



The Cogut Center for the Humanities

**“finding the aura of the opera”
weblog entry by Zachary McCune
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we've all been to the opera, right? we know what it means. we've been witness to it's permutations and parodies. we know what it sounds like, feels like, looks like. we know what it means to issues of class, western civilization, and elitism. we've all been to the opera, but we've never actually sat down in the third row, second balcony, and been unable to escape it, unable to look away or stop listening, because everything about the opera house is opera.

because we've never actually been to the opera, but we've been to innumerable mediations of the experience, and unfortunately, we've let that stand in for the aura of the opera.

i'm appealing of course, directly to walter benjamin's idea of the work of art in the age of reproduction. in it, benjamin argues that the reproduction of an art works loses an essential quality (the famed 'aura'), impossible to detach from the original. the aura, put simply, amounts to its history through time and space, and the visible hand of the artist within the work. benjamin's ideas are most often employed in theories of visual culture, as the photograph and the lithographic reproduction (among many technologies of visual reproduction) have enabled fleeting moments and singular artworks to escape their specificity and become mass media- international symbols rather than individual art works.

the assumption followed that in the age of reproduction, the mass media are somehow soul-less (without that quality of aura) and therefore not a substitute for the original, though their tracing of the original does lead us back to the fountainhead, back to the aura we somehow we will find at the original.

which is why there is always a line in front of 'starry night' at the moma. because the visitor feels compelled to confront a something in the painting that every copy they've ever seen of it never had. they look at it like they've never seen it. because they don't think they have. because they think that aura might be visible.

but of course, the aura isn't visible. the visible is that which has been reproduced. but it's still there somewhere. it's the reason they stopped to look at the painting in the first place.

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the opera of media culture

i have both been and never been to the opera.

i've never been in that i have never taken a seat, and listened to the orchestra tune up, watch the maestro stroll out, grow excited when the curtain lifts, and been forced to decide whether to follow the actors or the subtitles on the back of the chair in front of me.

but i've been there in that i know the music. i know that wagner wrote "ride of the valkyries" and that i've seen it in a hundred commercials, parodies, and movies, most notably, in francis ford coppola's "apocalypse now." i've been to the opera house too. they're all over our culture. in newport (ri) the main cinema is called opera house, though i suspect it hasn't seen an opera in half a century. further up the road, at another theater, there are live broadcasts of the metropolitan opera every so often. i've watched the newporters dress up to watch these broadcasts, and line up touro street in the january dark waiting for the theater to open.

i've been to an opera house of the future, with bruce willis, and been told that it was the "new opera house modeled on the old opera house" as a fantastic blue diva sang what what you-tuber called "hyper-opera." and i've loved it. and i've identified with the shots of bruce's confusion, as he doesn't know the words, and he didn't speak italian, and all he can perceive of the experience is all i can perceive of it, that there is some otherworldly beauty in the experience, but that we both don't know enough to really engage it.

last tuesday, i went to the opera with james bond. as he took on global capitalism in austria. at toska. and the violence of the 21st century bond was made to bear resemblance to the great action heroes of western civilization, the siegfrieds and the tristans, who are still heroes in the opera house, and still define the qualities of the epic male protagonist.

on my bookshelf, it between memento and the big lebowski, there is a dvd of don giovanni which i've never made it through. it was a gift of a friend's father, who is obsessed with the opera, and maintains that the more times i watch don giovanni and fail to finish it, the more meaningful it will be when i one day do.

being there

i am 21 years old. i am a junior in college. and i have never been to an opera.

i admitted this in a letter to the cogut center for the humanities, who were soliciting applications for students interested in attending a rehearsal of tristan and isolde at the met, and they took pity on me.

on the 6:30 bus to new york, with twenty other students of extensive musical experience, i felt a little out of place. so i kept to myself, and re-read the wikipedia entries on tristan

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and isolde, and daniel barenboim, the director, whose entry must be one of the most interesting biographies on the entire database. and eventually fell asleep, waking on the bridge into manhattan.

we slowly worked through the mid-morning traffic to barely get to lincoln center in time for rehearsal. in that fantastic modernist opera house, with its sleek marble lines and molecular glass chandeliers. where we sat in the first row of the second balcony with no one except the orchestra and the crew for company.

and the lights went down.

and daniel barenboim stoked up the orchestra.

and they played the prelude.

and the curtain rose.

and it was opera.

what they don't tell you

is that opera is anything but boring. there is simply too much to pay attention to. on stage, you have amazing talents, singing at outstanding ranges, filling the entire house with their voices, and managing to find time to act between their vocal performances. directly in front of you, you have the entire orchestra. with each musician an individual who could be closely followed to see when and how he changes the sound of the symphony. and there are so many of them. if one were to follow each musician for two minutes, then by the end of the first act you would still have a few to go.

and you have the conductor, cajoling them faster or slower, his whole body a mediation of the sound's experience, a ceaseless blur of expression. he is the shaper of the collective, and is yet somehow engaged in each instrument. at one point in the rehearsal, barenboim called out to the percussionist to sharpen his sound.

“no not like that” he called, “it's za da da Dat! za da da Dat!”

i also surmise that the opera is a great place for people watching. though we were (wonderfully) alone in the space, i could imagine myself roaming through the house with my eyes, wondering if those two were a couple, or if that old man had seen this opera before, or who exactly those people in the third box on the right were and why they chose to sit there.

no the opera is anything but boring. it is the original multimedia. it is the great western hybrid art form- that plays with poetry, stagecraft, acting, singing, and orchestral composition. each and every one of those disciplines is it's own massive art form, with ranges of subtly and control.

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but in opera, no one of these arts be distilled or essentialized. they all must work together. so the spectator-listener must engage the opera actively, and cannot be distant or apathetic.

there is simply too much going on.

the opera is not that which happens to you, it is that you are willing to work to put together.

meeting him

daniel barenboim told us just this. he mandated active participation in the experience of the opera. which was certainly a helpful pointer for me. in fact, it was simply astounding to be in a position to receive that kind of advice at this kind of a moment. two hours before, i was seeing my first opera. now, daniel barenboim was telling me how to listen to it.

it was like bill belichik telling me how to understand football.

i could not be more grateful to the cogut center and michael steinberg for this experience. i was lucky enough to get to see an opera, let alone at the met, when the experience became simply unbelievable in that i was sitting down to talk with daniel barenboim about what i'd just seen.

so i asked him about the only thing i felt equipped to talk with him about: the mediation of the operatic experience. did he think that the opera could be captured in film or broadcast televisually?

he told me no. of course he told me no.

“the short answer is no and the long answer is no.”

it has to do with the multiplicity of experience. in a film or on tv, barenboim explained, you are always “the point of view of the camera man.” which doesn't equate with the myriad ways one can engage with the operatic experience when you are physically there.

and of course, there is a certain agency of the spectator in opera. “you cannot simply sit down and wait for magic to happen, you must be active,” barenboim said.

because the opera is something that you must construct for yourself.

and until then, i never had.

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