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Hermeneutic Truth in Contemporary Opera

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ABSTRACT. While an enormous number of aesthetic texts have been produced in recent times, opera continues to occupy very limited space, one that is even more reduced when thinking about contemporary opera. However, few art forms pose as many questions to the formulation of aesthetic thought as current musical creation, specifically opera. It is here that an ecosystem of cultural actions is brought together that, in light of hermeneutics, opens up to truth in different possibilities. This paper focuses on the notion of hermeneutic openness in contemporary opera, providing certain aesthetic criteria to substantiate the ontological validity of the contemporary opera.

1. Introduction

As Gadamer manifested in his body of thought, a work of art has an anthropological base that we believe is unfolded in contemporary opera with all its interrogative force, since new integrations of artistic experience are incited within it. These reflections are based on different opera typologies, all composed or staged in the 20th and 21st centuries, which include *literaturoper*, (*El público*, opera by Mauricio Sotelo based on *El público*, by Federico García Lorca, *première* in Teatro Real de Madrid on 2015), experimental stage, (*Die Zauberflöte*, performed by *La Fura dels Baus* using digital technologies, in Bochum in 2003), feminist opera, (*A Amnesia de Clio*, from Fernando Buide, performed in Santiago de Compostela in 2019) or *Lulu*, from Alban Berg, staged by Andrea Breth, in 2015.

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2. Contemporary Opera's Truth

Gadamer carries out a profound hermeneutic study on the experience of art and its truth content on the basis of the fusion of horizons. This lecture builds on his reflections from the point where historical tradition and the contemporary historical moment meet, interrogating the present as he interrogated the past: “We should not think of historical awareness in terms of rather scholarly ideas or in terms of world-views. We should simply think of what we take for granted when confronted with any artistic work of the past” (Gadamer, 1991, p. 43). In order to reach this meeting point, this lecture begins with the music of the present. Specifically, it begins with opera.

For this purpose, I will alternate between two levels of exposition: one purely theoretical; the other focused on the operas mentioned, but not as examples or as specific epistemological phenomena but as hermeneutic paradigms, addressing our own prejudices and delving into them and into the work based on an open game of questions and answers. I shall develop a concrete dialogue between theory and artistic representation to try to understand “this totality with the individual utterance, and the individual utterance with this totality” (Gadamer, 1977, p. 360).

Thus, I shall reflect on the being that opens up to the authentic in contemporary opera based on Hermeneutics, since it allows us to penetrate the different possibilities for comprehension that are rooted in the truth of a work—work that heretofore has not received much attention by theorists of Aesthetics.

Lastly, I must point out that the staging is as important as the music. Many times, when reflecting on opera, the fundamental role that scenography and stage direction have in the work is forgotten, especially when it comes to CD recordings or formats without images. This role is fundamental in 21st-century opera productions, where reflections on the implications of the stage (as a space where a specific time passes, as a “house of music”) are extremely important and provide a specific meaning to the work. As argued by Gadamer, performing or executing poetry and music are essential and in no way adventitious actions. Only they fully realise what the works of art are themselves: the there being of what is represented through them. The specific temporariness of the aesthetic being—i.e., its existence consists in being represented—comes to exist in performance, as an autonomous manifestation with its own relief (Gadamer,

1977, p. 181).

We are going to start with a hermeneutic question: The notion of hermeneutic openness in contemporary opera, especially regarding the possibility that it opens up to the truth from avant-garde operatic writing: is current opera a language open to universality and with that, to the truth, or is it, on the contrary, a closed language and with that, veiled? Contemporary opera expands on the suppositions established by Heidegger and continued by Gadamer, who contended that the way in which poets speak of the world then becomes a condition of the experience of the world. In contemporary opera, this experience is the result of conceptual inquiry, of an art that is given to the experience of doing, sounding, and thinking. By way of illustration: the sound “G/sol” is a symbol of what Lorca means to the composer Mauricio Sotelo and on which the entire opera develops musically; furthermore, five notes open the work because there are 5 letters in Lorca.

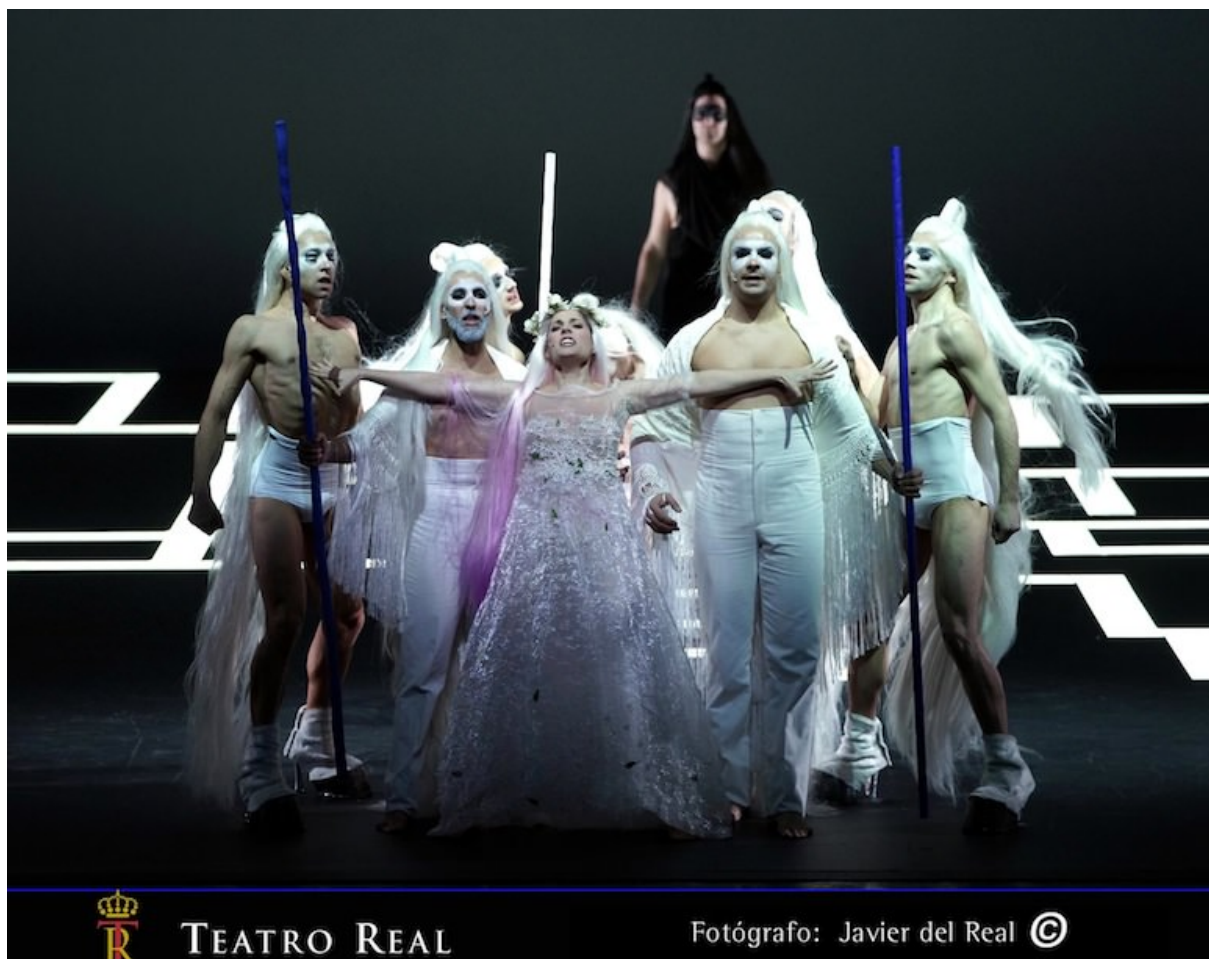


Figure 1. *El Publico*, Opera by Mauricio Sotelo

This truth of art is revealed, at the same time that the opera becomes *Aletheia*, by bringing out the truth in another way (for example, the opera *Falluja*, from Tobin Stokes, first opera on the Iraq War, premiered by Long Beach Opera on 2016, that reflect the artistic experience of the vision of war).

3. Hermeneutic Criteria for Contemporary Opera

Contemporary opera musters the authentic task of performing as a result of dramaturgical, scenic, compositional, and scenographical creation.

We must provide certain aesthetic criteria to substantiate the ontological validity of a contemporary opera. These criteria must have a fundamental condition: their permanent nature. They must allow an assessment that places us on a different plane to that of art critics and to that of purely historical studies, despite the fact that contemporary opera is not, indeed, an *ex-novo* discourse, unconnected to tradition. As argued by Gadamer—though not in reference to today’s opera— “here there is no random succession, a mere variety of conceptions; rather, by constantly following models and developing them, a tradition is formed with which every new attempt must come to terms. The performing artist too has a certain consciousness of this” (Gadamer, 1977, p. 164). Beyond the outlooks of creators, critics, and historians, I shall address the truth of opera in the 21st century from the standpoint of philosophical reflection.

3.1.1. Self-Interrogation Criterion

It is clear that meeting the truth also involves meeting oneself since the work always questions each of us in a unique way. This is the reason why there is so much variability in the interpretation of works of art, as pointed out by Grondin (Grondin, 2008, p. 75). However, this does not imply falling back into subjectivity or mere historicism, because the experience of truth does not depend on my own perspective. Above all, it depends on the work itself, which “opens my eyes to that which is”, says Grondin. But what is the meaning of ‘that which is’? Some notions common to Hermeneutics and the Aesthetics of reception delve into this approach.

In this vein, in the *Salzburg Colloquium* on musical and literary hermeneutics, Jauss presents the following questions: in what conditions may certain interpretations end up prevailing, becoming generators of standards? When and how are they recognised as such or again dismissed? How does this permanent process of formation and transformation of canon take place in the history of music? From my point of view, through various criteria, such as **self-interrogation**, open to the full historical dimension of the past and the present. As argued by Gadamer in *Truth and Method*, one who wishes to understand a text must, in principle, be ready to allow it to say something to one. A hermeneutically formed consciousness needs to display receptiveness to the text's alterity from the start (Gadamer, 1977, p. 335). When we delve into a work created today, the problems with its evaluation increase if we look at them under the light of the fusion of horizons, since we cannot bring into play that which the German philosopher refers to when he argues that the perspective of time and temporal distance allows us to distinguish between good and bad prejudices. We can see this in contemporary art for example, where only the perspective of time offers some aid (Grondin, 2008, p. 79).

The horizon of the present is constantly forming, inasmuch as we are constantly forced to test all our prejudices. Part of this test is meeting the past and understanding the tradition from which we ourselves come. Gadamer accords crucial importance to tradition: "Every experience has implicit horizons of before" (Gadamer, 1977, p. 376). Even if generally agreeing with it, this approach does not suffice for the purpose of generating an authentic discourse and unveiling what happens inside a current opera, created and evaluated within the same contemporary horizon.

Is then no more than a sort of critical position possible in the objective evaluation of truth, or the specific value that an opera offers today as an artistic experience? What if a work does not directly fit into tradition, such as the opera *Omnivore*, composed by Miika Hyttiainen in 2012 to be viewed on a mobile device and fully conceived following such criteria? What if an opera also breaks with the genre's tradition as it had developed up until now, as in the case of Maria Kallionpää's *She*, based on the multitasking factor and conceived for augmented reality, or of composer Holzky's *Tragoedia*, which actually uses the libretto only as an indicator for the action (nobody performs it) and the entire opera is a development of the light and spaces? Does this lack of a horizon for deep evaluation of the work increase or decrease the hermeneutic value of its performance?

It is necessary to proceed radically in this self-interrogation process in order not to fall

into the circle of one's own preconceived views. In no way can one take for granted that what is offered in a contemporary opera may easily be fitted into one's own opinions and expectations. On the contrary, what one is told falls, in principle, under the opposing presumption, that those are other opinions and not one's, and that one is to acquaint oneself with it but not necessarily share it. This becomes more problematic when the individual's judgement or prejudice has to be validated within a larger entity, such as that which includes the controversial notion of the audience. Thus, according to Gumbrecht (1977, p. 77), the degree to which a work has an effect on a given audience is one of the factors of its validity as a work of art. This becomes especially problematic for all works that have been validated and judged from the point of view of their own aesthetic horizon—Ars Nova versus Ars Antiqua, Brahms versus Tchaikovsky, or some of today's composers versus the so-called 'conventional classical audiences'.

Karl Krauss himself demanded that art should operate on the reverse path, i.e. the one on which it is not the custodian of tradition, arguing that the role of art is not to bring order into chaos but to bring chaos into order (Wellmer, 1994, p. 41). And this is without even looking at all critical or openly negative authors. From my point of view, the audience's reception cannot be deemed to be a definitive value when it comes to approaching the work of art from its underlying truth. A new opera may represent a change of horizon by rejecting familiar experiences or developing awareness of those that manifest for the first time. And, as it happens with almost all contemporary scenic music, a part of the audience and the critics materialise criteria that do not persist with time. Thus, for some conservative audiences, an opera such as composer Fernando Buide's *A Amnesia de Clío* does not unveil truth because it neither contains it nor covers it; for others, however, it unveils truth to the highest degree.



Figure 2. *A Amnesia de Clío*, opera by Fernando Buide

I propose that the coincidence of factors deemed sufficient by Jauss—the horizon of expectation, which is the primary code implicit in the work; and the horizon of experience, which is the secondary code supplied by the recipient—be subjected to the self-interrogation criterion, i.e. opening up the historical depth of the present itself, in order to unveil what the work is in reality, which, as argued by the German philosopher, is part of the self-understanding of the contemporary subject beyond the forms of the path of history.

3.1.2. Realisation of the audience's self-interrogation

The hermeneutic criterion of self-interrogation of the audience of contemporary opera is essential since it is the one that tackles the work's *Aletheia*, the one that allows operas made in this century to become historically relevant processes. Nowadays it may be clear that many of our judgements of art are or have been historically conditioned. Thus, Kant considers the authentic carrier of beauty in painting to be form, and Fauvism extended that horizon (Gadamer, 1991, p. 74). We might conclude the same regarding music with a melody, an

imperative which is nowadays no more. At the same time, it may be that the audience's taste in a period is not the same as the interpretation of the truth, for a highly educated individual may consider one contemporary work to be a failure and another to be a masterpiece.

This does not imply that we should proceed with the work as with a product. The purpose is not to insert it into the happening of tradition, as Jauss would put it, but to actively appropriate the work through the previous approximations that make up the history of its reception (Jauss, 1986, p. 347) alongside the prejudices activated in the listener faced with new work, both constituents of their horizon of expectation: the capturing of form in a single representation, the weight of traditional listening, the capturing of what the new work brings that is new, the possibility of evading the weight of historical opera or not, etc. This horizon of expectation must be realised between a present subject and a likewise present discourse. Under what conditions of possibility is the truth unveiled in a work that is rejected as much as it was valued by the audience for which it was conceived? Gadamer speaks of the “overpowering impact of a compelling work” (Gadamer, 1991, p. 95). But how and in what way is a contemporary work compelling to its coevals? The German philosopher posits that the experience of historical tradition essentially goes beyond that which can be researched in it. It is not just truth or untruth in the sense decided by historical critique; it always provides truth—truth in which one must get to take part (Gadamer, 1977, p. 25). In the face of a contemporary opera, the audience is asked to position themselves at the moment described by Jauss as the threshold to an epoch and the consciousness of an epoch. This obviously carries certain risks.

In order to unveil the full truth content of the contemporary work, it is necessary to reach beyond what is described by Jauss when he distinguishes between the effect of tradition, determined by the work, and its reception, which depends on the active and free recipient who judges it in accordance with the aesthetic standards of their time and modifies the terms of the dialogue (Jauss, 1990, pp. 246 and 259). However, now that we are well into the globalisation epoch, if I may paraphrase Adorno, it seems evident that the aesthetic standards of our time are no longer evident.

3.2. Futurity Criterion

3.2.1. Contemporariness in its Hermeneutic Projection of the Present

Art is knowledge and experiencing an artwork means sharing in that knowledge (Gadamer, 1977, p. 139).

Contemporariness as a present moment of history may appear to be a *contradictio in terminis*. Comprehending historical and artistic phenomena that have come to be in the present is the great task delayed after being enunciated.

Heidegger, who was the first to qualify the concept of comprehension as the universal determination of the there being, does use it to refer to the project nature of comprehension, i.e. the **futurity** (*Zukünftigkeit*) of the there being.

In a sense, we could say that Gadamer does not delve into the comprehension of the contemporary work. Even when he mentions it, he immediately circles back to so-called *classical* art: “How can we find an all-embracing concept to cover both what art is today and what it has been in the past? The problem is that we cannot talk about great art as simply belonging to the past, any more than we can talk about modern art only becoming ‘pure’ art through the rejection of all significant content. This is a remarkable state of affairs. If we reflect for a moment and try to consider what it is that we mean when we talk about art, then we come up against a paradox. As far as so-called classical art is concerned [...]” (Gadamer, 1991, p. 59). His approach to contemporary art and its comprehension is even more disheartening when he digs into the concept of play as an essential ingredient of art in *The Relevance of the Beautiful*: “it seems a false antithesis to believe that there is an art of the past that can be enjoyed and an art of the present that supposedly forces us to participate in it by the subtle use of artistic technique” (Gadamer, 1991, p. 76).

From my approach, the hermeneutic criterion of futurity opens up what pertains to the work in terms of enjoyment and play by its questioning of the being from the perspective of the new realities brought by global contemporariness, where the break value is much more decisive than the continuity value (Groys, 2005, p. 23).

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer speaks of an epoch as if there were epochal unity today

as if the historically and politically fragmented time of Globality were a whole made up of common features. The philosopher argues that “every age has to understand a transmitted text in its own way, for the text belongs to the whole tradition whose content interests the age and in which it seeks to understand itself” (Gadamer, 1977, p. 366). While it is true that in the 21st century the conditions are not in place for speaking of common epochal features, we can recognise a common world that would allow self-understanding of a wider ego with space for the multiple conditions of possibility of the contemporary subject.

3.2.2. The Self-Understanding approach

Delving into contemporary music requires a self-understanding effort that even the philosopher himself appears to reject. Gadamer questions “the messianic consciousness of the nineteenth-century artist, who [...] as a social outsider pays the price for this claim since with all his artistry he is only an artist for the sake of art. But what is all this compared to the alienation and shock with which the more recent forms of artistic expression in our century tax our self-understanding as a public?” (Gadamer, 1991, p. 37). But I ask, did the contemporaries of Guillaume de Machaut or Beethoven not make the same self-understanding effort?

Other assertions are even more disconcerting due to their traditionalist nature since they seem to settle into certain prejudices instead of taking them into account in order to overcome them hermeneutically, such as when he contends “I should like to maintain a tactful silence about the extreme difficulty faced by performing artists when they bring modern music to the concert hall. It can usually only be performed as the middle item in a program—otherwise, the listeners will arrive later or leave early. This fact is symptomatic of a situation that could not have existed previously and its significance requires consideration. It expresses the conflict between art as a ‘religion of culture’ on the one hand and art as a provocation by the modern artist on the other” (Gadamer, 1991, p. 37).

In this sense, Grondin contends that when Gadamer refers to tradition, he does not do so in the way in which we usually perceive a traditionalist, which he is not, but rather thinking about the work of history that is being forged underneath tradition (Grondin, 2008, p. 79). With all due respect, I disagree. He himself asks in *The Relevance of the Beautiful* “why does the understanding of what art is today present a task for thinking?”. However, he only dedicates a

few pages of his two *Truth and Method* books, not mentioning his lectures and other books. In very few lines does Gadamer talk about music, and when he does so he deals with general questions and in a very vague way, such as when he speaks of time (Gadamer, 1991, p. 107) or rhythm (Gadamer, 1991, p. 109), absolute music (Gadamer, 1991, p. 96), etc., and when he finally discusses music with text he does so to legitimate urban or popular music, but without dedicating it specific exegesis, remaining in a position of intentional subjectivity that does not match the great hermeneutic task undertaken in other pages: “I would insist that the Threepenny Opera, or the records of modern songs so popular with the young people of today, are equally legitimate [as the Passion music of J. S. Bach]. They too have a capacity to establish communication in a way that reaches people of every class and educational background. I am not referring here to the contagious and intoxicated enthusiasm that is the object of mass psychology [...]. Yet it is surely significant that the younger generation feel that they express themselves spontaneously in the obsessive rhythms of modern music, or in very barren forms of abstract art” (Gadamer, 1991, p.120). From my point of view, these assertions place the philosopher among traditionalist prejudices that hinder his penetration into the authentic being that is unveiled in contemporary music.

For example, this moral guardianship regarding youngsters does not quite fit with the age of the people who go to see contemporary opera performances or of those who follow them on social media or download their digital content. Reflecting on and digging deeper into this is a task that we the researchers who deal with the nature of contemporary music are called upon to carry out.

4. Range of Truth of Contemporary Opera

Under the heading ‘range of truth’ I will focus on the following two theses:

- 1) No one can remain indifferent in the face of a work of art that subjects us to its truth (Grondin, 2008, p.76).
- 2) The word ‘art’ does not denote the concept of a mere happening. It is a concept of range. Art is not something found among other things, which one also performs and often enjoys. Art places the whole of existence in the decision

and keeps it there, hence why it is itself placed under unique conditions (Heidegger in Molinuevo, 1998, p.178).

As argued by Heidegger in *The Origin of the Work of Art*, history, art, and truth are the same in origin: the happening (history) of the being as the opening (truth) of the entity is art. This thesis is taken further by Gadamer in the first part of *Truth and Method* when he posits that art contains and conveys truth (López Sáenz, 1998, p. 333). The legitimation of art, therefore, does not just lie in the aesthetic pleasure that it produces but also in its revelation of the being (López Sáenz, 1998, p. 338).

The work is never received—cannot be received—as it was conceived or created. It is clear that the composer conceived the work in the context of their world, which is not ours. And what makes a work ‘eternal’ is certainly the fact that it adapts to the conditions of each time to say something to the spectator, because it answers the questions asked by the spectator.

No conductor would replace a D major chord with a C minor chord, and no singer would replace an instance of *Sprechgesang* with bel canto vocals. However, in contemporary direction we have characters in the scene without the libretto placing them there (as in *Don Carlo* by Warlikowski performed at Garnier in 2019) or Act 1 of *Un Ballo in Maschera* opening with the characters singing while sitting on the toilet (as at the Liceu’s production by Calixto Bieito in 2000). Such direction may alter the nature of the work but does not compromise its being, since the staging does not alter the message of the opera and is also aimed at an audience whose conditions of existence have substantially changed since the time in which it was conceived.

Thus, current direction can open up the work to truth by presenting a new interpretation of the conflicts inherited from the past—that which Gadamer considers to be ‘our tradition’, from which a fusion of horizons develops.

Let us take a hermeneutic look at two operas on the basis of contemporary instances of direction, which represent what is considered a new paradigm of opera. To do this, I will start with the specificity of opera. While it is true that no work of art exists as something independent of its representation, scene direction in opera is specifically not an autonomous creation, in contrast with that of a play. Instead, it constitutes mediated creation, since it is not disconnected from what the libretto says and what the music expresses. In this sense, it is formally subordinated to an objective that it cannot contradict. Its function is to take hold of one of the

aforementioned planes of creation in order for the authentic reality of the work to emerge.

4.1. Direction that Opens up the Understanding of the Hermeneutic Truth of the Work

In the work, the struggle of truth is always reopened. (Rebok, 2017, p. 255)

Some direction takes the audience to a logic of theatre that is different to the codes with which it was written, conceived, and imagined. Thus, it interrogatively opens up the truth of the work. This is the case with La Fura dels Baus's version of *The Magic Flute*, whose staging incorporated great transformations: the original libretto was replaced by a long poem created based on it by Rafael Argullol and recited through voice-over, and the dramatic action was moved to the protagonist's brain: a non-physical space—the imaginary inside of the protagonist's mind—and a time outside of time—an instant shorter a second. The floor symbolised the units of memory stored in the mind which also pointed to possible play between truth and fiction, as noted by those responsible for the staging.



Figure 3. *The Magic Flute*, Opera by La Fura dels Baus

In this case, Àlex Ollé and Carlos Padrissa's direction brought light to what Mozart and Schikaneder had written. I am not speaking from the perspective of relevance or interest—an area more pertaining to critics—but from the sphere of hermeneutics itself and its capacity for opening up the true being of the work through *polemos*, so that the work thus regenerates its existence in the 21st century. In this sense, I share the hermeneutic theses that consider that interpreting directions consists in them being followed in accordance with their sense and not literally. These theses base themselves on the fact that a text is not a given object, but instead a phase in the realisation of a process of comprehending.

4.2. Direction that Veils Understanding of the Hermeneutic Truth of the Work

All authentic art, not just avant-garde art, represents a challenge. (Martel, 2015, p. 55)

However, what about direction that radically strays from the original sense and openly contradicts the libretto, preventing the audience from comprehending and thus penetrating the truth of the work?

This is the case of Andrea Breth's staging of *Lulu* in 2015 at Berlin's Staatsoper. Breth overhauls Bertolt Brecht's dramaturgical conception of *Regietheater* according to which theatre is a non-affirmative reading of the world and must deploy philosophical, political, and ideological mechanisms to open up a decentralisation of the reading of the text in order to comprehend the mechanisms that it implicitly carries. Brecht proposes a different reading of the text, one that evidences the alienation that society is subjected to at the hands of the dominant class, in the same vein as Adorno brings forward, albeit in a different way, in his *Minimum Moratorium* 22 "that culture produces the illusion of a society worthy of human beings, which does not exist". But Brecht never mentions vandalising the text to the point that understanding the meaning of the work becomes almost impossible. This is what Andrea Breth does. She has generated such a radical and independent narrative development that a neophyte spectator will not comprehend the truth of this work. In fact, they will not even glimpse its threshold. The original work contains many relationships that have disappeared in this staging: at a structural level between the characters and some musical forms—i.e., Dr. Schön is represented by the sonata and Lulu by the parlour music—and between characters and instruments—the athlete is symbolised by the piano, Alwa by the saxophone and the Marquis by the violin. Lulu's portrait, an essential element of the works on which the libretto is based and of the score, does not appear either. Thus, when Lulu looks at herself in it (act I) or destroys it (act III) the audience cannot understand what is happening in the scene. Berg wanted the film that divides the opera into two parts to narrate Lulu and the Countess' stay in prison and in hospital. It, too, disappears, skipping to Scene 2 of Act 2 without giving the audience the necessary information to comprehend it. In summary, if direction problematises comprehension of a work to such a degree, the interpretation paradigm runs counter to the

possibilities that the work would open up.



Figure 4. *Lulu*, Opera by Andrea Breth

We do not intend to open the debate on the validity of beauty as constitutive of art, but we cannot omit reflections on what is beautiful in contemporary opera, re-assessing the Adornoian theses in light of what the 21st century has experienced musically. Contemporary opera is by no means foreign to this way of revealing the truth of what beauty is, and there are numerous examples. We refer to the beauty that makes the instant significant: the thousands of LED light bulbs that, in the scenography of *L'amour de Loin* by Saariaho at the MET, symbolized the Mediterranean Sea; the symbolic play of lighting, choreography, and chorus in *The First Emperor*; or Julieta harassed by white horses representing heterosexual desire in *El Público*, by Mauricio Sotelo at the Teatro Real. We also refer to allegorical beauty, subjected to time, which goes to its essence to transcend it, in the most Hegelian sense of the term. If we take into account that beauty is one of the ways of presenting the truth as *unconcealment*, this happens in contemporary opera with a revelatory force, since it allows the artistic mediums involved to go much further than when they are presented separately. Robert Lepage introduced circus,

acrobatics, and digital media to opera; William Kentridge used puppets, drawings, and animation; Robert Wilson, lighting and 3D animation; and Franc Aleu, robotics, and virtual reality. All these approaches come from a rigorous conception of opera, which broadens its horizons, those of art and, therefore, of ourselves.

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