Thrilling Opera

Conflicts of the Mind and the Media in Kasper Holten's *Juan*

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The present paper takes a look at the relation between opera and film through the lens of Danish director Kasper Holten's movie debut *Juan* (2010), a 90-minute screen adaptation of *Don Giovanni*. Trimming about half of Mozart and Da Ponte's opera and presenting the libretto in an irreverently contemporary English translation, the film makes full use of the visual language and fast pace of the movie thriller. Yet at the same time, by having all the singers perform live on the set, it aspires to the condition of filmed live opera. Whether intentionally or not, however, it seems less to effect a smooth fusion of these two sets of media conventions than to underscore their incompatibility. The resulting conflict, I will argue, is mirrored by the film's take on the protagonist, who fails miserably at living up to the Kierkegaardian ideal of unreflective vitality: instead, the media-specific techniques of cinematic narrative intervene, turning him into an introspective, self-conscious and deeply conflicted hero.

Ever since its conception, *Don Giovanni* has been the site of loudly clashing conventions. If we are to believe an often-repeated anecdote, Mozart and Da Ponte themselves were at odds, the composer being determined to compose a serious opera, while the librettist aimed for comedy throughout.¹ Whether we buy this legend or not, the result does contain plenty of *opera seria* elements within its general *buffa* framework. In musical terms, some roles (like Donna Anna and Ottavio) belong predominantly to the sphere of *seria*, while others (like Leporello and Zerlina) are purely *buffa*. The opera undeniably harbours enough darkness and drama to explain its afterlife in the nineteenth century, where the serious elements by far overshadowed the humorous ones.² In the last decades of the twentieth century, the growing predominance of more-or-less iconoclastic *mise-en-scène*, in particular on European stages, made Mozart's opera one of its favourite targets for creative deconstruction. Notorious examples include Peter Sellars' version set in south Bronx, which was staged in 1987 for the Pepsico Festival, and Calixto Bieito's smutty booze-and-drugs version, which was premiered by the English National Opera at the London Coliseum in 2001. These productions add a different kind of clash to the aforementioned ones, where the eighteenth-century words and music chafe against late-twentieth-century avant-garde staging (which, despite its claims to innovation, is of course anything but exempt from conventionality).

From this school of *Regietheater* staging emerged Danish director Kasper Holten, whose 2010 film version of *Don Giovanni* I will address in the present

paper. The film, which emphasizes its distance from Mozart and Da Ponte's work through its title *Juan* (although the DVD version is marketed under the original title of the opera), is entirely based on Mozart's music, but combines it with a mercilessly contemporary adaptation of the libretto and the story. Holten's film is arguably the most consistent attempt yet to apply the conventions of modern cinema to an opera. I will argue, however, that what appears as an attempt at a smooth fusion ends up emphasizing – and, ultimately, profiting from – the incompatibility of its own constituent parts.

Of course, one could say something similar about screen adaptations of opera in general. In her 2000 book *Opera on Screen*, Marcia Citron remarks about the object of her study: "Like many hybrids it [screen opera] bears the tensions of its components, some of which may not reconcile themselves easily with the others." (2000: 6)³ The difference between the clashes thus ascribed to the genre as a whole and their manifestation in *Juan*, however, is that Holten's film takes these incompatibilities as a central thematic concern, foregrounding them at every opportunity, and turning them into the driving force of the narrative. I will soon trace some of the ways in which this is achieved, but let me mention at this point at least one of the film's central *mise-en-abyme* strategies. In Holten's interpretation, Juan himself is a conceptual artist of sorts, and the material of his magnum opus, with the working title "The Woman Project", consists of the digital documentation of his sexual conquests. All his affairs are recorded and organized by Leporello – or Lep, as he is called in the film – whose laptop is chock-full of movie clips and photographs, all arranged in folders according to the nationalities and hair colour of the women.⁴ The Don's insatiable sexual frenzy, which has been construed as emblematic of the art of opera at least since Søren Kierkegaard's famous essay "The Immediate Erotic Stages or the Musical-Erotic" in *Either/Or* (1843/1987: 45–135), is thus explicitly framed in Holten's film as a question of media and mediation.

Holten's *Juan* puts its finger squarely on one of the sore spots of opera studies in recent years: the dichotomization of live experience and mediation through moving images, which inevitably carries Benjaminian echoes of auratic art and technological reproduction, and which is often, at least by the sceptics, conceived as a conflict between physical presence and the distance of mediation.⁵ Given the recurrent conceptualization of the experience of live opera performance in terms of corporeal eroticism, this duality also resonates with the idea of mediated opera as a kind of pornography, which, in the present case, is picked up by Juan's porn-art project.⁶ In the present paper, I will try to shed some light on the film's take on these issues by attending to its portrayal of two kinds of internal conflicts. The first, as I have already suggested, is located between the media conventions of filmed live opera and action thriller, and the second within the character of Juan himself.

1. Conflicts of the Media

The first shots of the film, interspersed with the opening credits, are of a vehicle swerving at high speed along a dark highway, chased by police cars with sirens wailing. Next, we see conductor Lars Ulrik Mortensen giving the preparatory beat for the *Don Giovanni* overture. As the first D minor chord strikes, the film's title appears, lit by a moving searchlight, and at the ensuing A major, we see a cellist playing an intense forte. The alternation of tonic and dominant, then, is overlaid with an alternation between unmistakable clichés of the action thriller and the live opera broadcast, and the elements of *Juan's* hybrid mediality are thus established in succession. At the exact moment when the tension between the tonic and the dominant inaugurates the drama of tonality, an analogous tension between action thriller and live opera sets off the drama of mediality. Their uneasy co-existence sets the tone for the whole film, and the friction is about to be taken up another notch.

Juan himself – played by Christopher Maltman – is in the audience, attending a performance of *Don Giovanni*. In the thirteenth bar of the overture, as the second violins start their anxious 16th-note figurations, something striking happens: having first been presented in succession, the operatic and cinematic conventions now appear simultaneously, superimposed on each other. While the music of the opera film, non-diegetic, as it were, carries on with the overture in its entirety, the diegetic music in the opera house skips ahead to the moment of the Commendatore's murder, shown on stage in traditional boots-and-doublet staging, in accordance with cinematic conventions.⁷ What happens, then, is that opera time and thriller time part ways.

The distance opened up here between the two participating media serves a number of purposes. For one thing, it carries connotations of class. When opera appears in film, one of its most frequent functions is to mark the possession of capital, cultural as well as actual. Whether the object of mockery or fetishization, the idea of opera as a stereotype of high-brow culture is typically brought to the fore whenever it is filtered through the silver screen (cf. Tambling 1987: 3–7). Holten plays on this stereotype when he lets the class difference in *Don Giovanni* be represented by the institution of the opera house itself, which is where the upper-class characters – Don Giovanni, Don Ottavio, Donna Anna and her father, who is the city's chief of police in the film – first convene.

The most fundamental function of the medial rift, however, is a question of time. Again, as Citron points out, this is a conflict that marks any screen adaptation of opera: opera “tends to unfold more slowly than cinema or television”, which “depend much more on movement and action, and thrive on a faster pace” (2000: 6f.). The spectators of a thriller, then, have no patience to listen to a whole opera; the action needs to be fast-paced. There is nothing really remarkable about this medial difference, and Citron is right to mention it

as her first example of the tensions that adhere to screen opera. What is interesting in Holten's opening scene, however, is that it consciously foregrounds this rift, rather than looking for a way of hiding it. During the six minutes of the overture, unfolding in the slow pace of opera time, the story of the movie has already fast-forwarded not only through the whole first act, but also through the intermission (during which Anna and Juan are introduced to each other by Ottavio); the second act (including the Stone Guest dragging Giovanni down into hell); Anna and Juan's rendezvous at a café after the performance; and, finally, their moving on to her fancy apartment, secretly followed by Lep, who is documenting the whole thing with a digital camera. The film is thus presenting us with two parallel narrative strands, moving at very different speeds. Each strand even has its own simultaneously audible sound track: while the diegetic opera is being performed on stage, watched by the characters, we can hear snippets of that performance – the Commendatore's dying words, Giovanni seducing Zerlina, his scream as he slides into the pit – superimposed on the music of the overture to the opera film. Driving a wedge between these two instantiations of *Don Giovanni* in the opening moments of his film, Holten thus deliberately directs our attention to the difference of pace – perhaps already signalled by the contrast between the speeding car and the reliably steady conductor – as the most conspicuous incompatibility between opera and cinema.

This incompatibility is amply confirmed during the rest of the film. Most obviously, the conventions of cinematic time force Holten to cuts that go way beyond what would be accepted on the opera stage: Mozart's three-hour opera is reduced to 90 minutes, most of the second act disappearing in the process. (Ottavio fares the worst, losing both of his arias.) In some instances, the cinema conventions are put to productive use: the extended time of certain instrumental passages allows Holten to add a number of elements to the story by strictly visual means. For instance, Anna and Ottavio's collaboration with the police force, who are putting Juan under surveillance, is presented in rapid sequences, while the story is not making progress in the score and libretto. As a result, the recitatives are no longer the prime locus of rapid development, but rather a point where the action slows down to the pace of a real-time dialogue. When the conventions of cinema's visual narrative are granted full access to opera, the drama can fast-forward at any point in the score: during a bar or two of an instrumental interlude, or even while the emotional reflection of an aria is going on. Also, the contrapuntal asides in duets and ensembles are neatly emphasized and clarified by interspersed close-ups of individual characters (which is of course nothing unique to Holten's project, but standard fare in opera films).

Another site of obvious clashes of convention in the film is found in the differing levels of tolerance vis-à-vis verisimilitude displayed by opera and cinema. While the plot of the run-of-the-mill crime drama may not always be a paragon of plausibility, it cannot compete with opera when it comes to the

amount of willingness that needs to be mustered in order to suspend disbelief. In Holten's film, this causes a number of moments verging on the embarrassing. For example: in one scene, Anna calls Juan on Ottavio's phone, subsequently trying to divert her boyfriend's suspicions by claiming that it was Juan who placed the call. In other words, we are supposed to believe that it would not occur to her that Ottavio might check his incoming calls to verify her story (which, of course, he does). While there are numerous plot elements in *Don Giovanni* that are just as improbable, the fact that this one is *not* in the original plot, but belongs specifically to the elements *added* by the contemporary thriller, makes it stick out as utterly improbable. The same goes for a second murder committed by Juan, rather gratuitously inserted to propel the action forward and push Juan across the edge: when a teenage cashier at a gas station recognizes Juan as the wanted cop killer seen on the news, he decides to grab a baseball bat and climb over the desk to perform an act of heroism, unsurprisingly getting himself shot in the process.

But the most obvious improbability of opera is, of course, even more fundamental: the fact that everyone is singing all the time. The language of the adapted English libretto, as it were, restores fresh improbability to this the most basic condition of opera. With its ample use of twenty-first-century colloquialisms, profanities, bad grammar and broken English – all of which works towards a cinematic version of realism – it places the operatic singing within a framework where it comes across as emphatically estranged. The strangeness and improbability that are part and parcel of the art of opera sit quite uncomfortably with the level of realism expected of a contemporary thriller movie, thus creating another conspicuous gap between the conventions attached to the respective genres and media, which is the source of much of the film's comedy.

By contrast, the most successful (and original) amalgamation of conventions is to be found not in the temporal, but in the spatial aspects of the opera: with the exception of the lines sung as an interior monologue, all of the singing in Holten's film is done on site. Technically, this was accomplished by letting the singers hear the orchestral accompaniments through a minute in-ear monitor. For the recitatives, a piano was used on the set, to be replaced by harpsichord in post-production editing.

To my mind, this actually remedies the most annoying problem of opera films, amply showcased by the arias in Joseph Losey's famous adaptation of *Don Giovanni* (1979). In her chapter on this film, which she reads in tandem with Francesco Rosi's *Bizet's Carmen* (1983) while focusing on the implications of outdoors settings in those two films, Citron notes that the recitatives, which are "shot live, sound vital and convincing, but full-blown music is sometimes unfocused. The break between the two is noticeable. Synchronization often suffers in the post-dubbed numbers (Masetto's aria in Act I is a particularly bad example.)" (2000: 203) Although I fully agree with these assessments, I would add that the problem is not just that the lip-synching is not good enough, or that

the transitions from the live recitatives are not smooth enough. More importantly, the fact that whether an aria takes place outdoors in a graveyard or inside a small bed chamber, the singer's voices always resound from a studio, with post-production reverberation, inevitably results in those voices being thoroughly and disturbingly divorced from their bodily presence at the set. In Holten's film, by contrast, the voice is consistently situated in an audible space. While this is obviously nothing new to film, it is new to opera film, which is brought significantly closer to the virtual liveness of a recording from the opera house, while employing the conventions and techniques of realism that have been developed during a century of cinema. João Pedro Cachopo, commenting on the often-repeated description of opera as the art form where "a guy gets stabbed in the back and, instead of bleeding, he sings", emphasises the novelty of Holten's project: "[...] as never before in an opera film (at least to my knowledge) the actor/singer playing the Commendatore – as all the other actors/singers in this production – actually sings while acting". (2014: 322) In Cachopo's words, Holten's film "gives new life to what might be said to be [...] a stillborn hybrid genre." (2014: 322)

At the same time, of course, the on-set singing does not eradicate the gap between the visual action and the audible music, but rather relocates it. In *Juan*, the gap is placed not between the visible and the audible sound track, but between the instrumental parts and the voices: the orchestra and continuo, as it were, still constitute an extra-diegetic sound track, the sound of which is clearly emerging from a different space than that of the voices. More importantly, however, the on-set-singing does not change the impression of an absolute incompatibility between the movie thriller and the opera. On the contrary, the strangeness between contemporary mainstream culture and eighteenth-century opera is more effectively foregrounded in Holten's film than in any modernized version of *Don Giovanni* that I have seen on stage. Paradoxically, the welding-together of the two media makes the gap between them yawn wider than ever. The effectiveness of Holten's film relies to a great extent on the idealism and metaphysics traditionally associated with opera – nowhere expressed with greater virtuosity than in Kierkegaard's reading of *Don Giovanni* – and their collision with the conventions of the contemporary thriller. Consequently, I am inclined to say that rather than subverting or unsettling traditional conceptions of opera – the direction in which Cachopo's analysis is ultimately leaning – it fortifies them, so as to make their clash with the cinematic medium all the more spectacular.

2. Conflicts of the Mind

It is often pointed out that Giovanni is a character with little propensity for self-reflection. The conspicuous absence of an aria where his inner life could be given voice is typically read as the lack of any such interiority, which, in the end,

is what prevents him from regretting, let alone repenting, any of his sins (cf. Rushton 1981: 82, 109). The most famous reading of Giovanni as unreflective is Kierkegaard's aforementioned essay from *Either/Or*. According to Kierkegaard's fictional essayist, *Don Giovanni* is the opera of all operas because the relation between the topic of Don Juan and the medium of operatic music is absolute. Giovanni is not to be understood as an individual character, but as the perfect embodiment of an ideal: that of the musical-erotic. On this view, it is vital that Giovanni never stops to take a look at himself. He is the embodiment of a single, immense force, which is always victorious, and which always propels him in one direction only: towards the next erotic conquest. Indeed, Don Giovanni's singularity of purpose clearly contrasts him to those who surround him. Ottavio and Anna are wavering between hundreds of emotions ("tra cento affetti e cento / vammì ondeggiando il cor"), Zerlina wants and does not want to give in to Giovanni's seduction ("vorrei e non vorrei"), and Elvira is torn between hating and loving him ("Che contrasto d'affetti in sen ti nasce!"). Even Leporello voices an inner conflict about whether to remain with his master or not; only Giovanni never stops to attend to or question his own desires.

Holten's reading of the character, however, seems to resist the idea of Giovanni as an unreflecting and essentially undivided force of nature. A hint of this resistance is given as early as the overture: when we first see Juan, he is seated in the opera house. Just as the irreconcilable difference between opera and cinema marks *Juan* from the very first seconds, so a division within Juan is suggested from the moment he sits down to watch an opera about himself. He demonstrates his refusal to see in the story of the punished dissolute any lesson relevant to himself: during the overture, he smiles and shakes his head at Mozart's opera, and while talking to Anna in the intermission, he says something that, although barely audible, sounds a lot like "one of the most boring art forms in the universe". Back in his seat, however, he closes his eyes, and in an ensuing shot we see him sitting by himself in the dark salon, still watching the stage, as if its events were playing for him and him alone, inside his head. From the very start, then, this temporary movement from outer to inner vision shows us a Juan who is struggling hard to repress his un-Giovanni-like inclination towards introspection.

Outwardly, of course, he keeps asserting his traditional lack of reflection and remorse, with present-day variations on Da Ponte's libretto. When Lep urges him to come clean - "With all shit you've done, which was, boss, work of asshole - there is only one thing to do. You make ... Confession!" - Juan lashes out at him in fury, insisting that his sidekick "learn some patience. We hold our nerve, and the whole thing will vanish." His 'art project', moreover, is the product of a male gaze so incessantly locked onto the female object that it never for a moment turns inward. However, when Juan's false promises have lured Elvira away so he can seduce another girl (who is normally her chamber maid, but here seems to be a random girl smoking a cigarette in the street), we

witness the destruction of his work: a blow-up of Elvira's face is consumed by flames. Of course, this underscores the demise of Elvira (who, in Holten's interpretation, actually kills herself shortly after), but it is also the collapse of his 'woman project'.

Indeed, the 'woman project' continues its road to perdition immediately after this shot. Even so, Juan appears incapable of maintaining his focus on the external object of seduction. In the canzonetta ("Deh' vieni a la finestra" / "I gaze at you and wonder"), Holten has Juan spectacularly botch the task of seduction – and not, as is usually the case, because Masetto shows up with his vigilante gang, but simply because he forgets about the object of his seduction. In close-up shots we see how he steps up to the smoking girl from behind, and sings the serenade softly right into her ear, without her turning around. During the second stanza, Juan suddenly starts crying, and as he finishes the serenade and she turns around to obtain the promised kisses, he looks right through her, his eyes brimming with tears. He does not even notice her as she frowns and walks away in disappointment. Why this sudden sentimentality, so powerful that it makes him indifferent to his conquest? The answer is simple: he is profoundly moved by the sound of his own voice. Perhaps the power of song causes him to feel compassion for Elvira, the image of whom flashes by in the middle of the serenade. Or perhaps – and to me, this is the more plausible and interesting reading – the part of himself that he has fought so hard to repress has suddenly returned to occupy the position of the verbally worshipped 'you' in the serenade. The English translation reads thus:

To gaze at you and wonder
that simple pleasure
to see one smile returned
is all I'll ever need
If you deny my soul –
such humble treasure –
before your lovely eyes
my lonely heart will bleed

Your honeyed lips beguile me
eyes enrapture
your skin's heavenly touch
my kiss must discover
don't turn your eyes away
my heart is captured.
Open your arms to me
your wounded lover.

Whereas the wound is a stock image of emasculation and castration angst, Juan is perhaps not so much feminized by this inward turn as he is womanized: it is as if he becomes the object of his own seduction. As his gaze turns inward, away from the female object he is supposedly wooing, his eyes are suddenly riveted to a part of himself that has hitherto been lost inside. The parody is

hilariously effective: it is as if the mumbo-jumbo metaphysics of musical authenticity, which is precisely what that Don Giovanni has always relied upon for his seductions, had finally blown up in his face. The voice of music cannot lie – not even to the singer himself.

The film's focus on Juan's inner conflict is also heightened by the fact that the other characters disappear from the story one by one: Elvira, in a thoroughly unconvincing combination of music and images, drowns herself in a slow and ceremonial fashion while singing "Mi tradì quell'alma ingrata" ("His ungrateful heart deceived me"); unconvinced by Zerlina's excuses, Masetto breaks off the engagement in (what is usually) the finale of Act I and the couple disappear from the action; Anna, meanwhile, accepts her doubts about her relationship and breaks up with Ottavio. Leporello is the last one to leave, but even he throws himself out of Juan's speeding car before it is too late. Ultimately, there is no one left to confront Giovanni in the final scene – except, we would assume, the Commendatore. As it turns out, however, the conventions of cinematic crime drama do not allow for spectral apparitions, and he remains stone dead rather than stone guest.

At certain a number of moments throughout the film – immediately after the murder, then again when he is about to get into a taxi with Zerlina to sing "La ci darem" ("Give me your hand"), during the party at the end of Act I, and once more when he mocks the Commendatore's image in the graveyard scene – a dark, hooded figure appears in the distance. We surmise that his eyes are directed at Juan, who is visibly disturbed by his presence. In the last of these sequences, Juan hears in his head the Commendatore's voice (sung by Eric Halvfarsson), and sees him in repeated flashback shots – yet it is not he, but the hooded figure, who eventually comes to haunt him.

In the final scene, Juan's conflicted psyche takes physical form: on the one hand, we see him speeding along in a stolen Mercedes, on the other hand, we see his interior, represented by the darkness of the warehouse where he was working on his art project. The artist's studio, then, becomes the arena for the return of the repressed, which enters in the guise of the mysterious hooded man. Already at the first line ("Don Giovanni a cenar teco m'invitasti, e son venuto" / "As I promised, we are together. You invite me – and I accept it.") the apparition's identity is given away. Although he tries his best to sound like a menacing bass, there's never any real doubt that it's Maltman's own baritone that calls out to Juan. Nevertheless, Juan is shocked when he suddenly finds himself staring into his own face. Vehemently he continues to claim his unreflective, internal emptiness: "You can't be me", he shouts to himself, "you're nothing." If, in the canzonetta, we witnessed Juan getting seduced by his own voice, in the finale seduction moves towards violation: as the apparition urges him to repent, it goes on to embrace him, locking him in his arms by force. As Maltman answers his own powerful "Yes" with a desperate "No", the overtones of what can only be labelled an autoerotic assault are clearly audible.⁸

The impression from the canzonetta, that Juan seemed to be struck by the power of his own singing, is now literally and explicitly confirmed. At this point, his inner division splits the core of the operatic subject and its erotic appeal: the voice. However obvious the point may be, it must be stressed that this incision is effected by the media-specific possibilities of film: by performing the simple trick of forcing Juan into a violent encounter with his own body and voice, the moving image ruptures not only the psyche of the opera's protagonist, but the very art of opera itself.

3. The Conflicts Converge

In terms of media and genre, as well as in terms of character interiority, Kasper Holten is showing us a deeply self-conscious entity, and one that does not hold together. To point to the mutual mirroring of these two planes is not tantamount to suggesting a hidden unity in Holten's film: in so far as they reflect each other, which I hope I have been able to make plausible, the mirrors remain cracked. My point, then, is not simply that Holten turns Don Giovanni into a conscious and reflective character, thus belying the reading of his nineteenth-century compatriot – which is hardly a rare occurrence in recent productions of this opera – but, that this reflectivity is forced upon him, as it were, by the precarious co-existence of film and opera. In Holten's version, Juan's self-consciousness comes across as a direct effect of the attempted amalgamation of incompatible media conventions. Maltman's Juan *wants* to be a Kierkegaardian force of nature, an unreflective and absolutely victorious ideal of the musical-erotic, but the media-specific characteristics and conventions of film keep intervening: the flashback shots of his victims tear him from the present moment; the close-ups of his facial expressions consistently pull him back from the ideal to the individual; and the trickery of rapid cuts, finally, splits him in two as he stands face-to-face (and voice-to-voice) with himself.

Another way of describing the rift between the media is to align them with their sensory channels: what we hear is the audible aspect of an opera, albeit with a strangely contemporary libretto, and what we see is the visible aspect of a movie thriller. In so far as we adhere to the cliché of hearing being the more interior sense, and vision the more exterior, we might also play with the thought that the film's operatic score is all in the protagonist's mind. From this perspective, he is as much Don Quixote as he is Don Juan, and the film is the aural hallucination of a megalomaniac conceptual artist and womanizer, who, after having attended a performance of *Don Giovanni*, believes himself to be the Don. As hopelessly out of tune with his time as the knight of La Mancha with his, Juan then perceives all the dramatic events of the ensuing days through a distorting filter – not that of chivalric romance, but of eighteenth-century opera. Mozart's music is running like a psycho-diegetic soundtrack in his head, while Leporello performs Sancho Panza's role of a down-to-earth

sidekick to his master's lunatic behaviour. As viewers of the opera film, we have the privilege of perceiving both worlds at once: the external world in all its realistic detail through what we see, and the psychotic, internal through what we hear.

Finally, if we regard Juan's pornographic project as a *mise-en-abyme*, which I think we should, then any judgment the film passes on Juan and his art could also, by extension, apply to the film itself. On this view, the film is putting its own authenticity into question, by asking whether its cinematic mediation of opera is not analogous to the digital simulacra of pornography. Holten's version of *Don Giovanni*, I would suggest, does not really present itself as opera's way forward into the twenty-first century, but rather as a head-on collision between two media that stubbornly hold their ground. "Hear his wild flight; he speeds past himself, ever faster, never pausing", writes Kierkegaard in an image that resonates in the car chase that opens and closes the film (1843/1987: 103). When Juan, in the film's final shot, hurtles the stolen car full-speed into a concrete barricade because he is unable to come to terms with his own inner voice, we are watching the art of opera crash and burn, fuelled by the irresolvable conflict between those elements that Holten's film has tried so hard to weld together. In the end, however, the resulting explosion is as entertaining and thought-provoking as any triumph, and opera is likely to emerge from the wreckage unscathed.

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¹ Julian Rushton has questioned whether we really ought to put much faith in this narrative of the opera’s birth (cf. Rushton 1981: 6f.).

² On the cultural legacy of *Don Giovanni* in the nineteenth century, see Goehr/Herwitz, eds. 2008.

³ The various relations between opera and film have become a wide field of research in its own right. Before Citron’s book, Jeremy Tambling’s *Opera, Ideology and Film* (1987) and the edited collection *A Night in at the Opera* (1994) were important foundational works, and later works of significance include the collection *Between Opera and Cinema* (2002), edited by Jeonwong Joe and Rose Theresa, and Bernhard Kuhn’s *Die Oper im italienischen Film* (2005), as well as Citron’s own follow-up, *When Opera Meets Film* (2010).

⁴ Neither the preoccupation with mediation in general nor the notion of Leporello as a pornographer is a stage novelty anymore. For instance, the 2006 production by Sergio Morabito and Jossi Wieler for the Netherlands Opera has Leporello document the Don’s conquests with a home-movie camera, the results of which form a catalogue in the guise of Kodak boxes. In the Morabito/Wieler production, it is the medium of television – in particular 1960s-style soap opera – that is merging with opera (see Will 2011).

⁵ For an exchange that exemplifies the arguments that typically circulate in this debate, see Treadwell 1998 and Levin 1998. Persuasive arguments in favour of studying live opera videos and DVD recordings from a media-specific perspective can be found in Levin 2007, Senici 2010.

⁶ For different takes on the connection between operatic performance and eroticism, see Abel 1997, Koestenbaum 1993/2001, and Risi 2006.

⁷ I am using the terms ‘diegetic’ and ‘non-diegetic’ in the sense that they are employed by Claudia Gorbman in *Unheard Melodies* (1987). For discussions of the many possible ways of refining and challenging this basic distinction, see the essays by Stokes and Wolf in this volume.

⁸ In Holten’s version, any idea of Juan being a rapist is otherwise absent, which is quite problematic. The film consistently presents the allegations of sexual assault as fictional inventions by the purported victims. Not only Anna’s testimony of Juan’s assault on her is turned into a lie – and this has been the standard choice in contemporary productions for some time now – but also Zerlina’s screams in the first-act finale: in Holten’s version, she calculatingly calls for help without Juan having touched her, as a part of her strategy to win back Masetto’s sympathies.