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# Orpheus in New Media: Images of the voice in digital opera

**ABSTRACT**

*Although musicological work on opera had been focused until recently on the analysis and criticism of music and voice to the detriment of its visual aspects, the meeting of opera with digital media calls for renewed attention to the voice. New media theories advocating meaningful embodiment in mediated experiences make use of implicit analogies rhetorically to attribute the characteristics of sound to our perception of visual objects. Theories of immersion in media also call for renewed vigilance in our understanding of digital media as part of a larger digital industry. This article discusses epistemological negotiations of the voice: how the voice was turned into an image for eidetic knowledge and how imparting the attributes of this signified voice can give the illusion of meaningful embodiment in fictional scenarios of immersion in media. By focusing on the figure of Orpheus, it also calls into question how literature – in the widest sense of the term – already participates in this mediation. The last section offers a brief analysis of a recent digital opera by Manfred Stahnke and Simone de Mello, Orpheus Kristall (2002), by contextualizing it within the article's larger debates.*

**KEYWORDS**

aesthetics  
aura  
digital media  
opera  
Orpheus  
politics  
psychoanalysis  
voice

1. From the libretto of *Orpheus Kristall*: 'Let your mouth utter what the eye is on the verge of losing' (Stahnke and de Mello 2002a) (The English translation of the libretto quoted in this article is the work of Mark Edwards and myself).
2. For a summary of the function of the voice in Lacanian theory and its negative inscription in western metaphysics, consult Dolan (2006: 35 ff.).

The sight of immediate reality has become  
an orchid in the land of technology.

(Walter Benjamin)

The aural has been muted, idealized, ignored and  
silenced by the very words used to describe it.

(Frances Dyson)

Hol aus dem Mund raus,  
was das Auge zu verlieren droht.<sup>1</sup>

(Manfred Stahnke and Simone de Mello)

## INTRODUCTION

The voice's central role as the guardian of phonocentrism, which Jacques Derrida criticized early on in his work, and its function as a remainder in Jacques Lacan's subversion of the dialectics of subjectivity, seemed to have left it in a theoretical no man's land.<sup>2</sup> However, in the wake of Michel Poizat's oeuvre, books like Bernard Baas's *La voix déliée* (2010) and Mladen Dolar's *A Voice and Nothing More* (2006) have renewed theoretical interest in vocal matters. In this article, I approach voice-related theory by placing it in dialogue with artistic representations of the voice, namely with operas that use the Orpheus myth. In following the figure of Orpheus, ultimately to Manfred Stahnke and Simone de Mello's opera for stage and periphery, *Orpheus Kristall* (2002a), I will engage with recent musicological scholarship by Carolyn Abbate and Melina Esse, which also uses the image of Orpheus to explain the technologically mediated voice and, by extension, mediated/mediatized opera. Drawing on Frances Dyson's scholarship on the conflation of visual and aural characteristics in new media theory, I will examine how the image of Orpheus is taken as a substitute for the sounds of the voice. Finally, building on recent work by the philosopher Bernard Stiegler, this article discusses how the poetics of digital opera can constitute a critique of capitalism's exploitation of subjective investments (desire, libido) in digital media.

## THE VOICE'S EPISTEMOLOGICAL OBJECTIFICATION

For Denis Vasse, the voice is at once 'the support for the formal coherence of a knowledge that condenses representations' but also, and at the same time, 'in the discourse it holds "on the outside," the voice expresses life in the very moment when life is felt as the proximity of the subject to itself "in" the body' (1974: 179–81, my translation). In other words, the inner voice is the mental backdrop against which are placed the sonorous images of words and upon which their meanings and, hence, knowledge is built. At the same time, the spoken voice is, in an outward push, the living body's sonorous point of irruption, thereby delimiting it from the world and founding subjectivity. Vasse is here repeating Derrida's problem, but placing it in a psychoanalytic framework. The psychoanalytic understanding of the voice challenges the dominance of eidetic knowledge (the order of representation) by including the subject's experience of his or her embodiment (the relation of the voice to its site) in the meaning of presence and identity.

The voice is neither of the order of representation (knowledge) nor of the order of presence to self (site). It is not conceivable except as the clearing

that *founds the limit it crosses*. As the founding crossing of the limit, the voice specifies the limit that separates and counter-distinguishes the body and discourse, site and knowledge. The voice is manifestation of presence, outside the site (body), in the concept, which is a representation of the presence. Apart from the concept of which the voice is the operator, there is neither presence nor knowledge. *The voice is the original in-between of knowledge and site.*

(Vasse 1974: 179, emphasis in original, my translation)

Embodiment, of which the voice is the originator and guarantor, thus grounds the experience of mediation. The Orpheus myth is a rem(a)inder of this condition and testifies to the linguistic limits of epistemology. With Orpheus as a subject for music, and particularly opera, it is difficult to organize the character's inscription into any further media without taking into account the original site of the voice's embodiment and its subsequent manifestation outside of the body. From this bodily containment, the voice's invocation of the dead Eurydice also, and at the same time, expresses the body's affective demands.

The voice has always been a challenge to categorization, since its sounds traverse and transcend the categories of knowledge. While scientific knowledge acquired by observation is technical in the narrowest sense, 'Plato [...] refers to the voice as an instrument not in the modern sense, but rather as a *technikon*, a technology, for revealing *alethia* (truth) and linked to *episteme*; knowledge in the widest sense' (Dyson 2009: 22). When Plato pronounced words, his speech used the same linguistic forms that had been given to things by the gods, thereby evoking their divine essence. Aristotle's categorizing project, on the other hand, rationalized the experience into its material aspects.

Voice then is the impact of the inbreathed air against the 'windpipe', and the agent that produces the impact is the soul resident in these parts of the body [...]; what produces the impact must have soul in it and must be accompanied by an act of the imagination, for voice is a sound with a meaning [...].

(Aristotle 2001: 573)

Note that 'air' makes its appearance into the equation here: it is not so much the instrument that produces sound, the windpipe, but rather the life-giving property that is taken in and given form by the imagination to voice something meaningful. If for Plato speech allows for the mediation of the human and the divine, for Aristotle, the voice is the mediation of air and an active *phantasm*, while the soul is the needle that ties together the threads. With Thomas of Aquinas, *phantasm* became 'an image originating in the imagination' because 'operations proceeding from the imagination can be said to be from the soul' (Dyson 2009: 23). The voice hereby had its air supply cut off, as the soul was now associated with the mind rather than the body; but no matter, for as the inner voice that supports eidetic knowledge it no longer needed to inhale or to exhale.

This inner voice presents to the mind's eye the images of sounds, thus reconciling the voice's sonority with the dominant historical projects of knowledge built upon observation of objects. Dyson's understanding of meaningful embodiment and its artistic expression is akin to the subversion psychoanalysis performs on discourses of knowledge: both give voice to what dominant discourses silence by objectifying the site (self and body) of subjectivity.

Ontology and epistemology are united via the being of the object, and the knowledge of this being is given through the sense of sight and touch. Being, knowing, and seeing (in Greek 'to be' is etymologically associated with 'to know' and 'to see') lay the ground for modern notions of eidetic knowledge, which is captured in nouns such as idea, reflection, speculation, enlightenment, and vision. The 'total darkness of matter-in-itself' gives way to enlightenment, through the spiritual truths of the cosmos and what will later be thought of as scientific truths of Reason. *Not surprisingly, sound and the speaking voice are banished from this ontological elite, not because of their sonority, but because of what sonority represents – impermanence, instability, change, becoming.*

(Dyson 2009: 21, emphasis added)

In other words, while the recollection of an image of the body or of the voice to the mind's eye is a function of reason – which objectifies a particular subject's voice or body – listening or speaking are acts of embodiment and potential expressions of the affective unknown. New media theories, as we shall see, seek to impart visual experiences with these meaningful aspects of embodied subjectivity. In order to achieve this, however, these theories need intermediary sites where subjective attributes are transferred to objects. I argue that 'aura' serves this function in media theories.

Since Aristotle, the voice's impetus has mainly been thought to be made of air. However, the voice should certainly not be conflated with aura, although epistemological negotiations of the voice have sought to assign it a similar place between the body, the soul and knowledge, which sometimes overlap.

The word 'aural,' from the Latin *auris*: pertaining to the ear, derives from 'aura,' originally Greek for 'air' and adopted by Latin as 'a subtle, usually invisible exhalation or emanation.' Like the voice, the breath straddles the internal and the external; the autonomic reflex that goes beyond control, and the signifying expression – such as the well-timed sigh – that is not yet language but has meaning nonetheless.

(Dyson 2009: 14)

Dyson's understanding of the voice resonates in sympathy with that of Vasse. The voice has a pivotal function without being in itself objectified. Aura, however, is already a step away from the embodying voice, an objectifying phenomenon that can recuperate the exhaled air of the voice and, for example, turn it into an attribute of authenticity, the 'emanation' of a visual work of art. Aura and the vocal characteristics it is predicated upon are still issues, points of contestation, because they indicate the limits of knowledge based on observation. In the following section, I will examine the widely used term of the Benjaminian aura, as well as revisionist readings of musical poetics as technological appropriations of the voice, and will subsequently identify opera's digital fate with Orpheus's dismemberment at the hands of the (industrial) maenads.

## THE RECORDED VOICE'S EXPRESSIVITY

Dyson does not engage with Walter Benjamin in *Sounding New Media*, but her overall discussion can help problematize the ambiguous mediation of sound and image in his seminal essay 'The work of art in the age of mechanical

reproduction'. The epigraph to Benjamin's essay comes from a short text by Paul Valéry, 'The conquest of ubiquity', which advocates the psychological advantages of playing recorded music in one's home. Benjamin's quotation of Valéry strips it of its references to music, which are reduced to 'auditory images' (Valéry in Benjamin [1936] 1985: 219). It is safe to conclude that although Benjamin's motivation in writing the essay was prompted by reading Valéry's remarks on the reproduction of music, a critique of musical reproduction – either in agreement or disagreement with him – did not find its way into his text.

In his essay, Benjamin attributes auras to visual works of art and even landscapes but, significantly, fails to distinguish clearly between the reproduction of music and of visual art.<sup>3</sup> As he strives to maintain a grasp of the artwork's inscription in a historical reality, he must take into account the passage of time through the artwork.

Since the historical testimony rests on authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when *substantive duration* ceases to matter. [...] One might subsume the eliminated element in the term 'aura' and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art.

(Benjamin [1936] 1985: 221, emphasis added)

Duration is conceived by the spatial fixation of the artwork, which in turn allows for its aura. In order to keep this definition in place, the sounds of speech fastened to subjectivity must also lose their aura through disembodiment. Tellingly, Benjamin constructs his argument for the *captation* of 'auditory images' based on Pirandello's account of the actor's disenfranchised embodiment in visual reproduction,<sup>4</sup> even though the latter's remarks 'were limited to the negative aspects of the question and to the silent film only' ([1936] 1985: 229).

The film actor feels as if in exile – exiled not only from the stage but also from himself. With a vague sense of discomfort he feels inexplicable emptiness: his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality, life, voice, and the noises caused by his moving about, in order to be changed into a mute image, flickering an instant on the screen, then vanishing into silence.

(Pirandello in Benjamin [1936] 1985: 229)

For Pirandello, the alienation felt as a result of one's visual recording is caused by the loss of one's voice: the vacated embodiment anticipates a morbid 'vanishing into silence'. Benjamin acquiesces and adds that even with the advent of audio-visual recordings, 'the sound film did not change anything essential' in this respect ([1936] 1985: 229). However, Gyorgy Markus's analysis of Benjamin's understanding of the voice and language would lead one to think that recordings of the voice can reveal the bodily traces of its expression:

One can communicate what is meant through language, because the way it is meant is directly and unintentionally expressed, physiognomically revealed in language as the medium of communication. Similarly, to understand the intentions of an interlocutor it is not sufficient to

3. I am aware of Benjamin's definition of aura found in 'A short history of photography' and of his knowledge of Proust's use of the term to qualify the actress *la Berma's* mass appeal (Shiff in Gumbrecht and Marrinan 2003: 63–64). However, I have chosen here to focus on aura as a mediating function of the visual and the aural.

4. According to the *Trésor de la langue française*, the French term *captation* is used to indicate the action of physically capturing something, as well as the audio-visual techniques of gathering waves of different nature (sound, Hertzian, telepathic, etc.) and fixing them to a physical medium.

5. Consult Eli Friedlander's (2005) article for a detailed discussion of Benjamin's understanding of the voice, language and music in the *Trauerspiel* qua precursor to opera.

comprehend to what his or her words and sentences refer. It is also necessary to grasp the pragmatic force of the utterances, which may be directly expressed solely in countenance, tone of the voice, or the manner of speaking.

(Markus 2001: 12)

The next conclusion that Benjamin draws is central to this discussion, in the sense that it relies upon remarks that deal with the *captation* of speech, which, I argue, should be differentiated from that of singing: 'for the first time – and this is the effect of the film – man has to operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura. For aura is tied to presence; there can be no replica of it' (Benjamin [1936] 1985: 229). Benjamin discusses neither filmed musical events nor filmed opera, although both had been done prior to 1936.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps Benjamin avoids the discussion of mechanically reproduced music because it would have tampered with the very notion of aura upon which his argument stands. Music, whether it is created or reproduced, maintains its *substantive duration*. One might ask then if music can lose its aura when it is reproduced by the *captation* of moving sound waves and their mechanical 'redeployment'. Benjamin's ambiguity in this matter suggests that he thinks of aura as already associated, in some epistemological respect, with the musical. After the essay's publication, Adorno raised the point of musical reproduction in a letter to Benjamin in November 1938, to which the latter replied: 'I do not mean to suggest that acoustic and optical perception are equally susceptible to revolutionary transformation' (Adorno and Benjamin 1999: 295).

Adorno's letter came with a copy of his article 'On the fetish-character in music and the regression of listening', which sought to complement Benjamin's critique of 'the work of art as a commodity' (Markus 2001: 3) with an analysis of musical consumption. In it, Adorno makes observations about the appreciation of the singing voice that should be taken into account in this discussion. He clearly distinguishes between those listeners who appreciate the musicality and artistry of a singer and the consumer listener, who looks to the voice as an ideal site for the reduction of music qua development (substantive duration) to its static possession as an object of consumption.

At its most passionate, musical fetishism takes possession of the public valuation of singing voices. Their sensuous magic is traditional as is the close relation between success and the person endowed with 'material.' But today it is forgotten that it is material. For musical vulgar materialists, it is synonymous to have a voice and to be a singer.

(Adorno 2002: 294)

He goes on to deplore that past concerns with the voice's virtuosity or capacity for musical expression are no longer important. However, the fetishistic commodification of the voice is reified when the voice in turn is produced according to the same commodifying logic:

Voices are holy properties like a national trademark. As if the voices wanted to revenge themselves for this, they begin to lose the sensuous magic in whose name they are merchandised. Most of them sound like imitations of those who have made it, even when they themselves have made it.

(Adorno 2002: 295)

As a response to Benjamin, it would seem that Adorno maintains that the singer's aura cannot be 'heard' unless his or her voice is fetishized. He draws attention to the manner in which the reduction of music's substantive duration through the fetishism of the voice commodifies its magical quality, only to see it wither away in turn through reification. In contrast, he says nothing against the recorded singing voice's potential for expressivity. Similarly for psychoanalysis, the voice can be transformed into an object of fascination through fantasmatic activity, leaving unheard the messages it carries: 'Recuperated by representation, the voice no longer gives itself as the support of difference [...], but becomes a *reified difference*. It then occupies the place of the *objet (a)*' (Vasse 1974: 180, emphasis in original, my translation).

Coming back to Benjamin, one understands that the reproduction of a work of art, turning the object into an image without an aura, is not merely the occasion for its distribution to the masses and thereby the dilution of its authority, but moreover the death of its historical meaning by asphyxiation, its impossibility to express itself from its original site, and the beginning of art's subservience to eidetic – breathless and bodiless – knowledge. This emanation or exhalation, the non-linguistic yet vocal aspect of the Benjaminian aura, is not unrelated to claims within new media theories that virtual reality offers experiences of meaningful 'mediated embodiment'.<sup>6</sup> When sound becomes image it is 'abstracted in the appropriation of externality: the aural becomes a metaphor, and actual sound is forgotten' (Dyson 2009: 25). The singing voice's *captation* requires therefore that one should not only listen to its recorded sounds and the meanings they express, but also keep in mind the fascination it can exert if it is objectified.

## ORPHEUS DECAPITATED ... BUT NOT CASTRATED

My understanding of the voice and the Orpheus myth as interwoven sonorous images *and* the body making itself heard is quite different from recent work in musicology that uses the figure of Orpheus as a metaphor to think through aspects of musical and digital mediation. As a musical intercessor with Hades for the dead Eurydice, Orpheus prefigures how sound was thought to have metaphysical qualities in Western epistemology; until recently, musicological work on opera was likewise dominated by the metaphysics of music- and voice-related analysis and criticism. If the musicological scholarship I discuss below partially departs from the constraints of this tradition, it nevertheless uses the Orpheus figure in ways that are difficult to reconcile with what I understand as the voice's function for embodied subjectivity within digital/mediatized opera.

Carolyn Abbate's book *In Search of Opera* proposes an almost technological perspective of opera's orchestration of non-linguistic vocal sounds. She convincingly demonstrates how the echo in Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* and the power of seemingly unending breath in Wagner's *Lohengrin* (Abbate 2001: 20–36) are rendered through orchestral composition. Abbate perceives 'Orpheus' [decapitated] head as a minor symbol for mechanical force' (2001: 28). However, by identifying the problem of vocal amplification with the figure of Orpheus's severed head, she establishes a logic in which the increasing amplification of vocal aerial matter by the orchestra results in a further disembodied singing voice. Thus her work raises the question of what happens to the status of singing as an invocation when obsessions with vocal size and volume culminate in disembodiment rather than the glorified and powerful embodiment they originally wanted to express.<sup>7</sup>

6. For divergent discussions of the Benjaminian aura in digital media, consult Gumbrecht and Marrinan (2003).
7. Abbate also discusses the question of embodiment, but her concerns are not directed at the affective expression of the body as site of the subject of the unconscious, but rather at the sociopolitical implications of embodiment and essentialism for feminism (2001: 52–53).

The implications of Abbate's work are also problematic for the embodying voice, especially in media, since her historical trajectory of the orchestral translations of the voice seems to foreshadow its technological reification. She uses the image of Orpheus's severed head as a metaphor for the reproduction of the mediating qualities of the singing voice: 'the head represents singing that travels far from the body in which it originated, as a physical object that is cousin to a classic poetic image, the echo' (Abbate 2001: 5). By choosing to examine Orpheus's last encore, Abbate puts forward a definition of the singing voice that 'travels far from the body in which it originated', thereby reducing his body to his severed head and identifying the source of the voice with its percussive and articulating parts. Abbate's conception of the voice is also one that has had the air blown out of it. There is no embodiment in this singing, just as Echo cannot express herself (*se dire*). Furthermore, it becomes harder to follow the metaphor when the severed head and its murmurs, as Ovid described them, metamorphose into an analogy for amplification, except if one thinks of the maenad's drumming as his new set of lungs.

Abbate's decapitated Orpheus becomes in turn an authoritative reference for Melina Esse's analysis of a fetishistic Orpheus in Harry Kupfer's (2002) production of Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*, first staged in 1987 and video recorded at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, in 1991. In this production, critical of capitalism's reification of music, Orpheus treats Eurydice as a commodity. Since he reacts to loss by replacing it with an object – a denial of castration in psychoanalytic theory – he is alienated from the living Eurydice he supposedly loved (she does leave him during the overture), as well as from the deceased one he supposedly still loves. Although Esse directs attention to Orpheus's fetishistic relation with the objects Eurydice has left behind, she does not write of the central fetish in this production: whenever Orpheus picks up his electric guitar to invoke the dead Eurydice, he seems to revel more in his power of invocation than in expressing his loss. Indeed why would he dwell on his loss, since his fetishism prevents him from experiencing it? Musical invocation, singing, is here the main fetish, the non-revealed object of the music. Accordingly, the overdone acting of Jochen Kowalski, who performs the role of Orpheus, is that of a Romantic artist, highly aware of his suffering and preoccupied with its uses for artistic self-glorification.

While overlooking this central fetish of Harry Kupfer's production, which is in itself critical of media, Esse wishes to 'reconsider distinctions being made [...] between the live and the mediated, between *televisual immediacy* and *lively distance*' (Esse 2010b: 82, emphasis added). Dyson's work examines how the visual rhetoric of new media theories, when claiming immediacy or embodiment in a mediated (artistic) experience, is based on the metaphysical characteristics of sound. In a dialogue with Barthes, Dyson recalls how the invention of the telephone and the phonograph has led to an assumption that bodily presence can be technologically displaced by the (re)transmission of the voice (2009: 26). She maintains that the ontological mediation of sound is then attributed to visual objects by new media theory through the use of rhetorical argumentation.

The first rhetorical manoeuvre of this kind Dyson identifies concerns the redefinition and confusion of space and presence 'by the artful dropping of analogical markers' (2009: 2). To use her examples, such a manoeuvre eschews distinctions between 'looking at' or 'watching' and 'being in', while the familiar claim 'it's as if you were there' loses the conditionality of *it's as if* and simply reads 'you are there'. The paradoxical inversion of the regular spatial



attributes of embodied presence and mediated representation that Esse sees and applauds in Kupfer's production would not be lost on Dyson:

The impact and slipperiness of these terms, their ability to articulate what are often fictional scenarios that nonetheless appear as fact, have much to do with their provocative construction. Uniting [...] tele with presence opens both terms to reinterpretation – disturbing the once-solid meaning of the latter term while grounding the former in accepted phenomenal concepts.

(Dyson 2009: 2)

Accordingly, Esse's argument relies on the 'increasingly blurred boundaries between mediatised forms and the unsullied "live"' (2010b: 82, emphasis added) to bring forth an imaginary immersive space of opera's visual *caption* at the expense of the already mediating aspects of the voice.<sup>8</sup> Esse claims that a focus on the visual aspects of Kupfer's production better ensures the viewer's critical reception of the spectacle:

here the up-close *presence* made possible by *televisual* technology is steeped in poignant and productive distance (because the real object is absent, unattainable), while live, unmediated presence is stripped of fantasy, closing the distance so necessary for operatic illusion.

(Esse 2010b: 93, emphasis added)<sup>9</sup>

This discussion of meaningful *telepresence* stems from a scene in Kupfer's production during which the image of Eurydice is transmitted to a television set onstage, the television set that Orpheus drags along as they are leaving Hades. It is Eurydice's *psyche* (her ghost or her soul) that follows Orpheus out of Hades, not her body, for her body never went to Hades in the first place. Thus the *telepresence* being evoked here nobly seeks to impart presence to a non-presence or, to use the substitutive vocabulary already in place, it wants to turn a fetish into a subject. However, this can only be accomplished when Eurydice's broadcast voice and image reunite with her body onstage, otherwise she remains but a concept, a *representation of the presence*, to put it in Vasse's words. Without the other's embodiment, without the reception (in the act of listening) of the voice's expression (through the body), one is left with just the image of the other, an imagined difference. Esse's appreciation of televisual opportunities involves the blurring of boundaries between embodied subjectivity and the projection of the phantasm through which objects appear in the world. It minimizes what is disturbing in Kupfer's production of *Orfeo ed Euridice*, namely her return from the dead as a hindrance to Orpheus's fetishistic musical and poetic *jouissance*.

## THE POLITICAL AESTHETICS OF MEDIA

The meeting of opera and digital media requires discussion beyond appreciation of the creative possibilities new technology offers. It comes at a moment when it is imperative to discuss problems within the three inseparable orders of technology, psychology and aesthetics, which contribute to the political backdrop of present-day society. The digitalization of traditional opera can lead to uncritical discourse and an undisclosed rhetoric that promotes the idea of meaningful embodiment in the face of actual alienation. However, it is not

8. Esse acknowledges work on the voice in her article, but this is limited to Abbate's mechanical conception of the decapitated Orpheus discussed above. However, in her editorial note in the same issue, she does write about the recorded voice's presence: 'For Gumbrecht, mediation does not preclude the possibility of enlivening presence; it is important, he insists, "to allow oneself to be touched, literally, by the intensity of the voice that comes from a compact disk [...]"' (Esse 2010a: 2-3).

9. Both Abbate and Esse follow Adorno in their criticism of the regressive admiration of audiophiles and melomanes for vocal material. Esse does not share, however, his acerbic criticism of media's marketing pretense of immediacy:

Above all, arranging seeks to make the great distant sound, which always has aspects of the public and unprivate, assimilable. [...] It is a compulsion similar to that which requires radio favorites to insinuate themselves into the families of their listeners like uncles and aunts and pretend to a human proximity. Radical reification produces its own pretense of immediacy and intimacy.

(Adorno 2002: 299)

a simple matter of completely dismissing the new audio-visual possibilities of digital technology. As the philosopher Bernard Stiegler writes:

There cannot be a 'fetishism of merchandise' because *economic exchange is at its base libidinal*. The 'denunciation' of this fetishism by Marxism is therefore a lure: it is the essence of merchandise to be a fetish. And *not a single object* can appear in this world without the projection of the *phantasm* through which it *appears*. But the critique of the libidinal *captivation* by mercantile fetishism qua hegemonic destruction of the libido is not at all a decoy: it is even, moreover, the first political imperative.

(2004a: 25, emphasis in original, my translation)

The word *phantasm* brings us back to the Thomist move that took the air out of the expressive voice (vocalized speech). Just as the attributes of sonority (impermanence, instability, change, becoming) were banished by the *phantasm* from epistemology, media-related discourse immersed in the *phantasm* through which fetishism appears leads to the grim reality of ideology-driven performances of mediated desire. Although Stiegler does not discuss immersion and embodiment in new media theory, his analysis of the present industrial turn towards digital technologies and media allows for a critical distance in which to re-evaluate our identification with mediatized representations and the subsequent loss of individually expressed desires.

If Benjamin, in the same essay discussed above, states that 'All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war' ([1936] 1985: 241) it certainly does not mean that aesthetics should not have their politics. Benjamin denounced how the masses can be aesthetically persuaded to go to war in order to eliminate surplus production. But the face of war has changed. In reminding his readers of *Le partage du sensible/The Politics of Aesthetics* (Rancière [2000] 2006), Bernard Stiegler adds that "in the industrial era, sensibility's bombardment by marketing has become the stakes of an actual war, whose arms are technologies and whose victims are individual or collective singularities' (2004a: 19, my translation). In many ways, Stiegler continues Benjamin's work throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, except that his critique of the aesthetic hijacking through mass reproduction is not directed at fascism but, instead, at the present-day threat against dignified life: the capitalist digital industry. An understanding of Stiegler's psycho-political critique is thus all the more important to the present discussion about critical uses of digital media.

Stiegler finds a parallel between the evolution of mass media and the enslavement of desiring subjectivity to consumption. Time and again, he describes the historical collusion between mass media and the industry's constant need to eliminate its surplus production by stimulating market growth (Stiegler et al. 2009: 23). The BBC's documentary *The Century of the Self* (Curtis 2002) brought to the attention of a large public the use of Freudian psychoanalysis in the 'invention' of marketing and public relations, or, as Stiegler would put it, the individual and collective captivation and channeling of desire. The manipulation of the masses by media is not unknown to Al Gore, who writes about Bernays in his book *The Assault on Reason*. Perhaps, however, Gore could not foretell how Bill Clinton's and his policy statement on 'Technology for America's Economic Growth' (1993) would steer societies into the problems for which he criticizes Bernays, since the digital technology

and ‘information highways’ this policy ushered in are fuelled on the harnessing of sublimation and its industrial creative by-products.

Stiegler analyses how the political vision and state intervention of Clinton and Gore is behind the digital turn of the economy.

It was a question of straightening a situation in which the United States had lost their leadership in the field of the electronics industry, to the partial benefit of Europe, and essentially to the benefit of Japan and then Korea. Today, the dynamic is no longer on the side of electronics issued from audiovisual analog technologies, but on that of chips, processors, programmes, servers and digital networks, from which a completely different audiovisual era starts [...].

(Stiegler et al. 2009: 30, my translation)

Gore and Clinton’s political vision did not change the economic logic of capitalism: it created an industrial revolution, the automobile/petrochemical industry giving way to the digital industry. Approximately one decade after the issuing of this new technology policy, Maurice Lévy – at the time, French Finance Minister under Nicholas Sarkozy’s presidency – published a report entitled ‘L’Économie de l’immatériel’/‘The economy of the immaterial’ (2006) in which he states: ‘Our principal wealth is human beings [*l’homme*] and it is suitable to deal economically with human capital as we treated physical and industrial capital in the past’ (Stiegler et al. 2009: 56, my translation). In short, governments are looking to prolong a model of unsustainable growth in the new (digital) economy by curbing the Internet’s capacity to erode the system of property. Therefore, they institute laws on *intellectual property* and communications that legalize the Internet market, thereby defining what constitutes sublimation and its products.<sup>10</sup>

According to Stiegler, such an absence of political vision is based upon a misunderstanding of the psyche and how desire and libido function. Individuals who are exposed to prolonged imperatives to consume by televisual publicity spots and movies packaged to fit the fantasies of the markets are left with deep psychological effects: ‘The result is a symbolic misery that is also a libidinal and affective misery, which leads to the *loss* of what I call *primordial narcissism*: individuals are deprived of their capacity for aesthetic attachment to singularities, to singular objects’ (Stiegler 2004a: 23, emphasis in original, my translation). In other words, people are bombarded with competing marketing messages by mass media, which has channelled their desire in such a way that it now has the capacity to make them jump from one object to another that has a similar set of particulars. What Stiegler is spelling out here is that marketing, over the last 70 years or so, is responsible for an increased propensity in traits of perversion in contemporary consuming and desiring subjectivities. The discussion of a media-induced deviation of desire and consumption brings us back to fetishism.

For psychoanalysis, fetishistic traits are often presented in practices widely referred to as perverse, in the sense that desire has been deviated from the goal of copulation. I am not making an argument here for normative heterosexual copulation, nor am I criticizing perversion’s potential as a subversive concept.<sup>11</sup> Rather, I am interested in setting the symptoms Stiegler describes in relation to a fetishistic, immersive relation to media. Roland Chemama gives a description of fetishism that is analogous to Stiegler’s description, except that here the subject has chosen his or her category: ‘If the fetishist elects

10. As this article goes to press, the American Congress and Senate are revising the Stop Online Piracy Act and the Protect IP Act, two bills which are highly contested by defenders of the Internet’s uncensored and unhindered flow of information. On 18 January 2012, the Wikipedia Foundation blacked out its English content to raise awareness about the potential consequences of the legislation of digital intellectual property, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:SOPA\\_initiative/Learn\\_more](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:SOPA_initiative/Learn_more).

11. For an historical analysis of perversion and a critique of its political subversion, including a discussion of identity politics based on queer theory, consult James Penney (2006).

- 12 For a summary of the sources and different versions of the Orpheus myth, consult the first chapter of M. Owen Lee's (1996) book *Virgil as Orpheus*.
13. Although the whole production calls into question the use of digital technology, Stefanie Wilhelm documented it visually using celluloid film. The resolution of the pictures is not sufficient for publication here, but they can be seen on her website <http://stefaniewilhelm.wordpress.com/2002/05/04/orpheus-kristall/>, accessed 28 January 2012.

a particular category of objects, he or she is not thereby "fixated" to one of them. Always susceptible to displacing his or herself towards another, equivalent but different, fetishism comprises that part of dissatisfaction constitutive of all desire' (Chemama 2005: 134, my translation). A fetishistic organization of desire does not lead to symbolic misery per se; its marketing, its *imposition* is what spells ruin on individual and collective desire, according to Stiegler. With increased legislation of the Internet and the digitalization of society, desire is being or is on the point of being evacuated. The digital industry has not only inherited, on the one hand, an agent (marketing) enforcing an economy of non-desire (through images that tell us what to want and how to be), but is, on the other, creating an industry that feeds off people's creative input in supposedly free acts of self-expression. The antinomy of this conjecture thus begs the question of what will be left to desire within the realm of digital aesthetics once the industry has consumed the libido that propels it.

While media as a support for marketing's imperative discourse can entertain the fascination for commodities, it can also generate fascination for itself as it becomes a commodity in its own right. Esse's article on opera and televisual immediacy speaks directly to this problem. The multiplication of images onstage and their reduplication on home entertainment systems, whether high- or low-tech, invokes the *simulacrum* as a fetish, and indeed Esse notes that Eurydice's simulacrum on the television screen calls into question the 'fetishistic thinking of the modern television viewer' (2010b: 89). But if Kupfer's production demonstrates how a libidinal investment (Orpheus's desire for Eurydice) can be captivated by media and results in the fetishism of musical invocation, it does not, to my understanding, relieve Orpheus's alienation in allowing him to access a real unsullied by his phantasms. This is exactly the problem *Orpheus Kristall* addresses, to which I presently turn.

### THE DIGITAL POETICS OF ORPHEUS KRISTALL

In line with the twentieth century's psychological turn in treating the Orpheus myth (Bernstock 1991), Manfred Stahnke and Simone de Mello's opera *Orpheus Kristall* (2002a, 2002b) is akin to Ovid's description of the grief-stricken lover in the interiorizing aftermaths of his Virgilian double loss of Eurydice.<sup>12</sup> Its fragmented narrative takes the form of a man's dream-like quest to regain self-identity in a maze of mental images and voices represented onstage. According to the formal disposition of Stahnke's score, Orpheus is thus confronted with the mnemonic incursions of three Eurydice figures: the first (Sopran 1, S.1) is like the Medusa, and will have Orpheus seduce himself through his gazing; the second (S.2) is a Sibyl type character, whose reflective remarks on speech contrast with the first figure; and the third (S.3) is like Ariadne, an overbearing parental figure (Stahnke and de Mello 2002a: 1). However, the opera never directly invokes Eurydice. Rather, the fantasies about the lost object of desire found in the myth are used to question how memories are retroactively given signification, after the fact. Speech, the sonorous voice, here acts as the copula between representation and the individual's desiring reality.

In the 2002 Munich Biennale's world premiere of the work, Stefanie Wilhelm's stage design represented an open laptop computer without the letter markings of the keyboard.<sup>13</sup> While Orpheus sang where one would normally type, the screen maintained its function for the projection of images. In one of the scenes, a woman's picture appears on-screen. In another, the

three female figures mentioned above literally burst through the screen, constructed with three swivel panels for this exact purpose. Such representation of digital technology in opera contrasts sharply with Esse's interpretation of Kupfer's visual use of a television set and mirrors in his production of *Orfeo ed Euridice*. Wilhelm does not use media for immersive purposes, but cites media in the production's overall design. Since Eurydice is never mentioned onstage in *Orpheus Kristall*, the lost love object is not what is to be found or mourned in its drama. What is at stake, rather, is the subject's capacity to infer meaning to his memories (images), and thus his subjective experience, when literally surrounded by digital media. Media is not the answer here, neither the path nor the access to the real, but part of the problem, the contours of the maze as it were.

Stahnke's use of digital periphery also questions how one makes sense of musical material when it is simultaneously mixed with sound via digital media. After the '*poème percussion*' representing Orpheus's soul, the first tableau goes on with the '*poème Internet*', which is the in-hall projection of a five-part improvisation over the Internet through the Quintet.net software designed by Georg Hajdu.

The players interact over the Internet or local networks by exchanging musical streams (control messages) via the Quintet.net server. For this, various inputs ranging from the computer keyboard, MIDI controllers, sensor input and/or the built-in pitch tracker can be used. On the server, the streams get multiplied, processed by algorithms, and sent back to the clients as well as to the listeners. In addition, a sixth performer, the conductor, can control the musical outcome by changing settings remotely and sending streams of parameter values either manually or by utilizing a timeline.

(Hajdu)

In contrast with earlier uses of the Internet in live music, Quintet.net corrects the deferral between Internet participation and its real-time integration in the hall. Computers on the network have become instruments in their own right, producing sound just like Orpheus onstage or the musicians in the orchestra pit. Like the set design, the music's digital poetics summon the listener to an aesthetic experience in which media are not only means of transmission, but also an integral part of the creative process. Stahnke's use of a digitally expanded network of sound, beyond the physical confines of the Carl-Orff-Saal in Munich (where the opera was staged), negotiates the immediate presence of digital sound with voices in the hall, thereby confronting the audience with the integration of media into the work's live performance.

Immediately after the opening '*poème percussion*', *Orpheus Kristall* mixes Orpheus's singing onstage into a microphone with the projection of Quintet.net in the '*poème Internet*' (Stahnke and de Mello 2002a: I/2–12).<sup>14</sup> The text for the '*poème Internet*' uses material found in the subsequent scenes but adds words like 'ethernet' and 'obernet', as well as vocalization on vowels. These words are used specifically to evoke digital media, while mixing together the different registers of sound, live and electronic. This procedure is used as well in the second scene, 'Cerberus – Shattering'. The baritone (Orpheus) reacts to the incursion of the three Eurydice figures, which together form the three-headed Cerberus. The libretto contrasts Orpheus's memories of a woman locked in fluid circles – '*scheinbar gefesselt/sahst du sie im kreis*

14. The score's pagination is divided into five sections in Roman numerals followed by page numbers in Arabic numerals, e.g.: I/12.

15. For a case study of a patient's psychosis inducing identification with a voice heard over the telephone, consult Jean-Michel Vives (2002).

*schwimmen*'/'seemingly shackelled/you saw her swim in the circle' (Stahnke and de Mello 2002a: II/4–5) – with the three Eurydices giving him instructions in how to place himself, how to perceive:

S.2 (*wie geträumt*): tritt zurück

S.1 (*härtest*): bleib steh'n

S.2 *der raum*

*den dein gang beschreibt*

*ist kaum zu beschreiten*

S.3: *wohin dich dein schatten führt*

S.2 (as if dreamt): step back

S.1 (harsh): stay there

S.2 the space

that your path delimits

can hardly be followed

S.3: to where your shadow leads you.

(Stahnke and de Mello 2002a: II/6–8)

In reaction to these spatial imperatives, the baritone '*spricht durch die Internetmusik*'/'speaks through the Internet music' as he recites: '*an dieser stille fast erstickt*'/'in this silence nearly suffocated' (Stahnke and de Mello 2002a: II/16). The imagery of circles upon which the libretto relies heavily throughout this scene is made manifest in the weaving of Orpheus's speech with the improvisation from the Internet. Indeed, Stahnke's score calls for the baritone to '*weiter ins Mikro sprechen: Krächzen übers Net*'/'speak in the microphone again: it weaves with the Net' while he speaks of '*dem wirbel in dem du sie schwimmen sahst, hielt sie deinen mund fest*'/'the whirlpool in which you saw her swim, she seized your mouth' (Stahnke and de Mello 2002a: II/21–22). The baritone goes on speaking this way for the remainder of the scene, in which he comes to terms with images of a woman that he is drowning.

In the third scene of the opera, the image of the other's body, reduced to a drowning head by the visual framing of the memory, foreshadows the dismemberment of Orpheus at the hands of the maenads. This morbid conflation speaks of the psychic violence produced by the absence of distinction between the other and the self.<sup>15</sup> Orpheus can here only find his way back to himself by talking through the images and voices imposed by the media surrounding him, bursting out of the screen in an attempt to take over his life. Unsurprisingly, it is the voice which orders this spatial confusion and leads him back to subjective embodiment when, in the third scene, he finally distinguishes his own fingers from those of the image he is conjuring. The drama then takes a different turn. The three Eurydices express their mournful laments at no longer being able to impose meaning on Orpheus's memories (Scene 4). Significantly, the last lament, sung by the Sybil-Eurydice, is the most engrained mediatic resistance that only lets go of its repressive power at the very end of the scene. This lament conflates the myths of Orpheus and Tiresias and thus reminds one that meaningful subjective embodiment cannot necessarily be regained in simply turning a blind eye to images, and that the voice, once it is institutionalized and has been affixed authoritative representations – like the prophetic, religious function of the Sybil's voice – can also contribute to subjective alienation.

*Orpheus Kristall* interrogates the voice as a *technikon* in which the resounding deferral of meaning is translated to percussion. Time and again, Orpheus

sings the words ‘*nach der Tat*’/‘after the fact’ (Eurydice’s murder), which are also the last three words of the opera before his voice gives way to a fading percussion solo (Stahnke and de Mello 2002a: I/1, V/45). In a technical musical displacement reminiscent of Aristotle’s ‘agent that produces impact’, Orpheus’s soul (*anima* in the score) is translated to the percussion, which opens and closes the opera (Stahnke and de Mello 2002a: V/44–45). This metaphorical displacement of the soul and the voice, especially the dying-out of sound in the final scene, brings to mind the symbolic use Abbate makes of Orpheus’s severed head. However, *Orpheus Kristall* demonstrates how voice, soul and instrumentation combine in an artistic production in which these elements are not assimilated to the eidetic reception of Orpheus, the aesthetic voice and musical reproduction, but challenge their historical signification in epistemological transmission and its inscriptive use of media. When Orpheus’s voice is translated to an instrument, it is at the price of his bodily expression. It symbolizes the gradual fading out of his animated presence. To put it bluntly, when Orpheus dies here his head does not keep on singing and the music dies with him.

## CONCLUSION

As in the eponymous myth, *Orpheus Kristall* is concerned, on the whole, with coming to terms with its mediation. All aspects of the production remind one that the myth of Orpheus itself is structured according to our human condition: one expresses unconscious affects through invocation in order to recognize in this projection that unknown part of oneself, just as one’s voice – on its way to the other – carries the traces of unconscious singular desires in search of recognition. The descent into hell to retrieve Eurydice’s *psyche* (or ghost) also reminds one that the voice’s embodiment is a necessary anchoring point for subjectivity. By staging a subject’s negotiation of digital media and inviting the spectator/listener to an analogous musical experience, *Orpheus Kristall* is a kindred work to Stiegler’s critique of media in the digital industry.

It is not a question of condemning, far from it, the industrial and technological destiny of humanity. It is rather the question of reinventing this destiny and, in this goal, of acquiring a comprehension of the situation that has led to aesthetic conditioning and, which, if it is not *overcome*, will lead to the ruin of consumption itself and a generalized disgust.

(2004a: 23, emphasis in original, my translation)

Rhetorical manoeuvres that metaphorically displace or conflate the voice with the head, the bodiless voice with authoritative knowledge, sound with image and imagination with media can lead to a loss of critical distance from media’s ideological role in the marketing and organization of individual and collective desires into ruinous expenditure and consumption. I have suggested that marketing’s successful harnessing of media relies psychically on the *phantasm*’s undisclosed characteristics of invocation (it calls to us). An attention to this two-faced voice can help in understanding and hopefully preventing the further deviation into desiring singularities. For if media in the previous industry was deployed to deviate desire towards the need for objects of consumption, then in the digital industry, it could be used to invert completely the desiring relation and reduce meaningful bodily expression and creative sublimation to the felt need of responding to media’s demands.

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