Delphine Vincent

"Den Propheten der neuen Welt". Is Meyerbeer's style cinematic?[1]

Giacomo Meyerbeer is famous for his contributions to opera, in particular his development of Grand opéra, characterized by early modern historical subjects and local color, in his Parisian works *Robert le diable* (1831), *Les Huguenots* (1836), *Le Prophète* (1849), and *Vasco de Gama* (1865). At the time of their creations, these works were staged after intensive research into historically accurate visual elements. This importance given to realist *mise en scène* in Grand opéra is one important aspect which has led modern researchers to consider links between Meyerbeer's music and film. Moreover, fantastical aspects, such as those found in the plot of *Robert le diable*, invite the use of special effects like those required for cinematic representation in order to appeal to an audience today. The spectacular component of Grand opéra – and its expensive cost – seems to resonate with equivalent aspects in cinema, in particular historical period films. Another aspect which invites this comparison is the crucial importance given to the crowd, portrayed in a very vivid manner and in all its diversity in Grand opéra. The numerous changes of musical focus during such scenes evoke film technique and editing potential. As Anselm Gerhard has shown in his brilliant study of music theatre in Paris in the nineteenth century, the development of Grand opéra is inextricably linked to the expansion of mass urban society.[2] This suggests another argument in favor of a connection between Meyerbeer and cinema, both being products of the modern age. In fact, the modernity of his musical and dramatic methods of representation has led some researchers to assume that Meyerbeer's style is in some sense "cinematic". It is the validity of this assumption that I will question in this paper, examining a few examples of cinematic analysis of Meyerbeer's operas in the relevant critical literature.

Musical heterogeneity and film editing The most frequent association of Meyerbeer and film is linked to the concept of editing. For some critics the composer's musical writing style even prefigures film. Matthias Brzoska affirms that:

> "Not only have their musical and theatrical techniques [of Meyerbeer's operas] continued to influence music drama of the 20th century, for instance in the works of Schreker, Berg, and B. A. Zimmermann;

1 I thank Louise Sykes and Laura Moeckli for their corrections of this paper.

2 Anselm Gerhard: *The Urbanization of Opera. Music Theater in Paris in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Mary Whittall, Chicago/London 1998 (orig.: *Die Verstädterung der Oper. Paris und das Musiktheater des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Stuttgart 1992).

> in their use of cutting and cross-cutting effects they point the way forward to film and other modern media."[3]

This is quite a bold affirmation. Obviously editing is inherent to film (until the advent of digital cinema) because it relies on the use of reels; in order to achieve a substantial length of film, one must paste numerous reels together. Thus the concepts of editing and cinema are intrinsically bound for technical reasons. Of course editing is not only used in this technical sense: it can achieve aesthetic and narrative goals too, for example by offering different perspectives on sceneries or characters. Therefore film does not refer to Meyerbeer or even to opera when using these techniques.[4] Nevertheless, Brzoska's assumptions are by no means new or unique in this field; a similar view was for example already suggested by Sieghart Döhring in 1977:

> "Insofern als die Musik hier [in den Großszenen] über ihren Immanenzzusammenhang hinausweist (was letztlich ein Charakteristikum dramatischer Musik überhaupt ist!), konstituiert sie in allen ihren Schichten Phänomene der 'Offenheit', deren adäquates Formprinzip das der 'Montage' ist. Man wird darin also keinesfalls nur 'Reduktion' sehen dürfen, sondern auch die Erschließung neuer, durchaus komplexer Ausdrucksbereiche, deren volle Anwendung erst das 'Gesamtkunstwerk des 20. Jahrhunderts', der Film, ermöglichen sollte."[5]

Film seems to offer answers to Meyerbeer's challenging way of writing, especially to what has often (and controversially) been characterized as his musical "heterogeneity". In what specific situation do musicologists resort to the term "editing" when analyzing his operas? Brzoska writes about *Robert le diable*:

> "Cutting and montage techniques allow simultaneous cross-cutting between the various musical strata. The beginning of Act 5 (nos. 20 and 21) provides an example. The distant choruses of the faithful at prayer and the offstage organ are cross-cut with the dialogue, and they participate interactively: Robert is prevented from signing a pact with the Devil by the musical evocation of the heavenly sphere."[6]

Indeed, this scene (No. 21) contains a juxtaposition of very diverse musical fragments. However, it does not present a case of cross-cutting, because one sees only one part of the action – Robert and Bertram – while the priest and the people remain offstage (rather

3 Matthias Brzoska: Meyerbeer, Giacomo, in: *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/18554 (18 January 2016).

4 I have approached elsewhere the stakes of inter-medial exchanges between opera and cinema on a more systematic level, cf. Delphine Vincent: "Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent". Some thoughts on inter-medial exchanges between film studies methods and opera analysis, in preparation.

5 Sieghart Döhring: Multimediale Tendenzen in der französischen Oper des 19. Jahrhunderts, in: *International Musicological Society. Report of the Twelfth Congress Berkeley 1977*, ed. by Daniel Heartz and Bonnie Wade, Kassel/London/Basel 1981, pp. 497–500, here p. 500.

6 Brzoska: Meyerbeer, in: *Grove Music Online*.

than onstage alternately with Robert and Bertram). Inherent to cross-cutting in the filmic sense is the *onscreen* alternation of simultaneous actions occurring in different places, which is clearly not the case here. Moreover, except for the initial organ passage, Robert always sings *simultaneously* with the instrument or with the offstage choir. This principle of musical vertical superposition is in contradiction with the very definition of cross-cutting. In fact, these observations suggest that cross-cutting is actually not possible onstage and therefore, that employing this term in an operatic context is erroneous.

This situation in *Robert le diable* does however entail a standard use of on/off music which is a cinematic feature, also commonly used in theatrical plays. Most performing arts resort to this type of effect, because the possibilities enabled by off screen/stage/frame are highly evocative. In opera, it permits a dramatic superposition of two simultaneous actions (one onstage and one offstage) through spatialization. Meyerbeer exploits this dramatic potential in *Robert le diable*, with the offstage choir coming closer and closer to the stage during the scene, thus making the dramatic space more real.[7] Fully aware of the impact of such superpositions on his audience, Meyerbeer often resorts to similar processes. This on/off configuration is useful not only to create dramatic tension but also to let the spectator imagine what is going on beyond the stage, in *Robert le diable*, for example, one does not see the activities of the demonic chorus occurring offstage (Act III, No. 10). The choice of this offstage process is rather efficient in order to create a sense of fear in the audience: every spectator imagines what is really terrifying to him- or herself. Instead of one image imposed by the stage director, the audience is free to picture a monster, the devil, flames, or whatever he or she likes (or fears). In these situations, the power of imagination is far greater than any specific set could be, because of the individual component involved.[8]

The notion of on/off music also appears in Gerhard's analysis of the coronation scene from *Le Prophète* (Act IV):

> "Meyerbeer's synthetic compositional process reveals itself at its best in scenes like this with their 'cinematic' tendencies, and gains additional dramatic impact from the assembly of heterogenous elements in a common frame." – and just above: "The manner in which he does it is breathtakingly modern, directly juxtaposing expressions of Fidès's maternal feelings and the religiously motivated hysteria of the Anabaptist masses in both the preamble and the closing bars of this great act-finale: in

7 "Chœur du peuple dans les coulisses de très loin" (m. 109) then "chœur dans la coulisse mais plus rapproché" (m. 163) and eventually "très rapproché" (m. 202); Giacomo Meyerbeer: *Robert le diable*, ed. by Wolfgang Kühnhold and Peter Kaiser, München 2010 (Giacomo Meyerbeer Werkausgabe, Vol. 10), Vol. 3, pp. 1101, 1106, 1111.

8 For more on the importance of offstage action, see Delphine Vincent: Fafner contro Harry Potter. Wagner e il cinema, andata e ritorno, in: *Siegfried* [*La Fenice prima dell'opera*], Venice 2007, pp. 23–40.

> the opening ensemble, *Prière et imprécation*, Fidès's prayer is heard against the hymn 'Domine, salvum fac regem,' sung offstage, while in the closing stretta the contrasting musics of the Anabaptist hymn, the people's chorus, and Fidès's solos create an effect like a series of rapid cinematic dissolves, 'synthetically' constructing the overall scene."[9]

Here Gerhard takes up the "cinematic" component already suggested in Döhring's analysis of the same scene.[10] But although Gerhard describes the scene very accurately, his use of the term "dissolve" seems erroneous here. Typically, a cinematic dissolve presents a gradual transition from one image to another. Three types of dissolve exist: fade-out and fade-in describe the passage to and from a blank image; fade-over superimposes two series of images, the last of the finishing shot and the first of the new one. Fade-over is often used to suggest an ellipsis. In *Le Prophète*, one first hears the offstage hymn, then Fidès and the organ, followed eventually by the choir and Fidès simultaneously, after which the situation becomes even more intricate. However, the scene always appears as a musical juxtaposition of on/off elements rather than a dissolve-like succession. Therefore, if one were to film this whole scene with its simultaneous events, one would actually have to use a split screen rather than a dissolve (even if in this case the split screen would imply the loss of the offstage/screen mystery and the possibility of imagining what is occurring).

What emerges from these examples is that the musical heterogeneity of Meyerbeer's large-scale scenes seems to be one of the reasons for pairing his works with cinema. However, it is worth asking whether these musical collage or superposition techniques are really similar to film editing. In fact, this comparison lies in an incomplete understanding of what editing is. Standard film editing consists mainly in the refined assembly of different "shots" in order to achieve continuity. Naturally, discontinuity may also occur in film, but classic narrative cinema generally favors utmost continuity in storytelling, in order to make the spectator believe in a realistic world. Every feature of framing, editing and acting constitutive of film is meant to achieve a seamless effect and thus be unnoticed by the audience. By contrast, when the term "editing" is applied to Meyerbeer,

9 Gerhard: *The Urbanization of Opera*, p. 307.

10 See Döhring: Multimediale Tendenzen, p. 500: "Als tendenziell 'filmisch' kann man das kompositorische Verfahren Meyerbeers in der Tat oft bezeichnen, wobei die Gestaltungsprinzipien aus dem multimedialen Kontext nicht selten auch auf die musikalische Ebene allein zurückwirken, etwa in der Krönungsszene des *Prophète* (IV. Akt, 2. Bild), wo am Schluß die schneidend hart gegeneinandergesetzten Klangflächen des Wiedertäufer-Hymnus ('Domine salvum fac regem'), des Volkschors ('Miracle du grand prophète …'; 'Sublime spectacle …') und der Soli der Fidès ('Non! … je n'ai plus de fils …'; 'O douleur …'; 'Et Berthe! O ciel! …') wie eine, lediglich durch knappe Überblendungen verzahnte Abfolge wechselnder 'Einstellungen' wirken, die die szenische Totale 'synthetisch' konstruieren."

it is generally to describe a situation of musical contrasts. For example, Gerhard writes that:

> "The chorus which follows the *Entr'acte* [in Meyerbeer's *Le Prophète*] is even more of a heterogenous montage, with a disjointed series of blood-thirsty shouts ('Du sang!'), a march-time injunction to be vigilant for spies ('Frappez l'épi quand il se lève'), and an unaccompanied Te Deum. The purpose of this, obviously, is to depict the hysterical volatility of the Anabaptist masses, and can surprise us nowadays by its anticipation of cinematic techniques, but it has its moments of weakness, when Meyerbeer adds elements that contribute no sense of 'characteristic' color and are musically highly conventional."[11]

Furthermore, there is another cinematic term often used in such contexts, which reinforces the idea that editing in an operatic context is used to depict musical discontinuity:

> "At the start of Act III of *Les Huguenots*, Meyerbeer has the Huguenot soldiers singing unaccompanied while imitating the action of drumming with their hands. Immediately following these rowdy *couplets militaires* from the men of the chorus, however, their female colleagues enter in the role of young Catholic girls singing a hymn to the Virgin Mary, in an example of 'successive development'. Alas, Huguenot provocateurs disrupt the pious procession, and the soldiers resume their 'Rataplan' which is now heard simultaneously with the girls' 'Vierge Marie.' The confrontation thus expressed in musico-dramatic terms is in danger of taking the physical form of a fight between the two factions in the crowd but that is averted by the arrival of a troupe of dancing gypsies – a coup de théâtre that Meyerbeer again handles with the immediacy of a cinematic 'cut.'"[12]

In this description, the term "cut" is used to qualify on a metaphorical level a sudden rupture in the musical discourse. In this sense it is perfectly appropriate; however it can become problematic if one tries to develop further analogies with the concept of film editing.

What these Grand opéra examples all have in common is a combination of very different types of music within a single scene, aiming to offer a multi-angled perspective of a complex situation. Indeed, the stage directions of the example from *Les Huguenots* indicate:

> "Le théâtre représente le Pré-aux-Clercs, qui s'étend jusqu'aux bords de la Seine. A gauche, sur le premier plan, un cabaret où sont assis des étudiants catholiques et des jeunes filles; à droite, un autre cabaret devant lequel des soldats huguenots boivent et jouent aux dés. Sur le second plan, à gauche, l'entrée d'une chapelle. Au milieu, un arbre immense qui ombrage la prairie. Au lever du Rideau, des clercs de la Basoche et des grisettes sont assis sur des chaises et causent entre eux. D'autres se promènent [sic]. Ouvriers, marchands, marionnettes, musiciens ambulants, moines, bourgeois et bourgeoises. Il est six heures du soir, au mois d'août."[13]

11 Gerhard: *The Urbanization of Opera*, p. 306.

12 Ibid., p. 204.

13 Giacomo Meyerbeer: *Les Huguenots*, Paris 1870, p. 211.

This description details distinct fore- and background areas, with several different buildings (chapel, cabarets) inhabited by a colorful crowd. Moreover, the scene is not static; during the "Vierge Marie" a procession enters onstage: "A ce moment une procession de jeunes filles catholiques paraît sur la droite. Elle accompagne le cortège nuptial de Nevers et de Valentine, qui, suivis de leurs parents et amis, se dirigent vers la chapelle à gauche."[14] Musically Meyerbeer begins with a *chœur des promeneurs*, followed by the *couplets des soldats Huguenots*, then the *litanies des femmes catholiques*, and finally a superposition of the soldiers' couplets and the women's litanies, which is interrupted by the *ronde bohémienne*. Thus one looks successively at different parts of the scenery and at various characters during this scene. In other words, the focus changes from one place and person to the other; the perspective through which the narrative is presented moves from one object to another. This is a question of focalization rather than editing. It is not specific to cinema but occurs in every narrative genre whether literature, opera or film. In my opinion what is often called "editing" in relation to Meyerbeer's music is in fact a case of focalization which requires narratological tools for its analysis.

Another example may underline this assumption. Gerhard resorts to cinematic "framing" terminology to qualify the entrance of the protagonist in *Le Prophète*: "Jean's first entrance, in Act II, somewhat resembles Arnold's in *Guillaume Tell*, in that he is singled out for a 'close-up' against the background of the noisy crowd in the tavern. He expresses his longing for Fidès's return in an aside".[15] Gerhard uses the term "close-up" on a metaphorical level and thereby creates a powerful image of what happens in the music. The effect is musically achieved through a change of texture, passing from the complete orchestra to the string section which accompanies the tenor. Moreover a modulation from E major to a minor underlines this change of focalization. This cinematic framing terminology is appropriate to describe the change of focus and the fact that the audience is meant to concentrate on Jean rather than on the choir. However, the use of this term is possible only on a metaphorical level, because the music is obviously not resounding closer to the spectator. In fact, it is quite impossible to imagine different framing sizes in a theatre because the stage is inevitably always at the same distance. Thus, in opera, the impression of framing is actually created not by a change of frame, but by a change of where one looks and what one focuses on.

Some other attempts have been made to use editing terminology in analyzing Meyerbeer's operas. For example, Laura Moeckli applies the word "shot" in order to delimitate smaller units in a scene (regarded as an equivalent to a film sequence).[16] The result of this

14 Ibid., p. 222.

15 Gerhard: *The Urbanization of Opera*, p. 260.

16 See for example Laura Moeckli's contribution in this volume pp. 133–146.

is that each shot corresponds to a portion of music written with the same features (for example tonality, rhythm, voice, character, et cetera). However, the analogy is problematic, mostly because this musical application of the term does not allow for "reaction shots", which are essential in cinematic discourse. In a film the spectator does not always see the character while he or she is speaking, and he also sees the reactions of other characters. This means that a line is not always filmed in only one shot which shows the character speaking. By contrast, when applied to opera, the term "shot" implies that when somebody sings the spectator cannot consider anything else. This is a rather reductive concept that does not correspond to what an audience effectively does in theatre. The problems arising with this analogy confirm that cinema and opera have different ways of dealing with narration and focalization, which make a comparison difficult.

Another aspect of this comparison which is problematic concerns the notion of pace. Since the French Revolution, the perception of time largely changed and historians underline the perceived acceleration of time, especially in cities.[17] This acceleration has often been seen reflected in the dramaturgy of Meyerbeer's music, as Gerhard shows brilliantly, for example in *Les Huguenots*:

> "For all the differences of artistic pretension and quality of realization, a similarly frenetic movement, with rhythmic effects to the forefront, can be observed in the musical construction of Act 1 of *Les Huguenots*. It is all the more striking in the opera because it is curiously incongruous in the context. The act is uncommonly long and contains few of the events necessary to the understanding of the plot, yet in detail it presents a turbulent succession of numerous short scenes."[18]

The frenetic movement associated with detailed action offers a variety of perspectives and therefore could – because of its rapid pace – give the false impression that the musical writing is comparable to film editing. However Gerhard continues: "In the second and third acts [of *Les Huguenots*], too, there is a similar tension between rapidly altering details and a slowly developing dramatic action. Almost every contemporary report comments on the 'revue-like' and 'undramatic' impression the work made."[19] This last quotation shows that the quasi-cinematic pace of Act 1 of *Les Huguenots* is not sustained in the two following acts. In fact, opera and cinema have very different paces altogether, and the former will always look slow in comparison to the latter. The structure of narration – especially with regard to pace – is not at all similar between the two genres, a fact that complicates these analogies.

17 Among others see George Steiner: *In Bluebeard's Castle. Some Notes towards the Redefinition of Culture*, New Haven 1971, pp. 11 f.

18 Gerhard: *The Urbanization of Opera*, p. 186.

19 Ibid., p. 186.

Suspense effects and film (music) One of the most dramatic effects in Meyerbeer's operas is his use of what a series of critics call "suspense effects" in analogy to cinematic thrillers. For example, Gerhard writes:

> "If Meyerbeer's montage-like use of the repetitions of fragments of 'Ein' feste Burg' [at the end of *Les Huguenots*] is suggestive of a technique that was not invented until the twentieth century, this ultimate heightening of the tension is more like the technique of the filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock than anything familiar from the theater of the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. And Meyerbeer knew exactly how his unprecedented musical conception might be supported by the use of precisely calculated optical effects. When *Les Huguenots* was to be performed in Dresden, he gave instructions that the church should be shrouded in total darkness and lit up only twice, and when it was revived in Paris in 1852 he recommended that the set for the churchyard scene should be designed as carefully as possible, so as to ensure 'the horrifying effect of fear and terror.' In thus intensifying the expectation of 'fear and terror' to the utmost by every scenic and musical means, Meyerbeer induced a feeling equivalent to what is meant by the word 'suspense' in the discussion of twentieth-century cinema. Its importance for the success of grand opéra was already apparent to Meyerbeer's contemporaries: less than two decades after the première of *Les Huguenots*, the director of the Opéra, Roqueplan, spoke of the process 'of keeping the spirit in suspense, of making a lively attack on the senses' as, allegedly, 'the sole means of attracting the public to his theater.'"[20]

In this case, the comparison is encouraged by the crucial visual component in Meyerbeer's operas; however Gerhard also underlines the differences between Meyerbeer and Hitchcock:

> "In Hitchcock's films, one of the outstanding features of the event in which the virtuosic build-up of suspense eventually culminates, having been drawn out as long as possible, is its hideous uniqueness. In the churchyard scene in *Les Huguenots* rather the reverse is the case, in that the initially striking effect of the progressive fragmentation of 'Ein' feste Burg' is repeated several times, even though the effect the first time the tune is heard depends directly on its unexpectedness – in a manner that, again, has been compared to a cinematic technique, this time the change of scene given by the cut, and in the context of a discussion of Berlioz."[21]

Despite these differences between film and opera, it is no surprise to find a *longue durée* in the theatrical representation of fear and suspense. Primary emotions are profoundly rooted in us, and are thus not greatly susceptible to major changes in connection with different socio-historical contexts.[22] For example, we still feel danger today when encountering a big and loud beast, and there is therefore basically no need to change the musical ways of expressing fear or tension.

20 Ibid., pp. 199 f.

21 Ibid., p. 200.

22 Among others see Luca Zoppelli: "Mors stupebit". Multiple Levels of Fear-Arousing Mechanisms in Verdi's *Messa da Requiem*, in: *The Emotional Power of Music. Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Musical Arousal, Expression, and Social Control*, ed. by Tom Cochrane, Bernardino Fantini, and Klaus R. Scherer, Oxford 2013, pp. 147–153.

With the previous example from *Les Huguenots*, the similitude of scenic devices between Meyerbeer and Hitchcock is emphasized. However, there are also aspects of musical writing, which can contribute to suspense effects, as Gerhard discusses with regard to the recurrence of melodies in Meyerbeer's operas:

> "Meyerbeer drew on a musico-dramatic tradition that may be said to have developed in the shadow of motivic recall. In some operas of the late eighteenth century, composers reintroduced melodies without any intention of shaping character or structure – although of course the recurrences aided the audience in orientation and strengthened the formal integration of longer scores. The recurrence arose simply and straightforwardly out of the drama, as the melodies acquired an immediate significance in the action visible on the stage. One of the earliest and most outstanding examples of the process [...] is Grétry's use of the *romance* 'Une fièvre brûlante,' heard nine times altogether in his *Richard Coeur-de-lion* (1784), deliberately introduced by the characters themselves in order to make themselves known to others during the course of a complicated plot. Alfred Hitchcock, incidentally, used much the same technique in the dénouement of the 1955 version of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*."[23]

Indeed, film music undoubtedly owes a lot to the musical language of opera and theatre. Among its main features, one finds, for example, what film music studies erroneously call *Leitmotivs*, which are in fact motivic recalls, inherited from the French tradition of opéra comique. The term is used to qualify every recurrent musical theme associated with a character, an event, an object, et cetera, in film scores; for example, Hitchcock's use of Franz Lehár's *Merry Widow* waltz as a motivic recall in *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943). However this is a vast field of study which is by no means limited to the influence of Meyerbeer.[24]

Pantomime and film Some researchers perceive a connection between Meyerbeer and cinema on the basis of the composer's extensive recourse to pantomime. Brzoska affirms that the nuns' scene in Act 1 of *Robert le diable* is "cinematic", because ballet is a part of the drama and not merely an optical divertissement:

> "La scène de la résurrection des nonnes mettait en œuvre les astuces que la technique la plus développée (hightech) de l'époque était susceptible de produire. L'opéra tourne ici en pure image animée, comme on en connaît seulement au cinéma. La comparaison avec l'esthétique du film ne vient pas seulement du fait que cette scène (le cœur de la séduction finale de Robert) est visualisée uniquement au moyen de la pantomime et de la danse, sans aucun recours au mot chanté. Bien des impressions visuelles renforcent cette stratégie: l'effet des feux follets au début de la scène; la transformation des

23 Gerhard: *The Urbanization of Opera*, p. 271.

24 Among others see Emilio Sala: *L'opera senza canto. Il mélo romantico e l'invenzione della colonna sonora*, Venice 1995; *Wagner and Cinema*, ed. by Jeongwon Joe and Sander L. Gilman, Bloomington/Indianapolis 2010.

> nonnes damnées qui, de spectres traversant les murs, deviennent des êtres de chair et d'os; l'aspect bleuâtre de l'éclairage que les spécialistes des techniques théâtrales ne savent toujours pas expliquer aujourd'hui, compte tenu des gaz utilisés à l'époque: tous ces éléments restaient des secrets de production de l'opéra."[25]

Brzoska emphasizes the importance of the visual component and of the novelty of the techniques, but he also claims that pantomime (i. e. music without singing during which expression is conveyed by gestures) is comparable to film aesthetic. However this link is by no means evident, because narrative cinema is actually an art based primarily on dialogue, which does not rely – except in a few avant-garde films such as those of Norman McLaren – on a specific bond between music, action, and editing in the same way as occurs in a pantomime. In fact, classical cinema consists of dialogue; gestures are there to support it and not to replace it. Brzoska's assertion seems to misconstrue the cinematic comparison here; probably he is confused by the fact that pantomime implies a parallel conjunction of music and gestures and that parallel scoring – i. e. "Mickey Mousing" in film terminology – is often taken to be something typically cinematic; this is however actually not the case, since this is an effect that often occurs in descriptive music, for example in symphonic poems. Moreover pantomime is not really a specific characteristic of Meyerbeer's writing, but rather a common feature of nineteenth-century opera in general.[26] Yet not all operatic productions containing pantomime are described as "cinematic". Thus the link between operatic pantomime and film appears highly ambiguous and problematic and would require much more precise consideration than has hitherto been proposed.

Conclusion After an examination of several examples, it appears that links between Meyerbeer and film have a long historiographical tradition, which is, however, far from being unequivocal. First occurrences of this practice are bound to a specific context: in Döhring's paper, presented at a conference in 1977, his references to cinema were meant to help see beyond Wagner's assertion that Meyerbeer lacked dramaturgical sense, and thereby change the negative reception of his monumental Grand opéras.[27] Döhring argues that it makes no sense to judge Meyerbeer's music *per se* and that it must be

25 Matthias Brzoska: "Wirkung mit Ursache". Idée esthétique et apparence du spectaculaire dans l'œuvre de Meyerbeer, in: *Le spectaculaire dans les arts de la scène du romantisme à la belle époque*, ed. by Isabelle Moindrot, Olivier Goetz, and Sylvie Humbert-Mougin, Paris, 2006, pp. 84–93, here p. 86.

26 See Mary Ann Smart: *Mimomania. Music and Gesture in Nineteenth-Century Opera*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 2004.

27 Döhring: Multimediale Tendenzen in der französischen Oper des 19. Jahrhunderts. Wagner polemicizes in *Oper und Drama* (1851) qualifying Meyerbeer's music of "Wirkung ohne Ursache"; Richard Wagner: *Oper und Drama*, Leipzig 1872 (Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen, Vol. 3), p. 371.

envisaged in relation to stage action. He pleads for a multimedia understanding of Meyerbeer's operas, in which film constitutes an essential element of his demonstration. However this was a time when musicology – especially in Germany – did not consider film music a serious topic of studies. Döhring's proposal was therefore quite provocative, but also rather general regarding cinematic concepts. During the nineties, cinematic terminology was used for its evocative potential on a metaphorical level.[28] It became a powerful way to describe some elements of Meyerbeer's writing. At the same time however, more dubious links between Meyerbeer and cinema remained in the critical literature. Nowadays the situation is completely different than in the seventies: film studies are flourishing. Yet, the accuracy of some of the examined examples remains problematic. This absence of evolution, at a time when film studies are omnipresent, suggests that this historiographical discourse is here for different reasons and not always for the pertinence of the association. In some cases, it seems to indicate an allegiance to the idea of progress as an artistic necessity. In this way it becomes indispensable to prove that a work of art prefigures another, whereby it somehow gains in 'value'. This entrenched concept of Meyerbeer's filmic quality also bears with it the risk of ascribing undue weight to the direction in which the composer's works point, rather than focussing on the detailed considerations of the works themselves and their historical context, so important to the understanding of nineteenth-century opera.

Regarding Meyerbeer's style, Gerhard and others have shown the influence of the historical context and the development of mass urban society on some musical aspects, characters and characteristics.[29] In my opinion it is more fruitful to look in this direction in order to explain Meyerbeer's writing rather than resort to the concept of "editing": a growing attention to the voices of the crowd in all their diversity necessarily leads to a manifold musical representation. It could furthermore be interesting to go back to narratological concepts to describe the richness of points of view in a scene with notions as focalization. As every great opera composer, Meyerbeer is a master in storytelling, and film is not the only possible reference regarding this particular aspect. Furthermore cinema did not invent the majority of its narrative options, but adapts features from other pre-existing arts to its own specific conditions.

Concerning the Meyerbeerian context, Brzoska underlines how the "prophet of the new world",[30] as Wagner called Meyerbeer, was linked to a philosophical environment

28 In addition to Gerhard's uses of cinematic metaphors, other authors resort to them, for example Luca Zoppelli in his book *L'opera come racconto. Modi narrativi nel teatro musicale europeo dell'Ottocento*, Venice 1994.

29 Gerhard: *The Urbanization of Opera*, pp. 158–214, 247–317.

30 Richard Wagner to Theodor Uhlig, letter from Paris, 13 March 1850: "In dieser zeit sah ich denn auch zum ersten male den Propheten, – den Propheten der neuen welt: – ich fühlte mich glücklich und

of the 1820s, especially Saint-Simonianism and Neo-Catholicism, in which projects of social regeneration included the idea of an art of the future embracing all arts – a kind of *Gesamtskunstwerk avant la lettre*.[31] Therefore it seems more pertinent to show how prophetic Meyerbeer was in this context rather than drawing hazardous parallels with cinema.

Meyerbeer's care for optic effects and *mise en scène* is obviously one of the reasons for the recurrent association of his works and film in the critical literature. Brzoska, among many others, has highlighted the visual aspect as an essential trademark of Meyerbeer's Grand opéras:

> "In both operas [*Le prophète* and *Vasco de Gama*], the moment of peripeteia is marked by a spectacular stage effect: in *Le prophète* it was the first successful use in any theatre of an electric spotlight, which Meyerbeer had specially made by the physicist Léon Foucault. Meyerbeer's multi-media conception caused him to reject older notions of tone-painting at this point. His contemporaries felt they were blinded by a 'real sun'. Technologically, the sunrise effect resulted from the most developed technology of the time, and the work itself became a synonym for a new age; the prophet was seen, as Wagner put it, as the 'prophet of a new world'. *L'Africaine* featured the first completely revolving stage set, on which the ship of Vasco da Gama's rival could be shown changing course. Both these stage effects marked crucial moments in the action: Jean's final guilty involvement in the historical process, and the premature failure of Vasco's mission of colonization."[32]

It is the argument of 'up-to-dateness' – and often in correlation with Wagner's bon mot – which seems to encourage associations between these operas and cinema. However these can be seen to demonstrate quite a different thing indeed: Meyerbeer was a gifted stage composer not writing music *per se* but in conjunction with visuals, i. e. fully conscious of what an opera is. In Döhring's article, film was evoked to prove this point, and Gerhard's analysis shows to what extent Meyerbeer was aware of the fact that music only creates emotion in a theatre in correlation with the stage, and that sometimes less music is the best option to achieve this goal:

> "In contrast to David, Verdi, or Wagner in *Das Rheingold*, Meyerbeer did not underpin the visual stage-effect with his music, which is more of an advantage than a disadvantage in the context of the finale of Act III of *Le Prophète*. It means that, like the Anabaptist troops, the audience is quite unpre-

erhoben, ließ alle wühlerischen pläne fahren, die mir so gottlos erschienen, da doch das reine, edle, hochheilig wahre und göttlich menschliche schon so unmittelbar und warm in der seligen gegenwart lebt. […] Kommt das Genie und wirft uns in andere bahnen, so folgt ein begeisterter gern überall hin, selbst wenn er sich unfähig fühlt, in diesen bahnen etwas leisten zu können." Richard Wagner: *Sämtliche Briefe*, ed. by Gertrud Strobel and Werner Wolf, Leipzig 1983, Vol. 3, pp. 248 f.

31 Brzoska: "Wirkung mit Ursache".

32 Brzoska: Meyerbeer, Giacomo.

> pared for the sunrise and is therefore astonished by it, while the music runs on as if oblivious to it, with the postlude to Jean's Hymne triomphal."[33]

Gerhard emphasizes that Meyerbeer's music does not always work in conjunction with the action onstage. In doing this, the Grand opéra composer embraces a typical French operatic aesthetic: the *tragédie lyrique* offers many examples of disjunction between music and action – some of them very spectacular – for example in the operas of Jean-Baptiste Lully and Jean-Philippe Rameau. Meyerbeer thereby positions himself within a *longue durée* tradition of musical writing, that of the Académie Royale de Musique. Precisely this choice of *not* underlining dramatic situations with music is particularly at odds with the concept of cinematic writing, since narrative film typically resorts to musical underscoring in such specific moments, and indeed in many others.

There is one final element that seems to encourage the association of Meyerbeer and cinema: it is what Gerhard calls "the fetish of authenticity" in *mise en scène* and in the musical scene-characterization, for example through the use of (pseudo-) folk songs.[34] Very often, film is considered a "realistic" medium. However this is a *cliché*; even in documentaries, cinema does not, and indeed cannot, "record" reality. This widespread simplification leads to one of the main problems regarding the reading of Meyerbeer as a generally cinematic composer: the comparison assumes cinema as an entity; it does not take into consideration the diversity of film media throughout history. To a certain extent this is equivalent to qualifying a film as "operatic", without specifying whether this quality concerns an affinity with the dramaturgy of Monteverdi, Gounod or Saariaho. If one were to continue with this type of comparisons, it would make sense to pursue in more depth what is exactly meant by "cinema". The fact that some features are common to Meyerbeer's operas and film is by no means ruled out because both are products of what Baudelaire calls *modernité* and as a result similitudes are quite conceivable, however, in my opinion, this analogy is not the best way to do justice to the fantastic abilities of Meyerbeer as a musical dramaturgist.

33 Gerhard: *The Urbanization of Opera*, p. 300. Moreover Sieghart Döhring affirms that: "Ohne die Realistik der Darstellung verliert die Musik [am Ende des *Prophète*], da sie selbst hier nichts als realistisch ist, ihre Funktion, erscheint isoliert und verfremdet, womit die szenische Einheit aufgelöst und die auf ihr basierende Wirkung zerstört ist." Döhring: Multimediale Tendenzen in der französischen Oper des 19. Jahrhunderts, p. 500.

34 Gerhard: *The Urbanization of Opera*, pp. 164 f.

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