**Audio-Visual Collisions: Moving Image Technology and the**

**Laterna Magika Aesthetic in NMT**

New Music Theatre (NMT) has long been considered a mixed form that hovers between genres. Often, this liminality has been referred to in terms of other musical and dramatic practices. Eric Salzman and Thomas Desi, for instance, place it between several existing musical types, explaining that “contemporary opera, music theater in its various forms, and the modern musical coexist on a continuum and the lines between them are often blurred” (2008, p.6). With this in mind, Salzman and Desi expand their understanding to include the placement of NMT’s style within a broader context, concluding that it is “closer in many ways to contemporary dance, dance theater, new theater and new performance art than to traditional opera.” (p.4). Along similar lines, David Rosener highlights the importance of the connection between the liminal sonic nature of the genre, which he locates at “the more musical wing of Composed Theatre”, and its realisation on stage: “Composed Theatre is not a genre—it is more a frame or a lens that brings quite disparate phenomena into view and collocates them.” (2012, p.11). Of course, the emphasis on, and inclusion of, staging elements at the conception of a work is not a surprise if we take into account the ways in which creative practice was breaking down disciplinary boundaries at the time, with the multimodal work of Cage, Kagel and many others including non-instrumental sounds, human gesture and movement as part of the composition, approaching, argues Rosener “the theatrical stage and its means of expression as *musical* material. They treat voice, gesture, movement, light, sound, image, design and other features of theatrical production according to musical principles and compositional techniques and apply musical thinking to performance as a whole”. (2012, p.9). Robert Adlington has interrogated the difficulty of definition further, noting that not only is the line between music theatre and instrumental works porous and unstable, the human voice is in fact not a necessary component for music theatre at all, an understanding that opens the style to textures from beyond the musical altogether, such as “facial expressions and bodily gestures”. (2005, p.227).

While Rosener understands NMT as a frame rather than a genre, then, Adlington suggests that it “is perhaps ultimately best seen as an ‘anti-genre’ – which is to say, as characterized by a refusal to conform to traditional or pre-existing genres and categories, rather than by any other consistent traits. Music theatre tends to illuminate the awkward interstices between art forms, the gaps between existing aesthetic categories” (2005, p.). Latent in these understandings is a move from consideration of NMT as comprising closed works with a distinct lineage and towards a more lateral and malleable interpretation open to volatile interdisciplinary relationships and contexts. In particular, Rosener’s rejection of generic boundaries in favour of a broader understanding of NMT as an umbrella heading for a collection of live art—drama, performance, dance and so on—is extremely useful, as it de-emphasises the work as text, focusing instead on its multi-textural, performative capacity, not only in terms of how each element fuses or collides with the others, but also on how these new juxtapositions are received within a performance setting.

That being said, NMT is certainly not limited to this liminal existence between musical or theatrical forms, for its emergence, which occurred during a time of great disciplinary convergence, also connects it to many other types of experimental culture. In fact, it can be argued that the “gaps between existing aesthetic categories” stretch way beyond musico-theatrical practices, narrowly defined, and that the “awkward interstices” between generic boundaries are further troubled by the inclusion of newly-available technologies. The expanding sonic palette of NMT often included tape, amplified voices and the spatialisation of sound using loudspeakers, inclusions that enhanced the confrontational relationship NMT held with its related historical cousins. But when moving image technology was also included—whether at the request of the composer, or through innovative and forward-thinking stage direction—it contributed to the destabilisation of genre in unique and significant ways: it could expand stage space, depth and time, re-energise forms of interaction between performers, activate scenography in new multimedial directions and, perhaps most significantly, refresh and reconfigure traditional relationships between work, performers and audience. As a result, the “awkward interstices between art forms” were significantly heightened. The porous intertextuality of moving image media opens compositional process to artistic practices that had hitherto remained separate from music theatre traditions, enabling composers to plunder the aesthetic innovations—but also challenges—that were driving concurrent experimentation in film, video art and the newly emerging forms of mass media documentation and dissemination.

Building on Salzman’s suggestion that music theatre “reverses the purism of modern art” via its referentiality and intertextuality (1988, p.245), Adlington surmises that “[o]ne of the ways in which music theatre became symbolic of a move away from the priorities of the avant-garde was its tendency to encourage an intermingling of different musical traditions.” (2005, p.235). And yet, the use of moving image media in specific stagings and performances, while allowing disparate elements to intermingle, could also cause them to repel and undermine each other to form clashing and confrontational audiovisual textures in which the boundaries between, and “purism” of, the individual disciplines remain stark and strident. In his 1940 paper, “Towards a Newer Laocoon”, Clement Greenberg bemoaned the “artistic dishonesty” inherent in the merging of disciplines. For him, the exploration of the limits of an individual medium by pressing at its formal and conceptual boundaries was a purer form of interrogation than simply removing the borders to allow disciplines and media to converge with one another. Avant-garde art that explored innovation from within its own parameters and through its own medium resulted in an emphasis on materiality—or “opacity”—that was to be praised:

The history of avant-garde painting is that of a progressive surrender to the resistance of its medium; which resistance consists chiefly in the flat picture plane’s denial of efforts to “hole through” it for realistic perspectival space. … The motto of the Renaissance artist, *Ars est artem celare* [Art is the concealing of art], is exchanged for *Ars est artem demonstrare* [Art is the manifesting of art]. (Greenberg quoted in Albright, 2000, p.12).

By including in the staging of NMT a multiplicity of other artistic forms in a self-reflexive and critical manner, moving image media enabled a complicated oscillation between an “intermingling” of disciplines *and* the promotion of their “opacity”.

This oscillation suggests a productive relationship between the aesthetics of NMT and several significant forms of collaborative experimentation that were manifesting in other domains in Europe and North America during the 1950s and ‘60s. During this time, a growing emphasis on the context of a work was having a considerable impact on the content of music and art, from avant-garde music, with its new forms of spatialised performance, sound art and its the relocation of music from the concert hall and into everyday life, to mid-century artwork that includes some form of temporal and spatial expansion. The emergence of installation art, for instance, repositioned an attendee’s focus from single objects to the movement, relationship and sound existing in the spaces between a number of elements and their contexts (Oliveira, Oxley and Petry, pp.1-2), something also explored in the activities of the Fluxus alliance.[[1]](#footnote-1) Notable in many forms of mid-century experimentation was the creative use of moving image technology, from the absorption of video into the intermedial textures of performance art and dance, the disruption of traditional cinematic forms through dissonant audiovisual textures, to the use of closed-circuit television to transform use the spatial context of a work into compositional material in real time (Rogers, 2013).

When these emergent and process-driven moving-image practices were included in the staging of NMT works, the dismantling of traditional generic boundaries and the resultant emphasis on context they encouraged contrasted sharply with previous music-theatrical practice. With this in mind, the productive historicisations of the authors above can be taken one step further: NMT can be understood not only in relation to other musical and dramatic traditions, but also in terms of its aesthetic engagement with—and remediation of—concurrent creative moving-image art practices that emphasised process and site-specificity. Shifting the focus thus from object to spatial process promotes a contextual reading of NMT based on specific performances. Here, I compare two stagings of Luigi Nono’s *Intolleranza* (1960)—as the earliest examples of audiovisual media on the musical stage—to suggest that the use of moving-image technology allowed composers, directors and scenographers not only to expand the physical space of the theatre, but also to allow innovative forms of interactivity and intertextuality that could signify in culturally and politically specific ways.

**Moving Image Interventions**

During the early coalescing of NMT, the use of projected images, filmed sequences and live television feeds became a prominent method of intervention into the traditional relationships between music, text and staging, with many composers—including Nono, Giacomo Manzoni, Egisto Macchi and Peter Schat —using moving image technology as an integral narratological tool. Today, filmed and videoed images are common to the operatic stage, where they have formed part of the composition process—as in Michel van der Aa’s *Sunken Garden* (2013)—been used to re-imagine existing operas—as in Opera De Lyon’s setting of Beethoven’s *Fidelio* in space (2013)—or, conversely, as a way to resound old film footage—as in Louis Andriessen’s re-rendering of Hal Hartley’s *La Commedia* (2009). In all these examples, moving-technology is seamlessly integrated into the action, often using large and immersive screens that add depth and a certain filmic believability to the staged action. In *Sunken Garden* for instance, a mystical and elusive hyper-saturated 3D garden indicates a move into an alternative, transcendent reality that breaks from the stage to bathe the audience not only in sound, but also in image (Rogers, 2016).

However, while such hyper-immersive gestures have become relatively normalised, when moving image technology first entered the musical stage during the 1960s, it operated as a radical intervention not only into traditional theatrical gesture, but also into conventional modes of operatic and dramatic consumption. Onstage screens could be used to augment the dramatic space; scenes could have more depth, more intricacy, more realism; they could reach into other geographical locations and enable grand visual gestures, like crowd scenes, the evocation of speed, close ups and so on. But these immersive qualities could also de-stabilise traditional dramaturgical forms and that is one of the key differences between the use of new media technologies by mid-century music theatre composers and directors, and the ways in which the moving image is most often configured today. As in *Sunken Garden*, contemporary productions use film technologies to pull the audience into immersive viewing positions akin to those encouraged by mainstream cinematic fiction, where a successful experience is predicated on absorption into the screened world and a loss of bodily awareness, a de-sensitisation that resonates with the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* and the desire to bridge the “mystic gulf” between performers and audience (Wagner cited in Kuritz, 1988, 263).

Although there has been ample research into opera’s appearance in, and influence on, film (Jeongwon and Theresa, 2003; Citron, 2010; Citron, 2013), investigation into the inclusion of film technology onto the stage has not been so forthcoming. When the role of film in the construction of a NMT aesthetic is critically considered, its use is often linked to the rise of neo-realist cinema and other art film traditions as popular forms of storytelling. The dwindling popularity of opera as a form of storytelling and its rejection by many progressive composers as the twentieth century advanced was due to a complex interplay of social and cultural factors, including the expense of staging such work in the post-war financial climate (Fearn, 1997, p.57) and the mass appeal and aesthetic power of film (Salzman and Desi, 2008, pp.8, 89). For Ralf Remshardt, one of the factors in opera’s perceived decline was a shift in narrative gaze initiated by cinema:

In rapid order, film achieved the status of a normative mode of representation. As the grammar of film integrated into visual discourses, and the homogenous viewer of the discontinuous film image replaced the dispersed viewer of the continuous stage image, film in turn acquired a certain transparency. At the same time, it threw the entire theatrical apparatus into relief and, in a move both hostile and curiously nostalgic, relegated the theatre to a position defined now by its antecedent function and its defective authenticity. We can assume a transitory-almost ineffable- moment when early cinema audiences shifted from *stage seeing* to *camera seeing* and the point of reference no longer remained a previously seen *stage* performance but a previous film performance which had lost trace, if subtly, of its stage antecedent. (2006, p.41).

In Italy, this shift in gaze and the decline of opera has been related to the popularity of neo-realist cinema (Fearn, 1997, p.59), a style that sought its inspiration from the post-war working classes and became characterised by storylines of oppression and poverty, a desolation heightened by a self-consciously constructed sense of ‘authenticity’ garnered from gritty location shoots, the use of non-professional actors, conversational speech and simple editing styles; traits that led Andre Bazin to describe the genre as “reconstituted reportage” (2011, p.33). Sitting somewhat strangely against this naturalism, however, are often grandiose, sweeping orchestral scores (think of Alessandro Cicognini’s sumptuous score for Vittorio De Sica’s *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), for instance).

Tapping into the complicated cultural resonances of moving image media, NMT composers could incorporate modern technologies as a coherent way in which not only to represent contemporary society, but more significantly, as a tool for direct intervention into its political and cultural fabric. As a result, although many early music theatre works, particularly in Italy, embraced topics similar to those of neo-realist cinema, its audiovisual aesthetics were very different from the smooth textures and structural and immersive cohesion of narrative film. Traditionally, mainstream film, including that in the neo-realist tradition, operates through an audiovisual flow so tightly synchronised as to engender a filmic illusion of unity and realism through discrete editing that effaces its materiality, as can be seen in the paradoxical audiovisual flow of *Bicycle Thieves*. By contrast, the angular textures forged by moving image technologies in early NMT productions resonated more clearly with the audiovisual dissonances, audience distanciation and promotion of materiality and artifice evident in much concurrent avant-garde film and video practice. At this time, many experimental filmmakers sought to address what was fast becoming accepted as ‘filmic realism’ by playing with the ways in which sound and image could contradict each other: music could be rhythmically, texturally or timbrally different from the image, or it could be placed against it in ironic, jarring, unexpected or culturally-subversive ways. Earlier in the century, for instance, Sergei Eisenstein and others had theorised that a gap between music and image, forged either via montage techniques or through sounds that contradicted visual information, could activate an audience’s interpretative capacity by providing a space for new meanings and forms of engagement to arise (Eisenstein, 1928). Such dissonance—or what they referred to as audiovisual counterpoint—is difficult to find in mainstream filmmaking, as it can question the integrity—or coherence—of what is being offered. But in experimental film, it not only drew attention to the work as a material piece of art—to its “opacity”—it could also place film goers in uncomfortable points of reception that embraced the alienating V-Effect promoted in Brechtian aesthetics. The discomfort of audiovisual counterpoint also manifested physically during the 1960s. Musicians, such as Nam June Paik and Steina Vasulka, and artists, such as Wolf Vostell and Bruce Nauman, began to use newly-available video technology and domestic television screens as sculptural objects to create interactive and site-specific audiovisual works that fractured conventional notions of space and problematised what they considered to be the indolent reception of televised content (Rogers, 2013).

These forms of dissonance—between music and image; between content and context; and between work and audience—can be seen at play in NMT productions that use moving image technology. Adlington understands the “anti-genre” as a similarly anti-realist, and ruptured, configuration, tracing a move from opera’s earliest history as “the most affectedly artificial of theatrical genres”, through its nineteenth century realistic configurations of dramatic and psychological upheavals to a return, in twentieth century experimentation, to a form characterised by stylised and unnatural gestures (2005, p.235). If we return to the examples of recent opera works that make use of moving image technology, such as *Sunken Garden*, we can suggest that filmed images have helped the move back into an immersive realism by reducing our awareness of the stage, its construction and limitations in order to draw the audience deeper into the fiction. Contrasted with this, Adlington identifies two forms of anti-realism at play in mid-century music theatre: “First, narrative cogency may be deliberately exploded – whether by presenting a succession of situations that refuse reduction to a simple narrative sequence, or by combining material that is not clearly related so that the drama appears internally divergent or contradictory”; and “Second, taking a cue from Bertolt Brecht, composers have set about the disintegration of the stage illusion that forms such a central part of traditional theatre.” (2005, p229). If we add to this the powerfully illusory qualities of film and the persuasive, agenda-driven discourses of television and news reportage, these ideas could be pushed to the extreme, particularly when screens were employed visibly and sculpturally to create montages that were not immersive, but instead vibrated with political resonances as sculptural objects.

**Laterna Magika**

Like Brecht and the experimental filmmakers, many NMT composers and directors embraced ruptured forms of storytelling through audiovisual counterpoint and “the disintegration of the stage illusion”, two forms of dissonance easily augmented via moving image technologies. The use of projected images was not new to the stage, however, and can be found in many works of epic theatre, particularly those of Erwin Piscator from the mid ‘20s on. In *Rasputin, the Romanoffs, the War and the People Who Rose Up Against Them* (1927), for instance, he spread out footage taken from 100,000 metres of feature film, newsreels and documentaries over three screens; these images were then used to contradict or comment on what was happening on the stage (Innes and Shevtsova, 2013, p.122). The rupture between narrative and visual adjunct supported his desire that theatre become an instrument for social change, able to jolt audiences from their leisurely and inactive gazes.

Although Claudia Georgi (2014) has noted that, after an initial flurry of activity in the 1920s, the use of filmed elements on the stage had begun to decline, by the mid-century, and contrary to the grain, the synthesis of film and live theatre had become the lynchpin of the newly emerging Laterna Magika, or magic lantern shows, a type of multimedia theatre that combined live and pre-recorded elements to simultaneously unfold multiple narratives and perspectives. The style was developed in Prague’s National Theatre by Czech stage director Alfréd Radok and set designer Josef Svoboda, who explained that the screens did not merely accompany the stage action; they were integral to it. A moving image, or travelling screen could direct an audience’s gaze to a specific moment, emotion of point of view, explained Svoboda, by “pick[ing] up different parts of the [scene] as if you were looking through a window at part of your environment” (cited in Burian, 2002, pp.94-5). However, such a gaze could be placed within or against others to initiate what the designer called a “confrontation of selected realities: actions, objects, people.” (p.95). It could, in other words, be both immersive and antagonistic.

The style can be divided into two types, which developed almost simultaneously: while Laterna Magika combined film with live actors, Polyekran—

or polyvision—performances were more technologically ambitious, yet using multiple screens and mirrors to fragment the narrative without the help of a live cast. Shortly after the first multi-screen performance at the Brussels Fair of 1958, Svoboda applied his polypohonic visual techniques to the operatic stage, creating the first screen-stage production of a pre-existent dramatic work, a version of Offenbach’s *The Tales of Hoffmann* (1881; performance 1962; with the composer and director Václav Kašlík). Unfortunately, the reviewers bemoaned a lack of unification and balance between stage and screen, an issue that perhaps arose from attempting to re-mould an earlier dramatic structure into polyekren form (Burian, 2002, p.109).

However, when employed more fluidly, screened images, configured via a Laterna Magika aesthetic, had much to offer NMT composers, who were already interested in rejuvenating traditional ideas of dramaturgy, but had found themselves hindered by a traditional proscenium stage. Even though no piece was composed specifically for the Laterna Magika style, Svoboda’s technological interventions were most successful when the possibilities of the moving image were taken into account during the compositional process, as Burian explains: “Scenography is not a background nor even a container, but in itself a dramatic component that becomes integrated with every other expressive component or element of production and shares in the cumulative effect upon the viewer.” (1970, pp.125-126). The openness to moving image technology was particularly apparent in what Raymond Fearn calls “the new spirit amongst Italian composers” in the 60s, and although scores do not necessarily contain instruction for visual extension, the knowledge of its possibility was deeply significant to the ways in which work was staged (1997, p.62). Heavily influenced by both Brecht’s thoughts on theatre and the Laterna Magika style, Manzoni and Nono in Italy, and Peter Schat in Holland, were drawn to the possibilities of moving image media. In 1975, for instance, Manzoni described his ideal form of musical theatre as one that emerged through creative convergence: “…on the one hand, the inventive, creative levels, of the convergence of various interests, and on the other of present-day techniques of a musical, vocal, scenographic and cinema-technical kind, and therefore an enrichment of artistic research. This means an enrichment of the conscience and of the critical capacity of the listeners-spectators who will increasingly become participants…” (Manzoni quoted in Fearn, 1997, p.99). Significant here are the notions that staged music theatre, when created from a fusion of disciplines, generated a form of artistic *research*; and that the exploratory nature of the form could activate an audience by allowing them to not just consume, but also to participate in the construction of the work’s message. Nono voiced a similar sentiment, suggesting that music could accumulate meaning through its social function and conceptualised a form of *engage* theatre—after Jean-Paul Sartre’s proposed Theatre of Situations—through which the consciences of an audience would be mobilised as they faced, without fictional cushioning, the horrors of contemporary reality (Suvini-Hand, 2006, p.22).

As mentioned, the use of moving image technology as something both integral to, and active in the construction of, contemporary life, was significant in forming this type of theatrical engagement. When screened on stage, filmed images could enlarge the psychological ramifications of the story by highlighting and punctuating certain elements of both music and libretto, by evoking memory or by revealing the inner thoughts of characters. But whereas now, with digital media, the use of moving image audiovisual technologies in post-theatre can operate as a live participant, open to flux and change—responsive, immediate, performative—this was not always the case with early technology, and analogue filmed elements were often immobile and pre-established. Attempting to synchronise pre-recorded footage with live action ran the risk of forming a rigid, rather than a fluid, staging situation able to augment, rather than interact with, the staged actions, as Svoboda warned: “It means that Laterna Magika is to a certain extent deprived of that which is beautiful about theatre: that each performance can have a completely different rhythm, that the quality of a performance can be better or worse, that a production can expand its limits.” (1968, p.103). Such pre-imagined structures can be found in a number of NMT works staged by Svoboda. For L. J. Werle’s *The Journey* (Hamburg, 1969) and Bernd Alois Zimmerman’s *The Soldiers* (Munich, 1969), for instance, Burian notes that “Svoboda’s scenography filled the stage with large cubic structures in and on which considerable action occurred accompanied by large-scale multiple projections of a documentary type, keyed in to heighten the impact of the music and libretto. In neither of the last two operas, however, did the projected images directly connect or interact with any on stage character or action as they had in *Intolleranza*, *The Last Ones* [Maxim Gorky], or *Prometheus* [Carl Orff].” (1970, p118). Despite the lack of live and screened interaction, however, Zimmerman, who specified which films were shown and where they were projected, created multiscreen staging that enabled complex forms of simultaneous action.

In other examples, moving images were a clear part of the actors’ world. The mixture of filmed and live action for the staging of Manzoni’s 1965 *Atomtod* (*Atomic Death*), for example, powerfully depicted events leading up to, and immediately after, an atomic catastrophe: in Act 1, scene 2, a talking head appears on a giant television screen to attempt to comfort the public initiating a direct interaction between technology and those on stage as well as off (Fearn, 1997, p.81). However, while the performance flow was heavily mediated by pre-existent visual information, when the images were spread over many screens, they acted like a simultaneous montage that shattered the fixed gaze of a director and distributed point-of-view across numerous spaces and depths.

***Intolleranza***

The interaction between actors and audience and the distributed form of engagement that this entails was fundamental to Nono’s desire to create a politically active and activating form of musical theatre. The composer had experienced Laterna Magika in Prague at the end of 1959 and described Svoboda’s work as “studies and analysis of history, in order to surpass it. And in order to surpass the Eurocentric limitations of European theatrical culture” (Nono, 1968, 246). Having long bemoaned the ways in which conventional operatic staging could induce a “total neutralisation of space” (Nono quoted in Fearn, 1997, p.68), Nono was seeking a form of total theatre, by which an audience would not simply witness events separated from them across the “mystic gulf” between stage and auditorium, but rather that audio and visual events would at once swathe and assail their senses from several directions at once. But while such a battering may seem reminiscent of a Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, it was in fact created from a completely different aesthetic. Whereas Wagner strove for a synthesis of the arts, Nono, influenced by the Brechtian V-Affect, sought instead to promote and disclose the discrete and unique texture of each artistic voice. When confronted with “selected realities” formed not only from a human narrative, but from a bombardment of “actions, objects, people”, the audience is required to assess and construct their own understanding of events.

Nono’s *Intolleranza 1960* was written quickly; mostly within three months. The self-described “scenic action” (“azione scenica”), commissioned by the Venice Biennale at the end of 1960, was premiered on April 13 1961 at the Teatro La Fenice in a production directed by Czech Václav Kašlík. But such quick composition was apt, for the work, which riled against fascism, was directly related to significant social events at the time. In one act divided into two parts, the plot follows a migrant worker, known only as “The Immigrant”, whose attempts to travel from his place of work back home leads him through protests and demonstrations, wrongful arrests, torture and finally to a concentration camp, which he manages to escape only to be washed away in a flood with his female companion: the themes are both local and ahistorical; worker exploitation, unemployment, protest, resistance and natural disaster as the result of human mismanagement. In his Darmstadt lecture delivered the previous year, Nono had problematised John Cage’s a-historical attitude to music, arguing instead that the moment of a work’s conception was deeply significant as it could move an audience towards immediate political consciousness (Fearn, 1997, p.68). Famously, in order to keep the work’s immediacy, Nono requested that the date in the title was to be changed to reflect the year of each performance.

*Intolleranza 1960* decentralised and destabilised the established gestures of traditional music theatre through its innovative construction of a compilation libretto and its spatialisation of sound across speakers on either side of the stage (De Benedictis, 2013; Santini, 2012). Dean Wilcox draws our attention to the negation of linear plot for a scenic action progressing via didactic and episodic montage techniques: “In this respect *Intolleranza* owes more to the episodically motivated political allegories of the Brecht-Weill collaboration than it does to the narrative process of the operatic tradition” particularly in its preference for “short scenes, voice-overs, projected slogans and images” (Wilcox, 1996, 117). This episodic style lends itself to multimedia and fragmented and simultaneous representation. Aptly, the work became the earliest example of an extended televisual presence on the musical stage. Similarly, in the many histories of experimental film, the coexistence of live and screened bodies is rare and there are only a few instances of what has become known as “film stage”—Robert Whitman’s *Prune Flat* in 1965 and Carolee Schneemann’s *Night Crawlers* in 1967 are two notable examples—so this is an important moment in both film and operatic memory. (Rogers, 2013, 155).

Svoboda was enlisted to reconfigure the work into Laterna Magika form for the premiere. He used polyphonic filmed projections to help achieve some of the ideas outlined by Nono in his first sketches for the work, in particular, as Angela De Benedictis explains, the construction of a “simultaneity of actions and situations; the rejection of the visual apparatus typical of conventional music theatre; … and the need to reduce the text component to a minimum in favour of the action” (De Benedictis, 2013, p.105). Unfortunately, the extant accounts of the *Intolleranza 1960*’s premiere, conducted by Bruno Maderna, were not encouraging (Boyd, 2012). The slides received from Svoboda and Radok in Prague that were intended to provide the projected material for the Venice stage were not adequate and some of the footage—particularly that taken from political film—was censored. As a result, the painter Emilio Vedova had to be brought in at the last moment to develop more viable décor and projections, as Svoboda later recalled: “the 1961 production was politically difficult, very much to the left. The films were not permitted by the head of the city. The stage setup was the same, but Emilio Vedova’s paintings were substituted for the political films.” (Svoboda, 1993, p.30). Despite the censorship, the political gesture of staging Nono’s politically-charged work in the Teatro La Fenice critiqued the nature of the establishment at a time when other productions were moving out of these spaces and this initiated a vocal and aggressive protest by the Italian Fascist group on the opening night, a riot described by a reporter for the New York Times as being so prominent that “the performance had to be halted while members of the audience were shrieking unprintable names” (reporter quoted in Wilcox, 1996, 119).

While the Venice premiere is the production remembered as a legendary *succes de scandale*, for Svoboda by far the greater achievement was the work’s third production by the Boston Opera Company. In a 1993 interview Svoboda described it as “the biggest, most complicated and best production I have ever done. It has not surpassed since” (1996, p.115) and later reminiscing in his memoirs collected in *The Secret of Theatrical Space*, that the event demonstrated “how new technologies, new expressive resources emerge” (Svoboda, 1993, p.104). Directed by Sarah Caldwell and again conducted by Maderna, this production had costume design by Jan Skalický and, significantly, was offered to the American audience in English translation.

Nono had recommended that Svoboda again be employed as scenographer for the production, which ran for two performances, both on 21 February 1965. With the use of technology that he had been unable to get his hands on in Venice and free from the censorship that hampered his previous production, Svoboda was able to extend his Laterna Magika in several significant ways, including the augmented use of pre-existent film footage and live, closed circuit TV able to fold together the spaces of performance and reception. Despite Nono’s famously negative reaction to the rehearsals, for which he arrived late due to visa issues and was immediately convinced his intensions were being misrepresented (“When I arrived and saw the work I rejected everything” [Nono quoted in Wilcox, 1996, p.121]), the performance was a critical success.

Cameras were placed on the stage, in the auditorium, outside the theatre, and, explains Greg Giesekam:

in two television studios several miles away … One studio recorded various documents—photographs, texts, slogans and so on. In the other members of the chorus were filmed—while they themselves followed the conductor’s baton on video. In the theatre itself, cameras were trained on both performers and audience: resulting images were mixed live with the other sources and relayed onstage. (2007, p.66).

Still and moving images mixed documentary footage of violent demonstrations and flowing landscapes with pre-recorded footage of the onstage actors and excerpts of the libretto in the form of slogans, which often acted like intertitles. Free from the censorship he had faced in Venice, Svoboda received access to the New York Times film archives and proceeded to make use of extreme and distressing footage. As one reviewer outlined, “there was a nightmarish montage of ‘scenes of injustice’—a Negro lynching, street riots, the desolation of Hiroshima, decaying bodies stacked in graves—flashed on dozens of various-sized screens, some dropped from the flies, others held aloft by the chorus in a jigsaw pattern” (1965, p.66). In addition, Caldwell recalls in her memoir that, added to the moving images were “photographs of incidents of intolerance worldwide”, taken from *Time* and *Life* Magazines, used to enhance the composition in a manner that was “either informational or affectively emotional” (2008, p.25).

Soprano Beverley Stills recalled the sense of injustice felt by the (largely American) cast that all the footage depicted questionable activities from within the States, and requested a more diverse representation of atrocity. Wilcox contextualises this reaction well:

…what Ms. Sills fails to take into account is that the political nature of Nono's work demanded that the piece not be presented for an American audience but at an American audience. Nono's work, designed to illuminate the atrocities of the twentieth-century, was aimed at his present audience, an action that allowed the piece to be critical of American ideology as well as foreign and domestic policy. (Wilcox, 1996, 127).

These antagonistic real-world images—far removed from the immersive reconstructed simulacra of neo-realist cinema—were projected predominantly onto a large screen hung on one side of the stage, while on the opposite side, another screen provided what one reviewer described as a “narrative (as well as pictorial) guide” (1965, p.21). In addition, differently sized screens placed variously around the space were, explains Caldwell, “covered in black velour and hung in the air”, opening “mechanically by remote control in different ways, some like the iris of a lens of a camera, while other had shutter openings” (Caldwell, 2008, p.25). These screens were not always visible, but could appear suddenly to create a strong emphasis or interjection. When spread across the screens, different images could combine and re-contextualise each other to offer an idea told simultaneously from many angles, in a way reminiscent of the multiple unfolded temporalities of a cubist picture. As a result, the screens did not offer mimesis, or mere enhancement, as Caldwell rather oddly suggests; rather the cross-pollination of information was generative and vital to the opera’s message, as Svoboda explained: “The play of the actors cannot exist without the film, and vice-versa—they become one thing. One is not the background for the other; instead, you have a simultaneity, a synthesis and fusion of actors and projection. Moreover, the same actors appear on screen and stage, and interact with each other. The film has a dramatic function.” (Svoboda quoted in Burian, 1970, p.83). While the screened images at varying instances ran alongside the live action, subverted it and determined its course, there were four moments when, for up to 4-5 minutes at a time, *all* the information was being delivered on the screens and via mime (Příhodová, 2011 pp.4-5). However, unlike the immersion of film with its dissolving borders that fade into cinematic blackness, here the materiality of the frames was always evident, as the collage-constructed narrative highlighted spectatorship and the act of viewing. If immediacy is a transparent, ‘present’ form of media that emphasises the content of a work over its presentation (the linear narratives and sutured audiovisuality of mainstream film is an excellent example of this), then hypermediacy (at its most basic) can be used to describe a work that highlights its “opacity”. The strong form of alienation garnered by this hypermediacy was heightened by the movement of the screens. After the opening chorus, for instance, written slogans—“demonstration”, “the refugee is a spectator”, “refugee is arrested”—and disturbing archival stills and documentary footage from demonstrations were projected across several monitors that were moved around the stage, with all of the information given via the moving image (Příhodová, 2011, p.4); at another moment, the conflict between the single voice and a suppressive power was symbolised by monitors pressing in around the protagonist as he sat in the dark. As one reviewer noted, “screens pulsating with light moved in to form an ever-contracting prison.” (1965, p.34).

**The Fractured Gaze**

The Boston *Intolleranza* has been the subject of several critical readings, including Dean Wilcox’s historical reconstruction of the staging (1996), Barbora Příhodová’s situation of the performance within the “pictorial turn” (2011) and Andrea Santini’s reading of the moving images as “an ideal visual counterpart to Nono’s engulfing musical space, designed to stimulate the listener’s critical awareness” (2012, p.82).

If we build on these historical and theoretical ideas through a critical engagement not only with the ways in which the moving image signifies a fractured relationship with other elements of the staging, but also with common modes of audiovisual consumption beyond the auditorium—and in fact the creative world all together—a more complex reading based on two contradictory forms of engagement emerges. First, the dissonant use of moving-image technology invites comparison with other art-technological modes of discourse, including the mid-century audiovisual experimentation outlined above. Second, if we expand our investigation from the conceptual and practical aspects of staged film and move from the theoretical ideal of experimental theatre, art and music into the domestic sphere of television, an additional form of subversion arises based on both immersive and distrustful strategies of audiovisual consumption that informed the everyday lives of the opera goers. By evoking and playing with the paradoxical fallibility and passivity of broadcast television, Svoboda’s staging in Boston was historically contingent. In contrast with the authors mentioned above, I suggest that the key to Svoboda’s success in Boston lay in the interplay between the different modes of attention and activation required to engage with the experimental arts *and* domestic television simultaneously.

Suggesting that the projected images of the Boston *Intolleranza* garnered an expressivity so significant that “they often suppressed the action of the performers”, Příhodová finds a displacement of power from the live operatic body to the screened image, a slippage she closely aligns with W. J. T. Mitchell’s concept of the “pictorial turn” (Příhodová, 2011, p.1). The ramifications of Mitchell’s reading of a morphing spectorship in which issues of observation, the gaze and surveillance are complicated and undermined by new modes of representation (what he describes as a “postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality”; Mitchell, quoted in Příhodová, 2011, pp.1-2) are closely aligned with the ways in which “images can perform power” (2). But while the pictorial turn that flows through the Boston *Intolleranza* exposes the passivity of mimesis and undoubtedly invests the moving image with great expressive and political power, the complicated interplay between live and screened bodies make it difficult to assign a complete relocation of the gaze. Taken from television and early documentary footage, the low fi images clash against the arresting immediacy of the live operatic body leading not to a replacement of the gaze, but rather a fracturing of a single point perspective into multiple views, modes of engagement and types of enunciation. Perhaps contrary to Nono’s wishes, such distributed attention could free an audience from a fixed point-of-view in a way reminiscent of the sculptural experiments in video installation art at the time. This reveals a dilemma that lies at the heart of ‘fractured’ theatre and with which Brecht constantly grappled: is this process of unfastening the audiovisual gaze aimed at freeing the audience, or insisting upon a fractured reality? Does it open a creative space for interpretation, or accurately reflect the splintered and contradictory nature of everyday life?

Just as early audiences of electronic and tape music voiced an unease at experiencing an acousmatic and de-humanised musical presence, we could suggest that here, the juxtaposition between embodied and low-quality two-dimensional forms would have rendered strange the visual human presence. In his analysis of the performance, Wilcox acknowledges this fractured gaze by highlighting the material incompatibility of screened and live representation: “The flexibility of the film to change perspective and location with the push of a button cannot be replicated by the materiality of the actor. The film, though unfolding through time, repeats its actions with the precision of a painting or a sculpture” (1996, p.122). He continues:

As rehearsed as the actions may be, the actor stumbles, sweats, speeds up, and slows down, responds to the audience, and adjusts his or her performance to individual rhythms for which the film cannot accommodate. All of this works toward revealing the seams of the construction and dissolving the union between these disparate elements. (p.123).

If Nono’s experimental timbres required a new form of listening, here the audience was asked to see afresh, not just through the lens of the newly available media and its pictorial turn, but also, and by extension, at how “real”, embodied forms could be transfigured as a result of their relation to their screened companions. Such a move, as Příhodová has accurately identified, from mimesis to a more self-consciously pictorial mode of address further shatters the Wagnerian mystic gulf between audience and performers. Rather than the fixed point of view of traditional theatre, opera and classical narrative film, experimental montage techniques, spread across the stage and several screens to form an audiovisual simultaneity, left multiple spaces for interpretation. Requiring the audience to take an active role in the construction of meaning, Svoboda’s staging dispelled any remnant of traditional theatricality, adding yet another dimension to Adlington’s second form of “anti-realism” mentioned above. The staging’s visibility of construction and embrace of disjuncture ensured that, although the separate elements were plausible, the “opacity” of their combination rejected immersion and invited instead an objective and active form of reception.

Moreover, the Boston performance highlighted the disjunctive relationship between pre-recorded footage and the present, embodied performers through the use of live-feed television projection to further explode the spatial constrictions of the proscenium stage. Svoboda recalls that “In the Boston theatre I was able to put my hands on equipment and facilities that I previously could only dream about. Part of the dream was industrial television with the possibility and capability of reproducing whatever was being shot.” (Svoboda, 1993, p.41). Images of an offstage chorus could be projected onto the stage at opportune moments in order to draw attention to their sonic, or semantic message; a close up of a performer in real time could direct the gaze of the audience to a specific visual moment within a crowded *mise-en-scene*. More significantly, it could operate performatively by transmitting elements from beyond the performance space (a radius of three miles was used, as well as footage from the protests that were being staged outside the theatre) directly onto the stage. In a recollection, Svoboda recalls that “This pictorial collage was given coherence and meaning in the television control booth, which determined the sequences of images filling the giant receiver screen on stage.” (1993, p.4). Such live and performative gestures were incredibly rare, and were not seen again until Svoboda’s scenography for a production of Carl Orff’s *Prometheus* (Munich, 1968), in which the protagonist, pinned to a rock, was bathed in a live television projection of his own face to symbolise both his inner turmoil and to suggest, perhaps, a presence larger than that embodied in a single man.

For the Boston *Intolleranza*, Svoboda used a closed-circuit feed several times, including a significant moment in which an image of the overwhelmingly white audience, listening to a protest song, found themselves not only confronted by their real-time images, but also by a reflection that switched from positive to negative to make them appear black. This unabashed and confrontational gesture had itself a double role, as Wilcox points out: “By incorporating images of the audience within the stage space, the spectators were both forced to become part of the horrors depicted by the stage action and were directly implicated in the continuation of these horrors”, thus enacting visually “the social and political accusations inherent in Nono's score”. (1996, 127, 128).

A similarly hostile gesture occurred during the “chorus of tortured prisoners”, in which the protagonist is being held and tortured. Here in Nono’s score, the chorus suddenly breaks the fourth wall by turning their attention away from the staged diegesis and towards the audience in what Svoboda called a “directed happening” (Svoboda quoted in Santini, 2012, p.82). Firing a string of questions into the auditorium, they asked:

And what about you?

Are you deaf?

Following the herd,

In its wicked shame?

Doesn’t the wailing

Of our brothers rouse you?

Megaphones! Amplify this shout! (Nielinger-Vakil, 2016, p.18).

At this moment, Svoboda used media to clearly amplify an aspect of Nono’s quasi-Brechtian dramaturgy: while this direct address to the auditorium threatened the illusory bonds of the theatre (and the disembodied reply destabilised its quality as a live medium), these bonds were re-inscribed in a different way by a brief visual gesture. A closed-circuit feed that showed the angered crowd on one of the large screens suddenly inverted, flashing up a real-time image of the audience shown behind projected prison bars and barbed wire. This moment of broadcasted reflection turned, as Manzoni had hoped, the inactive audience into “participants.” Of course, to activate an audience is a key technique of NMT, but here television technology did so without permission. While the breaking of the fourth wall had become a relatively standard theatrical gesture by the 1960s, the inclusion of an uninvited form of visual surveillance was an intrusive, almost hostile gesture that was at once alienating and immersive as it paradoxically shattered the boundaries of stage and auditorium while at the same time rebuilding it into an entirely different configuration.

In other forms of moving image experimentation at the time where forms of participation and interactivity were being embraced, this particular form of process-orientated circularity enabled by the closed-circuit television would have given rise to a new form of communal creativity. But if it appeared that Nono and Svoboda were handing over a portion of control to the audience, then this was an illusion. While *Intolleranza*’s moving images and projections flooded the stage space with new depths, there nevertheless remained a “one-way flow of communication” (Small, 1998, p.27) common to most theatre, narrative film and television: audience members could be moved by events—even included in them—but could not alter them. Rather, they were used, without consent, as compositional material. The clamour of discrete artforms colliding with each other created a strong sense of *V-Affekt* that Nono hoped would prove politically rousing and activating, and yet, the work remained removed from visitors at the discursive level.

This televisual moment not only supported and enhanced the libretto and music, as Wilcox has argued, then: it also extended them, forming multi-layered commentaries and forms of intertextuality only available via the new moving image technologies. While NMT often aspired to a Brechtian form of anti-realism, as Adlington has argued, the Boston *Intolleranza* paradoxically embraced its artifice by rendering fragile the borders between art and life; by using real-world, live images via methods of communication that were starting to press at the social and cultural structures of contemporary society.

This was a two-way process: first, the audience were drawn across the “mystic gulf” and into the work itself, albeit at the level of inclusion rather than true interactivity, and, as we have seen, the voyeuristic nature of this surveillance was also significant. Second, the emphasis on construction—the low fi image against the fully embodied singers, the multiple screens with their borders clearly in view, the collaged footage from different locations and events, the emphasis on performance as performance—drew attention not just to the story of oppression, but also to the ways in which information about such instances was being relayed and consumed. As a result, the choice of moving images, screens, television technology and documentary footage assumed an extraordinary if coercive power.

**The Medium is the Message**

In order to see exactly how these contradictions were playing out, we need to look more closely at the context: at the choice of vehicle for the visual messages. The ramification of a televisual flow, of a distortion of content and its means of dissemination are vital to a coherent understanding of *Intolleranza*’s early performance history. For the 1961 premiere in Venice, the screened images signified at an artistic level, enabling the multiplane narratives to distance audience from work. As we have seen, in Italy, such an antagonistic style was significantly different from two of its dominant artforms: the lavish “realism” (Adlington) that had infused its nineteenth century operatic customs, with their clearly flowing narratives and overblown staging traditions; and the “reconstituted reportage” (Bazin) style of neo-realist films, with locational shoots and linear plotlines stitched together by sumptuous orchestral scores. Although, as Remshardt has argued, the contemporary visual gaze was shifting from “*stage seeing* to *camera seeing*” as cinema offered a transparency uncommon on the operatic stage, the Venice *Intolleranza* used the two forms of engagement simultaneously. This duality not only threw into relief the viewing strategies of traditional opera and neo-realist film, encouraging audiences to think about common processes of engagement, it also initiated a critique of Hollywood’s influence in their culture at large.

In America in the mid-1960s, several recent televisual occurrences meant that Svoboda’s use of screened images may have signified very differently. As we saw above, Nono held a troubled and distrustful relationship with America and its political and cultural heritage, prompting Wilcox’s suggestion that Nono’s political work “demanded that the piece not be presented for an American audience but at an American audience” (1996, p.127). But if we follow this line of argument further, we can suggest that, for an American audience in the mid-1960s, newsreel footage, a structural use of screens and an inability to act despite the immersive lure of a mirrored image had resonances unique to that culture. One event in particular had initiated a troubled relationship with the apparent objectivity of reportage. The Vietnam War, whose occurrence coincided with great technological leaps in compact cameras, battery power and transmission quality, has famously been referred to as the first “television war”, or the “living room war” (Arlen, 1969). In the years before Nono took his work to America, domestic spaces were being filled with quickly-captured, locational reportage as it was occurring.

The brutality of real-world war footage, consumed within personal homes, had a disquieting effect on audiences for several reasons. First, while the infiltration of quickly-captured footage was making domestic spaces less insular, at the same time, the flow of information into it was becoming normalised, stripped of its potential to shock. And second, trust in the televisual image was being compromised. The high degree of audiovisual fidelity provided by the newsreel footage appeared to give accurate and immediate information in an objective way. But of course, by the time footage reached the home, it had been strongly edited, stylised and censored in the cutting room (Arlen, 1969, p.240). Nevertheless, televisual coverage of the war was extensive, beginning in an upbeat manner by celebrating the ‘American boys in action’, before gradually becoming tempered with anti-war sentiment, scepticism and concern over the increasingly untenable position America was finding itself in. Although a lot of the violence was kept off screen, there were some notable exceptions: in 1965, CBS aired footage of Marines setting light to a village with Zippo lighters, for instance; and in 1968 NBC showed Colonel Nguyen Ngoc Loan shoot a captive in the head (Anderegg, 1991; Berg, 1991). As events unfolded there developed a perceptible gap between events as they occurred and the way in which they were reported and, in one of the earliest examples of mass distrust in the media, audiences began to question what they were being told. Communication was fast but information was censored and stylised; and early television audiences had begun to realise that, although reports were readily available, they were not as disinterested as they had once appeared to be (Hallin, 1989). The trustworthy nature of televisual delivery had suffered a critical blow.

Svoboda’s deconstruction of the performance space fed directly into these concerns about media saturation and control. For the Boston audience, the use of this highly-charged technology could undermine the validity of what was being presented, and its relation to the ways in which the world beyond the stage was being portrayed in the newly emergent media. Svoboda’s use of TV footage drew attention to the processes of television viewing and its modes of consumption in several ways: moving image technology enabled the remediation of current news footage and political reportage; violent and shocking events were decontextualized and placed in a montage giving a new reading of occurrences; and the edges of each screen led not to the safety of a domestic setting that could allay shock but to other screens, or to the stage space, in which similarly traumatic scenes were unravelling. Here, screened images provided an intervention onto the stage, but also, and as a result, could themselves be read as a commentary on television viewing and popular culture; on domesticity, reportage, consumption and the way in which to lure audiences away from—or into critical positions about—contemporary American culture.

At the same time, however, the closed-circuit feeds transformed the auditorium space in *real* time, foregrounding the manipulation of information *as it was happening*. Such a transformative critique of established power deconstructed viewing habits in a particularly Brechtian way. With this in mind, Nono’s and Svoboda’s Boston *Intolleranza* can be read as an attack on intolerance that resonates on several levels: against social injustices of class and race; against modern audiences and their compliant and passive consumption of information; against the nature of television broadcast and its power over truth and opinion; against domesticity and the lack of motivation to act; and against its own operatic and dramatic heritage.

In attempting to embody and substantiate intolerance, then, the Boston *Intolleranza* privileged artistic collision by highlighting its media specificity; the edges of each discipline were left in full view, frayed and angular, enabling the “confrontation of selected realities” desired by Svoboda. And confrontation is a key word here. Rather than fusion, or cohesion, music, text, narrative and staging seemed to repel each other; and the audience were offered a form of integration that lacked reciprocity, turning them not into participants, but rather into another visual message designed to reveal the pitfalls of political and artistic inertia.

**New Realities**

Such uses of moving-image technology were very different from the audiovisually sutured, highly cinematic gestures of neo-realist cinema, despite the gritty, historical and political content that both shared. Instead, by embracing the physical, real-time interactive opportunities of moving image media, Svoboda embraced the contextual and radical possibilities of live-streaming that were also being investigated by experimental film and video artists. Significantly, these new technologies were not used as mere decorativism—as part of a staging—but were rather structurally vital, operating as another voice that gives information, affect and information not otherwise apparent in the work. As the designer later explained, “the objects thereby acquire new relationships and significance, a new and different reality” (Svoboda quoted in Burian, 1970, p.133). This “new and different reality” was achieved through the manipulation of both content *and* context: by holding a literal mirror up to the normally physically inactive audience in order to destabilise and objectify their gaze.

Such emphasis on the staging, and, as Carolyn Abbate would say, the “drastic”, ephemeral and experiential nature of music theatre, together with the dissolution of subject from object, posits the genre as an embodied practice, with an unusually close, even reciprocal connection with the world beyond the theatre (Abbate, 2004). Today, when the moving image is ubiquitous, present everywhere from the theatre to mobile media, its appearance on the stage is not shocking: we have become well versed in its immersive potential. But the ability of scenography which, as Svoboda has said, “is not a background nor even a container, but in itself a dramatic component” to take on a life of its own and respond to local cultural resonances is significant. Svoboda’s scenography, alongside the ambitious direction of both Kašlík and Caldwell, turned the work into an intertextual tapestry of actual and symbolic references, which fed into current and critical concerns about technology, reportage and representation. The resultant performative interplay between content and context enabled the two stagings to harness the power and potential of the newly-available live moving image while at the same time exposing their capacity for deceit. Although the audience was not invited to actively participate, this duality de-centred the composerly intentions of Nono, opening the work instead to a form of distributed or network creativity concomitant with the current explorations of experimental filmmakers and video artists.

The shift in emphasis from musical object to intertextual, spatial and performative *mise en scène*, then, is significant for both the staging and reception of *Intolleranza*, and for its historical contextualisation. The destabilising capacity of moving-image technologies positions NMT not only within musical and dramatic traditions, but also within the multimedia sensibilities of mid-century avant-garde art, expanded cinema and innovative audiovisual cultures. The hypermediacy that arose from the “awkward interstices” of these practices was significant as it enabled the prevalent use of dissonant montage techniques; the promotion of screens as sculptural objects for their politicised material presence; and the live-circuit feed that at once encouraged and repelled interactivity. The direct intervention into everyday life and site-specificity that this enabled was historically and culturally contingent, and this encourages a mode of analysis concerned not only with the musico-theatrical work, but also on its performative, transient and “drastic” potential.

1. Happenings and Events are a good example of this, as audience members were not only invited into the multidisciplinary space of the work, but also given the freedom to perform certain directions that could determine its course. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)