

This book assembles the contributions to the international symposium *Narrativity and Intermediality on the Contemporary Stage* in Montpellier 2016. The symposium was based on the hypothesis that, despite the rise of performative and postdramatic theatre and a subsequent abandonment of the plot, theatre performances tell stories after all. The variety of positions in this book now discuss and reflect the relation between narration, theatre and intermediality nowadays.

Ce livre rassemble les actes du Colloque international *Narrativité & Intermédialité sur la scène contemporaine*, manifestation qui s'est tenue à Montpellier 2016. Les contributions réunies dans cet ouvrage ont trait aux modalités par lesquelles la scène contemporaine, qu'elle soit théâtrale, chorégraphique ou performative, continue de produire du récit. Depuis l'analyse des œuvres, dans un dialogue avec les artistes, elles se consacrent aux interrogations qui relèvent de l'intermédialité.

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Studien zu den performativen Künsten

Alix de Morant / Helga Finter /
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Bernhard Siebert / Gerald Siegmund (eds.)

Narrativity and Intermediality in Contemporary Theatre / Narrativité et intermédialité sur la scène contemporaine




PETER LANG

Non palpable, insaisissable, parfois invisible, l'immatérialité du dispositif numérique dans *Axis Mundi* et *Hakanai* décuple les émotions du spectacle vivant en propulsant sur la scène des corps, sinon augmentés, du moins allant à la rencontre de la technologie, et en posant un regard teinté de poésie sur l'omniprésence de celle-ci dans notre quotidien. Si le corps est au centre du dispositif, le sujet central est plutôt la rencontre entre numérique et corps, éloignant définitivement la figure de l'artiste-démiurge.

Il est alors possible d'ouvrir ici un parallèle avec le champ des arts de la marionnette, où l'action des artistes fait de toute chose une présence. Le point central semble être le champ de forces que le marionnettiste instaure entre son corps et l'objet, qu'il soit numérique ou réel. Il relie ces deux corps, sinon contraires du moins différents, en dissolvant leurs contours respectifs afin d'annuler la frontière qui, d'origine, les sépare. L'action et l'interaction chez Omproduct et Adrien M & Claire B semblent bien s'approcher du nœud poétique de l'action du marionnettiste.

Terminons par ces mots de Brunella Eruli : « La fascination presque hypnotisante exercée par les images vient du fait qu'elles "sont" là, et que par leur présence elles nous rassurent sur notre propre présence, présence quelque peu teintée de voyeurisme »²².

22 Eruli : Le silence des Sirènes, p. 10.

Cristina Grazioli

Painting with light: Micro- and Macrohistory in the Dramaturgy of *Writing to Vermeer* by Peter Greenaway and Louis Andriessen

Résumé: Peter Greenaway est l'un des artistes contemporains qui ont le mieux exploité l'interaction entre les différents langages des arts : film, théâtre, peinture et littérature, pour donner corps à des histoires que le spectateur est invité à construire et à déconstruire en combinant des signes de différentes natures. L'opéra *Writing to Vermeer*, conçu en 1999 en collaboration avec le compositeur néerlandais Louis Andriessen, en est un exemple. Traversant plusieurs couches et plusieurs épaisseurs, suivant un modèle complexe et labyrinthique, les histoires racontées ne perdent jamais le pouvoir et la force d'émerveiller et d'impressionner le public. Les interférences entre les projections à savoir la lumière, l'espace, le corps et la voix, les éléments naturels (fluides colorés, eau qui inonde la scène), ont pour première fonction d'évoquer les motifs invoqués par la dramaturgie: la biographie de Vermeer, le quotidien de ses femmes (relaté dans des lettres), l'histoire des Pays-Bas au XVII^e siècle. Au même temps, ils constituent une matière première de la composition, comme l'est le pigment en peinture.

Abstract: Crossing languages and media interferences are at the core of Peter Greenaway's artistic research: film, theatre, painting and writing give form to a universe that the observer has to decode combining signs of different nature. An example of this interaction is the opera *Writing to Vermeer*, conceived in 1999 in collaboration with the Dutch composer Louis Andriessen. Peter Greenaway is one of the contemporary artists who have exploited the interaction between the different languages of the arts to give substance to stories that the viewer is invited to construct and deconstruct according to a complex labyrinthine model. Passing through several layers, the stories told never lose the power and strength to amaze and impress the audience. The interferences between projections, light, space, body and voice, natural elements (colored fluids, water that floods the stage) have as their primary function to evoke the motifs invoked by the dramaturgy: Vermeer's biography, the daily life of his women (expressed by their writing in the letters), the history of the Netherlands in the XVIIth century. At the same time, they are raw material of composition, like the pigment in painting.

Simultaneous perspectives

Crossing languages and media interferences are at the core of Peter Greenaway's artistic research: film, theatre, painting and writing act simultaneously and give form to a universe that the observer has to decode combining signs of different nature. An example of this interaction is the opera *Writing to Vermeer*¹, conceived in 1999 in collaboration with the Dutch composer Louis Andriessen, with whom Greenaway had already worked in 1994 staging *Rosa, a Horse Drama*².

Peter Greenaway's theatrical experiences³ are not numerous in comparison with his production in other artistic fields; nevertheless, it is clear that the theatrical dimension marks deeply the whole

1 *Writing to Vermeer*, an opera in 6 scenes by Louis Andriessen, 105 mins. Libretto: Peter Greenaway. Direction: Saskia Boddeke, Peter Greenaway. Music: Louis Andriessen. Scenography: Michael Simon. Costumes: Emi Wada. Video: Peter Wilms, Marita Ruyter. Dramaturgy: Klaus Bertisch. Premiered: Het Muziektheater, Amsterdam, 1st December 1999 (toured 11 performances). The libretto was published in the program booklet on the occasion of the production (Louis Andriessen, Peter Greenaway: *Writing to Vermeer*. Amsterdam: De Nederlandse Opera Stichting, 1999). This edition provides a generous documentation; given the poor literature concerning the subject, this useful edition supported me for this research, together with the direct experience of the performance (Lincoln Centre, New York, July 2000) and with the reviews that Annemarie Pols (De Nederlandse Opera, Amsterdam) and Barbara Sartore (Lincoln Center) kindly supplied to me.

2 *Rosa, A Horse Drama*, Opera in 12 scenes. Libretto: Peter Greenaway. Direction: Peter Greenaway and Saskia Boddeke, Music: Louis Andriessen. Premiered: Muziektheater, Amsterdam, 1994.

3 *100 Objects to represent the World – A Prop Opera*. Libretto: Peter Greenaway. Direction: Peter Greenaway and Saskia Boddeke. Music: Jean-Baptiste Barriere. Premiered: Zeitfluss Festival, Salzburg, 1997.

Christopher Columbus, Deutsche Staatsoper Berlin. Direction Saskia Boddeke and Peter Greenaway. Music: Darius Milhaud. Libretto: Paul Claudel. Premiered: Deutsche Staatsoper, Berlin, 1998. *Gold, 92 Bars in a Crashed Car*. Music-theatre on the subject of holocaust gold. Text: Peter Greenaway. Direction: Saskia Boddeke. Premiered: Schauspiel Frankfurt, 2001. In 2016, Greenaway staged Verdi's *Giovanna d'Arco* at the Teatro Farnese in Parma (Verdi Festival).

cinematographic activity of the director. Critics highlighted this trait as an important element to interpret his cinematographic language, but on the other side, there are really a few critical proposals concerning theatrical conception. In this regard, it is worth to remind also Greenaway's involvement in the field of installations, multimedia events and within all the mixed forms of aesthetic experience; we could understand this complexity as a sort of theatrical universe, peculiar to the director.

In this context – keeping the topic of multimediality as a backdrop of our remarks – it is important to highlight the role of writing. In Greenaway's works, writing turns into scenic presence appearing as a graphic trail that is also the result of the gesture producing it; it is the dark sign in contrast with the bright space of the paper (or even the space of the screen, or the space of the body). In this sense, writing works visually in the form of the relationship between shadow (or darkness) and light⁴.

Greenaway's work achieves its fulfilment through the spectator's activity of re-composition and assemblage of the many references, both in a single work and within his whole creative universe. In this respect, the topic of writing, that is central in the title *Writing to Vermeer*, evokes the presence of handwriting (and of calligraphy) within the performative dimension of all his works (particularly the cinematographic works, more known to the audience). Just to take a few examples among the others, let's think of *Prospero's Books*, of *A Zed and Two Noughts* (here the verbal code of the title is visually expressed: Z 0 0), or of the collaboration with Brody Neuschwander.

In *Writing to Vermeer* we never get the impression of a mere transposition of the cinematographic procedures on stage; on the contrary, film works as a scenic code in dialogue with space and with all other dramaturgical elements. In a review of the opera, we read that "the images do not come from Greenaway's films: Greenaway's Aesthetic metamorphoses into

4 This topic has been investigated in a different context (Italo Calvino's work) by Alessandro Carrera in *La consistenza della luce. Il pensiero della natura da Goethe a Calvino*. Milan: Feltrinelli, 2010.

Vermeer's Aesthetic"⁵; we should add that Vermeer's Aesthetic becomes here the core of the dramaturgy.

In this sense although theatre is certainly a source, a reference and a key to understand Greenaway's cinema (in the forms of quotation, script material, reference for spatial composition and for chromatic combinations), we can say that definitely the very true model and background of his work is painting⁶.

Theatre, writing as a visual code, and painting are emblematic aspects that reveal the director's obsessions: vision, perspective, gaze, eyes and optics. That is to say: the visual process in all its components, declinations and intersections.

The dramaturgy: layers of paint

Johannes Vermeer's painting is something more than a simple quotation, and it is a point of reference for Greenaway since his first films (*A Zed and Two Noughts*). Nevertheless, it was the visit to the important exhibition at the Mauritshuis in The Hague (then in Washington) in 1996 that started the inspiration for the opera⁷ *Writing to Vermeer*. It is not without importance for the analyses to remember that this project focused the attention on several archival documents that hadn't been so much investigated before.

However, the historical documentation works just as a starting point. The action of *Writing to Vermeer* is based upon a fictional correspondence, constituted by 18 letters written by the three women who represent the mirror of the painter's life and art: his wife Catharina Bolnes, his mother-in-law Maria Thins and the "fictitious" model Saskia de Vries, a character invented by the author (nevertheless we can think of the homonymous

5 Mirko Weber: *Frauenbriefe in Bildern und Klängen*, 06.12.1999 (review from De Nederlandse Opera, without source information).

6 Among the numerous critical essays on this topic, in our context it is worth mentioning Michael Schuster: *Malerei im Film: Peter Greenaway*. Hildesheim – Zurich – New York: Olms, 1998 (particularly *Das Tableau vivant im Film*, p. 69–106).

7 Or "Postopera", see Jelena Novak: *Postopera: Reinventing the Voice-Body*. London / New York: Routledge 2015.

Saskia van Uylenburgh and Rembrandt's wife, and maybe even of a winking to Saskia Boddeke). Greenaway's libretto is entirely composed by the texts of the letters: their content could be understood as the first layer of the narrative of this complex painting. It is interesting to notice the relationship between the role of the writings in the opera and the role of the letters in Vermeer's paintings: here their meaning is a mystery for the observer. "The content of the letters is a rewarding subject for our imagination"⁸, claims Andriessen. So Greenaway "used his imagination"⁹ to create these letters, which are thought as addressed to the artist in 1672, when he was travelling to The Hague in order to authenticate several Italian paintings purchased by the Elector of Brandenburg¹⁰ (Vermeer was a member of the Delft Guild of Painters and an art dealer). The plot takes place over 14 days, a little fragment of the artist's life that becomes a concentrate of his biography and of the historical period. The domestic microhistory echoes history.

The dramaturgy develops according to a complex and layered composition of the tale: the correspondence is fictional, but the main character is real; a historical character with all the implications of his artistic career. The places of the plot are real (Delft, The Hague and Dordrecht), as well as many other little details of Vermeer's domestic life. The year 1672 was the so-called *Rampjaar*, the "Year of Disaster" of the Dutch history. The fight between Catholics and Protestants erupted, and consequently war was declared against the Netherlands by France allies forces (England, Münster and Cologne), who invaded the country; the gunpowder of Delft exploded, the brothers De Witt were murdered by the Orangists; finally, the opening of the dikes flooded the country to stop the army of Louis XIV, a strategy that has been considered like a "national suicide" in order to maintain freedom¹¹. This dramatic turn of events brought to the crash of the tulip

8 Louis Andriessen: *The Art of Stealing Time*, ed. by Mirjam Zegers. Lanc: Arc Music 2002, p. 307.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 309.

10 See Peter Greenaway: *The Text*, in Louis Andriessen, Peter Greenaway: *Writing to Vermeer*. Program booklet, p. 20; John Michael Montias: *Vermeer's journey to The Hague*, *Ibid.*, p. 40–42.

11 See Joachim Lange: *Bilderfluten auf der Opernbühne*. Uraufführung "Writing to Vermeer" von Louis Andriessen und Peter Greenaway, in *Freie Presse* (Chemnitzer Zeitung), 08.12.1999.

market, an essential trading for the national economy, and it made the art market collapse. In brief, this year marked the end of the Dutch Golden Age.

Not far from the clamour of these events, Vermeer paints his famous domestic interiors permeated by suspended light and characterized by harmony and balance, in contrast with his coeval Rembrandt, master of *chiaroscuro* and of “the light of darkness”.

Vermeer’s travel to The Hague was his last one away from home. He died two years later, in 1674, gripped by a heart attack, probably caused by anxiety concerning his financial circumstances.

In *Writing to Vermeer* historical events are intertwined with Vermeer’s artistic traits and biography, both from the thematic and aesthetic point of view: these traits can be resumed with the quiet domestic interiors, the letters, the light, the women playing music, drinking, reading and writing, captured in an instant of “serendipity”¹². Sometimes a woman is reading music in the same attitude of reading a letter.

Light is a main focus for the director who notices how in the Western Art it has rarely such an effect of “domestic serenity”, “without moralizing or heroics”¹³. “It is a universal desire to try to manage the daily necessities without strife, hoping for the greatest sense of harmony possible under the given circumstances; this could be said to be the content of these extraordinary paintings; it is also the aim of the text of the letters that constitute the libretto of the opera”¹⁴.

Besides, with regard to the painter’s work, Greenaway writes: “the firm geometrical perspective creates balance and a firmly rooted sense of safety and steadiness. The use of colour creates warmth and a desirable atmosphere. The split seconds of activity create the sense of movement and a great sense of the present tense. And the depiction of sunlight creates an ambience of life and joy. This content organised in this language suggests a reachable ideal, but this ideal has to be strenuously preserved. In the performance of the opera, this ideal will be set against the activities of the world outside Vermeer’s front door”¹⁵.

12 The term “serendipity” was a main reference during the lecture Greenaway hold at the Lincoln Center in July 2000.

13 Greenaway: *The Text*, p. 23.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

15 *Ibid.*

The libretto takes into account the documents which came to light in occasion of the exhibitions in Washington and The Hague: while the details about the women and the children are plentiful, the informations related to the painter are lacking. All names refer to real people (in particular to artists of that time). But the historical data have been dramaturgically reinvented. The women provide information about the purchase of painting materials, pigments and canvases, about his children, Saskia tells of her father’s plans to arrange her marriage.

Motifs are composed together according to visual and aural associations, in a recurring way like thematic variations in music¹⁶. The necessity to defend the household from the outside is a theme that recurs and takes the concrete form of five liquids: “ink from an excess of writing, varnish that threatens the life of a child, milk that endlessly pours from the milkmaid’s jug, blood that demonstrates the violence of political assassination, and finally water that ultimately sweeps them, their household, their children and the stage away”¹⁷.

The letters do not ever reference to the war; it’s just thanks to their dates that we think of the Disaster Year and connect the different layers of the narration, the micro with the macrohistory. The development of the macrohistory is never mentioned in the libretto, but it is expressed by the performance text. Hence, there is a gap between the content of the letters and the context entailed by the performance.

“There was no narrative development in Peter’s libretto”¹⁸; indeed, the narration develops through the *mise-en-scène*. In this sense, we should not think the *mise-en-scène* as a translation of the libretto on stage. The two different media – libretto and *mise-en-scène* – are inherent parts of the same original dramaturgical core that develops through different languages.

The apparently lack of action has been underlined both by authors and critics; in the program booklet, *Writing to Vermeer* is defined as “an opera

16 Louis Andriessen deals in depth with the structure of the music in *The Art of Stealing Time*.

17 Peter Greenaway: Synopsis. In: De Nederlandse Opera: *Writing to Vermeer*, Program Booklet. New York: The Lincoln Center, July 2000, p. 20.

18 Saskia Boddeke: Interview with Peter Greenaway and Saskia Boddeke, *Ibid.*, p. 22.

without drama"¹⁹; while on the reviews' side we can read: "the narrative is kept to the bare minimum"²⁰, "*un opéra sans véritable intrigue*"²¹; "*Eine Geschichte erzählt Writing to Vermeer nicht*"²². Mirko Weber reflects on the few existing paintings and the lack of biographical information; he wonders: how is it possible to create an opera with such a few available data²³?

The composer Louis Andriessen confirms that "the libretto contains next to no dramatic development" and speaks about the so-called "windows"²⁴ that open from the intimacy of the domestic interiors, showing what is happening "outside". These breaks coincide with the passages of electronic music composed by Michel Van der Aa: ten "inserts" which are important for the dramaturgical dynamic and that recurrently interrupt the main score. Moreover, through this procedure one more important element of Vermeer's composition (the windows) is "translated" into the performance text (in the sound dramaturgy structure).

The critic Jean Luca writes:

*L'évolution d'une sérénité diaphane vers une plus grande densité dramatique est nettement perceptible dans l'écriture musicale proprement dite; et (seulement) lors que le monde extérieur fait irruption dans l'univers des trois femmes, des effets électroniques dus au jeune compositeur Michel Van der Aa viennent interrompre le discours musical.*²⁵

Only few critics grasped the role of this sound dramaturgy: "Mr. Greenaway and Saskia Boddeke seek to show us both the history and the art, as

19 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

20 Frits van der Waa: The music, in Louis Andriessen, Peter Greenaway: *Writing to Vermeer*, p. 14.

21 Jean Luca: Entre sérénité et turbulence: *Writing to Vermeer*, in *La Voix du Luxembourg*, December 1999.

22 Peter Hagmann: Wasser- und andere Fälle. In: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 13.12.1999.

23 See Weber: *Frauenbriefe in Bildern und Klängen*.

24 Andriessen: *The Art of Stealing Time*, p. 309; "I suggested that we should interrupt the tranquil domestic scenes with fragments from the outside world, like the knife cuts in Fontana's painting" (*ibid.*, p. 310). Andriessen deals also with the mirror structure of the composition.

25 Luca: Entre sérénité et turbulence.

if the silence to which Vermeer's pictures escape is best explained by the noise going on around them".²⁶

The double narrative layer is realized through the interaction between the tale of the libretto and the tale of the stage (from a visual and an aural perspective). A synthesis and a gap are produced at the same time.

"All this domestic material is substance and background to the real subject matter of letters, which is the women's wish for Vermeer to return home. They miss him"²⁷. The theme of the longing for the artist is a substantial motif. The women miss the artist and this lack embodies in the opera structure, corresponding to his absence on stage. Vermeer as a character never appears physically and nevertheless is the mainstay of dramaturgy. The text is a dialogue with an absence (an absence which is a dramaturgical presence)²⁸. We could understand the physical absence of the main character as the embodiment of Vermeer's art into the scenic composition. His imagery permeates the *mise-en-scène*. The narrative subject is Vermeer's art itself, approached through Greenaway's perspective, which goes beyond the biographical data.

In this regard, the suspended dimension created by light is crucial. Thanks to the light, the women merge with the environment; they are "treated with dignity"²⁹, without seductive attitude and gaze. The letters have a substantial role in the suggestion of this "suspension", giving the impression of a "supposed domestic idyll"³⁰.

As far as light and shadow is concerned, Andriessen assumes that the sense of mystery and beauty of these paintings is due to the unreal appearance of the figures: "Vermeer paints everything, very beautiful and very precisely, with shadows, but the human beings have no shadows. My theory is that the people are not real. The women are sorts of angels"³¹.

26 Bernard Holland: The Chaos Outside Vermeer's Quiet Rooms. In: *The New York Times*, 13.07. 2000.

27 Greenaway in De Nederlandse Opera: *Writing to Vermeer*, p. 20.

28 In a different way, this procedure recurs in Greenaway's cinema, for instance in *The Draughtsman Contract*.

29 Greenaway: *The Text*, p. 23.

30 *Ibid.*

31 Andriessen: *The Art of Stealing Time*, p. 307.

In the libretto, Vermeer's Art embodies also in the motifs related to sight, light and time: "Since there is a painter at the centre of this drama, whose paintings are essentially concerned with split seconds of observed time and a world created through the observation of sun-light, there is considerable textual reference to sight, time and light"³².

Besides, "Time is made visible"³³, the women tell continuously what happened and what will happen, creating a texture of temporal relations.

Stojan Pelko observes, "at the first sight this seems to be a story about how to defend oneself from chaos through peacefulness, rather than how to channel the chaos into the airy gusts. From the "inside", perspective, it is an opera about how it is possible in the three-dimensional space to construct a multi-layered painting, and thus extract it from the supremacy of special filmic effects – therefore, it is the disveiling of the image back into the space, rather than the layering of space onto the surface of the image"³⁴.

The multilayered narrative emerges from different points of view, focusing on the process of using different medias.

Telling painting through the visual writing

The space has been conceived as a rectangular, sloping and open frame stage, ideally without limits (no curtains, nor backdrop)³⁵. A pit, which is used to make the water flow during the performance, surrounds it along its perimeter.

Greenaway's "magnificent obsession" for handwriting can be compared to his attention to the materiality of the stage. The concrete consistency of the materials marks clearly the difference with the impact of the cinematographic medium.

The title itself suggests the essential coordinates to understand the concept of this opera and the process of spatialization of the word. *Writing to*

32 Greenaway: *The Text*, p. 24.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

34 Stojan Pelko: *Writing to Vermeer*. In: Barbara Novakovič Kolenc / Helena Pivec: *Peter Greenaway's Book*. Ljubljana: Museum Serendipity Edition 2000, p. 65–66.

35 I refer to the performance I saw at the Lincoln Center in July 2000.

Vermeer refers not only to the letters addressed to the artist, but also to the act of writing, with its gesture and its visual aspect. Writing becomes *mise en espace* of the time on stage telling Vermeer's Art. It makes the painting tell itself becoming *dramatis persona*.

The sequence of the projections provides different spatial compositions on stage according to the different dramaturgical moments: they are projected on the backdrop, on three smaller screens, on a screen placed on the proscenium, and also on the sloping stage. Texts are projected on the different screens, on the performers' bodies and on the objects. Every material surface is exploited as screen and is visible to the spectators. The texts are differentiated: we hear and see the projected words of the letters – which match with the voices of the libretto – but we only see the words telling the macrohistory, that are visible on stage and not pronounced. Hence, there is a verbal "score", which is perceivable only through the sight and not through the hearing. These two kinds of writing are also graphically differentiated; the one is shown as calligraphy and the other one as a printed type (a different example is shown in *Prospero's Books*, where the word appears multidimensional: the same text is pronounced by the actors and graphically replicated on the projection).

The ink, which provides a material consistency to the writing, is one of the five liquids with an expressive value in the context of the opera. In its concrete³⁶ and immaterial implications, every element highlights the importance of materiality.

Also the dichotomy male/female can be read against the backdrop of a dialectical structure: every aspect related to the male characters is spoken or shown as projected images, while the female characters act live on stage; the libretto implies only female and children voices and presences.

In this regard Saskia Boddeke explains that, even if the starting point is Vermeer's domestic dimension, the attention has been focused on the 18 women on stage, who attempt to survive the violence of the war and the economic pressure: "Because they have no power, the only thing they can

36 The liquids and the multi projections, realised thanks to the "Do Re Mi System", represented the greatest challenge from the point of view of the staging technique. See S. Boddeke, *op.cit.*, p. 22–23.

do is endure it, and in the end they lose it; they are victims of their surroundings". This factor implies also a political dimension of the opera: "Men go to war, they organise war, and these women, especially during this period, were at home. One of the strategies used to keep the enemy outside was to flood the country. And so many houses were flooded – with all these women and children"³⁷.

The dramaturgical dynamism and tension arise from the contrast between the serenity of the intimate dimension and the cruelty of the outer events. The storytelling proceeds through composition and alternation between these two levels. The images of letters in Vermeer's paintings become the letters of the dramaturgy and the writing that submerges the stage, so as the mass of water will do in the final scene. It represents the opening of the dikes and the flood: we see the water both on the screen and in its reality on the stage, listening to its continuous roaring.

Intervals and connections between these two "layers" are empty spaces with a dramaturgical function, as far as they act in relation with the other elements (they work as pauses and silence do in music). This articulated procedure is made possible through a multimedia language and the spectator is compelled to enact a complex process of perception. Thanks to this complexity, the dramaturgical story goes beyond the narrative level of the individual characters in order to narrate universal themes, a narration that arises on the base of the relations themselves.

In accordance with the principle of the multiplicity of presence, also the reproduction of Vermeer's paintings happens in different forms: the portrayed women are embodied live by the performers (actresses and singers) on stage, or projected in the form of pictures or videos (sorts of *tableaux vivants* in movement that reconstruct the paintings).

Sometimes the video works as a counterpoint to the reconstruction of the same "painting", which the performers are playing on stage. The narrative is based on a procedure of a visual and aural association, through correspondences and juxtapositions of details that are shown at their different levels (verbal, visual and sound). For instance, the details of the paintings during the entire performance: the checkered floor (projected),

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

the costumes, the yellow and blue colours, the pearls, the jug and the letters; all of these elements have their verbal correspondence in the libretto.

Furthermore, each of the main characters (the three women who write the letters) is multiplied on stage by two other performers, who do not sing, but move on stage, so that each role is interpreted by a singer (soprano or mezzo-soprano) and two dancers.

Jelena Novak developed an analysis of Andriessen's and Greenaway's work in the context of "post-opera". Her interpretation is based on the concept of "envoicing" "as both giving the voice to the women, and putting the women into the voice, hearing the feminine through the women's voices"³⁸. Her reflection about the "vocalic body" is conducted against the backdrop of Carolyn Abbate's concept of envoicing the women in opera³⁹, of Steven Connor's thought on ventriloquism (concerning the dissociation between voice and different presences of the character)⁴⁰, of Adriana Cavarero's essays about vocal multiplicity⁴¹ and of Hélène Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine*. Novak's interesting analyses can be seen on the same line of our proposal as far as the multi-layered narrative structure is concerned (in her case, focusing on the distinction between feminine and masculine regarding the complexity of dramaturgical structure and the "doubled" layer)⁴².

Greenaway's passion for numbers is well known: in this case each of the three women writes six letters (we have 18 letters, and also 18 women on stage, including the main characters, the "doubles" and the servants). The fact of tripling the characters gives them a universal value and an open meaning; it works once more in order to go beyond the one point perspective and the linearity of dramaturgy: each woman is herself and the other

³⁸ Novak: Singing Letters, Multiplied bodies, and Dissociated Voice. In: *Postopera*, p. 93, note 2.

³⁹ Carolyn Abbate: Opera, or the Envoicing of Women. In: Ruth Solie (ed.): *Musicology and Difference. Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*. Berkeley / Los Angeles / London: University of California Press 1995, p. 222-258.

⁴⁰ Steven Connor: *Dumbstruck. A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

⁴¹ Adriana Cavarero: *A più voci. Filosofia dell'espressione vocale*, Milan: Feltrinelli 2003.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 94.

two at the same time. Each of them expresses the dramaturgical centre, that is the letters and the complexity of the meanings involved – which we discussed above. This trait seems to be conveyed also by the musical score, which often superimposes the three voices giving the impression of a homogeneous universe.

Going back to the starting point of my contribution, to the relationship of this opera with the projections as cinematographic dimension of Greenaway's work, it is worth to remind the director's position about projections on stage, "the dead imagery"⁴³, according to his definition. He refers to the recorded image⁴⁴ that is abundantly used, and abused, in the field of opera staging. The aim here is to balance the image with the scenic play in a relation that is not merely cohabitation on stage, but a kind of contrast between the two languages in order to give reason of the complexity of the action.

In this regards it is worth to notice how space is processed: the simultaneity of the film here is obtained through the exceeding of the one-point perspective. The spectator puts together a composition with different focus.

Cinema procedures as frame, montage and close-up, are embodied on stage. The scene is open and sometimes the projections exceed the limits of the stage. This has another dramaturgical function: making perceivable the breaking of the Historical flow inside the domestic interiors of Vermeer's paintings (the sixth scene, insertion Nine, *French Invasion*, is an example in this regard). In the dramaturgical development, the tragical scenes of the outside become always more recurring until they envelop the entire stage (the alternation between the domestic dimension and the historical dimension begins with a dilation of the first one to reach the symmetrical opposite relation, that is the dominance of the historical events).

The climax corresponds to the final scene, when a real deluge falls on the stage and wipes everything away – once again, dramaturgicy of space inglobe the historical event (the opening of the dikes). Golden skeletons of mannequins without the bright costumes remain on the stage, empty shapes that the water takes away. Water, once more a leitmotiv of Greenaway's

work, works as a connection between the two layers – domestic interiors and history: it submerges completely the women and their little domestic stories together with the history of the Dutch Golden Age.

43 P. Greenaway, Interview with Peter Greenaway and Saskia Boddeke, *Ibid.*, p. 24.

44 *Ibid.*

Rodrigo García is writer and theatre director of Hispano-Argentinian descent. He arrived in Madrid in 1986 and founded the company La Carnicería Teatro in 1989. His pieces focus on experimentation and on the search for a language beyond traditional theatre. They have been translated into several languages and shown in many countries. García is the author of fifteen pieces, but also of videos, exhibitions, theatrical installations, and more than twenty theatre productions. He was at the head of the hTh, Montpellier's Centre National Dramatique, from 2015 to 2018.

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