

# Opera in (Italian) Film: From Intermediality to Remediation

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**Abstract** This essay focuses on Italian opera in film. Initially, the theory is reconsidered, showing how intermediality, intertextuality, and remediation are perspectives that coexist in studies of opera in film, yet they are not entirely overlapping. A case study is then examined, the Italian film *The Spider's Stratagem* (*Strategia del ragno*, 1970) by Bernardo Bertolucci, highlighting how an approach based on the dynamics of remediation is essential, to fully understand how, in this film, opera contributes to define a way of critically representing and analysing history.

**Keywords** Opera in film. Intermediality. Intertextuality. Remediation. The Spiders' Stratagem. Bernardo Bertolucci. Italian political cinema.

**Summary** 1 When Film Meets Opera. – 2 Deconstructing Memory. – 3 Shaping the Past.

## 1 When Film Meets Opera

In the title of this paragraph, I refer to the title of a book by Marcia Citron, *When Opera Meets Film* (2010), which is one of the reference studies on the relationship between opera and cinema. However, I voluntarily invert the terms. What I would like to focus on in this paper is a perspective on the relationship between opera and cinema that takes the latter as the primary point of observation in the process of remediation of the opera into film. The relationship between opera and cinema is a well-established topic in the context of musicological studies.<sup>1</sup> It seems to me, however, that despite the different approaches, the studies dedicated to this subject tend in principle to converge on a common attitude, if indeed on a common theoretical fundamental. They tend to focus on the intertextual and intermedial relationship between opera and film following analytical and critical paths

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**1** Just to mention some of the major contributions: Tambling 1987; Citron 2000; 2010; Joe, Theresa 2002; Kuhn 2005; Joe 2013. In Italy see at least Verona 2016.

that go precisely from the first to the second, from opera to film, as can be deduced even just by considering their titles.<sup>2</sup>

In the film, we mostly examine the effects of the opera as a given artistic elaboration, endowed with its own particular, structural and expressive profile and a vast, but still determined symbolic potential. In other words, we observe more how opera is capable of transforming the film that hosts it, ensuring the film an often decisive factor in defining its own identity, than on the contrary how the film transforms the opera (or operas) that it hosts. Perhaps because they mostly come from the area of historical musicology, accustomed to think according to the scheme of production/reception of the musical work of art and following a chronology from the past to the present, these studies, whose validity I certainly do not want to question here, are mainly interested in the 'difference' between opera and film when these two art forms meet in a film.<sup>3</sup> Difference is essentially at the heart of these studies not only when the presence of the opera in a film contrasts with the 'rules' and conventions of cinematic narration and representation, but also when it seems to fit in with the other components of the film.

According to Citron, then, the ideal theoretical framework for studying the encounter between opera and film is a theory of intermediality oriented primarily to clearly recognize and categorize the modes of combination between media, such as that of Werner Wolf (1999):

Wolf's system features two categories that capture the relative importance of the components in the medial combination. An encounter qualifies as overt intermediality if "both media are directly present with their typical or conventional signifiers and if consequently each medium remains distinct and is in principle 'quotable' separately". The other category is covert intermediality: "the participation of (at least) two conventionally distinct media in the signification of an artefact in which, however, only one of the media appears directly with its typical or conventional signifiers and hence may be called the dominant medium, while another one (the non-dominant medium) is indirectly present 'within' the first medium". These include, among others, the intensity of the intermedial relation and the fact that one or more of the media may themselves be hybrid - the situation for both opera and film. (Citron 2010, 7-8)

The objectives of the research are not too different if an intertextual approach is adopted that interprets the presence of opera in the film, for example, as a quotation. The relationship and the combinatorial play between media or textual forms remains the central point. Anyway, the intermedial approach according to Wolf's theory already allowed to "capture the relative importance of the components in the medial combination" (8). Similarly, the intertextual study of the operatic quotation in the film allows to grasp the process of reciprocal transformation between both textual forms, the opera and the film, on the basis of the following strong principle of the theory of intertextuality:

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<sup>2</sup> See the titles of the studies mentioned in fn. 1. Giuggioli 2015 and 2019, for example, are no exception. More oriented to the perspective I discuss in this paper is Giuggioli 2024.

<sup>3</sup> I am obviously oversimplifying here: Western historical musicology has been busy for some decades reviewing and expanding its paradigms. There is a huge bibliography on this, which does not need to be cited here.

che non esistono testi isolati, ma che tutti partecipano a un fitto intreccio di relazioni, in un reciproco scambio che genera inesauribili processi di trasformazione; e tale scambio non è affatto orientato unidirezionalmente secondo una vettorializzazione tesa lungo una direttrice cronologica dal passato al futuro, ma al contrario è biunivoco, arricchendo così sia il testo di partenza che quello di arrivo. (Verona 2016, 10)

that there are no isolated texts, but that they all participate in a dense interweaving of relationships, in a reciprocal exchange that generates inexhaustible processes of transformation; and this exchange is not at all unidirectionally oriented according to a vectorization stretched along a chronological line from the past to the future, but on the contrary it is biunivocal, thus enriching both the source and the target text.<sup>4</sup>

This emphasis that both the intermedial and the intertextual approaches place on the process of transformation that the opera undergoes and at the same time causes in the film is, we might say, even more marked if we observe the phenomenon of the opera in film through the lens of remediation. It is worth returning to the well-known formulation of this principle proposed by those who first enunciated and observed it in action in the context of contemporary digital media: “we call the representation of one medium in another *remediation*, and we will argue that remediation is a defining characteristic of the new digital media” (Bolter, Grusin 1999, 45). But the roots of remediation, as Bolter and Grusin themselves point out, lie in the distant past and this principle is fully active in the audiovisual media of the twentieth century. If we turn to the opera in film as a form of remediation, this entails a decisive shift in perspective more towards the film and a reversal of direction, from film to opera.

Rather than on the dialogue between opera and film, such research will focus on how, on how much and how radically the film recalls, represents and drags opera within itself. The intermedial and intertextual approaches to the opera in film, that I synthetically call approaches based on ‘difference’ allow us to understand in detail the structural, expressive and symbolic ‘play’ between the two parts. The approach based on remediation, on the other hand, allows us to understand more deeply how the opera becomes part of the body of the film and how, by assuming opera among its components, the film traces its own path in contemporary media culture, maturing its own strategy of representation of the real and of the media themselves, and thus pronouncing itself on “the twin preoccupations of contemporary media: the transparent presentation of the real and the enjoyment of the opacity of media themselves” (Bolter, Grusin 1999, 21). Aspects such as time and ‘corporeality’, as a theme linked to human nature or to cinematographic representation itself, thus take on importance. By re-mediating opera, the film can effectively face and problematize them.

A meaningful indirect confirmation of this tendency is offered by the important study on the relationship between opera and film by Michal Grover-Friedlander (2005). It is an indirect confirmation, since it is not a work focused primarily on remediation as Bolter and Grusin discuss it.

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<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the Author.

By examining the contact between the two media in terms that can be considered as orbiting in the sphere of remediation, Grover-Friedlander investigates the concept of survival. Note how in the title of her book (*Vocal Apparitions: The Attraction of Cinema to Opera*) the word 'cinema' is placed before the word 'opera'. Grover-Friedlander starts from the myth of Orpheus, who is able, with his singing, to bring the deceased Eurydice back to life. Orpheus' miraculous ability, however, is thwarted by his improvident gaze towards his beloved, which makes her disappear this time forever. Opera as a medium, and Grover-Friedlander refers exclusively to Italian opera, is characterized by an extraordinary and unmistakable use of the singing voice. The operatic voice ideally retains some of the properties of Orpheus' mythical voice. Like the voice of the mythical Greek singer, opera singing, thanks to an overflowing expressive potential, is capable of reaching out towards transcendence, towards a fullness of sensations and feelings that exceeds the earthly nature of things.

Placed in the media context of the film, opera singing seems to try each time, with its own materiality and at the same time with its absoluteness and otherness with respect to contingency, to activate the passage from death to life of something that is no more. The visual element reintroduces contingency, hindering this process. Like Orpheus' gaze, in cinema as in theatre, this element prevents the complete survival of what one wanted to bring back to life. However, Grover-Friedlander notes how the continuous return of opera to the moment of death and the search for overcoming the material limit of existence through singing manage to weaken the very idea of mortality and to fulfill, albeit in a fragile and evanescent way, Orpheus' will. But what kind of survival is it, in a film, that is linked to operatic singing? Is it a truly complete survival, that is, 'credible' as a concrete experience represented by the film, or is it just an effect, a 'ghost', an idea?

Taking this last point into account, I would like to discuss a case study, returning to an Italian film of the second half of the 20th century that remediates Italian opera, *The Spider's Stratagem* (*Strategia del ragno*, 1970) by Bernardo Bertolucci, well known to studies on opera and cinema.<sup>5</sup> In Italian cinema, the encounter with the opera often presents a high symbolic density, due to the link between opera and the fields of Italian history, memory and politics, all full of problems and unresolved questions.<sup>6</sup> Among the film directors most attracted to opera, and especially to the operas of Giuseppe Verdi, in the season of Italian political cinema of the 1960s and 1970s there is notoriously Bertolucci. He draws from Verdi's operas not only material for the soundtrack of his films. In Verdi's operas Bertolucci looks for narrative and dramaturgical models and themes to import and elaborate in his films. In some of them, opera imposes itself as the primary force.<sup>7</sup> *The Spider's Stratagem* is one of Bertolucci's 'Verdian' films.<sup>8</sup> In the

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5 See also Dalle Vacche 1992, 219-250; Basini 2001; Crisp, Hillman 2001; Giuggioli 2011; Verona 2016.

6 See Dalle Vacche 1992; Basini 2001; Crisp, Hillman 2002; Giuggioli 2015; 2019; Verona 2016.

7 See Caldwell 1994; Giuggioli 2011, Verona 2016.

8 As 'Verdian' I indicate Bertolucci's films in which Verdi's operas are present with extended excerpts that play an important role in the film: *Before the Revolution* (*Prima della rivoluzione*, 1964), *The Spider's Stratagem* (1970), *La luna* (1979). Verdi's opera is also cited and has an influence on *1900* (*Novecento*, 1976) and *Tragedy of a Ridiculous Man* (*La tragedia di un uomo ridicolo*, 1981).

following two paragraphs I will focus on the encounter between Verdi's operas and film in this film by Bertolucci. First I will do so in the perspective of intertextuality and intermediality, through an approach interested in understanding the characteristics of the difference between the two genres and media within this film and the features of their combination. Then I will adopt the point of view of remediation, showing how deeply Verdi's operas participate, in this film, in the definition of a certain way of representing reality and historical time through cinema.

## 2 Deconstructing Memory

The plot of *The Spider's Stratagem* focuses on the investigation that a man of about 35 years old called Athos Magnani carries out into the violent death of his father. The investigation takes place in a time that we can assume is contemporary to that of the realization of the film (the end of the 1960s), in Tara, the imaginary town in the Po Valley where the father (who was called Athos like his son) was born, lived, and was murdered. According to the local narrative, Athos father was killed, thirty years earlier, by the fascists. Athos the son' investigation is promoted by a woman, Draifa. At the time of the crime she was her father's lover. Athos comes to discover the painful truth: the gesture from which the heroic aura that still surrounds the figure of his father derives was a set-up. Athos the father had planned an attack on Mussolini. According to the official memory still shared thirty years later in Tara, he had been cowardly murdered by the fascists before he could carry out the attack. He had actually betrayed. When he was about to carry out his plan, frightened by the idea of the murder, he had revealed the plan to the police. Mussolini had not been brought to Tara and Athos had planned, with the same comrades who had previously helped him conceive the plot against the dictator, his own killing. This had taken place in the same place and at the same time as had been envisaged in the original plan for the murder of Mussolini, in the theatre during the performance of *Rigoletto*. The murder of Athos had been consigned to history as the exemplary martyrdom of an anti-fascist.

Verdi's operas, with excerpts from *Rigoletto*, *Il trovatore*, *Un ballo in maschera*, *Attila*, enters the film on several levels. *Rigoletto* is the most present opera. In the film, the murder of Athos senior is relived through Athos junior. On the same stage and near the same passage of the opera in which the murder of his father was committed – the desperate cry “Ah!... la maledizione!” that *Rigoletto* lets out at the end of the first act, when he realizes that he has participated in the kidnapping of his own daughter – Athos son understands how things really happened.

The plot of the film itself, in turn modeled on the story by Jorge Luis Borges, *Theme of the Traitor and the Hero*, shows a contact with the plot of *Rigoletto* in the themes of the conspiracy and the betrayal of the father towards his children. In *Rigoletto* there are two conspiracies: one is hatched by the courtiers against *Rigoletto* and leads to the kidnapping of Gilda, the other is the plan devised by *Rigoletto* to kill the Duke of Mantua. This murder plan involves *Rigoletto*'s betrayal of Gilda, since he intends to have his daughter's lover murdered without her knowledge. Gilda will in turn betray her father's mad love by allowing herself to be killed in place of the Duke. In *The Spider's Stratagem* there are also two conspiracies: the one

organized by Athos and his companions Rasori, Costa and Gaibazzi against Mussolini and the one arranged by the same towards history, staging the heroic death of Athos. Each plot is connected to a betrayal. Athos senior betrays his own plan for the political murder of the dictator. By creating a sensational historical fake, he betrays the future, the generation of the 'sons', including his son Athos.

In the film there are other connections with Verdi's opera. Opera is a strong presence in the cultural imagination of Athos father and his friends. This is highlighted, for example, by the operatic passages sung passionately by Gaibazzi, an amateur opera singer in some moments of the film. Gaibazzi condenses his own thoughts and feelings in these quotations from Verdi's operas, also giving voice to those of his friends. His singing always takes on a political value as well. During the dinner organized by Draifa in the presence of Athos to try, in vain, to resolve the ancient rivalry between the three elderly companions – and with them ideally Athos father – and Beccaccia, an evil and fascist landowner, Gaibazzi faces his opponent singing from Renato's aria in Act III of *Un Ballo in Maschera*, "Eri tu che macchiavi quell'anima". Later during the same dinner, the three friends recall a curious episode, which took place when Athos father was still alive: the escape of a lion from a German circus occasionally passing through Tara and the subsequent death of the animal, from fever, in the woods. In a flashback, the funeral procession with which the four companions had brought the roasted head of the lion to the table for their lunch is re-enacted. The procession is accompanied by Gaibazzi's singing: "Miserere d'un'alma già vicina", from Part IV of *Il trovatore*. The serious and solemn religiosity of Verdi's opera passage contrasts with the grotesque images of this sequence. Overall this sequence can be read as a political allegory of the fall of the fascist regime.<sup>9</sup>

These references to Verdi's opera aestheticize the actions and wills of the four anti-fascist friends. A peculiar relationship between reality and representation is thus triggered, in which this aesthetic projection confuses or deviates the practical intention of their gestures and purposes. The operational background chosen for the attack that was supposed to change the course of history thus fatally ends up hosting a sabotage of history, which the four friends carry out with the assassination of Athos senior. Verdi's opera cannot be avoided even in the path that leads to the unmasking of their act of falsification of history. Athos junior cannot reach awareness of the truth of what happened without participating in the performance, both in the one staged by his father and companions, and in Verdi's *Rigoletto*.

The sham of the four anti-fascists refers to the delicate question of the transmission of historical memory, underlining how the falsification of historical data is intrinsic to the discursive act (it does not matter whether it is a historiographical text or an artistic production) although essential to pass it on. The problem is amplified in the film by flaunting the theatricality of the representation. The setting, the profile and the way of acting of the characters, the music, dominated by Verdi's excerpts, are clearly theatrical. Verdi's opera are figures of ambiguity that profoundly mark the meaning of this film. In *The Spider's Stratagem* is also through opera, that ambiguity takes on concrete

<sup>9</sup> See Crisp, Hillman 2001, 258-60. Crisp and Hillman point out that while the references to *Rigoletto* are connected with the plot and the existential side of the film, those to *Un ballo in maschera* and *Il trovatore* are linked to the political motif of taking a stand against Fascism.

form on a spatial, temporal and political level. In the wake of this widespread ambiguity, the celebration, in the name of opera, of Italian national history can be replaced, in the political cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, as this film shows, by an investigation. There is a movement of attraction and repulsion towards Verdi's opera.<sup>10</sup> It can embody high revolutionary ideals, but also lend its resources to the realization of an act of historical falsification. Opera itself, however, contributes to making the political indictment that the film seems to want to take on elusive. By posing itself as a means both for the falsification of historical memory and for the subsequent discovery of truth, it introduces a fracture at the very point where it indicates a transition between generations. The political gesture of the film thus becomes ferocious and indulgent at the same time, disturbingly distancing any hypothesis of ethical redemption in the path of national history.

### 3 Shaping the Past

In the key sequence of the discovery of the truth about his father's murder, with which the final part of the film begins, Athos Magnani son is at the Tara railway station, with a suitcase, ready to leave. Until that moment he has not been able to reconstruct how the events unfolded. The inhabitants of Tara have been evasive and sometimes hostile to him. Athos is embittered and indignant. He imagined that his investigation, urged by Draifa, a local woman implicated in that strange story, would be well received in the village. He thought that the inhabitants of Tara wanted to re-establish the historical truth as he did, and thus make the memory of his father's heroism even more magnificent. In the sequence of discovery, however, there is something that holds Athos son to Tara. He wanders around the deserted station. No trains pass, the environment is suspended in an unreal atmosphere: the horizontal movements of the camera that try to follow the nervous movements of Athos in the empty rooms of the railway station flow along the walls of the building as if they were backdrops of a theatrical scenography. The light is uncertain. From some shots it seems to understand that night has arrived, from others it seems that it is still day. The electric lights inside the station and those of the public lighting in the streets surrounding it are on.

What attracts Athos' attention and pushes him to retrace his steps and resume the road to the small town is the music of Verdi. The Prelude of *Rigoletto* resonates at the beginning of the sequence as if it were extradiegetic music. The repeated note that will be, in the opera, a main element of the motif of the curse, the dissonant chords in which the repeated note deflates, the orchestral crescendo: this music contributes in a decisive way to charge the rarefied and enigmatic atmosphere with anguished expectation. Athos hears the music and as if called by it resumes his way to Tara. Along the way he sees some loudspeakers. The music comes from them, so we now discover that it is a diegetic presence mediatized through recording. *Rigoletto*, in the form of a musical *potpourri* of excerpts from the first act and the beginning of the second act that follow one another without interruption, is the constant musical element of the sequence,

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<sup>10</sup> On the ambiguous and at times hostile reception of Italian opera in Italian culture, not only in the second half of the twentieth century, see Bracci 2020.



which extends for about six minutes [01:14:20-01:21:41]. The dramatic arc of the opera linked to that music, from the Prelude to *Rigoletto*'s despair when he discovers that Gilda has been kidnapped and understands that Monterone's curse has fallen on him, corresponds to the dramatic arc, in this sequence in the film, of the disconcerting discovery of the betrayal and the fabrication of Athos father and his friends. Athos junior' active listening to opera, active because through that listening he seeks and finally finds an answer to his question about his father's death, is counterbalanced by the passive, ecstatic listening to the opera in which Athos sees the villagers absorbed when he returns to Tara. The unnatural act of this second type of listening is exhibited in the film in shots of two men standing in their chairs with their ears stretched out towards the same speaker. Similarly, we see some women totally immersed in listening to opera and immobilized by it as they tell Athos son the false story of his father's death, the one artificially constructed to maintain the memory of him as an anti-fascist hero.

The fundamental logics of immediacy, hypermediacy and remediation identified by Bolter and Grusin are clearly at stake in this sequence and Verdi's opera is the main element through which, at this point in the film, but with influences on the whole film, a peculiar strategy is elaborated in their use. This strategy concerns the film in its essence as a medium capable of representing the real as space-time. This level of sense goes beyond the 'intellectual' level of Bertolucci's refined reflection, at the same time pessimistic and mockingly amused, on the artificiality of historical memory that we were able to understand through the intertextual and intermedial approaches. From the point of view of remediation Bertolucci, in his use of Verdi's opera in this film tends towards the logic of hypermediacy. Bolter and Grusin explain that

where immediacy suggests a unified visual space, contemporary hypermediacy offers a heterogeneous space, in which representation is conceived of not as a window on to the world, but rather as 'windowed' itself - with windows that open on to other representations or other media. The logic of hypermediacy multiplies the signs of mediation and in this way tries to reproduce the rich sensorium of human experience. [...] In every manifestation, hypermediacy makes us aware of the medium or media and (in sometimes subtle and sometimes obvious ways) reminds us of our desire for immediacy. (Bolter, Grusin 1999, 34)

In listening to Verdi's opera, a listening open to different possibilities, from the restless cognitive action of Athos junior to the ecstatic paralysis of the inhabitants of Tara, this "desire for immediacy" is reflected in *The Spider's Stratagem*, which is here first of all the impossible immediacy of the historical truth of the facts that concerned Athos senior and all the inhabitants of Tara at the time of fascism. By remediating *Rigoletto* and staging the different listening practices in relation to it, this film shows us the action of giving shape to the past. As Emilio Sala recently wrote: "L'opera è un dispositivo che viene *dopo*: implica sia l'incredulità sia l'illusione retrospettiva e l'utopia incantatrice" (2024, 15; Opera is a device that comes *after*: it implies both disbelief and retrospective illusion and enchanting utopia). If in this sentence we replace the word 'opera' with the word 'history,' I think we have found the ultimate meaning of the thought to which Bertolucci gives shape to in *The Spider's Stratagem* through the remediation of opera in film.



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