

Opera as method in the work of Grace Schwindt

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So, should we decide to keep the word 'method', let us then fabulate it a bit, and absorb it into language, thought and narrative practice that can lend it a specifically Brechtian resonance and distinctiveness. (Jameson 1999: 37)

Grace Schwindt's performance and moving image-based practice commonly sets the body to work within a tightly scripted or choreographed score such that a tension emerges between the material capacity of the body and the structuring potential of the system that delimits but also generates its movement. At points, this dialectic between body and text in Schwindt's work (where the text is the infrastructural system that conditions the capacities of the body) is either further complicated or unravelled. As a result, the work produces a tripartite weave between the body as a material and as a kind of image, forms of infrastructure such as the theatre or more recently opera, and questions of freedom and agency arising from these combinations. As Schwindt has said in regards to her work: 'I place bodies in (these) spaces... and use a tight scripted choreography in which every move relates to institutionalised systems that rely on exclusion and destruction.' (Ledo, and Park 2016: 3) In his writing on theatre, the French philosopher Alain Badiou has similarly written of theatre as a 'complex ordering system' and a 'material ordering' based upon the combining of body and text in the space of a stage. (Badiou 2012: 19) In Schwindt's work this 'material ordering' can be understood in a variety of ways, from the sensual and bodily (signalled by regular use of different textures and textiles such as in the work, *Curtain* (2016), a wall of silk ribbons which the viewer walks through), to the script, choreography, score or 'institutionalised system' that *orders*. Schwindt's use of scripting or scoring structures, such as operatic or balletic forms, further complicates the presence of the body (on the stage of the performance or in the frame of the film) by subtly questioning the differing temporal presences of the body and the image. In so heavily mediating the presence of the body in performance or on screen, Schwindt's work often acts to question when and where the body is 'live'. In the essay that follows, I will explore these questions in relation to two recent works by Schwindt: the performance, *Madness and Other Tales* (2016) and the long-form film, *Only A Free Individual Can Create A Free Society* (2014).

Madness and Other Tales (2016) was first performed within the exhibition, *Run a Home, Build a Town, Lead a Revolution. An Exhibition in Three Acts* at Museo De Arte Contemporânea De Vigo (MARCO), and was composed from a live, operatic performance accompanied by a small musical ensemble. Situated in a large gallery space with dimmed lighting, the work plays upon and with the conventions of opera, making them visible. Not least of these is the unpicking of Wagner's famous *Gesamtkunstwerk* (the total art work), the advent of which ensured that the elements central to the construction of the illusion of opera – notably the orchestra – were hidden from sight. However, rather than completely undoing the Wagnerian demand for total illusion, which now dominates opera's staging, Schwindt situates the orchestra within a large purple tent made from a light-weight fabric which billows with the musicians' movements creating the sense of a large breathing (collective) mass. They are thus hidden from direct view but also present as labouring bodies. This partial obscuring of the orchestra highlights the shift from early 19th Century opera to the Wagnerian, by splaying open the rent between a (pre-Wagnerian) visibility and a (Wagnerian) illusion. In a similar manner, and in contrast to the luminous presence of the singer, the dark shadow of the conductor is projected against the fabric and we watch his movement. *Madness and Other Tales* therefore plays between the extremes of light and dark, between being illuminated on-stage and off.

While making reference to the effects of a now-commonplace Wagnerian staging, Schwindt's work is based upon what is commonly referred to as the 'Mad Scene' in

Gaetano Donizetti's opera, *Lucia di Lammermour* (first performance in Naples in 1835) – an opera that preceded Wagner by half a century and is very different in style. During the scene, Lucia descends into madness and murders her husband on their wedding night after being tricked into an unwanted marriage, and spurning her lover who she has been led to believe is dead. The aria is characterised by the initial use of fragmented vocal passages that become increasingly wild and 'florid' as Lucia succumbs to her grief. Schwindt adapts Donizetti's original score to include humming, whistling, trilling and other forms of improvisation thus putting further demands upon the capacities of the soprano singing the already, notoriously difficult aria. (Interestingly enough, a tradition for embellishing the aria began with the famous Australian soprano Dame Nellie Melba's performance in Paris in 1889 for which she introduced a complex development upon the cadenza in order to further show off her vocal talents. (Pugliese 2004: 30)) Technically demanding for the singer, Donizetti's aria (and Schwindt's by association) demands a high degree of rigour, technical accomplishment and stamina while, at the same time, suggesting a descent into madness or the attainment of freedom through madness (depending upon how you look at it). Here, as in a number of other works by Schwindt, the body strives between containment and liberation in the tension between the body as a highly trained (operatic) instrument and the freedom from constraint suggested by the introduction of the less refined sounds of whistling and humming.

One of the most lauded aspects of Lucia's 'mad aria' is the manner in which the voice of the soprano follows the rising melody played by the flute. Here the human voice, meandering initially then more urgently, follows along the path set by the flute. What is most interesting about this mirroring is the fact that the flute's line was originally played by the glass armonica, an instrument that, during the 19th Century, had developed extreme popularity as well as a notorious reputation amongst the gentry for its link to the afterlife and to death. There has been suggestion of fatality and madness associated with the armonica, and many players reported sensations of disorientation after playing, leading to claims that the instrument transmitted voices from the afterlife (although it is also suggested that the high lead content of the glass may have been a factor in these afflictions). The armonica was based upon the common dinner party trick of sounding tones by running one's finger along the rim of a wine glass, the tone emitted varying according to the amount of liquid in the glass. Following this principle, the instrument is made from a series of glass bowls (usually 37) of different sizes strung together horizontally along a metal pole, which is then turned as the armonica is stroked by the player. The form of the armonica is interesting to consider within the context of Schwindt's work for the way in which it stands in for a body through its elongated horizontal form, and the way in which it represents a vessel for the voice – giving voice to a voice from the afterlife, as was thought by some. While the glass armonica is not literally present in Schwindt's work, the frame of Donizetti's aria announces its presence and absence (being replaced in performance by the flute). The sounding of the void spaces of the armonica speaks to the singer's own body as a vessel for the voice, a sense that is further emphasised through accompanying works within the exhibition at MARCO such as the hauntingly beautiful *Figures Marching* (2016) – a series of small porcelain jugs placed upon a long room-length rectangular plinth. These tiny bodies echo the form and speak to the bodies of the dying birds rescued from oil spills by the protagonist of the associated work, *Little Birds and a Demon* (2015). Here the fragility of the body (human and animal) is announced as well as an elusive presence – is the body really present or is this presence eviscerated for and by the voice?

In opera, the body acts as a container for the voice; it is the voice's 'point of emission' and its instrument, so that the body is denied (or superseded) once the voice is sounded, yet so too is the voice superseded by 'the word'. (Dolar 2012) The philosopher, Mladen Dolar addresses this relationship between body, voice and word or meaning as a relationship of complex interdependence and subjugation, which he bases upon a hierarchical sequence from body to voice to word or meaning so that the body disappears as the voice sounds

and once the word is uttered so too does the word (or meaning) 'silence(s) the voice'. (Dolar 2012) This striving towards the 'word', as the highest attainment of voice, produces a division between aesthetics and meaning that is overcome in the work of other philosophers, such as Gilles Deleuze's unification of the body and voice in his work on the stutter. This dichotomy in which voice (and the sensuous expressive qualities of the voice) are opposed to meaning (conveyed through language and its operations) obviously produces problems in considering opera or song in which meaning is produced through the expressive sensuous aspects of the voice. 'One can say: the word silences the voice, but not quite', Dolar writes. (Dolar 2012) This 'not quite' is produced through song in which the voice becomes 'the bearer of what cannot be expressed by the signifier' and thus the tension between the voice's capacity to transmit 'a symbolic mandate' (that is meaning) and the voice as a sensual or aesthetic expression is reconfigured. (Dolar 2012) And so for Dolar (and other theorists of opera, such as Michel Poizat), this hierarchical division between aesthetics and meaning is problematised by opera because the voice threatens to dominate (thus overturning the ascendance of meaning over voice) but, rather than simply being a sensuous expression of beauty, opera conveys the expression of meaning in a way that supersedes meaning itself by expressing that which 'cannot otherwise be said'. (Dolar 2012)

Opera is, therefore, the ultimate consummation of the relationship between body and text (which Alain Badiou suggests forms the basis for theatre). Yet this dialectic is always already corrupted in the case of opera as the body is submitted to the structural ordering of the text through the rigorous system of vocal training, operatic convention and so on. In *Madness and Other Tales* (2016), Schwindt addresses this relationship between body, voice and word or meaning in a way that considers their 'material ordering' by articulating the relationship between body and text that forms the basis of opera itself. (Badiou 2012) Thus the system that orders the body, and (through intensive training) enables it to produce (the operatic) voice, is made visible through the virtuosic display of the aria. In *Madness and other Tales* this is further emphasised by the introduction of improvised sounds into Donizetti's aria such as whistling and humming so that the role of the body in producing the voice is insisted upon rather than denied (as in Dolar's model in which the voice supersedes the body) through the use of vocalisations that speak to the material capacities of the body in contrast to the instrumentalisation of the body as (operatic) voice. This insistence upon the body's presence (rather than its denial or accedence to the voice) is further suggested by the costume that Schwindt designed for the singer. Made from rigid pieces of mirrored material, the costume acts to enclose the singer's body – both capturing and announcing its presence on the stage. Thus contained it cannot disappear as only an emissary for the voice but remains present. As well as containing or holding the singer's body, the mirrored dress – lit as it is by spotlights – acts both to blind us (refracting its light back upon us) and seduce us by announcing itself as spectacle and us, the viewers, as audience. Here, in an opposite movement to the material insistence upon the singer's presence, the refracting light from the dress produces a dematerialising or spectacularising effect, as the body becomes image. Therefore the mirrored dress not only announces the relationship between body and image, where the body is encountered in a state of becoming image, it acts to insist upon a *material* relationship between body and voice that is otherwise denied through the operatic form.

We see this 'material ordering' of the body addressed in a different manner through the collectivisation of individual voice in Schwindt's film, *Only A Free Individual Can Create A Free Society*. *Only A Free Individual* is based upon an extensive interview that Schwindt undertook with a family friend who had been involved in radical political groups in Germany during the 1970s. In the ensuing work this interview is then voiced by a chorus so that both Schwindt and her interviewee's voices are each collectivised and made multiple. The use of the chorus in place of the individual acts to collectively narrate what is happening on the stage, activating a kind of truth effect or establishing a status quo – an assertion of this is 'how things are', as Schwindt has observed. (Schwindt 2014) It also

directly activates the 'expression beyond meaning' that Dolar articulates in his work on opera by emphasising the sound of the collective voice rather than a more direct and perhaps clearer transmission of meaning through a single voice. Furthermore, this transference from an individual to collective voice denies a subjectivised individual and instead each voice remains obscured from characterisation and individual narratives, emphasising *what* is said rather than *who* speaks. At the same time, while *what* is said is emphasised over the interior subjectivity of *who* speaks, the collectivisation of voice through the chorus has the seemingly opposite effect of emphasising the material and textual qualities of speech over meaning or content.

Only A Free Individual is an intensely complex work that involves more than 30 separate costumes alongside tightly choreographed movement and voice. As well as exploring the questions of a 'material ordering' between body and text (or body, voice and meaning, in Dolar's case), the work interrogates questions of presence pertaining to the live body distinct from the mediated or represented body – the image. Here the questions of freedom alluded to in the title are played out through the form of work (they are also, of course, present in the spoken text – the interview with the taxi driver and ex radical) so that we are asked to consider whether the live body is really free. *Only A Free Individual* therefore deals with the threshold between what might be considered a 'live' body and one that is mediated through forms of representation or mediation (such as the image or forms of electronic imaging). Here representation can be understood as pertaining to an image but also as an ordering system that acts to produce an idealised body whether that is an operatic or, in the case of *Only A Free Individual*, a balletic body. This is seen through the manner in which the spoken text, voiced by the chorus, is accompanied by movement that is strictly structured – choreographed and balletic in form. This movement is not only designed to be considered symbolically – as a form of language akin to meaning – but rather as further evidence of the influence of structure and the structuring institutions of balletic or operatic training upon the ordering of the body and its movements. It also speaks to a similar impetus in *Madness and Other Tales* in which the body is trained, refined and finessed as an instrument suitable for the emission of *bel canto* (simply translated as 'beautiful song' but also pertaining to the operatic form characterised by Italian opera in the first half of the 19th Century). In this way, the balletic body does not speak to the immediacy of presence as we have come to know it through forms of contemporary post-1960s performance art in which the body is extended and unbound but to a body that is disembodied into a network of significations.

Schwindt most visibly addresses the threshold between the body experienced as 'live' and not 'live' in an earlier performance rendering of the work entitled, *Free Individual / Free Society*. In this iteration, programmed by Pavilion, a dancer performs a section of the film on a stage in an empty theatre while the audience sits in the auditorium of the Hyde Park Picture House in Leeds where they receive the performance via phone having been provided with individual handsets. Here in an interesting twist, the visual medium of the film is undone; and curiously what remains in this unpicking is the sound of a body in movement. The performance involves a scene from the film in which a dancer's movement is augmented by the costume she wears, a costume comprising a number of wooden sticks that amplify and echo the dancer's moves. For us, unable to see to the performance, the dancer's movements are freed from the confinement (or refinements) of the balletic order and instead we sense its presence (sonically) as a material form that interacts with another material form – the wooden floor of the stage. The phone-line itself – a conduit between disunited bodies – calls our attention to this presence and absence of live bodies in a way that is simplified to questions of here and there, proximity and distance. And this enforced separation of us, the audience, from the immediacy of the action also calls attention to the further separation of each member of the audience each seated in a single modular unit and not collectivised as participants.

This teasing apart of parts – text, body, audience – is then what makes Schwindt’s work an exploration (and enlivening) of ‘method’ in the sense of Fredric Jameson’s words quoted at the beginning of this essay. Like Badiou’s theatre of operations, Jameson’s evocation of Brecht’s method suggests openness within the body-text dialectic – and this opening is further teased apart in Schwindt’s work. As has been already noted, Schwindt’s working process often begins with a form of text. This might be an operatic aria, such as in the work *Madness and Other Tales* (2016), or a lengthy interview with a taxi driver such as that which forms the basis of her work, *Only A Free Individual Can Create A Free Society*. Here, text provides a starting point from which the work evolves, operating in a manner that is, on the one hand, comparable to what Keller Easterling has referred to within a very different context as ‘infrastructure’, as the making visible of the hitherto invisible structures of global capitalism, and, on the other, to what Jameson suggests as an expanded notion of ‘method’ in his book, *Brecht and Method*. Both notions, of ‘infrastructure’ and ‘method’, while exercised in quite different ways, resolve the modernist demand for functionality and usefulness in a way that provides a clear insight into both form and structure while enabling the poetic (and perhaps erratic) interplay of the body to be also present. To state it briefly, Easterling’s notion of ‘infrastructural space’ aims to make visible the usually hidden ways in which global flows of finance, information and data structure and produce hidden conduits and annexes of power, which ultimately effect our daily lives. This might equate to what Schwindt has referred to as ‘institutionalised systems’ that inform her work and which she, like Easterling, strives to make visible.

As much as Schwindt’s ‘method’ might be understood as pertaining to institutionalised power, it is also particularly theatrical in form, following as it does Badiou’s formulation of theatre as a specific combination – or material ordering – of body and text in the space of the stage. Schwindt’s work across both performance and moving image addresses the interplay of these distinct parts and the dialectical tension between them. However, in a move that is instinctively Brechtian, the interplay of these structures is often rendered as a complex puzzle for us to unravel. Here then, in this complex interweave of body and text (Badiou’s ‘material ordering’) is Schwindt’s reformulation of what Jameson has referred to as ‘method’, and which he bases upon the delightful couplet by Brecht himself:

*He made proposals. We
Carried them out.*

Jameson works to distance Brecht from what he calls a purely ‘functionalist’ approach, opting instead for an approach that is more expansive, taking on board his work as ‘a type of pragmatism’ while coupling this with what he calls a Deleuzian ‘joyousness’ for thinking the importance of the ‘idea of Brecht’. (Jameson 1999: 37) And in this couplet, we see something of the dynamic tension between text (also institutionalised system or infrastructural space), as an ordering device, and the body that carries out these proposals extending their possibilities beyond the strictures of order to something that is poetic, bodily and potentially disordered ...

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