

(De)coding Contemporary South African Opera: Multimodality and the
Creation of Meaning, 2010–2018

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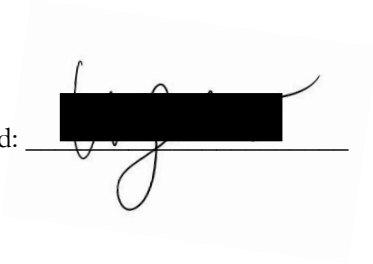
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Declaration

I, Melissa Gerber, declare that the thesis I herewith submit for the Doctor of Philosophy in Music Degree at the University of the Free State is my independent work, and that I have not previously submitted it for a qualification at another institution of higher education.

Signed: _____



July 2021

Abstract

Congruent with new investigative avenues considering the mediatisation and increased digital dissemination of opera, this thesis contributes to new directions in the field of opera studies. It promotes a multimodal analysis of opera production to uncover the multitude of, and relationships between, semiotic elements influencing the reception of opera production, specifically as it pertains to contemporary South African opera. I present multimodal readings of three South African operas: *Saartjie* (2009), *Poskantoor* (2014) and *Mandela Trilogy* (2011/2014), focusing on the interplay between elements – ranging from musical and visual modes of opera production to paratexts and the audience’s own subjectivity – to gauge their impact on reception.

I draw on the work of Michael Hutcheon and Linda Hutcheon, and Yayoi Uno Everett, who, in varying degrees, unpack the multimodal communication of opera as an artform comprising multiple modes. I devise a multimodal framework for the analysis of opera production divided into four categories encompassing the multiple elements complicit in the creation of meaning in opera production: (1) design modes, (2) production media, (3) paratextual networks, and (4) horizons of expectation. Consistent with the genre’s increased digital presence, I significantly expand paratextual networks to include the video trailer as a meaning-encoded paratext capable of shaping audiences’ expectations. Redirecting the focus from the score as the primary semiotic source, the analytic approach adopted in this study drew heavily on video resources available in the public domain, extending to both production media and paratextual networks. In addition, media archives were utilised to inform the critical reception of the works discussed.

The intricacies of the multimodal network are illustrated by focusing on a select set of relationships across categories, applying strategies of close reading to three contemporary South African opera productions. In my discussion of the opera *Saartjie*, my analysis utilises recorded production media informed by the iconographic history of Sara Baartman. I illustrate how both production design – drawing heavily on the canon of Baartman’s visual representation – and the composer’s problematic take on the subject – disseminated as part of paratextual networks – affect the reading of production media. The discussion of *Poskantoor* and *Mandela Trilogy* focuses on the role played by paratextual networks. In the case of *Poskantoor*, the first Afrikaans opera to be staged post-apartheid, the opera’s creators sought to position it as an opera reflective of contemporary Afrikaans identity. However, attempts to challenge problematic apartheid nostalgia are undermined through design modes and production media’s simultaneous indulgence of that nostalgia. *Poskantoor*’s avant-garde aesthetic, relayed through conceptual photographs and trailers, positions the opera as a novel work challenging the aesthetic legacy of apartheid opera. The transformative role of the trailer as a persuasive paratext is illuminated in the case of *Mandela Trilogy* (2011/2014). Considering the wealth of trailers accompanying the work’s international tours, I demonstrate how these paratexts play into an aesthetic of “blackness” characteristic of Cape Town Opera, with each tour presenting a curated operatic image of South Africa to international audiences.

This thesis makes a noteworthy contribution to the field of South African opera studies by placing an invigorated emphasis on the multimodal in opera production. Contextualising the case studies within the post-apartheid milieu, this research zones in on the multimodal experience of contemporary South African opera, building on existing scholarship that interacts with musical aesthetics and socio-political contexts. By mapping the complexities of the genre's multimodal network, I show that opera is encoded with layers of meaning extending beyond the genre's musical mode. The broadening of the investigative scope to include digital paratexts is especially significant, paving the way for new avenues of inquiry in the field.

KEYWORDS: multimodality; South African opera studies; contemporary opera; paratexts; intertextuality; visual culture; digital media; trailer; design modes; production media; dramatic texts.

Opsomming

Hierdie studie sluit aan by nuwe ondersoekrigtings soos die mediatisering en toenemend digitale verspreiding van opera en dra sodoende by tot nuwe navorsingsmoontlikhede op die gebied van operastudies. Die studie bevorder 'n multimodale ontleding van operaproduksie om die veelvuldige semiotiese elemente en hulle wisselwerkings wat die resepsie van operaproduksie beïnvloed, bloot te lê, spesifiek wat hedendaagse Suid-Afrikaanse opera betref. In dié studie onderneem ek multimodale vertolkings van drie Suid-Afrikaanse operas: *Saartjie* (2009), *Poskantoor* (2014) en *Mandela Trilogy* (2011/2014), en fokus op die wisselwerking tussen elemente – van die musikale en visuele modusse van operaproduksie tot paratekste en die gehoor se eie subjektiwiteit – om hulle effek op resepsie te meet.

Ek put uit die werk van Michael Hutcheon en Linda Hutcheon en van Yayoi Uno Everett, wat in wisselende mate die multimodale kommunikasie van opera as 'n kunsvorm met veelvuldige modusse ontleed. Ek ontwikkel 'n multimodale raamwerk vir die ontleding van operaproduksie, verdeel in vier kategorieë wat die veelvuldige elemente omvat wat betekenis in operaproduksie help skep: (1) ontwerpmodusse, (2) produksiemedia, (3) paratekstuele netwerke en (4) horisonne van verwagting. In ooreenstemming met die genre se breër digitale voorkoms, brei ek paratekstuele netwerke aansienlik uit deur die videolokprent in te sluit as 'n betekenisgeënkodeerde parateks wat gehore se verwagtinge kan vorm. Die analitiese benadering van dié studie skuif die fokus weg van die partituur as die primêre semiotiese bron en steun sterk op videobronne in die openbare domein, uitgebrei na produksiemedia sowel as paratekstuele netwerke. Media-argiewe word ook benut om die kritiese resepsie van die werke wat bespreek word, te ontgin.

Die verwickeldheid van die multimodale netwerk word geïllustreer deur te fokus op 'n uitgesoekte stel verhoudings oor kategorieë heen. Met behulp van noukeurige leesstrategieë word drie hedendaagse Suid-Afrikaanse operaproduksies ondersoek. My bespreking van die opera *Saartjie* berus op my ontleding van produksiemedia-opnames wat onderlê is deur die ikonografiese geskiedenis van Sara Baartman. Ek toon aan hoedat produksieontwerp – wat swaar steun op die kanon van Baartman se visuele voorstelling – en die komponis se problematiese benadering van die onderwerp – versprei as deel van paratekstuele netwerke – die lees van die produksiemedia beïnvloed. Die bespreking van *Poskantoor* en *Mandela Trilogy* fokus op die rol wat paratekstuele netwerke speel. Die skeppers van *Poskantoor*, die eerste Afrikaanse opera wat ná apartheid op die planke verskyn, het dit probeer posisioneer as 'n werk wat eietydse Afrikaanse identiteit weerspieël. Die pogings om problematiese apartheidsnostalgie aan te vat, word egter ondermyn deur die ontwerpmodusse en produksiemedia wat terselfdertyd toegeeflik oor dié nostalgie is. *Poskantoor* se avant-garde-estetika, oorgedra deur konseptuele foto's en lokprente, posisioneer die opera as 'n nuutskepping wat die estetiese nalatenskap van apartheidsopera aanvat. Die transformatiewe rol van die lokprent as 'n oordedende parateks word toegelig deur *Mandela Trilogy* (2011/2014). Deur te kyk na die oorvloed lokprente wat die opera se internasionale toere begelei het, toon ek hoe onderlê dié paratekste 'n

estetika van “swartheid” wat eie aan Cape Town Opera is en hoedat elke toer ’n gekureerde operabeeld van Suid-Afrika aan internasionale gehore voorhou.

Dié studie lewer ’n beduidende bydrae tot navorsing oor Suid-Afrikaanse operastudies deur sy vernuwende klem op die multimodaliteit van operaproduksie. Deur die gevallestudies in die post-apartheid milieu te kontekstualiseer, plaas dié studie die kollig op die multimodale ervaring van eietydse Suid-Afrikaanse opera, om sodoende voort te bou op bestaande navorsing wat tot musikale estetika en socio-politiese kontekste spreek. Deur die genre se vervlegte multimodale netwerk te karteer, bewys ek dat opera gekodeer is met betekenislae wat verder as die genre se musikale modus strek. Dit is veral betekenisvol dat digitale paratekste ingesluit is, aangesien dit die weg berei vir nuwe navorsingsmoontlikhede op dié gebied.

SLEUTELWOORDE: multimodaliteit; Suid-Afrikaanse operastudies; eietydse opera; paratekste; intertekstualiteit; visuele kultuur; digitale media; lokprent; ontwerpmodusse; produksimedia; dramatiese tekste.

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This thesis is the result of a more than decade-long obsession with opera, as both a singer and an academic. My first academic forays into opera took place at the University of Pretoria, where Prof. Heinrich van der Mescht and Dr. Clorinda Panebianco enthusiastically allowed me to venture outside the box. Coupled with my performance experiences (both locally and abroad), this ultimately planted the seed of the visual of opera in my brain – a seed that blossomed under the guidance of my promoter, Dr. Matildie Wium at the University of the Free State. From day one, Dr. Wium’s encouragement, patience, and moral support has never wavered – far exceeding my expectations and transcending vast geographical distances. I am very grateful for the continuous direction Dr. Wium has provided, as promoter and mentor, and I consider myself privileged to have completed this study under her guidance.

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I dedicate this thesis to my grandparents. To my grandfathers: Steve, a man with a golden voice, and Attie, who said one should never stop learning; and my grandmother Ria, a lover of music who sadly passed before she could hear me sing one last time.

Pretoria, July 2021.

Note to the Reader

Since this study adopted a multimodal approach, certain points are undoubtedly hindered by its primarily page-based medium. To promote a multimodal reading of the opera productions discussed in this study, I have sought to enrich the text with images and audio-visual media. Regarding the latter, several links are embedded in Chapters 4 through 6. While the links in Chapters 4 and 6 have unrestricted access in the public domain, the links in Chapter 5 are connected to an unlisted video and can only be viewed by clicking on the embedded link.

In this thesis I adopt the term “dramatic texts” in line with Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009:65) to refer to the libretto and the score. Following its first appearance, I revert to unmarked usage to avoid superfluous punctuation.

Reception and publicity texts in English, Afrikaans and German were consulted in the course of this study. I present translations as follows: longer quotations are indented in the main text, immediately followed by the English translation. Shorter quotations of phrases or words are translated within the body of the text. Where insights have been drawn from longer texts, the original language quotation is provided in footnotes for context. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Background and Rationale

Opera in South Africa, like other colonial remnants, is tainted by the legacy of apartheid. In this political context, the artform was earmarked as the exclusive domain of white South Africans, through which this demographic clung to a European cultural identity through the widespread performance of venerated Western works on a grand scale.¹ Following the country's democratic transition in 1994, this previously exclusionist European model was heavily supplemented through the indigenisation of canonic works, the composition of new operas attempting to reconcile the Western Art music model with previously neglected African elements, and the presence of black bodies, voices and histories on the operatic stage. The result was a new indigenous opera aesthetic, seeking to distance the genre from its apartheid legacy. It should thus come as no surprise that documenting and questioning opera's complex socio-historical legacy and its musical aesthetic have taken centre stage in South African opera studies – a research niche that has experienced rapid growth in the past decade. Broadly focused on socio-political contexts, research in this field often engages with opera's "musical text" (i.e., the score) as the "primary object" (Abbate and Parker, 2005 [1989]:1) of analysis (see, for example, May, 2007b; Olsen and Kruger, 2019; Spies, 2010, 2014, 2016; Viljoen, 2006). However, for all that the score, as opera's musical mode,² forms a crucial part of the genre's identity, opera's other modes are equally complicit in influencing the reading of an opera or production.

In their introduction to *Analyzing Opera: Verdi and Wagner* (1989), prominent opera scholars Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker write that "[opera] lives in association with poetry and dramatic action, an association that has made it idiosyncratic and special, certainly different in fundamental ways from instrumental music" (Abbate and Parker, 2005 [1989]:3). Reflecting on music theorist Heinrich Schenker's avoidance of opera, the authors write that:

[A]ny writer who [...] chooses to regard opera as music alone is seeing only one of the three primary colours. 'Analysing opera' should mean not only 'analysing music' but simultaneously engaging, with equal sophistication, the poetry and the drama. Analysis of opera might also attempt to characterise the ways that music in opera is unique; that is, to address the idiosyncrasies that set operatic music apart from the instrumental music that has shaped our notions of analysis (Abbate and Parker, 2005 [1989]:4).

The type of engagement that Abbate and Parker (2005 [1989]) call for here has been central to the interdisciplinary nature of critical musicology that has also characterised Anglophone opera studies for the

¹ The activities of the Eoan Group complicate this narrative (See Chapter 2 section 2.2.2).

² In this thesis, modes, also called semiotic resources or modalities, refer to resources (for example, "language, image, music, gesture and architecture"), that integrate across sensory modalities and converge within "multimodal texts, discourses and events, collectively called multimodal phenomena" to make meaning (O'Halloran, 2011:120).

past three decades.³ Since the mid-2000s, global opera studies have again plunged deeper into the pool of interdisciplinarity, this time fuelled by the technological advances that have impacted the accessibility and dissemination of opera productions, as well as the communications surrounding them (Marvin, 2013:117). Scholarly interest in opera's relationship with the screen has been longstanding (see, for example, Citron, 2000, 2010; Cooke, 2005; Joe and Theresa, 2002). The rise of the opera simulcast, pioneered by the Metropolitan Opera in 2006 (Fryer, 2014; Heyer, 2008), and the forced online migration of the genre because of the global pandemic in 2020, have nevertheless intensified opera's relationship with media studies, performance studies, and, most notably, visual and popular culture. This interplay has resulted in insightful research that interacts not only with the music of opera, but also with the diverse elements that make up the identity of an operatic work. These wide ranging investigative threads are reiterated by Gregory J. Decker and Matthew R. Shaftel in their introduction to *Singing Sings: New Semiotic Explorations of Opera* (2020), where the authors write that "[...] opera analysis, in the best sense, seeks to incorporate a number of interrelated fields of inquiry: cultural studies, music analysis, dramatic/critical/literary analysis, performance, and studies of art and aesthetics" (Decker and Shaftel, 2020:1).

Scholars have broadened their focus to include the visual spectacle of live performed opera (Levin, 2007:3), "consider[ing] its social and historical contexts" and the materialisation of the written text through staged elements, in order to uncover a work's "aesthetic identity" (Hutcheon and Hutcheon, 2009: 65). New analyses in the realm of opera studies consider opera reception by drawing on the multitude of digital visual resources that relate not only to opera in performance but also production, as evidenced in the work of David J. Levin (2007), and the embodied experience of opera production, seen in the work of Michael Hutcheon and Linda Hutcheon (2009), and Yayoi Uno Everett (2015, 2020). Most significantly, by reconceiving opera as a text in performance, Levin (2007:3) argues that opera "has emerged as an agitated or unsettled site of signification, [...] that encompasses multiple modes of expression and necessitates *new* modes of reading" (my emphasis).

Opera has had a longstanding relationship with visual spectacle since its inception. Historically speaking, the importance of the visual in opera has long exceeded purely aesthetic considerations. In *The Routledge Companion to Music and Visual Culture*, Sarah Hibberd (2014:322) reflects on the genre's visual domain, highlighting the emergence of nineteenth-century political nationalism and how these ideals were absorbed into operatic culture at the time. Referring specifically to the grand operas of July Monarchy Paris, Hibberd (2014:322) states that opera became increasingly "enmeshed in political culture", reflecting historical moments relevant to political events, "brought to life vividly with musical and visual symbols and magnificence". Similarly, opera in South Africa has been entangled in politics since its introduction by colonial powers in the early nineteenth century. In a colonial context, opera was very much employed as a

³ These approaches initially formed part of the so-called "New Musicology" of the 1980s; however, Nicholas Cook (1999) considers this term "past its sell-by date" since its "broadened agenda has been absorbed into the musicological mainstream". Instead, Lawrence Kramer (2003:6) suggests "cultural musicology" as a term more suited to the fast-paced nature of the discipline.

tool connecting settlers to the metropole, and to promote and foster culture amongst local inhabitants perceived as less cultured. With colonial opera production largely being a continuation of a European aesthetic, the genre resisted acclimatisation, firmly perpetuating notions of Otherness. Following the end of colonial rule, South Africa's white minority subsequently harnessed the political power of opera. During apartheid, the four regional Performing Arts Councils (1962–1998), organisations heavily subsidised by the state, became a vehicle for Afrikaner nationalist ideals through the promotion of opera as cultural capital. Reflecting on these colonial and apartheid opera histories, Daniel Herwitz (2017:125) most aptly describes opera in South Africa as “tainted goods” at the moment of democratic transition. In a similar vein, journalist J Brooks Spector (2011a) labels opera during the regime as a cultural weapon – a “way of sending a brutal message to lesser people from their rulers: opera and classical music are our heritage, these buildings where it is performed are our buildings, and none of this is yours [...]” (Spector, 2011a). He adds that: “The performing arts council versions of opera often featured famous, but somewhat over the hill, European singers and overly florid costumes, sets and staging. The kind of thing that often elicited a gasp when the curtain went up, regardless of the singing” (Spector, 2011a). Seen thus, the visual history of opera in South Africa forms part of the broader network of apartheid visual culture that has undoubtedly shaped the composition and performance of opera post-apartheid.

In light of these trends – the emulation of a European opera aesthetic during apartheid and the representation of a uniquely South African opera aesthetic post-apartheid – it is surprising that engagement with opera in South Africa/South African opera as visual cultural artefact remains wanting. Most recently, *Troubling Images: Visual Culture and the Politics of Afrikaner Nationalism* (2020) unpacked the relationship between visual culture and apartheid. In their introduction, Federico Freschi, Brenda Schmahmann and Lize van Robbroeck (2020:2) posit visual culture as a key “mechanism for rationalising and normalising apartheid, and [...] the Afrikaner nationalist ideology that bolstered and supported it”. The authors describe this visual domain as a “multifaceted and wide-ranging” complex, operating across a network spanning both the private sphere, via print culture and television accessed in private homes, and the public sphere, transmitted via monuments, sculptures, and art exhibitions (Freschi *et al.*, 2020:2–3). Considering the performance of opera during apartheid, as described by Spector (2011a) above, opera in South Africa firmly positions itself within this intricate web of visual culture. As a result of this aesthetic legacy, South African opera post-apartheid stands in contrast to apartheid opera's vestige – a reaction against the historical European grandeur, predominantly contained to whites-only venues. Post-1994, opera has not only embraced a new aesthetic idiom on the local opera stage as a new democratic cultural product; but it is also being exported overseas physically through international tours, and digitally via YouTube and social media channels – in line with global opera industry trends that foreground the visual spectacle inherent in the genre.

Despite these developments on the South African operatic landscape, international scholarly approaches that consider opera production and the genre's new media have not yet gained traction in South African musicology. The most recent contributions such as those of Hilde Roos (2018) and Wayne Muller (2018)

have nevertheless departed from the historiographic and musical analytic approaches once prevalent in the local field. Muller's (2018:13) doctoral thesis, for example, constructs a reception history of the staging of opera in Cape Town, and highlights the emergence of a "broad yet distinctly South African operatic aesthetic" (Muller, 2018:266), a phenomenon already probed to some extent by Roos (2010, 2012) and Stolp (2016). Indeed, the consideration of the visual in opera has not been absent from South African opera studies, where it has often fulfilled a role supplementary to musical analysis and socio-political contextualisation, as evidenced in the work of Viljoen (2012), Spies (2016), Stolp (2016) and Olsen (2017). However, the contemplation of the staging of South African opera, and its effect on reception, remains elusive in scholarly South African discourse about opera.

This thesis seeks to address this lacuna: it is precisely the potential creation and alteration of meaning through the various modes of performed opera in South Africa that concerned me in this study. While this study is the first within South African opera scholarship to engage explicitly with the visuality of opera, it is not my intention to argue for the primacy of the visual in opera nor to ascribe a hierarchy to opera's modes. Rather, by shifting the focus from the musical to the visual, I aim to investigate the multimodal experience of opera, rather than the experience of single modes.⁴ By interrogating the processes of meaning-making in opera production through the lens of multimodality – the creation of meaning through the use or presence of multiple semiotic elements – my study explored the relationship between contemporary opera production and critical reception in three recent South African opera productions: *Saartjie* (2009), *Poskantoor* (2014), and *Mandela Trilogy* (2011/2014).

1.2 Research Problem and Objectives

This study aimed to undertake a multimodal analysis of three contemporary South African opera productions by considering the multiple parts complicit in the creation of meaning in opera. My goal, in other words, was not to concentrate on the musical mode of these operas but rather to focus on the multiple facets of production, their signifying capacities, and how these aspects/elements/facets interact with reception. The three operas discussed in this thesis all occupy unique positions in the emergent canon of South African opera, whether through the historical significance ascribed to their premiere productions (in celebration of a *new* South African opera aesthetic) or their dissemination outside the geographical borders of the country through tours (exporting this new aesthetic to the globe). The scholarly focus on the operas has also been uneven, with some receiving more attention than others.

In terms of scholarly discourse, the opera *Saartjie*, based on the life of historic figure Sara Baartman, has enjoyed the most scrutiny (see Spies, 2010, 2016; Olsen, 2017; Olsen and Kruger, 2019). *Saartjie* formed part of Cape Town Opera's (CTO) *Five:20—Operas Made in South Africa*, a production that sought to

⁴ Scholars like Kress and Van Leeuwen have established that modes carry differences in terms of the possibilities they offer for meaning making yet "[...] it is not the case that one resource has *more or less* potential than the other" (original italics) (Jewitt, *et al.*, 2016:3).

showcase inherently South African operas – composed by South Africans on South African topics. In a socio-political environment still haunted by the ghosts of the country’s colonial/apartheid past, Hofmeyr’s *Saartjie* was one of only two operas in *Five:20* to take colonial history as its subject. Considering the political ties of the opera genre briefly outlined above, Hofmeyr’s controversial decision to challenge the engrained narrative of Baartman as victim was further complicated by his explicitly Western musical aesthetic, as a composer who adheres to the autonomy principle in a highly political artistic realm. Critics and scholars alike were quick to voice their dismay. While the musical idiom of Hofmeyr’s score and the question of cultural sensitivity were highlighted across the board, the on-stage realisation of the work, where Saartjie is “exhibited” in a menagerie-like fashion, stirring up historic imagery of Baartman’s maltreatment and objectification, received little attention in either critical reviews or academic discourse. As I shall argue in Chapter 4, however, the visual modes of the opera, like *mise-en-scène*, clearly shaped the interpretation of the opera as a whole.

Further delving into the role played by the visual in the shaping of interpretation in opera production, Chapter 5 focuses on the opera *Poskantoor* (Post Office) (2014) – the first Afrikaans opera to be staged post-apartheid. Although the work did not openly present a particular political stance, the opera has been deemed “socio-politically” relevant (Stolp, 2016) because of its commentary on contemporary South African society. However, given the historical links between the Afrikaans language, apartheid, and the opera genre, *Poskantoor*’s inception and performance were not without historical baggage. The opera’s visual identity (the work of South African theatre and film visionary Jaco Bouver) endeavoured to distance the opera from the legacy of grand apartheid-era spectacle. This was achieved by indulging in an avant-garde aesthetic that saturated the opera’s paratexts and production media; however, where this visuality sought to depart from the visual legacy of European emulations, the opera’s libretto and score indulges in Afrikaner nostalgia (like many Afrikaans cultural products) in ways, I argue, that undermine its apparent socio-political relevance. The interplay between *Poskantoor*’s different modes highlighted and camouflaged apartheid-era nostalgia to such a degree that problematic racist references passed undetected. To put this another way, while *Poskantoor* sought to present a reconfigured Afrikaans identity free from apartheid-era political connotations, its pandering to apartheid-era Afrikaner nostalgia complicates this strategy, as I will show in Chapter 5.

While the dissemination of *Saartjie* and *Poskantoor* were mainly limited to local South African audiences, CTO’s *Mandela Trilogy* has toured extensively, most significantly exporting a new South African opera aesthetic internationally. *Mandela Trilogy* was first conceptualised as *African Songbook: A Tribute to the Life of Nelson Mandela* (2010) – a production that banked on the Mandela “brand” and the influx of tourists that flocked to South Africa for the FIFA World Cup. *African Songbook* saw collaboration between three composers: Allan Stephenson, Michael Campbell, and Roelof Temmingh (Da Fonseca-Wollheim, 2010), resulting in a mashup of musical styles that struggled to relay the opera’s narrative of the Struggle and democracy. In 2011, *African Songbook* was reworked and renamed *Mandela Trilogy*, addressing critique to present a fine-tuned musical portrait of South Africa. Since 2012, *Mandela Trilogy* has toured multiple

global cultural centres. In keeping with CTO's growing international presence as "the blackest opera company in the world" (Koenigsdorf, quoted in Roos, 2010:14), *Mandela Trilogy*, like its other touring productions, showcases the company's "black" aesthetic. Quite significantly, the musical portrait of (South) Africa also proliferated *beyond* the confines of theatre space, with each international tour accompanied by a newly curated digital paratextual identity, comprising trailers and "behind-the-scenes" videos. In Chapter 6, I argue that, through this curation, *Mandela Trilogy* allows CTO to export an idea of South Africa and of South African operatic identity that panders to a European idea of "Africa", buying into notions of "blackness" that could be positioned as problematic, considering the country's racial history.

Given the notable presence of the visual mode in these three works, this study sought to promote a multimodal framework working towards the analysis of opera production as a cohesive whole, rather than interpreting multiple semiotic components of opera (libretto, score, and performance) as "separate texts" (Viljoen, 2012:115). To achieve this, I drew from the insights of Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009) and Everett (2015) – scholars who interrogate the multiple elements complicit in the creation of meaning in opera. Drawing from these scholars, I devised a framework for the multimodal analysis of opera production that accounts for the multiple elements complicit in the creation of meaning.

The following question underpinned this study:

- How might opera production realise the multimodal creation of meaning in contemporary South African opera, and how does this relate to the reception of operatic works?

Two sub-questions emanated from this:

- How do the multiple elements within opera's multimodal network interact with one another, and what are the effects of these interactions?
- To what extent does contemporary South Africa opera's visuality engage with/negate the genre's apartheid legacy?

1.3 Research Design and Methodological Approaches

In this thesis, I conduct a multimodal analysis of opera production that accounts for the multiple elements complicit in the production of meaning. The study adopted an interdisciplinary approach, working across the fields of visual culture, visual cultural studies, and opera studies to interrogate the multimodality of contemporary South African opera. Multimodality has not yet been employed as an investigative lens in the academic discourse of South African opera studies. A term mainly associated with communication studies, multimodality questions the strict divide between disciplines and encourages the consideration of multiple modes of meaning that are co-present in communication processes. Though multimodality has always been a characteristic of communication (Kress, 2005:5; Djonov and Zhao, 2014:1), solely focusing on only one mode provides partial insight into meaning (Kress, in Kress and

Mavers, 2005:172). While scholarly considerations of opera have arguably never been “monomodal”, the prominence of music or drama as the defining characteristics of the genre, results in the neglect of the multiple communication processes at play in the creation of meaning in production. Multimodality calls for an “interdisciplinary approach” (Bezemer, 2012) comparable to that of cultural musicology. In line with approaches inspired by Levin (2007), the consideration of opera as a performance text offers the opportunity to focus on aspects of opera production, resulting in insights that could not be gleaned by studying the libretto, the score, or reception alone. Levin also advocates the use of video recordings as a supplement to the study of live performance. This is significant since such recordings negate the ephemerality of production. For that reason, this study used digital video material as an analytic source; indeed, the opera productions in this study were chosen specifically because of the abundance of digital video texts surrounding them. These videos range from recorded performances to interviews and promotional materials like trailers and previews that proliferate in the public domain.

To create a framework for analysing opera production, my research methodology draws on and expands the multimodal approaches of Michael and Linda Hutcheon (2009) and Yayoi Uno Everett (2015). These scholars provide productive methods for the multimodal analysis of opera production (see Chapter 3.2). Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009) underline the intermedial nature of the genre. The authors draw from their own embodied experience of attending in-house opera productions of Wagner’s *Ring* tetralogy during the early 1990s. By comparing three different productions of Wagner’s work in three different theatres, the authors outline a vast network that emphasises opera’s multimodality; and by drawing on multiple productions, they point out the variety of possible factors that contribute to opera’s multimodality.

The multimodal network that Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009) map out comprises four main parts. The first of these is design modes, which consist of the production and creative teams’ interpretation of the composer/librettist’s original texts (score/libretto), labelled “dramatic texts” (Hutcheon and Hutcheon, 2009:68).⁵ The second is the realisation of design modes via production, labelled production media – comprising elements such as set design, orchestral sounds, lighting, blocking, props, and the actions of the singing actor. Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009:74) also identify a paratextual network, the third element of opera’s multimodality, that informs production media and influences the viewer’s interpretation. The proximity of these paratexts to production varies. For example, a programme booklet that accompanies a performance is much closer to production than a press release circulated in printed media prior to performance. Paratexts like programme booklets can be very detailed, including essays by the composer or director with additional images that add even more layers of paratextual meaning.

⁵ Throughout this thesis, I opt for this labelling in line with Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009:66), as opposed to labelling the libretto and the score “source texts”. Hutcheon and Hutcheon draw their understanding of “dramatic texts” from the formulation of Keir Elam (2005 [1980]), distinguishing between the theatrical or performance text, that which is “produced in the theatre”, and the written or dramatic text, which is “composed for the theatre” (Elam, 2005 [1980]:3).

Significantly, the authors also account for the viewer's "horizon of expectation" (Hutcheon and Hutcheon, 2009:66), the fourth element of the multimodal network. The "horizon of expectation" is highly subjective and varies from viewer to viewer. In the case of Wagner's tetralogy, for example, the audience may contain opera connoisseurs familiar with the composer and other productions of the same operas, who are likely to have different expectations to opera novices. Considering the plurality of audiences and the differing exposure to the paratextual network as well as the subjective "horizon of expectation", I adopt the plural form (*paratextual networks* and *horizons of expectation*) when speaking of these concepts. The variability of these elements alone already points towards the intricacies that can arise within elements of opera's multimodal network.

In contrast to Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009), who reflect on canonic opera, Everett (2015) focuses on contemporary opera and proposes an analytical model which accounts for the various factors shaping the communication processes between opera production and reception. Everett's (2015) model divides opera production into two categories; Production and Reception (see Chapter 3.2.2). Production is further divided into (1) pre-production, comprising the initial "source material" of the libretto and score, (2) the production itself, i.e., *mise-en-scène*, along with previews and programme notes that elaborate on the production's aesthetic choices, and (3) post-production, which comprises productions filmed for broadcast. Under Reception, Everett includes (1) the audience's embodied experience, and (2) any critical or scholarly reviews of the production. Everett (2015:ix) argues that "the signifying capacity of music and text may be significantly altered by the performative components of an opera's *mise en scène*". A new production with a new *mise-en-scène* then arguably results in the creation of a new text with every subsequent performance and thereby a new meaning for the operatic work. Although this is significant when considering performances of the Western operatic canon, the same may not be said for performances of South African operas as most are not restaged or revived following their premieres.⁶ Unlike Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009), Everett does account for the role of previews in her model; however, neither of these authors addresses the role of digital media in opera production, which has proliferated with the rise in digital streaming. Acknowledging this gap in the literature, it is significant to note that the trailer – a film-based (video) preview initially confined to the world of cinema – has become an increasingly important part of the marketing strategy for the entertainment industry, also filtering through to theatre and opera (Vollans, 2014). Recognising these trends within the international opera industry, and cognisant of their application within the South African opera sphere in recent years, I broaden the paratextual networks within opera's multimodal framework to account for the role of the trailer as a significant video paratext capable of influencing the audience's horizons of expectation by creating expectations before the attendance of opera production. Building on the insights of Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009) supplemented by those of Everett (2015), I propose a framework for the

⁶ The critical reception of these works thus has a lasting effect on their reading as the audience is not presented with other interpretations. In the context of South African opera, the performances of *Saartjie* (2009) and *Poskantoor* (2014) aptly illustrate this point.

multimodal consideration of opera which accounts for interrelationships between design modes, production media, paratextual networks, multiple horizons of expectation, and reception (see Chapter 3.2.4).

To map the multimodal processes at work in the productions explored in this study, I first traced the public response to each work. This was done by conducting a thorough study of media archives, both printed and digital, including press releases and reviews. Academic responses from peer-reviewed journals, theses, and printed publications were also consulted. Reception texts such as reviews were considered as part of opera production's paratextual networks, together with press releases and the addition of digital paratexts such as trailers and video interviews. Using footage from the public domain and, in some cases, made privately available to me, I conducted a close reading of the three operas' productions (where possible) and video paratexts. I conducted critical audio-visual analyses of materials to question how multimodality and context may influence the creation of meaning in post-apartheid opera. The findings of the respective analyses were examined in relation to the reception of the works.⁷ Through this combination, I attempted to negate the challenges presented on the one hand by the ephemerality of visual traces of productions that pre-date video recording and, on the other, by the selective reception history/captured by written texts.

1.4 Overview of the Study

For delving into the investigation of South African opera as a performed text on stage, this thesis needs to be positioned within current discourse. Following this introduction to the study (Chapter 1), Chapter 2 therefore provides an overview of South African opera, tracing both the history of opera in South Africa for the reader and sketching the enduring visual legacy of apartheid opera through the workings of the Performing Arts Council of the Transvaal (PACT), also tracing the emergence of South African opera studies as a field of inquiry and illuminating historical musicological approaches and current investigative trends. Though significant historical and cultural occurrences are referenced – such as the end of apartheid and the transformation of opera as a Eurocentric art into a culturally inclusive idiom – it is not my aim to provide an overview of the entire history of the genre in South Africa, since several existing studies have already done so (see for example Roos, 2010, 2012). The chapter covers research intersecting with opera published from 1990 until 2019 to map the emergence and trajectory of South African opera studies. Following this, developments in the field of global opera studies are discussed: specifically, the move away from the primacy of opera's musical mode, to highlight research that considers opera's other modes and studies that adopt a holistic approach to the study of opera.

Following the discursive context and literature review established in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 unpacks the methodological approaches of the study – above all, multimodal analysis. I also provide a more in-depth

⁷ “Alone”, Jennifer R. Sheppard (2010:1) writes, “neither production nor reception can completely represent the impact of performance”.

overview of the theories of Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009) and Everett (2015) briefly outlined in section 1.3. Using and expanding upon these insights, I propose a framework that accounts for the multiple elements within opera's multimodal network, also broadening paratextual networks to account for opera's digital dissemination. Finally, this chapter outlines the data collection methods used and analytic approaches taken in this study.

Following the contextual and theoretical groundwork laid in Chapters 2 and 3, Chapters 4, 5 and 6 present the three opera productions used as case studies, in each case focusing on a select set of relationships between elements within the multimodal network outlined in Chapter 3.

In Chapter 4, I discuss Hendrik Hofmeyr's *Saartjie*; a 20-minute opera presented as part of CTO's *Five:20—Operas Made in South Africa* (2010), concentrating on the opera production's paratextual networks and production media. Under the former, I explore the controversy surrounding the composer's utterances which suggested that Baartman had somehow been complicit in her own objectification, together with the composer's autonomous position within a genre perceived as highly political. The opera's production design (realised through production media), which deviated from Hofmeyr's vision (as outlined in dramatic texts), is then read against the visual canon of Baartman's representation to posit how production media's re-enactment of these troubling scenes of Baartman's life contributed to the opera's reception.

Insights regarding opera's cultural capital during apartheid, briefly unpacked in Chapter 2, come back into play in Chapter 5, where I explore the case of *Poskantoor* (2014). As the first explicitly Afrikaans opera staged post-1994, the opera undoubtedly interacts with problematic aesthetic remnants of apartheid opera – and not only through association: the opera's modes specifically indulge in Afrikaner nostalgia, with the genre's multimodality working to foreground and mask these nostalgic reminiscences to various degrees. In this chapter, I interrogate the disjointedness between the opera's dramatic texts, which position the opera as a product of the Afrikaans culture industry (Steyn, 2016b), and the opera's visual paratexts, which firmly seek to situate the opera as a “new” type of Afrikaans opera that speaks to democratic Afrikaans identity.

In Chapter 6 I consider the case of *Mandela Trilogy*. This “cultural showpiece” (Cape Town Opera, n.d.c), premiered in 2010, has become one of CTO's most toured productions. In the absence of production footage, I draw extensively from reviews and the publicity texts that form part of the opera's paratextual network. Uncovering the differences between the work's multiple trailers, I consider the possibility that the opera was tailored to specific tastes, resulting in the initial reworking of the opera, and the customisation of its paratexts to suit specific geographical locations. Through this process, I argue that, through *Mandela Trilogy*, CTO exports a highly curated image of South African opera: one that is ultimately not operatic at all.

In Chapter 7 I present a summary and outline of the findings of the study together with recommendations for future study.

1.5 Value of the Research

As the first study in the field to explicitly adopt a multimodal approach to the study of South African opera production, this study aimed to contribute to, and broaden the scope of, South African opera studies. The visual sources it utilised take note of the digital dissemination of opera production that increasingly proliferates within the global industry. This research thus connects the South African opera sphere to international scholarly debates that interrogate opera's digital, and increasingly visual, guise. Most significantly, the multimodal framework devised in this study attempts to account for all the elements that play a role in the multimodality of opera as a performance text. Within this multimodal network, the broadening of opera's paratextual networks – to account for the widespread presence of digital paratexts like trailers – substantially contributes to global opera scholarship. It is hoped that the multimodal approach adopted in this study provides a basis for future research, both within and beyond the field of South African opera studies. Specifically, this thesis seeks to prompt a dialogue about the multiple signifying elements within South African opera production to move away from the primacy of the musical mode, showing the insights that can be gained through considering opera in twenty-first-century South Africa as a multimodal artefact.

CHAPTER 2

Setting the Scene: Mapping the Discourse of South African Opera Studies (2010–), and Reading Opera on Stage

2.1 Introduction

As explained in Chapter 1, this study considered opera production's multimodality, referring here to the holistic consideration of meaning-making elements in opera and the question of how the creation of multimodal meaning is reflected in reception texts. The weaving together of these separate strands in a single study has not yet been attempted in South African opera studies. To situate this novel approach in the fullest possible discursive context, this literature review consists of four parts: the first (Section 2.2 below) outlines the history of opera in South Africa, from its colonial introduction through to the Performing Arts Council years (1963–1998) and the country's operatic reform (1994–2020), to illuminate the aesthetic history of the genre for the reader; the second (Section 2.3) traces the development of South African opera studies (2010–) as a field of inquiry, exposing both thematic and methodological investigative trends in research; the third (Section 2.4) unpacks the rise of performance and production elements of opera *on stage* in global opera studies discourse. This leads to the final section (Section 2.5), which considers the field's recent "multimodal turn".

Though this study did not adopt a historiographical approach, the documentation of South Africa's opera history, both in academic sources and media archives, will be discussed to contextualise current scholarship for the reader. As this literature review will reveal, the study of opera in South Africa has a chequered history: the genre itself has traditionally occupied an ambivalent position, stemming mainly from its colonial legacy and apartheid usurpation. Considering these histories, scholars have been rightly preoccupied with aspects of operatic reform that relate to post-apartheid musical aesthetics, the relevance of the genre, and how it addresses the socio-political challenges experienced by contemporary South African society. As a result of this emphasis on post-apartheid operatic redress, however, aspects of the country's apartheid opera history, such as the role of the Performing Arts Councils in the promotion of an Afrikaner nationalist opera aesthetic, have been largely neglected.

The staging of opera has fulfilled a supplementary role in South African opera scholarship, used mainly as an informative tool for score-based analyses. The consideration of opera production as the *main* interpretive text in opera (Levin, 2007; Everett, 2015:2), however, has not yet been adopted by scholars of South African opera. Outside the South African musicological context, the consideration of opera's visual modes has experienced an unprecedented surge in global opera studies in recent years, with production elements and aspects of performance featuring strongly in scholarship, often drawing on fields including theatre, performance studies, and media studies. Informed by historical contexts, I unpack these two

frameworks, namely South African opera studies, and the rise of opera's visual fields in global opera studies, to situate multimodality as a novel interpretive lens in the field of South African opera studies.

2.2 Opera in South Africa

2.2.1 An Imported Culture: Opera during Colonial Rule

Like the operatic culture of other colonised regions, opera in South Africa is very much a “European implantation”.⁸ Music undoubtedly formed part of colonial life during Dutch occupation (1652–1795); however, a formalised theatrical infrastructure only became a priority during the first British occupation of the Cape (1795–1803), beginning with the construction of the Colony's first purpose-built theatre, the African Theatre (Afrikaansche Schouwburg) in 1801, situated on the former “Hottentot's Square” in Cape Town.⁹ Considering the reinforcement of socio-political ideals through the construction of cultural monuments during the colonial era, part of what Michael McClellan (2003:135–136) terms “material manifestations of power”, the construction of a performance venue by British forces at the Cape is hugely significant. For Tobias Becker (2014:701), theatre is “an important institution of the colonial public sphere”: its purpose extended beyond that of entertainment and provided a social space for British diaspora. In the case of the African Theatre, this colonial space acted as an extension of Empire for the British, providing a connection to their homeland (Becker, 2014:701). Here, whether in the capacity of observer or participant, the act of performance allowed colonists to reconnect with “civilisation” (Becker, 2014:701). This was not only for their own benefit, but also formed part of what Adele F. Seeff (2018:17–18) proposes as “an early informal local Anglicising undertaking” accomplished through the objective of theatre. However, the cultural plurality of the Cape Colony meant that the African Theatre became a site of cultural significance not only for the British, but also for Dutch, French, and German theatre groups following 150 years of European settlement, with each referencing a different metropole through their respective performances (Seeff, 2018:21,23–24).¹⁰

⁸ I borrow the phrase from Stein (2006:441). Numerous studies concerning colonial opera culture have been undertaken. These are site-specific, as seen in publications on colonial opera in Australia (see Gyger, 1990, 1999), the United States (see Preston, 2001 [1993]), Mexico (see Saavedra, 2007; Vogeley, 1996), South America (see Stein, 2006), and Southeast Asia (see McClellan, 2003; Yamomo, 2017).

⁹ Prior to its construction, theatrical entertainments were performed by soldiers at the Garrison Theatre, a small room in the French barracks (Neethling, 2002:15). Also known as “Boeren-plein” (Farmer's Square) in Dutch, the name Hottentot's Square stems from its use as an informal marketplace by Khoesan traders who were forcibly removed from the site in order to make space for the theatre's construction – “a disheartening foretaste of the practice of forced removals which was to define apartheid land and populations policies” (Wright, 2009:15). The square was later renamed Riebeeck Square (Neethling, 2002:16), presumably after Jan van Riebeeck, the first administrator of the Cape Dutch Colony. Though its theatrical bones were removed after its sale in 1839, the theatre still stands today as St Stephen's Church, and enjoys protected status as a national heritage site.

¹⁰ Despite the presence of multiple nationalities, the British administration made it their duty to instill British principles and practices in various areas of colonial life, such as law, language policy, and education. “English ways are best”, Seeff writes (2018:4), was most perceptible in the Colony's fashion, recreation, and architecture trends. In this regard, it seems worth pointing out that the African Theatre's inaugural performance was Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part One* – “a play about legitimating sovereign authority” (Seeff, 2018:15).

Given the political dominance of the British at the beginning of the nineteenth century, it is unsurprising that the first documented opera performance at the African Theatre was an English work – Charles Coffey’s ballad opera *The Devil to Pay* (1728) in 1802. Due to the limited musical infrastructure in the Colony, genres that combined music and spoken dialogue were particularly suited to the environment (Roos 2010:29), as evidenced by the initial popularity of the ballad opera followed by French *opéra comique* during the Theatre’s first decade of operation.¹¹ Jan Bouws’s (1982:25) prejudice against these genres in his overview of musical life in South Africa (1652–1982) is readily apparent. Recognising the composers of this “pleasant light music” as masters of their craft, Bouws nevertheless describes their subjects as “rather plain”, with the “little artworks” themselves being unchallenging to performers, in contrast to *real* opera, “the epitome of order and discipline” (Bie, quoted in Bouws, 1982:24). In keeping with such remarks, Bouws lauds the 1831 performance of Weber’s *Der Freischütz* (1821) by an amateur British group. The first full-length opera at the African Theatre, this production boasting “new scenery, dresses and decorations” (Bosman, 2011 [1928]:217–218) proved popular enough for a repeat performance to be staged, where the orchestra was guaranteed to be “very effective” thanks to the services of local amateur musicians (Bosman, 2011 [1928]:217–218).¹²

An overview of operatic activity from the 1860s onwards reveals a vibrant culture (Malan, 1986; Hale, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018). The demographic and economic developments resulting from the discovery of minerals in the 1860s and the 1880s meant that opera moved beyond the borders of the Cape Colony. The founding of cities and towns, particularly following the discovery of gold in Johannesburg in 1886, resulted in the settlement of larger European populations, “bringing with them the cultural habits and demands which they had the means and the leisure to satisfy” (Malan, 1986:351). Recognising opportunity, a vast number of travelling theatre companies from the Empire added the Cape Colony to their schedules, planning extensive tours throughout the country’s interior and often returning annually with new repertoire.¹³

In contrast to the only sporadic operatic entertainments on offer during the first half of the nineteenth century, a steady stream of professional opera fresh from the continent now entertained settlers, which significantly affected local opera culture. Due to the initial lack of transport facilities and long distances

¹¹ According to Roos (2010:29) Coffey’s ballad opera was performed twice (in May and June), followed by the performance of John O’Keefe’s *The Poor Soldier* (1783) in September of that year.

¹² Bouws (1966) attributes the success of the opera’s performance to the public’s familiarity with the composer’s music, evidenced in local music programming.

¹³ Companies that toured the Colony during this time include the D’Arcy Read Operetta Company (1869–1874), the Miranda Harper Opera Company (1869/18–71, 1873/18–74), the Harvey Turner Opera Company, the Cagli Opera Company (1875–1877), the Vesalius Opera Company (1879–1882), the Australian Opera Company (1887–1889), the Royal Italian Opera Company (1894), the Moody-Manners Company, the Quinlan Grand Opera Company (1913) and the Carl Rosa Opera Company (1875/1937). This list is by no means exhaustive and excludes several smaller companies mentioned by Malan (1986). It falls beyond the scope of this study to unpack and explore the travels of all these touring groups and their influence on South African opera culture, which would undoubtedly make for a fascinating study. By drawing attention to these groups, I aim to highlight the liveliness of operatic life in this corner of the Colony during the nineteenth century.

between cities, visiting artists and performers adopted “leisurely itinerar[ies] with stops for concerts” (Malan, 1986:349). These travel trends resulted in the widespread dissemination of the artform and prolonged contact between professionals and amateurs, which significantly influenced the establishment of a local formalised musical culture, according to Malan (1986:349). Moreover, touring companies were dependent on the skills of local amateurs to complement their productions. In some cases, professional performers would opt to leave their company following the completion of their tour, choosing instead to remain in South Africa and pursue musical endeavours of their own, often combining teaching careers with community performance initiatives. Much of the groundwork of local operatic training and performance culture was laid by these individuals.¹⁴ The consistent exposure to cosmopolitan repertoire coupled with the increased availability of printed music and professional tuition led to the establishment of training centres and the founding of amateur societies. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, educational institutions in cities like Cape Town and Johannesburg boasted staff trained in Leipzig, Paris, and London, clearly indicating the Colony’s drive to align itself with a European aesthetic (Wolpowitz, 1969:109). In the colonial climate, these musical bodies were very much geared towards the promotion of the Western artform and ideals of European culture, evidenced in their training standards and repertoire choices. With great emphasis placed on European training practices, many immigrant musicians headed up music schools and music departments when universities and formal training centres were founded in the early twentieth century.

In terms of repertoire, Malan’s (1986) overview of travelling opera activity between 1850 and 1915 indicates that performances of operetta and comic opera eclipsed those of *opera seria* (Malan’s own categorisation) – a pattern that may be attributed to metropolitan trends and audience demographics. Unpacking the musical activities of Durban, in the British Colony of Natal, George Jackson (1970) underlines how musical tastes were dictated mainly by the influx of “British settlers [who] brought with them the musical heritage of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British music compounded with many contemporary Continental influences” (Jackson, 1970:2). This musical heritage, Jackson (1970:2) writes, included “the nautical tunes from Dibdin’s ballad operas; the arias from Italian operas such as Rossini’s *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, *Tancredi* and *Guillaume Tell*; Auber’s *Masaniello* and *Fra Diavolo*”, together with the operas of Bellini and Donizetti (many of which were produced in London during the 1830s and 1840s). Though not all British settlers had necessarily attended the theatre in Britain, the dissemination of opera in the public sphere through “popular arrangements, barrel organs and ‘street pianos’” (Jackson 1970:4) meant they would have been familiar with the most popular arias from contemporary operas. The performance of such “West End hits” arguably allowed the British to engage

¹⁴ Examples of such individuals include Italian tenor Alberto Terassi (formerly of the Grande Italian Opera Company), who opened private voice studios in Johannesburg and Pretoria in the 1910s and staged small opera concerts from 1916. His efforts culminated in a double bill of Mascagni’s *Cavalleria rusticana* (1890) and Leoncavallo’s *Pagliacci* (1892) staged in February 1921, before he emigrated to the USA (Wolpowitz, 1984:34–35). Other musicians, such as the Scottish organist John Connell, strove to establish a major operatic culture in the Transvaal in the 1950s – and in part succeeded (Malan, 1979:297).

with Metropolitan culture while also attaining the unification of Empire (Becker, 2014:702), reflected in the popularity of English works such as *The Bohemian Girl* (Balfe, 1843), *Maritana* (Wallace, 1845) (Jackson, 1970:2) and, to a still greater extent, the Savoy operas of Gilbert and Sullivan. An integral part of imperial culture, Gilbert and Sullivan's works were shaped by the patriotism and chauvinism characteristic of the late Victorians, "...part of the imperial culture that bound together the English-speaking members of the British Empire and the Commonwealth" (Burns, 2003:234–235), and featured prominently in the playbills of touring theatre companies throughout the colonial world (Richards, 2001:33).

These trends reveal that English works formed the core repertoire for most touring groups, as a list in Malan (1986:357–358) confirms. English repertoire was performed in combination with excerpts from contemporary continental operas made famous through their London premieres (Jackson, 1970:2,4). Endeavours solely focused on *opera seria* were not absent, but they proved less successful, as Frederick Hale (2015, 2016) reveals. Offering insights into the early attempts to establish Italian *opera seria* at the Cape, Hale (2015, 2016) unpacks the tours of impresario Augusto Cagli and his two seasons of Italian opera in 1876 and 1877, both of which experienced diminishing success. Hale compares Cagli's endeavours with the success of Luscombe Searelle and his Australian Opera Company who toured the Colony a decade later, in 1887–8, pointing out that Searelle's repertoire choices, focusing on comic operas, operettas and the "quintessentially British" works of Gilbert and Sullivan, "harmonised well with trends in public taste elsewhere in the English-speaking world" (Hale, 2016:116). Responding to the widespread popularity of comic opera during the late nineteenth century, "Searelle catered to a broader spectrum of popular taste than had Cagli with his emphasis on Italian *opera seria*" (Hale, 2016:116–117) by pairing a "heavy dose" of predominantly English comic opera with occasional grand opera (Hale, 2016:117).

In striking contrast to the popularity of English-language repertoire during the nineteenth century, Italian opera dominated the South African opera landscape during the latter part of the twentieth century. This change of dynamic stems from a rise in longstanding anti-British sentiments, particularly following the Boer Wars of 1899 and 1902, and the rise of Afrikaner Nationalism (Muller, 2018:87–88), which Muller (2018:88) rightly argues "ushered in a period of the indigenisation and appropriation of opera for narrow political gains".

2.2.2 Adopting an "Imagined Culture": Opera and Afrikaner Nationalism

Similar to opera in the colonial space, where the artform stood as the primary cultural difference between the settler/coloniser and native – "a piece in the vast apparatus used to distinguish European from native in virtue of its proclaimed superiority and exclusive use by the settler/coloniser" (Herwitz, 2017:125) – opera was still used to claim cultural superiority in South Africa following the end of British colonial rule. In the broader political context, South Africa was granted independence as a self-governing dominion of Great Britain with the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 (Giliomee, 2003:277). At that point, the drive to carve out a distinct Afrikaner cultural identity was particularly strong. As the Afrikaner

nation was “both coloniser and colonised (by the British)” (Steinberg, 1994:3), Afrikanerdom strove to distinguish itself as a nation free from imperial influence, with “its own history, traditions, religion, philosophy, language and culture” (De Villiers, quoted in Steinberg, 1994:3) and without identifying with the indigenous culture of the colonised, while simultaneously distinguishing themselves from the indigenous African cultures which they deemed inferior (Steinberg, 1994:4).

In keeping with the Afrikaner nationalist drive to foster their own cultural identity, initial efforts concentrated on the development of the Afrikaans language. As Afrikaans only received official recognition and equal status with English in 1925 (with the colony’s official language policy previously recognising only Dutch and English), distancing the language from its inferior “kitchen Dutch” stigma became essential (Giliomee, 2003:367; Willemsse, 2018:118–119). As such, the development of a body of literature took precedence, not only through the creation of new works by Afrikaans writers and poets but also the translation of “great works of world literature” (Van Zyl Smit, 2011:478). Without delving too deeply into the history of Afrikaans and Afrikaans theatre, it is essential to note that although the practice of translation to expand a corpus of literature is not a unique occurrence, as Marisa Keuris (2020:6) points out, in the context of the Union of South Africa (1910–1961) this move was undoubtedly politically motivated. Bettine Van Zyl Smit (2011:481), for example, connects the performance of translated plays to the determination of language advocates to promote the prestige of the language, highlighting the success of the Afrikaans translation of Sophocles’ Greek tragedy, *Koning Oidipus*, in 1938. This performance was considered a shining manifestation of the “power and capacity of the Afrikaans language to convey the most moving ideas and thoughts expressed in ancient and classical languages” (Conradie, 1999:15). The stage thus offered a unique opportunity not only to develop the language but also to amalgamate the development of culture with political motives. “[I]n his ardent desire to seize political power”, actress Leontine Sagan reflects, “[the Afrikaner] welcomes every means, and the stage offers a good platform from which to propagate his own language” (Sagan, quoted in Van Zyl Smit, 2011:482).

Building on the practice of translation first applied to drama, this trend also extended to opera, with Afrikaans translations of venerated works emerging from the 1940s. Although opera in its original language form was quite widely disseminated in South Africa between the 1920s to the 1950s through the efforts of local amateur organisations and radio broadcasts, the promotion of an Afrikaans opera aesthetic was initiated by the *Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns* (South African Academy for Science and Art)(1909–), as historian Pieter Kapp (2008:16–17) underlines. It was through the initiative of one of the Academy’s committee members, Cornelius de Villiers, that the translation and performance of the first opera into Afrikaans, Mascagni’s *Cavalleria rusticana*, took place in April 1940.¹⁵ In keeping with

¹⁵ De Villiers, who had become a member of the organisation’s Music Committee in 1939, undertook the translation (Kapp, 2008:16). The opera was performed by the Afrikaans National Student Association and the Radio Association in Stellenbosch. De Villiers expressed his willingness to translate even more Italian operas into Afrikaans, but his enthusiasm was curbed by a lack of funds (Kapp, 2008:16–17).

Afrikaner nationalist trends, local musicians and organisations were quick to promote this translated aesthetic. Scotland-born impresario John Connell, who led a thriving opera scene in the Transvaal, for example, capitalised on this trend by producing Bizet's *Carmen*, translated into English and Afrikaans, in 1946 (Wolpowitz, 1984:37), followed by Afrikaans versions of *Tannhäuser* in 1948, and *Die Zauberflöte* in 1950 (Kapp, 2008:15), independent from the Academy. Significantly, while the production of translated works was aimed at positioning opera as a white Afrikaans artform, the performance of opera by Cape-based Eoan Group, a so-called "coloured" arts group founded in 1933, disrupted this Afrikaner nationalist pursuit.¹⁶ It has been argued that the members of Eoan, South Africa's first grassroots opera company to regularly perform opera (Pistorius, 2017a:231), classed as "coloured" under the apartheid regime, aspired to colonial culture through their performance of European opera (African Noise Foundation, 2014). Though the group performed in front of segregated audiences, Juliana M. Pistorius (2017a:234) points out that by performing opera, Eoan "exposed European culture as something that did not necessarily have to be white", thereby underlining the performativity of whiteness.¹⁷

Despite the Afrikaners' collective goal of establishing an Afrikaans opera aesthetic as a marker of culture, the performance of operas in Afrikaans was predominantly dependent on the efforts of independent initiatives, rather than government organisations. The 1950s were characterised by the founding of numerous societies that focused on the performance of opera in Afrikaans, addressing a disparity in the operations of the National Theatre Organisation (Nasionale Toneelorganisasie) (NTO)¹⁸ (1947–1961). As the first bilingual professional theatre body in South Africa, the NTO saw the widespread dissemination of Afrikaans cultural products. However, the organisation's focus predominantly fell on the development of an Afrikaans and English South African theatrical idiom, touring throughout the *platteland*¹⁹ to foster a love of theatre amongst rural white audiences.²⁰ This predisposition towards drama meant that the performance of ballet, opera, and orchestral music was still largely dependent upon individual initiatives and amateur organisations. In this regard, organisations like the *Operavereniging van Suid-Afrika* (The Opera Society of South Africa) (OPSA) (1956–1963) (combining to form the South African Opera Federation (OPEROSA) (1957–1962)) and the Pretoria Opera Group (1955–1963) supplemented their core repertoire of *La traviata* and *Rigoletto* (Verdi), and *Don Pasquale* (Donizetti) with several other canonical

¹⁶ The history and activities of the Eoan group were largely omitted from South Africa's apartheid music history (Roos, 2014a) – presumably for not fitting the narrative of promoting white excellence in the apartheid era. Eoan's history only recently became known through the efforts of Roos (2010, 2014a, 2018).

¹⁷ Opera was still posited as the height of sophistication, as exhibited through Eoan's highly celebrated performance of *La traviata* in 1956 (Pistorius, 2019).

¹⁸ Van Zyl Smit (2011:487) considers this communal abbreviation as an acknowledgement of Afrikaans's "cultural parity" with English.

¹⁹ The *platteland* (literally "flat country") occupies a unique place in the Afrikaner cultural imaginary, as will later be explored in Chapter 5. The term denotes rural areas characterised by farmland and scattered remote towns away from thriving metropolises like Cape Town and Johannesburg.

²⁰ Lack of funding combined with South Africa's vast geographical area hindered the NTO's fulfilment of their mandate (Blanckenberg, 2009:7).

European operas translated into Afrikaans.²¹ Although there seemed to be a divide between Afrikaans and English South Africans, the latter favouring Italian opera and the former translated versions (Kapp, 2008:18), organisations such as the Pretoria Opera Group decided to alternate productions in Afrikaans and English to make opera more accessible to an “inclusive public” (Botha *et al.*, 1984:313). In practice, however, since apartheid policies segregated every aspect of daily life, this “inclusivity” was limited to white audiences. Translated opera was also widely disseminated during this time, with the Johannesburg-based South African Opera Federation, and the Pretoria Opera Group undertaking touring productions in rural areas (Botha *et al.*, 1984:312).

Given the amount of arts activity taking place, the consensus was that a national arts body would better serve the collective interests of the public. In 1960, 150 delegates from cultural organisations and universities (Blanckenberg, 2009:7–8; Roos, 2010:48) attended a conference in Pretoria to discuss the arts in South Africa. Here, the idea of a national state-subsidised arts body that would shape South Africa’s apartheid opera legacy was born.

The year 1963 saw the establishment of four regional Performing Arts Councils (PACs): the Cape Performing Arts Board (CAPAB), the Performing Arts Council of Transvaal (PACT), the Natal Performing Arts Council (NAPAC) and the Performing Arts Council of the Orange Free State (PACOFs). Through the activities of these organisations, the promotion of European culture amongst the white population accelerated rapidly (Kruger, 2019:132–133). The PACs promoted the arts, including opera, on a grand scale, providing “opportunities for white writers, directors and actors who were interested in developing Eurocentric theatre, music, opera and ballet productions to experiment and create high-quality productions” – activity that formed the basis of formal theatre in the country until the 1990s (Hutchinson, 2004:350). Benefiting from generous government funding that drove a huge volume of artistic activity, the PAC years have been referred to as the so-called “golden age” (Stark, 1981, cited in Harris, 2018:24) of South African theatre. In terms of opera production, all four PACs were particularly active during the first five years of operation, with each staging an average of three operas or operettas per year (Roos, 2010:51). Promoting European “high art” in their respective provinces and in rural (white) districts through regional tours, the PACs echoed the mandate of the NTO and art groups that preceded them. The opera activities of CAPAB and PACT outweighed those of NAPAC and PACOFs, primarily due to logistical and artistic factors. CAPAB flourished due to the proximity of the University of Cape Town Opera School that provided the company with a steady stream of skilled singers (Roos, 2010:54).²² At that time, several tertiary institutions had fledging music departments and singing teachers of note, but the University of Cape Town housed the only opera school in the country (Roos, 2010:55).

²¹ In the case of the South African Opera Federation, these included *Die Fledermaus* (1958), *La bohème* (1959), *Die Tonverfluit (Die Zauberflöte)* (1962) and *Die Verbale van Hoffmann (Les contes d’Hoffmann)* (1962), along with an English *Gianni Schicchi*. See Botha *et al.* (1984:313).

²² This is still true at present with the UCT Opera School feeding directly into Cape Town Opera, a company founded following the PACs’ collapse in 1998.

In addition, CAPAB was the only PAC to benefit from a purpose-built performance complex during the PACs' early years – the Nico Malan Theatre, inaugurated in Cape Town in 1971 (Roos, 2012:137).

As a result of the prominence of the Cape in South Africa's opera landscape, much of the research regarding opera in South Africa in general and opera during the PAC years has concentrated almost exclusively on the Cape region. The fact that Artscape (the successor organisation to CAPAB) currently houses the only accessible opera archive in the country further perpetuates this Cape-centred dominance. By contrast, apart from Blanckenberg's (2009) study into the musical activities of CAPAB, and the brief forays into CAPAB's operatic output by Roos (2010) and Muller (2018), the opera culture established by the other three provincial PACs remains largely unresearched. Christiaan Harris (2018:2) suggests that the academic neglect of this subject stems from the inaccessibility of records or lack of archives, an unfortunate aspect of local theatre history further unpacked by Keuris and Lida Krüger (2014a, 2014b).²³ To counter this imbalance in South African opera history, in the remainder of this section of the literature review, I explore the workings of the *other* opera powerhouse during apartheid, namely the Performing Arts Council of the Transvaal (PACT).

2.2.3 The Promotion of a European Aesthetic: The Case of PACT (1963–1993)²⁴

Responsible for the presentation and dissemination of “European ‘high arts’” (Steinberg, 1994:29) in the Transvaal province,²⁵ PACT's artistic output and mode of operations illuminates the white government's drive to align themselves with a European aesthetic, which would ultimately act as a manifestation of Afrikaner cultural identity. Following South Africa's declaration of the republic and withdrawal from the Commonwealth in 1961, PACT, together with the other PACs, was motivated to assert its “independence from an especially English culture that had basked for too long in its assumed superiority” (Schalkwyk, 2014:242).

Initially, PACT, like its sister organisations, inherited the NTO's duty of touring remote districts of the “(white) rural Transvaal” to disseminate European arts amongst the rural *volke* (Steinberg, 1994:22).

However, the lack of specialised performance spaces in the region and accompanying

²³ Apart from the lack of sources and limited accessibility, scholars also tend to shy away from this topic as the current political climate is not conducive to such an investigation; indeed, scholars are still searching for ways to sympathetically engage with the loaded topic of white opera during apartheid.

²⁴ The PACT archives, as part of the State Theatre Archives (1960–2000), were acquired by the University of South Africa (UNISA) in 2017. The total volume of material transferred was estimated at 543 linear meters (Anri van der Westhuizen, Personal Communication, 2018). These archives are yet to be catalogued and formally made available to researchers. The present writer made numerous efforts to visit this archive during the 2019/2020 academic years, but these attempts were curbed by student protests and subsequently the global pandemic. As such, the archive remains dormant.

²⁵ The Transvaal province encapsulated most of country's northern territory. Pretoria, the executive capital of the Republic and presently the administrative capital of South Africa, is located here.

production/logistical concerns meant that artistic standards suffered when touring.²⁶ Apart from unsuitable touring venues, PACT's main venues during its first two decades of operation, namely the Aula at the University of Pretoria and the Civic Theatre in Johannesburg, also left much to be desired.²⁷ The unsuitability of venues and frequent touring were considered the main hindrances preventing PACT from presenting the "high arts" as per "European standards" (Steinberg, 1994:22). To remedy this, PACT campaigned to consolidate operations under one roof (Steinberg, 1996:23), a wish that was granted with the completion of the State Theatre complex in Pretoria in 1981.

The State Theatre complex allowed PACT to thrive since the organisation was no longer bound by the obstacles that curbed its potential to meet "European standards" (Steinberg, 1994:24). Modelled on overseas theatres and costing R50-million, the State Theatre complex was branded the biggest venue of its kind in the Southern hemisphere (Stark, 1979:42).²⁸ The largest of the four theatres, the Opera theatre, could seat an audience of 1,327 with the continental seating arrangement providing an unhindered view of the stage, and its orchestra pit could accommodate 110 players (Reinecke, 1985:88–89). The Opera theatre's stage was also massive compared to the Aula and *platteland* stages – constructed in a T-shape with a proscenium stage (25,6 x 21,5m), two side stages (16m x 17,6m) and a backstage (25,6m x 24m) (Stark, 1979:45).²⁹ In addition to multiple performance spaces, the State Theatre granted an abundance of space for cloakroom facilities, in-house production workshops, and décor workshops, also allowing for set and production storage (Reinecke, 1985:88; Stark, 1979:46) – all in contrast to PACT's initial off-site and multi-site model of operations. The building also housed seven rehearsal spaces (one complete with an orchestra pit), with 88 dressing rooms for 350 artists situated close to rehearsal spaces and theatre stages (Reinecke, 1985:88). Unhindered by the spatial, technological, and logistical constraints that had plagued opera production during their first decade, PACT greatly benefitted from centralising operations at the State Theatre, with the venue facilitating a radical increase in production capacity, allowing PACT to stage opera on a much grander scale than before.

²⁶ In her paper, Carol Steinberg (1994:23) provides some insight into the concerns related to the use of these venues. The size of *platteland* stages was a particular problem highlighted by PACT Ballet – one leap and a dancer would end up in the opposite wing, and partner lifts would render the top half of a dancer invisible "her head [...] [disappearing] into the grid", hidden by borders hanging from the ceiling (Memorandum on the future development of PACT Ballet, 1974, quoted in Steinberg, 1994:23).

²⁷ The Aula, for example, had insufficient wing space, resulting in the storage of scenery and sets in a tent outside the building (Lovegrove, cited in Harris, 2018:25), while sets and costumes were created off-site. The Aula's stage constraints also impacted the set design, which in turn affected what could be designed and transported to the Civic Theatre (Harris, 2018:27).

²⁸ In 1977, the Commission of Inquiry into the Performative Arts in South Africa expressed the expectation for "theatre buildings" to adhere to "overseas standards", thereby allowing arts bodies like PACT to maintain a "degree of excellence" (Niemand Commission, 1977, quoted in Steinberg, 1994:24). Architects drew first-hand inspiration from the great houses of the United States, Europe, Japan, and Australia (Reinecke, 1985:87). Harris (2018:30) claims that the venue was regarded the most advanced of its kind in the world, though the present writer could not establish the validity of this statement.

²⁹ These grandiose spatial and visual attributes presumably resulted in Harris's (2018:30–31) comparison of the Opera Theatre with Wagner's *Festspielhaus* in Bayreuth.

PACT's "new era" (Harris, 2018:32) of production was ushered in through the inclusion of the Triumphal March scene from *Aida* – an opera known for its opulence – at the State Theatre's inaugural performance.³⁰ PACT delivered "a staggering spectacle incorporating an immense set that filled the entire stage" with "tier upon tier of chorus members, lines of trumpeters precariously perched high above the stage" (Eichbaum, 1981:1015), and a procession that included live lions and horses. This performance raised the bar significantly, with the extravagant display of operatic prowess setting a precedent for PACT's future productions. Following this display, Julius Eichbaum (1981:1018), writing in *Opera Magazine*, claimed that PACT had "at last set an international standard", with its first season productions of *Otello* and *La traviata* finally putting South Africa on the "international opera map". A full-length production of *Aida* staged in July 1982 was described as "the most lavish operatic spectacle yet staged in South Africa", with designer Anthony Farmer's set described as "mammoth" (Eichbaum, 1982:1293) and the "spectacular" Triumphal Scene equated to Günther Schneider-Siemssen's designs at the Salzburg Festspiele (Eichbaum, 1982:1295). Visual spectacle became characteristic of productions from 1981 onwards. Building on this precedent, PACT poured money into the seemingly bottomless pit of operatic production. By the mid-1980s, vast amounts were spent on elaborate productions emulating European standards. Costs ultimately far outweighed box office profits (Steinberg 1994:7), with expenses totalling R10,748,769 compared to the box office income of R1,027,563 in 1990/1991 (Steinberg, 1994; Appendix C). Despite this deficit, by 1991, PACT received R30-million of the R70-million funding distributed between the four PACs, with its opera department being first in the receiving line (Steinberg 1996:24). Coupled with the construction cost of the State Theatre Complex, this vast financial commitment by the apartheid government underwrites the importance of "high culture" in the construction of Afrikaner cultural identity.³¹

Surprisingly, the promotion of an Afrikaans opera aesthetic moved into the background with PACT abandoning the performance of operas in translation by 1982, focusing instead on mounting standard canonic works, thereby modelling Afrikaner cultural identity on a stricter European model. In contrast to international opera houses, however, PACT's repertoire lacked variety. "[D]ominated by Italian verismo", PACT's repertoire was considered "unbalanced" by critics (Eichbaum, 1988:38; Eichbaum and Viljoen, 1987:24). For PACT to recognise its potential as a world-class opera company, it was suggested that it widen its repertoire, not only to meet the ideal of international houses but also to build a "hard-core opera loving audience" and benefit the training of local singers (Eichbaum and Viljoen, 1987:24). However, the relative infancy of professionalised opera in South Africa coupled with cultural and political

³⁰ The inaugural performance ("Applause!"), included performances by each of PACT's four branches. The drama department performed extracts from *King Lear* and *Theodora* (Afrikaans translation); dance performed two ballets by Ashley Killar; the orchestra played the 1812 overture, with PACT opera presenting Act 2 from *Die Fledermaus* in addition to the excerpts from *Aida* (Eichbaum, 1981:1015).

³¹ Steinberg (1996:247) refers to PACT as an "ideology production centre" aimed at institutionalising and promoting *volkskultuur*.

constraints meant that opera production in South Africa faced numerous challenges that were not necessarily reconcilable with the European opera ideal.

A major artistic and financial concern was PACT's reliance on imported vocal talent to realise their artistic vision. In an interview, Neels Hansen, Artistic Director of PACT Opera (1984–1991), stated that “if someone in the country [could] sing Turandot and Calaf I won't import singers” (Hansen quoted in De Kock, 1992). The fragmented state of vocal training in the country at the time meant that local singers were inexperienced, and the voices required for specific roles could simply not be sourced locally.³² Though very few international opera houses were considered self-sufficient in terms of casting (Eichbaum, 1992:16), Hansen faced criticism for seemingly neglecting local singers in favour of international stars. For Eichbaum (1992:16), such critique was unmerited and stemmed from the public's inability to differentiate between patriotism and artistic excellence. In turn, Hansen maintained that the contact between international and local professionals was essential for the country's opera development. However, in terms of talent, imported often outnumbered local in production.³³ Coupled with Hansen's belief that audiences would not be satisfied with anything other than the best, given the State Theatre's “international status” (Hansen, quoted in De Kock, 1992), it could be surmised that importing major opera stars to headline productions was, in fact, a source of pride for PACT.³⁴ Even if the lack of local talent could be remedied by an institution like a National Opera School that would feed directly into the PACs (Eichbaum and Viljoen, 1987:23), these singers would still need to be guided by a talented conductor (Viljoen, 1988:42). Eichbaum and Viljoen (1987:24) underline the importance of good conductors since “[i]t is he [...] who places the stamp of artistic excellence on a production”, adding that no “expense or effort should be spared” in securing their services. Statements such as these support the assumption that there would always need to be some degree of involvement of imported talent, placing the development of a uniquely South African opera culture into question.

Ultimately, PACT's continued dependence on international talent, its spending practices, and a decline in audience attendance spelled trouble for the organisation. With the cultural boycott drastically impacting the availability of international artists, European production standards were still emulated at great cost. In this regard, Henning Viljoen (1993) questioned whether opera in South Africa would continue to be performed “as it [was] currently being presented”. Drawing opera in South Africa into the global opera

³² This was also partially the result of the mass exodus of local talent who pursued professional opera careers abroad due to the lack of permanent contract opportunities at PACT (PACT, 1972, cited in Roos, 2012:138).

³³ PACT's 1991 *Die Zauberflöte* consisted almost exclusively of foreign talent (Van den Bergh, 1991). For this production, only two roles were cast locally; moreover, one of them (Rouel Beukes in the role of Sarastro) was cast for only two performances, while German bass Harald Stamm sang the role for the remainder of the run (Van den Bergh, 1991).

³⁴ This was already revealed in the large-scale recruitment of “top artists from the most highly regarded theatres, opera houses and music halls of the world” for PACT's first season at the State Theatre (Stark, 1979:41). Similarly, the 1963/64 yearbook lists the members of the PACT orchestra according to nationality: the ensemble consisted of Belgian, Dutch, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Portuguese, and Swiss nationals, in addition to South African players.

debate, Viljoen claimed the artform's performance globally was under threat simply due to its insurmountable cost, highlighting not just the fees of international soloists and the importance of government subsidies, but also repertoire choices and the "flights of fancy" of directors and designers, and their blatant disregard for financial limits. During the "Neels Hansen-era" at PACT, Viljoen (1993) argued, the visual spectacle of productions overshadowed and inhibited the music of the opera – "as no more funds were available for good singers and/or directors".³⁵ In addition, the organisation's predisposition towards Italian repertoire led to public belief that the "only *good* opera is Italian opera" (Eichbaum, 1992:18). The public was also reluctant to attend the stagings of previous productions as the novelty had worn off (Viljoen, 1988:42).³⁶ These factors, coupled with a decline in government subsidies and growing political pressure, made the sustainability of opera production particularly challenging. The dedication to European operatic ideals, exemplified in the case of PACT, led to a tainted operatic legacy from which South Africa is still trying to recover.

Following the end of apartheid in 1994, the transformation of opera into a racially and culturally inclusive idiom took precedence. The exclusion of African culture in the composition and performance of opera during apartheid demanded a subsequent drastic aesthetic shift away from the European operatic idiom that had been entrenched by the PACs. In marked contrast to the primacy of European works, repertoire post-1994 was supplemented through the Africanisation of canonic works, together with newly composed operas.³⁷ Arguably, the most tangible change was the widespread presence of "coloured" and black opera singers on PAC stages. By adopting these strategies, opera became a significant tool for socio-political redress post-apartheid. Local historical topics and settings – which had previously been absent from PAC's stages – became the main sources of inspiration, diversifying the staple offerings of venerated European works.

2.2.4 In Transition: Opera in South Africa from 1994 onwards

The first locally composed work to herald a major directional change was composer Roelof Temmingh's opera *Enoch, Prophet of God* in 1995. Commissioned as part of the CAPAB opera festival, the work was intended to be the start of an "indigenous South African opera culture" (Stemmet, 1995:42). Described as "the first full-scale African opera ever written", Temmingh's opera tells the story of the 1921 Bulhoek-massacre where self-styled prophet Enoch Mgijima and his followers, the Israelites, were attacked by

³⁵ When I was an undergraduate student and opera chorus member of the Black Tie Ensemble, backstage gossip was rife with tales of the PACT heydays when Hansen supposedly travelled to China to choose the silk fabric to be used for the costumes of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. His biography, *Neels Hansen: Van Plaasseun tot Opera Man* (From Farmboy to Opera Man), was published in 2015 (see Kühn, 2015).

³⁶ Hansen suggests that the public take their cue from the country's rugby enthusiasts, arguing they will not miss a match because they have already seen the teams play against each other (Viljoen, 1988:42).

³⁷ The first attempts to Africanise repertoire already occurred in 1991, with *Themba no Thembile*, a Zulu adaptation of Mozart's *Bastien und Bastienne* (1768) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The work was taken out of its original pastoral locale and set in an informal settlement, and the occupation of the character Colas, the resident magician, was altered to *sangoma*, a South African traditional healer (Tyler, 1991).

white military forces after refusing to vacate the private land where they had set up camp.³⁸ Temmingh's opera was a monumental achievement: this was arguably the first time that indigeneity had been celebrated on an operatic main stage in South Africa, the subject was drawn from South African history, and the cast of ten soloists and 40 to 50 chorus members was equally divided by race, indicative of a striving towards an inclusive representational operatic idiom. Though the Nico Malan Theatre in Cape Town had been desegregated since 1975, this was the first time that black opera singers had taken centre stage in an opera production at the venue.³⁹

While Temmingh's work significantly embraced socio-political change, it may be argued that new works like his, and others that followed, still clung to the Eurocentric model of the opera introduced during colonial rule, resulting in newly representative works cloaked as musical exoticism. Newly composed operas and localised adaptations limited indigenous inclusions to subject matter, single indigenous instruments integrated into a Western orchestral idiom, and superficial language inclusions. At that time, Temmingh's opera was described as "[u]ncentred", adhering to neither a Euro- nor Afrocentric idiom (Stemmet, 1995:42). Traditional Xhosa music, attributed to composer Lungile Jacobs, was rather neatly integrated into the opera's musical fabric, with the orchestra supporting the performances of traditional song in the opera through Western orchestral accompaniment and improvisation. Granted, these were early days for South Africa's operatic reform.⁴⁰

The democratic government officially endorsed the new aesthetic inaugurated by Temmingh's opera and later indigenised productions with the White Paper on Arts, Heritage and Culture in June 1996.⁴¹ This publication a) expressed the need for equal cultural representation among the arts, and b) called for the inclusion of individuals from previously disadvantaged communities. The immediate result was racially diversified casts performing European opera, and the discovery of a plethora of previously overlooked world-class vocal talent.⁴² However, in many respects these changes have not led to comprehensive transformation. In the case of CTO, Roos (2014c:265–266) has argued that the "new set of rules" only influenced the racial demographic of singers, leaving management structures and the continued

³⁸ This conflict undoubtedly pre-echoed the many racially fuelled clashes that would plague South Africa during apartheid, notably Soweto and Sharpeville.

³⁹ A handful of black and "coloured" singers graced PAC stages during apartheid. Grütter (cited in Blanckenberg, 2009:42–3) lists Pieter Abel, a singer from Stellenbosch, as the first "coloured" singer to appear on the Nico Malan Stage in November 1977. NAPAC appointed Raphael Vilakazi as a company artist in 1991 (Charlton-Perkins, 1991:15).

⁴⁰ Recent trends favour works saturated rather than superficially infused with indigenous elements. Composers like Neo Muyanga (see Stolp, 2017) advocate for a syncretism, a fusion of different forms. For Muyanga, African opera would be a true "fusion of different forms", allowing diverse elements such as "traditional, folk and popular musics, composed and improvised music, music in multiple languages, and Western as well as African instruments to coexist in single compositions" (Stolp, 2017:74).

⁴¹ Opera Africa's ethnic *Magic Flute* in 1996 (see Eichbaum, 1996) is comparable to *Themba no Thembile* (Tyler, 1991).

⁴² This is largely thanks to initiatives like Cape Town Opera's Choral Training Programme (Milnes, 1995:402; Streek, 2001) and the Black Tie Ensemble (Olivier, 2014; Olivier and Viljoen, 2015) that dedicated themselves to the recruitment and training of singers from previously disadvantaged backgrounds.

dominance of European repertoire unaffected.⁴³ Following the White Paper, the indigenisation of European repertoire in localised settings or reworked versions continued, along with the composition of new operatic works, some of which have never been staged.⁴⁴ Roos (2014c:261) posits indigenised operas as marginal to the core of the canonic repertoire that dominates the local opera sphere due to audience preferences.

With the disbandment of the PACs in 1998, the face of opera in South Africa changed dramatically. Regional operatic activity died down, and what was quite a varied landscape during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has become increasingly focused on a centre – Cape Town – with minimal peripheral activities. CAPAB was the only PAC that successfully transitioned from a state-funded arts body to form a private company, CTO, the only active full-scale opera company in South Africa at the time of writing.⁴⁵ CTO continues to be a driving force for operatic transformation. Following *Enoch, Prophet of God* (1994), several indigenised productions and South African operas achieved great acclaim. Since 2010, specifically, opera composition has experienced a notable surge (Stolp, 2016:141). The year 2010 saw the premiere of two productions, namely *African Songbook: A musical tribute to the life of Nelson Mandela* (revised to become *Mandela Trilogy* in 2011)⁴⁶ and the *Five:20—Operas Made in South Africa*. Building on the aesthetics first presented in *Enoch, Prophet of God* fifteen years earlier, works like *African Songbook* and *Five:20* mark a defining moment in the South African opera landscape. Based on the life of anti-apartheid icon and former president Nelson Mandela, *African Songbook* showcases the “diversity of expression in contemporary South Africa” through the combination of “[...] traditional Xhosa songs, jazz tunes and modern music” (Cape Town Opera, n.d.c). CTO’s *Five:20—Operas Made in South Africa*, a format inspired by Scottish Opera’s *Five:15*, ushered in a new era of opera composition in South Africa. Consisting of five 20-minute operas composed by Bongani Ndodana-Breen (*Hani*), Martin Watt (*Tronkvoël*), Hendrik Hofmeyr (*Saartjie*), Peter Klatzow (*Words from a Broken String*) and Péter Louis van Dijk (*Out of Time*), the works were commissioned for the University of Cape Town’s centenary celebrations (Gordon Institute

⁴³ This observation is not unique to South Africa. In 2020, the Black Lives Matter protests sparked similar debate. An article in the *New York Times* (“Opera Can No Longer Ignore its Race Problem”) sheds light on how, globally, “blackness in opera more or less ends on stage” (Barone, 2020). Bass Morris Robinson reflects: “In 20 years, I’ve never been hired by a Black person; I’ve never been directed by a Black person; I’ve never had a Black C.E.O. of a company; I’ve never had a Black president of the board; I’ve never had a Black conductor [...] I don’t even have Black stage managers. None, not ever, for 20 years” (Morris, quoted in Barone, 2020). Similar experiences were shared by black panellists at the online launch event of the Black Opera Research Network (BORN) on 21 August 2020.

⁴⁴ This includes large-scale works like composer Hendrik Hofmeyr’s *Lumukanda* (1996).

⁴⁵ In addition to larger organisations like Opera Africa, smaller independent companies have also sprung up, often founded by prominent South African artists. These include the East Cape Opera Company (1995) (see Lloyd, 2007), the Black Tie Ensemble (subsequently rebranded as Gauteng Opera in 2015), Sempre Opera (2011), the Reakopana Opera Festival (2012), and Big Wig Opera (2015). However, most of these companies focus on performing works from the standard Western canon and make no attempt to produce indigenous works. In addition, many of these endeavours are short-lived due to lack of funding. Gauteng Opera announced their closure in 2018 (“Gauteng Opera to shut down after 19 Years”, 2018). Johannesburg Opera sprung up to take its place, but the company is more focused on recitals and concerts than mounting opera productions (see Jozi Opera, 2021).

⁴⁶ This work is discussed in depth in Chapter 6.

for the Performing and Creative Arts, 2016) and were intended to be proudly South African: written by South African composers on innately South African topics.

In contrast to the dominance of European repertoire during the nineteenth century and most of the twentieth, South Africa's operatic landscape is at present reasonably diverse, with operas in isiXhosa, isiZulu, and Afrikaans being staged to great acclaim on both local and international stages. Unlike earlier practices, then, opera in South Africa is no longer simply a "borrowed replication of a foreign tradition" (André, 2016:13). Coinciding with the emergence and cultivation of a new indigenous South African opera aesthetic, developments within South African opera scholarship have also moved away from historiographic approaches towards methodologies that interrogate the multiple facets of this new opera idiom.

2.3 South African Opera Scholarship

2.3.1 Historical Perspectives: 1960s–2000s

Early studies addressing opera in South Africa were historiographic in approach, preoccupied with issues of documentation and aspects of history, specifically relating to the performance of music during its colonial period. Significant dates, places, and people form the basis of publications including Bouws's *Die musieklewe van Kaapstad (1800–1850) en sy verhouding tot die musiekkultuur van Wes-Europa* (The musical life of Cape Town and its relation to the musical culture of Western Europe) (1966), *Solank daar musiek is...* (As long as there is music...) (1982) and J.P. Malan's four-volume *South African Music Encyclopedia* (1979–1986).⁴⁷

As discussed in the previous section, the onus of the transformation of opera post-1994 fell on *performance*, fuelled mainly by socio-political changes of democratic transition rather than on academic interventions. Indeed, perhaps due to the delayed embrace of cultural musicology in South Africa, the academic critique of this new South African operatic idiom evaded musicological inquiry until the 2000s. Similarly, the formal academic divide in South African universities between the study of theatre and opera has further hindered the widespread adoption of interdisciplinary approaches. Scholars were slow to reflect on the transformation of the South African opera landscape. Considering the significance of a work like *Enoch, Prophet of God* (1994) in light of South Africa's operatic reform, it is surprising that the opera provoked little academic engagement. An undergraduate dissertation by Marita Groenewald (1997), entitled *Roelof Temmingh se Enoch, prophet of God as brugslaner oor kultuur-grense heen* (Roelof Temmingh's *Enoch Prophet of God* bridging cultural borders) is the only study to interrogate critical aspects of the opera such as the musical and dramatic inclusions that make the work accessible to both white and black audiences,

⁴⁷ Bouws, a Dutch historian, has been positioned as a significant figure in the creation of a nationalist Afrikaans music history (see Venter, 2009:61–63). Despite the shortcomings of its citation practice (sources are difficult and often impossible to trace, if listed), Malan's Encyclopedia remains a resource of considerable academic value. The four volumes were published in 1979, 1982, 1984 and 1986, respectively.

positing the work as a manifestation of the operatic zeitgeist. Although this level of scholarship does not carry the weight of academic articles and doctoral theses, Groenewald's engagement with politically relevant issues a mere three years following South Africa's democratic transition, and two years following the premiere of Temmingh's work, does merit recognition and is indicative of the type of fruitful scholarship that can result from critical scholarly engagement with contemporary South African works and their socio-political context.

From the 1990s until the 2000s, research intersecting with aspects of opera performance in South Africa focused on place and biography. This is evidenced in publications like Haasbroek's (1990) detailed biographical study of South African soprano Cecilia Wessels, and Eric Atwell's (1992) monograph *Port Elizabeth Opera House: The First 100 Years*. Studies like that of Mariëtte Uys (1999, 2001), Sabina Mossolow (2003), John de Courteille Hinch (2004), Gerrit Olivier (2005), Carol Steyn (2006) and André Louw (2006) similarly examine the lives and careers of key white figures within the South African opera world. Though these studies fill important voids in South African opera history, they are often hagiographic in tone and fail to engage with critical aspects of socio-political and cultural history.⁴⁸ Although several personal memoirs like Stanley Peskin's (1990) *PACT: The First 25 Years* were published, these are not scholarly in approach.

Together with the study of biography and place, a handful of scholars reflected on local opera history and the composition of contemporary South African operas, questioning the aesthetic nature of contemporary opera as it related to post-apartheid politics and socio-political contexts.⁴⁹ Kapp (2008) focuses on the contribution of the *Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns* (Academy for Sciences and Art) to opera in South Africa, focusing specifically on the promotion of opera in Afrikaans amongst the Afrikaner community, and the activities of smaller opera companies in the years leading up to the establishment of the four provincial Performing Arts Councils in 1963. Though Kapp's study illuminates important aspects of opera history, the organisation's contribution is viewed essentially in isolation. Apart from referencing the Academy's recognition of the Eoan Opera Group and their achievements to promote opera in the "coloured" community, no mention is made of apartheid opera culture, such as racially segregated audiences and the absence of black singers on PAC stages. The prevalence of this non-contextualised

⁴⁸ For example, Hinch's article, detailing the life and career of conductor Leo Quayle (1918–2005), PACT's first Director of Opera and Music (1964–1983), highlights the fact that opera, musical theatre, and ballet in the Transvaal region reached an "international standard" during Quayle's reign at PACT (Hinch, 2004:75). In a footnote, Hinch clarifies that Quayle was always in favour of promoting opera sung in the vernacular, and quotes: "I would do it in Zulu if the people wanted it that way". However, the article is completely devoid of political context.

⁴⁹ Meredith's (2006) unpublished master's dissertation *Opera in South Africa: The first democratic decade, 1994–2004*, for example, attempts to classify and categorise operas composed after apartheid. Meredith (2006:1) distinguishes between "South African Opera", a genre that includes assimilated indigenous ethnic elements (dance, music and language), and "Opera in South Africa", an artform clinging to its Eurocentric roots devoid of any reflections of national identity. Though admirable in his approach, the author compares South African opera trends to those of Eastern European opera nationalism, an approach which, in my opinion, equates South African opera with a political milieu that is too far removed from the politics of apartheid and other relevant frameworks such as post-colonial operatic representation to be productive.

historical approach is perhaps an indication that scholars struggle(d) to grapple with the uncomfortable position of a highly politicised genre.

In a significant development, contemporary operatic works are addressed in studies by Stephanie Dias (2006), Martina Viljoen (2006), James May (2007b), and Thembela Vokwana (2006/7). Both Dias and Viljoen gravitate towards specific operatic works and the question of how these operas navigate post-apartheid politics through their subjects and their musical language, whereas Vokwana (2006/7) reflects on the genre's place within a democratic South African society. May (2007b), by contrast, adopts a conservative approach in his article on Hendrik Hofmeyr's award-winning opera *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1987). Concentrating on a score-based analysis of the work, the article is devoid of the opera's compositional and performance context.⁵⁰

Dias (2006) considers the dramatic film re-imagining of Bizet's opera *Carmen* (1875), *U-Carmen eKbayelitsba* (2005) by Cape Town-based company Isango Ensemble (formerly Isango Portabello). Set in an informal settlement with a black cast, *U-Carmen eKbayelitsba* undoubtedly brought to the fore the issues plaguing contemporary South African society, such as prevailing class differences, inadequate service delivery, and gender violence, probing responses from a wide range of disciplines, including film studies (see Davies and Dovey, 2010). Dias compares the gender, race, and class politics of nineteenth-century France to that of black South African culture, arguing that the socio-economic issues reflected in *Carmen* have the power to transcend the socio-economic issues of its time to allow us to question "our role in society as possible precursors of social change" (Dias, 2006:92). Viljoen (2006) focuses on Hans Huysen's opera *Masque* (2005) (another by CTO) in navigating the balance between "high" and "low" culture. Distinguishing it from "African-inspired works", criticism that perhaps invokes *Enoch, Prophet of God* (1994) and other contemporary works, Viljoen considers Huysen's opera as intended to be saturated with "genuine African spirit rather than 'superficially touch[ed] up with some exotic elements'" (Viljoen, 2006:115).⁵¹ This notion of "African spirit" is questioned in Vokwana's 2006/7 article "Opera in Africa: Music of the people, for the people, by the people". The author details the "racialisation of culture" during apartheid, questioning the idea of an "African Opera" (referring to Africanised productions by local opera companies such as Opera Africa) (Vokwana, 2006/7:13), interrogating the genre's relevance to Africa and its role in nation-building within a new South African democracy. Most significantly, Vokwana argues that the representation of Africa on the part of creative teams becomes obsessed with representing a historic, pastoral setting with "singers clad in traditional garb" (Vokwana, 2006/7:14). The author considers it problematic if a production fails to "[evoke] any ambiance of Africa", when "stripped of the element of spectacle" (Vokwana, 2006/7:15). Since musical aesthetics were a dominant part of South African opera

⁵⁰ Hofmeyr composed the work during self-imposed exile in Italy as a conscientious objector to the apartheid regime. The opera won the Nederburg Prize for Opera, and was staged at the Arena, a small venue at the State Theatre (Eichbaum, 1989:346).

⁵¹ With statements such as these, it seems plausible that scholars were desperate to identify the first great "African" opera in the post-apartheid milieu.

scholarship at this time, as seen in Viljoen (2006), the questioning of the visual representation of black South African culture in local opera by Vokwana (2006/7) is particularly significant. Despite this engagement, opera predominantly remained at the margins of South African musicology. The sheer volume of academic engagement with the topic after 2010, however, indicates that musicologists have actively turned their gaze towards South African opera, resulting in what could be described as the emergence of South African opera studies.

2.3.2 South African Opera Studies: 2010–

In respect of content, South African opera studies of the past decade can broadly be divided into two categories: scholarship that predominantly engages with contemporary South African operas (2002–); and research that illuminates previously neglected aspects of opera composition and performance during the apartheid era. To provide an overview of the field of research, I explore the emergent themes of key publications in South African opera studies before turning my attention to their methodological approaches.

2.3.2.1 *Emergent Themes*

Roos's (2010) dissertation investigates the indigenisation of opera in South Africa and can be regarded as the inaugural study that shaped South African opera studies. Reflecting on previous historiographic (and Afrikaner nationalist) approaches like those exemplified in publications by Bouws (1966, 1982) and Malan (1979–1986), Roos constructs a detailed timeline of first performances, operas, composers, and key players in the local opera scene, in order to sketch the “presentation of the genre in secondary literature as influenced by the circumstances, people, and institutions involved with opera” (Roos, 2010:71). Roos (2010) presents three case studies that illuminate her theories on indigenisation: the first is the history of the Eoan Group, where the author provides insight into Eoan's history and opera performance activities under apartheid; the second is an analysis of Hans Huysen's opera *Masque* (2005), considering the “aesthetic indigenisation” of opera, in this case specifically related to voice production; and the third is the structural indigenisation of opera as spearheaded by Cape Town Opera (Roos, 2010:16–18). Roos (2010) posits indigenisation as a constant throughout South Africa's opera history; from Afrikaner nationalist tendencies during the PAC years and the translation of opera into Afrikaans, to the performance of Italian opera by a racialised group, and the aesthetics of contemporary opera.

Following Roos (2010), the indigenisation of opera in the post-apartheid climate has been a predominant concern for researchers. In terms of the localisation of European canonical works, the productions of the Isango Ensemble have received widespread attention. Research on the company's *Impempe Yomlingo* (2007), a reworking of *Die Zauberflöte* (Davies and Davies, 2012; Olsen, 2012), has considered notable aspects of post-apartheid operatic reform. Sheila Boniface Davies and James Q. Davies (2012) consider *Impempe Yomlingo* in the light of the country's political transition, illuminating the ways in which the opera was utilised as “a vehicle for social and political change” (Davies and Davies, 2012:56). In a similar vein of

inquiry, Andrew Olsen (2012) evaluates *Impempe Yomlingo*'s adherence to operatic reform as set out by the 1996 White Paper on Arts, Heritage and Culture, evidenced in the localisation of settings, characters, and musical language (Olsen, 2012:77). Another production by the Isango Ensemble, *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha* (2005), is an interdisciplinary endeavour which has prompted engagement from multiple academic spheres. Already probed by Dias (2006), this work is the topic of investigation in Santisa Viljoen's (2012) doctoral dissertation. Viljoen (2012) focuses on the articulation and context and identity in operatic texts, specifically pertaining to this film opera. Research drawn from this study is used as a basis for Viljoen and Wentzel's (2016) article which focuses on the work's film medium⁵² and social contexts, specifically the encoding of identity through semiotic and narrative strategies "found in literature, music, and cinematic texts" that result in differing perceptions of the title character's identity (Viljoen and Wentzel, 2016:55,64). Indigenised adaptations like those discussed here allowed scholars to comfortably probe South Africa's changing opera aesthetic. However, with the composition of contemporary South African works gaining momentum from the mid-2000s, followed by the post-apartheid opera boom (2010–), the scholarly prominence of these adaptations was traded for scholarship that unpacks the content and musical aesthetics of contemporary opera in general. In terms of cultural categorisation, studies on contemporary South African operas and social contexts have constituted most South African opera studies.

With present-day critics highlighting the aesthetic trends of the PAC years, where opera was predominantly classed as white, Eurocentric, and elitist (Da Fonseca-Wollheim, 2010), the accessibility of the new post-apartheid contemporary South African operas has been underlined by many. Starting with CTO's *Five:20*, Bertha Spies's (2010) report highlights the temporal relevance of the topics, arguing that these contemporary works with relevant (relatable) themes composed in an accessible musical language addressed a "niche in [South African] cultural life" (Spies, 2010:89). Similarly, Mareli Stolp (2016:141) investigates the ways in which contemporary South African opera portrays "significant political and cultural material relevant to present-day South Africans" by considering key works in the emergent South African opera canon: *Five:20* (2010), *Mandela Trilogy* (Campbell and Van Dijk, 2014), *Winnie: The Opera* (Ndodana-Breen, 2011), and the Afrikaans opera *Poskantoor* (2014). Drawing on Richard Taruskin's 2003 article "Sacred Entertainments", which unpacks similar trends in American opera during the 1980s/90s, Stolp (2016:139) discusses the "politopera" trend in South African opera.⁵³ Gesturing towards the utilisation of historical themes and authentic (South) African musical elements, Stolp argues that opera post-1994 echoes similar trends to those described by Taruskin (2003), drawing new audiences but also commenting on local social and political issues. These approaches, Stolp posits (2016:154), have the potential to bring opera closer to the "mainstream", shifting the genre away from its "historically

⁵² In the context of this thesis, medium refers to "the means through which multimodal phenomena materialise (e.g. newspaper, television, computer or material object and event)" (O'Halloran, 2011:121).

⁵³ The emergence of this concept in South African opera had already been discussed by Spector a couple of years prior (see Spector, 2011b).

marginalised position where it was predominantly only accessible to the cultural elite”. Stolp (2016) notably highlights the immortalisation of anti-apartheid struggle-icons like Nelson Mandela (*Mandela Trilogy*),⁵⁴ Winnie Madikizela-Mandela (*Winnie: The Opera*, 2011) and Chris Hani (*Hani, Five:20*, 2010) in contemporary South African opera. In addition to their popularity among budding audiences (Stolp, 2016:147), the choice of these figures as operatic heroes/heroines also speaks to the desire to reflect elements of national identity, a crucial component of the nation-building process.

Where Stolp (2016) considers the relevance of contemporary opera within the changing opera landscape, research by Olsen and Kruger (2019) and Spies (2014) takes a different approach. In contrast to the emphasis on socio-political contexts and redress, Spies’s articles on two of *Five:20*’s operas, namely *Saartjie* (Hofmeyr, 2009) and *Words from a Broken String* (Klatzow, 2010), are concerned with aspects of musical signification, and are predominantly score-based analyses. Spies’s (2014) article on *Saartjie* considers the tragic figure Sara Baartman, contextualising the character’s operatic treatment through an in-depth overview of her life as a colonial object. In contrast, Olsen and Kruger (2019)⁵⁵ focus on the “speaking ability” of the orchestra and its capacity to convey extra-musical ideas in the opera (Olsen and Kruger, 2019:74).

Given the previous aesthetic dominance of white Eurocentrism in South African opera, it is understandable that works composed by black composers following operatic reform would prompt musicological engagement. In this regard, Naomi André, Donato Somma and Innocentia Mhlambi (2016:1) reflect on recent operatic developments in the South African cultural landscape and what they deem the emergence of “South African black operatic culture”. Such research focuses on the repertoire of black South African composers that embrace black and cultural-historical icons as subjects, coupled with a predominantly African musical language and visual aesthetic. In contrast to scholarship that underlines the “African-ness” of operas composed by white composers, post-apartheid (Viljoen, 2006; Roos, 2010; Spies, 2016), research discussing black opera has provided some balance to the narrative of South African opera, to some extent re-empowering black voices and histories previously omitted from the South African opera sphere. Mhlambi (2015) foregrounds national identity in her article on Mzilikazi Khumalo’s opera *Princess Magogo kaDinuzulu* (2002), the first mainstream opera composed by a black South African composer.⁵⁶ Commissioned with financial support from both the democratic government and the private sector, this opera, Mhlambi (2015:294) notes, primarily draws on “nationalism and nation-building vocabularies” that “resonate with the post-1994 rainbow nationalism”. Mhlambi (2015:295) considers the title character and how the Princess, a monolithic political and cultural icon of the Zulu nation, is utilised

⁵⁴ Mandela has been a favoured topic in South African opera, with numerous operas composed on his life. CTO’s *Mandela Trilogy* is discussed in Chapter 6.

⁵⁵ The research by Olsen and Kruger (2019) stems from Olsen’s (2017) master’s dissertation on the subject.

⁵⁶ Mhlambi (2015:296) lists several works that have set African epics to music such as Mazisi Kunene’s *Emperor Shaka the Great: A Zulu Epic* (1979) and Khumalo’s oratorio *Ushaka KaSenzangakhona* (1996). Other examples of operas composed with this aesthetic in mind in a South African context include Phelelani Mnomiya’s *Ziyankomo and the Forbidden Fruit* (2012) (see Boekkooi, 2012) and Neo Muyanga’s *Flower of Shembe* (2015).

to speak to a collective South African identity. In addition to Mhlambi's (2015) discussion of *Princess Magogo kaDinuzulu* (2002), two operas arguably adhering to this aesthetic as described by André, Somma and Mhlambi (2016:1) have been considered academically – Ndodana-Breen's *Winnie: The Opera* (2011) (André *et al.*, 2016; André, 2016; Mhlambi, 2016; Somma, 2016; Stolp, 2016), and Neo Muyanga's *Heart of Redness* (2015) (Stolp, 2017).⁵⁷

A cluster of articles titled "New Voices in Black South African Opera" presents a multi-faceted analysis of *Winnie: The Opera* (2011). In their introduction, André *et al.* (2016) describe the work as a full-length English/isiXhosa opera composed by a "black composer of international standing [presenting] a new kind of South African opera in conception, scope, and production" (André *et al.*, 2016:3). In each of their respective articles, the authors approach the opera from a different angle. Mhlambi (2016) considers the importance of language in *Winnie: The Opera* (2011), focusing on isiXhosa vernacular in the libretto. Somma (2016) shifts his attention towards two critical scenes in the opera (the Torture Scene and the Funeral Scene) and reflects on the genre's suitability to represent the historical/operatic figure of Winnie. In a novel approach, André (2016) connects the opera to concurrent developments in both South African opera and the global opera studies sphere, specifically broader debates concerning black American opera.⁵⁸ In her consideration of *Winnie: The Opera* as a "politopera", Stolp (2016:147) reflects on the aesthetics of the opera, which combine predominantly European musical characteristics (a full symphony orchestra, the use of Western notation, and predominantly Western tonality) with indigenous influences, such as the use of folk music native to the Transkei region (where Winnie spent her childhood years) and an isiXhosa libretto. Both *Winnie: The Opera* and *Princess Magogo kaDinuzulu*, mainstream operas adhering to this aesthetic, entail orchestration in a Western idiom for Western instruments.⁵⁹ Works composed in a Western idiom are perhaps more prone to intellectually conservative, analytically driven approaches,

⁵⁷ Black South African operas that have not yet entered the academic sphere include Phelelani Mnomiya's *Ziyankomo and the Forbidden Fruit* (2012), an opera sung entirely in isiZulu, and Sibusiso Njeza's *Madiba the African Opera* (2014).

⁵⁸ While I acknowledge André's status as an expert in the study of black opera, particularly in the context of the United States, her surprise at the vibrant black opera culture of South Africa is indicative of a naivety. In *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement* (2018), André anecdotally reflects on the "shock" she experienced when students at the South African College of Music began humming along to Verdi's "Va pensiero" chorus from *Nabucco* during a guest lecture she delivered. "I was shocked", André (2018:39) writes, "– most opera fans in the West do not know this opera at all, let alone be able to hum one of its tunes". She continues: "The students told me they had sung this tune (and, it turns out many other opera tunes) in their township choirs. I came to realize that though these students might not have attended an opera, they had been singing choruses and adapted numbers from operas [...] for generations". While this does point to the role played by the black choral tradition in South African opera, André seems to discount the fact that her audience at SACM contained opera singers that live, breathe and study the art, and are not merely "fans". For detailed perspectives on the topic of "black opera" see *Blackness in Opera* (André, Bryan and Saylor, 2012).

⁵⁹ Khumalo himself did not orchestrate the opera. Since "Zulu vocal music is not written in traditional Western notation", Khumalo's music was "transcribed by Western musicians, then orchestrated and arranged by Michael Hankinson, a British-born conductor" (Tommasini, 2004). This continues to be an issue. For example, in 2014 Neo Muyanga was commissioned to write an opera on the life of Nelson Mandela for Opera Africa; however, the composer withdrew from the project since it was stipulated that the opera would only be staged if the score contained Western instrumentation and was orchestrated by a composer trained in the Western idiom (Stolp, 2017:75). The insistence by some bodies, like Opera Africa, for an African work to be orchestrated in a Western Art tradition raises some concern. Stolp (2017:76) regards the political message this entails ("West is best") as detrimental to the decolonial approach of creating opera in a former colony.

resulting in the exclusion of black operas that do not conform to these characteristics. Stolp (2016:159), for example, excludes Mnomiya's *Ziyankomo and the Forbidden Fruit* (2012) – labelled as a significant new work – from her discussion of “politopera”. Since Mnomiya's opera has been performed only once (with piano accompaniment) in combination with excerpts from other European operas, Stolp argues it does not contain sufficient similarities to be classed with the other “politoperas” discussed in her article.

Approaches that incorporate not only contemporary opera production but also apartheid opera have illuminated previously dormant aspects of South African opera history. The research stemming from the Eoan Group Archive is significant in this regard.⁶⁰ Roos (2010) was the first to write about the Eoan Group's history in her doctoral thesis, and numerous academics have since drawn on this rich archive from a multitude of perspectives.⁶¹ The main body of research emanating from this archive has been focused on the documentation and the dissemination of the Eoan Group's history. *Eoan – Our Story* (2013, edited by Roos and Muller) presents a series of interviews along with rich visual resources and archival material that offers detailed insight into Eoan members' personal experience of performing opera under the strictures of apartheid. The political implications of the Eoan Group's performances have been considered at length by Pistorius in her PhD thesis, *The Eoan Group and the politics of coloured opera in apartheid South Africa* (2017b), as well as other articles (Pistorius, 2017a, 2018, 2019). In her article entitled “Inhabiting Whiteness: The Eoan Group *La Traviata* 1956”, Pistorius (2019) focuses on the group's historic performance of Verdi's *La traviata* in 1956, the first performance of the work by a non-white opera company in South Africa, highlighting the performativity of whiteness in South Africa's opera sphere. A significant milestone in South African opera studies has been Roos's book *The La Traviata Affair: Opera in the Age of Apartheid* (2018), which provides a detailed account of the Eoan Group's activities (1933–1980), building on her previous research on the subject (Roos, 2010, 2014a, 2014b, 2015). Connecting the strands of Eoan, CAPAB and race, Pistorius and Roos (2021) recently shed light on the opera performances that accompanied the 10th anniversary celebrations of the Republic of South Africa in 1971, arguing that the performances by the two organisations embodied different ideals: Afrikaner exceptionalism (*Aida*, CAPAB) and cultural excellence (*Rigoletto*, Eoan). Drawing on the Eoan, as well as the Artscape archive, Pistorius and Roos's article is enriched through the inclusion of photographs, specifically production photographs of CAPAB's production of *Aida*, recognising, to some extent, the power of the visual in the promotion of Afrikaner cultural ideals via opera production. Together with the emergence of multiple themes in the field, as discussed in this section, the past decade has also witnessed enormous strides in terms of research development, as I elaborate below.

⁶⁰ The materials that make up this archive were uncovered in the orchestra pit of the Joseph Stone Theatre in Athlone, Cape Town, in 2006. The materials were acquired by the Documentation Centre for Music (DOMUS) at the University of Stellenbosch in 2008.

⁶¹ These explorations are not necessarily limited to musicology. In an article that moves between musical historiography and gender studies, Roos (2016) explores the concealment of Eoan Group répétiteur Gordon Jephthas's sexuality as revealed through written correspondence.

2.3.2.2 Methodological Approaches

In contrast to the historiographical approaches evidenced in the publications of Bouws (1966, 1982) and Malan (1979, 1982, 1984, 1986), new methods of engaging with historical sources have been exemplified in research concerning the Eoan Group. The primary source of research on the Eoan Group has been the newly uncovered archive and the plethora of material that it contains. As such, the discovery and accessibility of these new sources have prompted new strategies of academic engagement. The material has been used to construct a detailed history of the Eoan Group and their activities, evidenced in the oral history used to construct *Eoan – Our Story* (2013). The methodologies employed during the compilation of the publication are discussed at length in Roos (2015). To “allow for silenced voices to speak” (Roos, 2015:185), Roos posits that developments in the field of “New Musicology”, such as the use of oral history and community interaction, enabled the authors to engage sympathetically with a sensitive topic in *Eoan – Our Story* (Roos and Muller, 2013). This approach also allowed for a construction of a co-operative history, in collaboration with members from the Eoan Group, in contrast to the conventional single-author approach that is normally utilised (Roos, 2015:192) and that arguably erased Eoan from South African music history in the first instance.

Other approaches inspired by this archive include comparative listening, as evidenced in Roos (2014b), and materialist readings of archival items, as in the case of Pistorius (2019). Roos (2014b) considers two recordings by two singers (Eoan’s tenor Joseph Gabriels and American tenor Neil Shicoff), both singing the same aria from Verdi’s *Rigoletto*, to establish whether musical literacy is audible in performance. In the recording featuring Gabriels, the singer had, up to that point (1960), learned all his repertoire by ear, only becoming proficient in staff notation after moving abroad in 1967, whereas Shicoff had received his vocal training at Juilliard. Though Roos’s article includes musical examples referencing specific interpretive performance elements such as the singers’ diction and the alteration of note rhythms, these voices are unfortunately silenced by the restrictions of the publication platform, resulting in a less riveting comparison. Nevertheless, this investigative shift towards *audible* source material rather than historiography is a significant development in South African opera studies. Similarly, Pistorius (2019) considers physical items such as costumes, props, ephemera, and financial statements relating to the Eoan Group’s historic performance of *La traviata* (1956), adopting a materialist reading to offer insights on select items in the Eoan Group Archive. Paying attention to the excessive detail of the stage production, Pistorius argues that the Eoan Group constructed an imagined Italian heritage to not only emphasise the standard of their production but also to attract white audiences.

In line with global trends established by cultural musicology, the socio-historical contexts of opera in South Africa have become a dominant focus, mirroring the socio-political milieu of the post-apartheid sphere. Reflecting on opera’s apartheid legacy, the role of contemporary South African operatic works, both new compositions and localised adaptations of canonical works, in the process of operatic reform has been widely debated, in, for example, Davies and Davies (2012) and Olsen (2012). Several studies

consider the ways in which opera has embraced the guidelines set out by the South African government, either through directly measuring operas and adaptations against these criteria (Olsen, 2012), or by weaving this thread more subtly into the broader context of their arguments—the latter being the case in most studies discussed here that consider contemporary South African repertoire. Considering the framework outlined by the White Paper in 1996, South African opera scholars have concentrated on processes of operatic reform relating to the genre’s primary dramatic texts, i.e., the libretto and score. Significantly, some contributions have been offered from outside the field of musicology, as in the case of Mhlambi (2015, 2016). A professor of African languages and literatures, Mhlambi employs the libretto as the main analytic text, arguing that this text in *Princess Magogo* aims to draw on Zulu experience to promote a national consciousness post-1994.

Aside from contributions like Mhlambi’s (2015, 2016), score-dominant hermeneutic approaches have been widely adopted in the consideration of contemporary South African opera, further pointing to the dominance of music in the study of opera.⁶² These methodologies are mostly centred on theories of semiotics and signification as denoted from the musical score. This includes research by Olsen and Kruger (2019), Olsen (2017) and Spies (2014, 2016). Close-reading strategies as methods of analysis have been widespread, with the score scrutinised for musical signifiers and their effects. In the cases of Olsen (2017) and Spies (2014, 2016) these observations are contextualised through historical overviews of the opera’s main character and political contexts. In her article on Klatzow’s *Words from a Broken String* for example, Spies (2016:31) investigates the ways in which melodic gestures promote the understanding of the interaction between two diverse cultures, namely Victorian English and African |xam (“Bushmen”), pointing towards a strategy that promotes a deeper understanding of the latter culture commensurate with the recognition and promotion of cultural diversity post-apartheid. Expanding on the score-centred methodologies discussed here, scholars have, to some extent, ventured outside the bounds of the musical score. This is either done by supplementing analysis-heavy approaches through the incorporation of other elements of the operatic work, notably opera performance, evidenced in the work of Roos (2010) and Spies (2010, 2016), or by breaking away from the score completely, as I subsequently elaborate.

Roos’s (2010) analysis of Hans Huysen’s opera *Masque* draws not only from the score and/or performance but also the author’s observations of the rehearsal process, supplemented with the opera’s reception (Roos, 2010:17–18). Using her own embodied experience supplemented with interviews, Roos offers insightful perspectives on the composer’s expectations and assumptions regarding the vocal timbre of the black cast members. Spies (2010) similarly draws on her own embodied experience attending the premiere of CTO’s *Five:20*, including musical examples that, for Spies, highlight significant compositional aspects of these works, “musical events which struck [her] on first hearing when ...[attending] the

⁶² This methodology is widely associated with the North-West University Potchefstroom’s MASARA (Musical Arts in South Africa: Resources and Applications). A detailed description of this research niche can be viewed on the University’s website (See North-West University, 2021).

performance” (Spies, 2010:80). In the method adopted by Roos (2010) in her analysis of *Masque*, there are four trends that echo elements central to my own methodological approach: first, the utilisation of audio-visual material as analytic sources; second, the consideration of a specific opera production and its relative media texts; third, the semiotic capacity of opera’s theatrical elements; and fourth, the consideration of reception texts.

The trends identified in Roos’s (2010) consideration of *Masque* are adopted in varying degrees in Stolp (2016), André *et al.* (2016) and Somma (2016). Breaking away from the primacy of the musical score, they all focus on specific opera productions, resulting in insightful observations. Stolp (2016) significantly bases her analysis of recent “politoperas” – *Five:20* (2010), *Mandela Trilogy* (Campbell and Van Dijk, 2014), *Winnie: The Opera* (Ndodana-Breen, 2011), *Poskantoor* (2014) – on audio-visual performance footage available in the public domain or privately provided to the author (Stolp, 2016:139), supplemented with reception texts.⁶³ Stolp’s predominant focus seems to rest on the thematic and musical aspects of these operas, and their socio-political relevance in the post-apartheid environment. In her article, Stolp (2016) refers to instrumentation, orchestration, singing style, and the inclusion of folk/popular songs. Stolp’s discussion of these works, though insightful, comes across as uneven. Since her descriptions are predominantly based on audio-visual material, it is surprising that Stolp comments only on visual aspects in *Winnie: The Opera* and *Mandela Trilogy*. Regarding the former, Stolp refers to the representation of ancestors and the inclusion of video projections to place the opera within the context of apartheid history, and the set design of the 2014 Munich tour of *Mandela Trilogy*, which includes intertextual references to Todd Matshikiza’s jazz opera *King Kong* (1959) (Stolp, 2016:147,160). No other aspects of staging are mentioned, which is surprising, especially considering the avant-garde aesthetic of the opera *Poskantoor*.⁶⁴ In addition, in the exclusion of text-based sources in her overviews of the first three operas, it must be noted that Stolp’s (2016) discussion of *Poskantoor* is informed by the libretto and the musical score (provided by the librettist Tertius Kapp and composer Braam du Toit respectively).

In their discussion of *Winnie: The Opera* (2011), André *et al.* (2016) underline the fact that each author had the opportunity to attend one of the premiere performances of the opera. Similar to Roos’s approach in her study of *Masque*, André (2016) observed rehearsals and dress performances prior to the work’s premiere, also drawing on her interviews with cast and production crew. Apart from drawing on embodied experience and rehearsal observations (André *et al.*, 2016:5), the authors consulted the opera’s programme booklet, which contains essays written by the composer and analytical information detailing musical themes, their integration, and the score’s harmonic language. The authors also had access to the rehearsal piano score, the libretto, and the DVD-recording of the final dress rehearsal (André *et al.*, 2016:5). Somma (2016) notably draws on this experience in his analysis of two key scenes in the opera.

⁶³ The audio-visual material is not integrated into the body of her article (the reader is advised to view the videos at their leisure), which is unfortunate, considering the digital possibilities of the online publishing platform *LitNet Akademies*.

⁶⁴ The avant-garde aesthetic of *Poskantoor* is discussed in-depth in Chapter 5 of this thesis.

Although Somma refers to the opera's programme booklet cover (also the poster) with "[t]he palindromic representation of [Winnie's] name and Janus-headed image" hinting at the complexity of the title character (Somma, 2016:34), the description of the scenes lacks a visual element.⁶⁵

In contrast to the absence of the visual references in André *et al.* (2016) and Somma (2016), Spies (2016:33) briefly supplements her analysis with the consideration of the visuality of *Words from a Broken String*, acknowledging the role played by the perceiver (viewer) in the interpretation of visual imagery in opera. Spies includes two production stills in her article that she regards as symbolic of the two contrasting approaches (academic, represented by a prop book, and emotive, through physical contact between characters) that inform the relationship between two cultures (Spies, 2016:33–34), clarifying that it would be difficult to determine to what extent the body language of the singers or their facial expressions are due to blocking or their own intuitive empathy with their respective characters (Spies, 2016:37). Though this indeterminate aspect of opera production presents a challenge for interpretation, one can only wonder what insights would have arisen had Spies chosen to approach the opera's creative team for commentary.

While the approaches drawing on embodied experience, performance, opera production and reception discussed here have contributed somewhat to the broadening of analytic material, the slow turn towards the visual aspects of opera has been partial at best, still fulfilling a supplementary and subsidiary role in the study of South African opera. Olsen (2017), for example, draws on production footage in his exploration of how the orchestra, through its "speaking ability", communicates ideas and contexts in *Saartjie* (2009); however, while the author does briefly discuss the "visual and dramatic elements" that form part of opera's "narrative texts" (Olsen, 2017:26), he clarifies that the production footage was first employed as an acoustic text to inform the text-based sources of score and libretto, and secondly used to analyse the visual elements of the monodrama in order to "understand [the character's] action on the stage and [...] how her actions are supported by the music" (Olsen, 2017:119). The inclusion of production stills is significant, but the score-dominant focus means Olsen fails to consider the work holistically.⁶⁶ Most tellingly, in the article based on this research (Olsen and Kruger, 2019) the references to production media are omitted, again ascribing a primacy to the score.

Whereas Spies (2016:33–34) considers the role of the viewer in the interpretation of opera, Viljoen (2012:113) acknowledges the role of the audience in the communication. Writing at length about the semiotics of opera in her doctorate, Viljoen (2012:113) unpacks the theatrical elements of opera, specifically costumes (contributing to identity), and set designs and scene changes (contributing to the construction of context and identity), that add to opera's "communicative efficacy". Adopting a strategy

⁶⁵ Somma (2016:46) alerts the reader in a footnote to the presence of these scenes on the opera's now defunct website.

⁶⁶ Perspectives on the meaning of the visual in *Saartjie* are probed in my paper "Seeing Venus: 'Enfreakment' and Spectacle in Hendrik Hofmeyr's 'Saartjie' (2009)" (Gerber, 2017), included as part of conference proceedings. This is elaborated upon in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

comparable to the close reading of a literary text, Viljoen combines readings of traditional stage productions of opera with the cinematic adaptation of the artform. Drawing on the operatic representation of the Other, the author utilises visual examples taken from staged productions of Western canonic works, specifically *Madama Butterfly* (costume), *Lakmé* (costume/set design) and *Le nozze di Figaro* (set design) in order to inform her reading strategies of the film opera *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha* (2005) (Viljoen, 2012:113–114).⁶⁷ Viljoen acknowledges the “multi-layered quality” of communication in opera, stating that “the discrete components of opera may be read as separate texts”. Most significantly, Viljoen (2012:115, 117) highlights the processes of interpretation in opera production, stating:

The [...] theatrical elements in opera can be inferred from the libretti, but can also be encoded by the way in which the production’s director and producer choose to articulate these elements. The performers and those responsible for costume and set designs decode the production team’s encoding during the act of interpretation. The performers [...] decode the musical and dramatic texts and [...] encode those texts during their performance. The audience encodes the performance and, by attributing meaning, encodes it again (Viljoen, 2012:115, 117).

The insights Viljoen expresses here point towards the multiple meaning-making elements within opera that stretch far beyond the bounds of the musical score; however, these relationships remain largely unexplored in South African opera studies. Muller has, however, unpacked the audience’s encoding of an opera production through the processes of reception, completely shifting away from the consideration of opera’s dramatic and performance texts. Muller (2018:13) traces patterns in reception history relating to the staging of opera in Cape Town by utilising media archives; specifically, newspaper articles and reviews from two print publications, the *Cape Times* and *Die Burger*, paying specific attention to the presence of performance aesthetics, notably staging: stage directions, set and costume design, lighting design, acting, and language (Muller, 2018:67).

It will have become clear from this discussion that South African opera studies is an emergent and prolific field of inquiry, with research adopting a multitude of approaches. Though score-based approaches and the consideration of opera as a “musical work” remain prevalent, a methodological shift has clearly occurred – resulting in work focused on not only musical aesthetics and analysis, but also on specific opera productions, reception, and new ways to engage with historical artefacts. In this regard, the obvious shift towards the consideration of the role of production elements in opera and the meaning this creates point towards the broadening of the scope of inquiry in South African opera studies, and more specifically, new directions for the study of South African opera that inform my own research. The studies by Stolp (2016), Spies (2016), André *et al.* (2016), Somma (2016) and Viljoen (2012) discussed above all engage to some extent with opera’s visual fields, whereas Muller (2018) engages to some degree with the potential reactions that such visual fields elicit. However, while acknowledging the possibility of

⁶⁷ Regarding these canonic works, the visual examples in Viljoen’s thesis are drawn from productions staged at the Royal Opera House and Opera North (UK), and Florida Grand Opera (USA).

reading opera's multiple modes as separate texts, as Viljoen advocates, I instead regard the visual production media as key to the holistic meaning making processes of opera, as I will unpack in Chapter 3.

2.4 Opera Studies and Opera on Stage

Up to this point, I have outlined the contextual history of opera in South Africa, and the development(s) of South African opera studies following post-apartheid operatic reform. Apart from highlighting the addition of forgotten narratives to South Africa's opera history, this discussion has thus far focused on engagement within the South African academic domain with contemporary opera and, more specifically, with how this relates to developments in the realm of South African opera performance. The present dominance of socio-cultural/political contextualisation in South African opera studies, however, closely mirrors developments in cultural musicology: a moment when Anglo-American opera studies moved away from formalist and liberal humanist approaches (Till, 2012:2) to examine the socio-historical contexts of a work and engage with the materiality of performance practices and events, as well as the endurance of these occurrences through organisations and cultural discourses.

From the outset, opera has been a multimodal artform (Sindoni, Wildfeuer and O'Halloran, 2017:1; Hutcheon and Hutcheon, 2009:65), one made up of various puzzle pieces interlocking to form a collective whole. Despite this fact, opera scholarship long considered the score as the primary source of analysis, with the so-called extramusical elements capable of influencing the meaning and reception of the operatic work initially getting lost in the fray. "To study opera", Nicholas Till (2012:2) writes, "we have to study more than operas". In line with a call for greater interdisciplinarity, Till identifies opera studies' new investigative horizons as exemplified in two publications: Abbate and Parker's *Analyzing Opera: Verdi and Wagner* (2005 [1989]), and the launch of the *Cambridge Opera Journal* (1989–) by Parker and Arthur Groos (Till, 2012:3). The latter cast a wider net, departing from score-based analysis to encourage a multidisciplinary approach to the study of opera. Since this interdisciplinary turn, opera studies have evolved and expanded rapidly, with one key direction being the consideration of opera as seen on stage. Studies concerning opera's visual fields have traditionally been mainly historical in their approach, with a vast amount of research drawing heavily on archival sources, particularly research concerning French grand opera, as evidenced in the work of H. Robert Cohen (1991), and Cohen and Marie-Odile Gigou (1986). Arnold Jacobshagen (2001), for example, compares two staging manuals, *livrets de mise-en-scène*, of Auber's *Fra Diavolo*, highlighting staging practices in Paris. Hibberd (2014:323) similarly reflects on visual source materials, such as sketches for sets and costumes and scenery of specific productions, together with a variety of technical manuals that illuminate historic staging practices, also elaborating on the rise of special effects on stage.

In 'Analyzing mise-en-scène', Jacobshagen states that the opera as multimedia art cannot be limited to the consideration of the score of the libretto alone (Jacobshagen, 2009:176). Jacobshagen (2009:176) argues that previously neglected sources such as iconographic contexts and staging manuals contribute to the

holistic understanding of an opera, revealing aspects of interpretation that cannot be denoted by focusing solely on the score. The relevance of the visual in opera is further emphasised by the increased importance of staging during the nineteenth century, where it was regarded as an “integral aspect of a work” with its “character and individuality... realised only by way of decisions made in the performative arena (costumes, scenery, staging, etc.)” (Jacobshagen, 2009:176). This is particularly true, considering the obsession of composers such as Wagner (Syer, 2009) and Verdi, and their desire to exert control over all aspects of operatic production. Historical sources inform not only staging practices of the time but also the tradition of retaining a work’s original aesthetic. In France, staging manuals were geared towards the “art of preservation” (Cohen, 1991, quoted in Jacobshagen, 2009:178). Roger Parker (1997:130) underlines the aim of *livrets* as ascribing a fixedness to aspects of opera production to “govern the visual manner in which the operas would be revived”. It was assumed that all subsequent productions of an opera would be an exact replication of the premiere, resulting in an enduring visual aesthetic associated with the work, as in the case of Wagner (Willberg, cited in Jacobshagen, 2009:178). However, with the mid-twentieth-century advent of *Regietheater/Regieoper* – a practice where the director assumes an authoritarian role in the transformation, alteration, or reinvention of an operatic text – the enduring aesthetic legacies of canonical operas were radically transformed, necessitating scholars’ engagement with new types of operatic visuals. This was further fuelled by the rise of technology in the performance and dissemination of opera from the mid-2000s.

To explore these avenues, I turn my attention towards developments in global opera studies in this penultimate section of the literature review, specifically research that engages with opera’s visual fields. Beginning with the phenomenon of *Regietheater*, I consider the revival of opera’s visual drive. I subsequently explore the study of opera’s select visual elements (Section 2.4.2) such as staging, costumes, and lighting, as this relates to both historic staging and postmodern staging trends, before finally elaborating on the consideration of opera production as an analytic text (Section 2.4.3).

2.4.1 *Regietheater/Werktreue*

*Regietheater*⁶⁸ was aimed at “creating new experiences and understandings of canonic repertoire through defamiliarization” (Rothe, 2019). This “‘radical’ mode” of staging, Gundula Kreuzer (2006:151) writes, “supposedly cares little about stage directions in the score or ‘authenticity’” of production elements like scenery or costume design. Instead, underlying psychological, social, or political motives are highlighted to bring an old operatic work in touch with contemporary issues (Kreuzer, 2006:151–152). Clemens Risi (2019:2) notes that the *Regietheater*-trend is generally applicable to well-known works that form part of the Western canon, excluding new compositions and “‘rediscoveries’” from this debate. Radical staging also emphasises the relationship between “auditory and visual elements”, meaning that the difference between

⁶⁸ As *Regietheater* is a phenomenon first encountered in Germany, a vast amount of research on the topic has been undertaken by German scholars, particularly concerning the work of Wagner (see Garaventa, 2006; Risi, 2012, 2013).

that which is experienced in performance and the expectation of a canonical work may lead to varying opinions as to whether a *Regieoper* performance is an interpretation of a canonic work, or something new entirely. A prime example is French director Patrice Chéreau's highly contested centenary production of Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (Bayreuth, 1976). Attempting to free the *Ring* from "fossilisation" (Poll, 2018:92), Chéreau's production "evokes a nineteenth-century dreamscape: gods, giants, dwarves and mermaids in dinner jackets and petticoats scheme against a backdrop of steel dams and massive cogwheels" (Raz, 2011:91), breaking away from the romantic aesthetic inherent in the work's identity. By combining elements traditionally encountered in the *Ring*, such as Nibelheim weapons and costumes, with both nineteenth-century Industrial Revolution and contemporary visual references,⁶⁹ Chéreau adds a layer of "interpretive possibilities for spectators" (Poll, 2018:93), encouraging viewers to consider the original context of Wagner's work and its troublesome historic legacies, while offering new socio-political critiques. Since Chéreau's *Ring*, updated and radical staging has become the norm in contemporary opera production (Kara, 2018:569; Wilson, 2013:186). Revisionist stagings by directors like Hans Neuenfels (Fischer-Lichte, 2015; Risi, 2002), Peter Konwitschny (Levin, 2011), Peter Sellars (Littlejohn, 1992; Van Maas, 2011), and Calixto Bieito (Bala, 2010; McKechnie, 2008; Müller, 2014; Wright, 2004) have since become rich sites of investigation, prompting scholars to question directorial authority, politics, aesthetics, and meaning in contemporary opera production.

The same widespread cultural postmodernism that gave rise to *Regietheater* also filtered into scholarly notions of authorial intention as well as interest in the history and historicity of opera staging. In contrast to *Regietheater*, where "a fundamental disparity" exists between what is seen and what is heard, *Werktreue* aims to retain the "fidelity of a work, i.e., the words, the music and the author's intent" (Müller, 2014:590), an application that has not seriously been adopted in the staging of opera. Such approaches to staging would seem unbelievably dated in the contemporary climate and would be heavily influenced by the subjectivity of "authentic" productions as defined by production and creative teams. Furthermore, striving for "authenticity" is complicated; perhaps impossible, necessitating clarification regarding who the "author" of an opera actually is. Ulrich Müller (2014:591) argues that staging opera in this way (as the author intended or as originally staged according to nineteenth-century practices) is similarly not possible as theatre today is constantly influenced by "developments, modes, fashions", arguably more so than other visual mediums such as painting or film. Apart from the obvious developments in stagecraft during the last two centuries, this is particularly true when considering recent technological advancements concerning the dissemination of and communication surrounding contemporary opera production. These

⁶⁹ Visual references in Chéreau's production spanned multiple eras; from the Baroque costuming of the gods in *Das Rheingold*, to industrial machinery and "grandiose architecture" reminding viewers of the work's nineteenth-century origin, to a hydroelectric dam across the Rhine, "dinner jackets in the Gibichung Hall and the *On the Waterfront* setting for the end of *Götterdämmerung*", situating the work in the modern era (Carnegy, 2006: 355–356).

developments include the opera simulcast,⁷⁰ pioneered by the Metropolitan Opera (henceforth: MET) in New York in 2006 (Heyer, 2008) (subsequently adopted by opera houses across the globe) and a rise in social media engagement strategies to promote opera amongst new audiences (Belina-Johnson and Scott, 2015:9–10; Harlow, 2020). As such, new ways of *seeing* opera have led to the interrogation of that which is seen on the opera stage, both its individual elements and, more recently, as an integrated whole.

2.4.2 Researching Opera's Visual Modes: Scenography, Costumes, Lighting

Studies that analyse opera's "visual domain" (Hunter, 2014:609) have primarily focused on contemporary production modes in opera – scenography (set design), costumes, and lighting – as separate entities, with scholarship intersecting a wide range of disciplines including theatre studies and fashion. Like the widespread interdisciplinarity practiced in cultural musicology since the 1980s, recent interest in scenography is the result of theatre studies' "theoretical turn", attributed to Patrice Pavis (1980) and his introduction of "semiotic concepts" to the field. Drawing on Pavis' definition of scenography as "writing in space" ("l'écriture dans l'espace", Pavis, quoted in Balme, 2019:xvi), there has been a push to define all elements used within the spatial element of theatre, for example costume and lighting design, as scenography. However, distinguishing between these elements in opera studies is essential because of roles played by different individuals in the designing of these modes.

Early studies engaging with scenography in opera tended to focus on historical aspects of set design (see Baker, 1990; Radice, 1998; Bianconi and Pestelli, 2002) or the aesthetics of single designers (see Burian 1974, 1983). Contrary to these approaches, Ewa Kara (2015, 2017, 2018) considers contemporary opera production and scenography. In her doctoral thesis, Kara (2015) investigates the relationship between the visual and the theatrical in contemporary opera by looking at the work of three designer-directors: Robert Wilson, Achim Freyer, and Karl-Ernst Herrmann. Kara combines a close visual analysis of current production with archival research, unpacking two major developments in recent operatic culture, namely the growing importance of "scenography and visibility in global opera", and the rise of "new scenographic idioms" that undermine the previously dominant aesthetic of historicist and realist staging conventions. Her chapter in *The Routledge Companion to Scenography* (2017) outlines the current state of design in contemporary opera production. Highlighting the genre's inherent visual nature, Kara (2017:563) points out that the visual image in contemporary opera has become a "communicative tool". In the 1990s stages were "aesthetically transformed", with design consciously moving away from "traditional operatic décor" (Kara, 2017:564). Kara identifies this as the key moment in operatic design, as design started to play a more prominent role in opera production, rather than being "an ancillary element of the operatic

⁷⁰ The streaming of "live" opera through the *Met:Live in HD* and other similar platforms has caused scholars from a range of disciplines to question the topic of "liveness" in opera, together with the after effects of this new media guise on the audience and the operatic work itself (see Anderson, 2014; Atkinson, 2019; Cachopo, 2018; Irina, 2016; Van Eeden, 2011).

spectacle” (Kara, 2017:564), highlighting the developments at the Salzburger and Bregenzer Festspiele in the early 1990s as representative of this trend.

The technological advancements impacting opera stage design, particularly the use of new media such as projections on large screens, live camera work, video projections, and animations are also unpacked by Kara (2017:576). Whether realistic or artistic, projections can form part of the background, feature more prominently to support the narrative, or replace the scenery entirely, often becoming a dramaturgical tool. Kara (2017) provides an extensive overview of the latter application, focusing on, amongst others, the production designs of South African visual artist William Kentridge. Though Kentridge is not the first visual artist to move into the realm of opera (see Littlejohn, 1992), his designs for *Lulu* (Metropolitan Opera, 2015) and *Wozzeck* (Salzburg, 2017; Metropolitan Opera, 2019) point towards the transformative potential of production design. The design for *Wozzeck* utilises projections of Kentridge’s charcoal drawings that fill the entirety of the set; with images representing the landscape or the location of a scene, sometimes transforming into *Wozzeck*’s visions, “intimations of disaster that surround him” (Kentridge, quoted in Picchi, 2017). Similarly, in *Lulu* Kentridge’s aesthetic of harsh brushstrokes and black ink become representative of the “black blood spilt during productions”, with multiple versions of Lulu’s portrait projected on stage, suggesting “there is no one image of the heroine, only multiple reflections of her in the eyes of her many admirers” (Jorden, 2015).

A key player in the visual spectacle of opera, costume has been eclipsed by other visual elements in opera and theatre scholarship. Veronica Isaac (2014:556) notes that scholars are only now starting to build upon the work of theatre scholars, investigating the history of costume in opera production, and costumes in connection with the stage works of specific composers. Costume is, after all, both a tool of production (Isaac, 2014:553) and an integral part of scenography (Balme, 2019:xvi). Numerous studies have recently started to explore its signifying capacities in opera.⁷¹ Isaac (2014), for example, considers the significance of costume design of Gilbert and Sullivan’s opera *Patience* (1881) in light of the aesthetic movement. Drawing on a wide range of sources including ephemera, reviews, and production photographs (in the absence of extant garments), Isaac posits the costume design in *Patience* as satirical commentary. Most significantly, Isaac (2014:556) notes that the main purpose of costume in opera and theatre is to provide a “visual signal” of the character’s significance within the production, often reflecting parts of their inner nature. Contrasting to Isaac’s historical approach, and outside the realm of musicology, costume designer Julie Lynch (2016) focuses on contemporary opera production, exploring the semiotic and scenographic potential of costumes by comparing two productions of *The Tempest*, by Giorgio Stehler (Piccolo Theatre, Milan, 1978) and Thomas Adès (MET, 2012) respectively. Focusing on the character Ariel, Lynch explores the ways in which costume can undermine or enhance meaning in performance.

⁷¹ Though not related to Western opera, Alexandra B. Bonds (2019) has unpacked the communicative capabilities of costumes in Beijing Opera.

In a similar vein of inquiry, Hansjörg Schmidt (2014) focuses on yet another overlooked tool of production – lighting. Considering the lighting design of Max Reinhardt, Patrick Woodroffe, and Heiner Goebbels, Schmidt explores how light in opera fulfils a dramaturgical role. Most significantly, Schmidt introduces the concept of light as a “medium for communication, governed by the wish to create meaning”, as exemplified in, amongst others, the mise-en-scène of Jürgen Flimm’s *Romeo et Juliette* (Wiener Staatsoper, 2001).⁷²

2.4.3 Opera Production as Interpretive Text

Building on studies that consider the role of individual visual elements in opera production, both historical and contemporary, recent publications have increasingly considered opera holistically. This approach has largely been driven by the work of Levin (2007), who considers opera as a text in performance. Departing from traditional score-based analytic approaches, Levin (2007:7) introduces a “cross-section of modes of stage production”, with an array of analytic modes applied to a wide range of analytic objects. By splitting opera into “opera text” – what Levin (2007:11) defines as “opera’s agitated and multiple signifying systems” (libretto, score, stage directions) – and opera as “performance text” (i.e., the physical realisation of opera’s multiple semiotic texts through performance/production), Levin focuses on productions that “unsettle operas and opera”, challenging the signifying capacity expressed in “opera texts”. A significant development is the advocacy of both video and DVD recordings as sources of analysis, even though some question the validity of opera in its mediatized forms (see Morris, 2010). Levin takes issue with the idea that the embodied experience of opera should be limited to live performance as this predisposition resulted in the exclusion of mise-en-scène from operatic discourse. Drawing on Abbate’s (2001, 2004) discussion of mediation in the experience of opera, Levin (2007:10) argues for performance – both live and recorded – to be considered as an object of absorption, in a significant approach that negates the ephemerality of opera as a live performed event, thereby allowing the reader to experience the operas discussed (Levin, 2007:7). From this Levin derives a methodological basis which allows for the evaluation of stage productions based on the quality of their readings; “strong readings” would provide a defamiliarized account of the opera whereas “weak” readings would reiterate existing meanings, also discussed by Levin in his 1998 article “Reading a Staging/Staging a Reading”. Though novel, this approach is problematic, as Jennifer Sheppard (2010) rightly points out. Levin’s subjective predisposition to study only productions regarded as provocative results in a “canon of great directors and stagings on what now seems an outdated romantic or modernist model” (Sheppard, 2010:viii). Nevertheless, Levin’s incorporation of recorded performances as sources of analysis opened the floodgates, with this method informing several scholars’ approaches to opera in the last decade. In

⁷² Flimm’s production is marked by the absence of scenery and sets, with lighting designed by Patrick Woodroffe being the only scenographic element, apart from costumes. The work of Woodroffe, a successful designer synonymous with stadium concerts of *The Rolling Stones* and *Michael Jackson*, was described by the Staatsoper as “Lichtkunst”.

this regard, three scholars, Sheppard (2010), Holly Champion (2016) and Jennifer Tullman (2019), take their cue from Levin, including recorded performance texts as sources of analysis in their doctoral studies.

Four operas by Janáček are taken as case studies by Sheppard (2010:1), with the aim of resolving some of the challenges encountered in the methodologies surrounding the analysis of opera productions.

Sheppard supplements her examination of opera production with reception history. This strategy is validated due to the ephemerality of visual elements in productions that pre-date video recordings, and the fact that written texts “compromise reception history by only telling part of the story”. Sheppard follows Kreuzer (2006) and suggests the investigative scope be expanded to include staging from the premiere of an opera up to productions of recent years, to negate the reductionist effect of focusing on a single production.⁷³

Champion (2016:ii) contributes to the field of “interdisciplinary opera studies” – an “emerging sub-discipline that [addresses] contemporary opera performance” she labels as “(the) analysis of (the) modern performance of opera (AMPO)” (2016:1). By analysing four productions of Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas*, she considers the interpretive potential of performed opera by unpacking the “construction of meaning and signification through modern musical and theatrical performance”. The main focus is the ways in which meaning is constructed in these productions through the analysis of three texts: the source text, the “text” (libretto and score) and the “performance text” (Champion, 2016:37), following Levin’s (2007) definition. Rather than adopt semiotic approaches, Champion concentrates on a narrative and textual analysis, focused on dramaturgy, specifically the situation implied or supplied by the “text”.

Also focusing on a single opera, Berg’s *Lulu*, Tullman (2019) investigates the transformation of the title character in what Tullman considers to be *Werktreue* and *Regietheater* productions, also considering Olga Neuwirth’s adaptation of Berg’s opera text into *American Lulu*. Tullman (2019) adopts a well-rounded methodology, combining a semiotic analysis of staging elements with a musical and textual analysis of archival materials, together with the political, social, and cultural contexts of each production. The production analysis highlights significant features of staging that are alluded to in the opera’s dramatic texts, such as the design of Lulu’s portrait, the costuming in the opera’s opening scene, the film interlude, and Lulu’s death scene (Tullman, 2019:17). Berg’s original conception and the at times radical alteration of mise-en-scène are compared, illuminating the mediation between new and old and, most significantly, the interplay of the operatic text and the transformation of that text in modern performance.

Champion (2016) and Tullman (2019) adopt similar strategies in terms of their combination of analytic materials: strategies that resonate with my own approaches. Champion (2016:40) draws on her own experience of attending a live performance, together with archive DVD recordings, providing stills and

⁷³ This is, of course, only possible if the opera in question has a history of performance. This approach is applicable to my own research, specifically Chapter 6, which focuses on performances of *Mandela Trilogy* on both South African and foreign soil.

audio-visual examples in her text.⁷⁴ Considering the amount of extant scholarship on Purcell’s opera, Champion steers clear of a substantial score analysis, yet still reflects on the opera’s musical material through the utilisation of a range of sources ranging from modern score and libretto editions to existing studies. Tullman similarly combines DVD recordings, also consulting their accompanying booklets or production information in her analysis of *Lulu*, together with published reviews, and select musical analysis of key sections of *American Lulu* (Tullman, 2019:14–15). The effect of filming angles is highlighted by Tullman, “[limiting] the perception of certain staging elements”; however, Champion (2016:38) underlines the fact that the utilisation of filmed performance is also “detail-friendly”, assuming that editing is at work as opposed to a fixed camera position. Significantly, Champion advocates the convenience of opera’s “audio-visual mediatisation”, writing “[...] whether through DVD or live broadcast [this] offers uniquely profound potential for ‘close study’ and, in the case of DVDs [...] for repeated viewings. It also offers the possibility for scholars to study a much wider range of productions... and to study opera performance from anywhere in the world” (Champion, 2016:39).

2.5 Multimodality in Opera Studies: Recent Approaches

In the previous section, I provided a detailed look into the consideration of both opera’s individual visual modes and opera production, i.e., performed opera – the staged realisation of opera’s dramatic texts – in global opera studies. With approaches like that of Levin (2007) advocating the analysis of opera’s recorded audio-visual media, recent developments in opera studies have focused on opera’s multimodality, a prevalent concept in communication studies which denotes the presence of and integration between multiple modes. Opera’s multimodal character is apparent in the genre’s incorporation of a wide range of semiotic resources such as language, music, and body movements that are “orchestrated to produce meaning in specific contexts and cultures” (Sindoni, Wildfeuer and O’Halloran, 2017:1). These new approaches build on the investigation of opera’s individual visual elements on stage, adopting a holistic approach to the study of opera, rather than affording semiotic primacy to dramatic texts. In recent years, several scholars have published on the topic of opera and multimodality, including Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009), Everett (2015), and Fabio Rossi and Maria Grazia Sindoni (2017), with studies straddling the fields of theatre and performance studies, together with visual culture, often taking the work of social semioticians Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen (2001) as a point of departure.

Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009) focus on the semiotics of the reception of opera as a multimodal entity rather than as the encoding of intention. The authors reflect on their attendance of a performance of Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, arguing that “cultural and historical specificity” determine reception. Though the story might be familiar, the way it is told defines the “multimodal narrative experience” (Hutcheon and Hutcheon, 2009:66). The combination of what they call production media (the realisation

⁷⁴ Due to copyright restrictions, audio-visual examples are excluded from the public version of Champion’s thesis.

of an opera on stage, such as the voices, gestures and motions of the opera singers, orchestral music, stage actions and *mise-en-scène*) and design modes (the score, libretto, the director's interpretation, the input of the creative team and the performers) in opera undoubtedly create a "particular and quite specific form of [...] semiosis" (Hutcheon and Hutcheon, 2009:65).⁷⁵ Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009:65) state that, in opera, "each mode deployed has always contributed to its complex of musical, verbal, visual and dramatic meanings". The authors draw on the work of theatre semiotician Keir Elam (2005 [1980]) who, in his unpacking of the semiotisation of theatre, draws on folklorist Petr Bogatyrev (1938). Bogatyrev argued that objects and bodies are radically transformed through their placement on the stage, with this positioning "bestowing upon them an overriding signifying power" previously lacking or obscured in their "normal societal function" (Bogatyrev, cited in Elam, 2005 [1980]:5). "[O]n the stage", Bogatyrev (quoted in Elam, 2005 [1980]:5) writes, "things that play the part of theatrical signs [...] acquire special features, qualities, or attributes that they do not have in real life". Mindful of this, Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009:67) argue that, in "multimodal terms", "production adds to design [...] to accumulate meaning(s)". Rather than replacing the original texts, as Bennett (cited in Hutcheon and Hutcheon, 2009:67) argues, the authors posit that the structure of *mise-en-scène*, though created to give significance to sign(s), generates *new* meanings, which may differ from those intended in the dramatic text. In short, production does not only "'realise' design". While the production text provides directions, the interpretation and encoding of visual elements by the production teams and cast shape and limit the audience's reading of the production. Similarly, Rossi and Sindoni (2017:61) argue that each multimodal element in opera can be "read, understood and received differently", dependent on the context of reception and the semiotic expertise of the viewer. Though Rossi and Sindoni (2017:62) call for a multidimensional framework of interpretation that allows for the differences between live opera and performed opera, the authors believe that opera's complexity, being a page based as well as a performative art, means it cannot be analysed by using a definitive analytical framework (Rossi and Sindoni, 2017:65). Using an extraordinarily complex framework rooted in systemic functional grammar (Halliday, cited in Rossi and Sindoni, 2017:63), the authors conceptualise three semiotic systems of opera: (1) verbal language (the libretto) comprising parts in verse and prose, (2) music (the score) comprising vocal and instrumental music, and (3) *mise-en-scène*, which incorporates performance (voice and kinesics). and staging and design (Rossi and Sindoni, 2017:65, 67).

Everett (2015) draws her definition of multimodality from Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2001) discussion of communication, where the authors distinguish between *multimediality*, the encoding of physical media elements (print media, radio, etc.) to convey information, and *multimodality*, the utilisation of different sensory modes to construct meaning. For Everett (2015:3), *multimediality* refers to the encoding of media elements for the perspective of production and *multimodality* to the decoding of these elements on the

⁷⁵ Semiosis relates to the processes of meaning making, i.e., the signification and interpretation of modes or semiotic resources by individuals and societies.

part of the interpreter. Everett (2015:2) proposes studying opera in its totality, using a dynamic analytical model for the study of contemporary opera that considers the various factors that shape the communication process between Production and Reception. Dividing Production into three sections – pre-production (initial “source material” of the libretto and score), the production itself (i.e., *mise-en-scène*, along with previews and programme notes that elaborate on the production’s aesthetic choices), and post-production, (film versions of broadcast productions) – Everett highlights the relationship between different semiotic modes in the creation of meaning.

2.6 Conclusion

The purpose of this literature review was three-fold: the first was to provide a discursive context for the study of contemporary South African opera, illuminating critical aspects of the genre’s colonial history and the political significance associated with the performance of opera during apartheid. The second was to outline the current state of South African opera studies and the dominant investigative trends, highlighting the lacuna this study sought to address. Finally, the third unpacked recent approaches in Anglo-American opera studies, including the consideration of individual production elements, and most significantly, the study of opera’s performance text as an integrated whole.

The apartheid government, through the activities of the Performing Arts Councils, exemplified in the case of PACT, used the arts, in particular opera – a remnant of the country’s colonial history – to maintain a sense of European superiority. The grand scale of opera production during the 1980s and 1990s and the continued dependence on imported talent and canonic repertoire attest to this. The dominance of this grand European aesthetic prompted a drastic shift away from this model towards a more inclusive idiom post-1994, resulting in operatic reform that is still, in many ways, ongoing. This chapter has revealed that the study of opera in South Africa has recently gained momentum, as evidenced in multiple publications that probe South Africa’s opera history and contemporary practice. The research originating from the niche of South African opera studies (2010–) has unpacked numerous facets of post-apartheid opera reform, with musical aesthetics and socio-political relevance of themes, in particular, emerging as investigative subjects. This first decade has proven to be fruitful, not only for the academic consideration of both contemporary and historical works, but also the discovery and utilisation of new sources of analysis, as evidenced in the research stemming from the Eoan Group Archive, filling significant gaps in the country’s opera history. Furthermore, broadening methodologies that transcend traditional musicological and historiographic hermeneutical approaches have allowed scholars to move beyond the study of opera as a primarily *musical* work.

In terms of global opera scholarship, contemporary and historical opera productions, and the industry professionals tasked with the multiple facets of production, have become objects of inquiry. Specifically following the rise of *Regietheater*, the growing importance of the visual on the opera stage has led to a reinvigorated interest in opera’s visual fields. The focus on opera’s visual modes has revealed the potential

signifying capacities of *mise-en-scène* on stage, such as costume (Lynch, 2016) and lighting (Schmidt, 2014), to both undermine and enhance meaning in performance. Apart from considering these separate modes, there has also been a notable shift towards the consideration of opera as a performed text, predominantly led by Levin (2007). Significantly, Levin's adoption of both the in-house performance and recorded performance as worthy of analysis is hugely beneficial, with the latter negating the previous limitations that bound researchers to particular geographical locations.

Of these new approaches, the focus on the visual in South African opera is particularly significant. Considering the visual mode as integral to the fabric of opera as a genre, and more particularly opera's visual legacy in terms of PACT's staging of opulence and spectacle, it is surprising that the visual elements of opera production such as scenography and costume design have only recently been considered in South African opera studies. Though this neglect might stem from a lack of sources, this move away from the dominance of Eurocentric/Afrocentric musical aesthetics perhaps means that South African opera studies is ripe to join the multimodal trends exhibited in global opera scholarship. I will address this more fully in the next chapter, Chapter 3, where I detail my methodology for multimodal analysis, building on the approaches of Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009), supplemented with those of Everett (2015).

CHAPTER 3

Opera as a Multimodal Text

3.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I unpacked the history of opera in South Africa from its colonial introduction and dissemination through opera production under the auspices of PACT during the height of apartheid, to South Africa's operatic reform post-1994. The discussion revealed that the processes of post-apartheid operatic reform predominantly focused on musical aesthetics and the socio-political contextualisation of the genre, with strategies of transformation widely adopted in local opera composition and production. This new opera aesthetic, and the uncovering of previously marginalised opera histories, has in turn fuelled the growth of South African opera studies. While the role of production elements in opera and the consideration of opera as a *performed text* have been gaining traction in Anglo-American opera studies, approaches pursuing this line of inquiry have struggled to gain momentum in South African opera research. Instead, a concern with post-apartheid musical aesthetics of opera drives the dominant narrative. Although these perspectives are no doubt necessary, and can generate insightful contributions to the field, my own concern lies with the socio-political facets of opera as a visual cultural artefact, and with what we can infer from its stage presentation and everything that that entails. To that aim, this chapter presents my research approach and methods adopted for the study.

The research design for this study is based on a multimodal approach. Multimodality, or multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) (also called "multimodal analysis, multimodal semiotics and multimodal studies" (O'Halloran, 2011:120) is as an emerging field of inquiry which has experienced rapid growth since the 2000s. Multimodality queries the concrete divide between disciplines that consider meaning making because "*different means of meaning making are not separated but almost always appear together: image with writing, speech with gesture [...]*" (original emphasis) (Jewitt *et al.*, 2016:2). However, initial work in the field of multimodality focused on singular communicative modes with the application of linguistic models to modes occurring within the same semiotic domain, i.e., visual communication as a "language of images" and musical communication as a "language of music" (Van Leeuwen, 2020:466). In their introduction to *Multimodal Discourse: The Modes and Media of Contemporary Communication*, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001:1) underline the "monomodal" research emphasis of these disciplines. To clarify, the authors refer to instances where the primacy of communication was afforded to a single semiotic resource, elaborating that:

[t]he most highly valued genres of writing (literary novels; academic treatises, official documents and reports, etc.) came entirely without illustration, and had graphically uniform, dense pages of print. Paintings nearly all used the same support (canvas) and the same medium (oils), whatever their style or subject. In concert performances all musicians dressed identically and only conductor and soloists were allowed a modicum of bodily expression (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001:1).

While Kress and Van Leeuwen's position here is problematically ahistorical – simplifying, for instance, important differences between genres and media as well as changing practices in classical music performance – their statement usefully identifies a one-dimensional or monomodal approach to analysis that ultimately ignores/discounts the signifying capacity of other modes present in these texts. Rather than ascribe a fixedness to single signs and meaning, multimodal analysis is more nuanced in the sense that it considers the potential meaning of signs that are combined into an integrated whole (Ledin and Machin, 2020 [2007]:13). In multimodality, the meaning of signs is thus “realised in context through its combination with other elements”. Multimodality thus recognises the need to consider multiple modes of meaning making that are brought together into an “integrated multimodal whole” (Jewitt *et al.*, 2016:2). This underwrites one of the key assumptions of multimodality, namely that communication is always multimodal (Kress, 2005:5; Djonov and Zhao, 2014:1). Considering the co-presence of different modes, as highlighted by Jewitt *et al.* (2016:2), Kress (in Kress and Mavers, 2005:172) argues that the sole consideration of a single mode, for example language, cannot provide insight into the meanings of “contemporary messages” as these are now composed in several modes. In texts such as documents and digital media, “each mode, language included, is a partial bearer of meaning only”, thus necessitating an “interdisciplinary approach” (Bezemer, 2012) to uncover the multiple communication processes implicit in the multimodal creation of meaning. Due to the vastness of multimodal material, the management of detail and complexity surrounding the annotation, analysis, search, and retrieval of multimodal semantics patterns within and across complex multimodal phenomena is a major challenge (O'Halloran, 2011:136). However, the material nature of multimodal texts might justify the application of different theoretical approaches; for example, approaches from film studies might prove useful to video and film analysis, speaking to the interdisciplinary nature of the field.

This kind of drive towards interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches has been a prevalent thread in opera studies, in line with trends in cultural musicology, as discussed in Chapter 2. Specifically, Chapter 2 detailed trends in Anglo-American opera studies where a notable shift has occurred regarding the consideration of opera performance and an increasing focus on opera's visual fields, and how these may contribute to the reading of opera. The systematic reading of opera's multiple modes is apt, considering the genre's multimodal character, as discussed in Chapter 2 (sections 2.4 and 2.5). Taking my cue from these approaches, I want to read South African opera in a novel way. I regard opera as a *performance text*, and pay specific attention to its visuality and its multiple visual media guises. This chapter details my approaches to consider the multiple modes complicit in communication processes that take place at the interface of opera's interaction with an audience; whether that be in an auditorium, or via a screen (computer, television, or film); their role in meaning making; and their influence on reception. My research approach is derived from the multimodal perspectives of Linda and Michael Hutcheon (2009) and Yayoi Uno Everett (2015). Hutcheon and Hutcheon reflect on the semiotics of reception as shaped by opera's multiple modes, whereas Everett promotes her own model of multimodal opera discourse following a binary approach of production and reception. These approaches are detailed in the first part

of this chapter (Section 3.2 below), which outlines the research design and methodology of the study. The second part of the chapter (Section 3.3) describes the data collection strategies and analytic methods that inform the analyses of the operas discussed in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 of this thesis.

3.2 Constructing a Framework for the Multimodal Analysis of Opera

As previously mentioned, the methodology adopted for this study is a multimodal analysis of selected operas: the holistic consideration, in other words, of the multitude of meaning making modes that are combined into a whole (Jewitt *et al.*, 2016:2). In terms of existing scholarship, the application of the multimodal approach in the study of opera is a relatively new trend. Following the critical consideration of the perspectives of Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009) and Everett (2015), I devised my own framework that allows for a multimodal reading of opera production.

3.2.1 Hutcheon and Hutcheon, and the Multimodality of Live Opera

In keeping with the growing interdisciplinarity of opera studies (see Hutcheon, 2006), in their chapter “Opera: Forever and Always Multimodal” Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009) unpack the complexities of opera’s visual semiotic grammar. They posit that as an artform with a distinctive combination of text, music, and dramatic action, opera communicates meaning multimodally, i.e., through the combination of different modes – a characteristic inherent in the artform since its inception. However, as opera’s musical mode has been taken as the defining characteristic for many scholars since the beginning of Anglophone opera studies in the late twentieth century, as well as a significant topic of inquiry in musicology, Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009:65–66) shift their focus to “what *else* opera also ‘is’ multimodally”. Like Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001), Hutcheon and Hutcheon highlight the significance of Richard Wagner’s concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and of the composer himself, who was arguably the first to “create...multimodally”, exercising control over all aspects of production and “foreground[ing] how each semiotic resource brought with it new meaning [...] at every stage of the creation and reception process” (Hutcheon and Hutcheon, 2009:65). Following the phenomenon of *Regietheater*, evoking the philosophy of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* – where the multiple elements of opera on stage contribute to the collective whole – Hutcheon and Hutcheon underline the fact that: “[...] live opera is both multimedial – the eye and the ear are addressed by different material media – and multimodal, engaging voice and music, but also language, gesture, visual architectural form, colour, and many other semiotic resources” (Hutcheon and Hutcheon, 2009:66).

Considering this multimedial/multimodal nature, and in line with Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001), Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009:65) argue that opera comprises production media and design modes. To briefly elaborate, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001:66) assert that production, what they term the “communicative use of media, of material resources”, is an independently variable semiotic entity that plays an active role in the processes of communication. For Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001:66), production media are made up of different material qualities that are experienced by the senses, either

perceptively, physically or in combination. In opera, production media thus constitute the physical means of creating abstract semiotic media – voice, gesture, and action on part of the singer, the sound(s) produced by the orchestra, the blocking of the stage action and the construction of the set (Hutcheon and Hutcheon, 2009:65), encompassing the “live staging of the visual and aural” (Hutcheon and Hutcheon, 2009:74). In contrast to production, as the “material production of the semiotic product” (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001:66), design relates to the “[conceptualisation] of the form of semiotic products and events” (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001:21) and is dependent on production for its realisation. For example, a musical score (design mode) needs to be performed by a musician or orchestra (production media) in order to be decoded by an audience. The design modes in opera comprise the libretto, the musical score, the interpretations of these texts on part of the director and designers (creative team), as well as the interpretation by the cast (Hutcheon and Hutcheon, 2009:65). In opera production, media and design modes are inherently paired due to the genre’s multimodal nature, resulting in a highly specific form of “the social organisation of semiosis” (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001:67). The dramatic texts (libretto and score) (Hutcheon and Hutcheon, 2009:66; Elam, 2005 [1980]:3) form part of design modes and partly dictate aesthetic qualities of production media. However, given opera’s collaborative nature, production media might attribute meaning to processes not ascribed by design modes, thus going *beyond* the mere realisation of design (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001:66). In this regard, Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009:86) emphasise the fact that opera’s visual product on stage is the amalgamation of a team effort, with members “all interpreting the dramatic texts and developing their own way of making meaning...of telling this story” (Hutcheon and Hutcheon, 2009:68). This collaborative model thus challenges the notion of the dramatic text as a relatively fixed entity at the outset of production.

Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009) illustrate the complexity of opera’s multimodal relationships by drawing on their own embodied experience of attending three productions of Wagner’s *Ring* cycle during the 1990s, as interpreted by three directors: Otto Schenk at the MET, Harry Kupfer at Bayreuth, and Herman Wernicke at the Théâtre Royal de La Monnaie. Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009) highlight two significant aspects that shape our reception of live opera. The first of these is the “horizon of expectation”. A concept central to reception theory as formulated by literary critic Hans Robert Jauss, the “horizon of expectation” posits that when a reader (interpreter) is exposed to a work, they do not come to it as a blank slate. Instead, the work is read against their previous “literary, cultural, and social experience” in an approach that allows for the consideration of the cultural and the social in the construction of meaning (Griswold, 2013:87). For Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009:66) their “horizon of expectation” when attending *Die Walküre*, the second opera of the tetralogy, derives partly from their own experience as avid theatre and operagoers, and partly from attending *Das Rheingold* the previous evening. However, the “horizon of expectation” is dependent on audience demographic, and could include knowledge of the dramatic texts, the composer’s life, and the appropriation of their music in political contexts, or performance-specific information (Hutcheon and Hutcheon, 2009:76). Also, the “horizon of expectation”

can be influenced by previous encounters with the same opera, or the work of the designer/director and/or the artists.

Intricately linked to Hutcheon and Hutcheon's "horizon of expectation" is the paratextual network, a concept derived from the paratext, a term coined by French literary theorist Gérard Genette (1997) to describe the material framing of a text that influences the way it is received.⁷⁶ Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009:74) argue that the paratexts surrounding opera form part of the "audience's context of interpretation", feeding directly into the "horizon of expectation".⁷⁷ In this regard, the authors highlight the role of the programmes, reviews, interviews, together with seminars or conferences, "local radio and television programming ... exhibits at local museums, libraries, or the theatre itself" as paratexts that "guide and shape audience interpretation and response" (Hutcheon and Hutcheon, 2009:74).⁷⁸ Hutcheon and Hutcheon single out the programmes that accompanied Wernicke's production of *Der Ring* in Brussels as an example of the function of the paratextual network. Described as "extremely large and extensive *libretti* programs", these publications saw the supplementation of printed text with a diverse selection of images, including "photographs, paintings, and newspaper clippings" that provided the inspiration for Wernicke's production design and concept.⁷⁹ As a paratext, this programme provides the audience with essential context for the staged visual. Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009:74) explain: "[A] photo of Mussolini swimming in the Adriatic Sea alongside the text of Alberich entering the Rhine waters at the start of *Das Rheingold*: in this production, their shared bald heads not only made the Nibelung dwarf suspect from the start, but established the associative temporal setting in fascist Europe." Closer in proximity to production media than publication paratexts, the programme also features as a significant paratext which is meant to influence a spectator – "to inform, guide, motivate, provoke or confuse [...] to contextualise or explain [...] or maybe to support or subvert certain presuppositions" about a stage work (Fodstad, 2006:151).⁸⁰ However, access to paratexts is not necessarily guaranteed; programmes, for example, are not always offered free of charge. Nevertheless, Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009:74) consider the paratextual network as central to the construction of an "interpretive community", an argument central to my own approach. While Hutcheon and Hutcheon's chapter was written in 2009, the

⁷⁶ "More than a boundary or a sealed border", Genette (1997:1) writes, "the paratext is, rather, a *threshold*, or, [...] a 'vestibule' that offers that world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back". Genette quotes Philippe Lejeune (1975) who classifies the paratext as "a fringe of the [...] text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text" (Lejeune, quoted in Genette, 1997:2).

⁷⁷ Though not applicable to this study, this also resonates with Carlo Cenciarelli's (2013) discussion of paratexts connected to post-production material such as the opera video and DVD.

⁷⁸ Genette (1997:5) considers the paratext to be the sum of the peritext and epitext. Peritexts are found on the perimeter of the text, for example the images, titles, and notes inside a published work; Epitexts are located outside the text and comprise media features such as interviews, publicity texts, reviews or authorial and editorial communications. Genette also pays special attention to the moments paratexts appear, distinguishing between, for example, prior paratexts (published prior to public production), and posthumous paratexts, amongst others (Genette, 1997:5–6).

⁷⁹ Levin (2007:5–6) notes that these *Programmbefste* have become standard practice in Germany.

⁸⁰ Like other paratexts within the network, exposure is not guaranteed here. For example, if the programme is not free and an audience member decides not to buy it, their interpretation will not be shaped by the information/images contained in this paratext.

productions upon which the authors reflect were staged in the 1990s. Consequently, their unpacking of the paratextual network is thus inevitably somewhat dated as it fails to account for the digital expansion of opera. Considering this, I argue that (and will later elaborate on how) the rise in opera's digital engagement and marketing strategies has resulted in a significant broadening of the paratextual network as laid out by Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009).

In contrast to the supposed singularity of Hutcheon and Hutcheon's formulation of the concepts "horizon of expectation" and paratextual network, I campaign for the plurality of these elements within opera's multimodal network. Given the diversity of audiences and reception contexts, horizons of expectation, rather than a singular "horizon", constitute a more nuanced approach which acknowledges the emergence of these elements at an individual level, significantly shaped by the audience member's personal experience and subject position, and further complicated by the individual horizons of expectations of the production and creative teams that fuse their own interpretations to design modes. Similarly, an audience's exposure to a production's paratextual network, in the broadest sense, varies from individual to individual. For example, some might attend a pre-performance talk and read reviews prior to experiencing production media, whereas others might only access the programme on the date of the production. Similarly, some aficionados might be familiar with the controversies surrounding a specific director or interpretation, while others will be blissfully unaware. Considering the vastness of contemporary paratextual networks, it is plausible that overlapping occurs, resulting in the presence of multiple interlinked networks. To account for this plurality, I henceforth refer to *horizons of expectation* and *paratextual networks*.⁸¹

Though the "aural dimension" of each production is unique – the result of different conductors, musicians, and singers all lending their own interpretation to the realisation of design modes – and no two opera productions are the same, each with a range of paratextual networks that influences the reading of production, the *visual dimension* is considered the defining characteristic of difference between Schenk, Kupfer and Wernicke's productions of Wagner's *Ring* (Hutcheon and Hutcheon, 2009:68). The authors highlight the productions' adherence to/deviation from design modes, differentiating between "traditional" or "innovative" mise-en-scène. This perspective, although reminiscent of Levin's (1998) "strong"/"weak" binary reading of opera productions, focuses on the overall aesthetics of production rather than the subjective "artistic value" of a production's interpretation.⁸² Thus, for Hutcheon and Hutcheon, Schenk's interpretation of the *Ring* at the MET is an example of "traditional" mise-en-scène. Following Wagner's directions to the letter, "from set design to character action", Schenk's design largely ignored the "textual or motivational" ambiguities that have come to accompany Wagner's oeuvre, in an

⁸¹ Since Genette's concept formulation predates digital paratexts, I opt for the term "paratextual networks" in order to account for the broadening of the concept in light of the advent of digital media and to point towards the interconnected nature of contemporary paratexts.

⁸² I agree with Sheppard (2010:viii) that Levin's considerations are problematic precisely due to the subjectivity of terms such as "best", "strong", and "innovative".

“antiquarian production” that offered novices ease of interpretation but resulted in the frustration of those more familiar with Wagner’s dramatic texts and other productions (Hutcheon and Hutcheon, 2009:69). Contrasting to this “traditional” *mise-en-scène*, Harry Kupfer (Bayreuth) and Herbert Wernicke (Brussels) offered “innovative” interpretations that deviated from Wagner’s original dramatic text. Kupfer presented a “post-nuclear holocaust tale” and added an “interpretive frame for the audience” (Hutcheon and Hutcheon, 2009:69) by changing the entrances and on-stage presence of characters in scenes. In contrast to this, Wernicke’s staging in Brussels referenced a different visual intertextuality by drawing heavily from Germany’s political history, directly exposing the problematic links between the composer’s music and its appropriation by the fascist regime (Hutcheon and Hutcheon, 2009:70).

With radically different interpretations of the dramatic text, it is evident that new or additional meanings can be inferred via production media – meanings not necessarily suggested by the design modes (Hutcheon and Hutcheon, 2009:67). Despite *mise-en-scène*’s apparent meaning-making capacities resulting from these interpretations, Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009:70) also acknowledge the semiotic capacity of the cast, forming part of the “visual semiotic grammar” on stage, but also operating within a “musical mode”, both through their interpretation of the character and individual vocal qualities. Going even further, the authors alert us to the “diegetic” sounds that accompany stage action, informing our reading of a production. Most significantly, the authors posit *mise-en-scène* as “the theatrical construct” that combines the multiple semiotic parts of “operatic grammar”. Ultimately, Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009:68) argue that “it is the task and responsibility for the *mise-en-scène* to constrain and direct the variety of possible interpretations and responses” of the audience. However, this is an impossible feat. Due to the number of “aural and visual codes and codes of communication” opera employs (Hutcheon and Hutcheon, 2009:75), the audience cannot be bound to a single interpretation. Opera’s multimodal character thus complicates the reception of production media.

3.2.2 Everett’s Approach to Operatic Discourse

In her book, *Reconfiguring Myth and Narrative in Contemporary Opera* (2015), Everett (2015:3) formulates a model for investigating contemporary opera production “in its totality”. This dynamic analytical model for the study of contemporary opera considers the various factors that shape its communication processes. Opera’s “multimedial elements – music, libretto, film, objects, lighting, mime, and, or dance”, Everett (2015:2) writes, “operate as interdependent structural and semantic components that shape the narrative production of the whole”. Considering the unique relationship between these components, Everett (2015:3) proposes a multimodal approach to operatic discourse, detailed in Figure 3.1, paying attention to the multiple factors that shape the communication processes of opera by dividing its components into two categories namely Production and Reception.

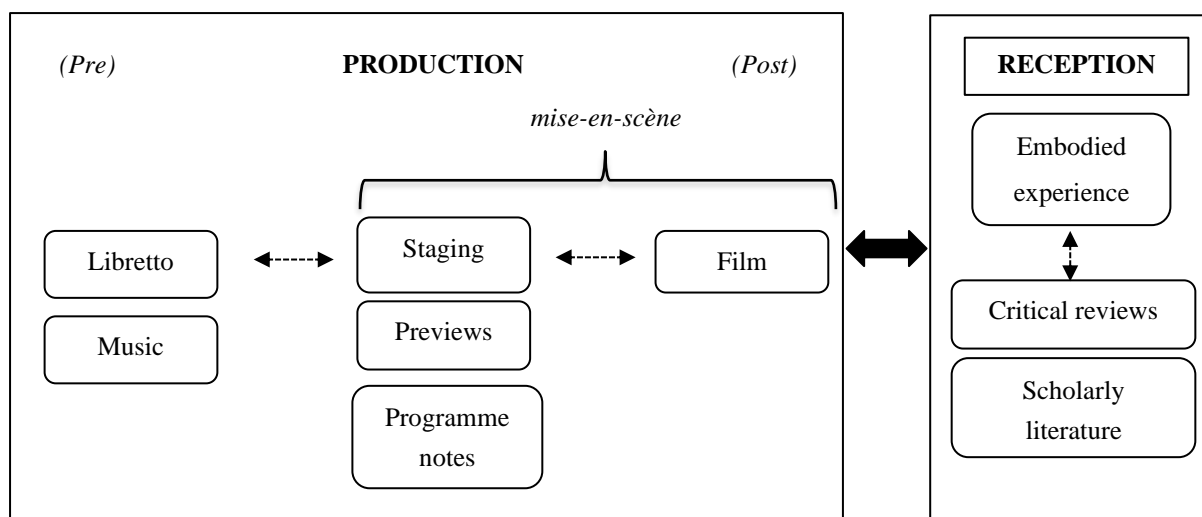


Figure 3.1: Everett's Proposed Model for Operatic Discourse (Everett, 2015:3).

Everett's model (Figure 3.1) divides production into three parts: (pre)production, production, and (post)production. The initial source material for the staged production consists of the libretto and score (the work of the librettist and the composer) and constitutes (pre)production. Following this, production itself consists of the (live) staged work (the realisation of the director, set and lighting designers, and choreographer/s), along with previews and programme notes that elaborate on the production's aesthetic choices. Under (post)production, Everett classifies a high-definition broadcast of an opera released as a film. Everett accurately observes that, due to editing, the medium of a filmed opera "shapes" the content and narrative of the opera through the use of filmic techniques, in contrast to the "holistic visual perspective" experienced in theatre (Everett, 2015:3).⁸³ The recognition of the controlling gaze of editing is significant, clearly positioning Everett's approach as more contemporary than that of Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009). As detailed in Figure 3.1, Everett considers *mise-en-scène* to be present in both the production and (post)production stages, differentiating between *mise-en-scène on stage*, which includes "props, scenery, acting, lighting, costumes, and/or music as shaped by stage direction" and the *mise-en-scène of the opera film*, which refers to "everything that is defined through the composition of the shot" (Everett, 2015:2–3). Reception comprises the embodied experience of the audience, together with reviews and scholarly critique that "shape our critical response to the work" (Everett, 2015:2). Everett employs bi-directional arrows in her model to highlight the interplay between Reception and Production, arguing that the former plays a role in the interpretive process, capable of influencing future productions of contemporary works. Everett also places great emphasis on the viewer's embodied experience in Reception, arguing that the "multiplicity of elements that shape [...] embodied experience: text, music,

⁸³ Everett's distinction between live performance and recorded performance here is significant, especially considering the debates surrounding the "liveness" of recorded performance (see Esse, 2010; Irina, 2016; Senici, 2010).

filmic images, choreography, action, lighting [...]” further complicate the multimodal experience. To navigate this complexity, Everett invokes Lars Elleström’s (2010) four modalities of media: material modality, sensorial modality, spatiotemporal modality, and semiotic modality (Elleström, 2010:15).

To contextualise Everett’s approach, it is necessary to briefly unpack Elleström’s (2010:17–24) modalities. Material modality refers to the dormant physical interface of the medium. For example, the material interface of film is a combination of changing images on a (relatively) flat screen paired with soundwaves (Elleström, 2010:17). Though Elleström acknowledges the fluidity of media materiality, he creates an approximate distinction, dividing material modality into three modes: (1) human bodies, (2) other materiality of a demarcated character, like flat surfaces and 3-D objects, and (3) those of a less demarcated character, such as sound waves and laser or light projections. Sensorial modality refers to the physical and mental acts of experiencing the medium’s interface through the senses (Elleström, 2010:17), with sight and hearing being the most prominent, albeit not exclusive, in the experience of media and arts (Elleström, 2010:18). For Elleström (2010:21), the process of interpretation “begins in the act of perception” as the material interface of media is meaningless on its own; however, semiotic modality is in effect all along as meaning creation commences in the “unconscious apprehension and arrangement of sense-data perceived by the receptors and [...] continues in the conscious act of finding relevant connections within the spatiotemporal structure of the medium and between the medium and the surrounding world” (Elleström, 2010:22). Drawing on semiotician Charles Peirce’s three categories of the sign – symbol, index, and icon – Elleström (2010:22) posits that convention (symbolic signs), resemblance (iconic signs) and contiguity (indexical signs) should be regarded as the three main modes of semiotic modality, always co-present with one normally dominating. Informed by Elleström’s modalities, Everett (2015:5) argues that our embodied response as audience members is shaped by a combination of material, sensory, and spatiotemporal modalities of experience. Referring to her own embodied experience of watching and listening to John Adams’s *Doctor Atomic* (Peter Sellars’s production), Everett (2015:5) compares the differences in seeing Act 1 scene three of the opera which depicts a “powerful electric storm”. “[T]he absence of the visual dimension in the [...] concert setting”, Everett (2015:5) writes, “failed to induce the embodied sensation of ‘panic’ [she] experienced in watching the DVD or attending Sellars’s staged productions”. Everett specifically highlights the combination of “fast, syncopated music” and the strobe lighting effect that “flickers at odd intervals and obscures the view of the stage”, and workers that frantically run back and forth on the stage. She argues that the visual semiotic fields of this scene in conjunction with the music succeeds in conveying “the physical and psychological state of panic”, without need for sung or spoken text (Everett, 2015:5).

Productive as Everett’s multimodal framework is, certain aspects nevertheless strike me as problematic. Firstly, the consideration of the libretto and score as “source texts” under the label (pre)production suggests that the libretto and the score are assumed to retain authorial primacy, as the defining characteristics of the operatic “work”, thereby negating the role of *mise-en-scène* as a major contributor to the core identity of an operatic work. Yet if one considers the minutiae of French *livrets de mise-en-scène*

and Italian *disposizioni sceniche*, which aimed to instil an equivalent fixity in the operatic text to ensure the “authenticity” of future productions (Parker, 1997:130), it is clear that staging or mise-en-scène was very much engrained into the fabric of opera. Everett’s specific model is meant for contemporary opera, so this reference to historical visual staging manuals might seem superfluous; however, Everett’s hierarchical distinction between “source texts” and mise-en-scène alone subverts the supposed multimodality of opera production and her approach (Figure 3.1). Moreover, the classification of libretto and score as sole (pre)production texts unwittingly ascribes a supposed fixity to these “texts”, conceiving them as inherently unchangeable, revered artefacts of the established opera corpus, thereby undermining their fluidity in terms of contemporary opera production and performance. In a connected vein, Everett fails to account for the role of the dramaturg or director, who increasingly has a status of authorship akin to that of librettist and composer, especially when it comes to the inception of new works. Though Everett does acknowledge the capacity of a work’s initial Reception to result in the revisions to the libretto and score as “source texts” – and also the production itself, as in the cases of Osvaldo Gojilov’s *Ainadamar* and Tan Dun’s *The First Emperor* (Everett, 2015:3)⁸⁴ – there seems to be minimal consideration for the influence of Production, as the result of the creative/artistic team’s interpretation, on Reception.

In addition to these concerns, Everett’s framework – while distinguishing between live and recorded/broadcast performance – is largely limited to proscenium-arch framed or screen-based recorded/livecast performances. However, as Christopher Morris (2012:100) illuminates, opera performance is no longer confined to the “traditional opera house”. In “Too Much Music: The Media of Opera” (2012), Morris unpacks some of the “experiments” involving the migration of opera out of the theatre, such as flashmob performances, television broadcasts of site-specific performances, and cinematic adaptations (Morris, 2012:100). The latest development in this thread is virtual reality, as seen in Welsh National Opera’s *Magic Butterfly* (Welsh National Opera, 2021), and projects like Dutch composer Michel van der Aa’s *Eight* (see Novak, 2020). In these environments, the traditional divide between performers/performance on stage and the audience falls away. To varying degrees, the viewers in these environments are immersed in the performance of the opera, thus blurring the boundaries between Production and Reception, something for which the binary construction of Production and Reception in Everett’s model fails to account.

Despite the shortcomings of both Hutcheon and Hutcheon’s and Everett’s approaches, notable parallels can be drawn between Hutcheon and Hutcheon’s perspectives on opera’s multimodality and Everett’s model of multimodal operatic discourse (Figure 3.1). Both, for example, reference programmes, set and

⁸⁴ Both these operas were extensively revised following their premieres. When Reception and premiere performance result in the reworking of an opera, as in the case of *African Songbook* (2010)/*Mandela Trilogy* (2011/2014), as I will unpack in Chapter 6, these changes warrant interrogation. In addition, the relationship between Reception and Production is problematic when new operas are shelved following their premieres, resulting in the initial Reception, whether positive or negative, becoming ingrained in the identity of the operatic work. This is the case with Hendrik Hofmeyr’s *Saartjie* (2009) and Du Toit/Kapp/Bouwer’s *Poskantoor* (2014), which I discuss in Chapters 4 and 5, respectively.

costume, and reviews in varying degrees. Everett (2015:3) includes programme notes as they elaborate on the production's aesthetic choices. However, her consideration of opera's paratexts in influencing the reception of opera is limited, whereas Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009:74) account for the relationship between the paratextual network and the "horizon of expectation". In my opinion, though, there is one element which none of these scholars highlight sufficiently: the role of the preview. Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009) do not refer to the preview, and though Everett refers to previews in her model (as elements of production, Figure 3.1), their material nature is left very vague. Everett (Personal Communication, 24 July 2020) clarifies that she generally understands previews as newspaper articles written by critics prior to the premiere of a contemporary work. However, in the digital age, the preview has come to encompass much more than texts published in print media. I argue that although previews take on various guises, the most recognisable in the opera world at the time of writing is arguably the trailer: a short audio-visual preview which offers further opportunity to read key elements and visual aesthetics of production media. Cognisant of these industry trends, and drawing on the insights of Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009), I propose the addition of trailers (as part of marketing materials) as critical video paratexts that inform the horizons of expectation in the reception of opera.

3.2.3 Trailers as Paratexts and Opera's Multimodal Network

The use of digital and social media in opera has seen unprecedented growth in the last decade. This move, primarily inaugurated by the opera simulcasts of the MET in New York in 2006 (see Heyer, 2008), has resulted in the proliferation of opera in the digital media sphere as opera companies increasingly depend upon digital engagement to draw new audiences. Chapter 2 briefly stated that this focus on the visual has resulted in several scholars interrogating opera's visual elements, whether from archival historical or contemporary perspectives. The latter has resulted in scholarship that considers the mediatisation of opera through various digital platforms, although to date these arguments predominantly debate the liveness of mediated opera.⁸⁵ Even with recent scholarly focus on opera's digital guise, I have not yet encountered studies that discuss the role of the opera trailer, a prominent video paratext in opera production and reception.⁸⁶

In line with the development of new digital forms that harness the multimodality of communication (Kress and Mavers, 2005:172), trailers, a promotional mode previously confined to the realm of cinema, have now thrived across multiple strands of the entertainment industry, including theatre and opera (Vollans, 2014, 2015). In the context of film, Carmen Daniela Maier (2009) argues that "trailers represent an important element of the promotional campaign that precedes and accompanies the release of new films" (Maier, 2009:159). Maier's (2009) perspectives on the use of the film trailer as a marketing tool are

⁸⁵ The latest insights have explored the behind-the-scenes look offered by opera cinema (see Atkinson, 2019).

⁸⁶ In his PhD thesis, Ed Vollans (2014) explores the expansion of the trailer into realms beyond that of film and television, specifically the rise of the theatre trailer and the book trailer.

highly transferable to opera, and it could be argued that trailers in this context are “[d]esigned to introduce a new [opera (production)] to prospective viewers” (Maier, 2009:159).

Opera trailers have formed an increasingly dominant part of opera companies’ marketing strategies in keeping with the genre’s digital proliferation. The migration of opera from the proscenium-arch stage to film screens and other digital devices because of the global pandemic has further foregrounded the essential nature of visual engagement. In this regard, opera trailers – like film trailers – are engineered to whet audiences’ appetites for a specific production. This is especially the case when new interpretations of canonic operas are offered.⁸⁷ Prime examples of this are the YouTube channels of the MET in New York, and the Royal Opera House (henceforth: ROH) in London, both of which contain multiple trailers from past and upcoming seasons.⁸⁸ Different strategies are adopted by both, with the MET predominantly utilising footage from existing productions, whereas ROH adopts a more conceptual approach that contains no production footage but rather visual clues regarding the overall production aesthetic.⁸⁹ The latter is seen in the trailers of *Guillaume Tell* (2015) (Royal Opera House, 2015) and *Lucia di Lammermoor* (2016) (Royal Opera House, 2016), productions that drew widespread opinions from critics and ROH audiences. The trailer for the 2015 production of Rossini’s *Guillaume Tell* directed by Damiano Michieletto, for example, combines the energetic overture and visuals of an arrow leaving a bow, as per the opera’s plot, combined with a timelapse depicting the germination of a seed, and brief close-ups of the production design which featured a giant uprooted tree. This imagery is interspersed with title cards, showing phrases like “Opera’s Greatest Overture... is only the start” and “A Breathtaking New Staging” (Royal Opera House, 2015). The trailer makes no reference to Michieletto’s widely contested inclusion of an explicit sexual assault scene of almost 5 minutes, though it is quite possible that the trailer was created before certain production details were finalised. Still, the strong reaction elicited by the production measured against the seemingly innocent nature of the trailer leads me to posit the opera trailer as a particularly valuable source for analysis.⁹⁰ Given the importance of the trailer in the promotion of cultural products in recent years, I argue that this tool of production forms part of the paratextual networks which in turn inform the horizons of expectation, as outlined by Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009), accompanying us in viewing a performance, whether live or recorded. The trailer accompanies additional paratexts, such as interviews (which are increasingly filmed), and behind-the-scenes footage (a favourite of the MET Live in HD; see Atkinson, 2019), along with other elements of the “promotional network” including websites,

⁸⁷ In opera, this trend is strongly associated with the rise and popularity of the HD-broadcast (and the universal upsurge of digital and social media in opera) (Belina-Johnson and Scott, 2015:9).

⁸⁸ At the time of writing, the MET’s YouTube Channel (which is divided into various categories), features 28 trailers. During the COVID-19 pandemic, ROH uploaded a series of trailers to generate engagement with their #OurHousetoYourHouse Campaign, which saw the “premiere streaming” of several ROH productions.

⁸⁹ In a tweet from 2014, ROH refers to their trailer for Stefan Herheim’s 2013 production of *Les Vêpres siciliennes* stating that the style of the trailer is somewhat determined by extant footage (Royal Opera House, 2014).

⁹⁰ This production caused heated debate both in the UK and internationally (see Fitzpatrick, 2018). Despite its controversy, which resulted in ROH “toning it down”, Michieletto’s production was most recently restaged in Palermo (see Imam, 2018).

posters, magazine publications, and media features (Maier, 2009:159–60) – all constituting part of the paratextual networks that accompany opera production.

Building on these insights, I have devised a framework that seeks to address the multiple parts of opera's multimodal network, modelled on those of Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009) and Everett (2015). Based on their terminology, with my own additions, this dynamic model (Figure 3.2) accounts for the integral relationship between the multiple parts of opera production and the processes of reception. The relationships between design modes, production media, paratextual networks, and multiple horizons of expectation thus encompass the multimodal network of opera production, as I have mapped out in Figure 3.2.

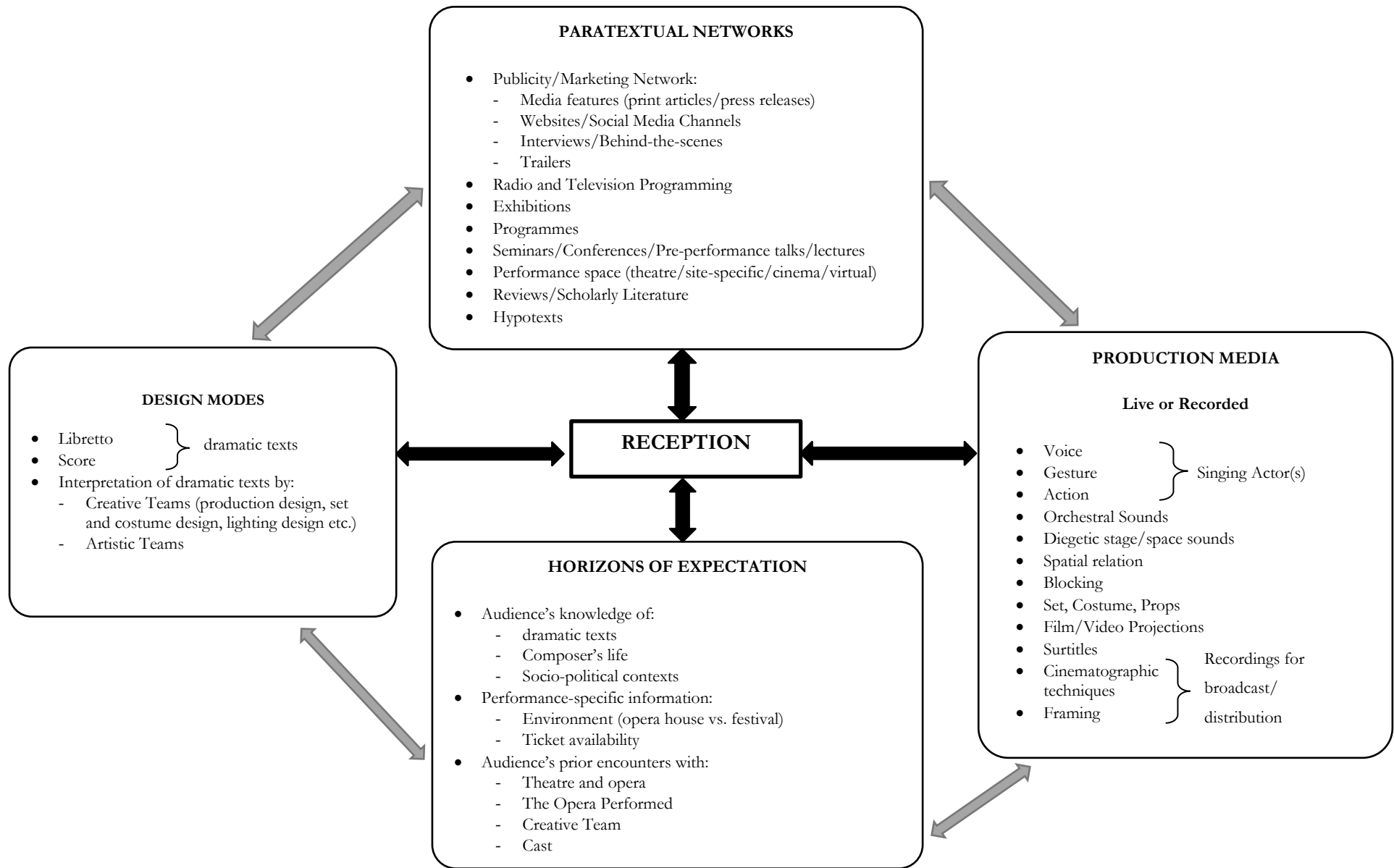


Figure 3.2: Opera's Multimodal Network, derived from Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009) and Everett (2015).

This framework maps out the multimodal network of opera production, primarily derived from Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009), supplemented with perspectives from Everett (2015), and comprises design modes, production media, paratextual networks, and multiple horizons of expectation. The bi-directional arrows indicate the dynamic relationships between these entities, with reception at its nexus.

As previously unpacked (section 3.2.1), design modes are the conceptualised form of semiotic products and events – in the case of opera, these include the libretto and the score, together with the interpretations of these on the part of the creative production and artistic teams. In keeping with Levin’s (2007) advocacy of recorded performance texts as important sources for analysis, production media are the physical realisation of design modes, whether through live or mediated performance. Production media include anything related to the visual realisation of opera: the action of the cast on stage, costuming, the set and lighting, the spatial relation between audience and stage action. In the case of recorded performance, the purpose of the recording also needs to be considered. Christopher Balme (2008) distinguishes between recordings for archival or documentary purposes and professional recording as these “represent different degrees of distance from the original theatre production” (Balme, 2008:139).⁹¹ For example, a filmed recording that maintains a fixed proscenium front view of the production will show the viewer a different visual than a studio recording, or productions edited for broadcast. As with production photography, the aesthetic quality is a crucial factor in the contextualisation of visual artefacts like photographs and recorded footage. Regarding the former, Balme (2008:139) notes that photographs are mainly produced for advertising purposes, images that are “products of an artistic process” that do not merely capture visual elements of production. In terms of the latter, cinematographic techniques and framing thus need to be considered when analysing recorded production media as the director, editor, and/or cameraman tend to *direct* the gaze of the viewer, focusing the viewer’s attention on certain scenes or production elements. Recognising the possible subjectivity of these visual artefacts is thus essential to the analysis of production.

Situated midway between production media and design modes are paratextual networks. Building on Hutcheon and Hutcheon’s paratextual considerations, I expand paratextual networks to account for the web of publicity/marketing that accompanies opera production at the time of writing. This includes media features (magazine and newspaper articles and press releases), websites, social media channels and interviews (across print, radio, and video platforms). Everett’s consideration of the critical reviews and scholarly literature (classed under reception in her framework) is absorbed here. Significantly, the previews that Everett (2015) considers part of production are replaced by the trailer. Material that informs or has inspired dramatic texts, classed as hypotexts, is also included under paratextual networks. Hypotexts account for cases where

⁹¹ Balme (2008:139) further divides professional recordings into subcategories considering their “degree of adaptation”: “(1) live recordings during a performance; (2) studio recordings”; and “(3) adaptations by the director or choreographer for film or television”.

extant operatic works “inspire” new works, such as Olga Neuwirth’s *American Lulu* (Tullman, 2019) (based on Berg’s *Lulu*), or, as in the context of this study, first incarnations of works that provoke modifications following their initial reception, resulting in second versions, such as *African Songbook* (2010) and *Mandela Trilogy* (2011/2014). Such original works or productions can be described as hypotexts. Meanwhile, in the broader scheme of multimodal analysis, it can be argued that in the case of venerated works that continue to be restaged and reimagined, these productions become part of paratextual networks in themselves, forming part of the “intertextual memory” against which subsequent productions are read (see Hutcheon and Hutcheon, 2009:75). Through the extensive broadening of paratextual networks (Figure 3.2), I argue that the paratextual network interacts with multiple horizons of expectation *prior* to viewing production media, thus significantly shaping audience expectations.

Horizons of expectation are unique to every viewer, as underlined by Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009:65). Here, prior knowledge of the dramatic texts, the composer and socio-political contexts come into play. Similarly, this may be informed by previous encounters with theatre and opera, the opera in question, but also the work of the creative team and the cast. For example, the involvement of a renowned director/designer in a production or a famed singer might influence audience expectation. In addition, performance specific information also plays a role. A performance in a traditional opera house environment may have a different connotation to a performance at an arts festival.⁹²

Located at the midpoint of these four concepts, Reception is the consequence of this complex multimodal network (Figure 3.2). Following Everett, this model also accounts for the capacity of reception to influence future productions, seen in the bi-directional arrows between design modes and production media.

3.3 Applying Multimodality to Contemporary South African Opera

3.3.1 Motivation and Sources

The decision to focus on three specific South African operas was motivated mainly by events relating to the reception of these operas. *Saartjie* (2009) was the first opera by Hendrik Hofmeyr to be staged since he won the Nederburg Prize for Opera for his work *The Fall of the House of Usher* in 1987. *Saartjie* formed part of a major operatic happening in post-apartheid South Africa, namely *Five:20*. This production saw the composition of five 20-minute operas by South African composers, on South African topics, in celebration of the centenary year of the South African College of Music (part of the University of Cape Town (UCT)).

⁹² In this context, arts festivals refer to variety festivals like Aardklop, the Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees (Little Karoo National Arts Festival) or Edinburgh Fringe Festival, and not highbrow festivals with specialised audiences, like Klein Karoo Klassique (the classical music equivalent of the KKNK), or, in a more international context, that of the Salzburg Festspiele or Glyndebourne Festival Opera.

Saartjie was criticised for the inconsistencies between the seriousness of the subject and the “lightweightness of the musical idiom”, which “borders on musical theatre [...] and generally makes for undemanding listening” (Blake, 2011, quoted in Stolp, 2016:143). Furthermore, *Saartjie* was subsequently excluded from Gauteng Opera’s mini revival of *Five:20* in 2015. Multiple factors might have influenced its exclusion; however, I consider the opera’s visual identity to be to blame. Since no critics or scholars seemed to explicitly address the staging of the opera as part of *Five:20* in their critiques, this piqued my interest. Encapsulating issues of historical sensitivity and contemporary operatic and visual representation, a paper I delivered at the annual South African Society for Research in Music (SASRIM) conference in 2017 addressed some of these concerns. A member of the audience severely critiqued the topic of my paper, implicitly suggesting that *Saartjie* be excluded from South African opera discourse since discussing the work granted it unmerited power and attention, further underlining the problematic nature of the opera.

Somewhat surprisingly, the Afrikaans opera *Poskantoor* (2014) escaped the censure *Saartjie* was subjected to. *Poskantoor* was nominated for several awards and widely celebrated by the press but has been slow to enter academic discourse, with only Stolp (2016) briefly discussing it in her consideration of “politoperas”. Again, the socio-political relevance took precedence in this discussion, ignoring the work’s overwhelming avant-garde visual aesthetic: a first for South African opera. With an impressive marketing campaign that comprised multiple teaser trailers, a full-length trailer and a music video, issues relating to apartheid nostalgia were conveniently sidestepped, resulting in critics lauding the opera for its innovation without addressing its aesthetic appearance. The inconsistencies between the reception of *Saartjie* and *Poskantoor* led me to question the role played by production media in the reception of an opera. In a South African context, the visual aspect in opera is particularly significant, mainly due to the genre’s association with white European opulence during apartheid, as outlined in Chapter 2, an association that remains engrained in South African visual culture. Consequently, the intersections of opera and visual culture have remained untouched by South African opera/theatre scholars. In contrast to the local dissemination of these two operas, *Mandela Trilogy* (2011/2014) has travelled extensively over a number of years, offering me the opportunity not only to examine local opinions but also to consider the international reception of these works, specifically in light of South Africa’s rise as a significant operatic powerhouse in terms of opera exports following 2010. *Mandela Trilogy* was revised multiple times following its premiere as *African Songbook* in 2010, leading me to question the possible role played by reception in the revision of the source and performance texts.

The dissemination of these three operas in the digital sphere has resulted in a wealth of source material, providing a unique opportunity to consider the visuality of South African opera, both on local and foreign soil. Broadly speaking, all the operas:

- form part of the emergent South African opera canon, and are, dependent on the opera's demographic, relatively well known in the academic as well as the public sphere;
- are based on South African themes, whether relating to colonial or apartheid history, or contemporary socio-political issues;
- are associated with prominent South African companies, whether independent, as in the case of Biblioteek (*Poskantoor*), or major, such as CTO (*Saartjie* and *Mandela Trilogy*); and
- have extensive audio-visual resources and digital legacies stored in the public domain, largely allowing for unhindered accessibility.

Given the number of semiotic modes at play in opera production performance, the nature of this study necessitated the use of a wide range of sources to ultimately investigate the role of production elements in the creation of meaning. In Figure 3.2, I unpacked my framework, which accounts for design modes, production media, paratextual networks, and multiple horizons of expectation as active parts of the reception process. With reference to this model, the range of data used for this study was drawn from multiple sources. Due to the limited availability of certain data, the resources considered vary from opera to opera. This challenge was addressed by focusing on a specific aspect of performance and/or reception in the respective chapters, as I discuss in subsection 3.2.2.

3.3.1.1 *Design Modes and Production Media*

The purpose of this study was to consider how opera production realises the multimodal creation of meaning; hence I do not provide an in-depth musical analysis of the operas discussed in this thesis. The score in this instance is examined for aspects that inform the performance text. For instance, notes on staging, blocking or gesture detailed in the score significantly inform adherences to the composer's encoding of this text and the creative team's decoding, or re-encoding of these texts via production design. I utilise complete production footage for only two of the three operas discussed, *Saartjie* (Chapter 4) and *Poskantoor* (Chapter 5). Pertaining to *Saartjie*, two performances featuring two separate casts were uploaded to YouTube by Cape Town Opera and the University of Cape Town Opera School, respectively. An archival recording of *Poskantoor* filmed during the opera's run at Aardklop in 2014 was privately made available to me for research purposes by Biblioteek Productions, and the company kindly agreed to upload this recording to YouTube as an unlisted video, making this material available to the examiners for examination purposes. The same approach was adopted in obtaining permission to include photographs from the production and conceptual photographs that accompanied marketing paratexts in Chapter 5. In instances where audio-visual material is available in the public domain, I provide links to the material in question, urging the reader to view the video paratexts/production media at their leisure.

3.3.1.2 Paratextual Networks and Horizons of Expectation

Due to the absence of production media footage for *Mandela Trilogy* (Chapter 6), I specifically focus on the relationship between the paratextual networks and horizons of expectation in local and international performances of this production. *Mandela Trilogy* has a wealth of trailers, unique to every touring destination and devised in line with CTO's international profile. Similarly, my consideration of *Poskantoor* (Chapter 5) also includes the opera's trailer.

A large proportion of press releases and media reviews for all the operas were drawn from the SA Media archive, an online platform that contains digitised copies of South African newspaper and magazine articles. Reviews were also drawn from online news websites. Due to the international reception history of *Mandela Trilogy* (Chapter 6), local journalistic articles were supplemented with reviews drawn from several global online news platforms, together with articles taken from the *Opera Magazine* archive. The scholarly literature used to supplement critical reviews was predominantly accessed through online journal platforms, with select dissertations on the operas *Saartjie* (Olsen, 2017) and *Mandela Trilogy* (Sello, 2018) also being examined.

In view of South Africa's loaded operatic history, the horizons of expectation for South African audiences are significantly influenced by socio-political context, especially due to the historical connotation of opera as a white European artform, as was discussed at length in Chapter 2.

3.3.2 Analytic Approaches

As discussed in Chapter 1, I analyse these three opera productions in terms of their design modes, and production media, together with their paratextual networks and multiple horizons of expectation, to investigate the ways in which opera makes meaning multimodally, and how this is reflected in reception. The analysis adopted in the three chapters that constitute the second half of this thesis pertains specifically to a combination of these four elements of opera's multimodal network, selected to illuminate the complex interaction between these concepts. My overall approach for the analysis of the opera productions in question can be described as a hermeneutic reading. To compensate for the limited (local) run of *Saartjie* and *Poskantoor*, and significant (international) performance history of *Mandela Trilogy*, my analytic approach in Chapter 6 differs from that adopted in Chapters 4 and 5, as I will elaborate shortly.

Though Chapters 4 and 5 follow similar analytic approaches, their respective focus differs. Chapter 4 (*Saartjie*) concentrates on the relationship between production media and design modes and subsequent reception, as revealed through critical reviews/scholarly literature (both part of paratextual networks). The dramatic texts as design modes are read first to identify stage directions and notes relating to mise-en-scène. Production design is then compared to design modes by viewing production media with these insights then subsequently read against reception. Chapter 5 (*Poskantoor*) focuses on the relationship between paratextual networks and

production media. I consider elements like the publicity/marketing network – media features, interviews, and trailers, etc. – to determine the expectations set up for the audience as the interpretive community prior to their exposure to production media. This is read against the critical reviews/scholarly literature, also part of the paratextual network, to expose any significant aspects that warrant investigation. Following this, I conduct an analysis of production media. Here, the dramatic texts are considered to analyse certain musico-dramatic relationships in production media. Due to the digital nature of the extant production footage, I was able to conduct multiple viewings, paying close attention to elements such as set and costume design, lighting, mise-en-scène, the adherence to/diversion from the dramatic texts, and key visual cues exposed/alluded to via the paratextual network.

For Chapter 6 I adopt a different approach due to a) the absence of production media footage and b) the proliferation of *Mandela Trilogy*'s paratexts. As the work has been performed more than once, this performance history has resulted in a wide range of critical reviews and scholarly literature to draw from. In Chapter 6 I therefore concentrate on the relationship between the paratextual networks and horizons of expectation. Here, I investigate the South African premiere of *Mandela Trilogy* (in its first incarnation as *African Songbook*), exploring the critical reviews and scholarly literature to map the initial responses to the work, which I argue informed CTO's subsequent revisions. I then focus on *Mandela Trilogy*'s international performance history, considering its presentation through the vast paratextual networks that accompanied its international tours, also considering reception texts. Though analysis of production media does not explicitly feature here because of the absence of production media in the public domain, multiple aspects of the production media, such as set and costume design and mise-en-scène, are visible in the trailers thanks to the inclusion of extant production footage.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has unpacked my methodological and analytical approaches for this study. Starting with Hutcheon and Hutcheon's discussion of the multimodality of opera and the semiotics of reception, it is evident that numerous modes are complicit in the creation of meaning in opera as a combination of text, music, and dramatic action. The observations by Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009) and Everett (2015) clearly illustrate that audiences construct interpretations of opera productions informed by complex multimodal and multimedial experience. Drawing from these insights, I have devised an approach to the study of opera production that considers design modes, production media, paratextual networks, and horizons of expectation, as detailed in Figure 3.2. In addition, I have outlined my motivations for selecting the operas discussed in this study, together with the sources of analysis and an outline of the analytic approach for each opera and chapter. In the following three chapters, my thesis continues with my analysis of three contemporary South African operas: *Saartjie* (2009), *Poskantoor* (2014), and *Mandela Trilogy* (2011/2014), in

each case focusing on specific reciprocal relationships between select elements within opera's multimodal network.

CHAPTER 4

The Politics of Production Media: The Case of Hendrik Hofmeyr's *Saartjie* (2009)

4.1 Introduction

On 27 August 2009, CTO hosted a media launch⁹³ for *Five:20—Operas Made in South Africa* – a landmark production in the local opera scene, as Spies (2010) and Stolp (2016) have underlined. *Five:20* saw the realisation of five uniquely South African stories in an operatic medium (Muller, 2010b). The media launch offered composers involved in the project the opportunity to share insights about their respective 20-minute operas with the press. At this event, composer Hendrik Hofmeyr elaborated on his interpretation of the tragic South African icon Sara Baartman⁹⁴ – the protagonist of his opera *Saartjie* (2009). As a Khoekhoe⁹⁵ woman exhibited in “freak show” fashion in Europe (1810 to 1815), Baartman is widely considered a paradigmatic victim of colonial brutality. Baartman’s history – a combination of facts and myth – is relatively fixed. She is a respected figure who occupies a sacred position within the South African cultural-political imagination.⁹⁶ At *Five:20*’s media launch, Hofmeyr revealed that he would not maintain the widely accepted view of Baartman as victim but rather position her as an opportunistic entrepreneur with agency. The composer’s controversial remarks at the media launch, discussed in length in this chapter, thus set the stage for the opera’s problematic reception. Considering opera’s multimodal character, Hofmeyr’s utterances as part of the opera’s paratextual networks are but one of the multiple elements that influence *Saartjie*’s reception. The interpretation of his

⁹³ The excerpt from the media launch was uploaded to YouTube on a channel named CapeTownOpera1. It was removed when the account was terminated, and it does not appear on Cape TownOpera’s current YouTube channel. Prior to its removal, this video, together with a video performance of the aria ‘Al lê die berge nog so blou’ with soprano Siyasanga Mbuyazwe accompanied by Hendrik Hofmeyr on the piano, was uploaded to another YouTube channel with the name Saartjie Baartman (2012). The latter channel provides now defunct links to the channel of origin.

⁹⁴ Numerous spellings of Sara Baartman’s names (spelled Sara, Saartje, Saartjie, and Bartman, Bartmann) have entered the discourse. In the 1811 baptismal register in Manchester her name is recorded as “Sarah Bartmann”. Throughout this chapter I use the name Baartman to refer to the historical figure of Sara Baartman, using quotations to refer to other scholars’ spellings, and Saartjie, to refer to the title character in Hofmeyr’s opera.

⁹⁵ Baartman’s people were the Gonaqua (Scully and Crais, 2008:307), an indigenous Khoekhoe (also Khoikhoi, meaning “men of men”) people who inhabited parts of Southern Africa before the arrival of Europeans in the seventeenth century. Contrary to the San (formerly called Bushmen) people, who were hunter-gatherers, the Khoekhoe were pastoralists. Historically, the amalgamation Khoe-San or Khoi-San was used to establish a “physical anthropological connection” between the two groups (Vossen, 2013:2–3), referring to all non-black inhabitants of Southern Africa. Linguistically, Khoesan is the classification of a group of languages with click consonants, under which Khoe refers to a branch of the linguistic group (Central Southern Africa Khoesan), which includes multiple Khoekhoe-dialects (see Vossen, 2013). In this chapter Khoekhoe will be used to refer to the people, whereas Khoe will refer to the language group.

⁹⁶ Of the five operas composed for *Five:20*, *Saartjie* was one of two operas that took a historical figure as its subject. The other was Bongani Ndodana-Breen’s *Hani*, based on the life of political activist Chris Hani, the leader of the South African Communist Party and head of the African National Congress’s armed wing, *uMkibonto we Sizwe*, who was assassinated in 1993.

dramatic texts via design modes and their realisation via production media also play a significant role, as this chapter will show.

It is necessary to note that Baartman's history has been subject to widespread speculation due to the lack of historical sources. For example, there is dissensus regarding Baartman's relocation to Europe in 1810. Some argue that she left the Cape of her own volition, others that Baartman's "masters"⁹⁷ forced her to move to Europe as a slave. Despite these debates, she promptly stepped into the role of the "Hottentot Venus" upon her arrival in England, where she was exhibited alongside other human curiosities in London. Baartman's voluptuous physique was the primary source of fascination for Europeans. A culturally constructed condition, *steatopygia* (Abrahams, 1998:220–221), referring to the presence of excess fatty tissue in the lower body, was used to stigmatise and fetishise Baartman's body (Hobson, 2018 [2005]:36), positioning her as Other to a European norm. Baartman's curves became her "trademark", occupying prime position in all representations of her, as will later be discussed. Baartman's exhibition drew stern critique from the African Institution, Britain's leading abolitionist organisation,⁹⁸ who were convinced Baartman was kept as a slave. Following public pressure, the court eventually opened a case to investigate the "Hottentot Venus" (Crais and Scully, 2009:95). The abolitionists hoped that the court would grant Baartman freedom from her captors and return her to Africa, resulting in a victory for their cause. However, evidence presented during the subsequent court case revealed that Baartman had signed a lucrative contract "proving" she was allegedly being exhibited of her own free will and the case was dismissed.

Like the controversy surrounding her relocation to Europe, Baartman's complicity in her exhibition is also questioned by some scholars since her assumed illiteracy, as a woman of colour in a colonial context, complicates her ability to comprehend either the contents of a contract or its signing. Clifton C. Crais and Pamela Scully (2009:98) argue that the contract was written in English. Though Baartman could understand some English, there is no evidence that she could read, and it is uncertain whether the contract was read to her or translated. Baartman's testimony was also presented to the court. Though this testimony was arguably

⁹⁷ Baartman's "keepers", as they are referred to, were Hendrik Cesars, a freed slave of the Cape in whose house she was a servant, and Alexander Dunlop, a Scottish military doctor who had arranged the transfer of Cesars and Baartman from the Cape. Cesars initially played the role of the showman in Baartman's exhibition (Crais and Scully, 2009:73).

⁹⁸ The initial investigation into Baartman's exhibition was undertaken by Zachary Macaulay (Crais and Scully, 2009:82). Secretary of the African Institution at the time, Macaulay was one of the "Four Saints" (together with Thomas Babington, Thomas Buxton, and William Wilberforce), so named for their "combination of political fervor and political activism in the cause of reform" (Crais and Scully, 2009:82, 84).

taken under duress, it revealed that Baartman had no desire to leave England.⁹⁹ She eventually ended up in France, where, after her death in 1815, her body was handed over to scientists for dissection and study. Baartman's remains, including her skeleton and bottled organs, together with a plaster cast of her body, were placed on display in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris until the 1970s. Her remains were only repatriated to South Africa in 2002, following years of campaigning by her descendants and high-profile political leaders.¹⁰⁰ Regardless of the debates surrounding the facts of Baartman's life, the treatment and objectification of her body have firmly solidified her status as a colonial victim. Consequently, representations of her are expected to convey a particular sensitivity. Cultural theorist Rosemarie Buikema (2009 [2007]:72) points out that "[w]henver an image of Sarah Bartmann (sic) appears, or a story about her is told, emotions inevitably flare-up, followed by heated debate". Hofmeyr's opera is no exception.

In *Saartjie*, Hofmeyr chose to present a fictionalised account of Baartman's death, set in Paris on New Year's Eve 1815. Saartjie arrives at a modest studio-style apartment following a day of performing. Exhausted and feverish, she reflects on her life as a human exhibit while consoling herself with a bottle of brandy. She grows increasingly weary; her thoughts turn to Hendrik Cesars, the family friend who allegedly persuaded her to leave the Cape, and she wonders if he knew what her life as a performer would turn out to be. She also reminisces about her former lover at the Cape, Daniel, and her child, Elsie, who died in infancy. She laments her life decisions and yearns for the familiarity of South Africa. She refers to the Gamtoos river of her native Eastern Cape, to indigenous birds, and to days in Cape Town spent celebrating with Daniel. In her melancholy, she sings an Afrikaans folk song. She also sings a Nguni lullaby in memory of Elsie. The New Year's Revellers' celebratory sounds echo in the streets of Paris below her apartment. In her inebriated and feverish state, Saartjie misconstrues this noise as Daniel coming to rescue her. With the sounds of cannon fire, she fears retribution, and she recites a Khoe prayer. Ultimately, seeing the "fiery stars of Africa" (fireworks) outside her window, the Voices of the Ancients (the ancestors) call her home to Africa, and she dies.

Though this plot outline might seem sympathetic to Baartman's suffering, Hofmeyr's comments as part of paratextual networks complicate such an intention. At *Five:20's* media launch, Hofmeyr revealed that he

⁹⁹ Baartman's testimony cannot be divorced from its context. Her statement is the result of a three-hour interview conducted at her residence in the presence of four European men. Given the power relationships at play, Baartman's testimony may have been the result of coaching on the part of her exhibitor (Hobson, 2018 [2005]:42; Keerseboom, 2011:65), or coercion (Crais and Scully, 2009:100–101). Keerseboom (2011:65) adds that Baartman's interview, which was conducted in Dutch via a translator, was paraphrased and translated into English. Crais and Scully (2009:100) also state that Baartman evaded answers that would put her at odds with her exhibitor, and she was unwilling to discuss her desire to end her exhibition. See the Appendix in Strother (1999:41–48).

¹⁰⁰ Baartman was finally laid to rest on the 9th of August (National Women's Day) 2002, in Hankey, Eastern Cape. Her grave was vandalised in 2008 (when the plaque was stolen) ("Sarah Baartman's grave damaged", 2005) and again in 2015 (when the plaque was defaced with paint) (Montsho, 2015), resulting in the erection of a palisade fence by the local tourism board to keep vandals at bay.

wanted to challenge the “myth” of Baartman as victim and argued that she was more than just a victim of colonial exploitation. The composer explained that during his research for the libretto, which he co-wrote with author Fiona Zerbst, he learned new information about Baartman’s life which “placed her in a totally different perspective for [him]” (Saartjie Baartman, 2012).¹⁰¹ Playing up Baartman’s entrepreneurial prowess, Hofmeyr suggests that Baartman was fully aware of the profitability of showcasing her body:

She has been celebrated, I suppose, as the ultimate African victim and, while there certainly is a component of that to her story, she was also, at the time when she was in Europe between 1810 and 1815, by far the most famous South African who had ever lived. Literally hundreds of poems and ballads were written about her, and she was in fact far more in control of her own destiny than we are commonly led to believe. She had already done little exhibitions when she was living in Cape Town to British sailors, and she found that they were fascinated by her physical attributes and that she could make money out of that. She wasn’t the innocent girl from the bush that we are led to believe. She lived in Cape Town for 15 years before she went overseas, and she was well into her thirties when she did go. Not only that, she also negotiated an extremely lucrative contract for herself in which she would take home 50% of all the profits of the show. Now I haven’t heard of a showgirl before or since who managed to do that. So, I think victim that she might have been, she was also an extremely sassy individual and knew what she was about (Hofmeyr, in Saartjie Baartman, 2012: 0:18–1:32:).

The press was quick to latch on to Hofmeyr’s controversial opinions. Journalist Fiona Chisholm (“Opera unveils real deal about Saartjie”, 2010)¹⁰² further underlined Hofmeyr’s role as “myth buster” in the *Weekend Argus*, writing: “[Hofmeyr] has burst open myths about [Baartman] as a poor exploited woman kept in a cage and made to show her naked body to gawping Europeans”.¹⁰³ Hofmeyr describes Baartman’s victim status as a “one-dimensional view” of a character he deems to be “incredibly complex” (Hofmeyr, quoted in Chisholm, 2010). The composer also contradicts the widespread myth that Baartman was exhibited in the nude, and traces the origins of Baartman’s victim status to the supposed indecency of her exhibition:

[o]ur view of her as victim is still based on strangely Victorian notions of the impropriety of a woman making a career out of showing her body on stage. Saartjie was clothed from head to toe in a kind of full body stocking showing far less than [Josephine] Baker, or any modern dancer in a leotard. The whole idea of the innocent savage taken from the bush, was, I believe a construction, which, like any good showgirl, she did her best to live up to (Hofmeyr, quoted in Chisholm, 2010).

The “famous posters” that were used to advertise Baartman’s exhibition, showing her “sideways and full front” (Hofmeyr, quoted in Chisholm, 2010) are also referred to. Baartman’s supposed status as the publisher of these posters, as denoted by the fine print, is used by Hofmeyr to undermine Baartman’s victim status. Rather than question the problematic representation of Baartman in these images, Hofmeyr instead positions Baartman as the first female publisher of South Africa, rather than an exploited woman. Though Hofmeyr is

¹⁰¹ Hofmeyr set some of Zerbst’s poems for his song cycle *Of Darkness of the Heart* (1999).

¹⁰² This published piece omits a number of paragraphs from the original press release as written by Chisholm, which CTO made privately available to me.

¹⁰³ While much of the information in this press release is derived verbatim from the media launch, new quotations from the composer are included that support and elaborate on the opinions expressed at the event. Again, myth and fact converge here.

free to interpret Baartman's legacy as he sees fit, his arguments overlook crucial political, cultural, and historical contexts that inform Baartman's victimisation. Hofmeyr's views can be described as audacious and are undoubtedly unsettling when one considers the well-ensconced history of Baartman as a victim.

As Genette (1997) and Jonathan Gray (2016) have argued, the information disseminated via – and the opinions voiced in – paratexts can influence the interpretation of a text. Whether the experience of opera's production media is in-theatre or digitally mediated, during a production run or retrospectively, these paratexts are crucial in informing the context of reception. Hofmeyr plays up Baartman's fame and entrepreneurial prowess, resulting in a reading that positions Baartman as complicit in the widely adopted narrative that underwrites her victimhood. While Hofmeyr's claim of busting myths did not escape criticism – Michael Blake (2011) writes that Hofmeyr's utterance in that regard made him “uneasy” – most of the critique of the opera is limited to the opera's *musical* mode. Blake (2011) finds the “disconnect between the seriousness of the subject matter and the lightweightness of the musical idiom” in *Saartjie* (together with two other operas in *Five:20*) “surprising” (Blake, 2011:42,44). Blake (2011:44) clarifies that, for him, “lightweight [means an] operatic idiom that borders on musical theatre, or that emphasises romantic lyricism, even sentimentality, and generally makes for undemanding listening”. He writes, moreover, that the “combined appropriation of fairground sounds, sentimental tunes, and a Nguni lullaby does not bust any musical myths”. Similarly, Stolp (2016) in her discussion of “politoperas” calls out Hofmeyr's incorporation of the Afrikaans folk song ‘Al lê die berge nog so blou’ (As long as the mountains lie so blue) – a song which would not have been in existence at the time of Baartman's death, given that the language's official recognition occurred more than a century later and that the song was only recorded in the songbook of the FAK (Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurvereniginge / Federation of Afrikaans Cultural Associations) in 1937. For Stolp (2016:144), this could be indicative of Hofmeyr's alignment with postmodern compositional techniques where “quotation, pastiche, and satire [...] [are] used to weaken the borders between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art”. Nevertheless, Stolp (2016:144) concurs with Blake (2011), and writes that: “Hofmeyr's musical portrayal of Baartman, a tragic figure in world history whose treatment in both South Africa and Europe is extremely indicative of racism, sexism, and colonialism – does not allow the seriousness of the theme or the impact of this historical figure to come into its own”.

Even though *Saartjie* received predominantly positive reviews (see Muller, 2010c; Smith, 2011a), the opera undoubtedly touched some nerves, as the concerns raised by Blake (2011) and Stolp (2016) reveal. When Gauteng Opera (henceforth: GO) restaged some of the *Five:20* opera's for its *Cula Mzansi* (2015), *Saartjie* was one of two operas excluded from the new production.¹⁰⁴ At the time, company CEO Marcus Desando

¹⁰⁴ Van Dijk's *Out of Time*, dealing with a “Black Taxi”, was the other opera excluded from *Cula Mzansi* (see Spector, 2015).

decided that the “works by Klatzow, Watt and Ndodana-Breen respectively would be a production that spoke cogently and forcefully to the questions of memory and remembering – as they drew deeply on South Africa’s history and depicted three telling episodes in the country’s history” (Spector, 2015). *Saartjie* does engage with “memory and remembering”; however, Hofmeyr’s take on Baartman’s history – that she had a hand in her own objectification for financial gain – is deeply unsettling for some. Similarly, at the South African Society for Research in Music (SASRIM) conference in Potchefstroom in 2017, my paper on Baartman (Gerber, 2017) drew stern critique from a fellow scholar, who suggested that *Saartjie* be excluded from local opera discourse since even discussing the work granted it undeserved authority and attention. Though there might have been other factors at play with GO’s choice to exclude *Saartjie* (the fact, for example, that Desando had directed Watt and Ndodana-Breen’s works for the *Five:20* premiere), these occurrences undoubtedly highlight the work’s controversy.

Given opera’s multimodal character, it is implausible to think that these reactions result solely from Hofmeyr’s musical mode. While much of the critique of *Saartjie* is levelled explicitly against the opera’s score, existing scholarly and journalistic responses to the opera have hitherto failed to acknowledge that the visual representation of Baartman in the opera may have contributed much to the impression of disrespect for the title character conveyed by the *Five:20* production. Baartman’s visual history necessitates engagement with *Saartjie*’s visual modes. This is because Baartman’s representation in the opera must be seen as a part of a vast intertextual canon of images that cannot be ignored, ranging from promotional posters and political caricatures during her own lifetime, to the display of a plaster cast of her body as a museum artefact, with traces of her display frequently referenced in contemporary pop culture.¹⁰⁵

Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009) have underlined the essential role played by the visual in opera. The authors argue that “[t]he visual impact of sets, lighting, colour, and perspective, to only mention a few, is part of [opera’s] multimodality, in that *everything* works to configure the interpretation of the audience” (my emphasis) (Hutcheon and Hutcheon, 2009:70). The role of production media – the staged operatic product – is integral to the study of an opera’s reception since this is where opera’s multiple modes converge. In *Saartjie*, production media sees the amalgamation of design modes (comprising Hofmeyr’s “lightweight” musical idiom and controversial interpretation of Baartman’s life via dramatic texts, together with the interpretation of these texts by the creative team) which are physically realised via production design and media that crucially engage the visual mode. What can be gleaned from the interpretation of Hofmeyr’s dramatic texts

¹⁰⁵ In January 2016, it was rumoured that Beyoncé would star in a biopic of Baartman’s life. The comments of chief Jean Burgess of the Gonaqua were widely published. Burgess stated that Beyoncé “[lacked] the basic human dignity” to write Baartman’s story and play the role. Burgess also expressed outrage at the fact that such representation would be problematic since Khoekhoe descendants are still a recognised ethnic group today and that any portrayal of Baartman would have a direct impact on them. (“Beyoncé not worthy of playing Sarah Baartman – chief”, 2016).

via direction (Geoffrey Hyland) and design (Michael Mitchell)? Similarly, the reading of *Saartjie*'s production media is coupled with Baartman's visual legacy and the composer's controversial opinions disseminated in the press as part of paratextual networks. In what ways do production media interact with Baartman's history? How, for example, are the combination of "fairground sounds" in Hofmeyr's score (dramatic texts) and the presence of a miniature carousel on-stage via production design play up the repetition of historical injustices that the real-life Baartman suffered? What, in sum, are the effects of these multimodal elements on the reception of *Saartjie*?

This chapter investigates the reciprocal relationship between these multimodal elements, focusing specifically on design modes and production media to provide new insights into the critical reception of *Saartjie*. Though the emphasis here rests on the relationships between design modes and production media, elements of opera's multimodal network that lie on the periphery of this focus (such as paratextual networks and horizons of expectation) are also unpacked as these are integral to the creation of an interpretive framework for the reading of production media. This chapter first explores *Saartjie*'s paratextual networks, specifically the historical visual representation of Baartman together with the composer's own position as a controversial figure within the South African musicological landscape. Baartman's visual legacy is especially significant here as it underpins the reading of the visual mode of *Saartjie*'s production media. Similarly, Hofmeyr's adherence to the autonomy principle, which complicates his presentation of a "new" reading on Baartman's victimhood, will also be explored. Once these interpretative contexts have been established, I consider Hofmeyr's design modes together with the production design to construct a framework for what Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009) might consider a "traditional" *mise-en-scène*: one that emerged explicitly in line with the composer's intentions. Using video material on the YouTube channels of CTO and the UCT Opera School, who collaborated for *Five:20*, I subsequently undertake a close reading of the work's production media, focusing on elements such as gesture, blocking, set and costume design, and props, to trace the additional layers of meaning attributed to the opera via Hyland's direction and Mitchell's design. I argue that the visual modes in *Saartjie*'s production media, aided by the opera's paratextual network, significantly contributed to the critical reception of the opera.

4.2 On Display: Visual Memory and the Legacy of Sara Baartman

"[S]tage shows die but pictures stay" – Jean-Paul Goude (quoted in Eckardt, 2019)

The legacy of Baartman's abuse, like many things in South Africa's history, is a very recent memory. Baartman was one of South African history's salient victims of colonial subjugation, racism, and sexual exploitation. Her treatment thus requires a heightened degree of sensitivity as emotions run high, as evidenced in the debate elicited by Willie Bester's "Sarah Baartman" (2001) sculpture at UCT. While contemporary artists across multiple spheres have attempted to create dignified and complex portrayals of

Baartman, any visual interpretation of her is read against an intertextual memory field rife with “racist and sexist” renderings, forming part of a wider network that necessitates the consideration of the ethics and sensitivity surrounding the visual representation of black women. Professor Nomusa Makhubu, the current head of the Works of Arts Committee (WOAC) at UCT, sheds light on the cycle of ceremonious “robing” and unceremonious “derobing” provoked by the display of Bester’s sculpture at UCT between 2016 and 2019.¹⁰⁶ “Dressing” the sculpture was, Makhubu states, “an engagement with not only looking at Sara’s body as that sort of canonised caricatured image [...] but also thinking about how people relate to image, *not only the story of Sara but the image of Sara*” (my emphasis) (Makhubu in University of Cape Town South Africa, 2018: 10:03–10:25).¹⁰⁷ The phrase “canonised caricatured image” is significant here: Baartman’s legacy is a highly visual one which unfortunately foregrounds the physical attributes for which she was objectified.

Considering Baartman’s prominence as a South African icon, it is fair to assume that most potential audience members of the opera *Saartjie* would be familiar not only with Baartman’s story but also her problematic visual legacy, since the two are inextricably connected. This assumed familiarity with Baartman’s history speaks to the audience’s knowledge of the subject within the frame of horizons of expectation in opera’s multimodal network. The heightened visuality of Baartman’s history, in this case, interacts with audience expectation, becoming a type of visual intertext against which all subsequent interpretations are read. To illuminate the intertextual visuality between the representations of Baartman and *Saartjie*’s production media, I need first to explore the visual history of Baartman, stemming from her iconographic legacy to her posthumous display as a museum artefact, to trace her canonised image. In what follows, I also interrogate the nature of her exhibition as a human curiosity via the “freak show” platform to establish similarities between her “performance” as a human curiosity and her representation in Hofmeyr’s opera.¹⁰⁸

Labelled the “Hottentot Venus”, Baartman’s exhibition in Europe positioned her as a dual specimen of both the supposed “primitiveness” of “Hottentot” peoples and savage sexual excess. The visual representation of

¹⁰⁶ In a gesture to restore dignity to the exposed Baartman, the “naked” sculpture was ceremoniously “clothed” in a kanga and a headwrap by students from UCT’s Black Academic Caucus (BAC) Womxn’s Collective in 2015 and 2016. When the sculpture was “derobed” by a white male in early 2018, the BAC Womxn’s Collective (2018) condemned this unceremonious derobing, highlighting the act as a “particular kind of public shaming that is reminiscent of the violated spectacle that the black body has been and continues to be” (BAC Womxn’s Collective 2018, quoted in Kessi, 2019:83).

¹⁰⁷ In the aftermath of the outcry following the “robing” of Baartman, and the ongoing process of “Re-Curating Art at UCT”, the WOAC curated an exhibition “Sara Baartman – A Call to Respond”, centred around Bester’s sculpture in September 2018, complete with a sound installation featuring Diane Ferris’s poem ‘A Tribute to Sarah Baartmann’, which inspired Bester to create the work, coupled with images and artworks of the “robed” Baartman sculpture when it was still on display at the Chancellor Oppenheimer Library (UCT Communication and Marketing Department, 2018). While it falls outside the remit of this thesis, it must be noted that the perspective of Makhubu, an artist herself, would benefit from contextualisation within the wider frame of visual arts and debates around censorship.

¹⁰⁸ Cognisant of the discourse surrounding the reproduction of the visual canon of Baartman (see Gordon-Chimpembere, 2011:5) and the risk of re-objectifying her and objectifying new black bodies, I include visual references here in line with Hobson (2018 [2005]:16) – to be viewed “not...as ‘evidence’ but instead as ‘cultural products’”.

Baartman stems not purely from her exhibition in London but from an existent iconographic history, as unpacked by art historian Zoë Strother (1999) and Janell Hobson (2018 [2005]). Tracing the visual legacy of the “Hottentot” in the European imagination, Strother (1999:2) underlines the central role played by language in the initial “Othering” of the Khoekhoe during the sixteenth century as a point of departure. In addition to the language barrier causing predictable misunderstanding of Khoekhoe customs, European prejudice against the characteristic clicking sounds of the Kho language contributed significantly to the emergence of the “Hottentot” discourse (Strother, 1999:3,4), with Kho being described as a “natural link between the language of men and that of the animals” (Saintine, quoted in Strother, 1999:4). Positioning the Khoekhoe as creatures existing between the realms of man and beast dehumanised them, with visual representations further supporting their subjugation (Qureshi, 2004:234). For Strother (1999:4), the history of Khoekhoe visual representation exposes the process of “transforming the Khoikhoi into the Hottentot”. The token symbols of “Hottentot iconography”, Strother (1999:4–6) argues, were established in a broadsheet by Hans Burgkmair the Elder of Augsburg, titled *In Allago* (In Algoa) (1508).¹⁰⁹ Burgkmair’s composition, which depicts two adult Khoekhoe figures and their two infant children, includes the prominent Hottentot symbols: the *kaross* – a cloak made from animal skin – together with a walking stick, sandals, and a sheepskin hat (worn by the woman). All, in varying degrees, became the visual markers of the Khoekhoe in the European imagination (Strother, 1999:5–6). The *kaross*, Strother (1999:5) argues, would become *the* defining characteristic in visual representations of the tribe. Subsequently, in the eighteenth century, the smoking pipe was added to the collection of “Hottentot” iconography first established in Burgkmair’s representation (Strother, 1999:13).¹¹⁰ Distinct from European customs at the time, which saw smoking as a distinctly male habit (Elliot, 2001:46), Khoekhoe women also smoked cannabis and tobacco like the men, and often near their children, as evidenced in illustrations in Kolb (1742) and Sparrman (1786) included in Strother (1999:14,15). For Strother (1999:6), these visual representations established a set iconography to which Baartman had no choice but to conform upon arrival in London.

Both Strother (1999) and Hobson (2018 [2005]) discuss the representation of Khoekhoe women as savage and/or disproportioned in comparison to their male counterparts, with images of savagery being combined with sexual excess. Regarding the former, women were positioned as the “missing link” between man and ape (Strother, 1999:10), with representations depicting women with “simian proportions and pendulous breasts” (Strother, 1999:11; Qureshi, 2004:234). Among the representations Strother (1999:9–11) highlights, one illustration (“A man and a woman at the Cape of Good Hope”, 1634) in a travelogue by Sir Thomas Herbert

¹⁰⁹ Interestingly, this rendering bears similarities with Albrecht Dürer’s *Adam and Eve* (1504). By drawing visual comparisons between the Khoekhoe couple and Adam and Eve, Burgkmair familiarises the former alien figures by placing them in a well-known frame of reference (Strother, 1999:5).

¹¹⁰ The image of the smoking Hottentot came to embody a perceived idleness which was used by European forces to justify their annexation of Khoekhoe lands (Strother, 1999:16,28,29).

depicts a disproportioned woman with one hand clasp[ing] bleeding entrails and her one breast flung over the shoulder to nurse the infant on her back. Regarding sexual excess, Hobson (2018 [2005]:29) argues that the representation of the bodies of African women via European travelogues created a “monstrous hyper-woman” that “seem[ed] to function as overly female compared with the European woman”. Hobson (2018 [2005]:30) points out a correlation between the so-called savageness of the female Hottentot and the sexual excess attributed to them by the scientific male gaze, which, according to Schiebinger (quoted in Hobson, 2018 [2005]:30), was concentrated on their “private parts”. In addition to the emphasis placed on breasts in these representations, the depictions of Khoekhoe women further delved into the obscene by detailing the elongated labia which they were rumoured to possess. The fetishisation of these sexual organs is exemplified in François le Vaillant’s lascivious sketch of Narina (*Hottentote à Tablier*, 1790) in his two-volume *Voyage de M. Le Vaillant dans l’Intérieur de l’Afrique par Le Cap de Bonne Espérance*, which shows a Khoekhoe woman (with the token *kaross*, hat, and tribal adornments) in a full-frontal naked display, with her “‘Hottentot apron’ or ‘tablier’” fully exposed (Wright, 2013:62).¹¹¹ In addition, much of the fascination with Baartman’s body rested in her so-called *steatopygia*. Baartman’s buttocks became her “trademark”, occupying prime position in all representations of her figure.

The established set of “Hottentot” iconography outlined by Strother (1999) and the fetishisation of the black female body (Hobson, 2018 [2005]) marks all visual representations of Baartman, the most famous of which are the two aquatints ascribed to Frederick Christian Lewis (1779–1856), dating from 1810 and 1811 respectively (Crais and Scully, 2009:74–75; Wright, 2013). There is some disagreement regarding the use of these two illustrations. Strother (1999:25) believes that both representations accompanied Baartman’s exhibition on an alternating basis; the poster showing Baartman in three-quarter view (Figure 4.2) showed viewers what they would see, with the poster depicting Baartman in profile view (Figure 4.1) “advising them on how to interpret what they see” (Strother, 1999:27). Others argue that the second aquatint (Figure 4.2) was created to accompany objections following Baartman’s court case, clearly addressing concerns of the exhibition’s indecency. Nevertheless, Baartman’s physical difference is foregrounded in both representations to varying degrees.

The first of these illustrations, entitled *Sartjee, the Hottentot Venus* (Figure 4.1) accompanied Baartman’s exhibition following her arrival in London (Wright, 2013:60). This rendering is one that undoubtedly conjures up sensationalism to accompany the printed advertisement that paints Baartman as a naked savage – the “Hottentot Venus” on display – fresh from the “interior of Africa” (Qureshi, 2004:237). It shows Baartman in profile, a position which underlines her categorisation as a “specimen” or “a type” (Strother, 1999:29) with

¹¹¹ Hobson (2018 [2005]:30) compares Le Vaillant’s depiction of Narina’s private parts to a phallus, blurring the boundaries of sexual gender and further framing Khoekhoe women as frightening and fascinating – excessively female but with male characteristics.

her buttocks, the site of her “difference”, occupying the centre of the image (Wright, 2013:60). The angle of her presentation here is deliberate; the position of Baartman’s body insinuates full nudity – while her breasts are obscured from view, an abundance of seemingly uncovered flesh is revealed to cause a stir. Contrasting to the representational norms established by travelogue culture that often places the Khoekhoe in their natural landscape, this image is devoid of nature, with Baartman standing on barren ground. The only references made to Khoekhoe tribal culture are the incorporation of the token symbols of “Hottentot” iconography – the *kaross*, the walking stick, and the smoking pipe – highlighted by Strother (1999:27). The styling of Baartman here plays up both her “Hottentot-ness” and the perceived abundance of sexuality, focusing mainly on her buttocks. Here, the woolly *kaross*, which would “traditionally” be fastened around the neck and worn as a mantle, has come undone, cascading over Baartman’s back shoulder, its strategic slippage suggestively exposing her bottom. The white fluff of the *kaross* is contrasted against the dark outline, emphasising Baartman’s figure. She holds a walking stick with a clenched fist, evoking a stance of power, undermined, and rendered absurd by her proportions. The primitive “tribal” aspect of Baartman, as a specimen of the Khoekhoe, is played up by adding a patterned headband and strings of beads that adorn her body, the authenticity of which is contradicted by Western-style footwear. Her face is covered in thick black paint, creating a “mask” that places distance between the subject and the viewer (Strother, 1999:29). A smoking pipe protrudes from her pouted lips, with a puff of smoke clearly visible.



Figure 4.1: *Sartjee the Hottentot Venus*, attributed to Frederick Christian Lewis. 1810. Aquatint with etching, printed in brown ink © The Trustees of the British Museum.

In stark contrast to this representation, the 1811 aquatint (Figure 4.2) is mostly devoid of scandal. Here, Baartman is shown in a three-quarter frontal view; a stance considered typical of the exhibition circuit (Strother, 1999:27). This representation shows Baartman “in costume”, downplaying the nudity of her first representation (Figure 4.1). Strother (1999:27) underlines the unauthenticity of this costume as a “pastiche of exotica” comprising “Hottentot” references and tribal beadwork. The *kaross*, the token symbol of the “Hottentot”, is included once again but styled in a mantle fashion, covering Baartman’s rear even while this is obscured from view. Contrasting to the focus placed on Baartman’s buttocks in Figure 4.1, in Figure 4.2 beaded necklaces of varying lengths cascade down her front, drawing the viewer’s eye down to her groin. Here, the famed “Hottentot tablier” is nevertheless hidden from view, its presence insinuated by a fringed apron made of animal skin, with decorative tassels (reminiscent of those detailed in Figure 4.1) dangling to Baartman’s ankles. As in Figure 4.1, the “authenticity” of this ensemble is again questionable, betrayed by clearly European slippers adorned with decorative bows. The background features a chair, which may allude



Figure 4.2: *Sartjee, the Hottentot Venus. Exhibiting at No. 225, Piccadilly. Lewis Delin.et. Sculp. London. Published as the act directs March 14th, 1811, by S. Baartman, 225 Piccadilly. F.C. Lewis, 1811. Aquatint with etching on paper, no dimensions stated. © British Library Board C.103.k.no.104.*

to Baartman's legendary posterior which is hidden from the viewer. A *ramkie*¹¹² is propped up against the arm of the chair, not only suggesting that which spectators may observe during her exhibition but also arguably elevating the nature of Baartman's display – this is not the exploitative showcasing of a naked slave, but rather an exhibition which enters the realm of artistic performance.

As stated, the advertisement published prior to her first exhibition emphasised Baartman's classification as a "Hottentot" and the place of her origin, the "interior of Africa" (Qureshi, 2004:237). As an ethnological exhibit, Baartman's exhibition took place alongside humans with "anatomical curiosity". Similarly, Spies (2014:66) attributes Baartman's classification as a "freak" to her distinctly non-European physique. In true freak show fashion, Baartman's "showman", Hendrik Cesars, required her to perform; apparently "obliged to walk, stand or sit as he ordered" and to "come and go into her cage, more like a bear on a chain than a human being" (Chambers, quoted in Qureshi, 2004:236). One eye-witness account refers to Cesars as Baartman's "keeper", further establishing links between Baartman's exhibition and a zoological display. The "keeper", acting as a mediator between the "silent spectacle" and the paying viewers, also invited the viewing public to inspect Baartman's posterior to ensure the authenticity of the display. Qureshi (2004:237–238) equates the reactions of Baartman's audience to visits to the local menagerie, where animals were teased and taunted by onlookers.

Eye-witness accounts presented at the court case (in Strother, 1999:43) provide further information regarding the nature of Baartman's exhibition. Baartman was not exhibited naked, although her costuming was engineered to insinuate this, presumably playing up the risqué nature to draw viewers. A skin-tight body stocking, in a colour resembling her "very dark" complexion, notably emphasised her breasts and buttocks. The room in which Baartman was exhibited at no. 225 Piccadilly contained a stage "two or three feet in height", with "a small recess at the end of the said stage into which [Baartman] occasionally retired". A musical instrument, presumably the *ramkie*, is mentioned; however, contrary to iconographic depictions, no reference is made to a smoking pipe or a *kaross*.

In the absence of visual records of Baartman's exhibition, a French cartoon *Les curieux en extase ou les cordons de souliers* (The Curious in Ecstasy or Shoelaces) by Louis François Charon (Figure 4.3) foregrounds aspects of her display. This satire offers commentary on the English and the French. Baartman's display straddles the realms of the museum and the freak show. Baartman is placed on pedestal engraved with the title "LA BELLE

¹¹² Rycroft and Impey (2001) define the *ramkie* as a "long-necked unfretted finger-plucked lute with three or four strings". It has been suggested that the *ramkie* was copied from similar instruments brought to the Cape by Portuguese slaves and pioneered by the Khoekhoe (Lottering, 2021). Whereas contemporary versions of *ramkie* are tin guitars (Afrikaans: blik kitaar) with bodies made of empty oil cans (tourist memorabilia painted in South African colours) (Lottering, 2021), the eighteenth-century incarnation of the instrument comprised a body made from a "half-gourd covered with stretched sheepskin", with one end attached to a plank which housed a bridge to raise strings made from gut or wire. The tuning pegs resemble that of a *ukulele* and were inserted from behind (Rycroft and Impey, 2001).

HOTTENTOTE” (The Beautiful Hottentot), almost statuesque, while her naked body is ogled by viewers.¹¹³ Like other iconographic representations, Baartman’s buttocks are prominent, and in this cartoon her breasts are exposed, with her areolas noticeably pronounced. Both the painted stripes on Baartman’s cheeks and forehead, and an apron, hiding the “Hottentot tablier” from view, are additional visual markers that correspond with earlier iconographic depictions (Figures 4.1 and 4.2). Although the “tablier” is obscured from the viewer, Baartman’s tassel apron and the strategic placement of her hand resting on her upper thigh with her fingers dangling down are visually suggestive of its presence, further emphasised by the concentrated gaze of the soldier on the right. Three of the five viewers in this cartoon are male (two Scottish soldiers, and a civilian) along with a woman civilian and a dog, the latter arguably suggestive of the “base, animal-like nature of the human spectators” (Sharpley-Whiting, 1999:21). The outstretched hand of the soldier on the left suggests that although Baartman is on a pedestal, nothing is off limits, and he might be able to reach out and investigate the “authenticity” of Baartman’s physical attributes. The strategic placement of the woman in white, kneeling to tie her shoelaces, further underlines Baartman’s “difference”; Baartman, as the “naked savage”, is juxtaposed with the woman in an immaculate period dress complete with delicate lace detailing, glistening pink ribbon and a hat featuring white plumes, which positions her as the epitome of femininity and elegance. Furthermore, the delicate facial features of this woman are in sharp contrast to the traits exhibited by Baartman – large eyes (that stare at the viewer), thick lips, and short hair. The woman’s complexion, almost matching her dress, further highlights Baartman’s non-whiteness. Numerous scholars have pointed out that the woman’s gaze is not directed at Baartman, but rather up the kilt of the guard regarding Baartman from behind. Her statement “À quelque chose malheur est bon” (From some points of view misfortune can be good) reflects the upside of tying her shoelace, which enables her to catch a glimpse of the soldier’s phallus. In this rendering, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (1999:21) argues that Baartman’s body simultaneously becomes that which is inscribed upon her, “roast beef, a strange beauty, an amusing freak of nature”, while being rendered invisible, evidenced by the woman’s diverted gaze.

¹¹³ Considering the scandal surrounding Baartman’s supposed “slave-status” in England, parallels can be drawn between the wooden box and a slave auction box.



Figure 4.3: *Les Curieux en extase, ou les cordons de souliers.* Louis François Charon. Published by Aaron Martinet. 1815. Lettered with production and publication line ‘A Paris chez Martinet, rue de Coq no.15 et chez Charon rue St Jean de Beauvais no.26. 1815. Hand coloured etching. 222mm x 295mm. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Asset number 99425001.

Contributing to Baartman’s iconographic history, her posthumous display continued the pattern of her objectification. Following her death in 1815, scientist Georges Cuvier examined and dissected Baartman’s body.¹¹⁴ A plaster cast was subsequently displayed in a diorama next to her skeleton until the 1970s.¹¹⁵ Crais and Scully (2009:142) most aptly describe the grotesque nature of this posthumous display in their chapter “Ghosts of Sara Baartman”:

She stood there for nearly two hundred years, lips sealed in plaster and paint, her naked body exposed to the multitudes. Thousands of people, scientists and tourists, children, families, writers and artists, stared at her [...] At Case Number 33, visitors viewed her brain and the skeleton stitched by wire and held erect by a simple metal pole. A few beheld the excised organs than lay well preserved on a shelf in one of Cuvier’s wooden cabinets. [...] And always ‘she’ was the Hottentot Venus, never Sara Baartman, always a symbol and never a human being [...] a spectral being, someone who never existed except in the minds of others.

¹¹⁴ Cuvier’s detailed description of Baartman is included in *Notes of the Museum d’Histoire Naturelle* and *Histoire naturelle des mammifères*. In the latter, a detailed study of mammals, Baartman is the only human included (Hobson, 2018 [2005]:46). It is interesting to note that the sketch included in the latter, showing Baartman in profile view (C. de Last, *Femme de race Bochismann*), was included in the handout detailing the plots of the *Five:20* operas, which CTO made privately available to me.

¹¹⁵ First kept at the *Jardin des Plantes*, Baartman’s remains were moved to the Musée de l’Homme in 1937 where they remained until the early 2000s. Similar dioramas used to dominate museum spaces in South Africa (see Davison, 2018).

A photograph by Henri Tracol (Figure 4.4) of this museum display foregrounds the emphasis placed on Baartman as a hypersexualised specimen of the “Hottentot”. Interestingly, no “Hottentot” references that permeate previous representations of Baartman feature here; Baartman is presented naked, even without her “apron”. Nevertheless, visual similarities can be drawn between the iconographic representation of Baartman (Figure 4.3) and her display as a museum artefact (Figure 4.4). Both these representations feature a naked Baartman placed on a pedestal. In some respect, in case 33 (Figure 4.4), Baartman is still “on stage” – her placement in a glass display case offers protection from unwanted physical contact from spectators but grotesquely exposes her to the gaze that has accompanied her throughout her history.

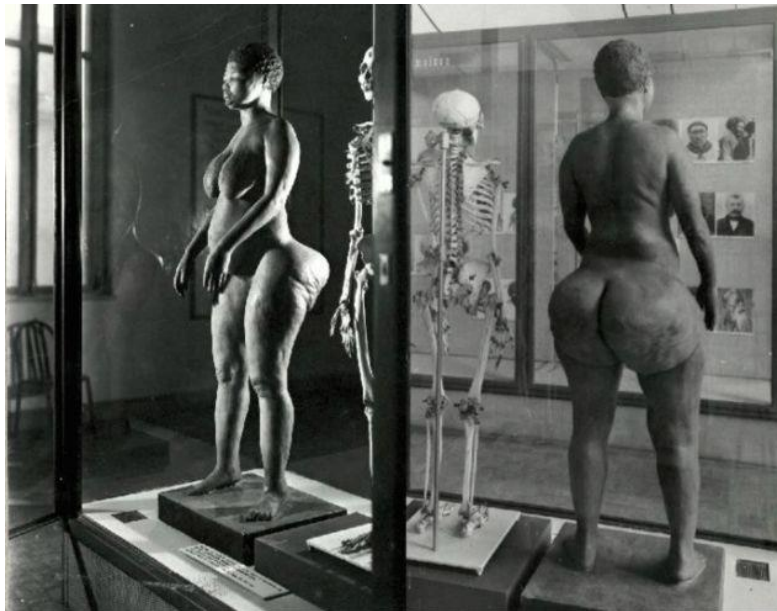


Figure 4.4: *La Vénus Hottentote. Vue du moulage de Saartjie Baartman (c.1789–1815), la "Vénus Hottentote", dans la "Vitrine n°33" des salles dédiée à l'Anthropologie du musée de l'Homme. Son squelette est exposé à côté Vers 1940. PP0101027. Tracol, Henri (1909–1997) © Henri Tracol. Photographs mounted on board. Left photograph: 11.7 x 16.4 cm, right photograph: 10.5 x 16.4 cm. © musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac.*

As will by now be clear, the very mention of Baartman’s name conjures up specific and highly disturbing imagery. Stemming from the first iconographic representations by F.C. Lewis to her display as a museum curiosity, this visual baggage inherently forms part of the paratextual periphery accompanying the audience for the opera *Saartjie*. But alongside the impact of well-known artistic representations of Baartman herself, the position of the opera’s composer Hendrik Hofmeyr within the musicological landscape also complicates the reception of the work. This is unpacked in the next section before I move on to consider the opera’s texts.

4.3 Hofmeyr's Position within the South African Musicological Landscape

Hofmeyr can be described as a controversial figure in South African musicology. He is no stranger to the stern critique of South African scholars. As a conscientious objector to the apartheid regime, Hofmeyr moved to Italy in self-imposed exile during the 1980s, where he furthered his studies in composition, conducting, piano, and voice, before returning to South Africa in 1992 (Roos, 2000:10–11; May, 2007a:7). He has since established himself as a composer of international renown and at the time of writing holds the position of the Head of Composition at UCT. As a fervent subscriber to the ideology of aesthetic autonomy, Hofmeyr's artistic beliefs place him in conflict with musicologists trained in the postmodern tradition.

During apartheid, aesthetic autonomy was a prevalent ideology in the practice of Western art music. As underlined in Chapter 2, Western art music held symbolic capital for the state – a way for the white minority to equate themselves with Europe. Stephanie Vos and Stephanus Muller (2020:22), for instance, state that Europe was not only the inspiration for Western art music practice in South Africa, but also the ideal against which artistic success was measured. Interpreting the correspondence of South African musicians, for instance conductor Anton Hartman (1918–1982) and composer Arnold van Wyk (1916–1983), indicates that South African works were expected to compare with other “great” European works in terms of their aesthetic value. There also seemed to be an unquenchable thirst shared by these figures that could only be satiated by “regularly drink[ing] from the old fountains of Europe”. Western art music in South Africa at the time was very much a European replication, the result of a history of colonisation. Vos and Muller (2020:22) further write that:

The assumption that the musical interests of “white’ South Africa, as represented by the outspokenly elitist pioneers of the practice and promotion of Western art music, would include the cultural interests of the entire country and its people, has faded away during the twentieth century and specifically the decades of apartheid rule into the understanding of this type of music as universally applicable and ideologically neutral.¹¹⁶

The opposite was in fact true. Scholars have repeatedly interrogated the autonomy associated with Western art music during the apartheid regime. Aesthetic autonomy has come to be considered “aligned with a colonial past, unacceptable to the postcolonial democracy of post-apartheid South Africa” (Pooley, 2008:15). The continued adherence to this aesthetic in the post-apartheid sphere would thus undoubtedly lead to scholarly scrutiny.

¹¹⁶ “Die aanname dat die musikale belange van ‘wit’ Suid-Afrika, soos verteenwoordig deur die uitgesproke elitistiese pioniers van Westerse Kunsmusiekbeoefening en -bevordering, die kulturele belange van die hele land en al sy mense sou insluit, het tydens die twintigste eeu, en spesifiek die dekades van apartheidsregering, versuf in ’n begrip van hierdie soort musiek as universeel-geldend en ideologies-neutraal.”

Hofmeyr has on several occasions reiterated that he does not consider himself a political composer. In an interview with Conroy Cupido (2009), the composer expresses his belief that music “does not convey political ideals”:

I still feel that art should deal with what is universal in the human condition, extrapolated from a specific experience. Politics are always about ideological generalization, and are too easily manipulated by the powers that be. There is also the very real danger of turning your beliefs into a way of earning money and/or fame for yourself – what I term ideological prostitution. I think we have seen a great many instances of this in [South Africa], where a great many artists have made highly profitable jumps onto the PC bandwagon (Hofmeyr, quoted in Cupido, 2009:7).

The insight that art music does not exist in an autonomous realm, but is political through and through, was so central to the “New Musicology” and is now so well established as part of Anglophone musicological orthodoxy that it hardly needs further elucidation or defence here.¹¹⁷ As such, this insight may also be observed to inform specific criticisms of Hofmeyr’s compositional practice and views. Etienne Viviers (2016:179), for example, argues that Hofmeyr’s actions complicate his “non-political” narrative. Viviers posits that Hofmeyr’s self-imposed exile in Italy must be read against not only his ardent desire to study Western art music in a “more immediately European cultural environment” but also the way this decision allowed him to avoid apartheid-era military conscription. Although the composer tries to distance himself from politics, for Viviers (2016:179) these decisions indicate astute political awareness. Aesthetically, Hofmeyr’s primary point of reference is “the ‘Western canon of masterworks’ (Hofmeyr, cited in Pooley, 2008:86), which also poses challenges considering the legacy of Western art music in South Africa as described above. This recalls the historic striving for South African works to be/sound “European”, as if to prove that South Africa could hold its own with the artistic output of the Continent.

Hofmeyr’s comments at a panel discussion at the Hearing Landscape Critically conference at Stellenbosch University in 2013 are indicative of his compositional ethos. In the podcast of this discussion, uploaded to Soundcloud, Matildie Wium remarks on Hofmeyr’s use of fragments of “Bushmen” music in his works *Partita Africana* (I. Preludio) (2006) and the opening of his *Sonata for Flute and Piano* (2006). Recognising Hofmeyr’s concern for the aesthetic, Wium significantly highlights the issue of appropriation and posits that the responsibility possibly falls on the academic community to “bring out such references and interpret

¹¹⁷ The entanglement of music and politics is a prominent thread in cultural musicology. See, for example Joseph Kerman’s *Musicology* (1985), Nicholas J. Cook and Mark Everist’s *Rethinking Music* (1999), Susan McClary’s *Feminine Endings* (1991) and *Reading Music* (2007), Lawrence Kramer’s *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* (1995), Gerogina Born, Lydia Goehr’s *The Imaginary Museum: An Essay of the Philosophy of Music* (1992), “Political Music and the Music of Politics” (1994), *Art and Politics* (2005). In the South African context see Grant Olwage’s *Composing Apartheid* (2008), Stephanus Muller’s “Protesting Relevance: John Joubert and the Politics of Music and Resistance in South Africa” (1999), “Imagining Afrikaners Musically: Reflections on the ‘African music’ of Stefans Grové” (2001a), “Spaces of Nationness: On Myth, Masks, Music and Afrikaner Identity” (2001b) and *Nagmusiek* (2014).

composers' aesthetic statements in that way" (Wium in HLC 4 Stellenbosch, 34:09–34:19). Hofmeyr's reply to this comment most aptly captures his approach:

[A]s a musician I think my primary concern is musical and everything else for me, unfortunately, is secondary. I am aware that that in itself is a political statement, but I don't intend my music primarily as a political statement – others may read into it what they will. Yes, but for me personally I'm not trying to make political statements with my music, it really is, for me, just a continuation of a classical tradition which I love, and which has I think through the ages, been incredibly kind of accessible and accommodating in terms of absorbing whatever happens around it musically into itself. But yes, that is my primary [inaudible] my primary heritage and other heritages flow into it in a way which I suppose could also be denigrated as colonialist and appropriating. But ja, I... Personally, I don't experience it that way, if I hear something that I like or that I find attractive, I see no reason why I shouldn't use it. After all, we are finally in a free country (Hofmeyr, in HLC Stellenbosch 4, 2013: 34:19–35:25).

Though Hofmeyr is right when he reflects on the freedoms afforded to all following the end of apartheid, particular difficulties arise when materials are incorporated that reference colonial/apartheid connotations. For example, Hofmeyr's large-scale work for soprano and symphony orchestra, *Sinfonia africana* (2004), is a prime example of the problematic nature of certain politico-cultural inclusions.

Commissioned by the organisation Vriende van Afrikaans (Friends of Afrikaans), the original prompt for the piece was for Hofmeyr to write a work with a feminist perspective, focused on the role of women (No author, cited in Viviers, 2016:141). This goal subsequently morphed into the celebration of all South African people. In *Sinfonia africana* Hofmeyr decided to set three Afrikaans poems from the 1930s, for which one reviewer, musicologist Stephanus Muller, seriously questioned Hofmeyr's "ideological position" in light of the "historical precedents of patriotic choral-and-orchestral combinations on Afrikaans texts" (Muller, in Albrecht, 2004:10).¹¹⁸ For Viviers (2016:142) the composer's choice of poetry posits the history, culture, and politics of Afrikanerdom as "a narrative with universal significance", tying in with the observations of Vos and Muller (2020:22). Viviers (2016:142) continues, stating: "It [...] becomes problematic when post-apartheid compositions like *Sinfonia africana* employ conservative poetic and musical resources, which have long already been invested with an aesthetic of 'white' cultural survival, to try and communicate any *universal* message of hope" (original emphasis). Considering Hofmeyr's adherence to aesthetic autonomy, it comes as a surprise that he expressed his disappointment that "the message of reconciliation and inclusivity" he wanted to convey was "misunderstood or rejected simply because [the poems] are in Afrikaans" (Hofmeyr, quoted in Albrecht, 2004). The composer further states:

¹¹⁸ Muller thoroughly outlined the debates surrounding Hofmeyr's work in an article detailing the reception history of *Sinfonia africana* (see Muller, 2009).

The work would probably have caused less friction if it did include other languages, as they suggested. At least it could not be so conveniently relegated to the genre of unfortunate patriotic work or Afrikaans texts.¹¹⁹

Hofmeyr's purportedly autonomous position is further complicated by the horizons of expectation – the “set of cultural, ethical, and literary (generic, stylistic, thematic) expectations of a work's readers ‘in the historical moment of its appearance’” (Suleiman, 1980:35) that relate not only to the reception of a work but also its inception. Suleiman points out that a work is both produced and received based on these expectations. Thus, a writer, or in this specific case, a composer, creates with the previous experience or expectations of the receiving public in mind, even if “he criticises or acts against those expectations”. Hofmeyr's position would have the composer not be susceptible to political sensitivity since he considers art to be separate from politics. However, in a political sphere where a genre such as opera has long been enmeshed in politics, this is near impossible. In the case of *Saartjie*, specifically, Hofmeyr encodes the opera with his preferred reading of an alternative image for a widely revered icon with a tragic history. The thorniness of *Saartjie* in part rests in the representation of a figure such as Baartman in a European genre specifically associated with white elitism in a South African context. Opting to portray Baartman in the medium of opera is questionable since the historical gaze directed at Baartman has been predominantly European and exploitative, resulting in an interpretation which can be read as insensitive. Hofmeyr's own interpretation of Baartman is further warped by opera's multimodal nature, through both the paratextual network, and the layers of interpretation accompanying the realisation of the opera's production media on stage, as the following discussion of the opera *Saartjie* will show.

4.4 Saartjie

The opera's title *Saartjie* is problematic when considering debates concerning nomenclature. Like many things in South Africa, the name(s) of Sara Baartman are caught in debates that touch on colonial and apartheid histories. As an Afrikaans diminutive for “little Sara”, “Saartjie” is deemed insulting and offensive by some as it carries connotations of slavery where the naming of people of colour is concerned. Pumla Dineo Gqola (quoted in Van der Schyff, 2018:1), for example, argues that the use of “Saartjie”, rather than Sarah Baartman – the name as recorded in the baptismal register in England 1811– “infantilises” Baartman, and that using this variant adheres to the colonial “history of naming and objectifying African subjects”. Contrasting to these politicised views, Spies (2014:75), a South African musicologist with an Afrikaans background, argues that this diminutive form is “actually an affectionate way of expressing endearment”.¹²⁰ Though this might be true

¹¹⁹ “Die werk sou waarskynlik minder wrywing veroorsaak het as dit wel ander tale ingesluit het, soos hulle voorgestel het. Ten minste sou dit nie so gerieflik gereguleer [sic] kon word tot die genre van ongelukkige patriotiese werk of Afrikaanse tekste nie.”

¹²⁰ Spies (2014:75) clarifies that she herself knows three Saartjies, “all intelligent and refined women, one with a doctor's degree”.

in an Afrikaner cultural context, the use of the diminutive cannot be divorced from its socio-political context. Despite the condemnation of the use of the diminutive by the South African government in 2002, stipulating that the recorded name “Sara Baartman” should be used, Hofmeyr opts to use the name “Saartjie” as the title for his opera. Since the composer hails from an Afrikaans background, his use of this name might be in line with the explanation of Spies; however, this decision may equally be indicative of an apathy towards local politics. Building on the paratextual network as outlined above, the next section of the chapter concerns Hofmeyr’s dramatic texts and the interpretation thereof by the creative team as realised through production design, and ultimately production media.

4.4.1 Dramatic Texts versus Production Design

As per Hofmeyr’s statement at the opera’s media launch, the historical facts of Baartman’s life undoubtedly informed his writing of the libretto. Although the composer and author Fiona Zerbst, who co-wrote the scenario, took some liberties with historical facts – like situating Saartjie’s death on New Year’s Eve due to the irresistibility of the dramatic opportunities offered – the opera is rife with specific references to Baartman’s life and legacy. For example, specific stage props that are directly drawn from iconographic depictions of Baartman, as previously discussed (Section 4.2), are included: the long pipe (shown in Figure 4.1 and 4.2) and the *ramkie* (Figure 4.2). Attempting to challenge the “myth” of Baartman as victim, Hofmeyr’s mise-en-scène breaks with the token exhibitionist model of representation where Baartman is put on display. The libretto sees the composer placing Baartman in her bedroom, which one can only assume would be in a modest studio-type apartment. Hofmeyr specifies a door in one of the side walls and a window in the back wall through which Parisian rooftops and the sky are clearly visible, presumably to assist with the portrayal of New Year’s Eve. The décor and props are specific but not very elaborate. The libretto lists a bed with low table beside it which holds an oil lamp, Saartjie’s long pipe, a bottle of brandy, and a vase of chrysanthemums. The room also features a chair (next to the low table) facing the audience, a full-length mirror downstage with its back angled to the audience, and a *mamokborong*¹²¹ hanging over the downstage corner of the mirror (Hofmeyr 2009a:1). Upon entering the room, Saartjie brings a *ramkie* with her, which she proceeds to throw on the bed. The idea is thus that the audience encounters Saartjie in the intimate environment of her bedroom. The room’s furnishings are in stark contrast to the rumoured “savage” nature that Baartman was thought to embody. For example, the presence of a vase of chrysanthemums, apart from their association with death, suggests that Saartjie has taken the time and effort to beautify her environment. Hofmeyr’s

¹²¹ The *mamokborong* is bowed monochord instrument traditional of Basotho music. The instrument is made from a five-litre tin-can resonator, with a piece of wood inserted into the tin can and a string strung between the top of the piece of wood to the can’s base. A bow is used to play the instrument with the pitch controlled by the movement of the player’s thumb and index finger on the string. The *mamokborong* is traditionally associated with herders who play the instrument for entertainment (Molikeng, 2019).

decision to situate Saartjie in a home environment instead of the token “freak show” spectacle that plagues Baartman’s representation can be read as an attempt to break with a history of her dehumanisation and objectification. This is however subverted by the creative team’s interpretation of Hofmeyr’s dramatic texts.

Contrary to the detailed *mise-en-scène* prescribed by the libretto, the production design – the work of Michael Mitchell, CTO’s resident designer at the time, in collaboration with director Geoffrey Hyland – presents a rather minimalist set design. In lieu of a “room” defined by walls, with a side door and a window offering a view of Paris, Saartjie’s “room” in this production is denoted by a bare metal cube, which takes up minimum space on stage, with no visual reference to the opera’s setting in Paris. The metal cube is placed in the centre of a raised platform, its interior edges and boundaries clearly demarcated by illuminated blocks. This “room” is also sparsely furnished. All the props listed in the Hofmeyr’s dramatic text are excluded, apart from the bottle of brandy and the *mamokhorong* (on the floor). Saartjie has no bed, table, chair, or mirror; instead, the furniture has been replaced by a *chaise longue*, which occupies prime space in this metal cube. Surprisingly, the composer does not take issue with the modification of his *mise-en-scène* from an upstairs apartment with multiple props and a clear view of Paris to a small “room” without walls, a door, or a window (Hofmeyr, in Olsen, 2017:158). Hofmeyr (in Olsen, 2017:158–159) merely views this as a challenge for the director and the soprano, as the space for movement was severely restricted, resulting in the repetition of certain actions. The absence of props also meant that there was very little for Saartjie to interact with, as the discussion of production media in section 4.3.2 will reveal. Though following Hofmeyr’s dramatic texts would have offered opportunity for additional dramatic action, the production design, I argue, instead interacts with the history of Sara Baartman’s exhibition.

In contrast with Hofmeyr’s libretto, the audience does not encounter a sickly, feverish Saartjie in the intimacy of her home environment, surrounded by curated objects. Instead, the production design has Saartjie doubly placed on stage, resulting in the emergence of nested narratives not necessarily implied by Hofmeyr’s dramatic texts. The *mise-en-scène* does not afford Saartjie the opportunity to be human – to sleep on her bed, sit on a chair, decorate her space, regard herself in the mirror, or gaze out the window. Rather, Saartjie is trapped in a cramped and bare environment. Save for the *chaise longue*, the *mamokhorong*, and a crate containing some personal possessions, this space almost resembles a cell. Placing Saartjie in a metal-framed cage arguably further “dehumanises” her, reducing her to an ethnological curiosity, or an artefact in a museum display case. This is further supported by the integration of non-singing extras into the production design.

Hofmeyr scores *Saartjie* as a *monodrama* with “just one singer on stage, but with her interacting with an off-stage chorus representing the revellers in Paris on New Year’s Eve and her reaction to their revels” (Hofmeyr, in Saartjie Baartman, 2012:3:19–3:30). In the dramatic texts, the musical entrances of the chorus are preceded by directions such as “far-off and indistinct”, “passing under the window”, and “disappearing

into the distance”. This suggests that the chorus are unseen passers-by, celebrating in the streets of Paris. The production design, however, supplemented the off-stage chorus with the addition of non-singing extras on stage, or “riders”, to use Hofmeyr’s wording, that were integrated into stage action. These extras, dressed in period dress, are employed as background figures and spectators, who, on multiple occasions, congregate behind Saartjie’s “cage” to view the spectacle. The reason for the inclusion of these riders may be two-fold: firstly, to suggest the zoological display of Baartman, as suggested by her history, and secondly, as a co-production between CTO and UCT’s Opera School, to grant students the opportunity to gain some stage experience.

While Hofmeyr chose to do away with the “traditional” voyeuristic gaze that depicts Baartman as an exhibit in his setting for the opera, the composer opts to derive Saartjie’s costume directly from Lewis’s 1811 aquatint (Figure 4.2), in an intertextual move which complicates his desire to break with Baartman’s victim status: “Saartjie enters, wearing pointed green slippers with black silk bows, and a long cloak which covers her down to her ankles. Under it she has on a flesh-coloured body stocking lined with cotton, and decorated with ivory-coloured ostrich-eggshell beads looped around her neck and waist, an elaborate apron, and various pendants, as in the 1811 aquatint by FC Lewis” (Hofmeyr, 2009a). The purpose of this costuming might aid the narrative, since Saartjie returns to her apartment following a day spent on display. While the costume description provided in the libretto is relatively consistent with that of the production design, some modifications have been made, presumably for the comfort of the singer. The “full body stocking” Hofmeyr dictated is replaced by a floor-length skirt, over which the “elaborate apron” is worn.

An interview with Hofmeyr conducted by Olsen (2017, Appendix D) provides unique insight into the composer’s opinions about the production. Hofmeyr expresses mixed emotions. His reply is worth quoting at length:

I think they got much of it right and I think in some senses some of the things the chorus did in the background enhanced what was happening. I still would like to see a production where it is really twenty minutes of Saartjie and nothing else, but I think that takes a certain kind of bravery to say, okay, we are sure that this singer can hold the stage for twenty minutes. It’s not the kind of bravery... The director in this case was not a person from a musical background. And I have often seen stage directors who go into opera and that they mistrust the ability of music and the singer to hold the stage. We see increasingly also in other professional opera productions where as soon as a singers [sic] has to sing an aria we have what I call the ‘riders’ – kind of figures moving around on stage to create some kind of action while the aria is being sung because somehow they feel a voice singing and emotion being conveyed is not enough. There needs to be some kind of visual and physical action going on as much as possible – something, which I disagree with completely (Hofmeyr, in Olsen, 2017:157–158).

Hofmeyr explicitly states that “[he] had absolutely no say in how the work was presented” (Hofmeyr, in Olsen, 2017:157). The tension between the composer and the opera’s director Geoffrey Hyland (whom Hofmeyr never mentions by name) also emerges here:

[Y]ou are in the hands of your director. And directors generally don't hold composers in very high esteem; they see them as some mild irritant or major irritant at times. I remember the first thing the director said when I walked into rehearsals the first time: 'Oh my God, here comes the composer!' So, that seems to be the kind of general attitude (Hofmeyr, in Olsen, 2017:157).

The composer proceeds to elaborate on an instance where he voiced his opinion regarding the director's choices. Originally, the director had the chorus of Parisians walking around in the background after Saartjie's death. Hofmeyr probed Hyland for his reasoning behind this, to which Hyland responded, "to show that life goes on" (Hofmeyr, in Olsen, 2017:158). Hofmeyr explains that this is the only directorial decision he opposed.

The comments highlighted here and above point towards differing interpretations of the dramatic texts, indicating that the production teams added their own interpretations to Hofmeyr's libretto and score. Olsen (2017:8) ascribes the role of encoding a "text" to the author/composer/librettist and the decoding of said text to the reader/audience, in an approach which foregrounds the primacy of the composer/librettist as the sole encoder of meaning. However, Chapter 3 foregrounded the role of the production team and their individual and collective interpretations of the "original" dramatic texts into design modes which are then realised through the processes of production. Olsen further broadens the concept of narrative text in his dissertation, positioning opera as a text which is "narrated" to an audience through the combination of sung text and orchestral accompaniment, rightly ascribing a communicative role to the orchestra (Olsen, 2017:8). In line with interdisciplinary approaches, I now turn my attention towards *Saartjie* as a multimodal artefact, by interrogating the amalgamation of opera's multimodal elements in production media.

4.4.2 Production Media

The production media are recorded in two videos uploaded to YouTube. The videos feature sopranos Siyasanga Mbuyazwe (Cape Town Opera 2014) and Siphamandla Yakupa (University of Cape Town – OPERA SCHOOL, 2015), who sang the role of Saartjie on alternate nights, and are subject to cinematographic techniques in varying degrees. The first (Cape Town Opera, 2014) maintains a relatively steady angle, whereas the second (University of Cape Town – OPERA SCHOOL, 2015) indulges in editing and cutaway scenes.¹²² The second also contains video footage from all the operas performed as part of *Five:20*, which results in additional paratextual considerations. Though the latter offers a unique opportunity to study detail and elements of production which may be obscured to the in-theatre viewer, the first adopts mainly two shooting angles: close-ups, and what can be described as a proscenium-frontal view. For this reason, the observations in this section are drawn from the video featuring soprano Siyasanga Mbuyazwe

¹²² Olsen's (2017) insights are drawn from the production media featuring Siphamandla Yakupa.

(Cape Town Opera, 2014). The libretto, minus the stage action (included here in block brackets) was also printed in the programme for this production, presumably to make up for the lack of surtitles.

The manipulation of production design, and the elements of production media, such as the actions of the singing actor Siyasanga Mbuyazwe, orchestral sounds, blocking, and framing, result in the emergence of nested narratives that both conform to, and complicate, the legacy of Baartman as an exhibited human artefact. I focus on five emergent themes – confinement, performance, visual intertextuality, temporality, and the gaze – as relayed via production media. Video links to the relevant YouTube video are included in the text to aid in the multimodal reading of the opera.

Confinement

Saartjie is confined to two specific areas during the opera, namely the fairground, and the metal framed “cage”. The fairground features during the preamble of the opera. Saartjie stands in what appears to be a miniature fairground, complete with a Ferris wheel, working carousel, and festoon lighting (1:00–1:30). Saartjie stands motionless, planted in this fairground environment, the eeriness of which is suggested through Hofmeyr’s scoring of repetitive chromatic passages in the flutes, clarinets, and vibraphones together with harmonic quintuplet *glissandi* in the strings, creating a collection of sounds reminiscent of a hurdy gurdy (1:19–1:31). The static nature of Saartjie is contrasted with the entrance of extras (from stage left) (1:31). Dressed in period dress, these shadowy figures carry parasols and stroll at a leisurely pace. The solo violin melody that rises out above the haunting carnival texture of the woodwinds and strings arguably represents a feeling of longing (1:31–2:00). A fragment of this melody is later incorporated into Saartjie’s vocal line when she sings of her baby, her “darling” Elsie (17:06–17:20).

[Saartjie \(2009\) Fairground Environment](#)

In contrast to the delayed reveal of the miniature fairground, the metal “cage” is emphasised even before the start of the opera. While introductory credits roll, the bars of the metal structure are dimly lit by the edge of the spotlight illuminating the *chaise longue* and the *mamokborong*. The outline of the minimalist frame is further highlighted through the introduction of upstage lighting (0:00–0:20). During the tumultuous preamble, the spotlight gradually dims (0:21–0:35), with the outline of the metal structure still clearly visible against the stage backdrop (0:35–0:42). The coldness of this environment is suggested by a solemn melody in the cor anglais (0:50–0:59), accompanying the gradual reveal of Saartjie, standing stage right.

[Saartjie \(2009\) Cage environment](#)

Following the focus on the fairground, the outlines of the metal cube are again foregrounded thanks to upstage lighting (1:31–2:00). It is revealed that the metal frame is housed on a stage platform – the edges of which are outlined by a warm white border of light (1:31–2:20). Once Saartjie steps onto this stage platform

(2:21) and enters the cube (2:26), she is confined to this space for the remainder of the opera. This action could be interpreted as her “stepping onto her exhibition stage”. The size and furnishing of this space suggest two interpretations: it calls to mind the “recess” next to Baartman’s stage at no. 225 Piccadilly, with the *chaise longue* presumably supplied for her to rest between showings; but it is also reminiscent of a museum display case. I posit that this cube may be viewed as a hybrid between a cage (in which Baartman was rumoured to be exhibited both in London and Paris) and the glass display case which housed Baartman’s plaster body cast and skeleton at the Musée de l’Homme (Figure 4.4). The spatial restriction is effective in supporting the idea of a “caged” Saartjie, as a trapped exhibit/artefact, forever victim to the gaze of others.

[Saartjie \(2009\) The Exhibitionist Stage/Display Case](#)

Physical limitations are placed on the soprano by the confines of this space, a fact that the composer also mentions in Olsen (2017:158). Saartjie circles the *chaise longue* incessantly since the exclusion of props resulted in her having very little to interact with, as Hofmeyr points out:

[...] I think she went around the couch maybe seven or eight times, now whether that was intentional or not. I thought at a point well maybe this idea of the little roundabout which she has on the side of the stage at one point are being imitated by Saartjie going around the couch because [...] she is going around in the same direction all the time” (Hofmeyr, quoted in Olsen, 2017:158).

Also, Hofmeyr does not critique the addition of the cage to the production design but rather the size of the space:

If they were going to put her in a cage, they could have made the cage a little bit bigger so that there was more room for her to manoeuvre, more things to do. The stage instructions in the libretto incorporate the idea of her... a chair and a bed and a mirror, things with which she interacts in quite dramatic fashion at times. And all those things were kind of removed so there was very little for her to do except run around the couch” (Hofmeyr, quoted in Olsen, 2017:159).

The absence of props and the repetition of certain movements result in behaviour that could be read as animal-like. With nothing to interact with and limited space, Saartjie resorts to pacing around her “cage”, in behaviour that might be compared to that of a caged animal, echoing the zoological quality associated with Baartman’s display. The presence of non-singing extras further underlines the observational component associated with the menagerie. Multiple times in the opera, the riders emerge from the wings and congregate behind Saartjie’s “cage” to look at her. Accompanying the singing of the first ditty, the crowd of extras rush in and gather behind the cube (5:48). In slow-motion, they noticeably gossip, laugh, and point to her, taunting her. Their presence is notably emphasised as they congregate behind Saartjie’s “cage” towards the end of the opera. Here, Saartjie’s cage is darkened while they are bathed in a poisonous green light, laughing at the “exhibit” before them. This final appearance is combined with the repeat of the eerie carnival-texture from the preamble (19:26–19:49):

[Saartjie \(2009\) Extras congregate to view the spectacle \(1\)](#)

[Saartjie \(2009\) Extras congregate to view the spectacle \(2\)](#)

The text further underlines the zoo-like quality of her exhibition. Saartjie compares her exhibition to “prancing like a monkey for the jades of gay Paree”. The “monkey” reference is significant here, in light of the classification of Baartman as more primate than human (Hobson, 2015 [2008]:46) and the history of scientific racism equating the “Hottentot” with the great apes.

Though Saartjie is unable to physically escape her cage, the vocal abilities of the soprano Mbuyazwe grant Saartjie some means of audible escape. When Saartjie realises the Parisians are singing another ditty about her, she expresses her frustration with the repetition of the phrase “Enough!”, jumping from G-sharp to top E for the last utterance, instead of the A that Hofmeyr scores, cutting through the sound of the chorus (6:09–6:16). She appears to regret her outburst, and promptly takes cover behind the *chaise longue*. Later, Mbuyazwe again relies on her vocal prowess to rise out above the sounds of cannon fire, again offering Saartjie an escape (19:50–19:53).

[Saartjie \(2009\) Viewers gather behind Saartjie’s “cage” to view the spectacle \(1\)](#)

Performance

Saartjie is exhibited not only for the non-singing extras but also for the audience. By positioning her on a platform on stage, a “play within a play” quality is ascribed to the opera. Saartjie’s actions on this stage can thus be read as a performance for the audience. This is evidenced in the inclusion of three waltzes that are incorporated in the opera, offering the audience some “comic relief” between Saartjie’s dramatic and tragic reflections on her experiences. The first waltz is preceded by Saartjie taking a long draught from a bottle of brandy. With a sigh she exclaims “That’s better” (3:23–3:33), the suppressed laughs of the audience clearly audible on the recording. Breaking the fourth wall, Saartjie reveals that she spent the day on display:

Another dreary evening
of being prodded, gawked at, pawed,
of prancing like a monkey
for the jades of *gay Paree*.

Sitting on the *chaise longue* with a bottle in hand, Saartjie’s gestures emphasise the physical nature of her display. She paws at her thigh, mockingly wiggles her right leg, and shakes her hands, mimicking the behaviour of an animal.

[Saartjie \(2009\) First Waltz](#)

This waltz is cut short through Saartjie’s serious utterance of “It must be the last time!” (3:56–4:04). The carnivalesque atmosphere of the waltz is further undercut by Saartjie’s subsequent narration, detailing the macabre scientific environment where she was examined:

Those frigid men of science
among their skeletons and heads in jars,
those men, who made me strip
so they could probe me top to toe,
those men will pay most handsomely
for my body when I'm dead.

In this section, marked *Lugubre*, an ominous semitone motif in the contrabassoon lends a predatory quality to the text before Saartjie sings. This is coupled with *tremolo* triplet figures in the cello (m.130, m.133, m.134, m.137, m.138) with echoing *frullato* triplet flourishes in the flute and clarinet (mm.131–133, mm.135–137, mm.139–142¹), and with *pianissimo* sustained chords with harmonics in the first and second violins (mm.128–141). Again, the tense atmosphere created by Saartjie's testimony of this abuse is quickly dissolved by a second waltz. Clearly prompted by her "showman" (the conductor) (5:01–5:06), Saartjie impersonates these scientists in a "mockingly bombastic" tone (Hofmeyr, 2009a:17) (5:00–5:40), before breaking out in hysterical laughter and consoling herself with alcohol:

As rare and fine a specimen, dear sirs,
as one could hope to find;
the famous Saartjie Baartman,
known as la Vénus Hottentote.
Vive the great collection of the famed *Jardin du Roi*!

Despite the jaunty character of the waltz, the gloominess of Saartjie's experience at the hands of these racial scientists still lurks in the orchestral texture through the inclusion of the *Lugubre* section's *frullato* triplet figures of the flute and clarinet, their note values doubled (mm.144–165), with *legato* phrases in the contrabassoon part.

[Saartjie \(2009\) Second Waltz](#)

During the third waltz, Saartjie reflects on Hendrik Cesars's "promises of fame and fortune" when he first brought her to Europe:

Your promises of fame and fortune
entranced my all too eager ears.
I left all that was dear to me
to play the savage on a London stage.

The gesture accompanying Saartjie's mention of "play[ing] the savage on the London stage" – arms outstretched – again suggests the performativity of Saartjie's "savageness". Like the first waltz, the third also ends with a dramatic observation. This time, Saartjie expresses her dismay that Hendrik has returned to Africa without her, leaving her to fend for herself in Paris: "Now you've gone back...". Saartjie's anxiety in Paris following Cesars's abandonment is suggested through the repetition of the jagged motifs first heard in the preamble.

Saartjie (2009) Third Waltz

Apart from these comic/dramatic episodes, Saartjie also steps into her role as “la belle Vénus Hottentote” in the opera, giving the audience what they came for. Following the first ditty about her, Saartjie takes off her khaki cloak to reveal her full costume, comprising a feathered cropped bodice, an exposed midriff, and beaded necklaces, before repeating the ditty the chorus just sang about her (6:40–6:51):

[She leaps up, and staring at her image in the mirror,¹²³ tears off her cloak to reveal her costume.]

Voilà la belle Vénus Hottentote,
C'est vraiment une tendre gelinotte!

Saartjie (2009) Saartjie unveils her costume

During her repetition of this ditty, Saartjie’s walk is fluid, reminiscent of a stalking prance. This change in her demeanour further creates a link to the performativity of her supposed “savageness”, which is referenced multiple times. The absence of the mirror prop following the costume reveal further suggests that Saartjie is playing to her audience. Positioning herself behind the *chaise longue*, with one foot on the upholstery and arms outstretched, she proceeds to narrate her *spiel* for them, telling the audience of the legendary “Hottentot Venus”:

The Venus Hottentot!
Voluptuous monster,
beast from darkest Africa,
creature of your wildest fantasies!

[She fights for breath and sinks into the chair. The sound of the revellers disappears into the distance.]

The flute, contrabassoon, and bass clarinet feature prominently during this narration. The predatory quality of the earlier *Lugubre* section is again evoked here where Saartjie’s vocal line is doubled by the contrabassoon, along with the return of *frullato* triplet figures in the flute and bass clarinet. Where previously the role of the predator was assigned to the racial scientists, Saartjie now claims this role for herself. Musically, the lower register of the soprano voice, combined with the deep timbre of the contrabassoon, arguably underwrites the view of Saartjie as “Other” – a “monster”, a “beast from darkest Africa”. This is coupled with the intimidating physical stance Saartjie assumes, with one foot resting on the *chaise longue* and her arms outstretched. Saartjie’s “exotic” nature is also foregrounded here through the inclusion of chords in the marimba, doubling her vocal line.

¹²³ The text in red shows Hofmeyr’s original staging directions, from which the creative team deviated through blocking and the omission of props.

[Saartjie \(2009\) Saartjie performs her *spiel* for the audience](#)

Three arias are included for the audience's enjoyment. The first two, a rendition of the Afrikaans folksong 'Al lê die berge nog so blou' and the Nguni lullaby 'Thula thu' (isiZulu), both see Saartjie reflecting on her life before coming to Europe. In the minutes leading up to Saartjie's rendition of 'Al lê die berge nog so blou', Saartjie picks up the *mamokhorong* and reflects in her younger years growing up in the Gamtoos Valley, where she mixed her song with that of the birds. She gazes dreamily into the distance, while leaning against the metal frame, at times plucking the strings of the instrument to accompany herself, recalling memories of her life at the Cape and evenings spent celebrating with her lover Daniel. This accompaniment, echoed in the *pizzicato* of the strings (7:49–8:25), is meant to continue for 'Al lê die berge nog so blou'; however, Saartjie puts down the instrument, depending on the orchestra for accompaniment.

[Saartjie \(2009\) Saartjie reminisces about her past](#)

For the second aria, 'Thula thu', Saartjie again removes her cloak, once more showing her costume in profile view (17:34–17:47). The audible presence of the solo violin again suggests a heartfelt longing on Saartjie's part as she sings this lullaby to a swaddled baby, fashioned from her khaki cloak.

[Saartjie \(2009\) Saartjie again unveils her costume prior to the performance of the second aria](#)

Though these reminiscences do speak to Saartjie's memories of a life before becoming a human curiosity, the delivery of these arias in a "cage" brings their putative framing as "nostalgic" into question. Though the inclusion of these arias may simply hint at the idea of Baartman being multilingual (Hofmeyr, 2009a), inserting a song such as 'Al lê die berge nog so blou' is perhaps not as innocent as it may seem. In his notes to the libretto, Hofmeyr (2009a) states its inclusion is "inspired by a nineteenth-century remark on the popularity of the certain plaintive Afrikaans song among the Khoi". It could be argued that this inclusion turns Saartjie into a colonial mouthpiece, hinting that the only possible recollections of her homeland must be relayed through an Afrikaans or Dutch frame.¹²⁴ Saartjie also refers to the "*loerie's* call" and the "*aalwyn's* flame",¹²⁵ opting for Afrikaans terms which presumably did not exist during her lifetime. Hofmeyr's inclusion of the Nguni lullaby 'Thula thu' further gestures towards exoticist confusion since this musical artefact (which

¹²⁴ Hofmeyr (in Olsen, 2017:152–153) justifies his decision to include this folksong as an "operatic liberty" and that he considers the song suited to the moment: "[For] me it is emblematic of the kind of melancholic strain that one finds in some Afrikaans folksongs and I thought it's particularly appropriate for her [Saartjie Baartman] condition of nostalgia and longing for a love that was lost [...]".

¹²⁵ *Loerie* and *aalwyn* are two Afrikaans names for fauna and flora that occur in the Eastern Cape region where Baartman was born. The former refers to the turaco bird and the latter the aloe vera plant. The "flame" of the aloe presumably describes its flowers – red, orange, or yellow – on stalks rising from the plant's base.

is not authentically applicable to Baartman as a Khoekhoe) becomes a placeholder for the exotic in *Saartjie*. This is further supported through Hofmeyr’s invention of a Khoe prayer, included as a third aria in the opera. The Khoe prayer to the thunder god Gurub follows the sounds of cannon fire after midnight. In a state of panic, Saartjie falls to her knees and prays to Gurub for forgiveness:

!Nanumatse! !Gari-khoi, !Gurutse!,
 ‡Ouse gobare, /havië t’am u-hã-tamaö;
 /Ubatare ‡outago Xuige.
 !Gurutse! /Nanus oatse!

(Son of the Thundercloud! Brave, roaring Gurub!
 Speak softly, for I am without guilt;
 Forgive me, for I am grown weak.
 O Gurub! Son of the Thundercloud!)

In contrast to the first two lyrical arias, which are based on existing melodies, the short jagged vocal melody is an invention by Hofmeyr (see Example 4.1), inspired by a bow song he once heard Princess Magogo perform.¹²⁶ Hofmeyr confirmed in Olsen (2017:165) that he could not recall where he had heard the song, whether it was a live performance or a recording, but the song “had a particular kind of plangent character and [...] it was very beautiful and very tragic”, “[starting] fairly high and [going] fairly low in each individual phrase” – a contour the composer considers characteristic of Xhosa and Zulu music.¹²⁷ Again, this amalgamation of musical cultures problematically points towards notions of exoticist vagueness. The text is taken from Theophilus Hahn (1881:59–60), who classified it as a “religious dance” or *ǃgei*. The incorporation of a Khoe prayer is significant here since this can be read as a performance of Saartjie’s “exoticism”. The clicks of the Khoe language that aided in the European construction of the “Hottentot” as Other are also explicitly incorporated here. Furthermore, Hofmeyr again employs the “lowest and chested notes of the female voice” (Hofmeyr, in Olsen, 2017:152), which reflects the world’s “almost savage” view of Baartman. While Hofmeyr draws the text from Khoe heritage, and attempts to reflect his own interpretation of what this melody might have been like, he awkwardly draws musical inspiration from other South African cultures, as exemplified in his reference to Princess Magogo, problematically pointing towards the assumption that these musical cultures are interchangeable and showing little concern for critical aspects of heritage.

¹²⁶ Princess Constance Magogo Sibilile Mantithi Ngangezinye kaDinuzulu (1900–1984), daughter of Zulu king Dinuzulu kaCetshwayo, was an enigmatic figure in South African history. As an *imbongi* (praise-poet) and composer and performer, she played an essential role in the preservation of Zulu heritage and culture through her recordings of Zulu songs and legends (Mhlambi, 2015:293), performed on the *ugubhu*, a gourd resonator instrument for self-accompaniment (Mhlambi, 2015:309).

¹²⁷ Hofmeyr’s list of works includes two works for mixed choir that interact with Khoe-San heritage: *Desert Sun* (2007) is based on “Bushman legends”, and *Lied van die !Kò* (2007) is based on “Bushman” songs. Both works feature text by the composer. Justin Carter (2019:49) notes that Hofmeyr’s *Sonata for Flute and Piano* (2006) also features “short, choppy and repetitive” phrases, reflecting the “music style of the Bushmen”.

Example 4.1: Hofmeyr (2009b), *Saartjie* (2009), Khoe prayer, mm.525–548.

liberamente

525 Saar. 
 !Na - nu - mat - se!
 (! = cerebral click against the back palate)

529 
 !Ga - ri - kloi, !Gu - rut - se!,

532 
 ǀOu - se go - ba - re,
 (ǀ = alveolar click against the front palate)

536 
 /Ha - vi - ë t'am u - hã - tam - a - ö;
 (/ = dental click against the upper teeth)

540 
 /U - ba - ta - re ǀOu - ta - go Xui - ge.

544 
 !Gu ru - tse! - !Na - nus

547 
 oa - tse! /Na - nus oa - tse!

[Saartjie \(2009\) Saartjie “performs” a Khoe prayer](#)

Visual Intertextuality

Given the innately visual nature of Baartman’s history, it is unsurprising that the production media of *Saartjie* refers to historic representations of her, with intertextual links to Baartman’s iconographic legacy established within the first minutes of production media. During the preamble, Saartjie stands, expressionless, behind a miniature fairground, dressed in a green cloak fastened at the front, wearing a yellow headband with a geometric tribal pattern and with thick lines of make-up visible on her cheeks and forehead (0:59–1:30). Although her body is hidden beneath the cloak, the styling here undoubtedly mirrors the second aquatint of

Lewis (Figure 4.2), advertising Baartman's exhibition in London. Saartjie's slippers with black bows are also taken from Lewis' aquatint. Emerald-green slippers topped with black bows – suggestive of luxury – are clearly visible when Saartjie lies down on the *chaise longue* to enjoy a drink (5:40), betraying the supposed authenticity of her “African” dress. At the same moment, the strategic slippage of her cloak as she lies down reveals an “apron” made of leather and with fur tassels. The dangling tassels of the apron call to mind the famed “Hottentot tablier”. Lewis's first aquatint is also referenced, though not in the *tableau vivant* style of the preamble. Saartjie removes the cloak, revealing a feathered cropped bodice, a tasselled apron layered over a yellow skirt (already seen by the audience) and multiple necklaces (6:43–6:51). The blocking of this section also has Saartjie walking stage right, her curves for which she was famed clearly visible to the audience.

The positioning of Saartjie on a raised platform on the stage could be interpreted as a nod to the fact that Baartman's exhibition took place on a stage platform four to five feet high. What is more, this design decision recalls the satirical sketch (Figure 4.4) featuring the nude Baartman on a wooden box. Like the historical Baartman, Saartjie is positioned as an object on display, placed on a pedestal to be ogled for her attributes. The incorporation of extras on stage, wearing period dress reminiscent of that depicted in Figure 4.3, further strengthens the visual link, solidifying the depiction of Saartjie within the “freak show” environment. The presence of the *mamokborong* is yet another nod to Baartman's iconographic representation. A decorative object at first, the instrument is later used by Saartjie to accompany herself prior to her rendition of the Afrikaans folksong, playing into the artistry of her exhibition.

Temporality

It can be argued that Saartjie operates within three temporalities: 1) Her present time of 1815, where she has returned home from a day spent on display; 2) Her past, before 1810, when she was still resident in Southern Africa (evidenced in her memories voiced via the two arias mentioned above); and 3) Her future (the audience's present), where her legacy still sees her falling victim to the nature of spectacle. These temporalities are often suggested simultaneously, as evidenced in the opera's opening scene. The illumination of Saartjie's empty “room” during the tumultuous preamble is followed by her first appearance on stage. Positioned behind a miniature fairground, Saartjie stands statuesque in her token uniform to be observed as she has been in her past, her present, and as she continues to be in her future (0:58–1:58). When Saartjie finally reveals her costume to the audience, it can be read as a reference to her present (in the opera), where she has just spent a day on display, but is also, more importantly, delivering spectacle for her future audience.

Gaze

In keeping with Baartman's history as a viewed “object”, the production media foregrounds Saartjie's position as the object of multiple gazes. A major indication that points towards this fact is the placement of Saartjie on

a raised platform centre stage for most of the opera. From this position, Saartjie is continuously observed, the victim of the gaze of on-stage extras, that of the in-house audience, and the viewer of the recorded production media. Most significantly, though, Saartjie also returns the gaze of the audience, in a manner which critiques the audience's spectatorship.¹²⁸ At several points in the opera Saartjie interacts directly with the audience, whether in the form of a direct gaze, or of a direct accusation or question. Examples of this include her labelling the audience as "dirty-minded dogs" (6:25–6:28) following the first ditty about her. Projecting her own classification in the animal realm back on them, her index finger points accusatively: "To you", she exclaims, "I am no more than this!" (6:29–6:39), again referencing the "savage" gesture (arms outstretched). Later, following her retelling of the legend of the "Hottentot Venus" (6:53–7:14), Saartjie asks if this is all that remains of her (7:16–7:41), her eyes wide with horror. It could be argued that she puts this question to the audience, confronting them directly for buying into the spectacle of her display.

[Saartjie \(2009\) Saartjie confronts the audience](#)

[Saartjie \(2009\) Saartjie puts a question to the audience](#)

Saartjie's actions during the singing of *La Marseillaise* – a song included by Hofmeyr (in Olsen, 2017:157) as a "potent symbol of freedom, equality, liberty" – further speaks of her disdain for the audience's behaviour.¹²⁹ With the off-stage chorus singing, and the non-singing extras smiling broadly, raising their fists and triumphantly marching in all directions behind her "cage", the performance of *La Marseillaise* can be interpreted as mocking the entrapped Saartjie. Saartjie (almost sardonically) concedes and joins in singing "Liberté, liberté chérie, Combats avec tes défenseurs!" However, she quickly breaks free from this irony, sustaining a high B-flat for seven beats. The significance of this pitch is further intensified as Saartjie defiantly raises her right middle finger at the audience: "Ah, tes défenseurs, indeed!" (13:22–13:40).

[Saartjie \(2009\) Saartjie swears at the audience](#)

4.5 Discussion and Conclusion

Very little of what is relayed via production media points towards Hofmeyr's "myth-busting" interpretation of Baartman as a woman with entrepreneurial prowess. What emerges instead is a representation that adheres to the canonised image of Baartman, a woman trapped and subjected to ridicule and observation, doubly staged for the entertainment of others at the cost of herself. Through elements of production such as set design,

¹²⁸ Erika Fischer-Lichte (2015:166) most significantly writes "[b]y taking part in a performance, the spectators [audience] attempt responsibility for a situation which they have not conceived, but which they co-create".

¹²⁹ *La Marseillaise*, now the national anthem of France, was banned when Baartman lived in Paris. Hofmeyr's reasoning behind its inclusion, apart from its symbolic value as a (perhaps ironic) call for freedom and unity, also extends to New Year's Eve festivities, and the fact that the song might have been sung by revellers in their drunken state (Hofmeyr, in Olsen, 2017:157).

costuming, gesture, and blocking, the opera depicts Saartjie as a human exhibition, calling to mind Baartman's historical objectification through the freak show platform. Here, Saartjie is limited to the confines of her "cage", and routinely performs at the beckoning of her showman (the conductor). The confinement of Saartjie in a metal frame draws parallels with her exhibition at no. 225 Piccadilly, but also the museum diorama containing Baartman's body cast and skeleton (Figure 4.4). This is further reinforced by the on-stage presence of extras that fulfil the role of spectators at her exhibition/in the museum. The audience's gaze also features here. The singing actor, the soprano, further indulges in this operatic exhibition of Baartman by displaying her vocal prowess. Siyasanga Mbuyazwe frequently leaps to the top of the stave at key points during the opera. The operatic representation of Baartman thus straddles the realms of theatre and ethnological display.

Though the production design and direction did receive some mention by Muller (2010c), Irish (2010b), and Blake (2011), very few engaged critically with the opera's visual mode. Muller (2010c) specifically highlights the direction of the *Five:20* operas which "overwhelms the eye time and time again"; however, he is much less descriptive regarding the staging of *Saartjie* in his discussion of the opera, compared to his explorations/overviews of the other four operas in *Five:20*. Muller merely states that: "in [*Saartjie*], the 'Hottentot Venus' is alone in her 'Parisian apartment' and she longs for the land of her birth and the stars there. She hears the Parisians laughing outside about her exhibition of her big backside by day". Irish (2010b) and Blake (2011) briefly mention the direction of Geoffrey Hyland. Irish (2010b) describes Hyland's direction in *Saartjie* as "deftly illustrative", and is the only critic to refer to the set design, labelling the "miniature carousel", which is on stage throughout the opera, "a masterstroke", whereas Blake (2011:45) argues that Hyland "submitted to the temptation to over-produce", in sharp contrast to the work of "more politically sassed director Marcus Desando", who directed the operas *Tronkevoël* (Watt) and *Hani* (Ndodana-Breen).

As mentioned earlier, Hofmeyr did not take issue with the general deviation from his *mise-en-scène*. However, as this analysis of *Saartjie's* production media has revealed, the exclusion of props and the spatial confines of the set undoubtedly impacted the dramatic action. As previously mentioned, confining Saartjie to a relatively limited space resulted in the repetition of stage actions. For Hofmeyr (cited in Olsen, 2017:158), the repetition of this action became "tedious and anti-dramatic"; yet the repetitiveness of Saartjie's movement inside her cage also draws parallels with a caged animal in a menagerie, again equating her display to that of an animal in a zoo. Since Saartjie has few props to interact with, she interacts instead/most obviously with the in-theatre audience, in a move which critically engages with the nature of her display. Rather than being a passive victim of the gaze, Saartjie returns the gaze to the audience, confronting them and holding them accountable for the continued objectification of her body.

Although I agree with both Spies (2014) and Olsen (2017) that specific melodic material and compositional techniques do highlight the nuances of Baartman's fragility, I also acknowledge the reservations of Blake (2011) and Stolp (2016) about a woman with a deeply rooted history of colonial subjugation portrayed in a Eurocentric operatic idiom, especially given the emphasis placed on transformation within the post-apartheid South African opera sphere. Hofmeyr's choice of drawing on existing musical sources for two of Saartjie's arias is cause for some critique, in my view. Employing an anachronistic Afrikaans song to capture Saartjie's longing for her homeland in her first aria, 'Al lê die berge nog so blou', problematically projects a colonialist gaze onto Saartjie's suffering. The decision to quote Nguni musical heritage, rather than more appropriate Khoe sources, in Saartjie's second aria, 'Thula thu', and Hofmeyr's invention of the Khoe prayer (inspired by Princess Magogo's songs) speak of exoticism with its characteristic vagueness regarding the representation of non-Western cultures. I have argued that the 2010 production of *Saartjie* notably foregrounds the elements of historical display that have come to define the history of Sara Baartman. The libretto and music provide insight into the personal feelings of Saartjie, emotions which are only speculative in the absence of written accounts. From the outset, Hofmeyr's uncontextualized utterances regarding the active role Baartman played in her objectification are deeply disconcerting, lacking a degree of sensitivity the subject deserves. Yet the "myth" of Sara Baartman which Hofmeyr attempts to unsettle in this opera is undermined through the visual mode of production media, which, I have argued, draws extensively on the canon of Baartman's representation. Although the text captures Baartman's inner thoughts, attempting to grant her agency which has historically been denied her, the narrative here is shaped by the nested stories revealed via production design. The production team's interpretation of the composer's dramatic texts undoubtedly added additional layers of interpretation drawn from Baartman's visual legacy – not only her iconographic representation, but also her posthumous exhibition as a museum diorama.

The analysis of production media in this instance has revealed an interpretation at odds with that intended by the composer. Like the "robing" of Bester's sculpture, the unfortunate prevalence of the "canonised caricatured image" of Sara Baartman is perpetuated on stage and continues reinscribing her abuse. However, this arguably foregrounds Baartman's objectification, forcing the audience to reflect on the damaging history of Baartman's visual representation. Nevertheless, Hofmeyr's revisionist take on Baartman – positioning her as a figure with agency rather than a victim – remains deeply unsettling. The insights gained from this chapter show that Hofmeyr's utterances as part of paratextual networks and his position as a supposedly autonomous composer further influenced the critical reception of *Saartjie*.

CHAPTER 5

Problematic Postcards: The Case of *Poskantoor* (2014)

5.1 Introduction

The performance of opera in South Africa has always been politically motivated. Chapter 2 of this thesis outlined the importation of opera during colonial times, and the usurpation of this European genre during apartheid to forge cultural capital. The practice of translating opera into Afrikaans in the 1940s already pointed to the genre's politico-cultural significance: as a means of generating prestige for the Afrikaans language and as a tool to create a cultural identity separate from that of the British. While a few new operas were composed in Afrikaans, the reigning aesthetic was a translated one, enabling the apartheid government to engrain the idea of an Afrikaner culture on par with that of Europe.¹³⁰ Though the performance of opera in translation died out in the early 1980s, the aesthetic of opera in South Africa remained white; white opera singers clad in opulent period dress sang in “traditional” European settings on grand apartheid theatre stages, in venues mainly open to whites only. This chapter in apartheid history, together with the Afrikaans language's status as *lingua franca* of the regime, ultimately meant that Afrikaans did not feature in operatic transformation post-apartheid.¹³¹ As such, the language has been absent from the South African opera landscape for several decades. However, with the 2014 premiere of the opera *Poskantoor* (Post Office), Afrikaans again entered the fringe of the South African opera landscape after years in exile. Labelled the first Afrikaans opera of the twenty-first century, *Poskantoor* premiered at the Aardklop Festival, an annual Afrikaans arts festival in Potchefstroom (North West Province). *Poskantoor* was produced by Biblioteek Productions, a boutique production company that frequents the South African festival circuit.¹³² The creative team comprised some of South Africa's most innovative artists: “musical rebel” (Klopper, 2013) Magdalene Minnaar as the opera's star soprano and producer, acclaimed writer Tertius Kapp (libretto), composer Braam

¹³⁰ Cromwell Everson's *Klutaimnestra* (1967) was the first Afrikaans opera to be composed (see Brukman, 2012).

¹³¹ In this chapter I distinguished between Afrikaners – the white Afrikaans-speaking demographic that held political power during apartheid – and Afrikaans-speaking South Africans that include white, “coloured”, and black individuals, post-apartheid. Cultural identity thus becomes entwined with this history since Afrikaans culture during apartheid was reserved for the white Afrikaner demographic, but post-apartheid Afrikaans cultural identity is not bound to a specific racial background.

¹³² Biblioteek (Library) Productions is an innovative and ambitious production company founded by soprano Magdalene Minnaar in 2010 offering a “creative platform” for artists across the board to “collaborate and explore the reinvention of classical music in South Africa” (Biblioteek Productions, 2017). The company has produced multiple “pastiche operas” that have toured South Africa's festival circuit (*Vuurvoël*, 2011; *Amore*, 2012; *Waansin*, 2013), along with several canonical works such as *Poulenc's La voix humaine* (2017, 2018) and *The Recycled Magic Flute* (2018), an eco-friendly one-hour adaptation of Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* with costumes, sets, and props constructed using recycled materials, and a full-length *La bohème* (2019).

du Toit (score), and award-winning Jaco Bouwer (designer and director).¹³³ Apart from Minnaar, these three figures are primarily associated with film and theatre, making *Poskantoor* their first incursion into opera.

Written in six parts, *Poskantoor* presented a uniquely “South African” story, focusing on ordinary people in an unspectacular setting. As the title suggests, the work is set in the post office located in Karkaskraal (Carcasskraal), a fictional town in the *platteland*.¹³⁴ The plot revolves around the lives of a group of employees. The main character, Grethe (white), is a young (and rumoured to be promiscuous) widow whose main desire is to leave the “horrible” town due to the judgement and gossip she falls victim to. Early in the opera, her plans are thwarted as she becomes romantically involved with an impoverished car guard, Napoleon (black).¹³⁵ This interracial relationship develops much to the dismay of Grethe’s female colleagues, Ronel (white) and Saartjie (“coloured”), and her boss, the self-obsessed Posmeester Smit (Postmaster Smit, hereafter Smit) (white), who finds himself infatuated with Grethe. Life in the post office is marked by routine, and the women entertain themselves by steaming open letters and reading the town’s correspondence. When a letter arrives inviting Smit to the opening of a new opera house in Venice, Ronel and Saartjie beg him to take one of them as his companion, but he only has eyes for Grethe. Since she will not return his affections, Smit takes revenge on Grethe by hiring Napoleon as an aid to help him maintain his reign of tyranny and subjugation in the workplace. Tired of the oppression, the women revolt, and ultimately, under the premise of seduction, murder the men, dismember their bodies, and mail the body parts to other rural towns.¹³⁶ Following the murder, order is restored in Karkaskraal, and the women proceed to work in what is now framed as a charming and picturesque *platteland* town.

On the surface, *Poskantoor* engages with contemporary socio-political issues that plague post-apartheid society. Stolp, the only scholar to consider the work thus far, categorises *Poskantoor* as an opera that is socio-politically relevant due to its commentary on critical aspects of post-apartheid society (Stolp, 2016:151–152). For

¹³³ Other members of the team included Wolf Britz (lighting designer), Richard de Jager (costume designer) and Nicola Elliot (choreographer). The opera is scored for a chamber ensemble of seven players (piano, flute, violin, viola, cello, double bass and marimba/percussion), with five main singing roles, and three chorus members (Clover Aardklop Feesgids, 2014:45).

¹³⁴ Literally translated as “flat country”, the *platteland* could be taken to refer to the “countryside” or a “rural area”, though these latter terms evoke their own imagery. In light of this, my use of the term here is deliberate, in line with Van Zyl, since *platteland* “embodies the very imagery, identity, values and notions that Afrikaners yearn for” (Van Zyl, 2008:128–129).

¹³⁵ A car guard (sometimes referred to as a parking attendant) is a self-employed individual working in South Africa’s informal sector. Working on a donation basis, they provide security for vehicles in public parking lots (at shopping and business centres), guarding against damage and theft, also assisting customers with finding and reversing safely from parking spaces (see Foster and Chasomeris, 2017). It might seem unusual to list the racial identities of the opera’s characters in a plot description, yet racial difference notably informs the relationships and interactions between characters in *Poskantoor*. While the role division in the libretto does not list the race of characters, the names of the artists who created the roles are included, informing the racial-make-up of the cast.

¹³⁶ An instance of Biblical intertextuality emerges here. Judges 19:29–30 tells of the Levite’s dismemberment of his concubine’s corpse following a gang rape, and the distribution of the twelve parts of her body to different regions in Israel, ultimately leading to war.

example, Stolp highlights the metaphorical representation of “economic inequality in South Africa, specifically between white South Africans (advantaged under apartheid) and black South Africans” in the opera, referring to the white affluent Smit and the destitute Napoleon, along with gender inequality. Stolp reads the powerplay between men and women as a commentary on the negative and oppressive working environments within which South African women find themselves. The opera’s murderous ending is positioned as a “type of metaphorical incentive for women to resist the status quo” (Stolp, 2016:151). Stolp (2016:151–152) also mentions racial tension and the oft-contested position of Afrikaans in the post-apartheid sphere.

Considering Stolp’s observations regarding the opera’s contemporaneity, it is significant to note that initial publicity material had *Poskantoor* set in the 1970s (Malan, 2014a) – a particularly turbulent time in South Africa’s history. This era was initially thought to be ideal, allowing the creative team to indulge in a “retro-feel” for the production (Kapp Personal Communication, 2020). The presence of a car guard, and the multiracial workforce of the post office nevertheless imply that the opera’s setting is more contemporary. Whether the action plays out in the present or one or two decades ago is unclear, considering the “timeless costumes” and “unrealistic styling” of the opera (Kapp Personal Communication, 2020). Indeed, possibly more important than the action’s precise temporal location, *Poskantoor* indulges in nostalgia on all levels of production. However, this pandering to nostalgia is ambiguous – the opera does not simply draw from apartheid-era Afrikaner nostalgia. Rather, *Poskantoor* simultaneously indulges and complicates this nostalgia through mutually undermining strategies intricately woven throughout its multimodal components, resulting in the reconfiguration and complex representation of contemporary Afrikaner identity.

Historically, the Afrikaans language has been intrinsically linked to Afrikaner identity – a marker denoting Afrikaners’ independence from British colonial rule. Consequently, this demographic fosters a unique emotional attachment to the language since it has been integral to the development of Afrikaner identity (Steyn, 2016b). During apartheid, specifically, Afrikaans became even more politicised – the Afrikaner demographic claimed the language as their own, as an inherent symbol of white cultural identity. Post-apartheid, this linguistic and cultural hegemony enjoyed by the Afrikaner since 1948 was disrupted, with Afrikaans forced to share equal footing with ten other official languages striving for equal representation.

Following these socio-political shifts, a widespread anxiety emerged amongst the Afrikaner demographic, who feared the eradication of *their* language and culture in the democratic sphere.¹³⁷

However, the Afrikaans-speaking demographic has never solely consisted of white Afrikaners, even though the apartheid government fought hard to maintain the language's "racial purity".¹³⁸ In the post-apartheid sphere, white Afrikaners are still overprotective of Afrikaans. In many ways, the language is considered a "possible safe haven", which offers its speakers "a sense of community, belonging and control" (Steyn, 2016b:485). The "safety" of this linguistic home can be considered the root of widespread nostalgia amongst the post-apartheid white Afrikaner demographic.

Nostalgia has become a token characteristic of products produced by what Adrian S. Steyn (2016b) terms the Afrikaans culture industry. This industry sprang up in the wake of Afrikaner anxiety that accompanied democratic transition. With their language, the root of their identity, constantly framed as "under threat", Afrikaners were fearful for the survival of their cultural heritage. Addressing the Afrikaner demographic's sense of anxiety, the Afrikaans culture industry – a vast network encompassing print and broadcast media, satellite television, film, music, corporate enterprises, and arts festivals – has assuaged concerns by providing cultural products specifically for the consumption of Afrikaners in the post-apartheid climate (Steyn, 2016b:485). A major way in which the industry addresses these concerns is through the evocation of nostalgia in its products.

Reflecting on these cultural products, Oliver Hermanus, director of the acclaimed *Moffie* (2019) film,¹³⁹ underlines the prevalence of a selective nostalgia that permeates these products, protecting whitewashed

¹³⁷ While the extent of this transformation falls beyond the purview of this chapter, it is worth noting that the formerly dominant position of Afrikaans has been challenged on almost every front: from its removal on signage and product labelling, through to its abandonment in commerce and bureaucracy, to educational establishments facing increasing pressures to do away with Afrikaans as a medium of instruction (Louw, 2004:46; Van der Waal and Robins, 2011:774). The latter is continuously regarded by Afrikaans language activists as proof of the democratic government's "hostility" towards Afrikaans since this move is at odds with the multilingualism of the post-apartheid sphere and considered purposefully directed at the eradication of Afrikaans (Steyn, 2016b:483). This hostility towards Afrikaans, as the "language of the oppressor", is deep-seated. During apartheid, the Department of Bantu Education enforced a 50/50 (Afrikaans/English) policy in 1974, forcing Afrikaans as a language of instruction on non-Afrikaans speakers. This ultimately led to the Soweto uprising of 16 June 1976, where hundreds of black student protesters were killed by police.

¹³⁸ This is evidenced in the standardisation of Afrikaans that specifically excluded the "coloured" Afrikaans-speaking community's use of the language, resulting in a divide between (white) "civilised Afrikaans" and "coloured Afrikaans" (Odendaal, 2014:659).

¹³⁹ *Moffie* follows a young closeted gay man and his quest to hide his sexuality while serving his two-year mandatory conscription in the South African National Defence Force service in 1981 – a time when being openly gay was unthinkable. Considering the film's title (a derogatory word in contemporary South African society) and its provocative subject matter, the director argues the film's forced online screening due to the global pandemic meant that more audiences saw the film, since conservative society is more likely to watch controversial material in the comfort of their own homes than at a public cinema. Speaking in the context of the film's apartheid army setting, Hermanus argues that many white veterans hold fond memories of their time serving in the apartheid-era military; as such, they do not want to be confronted with the reality that the "army and [...] war was racist, illegitimate, hateful, bigoted and violent" (Hermanus, quoted in McMichael, 2020).

memory. The conservatism that pervades South African (white) audiences, Hermanus argues, stems from a “refusal” to confront a “traumatic past and the corrosive legacies of apartheid in the present”. For Hermanus, this is obvious when considering the output of privatised platforms like kykNET, a popular Afrikaans satellite television channel. “This”, Hermanus (quoted in McMichael, 2020) states, “is nostalgia world”. He continues:

They show a world devoid of black people, black interaction, black narratives, black characters. This is a world where people don’t talk about politics. It is a huge dome of nostalgia for a white way of life. [...] There is a discomfort in these companies about challenging their base – and what that audience is buying is an escape, a head-in-the-sand perspective on who they are (Hermanus, quoted in McMichael, 2020).

Hermanus’s statement here speaks to white South Africans’ unwillingness to come to terms with the post-apartheid socio-political climate, where whites, specifically Afrikaners, face their actual status as a minority group. Thus, the cultural products created for this demographic indulge in a nostalgia that offers consumers the opportunity to experience the whitewashed apartheid past. These products entertain “domes of white nostalgia”, to use Hermanus’s term, to coddle consumers – offering them a sense of security that their culture and language are protected.

In the case of *Poskantoor*, then, it can be argued that the opera’s creators also seek to tap into this vein of white nostalgia, in line with Hermanus’s observation, through its indulgence of Afrikaner cultural memory. However, as previously mentioned, this nostalgia is not clear cut – the opera’s modes simultaneously indulge and complicate this nostalgia to present an operatic identity reflective of the contemporary Afrikaans-speaking demographic. This intention is already reflected in the cast, which features white, “coloured” and black Afrikaans-speaking characters as a realistic reflection of the language’s racial demographic. Furthermore, Kapp’s libretto not only incorporates “standard” Afrikaans, but also Cape Afrikaans or *Kaaps*, historically classed as a “coloured” variant. On the surface, these decisions firmly undermine the white Afrikaners’ historical claim to the language’s racial identity. Furthermore, the libretto exploits the specific expressive affordances of Afrikaans, incorporating Afrikaans expletives, in stark contrast to the “elite” and “sophisticated” character conventionally associated with the genre. Going even further, these expletives are attributed to the women in the opera, firmly shattering any remaining traits of *ordentlikeheid* (decency) associated with traditional Christian-Afrikaner femininity. While these tactics seek to position *Poskantoor* as a twenty-first-century Afrikaans work, other creative decisions undermine this goal by pandering to Afrikaner nostalgia that predominantly dates from the apartheid era. Along with Kapp’s inclusions outlined above, Afrikaans also becomes an emblem of class, and more problematically, apartheid-era racism: several racial slurs are included in the libretto, and their use is not restricted to white and black social interactions.

Composer Braam du Toit laced the opera with nostalgic references, both melodic and stylistic, incorporating “highbrow” and “low brow” genres, strategically included, and intended to “trigger” the audience’s memory to make the opera more accessible (Du Toit, in Magdalene Minnaar, 2014c). In terms of the former, Du Toit

includes well-known themes from operas such as *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, and *Les contes d'Hoffmann*, and more coded quotations from *Don Giovanni*, and attributes them to white characters like Postmaster Smit who exude power and authority. While these inclusions might gesture towards popular culture, they also connect *Poskantoor's* Afrikaans opera idiom with the translated idiom of the PACs during apartheid, since these operas were among those performed in translation, linking the prestige associated with opera to aspects of racial class. In contrast, “low brow” references date from the 1950s to the 1980s, again resulting in a throwback to a turbulent period in South African history.¹⁴⁰ Incorporating these references, Du Toit possibly seeks to connect with a wider audience demographic not necessarily familiar with opera. However, Du Toit also attributes specific repertoire associated with white singers to a black character, thus complicating the whitewashed memories of this era. *Poskantoor's* visual identity employs similar strategies.

Poskantoor's aesthetic was a far cry from that promoted by the PACs. Instead of indulging in opulent spectacle that emulates European tradition through period dress and set design, director and designer Jaco Bouwer infused the opera with the powerful visual grammar that has come to characterise his work. Known for his work in theatre and film, Bouwer thoroughly doused the opera in the avant-garde, explicitly distinguishing *Poskantoor* from local fare. In terms of production design, the opera indulged in token postal ephemera already reflective of a bygone era in today's digital environment, presented both in keeping with, and contrary to, their standard application. Brown paper packages, boxes and envelopes strongly featured as props, together with wooden stamps (cleverly employed as percussive instruments by Du Toit). In terms of staging, Bouwer created an outdated, dark, and broody post office environment with rich brown wood details and vintage furniture. Apart from a moveable wooden counter (that adopts various uses throughout the opera), a vintage desk and office chair, the set design featured an impressive, giant interlocking wooden structure, reminiscent of a library card catalogue, running along the back wall. Its series of doors create private hideaways for characters, props, or pictures, abruptly opening, and closing, by either named characters or one of the three masked chorus members, constantly keeping the audience guessing as to what will emerge/be revealed next. The opera's visual aesthetic was also widely disseminated through conceptual photographs accompanying published paratexts and, most significantly, through a series of teaser trailers. Replicating international industry trends, these were the first South African opera trailers, engineered to entice potential audiences with a filmic introduction to *Poskantoor's* avant-garde aesthetic. The creative decisions outlined here indicate that *Poskantoor's* creators endeavoured to make the opera accessible to a broad target audience. Furthermore, the

¹⁴⁰ Since the focus of this chapter is not an in-depth analysis of the score, a discussion of all the instances of musical nostalgia in *Poskantoor* falls beyond its purview. However, a preliminary reading of the score has uncovered references that include comedian Al Debbó's 'Hasié, hoekom is jou stert so kort?' (Bunny, why is your tail so short?) (1950), ABBA's 'Mamma Mia' (1975), and Belgian band The Klaxons' 'Clap Clap Sound' (1984).

mass of nostalgia inclusions and contemporary allusions create intricate relationships between modes that speak to the genre's multimodal communication.

Following its premiere, the opera was lauded by critics. *Poskantoor* was awarded the Aardklop Festival's Soveel Beter (So Much Better) prize for the best production. Nominated for seven kykNET Fiësta awards (Stehle 2015), Bouwer and Du Toit took prizes in the categories "Best Theatre Design" and "Best Achievement in Classical Music" respectively (Meyer, 2015). Perhaps the most telling review is that of revered critic Paul Boekkooi (2014), who labelled the opera as:

[...] losvoor een van die indrukwekkendste Suid-Afrikaans operas wat voldoen aan die begrip van die Gesamtkunstwerk – 'n kunswerk wat vanweë byeengevoegde elemente die geheel grootser en omvattender saambind as wat die onderdele ooit op hulself sou kon vermag. Vir die duur van sy 100 minute maak dit geen kyker, hoorder en denker los van die gebeure wat hom op die verhoog afspeel nie (Boekkooi, 2014).

[English translation]

[...] hands down one of the most impressive South African operas that satisfies the concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk – a work of art that, because of the combination of elements, binds together the whole more grandly and comprehensively than the parts could ever achieve on their own. For the duration of its 100 minutes, it allows no viewer, listener or thinker to detach from the events unfolding on the stage.

Boekkooi's mention of the Gesamtkunstwerk here is especially noteworthy, drawing an explicit link between *Poskantoor*, an opera in Afrikaans, and the ideal masterworks of the European canon, arguably suggesting that the ideal of an Afrikaans opera aesthetic on par with Europe that the PACs strived for, is finally within reach. Boekkooi also seems spellbound by the opera's multimodal character. Boekkooi is particularly attentive to the interplay between these modes:

Tertius Kapp se libretto weerspieël 'n ryke verbeeldingskrag en fantasie op baie vlakke, maar onderliggend ontlok dit ook in Jaco Bouwer se regie 'n onderliggende spanning wat die humoristiese elemente ietwat onderdruk, behalwe wanneer Du Toit se musiek in 'n rigting inbeweeg waar hy bekende melodieë aanhaal [...] (Boekkooi, 2014).

[English translation]

Tertius Kapp's libretto reflects a rich imaginative power and fantasy on multiple levels, but underneath it evokes in Jaco Bouwer's direction an underlying tension that somewhat suppresses the humorous elements, except when Du Toit's music moves in a direction where he quotes famous melodies [...]

While it is evident that the different modes of *Poskantoor* communicate collectively, I argue that these modes are in a state of flux. This interaction between modes is significant, and warrants questioning since the opera's multimodality might have masked certain problematic elements, such as apartheid era racial terms, via production media.

In stark contrast to the intelligentsia's opinions of the work, however, the conservative media were less captivated by *Poskantoor*. The Afrikaans news platform Maroela Media, a body that "functions within a Christian moral framework" (Maroela Media, 2021), expressed their disappointment in *Poskantoor*. In a review

titled “Aardklop, 2014: Dié Poskantoor staak ook” (Aardklop, 2014: *This* Poskantoor also strikes), Susan Lombaard (2014), executive director of the platform at the time of writing, refers to an interview where Magdalene Minnaar confidently states that the opera’s creative team achieved what they set out to do, namely:

[...] om ’n opera te skep wat terselftyd verskeie gehore gaan verlei. Hoog en laag, ernstig en lig, konserwatief en liberaal, Aardklop en Grahamstad,¹⁴¹ of watter ander kategorieë Suid-Afrika ook bied. Met ander woorde: enigiemand met ’n sin vir humor en ’n waardering vir musiek (Minnaar, in Janse van Rensburg, 2014).

[English translation]

[...] to create an opera that will simultaneously seduce a variety of audiences. High and low, serious and light, conservative and liberal, Aardklop and Grahamstown, or whatever other categories South Africa offers. In other words: anyone with a sense of humour and an appreciation for music.

Apart from the noteworthy vocal performance of the cast, the opera did little to impress Lombaard, as her review, quoted at length, reveals:

Poskantoor het Maroela Media egter grootliks teleurgestel, veral gesien in die lig daarvan dat dit op so ’n wye teikengehoor gerig is. Hoewel daar komiese oomblikke is, is die atmosfeer van die stuk wroegend, gespanne en swaar. Dit is egter moeilik om na die musiek te luister en die lirieke te interpreteer. ’n Gedeelte van die opera wat, volgens wat vooraf gesê is, veronderstel is om ligweg spot te dryf met Afrikaanse vloekwoorde, kom kru oor en is allermins ’n ligte gespot, veral omdat die vloekwoorde in intensiteit toeneem en oor en oor herhaal word. Ook suggestiewe tonele in die opera is té eksplisiet vir die “ligte” aard van die stuk. (Toegegee – die ouderdomsbeperking van *Poskantoor* is 16.) Moontlik leen die klankkwaliteit van Afrikaans hom net nie tot ’n genre soos opera nie; of dalk moet daar nog heelwat geëksperimenteer word voor ’n Afrikaanse opera by sy gehoor aanklank sal vind.

[English translation]

Poskantoor, however, greatly disappointed Maroela Media, especially in light of the fact that it was aimed at such a wide target audience. Though there are comical moments, the atmosphere of the piece is agonising, tense and heavy. It is however difficult to listen to the music, and to interpret the lyrics. A part of the opera that, according to what was said beforehand, pokes fun at Afrikaans curse words, comes across as crude and is anything but light joking, especially because the curse words increase in intensity and are repeated over and over. Also, suggestive scenes in the opera are *too* explicit for the “light” nature of the piece (Granted – the age restriction is 16.) Perhaps the sound quality of Afrikaans simply does not lend itself to a genre such as opera, or perhaps much more experimenting will be needed before an Afrikaans opera will resonate with its audience.

Lombaard’s review contrasts sharply with the praise issued by Boekkooi, her critique foregrounding a discomfort with the opera’s dramatic texts (libretto and score) but also production media which see the staged realisation of these texts. While the opera’s Afrikaans medium and promises of nostalgia were intended to appeal to a wide audience, it could be argued that Lombaard considers the opera at odds with a conservative idea of Afrikaner identity that abhors profanity, sexual promiscuity, and mixed-race relations. While Lombaard (like Stolp) does not explicitly mention the latter, it must be mentioned that there is a continued intolerance towards interracial relationships in conservative (white) Afrikaans communities. As

¹⁴¹ Grahamstown here refers to the site of the annual National Arts Festival (NAF). *Poskantoor* planned to play the NAF, also setting its sights on a run at the Artscape Theatre in Cape Town but this never came to fruition (Du Toit, Personal Communication, 2020). As with most South African operas, *Poskantoor* has remained shelved since its premiere.

recently as 2019, the screening of the first interracial kiss between a black man and a white woman on the popular Afrikaans soap opera *7de Laan* (Seventh Avenue) led to an outpouring on social media (“Interracial kiss has some ‘7de Laan’ viewers fuming on social media”, 2019; Venter, 2019). Despite *7de Laan*’s racially diverse audience profile, the public reaction following the screening of this kiss points to the inherent conservatism prevalent amongst white Afrikaans audiences.¹⁴² Lombaard’s expression of conservatism ties in with Hermanus’s observation regarding the Afrikaans culture industry’s creation of nostalgic spaces that protect conservative Afrikaner audiences from post-apartheid realities. As Lombaard’s response shows, once this constructed reality is fractured by breaking away from nostalgia and presenting a contemporary Afrikaans culture, the cultural product is not well received.

This chapter will argue that *Poskantoor*, the first opera classed as an Afrikaans cultural product, endeavoured to present a reconfigured Afrikaans identity to its audience. With the emphasis placed on its Afrikaans language medium, the location of its premiere, together with nostalgic references in its dramatic texts, the opera embraced aspects of white nostalgia harking back to a time when Afrikaner identity and culture were ensconced as hegemonic. However, the opera also reflects elements of contemporary Afrikaans identity, resulting in the simultaneous fracturing of the protective surface of that nostalgia. The subtle relationships within the opera’s multimodal network result in an intricately woven representation of nostalgic/contemporary Afrikaans identity. As a point of departure, I present a detailed discussion of dramatic texts and production media to untangle the embeddedness of Afrikaans identity and Afrikaner nostalgia in these modes for the reader (Section 5.2). Following this, I explore the role of nostalgia in the Afrikaans culture industry (Steyn, 2016b) to contextualise *Poskantoor*’s conceptualisation and the trends to which it conforms. I then interrogate the ways in which the creative team constructed horizons of expectation for the audience before the opera’s premiere by considering *Poskantoor*’s paratextual networks (Section 5.3.1), including press releases, interviews (published and video) and electronic press kits (EPKs), as well as visual paratexts – comprising conceptual photographs, and the opera’s trailer.¹⁴³ Within these paratextual networks, I argue that the printed publicity texts and visual paratexts are ultimately at odds with one another, with the promise of comedy and nostalgia undermined through its avant-garde aesthetic. Ultimately, I argue that the opera’s creative team attempt to present a reconfigured Afrikaans identity to its audience, but this is

¹⁴² The soap boasts an audience profile that is almost equally divided between white, “coloured”, and black viewers (Van der Merwe, 2012:37). The soap’s executive producer Thandi Ramathesele, on SABC2 breakfast show Morning Live, revealed that *7de Laan*’s social media following approved of the kiss (with a poll resulting 70 per cent in favour). Despite this, Ramathesele argued that the media instead chose to focus more on the negative side of the story (See SABC News, 2019).

¹⁴³ Originally deployed in film, an electronic press kit, or EPK, is a collection of digital materials that promote interest in a work. Considering the digital engagement sought by audiences on social media sites, an EPK is considered essential to “building interest” in a work (Ostrove, 2015).

undermined through the inclusion of problematic remnants of Afrikaner culture that fail to fracture the dome of white nostalgia.¹⁴⁴

5.2 Breaking Frames: *Poskantoor*'s Design Modes and Production Media

A cinematic image of nostalgia is double exposure, or a superimposition of two images – of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life. The moment we try to force it into a single image, it breaks the frame or burns the surface.

— Svetlana Boym (2001:xiii–xvi)

The inclusions on part of *Poskantoor*'s creative team simultaneously indulge and problematise Afrikaner nostalgia at every level of production. For example, employing “standard” Afrikaans together with regional dialects could be considered as reflective of the current linguistic landscape. However, alongside this inclusive strategy, the language simultaneously becomes a marker of class, problematically hinting at apartheid-era divides. Similarly, incorporating musical references dating from the apartheid era that are historically linked to a white artist undoubtedly hints at Afrikaner nostalgia; but attributing its use to a black character in *Poskantoor* complicates that memory for the viewer by delivering a disconnect between the “white” memory and the “black” stage reality. These are only two of the instances that proliferate through *Poskantoor*'s dramatic texts and production media. While these strategies may be produced in one text alone, i.e., either the libretto or the score, they are also most significantly presented *multimodally* – through the combination of textual, musical, and visual modes – resulting in a complex network of elements that interact with white nostalgia.

Starting with language, Kapp uses different varieties of Afrikaans in the libretto: standard Afrikaans, predominantly used in association with white characters; and Cape Afrikaans, associated with Saartjie, a working-class “coloured” character. This attribution is arguably reflective of historical divides. While the use of these two vernaculars in *Poskantoor* undoubtedly points to the Afrikaans identity of the work, their combination results in multi-layered dichotomies that complicate the representation of this seemingly united Afrikaans identity. Since Afrikaans is considered the *lingua franca* of the apartheid regime, employing the language operationally undoubtedly interacts with the problematic historical bind between Afrikaner culture and politics – indicative of a representation where opera is still classed as an elitist “white” art. However, while standard Afrikaans as a historically “white” language speaks to this, the incorporation of Cape

¹⁴⁴ While a 20-minute highlight reel of the opera was uploaded to Biblioteek Productions' YouTube channel as a public video in July 2020 (see BIBLIOTEEK PRODUCTIONS, 2020), most of the scenes discussed in this chapter are not included in this 20-minute video. It is plausible that Biblioteek would like some elements of production to remain hidden to maintain a sense of mystery, should the opera be staged again; however, the exclusion of certain scenes, like those that contain profanity, explicit gestures, and racial slurs, potentially points to an awareness on the part of the opera's creators of the inflammatory nature of these inclusions. The examples of production media included in this chapter were drawn from an archival recording kindly made privately available to me by Biblioteek Productions, which was uploaded as an unlisted video to YouTube for examination purposes.

Afrikaans, a vernacular mostly associated with the “coloured” community, complicates this construction. This is further disrupted through the inclusion of a black Afrikaans-speaking character. *Poskantoor* thus becomes reflective of the contemporary Afrikaans-speaking demographic, as well as a more accurate representation of this demographic’s longer history, since Afrikaans was never exclusively used by Afrikaners, even though the apartheid government staked its claim to the language. These decisions arguably seek to position *Poskantoor* as a work that is inclusive of the multiracial identity of Afrikaans, signifying that opera, and specifically opera in Afrikaans, is no longer an idiom that is exclusively white.

To give voice to this “new” Afrikaans identity, standard Afrikaans and Cape-Afrikaans are often used in combination in the libretto. For example, phrases exclusive to Afrikaans (that occur in both the standard and Cape vernaculars), are combined with phrases and phonological occurrences unique to Cape Afrikaans. In Part 3 of the opera, for example, Kapp uses a traditional Afrikaans greeting “Goeiedag” (Good-day), emphasising the fricative nature of the language through the repetition of the [g], together with an informal greeting in Cape-Afrikaans, “jis wa my kinnes”, which roughly translates as “hey, where my peeps (friends) at?” with the “wa” (“where”) illustrating the omission of the postvocal [r] (e.g. wa vs. waar) commonly found in this vernacular (see Excerpt 1). The pronunciation of these Afrikaans phrases is in stern contrast to the legato phrasing of the two iconic Italian phrases (“bonjourno” [sic] and “ciao bella”) used in this scene:

[Excerpt 1, *Poskantoor*, Part 3]

SAARTJIE	Piesangbote in doerielande sing ‘bonjourno’ en ‘ciao bella’. Hier het ons ‘gggoeiedaggg’, of ‘jis wa my kinnes’.	Bananaboats in faraway lands sing ‘buongiorno’ and ‘ciao bella’. Here we have ‘gggoeiedaggg’ or ‘jis wa my kinnes’.
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Similarly, at the beginning of Part 5, the word “mos”, an adverb unique to Afrikaans that changes an entire utterance “to guide the hearer to a particular interpretation” (Jantjies and Van Dulm, 2012:3), is innovatively used in an aria. The use of this word is combined with instances of affricatisation ([j] > [dʒ]) in “djy” (“you”), exclusive to Cape Afrikaans phonology:

[Excerpt 2, *Poskantoor*, Part 5]

SAARTJIE:	Dis <i>mos</i> maar hoe die lewe werk – sie djy. Jy droom <i>mos</i> maar van ’n beter plek – sie djy. [...]	That’s <i>mos</i> how life works – you see? You <i>mos</i> dream of a better place – you see? [...]
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By not exclusively using standard Afrikaans in its libretto, *Poskantoor* comments on the future of the Afrikaans language, which many scholars consider Cape Afrikaans to be. However, the use of the “regional dialect in an opera register” (Minnaar, quoted in Janse van Rensburg, 2014) also speaks to the elevation of the language from a dialect to something more prestigious that can hold its own in a genre such as opera. While the inclusion of Cape Afrikaans is reminiscent of translation trends associated with the generation of prestige for

the Afrikaans language during the 1930s and 1940s, it also shatters the illusion that the racial identity of Afrikaans and (Afrikaans) opera is straightforwardly white. The presence of standard Afrikaans and Cape Afrikaans does much to reflect the multiracial identity of the contemporary Afrikaans-speaking demographic. However, this strategy of inclusivity is undercut when language also becomes a sign of class and racism in *Poskantoor* – not only between white and black, but also “coloured” and black. Saartjie, for example, comments on Napoleon’s class in the opera, remarking on his physical appearance, and seriously questions Grethe’s feelings towards him. In Part 2 of the opera Saartjie tells Grethe to stick to her class (see Excerpt 4). This happens again in Part 3. Following Grethe’s revelation that her new love (Napoleon) is a “digter van die straat, ’n ongeslypte edelsteen” (“a poet of the street, an uncut gem”), Saartjie lashes out, resorting to profanity and vulgarity (see Excerpt 5) to make her point. In both these episodes, Saartjie positions herself as having a better social standing than Napoleon. In the scene from Excerpt 4, Saartjie holds a delicate porcelain teacup, positioning her as a figure with class, while she regards Napoleon with a judgemental gaze. In Excerpt 5 Napoleon’s race is foregrounded in the use of the term “klong”,¹⁴⁵ which in this context is taken to refer to a young black man:

[Excerpt 4, *Poskantoor*, Part 2]

SAARTJIE	Daai skollie is ’n koeroeding ¹⁴⁶ Jy kan sien aan sy kuite hy slaap buite.	That hooligan is a <i>koeroeding</i> You can see he sleeps outside by looking at his calves.
	Nee man, sis! Vry in jou klas! Die suipgat is mos laerklas.	No man, gross! Date in your class! That drunkard is <i>mos</i> lower class.

[Poskantoor, 2014 \(Part 2\), Saartjie lectures Grethe and adopts a social standing superior to that of Napoleon](#)

[Excerpt 5, *Poskantoor*, Part 3]

SAARTJIE	Nou praat die kind mos warme kak! Jirre, vrou, is jy behoefstig? [...] Daai klong soek mos net zak en rama! ¹⁴⁷ Jou bek ruik vrot! Gaan was jou tanne!	Now this child is <i>mos</i> talking hot shit! Jesus, woman, are you needy? [...] That <i>klong</i> mos only wants money and rama Your mouth smells foul! Go wash your teeth!
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In addition to the use of the word “klong”, other racist terms are included in the opera, attributed to the white authority figure, Smit, in a creative decision that problematically includes apartheid-era racial terms.

¹⁴⁵ According to Anton F. Prinsloo (2009:281), “klong” means different things in different regions. In Namakwaland (Northern-Cape), for example, the word refers to a white male, whereas in the South-Cape, Transvaal (Gauteng) and Free State regions, it is a racist term for a black male. Contrasting to these race-based terms, in Franschhoek, in the Cape winelands, “klong” refers to a bottle of wine. While it is possible to entertain the idea that “klong” might not be intended to be racist, this is contradicted through the racial identities of the singers present on the stage.

¹⁴⁶ Kapp (Personal Communication, June 2021) clarified that his application of “koeroeding” is drawn from the various definitions of the word “koeroe” in Prinsloo (2009:315). In the context of this scene, I interpret “koeroeding” as a reference to a “common, uninteresting person” (Prinsloo, 2009:315).

¹⁴⁷ *Rama* is a brand of margarine; however, the word also refers to money in Griekwaland-West (Prinsloo, 2009:465).

Following Saartjie’s mocking of Smit’s use of florid language in Part 3 of the opera, Smit reprimands her with the phrase “Gam se kind, jy hou jou wit!” (“Ham’s child, you are keeping yourself white!”), referring to the “curse of Ham”, a Biblical story that has long formed part of racial discourse (Adhikari, 1992:95).¹⁴⁸ This is undoubtedly intended to remind Saartjie of her station; however, this does not phase her as she proceeds to inspect Smit’s bald spot, and continues to mock him, purposefully undermining his display of racism. While Smit’s utterance of this phrase is *fortissimo*, the chromatic ascending septuplet phrase (employed to support the chaos unfolding with the women undermining Smit’s authority) (Example 5.1) (mm.245–246), masks this racial term.

Example 5.1: Du Toit (2014), *Poskantoor* (Part 3), “Gam se kind, jy hou jou wit”, mm.245–246.

The musical score for Example 5.1 consists of three staves. The top staff is for Saartjie 2, starting at measure 245 with a treble clef and a whole rest. The middle staff is for Posmeester, starting at measure 245 with a treble clef, a forte (*ff*) dynamic, and a chromatic ascending septuplet phrase. The bottom staff is for Piano, starting at measure 245 with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs), a forte (*f*) dynamic, and a chromatic ascending septuplet phrase. The lyrics for Saartjie 2 are "Haai shame kyk" and for Posmeester are "Gam se kind, jy hou jou wit!".

While Du Toit perhaps scores against this racist reference here, the actions of the singers on stage imply an awareness of the taboo nature of this reference: Grethe audibly gasps at Smit’s use of the phrase, and looks at Saartjie, whose jaw has also dropped in shock (BIBLIOTEEK PRODUCTIONS, 2021:43:45–43:48).¹⁴⁹

[Poskantoor, 2014, \(Part 3\): Grethe and Saartjie express their shock at Smit’s use of a racist term](#)

Racial terms seep in again a couple of scenes later. To punish the women for their insolence, Smit declares that he has hired Napoleon as “onder-adjunk-vise-posmeester” (“under-adjunct-vice postmaster”) – a rank essentially three times lower than Smit’s own. This “false” promotion is mirrored in Napoleon’s costuming. While the military-style jacket of his uniform echoes that of Smit, he wears the same pair of trousers made

¹⁴⁸ Mohamed Adhikari (1992:95) identifies “Gam” (Ham) as a pejorative term used to refer to the “coloured labouring poor” in a South African context. This term is still used by the far-right to justify the continuation of apartheid-era racial segregation.

¹⁴⁹ This scene is included in the excerpts uploaded as part of the opera’s showreel (see BIBLIOTEEK PRODUCTIONS, 2020).

from fabric of the blanket that has accompanied his appearance throughout the opera (Figure 5.1 and 5.2); arguably still pointing towards his “lower class” status.¹⁵⁰



Figure 5.1: Napoleon’s costuming in Part 1 of the opera. Photograph. © Alet Pretorius.



Figure 5.2: Napoleon’s costuming in Part 3 of the opera, the fabric of his trousers indicative of the lingering presence of poverty and his “lower class” status despite his promotion. Photograph. © Alet Pretorius.

¹⁵⁰ This blanket, usually grey with white or multi-coloured stripe design, is synonymous with poverty in South Africa. Sold by PEP stores, a lower-end retail store, they are often requested as donations by homeless shelters (and animal shelters) to help those in need during the winter season. It was observed that this costuming was changed in production media: the archival footage utilised for this chapter shows Napoleon wearing the same trousers as Smit. This change of costume is significant, perhaps not merely pointing to aesthetic considerations but the decision to do away with symbols of poverty following Napoleon’s promotion.

In explaining Napoleon’s duties, Smit refers to Napoleon as “posjong”, “jong” being a racist term referring to the “help”. Napoleon proceeds to correct him, stating that he is no longer a servant (“Nie meer klaas”). However, Napoleon still buys into the “master and servant” dynamic by addressing Smit as “boss” (“Baas, semblief, my baas is baas”), perhaps to soften the blow. Smit apologises profusely for his mistake, and, as incentive, adds that with some dedication Napoleon might rise even further in the ranks, as “postman” eventually becomes “postmaster”:

[Excerpt 6, *Poskantoor*, Part 3]

SMIT	Jou taak, as posjong, is tug oor die teefhok: die nodige leiding deur tere kastyding.	Your job, as postboy is discipline over the bitch-cage the necessary guidance through tender chastisement.
NAPOLEON	Baas, semblief, my baas is baas Maar die klaas nie meer klaas. Die baas se ‘posjong’. Die naam is ‘posman’.	Boss, please, my boss is boss But this servant is no longer servant. The boss says ‘postboy’. The name is ‘postman’.
SMIT	Natuurlik, jongman! Vergewe my tong. Pragtige posman en nooit weer posjong! Met ‘n bietjie toewyding Word posman posmeester!	Of course, young man! Forgive my tongue. Beautiful postman and never again postboy! With a little dedication postman becomes postmaster!

Hy wink vir NAPOLEON.

He beckons NAPOLEON.

[*Poskantoor*, 2014, \(Part 4\): Napoleon points out Smit’s use of a racial term and Smit apologises](#)

While the stage direction here has Smit beckoning Napoleon, the gesture that accompanies Smit’s apology has been replaced by a wink; either purposefully or through the misinterpretation of the singer. This facial gesture underlines the fact that this is an empty promise, and that Napoleon will never advance in his post. This thus constructs a space of white nostalgia, where Napoleon, as a black man, is denied the opportunity for advancement, and Smit, the white man, stays in power. Smit’s indifference is obvious in his facial expressions accompanying his utterance of “*posman*”, with his eyes wide and eyebrows raised as emphasis is placed on Napoleon’s “actual” title (BIBLIOTEEK PRODUCTIONS, 2021:47:50–48:01). While these racial terms are mild compared to others that still creep up in contemporary South African society, their use undoubtedly points towards apartheid-era thinking, perhaps echoing Stolp’s (2016) observation that not much social change has taken place following the end of the regime.¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ Afrikaans racial slurs, like the k-word, are notably included in Roelof Temmingh’s *Enoch, Prophet of God* (1995) and also in Martin Watt’s *Tronkvoël* (2010).

Smit, for example, uses florid and poetic language and metaphors to further position him as a man of status in the opera. This contrasts with the Cape Afrikaans predominantly associated with Saartjie. In an excerpt from Part 3, Smit notably reflects on his position of power, with Saartjie subsequently confronting him for his bombastic rhetoric, notably incorporating a case of assimilation (e.g., “kykchie” vs. kyk hier / look’ere vs. look here), characteristic of Cape Afrikaans:

[Excerpt 7, *Poskantoor*, Part 3]

SMIT	Mag, met mag, mag ek maak, mag ek breek En verag, geringag, en aflag. Die goue mag van ‘n duisend stempels – Die son waarom jul lewentjies wentel.	Power, with power, I may make, I may break and undermine, and laugh off. The golden might of a thousand stamps – The sun around which your little lives orbit.
SAARTJIE	Praat soos ‘n mens, kykchie, wat makeer jou? Jy’s om en om met jou ommerasies: ‘dus’, ‘derhalwe’, ‘desnieteenstaande’ Jy wil sê van daai dan sê jy van dit!	Speak like a person, look’ere, what’s the matter with you? You keep talking in circles: ‘thus’, ‘therefore’, ‘nevertheless’ You want to speak of that then you say this!

The incorporation of expletives heavily undermines the prestige associated with opera, particularly since it was positioned as the epitome of class and sophistication during apartheid. Kapp’s choice of expletives in the libretto includes words that have entered the mainstream and have lost much of their shock value due to their widespread use (see Excerpt 5). However, Kapp also includes phrases and combinations that are extremely vulgar, to which audiences are not desensitised and that are considered offensive. Even more significantly, Kapp attributes these words and phrases to the women in the opera, in a decision which severs any ties to traditional Afrikaner femininity by contradicting notions of *ordentlikheid* (decency).¹⁵²

While the image of the pious and chaste “traditional” Afrikaner woman is already disrupted through the allusion to Grethe’s rumoured promiscuity and her interracial relationship with Napoleon, the image of the Afrikaner woman is further damaged in Part 4 of the opera. Following Napoleon’s appointment, the women are slaving away in the post office, “similar to dwarves in a mine” (Kapp, 2014). Powerless, the women seemingly revert to the only weapon available to them – language – with their expletives increasing in intensity. By doing so, they fracture the image of the traditional Afrikaner woman. While Napoleon reprimands the women for using their vulgarity (“Vuilbek-vroue stank!” / “Foul-mouthed-female-stench”), they continue to defy him, as evidenced in Saartjie’s response (Excerpt 9):

¹⁵² Christi van der Westhuizen (2019:147) writes that “ordentlikheid is difficult to translate: its meanings are embodied and include presentability, good manners, decency, politeness and humility with a Calvinist tenor [...] collectively [...] speaking to the idea of respectability”. Similarly, Theo Sonnekus (2020:32) describes ordentlikheid as an “ordering principle for Afrikaner femininity”, dictating “appearances, demeanour and moral character”.

[Excerpt 8, *Poskantoor*, Part 4]

RONEL:	Die...bliksem!	The...bastard!
SAARTJIE:	Die poephol!	The asshole!
RONEL:	Die... duiwel!	The devil!
SAARTJIE:	Die doos!	The... doos!
RONEL:	Stoepkakker!	Porch-shitter!
[...]		[...]

*Hulle kyk met afwagting vir GRETHE om by te dra.
Die musiek bou op tot 'n crescendo en sy sing
uitbundig.*

*They look at GRETHE expecting her to contribute:
The music builds up to a crescendo and she sings
uninhibited.*

GRETHE:	Die konsentrasie-kamp-kanker- kadawer-kut-stamper!	The concentration-camp-cancer- cadaver-cunt-pounder!
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RONEL & SAARTJIE & GRETHE:	Die ma-se-poesel! Die toiletbak-droesem! Die slappe-kak-skyters! Kameelskrotumruikers! Die druppende derm! –	The mother's cunts! The toiletbowl-lees! The loose-stool-shitters! The camel scrotum-sniffers! The dripping intestine! –
[...]		[...]

[Excerpt 9, *Poskantoor*, Part 4]

SMIT:	iets te sê, julle drie?	Something to say, you three?
RONEL:	Nee, meneer.	No, sir.
SAARTJIE:	Net dit: fok u.	Just this: fuck you.

The multimodal character of opera is particularly effective in foregrounding this trio of colourful profanity (Excerpt 8). In terms of musical mode, Du Toit scores a notably intricate passage for *a cappella* voices (Example 5.2). While Grethe, Saartjie and Ronel all sing the same text, their melodies (all sextuplet phrases) are not identical, and they do not sing in unison. Instead, Du Toit cleverly plays with rhythm here, with Saartjie and Ronel's lagging a semiquaver and quaver rest behind Grethe's sextuplet melody, resulting in a dramatic display of plosive consonants. The intensity of this passage is further underlined by Du Toit's indication for the trio's delivery to be *fortississimo* (*fff*) in the previous bar (m.43). The absence of orchestral texture here, coupled with the dynamics, mean that nothing can drown out these words.

Example 5.2: Du Toit (2014), *Poskantoor* (Part 4), Expletives Trio, mm.44–45.

The musical score consists of the following parts:

- G. 1**: Soprano 1, lyrics: Die ma - se - poe - se! Die toi - let - bak - droe-sem! Die slap - pe kak sky - ters! Die ka - meel - skro -
- S. 2**: Soprano 2, lyrics: Die ma - se - poe - se! Die toi - let - bak - droe-sem! Die slap - pe kak sky - ters! Die ka - meel - skro
- R**: Alto, lyrics: Die ma - se - poe - se! Die toi - let - bak - droe-sem! Die slap - pe kak sky - ters! Die ka - meel - skro
- K. 1**: Keyboard 1, lyrics: Die ma-se-poe - se! Die toi-let - bak-droe-sem! Die slap - pe kak sky-ters!
- Perc. 2**: Percussion 2
- K. 2**: Keyboard 2, lyrics: Die ma-se-poe - se! Die toi-let - bak-droe-sem! Die slap - pe kak sky-ters!
- Perc. 3**: Percussion 3
- K. 3**: Keyboard 3, lyrics: Die ma-se-poe - se! Die toi-let - bak-droe-sem! Die slap - pe kak sky-ters!
- Perc. 4**: Percussion 4

The score includes musical notation for all parts, with dynamics such as *ff* and *f* indicated. The lyrics are written below the corresponding staves.

In terms of stage action, in this scene the women take up positions downstage centre. Grethe adopts a stance of empowerment, akin to a revolutionary, holding a wooden spade high, with Ronel holding a giant wooden stamp and Saartjie carrying a cardboard box (Figure 5.3). What is more, the three women deliver their unbelievable collection of expletives while looking out into the auditorium. Such blocking makes the onslaught of profanity more intense and emphatic (BIBLIOTEEK PRODUCTIONS, 2021:52:51–53:20):

[Poskantoor, 2014, \(Part 4\): The women stun with their utterances of profanity](#)



Figure 5.3: The female employees rebel using language. Photograph. © Alet Pretorius.

Though women swearing is not an uncommon occurrence in certain modern Afrikaans circles, this behaviour exhibited in these two episodes is at odds with the traditional Calvinist values of Afrikaner women. While research regarding women and profanity in South Africa is wanting, Anna Elizabeth Feinauer (1981) did observe that the linguistic community views the use of profanity by women more negatively than if used by men. Furthermore, Feinauer (1981:236) writes that “where expletives with the highest taboo rating are permissible for male speakers, women are expected to resort to curses or tears in order to express emotions and attitudes”, undoubtedly pointing towards sexist trends. The inclusion of profanity uttered by women could thus be read on some level as a striving toward gender equality.

Tying in with the expletives’ destruction of the wholesome image of the Afrikaner woman are allusions to sex and suggestive gestures in the opera. The perception of Grethe as an “innocently judged” widow is shattered

in Part 5 of the opera. Here, Grethe and Saartjie seduce Smit and Napoleon, respectively, to entrap them.¹⁵³ Once this has been achieved, Grethe confesses that the rumours pertaining to her promiscuity were true all along:

[Excerpt 10, *Poskantoor*, Part 5]

<p>GRETHE: O, posmeester, tussen jou en my: ek het hulle almal bloots gevry. Oom Doppie: ag, al die ervaring – wat weet die man nie als van paring! Jurgen na die pretzelfees, en Sybrand met ’n vriend daarby. Die skaapskeerders so op ’n ry – dit was ’n woeste maand gewees! En arme, arme, arme jy die enigste man wat my nooit kon kry!</p>	<p>Oh, postmaster, between you and me: I rode all of them bareback. Oom Doppie: oh, all the experience – what does the man not know all about mating! Jurgen after the pretzel festival, and Sybrand along with a friend. The sheep shearers in a row – it’s been a wild month! And poor, poor, poor you the only man who could never have me!</p>
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Again, the pious and chaste image of the traditional Afrikaner woman is shattered here. Grethe not only confesses to these sexual escapades, but she emphasises this proclamation of her promiscuity with sexual gestures. Equipped with a riding crop, Grethe’s confession takes on a notable gestural character. Facing the audience, Grethe bends over from the waist in front of the bubble-wrapped Smit, suggestively rubbing her buttocks against his lap. She mimics mounting and riding a horse when referring to Jurgen, the German, and when speaking of Sybrand, the gay baker, and his friend, she positions the crop between her thighs suggestively moving forwards and backwards. Following the reference to the sheep shearers, she uses the crop to whip herself, tauntingly looking at Smit while doing so. Her blatantly false display of sympathy for Smit (“arme, arme, arme jy”/ “poor, poor, poor you”) ends when Grethe bends him over the counter and pins him down, her wide-legged stance behind Smit clearly framing her as the party with the sexual power.

[*Poskantoor*, 2014, \(Part 5\): Grethe proudly details her sexual exploits with several of Karkaskraal’s men](#)

The opera’s evocation of the *platteland* further interacts with the construction and destruction of the dome of white nostalgia. The opera’s opening aria ‘Vieslike, verskriklike, vervloekte dorpie’ (‘Horrible, terrible, cursed little town’), for example, heavily debunks the image of the *platteland* as the idyllic space of the collective Afrikaner cultural imaginary.¹⁵⁴ This is significant since this is the audience’s first introduction to the town of Karkaskraal – an environment already infused with the macabre through the nominal reference to

¹⁵³ A unique instance of intertextuality within this thesis – between *Saartjie* (Chapter 4) and *Poskantoor* (Chapter 5) emerges here. Admiring Saartjie from behind, Napoleon specifically mentions her “oormekaarkyboudjies” (roughly translating to “cross eyed buttocks”) referring to her voluptuous derriere, and states that if he had the opportunity to choose a lover again, he’d choose Saartjie, instead of Grethe. The emphasis placed on Saartjie’s anatomy here recalls the objectification of Baartman’s body discussed in Chapter 4, and problematically gestures towards a stereotypical physical difference inherently tied to Saartjie’s ethnicity.

¹⁵⁴ This aria’s text is also printed in the festival programme booklet (see Clover Aardklop Feesgids, 2014:45).

carcasses.¹⁵⁵ Kapp plays up *platteland* characteristics, such as the safeness of the neighbourhood – with both the magistrate, keeper of law and order, and children sleeping peacefully since there is no need to fear for the crimes that plague big city life. Crochet curtains and gingerbread biscuits are mentioned, reflecting the wholesomeness of the *platteland* environment. Hobbies such as crocheting and baking require copious amounts of time and are thus perfectly suited to *platteland* life where residents embrace a slower pace of living. However, life on the *platteland* is not just wholesome. Kapp notably includes references to the snide side of small community life, referring to the rumour mill that is rife with gossip and judgement. Moreover, the aria’s title and refrain keep underlining how “horrible” this *platteland* space is:

[Excerpt 11, *Poskantoor*, Part 1]

GRETHE:	Ag, wat ’n haglike plek wat ’n afgryslieke gat wat ’n vieslike, verskriklike, vervloekte dorpie waarin ons woon. Snags dans die duiwel om die maanlig tussen selonsroosstiltes en agter hekelgordyne bloei onheilige blomme En die magistraat slaap rustig en jou kinders slaap rustig want die sondaars sluip rustig deur die grou oggendlug Ag, wat ’n haglike plek wat ’n afgryslieke gat wat ’n vieslike, verskriklike, vervloekte dorpie wat ek nou verlaat. Bedags koer die koppies en die gemmerkoekies giggel oor die skaamte en skande van ’n vrou wat nog vrou is [...]	Oh, what a horrible place what a terrible hole what a horrible, terrible, cursed little town in which we live. At night the devil dances around the moonlight between oleander silences and behind crochet curtains unholy flowers bloom. And the magistrate sleeps peacefully and your children sleep peacefully for the sinners sneak quietly through the gray morning air. Oh, what a horrible place what a horrible hole what a horrible, terrible, cursed little town which I am now leaving. During the day the cups coo and the gingerbread biscuits giggle about the shame and disgrace of a woman who is still woman [...]
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The main motif here employs parallel fifths in the viola and cello, which is later accompanied by a contrary motion quadruplet motive in the piano and descending fifth harmonics in the violin, and *fluttersongue* in the flute. The incorporation of a wind machine notably highlights the desolation of the *platteland* space.

¹⁵⁵ The same aria is used in the video trailer, discussed in Section 5.4 of this chapter; however, the name of the town is not revealed in the trailer, leading me to this conclusion.

Example 5.3: Du Toit (2014), *Poskantoor* (Part 1), Opening motif, mm.1–6.

To further inform the setting of Karkaskraal, Kapp includes specific reference to *platteland* towns and geographical locations. Part 2 of the opera thus opens with Ronel and Saartjie processing letters destined for *platteland* towns: Soekmekaar (Limpopo), Soebatsfontein (Northern Cape), and the famous Tweebuffelsmeteenskootmorsdoodgeskietfontein¹⁵⁶ (North West). This trend continues in Part 3 where these two women start steaming open letters and reading Karkaskraal’s residents’ private correspondence. More towns and regions in the Northern Cape are mentioned here: Aggeneys, Daniëlskuil, Hakskeenpan, Kuruman, Mier, and Nababeep. The locations mentioned in these two scenes are extremely rural and desolate.¹⁵⁷ Hakskeenpan, in the Kalahari Desert, for example, is an isolated saltpan with no inhabitants and no infrastructure, reflecting the trivial nature of the correspondence addressed there. Tying in with the framing of Karkaskraal as a backwater town, Du Toit includes stylistic reference to Die Briels.¹⁵⁸ With these letters addressed to “middle-of-nowhere” locations like Hakskeenpan, the women express their disdain for the tedium of *platteland* life – the score calls for “a type of ‘Die Briels’ inflection with a bad scoop” (Du Toit, 2014c:1), presumably imitating Die Briels’ characteristic yodelling sound. The orchestration for this section is also overly simplistic, calling for a prepared piano to recreate the folksy strumming of Die Briels’ guitar. This

¹⁵⁶ This name roughly translates to “The spring where two buffaloes were killed with a single shot” (Scott, 2016).

¹⁵⁷ The Moordenaarskaro (Murderers Karoo) is also mentioned in Part 5, as a foreshadowing of the men’s fate.

¹⁵⁸ Die Briels were a brother and sister duo who wrote songs that capture the trials and tribulations of the working-class Afrikaner during the 1950s. Famously sentimental, they used to scour newspapers for tragedies that they could write songs about. The custodian of Afrikaans art and culture, the FAK, considered their songs an embarrassment, banning certain tracks from being broadcast on radio (Van der Merwe, 2017:76).

miserable, almost weeping, sound further positions Karkaskraal as an undesirable place where nothing exciting ever happens.

One of the main ways in which the routine of the *platteland* is reflected is through Du Toit's scoring of repetitive phrases. The daily processing of mail in the opening scene of Part 2, for example, is accompanied by the post office theme consisting of the constant repetition of sextuplet phrases in the right hand of the piano, with the doubling of motifs between the violin and viola, and marimba (Example 5.4, mm.1–4). Stamps (used by Ronel and Saartjie) are cleverly employed as percussion here. The two women are assisted by masked employees that go about their duties, as if on autopilot, constantly repeating the same tasks and tracing the same steps. "Karkaskraal", sung by Ronel (m.3), is also chanted here, attributing a harsh quality to the supposedly picturesque *platteland* town.

[Poskantoor, 2014, \(Part 2\): The post office opens for business and daily routines commence](#)

Example 5.4: Du Toit (2014), *Poskantoor* (Part 2), Introduction of post office theme, mm.1–3.

1 $\text{♩} = 48$ *mf*

Saartjie 2 *mf* 3 Soek-me-kaar

Stempel 1 *mf* 3

Ronel *mf* 3 3 3 3 Van Kar-kas - kraal na... Van

Stempel 2 3 3 3 3 3 3

Marimba *mf* 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 9 9

Piano *mf* stick double-sided tape over strings to create muffled percussive sound 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6 6

Violin $\text{♩} = 48$ *mf* pizz. 3 3 3 3

Viola *mf* 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 9 9

In contrast to the jagged repetitive nature of routine in the *platteland*, Du Toit incorporates the lush rolled chords of Offenbach's 'Barcarolle' from *Les contes d'Hoffmann* to accompany Ronel and Saartjie's daydreaming session of Venice and all things Italian following the discovery of a letter from Venice in Part 3. The 'Barcarolle' theme returns when the two women try to charm Smit into taking one of them as his companion to the opening of the opera house. While Du Toit's inclusion of opera themes might recall the "golden age" of PAC opera, again speaking to the positioning of opera as a "white" Afrikaner cultural artefact, the themes are employed either to position opera as an innately European art, as in the case of the 'Barcarolle', or to question the Afrikaans association with it. Regarding the latter, opera themes that Du Toit employs in connection with Smit ultimately undermine the elite status linked to the genre. Smit's first aria in Part 2, for example, begins with the solo *pizzicato* violin playing the introduction of 'Deh vieni alla finestra' from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, fitting with the framing of Smit as a type of Casanova-character. Prior to this, Smit has underlined his position in the local community, in a sense speaking to the Afrikaner male stereotype: a "deacon and board member, a wine connoisseur", positioning himself as a desirable "bull stud" ("stoetkwaliteit") within the town (Kapp, 2014). This continues as Smit proceeds to sing his own praises, referring to his impressive backhand in tennis, and girls swooning over him and affirming that people "know his name well" and "they know who he is". To confirm this, he asks the staff who he is to have them reaffirm his status, eventually standing on the counter and forcing the women to look up at him. The repetition of "Wie is ek" (Who am I?) mimics that of Rossini's repeated "Figaro" phrase from *Il barbiere di Siviglia*'s 'Largo al factotum', a phrase that has become a token opera reference in popular culture. However, in contrast to the traditional virtuosity associated with this aria, Smit falters as the tempo increases, with him audibly hitting a false note toward the end.¹⁵⁹

[Poskantoor, 2014, \(Part 2\): Smit copies the famous "Figaro" phrase from 'Largo al factotum'](#)

Contrasted sharply to Smit's pompous self-praising behaviour, referencing "high culture", Napoleon is linked to Afrikaner heartthrob opera and crossover singer Gé Korsten, arguably positioning him as the favourite love interest.¹⁶⁰ Straddling apartheid-era "high" and "low" culture, Korsten's music appeals to a wide demographic, thus allowing *Poskantoor* to do the same through quotations of his music. Du Toit weaves a number of Korsten's hits into the score, including 'Hier is 'n mens' (Here is a person), the title track of Korsten's 1972 album, as well as his hit 'Liefing' (Beloved). In Part 2, Napoleon's performance of 'Hier is 'n

¹⁵⁹ Furthermore, Smit's initials "S.P.U.U.G" literally spell out spittle, further undermining his supposed status. This is supported by his costume, which includes a golden stamp, a symbol of his power and position, which resembles a pacifier. It is also employed as such when the women mock him in Part 3 of the opera.

¹⁶⁰ Korsten was an Afrikaans opera singer who not only frequented the stages of the PACs during apartheid but also had a highly successful career as a "cross-over" artist, singing Afrikaans "opera-pop" during the 1960s as well as finding success as an actor in film and soap opera. Korsten was particularly effective in luring novices to the opera house due to his popularity. Francois Jonker (2015:98) even brands Korsten an "accessible face' to so-called high-brow culture".

mens' relays a tenderness that Smit is lacking. While Napoleon's initial vocal entrance is *a cappella*, Ronel, Saartjie, and the chorus join in during the chorus offering back-up vocals for this in-opera performance. Grethe gradually approaches Napoleon who, facing the audience, asks her to "open her heart" to him. With the opera's opening theme returning, the pair are positioned back-to-back, before Napoleon sings the second verse. During his delivery Grethe clings to him: she takes his hands in hers and their fingers interlock; she affectionately embraces him from behind with her eyes closed, resting her head against him, almost as if infusing him with love and acceptance. Later she moves in beside him while he wraps his arm around her. Napoleon faces out towards the audience during this "performance", arguably serenading them as well, charming them by channelling Korsten.

[Poskantoor, 2014, \(Part 2\), Napoleon uses the music of Korsten to serenade Grethe \(and the audience\)](#)

[Poskantoor, 2014, \(Part 2\), Grethe infuses Napoleon with love and acceptance during his performance](#)

Melodic remnants from 'Hier is 'n mens' become a sort-of *leitmotiv* for Napoleon throughout the opera. Grethe, for example, adopts the same melody when telling her co-workers about her new love interest. Later, Korsten's ballad 'Liefing' (Beloved) is also referenced in Part 5 of the opera. Wrapped in packing materials, Napoleon breaks into the chorus ("Liefing/Kan ons nie maar vergeet..."/ "Beloved/ Can't we forget...") (BIBLIOTEEK PRODUCTIONS, 2021:1:09:40–1:10:02) as an act of desperation, in the hope that Grethe and the women will not harm him and Smit. This musical link created between Korsten, as the white poster-boy of apartheid opera, and Napoleon interacts with apartheid-era Afrikaner cultural memory. Since Korsten is firmly associated with white masculinity (see Jonker, 2015), the attribution of his songs to Napoleon, a black character, essentially breaks this nostalgia.

In line with Boekkooi's observation regarding the interplay between the opera's multiple modes, the preceding discussion illuminates the intricate embeddedness of nostalgia in *Poskantoor's* dramatic texts and production media. Kapp's libretto references both problematic apartheid-era and contemporary Afrikaans identity. Significantly, the musical mode and direction simultaneously highlight and mask the (problematic) evocation of nostalgia to varying degrees. If one mode overtakes another in its perceptibility, the audience's attention will shift, leading to my theory that certain elements embedded within these modes will be overlooked. This is evident when comparing, for example, Smit's use of a racist reference towards Saartjie in Part 3 of the opera, and the blocking of the women's trio of expletives in Part 4 of the opera. The former sees the masking of this reference through orchestration. The absence of surtitles (De Beer, 2014b), and the acoustic nature of the performance space probably also contributed to the veiling of certain sections of text, resulting in racial references going undetected. However, the absence of accompaniment during the trio of expletives and blocking that positions the women front and centre make the profanity inescapable. *Poskantoor* not only reflects the contemporary racial make-up of the Afrikaans-speaking demographic, it also corrupts the

nostalgic image of the Afrikaans woman, with this representation in striking contrast to the trope of Calvinist Afrikaner femininity. Furthermore, the action is set in the *platteland*, a unique site within Afrikaner cultural memory; however, the representation of this space – as a boring and mundane place, marked by routine – contrasts markedly with its imagined idyllic character. With the relationships between the opera’s modes outlined, the following section details the emergence of Afrikaner nostalgia in Afrikaans cultural products, and the significance of the *platteland* site to further inform *Poskantoor*’s veneration of Afrikaner nostalgia.

5.3 Solace in Memory: Nostalgia and the Afrikaans Culture Industry

As briefly outlined in the introduction of this chapter, the undoing of apartheid resulted not only in political shifts but also in cultural shifts. The dethroning of Afrikaans, and by default Afrikaner culture, post-1994 led to widespread anxiety amongst Afrikaners, fearful for the eradication of their language and culture (see Steyn, 2016b; Verwey and Quayle, 2012:554). Thrust into democracy, Afrikaners were forced to come to terms with their position as an ethnic minority, with their identity unsettled, desperate for a “sense of continuity” in the face of change. Danelle van Zyl (2008:132) argues that “this continuity is found in the past”. Given the transformation that swept South Africa post-1994, it is thus hardly surprising that nostalgia would manifest amongst the Afrikaner demographic. Svetlana Boym describes nostalgia (an amalgamation of the Greek words “nostos” – to return home and “algia” – longing) as a yearning for “a home that no longer exists or has never existed”, as a “sentiment of loss and displacement” and a “romance with one’s own fantasy” (Boym, 2001:xiii). Nostalgia often emerges in times of change, for example post-revolution (Boym, 2001:xvi) or, as Van Zyl (2008:132) outlines:

[N]ostalgia emerges against the backdrop of historic upheavals or transitional events that disrupt and displace society to such a degree that massive identity dislocations occur (Van Zyl, 2008:132).

In light of these facts, it is understandable that nostalgia forms an integral part of Afrikaner identity post-apartheid. The Afrikaner demographic arguably longs for the comfort of apartheid (Steyn, 2016a:132; Van der Waal and Robins, 2011:774) – a period and place where their language and culture were unthreatened, even if this hegemony was at the cost of other racial groups. In the post-apartheid environment, the Afrikaner demographic clings to historic narratives they consider “non-threatening and ‘safe’” (Van der Merwe, 2017:136–137), creating a laager of memory impenetrable by the threats of contemporary South Africa. Nostalgia has become an essential strategy to “conserve aspects of Afrikaner identity” (Van der Merwe, 2017:137), even if they are at odds with the post-apartheid democratic environment and linked to a problematic past. Most significantly, Van Zyl (2008:132) notes that the past is “specially reconstructed and sweetened with sentiment”, resulting in the whitewashing of tainted memories to create a “more pleasing, if partly mythical, recollection of the past”. These insights tie in with Hermanus’s observation regarding the “domes of white nostalgia” unpacked earlier, where Afrikaans cultural products draw from apartheid

narratives that are out of touch with post-apartheid socio-cultural and political realities. While this predominantly extends to apartheid-generation Afrikaners, young Afrikaners share this sentiment: they are constantly blamed for the actions of their forebears, with progressive Afrikaners often disassociating from the Afrikaner identity (see Klopper, 2008; Verwey and Quayle, 2012) and conservative Afrikaners embracing their cultural heritage and adopting victim status.

In this respect, the Afrikaans culture industry – a vast network encompassing print and broadcast media, satellite television, film, music, corporate enterprises, and arts festivals – has assuaged concerns by providing cultural products specifically for the consumption of Afrikaners in the post-apartheid climate (Steyn, 2016b). The most obvious trait of Afrikaans cultural products is that they are explicitly marketed as such. Steyn notes that the slogan or label “‘Trots Afrikaans’ [Proudly Afrikaans]” often accompanies Afrikaans products, “[implying] that through buying and consuming these products, one is also expressing one’s loyalty to the language” (Steyn, 2016b:486). In this regard, Afrikaans is considered a “brand” that has fostered consumer attachment and loyalty (Steyn, 2016b:486). By engaging with Afrikaans cultural products, consumers convey their loyalty while simultaneously “investing in the sustainability of the brand, so that they can continue to consume its products in future” (Steyn, 2016b:486). Steyn (2016b:485) explains that brand loyalty is “continuously produced and reproduced”, and that the industry not only provides products for consumer consumption but also fuels anxiety to perpetuate the cycle of consumer engagement (Steyn, 2016b:486). Since the industry mostly concentrates its efforts on “lucrative white consumers” who have retained their buying power post-1994, Steyn (2016b:500) argues that organisations within the industry that often maintain political neutrality, like kykNET and publishing conglomerate Naspers, have:

[...] been [...] complicit in generating and reinforcing forms of Afrikaner enclavism, producing and reproducing difference and opening up Afrikaner-majority spaces where a compromised form of apartheid can persist (Steyn, 2016b:500).

Through the focus placed on this demographic, Steyn’s observation here ascribes a political significance to the industry’s output, arguably resulting in the politicisation of nostalgia. Though collective nostalgia pervades Afrikaans cultural products across all markets – from publishing and prose to television and film, to music and corporate industries – the ‘De la Rey’ phenomenon, a craze that swept the Afrikaner music industry in 2006, is perhaps the most telling example of the Afrikaans culture industry’s evocation of collective Afrikaner memory and its political aftermath.

‘De la Rey’, a song released by Afrikaans artist Bok van Blerk (artist name of Louis Pepler) in 2006, developed an almost cult-like following. The song recounts the story of Afrikaner Nationalist icon Koos de la Rey, an Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902) general instrumental in the struggle for Afrikaner independence. The song’s

lyrics vividly recount the suffering endured by the Boers during the War.¹⁶¹ While Van Blerk's song speaks to an Afrikaner collective that considers the War and the "heroic suffering of Afrikaners as foundational experiences" (Van der Waal and Robins, 2011:767), the song foregrounds critical aspects of Afrikaner cultural identity post-apartheid. Van Blerk repeatedly clarified that the song had no political agenda. However, anti-apartheid journalist Max du Preez (quoted in Jacobs, 2019:138) disagrees, taking issue with what he sees as the song's manifestation of racism. Du Preez detects this in the fact that the Afrikaner's enemy in the current socio-political climate is no longer British but black. This is arguably mirrored in the song's popularity amongst Afrikaner students that feel victimised in the post-apartheid space.¹⁶² The song's effects on audiences further encroached dangerous political territory, inspiring the reappearance of apartheid-era symbols like 'Die Stem van Suid-Afrika' ('Call of South Africa') – the Afrikaner national anthem – and the old South African flag (Van der Waal and Robins, 2011:769).¹⁶³ Despite the song's association with right-wing politics, 'De la Rey' proved to be a major hit, selling over 200 000 copies – a significant feat given the size of the Afrikaner market (Grundlingh, 2007:149). The song also inspired a stage musical *Ons vir Jou* (We for Thee – taken from the 'Call of South Africa'), which played to full houses at the South African State Theatre in 2008 and 2009 (Baines, 2013:255). Considering this success, Gary Baines (2013:255–256) rightly argues that nostalgia is a marketable commodity in a context that capitalises on the "commodification of Afrikaner culture and identity". In the wake of the 'De la Rey' phenomenon, pandering to nostalgia has proved to be particularly profitable, with producers cognisant of the advantages of "[riding] that wave" (Bester, quoted in Steyn, 2016a:103) to tap into an existing market to ensure the success of a project.¹⁶⁴

Apart from drawing on historical narratives, Afrikaner nostalgia is tied to a specific place, namely the *platteland* (Van Zyl, 2008), the resurgence of which is linked to the Afrikaner's sense of loss post-1994. During apartheid, the *platteland* was linked to underdevelopment and backwardness, far removed from the sophistication and affluence of the urbanised Afrikaner middle-class. Post-1994, however, the *platteland* has become a romanticised space representing that which Afrikaners dreading the eradication of their language and culture post-1994 yearn for: a close-knit community characterised by neighbourliness, set in an unspoiled

¹⁶¹ The music video also utilises nostalgic imagery, featuring old photographs of Boer soldiers, with Van Blerk, dressed in a period-specific costume, spattered with blood. The video includes scenes that re-enact the violent clashes between Boer and Brit, the burning of Boer farms, and the internment of Boer women and children in a concentration camp (Jacobs, 2019:138).

¹⁶² Baines (2013:255) writes of the song's popularity amongst this demographic, with students launching into a rousing sing-along anytime 'De la Rey' starts playing.

¹⁶³ 'De la Rey' was also adopted as a right-wing anthem by the white supremacist group the Boeremag, fuelling the revival of struggle songs like 'Umshini wam' (Bring me my machine gun) and 'Dubul' ibuhu' (Shoot the Boer) sung by ANC leaders (Van der Waal and Robins, 2011:769, 763).

¹⁶⁴ Film producer Danie Bester made this statement before the release of the film *Ballade vir 'n Enkeling* (*Ballad for a Loner*) (2015), an adaptation of the 1980s television series (Steyn, 2016a:103).

natural landscape where safety-concerns and mental distresses that accompany city-life fall away (Van Zyl, 2008:139–140). Most importantly, Van Zyl (2008:141) clarifies that the *platteland* is “an inscape, a landscape of the mind” and not a physical place since the Afrikaners’ romanticisation of this place, “a utopia of simplicity and contentment”, has never existed. While *plattelandse* nostalgia saturates numerous Afrikaans cultural products, its presence in the offerings of popular Afrikaans music artists is particularly significant.¹⁶⁵ Van der Merwe (2017:165) notes that Afrikaans artists like Steve Hofmeyr have started projecting their political views accompanied by a “strong dose of Afrikaner nostalgia”. Aware of what his demographic wants, Hofmeyr (quoted in Van der Merwe, 2017:140) banks on nostalgia in his shows, “bringing something new – always with the right quota of nostalgia”. However, like the case of ‘De la Rey’, Hofmeyr’s evocation of nostalgia has also entered the realm of the political through the performance of the problematic apartheid-era anthem.¹⁶⁶ Hofmeyr’s performance of ‘Die Stem’ at Aardklop in 2015, where hundreds of people joined in wholeheartedly (Strydom, 2015), led to the North-West University (NWU), a sponsor of Aardklop, distancing itself from Hofmeyr’s actions. NWU spokesperson Louis Jacobs said that the institution “does not want to be associated with the use of cultural artefacts and symbols of [South Africa’s] painful past” (“University distances itself from Steve Hofmeyr after he sings Die Stem again”, 2015). However, Hofmeyr’s fans, predominantly white Afrikaners, considered this “call for censorship” an attack on their culture, again foregrounding the defensiveness prompted by tampering with white nostalgia. While this nostalgic indulgence is blatantly political and very much exposed, *Poskantoor*’s nostalgia is more coded (as discussed in Section 5.2), making it less discernible to the public. With nostalgia being a prevalent and lucrative thread within the Afrikaans culture industry, *Poskantoor*, as a product of this industry, arguably exploits the popularity of this theme. While this is evident in design modes discussed earlier in this chapter, this strategy also comes to the fore in the opera’s paratextual network.

5.4 A Web of Intrigue: *Poskantoor*’s Paratexts and Creating/Meeting Audience Expectations

Considering the “novelty” of *Poskantoor*, the Afrikaans media were quick to latch on to the work, with Afrikaans news publications widely promoting the opera. In a feature “Afrikaanse opera vol liefde, geheime” (Afrikaans opera full of love, secrets) (Malan, 2014a) published in May (6 months before its premiere), *Poskantoor* is labelled the “first Afrikaans opera of the 21st-century”. Though this was not technically true (it

¹⁶⁵ See, for example Steenkamp (2016) and Van der Linde (2013). The nostalgia for the *platteland* is not blindly accepted by all, as evidenced in the song ‘Hemel op die Platteland’ (Heaven on the *Platteland*) by South African punkrock group Fokofpolisiekar (see Klopper, 2008).

¹⁶⁶ Hofmeyr has positioned himself as a representative of the far right, using the stage as a platform for his political views. The singer was subsequently banned from performing at several festivals.

was the century's first *staged* Afrikaans opera), this label was used strategically to create hype around the opera.¹⁶⁷ Tapping into Afrikaners' nostalgic vein, this publication describes *Poskantoor* as the “nostalgic story of inquisitive women secretly opening letters to reveal the town's secrets, and love from an unlikely source”, set in a post office in Karkaskraal, a fictional Karoo town during the 1970s. Minnaar (in Malan, 2014a) regards *Poskantoor* as a distinctly South African story where opera clichés and over the top sentimentality are mocked – “predominantly comic, but with tragic elements” (Malan 2014a). However, Minnaar describes the opera as “something completely new” and suggests that the creative team are “making history” by staging the work (Minnaar, quoted in De Beer, 2014a).¹⁶⁸ While the use of Afrikaans as an opera language was not strictly new, opera in Afrikaans was not pervasive following the PACs' decision to discontinue the practice of translation in the 1980s. Despite this absence, however, Afrikaans-speaking audiences still fostered a love of opera post-1994, as broadcasting trends make clear.¹⁶⁹

Aardklop was the ideal site for *Poskantoor*'s premiere. Widely regarded as a mecca of Afrikaans art and culture, Aardklop (founded in 1998) is one of the many arts festivals that proliferated in the face of the 1990s “language struggle” (Hauptfleisch, 2007:84; Steyn, 2016b:487), with the phenomenon of the Afrikaans festival becoming a prominent feature of the post-apartheid Afrikaans cultural landscape (Hauptfleisch, 2007:80; Steyn, 2016b:487). At its inception, Aardklop cast a wide net for all the arts, with its core set to be theatre and music.¹⁷⁰ Aardklop sought a physical presence in the *platteland*, recalling travelling amateur theatre and music organisations that kept the arts going before the PACs and returning to the locations the PACs abandoned, essentially bringing art back to the people. Like other Afrikaans arts festivals, Aardklop's primary purpose was “preserving and enhancing the Afrikaans language and culture” (Kruger *et al.*, 2011:511). Due to the festival demographic, *Poskantoor* sought to appeal to a wide audience (as Minnaar in Janse van Rensburg, 2014

¹⁶⁷ In this feature, Minnaar explains: “As far as we know it is the first Afrikaans opera of the twenty-first century [...] [t]hat's how we are going to promote it” (Minnaar, quoted in Malan, 2014a). Hendrik Hofmeyr's chamber opera *Die laaste aand* (2002), though never staged, is arguably the first Afrikaans opera of the century. Biblioteek seemed to have realised this, amending later statements to include the term “full-length”, presumably to distinguish *Poskantoor* from operas like that of Hofmeyr that came before. However, in manuscript the running time of the Hofmeyr's opera is longer than *Poskantoor*, again calling the choice of words in this label into question.

¹⁶⁸ The opera premiered in the Sanlam Auditorium at the NWU, one of the festival's largest venues, with 957 seats. Ticket sales data for the production could not be provided by Aardklop.

¹⁶⁹ The Afrikaans radio station *Radio Sonder Grense* (Radio without Borders) (RSG) has long broadcast classical music, lieder and opera. The request programme *U eie Keuse* (Your Own Choice) has been broadcast since 1945, and the programme *Dis Opera* (That's Opera) is broadcast every Sunday evening. Between 2000 and 2017 kykNET also broadcast recordings of ballet and opera productions and special interest pieces on local legends like soprano Mimi Coertse on their programme *Overture* on Sunday afternoons (03-RA-Kyknet, Personal Communication, 2021).

¹⁷⁰ Reading the reminiscences of Gerrie de Villiers (2016), one of the festival's founding members, following Aardklop's closure announcement in 2016, one cannot help but draw connections between this festival and specific goals set by the apartheid PACs: while Aardklop actively encouraged Afrikaans in a broad sense, i.e., not restricting its vibrancy to white Afrikaners alone, the festival sought to be measured against international standards “of a Salzburg and an Edinburgh festival” (De Villiers, 2016), embracing a European ideal.

underlined). However, *Poskantoor* primarily targeted Afrikaans audiences who “seldomly (if ever) have the opportunity to hear opera in their mother tongue” (Stolp, 2016:151), an aspect that was heavily underlined in all published publicity materials.

While the Afrikaans-language might be the common denominator for *Poskantoor*'s audience, the festival demographic is particularly diverse. Prominent theatre scholar Temple Hauptfleisch (2007:86) writes that festival audiences are unique since they are “drawn from a much wider catchment”, flocking to a festival town from across South Africa, “from farms and small towns as well as cities, from all walks of life”. The festival audience also exhibits unique behaviour. Hauptfleisch (2007:86) observes that festival audiences are quick to voice/show their disapproval, “very easily walking out if they do not like something”.¹⁷¹ These audiences are “generally not ‘sophisticated’ theatre audiences, but people out for fun” (Hauptfleisch, 2007:86).¹⁷² While the layperson might be more prominent in the festival audience demographic, audiences are selective in their attendance at Aardklop, as data considering different age groups’ festival attendance reveals. Studies indicate that audiences over 45 years old frequent musical theatre-type productions (Botha and Slabbert, 2011:13; Kruger *et al.*, 2011:519), whereas older audiences over 51 years frequent shows and productions of classical music (Kruger *et al.*, 2011:520). The latter group of attendees also spend more time and more money at Aardklop, and are avid festivalgoers, returning annually. Considering the age and preferences of this group, many festival attendees would arguably remember the golden days of opera under the PACs. Despite this seasoned demographic, Biblioteek sought to engage younger (opera-novice) audiences in line with its mission statement.

Biblioteek explicitly endeavours to “grow a bigger, younger and more diverse classical audience” (Biblioteek Productions, 2017). With *Poskantoor*, the company underwrote the focus on presenting a “new” idiom for opera, explicitly targeting new audiences:

Waarom sal 'n mens deur al die moeite gaan om 'n teks te verwerk, nuwe musiek te komponeer en dan 'n NUWE AFRIKAANSE OPERA op die planke bring? Juis dit: nuwe musiek; vars idees; vry van vorige oudedoos gedagtes oor 'n toeka-se genre; 'n wydverspreide gehoor wat hopelik jonger mense EN opera-maagde sal lok.¹⁷³

[English translation]

Why would a person go through all the trouble to adapt a text, to compose new music and then stage a NEW

¹⁷¹ While this is written in the context of the Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees (Little Karoo National Arts Festival) (KKNK), it is applicable across the board.

¹⁷² This does not apply to Klein Karoo Klassieke, the KKNK's classical counterpart.

¹⁷³ This information is taken from the company's application to stage the work at the KKNK in 2015. This document (Konsep en Motivering vir Uitvoering by KKNK, n.d.) was kindly made privately available to me by Magdalene Minnaar.

AFRIKAANS OPERA? Exactly that: new music; new ideas; free from previous old-fashioned thoughts about a bygone genre; a widespread audience that will hopefully lure younger people AND opera-virgins.

The acknowledged departure from Afrikaans opera's historical identity is highlighted here, indicating awareness on the part of the creators that the genre comes with significant political baggage. Biblioteek also firmly addresses the lack of Afrikaans opera, underlining the need to create new works reflective of a new era:

Opera in ons eie taal – iets waarmee die gehoor dadelik sal aanklank vind, sonder om te moet soek na 'n programvertaling of sur-titels, is iets van die verlede. Die dae toe operas nog in Afrikaans vertaal is, sommer met 'n landsweye toer na elke put-sonder-water en groot stad, is verby. Dit is dus brood-nodig vir opera [...] om nuwe werke te sien ontstaan wat aangepas is vir die 15 jaar wat sedertien verby is, en ook vir 'n gehoor wat algaande meer Televisie-en Film-wys word.

[English translation]

Opera in our own language – something with which the audience immediately identifies without the need to look for a programme translation or surtitles, is something of the past. The days when opera was still translated into Afrikaans, with a nationwide tour to every backwater town and big city, are over. It is thus essential for opera to see new works arise that are adapted for the 15 years that have now passed, and also for an audience that has become increasingly Television- and Film-savvy.

Once again, the heyday of Afrikaans opera is mentioned here, priming the stage for the arrival of *Poskantoor*. In addition, since the three-hour duration of an opera in a foreign language is challenging to sit through, *Poskantoor*'s duration is listed as 100 minutes without an interval – “just long enough to tell a story, and short enough for the unseasoned operagoer”. Acknowledging that audiences are becoming more visually inclined, Biblioteek specifically banks on Boucher's “characteristic style of design, lighting and costumes” to draw younger audiences to the opera. Reading through this motivation (Konsep en Motivering vir Uitvoering by KKNK n.d.), it becomes clear that the creators of *Poskantoor* were fully aware of what they wanted to achieve with the opera. Since this document was not available to the public, consideration of *Poskantoor*'s paratextual network is especially useful in uncovering the approaches used to establish specific horizons of expectation for audiences.

Starting with the opera's Afrikaans medium, the creative team attributed a certain prestige to the work, underlining that writing and performing an opera in Afrikaans is no easy feat, thereby framing *Poskantoor* as a significant cultural achievement. Kapp, in an article by Rudolf Stehle (2014) (“Wulpse opera' in kontreitaal” (Lascivious opera in regional dialect)) states that writing the libretto was “more difficult than he initially thought”. Kapp elaborates that immense pressure was placed on rhythm and rhyme, which takes precedence in the genre of opera, contrary to drama (his usual genre). The complexity and technical skill required to sing in Afrikaans was also underlined by Minnaar. In an interview with Carine Janse van Rensburg (2014) for *LitNet*, Minnaar highlights the technique required to sing in Afrikaans, perhaps strategically mentioning her Afrikaans status:

Afrikaans is 'n baie glottale taal, maar miskien omdat ek self Afrikaans is, vloei dit vir my redelik maklik as sangtaal. Sekere klanke, veral diftonge, is moeilik om te sing, maar daar is verskeie tegnieke om dit verstaanbaar te sing. En dan is goeie diksie natuurlik van kardinale belang, sodat die gehoor die storie kan volg (Minnaar, in Janse van Rensburg, 2014).

[English translation]

Afrikaans is a very glottal language, but maybe because I am Afrikaans myself, it flows quite easily for me as a singing language. Certain sounds, especially diphthongs, are difficult to sing, but there are several techniques for singing them intelligibly. And then, of course, good diction is crucial so that the audience can follow the story.

Both Minnaar (in Janse van Rensburg, 2014) and Bouwer (in Webb-Joubert, 2014) mentioned the work's inclusion of profanity. This was presumably part of the strategy to appeal to a younger audience base – to make opera seem less pretentious and old-fashioned and forewarn more conservative audiences of these inclusions, speaking to the creators' awareness of their demographic. Interestingly, Minnaar (in Janse van Rensburg, 2014) positions the incorporation of Afrikaans expletives as one of the elements that makes the opera “uniquely South African”. The opera's setting in a post office is also framed as novel. Mariana Malan (“Opera besing “Poskantoor” intriges”/ Opera sings about ‘Poskantoor’ intriges”) (2014b) writes that this location “sounds like the last place where an opera can play out”. However, this everyday environment sets the stage for several twists.¹⁷⁴

Musically, the opera's “accessibility” is underlined by several members of the creative team. Minnaar (in Malan, 2014b) describes the music as “almost filmic, but not so light as to disappoint connoisseurs”. Similarly, in one of the opera's EPKs, Lynelle Kenned, who plays the role of Saartjie, adopts the same stance as Minnaar, labelling Du Toit's music as “beautiful” but “intricate enough to stimulate opera lovers” (Kenned, in Magdalene Minnaar, 2014a:3:20–3:30). Du Toit also provides insight into his musical idiom, explaining his “layered” approach to the composition of the work:

Ek het baie rondgespeel met verskillende lae in die musiek, jy weet, so daar sal 'n laag wees waar die instrumente stel die land voor, die aarde, jy weet, en dan kom al hierdie ander goeters bo-oor dit so basies die land is onskuldig, jy weet [...] en dit is in 'n puur C majeur, jy weet, helder skoon, jy weet, en dan is daar al hierdie ander goeters wat bo-oor dit geplaas word en dit dan verkleur [...] Ek het ook baie daarmee rondgespeel in die musiek, jy weet, om sekere goed in die gehoorlede of luisteraars se geheue te ‘trigger’ jy weet. Sodat daar iets is van 'n gevoel van ‘ek ken dit’, jy weet, ‘ek het daarmee grootgeword’ of ‘daai laat my daaraan dink’. Ek het baie getrek van ervaringe van my kinderdae, drome, verskillende voëlklanke, jy weet, en al daai goeters so saambring. [...] (Du Toit in Magdalene Minnaar, 2014c:1:23–2:23).

[English translation]

I played around with different layers in the music, you know, so there will be a layer where the instruments represent the land, the earth, you know, and then all these other things come over it, so basically the land is innocent, you know, it is actually, and it is in a pure C major you know, bright and clean, and then there are all

¹⁷⁴ Given the total collapse of the state-owned enterprise's service delivery over the past decade, the post office in South Africa is itself now a nostalgic concept. In 2018, a backlog of 13 million envelopes and parcels was waiting to be cleared from the Johannesburg distribution centre. In January 2021, it was announced that the SA Post Office was on the brink of collapse, with branches being shut and kicked out of premises due to not paying rent (see Ramphela, 2018).

these other things that are placed over it that change its colour [...] I also played around with this a lot in the music, you know, to ‘trigger’ certain things in the audience, or the listeners’ memory, you know. So that there is something of a feeling of ‘I know this’, you know, ‘I grew up with this’ or ‘this makes me think of that’. I drew from experiences from my childhood, dreams, different bird sounds, you know, and brought all those things together. [...]

Du Toit’s comments here explicitly highlight the deliberate inclusion of nostalgia, intended to jog the audience’s memory to make the opera more accessible. The main way through which the composer achieves this is through quotation and parody. In the EPK, the opera’s musical director José Dias sheds light on some of the references Du Toit incorporates:

Behalwe sy minimalistiese, film musiek-agtige tendense wat hy het in sy musiek, het hy baie ‘references’ ingebring. So, hierdie ‘references’ kan van iets so eenvoudig soos ’n Gé Korsten ‘song’ tot Mozart opera temas of Mozart opera motiewe of Italiaanse Napelse liedjies of sulke goed. Dit werk want elke keer wat mens iets sien gebeur op die verhoog hoor jy ook ’n musikale ‘cue’ wat vir jou iets laat voel. So dit is eintlik wat opera exciting maak, is daai dat die musiek werk amper ‘subconsciously’ op die gehoorlid (Dias in Magdalene Minnaar, 2014c:2:25–3:18).

[English translation]

In addition to his minimalist, film music-like tendencies he has in his music, he has brought in many references. So, these references can range from something as simple as a Gé Korsten “song” to Mozart opera themes or Mozart opera motifs or Italian Neapolitan songs or the like. It works because every time you see something happening on stage, you also hear a musical cue that makes you feel something. So that’s actually what makes opera exciting, is that the music works almost subconsciously on the audience member.

Because the Afrikaans culture industry still profits from Korsten’s popularity, the mention of these references is significant.¹⁷⁵ Since Korsten’s popular music did not find resonance amongst the Afrikaner youth of the apartheid era (Van der Merwe, 2017:89), audiences might hold fond memories of their parents or grandparents enjoying Korsten’s music. Even more significant is the fact that these Korsten references are attributed to the destitute black car guard Napoleon in the opera (Minnaar, quoted in Janse van Rensburg, 2014). It could be argued that, through this decision, the creation and fracturing of the dome of white nostalgia is already present at this paratextual level prior to the embodied experience of production media. By attributing the aural memories associated with Korsten to a black character, Kapp and Du Toit not only position Napoleon as a likeable character, but further impose the frame of Korsten, as Afrikaner idol, onto him.

With *Poskantoor* targeting younger, more visually inclined audiences, the involvement of Bouwer as designer and director was emphasised to create certain expectations. Minnaar, for example, calls Bouwer’s direction

¹⁷⁵ A recent tribute show, *Gè Sing: Hoor My Lied!* directed by Frans Swart, which toured South Africa in 2019 and was broadcast online in 2020, incorporates archival video footage of Korsten’s life and career together with orchestral arrangements of his songs performed by some of South Africa’s top artists (see Opperman, 2019; “Superster Gé geëer in aanlyn konsert”, 2020). A film musical, *Liefeling*, was also released in 2010 (see De Lange, 2010).

and design “something unbelievable” (Clover Aardklop TV, 2014:2:03–2:09), further underscoring the opera as a “groundbreaking work”, as something not yet seen before on the South African stage. These cryptic statements undoubtedly awaken intrigue. In sharp contrast to Kapp’s textual and Du Toit’s musical references in the opera’s dramatic texts that seem engineered to evoke nostalgia amongst the audience, Boucher’s design straddled the realms of familiar and uncanny, an aesthetic that notably comes to the fore in the opera’s visual paratexts.

Poskantoor’s marketing campaign included striking visual media – ranging from conceptual photographs, taken by Boucher, printed alongside press releases, proliferating news sites and social media, to the opera’s poster design, and significantly, video trailers.¹⁷⁶ To start with, conceptual photographs accompanied various printed media and website features.¹⁷⁷ Staying true to the opera’s title, these images all incorporate post office ephemera such as paper, packing materials and postage stamps, strikingly utilised. The dark nature of these images contradicts the “comedic” nature of the piece that was highlighted throughout its marketing campaign. The first photograph (Figure 5.4) shows three figures (Kenned, Frandsen, and Minnaar) huddled together in front of a pitch-black background. Their bodies are encased in brown paper bags, their faces expressionless, hinting that there is more at work in the opera than comedy alone.

¹⁷⁶ The music video and trailers were also linked in several publicity features (see Korff, 2014; Malan, 2014b; Meyer, 2014), creating an intertextual experience that banks on instant gratification.

¹⁷⁷ The conceptual photographs discussed in this chapter are by no means exhaustive.



Figure 5.4: Conceptual photograph 1: Three women packaged for postage. © Jaco Bouwer.

Two more photographs (Figure 5.5 and 5.6) incorporate additional postal ephemera, and, like Figure 5.4, also relay a disturbing atmosphere. One photograph sees Kenned standing behind a mass of crumpled packing paper (Figure 5.2). Her eyes, almost black, are staring at the viewer, and her mouth is pasted shut by a mess of stamps in designs reflective of fauna found in South Africa – robbing her of the ability to speak. The other (Figure 5.3) shows Minnaar behind a crisp-white origami collar – its V-neck design strategically drawing the eye down to her décolletage. Like Kenned, Minnaar has also been robbed of one of her faculties: her eyes are pasted shut with stamps. While the absence of the returned gaze of the object (so present in Figure 5.2.) is prominent here, closer inspection reveals that the combination of shadow and the stamps’ design suggests the presence of an iris, in a sense granting Minnaar “new” eyes through which to view the viewer.¹⁷⁸ The styling of these two photographs calls to mind the Japanese pictorial maxim of the three wise monkeys, referencing “speak no evil” and “see no evil” respectively. The disturbing nature of these images is in marked contrast to the supposedly “comic” nature of the opera. These images also provide a taste of the opera’s most subversive set of paratexts, namely the trailer(s).

¹⁷⁸ A version of this photograph accompanied the opera’s listing in the 2014 Clover Aardklop programme booklet.



Figure 5.5: Conceptual photograph 2: Lynelle Kenned. © Jaco Bouwer.



Figure 5.6: Conceptual photograph 3: Magdalene Minnaar. © Jaco Bouwer.

The incorporation of trailers is highly significant since this was the first time that this approach – integral to the “new” media of opera following the birth of the simulcast – had been adopted in staged South African opera.¹⁷⁹ The inclusion of this media also hints at Biblioteek’s drive to engage with younger audiences more attuned to the visual. A number of teaser trailers, a full trailer and a music video of the opera’s first aria, all directed by Bouwer, were released online in the run-up to the opera’s premiere. In an approach akin to that

¹⁷⁹ I say “staged” since the film opera *U-Carmen eKbayelitsba* also employed the trailer as a marketing approach, though the opera is primarily classified as a film, and not a staged work.

adopted by the film industry, the teaser trailers offered short bites of footage, with the opening strains of the aria ‘Vieslike, verskriklike, vervloekte dorpie’ (“Horrible, terrible, cursed little town”) as soundtrack, cut short by the sound of a mechanical stamp accompanying three title cards: “Poskantoor”. “n Opera” (An Opera). “Clover Aardklop 2014”.¹⁸⁰

In contrast to the cryptic nature of the teasers, *Poskantoor*’s full-length [trailer](#) of 2 minutes 18 seconds contains a wealth of imagery that curiously combines remnants of Afrikaner memory and the avant-garde.¹⁸¹ The trailer features a grand abandoned building with a wood-clad interior, littered with post office ephemera. In this building we encounter an unknown woman, later revealed to be Minnaar, going about her daily routine. We see her getting dressed for work and follow her while she roams the gangways and empty halls of the building and carries out her duties as a post office employee. Significantly, Boucher creates images that are simultaneously connected to and removed from Afrikaner identity. Like the conceptual photographs, a woman is foregrounded in the trailer, with the evocation/problematisation of nostalgia specifically speaking to stereotypical Afrikaner femininity. Positioned as the protagonist in the trailer, the woman’s traditional role as homemaker is foregrounded through the inclusion of hobbies and cultural symbols relating to the Afrikaner ideal of the *volksmoeder* (mother of the nation) – a male-constructed concept central to Afrikaner nationalism, and a key symbol in the forging of female Afrikaner identity.

In the trailer, the woman encounters several figures connected to Afrikaner symbols and hobbies that resonate with *platteland* life and the *volksmoeder* ideal. However, these figures are rendered alien. Masked and reminiscent of sadomasochistic gimps, these creatures curiously observe the woman as she moves through the building. The first three figures (Figures 5.7 and 5.8) are living displays of handywork (Magdalene Minnaar, 2014b:0:31–35; 0:45–50). The first two figures the woman encounters are faceless and decorated with doilies – prominent cultural artefacts that have prime place in many South African homes. The placement of these crocheted adornments is significant: the first figure’s face is entirely covered by a doily, forming a suffocating crocheted web, whereas the second merely wears a doily on its head, coupled with a fascinator while its face is covered in flesh-coloured fabric. Both these figures’ bodies are wrapped in packing paper with the second figure’s styling reminiscent of a shawl. The first figure also holds a teacup, only briefly visible (Magdalene Minnaar, 2014b:0:31), its delicate nature suggesting a refined sense of taste. A dolly shot creates the impression that these faceless figures observe the woman passing by with an eyeless gaze, with the head of the second tilting in interest, ever so slightly. A third figure (Magdalene Minnaar, 2014b:0:45–0:50) is a “living” floral arrangement, its head replaced by a bouquet that features indigenous flora, specifically the

¹⁸⁰ Though the teaser trailers have been removed from social media, one of them can still be viewed on Jaco Boucher’s website (see Boucher, n.d.).

¹⁸¹ Some of the insights expressed here are included in an article for SAMUS titled “Postcards from the *platteland*: Avant-garde Aesthetics and Nostalgia in *Poskantoor*’s (2014) paratexts” (Gerber, 2021).

pincushion protea, a variant of South Africa's national flower. This figure too (Magdalene Minnaar, 2014b:0:45–0:47) follows the woman, like a flower following the sun. Like crochet, flower arranging is another pastime encountered on the *platteland*, often linked to the community church.¹⁸²



Figure 5.7: Still from Bouver, *Poskantoor* (Magdalene Minnaar, 2014b), Doily-masked and adorned figures holding dainty teacups, gaze in judgement, 0:31.



Figure 5.8: Still from Bouver, *Poskantoor* (Magdalene Minnaar, 2014b), A living flower arrangement featuring local flora, 0.47.

¹⁸² The women of the congregation will normally take turns to do the flowers in the main church every week. The Vroue Landbou-unie (South African equivalent of the WI) also hosts flower arranging workshops in the community.

While these figures allude to cultural markers of Afrikaner female identity, the ideals of Afrikaner femininity and *ordentlikheid* are most obviously suggested/undermined through the costuming and styling of the woman in the trailer. The woman's uniform – a single blue male dress shirt, denoted by the buttons on the right – is not reserved only for her. Early in the trailer a drawer opens to reveal a stack of neatly folded shirts (Magdalene Minnaar 2014b:0:08–0:11), later packaged to be exported to other districts (Magdalene Minnaar, 2014b:1:24–1:25). The woman's costuming both downplays and accentuates her sexuality. For example, her shirt is fastened to the top button (Magdalene Minnaar, 2014b: 0:11–0:13), making sure that no skin is showing to maintain chastity. We also see her sitting alone in the gallery with her hands piously folded in her lap (Magdalene Minnaar, 2014b:0:58–1:00, 1:56–1:57), underscoring the modesty and piousness expected of her. However, her uniform consists of only a shirt, stockings, and high heels, attributing a sense of promiscuity to the ensemble. This combination gestures towards the fetishisation of the female body. This is evidenced through extreme close-up sequences that show the woman getting dressed, highlighting her delicate fingers carefully doing up the buttons of her shirt (Figure 5.9), and a close-up sequence of her putting on flesh-coloured stockings (Magdalene Minnaar, 2014b:0:15–18). The framing of these shots draws the viewer in, allowing them to actively observe this intimate and sensual ritual. The woman is also shown walking in heels up a staircase (Magdalene Minnaar, 2014b:0:20–22), with one close-up shot showing her heels (constructed of post office stamps) walking across a letter-strewn wooden floor (Magdalene Minnaar, 2014b: 0:50–0:55, 0:55–0:57).



Figure 5.9: Still from Boucher, *Poskantoor* (Magdalene Minnaar, 2014b), Getting dressed – combining *ordentlikheid* with sensual ritual, 0:12.

The single shirt uniform subsequently morphs into various incarnations through the addition of multiple shirts, sewn together in diverse ways. The creation of a bustle (Magdalene Minnaar, 2014b:0:42–0:43) and the

use of multiple sleeves cascading to create a flowing garment foreground femininity. This is, however, undermined in the final incarnation that sees the presence of multiple ghostly headless torsos (Magdalene Minnaar, 2014b: 1:11–23) that sprout forth from the woman’s own. The latter ensemble is heavily emphasised, with extreme close-up shots capturing the detail of this costume appearing throughout the trailer (Magdalene Minnaar, 2014b: 0:29–0:30, 0:35–0:37, 0:42–0:45, 1:42–1:44). Though the woman is not the only figure dressed in blue – she is joined by two masked figures representing the woman’s colleagues (Magdalene Minnaar, 2014b:1:33–1:36, 1:44–1:46) – hers is the only uniform to evolve during the trailer. This development points towards the woman’s non-conformity which is at odds with the expectations of *platteland* society.

The development of the woman’s uniform is mirrored in her styling. Dressed in her initial uniform, the woman’s style is noticeably conservative, with her hair neatly pinned back into a bun to exemplify *ordentlikheid*. However, when wearing other versions of her uniform her style is uninhibited. Early on we see her with her hair down and blowing in the wind as she exits through doors like a *femme fatale*. The same vibe is suggested in the shot that shows her walking up the stairs (Magdalene Minnaar, 2014b:0:50–0:52). Her conservativeness returns, however, when wearing the layered and stuffed costume as seen in the second buttoning-up sequence (Magdalene Minnaar, 2014b:1:12–23) (Figure 5.10). The stuffed torsos recall the earlier image of folded blue shirts in a drawer, and the same shirts being prepared for postage to other regions – exporting conformity, and *ordentlikheid*.



Figure 5.10: Still from Bouwer, *Poskantoor* (Magdalene Minnaar, 2014b), Costuming still points towards conservativeness, 1:17.

Tellingly undermining the notions of racial purity expected of Afrikaner women during apartheid, the framing of a black male figure in the trailer is significant. Hinting towards the woman’s desires, the black male figure is shown right after the encounter with the doily-figures. His face is also obscured by a full-face doily. Yet a

close-up of his face reveals that his mask is covered in red and white (clear) crystal beading detail, positioning him as a prominent object of desire (Figure 5.11). The male figures are further objectified through the strategic placement of board and fabric. The wood veneer placard that covers the front of the black male's body does little to hide his muscled physique (Magdalene Minnaar, 2014b:0:37–0:43). This contrasts markedly to the framing of the white male figure whose entire face is covered by a clump of raw dough (Magdalene Minnaar, 2014b:1:46–50).



Figure 5.11: Still from Bower, *Poskantoor* (Magdalene Minnaar, 2014b), The black (male) body is framed as desirable, 0:40.

Similar to the alienation achieved through the inclusion of weirdly familiar figures in the trailer, the trailer's location is simultaneously recognisable and unknown. Shot in Stellenbosch City Hall (Minnaar, private communication, 2020), the wood-clad interior (Magdalene Minnaar, 2014b:0:23, 0:50–0:52, 1:06–1:09), grand staircase, high ceilings and giant windows (Magdalene Minnaar, 2014b:0:13–0:14) recall the grandeur of apartheid-era administrative buildings that still dot the *platteland*. However, there are few signs of life at the beginning of the trailer. The building appears to be abandoned, with litter and letters blowing in the wind, and cleaning equipment and chairs stacked along corridors. Furthermore, the colouring is notably dark and sombre, assigning an eerie quality to the location – clearly positioning the supposedly idealistic *platteland* locale as a mundane place. This point is further emphasised through the foregrounding of routine through the repetition of certain actions that relate to post office operations, such as the processing of envelopes (Magdalene Minnaar, 2014b:1:33–1:38), the packing and wrapping of parcels (Magdalene Minnaar, 2014b:1:28–1:30, 1:32–1:33), and the opening (Magdalene Minnaar, 2014b:1:00–1:05) and closing of service hatches (Magdalene Minnaar, 2014b: 1:39–1:41, 2:11–2:14). The routine extends to the woman, who is shown fastening the buttons of her uniform twice (Magdalene Minnaar, 2014b:0:11–0:13, 1:11–1:23). This repetition

suggests that *platteland* life is marked by routine with little variation. The choice of soundtrack further attests to this. In the opera's opening aria 'Vieslike, verskiklike, vervloekte dorpie', used as the trailer's soundtrack here, Du Toit suggests the routine of *platteland* life through the scoring of repetitive motifs. While the soprano's vocal line mostly maintains a stepwise contour, this is disrupted as she suddenly leaps to the top borders of the stave, expressing "Wat 'n vieslike, verskriklike, vervloekte dorpie waarin ons woon!" ("What a horrible, terrible, cursed little town we live in!"). The woman's frustration is conveyed through Kapp and Du Toit's alliteration of the 'v' (/f/) in this phrase. This phrase is accompanied by agitated trills in the strings and tremolo chords in the piano, supporting a sense of dread of being trapped in this space. The corresponding shot in the trailer suitably shows the woman standing centre stage, "drowning" in a dress of letters, her arms outstretched, voicing a silent scream – the only time she appears to express herself verbally. However, this agency is short-lived. Finally, enclosed in a wooden box, trapped, the woman is wheeled away, presumably to continue living a life of routine.

Poskantoor's printed publicity paratexts and its visual paratexts are ultimately at odds with one another. On the one hand, the audience is lured in with promises of comedy and nostalgia; but although fulfilled to some extent by production media, those promises are undermined, on the other hand, by *Poskantoor's* visual identity.

5.5 Discussion and Conclusion

Despite its Afrikaans demographic, *Poskantoor* was a landmark production in the South African opera scene. The emphasis placed on the opera's language medium, its pandering to nostalgic remnants of Afrikaner culture, and its curious visual aesthetic presented something not yet encountered on the South African opera stage. Regarding the latter, the creative team's utilisation of social media distinguished the work as an opera far removed from the aesthetics that burden the genre in the South African context. While Stolp (2016) positions the opera as a socio-politically relevant work, the putative realities that are relayed via production media must be questioned. In their effort to appeal to the wider Afrikaans demographic and distance Afrikaans opera from its apartheid ties, *Poskantoor's* creators embrace contemporary Afrikaans identity; Yet they also evoke Afrikaner nostalgia, at times awkwardly recalling the apartheid era. When measured against each other, these objectives are counterproductive, especially since the opera tries to "rebrand" Afrikaans as an opera language in the post-apartheid sphere. As revealed in this chapter, *Poskantoor* presents a complex representation of Afrikaner identity that both panders to nostalgia, recalling practices of the apartheid era, and includes contemporary references reflective of present-day Afrikaans identity. Most problematically, the continuation of class and apartheid-era racial references included in the opera that speak to white nostalgia severely complicate the opera's efforts to project progressive post-apartheid identity.

With the unsettling of Afrikaner identity post-apartheid, nostalgia has emerged as a significant theme in Afrikaans cultural products, mainly since this allows the demographic to indulge in the past while stuck in a present where they feel their language and cultural survival is threatened. *Poskantoor*'s evocation of nostalgia therefore speaks to assuage this anxiety, while also pointing towards an awareness of the proven commercial success that accompanies nostalgia in the Afrikaans culture industry. For this reason, the opera's *platteland* setting and musical quotation of Afrikaans popular music are strategic, intended to "trigger" certain memories and emotions amongst audiences, as Du Toit revealed. However, premiering at Aardklop, the opera needed to engage a demographic that included both operatic novices and connoisseurs. To appeal to the latter, well-known opera themes were incorporated. Due to the links between the language and the opera genre, the strategy of embedding existing themes taken from the Western operatic canon in the musical fabric of a new Afrikaans work recalls the performance of opera in translation during apartheid. Since the opera sought to appeal to a younger audience base, the employment of apartheid-era "low brow" references is curious. Given Afrikaans pop music and artists' constant entanglement with post-apartheid language and identity politics, Du Toit perhaps intentionally included musical references free from contemporary politics. However, bearing in mind younger audiences' possible unfamiliarity with artists like Gé Korsten and Die Briels, the inclusion of these musical reminiscences is lost on this demographic, speaking instead to older audiences who cherish fond memories of these artists.

In contrast to the condemnations levelled against *Saartjie*, as discussed in Chapter 3, *Poskantoor* emerged relatively unscathed, with the use of racist terms completely overlooked by critics. This selective blindness to problematic racial interactions is potentially an effect of the festival environment. Hauptfleisch (2007:79) observes that the theatrical system, in this instance represented by Afrikaans festival culture, is becoming "increasingly important as a means of understanding and re-interpreting the past, coming to grips with the present and shaping the future, and thus in shifting perceptions across a wide spectrum and the many chasms that divide people and communities". For Hauptfleisch (2007:82), festivals not only point to the physical occurrence of the work, but to "where the artistic output of the actor, director, choreographer and others is *eventified*". Here, the *life event* of performance – *life event* defined by Hauptfleisch as a social event with performative qualities (Hauptfleisch, 2007:94) – becomes a "significant *cultural event*, framed by the festival and made meaningful by the presence of an audience and reviewers who will respond to the celebrated events in that celebratory context" (Hauptfleisch, 2007:82). The performances of *Poskantoor* at Aardklop thus took place in an extremely specific cultural space, evidenced by its glowing reviews. When one considers the fallout caused by the appearance of other apartheid-era symbols at Aardklop, the coded nature of these racial references in *Poskantoor* further allowed these racist terms to pass unnoticed. The multimodal communication in *Poskantoor* – within paratextual networks (between publicity paratexts and visual paratexts), the horizons of expectation, and design modes and production media – is extremely intricate, as this chapter has shown.

Significantly, this interplay between modes, which Boekkooi observed, results in the emphasis or masking of certain elements in the opera.

As the critiques of the intelligentsia revealed, progressive audiences were enthralled by the opera, arguably due to Bouwer's innovative design and direction – an argument supported through the kykNET Fiësta award he won for the production. However, as the review by the conservative media revealed, this was not enough to sway them. In keeping with the festival demographic, it is essential to note that audiences did express their upset through walking out. Christina Kennedy (2014) tellingly observes that:

The interracial shenanigans between a young widow [...] and a tramp-poet [...] didn't seem to ruffle feathers, but when the clerks started swearing at the chauvinistic postmaster [...] that was a bridge too far. Several audience members (mainly elderly) walked out in a huff.

What Kennedy's observation foregrounds here is the conservative public's discomfort on being confronted with values that conflict with "traditional" Afrikaner cultural identity, echoing the review of Lombaard. Interestingly, this offense is caused by profanity (used by women) and not racism. The fact that the latter did not prompt action gestures towards the lingering presence of racism in the democratic environment, thereby aligning with Stolp's observation of *Poskantoor* as socio-politically relevant. Indeed, perhaps what *Poskantoor* demonstrates above all is just how much political baggage the concept "Afrikaans opera" still carries: despite innovative strategies, the opera's pandering to Afrikaner nostalgia and the use of racist terms is highly problematic. *Poskantoor* attempts to capture a representation of progressive Afrikaans identity, however, the work undermines its own intentions by perpetuating domes of white nostalgia where remnants of apartheid are uncontested, and its audience can find comfort in a cocoon of memory.

CHAPTER 6

Curating an Image of Nation: The Case of *Mandela Trilogy*

6.1 Introduction

Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela (1918–2013) is the most revered political figure in South Africa’s history and a global icon. As an anti-apartheid activist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Mandela was instrumental in negotiating South Africa’s turn to democracy. After 27 years in prison, he was released in 1990, and in 1994, Mandela became the country’s first democratically elected and first black president in a moment that changed the country forever.¹⁸³ In her review of the 2013 *Mandela Poster Project Collective*, a creative initiative seeking to celebrate Mandela’s humanity by collecting 95 posters (reflective of his milestone birthday) in 60 days from around the globe, Amanda du Preez (2013) underwrites the nature of Mandela’s icon status:

Freedom. Peace. Justice, Humanness. Africanness. Anti-apartheid. Father of the Nation. Forgiveness. These are some of the terms used to describe Nelson [...] Mandela. In the same breath it must also be acknowledged that after Coca-cola, Mandela has become the best known brand internationally. [...] One cannot simply talk about the man without also implying the global icon that he has become (Du Preez, 2013:144).

Despite the monetary value that has been generated through the marketing of Mandela-branded products in recent years, the power of the Mandela “brand” still lies in its symbolic value. Ollie Schmitz, the MD of Brand Finance South Africa, writes that Mandela “was/is the brand every South African wants to believe in; one of forgiveness, reconciliation, kindness, respect, love, equality and colour blindness”. In the same way brands are used to inform consumer identity, South Africans purposefully adopt the Mandela brand, recalling the ideals that Mandela stood for (Schmitz, 2014:5), in attempts to paper over cracks in the façade of South Africa’s present democracy.¹⁸⁴ As such, the Mandela brand has become a powerful “tool” in striving for social cohesion in South Africa, and to some extent, globally.

Mandela’s contribution to the dismantling of apartheid has been immortalised through numerous sculptures that capture his image, together with monuments and architectural structures, and the naming of various local and international spaces and locations in his honour – driving consumer consumption through visual

¹⁸³ Mandela stepped down from office in 1999 and was subsequently replaced by Thabo Mbeki.

¹⁸⁴ For Schmitz (2014:5) the consumer’s “emotional and psychological relationship” with a brand, rather than vice versa, “shapes [a brand] and allows it to exist”. Schmitz argues that while the Mandela brand offers its consumers a lot to “buy into”, it does not provide its consumers with material products to buy. While there is some truth to this fact, especially when compared to the product offerings of Coca-cola, there are numerous products that bank on the Mandela brand. Following Mandela’s death in December 2013, the Nelson Mandela Foundation also launched a range of merchandise for sale, the proceeds of which help the charity to fulfil its goals.

culture.¹⁸⁵ Quite significantly, this immortalisation trend has also spilled over into the realm of the performing arts. It did, however, take several years for South African artists to turn their attention towards the life of Mandela and his struggle for liberation as subjects for the creation of cultural products. While these topics have inspired several theatrical works, both conceptualised and performed on foreign soil, the 2010s saw a notable rush of South African operas on the life of Mandela.¹⁸⁶ Of these works, *Mandela Trilogy* by Cape Town Opera (CTO) has distinguished itself as probably the most successful in terms of both longevity and profitability.¹⁸⁷

As South Africa's premier opera company, CTO has endeavoured to transform opera – a genre rife with colonial and apartheid ties, as discussed at length in Chapter 2 – into a racially inclusive idiom reflective of a democratic society. It thus comes as no surprise that CTO would seek to represent Mandela and his legacy via this transformed medium. *Mandela Trilogy* is significant since it is not only the most performed work in the emergent canon of South African opera; it is also regularly revived on both local and international stages. *Mandela Trilogy's* international presence further highlights its unique character – unlike other local opera fare, its dissemination has not been limited to South African audiences.¹⁸⁸ However, the journey that resulted in the version of *Mandela Trilogy* performed today was a long and arduous one, complete with an identity transformation, as this chapter will show.¹⁸⁹

Mandela Trilogy started its life as *African Songbook: A Tribute to the Life of Nelson Mandela*. With a libretto by Michael Williams, former MD of CTO,¹⁹⁰ and a score by three composers (Allan Stephenson, Mike Campbell, and Roelof Temmingh), *African Songbook* was premiered in 2010 – the year South Africa became the first African country to host the FIFA World Cup. While Mandela's 92nd birthday (and the 20th anniversary of his

¹⁸⁵ Mandela's grandson has spoken out against the continued fixation of "Mandelisation", arguing that the obsession with naming things after the late statesman overlooks the contributions made by others in the struggle for freedom (see Giaimo, 2016).

¹⁸⁶ Apart from *Mandela Trilogy*, three other South African operas are based on his life. *Madiba, The African Opera* (2014) by Unathi Mtirara, Sibusiso Njeza and Kutlwano Masote was marred by controversy. Following three nights, the production was cancelled and Mtirara subsequently disappeared with a large sum of funds, failing to pay the cast, and breaking the contract with the production's funders, the Department of Arts and Culture (see Makhubu, 2014). The opera was revived in 2021 (see "UWC's choir master pays tribute to Madiba through Opera", 2021). Durban-based musician and composer Juan Burgers' *Ubuntu* (2015), funded by the National Lotteries Commission, is another opera based on the life of the struggle icon (see Smart, 2015); however, this work either seems to exist under the radar or it has been largely ignored by the academic community. *The Struggle is My Life* was yet another opera envisaged by Opera Africa, to be premiered the same year as *Madiba, The African Opera* (see Mabaso, 2014), but this never came to fruition.

¹⁸⁷ To avoid confusion in this chapter, I use *Mandela Trilogy* when speaking of the work, collectively incorporating all its versions. When referring to a specific version of the work, the date is added in brackets.

¹⁸⁸ Mzilikazi Khumalo's *Princess Magogo kaDinuzulu* (2002) is also an exception here since this opera has toured to Sweden (Den Norske Opera Oslo), the Netherlands (Het Muziekteater Amsterdam) and the United States (Ravinia Festival, Chicago) (see "Opera Africa's Royal Success", 2004:41).

¹⁸⁹ Most recently, *Mandela Trilogy* formed part of CTO's 2018 season, with two performances (17 and 18 July) staged at Artscape (see Berry, 2018).

¹⁹⁰ Williams left CTO in 2018 to take up the position of CEO of the Buxton International Festival in Derbyshire, England.

release from prison) also served as motivation for the work, it could be argued that CTO's decision to conceive *African Songbook* as a "cultural showpiece" (Cape Town Opera, n.d.c) was primarily motivated by the international attention garnered by the tournament. In the background information about the work on CTO's website, the company states that "[a]fter its premiere, the show's title was changed to *Mandela Trilogy*" (Cape Town Opera, n.d.c). While this change seems purely nominal, closer inspection reveals that, as I shall argue, each round of revisions throughout the work's history has been driven by its reception.

In *Reconfiguring Myth and Narrative in Contemporary Opera*, Everett (2015:3) argues that the reception of a new operatic work "informs future production". The author discusses the cases of Osvaldo Golijov's *Ainadamar* and Tan Dun's *The First Emperor*, both operas that were substantially revised following their premieres.¹⁹¹ Premiered at Tanglewood in 2003, *Ainadamar* was revised twice – once prior to its 2004 performance in Los Angeles (Swed, 2004), and again in 2005, with director Peter Sellars overseeing a complete overhaul of the dramatic texts for the production in Santa Fe (Everett, 2015:42). Following the revision, new productions, both staged and in concert form, proliferated between 2007 and 2012 (Everett, 2015:42). Similarly, following the premiere of *The First Emperor* at the Metropolitan Opera in 2006, Tan Dun "extensively revised the score's vocal settings and rendered them more 'Pucciniesque' for the second run in 2007" (Everett, 2015:167). This move, Everett argues, shows that the composer addressed the criticisms levelled against the opera in its original form. Since film director Zhang Yimou's mise-en-scène for the 2006 premiere was reminiscent of his design for *Turandot* in 1998, set in the Forbidden Palace in Beijing, MET audiences expected Tan Dun's opera to deliver the same "musical splendor of Puccini's grand opera" (original emphasis) (Everett, 2015:167). Everett suspects that the composer "made concessions, tipping the balance more toward the 'exotic' grand opera tradition in [the] final version in order to placate his western critics".

The trend Everett discusses here points towards the possible effects of critical reception, not only in terms of production media but also design modes. *Mandela Trilogy* presents a similar case. Following its premiere as *African Songbook* in 2010, the work underwent multiple rounds of revisions, ranging from the nominal to the rewriting of dramatic texts. More revisions followed *Mandela Trilogy*'s first international performance in Wales in 2012. As in the cases of *Ainadamar* and *The First Emperor*, I argue in this chapter that the revisions of *African Songbook* and subsequently *Mandela Trilogy* are intimately linked to their critical reception. I further posit that CTO tailored its digital identity through the work's paratextual network to deliver an image of (South) Africa to international audiences that buys into problematic notions of nationhood and race. In what follows, I delve into the critique of *African Songbook* (2010), and *Mandela Trilogy* (2011, 2014) in the public sphere, arguing that CTO's processes of revision point towards the cognisance of public opinion. I argue that CTO tested the

¹⁹¹ Post-premiere revisions have been a common feature of opera for centuries, with instances of revision proliferating throughout the Western canon.

work and production, in the guise of *African Songbook*, on home ground to gauge critics' opinions regarding possible triumphs or major pitfalls of the operatic work/production. These issues were addressed through the first round of extensive rewrites of the libretto and score resulting in *Mandela Trilogy* (2011). I discuss in depth the multiple rounds of revisions – beginning in 2010 and ending in 2014 – to highlight not only the effects of the reception of production media on the revision of design modes, but also the work's ideological impact as it increasingly instrumentalises the Mandela brand. Unfortunately, the lack of accessibility to the libretti and musical scores of these works has complicated this investigation;¹⁹² however, the rise of digital engagement in opera globally has resulted in a wealth of paratextual material that informs CTO's shaping of audience expectation.

As in Chapters 4 and 5, the peripheral elements within opera's multimodal network once again come into play with the paratextual networks and horizons of expectation crucial in this case study. Regarding the former, each international tour of *Mandela Trilogy* (in 2012, 2014, 2016 and 2017) was accompanied by digital paratexts carefully designed by CTO to present an "idea" of (South) Africa unique to the touring location. CTO expanded their digital engagement through the paratextual network, with multiple trailers uploaded to YouTube, along with electronic press kits and behind-the-scenes features, all providing potential audiences with more information about the company and *Mandela Trilogy*. As I argued in Chapter 3, horizons of expectation comprise elements such as the audience's knowledge of socio-political contexts, performance-specific information, together with prior encounters with opera, the production company, or the cast. In the case of *Mandela Trilogy*, the horizons of expectation extend to CTO's profile as an internationally renowned company that prioritises "black talent", as evidenced in their tour programming. In addition, the sheer volume of digital video material that surrounds *Mandela Trilogy* is particularly significant. As every international tour is accompanied by a specific set of carefully edited video paratexts, it can be argued that CTO exports a carefully curated image of nation through *Mandela Trilogy*, delivering an idea of what (South) Africa looks/sounds like on the international stage – a theory supported, I will suggest, by the work's multiple rounds of revision. These paratexts range from trailers to "behind-the-scenes" footage and interviews, and buy heavily into the Mandela "brand", relying not only on iconic images of Mandela that speak to a visual intertextuality interacting directly with South African history but also Mandela's symbolic value as an icon of transformation. The latter perfectly supports CTO's mission to transform the South African operatic landscape. As such, *Mandela Trilogy*'s paratexts consistently showcase black voices, a trademark that has come to characterise CTO's international profile. These paratexts thus present Mandela as the token icon of South

¹⁹² While some materials in this thesis were kindly supplied by CTO, certain aspects of the company's work remain shrouded in mystery.

Africa, in combination with CTO's promotion of "black voices", resulting in an export that directly interacts with audiences' horizons of expectation.

This chapter consists of three parts. The first (Section 6.2) contextualises *Mandela Trilogy* by outlining the horizons of expectation established by CTO for its collective audience. To this end, I provide a brief outline of the role played by CTO in the (continuing) transformation of South Africa's operatic landscape, highlighting the company's international profile which relies heavily on their promotion of formerly disenfranchised opera talent. The foregrounding of said talent in CTO's international marketing strategy necessitates the brief exploration of the company's digital profile to highlight aesthetic trends that permeate CTO's digital paratexts – trends that are markedly employed in the curation of *Mandela Trilogy*'s digital paratexts. The second part of the chapter (Section 6.3) unpacks the South African history of *Mandela Trilogy*, starting with its first incarnation as *African Songbook*. I discuss the work's conceptualisation and consider its critical reception in South Africa during 2010–2011. The third part (Section 6.4) then moves on to the work's international performances in Cardiff (2012), Munich (2014), the tour of the United Kingdom and Ireland (2016), and finally Dubai and Hong Kong (2017). Drawing extensively on reception texts and digital paratexts, this chapter interrogates CTO's exportation of South African operatic identity and reveals that the company's initial drive to present an opera on the life of Mandela ultimately morphed into a crowd-pleasing musical through multiple revisions, with digital paratexts manipulated to appeal to clichéd international expectations of South Africa that maintain CTO's reputation.

6.2 Cape Town Opera: Transforming South African Opera and Exporting South Africa

In 1999, CTO rose from the ashes of the Cape Performing Arts Board, one of the four regional arts councils that had ensured the survival of "high art" during apartheid. Unlike initiatives in other regions, CTO successfully made the transition from a government-subsidised and state-owned company to a private non-profit organisation (Roos, 2014c:251). Even before CTO was founded, Cape Town was ground zero for operatic transformation in South Africa.¹⁹³ Once established, CTO focused on incorporating indigenised versions of canonic repertoire, set in and reworked for a (South) African context, alongside their standard Western fare, which now featured predominantly black casts. Examples of this include an adaptation of *La bohème* entitled *La bohème: Noir* (1997), where the action was set in Soweto during the 1976 uprising (see Irish 1997) with a new English libretto written to accompany Puccini's original score. Muller (2018:213) regards this production as a step towards the "Africanisation of opera in South Africa". In 2001, the company went even further – adapting Verdi's score for their reimagining of *Macbeth*, titled *MacbEth*, directed by Brett Bailey

¹⁹³ In 1995, CAPAB produced *Enoch, Prophet of God* – a monumental work in terms of its socio-political agenda. See Chapter 2, section 2.2.3.

(see Irish 2001).¹⁹⁴ With these reworkings, CTO has been very strategic in terms of showcasing its socio-political awareness. This also extends to site-specific performances to commemorate historic events. In 2004, for example, the company staged a production of Beethoven's *Fidelio* on Robben Island, in the exercise yard of the prison where Mandela had spent 18 of his 27 years in incarceration, in a site-specific performance intended to commemorate South Africa's first democratic decade.¹⁹⁵ Most significantly, CTO also set out to export South Africa's "new" opera aesthetic. Following the success of the Robben Island *Fidelio* (a co-production with the Norwegian National Opera), CTO announced that its production of *Show Boat* would tour to Europe in 2005 ("Show Boat to sail new seas", 2004). The article reports that CTO had been invited to stage 34 performances in Nuremburg, Germany, and Oslo, Norway, in an "historic first visit" of the "61 strong Voice of the Nation" (the former name of the CTO Chorus) to Europe. The prominence of the "black voice" is where the appeal of CTO lies.

In line with the socio-political redress that accompanied democratic transition, CTO has actively concentrated since its founding on harnessing the talent of previously disenfranchised individuals.¹⁹⁶ As a result, since 1994 the presence of black singers on the South African opera stage has increased dramatically. Writing in 2014, Roos reports that by the year 2000 black singers represented three-quarters of local opera houses' singing corps. While several opera companies have closed since Roos' article was published, this trend has not slowed down, and black singers feature prominently at CTO. Tracing the rise of the "black operatic voice" in South Africa's operatic landscape, Roos (2014c:255) states that this "phenomenon [...] represents the most radical break with the pre-1994 opera tradition". The continued reliance upon race-based description is problematic, but inevitable, as Roos (2014c:255) points out. Due to the prevalence of a "racialised discourse" in South Africa, "[discussing] issues concerning tradition and/or change in South African opera inescapably draws on a discourse based on racial categorisation" (Roos, 2014c:255). While there is no doubt that CTO offers invaluable opportunities for singers of all races and cultural backgrounds in line with the country's drive towards inclusivity, the continuous underlining of the "uniqueness" of South Africa's "black voices" is an issue, as Roos (2014c:256–258) argues.

Roos explains that the "so-called 'natural talent'" of black opera students is often credited to aspects of indigenous language, cultural environment and "voice type". For example, the vowels and consonants of the

¹⁹⁴ Bailey created three versions of this work, with the third version, reworked in 2014 (score by Fabrizio Casol), touring extensively (see Third World Bun Fight, 2015).

¹⁹⁵ Other commemorations also intersected with this landmark production, such as UCT's 175th birthday, and the 150 years of friendship between South Africa and Norway. Regarding the latter, the Norwegian National Opera contributed financially and artistically to the realisation of this production. ("Freedom opera to mark milestones", 2004). In 2012 yet another site-specific performance of *Fidelio* was staged, this time in the Castle in Cape Town.

¹⁹⁶ While Roos (2010:222) identified three training schemes, this had been reduced to only two at the time of writing: the Young Artist Programme (formerly the Voice of the Nation Studio), and the Cape Town Opera chorus (formerly the Voice of the Nation Ensemble).

Xhosa language have been equated to those found in Italian, with widespread claims positioning Xhosa-speakers as naturally adept at singing in Romance languages (Khan, quoted in Roos, 2014c:256). Most tellingly, Roos quotes Christine Crouse, former artistic director of CTO, who considers the “timbre of the so-called ‘black voice’” different to that of the European voice.¹⁹⁷ While European companies might rival CTO in terms of “musical polish or [...] sophisticated musicology”, CTO brings “passion” and “exceptional voices that you will not find in Europe” (Crouse, quoted in Roos, 2014c:257). Reflecting on the successes of CTO’s touring productions of *Porgy and Bess*, and the musical *Show Boat*, Corinna Da Fonseca-Wollheim (2010) writes that the “fusion of musical cultures” in CTO’s chorus lends a “unique flavor not only to the productions but to the *sound* of South African opera” (my emphasis). Soprano Janelle Visagie, who was cast in *Show Boat*, also reflects on the “African voice”, saying “[i]t’s the type of sound – it’s very different from European opera singing. It’s huge. European audiences are really stunned by what actually comes out of Africa and how good it is” (Visagie, quoted in Da Fonseca-Wollheim, 2010). These perspectives point to race and culture as the “roots” of South Africa’s operatic voices in a characterisation that problematically hints at exoticism and speaks to the fetishisation of the “black voice”. However, Roos (2014c:258) argues that while a perceptual difference between “white” and “black” voices remains, the classification of the latter has now changed. Where historically the “black voice” was described as “harsh” and “vulgar” (Olwage, cited in Roos, 2014c:258), post-1994 it has now become “politically and financially lucrative”, and thus plays a key part in CTO’s marketing strategy.

In a 2009 feature for *Opera Magazine*, John Allison observes that CTO’s international presence is “[dominated]” by works that call for black casts, such as *Porgy and Bess*, *Show Boat* and *Treemonisha*. Reflecting on this trend, Allison asks Williams, CTO’s former MD, whether the singers of CTO feel “typecast”, to which Williams responds:

That’s not a feeling we’ve had here yet. Everyone’s happy to have the work. *Porgy and Bess* remains an opportunity for South African singers to show their talents on an international stage. It’s as simple as that. It’s conceivable that we may get to the type-casting stage, and in ten years’ time we may want to be touring something other than *Porgy*, but for now it’s an arrangement that works for everyone (Williams, quoted in Allison, 2009:1201).

¹⁹⁷ Concerning the “race” of timbre, Nina Sun Eidsheim (2019) has written extensively on racialisation of sound in her book *The Race of Sound, Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music*. For Eidsheim, the idea that the “black voice” is different to the “white voice” is rooted in racist historical notions of “physiological difference” (Eidsheim, 2019:63). Since studies in vocal morphology have concluded that physical difference between racial groups is insignificant, the racialisation of sound, Eidsheim (2019:63) argues, “[lies] beyond the sound itself, in a phantom genealogy that is often activated by nonsonorous cues”. In the context of the United States, the inability of white listeners/audiences to reconcile the “sight and sound of a black person singing classical music” led to the classification of such performances as “minstrel shows” (nicknamed “black opera” during the Reconstruction era), undercutting black voices’ suitability to sing classical music (Eidsheim, 2019:64).

As the country's only full-time opera company, CTO is the only platform where South African opera singers, of all races and cultural backgrounds, can hone their art. However, what Williams' reply foregrounds here could be framed as an exploitation of black culture. While CTO has become synonymous with operatic transformation in South Africa, the company continually banks on the power of the "black voice" and black choral culture to drive the success of its international tours. The main way in which this is achieved is through CTO's chorus.

Known for "their vocal power and unique musical interpretation" (Cape Town Opera, 2019:19), CTO's award-winning chorus forms the heart of many of the company's touring productions.¹⁹⁸ Apart from the company's dependence on repertoire that requires "black casts", it is noteworthy that the programme for CTO's touring productions that explicitly features the chorus incorporates "traditional 'African'" repertoire alongside Western art music. The programme *Grace Notes*, for example, draws on the rich choral singing traditions of Africa. This *a cappella* concert "[juxtaposes] ancient and modern music from Europe and Africa", and features the music of Byrd, Palestrina, Duruflé and Pärt programmed together with religious music from "Xhosa, Venda, Zulu and Swahili traditions". Similarly, *African Angels* features opera repertoire together with "African traditional and gospel music". A press release from 2016 lists some of the items in the programme – 'Summertime' and 'Plenty o' Nuttin' from *Porgy and Bess*, and Miriam Makeba's hit 'Pata pata', spirituals like 'Oh Happy Day' and 'The Battle of Jericho', together with the 'Brindisi' from *La traviata* and a Xhosa version of Strauss' Champagne song from *Die Fledermaus* (SA Embassy, 2021).¹⁹⁹ Both *Grace Notes* and *African Angels* have toured Europe extensively, sometimes returning annually.²⁰⁰ In terms of opera productions, *Porgy and Bess* has been one of CTO's showpieces. Set in apartheid South Africa, the production first toured to Sweden in 2006, then to Kenya (2007), and Wales (2009), followed by an extensive tour to England, Wales, and Scotland in 2012 (with concert versions presented in Australia and Germany). More recently, the production also toured to Spain (2014, 2015), Buenos Aires (2016), and South Korea (2018) (Cape Town Opera, n.d.d).

¹⁹⁸ The CTO Chorus was awarded best chorus at the 2013 International Opera Awards. See the Opera Awards Ltd (2021). In 2016 a scandal rocked CTO when the chorus accused the company of financially exploiting them during a tour to the Aix-en-Provence festival. The dispute ultimately resulted in the dismissal of chorus members from the company (see Carrell and Brown, 2016; Huisman, 2016).

¹⁹⁹ When reflecting on this compilation of repertoire in CTO's touring productions, Eidsheim's (2019:64) striking description of the "phantom limb", referring to the lingering presence of the "phantom genealogy of race [...]" springs to mind. Eidsheim writes that the activation of racial politics that emerged in the US during the 1960s and 1970s with the appearance of black opera singers continues at present. The writer refers to 2011 Met Opera Grand Finals winner Ryan Speedo Green's recounted experiences of being asked to sing "Ol' Man River" from *Show Boat*. This request, Eidsheim argues, points towards structures of privilege, where "people of privilege asked a less-privilege person to perform a certain position within the U.S. racial hierarchy" (Eidsheim, 2019:181). CTO's choice of repertoire thus buys into "black opera" but also includes items from the Western canon, proving "black" voices' ability to sing Western repertoire.

²⁰⁰ *Grace Notes* premiered in France in 2016, touring Luxembourg, Hungary, Austria, and Germany in 2019 (Cape Town Opera, n.d.b). For the touring history of *African Angels* see Cape Town Opera (n.d.a).

While CTO does apply for funding and depends on private donors and organisations to meet their goals, international engagement is key to its financial survival. Allison (2009:1201) goes so far as to suggest that the company would be forced to close without overseas touring, an observation that the company's financial reports support.²⁰¹ What is apparent is the emphasis placed on the "South African-ness" of these productions. Marketing paratexts for these touring productions also heavily underline the vocal quality of CTO's singers. In this regard, the use of digital media paratexts is significant, offering CTO the opportunity to showcase its aesthetic through multimodal paratexts disseminated via the internet and social media sites, reaching far *beyond* the limitations of local printed media.²⁰²

In keeping with the global rise in digital engagement across creative industries in recent years, CTO has followed international opera trends by increasing its digital presence using social media. In this regard, CTO's YouTube channel has become a tool that allows the company to disseminate their goals and artistic aesthetic, further extending their global reach. An exploration of CTO's digital aesthetic would make for an insightful case study in itself. However, for the purpose of this chapter, I will focus on how CTO not only shapes viewer expectation through their use of digital media, but also foregrounds vocal talent – aspects that prove crucial to the consideration of *Mandela Trilogy's* paratexts. While CTO still relies on written copy to promote their aesthetic, the multimodal nature of digital artefacts like trailers and previews offers the company the opportunity to really drive home their aesthetic. For example, while CTO's website merely *describes* the production *African Angels* as "[showcasing] the exceptional voices and stylistic versatility of CTO's ensemble", the trailer (Lesley Liddle, 2017) goes one step further, validating this claim by exhibiting CTO's voices through multimodal presentation. An overview of the corpus of CTO's YouTube channel shows that different trailer aesthetics emerge. Trailers or previews either combine performance footage with interviews of the creative team providing commentary, or solely focus on performance, presumably to convey the effect of embodied experience. In the case of the former, the editing process is strategic.

One of the trailers for *Grace Notes* (Cape Town Opera, 2018d), for example, contains the sounds of ethereal choral singing that almost envelops the viewer together with title cards featuring highlights from reviews ("POWERFUL VOICES, FULL OF GRACE – CAPE ARGUS") or evocative one-liners that speak to the aesthetic of the performance ("A moving reflection on the yearning to express spirituality through music"). This is interspersed with footage that shows the choir, dressed in black, performing in a stone church, with sunlight

²⁰¹ According to CTO's annual report of 2017, 51% of their income is derived from international touring fees, compared to an 11% that comes from local box office sales (Cape Town Opera, 2017:32). While CTO has concentrated on its YouTube presence in light of the pandemic, official figures for 2020 have not yet been released so it is not possible to deduce how the lack of touring has affected their income.

²⁰² This is not to deny the possibility of international readers with regard to South African news publications due to the increased digital footprint of print media. What I wish to highlight here is the character of CTO's digital engagement, providing potential audiences the opportunity to *experience* the sights and sounds of CTO.

streaming in through stained-glass windows. *Grace Notes*' musical director, Thutuka Sibisi, also provides commentary, in both an interview setting and via voiceover, to contextualise the programme for the viewer. Furthermore, the trailer strategically presents excerpts from Western art music and African sacred music repertoire. The latter is highlighted through the inclusion of footage that foregrounds the physical characteristic of African music, showing the chorus performing with choreographed movements, in stark contrast to the static position of the Western choral tradition exhibited earlier in the trailer. Crucially, Sibisi clarifies that it is not about the location of the content (the West versus Africa) but rather *hearing* the chorus perform these works. These insights undoubtedly shape viewer expectation, in contrast to trailers which only feature live performance footage.²⁰³

The process of strategic curation exemplified in CTO's digital marketing materials clearly interacts with audiences' horizons of expectation regarding the company's creative output. However, at the time *African Songbook* (2010) – *Mandela Trilogy*'s predecessor – premiered, CTO had a limited digital marketing profile, with the possible shaping of audience expectation still largely bound to paper-based paratexts and previous experiences with the company. While these early paratexts are perhaps less multimodal than later ones accompanying international tours, the printed medium does not undermine its validity in tracing the history of *Mandela Trilogy* and its critical reception. With a wave of tourists already lured to Cape Town by 2010's World Cup event, CTO could concentrate on its local audience base, and bank on the power of the Mandela brand to do the rest. In the section below, I provide an overview of the work's history and its revisions. Starting with *African Songbook*, I unpack paratexts and explore critical reception to make new sense of the rounds of revisions following the premiere of *African Songbook* (2010) and *Mandela Trilogy* (2011), before subsequently addressing the digital identity (and transformation) of *Mandela Trilogy* in the international sphere.

6.3 From *African Songbook* (2010) to *Mandela Trilogy* (2011): Immortalising an Icon

“African Songbook [...] was the result of Cape Town opera's question: what is our response to 2010? And the answer was unequivocally ‘Madiba’”.

— Michael Williams, quoted in Edmunds (2011).

In 2010, South Africa became the focus of an international gaze as the host country for the FIFA World Cup tournament. With this high-profile event almost guaranteed to provide immense economic stimulus, CTO

²⁰³ The process of curation is evident here. Compared to the 2-minute trailer (Cape Town Opera, 2018d), the first trailer (Cape Town Opera, 2018a) features black and white performance footage, with title cards only featuring at the beginning and end. The previews titled GRACE NOTES #1 (Cape Town Opera, 2018b) and #2 (Cape Town Opera, 2018c) respectively both comprise performance footage only. Interestingly #2 is clearly aimed at Afrikaans audiences – the programme by-line and the titles of the specific performance have been translated to Afrikaans, and the song performed in the preview is an Afrikaans hymn (“Soos ’n wildsbok wat smag na water’ / ‘As the deer panteth for the water”). In both #1 and #2 the performance is expected to speak for itself, as opposed to the viewer's opinion being shaped by the inclusion of title-cards and creative commentary.

evidently sought to capitalise on the increased presence of tourists visiting Cape Town: a billboard in the city declared “Welcome to the Cape of Good Opera”²⁰⁴ (Hamilton, 2010), and, as Williams’ statement above reveals, CTO’s “answer” to the World Cup was to create an opera on the life of Nelson Mandela, the token South African icon. The result was *African Songbook*.

Before *African Songbook*, Williams already had extensive experience writing opera libretti that spoke to South Africa’s socio-political transition and had directed for CTO for 18 years. During this time, Williams had already turned down commissions for an opera about Mandela, since he felt ill-equipped and as the subject lacked historical distance (Muller, 2010a).²⁰⁵ In the programme for *African Songbook*, Williams confesses that “[he] could not find [his] path through the labyrinth of [Mandela’s] life, and could not even imagine what the music would sound like” (Williams, quoted in Muller, 2010a).²⁰⁶ However, with “tons of soccer tourists visiting the Cape”, and the 20th anniversary of Mandela’s release, he finally felt the time was right for an operatic epic on Mandela’s life (Muller, 2010a).

Williams used Mandela’s autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom* as the source material for *African Songbook*, opting for a three-act structure (Muller, 2010a).²⁰⁷ Each act depicts a “directional moment” in Mandela’s life as Williams (quoted in Muller, 2010a) explains, providing insight into Mandela’s character and his role in South Africa’s socio-political transformation. For the three acts, CTO decided to commission three different composers.²⁰⁸ British-born composer Allan Stephenson composed the music for Act I (“Qunu Oratorio”), which captured Mandela’s early years in rural Qunu, in the Eastern Cape. Act II (“Sophiatown Playlist”) was the work of jazz musician Mike Campbell, and depicts Mandela during his Johannesburg years, working as a lawyer and enjoying the offerings of Sophiatown, a hub of black arts and culture during the 1950s. For Act III, composer Roelof Temmingh was called in. Starting with the Sharpeville-massacre, this final Act (“Amandla!”)²⁰⁹ covered the period from 1960 to 1994, depicting Mandela’s arrest, his incarceration on Robben Island, and the first democratic elections (Muller, 2010a). Considering CTO’s commitment to

²⁰⁴ This clever play on words adapts the “Cape of Good Hope”, another name for the Cape Colony.

²⁰⁵ On turning down a commission in 1998, Williams (quoted in De Beer, 2011) states: “I felt both Mandela and I were too young for this to happen. That and too unprepared”. However, by 2010, Williams had written several operas and felt more experienced to mount the project. Several books on Mandela and his life had also been published since 1998, giving Williams much more material to work with.

²⁰⁶ According to Muller, one of the major challenges for Williams was the fact that he could not indulge his imagination as Mandela’s life was too well known and well documented (Muller, 2010a). Most controversially, Williams reveals that he had the idea to “[make] Mandela non-specific”: “[A] white Mandela, a woman Mandela, a coloured Mandela. When I presented it to my team they were horrified. They said, ‘You can’t’. I said, ‘Well, listen, he represents so much more than his skin colour’. But I didn’t have enough courage to do that. Can you imagine what the ANC Youth League would have to say?” (Williams, quoted in Sichel, 2010).

²⁰⁷ Since *A Long Walk to Freedom* (Mandela, 1995 [1994]) has a total of 115 chapters, and is divided into eleven parts, the three-act structure of *African Songbook* suggests that parts of Mandela’s life are heavily condensed in the work.

²⁰⁸ Three singers were also cast in the role of Mandela, one performing in each respective act.

²⁰⁹ “Amandla”, a Nguni word meaning “Power” and its response, “Ngawethu” or “Awethu”, roughly translates to “power” “is ours”. This cry was adopted by the ANC during apartheid.

operatic transformation, the dominance of white composers in a work about the life of Mandela is surprising. In this regard, journalist Adrienne Sichel (2010) asks the obvious question: “Why commission composer [Allan] Stephenson when Neo Muyanga and Bongani Ndodana-Breen come instantly to mind?”

Cognisant of the risk that accompanies his artistic decisions since he is “treading the heritage trail” (Sichel, 2010), Williams curiously connects his decision to use Stephenson, a composer trained in the Western art music tradition, to his uncovering of the “ceremonial almost classic nature” of 1930s Xhosa culture:

[W]hen I did my research on the beginnings of Mandela’s life, I was very impressed by the traditional, ceremonial almost classic nature of Xhosa culture in the Transkei in the 1930s. What intrigued me about it was the formality of the cultural rites, as it were. As I was trying to work with the vast canvas of Mandela’s life, that in itself is a huge task, I asked, what do I want to say? Opera isn’t a documentary form, it doesn’t suit that genre at all. But reading about his earlier life made me think: wait a minute, I could write an African oratorio called Qunu Oratorio. I have worked with Allan [Stephenson] before. He is a highly skilled classically trained composer (Williams, quoted in Sichel, 2010).

William’s decision to use “classically trained composers” such as Stephenson (and Temmingh) seems at odds with the transformation of opera. In her consideration of the work, Stolp (2016:149) points out that Stephenson had “little (if any) experience with traditional Xhosa music”, resulting in a superficial evocation of the tribe’s music and culture.²¹⁰ Sichel’s (2010) question in a sense pre-empts concerns regarding the authenticity of Stephenson’s idiom. While scholars like Naomi André (2016) regard the fusion of Western and African idioms as representative of South Africa’s “operatic voice”, the continued dominance of Western musical elements, such as Western orchestration and Western notation, is questionable, considering broad cultural and scholarly moves towards decolonisation. In a South African context specifically, the continued dominant position of Western musical elements could be considered detrimental to the development of a uniquely South African opera idiom. For example, when composer Neo Muyanga was commissioned to write an opera on the life of Mandela for Opera Africa, he was told that he would be responsible for the composition of vocal lines and the setting of the libretto, but it was dictated that the score would need to include Western orchestral accompaniment that would be “entrusted to a Western trained composer” (Stolp, 2017:75). Muyanga refused, and the opera has not been staged. Employing “classically-trained” composers for *Mandela Trilogy* perhaps avoided possible logistical issues accompanying touring on the part of CTO. Since financial restrictions do not often allow the orchestra that played for the premiere run to accompany CTO on tour, non-Western notation would pose problems for orchestral musicians in European venues. For *African Songbook*, the evocation of Xhosa song was thus assigned to Stephenson, with the burden of “authenticity” resting on the primarily black cast.

²¹⁰ The process adopted for Act I saw the selection of six isiXhosa songs that were taped and deconstructed, with Stephenson “[weaving] a score around these high points of traditional music” (Williams, quoted in Sichel, 2010).

While questions regarding the authenticity of *African Songbook*'s musical representation did not dominate the critique following the work's premiere in Cape Town on 17 June 2010, the internal musical disparity of the work, resulting from the involvement of three composers, was mentioned in several reviews. Deon Irish (2010a) anecdotally reflects that *African Songbook* lacked musical unity since the three composers were required to compose "three wholly dissimilar and, indeed, disparate scores for three disjointed acts". Similarly, for Muller (2010c:16) the use of three musical styles in one story resulted in a "fragmented 'opera'", with each of the acts too short to provide insight or opportunity for character development. For Irish (2010a), the musical idiom of Temmingh was reminiscent of his earlier collaboration with Williams on *Enoch, Prophet of God*, resulting in "a Shostakovich-like threnody to round off the Butterworth bucolics [Act I] and the Jozi jazz [Act II]. A truly bewildering mix that serves none of them well" (Irish 2010a). Barry Smith, writing for *Opera Magazine*, similarly writes that Temmingh's Act III, which contained the weightiest subject matter of the work, did not offer easy listening. Smith writes:

Act 3 was always going to be the hardest to convey both in music and on stage – so much of the turbulence of present-day South African history had to be included and the suffering and eventual triumph conveyed in one comparatively short Act. [...] Temmingh produced a fine score – unrelentingly bleak though its entirety suitable for the subject matter of agony and cruel oppression. For those of us who lived through this era, both music and action gave a feeling of claustrophobia as we watched the re-enactment of 'man's inhumanity to man' [...] After all the discomfort and dissonance, the gentle *a cappella* rendering of 'Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika' (the South African national anthem) was most moving and had the audience on its feet (Smith, 2010:1131).

From Smith's description, it seems that Temmingh's musical idiom suitably captured the complex history of South Africa's road to democracy, even though reliving this historical moment seemed awkward for some. Temmingh's inclusion of Enoch Sontonga's hymn 'Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika' arguably eased this tension, given the hymn's power as a symbol of the struggle for liberation (Coplan, 2008 [1985]:58). However, despite the hymn's reputation as the token symbol of reconciliation, its inclusion here could be considered superficial – a token crowd-pleaser – when compared to the overall atmosphere of Temmingh's act.²¹¹

The sheer volume of material in Williams' libretto failed to provide an in-depth perspective on this period of the country's history. Considering the length of source material in Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*, Williams appears to have opted for a "complete" history. "Williams has crammed so much into it", Irish (2010a) writes, "that the result is the operatic equivalent of a Black Hole". This was especially evident in Act III, as Irish notes:

The events narrated in this lengthy act are the stuff both of legend and of painful recent memory. On either basis, they deserve from the operatic form due reverence and careful examination. I find it unpalatable that seminal texts – such as Mandela's speech from the [defendant] dock [at the Rivonia Trial] – could be so superficially dealt with in the rush to tell the whole story. Starting with Sharpeville, we go through the passbook

²¹¹ The hymn was widely disseminated during apartheid, with ANC choirs touring and recording the work in Sweden, the United States and Britain (Coplan, 2008 [1985]:58).

campaign, the armed struggle, Rivonia trial, Robben Island incarceration, personal tragedies, the 1976 uprising, the negotiated settlement, the Walk to Freedom and democratic elections (Irish, 2010a).

As Irish's description above suggests, Act III reads like a summary of turbulent history that lacks complexity and depth. This "frenetic rush of images" (Irish, 2010a) could be described as an oversimplification of South Africa's apartheid history and reconciliation, aided by Temmingh's incorporation of the national anthem. Furthermore, Irish notes that the work should be considered "entertainment not opera", a binary that invokes the imagined preferences of the work's target demographic. In line with *African Songbook*'s envisaged goal – as a "cultural showpiece" accompanying the World Cup – CTO sought to appeal to opera novices, i.e., soccer tourists seeking to supplement their experience with the country's operatic fare, rather than their usual audience base. In this regard, *African Songbook* delivered, with the talent and passionate performance of the cast and chorus (Smith, 2010:1131) overshadowing most of the work's issues.

Both Irish (2010a) and Smith (2010) compliment the singing in *African Songbook*; however, writing for an international audience, Smith highlights the chorus' evocation of rural South Africa. "A massed and full-voiced chorus and some imaginative dancing", Smith (2010:1131) writes, "gave an evocative picture of rural tribal life". Smith commends Stephenson's masterful combination of "traditional Xhosa melodies in some rich orchestration" leading up to a choral finale which certainly impressed. While earlier comments like those of Sichel (2010) point towards an awareness of the possibly problematic representation of a Xhosa musical idiom by a white composer, Smith seems less concerned over the "authenticity" of Stephenson's musical idiom and more taken with the chorus's "authentic" performance.

Following *African Songbook*'s "test run" in 2010, the librettist/director paid heed to the press' concerns regarding the piece's musical disparities and the amount of historic material included in the work. In a feature for the *Sunday Argus* ("A bit of this, a bit of that"), Williams confesses that *African Songbook* was "event-driven", with the "re-worked version" – titled *Mandela Trilogy* – instead being "character-driven" (Williams, quoted in Brommert, 2011). Act III, which received the most critique, was rewritten in its entirety. The libretto for the new Act III, now titled "Prison Years" (Boekkooi, 2011), focused on the details of the well-known Rivonia Trial, where Mandela was sentenced, and on his incarceration, contrasting to the previous version's condensed apartheid-themed trip down memory lane. Temmingh's original sombre depiction of the themes "revolution, incarceration and eventual freedom" (Smith, 2010:1131) was also replaced with more "listener-friendly music" (Smith, 2011b:1344) composed by Péter Louis Van Dijk.²¹² Described as "more upbeat", the 2011 *Mandela Trilogy* culminates in the release of Mandela and the subsequent speech he

²¹² The erasure of Temmingh from the work seems particularly complete. Neither Stolp (2016) nor Lebona Sello (2018) acknowledges Temmingh's artistic presence in *Mandela Trilogy*'s initial incarnation as *African Songbook*.

delivered from the balcony of Cape Town's City Hall,²¹³ “[ending] with hope for the fledging ‘Rainbow’ nation” (Smith, 2011b:1344). The opera's lack of musical cohesion was addressed through the addition of a prologue and linking interludes between the acts. In addition, changes were made to the casting. Baritone Aubrey Lodewyk, who sang the role of Mandela II in *African Songbook*, became Mandela III, with Aubrey Poo, a local actor with musical theatre experience, stepping into the role of Mandela II. With the critiques levelled against *African Songbook* addressed, the 2011 version of *Mandela Trilogy* was tested on a larger audience base, thanks to financial support from the National Lottery Distribution Fund (Williams, quoted in Brommert, 2011:7). The work toured South Africa, with performances in Bloemfontein (22–23 July), Durban (29–31 July),²¹⁴ and Johannesburg (13–19 August). Contrasting to *African Songbook*, Williams set specific parameters for audience expectation with the 2011 *Mandela Trilogy*. In a feature by Gayle Edmunds prior to the 2011 run, Williams explicitly states *Mandela Trilogy* “is not a documentary: it's not a movie. It is three emotional moments in [Mandela's] life – it's toe-tapping and it includes some grand ceremonial pieces” (Williams, quoted in Edmunds, 2011). The 2011 version clearly delivered on these fronts: providing a combination of upbeat and “serious” musical idioms that speak to Mandela's life.

Critic Paul Boekkooi (2011), writing about the Johannesburg performance, describes Williams' direction as “more music-sensitive than before”, stating that the production “flows from scene to scene in an ideal tempo”. Although designer Michael Mitchell's minimalist production design is praised by Boekkooi (2011), Diane De Beer (2011) considers the design “lacklustre”. De Beer (2011) voices her objections regarding choreography and the work's duration, which had been reduced to just under two and a half hours – shorter than *African Songbook*'s almost three hours (Smith, 2010:1131). “Musically”, De Beer (2011) writes, “it's a spectacular trilogy, cleverly constructed from the traditional, the Soffiatown [sic] songs and in conclusion, the opera which majestically encapsulates Mandela's life as a political prisoner and his triumphant release”. However, echoing the question posed by Sichel (2010) regarding *African Songbook*, De Beer (2011) reflects on the absence of a black composer in this version. While the three acts work together “wonderfully”, De Beer suggests that “[...] one could perhaps have reached greater heights with some black composers included in the mix for the original music as well”. The musical brilliance of the cast is highlighted across the board. De Beer (2011) considers it “remarkable that no voices disappoint or even falter”. Similarly, the chorus delivers pure and resonant sound (Boekkooi, 2011).

At variance with these reviews, Lesley Stones (2011) describes the 2011 version of *Mandela Trilogy* as a “sanitised version of history”. Recognising the work as a “great piece of theatre ... with too much of a Hollywood happy ending”, Stones critiques the work for overplaying the ease with which peace and

²¹³ In 2018, a bronze sculpture of Mandela, created by Barry Jackson and Xhanti Mpakama, was unveiled at this location as part of Mandela's centenary celebrations (see Hansen, 2018).

²¹⁴ A link to an unlisted video of this live performance is included in Stolp's (2016) article.

reconciliation were achieved. Though this is less problematic when the opera is performed locally, Stones voices her concern that the facts of South Africa's complex journey to democracy are not as obvious to international audiences. This also extends to the incorporation of known musical material in the score, highlighted by Stolp (2016). While South African audiences might be familiar with the significance of songs like 'Meadowlands', these references are lost on international audiences since they are neither acknowledged nor explained in printed paratexts. Despite these criticisms, the 2011 version of the work made its European debut at the Wales Millennium Centre (henceforth: WMC) in Cardiff in June 2012.

In *African Songbook*, Campbell, the Act II composer, had already evoked the glamour of a bygone era. The suburb Sophiatown, where this act is set, was specifically known for its jazz clubs where big industry names like Miriam Makeba and Hugh Masekela started their careers (Muller, 2010a) prior to the suburb's demolition by the apartheid government in 1955. To capture Sophiatown, Campbell drew from existing repertoire, including songs from Todd Matshikiza's jazz opera *King Kong* (1959),²¹⁵ Makeba's 1950s hit song 'Pata pata'²¹⁶ and the protest song 'Meadowlands'.²¹⁷ 'Back o' the Moon', a song from Matshikiza's *King Kong* is used "almost unchanged" with only the lyrics adapted to suit that narrative (Stolp, 2016:150).²¹⁸ Boekkooi (2011) considers Campbell's Act II "strictly authentic", driven by the central placement of Bosman (as the legendary Dolly Rathebe), with the composer successfully capturing both the tense and entertaining facets of the Sophiatown era. Boekkooi's observation could be characterised as naïve, considering that Campbell, a white composer, symbolically and problematically takes ownership of these black cultural artefacts with no mention made of the original artists of these pieces in marketing paratexts (Stolp, 2016:150). While the inclusion of this repertoire could be read as Campbell's way of linking *Mandela Trilogy* to the history of the "Struggle", not acknowledging the original creators of this material not only denies them due recognition, but also undermines the political significance of this material (Stolp, 2016:150). However, Campbell's use of these songs did not go unnoticed, with accusations of plagiarism reportedly prompting the first round of changes to the 2011 *Mandela Trilogy* (Smith, 2019).²¹⁹ Yet, despite Campbell's problematic claiming of these songs, the "authenticity" of Act II was still wanting. De Beer (2011) argues that the trio 'Hearts and Minds' could have benefitted from a "[stronger] African idiom".

²¹⁵ The jazz opera tells the story of South African boxer Ezekiel Dlamini, nicknamed "King Kong". Lindelwa Dalamba has written about the politics of this work at length in several publications (see Dalamba, 2012, 2013).

²¹⁶ This song is one of CTO's most popular inclusions when touring.

²¹⁷ 'Meadowlands' is an anti-apartheid song composed by Strike Vilakazi in 1956 in response to the forced removals from Sophiatown the previous year.

²¹⁸ The lines "Back o' the Moon boys" and "Right in front is the Back o' the Moon" are changed to "Come to Kofifi" and "Come on down to the hotspot in town" respectively.

²¹⁹ Neither CTO nor the composers have acknowledged this. Considering the work's international dissemination, Allison R. Smith (2019) argues that *Mandela Trilogy*'s performances abroad may be interpreted as "an attempt to encourage the spread of CTO's portrait of Nelson Mandela across borders, away from local accusations of plagiarism".

Considering these insights, we can see how the transformation of *African Songbook* (2010) to *Mandela Trilogy* (2011) indicates an awareness of critical reception, with revisions specifically undertaken to address critics' concerns. *Mandela Trilogy* no longer attempted to capture the entirety of Mandela's history and the "Struggle"; instead, the work shifted towards a musical portrait of Mandela's life, showing the man behind the icon. The libretto, previously overloaded with historical facts, was rewritten to streamline the narrative, resulting in a slightly shorter work. Most tellingly, Temmingh's tense and bleak Act III was traded for a new Act by Péter Louis van Dijk, negating the distressing nature of democratic transition and ending on a more hopeful note – with Mandela's release from prison. The addition of a prologue and musical interludes also provided a stronger sense of musical cohesion, addressing the stylistic disparities between the three acts. Having outlined the creators of *Mandela Trilogy*'s cognisance of reception, the next section of this chapter explores the work's international identity, indicating that this pattern in the revision of dramatic texts continued to suit international tastes. Significantly, in the international arena, CTO's curation of digital paratexts unique to each touring location communicated what I regard as an ultimately essentialist idea of South Africa's operatic identity.

6.4 Introducing *Mandela Trilogy* to the World: Tours, Paratexts and Reception

Starting with the 2012 tour to Cardiff, CTO has taken *Mandela Trilogy* across the world and back again, making the work one of the company's most well-travelled productions. Considering its touring history, *Mandela Trilogy* has amassed a wealth of visual paratextual material: every tour was accompanied by new digital material. This trend not only charts the work's transformation but further suggests that *Mandela Trilogy*'s video paratexts are specifically curated, re-framing the work for every performance location. Since *Mandela Trilogy* is described by CTO as a "truly home-brewed production that highlights the unique and forceful sound of the African voice", it can be argued that *Mandela Trilogy* capitalises on the "sound" and "image" of South Africa, foregrounding CTO's "black" operatic identity through the Mandela brand. By doing so, CTO exports a specific operatic identity overseas via digital media. In what follows, I discuss *Mandela Trilogy*'s digital paratexts and international reception, tracing the work's transformation over time.

6.4.1 *Mandela Trilogy* (2011) in Cardiff, 2012

CTO already had a longstanding relationship with the WMC in Cardiff prior to the performance of *Mandela Trilogy* (2011) in 2012. While this was CTO's first international tour with *Mandela Trilogy*, audiences in Cardiff had already been exposed to the company's sound and aesthetic; CTO's chorus performed at the opening of WMC's Donald Gordon Theatre in 2005, and CTO mounted their production of *Porgy and Bess* (set in 1970s Soweto) at WMC in 2009. This history, and the announcement of a new collaborative partnership between the two companies ("Newsdesk: Cape Town-Cardiff collaboration", 2010:1343), made WMC the perfect location for 2011 *Mandela Trilogy*'s European premiere. In keeping with the rise in digital engagement in the

performing arts, CTO engineered two video paratexts: a trailer and a “behind-the-scenes” video showing the company in the throes of rehearsal. WMC then uploaded these paratexts to their YouTube channel to publicise the run of *Mandela Trilogy*.

WMC’s 2012 trailer for *Mandela Trilogy* (2011) specifically draws on the image of Mandela and foregrounds the vocal sound of the cast. Regarding the former, the iconic image of Mandela is already evoked through the work’s title card at the start of the trailer – the silhouette of Mandela, dressed in a suit, with his fist raised in the Amandla salute features in the work’s logo (Wales Millennium Centre, 2012:0:01–0:06). A honeyed baritone voice starts singing and the title card fades to a montage reel featuring recorded production media, presumably shot during the work’s 2011 South African tour. The montage begins and ends (Wales Millennium Centre, 2012:0:05–0:15; 1:50–2:08) with production media showing the historic moment where Mandela addresses a crowd from the balcony of Cape Town City Hall. Significantly, most of the footage employed in this trailer is in slow motion; a conscious decision made during the editing process, suggestive of the epic tale – Mandela and South Africa’s journey to democracy – relayed by the work. The vibrancy of dancing and choreography in *Mandela Trilogy* is also highlighted through the inclusion of dance scenes from Act II, together with scenes showing the cast in traditional dress, hinting at the “tribal” aspects that permeate Act I. Accompanying this montage is the final chorus – ‘We are One’ – essentially positioned as the soundtrack to the piece. While this number showcases the vocal prowess of baritone Aubrey Lodewyk, as Mandela, as well as the powerful sound of the chorus and company, accompanying images show Mandela interacting with white characters, presumably underlining the message of reconciliation. The sung text, below, recounts the long road to democracy, notably underscoring the iconic nature of the subject:

Mandela:	Time has come, day is here. The day we’ve all been fighting for. Forget the past. Seize the day. We can’t let fear stand in our way.
Chorus:	The gift of freedom comes and gives us courage to go on The earth is trembling, Rivers roar, Speak out fearlessly o Thembu ²²⁰
Company:	Time has come, day is here The day the world’s been waiting for Forget the past. Seize the day. We can’t let fear stand in our way. The gift of freedom comes and gives us courage to go on The time has come forth, for men and women, For all to say we are one country. We are One.

²²⁰ Mandela was part of the Thembu people, a tribe incorporated into the Xhosa nation during the 16th century. The name “Madiba”, which Mandela is often called as a sign of respect, refers to his clan’s name, which stems from the name of an eighteenth-century Thembu chief (Mandela, 1995 [1994]:4).

We are One.²²¹

During the final utterance of the climactic ‘We are One’ (Wales Millennium Centre, 2012:1:47–1:52), a photograph of the balcony scene, showing Mandela gesturing Amandla, the black, green, and gold of the ANC flag visible behind him, is used for the final few seconds of the preview, edited here to resemble a vignette (Wales Millennium Centre, 2012:1:54–2:07), firmly positioning the image as a moment in history.

[Wales Millennium Centre: *Mandela Trilogy* Trailer \(2012\)](#)

While CTO had already impressed with their tour of *Porgy and Bess* to Cardiff in 2009, critics’ comments reflect a naivety towards South Africa’s opera landscape. Verity Quaite (2012), writing for *Bachtrack*, accurately observes that *Mandela Trilogy* “is meant to be proudly South African”, highlighting the fact that, in Stephenson’s Act I, the “all-South African cast appear on stage in traditional costume singing entirely in Xhosa”. For Quaite, seeing a predominantly black cast is “refreshing”, especially since black singers have only been “allowed” to perform in South Africa “relatively recently”.²²² However, while the appearance of black singers on South Africa’s opera stage increased drastically since 1994, this is not indicative of any previous absence of singing or vocal talent (considering the long history of black choral tradition in South Africa) but rather points to the end of segregationist policies and the protection of white privilege. While Roger Jones (2012) connects the work’s display of vocal talent to South Africa’s “choral tradition”, he commends CTO for “[creating] a home grown operatic tradition reflecting the spirit of South Africa and performing to such high standard”, considering the fact that Cape Town is “thousands of miles” from the nearest opera company. From this assumption, Jones evidently considers the “centre” of opera to be located in Europe, measuring CTO’s quality to the standards of this centre. This also suggests a certain disbelief that opera can exist *outside* this centre, undermining CTO’s artistic output. Jones (2012) writes that the performance at the WMC provided the opportunity to “[listen] to the crème de la crème of the country’s singers [...] [performing] protest songs, folk music, laments, songs of jubilation, jazz numbers and more classical music with versatility and verve, often in splendidly choreographed bursts of energy”. While the mix of genres Jones details here indeed displayed the cast’s vocal diversity, it again highlights the disjointedness of the 2011 *Mandela Trilogy*’s musical idiom. In this regard, Rian Evans (2012) echoes earlier South African critics when she maintains the work is “more musical than opera”, referring to these stylistic inconsistencies.

However, going one step further, both Quaite (2012) and Michael Church (2012) questioned the authenticity of Stephenson’s representation of Xhosa culture in Act I. Quaite (2012) anecdotally considers Stephenson’s

²²¹ Due the inaccessibility of the libretto and score, this text excerpt was transcribed from the 2011 performance of *Mandela Trilogy* in Durban. This video is unlisted and can be viewed here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RWqPMJT4LPM>.

²²² Quaite’s statement is indicative of an unawareness of South Africa’s opera history, discounting, for example, the activities of the Eoan Group who were in fact “allowed” to perform during apartheid.

orchestrations of Xhosa song “a little disappointing, even unsettling”. Significantly, Quaitie writes that Stephenson’s representation felt like “a watered-down version of this colourful culture”, with Xhosa song “tamed [...] to fit more neatly into a Western framework”. While Quaitie considers this creative decision at odds with the work’s anti-apartheid message, the use of the word “tamed” here is significant, pointing towards expectations of exoticism. Similarly, Michael Church (2012) writes Stephenson’s idiom has “tamed the thrilling vividness of the real village sound”, noticeably affecting the performers. This notion also extends to the production. Acknowledging the challenge of merging African and Western operatic idioms, John Allison (2012:1118), writing for *Opera Magazine*, remarks that it takes considerable effort for Act I to “avoid lapsing, statically, into naïve tableaux of tribal life”. The use of the word “tamed” by both Quaitie (2012) and Church (2012) is problematic since it symbolically ascribes a “wildness” to true Xhosa music, and by extension the Xhosa people. Similarly, Church’s (2012) observation suggests that the cast were forced to restrain themselves to adhere to Stephenson’s interpretation of Xhosa culture, effectively acting out a white man’s idea of what that entails. What becomes apparent here is that wearing traditional dress and singing in Xhosa does not equate to authentic Xhosa culture. Quite problematically, Simon Broughton (2012a), in his review for the *Guardian*, also reflects that Act I’s ceremonial moments “in South African traditional dress” were reminiscent of *Aida*, awkwardly connecting *Mandela Trilogy* with notions of Orientalist spectacle.²²³

Following this European premiere, the work underwent another round of revisions. In a feature for *Art Scene in Wales*, Williams (2016) mentions that following the success of the 2012 tour “[he] felt *Mandela Trilogy* needed to be revised one more time”. This round of revisions saw the addition of two narrators (Mandela and the Prison Guard), “the pairing down of both cast and orchestra forces”, resulting in a “work that is now less grand opera and more musical theatre” (Williams, 2016). Act I was also rewritten. Stephenson’s Act I – to which critics Quaitie (2012) and Church (2012) had both objected – made way for a new score, once again not by a black composer, but rather Van Dijk, who had already reshaped Act III. From *African Songbook* (2010) to *Mandela Trilogy* (2014), the work had now morphed from a disjointed three act “opera” with contributions by three composers, to a “musical” or “folk opera” composed by two composers.

6.4.2 *Mandela Trilogy* (2014): in Munich, 2014

For the 2014 tour to Munich, CTO made a conscious decision to brand *Mandela Trilogy* a “folk opera”. Through this classification, CTO possibly sought to escape critique regarding the work’s hybrid nature which had consistently plagued reviews since 2010. Furthermore, the “folk opera” label allowed CTO to underline the “African” character of both *Mandela Trilogy* and the company. This innately (South) African character was conveyed by relying on that which distinguishes CTO from other companies – the dominance of the “black

²²³ The cultural politics of this opera are famously discussed in Edward Said’s seminal “The Empire at Work: Verdi’s *Aida*” in his book *Culture and Imperialism* (1994 [1993]).

voice”. CTO had toured to Germany with their Soweto-set *Porgy and Bess* the year before and though this production played in Wiesbaden (almost four hours from the Deutsches Theater in Munich), CTO left a lasting impression. In a publicity feature for *Mandela Trilogy*, Horst Dichanz of *Opernnetz* specifically recalls the excellence and exciting energy of the CTO’s chorus. Commending the “high musical quality” of *Porgy and Bess*, Dichanz writes:

[t]he African voices of the soloists and the choir, their special body language and their performance lends these performances a special intensity and touching musical power that does not leave the visitor indifferent. [...] The numerous foreign guest performances inspire their visitors again and again with this “African spirit”²²⁴ (Dichanz, 2014).

Dichanz’s reflection here shows that the “African” character which CTO possesses stems from the voice rather than repertoire, since *Porgy and Bess* is an American opera. Through his characterisation, Dichanz distinguishes CTO’s voices as different to a European norm, echoing problematic notions of exoticism also prevalent at CTO, as discussed earlier. While the “African-ness” of CTO’s singers is a characteristic that oozes from their entire being for Dichanz, it is most prevalent in voice and body language, which gives their performances a “special intensity and touching musical power”. Similarly, Carmen Bayer, the director of the Deutsches Theater, was fascinated by the “Power-Stimmen” or “power-voices”²²⁵ of Cape Town Opera the first time she saw the work (Bayer, quoted in Sigg, 2014). Considering this impressiveness of CTO’s African “Power-Stimmen”, the company sought to capitalise on this popularity by staging a pop-up performance at the Stachus, a central square in Munich. Dressed in jeans and company T-shirts, the CTO chorus gave the German public a taste of the “African spirit” on offer in *Mandela Trilogy*. The repertoire chosen for these performances specifically foregrounds the emphasis placed on “African” character. While the choral finale from Van Dijk’s Act III’s ‘We are One’ (jerzy wasner, 2014c) was performed, their vocal power, passion, and physical performativity was most obviously displayed through their performance of Act II’s ‘Come to Kofifi’ (jerzy wasner 2014a) and Makeba’s ‘Pata pata’ (jerzy wasner, 2014b).²²⁶

Alongside the emphasis placed on the company’s unique “African” character in publicity material, the trailer for the Munich performance focuses explicitly on the image of Africa. The 1-minute trailer, uploaded to Deutsches Theater’s YouTube channel, contrasts markedly from the reverential Cardiff trailer. The opening of the Munich trailer again shows Mandela on the balcony of City Hall. Here, his appearance is announced by triumphant brass with the addition of celebratory whistling and ululation emanating from the chorus,

²²⁴ “Die afrikanischen Stimmen der Solisten und des Chores, ihre besondere Körpersprache und ihre Darstellungskraft geben diesen Aufführungen eine besondere Intensität und berührende musikalische Kraft, die den Besucher nicht kalt lässt. [...] Die zahlreichen ausländischen Gastspiele begeistern ihre Besucher immer wieder mit diesem ‘African spirit’.”

²²⁵ “Als Carmen Bayer, mit Werner Steer Intendantin am Deutschen Theater, die ‘Mandela Trilogy’ zum ersten Mal sah, war sie völlig fasziniert von den Power-Stimmen der Cape Town Opera”.

²²⁶ ‘Pata pata’ also features in a performance of the *Show Boat* chorus at the WMC in 2014 (see Wales Millennium Centre, 2014).

underlining their “African character” (Deutsches Theater, 2013:0:00–0:10). While the chorus hums the melody of ‘We are One’, Mandela addresses his supporters for the first time since leaving prison:

Mandela: Comrades, friends, fellow South Africans, I greet you all in the name of peace, democracy, and freedom for all. I stand before you not as a prophet but as a humble servant of you, the people.

This spoken text clearly gestures towards the work’s genre shift away from opera towards the realm of “musical”. ‘We are One’ still features as the soundtrack for this trailer, but the quick succession of images here adds an excitement not conveyed through the Cardiff trailer. Most significantly, the Munich trailer comprises recorded production media and photographs but also “behind-the-scenes” footage, showing scenes from the wings and showing the chorus getting dressed in their traditional wear for Act I (Deutsches Theater, 2013:0:16–0:21, 0:27). This emphasises the inherent “Africanness” of the cast, with black singers dressing in “traditional” costumes. The auditory focus placed on the vocal “power” of the black ensemble, with the performance of Van Dijk’s ‘We are One’ building in intensity as the trailer progresses, foregrounds the cast’s “Africanness”. The trailer ends with the logo for the production used at the beginning of the Cardiff trailer, incorporating Mandela’s silhouette, with the by-line “A Musical Tribute to the Life of Nelson Mandela” (Deutsches Theater, 2013:1:00–1:07). This title card is accompanied by rousing applause from an audience, clearly underlining the work’s previous success.

[Deutsches Theater: *Mandela Trilogy* Trailer \(2014\)](#)

For Sammy Khamis (2014) of *Deutschlandfunk*, Van Dijk’s new Act I is the “typically South African” part of the musical, with English alternating with Xhosa and props referring to folklore.²²⁷ The latter presumably refers to the evocation of rural Qunu on-stage. The comment regarding the cast’s behaviour is peculiar. Khamis writes that the cast wear “African fabrics” and “[hit] anything that makes a sound on stage with their wooden sticks”. This observation points towards a cultural naivety, suggesting at barbarism at play on stage – that the “hitting of objects” must be both random and devoid of cultural meaning. The qualities Dichanz remarked on feature prominently in Robert Braunmüller’s review in the *Abendzeitung-Muenchen*. Braunmüller writes that the cast’s “passionate fire” enables them to be forgiven a lot of sins. However, in line with Khamis, Braunmüller (2014) considers the newly composed Act I to present “gruesome African clichés”. He writes that Van Dijk’s music could find a second use at the Karl May Festival (a Wild West theatre festival in Bad-Segeberg) since “the white men who stage and compose have reached so deeply into the exotic realm.

²²⁷ “Es ist der typisch südafrikanische Teil des Musicals: Englisch – die eigentliche Sprache des Stücks – wechselt sich mit der südafrikanischen Sprache Xhosa ab, die Requisite wechselt in die Folklore. Die Schauspieler tragen afrikanische Stoffe und schlagen mit Holzstäben auf alles, was auf der Bühne einen Klang hergibt.”

Even the coloured choreographer did not prevent the worst”.²²⁸ Braunmüller’s observation of the racial demographic here is significant, though here his comment foregrounds not only the musical idiom, highlighted in reviews in South Africa, but the *visual* representation of the Xhosa culture. The expectations of “African-ness” thus not only relate to sound but also extend to how a white audience thinks the visual representation of a black people like the Xhosa should *look*.

6.4.3 Touring the United Kingdom, 2016

Two years after the tour to Germany, *Mandela Trilogy* (2014) embarked on its widest tour yet. The work was staged at the WMC, (24–27 August), the South Bank Centre (31 August–3 September) (concert performance), the Mayflower Theatre, Southampton (7–10 August), the Bord Gáis Energy Theatre, Dublin, (14–17 September), the Birmingham Hippodrome (20–21 September), and the Lowry Centre, Salford (23–24 September).²²⁹ Since the 2016 tour was the largest undertaken for the work, CTO focused heavily on marketing. The tour had a clear branding identity, with visuals adopting a consistent aesthetic. CTO ran a full-page advert on the inside of *Opera Magazine*’s January back cover page (Figure 6.1) prior to the commencement of the tour. The imagery that features here – Mandela standing with his fist raised on a golden yellow and orange-tinged background, a township clearly visible in the background – is carried through to digital paratexts, with title cards of trailers and other video material evoking some incarnation of this image.

²²⁸ “Und die Musik könnte hier notfalls bei den Karl-May-Festspielen eine Zweitverwendung finden, so tief haben da die inszenierenden und komponierenden weißen Männer in die exotische Kiste gegriffen. Und die farbige Choreografin hat auch Schlimmstes nicht verhindert.”

²²⁹ Prior to the UK tour, *Mandela Trilogy* was staged at the Ravenna Festival in Italy (9–12 June).



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A MUSICAL TRIBUTE TO THE LIFE OF NELSON MANDELA
MANDELA
TRILOGY

Figure 6.1: *Mandela Trilogy*, UK and Ireland Tour, Advert, *Opera Magazine* (January 2016 Issue), Inside Back Cover Page. Reproduced with permission of *Opera Magazine*.

Several video paratexts were devised to assist venues with publicity. These videos were uploaded to the venues' YouTube channels to promote public engagement.²³⁰ Contrasting to the single trailers that accompanied the performances in Cardiff and Munich, CTO increased their use of video paratexts including “Question and Answer” type videos, where members of the cast and creative team answer set questions that potential audiences might have, and interviews with the creative team.

Before unpacking the 2016 trailers, it is necessary to note that the addition of “Q&A” videos is significant. This could be read as a move on part of CTO to envoice a future audience and shape interpretation. These “Q & A” videos feature on the YouTube channels of the Wales Millennium Centre, the Birmingham Hippodrome, and the Southbank Centre. While a video title might only contain one question, this is not only answered by multiple members of the cast; this “main question” is followed by multiple “sub-questions” squeezed into one video to relay more information to the viewer. For example, a video titled “Mandela Trilogy – Who will the production appeal to?” (Birmingham Hippodrome, 2016e) features input from Thato Machona (Mandela I), Candida Masoma (Dolly) and Tim Murray, the conductor for the UK tour. The cast is also asked what they are looking forward to most on this visit to the UK, with Peace Nzirawa (Mandela II) and Masoma weighing in. Most tellingly, Williams, outlining why Mandela is “still relevant to the British people”, connects *Mandela Trilogy* to broader socio-political issues:

I think in the modern world at the moment, there's such a fear of the Other. We are so terrified of this movement of people coming from Africa into Europe, coming from Mexico into America. And normal society or rather traditional society fears the Other, and with Nelson Mandela's message, is a message of inclusivity, is a message of peace, is a message of acceptance and that's why I think he is still very relevant today. Not only did he change South Africa's history with what he did but he made an impact on the world, in terms of his message of a *non-racial* society which I think we are striving for still [...] (Williams, quoted in Birmingham Hippodrome, 2016e: 1:52–2:46).

While Williams preaches Mandela's message of inclusivity, it is striking to note that singer Derick Ellis, who plays the character of “White Man” – a key role in the interactions with Mandela, a voice that charts the white demographic's changing attitudes during apartheid's dismantling throughout the work – is strategically omitted from these “Q & A” paratexts (Birmingham Hippodrome, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c, 2016d, 2016e). To me this seems at odds with the notions of “inclusivity” that Williams seeks to relay via *Mandela Trilogy*. Considering the prominence of “white talent” in opera during apartheid, the omission of Ellis from the paratexts of a contemporary work that takes the regime's demise as its subject can be considered reflective of the genre's socio-political milieu. What Ellis's absence thus underlines is CTO's artistic identity as a company

²³⁰ Since some locations, including Southampton, Dublin and Manchester, did not feature digital paratexts, the reception of *Mandela Trilogy* in these locations falls beyond the purview of this chapter. Even though these venues did not utilise video material, it is plausible that audiences were exposed to these paratexts via other channels due to the inter-linking nature of the internet. A website (www.mandelatrilogy.com, now defunct) was created for the production.

that concentrates on the harnessing of black talent to mark the shift away from opera as a historically “whites-only” genre, aiding strategies of transformation.

The question of the work’s genre is addressed in a video titled “Mandela Trilogy – is the production an opera or a musical?” (Birmingham Hippodrome, 2016b). Here conductor Tim Murray (quoted in Birmingham Hippodrome, 2016b:0:08–0:16) classifies *Mandela Trilogy* as “possibly both and also neither”, highlighting the work’s “clever” nature through the incorporation of musical styles that are “relevant to the setting of each individual scene” (Birmingham Hippodrome, 2016b:0:16–0:27). Murray’s expert opinion as the work’s conductor carries some weight as he informally considers “the whole thing [to be] integrated into an entire piece very successfully (Murray, quoted in Birmingham Hippodrome, 2016b:0:58–1:03), seemingly quashing any potential doubts regarding the work’s hybrid aesthetic identity. Similarly, Williams, in an interview for WMC, states that *Mandela Trilogy* presents “the soundtrack of [Mandela’s] life” (Williams in Wales Millennium Centre, 2016b). Williams remarks on the contemporary operatic nature of Act III which “speaks to the incarceration years”. However, he also plays up the work’s entertaining character:

If you were to come and see *Mandela Trilogy* you are going to hear great voices, dance ... dancing that’s going to get your toes tapping sung by a company that is so passionate about the subject. And it’s gonna be an evening of absolute sheer enjoyment and entertainment, and at the end of the evening you’re going to be leaving humming some of the tunes from Africa (Williams, quoted in Wales Millennium Centre, 2016b:2:16–2:44).

This statement foregrounds *Mandela Trilogy*’s first priority, namely, to *entertain*, and makes one question the marketing of the work as a retelling of one of the most serious historic episodes in South African history.

The work’s prior success is further played up by highlighting the work’s “critically acclaimed” status, through the incorporation of review title cards in the trailers. Two trailers were produced for the tour. The first, with a duration of 1 minute 10 seconds, was used by both the WMC and the Birmingham Hippodrome. The second, used by the South Bank Centre, lasts just under thirty seconds. While both trailers underline the work’s success, they adopt different aesthetic approaches. The opening title-card of the first trailer (for WMC and Birmingham Hippodrome)²³¹ shows the iconic image of Mandela (centre), sandwiched by tribeswomen (left) and 1950s freedom fighters (right), with a township stretching the length of the horizon. This is accompanied by a commotion of loud ululation and dramatic brass, with percussive elements. The title-card cuts to excerpts from Act I, including the stick-fighting scene (the “tribal” character echoed in the inclusion of a percussion-heavy excerpt from the score) and scenes from rural Qunu, featuring black singers in traditional garb (Wales Millennium Centre, 2016a:0:00-0:16). In keeping with reputation of CTO’s singers, the first title card (“ONE OF THE GREATEST STORIES OF OUR TIME” – *Guardian*, with four gold stars) (Wales

²³¹ While the WMC’s trailer is referenced here, these observations extend to the trailer uploaded to the Birmingham Hippodrome YouTube channel as well (see Birmingham Hippodrome, 2016a).

Millennium Centre, 2016a:0:16–0:18) is accompanied by a dramatic solo from Act I. This title-card disappears, revealing the soloist to be Tshepo Moagi, a praise singer from Act I, dressed in animal skins and accusingly pointing his knobkierie at the conductor/audience (Wales Millennium Centre, 2016a:0:18–0:27). The second title card (“AN INSPIRATIONAL JOURNEY TOWARDS LIBERATION” – *Independent*, four gold stars) similarly features a solo by Tina Mene, Mandela’s mother, from Act I (Wales Millennium Centre, 2016a:0:28–0:33). The close-up of Mene shows her with white paint on her face, several strings of beads around her neck, wearing a shawl and a traditional headwrap. In contrast to this drama, the solo “Freedom in our time” from Act II is introduced – showing Aubrey Poo (an earlier Mandela) singing in a dapper suit (Wales Millennium Centre, 2016a:0:34–0:40). As the chorus joins in (“Freedom in our time”), the scene cuts to footage of the women of Sophiatown, dancing, their colourful dresses twirling in slow motions (Wales Millennium Centre, 2016a:0:41–0:42). Dolly Rathebe is shown flirting with two men in the club, the light bouncing off the curves hugged by her red velvet dress (Wales Millennium Centre, 2016a:0:43–0:45). These scenes and the jazzy musical soundtrack underline the musical theatre character of the work. Also included is Mandela’s speech on the balcony – “We have waited too long for our freedom, we can no longer wait” (Wales Millennium Centre, 2016a:0:46–0:51). The trailer ends with a montage of performance footage. As the company sing the final utterance of “We are One”, the closing scene is shown with a final title-card (“MAGNIFICENT” – *Daily Telegraph*) (Wales Millennium Centre, 2016a: 0:54–0:56) floating above the company. Mandela is shown shaking the hand of Ellis, dressed in his uniform, in slow motion (Wales Millennium Centre 2016a:0:58–1:00), underlining the reconciliation emphasised by the sung text. The company hold up placards that spell out “FREEDOM” (Wales Millennium Centre, 2016a:1:00–1:01), and Mandela triumphantly raises his fist on the balcony for the final time (Wales Millennium Centre, 2016a:1:02), before the opening title-card returns, lingering for the remainder of the trailer while an audience applauds (Wales Millennium Centre, 2016a:1:04–1:07) before cutting to black.

[Wales Millennium Centre: Mandela Trilogy Trailer 2016](#)

In contrast to this trailer’s opening showcase of African-ness, the trailer uploaded by the Southbank Centre foregrounds the work’s “new” classification as a musical, following the tour to Germany. The trailer starts with an excerpt from Act II’s “Come on down to Sophiatown” while title cards displaying one-line reviews highlight the work’s outstanding reception (Southbank Centre What’s On, 2016:0:00–0:12). The two four-star reviews from the *Guardian* (“ONE OF THE GREATEST STORIES OF OUR TIME”) and the *Independent* (“AN INSPIRATIONAL JOURNEY TOWARDS LIBERATION”) are again used here in title cards. Twelve seconds in, the atmosphere changes: the jaunty jazz song is traded for the stirring choral sounds of Act III’s ‘We are One’ (Southbank Centre What’s On, 2016:0:12–0:27). To drive the point home, a title card with a one-word review, this time without a rating, is included towards the end (“MAGNIFICENT”, *Daily Telegraph*) (Southbank Centre What’s On, 2016:0:21–0:24). This word is magnified while the background

features footage of the three Mandelas standing with their fists raised, accompanied by the company singing the rousing final cadence of 'We are One'. Again, enthusiastic applause is employed here, accompanying the production's branded title card.

[Southbank Centre: *Mandela Trilogy* Trailer 2016](#)

Considering the message of reconciliation and inclusivity that accompanied this 2016 tour of *Mandela Trilogy*, Rupert Christiansen (2016) questions who *Mandela Trilogy* is aimed at, remarking that the entire creative and production teams are all white, with the audience of WMC also being "99.9 per cent Caucasian". For Christiansen, the performance "felt mechanical". The critic remarks that the performers "seemed to be grinning and jiving and emoting by rote" (Christiansen, 2016), in marked contrast to the "passion" that characterised the performances in Germany. While both Van Dijk and Stephenson incorporated "ethnic touches", Christiansen points out that work's "idiom is broadly [...] Bernstein on Broadway: jazzy, punchy, pacey [sic]".

The fact that the performance of *Mandela Trilogy* (2014) at the Southbank Centre was a concert performance could have had a detrimental effect on the work's reception.²³² Together with the orchestral musicians and cast, 60 people crowded the stage at the Royal Festival Hall, "[performing] a 'musical/opera' to a backdrop of stills and video of the South Africa where [Mandela] grew up" (Denselow, 2016). Robert Matthew-Walker (2016) nevertheless argues that the production "lost very little from a theatrical point of view" and Hannah Nepil (2016) similarly lauds the chorus for "[singing] brilliantly and [dancing] with infectious energy". However, most tellingly, Nepil (2016) labels the work "cartoonish" in her review for the Financial Times. While Nepil acknowledges that, on some level, CTO succeeded in "condensing [...] Mandela's life story into a two-hour musical-cum-opera", *Mandela Trilogy* is still considered to be superficial, "only skin-deep", "lurching like a comic strip from Mandela's early years [...] through his career in the African National Congress, to the final episode of the trilogy: his 27-year stint in [...] prison and his 1990 release". She compares Campbell and Van Dijk's score to a "catchy pop hymn" which lacks originality. Nepil adds that the production has "plenty of razzmatazz to fire up its audience", presumably to distract them from the weakness of the drama. Robin Denselow (2016) similarly labels the score a "curious pastiche", arguing that Act I needed more "a capella harmony singing" to fit the mould of Xhosa culture. Act II's highlight is also not a song by Campbell but rather CTO's token crowd pleaser 'Pata pata'. CTO's racial make-up was still prominent, with the singers placed behind the orchestra. Matthew-Walker (2016) concentrated on the number of "ethnic singers", their "Suid-Afrikan dialect [rendering] the surtitles essential". For this reviewer, what is most evident about the piece is that it is an innately South African work of art, with a South African subject

²³² This performance formed part of the Southbank Centre's Africa Utopia Festival (Nepil, 2016).

and no resemblance to European music-theatre. For Rian Evans (*Opera Magazine*), the “energy and passion of the final number ‘We are One’” saved Act III, successfully “underlining the essential principle to which Mandela had committed his life” (Evans, 2016:1449). This, together with the “iconic image of [Mandela]” on the balcony, is described by Evans as “moving”. Evans notes that the work has now delivered on the initial impression made in 2012, of *Mandela Trilogy* being a musical rather than an opera.

6.4.4 Touring the Middle East and Asia, 2017

6.4.4.1 Dubai

For CTO’s tour to Dubai, the company received support from the “official cultural custodian of South Africa’s Nation Brand”, *Brand South Africa*. Through this partnership, CTO could frame the performance of *Mandela Trilogy* as an “occasion to promote the nation brand and engage with the South African diaspora in the Gulf” (Anderson, 2017). This meant that *Mandela Trilogy* was *officially* packaged as a cultural export, contrasting to the “unofficial” exportation of the work in 2012, 2014 and 2016.

The day before the production’s premiere in Dubai, Karishma H. Nandkeolyar (2017), writing for *Gulf News*, reports that *Mandela Trilogy* is told through the “rich variety of music [South Africa] has to offer. The “three-part opera” (Nandkeolyar’s words) is described by Williams as a “bright, bold and brassy show that pulls together all the musical traditions of South Africa”:

South Africa has many different musical styles – the evening of musical theatre looks at these different styles to tell Mandela’s story [...] We have the music from the hills of the Transkei, the songs of the shebeens from the townships, the struggle songs of the fight for freedom, and the songs of joy when he is released from prison (Williams, in Nandkeolyar, 2017).

The mention of struggle songs here is significant, considering the lack of recognition of Vilakazi’s ‘Meadowlands’ in the 2011 *Mandela Trilogy*. However, it is curious that while Nandkeolyar explicitly mentions “opera”, Williams, the MD of CTO, never mentions the artform as part of his description of the work, excluding opera from South Africa’s musical fabric. Again, the work’s classification as a musical, and definitely not an opera, is significant here. In an interview with Frank Kane for *Arab News* (2019), the former CEO of Dubai Opera, Jasper Hope, explains that the genre of opera is rarely profitable and that “all have to widen their appeal” (Hope, quoted in Kane, 2019). The same is not true of musicals. Since Dubai Opera is run as a commercial business, Hope explains that the basic rule is “[d]on’t do stuff that loses money, unless you’ve got other things that make money that can balance that” (Hope, quoted in Kane, 2019). By the time *Mandela Trilogy* reached Dubai it had already been promoted as a “folk opera” in Germany (2014), while the jury was still out regarding the work’s classification during the 2016 UK tour – reflected in conductor Tim Murray’s woolly musing on the work’s medium (quoted in Birmingham Hippodrome, 2016b). Responding to Dubai’s preferences, the reframing of *Mandela Trilogy* as a musical specifically points towards CTO’s curation

of the work to suit its audience base in this location. This is particularly foregrounded in the video paratexts that accompanied the work's tour to Dubai.

Dubai Opera uploaded two trailers for *Mandela Trilogy* to their YouTube channel: a 4-minute trailer and a thirty-second teaser trailer. The 4-minute trailer for Dubai Opera (2017a) (which had 2,465 views at the time of writing) is perhaps the most cinematic yet. The trailer opens with the sounding of an alarm with percussive sounds combined with title cards. A four-star review from *The Guardian* reads “[...] one of the great stories of our time”. This cuts to footage of Mandela III sitting in a dimly lit prison cell (Dubai Opera, 2017a:0:03–0:04, 0:09–0:10, 0:14–0:16). Following this first glimpse of Mandela, another four-star review appears, declaring “[...] the evening's momentum was unstoppable” (*The Times*) (Dubai Opera, 2017a:0:06–0:09). As the siren winds down, a final review labels the work “an inspiration journey towards liberation”. (Dubai Opera, 2017a:0:11–0:13). The title card features a collage of photographs from production media (Dubai Opera, 2017a:0:16–0:22). The first performance snippet (Dubai Opera, 2017a:0:27–0:32) shows Act I's Thembu tribesmen dancing and lifting wooden sticks, singing the phrase “Madiba, Mandela, Rolihlahla, Nelson Mandela”. This inclusion is significant. This scene appears to be taken from archival footage from the 2011 version of *Mandela Trilogy*, meaning that the music the chorus sings here is taken from Stephenson's original Act I, which is a curious inclusion, as I will discuss shortly.

In an amalgamation of the UK paratext aesthetic, the Dubai trailer features commentary from the creative team – Albert Horne, the chorus master and conductor at that time, and Williams.²³³ A photograph of Horne, the conductor for the Germany tour, is shown as a voice-over informs potential audiences that:

Mandela Trilogy is not telling the story from birth to present day but instead it's focusing on three major episodes in his life. It therefore made more sense for us to commission three varied and period-specific musical compositions, each one perfectly capturing the mood and atmosphere of each of these episodes (Horne, quoted in Dubai Opera, 2017a:0:35–0:53).

An excerpt from Act II is included here: the beginning of the club performance of ‘Pata pata’. Gloria Bosman performs her heart out with the on-stage band, while dance scenes showcase the choreographed scenes in the work. Next up is Williams, as writer and director. He does not address the camera directly; instead, we see him giving directions mid-rehearsal followed by archival footage of Mandela's life, while the voiceover details the motivation behind the work:

²³³ The trailer for Dubai Opera follows the same pattern as the one for the Ravenna Festival. However, Ravenna includes a scene where Gloria Bosman, seated in costume in her dressing room, provides insight into the character of Dolly Rathebe, the character she plays in *Mandela Trilogy*. In Xhosa, Bosman reveals that Rathebe was a jazz singer and one of Mandela's lovers. While this insert does not contribute much to the larger narrative, it is plausible that Bosman's Xhosa excerpt was included here to foreground her nationality and pique the audience's interest. This was presumably cut from the Dubai trailer to abide with UAE customs regarding the appearance of women on screen. The scene where Mandela III sings a solo aria also does not feature in the Ravenna trailer (see Ravenna Festival, 2016).

When this idea came up in 2009 in preparation for 2010, it felt to me that the legacy of Nelson Mandela was very strong in the country. People knew now and understood what he had done in terms of building the ‘new’ South Africa (Williams, quoted in Dubai Opera, 2017a:2:21–2:33).

While this statement underlines the lasting political impact of Mandela’s actions, the sentiment of this thought – that South Africa had finally realised what Mandela had achieved for the nation – is peculiarly undermined through the editing process. At the end of Williams’ spiel, a time-lapse showing a giant mural of Mandela being installed cuts to Bosman (as Rathebe), singing “Come to Kofifi” together with Poo (Mandela) (Dubai Opera, 2017a:2:39–2:58), with Bosman’s gestures drawing attention to her breasts (“Kofifi’s the place where we all feel free”, Dubai Opera, 2017a:2:35–2:38). The atmosphere of this excerpt seems at odds with the sentiment expressed by Williams. Compared to other snippets used in the trailer, this excerpt is longer, drawing attention to the “jazzy” nature of the work. Bosman and Poo sing the refrain “Come on down to Sophiatown!”, their arms stretching out towards the audience with the final utterance, as if extending an invitation (Dubai Opera, 2017a:2:48–2:57). This trailer is the first to feature a scene where Mandela (Lodewyk) performs a dramatic solo alone in his cell, reflecting on the decisions he has made in his struggle for freedom (Dubai Opera, 2017a:3:06–3:32). This cuts to Mandela’s appearance at Cape Town City Hall. The crowd cheers and ululates as he addresses them. The same speech from the Munich trailer is included here; however, rather than focusing on Mandela, this narration is accompanied by a montage of photographs interspersed with performance footage while the chorus hum the melody to ‘We are One’. This pattern continues with the chorus’s singing growing from a soft murmur to a loud roar. The title card featuring the production’s title is again accompanied by audience applause at the end.

At this point, it becomes clear that the sound of CTO’s chorus features prominently in these trailers, showcasing the company’s characteristic “black” aesthetic through choral numbers, accompanied by footage that depicts a vibrant culture, filled with tradition, rites, and dance. This idea of South Africa is further perpetuated in the Dubai trailer. Multiple scenes that focus on the chorus are included (Dubai Opera, 2017a:0:27–0:32; 0:54–1:10). While the first excerpt shows the glorious sound of the Thembu tribesmen, this idiom, as pointed out earlier, is that of Stephenson. As Stephenson’s score no longer formed part of *Mandela Trilogy* by this time, the inclusion of this footage here serves to underline the sound of the chorus and an “image” of Africa – even if that sound is problematically Western, as many reviewers have underlined. The second excerpt shows the entire company in the courtroom with close-up shots detailing passionate singing on part of the chorus (Dubai Opera, 2017a:0:54–1:10), moving to the proscenium view to document the full chorus’ final note. The voice of Tina Mene, Mandela’s mother in Act I, rings out underneath Horne’s voice over (Dubai Opera, 2017a:0:37–0:43). While these clips speak to the quality of CTO’s voices, the performance of ‘Pata pata’ in Dolly’s club (Dubai Opera, 2017a:1:29–1:55) highlights the catching energy of the cast, and the lively dancing in Act II. This is followed by an excerpt from Act II’s “There will be freedom

in our time” (Dubai Opera, 2017a: 2:00–2:22), with the singing style of Mandela II (Poo) underscoring the musical theatre quality of the production.

[Dubai Opera: *Mandela Trilogy* Trailer \(4 minutes\)](#)

The 30-second trailer (Dubai Opera, 2017b) is packed with recorded production media and photographs. Opening with the sound of a prison siren, we see three Mandelas raising their fists before the screen cuts to black for a brief second. A title card reads “the story of one of the world’s most iconic figures”. Most significantly, this card is transparent, allowing more recorded production media and photographs to be displayed in the background. Following this title card, the siren sound is quickly traded for Act II’s “There will be freedom in our time”. The club performance of ‘Pata pata’ follows, with Bosman gleaming behind the microphone. Another title card is included here “brought to the stage in this epic and original musical tribute”. Dance scenes are especially included. The refrain of ‘Come to Kofifi’ is subsequently heard, with a title card with performance dates overlaying a photo montage. The jazzy music ends with the title card, showing Mandela lifting his fist with the township image (from the UK tour) visible in the background.

[Dubai Opera: *Mandela Trilogy* Trailer \(30 seconds\)](#)

Brand South Africa clearly emphasises the popularity of *Mandela Trilogy*. An article following the Dubai performance mentions not only *Mandela Trilogy*’s “sold-out performances in the UK and Germany” but also the fact that “[a]ll three shows were sold out” in Dubai (Anderson, 2017). Since I have had no access to ticket sales data, it is impossible to ascertain whether this is actually the case. However, highlighting *Mandela Trilogy*’s success is in line with the organisation’s goals – to effectively export a cultural product. But again, this popularity rests on the work’s classification as a musical rather than an opera, given Dubai’s audience demographic.

6.4.4.2 *Hong Kong*

Perhaps the most telling instance of cultural exportation is *Mandela Trilogy*’s performance in Hong Kong. Staged as part of the World Cultures Festival 2017, a biennial Chinese government funded festival, *Mandela Trilogy* formed part of the festival’s closing programme.²³⁴

Writing in the *South China Morning Post*, Libby Hudson (2017) reflects on the iconic status of Mandela, “[r]egarded by millions as the father of the South African nation”. Hudson writes that the history of

²³⁴ Additional paratexts accompanied the performance in Hong Kong, further shaping the audience’s horizons of expectation. A press release issued by the government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (“Mandela Trilogy’ pays tribute to South Africa’s monumental hero”, 2017) details an exhibition in the Hong Kong Cultural Centre’s foyer titled “Nelson Mandela: Voice of the Nation”, featuring characters and scenes from *Mandela Trilogy* and Mandela’s history, along with a foyer performance of “traditional songs of South Africa” and show excerpts.

apartheid, including Mandela's fight to abolish the regime and the negotiations that instigated South Africa's democratic transition "helped shape the country's artistic expression and conversation" (Hudson 2017).

Mandela Trilogy is positioned as one of the cultural products "shaped" by democracy. It is reported that the production has "wowed" audiences across the world. Hudson quotes Williams, who considers *Mandela Trilogy* a work that is reflective of the "multicultural aspect of South Africa". He firmly states that the work is "not a documentary". Due to the time constraints that accompany a stage work "[they] don't pretend to tell the whole story of Mandela's life" (Williams, quoted in Hudson, 2017).

Whereas the trailers discussed so far foreground the "African" aesthetic, vocal power, jazz idiom and lively choreography of *Mandela Trilogy* to various degrees, the Hong Kong trailer contains a new voice-over by a narrator (WCF lcsdgvhk, 2017). All of CTO's branding has been removed from the trailer, replaced by that of the World Cultures Festival, the logo of which (a thumb print containing a map of the world) has been placed in the bottom left corner. Title cards (narrated) are used here to introduce the "Closing Programme", *Mandela Trilogy* Cape Town Opera (South Africa), accompanied by a dramatic show of strings and brass. A brief shot of Mandela III is shown before another title card introduces the orchestra (Cape Town Philharmonic) and the CTO Chorus. The next title card draws on a review from the *Guardian* ("Compelling storytelling"). The narrator outlines the premise of the production:

Through remarkable leadership and unshakeable resolve, Nobel Peace Prize laureate and former South African president Nelson Mandela, peacefully abolished the country's apartheid policy, achieving racial reconciliation and winning worldwide respect.

Throughout this first narration, scenes from production media are shown; the judge from the Rivonia trial, the three Mandelas raising their fists, with the courtroom gallery joining in; Mandela's reaction following sentencing with the departure of the judge. Singing is only included following the end of the first narration where a prison guard tells Mandela III to face the consequences to which Mandela defiantly replies, "we will not", the rich timbre of Lodewyk's voice shining through (WCF lcsdgvhk, 2017:0:34–0:41). This subsequently cuts to the performance of 'Pata pata', featuring Gloria Bosman (WCF lcsdgvhk, 2017:0:41–0:42), before being drowned out by the second narration:

In this moving theatrical tribute to the "father of the nation", Cape Town Opera integrates opera, Broadway music and traditional Xhosa song and dance to tell Mandela's life story. A festival must see.

Following the end of the second narration, the final scene of the work is shown: Mandela III stands on the balcony and the chorus faces the audience as the ensemble sings the final note of 'We are One'. Subsequently, a close-up of Mandela III with his fist raised is shown, before the final title card lists the dates of the performance, the location, and the prices of tickets (WCF lcsdgvhk, 2017).

[Hong Kong World Cultures Festival 2017: *Mandela Trilogy* Trailer](#)

While this trailer is not devoid of music, its aesthetic is in sharp contrast to earlier trailers. The music is clearly not the focus here, since it is at such a low volume it is almost inaudible. No scenes of the cast dancing are included either. Rather, what is apparent is the shaping of the work's narrative through the addition of a narrator, foregrounding Mandela's role in South Africa's political history. The focus on politics here is significant, considering the performance location's own contested political relationship with China.²³⁵

6.5 Discussion and Conclusion

As many critics have observed, writing a work like *Mandela Trilogy* cannot have been an easy task. Considering the high profile of the subject, it is especially clear that audiences bring their own expectations to a work such as *Mandela Trilogy*; however, in this chapter I have argued that CTO's reputation, as a company that banks on black talent, clearly and consistently informs audience expectations. Prior to *Mandela Trilogy*'s international tours, the company had already made a name for itself in Europe, with programming that highlighted black voices previously silenced by apartheid policies. It must be added that, while racial classifications are problematic here, CTO is the only company that can provide some South African opera singers with full-time employment. Given the overwhelming presence of black singers, it is to be expected that the company's demographic would be representative of this. Yet, it may be argued that CTO continually promotes the "exotic" sound of the black South African voice, positioning it in publicity texts as a unique sound rooted in the African continent.

At the start of this chapter, I sought to show the correlation between the reception of production media and the revision of design modes. While processes of revision are not uncommon in operatic practice, this chapter has argued that a direct correlation exists between the South African reception of *African Songbook* and its subsequent transformation into the *Mandela Trilogy* (2011, 2014). For most South African critics, the concern was the downplaying of the Struggle due to the sheer quantity of dramatic material included in Act III of *African Songbook*, a concern shared by some commentators following the work's European premiere as *Mandela Trilogy* (2011) in 2012. Some, like Sichel (2010), also questioned the absence of black composers in the work. A strange imbalance of power thus exists here. As in the case of the operatic representation of Baartman in a Western medium discussed in Chapter 3, one must question the cultural-political significance of the representation of black culture in an artform historically associated with racial exclusivity in South Africa, especially if this representation stems from a white composer. However, the contemporary opera idiom of Act III which specifically focuses on Mandela's incarceration during apartheid does have clear symbolic value. The creative decision to have Mandela, as the character that campaigns for democracy

²³⁵ Only one review of this performance is available (see Hong, 2017).

throughout the work, sing in an operatic idiom reflects his interaction with his apartheid environment and his shaping of that environment into something which can accommodate people of all races and creeds.²³⁶

While critics across the board were not at ease with the treatment of some of the indigenous Xhosa elements in the original work, such objections were also shared by international critics following the performance of the revised *Mandela Trilogy* (2011) in Cardiff (2012). Those critics similarly picked up on the disjointedness of the three-act work and the presence of three composers, presumably prompting Williams to replace Roelof Temmingh, and subsequently also Allan Stephenson, with Péter Louis van Dijk. With multiple revisions, the “opera” moved further away from its original aesthetic, which was already quite hybrid, towards its classification as a “musical”. This transformation is also evident in the sentiments of its creators. Where first they had set out to create a musical tribute to the life of Mandela, recognising his contribution to changing the face of our nation, *Mandela Trilogy* later morphed into a work that foregrounded the black talent of CTO as representative of a South African theatre idiom. In a feature written before the opera’s 2012 premiere in Wales, Williams (quoted in Broughton, 2012b) says “[he] wants the evening to be tight and entertaining [...] It mustn’t become a history lesson or a documentary”.

The transformation reflected in the replacement of composers, and the emphasis placed on the work as entertainment, are most evident in the digital paratexts that have accompanied *Mandela Trilogy* throughout its international tours. The initial trailer that accompanied the European premiere of *Mandela Trilogy* (2011) underscored the work’s classification as an epic, almost heroic tale, using predominantly slow-motion production media footage and photographs accompanied by the stirring sounds of the opera’s final ensemble ‘We are One’, composed by Van Dijk. The work’s second trailer, created for its German premiere in 2014, emphasises the work’s new classification as a “musical” through the inclusion of spoken text, but here the “African-ness” of the work and cast, in line with the expectations set by CTO’s previous tour of *Porgy and Bess*, is foregrounded. With the 2016 tour to the UK and Ireland, it becomes apparent that each venue presented a trailer that foregrounded a specific element or theme in line with their expectations. While all trailers highlighted the work’s glowing reviews, the expansion of the paratextual network to include interviews and “Q&A” videos notably points towards the shaping of audiences’ horizons of expectation. By the time *Mandela Trilogy* toured to Dubai and Hong Kong, South Africa had become aware of the work’s value as a cultural artefact, as evidenced in the support garnered from *Brand South Africa* for CTO’s 2017 tour to Dubai. Most significantly, the involvement of *Brand South Africa* speaks to an awareness of the financial benefits gained from exporting a one-of-a-kind product such as *Mandela Trilogy*. By considering this rich paratextual network, I have shown that, through their manipulation of *Mandela Trilogy*’s paratexts, CTO curated an idea of

²³⁶ This cannot be fully explored without access to the score.

the South African nation that problematically banks on the exoticism of the “black voice” and culture to live up to clichéd international expectations of Africa.

While local audiences were largely concerned with the work’s musical idiom, international audiences were most obviously dazzled by the brilliance of CTO’s energetic cast, which was emphasised in the audible and visual presence of the cast and chorus as underscored in various digital paratexts. This chapter has not only shown that reception and production media influence each other in a circular fashion, as per Everett’s suggestion. It has also shown that paratexts can be manipulated in such a way as to influence audience expectations, highlighting the significance of the consideration of opera’s digital paratexts. Though *Mandela Trilogy* was intended to be a cultural showpiece from its first incarnation as *African Songbook* (2010), the importance of suitably capturing this turbulent time in the history of the South African nation subsequently became less important. Through digital curation, the work’s focus shifted from an opera that celebrates South African history through South African talent to a musical that provides “toe-tapping tunes” and an image of (South) Africa to appeal to the masses.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusions

In the introductory chapter of this study, I reflected on a quotation from Abbate and Parker (2005 [1989]) in which the authors equate the analytical focus restricted to only one of opera's elements – music, in this case – that was then conventional in opera studies to seeing only one of the three primary colours, rendering a reader selectively blind to the other elements that contribute to the operatic product. Three decades later, observations solely drawn from music are slowly becoming less prominent in the study of opera, though it remains a prevalent investigative thread in South African opera studies, especially in a South African context. The ever-increasing number of scholarly publications that focus on elements lying outside opera's musical mode, however, indicates a growing awareness of opera's multimodal character and the richness of multimodal experience. This study has sought to connect South African opera studies with a stream of global opera research that seeks to interrogate the multiple semiotic facets of the genre, realised through production. At the start of this study, then, I set out to question the multimodal character of South African opera as relayed via production, to uncover what, apart from music, contributes to the creation of meaning on stage, and how different modes interact collectively.

While this study did not adopt a primarily historiographic approach, it was essential to sketch the context of South African opera and South African opera studies for the reader. To this aim, Chapter 2 presented a literature review that traced the history of opera in South Africa since its colonial introduction, highlighting the genre's political ties. Initially, during the nineteenth century, opera in South Africa was used as a cultural tool to maintain a link to the (British) metropole. Subsequently, during apartheid, the genre was usurped by the government to promote white (Afrikaner) cultural capital. Pertaining to the latter, I explored the operatic output of the apartheid government-subsidised Performing Arts Councils. I specifically delved into the neglected history of PACT, which operated in the northern region of the country, to balance out the dominance of Cape Town in South African opera studies. Considering the opera output of PACT, I argued that the visual legacy of opera in apartheid South Africa was a continuation of a European aesthetic. This exploration revealed that the Afrikaner government sought to position themselves as European by adopting a performance culture that saw the replication of a European production aesthetic rooted in “traditional” staging trends (as opposed to *Regietheater*) and the performance and translation of the Western opera canon on African soil. To this end, they spared no expense in the promotion of this aesthetic through opulent productions, the importation of international directors and singers, and the construction of grand theatres echoing the great opera houses of Europe. The socio-political affiliations between opera and “whiteness” established by these practices endured and still plague the performance and production of opera at present.

Post-1994, South Africa was desperate for operatic transformation. CAPAB and CTO took the lead in this regard, predominantly by doing away with segregation and by striving to forge a uniquely South African opera idiom. In the spirit of socio-political reform, opera became a vehicle for social change in the democratic environment, mainly through casting, with previously marginalised voices making their way to the South African opera stage within a year of democracy. While opera production was quick to embrace change, the composition and production of South African operas had not yet gained momentum. Moreover, scholarly contributions pertaining to opera in South Africa still echoed the historiographical approaches of apartheid-era musicologists, often divorced from socio-political contexts. With the composition of South African operas gaining momentum during the 2000s, scholars started interrogating these works, considering their aesthetic suitability to the racially inclusive, democratic environment. Following the remarkable blossoming in local opera production since 2010, the emergent field of South African opera studies has started diverging from historiographical and positivist approaches. Despite this drive, the focus still primarily rests on only one of opera's modes, largely negating the role of the visual in the creation of meaning in an operatic work. In the research niche of South African opera studies, two investigative themes have been identified, namely (1) research broadly concerned with the socio-political aspects of contemporary South African repertoire (2002 onwards), and (2) the unveiling of previously discounted apartheid opera histories. Regarding the former, the investigative focus very much rested on the genre's primary modes of libretto and score, while the latter utilises archival sources.

While South African opera scholars were grappling with the country's new indigenous opera aesthetic, approaches in global opera studies focused with renewed vigour on opera's visual identity. This was largely driven by developments relating to opera's digital dissemination which has been increasing drastically since the mid-2000s. The digital medium of the opera simulcast, in particular, has allowed scholars to engage with and interrogate multiple aspects of opera production. As I wrote in Chapter 2, the increased interest in opera's individual modes, and as an integrated whole, related to new ways of *seeing* opera. With opera no longer bound to the theatre, new research has extended not only to opera's screen-based dissemination, but also to the incorporation of new media in *mise-en-scène* itself. In this regard, Kara's observation regarding the visual image as a "communicative tool" in contemporary opera is significant (Kara, 2017:563).

Apart from the broadening of media in set design, the consideration of opera as a "performance text" (Levin, 2007) has been a crucial development in global opera studies. In this regard, the utilisation of recorded performances as analytic sources has increased the adoption of interdisciplinary approaches, establishing links between opera studies and the fields of theatre, film, and visual culture. The widespread application of recorded performance as a source of analysis is paramount in negating, at least to some extent, geographical hurdles between opera productions and opera scholars, and also the ephemerality that is part of all musical performance. The latter is greatly significant in the context of South African opera studies. This study has

shown that the use of recorded production media as analytic sources, where available, vastly broadens the investigative scope of South African opera, allowing for the consideration of the physical realisation of an opera and the observation of its multimodal aspects retrospectively.

While score-led methodological approaches do contribute to the field of South African opera studies, the prevalence of this analytic focus means that the multimodal consideration of opera exemplified in this study is a novel investigative approach in the field. In Chapter 3, then, I outlined multimodality as a lens for the investigation of opera production. Associated with communication studies, multimodality refers to the integrated nature of meaning-making, i.e., that meaning is rarely restricted to a single modality. This is especially applicable to opera, given the multiple modes at play in the realisation of an operatic work since the genre's inception. While the experience of opera can be *monomodal* (for example, when listening to a recording), this study interrogated the multimodal character of opera by outlining the multiple processes complicit in the making of meaning on the contemporary opera stage and illuminating the relationships between these elements. The framework devised in Chapter 3, drawn from the insights of Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009) and Everett (2015), maps out the multiple parts involved in the on-stage realisation of an opera, as well as the additional elements that contribute to the audience's reading of the work.²³⁷ Since the artform has very recently entered a new phase of digital dissemination in light of the global pandemic, the multimodal network for opera proposed in this study is by no means exhaustive. However, it highlights the dynamic interplay between opera's different modes.

I identified four categories, each with multiple sub-elements, that collectively contribute to the creation of meaning in opera production. The first two are the most prevalent in contemporary opera studies, namely (1) "design modes", and (2) "production media". The former comprises dramatic texts – texts encoded with meaning by their creators, namely the libretto and score – and the decoding and re-encoding of these texts by creative teams. The latter relates to the staged operatic product, including but not limited to the sounds and actions of the cast, the sounds of the orchestra and the performance space, together with *mise-en-scène*, and – in the case of recorded production media – any cinematographic techniques that frame stage actions. Together with these categories, (3) paratextual networks has emerged as a significant category that encapsulates the vast range of paratexts that inform the audience's interpretation of production. In this study, I broadened paratextual networks by incorporating digital media that proliferate in opera production at present. This move was essential since the material nature of paratexts outlined by Hutcheon and Hutcheon (2009) is closely bound to the technology of the 1990s. Similarly, while Everett (2015) acknowledges the role of recorded and live broadcast production media, the "previews" the author lists are page bound, discounting the genre's digital identity. In this regard, I have identified the opera trailer as a significant multimodal

²³⁷ See page 64.

paratext that informs and shapes audience expectation. The last category within this multimodal network, (4) horizons of expectation, encompasses the collective experiences that an audience brings with them when interpreting a work. Like paratexts, horizons of expectation also affect interpretation; however, unlike paratexts, these experiences are unique to each audience member. For example, in the South African context, the horizons of expectation are significantly influenced by the country's socio-political history, while audiences from abroad will bring different expectations to a work/production. I have argued that these four outlined categories are in constant dialogue, ultimately converging at the centre of the multimodal framework to inform Reception. I sketched the unique interplay between these categories and opera's multiple modes by focusing on selective relationships in my consideration of the opera productions of *Saartjie* (Chapter 4), *Poskantoor* (Chapter 5) and *Mandela Trilogy* (Chapter 6).

Starting with Hendrik Hofmeyr's *Saartjie* (Chapter 4), my investigative focus fell on the design modes–production media relationship, informed by the paratextual networks. I have shown that when production media are at odds with design modes, this can influence the reading of the staged production. *Saartjie* formed part of a landmark production in the South African opera landscape, CTO's *Five:20*, a collection of operas engineered to usher in a new era for the genre. However, Hofmeyr controversially sought to offer an alternative take on the life of a tragic icon that occupies a revered position in South African cultural memory – with his views widely disseminated in the opera's published paratexts. While Hofmeyr's "take" on Baartman is problematic, the production design that banked on Baartman's visual history further complicated the representation of Baartman, effectively perpetuating the historical pattern of objectification and maltreatment. While the design modes and production media equally contributed to a thorny representation of Baartman in *Saartjie*, the critics were seemingly blind to issues of visual representation, focusing instead on the suitability of Hofmeyr's musical idiom. The decision to represent a woman of colour historically objectified and forever trapped in a white European gaze in a Eurocentric idiom firmly associated with apartheid is troubling. Hofmeyr's own contested position within the South African musicological community perhaps led critics to concentrate on the opera's dramatic texts, pointing towards the influence of horizons of expectation and Reception. However, considering the visual imagery evoked by the very mention of Baartman's name, the mise-en-scène arguably provided the canonised and caricatured image of Baartman to deliver audience expectations. Chapter 4 also demonstrated the embeddedness of visual history and intertextuality in the paratextual networks and production media.

Chapter 5 focused on a trifecta of design modes–production media–paratextual networks. As an Afrikaans opera, the artform's political history plagued *Poskantoor* by association. However, the opera's creators sought to distance the work from the Afrikaner operatic legacy, endeavouring instead to represent an Afrikaans idiom suitable to the contemporary socio-political sphere. As a work of the Afrikaans culture industry, the opera, like other cultural products, indulged in remnants of (apartheid-era) nostalgia – a proven lucrative

strategy as exemplified in other cultural products of the industry. In keeping with the existential angst plaguing the Afrikaner demographic post-apartheid, *Poskantoor* sought to speak to a demographic unable to hear opera in their mother language. However, I demonstrated that *Poskantoor* simultaneously seeks to pander to nostalgia and interrupt it, attempting to shatter the allusion to problematic Afrikaner memory but perpetuating this memory by including apartheid-era musical reminiscences and by situating language as a marker of classism and racism. In this case, the multimodal character of production media cleverly foregrounded and masked elements contained in the dramatic texts. The absence of subtitles in the production at Aardklop, for example, meant that the audience was dependent on the cast's diction for clarity, so that the racist terms in the libretto, already veiled through the composer's orchestration, might have gone unnoticed, even when gestures drew attention to them. In contrast, stage directions foregrounded specific narrative inclusions. For example, the three women were positioned downstage centre for the episode of profanity (representative of the women's rebellion). The only way for audiences to avoid this confrontation, which breaks from Afrikaner conservatism, was to leave the auditorium – which some audience members opted for, according to reviews.

While the transformation of opera in South Africa has played an important role in rectifying historic injustices, the opera productions discussed in this study clearly indicate that race is still a prominent issue on the South African opera stage, with the colour-blind casting characterising Western canonic works not featuring in locally composed operas. This is evidenced in the three opera productions discussed in this study. The representation of race in these productions is problematically stereotypical: Saartjie, as the “savage” “Hottentot Venus”, is placed in a cage on stage for Europeans to gawk at; Napoleon, in *Poskantoor*, is portrayed as a homeless black car guard, his status continually confirmed through inclusions in the libretto; and *Mandela Trilogy* banks on the “sound” and “image” of Africa, in a sense perpetuating exoticism and the fetishisation of the black voice. Furthermore, all these works contain an overwhelmingly white creative team, which further complicates the position of opera as a tool of socio-political transformation. In addition, audience demographic plays a significant role here. In the case of *Poskantoor*, for example, the work's premiere location – a predominantly Afrikaans festival – renders the opera's representation of race, coloured with allusions of apartheid-era nostalgia, highly problematic. However, in this instance, the opera's visual mode dazzled audiences, arguably distracting their attention from these inclusions – a strategy further aided by the opera's multimodal presentation.

In the case of *Mandela Trilogy* (Chapter 6), a select number of South African critics commented on the absence of a black composer, but this was mostly ignored in overseas reviews. Significantly, Robert Braunmüller, in his review of the work's Munich premiere, quite tellingly observed that the white creators of *Mandela Trilogy* reached deeply into the “exotic realm”, resulting in a production that banked on African clichés. The image of (South) Africa presented on stage is thus a white European construction, with the “Africanness” carried by

the black cast. This trend also extends to the work's musical mode. Like the image presented on stage, the "African" sound, though produced by the chorus, was conceptualised by a white Western composer. While CTO sought to present an image of a unified South African identity in *Mandela Trilogy*, the construction of this identity stems from a white perspective, which seems at odds with CTO's commitment to transformation. Awkwardly incorporating extant "black" repertoire in Act II of the work resulted in the problematic usurpation of this repertoire into a "white" musical fabric due to the omission of the original creators. What ultimately emerges is a curious double-edged sword of cultural exploitation: CTO is the only company capable of offering South African opera singers full-time employment, with these singers required to overlook the stereotyping of blackness through the company's choice of repertoire and its constant evocation of the "black" sound only found in Africa.

The trends of "exoticism" and the fetishisation of blackness extend not only to production media but also to paratextual networks in *Mandela Trilogy*. The paratextual networks for this production comprised several digital paratexts ranging from multiple trailers to "behind-the-scenes" footage and interviews that buy heavily into the Mandela "brand", relying not only on iconic images of Mandela that speak to visual intertextuality interacting directly with South African history but also to Mandela's symbolic value as an icon of transformation widely adopted locally and abroad. Multiple trailers allowed CTO to tailor their product to audience expectations unique to geographical locations. I showed that the company, at present the only South African opera company to maintain an uninterrupted international presence, still problematically banks on notions of "exoticism" and the fetishisation of the black voice through the trailer. The trailers in CTO's corpus all foreground these aspects to some degree, pointing towards an awareness of their international demographic's desires – namely the sound and image ("blackness") of Africa. For *Mandela Trilogy* specifically, the trailers accompanying international tours all evoked imagery associated with the Mandela brand as the token symbol of South Africa's struggle for democracy. However, interviews focused on the experiences of black cast members, and the vision of the white creative team, specifically excluding a main white cast member from these paratexts, and, in so doing, undermining the presentation of reconciliation.

Most tellingly, I demonstrated that video paratexts can cater to specific audience demographics to help shape the preferred reading of the opera on the part of its producers. The image of reconciliation faded into the background for the international performances of *Mandela Trilogy*, traded instead for production footage that highlights the "tribal" character of the Xhosa people. This aesthetic resonates with the observations of Thembe Vokwana (2006/7:13), mentioned in Chapter 2, where Vokwana argues that the representation of Africa becomes pigeonholed, obsessed with representing a historic, pastoral setting with "singers clad in traditional garb" (Vokwana, 2006/7:14). I also showed that these video paratexts document the work's transformation from an opera (2011) to a musical (2014). In the trailer for Dubai (2017), for example, the upbeat "musical" character of the work is underlined, considering the popularity of musicals at Dubai Opera,

with opera specifically excluded from South Africa's musical fabric. CTO also depends on the horizons of expectation created in these trailers, foregrounding their characteristic aesthetic by riding on the coattails of their previous tours of "black" repertoire like *Porgy and Bess*.

The utilisation of digital media, specifically social media channels such as YouTube, features significantly in the paratextual networks of *Mandela Trilogy* and *Poskantoor*, and speaks to the relationship between opera and visual culture. In this regard, the continuous broadening of paratextual networks within opera's multimodal framework is significant. This study has shown that local opera companies like CTO and Biblioteek Productions embrace international industry trends that speak to opera's growing visibility through digital media. In Chapters 5 and 6, I demonstrated that the trailer, as part of opera's paratextual networks, significantly contributes to establishing audience expectation.

By adopting an approach in line with film trends – releasing several cryptic "teaser" trailers, and a full-length trailer – the creators of *Poskantoor* sought to create hype around the production, strategically targeting younger audiences who Biblioteek rightly claims are more visually inclined. This strategy is in line with the company's aim to grow a "younger" audience base to keep opera alive and vibrant. *Poskantoor's* visual identity, disseminated through video trailers and conceptual imagery that present an avant-garde aesthetic, significantly positioned the opera as an Afrikaans work far removed from the aesthetic (and by connection, racist) legacy pushed by the apartheid PACs. Like the cinematographic techniques utilised in recorded production media that control the viewer's gaze (Everett, 2015), the images created in the trailer are also subject to framing by the director, forcing potential audiences to see what they want them to see. In the case of *Poskantoor*, Boucher created imagery that speaks to and problematises nostalgia, tempting potential audiences with familiar visual images rendered uncanny. By re-creating these images and symbols on stage, the opera's aesthetic seemed less alien to audiences than they had experienced it before. *Poskantoor's* trailer points explicitly to multi-layered multimodality within opera's multimodal framework.

In a South African context, the trend of employing video paratexts indicates the prioritisation of the visual mode in terms of increasing audience engagement. Furthermore, these paratexts also testify to a shift further away from the traditional Eurocentric staging practices associated with the PACs, and towards a South African idiom. While the latter has been extensively probed in local scholarship, further research could investigate the significance of the visual in other South African operas, decoding the paratextual networks and reading production media to move towards the consideration of opera as a cohesive artform.

While I have shown that the application of the multimodal framework devised in this study allows for the exploration of the complex relationships between opera's various modes, its application is not without its challenges, and certain limitations did arise. Since this study considered facets of opera production rather than focusing on the opera as a "work", certain investigative avenues were cut short due to the ephemerality that

plagues South African opera production, and the inaccessibility of source material. These two factors complicated the multimodal approach. Regarding the former, the footage of only one of the opera productions discussed in this study, namely *Saartjie*, offers unrestricted viewing online, with the footage for *Poskantoor* made privately available for research purposes. While Biblioteek Productions and *Poskantoor*'s creative team were forthcoming, sharing visual material and archival documents for the purposes of research, other industry professionals were less keen to share material and insights. This reluctance to share resources points towards the protective and at times secretive approach that currently pervades South African opera, which is inevitably detrimental to the study of local opera repertoire and production.

With production footage and paratextual material now abounding to an unprecedented extent, the multimodal framework presented in this study could easily be applied to opera's new media. In the context of this study, avenues that could not be explored but that would lead to insightful research include the consideration of operas like *Saartjie* within the production environment of *Five:20*, where the audience's exposure to the four operas could be positioned as paratexts in their own right. Building on the insights drawn from *Mandela Trilogy*'s paratexts, a detailed exploration of CTO's trailer corpus would be able to reveal whether the trends of exoticism and fetishisation proliferate within the company's digital identity. In a global context, the study of video paratexts could extend to the trailers of international opera houses, such as the Royal Opera House and the Metropolitan Opera, illuminating similarities and differences in company aesthetics. On a micro level, it would also be useful to delve deeper into the categories outlined in opera's multimodal framework. For example, under paratextual networks, production-specific programmes or programmes of specific production companies over multiple seasons could be considered and measured against reception, to map the shaping of audience interpretation.

By interrogating the multimodal relationships between modes in three contemporary South African opera productions – *Saartjie* (2009), *Poskantoor* (2014) and *Mandela Trilogy* (2011/2014) – this study has shown that the creation and conveyance of meaning in opera production is a collective process operating far beyond the reach of musical observations to which other scholars have previously confined themselves. The three operas chosen as case studies in this thesis allowed for the interrogation of opera's multimodality by focusing on the micro-relationships within opera's multimodal network. Even though different elements were considered in combination, it has become evident that the elements on the periphery still contribute to meaning. The proposed multimodal framework is not only applicable to contemporary production; adopting this approach for historical case study, looking at the productions of PACT, for example, the multimodal approach holds the potential to unlock the South African opera archive in a novel way.

Since the start of this project, the global operatic landscape has changed tremendously. The influence of the global pandemic in 2020–2021 has further forced opera companies, composers, and creators to drastically

rethink the presentation and dissemination of repertoire. As a result, opera is migrating further into the realm of the digital. In May 2021, ROH launched their first series of Instagram operas (*8bi*), directed by some of the biggest names in the business. Locally, CTO also embraced the possibilities of the digital with their version of Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater*, a 23-minute adaptation featuring two singers and six dancers (adhering to social distancing protocols) conceptualised for and broadcast on kykNET in October 2020. Since producers of opera had no choice but to embrace screen-based presentation, the visual mode has become an area of focus for many. CTO, for example, have embraced the union of music and the visual, announcing their collaboration with visual artists for the whole of their 2021 season (see Bain, 2021a). This extended beyond paratextual elements, such as poster design, to design modes and production media; *Hänsel und Gretel* (April 2021), for example, was directed and designed by Johannesburg-based American photographer Roger Ballen in a creative decision that further closes the gap between opera and pop culture (see Bain, 2021b). CTO's appointment of an artist as designer and director is not novel, as the relationship between visual art and opera was already probed locally (and independently) by artist William Kentridge (*Magic Flute*) in 2005; however, the widespread emergence of visual trends in a South African context is indicative of two things: (1) a further shift away from the traditional Eurocentric staging practices associated with the PACs, and (2) the prioritisation of the visual mode in terms of viewer engagement.

The proliferation of video paratexts and recorded/live production media on the internet and social media sites further gestures towards the increased visibility of opera in the digital age. South African opera has slowly started embracing these strategies, meaning opera is no longer bound to the temporality or physical space stage environment. Apart from *Mandela Trilogy*, operas like *Saartjie* and *Poskantoor* can transcend both ephemerality and the limitations of location. In addition, the proliferation of video paratexts on YouTube and social media, hold equally rich potential for study outside the remit of cultural musicology, for example, marketing and communication studies. Working at the intersection of the disciplines of cultural musicology and visual and popular culture, this study has shown that adopting opera's multimodality as a point of departure for analysis results in productive and insightful engagement with the artform. As the first study to apply a multimodal strategy in the consideration of South African opera, this thesis has greatly contributed to the vibrant research niche that is South African opera studies by presenting a new potential avenue of investigation into the field. This thesis has revealed that opera production is encoded with layers of meaning that accumulate across opera's modal spectrum. From design modes and their realisation through production media, to the shaping of audience interpretation through paratextual networks and subjective horizons of expectation, opera's multimodal network, outlined and investigated in this thesis, has illuminated the intricacies of these relationships. Opera is continuously evolving and moving beyond the confines of the traditional opera house. Taking note of this evolution, South African opera studies too must adapt and

embrace global opera research trends, recognising that the genre necessitates consideration for what it is: an all-encompassing multimodal artform.

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