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Meaning-Making in Contemporary Operatic Performance

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Tereza Havelková. *Opera as Hypermedium. Meaning-Making, Immediacy, and the Politics of Perception*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. 200 pp. ISBN-13: 9780190091262.

[reviews]

In her study, musicologist Tereza Havelková focuses on the contemporary staging practice of opera, with special interest in the relationship between opera and media. Especially the relationship between the human body, both of the performer and the spectator, and technology is interrogated in several parts of her book. Havelková touches upon historical works in contemporary performances (Lepage's and La Fura dels Baus' productions of the *Ring of the Nibelung*) but dedicates the four chapters of the book to the analysis of scenes from more recent works: *Rosa, A Horse Drama* (prem. 1994) and *Writing to Vermeer* (prem. 1999). In the theoretical and analytical parts of the text Havelková investigates the issues of meaning-making in connection to notions that contemporary theatre studies place a great deal of focus on, e.g., presentness of the theatrical event, immediacy, temporality, representation, corporeality, etc. She also deals with the politics of perception, one of the key topics of her book connected to the proposed shift in understanding of operatic performance (against the 'classical' approach to operatic production as a communicant of a coherent artistic message).

Havelková based her approach to operatic performance on the concept of *hypermediacy* – the notion elaborated by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin in their

1999 work *Remediation. Understanding New Media*. Relying on their approach as a starting point, rather than providing her reader with a 'solid' definition, she instead offers a cluster of characteristics and salient features of the concept. Hypermediacy is thus reprehensible via its typical creative principles such as multiplication and excess, as well as fragmentation and multiplicity of visual representations (125), or 'creation of multimedia spaces in the physical world' as Bolter and Grusin put it in Havelková's quotation of their work (136), etc. The important part of Havelková's treatise and also the very 'definition' of hypermediacy itself lies in the approach to the spectator. Havelková understands a 'perceiver' of an operatic performance as an *audio-viewer*, and uses this as a basis to approach the concept of operatic spectatorship throughout the whole book. Amongst other concepts related to (performance) perception, Havelková borrows one, in my opinion crucial, based on Norman Bryson's (1983) notion that Bolter and Grusin also work with: *the concept of the glance*. According to this approach, the (audio)viewer looks here and there 'in brief moments' instead of performing 'unified and sustained gaze' (127). I think this can be seen as a substantial, almost self-explaining, facet/layer of hypermediacy. Havelková thus touches upon the complex

issue of perception. In four chapters, most of the layers of *hypermediacy* are interwoven with the phenomena, especially in connection to a spectator – understood as an audio-viewer. This approach to the spectator contributes to the very ‘definition’ of *hypermediacy*, since it explains the complexity of his/her theatrical experience. This is further elaborated, for example, in Havelková’s repeated dealing with the issue of the body perceiving another body (or object) and others.

In the first chapter, hypermediacy is approached via allegory and excess (38–68). The main concerns of this chapter are ‘how hypermedial opera produces meaning and how it produces material effects’ (67). The case study example included in this chapter is Peter Greenaway’s and Louis Andriessen’s opera *Rosa*. Havelková uses it as an example of allegorical structure that ‘has important theoretical implications’ for the understanding of the hypermedial opera meaning-making process (38), since allegory, based on a specific relationship between present and past, is characterised as a ‘tool/principle’ that ‘complicates the reading of the opera’s signs and of its story’ (39).

The second chapter (69–97) introduces hypermediacy as an ‘alternative to the logic of transparent immediacy’ which was/has been typical for the approach based on (modes of) representation ‘long dominated in our cultural economy’ (69). In this chapter Havelková examines the notions of theatricality and absorption, and especially the narratological notion of *focalisation* to which she relates the concept *point of experience* as a ‘correlate’ to the point of view. According to Havelková, although the music in hypermedial opera does not take part in ‘unifying perspective’, it can

provide a point of perspective – *point of experience* (95). This idea is followed and further examined in the following chapters.

In the third chapter (98–126) the notions of liveness and medialisation are investigated in more detail. Especially, the ‘paradox’ of *liveness* that can be recognised only in relation to the *mediatised* serves to Havelková as a bedrock for her theoretical reflections. And once again the allegorical strategy, this time in connection to appropriation, is considered here – in the example of the *Writing to Vermeer* opera (119). This work and its staging which direction-scenographic conception is based on the creative scenic manifestations (co-presence?) of Vermeer’s women (on his painting) and singers embodying them and elaborating their livings, enables Havelková to further explain and weigh some characteristic connected to hypermediacy. For example, femininity and body-voice relationships are investigated in detail here.

The crucial effect that can be found in the contemporary hypermedial opera is discussed in the last, fourth chapter (127–161). In broad context, and substantially based on Bolter and Grussin’s discussion on Adorno’s critique of Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk* (2005), the effect of *anaesthesia* derived from/in connection the notion of *synaesthesia* is thoroughly elaborated on. In the chapter, the crucial (possible) effect of *hypermediacy* of (contemporary) opera, or rather operatic staging practice, is examined. This effect can be assigned to the ‘definition’ as a key feature of the phenomena itself. Basically, and in the context of psychology, anthropology, and some other disciplines, the anaesthesia is understood as a response to the ‘overloading’ of the senses, as our ‘psychophysical’ defence

mechanism. To put it simply, where synaesthesia goes beyond its 'boundaries', and our senses are flooded by stimuli, the anaesthesia takes control over our perception – historically to protect us. Havelková examines this phenomenon in the context/situation of the (operatic) theatre, in hypermedial performance. She focuses on the (*over*)saturation of senses, that she finds typical for hypermediality (of opera), as a 'response to the desire for immediacy' (129). The author discusses the notion of *immediacy* several times during the course of her book. This time she explains how hypermedial opera can achieve this effect. She again refers to Bolter and Grusin (1999) and explains/interprets that '[h]ypermediacy achieves immediacy not by virtue of correspondence to an external reality but rather because they do not refer to anything beyond themselves. The excess of media becomes "pure experience"' (129).

In her conclusion, Havelková emphasises 'the interdependence of meaning-making and presence effects' (163) as effects of (mainly) immediacy. She admits her interest in meaning-making production in contemporary opera and according to her – since it happens 'between stage and screen' (162) – it 'engenders effects of immediacy, and may be ultimately political, not in terms of its content but in terms of the relationship between the perceiver and the perceived that is capable of creating' (162). The creative faculty is again put, at least partially, into the senses of an audio-viewer; and from the theoretical point of view, contemporary operatic staging practice is treated in the context of contemporary media culture.

Amongst examples from opera staging practice, I find of great importance,

bearing instructive potential in explaining the *hypermediacy* of opera and its different approach to involving media in operatic production, Havelková's dealing with Wagner's notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk* and two particular productions of the *Ring of the Nibelung*. Using the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, she illustrates and explains several other concepts outlined in her book. Firstly, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is approached as a 'practice' that illustrates possible ways of managing the senses in/by theatre, a sort of 'psycho-technical' manipulation of the sensorium. I think Havelková's characteristic of Wagner's art via hypermedial features is very insightful: especially via 'flooding of the senses' (153), Wagner's creating a world 'outside' our world similarly as media could do it, and via promising (total) synaesthesia while in fact 'ultimately' – and in a way paradoxically – providing the audio-viewer an anaesthesia (146). This offers a reader an in-depth analysis of the possible approach to the totality of operatic theatre. In this matter, Havelková relies especially on Adorno's writing on Wagner (2005), although she doesn't push us to accept the critique of Wagner. I find her summarisation of Wagnerian discussion in the context of media very refreshing. Particularly illuminating are the parts of the text commenting on Wagnerian management of senses, sensorium, where the author touches upon contemporary 'hot issues' of cognitive (theatre) studies, e.g., time and space perception, etc. – in this case in the power of music.

Secondly, Havelková's characteristics of different ways of using media and technology illustrated on Lepage's and La Fura dels Baus' approaches to the *Ring of the Nibelung* is instructive and important for discussion of the meaning-making processes

we can face in contemporary operatic staging practice. According to Havelková, Lepage's approach to Wagner's work is more in congruence with the composer's dramatic ideas, his world and story, treating media and technology mostly as tools of illustration and characterisation (of the dramatic personas, localities, etc.). La Fura dels Baus' use of media serves Havelková as an example of the production in which technology is a theme in and of itself. In this context, she comments on La Fura dels Baus' more complex 'digital imagery', she emphasises especially the relationship between technology and the human body foregrounded in the performance, i.e., foregrounding 'performers' physicality rather than the depiction of characters and their relationships with the drama' (6) and takes the production as an example of a more critical approach to the use of media and technology. She characterises Lepage's approach as a more straightforward visual interpretation of Wagner's music, while La Fura dels Baus 'introduce[s] layers of signification that may not be immediately decipherable to the audience' (5). Havelková's insightful commentary on Lepage's *Ring* as a baroque-like staging approach, encouraging spectator/ audio-viewer to find out about the 'magic' behind the stage 'wonders', is also worth mentioning in discussing *hypermedial* characteristics. Havelková thus suggests the analogy with the baroque operatic practice in terms of *hypermedial* characteristics: 'amazement and wonder at an illusion [applicable to Lepage's *Ring*; ŠHK] requires awareness of the medium, and thus hypermediacy' (8). In my opinion, the 'baroque' approach to operatic staging practice, and especially to scenography as an audiovisual component/concept of production, is

quite typical for contemporary operatic theatre.

All in all, despite Havelková's analyses of recent operatic works I think (and I feel Havelková proves it) that intriguing 'material' for approaching *hypermediacy* of opera awaits in the direction of scenographic conceptions of historical works.

Overall, Havelková's book emphasises and in a way sums up that

hypermedial opera highlights the incongruity of its various systems of signification. It does not establish a 'coherent system of forms and meanings' (KRAMER 2002: 183); but rather 'rearranges existing forms' detached from their original context (BOLTER and GRUSIN 1999: 39). Characterised by fragmentation and montage (visually manifested in the 'windowed' effect of hypermediacy), it tends toward allegory, which also pertains to the narrative structure of hypermedial opera. (67)

Havelková fulfilled her aim 'not to map out an exemplary repertory of contemporary hypermedial opera, but rather to chart the theoretical terrain of opera as hypermedium' (23). Her book contributes many inspiring ideas to the discussion of contemporary opera staging and the meaning-making process, especially if it is approached as a point of human experience, as an (performative) event. Beside other topics, she deals with the crucial issues as relationships of text, sound and image, the role of the voice and sound, and 'eternal' theatre studies topic of 'presentness' in (not only operatic) performance. In this endeavour, Havelková also sums up crucial, insightful and (still) up to date approaches to opera, theatre, media, and technology in the context of culture, including,

e.g., Walter Benjamin's thoughts or Hans-Thies Lehmann's concept of post-dramatic theatre (see BENJAMIN 1969, 1977; LEHMANN 1999). Havelková's book is a significant contribution to the theoretical discussion to be further evolved.

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