

Jelena Novak

## Televisual Opera After TV

This study is an attempt to illuminate ways of transforming and commenting on televisual expression (especially documentary and news) in recent opera pieces, and to investigate if/how anything like television opera will continue to exist at the time as this medium goes through significant change. The context relevant for opera in the age ‘after television’ is determined by (1) the crisis of television as a medium and (2) the proliferation of contemporary opera in the age of new media. I will briefly discuss this context before investigating how and why John Adams and Peter Sellars’s ‘CNN operas’, Steve Reich and Beryl Korot’s ‘video-documentary operas’, Jacob Ter Veldhuis’s ‘reality opera’, and Michel van der Aa’s ‘one-minute operas’ might be also perceived as television operas, and how they are defined by the medium of television and contemporary televisual culture in general.

By the time the first television opera emerged – Gian Carlo Menotti’s *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (1951)<sup>1</sup> – the medium of television was already well established and there were no profound doubts regarding how it operates and what it is. In contrast, according to recent research in the area of television studies, the medium is currently undergoing significant changes, and more than a few scholars are writing about its end. It has been pronounced that it is a “medium that runs the risk of becoming obsolete.”<sup>2</sup> However, ‘the crisis’ is also questioned and “perhaps paradoxically, the question ‘what is television?’ has gained relevance as the medium falls into demise.”<sup>3</sup> Marijke de Valck and Jan Teurlings map the views of various authors in television studies to compare what the television used to be and what it becomes:

[F]rom network to multi-channel environment, from broadcasting to narrowcasting, from scarcity to plenty, from collectivist to individualist medium, from analogue to digital, from nationally oriented to globalized, from programmers’ flow to on-demand view-

<sup>1</sup> The institution producing it was NBC Opera Theatre (1949–1964), established to produce the repertory of the operas conceived for television. Also see Barbara Dietlinger’s article in this volume, pp. 23–42.

<sup>2</sup> Marijke de Valck, Jan Teurlings (eds.), *After the Break*, Amsterdam 2013, pp. 7–8.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

ing and metadata protocols, or as a mutation in regimes of immersion.<sup>4</sup>

While television faces a transformation and even crisis, opera lives its rich ‘afterlife’. With live opera broadcastings from prestigious opera houses, wide availability of opera recordings, opera installations,<sup>5</sup> reinvention of the opera in the age of new media,<sup>6</sup> and vibrant activity in the field of opera studies, it seems that opera was never as alive as it is today. The scene of contemporary opera is particularly dispersed and broad, and is still hard to map, because there is no clear institutional structure involved. Even if one travels internationally and establishes a network of institutions and contacts, the scene can be followed in only a fragmented fashion. ‘Post-opera’, opera beyond drama, opera that is at the same time postmodern and postdramatic, is often not performed in existing opera houses: productions can be found in theatres or galleries, but also in site-specific areas like old factories, botanical gardens, trains and boats, train stations, swimming pools, old churches and TV studios.<sup>7</sup>

The impact of new media on the world of opera is significant. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, electronic and digital media and technologies significantly influenced opera in many ways. New media in opera opened up possibilities for reconsideration of the need for opera to be witnessed and brought changes in its spectatorship. The problematizing of ‘live’-ness became incorporated into the concept of some operas. For example, when Glass’s opera for ensemble and film *La Belle et la Bête* (1994) is performed live, the silent film is synchronized with singers and musicians singing and playing live on stage, lip-synching the film. In the DVD version of this opera, the previously live audio synchronization is captured on a recording and the DVD could then be considered to be the only necessary medium for the piece.

The impact of new media on operatic texts, redefining both the languages’ materiality and the way they are structured, is significant.<sup>8</sup> Among

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> The number of installations that use opera as an inspiration or material is increasing – for example, *Opera for a Small Room* (2005) by Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, *The Opera of Prehistoric Creatures* (2012) by Marguerite Humeau, and the desk opera *Remember Me* (2012) by Claudia Molitor. See also Ulrike Hartung’s article in this volume, pp. 145–158.

<sup>6</sup> For example: *Invisible Cities, opera for headphones* (2013), by Yuval Sharon and Christopher Cerrone.

<sup>7</sup> For more details about postopera see my book *Postopera: Reinventing the Voice-Body*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Under the notion of ‘text’ I understand “A group of entities used as signs, which are selected, arranged, and intended by an author in a certain context to convey a

other thing, it has made the body-voice relation in opera increasingly problematic. Video is becoming an inseparable part of many works. The status of opera directors is changing, and it is becoming more important that composer and director share authorship of a work, as happened with *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) by Robert Wilson and Philip Glass. Leading directors figures have come to opera from other fields, such as film (Peter Greenaway, Hal Hartley), architecture and visual arts (Robert Wilson), video (Beryl Korot), and theatre (Peter Sellars, Heiner Goebbels). For the first time in opera they share an equal authority with the composer, importing representational procedures and technology that until now have not been common on the opera stage. In that context, the role that screens and videos play in a large number of contemporary opera productions is significant. The relationship between opera and film is intensified in various ways. For example, the ‘film opera’ *La Commedia* (2004–8) by Louis Andriessen and Hal Hartley merges film projection, opera performance, and video projections in complex ways, Olga Neuwirth’s opera *Lost Highway* (2002–3) is based on the film by David Lynch, Michel van der Aa’s opera *After Life* (2005–6) is inspired by the film by Hirokazu Kore-Eda, and Kasper Holten’s film *Juan* (2010) deconstructs and reinvents Mozart’s famous opera *Don Giovanni* (1787) on film.

Some critics marked the first television opera *Amahl* not as TV opera, but as an opera for television. Jennifer Barnes, in her pioneering study about television opera, tackles this discussion.<sup>9</sup> With this in mind, I wonder what the definition of television opera would be nowadays when the television medium itself is changing. For example, Robert Ashley’s emblematic piece *Perfect Lives* (1978–83), a rare contemporary work that directly questions the issues related to connections between opera and TV, has been called ‘opera for television’. The pieces I will analyze are connected with television in various ways that question the medium of television, the medium of opera, or both. My attention is focused on what could be called ‘operatizing television’ in the age after TV. I am interested in works by the authors that build their (post)operas upon media events, and principally TV news events, questioning the aesthetics of televisual expression.

Maybe the most obvious examples to illustrate this are the operas by John Adams – *Nixon in China* (1987) and *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991) – based on ‘news events’: Richard Nixon’s visit to China, and the murder of Leon Klinghoffer, a disabled American, executed and thrown over-

specific meaning to an audience.” (Jorge J. E. Gracia, *Texts, Ontological Status, Identity, Author, Audience*, Albany 1996, p. 9).

<sup>9</sup> Jennifer Barnes, *Television Opera: The Fall of Opera Commissioned for Television*, Suffolk 2003, p. 2.

board by Palestinian terrorists who hijacked the cruise ship Achille Lauro in 1985. At the time these operas appeared they were labeled ‘CNN operas’ in a somewhat pejorative manner. Peter G. Davies, New York magazine’s music critic, was first to use the label ‘CNN opera’ in the 1980s. He actually used the phrase “CNN School of Opera”, “where music theater works were based on the lives of real individuals and often built around political events.”<sup>10</sup> However, not only did these works take TV events as their basis (especially *Nixon* – news reports about Richard Nixon’s historical visit to China), the way the events are elaborated in the opera also questions the medium of television news. Opera starts to look like and to ‘behave’ as television, although it is not itself conceived for the television medium.

The ‘CNN opera’ label still produces contradictory reactions. The music critic of the Los Angeles Times, Mark Swed, criticized it when writing about the 2010 Los Angeles Opera premiere of *Nixon in China*: “Anyone who took a close look at ‘Nixon in China’ discovered that it was not ‘CNN opera’, despite the historical accuracy of the libretto: It was a boldly anti-CNN opera. Its concern was everything that they didn’t tell you on television.”<sup>11</sup> I agree with this on the level of the events that were depicted for the libretto, since there are poetical accounts of the emotional worlds of principal characters. However, the driver of Sellars’s visual expression in his direction indeed was the televised visuality of Richard Nixon’s historical visit to China and his talks with Mao Tse-tung. The images and situations that dominated in his direction of *Nixon* were based on TV and newspapers documentary material in relation to the subject. I see his staging as not about the event itself, but about how this historic diplomatic visit was known through television and newspapers. This staging shows that the main event was not what had really happened in China (this is probably known only to the protagonists of the visit themselves); the main event for Sellars was how television and other media represented this visit for Western society. Sellars’s staging even re-enacts some of the famous news images of the event, such as the airport pictures of the first meeting of two delegations of politicians.

Some more recent stagings of *Nixon*, such as the 2012 Eugene Opera production directed by Sam Helfrich, appear to estrange themselves from Sellars’s original intentions. Characters represented in this production are “buoyed by music and poetry, are more mythological or archetypal than

<sup>10</sup> This is quoted in William Schoell, *The Opera of the Twentieth Century: A Passionate Art in Transition*, Jefferson, NC 2006, p. 194.

<sup>11</sup> Mark Swed, “Nixon in China is neglected no longer”, in: *Los Angeles Times*, March 7, 2010, <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/mar/07/entertainment/la-ca-nixon-china7-2010mar07> (Accessed: May 17, 2015).

historical figures”,<sup>12</sup> which, according to Mark Mandel, proves that Helfrich and his team, while maintaining a realistic style, distanced their production from news-footage accuracy and from the literalism of the original Peter Sellars staging.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately I didn’t have the opportunity to see Helfrich’s staging, and I am curious about a *Nixon in China* that has been ‘cleaned’ of the TV images featured by Peter Sellars. The significant degree of irony contained in Sellars’s original direction of *Nixon* is contained precisely in his view of the television images transported from news reports to the opera stage. So it must be a challenge to stage *Nixon* without Sellars’s references to the mass media coverage of the event.

In light of these discussions in the rest of the text I focus my attention on several recent postoperas whose different relationships to the medium of television I find significant for interrogating the status and function of the productive relationship between television and opera. My first example is the video documentary opera *Three Tales* (1998–2002) by Steve Reich and Beryl Korot. Another example is a reality opera, *The News* (2011) by Jacob ter Veldhuis (Jacob TV). Finally, I will discuss five one-minute operas, produced from 2010 to 2014, commissioned for the Dutch TV program *Der Wereld Draait Door* by Michel van der Aa. *Three Tales* is inspired by the events that show how technology influences mankind. However, depicted events are at the same time media events. Both Jacob ter Veldhuis and Michel van der Aa take news events in their operas, but elaborate them in quite different ways. Ter Veldhuis develops an ongoing ‘reality opera’ that changes its editions from performance to performance. The choice of media events changes too in various versions. Van der Aa makes five one-minute contemporary ‘operatic caricatures’, which might be seen as loaded portraits of persons and/or events that had a widespread national or international impact in the media.

What is in common to all the operas I discuss is a documentary approach to their subjects, although on a very different levels. They all seem to deal with a documentary dimension television programs often incorporate. None of these pieces were called television operas by their authors, but I find in their structures, functions, and effects reasons to analyze them in the context of televisual opera after TV.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Mandel, “Nixon in China”, [http://www.operanews.com/Opera\\_News\\_Magazine/2012/6/Reviews/EUGENE,\\_OR\\_\\_Nixon\\_in\\_China.html](http://www.operanews.com/Opera_News_Magazine/2012/6/Reviews/EUGENE,_OR__Nixon_in_China.html) (Accessed: May 17, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Peter Sellars co-authored the first production of *Nixon in China* with John Adams and librettist Alice Goodman. His role could be seen as dramaturge of the piece, as well as director of the original production.

*Video-Documentary Opera*

In both of their video-documentary operas *The Cave* (1993) and *Three Tales* Steve Reich and Beryl Korot are occupied with subjects connected to the global distribution of power, whether through religion or technology. When *The Cave* is performed live with the ensemble on stage it includes video images projected on five screens distributed throughout the performance space. The piece can also be presented as a kind of opera installation including five TV screens on which videos playing the music of *The Cave* are shown.

Like *The Cave*, *Three Tales* is also called video-documentary opera. Although *Three Tales* can be performed live, with ensemble and the video on stage, since there is a commercially available DVD, the necessity to experience this piece live is minimized. Video conveys the sequence of events, and the singers sing along with it, over the gap between the physicality of the voice they produce and the meaning of the words that are inscribed on the video. The singers are in the opera, like the members of the ensemble, but are not 'of the opera'; they are not opera characters, and therefore not incorporated into the 'story' that is being 'told' by the video. The voice appears between its semantic and fetishistic functions, which are both questioned: the voice sounds monstrous, which reduces its seducing fetishistic potentiality, and the meaning of the text does not need to be understood from the voice, since the sung text can be simultaneously read from the screen. By 'monstrous' voice I refer to the effect that 'reworks' the voice produced by human larynx, so that the final vocal result in this case sounds unsettling, a kind of roaring, an unhuman product.<sup>14</sup>

There are no roles; the singing bodies of this opera function as mere generators of voice, as 'singing machines'. In this case, by 'singing machines' I refer to the remarkable fragment of the third act, Dolly, where Richard Dawkins's speech on machines is looped, so that he appears absurdly repeating the word 'machines', thereby almost becoming one himself. Otherwise, the whole tissue of this postopera is 'machinized' by Reich's specific relationship to the voice and its transformations beyond the singing body by 'slow-motion' and 'freeze-frame' sound procedures.

The media, technology, and political events that are the subject of *Three Tales* marked the twentieth century: the explosion of the zeppelin Hindenburg in New Jersey in 1937, announcing the approach of World

<sup>14</sup> For more details see: Jelena Novak, "Monsterization of Singing: Politics of Vocal Existence", in: *New Sound: International Magazine for Music* 36 (2010), no. 2, pp. 101–119. The article is available online, accessed April 4, 2014, <http://www.newsound.org.rs/en/pdfs/ns36/09%20Core%20Novak%20101-119.pdf>, or the book *Postopera: Reinventing the Voice-Body* (Ashgate, 2015).

War II (Act I, Hindenburg); the atomic explosions from 1946 to 1952 on Bikini Atoll during the Cold War (Act II, Bikini); and the cloning of the sheep Dolly in Scotland in 1997, which symbolizes technology entering the body and modifying life itself (Act III, Dolly). These events are loaded with political connotations. The authors comment on the extreme development and usage of technology during the twentieth century and criticize Western contemporary society over ethical issues. At the same time, however, *Three Tales* itself is made with the high-level technology reshaping the opera world, since its visuals and its music are created by complex digital procedures.

The videos used in this opera have a considerable televisual dimension. The crash of zeppelin Hindenburg was one of the first disasters to be captured in real time – on video, radio and in photographs. Korot uses the original documentary images of this catastrophe and manipulates them in the video, but the video material's documentary dimension remains dominant. The voice that is heard speaking belongs to the radio announcer Herbert Morrison. On May 6, 1937, Morrison was supposed to report from Lakehurst about the landing of the Hindenburg airship, and his story started out as an ordinary description of the event. However, suddenly the Hindenburg bursted in flames and Morrison continued to report over that dramatic development. The recording became a classic of audio history: it combined the urgency of disaster with both emotional shock and professional reporting by Morrison. Morrison's eyewitness audio report was later synchronized with the film footages of the disaster, to produce a televisual dimension. The poignancy of this recording attracted Reich and Korot's attention. They used both the audio and the video in Act I, restructuring it by slow-motion sound and freeze-frame sound procedures, repeating fragments, and 'zooming in' to parts of particular interest.

The documentary video material used in Act II (Bikini), which includes images of natives of Bikini who are forced to move from their island because of the nuclear tests and of the American soldiers who manage the moving, has been reworked by Korot's interventions in the video, and Reich's interventions in the audio recordings and live singing that accompany them. The third act (Dolly) was made as a combination of fragments from video interviews. Korot and Reich depicted top-class scientists involved in questions of cloning and how technology affects the human body. They juxtapose scientific accounts of the cloning with the views of the religious experts. The way video interviews are edited is questioned by the interventions that Reich makes into the recorded speeches.

In *Three Tales* the structure of the dramatic texts is fragmentary, and the composer embeds the melody of these fragmented parts in the music structure he composed using electronic devices as an aid. Techniques of

changing and deforming the vocal sphere in *Three Tales* coincide with Reich and Korot's critique of producing the monstrous, or 'deviating' the human as a clone, robot, machine. *Three Tales* deals with issues of science, technology, politics, and their intersections and interrogations, and appears as a polemical case study for further discussing the issue of rethinking the human through body-voice relations in postopera.

By commenting the political distribution of power, Reich and Korot question if today, it is at all possible for the artist to act as a political individual, and if so, what the strategies and effects of that activism should be. The video-documentary opera *Three Tales* raises questions about political activism in opera. Its creators make their operatic work a field to express their acts as political individuals. They express resistance to the governing platforms of political power and disagreement with the conditions, effects, and strategies of contemporary Western civilization's use of technology. Using the 'monstrous' singing voice and intervening in the recorded video interviews makes it possible to perform an opera spectacle that becomes the place for an outspoken critique of society.

#### *Reality Opera: The News*

Dutch composer Jacob ter Veldhuis also uses opera as a platform for social critique. He is interested in power of the televised news and he develops operatic critique of contemporary television expression in his recent music theatre piece *The News* (2011). To some extent, the way he intervenes in recorded audio materials is similar to the way Steve Reich uses speech melodies and rhythms, importing, repeating, and developing them in the instrumental environment. However, the news subjects these two artists depict, and the ways they intervene in the materials, are quite different. Reich's approach is loaded with irony and sharp critique, and Ter Veldhuis's view is more on the side of parody, making the grotesque caricature of the aesthetics of TV news in general.

Here is how Ter Veldhuis describes *The News* in the program notes of one of the performances:

A reality opera in which live music is synchronized with non-fiction footage from the international media, based on speech grooves. (...) The drama is constructed using broadcasts from newscasters, politicians, scientists, televangelists, athletes, movie stars and celebrities discussing a vast array of socio-political issues, from global warming to the credit crunch, as well as matters of war

and peace to trivialities, thus exposing our western society's obsession with public image, fame, catastrophe and morality.<sup>15</sup>

Singers perform alongside the video, their vocal parts 'commenting' on it. These musical comments, musical fragments, react to the heard speech rhythm and melody, repeating, emphasizing, or deforming its documentary dimension. And what is on the video? Short excerpts of speeches of various personalities from the spheres of politics (Nicolas Sarkozy, Vladimir Putin, etc.), religion (the Dalai Lama, pope Benedict XVI), the business world, and show business (Lady Gaga), as well as some anonymous people reporting on world conflicts (Somalia) or global warming. Ter Veldhuis obviously picks up television excerpts that are typical of media spectacle related to late-capitalist societies.

Like TV programs that have different editions for broadcasting via different national networks, reality opera *The News* also has different editions for performing on different occasions. Its variants change from performance to performance, including different TV news events. The piece is a work in progress. Thus there is *The News Opera Edition* and *The News Piece Edition*. However, in these different versions the two singers always appear on stage accompanied by the ensemble and the accompanying television excerpts online in the same way. The vocal parts of the singers are deeply reliant on the intonation, melody, and timbre of the voices of the protagonists in the video/TV excerpts.

Ter Veldhuis's program note appears as a kind of manifesto for contemporary TV opera. It reveals the economy of television image/sound as its inspiration:

THE NEWS is a never ending opera, constantly updated, because news is temporary and news-value never lasts long. However, instead of keeping up with the speed of overwhelming quantities of 'daily news', we pick footage that in our opinion has a timeless quality, rather than striving for actuality. And like journalists, I must admit, also artists are manipulating, turning news into the libretto for an opera ...<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> From program notes of 2012 *The News* performances in Chicago and Rome provided for this article in digital form by the composer.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.



Figure 1: Jacob ter Veldhuis, *The News*, edition 2014<sup>17</sup>

The form of the opera is that of collage. Segments follow each other in what appears to be an arbitrary order. Maybe the best way to describe what this opera looks like is to say that it resembles singing TV news. The performance is composed of a series of TV news inserts that are desynchronized with the singing/playing ensemble on stage (Figure 1).

Ter Veldhuis calls his piece a ‘reality opera’; he finds its ‘realism’ in the connection of its singing melodies with the speech melodies from international news:

THE NEWS is a reality opera, because it is entirely based on the melody of speech from the international media. When I listen to speech, I hear rhythms and melodies all the time. By analyzing speech and translating it into musical notation, it becomes the leitmotif for the music. As a composer, I can even derive harmonies from speech, because people speak in different keys! By literally zooming in on speech from everyday life, I try to zoom in on people’s thoughts and feelings and meanings.<sup>18</sup>

When *The News* is compared with how Steve Reich treats voices in *Three Tales*, what is obvious is that Reich sometimes makes the voices sound ‘monstrous’, as though they were not produced by the human body, by using slow-motion sound and freeze-frame sound procedures. That is not the case with *The News*. The vocal sphere of *The News* is composed in two ‘layers’. First, the voices that originally exist on the video are changed – vocal lines are repeated various times quickly, ‘percussionized’, and affected by different montages of the sound heard in the excerpts. Second, the vocal lines of the two singers emphasize, exaggerate, imitate, and basically go ‘beyond’ the voices from the documentary excerpts. This way, the ‘vocal realism’ of the existent video excerpts is changed both by manipula-

<sup>17</sup> Photo by Marco Borggreve with permission of Nationale Reisopera.

<sup>18</sup> From program notes of 2012 *The News* performances in Chicago and Rome provided for this article in digital form by the composer.

tion of the excerpt, and by the commentary on it by the two vocal lines on stage.

Unlike the vocal sphere of *Three Tales*, which is ‘monsterized’, in *The News* the vocal sphere becomes ‘pop’ in a kind of sensationalist and trivialized manner. Having in mind the fact that the excerpts selected show the sensationalization of media culture and everyday life, the vocal commentary in *The News* makes this culture even more sensational. Ter Veldhuis insists on the grotesque dimension of the audiovisual material. He brilliantly depicts the most trivial or absurd part of the news, and further uses it for loops of melodized repetition. In contrast, Reich’s way of representing and commenting on the speakers whose attitudes he finds to be problematic – especially in Act III, Dolly (the scientists and religious experts interviewed) – is based on ‘zooming in’ their voices by slowing them down, freezing them, or mechanically repeating what they say. He criticizes the scientists by confronting their views with religious views. I don’t find humor in his acts; instead, some serious irony is present. And maybe it is this ironic impulse that led him to make the scientists sound like singing machines in *Three Tales*. Ter Veldhuis makes some of the protagonists of the depicted TV images sound ridiculous; his approach is often full of humor. He exaggerates the protagonists’ vocal abilities, making them sound over-produced: they become singing caricatures.

#### *Singing Caricatures: One-Minute Operas*

Singing caricatures are also a field of interest for Michel van der Aa. His operatic caricatures are also full of criticism of media, power, and society, but are realized in quite a different manner than Veldhuis’s. In 2010 one of the most popular Dutch television talk shows, *De Wereld Draait Door* (The World Keeps Turning) by public broadcaster VARA, TV Channel NPO 1, started commissioning one-minute operas to be performed live in their program. At time of writing, fifteen one-minute operas labeled as ‘actuele opera’ are archived on the station’s website.<sup>19</sup> The cycle started on September 22, 2010 with the piece *De Formatie* by Micha Hamel, which is about the formation of the cabinet in 2010 by Dutch politicians Mark Rutte, Maxime Verhagen, Geert Wilders, and Job Cohen. Judging by this first work in the cycle, it was clear what the producers of the series wanted – short operatic commentary about actual political and media events. Immediately, the next one-minute opera extended the scope from the Dutch political scene to that of international media events. This was a

<sup>19</sup> <http://dewerelddraaitdoor.vara.nl/rubrieken/actuele-opera> (Accessed: July 6, 2015).

piece by Michel van der Aa inspired by tragedy of Chilean miners and media coverage of that event (*With my Ear to the Ground*, October 13, 2010). The series continued with:

- *Vesuvius, 1927* (November 1, 2010) by Caliope Tsoupaki, which was a kind of obituary of Dutch writer Harry Mulish
- *Van het Vergeten* (November 19, 2010.) by Michel van der Aa, about Dutch right-wing party leader Geert Wilders and his moral horizons
- *Altijd Samen* (February 11, 2011) by Bob Zimmerman, focusing on the fall of Mubarak in Egypt
- *Het verraad der klerken* (April 22, 2011) by Joey Roukens, commenting on the bitter destiny of an Afganistan soldier hero
- *Bericht van een aangekondigde dood* (May 2, 2011) by Theo Lovendie, about the death of Osama Bin Laden
- *Het Cijferspel* (November 14, 2011) by Merlijn Twaalfhoven, featuring the character of Silvio Berlusconi resigning as premier of Italy
- *Willem Holleeder* (January 27, 2012), again by Van der Aa, which dares to comment the release of notorious Dutch criminal Willem Holleeder from prison
- *God, Vaderland en Oranje* (September 13, 2012), also by Van der Aa, which poses questions in relation to the position of the monarch in The Netherlands
- *Klootzakken* (October 11, 2012) by Twaalfhoven, about the fall of cycling star Lance Armstrong
- *Vermoorde Onschuld* (October 30, 2012), by Florian Maier, inspired by professional shame of Dutch lawyer Bram Moszkowicz
- *Vlucht MH 370* (March 20, 2014), Van der Aa's piece about Malaysia Airlines' mysteriously lost flight
- *Wubbo Ockels* (May 19, 2014), by Reza Namavar, which illuminates the life and deeds of a recently deceased Dutch astronaut
- *Het Joodse Bruidje van Rembrandt* (February 2, 2015) by Arnoud Noordegraaf, referring to *Jewish Bride*, the famous painting by Rembrandt van Rijn, painted around 1667.

I proceed with close reading of the pieces by Van der Aa because I think they question the relationship between the 'live', actual, documentary, and reproduced in most striking ways. After creating several larger opera works – *One* (2002), *After Life* (2005–2006), music theatre for actor, ensemble and film *The Book of Disquiet* (2008), film opera *Sunken Garden* (2011–2012) – Van der Aa accomplished the tour de force of composing, filming, editing, and rehearsing an opera of about minute in duration all in

one day (in 24 hrs or on the same day of the broadcast), with the pieces *With My Ear to the Ground* (2010),<sup>20</sup> *Van het Vergeten (Of the Forgotten)*, (2010),<sup>21</sup> *Willem Holleeder* (2012),<sup>22</sup> *God, Vaderland en Oranje (God, Homeland and Oranje*, 2012),<sup>23</sup> *Vlucht MH370 (Flight MH 370*, 2014).<sup>24</sup> The libretti of all of them are in Dutch. The subjects depicted are public events that attracted strong media attention, either internationally or on the national level.

Both the Chilean mining disaster and the disappearance of flight MH 370 turned out to be not only catastrophes, and later media events, but also events that started to mirror the political powers of the different parties involved. In both these cases the unusual circumstances that surrounded the events and the wide scope of catastrophe provoked widespread speculation and a questioning of power positions on the national but also the global level. Those events were largely covered in the media, and television played a prominent role in them.

For example, the final operation to rescue Chilean miners was followed by thousands on an international television broadcast. Thirty-three miners were trapped seven hundred meters below the ground in an accident, and were only rescued after sixty-nine days. The media also followed the personal stories of some of the protagonists in the catastrophe. From the libretto it seems that Van der Aa aimed his criticism precisely at this dimension of the media event:

WOMAN

With my ear to the ground. As if I could hear you. I've made your favorite dish. Will you kiss me later? With the cameras present?

MAN

I have to go up. To where the light is.

The man, the last one to be rescued, sings about how he has to go up where the light is, while at the same time the woman sings about their reunion. Both the man and the woman are singing simultaneously. However, he sings from the screen, pre-recorded, while she sings with him live

<sup>20</sup> Scored for mezzosoprano (Tania Kross), actor (Thom Hoffman), positive organ (Jeroen Bal); composition, film: Michel van der Aa, libretto: Nico Dijkshoorn.

<sup>21</sup> Libretto: Adriaan van Dis; composition, film: Michel van der Aa; design: Maarten Cornet.

<sup>22</sup> Text: Tommy Wieringa; music: Michel van der Aa; performers: Tiemo Wang and vocalists VocaalLAB.

<sup>23</sup> Libretto: Felix Rottenberg; pictures: Museum Geelvinck Hinlopen Huis aan de Keizersgracht in Amsterdam.

<sup>24</sup> Libretto: Beatrice de Graaf; baritone: Martijn Sanders; soprano: Nora Fischer; string quartet: Het Dudok Kwartet; double bass: Marijn van Prooijen; music: Michel van der Aa.

in the TV studio. Thus, the operatic situation is obtained, as in Van der Aa's opera *One*, from the simultaneous performing of the screen and live singers. The woman's question "With the cameras present?" finishes her line, and this seems to be the most prominent line in the libretto. It calls for discussion in relation to how the media change events and their aura. An intimate kiss stops being just that when it is transmitted worldwide. Trivialization and sensationalism are the focus here; the wife of the tragically trapped miner appears as tabloid figure. Raising the discussion of this one-minute opera to another level, I wonder if this whole piece is a simulation of tabloid principles. The artist's consciousness of it is contained in the woman's question about "cameras present." So this need to play with and criticize the sensationalist side of television journalism might be highlighted as one of the features of television opera after TV.

In the one-minute opera *Flight MH 370* librettist Beatrice de Graaf imagines a rather transcendent conversation between the female flight controller and the male pilot of flight MH 370. The controller, appearing to be concerned, sings live in the TV studio with headphones on her ears asking the pilot why the flight is heading westwards, off course. While she sings, we see the cockpit and radar equipment on the screen behind her. She twice asks: "Are you there?" ("Ben je daar?"). Then we see on the screen the singing character of the pilot, who responds from the cockpit. The insert was filmed in a flight simulator and it strongly resembles re-enactments of air disasters depicted by the popular Canadian documentary TV program *Mayday*, also known as *Air Crash Investigation*. In this program re-enactments of situations in relation to air crash events are often used, as well as interviews with aviation experts, retired pilots, and crash investigators. The aim of the series is to reconstruct what happened in certain air crash cases, why it happened and how it could have been prevented.

In Van der Aa's opera the pilot responds to the controller's question by singing "All right, goodnight," and the piece finishes. The controller's unanswered question stays in the air, and captures the grimy atmosphere of this mystery catastrophe, which remains unresolved. The *Mayday Air Crash Investigation* television program is the striking reference here. The one-minute opera performed in the television studio live presents itself as singing re-enactment of a popular television documentary about airplane crashes that also uses re-enactments of aviation industry situations. This double re-enactment, self-referentiality, is also one of the features that characterizes 'television opera after TV'.

Van der Aa's three other one-minute operas illuminate issues in relation to Dutch society. These three pieces might be called 'national one-minute TV operas'. In contrast to the two operas previously discussed, in these pieces the figures of very different leaders are examined. One needs

to be informed about the nature and impact of these events in Dutch society in order to get the layers of meaning embedded in those short but dense one-minute operas.

In 2012 Queen Beatrix had suffered a debilitation of her political power; the Dutch parliament revoked the advisory role the queen used to have in the formation of a new cabinet. Van der Aa's opera takes as its formal frame the queen's Christmas address, and embeds some irony in it. The figure of the queen appears on the screen in the studio and live singing in the studio at the same time. The two queen figures – in the studio and on the video – are played by the same person, they are dressed in the same way, and the merging of the projected image and the scenography in the studio gives the illusion that they are sitting at the same table (Figure 2). This appears as a reference to Van der Aa's opera *One*, in which he strongly problematized issues of the singing body on stage and on the screen, and the ways in which the voice and the body are upgraded by technology.<sup>25</sup>



Figure 2: Michel van der Aa, one-minute opera  
*God, Homeland and Oranje* (2012)<sup>26</sup>

Felix Rottenberg's libretto for this one-minute opera, makes it clear that his intention was to critically outline the issue of Queen's power:

God, Fatherland and *Oranje*<sup>27</sup>  
 Real contact originates in deeds and words.  
 Grandmother and mother have told me  
 that on us God's wisdom was bestowed.  
 It is insane that I have been put aside

<sup>25</sup> For more details about Van der Aa's *One* see Novak, *Postopera* (footnote 7).

<sup>26</sup> Commissioned by the TV program *De Werelt Draait Door*, video still. Courtesy of the author.

<sup>27</sup> The Dutch royal line is the House of Orange.

and am no longer allowed to open the black box  
Who doesn't engage in dialogue excludes himself.

The first verse of the libretto is a quote from Queen Beatrix's 2009 speech. According to Frits van der Waa, the third verse is a double-entendre on the biblical 'God-given wisdom', and the last verse is again a quotation from the 2009 speech, used as a hint that the politicians exclude themselves by not wanting to deal with the Queen anymore.<sup>28</sup> Opera in this case appears as a platform for sung 'loaded portraits' that, like a kind of singing caricature, show features of their subjects in a simplified or exaggerated way. Thus, Queen Beatrix is represented in a classic outfit, with her typical hairstyle, with romantic landscapes in the background that usually suggest the arousal of 'homeland' feelings. Her figure appears divided, between stage and screen, but also between a charismatic leader of a modern and prosperous nation and a monarchy protagonist who is supposed to defend conservative values.

The visual language used in the film recalls that of kitchen-sink drama, but since here it is a royal character that is being portrayed, this approach appears provocative. Kitchen-sink realism was a kind of social realism that often represented working-class domestic situations. To use this visual style in a royal context creates a parody. This might be called monarchical realism. And the question of realism in opera is always the 'impossible one'. Even when the characters visually appear in situations identical to those in real life, the singing destroys the illusion of realism. In the case of television opera after TV, and its visual documentary dimension, the mismatch between the realism of documentary image and the singing voice is the field that is interrogated.

In case of the figures of 'problematic' leaders – Holleeder and Wilders – Van der Aa depicts quite different personalities. The character of Holleeder is shown with his motorbike on the stage of the TV studio: the hero in black, with several girls and a man around him (forming a choir). Toward the end of the one-minute piece his live presence on the bike is juxtaposed by the video of him on his speedy vehicle on screen. He sings about himself as a strong and brave man. Holleeder appears as a typical macho figure.

Wilders' character, however, is in bed; he sings live in his pajamas and is shown constantly falling asleep and being awakened by his mobile phone, whose text message alarm sound actually outlines the structure of the piece. The character's lines disclose his political incorrectness. The

<sup>28</sup> The translation in English and comments that reveal the context of libretto were provided by Amsterdam-based musicologist, translator, and music critic Frits van der Waa for the purpose of this article.

opera ends with a ‘unison’ of the character in the TV studio and one that appears on the screen of the mobile phone, singing “Power off.” I read this “power off” as a fragment with a double meaning. Its obvious meaning relates indeed to the mobile phone use depicted on screen. But “power off” could also be read as a call to take the power from the right-wing leader, to shut down his power.

Van der Aa’s approach to the critique of society through operatic public space is sharp and efficient. He makes operatic representations of picturesque media events using an effective combination of live performance and video, thus simulating particular news events transmitted by television, re-using them in the context of one-minute operas performed and broadcast live in a television studio.

### *Conclusion*

Comparing approaches to operatizing televisual expression by various authors – Adams/Sellars, Reich/Korot, Ter Veldhuis, and Van der Aa – an interesting spectrum of strategies appears. All the examples are loaded with critique of both the video and audio representation of TV news events. Reich and Korot’s approach is highly ironic and critical towards Western society and its use of technology; their standpoint is a satirical one. Both Sellars’s and Ter Veldhuis’s approaches are more like parody. They both laugh at television, to the objects of its reporting, and to all of us who watch it. They make television’s expression look silly, sung in the opera, but at the same time their laugh is not a happy one, it is rather melancholic. Finally, Van der Aa is critical of the TV news issues he depicts while at the same time he reinvents televisual expression through operatic ‘machine’ and re-uses it in context of television. All these examples, when viewed in the context of television opera, contribute to a broadening of that context. A more appropriate name for them in this context might be televisual opera: opera that makes television operatic. If nothing else, the crisis of television as a medium has obviously created a fertile ground for examining, expanding, and operatizing its aesthetics.