

# PROPERA

## The Profanation of Opera: Music and Drama on Film

Global Fellowship - Project 708601

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University of Chicago

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# 1. Research objectives (Abstract)

The project PROPERA (The Profanation of Opera: Music and Drama on Film) aims to shed new light on the relationship between opera and film. It draws on the hypothesis that the mediation of film displaces, broadens, and enriches our experience and understanding of opera in ways that have not yet been fully explored in their aesthetic and political potential. To fill this gap, the proposed research on the interplay between the two genres and media over the last hundred years will focus on a variety of objects including not only opera-films, but also feature- and short-length mainstream and experimental movies that incorporate opera in relevant and thought-provoking ways. The ultimate goal of looking at opera through the lens of film is to develop and refine a “profane” approach to a “sacred” genre – that is, to challenge the identification of opera as a live performance art belonging to an inherently conservative tradition so as to reimagine the past, present, and future of the operatic genre in a media-saturated world.

# Film and the alleged death or survival/rebirth/redemption of opera

“Broadly speaking, screen opera is a product of media culture. It modernizes old works as it passes them through technology and distributes them by means of popular channels of communication. [...] It has the potential to keep opera alive in a technological age.”

Marcia Citron, *Opera on Screen* (2000)

“One of my main claims is that cinema inherits opera, as it were, reincarnating it. [...] by lavishly staging the human voice with its implications of life and presence, opera in cinema holds out a promise of revival.”

Michal Grover-Friedlander, *Vocal Apparitions: The Attraction of Cinema to Opera* (2005)

“[...] it seems important that the heavily generalised and imprecise values that are presented in opera should be articulated more precisely in film, with its narrative stress, its ability to handle detail and ability to make something of objective reality. At least in the cinema, opera becomes the art that speaks its name.”

Jeremy Tambling, *Opera, Ideology and Film* ()

# Mise-en-abîme: the technological reproduction of opera within film



Mark Rappaport's *Mozart in Love*

Beineix's *Diva*



Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo*

# Profanation ≠ Secularization

“In this sense, we must distinguish between secularization and profanation. **Secularization** is a form of repression. It **leaves intact the forces it deals with by simply moving them from one place to another.** Thus the political secularization of theological concepts (the transcendence of God as paradigm of sovereign power) does nothing but displace the heavenly monarchy onto earthly monarchy, leaving its power intact.

**Profanation, however, neutralizes what it profanes. Once profaned, that which was unavailable and separate loses its aura and is returned to use.** Both are political: the first guarantees the exercise of power by carrying it back to a sacred model; the second deactivates the apparatuses of power and returns to common use the spaces that power had seized.”

(Giorgio Agamben, “In Praise of Profanation,” in *Profanations*, 77)

# Abridged Filmography

- (1904) *La Damnation du Docteur Faust* (Gounod) by Georges Méliés [silent; 13 mins].
- (1915) *Carmen* by Cecil B DeMille [silent; 60 mins; accompanied by music based on Bizet's *Carmen*].
- (1926) *Le Chevalier à la rose* (Strauss) por Robert Wiene.
- (1931) *Die Dreidroschenoper* (Kurt Weill) por Georg Wilhelm Pabst.
- (1948) *Unfaithfully Yours* by Preston Sturges.
- (1951) *Tales of Hoffmann* (Offenbach) by Michael Powell e Emeric Pressburger [sung in English].
- (1974) *Moses und Aaron* (Schönberg) by Jean-Marie Straub e Danièle Huillet.
- (1975) *The Magic Flute* (Mozart) by Ingmar Bergman [sung in Swedish].
- (1975) *Mozart in Love* by Mark Rappaport
- (1979) *Don Giovanni* (Mozart) by Joseph Losey (in collaboration with Rolf Lieberman)
- (1979) *Falstaff* (Verdi) by Götz Friedrich.
- (1982) *Fitzcarraldo* by Werner Herzog
- (1982) *Parsifal* (Wagner) by Syberberg.
- (1983) *E la nave va* by Federico Fellini.
- (1983) *Prénom Carmen* by Jean-Luc Godard
- (1986) *Otello* (Verdi) by Zeffirelli.
- (1988) *Os Canibais* (music by João Paes) by Manoel de Oliveira
- (1992) *Salome* (Strauss) by Götz Friedrich.
- (2011) *Juan* (Mozart's *Don Giovanni*) by Kasper Holten [sung in English].

## 2. Objectives in terms of integration within the host institution(s)

- Three workshops at the Film Studies Center of the University of Chicago (Fall 2017 / Spring 2018 / Fall 2018)
- Research, teaching and supervising activities at FCSH/NOVA
- Organization of International Conference “The Operatic Imagination and Its Metamorphoses” at FCSH-NOVA / Gulbenkian
- Coordination of research group on contemporary opera at CESEM (FCSH/NOVA)

### 3. Objectives in terms of transfer of knowledge

- to diversify and deepen analytic skills in order to bring together methodologies from musicology and film theory in a productive and innovative way;
- to enlarge and enrich knowledge of the filmic-operatic repertoire from the silent era to the present;
- to refine a comparative approach to the complexities of the contrast between staged and filmed opera

# 4. Objectives in terms of dissemination

From an academic perspective:

- the participation in conferences throughout the whole duration of the fellowship,
- the organization of three workshops at the UC and one international symposium at the FCSH (jointly organized by Gulbenkian)
- the completion and publication of around six scholarly articles and one book, along with a variety of shorter pieces

From a non-academic perspective:

- the creation of an online platform dedicated to the project, providing a means not only for the dissemination of research-related materials, but also for communication and interaction with the public (it will function not only as an archive but also as a blog-like site).
- the organization of a lecture series at the Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, in dialogue with the Met Opera Live in HD season (which is hosted by Gulbenkian).
- the organization of an opera-film festival in 2019 in collaboration with the Portuguese Cinemateca, Miso Music Portugal (a Lisbon-based centre dedicated to contemporary music) and the TNSC (the National Opera House), consisting of a variety of public events such as: a) screenings (at the Cinemateca); b) multimedia performances of musical-theatrical works (at Miso Music); c) debates and concerts (at the TNSC).
- the posting/sharing on the online platform of various materials (by the researcher and his collaborators), including not only articles and essays, but also interviews, reports, videos, podcasts, photographs, scores, librettos, scripts.