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# OPERA AND FILM – AN UNLIKELY MARRIAGE

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**SUMMARY.** The aim of the following study is to analyze the manner in which opera music influenced film and became a crucial building block of certain cinematic narratives, in such films as Jonathan Demme's *Philadephia* (USA, 1993), Luc Besson's *The Fifth Element* (France, 1997) and Liliana Cavani's *Il portiere di note / The Night Porter* (Italy, 1974). By revealing the correspondence between these audiovisual mediums and examining the common language used by them we intent to reveal numerous facets of this symbiotic relationship, all put in the service of lending meaning to the film, thus making the viewer's escapist adventure truly unique.

**Keywords:** opera, film, music, narrative, correspondence, meaning, audiovisual medium.

Nowadays, the common perception of people regarding opera is that it is an inaccessible art form, pertaining to high culture and that one necessarily has to be an 'elitist' and possess 'refined taste' in order to be able to enjoy it. Still, it is interesting to observe that this 'elitist art form' is often associated with one of the most popular as well as accessible mediums for today's mass-culture phenomenon – film. The symbiotic relationship between the two comes naturally and is due to the audiovisual features of both art forms. Thus, however unlikely, opera – or at least certain fragments of opera works, used wisely within the context of the film-plot – has contributed to the great success of mainstream Hollywood movies, but also films of great importance in the field of film studies, such as Jonathan Demme's *Philadelphia* (1993), Luc Besson's *The Fifth Element* (1997) or Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972), just to name a few.

One might be tempted to ask: why should opera music be featured in film at all? Why should a director decide to combine these two different mediums and to what purpose? The answer is a rather simple one, for it is

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enough to take into account the impact music – one might argue that classical music and opera especially – has on the human psyche. On the other hand, film – being an imaginative art form – also has the power of engaging viewers on an emotional level, while stimulating them intellectually, not unlike a unique opera performance. Thus, the marriage of the two seems to be not only appropriate, but even desired, for it results in a collaborative effort to heighten the effect a certain film has on its audience.

According to musicologist Marcia J. Citron "*opera can reveal something fundamental about a film, and film can do the same for an opera*".[2] By having a major influence upon the narrative, opera helps shape the character of a film and affects the end result of the cinematic process as well as the manner in which the film is received by audiences.[3] Hence, not only the symbiosis of opera and film, but also the way in which opera 'inhabits' certain movie scenes, impacts the film plot, and offers meaning to the film is crucial.

Our intention is to reveal the role of opera music and its impact on the film narrative within the following three works: Jonathan Demme's *Philadephia* (USA, 1993), Luc Besson's *The Fifth Element* (France, 1997) and Liliana Cavani's *Il portiere di notte/The Night Porter* (Italy, 1974).

It would be rather foolish to assert that one could propose a unitary approach by which the relationship between opera music and film could be analyzed, for each movie represents a unique world of elements in which every single one – opera excerpts included – has a particular role to play. This is the reason why we would propose to analyze the scenes relevant for this paper – those that are based on the interaction of opera and film – in the particular context of each of the three aforementioned films.

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*Philadelphia*, Jonathan Demme's drama, released in 1993, was one of the first mainstream Hollywood films that openly acknowledged the controversial issues of homosexuality and homophobia, and explicitly revealed the shame, stigma and discrimination of people infected with HIV/AIDS. The impact of the film was significant. Tom Hanks, the actor who portrayed the main protagonist Andrew Beckett, the HIV infected gay attorney, received an Academy Award for Best Actor, while Bruce Springteen's song - *Streets of Philadelphia* - received the Academy Award for Best Original Song.

The film focuses on the manner in which people infected with HIV/AIDS are discriminated at their workplace. It tells the story of Andrew

[2] Marcia J. Citron: *When Opera Meets Film*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 1.
[3] Ibidem, p. 2

Beckett, who – although the senior associate at the largest corporate law firm in Philadelphia – was fired from his job, because one of the firm's partners noticed a small lesion on Beckett's forehead, recognizing it as a symptom of the terrible disease. Beckett sues the firm and with the help of attorney Joe Miller, played by Denzel Washington, in the end proves that his firing was due to discrimination and not to the incompetence previously claimed by his former employers.

The movie's most powerful scene – and the climax of the film itself, in our opinion - is the one in which the two main protagonists, Andrew Beckett and Joe Miller, sit down at Beckett's house after a party to discuss his testimony scheduled for the following day. Miller is an admittedly homophobic African-American attorney, who initially declined Beckett's request to represent him in the trial. During that time, the common perception regarding this illness was based on the prejudice that only 'deviants' could be affected by it because of their lifestyles, so it is easy to understand why even Miller – a law-school graduate - went to see his doctor after meeting Beckett, because he feared he could have been infected with HIV/AIDS just by shaking his hand. The scene itself starts after a costume party at Beckett's house, also attended by Miller and his wife. Still visibly shocked by the details of what he witnessed regarding Beckett's lifestyle, Miller sits down to go over Beckett's testimony.[4] Beckett acknowledges Miller's efforts to overcome his own prejudices and congratulates him for attending his first 'risqué party'. In order to defend himself and his position, Miller responds by depicting the manner in which gay people were (and in some places in the world still are) perceived by society, thus voicing the common prejudices of the average American regarding "homosexuality" or "alternate lifestyles", which serve as a source of fear and hatred directed towards them: "as a kid, you are taught that queers are funny, queers are weird; queers dress up like their mother, they are afraid to fight, they are danger to little kids, and that all they want to do is to get into your pants".

Beckett, who during the trial has underwent chemotherapy, is noticeably exhausted after the party, and is reluctant to focus on the task at hand. Instead, while opera music is heard in the background, his mind wanders off as he poses a few rather interesting questions to his lawyer: "Miller, do you ever pray?" and "What do you pray for?"... And suddenly, just by asking these two seemingly simple questions, the main protagonist closes the gap between him and his lawyer, for although they could not be more different from the standpoint of their origins and 'lifestyles' – as in

[4] Ian Conrich, Estella Tincknell (eds.): *Film's Musical Moments*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2006, p. 159.

race, color, class, sexual orientation, etc. –, the answer to these questions reveal certain essential common traits of human beings – the fact that they pray for the health and happiness of people they care for, and that they will all – sooner or later – face death, the ultimate leveler... The opera music suddenly gets louder, as the solo cello introduces *La mamma morta*, Maddalena's aria from Umberto Giordano's opera *Andrea Chenier*. During the aria Andrew Beckett seems to get transfigured by the opera fragment, as he is almost reliving Maddalena's memory, while at the same time emotionally conveying the message of the aria to Miller. The great impact of this diegetic music comes from the interpretation given by the main protagonist himself, who not only translates almost verbatim the Italian libretto of the aria, but also 'lives' it in a surreal way. Interestingly and with great cinematic craftsmanship, we might add, everything within the scene changes, so that the viewer cannot help but be drawn into this surreal world, where it would seem that time and space have lost their normal parameters.

Suddenly, the components of *mise-en-scène* take center stage and help create the wanted effect. Beckett's face is unexpectedly shot with a high angle close-up as we see him from above in constant slow movement, suggesting the inner turmoil he goes through during his unique experience. The lighting changes also, but this will be a multiple-fold change. As he walks around in the room holding his portable intravenous therapy pole, he explains Maddalena's story, who remembers the time when during the French Revolution the mob burnt down her house, and the sorrow and despair she felt knowing that she was all alone in the world, while there was only hunger and misery around her.[5] During this sad portrayal of the historic atmosphere, the grey, almost cold lighting also conveys the misery depicted. The parallel of the story and the despair of Beckett's situation is continued also externally with the help of the composition, camera as well as figure movement and placement. The shot angle which changes from eye-level shot to a high-angle close-up tries to emphasize Beckett's trance-like state, in which he entered as soon as the aria began. Maddalena's story continues on a more hopeful note, for she talks about her faithful nurse, Bersi, who took care of her when she was ill. The hopeful image is mirrored not only within the string section of the musical material, but also in the lighting, for Beckett's face is slowly lit with a warmer shade of pink, only to be dimmed again almost completely when – not unlike a revelation -, Maddalena talks about a voice full of harmony that spoke to her. Interestingly, the viewer is led to believe – both from an audio standpoint, by the manner

[5] Burton D. Fisher (ed.): *Andrea Chénier – Opera Journeys Mini Guide Series*, Opera Journeys Publishing, 2002, p. 4.

of interpretation of Maria Callas, as well as a visual one, based on the mimicry of Tom Hanks – that the voice Maddalena was referring to was of divine origin. This voice appears and speaks to Maddalena in her hour of despair as it encourages her to live, to hope and to love. The tension built along the scene has reached its climax, as everything unfolds into a sort of fluid emotion, unleashing the all-consuming power of love. From a visual standpoint, it is quite fascinating the manner in which this message was reinforced: at the moment when Beckett makes reference to the will to live and ability to feel love, the lighting in the entire room changes again, as it seems to be a very powerful pulsating reddish light, that apparently would come from the reflection of the fire burning in the fireplace. The color red, however, especially associated with life and love suggests in our view blood as it travels through our bodies; as in the 'life' that literally runs through our veins.

The frame narration ends at the same time the aria does, as both Beckett and Miller are 'dropped' back into reality. However, the impact of the scene and the effect of the opera excerpt does not end there, for from a diegetic music – heard by both male leads in the same time – the aria becomes non-diegetic, as it is used as a soundtrack after Miller leaves Beckett's apartment and goes home to hold his new-born baby and hug and kiss his wife.

Our argument regarding this scene would be that through music – in this case opera music – the two characters have discovered certain values, which are universal. By invoking the traits common to all people, intrinsic to human nature itself, namely hope, love, faith, people can more easily overcome the differences that divide them, and perhaps prejudice and discrimination would eventually become a thing of the past.

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The second operatic scene analysis within a movie will be based on Luc Besson's 1997 science fiction film *The Fifth Element*. Although it is hard to imagine that opera music and the realm of science fiction would have anything in common, it is somewhat comforting – for opera fans, at least – to know that one might be able to listen to opera music also in the futuristic 23rd century, as in the time the movie plot takes place. While the characters are all dressed in ultramodern Jean-Paul Gaultier costumes and the film is dripping with computer-generated imagery, the plot itself is in fact a simple one, of good versus evil. In short, the lead male protagonist – Maj. Corben Dallas, played by Bruce Willis – has to stop the Great Evil from exterminating all humanity with the help of Leeloo, the "Fifth Element", played by Milla Jovovich. The two have to travel to a luxury cruise in space, where they would meet the opera singer Diva Plavalaguna, who was

entrusted with the four mystical elements that together with the fifth one would bring about the salvation of the entire human race.

It is quite interesting that a great part of the movie – more than half of the 180 minutes, actually - deals with establishing the characters and their motivations and that the explicit physical conflict between good and evil does not unfold overtly until the concert of the Diva. The opera insert is used here to build tension and let the audience know that a crucial scene will take place. The Diva's concert scene has two parts in our view: the first, where we see mostly the Diva singing the aria "*Il dolce suono*", from Gaetano Donizetti's opera *Lucia di Lammermoore*,[6] and the second part, where she sings a more energetic, up-beat music in the same concert hall.

The first segment of the concert would in fact represent the hallucinatory state Lucia had succumbed to after murdering her husband. However, the Diva uses this particular atmosphere to convey a different situation. The sense of impending doom is felt by her, for she knows that both Leeloo and Corben are in great danger. She tries to express this with the aria. Lucia, in her madness, hears the voice of her beloved Edgardo, and sees him as a ghost that comes to her, takes her before the altar and vows his love for her. For the Diva, this 'phantom' will be the menace of evil approaching. The way in which the scene is cut is most interesting. Although it starts out with the Diva singing with her ethereal voice, mesmerizing the audience, as the music becomes faster in tempo and more agitated, depicting Lucia's confusion, the scene of the Diva singing is cross-cut with scenes happening behind the stage, where Leeloo is fighting with the Mangalores who want to take the four elements from the Diva's room. This tries to suggest that the Diva has a special connection with Leeloo and senses the suffering that is going to take place backstage.

From the standpoint of imagery we believe one backdrop in particular should be emphasized – the background of the Diva as she commences to sing is an image of a light-blue planet slowly moving. The lyrical style of this part of the aria and the slow movement of the planet – showed as if it were 'outside the window' – suggests a sense of calmness, peaceful harmony.

[6] Lucia is forced by her brother to marry a man she does not love. When she refuses, her brother fabricates evidence, which proves that Lucia's love, Edgardo, has planned to marry another woman. Confronted with the evidence, Lucia finally agrees to go through the wedding with Lord Arthur. As they sign the marriage certificate, Edgardo appears, accusing Lucia of being unfaithful and curses her entire family. After the newly wedded couple retire for the night, Lucia becomes insane and murders her husband. The aria *"Il dolce suono*" is sang by her as she hallucinates in a state of delirium of her beloved Edgardo and of their marriage. - Burton D. Fisher (ed.): *Lucia di Lammermoore – Opera Journeys Mini Guide Series*, Opera Journeys Publishing, 2002, p. 2.

Nevertheless, this would be only a temporary feel, for the audience soon will come to realize it had been only the calm before the storm. Things rapidly unfold, and for the second part of the scene we witness a violent turn, both in music and action. An energetic electronic-type opera music which has a very lively beat takes over for the opera excerpt,[7] while instead of a calming background we see action-packed fighting going on backstage. Thus, the transition from 'non-action' to action has been made without the use of clever dialogue or 23rd century car-chases. This scene represents a crucial turning point of the plot, making the power of the Fifth Element obvious and contributing to the further escalation of the physical clash between the multiple sides of the conflict.

In contrast with the previous film analyzed, where the opera fragment helped build the climax of the entire narrative, in *The Fifth Element* we see how opera has been used to make the transition between two important parts of the movie. It had the role of providing meaning and subtext to the plot by way of metaphors.

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The third and final film analyzed is Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter*. The Italian film released in 1974 is set in Vienna, 1957, and deals with the aftermath of World War II, namely the way in which certain former members of the Third Reich have escaped prosecution by eliminating people and evidences which could incriminate them, and living secluded lives out of the spotlight. The main protagonist, Max (portrayed by Dirk Bogarde), is a former member of the Third Reich and works as the night porter of a hotel. In the initial scenes of the film, we see him meeting with other former Nazi officers to discuss his 'trial', as in to analyze his past and find out if there were still people who could turn him in to the police for the crimes he committed during World War II. Max seems reluctant to obey to the scrutiny and expresses anger toward the group for not leaving him to "live like a church mouse". In the meantime, just as they prepare for the 'trial', the only witness who could possibly testify against Max and his crimes – for she herself was a prisoner during the war - walks into the hotel, checking into a room with her husband. Max and Lucia both recognize each other instantly and, for a moment, the audience feels something catastrophic will happen, and she will blow Max's cover and reveal his true identity. We are kept in suspense for several minutes, not knowing where this all will lead. It is quite obvious – not only by her own physical reactions but also by the flashbacks she experiences - that Lucia is afraid of him and is haunted by his image. However, it is not until the opera scene that we find out that

[7] Paul Tonks: *Film Music*, Great Britain, Cox & Wyman, 2003, p. 83.

they have a shared history beyond that of prisoner and captor. We soon find out that they had a mutual obsession for each other manifested in a sadomasochistic relationship while she was a prisoner during the war and he was one of the commanding officers of the facility. The details of the relationship – depicted vividly by the flashbacks they both experience – portray the way in which each of the two perceived this very unusual love-hate relationship. The flashback scenes detailing their affair make clear the fact that Max is indeed a person who suffers from a sort of mental imbalance that relishes the idea of physical and sexual dominance and finds pleasure in pain. Still, this characterization of a former SS officer is somewhat consistent with the common perception of them being 'cruel monsters', who inflict pain and suffering without even a second thought. Conversely, the portrayal of the prisoner is most unusual. The public perception commands that a WWII prisoner is a victim, taken into the custody of the Nazis against their will, in order to be exterminated based on an entirely misguided notion of 'racial supremacy'. However, the character of Lucia defies that logic, as she is depicted not only taking part willingly in whatever sexual dominance game Max would initiate, but even drawing pleasure from that experience. Her characterization is even more shocking by the fact that she is more than prepared to continue her relationship with Max years after the war has ended, and she gladly leaves her husband to do so. It would seem that from the moment they met up again more than a decade after the war has ended, they forsake their lives only to fall back into their pathological pattern of behavior. The obsession they have for each other will ultimately lead to their deaths, for they would rather starve to death or be killed in the street than to give up their codependent relationship, the only source of 'happiness' they ever truly felt.

In contrast with the aforementioned films, opera is not used within *The Night Porter* in a single scene in order to emphasize a crucial moment in the plot, but it acts as a motif. Initially, the opera-motif appears as we see the name of the hotel where Max works as being 'Hotel zur Oper'. The second reference to the motif will be made by several posters in the lobby of the hotel first advertising *The Magic Flute*, and then other events – all connected to Mozart, who had spent his most prodigious years living in Vienna, the great majority of his works from his mature period being composed there. We believe this was meant not only to link the plot of the movie to classical music and Mozart, but also to revive the old glory and particular atmosphere of 19$^{th}$ century Vienna in contrast with the Vienna of 1957, a city struggling to remove the mark left on it by WWII. This standpoint is illustrated in our view also by the half-way renovated Hotel zur Oper, with one half of the building being restored to its old time glory (gold ornaments on the facade of the construction), while the other side of it is still grey and ruined, with scaffolds awaiting for the renovation to continue.

Another interesting facet that emphasizes the leitmotif of the opera is the fact that Lucia's husband is actually an opera conductor, who came to Vienna to conduct *The Magic Flute*.

However, not only visual or metaphorical references point to the leitmotif of the opera, but also opera music itself. The first interaction between Max and Lucia takes place during the opera performance of *The Magic Flute*. As we see those exchanging glances, we hear the duet between Pamina and Papageno from act I. The scene is cut in the way that it would suggest a parallel between what goes on between Max and Lucia in the audience and what actually happens on stage. The duet speaks about the divine origin of love between a man and a woman:

> "Bey Männern, welche Liebe fühlen,
> Fehlt auch ein gutes Herze nicht.
> Die süßen Triebe mit zu fühlen,
> Ist dann der Weiber erste Pflicht.
> Wir wollen uns der Liebe freu'n,
> Wir leben durch die Lieb allein.
> Die Lieb' versüßet jede Plage,
> Ihr opfert jede Kreatur.
> Sie würzet unsre Lebenstage,
> Sie wirkt im Kreise der Natur.
> Ihr hoher Zweck zeigt deutlich an,
> Nichts edlers sey, als Weib und Mann.
> Mann und Weib, und Weib und Mann,
> Reichen an die Götter an."[8]

Interestingly, the duet within the singspiel[9] makes reference to the plot of the opera, where as in a fairy tale, the brave, valiant Prince (Tamino) has to overcome certain obstacles to win the heart and hand of his beloved, the pure Princess (Pamina). Nevertheless, in our view, the original meaning and intent of the text is distorted to fit the paradigm of the relationship

[8] "In men who feel love, /a good heart, too, is never lacking./ Sharing these sweet urges/ is then women's first duty./ We want to enjoy love;/ it is through love alone that we live./ Love sweetens every sorrow;/ every creature pays homage to it. / It gives relish to the days of our life,/ it acts in the cycle of nature. / Its high purpose clearly proclaims: / there is nothing nobler than woman and man. / Man and woman, and woman and man, /reach towards the deity." Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: *Die Zauberflöte (Full Score)*, Leipzig, C. F. Peters Edition, 1954, p. 56-58.

[9] (Ger.: 'sung play'). An opera, usually comic and in German with spoken dialogue. Sadie, Stanley (ed.): *The New Grove History of Music and Musicians*, Second Edition, Macmillan Publishers Limited, 2001.

between the two protagonists, which has nothing to do with bravery, valiance, purity or noble feelings, but feeds itself from the tainted fountain of sadomasochistic pleasure. For during the time Max listens to this serene, ethereal music, he has a flashback with some disturbing images of an inmate being forced to engage in sexual intercourse with a guard, while the other prisoners watch quietly from the corner of the same room.

The opera scene continues with Tamino's aria, in which he praises the sound of a flute that could tame even the wildest animals.[10] The shot cuts then to another flashback, in which Lucia is chained – not unlike a wild animal – to the bed, while Max takes advantage of her.

The third and final opera excerpt in this film – the only non-diegetic one - is played while Lucia goes for a walk in Vienna, and ends up buying a similar pink dress to the one she wore for Max back when they first met. Another flashback emerges as she remembers the way in which Max tended to her wounds back then. The musical fragment that accompanies her journey – both physical as well as that of her memory – represents one of the final scenes of the opera, where the Prince and Princess had overcome every obstacle put before them and can finally be with each other. The text of the duet between Tamino and Pamina refers to the fire they walked into and came out of together, thus surviving the ultimate challenge.[11] A parallel can be drawn easily between the symbolic flames of Mozart's singspiel, and the actual ones that were used to exterminate human beings in the Holocaust. Also, it makes reference to the relationship between Max and Lucia, whose bond has survived the flames of war – both literally as well as symbolically.

In *The Night Porter*, opera was used to emphasize the peculiar relationship between the two protagonists by contrasting the two ends of a spectrum – true, innocent, noble love on one hand and perverted, pathological obsession on the other.

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In conclusion, opera and film – even if it would seem unlikely at first – can merge beautifully into a harmonious duet, in which all the elements of each art form assist the other to create meaning. Thus, the message of the film is conveyed not only through words and dialogue, but also using a

[10] "How powerful your magic sound is,/ sweet flute, since your playing / brings joy even to wild animals./ Yet only Pamina stays away!/ Pamina! Listen, listen to me!/In vain! /Where? Oh, where shall I find you?" Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: *Die Zauberflöte (Full Score)*, Leipzig, C. F. Peters Edition, 1954, p. 70.

[11] "We have walked through flames,/ fought the danger bravely./ May your sound protect us in the floods / as it has in the fire." Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: *Die Zauberflöte (Full Score)*, Leipzig, C. F. Peters Edition, 1954, p. 153-155

different medium. May it be to build tension, to emphasize a detail, to act as a symbol or to draw a parallel, opera lends additional meaning to a film by way of its own plot and raises the level of communication between the film and its audience. Hence, the impact of a film on its audience becomes much greater and the escapist adventure is enhanced, offering the viewer a truly entertaining experience.

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