

NOTES ABOUT OPERA AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

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As an art form, opera is a rare and remarkable creation. For me it expresses aspects of the human drama that cannot be expressed in any other way or certainly not as beautifully.

Luciano Pavarotti

The fear of death, the agony of mortality and its awareness, the loss of consciousness, loneliness, nothingness, and the total alteration into something we are not able to identify or control, can lead us feel completely vulnerable and in a deep existential anguish (Yalom 2008). It can be turned inwards towards self destruction, or outwards in destructive acts and aggression. According to Freud 'it is indeed impossible to imagine our own death; and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators' (Freud 1915: 289). However, death is everywhere in nature and no matter how much we deny it, avoiding facing our concerns about death for many decades, there comes a day when we feel the ageing and all the signs of maturing in our body or symptoms that disclose our unconscious anxiety about death. Art turns against human morality. It fights human agony and the despair of death. The creativity of the artist can be something higher lives longer than the physical body. The artist's ideas can travel through time and in some cases a long distance. The ancient Greeks called it *hysterophemia* (posthumous fame coming from higher ideas). Art is a form of communication, and it can also serve aesthetic ends, and be a way to express emotions. As such it is not outside the symbolic but is a form of discourse (Phillips 1957).

Opera, as an art form, is in many ways a resurgence of ancient Greek drama that comes from the fertility festival for Dionysus, where we can find sacrifices either in literal or symbolic ways. The word 'opera' derives from the Italian word for work and its meaning includes a multi-spectacle of singing, dancing, acting, and playing music. But we might also be reminded that psychoanalysis is, too, a 'work'. Something through which we pass; a process of which we are largely unaware

because it is unconscious. Thus, opera comes quite close to Freud's notion of *Durcharbeiten*. In the action of the drama, we are working through our own story.

In opera we see good and evil, lust, mercy, life and death, desire, sanity and insanity, sickness, and imbalance. We see the power of darkness and light, the hero transformed into a monster, human fear and defense mechanisms. We see our lives in the plot and ourselves in the characters, presenting all the pieces of the self that we deny or avoid. In opera we empathise and feel the human drama of morality with all its characteristics. And we can, I suggest, connect the opera to psychoanalysis from four angles. First, the creators' unconscious (composer, librettist, director, costume designers); second, the participants' unconscious (singers, actors, dancers, conductor); third, the audience's unconscious, and how each person inserts him or herself into the plot¹; and fourthly, the way unconscious material is imprinted into the set (the position of the stage, the lighting, the costumes)².

The Shell Game

The Shell Game³ is an opera, directed by Raia Tsakiridis⁴, that reflects on human relationships through a contemporary visual and aesthetic perspective⁵. The title is inspired by the three-card monte game, in a version that uses exotic shells and a pea fruit. It is a one-act opera, with seven scenes, written in English, in correspondence with Leonard Bernstein's famous opera 'Trouble in Tahiti'. The dramatic text describes the archetypal journey of the love affair of a modern couple illustrating it exactly as it is: as a gamble that offers false vitality which empties the pocket and emotionally empties the players.

In other parts of the world, it is played with three shells hiding a small green bean inside. In the beginning we have the illusion that we will win. We gain confidence and hope to continue. It is the same in the romantic first phase of a new relationship. We idealise our partner, denying the

¹ Zuccarini, C. The (Lost) Vocal Object in Opera: The Voice, the Listener and Jouissance *PsyArt*: <http://psyartjournal.com/article/show/zuccarini-the-lost-vocal-object-in-opera-the-voice>

² Psychoanalysis Film Theory see: <https://www.slideshare.net/isuqhsujqiwdjidwj/psychoanalysis-film-theory-essay>

³ An opera of 2x2 Selves. Music by George Dousis; libretto by Eri Kirgia. 1st global presentation by The Medium Project; stage director, Raia Tsakiridis; and music director Andreas Tselikas. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vpX2wUGRLWg>

⁴ Cf. Raia Tsakiridis- My portfolio: <http://www.raiatzakiridis.com/>

⁵ Ράια Τσακηρίδη: «Η όμμερα είναι μία γλώσσα μεντακάθαρη, γεμάτη εικόνες» interview at Mania Voreaku artic.gr/raia-tsakiridi-opera-sunenteuxi/

shadow and avoiding to expose it to the light⁶. The musical composition is written in clear forms without extra adornments, rich in jazz melodies and serves the action and drama. The stage director underlines the simplicity by using basic lines in black and white⁷.

The libretto comes in English and French and this is not just by accident: it reflects sets of duos. Animus and Anima, goddess Aphrodite and her brother Apollo who could calm nature with his lyre. Black and white is everywhere, even in the clothes of the singers. The subtitle of the title of the opera is: *An Opera of 2x2 Selves* and we can see depicted, with two couples, the dichotomy of the one. We see them growing up fast. According to Raia Tsakiridis⁸, the inspiration for this opera came from the Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development where, in the birth of the relationship the 2x2, the lovers are gaining basic trust, learning to be autonomous within the relationship, learning to be skillful and creative, to complete each other, feeling confusion in their role in the relationship, struggling between isolation and intimacy, feeling unable to act, and finally finding the wisdom to do so within themselves⁹. Their growth also resembles that of a child going through the various stages of psychosexual developmental. Trying to be fed by an archaic Great Mother from each other, protesting against the authority, hating and loving at the same time. And turning their minds to things other than sex by denying its existence. Then negotiating and putting a final last effort into saving the relationship. It is an allegory of birth and the death. It is the Eros and Thanatos, love and its opposite, fear. The demolition of the relationship resembles the death anguish, the last breath. In the last aria we see the condensation of the whole opera as a child remembers the search of the three shells at the beach in the summer. It is the lost object (Freud 1905), the '*object a*' (Lacan 1977).

⁶ The Medium Project page on Facebook:
https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=The%20Medium%20Project&init=mag_glass&tas=search_preload&search_first_focus

⁷ Η «εξωθεσμική» όμερα στο εγχώριο μουσικό οικοσύστημα efsyn.gr www.efsyn.gr/arthro/i-exothesmiki-opera-sto-eghorio-moysiko-oikosystema

⁸ Raia is co-founder of The Medium Project Opera Ensemble which, under her direction on Giancarlo Menotti's 'The Medium' the ensemble gained particular success.

⁹ Ραία Τσακηρίδη: «Χωρίς την τέχνη στη ζωή μας κινδυνεύουμε να βουλιάζουμε σε εμικίνδυνα βάθη» interview at Spiridonia Kranioti www.zougla.gr/politismos/sinentefksis-politismos/article/rea-tsakiridi

The Medium – an opera in two acts by Gian Carlo Menotti

The opera 'The Medium' is set in a basement slum in the 1950's and focuses on the relationship between the metaphysical and reality, and questions of truth. Ghosts appears throughout, as manifestations of our own self and our own prejudices.

The main character, Madame Flora, or Baba as she is known, is a medium who cheats the parents of deceased children by mediating between them and the spirits of the children. Baba lives with her daughter, Monica and Toby, a mute servant boy. Toby seems to be in love with Monica. Baba, after entering the house drunk, is preparing the séance with the help of Monica and Toby, and waiting for the parents to arrive. There are some old clients, the Gobineaus, and a Mrs. Nolan who comes for the first time to communicate with her sixteen-year-old daughter. During the séance, Baba feels a hand on her throat trying to choke her. She demands her guests leave and tries to find Toby accusing him of having done it. Next day, Toby and Monica are giving a puppet show and Baba comes to prepare the séance. Baba tries to convince her clients that she was cheating on them but they do not seem to believe her thinking that everything was true. After the clients leave, Baba, tries to sleep and then Toby searches for a tambourine he was playing earlier. Baba wakes up and he hides at the puppet theatre and then Baba takes a gun and kills Toby shouting in a triumphant tone that she killed the ghost that tried to choke her. As Monica tries in vain to help Toby, who is already dead, Baba whispers: 'Is it you?'

The point of 'The Medium' is that Madame Flora, a tawdry fraud in decline and in the clutches of drink, falls prey to the cheap superstition she has inculcated in the clients who come to her seances. Her disintegration into terror and tragic violence can be a lurid, compelling monodrama in the right conditions. But by adding a layer - the stage was peopled with wraiths that were not of the medium's sham devising - Michel Armin's direction diverted the focus from Madame Flora and the forces (the natural ones) that are closing in on her.

Crutchfield 1986

Baba is similar to the Great Mother. Sometimes the Negative Mother and sometimes the Positive Mother, especially when she sings the beautiful lullaby 'Black Swan' to her daughter and with her, despite the fact that the lyrics of the song are full of horror, of killing and drowning. Monica does the same to her mother: she sings the lullaby to comfort and propitiate her. Is it the hypertrophy

of the maternal element or is it the identity with the mother? What about Baba? Could it be the resistance to the mother complex? No matter the answer, the archetype of mother is clearly depicted in this opera¹⁰. Baba feels belittled, ridiculous and weak that she cannot find the spirit from the very beginning. She feels guilty for the first time because she cheats her clients. Maybe it could be the breath of death that she felt closer to, that made her come closer to her guilt. Monica is the peacekeeper. She tries to save Toby from her mother's violence. She knows how to calm her, through a ritual similar to those in primitive cultures to the powerful mother goddess (Hutcheon, L. and Hutcheon 2004).

The composer, Gian Carlo Menotti, wrote this opera after a real séance in a small village near Salzburg. He was amazed by the great need human beings feel to communicate with their past and their departed loved ones. Was this a reflection of his own need, like that of children who share stories about death, or it was his need for communication with his dark and unknown pieces the self? The stage is black, giving a sense of endlessness to the audience. The stage designer placed pictures of dead people and departed families, around the stage. Their faces are brutally erased. They look as if they have been stubbed out, erased in anguish, the not-to-be-seen. On the stage and during the séances there is a medieval pentacle, placed on the floor. With the last phrase that Baba utters – ‘Was it you?’ – come a whisper, we do not know if Baba addresses it to a spirit or to Monica or to the dead Toby. Her distortion between reality and illusion covers her voice and perception. In the words of Maria Callas, ‘an opera begins long before the curtain goes up and ends long after it has come down. It starts in my imagination, it becomes my life and it stays part of my life long after I’ve left the opera house.’

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¹⁰ On the Mother Archetype and Mother Complex in C. G. Jung see: www.the16types.info/vbulletin/content.php/268-On-Mother-Archetype-and-Mother-Complex-by-C-G-Jung

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