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The composer as bricoleur: Notions of contemporary opera in the genesis of a short film

This thesis is presented in partial fulfilment of the degree of Master of Arts (Performing Arts)

Tsok Wee Yap

Edith Cowan University
Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts
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Introduction

This Master of Arts research was conceived from an idea to examine the role of the composer in the imagination and genesis of a short film that combined contemporary opera and film. The short film was envisaged to be a feasible way of testing the ideas and theories generated as part of the research enquiry. What eventuated was Out of Sight / Out of Mind (short title: Out of Sight), an eight-minute film that readapts the operatic voice for screen and uses contemporary notions of composition and opera in its presentation. In reporting the research, this exegesis incorporates literature and multimedia reviews of opera, film and music; discusses the practices and methodologies applied to make the short film; and reflects on the overall process, from beginning to completion. This exegesis is confined in its examination of opera as film in how to create an opera for screen. It does not delve into areas such as visual music, theatre conventions and music videos, where the relationship and language that exists has developed out of cinema’s own relationship with opera.

The research partly drew on my personal experiences, history, education and connection to film and music. My education and experience in music and film include a Graduate Diploma in screen composition from the Australian Film Television and Radio School (AFTRS), where I composed the music for the short films, Needle, Brush, Arrow, Sword (Fairfield, 2015), Smith (Fairfield, 2011), Entwined (Ford, 2011) and Kiss (Murawski, 2011). In addition, I have an Associate and Licentiate of Music Australia for piano from the Australian Music Education Board, and a Certification III in Electronic Music Production from the Sound Audio Engineering Institute in Perth, Australia.

In pursuing this research and creating the project, I worked in the capacity as researcher, scriptwriter (librettist), composer, sound designer and director, among other things. Specifically, working as the screenwriter, composer, sound designer and director allowed the aural performance to be considered
composition (Cage, 2011) and the work to be expressed as screen opera — where ‘music’ was essential to the work (Kennedy, 2015). In this case, music incorporates all the sounds in the film — the dialogue, sung words, instrumental music and manipulated sounds and music. The layering of sounds as composition (Cage, 2011) and use of noise and sound, as opposed to only musical notation, correlates with John Cage’s notion of composition, where “everything we do is music” (as cited in White, 2004, para. 8). In capturing and expressing the complexity and emergent nature of this research, which required various synthesised roles to accomplish the short film, the metaphor of the composer as bricoleur was employed.

Bricolage was used by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) to elucidate the process in which mythmakers conceive their ideas. According to Lévi-Strauss, the ‘untamed mind’ pools readily available ideas, notions and beliefs as its ‘tools’ in building mythology. Bricolage, as the derivative word suggests, is an approach to problem solving that uses all available resources to construct, procure and fashion a solution. In research enquiry, bricolage allows the combination of multiple, and sometimes competing, methodologies, ideologies, theories, narratives and positionality (Denzin & Lincoln, 1999; Rogers, 2012).

Denzin and Lincoln (1999) suggested that there are five types of bricoleur that fall under the umbrella of bricolage. In generating and reporting an interdisciplinary work that incorporated film and opera, I identified with three of these types — the methodological, interpretive and narrative bricoleur. The methodological bricoleur captures the multifaceted responsibilities and methods that were assumed by my differing and changing roles in the research. In the capacity of the interpretive bricoleur, bricolage highlights the various perspectives that I carried as a result of my positionality — for example, how my “personal history, biography, gender, social class, race and ethnicity” affected the research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1999, p. 5). The narrative bricoleur frames research in a certain context and ideology — in this case, contemporary opera, screen opera and music were among the ideas and concepts on which this bricolage was based.
Even in the role of composition, bricolage may be employed to illustrate the compositional process. In this instance, similarities may be drawn between the metaphor of researcher as bricoleur and composer as improviser. Improvisation in music is the ability to create and perform music simultaneously. Improvisation draws on musical experience, technique, knowledge, past practice and an understanding of the work of others to inspire the creation of new musical moments (Bailey, 1992; Grant, 2010), and is applied in a vast array of musical styles, including opera. Improvisation can be described as:

the creation of a musical work, or the final form of a musical work, as it is being performed. It may involve the work's immediate composition by its performers, or the elaboration or adjustment of an existing framework, or anything in between. (Nettl et al., 2015, para. 1)

Improvisation is a technique that I employ when composing. This developed from my ability to audiate (create and hear music in my head) and play by ear. For me, improvisation is a spontaneous form of composition in which music is heard first in my head, and then transposed onto the keyboard. It is analogous to presenting a speech or writing a story. Knowing what comes next often varies — sometimes I know what I want to ‘say’ a few phrases ahead, and sometimes I know only a moment before. In this manner, improvisation connects the music because it allows what was previously played to influence and inspire the next musical moment. As my technical ability on the piano developed and my exposure to music grew, so did my ability to improvise. In the overall composition of Out of Sight, I employed and adapted different approaches to composition. As a bricoleur composer, I employed improvisation, the layering of sounds and audio files, readaptation of ‘operatic voice’, and manipulated sound and dialogue.

Research Questions

This study’s research questions were as follows:
1. What are the conventions of opera and film that pose challenges specific to composing and realising an operatic short film?
2. What innovations and techniques can be developed and employed to overcome the challenges to realising opera as film?
3. How does adopting the role of composer-bricoleur affect the interdisciplinary collaborations inherent in the project?

**Aim**

The aim of this research was to create an original short film as an experiment examining opera as film, by adapting a practice-led research (PLR) methodology, while working in the role of the composer as bricoleur. As part of this aim, the work examined and attempted to resolve the conflict between the conventions of film and opera through notions of contemporary opera and composition. The ideas generated from the research and the influences gained during the conceptualisation of the project were anticipated to drive the necessary adaptations required to resolve this conflict.

**Significance**

This Master of Arts research is significant in its contribution of knowledge to the area of contemporary opera, film studies and interdisciplinary studies. As an original work, it is a unique addition to the body of Australian films, Australian operas and Australian screen operas. The ideas generated by using the captured and manipulated voice demonstrate a synthesis of novel ideas in readapting the operatic voice for screen. In composition, the adaptation of the entire audio track as a composed score challenges preconceived notions of composition and the composed score in film. The analysis of this score, in terms of its diegetic components — *non-lyrical* (sound) and *lyrical* (music) aspects — and how the audience associates with each element may hold significance for future analysis of films as screen operas. The documented role of the composer as bricoleur is also a novel and unique approach to research
and composition. As a study in interdisciplinary collaboration, this captures a perspective of collaboration in a field that has been largely unexamined.

**Chapter Outlines**

This exegesis is structured into five chapters. ‘Chapter One: Setting the Scene’ examines the definitions of opera and its relationship to film as screen opera. Opera's history is examined and contextualised, thereby providing an opportunity to develop the evolving operatic voice for screen. In a review of its rich history, screen opera is traced from its infancy during the silent film era to its contemporary form. From the 1980s, despite attempts to revive its form through television audiences, screen opera’s existence (excluding documentary-styled broadcasts of operas) relied mainly on experimental one-off pieces. Chapter One concludes with a section on interdisciplinary collaboration, and examines areas where opera on screen has been studied.

‘Chapter Two: The Challenge’ explores the challenges faced when marrying film and opera. The conventions of opera — sung dialogue, suspension of action and time through music, exaggeration of words, and repetition of words and phrases (Fredman, Sutherland & Bonyne, 2003) — are revealed by examining verisimilitude and the suspension of disbelief in the context of opera as film. Siegfried Kracauer’s (1970) theory on the realism of film is examined and contrasted with the artifice of opera as a cause for the collision between the worlds of opera and film. This chapter presents a possible solution to this collision by readapting the operatic voice to include spoken, sung and affected voice. It examines diegesis as a way of relating and analysing the different types of operatic voice on screen. The discussion of the role of sound and music in film leads to Anahid Kassabian’s (2001) ideas on how audiences identify with music in film through **affiliating** and **assimilating identifications**. Following this, the organisation of sound is examined as a way of describing musical composition. Through this notion, the entire audio track of the short film may be regarded as composition, and the short film may be thought of as screen opera. Finally, surrealism is presented as a movement in
arts and literature that shares a commonality with opera in its affinity for the irrational, thereby allowing the artificiality of opera to exist on screen.

‘Chapter Three: Piecing the Research’ outlines how the research was assembled through the project’s overarching methodology of PLR. PLR allowed me to use my practice to outline the research through a narrative — the exegesis — that describes the events, circumstances, scenarios, strategies and methods used. In this multifaceted research project, I worked as a bricoleur to weave together the various stories, processes, methods and strategies that piece the research together. Here, bricolage was employed as a metaphor to describe the patchwork nature of this research practice, where a multitude of methods and tools were employed individually, in conjunction and at times overlapping, in order to fulfil the research needs.

Chapter Three also discusses the four steps of creativity (preparation, incubation, illumination and verification) established by Wallas (1926), and applies these steps to break down the creative process. In addition, each research activity is further classified as either research for, through and/or into practice (Frayling, 1993). In this manner, the various pieces of research methodology may be viewed topographically, and appreciated when examining its construction and the relationship between each piece of activity in the genesis of the short film as research.

‘Chapter Four: Behind the Scenes’ is a reflective discussion of the creative aspects of the project, from the conception to completion of Out of Sight. The themes in this short film are divulged in an exploration of the film’s hidden messages. This chapter also examines my intentions and ideas regarding film and operatic conventions in combining opera with film in this production. Surrealism as a genre, as well as its relationship with poetry and dreams, are discussed as an influence on the project, and used to support the stylistic choices made in the film. This chapter examines the collaboration employed in this interdisciplinary work, focusing on how I worked as a bricoleur and collaborator. It also includes a section on music, composing with a Musical
Instrument Digital Interface (MIDI) and sequencer, and a breakdown of the musical pieces in the short film. Finally, this chapter analyses the audio elements of the film, based on *assimilating* and *affiliating assimilations*.

‘Chapter Five: Out of Sight | Out of Mind’ presents the short film, *Out of Sight | Out of Mind*. This is the creative outcome of the research led by practice, as described in Chapters Three and Four, and is the culminated research work examined and discussed in Chapters One and Two. While this film has been positioned towards the end of the exegesis, it is not my intention for it to be viewed only after reading Chapters One to Four.

In, ‘Chapter Six: Conclusion’, the significance of the research and the research questions are reviewed. The main points of the exegesis are considered with particular focus on the resolution of the conflict between operatic and cinematic conventions in presenting opera as film. The readaptation of the operatic voice, surrealism, contemporary notions of opera and composition, and my journey as a composer-bricoleur in this practice-led research are discussed in the summation of this exegesis.