

Introduction

Intermedia Opera: Lyric Traces in Italian Cinema

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A Remediation on Trial

In 1951, *Enrico Caruso, leggenda di una voce* was released in theatres, directed by Giacomo Gentilomo and starring Ermanno Randi for Asso Film. As the title suggests, the film is a celebratory biopic of the famous Italian tenor. On October 9, 1951, it received a censorship certificate with approval from the Commission, provided that “the close-up of the actress’s leg in the dressing room is removed”. The film was distributed in cinemas worldwide and immediately enjoyed great success with international audiences. However, Caruso’s heirs reacted negatively, objecting to the portrayal as inaccurate and unauthorized.

The dispute between the family and the production company centered mainly on the depiction of the tenor’s early environment, “the low social status and poverty of the environment in which Caruso grew up”, his drunkenness at his debut in Trapani, a suicide attempt, and the narrative arc surrounding “Caruso’s love for Stella, who later marries another man”. According to Caruso’s heirs, all these scenes amounted to “genuine offenses to the dignity and honor of the celebrated singer”.

The film’s production and distribution history reveal a structural tension between the demands of cultural legitimization and the logic of a spectacular remediation. Such legitimization appears as a consequence of the traumas following both the nation’s formative years and the World War II. In the postwar period, cultural reconstruction was accompanied

The authors jointly discussed the contents of this introduction. However, the writing of the first paragraph is by Laura Cesaro, while the second is by Chiara Casarin.



by a profound redefinition of collective identities, marked by the need to distance oneself from the ideological appropriation of art and media carried out by Fascism (Gundle 2013; Brunetta 1979). After years in which operatic spectacle and its performers had been instrumentalized as propaganda, there emerged an urgent need to assign new meanings to representation, questioning what it meant to depict reality and through which forms. This reflection particularly had a particular impact on cinema and literature, which became privileged arenas for experimenting with new expressive modes capable of restoring complexity, memory, and truth to a national identity that had been fragmented and wounded. It is within this broader horizon of cultural reconstruction and redefinition of collective identities that *Enrico Caruso, leggenda di una voce* must be situated. On the one hand, the film presents itself as a tribute to the Italian operatic tradition and to one of its most emblematic figures; on the other, it reinterprets that very tradition through the biopic format, resorting to a narrative and visual apparatus imbued with rhetoric.

In the film, opera - originally a complex, performative, and spectacular language - is re-coded and re-signified as an emotional repertoire, instrumental in constructing a process of symbolic investment and mediation. It is precisely out of this tension that the aim of the present volume takes shape: to explore how cinema and opera intersect, cross-fertilize, and rewrite each other, generating hybrid forms that move between homage and appropriation. From this angle, *Enrico Caruso, leggenda di una voce* offers a privileged vantage point from which to reflect on the processes of remediation between the two media, serving as a paradigmatic example of how the operatic tradition is absorbed, reshaped, and rearticulated by the cinematic dispositif within new frameworks of consumption, spectacle, and cultural legitimation.

In this framework, the film's remediation unfolds across at least three analytical levels, which we have conceptualized in our work. The three levels to which we refer, and which constitute the framework of this volume, can be summarized as follows. The first level concerns remediation between semantics, understood as the way in which opera's signification structures enter, modify, and determine cinematic products as citational devices, dramaturgical references, and cultural tools capable of (more or less) broadly recontextualizing cinema. The second level involves remediation between genres, which examines how the relationship between cinematic (biopic, Italian comedy, drama film, musical) and operatic (opera seria, opera buffa, melodrama, opéra-comique) genres influenced the inception and development of cultural processes related to both media. The third and final level concerns remediation as a site of intersection between medial languages belonging to different periods, contexts, and purposes, and how such crossings generate new forms of reception and rewriting. Considering the three-level theoretical and methodological framework here proposed, we now turn to the film *Caruso*, which exemplifies these levels.

First, *Enrico Caruso, leggenda di una voce* stands as an epitome of remediation through appropriation, where cinema absorbs and reformulates the codes of opera within a new narrative and cultural framework. The choice of Caruso as subject is not accidental: he was already the first great transnational media star, whose image and voice had been incessantly reworked through records, radio, the press, and photography. The biopic thus builds upon a preexisting icon, further amplifying his charismatic aura.

From this perspective, Ermanno Randi – an actor with a vocal quality softer and more popular than the norms of Italian opera – becomes the cinematic vehicle of a new phase in Caruso's divinization, making him accessible and even more appealing to a broad and global audience, while embodying a figure that was already, in itself, the product of earlier processes of remediation. At the same time, the film does not merely relaunch Caruso's icon but also participates in the construction of new star trajectories: alongside Gina Lollobrigida, already on the verge of establishing herself as a leading figure of Italian cinema, Randi finds in this role the turning point that transforms him from an emerging face into a genuine star. The overlap with the Caruso myth – impersonating the first great global singer and, at the same time, lending him a body and a more accessible voice – confers upon the actor an aura extending well beyond the single film, marking his definitive legitimization within the cinematic landscape of the period.

This choice involves a profound semantic transformation: the operatic voice – symbolizing a strong and codified cultural identity – is 'domesticated' and presented as an immediate emotional effect rather than as a high, ritualized, and layered form of performative expression. The biographical homage is thus converted into a process of simplification and rewriting, in which not only the chronology of Caruso's life is altered for narrative purposes, but the complexity of his artistic figure is reduced to (not only) a cinematic cliché: the natural genius, the man of the people who conquers the elite, the tragic fate of talent. This is a hierarchizing medial operation in which cinema does not merely integrate opera, but subordinates it to its language, rewriting it according to its logic of consumption and spectacularization.

This process has significant cultural consequences: the legal action taken by Caruso's heirs highlights how this remediation was not perceived as a neutral or celebratory gesture, but rather as a transgression of the symbolic boundaries of national identity. In the Italian cultural imagination of the time, Caruso's body and voice were part of a heritage to be protected; their reworking according to the logic of global spectacle was therefore perceived as a symbolic dispossession carried out by the culture industry. The friction between this local perception and the global logic of cinema reveals the ambivalent nature of remediation as a cultural practice. On the one hand, it enables the survival and dissemination of the opera and/or its protagonists through new media and new audiences; on the other, it raises questions of cultural authority, fidelity, and narrative control.

Enrico Caruso, leggenda di una voce, serves as a paradigmatic example not only of how cinema has remediated opera, but also of how this process takes on the contours of a profoundly political cultural act, in which tensions between center and periphery come into play, in this case, between cultural hegemony and identity-based resistance.

Bearing in mind the three-level scheme we are proposing, we proceed to the second level of remediation that can be identified in the film. It uses opera as a memorial tool, transforming arias and operatic performances into moments of emotional recollection rather than performative acts tied to a specific dramaturgical context. There is no simple evocation of opera in this context, but its reconfiguration as a language of memory, as living matter through which the viewer can access the myth of Caruso. Well-known arias, removed from their original dramatic framework, are presented as sound fragments capable of activating collective memory, recognizable, familiar,

and charged with an emotional intensity that transcends time. In this light, the film constructs Caruso as a posthumous star figure, a “hero of song” who continues to live on through his melodies, which are transmitted via cinema and sound reproduction.

However, this monumentalization is not abstract: it is rooted within a narrative that strongly emphasizes the return to origins, highlighting the protagonist’s humble Southern background. The film highlights Caruso’s connection to his family, as well as his childhood experiences in Naples, which shaped his artistic path, imbuing it with a meaning of both personal and collective redemption.

Caruso’s legacy is not only that of the great tenor who conquered the world stage, but also that of the son of the people, emotionally and symbolically linked to his roots. The decontextualized lyrical fragments reconfigured throughout the film as universal symbols of passion, genius, and sacrifice construct a mythicized idea of Italianness and project it, like a matrix, onto the tenor’s biography. This process of displacement compromises the historical integrity of the narrative while redefining opera’s role in cultural memory, transforming it from a situated performative practice into a quotable repertoire. Operatic moments shift from being ephemeral events to becoming spectacularized monuments. As a result, opera loses its performative and ritual dimension as a “school of emotions” and takes on the form of an accessible, immediate, consumable “emotional archive,” based on memorable vocal moments rather than dramaturgical and textual complexity.¹

In this interplay between celebration and humanization, between international icon and local roots, opera assumes a complex memorial function. It does not merely honor an artist; instead, it presents him as a familiar and emotionally accessible figure to the public.

Notably, the film’s concluding episode, set in Trapani, features the performance of *Andrea Chénier* by Umberto Giordano – one of the most cherished operas in Caruso’s repertoire. The staging, as reconstructed in the film, mirrors the opera’s premiere at La Scala in Milan in 1896, as if to replicate – on a smaller scale but with no less solemnity – that founding moment of modern Italian operatic history. This choice is no coincidence: through this reenactment, the film symbolically inscribes Caruso within the national operatic canon, linking him not only to international success but also to the institutional heart of Italian opera culture.

Thus, cinema acts as a mediator of a simplified operatic memory, revisiting the past through the narrative and aesthetic lenses of the present. This confirms cinema’s tendency, as a form of remediation, to rewrite the history of opera according to principles of visibility and recognizability. This process operates according to a dual logic: on the one hand, it contributes to the transgenerational transmission of opera, promoting its cultural survival; on the other, it leads to its decontextualization, fixing its meanings within a stereotyped and mythologized imaginary. It is within this tension between memory and reinvention, fidelity and anachronism, that opera’s role as a cultural device across time unfolds: not as a fleeting, situated experience, but as a layered and remediated memory, subject to continual negotiation among various media, epochs, and representational codes.

¹ On the concept of opera as a “school of feelings”, cf. Bianconi 2003.

Third and final level. We can view *Enrico Caruso, leggenda di una voce*, as an early example of the intermedial persistence of opera, one of the many afterlives through which musical melodrama traverses epochs, languages, and devices, continually taking on new forms to endure over time. Indeed, the persistence of opera rests on a paradoxical dynamic: to survive, it is often compelled to transform, to translate itself – sometimes even to betray itself – in order to adapt to new audiences and new media.

This approach is accompanied by a highly evocative and celebratory iconographic construction, populated by idealized representations of the masters of Italian opera, even at the cost of historical inaccuracies. For instance, the film includes singing teachers and critics whom Caruso likely never met in the contexts portrayed, introduced not for biographical accuracy but to symbolically legitimize the protagonist's ascent into the national operatic *pantheon*. The presence of the Leoncavallo character, who in fact played an important role in the tenor's career, as well as the use of a large portrait of Verdi in one scene, creates a constellation of legendary figures that places Caruso within a mythical and institutional genealogy of Italian opera, rather than within a faithful chronicle of his life.

This process involves both simplification and reactivation: on the one hand, opera is stripped of its complex structure and theatrical context; on the other hand, it survives and is renewed through the language of cinema, making it accessible to a broader and culturally heterogeneous audience. The film does not merely represent opera: it reinvents it as a narrative and affective device (level 1), endowing it with a new audiovisual "truth" (level 2), and placing it within a media ecosystem in which it can continue to exert its evocative power (level 3). In this regard, the film's remediation should be understood not merely as an adaptation, but as a cultural act of considerable significance, one that opens up new avenues for interpretation and reception. The three interpretative levels identified serve as a compass for navigating this complex social and cultural phenomenon.

Remediation as a 'Critical Machine'

The idea of remediation as an intermedial practice unifies the three key points illustrated by the case of *Enrico Caruso, leggenda di una voce*. Remediation involves more than simply transferring content from one medium to another; it fundamentally renegotiates aesthetic forms, conditions of reception, and the form of meaning construction. The theory proposed by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999), in defining remediation as "the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media," underscores the dialectical nature of every process of transcoding examined here. On the one hand, there is a notable drive toward immediacy, which aims to erase traces of previous mediation; on the other hand, there is a push toward hypermediacy, which emphasizes the apparatus and multiplies layers of representation. When examining the relationship between cinema and opera, the double logic of remediation – as defined by the two authors – becomes even more complex, as it concerns two highly stratified performative systems that are historicized and possess their own grammar, temporality, and audience relationships.

In the case of opera, the transition to cinema does not merely represent a transposition; rather, it entails a reconfiguration and re-signification of its essential components: the voice, the body, the (visual) space and time of

performance, the ritual and collective dimension, and the musical and aural element in all their complexity. This reconfiguration, based on mechanisms of montage, condensation, and selective exposure, unfolds on multiple levels. On the one hand, remediation affects the visual dimension by enhancing the visibility of the performance, emphasizing facial expressions (and expressiveness), the intimacy of gesture, and the emotional modulation of the voice through the proximity of the shot, thereby transforming stage spatiality into diegesis. On the other hand, remediation extends beyond the visual dimension, involving both the sonic level – when opera becomes an integral part of the soundtrack – and the dramaturgical one, influencing the articulation of narrative through reference to opera as archetype. In this way, within this complex intertwining of vision and sound, diegesis and drama, remediation generates new meanings by quoting, reflecting, and reinventing opera, yet always according to a logic of medial rearticulation that redefines its function and reorients its affective, symbolic, and political potential.

To grasp this dynamic, we can also consider the concepts of cultural memory (Assmann 2011) and intermedial afterlife (Erl 2011) alongside that of remediation, as they illuminate how cinema does not merely represent opera but reactivates it, each cinematic appearance enacting a new form of survival. Every remediation of opera can be viewed as a memorial act, in which the past is summoned into the present through selection, deformation, and relocation. Cinema not only stages opera but also actively shapes its intermedial survival, hybridizing memory, body, voice, and space to create new meanings. However, this survival never occurs neutrally: aesthetic, productive, and ideological forces always influence it. Intermedial translation never proceeds innocently; it involves omitting, cutting, selecting, and thus exercising power.

From this perspective, remediation can be understood as a “critical machine” that uncovers the hidden tensions between media and makes visible their historical interrelations. Italian cinema, in particular, has engaged with opera since its inception in ways that reflect the country’s cultural transformations: from constructing national identity to contesting established canons, to experimenting with digital adaptations in response to recent crises, such as the pandemic. Throughout these moments, the remediation of opera has served as a strategy to interrogate tradition: to ‘use’ it, to pay homage to it, to betray it, to rewrite it. In this sense, cinema emerges not just as a hosting medium but also as a site of cultural negotiation, where opera is manipulated – at times deconstructed and then reassembled – becoming, at various times, a nostalgic object, a malleable material, or a field of reinvention.

It is this hybrid, unstable, and productive nature of remediation that the volume seeks to emphasize: not merely as an object of formal analysis, but as a critical category for understanding the complex relationships between media, tradition, and cultural transformation. The collected essays demonstrate that remediation is not just a technical device; rather, it embodies a spectrum of aesthetic, historical, and ideological forces, where the potential for non-linear, open, and differential cultural transmission is at stake. Moreover, the essays collected in this volume demonstrate how Bolter and Grusin’s broadly defined concept can generate a kaleidoscopic variety of meanings. Opera does not survive unchanged in its transition to cinema: it survives by transforming. Through this metamorphosis, opera reveals its cultural resilience, its ability to question the present and continue to present itself as a living form, a receptive body, and a gesture to be reinvented.

The structure of this volume itself recalls, by analogy, that of the operatic form, unfolding across three “thematic acts”, each dedicated to a fundamental conceptual axis: homage and appropriation, displaced cultural memory, and the transformative survival of opera. These acts are punctuated by dialogic intervals that mark the rhythm of reading and vary its tone. Each section features a dialogue among critical voices from different but complementary disciplinary fields. On the one hand, film studies focus on the materiality of the image, the devices used, and the forms of audiovisual narration; on the other hand, musicology reflects on history and the reception of opera. This dialogue – at times harmonious, at others dissonant – has been deliberately sought out to highlight the frictions and resonances that emerge from the relationship between cinema and opera.

The transitions between sections are framed by interviews that function as interludes, scene changes, or orchestral refrains. These are moments of suspension and reflection, in which the voices of scholars and professionals – Roberto Chiesi, Michal Grover-Friedlander, and Vincenzo Borghetti – guide the reader beyond the linearity of ‘traditional’ essays into a more dynamic experience, shaped by intuition and openness. A brief musicological contribution by Roberto Calabretto, along with a conclusion by Miriam De Rosa and Vincenzina Caterina Ottomano, completes the narrative arc of the volume, revisiting, transforming, and projecting forward the main themes.

In this deliberately asymmetrical and layered polyphonic structure, the volume not only provides an analytical exploration of remediation but also puts its principles into practice, becoming a hybrid device, a space of contamination and listening. Like an opera, the variety of registers – narrative, theoretical, dialogical – does not aim for uniformity, but rather for a productive tension between different languages. Remediation is not just the subject of study here: it is the internal logic that informs the volume’s structure and invites the reader to follow its course.

The volume organizes its contributions around the themes of homage and appropriation, the temporal displacement of operatic memory, and the transformative survival of opera in new media environments. The collected essays aim to provide a plural and interdisciplinary reflection on how Italian cinema – through various forms, languages, and devices – has remediated opera, not merely as a repertoire to be cited or reinterpreted, but as a performative and symbolic space to be redefined.

Building on this conceptual structure, the first part of the volume explores the relationship between cinema and opera, focusing on the productive tension between fidelity and rewriting. It examines how cinema appropriates the operatic repertoire to construct new narratives and create distinctive images. Elena Mosconi’s analysis of Italian biopics from the 1940s and 1950s reveals how the cinematic portrayal of opera singers contributes to the canonization of an idealized image of the performer through visual and narrative strategies that merge melodrama with national celebration. Chiara Casarin, in her study of the theater scene in *Il Marchese del Grillo*, explores the boundaries of remediation, questioning the implications of using an opera composed *ad hoc* in Monicelli’s film to mimic a specific musical genre and thus reactivate its cultural connotations. In both cases, opera is not merely evoked or represented, but it is actively refunctionalized, illuminating the cultural and political logics that shape its remediation.

The second part of the volume shifts the focus to memory and cultural displacement, exploring the remediation of opera as a practice of rewriting the past. Giorgio Biancorosso analyses the recreation of operatic performances – understood as moments of reflection on cinema’s performative potential – in selected films by Luchino Visconti and Bernardo Bertolucci. He examines the dialectic between representation and ritual, redefining the concept of ‘performance’. Laura Cesaro reflects on the coexistence of operatic traces and representations of labor in Italian industrial cinema, demonstrating how opera can provide a sonic and symbolic counterpoint to collective experience, reconfiguring the factory space as an alternative site of memory.

The third part of the volume addresses the survival and metamorphosis of opera in the contemporary context, specifically focusing on instances where remediation manifests as a creative translation. Matteo Giuggioli uses Bertolucci’s *Strategia del ragno* as a case study to analyze operatic remediation from a cinematic perspective. He observes how cinema evokes and incorporates opera, making it an integral part of its own narrative. Lorenzo Rossi examines Mario Martone’s theater-film trilogy, produced during the height of the pandemic. He reflects on how opera, which was forced to close and rethink its practices, finds a new medium in cinema to redefine its forms, spatiality, and ways of being received. The media transformations brought about by the health crisis present an opportunity for opera to develop new strategies for survival, which include filmed theater, virtual stages, and innovative scenographic approaches. Since cinema has remediated opera by appropriating and transforming it, we can now conceive opera as an active subject in new intermedial practices. This shift allows opera not only to survive but also to create new audiovisual, performative, and theoretical forms independently.

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