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Introduction

1 As early as 1911,[1] the Italian film theorist Ricciotto Canudo wrote about Music with lofty admiration. In his account of the existing art forms, he significantly mentioned music first: "[...] we notice [in all nations] the same expressions of the aesthetic shape [*fantôme*]: Music, with its complement, Poetry; and Architecture, with its two complements, Sculpture and Painting" (*L'usine aux images* 32, my translation).[2] Music and Poetry, forming the artistic subset of Temporal Rhythms (*Rythmes du Temps*), conjoined with the Spatial Rhythms (fine arts) to announce the advent of a budding artform (the Sixth): the cinematograph, with aesthetic capabilities yet to be developed in full. In 1919,[3] Canudo considered this potential artform (by then labelled the Seventh, as dance had meanwhile been added to the temporal arts) as relentless as music and equally capable of "touching our sensibility" (41). It had truly become an artistic synthesis (43), in which music was literally considered the "First Art" (91).[4] In the short essay "Music and cinema, universal languages" both cinema and music are deemed by Canudo as "undeniable expression[s] of moods" and "grandiose evocation[s] of superior elementary feelings"; "through the magic of suggestion, they render images of their most profound sentimental or sensual life" (72).

2 My resorting to an early film theorist, in his synthetic approach, immediately reveals that any confluence of cinema with other art forms is essentially intermedial. In this confluence, music and cinema are equated with one another by Canudo and referred to as exerting the same influence upon the audience and triggering the same affects. I wish to propose that those feelings and sensations, by being "grandiose", are operatic in nature, falling under what Canudo derogatorily calls "the changing real of the Stage"

(64),[5] where the actors seem "possessed" by the characters they impersonate for a short time" (65)[6] as is always the case with works performed live. The redeeming feature of cinema over opera, from Canudo's perspective, is its inherent plasticity: "[T]he plastic vision must alone satisfy the spectator's emotion and the true nature of this art [cinema] which aims at *expressing the essential by means of the visible*; as the most modern music, painting and poetry [...] *express the essential by means of the sensible*" (48, emphases in the original).[7]

3 Canudo argues in favour of a strict visuality in motion. Everything, including actors' gestures, light, and objects, should, in their interrelation and placement, be as meaningful as words, thus creating a "plastic language" (48). Based on Canudo's plasticity of cinema and its relationship with music and rhythm in general, the possibility arises to conceive of some sound films as being *musical* in a special, qualified way, an artistic way. However, it should be noted that when Canudo wrote about cinema it was still a silent medium, hence his insistence on visuality alone. Today cinema is audio-visual, and a film's aural contents are crucial to its overall import and artistic appreciation. Audition is part of the experience of cinema and is as much a generator of affects[8] as vision, and so there is all the more reason to claim that words perceived as one signifier on a par with other musical elements (which may also contain noises) acquire an intrinsic musicality that is worth studying from an intermedial perspective. Stories for the screen should be cinematic, conceived by visionary writers, Canudo argues, and put into a form by "screen artist[s]" ("*écraniste*[s]") – that is, the directors, whom he considered the true cinematic *auteurs* (50–51)[9] – and a mix of all the other artists (52). Canudo's cinematic aesthetics is unapologetically elitist. For him, Art is always written with a capital A. Opera too is traditionally considered high art and is made of music and sung words staged in an exuberant visuality. Some films exist which are not only musical, but also truly *operatic* in their very dramatic nature and construction.

4 Pushing the argument further, I wish to correlate cinema with opera. My aim is to gather how an operatic film can fulfill Canudo's desired prophecy of a superior musical film, one which is "an abstraction, like the written Tragedy, like the Drama one reads" [...], "one work which is an absolute spiritualization: an absolute Art" (65). However, I will not focus on cinematic adaptations of pre-existing operas, a transmedial process consisting of "repeated mediation of equivalent sensory configurations by another technical medium" (Elleström, *Media Transformation* 14). I will turn toward the phenomenon of "media combination" (Rajewsky 55) but not to realize how cinema and opera interact and interfere with one another, for contrary to Rajewsky's and Elleström's view I am not interested in the borders of the arts but in the exact opposite: their fusion or symbiosis. I aim to explain how a film can be considered an opera through its melodramatic stylization and soundtrack, being composed like an opera without really being one.

1. Opera and cinema in between action and feeling

5 Opera emerged, in 17th century Italy, from the combination of a story contained in the *libretto* and of music ingrained in the musical score. This duality charges it with artistic alterity that makes it – literally – non-theatre, yet performative, and non-music, yet orchestral and lyrical. Opera is, then, a benign chimera much revered as high culture,

but not necessarily understood for its versatility. Jacques Aumont, however, claims that music takes the upper hand in this mixture of action and pure emotion. Opera was born, he writes, as "musical drama" (154). It is "impure", but by conveying feelings and emotions through action it escapes the strictly verbal and is closer to music than anything else, which endows it with a redemptive power (154). The same had been stated by the composer Salieri in 1786 – "*Prima la musica e poi le parole*" ("First the music and then the words") – claiming an artistic hierarchy in which music came first even though chronologically it was the last (Carter).

6 According to Tim Carter, defining a work of opera is a problematic affair, due to the many subvarieties of the genre. The entry "opera" in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* contains 69 subdivisions, with expressions in different languages, subgenres (*opera seria* and *opéra comique*), and other nuances, not to mention a strong relationship with theatre (musical theatre), and drama (*melodramma*, the Italian expression par excellence, or *drame lyrique* and *tragédie en musique*, the French equivalents) (Carter 3). According to the *New Grove Dictionary*, the common denominator of all types of opera is "a drama in which the actors sing throughout" (3). However, not all operas are entirely sung, such as Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*, 1791), which immediately invalidates this definition. A small change such as "a drama in which the actors sing some or all of their parts" is not good enough, because musicals match this definition, and they are not operas either (Carter 3).

7 Confronted with this problem, Carter finally decides to focus on the collective spectacle, providing his own definition of the genre: "Opera is essentially a collaborative venture that focuses in the end on the event of performance [...]. This is particularly true of works that cross between the worlds of opera and of musical theatre" (4). He is nevertheless thinking about *staged* opera, not the filmic one. Yet, I would suggest that his definition of opera rings true for cinema as well. For the most part (experimental films aside), cinema is a collaborative venture which is highly performative. Usually, this word is applied to arts that use the bodies of performers as a direct vehicle of art-making. Yet, live theatre and dance may use graphics, images, lights, and – most importantly – music as part of their art. Therefore, the performers do not present the full extent of these arts' performativity. In fact, the hybrid genre known as screendance is based on a communion of dancers' bodies and mediation equipment whereby the latter fashions the formers' movements and gestures in a way that makes both media dance together in the final edited version.[10] Stephen Barber, in "Film and Performance: Intermedial Intersections", claims that there are "performative dimensions (beyond those of acting)" having to do with "rapid editing, filmmakers' interventions in the screening space" and expanded cinema (14). Likewise, intermittence, temporality, and narration are considered by Boris Wiseman as cinematic features even before the existence of cinema as we know it (123). The way shots/images move, and the way rhythm changes them over time may be considered performative, as I claim elsewhere (Chinita 2022).

8 Like opera, cinema is a mix between action and feeling, but, contrary to its forerunner, music as such does not seemingly take the upper hand. For the most part, music is present in films as a component of the soundtrack, i.e., as "film music", which serves to illustrate the action rather than en-*forming* it. Cinema – especially of the fictional variety – is, therefore, less intrinsically *musical* than opera, but by resorting to it may gain back part of music's cultural *cachet*, as Jacques Aumont argues (154). Generally

speaking, opera can be part of cinema in two different ways[11]. First, as "film-opera", which is a film that adapts a previously existing opera (both *libretto* and music score) (Citron "Opera and Film" 45), such as Franco Zeffirelli's Golden Globe Winner *Otello* (1987). Second, as an "operatic film", which resorts to many characteristics of the opera, but does not stem from one such work (thus having no pre-existing *libretto* and score) (Schroeder), such as Sergei Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) with original music composed by Sergei Prokofiev.

9 A film-opera is foremost *a film* because it uses the cinematic codes at its disposal and makes ample use of their characteristics, making them the core of the aesthetic vision adopted. Such films may use the full shooting scale (including close-ups of the actors/singers), expressive lighting and camera framing (including high angles and low angles), sharp cuts (and the entire gamut of editing options), focus changes, a minimalist or an opulent design and costumes, and so on. The dramaturgical decisions in a film-opera are inherently cinematic, which makes it prone to criticism of inferior quality, usually dispensed by opera commentators who are unforgiving of the liberties taken with the original score. However, a film-opera's style is always determined by the operatic source (Citron, "Opera and Film" 44). It is the score that is translated into film and determines the whole aesthetic conception, involving metaphorical imagery, rhythm, meaning, and the relationship with other music (Citron, "Visual Media" 5). The original operatic score may be adapted to fit a different length than that of the opera, intermeshed with bits of music composed expressly for the film, and parts of the work may have no music score at all. Yet, the whole soundtrack is extremely important in this film genre, not just the music. A film-opera may contain a wide variety of sounds, operating at the same level as the image, and being truly *musicalized,* as is the case of Francesco Rosi's *Bizet's Carmen* (1983) (Citron, "Visual Media" 7).[12] It may have diegetic sound (and music) corroborating and adding extra layers to the score, or its exact opposite: sounds and music that are heard in the absence of their visible source.

10 An operatic film is usually a *performative affair*. According to Aumont, there must be a tension between "a dramatic dimension" and "a musical dimension", corresponding to the fundamental aesthetic principle of opera of engendering the coexistence of the verbal and the non-verbal *in the very action* (Aumont 162). Aumont conceives of it as either a film that literally mimes operatic singing and drama (like Manoel de Oliveira's entirely sung macabre story *Os Canibais / The Cannibals*, 1988),[13] or a film that structures its soundtrack through music, according to a musical idea, as in Marguerite Duras's rather lyrical but literature-inclined art-house dramas. However, I would like to extend the concept to any film that balances drama and music with a performative intention. The core of this argument is that film *performs*, or rather that its very nature is performative beyond the actors' delivery. The camera, sound, and editing *sing* in a rhythmic affair that is akin to music's makeup. Indeed, that is the argument made by Danijela Kulezic-Wilson in *The Musicality of Narrative Film* when she connects film rhythm and musical kinesis in the single attribute of "musicality", shared by cinema and music alike. As the author remarks: "Basically, any aspect of film's audio-visual texture that may invest the parameters of time, rhythm and movement with musical qualities can be considered a carrier of film's musicality" (4). That is exactly what happens in Orson Welles's *Othello* (1951), as I will explain later in this essay.

11 Sergei Eisenstein himself, in his "Vertical montage" essay, argues that films are essentially a polyphonic structure made of several combined strands that achieve a

kind of "fusion" (331) in a horizontal annexation, with an additional vertical combination of visual depiction and music (together with dialogues) in the case of sound films. Yet, his search for an "inner synchronicity" of all the elements in a way that makes the parts come together in a meaningful whole (334–36) ultimately applies to any film, whereas my contention here is that some films are musicalized and rendered operatic, especially through their soundtrack (and image operatic codes).[14] The British documentarist John Grierson used Eisenstein horizontal and vertical coordinates for sounds only – although used musically – naming the pasting of sounds together as "horizontal orchestration" and the multi-layering of sounds achieved through re-recording as "vertical orchestration" (quoted in Jacobs 28). That is, of course, how sound designers think of the soundtrack, as being "composed" much like a piece of music. Their art is to "hear, recognize and describe how musicality – an artful organization of sound – extends beyond a film's music to the soundtrack as a whole" (Buhler et al. 35). One should, after all, remember that not all music is strictly melodic, and therefore Aumont's reference to it should not be understood in that way alone.

12 Like Eisenstein, Welles uses musical metaphors in referring to editing, but unlike his Soviet counterpart, he used opera thematically even in his first feature film *Citizen Kane* (1941), thus revealing his knowledge of it as a *medium*.[15] In 1978, in the cinematic essay *Filming Othello*, Welles's imposing figure appears seated at an editing table, in a revelation of the apparatus in general and of *Othello*'s in particular, and remarks that

> [...] anything analyzed deeply enough will turn out to be musical. Of course, this is profoundly true of motion pictures. The pictures have movement; movies move and there's movement from one picture to another. There's a rhythmic structuring to that, there's counterpoint, harmony, and dissonance. A film is never right until it's right musically. And this moviola, this filmmaker's tool, it's a kind of musical instrument. It's here that other filmmaking instruments are tuned and finally orchestrated.

13 Welles had full control over the editing of *Othello*, just like for *Citizen Kane*, despite the chaotic and distressing production that lasted three years. For that reason, *Othello* is considered by André Bazin "as one of Welles's most characteristic and personal" films (74, my translation). Welles himself considers the editing room the only place where the director is potentially a true artist (Bazin 75) and, fittingly, he draws a musical metaphor: "As far as I am concerned, the celluloid strip is played like a musical score and that execution is determined by the editing just like a conductor will interpret a musical excerpt in rubato, another one will play it very drily and academically, a third one very romantically, etc." (Bazin 75–76, my translation).

14 Shakespeare's character and poetry are very well integrated into the visual rhythm of Welles's film (Jorgens 122); its graphic power "stand[s] comparison with Shakespeare's poetic images, in which the visual imagery compensates for the inevitable loss of complexity of dramatic voltage" (Jorgens 146). The sound is equally expressive, despite the poor-quality equipment used during the shooting and the originally faulty post-synchronization. This lack was compensated by the creative use of music and sound effects. For example, several instruments were used with clearly semantic purposes, rendering the atmosphere even more claustrophobic and menacing: sharp piano keys, exotic instruments such as a *spinetta* and a harmonium, forty mandolins played at an increasingly faster pace in the murder scene of Roderigo, several choruses throughout the film, louder sounds in the scenes set in Cyprus. All in all, the soundtrack is raw but filled with "specific performances, textures, and tonalities" (Rosenbaum 172).

Additionally, Francesco Lavagnino's musical score and Welles's sound effects permeate the entire film, contrary to what usually happens in the classical Hollywood movie tradition in which the score is secondary to the dialogue and the music is simply made to mask technical imperfections and punctuate the narrative (even when anticipating actions or providing ironic commentary).

15 There is no doubt in Welles's mind that his film *Othello* is musical. It rightly is, but – using his own famous *boutade* of *Vérités et mensonges* (*F for Fake,* 1973) against him – could it be art (in this case, opera)? To this question Welles himself provides no answer, but the answer could nonetheless be affirmative. I argue that Orson Welles's *Othello* is indeed operatic to the point of becoming an opera film as Aumont conceives of it and that it goes actually further than that to become a full-fledged cinematic opera.

16 In what follows I will analyse the film, using Welles's original version, not the European version from which Criterium produced its DVD. My choice is simple: although both versions can be construed as cinematic operas, Welles's original version is a fuller operatic experience. True, the remastered film has cleaner and more audible dialogues and the technical sound quality is much improved, but that emphasis on the dialogue track, following the Hollywood credo, has reduced the importance of the music and its sensorial impact, as well as the importance and the audibility of most of the sound effects and of the ambient sound. Thus, the better-quality version of the film is devoid of the rich polyphonic textural and semiotic import the soundtrack has in Welles's original version, in which the low-quality dialogue, by fusing with the rest of the soundtrack, is more musical and hence, in my view, "operatic".

17 My analysis will proceed in two stages, although in practice the two aspects that they refer to are deeply interconnected in the film. I will operate this division for clarity's sake. The first stage concerns the film's style and structure while the second pertains to the musicalization of the drama. My reason is simple: despite maintaining the full title of Shakespeare's play, Welles's film is operatic because it is foremost a stylistic audio-visual work with a specific semantic purpose; yet it is also a musical work. Although the main actors do not sing, singing does exist in the several choruses that are featured throughout the film and the protagonists' voices are textured, often velvety. The use of music and effects is not consonant with mere punctuation or narrative illustration as in the Hollywood paradigm; music and effects in Welles's *Othello* work as an operatic musical score conveying as much, if not more, meaning than Shakespeare's dialogue itself.

2. *Othello* as Cinematic Opera: Stylization and Structure

18 Orson Welles's *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* (1951), Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival in 1952,[16] is an adaptation of William Shakespeare's eponymous play (ca. 1603), and not an adaptation of *Otello*, the opera composed by Verdi to a libretto by Arrigo Boito (1887) from which Zeffirelli's film version is derived.[17] This endows Welles with greater freedom to adapt the story as he pleases, although he admits to being aware of Verdi's operatic treatment of the play: "And Verdi had no hesitation in doing what he did with Otello, which is an enormous departure from the play; nobody criticizes him. Why is a movie supposed to be more respectful to a play than opera?" (Bogdanovich 228). Indeed, despite being a Shakespearean aficionado, Welles decided to

leave out a large part of the play's material and cut the film to 93 minutes, half of the play's length when performed in full on stage.

19 Joseph McBride is deeply critical of Welles's adaptation on the basis that it removes the psychological subtleties of Othello's mounting jealousy, which is reduced to matter of fact, and dismisses Iago's intrigues. "[W]ith [Iago's] deliberations scanted", he says, "the film teeters wildly into unrestrained grand opera [...]. *Othello* presents a mere spectacle of frenzy and disintegration, fascinating as spectacle but alienating as drama" (McBride 123). He considers Welles's performance to be "anesthetized", devoid of tragic greatness. Yet, Welles himself, in conversation with Peter Bogdanovich, admits that he was attempting "tragedy within the design of melodrama", which is why his Othello was a "morally diseased" character, compelled by his own nature, a villain (Bogdanovich 235), contrary to the Aristotelian notion of tragedy, according to which the hero's downfall is the result of a flaw that prompts human error.

20 Welles's *Othello* is an audio-visually grandiose work**,** which is equivalent to saying that *Othello* is foremost a cinematic opera because of its style. Indeed, its audio-visual ostentation brings about emotional, thematic, structural, and aesthetic intensification, which together with a ritualistic nature pretty much sums up Marcia J. Citron's list of operatic features present in films.[18] *Othello*'s epic tone emanates primarily from the architecture and the military setting of the action, helped by the canted angles of the camera placement, the heavily-cut editing, and the dense soundtrack. The protagonist is a mighty General who defeats the Turks and has a stately demeanour, yet he first appears in the film as a corpse. The fact that he is the object of a ritualistic Catholic funeral – despite having killed his wife and committed suicide – instantly raises the film to a mythic level. That is not the substance mere humanity is made of. His sins are apparently washed clean by the Holy Mother Church, an impossible outcome in a tragedy generally and in Shakespeare's *Othello* specifically, which is based on the opposition of white and dark with moral connotations beyond skin colour (and which, incidentally, Welles's visual imagery in the film upholds). Othello is treated as a martyr and not as a murderer, as a victim and not as a predator. Such a contradiction is befitting of an opera. Othello is not made a "fool, fool, fool" by Iago in the filmic enunciation as he is in the play (Shakespeare V.2.319).

21 David Schroeder further explains the core operatic traits, adding some additional ones to the list. In his view, cinematic opera is synonymous with "grand illusion".[19] Characters and situations are artificial, intense, and sensual. They are truly "bigger than life" (233), as Orson Welles himself was once said to be. This configuration entails extreme emotions (like passion and obsession) and excesses of all sorts (such as self-destruction, hopelessness, fits of rage, and jealousy – Othello's own flaw). But it also implies beauty, truth, exuberance, mystery, and transcendence – which Desdemona possesses. In Welles's *Othello* there seems to be a balance between negative and positive traits, but this is not a requirement of opera according to Schroeder. An exaggerated behaviour short of mythological status, as perceived in the case study of *Vertigo,* is probably enough. Ironically, a bigger-than-life behaviour and context often cause violent death, especially for women. "The life expectancy for female characters in opera is exceptionally low [...]. The men who treat women unkindly if not brutally [...] also seem to come with the operatic territory. [...] In some cases, these men actually get what they deserve". (Schroeder 236). Or they may just be lovers. Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde* "equates love and death" (Schroeder 238).

22 In any event, the operatic world is artificial, requiring from the audience a "suspension of disbelief". The plots "usually stretch our sense of reality beyond all reasonable limits" (Schrœder 237). All situational incongruities and emotional excesses must momentarily be dismissed as such for the sake, and throughout the duration, of the spectacle. Like the Italian operas of the 19th century, Welles's *Othello* is fuelled by questions of honour and loyalty (Desdemona's, Iago's, Cassio's) on the one hand, and betrayal and revenge (Iago's and Othello's), on the other. "Honesty" is the key word, whose meaning gets contaminated and played with to the point of utter reversal. Desdemona's "honesty (i.e., sexual purity) is questioned, but Iago's, a self-serving predator, never is (Othello refers to him often as "Honest Iago"). The seed of the drama is, therefore, a lack of correct perception, a very cinematic theme, and – in its reflexivity – a very operatic one too. According to Schroeder, the medium of opera itself suspends reality (236), because we do not go about singing and dancing in our everyday life.

23 Welles's *mise-en-scène* in *Othello* is extremely stylized, with image and sound working together as absolute equals. The film cannot be decoded through the image and dialogues alone; the solution lies in the full soundtrack that acts as a structural pattern as it does in opera. The film starts with the equivalent of an overture, a "distinct, self-contained, introductory musical entity", preceding the opening credits (Melvin 404). It is a musical statement on an aesthetic as well as thematic level, the "overblown" quality of its musicality serving to "install a heightened sense of melodrama from the outset" (Melvin 407), presenting Othello and Desdemona as a tragic couple.

24 A black screen opens laterally in an optical effect akin to that of a theatre curtain parting. It reveals the upside-down face of Othello in close-up, his black skin gleaming under a key light projector. The cinematic chiaroscuro, present from the start and used throughout the film, not only spells mystery and foul play; it also respects the semantic contrast of black and white contained in the play. Indeed, the cultural and ethnic difference between the Moor Othello and his pale-skinned and blonde Venetian wife Desdemona is matched by their own moral disposition and actions as the story develops: while Othello's soul grows increasingly darker Desdemona professes her fair heart even more. However, in the film, this opposition is Manichean and thus operatic, reinforcing the black-and-white cinematography which invades the screen and relates to much more than just Othello's and Desdemona's moral values as it happens in the play.

25 The film's beginning is silent but then some undefined knocking sounds fade in, USOs[20] which produce a sense of fear and metaphorically mark the beginning of a drama in the theatre. The music, conveyed extradiegetically, suddenly erupts with sharp piano keys, followed by a men's chorus associated with the monks that compose the funeral procession leading Othello's and Desdemona's open caskets to their resting place. The chorus is mournful and solemn, as befits the occasion and is heard throughout this opening sequence. Another sound layer is added by brass instruments until a musical dissonance, visually illustrated by angled discontinuous shots,[21] breaks the melodic pattern. Iago is brought in irons by guard members against the crowd's hooting; drums, reminiscent of a military march, are added to the music, enriching the orchestration. Loud bells sound repeatedly (*fortissimo*), working as sound signs according to Flueckiger (159), as Iago is hoisted above the citadel's walls in an iron cage. Female voices are added to the chorus, making its sonority shriller and texturally more complex in true

musical polyphony. The music and all the sounds that are integrated into it evolve in a *crescendo.* Two of the musical layers are now joined together as one: the ceremonial leitmotif of Othello's and Desdemona's burial, for all to see, and the dissonant and disorderly leitmotif of Iago, their murderer, whose subjective vision (a POV shot) is disturbed by the iron bars of the cage and its irregular motion. Then, abruptly, the music and all the sounds cease, being replaced by male voices only: a Latin prayer, sounding acapella, almost in a murmur. The camera tilts down along a dark wall, and the image fades to black.

26 This grandiose opening sequence is entirely missing from Shakespeare's play – which begins with a rather banal conversation between Roderigo, a foolish suitor to Desdemona's love, and Iago – thus strengthening my reading of the film as a cinematic opera. The opening sequence lasts less than five minutes (4:45 to be exact) and acts in the film structure as an operatic overture. Although it contains voices, they are perfectly intermingled with the music and form just another layer of it, as part of the orchestration; they do not have any meaning as discourse, rather they are sensual and emotional tools, voices that do not directly emanate from a seen body,[22]. The music illustrates the action taking place and befits its mythical grandeur. Although the procession is in motion, the music and the canted framing used seem to figuratively stop time, or literally transform it into operatic time, which is rather slow (due to the need to project voices that articulate words). In this case, however, by framing the procession against the sky, in silhouette, the pace is slowed down *cinematically*. This larger-than-life and memorable *mise-en-scène* of an action entirely missing from Shakespeare's play is an operatic statement. To reinforce it, Welles closes the film in the same way, by resuming the funeral procession a little before its ending as first deployed in the opening sequence. Thus, a little portion of the film is repeated in this circular structure. The procession frames the entire film as a ritual with a melodramatic overtone. It is a powerful structuring device, one among several that fulfil a ritualistic function in this film.

3. *Othello*'s Musicality: Opera as Soundtrack

27 The story itself begins with the main credits, which take place only after the opening sequence**.** We see the full title of Shakespeare's play on canonically old paper – a cinematic stereotype of period films – followed by a written description of Othello's and Desdemona's falling in love. Non-synchronously with it, we hear Welles's own voice-over repeating the same information as a non-diegetic narrator, much like an operatic prologue (sometimes used to explain the work's context and setting). In the remastered European version of the film, Welles voices the credits in a Sacha Guitry-like manner over realistic images of shots taken in the Venetian canals. In the *musicalized version* that interests me here, the operatic supersedes the poetic, so much so that the reference to the play, edited in by way of dissolves resembling musical transitions, is mellower than the hard cuts of the European version. It also adds a high-culture status different from the almost neo-realistic style of the European opening credits.

28 During the credits and for the duration of the voice-over, the spectators see Desdemona eloping at night to marry Othello in a solitary church ceremony attended only by the inconspicuous Iago and his human marionette Roderigo, both spying from afar. The subsequent wedding night and ensuing festivities take place in Cyprus, after an ellipsis

during which the Moor defeats the enemies of the Venetians, the Turks. Othello and Desdemona's nuptials provide the dramatic reason for much merriment and the resulting diegetic music, used mostly as ambient sound so as not to slow down the film's rhythm and, consequently, unbalance the duality of image and sound. Mandolins and flutes figure prominently in this part of the film, as did other Venetian instruments when the action was set there, at the beginning of the story. Often the direct source of this music is not seen, operating together with natural elements. Budgetary constraints during the long production of the film led to the sound being added later in post-production, thus avoiding hiring musicians during the shooting period. A notable exception is the melodramatic (i.e., both sensational and musical) sequence set in the Turkish baths. It is filled with perfidious action, as Iago convinces Roderigo to murder Cassio and then kills the said Roderigo in order to silence him. The sequence is also famous for its stunning photography, which highlights the steam and the running water in a chiaroscuro setting; and the fast-paced editing, together with almost orgiastic mandolins sounding in the sequence's grand finale, which amounts to a musical and dramaturgical climax (conveying Iago's sadism towards Roderigo). The music in this sequence begins as diegetic, with two players seen fingering their instruments, and ends in an extradiegetic crescendo of forty mandolins combined as one to reinforce the intensity of the drama and the perfidy of the action. Such excessive music is a commentary, no longer on the characters but rather on the moral nature of the Cyprian microcosm, rendered even more claustrophobic and malign.

29 The music is overall quite ritualistic. The military trumpets sounding on the citadel's ramparts and the bells tolling a little everywhere bring together State and Church in a Catholic context, contrary to the exotic and profane instruments of the festivities. They work not only as signals (heard in the foreground) but as symbols as well, not always aligned with the corresponding image (Flueckiger 161). The musical score is not continuous, but its impact is reinforced with musical leitmotifs used in the same way Wagner employed them. In *Othello,* these musical leitmotifs have the psychic and emotional import of opera, but with the short length found in film scores. They are short but effective. For instance, the sharp piano keys from the initial sequence and the dissonant beats we hear when Othello's ship returns from defeating the Turks relate to the Moor and represent him. They stand for authority – to which the quadruple-meter majesty contributes – but equally menace (as they are rather loud). Inversely, a choir of female voices works as Desdemona's leitmotif, conveying her candour and purity of heart. These two leitmotifs are semantic counterparts of each other, as the play (and the film) lays down the dichotomies black/white, male/female, false/true.

30 These leitmotifs change over time, depending on the events and emotions both characters face (as per Bribitzer-Stul 8, and Link 180). They produce an emotional association in the audience while allowing for new music-dramatical contexts in a vaster musical structure (Bribitzer-Stul 10). For instance, when Othello arrives in Cyprus to reunite with Desdemona, a female choir is heard over her image because Othello sees her as pure. Later, already poisoned against her by Iago, in a scene in which he is outdoors on the ramparts, overlooking Desdemona with her maid, he lists his wife's qualities and a mix of his and Desdemona's respective leitmotifs can be heard, signifying that her purity has been tainted by Othello's ruminations. Othello's leitmotif changes as he is more and more contaminated by Iago's perfidy. Both protagonists' leitmotifs keep on interacting like this in hybrid combinations until Othello decides to strangle Desdemona. Fifteen minutes before the end of the film, Desdemona retires to

her bed and Othello lurks outside her quarters, seen in a looming shadow on the wall. The sharp ominous piano keys of the opening sequence sound again followed by the essentially female choir we have come to associate with Desdemona, but now with some male voices added in. The two leitmotifs then separate, foretelling that the Moor will soon separate his wife from the living. On the other hand, Iago's leitmotif – the dissonance we hear when we first see him in the iron cage – stands for his duplicity and treachery. It is deployed in more tenuous variations throughout the film when he is seen plotting with Roderigo or insinuating to Othello that Desdemona is physically intimate with Cassio. Iago's leitmotif is as winding as the metaphorical serpent that he is. Thus Othello's, Desdemona's and Iago's leitmotifs are also metaphorical evocations of the characters they represent. Iago is pure Evil, Desdemona is pure Good (hence her more melodic leitmotif constituted by singing); Othello, as pure Force, is easily manipulated by the former to annihilate the latter. Indeed, after Othello strangles Desdemona, he covers her face with a white silk cloth and Desdemona's leitmotif chorus is heard, followed by the dissonant chords associated with Iago in a very long shot that shows the iron cage hanging in the distance. Evil has triumphed over Good.

31 Non-diegetic music is often used in *Othello* and serves as short musical interludes when clearly separating scenes. Although that is also one of the functions of a musical score in the Hollywood cinematic tradition, here music begins a scene and is then complemented by the sound effects or ceases altogether, not necessarily giving way to the dialogues. In fact, in Welles's *Othello* the classical sound hierarchy is clearly challenged: dialogues are not placed in the forefront, effects at the end, and the music in the middle. Notwithstanding the importance of the film's music *as* music, in *Othello*'s soundtrack all sounds are woven together, and it is from this embroidery that the film derives its true *musical* nature.

32 Thus, in *Othello* sounds and voices are "musicalized" as much as the music itself, all being sources of musicality as argued by Kulezic-Wilson (*The Musicality* 4). "The performative dimension is obviously an important factor that can lend a musical quality to spoken language" in this film as in others (Kulezic-Wilson, *The Musicality* 6). Contrary to what some critics have claimed, the voices in the film are not boringly amorphous but rather deliberately kept at a low pitch to better blend with the other sounds. In the already-mentioned scene when he is reunited with Desdemona in Cyprus, Othello's already suave voice is made even more musical by the sounds of the wind blowing and the sea crashing in the background. Roderigo's voice is slightly high-pitched because he is portrayed as a rather effeminate nobleman, in clear contrast to Othello, who is weakened in the play but not to the point of emasculation. Welles's profoundly charismatic voice is naturally melodic; in *Othello* he makes it vibrate even more by using a lower pitch than usual. So proficient and seductive is his voice that it is a credible medium to convey his deeds to Desdemona. This is what ultimately made him win her love, as Othello himself explains to the Venice senators at the outset of the film. The scene of this report marks the first time the audience clearly sees the protagonist's face, in a profile close-up, immediately granting the Moor an iconic status. All music and sounds – which thus far had been uninterrupted – stop at that point. Othello's voice is the instrument to which this scene is anchored, and it alone suffices. However, even Micheál MacLiammóir's voice playing Iago is somewhat grainy; his timbre is different from Welles's playing Othello, but he too is using a low pitch. So, although here Othello and Iago are not vocalizing as a tenor and a baritone respectively, as happens in Zeffirelli's film adaptation of Verdi's opera, they are

nonetheless using *singsong* voices. Jack J. Jorgens perceives this underplaying as a very apt choice on the director's part:

> Welles expresses Othello's character not through acting, but through sound effects, movement, and setting. Unlike Olivier, Welles cuts the scenes of bravado, avoids the big gestures and *continual use* of his magnificent voice" (Jorgens 155, the emphasis is mine).

33 Overall the film has little action, except for Cassio's drunken scene, the duel in the underground reservoir, Roderigo's murder in the Turkish baths, and Desdemona's and Othello's deaths. Due to its theatrical source, the film is loaded with dialogue. Conversations such as those between Iago and Roderigo or Iago and Othello, in which insinuations are made and lies told (relating to supposedly past events committed by Desdemona, Cassio, or both) should be considered opera recitatives. No visual equivalent is provided in Welles's film for these narratives which occur, for the most part, with a sound effects background composed of wind and/or other natural elements. Since the accompaniment is kept to a minimum, they may fall under the category of *recitativo secco*. Iago's claim that he heard Cassio dreaming of Desdemona and indiscreetly revealing their alleged passionate affair while sleeping is an action that never took place, but as it is believed by Othello it advances the plot. In contradistinction, one would expect the arias (that is, the monologues) to be more flamboyant, as is the case in opera, but Welles confounds our expectations and for a good reason. Michal Grover-Friedlander asserts that in Zeffirelli's *Otello*, the tenor Placido Domingo in the title role shouts rather than sings during his first rendition (the "Esultate"). At that point, the commentator claims, Othello's voice "is an operatic voice without melody, a voice somewhere between melody and noise, an extension of musical representations of noise, which recurs in [Verdi's] opera" (64). Welles's strategy for his film is the very opposite of Zeffirelli's in that here the noises are made into music; the acting may be downplayed but all sounds are musicalized, including the voice. Thus, what could be more flamboyant than making the voice shine above the rest, as is the original intention in opera arias? Othello's abbreviated monologue "It is the cause", delivered before he goes to his marital chambers to kill Desdemona, works in the film as an inverted aria. The Moor is expressing his darkest feelings about his relationship with his beloved, and no other sound is heard besides his voice. The same happens shortly after with the monologue "Put out the light!"

34 This monophonic texture of the Wellesian arias is made even more unforgettable because of what lies in between them. In the above-mentioned example of Othello preparing himself to kill Desdemona the two monologues or operatic arias of maximum dramatic importance are separated by a chorus that stops abruptly as the Moor opens the curtains in Desdemona's lodgings. It also contrasts with other solos which do have background noises as a sort of homophonic variation on the traditional musical accompaniment. For example, Othello's monologue "Farewell!", which he voices before receiving the Venetian ambassadors that visit Cyprus, is pronounced over a background effects track composed mostly of wind blowing and sea waves crashing. The same happens in the film's most visually stunning scene, the dialogue between Othello and Iago in which the latter finally convinces the Moor of his wife's betrayal. This duo is the only scene in the whole film that has a long tracking shot, in contrast to the fast-cutting pace of the rest of the opus, but the soundtrack is that of nature's musical reinforcement and loud sounds, just like the waves crashing below.

35 Indeed, the sound effects, unusually loud for Hollywood standards, are part of both the structural and musical patterns, operating as fertile semantic elements. For example, the cries of seagulls are integrated into the natural embroidery of the soundtrack, but they become symbols of decadence as well. When Iago and Cassio talk about Bianca, seagulls fill the shore and the sky as Othello believes Cassio is speaking rudely about Desdemona instead. The sexual connotation of the scene is evident. Soon after, Othello falls to the ground stricken with an epileptic seizure. The first thing he sees when he recovers consciousness is a seagull flying over, then the ramparts filled with people, perceived upside down as he is lying on the ground. After blinking, he sees a whole flock of seagulls. These images are psychologically produced and so is the soundtrack at this point. Later, on what is to be her deathbed, Desdemona waits for Othello to come to her, fearing his anger. The loud metal sound of a gate clanking as he penetrates a large antechamber, his footsteps on the stone floor resonating in the hall, together with a non-diegetic anguished chorus that stops suddenly at a very high pitch – almost shrill – disclose her state of mind to us.

To conclude

36 As I hope to have proved with my overview of Welles's *Othello* structure, stylized ritualistic nature and soundtrack, the film is "operatic". Yet, for it to be considered a cinematic opera one needs to go beyond style, because this can be used in films that are not musical enough, such as *The Godfather – Part I* and *The Godfather – Part II*.[23] One needs to *think musically*, putting together voice and music (including "musicalized sounds") almost uninterruptedly, in an approximation to the typical operatic elements and structure. Although Welles's film is very different from Verdi's opera, it retains its spectacle and drama, flourishing above the text, to which the plot and the actors' performances nevertheless do justice. To the plot was added splendour, and to the drama was added restraint. This paradoxical combination is only possible through a special use of music that beats the strict sentimentality of melodrama. Welles's *Othello* may not be Italian grand opera, but opera it is, nonetheless.

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NOTES

1. In "La naissance d'un sixième art, essai sur le cinématographe" (1911). All Canudo's articles mentioned in this section of the article are included in the book *L'usine aux images*, edited by Jean-Paul Morel in 1995.

2. All translations from Ricciotto Canudo are mine.

3. In "La leçon du cinéma" (1919).

4. In "Deux arts réunis, cinéma et musique" (1921).

5. In "Esthétique du Septième Art (II)" (1921).

6. In "Esthétique du Septième Art (I)" (1921).

7. In "Défendons le cinématographe" (1920).

8. Cf. James Wierzbicki (2016).

9. In "Esthétique du cinéma: défendons le cinéma" (1921).

10. "In short, the visual culture of screen-based dance cannot be separated from the signifiers present within the frame itself and in the device by which that frame is created" (Rosenberg 113).

11. Jacques Aumont conceives of three different ways, but since the first one is "filmed opera", consisting of multicam – usually live – recordings of theatrical opera performances for the purposes of televised broadcast, its audiovisuality is restricted and does not partake of many cinematic codes (such as lighting, and editing, among others). It will not, therefore, be considered for the purposes of this article. For those who wish to compare it to the two other types of opera indicated by Aumont, I suggest the televised rendition of *Otello* broadcast by RAI with, coincidently, Placido Domingo in the title role.

12. On the "musicalization of the noise track" cf. Marshall H. Leicester, "Discourse and the Form Text: Four Readings of Carmen". *Cambridge Opera Journal* 6/3 (1994): 245–82.

13. The opera – libretto and music score by João Paes – was purposely created for this cinematic rendition.

14. Granted, this is a thin distinction, but one that makes all the difference since Eisenstein himself never equated his films with music (or opera, for that matter). To be fair, I do agree that *Alexander Nevsky* is an operatic film, but its sound layering is much less fertile than *Othello*'s and the comparison is made on the basis of two components alone: image and music (not musicalized soundtrack).

15. A substantial part of one of the accounts of the film's protagonist, that of Susan Alexander, Kane's second wife, depicts her failed career as an opera singer.

16. The equivalent of the current Palme d'Or (which was only introduced in 1955).

17. In fact, both Verdi's *Otello* and Rossini's earlier version (libretto by Berio di Salsa, 1821) derive from Shakespeare, although the latter in a more tortuous way, and were worked over for the operatic stage from the start.

18. As Marcia J. Citron claims of *The Godfather* trilogy, which she places in the operatic film category (*When Opera Meets Film* 20).

19. In his opinion, the very subject of Alfred Hitchcock's film *Vertigo* (1958).

20. USO is an unidentified sound object whose origin and nature are unknown (cf. Flueckiger 157).

21. Many are placed at a low angle against the sky, adding a visual layer to the ongoing semantic polyphony in Eisenstein's sense.

22. The monks' lips never move in any discernible way and the musical instruments are entirely missing from the action on screen.

23. As mentioned above in note 18, Marcia J. Citron considers *The Godfather* trilogy (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972–1990) a good representative of "operatic cinema". My contention in this article is, inversely, for cinematic opera.

ABSTRACTS

Early film theorist Ricciotto Canudo equated cinema with music because of the Seventh Art's inherent plasticity; in the 21st century, plasticity extends to the soundtrack. In this article, I explore the fusion of cinema with the musical genre of opera. By considering that film is a performative medium, beyond the actors' agency, I confirm music's importance in it as part of the structure and style of opera. Unlike Franco Zeffirelli's adaptation of Verdi's opera *Otello,* Orson Welles's adaptation of William Shakespeare's play conforms to Jacques Aumont's concept of "operatic film" in that it engenders a coexistence of the verbal and the non-verbal, balancing drama and music with a performative intention. However, this film is so musicalized and operatically rendered, especially through its soundtrack, that it exceeds Aumont's intention and becomes what I call a "cinematic opera": a film that is operatic in its artificial and ritualistic nature as well as in its well-woven soundtrack of music, sound effects and voice working together in a common musicalized pattern.

Le théoricien du cinéma muet Ricciotto Canudo comparait le cinéma à la musique en raison de la plasticité inhérente au Septième Art ; mais il se trouve qu'au XXIe siècle la plasticité s'étend à la bande son. Dans cet article, j'explore la fusion du cinéma avec le genre musical de l'opéra. En considérant que le cinéma est um médium performatif au-delà de l'intervention des acteurs, je confirme l'importance que la musique y détient au niveau de la structure et du style. Contrairement à l'adaptation par Franco Zeffirelli de l'opéra *Otello* de Verdi, l'adaptation d'Orson Welles de la tragédie de William Shakespeare correspond au concept de « film-opéra » défendu par Jacques Aumont en ce qui concerne la coexistence du verbal et du non-verbal, qui unit le drame et la musique avec une intention performative. Cependant, ce film est si musicalisé et rendu lyrique, surtout à travers la bande son, qu'il dépasse la conception d'Aumont et se transforme en « opéra cinématographique » : un film aussi lyrique par sa nature artificielle et

ritualiste que par l'entrelacement de sa bande son, dans laquelle la musique, les bruits et les voix se combinent pour aboutir à une trame entièrement musicalisée.

INDEX

Mots-clés: cinéma, opéra, musicalization, bande son, Othello, Welles (Orson), intermédialité
Keywords: cinema, opera, musicalization, soundtrack, Othello, Welles (Orson), intermediality

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