

INTRODUCTION



THIS BOOK is about cinema's attraction to the operatic voice: not about any and all points of contact between cinema and opera but rather about films that thematize the power that opera has over film—thematize, so to speak, their own “pull” toward opera. I explore cinema's acknowledgment of opera's power over it and account for this extreme attraction to opera. If a film is not driven by opera or does not wish, in its infatuation and obsession, to become operatic, if it does not risk its own “cinematicness” in being so haunted by opera, it does not figure in this book.

Starting with questions about the inner elaboration of the space of opera, I ask what happens when that space is projected onto the medium of film. My emphasis is on what specifically occurs when what is aesthetically essential about one medium is transposed into the aesthetic field of the other. It is not the case that each medium—opera or film—loses what is characteristic about it in this transformation. Instead, the transformation reveals the specificity of each, in ways that a consideration of opera or film on its own terms cannot. Paradoxically, cinema at times can be more “operatic” than opera itself, thus capturing something essential that escapes opera's self-understanding.

I deal with opera as a *medium*, on par with the medium of cinema, rather than as a musical genre or style comparable with, say, the symphony or the concerto. My investigation of cinema's relation to opera is to be distinguished from historical accounts of the influence of opera on cinema or of operatic music on film music. I do not outline continuities between the two media or discuss the development of genres across them (for instance, the melodrama of opera as finding a renewed life in Hollywood melodramas). Nor am I concerned with analogies of themes, actions, or characters, although those are always part of the picture. Operas appear within plots of films; characters go to the opera, listen to it, and are absorbed or overwhelmed by it, as we ourselves often are when viewing and listening to opera.

But if those instances are to be elaborated in relation to the guiding thread of the book, it is not by merely asking about the relation between the plot of the film and that of the embedded opera, or by treating the music of the opera as part of the film's music (operatic music as background film music is almost “too much,” overdetermined). This is true of filmed operas as well: the attraction that opera holds for cinema does not express itself in what would initially seem to be the obvious case of filmed opera productions. Indeed, the most important, even avant-garde filmed

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operas emphasize the impossibility of a straightforward and direct transformation of the operatic into the cinematic, or of the vocal into the visual.¹

The fundamental point is always how all these cases of film's interaction with opera teach us something about the exchange between the two media, and how the transformation of one medium into the other may reveal unanticipated or previously unarticulated characteristics of each. The particular cases thus teach us something essential about the two media in question.

For precisely this reason, I am most interested in individual cases where the affinity between opera and film is extreme and extravagant, since true attraction is never moderate. These are often cases where opera—true to its nature—makes contact with film in unique conditions, under special circumstances, or in unexpected places. These extreme cases delimit the boundaries of the possibilities for film's involvement with opera.

This book assumes a conception of opera that ties together all six chapters. First and foremost, the chapters share a premise about the foundation of opera in a notion of *voice*. Voice is thus a common theme, yet I have not tried to cite or construct some common theoretical framework that could subsume and organize all the works I discuss. Any theoretical framework must be consequential to the interpretation of the works themselves, not something assumed or imported beforehand. My own idiosyncratic view of the nature of opera and of cinema, in particular the importance I assign to the singing voice and to the voice as a more abstract idea, does inform my approach. Yet I have tried to allow it to emerge from the material: the voice of opera in silent film (chapter 1), an impossible striving for the perfect image of song (chapter 3), opera on the phone (chapter 5), and a journey of the bodily remains of opera (chapter 6). It is my hope that, viewed in this way, my operatic films will reveal something about the relation of opera and film that is available neither in the abstract nor by way of theoretical accounts alone.

The title *Vocal Apparitions: The Attraction of Cinema to Opera* is meant to intimate a paradoxical linkage. First, "attraction" is meant, deliberately, to anthropomorphize film and opera, to imply transgression, to suggest that films deal with opera as an object of desire that may also be perilous to their autonomy or strict cinematic identity. But in coining that title, I wanted as well to problematize the notion that there is some continuous passage or smooth, predictable transition (either historically or within any given film) between opera and cinema. The linkage between cinema and opera should be taken as improbable or paradoxical, not natural; we should not assume that one melodramatic genre naturally and inevitably calls out to another and is answered in kind.

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The title is also meant to suggest a series of *passages* or transformations. First among these is the passage between the *vocal* and the *visual*, both within each medium and in film's appropriations of opera. The idea of a vocal apparition unites the spectral with the acoustic; in my view, the interaction of these two domains always involves a critical negotiation, and not just in the more obvious case of film. Voice and image are uneasily related within opera. But "apparition" also alludes to the specific case where film calls up images whose origin lies, so to speak, beyond the medium of film. These images are imported into film by way of a hidden power that belongs to opera—they are the spectral remnants of the immaterial, invisible operatic voice.

Another passage implied by the idea of the apparition is the passage between death and life. One of my claims is that cinema inherits opera, as it were, reincarnating it. Thus scenes and images of opera in cinema refer to a past existence, a dead ancestor. At the same time, they *mask* these reminders of mortality; they both divert us from and draw our attention to the uncanny presence of death. And paradoxically, at the same time, by lavishly staging the human voice with its implications of life and presence, opera in cinema holds out a promise of revival.



Four premises delineate my understanding of opera. The first premise is that the aesthetic foundation of opera is the operatic voice. Opera's voices and, with them, *the idea* of the operatic voice are unique to its world; the medium conceives of itself through its voices. This premise assumes a notion of song and singing that is characteristic of Italian opera and less so of other national genres. Though I do not wish to insist on or argue for the point, my view is that all opera—including nineteenth-century French and German opera, twentieth- and twenty-first-century opera—carries some trace of an "Italian" notion of song.

By an "Italian notion of song," I do not refer to some style of singing (such as *bel canto*) or even to the general point that melodious singing is an important aesthetic criterion in opera. What I mean is something quite different: opera that engenders a state in which one is always listening in anticipation of, or listening toward, a place where one knows beautiful singing will take place. The Italian notion of song produces the condition of always waiting for "beautiful moments" of singing. This is a kind of ecstatic listening, and it specifically acknowledges operatic singing as an activity bordering on the superhuman. Such singing is transcendent on the one hand yet always under the threat of appearing ridiculous on the other, being both miraculous and continually available for parody.

Such beautiful moments do not have any fixed aesthetic manifestation.

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They could figure as outbursts of coloratura, as improvisation, as continuous and smooth legato articulation, as singing to the limits of breath, or as an expression of “dramatic truth.” These beautiful moments could yield the high note, the long note, the darkest note, and the most lyrical note. But in all cases, it is the special state of listening in anticipation of these moments that is crucial and accounts for their meaning. All opera has such moments.

These beautiful moments are objects of desire and anticipation; however, they are also ephemeral. Thus the state of anticipation brings with it a simultaneous consciousness of mortality. Moments of beautiful singing are always already being mourned, since one knows that they will have gone by at the very moment they appear. Put in its most paradoxical form: they are gone before they are there. There is a sense of no return connected to those beautiful moments, and, ultimately, their power over the listener depends on this programmed loss.

By raising the issue of mortality, I am intimating the second premise that conditions my understanding of opera. This is that death is immanent in the operatic voice. There are several accounts of death as a phenomenon in opera, and not just simply from the overobvious perspective of the libretto and the plot. Catherine Clément, Michel Poizat, Slavoj Žižek, and Carolyn Abbate, to name only a few, have various perspectives on this theme.

Clément provocatively claimed that singing itself seems to kill the heroines of opera. In her interpretation of opera’s cultural work, these repeated deaths—the “undoing of women” in opera—are a symptom of female victimization in general. Our investment in this victimization ensures that opera will continue to be enjoyed. We are doubly deceived by the beautiful music, for it not only gives voice to and even causes these deaths but also encourages us to overlook or become amorally complicit in the murderous plot. Thus though the plots wallow in female death scenes, singing and music are also guilty—or even guiltier. They mask the horror of opera’s excessive female mortality. Clément envisions a future for opera wherein women sing and are finally *permitted to die* for good. Violetta expires one last time, and *La traviata* is never performed again, for this is preferable to the forced immortality of infinitely repeated deaths.²

In theorizing opera’s attraction to death, Michel Poizat downplays the role of operatic plot while endorsing Clément’s correlation between voice and death. For Poizat, the various characters’ deaths mirror a trajectory that is, in the abstract, immanent in the idea of the operatic voice as such. Voice, in Poizat’s view, is a spectrum, a continuum whose “high” extreme is a sound beyond singing (melos) and beyond signification: the cry, the shriek, the scream, fading out into after-echoes and silence. The “low” extreme of the voice is logos: a logical, minimally inflected, and unsung

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speech. For Poizat, operatic voice, in being drawn into melodious singing, is always impelled toward the high extreme in an unattainable quest for a transcendent point that does not exist. Thus operatic narratives that prescribe death for their characters allegorize the tendency of voice to reach for its own high extreme. Thus in staging death, opera stages its fundamental vocality. For Poizat, opera's essence resides in moments in which listener and singer alike lose themselves in the singer's voice, dissolving in what becomes sheer voice, a vocal object. He writes: "In opera, the voice does not express the text—that is what theatre is for; the text expresses the voice . . . it is not because the dramatic logic of the libretto has led the female character to her death that she cries out at that moment; it is because a logic of vocal jouissance is at work and is driving at the cry that the dramatic conditions necessary for its occurrence are created, demanding a death, for example."³

Slavoj Žižek, concentrating mainly on Wagner, interprets opera as being about a subject unable to die, about longing for peace in death. Žižek imports the Lacanian—some might say horror-movie—motif of "two deaths" and existence "between two deaths," the first being the biological death, and the second, dying in peace "with . . . accounts settled and with no symbolic debt haunting his or her memory."⁴ Between the two deaths is a state of eternal longing and unfulfilled desire. It is here that Žižek locates the exemplary Wagnerian horror as he sees it: the threat of existing as an undead monster. For Abbate, however, death in Wagner's operas is a Utopian moment in which the opera seems to displace the authorial voice quite radically, replacing it with a voice that has no source from within the plot. Death thus also allows a form of operatic immortality. Heroines remain in music after their death, in something resembling a sonorous form.⁵

As an addendum to these theories about death in opera, I formulate my third premise, which is more specific and yet makes a rather pan-historical critical claim about mortality and operatic voice. Operatic deaths replay the medium's primal "Orphic death," by which I mean not the death of Orpheus (which was, in fact, seldom included in librettos) but a more complicated system or structure implicit in the myth. Citing the Orpheus myth as a master operatic figure is, of course, hardly unprecedented. As Wayne Koestenbaum put it, "Every opera revives Orpheus, the art form's genesis."⁶ The very persistence with which critics and historians return to this master trope should, itself, be seen as significant. We should note how curious it is that the founding myth of the "birth of opera" via the narrative of Orpheus has persisted for so long, despite grave reservations concerning its historical accuracy. An accounting of the actual invention of opera, the precedents of opera, and its development after 1600 has long

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gone beyond Orpheus. Yet the sense of a miraculous birth persists—in other words, opera’s “philosophical” and fabulous lineage, as opposed to its actual and “pragmatic” lineage, persists even in light of contradictory evidence.⁷

And so, the founding myth: the death of Eurydice, the transformation of Orpheus’s loss into music that attempts to overcome death. Initially, Orpheus is successful in bringing back the dead Eurydice. But Orpheus’s success is ultimately also the story of his failure to sustain Eurydice’s revival. What is striking in the myth is that song’s power manifests itself in the first instance as the *possibility of passage* between death and life, indeed, as the power to bring the world to life or back to life. But if we turn this on its head, we see the corollary: without facing mortality and separation, without experiencing the pain that can create song, one brings death into one’s life. A world without song is itself dead.

But there should be reservations about any such ecstatic claim, reservations already intimated in my first premise, about opera, voice, and song. It is inherently impossible to sustain the ecstatic power of song. Singing, “Italian song,” is always anticipated as subject to inevitable mortality. Singing is a way station on the voice’s inevitable trajectory toward cries and silence. And, in the Orpheus myth, song opens only a *temporary passage* between worlds, and it is unable to make the upper world a permanent home for someone who inhabits the netherworld. The slip back into old ways of experiencing the world is the temptation figured in Orpheus’s need to gaze backward at Eurydice. But, more important, he cannot sustain, or make permanent, a miraculous phenomenon based on and in song. Any such phenomenon is transient, ephemeral, and without the reassurance of actual presence. Orpheus is tempted to look back at Eurydice and to relate to her in the way that must bring her renewed death.

In the myth, a distinction is established between a song that revives (but is transient) and a gaze that kills (and is permanent). According to Stanley Cavell, this duality has to do with “the expressive capacity of song: ecstasy over the absolute success of its expressiveness in recalling the world, as if bringing it back to life; melancholia over its inability to sustain the world, which may be put as an expression of the absolute inexpressiveness of the voice, of its failure to make itself heard, to become intelligible—evidently a mad state.”⁸

What I mean by “Orphic death” as a premise about opera, then, is the complete structure suggested by the myth. Song revives the dead, but that revival is overturned by a gesture that is not acoustic (song) but visual (looking back). The myth of Orpheus is first and foremost about the power of Orpheus’s voice. But a curious power it is, since Orpheus cannot sustain it and loses whatever this power achieves. Perhaps Clément’s formulation that singing in opera “kills” is possible only if we first assume

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that the voice has the power *to revive*; yet this power is fragile. Song, it would seem, is too easily overcome, and the puzzle is not why Orpheus turned around but rather why song's power to revive is overturned and canceled so easily by only one quick glance. "Orphic death" thus hints that the spectral, the visual, or the optical is able to bring about the total collapse of whatever has been achieved by the vocal or the acoustic.

That this model is critical to any consideration of cinema and opera should be stressed in no uncertain terms. Even simply taken at face value, the model indicates that "the visual" might summarize the impossibility of ever completing a passage and thus stands for an interruption, a rude break in the death-to-life motion that song continually attempts to achieve but cannot.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge opera's "Orphic" basis—in my particular sense of "Orphic death"—if only to distinguish its aesthetic foundation from the many other myths about the power of voice, the miraculous effects of voice, and so forth. For instance, the myth of Ulysses and the Sirens (to cite another paradigmatic myth about voice) deals with voice as an enchanting force capable of waylaying the senses. There have been contrary readings of this myth: Kafka, troubled by the idea that Ulysses overcomes the power of the Sirens' singing, explains that the Sirens, offended by Ulysses, did not sing at all; it is only their silence that Ulysses withstood.⁹ But the Sirens, in either case, are not very good as a model for the origination of operatic song, since their song kills its listeners. Neither can Ulysses be opera's ideal mythical listener, since, if anything, he allegorizes the capacity to resist song by whatever means possible, and opera is about neither withstanding the power of song nor refusing to listen. On the contrary, from the listener's point of view, opera involves abandoning oneself to song, anticipating its beautiful singing, longing for the intimations of a miraculous passage inherent in that singing, at the same time knowing that the singing will come to an end.

My fourth premise follows on the notion of an "Orphic death" of song itself within opera, the idea that song is abbreviated or terminated by a visual intervention. The relation between the vocal and the visual, the passage toward death or away from it: these are themes internal to opera; yet, as I have argued, they are not independent themes, unrelated to one another. The myth of Orpheus shows visuality entering the picture in the case of a primal operatic death. But I want to turn the screw one last time and say that it is not quite the gaze that causes death. Rather, the idea of mortality or impermanence is already called for by the frailty of song, by its incapacity to *sustain* life, or by its passing and ephemeral nature.

According to this formulation, opera's repeated murders within its plots, which for Poizat echo the voice tending toward its own unraveling at the "high" extreme, are, with that unraveling, a reference to what initi-

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ated operatic singing in the first place—the Utopian attempt to overcome death with song and the belief (as Cavell put it) that song will revive the world, which end in the inevitable failure of those attempts and their revival, the repeated hope invested in song. The promise to bring back what is dead is supplanted by a more profound, less ecstatic acknowledgment that what is ephemeral and passing is also what can return. The gesture of endless dying signifies the failure of death to hold sway. The repetition of song questions the finality of death, introducing a dimension of immortality. The repetition becomes its own conversion and a correction. In opera what cannot truly be internalized is this power to resurrect, and the constant resurgence provides for the medium's immortalization.

One can, therefore, phrase a counterargument to Clément—whose distaste for turning death into a Utopian metaphor is so patent—in the following terms. Opera's endless repetitions of the structure of singing and dying restate the originating act of Orpheus's revival of Eurydice through song while also reinscribing the failure to sustain life—which is also opera's own. Through its sheer mortality and human frailty, the operatic voice wills what is beyond the human: the reversal of death. The possibility opened by loss is one where singing reverses death. Thus, against Clément's conclusion that the death of heroines attests to women's problematic positioning within opera, we might say that death in fact hands over to the operatic heroine the ultimate power of song. In apparently dying Eurydice's death, the heroine is endowed with the power opera longs for: that granted to Orpheus. Finally, it is symptomatic that opera tends to delegate the biggest moment of Italian song to the heroine at her fatal apotheosis. If the soprano's death song is the prototypical beautiful moment in opera, this is not simply because, as Clément suggests, the most regressive or horrifying plot element demands the most persuasive musical cover-up. As I have intimated, what goes on at such moments is far more complex and may well be the first entry point that cinema found in opera when it was first felled by opera's seductive gaze.



This book is divided into three parts, each with two chapters. Each part has a particular local color and a singular inner unity, but there are also important thematic connections running through the different parts. The first part, "Silent Voices," begins with the last decade of silent film. Its two chapters trace film's attempts to visualize the voices of opera while forgoing its sounds. On the whole, silent film was attracted to opera in both obvious and paradoxical ways—in an obvious way in that an operatic voice may have seemed an ideal compensation for the absence of sound; in a paradoxical way in that it is unclear how an operatic voice would be represented in a silent genre. And yet, it is precisely silent film that depicts

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something essential about opera: silence, muteness, and the disintegration of language are at the core of the operatic voice.

The film interpreted in chapter 1, the 1925 silent version of *The Phantom of the Opera*, portrays an obsession with opera, primarily the obsession of the central character in the film, the Phantom, but also that of the film itself. *The Phantom of the Opera* attempts at all costs to express the conditions of voice in opera by way of the cinematic image. The film is haunted by the operatic voice and makes its singing “audible” by revealing this voice’s power to take over the images of cinema. Ultimately, cinema substitutes for opera. The Phantom, as he comes to signify the operatic in the film, dies an operatic death. His death pulls down the cinematic figure, the one that took over opera, and allows the operatic figure of the prima donna to live but requires her to relinquish her powers of song to obtain that cinematic happiness. In *The Phantom of the Opera*, it suffices to see the operatic voice in order to hear it. This provides the first fundamental interpretation of the interplay between the vocal and the visual and of the passage between opera’s vocality and cinema’s visuality.

The Marx Brothers’ film, *A Night at the Opera* (1935), is the main focus of chapter 2. Though not a silent film, *A Night at the Opera* invokes silent film by thematizing film’s attraction to opera. In their extravagant display of the disintegration of speech, the Marx Brothers show their inheritance of silent burlesque but, more important, their sense of the uneasy relation between operatic music (perhaps even music in general) and discursive meaning. In translating operatic manners into their own mode of being, the Marx Brothers subvert opera’s tragic fate, allowing for a cinematic happy ending for one of the Italian repertory’s most melodramatically deadly operatic works. In effect, the Marx Brothers rescue the film’s operatic twin plot of *Il trovatore* by avoiding a repetition of its unhappy end. The happy ending made possible by the film overrides the threat implicit in that tragic opera. In the process, however, the film carefully conceals the origins of its own happy ending, which restages a famous death scene: the now-united lovers (a star soprano and an aspiring tenor) joyously celebrate their triumph and future marital bliss by singing what, in Verdi’s *Il trovatore*, is a last pre-mortem duet.

Considered together, the two chapters put forth the claim that something about silent film’s way of presenting the operatic voice without sounding it is essential for understanding a more general relation between opera and film. Moreover, both films show that in engaging with the operatic voice, they must also share opera’s preoccupation with death as an outcome of the journey of the operatic voice. The Phantom dies operatically; the Marx Brothers cunningly, willingly, and cheerfully “mishear” the operatic death and avoid its fate.

The second part of the book, “Visions of Voices,” considers what oc-

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curs when cinema absorbs opera in its entirety in the form of filmed opera. Chapter 3, “*Otello’s One Voice*,” and 4, “*Falstaff’s Free Voice*,” center on Verdi’s last operas and two unusual and (some would say) problematic cinematic realizations: Franco Zeffirelli’s *Otello* and Götz Friedrich’s *Falstaff*. Part 2 is the most explicit in arguing that the tensions between the vocal and the visual are inherent to the medium of opera prior to any consideration of its relation to cinema. *Otello* and *Falstaff* represent opposite notions of the relation of the vocal to the visual in opera (notoriously, in the case of *Otello*, “optical proof” is at odds with the truth expressed inefably through Desdemona’s voice). The cinematic productions enter this picture as secondary reorderings of a vocal-visual dyad that has already been foregrounded by the operas themselves. Taken together, these two chapters claim that a successful cinematic production of opera is necessarily a radical interpretation of relations that occur within the opera itself. A straightforward transposition of opera into film would neither be cinematic nor operatic.

In these chapters, the complex relationship of the vocal and the visual is elaborated in interpretations more attuned to musical detail than in any of the other chapters. An implicit aim of this part is to show that Verdi’s aesthetics—his conceptualization of the relationship of the vocal to the visual in opera—run as deep as Wagner’s. Indeed, *Falstaff* is often considered Verdi’s response to Wagnerian notions of opera. Thus, I have chosen to interpret Zeffirelli’s more traditional production of *Otello* as a cinematic treatment of an opera that represents one of the culminating moments of the tradition of Italian song. Similarly, I have chosen Friedrich’s production of *Falstaff* because Friedrich is a director immersed in staged and screened productions of Wagner who can illuminate aspects of Verdi’s opera that reveal it as a response to Wagnerian aesthetics.

The sense of the difficulty or ease with which the visual and the vocal come together is not just a feature of these productions but rather the outcome of the inner possibilities of each opera. *Otello* seeks to present a voice beyond any physical embodiment, a voice that no image can match, whereas *Falstaff* plays with the voice’s different, often grotesque, embodiments, matching and mismatching them with the image. These different relations between the vocal and the visual determine the tragic outcome of *Otello* and the comic resolution of *Falstaff*. An operatic voice fated to die, as in *Otello*, differs from an operatic voice celebrating life, as in *Falstaff*. *Otello* is the culmination of depictions of the death of voice, and *Falstaff* opens the possibility to address this fate comically. The two operas combined manifest the comic resolution of the tragic fate.

Part 2 further elaborates on both the theme of silence and of the relation of voice and death, which is broached in part 1. In his production of

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Otello, Zeffirelli almost seems to fear silence. Even though the opera calls for a crucial moment of silence when it brings its heroine onstage to sing nothing, Zeffirelli abstains from visually representing that staged silence and removes Desdemona altogether from the scene. In *Falstaff*, Friedrich does not alter anything within the body of the opera but, surprisingly, adds to it, inserting silent visual interludes between the opera's scenes. Through these interludes, Friedrich demonstrates that the visual can arise out of the vocal and, even more strikingly, that music can arise out of silent visuality.

The third part of the book, "Remains of the Voice," develops an account of the sense of the immortality of the operatic voice. Cinema, in recalling the operatic, allows its voices to echo; it provides opera with a peculiar afterlife. Chapter 5, "Opera on the Phone: The Call of the Human Voice," interprets Poulenc's opera *La voix humaine* and Rossellini's film *Una voce umana*. The film and the opera were created independently of one another; initially, their only relationship was that they were based on the same play by Jean Cocteau. Rather than examining what the filmic image makes of the operatic voice or how film incorporates an entire opera, I examine how film and opera react differently to an identical text—one that precisely invokes the themes of the vocal, the aural, the visual, and death.

The opera and the film take on the idea of a silent voice, a voice on the other side of a phone line, the source of which is not located in an image. A comparison between the film and the opera reveals complexities in the interrelations and differentiation of notions such as "unheard," "silent," "mute," "voiceless," and "speechless." It is the unheard and invisible voice that becomes the driving force of events. But, at the same time, this nonpresence brings about the power of the voice that we do hear to construct the whole world enacted in the works.

The different conceptions of voice and vision growing out of the same text reveal different sensitivities to death. Despite its modern, technological setting, the opera takes the traditional notion of solitary singing unto death to its extreme and constructs an opera-length death song. Rossellini's *Una voce umana*, which is independent of opera, is not bound to the operatic dependency of voice on death and is free to offer an alternative. In the film, Rossellini does not remain with the deadly invisible voice on the phone but generates an intense expectation for an apparition to be conjured out of that voice. Although Rossellini does not change the deadly outcome in Cocteau's play, he does add a second film, *Il miracolo*, which provides a glimpse of the future in the sound of a baby's newly formed voice.

In the sixth and final chapter, "Fellini's Ashes," I interpret Fellini's *E la*

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nave va as offering a spectacle of the afterlife of the operatic voice. This possibility of a future after the death of the voice was intimated in Rossellini's film, where it was figured in nonoperatic terms. Fellini's film, by contrast, is all opera. This film incorporates themes discussed in all of the earlier chapters. *E la nave va* includes scenes of vocal acrobatics, pyrotechnics, and vocal contests, as do *The Phantom of the Opera* and *A Night at the Opera*. Operatic excess is carved into the film's very style as in *The Phantom of the Opera*; it captures the ridiculous and absurd side of the operatic voice as in *A Night at the Opera*; it employs technology to sound the voice as in *Una voce umana* and *La voix humaine*; and it evokes fantasies of the perfect operatic voice as in *Otello* and carnivalesque visions of the voice as in *Falstaff*. Fellini's film evokes, more than any of the other films considered in this book, the total phenomenon of opera. I do not interpret the many associations with opera; in its overwhelming references to opera, the film almost calls for an abstention from such an endeavor. In being "too much" it allows us to select moments, like mementos, to stand for the rest. It is in this spirit that I interpret what I identify as its most deep-seated attraction to opera, namely, its attraction to the death of the medium of opera itself.

Fellini's film begins, rather than ends, with the death of the operatic voice when it stages the funeral of the most famous prima donna of all. The film portrays her voice indirectly: not by sounding it, but by staging the cult of that voice. *E la nave va* shares with other films I discuss in the book the attraction to the operatic voice through the filter of silent film. It opens with an imitation of a silent film. The funeral procession of the prima donna is placed in a silent film sequence. A nostalgic return to cinema's silent decades depicts the start of the funeral at sea, where her ashes are spread. Toward the end of the film, the use of the gramophone to sound the voice of the prima donna serves to further relate the reproduction of the operatic voice to the essentially nostalgic nature of the cinematic image. Fellini thus intimates that the birth of film coincides with the death of (at least) the Italian tradition of opera. More important, he understands film to provide opera with an afterlife.

In *E la nave va*, cinema not only does not correct opera's deaths but also uses the occasion of the death of a prima donna to show, beyond any specific opera, that death threatens both the characters of opera and the medium itself. The film allegorizes the death of the singing voice as the end of opera. In so doing, it places, alongside its own anxiety over the death of cinema, that of the death of opera—understanding one by way of the other. If, in 1925, *The Phantom of the Opera* exhibited the fear that opera will haunt it and that cinema will never replace opera, in 1983, at the occasion of cinema's one-hundredth birthday, *E la nave va* exhibits, through its operatic past, the fear of the end of cinema. Through the death of the

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operatic voice, Fellini envisions the death of the medium of cinema, a death that is, for Fellini, no less than a vision of a world bygone.



Introductions are tricky. They call out for manifestos and clear-cut declarations that in my case are at odds with a more cautious, tentative, modest, and interpretative style. No single theoretical framework or opera-and-cinema method could serve as a rubric or road map for the various arguments I present here. My most elaborate theoretical discussion appears in chapter 1, where I rely on a Lacanian notion of voice. The second part of the book, chapters 3 and 4, considers operatic music in great detail, cinematic productions of whole operas, and depends to a great extent on musical analysis. Chapter 6 involves cultural history and uses what might almost be called a montage technique, a thick nexus of texts.

The shifts in techniques, or even in scholarly attitudes, are, in part, the after-echo, reflecting the radical heterogeneity of the phenomena I am trying to bring into view. There is no theoretical framework that I know of that could deal with one phenomenon I am working with, the transitions or passages between one medium and another. There are no established assumptions that make working between opera and cinema easier; the modulations between opera and film require a different starting point every time, require that one start with the specificity of the work.

I find that I cannot even imagine a single, specific cinematic style that would be most suited, or preferable above all the others, for portraying the operatic voice. Rather—as in *E la nave va*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, and *A Night at the Opera*—different cinematic styles invoke different traits of the operatic. One finds expressionism (as in *The Phantom of the Opera*), burlesque (as in *A Night at the Opera*), and the grotesque (*E la nave va*). Even Rossellini's *Una voce umana* brings the style of neorealism to its limit, combining the realistic and the operatic. Any one of these filmic styles (the expressionist, the burlesque, the grotesque, and the neorealist) can come to approximate the condition of opera. These films are not analogous to opera. They become operatic.

Still, there is one theoretical domain that I want to address, and that is the issue of what is sometimes called internal and external criticism. Interpretative positions with respect to opera often adopt two opposed sides. Internal criticism, one might say, is completely engaged in the work, completely absorbed by it, by its magic. In opera, this tends to take the form of elucidating opera's power over the listener and often deals with voice in the abstract or operatic singers specifically. Sometimes the writing itself is carried away in an attempt to recapture the ecstasies of the medium and its powerful attraction through verbal excess or an open confession of the emotions that opera engenders. Hence Wayne Koestenbaum's poetically

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explosive language: “Opera has the power to warn you that you have 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 only used a fraction of your bodily endowment, and your throat is closed.”¹⁰ Collaborating on an opera, as Koestenbaum did in *Jackie O.*, does indeed seem the next step after that kind of writing.

The second interpretative position, external criticism, views operatic works as a function, or even symptom, of various social or cultural forces. In this domain, opera’s attraction is socially regressive and politically dubious, since opera is invariably ideologically motivated. Implicit in its assumptions is the idea that opera is, properly, a phenomenon of the past, linked to the emergence of a bourgeois world. If opera continues to fascinate, this is cause for alarm. As Theodor Adorno writes: “It would be appropriate to consider opera as the specifically bourgeois genre which, in the midst and with the means of a world bereft of magic, paradoxically endeavors to preserve the magical element of art.” This is something that one, at most, clings to nostalgically: “what happens on the operatic stage is usually like a museum of bygone images and gestures, to which a retrospective need clings.”¹¹ Jeremy Tambling, in his writings on opera and the media, is equally suspicious. He calls for us to correct opera, seeking ways to expose its many disguises and wrongdoings. Tambling argues that our experience of opera should be totally altered by the estranging effect that he hopes postmodern cinema will have on it.¹²

Some writers are amphibious, so to speak. Catherine Clément, for instance, feels the force of opera and expresses it in her style of writing about the works, but at the same time she strongly senses the problematic nature of a medium that habitually kills its heroines and aestheticizes their deaths. Even Adorno starts from a position of suspicion but comes to admit that, together with the negative ideological moment of semblance, there is, in opera, at least the promise of another happiness.

Is it possible to find a stance between the inside and the outside, to sense the transformative truth of opera but also the problematic nature of its lure? Can we do this as easily as we acknowledge opera’s success and recognize its failure, realize at once its power and weakness? What I propose is that thinking about opera and cinema together can provide a position that assumes neither total immersion in the operatic work nor ideological estrangement from it.

In a sense, such positions are opened by the transformation of the very life, or afterlife, of opera in cinema, the ways in which opera loses itself and finds itself anew in cinema. Cinema can thus speak for opera’s truth, give it voice, and at times replace it, criticizing its failures and illusions. A look

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at films that are driven by opera—drawn to it or haunted by its presence—reveals what might have been hidden if one were totally immersed in opera or if one were too skeptical of its powers. Thus, in the idea of the refraction of one medium in another, we find the possibility of interpretation and criticism that avoids both the wholly internal and the wholly external perspectives.

Given my preference for metamorphic transitions, it is not surprising that I swerve toward a style of writing that holds to the tensions and paradoxes of bringing together film and opera while respecting the independence of each. In this regard, Stanley Cavell as well as Carolyn Abbate have served as models. If I have profited from their insight and perceptiveness on the subject of opera and film, I have also tried to learn from an example they set of writing that is responsive to phenomena, like opera and film, that is always polysemic and never easy to see at first glance. In their work, an attraction to opera is both set at some distance and responded to in full. The fundamental meaning of voice and singing in opera is thus made uncanny or strange and shown to be inherent to the medium as such. Something fundamental about opera is conveyed not by rationalization but by responding with equal verve.

Cavell, for instance, first gave voice to one of the main ideas I have borrowed in this book: the excesses of opera as linked to deep intimations of ephemerality, the constant threat that singing will be terminated. What is nevertheless essential for Cavell is how even such excesses, transgressions, and failures reflect something essentially human—as though the human is essentially beyond itself, bringing out the contours of the human voice. Cavell writes:

Such a view will take singing, I guess above all the aria, to express the sense of being pressed or stretched between worlds—one in which to be seen, the roughly familiar world of the philosophers, and from which to be heard, one to which one releases or abandons one's spirit (perhaps to call upon it, as Donna Anna and Donna Elvira do; perhaps to forgo it, as the Marschallin and as Violetta do; perhaps to prepare for it, as Desdemona and Brünnhilde do; perhaps to identify it with this one, as Carmen does), and which recedes when the breath of the song ends. This expression of the inexpressible (for there is no standing language of that other world; it requires understanding without meaning) I described as a mad state, as if opera is naturally pitched at this brink.¹³

Abbate expresses a related thought by stressing the presence in opera of unheard song or music that sings itself, thus bringing out the unattainable nature of song, or its inherent “beyondness.” Its absent sounds are what make them resonate so powerfully: “One might therefore say that contemplating the ineffability of music entails seeking out places where opera

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posits inaccessible music beyond what we can hear, as a specific sign for that general elusiveness.” That elusiveness demands writing about music that is commensurable with it. It is “choosing to write about music in certain ways: no pins, no jagged edges.”¹⁴ We might be made uncomfortable by reminders that experiences of opera remain personal (and are not universal) and that the very language in which we couch our “scholarly” interpretations, in itself, performs the work of interpretation. This discomfort should be momentary. As I have found, and as I hope to convey in this book, accepting the reality of opera’s force can make for a scholarly conversation that is full of life.