

# Reinventing and Relocating Opera

## Digital Creativity and Opera Heritage in the Intermedia Project by Davide Livermore and D-Wok

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From the systematic hybridization of imagery so as to stage reworking through digital technologies, the path of reinvention of operatic heritage carried out by Davide Livermore's direction and D-Wok's video and virtual design appears today as an ecosystem project requiring the overcoming of boundaries of theatrical space itself.

From *Ciro in Babilonia* at Rossini Opera Festival (2012) to *Don Pasquale* at La Scala (2018); from *Attila* (2018) to *Macbeth* (2021), again at La Scala; from *Aida* at Sydney Opera House (2018) to *Aida* at Teatro dell'Opera di Roma (2023), the project emerging is one of a progressive experimentation of intermedia expansion of opera boundaries, with the intention of updating its cultural legacy and making it contemporary.

Within this process, through the increasing, as well as conscious, use of digital technologies, it has been possible to relocate almost naturally the opera in the cross-television space of *A Riveder le Stelle* (2020), shot and produced during lockdown. Similarly, the cinematographic project of *The Opera!* has been put in place, involving a production summoning Kolossal virtual reality to "launch" the memory of opera into the future.

Through specific case analyses (*Attila*, *Tosca*, *A Riveder le Stelle*, *Macbeth*, *Aida* and the movie *The Opera!*), this article will explore the question of the construction of the intermedia project by Livermore/D-Wok, focusing on the use of new technologies and the need to open up to different media to update contemporary opera.

### 1. *Opera in the Contemporary Mediascape*

Opera direction is today a specific place of experimentation for complex staging and visual techniques. Language and technology intersections transform the operatic show in a multimedia experience that is able to

<sup>1</sup> This article was jointly conceived by both authors: Giulia Carluccio wrote section 1, Stefania Rimini wrote section 2, and together, the authors wrote section 3.

redefine and problematize the idea itself of musical dramaturgy, of the staged space, and of its direction.

Furthermore, the remediation of operatic repertoire through digital technologies is a crucial phenomenon to understand not only the ways and meanings of the staging of lyrical texts but also to think about the contemporary multimedia scene, the converging of experiences that arts, shows and performance share today on the background of a constantly moving mediascape.<sup>2</sup> The case of Davide Livermore and D-Wok, which we will examine in this article, is a continuation of the work started at the conference, “Re-Directing. La regia nello spettacolo del XXI secolo” (held at Lecce in October 2019), and developed further on following occasions. To expand our study, we are also preparing a monograph to be published soon.<sup>3</sup>

The assumption we start our argument from is that, on the one hand, “an Art Form consisting of a literary text, a dramatic stage performance, and music should be studied in all its multimedia and ‘multimediated’ dimensions” (Hutcheon, 2006, 802), and, on the other hand, that “the history of opera experiments is old as the form itself, which evolved, one might say, as a form of ongoing experiments from its beginning” (Early, 2014, 234).

If it is true that opera by nature is an experimental art form, it is worth examining the reinvention of the opera stage as a result of the tools of new media and of its transmedia. The Livermore/D-Wok ecosystem, as we define it, can indeed serve as a reference of such reinvention of staging.

This question requires us, on one hand, to observe opera remediation processes and to insert them in the broader theoretical frame of theater performance studies – more specifically, within the works, such as that of Chapple and Kattenbelt and others, on various phenomena of theater

<sup>2</sup> This article is part of a project that has been going on for several years. “Opera Project, an interdisciplinary workshop on forms and languages of contemporary opera direction” was presented for the first time in 2019 at the Conference “Re-directing” in Lecce. The intent was to create an interdisciplinary observatory on contemporary opera as a space for multimedia exchanges and elaboration. Opera direction is today a specific place of experimentation with regard to complex staging and visual techniques that transform the operatic show into a multimedia experience that redefines and problematizes musical dramaturgy, staged space, and its direction. The aim of our project is to encourage an interdisciplinary reflection that gathers scholars from various disciplinary field, in the form of a laboratory open to challenges and comparisons with artists and professionals.

<sup>3</sup> Carluccio and Rimini 2020a; Carluccio and Rimini 2020b; Carluccio and Rimini 2023.

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mediatization. On the other hand, it is equally important to adopt a medial and transmedial approach to opera history,

as is increasingly asserted by an academic perspective within opera studies.

As Morris highlights, “[I]n common with other forms of theatre, opera now embraces and mobilizes both new and traditional media: live voices and records sounds, stage actors and screen counterparts, sung lyrics and projected text, auditorium and home theatre” (Morris 2012, 112).

It is equally worth mentioning, with Chapple and Kattenbelt,

[T]he theatre has become a hypermedium and home to all. It provides a space where the art forms of theatre, opera and dance meet, interact and integrate with the media of cinema, television, video and the new technologies; creating profusions of texts, inter-texts, inter-media and space in-between. It is in the intersection and the space in-between the intersections that we locate intermediality. (Chapple and Kattenbelt 2006, 24)

We might add, with Havelková as further reference:

[T]he concept of hypermediacy serves as the starting point for an enquiry into contemporary relationships between opera and media. It allow[s us] to situate opera on both stage and screen within the larger context of contemporary media practices, and particularly those that play up the multiplicity, awareness, and enjoyment of media. I am concerned with how opera’s engagement with media fits into the general framework of today’s audiovisual culture, arguably dominated by digital technologies. (Havelková 2021, 1)

Because we take for granted here a broader theoretical frame of reference, we just intend to highlight how today’s tendencies toward grafting multimedia and intermedia grafting, which are useful in expanding the borders of the staged space and in revising the relationship between settings and formats, through the use of hybridizations and transmigrations. Such trends have accelerated recently as a result of the pandemic, pushing even further toward a new dimension of opera itself that is not only hypermedial, but also, as we will see, transmedial.

Moreover, this push toward transmedial practices of direction and production today embraces more broadly the whole world of performance and media, which seems to be moving in a direction in which convergence culture, narrative ecosystems and other phenomena related to transmedia storytelling, as studied by Jenkins, are grafted into development of technologies and digital arts. This leads to a discussion of transmedia direc-

tors who have made their mark on the fields of artistry, industry and new audiovisual aesthetics, as highlighted by Carol Vernallis, Hally Rogers and Lisa Perrott in their recent work. (Vernallis, Rogers, and Perrott 2020).

## 2. *Livermore/D-Wok Ecosystem*

Within this context, Livermore's career in directing, in particular, since his collaboration with D-Wok and Paolo Gep Cucco for the digital stage, is undoubtedly extremely interesting. One of the reasons is the growing transmedial development that has led, after years of experimentation, to what we had previously defined as "polytechnic direction." This way of directing calls for other media to play a role within opera, as well as exporting opera toward other media forms, in a comprehensive, ecosystemic perspective.

It is not a new development that Livermore has always been keen on the necessity of opera to confront contemporaneity and contemporary languages. Let's look at what Davide Livermore himself said in 2008, when staging *Aci, Galatea, e Polifemo* at the Teatro Regio in Turin:

Of course, opera now has to stand up to a century of cinema history, as well as with contemporary art and design. Shall we talk about videoclips? There we find a spectacular formal model for eighteenth-century opera... But this can be understood only if we have two tools at our disposal: one, is great respect for the score; the other, is to have one's feet well grounded in today's world, to know and master the languages of contemporaneity. (Cosso 2019, 31)

Surely, the collaboration with D-Wok, started in 2012 with *Ciro in Babilonia* for the Rossini Opera Festival in Pesaro, has allowed for a full experimentation with the languages of contemporaneity. It has developed a hypermedial scene that, in the fullest and most *joyeux* appropriation of digital resources, has led not only to the attainment of a specific "visual seductivity," as Graziella Seminara has suggested, using Julia Sirmons's notion (Seminara 2022). Further, it has also made it possible to roam among different imageries, first of all the cinematic one, going beyond postmodern quotationism and calling for engaging an intermedial and transmedial logic that leads to the creation of an ecosystem. In such an ecosystem, echoes often evoke one opera in another, as is the case in the recurring reference to *Cabiria* in both *Ciro in Babilonia* and the recent *Aida* at Teatro Costanzi in Rome. We also see this in the Monteverdian muse opening *A Riveder le Stelle*, the hybrid operatic-television production of 2020, on which Livermore present in the movie project *The Opera!*, currently in post-production.

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An ecosystemic perspective with a trend toward a sort of transmedial macro-opera which uses at different stages various media, languages, effects and textualities. Livermore's profile itself, as theater director, scenographer, costume designer, anchorman, art director, light designer, actor and teacher, writer, singer, opera director and now screenwriter and film director), is testimony of a fluid art-making process without boundaries, which passes readily from opera to classical theater, as demonstrated by the staging realized at the ancient theatre of Syracuse.<sup>4</sup>

In each project carried out by Livermore and D-Wok, the mobilization of expressive linguistic resources and fluid technologies, as well as the use of texts and visual quotes, leads to the overcoming of the work's boundaries. In this way, each work is related to those following, as well as the foregoing ones, in an overall, extensive digging into a specific text. Equally, the work is also promotes a hypertextual openness towards legacy and cultural heritage of the history of theater and entertainment in all its forms – such as opera, cinema, theater, and television – pushing toward contemporaneity.

These efforts can be described as a “back to the future” operation, as well demonstrated by the productions at La Scala in Milan (*Attila*, *Tosca*, *A Riveder le Stelle*, and *Macbeth*, from 2018 to 2021), as well as by the two productions of *Aida* 2018 in Sydney, Australia, with a fully digital setting, and in 2023 in Rome. Looking at these stagings, where a strong technological input and intermedial vocation have contributed to the signature Livermore/D-Wok style, we can notice their aim to redefine the format itself of “opera,” through echoes that are not just simple quotes but that activate hybrid medial dynamics, making thus opera “the medium of the media,” the art form that is the most contemporary and at the same time rich in cultural heritage.

On an earlier occasion, we had the opportunity to analyze *Attila*, by reconstructing the hypermedial nature of its creation through its fabric of digital effects and cinematic echoes that fostered a particular transmedial project. Its off-stage prologue / trailer, which precedes the opera itself, reveals a logic of a clearly transmedial storytelling. The prologue resembles a trailer that clearly testifies to Livermore's obsession / fascination with

<sup>4</sup> Davide Livermore directed *Elena* for the fifty-fifth season of Inda Foundation in 2019. Three years later, in 2022, he staged *Agamemnone* for the fifty-seventh season and then completed the Trilogy of Aeschylus in 2023 with *Coefore* and *Eumenidi*. Cf. Pernice 2021; Rimini 2019.

cinema, which he shares with D-Wok, and which is often at the basis of his/their concepts of *mise en scène*.

Paolo Gep Cucco, in an interview with us, says: “Every opera created with Davide started from a cinematographic input, starting from the first collaboration for *Ciro in Babilonia* by Rossini, which took inspiration from *Cabiria* and other silent movies of the Kolossal tradition” (Cucco 2020-2023).

Yet if this cinematic image nourishes, both at a narrative and at a cultural level, Livermore’s work, most innovative element is precisely the remediation of the cinematic language for a new scenic dimension, as well as the profound belief in analogy between form and structure, as often repeated by the director himself (as for the videoclip and eighteenth-century opera example, already cited). For instance, in the 2019 production of *Tosca*, it is not the various references and quotes that are remarkable, but rather the use of technologies acting as a sort of movie camera within the scenic space, with long takes, zooms in, still images, to the extraordinary technological effect à la Hitchcock of Tosca’s body being swallowed up in a whirl of light in the finale.

Once again Cucco explains: “[F]rom *Tosca* onwards, being open to other experiences is increasingly important, for a reinvented opera which in turn generates other formats across different media, cinema, television, etc.” (Cucco 2020-2023).

If indeed the experience of *Tosca* seems to have generated the subsequent hybrid format of *A Riveder le Stelle* of 2020, the production of *Tosca* represents a decisive step in this process of shifting borders and transmediation. With regard to *A Riveder le Stelle*, which was already analyzed in a previous conference in Bergen, Norway,<sup>5</sup> it is useful to recall here how the complex procedure as achieved during lockdown, with the theater itself closed to the public, led to a television show that was not a filmed version of the opera but rather about the direction of a production that resulted from the reinvention and multiplication of theatrical space. This, in turn, becomes available for further direction, the televised one, that relocates the experience as offered by Livermore and his team. Here we can see manifest the intent to challenge the space and the meaning of theatrical space, starting from the most iconic and symbolic spaces and places of the opera world, La Scala, and even more so, on the poignant day of the season’s opening. In a certain way, the pandemic lockdown has allowed the opening of the new forms of experimentation through which Livermore

<sup>5</sup> The article, Carluccio and Rimini 2024, traces the development of this process.

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retrieves his own work (even literally, with fragments of previous scenes). Livermore does this by broadening the questions related to his previous works and by expanding its multiple meanings, not through *an* opera, but through an ensemble of fragments of operas and other kinds of performance (such as reading and reciting parts), which will eventually form a set to be staged in the television space.

It is surely worth of noticing, in this process of hypermedial reconfiguration of the operatic space, not only the encounter of multiple expressive typologies but also of the catalogue effect as sprung from the exploitation of various styles and iconographies in different scenes.

More broadly, it can be stated that today the very mobilization of different technologies and languages that opera borrows from and shares with other artistic experiences intensifies and motivates trends such as iconographic rehabilitations and quotations (first and foremost from the cinema sphere) and the use of references from the general cultural heritage. It thus produces an “archive-effect,” or rather a “museum-effect,” that renders opera today *musealization*, an archeological experience in itself. This multimedia and transmedial “musealization” pushes the traditional borders and eventually possesses its own transformative and generative strength.

### 3. *Beyond Opera Boundaries*

From the systematic hybridization of imagery to reworking the stage through digital technologies, the reinvention of operatic heritage carried out by Davide Livermore’s direction and D-Wok’s video and virtual design appears today as an ecosystem project requiring the overcoming of boundaries of theatrical space itself. The Livermore case is surely a paradigmatic one, representing a phenomenon where multimedia effects and the convergence of different languages go hand in hand with the staging of fragments of artworks (mostly cinema, as mentioned earlier), using found footage effects, musealization, and transmedial openness.

What emerges is a process of progressive experimentation of intermedia and transmedia expansion of opera’s boundaries, with the intention of updating its cultural legacy and making it contemporary.

Within this process, through the increasing, as well as conscious, use of digital technologies, it has been possible to *relocate*, almost naturally, opera in the cross-television space of *A Riveder le Stelle* and to create the cinematographic project of *The Opera!*, involving the production by means of virtual reality summoning Kolossal to “launch” the memory of opera into the future.

Starting from the show *The Opera*, another hybrid experiment realized in 2017 for the Royal Opera House Muscat, Livermore and Cucco created a project for a film, *The Opera!*, of which they then wrote the script. Describing the theatrical piece, *The Opera*, Cucco says, “[W]e have mixed everything, opera and musical, prose and electronic music, video mapping and acrobatics, updating to modern expressive codes the great spectacular tradition of the Italian opera” (Cucco 2020-2023). Livermore is the director, between real-life takes and virtual reality, with Caterina Murino and Vincent Cassel, in an international super-production. It starts from the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, transposed into contemporaneity, to traverse opera, and the history of opera, and to reinvent it once again, radically “relocating” it further, between the rehabilitation (of one’s own work and not only one’s own work) and bold technological experimentation.

Yet the evolution itself is more or less straightforward, as Cucco tells us:

[T]he film, *The Opera!*, currently in its production phase, starts from the experimental turning point of the stagings created for the four openings at La Scala. It is itself a natural turning point for further evolution of the opera scene through cinema...*The Opera!* puts everything together, cinema with opera, into opera, opera history, starting from the previous show created for the Oman theatre, which, in the end, was a sort of musical. It starts at Monteverdi’s *Orfeo*, at the roots of opera... With *The Opera!* we wanted to translate opera into cinema, which has always been a part of the way we work, the fact that we conceive opera in a cinematographic way, to give it back to cinema with a new language, with virtual reality, in order to make opera ever more contemporary. (Cucco 2020-2023)

This experiment means going beyond opera, yet back to opera, after exploring and testing its borders, in a hypermedial and transmedial sense, drawing on the fluidity of digital technologies that at a certain point make virtual the very distinctions between media, in a permeation that within contemporary opera makes it more resounding and inventive in comparison with other experiences of medial performance.

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