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**Ambivalent Engagement: contemporary
opera between populism and the
postmodern**

(Hauke Berheide & Amy Stebbins)

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Abstract

Today, the relationship between opera and society could best be described as 'displaced'—at least in the German-speaking countries. As an institution, opera has become a 'Repertoirebetrieb' that hires living stage directors to make popular works from the 18th and 19th centuries palatable through their scenic recontextualization, despite the racism, sexism and otherwise questionable ideology of these works. The critical approach of this mode of stage direction creates space for the discomfort of ideological regression and, at the same time, fends off such discomfort, ultimately saving the work—untouched in its musical and textual structure—for the enjoyment of and commercial business with that regression. At the same time, these institutions also commission and perform new operas, which disappear after their world premiere, never to be integrated into the seemingly closed opera canon. These new operas suffer, in particular, from two ambivalences: i) the institutional ambivalence of opera houses towards these works; ii) the ambivalence of the new operas (and their creators) towards their audiences, which manifests, for example, in a kind of prejudice against categories such as narrative, identification and pleasure.

In this article, German composer Hauke Berheide and US-American director/librettist Amy Stebbins propose an aesthetics of 'ambivalent engagement' as a conceptual framework for constructing narratives in contemporary opera. The article begins with an historical overview of the aesthetics and institutional parameters of postwar opera in the German-speaking context, giving particular attention to its role in the public sphere. To this end, it refers to operas by Helmut Lachenmann, Olga Neuwirth/ Catherine Filous, Beat Furrer/ Händl Klaus, Anno Schreier/ Kerstin Maria Pöhler, and David T. Little/ Royce Vavrek. Using examples from their own opera *Mauerschau* (Bavarian State Opera, 2016), the authors show how the reflexive and intermedial character of opera lends itself to large-scale narratives that call attention to their own inner contradictions. In this way, Berheide and Stebbins seek to demonstrate opera's unique potential to make current issues, such as the rise of neo-fascism, sensorially understandable without slipping into the populist affirmations particularly present in contemporary American opera.

Zusammenfassung

Für die deutschsprachigen Ländern lässt sich im Verhältnis zwischen Oper und Gesellschaft eine Bedeutungsverschiebung konstatieren. „Oper“ wird inzwischen wesentlich als derjenige Repertoirebetrieb verstanden, für den lebende Regisseur*innen angeheuert werden, um populäre Werke aus dem 18. und 19. Jahrhundert trotz ihrer fragwürdig gewordenen Ideologie, ihrer Rassismen und Chauvinismen durch szenische Rekontextualisierung wieder kommensurabel zu machen. Die kritische Perspektive solcher Regie verschafft dem Unwohlsein an der ideologischen Regression Raum und wehrt jenes Unwohlsein zugleich ab, um damit das in seiner musikalischen und textlichen Struktur unberührte Werk für den Genuss und das Geschäft mit der Regression zu retten. Gleichzeitig vergeben diese Institutionen auch Kompositionsaufträge für neue Opern. Diese Werke leiden jedoch unter zwei Ambivalenzen: i) der institutionellen Ambivalenz der Opernhäuser gegenüber den Werken; ii) der Ambivalenz der neuen Opern (und ihrer Schöpfer) gegenüber ihrem Publikum, die sich etwa in einer Art Befangenheit gegenüber Kategorien wie Erzählung, Identifikation und Vergnügen äußert.

In ihrem Beitrag schlagen der deutsche Komponist Hauke Berheide und die US-amerikanische Regisseurin/Librettistin Amy Stebbins eine Ästhetik des sogenannten „Ambivalent Engagements“ als konzeptionellen Rahmen für die Konstruktion von

Erzählungen in der zeitgenössischen Oper vor. Der Artikel eröffnet mit einem historischen Überblick über die Ästhetik und die institutionellen Parameter der Nachkriegsoper im deutschsprachigen Kontext mit besonderem Augenmerk auf ihre Rolle im öffentlichen Raum. Hierzu bezieht er sich auf Opern von Helmut Lachenmann, Olga Neuwirth/ Catherine Filloux, Beat Furrer/ Händl Klaus, Anno Schreier/ Kerstin Maria Pöhler, and David T. Little/ Royce Vavrek. Anhand von Beispielen aus ihrer eigenen Oper *Mauerschau* (Bayerische Staatsoper, 2016) zeigen die Autoren, wie sie den reflexiven und intermedialen Charakter der Oper für groß angelegte Erzählungen zu nutzen versuchen, und so ihre eigenen inneren Widersprüche zu thematisieren vermag. Auf diese Weise versuchen Berheide und Stebbins, das einzigartige Potenzial der Oper aufzuzeigen, aktuelle Themen wie den Aufstieg des Neofaschismus als komplexes Phänomen sinnlich begreifbar zu machen, ohne etwa in die populistischen Affirmationen vor allem amerikanischer Oper auszugleiten.

Ambivalent Engagement: contemporary opera between populism and the postmodern

Introduction

The Greeks had their agora. The Germans have their ‘Innenstadt’. From Munich to Kiel, from Dresden to Dusseldorf, the German city center represents and nurtures an idea of public life as a shared space of political, economic, and cultural activity. Its parks and benches promote collective gathering. Its pedestrian zones facilitate universal access to the institutional fixtures of civil society: city hall, the market place, and the opera house.

It is a unique and enviable fact that Germany’s opera houses are not private clubs, but public institutions. Since the founding of the Hamburg Opera House in 1678, they have seen themselves as agents in the formation and preservation of an informed public sphere as reflected in the language of their designation by the German UNESCO Commission as a site of “Intangible Cultural Heritage”.

Theatrical and orchestral art are characterised by emotional experiences, common activities and lively exchange. Thus, they open up crucial socio-cultural spaces beyond the necessity of rational activities. The theatre ensembles and orchestras, and those participating therein, see themselves as socio-political and aesthetic co-designers of society.¹

The commission’s recognition of these cultural institutions as “co-designers of society” puts emphasis on their specifically *political* commitments. Lest we forget that the collection of spectators in a German theater (as opposed a football stadium) is a ‘Publikum’, ‘of the people,’ a ‘res publica’.

This article explores the relationship between Germany’s opera houses and its public — a relationship which we believe has become displaced. No, the opera houses have not been forced out of the city centers. Their displacement is not a spatial one, but a temporal one. Whereas the Hamburg Opera House of the late 17th century presented new works written by living composers and librettists, most opera houses today present old works written centuries ago, for

¹ German Commission for UNESCO, “Theatres and Orchestras in Germany and Their Socio-Cultural Spaces”, <https://www.unesco.de/en/culture-and-nature/theatre-and-orchestra> (accessed: 5 January 2021).

another time, and for another audience. Yes, composers such as Wagner might have mused about the long-term sustainability of their music, but it still had to prove successful in its own moment.

The critique of opera's 'museumification' is, of course, nothing new, and it is not our aim here to rehash those arguments or to pit artists against institutions.² Instead we wish to address this displacement from a different angle, by thinking critically about how we, the artists, have contributed to this situation. For in truth, the rift that has grown between opera and the public is not just an institutional failure. In many cases, it is an artistic one as well. As we see it, the museumification of opera is symptomatic of two ambivalences. The first is the ambivalence of opera houses (and management) toward new operas. The second is the ambivalence of new operas (and by extension opera makers) toward their audience.

In the following, we offer an artistic position on contemporary opera as developed out of our practical work as a composer and a librettist/director. It is not a work of scholarship. It is a polemic intended to convey the urgent need for opera's producers — that is, the institutions which commission new works *and* the artists who author them — to re-imagine the relationship between contemporary opera and its audience. Our argument begins with a general overview of current trends in opera programming and new work development. Here we investigate how institutional structures designed to facilitate the production of new stagings of old works fail to adequately support the creation of new works. We then explore how the contested status of once key aspects of opera dramaturgy and musical composition (e.g., narrative, causality and identification) has resulted in an incompatibility between opera makers' artistic aspirations and their audience's desire to feel addressed. Using examples from our own work, we then (cautiously) propose the concept of 'ambivalent engagement' as one possible approach for opera today to address itself to a general audience without regressing into ethically dubious strategies of unmitigated identification.

² Cf. Moritz Eggert, „Fifty-fifty, bitte!“, in: *Zeit-Online*, 19 September 2018, https://www.zeit.de/2018/39/opernbetrieb-urauffuehrungen-wiederauffuehrungen-reform?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.moritzeggert.de%2F (accessed: 5 January 2021); Roman Reeger, „Das Immergleiche ist nicht einmal das Beste“, in: *VAN Magazin* 08, 6 May 2015, <https://van.atavist.com/roman-reeger> (accessed: 5 January 2021).

As a final point of clarification before we proceed: over the course of the 20th century, the international opera scene has broken up into increasingly disconnected national contexts to the point where it is no longer possible to speak of universal developments in contemporary opera.³ Nevertheless, in the interest of brevity and style, throughout this article we use the term ‘contemporary opera’ even though our discussion refers specifically (and almost exclusively) to opera in the German and German-speaking context.

Ambivalent Institutions

Germany’s municipal and regional theater system [*Stadt- und Staatstheatersystem*] is a robust network of some 140 public theaters, of which approximately 80 produce opera. As public institutions, they receive a subsidy of roughly 60-80% of their operating budgets, the purpose of which is not only to guarantee universal access by keeping ticket prices low, but also to safeguard theaters from the economic constraints of commercial markets. The mainstay of the public opera houses’ artistic programming is what is commonly referred to as the ‘repertoire’ — the historically sanctioned canon of works by composers like Mozart, Wagner, and Verdi. The 2017/2018 annual report of the German Stage Association [*Deutscher Bühnenverein*] shows that of the 866 operas presented that season, only 16.01% were written after January 1, 1945.⁴ Contemporary opera is so underrepresented, in fact, that it is separated into its own data set, and even still, of these ostensibly ‘contemporary’ works, the most frequently staged were Stravinsky’s *The Rake’s Progress* (1951), Poulenc’s *Dialogues des Carmélites* (1957), Britten’s *Peter Grimes* (1945), and Menotti’s *The Consul* (1949) — exposing the editors’ rather liberal understanding of the word ‘contemporary’.⁵

But what about those operas that are truly of our own time? For this, the report provides an even smaller third set of statistics for “World Premieres”

³ Cf. Amy Stebbins, “Dramaturgical oper(a)nations: De-internationalization in contemporary opera libretti”, in: *Theatre and Internationalization: Perspectives from Australia, Germany, and Beyond*, ed. Ulrike Garde and John R. Severn, London 2021, pp. 128–145.

⁴ Deutscher Bühnenverein, „Oper“, in: *Werkstatistik 2017/2018: Wer spielte was?*, Cologne 2019, pp. 29–59, here p. 54.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

[*Uraufführungen*]. Of the 138 ‘contemporary’ operas staged, world premieres accounted for a fourth, or 4% of all total new productions. The best attended of these was Arnulf Hermann’s *Der Mieter* (Oper Frankfurt), which played for a total audience of 6,129. By contrast, in the same season Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte* (1791) was attended by an audience of 277,510.⁶ This difference more or less sums up contemporary opera’s role in Germany’s opera houses.

This imbalance between old and new works in opera programming is not itself new. It began in the first half of the 20th century — the result of political and social changes that impacted not only opera aesthetics but also public taste. On the one hand, the Romantic legacy left by Beethoven and Schopenhauer inspired composers like Wagner, who saw opera not as “entertainment” but as containing some “artistic truth”, and consequently no longer felt the need to address themselves to any audience in particular.⁷ Moreover, the end of the imperial period, the rise of mass media, and the advent of cinema bent public taste for opera toward the familiar.⁸ And while the cultural rupture prompted by World War Two could have been an opportunity for new beginnings, the ‘Zero Hour’ [‘Stunde Null’] appears instead to have occasioned updates to the opera houses’ facades, but not to their programming — a point (in)famously made by Pierre Boulez in his 1967 interview with *Der Spiegel*.⁹

New German opera houses certainly look very modern — from the outside; on the inside, they have remained extremely old-fashioned. Only with the greatest difficulty can one bring a modern opera to a theatre in which mostly repertoire pieces are performed — it is unconvincing. The most expensive solution would be to blow the opera houses into the air.¹⁰

⁶ Although the report lists Hotel Pro Forma’s *Vespertina* (Nationaltheater Mannheim, 2018) as the world premiere with the greatest number of spectators, we have decided not to include this work insofar as it is not an opera, but a musical revue based on an independently created commercial album by Björk. Cf. *Werkstatistik* (see nt. 4), p. 54 and p. 59.

⁷ Bernd Feuchtner, *Oper des 20. Jahrhunderts in 100 Meisterwerken*, Hofheim 2020, p. 19.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁹ For more on the relationship between architecture and the postwar rehabilitation of Germany’s theaters and opera houses, see: *Ruinierte Öffentlichkeit: Zur Politik von Theater, Architektur und Kunst in den 1950er Jahren*, ed. Claudia Blümle and Jan Lazardzig, Zürich 2012.

¹⁰ „Die neuen deutschen Opernhäuser sehen zwar sehr modern aus—von außen; innen sind sie äußerst altmodisch geblieben. In einem Theater, in dem vorwiegend Repertoire gespielt wird, da kann man doch nur mit größten Schwierigkeiten moderne Opern bringen—das ist unglaublich. Die teuerste Lösung wäre, die Opernhäuser in die Luft zu sprengen.“ Felix Schmidt and Jürgen Hohmeyer, Interview with Pierre Boulez, „Sprengt die Opernhäuser in die Luft!“, in: *Der Spiegel* 40 (1967), pp. 166–174, here p. 172.

Over the second half of the twentieth century, as the age gap between the repertoire and opera audiences grew wider, so did their ideological differences. Plots rife with racist stereotypes, misogynist heroes, and totalitarian affirmation no longer reflected the society in which these operas were being performed. The solution to this was what is commonly, albeit problematically, known as ‘Regietheater’. By foregrounding the work of directorial interpretation, opera houses could continue to program historical works made consumable by their critical stagings. From this perspective, opera houses today are backward-looking havens of interpretation and commentary, not forward-looking sites of original creation.

Insofar as the repertoire constitutes the majority of opera houses’ artistic output, almost every aspect of their institutional operations — from internal scheduling to job descriptions to marketing — has been optimized to serve new productions as opposed to new works. Each production is allocated five to six weeks of rehearsal, prior to which there is a standard timeline of meetings and deadlines between the directing team and the house such as the technical presentation and the ‘Bauprobe’.¹¹ New operas, despite their very different needs, are prepared and rehearsed according to this same timeline. But whereas directing teams have the institutional support of dramaturgs, management, and the technical staff, librettists and composers are expected to deliver a new score or text with little to no institutional interaction or infrastructure — a situation that is particular to German-speaking institutions. In the United States, for example, it has become common practice to workshop new operas months, if not years, in advance of the premiere. At German-speaking opera houses, by contrast, the first complete musical rehearsal with orchestra and singers typically takes place seven to ten days before the premiere, after the staging rehearsals are already complete. This set-up not only makes it impossible for the composer or librettist to make revisions, it also leaves the singers and directing team to speculate about the musical world of the opera with only the (frequently very complex) score or, in some cases, piano reduction to guide them.

¹¹ A ‘Bauprobe’ is a fixed date in the production process where a mock version of the set is constructed for the directing team and technical staff to inspect the design several months before rehearsals begin.

The dominance of the repertoire in institutional programming also impacts managerial tasks and employment opportunities. Stage directors are today's opera stars. Managers and dramaturgs consider it a critical part of their job to remain informed about the current pool of directorial talent, while there are countless industry rumors about administrators helplessly turning to Google to find a living composer to commission for a world premiere. This is unsurprising given that the pipeline for future directors flows directly through the opera houses in the form of full-time, salaried jobs for assistants as well as paid internships. No such jobs or training exist for young composers or librettists.

This utter lack of institutional infrastructure for new work production has prompted a recent wave of discussions amongst composers, librettists, directors, and collectives. In April 2020, a special edition of *Seiltanz* surveyed some twenty artists about the ideal institutional context and/or conditions for creating new opera. The contributors describe a broad spectrum of structures and spaces that often stand in direct opposition to one another: Elena Mendoza argues that new works should be produced by the public opera houses, but with “a fundamentally new definition of what an opera house should do.”¹² Ulrich Kreppein, the co-editor of the edition, suggests dividing public opera houses into two separate institutions, one for historical repertoire, the other for new work.¹³ Sarah Nemtsov imagines a more abstract, utopian space with “flexible”, “hierarchy-free” structures.¹⁴ Yet despite the clear articulation of how these dream institutions would facilitate certain kinds of artistic processes, little consideration is given to the work they would actually produce. What kind of operas would these artists make in these ideal spaces? For whom do they imagine themselves writing? This question is critical; for even if institutional reform is vital to the future of contemporary opera, opera makers (ourselves included) must not use the opera houses' shortcomings as an excuse to stay silent about our own role in our art form's societal displacement.

¹² Elena Mendoza, „Wie sieht Euer idealer Ort für Musiktheater der Gegenwart aus? (I)“, in: *Seiltanz: Beiträge zur Musik der Gegenwart*, ed. Fabian Czolbe and Ulrich Kreppein, 20 (2020), pp. 9–13, here p. 9.

¹³ Ulrich Kreppein, „Musiktheatralische Scheidungsberatung“, in: *Seiltanz* (see nt. 12), pp. 6–8.

¹⁴ Sarah Nemtsov, „Wie sieht Euer idealer Ort für Musiktheater der Gegenwart aus? (III)“, in: *Seiltanz* (see nt. 12), pp. 9–13, here p. 39.

Ambivalent Artists

The cover of Bernd Feuchtner's *Die Oper des 20. Jahrhunderts* [*Opera of the 20th Century*] gives a frank illustration of contemporary opera's reputation. The image — from Achim Freyer's staging of Helmut Lachenmann's *Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern* [*The Girl with the Matches*] (Hamburg State Opera, 1997) — depicts a woman with her hands clasped over her ears and a look of acute pain on her face. Feuchtner takes this motif of contemporary opera's acoustic offensiveness as the starting point of his introduction, in which he relates a conversation he had with a young opera manager:

“Not only do you have to put on the most exciting new opera every season,” I said to the young artistic director, “You also have to always put on a 20th-century masterpiece.” He was alarmed: “But I don't want to scare away my audience.”¹⁵

Feuchtner's anecdote reflects how managerial fear and audience prejudice mutually reinforce one another to keep new works off the stage.

At the same time, for several decades the majority of prominent composers who self-identify as the European avant-garde refused to engage with concrete (opera) audiences at all.¹⁶ This only changed after György Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre* (Royal Swedish Opera, 1978) and Wolfgang Rihm's *Jakob Lenz* (Hamburg State Opera, 1979) broke the ice. Since then, the number of new and interesting works in the field of opera has only grown. Still, these new operas — different as they may seem from one another — feel together strangely displaced from the repertoire as they are widely ignored by institutions, and disdained by general audiences.

Perhaps the one other characteristic these works share is their deference to certain aspects of a set of ideas often referred to as 'postmodernism'. For nearly half a century, the postmodern specter has haunted art, philosophy, and politics as an over- and under-determined catchall for both its champions as

¹⁵ „Man muss in jeder Saison nicht nur die spannendste neue Oper nachspielen,‘ sagte ich zu dem jungen Intendanten, ‚Man muss immer auch ein Meisterwerk des 20. Jahrhunderts aufführen.‘ Der erschrak: ‚Ich will doch mein Publikum nicht vergraulen.‘“ Feuchtner, *Die Oper des 20. Jahrhunderts* (see nt. 7), p. 11.

¹⁶ None of the notorious Darmstadt composers such as Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen or Iannis Xenakis wrote 'operas' — and even those works eventually labelled as such (e.g., Stockhausen's *Licht*) only appear starting in the late 1970s. Those composers actively engaging with the operatic tradition were those on the periphery of the avant-garde such as Bernd Alois Zimmermann, Hans-Werner Henze or Aribert Reimann.

well as its detractors. Of course, the postmodern turn does not account for all contemporary music-theater produced in the German-speaking context; nor can those operas informed by postmodernism be organized into one uniform group. Still there are some general, albeit vulgarized, principles of postmodernism that seem to be reflected in the thinking and the artistic output of many contemporary composers and librettists, especially with regard to narrative conventions, audience identification, and the very possibility of creating meaning.

Each of these postmodern principles represents some form of disavowal. The first rejects a holistic understanding of reality in favor of a ‘fractured’ or ‘schizophrenic’ one.¹⁷ The second principle is — as a consequence of the first — a skepticism toward grand or closed narratives resulting (in part) from the loss of universal heroes, struggles, and goals.¹⁸ (This skepticism has occasioned pastiche-like operas that deploy several musical idioms or ‘styles’ without committing to any one in particular.) The third principle is the shift away from authorial intent toward interpretation as the site where a work’s meaning is produced.¹⁹ And the fourth is the decoupling of material (such as historical musical styles) from its original context whether with regards to its historical moment, social setting, or economic function.²⁰ These principles do not apply universally or to the same extent in every single work, but their general outcome has been the intentional — or at least tolerated — disavowal of concrete meaning.

If we hone in on the specific sociological context of world premieres at major opera houses such as the Deutsche Oper am Rhein or the Vienna State Opera, two distinct modes of ‘postmodern opera dramaturgy’ begin to emerge,

¹⁷ This principle is based on Fredric Jameson’s observation of postmodernism as “pastiche” and “schizophrenia”—pastiche in the sense of “stylistic diversity and heterogeneity” resulting from the loss of faith in “the linguistic norm”, and “schizophrenic” as “the breakdown of the relationship between signifiers” including the lack of a consistent and coherent “I”. Cf. Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society”, in: *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster, Seattle 1983, pp. 111–125, here pp. 113–114.

¹⁸ Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, in: *Theory and History of Literature*, ed. Wlad Godzich and Jochen Schulte-Sasse, vol. 10, Minneapolis 1984, p. xxiv.

¹⁹ Cf. Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author”, in: *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory: A reader*, ed. K.M. Newton, 2nd ed., London 1997, pp. 142–148.

²⁰ Cf. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Unsere breite Gegenwart*, Trans. Frank Born, Frankfurt/Main 2015.

both of which engage with practices of quotation. On the one hand, operas like Anno Schreier's *Schade, dass sie eine Hure war* [*'Tis a Pity She's a Whore*] (Deutsche Oper am Rhein, 2019) deploy 'postmodern' compositional techniques that draw on pre-existing musical material in the service of telling a traditional, closed narrative. On the other hand, operas like Olga Neuwirth's *Orlando* (Vienna State Opera, 2019) use similar techniques with the goal of breaking narratives open, creating a sense of audience dis-identification by fracturing — or in Neuwirth's own words "distorting" ["verzerren"] — the material references.²¹ For us, the critical difference between these two dramaturgical modes lies in the relationship they imagine between history, narrative, and identification — the three aspects of contemporary opera whose relationship our own artistic position aims to rethink.

Interestingly, the resistance to narrative logic in contemporary opera is more apparent in works globally characterized by compositional idioms following the tradition of the classical avant-garde. Their concept of musical material is still largely influenced by the progressive optimism of classical modernism, but at the same time they share postmodernism's concept of a fractured reality — resulting, for example, in dramaturgies of text montage— and its skepticism toward heroes, conflicts, and narrative as such. Helmut Lachenmann's *Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern* has no plot, no characters, and no dramatic situations. When performed, the text is barely intelligible. Lachenmann doesn't even call it an "opera", but rather "music with images, in which seeing comes to itself — as music in which hearing comes to itself."²² This would be an exemplary stance for postmodern opera, were it not for the fact that Lachenmann still has a reasonably clear political agenda, and a point of reference vis-à-vis the public sphere. In *Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern* there is still something at stake. The work is still looking for meaning, trying to have an impact on the world. Today, operas of this kind steer

²¹ Michael Stallknecht, „Inzest und Ehebruch: Man ist begeistert“, in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 17 February 2019; Olga Neuwirth, „Über Orlando, eine fiktive musikalische Biographie“, in: *Orlando*, program booklet, ed. Andreas Láng and Oliver Láng, Vienna: Wiener Staatsoper 2019, pp. 25–39, here p. 26.

²² „Bilder, in denen das Schauen—so wie in der Musik das Hören—,zu sich selbst kommt.“ Helmut Lachenmann, Klaus Zehelein and Hans Thomalla, „Gespräche von Helmut Lachenmann mit Klaus Zehelein und Hans Thomalla“, in: *Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern*, program booklet, Salzburger Festspiele 2002, pp. 20–34, here p. 25.

clear of any explicit statement, political or otherwise. They too reject dramaturgical conventions such as narrative, identification, and action, but they also refuse to commit to any definitive meaning at all.

This disavowal of meaning is not just a feature of contemporary opera's form. It has also appeared as its content, for example, in Beat Furrer and Händl Klaus' *Violetter Schnee* [*Violet Snow*] (Staatsoper Unter den Linden, 2019). Based on Vladimir Sorokin's eponymous novel, *Violetter Schnee* explores the sense of alienation experienced by five people shut indoors during a snowstorm, who have lost the ability to communicate with one another. To capture this state of existential paralysis, Klaus' libretto forgoes any kind of narrative causality or individual psychology. Instead, the libretto presents a text surface of interwoven voices that never achieve unambiguous expression. For instance, in Scene 15 four characters reflect on the absence of any sound except for the falling snow:

NATASCHA	nichts --- höre ich ---
PETER	nichts --- nichts ---
JAN	ich höre --- nichts ---
SILVIA	hört ihr nicht --- hört ihr ---
PETER	ich höre --- nichts ---
JAN	nichts --- ist ---
PETER	zu hören ---
NATASCHA	nichts --- nichts ---
SILVIA	als --- der Schnee ---
JAN	nichts --- als Schn... --- ²³

To be sure, such extreme sparseness is a typical feature of libretto composition. Opera has always benefited from the contrast between the libretto's logocentrism and the referent-less realm of musical expression. In *Violetter Schnee*, however, this semantic economy is unrelenting. Scene 16 continues in the same abstruse, descriptive register:

SILVIA	unser Haus --- ist --- nicht zu sehen --- einsam --- steht es --- ringsum Wälder --- nichts --- ihr schaufelt --- Schnee --- auf dem Dach --- ihr steht --- und schaut --- hört ihr ---
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²³ Händl Klaus, „Violetter Schnee“, in: *Violetter Schnee*, program booklet, ed. Yvonne Gebauer and Roman Reeger, Berlin: Staatsoper Unter den Linden 2019, pp. 72–105, here p. 86.

etwas --- fliegt ---
etwas zieht --- da --- seine Kreise²⁴

Page after page, the libretto attempts to convey the failure of language by reproducing that failure. It stubbornly holds to the same stylistic register, the same mode of representation, always the same, always without difference.

The musical language of *Violetter Schnee*, also primarily characterized by its texture composition, finds itself in a strange alliance with the openness of the libretto's postmodern textures, even though it is clearly derived from a modernist, avant-garde stance. In an interview printed in the program booklet titled "The End can only be Open", both Furrer and Klaus celebrate this "openness" as a kind of optimism, an expression of infinite possibility, a sign of "hope".²⁵ On the one hand, the authors' rejection of semantic meaning could be defended as a clever theatrical transposition of the opera's central topic (e.g., "the language beyond language").²⁶ On the other hand, this approach and its lack of internal difference can be frustrating for audiences as Shirley Apthorp describes in her review for the *Financial Times*. She writes:

Any sense of loss is usually preceded by some form of attachment. Here, we are invited to look on from a position of consummate detachment, so that we can never engage with any sense of fear or regret on behalf of the protagonists. ... The problem with operas that forgo narrative action in favour of a condition of being is that when nothing much happens, we get bored. Who are these people? Why are they here? Do we care?²⁷

Here, Apthorp criticizes the opera for not offering its audience any basis for "attachment"—what we might alternatively call "identification". Specifically, the lack of any kind of recognizable shift from state A to state B, the absence of any kind of difference, transformation, or let alone action, seals the work off from its viewers. What the authors intend as "openness" is experienced by the audience as fundamentally closed — not full of meaning, but void of any.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Beat Furrer qtd. in: „Das Ende kann nur offen sein“, in: *Violetter Schnee*, (see nt. 23), pp. 6–19, here p. 11.

²⁶ Marie Luise Maintz, „Spiel Ohne Grenzen: Beat Furrer's Komposition *Violetter Schnee*“, in: *Violetter Schnee* (see nt. 23), pp. 28–37, here p. 31.

²⁷ Shirley Apthorp, "Violetter Schnee at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden, Berlin – ravishing, beautiful and cold", *Financial Times*, 16 January 2019. <https://www.ft.com/content/30d25d1c-18b7-11e9-b191-175523b59d1d> (accessed: 3 January 2021).

Furrer and Klaus' commitment to "openness" resembles Miroslav Srnka's view on the role of music in his opera *South Pole* (Bavarian State Opera, 2016). However, for Srnka the goal is not to represent meaninglessness, but to create a musical score that is itself meaningless. In the following statement, he describes his compositional practice as a disavowal of "clear-cut determinations" that defers all meaning-making decisions to the stage director.

I understand directing as an art in its own right. For me, writing an opera therefore means to develop an open code that is as general as possible, that never loses sight of this other art form and offers it enough possibilities. Therefore I am very happy about the collaboration with Tom Holloway, the librettist, who is a purely original theater writer. His language opens a lot of contexts behind a semblance of simplicity. But he does not determine the direction in which these contexts should be interpreted or staged. This is ideal material for me, because the music has to be a pre-interpretation of the text. I have to choose, but I try to avoid clear-cut determinations. We tried together to remain as open as possible.²⁸

According to his account, Srnka's music represents an "open code", a referent that points to no actual object. It is, in other words, a 'floating signifier' for the director to invest with his or her own meaning through the creation of images.²⁹ As we see it, by abdicating the responsibility to say something, by leaving the meaning up to the director, a composer does not create an opera that is even polysemic, which would require the presence of at least two concrete meanings. Instead, if the music is written to be "as general as possible", the opera itself is

²⁸ „Ich verstehe Regie als eigenständige Kunst. Eine Oper zu schreiben heißt für mich daher, einen möglichst allgemeinen offenen Code zu entwickeln, der diese weitere Kunstform nie aus den Augen verliert und ihr genügend Möglichkeiten anbietet. Daher bin ich sehr glücklich über die Zusammenarbeit mit Tom Holloway, dem Librettisten, der ein originärer Theaterautor ist. Seine Sprache öffnet hinter einer scheinbaren Einfachheit sehr viele Kontexte. Er bestimmt aber nicht, in welche Richtung man diese Kontexte deuten oder inszenieren soll. Das ist für mich das ideale Material, weil die Musik eine Vor-Interpretation des Textes sein muss. Ich muss auswählen, aber ich versuche, eindeutige Festlegungen zu vermeiden. Wir haben gemeinsam versucht, möglichst offen zu bleiben.“ Miroslav Srnka qtd. in: „Wozu sind wir aufgebrochen“, in: *South Pole*, program booklet, ed. Malte Krasting, Munich: Bavarian State Opera 2016, pp. 258–264, here p. 259.

²⁹ Srnka's abdication of authorial intent closely resembles Walter Benn Michaels' critique of postmodern theory in "The Shape of the Signifier". In this article, Michaels connects the dots from Jacques Derrida to Samuel Huntington to Judith Butler, showing how by replacing authorial intent with subject-position-based interpretation, postmodern theory shifts the basis of political conflicts from questions of collective ideology (materialism) to individual identity (liberalism). In another context, it would be interesting to consider artistic positions such as Srnka's that refuse to engage with their own authorial power as artifacts of neoliberal thought. Walter Benn Michaels, "The Shape of the Signifier", in: *Critical Inquiry*, 27/2 (2001) no. 2, pp. 266–283.

likely to come across to its audience as meaningless. What's more, Srnka's understanding of opera as a collection of discrete elements (i.e., music, text, image, performance) denies our art form's unique intermedial force. Opera is more than the sum of its parts. Its meaning is formed by a process of 'fulguration' whereby the interactions of those parts combine to create something entirely new.³¹

Another 'postmodern' trend in contemporary opera we wish to address is a group of narrative operas that speak to the traditional expectations of an (allegedly) bourgeois audience. Although in the German-speaking context the majority of these works are typically subsumed under the term 'literature opera' ['Literaturoper'], some draw on conventional narrative dramaturgies beyond literature such as film and television. What all of these operas have in common, however—from the 'well-made plays' that are contemporary American opera to Detlev Glanert and, to a certain extent, to Manfred Trojahn—is their fidelity to a dramaturgy of narrative cohesion and identification. These operas have endured as a comparatively popular form of contemporary opera, though still without actually ever being incorporated into the canon.³² Their dramaturgical devices are closed narratives, which appear to neglect postmodernism's recognition of reality's fracturedness. By 'closed' narratives we mean those that present the conflicts of psychologically credible (because seemingly realistic) characters in order to evoke audience identification. These stories purport to be 'true,' to 'tell it like it is,' ignoring the incoherent, schizophrenic reality of our time, and replacing it with a consumable truth. They know, in the Adornian sense, no remainder.

Even when stylistic fracturedness appears on the musical level — namely in the form of postmodern polystylism — it only serves as a facilitator for an overall aesthetic regression. In this way, a musical dramaturgy which was originally created as a form of artistic resistance against the pathos or radical identificatory potential of opera (e.g. John Cage, Mauricio Kagel) has become

³¹ Fulguration is a term coined by Konrad Lorenz to describe the sudden emergence/appearance of new properties/elements in a system that cannot/could not have been predicted from the properties of that system's individual parts. Cf. Konrad Lorenz, *Die Rückseite des Spiegels: Versuch einer Naturgeschichte menschlichen Erkennens*, Munich 1987, p. 49.

³² Aribert Reimann's *Lear* (Bavarian State Opera, 1978) remains one of the few, if not the only example of such a piece entering (halfway) into the canon.

the enabler of the very thing it once opposed. Postmodernism's music-dramaturgical fracturedness is the unpleasant digestive that makes the main course – that is, the closed narrative – consumable for a bourgeois audience uncomfortable with its own desire for affirmation.

Of course, these observations are aesthetic, and make no claim about the political intentions of the authors in question. Nevertheless, this desire for closed narratives, for consumable truths, assumes its real and most threatening form beyond the opera house, beyond the agora, on the other side of the city center – in the parliament in the political populisms of our time.

The connection between unbroken identification and populism is quite evident in contemporary opera in the United States. For nearly twenty years, US-American opera houses have been investing in the development of a national opera canon. The success of this effort is visible in the season brochures of the country's flagship opera houses, almost all of which feature at least one new "American opera". A staple of these new works are plots about 'great Americans' from Walt Whitman to Walt Disney.³³ In this vein, Fort Worth Opera (Texas) commissioned composer David T. Little and (Canadian) librettist Royce Vavrek to create a new opera about John F. Kennedy. *JFK* had its world premiere in 2016, and its European premiere at the Staatstheater Augsburg in 2019. In stark contrast to the warm reception by the US press, many German critics were put off by what they considered to be the opera's sentimental nationalism – a concern much more present in German opera discourse than in the US-American context. Critic Robert Braunmüller of the Munich *Abendzeitung* wrote:

If the composer were to wear a baseball cap in American colors, it would definitely read "Make Opera Great Again". David T. Little's *JFK* is a populist alternative to the European avant-garde of music theater. Premiered in 2016 in Fort Worth, Texas, the opera more or less takes up where Giacomo Puccini left off: the cult of beauty, cantilenas, top notes and the undisguised will to overwhelm the listener.³⁴

³³ For more on nationalism in contemporary American opera see: Amy Stebbins, "Dramaturgical Oper(a)nations" (see nt. 3), pp. 132–136.

³⁴ „Wenn der Komponist ein Käppi in den amerikanischen Farben tragen würde, müsste unbedingt ‚Make Opera great again‘ draufstehen. David T. Littles ‚JFK‘ ist ein populistischer Gegenentwurf gegen die europäische Avantgarde des Musiktheaters. Die 2016 in Fort Worth (Texas) uraufgeführte Oper setzt mehr oder weniger da an, wo Giacomo Puccini aufgehört hat:

Braunmüller's critique points to the seemingly irreconcilable conflict between a 'postmodern' reality and 'story-driven' operas whose aspirations to "beauty" pave the way to reactionary populism. This dichotomy forces audiences to choose between those operas that acknowledge the schizophrenia of the present day and fade into artful meaninglessness, and those operas whose dramaturgical structures provide easy access and thus apparent meaningfulness on the basis of identification and closed narratives, but which deny reality's dialectical complexities and, through ultimately populist simplifications, tell the untruth.

To populists from the Kaczynski's PiS to Trump's GOP, the world has become 'postmodern.' Mediatization has made individual phenomena accessible to an unprecedented degree, while, at the same time, their complex causal relationships are no longer visible.³⁵ Populisms of all kinds in all locations are fighting against this with deceptively straightforward narratives or 'stories'. Not only do these stories appear to explain phenomena like the economic decline of the U.S. Rust Belt or former East Germany, but they also lend themselves to self-encapsulated slogans such as "Restore family values!" (PiS) or "Make America great again!" (GOP). Such simplistic statements provide something that postmodern theater denies: a kind of non-expert 'accessibility'. Our question is what approach to narrative form in opera might make visible the coherent, causal relationships between these fragmented individual phenomena without cutting them off at the roots. How can we think of a politically engaged music theater that integrates postmodernism's epistemological skepticism, but which still fosters an identificatory dialogue with its audience?

beim Kult der Schönheit, bei Kantilenen, Spitzentönen und dem unverstellten Willen zur Überwältigung des Hörers.“ Robert Braunmüller, „John F. Kennedy als Opernheld in ‚JFK‘ von David T. Little“, in: *Abendzeitung*, 25 March 2019, <https://www.abendzeitung-muenchen.de/kultur/buehne/john-f-kennedy-als-opernheld-in-jfk-von-david-t-little-art-466528> (accessed: 5 January 2021).

³⁵ For more on the relationship of mediatization and postmodernism, see: Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, NC 1991, p. 162.

Ambivalent Engagement

One answer to this question, as we see it, lies in opera's constituent and contradictory parts — its intermedial ontology. From Piscator to Pollesch, the German tradition of 'engaged' theater demands the critical distance of the spectator, familiar to most in the form of Brechtian 'distanciation' ['*Verfremdung*']: for the public to assume a critical stance it must distance itself — or 'dis-identify' — from the events represented on the stage. This is the exact opposite of what music achieves. As Walter Benjamin noted nearly a century ago, music is purely identificatory.³⁶ Unlike a text or an image, music's reception does not open itself to unmediated cognitive reflection. It is physics. It is created by a body just as it is received by a body. The sound of music becomes meaningful only when the stress and release of musical motion become the stress and release of the listener. Music is thus a social practice that operates by means of identification.

It is this tension in opera between the competing operations (and potentialities) of identification in music, text, staging, and performance that seems to us infinitely fruitful. In them, we find the vibrant moment that oscillates between critical distance and rapt absorption through a dialectical interplay of opera's constituent parts. We want to seduce the audience into identification through seemingly unbroken musical gestures that then break with the text and scenic representation. For all the necessary deconstruction, political criticism too needs synthesis. It needs to attempt to represent coherence, to make causality possible. Material relationships must become nameable, understandable, and accessible, without being oversimplified. Opera

³⁶ "What theater today is about can be defined more precisely in relation to the stage than to drama. It is about the obliteration of the orchestra pit. The abyss that separates the players from the audience like the dead from the living, the abyss whose silence in drama heightens the sublimity, whose sound in opera heightens the intoxication, this abyss, which of all elements of the stage bears the traces of its sacred origin most indelibly, has become functionless." [„Worum es heute im Theater geht, läßt sich genauer mit Beziehung auf die Bühne als auf das Drama bestimmen. Es geht um die Verschüttung der Orchestra. Der Abgrund, der die Spieler vom Publikum wie die Toten von den Lebendigen scheidet, der Abgrund, dessen Schweigen im Schauspiel die Erhabenheit, dessen Klingen in der Oper den Rausch steigert, dieser Abgrund, der unter allen Elementen der Bühne die Spuren ihres sakralen Ursprungs am unverwischbarsten trägt, ist funktionslos geworden.“] Walter Benjamin, „Was ist das epische Theater [I]: eine Studie zu Brecht“, in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. II.2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt/Main 1977, pp. 519-531, here p. 519.

must remain engaged, but acknowledge the limitations of its own diagnostic power.

In a word, we want to perform an ambivalent engagement by means of opera's intermedial functions. This is where, we believe, the unique potential of contemporary opera lies. The reflexive and intermedial character of opera lends itself to causal narratives that call attention to their own internal contradictions. Opera makes ambivalent engagement possible through its potential as a medium of both identification and critique. Ambivalent engagement knows that in opera, even though the position it takes will ultimately be wrong, it must still take one.

Ambivalent engagement is not a strategy we developed, but a phenomenon we only first noticed in our work after multiple collaborations, one of which we will now share. The following self-analysis is not intended as a 'how-to' for aspirational opera makers, nor is it meant to prove that our practice is 'right'. It is simply an invitation to the reader to better understand the concept in its practical form — not as theory, but as opera. The example we will discuss is *Mauerschau*, an evening-length opera for six singers, an actor, male chorus, and a thirty-piece orchestra commissioned by the Bavarian State Opera, which premiered in 2016 at the Munich Reithalle. The German title translates into English as 'teichoscopia', a Greek staging technique whereby an actor looks out over the audience and describes what he or she sees 'out there'. The Greeks often used teichoscopia to depict murder, war, and other 'unstageable' scenes. At the same time, teichoscopia poses a dilemma in that the information it imparts is always and necessarily mediated. Audience members must blindly trust the speaker, and have no way to verify the information for themselves. In the opera *Mauerschau*, this technique becomes a gateway to explore recent developments in visual technology such as drone warfare and deepfakes, and how these technologies have impacted our ability to distinguish between what is real and what is not.

In order to engage with these topics, we drew on the Greek myth of Penthesilea and her fight against Achilles, her natural enemy and the object of her desire. As is the case with many myths, Penthesilea's tale has multiple, conflicting endings. In one version, Achilles mistakenly kills Penthesilea in

battle, and arranges a glorious funeral for her. In another version, he kills her and then violates her corpse. In Heinrich von Kleist's 1808 dramatic adaptation, it is Penthesilea who kills Achilles, though she has no recollection of her crime. After suffering a breakdown on the battlefield, she refuses to accept her soldiers' account of what she has done. As she descends into despair, the soldiers describe her actions while she performs them on the stage. Here, teichoscopic form becomes dramatic content.

The libretto of *Mauerschau* draws primarily on Kleist's adaptation in combination with historical texts from Ernst Moritz Arndt to Colin Powell, posing the question: how do we know what we know? This epistemological inquiry into truth and its representation was crucial for Kleist's thinking. In 1801, he speculated:

If all people had green glasses instead of eyes, they would have to view the objects they see as green – and they never would be able to determine whether their eye shows them things as they are, or whether the eye adds something that does not belong to them, but to the eye. So is it with reason. We cannot decide whether what we call truth is really truth, or whether it only seems as such to us.³⁷

In *Mauerschau*, this quote served as the point of departure for a series of conceptual associations that became the opera's dramaturgical connective tissue. Kleist's rumination on skepticism, mediation, visual perception, and the color green recalled for us the jade images of television broadcasts of the Gulf War (1991). This brought to mind Colin Powell's 2003 testimony to the UN Security Council about the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq – testimony it was later revealed had been false despite the photographic 'proof' Powell presented. This, in turn, led us to a historical photograph that shows the aftermath of a battle during the Crimean War taken by the British photographer Roger Fenton in 1855. This image appeared on the front page of British newspapers only days after the battle, and is generally considered the first war

³⁷ „Wenn alle Menschen statt der Augen grüne Gläser hätten, so würden sie urteilen müssen, die Gegenstände, welche sie dadurch erblicken, sind grün – und nie würden sie entscheiden können, ob ihr Auge ihnen die Dinge zeigt, wie sie sind, oder ob es nicht etwas zu ihnen hinzutut, was nicht ihnen, sondern dem Auge gehört. So ist es mit dem Verstande. Wir können nicht entscheiden ob das, was wir Wahrheit nennen, wahrhaft Wahrheit ist, oder ob es uns nur so scheint.“ Heinrich von Kleist, „An Wilhelmine von Zenge“, in: *Heinrich von Kleist: Sämtliche Werke und Briefe*, Munich 2000, pp. 630–636, here p. 634.

photograph. Recently, however, it was discovered that the image was a staging, a 'fake'. When Fenton arrived on the battlefield, the cannonballs had fallen into a shadowy ditch, making them impossible to see on the negative (Fig. 1). To better represent the battle that had transpired only hours before, Fenton moved the cannonballs from the ditch onto the street (Fig. 2).



Figure 1: “The Valley of the Shadow of Death” (Roger Fenton) with cannonballs in the ditch.
© bpk / RMN – Grand Palais / Roger Fenton.



Figure 2: “The Valley of the Shadow of Death” (Roger Fenton) with cannonballs moved onto the street. © bpk / adoc-photos.

These materials, taken from seemingly disparate contexts, appear throughout the opera in the libretto (e.g. Kleist's "green glasses"), the musical score (e.g. Morse code and the cannonballs from the Fenton photograph), the set and video design (e.g. the Fenton photograph), the sound design (e.g. Colin Powell's speech), and even the props (e.g. again the cannonballs) – fragments which suggest a whole only in their relationship to one another, in the constellation they collectively form.

In his *Theses on History*, Walter Benjamin uses the figure of the constellation to describe the only truthful representation of the past that a historian can offer.

Thinking involves not only the movement of thoughts but also their zero hour. Where thinking abruptly halts in a constellation overflowing with tensions, there it produces a shock to the same, through which it crystallizes as a monad. The historical materialist approaches a historical object solely and alone where he encounters it as a monad.³⁸

Even if the work of the artist is not to write history, the Benjaminian historian's search for the monadic is comparable to its representation by ambivalent engagement. Like the historian, the artist creates a constellation of 'fragments' or signifiers positioned obliquely to one another other. This constellation may not be able to maintain a permanent hold on truth, but it can for a moment make truth visible, tangible, recognizable. To identify and expose this fleeting truth with the knowledge of its future falsehood is the intention behind our dialectical, sensory methods. Ambivalent engagement generates truth for a single evening.

The libretto of *Mauerschau* is also created out of 'fragments' or, more precisely, quotations, out of which coherent, narrative scenes are formed. Figure 3 shows this phenomenon in the libretto for scenes ten and eleven with the composer's handwritten notes in the margins.

³⁸ „Zum Denken gehört nicht nur die Bewegung der Gedanken sondern ebenso ihre Stillstellung. Wo das Denken in einer von Spannungen gesättigten Konstellation plötzlich einhält, da erteilt es derselben einen Chock, durch den es sich als Monade kristallisiert.“ Walter Benjamin, „Über den Begriff der Geschichte“ in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I.2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Herrmann Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt/Main 1974, pp. 693-704, here pp. 702–703.

As Figure 3 illustrates, in scene ten, Achilles waits for Penthesilea to enter the battlefield, where, according to their agreement, he will feign his defeat. A messenger enters to inform him that she has arrived, but unexpectedly well-armed “with dogs too. And elephants!” Achilles dismisses the messenger’s concern, and exits for battle. The messenger then turns to the two remaining soldiers and asks, “Who started this war?” The soldiers reply that they are not at war, but installing “the conditions for peace and human rights.”

What here appears to be a coherent scene is in truth a collection of quotations by authors ranging from Kleist to Hannes Küpper to Joschka Fischer to Donald Rumsfeld to Heiner Müller. Quotation and pastiche are, of course, recognizable features of postmodern aesthetics, but whereas for postmodernism quotation is said to free language from any context or origin, here the quotation’s history is an essential aspect of the opera’s critical stance. The aesthetic fragmentation created by this pastiche technique in the libretto is then counteracted (or contradicted) by the music, which forms a coherent temporal and harmonic structure that integrates the disparate quotations into a single dramatic situation.

The subsequent scene, ‘Act of Heroism’ [‘Heldentat’], epitomizes the way in which identification can be encouraged or discouraged in order to aesthetically illuminate ethical contradictions within audience’s own desire. The text consists of quotations from three sources, all authored by Kleist: *Penthesilea*, *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg*, and excerpts from a letter Kleist wrote to his lover and partner in suicide, Henriette Vogel. The text from *Prinz Friedrich von Homburg* glorifies the fantasy of a hero’s death as an act of divine transcendence. The text from the letter to Henriette Vogel depicts how Kleist seduced Vogel, and convinced her to sacrifice her life to fulfill his wish to aestheticize his own death as a staged murder-suicide. And as an image, the *mise-en-scène* quotes the most brutal of the original myth’s multiple endings, in which Achilles kills Penthesilea, and subsequently defiles her corpse. The combination of these quotations points to a shared, perverse exaltation of both the classical hero (Achilles/Homburg) and the artistic genius (Kleist). All three ‘heroes’ enlist their narcissistic energy in the subjugation and domination of a woman, of their own bodies, of art, and by extension of their unsuspecting

interlocutors: the audience. In this situation, the music has no option but to deploy its most seductive means without reservation in order to arouse identification with the wrong person: the hero. Against this affirmative musical pathos [[musical excerpt](#)], the staging presents a contrasting image of violence, in which Achilles stands in a battlefield of slaughtered Penthesilea corpses. As a National Socialist 'Lichtdom' gradually materializes around the scene, the image becomes an unmistakable reference to fascist visual culture, all the while gently buoyed by the lulling voice of a lyric baritone singing the abovementioned constellation of historical texts.

Of course, these methods are not exactly original. Opera directors frequently stage images that contradict the music, typically as a way to distance themselves from the original libretto or score. What is perhaps unique to our approach — or what is, at least, less common — is that here the composer wrote the aria in question on the basis of this particular staging. That is to say, he abdicated complete control over the meaning of the scene, and intended the music to figure as one part of an intermedial signifier of text, music, image, and performance. From a phenomenological perspective, the opera's act of critique is not performed by the *mise-en-scène* alone, as is the case with so-called 'Regietheater'. Instead, here the critique emerges out of the interplay of text, music, and staging. Moreover, the (collective) authorial intent of the scene is only legible in the context of its performance and simultaneous reception. This potential for meaning created beyond the individual author and which cannot be located in either the libretto, the score or the *mise-en-scène* alone is, we believe, a potential that is unique to opera, and an uncharted horizon we are excited to explore further in future collaborations.

Conclusion

In this article, we have offered an overview of the impasse between contemporary opera's creators and its audience particularly as concerns identification and narrative. Furthermore, we proposed ambivalent engagement as a practice that accommodates both the audience's desire to identify with a work, as well as the artists' commitment to truthfully represent the fractured

reality we inhabit. Regardless of whether or not the reader agrees with our position, we maintain that the issues raised in this article are more pressing than ever. Just as the 1950s and 60s marked the age of Germany's opera houses' 'restoration', today marks the age of their 'renovation'. Nearly eight decades after the end of World War II, Germany's public theaters have fallen into disrepair. From Berlin to Cologne to Stuttgart, hundreds of millions of public euros are being pumped into large-scale building projects. Unfortunately, as far as we know, none of these initiatives has consulted with composers, librettists or other artists who might eventually create new works for these new venues. In fact, one has to wonder if this period of renovation isn't on a course to reenact the failed restoration condemned by Pierre Boulez over half a century ago.

And yet, perhaps the critique of the opera house as a 'museum' is no longer the most fitting metaphor. Maybe today it is actually a graveyard. Once a mainstay of the city center, graveyards offered sites for individuals, families, and friends to gather. At the time, it was believed that the deceased carried on as spirits, actively participating in the everyday dealings of the living. In this way, a visit to the graveyard was not necessarily an occasion to reflect on the past, but an opportunity to reflect on time and space in general. This is why Foucault considered the graveyard one of the most paradigmatic of all heterotopias, a distinction he also conferred on the theater, or opera house. Once it was discovered, however, that graveyards are also sites of contagion, they were removed from the city center, and relocated to the periphery.³⁹ Today, opera houses in cities such as Frankfurt and Dusseldorf also face the distinct possibility of being moved out of the city center. A valid and effective response to this can only lie in institutions and artists engaging with their audiences as emancipated and necessary participants in the creation of opera's meaning. Then, and only then, can contemporary opera be truly of its own time. Then, and only then, can it be truly 'contemporary'.

³⁹ Cf. Michel Foucault, "Des espaces autres", Lecture, Tunisia, 14 March 1967, in: *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5 (1984), p. 46-49, here 48.