OPERA, MYTH, SOCIETY: HOW DO THEY CORRELATE?[*]

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Abstract. The paper examines some mythical aspects of social representations of opera, and is supported by examples from the Slovenian operatic environment. The argumentation rests on three key premises: firstly, considering the mass of words and images which surround the opera phenomenon in public spheres, it is strange that there is a relatively small number of interpretations of the opera which would surpass the canonised notions, such as opera as a work of art, as heavenly music, as "high culture", as a phantasmagoric world, and, particularly, as a "national thing", etc. The world of production of modern mythologies within the context of the contemporary westernised societies likes to connect the operatic arena with some "mythical" ritualisation of "national societies", which all have placed the opera on an incontestable pedestal of "representative art", "elite culture" or "national tradition". Secondly, it is argued that the usage of myth in opera historically shows a specific continuity of operatic appropriation of mythological material which served and still serves as an example how to reinvent traditions for the construction of new modern myths. Thirdly, if we take opera as a social practice then we could acknowledge also that opera as a social phenomenon creates an interesting segment of "mythologisation" of society, which is most evident in images of myths, produced by opera repertoires, and in images of "typical" institutionalised theatrical life, extensively spread in public and surrounded by indisputable and obstinate stereotypes about opera in society. The article is an attempt to tackle the anthropology of reading of the myth structures and the social aspects of opera *imaginaire.*

Keywords: opera, myth, society, anthropology, Slovenia

1. Introduction

Opera, myth, and society: how do they correlate? This question has been asked for many years but still evokes new interpretations which we can examine in some

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major theoretical works relevant to this topic, both methodologically and in terms of the specifics of opera, yet receive no mention in the piece of one's epistemology. For example: Carolyn Abbate, Mary Cicora, Herbert Lindenberger, and others. Therefore, it is not at all unusual to apply ideas of mythology and models from the domains of opera analysis, musico-historical theory or hermeneutics to opera. Musicologists, opera historians and other proficient figures in the field have always been interested in exploring convergences and orthodoxies of the relationship between the evolution of operatic genre, mythology, and society and have either studied the theme of artistic pieces, or the nature of the art form as such, emphasising the effects of musico-historical and societal backgrounds of works, the system of production, or the changing nature of libretto, and the content of creative expression. Taking into account that it has been for a long time widely recognised and accepted that the interpretation of opera can be associated with the myth, this paper will focus on the specific features of a particular repertoire as well as on some specific underdeveloped subtopics within this broad theoretical domain. Therefore the article may be interesting for readers who are not familiar with certain recent characteristics of the Slovenian operatic activity. On the other hand, it may seem somewhat behind the state of the art to the readers who are familiar with the culture-theoretical approaches to opera.

The essay reflects some mythical aspects of social representations of the opera. In Roland Barthes's words, the starting point of this reflection is some kind of "naturalness" and "self-obviousness" with which operatic art and its common sense imagery constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is one we live in or just pass by, is undoubtedly determined by standardised codes of understanding (Barthes 2000:11). As an anthropologist who was (is) educated in Slovenia during "transition period", my approach to opera is maybe an idiosyncratic one. Opera as musical, compositional, stylistic and aesthetic structure is by far the most difficult field to analyse. Why? This question in itself could be and is an anthropological problem. But if we take into account opera's social component, we can say something about its "social power" according to the methods sociologists and anthropologists use to understand social phenomena: by studying the use of their own scientific practices. Opera is peculiar: its signs produce incongruities and miscalculations. It invites a multiplicity of approaches, challenges orthodoxy, and embraces ambiguity. As the editors of the collection *Analyzing Opera: Verdi and Wagner* point out in their introduction, analysing opera is one of the liveliest (and most polemical) areas in modern-day musical scholarship (Abbate & Parker 1989), but is getting an increasingly visible position also in other social sciences and in the humanities.

2. How does peripheral society mythologise opera?

That opera is, among the cultural representations, unusually revealing of pressures within the society that creates it is not a new idea. In the early 20th century, many connoisseurs (e.g. Edward J. Dent, Paul Bekker, Donald J. Grout, and others) were aware of it, but they did not care to deal with the question

systematically. What has brought about a new approach in understanding the relationship between opera phenomenon and its social background is the rapid spread, from the mid-1970s, of an interest in the social or collective dimension of history, partly under the influence of the group of French historians (Marc Bloch, Fernand Braudel). Then in social sciences in the 1980s (Theodor W. Adorno, Rosanne Martorella, John Rosselli, Herbert Lindenberger, et al), and in the 1990s with the movement of the so-called new musicology (Carolyn Abbate, Roger Parker, Arthur Groos, Gary Tomlinson, and many others).

Two lines of inquiry have developed in recent years which try to deal with the topic of the relationship between opera and society. The first endeavours to understand opera as a social statement. This approach is concerned with the inner workings of opera as a genre, and of particular operas. It asks what these tell us about social relation in the cultures from which opera (or particular operas) sprang: opera as a genre embodiment of projections of the fears, desires, and conflicts within society; the social significance of libretto. The second approach concerns itself with the production, consumption, social elaboration, media distribution and political function of opera. It studies how opera as a social practice has financed and managed, systematised, institutionalised, and how it has been influenced by its patrons, state, cultural bureaucracy, media, academic milieu, audiences, critics, artists etc. (Rosselli 1992:431).

Although I have no intention to historise the topic, it seems that the whole European artistic and cultural tradition is constantly presenting the products of classical Greece as reborn "wrecks" of Greek mythology and antique tragedy (for the link between opera and Greek tragedy, see Williams 1981), when trying to stay in touch with "European heritage". In a similar way, the birth of the opera, placed in Italy at the end of the 16th century, filled a vacancy, because all aesthetic artistic structures before opera were perceived at that time as cloven, partial, imperfect, inconsistent and superficial.

As the Slovenian philosopher Mladen Dolar acknowledged, already at the very beginning the opera was caught between the demand for a rebirth of a mythical past, the loyalty to an ideal antique standard, namely antique tragedy, and the need for a Renaissance[1] innovation required by this rebirth. Therefore we could assume that opera as an art, as well as a social phenomenon with this socio-historical background, bears its rich mythological baggage even today. In this context the opera is, for him, a bizarre or at least an unusual subject for scrutiny in the social sciences or the humanities. Dolar concluded that opera was, throughout four centuries, a privileged place for enacting the fantasy of a mythical community, and by virtue of this presentation, the "imagined community"[2] (to use Benedict Ander-

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[1] For an extended treatment of the use of myth within scientific, cultural and musical discourse of the early seventeenth century, see Victor Coelho, "Musical Myth and Galilean Science in Giovanni Serodine's *Allegoria della scienza*" (1992).

[2] Benedict Anderson (in his context) proposes the following definition of nationality, nation-ness, and nationalism: it is an imagined political community that is both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined in this way because its members will never know most of their fellow-members, yet in the

son's term) spilled over into the "real community", and then as the foundational myth of the nation-state (Žižek & Dolar 2002:2–3). These dialectics might have largely influenced the whole history of opera (ibid., 6). Furthermore, we should not forget that opera is a social event, it has practically always been surrounded with an elaborate social and political display, by demonstrations of economic power and cultural elitism, though such manifestations may seem obvious during the whole phase of the development of opera. Opera as a social force might even have peaked in the seventeenth century, when the opera house was for the ruling power. Philippe-Joseph Salazar noted that the first French operatic production was a political act and a display of political power of the rulers over it (cf. Salazar 1980). Already known for his incisive books on eighteenth-century France and the French revolution, Patrice Higonnet wrote an interesting book on the Paris of a century ago. When making a distinction between myths and phantasmagoria of social life, he includes some negative and positive myths of Parisian opera as a part of essential myths of the city, of the latter's reputation as the capital of individualism, revolution, social development, science, alienation, pleasure, and art. In his understanding, myths are "life stories" that societies elaborate to explain to themselves the rise and sometimes the fall of their collective enterprise (Higonnet 2002). In the 18th and 19th centuries the opera house was often the main social venue of the bourgeoisie and played an important role in the great bourgeois revolutions (cf. Foulcher 1987). But even nowadays when opera is in many European countries financially supported only by the state, it proves its extraordinary nature, adaptable to the old, absolutist modes of behaviour. There is no doubt that opera is not only a part of society but also a (specific) social sphere with some specific characteristics in different countries, cultural milieus, national traditions, and periods of time.

The conditions under which opera is produced today – its affiliation to large performing arts centres, its grandiose and expensive administrative machinery, the changing nature of philanthropy in the so-called developed part of the globe (particularly, in the United States and Western Europe), its discographic industry, its technologising development, and its strong reliance on the box office – maybe will be seen to significantly affect what is (re)produced within the opera system in Slovenia. In general we could say that in Slovenia the sphere of opera does not like to undergo any examination or critical reflection. Let me offer a short epistemology of the social characteristics of opera.

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mind of each person lives the image of their community (B. Anderson 1995). Anderson's concept can be applied in the field of the opera, especially to the reception of the opera by the audience. An opera audience has all the characteristics of a specific imagined community. It is occasionally limited because it has finite (limited to operatic performance), but elastic boundaries beyond which lie other groups of different interests. It is sovereign because the opera-goers gather together in a communal place by their own will. And it is imagined as a "community" because it is conceived as a relatively coherent comradeship or community of interests (opera fans' clubs, opera-goers, opera lovers often meet each other not only in the opera house but also outside its walls). And it is imagined because every spectator does not know everything about opera-goers or the audience; he/she can have in his/her mind only a personal image of their communion.

Firstly, social characteristics of state or a system's discourse about opera: it discusses the constitution of the national importance of opera through the bureaucratic discourse of state, and establishes social, political, cultural and ideological frames for the functioning of the opera in Slovenia, and focuses on the relations between the state with its formal representative, e.g. the Ministry of Culture, and the opera houses in Ljubljana and Maribor. My analysis discovers that different debates which took place in the preparation of the national cultural program (in the second half of the 90s) resulted in some promising ideas about the need of diversification, deautarhysation and deinstitutionalisation of opera. For example, the idea that it is not right to put all effort into the preservation of the Slovenian national independence; that it could be dangerous to talk about national art and the protective role of art for the nation; that it is inappropriate to talk about ethnical authenticity of opera and the authentic character of Slovenian opera tradition; that we do not need a strong defensive practice of the Slovenian language, which would in terms of the imaginary Slovenian character preserve the idea of a pure language; that applying the opera activities only to Slovenian national identity leads to self-isolation and autistic behaviour, etc. But the observation also concludes that all those ideas were never implemented because official documentation focuses on the discourse about national character, the need to protect the Slovenian language in the opera houses and the need to preserve the Slovenian musical heritage.

Secondly, social characteristics of scientific or research discourse: the majority of scientific and academic activities in the field are still tightly wrapped in the stuffy ideological space of socialistic mental paradigm of multi-layered neglect and non-reflection, as well as in the mechanisms of complete marginalisation or abundantly decorated disfiguration of this topic in the greater Slovenian cultural and academic milieu. The described circumstance results in the present situation, where we cannot find any recent studies dealing with various aspects of social representations of opera or trying to approach opera in a critical, distinctive, multidisciplinary or postmodern way. The result of the long lethargic and passive decades is a large gap characterised by a significant lack of exploration and systematic studies about opera which would follow current trends in theorisation. It is telling that opera is by so many Slovenian self-declared experts, even musicologists, musical historians and other specialists, regarded as a great phantom. The mythology of the phantom, which surrounds the scientific vacuum in Slovenia, is probably the fatal obstacle to the serious and systematic elaboration of the field. It is not difficult to see that the traditional part of Slovenian musicology, which regards opera as a great privilege, has often used the ideology of the current organisation of state as the basis for the explanation of social and cultural importance of opera, of its national importance, and especially in the search for the origins of the Slovenian opera and its Slovenianness. The basic writings about opera still aim to fulfil the eminent project which consists of the positivistic construction of the "fantastic national musical history". The discourse of the majority of Slovenian researchers, also from the point of view of certain cultural and academic connoisseurs of the opera, excellently fits into the state discourse. Neither managed to get rid of national mythology, political invest-

ments and ideological mystifications, they rather *invent traditions* (as Eric Hobsbawm would say) or they *reproduce* (as Pierre Bourdieu would say) traditionalisms and dogmatic representations of the so-called national significance of opera.

Thirdly, social characteristics of the institutionalisation: opera is closed into the "ghetto" of two opera houses, in Ljubljana and in Maribor. Their production policies are almost identical. The repertoire is modest and monotonous; more concretely, it is belcantism- and verism-centred (Verdi, Puccini, Rossini, Donizetti), and operetta-centred (Smetana, Strauss). The work of Slovenian opera composers has been paralysed for many years because of the financial problems. The discography market is very poor.

Fourthly, social characteristics of media representations: it could not be said that the media is excluded from this "dysfunctional" world, for nowadays the media is the crucial catalyst not only of the public image of opera, but also the creators of distorted projections of opera reality. According to my (discursive and semiotic) analysis of newspaper articles and magazines between 1991 and 2002 it could be said that the media is encouraged to report about opera by the events related to the problems of opera, the conflicts between certain agents from the two opera houses and the intrigues between the institutions. These are the situations which the media, especially the magazines, transform into highlights. With this kind of reporting, the daily press as well as magazines reinforce the importance of the happenings in opera, but also the importance of their own reporting. The main aim of the periodicals is to provide the public with sensational news, scoops, and exclusive reports about the scandals and affairs in the opera houses (Kotnik 2003:393–397).

This kind of characteristic limiting social resonance of opera, could not be more suitable for the agents who think that opera is unnecessary. And there is a substantial number of those who claim that opera must be locked away in the wardrobe of relics where such fading phenomena should be kept forever[3] – opera as something *passé,* as mythical past, as part of mythology in terms of a sort of anachronism. Paradoxically, all the informants (among the Slovenian cultural bureaucracy, opera directors, artists, journalists, researchers, and others) I contacted during my ethnographic research in 2001, agreed to describe opera with grand denominations such as "national art", "state-representative culture" and similar (Kotnik 2002). The majority of them did not consider these denominations to be specific socio-historical constructs, but self-evident phenomena. We should be aware that cultural phenomena are not "natural" and "organic" by themselves; furthermore they are far from being social facts although the nationalistic ideol-

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[3]   Why such denominations of opera were in the past usually excluded from serious scientific scrutiny is more a matter of its epistemology. According to the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, it is a matter of the construction of opera as an object of scientific practice (cf. Bourdieu et al. 1991), made by opera researchers in various forms of opera studies. In this respect a Slovenian historical anthropologist Taja Kramberger talks about the "inversion in the objectification", which generates the perverted way of thinking of the "generic relationship" between observer/researcher/subject and observed/researched/object (Kramberger 2002:53).

ogies of the 19th century tend to consider them as such. In brief, cultures are historically originated systems of social representations.

The short outline of the reception and the current social position of opera in Slovenia only indicates its complicated social history. If we take into consideration here only the current characteristics *hic et nunc,* it becomes clear that the social aspects of opera of this very particular and nationally determined time and place are dominated by the hegemony of two mutually operating mythologies: firstly, the mythology of nation and national – national identity, national culture, national art; and secondly, the mythology of tradition, canonisation and perpetuation of standardised codes. Both mythologies derive their energy from the naturalised ritualisation, the revivals of traditions and the mystifications of an imagined "national past".

These two mythologies, or even better, these two chains of the nationally unified "social mythology" have been the best guaranty that imaginations, notions, ideas and words relating to opera have never been scarce, even if only because the opera (as a social representation) seems to fascinate people in order to be well-accepted inside its own production enterprises (and in public sphere) all over the world. The operatic performance is usually a grand public occasion or event, generating lively public response (opera critique, operatic journalism, media representations of opera, etc.). The social structure of operatic event is often irreplaceable and refers to the interplay of action and alienation in society. Media has the power to (re)produce a clientele sphere of the *intentional images of opera* parallel to the one they rely on as actual reality, but in the process of media codifying they transform it into a different reality, the "mythical (mediated) reality", in which scandals, intrigues, affairs, crises and failures combine with fame, glory and a magic world. The "role" of media is to narrow the gap between additional or accompanying operatic activities (such as specific theatrical life, public attention, media reactions, critique, making a show, world of dreams, star-system, phenomenon of primadonism) and their ideologies and mythologies. The point is that both sides of the image are founded on a combinatory system which tends to correlate with some social reality and, at the same time, ignores ordinary everyday life situations. This effect is usually achieved as an excuse that the task or mission of opera in society is trying to transcends habitual everyday living.

When discussing 'social mythology' or 'national mythology' I do not refer strictly to the classical understanding of mythology as "body of myths of a particular culture". I rather use these syntagms in order to make a difference from ancient mythologies and to indicate that our societies also (re)produce myths and mythologies. The term 'myth' is here used as social concept. Mythology is not something that belongs only to ancient Greeks or Romans. The comparison between the types of ancient and modern mythologies is, at least at first sight, quite meaningful. For example: foundation myths – national mythologies, myths of nature birth – myth of opera birth (for this topic see Kirkendale 2003), myths of culture heroes – myths of opera icons, etc. The other possible way of understanding mythology is literary approach, mythology as metaphor, as developed by Mary Cicora. Her social and

critical approach to Wagner's *Ring* shows how this piece of work can be examined in the tradition of romantic drama as a reworking of a Greek tragedy as expressed in the second part of Wagner's theoretical work *Oper und Drama.* In the *Ring,* using myth as a metaphor for history she presents a paradoxical world. The innertextual reflection that Wotan performs in his monologues causes the *Ring* to self-destruct from within. As Cicora wrote, he actually dismantles or deconstructs the text of the *Ring.* The doom of the gods happens because the *Ring* has undermined, unworked and dismantled its system of signification (Cicora 1998). In Cicora's research we can see how the textuality of a particular piece bears in itself an "inner-mythological reality"; not to mention that there exists also the "outer" side of its mythological reality, the social one, which says that this particular Wagner's opera is an important phenomenon of the German drama tradition, as is shown by Cicora in her other book (Cicora 1999). At long last, alongside other Wagner's major works it stands as a German national canon.

If Foucault stated, for his specific case, that the phenomenon of social body was *"the effect not of a consensus but of the materiality of power operating on the very bodies of individuals"* (Foucault 1980:54), then we could direct this optics a little bit more towards the point where the perception of opera phenomenon as a social practice is not seen only as the product of real artistic production practice, but rather as the imagery of a world of phantasms. It seems that the question of mythical technologies of society, of social reproduction of renewed ancient and modern mythologies appears in the inter-relationship between the knowledge of opera in terms of its compositional, stylistic, aesthetic, textual, performing and genre diversities, and their social representations in terms of social standard of opera plot, in terms of ideologies of opera glamour, in terms of *mythicality* of staging, which all are created in the sphere of social reality and by social realities. Performing opera is no longer only the composer's work or the work of artistic activity, it is a "social work" which broadens the complex possibility of significa-tion. It is what Carolyn Abbate seeks in her book *In Search of Opera,* namely, a matter of a middle ground between operas as abstractions and performance as the phenomenon that brings opera into being.

I have compiled a schema to show the crucial elements which configure opera essentialism (as a nationally determined ideology about the constitutive role of opera) in Slovenia.

All modes and representations presented above should not be understood as isolated entities, but rather as a mix of elements, which have important symbolism in the structure of the provincial notion of opera essentialism. Probably we did not itemise all potential markers but only a few of them. Also we do not want to create the impression that these representations of "social micro-mythologies" which contribute to the process of creating a specific opera essentialisms are self-sufficient. On the contrary, negative or derogative representations have their own specific ideology and social textuality, as well as positive or glorified ones. They actually function with a more or less mutual interfering, transposing, and trans-forming of relationships.

Schema 1. Structure of national mythology of local opera essentialism

Modes of existence	Representations of nationally codified mythology
defensive rhetoric of cultural bureaucracy in the name of protecting a "national interest"	– ideology of national authenticity of the Slovenian opera heritage – ideology which says that there exists certain generic autochtonism in composing practice – mythology of opera as an exclusive "national thing"
positivism of eminent expert figures	– writing national opera history in accordance with the project of building fantastic national (musical) history
significant lack of the studies about opera and their marginal academic position	– reproducing mythology of opera as a phantom, or as a bizarre phenomenon – it looks as if some Slovenian musicologists or musical historians do not believe opera can be an object of serious scientific scrutiny without "national-artistic emotionalism"
sensational news, scoops and exclusiveness in media reporting	– creating opera world through fame, scandalous theatrical life and other "typical" stereotypes – mythology of opera as a glorious ritual or spectacular reality – ideologies of operatic agents as social players – negative representations (conflicts, intrigues, primadonism)
epistemological insensibility for social phenomenon distinction of all kinds of public spheres (political, media, academic …)	– believing in self-obviousness existence of opera (and other cultural representations) as a "national phenomenon" – mythology of organisation of national state as a supreme criterion or normative for understanding social realities like opera

3. Repertoire canon: anachronistic reality?

Tom Sutcliffe, a British opera journalist, wrote that the tension between opera's conservatives and innovators has gone on for years: the defenders of an established canon and "repertoire of classics" take issue with those who want fresh perspectives, modernised repertoires, current stage settings, etc. Thus, the repertoires of opera houses and their producers (managers or directors) grow increasingly daring, and they often stir controversy with extreme interpretations (see Sutcliffe 1997, especially the chapter "A Repertoire of Classics"). Many critics and researchers stand firmly by the innovators. They usually see opera's future in its ability to re-imagine its classics. For them, the work of provocative initiators in the past two decades makes a persuasive case, even when some of the productions sound like misfires. On the other hand, there is a huge majority of those who much prefer the great repertoire traditions, classical stage settings and their standardised repetition.

In the last third of the 19th century, the repertory opera had become the norm and the bearer of "classical repertoire" all over Europe. In the early 20th century, plenty of opera houses of the second or third rank, among which many were totally new institutions (such as the opera house in Maribor) and had no *long-durée* cultural memory, could not be dominated either by an aristocratic and well-situated audience or by those who demanded a steady diet of new works. During the decades of Slovenian socialism of the second half of the 20th century, opera

was to a certain extent treated as an ideological anachronism, as something grotesque, artificial, bizarre and unnecessary to the socialist reality of the national community. During my ethnographic research many Slovenian artists told me that opera was probably the most unwanted art form in the socialist cultural stratification. Some consequences of the heritage of this past can be seen in many ways even today, especially in the policy concerning the repertoire building of the two Slovenian opera houses. During the last decade of the 20th century, known as a transitional phase of Slovenian society, the repertoire of Slovenian opera houses faced cultural, political and especially financial crisis. The crisis has been manifest in all domains to which we regard "conventional", "classical" or "serious" opera repertoire construction. In every category, there was an "inherited repertoire" of works from the eighties, still popular and supported by a majority of visitors, but with almost nothing new that has proved capable of establishing itself in the affections of that public. In the nineties, there was a huge fall of subscriptions and audience in Ljubljana opera house because of economically and artistically unreasonable collapse of the repertoire.

My examination of the repertory systems of the two Slovenian opera houses reveals that the repertoire is supposed to reflect a reconciliation of public tastes, economics of opera production and institutionalised repertoire mythology. The examination of the standard repertoire during the period of more than thirty years (1967–2000) reveals the names of the most frequently presented composers and operas or operettas which were consequently the most popular in the Slovenian opera houses. Furthermore, we can count the number of representations of these performances between 1967 and 2000. For example: the most frequently presented composers during this period in Ljubljana opera house were Verdi (around 650 performances), Puccini (around 300 performances), Strauss Junior (less than 200), Mozart and a Slovenian composer Foerster (a little over one hundred performances); in the Maribor opera house there were Verdi (around 500 performances), Puccini (with 200), Rossini, Donizetti and Smetana (all less than one hundred performances). *Nabucco* (Verdi) was the most frequently presented opera in Ljubljana opera house. Others, in rank order: *La Traviata* (Verdi), *Gorenjski slavček* [*The Upper-Carniolan nightingale* (Foerster)], *The Bat* (Strauss) and *The Bartered Bride* (Smetana). In the Maribor opera house, *La Traviata*, was undoubtedly the most performed work. Other works were, in rank order: *Rigoletto* (Verdi), *The Barber of Seville* (Rossini), *The Bartered Bride* and *The Bat*. As one can see, the productions, as well as the composers, which prevail include works from Romantic Era, predominantly from the nineteenth century, and exemplified bel canto, verism, melodic and virtuoso styles, and operetta repertoire, in Slovenia usually perceived even today as, "light" version of opera. The range of Slovenian domestic works and modern works of the 20th century in the repertoire of the Slovenian opera houses was very limited while those from the pre-Romantic era were almost absent. Even Wagner is totally excluded (for more see Kotnik 2003:104, 109).

I try to show that a significant amount of opera performed in both opera houses has consisted of standard works, and the tendency is to rely more and more on the

staples to offset the expanses of new productions, and to curtail costs which would arise from extra rehearsal time, scenery, etc. The standard repertoire represents approximately 95 percent of *long-durée* repertoire and includes the mainliner, while the remaining 5 percent are new productions, and 0 percent being contemporary or experimental. What opera houses select for presentation does, therefore, depend on what the public buys and on state subsidies; and this relationship is slightly variable according to the season's budget and reliance on the box office. Both opera houses have been very conservative and have not been able to commission new works and present operas which are considered avant-garde or are rarely performed. But it is reasonable to ask what the classical repertoire actually is. First of all, the "classical repertoire" presented in Slovenia could not be compared with the classical repertoires of the world's metropolises. It is "classical" only for the specific peripheral situation in Slovenia and would probably be perceived as very limited and monotonous (which it actually is) in other social environments. Such "standardisation" is a manifestation of poor production values, simple public tastes and provincial cultural milieu.

It seems that keeping to tradition, the same repertoire, the same staging and the same "archaic" logic of opera settings have produced in the Slovenian public a specific notion of opera's social mythology in which opera's world is, according to all the above-mentioned elements, seen as something obsolete, archaic or romanticised. Since there is little diversity in the repertoire, the way operas are produced becomes most important. Audiences come to see "romantic world" on stage, owing to their fascination with "mythical scenery", stage directors and conductors provide the audience's imagination with some dramatic changes to the old staples. The desire for the spectacular has facilitated the trend of stage setting mythologisation. The importance of a spectacular performance has to do with the economics of opera, better to say, with economics of repertoire. The battle between a financial crisis (low or very limited state budget) and a spectacular production has become the norm of everyday opera's life in Slovenia. In other words, using Pleasants's dichotomy between *stile antico* and *stile moderno,* the great majority of Slovenian opera production is made in "stile antico", avoiding any possible avant-garde, too experimental or too provoking production (Pleasants 1989:15). The devotion of the opera houses to traditionalism and conservatism is greatly masked by the certainty and even fear of losing audiences which is in Slovenia very conservative, unsophisticated and, mostly misinformed and with poor knowledge about the variety of conceptions and themes, as well as their realisations developed abroad. The stereotypical and relatively successful productions are introduced to keep the same audiences returning to see the same operas season after season. Old-fashioned and petrified opera repertoire was and still is a "good argument" of those who like to distribute, to say with Herbert Lindenberger's words, the "antioperatic prejudice" and produce stereotypes about opera in terms of its alleged absurdity, tediousness, grotesqueness and obsoleteness (Lindenberger 1984:197–201). The most ridiculous irony is that many Slovenian opera managers through the compilation of repertoire mainly contributed to the development of such stereotypes in public sphere in the

past. Possible changes were undertaken primarily in the restaging and redesigning of a "dead" opera. In this respect, Rosanne Martorella's acknowledgement could be very elucidating in our case when saying:

> *The world of opera is split in two. One is a world of virtuoso production and the other a world of living but sometimes uncommunicative creation. These two worlds do not form the basis for opera as a living force presenting new ideas to an audience. Consequently, it has become a museum for the art of the nineteenth century and involves an aesthetic cult of groups anxious to belong to a very small elite* (Martorella 1975:252).

Martorella's estimation, written almost thirty years ago, excellently fits into the discourse of today's repertoire reality in Slovenia. According to the above-mentioned, opera repertoire of Slovenian two opera companies could be seen as an indicator and distributor of the systematic reproduction of specific mythological scraps or crumbs of "auratic world" in society. Therefore, opera repertoires should necessarily be considered as the ideation of mythologised opera audiences and the public (Kotnik 2002:254). As my research on opera in the Slovenian mental universe showed, the repertoire of the Slovenian opera houses was in the last two decades simply a place of very limited repertory engagements and redundant national ideologisation. To use Rosanne Martorella's expression, the interplay between public tastes, box offices and repertoires (Martorella 1982:83) corresponds to a high extent to the interplay between socially determined convention, institutional ritual[4] and internalised opera mythology.

Schema 2. Inter-relationships of the interplay between taste, box office and repertoire

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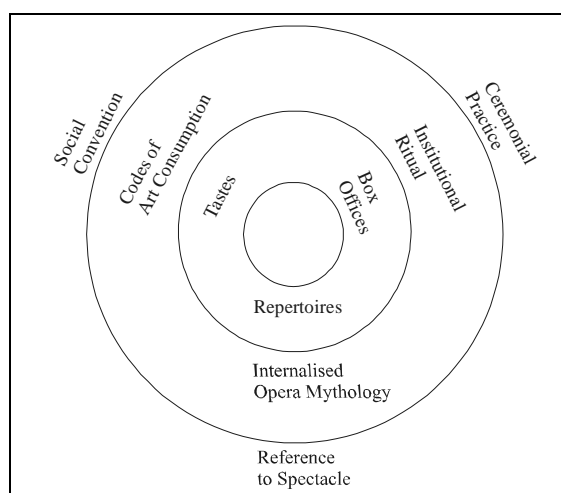
[4]   In my opinion, one of the most efficient approaches is based on Turner's theory "from ritual to theatre". Within such a framework the claim that rituals are essentially liminal activities, as was suggested by Victor Turner, can also contribute to the potential operationalisation of the relationship between ritual and opera, not only as a relationship between social drama and theatre drama (Turner 1982), but it also goes to the point where opera is comprehended as a theatrilised social ritual.

All the nine categories schematised above can be read vertically, that is, as a transformation of categories, or horizontally, clockwise, on the level of discursive series. For example, opera repertoires represent an institutionalised code of internalised opera mythology which emanates the "materialised" reference to spectacle. Opera box-offices must be perceived, for better understanding of their function, through a certain institutional ritual which makes an opera event an imagery of a specific ceremonial practice. Therefore, box offices are not just necessary technical equipment. They are symbolic instances of the social initiation of opera-goers (the tradition of queuing in the world's most famous opera houses should also be understood this way). Opera tastes are usually the standardised codes of art consumption, which is the product, and also the construct of different aesthetically, moralistically, politically, and ideologically organised social conventions. According to Pierre Bourdieu[5] we could assume that different tastes for the opera depend on ideas which a particular social class, stratum, group, or cultural *milieu* has about (selected) art, (classical) music or ("high") culture, depending on the effects of opera on the social status and its role, that is, upon its social stratification, reputation position, distinction, and nobility. Tastes depend also on the categories involved in the process of evaluation of these effects which are differently classified according to cultural surroundings which considers some of these effects as important, and ignores the others. In this social process things, individuals, priorities and groups are sorted, and this has certain impacts on the perception of social, cultural, artistic stratified scale (adjusted to Bourdieu 1984:190).

We could say that opera in Slovenia is a place where artistic primacy and businesslike effectiveness of the repertoire are still most often justified as means to create spectacular settings, "mythical" stagings, "romanticised" performances. In short, opera must provide an ambient which would, as much as possible, oppose the standard of the ordinary, the common or *everyday life,* as Michel de Certeau would put it (1988), and social reality. The transcendence of opera performances should satisfy the common human phantasm of the extraordinary, the exceptional, the uncommon, the unusual, the supra-natural, the surreal, the supra-temporal, the supra-spatial, and the transcendent. This kind of logic is usually the result of the "common sense" of Slovenian opera directors, supposedly because watching opera performances presented in standardised codes, that is in "mythologised contexts", should be more attractive, easier to observe.

Let me try to answer the question why opera in Slovenia is often treated as anachronistic *imaginarium.* As Martorella pointed out, box-offices predominantly respond to the "standard" repertoire – works that have survived a competitive

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[5] In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste,* Bourdieu has offered a powerful explication of "taste", with all its meanings from choices in art through choices in dress, furniture, to tastes in food, both as a means of unification and as a method of producing and reproducing power differences among social classes. Bourdieu elaborates a model of symbolic power describing the role of culture in the reproduction of social relations in contemporary France. In our context it is important to note that his description focuses on the social functioning of the cultural capital, rather than on Bourdieu's attempt to redescribe what aesthetics and tastes are.

selection over time (Martorella 1982:91). Opera repertoires all over the world could be regarded as specific and petrified institutions of opera companies. This situation mainly remains unchanged. If one looks carefully at what is produced, it is possible to analyse the nature and social role of the repertoire of opera. Repertoire becomes a significant factor since it reflects (or does not reflect) audience demands and thinking, and the response to it by administrators. During my fieldwork, many informants (even artists) liked to connect the idea of temporality, anachronism or archaism of opera with the idea of an "iron repertoire" of Slovenian opera houses. The majority of them thought that such "petrified repertoire" leads to a certain "irony" of repetition politics of opera reality. They think that this kind of repetitions create their own codification of what the opera repertoire intersects, what it represents, how much it changes during a certain period of time, etc. Repetitions have a special ability to mythologise reality. Thus the unchangeable repertoire is the first reason why my informants treat it as a mythological structure, which produces archaisms and does not change a lot during a long period of time.

The second reason lies in the repertoire's vital role, which consists of a ritualised prediction and production of social occasions and spectacles. Let me begin with the spectacle. Debord, author of the theory of "society of the spectacle", stressed

> *The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images. […] The spectacle cannot be understood as an abuse of the world of vision, as a product of the techniques of mass dissemination of images. It is, rather, a* Weltanschauung *which has become actual, materially translated. It is a world vision which has become objectified* (Debord 1994).

Within the terms of social opera's semiotics, opera is today more a model of publicly dominant perception of the spectacle itself, which is not so correct, rather than a model of social practice which (with the affirmation of social appearance in society) produces meanings and images of opera spectacle. The real operistic practice is actually far from being spectacular. But social practice which makes the opera phenomenon possible is directly confronted with the social construction of opera spectacle. No doubt, social practice of the opera production has a tendency to become a spectacle.

A similar idea of the theory of society as an integrated spectacle can perhaps be found in the field of writing about opera. Namely, Boll's approach to the reflection of the opera constituted the idea of opera as an *integral spectacle* (Boll 1963: 11–12), consisting of operatic production, theatrical codification, and social representation. According to John Rosselli, the spectacularity of opera lies in its social nature. He pointed out that opera, a multi-media entertainment, requires so many people to produce it that it can be justified only if the audience is large or is made up of important people, preferably both. Rosselli writes: *"As a social occasion opera wants a crowd"* (Roseelli 1996:304). Crowding at least implies that the occasion matters.[6]

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[6] For the popular myth that gays are the biggest opera fans and the frequent notion that opera is a gay thing, see the news item of Robert Hofler, "The myth of the opera queen" (1998).

Opera as a social occasion is certainly a place of specific ritualisation of society. One of the effects of the ritualisation of opera repertoire, according to Bourdieu, lies in the ascription of fixed or measured time – the moment, tempo, duration, calendar, the events' rhythm –, in a defined formation, in its stationary character of place, in its standardised functions and in the forces which tend to bind or dissolve it. That means all the elements that are relatively independent of outside necessities, such as political situation, economical regime, social order. Thus, we can assign them to that kind of arbitrary necessity which separately defines the cultural arbitrariness (Bourdieu 1980, chapter: Believing and the Body). Edward Dent's verdict, cited by Peter Kivy, that opera has become just a concert in costume – referring to a specific historical period of its representation – (Kivy 1999:133), could be a little changed in our off-stage context: it seems that opera premieres provide only a fashion show for the press, photographers and the media – a myth of an event which has to be fully distributed in the public sphere. In this respect, the new myth of opera is born, namely, the myth of opera's publicity. Here we agree with Paul Robinson's approach to opera, which tries to persuade us that opera is not only a product of musical, artistic or theatrical history but also a result of social and intellectual history (Robinson 1986:7).

4. Looking around: How much myth is in opera narrative?

Myth, close to what Durkheimian sociology calls a 'collective representation', can be read in the anonymous utterances found in the press, in advertising, in mass consumer goods, on the art market, in the culture production and in new technologies. As Roland Barthes indicated, contemporary myth is socially determined, a kind of 'reflection'. It is discontinuous. It is no longer expressed in long fixed narratives but only in 'discourse', like the representation of myths in opera plots; at most, it can become *phraseology,* a corpus of phrases (of stereotypes); myth disappears, leaving – something more insidious – the *mythical* (Barthes 1977:165). It is what the representation of myth in opera plots really is, namely, a form of phrasal repetitions, a form of endless repetitions of the same words, identical pictures, similar acts, stories, events, characters.

In Jean-Pierre Vernant's theory of myth we find a solid and satisfactory explanation why contemporary societies have an affinity for myth. Firstly, myth is usually perceived as a traditional story, which characterises classical times, supra-natural forces in the events and persons involved within the narrative. All in all, they look like narratives which avoid rules and criteria of everyday possibility or probability. In this segment we find a small part of the answer to the question why opera plots based on mythology, are highly effective in operatic context. The segment of mythical narratives, which would in serious analysis probably be reduced or even totally denied because of their supposed non-up-to-date nature, obsoleteness, irrelevance, or low verifiability, gets in the opera context a very positive and powerful surplus of being "merely" a simple story. We could illustrate this even

further and denote this transformation process as a way from everyday social context to operatic social context; actually, it is the way leading from ordinary to extra-ordinary. The whole secret of the great narrative success of myth in the opera context is hidden in the very structure of the myth, in its narrative form, inner segmentation, course of events, order of sequences, series of similarities, diversities, contrarieties, or contiguities (Vernant 1996).

Secondly, Vernant also states that information contained in myth works as a sign of "selectiveness", of selected information in all meanings. This includes also a kind of confirmation of difference, which *"separates the urbanised élite from the average – so to say, from all of that which is people's, uncultured, barbaric"* (Vernant 1996). This reality is not far from opera distinctions determining in the history of society, all the more so because opera was programmed by its inventors at the very beginning exclusively as courtly entertainment – especially in Florence, Mantua and Rome (Anderson 1994:25–29), where opera significantly became dependent on various patronage systems by finding a home in different political institutions and social and cultural environments. Only when the first opera house, *Teatro San Cassiano* was built in Venice, followed shortly by other houses opened especially for this new genre that was brought to Venice as late as in 1637, opera, which was until then a completely aristocratic domain became more public, more accessible and more open to all (Rosand 1990). Venice certainly had strong theatrical tradi-tions, whether in private houses or in the more public forums providing a special social and economic environment in the seventeenth-century Italian cities. Venice also provided civic and ceremonial life in the city which always took on a theatrical aspect, especially during the carnival. For the first time Venetian opera houses, all built in a very short period of time, catered for a paying public. Nevertheless, opera still remained a powerful political tool even in an ostensibly more democratic environment of a republic. Like all the arts, opera was fast drawn into the service of articulating the so-called 'myth of Venice', emphasising greatness, magnificence, and luxury. Opera still catered for the upper echelons of society, and entertained both the city's leisured classes and the steady stream of tourists who saw in Venice an essential stop on their "grand tour". The context of the seventeenth-century north-Italian city reveals the trend of opera mythologisation. As in all opera cities (e.g. Florence, Mantua, Rome, Naples, Venice), mythological themes and ancient tales remained popular. Here, the link between opera plots and social history is obvious. Namely, ancient or heroic historical or mythical tales could take on even more significance during the long Venetian wars against the Ottoman empire, having dominated the mid-century and beyond. So, classical histories and ancient mythologies had a special resonance for the inhabitants of the "new Italian Troys" (Florence, Rome, Venice). When opera, shortly after its native Italian birth gradually spread outside Italy and all over Europe, it became first and foremost a place of royal displays (Jellinek 1994). Another interesting piece of information is given by Dolar who says that part of the secret of Wagner's and Verdi's great success in the nineteenth century lay in the fact that both were able to provide the mythological support to precisely those two nations that had not been able to constitute themselves

as national states. Opera thus assumed the place of the missing state, as it were, and proved itself extraordinarily helpful in constituting it (Dolar 2002:91).

In discussing opera, the question what is opera has to be asked constantly. Hundreds of definitions we have, the great English lexicographer of the opera, Stanley Sadie, added that the more one works with opera the fuzzier become its demarcation, denomination, notion, and interpretation lines (Sadie 1992:i). At present, opera is broader, more complex, more virtual, and even more "mythical" than it has ever been. The fact that operas were always or relatively often set in distant legendary times and mythical places or even, when they include present-day themes, they are still "mythical" to a certain extent, is very meaningful. Operistic[7] re-animation of myths of all kinds (cosmogonic myths, heroic myths, myths of gods, myths of birth and rebirth, foundation myths, myths of historical events, nation myths, myths of human universalisms, ancient or legendary myths, modern myths, etc.) had made a great contribution to the history of opera, which is fully represented by mythological materials. Many well-known myths, such as Oedipus, Daphne, Medea, Orpheus, Eurydice, Ariadne, have found their revival in opera's *imaginarium.* Mythical narratives, used in opera dramaturgy, usually prefer the wide-range of pedagogical and moralistic attitudes to a bequest of "other" times (cf. Veyne 1983). At this point I am concerned about the question why myths as such are so effective and successful narratives. Furthermore, opera audiences all over the world constantly participate in operistic re-animation of this "mythical context". Myths are maybe effective, firstly, because of the distance of mythical events. Secondly because the message of myths is usually a well-known topic. This makes their decoding and reading much easier. And thirdly, there is above all still a place for manipulating with possible personal interpretations, encodings or readings, although believing or not believing in mythical stories is still a matter of one's own decision.

Using Vernant's words, myths are simply successful narratives because of the distance from everyday life. The myth's "anachronism" lies exactly in the distance it keeps from everyday reality which is a marvellous advantage and privilege of the myth because only in this manner is it possible to play it with the effect of reality. By using myth we can say more, we can express even what in some formal language could be too scandalous, shocking, indecent, improper or offensive for the audience. Myth has no "serious" social consequences. It is treated as something irrational, legendary, fantastic, illogical, unreal, supra-temporal, infantile, extraordinary, unbelievable (Vernant 1996). Moreover, it is possible to make an analogy with the opera. Is it not true that there is a lot of labelling ascribed to the opera, often because of its supposedly old repertoire, which makes it appear a bit anachronistic, obsolete, old, overused, too traditional, but also resembling the fantastic, fascinating, magic, enchanting and distant mythic world. If in Slovenian socialism opera was to a certain extent treated as an ideological anachronism, the present social situation

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[7]   I use two notions with a relative semantic differentiation: *operistic* and *operatic;* the first includes the aspect of the speech on opera which takes into consideration the involvement of the producers' practices in the production of the art; the second one implies speaking about opera in general, here it is used in adjectival form.

increasingly shows it as an artistic anachronism. Its survival might come from the same source than the post-modern use of ancient mythology in today's wide area of modern technologies (visual cultures, artistic marketing, internet, etc.).

The traditional view on the origins of opera continues to offer the best mythical narrative of the opera birth leading directly to the first opera settings: Rinuccini's *Dafne* of 1598 with music by Jacopo Peri and Jacopo Corsi, two Rinuccini's *Euridice* settings of 1600 and 1602, set by Peri and by Giulio Caccini, as well as Striggio's *Orfeo* of 1607, with music by Monteverdi. When speaking about opera within myth and myth within opera, it is evident that the history of opera with its first settings greatly showed its primordial tendency for myth. There is a general accepted agreement among opera researchers that the first great opera responding to its very concept was Monteverdi's *Orfeo*. Even though written barely a decade after the opera's official birth, Monteverdi was already the third composer who used this myth to create a work in the new genre. Frederick William Sternfeld listed around twenty operas based on Orpheus in the seventeenth century alone. He explored in particular and in greater detail the enduring fascination with the Orpheus myth, from ancient Greece to Haydn and Stravinsky. Moreover, he stated that the Orpheus myth provided the key plot for the first operas and loomed impressively, both in quantity and in quality, at the time of the inception of the genre (Sternfeld 1995:1–2). Hence, many other researchers like to connect the first opera settings of famous ancient myths directly with specific social or eventful occasions of opera production. The Orpheus myth was probably the most popular operatic myth during the first two centuries of opera (Tommasini 1997:32). More than any other mythological figure, the Thracian bard Orpheus fascinated the early composers and librettists. Jeffrey L. Buller analyses the artistic, musical, social and even personal reasons why composers during the Baroque Age frequently changed the ending of the myth of Orpheus (Buller 1995:57–80). He suggests that some of these reasons were connected with certain deep and serious socio-historical actualities of that time and not only literary or dramaturgical ones.

Thus, Mladen Dolar stressed that the first operatic version of Orpheus, namely Peri's *Euridice* of 1600 (libretto made by Rinuccini) was produced for the wedding of Henry IV and Maria de Medici. According to this specific occasion Rinuccini adapted the original mythical story and the libretto provided the story with a happy end (ibid., 11). Narrative attractiveness of famous ancient myths was recognised already by the early composers and librettists. On the basis of this opera heritage the whole history of opera is full of numerous re-appropriations of myths. There are hundreds of versions of Jason, Medea, Eurydice, Ariadne, Orpheus, and other myths (cf. Sadie 1992, Warrack & West 1996, Rosenthal & Warrack 1964). Various opera productions of myths created the complex net which generates operistically used mythological material in synchronic variations as well as in diachronic continuities. With such libretto policy the opera has developed a strong codification in which a real fortress of opera perceptions has been in construction from its very beginnings till now. In this respect, probably correctly, the idea of an "iron repertoire" or "steel repertoire" of the production of

opera houses leads to the "steeliness" of narrative repetitions of "opera reality". Such conclusion was often reached by some of my Slovenian informants.

As mentioned above, many ancient, newly-emerged and old-fashioned myths have been set to opera context. Characters from classical Greek, Roman or Nordic mythology have been the subject of great opera settings. James Conlon tries to convince us that characters from ancient myths represent just one line of operatic re-animation of myths. Another line, according to him, belongs to the newly-emerged narratives, some of them only for the purpose of opera. For example: Bizet's *Carmen.* Conlon writes:

> *The story of Don Juan had been around in several forms before Mozart elevated his story to the sublime. Faust existed long before Goethe appropriated him for his magnum opus; [...] Carmen, on the other hand, had no prehistory: she was perfectly realized the first time she was set to music. [...] Many operatic attempts have been made to enthrone the femme fatale. Manon, Lulu, Thais, Salammbo, even Melisande, are later examples of this genre, but none of these women have ascended to Carmen's Olympian stature of myth. [...] A myth is a bridge to the transcendent. Carmen and her story are now in this realm. [...] No, like a mythological goddess, she is revealed and rediscovered over and over again, in every rehearsal, performance and discussion of the opera, that bears her name* (Conlon 1997:8–9).

Most researchers accept that Carmen could be, and maybe has become, a symbol of disenfranchised voices everywhere, a mythopoetic heroine to the poor in the class-conscious nineteenth-century France and Europe, to women in a male-dominated world, to all minorities (especially the Gypsies) in racist societies and a specific era's general inequality. Taking this approach to myth's and opera's correlation, we could say that opera in this sort of correlation actually does not appropriate or adopt the myth to itself, as in case of ancient myths, but it is able to produce the myth with/within its own specific *imaginarium.*

Till now we considered the appropriation of myth in opera in very generalised way and without looking at the diversity of cultural, historical, compositional, stylistic aspects. This generalisation weakens the chapter's main argument, opera as myth, but maybe only because I tried to avoid repeating the previously elaborated findings, as well as neglecting the complexity of opera in favour of the myth argument. As a matter of fact, the simplified idea, defining all opera as a re-animation of ancient myths, would be very misleading and ignores the variety of conceptions, the themes and their realisation as developed by several composers, in several styles, along several periods of Western music and culture. For example: Verism, Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* or *Lulu,* jazz opera, anti-opera, or more recently, Glass's *Satyagraha*. Opera is a very formalised *imaginarium,* a system of signs. It sets a web of signification in a particular place and time. Contemporary composers are constantly challenging the genre by pushing its limits in libretto, musical structure, voice production, stage conception, production technology, etc. It should also be considered that 19th century opera influenced the way Hollywoodian cinema was structured. All in all, when I try to connect opera with myth or show opera as myth, I do not want to claim that opera is a dead language; on the

contrary, the correlation between these two is the proof that it is very alive. This actually shows how it is able to (re)produce its own system of signs and signification and, furthermore, to establish the cognition of that sign system within every society, every place or cultural milieu in which it participates.

Let us look at the current appropriation of myth in opera. The example refers to the rare *novum* of today's Slovenian libretto-composing. In 2000, an interesting production of modern Medea, set in music by Slovenian composer Jani Golob, libretto by Slovenian playwright Vinko Möderndorfer, was performed at the Slovenian national opera house in Ljubljana. Although the performance has an inventive plot with powerful music (which is definitely worth closer analysis), it was played only one season. Golob's and Möderndorfer's Medea here discussed was namely a good attempt to reinvent mythical Medea by using operatic machinery. According to their conception of operatic Medea it is appropriate to conclude that modern representations of mythical past play an important and meaningful role in the process of invigoration and fortification of actualising social situations. Here I am making a combined analysis only on the level of the libretto's discourse and not in terms of music or aesthetic style.

Schema 3. The play of representations – mythical Medea *versus* operatic Medea

Criteria of distinction	Continuity and asymmetry of Medea's images	
	Mythical Medea	**Operatic Medea**
Social context	– as Veyne acknowledged, for the ancient Greek society there was no problem with the world of myths; – Euripidus' Medea, performed in antique theatre as a place for realisation of the *polis* democracy, presents therefore only one sign of democratisation of ancient Greek reality; – in such imagery mythical Medea played a <u>positive elucidative and illustrative role;</u>	– contemporary westernised societies usually use antique mythology as reference to the ideal standard of life, as "exotic" distant past; – the Möderndorfer's use of mythical narrative in opera only follows the historically strongly rooted codification made at the very beginning of operatic genre; – in such imagery operatic Medea works like <u>reinvention of anachronistic tradition;</u>
Theatrical dispositive of narrative	– it is *tragedy* which shows universalisms of human nature; – mythical Medea as a metaphor of "common values, virtues and mistakes"; – according to Jacques-Alain Miller, Medea's myth as drama is essential exactly as for her knowledge: Medea as a wisewoman is the bearer of *epistéme;* also Lévi-Strauss argues that maybe we will discover someday that the mythical thought is borne by the same logic as scientific thought;	– it is performed as *opera seria* with melodramatic characterisation of modern family life and marriage (librettist subtitled his work as "opera from everyday life"); – Golob's Medea works like the coloniser of her antique precursor: in this respect operatic Medea has to repeat the scandal of mythical Medea in order to achieve the required dramatisation and narrative attractiveness on stage; – mythical Medea is a platform for modern Medea: the librettist was

	– Medea's myth is not a representation of a later Aristotelian ethical slogan of the golden mean, it is actually opposed to it by showing of the "rise of the absolute";	actually inspired by the real story taken from a Slovenian daily reporting about a mother who threw her two children over the bridge because her husband ran away with another woman;
Image of woman	– although Medea is presented as a well-skilled witch or child murderess, her tragic path is understood to be a positive life project which characterises mobile ability, freedom, disconnection with tradition, capability for adaptation, communication and taking risk; – mythical Medea is the story about woman who is able to destabilise the antique man as citizen (the explanation of woman situation is subversive and outer-inversive);	– Golob's Medea is about a woman who destabilises her own life by destroying family life and her husband's life (the explanation of woman situation is inner-inversive); – Medea is presented as a coloniser of cultural and symbol image of a "typical woman" project in the western world praising her double role to be a good wife or loving mother and a successful woman with career at the same time;
Ethical dilemmas and moralism	– mythical Medea is not totally excommunicated from wide community; after the killing of her children the path is still open for her (she has a chance to pass over one system to another); – she was not punished by any juridical or institutional regulation but by fatalistic community convention which says that the destiny punished her enough because she has to live such a life (similar ethics bears the entire mythical Greek world).	– Medea is characterised as insane, irresponsible, crazy, hysterical, her identity is not whole, she loses the unity in herself *etc.* – the criminal act of mythical Medea gets through operatic adaptation very different, modernised moral qualifications; – Golob's Medea is jailed and after many years when set free she has to go home where she is punished again in a way because her own family and neighbourhood stigmatised or excluded her – her path ends in the old traumatised family environment (she has no chance to step out of the system)

The Medea myth seems to be convenient for the illustration of the point of our debate in many ways. It is especially suitable and preferential because it is well-known. Golob's Medea is an interpretation which finds the only possible solution to the infanticide in "madness" (showing a woman betrayed by her nerves) and, thus, openly revealing her repressive culture. This shows that Möderndorfer's reading of infanticide is simply censored: Medea's infanticide is acceptable only if her act is presented as instinctive, non-pragmatic, affective. The point of Golob's Medea lies in the evident modernity of mythical Medea and her similarity to westernised contemporary woman. By using specific genre dramaturgy (drama-melodrama-hymn), stereotypical convention and conservative codes Golob's modernised operatic Medea as well as mythical Medea confirm our statement that she is still far to much avant-garde to be understood in the motive for infanticide, or to be accepted as such in our contemporary society. As we can see, the problem

of mythical Medea is solved less pathetically, less burdened with some swollen symbolism of familiar yoke of marriage. Therefore, Golob's operatic Medea is meaningful in all respects, including the respect in which she summarises the frame of mythical narrative, as well as the respect in which she ignores it, omits it, adapts it or "modernises it". The point is that the comparison schematised above shows these two Medeas in "good" continuity and in "bad" asymmetries. In subversivity Golob's *Medea* could not compete with, for example, Swiss composer Rolf Liebermann's *Medea* with its homosexual theme, recently presented by the Bastille Opera in Paris (Riding 2002:E1).

5. Opera as myth: *Gesamtkunstmythos*?

Wagner is best known as a composer of mythological works, although his music-dramas contain, as is shown by Mary Cicora, basic problems that contradict what is usually regarded as their mythological or legendary nature (Cicora 2000). They all self-referentially play out certain critical processes and historical contingencies. Focusing on Wagner's opus, his operas often pose the question how Wagner's *operised dramas* use their legendary or mythological raw material in a specifically 19th-century Romantic way to create meaning. It is often argued that by means of Romantic irony, internal self-reflection or self-consciousness, each work deconstructs its own mythological or legendary nature. It seems no operatic figure has ever been the subject of so many theorising prefaces, articles, exegeses and books as Wagner. Wagner as a central figure in different expert spheres, especially in scientific one, became a specific myth, a "Wagner" in itself. Similar baggage of "mythological destiny" is also borne by many other formative figures in opera, e.g. Verdi, Mozart (Weber 1994:34–48, Wallace 1999:1–25), the Viennese opera dynasty Strauss, *etc*. When discussing the relationship between opera and myth, opera researchers usually focus on Wagner. Wagner became the significant figure of German national mythology already during his lifetime. He became the embodiment of German Romanticism, if not of German music in general, the symbol of Germany's political and cultural aspirations. For Wagner opera composing was a specific "mythological program". The lessons as revealed in his musical (compositional and librettist) and theoretical works create instead a fundamental myth, a *Grundmythos,* which served and serves an important function in any political reality or national history. As Jürgen Maehder has found in his study of operas dealing with the discovery of the New World,

> *Mythologizing is ... an interactive process through which historical events and protagonists are translated into cultural discourse, often subordinating the actual facts of an event to the value system of the dominant society* (Maehder 1992:258).

Wagner is thus best known as a composer of mythological works, but Mary Cicora argues that these music-dramas contain basic problems that contradict what is usually regarded as their mythological or legendary nature. According to her,

they all self-referentially play out certain critical processes. Her work asks how Wagner's drama uses its legendary or mythological raw material in a specifically 19th-century Romantic way to create meaning and specific social resonance. Cicora calls our attention to the fact that

> *A caesura in Wagner's output is usually drawn between* Rienzi, *a "grand opera" on historical subject matter, and* Holländer, *which is usually considered a "mythical" Wagnerian Romantic opera.* Rienzi *is never performed in Bayreuth,* Holländer *is. The distinction between history and myth in Wagner's work is, however, not so easily draw* (Cicora 2000:25).

Rather, she argues that history and myth intermingle in each individual drama of Wagner, as an internal dichotomy. His so-called mythological works are, to her mind, in several ways profoundly historical, and his Romantic operas use traditional mythological elements in a novel, revolutionary, and timely or suitably nineteenth-century ways. She explains further:

> *After all, inherent in the term "Romantic is that the work is nineteenth-century, and thus not really mythical. Wagner's operas are, accordingly, not genuinely mythological or legendary. The myths and legends that they use as raw material are self-reflective, and thus they contain internal hermeneutics. Myth and legend are portrayed in these operas through the distorting, fragmenting lens of nineteenth-century Romanticism. In other words, these dramas have an essential Romantic irony with regard to their mythological or legendary nature* (Cicora, ibid.).

Making the dichotomy between myth and legend, Cicora debates, first of all, the question of whether Wagner's operas can really be treated or justifiably described as "mythological works". In doing so, she focuses on a particular opera, *Holländer,* which would be by most critics and theorists, as she argues, probably accepted as a typical mythological opera. Taking "literary-hermeneutic" approach to the topic of myth and legend in this opera, she demonstrates how the content of the work destroys the legendary or mythical raw material that is used as its basis. She finds one of the crucial arguments of her theory even in Wagner's text *Oper und Drama,* in which Wagner not only theorises the origin of the Flying Dutchman myth, but also discusses mythological re-fabrication.

In other words, she tries to show that the "myth" in opera thus created is not always genuinely "mythical", but can be "legendary" on the level of self-reflection. In arguing this, Cicora suggests how this basic "mythical" nature of Wagner's opus has a general, "purely historical" significance. She concludes:

> *Therefore, I would add, these works are not so much "Romantic operas" as they are criticisms of such. In other words, their being and essence as "Romantic operas" contains an inner contradiction. [...] In other words, I feel that the "Romantic" interpretation of these works should be rejected in favour of a more modern, revolutionary one. [...] Furthermore, many of Wagner's so-called mythological operas are not primarily mythological, but rather, they place mythological elements against a historical backdrop. Accordingly,* Holländer *is not really a mythical opera in the narrow sense of the term* (Cicora, ibid., 29–30).

Why does Cicora not look at Wagner's operas from predominantly mythical viewpoint? I think it is because she develops a very specific meaning of the term 'myth'. Her understanding of myth is, in a way, "literary-hermeneutical" and not "purely social" or "purely historical", although she stresses the importance of the relation between myth and history.She understands myth as a literary concept, or maybe an aesthetic concept. The fact which probably proves my way of reading her theory about the mythical nature of Wagner's operas is the assertion extracted from her book that Wagner's operas, especially *Holländer,* could only be called "mythical" insofar as the term could be considered a "form of regressive, primal material or folk-literature". The main point of her reflection is that, by means of internal self-reflection or self-consciousness, each opera deconstructs its own mythological nature. Although her theory of Wagner's operas can be taken as an original approach to myth in opera, it also confuses me because I am convinced that myth can be progressive, modern or self-explanatory. In other words, if we use myth as a social concept we can see that it is continuos and, according to Lévi-Strauss, self-reflective and even inter-reflective and intra-reflective. Also it is well known that the history of many Wagner's operas, for example the history of the *Ring* text's evolution from a single opera, has itself become a Wagnerian myth. When I was trying to "compare" myths represented in some Wagner's best-known operas, it occurred to me that the myths in his musical dramas function as a myth-system. They effectively narrate a single myth-system, repeated and mutated in many guises, each variation located at another point of a story, legend or message in the past, present and future time. Thus the narrative of myths in Wagner's operas is cyclic and that some invariable sequences recur in variant forms. His myths have their own discursive social life. For example: the hystericistic construction of Wagnerian operatic subjects (Žižek 1993:177–214). Especially Slavoj Žižek and Elisabeth Bronfen through their philosophical-psychoanalytical readings of Wagner's operas explore and reveal the analogy to Wagnerian characters, that is, a common logic of Wagnerian operatic subjects: the Dutchman as Senta's hysterical vision, confirming her fantasy of being a redeemer; Elsa phantasmatically conjuring up Lohengrin; Isolde's arrival and death as the hysteric vision of the dying Tristan; or Kundry, the split hysterical woman who wants the other to resist her conquest; etc. (Bronfen 1996:152). These inter-relational analogies of Wagnerian subjects intimately build the contingent netlike system of Wagner's mythological allegories.

Barthes said of myth that it *"transforms history into nature ... what causes mythical speech to uttered is perfectly explicit, but is immediately* frozen *into something natural; it is not read as a motive, but as a reason"* (Barthes 2000: 129). Using Cicora's language of interpretation, I would say that myths in operas (it does not matter of which authors, places or times), by making a historical progression of a "natural", "inevitable" and "repeated structure", have a literary or a legendary *frozen* history.

6. Opera like myth: transgression of the incest taboo?

In the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, art and music, especially opera, played a manifold, compelling role. The leading proponent of structuralist approach in social anthropology had defined the invention of melody as "the supreme mystery in the *sciences de l'homme*". His magnum opus, *Mythologiques,* in which the seeming multitude and diversity of Amerindian myths are analysed according to fundamental, "deep-structured" logical and linguistic rules, is organised "musically". It seems he built "mythologiques" in co-ordination with "musico-logiques". An "uverture" leads to a vast set of thematic variations and narrative fogues, arias, recitatives, cantatas, toccatas, sonatas and harmonies. At the end of the four-volume symphonic edifice, a reprise and coda crown the argument. Yet, like almost every thinker in contemporary French pantheon, Lévi-Strauss has been influenced by Wagner. He does not repudiate the analogies often proposed between his own "tetralogy" of myth-logic and that of the *Ring.* Fundamentally, Lévi-Strauss sees in myth and in music the two principal enactments of consciousness, where such consciousness admits contradictions, the unresolved and the collective.

Lévi-Strauss showed that the relationship between opera and myth is productive in many ways at least on three levels: structural (in terms of music composition), aesthetic (in terms of effects which make opera beautiful) and social (in terms of the line of separation of the opposition *nature/culture* appearing in an arbitrary register of opera's everyday life).

The mechanism of fantasy in the opera is according to him greatly enhanced by the element of music. Lévi-Strauss described the relationship between myth and music, on which he insisted so much in the initial section of *The Raw and the Cooked,* as follows: music is "a machine to suppress time", just like myth (Lévi-Strauss 1964:24). At this point we can consider Lévi-Strauss at least as an inheritor of another well-known opera codification, representing probably the most powerful slogan in the eighteenth century, namely the slogan *prima la musica poi le parole.* Here we can make a few Lévi-Straussian analogies or parallels with the opera. Firstly, the textual substance of opera stories or themes is often based on myth, and according to this the opera (as a social phenomenon) is in a position to cause vital presence of mythology in contemporary society. Secondly, both opera (as a musical representation) and myth suppress time, and at the same time both represent a temporal snare. This simply means that both formations play in a social context a supra-temporal structure, which is able to stop time or to ensnare it. When Lévi-Strauss tried to compare opera structure and myth structure, he assumed that if we try to read myth, we have to read it as we would read an orchestral opera score (Lévi-Strauss 2001:39–40; also 1955:428–444), because both exploit otherwise different cultural machinery (opera in terms of musical instruments, myth by mythical schema), but attain nearly the same social effects (Lévi-Strauss 1964). Furthermore, the real aesthetic effect of opera can be, according to Lévi-Strauss, discovered by structural analysis of opera and myth, for

both appear as a structure of repeating numerous elements or hacked pieces. What kind of mechanism is, therefore, required for producing or achieving an aesthetic effect of opera? To put it in the style of Lévi-Strauss, the aesthetic effect of opera arises from the so-called lessened or reduced model, if this is understood as a miniature of the original. Operistic miniaturisation or reduction of mythological narratives might consequently produce the aesthetic attractiveness of opera as art, and by special grips of dramaturgy fulfil its social function. By supposing it as true, the opera structure seems to appear in a Lévi-Straussian perspective as a kind of model of myth, or even more, as a reduction of a mythical story, embedded in a libretto form. This is the point where Salazar tried to reject Lévi-Strauss's idea that the opera was a mythical dimension of our society. Opposing it for that very reason to a provocative argument that the opera is the least mythical phenomenon in comparison with other several culture forms in society.

For Lévi-Strauss, both music and myth are basic human universalities. Conceptualising the dichotomy between nature and culture, Lévi-Strauss argued that if music reminds us of human physiological (natural) roots, myth reminds us of our social (cultural) roots. According to this idea, unexpectedly, he regards opera as an eminent cultural extensiveness of nature. Lévi-Strauss continues with the assertion that opera is able to unify both, nature and culture; even more, according to Lévi-Strauss, it transgresses the nature/culture dichotomy. By inserting opera as an eminent representation of music into his typical structural relation between nature and culture, he also regards it as an irreducible cultural mirror of Western human life which does not have much to do with the nature primarily represented in the "wild thought". We could say that, in the previous sentence, Lévi-Strauss understands opera in relation with its "civilisation context". It seems he wanted to tell us that music (which includes opera) had the same value in the mind of a contemporary "European" that myth had in the "wild thought". Thus music might be the only mythology which still remains at the disposal of the contemporaries of the "civilised thought".

It is obvious that we cannot reflect opera if we do not adopt an external point of view related to the dichotomy nature-culture. We cannot only consider it from inside, from the viewpoint of Western culture. Therefore, the perspective should be understood inversely: opera cannot be explained only "from the point of view of society" because it actually constitutes society; it constitutes, using the Lévi-Straussian dichotomy, the nature of Western culture. Metaphorically, opera *performs the constitution of society*. To paraphrase and summarise Lévi-Strauss's thought, opera may be a provoking and even a phantasmagoric way for opera's societies to retrieve the situation and the problem which all societies usually try to resolve with incest taboo, namely the problem of the relation between nature and culture. Critically speaking, the societies which "failed" to separate nature and culture entertain opera. A marvellous coincidence which may prove our thesis is that Lévi-Strauss's classical book *Tristes Tropiques* needed to be transformed into opera (Steiner 1996:50–51) .

7. Conclusions

In addition to all this, we certainly cannot ignore some denominations and labels of the social function of opera. There are many epistemologically differentiated, totally incompatible, and incomparable, but also ideologically disorganised, clear or dim perceptions, grouped around the demands of etiquette. According to them, opera remains at the same time a social attraction, perverted spectacle, ideological and artistic anachronism, persistent revival of a lost past, event for the élite, meeting of the fans of an excessively emotional world, huge fading relic of contemporary society, jet set, weird rite of modernity, mythical beginning of our society, banal and trivial cultural form, spectacular star-system, modern archaism, constitutive traditionalism of society, art of all arts, the most perfect artistic genre, *Gesamtkunstwerk,* an important cultural institution, enormous architecture, symbol of national metropolises, heavenly music, "survival" of the old social rituals/customs, stuffing material in the world of culture, insensible screaming, an unnecessary thing *etc.* From all this it is probably clear that the position of intellectual objectivation of opera (namely, our understanding of the social function of opera) cannot be separated from the ground of the thesis which promotes the idea of a specific mythological role of the opera phenomenon in contemporary societies. When reflecting on opera in his book *Introduction to sociology of music,* Adorno, a German philosopher, sociologist, and musicologist, felt a little uncomfortable and tried to apologise for his writing on opera (Adorno 1975). Especially in intellectually simplistic and culturally undifferentiated social environments, such as the Slovenian one, there is a lot hesitation about how to perceive opera in general, how to think opera at all, how to theorise and write about it. This is only an additional proof of Dolar's thesis supporting the idea that opera remains a true postmodern subject (or object, depending on the uttering perspective) *par excellence* (Žižek & Dolar 2002:3).

Briefly, opera is interpellatoire (according to Althusserian and Barthesian thought), an interpellation system, which transforms myth into reality, art into spectacularity, and society into rituality. Because of this interpellant rhetoric opera is at the same time a condensed meaning: on the one side the reduction of myth in the operatic plot and on the other side there is a dispersion of modern mythology in relation to society. Salazar's schema of correspondence between the world, the state, and the opera (Salazar 1980) could be in Slovenian circumstances re-categorised as follows.

Schema 4. Correspondence between society, myth, opera

	Society	Myth	Opera
Nature of body	organic	fantastic	artistic
Bearer/Transmitter	Institutions/Interactions	Past/Traditions	Repertoire/Machinery
Representation	Social	Narratives/Messages	Ritual/Spectacle/Events
Structure of place	Phenomena/Culture	"inter-textuality"	"institutional ghetto"
Reference to world	"provincial space" constitutive	transcendental	anachronistic

From the viewpoint of the production of the so-called opera mythology, opera proves to be a very prominent place, in the middle of which, in its "modernity", arises one of the most parasitic processes of specific "mythical" ritualisation of contemporary society. Thus, operatic mythologisation of social environment is realised in the construction of everyday life. It is obvious that a sort of social mythology may manifest in opera (as around any other art form or cultural activity), but that is not what opera is about today in cultural metropolises around the world. With this article I did not intend to reduce opera to any derogative meaning. On the contrary, I only tried to demonstrate some of its representations. After all, one thing is difficult to deny – modern myths and mythologies about opera reflect and represent a significant aspect of social economy of contemporary societies.

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