

# Opera at the Time of COVID-19: Intermediality and Scenic Rewriting in Mario Martone's Film-Theatre Triptych

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**Abstract** This article examines Mario Martone's film-theatre triptych – *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (2020), *La Traviata* (2021), and *La Bohème* (2022) – realized during the COVID-19 pandemic. Conceived for empty theatres, these hybrid works merge cinematic and operatic languages, turning absence into a narrative resource. Through editing, spatial reframing, and metatheatrical devices, Martone redefines operatic staging, transforming theatre into cinematic space. His approach challenges traditional performance boundaries and opens new aesthetic and political paths for opera in the context of audiovisual media and contemporary crises.

**Keywords** Mario Martone. Intermediality. Opera and cinema convergence. COVID-19 and performing arts. Media archaeology of opera.

**Summary** 1 Reimagining Opera in the Time of Crisis: A Cine-Theatrical Project. – 2 *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*: Performing Absence, Framing Space. – 3 From *La Traviata* to *La Bohème*: Reimagining Opera Through Cinema. – 4 Opera as Historical Mirror: Melodrama, Memory, and Contemporary Relevance.

## 1 Reimagining Opera in the Time of Crisis: A Cine-Theatrical Project

In addition to having established himself as one of the central figures of contemporary Italian auteur cinema, Mario Martone has, for several years now, been engaged in an in-depth exploration of the connections between the domains of cinema and opera. Adopting a perspective that allows both observation and illumination of the historical, social, and artistic tensions and transformations that characterize our present time, between 2020 and 2022 – at the height of the pandemic – Martone directed three iconic works from the Italian melodramatic tradition: Gioachino Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (henceforth *Barbiere*, 2020), Giuseppe Verdi's *La Traviata* (2021), and Giacomo Puccini's *La Bohème* (2022). These productions resulted in



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audiovisual works that defy easy categorization, falling somewhere between filmed theatre, cinema, and television. These 'cine-theatrical' works (cf. Forestieri 2021), produced by Rai Cultura in collaboration with the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma (Teatro Costanzi), were initially broadcast on Rai 3 (on 26 December 2020, 2 April 2021 – Good Friday – and 23 December 2022, respectively) and subsequently uploaded to the RaiPlay streaming platform. From their inception, they were conceived as hybrids of different languages and have represented one of the boldest experiments in narrating opera through the moving image, becoming symbolic of a unique historical moment in our contemporary experience: the television production of *Il barbiere di Siviglia* began in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as part of a broader production strategy adopted by Rai. This strategy,<sup>1</sup> implemented in response to the closure of theatres and the suspension of live events, aimed to consolidate the relationship between opera and television through special programming designed to ensure cultural continuity and to reaffirm the role of public service during a phase of emergency and redefinition of the spaces for artistic engagement. Martone's three operations also established themselves as a kind of dialogue with the historical genre cinema he has explored in recent years – particularly evident in his sweeping historical fresco *Noi credevamo* (2014) – and with the sociopolitical resonance that the referenced operas had assumed during key moments of pre- and post-Risorgimento Italian history.

Yet Martone's path does not end with the development of alternative performance models prompted by the pandemic emergency. Rather, it is rooted in his long-standing experience as a theatre director. This experience reveals at least two key elements: on the one hand, the ability to grasp – and consequently convey – the expressive specificities of opera, in order to use them as communicative codes accessible to a far broader audience than that traditionally associated with classical melodrama; on the other, an exceptional mastery of techniques involving “work on the performance space, scenographically articulated in always different and personalized ways” (Pernice 2022, 210). Martone demonstrates a continuous ability to reframe the visual grammar he employs, in accordance with the internal

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<sup>1</sup> In this context, alongside the production of *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (2020), other emblematic examples stand out, testifying to a broader strategy of reconfiguring the relationship between live performance and audiovisual media. Among these are *Rigoletto* at the Circus Maximus, staged in the summer of 2020 for the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma and broadcast on Rai 5, and Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, presented at Teatro alla Scala in November 2020 in concert form, without an audience and specifically filmed for television. In these cases as well, Rai ensured the broadcast on Rai 5, reaffirming the role of television as a tool of cultural mediation during a time when theatre activities were suspended. Also worth noting is the 2021 New Year's Concert from Teatro La Fenice in Venice, broadcast on Rai 1: a national event, performed without an in-house audience, which assumed a strong symbolic value by reaffirming the central role of culture in the public and institutional narrative of the emergency. As a point of comparison, we may also cite the program *Ricomincio da Raitre*, conceived during the crisis phase as a platform for revitalizing the performing arts – particularly theatre, music, and dance. Broadcast in prime time on Rai 3 between 2020 and 2021, the episodes featured the participation of actresses and actors, directors, musicians, and composers in a format alternating live performances, testimonies, and moments of reflection. The project explicitly aimed to ‘keep the spotlight on’ cultural venues closed to the public, transforming the television space into a medium of cultural substitution and resistance. The initiative, strongly supported by Rai Cultura's management, represented a productive response consistent with the institutional line adopted in those years: making television a privileged channel for cultural continuity, capable of absorbing – and partly reworking – the crisis of traditional modes of cultural engagement.

tensions of the text and scenic action. It is a balance capable of resolving – or at least mediating – that “constant tension” (Barra 2020) which has long defined the relationship between opera – indeed, cultivated music more broadly – and its television transposition. Indeed, it is precisely the use of (not only) scenic space that emerges as the principal element of innovation across the three Martonian productions under analysis. Not only in how theatrical space assumes a dialectical connotation (as a result of the forced emptiness imposed by pandemic restrictions), but also in how it is rendered expressive through contamination with the cinematic medium: an outcome Martone achieves by working attentively with the essential coordinates of filmic representation, such as enunciation, narration, and above all, editing – as we shall see. His decision not to adhere to the more traditional canons of the film-opera<sup>2</sup> – “a hybrid form by definition” (Pescatore 2001, 10) – or to the musical genre (of which the operatic film is but one possible declination, with cinema accommodating multiple forms, from musical to musical drama to musical comedy) also allows for an “original [...] blending of different forms” (11). This in turn generates a unique corpus that prompts a significant reflection on the relationship between cinema, opera, and history.

## 2 ***Il Barbiere di Siviglia: Performing Absence, Framing Space***

The staging of *Il barbiere di Siviglia* is, in this respect, one of the most accessible examples through which Martone’s process of remediation can be clearly identified. Conceived and created within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and first aired on 5 December 2020, the production was from the outset imagined for a theatre emptied of its audience – thus, potentially, without scenic boundaries or the relational coordinates usually linking singers and spectators. The orchestra was conducted by Daniele Gatti, while Martone directed both the theatrical staging and the televised version. This was therefore neither a ‘live opera’ nor a classical opera film in which the theatrical plane is entirely translated into a cinematic one,<sup>3</sup> but rather a continuous dialogue among different dimensions of performance and representation, designed to reflect, in every element, the complexity of the present moment in which it took shape.

From its earliest conceptualization, the staging took the form of a political gesture rooted in the present. The use of theatrical architecture was entirely unconventional – not only because the stage appeared empty, but also because the relationship created with this emptiness was conceived in a markedly dialectical fashion. Every internal and external space of the theatre became a stage:

the [t]heatre [...] painfully empty is first Seville, with the stalls as the town square and the boxes as the windows of houses from which the characters sing [...] and then becomes Don Bartolo’s house and Rosina’s room. (Forestieri 2020)

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the notion and definition of the concept of ‘film opera’, see Pescatore 2001.

<sup>3</sup> *Il teatro vuoto*. <https://www.fatamorganaweb.it/il-barbiere-di-siviglia-rossini-martone-opera-di-roma/>.

The scenographic apparatus, by contrast, was deliberately left bare: there is “no scenography [and] nothing, aside from the singers’ costumes, to suggest we are in Rossini’s 1800s” (Forestieri 2020). Scene changes were introduced by black title cards indicating the location, while the physical space remained the same: the performers alternated their presence between the proscenium, the boxes, the stalls, and the foyer, even entering and exiting the theatre building itself<sup>4</sup> – visually materializing the spatial and textual hybridity evoked by the production’s concept.

The result is therefore something closer to cinema than to theatre or television. While the setting and dramaturgical adaptation are the most immediately visible elements, Martone’s operation is fundamentally based on the remediation of the theatrical and operatic performance tradition, in the name of a *cineficazione*<sup>5</sup> of its linguistic structures – that is, a scenic, spatial, and dramaturgical construction conceived as a profilmic device. The exceptional nature of Martone’s work lies in his ability to reconcile the demands of a live performance (without interruptions) and of a live television recording with those of a narrative that adheres to the specific requirements of cinematic language: namely, recording and editing. While the music functions as a connective tissue that flows without pause, as in traditional operatic performance, the images appear fragmented and varied, generating a narrative that differs from both the classic opera film and the live opera broadcast. In addition to traditional narrative editing – aimed at clarifying plot progression and achieved through the use of numerous simultaneous camera angles, with minor ellipses to omit some scene changes and performer movements for fluidity and rhythm – Martone also includes found footage. These are archival segments from different periods, all in black and white, which interrupt the scenic flow.<sup>6</sup>

This free use of editing signals Martone’s clear intention to pursue an inquiry that challenges the conventions of classical theatrical representation, aiming instead to construct a perspective on operatic performance that is as unrecognizable – and nontraditional – as possible. A similar notion had already emerged in Martone’s reflections on cinema and theatre at the time of his successful stage work *Ritorno ad Alphaville* (1986):

scene and sound traverse space and time: the space and time we live in are traversed by media [...]. Cinema first, and then television, are expressive forms born alongside new concepts of space and time; they introduced the

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**4** The most striking moment of the opera is undoubtedly the performance of its most iconic aria, the famous cavatina of Figaro (*Largo al factotum*), which Martone stages by showing the performer of the protagonist, baritone Andrzej Filończyk, arriving at the theatre on a scooter driven by conductor Daniele Gatti. The sequence, intercut with the opening credits (Figaro’s entrance in the score comes about 18 minutes into the performance), shows Filończyk running errands around Rome before reaching the theatre, dismounting the scooter, entering the foyer, putting on his costume, and finally making his entrance into the auditorium.

**5** The concept of *cineficazione* – a term aptly applied by Laura Pernice to Martone’s work – should be understood in the sense proposed by Mario Verdone, who defines it as the adoption, by theatrical language, of principles specific to cinematic language. Verdone discusses this concept particularly in relation to the productions of Erwin Piscator, Futurist synthetic theatre, and the *Fregoligraph* developed by Leopoldo Fregoli (Verdone 1983, 51–62).

**6** At the end of the first act, during the ensemble piece *Mi par d’esser colla testa*, images of various Italian theatres filled with audiences are shown. Among them appear several famous faces from the world of performance, such as Anna Magnani, Gina Lollobrigida, Maria Callas, and Sofia Coppola – iconic female figures who symbolically merge theatre, cinema, and opera.

tool that allows them to harmonize with these two dimensions: editing. (Martone 2004, 38)

Martone's *Barbiere* thus demands to be viewed through this lens of remediated spatial and temporal experience, shaped by the cinematic language and understanding editing as "a natural mechanism for filmic languages that [does not question] the division between literary text, image, and sound" (38).

In this light, the issue of expressive choices becomes particularly significant, because what Martone asserts is the evident inseparability between what is represented (the signified) and the mode through which it is represented (the signifier). Formal choices, then, are never neutral, but charged with symbolic and metaphorical meaning that contributes to shaping the overall vision of the representation. Likewise, all these elements acquire additional meaning when considered in relation to the historical moment in which the work is produced. Scenic, visual, and performative choices are never isolated – they are deeply influenced by the cultural, political, and social context of production and reception. A clear example of this appears in the opening of the first act (in fact, the singers' entrance following the overture), when bass Roberto Lorenzi, in the role of Fiorello, enters singing Piano, pianissimo together with the chorus, wearing a face mask as he sings "piano pianissimo senza parlar", before stepping to the centre of the stalls and exclaiming "tutto è silenzio, nessun qui sta!". At that point, he removes the mask and completes the verse: "che i nostri canti possa turbar!". This gesture is "just the first of many ironic, intelligent, and biting references to Covid in this staging by Mario Martone – yet, in its lightness, it conveys the sense of a *Barbiere* that is anything but ordinary, just like the times we are living through" (Forestieri 2020).

Much more evidently, and with greater complexity, this same level of reflection on the present through Rossini's score can be observed from the middle of the first act onwards, when – during Rosina's cavatina (Una voce poco fa) – the empty theatre is suddenly crisscrossed by a spiderweb of ropes stretched chaotically across the space: from side to side, top to bottom, between stage, boxes, stalls, and orchestra pit. This visual element does not merely serve to aestheticize the environment; it also evokes a network of social traps and control mechanisms that, in Beaumarchais's original play – adapted in Cesare Sterbini's libretto – weigh upon the characters. The spiderweb thus becomes a layered visual metaphor that reveals the mechanisms of deception typical of Rossinian theatre, with the ropes "evoking Rosina's entrapment in Don Bartolo's grip" (Forestieri 2020). At the same time, it stands as an image of the invisible and oppressive web that characterized both public and private spaces during lockdown, "symboliz[ing] even more strongly the 'yoke' of the pandemic that 'traps' live performance, preventing it from physically meeting its audience" (Pernice 2022, 215). In this sense, the gesture at the end – where singers and musicians, armed with shears, simultaneously cut the ropes, making the spiderweb disappear – is clearly imbued with hope for the future: a "still-possible collective catharsis of the theatrical event" (217).

This perspective is explicitly affirmed by Martone in his comments on the tight relationship between cinema and theatre in his work:

cinema and theatre remain an open field of play for me [...]. In the *Barbiere di Siviglia* film, all the materials are purely theatrical – from the ropes crisscrossing the space to the trunk normally used to store stage props, which becomes part of the scenic furnishings. (Capitta 2020)

Martone's staging therefore represents an uncharted territory within opera film. The hybridization between cinema and opera is more than a technical device – it becomes a poetic and political choice, inviting us to rethink the relationship between art and audience, and between tradition and innovation. It shows how the empty theatre can be a laboratory for new forms of community, new modes of engagement, and new expressive possibilities – not merely a response to crisis, but a model for the future of musical theatre in its relationship with the audiovisual medium.

### 3      **From *La Traviata* to *La Bohème*: Reimagining Opera Through Cinema**

The clearest confirmation that the 2020 production of *Il barbiere di Siviglia* offered Martone an opportunity to initiate a project aimed at rethinking (and redefining) the relationship between cinematic language and operatic staging lies in the fact that the Rossinian opera was not the only work he staged using a hybrid form of representation designed for an audience-less space. With *La Traviata* (2021) and *La Bohème* (2022), Martone expanded and deepened his experiment, consolidating the intermedial inquiry he had begun with *Barbiere*. By engaging with Verdi's melodrama and Puccini's verismo, he effectively completed a sort of foundational triptych of the Italian operatic tradition, reactivating its cultural force through a hybridization of languages that was only partially shaped by the pandemic context and instead evolved into a form of investigation capable of raising fundamental questions about the aesthetics of opera in the contemporary era.

Martone traces a developmental path for operatic staging that cuts across cinema, theatre, and television. This trajectory unfolds through three experimental models and, building on the approach taken with the Rossinian work, pushes even further the use of theatrical space. The theatre building becomes a genuine narrative device – stripped bare and even deprived of its traditional function.

In *La Traviata* – which aired on Rai 3 on 9 April 2021 – even more so than in *Barbiere*, the theatre becomes a universal site of representation: in addition to expanding the scenes into areas usually reserved for viewing (boxes, stalls) and reception (foyer, side rooms, atriums), these spaces are entirely emptied of furnishings. The stalls are cleared of seats – just like the boxes and the gallery – effectively becoming a second proscenium, mirroring the traditional one, from which it is separated by the orchestra and situated on a lower level. The backdrop is entirely absent, allowing the rear of the stage and the movement of scenic panels – vertically, horizontally, and in depth – to remain visible, as is the “massive use of metatheatrical devices, visible stage machinery (and even stagehands)” (Forestieri 2021): in effect, everything usually hidden becomes visible.

But there is more. As in *Barbiere* with Figaro's cavatina, the editing in *La Traviata* includes sequences filmed outside the theatre, such as Alfredo's carriage ride to Paris or his duel with Duphol, set in the area of the Baths

of Caracalla in Rome, as well as the carnival procession filmed outside the Teatro Costanzi “amid confetti and parked cars” (Pernice 2022, 217). The most evocative moment in this regard occurs during *Parigi, o cara*, in the final act. In what is perhaps the most heartrending aria of Verdi’s score, Martone momentarily cuts away from the two protagonists – clinging to one another, their clothes dishevelled, their faces marked by melancholy – to show them, still in the same position, but now beneath the massive Bohemian crystal chandelier that looms over the stalls, happy, radiant, elegant, wearing the costumes from Act I, shortly after their first meeting.

Here, editing ceases to serve merely a narrative function and instead assumes a clearly conceptual value, thus revealing the full expressive potential of cinematic language, which – configured in this way – surpasses the expressive limits of theatre. The dialogue created between these images not only reshapes the scenic space but also transforms its temporal coordinates, suggesting a production conceived from the beginning with a cinematic sensibility. A similar strategy appears shortly afterwards during *Addio, del passato bei sogni ridenti*, as Violetta – now close to death – remembers happier, carefree times. Martone stages a crossfade flashback – where present and past images never fully dissolve into each other but remain perceptibly intertwined – showing early scenes in which Violetta sings, dances, plays with friends, and meets Alfredo for the first time.

This apparatus – far more complex than that used in *Barbiere* – could not have been realized as a live performance. For this reason, *La Traviata* becomes an opera built through the expressive conventions of cinema, largely abandoning the linguistic structures of both theatre and traditional opera. As Martone explained, *La Traviata* is “theatre that dissolves into cinema – made up of – scenes shot in five days, out of chronological order and then edited together, but with singers and orchestra performing everything live” (Scotti 2021). The empty theatre becomes a cinematic set in which the theatre building itself becomes both the locus of representation and the site of vision. “Deprived of the theatre, we took possession of the whole theatre” (Scotti 2021), Martone declared. And from this perspective, the gradual dissolution of traditional spatial hierarchies transforms the building into an extension of the diegetic space, in cinematic terms.

*La Bohème* – broadcast, again on Rai 3, on 8 April 2022 – the concluding act in Martone’s creative arc, reveals his full awareness of the hybrid and intermedial nature of this new stage language, presenting itself as an almost experimental expression of that very language. In this staging, the theatre building is not only reinvented and resemanticised in spatial terms – it is eliminated altogether. The opera, while retaining a strong link with the Costanzi, does not use the theatre space as a scenic setting. Instead, the Scenography Workshops of the Teatro dell’Opera di Roma serve as the backdrop. These are a series of large warehouse spaces for sets, costumes, and stage props, housed in a vast early 1930s building near the Circus Maximus. Here, singers, chorus, and orchestra are distributed across the expansive workshop areas, and – just as in a soundstage – each of the four tableaux into which the opera is divided is reconstructed with essential scenography, allowing the industrial structure of the building to remain visible.

Though filmed in real time, the shots are not continuous, and as in the previous two works, the final edit includes two scenes shot outside the



scenic space. These include the opening of the second tableau, in which the bohémien head to Café Momus, with sequences shot on the streets of Rome and Paris, and the start of the third tableau, when Mimì reaches Marcello at the inn to confide her heartbreak. This latter scene is set outside the workshops, under snowfall, with Mimì arriving from the direction of the Circus Maximus and walking through scaffolding and snow machines.

Beyond the location, however, another fundamental novelty distinguishes *La Bohème* from *Barbiere* and *Traviata*: its historical setting. Martone shifts the time of the story to the 1960s, transforming the 1830s Parisian bohémien into young artists and intellectuals of the French New Wave. Numerous scenic elements explicitly reference the works of Godard, Truffaut, and others – posters of *Jules et Jim*, *À bout de souffle*, and a copy of *Cahiers du Cinéma* appear prominently. Costumes and makeup similarly evoke the visual lexicon of May 1968.

I wanted to tell the story of *Bohème* as if it were a New Wave film: youth, friendship, dreams, rebellion, betrayal, love. And it's incredible how much energy can still be released by an opera written over 120 years ago.

Martone explained (Urbani 2022) explicitly declaring his intent to reinterpret Puccini's work through the lens of a cinematic aesthetic defined by spontaneity, realism, and formal freedom.

This cinematic inspiration is manifest not only on a dramaturgical level, but also in representational choices. Martone seems intent on shifting opera from the theatrical to the cinematic realm, both narratively and in terms of language and meaning. The naturalism of the night sequences filmed outdoors – in urban settings in Rome and especially Paris – with dark, unfiltered lighting primarily from ambient sources, directly echoes the expressive freedom of Truffaut's *Les quatre cents coups*, conveying a sense of vibrancy, intimacy, and emotional immediacy. Similarly, the extensive use of the Steadicam and moments of fourth-wall breaking evoke Godard's formal disruption, while the long takes following the actors in motion function as a more direct and continuous way of describing scenic space than classical *découpage*.

If the reference to the New Wave confirms the full semantic 'cinematisation' of theatrical space – "a cinema that looks in the mirror and sees reflected also the opera"<sup>7</sup> then Martone's intervention becomes a true prototype for a new musical cinema. A device capable of engaging with history, memory, and the present – and of opening up new expressive possibilities.

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<sup>7</sup> *La bellissima "Bohème" progetto opera-film di Martone*. <https://www.musiculturaonline.it/la-bellissima-boheme-progetto-opera-film-di-martone/>



#### 4 **Opera as Historical Mirror: Melodrama, Memory, and Contemporary Relevance**

As the complexity just described demonstrates, the Martonian triptych under analysis does not belong to an experience limited to a response to the pandemic emergency; rather, it takes shape as a deep and structural reflection on the relationship between cinema, opera, and history – one destined to leave a lasting mark on Italian audiovisual culture. *Bohème* and *Traviata* – far more than *Barbiere* in this sense – also indirectly evoke the pandemic (it can hardly be a coincidence that both heroines, Violetta and Mimì, die from a pulmonary illness), but they also establish a dialogue with the present, thematising issues of urgent contemporary relevance. In this context, opera emerges as a representational device capable of reflecting the anxieties of the contemporary through forms and codes inherited from the melodramatic tradition – a tradition in which subjectivity and singularity confront historical and social reality (Ceraolo 2015, 452).

This is an aspect found throughout much of Martone's cinematic work, particularly in *Noi credevamo*, arguably his most complex and layered film, rich in historical, stylistic, and narrative stratifications. In this film dedicated to the Italian Risorgimento, melodramatic echoes are evident, both in terms of historical setting and in the emotional portrayals and existential trajectories of the characters. In *Noi credevamo*, as Francesco Ceraolo notes, the tension between subjectivity and historical reality defines a “dialectical path in which melodrama does not represent the crushing of subjectivity by the determinism of objective becoming [...], but rather its opening to a true ‘ontology of hope’” (2015, 452). The Risorgimento is thus portrayed as a contradictory process, marked by enthusiasm and betrayal, radical idealism and painful disillusionment – elements Martone illustrates through a mise-en-scène that rejects the frenetic pace of conventional historical cinema. Instead, he works through subtraction, allowing internal tensions within the characters to emerge more strongly than external action, relying on a fragmented, almost anti-narrative structure that evokes the complexity of historical processes in motion.

Significantly, Martone himself has described the importance of the relationship between opera and cinema in his artistic journey:

It happened, in my case, that it was the opera director who influenced the film director and not the other way around [...]. While I was writing [*Noi credevamo*] [...] I was staging several operas by Verdi and Rossini. Opera therefore nourished me. [...] The relationship between the film and opera is not limited to the soundtrack: the dialogues, written and performed in an anti-naturalistic sense, become a kind of libretto, and the overall mise-en-scène converses with the nineteenth-century aesthetic of melodrama. (Martone 2013, XXVI-XXVII)

This recovery of the idealistic dimension of melodrama thus resonates both in Martone's cinematic direction and in his theatrical productions: it stands as a significant trace and, at the same time, as a useful tool for interpreting the connection between his work and a vision of art as experience – capable of activating critical reflection on the present through the reworking of the past. The bridge Martone constructs between opera, cinema, and modernity is undeniably rooted in this conscious reinterpretation of melodrama: from

traditional form of tragic representation to a language capable of conveying the complexity of historical becoming and suggesting the possibility of an open gaze toward the future – of cinema, of theatre, and of opera alike.

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