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Opera and Objecthood:

Sedimentation, Spectatorship, and *Einstein on the Beach*

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Once it became imaginable that a “world” could be “contaminated” by the mere fact of being beheld, the situation was ripe for the emergence of an esthetic that would accept such “contamination” as the basis of its procedures.

—Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*¹

“In theatre and in opera we can and should apply moral standards, but there is no rulebook defining the right approach to performance and interpretation.”² So begins Tom Sutcliffe’s 1996 study *Believing in Opera*, a book credited with introducing the discussion of contemporary operatic staging practices to English-language readers. In the sentences that follow, though, Sutcliffe goes on to offer a rulebook of his own. “The purpose of performing opera,” he declares, “is to bring the work to life, to make its meaning tell, to help the audience believe in the truth and vitality of its message. Every serious attempt to perform an opera adds to the richness and depth of that process.”³ Although the three “purposes” adumbrated here—“bring[ing] the work to life,” “mak[ing] its meaning tell,” “help[ing] the audience believe in the truth and vitality of its message”—may seem both modest and self-evident, there is one dominant approach to staging they exclude. Speaking of what might be termed “traditional” or even “authenticist” productions of Wagner’s *Ring* cycle, Sutcliffe observes: “We may believe like the composer and critic Robin Holloway that the music of Wagner’s dramas requires the flowing woollen and skin costumes German chieftains wore a

thousand years ago. But those are *our* associations, connected with *our* knowledge of the gothic revival, or of the deeper past, or of grand opera in the time of Queen Victoria.” These associations “are not inherent in the works themselves.”⁴

More than twenty years on—in the wake of *regietheater*, and well after debates about “historically-informed performance” have run their course—Sutcliffe’s defence of innovative stage direction may seem uncontroversial, his interlocutors remote. *Believing in Opera* is worth revisiting, however, because its opening gesture lurks behind another, more sophisticated, and now vastly more influential account of operatic staging, one published some ten years later. “Although a stage production can unsettle a work that was thought to be settled,” writes David J. Levin at the start of *Unsettling Opera* (2007), “opera itself is unsettled, and ... stage performance, at its best, clarifies this condition and brings opera in its unsettledness to life.”⁵ “Clarifying” a condition is not, to be fair, the same thing as inspiring “belief” in a message, but I am struck by Levin’s positing of unsettledness as an inherent quality of operatic works. He relies on a seemingly innocent phrase that Sutcliffe also uses, “bring to life,” as if to suggest that opera possesses an innate polysemy—subsequently termed a “condition of agitation and multiplicity”—that needs only to be unleashed:

Thus, throughout this book, I will use the term “opera text” to designate opera’s agitated and multiple signifying systems—for instance, the score, the libretto, stage directions—prior to performance. On the other hand, opera in performance, its “performance text,” lends expression to this condition of agitation and multiplicity while at the same time partaking of it. This is not true of certain select productions. Rather, every production (or performance text) takes up a position relative to the opera text. And although most performance texts reiterate a consensus about a given opera text (rendering it readily comprehensible by inflecting it in a recognizable

relation to familiar forms of representation), some productions seek to render the characteristic agitation of the opera text.⁶

Levin's "two texts" theory recalls Sutcliffe's dismissal of the traditional accoutrements of *Ring* productions: "readily comprehensible" stagings may "reiterate a consensus" about a given opera, but that consensus is secondary to, and chronologically and conceptually distinct from, the operatic work.

If one wanted to "unsettle" a given opera, there are many reasons one might do so: to make it relevant to new audiences, to counter its political legacies, to break the status quo. Levin's suggestion that innovative stage direction is authorized by—and, in a paradoxical sense, faithful to—the inherent instability of the operatic text is thus distinctive. And if his argument echoes Sutcliffe's, it also resonates strongly with another contemporaneous call for operatic reform. In his 2006 monograph *Remaking the Song*, Roger Parker suggests that we might refashion not just an opera's dramaturgy, but its very music, granting ourselves permission to violate the most sacrosanct dimension of the "opera text" itself. He does so, significantly, through a philologically minded practice he describes as "chipping away."⁷ Highlighting musical passages left incomplete by their composers, that evidence "a surplus of signature" or a process of "unconscious infiltration," Parker depicts himself as merely "testing places where [canonical works] were and might still be liable to change."⁸ His techniques are different from Levin's or Sutcliffe's, but he too frames his most subversive proposals as honouring the unruly essence of the operatic text.

My aim in this article is not to question Parker's or Levin's enthusiasms, nor in any sense to advocate for a more traditionalist conception of editing and mise-en-scène. Instead, I want to explore what a by-now-routine assertion of operatic open-endedness may fail to account for, and what it may exclude. In the first instance, it seems worth noting that the arguments set forth in *Unsettling Opera* and *Remaking the Song* are based on a rather narrow

selection of late-eighteenth to early twentieth-century texts (the subtitle of Levin's study is "Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky"; Parker's extends more capaciously "from Handel to Berio," while still giving Mozart and middle-to-late Verdi pride of place). Yet attention to more recent (and older, but less hallowed) operas might complicate our understanding of the form's affordances, suggesting an account of operatic history as less a "tradition of proliferation" than a process of increasing sedimentation through which the work of opera came to be not so unsettled after all.⁹

My counter-narrative will take its cue from the (near) present in another sense as well. The years 2006 and 2007 may have been epochal for opera scholarship, but they will also be remembered for one of the defining operatic events of the new millennium: on December 30, 2006, Julie Taymor's production of *The Magic Flute* inaugurated the Metropolitan Opera House's first series of live high-definition simulcasts to cinemas around the world.¹⁰ These simulcasts, and the countless imitations they inspired, have since become an increasingly familiar feature of the operatic landscape, and they have fuelled an explosion of scholarly interest in technologies of mediation and dissemination, both contemporary and historical. Technology, glibly, has become the new "voice" (opera studies largely abandoned that topic to other corners of the discipline), yet the replacement category has not always inspired the sort of sustained, creative, and critical engagement with operatic texts that was a hallmark of its predecessor.¹¹ Although there are no doubt many reasons for this "displacing [of] musical attractions onto nearby objects,"¹² our new appreciation for trains and fog machines and DVDs might also prompt us to reengage with opera's aesthetic and affective worlds.¹³

For one model of how we might begin to do so, I should like to propose a somewhat altered history of opera—one written, as it were, from the perspective of the global cinecast. I begin by sketching a brief (and obviously provisional) outline of the form's progress since the early nineteenth century, focusing on the politics and aesthetics of medial coordination

and what I describe as a dialectic of unsettledness and fixing. I then apply this framework to a more concrete case study, and consider how it might help explain American minimalist and post-minimalist opera as it developed between the mid-1970s and early 1990s, paying particular attention to *Einstein on the Beach*.

Scenic Dispositions

My story begins with the rise of the staging manual in mid-nineteenth-century Paris, and later Italy. Fanatically detailed “rulebook[s] defining the right approach to performance and interpretation,” staging manuals contained precise instructions for building sets, designing costumes, and lighting scenes, as well as moment-to-moment choreographies of singers’ movements. They aimed to fix an opera’s visual world, to coordinate musical and scenic action, and to ensure that all subsequent performances of an opera were identical to its premiere.¹⁴ (As early as 1911, they were also used to guide silent-film adaptations of operatic classics.¹⁵) It is possible, of course, to claim that staging manuals were produced after the fact—that, in Levin’s terms, they are more “performance texts” than “opera texts”—but certainly by the early twentieth century this distinction was no longer clear. As Ellen Lockhart has shown, the *disposizione scenica* for Puccini’s *La fanciulla del West* (1910) was integral to the composer’s own conception of the work, whose every detail Puccini modelled on David Belasco’s obsessively realistic source play.¹⁶ Written in close consultation with Belasco himself (he also directed its premiere), *Fanciulla* is less an adaptation or interpretation than a re-inscription of an earlier drama—one, moreover, in which scenography took precedence over dialogue or character.

The opera’s score, Lockhart suggests, thus assumes a distinctly secondary role to its elaborate mise-en-scène: blankly repetitive and uncharacteristically illustrative of passing images, Puccini’s music “registers neither meaning nor subjectivity, nor depth of experience,

but merely an array of surface details.”¹⁷ This willing evacuation of emotional depth—seemingly the *raison d’être* of operatic music—further a collapse of “distance between character and thing” that Marc Robinson has argued was already at work in the original:

Claims we unthinkingly make for the autonomy and spontaneity of characters (and perhaps even for the humanism at the core of drama in general) grow harder to sustain amid the mounted elk antlers, bird wings, antelope heads, bearskin rugs, and wildcat pelts—to say nothing of a buck horn used as a coat hook, a deer’s foot turned coat hanger, and a whole fawn carcass hung like mistletoe over the saloon entrance.¹⁸

Belasco’s taxidermal anti-humanism was no doubt eccentric, but the medial reconfiguration proposed by *Fanciulla* would be vindicated by the century that followed. The opera seems an obvious precedent for *Nixon in China* (1987): a work conceived by its director, not its composer, and one whose distinctive visual world was integral to its meaning. Like *Fanciulla*, *Nixon*’s music has long exasperated critics through its refusal to convey depth or subjectivity. (According to Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, its “effect is close to film music, especially the kind of film music that accompanies grand outdoor vistas.”¹⁹) And, *pace* Robinson, its scenography—famously inspired by American television and Chinese Communist propaganda—mitigates against the human autonomy on which conventional drama is predicated, thematizing the triumph of image over character in the opera as a whole.²⁰

The seeds planted by Belasco and Puccini and later fertilized by Peter Sellars and John Adams have now fully taken root. Countless recent American operas are inspired by, and derive much of their interest from, cinematic classics: André Previn’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1998) and *Brief Encounter* (2009), Jake Heggie’s *Dead Man Walking* (2000), William Bolcom’s *A Wedding* (2004), Kevin Puts’s *Silent Night* (2011) and *The Manchurian Candidate* (2015), Tobias Picker’s *Dolores Claiborne* (2013), Paul Moravec’s *The Shining*

(2016), Nico Muhly's *Marnie* (2017). These works do not ask for or support radical restagings, as they are all to varying degrees parasitic on their filmic sources. A more complex, if closely related, example is Thomas Adès's *The Exterminating Angel* (2016), which reproduces not just the original screenplay, but some of the more distinctive editing techniques, of Luis Buñel's film. Critics have asked what Adès "added" to *El ángel exterminador*, but this seems like the wrong question. Like *Nixon* and *Fanciulla* before it, *The Exterminating Angel* may be less an attempt to bring an earlier work to life than an act of compositional self-abnegation.²¹

The works described thus far have not garnered much by way of intellectual prestige, but that is in itself significant. In an essay on the problem of staging Rossini's operas, Mary Ann Smart suggests that the practice of *regietheater* is predicated on a narrow, and largely Germanic, slice of the operatic canon—one that encodes specific ideas about acting and representation, and about what the proper relation between audience and spectacle should be.²² It might be added that similar values now shape the composition, not just the production, of new works. If your goal is a certain type of modernist respectability, that is to say, it is essential to rely on a quite traditional medial hierarchy, a specific distribution of opera's "systems" in which the composer is firmly on the top. The handful of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century European operas that have entered both the performing repertory and academic canon—György Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre* (1978, rev. 1997), Olivier Messiaen's *Saint François d'Assise* (1983), Kaija Saariaho's *L'Amour du loin* (2000), Adès's *The Tempest* (2004)—reward competing directorial visions because they insist on their superiority to any specific *mise-en-scène*. Surely this is one reason why they all feature historically remote and vaguely defined settings, and characters that are abstracted, magical, or not fully human.²³

To illustrate the competing claims of what might in this context be called “director’s opera” and “composer’s opera,” it may be helpful to consider two figures in more detail. The first is Benjamin Britten, perhaps the only postwar operatic composer to have achieved both widespread popularity and a significant degree of intellectual prestige. Britten’s early “middlebrow” aesthetic, as Christopher Chowrimootoo has described it, carefully attempted to carve out a space somewhere between realism and abstraction, modernism and the cinematic.²⁴ *Peter Grimes* (1945), most obviously, is an opera as elaborately and exclusively about a specific fishing village in Suffolk as *Fanciulla* is about a specific mining camp in California. On the other hand, and quite unlike any of Puccini’s operas, it also seems to be about something else more ambiguous and important. The fact that that “something else” (pacifism, the closet) can never be pinned down definitively is the badge of the work’s unsettledness and no small part of its critical appeal. As for Britten’s later operas, they declare an increasingly emphatic desire to be taken seriously not only through their twelve-tone rows, but also by rejecting visual realism and staging their own unstagability. Speaking of *Death in Venice* (1973), Chowrimootoo notes that “anti-literalism was fundamental to all aspects of the opera’s conception.”²⁵

My second example is George Benjamin, whose *Written on Skin* (2012) has already become the most frequently performed, and perhaps most widely touted, opera of the past two decades. *Written on Skin* shares many basic features with the late-modernist operas mentioned above: a vaguely medieval setting, angels, characters without proper names. So perhaps it should come as no surprise that its spellbound early critics seem automatically to have assumed that Katie Mitchell’s production was inadequate to the work itself. For Alex Ross, it was “indifferent to the gorgeous blossoming of the sound,” lacking an appropriately “fluid response to the opera’s tricky temporal structure.”²⁶ For Andrew Clements, Mitchell’s “directorial glosses seem[ed] fussy and distracting, as if [she] were determined to leave

her own mark on a work that seems perfectly self-contained dramatically anyway.”²⁷ These claims speak volumes, given that Mitchell’s staging was both the opera’s first, composer-supervised production, and the only one that anyone had seen. Benjamin himself may not have disagreed. In an interview celebrating the world premiere of his subsequent opera, *Lessons in Love and Violence* (2018), the composer was asked “What does Katie bring to your work?” “Imagination, depth, psychological depth; loyalty to the music, listening to the music, trying to reflect and not distract from the music, helping it acoustically,” Benjamin responded, making painfully clear the hierarchies of power and gender on which his work depends. For him, Mitchell “brings the piece to life in an authentic way”—that phrase again!—“loyal to what our vision is.”²⁸

Melodrama and Anti-Drama

The question of opera’s settled- or unsettledness is not only a matter of distinction, though; also at stake are two opposed aesthetic postures. To begin to explain what I mean by this, it may be helpful to return to Smart’s essay on the problem that Rossini poses for radical stage directors—a problem related but not limited to the less-than-exalted reputation of his works. Although Rossini’s operas may not confer much prestige on their interpreters, Smart suggests, they also refuse a basic demand of operatic spectatorship: for her, “the copious musical repetition and the frozen ensembles militate against the spectator’s immersion in the drama, rendering a naturalistic or identificatory experience almost impossible.” In these phrases, Smart comes surprisingly close to the language of modernist criticism, and she goes on to describe, in terms that could well be Walter Benjamin’s or Michael Fried’s, Rossini’s “general posture of pushing away the spectator.”²⁹ What is more, the specific techniques through which Rossini’s operas seem to resist immersive identification—temporal distortions that fight against the naturalized rhythms and limits of the human body; an artificial and

quasi-mechanistic rhythmic and harmonic apparatus radically indifferent to individual psychology—bring to mind the medium that, for Benjamin and Fried, represented the total negation of live theater, namely cinema.³⁰

This way of thinking about Rossini precedes the invention of the movies.³¹ In 1841, the Italian critic Carlo Ritorni contrasted the “anti-dramatic” character of Rossini’s stage works with a more psychologically nuanced and affectively engaging operatic mode that he associated with a subsequent generation of composers and singers (Vincenzo Bellini and Giuditta Pasta), terming this new style “melodrama.”³² And, almost two decades before Ritorni, Stendhal had celebrated Rossini’s “abnormal coldness and indifference.”³³ If we were to resurrect this way of hearing the composer in light of subsequent developments, we might be prompted to supplement that hackneyed Beethoven-Rossini opposition with another dialectic, and to reimagine the history of opera since the early nineteenth century as the history of two competing strands.³⁴ On the one hand, there is a type of opera (most readily associated with Mozart, Wagner, and post-1850 Verdi) that insists on the primacy of music and on a depth of character that invites audience identification. This is the body of work, familiar from Joseph Kerman’s *Opera as Drama* and roughly comparable to Hans-Thies Lehmann’s category of “dramatic theater,” that can properly be called “unsettled,” that solicits directorial intervention, and that (as Kerman’s New Critical pronouncements make clear) is generally considered “good.”³⁵ On the other, there is another type of opera that resists subjective depth and ambiguity, whose music sacrifices its own richness in favour of novel combinations with other media, and that, in the course of the twentieth century, seems to have grown ever more intimately aligned with film. This second opera is notably different from what Lehmann means by “post-dramatic theater,” however: it does not necessarily emphasize the autonomy and integrity of its different signifying systems, and it does not inherently seek to disrupt mimesis. (*Fanciulla* does neither of these things.) Nor does it aim

to “withdraw from the reproduction of ‘images’ into which all spectacles ultimately solidify”—the *telos*, for Lehmann, of postdramatic theater.³⁶ If anything, it aspires to the strange solidity of spectacle.

This last distinction is important. For Lehmann, the critical power of postdramatic theater depends on the fact of its live unrepeatability: “theatre,” he writes, “does not produce a tangible object which may enter into circulation as a marketable commodity, such as a video, a film, a disc, or even a book.”³⁷ Yet the history of opera (and, of course, of theater) is littered with and increasingly inseparable from precisely these commodities, a fact that can hardly have been lost on all of its practitioners. What Ritorni presciently identified as anti-dramatic opera might thus be explained as opera that acknowledges its own reification, and attempts to stage its adjustment to the tangible. It does so by arguing with some of the basic conditions of live theater itself. It is, in other words, less postdramatic than “anti-theatrical.”

Before going further it may be helpful to clarify my usage of this term. It is true, of course, that no staged opera can be called truly anti-theatrical if it is recognizable as a theatrical performance—and not, say, a rehearsal or an audition—in the first place. It is also true, as Herbert Lindenberger suggests, that many twentieth-century operas are broadly anti-theatrical in their resistance to the specific mimetic conventions that were naturalized in the later nineteenth century.³⁸ Here, though, I want to use anti-theatricality in the more precise and eccentric sense in which it has been employed by Fried: as an artwork’s attempt to achieve a condition of separateness or apartness from its beholder and, in so doing, establish its essential difference from a debased world of things. One of the more notorious claims in Fried’s 1967 essay “Art and Objecthood” was that cinema possessed an “automatic, guaranteed” anti-theatricality that all other arts had to struggle to achieve; it was that struggle, articulated through ever more elaborate assertions of medial specificity and stagings of absorption, that constituted the modernism of any given media at any specific point in time.³⁹

It is admittedly perverse to adapt Fried's endlessly-critiqued attack on theater into an operatic context. (In opera, the "illusion that the barriers between the arts are in the process of crumbling" has been sustained for quite some time.⁴⁰) Nonetheless, I am drawn to Fried's more recent, and more sympathetic, work on contemporary art photography, in which he suggests that a transformation in the basic conditions of photographic display—radically increased scale, the emergence of light-box technology, unprecedentedly inflated market value—has led visual artists to rearticulate modernist formal strategies and anxieties that had, in the spheres of painting and sculpture, long seemed lost to history.⁴¹ Similarly, I want to suggest that it is through an engagement with and aspiration to a certain fantasy of cinema that opera reflects on its own commodification, its processes of fixing and distribution, and its entry into a not-quite-metaphorical museum of "works." What happens, anti-dramatic opera asks, when being brought to life becomes a matter of merely switching on?

Consider a remarkable moment at the very end of the first act of *Fanciulla*. Minnie—our heroine, alone on stage for the first time in the act—walks to the front of the proscenium, her face illuminated by a single spotlight. Then, to quote Lockhart again, she "covers her face, breaking the spectator's contact with the object of contemplation as well as her own vision."⁴² What is at stake in placing an unmistakably absorptive gesture of refusal at the heart of a multimedia spectacle that was designed to travel the world in exactly the same form? Why does a character we have been "getting to know" for a good hour suddenly absent herself? Why did Puccini invent a new electronic instrument, one that could be played without the mediation of human hands, to sound at precisely this moment? And how, looking further afield, might such visual and auditory declarations of apartness be thought alongside the anti-immersive alterity of Rossini's music, whose radical indifference seems to allegorize its own unprecedented standardization and mobility, the fact that it produced exactly the same effect everywhere, "from Moscow to Naples... Paris to Calcutta"?⁴³

I pose these questions with intended irony. If, as Martin Puchner has demonstrated, anti-theatricality was constitutive of modernism, are we truly prepared to place Rossini and Puccini at the vanguard of modernity itself?⁴⁴ Such a proposal might seem more palatable if it could be shown to offer a better explanation of some key aspects of operatic history than others on offer—if it could, for example, provide us with a new way of understanding and contextualizing one of the most confounding and seemingly out-of-left-field works in the whole genre. With that in mind, let us turn to *Einstein on the Beach*, the 1976 opera directed by Robert Wilson, with choreography by Lucinda Childs, words by Christopher Knowles, Samuel M. Johnson, and Childs herself, and music by Philip Glass.

The Diorama Effect

From one perspective, *Einstein* is clearly paradigmatic of “director’s opera” as described above. Not unlike *Nixon in China*, it was dreamed up by Wilson, not by Glass, Childs, or its multiple librettists, and its mise-en-scène is no more expendable than its musical or linguistic systems. (In this, *Einstein* was consistent with the director’s earlier priorities and understanding of his role. Since the early 1970s, Wilson had identified his original theatrical productions as “operas,” even though they lacked song, music, or even spoken language.⁴⁵) At the same, however, *Einstein* might seem alien, if not opposed, to the anti-theatrical tradition I have been trying to describe. After all, Wilson’s *oeuvre* has long been celebrated as the quintessence of post-modern theatricality: its giddy disregard for medial specificity, open-ended meanings, and transgressions of the space between audience and work are precisely those aesthetic errors that “Art and Objecthood” had been written to refute. Indeed, no less a critic than Julia Kristeva seemed to take on Fried directly as she awarded one of the director’s performances the prize for *sculpture* at the 1993 Venice Biennale:

The traditional categories—painting, sculpture, stagecraft, etc.—no longer correspond to reality. Personally, I think this is due to the crisis in our psychic space and the borders that separate the object and the subject. In the same way that there is a breaking down of the boundaries between objects, there is an intrication of the roles of the artist and the spectator, erasing the borders between self and other.⁴⁶

For reasons similar to Kristeva's, Lehmann has named Wilson as one of the founders of postdramatic theater, and Jelena Novak has identified *Einstein* as emblematic of what she terms "postopera": a form in which "the search for unity between music and drama has been abandoned, the dramatic principle is deconstructed, and operatic texts are not in a strict hierarchical position."⁴⁷ These assessments are unsurprising. If Fried worried that minimalist sculpture risked denigrating into a condition of empty, dangerous theatricality, then you would surely expect minimalist opera to be doubly, if not triply, theatrical.

Yet Kristeva's proposed "intrication" between artist and spectator, self and other, may be precisely what *Einstein* struggles to avoid. My case for the opera's poetics of spectatorial refusal takes its cue from some curious comments on Wilson in *Postdramatic Theatre*, in which Lehmann reflects on the relationship between painting, theater, and film:

Although one needs to distinguish between painterly and theatrical forms and to take their respective laws and rules into account, the peculiar *transformation from stage space into landscape*... recalls an inverse process in the nineteenth century when painting approximated a theatrical event. I am talking here of the panorama and the diorama, the gigantic transparent pictures by Daguerre, in which different kinds of lighting seemed to move sceneries, architectural structures and landscapes. For example, the interior of a church would at first seem empty but through a change in lighting one would suddenly notice visitors in it; music would be heard and finally there would be darkness again. Such occurrences are reminiscent of the

metamorphosis in Wilson. One can see in them an anticipation of cinema, the satisfaction of scopophilia in a manner that was felt to be sensation at the time...

Stephan Oettermann comments that it was precisely the arresting of time in this fascinating simulation of reality in panoramas that evoked the desire for movement and narration (which would later be satisfied by cinema). This comment can also be read in the sense that this was a point of departure for a theatrical experience dominated by *the effects of diorama (image) and parallel language*.⁴⁸

Lehmann begins this paragraph by proposing a simple reversal: nineteenth-century painting increasingly “approximated” theater, and Wilson enacts a similar process in reverse. Yet with the mention of the diorama—an art with which, Lehmann suggests, Wilson’s theater may ultimately have more in common than it does with painting—something sticks. For if the diorama anticipates cinema, and if Wilson’s theater resembles (and, indeed, is “dominated by”) the diorama, then it must also seem to inhabit a lost moment prior to the invention of cinema itself. But this prior moment—before cinema but after painting—is itself riven: it is as if by becoming painting theater is simultaneously becoming cinema—becoming, that is to say, a simulacrum of the live unfolding “event” that it already was. And if we accept Fried’s and Benjamin’s proposals that the temporal dislocations of cinema make it an inherently anti-theatrical medium, we might also describe what Lehmann elsewhere characterizes as Wilson’s “theatre of metamorphosis” as instead a theater *of its own* metamorphosis, one whose drama consists of the transformation of an art of live co-presence into its substitute and opposite. To consider the workings of this “diorama effect” in more detail, it may be helpful to revisit some basic features of *Einstein on the Beach*.

First, in terms of autobiographical self-fashioning, both Glass and Wilson have repeatedly aligned themselves with a tradition of high-modernist anti-theatricalism. Glass likes to cite the plays of Samuel Beckett and Gertrude Stein as major influences—precisely

those authors, in other words, who Puchner suggested were at the vanguard of twentieth-century assaults on the status of the actor and the audience.⁴⁹ Similarly, Wilson (who credits Stein's *The Making of Americans* with his decision to become a director in the first place) has claimed that his famously "cool" aesthetic emerged as an attempt to reject the intensely engaged and participatory practice of 1960s ensembles like the Living Theater.⁵⁰ In both cases, then, work that now seems predicated on a desire to blur "the role of the artist and the spectator, erasing the borders between self and other," may actually have emerged from an impulse to maintain and reassert these very divisions. As Wilson himself states: "I prefer a proscenium for many reasons. I like its form. I like the tension it sets up between two and three dimensions. I like the distance it creates between stage and audience."⁵¹

Second, we might note that *Einstein* does not only rely on a readymade architectural division between stage and audience: it seeks to emphasize it, and in so doing undermines the communal experience on which live theater depends. The opera begins before the audience enters the theater; it continues, uninterrupted, for five hours; individual spectators can come and go as they please. When the piece was revived at Brooklyn Academy of Music in 2012—and here I draw on anecdotal evidence—a common refrain was that it was so compelling that no one wanted to leave their seats. Yet to remain seated is, in a real sense, to misinterpret the work. The experience is different if you arrive, leave, and return, only to realize that nothing has changed and that your own presence is irrelevant.

Third, there is a suggestive affinity between this specific experience of irrelevance and a certain style of cinematic spectatorship—one that, five years before *Einstein*, Fried's close associate Stanley Cavell argued was essential to the meaning of the form. "When moviegoing was casual," he noted:

and we entered at no matter what point in the proceedings (during the news or short subject or somewhere in the feature—enjoying the recognition, later, of the return of the

exact moment at which one entered, and from then on feeling free to decide when to leave, or whether to see the familiar part through again), we took our fantasies and companions and anonymity inside and left with them intact.⁵²

For Cavell, this essentially private encounter with the filmic apparatus was fundamentally different from the collective experience of attending plays or operas. And it is in part the idea of a projector looping constantly, whether or not there is an attentive audience, that led Fried to praise the “automatic, guaranteed” anti-theatricality of cinema.

Fourth, and in light of this, other key aspects of Wilson’s stagecraft might also be described as cinematic, at least in the terms through which modernists celebrated cinema as a deanthropomorphic alternative to live theater. “[The film actor’s] body has lost its substance ... has been volatilized, stripped of his reality, his life, his voice, the noises he makes when moving about,” to quote Benjamin quoting Luigi Pirandello.⁵³ Is this not what Wilson’s famous, and famously meticulous, lighting effects struggle to achieve? “Not one production goes by without Wilson dismembering the body, in some way, with light,” notes one critic; another speaks of actors “detached from the surrounding environment, seem[ing] to float in space.”⁵⁴ Wilson himself describes his effects in terms of “zooms” and “close ups.”⁵⁵ Many of his productions begin life as visual diagrams that Wilson refers to as “story boards,” an overtly cinematic practice first used in *Einstein*.⁵⁶ (For some later productions, these story boards were drawn onto enormous scrolls that resembled reels of film.⁵⁷) He juxtaposes and intercuts scenes through a process best understood via analogy with montage.⁵⁸ And, as already observed, the director praises proscenium theater for “the tension it sets up between two and three dimensions.”

Fifth, on a more local level, *Einstein* is full of what Fried has taught us to identify as absorptive actions: people reading books and newspapers, writing, typing, conversing privately, listening to inaudible sounds, practicing the violin. These actions separate the

characters, or whatever they are, from the audience—and when the actors do turn face the hall directly, it's not with an empathic gesture, but rather a blank stare or horrible grimace. Rather than breaking through the fourth wall, they seem trapped within it. This is especially the case because the sheer intensity of Wilson's lighting effects often blinds the eyes of those on stage.⁵⁹ Absorption is not just thematized, in other words, it is also violently imposed.

Sixth, anything that can be said about the anti-theatrical strangeness of Rossini's music—its paradoxically circular momentum, its nested structures of repetition, its refusal of depth and denial of individual characterization, its conversion of language into empty sound, its descent from virtuosity into tedium—is even more obviously applicable to Glass's own.

Trial by Jury

The strongest evidence that *Einstein* severs an affective bond between work and spectator comes, however, from its spectators themselves, especially those who have tried hardest to engage with the opera's aesthetics of disengagement. Consider Stefan Brecht's description of the opening eleven or so minutes of *Einstein*'s first "trial" scene, taken from his sixty-page account of the whole work:

As to that strange, extremely lovely tune from the organ, the turning of a screw, the lights go up a little more, performers are entering from left and right, ceremoniously strolling, two young couples, — spectators? prisoners waiting to be arraigned? — seating themselves on the stage-left bench, three out of the four beginning to read newspapers, four or five persons, —the jury? — entering the stalls to the left, standing in two rows, pencils or ball points in hand, the tall writer in the red shirt among them, writing in the air, their voices (they don't look as tho [sic] they were singing) echoing the organ's notes as tho taking care of them. Two young women in light green shirts, dark green pants, harmonising with powder-blue desks there, looking like dancers,

enter from the left, walk to the school-desks, very slowly float their arses down into them, deposit their little brown paper lunch bags on the floor, in unison lift their enormous hand bags into the air, deposit them on their knees, and proceed to do various things that a court room stenographer might do while waiting for the court to into sessions, dig for things in their bags, file their nails elaborately, hand extended with their fingers, up... Sutton enters with a red book and a lunch bag downstage, stage-left, slowly, compelling as always, walks across, again very straight in a light tight vest, her straight arms (hands curving) in counterpoint to her water- or dream-walking long legs, an apparition as she crosses to *the magical music*, past the vainglorious stenographers, turns up past the jury-stand and stands to the left of the judge's dais, between it and the jury-stand, but looking by herself. The four spectators/arraigees rising, the judges, two of them, in black robes and 18th century white wigs, one normal size (Samuel Johnson, an elderly black gentleman), one small (the little boy that was part of the signal on the signal tower), enter and not too ceremoniously, their briskness a nice contrast to the formality of the proceeding entrances, file along some Wilsonian path composed of cross-stage and straight up-stage-down-stage segments and right-angle turns up to the judges' double seat and sit, (the small judge now the taller, a little joke), bow to the court and to one another, and commence to arrange stuff on the desk. The spectators/arraigees sit. Childs coming in quietly with a guardian, with a sudden violent wrench frees herself from his grip, — a splendidly sudden, *silent* violence — and followed by her guardian, who positions himself next to her walks to the high chair stage-left of the judge's seat, with an obstreperous air, a piece of acting, unpleasant in the general formal context, an individualisation, almost a heroisation of the indicted. She sits way up, hands in her lap, by her proximity to the judges and by the fairly strong figure of the guardian,

right up against her. A light makes her face bluish, she is leaning stiffly to one side,
— the defendant executed, a corpse.⁶⁰

A breathless accumulation of surface detail may be the most immediately striking aspect of this text, but I also want to call attention to Brecht's repeatedly frustrated attempts to exercise aesthetic judgement. His gestures toward critical evaluation ("*the magical music*," "unpleasant in the general formal context") and conventional character analysis ("vainglorious stenographers," "a heroisation of the indicted") are mere assertions, and they vie with telling admissions of defeat: are they spectators or prisoners? The sense of enthusiastic confusion grows more pronounced as Brecht continues. The backdrop, we learn, features either "18th or 17th century book illustrations."⁶¹ "The other jurors"—who, recall, may not be jurors—"rub their left eye and do something else I forget."⁶²

"Who is on trial?" asks Maria Shevtsova, reasonably enough. "Is it Patty Hearst? (She *was* tried.) Einstein, for opening the door to the atom bomb? No one in particular? Stefan Brecht ... indicates that Einstein was a dreamer and thus the bed can be associated with him. But, to his mind, the bed, not Einstein is on trial, and his guess is as surreal as any other."⁶³ Shevtsova's confusion, like Brecht's before hers, is especially indicative given the actual subject of the scene. The courtroom, after all, has long figured as a *mise-en-abyme* of theater itself—a topos that stretches back through Shakespeare to the *Oresteia*. In *Einstein*, though, we are confronted with a trial where no evidence is presented, and no judgment made. Are we its spectators or prisoners?

Reading Brecht's and Shevtsova's analyses, one finds scant evidence of emancipated spectatorship, of viewers granted a radical freedom to create their own meanings in an open-ended dialogue with the work. Instead, the opera seems to produce a sort of critical aphasia that reiterates the acts of stuttering and hysterical stenography depicted on the stage. This "mimetic effect," in which the overwhelmingly boring, incoherent, and idiotic qualities of an

artwork transfer themselves to the language of its audience, is a hallmark of the affective structure that Sianne Ngai terms “stuplimity.”⁶⁴ A specifically late-modern combination of the astonishing and tedious, the stuplime, like its eighteenth-century antecedent, challenges our own “capacity to interpret or respond [...] in conventional ways.”⁶⁵ The difference, though, is that it does so by “draw[ing] us *down* into the sensual and material domain of language and its dulling and irritating iterability, rather than elevating us to a transcendent, supersensible, or spiritual plane.”⁶⁶ Ngai’s main examples of the literary stuplime—Stein’s *The Making of Americans*, Beckett’s *How it Is*—are the same that Glass and Wilson cite as influences, and many other aspects of their work chime with her account: the constant descent into banality, the foregrounding of the specific bodies and voices of its actors (no casting is less “race blind” than Wilson’s), the use of texts by mentally disabled poets. For Ngai, stuplimity gives shape to the experience of “going limp or falling down” in the face of larger systems.⁶⁷ It makes common cause with modernism and with slapstick, and never more so than it does in *Einstein*.

Wilson’s opera, to summarize, is resolutely opposed to the experience of intersubjective openness with which it is often credited, yet it also deliberately falls short of offering the sort of magical encounter with radical autonomy valorized by Fried. Unwilling to achieve or fully believe in its own poetics of negation, it teeters between two distinct but adjacent models of aesthetic disengagement: good and bad, modernist and stuplime, serious and comic. It doesn’t quite pull off the diorama trick, that is to say, and its failure to do so speaks to the historical situation in which it was produced. On the one hand, *Einstein* was designed as—and, after more than forty years, remains—an unassimilably strange, collectively authored testament to a specific moment in the New York avant-garde. On the other, it is, in every sense, a worthy heir to the mantle of *Aida*: a virtuosic multimedia spectacle in love with the machinery of its own extravagance, a largely fixed text that has

withstood tours and multiple revivals. How might it have felt, and what was at stake, for a group of downtown experimental artists to lay claim to opera at a moment (and in a city) where the art form would have seemed *unusually* monumental and comatose? Performed on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera ten years after the disastrous premiere of Samuel Barber's neo-Verdian *Antony and Cleopatra*, and fifteen years before the company premiered another newly commissioned work, *Einstein's* simultaneous ambition and inability to become like painting registers its own discomfort with the imaginary museum. And perhaps this is why the more conventionally aspirational "post-minimalist" operas that *Einstein* gave rise to attempted to repress and redirect its stuplime secret. By way of a conclusion, then, let me offer four snapshots from a history of American opera as it emerged in the shadow of *Einstein on the Beach*.⁶⁸

From Stuplimity to the Everyday

1980. Two years after *Einstein* premiered and went on tour, Philip Glass received a commission from the city of Rotterdam to write a "real opera" that capitalized on its para-institutional success.⁶⁹ *Satyagraha*, the resulting work, would prove more directly influential than *Einstein* ever was; it now seems to be the founding work of what David Gutkin calls "neo-grand opera," a genre whose basic format is very much still with us.⁷⁰ It is worth asking what precisely makes *Satyagraha* a "real opera," though, and to which specific values it returns. In a sense, the answers are obvious: it features a proper orchestra, classically trained singers, and characters with names who move through something that might be called a plot. Another aspect of *Satyagraha's* distance from *Einstein* is that its music, no less than *Written on Skin's*, seems independent from, and superior to, the visual world that it depicts. It has been staged successfully by directors as diverse as Achim Freyer, Phelim McDermott, and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui. It is, in a word, unsettled.

Significantly, though, *Satyagraha*'s admirers have long insisted that it is not an opera at all. Tim Page claims that it is "vastly different from traditional music drama, designed on a moral, indeed religious, plane, and as such is closer to ritual than entertainment, to mystery play than standard opera."⁷¹ For Daniel Mendelsohn, "What *Satyagraha* aims at, in both its text and its music, is a kind of meditative state of spiritual elevation that allows us to think clearly about Gandhi's goodness and its effects, rather than to get wrapped up in his 'drama'."⁷² These are textbook anti-theatrical valorizations, of course, although it may seem strange to use ritual, the very paradigm of spectatorial immersion, as a strategy for keeping the audience at bay. At the same time, and unlike earlier and more overtly participatory attempts at ritual opera (*Noye's Fludde*, *Der Jasager*), what *Satyagraha* may truly aim for is a peculiar form of proscenium ritual, in which the spectator is doubly distanced from the events on stage. The Sanskrit libretto is a central aspect of this refusal. Not only can no actually existing audience understand what's being sung, but the linguistic estrangement—so different from Einstein's schoolbook rhymes and pop-cultural references—prevents us from being drawn "down into the sensual and material domain of language." And this is why *Satyagraha*, however tedious and incomprehensible it may be, is not stuplime. As its embrace by the Occupy Wall Street movement suggests, Glass's life of Gandhi does not irritate any "capacity to interpret or respond."⁷³ Its language is hieratic, and we do not need to know precisely what it is saying to know that it is saying something good.

1984. *Satyagraha* steps away from *Einstein* in two different directions, you might say. On the one hand, it returns to a more conventional idea of opera in which music takes priority over the contingencies of mise-en-scène. On the other, it aims for—and, according to its many fans, achieves—a condition of sacred indifference that avoids the stuplime comedy of its predecessor. (No opera is less funny.) *Akhnaten*, the final work in what it constituted as

Glass's "great man trilogy," moves further down both paths. It is, from one perspective, even more of a "real opera" than *Satyagraha*. Its grandiose, ancient Egyptian setting can only bring to mind *Aida*, and many of its individual tableaux (the love duet, the ballet, the reflective aria intoned by an isolated monarch, the domestic scene where women sing for each other, the spectacular crowd scene involving the destruction of a temple) seem modelled on the specific conventions of grand opera. At the same time, the closer Glass gets to the dramatic world of Meyerbeer and Verdi, the more the peculiarity of his musical style comes into focus. *Akhnaten* has been compellingly described as "singing archaeology," and its mummied affect is reinforced on stage.⁷⁴ The opera's characters return as ghosts at the end of the work and, in one remarkable scene, a contemporary guide re-narrates the plot of the opera to bored tourists. It is hard to think of another opera that reminds us so insistently that its historical characters are now dead.

As such, *Akhnaten* is faithful to its operatic model. In a famous attempt to situate *Aida*'s "airlessness and immobility" within the discourses of Egyptology and imperialism, Edward Said highlighted unsettling anti-theatricality of Verdi's work, and described it as if it were a painting by Frank Stella.⁷⁵ "*Aida* is self-limiting, atypically held in, and there is no record of any participatory enthusiasm connected with it," he notes. "Verdi's other works that dealt with remote or alien cultures did not inhibit his audiences from identifying with them," but *Aida*, with its "unusual ... blend of masterly competence and affective neutrality," did.⁷⁶ Glass, I strongly suspect, had a similar intuition about *Aida*'s lifelessness, and used it as a strategy to prevent his audience from getting involved too closely with the onstage drama. *Akhnaten* is really an archaeology of singing, an investigation into the marmoreal qualities of the operatic past.

1987. Glass's three portrait operas are winked at throughout John Adams' *Nixon in China*: from the opening descent of Air Force One, a nod to *Einstein*'s spaceship, to its flatly presentational depiction of "great" men and historical tableaux. Like *Akhmaten*, if more ironically, *Nixon* aspires to grand opera only in its most stilted form (the da capo entrance aria, the *brindisi*, the papier-mâché elephant wheeled on stage). Similarly, the opera's embrace of televisual imagery both invokes and deflates *Einstein*'s cinematic aspirations: no one has ever proposed CNN as a model for the ontological conditions of high modernism.⁷⁷

The real difference between *Nixon* and Glass's early operas, though, resides in its increased, and extensively thematized, self-consciousness about spectatorship and theater. Pat Nixon, the work's heroine, spends much of the opera reacting inappropriately to Chinese propaganda—attempting to relate personally and emotionally to mass-produced spectacles whose meanings (not unlike *Einstein*'s) refute interpretation:

PAT

This little elephant in glass
Brings back so many memories...
Tell me, is it one of a kind?

CHORUS

It has been carefully designed
By workers at this factory.
They can make hundreds every day.

CHORUS

This is the people's clinic.

PAT

Ouch!

I think it's sort of rude to watch.

CHORUS

"Do not distress yourself," she begs.

She will get well. Come see the pigs.⁷⁸

Pat's failure to understand (or refusal to accept) her role as passive tourist (here we might think back to *Akhnaten*) climaxes in the second scene of Act 2, when she attempts to rescue the protagonist of one of Madame Mao's agitprop ballets. Her character has been described as a parody of American earnestness, but given *Nixon*'s thoroughgoing conflation of Chinese propaganda, American mass media, and grand operatic pageantry, it might be better to say that Pat seems uncomfortable in the aesthetic world of the opera as a whole.⁷⁹ She longs for a form of everyday engagement that is antithetical to both conventional theatrical spectatorship and to its modernist negations.⁸⁰

"This is prophetic"—Pat's climactic aria, and the still point of the whole work—reads in this context like a plea for acknowledgment directly opposed to the central terms of "Art and Objecthood." It moves from an affirmation of a certain type of live performance to a dream that sculpture itself might become slightly more theatrical:

Yes! Let the band play on and on;

Let the stand-up comedian

Finish his act, let Gypsy Rose

Kick off her high-heeled party shoes...

Let the expression on the face

Of the Statue of Liberty

Change just a little, let her see

What lies inland...⁸¹

Celebrating what she calls “the simple virtues,” Pat imagines American popular entertainment (jazz, stand-up comedy, Gypsy Rose Lee) as an authentic form of communal self-expression, an alternative to both CNN and agitprop. In so doing, she rejects a perhaps more common understanding of the culture industry as a terrain of “dulling and irritating iterability,” a notion integral to *Einstein on the Beach*. “In the bedroom communities / Let us be taken by surprise,” Pat sings. This fantasy of suburban life contrasts tellingly with one of the more notorious sections in *Einstein*, in which Lucinda Childs recites a blank, disengaged, and utterly *unsurprised* account of quotidian life in the US:

I was in this prematurely air-conditioned super market
and there were all these aisles
and there were all these bathing caps that you could buy
which had these kind of Fourth of July plumes on them
they were red and yellow and blue
I wasn't tempted to buy one
but I was reminded of the fact that I had been avoiding
the beach.

Child's monologue (which, of course, repeats and repeats) is offered as a sort of “witness statement” at the climax of *Einstein's* trial. When she and Pat look at what lies inland, they see very different things.

1990. If *Satyagraha* and *Akhmaten* avoid stuplidity, *Nixon* re-inflects it toward the everyday. This sleight-of-hand is easy to miss, though, and it would create problems for John Adams in the future. *The Death of Klinghoffer*, the composer's more musically ambitious second opera, is in many regards his *Satyagraha*: it draws on ritual forms of scared theater (here, Bach's passions); it inspires but stands proudly apart from different stagings (*Nixon's* choruses, by

contrast, are never performed in concert versions); and—in the true sign of its unsettledness—it has provoked a bona fide crisis of interpretation as *Satyagraha* never did. Without entering into the debate about the opera’s putative antisemitism and ultimate “message,” I would note that anti-theatricality is central to the positions of both sides. Richard Taruskin’s notorious attack on the work is based on the observation that its “portrayal of suffering Palestinians in the musical language of myth and ritual was immediately juxtaposed with a musically trivial portrayal of contented, materialistic American Jews, straight from a sitcom.”⁸² Taruskin is unnerved, in other words, less by an invidious moral or political opposition than by a confusing oscillation between the two competing modes of minimalist opera that I have been trying to describe: one “good,” based on the elevated circularity of sacred drama, and one “bad,” based on the stuplime seriality of slapstick and television. (If only *Klinghoffer* had been more like Messiaen’s austere modernist *Saint François d’Assise*, which “offers pure Catholicism without the slightest multicultural palliative.”⁸³) Robert Fink’s counterargument, meanwhile, aims to rescue the opera from Taruskin’s reading, but only by accepting all of his concerns. First, Fink suggests, *Klinghoffer*’s politics are themselves anti-theatrical, in that they depict self-dramatizing public statements as violently destructive, and instead valorize a form of everyday intrication (familiar from “This is prophetic”) embodied in the opera’s Jewish characters. Second, the opera’s aesthetics are more sincerely ritualistic than Taruskin gives them credit for being. (“A clearer musical evocation of the gilded halo surrounding a medieval Crucifixion scene is hard to imagine,” Fink notes at one point.⁸⁴) Third, and again like Pat Nixon’s aria, *Klinghoffer* imagines television and popular culture not as commodified dystopia, but rather a legitimate manifestation of Jewish-American culture. Taruskin, that is to say, is “right” about the dangers of theater and stuplimity, and errs only in his actual interpretation of the work.

“*The Death of Klinghoffer* attempts to counterpoise to terror’s deadly glamour the life-affirming values of the ordinary, of the decent man, of *small things*.”⁸⁵ I find Fink’s account of what he calls “the message of *Klinghoffer*” compelling, but I want to conclude with a call to reflect on how strange it is for an opera to set forth such a message in the first place.⁸⁶ “Small things,” a phrase lifted from Alice Goodman’s libretto, is also one that has often been used to praise, criticize, and delimit Puccini’s realist operas. The echo many not be entirely accidental. It speaks to opera’s ongoing struggle to come to terms with its own objecthood, with its increasing similarity to other things of this world, and with the conditions of its settling.

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¹ Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 35.

² Tom Sutcliffe, *Believing in Opera* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 3.

³ Sutcliffe, *Believing in Opera*, 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵ David J. Levin, *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 1.

⁶ Levin, *Unsettling Opera*, 11.

⁷ Roger Parker, *Remaking the Song: Operatic Visions and Revisions from Handel to Berio* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 13.

⁸ Parker, *Remaking the Song*, 8, 30, and 13.

⁹ Here I paraphrase Parker's claim, "But Luciano Berio's ending might just be a beginning, the start of a great tradition, of a proliferation of new ways in which the music that lies at the center of operatic works might be reconfigured." See *Remaking the Song*, 120.

¹⁰ For scholarly discussions of the HD phenomenon, see James Steichen, "HD Opera: A Love/Hate Story," *Opera Quarterly* 27/4 (2011): 443-59; and the special issue *Opera at the Multiplex*, ed. Christopher Morris and Joseph Attard, *Opera Quarterly* 34/4 (2018).

¹¹ This shift in focus was anticipated, like so much in opera studies, by Carolyn Abbate; compare her broadly post-structuralist *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) with her more Kittlerian *In Search of Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

¹² Nicholas Mathew and Mary Ann Smart, "Elephants in the Music Room: The Future of Quirk Historicism," *Representations* 132 (2015): 61-78, 72.

¹³ On these technologies, see Francesca Vella, "(De)railling Mobility: Opera, Stasis, and Locomotion on Late-Nineteenth-Century Italian Tracks," *Opera Quarterly* 34/1 (2018): 3-28; Gundula Kreuzer, *Curtain, Gong, Steam: Wagnerian Technologies of Nineteenth-Century Opera* (Oakland: University of California Press, (2018); Emanuele Senici, "Porn Style? Space and Time in Live Opera Videos," *Opera Quarterly* 26/1 (2010): 63-80; and Christopher Morris, "Digital Diva: Opera on Video," *Opera Quarterly* 26/1 (2010): 96-119. Both Senici's and Morris's essay appear in a special issue of *Opera Quarterly* on "Mediating Opera," guest-edited by Melina Esse.

¹⁴ For an important recent study of these documents, see Alessandra Campana, *Opera and Modern Spectatorship in Late Nineteenth-Century Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

¹⁵ See Christy Thomas, "From Operatic Stage to Silent Screen: Casa Ricordi and Film d'Arte Italiana's 1911 *Aida*," *Opera Quarterly* 32/2-3 (2016): 192-220.

¹⁶ See Ellen Lockhart, “*Laggiù nel Soledad*: Indexing and Archiving the Operatic West,” in *Giacomo Puccini and His World*, ed. Arman Schwartz and Emanuele Senici (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 85-109; as well as her article “Photo-Opera: *La fanciulla del West* and the Staging Souvenir,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 23/1 (2011): 145-66.

¹⁷ Lockhart, “*Laggiù nel Soledad*,” 101.

¹⁸ Marc Robinson, *The American Play: 1787-2000* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 141.

¹⁹ Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, *A History of Opera: The Last 400 Years* (London: Penguin, 2015), 535.

²⁰ For an important discussion of *Nixon* along these lines, see Peggy Kamuf, “The Replay’s the Thing,” in *Opera through Other Eyes*, ed. David J. Levin (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 79-105.

²¹ For a nuanced discussion of the complex relationship between Adès’s opera and its filmic source, see Laura Tunbridge’s essay “Exterminating the Recording Angel” elsewhere in this double-issue. For a collection of responses to the Metropolitan Opera’s HD cinecast of *The Exterminating Angel*, and to the host of questions raised by that spectacle of multiple remediation, see Christopher Morris, Áine Sheil, Candida Mantica, João Pedro Cachopo, Laura Tunbridge, and Francesca Placanica, “Review Colloquy: *The Exterminating Angel*,” *Opera Quarterly* 34/4 (2018): XX-XX.

²² Mary Ann Smart, “Resisting Rossini, or Marlon Brando Plays Figaro,” *Opera Quarterly* 27/2-3 (2011): 153-78.

²³ All of these features can also be found in Karlheinz Stockhausen’s contemporaneous *Donnerstag* (1981), the first-completed opera in his *Licht* cycle. If a spate of recent productions in Basel, Paris, and London suggests that *Donnerstag* is at least poised to enter the fringes of the performing repertoire, it is significant that these productions have also prompted a debate about whether or not the opera can be staged in ways unimagined by the composer. See Paul V. Miller, “Stockhausen in Basel and Paris: *Donnerstag* in a New Light,” *Opera Quarterly* 32/4 (2016): 321-27.

²⁴ See Christopher Chowrimootoo, *Middlebrow Modernism: Britten's Operas and the Great Divide* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

²⁵ Chowrimootoo, *Middlebrow Modernism*, 154.

²⁶ Alex Ross, "Illuminated," *The New Yorker* (25 March 2013).

²⁷ Andrew Clements, "Written on Skin," *The Guardian* (8 July 2012).

²⁸ George Benjamin, "Creating Psychological Sound Worlds" (Oliver Mears, interviewer), program for *Lessons in Love and Violence* at the Royal Opera House (London, 2018): 10-15, 15.

²⁹ Smart, "Resisting Rossini," 154.

³⁰ For an important discussion of Benjamin's and Fried's theorizations of the relationship between theater and cinema, see Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 3-4.

³¹ See Emanuele Senici, "'An Atrocious Indifference': Rossini's Operas and the Politics of Musical Representation in Early-Nineteenth-Century Italy," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 17/4 (2012): 414-26. See also his earlier "Introduction: Rossini's Operatic Operas," in *The Cambridge Companion to Rossini*, ed. Senici (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1-8; as well as his forthcoming monograph *Music in the Present Tense: Rossini's Italian Operas in Their Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, in press). My comments on Rossini here and throughout this article are deeply indebted to Senici's work on the composer.

³² Carlo Ritorni, *Ammaestramenti alla composizione d'ogni poema e d'ogni opera appartenente alla musica* (Milan: Pirola, 1841), 176. Quoted in Susan Rutherford, "'La cantante delle passioni': Giuditta Pasta and the Idea of Operatic Performance," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 19/2 (2007): 107-138, 112.

³³ Stendhal, *The Life of Rossini*, trans. Richard N. Coe (Richmond: Oneworld Classics, 2010), 189.

³⁴ For recent perspectives of the Beethoven-Rossini dialectic, see *The Invention of Beethoven and Rossini: Historiography, Analysis, Criticism*, ed. Nicholas Matthew and Benjamin Walton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

³⁵ See Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); and Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (London: Routledge, 2006).

³⁶ Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 184.

³⁷ Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 16.

³⁸ See Herbert Lindenberger, "Anti-Theatricality in Twentieth Century Opera," in *Situating Opera: Period, Genre, Reception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 196-218.

³⁹ Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 148-72, 164. For a recent collection of responses to and re-evaluations of Fried's essay, see "*Art and Objecthood*" at *Fifty, nonsite* 21 and 22 (2017), www.nonsite.org (Accessed January 7, 2019).

⁴⁰ Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 164. For an overview Fried's legacy that pays particular attention to theater and performance studies, see Philip Auslander, "Presence and Theatricality in the Discourse of Performance and the Visual Arts," in *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1997), 49-57. For a suggestive recent attempt to rethink what Fried might offer the history of theater, see Joseph Cermatori, "Allegories of Spectatorship: On Michael Fried's Theory of Drama," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 32/2 (2018): 89-103.

⁴¹ See Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*.

⁴² Lockhart, "Photo-Opera," 160.

⁴³ Stendhal, *Life of Rossini*, 3.

⁴⁴ See Puchner, *Stage Fright*.

⁴⁵ See Maria Shevtsova, *Robert Wilson* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 9.

⁴⁶ Julia Kristeva, "Robert Wilson," *Art Press* 191 (1994): 64-5, 65. Quoted in Shevtsova, *Robert Wilson*, 3.

⁴⁷ Jelena Novak, *Postopera: Reinventing the Voice-Body* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 29.

⁴⁸ Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 78-9.

⁴⁹ Glass describes his transformative encounter with Beckett (who “pushed me into what became my first really original music”) in *Words without Music: A Memoir* (London: Faber and Faber, 2015). 124-6. For a discussion of Stein’s impact, see Cyrena N. Pondrom, “Gertrude Stein, Minimalism, and Modern Opera,” in *Modernism and Opera*, ed. Richard Begam and Matthew Wilson Smith (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 244-67.

⁵⁰ On Wilson and Stein, see Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 81. On Wilson and the Living Theater, see Shevtsova, *Robert Wilson*, 18-19; and Arthur Holmberg, *The Theatre of Robert Wilson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 2-3. It is worth noting that Wilson’s poetics of distance are also a rejection of his earlier, more collaborative, and quasi-therapeutic work with his non-professional “ensemble” the Byrd Hoffmann School of Byrds. For a brief account, see Holmberg, *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, 3-4.

⁵¹ Quoted in Holmberg, *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, 124.

⁵² Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, enlarged edition (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1979), 11.

⁵³ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility: Third Version,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938-1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 251-83,

⁵⁴ See Shevtsova, *Robert Wilson*, 64; and Holmberg, *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, 125.

⁵⁵ Holmberg, *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, 125.

⁵⁶ See Shevtsova, *Robert Wilson*, 42; and Holmberg, *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, 57.

⁵⁷ See Holmberg, *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, 77.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 97-98.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁶⁰ Stefan Brecht, *The Theatre of Visions: Robert Wilson* (London: Methuen Drama, 1994), 329-30.

⁶¹ Brecht, *Theatre of Visions*, 333.

⁶² Ibid., 332.

⁶³ Shevtsova, *Robert Wilson*, 105.

⁶⁴ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 250.

⁶⁵ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 250.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 267.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 297.

⁶⁸ For an alternative account of the development of this repertoire, see Arved Ashby, “Minimalist Opera,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth Century Opera*, ed. Mervyn Cook (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 244-66. For an incisive study of the challenges and paradoxes of American post-minimalist opera, see Robert Fink, “After the Canon,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Opera*, ed. Helen Greenwald (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1065-86.

⁶⁹ The next two paragraphs draw on my short essay, “New York Telephone Conversation; or Gandhi’s Last Act,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 28/2 (2016): 267-70.

⁷⁰ See David Gutkin, “‘Meanwhile, Let’s Go Back in Time’: Allegory, Actuality, and History in Robert Ashley’s Television Operas,” *Opera Quarterly* 30/1 (2014): 5-48.

⁷¹ Tim Page, “Satyagraha,” *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, *Grove Music Online*, *Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/O002837 (accessed June 11, 2015).

⁷² Daniel Mendelsohn, “The Truth Force at the Met,” *New York Review of Books* (June 12, 2008).

⁷³ On *Satyagraha* and Occupy Wall Street, see my “New York Telephone Conversation.”

⁷⁴ See John Richardson, *Singing Archaeology: Philip Glass’s “Akhnaten”* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1999).

⁷⁵ Edward W. Said, “The Empire at Work: Verdi’s *Aida*,” in *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 111-32, 124. For more recent accounts of the opera’s inhuman qualities, see Katherine Bergeron, “Verdi’s Egyptian Spectacle: On the Colonial Subject of *Aida*,” *Cambridge*

Opera Journal 14/1-2 (2002), 149-59; and Gabriela Cruz, "Aida's Flutes," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 14/1-2 (2002), 177-200.

⁷⁶ Said, "The Empire at Work," 114.

⁷⁷ In an early review of *Nixon in China*, Kyle Gann also identified more specifically musical allusions to Glass's portrait operas. See "First Flight," in *Music Downtown: Writings from the Village Voice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 218-20.

⁷⁸ Alice Goodman, *Nixon in China*, in *History is Our Mother: Three Libretti*, (New York: New York Review Books, 2017), 1-69, 35 and 36.

⁷⁹ On Pat's earnestness, see James Williams, "Introduction," in *History is Our Mother*, ix-xxviii, xv. For a detailed discussion of her characterization in the opera, see Matthew Daines, "Nixon's Women: Gender Politics and Cultural Representation in Act 2 of *Nixon in China*," *Musical Quarterly* 79/1 (1995): 6-34.

⁸⁰ The idea of everyday engagement as an alternative to theatricality (derived, of course, from Cavell's readings of Thoreau and Wittgenstein) has been explored extensively in Fried's more recent writings: see especially *Menzel's Realism: Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth-Century Berlin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), and *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*.

⁸¹ Goodman, *Nixon in China*, 37-8.

⁸² Richard Taruskin, "The Danger of Music and the Case for Control," in *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 168-80, 172.

⁸³ Taruskin, "Sacred Entertainments," in *The Danger of Music*, 280-300, 289.

⁸⁴ Robert Fink, "Klinghoffer in Brooklyn Heights," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 17/2 (2005): 173-213, 179.

⁸⁵ Fink, "Klinghoffer in Brooklyn Heights," 206.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 207.