The Moving Stage: Writing about Opera

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The recent genre-defying multimedia opera *Writing to Vermeer* is the combined invention of its composer, Louis Andriessen, its librettist, British film auteur Peter Greenaway and its director, Saskia Boddeke, integral to which are Michel van der Aa's electronic music inserts and Emi Wada's design. So far there has been only one production of the opera: it was produced in Amsterdam in 1999 and in Adelaide and New York in 2000. In spite of, or indeed perhaps because of, the singularity of this production, the experience of the opera as a whole resists attempts to divide it up into parts. In particular, a written 'text' cannot be extracted or removed from the opera as experience or event, although it might be argued that, with the score and the libretto, two such texts exist.[1] It is thus for both theoretical and pragmatic reasons that we deal with the production in its entirety as the opera's text, and not as an exemplar that is secondary to a written (meta-) text from which it is seen to be derived.

The first part of the article seeks to generalise from this position, and by adopting what might be loosely termed a deconstructive approach to genre, offers an alternative to the idea of the integrity of opera as a synthesis of various art-forms, an idea which in one form or another has imbued thought about opera since its inception. The second part presents itself as an engagement with *Writing to Vermeer* that seeks to employ the inter-disciplinary and non-synthetic approach valorised in the preceding section.

I. Writing about Opera

It is our contention that writing about opera, for the most part, has written it out of the theatre. Writing about opera has meant writing about the parts of opera that are written down, namely the libretto and the musical text, rather than the parts that are not written down, that is, the *mise en scène*; the sets, the lighting, the costumes, the production, the event; that which we conceive of as the 'theatre' of the opera. Writing about opera has consequently taken its subject as far away as possible from ideas such as those of Brecht and Artaud, ideas that foreground the nature of

[1] There are many discrepancies between the printed libretto and the words actually sung. Further, the printed score (necessarily) entirely omits Michel van der Aa's electronic sound-track.

the theatre as construct, as something that can only take place as an event created in the artificial world of the stage.[2] Indeed, we speak of going to 'hear' an opera and for decades we have been happily listening to recordings 'of' operas, as if the opera were something whose essence could be extracted and detached from its performance context, as if its theatrical side were peripheral, or could be constructed in the imagination without the loss of anything essential.

This is not a recent phenomenon. Anton Bruckner used to listen to Wagner's operas with his eyes shut. It is said that after a performance of *Die Walküre*, he asked 'Tell me, why did they burn the woman at the end?'[3] Whether or not this anecdote is true, it serves as an urban myth for opera reception. Many present-day listeners to opera share this sentiment, in part because opera is generally loved by music lovers (it is no longer considered a 'low form of music' as it perhaps was in Kerman's day) rather than theatre-goers (who still largely consider it a 'low form of drama');[4] and those people who aren't musically literate but love opera seem to love it for the emotive and dramatic force of the music that renders and exceeds its often clichéd narratives of human drama and tragedy. Alternatively, they valorise the 'romanticism' of the stock story and somehow the music becomes imbued with the narrative force of the drama even though it has an affective life of its own.

It is a commonplace of opera criticism today that directors have (and all too often exploit) the capacity to distract attention from the music with their ideas for the theatre. The implication here seems to be that the imagination of the auditors, if required at all, is as good as or better than anything that might actually take place in the theatre; further, that music *is* the opera's 'world,' that what opera *is* is music; that is to say that music is all that is necessary to enter into the space of the opera. It is not so much that the auditor's imagination is trusted but that it is of so secondary an importance as to be immaterial to the experience of opera.

To take a recent example, in the Peter Sellars production of *Tristan und Isolde* at Opéra Bastille the scenery and props are replaced by a video that runs for the entire length of the opera. The stage supports only the opera's characters and the video is deliberately designed not to complement but rather to function in 'conversation' with the opera's stage action. Unsurprisingly, this has provoked consternation. Criticisms have included: 'The video ruins the music'; 'The music doesn't need the multi-media; the music itself evokes pictures or feelings in the mind of the listener.'[5] Sellars' response to such critics is to suggest that they stay at home with their CD players. Interestingly, Sellars feels that the way in which his production combines music, video and lighting brings it 'as close as possible to Wagner's conception of the unified work of art.' We will return to this observation at the end of the article.

Writing about opera has largely been the domain, not of theatre or performance studies specialists, not of art theorists, not of critics of literature, but of musicologists. The reasons for

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[2] See especially Bertholt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, 2nd edition, ed. and transl. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1974). Artaud's ideas are expressed most persuasively in 'Oriental and Western Theatre,' *The Theatre and its Doubles: Essays by Antonin Artaud*, transl. Victor Corti (London: Calder, 1970) 50–54.

[3] 'Bruckner used a piano score without text to study *Tristan*, proof that his interest was the actual music and that the dramatic content of the work was of no concern to him.' Hans-Hubert Schönzeler, *Bruckner* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1970) 46.

[4] Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (New York: Alfred A.Knopf, 1956) 21.

[5] Interview with Peter Sellars, *The Ticket*, BBC World Service (27 June 2004), <http://ww.bbc.co.uk/radio/noscript.shtml?/radio/aod/wservice_aod.shtml?wservice/theticket>.

this clearly have much to do with the fact that musicologists feel at ease discussing librettos, whereas literary theorists on the whole do not feel comfortable reading or analysing musical scores. These disarmingly simple reasons have had a crucial effect on the formation of the discipline of opera criticism. Musicologists are most in their element only when discussing music. Their discussion of librettos is on the whole lomited in scope; whilst some such discussion is highly perceptive, as a general rule it tends to be uneven and at times clumsy and un-insightful. The specialised nature of musical literacy has served until recently to keep opera criticism largely sealed off from literary theory (in what Greenaway refers to as 'the hallowed domains of music purists'[6]), and almost completely aloof from the wider forum of theatre criticism. It seems that the construction of and insistence upon opera *as* music and *not* theatre, may be attributed to this reluctance to treat opera in a meaningful way outside of a specifically musical context.

From time to time those concerned with opera have noticed the discrepancy between the genre and its reception. Gluck (following Francesco Algarotti), Wagner, Edward Dent, and Joseph Kerman tried in various ways to establish a relation between music and 'the rest' of what constitutes opera.[7] They have posed such questions as; 'How can the music serve the drama?' (Wagner); 'How can the music be dramatic?' (Kerman); 'How can music be prevented from swamping the exigencies of drama?' (Gluck/Algarotti).[8] Implicit in Kerman's thesis is a desire that the music of an opera be so dramatic as to override all other considerations and thus independently carry the dramatic content of the action. Tellingly, despite the title of his widely read work on opera, *Opera as Drama*, the word drama is nowhere defined, being characterised only in terms of what it is not; and one of the things drama is not, for Kerman, is theatrical.[9] His point of view is an extension of the tautology implicit in Wagner's insistence that opera's media (music, libretto, staging) be integrated to the point whereby they are mutually supportive. For Kerman this integration, with its insistence on the absolute centrifugal force of the music, would render virtually redundant all of the opera's other elements in that they are entirely given up to the music that is at its centre. It is as if Kerman would secretly approve of the invention of the invisible stage, which Wagner, having invented the invisible orchestra in the theatre at Bayreuth, perhaps facetiously wished for while watching rehearsals for *Parsifal*.

The question that we read into the writings of Algarotti is expressed from a different point of view by Nietzsche when he asks whether it is possible to listen to the third act of *Tristan und Isolde* without the stage and not expire from the unmediated power of the music.[10]

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[6] Jill Singer, Interview with Saskia Boddeke and Peter Greenaway, *The Arts Show*, ABC TV, <http://www.abc.net.au/artshow/2000/greenaway.htm> (accessed 28 February 2000).

[7] See Christoph Willibald Gluck, *Alceste* (preface), *Source Readings in Music History*, ed. Oliver Strunk (New York: Norton, 1950) 673–75; Francesco Algarotti, *Saggio sopra l'opera in musica* (1755), transl. unknown (1768), reprinted under the Italian title in Strunk, *Source Readings* 657–72; *Richard Wagner, Opera and Drama*, transl. William Ashton Ellis (Lincoln: U of Nebraska Press, 1995) and Edward J.Dent, *Opera* (London: Penguin Books, 1940).

[8] By 'drama' Algarotti meant situation.

[9] Kerman, *Opera as Drama* 7.

[10] 'To these genuine musicians I direct the question whether they can imagine a human being who would be able to perceive the third act of *Tristan und Isolde*, without any aid of word or image, purely as a tremendous symphonic movement, without expiring in a spasmodic unharnessing of all the wings of the soul?' Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, transl. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966) 126–27.

Nietzsche was unusually well positioned to write about opera; as a classical scholar he had an intimate knowledge of Greek drama (the model from which opera was invented); and not only was he a deeply literate musician, indeed a composer, he was a philosopher who unlike his contemporaries contributed substantially to the discipline of literary theory. His expostulation about *Tristan*, while perhaps implicitly endorsing Wagner's complaint that music should not be the 'master' of the drama, is certainly far removed from Wagner's assumption that the various constituent elements of opera, considered on the same plane as each other and thus all equally subservient to the 'Drama,' be given equal weight. Significantly, Nietzsche here makes a plea for theatre to rescue music for the imagination (the Apollonian) from the amorphous, hallucinatory clutches of the Dionysiac.

The Wagnerian idea of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* implies that the ideal opera which he had in mind is a synthesis of its various constituent parts.[11] By considering all of opera's parts as necessarily interdependent and complementary to its music, Wagner, and a whole tradition of musicological writing on opera after him, from Dent and Adorno to Kerman, purveyed the synthetic ideal. At least, when taken on their own terms, this is what they appear to do.[12] What is suppressed here, except where it is explicitly denied, is the position that is at odds with the very notion of synthesis: opera turns on music, and everything else bears a relation to music, with all other possibilities of dialogue or interaction between the constituent parts being entirely secondary.[13] Music is always, it seems, despite much protestation to the contrary, considered to be the separate master-text; the music is the *Kunstwerk* and the rest is *gesamt*. If we close our eyes we can experience opera—if we close our ears we cannot.

In his insightful introduction to the collection of essays entitled 'Opera through other eyes' David Levin raises a number of these issues.[14] Accepting that 'opera has traditionally been seen as a musical genre,' he is, as we are, cautious about what an opera's text might be ('those aspects of opera that can be read'). Asking 'Why would opera be off-limits to contemporary literary theory?' he suggests that approaches derived from such theory 'would challenge some of the most entrenched and jealously guarded notions of how and what opera communicates,' and highlights the tendency of musicologists to 'avoid a contestation of meaning, instead of seeking its sanctification' by taking refuge in music. However, most of the essays that follow rarely mention the music of the operas they deal with. It has taken a generation of writers from the movement known as the New Musicology, writers such as Susan McClary, Carolyn Abbate and John Richardson, to call the idea of synthesis into question by addressing the 'contestation of

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[11] Despite the Wagnerian origin of this term and the fact that it conveys adequately Wagner's thinking, Wagner himself hardly ever used the term. The usual English translation, 'Complete artwork,' fails to do justice to the first part of the word; '*gesamt*-' from the root '*sammeln*' (to collect or gather) imports into the word '*Gesamtkunstwerk*,' the idea that the completeness of artwork in question is a collection of various parts, whose synthesis forms a whole.

[12] Dent, *Opera* 27: 'The more I frequent opera, the more I am interested in the work itself and its presentation as a whole, and the more indifferent I become to its individual parts'; Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner* (Trowbridge: New Left Books, 1981). See also the succinct analysis of Adorno's view of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in Robert Widkin, *Adorno on Music* (London: Routledge, 1998) 76–8.

[13] In Dent (*Opera*) this is not even hidden. Despite footnote 12, above, he says: 'In all operas, what really holds the audience is the beauty and expressiveness of the music' (26).

[14] David J. Levin, ed., *Opera through Other Eyes* (Stanford, CA; Stanford UP, 1993). The following quotations are from pages 2–5.

meaning' in the music.[15] Their writing, informed by literary theory of French post-structuralism, asks questions not about how opera is put together, but what its effect is. Abbate's question about whether the characters in opera hear the music as the audience does prises apart assumptions of musical autonomy, and consequently the notion that an opera can be heard in only one way, that the music essentially has one meaning.[16] Richardson draws attention to the Brechtian effects of distanciation in both the music and the staging of Philip Glass's opera *Akhnaten*, a technique that persistently reminds the audience that they are in the theatre by foregrounding its artifice. This foregrounding allows the audience at once to succumb to the theatrical illusion while being able to distinguish it from reality, a distinction which playfully highlights the impossibility, and perhaps more significantly, the undesirability, of verisimilitude.

In the final scene of *Writing to Vermeer* the stage is flooded as a great stream of water (and light) pours from the ceiling onto the centre of the stage. This is a *coup de théâtre*. It is the end of the world for the women on stage and yet the audience, although surprised, remain in their seats in the opera theatre. This foregrounding of theatrical artifice and emphasis on the symbolic is an approach that, whilst drawing upon them, is altogether opposite to those illusionist devices invented in the seventeenth century, notably by the sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini, who was also a playwright and director of stage plays. For example, it is reported that in Bernini's celebrated spectacle *The Inundation of the Tiber*:

> he made it appear that a great mass of water advanced from far away little by little breaking through the dykes. When the water broke through the last dyke facing the audience, it flowed forward with such a rush and spread so much terror among the spectators that there was no-one, not even among the most knowledgeable, who did not quickly get up to leave in fear of an actual flood.[17]

We now venture upon an approach to writing about opera that is to be distinguished from those approaches referred to above on both a theoretical and a practical level. Firstly, the opera we address interrogates and exploits the limits of its genre in both subject and performance. The nature of *Writing to Vermeer* is such that attending seriously to its force and significance demands a deconstruction of the way opera has traditionally been thought. Secondly, we attempt to gesture beyond the medium of print, a medium which has obvious shortcomings. Musical examples must be very short, illustrating detailed points of analysis, shorn even of an immediate context that might have empowered the reader to evaluate the written text. An even greater restriction, it seems to us, is that illustration of the theatrical side of opera is generally limited to a few still photographs that provide an inadequate illustration of the sets and costumes of a given production, and which are altogether meaningless when it comes to conveying a sense of the opera as event experienced by its audience *in situ*. Our insistence upon

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[15] Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: U of Minneapolis Press, 1991); McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 2000); Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narration in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991); John Richardson, *Singing Archaeology: Philip Glass's Akhnaten* (Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 1999).

[16] Here Abbate gestures towards Derrida's deconstruction of the text with its insistence on the logic of the supplement, the activity of which challenges the logocentric notion that the text only says what it purports to say. This is discussed at length in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, transl. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976).

[17] Catherine and Robert Engass, *The Life of Bernini by Filippo Balduccini*, quoted in Charles Avery, *Bernini: Genius of the Baroque* (Pennsylvania & London: U Park Press, 1966).

the shortcomings of an approach to opera that revolves around it as text extends to the very medium in which debate about opera takes place. We utilise possibilities of digital technology to present examples in the form of video, hyperlinked to text, in order to bring something of the theatre of the opera into the space of textual criticism.

II. Fluidity and Constraint in *Writing to Vermeer:* The Moving Stage

In the opera *Writing to Vermeer*, the stage moves. The ground shifts constantly and this incessant instability subverts and makes a folly of any attempt to stand still. The *mise-en-scène* is a constant stream of flux and liquids; indeed, the very stage itself—across which letters sung and written flow like water—appears unstable. As the audience take their seats in the opera house Catherina, Maria and Saskia have already begun writing their letters on three screens at the back of the stage. Their activity of writing is accompanied by Van der Aa's electronic sound-sample of a toothpick being scraped on a table. Instead of beginning with an overture the opera introduces its audience to the sight and sound of the letters being written, and the stage is broken up into a 'chequerboard' of illuminated squares that the women it seems are at risk of falling through. From the very outset *Writing to Vermeer* signals its departure from the traditional formal framework of opera (see Figure 1).[18]

Figure 1. Opening scene of *Writing to Vermeer*

The opera's three principals, Catherina Bolnes (Vermeer's wife), Maria Thins (Vermeer's mother-in-law) and Saskia de Vries (Vermeer's model), write letters to Vermeer. These letters, full of domestic affairs, of children's accidents, of local news and of longing, quickly take on a significance beyond the intimacies of the life they recount. So too, the text of these letters initially projected onto screens at the back of the stage—the letters that the women begin to write even before the opera proper starts—trespasses onto the stage itself. The letters move; at times casting themselves like shadows onto the bodies of the characters whom they concern and whose concerns they recount, impeding them, being impressed upon them. And ultimately,

[18] All examples in this article are taken from the house video of the production of *Writing to Vermeer*, Telstra Adelaide Festival, 2000, and are reproduced by permission. MPEG files of all examples may be viewed at: www.music.unimelb.edu.au/research/context/vermeer.html.

the letters, along with their subjects, are erased in the opera's final scene of inundation as everything turns to water at the end of the stage.

A previous article examines the creative significance of the disjunctive spaces generated by the interplay of *Writing to Vermeer*'s multi-media, and employs as metaphor for these spaces the blank pages in the score of Sweelinck's 'Mein junges Leben hat ein End' that Saskia performs in the opera.[19] The present chapter, arguably continuing this theme, is concerned with the significance of various fluids—the blood of assassination, the ink of writing, the varnish of painting and the ever-present water (life-giving and ultimately murderous)—that repeatedly flood the stage and the senses. These liquids seep, overlap and imprint themselves on the creative space of the opera and so disrupt the integrity of its various domains (film, stage, music) by flowing between them. It explores the ways in which these seepages are conveyed, among others, by the musical processes of the opera; the seepage of seventeenth-century bowing and non-vibrato practices into twentieth-century string technique, the interchange between Sweelinck's songs and structures from John Cage, and the expansion of the sound of writing into van der Aa's electronic contribution to the score. Finally, it scrutinises the complex exchange between these uncontained fluids and the symbolic constraints placed upon the women ('it's all women that you paint') writing from within the household to Vermeer as they move upon the stage, in and out of the canvasses of Vermeer, and as they paradoxically emerge from cages made of giant dressmakers' frames in the final, flooded, scene.

The movement, and indeed even the presence, of various fluids on the opera's stage is emblematic of a mobility and contamination being explored and exploited in the domain of opera by the creators of *Writing to Vermeer*. The opera playfully engages the limits of representation in a manner that laps at the borders of opera, music, theatre and music theatre. Also, in a sense, the opera writes itself on the stage; Greenaway's libretto, designed with a 'non-developing line,' was 'translated and taken up' in production by Boddeke.[20] This is signalled by the very title and subject of the opera, and by the variety of media engaged for the purpose of writing to Vermeer. Peter Greenaway comments in an interview, 'It is a nice irony that the opera is called *Writing to Vermeer.* Vermeer is a painter so why do we talk about writing? And in terms of the story Vermeer is entirely and absolutely absent.' [21] The opera begins by marking Vermeer's absence. Its action turns on the correspondence precipitated when the Dutch baroque painter leaves his domestic household and with it the traditional subjects of his painting to travel to the Hague. Catherina, Maria and Saskia, although dressed in Emi Wada's costumes imported and modified from Vermeer's canvasses, challenge and stretch the bounds of their seventeenth-century frames, the frames in which they appear to be opaque, serene and self-contained subjects (see Figure 2).

As the opera develops the frames from within which Catherina, Maria and Saskia are reconstructed become increasingly flexible and asymmetrical. The women are not so much taken out of their domestic frames but rather these frames expand and warp allowing them greater scope for movement and expression beyond composure.[22] This expansion, distortion

[19] Rowena Braddock and Nichols Routley, 'Productive Disjunction and the Play of Rapture: Reading the Blanks in *Writing to Vermeer*,' *Musicology Australia* 27 (2004-5): 73–93.

[20] Singer, Interview.

[21] Singer, Interview.

[22] Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, transl. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1987).

Figure 2. Opening of scene IV of *Writing to Vermeer*

and discomposure occurs as the domestic sphere of the stage is subjected repeatedly, in a jarring and violent fashion, to political events that are projected behind and at times onto the very stage itself. These events—lynching, mob violence, riots, flooding—that impose themselves in the opera theatre by way of projected images and filmed episodes accompanied by an electronic soundtrack are represented on the stage in the form of various fluids. The blood, ink, water and varnish that appear and flow upon the stage signal the impossibility of the discretion of the domestic sphere (the sphere of Vermeer's paintings), the impossibility of self-containment for both the women and the insular world they inhabit. Curiously, these events impact upon the women and yet remain entirely separate from them; the content of their letters never ventures beyond the concerns of Delft and yet the incidents and fears related in these letters parallel the escalating violence outside their world. In this respect *Writing to Vermeer* demonstrates and develops what is at once a strange schism and an overlapping between different realms of experience and different modes of representation. This contradictory or paradoxical dynamic of fluidity and constraint signals both the difficulty and the unique force of this hybrid opera for which synthetic unity is out of the question.

In a moment in the opera when painting and life dangerously coincide, Cornelia, one of Vermeer's children, swallows a liquid described as both varnish and paint. Catherina and Maria, whose letters recount the incident, berate the absent Vermeer for leaving the pot uncovered. In the extract shown at Figure 3, the women can be seen sitting and standing at their kitchen tables, tables perched on top of the projected text of the letters they are singing to Vermeer. The three principal women are tripled (the stage is busy with not only them but six other women who magnify them, and a chorus of children), although only one of the triply represented women sings. Here Catherina and Maria sing of their alarm in a fast recitative, while two of the children sing over them in music of an almost chorale-like unexpressiveness. The children sing the date (20 May 1672) and announce 'The third letter from Maria Thins to Johannes Vermeer in The Hague,' while the women, as always, sing the text of their letters; not to each other, or to the children, but to the audience, and to the absent Vermeer (see Figure 3).

In Cornelia's encounter with varnish, an unease is generated as elements that might otherwise remain discrete collide and interpenetrate in alarming and unpredictable ways.

The boundaries between things suddenly seem porous as they accidentally intersperse and interpenetrate, producing new resonances with their own contradictions. Our article is concerned in part with the question of the significance of this moment in which art, represented here by the means necessary for its production, intrudes critically upon and threatens to disrupt life.

The varnish, or paint, which to Cornelia tasted like 'syrup of figs,' turns her grey and soon passes through her 'like sticky sludge from the canal.' The liquid that Cornelia consumes, a liquid she curiously mistakes for something sweet and delicious, threatens her life and texturally connects her to the slime at the bottom of the canal. Here, Vermeer's paint takes place and moves where it does not belong. Accordingly, this brief coincidence of art and life bespeaks a certain menace, a disruption in the order of things that is played out on multiple levels in *Writing to Vermeer*.

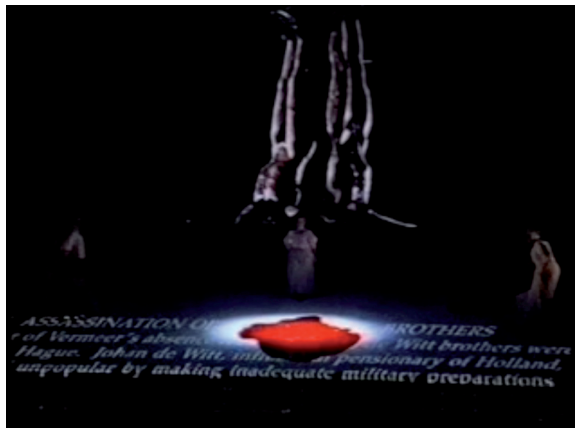
The domestic sphere from which Catherina, Maria and Saskia write to Vermeer of fairly mundane everyday concerns is seemingly discrete, but on closer inspection it is riddled with symbols and symptoms of foreboding and of unease. For example, as this passage illustrates, the only intended interaction that the women and children would have with Vermeer's paint is its purchase: Maria writes, to music as serenely untroubled as Vermeer's canvasses, 'I have bought you a quantity of natural ultramarine from a new apothecary.' And, of course, it is these women, in the domestic sphere that he paints. We shall return to develop this theme later.

The opera in general works to set up agonistic oppositions—public/private, political/domestic—that are reflected visually in the separate domains dedicated in the theatre to stage and film, and musically by the use of acoustic music for the stage action and electronic music for the film sections. These oppositions seemingly insist on discretion, yet the integrity of the opposing spheres is constantly threatened by the transgressive movement of fluids between them. These seepages between realms are provoked by moments of violent rupture and intrusion, caused by the violent events of the Year of Disasters, 1672, the year of the opera's action. Cornelia's encounter with the varnish connects, all too tangibly, the paint with the painted. Ink enables the women to write to Vermeer, to tell how much he is missed and what is awry in Delft, though, worryingly ('what if you fell into a canal … were seduced by Spanish brigands, attacked by the Orange mob in The Hague … ?'), he never replies.

Figure 3. Opening of scene III of *Writing to Vemeer*

Although never mentioned in the letters/libretto, rioting between Protestants and Catholics which culminates in the political murder of the de Witt brothers in The Hague (shown on film with electronic music, as are all the 'public' scenes of the opera) erupts onto the stage. A video of a lynching projected at the back of the stage spreads beyond this domain, grafting itself as palimpsest onto the *mise-en-scène*. After the video, a slide of the painting entitled 'The bodies of the de Witt brothers' is projected onto the back of the stage.[23] Electronic music is abruptly displaced by acoustic music. Finally, a text that connects the murder of the de Witt brothers to Cornelia's drinking of varnish, a text entirely separate from the letters being sung at that point, is scrolled backwards up the stage. At the same time, the blood from the hanging bodies of Johann and Cornelius de Witt pours onto the floor of Vermeer's household in Delft. The stage covered with projections of the letters being written to the absent Vermeer is layered over with blood, and the women of his household, initially alarmed by its presence, soon abandon their desperate attempts to remove it and begin, inexplicably, in a rhythm that becomes increasingly frenzied, to immerse themselves in it. The commonplace device of using paint to represent blood on the stage here takes on a new significance.

Example 4. From scene V of *Writing to Vermeer*



The women on a stage plunged into darkness stare with horror at the illuminated circle of blood, with an intensification of the alarm with which they described Cornelia's drinking of the varnish; yet strangely they go on to tell of quite unrelated incidents in a tone that is altogether cheerful and ebullient ('I have an excellent piece of news'). And yet the music that accompanies this bloody moment, as has already been remarked on in the existing scholarship on this opera, is of an intensity commensurate with the women's expressions of horror and entirely at odds with their words.[24] Likewise, the electronic music played during the film of

[23] Attributed to Jan de Baen, 1672–1675. This painting hangs in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. It depicts the murder of Grand Pensionary Johann de Witt and his brother Cornelius.

[24] Yayoi Uno Everett, 'Musical Design and Signification in *Writing to Vermeer* (1997–1999),' *Tijdschrift voor Muziektheorie* 7.2 (2002): 67–79; Maya Trochimczyk, '"Writing to Vermeer": A View of a "Filmic" Opera,' *The Music of Louis Andriessen*, ed. Maya Trochimczyk (New York: Routledge, 2002); see also comments by Andriessen himself: 'Writing to Vermeer,' *The Art of Stealing Time*, ed. Miriam Zegers, transl. Clare Yates (New York: Arc Music, 2002) 301–32.

the lynching is generated by sampling the sounds heard at the very beginning of the opera, of women writing letters, and thus is similarly disjunctive. The sound of writing, alarmingly, becomes the sound of bones cracking as ink and blood flow between these two acoustic realms. Later in this scene, water pours across the stage as the women, now stripped down to their undergarments, attempt to wash the blood of the murdered de Witt brothers from their bodies (see Example 5).

Example 5. Interlude between scenes V and VI of *Writing to Vermeer*

Water and blood mix on the stage as Lully's Turkish March invades the medium of electronic music, and the resulting electronic distortion both highlights the discreteness of the two musical realms and connects them in an uneasy and provocative way. Significantly, many of the musical processes that characterise this opera act as metaphors for the see pages of fluids that invade its disparate realms of experience. The seventeenth-century musical setting, so favoured by Vermeer and his contemporaries in their domestic paintings, intrudes upon the realm of late twentieth-century opera in several ways. Andriessen exports aspects of Baroque string technique (lots of bow, extended phrasing, a minimum of articulation and no vibrato)[25] and the sound-world of a Baroque continuo section (the many plucked and struck instruments in the score) into a world of Stravinskian rhythms and late twentieth-century abruptness of contrast. Music by Sweelinck, Lully, and other seventeenth-century composers intrudes into structures derived from Cage's *Six Melodies*. Van der Aa's treatment of Lully's march is emblematic of the distortion generated between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, which is played upon throughout the opera. Both Andriessen and van der Aa engage sound images of baroque musical practice in spirited conversation with unmistakably twentieth-century musical languages.

In the following scene, the stage itself becomes a canvas. The stage, already riddled and awash with letters, now becomes densely multi-textural and inter-textual. Vermeer's costumes, his distinctive use of blue and yellow, are taken out of their seventeenth-century settings as the milkmaid walks upon the stage and the women roll out and beat rugs that are Vermeer's canvasses (see Example 6). Saskia, standing on the kitchen table, frenziedly plays dress-ups with

[25] See Andriessen, *The Art of Stealing Time* 323.

Example 6. From scene IV of *Writing to Vermeer*

Vermeer's costumes while his paintings are projected behind and across the stage. Vermeer's and Wada's costumes are taken off and put on layer after layer as Saskia animatedly reads a letter. In this scene in which Maria writes, to a musical phrase of exceptional strength, 'It's all women that you paint,' *Writing to Vermeer's* women stretch the frame just as they repeatedly, along with the water, negotiate the limit of the stage and the domestic sphere. In this scene one of the children, possibly Cornelia, cuts a hole—as though she is cutting a canvas—on and in the stage.[26] The hole fills with water and she tumbles in. We witness her attempts to surmount this alarming momentary immersion. Ironically, of course, it is Vermeer who the women fear will be drowned in a canal when all the while it is they who face the ever-present threat of inundation. This threat of inundation is realised in the final scenes of the opera when the women emerge, like moths from a chrysalis, from dressmaker's frames, as the stage is apocalyptically flooded with water (see Example 7).

This inundation in *Writing to Vermeer*, so different in theatrical intent from Bernini's overflowing Tiber, marks a paradoxical freedom. In the deliberate breaching of the dykes to protect Holland from invasion the Dutch economy was irretrievably damaged. This violent immersion was an act, a movement to secure freedom that brought with it immense destruction and human suffering. As the opera's director emphasises, this strategy of flooding the country in order to keep the enemy away resulted in the flooding of many homes, homes that were inhabited by women and children.[27] The flow of ink that enables communication with the absent Vermeer lends the women an expressive freedom of movement not afforded them as his painted subjects even as it binds them to him (after all they are largely letters of longing, letters asking him to hurry home). So too, the (partial) emergence of the women from the constraint of the dressmakers' frames, and by extension from the frames of Vermeer's very canvasses, is no simple release—it is a freedom that is circumscribed, compromised and immeasurably complex in a manner that recalls the relation of the quoted seventeenth-century music to

[26] Referring to a moment in the Frankfurt staging of *Aida* in 1981 where the stage is dug up, Samuel Weber suggests that such disruption of the stage questions '*the materiality of the scene itself* in all its equivocal overdetermination' (his emphasis). Samuel Weber, 'Taking Place: Towards a Theatre of Dislocation,' *Opera Through Other Eyes*, ed. David Levin, 107–46.

[27] Singer, Interview.

Cage's musical structures.

The water that flows repeatedly across the stage in *Writing to Vermeer* symbolises the opera's deliberate breaching of boundaries between terrains—of art and life, acoustic and electronic music, film and stage, flesh and varnish. The boundaries of the opera's constituent art forms are blurred and ruptured by the movement, seepage and eventual flooding of ink, blood, paint and water. *Writing to Vermeer's* constituent overlapping of art forms, its crossings-over of seemingly discrete realms and resonances, its co-implication of fluidity and constraint, plays significantly upon notions of integrity, unity and authenticity.

Example 7. Closing scene of *Writing to Vermeer*

Living with Transformation

Writing to Vermeer is an exceptional opera. The question may reasonably be asked: why have we taken such a work to exemplify what we characterise as a new approach to opera? This hybrid opera does not proceed by way of principles of harmonisation or integration; rather its constituent elements combine in a manner that is provocative and at times mystifying. *Writing to Vermeer* presents us with snap shots of a world that is fragmented and inchoate as opposed to synthetically unified; a world on and beyond its stage, its subject(s) and its music that never stands still. As Peter Greenaway remarked in a forum at the Adelaide Festival where *Writing to Vermeer* was performed, 'Part of our [the production team's] success is disagreement.'[28] Its many media, each of which make distinctive individual contributions while remaining wholly interdependent, are engaged in a constant mutual interrogation which both saturates the surface of this work and constitutes its very substance. We suggest that this mutual interrogation underlies all opera, to a greater or lesser extent. In this respect *Writing To Vermeer* may be seen to render actual that which is latent or potential in opera as an art form that is inherently mobile, mixed and diverse. Not only does this opera stretch and interrogate the framework of Vermeer's paintings, but it also explores and exploits the limits of its genre.

Clearly, the way in which *Writing to Vermeer* employs multiple and highly sophisticated forms of film and video projection, as opposed to the more limited ensemble of media available to the nineteenth century, lends itself to a response that focuses to a significant degree on

[28] Singer, Interview.

the theatre of the opera and the opera's production *per se*. And yet, it is a commonplace that Wagner's theatre at Bayreuth, with its darkened auditorium, raked seats, and invisible orchestra, is the prototype of the cinema. This overlap between opera and cinema brings to mind Eisenstein, who early in the history of the cinema invokes the notion of the collision rather than the collusion of its elements.[29] Interestingly, despite the fact that cinema was not invented until 1895, French film-maker Jean-Luc Godard refers to Vermeer as the first cinematographer.[30]

It is perhaps no surprise that the opera event provoking the most comment as we write is Peter Sellars' *Tristan*, referred to above. This production incorporates a video, which is more or less all that is visible apart from the characters dressed in minimalist costumes. Sellars considers the video to be an attempt to make visible the 'psychological murky waters underneath' the score; in other words, to render visible what is latent.[31] When talking about the production, Sellars invokes Wagner's idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and, resisting a notion of synthetic fusion, describes it as a place where 'the senses blur.' Accordingly, he maintains that the video projected onto the back of the stage provides not a distraction, but a 'chorus of diversity, where nothing drowns anything else.'[32] In this respect Sellars is enacting and exploiting the play of contradictions that we are attempting to theorise.

In our insistence that opera takes place on the stage we do not wish to say that its music is not profoundly important, only that to treat the opera *as music* betrays opera into a realm of experience whose exclusiveness it resists. We do not want to argue about the equality or otherwise of the various component media of opera. We seek to demonstrate that the performance of opera, because of its unique composition, is a space where nothing is stable and where everything is constantly in motion; where the primacy of one medium, if momentarily established, is immediately challenged. To extend Nicholas Cook's discussion of the relationship between primacy and meaning, we would say that where primacy is challenged, meaning is transformed.[33] And indeed, as Sellars says, opera means 'a constant sense of living with transformation.'[34] Opera turns on this, not on music alone. The operatic stage, when fluid and perpetually mobile as it is in *Writing to Vermeer*, is a site *par excellence* for the reversal of expectation, and for the transformation and destabilisation of any fixed and singular relation to meaning.

[29] Discussed in Nicholas Cook, *Analyzing Musical Multimedia* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), chapter 2.
[30] Singer, Interview.
[31] Sellars, *The Ticket*.
[32] Sellars, *The Ticket*.
[33] See Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia* 98–129.
[34] Interview with Peter Sellars in forum 'Opera Now' at the Adelaide Festival, March 2000.