

A BARTHESEAN ANALYSIS OF REVISIONIST STAGINGS OF
VERDI'S LA TRAVIATA

by

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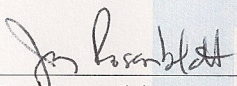
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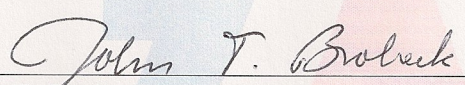
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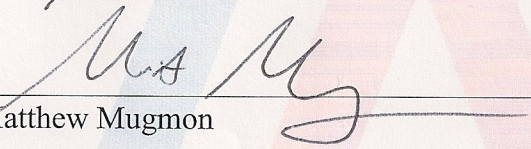
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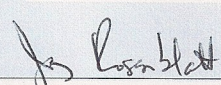
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
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Abstract

David Levin wrote in his book *Unsettling Opera*, “Staging has played an important role in the history of opera, dictating compositional choices and affecting public reception. However, the notion that staging is integral to both the interpretive work and the eventness of opera is relatively recent.”¹ Levin made this remark in 2007, but more than ten years later, we still have not developed a consistent framework for which we as an audience can judge the value of revisionist productions. In this document I will analyze and evaluate three different productions of Giuseppe Verdi’s *La Traviata* in terms of their effectiveness as revisionist stagings by using a set of criteria from the writings of Roland Barthes as laid out by Alessandra Lippucci in her article “Social Theorizing on the Operatic Stage: Jean-Pierre Ponnelle’s Postmodern Humanist Production of *La Traviata*.”² Lippucci borrows Barthes’s concepts of relevance, logic, and innovation from his research in reading revisionist literature and applies these concepts to revisionist opera stagings.

By demonstrating how we can use these three concepts (the Barthesian model) to create a standard by which to judge revisionist productions, I hope to uncover the value of revisionist productions and determine whether they are *valid* based on Barthesian principles. This paper will use information gained from isolating these productions of *La Traviata* as a microcosm for understanding the benefits and cultural necessity of welcoming and evaluating other operas staged in modern revisionist ways.

¹ David Levin, *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 4.

² Alessandra Lippucci, “Social Theorizing on the Operatic Stage,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 12, no. 3 (1992): 266.

Chapter I Revisionist Directors

Scholars, critics, performers, opera directors, and operagoers have questioned how to give opera greater relevance in the modern world. There is a sense that opera is an “insect-in-amber,” so to speak, a relic from another time, trapped and preserved in its respective period, and that it can only be viewed with a historical appreciation or, at most, with an appreciation for the universality of the human experience that remains true and timeless. However, there remains a nagging question: how many traditional period productions of an opera can a person sit through before the narrative becomes exhausted? Once one is well-acquainted with the story, the characters, the music, and the history, has one gained all the value the opera has to offer? Is it time to shelve this opera and move on to conquering the next?

Revisionist opera directors would certainly respond in the negative. They endeavor to discover how we can tell old, familiar stories in new ways. They also try to uncover new insights that can be gained from these familiar narratives by applying new interpretive devices. In 1981, Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, an opera director famed for his controversial revisionist stagings, is quoted as saying, “I think our duty in the second part of the twentieth century is to re-read all the repertory, because we understand much more with all the different sciences we know. There is psychoanalysis. There’s Marxism, of course . . . and a lot more things like that, sociology, etc.”³ Alessandra Lippucci herself echoes this sentiment in a more eloquent way: “Take the critical language of psychology, sociology, and anthropology which, while they postdate the majority of operatic texts, may nevertheless be used as interpretive protocols for rereading those texts.”⁴

³ As quoted in Lippucci, “Social Theorizing on the Operatic Stage,” 266.

⁴ Ibid.

Of course, there is merit in preserving artistic tradition by presenting traditional historical settings of operas, and this has been done successfully in Western culture. However, to prevent opera from becoming merely an art form of the past — to keep it a living, growing artistic organism — some have applied modern sensibilities retroactively to these works. Directors are able to accomplish this not by changing the music, characters, or plot, but by simply changing the staging. By changing the visual perspective, they are able to alter the audience's broader perspective on what ideas art can communicate. It is imperative that scholars and opera-lovers view these revisionist stagings with an open mind while, at the same time, thinking critically about what new perspectives can be gained from the interpretive devices the director has chosen.

Revising *La Traviata*

What is the excuse, ask the skeptics, for a new production of an old chestnut like *La Traviata*? Why revive the hectic life of the nineteenth century, the melodramatic heart and soul of the gaslight era? Like their sensational prototypes in the play *La Dame aux Camélias*, can Violetta, Alfredo, and Germont still influence our own generation? Isn't it more reasonable to treat *La Traviata* — as well as *Camille* — as leftover theatre?⁵

This question was posed by Harrison Clark in an early 1940s *Opera News* article. Eighty years later, it is a question we are still grappling with. How can we justify selling “leftover theatre” with an exhausted narrative to audiences? How can we bring relevance to a relic? Can it be done at all, or is *La Traviata* doomed to decay?

The hopeful answer is that *Traviata* is not doomed. Certainly, *La Traviata* has the same power to move audiences today as it did during the opera's Venetian premiere in 1853. It is impossible to ignore the universality in the storyline and characters of *La Traviata*, and this

⁵ Harrison Clark, “L’amour, La Mort,” in *The Opera News Book of Traviata*, ed. Frank Merklings (New York: The Metropolitan Opera Guild, Inc., 1967), 68.

universality has been noted time and time again by musicologists, critics, and operagoers.⁶ How, then, can we use the opera's universality to illuminate our modern age? How can we be faithful to the integrity of the story while simultaneously providing operagoers an opportunity to reassess the "exhausted narrative" through a lens that breathes new life into the old opera?

One answer to these questions is to use revisionist stagings. While discussing the famed opera director Ponnelle, who is known for his startling and controversial revisionist settings of some of the most popular and beloved operas in the canon, Alessandra Lippucci summarized the plight of emerging revisionist directors: "Now the narrative, from the revisionist director's point of view, is in need of redemption: it is a dead object, a pile of literary ashes that will dissolve in the course of history unless it is rescued by another artist, in this case, the redeemer-director who justifies its relevance to contemporary operagoers."⁷

In revisionist opera, there is a heightened expectation of creative ingenuity placed upon the director. The composer and librettist's creative work has been praised and stood the test of time, but what can a new director add? Historically, the responsibility of staging was left to the poet who generally chose to stage the production in such a way that preserves the primacy of music, or *prima la musica*.⁸ David Levin explains how there is a lack of systematic research that looks at the innovations in opera staging but notes that Wolfgang Willaschek believes that directorial interpretation began in Italy in 1955 with a production of *La Traviata* starring Maria Callas.⁹

⁶ Clyde T. McCants, *Rigoletto, Trovatore, and Traviata: Verdi's Middle Period Masterpieces on and off the Stage*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), 88; Harrison Clark, "L'amour, La Mort," 69.

⁷ Lippucci, "Social Theorizing," 263.

⁸ Levin, *Unsettling Opera*, 51.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 49. It should be noted that Wieland Wagner was an important predecessor who unintentionally paved the way for revisionist directors. His goal was to separate his grandfather's (Richard Wagner) music from its entanglement with the German Nazi party in the beginning half of the 20th century. In 1951, he staged Wagner's *Parsifal* at the Bayreuth Festival. Although he made several changes to distance Wagner and the Bayreuth Festival

However, it was not until the 1970s that a consensus arose about a director's right to dramaturgical interpretations.¹⁰

Traditional settings allow audiences to marvel at the music, but revisionist settings go beyond that by encouraging audiences to also marvel at the *meaning*. The meaning of course changes based upon the director's vision, agenda, or message. Ponnelle expressed the necessity of the creative trade-off in dealing with the standard operatic canon by saying, "So give us new operas like [Reimann's] *Lear* opening every week around the world, and perhaps the power of the conductor and the power of the director will decline and revert again to the composer. But for now, our duty is really to keep the entire repertory alive, so it doesn't just exist in a museum."¹¹ Ponnelle has also taken a firm and, again, controversial stance on literalist experts who recoil at any non-traditional stagings, believing that their insistence on traditionalist stagings is a form of censorship.¹²

Those who believe in the necessity and value of revisionist stagings defend the artistic autonomy of the director. Heather Hadlock expressed this by saying, "We need to acknowledge the director's creative importance — his authorship — while at the same time insisting on a difference between the director's opera and the composer's."¹³ By noting the difference between

from the Nazis, one of the most striking was his rejection of the grandiose staging elements his grandfather's operas were known for. In her article, "Black Venus, White Bayreuth: Race, Sexuality, and the Depoliticization of Wagner in Postwar West Germany," Kira Thurman writes, "Instead of traditional sets with mystical and magical costumes and props, Wieland's productions were abstract, minimalist, symbolist, and ultimately, modern.... Wieland launched a visual assault against Bayreuth's previous traditional opera productions." Kira Thurman, "Black Venus, White Bayreuth: Race, Sexuality, and the Depoliticization of Wagner in Postwar West Germany," *German Studies Review* 35, no. 3 (2012): 611.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Lippucci, "Social Theorizing," 246.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Heather Hadlock, "Violetta's Passion, According to Zeffirelli," *Repercussions* 9, no. 2 (2001): 70.

the director's opera and the composer's, Hadlock seems to be saying that to see value in a director's creative vision does not mean that you must abandon your appreciation for tradition. Both types of appreciation can coexist harmoniously.

Lippucci also comes to the director's defense by saying, "A gifted opera director can bring social theory to life in the domain of human experience in ways that enrich rather than impoverish his or her art."¹⁴ Her focus here is on Ponnelle's application of social theories such as Marxism and Lacanian psychoanalysis to his staging of *La Traviata*, however this notion of retroactively applying concepts relevant in our modern world to operatic interpretations can be applied in a broader sense; gifted opera directors can bring *any* concept of their choosing to life in the domain of human experience in ways that enrich rather than impoverish their art.

There is, however, a standard to which revisionist settings are held. That is to say, revisionist directors must follow a short, but important, list of criteria for their staging to be deemed valuable. Although they may sound limiting or censoring, the expectations laid out by Lippucci prevent complete chaos and/or triviality in a staging. She explains these criteria as follows:

Directors are to be (1) *logical*, (2) *relevant*, and (3) *innovative*, that is, they must create new meaning and not repeat what is already known. A *valid* revisionist production would, then, be characterized by the responsible choice of a critical (interpretive) language (or languages) that logically illuminates new meaning in the text, meaning that it is relevant to the director's own time.¹⁵

Though Lippucci lays out the criteria in a concise way in regard to opera productions, she was inspired by the works of French literary theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes. Barthes used these three elements to determine what could be considered a valid attempt at revising old

¹⁴ Lippucci, "Social Theorizing," 248.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 265.

works of literature. He believed that writers surrender the last word; that to write anything inherently gives the *reader* the final word because of their personal interpretation. Likewise, Barthesian theater or opera invites the viewer to understand that their own perception is crucial to the meaning of the performance.¹⁶ The idea of “validity” stems from Barthes’s insistence that writers (or in this case directors) strictly adhere to whatever interpretive tools they decide to use. Lippucci’s list of three components of a successful Barthesian revisionist production was born out of this concept.

Under the Barthesian model, the production needs to be logical, relevant, and innovative. Barthes and Lippucci define *logical* as the director making choices that communicate clearly and are sensible under the circumstances chosen by the director. For example, it would be perfectly acceptable to select any conceivable setting for *La Traviata*, say, the Wild West. To introduce Germont as sheriff and Violetta as a saloon girl would be considered *logical* despite having no relationship to the music or libretto. This setting would preserve the class distinction between the two characters. Under these circumstances, it would be *illogical* to present Violetta as the daughter of a wealthy railroad tycoon.

The term *relevant* focuses almost entirely on time, meaning that the director’s choices are appropriate to the current time period and could conceivably be of contemporary interest. For example, tuberculosis is an uncommon and rarely fatal disease in our modern age, so to present Violetta’s illness as such would be *irrelevant*. Another disease, such as cancer, would be a much more *relevant* choice in the early twenty-first century to communicate Violetta’s plight to the audience.

¹⁶ Roland Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, trans. Katrine Pilcher Keuneman (London: The Athlone Press, 1987), 27.

By *innovative*, Barthes means any way in which the director features new methods, introduces new ideas, or displays original creative vision. The concept of *innovation* is the broadest of them all and the possibilities are truly endless. If a director sets *La Traviata* on Mars and finds a way to communicate that Earth has been left uninhabitable by climate change, it could be considered *innovative*. If a director were to eliminate a physical stage and could justify a production performed in a pool of water, that also could be considered *innovative*. It is important to note that these categories are fluid and very often intersect. For example, a staging decision could easily fall under both the *relevant* and *innovative* category. Finally, the term *valid* is used for productions that do adhere to these Barthesian principles. Likewise, *invalid* is used to describe productions that do not adhere to Barthesian principles.

David Levin wrote in his book *Unsettling Opera*, “Staging has played an important role in the history of opera, dictating compositional choices and affecting public reception. However, the notion that staging is integral to both the interpretive work and the eventness of opera is relatively recent.”¹⁷ Levin made this remark in 2007, but more than ten years later, we still have not developed a consistent framework for which we as an audience can judge the value of revisionist productions. Using a set of objective guidelines to judge revisionist productions can help thoughtful audiences’ sort through productions that have important messages from productions that could be considered indulgent vanity projects for overly ideational directors.

Through analysis of three productions of Verdi’s *La Traviata*, I will attempt to demonstrate that Roland Barthes’s model can provide a systematic way to determine a staging’s effectiveness, or in Barthesian terms, its validity.

¹⁷ Levin, *Unsettling Opera*, 4.

The productions I will be comparing are: (1) The Salzburg Festival, 2005, directed by Willy Decker, and conducted by Carlo Rizzi. Principals include Anna Netrebko as *Violetta*, Rolando Villazón as *Alfredo*, and Thomas Hampson as *Germont*. I chose this production because, though it is unmistakably modern, it is minimalist enough to have scenes that seem to transcend time. Additionally, this production generated much conversation after its premiere and has continued to do so on subsequent tours (the same staging was produced at the Metropolitan Opera in 2011 and 2017). (2) The production from La Scala, Milan, 2007, directed by Liliana Cavani, and conducted by Lorin Maazel. The principals include Angela Gheorghiu as *Violetta*, Ramon Vargas as *Alfredo*, and Robert Frontali as *Germont*. This is a traditional staging, which I have chosen as a “control” to compare to the other stagings. (3) The Festival Verdi, Parma, 2017, directed by Andrea Bernard, and conducted by Sebastiano Rolli. The principals include Isabella Lee as *Violetta*, Alessandro Viola as *Alfredo*, and Marcello Rosiello as *Germont*. The reason I chose this staging is because it is very contemporary. Unlike the minimalist concept of the Salzburg production, the Parma staging is replete with modern props and references to pop culture.

Although the discussion is not limited strictly to them, this analysis focuses on five significant moments in the opera: (1) the activity that takes place during the *preludio*, (2) the handling of the white camellia, (3) the party guests’ farewell, (4) the payment of Violetta, (5) Violetta’s death. Within those five key moments, I will be considering the significance of the set/stage design, costumes, props, and any unconventional elements. With a particular focus on the relationship (or Barthesian co-authorship) the director means to build with the audience, I will investigate how the director’s choices affect important moments in the opera and the ways in which these choices are deliberately used to convey something new.

This paper will use information gained from isolating these productions of *La Traviata* as a microcosm for understanding the benefits from staging other operas in modern revisionist ways. Though many operas are being pulled (sometimes arbitrarily, it seems) from the canon to be reimagined and set contemporaneously,¹⁸ *La Traviata* presents a unique case because of Verdi's initial intentions for the staging of the premiere in 1853.

Historical Background

After the success of *Rigoletto*, the administration at La Fenice opera house in Venice was determined to secure Verdi for the following year. After many refusals, Verdi was finally persuaded to sign a contract by the opera house's administration secretary, Guglielmo Brenna.¹⁹ It took Verdi a long time to settle on a subject. Francesco Maria Piave, Verdi's librettist, offered several suggestions, all of which Verdi refused. Verdi requested multiple extensions from the opera house, his reasons ranging from a lack of inspiring options from Piave, to rheumatism, to his dissatisfaction with the "mediocrity" of the cast the opera house had engaged for the production.²⁰ At this point in the planning Verdi only knew that he was determined to have a strong soprano lead, and that whoever was engaged for the part must be excellent.²¹

¹⁸ For a small example of other operas treated in this manner, David J. Levin's book, *Unsettling Opera*, deals with revisionist stagings of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* and *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, Verdi's *Don Carlos*, and Zemlinsky's *Der König Kandaules*.

¹⁹ Fabrizio Della Seta, ed., *Giuseppe Verdi: La Traviata, The Works of Giuseppe Verdi 19* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), xv.

²⁰ Mary Jane Phillips Matz, *Verdi: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 317.

²¹ Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi: Volume 2, From Il Trovatore to La Forza del Destino* (London: Cassell Ltd., 1978), 122.

Finally, after nearly five months of indecision and two missed deadlines, Verdi settled on a subject, *La Dame aux camélias*.²² The story was based in reality and was written as a novel by Alexandre Dumas *filis*. Dumas later adapted the novel as a play which Verdi saw in February of 1852. Verdi claimed to have been so inspired by the story, that he began composing music immediately after viewing.²³ That summer Verdi had a copy of the play sent to his residence, he and Piave used it to begin writing the opera.²⁴ Despite the inordinate length of time it took the two men to decide on a subject, it took only five days for Piave and Verdi to draft *Amore e morte*.²⁵

Amore e morte was the original title Verdi and Piave conceived for their new opera. After battling with the censorship board for his previous operas, Verdi was understandably concerned about how the censors would view an opera about a consumptive courtesan. However, the Venetian censors were used to Verdi at this point, and censorship was not an issue. They merely suggested a title change from *Amore e morte* to *La Traviata*.²⁶

However, Verdi did not escape censorship entirely. From the very genesis of *La Traviata*, Verdi had his heart set on a contemporary staging. Famously, Verdi referred to *La Traviata* as “a subject for our own age.”²⁷ From a purely pragmatic standpoint, Verdi argued that the waltzes in the party scenes were contemporary and were used within the opera to represent high society. He

²² Phillips Matz, *Verdi: A Biography*, 318.

²³ *Ibid.*, 317

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 318.

²⁶ Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, 116.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

feared the effect of these pieces would be lost if the opera were set historically.²⁸ Verdi wrote “another composer wouldn’t have done it because of the costumes, the period, and a thousand other silly scruples. But I am writing it with the greatest of pleasure.”²⁹ By this comment, it is clear that Verdi had a vision that his opera would differ dramatically from other operas at the time.

Unfortunately, the theater did not share his enthusiasm. Contemporary stagings were practically unheard of at this time. The administration at La Fenice placed the blame on the public by writing in a letter to Verdi, “It is very important not to go against the ingrained opinions of the public, who are reluctant to see on the stage of La Fenice costumes without frills and lacking the splendor which is certainly wrongfully equated with the richness of spectacle.”³⁰ Other considerations were the proximity of the subject, as the woman on whom Violetta’s character was based had died only a few years prior to *La Traviata*’s premiere. Furthermore, consumption (tuberculosis) was a very common disease at the time and displaying the realities of it for the public (many of whom had the disease or knew someone afflicted) was upsetting enough without dressing the characters in contemporary garb.³¹

The opera ultimately was set in early eighteenth-century Paris and would stay confined to this time period in performances over the next fifty years.³² Verdi held firm in his conviction that the opera should be set contemporaneously and did not stop fighting for his vision until a month

²⁸ Della Seta, ed., *Giuseppe Verdi: La Traviata*, xv.

²⁹ Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, 116.

³⁰ Della Seta, ed., *Giuseppe Verdi: La Traviata*, xv.

³¹ Jane W. Stedman, “Naughty Violetta,” in *The Opera News Book of Traviata*, ed. Frank Merklung (New York: The Metropolitan Opera Guild, Inc., 1967) 127.

³² Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, 116.

before the premiere. The novel and play upon which the opera was based dealt heavily with realism, which translates into the opera.³³ *La Traviata* has even been seen as foreshadowing verismo opera, a Romantic sub-genre that originates with Pietro Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana* (1890).³⁴ It is clear how a consumptive courtesan could conceivably belong to verismo opera, which is partly characterized by its realistic subjects. The realism that La Fenice believed was too gruesome for Venetian audiences was precisely what *La Traviata* would come to be known for. Perhaps Verdi was simply ahead of his time, and these revisionist stagings (which can be quite unsettling to modern viewers) are a way of honoring Verdi's vision.

The historic issue of staging makes *La Traviata* an interesting case study. However, another important reason for focusing on *La Traviata* for this study is its popularity. Verdi's masterpiece has moved beyond the operatic stage and permeated pop culture. From beloved films such as Gary Marshall's *Pretty Woman* (1990) and Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge* (2001) to television ads for Bertolli pasta and Heineken beer,³⁵ the story has proven timeless. Because this opera reaches so many people, whether they even realize they are being influenced by Verdi's *La Traviata* or not, it is critical to explore and unpack the way it is presented to the public.

My final reason for choosing *La Traviata* relates to Ponnelle's belief in the importance of looking at culturally significant works of art through the lens of new structures and movements that arise. In the quote previously mentioned, he gives Marxism as an example. One interest of mine that originally brought me to my research around Barthes and *La Traviata* is in how

³³ Ibid., 119.

³⁴ Carl Dahlhaus, *Realism in Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans by Mary Whittall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 65.

³⁵ These ads can be found on YouTube. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nMuUIQxy1Rs> (Bertolli) and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-QogCxu-Fns> (Heineken).

modern stagings can repaint women in opera. The writings of Catherine Clément, Susan McClary, and Carolyn Abbate serve as important sources of inspiration for how musicologists can apply feminist philosophies to musicological work. My interest in revisionist opera began, and still primarily centers around, how revisionist directors treat the female characters in their revised productions. In particular, there is the way in which the writings of Barthes can be used to examine female characters in opera who seem rigidly defined by their sexuality or innocence. In the future, I plan to work on research that combines the “Whore/Madonna” complex from feminist theory with the application of Barthes’s theories discussed in this paper. With the current rise of feminist movements in the United State such as “Me Too” and “Time’s Up,” revisiting the culturally beloved Violetta seems timely.

In Verdi’s opera the female lead is Violetta Valery, a beautiful young courtesan. She entertained men from high society, attended balls and parties, and was “kept” by Barone Douphol, who provided for her. Alfredo Germont is a young bourgeois man who falls in love with Violetta and wins her affection. Finally, Giorgio Germont is Alfredo’s father; he asks Violetta to give up her relationship with Alfredo in Act II because it is scandalizing the family, making it difficult to marry off Alfredo’s sister to a suitable husband. The characters lend themselves to modern interpretation in part because they are tropes found again and again in Western culture. Their roles are largely dependent upon their status in society, and the social hierarchy has not shifted in any significant way since the time this opera was written. Again, one need look no further than the popular 1990 film *Pretty Woman* to see how well these characters transfer to the modern world.

Chapter II The Prelude

Though it is not uncommon to hear the opening of *La Traviata* referred to as an overture, it is more accurately referred to as a *preludio* (prelude). This term was used frequently in the nineteenth century for short to medium-length orchestral movements that served the purpose of an overture, and it distinguished smaller scale pieces from overtures of great size and complexity, such as Beethoven's "Leonore No.3" or Mendelssohn's concert overtures.³⁶

Verdi himself was purposeful about the terminology he used for the orchestral openings of his operas. He clearly distinguished full-blown overtures (which he called *sinfonia*) such as those found in *Nabucco* and *La forza del destino* from the smaller prefatory music of *Rigoletto*, *Aida*, and *La Traviata*.³⁷ As was standard for nineteenth-century opera, the prelude to *La Traviata* follows the conventions of a medley overture by sampling various melodies from the opera proper.

Traditionally, overtures or preludes preceded the opening of the curtain, and were therefore not staged. Even today it is common for operagoers to use the prelude as extra time to find their seats, finger through their program, or chat with the people next to them. Despite the lack of attention sometimes given to the prelude music, it can be used as critical material in the opera, as expressed by Stephen C. Fisher: "Though it was often the last part of an opera to be composed and was necessarily subordinate in the function to the vocal portions of the work, at certain times and places the overture was treated as one of the primary components of the

³⁶ Stephen C. Fisher, "Prelude (opera)," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, Grove Music Online (Oxford University Press), accessed February 19, 2018.

³⁷ Ibid.

musical drama.”³⁸ In the case of *La Traviata*, Verdi uses two significant melodies related to Violetta. The overture begins with a melody in the high strings that later is heard, in Act III, when she is dying. He also uses a transformation of “Amami Alfredo,” her outburst in Act II when she realizes her need to leave him. Both are significant dramatic components of the opera.

Traditionally, *La Traviata*’s prelude has been highlighted as one of the primary components of the *musical* drama, but many directors have decided to incorporate the prelude as an important component of the *story*’s drama. This is accomplished through staging decisions. Since the prefatory music of an opera is void of lyrics or language, the music provides the perfect opportunity, or empty slate, for directors to make a creative statement about the production to follow.

The surge in staging *La Traviata*’s prelude was likely due to the famous film version directed by Franco Zeffirelli in 1982. Though certainly a non-traditional approach, Zeffirelli was able to employ several unconventional treatments of the opera as it was filmed on a set (as a Hollywood movie would be) rather than as an actual opera staging (as we see with Met broadcasts). However, there were notable staged preludes prior to the 1982 film. In 1979, Jean-Pierre Ponnelle directed a controversial and often cited production of *La Traviata* where he staged the prelude in a most macabre way. Ponnelle began the opera with a living Violetta discovering her corpse upon her dining room table. Once her guests arrive in Act I, they sit to consume their “meal.”³⁹

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Lippucci, “Social Theorizing,” 255.

La Scala, Milan. 2007. Directed by Liliana Cavani

Of course, not all directors choose to stage the prelude. Of the three stagings this paper explores, only one of them handles the prelude in a conventional manner. The 2007 production at La Scala in Milan keeps the curtain closed during the orchestral prelude. This is by far the most traditional staging and, as previously mentioned, is used as a “control” for the other stagings discussed in this document. It is important to note that although there are many “new” or “innovative” stagings currently being produced, there are an even greater number of productions that adhere to the traditional staging model. Despite staged preludes becoming ever more common, they have yet to displace tradition by creating a new convention.

The 2007 Milan production of *La Traviata* handles the prelude in a traditional manner. The video I am referencing for this paper presents the opera staged like a live broadcast as opposed to Zeffirelli’s movie. However, it is not void of editing. During the prelude, the video alternates between artistic shots of the conductor leading the orchestra and credits on the screen. The live audience would have experienced a completely standard opera opening; the curtain remained closed, the room filled with the music of Verdi.

Salzburg Festival. 2005. Directed by Willy Decker

For those productions that opt to stage the prelude, it is important to assess the information being presented by looking at what the director is trying to communicate, the ways in which that message is conveyed, and finally, how well the intent comes across. The ultimate goal would be to weigh the scene against Barthes’s concept of *validity* in order to systematically and responsibly determine whether the director’s choices were judicious or merely indulgent. I

will look at the way each staging of the prelude fits the criteria of being logical, relevant, and innovative to determine the director's success against the Barthesian model.

In 2005, the Salzburg Festival staged a production of *La Traviata*, directed by Willy Decker, that has become famous worldwide. In this production, Decker made the decision to stage the prelude in a way that reveals something about Violetta's situation. The beginning is only four minutes long, but there is a wealth of symbolism (as well as oddities) presented to the audience in that short time frame.

This production gives a minimalistic impression. Though clearly modern, the costumes are relatively simple, and the set design is plain. The entire stage, both floor and walls, are painted stark white (Fig. 1).⁴⁰ When considering the wash of white from a minimalist

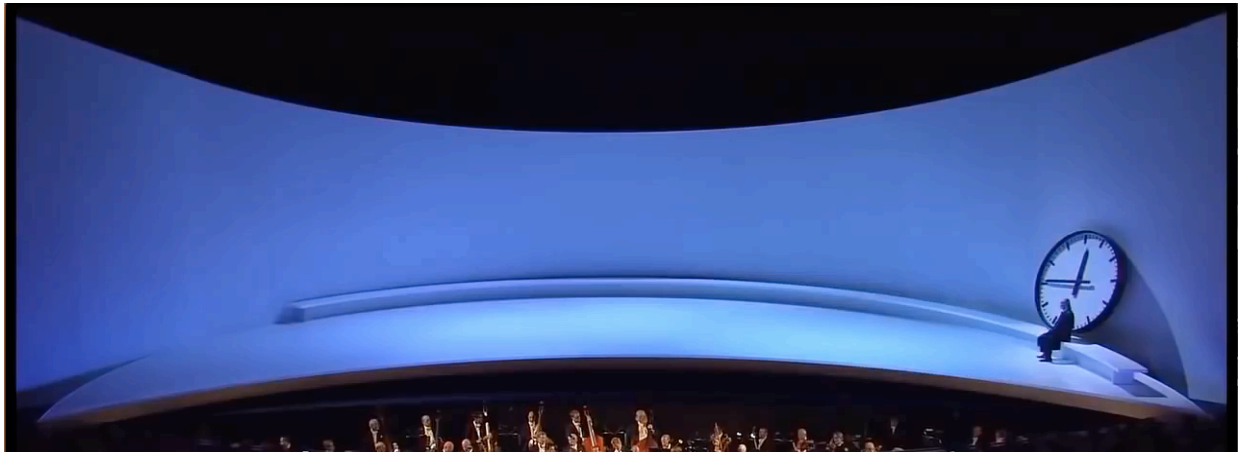


Figure 1. Willy Decker's minimalist stage.

perspective, it may be a clean and refreshing blank slate. Certainly, it serves as an ideal backdrop from which to reflect light, and from a purely practical standpoint, the white stage forces the viewer's attention toward the large clock on stage and, eventually, the characters. Later I will discuss the blatant color juxtaposition of white and red in this production, which is only aided

⁴⁰ *La Traviata*, directed by Willy Decker, Salzburg, Austria, 2005 (Deutsche Grammophon, 2006), DVD, 2:02.

and strengthened by the white stage. The juxtaposition prevents distraction which makes it a useful and inexpensive method to guide the eye.

The only scenic element used in the prelude is a large, foreboding clock which requires and demands a significant amount of attention from the viewer. The giant clock dominates the minimalist stage and is a focal point in every subsequent scene, to the point that the clock almost becomes its very own character as the opera progresses. I believe the symbolism — though poignant — is not hard to grasp; the imposing clock is a steady reminder that Violetta does not have long to live. It towers over the stage in the joyful party scenes, in private moments of love between Violetta and Alfredo, and during Violetta’s bleakest moments. There is no escaping the reality that her time to live and love is running out.

The concept of “time” has always played an important role in our understanding of *La Traviata*. Lippucci notes, “The tragic element of the opera no longer appears to be Violetta’s death, but rather her failure to grasp her true situation in *time* to change it.... Thus the real tragedy turns out to be the historical nature of human consciousness that often teaches us what we need to know when it is *too* early (because the external constraints on our actions are too severe) or else *too* late (because we are too sick or too old) to remedy the situation.”⁴¹ In this staging the clock not only serves as a grim reminder to Violetta but to the audience as well.

To understand the importance of the clock’s role in the prelude, it is helpful to examine its use elsewhere in the opera. In Act II Violetta and Alfredo are in their shared apartment. The couches in the room are draped with ornate flowered fabric which matches the robes that both Violetta and Alfredo are wearing. What is interesting, however, is how the clock is partially

⁴¹ Lippucci, “Social Theorizing,” 259. Italics added for emphasis.

draped in this same fabric (Fig. 2).⁴² While most of the clock is obscured, the clock face is visible out one side, as though the lovers naively believed they could stop time or, at the very least, forget the ever-looming threat of time by covering it up. But the clock, as time itself, never truly “goes away.”



Figure 2. The partially shrouded clock.

After Germont confronts Violetta about her relationship with Alfredo and she agrees to end the relationship, Violetta goes on a rampage through the apartment. She strips the flowered fabric off of the sofas, revealing plain white underneath. She removes her flowered robe so that she is down to her white slip. Finally, she pulls the flowered fabric off of the giant clock in a rage, revealing it entirely. At this point, we notice that her red dress has been hanging next to the clock which she then proceeds to put on her person in view of the ominous clock.

By removing the clock’s shroud and donning her red dress, she is facing reality. She is no longer Alfredo’s Violetta who lives in an ideal timeless state; she has become again society’s Violetta whose time is running out. As Harrison Clark notes, “It is like being ‘caught in the web

⁴² *La Traviata*, directed by Willy Decker, Salzburg, Austria, 2005 (Deutsche Grammophon, 2006), DVD, 49:35.

of circumstances,’ as another critic has described *Camille*. We go to try to understand the web of circumstance in *La Traviata* rather than the lovers involved. We know that Violetta will be eaten by the spider of her own misfortunes — her frailty of body, her ill-chosen way of life, her compromises. We know that we also will be eaten. That is why we must watch.”⁴³

The set and stage design seem well aligned with Barthesian principles. The white stage is a *logical* choice for several previously stated reasons: lighting considerations, guiding the audience eye, and color juxtaposition. The clock as the focal point, with its clear semiotics, is another *logical* decision on the part of Decker because the reason for its inclusion is clear and sensible.

Though the stage is minimalist to the point where it could possibly transcend a time period, it becomes unmistakably modern when paired with costumes and set pieces. Even without the aid of costumes and sets, the stage gives off a modern air. The gentle curve of the stage and sleek lines in the design are akin to what is seen in modern architecture or even similar to popular home furnishing trends. For this reason, I believe it is appropriate to our current time period and is of contemporary interest. According to Barthes, this design would be *relevant*.

The Barthesian concept of *innovation* is the most difficult to determine. To fit the model, it would have to feature new methods and/or ideas, which comes down to originality. Willy Decker tends to lean on minimalism for his stagings. His *Don Carlo* (2005) and *Otello* (2006) were both staged using similar devices — a heavy reliance on white with careful pops of meaningful color and very few props and sets. A minimalist stage is now almost expected from a Decker staging which, in a way, renders it unoriginal. However, at the time of the 2005 Salzburg production, it had not yet become a Decker custom. Furthermore, just as Barthes encouraged

⁴³ Clark, “L’amour, La Mort,” 72.

using the same devices for revisiting and reanalyzing different works of literature, one could use the same devices for revisiting different operas. Finally, there have been many minimalist productions of *La Traviata* since 2005, but Decker's staging was the first high-profile minimalist production to gain international attention. Thus, I believe we can safely consider this staging to be *innovative*. In addition to the white stage, the clock is inarguably an original idea. Though time has been a theme in previous productions of *La Traviata*, the use of a towering clock as the constant focal point was a new idea.

During the prelude, we are also introduced to Violetta's red cocktail dress. The stark contrast of Violetta's red cocktail dress against the almost visually assaulting whiteness of the stage seems significant. Red is often associated with youth, exuberance, and a lively disposition, which all are fitting descriptions of the heroine Violetta.⁴⁴ However, the color red also has more serious associations; rage, blood, and, most notably, the ever feared and condemned female sexuality, the latter being especially appropriate for Violetta. We need look no further than Nathaniel Hawthorne's famous novel *The Scarlett Letter* to see how our culture has internalized the color red with female sexuality and female promiscuity. The dress seems to invite the idea of female sexuality because the dress itself is "sexy." It is a modern cocktail dress, low cut, sleeveless, and short enough to reveal the entirety of Violetta's legs when she spins playfully in the following scene (Fig. 3).⁴⁵

⁴⁴ It should be noted that the color analysis discussed in this paper is based on Western cultural views of color symbolism. Dr. Rachel Lawes emphasizes how culture is the ultimate determining factor when considering something from a semiotic viewpoint. In her article "Demystifying Semiotics," she says, "[Semiotics] come from the surrounding culture in which respondents participate." "Demystifying Semiotics: Some Key Questions Answered," *International Journal of Market Research* 44 (2002): 252.

⁴⁵ *La Traviata*, directed by Willy Decker, Salzburg, Austria, 2005 (Deutsche Grammophon, 2006), DVD, 6:44.



Figure 3. Violetta's red cocktail dress.

Further evidence that the red dress holds significance is the fact that twice during this production Violetta strips down to her white slip. The first instance where Violetta is wearing white is in Act II when she and Alfredo are living together in domestic bliss. The second time is just after Alfredo tosses the “money he owes” at “his whore” during a public party scene. She peels off the red dress as she sings of her devout love for him, and she remains wearing white for the remainder of the opera, ultimately dying in white (Fig. 4).⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Ibid., 51:52.



Figure 4. Violetta's white slip.

Thus, the red dress can be interpreted as a sort of “mask” Violetta wears for the public. While wearing red she is the exuberant, youthful courtesan who oozes powerful sexuality and draws men to her like a moth to flame. However, she strips off the red dress to white undergarments when she is most “herself.” When she is experiencing the human vulnerability that only love can expose, she is wearing white. While red can be representative of sexuality, white is often representative of purity.⁴⁷ One could deduce that because her love for Alfredo is pure, that is, based on love alone (whereas her “love” for other men is primarily in return for money or status), she wears white while with him.

Though that may be true, it is important to note that Violetta dies alone wearing the white slip. The symbolic purity of the white slip could go beyond her love for Alfredo. Instead, it could symbolize the bigger picture which is the purity associated with the sacrifices she makes for that love — first, her willingness to acquiesce to Germont’s request for her to end her relationship with Alfredo, and second, her willingness to sacrifice her indulgent lifestyle for the love of

⁴⁷ Lawes, “Demystifying Semiotics: Some Key Questions Answered,” 252.

Alfredo. Harrison Clark notes this as the central element in the opera when he states, “This is what we come to see in *La Traviata*: not the love story itself but the crossroads of renunciation and self-indulgence where Violetta finds herself.”⁴⁸ Indeed Violetta’s sacrifices have been subject to a staggering amount of scholarship, and her elevation to a *Christos* figure has been explored in multiple productions of *Traviata*. The use of red versus white in this production could be a clear representation of the purification of Violetta’s soul that ultimately allows her to die a sort of “martyr” figure. Based on our Western cultural associations with the color red, it was a clear and *logical* choice for Violetta’s costume. The cocktail dress is distinctly modern. A contemporary woman could walk into any clothing boutique and buy similar garb for a party, and so I believe the dress would fit Barthes’s stipulations for being considered *relevant*.

Again, *innovation* involves a more complex set of criteria. The dress itself is not original or innovative. A simple red cocktail dress is easy to come by, and it is certainly not the first time an opera production used contemporary dress. The sexy, red dress was used to make a symbolic statement about Violetta’s two sides — her public and private personas. We see her wearing red in the public sphere where she belongs to others, and we see her wearing white in the private sphere where she belongs only to herself and Alfredo. She wears red while she flirts with men at parties, but she wears white during her sacrifice. However, this concept is a common trope. The idea of Violetta as a sinner (red) has been inherent to her character since the opera’s genesis. Verdi himself refused to write an opera about a prostitute just ten years prior to *La Traviata*. Throughout periods of history, audiences have had complicated feelings toward the leading lady due to her reputation as a flagrant sinner, particularly in Victorian England.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Clark, “L’amour, La Mort,” 71.

⁴⁹ Heather Wiebe, “Spectacles of Sin and Suffering: *La Traviata* in Victorian London,” *Repercussions* 9, no. 2 (2001): 33-67.

Likewise, painting Violetta as a martyr or a *Christos* figure had been done prior to Willy Decker's production. Victorian England was able to ultimately reconcile their love of Verdi's opera with their condemnation of Violetta by viewing her as a repentant Magdalen figure.⁵⁰ Ponnelle's controversial staging from 1979 was rife with overt religious symbolism.⁵¹ In one illustrative moment in Act II, Violetta is posed with her arms stretched above an "altar" with Alfredo on his knees as though he were praying to her. Additionally, Zeffirelli's popular film from 1982 has been noted for its more covert, but still significant, religious undertones.⁵² Using different colored dresses to depict the two sides to Violetta (sinner vs. saint) is undeniably effective in showcasing the duality in her character, but ultimately the message of duality it communicates is not original. Therefore, I believe that it falls short of Barthes's definition of innovation.

Finally, there is the figure of a mysterious man dressed in black (whose significance will be discussed in detail later on), sitting next to the clock as the curtain opens (Fig. 5).⁵³ Just as the orchestral music begins with the high strings, Violetta staggers onto the stage in her red cocktail dress looking exhausted and dejected. She stares sadly at the foreboding clock before wondering across the stage to the old man. Though words are not uttered, you see that she appears to be pleading with him. Perhaps Violetta pleads with him to be released from the shackles placed upon her by the patriarchal society in which she lives. Perhaps she knows death is imminent, and she is begging for more time. Whatever her request might have been, he refuses. Instead, he

⁵⁰ Ibid., 39.

⁵¹ Lippucci, "Social Theorizing," 252.

⁵² Hadlock, "Violetta's Passion," 69-89.

⁵³ *La Traviata*, directed by Willy Decker, Salzburg, Austria, 2005 (Deutsche Grammophon, 2006), DVD, 4:18.

offers her the white camellia — the symbol of her sexual availability according to the Alexandre Dumas novel on which the opera is based⁵⁴ — as if to insinuate that is all she is and all she can achieve. She accepts this flower and quickly resigns herself to the role life has assigned her. Upon accepting the camellia, she passes out in his arms (Fig. 6).⁵⁵

As she reawakens, he lets her go. She drops the flower on the ground and proceeds toward the giant clock. She reaches out to touch the face of the clock before crumpling to the



Figure 5. The mystery man with the clock



Figure 6. Violetta accepting camellia

ground in front of it in a moment that feels deeply private, lending the viewer an exceedingly voyeuristic feeling. Suddenly, the overture ends, and a choir of men appear on stage, interrupting her reverie. Upon seeing the herd, Violetta looks terrified. Quickly, she picks up the dropped

⁵⁴ Verdi's *La Traviata* is based on Alexandre Dumas's novel and play *La dame aux camélias*. In the novel Marguerite (Violetta) uses a white camellia to communicate her sexual availability to potential lovers. This interpretation will be explored in depth in chapter three. I have decided upon this interpretation based on its explicit use in the Dumas novel. However, it is important to note that there are other potential interpretations such as beauty, aging, steadfastness, purity, and death. Other sources for interpretations on the symbolism of the white camellia include: K. Balachandran, *Critical Essays on American Literature: A Festschrift to Dr. L. Jeganatha Raja* (New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2005), 274; Steven Olderr, *Symbolism: A Comprehensive Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2012), 43.

⁵⁵ *La Traviata*, directed by Willy Decker, Salzburg, Austria, 2005 (Deutsche Grammophon, 2006), DVD, 4:53.

flower, jumps up onto the platform with her back to the audience, turns around, lifts the flower, smiles, and begins flirtatiously taunting the men with the flower as they follow her adoringly around the stage. The fiery Violetta has surfaced, and the party scene has officially begun.

The significance of the camellia is not unique to this staging or even the opera in general. The flower has real historical roots that made its way into both Dumas's novel and play, as evidenced by the very name *La dame aux camélias*. In the next chapter, I will explore the history and significance of the camellia in an in-depth way as well as determine the value of its use in these productions.

Decker deliberately planned for the white camellia to be the only prop used in the prelude. As with his staging and costuming choices, I believe this was a *logical* decision. The flower plays an important role for Violetta's character, and so focusing on this one object is a sensible thing to do in order to draw the audience's attention to it. Decker managed to use perhaps the oldest and most constant element of the old story in a new and modern way. For this reason, I believe it can be considered *innovative* under the Barthesian model.

The concept of *relevance* becomes somewhat complicated with this element of the opera. The camellia is undoubtedly relevant to both the opera and Violetta's character. However, Barthes defines relevance as appropriate to the current time or of contemporary interest. With the long history of the camellia in relation to this story, we cannot say it is of current or contemporary interest. For this reason, I do not believe we can consider it *relevant* in this scene.

Nearly everything discussed in this document are elements of the opera that are treated in an unconventional way. However, there are times when a director incorporates an entirely new idea that is exceptionally unorthodox. Perhaps one of the most intriguing choices Decker included in this staging is the previously mentioned mystery man who is on stage from the very

beginning of the opera. We, the audience, do not know him. Verdi did not write this character into the opera. The man has no lines, does not sing, and does not interact with any characters aside from Violetta, yet he reappears throughout the entire production. He immediately draws attention and a number of questions from the audience: Who is this man? What is his purpose?

The man appears to be guarding the clock, and an argument could be made that the elderly man is Father Time. When we see Violetta silently plead with him, she could be begging for more time on this earth, which he denies her. Perhaps the gift of the white camellia represents life. He hands the fragile flower to her as if to say, “Go, enjoy yourself while you can. The clock is ticking down your remaining time.” This would also explain his continuous presence throughout the opera. Just as the clock is always ticking, Father Time is always watching.

Another very possible explanation is that his character is meant to be representative of God, watching over Violetta’s life and her choices, a symbol that perhaps solidifies Violetta as a *Christos* figure, reassuring viewers that God saw her sacrifice for love and promised to show mercy at her final judgment. Perhaps, when this man (or “God”) hands her the camellia, it is symbolic of him awarding her purity and innocence, even sainthood. Again, this explanation explains his omnipresence throughout the opera; he is always watching. His bearing witness to every moment of Violetta’s story is meant to be a reassuring reminder that though man may judge her by lowly standards, it is ultimately only God who can judge the heart of a person.

This mysterious man has yet another potential representation, the patriarchy. It has been noted by several scholars and critics, such as Catherine Clément, that Violetta is a victim of a male-dominated society. On the one hand, there is a tendency to see the positive qualities inherent to her character, and it is these qualities that give the audience a sense that she has sexual autonomy; for how could a young girl be full of such exuberance if she does not love her

life? In fact, is not “*Sempre libera*,” her famous cabaletta, a testament to how much she enjoys her life as a courtesan? It may not be so simple.

Audiences are willing to accept Violetta-the-martyr, but there is a discomfort in the realization that when one watches a production of *La Traviata*, one becomes a willing voyeur to the victimization of a young girl. As Clark observes, “Through her love and her death, Violetta establishes a rapport of guilt between watcher and performer.”⁵⁶ She is shackled by her society, her station, and the men who provide her livelihood.

Instead of his presence being a constant reminder of reality (as with Father Time) or a comforting force (as with God), the mysterious man would then become a sinister figure. When Violetta silently pleads with him, she could be asking for an escape from her situation, which is a product of living in a patriarchal society. When he refuses and offers her the white camellia, he is essentially condemning her to a lifetime of sexual servitude. He hands her the symbol of her sexual availability as if to insinuate that is all she is.

The addition of this mystery man is either an act of inspired Barthesian genius or a self-indulgent decision by the director. The introduction of this new character appears to be an *innovative* addition to the plot under the Barthesian model. It is certainly a new and original idea in the context of this opera. The *relevance* of this character is harder to determine. He is not distinctively contemporary in contrast to this production’s Violetta. He could be from any time period, and without the director communicating in a clearer way this character’s purpose, it is impossible to say conclusively that he is *relevant*.

I am also skeptical about considering the inclusion of this character to be *logical*. Any of his purposes, which I have proposed above, could easily be considered logical if they were ever

⁵⁶ Clark, “L’amour, La Mort,” 73.

validated. Yet the audience is left to speculate throughout the entirety of the production on the purpose of this character. Without providing the audience a clearer understanding of this person's role, we cannot reasonably deduce whether his inclusion was a sensible choice made with sound reasoning. Ultimately the point a director is trying to make can only come across as effective if their ability to clearly communicate it is done relatively well. Though the character is interesting and gives the opera an extra dose of intrigue, I feel that Decker falls short of Barthes's concept of what constitutes *logical* in this instance.

Parma, Festival Verdi. 2017. Directed by Andrea Bernard

Moving forward to the 2017 production staged in Parma, we see another unconventional interpretation of the prelude. This is the most recent of the productions dealt with in this paper. As we will explore through our analysis, the entire production seems to be an examination of female power in the modern age and starts this commentary with the prelude.

The curtain opens at the start of the prelude to reveal a business, Valéry's Art Gallery, in what appears to be contemporary with our own time (Fig. 7).⁵⁷ A woman, later revealed to be Violetta, is on stage. There are some clues that would lead one to believe she is the gallery owner. First, her surname is displayed in three places as the name of the business. Secondly, there are multiple people who approach her during the prelude looking for direction, which she gives authoritatively.

⁵⁷ *La Traviata*, directed by Andrea Bernard, Parma, Italy, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WPzF_, 3:04.

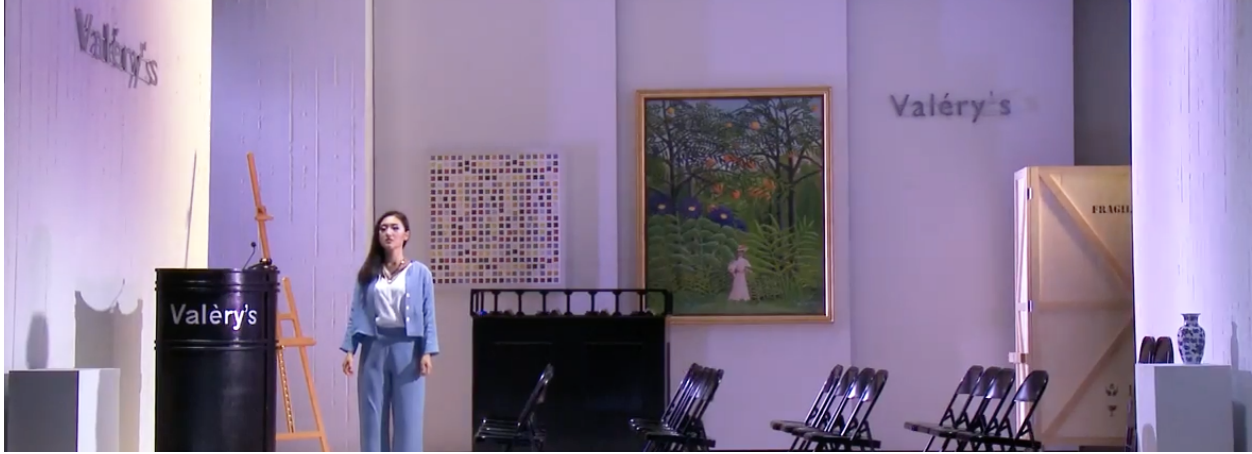


Figure 7. Valéry's Art Gallery

There is no debate that this Violetta is powerful. Unlike traditional stagings where Violetta is presented to us in a frilly ball gown, or Decker's 2007 interpretation, which introduces Violetta in a sexy red cocktail dress, this staging presents Violetta in a powder-blue pant suit. She looks like a modern business woman, and the interactions with her presumed employees help to clarify that we are in the presence of a powerful woman. Violetta, who so famously is painted as arguably opera's greatest victim, is portrayed as quite the opposite here.

I believe the decisions made in the prelude hold up well against the Barthes model; primarily in terms of *relevance* and *innovation*. When considering *relevance* as something that is appropriate to the current time or of contemporary interest, it is clear this production meets that requirement. Beyond the basics of recognizing the clothing and environment on stage as deeply familiar, there are the underlying implications that speak to modern culture. Historically speaking, women were not afforded many opportunities to make a living on their own and were therefore required to view themselves almost solely in relationship to men. The easiest and most conventional way to do this was through a marriage agreement. If marriage was not an option (for whatever reason), there were two options left to position yourself as valuable to men: through religious devotion or whatever level of prostitution was accessible to them based on

class. (In Violetta's case, she was fortunate enough to be "kept"). Though modern women can understand the difficulty of navigating through a patriarchal culture, their survival is no longer contingent on their relationship to men. Therefore, bringing Violetta into the modern world of business was *relevant* by making her relatable to our time. Violetta is no longer a vestige of "leftover theater,"⁵⁸ but rather, a woman we know.

In terms of *innovation*, this production is surprisingly successful. I use the term "surprisingly" because it does not employ new or advanced methods in staging. In fact, there are many items in the set design that could be found in any theater's storage; for example, several metal folding chairs and empty cardboard boxes. However, the new ideas and creative thinking used to retell the story of this familiar opera are commendable in their *innovation*. Unlike the 2005 Decker production which arguably tells the same exact story as the traditional staging but with attention given to themes that are normally subtle (i.e., the role of "time"), this 2017 staging endeavors to rewrite Violetta simply by a change of sets and costumes. Violetta's character is typically understood in terms of her role as a courtesan. This staging challenges the importance of Violetta's station. By removing the courtesan part of her identity on which audiences fixate, they are able to reveal another layer of her character and give audiences a deeper understanding of her appeal.

In examining the prelude alone, it is impossible to determine whether or not Bernard has made a *logical* choice in his staging decisions, particularly regarding Violetta's character. To follow Barthes's definition of *logical*, the choices the director makes need to be communicated clearly and be sensible under the circumstances. Bernard has communicated clearly Violetta's new role as a business woman and artist. However, we have yet to determine whether this choice

⁵⁸ Clark, "L'amour, La Mort," 68.

was sensible under the circumstances. It is difficult to imagine how Violetta's new identity will stand up against her old identity once Act I begins. It seems a perfectly *logical* choice when looking strictly at the prelude because the story has yet to begin, but how will her relationship with Barone Douphol make sense if they are economic equals? On what grounds can Giorgio Germont ask Violetta to leave Alfredo in a world with social mobility? With these questions unanswered, we cannot reasonably say this decision was *logical*.

The props used in the prelude were clearly purposeful and of considerable interest. During the prelude, the stage is being primed for an art auction. Workers are setting up chairs, dusting off art pieces, and hanging up new paintings and photographs. Most notably, we are introduced to a photograph that plays a role throughout the opera's entirety.

The photo used in the opera is a recreation of a famous photograph in recent pop culture history. The original photo is a risqué depiction of model Kate Moss and actor Johnny Depp. It was taken in a New York hotel room in 1994 by photographer Annie Leibovitz (Fig. 8).⁵⁹ Looking at Leibovitz's photo next to the image from the opera (Fig. 9),⁶⁰ it is clear that there is more than a resemblance; the recreation was unquestionably intentional.

⁵⁹ Bebe Leone, "Timeless Love Stories: Kate Moss and Johnny Depp," The Heritage Studio, accessed December 17, 2018, <http://theheritagestudio.com/2014/02/timeless-love-stories-kate-moss-and-johnny-depp/http://theheritagestudio.com/2014/02/timeless-love-stories-kate-moss-and-johnny-depp/>.

⁶⁰ *La Traviata*, directed by Andrea Bernard, Parma, Italy, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WPzF_, 3:34.



Figure 8. The original photograph by Annie Leibovitz.



Figure 9. The recreation used for the opera.

Was it merely a way to appeal to young audiences? Perhaps, but I believe there is a stronger statement being made. With countless couples in popular culture to choose from, and a wealth of intimate photos to imitate, why select this particular image? This staging of *La Traviata* premiered in 2017, and the relationship between Johnny Depp and Kate Moss ended

twenty years prior, in 1997. If the idea was to capture the attention of young audiences, wouldn't it have been better to select a couple currently in the public eye? I believe the Depp/Moss photograph was chosen precisely because their high-profile relationship ended. We know the nature of their relationship and the trajectory it followed, so the director is adhering to the Barthesian concept of *relevance* by drawing a comparison between Violetta and Alfredo's relationship to a relationship in contemporary pop culture. The relationship between Johnny Depp and Kate Moss was notoriously tumultuous, with one famed account of Depp destroying a hotel room after an argument with Moss. That type of destructive behavior can easily be transferred to Alfredo's dramatic outburst at the party where he publicly humiliates Violetta by throwing money at her feet.

The risqué nature of the photo could also have been a significant factor in the decision-making process. In the opera, the subject of the photo is not immediately clear although it would be reasonable to assume it is Violetta herself. This would create a strong relationship with traditional stagings as both would depict Violetta's body as an object for consumption: traditionally it is her body in its physical form being commodified, but in this case, she is selling the nude image of her body to be consumed visually as art. Maintaining Violetta's body as a commodity would appeal to Barthesian *innovation*. It is a new and creative way of presenting Violetta in a way that is more relatable to modern audiences (*relevance*) without changing the essence of her character. Also, if this recreated image is indeed of Violetta herself, it solidifies the director's decision to make her an art gallery owner and artist as a *logical* decision. By bringing Violetta into our modern world, it is sensible to make her a business woman and artist. It would have been possible to maintain her role as a prostitute/courtesan, however doing so would have failed the *innovation* criteria under the Barthesian model, as we as a culture have

already seen a version of Violetta introduced as a contemporary prostitute in the 1990 film *Pretty Woman*. In order to keep true to Violetta's body as a product while also presenting original ideas, it was perfectly *logical* to change Violetta's career and the introduction of this photograph was essential to the audience's understanding of how her new role relates to her traditional role.

Prelude Conclusion

Of the three productions discussed in this section, two were handled non-traditionally. The 2007 production in Milan clearly does not hold up against Barthes's view of a valid production, but then that was expected as the production never strived to be anything other than traditional. The 2005 production at the Salzburg Festival captured the attention of opera lovers around the world for good reason. Just by analyzing the prelude we are able to see many unconventional decisions which try to enhance the old story. The minimalism with nods to modernism keep the production *relevant*. Though depicting Violetta's dual sides (saint and sinner) through the color of her clothing is an interesting method, the presentation of this duality is a tired trope that can be seen in even the most traditional of stagings. Aside from that uninspired message, Willy Decker included many *innovative* ideas within the brief prelude. However, sometimes his zeal to be *innovative* could be perceived as futile. Under the Barthesian model *innovation* can only be considered valuable to a production if it is also *logical*. Decker's inclusion of the mystery man cannot responsibly be considered *logical* as his role is never validated and therefore left open to speculation.

The 2017 production in Parma would suffer the same lack of validation regarding Violetta's career change but is saved by the inclusion of an artistic photo that acts as a proxy for her actual physical body. Assuming Violetta is the subject of the photo, Andrea Bernard made

both a *logical* and *innovative* decision. Bringing the story of *La Traviata* into 2017 with furniture, props, costumes, and most importantly, characters that we recognize in our own lives follows the Barthesian principle of *relevance*. Interestingly, just by carefully modifying Violetta's role, Bernard has been able to achieve a prelude that adheres perfectly to the three criteria laid out by Barthes. By using this model, I believe the 2017 production presents the most *valid* treatment of the prelude.

Chapter III

The White Camellia

In 1848 a young man named Alexandre Dumas (son of the author Alexandre Dumas who famously penned *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*) decided to follow in his father's footsteps by writing a novel, *La dame aux camélias*. The novel was partly inspired by Antoine François Prévost's *Manon Lescaut* (which is referenced in *La dame aux camélias*). However, the greater inspiration came from Dumas's own personal experience. He had been traveling Europe in an attempt to distract himself from a painful breakup when he received news that his past lover Marie Duplessis had died.

Marie Duplessis was a young, beautiful Parisian courtesan. She had many famous lovers and was respected as nobility. As a courtesan she would be "kept" for a period of time by wealthy men during which period they would support her financially in exchange for her company. As history tells us, she began coughing blood at a party. Dumas noticed and followed her to ensure she was okay. Duplessis was so touched by his concern that she took him as a lover despite his lack of resources. Their relationship began in September 1844 and ended bitterly in August 1845. Because Dumas was a man of little means, at no point in their relationship could Marie Duplessis renounce her other lovers and commit solely to Dumas. He was overcome with jealousy and feelings of inadequacy, so he ended their relationship by letter in 1845.

To take his mind off Duplessis, Dumas embarked on a period of travel across Europe while she carried on her life in Paris. She died in 1847 at the age of twenty-three. Dumas was grief-stricken, and immediately began writing their love story. The novel was published a year later in 1848. Marie Duplessis had been renamed Marguerite Gauthier. By 1849 Dumas had adapted it into a play, but it took three years to premiere due to issues with censorship. Finally, in

1852 it premiered at the Vaudeville in Paris. Verdi saw the play in February of 1852, and a year later in March 1853, *La Traviata* premiered in Venice. This time Marie Duplessis transformed into Violetta Valéry.

In the novel (and subsequent play) Marguerite is called *la dame aux camélias* which translates to “the lady of the camellias.” She earned this nickname from her lovers based on the color camellia she would wear. One week out of the month she donned a red camellia which signaled to potential lovers that she was menstruating and therefore unavailable to accept their affections. Once she had finished menstruating and was available to take lovers again, she switched to wearing a white camellia.⁶¹ It is unclear whether this was a practice Marie Duplessis actually engaged in or if it was an example of Dumas taking creative license. Regardless, because it was significant in the novel and play on which *La Traviata* was based, the camellia is important to consider.

La Scala, Milan. 2007. Directed by Liliana Cavani

It is not uncommon for traditional stagings to ignore the camellia altogether. Often there will be an allusion to Violetta’s relationship to camellias either by wearing the flower in her hair or wearing a pin on her dress. In these instances, the camellia is seldom addressed outwardly. Ignoring the camellia altogether or failing to address it seems illogical considering that the libretto (and stage directions) mentions the flower explicitly.

VIOLETTA (*taking a flower from her bosom*)
It's like that, then?
Take this flower.

⁶¹ Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, 119.

ALFREDO

Why?

VIOLETTA

You shall bring it back —

ALFREDO

When?

VIOLETTA

When it has withered.

ALFREDO

Oh Heavens! Tomorrow.

VIOLETTA

Good, tomorrow.

ALFREDO (*joyously accepting the flower*)

I am happy!⁶²

Because of its explicit mention in the libretto, it is more common (and makes far more sense) to include the flower in some way. In the 2007 Milan staging which follows convention, there are some interesting uses of the camellia. The opera opens with a large party at Violetta's home, and a man walks around the crowd with a large basket of white camellias. Additionally, there is a large bouquet of white camellias as a centerpiece on the dining table. The camellia centerpiece does not seem to be symbolic but merely a decorative homage to *La dame aux camélias*. Perhaps the intent was to draw comparison between the decorative nature of the table's centerpiece to the decorative nature of Violetta in male-dominated high society. Perhaps, like Ponnelle's production, the intent was to encourage the audience to see the camellias as a proxy for Violetta herself and create the imagery of her on the table about to be consumed by her

⁶² Dmitry Murashev, "'La Traviata' by Giuseppe Verdi libretto English to Italian," DM's Opera Site: libretti & information, 2017. http://www.murashev.com/opera/La_traviata_libretto_English_Italian.

circumstances. The first possibility is unsubstantiated because there is no move on the part of the director to intentionally establish a relationship between Violetta and camellias to the viewer. It would be entirely up to the opera-goers to understand the flowers as a proxy for Violetta's character. The latter possibility is unsubstantiated by the characters' behavior and stage interactions as they never sit down to a meal, and even if they did, they certainly would not be eating the flowers. If the viewers are meant to see the camellias as more than a nod to the novel, I believe the director failed in that communication. Nevertheless, placing white camellias on the center of the table was an intentional choice, and I think most likely done to facilitate a meaningful use of the flower by Violetta later on in the scene.

The most interesting use of the white camellia in this opening segment is that every man onstage has a camellia fixed to his tuxedo. It would have been conventional to give the men pocket squares or red roses, but the director and costume designer decided on the white camellia. In the play the white camellia is a symbol of Violetta's sexual availability, so I believe having the men wear the camellia instead of Violetta is symbolic of their sexual interest in her. As is common in the opening party scene, Violetta interacts with her guests, often flirtatiously. By wearing the white camellia, the men are signaling to her that they are contending for her affection. (It should be noted that the camellia is used in this same manner during the party scene in Act II).

The most significant use of the white camellia in Act I comes near the end of the duet between Violetta and Alfredo. She picks a camellia from the centerpiece and holds it as they sing. At the immediate conclusion of their duet, the two share a passionate kiss while she holds tightly to the camellia. As they part, she transfers the camellia to Alfredo's hand. Using the camellia as a symbol of her sexual availability, she is then giving herself to Alfredo by giving

him her camellia. In a room full of men who are vying for her affection, she has bestowed her flower upon Alfredo. He then takes the flower and walks away, leaving a wistful looking Violetta behind. As soon as he disappears into the crowd, the chorus comes in singing (marked *allegro vivo*) their thanks and farewell. Violetta is pulled from her tender, private moment with Alfredo and again belongs to the public.

Other than the same treatment in the party scene in Act II, the camellia is mostly retired after Act I. Before the curtain opens on Act III, there is a flashback to Act I that highlights Violetta picking up the camellia from the table and giving it to Alfredo. The flashback is achieved through video editing and is therefore not re-acted. It is clearly presented as a feverish Violetta on her deathbed reminiscing on better days. There were missed opportunities to include the camellia in a meaningful way in Act II and III which suggests that despite some clear consideration given to the camellia, it was not a priority to thread the camellia throughout the production.

In terms of Barthesian analysis, the inclusion of the white camellia is quite *logical* given the history of the story, and the director incorporated the camellia in a *logical* way. It seems impossible to consider whether the inclusion of a flower could be considered *relevant* when using the definition presented at the beginning of this document, which states that the director's choice must be appropriate to the current time period and conceivably be of current interest. I believe there is an argument to be made that the camellia gender swap could be seen as *relevant*. After four waves of feminism, it could make a statement about modern women that, rather than Violetta wearing the camellia to announce her sexual availability, the men are wearing the camellia to express their interest in her. For this reason, I see the use of the white camellia as *relevant*.

However, I believe the use of the camellia falls short in the area of *innovation*. Again, the gender swap is of some interest, but pinning the camellia to clothing has been used repeatedly in productions and Violetta “making a gift” of the camellia to Alfredo is nothing new. For the most traditional staging in this study, I am impressed with the consideration given to the camellia, but it does not stand up to the Barthesian concept of *validity*.

Salzburg Festival. 2005. Directed by Willy Decker

In the previous chapter, there was a brief discussion of the white camellia’s role in the 2005 production of *La Traviata* directed by Willy Decker. It is significant that the only prop used in the prelude was the white camellia. Violetta pleads with the mysterious old man, only to be offered the white camellia (the symbol of her sexual availability) which she reluctantly accepts. A choir of men appear on stage, which abruptly stirs Violetta from her somber thoughts. She jumps up onto the platform with her back to the audience and the camellia in hand. The party music begins as she starts to flirtatiously taunt the men with the flower, like one would taunt a dog with a bone. The men follow her in hopes that they might reach the camellia she dangles before them. By using the camellia this way, Violetta is taunting the men with her sexual availability. In the play, the white camellia signals she is ready to accept lovers, and by dangling the flower in front of them, she is essentially saying, “I am ready to take a lover; which one of you will it be?”

At the start of Act I, Violetta places the camellia in such a way that it hangs out of her bodice (Fig. 10).⁶³ This serves a practical purpose as it allows her to use her hands throughout the scene, mostly to pour champagne into her guests’ glasses. Symbolically, the camellia

⁶³ *La Traviata*, directed by Willy Decker, Salzburg, Austria, 2005 (Deutsche Grammophon, 2006), DVD, 10:31.

continues to taunt the men throughout the scene. It remains a provocative and ever-present reminder of Violetta's sexual availability. She rolls around suggestively on a couch carried by men who are reaching for the camellia in hopes that they might be lucky enough to be the next lover of the beautiful Violetta.



Figure 10. White camellia in Violetta's bodice.

The flower remains in her bodice until the end of her duet with Alfredo (“Un dì felice, eterea”), at which point she takes the camellia out and playfully tosses it to Alfredo. After a refreshingly light-hearted “addio” (most productions tend to make this moment overly saccharine), Alfredo exits the stage with the camellia.

Violetta is left alone onstage to sing “Ah, fors’ è lui” and “Sempre libera.” After Alfredo’s interjection of “Di quell’amor” during “Sempre libera,” he appears onstage to offer Violetta her camellia as she sings “gioir” (rejoice). She refuses the flower, so Alfredo crumples it up and lets it drop to the floor. The remainder of the cabaletta shows Alfredo walking toward Violetta as she backs away nervously. Finally, the scene ends with a passionate embrace.

Like the 2007 staging in Milan, by giving Alfredo the camellia, Violetta is choosing him from the crowd to become her lover. Alfredo returning the camellia is new to this staging. If the

camellia is a symbol of Violetta's sexuality, perhaps Alfredo offering it back to her is symbolic of him wanting *more* from Violetta than what she can offer sexually. He could be saying he cares more about having her heart than her body. This could also explain why he crumples up the flower before embracing her, as if to say, "the flower is not what matters; you are." Another possible interpretation is that by offering her the camellia back and then destroying it, Alfredo is trying to show Violetta that he accepts the fact that she is a courtesan, but he does not care — almost a message that his love for her will enable him to transcend jealousy. In the next Act, we will see this is not the case.

The camellia does not come back until the end of Act II, Scene I. Near the conclusion of Violetta's duet with Germont, in which he asks her to leave Alfredo, Violetta dons her red dress again. Afterward, the mystery man from the prelude reappears from above and tosses the camellia onto the stage below. Violetta runs to pick it up. By putting the red dress over her white slip, she accepts that she is leaving the private sphere she shares with Alfredo for the public sphere where she belongs to whichever man can pay the most. She is covering up her humanity once again with the red "mask" of her party dress. Much like the start of the prelude, the older man gives Violetta the camellia as a gesture to remind her that her fate lies in her life as a courtesan. Unlike the prelude where Violetta accepts the camellia very reluctantly, she runs toward the offered camellia in Act II. She has resigned herself to her role.

Traditionally, Act II, Scene II begins at a party where the entertainers perform a song of foreign girls and matadors. This scene is almost always staged in an unsettling way as it is used to reflect Alfredo's current anxieties. Decker's production takes this one step further by depicting this scene as Alfredo's nightmare. His own mind is mocking him, and in this production, this scene can really be viewed as the impetus for his public outburst toward Violetta. In this staging,

a man wearing a female mask dresses up in Violetta's red dress (Fig. 11).⁶⁴ The significance of this gender swap could be a reminder to Alfredo that there is always a man behind Violetta supporting her. It could be a manifestation of Alfredo's own feelings of emasculation for his failure to provide a life lavish enough to keep Violetta as his own. More simply, it could be a reminder that, as a courtesan, Violetta is merely a pawn or "plaything" for men's enjoyment.



Figure 11. "Violetta" from Alfredo's nightmare.

What follows is a sardonic recreation of the party in Act I. The man in drag is carried across the stage by partygoers while waving the camellia around. This new Violetta offers Alfredo the camellia, but when he goes to grab it, "she" throws it far across the stage into the mob of adoring men. The dream Violetta is taunting Alfredo with her sexual availability, but when he tries to take it from her, she throws it to the crowd, symbolizing the reality that she is sleeping with other men because Alfredo is too poor to support her. From here, the audience watches Alfredo's jealousy grow and fester.

After Alfredo publicly shames the real Violetta by throwing money at her and Germont chides him for this behavior, Violetta strips off her red dress until she is in her white slip. Yet

⁶⁴ *La Traviata*, directed by Willy Decker, Salzburg, Austria, 2005 (Deutsche Grammophon, 2006), DVD, 1:18:58.

again, the mystery man appears offering Violetta the white camellia. She takes it readily this time and immediately offers it to Alfredo. He accepts the flower but then lets it fall to the floor and runs off stage. Violetta then lays on the floor next to the camellia at the mystery man's feet. This was Violetta's attempt at an apology and reconciliation which Alfredo rejects. She tried to give him herself and her love in the symbolic form of the camellia, but his jealousy and pride will not allow him to accept the flower this time.

In Act III the camellia does not play as large a role. Mere minutes from the end of the opera, after Violetta and Alfredo have reconciled and Violetta has forgiven Germont, Violetta picks up the camellia from its Act II resting place on the floor. She begins the *finale ultimo* holding the flower which Alfredo takes from her this time, just before her death. Alfredo finally accepts the apology and reconciliation that Violetta sought to make in Act II. Unfortunately, it is too late.

Willy Decker's semiotic approach to the white camellia throughout the opera was unique and often sent powerful messages that may be lost on those who do not know the history of *La dame aux camélias*. The importance placed on the camellia was a *logical* decision given the history of the opera and Violetta's character in particular. I would say the use of the camellia was mostly *logical*, however I would argue the logic is lost when the mystery man is the one handling the camellia. As we have previously determined, his character is not *logical* as his role is never explained, therefore any behavior he engages in onstage cannot be considered *logical* under the Barthesian model. *Relevance* is more difficult to determine. The flower is clearly relevant to the opera and to Violetta's character. However, Barthes defines relevance as appropriate to the current time or of contemporary interest. In this instance it seems that the very thing that makes the camellia's presence *logical* (its long history in relation to the opera) is the same thing that

prevents it from being *relevant*. Does the camellia offer some insight into our contemporary culture? No. Is it a new idea that strengthens our understanding in any way? Not really. That being said, Willy Decker uses the camellia in an *innovative* manner. The commitment he made to threading the camellia into the fabric of this production shows creativity and Barthesian commitment. The use of the camellia to taunt and flirt at the beginning was new and interesting. Violetta giving a camellia to Alfredo is nothing new, but the camellia being central to their back-and-forth love affair is.

Parma, Festival Verdi. 2017. Directed by Andrea Bernard

Unlike most stagings, traditional or otherwise, this staging opens Act I at an art auction as opposed to a party. At the beginning a worker brings a tray of white camellias to Violetta who takes a few. As she greets auction attendees, she hands the camellias out indiscriminately. By this I mean that she hands them to characters who are unnamed and do not reappear, and she hands them to equally as many males as females. This could be intended to be a statement on the fluidity of sexual orientation in our modern society, however I feel that is an unwarranted assumption and is not supported by any other behavior or symbolism within the production. Therefore, I am inclined to say that this use of the camellias is arbitrary. There are also a few white camellias laying decoratively next to a copy of *Manon Lescaut* which is up for auction. The display is a direct reference to Dumas's novel, in which a copy of *Manon Lescaut* (gifted to Marguerite by Armand) is auctioned off after Marguerite's death. Alexandre Dumas admitted *Manon Lescaut* was an inspiration to him while writing *La dame aux camélias*. The inclusion of the white camellias in this display is an obvious nod to Dumas's novel. I vacillate between whether I find the display nice or too cute, but regardless, it does not appear to be sending any

sort of profound message. It should also be mentioned that Gastone de Letorières, Alfredo's friend who introduces Alfredo and Violetta, is wearing a white camellia behind his ear and waving one around as he sings. There does not seem to be any meaning to this action.

There is one deliberate use of the white camellia in Act I. Alfredo ends up bidding on, and winning, the photograph discussed in the previous chapter. Afterward, Violetta writes something on a piece of paper and hands it to Alfredo. Though it is not clear, I am assuming she is writing a receipt for his purchase, although in fairness, she could simply be giving him her phone number. She passes the piece of paper to Alfredo with a white camellia. He throws the flower to the floor initially as his interest seems to be primarily in the paper. Quickly, he picks up the camellia and offers it to Violetta who happily accepts it. They sing their "*addios*" and he leaves. The exchange is long enough to seem to carry a message, but it is too short to be deeply profound. I interpret this use of the camellia to be the same as the other two productions; Violetta hands Alfredo a camellia as a symbol that she chooses him as a lover. It is not immediately clear why he tosses it to the ground, but it is apparent that he does not do it out of anger. Perhaps it was planned so that he could pick it up and give it to her as a symbol that he chooses her as well. Maybe he never intended to toss it to the ground. It could have been merely an accident as is possible in live performances. Act II and III do not present a white camellia in any way.

I feel that the use of the white camellia falls short in this production when compared to the Barthesian model of *validity*. The issue of *relevance* remains the same as in the other two productions. The camellia is steeped so deeply in the history of this story that it would be challenging to include it in such a way that it teaches us something new or relates to our contemporary culture. However, like the other two productions, the camellia's inclusion is automatically *logical* because of its history. The primary issue with this production's use of the

white camellia is its lack of *innovation*. Handing the camellia to Alfredo was done in all three productions, and there was no other attempt to use it meaningfully in this staging. Furthermore, it lacks commitment to follow through with the camellia as a symbol, and so I would argue, and I believe Barthesian directors would agree, that it would have been better to leave the camellias out altogether in this production.

White Camellia Conclusion

A paradox has been uncovered in regard to the white camellia. Including it in a production is naturally *logical* because the reasoning behind its inclusion is rooted in history and tradition. However, due to history and tradition, there is no apparent way to include the camellia while excelling in the area of *relevance*, although a brilliant director is bound to discover how this might be done in the future. Therefore, while all of our productions manage to handle the camellia *logically*, none of them handle the camellia *relevantly*. Because of this, the best marker for comparison seems to be the level of *innovation* the directors employed.

The 2007 staging in Milan gave the white camellia a twist by having the men wear it as opposed to Violetta. Other than that, it was used in a perfectly traditional manner. The 2017 staging in Parma did not adhere well to the Barthesian principles in regard to the camellia. It was introduced as having some sort of symbolic meaning in a banal way, and then failed to follow through by building on that introduction in a creative way. I believe the production that uses the white camellia in the way that most closely follows Barthes's criteria is the 2005 Salzburg production directed by Willy Decker. By taking a strong semiotic approach and carefully considering the camellia's role within each scene from beginning to end, Decker was able to *innovate* new ways in which the camellia itself could convey messages to the audience.

Chapter IV The Party's End

The party in Act I is crucial to the storyline. It communicates to the audience Violetta's status as a socialite, and directors often take the opportunity to display flirtatious behavior between Violetta and party attendees. Aside from giving the audience insight into elements of Violetta's character, there are many important moments that occur during this portion of the opera, namely Violetta's introduction to Alfredo. Naturally, parties must eventually end, and although it seems like a trivial reality, directors have found ways to make the party's end expressive and revealing, thereby giving it significance. This small moment comes approximately halfway through Act I and lasts about a minute and a half. Yet, there is a wealth of meaning that can be garnered from this moment.

La Scala, Milan. 2007. Directed by Liliana Cavani

As the most traditional staging of this study, it comes as no surprise that Liliana Cavani handles the party's end conventionally. Violetta is all smiles as she graciously bids her guests farewell. She walks around the stage kissing cheeks, taking hands, and blowing kisses to her guests. By looking at the libretto, there is no reason for Violetta to react any other way, for her guests are parting with kind words. The translation is as follows:

Si ridesta in ciel l'aurora
e n'è forza di partire;
mercé a voi, gentil signora,
di sì splendido gioir.
La città di feste è piena,
volge il tempo dei piacer;

Dawn is breaking in the sky
and we must leave.
Thank you, gentle lady,
for this delightful evening.
The city is filled with parties,
the season of pleasure is at its height.

nel riposo ancor la lena
si ritempri per goder.

We shall sleep now, to regain our strength
for another night of joy.⁶⁵

Unlike Cavani, some directors see this moment as an opportunity to delve into Violetta's psyche and explore what is going on in Violetta's outer world juxtaposed against what is going on in her inner world. The libretto certainly supports the traditional method of staging this scene, but does the music? The music is suspect to different interpretations as we will see by looking at the next two stagings.

The "Stretta dell'Introduzione Atto I" is marked *allegro vivo* (cheerful and lively). It begins in A-flat major which it stays in comfortably for a very brief moment. There is a sort of "call and response" section that works as the first tension point where the choir enters in the relative minor. Adding to the tension is the bass part which moves up chromatically at each musical iteration. Throughout this tumultuous chorus, Verdi also utilizes parallel minors liberally. There are strong juxtapositions between A-major and A-minor tonalities. (It should be noted that although this section moves quickly, the harmonic rhythm is rather slow.) Further adding to the growing tension is the *poco crescendo* that builds up from measure 724 through 756. Verdi employs a steady eighth-note syllabic text setting from measures 733 through 756, but at measure 757 the rhythmic structure suddenly becomes syncopated with tension-causing suspensions in the flutes and violins. The harmonic rhythm increases dramatically when Verdi begins harmonizing each note of the chromatic bassline. The syncopated section repeats and ends on a jarring A-flat major cadence. The cadence is followed immediately by an A-flat minor chord which heralds in a short A-flat minor transition back to A-flat major. For the first time

⁶⁵ Murashev, "'La Traviata' by Giuseppe Verdi libretto English to Italian," DM's Opera Site: libretti & information, 2017. http://www.murashev.com/opera/La_traviata_libretto_English_Italian.

since the start of the chorus, we remain firmly in A-flat major as Verdi ends the chorus with a conventional round of V-I cadences.

In this short chorus Verdi uses several methods to create tension and heighten anxiety: a gradual increase in volume, increase in harmonic rhythm, key instability, chromaticism, syncopation, and liberal use of suspensions. This section really becomes a statement on duality. The juxtaposition between parallel major and minor keys reflects the juxtaposition between the benevolent libretto against the tense music which ultimately reflects the juxtaposition between Violetta's outer persona and Violetta's inner self.

By staging this farewell scene conventionally, Cavani fails in the Barthesian categories of *relevance* and *innovation*. An argument could be made regarding the use of *logic* in this instance. It would be *logical* to set the staging traditionally if one is looking primarily at the libretto. However, the sense of agitation present in this choral section is nearly impossible to ignore. Joseph Kerman put it best when he said, "Musical meanings in opera trump verbal meanings (as well as directorial interventions); the music of an opera transforms the plot. It transforms the libretto."⁶⁶ If one believes the music is revealing Violetta's current emotional state when staging this opera and not just obediently following tradition, it would be *illogical* to present Violetta as calm and content during this section. Of course, the Cavani staging is working as a control precisely because the director shows little interest in challenging convention in favor of artistic interpretation.

⁶⁶ Joseph Kerman, "Verdi and the Undoing of Women," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 18, no. 1 (2006): 30.

Salzburg Festival. 2005. Directed by Willy Decker

Willy Decker chose to focus on the anxiety of the music for his staging as opposed to the words of the libretto. After Violetta and Alfredo's duet, Alfredo exits, leaving Violetta alone on stage. (The partygoers left the stage prior to the duet.) Slowly, the stage lights darken, creating an ominous atmosphere. The choir of men⁶⁷ appear above the stage and begin to sing while looking down on Violetta. The mystery man enters and sits next to the giant clock. The hands on the clock begin to rotate rapidly around the clock-face. Violetta runs across the stage and throws herself upon the clock in a futile attempt to prevent the hands from turning. Upon realizing that she is unable to prevent the spinning of the hands, she dejectedly sinks to the bottom of the clock. She stays in this position as she begins "È Strano!"

Of the three stagings, this is the only one where Violetta does not directly interact with her guests as they bid her farewell. The decision to leave her alone in the dark with a hoard of people singing at her is reflective of Violetta's mental state. She has just shared a private moment with Alfredo and, for the first time in her young life, is considering the value of a simple life with one man to love. While Violetta needs to turn inward to learn to navigate these new and challenging emotions, she is forced to do the opposite. The choir of men pull her from her introspection with their singing. By being staged above her, they are looking down on her as if condemning her. Here, we see another juxtaposition; the men are singing words of praise for her partying lifestyle, yet the music and their positions suggest that they are condemning her for her wanton ways.

⁶⁷ The chorus parts include female voices. There are female singers present in the choir, but they are dressed as men. Great attention was given to make the women look like men (wigs, no makeup, etc), so I believe the audience is meant to understand it as a group of men.

The mystery man enters and takes a seat next to the giant clock. He sits calmly as the hands on the clock spin wildly. The hand spinning serves as a sinister reminder to Violetta that time is running out. Not only is Violetta robbed of the privacy she needs to work through her budding feelings regarding Alfredo, but she is now reminded that time is not on her side. She cannot waste time thinking. She runs to the clock to try and prevent the inevitable passing of time but fails. Realizing her attempt is fruitless, she sinks to the foot of the clock, finally submitting to time. From this defeated position, she begins “È strano!” and regains her vivaciousness by the time “Sempre libera” begins.

Based on the music Verdi composed for this section, it seems Decker made a *logical* decision by highlighting the tension in this scene. Violetta’s struggle and anxiety are reflected in the music and her behavior on stage. Determining *relevance* is difficult due to the highly conceptual nature of this scene. When considering *relevance*, we look at how recognizable or meaningful a staging decision is to our contemporary period. I would suggest that because the overarching theme of this scene is anxiety over lack of privacy and time, it is extremely pertinent to our modern society. In a world with social media and enhanced surveillance technology, privacy (or lack of it) is a subject that appears in the news regularly. Similarly, time is something people never feel they have enough of today. By highlighting these two points of anxiety in our modern culture through Violetta’s character, Decker is creating a familiar feeling in audience members. In terms of *innovation*, I would say this production does well. As previously mentioned, this is the only staging among the ones we are examining where Violetta is left alone. It is unconventional to leave Violetta alone onstage and forgo interactions with her guests during this scene. Perhaps the most *innovative* inclusion is the spinning hands on the clock. Decker’s

solidifies his commitment to “time” as an over-arching theme in this production which is not necessarily a theme noted or highlighted by many directors.

Parma, Festival Verdi. 2017. Directed by Andrea Bernard

Like Willy Decker, Andrea Bernard chose to highlight the turmoil and stress Violetta feels in this scene as supported by Verdi’s composition. At this point in the staging, the art auction is ending. Attendees crowd the stage and begin walking toward her one-by-one to shake her hand “goodbye.” As the music picks up, they begin approaching her faster and faster until she is completely overwhelmed by people wanting to shake her hand. She exhibits physical symptoms of anxiety before climbing on a chair to escape the enclosing throng of people. The attendees continue to reach up at her for handshakes while she stands upon the chair, and Violetta tries to brush them off. Finally, it becomes too overwhelming; Violetta throws her arms out to tell the guests to “get away.” They back off, and the chorus ends.

Unlike the Decker production, Bernard chose to have Violetta engage with her guests, which is a conventional choice. However, like Decker, Bernard chose to express the way that Violetta feels overwhelmed by being expected to socialize during a moment where she desperately needs time and privacy for introspection. Just as aristocratic men feel entitled to Violetta’s body, the guests in this scene feel entitled to Violetta’s attention. In Bernard’s staging Violetta is bolder than in the other two productions. In Cavani’s, Violetta is so accustomed to “belonging” to the public, that there is no indication anything other than pleasant “goodbyes” are occurring. In Decker’s, Violetta rages against the passing of time, only to succumb to it forcibly. In Bernard’s staging, Violetta exercises her power by standing up for herself through casting off the encroaching crowd. In contrast to Decker’s staging, where Violetta begins “È Strano!” from a

place of hopelessness, Bernard's Violetta is able to begin "È Strano!" from an empowered state of mind. Considering that Bernard's Violetta is based on a modern business woman, this assertion of strength is an appropriate choice.

Like Decker, Bernard seems to have made a *logical* decision in this section. The tension in the music is mirrored by the tension Violetta feels on stage. Additionally, it is *logical* to follow through with the depiction of Violetta as a modern woman by giving her power and a sense of autonomy over her situation in this scene. For this same reason, I believe that Bernard's treatment of this moment is *relevant*. In terms of *innovation*, this scene seems to hold up well against the Barthesian definition. In the context of a character who is historically victimized (and is fated to be victimized in this production as well), it is refreshing and unusual to see an instance where Violetta is able to assert herself.

The Party's End Conclusion

All three stagings seem to interpret this scene in a *logical* way. However, it is important to consider whether the director is taking the libretto or the music into account when making this determination. If a director is primarily interested in communicating the libretto, which is a legitimate consideration (particularly for audiences that can be presumed to have no fluency in Italian), then it is perfectly *logical* to stage the farewell in a traditional manner. If the director is focusing on the atmosphere and feeling elicited from the music, it would be more *logical* to make a statement about Violetta's tense emotional state.

Cavani made no apparent attempt at *relevance*, but both the Decker and Bernard stagings can be considered *relevant*. Bernard created a contemporary atmosphere from the beginning of the opera, particularly with his decisions regarding Violetta's modern career and current

clothing. These choices worked in conjunction with her empowered behavior in this scene to solidify its *relevance*. Decker's attempt at *relevance* required more interpretation. Though his staging is modern, its minimalist feel is both a help and a hindrance. On the one hand, it creates a blank slate which prevents audience presuppositions. On the other hand, Decker has to work harder to communicate his messages in a clear and effective manner. Though we get the sense that Violetta's stress is related to a lack of privacy and time, it is not explicit. Of course, the messages art sends are not required to be explicit to be meaningful, but with the audience left to speculate, it makes Decker's attempt at *relevance* weaker than Bernard's.

Innovation is the category in which both Decker and Bernard seem to excel, particularly in this scene. (Again, Cavani made no clear attempt to be *innovative*.) Between removing Violetta from her guests as they say "farewell" and the fight between Violetta and time as signified by the spinning hands of the clock, Decker introduced new layers of understanding Violetta's relationship to this moment in the opera. He is both visually and conceptually *innovative*. I would argue that Bernard's staging is less visually interesting, and the message itself is less creative. However, he uses this moment to give Violetta something almost every production robs from her — power. He gives Violetta control over her situation and over others. After judging how these three productions handle the scene where the party guests leave, I would say that both the Decker and Bernard productions handled this moment in a *valid* way as determined by the Barthesian model.

Chapter V

The Payment from Alfredo

Perhaps the most defining moment in *La Traviata* is when Alfredo publicly disgraces Violetta at the end of Act II. Alfredo becomes angry and jealous when she arrives at a party, seemingly happy, with Barone Douphol. Alfredo approaches her and sings:

Ogni suo aver tal femmina
per amor mio sperdea.
Io cieco, vile, misero,
tutto accettar potea.
Ma è temp ancora! Tergermi
da tanta macchia bramo.
Qui testimony vi chiamo
che qui pagato io l'ho.

This woman was about to lose
all she owns for love of me;
while I, blinded, vile, wretched,
was capable of accepting everything.
But there is still time! I wish
to cleanse myself of such a stain.
I have called you here as witnesses
that I have paid her all I owe.⁶⁸

After Alfredo confronts Violetta, Germont reprimands Alfredo for his indecorous behavior in publicly calling Violetta a prostitute. It is a crucial moment in the opera and there is much scholarship dedicated to some of the meanings we can unpack from this scene, most notably, Verdi's obsession with father figures and Violetta's depiction as a *Christos* figure. We will delve into these interpretations as we discuss the stagings.

La Scala, Milan. 2007. Directed by Liliana Cavani

Unsurprisingly, Liliana Cavani handles this moment in a completely traditional manner. Alfredo throws Violetta to the ground after a passionate argument as the party guests watch. He pulls bills from the breast pocket of his tuxedo and throws them at the weeping Violetta. (In this production, it is almost anti-climactic because the bills are presented as a bundle and therefore

⁶⁸ Murashev, "'La Traviata' by Giuseppe Verdi libretto English to Italian," DM's Opera Site: libretti & information, 2017. http://www.murashev.com/opera/La_traviata_libretto_English_Italian.

thrown in one quick motion.) Two people immediately help Violetta to her feet. This clears the way for Germont to slowly emerge from the crowd to scold Alfredo.

The only element of this scene that is of any particular interest is the use of color. In Act I, when Violetta is presented at the party, she is wearing a white gown. In Act III, when Violetta is on her deathbed, she is wearing a white nightgown. In this scene, Violetta dons a red ball gown. The juxtaposition between red and white is similar to Willy Decker's costuming decisions in the 2005 Salzburg production. The white dress in Act I can be seen to have one of two purposes; the first being a representation of the white camellia, the second representing innocence in the sense of childlike naiveté. In Act I, the dress is frilly and almost looks like a camellia. Having Violetta parade around the party in this dress is similar to Decker's Violetta teasing the men with a camellia. She is flaunting her sexual availability. Another possible message is that the dress represents Violetta in her "girlhood." We can obviously assume that Violetta is not virginal when we meet her, but we can assume that she has yet to experience real love. In Act II, when she is seen in red, it represents Violetta as having been transformed into a woman by having experienced love for Alfredo. In Act III she appears in white again, symbolizing her transcendence or divinity.

It may seem unsubstantiated to make such connections, but when you consider the history of placing Violetta within a religious framework, it becomes plausible. From the premiere of *La Traviata* there were concerns about compelling audiences to feel sympathy for a "prostitute."⁶⁹ The way audiences navigated around that grey area (at least in conservative Victorian London) was to associate Violetta with Mary Magdalene. As Heather Wiebe explains, "By the mid-nineteenth century there was a long tradition of linking the sentimental mode, the Magdalen

⁶⁹ Wiebe, "Spectacles of Sin and Suffering," 34.

narrative, and the social problem of prostitution.”⁷⁰ Of course, viewing Violetta in such a way is completely contingent upon her repentance which can be seen in her interaction with Germont in Act II or in her death.

Though Violetta’s relationship with religion may have begun by comparison to Mary Magdalene, others have since taken it further. In her sacrifice — her willingness to give up Alfredo for the good of the Germont family — there have been directors who liken Violetta to Christ and have elevated her to a *Christos* figure. For example, the 1979 production directed by Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, on which Alessandra Lippucci’s article is based, is full of devices that raise Violetta to Christ-like status. As previously mentioned, Ponnelle staged the prelude by having Violetta discovering her corpse upon her dining room table. Once her guests arrive in Act I, they sit to consume her body like one would consume “the body of Christ.” At another point in Ponnelle’s production, Violetta uses the white camellia in a way that mimics giving the host to Alfredo. In Act II, Violetta poses with her arms outstretched over an “altar” as Alfredo sits on his knees before her. Finally, when Violetta dies, she poses like Christ on the cross (legs together, arms outstretched), and Alfredo throws himself on top of her in the same position.⁷¹ One production alone does not make a strong case for a pattern of *Christos* Violetta, but consider this quote from Lippucci: “Ponnelle’s device for discrediting Violetta’s conventional role as a victim, which is really to say those operamakers and operagoers who condemn her to this role, is hyperbole: by inflating her status as victim to Christ-like proportions, he succeeds in demolishing it.”⁷² So Ponnelle’s staging may have been hyperbolic, but he only exaggerated the Christ

⁷⁰ Ibid., 39.

⁷¹ Lippucci, “Social Theorizing,” 261, 252, 262, respectively.

⁷² Ibid., 252.

comparisons as a reaction against the many directors who had tried up until that point to make such comparisons which tells us how common those comparisons were and still are. With this knowledge, Cavani's choice to show Violetta's transformation through the color of her dresses, from "innocent lamb" to self-actuated woman to divine being, becomes conceivable.

Cavani's dedication to a traditional staging is apparent in this scene. By closely following the storyline and libretto, Cavani's decisions are almost always *logical*. The way she stages Alfredo's payment is no exception. Cavani does not fare well against the Barthesian concepts of *innovation* and *relevance*. There is no attempt to make this moment interesting to contemporary audiences, rendering the scene *irrelevant*. The scene also lacks *innovation*. There may be an attempt to send a message with the changing colors of Violetta's dress, but if there is, it has been done before and with more success (for example, Decker's production). For such a pivotal moment in the opera, Cavani's treatment is done so conventionally that it actually becomes tedious.

Salzburg Festival. 2005. Directed by Willy Decker

For the only time in this production, the big clock is center stage, on the floor, angled. (Fig 12).⁷³ Violetta and Alfredo are alone on stage while the crowd appears above. Alfredo throws her down on the clock face, pulls the bills from his jacket, and begins throwing them at her. Unlike the Cavani production where Alfredo throws a bundle of money at Violetta in one motion, Decker's Alfredo dramatically throws the money bill-by-bill. He makes a point to get on his knees and shove bills down Violetta's bodice and into her screaming mouth. It is less of a mere offense and more of a violent assault that is somewhat difficult to watch. Finally, Germont

⁷³ *La Traviata*, directed by Willy Decker, Salzburg, Austria, 2005 (Deutsche Grammophon, 2006), DVD, 1:27:56.

enters the stage to relieve the audience of their discomfort. As he begins chastising Alfredo, Germont tries to help Violetta off the clock, but she inches away. Unsure of how to help her, Germont begins picking up the money that lay around her body. When the choir begins to sing, the party of men show up in solidarity behind Germont. The scene continues like this until Violetta begins singing. She begins her part still laying on the clock then eventually rises by herself. She removes her red dress to reveal her white slip. She throws the red dress into the crowd of men, it lands on the floor, and Alfredo picks it up. The mystery man appears on stage to offer Violetta a camellia which she accepts graciously. She turns to offer it to Alfredo, who



Figure 12. The clock center stage.

accepts it only to toss it to the floor. He runs off and the Act ends.

This scene breaks from tradition from the very beginning. Typically, the entire party is onstage as bystanders to Alfredo's humiliation of Violetta, but Decker has the partygoers looking down in condemnation on Alfredo's attack. And with Decker's staging, it can really be seen as an attack. Publicly shaming a woman is bad enough, so it is typically presented with some level of decorum. Decker's Alfredo loses all sense of propriety and seems to seek more than Violetta's humiliation. He wants to violate her. He intentionally shoves money down her bodice (breasts)

and into her mouth which are parts of a woman's body associated with intimacy and love-making. By violating these areas, he is now treating her as a whore.

Germont arrives to scold his son, but in this particular staging, his goal seems to be more about saving Violetta. In many stagings, such as the other two we are looking at, it is common for Germont to slap Alfredo across the cheek. Instead, Decker has Germont attempt to help Violetta up from the clock. Throughout the entire scene Germont shows more concern for Violetta than anger toward Alfredo which is traditionally staged the other way around. When the choir appears, they stand behind Germont on the left half of the stage. They stand in opposition to Alfredo who is alone on the right. Germont and the guests are not just being chivalrous. This is another expression of Violetta as a religious figure. By this point in the opera, Violetta has already made her sacrifice and is therefore universally viewed as saint-like. Wiebe explains this by saying, "Violetta's confrontation with Germont⁷⁴ marks the moment of her sacrifice, and thus the point at which Violetta becomes a viable object of sympathy within the narrative of the repentant Magdalen. This is the moment where she gains her status as victim."⁷⁵ She is no longer seen as a courtesan unfit for Alfredo or the Germont family, but a victim, which makes it acceptable to view and handle her with sympathy. Heather Hadlock explains the phenomenon that occurs in this moment:

The universal condemnation of Alfredo makes sense if we see that in insulting her he has done more than "insult a woman" — he has violated the sanctity of the sacrificial victim. The opera's religious subtext crystallizes in this scene, which forges a link between Violetta's acceptance of martyrdom and the new status it brings her.... As a martyr, Violetta has become worthy of universal sympathy and respect: she is like a sacrificial animal that must be treated with reverence on its way to the slaughter.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Wiebe is referring to the conversation in Act II, where Violetta agrees to leave Alfredo.

⁷⁵ Wiebe, "Spectacles of Sin and Suffering," 48.

⁷⁶ Hadlock, "Violetta's Passion, According to Zeffirelli," 85.

Despite everybody's concern, Violetta musters the strength to stand on her own, which is a significant display of power as it is typical to have somebody "rescue" her from the ground where Alfredo left her. Decker's Violetta does not need help. She gets up to sing, removes her red dress (the symbol of her sexuality), and stands before the crowd in white slip (the symbol of Violetta's pure, inner nature). As she wanders the stage singing, the men on stage stand watching her, transfixed. As Hadlock says, "The courtesans, their patrons, and her former enemy Germont have all become Violetta's disciples, watching in solemn sympathy her progress toward suffering: her passion."⁷⁷ Violetta throws her red dress into the crowd. She does not need it anymore. She has shed the "public" Violetta and is now content to be presented in her true nature for the remainder of the opera. Alfredo picks it up, but he does not want *that* Violetta. The mystery man appears again, and for the first time in the opera, Violetta easily accepts the white camellia, just as she has accepted her fate. As soon as she takes the camellia, she turns to offer it to Alfredo. She looks at him with hopeful eyes, arm outstretch, camellia resting perfectly in her palm. Just as he takes the camellia, he lets it fall to the floor. Once again, she has offered herself to him, but this time he refused. Whether he is still angry with her or wracked with guilt, we do not know. He runs offstage and Violetta collapses to the ground, ending Act II. According to Hadlock, "This finale is thus a turning point in the opera, the moment that decisively lifts Violetta's story out of the realm of popular romance into that of myth and religion."⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 86.

In Barthesian terms, these staging decisions seem *logical*. It is *logical* that Alfredo could be in a rage and wish Violetta harm after seeing her with another man. It is *logical* that Germont could feel more sympathy toward Violetta than anger toward Alfredo. And it is *logical* that there be religious undertones to this scene given the history of religious connotations surrounding Violetta, in this moment in particular. *Relevance* is harder to determine because of the conceptual nature of this situation, but I believe it can be seen as *relevant*. The violence with which Alfredo displays toward Violetta is something that likely would not have been permissible in the nineteenth century and reflects what is seen in modern day forms of entertainment (movies, TV shows, video games, etc.). Furthermore, Violetta rising on her own (especially after refusing help from the man who helped put her in this position, Germont) can be seen as a triumphant feminist moment for an opera notorious for its treatment of women.⁷⁹

Though the treatment of Alfredo's payment seems full of *innovation*, we really have to think critically about the messages being sent. It is unconventional and interesting to have the choir above the stage while Alfredo confronts Violetta alone below, and Alfredo's rage is much stronger in this production than is typical. Also refreshing is Germont's genuine concern for Violetta which invites audiences to see his character in a new light. However, the religious aura surrounding Violetta in the scene has been done before. Decker is *innovative* in the way he uses the physical stage and in his handling of Alfredo and Germont's character development. He falls short with Violetta. Refusing help and standing on her own is new and makes a statement but stripping to white as everyone on stage watches, like the disciples watched Christ's crucifixion, has been done.

⁷⁹ Catherine Clément, *Opera or the Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 61.

Parma, Festival Verdi. 2017. Directed by Andrea Bernard

The production of *La Traviata* directed by Andrea Bernard takes an interesting approach to Alfredo's payment. As previously mentioned, Violetta's body is still a commodified "object" in this production, but rather than it being her physical body, it is the artistic nude photograph of her. Interestingly, Bernard incorporates this into the payment scene. Alfredo hauls the photograph on stage and begins ruining the painting. During the period where Alfredo would typically be throwing money at Violetta, Bernard's Alfredo begins throwing food at Violetta's photograph. He takes his anger out on the photograph and uses party hors d'oeuvres to ruin it. Violetta tries to step in to rescue her photograph, but then Alfredo begins throwing food at her. Similar to Decker's Alfredo, Bernard's Alfredo aggressively gets on top of Violetta and makes a point to shove food into her mouth. When they get up from the floor, Alfredo proceeds to dump an entire bottle of champagne over Violetta's head before Germont emerges from the crowd to scold him. Following tradition, this is all done in front of the party guests.

Even though Alfredo begins by attacking the picture instead of Violetta herself, the meaning remains the same as in a traditional staging because the photograph acts as a proxy for Violetta. Likewise, I would suggest that the added level of aggression from Alfredo stems from the same place as in Decker's staging. In Verdi's time, it would have been completely improper to toss money at a courtesan in public. In our current age, Alfredo has to go further to offend audiences with our modern sense of propriety (or lack of it). Violetta, being a strong contemporary woman in this production, comes to the rescue of her art. Just as when Violetta stood up for her boundaries at the end of the art gallery scene, Bernard has created another opportunity for the modern Violetta to assert herself and attempt to alter her situation by stepping

in to defend her photograph. Ultimately, she fails and then becomes the subject of abuse herself, but the idea that she has the autonomy to “fight back” is certainly unconventional.

Staging this moment in such a way makes the scene more *relevant* than a traditional staging. It would be more plausible in contemporary society for somebody to destroy a piece of artwork than it would be for a man to pay a courtesan at a party. Bernard’s staging decision is also quite *innovative*. It is a fresh way to approach the scene. As previously discussed, using the photograph as a proxy for Violetta’s physical body is *innovative*, and adhering to that device throughout the opera follows the Barthesian model. However, I am not convinced it is the most *logical* decision. In terms of this staging in particular, it is *logical* to continue using the same device (the painting) that was introduced in the prelude. Yet, looking at the libretto in this moment creates confusion. Alfredo says, “Qui testimon vi chiamo che qui pagato io l’ho” which can be translated to “I have called you here as witnesses that I have paid her all I owe.”⁸⁰ It is *illogical* for Alfredo to sing this and not actually pay Violetta. Overall Bernard seems to have done a great job infusing the opera with innovation, relevance, and logic. However, this seems to be an example where the message Bernard is hoping to communicate is contrary to the libretto, and in refusing to compromise his vision, has rendered this critical moment in the opera *illogical*.

The Payment from Alfredo Conclusion

Predictably, the production of *La Traviata* by Liliana Cavani does not exhibit anything other than *logic* when it comes to the Barthesian principles of a *valid* production. Her treatment of Alfredo’s payment fits comfortably within the traditional framework and does not show any remarkable attempts at *relevance* or *innovation*. The Willy Decker production is highly creative,

⁸⁰ Murashev, “‘La traviata’ by Giuseppe Verdi libretto English to Italian,” DM’s Opera Site: libretti & information, 2017. http://www.murashev.com/opera/La_traviata_libretto_English_Italian.

and he presents Alfredo's payment in a way that holds up well against Barthesian ideas. His decisions regarding character behaviors in relation to the story are both *innovative* and *logical*. Alfredo's overly aggressive behavior paired with Violetta's independence give the scene *relevance*. However, it appears that Decker is trying to uphold the idea that Violetta can be seen in a religious context, which is a narrative so old that it has been challenged since at least 1979, nearly thirty years prior to this production. According to Barthes, productions should always strive to say something new, and though Decker reveals a new side to Alfredo and Germont, he fails to do so in regard to Violetta which *invalidates* this scene in his production. Andrea Bernard's treatment of Alfredo's payment excels in the area of *relevance* and *innovation*, not only because it is set at a modern party with modern dress, but because paying a courtesan is not something common in our world today. Destroying a painting is far more plausible. However, by using this method to make this moment *relevant*, Bernard has ignored the libretto which makes the scene *illogical*, thereby losing credibility as a *valid* decision.

Chapter VI The Death of Violetta

Violetta must die. Her death is, in a sense, the *point* of the opera, and it would not be *La Traviata* without her tragic end. Because her death is inescapable, the way in which it is staged is the only creative autonomy the director has over the opera's ending. Furthermore, the audience enters every production of *La Traviata* knowing exactly how it is going to end; there is no possibility of Violetta getting out of this story alive. Because the finale itself cannot be a surprise to viewers, it falls on the director to create an element of surprise in the way her death is presented. Otherwise, the emotional impact of the opera could tragically end up in a state of tedium. Though this scene requires the highest level of creativity to garner a genuine visceral response from the audience, it is perhaps the most difficult scene in the opera to experiment with as a director because her death, and the circumstances under which it occurs, is "set in stone." There is only so much that can be altered without rewriting the story.

La Scala, Milan. 2007. Directed by Liliana Cavani

As the most traditional staging, Liliana Cavani's treatment of Violetta's death is handled in a conventional manner. The scene opens on Violetta's bedroom which is ornately adorned in a nineteenth-century French style. She dons a white nightgown. Her pale skin adds to the look of illness. She ultimately dies in Alfredo's arms. Violetta's death is so unimaginatively melodramatic, that it almost completely loses its dramatic impact. This staging decision is exactly what revisionist directors try to avoid. Cavani presents Violetta's death in the same way it has been presented in countless productions. Of mild interest is the fact that the opera ends with Violetta's final outburst of "oh gioia!" In the score, there are seven bars after this where

those present at her death sing. The words are not significant as they are merely phrases one might say at a death: “Oh cielo!” (Oh, heavens), “Oh Dio, soccorrasi” (Oh God, help), “È spenta” (she’s gone), and “O mio dolor” (Oh, my sadness), sung by the other characters present in the room.⁸¹ Because of the insignificance of the text, these vocal lines are frequently suppressed in many productions and recordings. However, giving Violetta the last word often creates a powerful ending.

Perhaps by giving Violetta the last word in her own story, Cavani was hoping to strengthen an otherwise dull ending, but such a small and common change in the score did very little to improve the quality of Cavani’s finale. In response to revisionist stagings of *La Traviata*, Susan Painter wrote critically about “the audience’s ... punitive vindictiveness in seeing a whore die.” She goes on to praise revisionist directors who “emphasize for us that it is not ethical for women to present this death uncritically for the satisfaction of voyeuristic spectators.”⁸² Painter might say that, as a female director, Liliana Cavani is not only unimaginative in her staging decisions, but more significantly, immoral. Painter seems to be saying that as a female, it is crucial to be critical in staging the death of a woman who was victimized by, and eventually succumbed to, the patriarchal system in which she lived. Unfortunately, Cavani staged Violetta’s death in precisely the way that Painter believes satisfies voyeuristic spectators.

In terms of the Barthesian model, Cavani’s ending largely failed. (Though, of course, it is not intended as a revisionist staging). Because Violetta’s death makes sense and is done in a traditional way, it can easily be considered *logical*. However, it is almost an exact repetition of past stagings and, as Painter would argue, lacks any sort of critical thought. Therefore, the

⁸¹ Though the score indicates this is sung by “Dottore,” meaning Doctor, it is more commonly sung by Germont.

⁸² Susan Painter, “*La Dame aux Camélias*: The Myth Revised,” *Melodrama* 14 (1992): 125.

staging cannot be considered *innovative* nor can it be thought of as *relevant*. It should be reiterated that Cavani's staging is used as a control and was selected precisely because it does not endeavor to revise the story or staging traditions in any way. However, in its commitment to conventionality, we see the issues that can arise in our current time by passively staging an opera. By passively, I mean a staging that lacks a critical eye or an intended statement. In the case of Cavani's *La Traviata*, she ignores trends in our current time by failing to look at Violetta's death in a relevant way, in this case, through a modern feminist lens.

Salzburg Festival. 2005. Directed by Willy Decker

In Willy Decker's production, Act II bleeds seamlessly into Act III. At the end of Act II, Alfredo rejects the white camellia offered by Violetta, and Violetta falls to floor. Act III begins with Violetta in the same location on the floor. Following the style of the staging, Act III is presented in a minimalist way. The clock that served as the focal point on stage throughout the production is nowhere to be seen, which signals to the audience that Violetta's time has (literally) run out. There is no bed serving as a "deathbed." Violetta is not traipsing around stage feigning coughing fits. Though she does exhibit signs of weakness periodically, they are not done in an overly dramatic way. One by one, those present at her death arrive. Her maid, Alfredo, Germont, and the mystery man. They take four spots equidistant from each other around



Figure 13. Stage set-up for Violetta's death.

the stage, while Violetta walks to each one to make her peace and say “farewell” (Fig. 13).⁸³ She begins next to Alfredo, moves to Germont, and then to her maid, all of whom stay in their seat throughout the finale. Finally, Violetta moves to the center of the stage. The mystery man approaches her for an embrace, and then he walks back to his seat. Violetta sings her last lines alone center stage before collapsing. Unlike Cavani’s Violetta, who dies in Alfredo’s arms, Decker’s Violetta dies alone while the others look on calmly. Nobody rushes to help her after her collapse. The curtain closes.

Jane W. Stedman quoted G.H. Lewes in her article, “Naughty Violetta,” which discusses some of the controversy around staging a death from tuberculosis. He said, “Every hospital has its terrible realities, which it must keep from the public eye, and which Art refuses to acknowledge as materials.”⁸⁴ In Heather Wiebe’s article, she discusses the audience’s morbid fascination when she writes, “In many accounts, there is a marked fetishization of every detail of Violetta’s death.”⁸⁵ What is interesting about the Decker staging is that it seems to take these criticisms into consideration and remove them altogether.

By keeping the staging and costuming simple and consistent, Decker avoids displaying the “terrible realities” discussed by Lewes. This is in contrast to the Cavani staging which shows Violetta suffering on her deathbed. Her thin, pallid body appears so small and frail against her giant bed and oversize nightgown. The large windows and ornate décor of the Cavani staging tower over the sickly Violetta. The contrast of an elaborate stage against the sickly woman in addition to Violetta’s melodramatic display of her illness all recreate the “terrible reality” of a

⁸³ *La Traviata*, directed by Willy Decker, Salzburg, Austria, 2005 (Deutsche Grammophon, 2006), DVD, 2:10:11.

⁸⁴ Stedman, “Naughty Violetta,” 128.

⁸⁵ Wiebe, “Spectacles of Sin and Suffering,” 63.

death from consumption. Decker's minimalist stage, props, and costumes remove the "terrible reality" and create a more artistic and ambiguous depiction of a tuberculosis death. By handling her death in this way, Decker also removes the "details" which Wiebe believes audiences "fetishize." To an audience member who is unfamiliar with the opera and does not speak Italian, Violetta's death in this staging would come as a complete shock, whereas Cavani's Violetta is clearly dying.

Decker's staging of Violetta's death is successful when weighed against the Barthesian model. Given the minimalistic and ambiguous nature of Decker's production, it is *logical* for him to stay committed to those devices during Violetta's death. It would ruin the credibility of the production if he had suddenly deferred to traditional melodramatics or a depiction of an overtly ill Violetta as is customary. I do not think Violetta's death is necessarily *relevant* or *irrelevant*. It is difficult to say definitively that it is *relevant* as there is no attempt at relating it to modern times or contemporary sensibilities. However, neither is it *irrelevant*. If an argument for *relevance* is to be made, it would center on the depiction of Violetta's illness rather than her death itself. Tuberculosis is an uncommon form of death in contemporary Western society, and therefore to stage Violetta as overtly consumptive would render her death *irrelevant*, and therefore, *invalid*. By avoiding a depiction of a dramatically ill Violetta and making the source of her weakness in Act III vague, Decker saves her death from *irrelevance* and *invalidity* but does not bring it fully into the realm of *relevance*. Finally, in looking at *innovation*, Decker is successful. The simple staging and lack of melodrama surrounding her death is unique. Of particular interest is the way in which the characters interact with Violetta. Nobody rushes to her side at the moment of her death nor do they make any attempt to approach her once she has collapsed. All four people present sit calmly as she takes her last breath. First, and most

practically, this allows the audience to pay full attention to Violetta. Second, it displays a level of acceptance from the characters that is rarely seen. The mood on stage is more solemn than impassioned which, arguably, leaves the viewer with a more realistic sense of grief. This treatment is fresh, leaves a different impression of Violetta's death, and most importantly, leaves the audience with a different feeling than a traditional staging, which qualifies as *innovative*.

Parma, Festival Verdi. 2017. Directed by Andrea Bernard

The immediate mood set in this scene by Andrea Bernard is one of depression. There is a mattress in the middle of the floor and packing material scattered around. The once trendy apartment, full of life and personality, that was shared by Violetta and Alfredo in Act II, is now squalid. Like every other production of *La Traviata*, the spectators to Violetta's death arrive one by one throughout the scene. Violetta sings her last note and collapses on the mattress. Like Decker's production, Violetta falls alone in the middle of the stage. Unlike Decker's production,



Figure 14. Germont holding the photograph over Violetta's corpse.

Alfredo tries to rush to her but is held back by her maid. Germont is holding the large photograph, and once she dies, he begins walking off stage with it (Fig. 14).⁸⁶

Violetta's death is handled quite conventionally for a production that makes a strong attempt at revising tradition. Following suit with the rest of the production, the props and costumes are modern, but the action follows convention. The only unconventional part of the ending is Germont's interaction with the photograph. He holds it over Violetta's dead body as the cast sings the last seven bars of the opera. Perhaps it is meant to be a reminder to the audience of how beautiful and lively Violetta used to be. More likely, it is meant to send a message that it is because of Violetta's promiscuity, or in this production, art, that she is dead. Germont also makes a point to begin walking off stage before the curtain closes whereas the other four living people on stage do not. Perhaps Germont's premature exit with the photograph is meant to reflect Violetta's premature exit from this world, or maybe it is an attempt by Bernard to be respectful to the deceased woman by making her center stage before the curtain closes. Whatever message the director was trying to send, it is difficult to interpret, and therefore, not executed successfully.

Violetta's death scene is most successful in terms of *relevance*. The costumes, set pieces, and props are all modern. Beyond that, the behavior of the characters is relatable. At the beginning of the scene, Violetta's maid gives her a pill out of a modern medicine container. Before Alfredo arrives to reconcile with her, Violetta sits in bed lazily scrolling through channels on the television. These are behaviors anybody who is ill in our current age can relate to. Violetta's death scene is not handled in a fully *logical* way. It is clearly *logical* up until Germont's interaction with the photograph. His purpose with the photograph is unclear which

⁸⁶ *La Traviata*, directed by Andrea Bernard, Parma, Italy, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WPzF>, 2:14:52.

makes the message behind his behavior unclear as well. The inclusion of Germont and the photograph unfortunately seems to render the scene *illogical*. The *innovation* of this scene is also lacking. Making Violetta's death occur in a modern setting does not change the meaning nor does it invite audience members to learn something new about the situation. Perhaps Germont's interaction with the photograph was intended to be innovative, but because the message is too obscure, it fails. I believe in comparing this scene to the Barthesian model, Bernard has staged Violetta's death in an *invalid* way.

The Death of Violetta Conclusion

As audience members, we enter every showing of *La Traviata* knowing that Violetta's death is inevitable. Despite knowing Violetta will meet a tragic end, audiences still flock to opera houses to watch her tragedy unfold. We may not be surprised by her dying, but directors still have the ability to surprise audiences with how they stage her death. They can still critically analyze Violetta's unavoidable fate and uncover new meanings and messages. The most important thing to consider is how well these new meanings are communicated.

Liliana Cavani's production of *La Traviata* handles Violetta's death in a traditional way and therefore does not adhere to the Barthesian principles of *innovation* and *relevance*. However, partly due to its predictability, it can be considered highly *logical*. According to Barthes, this production would not be *valid* because it does not meet the three important criteria. Furthermore, Cavani's conventional treatment of Violetta's death raises ethical questions about a director's duty to reinterpret old narratives. Just as in the other key scenes in his production of *La Traviata*, Willy Decker handles Violetta's death in a highly *innovative* way. The minimalist stage design and behavior of the characters in the finale are both new and revealing. Despite the

level of *innovation*, Decker is still able to achieve a very *logical* ending by adhering to the storyline while also following through with the interpretive devices he introduced at the beginning of the opera. Though he may not have reached complete *relevance*, he managed to avoid irrelevance by keeping Violetta's ailment mostly ambiguous. Finally, looking at Bernard's production, he fares best in the area of *relevance*. His characters act, react, and interact with their environment in a way that modern audiences can relate to. We are able to see ourselves much more easily in the characters of this opera. However, he weakened an otherwise *logical* scene by including the questionable interaction between Germont and Violetta's photograph. Had this moment with Germont and the picture been executed in a clearer way, it might have added an element of *innovation* to this scene. But, because Bernard failed to get his message across to the audience in an effective manner, the scene lacks both the element of *logic* and *innovation*. It is clear that through using the Barthesian model, Decker offers the most convincing handling of Violetta's death of the three productions.

Chapter VII Conclusion

What is the excuse, ask the skeptics, for a new production of an old chestnut like *La Traviata*? Why revive the hectic life of the nineteenth century, the melodramatic heart and soul of the gaslight era? Like their sensational prototypes in the play *La Dame aux Camélias*, can Violetta, Alfredo, and Germont still influence our own generation? Isn't it more reasonable to treat *La Traviata* — as well as *Camille* — as leftover theater?⁸⁷

To reconsider this question posed by Harrison Clark as to *why* we should revive the “hectic life of the nineteenth century,” after comparing these stagings, the answer is, “maybe we shouldn't.” Yet, it is also clear that Violetta, Alfredo, and Germont *can* still influence our own generation. In order to move audiences today the same way Verdi did in 1853, perhaps we must forgo revisiting the “hectic life of the nineteenth century” and invite these influential characters into our modern world, not simply to modernize the production to appeal to contemporary aesthetics, but to see what this story and these characters can reveal about our world today. Maybe to prevent *La Traviata*, as well as opera in general, from becoming “leftover theater,” we rise to Jean-Pierre Ponnelle's challenge, “I think our duty in the second part of the twentieth century is to re-read all the repertory.”⁸⁸ As Barthes himself says, “We should not be surprised that a country should periodically review ... the things which come down from its past and describe them anew in order to find out *what it can make of them*: such activities are and ought to be normal assessment procedures.”⁸⁹ As Ponnelle and Lippucci discuss, any creation of a critical language or a change in culture can (and should) be an

⁸⁷ Clark, “L'amour, La Mort,” 68.

⁸⁸ Lippucci, “Social Theorizing,” 266.

⁸⁹ Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, 1.

opportunity to reread and reinterpret any given opera. Staging decisions offer opera an opportunity to be treated not like a historical relic, but rather a living and evolving art form.

Final Comparison of the Three Stagings

It is true that by adding *my* situation to my reading of a work I can reduce its ambiguity (and that is what usually happens); but this situation, as it changes, *composes* the work and does not rediscover it: as soon as I submit to the constraints of the symbolic code on which it is based, that is to say as soon as I agree to inscribe my reading in the symbolic domain, the work cannot protest against the meaning I give it, but neither can the work authenticate that meaning.⁹⁰

Perhaps it seems as though this document should present a final assessment of the three productions of *La Traviata*, crowning one the most *valid* under the Barthesian model. However, that is not the point of this discussion. I am not arguing which production is the most *valid*; I intended only to demonstrate how Roland Barthes's model can provide a systematic way to determine a staging's *validity*. In fact, my interpretation of these productions can hardly be considered "truth." As the Barthes quote above states, the work can neither protest nor authenticate the meaning I prescribe. My interpretation, though informed and valid, is only one of many possible interpretations. As Barthes says, "the work holds several meanings simultaneously."⁹¹

Today, opera staging seems to be divided into two camps: traditionalists (who produce "consciously imitative products")⁹² and innovators (who "explore unconscious historical, ideological, socio-political, or aesthetic resonances").⁹³ Traditionalists are criticized for saying

⁹⁰ Ibid., 27.

⁹¹ Ibid., 24.

⁹² Levin, *Unsettling Opera*, 44.

⁹³ Ibid.

nothing, or more accurately, saying what has already been said. Innovators, on the other hand, are criticized for being senseless or being “overly provocative without being intelligent.”⁹⁴ Sometimes this criticism is fair. Sometimes this criticism is unfair, and the critic is simply afraid of change. As Barthes says, “the speaker fears all innovation, which he denounces on each occasion as ‘empty’.”⁹⁵

To determine whether these revisionist stagings are truly “empty” or actually meaningful, it is important to develop a consistent criteria to weigh them against. I believe Barthes’s insistence on logic, relevance, and innovation are fair and useful markers of a valid production. They are concrete enough concepts for audiences (or critics) to look for while watching a production while conceptually ambiguous enough to grant directors maximum creative license as well as allowing for many different audience interpretations. Although it is impossible to definitively say which production is most *valid* because these are my interpretations alone, my critical analyses shows that the 2005 Salzburg production and the 2017 Parma production both measured well against the Barthesian model of a *valid* production, with Willy Decker’s 2005 production in Salzburg faring slightly better.

Though I believe the Barthesian model is a good place to start in analyzing revisionist opera productions, and I am advocating for more widespread knowledge and use of this system, I also acknowledge that it is not a perfect system. In particular, his concepts of logic, relevance, and innovation are very broad. One possible direction for future research would be to devise an intelligent and systematic way to break these three elements down into clearer components. Additionally, it would be helpful to devise a language around applying Barthes’s literary theories

⁹⁴ Ibid, 47.

⁹⁵ Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, 26.

to opera specifically. One of the primary reasons I relied so heavily on Lippucci's writing as opposed to Barthes's own works is because she does a wonderful job of applying his thoughts and systems meant for the reading of literature to the viewing of opera.

The Importance of Revisionist Stagings

The premiere of Willy Decker's staging of *La Traviata* in 2005 took the opera world by storm, partly because the world was entranced with the lovely and talented Anna Netrebko. However, the staging has been revived without Netrebko as the leading lady. It ran at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York during the 2011 season and was revived most recently at the Met in 2017. Considering that this particular production has fared well in two separate runs on the Metropolitan opera stage, we can assume it is favorably popular (though it should be noted that the production always receives a fair amount of criticism and pushback during each run). It almost goes without saying that if Decker's production of *La Traviata* did not draw audiences into an opera house, opera management would simply stop staging it.

The question then arises, "is popularity a measure of validity?" There may be a number of factors that affect the answer of this question, but I believe the answer is "no." I think with a solid understanding of the Barthesian model, the criteria presented create an objective view of the opera's *validity*. Perhaps the stagings that fare strongly against Barthes's criteria tend to become more popular because they are new and interesting, but more importantly, excel in "making sense" and therefore tell a clear story as opposed to a staging too conceptually complex to reach audiences.

That being said, I do not believe a production has to be *valid* to be well received, nor do I believe that all *valid* productions end up being well received. Providing criteria for which to

judge art does not erase the realities of ingrained biases, individual experiences, or even just personal taste. However, using clear guidelines to judge these productions can help opera-goers separate meaningful productions which communicate an important message from the productions that are meaningless projects created and performed solely for shock value.

Despite the popularity of the Decker production, not all opera fans welcomed its return. The last time the production was staged at the Met, comments from the public were not favorable. Interestingly, as social media becomes more popular and a strong driving force in marketing and advertising, opera criticism is not confined to respected critics writing for reputable news sources. We are able to peer into the opinions of the general public. A possible direction for future research is the impact of social media on “opera culture.” As our society becomes further entrenched in the virtual world of social media, will opera houses take new pieces of information into consideration beyond just ticket sales? Will they look at an opera singer’s social media following as an indication of whether or not they should be engaged for a season? Will they refuse to rehire singers based solely on opinions posted on social media? Will they offer polls in advance to get feedback about what the general public would like to see in upcoming seasons? Will more engagement with social media mean that average viewers have more say in the future of opera as opposed to only top donors and patrons? The potential implications of opera houses’ social media use could provide useful information to researchers about the future of opera. Below, I have included some of the comments from Facebook and Instagram that highlight some social media comments about Decker’s staging. (The language used in the following social media excerpts may be offensive and/or triggering to some readers).

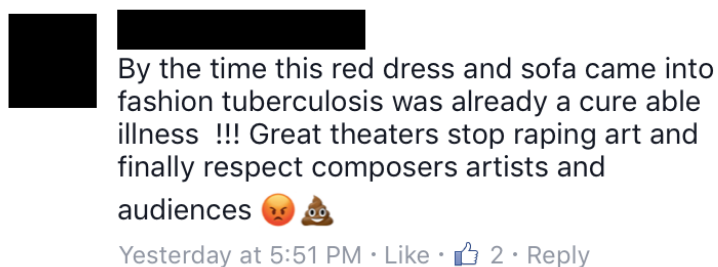


Figure 15. Facebook example 1.



Figure 16. Facebook examples 2 & 3.



Figure 17. Instagram example 1.

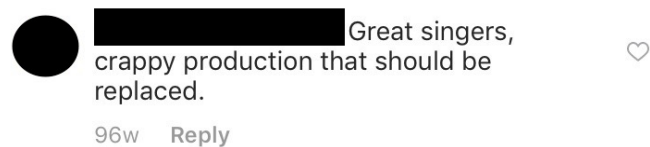


Figure 18. Instagram example 2.

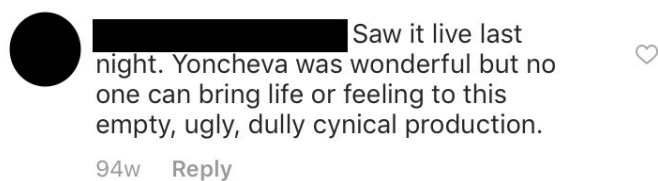


Figure 19. Instagram example 3.

To be clear, there were far more positive comments than negative ones on all social platforms (Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube). The fact that the Metropolitan Opera has welcomed this staging to their house twice is evidence enough that it is generally well received. However, my interest in these negative comments is the way almost all of the criticism is directed at the staging rather than at the singers, the music, the venue, etc. It exemplifies how polarizing different stagings (particularly revisionist ones) can be. Of course, everybody has a right to their opinion. Of course, everybody has a right to voice their opinions, even scathing ones. In fact, the controversial nature of certain productions may be partly why opera houses keep staging them, following the belief that “all publicity is good publicity.” However, the danger arises when a spectator’s knee-jerk reaction to a revisionist production is to dislike it or when one criticizes the production without making an honest endeavor to understand it. It calls to mind Roland Barthes’s comments on those who criticize new thought: “everything appears to it as ‘absurd,’ ‘bizarre,’ ‘aberrant,’ ‘pathological,’ ‘frenzied,’ ‘alarming’.”⁹⁶ And these terms are thrown around in regard to revisionist stagings without consideration to their meaning due to the “fear of change” Barthes discusses.

These types of unfounded criticisms also call to mind Ponnelle’s belief that literalists and traditionalists are censoring revisionist directors through their insistence on traditional stagings.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Barthes, *Criticism and Truth*, 4.

⁹⁷ Lippucci, “Social Theorizing,” 246.

At first, his claim of censorship can appear to be the melodramatic ramblings of a sensitive artistic type. If traditionalists insist upon traditional stagings, it seems simple to just agree to disagree and follow one's own creative impulses. However, his claims of censorship are grounded in reality and reveal a potentially alarming trend. Opera houses (and university music programs, for that matter) are businesses and must turn a profit. Therefore, it is in their best interest to put on productions that will draw a large audience. If audiences preemptively decide that they will not accept a revisionist staging for fear of something "new" as Barthes puts it, then revisionist directors are indeed being censored. If the patrons' and donors' lists are full of staunch traditionalists who balk at innovation, revisionist directors are effectively censored. It is generally agreed that censoring the arts is deplorable, unconscionable, and often seen in totalitarian states. To avoid censorship and continue to encourage freedom of expression and innovation in opera, it is absolutely critical that we develop an accepted procedure to judge the *validity* of revisionist productions. What I am truly advocating for is educated criticism of revisionist stagings, so that directors are held to an artistic standard and the public can learn to be more accepting of revisionist productions. In order to achieve this, we must adopt a consistent framework for which to judge these productions.

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