

# Wagnervideo

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If critics are to be believed, the use of video on the theatrical stage had become something of a fad by the early years of the new millennium. “Multimedia,” wrote Lyn Gardner in the *Guardian*, “is a word I’ve come to dread in the theatre. There was a period around five years ago when you could hardly step inside a theatre to see a new play without encountering a bank of video monitors.”<sup>1</sup> Diedrich Diederichsen recounts the similarly exasperated tone of a Berlin critic, who wrote in December 2003 of her wish for the coming year that the Berlin Volksbühne might resist using video projections just once.<sup>2</sup> Opera, meanwhile, has been no stranger to this fascination with video. Toronto critic Peter Goddard recently wrote of “opera’s video projection fetish,” quoting director Astrid Janson on the “fashionable” use of “large projections, particularly in Wagner.”<sup>3</sup>

Arguably, the ultimate product of this “fetish” has been *The Tristan Project*, a production of Wagner’s three-act *Handlung* directed by Peter Sellars with a commissioned full-length video by Bill Viola. Initially presented in semistaged form (one act per evening) at the Walt Disney Concert Hall, Los Angeles, in December 2004 and fully staged at Paris’s Opéra Bastille in April 2005, *The Tristan Project* attracted extraordinary media interest: interviews and preview articles flooded the press before the performances, while the review coverage was as widespread as it gets for opera. The source of the fascination? Undoubtedly, it had much to do with the contested reputations of the collaborators. If Sellars has surely outgrown his reputation as opera’s bad boy, he remains a provocative figure, still capable of dividing opinion.<sup>4</sup> Viola, meanwhile, is surely the most discussed figure in video art today: his installations have generated both critical and public interest worldwide, while the body of scholarly literature on his work has grown substantially. Yet admiration of Viola’s technical skill and the sheer beauty of his work tends to be met with concerns about a superficiality and the perceived absence of the qualities—cultural critique, skepticism about art and the aesthetic—that have characterized much video art since its emergence in the late sixties and seventies (an emergence to which Viola’s early work contributed).<sup>5</sup> Here was Viola’s stock-in-trade imagery: bodies floating in water and enveloped by fire, split-framed character studies summoning the allegorical resonance of Renaissance

portraiture, meditative shots of natural environments—such as the desert—that are the haunts of seers and prophets. All this was true to form and likely to confirm the views both of his admirers and his detractors. Critics of *The Tristan Project* summoned superlatives both positive and negative, characterizing Viola's video as everything from a revelatory experience to an extended Calvin Klein advertisement.

The core issue for many critics, however, was not the video per se, but its relationship to the production as a whole. This was no intermittent projection onto various surfaces of the *mise-en-scène*, a technique by now familiar to opera audiences; Viola's video sequences were projected in cinematic proportions onto a giant screen at the rear of the stage, and for almost the entire duration of the production. In this sense the production served as a touchstone for critical concerns about a perceived media overload that not only threatens the place of music in opera but also undermines opera's identity as theater, transforming the opera house into a cinema with a supplementary live stage. Yet it is precisely in these overlaps—these liminal spaces and crossings where traditional media and genre boundaries blur and even collapse—that the production offers so much to opera studies. It was the impression of media collision, sensory overload, and generic unraveling that I found most compelling in performance and that now motivates me to reflect on the implications of the production for questions of performance, spectatorship, and operatic mediality.<sup>6</sup>

#### THROWING IN THE TOWEL

Reaction to *The Tristan Project* tended to exhibit a typically operatic concern for the ways in which the production either enhanced or diminished the experience of music (opera critics, after all, are often music critics and tend to react negatively to perceived distractions from the score). Critics detected moments when Viola's nature imagery seemed to offer an illustration of Wagner's music, like the banal pictorial essays that so often accompany classical music on television; there were MTV moments, when the moody projections seemed to relate to the music like some exceptionally long-winded music video; and there was occasional film-style synchronization, but of a different kind—a video director can alter the speed of the video and add supplemental footage at the beginning and end of sequences to match the live performance, reversing the old film music practices of the silent era.<sup>7</sup> For Alex Ross of the *New Yorker*, the addition of the video resulted in a new engagement with the music: "I found myself listening with heightened alertness, as if the film were bringing Wagner into sharper focus."<sup>8</sup> Other commentators inevitably summoned the *Gesamtkunstwerk* idea, as though Wagner's dream had found new form in the twenty-first century.<sup>9</sup> But there were many more critics who complained that the addition of video had a more fragmenting effect.

Stefan Lühle complained that the video distracted from the music, while Martin Bernheimer of the *Financial Times* accused Viola of “trivializing” Wagner’s “monumental” score with inappropriate and at times irrelevant imagery.<sup>10</sup> The video, it seems, demanded attention, and that attention, rather than generating a productive tension with musical engagement, threatened to cancel it out. “That is the trouble with video in opera,” Richard Fairman concluded, “when it gets at all specific, it goes into a competition against the music, from which neither emerges the winner.”<sup>11</sup>

Yet concerns about the impact of Viola’s video didn’t end with its relationship to music. In fact, what most exercised the critics was the question of how the video related to the project as theater. These concerns turned inevitably on the sheer size and duration of the video. This might not have seemed so overwhelming were it not for the fact that Sellars’s direction gave the impression of being in thrall to the video. Largely confined to a thin strip of stage in front of the screen, dressed only in black, and moving around simple rectangles of light with the barest of props, Sellars’s actors were restricted to minimalist and ritualistic gestures. Wasn’t this precisely the sort of fetishistic surrender to video to which Goddard referred? For Lühle and Fairman, it all smacked of throwing in the towel, while Volker Hagedorn of *Die Zeit* wondered how Tristan and Isolde “could be expected to make theater, or love, when dominated by Viola’s flood of images.”<sup>12</sup>

Viola’s giant images, it seems, threatened not only to position Wagner’s orchestra, quite literally, as “underscore”—to use a term unpopular in film music circles—but to make Sellars’s theatrical bodies seem uncomfortably like sign language interpreters at the foot of some wide-screen extravaganza. Or, as Stefan Burianek of the *Wiener Zeitung* put it, the singers were reduced to the status of “audio channels accompanying a silent film.”<sup>13</sup> Writing in the *Independent*, Anna Picard raised similar concerns: “Whether beautiful or banal—and in just over four hours of music there is plenty of both—Viola’s video dominates the dialogue like a [soccer] match on a pub television, confirming my opinion that moving images have a narcotic effect, regardless of their content.”<sup>14</sup> And Klaus Georg Koch expressed dismay at a directorial approach that seemed to return the acting to the days of “stand-and-deliver”: “The singers wring their arms and produce their voices.”<sup>15</sup>

#### FILE FOOTAGE

Much of the critical reception struck a similar tone, at once fascinated by the effect of the video and puzzled by what seemed like Sellars’s capitulation. And, like much of the critical discourse on video in contemporary spoken theater, it situated the relationship of video and stage in terms of a dualism between the

technologically rendered virtuality of video on one hand and the live, embodied presence of acting singers on the other. While video is seen to offer a two-dimensional play of light representing now-absent bodies, theater places us in the presence of actors in all their corporeal and envoiced immediacy. Not that these perspectives have gone unchallenged. Philip Auslander has sought to question the assumptions on which these binaries rest, arguing that the very idea of the “live” has emerged as a response to a cultural economy in which engagement with video has assumed a status so ingrained that it shapes patterns of perception even for those in attendance at events like theater, rock concerts, and sports. “The live form,” Auslander concludes, “starts to replicate the mediatized form.”<sup>16</sup> Marvin Carlson, meanwhile, wonders whether the patterns of integration between stage and video evident in productions from the Berlin Volksbühne raise the technological and aesthetic stakes by suggesting a whole new level of sophistication in the relationship between mediatized and nonmediatized images. Citing Thomas Oberender’s distinction between *Einspielung* (the use of prerecorded video) and *Live-Produktion* (the live screening of video captured on camera in the theater), Carlson argues that the “hall of mirrors” effects of these emerging practices foreground new dimensions of critical spectatorship, ones that invite us to reexamine not only our engagement with video, but the very idea of “seeing” the actor or stage directly.<sup>17</sup>

Carlson concludes with the assertion that this practice of “co-dependence” or “feedback” complicates the more simple movement from live to mediatized modeled by Auslander.<sup>18</sup> Yet Auslander imagines just such a reciprocal play, addressing the relationship between the live and mediatized in light of a passage from Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulations*: “nothing separates one pole from the other, the initial from the terminal: there is just a sort of contraction into each other, a fantastic telescoping: an implosion.”<sup>19</sup> In Baudrillard’s account of postmodern simulation, the very notion of an original or “real” source is lost; in a culture based on copies of copies, the privileged status of the original—the quality that Walter Benjamin associated with the “aura”—is transformed. And if Carlson oversimplifies Auslander’s model, his celebration of the complex and culturally attuned implications of *Live-Produktion* also risks overlooking the critical potential of *Einspielung*. For it could be argued that it is precisely the prerecorded nature of video in productions such as *The Tristan Project* that is most subversive in a theatrical context. By drawing a spatial and temporal gap into the theatrical space—a gap, that is, between the time and place of production and the time and place of playback—prerecorded video collides with the notion of “liveness” that is so central to theater’s self-definition, to the “bodily co-presence of actors and spectators” that Erika Fischer-Lichte associates with the mediality of theater.<sup>20</sup> Jeongwon Joe highlights this subversive potential in her reading of Philip Glass’s *La Belle et la Bête*, a mixed-media work that combines a screening of Jean

Cocteau's film *La Belle et la Bête* (minus its soundtrack) with live singers and instrumentalists. The result, in a reversal of the familiar yet strange practice of lip-synching at live popular music events, is an event that "'stages' the postmodern loss of the real: the real is inscribed with the presence of live bodies and music, but at the same time is subverted by the presence of recorded images."<sup>21</sup>

As many critics noted, the configuration of the relationship between projected video and live orchestra in *The Tristan Project* suggests an orchestral score for silent film. Yet Viola's reflections on the editing stage of postproduction are telling: "That's when the music reappeared for me because music is all about the rhythmical structuring of time. And that was telling me how long these shots are, when they should start and stop, in what order and sequence they go."<sup>22</sup> The process that Viola describes in fact resembles the traditional synchronizing of music in cinematic production, except that now it is the score that precedes image in the production process. Role reversal is equally evident in performance, when the video operator is required to manipulate playback to synchronize with the live performance. All this suggests a blurring of the traditional distinctions between live and recorded, performed and reproduced. Consider, too, the peculiar take on the ideology of *Werktreue* in contemporary operatic practice, in which Wagner's stagecraft is pointedly discarded as a relic of the nineteenth century, while his words and music are treated as sacrosanct, open to expressive interpretation but not to any substantive alteration beyond a few optional cuts. Add to this the international standardization and interchangeability of interpretation brought about by the contemporary operatic jet set of conductors, directors, and singers, and the relevance of the traditional distinction between the fixed technology of video playback and the variable live performance of a canonic work seems more and more questionable. If opera as institution and tradition displayed more of a commitment to new commissions or even to an operatic equivalent of postdramatic theater, the almost industrially repetitive nature of operatic production might be mitigated by an urgent sense of the live and unpredictable. Instead, contemporary operatic practice follows a logic of faithful *reproduction* of a tiny canon. Within this context the introduction of prerecorded video is hardly the alien invasion that critics have implied. Here, then, is one of the "crossings" to which I referred. Much more than a technological intrusion into the live, natural domain of theater, Viola's video might be interpreted as holding a mirror up to the already fixed, reproduced character of operatic practices and habits, not least those of the professional critics, whose endless clichés and "churnalism" might seem to be stuck in prerecorded loop of their own. But this is only one consequence of the meeting of media and traditions; there are others.

## A GLIMPSE BEHIND THE SCREENS

Presented in a familiar cinematic environment—a darkened auditorium with rows of seats facing a single large projection screen—Viola’s video for *The Tristan Project* might be understood to invite the audience to engage with its two-dimensional form without, as it were, “missing” the third dimension.<sup>23</sup> Yet the presence of the stage in *front* of the screen challenges this cultural contract, throwing into relief the missing spatial dimension of the video images, as though staging, literally and figuratively, the absence built into cinema. If the spectator focuses on the stage, does the video lose its impression of depth and become what it always was: an image? Conversely, what kind of “off-space” do the actors occupy when the video image is perceived as a virtual three-dimensional environment?

Yet this is only the beginning, for Sellars’s *mise-en-scène* layers another spatial dimension when it distributes actors and musicians throughout the auditorium: the mocking sailor at the beginning of act 1 sings from a high balcony, as does Brangäne during her night vigil of act 2; Marke makes his entrance at the end of act 1 into the middle of the orchestra-level seats, announced by sailors and trumpeters positioned throughout the auditorium; and the solo English horn plays the shepherd’s mournful tune of act 3 from a balcony.<sup>24</sup> With its fondness for off- and backstage voices, opera could be seen to license this kind of dispersal of forces, although Sellars’s practice clearly raises the stakes. While offstage voices play with the notion of invisibility and disembodiment, Sellars’s actors and instrumentalists acquire visible embodiment where the score’s stage directions had hidden them from sight (the mocking sailor is marked “from above,” Brangäne as “invisible,” while Marke never appears in act 1). At other times they find themselves displaced from stage to auditorium (trumpets and English horn are marked “onstage,” while the sailors of act 1, initially marked offstage, appear toward the end of the act). In each case the effect is to challenge the theatrical fourth wall, opening up the performing space beyond the proscenium and generating a visual and acoustic “swerve” in which sights and sounds emanate from spaces traditionally marked by darkness and silence.<sup>25</sup>

At the same time, the audience’s experience of offstage space is inverted from a conventional impression of distance and the half-perceived to proximity and presence, making the stage seem, by comparison, an unreal, “unpresent” place. And this proximity of the offstage has important consequences for the audience’s awareness of its corporeal engagement with the performance, for, while the production and the performing space otherwise maintain the traditional physical separation of actor and audience, the appearance of actors and musicians in the auditorium introduces a bodily proximity that has the potential both to unsettle and to compel. It is unsettling because, as Herbert Blau puts it, “theater . . . posits

itself in distance.”<sup>26</sup> A mobilization of visual and acoustic play, theater is predicated on distance: “Sight and hearing are, classically, *senses at a distance*, as opposed to the immediacy not only of touch but of taste and smell.”<sup>27</sup> One possible way to understand Sellars’s practice, then, is that the “immediate” senses come into play for those in close proximity to the actors in the auditorium. This is an effect to which I can attest: when Marke swept past my seat during his entrance, I *felt* the wafting air that he had displaced, making his arrival, his presence, seem palpable in ways that the stage could not. And if this is unsettling, it is also compelling, in that another kind of engagement, more immediate and sensual, takes the place of detached observation and listening. Yet the question of immediacy and distance, and the pleasure or displeasure they might yield, is also one of context. This proximity took place in the cavernous environment of the Opéra Bastille, where intimacy is at a premium. I had adjusted to grand scales of architecture, vision, and acoustic space when Marke swept by; in a more modest setting, it might not have had the same effect. And, of course, there is a random element here of being caught off-guard: I did not know that I would be in the “right” place. When I attended a subsequent performance, my seat was much farther from any of the performers, and this sense of tangibility was lost.

But we might also consider the effect this kind of practice has on the very notion of spectatorship when it collapses the distance traditionally associated with seeing and hearing, supplementing them with a more immediate engagement. If overcoming distance can create impressions of intimacy, it can also, as Blau observes, imply disempowerment, a loss of voyeuristic control.<sup>28</sup> Nor are vision and hearing always easily grouped together as senses at a distance. A strong conceptual history divides the detached quality of seeing with the more immersive experience of hearing. Writing on the “amplifier function” of Wagner’s orchestra, Friedrich Kittler observes that “sound . . . pierces the armor called Ego, for among all of the sensory organs, the ears are the hardest to close.”<sup>29</sup> This distinction between the distanced empowerment of observation and the more vulnerable implications of listening informs Michelle Duncan’s reading of agency in operatic performance. Citing Leigh Eric Schmidt on what he calls the “imperial sweep” of the rational, detached, observing subject, Duncan explores the association of vision with mastery, with affirmation of the Cartesian split between subject and object so central to Western thought. The effect of radical productions, Duncan suggests, is to challenge the “scopic distance of the ‘enlightened’ observer,” overturning his or her apparent sovereignty by “acting upon” the observer. Agency, in other words, is wrested from the spectator, who becomes “at once both subject and object” in relation to the production.<sup>30</sup> If Duncan imagines a theatrical swerve that effects a *conceptual* collapse of distance, Sellars’s auditorium actors suggest how this might be embodied in a very tangible way: as a loss of *physical* distance. What should be viewed from a distance—an object whose visibility

(and more important, whose status as object) is guaranteed by its being kept at a distance—enters a space that threatens scopic order. The darkened, voyeuristic, safe space of the spectator is now inhabited by the object of the voyeurism, and in this sense *The Tristan Project* challenges scopic distance both figuratively and literally. Like many experiments with the fourth wall, Sellars's practice suggests being caught in the act, like the archetypal discovery of the voyeur imagined by Sartre: "But all of a sudden I hear footsteps in the hall. Someone is looking at me! What does this mean?"<sup>31</sup> Sartre uses this scenario to explore questions of ontology, and in particular "being-for-others," the term he uses to denote the external, social constitution of self. There is, in other words, a powerfully social, even political, dimension to disrupting the established patterns and conventions of spectatorship. But within the context of *The Tristan Project*, the implications are potentially richer still. If the video mobilization of multiple virtual Tristans and Isoldes suggests a postmodern theater of simulated bodies, then Sellars's practice arguably pushes theater in the opposite direction: toward a mode of immediacy and embodiment that grates not only against the economy of the simulacrum but against theater's more traditional foundation in illusion and voyeurism.

#### | IN-BETWEEN-NESS

It might be said, in fact, that the fourth wall is not the only one affected by Sellars's staging. If the presence of actors and musicians in the auditorium modifies the audience's perception of the stage, highlighting its distance and making it seem oddly two-dimensional in relation to the wider stage that now envelops it, what is the impact on our engagement with the video projection? This wall—let us call it the "first wall"—is the site of the projection screen in the cinema and the place in the theater where backdrops traditionally create an impression of spatial depth and perspective, of stage space extending away from the audience. In both cases, the spectator is invited to invest in an imaginary dimension, a dimension that extends "through" the first wall. But if, as I have claimed, the stage already challenges the observer's traditional cinematic contract with the projected image, could it be that the expansion of the stage space to the auditorium renders the projection a kind of superflat space?<sup>32</sup> Jeongwon Joe interprets the screen in *La Belle et la Bête* as a postmodern substitution of depth paradigms with a celebration of surface and flatness. In that context, however, there is no stage per se (singers are visible but do not act), let alone actors distributed throughout an auditorium.

Besides, isn't the critique of depth paradigms one of the postmodern concerns that Viola's work tends to "eschew," as David Ross puts it? Although it often plays on the notion of flatness and depth, its drive is toward an (illusory) investment in depth as a kind of immersive spectral magic.<sup>33</sup> Take, for example,



one of the video sequences in act 1. As the onstage Tristan and Isolde begin their courtly ritual of ego, revenge, and desire, Viola's video is split into two symmetrical images, each centered on a simple classical stone door frame. In the center of each frame a figure, at first barely discernible, walks slowly from a distant horizon over a misty surface toward the camera. Finally distinguishable as a man and a woman, the figures begin to fill the door frames until, in a telling gesture, they step through the doorway and stand facing the camera, the frames now immediately behind them.

In one sense the gesture represents the act of stepping through a portal (which will mark the beginning of a series of purification rituals, leading to the title pair's decision to drink the death draft). In another it suggests a relationship of image to frame: the doorway frames the figures in painterly fashion until both "transcend" the frame and seem to acquire a third dimension, a spectral immediacy and presence. Similar in effect is the spectacular sequence that accompanies the drinking of the potion later in the act. A tiny point of light grows gradually larger until it becomes discernible as two entwined bodies. When the bodies suddenly plunge through a surface of water and float beneath the surface, we realize that we have been looking up from beneath the surface. Here the surface of the water acts as a screen that the bodies dramatically penetrate, traversing the flat space "within" the screen and entering what seems like a more immediate spectacular dimension: a depth paradigm indeed.

Yet, by juxtaposing multiple dimensions (screen-stage-auditorium), the production seemed to transform the effect of the video, constructing not the impression of depth, nor of flatness, but of something more multifaceted. What it created, in my experience, was something that might be described as a multiplanar space in which multiple performance spaces abutted or intersected, disrupting and reconfiguring each other. If cinematic projections seek an investment in the virtual depth of their space, the dimensionality of the projection screen in *The Tristan Project* seemed to be continually contextualized, juxtaposed, and contested. In this environment the metaphor of breaking the fourth wall is unhelpful, because the effect of the dispersed performers was not to join the auditorium to the stage in the sense of expanding depth. Rather it was as though each space were now reconfigured as a different dimension, creating a montage of surfaces. Even the surround-sound effects of the dispersed voices and instruments didn't generate an immersive space, as I discovered when I found myself registering the unique acoustical properties of the different locations from which they sounded. These were not extensions of the orchestra or of the stage but multiple dimensions in sonic fields of their own. Surtitles contributed here too; projected on to their own screen above the proscenium, they seemed to establish yet another perceptual plane within the performance space.

This is no articulation of depth but of a multiplicity of surfaces reminiscent of the dynamic space of a video installation or of a computer-generated virtual environment. In this context the act of breaking through frames, screens, and surfaces need not be seen as a conservative revival of surface/depth paradigms, the sort of paradigms that inform Wagner's metaphors of music drama as a poetic ship floating on the infinite, sublime depths of music. Rather they suggest a spectatorial experience in which imaginary spaces contradict and displace each other. In this way Viola's reconfiguring of surfaces and frames mirrors the experience of the spectator, who repeatedly crosses from one plane of perception to another and from one mode of engagement to another. It highlights what Steve Dixon, paraphrasing Elizabeth Grosz, calls the "in-between-ness" of theatrical space in digital performance, an environment in which "stage spaces become transitional, always in a state of flux."<sup>34</sup>

"YOU IN DARKNESS, I IN LIGHT!" (Im Dunkel du, im Lichte ich!)

If the visual relationship between theater and video in *The Tristan Project* can be understood in these spatiotemporal terms, it also needs to be considered as a confrontation of the media that it deploys—in this case as competing manipulations of light. At the end of act 1, the ship's arrival in Cornwall is accompanied by a gradual raising of the houselights until, at full intermission brightness, they reveal a silent Marke staring from the orchestra seats at the title pair. On a dramatic level, the gesture graphically stages the exposure of the title pair, whose plunge into an intoxicated abyss is so cruelly interrupted by the arrival. If the journey onboard the ship had afforded Tristan and Isolde a refuge from courtly scrutiny, the loss of privacy is signaled now by the loss of shadow in a blanket of revealing light, mirroring the juxtaposition of the chromatic "desire" music with the blaring C-major fanfares from the shore. In revealing the gazing Marke, the light also reveals the audience, whose spectatorial gaze is cast out of its darkened refuge and suddenly, subversively, aligned with Marke's. In the leveling glare of the Opéra Bastille's illuminated ceiling, we are caught in the act of watching Tristan and Isolde, exposed as complicit with Marke, exposed as complicit in the public gaze, and, in a pseudo-Brechtian act of distanciation, exposed to each other.

But what of the video? Here the only projection is a screen-sized dull yellow band, like an abstract representation of light and day. There is no longer a competing flood of imagery, but how could there be? The video projection must become secondary here, because the very environment that enables it is withdrawn. Projector technology may not physically require a darkened space—light will reach the screen and reflect from it even in a bright environment—but its perceived effectiveness, its vividness and perceptual impact, are greatly

diminished in a bright environment. Like the effect white noise might have on a traditional concert setting, blanket illumination disrupts our impression of projected images with what is effectively light pollution. This is where theater seems so multifaceted; where, as Matthew Causey has suggested, theater invites us to conceptualize it as a “medium that overlaps and subsumes or is subsumed by other media.”<sup>35</sup>

This idea of displacing video with blanket light is only one instance in the production in which light is manipulated to vivid effect. Sellars’s lighting designer James F. Ingalls also marked out stage space, not in the sense of creating mood or atmosphere, but in a much more physical sense. Rectangles of light projected vertically onto the stage floor define specific environments or enclosures. In act 1, for example, a rectangle becomes Isolde’s quarters on the ship. During the tense exchange that opens scene 5, Tristan paces the borders of the light as though seeking an escape from the confrontation. Here the light becomes a wall, in a vivid demonstration of theater’s capacity to define its own semiotics. Just as the multiple deployments of bodies in the production can be understood to repeatedly unsettle and redefine notions of embodiment and distance, so its mobilization of light and projection has the effect of throwing into question the medial identity and effects of vision and image. Which is to affirm, with W. J. T. Mitchell, that the very notion of a pure image or seeing is a retroactive construction originating in its thoroughly mixed deployments.<sup>36</sup>

#### IMPOSSIBLE VOICES

In opera, of course, this mixture is about image and sound (above all, the voice). What might a consideration of hearing and voice bring to an account of the production? In a compelling reading of the encounter between opera and silent film, Michal Grover-Friedlander locates a meeting point in their approach toward the Lacanian object-voice, an impossible object that, like the gaze, occupies a foundational void in the formation of the subject.<sup>37</sup> The object-voice stands for what has been lost upon entry into language, for a pure *jouissance* devoid of meaning. In Michel Poizat’s reading, it is the object around which opera gravitates and which it evokes through the extreme vocality of the pure cry.<sup>38</sup> If opera is “essentially about the wish for the autonomization of voice or the attempt to approach voice as detached object” (as pure cry), then silent film, Grover-Friedlander argues, touches on the same extreme in its visual representation of the cry.<sup>39</sup> The silence of the filmic cry, she adds, provokes a “generic anxiety” about the absence of voice, about the limits of the visible, just as the extreme vocality of the cry in opera “transcends voice” (in its domesticated sense) and gestures toward an impossible object. Yet this encounter via an economy of vocal lack and excess translates poorly to the media configurations of *The Tristan Project*. Most

obviously, the video represents figures who are not only comfortable with silence but appear to seek it. Viola's Tristan and Isolde embody his characteristic themes of pilgrimage and spiritual enlightenment; embarked on a journey toward transcendence, they have dispensed with language in favor of meditation and silent embrace. There is none of the visual representation of sound (of voice and the cry) that Grover-Friedlander finds in silent film. Silence here suggests no generic anxiety: far from it.

Beyond this representational level, though, there is another sense in which the production problematizes traditional notions of an intermedial encounter centered on the impossible voice of psychoanalysis. If film can be understood as photography in motion, Viola interprets video as the reverse: a constant, electronically induced rescanning that gives the impression of a coherent and stable image. In video, he stresses, there is no complete image, merely a cycle of image formation and decay that is rapid enough to give the impression of stability and duration. A "virtual image" rooted in "liveness," video presents itself as an event, as though a visual counterpart to music as a sonorous event.<sup>40</sup> This perception of shared qualities has encouraged Viola, like other video artists, to incorporate sonic dimensions closely into his work, especially within the context of installations.<sup>41</sup> It has clearly also contributed to the desire among practitioners to highlight and manipulate the temporal dimensions of video, as Viola has repeatedly pointed out.<sup>42</sup> In their manipulation of bodies in motion, the video sequences in *The Tristan Project* seem to take up the Wagnerian gauntlet, extending and interacting with the still challenging temporal experience of music drama.<sup>43</sup> Viola's sequences consistently avoid the kind of transparency of medium and striving toward realism characteristic of mainstream film and television.<sup>44</sup> He subjects the representation of movement to a range of temporal manipulations that set the sequences apart not only from what we associate with reality visually, but also sonically: the departure from television's transparent "documentary" mode is also a departure from the tight audiovisual synchronization that is its norm. Diegetic silence might also reference our shared cultural literacy in video in a different way. Slow-action replays on television and slow-motion effects available on consumer video players have taught us that when video is taken out of real-time playback it plays not with correspondingly slowed sound but with no sound at all. That the video sequences of *The Tristan Project* are, in and of themselves, silent is not surprising but expected: they *should* be silent.<sup>45</sup>

#### DIGITAL DOUBLES

But there is something else here too. In a critical survey of scholarship on performance, Carlson cites a definition by ethnologist Richard Bauman. All performance, writes Bauman, is predicated on a "consciousness of doubleness," in the

sense that any action in performance is always shadowed by the memory or potential of an action on which it is modeled.<sup>46</sup> In *The Tristan Project* this notion is actualized: Tristan and Isolde are shadowed by what Steve Dixon has termed “digital doubles.”<sup>47</sup> Their stage bodies are doubled by—or are doubles of—other Tristans and Isoldes: the penitents of act 1, the entwined shadows of the night in act 2, and what Viola calls the “celestial bodies” of act 3, in which both Tristan and Isolde float heavenward (Tristan amid cascades of ascending water). Surveying the practices associated with digital technology in the theater, Dixon outlines a typology of doubles that includes alter egos, narcissistic reflections, and the uncanny doppelgänger familiar from literature. But it is what he calls the double as “spiritual emanation” that seems to accord with Viola’s practice.<sup>48</sup> This is the double as reincarnation or spiritualized being, a soul made visible by what Roy Ascott calls the “technology of transcendence.”<sup>49</sup> This is the mystic, decororealizing tendency that Timothy Murray identifies in Viola’s work, summed up here in Viola’s Buddhist/Sufic title for act 2 (“The Awakening of the Body of Light”) and put into practice in the liquid dissolving of the celestial bodies in act 3.<sup>50</sup> Yet Viola’s doubles have a double effect, for, if their trajectory is heavenward, their spectacular form makes Sellars’s stage counterparts seem all the more earthbound. This, as we have seen, was a matter of concern for critics, who worried about the dominating presence of the video. Yet the avowed silence of Viola’s digital doubles serves, even if unwittingly, as a critical gesture: the comparatively humble bodies, dwarfed in dimension by the screen, are the locus of voice, and not just any voice but the extraordinary waves of vocal sound that compose *Tristan*.

This is not to say that some form of ventriloquism might not surface here, that the production might not create the impression of the spectacular doubles “borrowing” the voices as their own. Yet the apparent plenitude of silence in the video’s virtual reality can be understood to situate the projection not as a perceived channel for voice (as a dummy) but precisely as a flat screen that *reflects/repels* the sound, both figuratively and literally. This effect, I suggest, is only heightened by the deployment of the orchestra, which, far from functioning in its classic Bayreuth mode as emanating from a “mystic abyss” (*mystischer Abgrund*), seems to highlight its proximity to the singers. I have already referred to the distribution of instrumentalists throughout the auditorium and the all-black orchestral attire of the singers, but there is also a telling connection in act 1. During her great vow of vengeance, Isolde stretches her arms toward the orchestra and lifts them as the sound swells, as though she had broken through the operatic character’s traditional deafness to the orchestra and now summoned the sound at will, at once Isolde (abducted princess) and Waltraud Meier (Wagnerian singer).<sup>51</sup> This is staging in its broadest sense: *The Tristan Project* stages its own terms,

contextualizing and relativizing the voice as grounded in relation to the effects of the production as a whole.

#### A THEATER OF MULTIPLICITIES

Any attempt to embody the voice is confronted by the breadth and depth of anxiety focused on the capacity of voice to elide the borders of body and destabilize subjectivity. This is a question not just of the performer but of the listener: what are the implications of the penetrative, passive qualities of hearing for my body and subjectivity as I sit, virtually immobile, in the acoustically attuned space of the auditorium? Hardly any wonder that psychoanalytic theory, invested as it is in the split nature of subjectivity, should find fertile soil in opera. That opera's mobilization of voice is also a question of gaze—that it is also about the sight of vocal production—only raises the stakes. Slavoj Žižek, for example, finds much to contemplate in one of Tristan's last utterances, "Do I hear the light?" (*Hör' ich das Licht?*). What Tristan encounters here, Žižek suggests, is the impossible dimension of voice and gaze: "insofar as the object-voice is that which cannot ever be heard (with our ears), the only way to perceive it is with our eyes, and vice versa, the only way to perceive the visual object (the gaze) is with our ears, to hear it."<sup>52</sup>

Yet, as I have suggested above, the psychoanalytic reading of operatic voice and gaze is by now well-worn territory. The premise that voice, for example, is charged with Lacanian excess and lack is a commonplace of the scholarly literature on opera. More recently, scholars have sought to explore alternative lines of enquiry. Extending her argument about scopic agency, Duncan, for example, stresses the performative element of operatic production. If a production "possesses neither individual cognition nor will," she contends, then it is nevertheless "endowed with agency by those who are employed to create, to prepare and to execute it—to transform it into a (performative) *event* that *acts*."<sup>53</sup> The real challenge posed by this argument is not in a dismantling of the psychoanalytic paradigm—performativity is not necessarily inimical to psychoanalytic theory—but in its implication that agency in theatrical practice might be a matter of unstable and unpredictable negotiation. This is an issue already highlighted by a number of prominent twentieth-century practitioners and theorists of theater. In his call for a new "theatre of cruelty," for example, Antonin Artaud proposed what amounted to an assault on the senses: "we want to resuscitate an idea of total spectacle by which the theatre would recover from the cinema, the music hall, the circus, and from life itself what had always belonged to it . . . new images speak, even new images made with words. But space thundering with images and crammed with sounds speaks too, if one knows how to intersperse from time to time a sufficient extent of space stocked with silence and immobility."<sup>54</sup>

Granted, Artaud's language is short on specifics, and he was allergic to the notion of a theater based (like opera) on canonic texts, yet his appeal to the notion of disorientation through multimedia sensory stimulation resonates with my experience of *The Tristan Project*. The parallels only seem stronger when Artaud turns to the spatiotemporal dimensions of the new theater: "and we shall introduce into the spectacle a new notion of space utilized on all possible levels and in all degrees of perspective in depth and height, and within this notion a specific idea of time will be added to that of movement."<sup>55</sup> Here I am reminded of the multiple planes and perspectives of the production, and of Viola's peculiar manipulation of temporal perception, with its quasi-Wagnerian expansion of mere moments into sustained durations.

The potential embodied in Artaud's imagined theater—not least the capacity to *transform*—haunted the twentieth century. Its legacy surfaces, for example, when Gilles Deleuze summarizes the aspirations of a new theater: "a theatre of multiplicities opposed in every respect to a theatre of representation, which leaves intact neither the identity of the thing represented, nor author, nor spectator, nor character, nor representation . . . a theater of problems and always open questions which draws spectator, setting and characters into the real movement of an apprenticeship of the entire unconscious."<sup>56</sup> A tall order, no doubt, and one that, like Artaud's project, remains very much in the domain of unrealized potential. Yet, at their most challenging, operatic productions can at least hint at the transformational promise outlined by Deleuze. Stifled by tradition and often mired in the mediocrity of industrial-style production, opera can nevertheless take the most extraordinary turns in the domain of body, signification, and subjectivity.<sup>57</sup>

I locate the contours of this imagined theater in the very flux and instability I experienced in *The Tristan Project*, in the movement back and forth—the crossings—between diverse bodily forms and planes of perception. In its cycles of disembodiment and reembodiment, its configurations of corporeality both live and mediatized, spectacular and vulnerable, I see the capacity to animate, to disperse, to rearticulate the operatic body: the body of the performer, of the spectator, of the collective body that is operatic production. I locate it in the production's capacity to disrupt the economy of signification and representation that it had mobilized, confronting my expectations of specular and auditory engagement with disarming moments of immediacy—of presence. Not, I might add, an uncomplicated presence, but one that is always shadowed by the problematics of mediation, that repeatedly questions the reality of the real.<sup>58</sup> As Deleuze puts it, a "theatre of problems."

As for subjectivity, to speak of a coherent, unified subject in the face of an experience like *The Tristan Project* is, I would suggest, to summon an illusory wholeness. Granted, an investment in unity and wholeness would certainly sit well with Viola's and Sellars's documented accounts of subjectivity and aesthetic

experience. In an interview published under the title “Putting the Whole Back Together,” Viola questions conceptions of art and the self as fragmented. What is needed, he counters, is recognition of art as holistic experience, as “an avenue to self-knowledge” both for artists and audience.<sup>59</sup> Elsewhere he expands on this wholeness with an investment in the autonomy of the artist reminiscent of nineteenth-century aesthetics: “The rules for the artist ultimately do not come from art history or from current trends, ideas, and fashions or even from the materials themselves. These are merely resources to draw on. The real rules come from the Self. The only method is Self-knowledge, and its only parameters are that of the Gift, of receiving and in turn passing it on.”<sup>60</sup> Endorsing this return to old-fashioned aesthetic values, curator David A. Ross explains how Viola

eschews overtly theoretical postmodern concerns: he does not question his role as an artist or provoke such questions in the minds of those experiencing his work. In the traditional manner of great art, Viola provokes the heart by leading the mind to avenues of contemplation and self-discovery. In so doing, the art provides the basis for an experience best described as transcendent—a curious word to use at the end of the age of mechanical reproduction, yet the only word that applies.<sup>61</sup>

Sellars affirms this belief in art’s capacity for transcendence, but he questions the sovereignty of the subject:

For me, one of the hardest things to deal with about the 20th century—and I’m very relieved that it’s finished—is that it was so absorbed in psychology and the self. . . . This obsession with the self is of course exactly the opposite of centuries of spiritual seeking, which were all about how to escape the self. How can we finally annihilate this thing called the self, and literally transcend it? That’s what’s so liberating about opera, because nobody can do it alone. . . . You’re having this total experience. No part of it could ever be isolated—it’s only possible because the whole cosmology comes into play.<sup>62</sup>

Far from a solution, then, a coherent and stable self becomes, for Sellars, an unproductive fixation. The investment in wholeness and unity returns, but postponed to a broader, metaphysical level, a transcendent totality. Juxtaposing these accounts, a tension familiar from the nineteenth century emerges: between claims for the universalist and spiritualistic claims of the aesthetic on one hand, and the individualistic, interiorized dimension of the act of creating and experiencing art on the other.<sup>63</sup>

Yet it is precisely this tension over the question of the self that is so revealing. Relating it to my own experience of *The Tristan Project*, I feel driven to reclaim opera from the clutches of spiritual transcendence and cosmic unity while affirming the intensity of the experiences that fuel these accounts. If the title Viola and Sellars give to act 3—“The Dissolution of the Self”—encapsulates their



aesthetic-spiritual creed (while summoning the Schopenhauerian/Buddhist genealogy of Wagner's *Tristan*), it also points to something I recognize, something less transcendently inclined. The image of a dissolution of self rings true, but for me this hinges on the thoroughly worldly and corporeal impact of operatic performance. For Lawrence Kramer, this "double *Tristan*" at once engages with and unsettles the terms of the Wagnerian project. By revealing the already technological foundations of Wagnerian theater, it "re-exposes and reorients Wagner's attempt to question the perceptual and metaphysical limits of expression, representation, articulation, and predication."<sup>64</sup> Reflecting now on the experience—the juxtaposition of media, the manipulation of perspective, the repeated redefinition of performance space—I recall a sense of dislocation and disorientation in keeping with what Fischer-Lichte has called opera's "disjointedness" (*Zusammenhangslosigkeit*) and David Levin its "unruliness."<sup>65</sup> Investing in its effects, "I" was caught up in the transformative force of the production. If *The Tristan Project* is exceptional in many respects, might it also touch upon characteristics and effects that opera audiences will recognize from diverse operatic experiences? Perhaps Viola and Sellars merely foreground with particular clarity an experience of multiplicity that is widely understood, although I suspect that it is an experience made all the more precious for being so elusive. If this experience of multiplicity is opera as transition, then it is transition both in its most and least radical sense: most, in that transition comes to stand for a perpetual flow that crosses the dualisms so persistently imposed on aesthetic experience; least, in that opera's transitional character merely plays with a fragility that always characterizes our constitution as subjects and as bodies, both within and beyond the auditorium.

#### NOTES

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1. Lyn Gardner, "Waves Sets a High-Water Mark for Multimedia Theatre," *Guardian*, December 4, 2006, accessed July 7, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2006/dec/04/wavessetsahighwatermarkfo>.

2. Diedrich Diederichsen, "Theater ist kein Medium—aber was bewirkt es, wenn der Mann mit der Videokamera auf der Bühne arbeitet?" *Dramaturgie* 1, no. 4 (2004), accessed July 7, 2011, <http://www.dramaturgische-gesellschaft.de>

[/dramaturg/2004\\_01/dramaturg2004\\_01\\_diederichsen.php](http://dramaturg/2004_01/dramaturg2004_01_diederichsen.php).

3. Peter Goddard, "A Reaction to Opera's Video Projection Fetish," *Toronto Star*, February 14, 2008, accessed July 7, 2011, <http://www.thestar.com/comment/columnists/article/303307>.

4. Directorial license in opera is arguably more tolerated than it was when Sellars burst onto the scene, but opera critics (or at least the substantial traditionalist element among them) remain ready to pounce on what they perceive as an affront to the sacred operatic text. So when Sellars interpreted the relationship between *Tristan and Marke* as more than platonic, the results were somewhat predictable. "Most telling," wrote Martin Bernheimer in the *Financial Times*, "the ageless enfant terrible contributed a chatty programme synopsis that

included this gem of enlightenment: 'King Mark was Tristan's first lover.' Who would have guessed?' Martin Bernheimer, "The Tristan Project, Avery Fisher Hall, New York," *Financial Times*, May 3, 2007, accessed July 7, 2011, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/0db1a166-f994-11d9-9b6b-000b5df10621.html#axzz1S6cAqCM8>.

5. See, for example, Chris Keith's damning critique: "This is too much, I shout, he must be joking! Thirty odd years after the death of the author, etc., here is an artist posing as some saviour to the world, and, moreover, being received as such." "The Video Art of Bill Viola," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance Art* 20, no. 2 (May 1998): 12.

6. I attended two performances of the production at the Opéra Bastille: the first in December 2005, the second in November 2008. The performances in Avery Fisher Hall, New York, in April and May 2007 were, like the original Los Angeles incarnation, semistaged.

7. Not that this reversal of filmic practice is at all obvious: one could easily be tricked into believing that the conductor is following, and synchronizing with, the video.

8. Alex Ross, "The Waves," *New Yorker*, May 30, 2005, 94. Ross's review is based on a performance of the fully staged version in Paris.

9. Writing in the *Telegraph*, Rupert Christiansen enthused that "at moments like these, Wagner's vision of a union-of-all-the-arts, the Gesamtkunstwerk, was newly realized." Rupert Christiansen, "Wagner's Vision Transformed by a Modern Magician," *Telegraph*, April 19, 2005, accessed July 7, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/3640673/Wagners-vision-transformed-by-a-modern-magician.html>.

10. Stefan Lühle, "Heppner and Meier Triumph in Video Tristan," *Opera Critic*, April 19, 2005, accessed July 7, 2011, <http://theoperacritic.com/tocreviews.php?review=slpartrista0405.htm>. Bernheimer, "The Tristan Project."

11. Richard Fairman, "Tristan und Isolde, Opéra Bastille, Paris," *Financial Times*, April 19, 2005, accessed July 7, 2011, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/c58fed9a-b073-11d9-ab98-00000e2511c8.html>.

12. Lühle, "Heppner and Meier Triumph"; Volker Hagedorn, "Zen und die Kunst, Wagner zu lieben," *Zeit Online*, April 21, 2005, accessed July 7, 2011, <http://www.zeit.de/2005/17/Tristan.Fairman>, "Tristan und Isolde."

13. Stefan Burianek, "Viel Film und wenig Musiktheater," *Wener Zeitung*, November 4, 2008.

14. Anna Picard, "Big Themes, Big Voices, Enormous Videos," *Independent*, May 1, 2005, accessed July 7, 2011, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/reviews/tristan-und-isolde-opeacutera-bastille-paris-br-maggini-quartet-purcell-room-london-490619.html>.

15. Klaus Georg Koch, "Nacht der Liebe und des Denkens," *Berliner Zeitung*, April 14, 2005, accessed July 7, 2011, <http://www.berlinonline.de/berliner-zeitung/archiv/.bin/dump.fcgi/2005/0414/feuilleton/0003/index.html>.

16. Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2008), 183.

17. Marvin Carlson, "Has Video Killed the Theatre Star? Some German Responses," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 18, no. 1 (2008): 20–29. Carlson characterizes the most innovative uses of video in contemporary German theater in terms "of a co-dependence of the live and the mediatized, interpenetrating each other in an ongoing feedback." See also Carlson, "Video and Stage Perspectives: Some European Perspectives," *Modern Drama* 46, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 614–28.

18. Carlson, "Has Video Killed the Theatre Star?" 29.

19. Auslander, *Liveness*, 43–44. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 57.

20. Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Die Oper als 'Prototyp des Theatralischen': Zur Reflexion des Aufführungsbegriffs in John Cages *Européras 1 & 2*," in *Musiktheater Heute: Internationales Symposium der Paul Sacher Stiftung Basel 2001*, ed. Hermann Danuser and Matthias Kassel (Mainz: Schott, 2003), 283–308.

21. Rose Theresa and Jeongwon Joe, *Between Opera and Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2002), 68. Joe cites Steve Wurtzler's reading of lip-synching in popular music. See Wurtzler, "She Sang Live, but the Microphone Was Turned Off: The Live, the Recorded, and the Subject of Representation," in *Sound Theory/ Sound Practice*, ed. Rick Altman (New York: Routledge, 1992), 87–103.

22. Bill Viola, interview with John Schaefer, *Soundcheck*, WNYC Radio, November 10, 2005, accessed July 7, 2011, <http://www.wnyc.org/shows/soundcheck/2005/nov/10/bill-viola>.

23. Although, as film theory repeatedly reminds us, this investment is potentially always haunted by the absent "real." See, for example, Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*:

Psychoanalysis and the Cinema, trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 61.

24. Peter Konwitschny's 1998 production of *Tristan* for Munich's Bayerische Staatsoper also relocated the English horn from the pit, but in this case the soloist (in fact, the soloist doubled by another soloist) appeared onstage and handed the instrument to Tristan. In his manifesto for a "theatre of cruelty," Artaud had called for musical instruments to "be treated as objects and as part of the set." Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove, 1958), 95. For more on Konwitschny's practice, see also Clemens Risi, "Shedding Light on the Audience: Hans Neuenfels and Peter Konwitschny Stage Verdi (and Verdians)," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 14, nos. 1–2 (2002): 201–10.

25. The distributed voices and instrumentalists of Sellars's *mise-en-scène*, combined with cinematic projection, suggest more than a passing acoustic resemblance to the surround-sound technology of contemporary cinema.

26. Herbert Blau, *The Audience* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 86.

27. *Ibid.* (italics in the original).

28. *Ibid.*, 85–86.

29. Friedrich Kittler, "World-Breath: On Wagner's Media Technology," in *Opera through Other Eyes*, ed. David Levin (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 215–35, 224.

30. Michelle Duncan, "The Operatic Scandal of the Singing Body: Voice, Presence, Performativity," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 16, no. 3 (2004): 283–306.

31. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), 349.

32. Interviewed about his work with video in the Royal Opera House production of Tippet's *The Knot Garden*, director Michael McCarthy remarked "I am terrified of the flatness of projection. It is essentially anti-theatrical." Peter Aspden, "Pioneer of Opera on a Different Plane," *Financial Times*, April 11, 2005, accessed July 7, 2011, <http://www.hedjr.com/FinancialTimes.pdf>.

33. In *The Crossing* (1996), for example, video is projected onto the front and back of a screen simultaneously, while in *Slowly Turning Narrative* (1992), the reverse side of the revolving screen is a mirror.

34. Steve Dixon, *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theatre, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press,

2007), 337. Dixon cites Grosz's discussion of the "in-between" space in her *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 90ff. Viola's recent work has focused on the notion of in-between-ness. In *The Passions*, four men and a woman, shot from the torso up, were filmed at high speed in a one-minute sequence. Played back over sixteen minutes, the sequence becomes what Mark Hansen calls "a supersaturated, temporally distended presentation of the rich, affective tonalities separating but connecting discrete emotional states." Mark Hansen, "The Time of Affect, or Bearing Witness to Life," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 3 (Spring 2004): 613. Viola described his goal in this way: "I was most interested in opening up the spaces between the emotions. I wanted to focus on gradual transitions—the idea of emotional expression as a continual fluid motion. This meant that the transitions, the ambiguous time when you shift from being happy to sad, is just as important as the main emotion itself." Bill Viola, "A Conversation," interview with Hans Belting, in *Bill Viola: The Passions*, ed. John Walsh (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2003), 200. A short sequence in *The Tristan Project* (featuring the face of a distraught *Isolde-double*) draws on this technique.

35. Matthew Causey, "The Screen Test of the Double: The Uncanny Performer in the Space of Technology," *Theatre Journal* 51, no. 4 (December 1999): 394.

36. "All media," Mitchell writes, "are mixed media." W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 5. Nicholas Cook presents a parallel argument against the notion of "pure" music. Nicholas Cook, *Analysing Musical Multimedia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 81–82.

37. Michal Grover-Friedlander, *Vocal Apparitions: The Attraction of Cinema to Opera* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 20–24.

38. Michel Poizat, *The Angel's Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera*, trans. Arthur Denner (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 40.

39. *Ibid.*, 23.

40. Bill Viola, "The Sound of One Line Scanning," in *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House: Writings 1973–1994* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1995), 158. The "video-ness" of the sequences in *The Tristan Project* is complicated by the mixed image sources, which include both digital video and film digitally transferred to

video.

41. For more on sound practices in the context of Viola's installations, see Holly Rogers, "Acoustic Architecture: Music and Space in the Video Installations of Bill Viola," *Twentieth-Century Music* 2, no. 2 (2006): 197–219.

42. Coming to video from a background in the technology and practices of sound recording, Viola has always stressed the shared electronic origins of video and sound technology: "the video camera, as an electronic transducer of physical energy into electrical impulses, bears a closer original relation to the microphone than to the film camera." Viola, "Sound of One Line Scanning," 158–59.

43. Famously, *Tristan* seems to expand moments into monumental duration, while the rapid action of act 3 following the death of *Tristan* passes in the blink of an eye. Inspired by his reading of Schopenhauer and Buddhist doctrine, Wagner wrote to Mathilde Wesendonck in August 1860: "time and space are merely our way of perceiving things, but otherwise have no reality." *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, ed. and trans. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (London: Dent, 1987), 499.

44. One sequence, an apparently real-time shot of a sunrise in act 2, errs on the other side of the impression of reality by appearing to be too real: the pace of the sequence (about fifteen minutes in duration) confounds the viewer's ability to perceive the movement of the sun, which comes to seem more like a slow set of static images than an unfolding event. A familiar technique in Viola's work, the ultraslow sequence is not in fact in real time. As Viola explains, it is actually a time-lapse compression of a sunset in reverse. Viola, interview with Schaefer. The impression of reality, then, lies in the contrast with the much higher degree of temporal compression to which we are accustomed in filmic representation.

45. Not that tension is somehow neutralized, or the impossible rendered safe and knowable. In Lawrence Kramer's reading of the production, Viola's images resituate the question of an unsignifiable by triggering a haptic experience that problematizes image, music, and the relationship between them. The cinematic scale of the images, Kramer argues, endows them with a "modality of touch" that becomes a "visual surrogate or supplement" of Wagner's equally haptic music. At stake here is the question of an impossible object, a question Kramer approaches in terms of the Lacanian Real. Yet Kramer also acknowledges the limitations of psychoanalytic theory—or any other paradigm—in relation to a

production that he defines as an "event" capable of challenging traditional terms of understanding. Lawrence Kramer, "The Threshold of the Visible World: Wagner, Bill Viola, and *Tristan*," in *Wagner and Cinema*, ed. Sander L. Gilman and Jeongwon Joe (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 381–407. My thanks to the author for providing a draft copy of this chapter prior to publication. Kramer's is one of two essays on *The Tristan Project* in *Wagner and Cinema*; see also Jeongwon Joe, "The *Tristan Project*: Time in Wagner and Viola," *Wagner and Cinema*, 358–80.

46. Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 5.

47. Dixon, *Digital Performance*, 241.

48. *Ibid.*, 253–56. The often irritating tendency of Wagner's characters to refer to themselves in the third person would certainly license the idea of supplementing them with narcissistic doubles.

49. Roy Ascott, "Seeing Double: Art and the Technology of Transcendence," in *Reframing Consciousness: Art, Mind and Technology* (Exeter, UK: Intellect, 1999), 66.

50. Viola writes, for example, of the need to acknowledge the narrow historical and cultural range of Cartesian dualism and of the scopic foundation of knowledge in an "autonomous eye": "Art has always been a whole-body, physical experience. This sensuality is the basis of its true conceptual and intellectual nature, and is inseparable from it." "Putting the Whole Back Together" (interview with Otto Neumaier and Alexander Pühringer), in *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House*, 265. Yet this commitment to the materiality of aesthetic experience is so often subsumed by an unshakeable commitment to transcendence. As Timothy Murray puts it, "While Viola insists that his video art brings the viewer more in touch with the body, the endgame is the body's negation in the sense of mysticism's 'Via Negativa.'" Timothy Murray, "Digital Baroque: Via Viola or the Passage of Theatricality," *SubStance* 31, nos. 2–3 (2002): 269. Murray's response, which has shaped my own, is to interpret Viola's installations against the rhetoric of transcendence that enshrouds them, finding in Viola's practice altogether more grounded modes of transformation (*ibid.*, 271).

51. In relation to the original Los Angeles conception (which heightened the connection by situating singers and orchestra on the stage) the full staging at the Opéra Bastille represented a retrenchment to a more classically Wagnerian mode, even if the orchestra pit there is quite visible from much of the auditorium.

52. Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar, *Opera's*

Second Death (New York: Routledge, 2002), 129.

53. Duncan, "Operatic Scandal," 300–301.

54. Antonin Artaud, "The Theater and Cruelty" (1933), in *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Richards, 86–87.

55. Artaud, "The Theater of Cruelty (Second Manifesto)" (1938), in *The Theater and Its Double*, 124.

56. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 192. Seeking productive models for a reconsideration of opera in performance, Duncan turns to Henri Bergson's concept of "intuition." Bergson's ontology of becoming represents one of the formative strands in Deleuze's work.

57. In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980), Deleuze and Félix Guattari characterize the regulation of body, signification, and subject as sociocultural imperatives: "You will be organized, you will be an organism, you will articulate your body—otherwise you're just depraved. You will be signifier and signified, interpreter and interpreted—otherwise you're just a deviant. You will be a subject, nailed down as one, a subject of the enunciation recoiled into a subject of the statement—otherwise you're just a tramp." Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 2004), 176–77. The quotation is presented in the context of a discussion of what Deleuze and Guattari call the "body without organs," their term for a reconceptualization of desire outside the psychoanalytic paradigm of lack and what they see as its instrumentalization of the body. Deleuze and Guattari borrow the term from Artaud's 1947 radio play *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu* (*To Have Done with the Judgment of God*), which includes the line: "When you will have made him a body without organs, / then you will have delivered him from his automatic reactions / and restored him to his true freedom." Antonin Artaud, *Selected Writings*, ed. Susan Sontag, trans. Helen Weaver (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 571. Peter Sellars translated and adapted Artaud's play in a production for the Vienna Festival in 2002.

58. For a stimulating account of debates over questions of mediation and presence in theater, see Roger Copeland, "The Presence of Mediation," *TDR: The Drama Review* 34, no. 4 (Winter 1990): 28–44. One productive way to approach the question of presence in *The Tristan Project* would be via Gumbrecht's concept of

"presence effects." With this term Gumbrecht seeks to acknowledge the possibility of a coexistence of presence and immediacy on one hand and representation and "meaning production" on the other. See Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 18.

59. Viola, "Putting the Whole Back Together," 271. "Very early on," writes Chris Keith, "Viola dons the shaman's outfit, as evidenced by the metaphysics that inescapably prevail in his oeuvre." Chris Keith, "Image after Image: The Video Art of Bill Viola," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 20, no. 2 (May 1998): 16n17.

60. Viola, "Statement 1992," in *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House*, 212. The term "Gift" is a reference to Lewis Hyde's book of the same name. Viola explicitly cites *The Gift* in "Putting the Whole Back Together" (280).

61. David A. Ross and Peter Sellars, eds., *Bill Viola* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1998), 27.

62. "Interview with Peter Sellars," *The Question of God*, television documentary, first aired September 15, 2004, accessed July 7, 2011, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/questionofgod/voices/sellars.html>.

63. In "Know thyself," Wagner summarizes the philosophical journey toward an awareness of the metaphysical subject: "The great Kant taught us to place a longing for knowledge of the world after a critique of man's capacity for knowledge; if this brought us to the most complete uncertainty about the reality of the world, Schopenhauer then taught us to draw the most irrefutable conclusions about the world-in-itself from a more far-reaching critique, not of our mental faculties, but of that Will in us which precedes all knowledge. 'Know thyself, and thou hast read the world,' the Pythia said; 'look round thee, all of this art thou,' said the Brahmin." Richard Wagner, "Erkenne dich selbst" (1881), in *Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen*, ed. Richard Sternfeld and Hans von Wolzogen (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1916), 10:263.

64. Kramer, "Threshold of the Visible World," 404.

65. Fischer-Lichte, "Die Oper als 'Prototyp des Theatralischen,'" 306–7. David J. Levin, *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 26.