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

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**Chapter Six: Conclusion**

This Master of Arts by research began as an enquiry into opera as film, with the aim of creating and producing an original short film with the composer as bricoleur. The creative project, *Out of Sight / Out of Mind*, was born from the examination of past screen operas, opera's history and PLR strategies that together generated solutions for creating and assembling the short film. Resolving the conflict between the conventions of opera and cinema was a motivation to explore this area of film, music and composition. My aim to master the hybridisation of opera and film raised the following research questions:

- What are the conventions of opera and film that pose challenges specific to composing and realising an operatic short film?
- What innovations and techniques can be developed and employed to overcome the challenges in realising opera as film?
- How does adopting the role of composer-bricoleur affect the interdisciplinary collaborations inherent in the project?

In realising and composing an operatic short film, I found that the inherent conventions of opera posed a challenge to the conventions of cinema. Film imparts a sense of realism, while opera — an irrational art form — presents a world that is illogical and surreal. In opera's conventions, dialogue is sung with a projected voice, music can suspend action and time, and words and phrases are regularly repeated for emphasis and drama (Fredman et al., 2003). While on stage, the codes of opera are implicitly understood and accepted by the audience as the norm. However, in a cinematic setting, these conventions are at odds with film's conventions — they distract and confuse the audience to the point of losing verisimilitude and breaking the suspension of disbelief. The conventions of film — from the amplification of sound and magnification of image, to *mise-en-scène* and deep focus — relay a sense of realism. In the hybridisation of opera and film, in which there are two diametrically opposing conventions, one convention must give way to the other in order for the film to
succeed. I determined that sung dialogue and the projected voice posed a significant challenge to the realisation and composition of an operatic short film.

To overcome the conflict between opera and cinema, I had to develop and employ innovations and techniques in the area of the operatic voice and sung dialogue. As a component of opera’s convention, I specifically examined the operatic voice, which was established in Chapter One as a voice that has had to evolve and adapt to changing environments, tastes and technology. In the environment of film, where the amplification of sound and image renders a projected voice and exaggerated stage movements inappropriate, it was necessary to readapt operatic conventions. In examining contemporary notions of opera and composition, Chapters One and Two explored the works and ideologies of Ashley, Reich, Glass, Lang and Cage. This led to my readaptation of the operatic voice, and presentation of the entire audio track as a composed score.

The readapted operatic voice for Out of Sight used the microphone to capture the human voice. Once captured, spoken, sung and whispered, the voice could be organised and manipulated. As a source, it contained minor inflections of tone and pitch in speech that could be exploited. Through reverb, delay, pitch adjustments and equalisation — to name a few — the voice could be manipulated and embellished. The captured voice could also be repositioned and restructured, dictating a rhythm in its pacing, for emphasis or effect, through film and sound editing. The organisation of all the aural components when creating and assembling the film — including the sound design and composed score — was then examined in the context of a composition, applying Cage’s notion that “[e]verything we do is music” (as cited in White, 2004, para. 8) and the “organization of sound” (Cage, 2011, p. 3) as composition.

A further significant innovation lay in the analysis of the audio track as composition. Presented in Chapter Four, this analysis united the discussions
on diegesis, and affiliating and assimilating associations (Kassabian, 2001), as examined in Chapter Two. Through this analysis, particular aural components could be related back to the recitatives and arias of an opera (defined in Chapter One). Diegetic analysis — in which elements are analysed as diegetic, non-diegetic or meta-diegetic — allowed the readapted operatic voice to be viewed in terms of its function in the film. When applying Kassabian’s (2001) ideas on assimilating associations, aural elements were given meaning in terms of how sound (non-lyrical components) and music (lyrical components) transport the listener to known and familiar territories, revealing cultural and genre codes specific to Western music. Thus, this analysis connected the ideas discussed in the readaptation of the operatic voice, and contemporary composition, and allowed the film to be viewed in the context of contemporary screen opera.

A significant revelation in this research was in the area of surrealism. Chapter Two discussed this as a movement of the arts, and the way its influences led me to realise a film with surrealist notions (Chapter Four). Surrealism in screen opera was first presented in the examination of Syberberg’s (1982) film adaptation of Parsifal (Wagner, 1882), as discussed in Chapters One and Two. According to Fawkes (2000), in Parsifal, Syberberg was able to create a film that allowed opera’s expression to exist on screen. Bathed in surrealistic tones, Syberberg's film that did not appear to conflict with film’s cinematic conventions. In this respect, the inherent characteristics of both surrealistic works and opera allow such an accommodating merger. In a surrealist work, irrational thoughts, images and desires are presented with a disregard for logic. Similarly, opera is irrational and requires abandonment of logic in its approach, particularly in its use of a sung dialogue. While this convention poses a threat to verisimilitude and the suspension of disbelief in most films, the application of surrealism can allow sung dialogue to exist under the right conditions. Surrealism was applied to several aspects in the construction of Out of Sight / Out of Mind. Despite the replacement of the traditional sung dialogue with a manipulated and organised operatic voice, surrealism exists in
the film’s nonlinear narrative, depiction of the unconscious mind and its desires, social commentary, and elements of poetry and dreaming.

Lastly, adopting the role of composer-bricoleur in an interdisciplinary collaborative work both enhanced and challenged the project. In the role of composer-bricoleur, this research offered me the opportunity to work in shaping the composition at all stages; equipping myself with the skills, knowledge, and tools required to write a screenplay; and understanding film production, acting and directing (as detailed in Chapter Four). As a result, I was able to fulfil many of the traditional collaborative roles (scriptwriter, composer and director) in the project. This was significant and innovative in examining opera as film, for the following reasons. In most screen operas, music dictates the flow of the film. The opera is composed initially, then recorded, and then a film is shot around it. The composer works only in pre-production. An example is Menotti’s 1951 television opera, *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (Browning & Menotti). In contrast, in film, much of the pacing and structure of the final work occurs during the edit. Music is the final element added, and the composer tends only to work in post-production, composing to an already edited film. Thus, there is a fundamental problem in both approaches. In screen-based operatic works, by performing to a pre-recorded track, the film becomes rigid. Pacing is predetermined by a pre-recorded performance, rather than the immediate action. In film, the composer only has the opportunity to compose to the edited work, and music becomes incidental. In contrast, in my short film, I worked as the bricoleur and was active during all stages of creation and production of the work. This allowed me to organise the composition from conception to production, and subsequently produce a cohesive work that synthesised opera and film.

*Out of Sight | Out of Mind* was an interdisciplinary collaboration. The areas of cinematography, producing, sound mixing and acting required true interdisciplinary collaboration. In these instances, I had the opportunity to rely on the expertise of my collaborators. During collaboration, I found it challenging to balance compromise with achieving my aims. On some
occasions, when the consultative discussion of ideas enabled working through a problem to achieve what both parties wanted, collaboration ensued. However, during some extreme occasions, there was co-opting or bullying, where a team member dictated the final outcome. As the composer-bricoleur, it was important to maintain a cohesive and strong voice in the collaborative work. This was ultimately achieved in the post-production stages, where I collaborated with the editor, colourist and sound editor to unify the work. Thus, adopting the role of bricoleur in this project offered both positives and negatives. Due to its flexibility, bricolage allowed me to practice various roles, and provided me the opportunity to rely on the expertise of others in areas in which I was not proficient. However, the uncertainties and challenges related specifically to collaboration were a drawback.

PLR was applied as the overarching methodology to unify the ideas of bricolage and connect the various practices and processes in conceptualisation (as detailed in Chapter Three). A significant part of the conceptualisation process was generating ideas to create the screenplay and music, and resolve the elements of opera with film into a considered work. To achieve this, Wallas’s (1926) four-stage process of creativity gave me the ability to describe the creative process that eventually led to the creation of the short film. By applying Wallas’s process, I was able to examine the creative process as a series of stages, with various activities performed at each stage that led to the formulation of new ideas or concepts. For example, the literature review during the proposal stages of this thesis fell within the preparatory stage. The period of incubation that followed encompassed practice that was examined as unstructured observation. Illumination was the moment at which ideas were revealed. Finally, verification was the pursuit or execution of the solution, which encompassed activities in which I was immersed in practice, such as directing and composing. In relating these activities to research, Christopher Frayling (1993) examined research elements as research into, for and/or through practice. Through these classifications, various pieces of research methodology can be acknowledged when examining the film’s construction, as well as the relationship between each piece of activity in the genesis of the
short film as research. Thus, PLR as a methodology can be appreciated in enabling the creation of an original Australian work that contributes knowledge to the fields of music, film and interdisciplinary studies.

The creation of Out of Sight and the strategies applied during its creation allowed me to embrace composition and contemporary opera — particularly screen opera — in an original manner. The entire soundtrack, from dialogue to music, was the composition, and analysis of this composition offered insight to its connection with opera. Significantly, this required a shift in the perception of opera as film, which included reviewing the meaning of operatic voice on screen. In this instance, the operatic voice was approached from the perspective and in the context of opera's history, in which an evolving voice has adapted to its environment. On film, the operatic voice adapted to the amplification of sound during recording, and the manipulation of the captured voice. Adapting the operatic voice for this environment meant accepting recorded speech through a microphone, along with singing and affected dialogue, as screen opera’s operatic voice. This was incorporated with the use of silence, noise, sound design and instrumental music to form the full composition. The additional application of surrealistic notions further tied this film to the research, where surrealism was revealed to be a conduit for opera to exist as film. This ultimately allowed the audience to suspend their disbelief and accept the implausible aspects of the film, thereby further resolving the conflict between opera’s and film’s conventions.

By examining the presentation of opera as film, this research offers a new approach to film composition for the composer-bricoleur. Music and aural components were considered from the conceptualisation of the work by the composer, instead of being considered only at the beginning or end. By working through this entire process of film, the ‘composition’ became flexible and ‘music’ dictated the edit, without compromising the performance. The possibility to readapt the operatic voice and define composition as the organisation of aural components may have broader implications beyond screen opera. The use of the spoken and manipulated voice in contemporary
opera resembles musicals and other films with music, in which spoken dialogue, singing and meta-diegetic voices may be the norm. Thus, this project may offer clues and links to film's origins as an expression of opera and, similarly, films may be analysed and viewed as contemporary notions of opera.