

# Live from the Met: Digital Broadcast Cinema, Medium Theory, and Opera for the Masses

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*Abstract:* Beginning with the 2006-07 season, the New York Metropolitan Opera began broadcasting live performances into select movie theatres around the world. This article explores the phenomenon using an approach known as medium theory. It draws from the work of three analysts in that tradition who have focused on the performing and recording arts: Edmund Carpenter, John Ellis, and James Monaco. The author coins the term “digital broadcast cinema” (DBC) to refer to the virtual experience of seeing a live opera on a big screen in high definition. The Met’s project is assessed with respect to the conventions that govern theatre, broadcast television, and cinema, and with reference to how it both enhances and compromises the traditional concert-going experience.

*Keywords:* Medium theory; Cinema and television; Opera

*Résumé :* Lors de la saison 2006-2007, le Metropolitan Opera de New York a commencé à diffuser des représentations en direct dans certaines salles de cinéma autour du monde. Cet article explore le phénomène au moyen d’une approche communément appelée la théorie des médias. Celle-ci se fonde sur l’œuvre de trois analystes spécialisés dans les arts du spectacle et de l’enregistrement : Edmund Carpenter, John Ellis, et James Monaco. L’auteur formule l’expression « cinéma numérique radiodiffusée » pour décrire l’expérience virtuelle de voir un opéra présenté au grand écran en direct et en haute définition. L’auteur évalue ce projet du Met par rapport aux conventions propres au théâtre, à la télévision grand public et au cinéma et aux manières dont le projet parvient à améliorer et à empirer l’expérience traditionnelle d’assister à un concert.

*Mots clés :* Théorie du medium; Cinéma et télévision; Opéra

It will soon be possible to distribute grand opera music from transmitters placed on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera House by a radio telephone station on the roof.

—Lee de Forest (1907)

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When inventor/entrepreneur Lee de Forest placed the above copy in a magazine advertisement for his Radio Telephone Company, it was no idle boast. In January 1910 he twice broadcasted performances of Enrico Caruso from the Metropolitan Opera House in New York. The audience was small and the range of reception did not extend beyond Newark. Arguably, this might have been the first entertainment radio broadcast in the United States.<sup>1</sup> A year earlier de Forest had field-tested his concept using recorded music beamed from the Eiffel Tower in Paris. The Met broadcast was viewed at the time more as a publicity stunt than as a convincing demonstration of the possibilities of a new medium and attracted relatively little attention.

Fast-forward to December 30, 2006, date of the Met's first attempt to explore a new arts and entertainment media format. Mozart's *Magic Flute* is broadcast in digital high definition to select theatres across North America.<sup>2</sup> Subsequent "live" broadcasts—five more that season, eight the next, and eleven in the 2008-09 season—would include Europe, with recorded versions sent to other countries, such as Australia, where time zone differences make viewing the live broadcasts awkward. Four continents are currently being served as well as selected New York City public schools. With the April 5, 2008, broadcast of Puccini's *La Bohème*, the live transmissions began to include cruise ships at sea. The 2008-09 Gala, broadcast on Monday night September 22, was also beamed to multiple screens in New York's Times Square, making it the biggest event held there apart from New Year's Eve festivities.

This is a far cry technologically from anything de Forest envisioned, yet there is a common cultural thread. He loved opera and hoped to use a communication medium he claimed to have invented to enable a mass audience to have access to this form of high culture.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the Met's goal in presenting opera as what it calls "live cinema" is to create an affordable outreach both for those who love opera and wish they were there, and anyone who is curious and open to the experience. The Met's timing has been fortuitous. Given the performative aspect of opera, it has been steadily attracting a newer and younger audience, whereas the audience for traditional concert fare is in stasis, and perhaps even declining.<sup>4</sup>

The de Forest broadcast was not the first moment in media history to feature either the Met or Caruso. In 1901 the first recording of an operatic performance took place at the Met using an Edison phonograph. That same year Caruso became the first performer to sell a million recordings. At the time his name was virtually synonymous with opera, and he had a popularity that equalled and probably surpassed that of Luciano Pavarotti and the Three Tenors phenomenon more recently. Other media moments at the Met (they seem almost teleological given the current HD broadcasts) include the legendary Saturday-afternoon radio broadcasts that began on December 25, 1931, and continue to this day; the closed circuit television broadcast of Bizet's *Carmen* to 31 American theatres on December 11, 1951; *Live from the Met*, which debuted on PBS March 15, 1977 (it was soon replaced by pre-recorded videotapes); and the live Internet streaming that began on October 25, 2006, now augmented by a subscription service for archived productions on demand in HD.

The most recent example of the Met's outreach I have elected to call "digital broadcast cinema" (DBC). Although the term eludes precise definition, DBC as it is elaborated here can be said to *include the broadcast into movie theatres, either live or recorded* (some Met broadcasts are repeated as encores), *of various arts and entertainment productions that, like cinema, have a narrative format*. Besides opera, this would include ballet, musicals, and theatrical productions; it would exclude sports, concerts, and newsworthy public events.

These opera broadcasts are the sum of all previous media used by the Met and the addition of a new one, cinema. The screen is wide, with an aspect ratio of at least 1:85:1. Upwards of 12 cameras capture the performances. Broadcasts are edited "in camera," or more precisely at an editing console using a grid of monitors with the written score also serving as a reference—occasionally a camera reveals this aspect of a production to movie theatre patrons. In addition, broadcasts such as Engelbert Humperdinck's *Hansel and Gretel* (January 1, 2008) and Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* (March 22, 2008) featured multiple screens. The result matched or surpassed in shot possibilities, if not in editing, the most intricate music videos. The visual field of *Tristan*, for example, although grounded in the performance, at times resembled that of an experimental film.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, when we see a Met opera presented in this way, we are *not* watching a movie, despite similarities. The conventions of broadcast television also exert an influence. How this media interplay affects the production, transmission, and audience reception of the Met's DBC presentations is the subject of this article.

### Medium theory

Most commentaries on the Met broadcasts have focused on the way they present opera to a mass audience. However, the Met's experiment, and whether it is merely the sum of the various media elements that comprise it or something more, can provide a revealing case study for the application of medium theory. Medium theory can be seen as a subset of the widely used term "media theory." Usually associated with the work of scholars such as Harold Innis (1951) and Marshall McLuhan (1964), medium theory is a term coined by Joshua Meyrowitz to refer to an approach that considers the specific characteristics of each medium that make it "physically, psychologically, and socially different from other media" (Meyrowitz, 1992, p. 50).

Medium theory does not eschew content, as misinterpreters of McLuhan's most famous aphorism "The medium is the message" have often assumed. Rather, it begins with a consideration of the properties embodied in the carriers of that content and the influence those properties have on production, transmission, and reception. This includes the medium's facility for encoding specific narratives and the resulting bias, to use Innis' term, entailed in an audience's decoding what has been produced—which can be contrasted to how the presentation and reception of that material might be different should it be encoded in another medium. Using the example of opera, these contrasts can range from considering it as live theatre, as a radio broadcast, as a sound recording, on television, or as an example of media hybridity, such as DBC.

Approaching DBC in this way can benefit from applying some of the insights of an early, and perhaps the first medium theorist to grapple extensively with the

arts, the anthropologist Edmund Carpenter. A close collaborator with McLuhan at the University of Toronto during the 1950s—they co-founded the Explorations project—Carpenter, in his essay “The New Languages,” gives us the *raison d’être* for medium theory almost 40 years before the emergence of the term: “The new mass media—film, radio, TV—are new languages. . . Each codifies reality differently; each conceals a unique metaphysics” (Carpenter & McLuhan, 1960, p. 162). Carpenter has been one of the few in the medium theory tradition to express a direct interest in the arts, especially how the process of adaptation must bend a narrative toward the strengths of the new medium. This is illustrated in his analysis of Herman Wouk’s *Caine Mutiny* as a novel, stage play, film, and television drama. Worthy versions all, but each adaptation conveys a different emphasis resulting from the way the narrative is influenced by the conventions of each medium.

Not all approaches to what could be called medium theory derive from the aforementioned tradition. Useful inroads to understanding the relationship between medium specificity and narrative have been made by the British cultural theorist and television producer John Ellis. He sees cinema and broadcast television as having developed “distinctive aesthetic and commodity forms . . . and divergent forms of narration and representation of events and people” (Ellis, 1992, p. 1). Much of his book *Visible Fictions* is given over to examining these differences. His consideration of cinema as image, sound, and narration, and television as sound, image, and narration, has applicability to DBC, a medium that did not exist at the time he wrote.

Apart from the specific media involved in a DBC opera presentation, what is the art form we are experiencing? Does James Monaco’s (2000) distinction between a performing art such as theatre and a recording art have validity here? (Opera is one of the few art forms he does not consider, although its links to theatre are obvious.) For Monaco, recent technological developments have extended the recording arts, turning them into a “new mode of discourse” whereby any performance “that can be seen or heard can be recorded on film, tape, or disc” (p. 38). The Met broadcasts clearly straddle the performing arts/recording arts divide that he articulates. Theatricality is evident in the fact that we are viewing a live production, but we do not see it as the audience at the Met sees it.

Although the live audience at the Met sees the performers and stagecraft from the fixed position of their seats, is it possible to argue that viewing the same production in movie theatres offers more? Monaco’s position is that “we watch a play as we will; we see a film only as the filmmaker wants us to see it” (p. 48). Since the Met’s DBC presentations use, as does cinema, a variety of camera shots, are we therefore constrained to see only what those shots direct us to see? Given the live production and rich field accommodated in many of the shots, some of the freedom that an in-house audience has in viewing selected aspects of the *mise en scène* seems possible, and this in turn is augmented by cameras taking the DBC audience to places and points of view that only a recording art such as cinema can provide. Occasionally we even see the response of the in-house audience to aspects of the production. These reaction shots are used more frequently in comedies such as Rossini’s *The Barber of Seville* (March 24, 2007) and Donizetti’s *La Fille du Régiment* (April 26, 2008), than in tragedies.

With comic operas we can observe the Met audience laughing and laugh with them as well as collectively with those around us. The audience, either in-house or in movie theatres—is a participant. With tragedy, the movie theatre audience is comprised of individual spectators who appear to personalize their responses to the fate of the protagonists—one could sense the cinema audience at Puccini's *La Bohème* fighting to hold back tears at Mimi's death. In contrast, with the live audience at grand opera it has been traditionally permissible, sans embarrassment, for even grown men to cry. Tragedy or comedy, opera audiences have been renowned for the way they respond to productions, both in terms of felt emotions (Hutcheon & Hutcheon, 2000) and overt expression (Wechsberg, 1972). Tomato tossing episodes at Milan's *La Scala* are legendary. (Do they bring the produce because they know the performance might be questionable, or just in case?)

Met audiences are somewhat more sedate. Disapproval is more likely to be rendered by brevity of applause, a production's ordinariness by lack of a standing ovation. Nevertheless, faint boos were heard after the production of Verdi's *Macbeth* (January 12, 2008), not for the performers but for the production designer, whose interpretation transposed events from early medieval Scotland to a contemporary banana republic. This logically raises the question of *how* a DBC audience *should* respond. Does it make sense to applaud in a movie theatre in London, Toronto, or Waterloo, when the performers are only privy to reactions from inside the Met? Newspaper reviews of the first DBC season indicate that in smaller municipalities less familiar with opera custom, sporadic applause suggests a largely passive audience that is slightly less passive in their response when the production is a comedy. In larger centres, where many in the audience have previous opera-going experience and can imagine what it might be like to be at the Met, reactions are more overt.

Although DBC cannot be considered a recording art—such as painting, photography, film, or sound recording—according to Monaco's definition, it does provide a substantive link to film and painting. The camera work and editing, coupled with the wide-screen format, create an experience that at times seems very movie-like, until it is punctuated by televisual moments of narrative explanation, interviews, and backstage updates during intermissions.

It also becomes just as apparent in DBC as it is at the Met itself how important production design is to staging an opera. Scene changes, frequent in film, are less so in opera—generally ranging from two to five. This gives the DBC audience, because of zooms and pans, a better chance to lavish their attention on the context in which the performances take place. Franco Zefferelli's highly praised production design for *La Bohème* is a case in point. In Scene II for almost an hour it was possible to gaze at a dazzling and very painterly street scene in mid-nineteenth-century Paris—a veritable *tableau vivant* in actual motion. In contrast, the angular and colourless sets employed in *Tristan* evoked German expressionistic films such as Robert Wiene's *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919).

### TV or not TV

Despite the cinematic confines in which audiences experience the Met broadcasts, televisual conventions are still in evidence. Unlike previous concert genres beamed into movie theatres, the Met productions constitute an ongoing series. If

we apply Monaco's criteria, we can classify them as an open-ended program with "static" (versus developing plot) situations—whereas close-ended programming is the realm of the miniseries, one-off special, or made-for-television movie. Most television programs today, dramas and even some situation comedies are also open-ended, but involve the type of developing plot situation pioneered by soap operas. Tuning in to, for example, *24* or *Lost* in mid-season does not make for easy access to the ongoing storyline; whereas in the early years of television each episode of, say, *Gunsmoke* or *Bonanza* was relatively self-contained. And so it is with the Met telecasts. Occasionally the announcer might say, "If you saw the previous broadcast in our series," with respect to a conductor or cast member's earlier appearance, each broadcast nonetheless, usually makes concessions to the first-time audience member.

The closest parallel to a previous television format suggested by the Met telecasts might be the live anthology dramas from the medium's Golden Age during the 1950s—*Playhouse 90*, *U.S. Steel Hour*, *CBC Television Theatre*, and their kin. These shows sometimes featured a host, as do the Met programs. There are, to be sure, notable differences. The anthology dramas—which on rare occasions could feature a comedy or a condensed work of classic theatre, such as Shakespeare or Ibsen—lacked the presence of a live studio audience. Production usually employed three large cameras with turret lenses and limited tracking ability. In contrast, digital technology and robotics have allowed the Met's cameras to track, pan, zoom, or cut to almost every aspect of the production and its audience (although I have yet to see a shot of the prompter).

This capacity, which seems so cinematic, is also televisual, since it builds on the Skycam legacy pioneered in television sports coverage—wide attention was drawn to its use beginning with *Monday Night Football* on ABC in 2001—where robotic cameras can track and zoom in on a play down the entire length of the field before cutting to another shot. And, if the onstage perfection of a given Met production lulls the DBC audience into momentarily assuming they are experiencing a carefully edited video recording, moments of live televisual reality can occasionally intrude and elicit a chuckle: someone in the balcony stands unexpectedly and partially obliterates a shot, or a supernumerary, unaware of the shot being selected, evidences an out-of-context gesture or expression.

Another staple of the Met broadcasts that is both televisual and cinematic is the postmodern emphasis on the production process itself. The intermissions feature interviews with the performers and occasionally with the conductor. Hand-held cameras intrusively follow them backstage with a litany of questions—in pop culture cinema this was a recurring theme in Madonna's concert film *Truth or Dare* (1991). The Met's technical staff are sometimes interviewed, and we get a backstage look at the pyrotechnics involved in staging a production; behind every impressive facade we see a maze of industrial scaffolding. Each broadcast, then, is partly auto-documentary, recalling those "how they make it" programs featured on the Learning and Discovery channels, thereby adding genre hybridity to multi-media mix.

Carpenter's view is that the "grammar" of television is more suited to theatrical-type programs that feature a small cast and fewer sets and locations than

cinema. This helps explain the ongoing popularity of sitcoms, soaps, and lawyer programs. DBC operas also tend to feature a small primary cast and few set changes. Yet to say that television favours theatricality in its mode of presentation is not to suggest that theatre itself, or opera, can be successful when presented on TV. Contemporary rather than high culture is its mainstay; even historically inclined dramas or comedies are a rarity, with the occasional exception on CBC or HBO.

John Ellis' take on the medium-specific aspects of broadcast television would seem to exempt Met productions from fitting the criteria, but not completely. For Ellis, television, with a smaller, lower-quality image than cinema, as well as being viewed in conditions of ambient light, favours the glance rather than the gaze. Clearly the Met telecasts are quite the opposite. However, Ellis' claim that television, more than film, is anchored in sound, especially dialogue, has applicability to the Met broadcasts. An opera is notable more for what is heard than for its manner of visual presentation. Also, the "anchoring" in dialogue that Ellis speaks of can be said to reside in the opera's libretto. Verbally incomprehensible to non-speakers of the language used in a production, it can be followed through the Met's use of what in opera are called supertitles.

Ellis also argues that television's early history of live programming still "haunts" the medium by yielding an immediacy between the production and its audience that differs from cinema. This complements Carpenter's view that the television experience is closer to theatre than it is to film; in this regard the Met telecasts can be likened to "virtual theatre." According to Ellis, television favours quicker cuts and more close-ups than cinema. Perhaps surprisingly (or perhaps not, given the legacy of music videos), the Met telecasts follow suit. A duet is just as likely to be shown by rapid cutting between the singers than by keeping both of them in the frame; and should something orchestrally distinct emerge, a bass clarinet trill, for example, the camera may cut to a shot of fingers on keys.

Habituated to the close-up in television, we often find it used in the DBC transmissions. The resulting problem is that singers who are used to performing onstage where they are viewed from "public distance," to appropriate Edward Hall's terminology (1966), are now being seen from "personal" and, at times, even "intimate distance." Questions have therefore arisen regarding the importance of appearance to performance, and whether the singers will now have a look compatible with the roles they play in order to be convincing. As Hutcheon & Hutcheon (2000) show in their exceptionally inclusive study of the body in opera, debates about looking appropriate for a role and singing it adequately, versus the power of an extraordinary performance to suspend disbelief over what appears to be a physical miscasting, are nothing new.

At the very least, with the arrival of DBC changes appear to be forthcoming, and not just in the casting. The renowned opera diva and occasional host of the Met broadcasts Renée Fleming has said that she will consider altering her stage persona to accommodate a global audience who, because of the presence of the television cameras, will now see more of her than Met audiences ever have (Davidson, 2007). Expectations regarding her appearance in the September 22, 2008, gala, at least to those in the New York area, may have also been influenced by a publicity campaign

in which a large image of her face was seen on the side of New York City buses, à la Sarah Jessica Parker's Carrie Bradshaw in *Sex and the City*.

### Cinopera

Regularly seen in movie theatres on a wide screen, these productions are not motion pictures. Using the logic of *Jeopardy*, the question would be, "What are the Metropolitan Opera's HD broadcasts?" The Met uses the term "live cinema" to describe the phenomenon. The term is somewhat contradictory in that "live" implies a performing art like theatre or a music concert, whereas cinema is, in Monaco's terms, a recording art. As such its early links are to painting and photography; eventually another recording art, the novel, along with other print-based sources came to empower cinema as a storytelling medium. It could be argued, however, that with the rise of the concert film in the second half of the twentieth century—*Monterey Pop* (1969) and *The Last Waltz* (1978) being prime examples—the gap between what constitutes a performing art and a recording art was substantially narrowed, since the performances in these films were "captured" by rather than staged for the camera. Nevertheless, the conventions of a recording art predominate in that the duration of particular moments in the performances and how we see what took place are controlled through post-production. And, as with the recording art of cinema, a number of the Met's DBC productions will become available on DVD.

The Met telecasts strive for the precise packaging of a well-edited concert film, yet the editing necessary to achieve this end takes place as the performance is being experienced. The result at times is a compromise between long shots of the full staging, whereby the DBC audience is free to visually scan the entirety of a production as if they were attending it live, and specific shots edited "in camera" (from the monitor console), selected by the director to enhance an overall appreciation of the performance.

The Met's DBC productions show that opera can be cinematic. Of course, since its inception, cinema has been influenced by opera, both in terms of orchestral scoring and narrative, and numerous films have featured opera-singing protagonists (Schroeder, 2002; Wlaschin, 1997). Nevertheless, filmed operas have been few and far between, having never enjoyed significant box office success or critical accolades. An exception to the former might be the numerous versions of *Carmen*, given the visual dynamism of its dance numbers—Cecil B. De Mille even filmed a silent *Carmen* in 1915; and in terms of garnering a favourable reception from critics, Ingmar Bergman's 1974 production of *The Magic Flute* is noteworthy. Despite cinema's reticence to present full operatic productions, opera sequences within movies, such as those in *Citizen Kane* (1941) and, more recently, *Diva* (1982), *Amadeus* (1983), and *Meeting Venus* (1991), have yielded some arresting movie moments. With the Met's DBC productions the roles are being at least partially reversed and it is cinema's turn to influence opera. In contrast, opera on television, live or recorded, has attracted little notice, being consigned to the occasional PBS, CBC, Radio Canada, or BBC special.<sup>6</sup>

For Carpenter, cinema is suited to epic stories, whereas television favours intimate social dramas. He also notes, following T.S. Eliot, that cinema demands greater fidelity in its mode of presentation than theatre, where the direct contact

between actor and audience minimizes a dependency on detailed costumes and realistic sets. In the Met's DBC productions, such as Tan Dun's *First Emperor* (January 13, 2007) and Verdi's *Macbeth*, an epic sweep of the kind Carpenter attributes to film is at least suggested. Such productions, therefore, reside between the expectations we might bring to conventional theatrical stagings and cinema. Although the DBC sets might be more theatrical than cinematic—Zefferelli's *La Bohème* excepted—the costumes are as carefully crafted as any we might see in a big-budget historical film. Even before DBC this has been a source of pride for the Met. Now, because of the camera's presence, the costume designer's handiwork is being seen and appreciated in a new way and by a new audience. The prologue to the September 22, 2008, gala featured a close look at what Renée Fleming would be wearing in each of the three segments she would perform—costumes by Christian Lacroix for Verdi's *La Traviata*, Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel for Massenet's *Manon*, and John Galliano for Richard Strauss' *Capricio*.<sup>7</sup>

In comparing film to television, Ellis argues that the former is photographic, favouring the gaze, since sustained looking is "the constitutive activity of cinema" (1992, p. 50), while the latter is electronic, favouring the glance. Theatre (which unlike Carpenter and Monaco, Ellis does not consider) also favours the gaze, but it is anchored more solidly than film or television in sound through a dependency on dialogue. Cinema for Ellis is characterized by a larger-than-life image and one of higher fidelity than television—though with the recent advent of wide-screen HDTV, that resolution gap is closing and needs to be reassessed. Citing film theorist Christian Metz, Ellis re-emphasizes how cinema viewing takes place in the dark, as a dream-like fantasy experience. Also, given cinema's invitation to the gaze, voyeurism is an aspect of the way we respond to the medium.

These conventions also apply to DBC. Close-ups can render the performers larger than life, as if on a movie screen. The gaze is crucial, since attention is usually riveted on the performers, especially in productions such as Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette* (December 15, 2007) where the two leads were riveted on each other. The tenets of voyeurism and its associated pleasures as elaborated in film theory inspired by psychoanalysis (Mulvey, 1985) likewise have applicability.

In addition, the dream-like and fantasy experience sometimes attributed to cinema in psychoanalytical film theory might also have relevance to DBC operas. In opera, the conventions through which cinema often strives to create the illusion of realism are absent, since dialogue is almost entirely replaced by singing and most productions are set in either a vague historical context—*The First Emperor*—or a mythological past—Mozart's *Magic Flute*. The dream-like aspects of a production can sometimes take on a nightmarish quality, as with *Hansel and Gretel* or Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust* (November 22, 2008). *Hansel and Gretel*, ostensibly staged as a holiday production for children, featured enough nightmare-inducing ghoulishness, cannibalism, and cruelty to have perhaps elicited approval from that defender of fairy tales in the raw, the late Bruno Bettelheim (1976). The November 22, 2008, production of Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust* was directed by Canada's Robert Lepage (renowned for his work in theatre, film, and most recently Cirque de Soleil) and featured pyrotechnics that included projected images, something rarely seen on the operatic stage.

It could be argued that in some ways the Met broadcasts are more cinematic than cinema itself when it comes to how cameras are deployed. Their placement is ubiquitous and there are more in play at one time than are used in even the most ambitious Hollywood production. What we see in most mainstream films are scenes that result from post-production editing from footage shot normally with three to four cameras. In DBC a similar effect is attained by rapidly cutting among a dozen highly mobile cameras trained on various aspects of the performance. The process is similar to but more complex than what happens at a televised sporting event. What the DBC audience sees therefore goes beyond theatre, film, and television. The broadcast production is double-directed. First it is configured one way as part of what the Met has done traditionally—the *mise en scène* of the staging—and then reconfigured while being broadcasted to accommodate the intermedia parameters of DBC.

Mainstream narrative cinema has been and still is constrained to a degree by the rule that technique should not be so extreme that it draws attention to itself. Seeing something from all possible angles in, say, a shootout is permissible, but seeing what the human eye could not possibly see, apart from slow motion, generally speaking, is not (the *Matrix* films excepted). Television has been less constrained in this regard, as any viewer who has seen bullets enter bodies or cameras track through someone's digestive system in *CSI* can attest. One attention-getting technique the Met broadcasts have employed that is seen only occasionally in cinema or television is the use of multiple screens. A cinematic precedent for this technique can be found in films such as Abel Gance's *Napoléon* (1927), which divided the screen using a triptych format called polyvision.

An area in which the multiple screen as a split screen has been almost naturalized in cinema is when representing a telephone conversation. Michael Gordon's *Pillow Talk* (1959) is perhaps the most famous, but not the first example of this usage. When used outside this context, especially at length, as in Mike Figgis' intriguing four frames in one film *Time Code* (2000) or Hans Canosa's *Conversations with Other Women* (2006), the label "arty experiment" weighs heavily on any consideration of the film's narrative merits. The multiple or split-screen technique that is often used in concert films might have originated with *Woodstock* (1970).

Used freely in the Met's DBC telecasts of *Hansel and Gretel* and *Tristan und Isolde*, the effectiveness of the multiple-screen presentation over a repertoire of basic camera movements remains to be seen. The digital pyrotechnics involved also enable a screen within a screen to move across the overall frame, resembling what we might see in an experimental film or in a science fiction film inspired by video games. The use, perhaps overuse, of the multiple-screen option came to the fore in the emotionally stirring finale of *Tristan*, where, given the starkness of the sets, and with only the principals on stage, a simple long shot to zoom in might have been more effective.

## Conclusion

In 1918, when he was only three years old, Orson Welles made his first professional appearance onstage at the Chicago Opera in productions of *Samson and Delilah* and *Madame Butterfly*. Opera surfaced again in his career when, in

*Citizen Kane* (1941), he commissioned composer Bernard Herrmann to write an opera segment, *Salammbô*, for a crucial turn in the narrative.<sup>8</sup> The segment is intended to highlight a flawed performance by the lead, which it does impressively. But, given Welles' penchant for cinematic innovation, we also see opera as it had never been seen before. Camera shots capture the performance from behind, in front of, below, and above the stage; the opera's audience is also shown, and even the frustrated prompter. The Met's DBC productions employ a similar style in their attempt to present to a general public an art form to which it has traditionally had both limited media exposure and concert access, at least in North America, where opera carries the status and stigma of being regarded as high culture. In Europe, especially Italy, such exclusivity does not hold.<sup>9</sup>

Welles loved cinema because of the way it could bring together so many of the performing and recording arts. Given his extensive theatre background, we can only imagine what he might have done with the DBC possibilities offered by the Met productions.<sup>10</sup> Few twentieth-century artists have achieved notoriety in so many different media or done more to bridge the gap between high art and popular culture. The Met's DBC outreach has also been concerned with closing this gap. The question that has risen is whether the "virtual" compromises the "authentic," tarnishing what Walter Benjamin might call its "aura." How are we to regard DBC in light of his observation that "even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (1935/1985, p. 677). Yet the condition of the postmodern DBC viewing subject involves a situation Benjamin probably never imagined, whereby that subject is at a distance from the event being experienced yet at the same time an integral part of it, a phenomenon media historians sometimes refer to as co-presence.

Benjamin—in fairness, writing in 1935—compares theatre to film and argues that the camera's selection of what we see does not respect the performance as a whole; also, the film actor cannot adjust to his or her audience as is the case in a stage performance. The first point actually concerned Welles, who in *Citizen Kane* and many of his other films made extensive use of deep-focus cinematography, whereby foreground, middle ground, and background are all in sharp focus, thereby allowing the viewer to selectively concentrate on any part of the *mise en scène*. More recently theorists such as Marshall McLuhan (1964), Jean Baudrillard (1997), and Welles in his astonishing 1975 documentary, *F for Fake*, have argued that the distinction between the "real," or original, and the reproduction is of dubious value when assessing a work of art. Early newspaper reviews of the Met's HD broadcasts have quoted knowledgeable opera lovers who, having attended Met productions and viewed them in movie theatres, preferred the more comprehensive exposure to the productions that DBC allows. *New York* magazine arts critic Justin Davidson has said as much: "If I had to choose between paying \$80 for a spot in the upper balcony and \$22 to sit in the middle of the action, I just might make for the nearest multiplex" (2008, p. 3).

Benjamin's point regarding an actor's response to an audience in theatre versus its absence in film is certainly valid. However, in DBC the performer can respond to the in-house audience and then hope that response suits those experi-

encing the production in movie theatres. Again, this is live television, but occurring at another level technologically and employing the kind of expansive narratives that on television rarely if ever feature a studio audience. The Met DBC experiment has been successful enough to prompt the Royal Opera House Covent Garden, the Royal Ballet, and Royal Opera to follow suit, though not on such a global scale.<sup>11</sup>

The question is still open as to whether smaller local arts production companies will benefit from the increased appreciation and larger audiences created by DBC, or whether A-list broadcasts will trump B-list live theatrical productions. At a time when movie attendance is facing competition from technological innovations, such as the new generation of high-definition DVDs and the latest handheld screen options, DBC represents an intriguing counter-current. (Will Broadway be next? is a frequent query.) DBC combines the shared experience of traditional movie-going with at least part of the “aura” of attending a live theatrical performance. By attempting to bridge the divide between high culture and mass entertainment, the Met is heralding new possibilities for public access to the performing arts.

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### Notes

1. Another candidate for this honour is the Canadian radio pioneer Reginald Fessenden. From Brant Rock, Massachusetts, on Christmas Eve 1906, he broadcasted a holiday recitation, along with his violin playing, out onto the North Atlantic, much to the amazement of Marconi wireless operators who were used to receiving only Morse-coded transmissions.
2. That first season 113 screens in the United States were served along with 60 in Canada, a per capita ratio that shows Canadians might be more attuned to high culture than Americans. This throws into question Prime Minister Harper's rationale for cuts in funding to the arts on the grounds that they are only of interest to a small elite.
3. Douglas (1987) and Lewis (1991) examine thoroughly the issue of priority in the invention of the medium and question de Forest's claims.
4. The recent dissolution of the CBC Radio Orchestra might be a symptom of this declining audience.
5. Not surprisingly, an experimental filmmaker, Patricia Sweete, was given a free hand in the broadcast.
6. Opera segments on television, by the likes of Pavarotti, the Three Tenors, and Sarah Brightman, have fared somewhat better.
7. Adding another arts/opera tie-in to this prologue was an exhibition of the renowned painter Francesco Clemente's expressionist portraits of several opera divas, along with an interview with the artist.
8. Herrmann was so committed that the opera was composed and later performed in its entirety (see Heyer, 2005).

9. Opera in Italy has a strong blue-collar fan base. Not surprisingly, many North Americans were puzzled by the half-time show during the finale of the 1994 World Cup of soccer in Los Angeles. Instead of the latest pop stars, it was José Carreras, Plácido Domingo, and Luciano Pavarotti, who provided the entertainment.
10. Theatrical directors have been increasingly turning their attention to film, and film directors to opera. The list includes Woody Allen, Atom Egoyan, Michael Haneke, Robert Lepage, Baz Luhrmann, Anthony Minghella, Roman Polanski, and Julie Taymor.
11. Most recently, inspired by the success of the Met's DBC productions, the Stratford Ontario Shakespeare Festival, in conjunction with Cineplex and CTV-Bravo, will make available to 80 movie screens and television's Bravo channel, the gala premiere of *Caesar and Cleopatra*. However, this will not be a live broadcast but a prerecorded version of the Festival Theatre's stage production.

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- Hansel and Gretel*. (January 1, 2008). Engelbert Humperdinck.
- Tristan und Isolde*. (March 22, 2008). Richard Wagner.
- The Barber of Seville*. (March 24, 2007). Guiseppe Verdi.
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- The First Emperor*. (January 13, 2007). Tan Dun.
- La Traviata*, Act II. (Gala, September 22, 2008). Guiseppe Verdi.
- Manon*, Act III. (Gala, September 22, 2008). Jules-Émile-Frédéric Massenet.
- Capriccio*, Final Scene. (Gala, September 22, 2008). Richard Strauss.
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Other opera companies are copying, or planning to copy, the Met's cinematic venture. San Francisco Opera broadcast the first of six (pre-recorded) opera productions in March, proudly proclaiming that it is the first to use "Hollywood feature film-quality digital-cinema format". Tony Hall, boss of the Royal Opera House (ROH) in London, is jumping on the bandwagon, with last year's acquisition of Opus Arte, a maker of DVDs. This year Opus Arte is planning to bring the ROH's opera and ballet performances to cinema screens across Europe (both pre-recorded and live) in partnership with We broadcast the best opera performances live from the Royal Opera House, the Met and Opera Australia using 4k projectors and Dolby surround sound so you can experience every high note. Even members of the orchestra can't see each stitch on the soprano's cape or the twinkle in her eye when her lover enters stage right " but at Vue, you can. What you need to know. We show two types of Big Screen Opera: live showings (which are captured and broadcast as they happen) and encore showings (live broadcasts that have been taped). There are no adverts or trailers played before live performances. Arriv The potential of live cinema broadcasts of opera and ballet " which bring the art forms to life via 21st-century technology from companies including the Royal Opera House and the Metropolitan Opera " is awesome. In the space of just a few years, the Royal Opera House's annual "virtual audience" already outstrips its auditorium attendance. For the same ticket price, every member of the opera cinema audience enjoys privileged access to the stage action. However, the level of the Met performances, the ability to see the preparation and the interviews with the performers are such a wonderful addition, I'm not sure I would go back to the opera house. Actually I'm would for different reasons, the atmosphere and the splendor of live opera is amazing.