REVIEW

Caitlin Vincent, *Digital Scenography in the Twenty-First Century*, Ashgate Interdisciplinary Studies in Opera

Abingdon: Routledge, 2022. 212 pp. ISBN 9780367553920 (hard cover). DOI: 10.4324/9781003093305 (ebook)

Natalie Rewa

Queen's University, Ontario, Canada

It is June 2022 and the premiere of *R.U.R. Torrent of Light*, a multimedia opera, in Toronto is enthralling audiences. Inspired by Karel Čapek's play that introduced the word 'robot' into 20th-century vocabulary, composer Nicole Lizée and librettist and playwright Nicholas Billon have conceived a science-fiction opera for our current fascination with AI (artificial intelligence). The production by Toronto's Tapestry Opera Theatre is in partnership with the research and creation of new technologies at the Social Body Lab and the Digital Futures Initiatives at Ontario College of Art & Design University. It has been conceived to embed technologies into the scenographic dramaturgy as projections, wearable art and spatialisation of sound and light through the costuming and neologisms in instrumentation to create a 'unique electronica-classical sound' of the neo-futurist worlding. After the hiatus of the last two years, this live performance highlights our growing recognition of scenographic vocabularies of programmable performance affecting behaviours, as well as expanded definitions of sound and digital integration as contemporary opera. Such interdisciplinarity has often brought the spectator into fresh relationships with opera in performance, thereby activating the event of spectatorship.

Integrating film, video and currently digital scenographies has become a mode of performance dramaturgies that curate critical axes of time, space and scale as integral. As much as Čapek's play in 1920 looked to the animacy of machines, Béla Balázs had already applied his recent film theory to his libretto of *Bluebeard's Castle* to ghost affective camera angles on stage. Balázs's 1918 published libretto demonstrates a hybridisation with the filmic; the didascalia (stage directions) activate the events of the narrative comparable to acts of seeing through stylised camera work. In the shift from the prologue to the entrance of Bluebeard and Judith, Balázs's didascalia insist on a self-consciousness of backlighting as distinct from theatrical illumination: '*the figures of Bluebeard and Judith appear, dark against the open doorway.*'[1] Subsequently, as Judith opens each door, the emphasis is on the effect rather than a reinforcement of a locational setting: '*The door opens noiselessly, making a blood-red gap in the wall, like a wound. From the opening a long streak of red light is cast across the floor.*'[2] Balázs returns repeatedly to the insights of side lighting, encouraging the spectator to re-orientate the space through a 90° angle that choreographs Judith walking across the stage in profile, perpendicular to the auditorium, and along the streaks of light emanating from the doors; that is, her interaction is gesturally with the lighting, rather than Bluebeard.

---

[1] Bela Balázs, libretto of *Bluebeard's Castle*, trans. by Chester Kalman (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1952).

[2] *Ibid.*

The 1992 production of *Bluebeard's Castle* by the Canadian Opera Company – in a double-bill with Schoenberg's *Erwartung*[3] – took up Balázs's challenges, introducing media effects by Laurie-Shawn Borovoy of a holographic projection of a miniature castle on a turntable 'floating' in the immense darkness of the stage before the stage plunged into darkness. No architectural castle ever appeared during the performance. Set designer Michael Levine absented co-ordinates for the stage space by a steeply raked stage draped in black for a perspective that worked vertically and more like a screen. The entrance of Bluebeard and Judith was far upstage, with the two figures silhouetted in a rectangle of light that spilled downstage. Without any definition of walls of a castle, the events of Judith opening each door was comprehended as an intensely coloured beam of light that crossed the stage to be defined on the opposite side of the stage as a rectangle of light on a wall of an invisible architecture, one that stolidly remained imperceptible to the spectator. This flow of energy in Robert Thomson's lighting manufactured a conscious experience of the technologies of seeing. Robert Lepage's direction confirmed Levine's restrained, dematerialised stage space and its activation by the lighting; absent from the production was an impulse to decipher or recognise objects or simply to illuminate or explain. In *Erwartung*, Levine extended the potential to reorient the spatial co-ordinates of the stage space by introducing projected spatial co-ordinates of scenery that effectively turned the stage space through a 90° angle.

The integration of filmmakers as directors into opera production during the last decade of the twentieth century further reinforced the potential symbiosis of technologies of cinema with the production methods of opera. Productions directed by François Girard, Anthony Minghella, Liliana Cavani, Werner Herzog and others have thought through the flow of sound and image in performance. In addition to the aforementioned work by Lepage, a particularly fascinating example was the much anticipated cinematically inflected and technologically dominated scenography for the *Ring* Cycle in Bayreuth that was conceived by Lars von Trier. (Scheduled for a premiere in 2006, von Trier abandoned work on the production after two years in 2004, anxious that the technology in a theatre could not duplicate the precision achievable in filmmaking and that the potential expense threatened to overwhelm the Bayreuth Festival.)[4] Filmmakers encouraged a wider horizon of spectatorial synesthetic response.

When François Girard directed Stravinsky's *Symphony of Psalms* and *Oedipus Rex*,[5] he initiated an additional, unscored presence of men wearing dark suits who descended to the stage through the auditorium, commemorating those who had died of AIDS by reading their names from the books that they carried. These anonymous, whispering figures lay down on the stage and added names to their ledgers as, simultaneously, 'hand-written' additions were inscribed on the upstage screen that dominated the space. Michael Levine's stage setting presented the spectators with a composite stage space, in which the chorus singing was located strategically between the writing of the names on the forestage and the active projection of inscription of names upstage. For *Oedipus Rex*, Levine's production design located a pile of writhing half-naked bodies topped by a single red chair as the central focus of the performance space, this corporeal presence seemingly parallelling the projected acts of writing. Writing in this second opera of the double bill appeared as a Cocteau-esque 'hand-drawn' line-drawing scrolled on the upstage screen to arrive at the image of a crown. Such rebalancing of presence in the stage space – projected and corporeal – provided a powerful association of the contemporary consciousness with classical figures.

During the twenty-first century the use of digital scenography in opera productions has steadily increased critical discussion of individual productions. Caitlin Vincent's study is thus timely and expands the orbit of digital scenography as a scenographic practice. Her study of 63 productions between 2005 and 2020 focuses on an international repertoire in Australia, England, Europe, Hong Kong and the USA, and aims to establish benchmarks for the analysis of digital scenographies. Some of these productions she has seen live, many more as streamed, or on DVD. Her approach foregrounds digital

---

[3]*Bluebeard's Castle* and *Erwartung*, Canadian Opera Company, 1992. The production went on to tour internationally (1993 Brooklyn Academy of Music, Edinburgh Festival; 1994 Melbourne Festival; 1995 Grand Théâtre de Genève, 1996 Hong Kong Arts Festival; 2001 Cincinnati Opera) as well as nationally in Canada (1999 Vancouver, 2004 Montreal, and 2006 Edmonton).

[4]See Nila Parly, 'Lars Von Trier's Lost Ring', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 30.1 (March 2018), 1–28.

[5]*Symphony of Psalms* and *Oedipus Rex*, Canadian Opera Company, 1997. The production went on to tour internationally (2002 Edinburgh International Festival) and nationally in Canada (2006 Opéra de Montréal).

scenography as an exponent of the creative industries: she begins with aesthetic and dramaturgical rubrics, then moves onto the implications for the accommodation of the labour of digital scenographies as distinct from the models of the production design processes of the twentieth century.

The discussion thereby distances itself from a reliance on the vocabularies of *Regietheater*. Vincent's analysis centres on the critical range of *causal* interplay within digital scenographies that by their level of complexity and involvement of the performers have implications not only for design processes, but also for adjustments to rehearsals that establish performance protocols, and ultimately for fresh models of institutionalised forms of company management. While the discussion of film and digital scenography in theatre performance has become an increasingly crowded field in the last fifteen years – taking up questions of the integration of technologies as well as studying the effects on spatialization and intermediality – there has been a dearth of attention contextualising what has been happening on opera stages, although individual reviewers of productions are increasingly considering the dramaturgical contribution of filmic and digital media. At the same time, independent opera companies are exploring not only digital scenography, but also AR (artificial reality) and ER (extended reality), but this is a topic beyond the immediate scope of this review.

Vincent's thick description of the self-conscious presence of digital scenography in productions facilitates the move towards an appreciation of relational dramaturgy.[6] As she describes the emplacement of the scenography in time and space of the production on the stage, she marks what Peter Boenisch identifies as 'a production's spectatorial relations, its fluid shifting between materiality and semioticity'.[7] The excerpts from her interviews with the designers and creators of digital content sharpen the understanding of the adjustments to meaning-making, opera performance and modes of production. Her aim is to attend to the making of digital scenographies and to 'establish a much-needed benchmark of practice for digital scenography in opera that supports an analytical exploration of its broader implications for the genre' (p. 11).

The scope for this study comprehends the availability of the productions to a reader and thus makes her project all the more significant. Underpinning her study is the wider discussion of modes of creating performance based in manipulating time, space and bodies as historical; she draws on concepts of interactivity developed by Steve Dixon[8] and on observations of the adjustments to live productions noted by Greg Giesekam.[9]

Vincent develops a critical continuum, a spectrum, taking up Giesekam's differentiation between multi-medial and intermedial modes: digital elements that are evident and significant in the production but do not 'actively interact' (p. 28) with the performers, and the intermedial which foster an interdependence between the live and the filmic. From this basic binary, she productively figures gradations in the modes of synthesis that are crucial to opera production and, ultimately, the object of the interdisciplinarity. She first outlines the basic relationship of integration, or prominence, of the digital scenography ranging from non-synthesis, through partial synthesis, to full synthesis. Within each of these larger categories, Vincent concentrates on the causal interplay of the digital scenography with the live performers from the perspective of the audience. By highlighting the concepts of agency, augmentation and autonomy in relation to the presence of the performer and the perceptions of the audience, Vincent identifies how the singers are integrated *by*, or on occasion *into*, the digital components of a stage 'picture'. The discussion delves into functional or faux interactivities, evidence of modes that trigger interaction and notes the effects of synthesis. Her analysis takes into account spatial disposition of the

---

[6]Relational dramaturgy concerns the complex storytelling achieved by the production as it comprehends the elements of scenography as well as the composition and the libretto.

[7]Peter M. Boenisch, 'Acts of Spectating: The Dramaturgy of the Audience's Experience in Contemporary Theatre', *Critical Stages*, 7 (December 2012) <https://www.critical-stages.org/7/acts-of-spectating-the-dramaturgy-of-the-audiences-experience-in-contemporary-theatre/> [accessed 6 June 2022].

[8]See Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 559–98. See also *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*, ed. by Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt, 3rd edn (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi BV, 2007).

[9]See Greg Giesekam, 'Introduction: Contamination or Remediation?', in *Staging the Screen: The Use of Film and Video in Theatre*, Theatre and Performance Practices (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 1–26.

digital content on a stage, the inextricability of the links between the live performer with the components, the integration of the already existing references to supernatural effects in a libretto, and finally the scale of the digital elements as scenographic design. Three productions of *The Magic Flute* initiate the reader into a clear appreciation of the analytic matrix: the design by Japanese ceramic artist Jun Kaneko for San Francisco Opera (2012), William Kentridge's scenographic dramaturgy and direction at Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie (2005) and 1927's scenography for the Komische Oper Berlin (2012). Vincent builds her categories, drawing attention to the layering of digital content within the stage space, the negotiation of the design by the performers, the manufacture of the actual content, and also the distinct challenges of integrating digital design with its hierarchy of design and animation, including production studios on occasion, into the existing institutional structures of creative teams within an opera company. The detailed descriptions, in the examples of William Kentridge's work and that of 1927, trace the moments of precise choreography required of the performers to co-ordinate with the digital content so that they and the digital content 'become embedded in the physicality of the performance itself' (p. 39). The analysis of another half a dozen productions argues convincingly for the necessity of fresh contract conditions for performers and content producers.

An important aspect of this study are the interviews with individual designers of digital scenographies. Conducted over a period in the three years before the pandemic, and during the last two years, the interviews comprise a significant snapshot of the experience of the creative hierarchies to integrate digital scenographies – both into the creative teams and technologically. As part of the creative teams, digital scenography challenges much of modernist organisational practice. Vincent problematises the structure of artistic authority both in a hierarchical model in which the projection designer may be linked to the lighting and set designer, and in a more flexible one, described as 'lateral' in which the projection designer is considered an equal member of a creative team along with the set, costume, and lighting designers. She acknowledges the distinct position of William Kentridge as a content creator, designer, filmmaker, director and animator, as well as the devising methodology of creating productions by Simon McBurney and the overall silent film conceptualisation by 1927. In each of the examples, Vincent seeks to develop a matrix of behavioural responses (p. 49) between the live and the digital that reinforces the interdisciplinarity of causal interplay, whereby the digital elements can drive a sequence in performance as much as a performer can initiate/activate a digital co-presence. Remarks regarding the actual technical details remain in the background, mentioned as within the purview of a designer and budgets, and one presumes that such a discussion would make for excellent material for a companion volume.

In the final chapters, as Vincent turns to the specificity of producing opera, she rephrases the issue of integrating the projection designer by looking at the traditions of administrative structures that guide and support aspects of realising the design. The case studies in this section offer forthright information about the demands of projection design as disruptive of modernist traditions of the flow of production development. Taking into account different models of institutional infrastructure, she draws attention to the strains on both the opera companies and the projection designer, depending on the level of causal interplay. This section highlights the imperative attention to interdisciplinarity that ought to be accommodated within production schedules so that performers learn to perform with pre-programmed sequences, not so much for maintaining the illusion but rather for the visual stimulation of witnessing the assembly, or even the assembled effect.

Digital Scenography in Opera in the Twenty-First Century situates opera at the intersections of the creative industries, and is a productive contribution to the Ashgate Interdisciplinary Studies in Opera series. Vincent's own experience as a librettist encourages the reader in her concluding remarks to consider the futures of digital scenography that looks to different scales of production that are enabled by digital platforms. She draws attention to platforms such as VOCALOID that include augmenting the voice, and to the development of spatialising VR technologies that leave the model of an architectural envelope of an opera house with a proscenium arch and negotiate adapting chamber operas on Zoom.