New Approaches to Transcodification

Transcodification: Arts, Languages and Media

Edited by
Simone Gozzano

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New Approaches to Transcodification

Literature, Arts, and Media

Edited by
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Serena Guarracino

Transcodification as *Hantise:* Opera and Memory in Derek Jarman and Isaac Julien

Abstract: This essay explores the appropriation of opera and melodrama in two short films, Derek Jarman's *Depuis le jour* (1987) and Isaac Julien's *The Attendant* (1993), which counterpoint each other in their use of opera to voice the complex relationship between memory and desire, pain and pleasure, from a marginal subject positioning. Both films feature aging bodies as agents of desire, subverting linear time and normative narratives on desire and pleasure. Through their use of opera arias, the films interrogate the effect of remembrance and the power of memory to evoke pleasure and joy, even in the face of pain and trauma. By reclaiming opera as a means of expressing marginalized subjectivities, the films challenge hegemonic, Western forms of desire and offer a new poetics of transcodification. Ultimately, the essay reveals how these films use opera to cast the past as a source of joy and pleasure, rather than just melancholy and nostalgia, and to reclaim the place of marginalized bodies in a history of pleasure.

Keywords: Appropriation, opera, melodrama, body, marginality

An old white woman, in an elaborate, somewhat 18th-century dress and a long mane of white hair, is showered by petals, while George Charpentier's *Depuis le jour* (from the 1900 opera *Louise*) plays in the background. She bows and then throws her hands in the air with joy, holding a flower bouquet; the close-up on her face shows her smiling, blissfully.

A black, ageing man, wearing a white camellia on the lapel of his tuxedo, sings Henry Purcell's *When I am laid in earth* (from *Dido and Aeneas*, 1689) from a side box of an empty opera house. The singing is rather out of tune, but at the end of the aria the theatre nonetheless resonates with applause; the singer courteously bows.

These two scenes respectively open and close two short films, Derek Jarman's *Depuis le jour* (1987)[1] and Isaac Julien's *The Attendant* (1993),[2] works that counter-

1 *Depuis le jour* is part of the feature film *Aria* (Miramax Films, 1987), produced by John Boyd, which includes ten shorts based on opera arias directed by, among others, Jean-Luc Godard, Robert Altman and Ken Russell. Jarman's short runs 6' and it the last one in the film, with the exception of the framing performance of *Pagliacci* (directed by Boyd himself with Bill Bryden).

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point each other in their appropriation of opera and melodrama – both the genre and the 'mode' – to voice the intricate relationship between memory and desire, pain and pleasure, experienced from a marginal subject positioning. Furthermore, both films invite the audience in through complex mechanisms of mirroring and focalization, to share multiple dislocations of a hegemonic timeline that identifies the aging subject as agent of desire only in the form of memory and melancholia. In both cases opera, a dead art form, gets transcodified in the flow of the present without losing its marked out-of-timeliness, thus giving voice to the incongruous, queer desires of the explicitly elderly bodies it haunts, and subverting both linear time and normative narratives on desire and pleasure.

It is generally held that opera as it was known in its heyday – the time of Verdi, Wagner, and Puccini – is "emphatically finished,"[3] as Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar state in their brilliant study dedicated to the phenomenon of opera's ambivalent status: always-already dead and yet stubbornly surviving its own demise. This seems to be a constant concern throughout the history of opera – after all, early opera was an effort by the Camerata de' Bardi in Florence to resurrect ancient Greek theatre; however, as Fusillo and Petricola convincingly argue, the archeological intent of this project actually resulted in a heightened experimentalism, producing "the most relevant intermedial art form of the baroque age."[4] However, after two centuries of widespread popularity especially in the form of nineteenth-century melodrama, the issue of opera's out-of-time status resurfaces in the twentieth century, when the genre loses its role as a popular form of entertainment whose multifarious audiences cut across social classes, languages, and peoples. In a time when concerns about the representation of subaltern subjectivities – such as women and/or racialized Others – have become more and more pressing, opera's entanglement with the most tainted aspects of Western ideology such as misogyny, orientalism, and even outright racism has become too self-evident not to raise issues about its legacy for the contemporary stage. Recent scholarship has exposed its relish in patriarchal violence[5] as well as in the objectification of the Oriental 'other' put on display for Western eyes and ears:[6] with its

2 The short, running 8'11", is available among the special features included in the DVD of Julien's film *Derek*, dedicated to Derek Jarman (BFI, 2008).

3 Dolar/Žižek 2002, 2.

4 Fusillo/Petricola 2023, 568.

5 See esp. Clément 1989; McClary 1991.

6 A groundbreaking effort in this respect is the analysis devoted to Verdi's *Aida* by Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (Said 1993). I have discussed the impact of Said's work and the debate it sparked in Guarracino 2010.

ideological grounds under close scrutiny, one would think that opera could easily "be assigned a neat place in cultural archaeology and thus properly buried."[7]

And yet, in the face of its ever-announced death – whether hailed or mourned – the theatrical genre known as opera shows a stubborn vitality and a surprising ability to be subjected to transcodification, even in the form of unremitting interrogation or outright capsizing. This is certainly due to its belonging to the Western musical canon, which makes it part of a wider cultural legacy under constant revision and reappropriation; however, because of its overlapping with the mode of melodrama, opera has traditionally occupied a marginal, eccentric place in that very canon. Melodrama, Peter Brooks has notoriously argued, is a label that "has a very bad reputation", whose connotations include "the indulgence of strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of being, situations, actions; [...] inflated and extravagant expressions."[8] Opera, differently from most instrumental classical music, appropriates – in different ways at different times – these 'popular' elements of melodrama; in particular, it foregrounds a powerful thematization of the body as the intersection between language, music, and gesture: "opera owes its undeniable affective power to the overdetermination of the verbal, the visual and the aural – not to the aural alone. And it is specifically the body – the gendered, sexualized body – that will not be denied in staged opera."[9]

Hutcheon and Hutcheon's specification of the centrality of the body in *staged* opera may easily be expanded to include other genres and art forms, especially cinema where, as Linda Williams has prominently argued, melodrama belongs to the category of "body genres", those genres which both center on the performing body and excite bodily reactions from its audience (such as jump scares or tears).[10] While Jarman's and Julien's films do not strictly fall in the category of either operatic or cinematic melodrama, they do tap into melodrama as an aesthetic category of bodily excess:[11] in particular, it is the ageing, fragile body as a destabilizing agent of desire that represents the narrative and symbolic center of both works, as a syncretic embodiment of melodramatic excess and of opera's own radical refusal to disappear.[12]

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7 Žižek/Dolar 2002, 3.

8 Brooks 1996, 11–12.

9 Hutcheon/Hutcheon 2000, 206.

10 Williams 1991, 3–4.

11 For melodrama as an aesthetic category, broader and more pliable than genre, see Fusillo 2022.

12 It is beyond the scope of this essay to offer an overview of the marginalization of aging bodies in contemporary economies of desire; a good introduction to the issue is Featherstone/Werwick 1995 and, as regards women in particular, Hurd Clarke 2011.

Both directors' choice of opera arias heightens the unexpected centrality of an ordinarily marginal subject position, as their sources are not exactly congruent even with the canonical opera repertoire: *Dido and Aeneas* predates the heyday of melodrama of at least one century,[13] while Charpentier's opera may hardly be considered a major work. Yet the arias selected here are typical of operatic melodrama in the way they feature a strong emotional interpellation centered on a woman character, and a woman's singing voice. Dido's lament from Purcell's opera features a traditional subject of melodrama, the abandoned woman, who just before dying sings not to her departed lover but to her sister and handmaid Belinda, asking to remember her but without being burdened by the tragedy of her demise: "Remember me, but ah! forget my fate". Charpentier's *Depuis le jour*, instead, is addressed to no one in particular, as the main character Louise sings it to herself – and the audience – at the opening of the third act of the eponymous opera while happily reminiscing of the beginning of her love. The memory evoked here is, surprisingly for operatic melodrama, a happy one; and indeed, the love story lasts until the end, the opposition of Louise's family notwithstanding.

The two arias play with opposite emotional registers (joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain), but both harp on the same theme: the haunting power of memory, whether it be the tragic fate of the Carthaginian queen or the "souvenir charmant / Du premier jour / D'amour" of the young woman in twentieth-century Paris. Jarman and Julien both interrogate the effect of remembrance at a time – the end of the 80s and the beginning of the 90s – which saw the queer community on the verge of annihilation; and the issue of how to memorialize the lives and communities which were quickly disappearing under the pressure of the AIDS epidemics was central for artists and activists alike.[14] Jarman himself had been diagnosed HIV-positive in 1986, the year before the release of *Depuis le jour*; in the same year Julien, then a young artist and activist, released *This is not an AIDS advertisement*, a short film reclaiming homosexual desire in the face of the puritanical approach of anti-AIDS campaigns.[15] Both directors engage with opera as part of a broader poetics of hijacking hegemonic Western forms to find voice and expression for marginalized subjectivities, an approach which has been, in different ways, fundamental in the development of a specific LGBT politics and aesthetics.

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13 Peter Brooks locates the inception of melodrama in the years around the French Revolution, a time when the secularization of public morals leaves a residue or void in the representation of the sacred which is taken on by this new theatrical genre; see Brooks 1996, 15.

14 On the issue of memory and mourning in relation to the AIDS epidemics, see Butler 2004, 19.

15 See the page of the short film on Isaac Julien's website: https://www.isaacjulien.com/projects/this-is-not-an-aids-advertisement/ (last accessed 07/12/2024).

This project emerges quite clearly in *The Attendant*, where Purcell's aria is part of a wider set of rewritings and transcodifications. Julien pairs Purcell's aural suggestion with the visual re-coding of 19th-century painting *Slaves on the West Coast of Africa*, by French artist François-Auguste Biard, which comes to life under the scrutinizing eyes of the eponymous attendant, who is also the singer of Dido's lament. The painting, which is shown in full at the beginning of the film, is then fragmented in a series of close-ups on its main groups, which are transfigured as sadomasochistic tableaus. The representation of pain and violence endured by African slaves at the hands of European traders is transcodified into color-blind pleasurable play where, irrespective of race, black and white men play the role of tops (traders) and bottoms (slaves). The tableaus, in their turn, anticipate the old man's own relationship with a young white man called the Visitor, played out in the following scenes. The traumatic memory of slavery, which haunted the strained relations between black communities and the state in Britain at the time,[16] is here re-framed through sadomasochism as a way of turning violence into care, pain into pleasure: as Elizabeth Freeman writes, "it is inescapably true that the body in sadomasochistic ritual becomes a means of invoking history – personal pasts, collective sufferings, and quotidian forms of injustice – in an idiom of pleasure."[17]

Julien rewrites the history of violence over the black body by reclaiming that same body's ability to pleasure itself and others while still haunted by the memory of its traumatic past, and Dido's lament plays a crucial role in this transformation of painful memory into present enjoyment. Purcell's aria does represent, in this sense, a sort of sadomasochistic experience in its own terms: as operatic melodrama often does, it turns the excruciating pain of one character into a deeply pleasurable experience for the audience. Dido's cry is part of a long list of suicidal or otherwise dying women who represent the height of operatic melodrama as an aesthetic experience: as Catherine Clément argues in her seminal *Opera; or, the Undoing of Women*, "on the opera stage women perpetually sing their eternal undoing. The emotion is never more poignant than at the moment when the voice is lifted to die."[18] Forever ambivalent, opera audiences across centuries have both celebrated and shared this pain, at the same time suffering and enjoying the death of their favorite heroines.

16 In 1981 and 1985, so-called "race riots" broke out in major UK cities, including London, Birmingham, and Liverpool. While this unrest was caused by the discrimination of black communities founded by migrants from the former colonies after WWII, slavery remains a fraught legacy of colonial times (especially in a city such as Liverpool, historically a major slave trade hub).

17 Freeman 2010.

18 Clément 1989, 5.

Here, however, the pain for the opera lover is heightened by the fact that the film does not offer a technically impeccable rendition of the aria, but an off-key, travesty version in a lower register; a self-evident shift for those who are familiar with the original arrangement of the piece, further heightened by the movie's soundtrack, and in particular by the end titles immediately following the closing performance, where Jimmy Sommerville's impeccable falsetto offers a very different, virtuoso high-range male voice. In contrast, Thomas Baptiste, the actor playing the Attendant, offers an irregular, excessive vocality which highjacks the exceptionality of Dido's desire for Aeneas to make it his own. The Attendant's body thus powerfully occupies the incongruous position of subject of desire: incongruous because old in a culture that defines desire as a province of the young; because black in a history that casts black people as objects, not subjects; and as homosexual at the time of AIDS. This multiple displacement makes Baptiste's body the place where memory becomes, counterintuitively but joyfully, flesh; a flesh which bears the memory of pain but at the same time cries out its right and ability to pleasure. His performance is applauded by the third character in the film, a woman called the Conservator, who in other scenes is shown listening intently to the other, sexual performance between the Attendant and the Visitor. It is she, in both cases, that works as a place of focalization for the audience, who is invited into her emotional response to both performances, to share the mixture of surprise and empathy as historical pain is transfigured into aesthetic pleasure and erotic desire, embodied by the luxuriant black body bursting into color at the center of the tableau accompanying the Attendant's closing performance.

This unnamed young black actor[19] features first at the center of one of the sadomasochistic tableaus from Biard's painting, laying down at the center of the picture while a white, leather-clad man holds (or caresses) him by the throat and another points him to the crowd around them; he also plays a jewel-decked, scantily clad, triumphant Dido in the initial and final tableaus accompanying the opera performance, surrounded by similarly attired black and white performers (the same featuring, in different roles, in the tableaus); his half-length shot, with his eyes looking straight into the camera, close the film. Another object of desire for the Attendant and the onlooker, but also the projection of a younger, glorious self who, however, never sings and never smiles, this character offers another, more opaque subject position, a remote manifestation of being in contrast with the Attendant's fragile but strongly vocal presence.

19 Although he is a recognizable presence, his name is not identifiable in the credits among the other "players": the only actors who are associated with character names are Baptiste (The Attendant), Cleo Sylvestre (The Conservator), and John Wilson (The Visitor).

The counterpoint between a young and an old body is also at the core in Jarman's film. Memory here is represented through the classic cinematic strategy of the old reel, which alternates between black-and-white and grainy color segments to show what appears to be the old woman's young, remembered self, played by Tilda Swinton.[20] She is shown with her lover, as they spend time together at what appear to be different times of the year; the reel is introduced by the old woman, who welcomes the audience with wide, enthusiastic gestures which respond to the aria's own sense of immanent elation: "Tout vibre, / tout se réjouit de mon triomphe! / Autour de moi tout est sourire, lumièere et fête". While the two spaces of the film, the one occupied by the old woman and the one belonging to the young woman and her lover, are clearly demarcated, the formal division between them is constantly challenged: the montage of memorial fragments is constantly interrupted by close-ups of the old woman, the sequined linings of her dress and fan merging with the glittering waves among which the lovers play, as the camera pans over details of her clothes and of her lined, magnetically expressive face.

Especially if compared to the heightened tragicality of Purcell's aria (and of many other opera arias), Jarman's choice emerges as emphatically against the grain, eschewing the many voices who sing "their eternal undoing", as Clément puts it, and focusing instead on memory as a source of pleasure and joy, even of ecstasy. While Julien takes the pain embodied by Dido's lament and makes it a vehicle for the pleasure expressed by the Attendant, Jarman uses Charpentier's aria to cast the relationship between past and present as one not of mourning and loss, but celebrating a desire that goes both ways, from the present to the past but also vice versa. Considering that the film was produced at the same time as Jarman's own diagnosis, it is hard not to read it as an effort to overturn the tragic narrative of AIDS-related deaths – and the moral condemnation that came with it – to reclaim desire and joy for the prematurely ageing, quickly disappearing HIV-positive bodies.

At the end of the film, the old woman takes her leave with a bow; however, she does not bow at the audience but, as it were, *with* the audience, with her back to the camera, as if on the verge of joining us on the other side of the screen. The gaze of the audience, as in Julian, is guided by the aging towards the younger body; the woman's younger self, in her turn, recurrently looks at the camera throughout the whole film. Her look metafilmically addresses the audience and/as her older self, who finds itself at the receiving end of that blissful, desiring gaze. There is, in her mute look as in the silent black man at the end of *The Attendant*, a desire of the

20 Swinton had played for Jarman in *Caravaggio*, released the previous year.

past for its own future; a desire not only to be remembered, but to be a source of pleasure. These looks work as a reminder that bodies and lives that are considered expendable (because of their gender, sexual orientation, race, or age) have the right to be joyfully remembered and to reclaim their place in a history of pleasure. Through these operatic transcodifications, through the *hantise* of the operatic voice, the past embodied in the present is cast not only as the object of melancholy and nostalgia, but also as a very present source of joy, of *jouissance.*

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