The spectator-listeners' participatory roles in Michel van der Aa's stage works, *Blank Out* and *Eight*

Inkeri Jaakkola
The Sibelius Academy of The University of the Arts Helsinki, Finland
inkeri.jaakkola@uniarts.fi

Disciplinary background A. From the perspective of musicology, my paper offers examples of how postopera challenges opera's conventional communication strategy, how it activates the spectator-listener and how it brings the boundary between the genres of art and popular into question.

Disciplinary background B. From the perspective of theatre studies, my paper compares postopera with postdramatic theatre. It shows how, instead of illustrating the drama, postopera's performances create theatrical situations which stimulate the spectator-listeners' individual processes of interpretation.

Abstract

My paper discusses the spectator-listeners' participatory roles in twenty-first-century postopera. As oppose to conventional drama opera, in which the music and actions on stage primarily illustrate the written script, postopera combines various theatrical elements such as stage actions, music, film as well as verbal and visual elements, into performances without fixed meanings – thus, evoking the spectator-listeners' individual readings. In a larger context, the involvement of spectator-listeners can be linked to the democratisation of the art world. To clarify the audience's participatory role in postopera, I introduce Michel van der Aa's multimedial chamber opera *Blank Out* (2016) and his virtual reality installation *Eight* (2019).

Postopera is an umbrella term referring to a variety of twenty-first-century stage works which share certain aesthetic principles. They employ unconventional, often anti-temporal, means of storytelling that are familiar from film and video games. Modern audio-visual technology is employed in their realisations, wherein opera's centuries-old tradition is abandoned: the unity of body and singing voice.

The roots of postopera lie in late twentieth-century postmodernism and minimalism. Postmodernist artists typically challenged the uniqueness of the artwork by using repeated items and by composing collages based on citations. Instead of creating unique artworks, postmodernists organised unique performances or happenings and emphasised the performative aspects of their works.

Postopera is closely connected with experimental theatre – therefore, Jelena Novak (2013) has linked the phenomenon with postdramatic theatre. Hans-Thies Lehmann (2006) introduced the concept in his comprehensive study on experimental and performative theatre forms of the twentieth century. According to Lehmann, dramatic theatre is based on Aristotelian principles: the events of the plot are causally related to each other. By contrast, postdramatic performances consist of myths, ceremonials, or bodily actions, and they tend to explore taboos and the absurdity of the subconscious. Instead of attaining the satisfactory experience of catharsis, the audience leaves the theatre puzzled or irritated.

The aesthetic elements of postdramatic theatre are also essential to postopera. The utilisation of new media enables neo-narrative strategies. The audience is shown spatially and temporally scattered, disorganized performative actions such as mimes, gestures or dance movements. Postopera thereby challenges the concept of a unique human identity, the idea of a narrative based on causally related events – as well as the nature of theatre as drama. However, postopera create theatrical situations

and circumstances wherein the actions and experiences are shared between the performers and the audience.

Eight offers the perceiver an experience via virtual reality. The visitors, wearing VR headsets, walk one by one through an installation of both real and virtual objects. Through certain physical actions they can manipulate the installation, which consists of pre-recorded film scenes, pre-recorded sounds, alongside visual elements. Visitors are therefore involved in the very unfolding of the work: each path through the installation triggers a specific display of audio-visual material, actualized through the visitor's actions. The concept of a unique artistic work is challenged, as are the traditional roles of the composer, the director, the performer, and the listener. Instead of joining in a shared listening experience as part of an audience, each visitor is invited to interact and create a private, personal performance for themselves in virtual reality.

The mystery of *Blank Out* is not revealed at the opera's end, but the enigmatic performance nevertheless provides puzzling stimuli for the active spectator-listener. *Blank Out*'s storytelling is completely discontinuous and non-linear; instead of the unveiling of a temporally organised plot, the events are shown from a variety of perspectives. The concurrent events onstage and on the film are partly unified by the 3D-technique. The audience must construct the meanings of the multi-layered work themselves by active mental process. Significantly, the most important fact in the story is neither told nor shown to the audience – they must figure it out by studying additional background material.

Interdisciplinary implications. The new media generations who are used to the narrative strategies of interactive video games and music videos, might not be satisfied with the conventional storytelling of mainstream opera – nor are they willing to silently contemplate as a listener. Postopera's communication strategy, in which the audience is given the role of an active, creative partner, departs from the practice of mainstream opera significantly and needs to be discussed thoroughly. Furthermore, the post-operatic mix of art and popular can be approached from social and political viewpoints as well as by studying the relationship between the art world and the entertainment industry. Postopera evades genre definitions by combining elements of opera, film, experimental theatre, visual art, and the media industry. Similarly, the research of postopera cannot be limited to the preconceptions and methodologies of musicology alone. Through interdisciplinary research one can perceive postopera from myriad perspectives and create a broad picture of this multi-faceted cultural phenomenon.

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Van der Aa: *Blank Out* - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5rKK0gPtjSI&list=RD5rKK0gPtjSI&start_radio=1

Van der Aa: *Eight* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z8zMItj5Upk