identifies, in Baroque music “where notation of pitches and rhythms is often incomplete, misleading, or ambiguous, and where little or no information is provided on timbre, dynamics, tempo, and articulation,” performers must share in responsibility for the authorship of a live performance. Modern scores provide only a little more comprehensive account of a piece of music: “notation of the main musical elements is still usually incomplete without the interpretation of a skilled, musical performer who is knowledgeable in the terms and techniques of the performance practice for the period and genre involved.” In opera, where an intense culture of celebrity surrounds singers, more attention tends to be payed to the timbre of performers’ voices than credit is given to the skill of the ensemble in interpreting the incomplete musical template.

47 Ibid., 192.
48 Ibid., 194.
49 Ibid., 195.
50 Ibid., 196.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
In addition to advocating reform to musical education in order to redress the lack of cultural awareness in ‘great men’ conceptions of music history, in order to “reevaluate the western-art musical view of the composer as isolated genius creator of at the top of a hierarchy,” Detels suggests a new style of music writing focused on the concept of soft boundaries: “The new culturally related boundary concepts would come from the actual experience of music, including the way it is performed, heard, thought, danced or moved to, and from any dramatic or poetic texts with which it is associated.” Consideration of performance, dance, and dramatic and poetic texts suggests a model for feminist music criticism that is not only highly complementary to the ambitions of contemporary opera production design, but also suggests new possibilities for literary criticism concerning opera and adaptation. While opera criticism does frequently focus on the contributions of particular great composers, or, occasionally, librettists, understanding music as a practice rather than simply a text allows for a more comprehensive analysis of opera, both formally and culturally.

Following a very similar musicological methodology but with a less explicitly feminist focus than Detels, in ‘Toward a Psychopathology of Opera’ Jeremy Tambling offers an account of the psychological engagement of opera audiences. Here doubt about the relevance of borders in conventional musicology is related not to Heidegger, as in Detels’ account, but to the anxiety relating to bodily limits described in the work of Lacan. This psychoanalytic approach to opera considers how perceptions of identity influence perceptions of art, taking the example of how Freud vests personal identity in the ego, a conception that Lacan, according to Tambling, “specifically works against, stressing the méconnaissance, the misrecognition that underlies the ego’s perceptions, its fictional form and distorting function.” In order to account for “the aural unconscious that destabilises the organiser ego,” Tambling differentiates opera from cinema and spoken theatre, suggesting that according to a Lacanian reading, “the subject surrenders the aim of finding a phallic completeness in the other via ‘the gaze,’ replacing it with the objet petit a - an investment in those parts of the body, including the voice, that speak of the boundary between bodies. (Voices break down boundaries since sound does not respect borders: you can hear around corners).” In addition

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53 Ibid.
54 Ibid., 201.
56 Ibid., 266.
57 Ibid., 267.
to its ability to speak around corners, the throat carries a number of psychoanalytic connotations: as a body part that can be used to differentiate between human sexes; as an anatomical bridge between the body and the head; and through the penetration of the womb by sounds made by the voice, a link between mother and child.

Following from the film theory of Michel Chion and Kaja Silverman, Tambling argues that the voice is associated with female bodies and that “maternal voice is opposed to and prior to paternal meaning (the word).” This gender distinction between sound and meaning is the same as the one maintained by Clément, and while Tambling does not explicitly reference Clément’s work he does allude to *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, stating after a description of the suffering of female characters in Offenbach’s *The Tales of Hoffman*: “Such a display of the woman undone by the very process of singing is basic to much opera, as if there were a relationship between the melancholy position of loss that characterises the drive to watch and listen, and the discovery of melancholy within the text.” However, I would like to suggest another interpretation of the use of the phrase “the woman undone” here: that the focus these critics place on ‘undoing’ is a reflection of concern about the unstable subjectivity of the characters in opera, and by extension, that of the audience.

Tambling defines abjection as a fundamental consideration in discussions of the subject: “Abjection involves a pre-Oedipal attempt by the child to separate itself from the mother in order to establish borders; hence the hostility to things associated with bodily limits and borders (blood, filth, anything that flows) because these question the border and the possibility of a separate self. Inability to separate fully from the mother is paradigmatic of a fear of the other - that which contaminates the self and its separateness. The subject is identified both with what it repudiates and what is repudiated: not subject but abject.” Opera, with its typical thematic violence and eroticism, delivered via the boundary defying voice, clearly is in constant flirtation with the abject. Tambling concludes his argument by drawing attention to Lacan’s argument that art is Apollonian not

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58 Ibid., 269.
59 Ibid., 268.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid., 272.
62 Ibid., 269.
Dionysian, describing the attention of the audience as analytical rather than bacchanalian “No one is to be torn in pieces: there will be no corps morcelé.”

The perspectives on opera provided by Tambling and Detels are useful in accounting for the dramatic role of the voice, and developing a conception of music that is not just grounded in compositional elements but also significantly engages with the interactions between these compositional elements and the spectator as subject. I will return to Tambling’s work in later discussion about opera’s engagement with trends in postmodern performance, particularly in relation to the contributions of film theory and his comments relating to Barthes and opera as a negation of the modern dominance of the flat photographic image, but will now move on to discuss how these approaches to musicology relate to twentieth-century opera and how critical theory has responded to the aesthetic challenges of opera from the modernist period onwards.

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63 Ibid., 279.
6. Models for an Operatic Dramaturgy

“Theatre is not, as some have claimed, a corrupted theatre - theatre is impoverished opera.”
Ethan Mordden, *Opera in the Twentieth Century*

The contributions of critical theorists to operatic dramaturgy are similar to those produced by consideration of current literary debates regarding reception theory in that both acknowledge the important role played by the audience in constructing meaning. With aim to providing the comprehensive analysis of opera envisaged by Detels and Tambling that takes account of the structural complexity of opera while also acknowledging the process of musical composition, in this chapter I will look in more detail at the dramaturgical features of opera often overlooked in composer-oriented opera criticism, including the contribution of individual performers and the symbolic and critical potential of stage craft. In order to focus on the way that drama is created on the operatic stage, a consideration frequently overlooked because of the common perception that good opera is bad theatre, I will compare several models of dramatic performance - puppetry, conventional acting, and dance - in order to define a system of operatic dramaturgy.

While much commentary on opera responds to the conventions of Baroque and Romantic era opera, an understanding of these conventions remains relevant in consideration of twentieth-century opera when addressing how significant compositions have maintained the definitive structural and stylistic features of the genre while also developing according to contemporary trends in dramatic art and literature. In *Opera in the Twentieth Century*, Ethan Mordden directly addresses this cultural evolution of the genre. Much like Peter Kivy in *Osmin’s Rage*, Mordden constructs his account of the philosophical foundations of opera as the negotiation of two compositional elements, but choses the thematic poles of drama and comedy rather than Kivy’s distinction between the imitation of emotional states and the evocation of feelings in audience members. Reflecting his background in jazz and musical theatre criticism, Mordden’s study focuses on how twentieth-century cultural trends are reflected by and structurally accommodated within contemporary opera, based on a critical analysis of the cultural position of opera throughout its historical development. Mordden describes the ever contentious relationship between music and words in opera as representative of the

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paradoxical tension and connection between romance and satire in drama, following from the thematic distinctions maintained in classical Greek theatre. The conflict between music and words here becomes just one of a related set of pairs of opposing values representing the sublime and ridiculous, the negotiation between which is used to describe the aesthetic development of the genre: “Romance versus satire, tragedy versus comedy, music versus word, sensation versus intellect, ceremony versus naturalism.”\textsuperscript{2} The negotiation between these sets of conflicting aesthetic interests are historically and geographically tracked by Mordden, starting with analysis of the variety of early opera composed by members of the sixteenth-century Florentine Camerata, who deliberately mimicked the classic forms of ritualistic Greek drama, set against the comedy of realist opera developing simultaneously elsewhere in Europe: “with the aesthetic of the screens and ladders, of the coquette, the student, and the deceived husband, of the braggarts, bumbler, and beguilers.”\textsuperscript{3}

Mordden suggests that the negotiation between romance and satire (along with the several other parallel dichotomies he identifies) will continue to shape the development of the genre in the future, predicting “an increasing dependence on the mythic confirmations of music until the verbal absolute is overturned and must actually negotiate a comeback,”\textsuperscript{4} as individual works are most successful when they are able to balance both compositional elements:

> It is indeed only a step from one to the other, sacred to profane and back again, and by the twentieth century the two will begin to collaborate in opera. A freespoken res publica of form is the goal, a revolution; we will encounter this form when the neoclassical revival of the 1910s imposes the logic of comedy, through the Word, upon the prevalence of music, yielding the best of both romance and satire while chewing the bone of myth. And this is not, after all, a new idea: Greek tragedy was the fount of sacramental presentation, but the Greek festivals did not neglect comedy, and such awesome undertakings as Aeschylus’ Oresteia regularly melded a trilogy of crushing gravity with a fourth piece, the satyr play, on the same storyline but in a prankish vein.\textsuperscript{5}

 Appropriately, Mordden discusses the differences between Romanticism and Classicism in relation to these foundational elements with reference to Apollo and Dionysus, where in Romantic opera the dominance of music suggests Dionysian abandon, and in Classical era opera the logic of language

\textsuperscript{2} Mordden, Opera in the Twentieth Century: Sacred, Profane, Godot, 5.
\textsuperscript{3} Ibid., 3-6.
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 7.
marks the governing aesthetic as Apollonian. As is suggested by the previous discussion of Death in Venice, twentieth-century opera is not tied predominantly to the principles of either Romanticism or Classicism, rather frequently embracing the conflict between the two: this is described by Mordden as contrapositional technique, “Romanticism tears at shape; classicism recovers it.” Mordden suggests the negotiation of this relationship between the satire and romance in early to mid-twentieth-century opera has allowed the form to establish a greater deal of thematic complexity: “Naturalism now mates with romance, heroism adapts to comic logic, parody controls the spectator’s flight of belief, and expression may disagree, contrapositively, with action,” a development which complements the formal experimentation of many contemporary composers. Understanding romance and satire as two opposing weights on a continually shifting scale, while not a resolution of the tension that defines developments in opera prior to the twentieth century, offers insight into the conflict between the compositional elements of music and language in contemporary opera that also concerns Kivy.

In the context of the aesthetic development of contemporary opera, adaptation provides a different perspective on the difficulties in interpreting meaning from music. By rewriting well-known texts, composers can aspire to use music to recreate the feelings evoked by those earlier texts, and do so with the added security of the audience’s familiarity with the original. This reliance on the precursor text does however create some complications for the process of composition, as the stylistic and structural features of music drama operate very differently to the literary techniques used in novels, plays and short stories. Considering adaptation in this light might suggest that non-adapted operatic compositions (that is, those based on an original premise) lack representational power, as, for Kivy, it is music’s representational ambiguity which creates problems for the critical analysis of opera. The idea that the framework provided by adaptation might come to supplement compositional elements in creating meaning in opera is also reflected in Mordden’s comments about nineteenth-century opera, although here it is suggested that the adaptation’s contribution can also be problematic: “Not truly heroic, though it thought it was, nineteenth-century opera more often attitudinized [sic.] than achieved, and made too few real artistic demands […] Best selling novels and hit plays were a favourite source of opera plots, so it is fitting that when librettos once more become important at

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6 Ibid., 138-9.
7 Ibid., 139.
8 Ibid., 346.
the end of the century, plays would simply be set to music with a slight cutting of lines.” Under Mordden’s analysis adaptation is representative of the limits of nineteenth-century work in the genre and can confuse trends in subject matter and tone, and while the argument is effective in framing the thematic developments of twentieth-century opera, it does not provide a proper account of the thematic complexity of nineteenth-century Romantic operas and their libretti.

In describing the balance of two tonal elements in twentieth-century opera, the comic and tragic, “bimodal in the age of Godot,” Mordden distinguishes the structural features of recent work from compositions of the nineteenth and early twentieth century: “What in Richard Strauss’ day could be broken up into words and music for the purposes of disputation has become, for the first time in opera’s history, a synaptic organism, one in which the musical entity of romantic opera and its pull to fantasy is recycled against a simultaneous diagram of comic commentary - the horizontal extensions of song tempered by the vertical analysis of the Word.” In this context Mordden’s distinction between the horizontal analysis of song and the vertical analysis of word here recalls Roman Jakobson’s discussion of the linguistic poles of metaphor and metonymy. Jakobson’s metaphor and metonymy are two styles of poetic representation, where the subject is represented either by symbolic representation or associate substitution. Specific cultural movements are often associated with one of these poles over another, as specified by Jakobson:

In poetry there are various motives which determine the choice between these alternates. The primacy of the metaphoric process in the literary schools of romanticism and symbolism has been repeatedly acknowledged, but it is still insufficiently realised that it is the predominance of metonymy which underlies and actually predetermines the so-called ‘realistic’ trend, which belongs to an intermediary stage between the decline of romanticism and the rise of symbolism and is opposed to both. Following the path of contiguous relationships, the realist author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in space and time. He is fond of synecdochic details. In the scene of Anna Karenina’s suicide Tolstoj’s artistic attention is focused on the heroine’s handbag; and in War and Peace the synecdoches “hair on the upper lip” and “bare shoulders” are used by the same writer to stand in for the female character to whom these features belong.  

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9 Ibid., 10-11.
10 Ibid., 325.
11 Ibid.
The use of synecdoche as an example of metonymy surpassing metaphor here recalls Kristeva’s distinction between sacrificial and totemic substitution, indicating another ground for what she describes as the “semiotization of the symbolic” in art’s construction of language. Jakobson suggests that the use of metonymy in poetic language is not sufficiently recognised, tracking cultural history through the relative prominence of the two representational poles in a very similar manner to Mordden’s analysis of pre-twentieth-century historical trends when accounting for the contributions of romance and satire in opera.

The use of metonymy and metaphor are not only relevant to written language but also to other sign systems, presumably including music. In particular, Jakobson describes various schools in the history of painting with regard to the two poles: cubism understood in metonymical terms, the subject of the painting expressed through selected parts; and then surrealism, described as having a “patently metaphorical attitude.” In art forms where there is more variety in representational technique than static visual art the use of the two representational styles cannot be so easily categorised. Jakobson argues that the use of language in film, for instance, deviates significantly from language use in traditional theatre: “The art of the cinema, with its highly developed capacity for changing the angle, perspective, and the focus of ‘shots,’ has broken with the tradition of the theatre and ranged an unprecedented variety of synecdochic ‘close-ups’ and metonymic ‘set-ups’ in general.” Opera employs the techniques of visual art and, increasingly, those of cinema, and like cinema, uses more metonymic tools than one might assume. In opera and film, both substantially visual and performative, the use of metonym is not always easily separable from the use of metaphor. Much like the close-up, in which a small part of a subject is used visually to represent the whole, in opera the voice of the singer comes to represent the character metonymically, even when the character is offstage. By extension, particular melodic lines become associated metaphorically with characters and situations, but in a manner that remains inexplicably linked to the body of the performer that introduced that musical phrase. This dramatic technique is most frequently discussed in relation to leitmotifs in the work of Wagner, but is ubiquitous feature of the genre, particularly when music is used to define a particular character or theme, as where ‘Musetta’s Waltz’ marks a comic turn in the second act of La Boheme, or in Carmen where ‘The Toreador’s Song’ signals the entrance of Escamillo in the first instance but comes to thematically represent the inevitable progression of fate.

13 Ibid., 44.
14 Ibid.
In this regard metaphor and metonymy are interrelated, each operating to different extents via the various components of opera, with representation relying on verbal, musical, dramatic and visual sign systems. However, it seems critical work on opera relies predominantly on the analysis of symbolism, a more widely-held bias in literary criticism Jakobson identifies and suggests is due to the way that critical language tends to favour metaphor: “Similarity in meaning connects the symbols of a metalanguage with the symbols of the language referred to. Similarity connects a metaphorical term with the term for which it is substituted. Consequently, when constructing a metalanguage to interpret tropes, the researcher possesses more homogenous means to handle metaphor, whereas metonymy, based on a different principle, easily defies interpretation.”\(^{15}\) Appeal to metaphor is similarly common in the critical discussion of music, as aside from the synecdochic relationship between the voice and the body, music carries cultural associations rather than consistent and easily interpretable meanings.

Similarities can be seen here between opera and other forms of theatre that reject naturalistic representation, such as puppetry, a field of performance discussed more frequently by ethnographers than by literary theorists. On face value puppetry and opera inhabit very different cultural domains: one is primarily associated with street theatre and children’s entertainment, the other is levelled with claims of inaccessibility and the expression of bourgeois sentimentality. However, looking beyond these differences the two performance styles have much in common as forms of drama that implicitly reject realism and significantly rely on the audience’s awareness of genre-specific dramatic conventions, and these similarities have interesting implications for the way the two genres perform narrative.

Drama in the twentieth century has been significantly shaped by the evolution of theatrical naturalism and realism as propagated by the popularisation of cinema,\(^{16}\) and the subsequent popularity of Stanislavski and Method training for actors. However, the stylistic features of both puppetry and opera seem to preclude them from being enveloped too easily by these developments; the necessary rejection of naturalism sets both genres apart from more general twentieth-century

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 47.

\(^{16}\) As Andrew Sarris identifies, not only does naturalism in theatre significantly predate film, the style also has different characteristics in theatre and cinema - as a movement characterised by interiority in theatre and exteriority in film, see Andrew Sarris, “The Illusion of Naturalism,” *TDR* 13, no. 2 (1968): 109.
dramatic trends. Ultimately there is a limit to the amount of influence theatrical naturalism can have on opera, as the genre posits a different relationship between the audience and the performer than is the case for film or realist drama, one which is deliberately symbolic, much like the audience-performer relationship established in performances with puppets, which, as Eric Bass argues, place the performance in a distinctly metaphorical space: “Some theorists talk about using the actor as a puppet. […] I think the deeper sense of this idea is to bind the actor to a stage picture, so that he is perceived as an animation of a world, and one which is not ours. And by saying the world is not ours, I mean that the world we see is a metaphorical world, not a literal ‘outer space.’ Essentially, the puppet is a metaphor.”¹⁷ In light of Jakobson and Kristeva on metaphor and substitution, this comparison is illuminating: the singer can be considered, like the puppet, to operate both totemically and sacrificially, a revered figure on stage that simultaneously represents a character and the fictional world of the work, the metaphoric character singing with a voice linked metonymically to the performer that produces it.

These symbolic relationships between performers and roles in opera are not categorical. In conventional drama the relationship between the actor and the role they play can similarly considered to be both metaphoric (in that an actor might be considered to belong to a class of actors representing a particular character type such as matinee idol, comic foil or ingenue) and metonymic (in that the body of the actor is also the body of the character for the duration of the performance). Because of the association between the body of the performer and the construction of the character, metonymic association becomes more prominent in the performances of celebrity actors and singers: much in the way that Marlon Brando’s body continues to be associated with the role of Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, in opera the bodies, voices and performance auras of singers become intrinsic to the portrayal of characters never intended to have such confidence and authority. Both Joan Sutherland and Maria Callas have sung Lucia, the young and tormented bride in Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor*, and Turandot, the fearsome princess of Puccini’s last opera, but in critical accounts of these performances the fame of both singers eclipses assessment of ability to inhabit the vastly divergent roles.

Just as opera singers represent quotidian speech through vocally demanding song, puppets represent natural movement through mechanical movement, and it is this degree of necessary artifice that makes these genres of performance particularly symbolic, as Enno Podehl argues in his discussion of the dramaturgy of puppet performance: “Because the puppet in principle cannot move itself, each of its movements is understood to be a conscious sign by the performer free of coincidence, unintended subtext and dull naturalism.”\(^{18}\) Puppetry involves the manipulation of inanimate objects to represent living characters, but the appeal of the medium comes from observing the creation of the illusion, not the potency of the illusion alone.

The two art forms also share an appeal to archetypal forms, as vocal forms in opera commonly correspond to different roles in mythic tales - sopranos as the heroine, mezzo sopranos as (cross-dressed) young men and witches, contraltos as the crone - and even when these roles are subverted the musical association remains. Similarly in the case of puppet theatre Podehl argues that a “puppet can never be an individual person - but instead always has something ‘super-personal,’ its appearance always means something more fundamental: These ridiculousnesses, such characters, these tales, these feelings.”\(^{19}\) Both types of performance also conspicuously display the skills of performers; where the part of the appeal in puppetry lies in observing the technical skill of the puppeteer, in opera the audience marvels at the expressive power of extraordinary voices. This is one of the reasons both puppetry and opera seem to resist effective video recording; although as with stage drama, recordings of live operas have become increasingly common (and several attempts have been made to record opera specifically for film, with varying success\(^{20}\), these do not fully capture the experience of live performance. While all theatre is ephemeral, the difficulty in transferring the theatricality of opera or puppetry to film underlines the importance of interaction between the performer and the audience.

These shared areas of engagement with dramatic theory may indicate why opera and puppetry complement each other so well and are frequently teamed together in performance. Julie Taymor’s production of *The Magic Flute* for New York Metropolitan Opera in 2004 for example – a production


\(^{19}\) Ibid.

\(^{20}\) I will return to discuss this issue in Chapter Twelve of this thesis. See also Richard Fawkes, *Opera on Film* (London: Duckworth, 2000)
that has been frequently revived and received both positive\textsuperscript{21} and negative\textsuperscript{22} reviews – featured puppets extensively, specifically drawing on non-Western puppet traditions.\textsuperscript{23} Taymor, better known for her commercial work including Disney’s Broadway musical \textit{The Lion King}\textsuperscript{24} has extensive experience in opera direction and has worked for opera companies including Florence, Los Angeles and Kirov.\textsuperscript{25} She describes the stylisation of opera as stemming from its use of musical language: “What is opera? [...] It’s storytelling of large, epic emotions and landscape. You have dialogue, you have communication through language, but on top of that it’s stylized, because it’s musical. When I say the word ‘stylized,’ that doesn’t mean it’s not real. It always comes from a very real place. But it becomes heightened through the music, and when music heightens the emotions, the physicality has to match that.”\textsuperscript{26}

Many other opera directors have shared Taymor’s approach of adopting puppetry as a means to match the physicality of expression on stage to the stylisation of music. William Kentridge’s frequently revived 1998 production of Montiverdi’s \textit{Il Ritorno d’Ulisse} was developed in association with South Africa’s acclaimed Handspring Puppet Company (most famous for their puppets developed for the adaptation of Michael Morpungo’s children’s novel \textit{War Horse} at the National Theatre in London). Anthony Minghella’s 2006 production of Puccini’s \textit{Madame Butterfly} at The Metropolitan Opera used a bunraku inspired puppet (designed by Blind Summit puppet company) to play Cio-Cio San’s child Trouble in the place of a child actor. Minghella acknowledged that much of the joy in watching puppetry comes from simultaneously observing the skills of the puppeteers and the power of the illusion, the substance and the symbol: “They are profoundly and intrinsically theatrical. Operating them requires enormous skill, but we delight, as spectators, in the way that they can be made to appear real and true in front of us, and that they appear to change emotionally, even as we know that they can’t.”\textsuperscript{27} Archetypal characters from puppetry have even been used as the subject of opera, as in a 1968 adaptation of \textit{Punch and Judy} by Harrison Birtwhistle, a piece that for Mordden exemplifies the blending of the epic and comedic impulses in twentieth-century theatre:

\textsuperscript{24} Richard Schechner and Julie Taymor, “Julie Taymor: From Jacques Lecoq to ‘the Lion King’: An Interview,” \textit{TDR} 43, no. 3 (1999): 42,52.
\textsuperscript{26} Taymor cited in ibid.
\textsuperscript{27} Matthew Gurewitsch, “You Have to Pull a Few Strings to Create These New Opera Stars” in \textit{The New York Times}, November 19, 2006.
“This is the ultimate of the profane, using burlesque, alienation, parody and pastiche to intellectualize the ego of modern man in a modern art.”

Joan Acocella, performing arts critic for The New Yorker, has also acknowledged the recent proliferation of puppets in opera production, citing Minghella’s Madame Butterfly, Taymor’s Magic Flute and Phelim McDermott’s 2011 production of Philip Glass’ Bhagavad Gita adaptation Satyagraha, also at the Metropolitan Opera. She suggests that the use of puppets in these productions addresses specific dramaturgical requirements:

> Often, I think, puppets are used in shows whose makers feel that they need something, not necessarily animal vegetable or mineral, to represent a potent psychological force [...] But puppetry doesn’t have to fill a special need. It is a gift in itself. For one thing, it is an excellent arena for virtuosity. [...] Then we get the wit and mystery of transformation. In puppetry, at every moment, there is drama of scale. Large people operate these small puppets, and sometimes get them to do very small things. [...] Most important, puppets hover in a space between realism and abstraction. Because they are not human, they don’t come at us with a lot of confusing detail. What detail they do have is economical, artistic – chosen – and therefore they can represent ideas clearly.

While puppetry is commonly mentioned in reference to any potentially distant or unreal stage effect, as when Susan Sontag refers to Ionesco’s characters as “language puppets,” I cite Acocella here because of how closely her list of puppetry’s attributes suggests parallels to the dramaturgical strengths of opera: psychological force, virtuosity, and transformation are all terms that can equally be used to describe operatic style. Acocella’s description of the drama of scale also resonates strongly with Julie Taymor’s description of opera in her comments on her production of The Magic Flute. The most significant parallel is the description of puppets hovering “in a space between realism and abstraction,” a statement that is equally true for the performance register of opera singers. While unlike puppets opera singers share the corporeal naturalism of stage actors, emotions imitated or implied by actors are directly described or musically evoked by opera singers: in Act 1, Scene 4, of Death in Venice for instance, Aschenbach not only sings of his lust for Tadzio in a manner that is descriptive rather than imitative, he also explicitly identifies the metaphor the opera later uses

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28 Mordden, Opera in the Twentieth Century: Sacred, Profane, Godot, 283.
30 Sontag, “Ionesco,” 120.
to explain his desire: “Surely the soul of Greece lies in that bright perfection. A golden look. A timeless air. Mortal child with more than mortal grace.”

The analogy between opera performance and puppetry is used frequently by Mordden, who compares the operas of certain composers to puppet plays in his critical commentary on the way characters are stylised: Mordden suggests that Maeterlinck was obsessed “with the edgy cut of the puppet play, fashioned of a flesh so unmortal that he feared live actors would wreck the mood”; Pizzetti composed “funny little tragedies” with “his puppet figures,” as did Malipiero. Mordden’s use of the puppet analogy is most explicit in his assessment of Stravinsky, where the characters on stage are described as acting like the puppets of the omniscient voice of the orchestra: “[Stravinsky] could force any mood on the parts of his scores, be they voices or instruments, though one cannot resist the impression that his characters aren’t quite alive. How pervasive is the impression that it is the bassoon that sings, not the tenor; that the crisp scruples of the trumpet are in question, not those of the chorus; that Stravinsky in his long career never cut loose of the puppet play.”

The idea that the orchestra acts as an omniscient voice of narration is one that has been suggested by other musical theatre critics, with particularly interesting consequences when talking about the way time is experienced and represented in performance, and I will return to this idea shortly.

One interesting consequence of the deviation from realistic representation in opera and puppetry is the potential for apparent artifice to highlight the self-reflexive nature of performances. In this light Barthes offers endorsement of Japanese bunraku as a mode of performance that avoids the illusion of totality, in an argument that echoes Brecht’s theory of alienation: “The basis of Western theatre is, in fact, not so much the illusion of reality as the illusion of totality: periodically, from the Greek choreia to the bourgeois opera, lyrical art has been conceived as the simultaneity of several expressions (acted, sung, mimed) with a single indivisible origin. The origin is the body, and the totality claimed is modelled on organic unity.” Here Barthes sets Japanese bunraku puppets against not just opera but also the quintessential Western puppet show, Punch and Judy, where puppets simulate human order and are articulated by rough human gesture. Barthes identifies a greater

31 Britten, Death in Venice, 73.
32 Mordden, Opera in the Twentieth Century: Sacred, Profane, Godot, 24.
33 Ibid., 225.
34 Ibid., 226.
35 Ibid., 141.
elegance and abstraction in the operation of bunraku puppets: “Emotion no longer inundates, no longer submerges, it becomes reading material; stereotypes disappear, without, however, the spectacle resorting to originality or ‘felicity.’ All of this achieves, of course, the verfremdungseffekt advocated by Brecht.”37 As Barthes returns here to verfremdungseffekt, the question once again arises as to how far opera is able to achieve this aim of distancing the audience from the spectacle onstage when the features of opera that distance the performance from real life are so frequently described by critics as intoxicating rather than politically compelling.

In ‘The Art of Puppetry in the Age of Media Production,’ Steve Tillis applies the work of Walter Benjamin to puppetry, taking the examples of computer animation, stop-motion animation and animatronic figures, forms of animation in which “performance is made possible through technological mediation.”38 Tillis argues that these particular forms of puppetry pose a challenge to both puppet theory and Benjamin’s theory on the cultural impact of omnipresent mechanical reproduction, suggesting that Benjamin’s argument that film disrupts the performer’s aura is inapplicable to media figure puppetry: “Puppets cannot, of course, feel strange in front of a camera, but their lack of feeling does not obviate the estrangement that takes place when the actuality of their physical presence is reduced to a mere two-dimensional look-alike. Media figures, however - most obviously those created by computer graphics - cannot generally be said to lose their presence in time and space when presented by their particular medium, for their presence is actually created by the medium. They are not media reproductions, that is, but original productions made possible through media.”39 Tillis’ use of animatronic and stop-motion animation alongside computer animation in his discussion, along, perhaps, with the current cultural familiarity with the manipulation involved in photographic reproduction, suggests a weakness in this argument: what Benjamin is arguing is that reproduction is the creation of a new production with surprisingly little in common with the cultural object that it (with greater and greater accuracy) reproduces, that the photograph replicates the appearance but not the substance of the work of art. Stop motion animation is one form of art that most constructively wrangles with this illusion – relying upon the hidden multitude of interventions that can occur in the gaps between each of the twenty-four frames that make up a second of film footage. The resulting film, with animation that relies on

37 Ibid.
39 Ibid., 183.
technological manipulation to achieve motion, may therefore seem different than the filming of a live actor, but as Benjamin describes in part XI of “The Work of Art”: “The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web. There is a tremendous difference between the pictures they obtain. That of the painter is a total one, that of the cameraman consists of multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law. Thus, for contemporary man the representation of reality by the film is incomparably more significant than that of the painter, since it offers, precisely because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment.”\(^{40}\) In this regard animation is, just like live action film, an illusion of a world free from mechanical intervention created through deep-routed mechanical image construction.

Contrary to Tillis, I would argue that the media figures of animation (whether illustrated in physical or virtual space) do not have much in common with conventional puppets, as while they closely resemble puppets in form and function, by being performed for film in multiple takes they lose their ground in puppetry as the illusion of life in real time by mechanical skill; much as opera loses much of its technical splendour in theatres with mechanically reproduced sound and strategic video editing. It is entirely legitimate to distinguish between puppets designed for film performance and those for stage, as decisions in puppet design and operation can influence how effective the puppet is in expressing fluent movement on film. To take an example from puppetry for television: ballet dancer Rudolf Nureyev made a guest appearance on season two of *The Muppet Show* in 1977, appearing opposite Miss Piggy in a skit performance of ‘Baby it’s Cold Outside’\(^{41}\) - the famous dancer’s body, by all accounts entrancing on stage, carries less aura with it on film than the cartoonish puppet: unlike Margot Fonteyn, Miss Piggy does not struggle to upstage Nureyev (I will return to dance as a potential representational model for opera shortly). While, as I have identified previously, traditionally live performance genres like puppetry and dance show resistance to filming, the puppets from Jim Henson’s studio are specifically designed for use in video recording studios (large, bright and operated by a single mechanist located outside of the camera frame), the dramatic illusion of life-like animation relying on photographic replication. While alterations can be similarly made to stage opera productions in attempt to film them more successfully, these tend to be viewed


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as compromises rather than innovations, despite similar dramaturgical valorisation of theatrical skill performed live in both puppetry and opera.

Alternatively, and perhaps counterintuitively, the dramatic model provided by naturalistic theatre can also constructive when creating a model of operatic dramaturgy. In An Actor Prepares, Stanislavski describes his ideal of automatic naturalism often associated with his work as the art of the actor entering a state of unconscious flow: “The very best that can happen is to have the actor completely carried away by the play. Then regardless of his own will he lives the part, not noticing how it feels, not thinking about what he does, and it all moves of its own accord, subconsciously and intuitively.” This style of performance would presumably be difficult if not impossible to achieve for an opera singer, who is required to perform a significant number of technical musical tasks in addition to living as the character. Opera is typically associated with poor acting or pantomime-like exuberance, a characterisation understandable considering the demands placed on performers to produce tuneful and dynamic sound to fill houses that accommodate thousands of audience members, while responding to the real-time musical direction of the conductor. There has however been a considerable amount of attention payed to the possibility of training opera singers in the techniques of naturalistic acting, and as unlikely as it may seem, Stanislavski worked extensively with singers at the Opera Studio of the Bolshoi Theatre during the 1920s, directing productions of Eugene Onegin, The Tsar’s Bride, La Bohème, A May Night, and Boris Godunov. Baritone Pavel Ivanovich Rumyantsev recalls his time at the centre training with the director in Stanislavski on Opera, an account featuring what seems to be an implausible number of direct quotations from Stanislavski (perhaps imitating the form of An Actor Prepares, in which Stanislavski presents a fictional dialogue describing the rehearsal process at the Moscow Art Company), but nonetheless provides a useful insight into the way Stanislavski worked with singers when directing opera, essentially replicating the process he employed when training stage actors. In the sessions he led at the studio, Stanislavski prioritised diction and expressive physical movement, leading the singers in repetitive exercise drills, including, bizarrely, extensive training in fencing, seen as an ideal method for improving the singers’ concentration and flexibility.

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44 Ibid., 4-7.
According to Rumyantsev’s account, Stanislavski does not appear to see any significant distinction between the requirements of spoken drama and opera, considering music to be closely analogous to the inner drive created by a motivated actor in performing drama. Indeed, in reported statements to singers he seems to argue that music supplements dramatic performance in opera, making the task for singers of creating genuine dramatic moments easier than it is for actors: “How lucky you singers are […] The composer provides you with one most important element - the rhythm of your inner emotions. That is what the actors have to create for ourselves out of a vacuum. All you have to do is listen to the rhythm of the music and make it your own. The written word is the theme of the author but the melody is the emotional experience of that theme.”

The idea that Stanislavski’s theatrical strategies can be applied to opera is somewhat contrary to conventional understandings of opera production, considering singers’ technical musical skills tend to be valued far above their acting talent; an intuition confirmed by the fact that even at the Bolshoi theatre many singers able to find work elsewhere on the strength of their vocal abilities alone did not stay to complete Stanislavski’s strenuous training routine, with the director admitting that these singers would move elsewhere and “the core of our studio will consist of good singers with what we may call average talent.”

Edward Latham, another opera critic with a background in professional singing, also frames his analysis of several twentieth-century American operas with reference to elements of Stanislavski’s dramatic theory, noting, like Rumyantsev, that Stanislavski’s time spent working on opera was significant in allowing him to test and defend the universality of his acting system. First however, Latham asserts the significance of the musical structure of opera, his title Tonality as Drama referring to the “harmonic and linear progression” of a composition. In this linear-dramatic analysis, following the work of Heinrich Schenker, drama is considered to be created in musical compositions by interruptions or delays in returning to the tonic (the pitch that begins and concludes a scale in a particular key, usually prominent in a conventional tonal composition in that key). This theory is clearly not easily applicable to some modern music, particularly music with deliberately dual-key structures and chromatic compositions, but by following Schenker’s intuitive approach to non-

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46 Ibid., 2.
47 Edward D Latham, Tonality as Drama: Closure and Interpretation in Four Twentieth-Century Operas (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2008), 23.
48 Ibid., 1.
49 Ibid., 3.
50 Ibid., 6.
normative musical structure, Latham relates these principles of early twentieth-century musicology to the development of particular characters within the progression of the work.

Latham suggests that in “a post-Wagnerian world in which the use of tonal closure was a choice, not a requirement,”52 and that the dramatic path of different characters within each opera can be associated with the individual tonal lines they sing, and that the way that these harmonic lines develop - independently and in relation to the harmonic lines of other characters - contributes collaboratively with the verbal dramatic content to create the dramatic structure of the work: “A character’s dramatic success is defined by the attainment of local objectives, main objectives, and a superobjective, and the attainment of each objective represents a kind of dramatic closure, a closing of a chapter in the character’s history. Obviously, closure is also a prominent feature of music.”53 Latham defines his analysis not just as a negotiation between accounts of the contribution of words and music, but through this debate sees analysis of opera as analogous to an adaptation of the principles of musicology: “opera analysis has historically tended to migrate from one pole (music) to the other (poetry) and back again, while drama remained in a no man’s land between the two, an uncharted territory that must be crossed in order to reach the true destination. A formalist enterprise from the outset, music analysis has been adapted, only with difficulty, to the demands of the operatic genre.”54 Latham’s reading of drama as occurring in the space between music and poetry is astute, but his search for drama within tonal components of the score alone overlooks the greater dramatic apparatus of opera as a stage text.

Latham’s conception of characters as agents seeking to achieve specific dramatic and harmonic goals is firmly grounded in Stanislavski’s work, which requires actors to extensively visualise the drives and motivations of the characters they play based on a near-forensic, multiple-stage55 excavation of the text of the work, where the affective memories of the actor are associated with the physical requirements of the role. After the text has been read in this way, Stanislavski requires the conscious and unconscious objectives of the character to be deciphered with a view to attaching to these objectives the emotional experience unearthed in earlier readings. Appropriately this stage is what

51 Ibid.
52 Ibid., 46.
53 Ibid., 45.
54 Ibid., 2.
Latham recreates in his tonal analysis of opera, as Stanislavki chooses the musical terminology of “the score” in *Creating a Role* to describe the series of physical manoeuvres performed by the actor to describe the character’s path to overcome an obstacle or achieve a specific goal implicit in the text: “None of the listed objectives of the score, let us note, is profound; they can affect only the periphery of the actor’s body, the external manifestations of his psychic life, and only slightly effect his feelings. Nevertheless they were the creations of live feelings and not the product of dry reason. They were prompted by artistic instincts, creative sensitivity, the actor’s own life experiences, habits, the human qualities of his own nature. And each objective contained its own consecutiveness, gradual development, logic. […] With time and frequent repetition, in rehearsal and performance, this score becomes habitual.56 It is from this theory of training, introspection and repetition that Latham derives his goal-focused approach to interpreting the musical objectives of opera, noting how Stanislavski often compares acting techniques to musical features, such as the compositional similarity between character objectives and notes: “like the notes in music, [character objectives] form the measures, which in turn produce the melody.”57

While the techniques of repetition in Stanislavki’s methods of training for actors and mechanical training required for expert musicians may seem similar, subconscious inspiration is not encouraged to the same extent in music than it is in acting, as musical virtuosity measures fluency in interpretation of the written score whereas artistic fidelity in acting is more loosely defined - while the words in the script are not to be deviated from, there is much more freedom for personal flourishes. Although even in describing his work with actors, Stanislavki acknowledged the inherent tension between methodic training and inspiration: “we are supposed to create under inspiration; only our subconscious gives us inspiration; yet we apparently can use this subconscious only through our consciousness, which kills it.”58 That Stanislavski applied his system to opera performance when directing, and that the language of his acting system has become so pervasive in the analysis of stage performance suggests the relevance of his dramatic methods to opera; however, there remains an essential disjunct between acting and singing for stage, the nature of which is suggested by contradictions between Stanislavski’s instructions to actors and the requirements of singing for live performance. One would imagine method acting to be difficult if not impossible when even a

56 Ibid., 61-2.
57 Stanislavski cited in Latham, *Tonality as Drama: Closure and Interpretation in Four Twentieth-Century Operas*, 41.
character in the most desperate of emotional states must keep careful eye on the conductor. While for Stanislavski the score dictates the internal rhythm of the characters, the musical specificity of opera places significant restraints on both interpretation of texts and performance. Brook identifies a similar conflict in his discussion of the dramatic weaknesses of the conventional operatic repertoire: “[... the moment the actor dresses up and speaks with his own tongue he is entering the fluctuating territory of manifestation and existence that he shares with the spectator. Because the musician’s experience is so different, he finds it hard to follow why the traditional bits of business that made Verdi laugh and Puccini slap his thighs seem neither funny nor illuminating today.”

The plot of Puccini’s La Bohème, to continue with one of Brook’s examples, is structured around the love affair between middle-class Rudolfo and Mimi, a seamstress who dies from tuberculosis, and the opera would be rather strange aesthetically if the artist performing the role of Mimi sang poorly or inaudibly to reflect the character’s poor cardiovascular health. In actual performance however, Rudolfo and Mimi sing a beautiful duet as she dies, lavish orchestration swelling around them. The dramatic situation is traumatic but the music is beautiful, the return of the musical theme first featured when the audience first encounters the two lovers. Accordingly, La Bohème can be seen as useful illustration of the anxieties expressed by Marxist critics about the way opera causes a loss of subjectivity due to the affective flattening of invariant volume and performance. In making Mimi’s death aesthetically pleasing, and her fatal illness so incidental throughout most of the plot, her poverty and suffering are romanticised and therefore trivialised.

Stanislavski’s rebuttal can be extrapolated from his remarks during his direction of La Bohème for the Bolshoi theatre, where the singer playing Mimi is instructed not to perform her illness physically - “No naturalism, no suffering, tortured expressions of the face [...] you must not allow any external signs of pain” - but rather vocally, as the music is considered to adequately express this information: “What are the reflexes of a person at this moment? Complete immobility, half-closed eyes, inability to speak - his tongue is tied. Puccini was a subtle expert in his knowledge of human psychology, therefore he wrote Mimi’s last words with long pauses in between as if each time she had to gather strength to say the next word.” While examining Stanislavski’s case studies suggests a

59 Brook, The Empty Space.
60 Rumyantsev and Stanislavski, Stanislavski on Opera, 266.
61 Ibid., 267.
useful model for balancing the requirements of action and musical performance, the system here is inconsistent by necessity; the performers must constantly negotiate between their duties as musicians and actors. This tension was noted by critics of Stanislavski from very early in his career, even before he began working on opera, when his early productions of Chekhov and Ibsen for the Moscow Art Theatre became fettered by his obsession with naturalism, dramatic progression fettered by elaborate props and the use of various livestock on stage.\textsuperscript{62} This conflict is not necessarily neatly resolvable, as the negotiation between mimesis and theatricality is a significant source of dynamism in all dramatic art, but the negotiation is more starkly evident when considering opera. Alternatively Lee Strasberg’s ‘Method’, based on Stanislavski’s early work on affective memory in \textit{An Actor Prepares} and particularly popular as a method of training in the United States,\textsuperscript{63} appears to be much less applicable to opera performance, as introspection is a technique of limited applicability to musical performance.

Underlying much discussion of the theatrical consequences of the acting abilities opera singers (or lack thereof) is a preoccupation with the physical appearance of these musicians. Outside of Stanislavski’s experimentation at the Bolshoi theatre, given the level of technical training required to become an opera singer, typecasting is practically impossible, particularly considering the vocally demanding roles for adolescent heroines that feature in so many popular operas (Puccini’s Cio-Cio San in \textit{Madama Butterfly}, Manon in \textit{Manon Lescaut}, and Strauss’s teenaged Salome, to name just a few examples from turn-of-the-century work). Given the increasing popularity of film broadcasts of operas however the physical appearance of singers has become a more significant factor in casting decisions, as was revealed by the press attention surrounding soprano Deborah Voigt’s decision to lose weight after being fired from a production of \textit{Ariadne auf Naxos} at London’s Royal Opera House,\textsuperscript{64} fuelling debate among opera critics over increasing attention paid to the physical appearance of singers and the difficulty in balancing musical and theatrical aims in operatic performance. The conflict between theatrical values and quality vocal performance is however not a particularly recent development: on this point Tom Sutcliffe cites Arnold Haskell’s 1938 book \textit{Ballet}, where the dance critics suggests that “opera continually offends through the figures of the singers:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{62} Latham, \textit{Tonality as Drama: Closure and Interpretation in Four Twentieth-Century Operas}, 23.
\item \textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 37.
\end{itemize}
mountainous women dying of consumption, ugly women assuming the roles of *femmes fatales*, fat head-waiterish tenors aping ardent young lovers.”65 While the casting of ugly women and fat men in romantic roles may seem a betrayal of standard theatrical ideals, it actually introduces a further area of engagement with the audiences who value the genre’s irreverence in the face of realism, and moreover contributes to the subtle subversion of typical heterosexual narratives between stereotypically beautiful men and women.

In ‘On Divinity: A Dossier, A Performance Piece, A Little-Understood Emotion’ Eve Sedgwick and Michael Moon discuss, among many other things, the cultural implications of the body of the fat diva. The use of the word ‘divinity’ in the title of this work refers to Divine (Glen Milstead), a frequent collaborator of director John Waters, who, as a fat man who performed as a glamorous woman, is seen by the authors to have lived at the intersection of Queer and fat political identities. The dialogue begins with a section attributed to Moon where he describes how his relationship with opera began as a child:

My love of opera as a protogay child growing up in rural Oklahoma in the fifties had at least as much to do with the available ‘visuals’ as it did with the music - opening nights at the Met photographed in living color in Life and Look and on television, featuring bejeweled and befurred divas, usually fat, radiating authority and pleasure, beaming out at cameras from the midst of tuxedoed groups of what I remember one of the slick newsmagazines of the time calling “hipless” men. I was struck by the strangeness of the locution even when I read it at age eleven or twelve; like so many bits of knowingly inflected pseudo-information about adults, their bodies, and their mystifying sexualities, all I could figure out about what it meant for a reporter to call an elegant group of men in evening clothes “hipless” is that it must be another code for doing what was called at the time “impugning their masculinity.”66

Moon’s account here illustrates the focus on the private significance of aesthetic experience typical of Queer theory’s contribution to opera studies, and the essay’s later movement to focus on the representational power of trash and sleaze in John Waters’ work with Divine demonstrates how Queer theory, by methodologically resisting critical orthodoxy, can be used to discuss the relationship between high and low cultural objects, and assists in finding ways to address social behaviours as constructed formally and informally. Here the authors use discussion of the work of

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Waters and the relationship between fat and Queer identities to identify the weaknesses of existing descriptions of camp, including that of Sontag, which according to the authors rely on “knowing presumptions about the difference between ‘depth’ and ‘surface’ or between levels of culture that in fact mutually constitute, block, circulate or emblematize one another.”

The fatness of the operatic diva and the devotion of Queer opera fans in Moon’s account does not simply complicate the depiction of gender and sexual desire on stage, but also interrupts the assumed heterosexual desire of the audience for the bodies of the performers. In the dialogue Moon and Sedgwick discuss the intersections between fatness and Queerness as social identities, with Moon suggesting that cultural assumptions about the size of bodies regulate deviant gender identities in baffling ways, with the male body “supposed to be neither ‘hipless,’ i.e., gay, not ‘fatassed,’ i.e., gay” and as a consequence of these confusing regulatory cultural images, the fatness of the stereotypical opera singer’s body comes to be used as a model of social defiance: “the story of my own and many other gay men’s formations of our adolescent and adult body images is that the fat, beaming figure of the diva has never been entirely absent from our imaginaire or our fantasies of ideal bodies […] resolutely embodying as it does the otherwise entirely anachronistic ideal, formed in early nineteenth-century Europe, of the social dignity of corpulence, particularly that of the serenely fat bourgeois matron.”

I have touched upon the symbolic relevance of dance in my earlier discussion of affect and queer theory in relation to the ballet sequences in Death in Venice, and those theoretical considerations continue to inform analysis here. In an argument complementary to Judith Lynn Hanna’s identification of the potential for dance to act as a ground for the artistic expression of otherwise marginalised women and queer men, Clément suggests a parallel between the way that both the joys of music and dance are perceived as ‘light’ and the sidelining of female characters in literature and critical theory:

Lightness. That’s a word that Kierkegaard and Nietzsche resort to when they move beyond gravity. Both outline three dance steps, inviting women to their metaphysics. For Kierkegaard, they are, in Mozart’s operas, the fleeting partners of Cherubino, Papagano, and Don Giovanni, in whom the philosopher perceives the three

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67 Ibid., 244.
68 Ibid., 212.
69 Ibid.
Dance studies prove most useful in considering opera in consideration of the significance of temporality. Like opera and spoken theatre, dance analysis shares the challenges posed by the ephemerality of performance, but time is more explicitly discussed as a structural element of dance, as a crucial dimension of the symbolically loaded movement of the figure through space. In “The Perception of the Fleeting Moment in Dance” Don Herbison-Evans develops a theory of dance which conceptualises time through the description of four categories of movement following the model of differential calculus: posing moments, where the stillness of the body can be analysed using critical tools used in the appreciation of visual arts; suspended moments, where there is acceleration but no velocity, as occur during changes in direction; flowing moments, where movement velocity but no acceleration; and transitional moments, the most difficult of these categories to identify, where the movement has both acceleration and velocity (these occur, for example, during the balletic *port de bras*).\(^7^1\)

This analysis breaks the movement of the figure into discrete observational moments, but in describing these moments as defined by velocity, acceleration or stillness, each implies a relationship between the figure and the progression of stage time. While pure dance and dance-movement commonly only make up a small part of opera performance, useful counterparts to velocity and acceleration (or the absence of each) can be found in the relationship between musical components of opera when considering the dramatic treatment of time on stage: between volume and tempo, or between the voice of the singers and the ‘voice’ of the orchestra. The parallels between opera and dance theatre are also evident when considering the significance of symmetry in music and dance, with both repetition and reflection identified by Herbison-Evans as moments where components of the piece recognisably reoccur at different points in time: “Movements are ingrained in the mind through temporal repetition. An observer can more easily “capture” a fleeting moment when it is repeated.”\(^7^2\) While the physical skills required in performance vary wildly, in combining observation

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\(^7^0\) Clément and Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, 160.  
\(^7^2\) Ibid., 48.
from life, stylisation, and emotional fluency, aesthetic comparison to dance is also applicable in developing a critical framework for the consideration of opera.

In describing the analysis of dance using the principles of visual art appreciation, Herbison-Evans uses language that suggests the applicability of Jakobson’s linguistic analysis to dramatic theory:

The qualities of movement and time, when applied to a painting, are implied and are less basic than other qualities. They also appear to be somewhat metaphorical, whereas the other qualities are literal (in that conventional paintings do not move or physically change as one looks at them). This lack of distinction between basic and derived concepts, and between literal and metaphorical concepts, pervades much of the critical and aesthetic literature of the arts. […] The structural elements of continuity and closure are associated with the perception of gestalt. This is the propensity of the human mind to see a wholeness of form when viewing component parts.73

Specific to the language of dance, Herbison-Evans suggests that the combination of different movement types is used most significantly to create metaphor, allusion and allegory, which “occur when a position or moment reminds the viewer of something meaningful.”74 Here Herbison-Evans underestimates the significance of the movement of bodies independent of metaphor, in a manner that corresponds with Jakobson’s identification of the cultural underestimation of metonymy. Although, conversely, the grounding of dance in the corporeal body can also lead dance to be associated with non-conceptual expression, as Hanna argues: “Because the instrument of human dance is the body unmediated by other material such as the artists brush, and paint, and canvas, people associate dance in its primary nature with physicality and emotion.”75 However Hanna advocates for the use of linguistic theory in dance analysis, arguing that the gestures and interpretation of dance are significantly shaped by cultural patterns, and suggesting that dance is “often like poetry with its ambiguity, multiple meanings and latitude in form.”76 The body of the dancer strobos between representational functions: one moment recreating and stylising a moment of the life of the character, the next creating a visual metaphor.

73 Ibid., 46.
74 Ibid., 48.
76 Ibid., 43-4.
These ideas of interpreting dance in relation to movement over time tie neatly into theories of the operation of narrative time in musical theatre. Typically discussions about structural narrative development in music drama focus on transitions between song and progressive narrative music, and the relative prominence of these different components are considered to be the defining characteristics of different genres of musical theatre. This is set out by Scott McMillian in *The Musical as Drama* (titled in reference to Kerman), which draws the distinction between two orders of time in the narrative musical: *book time*, which relates to the progression of the events of the plot; and *lyric time*, the way in which narrative is illustrated through music. McMillin suggests that these structural features explain some of the reluctance of those engaged in work on conventional narrative theory to respond to lyric theatre: “Characters expand into song and dance, resisting expectations that action is progressive, substituting repetition instead, and making intellectuals uncomfortable.”

Where in musical theatre the orchestration tends to stop entirely for moments of dialogue and allow a lull in narrative progression for the repetition of chorus and verse during songs, modern opera is most commonly through-composed and orchestration is roughly continuous throughout the whole composition. It is as consequence of these very different approaches to time that McMillin identifies the position of omniscience as “one of the sharpest distinctions” between the musical and opera. Here orchestral music is considered to be the seat of omniscient narration in music theatre, opposed on stage by the fallible characters in musical theatre, but generally uncontested in opera: “The omniscient orchestra, asserting its authority from its unseen place in the pit, is supposed to be perfect […] The drive toward unification in Wagnerian opera can at the same time be a drive toward omniscience occurring both on stage and in the orchestra pit. If all is to be one in the theory of form, omniscience running through the elements of the work is a logical outcome. This is a totalizing drive that the musical resists in its book-and-number format.”

In *Unsung Voices* Carolyn Abbate similarly suggests that the audience’s awareness of time is a significant factor in the perception of narrative progress in opera, where the relentless progression of the score can prevent reflexive narration:

77 McMillin, *The Musical as Drama*, 199.
78 Ibid., 150.
79 Ibid., 149-50.
In one respect, music’s existence as a temporal art precludes its speaking “in the past tense.” As Ricoeur indicated, the pastness implicit in “it was” tells us many things at once. It tells us there is a narrator, someone who lived at the end of the story […] In terms of classical distinctions, what we call narrative – novels, stories, myths and the like – is diegetic, epic poetry and not theatre. It is a tale told later, by one who escaped to the outside of the tale, for which he builds a frame to control its dangerous energy. Music’s distinction is fundamental and terrible; it is not chiefly diegetic but mimetic. Like any form of theatre, any temporal art, it traps the listener in present experience and the beat of passing time, from which he or she cannot escape.\(^80\)

Stage time is authoritative; unlike written texts, where readers have the freedom to stop and start reading, in theatre the pace of audience comprehension is prescribed by the performance of actors and singers. Abbate focuses on nineteenth-century compositions and Wagner’s Der Ring des Nibelungen in particular, known for its distinctive structural narrative code established through the use of repeated musical motifs, but in so doing describes a system of narrative analysis that is equally useful for discussing modern work.

In The Semiotics of Opera, Arjan van Baest uses the treatment of time as the grounds to classify opera as epic drama, as it deviates from the unities of action, place and time characteristic of Aristotelian tragedy:

The temporal structure of most librettos is discontinuous, that is, the unity of time is confined within a scene, and does not apply to the whole of the libretto. As a result, each scene is a closed and relatively autonomous unity. Furthermore, librettos show sharp contrasts between story time, the amount of time an event really takes, and text time, the amount of time the description of an event takes in the text: whereas in the case of the recitative it can be said that both more or less coincide […] Aristotelian drama confines itself to the imitation of one action, leaving aside all non-relevant mental or physical side issues. Although opera librettos also concentrate on one central action, that is an action which has a beginning and an ending that shows the protagonist in an altered state, the intermediate scenes, which describe the process as followed by the protagonist, do not confine themselves merely to what is relevant.\(^81\)

Here ‘story time’ is the equivalent of McMillin’s book time, and text time is equivalent of lyric time. As van Baest identifies, “most librettos have a discontinuous temporal structure the unity of which is

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\(^81\) Arjan van Baest, *A Semiotics of Opera* (Delft: Eburon, 2000), 57.
confined within the boundaries of a scene."\textsuperscript{82} However, the way that orchestral music unifies these discontinuous scenes creates the sense of a much more relentless progression of time than in musical drama where songs are interspersed with dialogue. Songs in musical theatre frequently relate to past (as in second act reprises of earlier songs) or future events (as in the conditional love song, notably ‘If I Loved You’ from Rodgers and Hammerstein’s \textit{Carousel}, ‘Something’s Coming’ in Bernstein’s \textit{West Side Story}), where in opera arias seldom perform this function.\textsuperscript{83}

One significant exception to the standard semantic operation of lyric and book time occurs during songs classified by Carolyn Abbate as “phenomenal” performance; pieces of music intended to be understood as a performance by a character for an audience of other characters within the text (rather than song being a mode of dialogue, as it is generally considered in music drama),\textsuperscript{84} akin to diegetic music in film, and describes a more specific variation, the narrative song, where a character sings about the plot of the opera they feature within. As described by Abbate: “The reflexive capacity of narrative song (which often tells the opera’s own story in compressed or disguised form) […] sets up interference with the very idea of progressive musical narration. Narrative song, despite its apparent musical simplicity, thus represents one of opera’s most elaborate points of tension.”\textsuperscript{85}

The complexity of the operation of time in non-naturalistic theatre genres, including musical theatre and dance, reveals the potential structural depth of narratives set to music.

Having considered these theoretical models provided by conventional acting, puppetry, and dance, I will now consider the potential aesthetic features of a model of opera constructed at the junction of musicology, dramaturgy and critical theory, with particular focus on the meaning is added to a performance of music and text by virtue of it occurring on stage. During the twentieth century the semantic value of performance has come to be extensively theorised, and while certain features of opera distinguish it from analysis of the way that meaning is conveyed in spoken drama, there are many places where these analyses overlap. As suggested by the alternative dramaturgical models presented previously, techniques of stage representation can operate in a variety of ways within one genre and performance.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 60.
\textsuperscript{83} Although, as van Baest argues, this “is not to say that the past and future do not play a role in the dramatic world of the libretto: characters and events happen to be determined by their past and they determine their future by the choices they make.” Ibid., 61.
\textsuperscript{84} Abbate, \textit{Unsung Voices: Opera and the Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century}, 5.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 69.
While some types of theatre rely more heavily on imitative representational frameworks, the stage has significance in theatrical art as a device beyond acting as a venue for performance. Even within naturalistic works the stage exists as a physical location that can represent many locations during a single performance, and as a public place that typically represents a private (albeit fictional) space. In *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* Keir Elam describes this symbolic association of staging as transformative quotation: “A table employed in dramatic representation will not usually differ in any material or structural fashion from the item of furniture that the members of the audience eat at, and yet it is in some sense transformed: it acquires, as it were, a set of quotation marks.”\(^86\) In opera, and particularly opera adaptations of stage drama, the audience is made even more aware of the representational nature of the stage objects by the heightened representational style: these stage objects come to resemble a quotation of a quotation. Simultaneously however, the required virtuosity of opera also acts to distance the audience by way of intentional sign. In stage drama, Elam suggests that “the audience starts with the assumption that every detail is an intentional sign,”\(^87\) and this creates a great degree of investment in the body of the actor themselves: “The actors voice and body, considered as signal transmitters, are rendered pertinent to the text in their materiality, since his personal stature, vocal qualities and physical idiosyncrasies, however incidental to the drama, will influence the spectator’s perception and decoding of messages.”\(^88\) It the case of stage drama this investment in the corporeality of actors suggests that every movement of an actor on stage is an intentional sign, and in opera, where the technical requirements on performers are often greater, this intuition is more strongly supported.

Interpreting stage culture and audience perception of staging practices may seem inconsequential given that these conventions of staging are shared by a large variety of theatrical work, but considered in relation to specific texts the principles of staging can have a considerable influence on theatrical interpretation and reception. According to Marco di Marinis in his article ‘The Dramaturgy of the Spectator,’ as the definition of the ‘theatrical text’ has shifted to include not just the text as written but also the assemblage of signs and actions that occur on stage, dramaturgy, traditionally relating to the composition of the written text, can now be considered in a much broader context.

\(^{87}\) Ibid., 8.
\(^{88}\) Ibid., 38.
Specifically, de Martinis focuses the contribution of the audience to the theatrical text, suggesting that the dramaturgical contribution of the audience can be assessed in two dimensions: according to the way the text aims to manipulate the spectator, viewed without specificity; and according to the cooperation of the audience, viewed as a subjective entity. Following Umberto Eco’s “Model Reader” and acknowledging that theatrical productions anticipate particular kinds of audience response, di Marinis suggests that the extent that the audience is accommodated within a performance depends on the genre of theatre.\textsuperscript{89} In \textit{Space in Performance}, Gay McAuley frames consideration of spoken drama with a discussion of Iser’s theory on readership, suggesting that in theatrical practice “the practitioners’ ‘acts of ideation’ are manifested physically and spatially rather than remaining virtual.”\textsuperscript{90} Significantly for McAuley, dramatic texts are only understood as read by theatre makers rather than audiences, with the performers interpreting the text and then communicating their reading to the audience: “Playwriting is a particular form of writing in that most plays are not intended primarily as works to be read, but as the verbal component of a performance which is itself the primary means of communication. It is a form of writing designed to generate a spacial practice, or at the very least to lend itself to exploitation within a spacial practice.”\textsuperscript{91}

As Herbison-Evans identifies, in western theatre the prominent architectural feature of the proscenium arch performs a similar function to the frame around a work of visual art,\textsuperscript{92} and this static frame around performance enforces the audience’s position as an observer rather than a participant in the action on stage. This traditional architectural and symbolic construction, di Marinis’ similarly notes, had significant aesthetic consequences for drama, and the recent questioning of this convention reflects contemporary concerns about the readership of texts more generally considered: “Previously, the performance had appeared as a unitary object to be grasped whole by the onlooker. This had led to the unitary model of performance usage that for centuries had been the basis of Western theatre. Now, however, this unitary model entered a deep crisis. In many cases the spectators were forced to acknowledge the irredeemably partial and subjective name of their experience of the performance; this experience was now strictly conditioned by their material

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 219.
\textsuperscript{92} Herbison-Evans, “The Perception of the Fleeting Moment in Dance,” 45.
position, their point of observation. The dominance of naturalism in drama requires that action on stage to be framed for the audience as theatrical, and Martini suggests this is largely a dramaturgical function, arguing that “[what] makes such things theatrical are their editing and framing, devices which belong solely to the director, choreographer, or editor,” suggesting the example of the pedestrian movement in choreography. The same framing effect can be seen just as clearly in the use of non-poetic language in opera libretti or recitative – the words on stage, sung and spoken by elite performers, make the mundane appear exceptional.

The comparison of theatre spectatorship to readership is not entirely straightforward. One complication comes in considering the structural role played by the time in live performance discussed above, as while both aesthetic response theory and spectatorship theory allow for imperfect perception of the text, the act of spectatorship is less indicative of engagement with the text than reading, which requires comprehension rather than attendance. Accordingly, van Baest suggests that consideration of time is a compelling difference between spectatorship and readership: “Unlike a literary text, a musical composition does not give the subject much opportunity to hypothesize and to test his hypothesis. Abduction, deduction and induction require the possibility to temporarily slow down or even to completely stop the development of the sign. In the case of a literary text this is very well possible […] Music is motion. It is continuous motion that begins at the beginning and stops at the end. Motion can only be experienced by following it.” The idea of the unstoppable progression of music here echoing Clément’s political objection to the unrelenting progression of the score, classified as an expression of the masculine.

Understanding comprehension is a major complication for adopting readership approaches in the study of stage drama, as there are those opera critics, such as Sutcliffe, who argue that the understanding the text of opera is peripheral to the understanding of opera as performed: “Opera has a non-linear, non-argumentative, non-logical character – which is intensely demanding if audiences give it proper attention. The combination of music and text is innately suggestive, like lateral thinking. Textual understanding is not the priority. Reading and understanding text unmodulated in performance by the nuances of vocal and musical qualification (as happens

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93 de Marinis, “The Dramaturgy of the Spectator,” 105.
94 Ibid., 110.
95 van Baest, A Semiotics of Opera, 70.
increasingly in the opera-houses because of surtitles) may detract from and obscure other aspects of the imaginative stimuli being offered the opera audience to edit and assimilate. While reading a performance clearly does not begin and end with text comprehension, the relative difficulty of comprehending the text in opera distances the genre from similar approaches to spoken stage drama.

It seems however that neither opera nor spoken drama should aim for the comprehension of dialogue (or sung text) as being the ultimate goal of theatrical readership. Returning to di Marinis’ dramaturgy of the spectator, the very reliance on the involvement of the discerning spectator in creating meaning in theatrical work suggests that as a purposefully complex and temporal art, theatre favours varied and imperfect readings:

It is, in fact, due solely to the application and proper functionality of the spectator’s selective attention that the theatrical relationship is actually set into place and maintained, only then is the performance transformed from a confused jumble of disparate elements into a performance text furnished, at least potentially, with its own meaningfulness and coherence. [...] In this context, Roland Barthes spoke suggestively of a “polyphony of information” in theatrical performance, indicating the multiplicity of heterogeneous signs that are simultaneously emitted (Barthes 1963). Yet even this does not go far enough: to this polyphonic quality we must add that the performance text or, more exactly, its dense signifying surface, is characterised by its nondiscreteness (in that it is continuous), its instability (in that it is variable), and its impermanence (in that it is ephemeral).

Here di Marinis suggests that the reading of stage texts is essentially a selective process: the audience observes all the action on stage, discarding some stimulus in order to focus on specific features of performance. The success of the work is dependent on the way the production is able to manipulate the attention of the audience, but more significantly on the ability of members of the audience to personally construct a comprehensible performance text out of a range of stimuli (the experience of which will differ between individual audience members).

This epistemological instability inherent to the experience of the dramatic text is not unique to contemporary work, but it does resonate particularly strongly with some of the common thematic

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96 Sutcliffe, Believing in Opera, 6.
98 Ibid., 107.
preoccupations of modern and postmodern theatre. Discussing modern theatre in relation to the various expressions of loss and desire, in *Edges of Loss* Mark Pizzato acknowledges the link between performance and the transience of human life, and suggests that the stage edge can metaphorically and symbolically represent the liminal space between performer and audience, and also, borrowing from the feminist psychological criticism of Lacan and Kristeva, the liminal boundary between mother and child. Here Pizzato offers an account of the distinction between modern and postmodern theatre; modernist theatre involves “nostalgia for transcendent meaning,” while postmodernist theatre illustrates a “passion for perverse, diverse play.” The stage’s edge is a “meeting point of perspectives” with an implied sense of loss, and such “a theatrical encounter involves both belief and disbelief, complicity and questioning, traditional conventions and their perversion.” Theatre plays an important social function as the definition of the perverse comes to define the dominant social order. Pizzato describes the relationship between these aspects of the modern and postmodern at several points as a theoretical Möbius strip: dominated by two impulses (belief and perversion) that seem to be diametrically opposed but are actually inextricably linked, as theatrical convention defines audience expectations and therefore the scope of postmodern innovation.

It is in light of this type of view on contemporary theatre that opera can seem to wrest back some cultural relevance, as while opera is often considered to be bad theatre by virtue of its extravagance, the porousness of the boundary between belief and make-believe is clearly demonstrated by opera’s ability to combine apparent artifice, spectacle, and the affective response to music. As we have seen, issues surrounding the complexities of representation dominate aesthetic analyses of opera: the Aristotelian concept of mimesis gaining currency in discussions of modern theatre due to the complementary twentieth-century development of naturalist stage drama and technologies capable of recording bodies in performance. Many theorists frame this trend as a problem for opera, because opera is an emotionally overdetermined performance genre, hamstrung by tradition. However, I would like to suggest that this focus on representation of the world as opposed to expression is counterproductive in understanding the way that opera works dramaturgically, and this has the

100 Ibid., 7.
101 Ibid., 2.
102 Ibid., 13.
103 Ibid., 41-2.
potential to be particularly misleading when considering the process of adaptation, regardless of whether the work adapted is more closely aligned with those conventional representational aims.

Adorno describes this exaggerated style of dramatic expression as a definitive costume-like characteristic of opera: “Costume is essential to opera: in contrast to a play, an opera without costume is a paradox. If the gestures of the singers - which they often bring along from the prop room - are themselves already part of the costume, then their voices - which natural people, as it were, don as soon as they step upon the operatic stage - are entirely put on.” Adorno, “Bourgeois Opera,” 25-6. In a similar vein to the operation of puppets, as discussed earlier, the gesture in opera is part of a theatrical style that remains identifiable even in the most understated dramatic moments. But Adorno goes further than identifying this characteristic, suggesting that stylisation and self-referentiality are vital to success in the genre: “The closer opera gets to a parody of itself, the closer it gets to its own most particular element.” Ibíd., 25-6. In the next section I will examine the political implications of opera’s parodic, costume aesthetics.

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105 Ibíd., 26.
7. The Politics of Stage Spectacle

“In 1. The entire life of societies in which modern conditions of production reign announces itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.”

Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*

“Witchcraft of this sort must of course be fought against. Whatever is intended to produce hypnosis, is likely to induce sordid intoxication, or creates fog, has to be given up.”

Bertolt Brecht, “The Modern Theater Is Epic Theater”

In mapping out the political aesthetics of opera there are two relevant potential areas of concern when considering structural characteristics of the art form: one regarding contextual features of opera production including audience demographics and institutional funding, and the other relating to the political implications of work that makes use of opera’s distinctive stylistic excess. In its earliest incarnations opera was commissioned by very wealthy patrons for private performance, and it was only during the twentieth century that governments and non-profit organisations assumed the role of supporting opera composition and production financially. Even with production bolstered by state sponsorship, contemporary opera audiences tend to be older and with a higher average income than the typical audience of other types of theatre and live music. While funding and audience demographics are often considered in accounts of the impact of arts funding decisions on the development of theatrical culture, a full description of the cultural status of opera cannot be provided without an account of the politics of the genre’s dramaturgical features, including recognition of the logistical fact that the extravagance and technical precision required for the production of live opera cause it to be extremely expensive to produce.

Cultural critics tend to express hostility when discussing opera, or alternatively couch their own enthusiasm in a tone of guilty admission, as a consequence of common perceptions that the genre is excessively camp, bombastic and lacking in dramatic nuance. Much of the most productive

twentieth-century opera criticism has come from theorists who acknowledge the potentially problematic cultural context of opera while remaining open to the possibility of new work to subvert the genre’s foundations. Particularly in a non-European context, as we will see in the following section, theatre makers have demonstrated the potential for opera to contribute significantly to developing national literary cultures and engage with more diverse audiences than work from the conventional operatic repertoire. In this section I will outline several areas of engagement between the political aesthetics and the poetics of opera: the way that the expressive and narrative functions of opera are inflected by the politics of production; the disagreement over the ideal subject of modern opera, discussing why several critics have identified Berg’s *Wozzeck* as the first great modern opera; and finally I will provide a preliminary discussion of the political consequences of operatic spectacle.

Theodor Adorno is among many cultural critics who describe opera in hostile terms, referring to the form as a “bourgeois vacation spot” in his essay ‘Bourgeois Opera.’ Here Adorno argues that the most authentic opera is based on fairy tales or types of melodrama that might be classified as suitable only for children, and that the form is stylistically bold and pictorial in a manner that can be perceived as lacking in aesthetic nuance. Additionally, Adorno takes issue with the stylistic and structural particularities of the genre, describing libretti as “freakish” booklets of “manifold silliness,” and the genre as a whole “founded on so many conventions that it resounds into a vast emptiness as soon as those conventions are no longer vouchsafed to the audience through tradition.” Tension between the frequently mythic or epic thematic content of opera and this stylistic absurdity is described as opera’s “peculiar costume-quality,” with a parallel drawn between the dramatic extravagance of music and the overblown visual and thematic aesthetics of opera, where “mortals are described as heroes or gods, and this disguise is similar to their singing. Through song they are exhausted and transfigured. The process becomes specifically ideological in that such a transfiguration precisely befalls everyday existence [Dasein]; that something which merely *is* presents itself as if its simple being were already greater.” But these stylistic quirks are most characteristic of Baroque, Classical and Romantic era compositions.

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4 Ibid., 34
5 Ibid., 40.
6 Ibid., 38.
In discussing the twentieth-century crisis in opera, which for Adorno is where opera “runs head on into the aesthetic barrier of reification,” he argues that the intellectual rigours of modernist poetics are incapable of redeeming the genre: “Modernity, which does not really intervene in the matter, becomes a mere getup, becomes modernism - and yet, the operatic stage director finds himself repeatedly forced into all sorts of desperate interventions,” referring predominantly to modern directors staging new productions of older works. In reference to more recent compositions, Adorno describes a crisis in opera in Germany during the twentieth century, and attempts to describe how the structural conventions and thematic occupations of the genre have contributed to this crisis. For Adorno, modern work poses a challenge as opera is a distinctly aistorical dramatic form predominantly governed by metaphor:

This interlocking of myth and enlightenment defines the bourgeois essence of opera: namely, the interlocking of imprisonment in a blind and unselfconscious system and the idea of freedom, which arises in its midst. Opera’s metaphysics is not to be simply separated from this sociality. Metaphysics is absolutely not a realm of invariance which one could grasp by looking out through the barred windows of the historical; it is the glimmer - albeit a powerless glimmer - of light which falls into the prison itself: the more powerful it becomes, the deeper its ideas embed themselves in history; the more ideological it becomes, the more abstractly it appears in the face of history. Opera, hardly touched by philosophy, has sustained itself on metaphysics more than drama, which contaminated its metaphysical contents.8

The frequently metaphorical content of traditional opera is mirrored structurally in its essentially symbolic representational framework: the use of singing to represent dialogue and report the emotional states of characters, but also in opera’s distinctive theatrical style, where sets are typically ornate and static, costumes extravagant, and characters’ movements choreographed as opposed to naturalistic. Abstraction is inherent in this representational framework, and this abstraction can render much work in the genre aistorical. This identification of the additional symbolic properties of vocal expression raises questions about how opera comes to express meaning. Roland Barthes differentiates between two types of death in opera, that typified by Boris in Mussorgsky’s Boris Godunov and that of Melisande in Debussy’s Pelléas et Mélisande: “the death of Boris is expressive or, if preferred, hysterical; it is overloaded with historical,

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7 Ibid., 27.
8 Ibid., 34.
affective contents. Performances of the death cannot be but dramatic: it is the triumph of the pheno-text, the smothering of significance under the soul as signified. Mélisande, on the contrary, only dies prosodically [...] without any noise.” Recall here Clément’s similar uses of psychoanalytic language in her discussions of the representation of the feminine in opera, where the theme of death is related to ephemerality of performance – Clément describes the shock of returning from the opera theatre with all its heightened, hysterical, emotion: “Going to an opera is like an ethnologist taking a voyage to a strange land: when he comes back home, everything seems incongruous to him, and deprived of his culture he no longer recognises himself in his compatriots.”9 This concept of engaging with music within an overwhelming and alienating institution also resonates with Barthes’ reflections on the transformation of music from something that people once both listened to and performed to something professionalized which is passively received: “To find practical music in the West, one has now to look at another public, another repertoire, another instrument (the young generation, vocal music, the guitar). Concurrently, passive, receptive music, sound music is [sic.] become the music (that of concert, festival, record, radio): playing has ceased to exist; musical activity is no longer manual, muscular, kneadingly physical, but merely liquid, effusive.”10 There are two contradictory factors at play here when considering contemporary opera in this light: the description of music being a physical and even erotic experience, and the increasing mediation and passive reception of that music (a conflict I will return to discuss in Chapter Twelve). As in the Queer musicology of Abel and Koestenbaum discussed previously, Barthes describes the relationship between audience and performer as erotic: “I am determined to listen to my relation with the body of the man or woman singing or playing and that relation is erotic – but in no way ‘subjective’ (it is not the psychological ‘subject’ in me who is listening; the climactic pleasure hoped for is not going to reinforce – to express – that subject but, on the contrary, to lose it).”11

Adorno’s idea about the relationship between historicity and imprisonment in opera cited earlier, that “Metaphysics is absolutely not a realm of invariance which one could grasp by looking out through the barred windows of the historical,”12 is particularly relevant when noting that like several other cultural critics, Adorno considers Alban Berg’s Wozzeck (from Büchner) the most significant opera of the twentieth century as it “has sustained the illusionary as an operatic essence removed

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9 Clement, Opera, or the Undoing of Women, 175.
12 Adorno, “Bourgeois Opera,” 34.
from empirical reality,"13 the challenging atonal score of the piece complementing Wozzeck’s flights of emotional strain and intellectual discontent as he encounters the institutional strains of modern life. Adorno’s description of Wozzeck also recalls the language used by Virginia Woolf to describe the manoeuvres of literary modernism in Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown, where James Joyce in Ulysses is described as possessed of “the conscious and calculated indecency of a desperate man who feels that in order to breathe he must break the windows.”14 Released within a few years of one another, both Wozzeck and Ulysses are both characterised by the formal innovation and experimentation typical of modernism’s attempt to smash the figurative windows of traditional artistic representation, where art that aimed for mimesis was seen to artificially isolate a section of the world behind a narrative frame.

Adorno’s endorsement of the significance of Wozzeck stands in contrast to Berg’s own comments on the adaptation, where he states that he had no particular interest in revolutionising opera when composing, but rather focused explicitly on serving the requirements of the drama:

I never even dreamed to wanting to reform the art of opera by composing Wozzeck. […] Apart from the wish to compose good music, to transpose its poetical language into musical language, there was in my mind, at the moment I decided to write the opera, nothing else (even with respect to compositional technique nothing else) but the wish to give to the theater something theatrical, and to fashion music conscious at every moment of its obligation to serve the drama - and further, to make sure the music could force out of itself everything that the drama needed in order to be transformed into the reality of the stage, a task that demands from the composer all the essential duties of a stage director.15

Here Berg does not just prioritise drama, but compares his role as a composer to that of the stage director, and suggests it is ideally possible to translate literary compositions into musical ones. Berg’s prioritisation of drama and reverent attitude toward the source text goes quite a way to explaining why his opus is considered so significant by opera critics, and why many disagree about whether the dramatic structure of the piece is essentially innovative or conservative (and implications this has when paired with the avant-garde score). Mordden argues that Wozzeck is, despite the modernism of Berg’s twelve-tone technique, “one of the most traditional [twentieth-century operas] in its musico-

13 Ibid., 28.
14 Virginia Woolf, Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown, the Hogarth Essays (London: The Hogarth Press, 1924), 21.
dramatic operation,” as it attaches particular musical motifs to different characters and themes in a manner that recalls Wagner’s use of leitmotifs.

In ‘Listening to Schizophrenia: The Wozzeck Case,’ Jeremy Tambling undertakes a reading of Wozzeck that, following Deleuze and Guattari’s postmodernist methodologies, “asks us to listen for schizophrenia in all that there is.” Noting that Büchner’s play was based on accounts of the lives of several men sentenced to execution for murder in the 1820s and 30s, and dominant interpretations of this story as comment on the exploitation of soldiers and industrial workers (a thematic interpretation also offered by Adorno), Tambling considers the protagonist’s mental illness as an expression of the way the symptoms of schizophrenia are also characteristic of opera. Not only is it common for the plots of operas to turn on characters hearing voices (Tambling cites Tannhäuser and Tristan und Isolde as examples) but more generally opera can be considered structurally schizophrenic: “since opera vocalises thought in a way that embarrasses nineteenth- and twentieth-century drama, and since it adds to that objection a further ‘voice’ in orchestral sound, it implies an hallucinatory state inherently, whether or not it includes the overt signs of voices speaking to a protagonist.”

According to Tambling’s reading, in unifying these structural characteristics with thematic concerns of madness, Wozzeck is able to avoid being interpreted in any one way; like many modernist works, Wozzeck “preserves itself and its truth by difference and difficulty.”

Kivy, on the other hand, in a critique that perhaps reveals more about his scepticism about adaptation than about the opera, argues that the depth many read in Berg’s Wozzeck is in fact a misperception: “the kind of depth and complexity that are possessed by Büchner’s character Woyzeck, and, by consequence, by the character Wozzeck in Berg’s musically unadorned libretto, do not belong to that character in Berg’s opera.” Where Kivy describes the libretto as “unadorned” here, he is not criticising Berg’s atonal score but rather referring to the libretto as a stand-alone dramatic text, but one which will not be fully comprehensible when sung. Here Kivy’s concept of opera resting aesthetically on a conflict between words and music is recounted as an intense battle:

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16 Mordden, Opera in the Twentieth Century: Sacred, Profane, Godot, 158.
18 Ibid., 181.
19 Ibid., 191.
20 Kivy, Osmin’s Rage, 269-70.
When a drama becomes drama-made-music, or for that matter just musical drama, if its characters have great psychological depth and complexity to begin with, as they do in Berg’s libretto for Wozzeck, those must be lost. Nor will it help for our listener to choose the second alternative, concentrate on the words, and obliterate the music as best he can. For he will then not be hearing Berg’s opera Wozzeck at all, but either a travesty of it or a travesty of Büchner’s play, depending on how you want to look at it.21

Kivy is in some sense arguing for a house reading of opera: that the complexity of the libretto cannot be sensibly read independently of the way it is perceived in performance, and furthermore that consciously listening for meaning in opera will also distort perception of the musical content. In an argument that bodes very poorly for the merits of adapted opera more generally, he states that “the ‘object’ that is perceived will be neither Büchner’s text nor Berg’s opera, but a completely garbled version of both.”22 While the original text obviously does not survive in adaptation, it seems unlikely that Berg’s opera is garbled due to being adapted from another work. Appropriately, given Tambling’s comments that Britten’s “studies of tortured innocence owe much to Wozzeck,”23 his schizological reading is also potentially illuminating here: it is not necessary to view the components of inherently multifarious texts separately to appreciate their complexity. There is little point in separating music and drama for the purpose of assessment, as the centrality of music in opera performance has significant consequences for the dramatic style and reception of operatic work.

This structural and stylistic complexity of opera accounts for some of the reservations expressed by Marxist cultural critics about the form. Adorno’s argument in ‘Bourgeois Opera’ is in part a response to work by his contemporary Bertolt Brecht, “arch-enemy of romanticism,”24 who like Adorno considered opera to be to some degree ideologically and aesthetically irresponsible. Adorno also praises Brecht’s creative work in musical theatre, describing The Threepenny Opera as “one of the last successful works of musical theatre which was avant-garde,”25 and praising the use of music within it as warm and expressive, in spite of Brecht’s concerns about the genre. Both critics have reservations about opera’s ostentatious tone, but draw interesting arguments from consideration of its formal fripperies and aesthetic emphasis on artifice.

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21 Ibid., 271.
22 Ibid., 270.
23 Jeremy Tambling, Opera, Ideology and Film (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 84.
25 Ibid.
Despite these concerns, Brecht was interested in the potential of opera to achieve *verfremdungseffekt*, the ‘estrangement’ or ‘alienation’ effect (according to Brecht’s definition, to “alienate an event or character is simply to take what to the event or character is obvious, known, evident and produce surprise and curiosity out of it”)26, as opera’s stylistic peculiarities give composers, librettists and directors little choice but to eschew the relatable naturalism of much popular stage drama. On first consideration it would seem that vocal and orchestral music, which I will argue is almost always non-diegetic in opera, would constitute sufficient stage artifice to aesthetically destabilise the events of the plot and achieve estrangement, but this is complicated by the emotional engagement frequently achieved by music. This conflicted relationship with music provides some explanation of why Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera*, more a play with songs than a narrative musical, is, as Mordden notes, “basically a play into which songs have been hammered, to impart the message on the spectator.”27 As Joy Calico identifies, Brecht had a notoriously difficult relationship with opera throughout his career, writing several dramatic works which employ some of the conventions of the genre while remaining concerned about the social implications of the bourgeois opera canon and potentially narcotic influence of music on audiences,28 which Calico describes as Brecht’s “distrust of music’s maleficence.”29

The potential of music to overwhelm and distract audience attention away from other aspects of the dramatic text goes some way to explaining why Brecht found the political aesthetics of opera so concerning. While discussions of his theatrical aesthetics frequently refer to his interest in placing emphasis on the mechanics of theatrical production, it is critical that the political impetus behind this focus is recognised. In ‘On the Experimental Theatre’ (1961), Brecht acknowledges that culture has come to be a contest for attention, and suggests that radical theatre needs to fight aggressively to be noticed alongside more popular entertainments: “In a world as fast-moving and dynamic as ours the enticements of entertainment are quick to wear out […] In order to distract its already distracted spectator the theatre must first of all make him concentrate. It must lure him with its spell out of his noisy environment.”30 Accordingly, Brecht describes the development of theatre in the twentieth century as the result of several decades of formal innovation undertaken by experimental stage directors, but also, significantly, as a period defined by technical innovation including the

27 Mordden, *Opera in the Twentieth Century: Sacred, Profane, Godot*, 145.
29 Ibid., 38.
development of light boards, mechanised stage fittings, video projection and sound design, all described with a conflicted enthusiasm (Brecht even laments that directors have been slow to take full advantage of these technical developments, hindered by the fear of appearing to plagiarise the work of their contemporaries).

Outside of Brecht’s specific political context, alienation can also be a useful concept when considering postmodern perspectives on drama. Estrangement in drama can be seen to resonate with postmodernism’s focus on metafictional awareness, as Silberman identifies: “[Brecht’s] position against mimesis with its claim of reference to an original anteriority, or rather his critical questioning of how the audience is implicated through representation, corresponds to the postmodernist insistence on undermining the absolute status of representation.” Additionally, as Calico argues, Brecht’s dramatic theory has also had particular influence on modern opera direction, popularising non-literal productions of canonical operas as a way to achieve estrangement, with implications for both the reception of the individual work and the audience’s understanding of the genre: “Defamiliarization reconfigures the relationship of the audience member to the opera and, more ambitiously, even the relationship of the audience member to the act of opera going.” While these outcomes would seem to offer some redress to the problems of opera identified by Adorno, he remained overwhelmingly sceptical about the potential of director’s theatre to reveal new perspectives on texts: “If instead one sweeps away all the costuming and has the participants copying the practices of contemporary dance, dressed in sweat suits or even timeless outfits, once cannot avoid asking, what’s the point? Why even bother doing it on stage?

In Brecht’s earlier essay, ‘The Modern Theater Is Epic Theatre’ (1930), originally appearing in the notes to The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny, he defines twentieth-century theatre as split stylistically between naturalism and expressionism, just as it is split between the impulses to entertain and instruct (two distinctions that partially echo mimesis/diegesis division established in opera criticism):

31 Ibid., 4.
32 Ibid.
34 Calico, Brecht at the Opera, 140.
35 Adorno cited in ibid., 228, n31.
Naturalism, with its “intellectualization of the arts,” which provided it with social bearing, had doubtless paralyzed significant aesthetic forces, particularly that of fantasy, the aesthetic sense, and the genuinely poetic. The instructive elements plainly harmed the artistic elements.

The Expressionism of the post-war era had described the world as will and representation and brought a characteristic solipsism. It was the theatre’s answer to the great social crisis, just as the philosophical Machismus was philosophy’s answer to it. It was a revolt of art against life, and the world existed for it only as vision, strangely shattered, the off-spring of frightened minds.36

From Brecht’s description of the theatrical orientation of naturalism and expressionism, it can be seen that contemporary opera has come to uncomfortably straddle these two aesthetic styles, both the expressionism seen as a radical stylistic departure from operatic conventions at the beginning of the twentieth century (described as opera’s second death by Žižek), and the realist aesthetic of the adaptations of popular plays and novels that came to define opera developing out of the United States.

Brecht’s description of the twentieth-century crisis for innovative non-operatic theatre resonates with many of his more specific observations on opera: “A technical apparatus and a style of production was developed which were able to produce illusion rather than elevation, and deception rather than enlightenment.”37 Acknowledging the continuing dominance of Aristotelian aesthetics in theatre, Brecht describes the problematic “sympathetic understanding”38 invoked by traditional mimesis, where the audience becomes personally invested in the fate and emotions of the play’s hero in order to achieve catharsis, illustrated with the example of the wrath of King Lear, which under traditional models of spectatorship “was not to be discussed, only to be shared in, in this way social phenomena appeared eternal, natural, unchangeable, unhistorical and did not hold for discussion.”39 Instead Brecht envisages a mode of viewing theatre where Lear’s wrath is understood by the audience but not shared, and this vision of theatre anticipates a challenge for opera, as a form where emotional states tend to be evoked rather than explained.

A more comprehensive elucidation of Brecht’s specific opinions on opera can be found in his writing on his own musical drama works The Threepenny Opera and The Rise and Fall of the City of

37 Ibid., 9.
38 Ibid., 12.
39 Ibid., 13.
Brecht describes *Mahagonny* as “nothing more or less than an opera”, and while Kurt Weil’s compositions for both *Mahagonny* and *The Threepenny Opera* tend toward the conventions of cabaret, “The Modern Theater is Epic Theater” outlines his views on musical theatre and describes what he was aiming to achieve with the form, engaging directly with what would later become some of the dominant debates in contemporary opera theory:

When the epic theatre’s methods begin to penetrate the opera the first result is a radical separation of the elements. The great struggle for supremacy between words, music and production - which always brings up the question “what is the pretext for what?”: is the music the pretext for the events on the stage, or are these the pretext for the music? etc. - can simply be by-passed by radically separating the elements. So long as the expression ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’ (or “integrated work of art”) means that the integration is a muddle, so long as the arts are supposed to be fused together, the various elements will all be equally degraded, and each will act as a mere “feed” to the rest. The process of fusion extends to the spectator, who gets thrown into the melting pot too and becomes a passive (suffering) part of the total work of art. Witchcraft of this sort must of course be fought against. Whatever is intended to produce hypnosis, is likely to induce sordid intoxication, or creates fog, has to be given up.40

Brecht’s central concern here is about the passivity of the opera audience member, and it suggests again that modern opera benefits from the assumption of a more engaged viewer. However, as has been discussed in relation to queer theory’s contribution to opera musicology, the state of “sordid intoxication” induced by opera is not inherently a politically disengaged mode of spectatorship. The use of the terms “witchcraft,” “hypnosis” and “sordid intoxication” here bring to mind Abel and Koestenbaum’s later discussions of opera’s sensual power, a connection that suggests that it is possible to consider the intoxication delivered by opera to be political in itself; an assertion of divergent sensuality in an otherwise prohibitive social environment, through the creation of a public community of spectators indulging in non-heterosexual, non-penetrative pleasure.

In consideration of the relationship between music and words, Brecht sketches a distinction between “dramatic opera” and “epic opera,” suggesting that in epic opera, Brecht’s ideal form, music does not heighten the emotion evoked by the text but rather “takes the text for granted” and “takes a position.”41 Brecht’s vision of experimental theatre suggests ways that operatic compositions can achieve more substantial political engagement through acknowledging the interpretive role of the

41 Ibid., 345.
audience and using technological and formal developments of the form to mitigate the potential numbing effect of opera’s phantasmagoria. As a complimentary development to reader response and reception theory movements in literature, acknowledgement of the role of the spectator in theatre is similarly crucial to understandings of intertextuality; and Brecht acknowledges this role of theatre audiences in typically explicit political terms: “He is welcomed into the theatre as a great reformer, one who is capable of coming to grips with the natural and social processes, one who no longer merely accepts the world passively but who masters it.”

In his essay “The Grain of Voice,” Roland Barthes relates his reflections on the technical and stylistic features of the sung voice to a wider discussion of the meaning and interpretation of music, drawing a parallel between the audience’s imprecise ability to decipher sung language to the critic’s imprecise ability to interpret the meaning of music. Barthes describes the inability of language to adequately describe art, and given this failure, argues that music fares particularly badly: “Music, by natural bent, is that which receives an adjective. The adjective is inevitable: the music is this, the music is that. No doubt the moment we turn art into a subject (for an article, for a conversation) there is nothing left but to give it predicates; in the case of music, however, such predication unfailingly takes the most facile and trivial form: the epithet.” For Barthes voice becomes meaningless because it is excessively expressive, as he states in an aside that opera is “a genre in which voice has gone over in its entirety to dramatic expressivity, a voice with a grain which little signifies.” In discussing vocal music Barthes transposes Kristeva’s pheno- and geno-texts to the context of song: defining pheno-song as relating to the conventions of the genre, stylistic interpretation, and direction of the conductor (broadly consistent with the score); and with geno-song describing the “volume of the singing voice.” It is the grain of the voice, as the “friction between the music and something else,” that creates the geno-song.

Barthes’ discussion of the grain of voice, with ‘grain’ described as “the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs,” places specific focus on the physical performances and, consequently, the bodies, of singers, actors and dancers. In comparing two twentieth-century

44 Ibid., 181.
45 Ibid., 185
46 Ibid., 188.
baritones, Charles Panzéra and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, Barthes considers the cultural implications of each voice: Fisher-Dieskau’s clearness of sentiment and technical precision with Panzéra’s artificially rolled ‘r’s. Panzéra’s voice, not only largely unrecorded but under Barthes’ analysis not capable of being recoded with fidelity, is judged to be a more exclusively bourgeois vocal expression:

His [Fisher-Dieskau’s] art - expressive, dramatic, sentimentally clear, borne by a voice lacking in any ‘grain,’ in signifying weight, fits well with the demands of an average culture. Such a culture, defined by the growth of the number of listeners and the disappearance of practitioners (no more amateurs), wants art, wants music, provided they be clear, that they ‘translate’ an emotion and represent a signified (the ‘meaning’ of a poem); an art that inoculates pleasure (by reducing it to a known, coded emotion) and reconciles the subject to what in music can be said: what is said about it, predictively, by Institution, Criticism, Opinion. Panzéra does not belong to this culture (he could not have done, having sung before the coming of the microgroove record; moreover I doubt whether, were he singing today, his art would be recognized or even simply perceived); his reign, very great between the wars, was that of an exclusively bourgeois art (an art that is in no way petit-bourgeois) nearing the end of its inner development and, by a familiar distortion, separated by History. It is perhaps, precisely and less paradoxically than it seems, because this art was already marginal, mandarin, that it was able to bear traces of significance, to escape the tyranny of meaning.47

It is the ‘tyranny of meaning’, as we will see in the context of the adaptation of seminal American dramas to opera, that proves difficult to escape in some modern opera adaptations, as the adaptation of a well-known text reinforces its position in the literary canon, and as stagings frequently come to reinforce traditional readings.

Modern directors take many different approaches to these kinds of aesthetic challenges presented by operatic texts. I have previously mentioned director’s theatre with regard to the similarities that can be noted between the director’s interpretation of a stage text and the approach of the adaptor towards the source text, but opera involves structural and thematic particularities that can be approached in a number of different ways by directors in production, as American director Bartlett Sher describes:

I don’t think there’s such a thing as an absurd plot. I think that’s part of the task of making narrative. You have to find some way of sewing it together. There’s huge examples, opera’s one of those amazing art forms where there’s huge varieties of people who put together… Everything from Barrie Kosky, who’s a wonderful director.

47 Ibid., 185.
from Australia, who does one very intense, experimental kind of narrative, to… I’m slightly more like a Georgio Strehler - I’m not like Gerogio Strehler’s, he’s one of the great Italian directors - that would be a model for me. You are always searching for your way in to make sense of these [operas] now. […] There’s always a bit of a gray space between the audience and the event, which you fill in with lots of secret information.48

Here Sher is referring specifically to his work for the Metropolitan Opera’s 2012 production of Donizetti’s L’Elisir d’Amore, and modern productions of operas from the conventional repertoire more generally, but the way he frames the work of the director in interpreting the piece for the audience with reference to Barrie Kosky’s controversial body of work supports the idea of the director serving the role of a co-author.

Director’s theatre is a contentious issue in discussions of modern performance, precisely because it can be considered to promise to rescue difficult texts from problematic authorial contexts, which perhaps explains Adorno’s scepticism, as re-contextualising canonical texts can be seen as the equivalent of the “desperate interventions” he accuses modern composers of in attempting to recuperate the genre. Conversely for Peter Brook, who identifies somewhat similar concerns to those expressed by Adorno about attempts to reify theatre, director’s theatre is necessary in order for theatre to remain socially relevant: “When I hear a director speaking glibly of serving the author, of letting the play speak for itself, my suspicions are aroused […] a shifting, chaotic world often must choose between a playhouse that offers a spurious ‘yes’ or a provocation so strong that it splinters its audience into fragments of vivid ‘nos.’”49

The political aesthetics of opera are tied closely to the effect that the performance has on the spectator, extensively discussed in the theories that link readership and spectatorship discussed in the previous section. Di Marinis suggests that the performance text creates a hierarchy of “the spoken text, the gestural text, the scenery, music, [and] sound effects,”50 agreeing that musical performance texts offer more competition for the attention of the audience than a written text, while offering an approach to assessing the competing demands on the attention of the audience. Assessing the competing demands placed on the attention of the audience also aids in the

48 “Bartlett Sher Interviewed by Margaret Throsby,” in Midday Interview (Classic FM: ABC, 2012).
49 Brook, The Empty Space, 43-4.
acknowledgement of the multiple authors that contribute to the creation of a work. Di Marinis argues that while hierarchies in conventional Western verbal drama tend to be stable (placing emphasis on the canonical text as spoken), in opera the attention of the audience is focused alternately on different textual elements and changes throughout the performance, in what he calls a shifting hierarchy, “where a whole range of focalizing and/or de-focalizing devices operates within the one performance, a large portion of these devices being the scenic, lighting, and sound effects […] Undoubtedly the classic example here is opera, where, at one time, it is the vocal part (aria, recitative) which comes to the fore and, at another, the musical part, the relationship between the parts remaining inversely proportional and, as was suggested long ago by Abraham Moles, characteristic of the functioning of ‘multiple messages’ (1958).”51 The concept of audience attention that di Marinis uses is derived from understanding members of the audience as psychologically defined subjects; with his examples including the attentional priority of loud noises52 and the use of non-natural behaviour from actors to confound the audiences’ inherent expectations.53 Music in particular has the capacity to overwhelm the audience at a basic narrative level, as di Marinis cites the use of loud trumpets in sixteenth-century theatre to distract the audience during scene changes.

In “Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein,” Barthes reflects on the creation of meaning in theatre and particularly the Brechtian idea of communicating meaning through tableau: “The theatre is precisely that practice which calculates the place of things as they are observed: if I set the spectacle here, the spectator will see this; if I put it elsewhere, he will not.”54 Particularly at a time when naturalism is near ubiquitous in stage drama, and actors are typecast and are considered to fully inhabit their roles, it can be counterintuitive to think of the contents of the stage as set of deliberate symbols, and it is here that opera, in its resistance to Stanislavski’s naturalist acting techniques, helps prompt a reconsideration of stage representation, as is suggested by Barthes’ comments on meaning and emotional expression of stage actors:

Since the tableau is the presentation of an ideal meaning, the actor must present the very knowledge of the meaning, for the latter would not be ideal if it did not bring with it its own machination. This knowledge which the actor must demonstrate – by an unwanted supplement – is, however, neither his human knowledge (his tears must not refer simply to the state of feeling of the downcast) nor his knowledge as actor (he must not

51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid., 110.
show that he knows how to act well). [...] All this is a far cry from the facial affectations of the Actors’ Studio, the much praised ‘restraint’ of which has no other meaning than its contribution to the personal glory of the actor.55

Barthes presents an alternate understanding of stage spectacle to the cautious one presented by Brecht, indicating toward the potential problems raised by restraint in theatre. While large theatrical gestures have the potential to be stupefying, restraint can also pose a danger for relevant dramatic expression.

Although Guy Debord’s use of term ‘spectacle’ in *The Society of the Spectacle* is different from Barthes’ use of the term, meaning rather something that is “not a collection of images but a social relation between people mediated by images,”56 he is similarly concerned with the kind of apolitical cultural totality that occupied Barthes and Brecht. Debord describes culture as a whole in terms that seem to correspond with concerns about opera’s desensitising effect, with particular relevance to modern opera production, especially as his concerns stem from the numbing effect of celebrity, film, the reproduction of images, and the commodification of experiences:

Theater and the feast, the theatrical feast, are the dominant moments of baroque realization within which all particular artistic expression becomes meaningful only through its reference to the setting of a constructed place, to a construction which must be its own center of unification; and this center is the passage, which is inscribed as a threatened equilibrium within the dynamic disorder of the whole. The somewhat excessive importance given to the concept of the baroque in the contemporary discussion of esthetics translates the growing awareness of the impossibility of aesthetic classicism: for three centuries the attempts to realize a normative classicism or neo-classicism were no more than brief artificial constructions speaking the external language of the State, of the absolute monarchy, or of the revolutionary bourgeoisie in Roman clothes. From romanticism to cubism, it is in the last analysis an ever more individualized art of negation, perpetually renovating itself up to the point of the crumbling and complete negation of the artistic sphere which followed the general course of the baroque. [...] The baroque ensemble, which is itself a long-lost unity for artistic creation, is rediscovered in some manner in the present consumption of the totality of the artistic past.57

The use of ‘baroque’ both adjectivally and in reference to the conventions of the sixteenth century is indicative of the common understanding of opera as an aesthetically overburdened, decadent and

57 Ibid., #189.
therefore irresponsible form of art, but taking into account the artistic and performative aspects of Debord’s work with the Situationalist International, however, it seems that there is some potential for live performance to break this cycle of commodification and representation. Opera is perhaps not ideally suited to this task, given its class background and comparatively exorbitant cost, and also due to the fact that its stylistic features cannot accommodate as much radical innovation as the theoretical and performative work of Artaud and Debord that questioned theatrical conventions and drastically reconfigured, or disposed entirely of, the stage edge. In the second half of the twentieth century, when critics in the field of aesthetic theory came to be understandably concerned with the political consequences of mechanical reproduction and technological advances leading to the domination of naturalistic representation allowed by television and cinema, theatre was seen as a potentially radical artistic medium, and opera sits uneasily within these discussions.

In his discussion of Peter Brook’s attempts to create opera productions relevant to twentieth-century audiences, Tom Sutcliffe suggests that theatrical realism has been undermined by cinema, as any comparison between the illusion of life on stage and film would inevitably favour the naturalism achieved by cinema:

Verismo, the opera of Puccini and Mascagni where singers still dominated, had led the way in a sense - by preparing the public to expect a kind of cinematic naturalism, however prone to the prevailing musical convention. But the rise of cinema transformed the terms of trade for the theatre: for spectacle and the illusion of ‘realism’ in the theatre could no longer compete with the cinema. Inevitably the meaning of the theatrical illusion came to take precedence over merely seeming realistic. In any case by the late 1940s new operas which were vehicles for singers were not regularly appearing and entering popular affection. The value of the different elements in the operatic equation was being reassessed. Theatrical truth, meaning and intention, were becoming the new standards all around the operatic world.\(^5\)

I will return to consideration of the consequences of mechanical reproduction, but remaining for a moment with the aesthetics of live performance, there are aspects of operatic representation worth considering in the context of political readings of stage production. Sam Abel argues that in the face of technologically mediated performance, opera has the power to destabilise audience expectations of the way life is represented in fiction: “If theater, as Hamlet says, holds a mirror up to nature, than opera offers a fun house mirror. […] When Shakespeare says that the actor holds the mirror up to

\(^5\) Sutcliffe, Believing in Opera, 25.
nature, he presumes that the details will be amplified in the mirroring process. In the twentieth century, when film and television lead us to expect art to mirror life with the accuracy of a photograph, opera seems, by comparison, overlarge, distorted, entirely unreal in its characterizations. By understanding performance as a grounds for potentially destabilising forms of representation, production and spectatorship, it is possible to move away from the unresolvable debates surrounding the Aristotelian construction of interpreting lyric theatre as a conflict between the methods of phenomenology and hermeneutics, and places opera in an interesting position when viewed in the context of contemporary debates about the distorting effects of the illusion that the mediated image creates an accurate reflection of reality. The third part of this thesis will track these developments in operatic aesthetics through consideration of opera in the United States of America, starting with the popular importation of Puccini’s verismo style and through to the diversification and development of opera and musical theatre, considering the composition of Porgy and Bess and its subsequent incorporation into the operatic canon, the relationships between naturalistic theatre and opera adaptations of the same texts, the place of opera within Australian arts culture, and the impact of broadcast and recording technology on the genre.

59 Abel, Opera in the Flesh: Sexuality in Operatic Performances, 31.
PART C

Opera in Contemporary Culture
Voices in the distance: Hello! Hello!
Alla “Polka”! Alle “Palme”!
Hello! Hello!

A baritone from inside: “La lontano là lontan, quanto piangerà!”

(Nick comes out from behind the stairs with a lit candle. He uses it to light all the other candles on the tables and on the bar, upstairs and on all sides. The “Polka” is suddenly aglow and groups of miners burst in having returned from the mining chores at camp.)

Harry, Joe, Bello and others: Hello, Nick, Hello!

Nick: Buona sera, ragazzi!

Bello, Joe and some others: ‘Dooda, dooda day…’

Harry: Sigari, Nick!

Joe: E Whisky!

Giocomo Puccini, *La fanciulla del West*

Puccini’s *La fanciulla del West* premiered in New York in 1910, commissioned by the then fledgling Metropolitan Opera Company. Adapted from the play *The Girl of the Golden West* by David Belasco, *La fanciulla del West* was a grand Italian opera about America, composed by a man not well acquainted with the Wild West; in the opening scene a group of cowboys storm into a bar calling ‘Hello’ and singing ‘Dooda, dooda, day’ before segueing into Puccini’s distinctive Italian lyrical phrases. The opera’s vision of the United States is one typical of the nineteenth century: a land of wild spaces to be conquered by brave and industrious immigrants, the baritone’s early lament “La lontano là lontan, quanto piangerà” (Back home, far away, how much she’ll weep) speaking directly of the anxiety felt by first generation Americans in deserting their families in their native lands.

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Complete with romance, the wilds of California, and stereotyped Native Americans (named ‘Billy Jackrabbit’ and ‘Wowkle’), the performance signified the meeting point of the grand European operatic tradition and turn-of-the-century American sensibilities.

Before identifying individual thematic and stylistic changes to opera in the twentieth century, there is one significant shift that justifies particular attention as it anticipates several of these other thematic developments: the impact of psychoanalysis on opera. The most significant thematic trends in twentieth-century opera are prefigured by this developing awareness of the mental interior: the exploration of sexuality, madness, and the position of women in society. In their Lacanian study *Opera’s Second Death*, Žižek and Dolar argue that opera came to an end at the beginning of the twentieth century simultaneously with the birth and popularisation of psychoanalysis. The authors define opera in a Wagnerian light as an exploration of fantasy, and as such, the genre is challenged by the threat of psychoanalysis laying bare the unconscious motivations that underpin these kinds of fictional worlds. In declaring the death of the genre Žižek and Dolar suggest several candidates as the last opera (a selection of turn-of-the-century works on sexual themes post Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*): Strauss’ *Der Rosenkavalier* and *Salome*, Shostakovich’s *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, Berg’s *Lulu*, and Puccini’s final opera *Turandot*, left incomplete at the time of the composer’s death in 1926.

For Žižek, *Turandot* becomes a candidate for the last opera on the grounds that Puccini was caught between two forms of dominant cultural expression, the mythic and the psychological:

> ...let us not forget that *Turandot* was composed in the early 1920s, when Puccini already heard the music of Schoenberg and Stravinsky, when Freud’s discoveries were already exerting their impact. Within these coordinates (which do leave their trace in the very figure of Turandot) – there is no place for such a ghastly femme fatale in the late Romantic universe, the standard Puccini finale is structurally impossible. The only way to avoid the happy ending would have been to accomplish the fateful passage into the properly modern posttragic [sic.] universe, a universe whose horror undermines the very possibility of tragic dignity and in which monstrous figures like Lulu and Salome abound – a step Puccini was not ready to take.²

Similarly in his *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, Adorno claims that the social changes and political events of the 1920s and 30s rendered opera irrelevant, but leaves space for close adaptations of existing plays that provide an “autonomous structure alien to the music drama of times past.” As

identified in the proceeding chapter, Adorno has particular regard for Berg’s Wozzeck: “Wozzeck is a music drama starting out from the impulses of the main characters, with which the music empathizes, but simultaneously it points beyond the form it kindled for a last time, with a poetry already far in the past. It did this by clinging to the words more faithfully than had ever been done.”

However, here Adorno is identifying a particular historical moment that allowed for the success of Wozzeck that has now passed; “After Berg, resistance to the operatic imitation of states of mind became universal.” In the first thirty years of the twentieth century, opera’s thematic interest in madness was matched by a structural destabilisation, which Mordden describes as ‘contrapositional’ composition, a style where music and words are played off one another to create expressive dissonance: “It is jazz and an abrupt neo-classicism, busy with shapes more than melody, and atonalism, invented so music could be expressionist, too. It is opera gone mad.”

In Illness as Metaphor, Susan Sontag also specifically distinguishes the thematic twentieth-century literary interest in madness as a metaphorical link between unhealthy environments and unhealthy minds: “the idea of an organically contaminated, objectively pathogenic environment reappeared in the notion of a psychologically contaminated ambiance that produced a disposition to mental illness.” Here suggesting Debussy’s Pelleas et Melisande as a particularly vivid example, an opera “in which everyone avows feelings of weakness and being lost, and some are already ailing; with its old, decaying castle that lets in no light; where the ground is full of subterranean terrors and dank or watery depths into which one can fall – all the correlatives of miasma, minus the stench – seems, to us, supremely a portrait of psychological sickness, of neurosis.” In the light of this turn-of-the-century psychological probing the singing cowboys of La fanciulla del West appear joyfully oblivious to the changes occurring in the literary world around them, singing perhaps the last hurrah of a simpler narrative world. The premiere of the opera in 1910 also roughly corresponds with the date on which, in Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown Virginia Woolf stated, “human character changed,” distinguishing between the Edwardian and Georgian approaches to fiction, and ushering in an era of desperate and intimate investment in character in all genres of literature: “Thus it is that we hear all round us, in poems and novels and biographies, even in newspaper articles and essays, the sound of breaking and

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3 Adorno, Introduction to the Sociology of Music, 75.
4 Ibid., 76.
5 Mordden, Opera in the Twentieth Century: Sacred, Profane, Godot, 137.
6 Sontag, Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors, 131.
7 Ibid.
8 Woolf, Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown, the Hogarth Essays, 4.

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falling, crashing and destruction.” While Woolf’s discussion relates most specifically to English literature and the modern novel, several points of her argument resonate with the changes in narrative music that occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century when read through Adorno, Žižek and Dolar.

It is what Žižek describes as the “properly modern posttragic universe” that I am interested in exploring further in the context of twentieth-century performance culture, and American popular culture in particular: how did opera cease occupying the realm of fantasy and move into exploration of potentially monstrous inflections of psychological character. The thematic break established by Žižek is polemically blunt: there are, for example, psychologically resonant gothic dramas that bridge the gap between the epic and the post-tragic, such as Britten’s 1954 adaptation of Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw*, Philip Glass’ 1987 adaptation of Edgar Allen Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher*, and Stephen Schwartz’s *Séance on a Wet Afternoon* (2011), after Bryan Forbes 1964 film adaptation of Mark McShane’s novel. In adapting a greater variety of literary sources, however, opera has moved from being an expression of unconscious desire through fantasy to become a genre for the more explicit and almost clinical exploration of many forms of psychological conflict, as Bokina suggests: “In the first decade of the twentieth century, Vienna’s deep psychological sensitivity [referring here to Strauss’s *Elektra* and Schoenberg’s *Erwartung*] pushed operatic madness beyond the isolated mad scene to the entire mad opera.” The type of opera that Žižek and Dolar declare dead at the start of the twentieth century is a different beast to the type of opera that allows dramatic explorations of contemporary society in adaptations of American urban domestic dramas, which, through association with spoken theatre and the Broadway musical, suggested an alternate route for the development of opera to the mythical allegories of European operatic modernism.

While opera is not often discussed specifically through the critical lens of modernism, this interest in the psychological links the performance genre to the thematic bond between modernism and themes of madness. Louis Sass, for instance, describes how the contemporaneous development of modernism and schizophrenia as a diagnostic category in the late nineteenth and early twentieth
century, describing how the illness’s “mutations of selfhood”\textsuperscript{11} resemble some of the characteristics of the modernist movement in visual art and literature. Later he discusses Artaud, who, as both a diagnosed schizophrenic and an influential theorist of twentieth-century aesthetics, is worth special consideration when conceptualising the significance of madness in modernist aesthetics, and is described by Sass as struggling to reconcile his fragmented personal identity with his vision for violently transcendental art: “Artaud did desire to eclipse the mind through ecstatic sensation and fusion with the ambient world; yet far from being his primordial condition, this was an escape he never achieved - not through drugs, not through the theatre of cruelty, not even through his own quest for the primitive.”\textsuperscript{12} This identification of interest in the primitive refers to Artaud’s trip to Mexico in 1936, where he attempted to find emotional release in a typically primitivist exploration of various local rituals, a strategy of the kind that came to be quite frequently employed as an escape from rationality even in more conventional art and theory in the early twentieth century, as I will discuss further in the following chapter in relation to the conflict between primitivism and the artistic contributions of African American artists in the United States.

In addition to sharing elements of this crisis of stable identity, Sass identifies that modernism and madness share the structural similarity of being defined in relation to a formal norm:

> Might ‘modernism’ be only a negative category, an utterly diverse collection of styles and attitudes, linked by nothing more than that most elusive of attributes - the sheer fact of deviating from a norm (in this case, from the aesthetic conventions of preceding generations)? Actually there is no need to be so nihilistic - not a single underlying essence, perhaps, but at least a common thread or two […] both modernism and postmodernism are imbued with hesitation and detachment, a division or doubling in which the ego disengages from normal forms of involvement with nature and society, often taking itself, or its own experiences, as its own object.\textsuperscript{13}

Sass explicitly describes modernism as embracing the Dionysian rather than the Apollonian aspect of art, a further illumination of how \textit{Death in Venice} encapsulates many of the interesting intersections between modernism and contemporary opera. As has been identified previously, Britten’s work fits well within the model of the psychological drama, as from the very beginning of \textit{Death in Venice} narrative action is framed with regard to mental states, as Rupprecht argues: “As

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 239.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 37.
Aschenbach’s mind spins unproductively, we sense immediately that Venice itself will be ultimately just a picturesque exterior, the backdrop to a story where cardinal events belong to a mental world. […] What Aschenbach says verbally is always the voicing of a psychological interior, the articulation of consciousness.”

This focus on the mental interior becomes a problem when the impulse to psychoanalyse characters and themes leads to the largely unnecessary pathologisation of composers themselves, as in McClatchie’s analysis of Britten’s Owen Wingrave as the composer’s “exploration of the possibility of coming out.” McClatchie’s discussion draws a parallel between the pacifism of the opera’s title character and Britten’s homosexuality, but without sufficient acknowledgement of the fact that Britten was also a pacifist.

With this kind of dramatic exploration of interior spaces, the themes of sexuality and gender have come to be explored more explicitly in twentieth-century opera than in previous compositions, however this is a delicate distinction to make as the operatic genre has been historically associated with sensuality, the presentation of sexual themes, and to varying degrees, an identifiably camp aesthetic. In her early exploration “Notes on Camp” Susan Sontag considers several factors in her definition when considering opera: “whenever there is development of character, camp is reduced. Among operas for example, La Traviata (which has some small development of character) is less campy than Il Trovatore (which has none).” Earlier in the essay she claims that the seriousness of Wagner’s opera discounts him from camp, but Richard Strauss’ opera is sufficiently frivolous to qualify. By this criterion twentieth-century opera, with its in-depth exploration of personal conflict, can only be considered less camp than earlier opera. As previously discussed, many critics working in new musicology, such as Abel and Koestenbaum, have examined closely the appeal of opera to gay and lesbian audiences from a personal and critical perspective, an understanding that has different implications for modern audiences than does the conventional campiness of musical theatre.

In here identifying the prevalence of Queer aesthetics in twentieth-century opera, I am not simply referring to the type of theatrical male homosexuality unpacked by Sontag. Queer opera studies generally acknowledge this dimension of camp, but also refer to specific stylistic features of the genre that lend themselves to queer readings – some of which have fallen out of favour in the

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14 Rupprecht, Britten’s Musical Language, 245.
16 Sontag, Against Interpretation, 286.
twentieth century – such as countertenor roles for men (with Britten’s operas containing a few notable exceptions: Oberon in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and the Voice of Apollo in *Death in Venice*) and trouser-roles for women. Nonetheless, modern opera has occasionally come to establish a critical and interrogative position towards sexuality and sexual themes. Žižek & Dolar similarly identify this jump in sexual explicitness in opera between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: “The gap that nonetheless separates Strauss from Mozart concerns the status of the sexual act. It’s not that people do not make love in Mozart – on the contrary, all his plots turn around it – the point is, rather, that the reference to the sexual act is wholly abstract, lacking in earthly substance, somehow like the fade-in after the couple’s embrace in the good old days of Hayes Production Code Hollywood.”

Even in *Don Giovanni*, Mozart’s opera about a nefarious philanderer, sex and sexual desire are depicted at a remove from the actions of the characters: the plot turns on scandal, but nothing particularly scandalous makes it onto the stage. From the innovative turn-of-the-century play adaptations *Salome* and *Pelleas et Melisande*, a degree of sexual explicitness rarely seen in earlier romantic works can be identified along with a new interrogative attitude towards the libidinal investment in opera spectatorship, resonating with Sontag’s final statement in ‘Against Interpretation’ that “In place of hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.”

The cultural assumptions, including those relating to camp and sexual investment in the work, exist in relation to opera’s structural features, with some types of opera resonating with particular audiences. In the context of music drama from the United States in particular, these relationships are complicated by the separation of American musical theatre and domestic opera, as I will examine with relation to George Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* in the following chapter. Structural distinctions between different varieties of narrative music performance are difficult to consistently defend, and often considered to be primarily thematic. Jeremy Tambling discusses these different avenues of opera’s development in “Towards a Psychopathology of Opera,” where, following Roland Barthes and Walter Benjamin, opera is contextualised in the wake of postmodern theory arguing in specific reference to developments in American lyric theatre in the twentieth century. Tambling argues and that “a basic distinction between [opera and musicals] is impossible to maintain: it is not worth trying to argue that opera is inherently better or more serious; sung musicals often have the defence that they work within operatic styles to parody them, thus polarizing European opera against

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17 Žižek and Dolar, *Opera’s Second Death*, 209.
American music theatre.” In this section I will be specifically discussing operas based on iconic American literary texts - beginning with the iconic *Porgy and Bess*, through adaptations of Tennessee Williams, John Steinbeck and other iconic American authors – works which all tend to derive their high culture status from the position the adapted texts have achieved in the United States literary canon. Several stylistic shifts developed symbiotically with these aforementioned thematic changes during the twentieth century, such as the way the birth and growth of the film industry came to influence opera staging, dramatic structure, acting style, and perhaps most significantly, audience expectations.

In discussions of composition style, opera is generally divided into two main categories: the number opera and the through-composed opera. As the name suggests, the number opera is characterized by ‘numbers’, memorable standalone arias or ensemble pieces linked by recitative or dialogue, typical of the grand opera of the nineteenth century (and particularly operas by Rossini and the early works of Verdi). The through-composed opera (strongly advocated by Wagner, but utilized by many earlier composers including Mozart) features harmonic content distributed more evenly over all lines of dialogue, so that individual songs are indistinguishable and lyrical passages are seldom repeated. Not all operas fall clearly into one of these categories; through-composition is characteristic of the Italian ‘verismo’ tradition, which generally eschews set pieces for the sake of musical naturalism, yet Puccini, generally acclaimed for his use of the verismo style in his later works, wrote some of the best-known numbers in opera. The composition of numbers emphasises certain parts of an adapted text, while dialogue may be more seamlessly incorporated into a through-composed piece. Through-composition became increasingly popular during the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, reflecting the influence of the increasing popularity of naturalism in stage drama, and correspondingly has been used in the adaptation of many naturalistic plays.

While putting forward their suggestions about the last opera Žižek and Dolar recognise that any statement of the death of the genre is a contentious one: “The astounding thing is the enormous operatic institution’s stubborn, zombielike existence after its demise; it not only is kept alive but is also growing steadily. At present, opera is larger and more complex than it ever was during its lifetime.” In other work Žižek consistently describes opera in appropriately pre-twentieth century

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20 Žižek and Dolar, *Opera’s Second Death*, 3.
terms, taking his examples from Mozart and Wagner, and describing the poetics of the genre in terms that cannot be applied consistently to twentieth-century drama with its frequently realist aesthetics, an opera typified by “a kind of symbolic exchange between the human subject and the divine master: when the subject, the human mortal, by very way of his offer of self-sacrifice, surmounts his finitude and attains the divine heights, the master responds with the sublime gesture of grace, the ultimate proof of his humanity.”21 This assumption is not Žižek’s alone - in his essay ‘Bourgeois Opera’ Adorno lists among the “most authentic” operas Il Trovatore and The Magic Flute, despite the fact - or perhaps because – he describes them as having overblown and childlike narratives.22 Opera continues to occupy this contradictory space between the symbolic and the explicitly sexual, which complicates reception of work that disavows these aesthetic characteristics.

America opera’s zombielike resurgence has resulted in the adaptation of a range of canonical domestic dramas, with composers illustrating different attitudes to the role of music in expressing or complicating the emotional frameworks of the text. While, as Edward Latham identifies, analysis of opera in the twentieth century tends to focus on the work of European post-expressionist composers, such as Strauss, Berg, Schoenberg, Janáček and Britten, and their experimental embrace of an eclectic range of modernist influences, in the United States a different type of opera became popular, bringing with it its own implications for dramatic structure:

Determined to develop a uniquely American operatic style and laboring to various degrees under the strong influence of the European grand opera tradition, composers from Joplin to Sondheim opted to continue the development of a strategic approach to tonality begun by late Romantic composers such as Verdi, Massenet, and Puccini, among others. Their incorporation of elements from the folk, popular and jazz idioms necessitated a compositional approach that included a substantive role for tonality, broadened to include extended chords (ninth, eleventh, and thirteenth) and non-dominant cadential progressions, an approach made all the more striking by virtue of the fact that, following Wagner’s operatic “emancipation of the cadence” with his opera Tristan und Isolde (1859), tonality as defined by standard linear and harmonic progression was no longer considered to be a requirement for a successful composition.23

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23 Latham, Tonality as Drama: Closure and Interpretation in Four Twentieth-Century Operas, 9.
Latham’s analysis is based on both musical progression and the progression of individual characters towards their goals, as a response to what he perceives as the absence of formal theory about the relationship between musical structure and dramatic structure in contemporary opera. In identifying that many characters in twentieth-century operas fail to achieve their goals established in the narrative, he notes that the tragedy of these opera’s plots is reflected in the interruption that characterises harmonic progression within these compositions.

In approaching American opera, I will focus on how composers have used the genre to redefine American popular mythology. As Kramer identifies, the popularity of adaptation in American opera simplifies this task: “As movies do, opera in America today often stakes its artistic claims on the reproduction of an older literary work. With opera in particular, the work comes more often than not from the national canon. The opera tells the story of America by retelling one of America’s stories; tragic stories for the most part, but with a particular form that […] supports a national mythology that operas repeat and heighten – opera heightens tragic myth like nothing else can – without exactly admitting it, or even knowing it.”24 American opera emerged in the twentieth century to combine the stylistic particularity of psychologically focused literaturopers popular in Europe at the turn of the century, with a popularist and naturalistic sensibility borrowed from the commercial Broadway musical. However before discussing how this influence has shaped specific American operas I will first briefly discuss the significant differences between musical theatre and opera as performance genres and how these differences inform the popular reception and critical perspectives on different compositions.

Opera and musical theatre, while united by lavish theatricality and occasionally incomprehensible lyrics, are nonetheless subject to varying critical responses and have very different relationships to broader American culture. In developing definitions that distinguish between the opera and musical theatre as performance genres there are many possible distinctions that can be recognised based on a range of compositional features in music drama: the style of narrative, use of language, characterisation, the style and structural use of music, and the employment of song and spoken dialogue. Institutional factors have also had significant influence on the development of the two performance genres, opera being primarily state- and patron-funded whereas musicals are most often produced commercially. However the distinction between opera and musical theatre has

proved particularly nebulous in the United States, where the two national theatre traditions matured side-by-side in the first decades of the twentieth century, in a cultural environment where existing performance culture was largely imported from Europe.

The ability to distinguish between the two forms is relevant for the purposes of considering adaptation only in so far as the specific structural features of each form unavoidably influence the way that the adapted text is presented on stage. New York Times opera critic Anthony Tommasini argues that the distinction between musical theatre and opera is clearly marked by the priority of language in the piece:

Here’s the difference: Both genres seek to combine words and music in dynamic, felicitous and, to invoke that all-purpose term, artistic ways. But in opera, music is the driving force; in musical theater, words come first.

This explains why for centuries opera-goers have revered works written in languages they do not speak. Though supertitles have revolutionized the art form, many buffs grew up without this innovation and loved opera anyway. As long as you basically know what is going on and what is more or less being said, you can be swept away by a great opera, not just by music, but by visceral drama. […]

If you accept the distinction that words have the upper hand in musical theater but music does in opera, then lots of matters fall right into place: the nature of lyrics, singing styles, subject matter, orchestration, musical complexity. Theatergoing audiences may not care much whether a show is a musical or an opera. But the best achievements in each genre, and the occasional standout hybrid work (I’m thinking of Bernstein’s “Candide” and Adam Guettel’s “The Light in the Piazza”) have been from composers and writers who grounded themselves in a tradition, even while reaching across the divide.25

Tommasini’s analysis here is situated within an article contextualising several recent difficult to classify theatre works, but in describing opera’s driving force as “visceral drama,” he suggests that the audience’s embodied relationship to the genre described by feminist and queer theorists is shared with the broader public. As the United States’ own native variety of music drama, the aesthetic principles of Broadway musicals have their own political implications: appealing to queer audiences in a similar fashion to opera, but also often fundamentally conservative in their narrative resolutions of social problems. Tommasini’s claim that it is the priority of language that defines the musical is relevant in that with spoken dialogue and songs that often feature conventionally verse-chorus structure and therefore often repeat lines of song so they can be more readily understood by the audience, although the ease of deciphering the language of a piece only arguably indicates that this

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language is the dominant component of the composition. In the case of pieces that straddle the boundary between the two genres, arguments for inclusion in one or another are most frequently made on the basis of structural elements (such as whether the piece is through-composed or song based) or musical style.

The arbitrary nature of the distinction between mid-century American musicals and opera is most obviously exemplified by the reception of two of Leonard Bernstein’s lyric adaptations, *Candide* (1956), after Voltaire, and *West Side Story* (1957), after Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. *Candide* is generally considered an operetta, whereas *West Side Story* is unambiguously classified as a musical. In this case there no immediately apparent difference in the status of the adapted texts; considering nineteenth-century assumptions about the subject matter of opera one might consider the Shakespearean tragedy a more likely opera than the black comedy, but the two pieces were written simultaneously by Bernstein between 1954 and 1956, and musical passages were transferred between the two pieces, the music of “Officer Krupke” originally from *Candide*, as was “One Hand, One Heart” and “O Happy We” originally from the bridal shop scene in *West Side Story*. Like many American composers, and his English contemporary Benjamin Britten, Leonard Bernstein was interested in creating an accessible national classical music tradition. In the year before he wrote *Candide*, he is quoted as saying: “If I can write one real, moving American opera that any American can understand (and one that is notwithstanding, a serious musical work), I shall be a very happy man.”

Interesting here are his parenthetical remarks about “serious musical work,” echoing the frequently stated concerns of Gershwin a decade earlier, as I will identify shortly. Like Gershwin, Bernstein considered himself to be a classical composer at heart. As Helen Smith identifies, by the time Bernstein was composing in the 1940s and ‘50s, “American opera had already begun to develop a national style of prosody, through the works of Blitzstein [composer of *The Cradle Will Rock*], Virgil Thompson, George Gershwin and Gian-Carlo Menotti [composer of *The Consul* and librettist for Samuel Barber].” Bernstein, however, remained heavily influenced by European composers, including Benjamin Britten. As Smith identifies, at 28-years-old Bernstein had conducted the US premiere of Britten’s *Peter Grimes* at Tanglewood Music School in 1946, and several of his

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27 Stephen Sondheim (lyricist for *West Side Story*) cited in ibid., 23.  
29 Ibid.
compositions share structural features with that work: prominent use of irregular time signatures, such as 7/4; canonic imitation in duets where characters are moving from conflict to agreement; and spoken climax sequences.\textsuperscript{30} That Britten’s work should influence the development of American opera is not unexpected, as during his pacifist exile from the United Kingdom he lived for a short time in the notorious February House in Brooklyn, New York, alongside mid-century cultural icons including W. H Auden, Jane and Paul Bowles, Carson McCullers, and burlesque star Gypsy Rose Lee.

Jeremy Tambling argues that “a basic distinction between [between musicals and opera] is impossible to maintain: it is not worth trying to argue that opera is inherently better or more serious, since musicals often have the defence that they work within operatic styles to parody them, thus polarising European opera against American music theatre.”\textsuperscript{31} It is worth noting here that Tambling distinguishes the European operatic tradition against a specifically American music theatre, even though both (broadly defined) cultures have their own equivalent high and low culture music drama styles, and popular musical theatre in Europe at the turn of the twentieth century (including cabaret tradition in Germany and France and the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan in England) also parodied established operatic conventions. Early twentieth-century composers of American opera, developing the genre alongside and not necessarily separate from musical drama, similarly sought to establish a distinctive national style, explicitly expressing (as we will see) their ambitions to redefine the genre within American culture.

Discussions about the distinctions between the two forms tends to be unproductive when it relates to the classification of particular pieces, as these deliberations tend to be motivated by the desire to make claims of seriousness or significance, and elements of the distinctions often established between the two relate to each genre’s associations with class and assumptions of cultural significance. Peter Kivy suggests that these distinctions are frequently used to suggest something about the musical merit of the composition, where opera and music drama have distinct connotations:

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 25-6.
\textsuperscript{31} Tambling, “Towards a Psychopathology of Opera,” 265.
To call an “opera” - that is to say, an unequivocally musical work - a *dramma per musica* is to give it credit for being, in spite of its inherent musicality, faithful to the dramatic text. (This is the spirit in which we tend to call Mozart and Verdi great musical dramatists.) And to call something an “opera” that technically is not - say a Broadway show - is to pay it the compliment of elevating it from the level of “merely” musical theatre to that of “real music.” When, however, a work is problematical - when it is a question, as in the case of [Monteverdi’s] *Orfeo*, of what the work is - the temptation to call it *dramma per musica* rather than opera [...] clearly signals a reluctance to see the work as a bona fide musical one.32

Broadway musicals are referred to as operas not just as an assertion of the quality music composition, but also occasionally due to the use of structural features associated with opera, most commonly through-composition. *Sweeney Todd* and *A Little Night Music*, often performed by opera houses on account of how the demanding roles can be considered more suitable for classically trained singers, are both occasionally referred to as operas on those grounds. Although employing opera singers is not sufficient to justify classification as opera: Scott McMillin identifies that Frank Loesser’s *Most Happy Fellow* is almost entirely through-sung and requires an operatic singer as lead, but “no one confuses it with an opera,”33 but this is a contentious topic. In his discussion of the musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein, McMillin argues that “their status in the history of the genre depends on the enlargement they gave to the kinds of book the musical could take up, and not on a transformation of the musical into a quasi-operatic form.”34

In *The Musical as Drama*, titled in reference to Kerman’s *Opera as Drama*, McMillin does not explicitly define the musical formally in opposition to opera, but suggests that any significant distinction is primarily based on the narrative treatment of time: opera, due to generally being through composed, represents stage time as continuous; whereas musicals - which typically alternate between spoken dialogue, instrumental music and lyrical songs - place emphasis on characterisation and plot at alternate moments and suggest that stage time passes at different rates during songs than in other sections of the piece.35 McMillin takes issue with critical work that understands the American musical as an integrated unity of narrative, stylistic and structural elements (as the form is discussed in relation to the golden age musical, such as the work of Rogers and Hammerstein, following earlier

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34 Ibid., 21.
critical work on Wagner’s operas), arguing instead that in musicals the productive conflict between different elements is what gives musicals narrative and aesthetic substance. For opera, the suggestion in McMillin’s theory is that through-composed orchestration in opera provides a unified narrative voice, which may not be as effective in expressing narrative complexity and irony as is possible in the stage musical, but allows for the exploration of particular mental states through the actions of multiple characters. McMillin states, following Abbate’s work in Unsung Voices, that the musical drama can attain a “kind of narrative voicing, a melodic and harmonic world into which various characters enter at various times, not so much because they are like one another psychologically (although they may be), but because they belong to the same aesthetic design.” This way of associating characters with one another through similarity in aesthetic design is used in both the musical and opera, but can be less pronounced in opera where the musical narrative is generally more uniform. Michael Halliwell makes a similar argument to McMillin about narrative time when discussing the number opera (structurally resembling the musical) alongside the more conventional Romantic through-composed opera in his study of operatic adaptations of the work of Henry James: “The number opera has the flexibility to allow the operation of two time scales in which what can be called ‘naturalistic’ time allows the swift unfolding of event and plot, often in a quasi recitative style, while ‘psychological’ time allows the investigation of a state of mind or emotion utilizing the expansiveness of aria and ensemble.”

In correspondence with this nuanced understanding of the narrative music, Halliwell expresses scepticism about the twentieth-century trend of “increasing emphasis on fidelity to the original text” in adapted work, as the capacity for different uses of music to express narrative complexities differ considerably from the operation of narrative devices in a prose or spoken dramatic work. However, it does not necessarily follow that through-composition and excessive fidelity must go together, as different musical motifs can be associated with different themes even in a through-composed score and there are also many other ways that a narrative can be manipulated in a performance piece in addition to the way music is used. Indeed, the proliferation of musical styles and structural models available to classical musical composers in the later part of the twentieth century might be seen as an analogue to how in mainstream adaptation criticism increased

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36 Ibid., 1.
37 Ibid., 68.
38 Halliwell, Opera and the Novel, 28.
39 Ibid., 48.
technological development has come to allow more innovative adaptations in film. In *Double Exposure: Fiction into Film* (1985), Jay Boyum responds to the criticisms of Bluestone’s *Novels into Film* and Wagner’s *The Novel and Cinema* by identifying several changes in film during the second half of the twentieth century that have come to allow better adaptations: “…the widespread use of color, the development of handheld cameras, and the emphasis on location shooting to the increased pace and tempo of editing.”

Correspondingly the development of new musical and theatrical techniques in the twentieth century has allowed the development of interesting and dynamic operatic treatment of a variety of literary texts. A similar suggestion is made by Sutcliffe with regard to the evolution of musical style during the twentieth century, who suggests that “the breaking-up of the 19th century musical conventions – including the logic and decorum of the diatonic system – has in effect expanded the possibilities of expressiveness. Sounds that would have seemed meaningless a century ago are now potent with significance and dramatic consequence.”

But this expansive movement in musical forms is not without its own implications for narrative music – Sutcliffe bemoans the absence of rhetorical expression in the most musically progressive works of the late-twentieth century – while opera’s music has become increasingly dramatically expressive, the very role of the voice in these works has been called into question. The following chapter will consider developments in musical style and dramatic themes in the early twentieth century through consideration of the production history of Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*.

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41 Sutcliffe, *Believing in Opera*, 416.
42 Ibid.
9. American Vernacular Adaptation

There’s a boat dat’s leavin’ soon for New York,
Come with me, dat’s where we belong sister.
You an’ me kin live dat high life in New York.
Come wid me, dere we can’t go wrong, sister.
I’ll buy you de swellest mansion
Up on upper Fi’th Avenue
An’ through Harlem we’ll go struttin’
We’ll go a struttin’
An’ there’ll be nuttin’
Too good for you.

_Porgy and Bess_, Act III, Scene 2

In terms of domestic musical theatre in the United States, two prominent forms of popular entertainment far surpassed the popularity of opera during the first decades of the twentieth century: vaudeville, which presented visiting European stars such as Sarah Bernhardt alongside minstrel shows, music and other novelty acts; and the Chautauqua, a distinctive variety of live performance combining informative and polemic lectures, plays and music acts that seasonally toured settlements in agricultural regions across the country. While elements of the vaudeville tradition survived in the form of the Broadway musical, America’s own domestic form of lyric theatre, and later came to significantly influence the presentation of comedy and music in films, the Chautauqua, once described by Theodore Roosevelt as the “most American thing in America,” quickly became redundant as the film industry came to dominate popular American entertainment culture. While less popular, opera maintained a position of high cultural status and legitimacy over this period, and at the turn of the century cities around the country were building their own opera houses to host touring performing arts companies of various (often non-operatic) descriptions, as Alex Ross identifies: “Few of these venues had the resources to mount their own full-scale productions; instead, performances by travelling opera troupes and solo singers intermingled with band concerts, Shakespeare nights, Wild West revues, lectures, and other entertainments. (Oscar Wilde, on his American tour of 1882, took in a number of small-town opera houses.) Nevertheless, the choice of

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3 Ibid., 91.
name signifies the respect that opera commanded in the popular imagination, as the most extravagantly fulfilling spectacle of the age.\textsuperscript{4}

American opera, as defined against both popular musical theatre and productions of European operas (and operas by European composers, in the case of \textit{La fanciulla del West}), occupied a precarious position in the national cultural landscape in the first decades of the twentieth century, a position that is well illustrated by consideration of the production history and critical reception of George Gershwin’s \textit{Porgy and Bess}. First produced independently on Broadway in 1935, \textit{Porgy and Bess} was ground-breaking in that it empathetically portrayed African Americans in a drama originally intended for predominantly white audiences. This subject matter, along with Gershwin’s reputation as a composer of jazz-influenced popular music, contributed to the only marginal acceptance of the work as an opera at the time of the first performances, but over time the piece has come to be considered a significant part of the English-language operatic canon, particularly after the 1976 production by Houston Opera and the Metropolitan Opera’s first production of the piece in 1985.

Despite the significance the piece has come to have, in reviewing the correspondence between George Gershwin and his librettist DuBose Heyward (author of the adapted 1925 novella \textit{Porgy} and later play adapted with his wife Dorothy Heyward),\textsuperscript{5} it is apparent that Gershwin was initially equally motivated by the novelty of the concept of an opera about African American characters as he was by his interest in the narrative representation of a cultural minority group. In his first letter to Heyward proposing the project, Gershwin describes \textit{Porgy} as “still the most outstanding play that I know, about the colored people.”\textsuperscript{6} Previously, W. E. B. Du Bois had presented a model for black nationalist folk theatre in his 1913 historical pageant \textit{The Star of Ethiopia}, which embraced the operatic aesthetic with its inclusion of two excerpts of Verdi’s \textit{Aida},\textsuperscript{7} but otherwise few operas had been written or produced for performance by African Americans in first decades of the twentieth century. \textit{Porgy and Bess} clearly had less overtly political aims than Du Bois’ work, with early letters between Gershwin and Heyward suggesting that they were both writing under the influence of the

\textsuperscript{5} Dorothy Heyward originally started adapting the novel shortly after its publication without telling DuBose. Richard Crawford, “It Ain’t Neccesarily Soul: Gershwin’s ‘Porgy and Bess’ as a Symbol,” \textit{Annario Interamericano de Investigacion Musical} 8(1972): 18.
\textsuperscript{6} Letter, March 29, 1932. Box 64, unnumbered folder, George and Ira Gershwin Collection, Library of Congress.
vaudevillian foundations of the American lyric theatre tradition, which had implications for the presentation of race and class in the work. Heyward, for instance, hesitated initially to make an agreement on the rights to adapt the play as it was suggested that Al Jolson, famous blackface performer, had interest in playing the lead in a musical adaptation: “I have heard he was casting about for something more artistic than his usual Sonny Boy line, and what his real potentialities are, I have little idea […] Would it be possible to use Jolson, and arrange some sort of agreement with him, or is that too preposterous?”8 This suggestion to cast a white man in the central role of this sophisticated and tragic drama was not particularly appealing to Gershwin, who was committed to the idea of an African American cast:

I think that it is very interesting that Al Jolson would like to play the part of Porgy, but I really don’t know how he would be in it. Of course he is a very big star, who certainly knows how to put over a song, and it might mean more to you financially if he should do it – provided that the rest of the production were well done. The sort of thing I should have in mind for PORGY is a much more serious thing than Jolson could ever do. Of course I would not attempt to write music to your play until I had all the themes and musical devices worked out for such an undertaking. It would be more a labor of love than anything else. If you can see your way to making some money from Jolson’s version I don’t know that it would hurt a later version done by an all-colored cast.9

In an era when even famous African American vaudeville star Bert Williams was forced to wear blackface makeup in order to correspond more closely to the stereotyped appearance of nineteenth-century white minstrel performers,10 this casting decision was significant. It is also clear from these letters that it was Gershwin’s intention from very first enquiry that this piece was to be a ‘serious’ and ‘operatic’ version of the play, and a departure from his earlier more populist musical works. A few weeks later on the 14th of October, Gershwin wrote again to Heyward to stress further his reservations about Jolson: “I really don’t think that Jolson would consider doing an operatic version as I am quite sure that he would [consider] that out of his line. I have taken this attitude because I wouldn’t want to stand in the way of you making some money with your property at the present time, and also because I don’t believe that it would hurt a serious operatic version in any way. If

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8 Letter, May 20, 1932. Box 64, unnumbered folder, George and Ira Gershwin Collection, Library of Congress.
9 Letter, September 9, 1932. Box 64, unnumbered folder, George and Ira Gershwin Collection, Library of Congress.
anything further develops concerning Jolson I shall be happy to let you know.\textsuperscript{11} Due to the interest expressed by Jolson and in accordance with the austerity of the time, Heyward was initially forced by financial pressures to hold off on making a deal with Gershwin regarding the rights to \textit{Porgy}:

Miss Wood of the Century Play Company [Heyward's agents for the rights to \textit{Porgy}] writes that Jolson has been hot on her tail for the \textit{Porgy} book, and that in a ‘phone conversation with you, she was advised by you that his use of the story for his particular sort of musical play would not necessarily kill it for an eventual opera. As a matter of fact, upon my return here after my talk with you I learned of circumstances that have put me in a fairly tight spot financially, and that, and that alone, has prompted me to write to Miss Wood as per enclosed carbon. Of course what I would like to be able to afford would be to wait indefinitely for your operatic version, and to work with you myself without the least thought of the commercial angle.

It was not my idea to work in any way upon a possible Jolson musical, but merely to sell the story. Later I hope to work with you as we outlined in our recent conversation.

Please let me tell you that I think your attitude in this matter is simply splendid. It makes me all the more eager to work with you some day, some time, before we wake up and find ourselves in our dotage.\textsuperscript{12}

A year later in November 1933, with Jolson no longer in contention for the rights to the story, the two began work on the ‘serious’ opera adaptation.

Displaying a similar authorial relationship as to that between Britten and Piper during the adaptation of \textit{Death in Venice}, these letters between Gershwin and Heyward indicate that the two share a thorough dramaturgical understanding of the potential uses of music and non-verbal sound. Heyward describes making structural changes to the story and distinguishing important dialogue when drafting the libretto:

\begin{quote}
I have been thinking a lot about this job and have a pretty definite feeling about the treatment which I submit for your consideration. I feel more and more that all the dialog should be spoken. It is fast moving, and we will cut it to the bone, but this will give the opera speed and tempo. This will give you a chance to develop a new treatment, carrying the orchestration straight through the performance (as you suggested) but enriching it with pantomime and action on the stage, and with such music (singing) that grows out of the action. Also, in scenes like the fight, the whole thing can be treated as a unified composition drawing on lighting, orchestra, and the wailing of the crowd, mass sounds of horror from people, etc. instead of singing. It can be lifted to a terrific climax. That fight was treated with a great deal of noise in the play. It is not my idea of best art in handling it.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{11} Letter, October 14, 1932. Box 64, unnumbered folder, George and Ira Gershwin Collection, Library of Congress.

\textsuperscript{12} Letter, October 17, 1932. Box 64, unnumbered folder, George and Ira Gershwin Collection, Library of Congress.
I am offering a new idea for opening of scene as you will see from the script. The play opened with a regular riot of noise and color. This makes an entirely different opening, which I think is important. What I have in mind is to let the scene, as I describe it, merge with the overture, almost in the sense of illustration, giving the added force of sight and sound. I think it would be very effective to have the lights go out during overture, so that the curtain rises in darkness, then the first scene will begin to come up as the music takes up the theme of jazz from the dance hall piano. The songs which I have written for this part will fall naturally into the action and mood of the separate flashes of negro life.\footnote{Letter, November 12, 1933. Box 64, Folder 23, George and Ira Gershwin Collection, Library of Congress.}

Emphasis here is placed again on the race of the performers and the use of regional vernacular. To this end the two conducted research together, with Gershwin travelling in early January 1934 to visit Heyward in Charleston, South Carolina, where Gershwin hoped to “hear some spirituals and perhaps go to a colored café or two.”\footnote{Letter, November 25, 1933. Box 64, Folder 23, George and Ira Gershwin Collection, Library of Congress.} Authenticity in the presentation of African American characters was a concern of the authors, and as Richard Crawford identifies, Heyward had expressed interest in authenticity in commentary regarding the presentation of African Americans characters in Southern literature while working on the novel Porgy, suggesting in an article in The Bookman in 1925 that many authors were starting to move away from “good taste” and providing more complicated perspectives on “Negro life’ which were more sophisticated than the comical and dismissive accounts of black people in the South common at the time. It can be assumed that Heyward was attempting with Porgy to write a story with, in his own words, “the virtues of honesty and simplicity” even though “the skies may not be as blue, nor the women as universally beautiful, as when yesterday was at its high noon.”\footnote{Heyward cited in Crawford, “It Ain’t Necessarily Soul: Gershwin’s ‘Porgy and Bess’ as a Symbol,” 18.}

That the plot of Porgy and Bess relates to the tragic complication of a romantic relationship between the two title characters was also unusual for theatre concerning African Americans at the time. Popular vaudeville performer and producer Aida Overton Walker lamented this prejudice in a 1906 interview with Colored American Magazine. “In all the years I have appeared [in] and helped produce a great many plays of musical nature, there has never been even the remotest suspicion of a love story in any of them. During those same ten years I do not think there has been a single white company which has produced any kind of musical play in which a love story was not the central notion.”\footnote{Cited in Krasner, “‘The Pageant Is the Thing’: Black Nationalism and the Star of Ethiopia,” 321.}
While the romantic content of *Porgy and Bess* is presented with sincerity, it is marred by a problematic transcription of a racially stereotyped regional patois, as when Porgy serenades Bess in Act II, Scene I: “Want no wrinkle on yo’ brow, no-how, because de sorrow of de past is all done done. Oh, Bess, my Bess! De real happiness is jes’ begun.”17 It is also sexualised in a manner typical of early twentieth-century primitivism, the love affair between Crown and Bess even described as a “primitive scene of passion” by Heyward in a letter to Gershwin: “I have cut out the conventional negro vaudeville stuff that was in the original play and incorporated material that is authentic and [plenty] “hot” as well.”18

That Heyward “cut out the conventional negro vaudeville stuff” he had written into the play is also relevant to consideration of genre in lyric theatre. Aside from vaudeville and pageant performances that mixed vernacular and traditional music, the most significant precursor to Gershwin’s use of African American musical styles in *Porgy and Bess* was Louis Gruenberg’s opera adaptation of Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones*, which premiered at the Metropolitan Opera in 1933. Gershwin and Heyward do not mention *The Emperor Jones* directly in their correspondence, but Gershwin does at one point suggest auditioning a music teacher from Washington, D.C. for the baritone roles of Crown and Porgy, describing him as “the closest thing to a colored Lawrence Tibbett I have ever heard”19—Lawrence Tibbett being the white baritone who originated the title role of Brutus Jones in Gruenberg’s opera, wearing blackface (Tibbet appeared in costume and full black body paint, naked to the waist, on the cover of TIME magazine 193320).

The plot of O’Neill’s play concerns an African American man who escapes prison to a Caribbean island where he briefly establishes himself as emperor before the people of the island turn against him. The play was O’Neill’s first major success, but occupies an uneasy place in American theatre history due to the conflict between its ambiguous account of race and colonialism and its early use of African American performers in commercial theatre. Premiering in November 1920, *The Emperor Jones* was the first mainstream Broadway play to star an African American actor. In her article ‘Melancholy Bodies: Racial Subjectivity and Whiteness in O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones,*’ Shannon Steen

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18 Letter, February 6, 1934. Box 64, Folder 23, George and Ira Gershwin Collection, Library of Congress.
19 Letter, December 17, 1934. Box 64, Folder 23, George and Ira Gershwin Collection, Library of Congress.
describes several early twentieth-century dramatic works as part of a “replacement tradition of black actors performing in roles written by white authors, devised in order to express white anxieties.”

Like *Porgy and Bess*, O’Neill’s play has been praised for creating interesting dramatic roles for African American performers, but like *Porgy and Bess* strategically used African American performers to evoke the themes of literary primitivism popular among modernist authors at the time. As Steen identifies, white American authors came to use the “overdetermined racial qualities” of the African Americans characters they created to produce spectacle within ‘legitimate’ theatre: ‘The Emperor Jones taught Americans to read cross-racial borrowings within the context of the legitimate stage. Ironically, given the associations of blackness with sexuality, high-art experimental drama became “legitimate” using the highly illegitimate spectacle of the black body. The patina of legitimacy granted through literacy nevertheless promised the vulgar titillation of the already sexualised black body that had characterized racial borrowings by white stage practices in America from minstrelsy onwards.”

These cultural and racial tensions of the work were further compounded in Gruenberg’s opera adaptation, where Lawrence Tibbet was joined by African American opera singer Hemsley Winfield and other African American chorus dancers and singers, in what may have been the first appearance of African American performers on the Metropolitan Opera stage. The composition itself also borrowed from various folk music traditions, in what David Metzer describes as a colonial approach to African American culture, as while Gruenberg adopted elements of jazz and spiritual music into his own work, he frequently suggested that African American music was purely African and separate from American and European culture unless adopted into conventional music by white composers, and described these two traditions distinctly as ‘primitive’ and ‘civilized.’ Metzer suggests this often contradictory aesthetic framework was consistent with Gruenberg’s anxieties about culture and race: “Despite his ‘superior’ skills, Gruenberg suffered from anxieties over cultural borrowing: by appropriating African-American music, he mixed races, albeit symbolically. In his discussions of

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22 Ibid., 343.
23 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 57.
African-American music, he tried to allay fears of miscegenation, his rhetoric giving the impression that he controls this cultural transaction and can prevent racial pollution.” However, as with most Primitivist literature, the portrayal of African Americans and African American culture on stage is complicated by the use of African American characters as devices of expressionism and psychoanalytical fantasy.

Contemporary anxieties about the representation of race were more transparently addressed in following decades in works such as O’Neill’s ‘All God’s Chillun Got Wings,’ which proved much more controversial than The Emperor Jones, due to its multiracial cast and interracial marriage plot.27 The sort of excitement that was created for the theatre-going public by African American performers at the time is perhaps best exemplified by Orson Welles’ infamous ‘Voodoo’ Macbeth, produced in 1936 as part of the short-lived Federal Theatre Project. Welles’ extensively edited and abbreviated version of the play, America’s first professional black Shakespeare production, was set in Haiti and featured 43 witches played by a troupe of drummers including “a genuine witch doctor named Abdul.”28 Hallie Flanagan, the director of the Federal Theatre Project, described the production as “Emperor Jones gone beautifully mad.”29 Audiences were so convinced by the actors’ overblown exoticism that when Percy Hammond died a weeks after reviewing the performance negatively in the Herald Tribune, it was widely rumoured that the cast had caused his death by casting a magic curse.30

Gershwin and Heyward were undoubtedly attempting to play off this sense of cultural tension in Porgy and Bess, and they were concerned with preserving the novelty of the concept. In their letters Gershwin and Heyward also discuss and dismiss Virgil Thomson’s Four Saints in Three Acts, which premiered in February 1934, also written for an African American cast, with Gershwin holding particular derision for Gertrude Stein’s libretto, which he claims was “entirely in Stein’s manner, which means that it has the effect of a 5-year-old child prattling on,”31 a disdain perhaps partially motivated by jealously at the extreme excitement surrounding Stein’s appearance in New York in

26 Ibid.
30 Marguarite H Rippy, Orson Welles and the Unfinished RKO Projects: A Postmodern Perspective (Carbondale: SIU, 2009), 186.
31 Letter, February 26, 1934. Box 64, Folder 23, George and Ira Gershwin Collection, Library of Congress.
1934 for the opera’s premiere.\textsuperscript{32} The authors’ interest in Stein and Thompson’s work was also motivated by the difficulty in casting capable African American opera singers at a time when few singers had the opportunity for the necessary training (with some notable exceptions – aside from the singers cast in *The Emperor Jones*, Alex Ross has written about the unusual early success of Luranah Aldridge, daughter of early African American Shakespearean actor Ira Aldridge, who travelled to perform at the Bayreuth festival in 1896\textsuperscript{33}), and in their letters the two discuss the possibility of casting members of the cast of *Four Saints in Three Acts*.\textsuperscript{34}

The authors were also attempting to pioneer the use of American vernacular speech in opera, but in this respect *Porgy and Bess* was pipped to the post by Howard Hanson’s *Merry Mount* (1934), based on Richard L. Stokes’ dramatic poem (itself loosely based on Nathaniel Hawthorne’s ‘The Maypole of Merry Mount’) about a seventeenth-century conflict between Puritans and hedonists in Massachusetts.\textsuperscript{35} The opera was phenomenally successful at its premiere, receiving over fifty curtain calls after its first performance at the Metropolitan Opera and had its season extended from three to twelve performances.\textsuperscript{36} In the 1930s the idea of American composers producing opera about their own country and in their own dialect was still in itself a novelty. In correspondence Heyward reflects on the difficulties he faced in paring demotic language with Gershwin’s music: “I think I have managed to get the lyrical parts to conform to the rhythms of ordinary speech, and also the idiom, and what I have hoped to do is to ease these passages in so that there will be no consciousness of a break in the flow and no feeling of a set song in the conventional operatic sense.”\textsuperscript{37} In the same letter he adds his thoughts on hearing the radio broadcasts of *Four Saints in Three Acts* and *Merry Mount*, saying of the latter: “From the advance ballyhoo I thought that something revolutionary was coming that might steal our thunder, but it seemed to me to be pretty much the conventional thing.”

In his 1936 discussion of the impact of Howard Hanson’s work, including *Merry Mount*, Burnet Tuthill describes the slow progress to the definition of American musical style: “The final alloy has yet to come from the proverbial melting-pot of America, if ever one combination can be discovered

\textsuperscript{32} Not only did Stein attract large crowds at her public appearances, but references to the opera and its title were made in multiple department store window displays of women’s fashions. Deborah M. Mix, “Gertrude Stein’s Currency,” in *Modernist Star Maps: Celebrity, Modernity, Culture*, ed. Aaron Jaffe and Jonathan Goldman (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 93.


\textsuperscript{34} Letter, February 26, 1934. Box 64, Folder 23, George and Ira Gershwin Collection, Library of Congress.


\textsuperscript{36} Burnet C Tuthill, “Howard Hanson” in *The Musical Quarterly* 22, no.2 (1936):150

\textsuperscript{37} Letter, March 2, 1934. Box 64, Folder 23, George and Ira Gershwin Collection, Library of Congress.
that will represent our vast and diversified population as a single unit […] How can we expect a unity of musical expression in the face of such varied social, climatic, and racial differences if our music is to be what it should be, a true reflection of the vital background from which it springs?

In praising Howard Hanson, Tuthill states that in his music there can be found “no reminiscence or flavor of any folk music, no negro spiritual or fiddlers breakdown, no mountain, cowboy or Indian element, but a frank melody,” indicating why Gershwin, with his folk influences and popular musical intonations sets himself at odds with prior popular work. The tension surrounding the perceived legitimacy of conventional opera over popular music and the stylistic claims each holds to American operatic style and themes is reflected by Arthur Mendel’s report from New York in the 1934 issue of The Musical Times, prior to the Broadway premiere of Porgy and Bess:

In a recent issue of the Musical Times there was a discussion of the place that Gershwin occupies in American music. It would be very easy to get an exaggerated impression of that place from the fact that Mr. Gershwin’s new pieces are always performed by leading orchestras as soon as they are written. But that, I am afraid, is because they have a sure-fire box-office appeal rather than because they are taken seriously as music. Gershwin is thought of as a leading American composer only on the edges of the musical world, and Mr. Walter Damrosch, who has been his champion, can hardly be said to represent an exception to that statement. Unfortunately the extensity of the musical public is here, as everywhere in inverse proportion to its intensity, so that it would be easy to think from Mr. Gershwin’s popular success, even in the concert world, that he is an important figure. No serious musicians here, however, consider him one.

Our serious musicians have recently had another problem presented to them in deciding what to say about the latest ‘American opera’ – ‘Four Saints in Three Acts,’ by Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson. Readers of the Musical Times hardly need to be told that this opus is really in five Acts, and that the number of saints is not even a multiple of four. ‘If it were possible to kill fifty million Chinen by pressing a button, would it be done? ‘Saint Theresa not interested.’ This sort of thing is set, for a space of one and a half hours or so, to music which is a very watery compound of many unimportant ingredients. It is often amusing, but to me, at least, more often not. Much has been made of Virgil Thomson’s skill at prosody, and undoubtedly that the prosody of ‘Four Saints in Three Acts’ is good. But where neither the words nor the music need to make sense, good prosody would be easy.

Another American opera (‘Merry Mount,’ by Howard Hanson, director of the Eastman School of Music in Rochester) has just been performed at the Metropolitan. It is on a theme from the history of the Plymouth Colony.

38 Tuthill, 140
39 Tuthill, 145.
The premières of *Four Saints in Three Acts* and *Merry Mount* made 1934 a key year in the definition of the American operatic voice. Note also that Gertrude Stein’s libretto is subject to attack from not just Gershwin and Heyward, but also from music critics who deride Gershwin’s relevance to “serious” modern music. Here there exists an interesting conflict between the apparent investment in the idea of seriousness and the resistance to the influence of literary modernism (as exemplified by the disdain of the authors toward Gertrude Stein) displayed by both critical defenders of the ‘serious’ and Gershwin as a populist composer. It seems at this point in American cultural history, modernism, and particularly modernist drama, was not considered synonymous with seriousness to the extent that it is now, although one of Gershwin’s earlier compositions, *Rhapsody in Blue*, which combined classical and jazz influences, was described in a contemporary review in *Vanity Fair* as “the finest piece of serious music that has ever come out of America.”\(^{41}\) It is also interesting that the race of the performers of *Four Saints in Three Acts* is not mentioned in Mendel’s review. Two years later, Mendel predictably dismisses *Porgy and Bess* out of hand: “I have not heard it, but am reliably informed (what I should have believed anyway) that its hit songs are good Gershwin, on a level with his best musical comedy efforts, and that its operatic portions are a rehash of many successful operas, having nothing organic or really original about them.”\(^{42}\) The response of contemporary white critics was mild in comparison to some of the negative reviews from the African American press, as Latham identifies, citing James Hicks’ review describing the opera as “the most insulting, the most libelous, the most degrading act that could possibly be perpetrated against the Negro people.”\(^{43}\)

While it is clear from his correspondence that Gershwin considered his own work to be ‘serious’ music as opposed to popular, examination of his musical philosophy suggests that Gershwin did not set much store by these distinctions, and moreover describes jazz as embodying a particularly American cultural spirit: “Jazz is music; it used the same notes that Bach used. When Jazz is played in another nation, it is called American. When it is played in another country, it sounds false. Jazz is the result of the energy stored up in America.”\(^{44}\) While Gershwin’s embrace of the influence of jazz and other folk music caused critical consternation with the premiere of *Porgy and Bess* in 1935, his ability to recognise the cultural relevance of these traditions is what has cemented the position of the

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43 Latham, *Tonality as Drama: Closure and Interpretation in Four Twentieth-Century Operas*, 101.

piece in the American operatic canon, and anticipated the deconstruction of formal barriers between
genres of music in the later half of the century. The death of Gershwin in July 1937 marked the end
of what might have otherwise become a productive artistic relationship between Heyward and
Gershwin, with Gershwin suggesting in January 1937: “How about planning another opera or
operetta for the future? I am sure you could turn out a grand book and I am very anxious to start
thinking about a serious musicale. So put your mind to it, old boy, and I know you can evolve
something interesting.”

While the retrospective inclusion of *Porgy and Bess* in the American operatic repertoire has gone some
way to redeeming Gershwin’s reputation as a classical composer, critical commentary on the piece
does not provide a full account of its significance, and, particularly in the case of earlier criticism,
reflects the complicated relationship between race and dramatic art in the United States. Addressing
this lack of critical commentary on the piece, Lawrence Starr cites critic Eric Salzman, who, having
previously described *Porgy and Bess* as a musical comedy, rescinds his dismissal: “Porgy… is really a
grand opera which has been consistently and awkwardly cut back to Broadway-musical proportions
by the realities of American cultural life.” Starr likewise describes, after attending the 1977
production at the Houston Grand Opera, his “amazed realisation, about twenty minutes into the
performance, that I had lost all consciousness of the fact that the characters in the opera were black,
because I was witnessing a compelling human drama” (emphasis as in original). These assessments
of the work, although arguing for its relevance and cultural value, are troubling as they imply that for
the authors both grand opera and human drama are quintessentially not-black; blackness must become
invisible - as, presumably, whiteness is by default - to achieve transcendent moments in drama.
Great drama does not access universal emotions by transcending culturally specific detail, it achieves
these moments through relatable accounts of particular human experiences. Starr and Salzman’s
comments are representative of a great deal of writing on *Porgy and Bess*, most frequently in work that
attempts to reassert the value of the composition without taking into account the complicated
cultural history of the work. To assert that “it is best simply to say that *Porgy and Bess* is an opera
about human beings, who in this particular story happen to be black,” as Starr does, not only

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45 Letter, January 26, 1937. Box 64, Folder 25, George and Ira Gershwin Collection, Library of Congress.
48 Ibid., 26.
illustrates an unsophisticated understanding of racial politics, but considering the composition history of the work also overlooks the fact that the story was written deliberately and specifically about African Americans by white men.

While Starr’s perspective on race is problematic, he does make a useful point about criticisms of the characters of the opera as “unconvincing and one dimensional,” arguing that this is due to conventions of the operatic genre rather than an oversight on the part of Gershwin and Heyward, suggesting a disjunct between the narrative requirements of complex emotional drama and opera’s requirement for room to be provided for the expressive power of music. While describing the libretto of Porgy and Bess as relatively conventional, Starr also distinguishes Bess from earlier female characters in opera: “If we compare Bess with other operatic heroines, such as Bizet’s Carmen or Berg’s Marie, her true stature emerges clearly. Unlike Carmen’s or Marie’s tragedy, Bess’s is ultimately a psychological one: she possesses profound self-understanding, and understanding of others, and yet cannot use this knowledge to really help herself to do anything more than survive.”

While Starr here distinguishes Bess from Marie, the tragic heroine of Wozzeck, and in doing so his analysis counterintuitively associates Porgy and Bess with the psychoanalytical references typical of criticism of Wozzeck where interpersonal tragedy is framed as a metaphor for psychological collapse, associating modern American drama with the terminology of psychoanalysis used in analysis of European opera. Structural analysis also suggests similarities between the two. As Andrew Davis and Howard Pollack argue: “the libretto hews remarkably closely to the play, to the extent that Porgy and Bess - not unlike the operas of Berg - can be described as a musical setting of a spoken play with the insertion of some set pieces.”

While for contemporary audiences Porgy and Bess may lack subtlety in its presentation of African American characters, its growing popularity throughout the twentieth century exposed audiences to black performers on stage and has allowed singers to negotiate other roles within the standard operatic repertoire. Even as late as 1985 when the opera premiered at the Metropolitan Opera Company, choreographer Carmen de Lavallade recounts that “Practically the whole company of

49 Starr, “Toward a Reevaluation of Gershwin’s ‘Porgy and Bess’,” 27.
50 Ibid., 28.
*Porgy and Bess* was hired outside of the Met Opera,”

because of the lack of African American dancers in the ballet roster. According to de Lavallade, *Porgy and Bess* was one of the few operas for which black dancers were hired, and this considerably limited their prospects of continued employment: “There are only two operas that I know of where black dancers are always used: *Porgy and Bess* and *Aida*. I think typecasting is built in to begin with. Very few opera companies have a ballet company; so it’s rather a dead end. On the other hand, black singers fare much better.”

While marginalised performers have benefited from the success of *Porgy and Bess*, and recordings of the opera certainly feature frequently in indexes of opera recordings by African American singers, the advantages that came from the success of the opera were not universally reaped by performers, as black male singers experienced more difficulty in being cast in the broader operatic repertoire. Baritone Benjamin Matthews describes this as the *’Porgy and Bess Syndrome’*: “The females are assigned roles in regular operas. But the Porgys, Crowns, and Jakes, are left out. This sort of double standard the black man still has to deal with. It has gotten to the point where most of the black baritones who can really sing the role of Porgy with any kind of credibility will say to management […] ‘I will sing your Porgy, but what else are you going to give me in your regular season’. If nothing else is offered, they will refuse to sing it.”

While the opera provided employment opportunities for African American performers and certainly transcended minstrelsy, in practice, it was the white authors and producers of the work that most immediately reaped the rewards of the success of *Porgy and Bess*, as Ray Allen identifies: “Gershwin and Heyward were about the business of transforming white fantasies of black sensuality, spirituality and violence into a commodity that was marketable as entertainment for primarily white audiences.”

In “It Ain’t Necessarily Soul: Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* as a Symbol,” Richard Crawford argues that as a significant twentieth-century work *Porgy and Bess* tends to be assessed through several distinct theoretical lenses: as American opera, American folklore, racial stereotype, or cultural exploitation.

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53 Interviewed by Wallace Cheatham, ibid., 5.
55 Interviewed by Cheatham, “Benjamin Matthews and Wayne Sanders: And the Dream Became Reality to Dwell with Us,” 95.
For Crawford, *Porgy* is a paradoxical work: “The best-known American theatrical work about blacks, it was not only written but produced, directed, and staged by whites, which means whites reaped the monetary profits of its success.”\(^{57}\) As evidence of this paradox Crawford cites a review written by Virgil Thomson in the *New York Herald Tribune* in response to the early 1940s revival of the opera, which includes an accurate summation of how the opera had succeeded in spite of its paradoxical racial identity: “[Gershwin’s] musical heart was really pure. It was so pure that he could put music to a piece of phoney white folklore about Negro life in Charleston, music which is itself about as Negroid as Broadway, and still get Negro artists to perform it without sticking their tongues in their cheeks.”\(^{58}\) While this comment clearly betrays the rivalry between Gershwin and Thompson as composers, it also demonstrates the stakes of representing African Americans at a time when the political climate surrounding the representation of race in fiction was rapidly changing.

Representations of race within US culture at the beginning of the twentieth century cannot be fully discussed in isolation from the influence of primitivism on modernist artists, and here *Porgy and Bess* provides a useful example of how far this influence spread beyond literary work typically considered as part of the high modernist movement and how it complicates the politics of the portrayal of racial minorities in early twentieth-century art and literature. While perhaps primarily associated with the work of visual artists such as Picasso and Paul Gauguin, cultural primitivism came to influence a whole range of early twentieth-century literature and performance in Europe, including the poetry and drama of W.B. Yeats and the novels of Joseph Conrad and D.H. Lawrence. One of the most prominent examples of modernist primitivism within the performing arts is Stravinsky’s ballet *The Rite of Spring*, a piece that illustrates that modernist primitivism was not exclusively concerned with Asian and African cultures viewed through the lens of exoticism but also took interest in novel European cultures: as Taruskin identifies, Stravinsky revealed in an interview with his biographer André Schaeffner that the opening melody from *The Rite of Spring* was adapted from a Lithuanian folk song.\(^{59}\) It is also worth acknowledging that despite the occasionally problematic results of exoticism, primitivism was also informed in part by a sincere enthusiasm for distant cultures, distant in time if not geographically: it is not incidental that Nicolas Roerich, a noted ethnographer and archaeologist, worked with Stravinsky during the early stages of the composition of the piece

\(^{57}\) Crawford, “It Ain't Neccesarily Soul: Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* as a Symbol,” 23.
\(^{58}\) Ibid., 26.
between 1910 and 1911, also providing the anthropological titles for the movements, and designing the costumes and sets for the first production, as Craft recognises.\textsuperscript{60}

Primitivism becomes a more contentious influence on modernist culture when cultures from further afield came to be appropriated, as in the case of Heyward’s description early in the adaptation process of \textit{Porgy and Bess} of using dramatic material that was “authentic and [plenty] ‘hot’,” presumably claiming authenticity to African traditions surviving in America, although without any claim to what specific culture this tradition belongs.\textsuperscript{61} In the same letter where he describes this ‘authentic’ source material, Heyward describes his other research in language that appropriately echoes the quasi-anthropological approach typical of primitivist modernism: “I have discovered for the first time a type of secular dance that is done here that is straight from the African phallic dance, and that is undoubtedly a complete survival. Also I have seen that native hand of harmonics, comns, etc. It will make an extraordinary introduction to the primitive scene of passion between Crown and Bess.”\textsuperscript{62} However dubious the provenance of some of the material gathered by the composers for inspiration, the narrative focus of \textit{Porgy and Bess} and the involvement of African American performers unavoidably places the opera at the crossroads of the often tenuous connection between African art and the culture of African Americans in the early twentieth century.

There is some critical debate about the extent of overlap between primitivism and the artistic contributions of cultural minority groups in the early twentieth century. In \textit{Primitivist Modernism} Sieglinde Lemke considers the contributions of black authors and artists to modernism as they relate to the use of primitivist motifs by non-minority authors and artists. In this context discussion of primitivism suggests an alternative viewpoint to the idea that modernism is grounded in the possibility of advancements in technology leading to the establishment of new aesthetic conventions. Lemke argues that in Germany in the early decades of the twentieth century, assumptions about the prosperity of white Americans and the new consumer technologies they enjoyed contributed to the appeal of jazz music to German people,\textsuperscript{63} with scant acknowledgement that jazz was not only formally the opposite of the kinds of mass-produced American products associated with America’s

\textsuperscript{60} Robert Craft, “The Rite of Spring: Genesis of a Masterpiece,” \textit{Perspectives of New Music} 5, no. 1 (1966): 23.
\textsuperscript{61} Letter, February 6, 1934. Box 64, Folder 23, George and Ira Gershwin Collection, Library of Congress.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
prosperity, but also produced by African American artists who did not share equally in their nation’s
good fortune.\textsuperscript{64}

Relevantly, given the previously discussed centrality of gender in the interpreting of narrative music,
Lemke suggests that these contradictory elements of modernism are both gendered and associated
with different racial identities (with the technology-inflected modernism often considered masculine
and primitivist modernism often interpreted as reflecting the feminine, juvenile and racial other), and
examines the reception of Josephine Baker in Europe in this light:

The collective infatuation with Josephine Baker was at the center of the broader trend we know as the \textit{vogue nègre}. [...] How was it possible that a nineteen-year-old girl who had previously appeared only behind blackface
in burlesques was now widely celebrated as \textit{la vedette noire}, the black star? One answer is that Baker’s \textit{dans sauvage}
offered a novel blend of exoticism and eroticism that appealed to a jaded bourgeois audience yearning for
excitement; a significant part of her appeal had to do simply with the color of her skin. [...] Josephine Baker
appealed to colonialist fantasies of the exotic. Dressed in a skirt of bananas, she was all too
too-easy prey for
the voyeurs. Inviting the French gaze, she became their pet, or, should we say, their panther, titillating and tame
- potentially dangerous.\textsuperscript{65}

The marginalisation of black and female artists (and of black and female characters within work)
should not be equivocated however; while there are often similarities the treatment of minority
groups, membership of these groups is not exclusive: the reception of Baker as a sexual other is
related to her position as an African American woman, and as bell hooks has argued, there has often
been a considerable disjunct between Black and white women’s experiences of marginalisation and
the aims of feminism for different racial groups in America during the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{66} There are
however useful resonances here with Kristeva and Clément’s commentary on the position of gender
in narrative music and the reception and exploitation of jazz music. Where Clément sees
chromaticism signalling danger and uncontrollable femininity, African and African American artists
employing musical styles that similarly threatened conventional musical aesthetics were also seen as
dangerous, feminine and sexual. This threat is reflected in the language of Pierre de Régnier’s

\begin{footnotes}
\item[64] Ibid., 6.
\item[65] Ibid., 96-7.
\item[66] hooks identifies, to take one example, that white feminism’s focus on the right to work outside of the home has
historically marginalised black women, who have had no option but to be employed in domestic labour for white families, frequently performing the tasks abandoned by white women entering the formal workforce. bell hooks, \textit{Where We Stand: Why Class Matters} (New York: Routledge, 2000), 101-2.
\end{footnotes}
contemporary review of Baker’s performance, as cited by Lemke: “This is not a woman, this is not a dancer, this is something extravagant and fugitive as music itself, you might call it the ectoplasm of all the sounds one hears.” For Lemke, this review “reflects the difficulties critics encountered when they attempted to define the conundrum of Baker’s gender and color.” The similarity in the way race and the female gender is treated here again corresponds with Clément’s ideas of the mysterious femininity of chromatic music, her description of the mysterious sensuality of chromatic music holding much in common with the perplexing ectoplasm of Baker’s movement to music.

These resonances with Clément and Kristeva’s feminist musicology are further complicated when their psychoanalytic approach to opera is considered in the context of the problematic nineteenth-century racialist attitudes that inform much Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. Hal Foster’s psychoanalytic analysis of primitivism begins with the proviso that a “primitivism is inscribed in this psychoanalysis, too, one that correlates fantasies of racial otherness and female sexuality,” as indicated by, among other things, Freud’s Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics, published in 1913, the same year as the riotous Paris premiere of The Rite of Spring, and Freud’s similar assessment of racial minorities and the social other, which Foster describes as including “women (especially prostitutes) and Jews, all of whom are then deemed - from the normative position of the white bourgeois male - ‘primitive’ in psychosexual development, moral aptitude, and artistic, even civilizational capacity.” Foster links primitivism’s non-European visual references and use of non-white characters (or figures in visual art, or performers on stage) to the modernist interest in the reinvention of the artistic subject. Taking into account the problematic racial attitudes inherent to early psychoanalysis in order to simultaneously use and critique the work of Freud and Lacan, Foster argues with specific reference to visual art (and the work of Gauguin, Picasso and Kirchner in particular) that the construction of primitive scenes are expressions of the turn-of-the-century fascination with the origins of identity, gender and sexuality.

68 Ibid., 100.
70 Ibid., 72.
71 Ibid., 74.
Despite these concerns, some critics have found psychoanalytic criteria useful to their analysis of how anxiety about racial categories has been reflected in the presentation of social conflict in American musical drama. Jeremy Tambling, for example, considers Kern and Hammerstein’s *Show Boat* (1927) in this light, suggesting that the plot concerning the trials suffered by the multiracial character Julie, along with the way the songs sung by her character blur the distinction between typically white and black styles of music, are used as an expression of the anxiety about borders described by Lacanian psychoanalysis: “Though black, Julie appears as white, so that there is no marker of difference […] Her first big number, ‘Can’t help loving that man of mine,’ is immediately recognised by the other characters as black music, but is then taken up by Magnolia and becomes her leitmotif […] It loses its black origins, thus de-centering Julie; but in any case, its cheerful diatonicism contrasts with its giving voice to a melancholic subject position.”72 Here melancholia is read via Freud as a wound to the identity of the subject, where anxieties about race echo anxieties about the independence and completeness of the ego.

Tambling explicitly reads *Show Boat* as an opera, and deliberately discusses the piece alongside Wagner’s *Parsifal*, comparing how multiracial characters are presented through the music and narrative of each. For a piece that similarly straddles the divide between musical theatre and opera like *Porgy and Bess*, Tambling’s approach is illuminating, particularly in relation to the dominant American reading of Freud’s work and how it influences attempts to construct cultural identities through musical theatre:

> […]the American ‘take’ on Freud […] reads the ego as the site of intentional consciousness and authentic self possession, a reading that Jacques Lacan specifically works against […] In dealing with the organicist ego, it is important to ask what unconscious drives motivate opera and musical forms. For if the Broadway or Hollywood musical asserts a hegemonic position (the status of the WASP ego), the confidence is still a matter of anxious desire, not an ability to enact that position confidently […] Since the subject can exist only as a representation is placed before it, an art form (opera, theatre, cinema) that puts a hearer/viewer in front of actors, singers or dancers encourages identification with the representation offered as if in a mirror.73

Considering the constructions of identity created by music drama on both a cultural and individual level, the composition history of *Porgy and Bess* suggests anxiety about national identity and the

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72 Tambling, “Towards a Psychopathology of Opera,” 274.
73 Ibid., 266-7.
cultural status of the work itself: a white construction of African American identity at a time when such an identity was considered as separate from dominant white national identity, a populist composition eventually enfolded into the conservative and predominantly white American operatic repertoire. As such, this psychoanalytic approach resonates with Crawford’s suggestion with regards to a broader cultural reading that “When the question of performers and their commitment is applied to the consideration of Porgy and Bess, Gershwin’s opera becomes an excellent illustration of the thesis set forward in The Omni-Americans by the black writer Albert Murray: ‘American Culture is patently and irrevocably composite.”\(^{74}\)

Particularly in the case of Gershwin’s work, and in Porgy and Bess in particular, the significant contribution of minority artists can clearly be seen alongside Gershwin and Heyward’s enthusiasm for the exotic other (Lemke mentions the Heywards’ play Porgy alongside O’Neill’s Emperor Jones as an example of the common “fascination with blacks” displayed by white American writers).\(^{75}\) Beyond the contribution of individual African American performers, the work obviously employs the sounds and techniques of jazz - emerging from a number of musical origins including dance hall ragtime, African percussion traditions, and New Orleans dixieland bands - which was popularised as a distinct genre during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and ‘30s, with the European tours of many successful African American artists increasing the influence of the style in modernist literary circles; but jazz only became ubiquitous in the early twentieth century after the appropriation of jazz forms by white musicians, including Gershwin in his earlier composition Rhapsody in Blue (1924).

The difficulties presented by primitivism and exoticism for musical interpretation are similarly recognised by Ray Allen, who argues that the earlier play adaptation of Porgy was more positively received by contemporary audiences because without music it could be received as an unambiguous primitivist fantasy: “[...] the overall consensus of white critics of the period was that the Heywards’ play conveyed an exotic folk primitivism that strongly appealed to the [Theatre] Guild’s predominantly white audiences. Real black bodies on stage - singing, shouting, swaying and praying in a fashion deemed racially appropriate by white critics and audiences apparently translated into uncontested authentic performance. Equally important, the absence of a musical score (written by a white composer) obviated debate over the crucial issue of musical authenticity that would eventually

\(^{74}\) Crawford, “It Ain’t Neccesarily Soul: Gershwin’s ‘Porgy and Bess’ as a Symbol,” 35.

\(^{75}\) Lemke, Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism, 25.
haunt Gershwin’s yet-to-be-composed opera.” Primitivism was popular in the 1910s and ‘20s because it held the promise of accessing an authentic emotional world inaccessible to Western culture, but the window of time in which this device could be uncritically exploited was narrow. By the premiere of *Porgy and Bess* in the 1930s, black folk primitivism had become less acceptable, particularly, as Allen notes, following expressions of disapproval from newly prominent black cultural critics. Writing in the *Journal of Negro Education* in 1945, Mildred Jenkins identifies that the vogue for African influences within American music during and immediately prior to the jazz age was frequently a poorly-informed enthusiasm: “The problem of prescribing the impact of American music upon the music of the Western Hemisphere, is indeed a difficult one, not because of facts and theories, but owing to the lack of universal knowledge pertaining to African music compared with prejudice to any cultural contributions coming out of Africa, especially if it contributes to that culture of Europe and the Western World.” Jenkins suggests that the use of African influences in early twentieth-century music was often not necessarily based on particular expertise or investigation - Stravinsky’s use of primitivism, for example, Jenkins describes as a “drifting” - with even the use of African musical techniques in Southern folk music considered more of a reinvention than a continuation of that musical tradition. While jazz quickly came to influence popular music, the acceptance of the use of jazz styles to classical music was, and continues to be, more fiercely contended. As suggested by the reviews of *Porgy and Bess* cited earlier, Gershwin’s use of jazz features in opera was seen by contemporary reviewers as a gimmick, even though his earlier use of similar features in his earlier symphonic composition *Rhapsody in Blue* had been more favourably received.

Edward Latham discusses the plot of *Porgy and Bess* when describing his system of interpreting narrative through tonal analysis, where as outlined previously, tonal unities (established through the resolution of tonal conflict created by temporary departures from the previously established key) represent closure after episodes of dramatic development. For Latham the narrative of *Porgy and Bess* is dramatically defined by “a whole host of unfulfilled dreams and ambitions,” and, as such, a series of unanswered dramatic questions are progressively posed as the score progresses through a number

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77 Ibid., 254.


79 Ibid., 13.

80 Ibid., 14-5.

81 Latham, *Tonality as Drama: Closure and Interpretation in Four Twentieth-Century Operas*, 104.
of harmonic shifts. In maintaining this focus on harmonic analysis, Latham describes the ending of the opera as quasi-optimistic: “cinematic […] the theatrical equivalent of a fade-out,” with a descent to tonic (establishing tonal closure) scored as Porgy sings ‘Oh Lawd, I’m On My Way’ and departs for New York in search of Bess, suggesting unresolved narrative possibilities. Reflecting the cinematic tone identified here by Latham, Porgy and Bess was adapted for film (although still recorded as an operatic performance) in 1959, starring Sidney Poitier as Porgy and Dorothy Dandridge as Bess, but received mixed reviews and its reception among middle-class African Americans indicated concern about the lack of diversity of representations of race in American culture.

The portrayal of African American characters in Porgy and Bess has been a matter of contention throughout the performance history of the work. Sylvia Olden Lee, assistant to conductor James Levine for the 1985 Metropolitan Opera production, argues that it is productions of the work rather than the text of the work that diminish the characters within it: “Porgy, the character, is one of the most complex in all of opera, he really is, and to have him handkerchief-headed and grinning all the time, or feeling sorry for himself throughout the opera, is a mistake. The libretto doesn’t bear it out. […] I’m so glad that the work has been given its rightful place; and I don’t care what any bunch of Negroes, blacks, or African Americans decide. They don’t like it because it’s in dialect, and it’s holding us back. No. Dialect will never hold any people back […] it’s about what you do with your accent and your dialect.” These debates about the depth and subtlety of the characters in Porgy and Bess have surfaced again in response to a recent adaptation of the opera for production on Broadway by Suzan-Lori Parks and Diedre L. Murray, directed by Diane Paulus (current artistic director of the American Reperatory Theatre), in which Patrick Healy describes the creative team’s adaptation in which they “created scenes, invented biographical details and, in their most radical move, added a more hopeful ending that may roil purists who cherish the ambiguous final moments of the original. […] Ms. Paulus is assessing it virtually line by line to judge when heightened musicality or newly

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82 Ibid., 133.
83 Ibid., 132,34.
punched-up dialogue works best — resulting in a kind of hybrid.”\(^{86}\) This revision of the opera attracted the ire of Stephen Sondheim, who wrote a tremendously scathing letter to the editor of the *New York Times* after Healy’s profile of Parks, Murray and Palaus, taking particular issue with the way the work had been marketed:

To begin with, the title of the show is now “The Gershwins’ Porgy and Bess.” I assume that’s in case anyone was worried it was the Rodgers and Hart “Porgy and Bess” that was coming to town. But what happened to DuBose Heyward? Most of the lyrics (and all of the good ones) are his alone (“Summertime,” “My Man’s Gone Now”) or co-written with Ira Gershwin (“Bess, You Is My Woman Now”). If this billing is at the insistence of the Gershwin estate, they should be ashamed of themselves. If it’s the producers’ idea, it’s just dumb. […]

Ms. McDonald immediately dismisses any possible criticism by labeling anyone who might have objections to what Ms. Paulus and her colleagues are doing as “Gershwin purists” — clearly a group, all of whom think alike, and we all know what a “purist” is, don’t we? An inflexible, academic reactionary fuddy-duddy who lacks the imagination to see beyond the author’s intentions, who doesn’t recognize all “the holes and issues” that Ms. Paulus and Ms. McDonald and Suzan-Lori Parks do. Never fear, though. They confidently claim that they know how to fix this dreadfully flawed work.\(^{87}\)

Even the most positive reviews of the show suggest that the producer’s interventions added little to the performance.\(^{88}\) Ben Brantley for the *New York Times* describes the changes as minor and as catering mainly to the financial requirements of production: “Mostly, as far as I can see, this has meant scrapping much of the score, using dialogue instead of recitative and reducing sets and cast to an affordable minimum.”\(^{89}\) While the gradual embrace of the piece by the opera industry in America has had considerable cultural ramifications, those representing the interests of the Gershwin estate (the rights of which are worth more than a million dollars a year\(^ {90}\)) have the incentive to maximise revenue from the sale of the composer’s rights, and revisions to the piece to make it sit more comfortably within a musical theatre context may be more profitable than preserving its status as serious opera.

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88 Note also that the score was not performed unabridged until the Metropolitan Opera’s 1985 production; see Davis and Pollack, “Rotational Form in the Opening Scene of Gershwin’s Porgy and Bess,” 375.
*Porgy and Bess* has become an emblematic work in the English-language opera repertoire, and as the cultural status of the piece came to be re-evaluated in the second half of the twentieth century, so too did the subject matter conventionally considered operatic in the United States. *Porgy and Bess* was not just a typically twentieth-century psychological and psychoanalytical drama, but also an urban interpersonal tragedy, featuring characters representing an American racial minority rarely seen in mainstream theatre and avoiding some of the shortcomings of works such as *The Emperor Jones* that used African American characters to more explicitly Primitivist purposes. William Bolcom, composer of the 1998 adaptation of Arthur Miller’s *A View from the Bridge*, is empathetic about the influence of the piece on American opera, stating that in his opinion the six most important American operas are “*Porgy & Bess, Porgy & Bess, Porgy & Bess, Porgy & Bess, Porgy & Bess* and *Porgy & Bess*. […] They took this street stuff and mixed it with a classical background, that’s what opera should be for me; and that’s the same kind of fusion I don’t see anybody trying to do much.”

Having produced *Porgy and Bess* in 1985, The Metropolitan Opera has not yet revived *Merry Mount*, the other major American vernacular opera of the 1930s. In light of the reception history of *Porgy and Bess*, I now will discuss other iconic American literary works that have been adapted to opera and how the production of these works has been influenced by the prominence of media culture in the second half of the twentieth century.

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91 Bolcom interviewed by Herwitz, 525.
10. Media Technology and American Drama

Opera and film. Though these two cultural forms are not often thought of together, they have actually existed in an interesting symbiosis, influencing each other in the time they have been in co-existence, equally: film has wanted to be like opera, and opera has not been above learning from film.

Jeremy Tambling, *Opera, Ideology and Film.*

Not only did cinema quickly come to overshadow theatre as the dominant form of popular entertainment in the United States as the twentieth century progressed, but film aesthetics also came to exert a considerable influence over the development of prominent themes and styles in stage drama. While there is an apparent incompatibility between the predominantly naturalistic aesthetic of film and the conspicuous artifice of opera, cinema has nonetheless had a pervasive impact on audience expectations of all forms of narrative drama, and as a consequence, opera’s composition, staging, and the style of live performance. The directors, writers and composers of film and opera have also come to adapt some of the same significant American literary texts to both performance genres, so some of these adaptations have been the object of direct comparison by critics and audiences. In this chapter I will identify some of the ways critics have accounted for the relationship between opera and film and then discuss what the adaptation of American realist drama reveals about characterisation, plot and tone in contemporary opera.

Critics often acknowledge the influence of film culture and technology in critical commentary on opera: Tom Sutcliffe notes the similarities between the aesthetic and narrative structure of cinema and opera and suggests that these similarities are invoked by directors of contemporary opera such as Peter Brook and Patrice Chéreau to provide new interpretations of canonical work; Žižek compares characters from Wagner’s *Parsifal* to characters from Hitchcock’s films; Friedrich Kittler frames the use of Wagner’s ‘Ride of the Valkyries’ in Frances Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* as a reflection of Wagner’s own use of new media technology in his work; and Clément compares the

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1 Tambling, *Opera, Ideology and Film,* 1.
3 Ibid., 28, 109.
4 Žižek, “‘The Wound Is Healed Only by the Spear That Smote You’: The Operatic Subject and Its Vicissitudes,” 205.
tragic double life of the operatic prima donna to that of Norma Jean/Marilyn Monroe. While identifying specific references and resonances like these is useful when considering the influence of adaptation and related methods of authorship on the genre, the conventions of film have also influenced the style and content of modern compositions, and not in entirely predictable ways. Sutcliffe for instance argues that rather than cause theatre audiences to expect photographic realism on stage, the influence of film editing techniques has actually introduced creative new representative frameworks for theatre work: “our century’s revolutions in the cinema and in the theatre are closely related, that the language of film has irreversibly changed the terms of theatrical performance. The cinema is enormously manipulative in its games with imagery: film is all about association and the mysterious logic of sequential editing. The modern theatre has equally been freed in its new-found imaginative range to abandon literalism, to play with time and space, even to conjure with incoherence.” Jeremy Tambling also has written on the relationship between opera and recording technology, focusing primarily on operas that have been explicitly filmed for screen broadcast (as opposed to recorded performances and simultaneous broadcasts, of the kind primarily intended to document live performance), and focusing on the implications of these developments on audiences and institutions, suggesting that movements in cultural theory following Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ raise questions relating to “what happens to the cultic value of opera in the opera house when it can be ‘democratised’” by the accessibility of recording and broadcast technology.

Opera’s ability to influence - and to be influenced by - contemporary culture runs contrary to common perceptions of the genre as a museum art form, associated with the overblown dramatic posturing of Warner Brothers cartoon parodies of characters from Wagner’s Ring Cycle. But these perceptions are pervasive, and through shaping audience expectations, have had an impact on the way that opera is composed and staged for contemporary audiences. In his article “How Hollywood Films Are Killing Opera,” New York Times cultural commentator Zachary Woolfe suggests that the portrayal of opera in Hollywood films such as Pretty Woman and Moonstruck has contributed to the conservatism of current American opera productions and programming decisions:

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6 Clement, Opera, or the Undoing of Women, 29.
7 Sutcliffe, Believing in Opera, 12.
8 Tambling, Opera, Ideology and Film, 3.
In the two movies the vision of opera is the same: lush, static, stale. It is less a living encounter than a trip to Madame Tussauds. The experience of going is about wearing fancy clothes and having an expensive dinner, about leaving everyday life behind. It is about a few tears, not about deep emotion or thought. Opera is the most solemn kind of date night. Though both films have been given credit for helping to popularize opera, the idea of the art form they have popularized has profoundly damaged it in this country. The films have taught Americans a particular idea of what opera is, so that is the kind of opera Americans think they want. This is a large part of the reason audiences still flood en masse only to the war horses, and why they resist any directorial interpretation of those war horses that isn’t traditional.9

This relationship between opera and film, where references to opera in film become a cultural shorthand for the fussy refinement of high-culture, is complicated by the aesthetic developments in contemporary opera discussed previously: cinematic references are rarely made to less conventional work, but compositions by later artists might evoke very different connotations to those suggested by canonical works culturally associated with privilege and conservatism. Woolfe concludes that “until opera stops being associated with escapist nostalgia and fancy dates, it is doomed to struggle for relevance,”10 and while his concerns about the misrepresentation of the art form and the conservatism of audiences are valid, it is difficult to imagine that changing the representation of opera in popular culture might come to directly change the way opera is currently produced, particularly as the composers and directors of contemporary work have already significantly moved away from the Wagnerian model of music drama, and the persistent perceptions of opera in popular culture as discussed by Woolfe have already become an inaccurate reflection of opera as it is now typically staged given the influence of theatrical minimalism via the European avant-garde.

While mainstage opera production is typically dominated by several dozen recognised repertory works (two Romantic composers, Puccini and Verdi, account for six of the top ten most frequently performed works at the Metropolitan Opera11), the late 1980s and ‘90s were a boom period for new work commissions from the Metropolitan Opera, as Richard Taruskin identifies, with four new works commissioned, three of which were produced: John Corigliano’s The Ghosts of Versailles (1991), Philip Glass’ The Voyage (1992), and John Harbison’s The Great Gatsby (2000).12 During the same

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10 Ibid.
period William Bolcom’s *A View from the Bridge* was commissioned jointly by the Chicago Lyric Opera and the Met (premiering at the two companies in 1999 and 2002 respectively), and San Francisco Opera commissioned two new operas, Andre Previn’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1998) and Jake Heggie’s *Dead Man Walking* (2000). Taruskin suggests that this late-twentieth-century upswing in commissions for new work was the result of increasing acceptance of art that embraced American themes and concerns within prominent American cultural institutions, a trend particularly exemplified by the collaborations between John Adams, composer of *Nixon in China*, and director/librettist Peter Sellers, specifically catering to “the topical concerns of the contemporary cultural elite” and through doing so questioned assumptions that opera is able to rise above specificity through focus on common emotional narratives: “*Nixon in China* thus differed from most twentieth-century operas by reinvoking music’s power of enchantment, surrounding figures from recent history with a ‘transcendent’ aura that turned them into detemporalized, godlike figures. In particular, this characteristic set Adam’s opera off from the topical operas or *Zeitopern* [‘opera of the time’] of the 1920s and 1930s […] Where in the disillusioned aftermath of World War I audiences enjoyed an operatic genre that debunked the myth of timeless art, in the super-affluent, triumphant post-Cold War decade audiences sought through art the monumentalization of their own historical experience.”

Adams has suggested his references to modern historical events (as in his later operas *Death of Klinghoffer* (1991), about the 1985 hijacking of the cruise liner MS Achille Lauro, and *Doctor Atomic* (2005), about Robert Oppenheimer’s Trinity nuclear trials) place his work in opposition to traditional methods of adaptation, arguing that “we hardly need another opera on a Shakespeare play or a Greek myth.” *Nixon in China* may not be based on a conventional literary source, but as Linda Hutcheon and Thomas Leitch have identified through their reading of diverse adapted texts and adaptations, adapted works are characterised as much by an attitude to composition as they are by a relationship between adapted texts and their precursors. John Adams worked collaboratively with

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16. Ibid., 112.
Sellars and librettist Alice Goodman on both *Nixon in China* and *Death of Klinghoffer*, until suffering a creative estrangement with Goodman during the early stages of the composition of *Doctor Atomic*, an opera narratively based on a brief period in the life of Robert Oppenheimer, but also taking several poems by Muriel Rukeyser and John Donne and sections of the Bhagavad Gita as textual sources. In John Adams’ operas the innovation of musical minimalism was tempered by the familiar narratives of the documentary events depicted.

The move to the adaptation of less conventional literary works also allowed for opera companies to commission work that would be perceived as contemporary while still making use of the structures of conventional narrative music in order to appeal to broader audiences, as Taruskin describes in discussion of the narrative music compositions of American minimalists: “In part this seeming rebirth [of American opera] was a result of changes wrought by ‘post-modernism’ in the relative prestige of company styles. Harbison had been trained as a serialist, and of course Glass was one of the founders, in the 1960s, of hardcore minimalism. Both had abandoned their earlier avant-garde positions and were now meeting in the vast moderate middleground called ‘neo-romanticism’.”

In this Taruskin borrows David Brooks’ cultural categorisation of ‘bourgeois bohemians’ or ‘bobos,’ “the highly educated nouveaux riches of the information age,” suggesting that the shifting trends in subject matter and style of American opera as exemplified by works like *Nixon in China*, with their nods toward multiculturalism and global politics, play a central role in placating the educated upper middle class during their crisis of personal identity: “Their task in reconciling their identity, is to reconcile values that had been traditionally at odds: bourgeois values of ambition, social stability and material comfort on one hand, on the other, bohemian values that identified with victims of the bourgeois order: the poor, the criminal, the ethnic and racial outcast.”

Taruskin then argues that in aestheticising the petty concerns of the middle class these operas prove inferior to operas with aesthetic roots in ecclesiastical music, such as *Saint Francois d’Assise* by Oliver Messiaen, which while

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18 Goodman worked on *Doctor Atomic* during the early stages of its development before distancing herself from the project over objections to the presentation of Edward Teller in the piece. Goodman, Sellars and Adams had been levelled with charges of anti-Semitism for their earlier work in *Death of Klinghoffer*. See Alice Goodman and Jenni Murray, “Alice Goodman: Curate and Librettist,” *in Women’s Hour* (BBC: Radio 4, 2005).


21 Ibid., 115.

22 Ibid.
“oppressively lengthy and theologically alienating”²³ reach sincerely toward the transcendental. Devoid of traditional spirituality, he argues, bourgeois audiences use music to imbue the horrors of the twentieth century with transcendent meaning.

While the political implications of aesthetic developments in operatic musicology remain contentious and potentially problematic, this movement toward contemporary events as the narrative focus of contemporary opera, even when used in combination with other literary sources, allows opera composers to make more specific and deliberate political statements with their work. In the case of these later operas, particularly those by Adams, this thematic aim tends to extend not just to political events but also how these events are represented in media and culture, perhaps counterintuitively for a performance genre that firmly resists technological replication. As an opera about media representation, Nixon in China also provides insight into this relationship between opera and technology and the media. In “The Replay’s the Thing” Peggy Kamuf questions what technological reproduction implies for an art form quintessentially performed live, following the work of Walter Benjamin: “Nixon in China remakes the conditions of a media event and in so doing refuels the possibility of its own invention in the age of technological reproducibility. How is it possible for opera to reinvent itself as a contemporary of mass telecommunications.”²⁴ In describing Nixon’s historic visit to China in 1972, the opera has specific and peculiar implications of recording the performance for transmission: “There is telescoping of all the levels of representation: the actors’ pose reproduces the televised image of Nixon and Chou, who have already frozen the frame and given an initiation of themselves. The pose held on the stage becomes the image frozen on the screen which it already was.”²⁵

Adam’s opera is not as much about the specifics of Nixon’s visit to China as it is an exploration of Nixon as a character of American history, set against the jingoism of Communist China under the rule of Mao Zedong. Through the amplification of operatic performance Richard Nixon, Pat Nixon and Henry Kissinger become as cartoonish as ‘The Red Detachment of Women,’ the agitprop play-within-a-play performed during the state dinner in the opera’s second act. Even in works that do not make use of this play-within-a-play device, performance on stage has the potential to distance real-

²³ Ibid., 126.
²⁴ Kamuf, “The Replay’s the Thing,” 96.
²⁵ Ibid., 199.
world events from their conventional context as the subject of ideally objective news reports and historical accounts. As Jeffrey Mason suggests in the introduction to *Performing America*, “The tropes, phrases, and images of ‘America’ form and re-form as they are used, and to employ them effectively can serve to shut out someone else’s conception […] The stage then becomes the site of this struggle, a platform where players and audience may enact conceptions of identity and community, where ‘America’ becomes both the subject and the consequence of artistic, cultural and social negotiation.”

It is in the light of this ability for stage performance to play such a vital role in conspicuously reframing images of national identity that the relationship between film and opera becomes particularly illuminating in consideration of the adaptive process and raises interesting questions about what opera achieves when it replicates the stylistic naturalism dominant in twentieth-century commercial film. This influence of naturalistic film on opera has been complemented by the prominence of twentieth-century theatrical naturalism, but this influence is not necessarily and uncomplicated one: what might be perceived as an larger-than-life display of emotional distress in stage drama can be dwarfed by even the most mundane moment on the operatic stage - such as the climactic moment at the conclusion of Act I in Arthur Miller’s *A View from the Bridge* where Marco demonstrates his strength to Eddie by lifting a chair into the air by holding only the bottom of one of its legs, dramatically overshadowed by the music that surrounds it in William Bolcom’s 1999 adaptation. There is however a powerful complementarity between the emotional intensity of opera and the dramatic structure of these urban dramas where the characters are forced into tragic and unreconcilable conflict with their circumstances. The emotive impact of music in song acts dramaturgically as an advocate for the emotional perspective of the character who sings it. As the score moves between the voices of different characters the listener is transported between shifting power relations and allowing for more narrative ambiguity than might otherwise be expected from opera. Arthur Miller’s works have been widely adapted to opera: Robert Ward’s adaptation of *The Crucible* (1961), won the 1962 Pulitzer Prize for music; *A View from the Bridge* by William Bolcom (1999), and by Renzo Rossellini in Italian as *Uno sguardo dal ponte* with Gerardo Guerrieri in 1961.

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and *All My Sons* was adapted by James Legg and premiered after his death in a production by New York City Opera in 2001.\(^{29}\)

Jeremy Tambling identifies the most significant difference between operatic and film aesthetics as being related to use of dramatic modes rather than differences in dramatic pace: “Opera is usually thought of as being slow and static, hence unfilmic: though it would be truer to say its pace represents not inherent slowness but an entirely deliberate desire to accentuate actions in different modes […] this is part of a controlled signifying practice, and suggests a dramatic sense that could well be given a cinematic equivalent: is not, that is, simply a problem that opera is slow, and film is fast.” Is not just the selection of production techniques, but also the cultural connotations of these techniques that is significant in delivering a narrative. Tambling suggests that the two forms have developed a symbiotic relationship where “film has wanted to to be like opera, and opera has not been above learning from film,”\(^{30}\) but this symbiosis has different thematic and structural connotations for each form. What might be viewed as an operatic plot might be innovative in film or spoken drama would seem conventional when used in an opera.

A significant trend in twentieth-century opera production, the increased use of film projection in theatre, has been attributed to the influence of the work of Erwin Piscator, who, according to Brecht, used film to “[transform] the rigid backdrop of the stage into a new co-player, analogous to the Greek chorus.”\(^{31}\) Like the Greek chorus, film projection can be used to provide an explanation of the inner thoughts of characters and to establish a formal omniscient perspective, implied, for film, by the precision with which it replicates material in comparison to the fallible and variable action of live performance. In this sense Brecht describes Piscator’s use of film has having a documentary quality, as in comparison to the self-aware replication of the stage, film reports to represent reality with more fidelity: “Away with the painted sets when one could show a film which was shot at the very place of action, and which possessed a documentary, certifying worth about it.”\(^{32}\) This disjunct between the authority projected by the use of film and the authority assumed by action on stage resonate with the concerns raised by Benjamin in “The Work of Art in an Age of


\(^{30}\) Tambling, *Opera, Ideology and Film*, 1.


\(^{32}\) Ibid., 7.
Mechanical Reproduction,” as although it may seem that theatrical art might be relatively immune to the aesthetic and political influence of technological development, its very incompatibility with photographic and film technology has made it a ground for discussions about the cultural potential of resistance posed by non-duplicative cultural forms. I will return shortly to discuss the use of film projection, particularly in conjunction with the use of stage technology to enable ‘cinematic’ scene transitions in the work of Australian film and opera director Bruce Beresford, but before considering specific productions, I will discuss the issue of interpretation through staging more broadly in reference to Andre Previn’s adaptation of Tennessee Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

In terms of cultural expectations surrounding a work, *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a complicated adaptation, given the closeness in time between the original staging of the work and the first film adaptation in 1958 only two years after the play’s premiere, by the same director, Elia Kazan, and starring much of the same cast. The film, and several iconic moments within it, are so closely tied to understandings of the play that further adaptations cannot escape being considered in light of not just the stage text but also the film’s interpretive gloss on it. While certain elements of characterisation from the first production, memorialised subsequently through film, have had a pervasive influence on interpretations of the text, there are clearly structural factors that will make any adaptation to lyric drama differ considerably from an adaptation to naturalistic film. However there are also some notable differences between the two adaptations not entirely related to the structural requirements of the media: parts of the play implying that Blanche’s husband was homosexual, explicit references to Stella and Stanley’s sexual relationship, and the implication that Stanley rapes Blanche were excised from the film in order to comply with the requirements of the US Production Code Administration for the film to be allowed a wide release, limitations not applicable to the work of authors of later adaptations, such as Previn’s opera, which unambiguously represents the sexual violence of the original play.

Philip Kolin has studied the developing cultural significance of Williams’ play through consideration of its production history and various adaptations to film, dance and opera. He describes the strength of Previn’s opera adaptation of *A Streetcar Named Desire* as a consequence of the artistic strength of the original play: “Unquestionably, *Streetcar Names Desire* is Williams’ most musical, most lyrical play, and basing an opera on it is further proof that Williams’s characters, narrative techniques, poetic

nuances, visual poetry, and haunting sets energize an audience, regardless of the medium in which they see them performed.” Kolin’s argument here that the strength of the play is evident “regardless of the medium” it is performed in suggests a scepticism about both the constructive possibilities of adaptation and the expressive value of opera, but he does also acknowledge the constructive possibilities of music drama, citing Michael Kennedy’s *Sunday Telegraph* review of the original production at San Francisco Opera: “characters become more sympathetic, less rough edged, in their operatic guises; if we view them with more understanding, that is the result of the power of music.” This view, that the strength of adaptations is a reflection of the power of the narrative and characters of the original work, allows very little scope for acknowledging the creative contributions of the author of the adaptation, and a similar conservatism can be identified at the heart of many reviews of adapted operas in the popular press - as in Peter McCallum’s review of Opera Australia’s production of *Streetcar*, where he suggests that the adaptation adds something to the play without disturbing it: “Rather than reshape the work to accommodate the great waves of operatic dramatic rhythm, he has gone for a more literal adaptation, where the details of realist dialogue have been folded into the musical flow.”

Musically, Previn’s opera adaptation of *Streetcar* confounded some critics as it denied the expectations of audiences familiar with the composer’s work as a jazz musician, expectations perhaps also informed by the soundtrack of the film, notably one of the first mainstream film soundtracks to significantly incorporate jazz. This layering of aesthetic associations made by these different adaptations of the same play aligns with Linda Hutcheon’s approach of framing adaptations as “palimpsestuous,” as discussed previously. The potential downside of viewing adaptation as a kind of multi-media palimpsest however is also reflected in Kolin’s analysis, which here has more in common with critical production history than with conventional adaptation studies, with opera seen as a medium in which the play is staged with only superficial structural changes to accommodate the addition of music.

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34 Ibid., 174.
35 Ibid., 168.
Taking into account the aesthetic specificities of opera, Previn’s adaptation can be viewed as a more substantial departure from the stage work, undermining the conventional thematic interpretation of the play as relating to the death of Romanticism at the hands of pragmatic twentieth-century American industrialism. Since Kazan’s premiere production and the subsequent film adaptation this interpretation of the play has had a lasting critical impact. In discussion of the successful 2009 Sydney Theatre Company production directed by Liv Ullmann which toured to the Kennedy Centre in Washington D.C., Cate Blanchett, who played Blanche, described the cultural history of the play in very similar terms: “The play in the end, if you talk about it at a metaphorical level, it is about the death of poetry and that that is crushed, that flame of inspiration that Blanche represents, that fragile ephemeral poetry, is extinguished. And I think now an audience looks at the play and thinks about what we’ve lost. That we’ve lost those intangible parts. Where is the poetry in America? Where’s the idealism in America?”39 This is the very trap of interpretation that Sontag criticises Elia Kazan for in her discussion of A Streetcar Named Desire in ‘Against Interpretation’: “[...] in order to direct the play, Kazan had to discover that Stanley Kowalski represented the sensual and vengeful barbarism that was engulfing our culture, while Blanche Du Bois was Western civilization, poetry, delicate apparel, dim lighting, refined feelings and all, through a little worse for wear to be sure. Tennessee Williams’ forceful psychological melodrama now became intelligible: it was about something, about the decline of Western civilization.”40 In Previn’s opera adaptation however this interpretive move is challenged: Blanche cannot represent civilisation and poetry alone when Stanley also sings beautifully while tormenting her. The tragic turns of the play are glorified through music, and in this, the adaptation of Streetcar Named Desire acts as a rebuttal to the conventional interpretation of the play as a paean on the death of Romanticism.

Understandably for such a dominant critical perspective, the idea that Stanley represents barbarism is supported by some of the expressions of his character, such as the way he is described in some of Blanche’s outbursts (“Yes, something - ape-like about him, like one of those pictures I’ve seen in anthropological studies! Thousands and thousands of years have passed him right by, and there he is - Stanley Kowalski”)41 but these associations are complicated by other parts of the play, such as the way he is frequently identified by his European heritage, suggesting his behaviour as unsophisticated

as a virtue of his foreignness rather than as an expression of any assault on Western civilisation (an attitude Stanley dismisses as false pride “Don’t ever talk that way to me! ‘Pig - Polack - disgusting - vulgar - greasy!’ - them kind of words have been on your tongue and your sister’s too much around here. What do you think you are? A pair of queens?”). Subtleties of the play challenge these thematic readings from within the narrative: Stanley’s brutishness may well be understood as a challenge to Blanche’s romanticism, but Blanche’s refinement in the play is superficial and Stanley’s Polish background is hardly evidence of barbarism. While opera is rarely subject of literary analysis and not generally regarded as capable of subtle expressions of character, in this instance Previn’s adaptation can be seen to liberate the text from a dominant interpretation through opera’s aesthetic specificity - music is emotionally expressive but also usefully ambiguous. As reflected by Neil Sinyard’s previously discussed analysis of adaptation as a critical process, here opera adaptation suggests a different evaluation of the play’s themes, narrative and language.

In ‘Against Interpretation’ Sontag also identifies a significant rift between the way art is experienced and the way it is described in theory, beginning with the conflict between the ritual and incantatory associations of early art and the Platonic concept of art existing as imitation of reality. Sontag’s resistance to the idea that art is a representation of an object, and to the idea that the conceptual content of art is consistently discernible to audiences raises valid questions about adaptation, as the process of translating texts between media asserts a strong and specific connection between the conceptual core of their source text and the adaptation, even if the adaptation is framed as a critical engagement with those established themes. Interpretation and adaptation can be considered to be analogous, as suggested by Sontag’s comparison of interpretation to the act of translation, which, as discussed earlier, Hutcheon identifies as a variety of adaptation committed at least theoretically to the objective of fidelity or faithfulness to the original text. Like interpretation, adaptations also rely to some extent on “the highly dubious theory that a work of art is composed of items of content,” identified by Sontag as the justification for interpretation’s violation of art. This analogy between interpretation and adaptation can also be seen in the way Sontag describes the motivation to interpret:

42 Ibid., 194.
44 Ibid., 5.
45 Hutcheon, A Theory of Adaptation, 16.
Interpretation [...] presupposes a discrepancy between the clear meaning of the text and demands of (later) readers. It seeks to resolve that discrepancy. The situation is that for some reason the text has become unacceptable; yet it cannot be discarded. Interpretation is a radical strategy for conserving an old text, which is thought too precious to repudiate, by revamping it. The interpreter, without actually erasing or rewriting the text, is altering it. But he can’t admit to doing this. He claims to be only making it intelligible, by disclosing its true meaning. [...] The old style of interpretation was insistent, but respectful; it erected another meaning on top of the literal one. The modern style of interpretation excavates, and as it excavates, destroys; it digs “behind” the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one.47

While adaptation may be seen to share some of the same dubious assumptions and practices as interpretation, in the use of a new aesthetic sign system the adaptation reintroduces subtlety and ambiguity into the adapted narrative. Adaptation also forces the author to be more explicit about his/her aims of altering the original text through the creation of a new version, and, as the adaptation itself becomes subject to interpretation, is more obviously subject to interrogations about context and intention.

In describing modern culture’s “flight from interpretation,”48 the resistance to totalising ideology in the second half of the twentieth century, Sontag uses the examples of abstract painting, Pop Art and modern poetry as art forms that avoid interpretation by wilfully containing no content or content so blatant that it refuses to be interpreted. Cinema presents another opportunity for avoidance, with a “surface [...] so unified and clean, whose momentum is so rapid, whose address is so direct”49 that the work defies interpretation. Although opera certainly does not present the same clean façade or (perhaps) film’s thrilling momentum, it does share with film what Sontag describes as the quality of “directness” which evades the audiences’ impulse to interpret. While Sontag suggests that part of cinema’s escape can be credited to the early low-culture status of films, allowing them to “left alone by most people with minds,”50 opera has been similarly sheltered by its status as camp and by the understanding that music is predominately experienced emotionally rather than analytically. Finally, like film, opera is characterised by a surfeit of formal detail, a “vocabulary of forms”51 - orchestral composition, lyric style, set design, costumes, vocal skill, movement - providing plenty of structural

48 Ibid., 10.
49 Ibid., 11.
50 Ibid., 12.
51 Ibid.
ground for critical discussion before touching on content. While Previn’s opera does forcefully challenge associations between the feminine and Romantic era aesthetics, it cannot escape the historical and structural complications relating to the representation of women in opera, as discussed previously in relation to correspondence between Kristeva and Clément, and the work is similarly subject to the hermeneutic weight of the physical act of spectatorship.

If subsequent productions of plays have the ability to attach particular interpretations to the original work, regardless of the validity of these interpretations, it seems that adaptations of the text to different genres of performance have a significant potential to either reinforce or negate these associations. Adaptation to ballet for instance, as Streetcar was in 1952 with choreography by Valerie Bettis,\(^{52}\) indicates that the plot of the play is significantly iconic as to be able to be understood without words, and would presumably reinforce the existing associations relating to the text and its themes in popular culture. The strength of such an argument however would depend on the capacity of dance to consistently express ideas otherwise expressed through both movement and language, which, in discussing the ballet, Kolin suggests is considerable: “Bettis’s ballet added to an understanding of Williams’s script by confronting, translating, and altering it. […] When Blanche left at the end of Streetcar, it was not with the doctor but with the figure of Death, hauntingly enacted by Karel Williams. And Bettis choreographed Blanche’s famous exit line - ‘I have always depended on the kindness of strangers’ - as a curtsy, an apt signifier of her gentility and grace in triumphant defeat. Bettis’s ballet proved that kinesis can be mimetic.”\(^{53}\) This analysis of Bettis’s work suggests not just that the movements of dance can replicate the narrative of an existing dramatic work, but that audiences of such an adaptation can read back into gestures on stage to understand additional meanings superimposed over iconic moments, like the way that Bettis replaces Blanche’s doctor with Death.

These aesthetic consequences are slightly different when looking at the adaptation of prose texts, although many of these are similarly likely to have been adapted to many media as have plays. Carlyle Floyd’s 1970 adaptation of John Steinbeck’s 1937 novella Of Mice and Men also followed a 1939 film adaptation, itself based on Steinbeck’s own early stage adaptation of the original text,\(^{54}\) and

\(^{52}\) Kolin, Williams: A Streetcar Named Desire, 157.
\(^{53}\) Ibid., 158-9.
\(^{54}\) Carlyle Floyd and Bruce Beresford, “Of Mice and Men: Carlyle Floyd and Bruce Beresford Interviewed by Caroline Baum,” in Opera Insights (Opera Australia 2011).
a television adaptation directed by Ted Kotcheff for the US Turner network in 1968. In July 2011, Floyd appeared in conversation with director Bruce Beresford at the offices of Opera Australia to mark the Australian premiere Of Mice and Men. Bruce Beresford, best known as a film director of adaptations of classic Australian texts including Puberty Blues, Don’s Party and Breaker Morant, has directed several distinctively cinematic productions of twentieth-century opera adaptations for Opera Australia, including Previn’s A Streetcar Named Desire in 2007. In conversation with Beresford, Floyd discussed writing his own libretto when adapting the Of Mice and Men, and how he spent the first stages of the development negotiating for the rights of the novel with a living author, describing it as “an easy and comfortable working relationship.” Steinbeck and Floyd never met in person, discussing the adaptation via correspondence, with Steinbeck’s only restriction on the work was that there was to be no specific reference to the 1930s. In adapting the work he isolated the central idea of the novella, that “a flawed, very incomplete relationship is preferable to the isolation of the farm hands,” and developed the libretto from there, but admits that the emotional brevity and sparseness of the Steinbeck’s original work was deceptive: “I made a fatal mistake: I was seduced into thinking Mr Steinbeck had done my work for me.” In his subsequent quest to replicate the “leaness” of Steinbeck’s original, focusing on two essential ingredients of “Passion […] and also action.” Floyd redrafted the libretto without looking back at the original novel again, re-conceiving the opera as essentially a suspense story: “How long can George keep Lennie out of trouble?”

Beresford has pioneered the prominent use of film projections in Opera Australia productions, in a manner that has on occasion had more than a superficial influence on the staged work: Beresford asked Floyd to compose an extra minute of music so that he could screen a short pre-filmed cinematic projection during the scene transitions of Of Mice and Men, and Floyd’s willingness to do so reflects the his enthusiasm for film, describing film imagery and music as a key influence on the creative practice of his generation: “I was influenced by cinematic language growing up. […] Films were our art form.” However, even for a director as well-versed in cinema as Beresford, the

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56 Floyd and Beresford, “Of Mice and Men: Carlyle Floyd and Bruce Beresford Interviewed by Caroline Baum.”
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
61 Floyd and Beresford, “Of Mice and Men: Carlyle Floyd and Bruce Beresford Interviewed by Caroline Baum.”
relationship between opera and film aesthetics can be ambiguous. In discussing his production of *Of Mice and Men*, Beresford described his directorial style as “heightened realism,” and acknowledged using Lewis Milestone’s 1939 film version of the novel as a reference point, alongside Milestone’s earlier Academy Award winning film *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930). Beresford frequently describes his staging decisions using the language of cinematography: “With any opera, I’m conscious that the audience is watching what we’d call a wide shot […] So I try to do as much as I can to help them visualise the story. Many modern productions use abstract sets that contribute little, if anything, to the mood.” But while describing his practice in deliberately cinematic terms, Beresford suggests that when directing for opera he tries to respond to the text rather than the weight of the cultural history of the work, and when interviewed about his production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* he suggested he attempted to resist the influence of even Kazan’s ubiquitous film: “directing an opera for me is like directing a play, or even in some senses a movie, because I’m not conducting it, I’m certainly not singing it, so what I’m trying to do is realise its dramatic values, so I really studied the text very closely. […] I try not to be influenced in any way by any of the three film versions of the play, or of the written play.”

In his review of Beresford’s *Of Mice and Men* in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Peter McCallum draws a link between the stylistic choices of early twentieth-century authors like Steinbeck and the emotional resonance of contemporary opera: “The appeal to modern audiences lies not only in the greater relevance of the characters and social structure, but also in the way the story is told. Writers such as Steinbeck, Williams and Hemingway shaped a whole generation of thinking on how plots come to their culminating moment and emotions can be communicated minimally through dialogue and events rather than being bellowed by Valkyries and princes.” It is due to Beresford’s influence over Opera Australia’s recent programming that *Of Mice and Men* and Previn’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* are compared in McCallum’s review, as his productions have introduced a specific idea of American contemporary opera (and contemporary opera more generally) to Australian audiences, and one that corresponds with McCallum’s endorsement of the emotional minimalism. In the following chapter I will consider how new work and contemporary opera production are shaped by institutional factors,

62 Ibid.
with particular reference to recent Australian compositions, discussing how these works engage with this stylistic shift in contemporary opera.
11. Developing a National Contemporary Opera Culture.

“There is that type of operatic audience which always want to hear the same thing and suffers the unfamiliar with hostility, or, even worse, with passive disinterest, since, alas, it is condemned to it by its subscription tickets. The state of opera is not to be envied amid an administered humanity, which, regardless of political system, no longer concerns itself with liberation, escape, and reconciliation, as in the opera of the early bourgeoisie, but instead desperately stops up its ears to the sound of humanity in order to be able to stand the hustle and bustle, happy, contented, and resigned.”

Theodor Adorno, ‘Bourgeois Opera’

“In all our research we find that if people come to a contemporary opera and they don’t like it, we can’t get them back.”

Lyndon Terracini, Artistic Director of Opera Australia.

As discussed previously, in “Bourgeois Opera” Adorno identifies a contradiction that exists between the aspirations of opera toward grand and sincere emotional expression and the conservatism of opera production within established institutions, suggesting this conflict presents a problem for the continued relevance of the form. This conflict is especially relevant in the case of opera in Australia, as not only is the cultural climate occasionally hostile to the emblems of high culture, but Australia also lacks the large audiences and the extensive government, commercial and charitable funding available to arts communities within larger countries. As identified previously, the twentieth century was a significant period in the development of the dramatic identity of the United States, and lyric theatre, both in the guise of native opera and musical theatre, contributed significantly to the growth of America’s cultural identity. In Australia, which I will now consider as a point of contrast to the development of English language opera elsewhere, opera has played a role that somewhat resembles that it played in the United States during the early parts of the twentieth century: as a means of asserting the nation’s institutional sophistication, and through the adaptation of significant literary works, an assertion of cultural relevance and achievement. In surveying how composers have responded to literature through opera in a different cultural environment, I will here seek to acknowledge the role of institutional support in the composition of these adaptations; the influence

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1 Adorno, “Bourgeois Opera,” 41.
of developments in operatic aesthetic elsewhere, particularly the twentieth-century literary and musicological debates discussed previously, and the development of trends in style and content in national performance culture.

In drawing comparisons between performance cultures it is necessary to first acknowledge the way that opera funding arrangements differ between major arts institutions internationally: in this case between Australia, the United States, and, for the sake of comparison, the United Kingdom. While there are some opera specific grants available in the United States through the National Endowment for the Arts, and through OPERA America (an organisation also partially funded by the NEA), most major companies including the New York Metropolitan Opera, San Francisco Opera and Lyric Opera of Chicago receive little direct government funding. In 2009, government grants made up $23,872,928 of Opera Australia’s total operating revenue of $68,873,122; in comparison, government grants made up only $3.2 million of the Metropolitan Opera’s $153.8 million in revenue in the same year. This discrepancy is not just a reflection of the higher priority placed on direct government arts funding in Australia than in the US, but is also an indication of the high priority given to funding opera over other forms of art in Australia: in 2010 Opera Australia received more than 18 million dollars from the Australia Council, well in excess of the total funding received by groups representing dance, music, theatre, literature and cross-platform arts combined. In the UK the English National Opera received approximately £17 million in public funds in 2010/11 (covering half of the organisation’s operating expenses), and while Arts Council funding to the Royal Opera House was reduced by 4.8%, grants still made up approximately a third of the company’s operating income, and government funding for both companies is significantly greater than that received by major companies in the United States. While the donations received by opera

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4 “About Opera America,” OPERA America, http://www.operaamerica.org/content/about/.
5 In 2009 government grants (NEA, state and city funding) constituted only 1.2% of the Metropolitan Opera’s operating expenses” Annual Reports: 2007-08 and 2008-09,” (New York, New York: The Metropolitan Opera, 2009), 25.
companies from private patronage in the United States are tax-deductible and therefore do constitute indirect government support, the fact that the size and frequency of these donations is determined by the choice of patrons establishes a relationship between companies and their financial donors which has the potential to inform programming and casting decisions, rather than an obligation to fulfil the bureaucratic requirements of government arts funding bodies. Administrative context is often also relevant when looking at adaptation: Linda Hutcheon, for example, identifies that historically the expense of composing and producing opera in Italy in the nineteenth century led to conservative choices in adapting texts that would be likely to appeal to large audiences,\(^\text{13}\) and similarly the institutional environment in Australia does not encourage mainstage opera companies to take creative risks that fall outside whatever current schema that the Australia Council is using to assess funding applications.

Discussing opera funding in the United Kingdom, Jeremy Tambling identifies that funding arrangements have significant consequences on not just programming decisions but also the position opera occupies within broader culture, particularly in the context of broadcast technology: “the work of art [may] be relativised by mechanical reproduction […] but[…] these cultural chances do not exist in isolation: they are determined by the interests and ideology of a society, and it is evident, at present, that the government, for example, will have opera stay as it is.”\(^\text{14}\) Writing in 1987, here Tambling suggests that government funding to opera in the UK contributes to the structural prioritisation of the needs of wealthier audiences by predominantly funding large companies like Covent Garden and the English National Opera over regional companies and other organisations that prioritise accessibility, while simultaneously encouraging arts companies to rely on corporate sponsors, which also may encourage conservative directorial and programming decisions.\(^\text{15}\) This perception that new work is financially risky for companies is not necessarily supported by evidence on occasions when well-produced progressive programs are presented to audiences: as Sutcliffe has noted, a season of twentieth-century works presented by the ENO in 1990 only saw a relatively minor drop in attendance figures (with audiences falling from 76 to 72 per cent of capacity).\(^\text{16}\)


\(^{14}\) tambling, *Opera, Ideology and Film*, 9.

\(^{15}\) ibid.

\(^{16}\) sutcliffe, *Believing in Opera*, 62.
Nonetheless, fear of alienating audiences and appearing inaccessible has led to a certain degree of hostility toward the refined high-culture associations of the form and the intellectualisation of contemporary compositions, particularly in Australia. Lyndon Terracini, current artistic director of Opera Australia, has been particularly vocal in his attempts to dispel the high-culture associations of opera, and has suggested that critical engagement with the art form is unnecessary if not damaging to efforts to develop and build opera audiences in Australia: “It has become so driven by academics and I mean the pompous academic attitude to making music, I mean it’s just mad […] I mean, how mad is that and you can have a degree in opera?”17 While little can be said in favour of this hyperbolic antagonism toward critical consideration of the position of opera in society, Terracini’s statements have been accompanied by some attempts to introduce opera to new and broader audiences, such as the use of the unconventional publicity strategy of a collaboration between Australian Football League team the Greater Western Sydney Giants and Opera Australia where football players were brought to the Opera House to give the orchestra members advice on leadership, reported as “something that could see footy fans enjoy half-time arias courtesy of opera choirs with AFL players returning the favour by giving motivational talks to performers.”18

This rationalisation of the necessary elitism of opera production is a different cultural response to a similar conservatism to that which has informed unadventurous programming decisions in the United Kingdom. While enthusiastic about the possibility of introducing new audiences to his company’s work, Terracini has also expressed a strong resistance to producing existing contemporary opera, due to the perception that it falls outside the existing audience’s interests. For example, when asked why Opera Australia had not revived Voss, Richard Meale’s 1986 adaptation of Patrick White’s 1957 novel, Terracini replied:

> Fundamentally because no one wants to see it. When you start looking at ticket sales – I’m just speaking about something you can act in and piece that I think could enter the repertoire – I think Richard Meale’s Voss has that possibility in it musically and obviously dramatically because of the story. But I think a lot of people are

put off by it. In all our research we find that if people come to a contemporary opera and they don’t like it, we can’t get them back. The biggest complaint they have is, and this is a quote, they “hated the music.”

Not sharing Terracini’s scepticism about contemporary Australian work, Lindy Hume, artistic director of Opera Queensland has recently considered a revival of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (composed by Richard Mills, adapted from the play by Ray Lawler) specifically for regional audiences: “which I think, in a funny way, might be an interesting approach because I find regional Australian audiences are very open to adventure.” She is also enthusiastic about the potential of *Voss*: “I do think *Voss* is worth having another look at. The first production that you do of a new piece, in a way, just serves getting it up and on and, in a funny way, it’s the subsequent treatments of those pieces that somehow untether it from its initial constraints and set it forth to the world.”

While not all operas will be successful enough to achieve the revival productions Hume describes as necessary for the potential of a new work to be fully realised, considered alongside Terracini’s comments on the reluctance of audiences to engage with contemporary work, Hume’s statement indicates toward some of the difficulties created by the cultural anxiety surrounding Australian opera: the reluctance of audiences to engage with contemporary compositions is exacerbated by the reluctance of companies to stage this local work regularly enough for it to become familiar to the audience.

In *Hyperreality and Global Culture*, Nick Perry discusses postmodernism in the context of the proliferation of mediated representations of reality and suggests Antipodean Camp, a “pattern of stylized subversion and sardonic distancing,” as a theoretical lens to view the distinctive contemporary culture of Australia and New Zealand in relation to dominant culture elsewhere in the world. Although Antipodean Camp primarily relates to the style and form of culturally distinctive work produced by artists from Australia and New Zealand, it is also relevant to consideration of the way that producers, critics and audiences establish a deliberate distance from the European cultural canon, even in the production of stage work from within that tradition. The recent New Zealand Opera and Scottish Opera coproduction of *The Italian Girl in Algiers* (2009), for example, directed by

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20 Lindy Hume interviewed by Ashleigh Wilson and Matthew Westward, ibid.
21 Ibid.
Colin McColl, set Rossini’s light comedy as a low-budget soap opera being filmed on stage: the singers performed in front of a set of green screens, which were filmed with the resulting images superimposed on garish beachside stock footage and simultaneously projected onto a backdrop onstage. In the context of Perry’s work and its foundation in the theories of Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard, this production illustrates the anxieties about dramatic representation – as I have already mentioned with reference to Walter Benjamin - with McColl’s production mimicking the aesthetics of mediated mass culture through live performance while conceptually linking the slapdash aesthetics of serial television with assumed the high culture credibility of opera through juxtaposition.

Perry suggests that Antipodean Camp in Australia differs from its expression in New Zealand, featuring less Gothic preoccupation with dark aspects of national history and with a greater acknowledgment of the place Australia holds of the way external observers perceive Australian culture. For Australia, culture is significantly shaped by society’s premeditation of failure:

This is a second order version of kitsch, one in which the cultural cringe (i.e. The nominal repudiation, but tacit genuflection to European canons of taste) although it is still at work, shows signs of being not so much transcended as assimilated into the realm of cultural history. ‘Australian’ is, in part, still signified by the invocation of that once fresh pattern of mockery and condescension towards Dame Edna Everage and a now thoroughly Anglified Clive James. That is, however, interwoven with a reflexively informed exaggeration of its own banality, internalized and immunized itself against any such criticism on its own practices.

Perry’s description of this specific variant of Antipodean Camp is supported by many examples from contemporary Australian performance culture, particularly recent director’s theatre productions of canonical stage work, both in spoken theatre and music drama. Benedict Andrews has directed many theatrical productions where Australian cultural motifs are used to simultaneously indicate the relevance of the work to local audiences and to introduce a note of irony to the assertion of this continuing cultural currency: including a recent production of Chekov’s The Seagull, for Belvoir Theatre Company, set in a New South Wales central coast caravan park, and a production of Mozart’s The Marriage of Figaro for Opera Australia, set in a gated residential

24 Hypereality and Global Culture, 11.
community and cast by the staff and occupants.²⁶ These adaptations that deliberately frame foreign canonical works within Australian culture also reveal a common paradox in modern Australian theatre practice: the programming of conventional works asserts the universal relevance of the texts adapted, but the conspicuously local visual language (and often, in spoken theatre, vernacular Australian English) employed in these productions suggests that this relevance is only fully revealed through radical alterations to the work as conventionally produced.

A similar push and pull underlies the endurance of cultural cringe as a diagnosis for problems in the arts in Australia: while striving to establish a distinctive cultural identity, Australian artists and audiences still crave validation from critics and artists working within dominant cultures overseas. It is on the basis of this lack of active that Perry suggests that Australia and New Zealand have “experienced modernity without modernism,”²⁷ illustrating his argument with a re-imagining of Walter Benjamin’s interpretation of Klee’s angel – where history is envisaged as a benevolent but hapless figure blown by a violent storm into a future it cannot see because his back is turned.²⁸ For Perry modernism in Antipodean culture is similarly represented by the analogy of Alice tumbling down the rabbit hole in Lewis Carol’s Alice in Wonderland, a less tragic figure than Benjamin’s angel, although similarly lacking in control, tumbling into a foreign world: “At the beginning of the text, Alice, like Benjamin’s angel, is unable to see what she is coming to. She does, however, have time to look around her and to ponder upon what may be going to happen next, with her capacity to reflect upon the intersection of prior experience and the present flow of images as her guide and resource.”²⁹ The world that Alice enters is an Antipodean one, with everything upside down and reversed – echoing the isolation and inversion of culture in Australia and New Zealand – and, as Perry identifies, even Alice has her suspicions about the true location of Wonderland: “The Antipathies I think… Pray tell me Ma’am, is this New Zealand or Australia?”³⁰ Suggested here by Alice’s slip-of-the-tongue, antipathy is also a useful concept when considering the troubled

²⁷ Perry, Hyperreality and Global Culture, 14.
²⁸ Benjamin’s reading of Klee’s angel has been influential in the historicised artistic expression relating to other marginalised cultures, including Tony Kushner’s epic two-part play Angels in America (1991/3), in which Kushner takes Benjamin’s angel as specific provocation, tangentially linking the personal struggles of characters related to the AIDS crisis in New York with Reagan era personality politics, where angels are characterised as powerful but largely incompetent agents of an incomprehensible and absent God. Incidentally, Perry identifies Reagan’s presidency as something approaching camp in its banality. Ibid., 8.
²⁹ Ibid., 15.
³⁰ Carroll cited in ibid.
relationship between Australian and New Zealand art and artists and the cultural community in Europe and the United States. The dislike and opposition suggested by ‘antipathy’ are representative of Australian arts culture in two ways: the assumption that global arts culture is largely irrelevant to Australian cultural concerns (usually discussed in terms of anti-elitism) and the belief that the art produced within Australian culture is embarrassing or inadequate.

In attempting to develop a distinctive and specific aesthetic culture without the critical confidence to define Australian art outside the bounds of dominant foreign culture, Australian artists face significant challenges. Jon Rose describes Australian music culture as a “cut-and-paste paradise,” suggesting that the phenomenon of cultural cringe has hindered the development of local live music traditions and will continue to do so without a reevaluation of Australia’s rich musical history, including the performance traditions of Aboriginal people, and acknowledgement that foreign performance traditions develop in new contexts: “you can guarantee that the future will be mostly a rehash of the past […] where, without reassessment of Australia’s music performance heritage […] everything from faithful copies of European Baroque to yet more hip hop to concerts where almost any plink or plonk from the 20th century is attributed to John Cage.” While Australia has notably produced a disproportionately large number of world-class opera singers (most notably Dame Joan Sutherland and Dame Nellie Melba), opera is largely seen locally as irrelevant to national cultural interests, and ambitious singers emerging from the Australian industry are frequently driven to find work overseas by the limited budgets and programs of Australian companies. This cultural ambivalence toward opera is also illustrated by the previously cited statements from Lyndon Terracini on new work, and by his attempts to rationalise the elitism of classical music through connection to the pageant of excellence in professional sport. Writing in 1985, Leonie Kramer summarises this still-pervasive phenomenon of Australian anti-elitism in discussion of the relationship between national culture and the media: “Australians are prepared to take great pride in the achievements of their sporting heroes (as the time and space given to them in the media testify), but seem to have bad consciences about excellence in other areas. The cry of elitism is not heard in

32 Ibid., 10.
33 Ibid., 9.
34 See also Jon Rose’s discussion of how the contributions of local artists (such as the circular breathing techniques of Indigenous Australians) have been valued above local composers, ibid., 13.
reference to sports training; it is heard in relation to university education, ABC programs, and the arts. A thoughtless preoccupation with egalitarianism, nervousness about intellectual accomplishment, and a simple-minded conviction that equal opportunity will produce equal results, combine to inhibit vigorous, learned and fearless discussion of ideas.  

In the context of this national antipathy towards the arts, new commissions for Australian opera take on extra significance by virtue of their scarcity, having overcome the cultural and institutional reluctance to support new work and the careers of undeniably elite artists. The most significant recent new Australian work produced by Opera Australia was the adaptation of Peter Carey’s 1985 novel Bliss, which premiered in 2010 after being originally commissioned by Opera Australia in the late 1990s. Bliss was developed as a collaboration between Brett Dean, composer and former member of the Berlin Philharmonic, and Amanda Holden, the British translator and librettist of several contemporary operas including Mark Anthony Turnage’s The Silver Tassie, Jay Anthony Gach’s The Selfish Giant and Nigel Osborne’s The Piano Tuner, and, unusually for opera where composers are generally given primary credit, both were given equal billing on promotional materials. Bliss concerns the affair and family breakdown of an otherwise unremarkable thirty-nine-year-old man whose understanding of the world drastically changes after resuscitation from nine minutes spent dead following a heart attack. While the adaptation of the novel’s plot involves similar structural considerations to those discussed earlier in consideration of Britten’s adaptation of Death in Venice, in the case of Bliss the novel’s position within the genre of magic realism additionally complements common narrative strategies in opera, where fantastic events are expected and protagonists are fairly frequently dragged to hell (as in Mozart’s Don Giovanni, Stravinsky’s Rake’s Progress, and Gounod’s Faust), although admittedly this not typically such a mundane hell voiced by Carey’s characters. Aside from sharing the common operatic narrative threat of hell, Bliss here also has significant tonal similarities to The Rake’s Progress (libretto by Chester Kallman and W.H. Auden), an opera identified by Mordden as distinctive of the twentieth century due to its neoclassical mixture of farce and tragedy: Stravinsky’s rake similarly loses his grasp on reality after a nightmare-like progression of casual encounters with unlikely characters, but descends into insanity whereas Harry finds escape in a pastoral fantasy.

38 Mordden, Opera in the Twentieth Century: Sacred, Profane, Godot, 327.
During a seminar on *Bliss* held by Opera Australia at the Opera Centre in Surry Hills on February 21, 2010 excerpts of the opera were sung by cast members Peter Colman Wright, Merlyn Quaife and Lorina Gore, and in panel discussions moderated by Lyndon Terracini and the Sydney Conservatorium of Music’s Michael Halliwell (author of *Opera and the Novel*, previously mentioned), Amanda Holden, Brett Dean, and conductor Elgar Howarth commented the composition and rehearsal process. During this discussion Amanda Holden explained the role of a librettist in adapting material from a novel, taking the example of this except from Peter Carey’s novel to describe her process:

> And then Honey Barbara, who knew a lot about such things, gave him his first lesson for survival in Hell, which dealt, for the most part, with psychiatrists and the police, and went under the loose heading of keeping yourself clean, by which she meant: no drugs, no funny books, no funny friends, just clean. Don’t be a smart-arse with the cops, don’t argue with them, don’t let them search your room without a witness. Be nice to them, make them tea, don’t let your voice shake when you talk to them, try to think of them as human beings. Always have money, never write down the names of lawyers but memorize their phone numbers and make sure they’re up to date. If they send the Dream Police then don’t fight with them because they’re unhealthy and unfit and will use drug-guns on you and not their fists and you will arrive unconscious and not be able to admit yourself voluntarily (always admit yourself, always sign yourself in, and then, with luck you can sign yourself out later). Most of all, never admit that anyone is trying to threaten you, get you, hurt you, poison you, radiate you, punch you, pinch you, fuck you, or, in any way at all, do you the slightest bit of harm for these are the symptoms of paranoia and they are, Honey Barbara said, illegal and you can get locked up for showing them even if you really are being radiated by the air and poisoned by the water.39

In Holden’s libretto the instructions Honey Barbara from this paragraph are set to rhyme and delivered in a matter-of-fact manner in a brief aria:

**HONEY:** Keep very clean... by this I mean no funny looks, or books, no drugs! No smart-arse arguments with thugs; don’t try to be too clever.

When they come, use your real name, then maybe you can sign out again...

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And don’t forget this other trick,  
never tell them you’re not sick;  
nothing makes them more annoyed  
and they’ll assume you’re paranoid.  
Being crazy is expensive!  
Hang on to your dreams,  
they will make sense if  
you escape with tales to tell;  
go on, remember this,  
you can survive in Hell!  

Here, as in the rest of the adaptation, language is simplified: Holden identified changing the name of Harry’s lover from Honey Barbara to Honey B and his wife’s from Bettina to Betty, as the names from the novel have too many syllables to be easily sung, and explained her preference for rhyming couplets as stemming from the way they complement the musical structure of set pieces. Discussion between the Holden, Dean and the performers present further indicated the extent of the collaborative nature of the composition process for the project, as Peter Colman Wright, who plays Harry Joy, recounted Holden’s willingness to changing certain words that the cast found difficult to sing, or found difficult to sing in an Australian accent. Given the almost exclusively European canon of operatic works generally programmed by Australian companies, even the local cast of Bliss reported having difficulties singing operatically with an Australian accent.

In relation to the more outlandish details of the novel’s plot, Amanda Holden was reluctant to provide specific details prior to the opera’s premiere; refusing outright to answer when asked by an audience member at the Bliss seminar whether the episode in the novel where an elephant crushes Harry Joy’s car would be included in the opera. While such a question might simply arise out of curiosity about how a car-crushing elephant could be represented on stage, it is interesting to note that the sequence was included in the opera despite being not particularly significant to the narrative events, but rather underscoring the novel’s progressive movement away from the tenor of realism. In Carey’s novel the destruction of Harry’s car is recounted after the event during a light-hearted conversation in Milano’s restaurant:

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40 Bliss: An Opera by Brett Dean and Amanda Holden, Based on the Novel by Peter Carey, ed. Opera Australia (Pymble, NSW: Playbill, 2010), unpaginated.
“It was trained to sit on red boxes.”
“Big red boxes.”
“Big for a box, small for a car. It’s what you might call an apocryphal story.”
“It never really happened,” Billy de Vere said. “This elephant was trained to sit on red boxes, see, and one day someone came and parked near her.”
“In a red Volkswagen,” Aldo said. “Surely you’ve heard it?”
“Oh Fiat.”
“And she sat on it.”
“An elephant sat on my car?” Harry said glumly. “You’re laughing because an elephant sat on my car.”

In the following scene Harry is arrested for driving an unroadworthy vehicle while trying to make it home in his elephant-crumpled Fiat. In the premiere Opera Australia production an LED light array was used to depict the elephant crushing the car as the chorus struck the props establishing the restaurant setting from the stage, the libretto itself moving straight forward to events at the police station:

HARRY: An elephant sat on my car.
OFFICER 1: Tell us a taller story will you!
HARRY: Ask the circus, they know the truth, a fucking elephant sat on my fucking car.

The choice of whether or not to include details like Bliss’ elephant requires consideration of the expectations of the audience, and through this negotiation reveals what the adaptor considers most important and relevant to extract from the adapted work, particularly when these details present challenges for stage direction and production.

As an opera created from the work of a living novelist, Bliss is also an interesting composition with regards to collaborative composition, and one where the composer and author of the original text are known to have met together to discuss the project. Admittedly Peter Carey did not play a

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41 Bliss, 70.
43 Bliss: An Opera by Brett Dean and Amanda Holden, Based on the Novel by Peter Carey, unpaginated.
significant role in the composition, as made clear by the conversation between the author and Brett Dean on the ABC’s Artscape program:

Brett Dean: When I first spoke to you about it ten years ago... [...] And I said, you know, ‘I'd like to make an opera out of Bliss,’ you said, ‘You wanna what?!”

Peter Carey: Hey, I really, hey, ‘what?’ wasn’t really questioning your motive, I was just asking what opera was. It is thrilling to see somebody take something you’ve done and make something new with it. And if it works, and it looks like it will work, and work spectacularly, then it's amazing. And if it doesn’t work then it’s not my fault.44

Brett Dean was in the fortunate position of being able to discuss his work at several points with Carey while adapting Bliss, although clearly Carey was not particularly invested in the process. When asked by Michael Maher on the ABC’s 7.30 Report if he was an opera enthusiast, Carey replied, “No, I'm an idiot.” At the time of the interview Carey had not yet seen the opera, and admitted that while he is happy for his novel to have a continued cultural life, opera is not among his great passions, and distanced himself from the adaptation in similar terms to those he used in discussion with Brett Dean: “If it works, and it looks like it will work, and work spectacularly, then that’s amazing, and if it doesn’t work, it’s not my fault [...] I don’t think it’s very common is it for novels to become operas. Yet alone, films certainly simplify things - well operas have to essentially I think simplify things probably even more.”45 As discussed in previous chapters, simplification is perhaps not the most useful term to use when looking at the decisions made when adapting a novel to different media, as even when not all plot details from a prose text are selected for use in the composition of a dramatic text, a whole range of new semantic features are introduced. Here, with Bliss, the vernacular language used by the characters and Australian urban settings gain a specific significance in opera by virtue of their incompatibility with expectations of the form that could not be anticipated within the novel.

Nick Perry’s concept of Australian modernism represented by reading Antipodean experience of the modern world through the figure of Alice also resonates well with Bliss. Like Perry’s Alice, Peter Carey’s protagonist Harry Joy is a exploring a new world stocked by familiar characters, albeit a new world of a more sinister cast, when he is thrown into an unrecognisable and hellish version of his

44 “Making Opera Bliss,” in Artscape (ABC 1, March 10, 2010).
previous life after being resuscitated from his heart attack. Perry similarly applies his Alice reading to the protagonist of Vincent Ward's 1988 film *The Navigator: A Medieval Odyssey*, Griffin, a nine-year-old boy who attempts to tunnel to New Zealand to escape the Black Death: “Griffin, like Alice before/after him, strives to infer the logic of the social and material world he as entered on the basis of his working assumptions about the structures of representation. But whereas for Alice the ambiguities and problems of interpretation are linguistic, Griffin is concerned to probe the meaning of images, to construct a grammar of the visual and a narrative of how to see.”

In *Bliss* a similar exploration takes place in the world of representation through sound, where after his escape from death in the opening scene of the opera, Harry tries to make sense of a world where the juxtaposition between the banality of the Australian voice and the operatic register renders the characters around him sinister and grotesque. Harry’s rejection of the bourgeois pretensions of his life before his heart attack is metaphorically complicated by the distinctly bourgeois pretensions of the art form the narrative is presented within: the beauty of the music can represent both pointless artifice and the act of transcending those values.

Characteristics of Perry’s Antipodean Camp can similarly be identified in Graeme Koehne’s operetta *The Ringtone Cycle*, for Soprano, Violin, Cello, Piano and iPhone with a libretto by Peter Goldsworthy, author of novels including *Maestro* and *Honk! If You’re Jesus*, as well as the libretto of the 2001 mainstage opera *Batavia*. Produced on a significantly smaller scale to *Bliss*, *The Ringtone Cycle* premiered at the Adelaide Festival in 2012. Thematically the opera is loosely based on a number of references to the operatic repertoire (most identifiably, as in the title, Wagner, with the soprano also named Brunnhilde, after Wagner’s so named valkyrie) and twenty-first century culture where clichés are interwoven with slang, internet abbreviations and advertising slogans (“Dear John West / If these are the best / You can keep the rest!”) alongside parochial, slightly vulgar, humour:

- Did one of you reptilians
  demand a Brazilian?
- This bush-tailed girl
  is old growth Tasmanian!

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47 ‘Song 6,’ *The Ringtone Cycle*. 
Titled in reference to the quintessential nineteenth-century epic, Wagner’s Ring Cycle, the composition is a pastiche of the grand styling of nineteenth-century Romantic opera, themed around a single woman’s experience in the world of online dating.

As suggested by the title, The Ringtone Cycle opens with a musical canon repeating the familiar melody of Nokia’s signature ringtone. This ringtone, legally trademarked by the Nokia corporation\(^{48}\) and first installed in the company’s phones in 1991,\(^{49}\) was itself adapted (or extracted) from Francisco Tárrega’s 1902 composition for solo guitar Gran Vals. The use of the ringtone in The Ringtone Cycle does not begin as onomatopoeia, as it is not the musical imitation of a sound from the natural world but the sound itself which opens the piece by disrupting the customary hush of the performance space. The musical onomatopoeia then directly follows as the string quartet picks up and repeats the first distinctive notes several times, creating a cacophonous informal canon. The string imitation of the phone’s ring is then repeated at various points in the cycle, acting to interrupt the more conventional chamber melodies of the piece. In adapting what is otherwise an inconsequential sound, The Ringtone Cycle reinterprets that sound as a representation of the connection between people in an age of digital culture, associating it with types of language and behaviour that are typical detritus of the virtual world, and in using a sound associated with a model of phone already outmoded, the piece also highlights the ephemeral nature of technological culture. Beyond the piece’s fluid interpretation of modern electronic ephemera, the opera also makes reference to other modern musical sounds, as in the section where Brunnhilde delivers one of the songs in the cycle as recitative in cringeworthy pseudo hip-hop style:

If you bring the eggs
You’ll supply the jism?
If I bring the org
You’ve got the asm? […]
If I bring my pussy
You’ll give that cat-a-clysm?

Here *The Ringtone Cycle* can be seen to correspond with the “Australian tradition of mimicry, send up and pastiche”\(^{50}\) identified by Jon Rose, developed as a consequence of both the undervaluing of local music and the cross-cultural encounters that have occurred throughout Australian music history.\(^{51}\) There is a peculiar dissonance in hearing both these rap-like lyrics and the more grandiose lyrical phrases (“Your eyes are in the morning light/ your voice is in the song of birds/ I sense your promise everywhere”) sung by an Australian voice. But there are also interesting musicological implications from hearing a female Australian voice singing frankly about sex in operatic style, and dissonance in hearing this particular type of voice singing about technology. Discussing the impetus for *The Ringtone Cycle* Peter Goldsworthy describes a typically postmodern enthusiasm for embracing the contradiction between irony and sentiment in the libretto: “I wanted to satirise some of the clichés of internet dating, but perhaps also reinvigorate the odd cliché or two. Have my ironic cake, and eat it (sentimentally) as well. Clichés are usually true at some level after all – that’s how they get to be clichés, a kind of democratically elected truth.”\(^{52}\)

Here, to a greater extent than in *Bliss*, *The Ringtone Cycle* seems to correspond with Sontag’s description of camp as ‘failed seriousness,’ as the formality of the chamber musical style sits uneasily beside the cheerfully irreverent language of Goldsworthy’s libretto. It also aligns with Perry’s understanding of the position of formal features of literary forms in antipodean art: “artifice fails to function as a Brechtian-style provocation or incentive by which to forge a connection with that lived reality external to the text. Rather the effect is of a sliding in the very processes of signification which works as if to tacitly confirm the instability of that conception of meaning and representation on which such a connection is premised.”\(^{53}\) Perry suggests that while particularly pronounced in postmodern art of Australia and New Zealand, this kind of camp defined by failures of form to signify meaning is relevant also to global postmodern culture, and this suggestion has interesting consequences when considering contemporary opera:

Antipodean camp is distinguished by a generically nationalist inflection of the distinction which [Richard] Dyer makes [between camp as employed by queer culture and camp as appropriated by straight culture]. For it has emerged from within cultures for which colonization was constitutive. Thus the forms of cultural dominance to

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\(^{50}\) Rose, “Listening to History: Some Proposals for Reclaiming the Practice of Live Music,” 10.

\(^{51}\) Ibid.


\(^{53}\) Perry, *Hypereality and Global Culture*, 5.
which it is a response are the master discourses of (m)other countries, and the versions of cultural identity that it prioritizes are those which amplify the accident of place. Its multiple manifestations are, of course, never just nationalist. But if one considers, for example, Crocodile Dundee and Priscilla, Count Robula and Nukebuster then what is striking is that after subtracting, or otherwise controlling, that signifying of manifest social differences between each of the parties in these odd couple(t)s, their signs nevertheless go on working. Working, that is, to call up nationalist sentiments through cultural images that are constructed in accordance with bricoleur tactics, placed in quotation marks by the signalling of their own fabrication and asserted through self-mockery.\footnote{Ibid., 12.}

In describing camp as an aesthetic of colonisation of cultures and geographies, “a ‘post colonial’ aesthetic for the beneficiaries of colonisation”,\footnote{Ibid., 18.} Perry by implication wields a devastating blow for the prospects of opera’s relevance for Australian culture. Australian opera narratives typically have little in common with the epic myths and royal intrigues of conventional European opera, and accordingly many of the characters populating these works suffer a similar failure of seriousness, due as much to the tonal conflict between Australian culture and opera as due to the subject matter - a weakness not aided by the frequent use of already over-mythologised national events as the basis of historical adaptations: Maya Henderson’s *Lindy* (2002), based on Lindy Chamberlin’s trial and conviction for the murder of her infant child; and Alan John’s *The Eighth Wonder* (2005), based on the construction of the Sydney Opera House.

The Australian voice in opera does not simply convey the information provided by the libretto, but because of Australia’s cultural relationship to opera and the strange way it counters the audience’s expectations of a ‘classical voice’ and high culture, this cultural dissonance offers a critical challenge: is the problem with the way the Australian operatic voice is employed, or a challenge to the relevance of the form to Australian culture? While undeniably opera occupies an uneasy position in the Australian cultural landscape, some compositions within the form that resist typical narratives and aesthetic decisions indicate that this standard of camp might have subversive or expansive aesthetic potential, particularly when it is the colonial aspect of antipodean camp that is being subverted. In describing her 2010 opera *Pecan Summer*, Indigenous composer Deborah Cheetnam identifies areas of similarity between opera and Aboriginal performance traditions, suggesting that opera has the potential to be relevant in Australia without necessarily deferring to European
traditions and cliches: “Opera is corroboree, […] Opera is telling a story. Music, dance, costume, drama, that’s what corroboree is. We’ve been telling our stories through song for 60,000 years or more. It’s just that we think of opera in its caricature, a stuffy kind of something with Viking helmets that doesn’t relate. All Aboriginal people need, to get them started with opera, is to give them a story that’s about themselves. Everyone likes to see themselves reflected back.”

The final chapter of this thesis will consider indications for new opera in the immediate future and consider the implications for the live performance of opera in an age of technology that allows simultaneous broadcasts and video recordings in more depth. As previously discussed, Adorno and Barthes have commented on the impact of audio recordings to the cultural status of music, but now, as video of performances can be distributed not just widely but instantly, lavish productions starring famous voices are no longer exclusive to those attending the venue in person. What makes the consideration of contemporary opera adaptations particularly interesting in this context is that the changing status of the artistic medium has been accompanied by a unravelling of the structural requirements of the adapted text; recent significant compositions suggest a less formal approach to operatic adaptation, marking the unification of the thematic concerns of the great works in other genres frequently adapted in the twentieth century with the technological innovations that opera has belatedly adopted.

12. Broadcast Performance and New Opera in a Media Age.

The radio and the phonograph are harmful to the extent that they bastardize music and give currency to a lot of cheap things. They are not harmful to the composer. The more people listen to music, the more they will be able to criticize it and know when it is good. When we speak of machine-made music, however, we are not speaking of music in the highest sense, because, no matter how much the world becomes a Machine Age, music will still have to be created in the same old way. The Machine Age can affect music only in distribution.

George Gershwin, “The Composer in the Machine Age.”

In this discussion of the relationship between music and technology in the 1930s, George Gershwin argues that aside from the way that composers have experimented with “tempo, speed and sound” to represent the impact of technology on society, in practice technology has had the biggest impact not on what we hear but on how we hear it. Most obviously for opera, recording technology has contributed to the popularity of operatic music listened to out of dramatic context and the availability of these recordings has allowed the development of cultural enthusiasm inspired by the sound of particular performers in recordings extending far beyond audiences who have heard the singers perform live - such as the rivalry between Callas and Sutherland fans, or the renowned complementarity between the voices of Nellie Melba and Enrico Caruso. As the twentieth century progressed the relationship between music and recording technology became more complicated and ambiguous, with significant consequences for the recording and distribution of contemporary music drama: aside from the incorporation of technology as thematic content, the development of recording technologies and electronic music, and the impact of cinema and broadcast technology has had on the staging of live music drama, the technical intrusions required for recording and broadcast also introduce a further interpretive lens to adapted texts.

Video recordings of opera performances are not a particularly new development, but the recent success of the Metropolitan Opera’s in-house Live in HD simulcasts and DVD releases has focused academic interest on the aesthetic implications of the creative interventions required for filming a form of performance predicated on its flagrant theatricality. James Steichen shadowed the Metropolitan Opera’s production team during the January 16 Live in HD broadcast of Carmen in

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2 Ibid., 386.
2010, and, writing in the *Opera Quarterly*, suggests that the Metropolitan Opera’s approach to its broadcast program reveals a great deal about how production companies themselves understand the value of live performance. Steichen describes an enthusiastic promotion trailer for the broadcast at a regional cinema in Telluride, Colorado, in which “we can almost hear Gelb himself speaking: by all means, come to the met in person, but if you can’t, come to the HD broadcasts, and we’ll make up for your not being there, whether through the magic of ‘numerous robotic cameras’ or special intermission features - all for about twenty dollars a ticket, less than the going rate for standing room tickets at the Met itself.” Steichen labels the broadcasts’ documentary intrusions “institutional dramaturgy” - the means by which institutions dramatise their work (rather than the content of operas they produce) - and these efforts to promote the Metropolitan Opera as a brand are overt and explicitly commercial - during intervals principal artists describe the joy of attending a live performance and inform audiences that jewellery made from crystals just like those in the opera house’s sconces and chandeliers is available from the Met’s gift shop online.

While cinema screenings with ticket prices at a fraction of the cost of attending in person might seem to increase the accessibility of opera, Steichen identifies signs of conflict between the fiscal goals of the company and the alteration of artistic practices to suit the broadcast process: taking the example of the company’s use of the phrase “luxury casting” to describe a production of *Rosenkavalier* in the 2009-10 season, and the way that otherwise undisplayed backstage activities are reframed as entertaining documentary content during the broadcasts. As revenue from the *Live in HD* program has come to represent an increasing proportion of the company’s earned income, questions arise about whether production decisions are being unduly influenced by concern over how the performance will look on cinema screen and DVD rather than on the basis of how the performance will be experienced live. How far the recording of the production should shape the performance is a contentious issue, and scepticism about the impact of these simulcasts on live performance resonates with the earlier concerns of Benjamin and Brecht about the consequences of a culture mediated by the replicated image. McAuley references Benjamin explicitly in her discussions of archival recordings (admittedly filmed for different purposes than broadcast recordings, but with some critical similarities), suggesting that the development of audio-visual art

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4 Ibid., 447.
5 Ibid., 446.
6 Ibid., 450.
creates expectations for recorded performance that come into conflict with archival aims, as the audiences are accustomed to viewing images as works of art rather than as documents recording events that existed independently in the past: “A video recording of a theatrical performance is necessarily already an interpretation of that performance: it involves choices of what to record, what position to record from, what point of view (in both senses of the term) to adopt, and the video recording results in the creation of a new artifact.”

In “Digital Diva: Opera on Video,” Christopher Morris recounts a similar instance of live opera performance being influenced by broadcast decisions, describing a broadcast of Jonathan Miller’s production of *La bohème* by UK television channel Sky Arts which was presented in two broadcast streams on different channels: one featuring the conventionally filmed performance on stage, the other channel featuring footage of events backstage and interviews with production staff including Miller. According to Morris, at “several points in the backstage broadcast, the interventions of the presenter and camera threatened to delay stage entrances,” leading to arguments with the stage director and awkward segment transitions, incidents so successful at enlivening proceedings that Morris suspects much of the drama was choreographed. While the intention of this multi-channel broadcast was to present the dynamism of live performance to home audiences, and thus the priority of the direction was not to document the event for posterity without mediation (as McAuley describes as the aim of her work with theatrical archives), the technological mediation of live events does not simply have the potential to create a misleading impression of the events that occurred, but the act of recording has the potential to influence the experience audiences have of the performance when attending in person. Along the same lines, Alex Ross, reviewing the Metropolitan Opera’s 2011-2 season in the *New Yorker*, describes the consideration of how sets will look while filmed as a common complaint of productions developed since Peter Gelb’s appointment as general manager of the company in 2006: “Nowhere is the problem more acute than in [Robert] Lepage’s ‘Ring,’ where the dreaded apparatus known as the Machine [the production’s frequently malfunctioning multipurpose mechanical set] cuts off perspective for hours on end. In the movie-theatre simulcast, this problem disappears; roving cameras create their own sense of space.”

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8 Ibid., 187.
Morris argues that the distinction between the theatricality of live performance and the realism of screen drama is overstated in critical accounts of filmed performance, but suggests that given the current ubiquity of opera on film, it does remain necessary to account for how filming influences opera in performance. He relates this pressure also to the rise of director’s theatre, suggesting that with the careful documentation of significant productions with a view to revival, “[productions] become works: no longer labor that is being done, but a trace of labor that has been done.”

Morris suggests that perceptions of live performance as being a venue for audience participation are not accurate, particularly for opera as conventional opera venues are large anonymous spaces that separate the stage and audience structurally with both the proscenium arch and the orchestra pit, these features creating “an environment that encourages submission and passivity, where subjectivity is confounded by a sense of institutional authority.”

From the perspective of performance studies and theatre history, recordings of live performances are of great value, providing a much more comprehensive account of a performance than could be previously constructed from production notes, play scripts, production still photography and press reviews: Gay McAuley accordingly laments the slow uptake of video technology in creating theatre history archives, acknowledging that the “difficulties and disappointments that have been experienced with video recordings of performance may, indeed, be due less to the shortcomings of video as a recording medium, or to the resistance of theatre to reproduction, than to our failure to develop the ‘reading’ skills necessary to make appropriate use of video recordings, and also to our unrealistic expectations in relation to them.”

McAuley takes issue with the way recordings are judged on the strength of the films qua films rather than their usefulness as documents recording a past live event, especially as “actors are particularly vulnerable” when judged in accordance with the different expectations of performance in live and recorded media, a point that resonates with Steichen’s concerns about the way that filming at the Metropolitan Opera has altered expectations for operatic performance, although McAuley is describing the ideal academic use of video documents, a use which differs considerably from the intended use of the multi-camera Met HD

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12 Ibid., 105.
14 Ibid., 184.
15 Ibid., 192.
recordings. Despite these differences in intended use of these recordings, Steichen identifies a similar vulnerability in opera singers in discussing the Met’s broadcast program, particularly noting that many details featured in close-up during the broadcast are not at all visible to live audiences during the performance. Beyond the capturing the strain of performance, the singers’ laboured breaths and spit flying, the act of recording has the potential to change the singers’ style of performance, as Streichen argues: “it’s hard to imagine Marilyn Horne leaping on and off of a table and wagging her tongue during the seguedille like Ena Garan a. And Garan a would not be acting the way she did without the “numerous robotic cameras” dancing at her feet, ready and able to pick up such small gestures for immediate digital distribution. What is this that we’re really watching? during the Live in HD broadcasts this closeness of the camera seems to create a sense of almost invasive intimacy in equally recording the singers’ small expressive gestures and the strain of performance.

These films of live performances record the gargantuan task of singing to fill large auditoriums (seating hundreds or thousands of people) in minute detail, but the effort of filling that space with sound is redundant for cinema audiences - the elite skill of extraordinary acoustic vocal projection replicated for cinema audiences by the technical interventions of radio microphones and audio speakers in surround sound. However, the idea that recording deprives the broadcast audience is disputed by Morris, who suggests that the aesthetic value of the virtuosic tightrope walked by singers is often overstated:

Hasn’t opera historically served as a vehicle for vocal virtuosity, and don’t its formidable technical challenges form part of its allure? The answer is surely yes, but with qualifications and limits. Any operatic performance is a fraught undertaking; even beyond the fabled high notes and roulades, the very technology of vocal production tests the limits of the reasonable and the feasible. However, if this is a part of the thrill of operatic performance, it is a thrill with a low threshold. The singer’s failure to “pull it off” may tellingly reveal the labour involved, may elicit sympathy. It also, however, generates displeasure that will be eagerly, even ruthlessly flagged in audience reaction and in critic’s pen. To acknowledge that opera’s fragile performance is ingrained in its traditions is not necessarily to assert that this is a valued spontaneity.17

The relative value of vocal production within operatic performance is subjective; for critics like Morris it seems to be a virtuosity that creates frisson through the comparative likelihood of failure, a

17 Morris, “Digital Diva: Opera on Video,” 100.
rationale contrary to the practical aims of dramatic repertory performance. However, many opera critics (including Abel, Koestenbaum and, to some extent, Clément) track their emotional engagement with opera to the professional and emotional vulnerability of opera performers, the audience’s engagement with the bodies of the singers, and the sense of intimacy it creates. Opera celebrates artifice, but in adding another level of the technical infringements of video recording complicates an already dense framework of dramatic signification.

Before returning to the aesthetic consequences of filming opera, a consideration of the more widely theorised effect of filming on spoken performance provides a useful point of comparison. In his discussion of the links between industrial production and the rise of the film industry, Walter Benjamin suggests that film is irrevocably shaped by the knowledge that the performer has that he or she is performing not for the camera and director but for a distant audience: “Never for a moment does the screen actor cease to be conscious of this fact. While facing the camera he knows that ultimately he will face the public, the consumers who constitute the market.” In the case of opera broadcast to cinema, performers are aware that their straining face will be seen at giant magnification, revealing the strain that would never be so clearly perceived from the auditorium, but is required for the dual live and distant audiences of these broadcasts. Benjamin relevantly discusses the relationship between performances for stage and camera:

The artistic performance of a stage actor is definitely presented to the public by the actor in person; that of the screen actor, however, is presented by a camera, with a twofold consequence. The camera that presents the performance of the film actor to the public need not respect the performance as an integral whole. Guided by the cameraman, the camera continually changes its position with respect to the performance. The sequence of positional views which the editor composes from the material supplied him constitutes the completed film. It comprises certain factors of movement which are in reality those of the camera, not to mention special camera angles, close-ups, etc. Hence, the performance of the actor is subjected to a series of optical texts. This is the first consequence of the fact that the actor’s performance is presented by means of a camera. Also, the film actor lacks the opportunity of the stage actor to adjust to the audience during his performance, since he does not present his performance to the audience in person. This permits the audience to take the position of a critic, without experiencing any personal contact with the camera. Consequently the audience takes the position of the camera; its approach is that of testing. This is not the approach to which cult values may be exposed.

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19 Ibid., 222.
The difficulty in aesthetic assessment of live opera broadcasts is that the performances are intended for both live audiences and film audiences: the video director aims to replicating the aura of live performance in movie theatres, but in the attempt tangibly alters it: lighting schemes are changed to better suit the cameras, singers wear microphones so that their voices can be recorded and digitally mastered, and concessions are made to the wider and potentially less cosmopolitan audience of the broadcast (in 2011 costumes were revised to remove partial nudity from Bartlett Sher’s production of *Les Contes d’Hoffmann*). Due to these alterations the experience of members of the audience attending the performance in person is also altered: they see a performance that is different from the stage production, and without the broadcast additions provided to the cinema audience. The broadcast director can select shots from several cameras, picking close-ups and wide shots to direct the attention of the cinema audience, where in live performance the attention of attendees can be courted by stage effects but not coerced about the stage.

Benjamin distinguishes between painter and filmmaker as artists, drawing an analogy between the magician and the surgeon: “The magician maintains the natural distance between the patient and himself; though he reduces it very slightly by the laying on of hands, he greatly increases it by virtue of his authority. The surgeon does exactly the reverse; he greatly diminishes the distance between himself and the patient by penetrating into the patient’s body, and increases it but little by the caution with which his hand moves among the organs.”

Extending Benjamin’s critical logic to opera recordings, the resonance of this analogy is apparent: the aesthetic magic of operatic performance is diminished under the scrutiny of the high definition camera lens and the associated mechanical interventions of the broadcast film. Benjamin’s work has been significant not only in theorising the changing relationship between technology and culture in the twentieth century, but also; significantly, it has informed the way culture, including non-photographic media, is discussed. Benjamin suggests that just as Freud’s *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* changed the way we perceive and talk about mental processes, film has changed the way we think about optical and acoustical perception. This dual applicability of Benjamin’s work indicates the significance of considering how technology has changed opera not only in altering the distribution of operatic performance, but also in how technology, including photographic reproduction, cinema and television have come to

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22 Ibid., 229.
inform the construction of stage images. The incorporation of mechanical techniques and film imagery in stage production is a creative response to the challenges posed by film, but it is also an attempt to court an audience accustomed to the intensity and pace of film images.

While psychological assumptions about how individual audience members perceive performance are unlikely to be an accurate account of the experiences of any one subject, psychoanalytic approaches are useful in interpreting and understanding the perspectives of critical theorists who engage considerably with concepts of personal identity in the perception of art. For Tambling (who, as we have seen previously, comes to formulate a psychoanalytic approach to opera through application of similar methods in film studies) the work of Walter Benjamin is significant in considering the aura of voice, relating the reproducibility of cinema to live performance: “Opposed to silent film, which renders the audience mute, the aural sound film centres the subject and imposes on it the power of the superego while keeping audiences in a single subject condition.”23 The aura of sound is clearly a fundamental aspect of live performance, but takes on different dimensions when recorded from performance, where it will never be as polished as a recording of the same voice in a studio, especially if that recording is layered and manipulated mechanically to more closely mirror the exact pitch and volume specifications of the score. On the subject of the specific characteristics of the operatic voice, Tambling’s argument echoes Adorno’s skepticism about the compatibility of opera with modern technology and society: “Insistence on the purity of voice tries to overcome the unconscious threat of muteness, even though this contemplation of vocal aura is in any case now becoming obsolete: the aura is now established technologically, in conditions of absence, through reproduction and amplification of the CD and laser disc.”24

In light of earlier discussions of qualities of voice in live performance, productions like the Live in HD broadcasts are an unusual combination of traditional performance and performance mediated by technology. While the films are only broadcast directly to select markets, they allow a close facsimile of spectatorship to untraditional audiences, interspersed with documentary behind-the-scenes interviews during the intervals, and yet while these disparate audiences watch the same opera they have significantly different experiences of it, and the experience of audiences in the cinema cannot be understood through the same theoretical framework as live performance.

24 Ibid., 277.
Kaja Silverman’s *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* presents a psychoanalytic framework for film studies which, while described in relation to the specific formal features of film, shares a similar theoretical framework to that used by feminist musicologists, and with the increasing influence of film on performance genres, resonates with relevant dramaturgical theory. Silverman’s psychoanalytic conception of cinema links the elements of production hidden by mechanical reproduction with Freud’s concept of symbolic castration:

Lack would appear to be inscribed into cinema through the female body. Random as they seem, these displacements follow a very specific trajectory. The identification of the woman with lack functions to cover over the absent real and the foreclosed site of production - losses which are incompatible with the “phallic function” in relation to which the male subject is defined.

What I am proposing is that film theory’s preoccupation with lack is really a preoccupation with male subjectivity, and with that in cinema which threatens constantly to undermine its stability. This obsession with the coherence of the male subject informs the debates on realism and suture as well as those on sexual difference and representation.25

The loss of the object reproduced by filming is the symbolic castration, and for Silverman leads the audience to either disavowal of the absent object or to construct the relationship with the object as a fetishistic one. Both Tambling and Carolyn Abbate discuss the film theory of Kaja Silverman in their discussion of operatic aesthetics. For Tambling, Silverman’s identification of the audience’s aural identification with the characters onscreen as the grounds of the psychoanalytic drive in cinema spectatorship translates neatly to opera spectatorship, and for both media the interpretation of the female voice is a point of additional tension.

Applying film theory to opera sheds light on both disciplines: while many film theorists consider the consequences of the perception of absence, and others suggest that the cinematic object becomes tangible, the consideration of opera suggests toward the artificiality of both the representative form and the narrative and images conveyed by that form. Opera’s apparent theatrical artifice and the obvious operation of the apparatus of musical dramatic representation, unlike that of cinema, inoculate the audience from the illusion that the thing represented exists in the world of non-narrative experience. Silverman describes various other theoretical constructions of fetishism in film theory, starting with Christian Metz, who argues “that the cinematic fetish is most often technical

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virtuosity or formal brilliance - a demonstration, as it were, of the ‘goodness’ of the apparatus [...] that is, that the object is replaced by an overt display of artifice\textsuperscript{26}; but states a preference for Jean-Louis Comolli’s argument that the cinema’s fetishism lies in the replacement of the absent real with the simulated real. While this may be true for cinema, in discussing the live performance of opera, where formal brilliance and artifice are dominant and the audience is in the presence of the body producing the voice, Metz’s theory may be considered more relevant, although it could be argued that voice fetishism is similarly linked to the simulation of real-life emotional states via the mechanics of sung voice.

While recording and broadcast practices have influenced live performance, the incorporation of audio visual technology within opera staging also has considerable aesthetic consequences, and offers the potential for individual productions of operas to make use of references to mass culture, as was mentioned in the previous chapter with regard to the chroma key film projections used Opera New Zealand/Scottish National Opera production of \textit{The Italian Girl in Algiers}. Bruce Beresford’s work with Opera Australia, discussed previously in relation to adaptations of American naturalistic stage dramas adapted to film and opera, has also extended his experiment with cinematic technique and allusions in less conventional directions; in his 2012 Opera Australia production of Erich Korngold’s 1920 opera \textit{Die tote Stadt} (adapted from Georges Rodenbach’s 1892 symbolist novella) the orchestra performed in a separate theatre of the Sydney Opera House and the sound was simultaneously broadcast into the opera theatre, accompanied by slow motion digital projections, the production design a strange blend of baroque costumes and furniture and astronomical images evoking the final scenes of Stanley Kubrick’s \textit{2001: A Space Odyssey}.\textsuperscript{27} The technical experiments of Beresford’s production were not particularly successful: the orchestral accompaniment was dynamically and texturally flattened by the broadcast, and the singers were left exposed and unamplified on stage, struggling to maintain appropriate volume during the relayed performance, producing sound that was at times eerily reminiscent of karaoke. Interviewed by Steve Meacham, the production crew justified the work’s unconventional staging with assertions of the mechanical expertise employed:

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 5.
\textsuperscript{27} Erich Korngold, \textit{Die Tote Stadt}, directed by Bruce Beresford (Live performance; Sydney: Joan Sutherland Theatre, Sydney Opera House, June 15, 2012).
Over the past year Cray [Tony David Cray, sound designer] has supervised scores of scientific tests to ensure the audience hears as authentic a sound as possible - with the orchestra and chorus being broadcast through a series of small, carefully positioned speakers inside the auditorium, delivering the equivalent of a cinematic, surround-sound experience. As Terracini puts it: “There won’t be one big ghetto blaster. You’ll have the sensation of sitting in a cinema but watching a live opera.”

For Beresford […] the references to cinema are apt because Korngold is best known in the English-speaking world for his Oscar-winning Hollywood film scores, including Errol Flynn’s Adventures of Robin Hood. “And this score is very much like a romantic film score - lush, melodic.”

This justification of the sound design as “delivering the equivalent of a cinematic, surround-sound experience,” where cinema is seen as a standard for live performance to aspire to, is indicative of the conflicted relationship between cinema and theatre, and opera’s reliance on film aesthetics has consequences beyond standards of sound quality. In his review for ABC’s Limelight, Clive Paget argues that “Beresford, for all his cinematic talents, seemed unable to come up with anything more imaginative than a few ominous clouds, a clumsy gauze and a series of uninspired projections […] John Stoddart’s gaudy sets with their odd splash of art nouveau smacked of Walt Disney rather than the over-ripe sensuality of Gustav Klimt. His realisation of Bruges was dominated by an over-lit bridge straight out of Cinderella’s castle, while trashy costumes turned the commedia dell’arte scene into high camp rather than sinister grotesquerie.”

This review is illuminating not just for its engagement with Tambling’s understanding of the relationship between cinema and opera, in suggesting that cinematic cliché becomes more pronounced on stage when presented via film projection, but also can be set as a useful expression of how opera can fall under Sontag’s understanding of camp as failed seriousness, as discussed previously in relation to Perry’s discussion of Antipodean culture.

While Opera, Ideology and Film significantly predates the launch of the Metropolitan Opera’s successful live broadcast program, Tambling acknowledges the potential for the filming of opera to be used as a justification for its continued cultural relevance and for government financial support:

[these films promise] operatic material new style, but the newness merely cosmetic, and as establishment-based as any other aspect of what is defined as high art in Britain, with the addition that they display the effects of ‘culturism’: holding up that ‘art’ and ‘excellence’ within the field of opera in a way that ‘naturalises’ it, and

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makes it seem not the reactionary toy for the rich end of an elitist culture, but something of universal significance: which gives it a certain accessibility that can only work to ensure the continuance of opera houses, with the class and conservatism, both political and intellectual, that they [project].

In the context of Benjamin’s ideas about culture and mechanical reproduction, Tambling suggests that film has the potential to erode the “cultic value” of opera by removing the class context and ritual of performance from the genre, and creating the false impression that opera’s prior reputation for inaccessibility is the result of structural rather than ideological limitations: “Live opera and filmed opera, or the musical film, stand contrasted in Benjamin’s formulation; and mechanical reproduction should have the availability to challenge the pretensions of the former, privileged category: but the question that remains to mute Benjamin’s temporary optimism is, under what circumstances can the mechanical reproduction work to change perception? It might have the power to do so, but all depends on the opportunity to use that power.” In productions like Beresford’s Die tote Stadt, where characteristics of both film and live performance are combined, the political connotations of mechanisation are complicated - the work is still inaccessible to wide audiences, and yet aura of mass production and cinema provide a sense of permanence and reproducibility. Philip Auslander addresses similar issues in Liveness, identifying that television originally modelled itself on theatre (partially because of the technical requirement that early television be broadcast live), and yet theatre has come to increasingly incorporate and emulate mediated performance: “initially, mediatized [Auslander follows Baudrillard in using this term] events were modelled on live ones. The subsequent cultural dominance of mediatization has had the ironic result that live events now are frequently modelled on the very mediatized representations that once took the same live events as models.” Accounting for the structural links between live performance and recorded media brings us back to questions raised by the nature of modern adaptation: often we are considering the interpretation and staging of a text that has been interpreted and developed through adaptation from one or more source texts in different written, live and recorded forms.

30 Tambling, Opera, Ideology and Film, 2.
31 Ibid., 3.
32 Ibid., 106.
33 In 2010 Auslander was found to have failed to acknowledge the extensive re-use (under contract) of the work of William E. Deal and Timothy K, Beal in Theory for Performance Studies, a textbook he wrote as part of a critical theory series for Routledge. With this considerable reservation, Liveness stands as an interesting contribution to debate about the influence of media culture on live performance. See Richard Schechner et al., “Concerning Theory for Performance Studies,” TDR 53, no. 1 (2009), and Auslander’s acknowledgement of his error, Philip Auslander and Richard Schechner, “Philip Auslander Responds to ‘Concerning Theory for Performance Studies’,” ibid., no. 3.
34 Philip Auslander, Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture (London: Routledge, 1999), 12.
As the proceeding discussion has indicated, Gershwin’s claim that “[the] Machine Age can affect music only in distribution,” is considerably complicated by music drama, which cannot be divorced structurally from the context in which it is presented to audiences. Understandably, given the expansion of media influence on broader culture since the early twentieth century, his claim is also challenged by operas that take technology, current events and the media as themes, and these works also mark the significant intersection of the technologically mediated opera and adaptation: where media culture becomes the primary text of adaptations. As previously touched on in discussion Antipodean Camp and the many textual sources for *The Ringtone Cycle*, contemporary compositions that draw upon many sources surrounding a particular subject can be usefully examined as adaptations, but have particular structural nuances when based on historical events. In her discussion of historical events as the subject of adaptations, Linda Hutcheon suggests that these works can be considered as a historiographical cast on the debates surrounding intertextuality, suggesting that the “ontological shift that can happen in adaptations of an historical event or an actual person’s life into a reimagined, fictional form […] it is a paraphrase or translation of a particular other text, a particular interpretation of history. The seeming simplicity of the familiar label ‘based on a true story,’ is a ruse: in reality, such historical adaptations are as complex as historiography itself.”36 In opera this trend is best exemplified by John Adams’ major compositions based on significant twentieth-century historical figures and events, the aforementioned *Nixon in China*, *The Death of Klinghoffer*, and *Doctor Atomic*.

This use of documentary sources in stage drama suggests a movement away from more conventional models of adaptation where the debt to earlier work is openly acknowledged, and, like some of the other early twenty-first century works discussed, can instead involve reference to a network of textual sources – *Doctor Atomic*, as one example, is an account of the Trinity tests of the atomic bomb, but, as has been mentioned previously, includes sections of poetry by Donne and Muriel Rukeyser set to music alongside excerpts from the Bhagavad-Gita, a biography so intimate it frames the events with Oppenheimer’s own literary obsessions. Real life events have been the subject of other more unexpected recent adaptations, like Mark-Anthony Turnage’s *Anna Nicole* (2011), about the life of Anna Nicole Smith, former exotic dancer and wife of oil magnate J. Howard Marshall II,37

which, as Alex Ross notes in his review of the 2013 New York City Opera production, while concerned with an unorthodox subject, follows a similar emotional arc to Berg’s early twentieth-century opera *Lulu* (adapted from Frank Wedekind’s play). While part of the appeal of *Anna Nicole* comes from the novelty of seeing tabloid celebrity embraced within opera’s decidedly non-pop culture aesthetic, the opera also illustrates the similarity between these overblown narratives of personality in popular culture and the emotional narratives of opera. In a similar vein Richard Thomas, librettist of *Anna Nicole*, developed *Jerry Springer: The Opera* with writer and musician Stewart Lee (despite its through-composition and self-definition as an opera, *Jerry Springer* was generally reviewed as a musical and refused Arts Council funding on the grounds of its early commercial success) suggested parallels between bizarre and exploitative daytime television plots and the elevated emotional palette of opera.

Nico Muhly’s *Two Boys*, commissioned by the New York Metropolitan Opera and first performed by the English National Opera in 2011 (with its Metropolitan Opera premiere in October 2013, after significant revision), is based on the story of a British teenager who tried to organise his own eroticised murder online. Like *The Ringtone Cycle*, *Two Boys* appropriates slang in attempt to reflect the texture of online environments through language, and Muhly is appropriately described by Rebecca Mead in *The New Yorker* as having “an associative intelligence that is facilitated by Google and iTunes.” Mead describes observing him at work on an earlier composition, noting how his composition process reflects the flow of internet browsing:

> The image from Digges [a 1576 diagram of the universe] reminded him of an anthem by William Harris that sets part of a poem by Edmund Spenser (“Fair is the heaven where happy souls have place / In full enjoyment of felicity”), and that prompted him to listen again to a recording of Elizabethan minstrel songs by the

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41 To an email enquiry about changes to the dramatic structure of the piece following the ENO production, Muhly responded: “[it’s] not finalized yet […] you might have to wait until we produce the fucker!” (Personal correspondence with the author, October 10, 2012).
42 Judy Bachrach, “‘U Want Me 2 Kill Him?,” *Vanity Fair*, February, 2005.
countertenor Alfred Deller. Looking at a series of images of the sun marked by sunspots - which reminded him of a computer screen cluttered with icons - he thought of a passage from Roland Barthes’s “The Empire of Signs,” in which Barthes says that a chopstick “introduces into the use of food not an order by a caprice, a certain indolence.” Muhly decided that “a certain indolence” might be a good characterization of the mood with which he wanted his violin concerto to include.43

Dark Sisters, Muhly’s second opera - a chamber piece co-commissioned by the Gotham Chamber Opera, the Music-Theatre Group and the Opera Company of Philadelphia with a libretto by Stephen Karam - is also a crime procedural, based loosely on several recent events concerning allegations of illegal polygamy and statutory rape occurring within radical sects of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints through the lens of sensationalist network news coverage. While the events that inspire both of Muhly’s operas are substantially fictionalised, these operas borrow John Adams’ documentary approach to opera and extend the plot to implicate the mass media that report these events.

While not necessarily typical of all contemporary composers, Muhly’s access to, and willing emersion in, a variety of visual, musical and textual sources is indicative of the way contemporary adaptations often make use of a variety of textual reference points. Despite the subject matter and this collage-compiling approach to source material, Muhly has maintained that in terms of narrative and themes the opera is broadly conventional describing the plot as the modern day equivalent of the archetypal masked ball opera plot.44 In terms of institutional dramaturgy however (to borrow Streichen’s term), the technological aspects of Two Boys were emphasised by the Metropolitan Opera’s publicity campaign, with Muhly participating in a Question and Answer session on Reddit45 and interviewed by the host of the MTV internet fraud program Catfish for the Wall Street Journal,46 and with listeners to the live stream of the premiere encouraged to tweet along: “We’re just about to get started! If you’re in-house or listening at home, let us know what you think with hash tag #TwoBoys!”47

44 “Two Boys Interview.” June 14, 2011, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_IyNUilC7M
47 The Metropolitan Opera, Twitter post, October 21, 2013, 7:56 p.m., http://twitter.com/MetOpera
In this context, these contemporary works challenge Tambling’s suggestion that opera as a mode of performance is ill-equipped to adapt to a culture of technological interconnectivity. Tambling argues that even as its emblematic theatrical moments become citable cultural signals, opera becomesdigestible in the face of postmodern culture: “‘Distraction’ challenges autonomous high art, as does total visibility, the total slickness of opera presented with all the enframings of technology. Conditions of the postmodern elide reception of the popular and reception of art-culture: in fact they break down the distinction. […] Arguments from the postmodern would suggest that opera is characteristically consumed in a state of inattention even in the opera house, but more especially on video or television, or in extensions such as film scores, the narrative of films (Andrea Chénier in Philadelphia), the place given to the three tenors or arias heard during the World Cup”\(^48\). However, the challenges posed by intertextuality are not unique to dramatic music, and while the aesthetic consequences of media intervention and live performance are politically problematic, it is incorrect to assume that contemporary composers and opera companies are not able to engage with the reality of cultural interconnectivity in productive ways.

\(^{48}\) Tambling, “Towards a Psychopathology of Opera,” 264.
Conclusion

While this thesis has attempted to account for how different composers, librettists, directors and stage producers have employed the distinctive stylistic and structural features of contemporary opera to create adaptations, it has also endeavoured to illustrate how a consideration of opera illuminates several theoretical nuances of adaptation theory not sufficiently explored to date. In attempt to move away from the Aristotelian construction of lyric theatre as a representation of the conflict between the representational value of words and music (and the corresponding critical applicability of hermeneutics and phenomenology), this thesis has outlined a wide range of aesthetic strategies for considering modern compositions, providing a comprehensive account of how adapted dramatic texts are complicated by the representational complexity of performance.

Staging practice has been one of the central concerns of this thesis for two reasons: because the process of adapting a text to opera is significantly informed by structural considerations relating to producing for stage; and because operas are primarily experienced through performance and different productions of compositions significantly inform their cultural status and reception. Taking account of the role of directors and other producing artists can also help counter arguments about adaptation that envisage the process as a conversation between the author of the adapted text and a single adaptor; operas, like many other works for stage and visual media, are fundamentally collaborative and refer to a wide range of narrative, musical and visual precedents.

In light of the collaborative nature of opera authorship and production (and the relevant aesthetic specificities of the genre), this thesis has also suggested several structural models for opera adaptation as alternatives to the film case studies that dominate adaptation theory: the graphic novel, as a similarly visual adaptive medium with substantially different cultural
associations; and the dramaturgical models of puppetry and dance, allowing for more comprehensive consideration of the representational complexity of opera on stage.

This focus on dramaturgical analysis has also suggested relevant similarities between the adaptation process and the production and staging of dramatic work. Consideration of this similarity identifies an additional weakness of fidelity theory: just as a particular production of a play might be described as faithful if it resembles notable prior productions of that play (and equally a radical director’s theatre production might make full and complete use of the play script), adaptations described as faithful do not correspond to the primary text as much as they correspond to the dominant cultural reading of that text.

Beyond dramaturgical analysis, I have also significantly focused my analysis on the position of opera within wider culture, suggesting that the cultural ambivalence that surrounds the genre allows opera to challenge cultural conventions and dominant interpretive perspectives on texts. With regard to gender and sexuality, critics from the similar theoretical backgrounds have expressed significantly divergent interpretations of how the conventions of opera influence the presentation of narratives on stage: Kristeva and Clément have produced considerably different readings of the prominence of the female voice in lyric drama; and Queer theorists have produced similarly diverse interpretations of the cultural associations between homosexuality and the genre, while reading the female voice in distress as an expression of personal resilience and cultural defiance. In frequently returning to the conflict between narrative analysis and the symbolic implications of the visceral experience of sound, these discussions again highlight how pervasive the critical division between the analysis of words and the analysis of music is in theory relating to music drama.

In the context of national performance cultures the subversive implications of opera adaptation are also evident, as in the case of the stylistic and demographic expansion of opera culture in the United States following the success of *Porgy and Bess*, illustrating the
complex relationship between race, popular culture and literary modernism in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Within established literary traditions the conventions of opera also have the potential to destabilise common interpretations of texts and assumptions about national literary and performance cultures, as illustrated by discussion of how the lyricism of Previn’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* undermines the dominant interpretation of Tennessee Williams’ play as a dramatic exploration of the twentieth-century conflict between Romanticism and barbarous modernity. This subversive potential of the form is also illustrated through a consideration of how contemporary Australian opera, read through Perry’s Antipodean Camp, has allowed for sophisticated expressions of Australia’s ambivalent relationship with global literary and performance culture, granting the institutional antipathy toward new work and the apparent cultural incompatibility of opera and stereotypes of Australian identity.

While the specific conventions and cultural status of opera make it an ideal media for unconventional interpretations of canonical texts, the intricacy of the relationship between adapted operas and their source material is a reflection of the expansive creative and critical potential of all textual adaptations, rather than an exception based on the particular stylistic specifications of opera. In this thesis I have suggested that by taking into account cultural history and relevant features of live performance it is possible to have more productive discussions about adaptation and the place of opera in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.
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