

*The Phantom of the Opera* and the Performance of Cinema

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Posted on *YouTube* under the “[Film and Animation](#)” category by “[Movie Gamers](#)” on March 13, 2017, “All Chandeliers Crashes” [sic] is a chronological montage of the fateful [chandelier](#) crash as shown in more than a dozen screen adaptations—including one cartoon—of Gaston Leroux’s *Le Fantôme de l’Opéra*.<sup>1</sup> Consisting of low-quality video footage of the relevant film excerpts playing on a television set, the [video](#) may be artless but is not without interest. For it effectively underlines that, second perhaps only to the unmasking scene, the deliberate and indeed murderous [dropping](#) of the chandelier onto an unsuspecting opera audience is the true *pièce de résistance* of the countless screen versions of Leroux’s novel. Not that Leroux does not sufficiently draw attention to the episode in the novel itself. The catastrophic accident is perfectly timed and encapsulates the novel’s ambivalent appeal as an allegory of opera at once uplifting and lurid. It [symbolizes the](#) move from the allusiveness of Neo-Gothic [literature](#) to the graphic literalness of a new, and wholly modern, sensibility, one which the cinema would be supremely well equipped to cultivate. But the chandelier scene also marks another important passage. [Whether in novels, plays, or films,](#) performances are often seen as an interruption of [or at best a digression from the main line of action](#). In *Le Fantôme de l’Opéra* and its progeny, it is quite the other way around. Through the episode of the chandelier, [it is the inexorable unfolding of the action taking place off-stage that](#) interrupts a performance. Recast as cinematic spectacle, moreover, the crash is an unforgettable image of how the screen adaptations of Leroux’s novel have subsumed the representation of opera under a presentational agenda, the spectacle of cinema feeding off, engulfing, and ultimately moving past the reenactment of musical performance per se.

### **The Global Appeal of the Phantom**

Notwithstanding their intrinsic interest as works of sometimes great technical prowess and artistic value, the screen versions of *Le Fantôme de l’Opéra* are fascinating methodological objects. This is particularly the case when we contemplate them as a large family of cross-cultural, trans-historical, and inter-medial realizations of a resilient, easily identifiable, and yet surprisingly ever-shifting modern myth. We’ve lived with the phantom for so long that we have begun to take its presence—and its popularity—for granted. While Lloyd Webber’s

musical proved enormously successful, it did not create the myth; rather, it sanctioned it by building on an already existing string of cinematic versions, many of them flops, spanning several decades, four continents, and a dazzling range of film genres and conventions. The dual question of why the story “stuck,” and why it flourished in cinematic form before it reached a kind of apotheosis on the West End and Broadway stages, therefore remains a compelling one.

In proposing a “memetic” framework for the investigations gathered in this special issue, Cormac Newark has implicitly suggested one reason for the grip the story has held on generations of image makers and their audiences: its ability to adapt to radically different socio-historical conditions, cultural agendas, and mediascapes. The Mexican parody *El fantasma de la opereta* (Brooks, 1959), to take one example, is a classic star vehicle (for the proverbial “Tin-Tan” as comedian Germán Valdez-Váldez was then known). Leroux’s original story was grafted onto the personnel and conventions of Mexican cinema of the late 1950s, while the production served the larger purpose of indigenization of Hollywood precedents.<sup>2</sup> The metaphor of the meme goes a long way capturing another important aspect of the myth, namely its emancipation from the ostensible source-novel. Like a species-jumping virus, the phantom story has not only moved across media but also provided the occasion for sequels and derivative works independent of Leroux’s novel. This is indirectly but forcefully suggested by a lawsuit brought forward by Universal against *The Phantom of the Paradise* (Harbor, 1974). Universal claimed that Brian De Palma breached a 1925 clause giving the studio sole rights over the adaptation of Leroux’s original novel. Given the at most tenuous relationship between *The Phantom of the Paradise* and Leroux’s novel, the controversy over the rights over the novel likely emerged as a result of De Palma’s film betraying clear links not to the novel, nor the 1925 Hollywood adaptation, but rather Universal’s 1943 and 1962 versions. Universal’s lawsuit, put another way, sanctioned the view that the adaptations, not the novel, functioned as source-text.<sup>3</sup>

The extraordinary distance—geographical and hence cultural—travelled by *Le Fantôme de l’Opéra* is perhaps best exemplified by the first Chinese-language version (*Song at Midnight*, Xinhua, 1937). Topical and an instant hit with audiences, the film was produced in Shanghai and is the earliest adaptation to have been conceived for and realized with the benefit of a recorded soundtrack. Inspired by the 1925 Hollywood adaptation of Leroux’s novel—or, to be precise, the 1929 rerelease with a recorded soundtrack—rather than the novel itself, it builds on the influence of expressionist cinema and Soviet novelistic prototypes. Blending narrative elements from various Universal—mostly horror—films of

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the 1920s and 1930s, *Song at Midnight* recasts the phantom as a political hero in Republican China.<sup>4</sup> Because musical performances are an integral component of the source, the insertion of Chinese-language songs, a customary and indeed almost obligatory aspect of Chinese film production at that time, followed naturally from the adaptation process. The substitution of western opera with examples of didactic, nationalist-themed sung theater reflects the new setting and is a fine demonstration of the role played by music in the process of “sinicization” of narrative cinema in Republican China.<sup>5</sup> Strikingly, it was a process that neatly observed the diegetic/nondiegetic divide: the background score consists entirely of excerpts of western classical music (Respighi, Debussy, Dukas, and especially Mussorgsky), a selection that reflects the growing familiarity with western classical music in the cosmopolitan milieu of the Shanghai of the time.<sup>6</sup> But it also shows that, in the Far East, film was continuing to function as the main outlet for the “clearance” of well-known western classics as a burgeoning, global musical idiom.

Its reputation as a classic secured early on, *Song at Midnight* went on to create its own lineage, becoming the sole—or, at any rate, principal—source for sequels and remakes. One relatively recent version, the Hong Kong-produced *The Phantom Lover* (Mandarin, 1995), is an especially indicative example of the phantom’s will to not merely survive but thrive in different guises. The remake of the adaptation of an adaptation, the film was written and produced as a vehicle for singer/actor Leslie Cheung, who also plays the title role. The character of the Phantom (Song Danping) draws on the 1937 original, while at the same time tapping into the popularity of Cheung’s previous roles for such films as *Rouge* (1988) and *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), as well as his persona—and vocal skills—as a star of Cantopop. The embedded set-pieces appropriate the language of the West End musical in a not-so-covert homage to Lloyd Webber, as well as gesturing toward its then growing audience in Hong Kong as well as East Asia more generally. The filiation from the original *The Phantom of the Opera*, not to mention *Song at Midnight*, is unmistakable to anyone who cares to notice it. Yet it is also the case that to fully account for the adaptation process we need less a genealogical, vertically integrated model, and rather one configured like a web or a field of hypertexts.

To understand adaptation as both an artistic process and a means of survival inevitably calls to mind neo-Darwinian models of cultural transmission. The very idea of the meme emerged from scientific discourse, and points to the internal or “endogenous” factors that enabled Leroux’s novel to survive for so long, albeit in “mutated” versions. But biological models only go so far in accounting for agency. To look for the external or

“exogenous” factors that ensured the spread and subsequent mutations of the novel is not to probe into merely evolutionary or impersonal processes. It remains to be explained, in other words, not just what made the novel or at least its main conceit “tick,” but also who picked up the story and why (causing it, in a sense, to “adapt” and hence “survive” in the first place).

Doubtless the reasons underpinning the choice to adapt a text or remake a film are difficult to trace. Economics, sensibility, questions of casting and personnel, audience expectations, and inertia all play a role. It is my contention that *The Phantom of the Opera* owes at least part of its longstanding fortune on the big screen—and in the culture at large—to its appeal as a template for the exploration of the immense possibilities of the cinematic medium. Just as performers shaped music repertoires by privileging certain works at the expense of others, so filmmakers and their teams have exercised their right to return time and again to *The Phantom of the Opera* among a vast repertoire of possible narratives and motives. And the reason for this is that, in keeping with the analogy between musicians and filmmakers, *The Phantom of the Opera* proved to be an irresistible vehicle for the performance of cinema. To perform is to try one’s hand at, stumble upon something, and succeed—or fail. Like the novel, the films may not be canonical; in fact, many adaptations were critical failures as well as box office flops.<sup>7</sup> It is the novel as script, both in the cinematic sense of screenplay and the theatrical one of a set of instructions for a performance, that the screen adaptations have perpetuated.<sup>8</sup>

### “Not Live”

In what follows, then, I will interpret the screen adaptations of Leroux’s novel as the record of textual decisions, enactments, and technical interventions reconstituted as a kind of performance via the imaginative perception of the spectator. Before putting forward a definition of performance that does justice to the surprising trajectory of *The Phantom of the Opera* in the history of world cinema, a survey of the relevant uses of the term is in order. The performing arts are the source of the primary or ordinary meaning of what it is “to perform.” When applied to cinema, the term often retains what seems to be an inescapable—yet turns out to be less than irresistible—link to live-ness. The unabashedly event-based practices of avant-garde artists such as Nam June Paik explore the gray area between film presentation and performance art, and so do the film, video, and media presentations known under Gene Youngblood’s umbrella term “expanded cinema.”<sup>9</sup> In its literal sense, the term “performance” also applies to the exhibition of so-called “silent” films (or at least some of its aspects). Think of the production of sound effects, live presentation by a speaker—such as

the *benshi*—or the musical accompaniment of a full-blown orchestra.<sup>10</sup> A special and indeed instructive case is the “cinema of attractions” of the first decade of the [twentieth](#) century. As theorized by Tom Gunning and André Gaudrault, this is a cinema in which the focus on visual tricks, exhibitionism, and the demonstrative exploration of the medium took precedence over narrative continuity.<sup>11</sup> Given this, and the prevailing conditions of exhibition at the time, the screening of such films was an—indeed *the*—event (as opposed to a mere logistical necessity). “Early audiences,” writes Gunning, “went to exhibitions to see machines demonstrated [...] rather than to view films.”<sup>12</sup> What makes these films “performances” is not—or not only—their quality of live events. For “[t]he system of attraction,” Gunning [continues](#), “remains an essential part of popular filmmaking.”<sup>13</sup> Implicit in this acknowledgement of the continuing importance of the aesthetics of attraction is the fact that “seeing machines demonstrated” is not contingent on live presentation.

In another and very different sense, “performance” also refers to the affective and bodily impact films have on their audiences.<sup>14</sup> [Deleuze’s](#) notion of “affect” has been central to a recent strand of film scholarship that explores cinematic movement and gesture as harbingers of “unstructured sensations,” “unverbalizable effects” and a wide range of uniquely situated experiences such as one associates to performance-as-event.<sup>15</sup> Insofar as “[a]n attraction aggressively subjected the spectator to ‘sensual or psychological impact’,”<sup>16</sup> cinema as live event and cinematic performance as a cinema of “effects” come together in the cinema of attractions. [While](#) this convergence does not yet signal the emergence of cinematic performance, [it](#) paves the way toward its definition.

In yet another inflection of the term, “performative cinema” is associated [with](#) demonstrative and not infrequently extreme audience involvement. Examples range from the various rituals associated [with](#) “cult film” spectatorship to the behavior of repeat audiences of such films as *Pulp Fiction* or the reactions of fans to their stars’ on-screen performances in the movie theaters of cities such as Cairo or Mumbai.<sup>17</sup> In all these cases, the here-and-now quality of the spectators’ involvement becomes the true *raison d’être* of the screening. The film becomes the occasion for the performance of spectatorship, acquiring in the process the aura of a live event or, to be precise, a kind of residual live-ness reconstituted through the spectators’ demonstrative or ritualized participation.<sup>18</sup> What makes these expressions of spectatorship significant to my undertaking is not that they are paradigmatic instances of “performative cinema” in the sense in which I wish to pursue it (to the contrary, as must by

now be clear, it is my intention to move away from treating live-ness as a criterion). What interests me, rather, is that they are litmus tests of the constructive role of the audience.

### **Script and Realization**

Let me return to the root meaning of the term. Whether in a stage play, an opera, or a solo recital, the dimension of performance is not self-generating and self-sustaining but is underpinned by the play between a script and its realization on the stage. Such play depends not merely on the presence of the audience, but on its members' memory, expectations, and engagement. If we are to understand performance as more than the bringing of something into being or the physical process of sound production, we must move beyond a communicative, let alone a genetic, model of artistic practice, and embrace a participatory one in which audiences contribute a scenario against which the performer's art will be thrown into some kind of relief. Such a scenario need not be informed by acquaintance with a work to which we ascribe intrinsic value, as in the conventional use of the term, but it must be sufficiently effective to activate the play between a script and its realization. In the here-and-now of a theater or concert hall, the unfolding of this mutually implicating relationship is undoubtedly different to what it is in the mediascape. But it is as pervasive in the performing arts proper as it is in the recorded arts—music recording, television, and of course film—despite performers and their audiences not sharing the same time-space.<sup>19</sup> It follows that to examine the screen adaptations of *The Phantom of the Opera* in search of a new notion of performative cinema, as I will attempt below, is not a matter of thinking beyond the traditional notion of performance, but rather of unfurling its full scope when applied to film.

Historically, the link between live and recorded performances owes much to continuity of personnel and, in the specific case of classical music, almost exact duplication of repertoire. While they may not always work on filmed versions of the same plays they perform in the theater, stage actors work for the cinema as well. Musicians, for their part, play both live and in the studio, often performing the very same works in both. This much is unproblematic, and is echoed by the relative ease with which filmgoers, writers, and scholars apply the term “performance” to the work of film actors. But it isn't just that the persona of the performers one becomes acquainted with at live events rubs off on to their work in studio. It is also that the dynamic interplay of script and realization applies to their recorded enactments as well. Film scholars are therefore justified in positing a link between the theater and film performance (above and beyond historical and sociological factors). But they have limited themselves to the actors' work, so much so that the term performance has almost

become synonymous with acting. This seems to me unduly restrictive. “Because films depend on screenplays which in turn often depend on literary source material, in fact, they are doubly performative,” writes Thomas M. Leitch.<sup>20</sup> “Actors and actresses are translating into performance a written script which is itself an adaptation of a prior literary source.”<sup>21</sup> While he concedes that the work of the writer who adapts a novel is itself a type of performance, Leitch refrains from acknowledging the performative nature of other aspects of the filmmaking process. While in the theater the difference between actors and the rest of the crew may seem substantial enough—notwithstanding the real-time work of lighting technicians and live musicians, among others—this is not the case with a film. Like any other stage of the filmmaking process, the actors’ work reaches us mediated. It is rehearsed for the camera, recorded, edited, enhanced via special effects, and so forth.<sup>22</sup> Just because their work does not take the form of enactments, this does not mean that adaptors, editors, cinematographers, and directors are not molding the material at hand against a shared sense of how a certain state of affairs might unfold (in the dual sense of the narrative’s main incident but also the filmmakers’ treatment of it). Insofar as that is the case, and just like actors, they too are “performing.” They are the heirs of masters of ceremony, stage managers, tricksters, and magicians in something like the way screen actors are the heirs of their stage counterparts.

### **From Attractions to Performance**

Such an expanded notion of performance encompasses the demonstrative use of cinema-specific effects, the exploitation of new formats and technologies, striking deviations from the novel, and casting. All this plays out against a horizon of expectations informed by familiarity with the source-story, the basic capabilities of the medium, and, crucially in the case of *The Phantom of the Opera* screen adaptations, the history of musical performance on film. Adaptations and remakes are especially good examples of the sort of cinematic performance I am positing here. The broad geographical distribution and diverse routes of transfer that characterize the dissemination of Leroux’s story invite us to examine its screen adaptations in relation to other adaptations rather than in relation to the original vision supposedly embodied in an authoritative (i.e., Leroux’s) text.<sup>23</sup> The relationship between the “phantom script” and its realizations, moreover, is not static but dynamic in that it is underpinned by evolving conditions of productions and ever-changing sets of expectations. The “silent” 1925 version marked a watershed not only for its memorable deployment of

make-up and color but also the implicit demand for a score that did justice to the operatic setting.<sup>24</sup> Lubin's adaptation (Universal, 1943) was done in Technicolor. The 1941 sequel of *Song at Midnight* takes the deployment of horror devices—make-up and costuming, especially—to new heights, while the Hong Kong remakes of *Song at Midnight* (Shaw, 1962-3) refit the story for the widescreen format. The list of releases that make abundant, demonstrative use of new technologies is indeed long, and speaks to an extraordinary convergence between what the phantom narrative afforded and the film industry's continuing efforts to construct a film spectator, to quote Yuri Tsivian, "sensitive to the medium."<sup>25</sup> These efforts took place in the context of a media-shaped environment in which the main story, characters, and operatic setting were so well known that the filmmakers were expected to "riff" on it (rather like performers showcasing their mastery of new technologies of audiovisual representation before a cued up audience). The resulting adaptations are not just "medium-sensitive messages."<sup>26</sup> They also exemplify the persistence of a presentational mode in their open acknowledgement of the presence of the audience through the casting of well known stars.

The introduction of recorded sound in the late 1920s is a sterling example of the resurgence of the cinema of attractions in the context of a fully narrativized film environment. While the coming of sound provided the ideal terrain for experimentation and the spectacularization of a new technology, the room for manoeuvring was to remain relatively narrow, and with good reason. For by the time recorded sound arrived on the scene, film had gone narrative—or discursive, as in the documentary or newsreel—through and through. Which is to say that sound would be grafted onto an already existing *modus operandi* and had to be swiftly aligned with the exigencies of narrative cinema such as it was practiced before its advent. *The Phantom of the Opera* is in this respect exemplary. The "silent" version was re-released with a recorded soundtrack as early as 1930.<sup>27</sup> While the re-release was meant to come across as a signal improvement over its silent predecessor, the most likely primary motivation was to bank on the novelty value of recorded sound. Near the beginning of the film, synchronized sound completes the creation of a setting—the foyer of the *Palais Garnier* in Paris—brimming with people before the onset of a performance.<sup>28</sup> The suitably reverberated chatter of the audience segues well into the beginning of the musical performance (see fig. 1). Like a vector, it draws the music into the sphere of the story world, further differentiating it from what would have been a continuous, live score not just acoustically—the music is recorded—but also functionally: like the spectators' chatter, the

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music sounds as if issuing from within the theater in the here-and-now of the performance more convincingly than would its silent counterpart in a presentation with live accompaniment. When the action moves into the notorious “underbelly” of the theater, the appearance of a black cat is signaled sonically before we see it. The off screen meow grounds the technician’s movement of the head to his left in the wish to see the source of the sound. Sound and image do not complement each other as well in the remainder of the sequence, however. No matter how finely synchronized, the gasp of the ballerinas following their sight of the “phantom” is redundant for it is implicit in their body language—a classic instance of how sound could be conveyed through plastic values alone (see fig. 2).<sup>29</sup> Alternatively, hearing their gasp sounded out makes the acting seem exaggerated, contrived, possibly marking the silent version, albeit a mere four years old at the time of the re-release, already obsolete. Either way, the desire to showcase the new technology forces the hand of the adaptors, causing them to bare their as yet incomplete mastery of it. An unconvincing performance, perhaps, but a performance nevertheless.

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Ma-xu Weibang’s *Song at Midnight* (1937) features a complex soundtrack that alternates between tightly synchronized classical selections used as background score and carefully scripted performances of topical Chinese-language songs. The film also makes prescient and extraordinarily self-assured use of the then-still new technology of sound recording to project a sense of ambience. An eloquent case in point is the sequence of the theater group exploring the run-down theater where, unbeknownst to them, Song Danping is still hiding. Having been welcomed inside by a sinister-looking caretaker, the members of the group make their way inside behind him. Holding a gas lamp, the caretaker slowly leads them in a characteristic limp down a dark corridor. We see them follow suit slowly and cautiously, holding as it were their breath, in a long, frontal tracking shot, the camera receding at the same speed as they (see figs. 3-4).<sup>30</sup> The eerie atmosphere is punctuated by the sound of the caretaker laboriously dragging his feet on the dusty floorboard. The length of the shot draws the attention to his heavy breathing while at the same time inviting us to savor silence not merely as the technical aspect of the medium but rather the suspenseful absence of sound in the world conjured by the film.

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The early sound adaptations indicate a new path along which to substantiate Gunning’s statement about the continuing significance of “attractions” in the history of cinema (and their role in fueling production efforts, textual decisions and directorial choices).

As experienced in the phantom films, “attractions” do not merely co-exist with a strong narrative premise (as the examples of the musical proves without the shadow of a doubt). They are mutually reinforcing. To paraphrase Fernand Léger, the phantom adaptations “make sound heard” and, what is more, they do so because of, rather than despite, their structuring as narratives (as a Léger or an Eisenstein would have it).<sup>31</sup> Much as we might sympathize with their artistic, political, or social agendas, the avant-garde<sup>32</sup> artists who appropriated the playful, experimental, and exhibitionistic ethos of early cinema did so by framing it within a set of dichotomies—theater vs. cinema, narrative vs. perception, bourgeois vs. popular—which are spurious.<sup>33</sup> To subsume attractions within the context of a dramatic situation or the span of a narrative, no matter how derivative from literary or theatrical precedents, is not to mute them but to potentially enhance their perspicuousness as well as impact. What gave the meshing of attraction and narrative its momentum in the history of the adaptations of Leroux’s novel, and still does today, is that it turns a film crew into an ensemble of performers. But to perform the phantom onscreen is not only to perform cinema’s specificity as a medium but also to revisit known tropes and situations and invest them with new force.

### Performing Cinema/Performing Opera

Notwithstanding Leroux’s lack of detailed knowledge of opera, *Le Fantôme de l’Opéra* demonstrates a deep understanding of its place as an art form and an institution. But it can only conjure verbal images of actual performances. Screen adaptations are a different matter, for they relish the opportunity to show—as opposed to tell—with near-predictable abandon. Be it the musicians’ work, mechanics of theatrical production or the performance of spectatorship, the “phantom” films draw us closer to the opera house as a physical entity, its flesh-and-blood practitioners, and the whole coterie of contraptions of a standard theatrical stage (whether real or reconstructed in studio).<sup>34</sup> To accomplish this, filmmakers drew on their acquaintance with the theatrical traditions they knew and the expertise of professionals from the overlapping world of stagecraft. One need only think of the *mise-en-scène* and the sets of the 1925 adaptation, Ma-xu Weibang’s direction of actors in *Song at Midnight*, or Lubin’s secure handling of stage matters in Universal’s 1943 *The Phantom of the Opera*. Dario Argento’s *Opera* (ADC/Cecchi Gori/RAI, 1987), for its part, repeatedly stresses the introduction of wireless technology and sophisticated machinery in controlling stage production.<sup>35</sup> In short, screen adaptations have given a distinctive presence, in the world of *The Phantom of the Opera*, to music theater as a living practice. Lloyd Webber’s musical is

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in one sense the culmination of this process. The very plausibility of Lloyd Webber's musical as a stage work is in part due to having seen opera as evoked in Leroux's novel literally fleshed out in the screen versions in the first place.

Yet a "double bind" pulls cinema and opera closer together while simultaneously pushing them apart. For in rescuing opera from the depths of a purely literary evocation, the cinema also cannibalized it. Because of the source novel's narrative, performances are central to almost every single screen adaptation thereof.<sup>36</sup> Ironically, it is precisely their status as representations of performances in the ordinary sense of the word that drew my attention to them as embodiments of cinematic performances: the record of textual decisions, technical solutions, and various enactments reconstituted as performance via the imaginative perception of the spectator. Borrowing from the toolkit of opera analysis, I interpret them as instances of *topoi* or "set-pieces," not just in the sense of a musical number that, unlike recitative, has a set tempo, meter, key and formal design; but also in the sense that they are events associated to a set firm of expectations and around which representational codes have gradually accrued (in the same way as they have around all ritualized experience, from boxing matches to visits to the barber shop).<sup>37</sup> Much as the re-enactments of actors and musicians are central to it, moreover, my understanding of the *topos* of the stage performance stresses as well the role of writing and characterization, camera work, editing, *mise-en-scène*, and of course the use of sound.

What is not merely convenient but indeed also liberating about the stage performances in the adaptations of Leroux's novel is that they don't function as learned references, let alone gratuitous cliché. They are part and parcel of each film simply because their presence is mandated by the text—or film—the filmmakers are seeking to adapt. Hence the ease with which they may be disposed of (as the episode of the chandelier demonstrates in no uncertain terms). But while the performances may be ordinary and even incidental to the main thrust of the action, their specifically cinematic presentation demands the attention. Foreshadowing the efforts of a Visconti, Bergman, and even Syberberg, the beginning of Lubin's 1943 *The Phantom of the Opera*, for example, rewrites the experience of listening to an opera performance.<sup>38</sup> Notwithstanding the introduction of a trite romantic triangle via a series of conventionally realized cutaway shots, the [opening sequence](#) marries a fascination with opera with the ambition of spectacular cinema. [Whether the camera is on a dolly or crane, variable framing affords views of the opera house at once particular and sweeping. The strategic use of sync-points and care with which the cast act their part make palpable the work of the musicians. As the singers enter the stage, finally, the camera crosses the](#)

[proscenium](#). The film reconfigures the cinema goer as an ideally positioned opera listener. Lubin's vision is not confined to the representation an authentic or aboriginal encounter with opera through the tools of one's trade but rather the creation of a new entity altogether in the context of a presentational aesthetics.<sup>39</sup> The film *is* the performance of the opera, not a mediated attempt to capture one. The fact that operas are performed onstage in a dedicated venue has jelled into an aspect of the "opera-script," one which has found its realization in the form of a film. Put yet another way, the cinema has become the locus of innovative interventions in the *presentation* of opera.

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In pitting opera as the occasion for cinematic performance against the allegorical, instrumental, or expedient use of operatic performances in narrative cinema, I have found myself having to clear up a crowded field of definitions. My own definition follows from anthropology and bio-sociology rather than music or media studies, and posits that cinema's performativity lies in the play between a script and its realization. In a sense, this has taken us back to the ordinary meaning of "performance," as in "musical performance," where the score or a well-known "work" is the script and the performance is its realization. In another sense, it takes us someplace else altogether, on account of the staggered, scattered, and highly mediated nature of film at both the production and the reception ends (a dimension film shares with recorded music rather than musical performance as ordinarily understood). As I have shown, the relationship between a script and its realization is dynamic, in that it is underpinned by the evolution of the medium, novel conditions of productions, and ever-changing sets of expectations. The performative is emergent: neither the intrinsic property of the film work nor solely the quality of the spectator's experience. It emerges out of an encounter, and manifests itself as a type of relation. It is in constant flux, unpredictable, mercurial, but also pervasive. It [is hidden in plain sight and](#) can be spotted in unlikely places. It cuts across not just the dichotomy immediacy/mediation but also liveness/recording. From this follows the—only seemingly—paradoxical statement that if you cannot detect the traces of the performative in a film or studio recording, you are unlikely to do so during a live event.

Thus the performative is not embedded but emerges from a two-stage encounter: first, the productive collision between the members of a given filmmaking team, including but not limited to musicians and actors—be they producers, artists, technicians, writers, or advertisers—and the affordances of the medium; and second, the encounter between the film as a finished product and its audiences. Narrative, formal, and technological innovations

aside, the phantom of the opera narrative remains a surprisingly vital nexus of performative possibilities in the present mediascape, and in a certain sense beyond cinema, as well.

Because of the metanarrative status earned by *The Phantom of the Opera*, the script is not a static object authored by [a long-deceased novelist](#) or, a filmmaking team, let alone the singular film auteur. It is a live matrix that exists in the public domain, a fact that is now explicitly borne out by the proliferation of “phan art,” such as the YouTube [video](#) with which I opened this essay, across social media platforms.

<sup>1</sup> [“All Chandelier Crashes,” YouTube video, 3:20, a chronological montage, posted by “Movie Gamers,” March 13, 2017, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBdVHwvrAcI.](#)

<sup>2</sup> The 1943 Hollywood adaptation had been especially well received in Mexico City (see Jacqueline Avila’s article in this special issue).

<sup>3</sup> On this fascinating case, see the conclusion of Annette Davison’s article in this special issue.

<sup>4</sup> On the political themes woven around the disfigurement, see [Yomi Braester, “Revolution and Revulsion: Ideology, Monstrosity, and Phantasmagoria in Ma-Xu Weibang’s Film “Song at Midnight,” \*Modern Chinese Literature and Culture\* 12/1 \(Spring 2000\): 81-114.](#) For an example of an eclectic Chinese theatrical prototype capable of absorbing influences from a wide variety of sources, including Hollywood cinema, see [Judith T. Zeitlin, “Operatic Ghosts on Screen: The Case of \*A Test of Love\* \(1958\),” \*The Opera Quarterly\* 26, 2-3 \(2010\): 220-55.](#)

<sup>5</sup> [See Yueh-yu Yeh, “Historiography and Sinification: Music in Chinese Cinema of the 1930s,” \*Cinema Journal\*, 41/3 \(Spring 2002\): 78-97.](#) On a similar phenomenon in the context of the Mexican and Argentine film industries, respectively, see also the comments in Jacqueline Avila and Charlotte Gleghorn’s articles in this special issue.

<sup>6</sup> For a nuanced discussion of the complicated social and ethnic underpinnings of the adoption of the Western Classical repertoire in Shanghai, see [Joys H.Y. Cheung, “Divide and Connections in Chinese Musical Modernity: Cases of Musical Networks Emerging in Colonial Shanghai, 1919–1937,” \*Twentieth-Century China\*, 37/1 \(2012\): 30–49.](#)

<sup>7</sup> [“\[R\]epertories are determined by performers, canons by critics,” in Joseph Kerman, “A Few Canonic Variations” in \*Write All These Down\* \(Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press\), 33-50: 37.](#) For a critique of Kerman’s formulation, see [Mark Everist, “Reception Theories, Canonic Discourses,” in \*Rethinking Music\*, ed. by N. Cook-M.Everist \(Oxford: Oxford University Press\), 378-402: 387.](#)

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<sup>8</sup> [Here I use the term “script” not as indicating a “less detailed” text but rather pointing to “a reorientation between notation and performance.” See Nicholas Cook, “Between Process and Product: Music and/as Performance.” \*Music Theory Online\*, 7/2 \(April 2001\): 1-15:5.](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Gene Youngblood, \*Expanded Cinema\* \(New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1970\).](#)

<sup>10</sup> For a thorough account of the history of “silent film sound” practices in North America, see [Rick Altman, \*Silent Film Sound\* \(New York: Columbia University Press, 2004\).](#) For a shorter survey of the same in Japan, see [Shuhei Hosokawa, “Sketches of Silent Film Sound in Japan: Theatrical Functions of Ballyhoo, Orchestras, and Ensembles,” in \*The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Cinema\*, ed. by Daisuke Miyao \(New York: Oxford University Press, 2014\), 288-305.](#)

<sup>11</sup> [Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction\[s\]: Early, Its Spectators and the Avant-Garde,” in \*The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded\*, ed. Wanda Strauven \(Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006 \[orig. 1986\]\), 381-8.](#)

<sup>12</sup> [Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction\[s\],” 383.](#) The focus on display involved sound as well. For a reconsideration of the “cinema of attractions” in the context of the sound practices of early cinema, see [Richard Abel and Rick Altman, \*The Sounds of Early Cinema\* \(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001\).](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Gunning, 386.](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Used this way, “performance” is less a metaphor rooted in than a radical departure from the term’s common usage, namely the substantivization of the adjective “performative” inaugurated in Austin’s philosophy of language. For a survey of the debate, see Culler \(2007: 137-65\).](#)

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Del Rio (2008). The two paradigmatic genres of “performative” cinema in this sense of the term, it seems to me, are slapstick and pornography.

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<sup>17</sup> For a compelling first-person account, see [Sergio Cramerotti, "Performative Cinema," \(2007\) at http://alcramer.net/library/file/Performative\\_cinema.pdf \(last consulted January 18, 2018\)](#). *The Phantom of the Paradise* has of late become a cult film in its own right, complete with dedicated screenings at such events as "Phantompalooza," a fan get-together held in Winnipeg since 2004 in celebration of De Palma's film.

<sup>18</sup> The performances of Lloyd Webber's musical, or any similarly successful musical for that matter, present a special case in that their frequency and predictability would seem to deprive them of the character of a fully-fledged performance: liveness without performativity. What rescues them from the mechanical delivery of a standardized product is, again, the audience's participation.

<sup>19</sup> Unlike Philip Auslander, therefore, it is not that I see mediation as a challenge or even threat to live performance, but rather that I define performance apart from live-ness. See [Philip Auslander, \*Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture\* \(Abingdon & New York: 1999\)](#). My definition of performance also departs from the more stringent one offered by, for instance, Erika Fischer-Lichte in [The Routledge Introduction to Theatre and Performance Studies](#), trans. By M. Arjomand, ed. by M. Arjomand-R.Mosse (Abingdon & New York: 2014). For a view of "recordings as an integral part of a more generously conceived practice of performance," see [Nicholas Cook, "Methods for Analysing Recordings," in \*The Cambridge Companion to Recorded Music\*, ed. by Nicholas Cook, Eric Clarke, Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, and John Rink \(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011\)](#). Note that Cook is referring specifically to music recordings here.

<sup>20</sup> [Thomas M Leitch, "Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory," \*Criticism\*, Vol. 45, no. 2 \(Spring 2003\): 149-71: 154.](#)

<sup>21</sup> [Ibid.](#)



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<sup>22</sup> On film dance as a performing art distinct from its stage counterpart, see [Peter Wollen, \*Singin' in the Rain\* \(London: BFI Publishing, 1992\).](#)

<sup>23</sup> [Here I am paraphrasing Nicholas Cook's discussion of performance theorist Richard Schechner's work \(Cook, "Between Process and Product," 5\).](#)

<sup>24</sup> There were a number of scores prepared for the premieres and the early screenings in New York and Los Angeles, respectively, as well as the subsequent "sound" release, but it's not clear which were lavish and virtuosic and which were little more than glorified cue-sheets. The performative dimension of the score, I would argue, must have also consisted in the studiedness of the musical references (an aspect which is also central to the soundtrack of *Song at Midnight* [1937]).

<sup>25</sup> [Yuri Tsivian, \*Early Cinema in Russia and Its Cultural Reception\* \(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994\), 216.](#) Key to my argument are also the use of the DTS sound technology for *The Phantom Lover* and the computer-generated images that enhance the reconstruction of the theater in the film version of Lloyd Webber's musical directed by Joel Schumacher (Warner, 2004).

<sup>26</sup> [Tsivian, \*Early Cinema in Russia and Its Cultural Reception\*, 217.](#) Tsivian muses on the [revival of the "historical spectator," one "sensitive to the film medium" and "not yet deadened to the novelty of cinematic discourse."](#) (Tsivian, 216). Given the plethora of [proto-cinematic devices preceding the invention of cinema "proper," as well as the continuing changes undergone by cinema as both a medium and an art form, one wonders whether Tsivian is overstating the uniqueness of the—admittedly formative—early stages of the medium's history. A glance at the screen adaptations of \*The Phantom of the Opera\* suggests that such an exercise of the historical imagination is also called for in the study of later moments in the history of film.](#)

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<sup>27</sup> The film combined footage of the 1925 version with new material shot expressly for the re-release (very little of which has survived). The discs with the recorded soundtrack have come down to us, and in 2003 Milestone released a new DVD restoration with the soundtrack edited onto a composite of footage for the 1925 and what survives of the 1929 version, respectively (ID0209MLSDVD, 2003). It is to this version that I refer to in my analysis. While it cannot be taken to be an exact replica of the original 1929 release, the restoration gives in my opinion a fairly accurate impression of the main sync-points.

<sup>28</sup> *The Phantom of the Opera*, [DVD, Directed by Rupert Julian, and Lon Chaney, 1929, US: Jewel Productions, \(date\), 1'45" – 2'40."](#)

<sup>29</sup> *The Phantom of the Opera* (1929), 7'42" – 8'05".

<sup>30</sup> *Song at Midnight* (Yeban [Gesheng, 1937](#)), [DVD, Directed by Weibang Ma-Xu, 1937, China: Xinhua Film Company, \(date\), 22'00" - 23'30."](#)

<sup>31</sup> "[T]his stupendous invention [the cinema] does not consist in imitating the movements of nature; it's a matter of something entirely different; it's a matter of *making images seen*." [In Fernand Léger, \*Functions of Painting\*, ed. and intr. by Edward F. Fry \(London: Thames and Hudson, 1973\), 21. Emphasis in the original.](#)

<sup>32</sup> [????????????????](#)

<sup>33</sup> The dichotomy between a narrative-bound vision and a vision "freed up" by the constraints of narrative or dramatic considerations is a recurrent theme in the manifestos of practically all oppositional cinematic practices.

<sup>34</sup> On the challenges posed by the need present Christine's voice acoustically, see John Snelson's article in this issue.

<sup>35</sup> While not explicitly based on Leroux's original as Argento's subsequent 1998 adaptation, *Opera* too betrays a clear debt to the phantom story (if not the novel per se). On the relationship between the two films, see the essay by Roberto Calabretto in this issue.

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<sup>36</sup> [A partial exception is the 1962-3 Shaw Brothers versions of Weibang's 1937 and 1941 films, respectively, where the performances play an incidental role in the plot.](#)

<sup>37</sup> My thinking here revisits the deployment of “[topoi](#)” in terms of performance.

<sup>38</sup> The excerpt in question is from the Act III finale of Friedrich von Flotow's *Martha*, performed for the occasion in French.

<sup>39</sup> “This is the best Teatro de la Opera that has been presented on screen,” recited Mexican film journalist L. Pastor on reporting reactions to the film in Mexico City (see [Jacqueline Avila's essay in](#) this issue).