Cognitive Aesthetics, Neurosciences and Filmed Opera[1]

Héctor Julio Pérez López

1. *Film, Opera and Spectacle*

The consolidation of digital technology is transforming the nature of whole genres in our culture. In the field of the arts, there has been a dramatic overlapping of areas that seemed completely delimited only a few years ago. As a result, in addressing the issue explored in this article, I must necessarily turn to two seemingly conflicting cultural domains, at least in terms of their respective audience sizes: on the one hand, operas like *Die Walküre, L'amour de Loin, Theodora, Die Entführung aus dem Serrail* or *Les Paladins* are mostly unfamiliar to the general public; on the other, films like *The Lord of the Rings, Spiderman, The Incredibles* or *300* were seen by hundreds of millions of people worldwide over the span of a few months.

I will begin by considering the impact of digital technology on film, as explained by Darley (2000), who suggests that digital technology allows the spectator to experience in cinema something already present in the circus and other similar forms of entertainment. Films have been transformed into spectacles through the large-scale use of digital effects. But how do these digital effects captivate the attention of the spectator? In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the first part of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, directed by Peter Jackson in the late 1990s, there is a scene where a group of spectra are pursuing the elf Arwen, who carries the protagonist Frodo on horseback to take him to have his wounds healed. When the spectra are about to cross a river that is almost dried up, Arwen produces an enchantment that suddenly provokes a huge wave that stops them. The construction of this short sequence required the development of

[1] I wish to thank Martin Boyd for his linguistic revision of this paper.

special software exclusively for the design of the digital effects. The water needed to be transformed into horses running and the movement of the horses had to produce the illusion of being transformed into the movement of water. The visual perfection pursued involved presenting fantastic entities with the sharpness and texture of reality, or at least of analog photography, although it is worth noting that in Tolkien's book there is no literary recreation of these horses of water. This is a concrete example of what Darley (2000) suggests: in the movies mentioned above, the spectator overlooks the strangeness of the images, represented so faithfully, and simultaneously acknowledges the extraordinarily sophisticated artifice involved in their production. The logic-defying nature of these seemingly photographic images fascinates the viewer, causing a delayed reaction that prompts a desire to see it again, marvel at their realism and wonder how it was done. The keyword here is artifice. The illusory effect caused by digital imaging manipulation converges with the astonished gaze of the spectator faced with an acrobatic spectacle. Thus, the use of digital technology to provoke sensual pleasures maintains the traditional objective of the circus or magic shows to amaze the spectators.

In opera, spectacle is not a product of the most recent technology. Baroque theaters, such as the Drottningholm Court Theater or the Theater in Český Krumlov Castle, were equipped with machinery that served for the creation of all kinds of special effects. We can even enjoy watching a production such as Rameau's *Zoroaster*, staged by Pierre Audi and directed for TV by Olivier Simonnet, which features the use of the rudimentary machines of the House for some of the effects[2]. Today, this "philosophy of the spectacle" at the opera is very much alive and its influence depends on the technological and financial capabilities available: a gigantic stage in the middle of a lake, with a central space for the main narrative developments, and other "islands" where other actions with a choreographic value take place. In this case, the magnitude of the show exceeds the limits of the stage: a boat sails on the lake, drawing the attention of dozens of people on the stage. An aerial shot shows the excitement that the character on the boat causes among a group of children located on one of the scenic satellites. However, our attention to the spectacle of such a boat crossing the lake cannot maintain its exclusivity beyond a few seconds. A long row of young men and women runs along the edge of the main stage, all dressed in feast clothes whose brightness and glamour are captured by

[2] Jean Philippe Rameau, *Zoroastre*. Les Talents Lyriques. The Drottningholm Theatre Orchestra and Chorus. Musical Director: Christophe Rousset. Stage Director: Pierre Audi. Set and Costume Designer: Patrick Kinmonth. TV Director: Olivier Simonnet. Opus Arte 2007.

three cameras taking close-ups on and off the main stage. The magnitude of the stage, the brightness and color of the wardrobe and characterization, the exuberance of elements with a merely choreographic function, the amazing effects are all filmed in the same style we see on prime time television. I am referring here to the filming of *La bohème*, one of the major productions of the Bregenz Festival of 2004[3].

The use of digital technologies for such spectacular purposes can also be found in opera houses. The biggest success of 2004 in Paris was a production of J. P. Rameau's *Les Paladins*, directed for the stage by José Montalvo, for which all of the visual and dramatic features were based on digital technology. The subway train arrives on the scene while an elephant passes over it. In a French garden, a lion is playing while two acrobats in colorful clothes jump on him, the lion serving as a trampoline. To the trills of the flutes, the dancers are transformed into butterflies. Obviously, all of these phenomena are possible because there is a screen: a screen that can split open to reveal and hide the actors, a screen where the singers move, dance and develop the action, but above all a screen where small cypresses grow, where castles move, where dozens of rabbits jump into the hat of a giant magician, where dancers in period costume jump on the sky as if it were a trampoline of clouds. It is visually spectacular, thanks to the use of all types of digital imaging synthesis and modification. Is this the fabulous world of opera? Of course, but such spectacular digital strategies are not yet as common here as in Hollywood[4].

2. *Worldwide Distribution and New Conditions of Operatic Narration*

Opera houses have started to use digital instruments to deal with opera's greatest challenge: the expansion and renewal of its public. In fact, the main impact of the introduction of new technologies not only has to do with spectacle, but above all concerns the distribution of filmed operas through digital channels: on the one side, satellite and fiber optic television or, as is increasingly common, on all channels giving access to computers and smart devices such as tablets and mobile phones; and on the other side, distribution on DVD and Blu-ray Disc. The development of digital technology

---

[3] Giacomo Puccini, *La Bohème*. Bregenz Festival's Choir. Wiener Shymphoniker. Conductor: Ulf Schirmer. Stage Directors: Richard Jones & Antony McDonald. TV Director: Brian Large. Capriccio 2006.

[4] Jean Philippe Rameau, *Les Paladins.* Les Arts Florissants. Conductor: William Christie. Stage Director*:* José Montalvo. TV Director: Reiner E. Moritz. Opus Arte 2005.

used for broadcasting operatic performances means above all a wider audience of home viewers. Today, most major festivals and opera houses broadcast some of their more outstanding productions. Almost all opera houses are commissioning the filming of their most important productions, which are subsequently distributed worldwide on TV or the Internet. Moreover, as is well known, the dynamics of the technology have resulted in a fall in the cost of the equipment needed to generate audiovisual products and decisively influenced an extraordinary increase of operatic video productions available on the market. The greater availability of the filmed operatic repertoire and the increased audience are thus the major consequences of the utilization of digital technologies in the dissemination of opera[5].

In light of the above, we need to specify the conditions under which the audiovisual format favors a certain way "to experience the opera", which is not exactly identical to that which occurs within a theater. This raises an issue not so much quantitative as qualitative, concerning the consequences of digital filming as one of the main formats for the aesthetic experience of opera spectators today. It would be easy to fall into the temptation to characterize negatively the increasing presence of visual aspects in the opera as a symptom of decline. When Darley ([2000]: chapter 5) defined spectacle as the central category of commercial digital cinema, he introduced a radical critical vision: the spectacle grows at the expense of the narrative. The seduction of the spectacle leads to a distraction from the story, and those films where the spectacle is built through the use of digital techniques show an evident weakness in terms of narrative intensity. Darley's hypothesis also involves a relationship between the boom of digital effects and the big box office successes in that he assumes the increase of the number of spectators as the main consequence of the new technology.

In my view, Darley´s perspective is marred by a serious problem of consistency related to a rather narrow version of Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell's definition of Hollywood studio filmmaking as "classical" cinema[6]. When they proposed their notion of classical cinema, they considered films to be made in a system of production, all sharing some standardized norms of construction. One of these norms consists of a mode of narration with a high communicative density, a canonical form of narration

[5] A more extensive description of the impact of digital technology on opera is available in the "Introduction" to Pérez (2012: 7-12), in which I explore a second trajectory in the evolution of this impact involving the introduction of opera in the culture of convergence.
[6] Cf. Thompson, Bordwell (1985).

causally structured around the characters. More recently, Bordwell has defended the flexibility of his view by considering some recent aspects of cinema[7].

In order to explore a perspective in direct opposition with Darley's view, one way to approach the question is to examine whether (and how) filmed opera enhances the narrative aspects of performance. But is it possible to consider performative gestures, expressions or movements as narrative elements?[8]

Consider a performance of *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* filmed at the Zurich Opera House in 2004[9]. There, in the first act, while Konstanze sings an aria, the spectator watches a long close-up of the actor performing Bassa Selim's character. The shot, which lasts more than 25 seconds, shows a gesture of love for Konstanze in the eyes of the male performer, the well-known actor Klaus Maria Brandauer: «Her pain, her tears, her strength ... Strung further my heart. Who would dare to use force against a noble heart? No, Konstanze, Selim also has a heart; Selim also knows the meaning of love!» These words express Selim's mood after Konstanze's performance of her aria in the first act. His admiration for Konstanze is reinforced when she expresses the steadfastness and purity of her love for Belmonte. As we know, the plot of *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* basically involves the abduction of Konstanze by Bassa Selim. The plot finally reaches a successful conclusion, after endless entanglements, when Konstanze is freed and can return to her beloved Belmonte, thanks to Bassa's benevolence. The 25 seconds of Bassa's close-up are therefore very important for the development of the plot, because his admiration for Konstanze's nobility of sentiment anticipates a trait of his character that is key to the outcome: the decision to accept Konstanze's love for Belmonte. This

---

[7] Some of these are in films produced with a massive contribution from digital imaging, which are expanding the concept of the canonical form of narration produced by Hollywood. See Bordwell (2006).

[8] Verstraete (2005) has described the difficulties surrounding this issue. I would go beyond Manfred Jahn and Seymour Chatman's Aristotelian position when they claim that drama is mimetic, but also includes narrative passages vocalized by a narrator. See Chatman (1999): 338 and Jahn (2003). At a symposium on James Hamilton's *The Art of Theater* I expressed an alternative perspective. In spite of the thought-provoking nature of Hamilton's central idea of the *ingredients model* to argue that theatrical performances are an independent art form, I do not consider it necessary to propose a radical argument about the existence of performative processes that are fully independent of the text. The independence of a performative net of meanings in a diegetic structure can emerge through a productive relationship with the libretto.

[9] Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*. Orchestra and Choir of the Zurich Opera House. Conductor: Christophe König. Stage Director: Jonathan Miller. TV Director: Chloè Perlemuter. Belair Media 2006.

kind of 25-second shot showing a character that is not singing is not usual in filmed operas, and most of the time there is a dramatic representation of the interaction based on very dynamic changes of shots. However, we find here a particular attention toward the subtlety of a gaze in a dramatic interpretation. With continuous close-ups on the singers, the spectator's attention is more greatly sharpened and concentrated than the usual experience of any observer in an opera house. The clear and close view of the singer's gestures, movements and expressions during the performance gives us a different experience of the dramatic narrative. This closeness and increased visibility of dramatic action also introduce performative narration as a protagonist in the opera. The aesthetic appreciation of gestures, movements and expressions becomes a central element, but also enhances the narrativity of the dramatic actions, a greater emotional closeness to the dramatic events. Our attention is guided through the performance in a more continuous, almost fluid way. Obviously, this does not mean that someone who is watching an operatic performance at home will feel totally constricted; it is rather a subtler psychological conditioning of our attention, which becomes selective and focuses our understanding and sensitivity on specific elements of the stage. This perspective involves three narrative ingredients that are intensely related:

1. The preexistent narrative structure contained in the score and libretto. Most libretti provide a plot built around a certain ideal of verisimilitude that includes characters as main dramatic agents.

2. The theatrical narrative produced by all the agents and elements involved in the live performance.

3. The audiovisual narrative determined by the decisions taken by the video director, the work of the cameramen, and the technological equipment used for the production.

Although these three ingredients are of roughly equal importance, I have chosen to focus on the last ingredient for my purposes here, and on how it may have the effect of enhancing the other two. My hypothesis is that the increased visibility of the actions and gestures enhances the spectator's attention to the narrative, making it one of the salient features of the aesthetic experience.

In the following section, I will test some findings in the fields of cognitive aesthetics and neurosciences in an effort to gain a deeper understanding of the perspective adopted in this article. The scientists who have contributed most to these developments (especially Vittorio Gallese) have looked for connections between their fields and the

human sciences and have even worked together with art theorists[10]. Thus, the main authors in these academic fields are managing to bridge the existing gap between them[11].

3. *Aesthetics, Neuroscience and Enhanced Theatrical Narration*

Thanks to its proximity, the camera captures the actor expressing emotions and the spectator is spontaneously guided in the reading of the story, which is an experience partly based on the recognition of the expression of emotions. Empathy, as a fundamental mechanism in the narration and a key issue in any narrative theory, has been addressed repeatedly and discussed widely in cognitive aesthetics and film theory. One of the most challenging aspects of this concept has been raised and developed in recent years by Amy Coplan, who understands it as a process of the imagination which mainly involves taking a perspective akin to that of a participant in the narrative: «When I empathize with another, I take up his or her psychological perspective and imaginatively experience, to some degree or another, what he or she experiences» (Coplan [2004]: 143).

In Verdi's *Don Carlo*, there is a scene – where the main character, performed by Rolando Villazon, meets the woman he loves, his father Philip II's wife – which offers a good opportunity to explore some of the nuances of Coplan's concept of empathy[12]. This meeting occurs in the middle of the second scene in the first act, after some situations that provide the spectator with an insight into Don Carlo's tragic fate, which he himself expresses in his first aria, «Io l'ho perduta». However, this first meeting alone with his stepmother gives Don Carlo hope of receiving some indication that his love for her is requited. While she pronounces «*Prence, se vuol Filippo udire la mia Preghiera…*» (00: 36: 45), Don Carlo gazes at her from the other end of the stage, full of expectation as he awaits her answer. At this point, there is a change of shot as the camera zooms in on Don Carlo's expectant figure. As spectators, we wait in suspense to hear what the Queen

---

[10] See for example Gallese, Sinigaglia (2011): 196-200, where he offers a series of arguments to reinforce Siri Hustvedt's interesting theory that memory and imagination partake of the same mental process, since they are both bound with emotion and often assume the form of narrative.

[11] See Coplan, Goldie (2011), a recent contribution to cognitive aesthetics, revealing the diversity of positions and the depth of the problems associated with this question.

[12] Giuseppe Verdi, *Don Carlo*. Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra and Chorus of the Nederlandse Opera. Conductor: Ricardo Chailly. Stage Director: Willy Decker. TV Director: Misjel Vermeiren. Opus Arte 2005.

will say, as if we are experiencing the action from the psychological perspective of the prince. Is this, therefore, a typical situation of empathy in which the spectator would be driven to adopt the character's perspective? Even in this moment of great emotional intensity, I do not think that the spectator is guided imaginatively by the expectations of the protagonist. As we all know from our own experience, as spectators we have a whole range of information about the circumstances surrounding the protagonist of a narrative. In this case, we might know more about the future conduct of the queen than Don Carlo would know himself. This means that my adoption of the perspective of the protagonist can be independent of the knowledge that I possess about him. Indeed, this is an argument that has already been set forth by Noël Carroll (see Carroll [1998]: 245–359). Amy Coplan (Coplan [2004]: 148) has expressed one of the most interesting nuances in her concept of empathy with regard to the same difficulty. She proposes a hybrid solution: the spectator holds an empathic attitude while remaining conscious that he is not the character in the narrative.

However, this does not mean that we have to make an effort to overcome the barriers imposed by our knowledge, or that we need to work hard with our imagination. Usually, although we know the outcome of a story because we know it from prior versions or we have seen it a long time ago, we still have the same tendency to empathize as we did the first time. This fact reveals that the empathic mechanisms become active with a remarkable degree of unconscious automatism, so that we process emotions and create expectations in line with the characters regardless of the conscious knowledge we have about them. This emotional automatism when observing another's feelings of pain, fear or anger raises a compelling question that has received an answer from an ambitious general conception of interpersonal relationships. The theory was put forth by the Italian physiologist Vittorio Gallese, based on the discovery of the so-called mirror neurons and supported by the latest developments in various fields of experimental neurobiology and evolutionary psychology. His theory proposes that imitation, empathy, and the attribution of intentions are dependent on a shared mechanism: a process of «embodied simulation». The basic idea is that when we look another person's body movements or expressions of emotions or even when we anticipate another's intentions, we are always implementing a mechanism of simulation (Gallese [2006]: 3-19). To understand a moving body, I need, so to speak, to understand with my whole body. When I see someone bending an arm, I understand it because the movement I have represented in my brain represents how I move my own arm. Why do we always need a representation of our own body? Rizzolatti and Gallese have

discovered a set of neurons, first in primates and then in humans, that become active when the observation of animal and/or human movement and emotional expressions takes place. These are the now famous mirror neurons, which are responsible for the activation, during the observation of an action, of the same neuronal mechanism set in motion for the implementation of the action itself (Rizzolatti, Craighero [2004]: 169-192).

Research by the Department of Neuroscience at the University of Parma also addresses other elements that characterize Coplan's empathy as a central mechanism in engagement with the narration: the understanding or attribution of the intentions of others. In one of the most recent experiments, consisting of the identification of the areas of the brain involved specifically in the recognition of the intentions of a very simple action (a hand grasping objects), the results again involve the mirror neurons. The area of mirror neurons involved in the execution and observation of the action is identified as an active part in the forecasting of intentions as well. In the field of studies on emotion, there is evidence of a connection between the motor and sensory neural system and the emotional system. One of the most interesting experiments on this connection shows the importance of embodied simulation in responses characterized as empathic. Observers of a series of cartoons that were taken to produce artificial facial gestures such as smiles or laughs found drawings more fun than those that departed from a gestural neutral basis (Niedenthal [2007]: 1002–1005). This experiment depends on the recognition of an emotive gesture and bodily activation of the same gesture taking place, through the activation of neural circuits that may overlap. About these empathic responses, Gallese also expresses the relationship that they would have to mirror neurons and their previous character to the conscious responses: «However, we must note that in everyday life we are able to decode the quality of the sensations or emotions embedded in the behavior of others witnessed without the necessity of any intervening complex cognitive mediation». (Gallese [2003]: 519).

Based on this scientific conception, there is a subconscious level at which we are receiving decisive information about the intentions, actions and emotions of the characters. If we recognize this, we are bound to accept Gallese's theoretical assumption that the unconscious activation of a wide range of inputs constitutes a part of the narrative reality of a work. With this in mind, let us turn again to the narratives of Opera.

As is well known, the plot of the opera *Così fan Tutte* revolves around a test of fidelity proposed by the wily Don Alfonso. Ferrando and Guglielmo accept the challenge

and pretend to go off to war in order to test the fidelity of their beloveds, Dorabella and Fiordiligi, respectively. Upon their return, disguised, each one becomes a suitor for his friend's beloved, and both succeed in provoking unfaithful behavior. However, there is a happy ending. The duet between Fiordiligi and Dorabella that opens Scene II of the first act, «Ah, guarda, sorella» is the first time that both appear on stage together. Don Alfonso has already succeeded in convincing Ferrando and Guglielmo of the need to test the fidelity of their loved ones in Scene I. A wide shot of the scene shows Dorothea Röschmann (Fiordiligi) and Katharina Kammerloher (Dorabella), dressed in 1960s styles, sitting on a sofa. Immediately, the camera goes to a close up of Fiordiligi: she is smiling while looking at a picture frame in her hands (whose photo the spectator cannot see)[13]. She brings the object up to her lips (the spectator cannot see what is happening because Fiordiligi's face is hidden behind the photo frame). During these actions, the spectator immediately:

1. interprets Fiordiligi's smile as an expression of joy related to the person she is looking at in the picture (Assumption "a");

2. assumes that she has kissed the picture (Assumption "b").

In terms of the theory of embodied simulation, the two related assumptions imply two actions of unconscious simulation: first, the recognition of Fiordiligi's facial expression as joy, and second, the understanding of Fiordiligi's action when bringing the photo frame up to her face. These two cognitive processes correspond to the categories explained above; assumption "a" is related to the empathic understanding of emotions, and assumption "b" refers to the understanding of actions. Both processes are closely connected, and in fact virtually inseparable; in addition, assumption "a" and assumption "b" are fundamental cognitive processes for the activation of a third process that corresponds to the third category described by Gallese: the attribution of intentions. It seems that there are many cognitive activities performed by the unconscious mechanisms already identified in the neurobiology of mirror neurons, whereas all processes nourish a subjectivity characterized by a strong level of self-awareness. The cognitive processes described as embodied simulation are probably active parts of our attention, i.e. cognitive devices whose function consists of selection. Thus, while the filming of an opera ensures an easier view of all the elements capable of activating the

---

[13] Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Così fan tutte*. Choir of the Deutschen Staatsoper Berlin and Staatskapelle Berlin. Conductor: Daniel Barenboim. Stage Director: Doris Dörrie. TV Director: Michael Beyer. EuroArts 2003.

processes of embodied simulation, there should also be an increase in the spectator's attention. However, this point should be explored while taking into account some approaches from the latest research on emotions[14].

Nöel Carroll emphasizes the power of emotions in structuring experience. Emotions serve as a searchlight, bringing details to the foreground with a «special phenomenological glow» (Carroll [2001]: 226). In life, in contrast to fiction, emotions compel us to choose relevant details in a situation that presents a jumble of unstructured details. Emotions warn us of danger or other circumstances that are important for us. Carroll acknowledges the positive cognitive role of emotions in accordance with one of the most groundbreaking scientific contributions in the field of neuroscience: neurobiologist Antonio Damasio's identification of the adaptive significance of emotions from the point of view of human evolution. Damasio affirms that emotions such as disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, sympathy and shame are directly aimed at regulating our lives, to avoid danger, or to help the body take advantage of an opportunity (Damasio [2003]: 38). For neuroscience, emotions are complex reactions to external stimuli. When we are afraid of something, our hearts begin to race and our muscles contract because, for example, we have witnessed a violent act. All emotional reaction occurs automatically and unconsciously.

Damasio has shown that only after we become aware in our brain of physical changes, some of them produced by emotions, do we experience the corresponding feeling. This is the main difference between emotions and feelings. Emotions arise first: in the fictional world of opera performers express emotions that are immediate reactions to situations: the sadness of Orpheus when receiving the news of Eurydice's death; Siegfried's scorn for Mime when he recounts his merits as an educator; Othello's jealousy at the first suspicion of deception on the part of Desdemona; Papageno's joy when he thinks of the love of Papagena; Marcelline's surprise when she realizes she loves Fidelio; the anger of Donna Elvira in recalling the deceptions of Don Giovanni… But what do feelings add to all these emotions? Feelings are perceptions supported in the mind's body maps, which refer to parts of the body and physical states. They translate the ongoing life state into the language of the mind. Damasio's hypothesis, as a

---

[14] The explanation I have offered is still only a partial one and would need to be supplemented with a study of musical narrative factors, an area that has already been studied in instrumental music, but not in the case of the opera. See, for example Tarasti (2004): 283-304; Levinson (2004): 428-441; regarding the voice see Kolesch (2003): 267-281.

provisional definition, is that a feeling is a perception of a particular state of the body along with the perception of a particular way of thinking and thoughts with certain themes (Damasio [2003]: 87). It seems, however, that while emotions are related to exteriority, the perception of the innermost thoughts, including the emergence of self-awareness, corresponds to feelings. They imply the perception of a physical state and a certain mental state or images of our own way of thinking.

For example in *Theodora,* staged by Peter Sellars, when the protagonist is imprisoned, there is a splendid representation of this definition of feelings[15]. At the beginning of Act II, the spectator sees a figure alone in the darkness, in a yellow rectangle in the middle of the stage. Dawn Upsaw plays Theodora, a Christian martyr who is raped before being condemned to death. Before the scene of her rape in prison, there is an orchestral interlude marked by the interventions of the flute. Theodora, lying on the ground in the darkness, reacts like a scared animal when she hears the sustained notes of the flute. A growing sense of fear is reflected in her body, her facial expression changes to one of pain, captured by an extreme close-up (01: 34: 24), and her whole body is stretched and strained. The camera captures the dramatic intensity of the situation by introducing an element rarely seen in opera: intimacy. The spectator watching Theodora moaning and writhing in her symbolic jail is exposed to an intense expression of intimacy that recalls scenes from films like Alexander Sokurov's *Father and Son* (2003). It is difficult to explain how this is accomplished; sometimes the camera seems to move in closer and closer until it reaches Theodora's suffering face (01: 35: 16). In *Theodora*, this scene is not an exception, as the narrative is based on:

1. The expression of all acts of communication between the characters as acts of body language.

2. The representation of every thought, action or desire, however ethereal, through bodily gestures.

Based on the distinction proposed by Antonio Damasio, a narration seems to provoke emotions first, followed by feelings. The spectator first recognizes Theodora's emotion of fear through a mechanism of empathic simulation, which in turn will contribute to the generation of feelings. For example, after experiencing Theodora's fear, the spectator perceives feelings of sadness associated with thoughts of loneliness and injustice. The empathic relationship with a fictional character causes an effect whose perception is

[15] Georg Friedrich Händel. *Theodora*. Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment. Conductor: William Christie. Stage and Video direction: Peter Sellars. Warner Music Vision 1996.

part of the spectator's own consciousness. Thus, Damasio's scientific hypothesis provides another way to understand the coexistence of empathy and self-awareness. The greater the spectator's unconscious sensitivity to the emotions, actions and intentions of the characters in the opera, the greater the possibility of experiencing a simulation through them, and the better the chance of experiencing feelings, i.e. of creating elements that produce self-awareness.

4. Concluding Remarks

The thesis I have argued throughout this paper is that the main consequence of the opera's encounter with audiovisual technology is that it can increase its narrativity. The idea that the subjectivity of physical expression is itself at the heart of every narration in the opera has opened the possibility of describing some aesthetic and scientific accounts of our perception and experience of those expressive elements. According to the theory of embodied simulation, the viewer's predisposition toward operatic narrative depends on unconscious processes. These automatic responses can be considered an element that supports the theory proposed here, as well as the idea of a narrative based on corporeality as the key to understanding theater as a form of storytelling. Few narratologists have approached this idea of theater as a form of storytelling and for a long time there have been no good theories to explain theatrical performances in narrative terms. This is gradually changing[16]. Particularly noteworthy is the development of new perspectives arising from Monika Fludernik's «natural narratology», whose cognitivist reformulation of the concept of narrative seems to have changed the understanding of the differences between a narrator and a body on the stage, insofar as both require the viewer to construct meaning, and to enhance an awareness of the most real-life aspects of narrative, beyond the value of the text[17]. Although in her most recent

---

[16] On the one hand there is already a significant number of theoreticians open to contributions from the neurosciences, such as Patrick Colm Hogan, *The Mind and Its Stories; Narrative Universals and Human Emotion*; Mary Thomas Crane, *Shakespeare's Brain*; Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* and Alan Richardson, *The Neural Sublime*.

[17] «Unlike the traditional models of narratology, narrativity (i.e. the quality of narrativehood in Gerald Prince's terminology) is here constituted by what I call experientiality, namely by the quasi-mimetic evocation of "real-life experience". Experientiality can be aligned with actantial frames, but it also correlates with the evocation of consciousness or with the representation of a speaker role. Experientiality, as everything else in narrative, reflects a cognitive schema of embodiedness that relates to human existence and human concerns» (Monika Fludernik [1996]: 9).

contribution to theater narratives Fludernik seems to proceed much more cautiously with regard to the classical duality, her perspective has supported authors as Nünning and Sommer, whose most recent contributions clearly open the way for important developments in the future (Nünning, Sommer [2008]: 355-83, 331-54). In any case, this proximity between literary studies and cognitive neuroscience with respect to the phenomenon of the narrative from a corporeal/theatrical point of view is a point worth stressing.

The scientific theories I have presented here support a conception of filmed opera as an enhancement of the unconscious elements embedded in the narrative, but the acceptance of such an approach does not preclude the role of rational factors. Some of the most consistent contributions by cognitivist narrative theorists have presented results that are useful for the development of a flexible interpretation of the aesthetic experience. For example, this account of audiovisual narrative can be also complemented by the terms set forth by Carroll ([2001]: 32), when he suggests that «the earlier events fall into the causal network that gives rise to the later events where the weakest, but perhaps the most frequent, in that way of figuring causal network is as a causally necessary condition (or a contribution thereto) for the causation or later events. That is, the earlier event in the narrative connection must be causally relevant to the effect event.» I agree with Carroll that one of the key elements of the artistic character of opera may lie in the existence of a performance with a rich web of rational narrative connections. The increased visibility of the character's actions with all their corporeal nuances, considered in terms of embodied simulation, does not exclude a richer rational causal web when connecting initial events to their consequences. On the contrary, for example, the abundance of very close shots of Count Almaviva, in a production of *The Marriage of Figaro* in Salzburg (2006), vests this character with an interesting ambiguity[18]. This feature of the Count is not necessary for the plot's development, yet it is necessary for a better understanding of the plot, offering a clearer impression of the truly complex relationship between the Count and Countess. It is here that we find the virtues of the audiovisual representation of opera when guided by the objective of respecting the drama and music, something that the film's director, Brian Large, has pursued for the last thirty years (Large [2001]: 44-59).

[18] Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Le Nozze di Figaro*. Wiener Philharmoniker and Konzertvereinigung Wiener Staatsopernchor. Conductor: Nikolaus Harnoncourt. Stage Director: Claus Guth. TV Director: Brian Large. Deutsche Grammophon 2006.

I realize that I am dealing here with an aspect of perhaps the most complex phenomenon in aesthetics, and that the increased narrativity described in this article requires a particular set of conditions[19], which are only possible if the stage director works with a certain conception of corporeal narrativity, and if the video director and the filming and editing team have a proper grasp of it.

Such conditions mean that my hypothesis cannot be applied universally. But the rise of the narrative in the aesthetic experience of opera is not rare if we consider the frequency with which these conditions are met. In recent years the greatest artists in opera have moved toward a more intense theatricality. Thus today there are many, such as Peter Mussbach, Claus Guth, Peter Sellars, Peter Konwitschny, Calixto Bieito, Jossi Wieler and Sergio Morbito, Patrice Chereau, Harry Kupfer, Robert Carsen and Robert Wilson, who often create the conditions for a film with a high narrative intensity.

Bibliography

Bordwell, D., 2006: *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies,* University of California Press, Berkeley.

Carroll, N., 1998: *A Philosophy of Mass Art*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Carroll, N., 2001: *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Carroll, N., 2011: *On the Narrative Connection*, in W. van Peer, S. Chatman (eds.), *New Perspectives on the Narrative Perspective*, State of New York University Press, New York.

Chatman, S., 1999: *New Directions in Voice-Narrated Cinema*, in D. Herman (ed.), *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*, Ohio State University Press, Columbus.

Colm Hogan, P., 2003: *The Mind and Its Stories; Narrative Universals and Human Emotion,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Coplan, A., 2004: *Empathic Engagement with Narrative Fictions*, "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism", 62:2, pp. 141-152.

Damasio, A., 2003: *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain,* Hartcourt, Orlando.

Darley, A., 2000: *Visual Digital Culture,* Routledge, London.

Fludernik, M., 1996: *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology,* Routledge, London and New York.

---

[19] A fruitful account of the problems underlying such complexities is presented by Thom (2011).

Fludernik, M., 2008: *Narrative and Drama*, in J. Pier, J. A García Landa. (eds.), *Theorizing Narrativity*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin and New York, pp. 355-383.

Gallese, V., 2003: *The Manifold Nature of Interpersonal Relations: The Quest for a Common Mechanism*, in "Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Sciences", Royal Society Publishing, London (B 2003-358.1431), pp. 517-528.

Gallese, V., 2007: *Embodied Simulation: From Mirror Neuron Systems to Interpersonal Relations*, in *Empathy and Fairness,* Wiley, Chichester (Novartis Foundation Symposium), pp. 3-19.

Gallese, V., Sinigaglia, C. (eds.), 2011: *Embodied Simulation Theory: Imagination and Narrative. A Commentary on Siri Hustvedt*, "Neuropsychoanalysis", 13 (2), pp. 196-200.

Goldie, P., Coplan, A. (eds.), 2011: *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Hamilton, J., 2007: *The Art of Theater,* Blackwell Publishing, Oxford.

Jahn, M., 2003: *A Guide to the Theory of Drama. Part II of Poems, Plays, and Prose: A Guide to the Theory of Literary Genres*, http://www.uni-koeln.de/~ame02/pppd.htm.

Keen, S., 2007: *Empathy and the Novel,* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007.

Kolesch, D., 2003: *Die Spur der Stimme. Überlegungen zu einer performativen Ästhetik,* in Epping-Jäger, C., Linz, E., *Medien/Stimmen*, DuMont, Cologne, pp. 267-281.

Large, B., 2001: *Gespräch mit Brian Large über Probleme der Oper im Fernsehen,* in P. Csobádi, G. Gruber, J. Kühnel (eds.), 2001: *Das Musiktheater in den audiovisuellen Medien: '...ersichtlich gewordene Taten der Musik', Wort und Musik* 48, Mueller-Speiser, Salzburg, pp. 44-59.

Levinson, J., 2004: *Music as Narrative and Music as Drama*, "Mind & Language", 19/4, pp. 428-441.

Niedenthal, P., 2007: *Embodying Emotion*, "Science", 316/5827, pp. 1002-1005.

Nünning, A., Sommer R. (eds.), 2008: *Diegetic and Mimetic Narrativity. Some Further Steps Towards a Narratology of Drama*, in J. Pier, J.A. García Landa (eds.), *Theorizing Narrativity*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin and New York, pp. 331-54.

Pérez, H. J., (ed.) 2012: *Opera and Video: Technology and Spectatorship,* Peter Lang, Bern.

Rizzolatti, G., Craighero, L. (eds.), 2004: *The Mirror Neuron System*, "Annual Review of Neuroscience", 27, pp. 169-192.

Richardson, A., 2010: *The Neural Sublime,* Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.

Tarasti, E., 2004: *Music as a Narrative Act*, in M.-L. Ryan (ed.), *Narrative across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, pp. 283-304.

Thom, P., 2011: *Aesthetics of Opera*", "Philosophy Compass", 6*,* pp. 575-584.

Thomas Crane, M., 2001: *Shakespeare's Brain,* Princeton University Press, Princeton.

Thompson K., Bordwell, D. (eds.), 1985: *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960,* Columbia University Press, New York.

Verstraete, P., 2004: *Vocal Distress on Stage: Voice and Diegetic Space in Contemporary Music Theatre*, in *MiT4: The Work of Stories.* Fourth Media in Transition Conference*.* May 6-8 at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge. Internet: http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/mit4/subs/mit4_abstracts.html