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Composing Opera Under the Influence: of metafiction

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On Reading This Commentary...

Two distinct strands of writing run through the first two sections of this commentary, delineated by paragraph, font and justification. These strands might be thought of as representing the 'academic' and the 'personal' perspectives of the research-practice. Despite their different angles of approach, both text types are conceived to illuminate the making of *She Described It to Death*, combining to do so in greater depth.

Although the commentary can only be fully appreciated through engagement with both strands of the writing, it is equally appropriate to read the text in order – alternating between the 'academic' and the 'personal' – or to read through longer passages of one strand before 'doubling back' to take in the other.

With this in mind, I invite you to read in whatever way feels most comfortable, and thank you in advance for negotiating this important feature of the commentary.

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Life does not tell stories, life is chaotic, fluid, random; it
leaves myriads
of ends untied, untidily. Writers can extract
a story from life only
by strict,
close
selection, and
this must
mean
falsification.[1]

1. Background

This commentary hopes to illuminate certain conceptual and technical aspects of the opera *She Described It to Death*, which was written during a three year practice-based research residency at Guildhall School of Music & Drama in partnership with the Royal Opera House. The research-practice focuses on the relationship between opera and metafiction, deriving techniques of opera composition from the concepts of postmodern literary theory.

Alright, I'm here. Super rough though. It'll be alright. Get through go home. One of the oldest. Handwriting's shot. Make impressions. Supposed to have met with producer already, before the start. Email hurry that up. Four days for an introduction then it's to arrange a meeting a week later. I've got ideas that need practical context, and they'll need to know too, not just for me. We've started, I've started. Try and write some music early, before the libretto, just get going on something, for momentum. Can't get a handle on this proposal, how to change it though, to what. Less tech more narration? Must be opera studies on narration.

Supported by a combination of primary and secondary sources, the commentary sets out an overview of metafiction in the contexts of opera studies and literary theory, followed by a categorisation of the related compositional methods found in *She Described It to Death*. The Categories section details the conceptual frameworks used to generate the research-practice's four compositional categories – 'Description, Syntagms & the Narration of Fictional Time', 'Heteroglossia, Genre & Parody', 'Foregrounding the Animator & the Author', and 'Operatic Objects & Affordances' – and illustrates each category with examples from the opera, cross-referenced with its score. Since the opera's production was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, no recording is available.

1 Since B.S. Johnson's writing often involves typographic experiment, I would like to make it clear that this typography is my own, inspired by the work of Johnson and others. B.S. Johnson, *Aren't You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs?* (London: Hutchinson, 1972) p. 14.

Describe my research? Something about convolution maybe. Say that for now. Already talking with America about the opera going there. Who knows. Brought it all up at the meeting, They like it, but it's gonna be slow. Green light though. Asked them to contact the writers agent, don't know if they have. Wrote to America to say. More palpitations. It's like living a day in thirty seconds. Quite frightening. Email that there's meningitis in School. There's a symptom list. I remind the producer that I'm tied up on Mondays, maybe prompt them. Got my allotted supervision hours. Nothing to report yet, slow going.

Although *She Described It to Death* is the third chamber opera in my output, it is the first to be written under the conditions of academic research, and I took this as a cue to begin by reflecting more critically upon the previous two works. This period of reflection brought to light a particular attitude that is prevalent in both of those operas but, being that in each case its manifestations are composed purely intuitively, is not subject to systematic examination or development in either. Further inquiry revealed that the compositional devices characteristic of this attitude clearly fit the description of metafiction, and it became my intention to create an opera that deploys such devices in a more deliberate, informed and sophisticated manner.

More training, maybe the research is about the agency of tech. Fill out a report. Asked to be introduced to the opera department. Nothing for six days. Follow up myself. Need to meet the opera makers, clashes though. Excused one Monday. Wait till off-peak. Twenty two minutes takes forever every time. International concourse. Public pianos being thumped about. Tea. Opera makers are nice. Then an invite to meet the opera company. It's all opera now. Following up with the opera department though. No word. Now formal word. Need to book in, not welcoming but it'll work, give them some dates. I won't hear again.

The decision to pursue a deeper understanding and application of metafiction was informed by four main factors:

1. Having discovered that I am instinctively drawn to metafictional materials I wanted to identify what it is about them that I find attractive, in order to extend the technical capacity of my practice and expand its conceptual scope.
2. Opera studies and literary theory have an established connection, but work in this area tends to be focused on macro-structural relations, rather than the kinds of discrete, immediate devices I hoped to implement.
3. It became apparent through research that metafictional approaches have great potential to render unusual forms in an accessible way.

4. The position of narrative in contemporary society and academia.

The first three factors will be discussed in greater detail later in the commentary, but the fourth should be expounded here in order to provide the full context of my decision making. Before I explain further, however, it is important to note that the ideas represented in the following section do not themselves form the direct subject matter of the research-practice, rather, they reflect a personal interest in the subject of narrative that came to influence the direction of the research-practice as a whole, as well as representing a key influence on the opera's narrative design. As such, the following is not intended to provide 'argument' in a research sense, but simply to explain an important personal influence, that being my feelings of discomfort in relation to the real-world deployment of narrative.

What if it's about narration? Peers are great, no beers yet though. They've not contacted the agent yet. Got a personal contact myself, quicker. See what I can do. An opera maker's adapting Auster, City of Glass. It's not gonna work with the author. There's another angle though.

In its simplest and most common form, a narrative is a relation of events told from a single perspective, it does not admit much multiplicity. Historiographically, ethically and aesthetically, this presents a problem. Any single narrative is told to the exclusion of all other versions, which become hidden, if not obliterated, by it. Since it is impossible to represent human experience at the high fidelity in which it is perceived, any narrative involves a reductive process that acts to minimise 'noise' in order to foreground its 'message': the erasure of characters and events irrelevant or unhelpful to the main thrust, the simplification of causality to serve the primary chain – these are the moves by which stories are extracted from the chaos of the universe that has the potential to be arranged into any number of narratives. A narrator may consider this narrowing propensity of stories to be an opportunity or a problem, depending on their sensibilities and aims.

Timeline is off, no librettist and they want libretto when?! Met the company, afternoon meeting. Prosecco and popcorn at 3pm. Posh team building. I bring the new writer into the equation. Gut is bad. So unsettled and that lump every now and again. Must redesign things. The proposal. Reading Abbate, seems promising. Get a librettist. Write some music early. Finish up on this pinball project though.

The former attitude is exemplified by the way in which corporations use stories to sell their products

and create brand identity. Corporate storytelling employs the received shorthands of stereotype and genre to represent a product or process of manufacture in a neat, colourful, cosy or otherwise packaged and managed way that does not permit any other possibility than the happy ending, the story of fulfilling learning and growing, the satisfaction of a worrying problem solved or a lifestyle goal fulfilled. When non-normative story elements or marginalised communities are brought into play by the advertiser, their depiction is harmonious with the identity of the brand, their struggle shown to be analogous to that of the corporation itself.

Composing with bespoke Max patches and pinball. Someone else wants music. If I never see 'wacky' spelled without the 'h' again it'll be too soon. And 'zany' can do one too. Steel horse train-ing then ethics training.

A takeaway meal is eaten by a functional family who enjoy one another's company, or by an ironically, and stereotypically, dysfunctional family who love each other really, or by a party of friends who know how to share and would get along just fine if only the girls didn't keep getting in the way of the TV while the game is on. We don't see petty squabbles arising from mismatched numbers of dishes and people; we don't smell reused oil souring the street; we don't hear the disturbing muddle of battery farmed chickens. In this example, the story presents us with an over-simple depiction of social harmony that is cognitively dissonant with the low wages, poor working conditions, unethical farming practices, dangerous and irresponsible manufacturing processes, tax evasion and dubious political affiliations that so often lay behind a product. Such negative scenes are parts of other narratives, but unlikely ones that have the resources of a multinational company behind them.

Pinball's done. Was cool. Now historical wind arrangements and a self-indulgent clown. I chase up about the new writer, any luck? Esa Pekka Salonen's coming in.

Corporate storytelling attempts to dominate the narrative ecosystem, displacing other perspectives and other types of knowledge, specifically those which would bring into question the public facing tenets of a brand's identity and reveal the contradiction between the external and internal narratives of organisations that believe their success depends on disguising the reality of their own existence. To such an entity, brand driven storytelling represents an opportunity to narrow the recipient's 'field of vision' to such a degree that everything undesirable is 'out of shot'. This

approach saturates society in stories which expound fundamental emotional affects that do not intersect neatly with messy, lived experience, producing distorted vectors of desire that are unrealisable and unsustainable in a real society peopled by real individuals with contradictory drives that change from one moment to the next. These stories assume a stability and homogeneity that is so utterly unrealistic that, were any government to legislate accordingly, it would amount to a totalitarian expectation, even control, of its populace, yet the continuing deluge of them clearly suggest that the method is effective in achieving its primary aims.

My contact can get an email straight to the new writer, DIY is quicker. 'There is a broken glass panel in Moor Lane / east side of the Milton Court Building'. Lots of sandwiches.

The principle at work here extends beyond business corporations, of course. Any social or political entity that has the resource of mass mediation can harness the inherent reductiveness of narrative to try to develop or maintain the dominance of their sanctioned perspective. Persistently dominant narratives become naturalised, that is, come to be taken for granted, unthinkingly accepted as the 'norm', as being common sense or representative of social consensus. This enables such narratives to more easily evade critical scrutiny, in turn making them more likely to be unconsciously replicated, which amounts to the performative assent with which genres are maintained,[2] further instantiating the beliefs, desires and ideologies of which those narratives were born.

Remodelling Louis Althusser's notion of 'expressive causality', Frederic Jameson suggests that a telling of an event is an 'interpretation' or a construction based in the relationship between ideology (belief) and cultural artefact (story).[3] In other words, we produce, and reproduce, the stories we believe in, or, crucially, those which societal and institutional structures encourage us to uphold. The individualism inherent in the hero's journey – a narrative model that is near-ubiquitous in Hollywood storytelling – is a noted example of this.[4] Doubly insidious is that the commonplaceness of the media involved in disseminating corporate and political stories ensures that they are subsumed within the supposed 'paramount' reality of 'everyday life', wilfully exploiting features of the "social construction of reality", a key concept in the field of sociology which we will examine in

2 A description of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of genre can be found in chapter 3.2. of this commentary, 'Heteroglossia, Genre & Parody', pp. 104-05.

3 Frederic Jameson, 'On Interpretation: Literature as a Socially Symbolic Act', in *The Political Unconscious*, ed. by Frederic Jameson (London and New York: Routledge, 1983) pp. 1 - 88

4 See Toby Litt, 'How to Tell a Story to Save the World', *Writers Rebel* <https://writersrebel.com/how-to-tell-a-story-to-save-the-world-1/> [accessed 27 July 2021]

more detail in the following chapter, which further helps them to slip under our critical radar.

Producers have got agents email, but I've got a direct route by now. All green lit. Fingers crossed. Sally's event at the Whitechapel Gallery tonight, amazing speakers, Mark Currie's so sharp on writing. Spoke afterwards.

Corporations take advantage of single-viewpoint stories to cramp or snuff out analytical modes of thought in the hope of creating societal 'norms' that further reinforce their hegemony. Contemporary academic attitudes toward narrative, on the other hand, are motivated by a belief that for discourse to be an effective tool of positive social and cultural change, it must be consciously critical and inclusive, with no viewpoint given unquestioned or singular authority. In these contexts, overt subjectivity is often adopted as an intentional strategy for avoiding an authoritative objectivity, that undesirable and potentially unethical perspective characterised by Donna Haraway as 'the god trick of seeing everything from nowhere',[5] or what in literary theory might be called the omniscient narrator. This is frequently identified as the aim of such practices as autoethnography and fictocriticism.[6] However, these approaches do not eschew storytelling – autoethnography, for example is founded on a belief that 'the stories we tell enable us to live, and to live *better;* stories allow us to lead more reflective, more meaningful, and more just lives'– rather, they have developed methodologies of storytelling counter to those of the corporate mode.[7]

Writer is intrigued! Wants to hear more from me. Need to set it out so it's full of potential, open to development. The damp in this house is miserable. What if it's affecting our health in general. Landlord couldn't give a toss.

Where corporate storytelling creates a frame which diverts and discourages critical reflection, autoethnography 'Uses deep and careful self-reflection – typically referred to as “reflexivity” – to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the particular and the general, the personal and the political.'[8] Where corporations aim to benefit from the naturalised dominance of

5 Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, Vol 14, No.3. (1988), pp. 575-99 (p. 581).

6 See, for example, T.E. Adams, S.H. Jones, C. Ellis, *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) Chapter 1, pp. 1-20 and Anna Gibbs, 'Fictocriticism, Affect, Mimesis: Engendering Differences', *TEXT*, Vol 9, No.1, (2005), unpag. <http://www.textjournal.com.au/april05/gibbs.htm> [accessed 25 July 2021]

7 Adams, Jones, Ellis, *Autoethnography*, p.1.

8 ibid. p. 2.

their stories, fictocriticism sets out to resist the received authority of texts, working to counteract the potential for 'disciplinary authority and discursive protocol [to] function as the voice of the dead stalking the present so as to paralyse it with terror, or else as a kind of watchful superego as resistant to modification as if it were a text inscribed in stone.'[9] This approach of fictocriticism is equally focused on academic texts themselves, a move crucial to prevent naturalised authority from emerging in the ecosystem of academic narrative, which itself does not exist in isolation from broader cultural trends – from the perspective of feminism, for example, any text that originates in a patriarchal culture has the potential to reproduce patriarchal ideologies. Autoethnography's legitimising of the self-narrative is intended to include the perspectives of individuals who represent, and have lived experience of, positions beyond received cultural 'norms'. Similarly, fictocriticism seeks to admit multiple perspectives, 'traced by numerous voices which work now in unison, at other times in counterpoint, and at others still against each other, in deliberate discord.'[10]

Lost The Third Policeman to mildew. The mice run riot too. Caught them all humanely and let them go, took some doing though.

Another important point of difference between academic and corporate methods is that academic texts are expected to acknowledge the limits of their scope, openly delineate their boundaries and be willing to discuss how and why those boundaries have been drawn. This is antithetical to corporate operation as it constitutes an overt admission of the act of narrative control. If corporations were to share the methodology behind their storytelling it would reveal the very factors that their stories are designed to occlude. Perhaps one of the simplest descriptions of the fundamental difference between academic and corporate methods, then, might be that it is the difference between deliberate transparency and deliberate opacity, inclusion and exclusion. Academic discourse seeks to wrest control from monolithic hegemony and allow marginalised voices to play an active part, while also preventing academic forms themselves from tacitly dictating and limiting the types or categories of discourse available. To support this aim, methodologies have been developed to try to ensure that academic narratives operate differently than corporate narratives. But reductiveness is a property of all narratives, which makes the use of one type to resist the effects of another a particularly challenging endeavour, even with egalitarian-minded methodologies in place.

9 Gibbs, 'Fictocriticism, Affect, Mimesis', unpag.
10 ibid.

Any luck with the agent? In touch and waiting. Is narration an 'area' though, like a field of study?

The attraction of autoethnography in arts research is that, if used well, it is both appropriately scholarly and capable of accommodating meaningful representations of messy creative processes.[11] However, as well as the fact that, like any narrative approach, it runs the risk of erasing other subjectivities if handled with too great a bias toward the self-perspective, another particular problem of academic self-narrative is the potential exclusion of conceptual, analytical material that falls outside the purview of personal experience. Concerned about this potential of academic self-narratives, Mitch Allen warns that the researcher who employs narration of their own experience as a research methodology must

> look at experience analytically. Otherwise [you're] telling [your] story—and that's nice—but people do that on Oprah [a U.S.-based television program] every day. Why is your story more valid than anyone else's? What makes your story more valid is that you are a researcher. You have a set of theoretical and methodological tools and a research literature to use. That's your advantage. If you can't frame it around these tools and literature and just frame it as 'my story,' then why or how should I privilege your story over anyone else's I see 25 times a day on TV?[12]

'We also ask that you help us with reducing the risk of intruders gaining access around buildings by not allowing people to tail gate behind you, particularly within the Silk Street Building when you are entering the building using one of the swipe and access controlled doors'.

Autoethnography is a particular case of a wider academic engagement with methods of narrative research, which frequently play a part in fields such as sociology, anthropology, pedagogy, and medical or health humanities. Galen Strawson's essay *Against Narrativity* sets out to question the assumptions he considers to be built into this wide acceptance of the benefits of narrative. Strawson distinguishes between two types of narrative thesis in the academic context, the psychological and the ethical,[13] characterising the former as representing the idea that 'one sees or

11 Autoethnography is also dubbed 'mesearch' in reference to its focus on the self-perspective.

12 Mitch Allen, from a personal interview (4 May 2006) in Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams & Arthur P. Bochner, 'Autoethnography: An Overview', *Forum Qualitative Sozial Forschung*, unpag. <https://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1589/3095> [accessed 25 July 2021]

13 Galen Strawson, *Real Materialism and Other Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008) p. 189.

lives or experiences one's life as a narrative or story of some sort, or at least as a collection of stories', and the latter the idea that 'a richly Narrative outlook on one's life is essential to living well, to true or full personhood.'[14] Strawson's argument, however, is that 'It's just not true that there is only one good way for human beings to experience their being in time. There are deeply non-Narrative people and there are good ways to live that are deeply non-Narrative.' More than this, he believes that a belief in these combined theses can actually 'hinder human self-understanding, close down important avenues of thought, impoverish our grasp of ethical possibilities, needlessly and wrongly distress those who do not fit their model, and are potentially destructive in psychotherapeutic contexts.'[15]

What's the percussion for the 'zany' thing? Light stuff. Supervision reports Matt? Can't get anything signed. I like to work quicker than this, feel like it's all floating. Got to get a librettist.

In elaborating on his ideas, Strawson makes a distinction between 'Diachronic' and 'Episodic' self-experience – whether one figures, or does not figure, 'oneself, considered as a self, as something that was there in the (further) past and will be there in the (further) future.'[16] He takes it 'that many people are naturally Diachronic, and that many who are Diachronic are also Narrative in their outlook on life', but that 'Episodics are likely to have no particular tendency to see their life in Narrative terms.'[17]

Tell them about the new writer. Should write some music too, from early. Physiological Measurements Diagnostic Centre. NHS outsourcing. Medical privateers in a shopping centre. Ultrasound. Waiting to hear now. About everything.

Strawson's writing on the subject of narrativity tends towards the polemic, and in attempting to make a more measured reading of his 'guess' that narrativity 'almost always does more harm than good'[18] Angela Woods refines the point, saying:

> A more plausible suggestion is that a social injunction towards Narrativity – a

14 ibid.
15 ibid. p. 190.
16 ibid.
17 ibid. p. 191.
18 ibid. p. 205.

culturally contextualized demand to tell (particular kinds of) stories about the *self – can be experienced as "highly unnatural and ruinous" for people who, like Strawson, find themselves to be Episodic and non-Narrative. The harm of Narrativity, then, would be experienced principally by Episodics who presumably feel themselves to be excluded from what the majority of Diachronics view as legitimate and desirable forms of *self understanding, or, worse, who are corralled or even forced to view them*selves in these terms and perform accordingly, or come to be seen as faulty, deficient or as non-persons. Especially, it seems, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Episodics face the predicament of being square pegs in a sea of round Narrative holes.'[19]

The nuance here being that the imposition of particular kinds of narrative frameworks upon those who do not recognise narrative as a natural part of their experience is identified as the root of the problem, rather than narrative per se. Writing from within the field of medicine, where narrative is a common tool in researching the experience of illness and recovery, Woods's concern is that 'as narrative is increasingly becoming a culturally and clinically sanctioned imperative, narrating one's *illness* experience is on the verge of becoming a compulsory activity in certain contexts.' It is the naturalisation of narrative methods, then, that Woods considers to be problematic, and in keeping with this she does not advocate the ruling out of such approaches, but rather seeks to 'identify the *limits* of narrative and to explore alternative ways of understanding, representing and researching' the subject matter of her discipline.[20]

Think it might be about narration though, the research. Here's your 'wacky' number. And here's your invoice. Supervision about the research. Seems like it'll work. Got a meeting date with the writer.

Where Strawson and Woods are concerned with the potential benefits and hazards of prescribed narrative, Alasdair MacIntyre discusses the matter from a different perspective. In MacIntyre's conception, a person's experience of intelligible narrative order, and indeed 'narrative selfhood', can arise from the pursuit of valuable social 'practices' and the 'goods internal' to them.[21] MacIntyre

19 Angela Woods, 'Beyond the Wounded Storyteller: Rethinking Narrativity, Illness and Embodied Self-Experience', in *Health, Illness and Disease: Philosophical* Essays ed. by Havi Carel and Rachel Cooper (London and New York: Routledge, 2014) pp. 113-28 (p. 117).

20 ibid. p. 8.

21 A full description of this idea can be found in: Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007) pp. 116 - 118.

uses these terms with a very particular meaning, constructed in the context of his quest to usefully define 'virtue'. The full definition of these terms can be found in MacIntyre's *After Virtue,*[22] but here the relevant point is the suggestion that a person might generate their own sense of narrative cohesion through action in relation to the social context. MacIntyre also believes that a 'crucial characteristic of all lived narratives, [is] a certain teleological character':

> We live out our lives, both individually and in our relationships with each other, in the light of certain conceptions of a possible shared future, a future in which certain possibilities beckon us forward and others repel us, some seem already foreclosed and others perhaps inevitable. There is no present which is not informed by some image of some future and an image of the future which always presents itself in the form of a *telos* – or of a variety of ends or goals – towards which we are either moving or failing to move in the present.[23]

In factoring goal-oriented decision making into the equation, this assertion suggests another way in which a person's sense of narrative 'shape' might be understood to emerge in relation to conditions, rather than simply 'being the case'. At first glance, it appears that MacIntyre's idea could represent a practical mechanism by which an Episodic experience might come to feel more narrative. However, since the process in question is founded on 'looking to the future', which is antithetical to Strawson's Episodic (who does not figure themselves as ever existing in the future or past), it quickly becomes apparent that this is not the case. MacIntyre believes humans to be 'essentially a story-telling animal', and, as quoted above, his identification of a 'teleological character' to narrative is explicitly located in the context of 'lived narratives', which presupposes a Diachronic perspective.[24] So while it does support and enrich a description of the Diachronic, this idea says nothing to contradict the notion of episodic experience, or allay concerns about imposing narrative on such a perspective.

Author I should say really, one of my very favourites. Such good news. And movement, actual movement!

In light of which it is worth reiterating that Strawson does not deny that many people relate to their

22 ibid. pp. 187 - 189
23 ibid. pp. 215 - 216
24 'A central thesis then begins to emerge: man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal.' ibid. p. 216

own existence in narrative terms, it is for him simply that there are also many who do not. In fact, such narrative terms will later be seen to play an important part in the research-practice, and my ambivalence towards narrative arises precisely from my being both frustrated with 'corporate' storytelling yet also recognising my own Diachronic narrative tendencies. Although these matters are not the focus of the research-practice itself, they are key motivating factors behind my intention to make a narrative opera capable of critiquing narrative and narration. I wanted the opera to demonstrate both the hazards and joys of narrative, to rue and celebrate its powers, to represent multifarious attitudes to it in complex manifestations that resist straightforward explanations. It occurred to me that depictions of narrativity as part of the opera's plot element would provide exactly the formal opportunities necessary to achieve these aims, and through research soon realised that such recursion – the narrative discussion of narratives – was a natural part of metafiction, which clearly represented a way to imbue the opera with the desired criticality.

Exchange with America. Keep them in the loop at least. Dear friend's 40th coming up. We're to learn up songs, perform them at the bash.

Metafiction is a useful tool in this sense because it is fiction that is aware it is fiction, making it much more likely that the reader, too, will be conscious of the processes of fictioning. It wears its illusions on its sleeve, making apparent the mechanisms of construction, and potentially the underlying value structures that inform that construction. Sometimes this boosting of the signal can reach the pitch of a grotesque or a parodic exaggeration; sometimes it can involve a simple and subtle 'outing' of story's artifice through formal play. It is the full range of these metafictional devices that informed *She Described It to Death*. My initial thinking included many instances of unstable or absurd narration, intended to demonstrate the contingency of the stories, dialogues and arias within the story. And since the libretto itself was written with the aim of circumventing conventions of conflict-based narrative, the piece became, through the layering of formal and rhetorical devices, a cultural artefact that is not reducible to an over-simplistic social model or emotional drive.[25]

Surprise gig. Gonna do a Postal Service number. Will take a bit of learning up. Do it over Christmas. New year, need to meet but the meeting's two weeks away. Things will have changed by then. Back to training. Beers at the end of the day and I frightened colleagues with a turn. Near palpitations stood at the bar. I told them not to worry. Hospital later on in the month, should be fine. Clammy train journey home though.

25 For more information on this, please see Ursula Le Guin's *Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* in the Appendices, p. 138.

Sketched a music. Listened for inspiration. Sally's birthday badminton. Then back to the damp house. We've got to move. Friend's 40th, karaoke band. Shouldn't have been drinking but I don't know that yet. Will find out soon.

1.1. Research Objectives

As outlined above, this project comprises a more rigorous engagement with the natural tendencies of my composition practice in order to achieve the following research objectives:

1. To explore the implications of postmodern literary theory in the paradigm of opera composition.
2. To develop compositional techniques capable of generating metafictional effects, particularly in the form of discrete, immediate devices, as opposed to macro-structural relationships.
3. To make an opera that is unorthodox in form while being accessible and entertaining.
4. To make an opera that encourages in its makers and audience an active awareness of the mechanisms of storytelling.

1.2. Methodology

The research-practice considers itself to be interdisciplinary in that, while it draws on concepts of literary theory to address its research objectives, the paradigm of opera composition is nevertheless determinate of the modes of thinking and making involved. This ensures that the practice element is executed to an appropriately high skill level, and avoids othering itself in the interests of fulfilling the role of research-object while still developing in the light of, and engaging in dialogue with, external realms of knowledge.[26] Although there are criticisms of applying literary theory to music composition, these relate to the area of narratological analysis, where it can be argued that concepts evolved in the former are not necessarily apt to provide meaningful readings of the latter.[27] Where this research-practice engages with literary theory however, it does so in the interests of achieving metafictional effects in an opera, so the aptness of any conceptual analogies or transpositions involved can be meaningfully assessed by the degree to which they fulfill this criteria.

26 This position is also influenced by Sara Ahmed's idea of 'not philosophy': '*Not philosophy* is practiced by those who are not philosophers and aims to create room within philosophy for others who are not philosophers. Not being a philosopher working with philosophy can be understood as generative: the incapacity to return texts to their proper histories allows us to read sideways or across, thus creating a different angle on what is being reproduced.' Sara Ahmed, *Wilful Subjects* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 15.

27 For example, see Byron Almén's *A Theory of Musical Narrative* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2017).

A performance. My last commission. BBC here for it. OB truck attracting a crowd. Meet with the author. Try not to be a fanboy. He eats an egg sandwich and somehow I never forget that detail. Good conversation, he makes notes in a small book. Looks like we might be onto something. I'll set out thoughts about his work, with page numbers, give him a reference point for things I'm interested in. First hospital visit. First of many, but I don't know that yet. Urodynamics. Like an off-brand 80s synth outfit.

In the context of the broader critique of storytelling, this commentary both analyses and enacts the making practice, an approach intended to represent metafictional attitudes through demonstration, as well as providing an effective way to capture the messiness of making. It is hoped that in this way the research-practice can engage with knowledge production in its fullest sense, including the types of intuition and instinct that are a natural part of creative work but hard to describe, the knowledge ineffably but inevitably embedded and embodied in something that has been made.

Must be the youngest by about fifteen years. So much worry in the room. Should've gone in already. It's a day really, not the appointment time, just have to allow a day. Sweating to reframe the research-practice. Got something though. Notification of flexible cystoscopy. Autoethnography training. Bilateral Hydronephrosis. Fitted with an in-dwelling catheter. Bag strapped to my leg for the train home. Bed ridden. Revising proposal. Attempted phone snatches in Silk Street by moped-riding thieves. Hospital. In-dwelling removed and taught to self-catheterise. 'A Man's Guide to Intermittet Self-Catheterisation' booklet. Cartoon diagrams. Foxes in the garden. The den is on the garage roof.

Development of the compositional method of the research-practice begins with researching literary metafiction in order to understand its origins, objectives, taxonomies, and techniques. Although metafiction can be identified in all fictional media, its conceptual origins are in literature, so, in order to delimit this project, the research-practice chooses to focus on that field. This understanding is then applied to a compositional approach that exploits the universality of the compositional principles of postmodern literary theory – exemplified by, but not limited to, David Lodge's principles of contradiction, permutation, discontinuity, randomness, and excess – to move directly to a mode of praxis, whereby postmodern literary theory provides principles that I then work with empirically. Having composed opera music in this way, I then perform an interdisciplinary extrapolation from the mode of praxis back out to an understanding of metafiction in our opera. During the process there was a shift of focus from 'extreme' to 'gentle' metafictional attitudes, the natures of which are discussed in Chapter 2. Critical reflection upon the implications of this shift and

a detailed explanation, examination and evaluation of the full compositional process are carried out in Chapter 4, 'Process Under the Microscope'. A full description of my involvement in the creation of the non-musical elements of the opera can be found in section 1.3.4. 'Making the libretto'.

1.3. Process &Timeline

The Doctoral Composer in Residence programme is a collaboration between Guildhall School of Music & Drama (GSMD) and the Royal Opera House (ROH). It offers the composer a three year, funded residency in which to research and compose a 70 – 80 minute chamber opera for production at ROH. The residency provides an environment in which the composer can work in dialogue with the opera's producers from the very beginning of the project, and which includes workshopping as an integral part of the process so that in-progress evaluation and revision of material is possible.

Days of writing about writing. Days of catheterising. Page numbers and examples for the author. Hospital. Cystoscopy: 'Visualization: Poor, Tolerance: Good, Complications: None'. School says I can intermit, but what would I be doing then though? I'll keep going. Sent notes to the author, thrilling really. Marketing want bio and 'top line theme' of the new opera. Not even begun. Big email to marketing. 'The nature of narrativisation and mediation'. Will that do it? There isn't anything yet. Catheterising five or six times a day. Cold sweat to do it. Marketing happy. 'Fictionality as a property of both fiction and reality' we go with. Running out of catheters. Got to contact a special company. New prescription for a greater amount per month.

Below is a timeline that gives a general overview of the making process. Since the composing of *She Described It to Death* begins with the collaborative making of the libretto, this part of the process warrants a more in-depth description, which can be found after the timeline.

1.3.1. Year 1 (2017 – 2018)

As mentioned earlier, the initial phase of the project was a reflection upon my two previous operas, which led me to researching the subject of metafiction. The other objective in this period was to find a librettist with whom to collaborate. With postmodern literary theory becoming the focus of the research-practice I set out to find an author to work with, someone who would have a pre-existing, practical understanding of literary modes. Early in 2018 I secured such a collaborator and began initial discussions with them, but unfortunately by September of that year an unfinished prior commitment saw them leave the project. In this time I developed a lot of the formal ideas I hoped

to work with in the opera.

New regimen, new logistics. Hard to concentrate on anything else. Body stress. Starting a urination diary. Times and amounts. Every instance, every day. From now until the operation in November. Back to School. Training and public toilet catheterising. What a rigmarole every time. Takes forever. No tea now. Hospital. Ultrasound. Spoke to producer. Updating on the author. Previous opera from my programme to be revived. Good precedent, hope we can manage that. Will I be part of the Course Board session? Yes. Haven't written more music yet though. Still sweating on the revised proposal. Novak's postopera stuff in addition to Abbate, seems substantial.

1.3.2. Year 2 (2018 – 2019)

This period began with my arranging to work with the writer Sally O'Reilly, a regular collaborator of mine with whom I had made the previous two operas. Sally produced the first draft of *She Described It to Death* by the end of December 2018. 2019 began with a period of dramaturgical work between Sally and a Royal Opera House dramaturg to further develop and refine the libretto. During the same period, Sally and I were meeting with potential directors. Recognising that the project had been significantly delayed by the loss of the first librettist, the producers arranged for the final production date to be moved back by two months, to July 2020. By March the libretto was complete and I began writing the music. In August we first met with Anna Morrissey, who a month later was brought on board as director. In parallel with my ongoing composing, Anna assembled the rest of the creative team, and myself and ROH secured the London Contemporary Orchestra (LCO) as the ensemble for the production. To accommodate my later than planned start on the composition work, the music workshops were moved from the summer to the end of the autumn term of 2019.

Running low on catheters. My only thought. Got more catheters. Phew. Lots of infection from them though. Urine like wallpaper paste sometimes, almost pretty in the right light, through the green plastic. Like a glowstick. Did that beetroot help? The damp. Must move. Finally revised the proposal. Opera music as *narrator* now. That makes sense. And convolutions of narration. Author's gone quiet. Do I want to attend a dress run of Coraline? Yes, but how long is it? Have to think of the regimen now. Course Board member made the distinction between required and obligated.

1.3.3. Year 3 (2019 – 2020)

Auditions for the characters Acantha, Attis and Bract were held in October 2019, resulting in all

three roles being cast. Music workshops happened in December of that year, it having been agreed that the ensemble would comprise an equal mix of GSMD and LCO players (5 of each), an approach I brought to the programme to ensure that, since it is a requirement that GSMD players are involved in the workshop process, they would also be involved in the final production. As is the nature of the programme, although singers had been cast for the production, the workshops were conducted with singers from the GSMD opera and vocal departments. Day one was with singers and répétiteur only, day two with ensemble only and day three with everyone. By this point I had written six of eight scenes and it was possible to work with about half of this material in the three days allocated for workshopping, leading to simple revisions in those sections.

Auditions for the character of Volvox were conducted in February 2020. Volvox is a single character performed by four singers, so the audition process had to allow for group work. Myself, the director and répétiteur devised a day long session to facilitate this, and several potential cast members were identified.

Sally's in Bristol. Marketing need a photo of me. Sally's in Brussels. For me it's challenging to leave the house. Heard from the author. He's happy with my notes, I'll hear back soon he says. Reading about narratology. Hospital report, I'm clear of hydronephrosis. Actual relief. Viewed a flat, back in London. Not right but the area's great. Should be meeting producer but I'm waiting on document from the author. We postpone. Heavy limbo. Training and marketing and proposal and thinking. No words no music. Should write music, even before the libretto. Momentum.

Also in February 2020 I finished writing the music, delivering the vocal score at the beginning of March. The full score deadline was April 3rd, but the COVID-19 pandemic had reached the UK by this point and I was informed on April 2nd that the production had been cancelled.

1.3.4. Making the Libretto

I intended to compose with the full apparatus of opera, not just the music, and although it is common practice to adapt a libretto from a pre-existing text, I felt that something made from scratch would better suit this aim, allowing bespoke metafictional devices to be woven into the fabric of the opera. By this stage I had already been working on the project for some months, so Sally inherited a lot of ideas that she had not been party to devising. The essential challenge was for me to communicate my ideas precisely enough for us to reach a shared understanding of them, but

in a manner that was open enough to allow Sally space to bring her own thoughts and perspectives to the work. To set things in motion, I presented Sally with a list of formal ideas and devices I had conceived, with the understanding that they were to act as concrete reference for conversation, not a checklist of what the opera must contain. The hope was that this list would enable Sally to identify which of her interests resonated with my own, creating a Venn region within which the libretto could take shape.

Must move house though. Infections. Damp. Wheezes. Get back to London like the plan. We've found somewhere! 3 bed, right place. Both freelancers so we need a guarantor, but we can get one. And reference from the producer. Opera producer vouching for me to an estate agent. Hierarchies to cock but it'll get the job done. Composer's group. Dissecting an opera we've all seen. All my experiences are coloured by the regimen, but it wasn't good. Sanitised, unlike my bladder. Supervision reports. Antibiotics. Waiting.

Although I was interested in the libretto telling a story about storytelling, I brought no ideas of plot to the table, only particular formal devices I would like to compose with or types of events I would like to happen. Sally made sixty-five index-cards, each a distillation of one of these ideas, for example:

- Onstage apparatus (technologies or things) that make sound, or relay sound from elsewhere
- Tableau vivants & pre-recorded music
- Two characters four singers, one pair acting, the other recounting.
- Pre-existing characters (à la Textermination / League of Extraordinary Gentlemen)
- Narrating of the motives and positions of others
- We watch characters listening to the radio, broadcasts from elsewhere
- Bloopers, repeated mistakes re-taken

Sally then brought these ideas into relation with her own, catalysing their development with personal perspectives, she recalls:

> Matt's ideas were formal or compositional, to do with relationships between image and sound or between registers of representation, or were abstract themes

or situations or outlines of character traits or modes of language or action, or staging schema. Among them, one had been at the fore for a long time: a hole that can't be seen through or beyond, which is monitored and narrated and re-narrated, and that leaks.

I had recently spent a lot of time in intensive care with my mother, who'd had heart surgery and never recovered. I'd sat next to her while her chest was open, covered by thin medical gauze. I found it impossible to think about anything else while writing the libretto, and so this became the hole.

The plot of the first draft was arrived at through an incredibly complex series of adjustments and restructurings that would be impossible to relate here. Several of the index card ideas are still apparent in this version, but as a plot it is fairly incoherent, probably because I was trying to aim for these 'hit points'.

The piece subsequently went through dozens of further iterations, with huge structural changes. Gradually, more and more of the index-card ideas were extracted, in part through an attempt to solve problems of in-world logic. I wrote and rewrote the plot précis, portraits and trajectories of characters, and background information about the politics of the world. I made diagrams in notebooks of orders of events, the release of information and relations between characters. And I repeatedly rewrote the libretto to remould surface textual effects.

By the end of the process, not many of the index-card ideas remained intact in their specificity, but since Matt and I share an expanded understanding of the materials of writing/musical composition, many of their effects remained evident.

Reading lots. Dates wrangling over marketing film. Big email chain. Presentation coming up so I hijack the film maker for that. Can film my metafictional narration performance. Afford further metafiction.

Part way through this process, Sally worked with a ROH dramaturg who responded to the libretto

and suggested potential changes at various scales. Some of these suggestions were taken on board and some were rejected due to what Sally refers to as 'a fundamental difference' between her and the dramaturg's 'understandings of the nature of the piece'.

Helping Sally with a performance. Audio making. Her Mum is taken into hospital. Discussions about the Autumn workshops. No music or text yet but they're for early exploration. Set out my requirements. More emails about realising the non-existent music. No time to write any yet, writing too much else. No time and too much discomfort. Producer meeting. Ideas about forces. Preparing the way for amplification. Dress rehearsal of a peer's opera. All opera all the time. Author's agent wants to postpone an all team meeting. Alarm bells. We've passed referencing for the new flat.

Discussion between Sally, myself, the director and producers continued throughout the making process, and in fact the libretto did not reach its ultimate form until the month before the vocal score was due, with small changes in the score being possible at most stages. Similarly, I had the opportunity to request certain elements be added, particularly those that would require little or no change to plot or text – that it would be useful to have a doorbell rather than someone knocking, for example.[28] Although the final version of the libretto does not contain the majority of the initial index-card ideas, as Sally says, we had created a shared understanding of the materials and managed to synthesise the conceptual imperatives of the research-practice into the plot, fabula and stage directions of the text.

We're getting out of the damp! Maybe my infections will clear up. Got to organise the move. Filming for marketing. Outside, faux composing by hand, coloured pencils on display. Non-composers always excited by graphic work. Seems normal from the composer end of things. Excited about my use of dice. Sure, but they don't make the music better. Over-writing my first year presentation. So intricate, but treating it like making a piece. Maybe I can submit it at upgrade. All convoluted levels of narration. Reading Goffman and McLuhan. Poioumena. And Potter, Hide and Seek. Making a backing track so it's melodramatic.

The Categories section of this commentary details the particular metafictional methods to be found in *She Described It to Death*. First though, the following chapter provides an overview of the field, primary source examples from literature, an assessment of the area in relation to opera, and readings of some operas conducted from a metafictional perspective.

28 This doorbell enables a device detailed in chapter 3.4, Operatic Objects & Affordances, p. 131.

2. Metafiction

One of the first uses of the term 'metafiction' was by the novelist William Gass in the early 1970s. In Gass's opinion, critics of the late 1960s were too quick to label unusual works of fiction as 'anti-novels' when actually 'many of the so-called anti-novels are really metafictions',[29] and he noted that although metafiction naturally shares some traits with experimental fiction as a whole, its distinguishing feature 'is its direct and immediate concern with fiction-making itself'.[30]

Hospital. Assessment for operation. Panopticon waiting area. Surrounded by equipment and anterooms. Overrunning. Constant movement in the periphery. Ambient daytime TV. Brought a notebook but what can you write here? Only about here. Will I give a talk for the opera company's contemporary music circle? Sure. Will need to prep. First prep for School presentation. No room tech only my dictaphone. Logistical emails. Contemporary Music Circle talk needs better design. I'll take it on. Always more work, but better to plan your own plan.

Allying itself with uncertainty, contradiction, discontinuity, and randomness, metafiction sets out to destabilise and unseat the conventions of literary fiction. Though, as Gass does, it is quite straightforward to identify metafiction's characteristics, and point to a range of the devices it employs – inconsistent or incoherent narrators, fictions within fictions, ambiguous or impossible topographies and ontologies, incongruous juxtapositions of style and genre, absurd lists, ungridded or pictorial typography, obtrusive footnotes, non-linear page orderings, implicating the reader or other real people in the fictional world, conspicuous character names, excesses and convolutions of all kinds – it requires a little more effort than might be expected to properly delineate it from other, non-metafictional fictions.

Can offer something interesting, a mini workshop. More writing and planning that isn't the opera. Sally is away, visiting her Mum in hospital. Perform my presentation. Nested narrational frames and metafictional dressage all round. Seemed to go down well. Backing track works. Watching 2nd Year presentations all day. Necessary support, but no progress on my opera. After party too tricky with the regimen. Constant infections so tiring too. Scouting removal companies. Supervisions. Meet with the Contemporary Music Circle coordinator. New timeline. Author to come in for team meet. First draft libretto a month later. Nonsense. But we'll have to try.

29 William Gass, 'Philosophy and the Form of Fiction', *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (New York: Random House, 1972) p. 25.
30 ibid. p. 24.

This difficulty of delineation can be put down to two main factors. One is that 'metafictional characteristics can be found throughout the prehistory of postmodernism',[31] a matter that we will address in a moment, but first we will consider the fact that, since 'Metafiction explicitly lays bare the conventions of realism; it does not ignore or abandon them' and that 'very often realistic conventions supply the “control” in metafictional texts, the norm or background against which the experimental strategies can foreground themselves',[32] it is possible for metafiction to appear to some degree conventional, particularly when the metafictional aspect is handled more gently, rather than with the uncompromising wildness that occurs in some of its more extreme manifestations. And of course, the more subtle the effect, the larger a part readerly interpretation plays in the process of identification. For instance, a gentle metafictional effect might hinge on the reader being momentarily subsumed in the fictional reality of a conventional detective novel, creating an ontological bubble that can be delicately burst at a critical moment. A more extreme metafiction, however, might do everything it can to prevent the reader from becoming immersed in its fictional reality, or rather, its avowed reality may be that it is a novel, with every convention of fictional realism held hostage to the relentless affirmation of that fact. The experience of the former is like an intoxicating dance, the latter an intoxicated brawl. Where the latter's metafictionality is unquestionable, in that whatever the reader might call it, its effects cannot be overlooked, the former's might be debatable, or the characteristics in question even go unnoticed for some.

Please include time between me and author. Much email coordinating here. Hours of writing not the music, not the libretto. Necessary though. They want a table read of as yet non-existent libretto. When people try to use such a thing to imagine how the piece works they're always wrong. You can learn about the plot and get acquainted with the ideas, but people'll start to tell you a moment doesn't work without any context of the music. I try to modify with some success. Lots of emails. People are understanding but that's always the case too. I don't yet know it's all for nothing.

In the 'background' section of this commentary, I drew on the writing of Patricia Waugh to assert that 'metafiction is the class of postmodernist fictional writing which “self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.”'[33] So, in the interests of being able to identify metafiction

31 Mark Currie, 'Introduction', in *Metafiction*, ed. by Mark Currie (Abingdon: Routledge, 1995) pp. 1-18 (p. 1).
32 Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003) p. 18.
33 ibid. p. 2.

more clearly, we will begin by unpacking this statement. 'Self-consciousness' is a common shorthand for the metafictional mode,[34] referring to its signature self-referentiality, but Waugh enriches the sense of this already agential quality by choosing to emphasise the systematicness of metafiction's drawing of attention to its own artifice, reinforcing that it is a rigorous, performative act. She goes on to add that 'metafiction is not so much a sub-genre of the novel as a tendency *within* the novel which operates through exaggeration of the tensions and oppositions inherent in all novels',[35] and that while the expression of such tensions 'is present in much contemporary writing [...] it is the *dominant* function' in the texts that she considers to be metafictional.[36] As David Lodge puts it: 'it would be false to oppose metafiction to realism; rather, metafiction makes explicit the implicit problematic of realism.'[37] In these conceptions, certain characteristics common to all (contemporary) fiction arise from the novel's intrinsic tensions, but what distinguishes bona fide metafiction from its lookalikes is that these features are taken up as the primary material of the work. This feedback loop is the source of metafiction's self-conscious quality and enables its particular criticality since, in the same way that a meta-language is a language used to talk about another language, meta-fiction is fiction by which fictionality can be discussed.

Can I have the footage of my presentation? Do we need to provide our own packing boxes? Can this month's catheters be delivered early? Written a plan for the CMC talk. It'll need a rehearsal session too. All time taken up, but it'll play favourably. Sally at the hospital. Her Mum needs an operation. Send presentation video to supervisors. Covering email. I've been hired for a project at Stonehenge. Meet the artist in question soon. 'Wacky' ensemble again. Hospital. Conversation about surgery. I'm asked to consider sperm banking. Meet the Stonehenge project artist. Sally's Mum is in serious condition in hospital.

When Waugh refers to metafiction's 'dominant function', she uses 'dominant' in its everyday sense, but Brian McHale employs its technical counterpart to explain the essential difference between literary modernism and postmodernism, providing in the process a perspective which illumines the presence of metafictional characteristics in pre-postmodernist texts. In literary theory the term 'dominant' is given to mean 'the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components.'[38] This dominant can be thought of as a conceptual or

34 And not without its own problems, as Mark Currie elaborates upon in *Metafiction,* p. 1.
35 Waugh, *Metafiction,* p. 14.
36 ibid. p. 15.
37 David Lodge, 'The Novel Now', in *Metafiction*, ed. by Mark Currie (Abingdon: Routledge, 1995) pp. 145-60 (p. 154).
38 Roman Jacobson, 'The Dominant', in *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, ed. by Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1971), pp. 105-10 (p. 82).

ideological sun around which the other elements of the writing revolve, their orbits conditioned by its gravitational pull and their ecospheres flourishing or burning up by virtue of its heat and light. Rather than there being a single, fixed dominant, there are many that can be identified in a work depending on the perspective applied to it.[39] In these terms, McHale argues that the shift from modernist to postmodernist fiction can be read as a shift from an epistemological to an ontological dominant. In other words, the question at the heart of fiction changed from 'how can we know the world?' to 'what is a world?'.

Building on this, McHale explains that:

> Intractable epistemological uncertainty becomes at a certain point ontological plurality or instability: push epistemological questions far enough and they "tip over" into ontological questions. By the same token, push ontological questions far enough and they tip over into epistemological questions – the sequence is not linear and unidirectional, but bidirectional and reversible.[40]

In these terms, the key metafictional characteristic of ontological inquiry can be found in modernist texts because modernism and postmodernism are like two sides of the same coin. If you flip one (by stressing it to the point of crisis) you get the other, but there are also cusp states where the coin is spinning in the air. Or perhaps the image of a tug of war match is more apt, with the epistemological and ontological dominants as the two teams and the text a coloured flag tied in the middle of the rope. The flag can be pulled in either direction depending on which team exerts the most force, but if the teams are evenly matched, the flag hovers in no man's land with neither side having the right to lay sole claim to it. In keeping with this idea, McHale's 'pushing' of questions 'far enough' chimes nicely with Waugh's process of 'exaggeration of the tensions and oppositions' within a novel, giving the collective impression of a mechanism designed to test the structural integrity of fiction under pressure.

Sally's back and forth. It's a trek. Moving day. Difficult to coordinate with the regimen. Good job Sally's so

39 'Clearly, then, there are *many* dominants, and different dominants may be distinguished depending upon the level, scope, and focus of the analysis. […] In short, different dominants emerge depending upon which questions we ask of the text, and the position from which we interrogate it.' Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 6.

40 McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, p. 11.

proactive. A slog. Carrying my catheterising paraphernalia at all times. Coordinating CMC talk begins. Singers. Pianists. Rehearsal rooms. Interviewer. Emails. Tip run. Incredible specialist recycling plant. A kind of theme park almost. Went on all the rides. Got the singer, got the interviewer. Must write music for it. Music that's useful to the opera itself. Meet the singer. Gig of some old stuff – can I come to rehearsal for it? School email about doctoral loans for which I'm ineligible. Sci-art collective – will you work on our project? Old friends that need help. I agree, arrange to meet.

As we have seen, for Waugh, it is the self-conscious, systematic foregrounding of certain innate properties of the novel that differentiates metafiction from other, superficially similar, modes of writing. Where this perspective alludes to writerly intent, Mark Currie incorporates an interpretational perspective, saying:

> ...metafiction can be located at the conscious and unconscious level of the text. Whereas postmodern fiction can generally be regarded as conscious metafiction, postmodern readings can also identify metafiction as an aspect of the unconscious level of the text, against the grain of realist intention...[41]

He suggests that the aim of postmodernist fiction is 'to articulate the unconscious, and in particular the unconscious self-referentiality of non-metafictional fiction'.[42] In this context, 'unconscious self-referentiality' represents the proto-metafictional characteristics latent in all fiction, the 'articulation' being the drawing of our attention to those characteristics. Similarly, Linda Hutcheon makes the distinction between overt and covert forms of metafiction, contrasting 'explicit thematizations or allegorizations of their diegetic or linguistic identity within the texts themselves' in the former with the fact that the latter 'internalize' such processes rendering them 'self-reflective but not necessarily self-conscious'.[43] Thought of in relation to 'unconscious self-referentiality', Currie's mention of 'conscious metafiction' conjures a reframing of all fiction as either conscious or unconscious metafiction, elegantly reflecting the fact that the materials of metafiction are always present in fiction, and metafictional effect is simply down to whether the text itself can be seen to be aware of them.

41 Currie, *Metafiction*, p. 17.
42 ibid.
43 Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional* Paradox (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013) p. 7.

Mum and Dad are on holiday. I'm at their place to look after Decimus for a few days. Sally's Mum is in intensive care, unconscious. Fully moved into the new place. Such a relief, but still upside down. Urination diary is a big file by now. Will you speak in our 'on the shoulders of giants' session? Will you re-perform your presentation at our session on narrative? Gladly. Author has gone quiet. Writing music for a workshop within a public talk. No text to set so I'm using some Victorian poetry. Got to write my annual report. My studentship payment hasn't arrived. Emails to attend to it. All sorted. What's happening with the author's contract? Producer says radio silence from their agent. Louder alarm bells. A friend's opera at the Barbican. Panic while watching that I have no libretto or music. The author is unwell.

At the heart of these perspectives is the idea of metafiction as an act of revelation, of it shining a light on fiction to illuminate those aspects of fictional reality that convention invites us to ignore. The criticality of this attitude is acknowledged in Currie's definition of metafiction as 'a borderline discourse, as a kind of writing which places itself on the border between fiction and criticism, and which takes the border as its subject',[44] or as Waugh puts it, metafictional writers 'explore a *theory* of fiction through the *practice* of writing fiction.'[45] But if metafiction performs a critical act, what are the objectives of its criticism? What is to be learnt from examining the way in which fiction is constructed? These questions lead us to the second part of Waugh's definition: 'in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.'[46]

Collaboration is in doubt. That would be setback in every sense. Rehearsal for the CMC talk. Singer and pianist are grea. Meet with English Heritage, the artist and the ensemble. CMC Talk. Prep in the day. Talk in the evening. Goes well, is appreciated. Duty done, finished late so tomorrow is harder. Got me a taxi before I could say I'd rather get the train. They loved the talk and want me to come back with an opera update at some point. Should have done a second rate one and recouped myself some time! I'll go back though. It doesn't happen. Visit Stonehenge. Devise a 10 minute piece that doesn't need dots. Emails with percussionist. Not the opera obvs. Afternoon talk to new first years sprung on me. “Okay”, I say. Watched the opera maker's new pieces, ask to be put in touch with the singers. The opera makers come through. Department heads never replied.

Two sociological frameworks that shed light on metafiction's capacity to pose such questions are the 'social construction of reality', developed by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, and 'frame analysis', developed by Erving Goffman. In the context of the former, Berger and Luckmann regard

44 Currie, *Metafiction,* p. 2.
45 Waugh, *Metafiction,* p. 2.
46 ibid.

'reality as a kind of collective fiction, constructed and sustained by the processes of socialization, institutionalization, and everyday social interaction, especially through the medium of language.'[47] What is more, this fiction is considered to be 'opaque, that is, accepted as *the* reality, except under the probing of sociological reflection.'[48]

Within their conception, Berger and Luckmann view social habits and conventions as means to liberate our energies from the routine and create intellectual space 'for deliberation and innovation.'[49] The usefulness of conventions is offset by the risk that they can 'become oppressive and rigidified, completely naturalized. At this point they need to be re-examined, both in life and fiction' since 'it is only when a convention is exposed as such that the lacunae between levels [of reality] are also exposed.'[50]

In this respect, sociology and metafiction enact complementary critical analyses, the former examining the methods of fabrication of the realm which purports to be real, the latter that of the realm which purports to be fictional, converging on the mechanisms through which both are constructed. In this equation, the 'opacity' of reality's collectively sustained fiction is a counterpart to the intended 'invisibility' of realist fiction's artifice, both of which are enabled to a large or total degree by structures of language. Metafiction's kinship with sociological inquiry is responsible for the fact that, as well as creating a greater awareness of narrative structures, metafictional deconstruction 'has also offered extremely accurate models for understanding the contemporary experience of the world as a construction, an artifice, a web of interdependent semiotic systems'.[51]

Author says they can't work on the opera any more. Emails and managing and scrabbling for a plan B.
Sci-art lot are ready for the next phase. Annual Reports are due in. I submit mine. Sally's Mum has died.

As Waugh's 'web' would suggest, Berger and Luckmann's theory actually regards reality to be composed of multiple strands, each a reality or realm or world of its own, together forming a complex 'jigsaw puzzle of “subuniverses of meaning”:[52] the jostling world-views of different social

47 McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, p. 37.
48 ibid.
49 Peter L. Berger, Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London, New York: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 71.
50 Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 52.
51 ibid. p. 9.
52 Quoting Thomas Pavel, 'Fiction and the causal theory of names', *Poetics*, Vol. 8 (1979), pp. 179-91 (p.189).

classes, castes, religious sects, occupations, etc.'[53] These realities include, but are far from limited to: mythology, theology, philosophy, science, leisure, hobbies, games, gambling, sex, holidays, mass-media entertainment, therapy, the use of alcohol and drugs etc., each of which represents a bounded ontological region, sustained by its own, self-consistent social conventions.

Although they acknowledge multiple realities, Berger and Luckmann nevertheless regard 'everyday' reality as 'paramount', saying:

> Compared to the reality of everyday life, other realities appear as finite provinces of meaning, enclaves within the paramount reality marked by circumscribed meanings and modes of experience. The paramount reality envelops them on all sides, as it were, and consciousness always returns to the paramount reality as if from an excursion.[54]

This 'reality of everyday life' is primarily sustained by 'everyday' language, and in its interrogation of the 'relationship between fictional form and social reality'[55] metafiction accords with the sociological insight that such language facilitates the power structures of social reality

> through a continuous process of naturalization whereby forms of oppression are constructed in apparently 'innocent' representations. The literary-fictional equivalent of this 'everyday' language of 'common sense' is the language of the traditional novel: the conventions of realism. Metafiction sets up an opposition, not to ostensibly 'objective' facts in the 'real' world, but to the language of the realistic novel which has sustained and endorsed such a view of reality.[56]

New flat's still chaos, working in the midst of it. Need to find another librettist. Want to pursue future collaboration with the author. Sally's agreed to write the libretto, which would be amazing. Producers umm and err. Bell Studios for Stonehenge workshop. Ionescu's Exit the King, a stark death scene. Supervision. English Heritage marketing back and forth until I sign off on the text. Can I have a gong instead of a drum? Arrange to meet some singers from School. A different hospital for pre-operation assessment. Almost

53 McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, p. 37.
54 Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, p. 24.
55 Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 11.
56 ibid.

absurdist layout, Ionescu would be proud. Notebook is with me but the waiting room won't let me.

The work of Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor focuses on the relationship between the 'paramount' reality and other reality 'enclaves',[57] drawing our attention to the multitude of worlds through which we are required to shift as part of our daily experience:

> the world of a celebrity's love-life, as reported by the morning newspaper; the world of daydreams triggered by an old song heard on the car radio while driving to work; the game-world of a conversation about sports with colleagues over lunch; the projected "new landscape" of a conversation about holiday plans with one's spouse over dinner; the fictional "leisure ontology" of a James Bond adventure movie after dinner; and so on.[58]

Have you settled on a title? 'I sent you one days ago'. Not the opera. A letter to say when my operation is. Its a clash with Stonehenge. I begin work on my 'shoulders of giants' presentation. Bar meet with conductor of potential ensemble of the opera. Taking matters into my own hands. It's good. The operation date is changed. No clash. Sally's officially on board, thank god. Deadline is so tight now though for first draft. She's finishing her own PhD too. Producer on board in principle with ensemble. Everything too slow. Can I do a sci-art workshop? Can I do a Guardian interview for English Heritage?

In the context of multiple realities, Erving Goffman introduced the term 'frame' to denote the grouping of social events by commonality of the conventions that govern them.[59] As with the concept of the 'dominant', frame analysis recognises that such events may exist within multiple frames depending on the perspective applied to them. Waugh notes that, like life, novels are 'constructed through frames, and that it is finally impossible to know where one frame ends and another begins', a situation that metafiction seeks to draw attention to.[60] The complexly subjective nature of frame analysis reflects the fact that 'the distinction between 'framed' and 'unframed'

57 See Stanley Cohen, Laurie Taylor, *Escape Attempts: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Everyday Life*, Second Edition (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

58 McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, p. 38.

59 'I assume that definitions of a situation are built up in accordance with principles which govern events – at least social ones – and our subjective involvement in them; frame is the word I use to refer to such of these basic elements as I am able to identify.' Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Boston: University Press of New England, 1986), p. 67.

60 Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 29.

cannot in the end be made. Everything is framed, whether in life or in novels.'[61]

Flat has a new boiler fitted. Foxes here too, look in good health, singing all through the night. 'Timeline needs to be quite specific to allow me to collaborate with ensemble'. They're thinking of piano score first, but I'll be working into full score. Need to sort that out. Lots of emails, phone calls. Artist says we need to think about what the Stonehenge ensemble will be wearing.

Through the concepts of the social construction of reality and frame analysis we can see that existence is not as simply delineated as the categories 'reality' and 'fiction' would suggest, a position encapsulated in Waugh's assertion that 'for metafictional writers the most fundamental assumption is that composing a novel is basically no different from composing or constructing one's "reality".'[62] Goffman provides a more granular take, highlighting that:

> When we decide that something is unreal, the real it isn't need not itself be very real, indeed, can just as well be a dramatization of events as the events themselves – or a rehearsal of the dramatization, or a painting of the rehearsal or a reproduction of the painting. Any of these latter can serve as the original of which something is a mere mock-up, leading one to think that which is sovereign is relationship – not substance.[63]

It is no coincidence that this description of Goffman's bears the metafictional hallmark of 'mise en abyme', an effect achieved by placing a copy of an image within itself, in other words by manipulating the relationship between frames.

We meet at a cafe. Will the players need mutes? Are you free on Friday? I give a phone interview to the Guardian then call my urology consultant about the latest stubborn infection. Have to clear it to be operable. Go to Stonehenge for two days. Rehearse, perform and come back. Shoulders of Giants talk. Sci-art workshops decided. My new work chair is here. We could be a fiction in their world. Conversations about the opera world are happening. Finally cultivating the opera. Hospital to give a urine sample. Need to organise a Linbury visit.

61 ibid. p. 28.
62 ibid. p. 24.
63 Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, pp. 560 – 61.

With all this in mind, another way to approach a definition of metafiction is that frames are an emergent property of all social existence, and within the fictional context 'they become more perceptible as one moves from realist to modernist modes and are explicitly laid bare in metafiction.'[64] So to answer the question of what kinds of questions metafiction is apt to pose about the relationship between fiction and reality: they might be in the vein of 'can a novel be “true to life” or does it merely create a “reality effect”?' and if the latter, 'is reality itself such an effect?',[65] and if reality is such an effect, how is our experience of the effect organised?[66]

Supervision. Discussing my upgrade. Sci-art workshopping. Hospital again. In to be operated on. Everything's opera- something. Bladder Neck Incision. Overnight and up late reading about Carnatic music. Next day the anaesthetist tells me 'it took a lot to put you down.' Feels flattering almost. Sally picks me up to go home. I can move well enough to make the journey. Got to wear compression socks for a week. First draft libretto deadline in a month. No time at all but Sally will do it somehow. Intense libretto devising and discussion at all times.

With the groundwork laid, and before we turn to primary source examples, we will first look to identify some types of metafictional strategy. It is common for writing on postmodernism to perform such categorisations, but in order to provide a description of metafiction that is appropriately useful while not exceeding the bounds of this commentary, we will consider only the categories identified by David Lodge, which are exemplary of such categorisations and have directly informed the composing of *She Described It to Death*. Although Lodge's categories are intended to serve for all postmodernist writing, metafictional or otherwise, they by definition also cover metafiction itself.

The luxury of collaborating with the one you love. It's stressful too, but we're practised. Sally's still working on her PhD too. Sci-art media consent forms. We start looking for a director. Must write some music. I sketched some things out but I don't know if the material's relevant. Worldbuilding. Producers want a break down of roles for casting. Not quick to do. Instead of writing music or more libretto. That's how it is. Still bleeding a lot. Potential ensemble and producers talk soon. The libretto is really shifting. Incredible really. A great relief to be at this point.

64 Waugh p.30

65 Lodge, 'The Novel Now', p. 151.

66 'Analysis of frames is the analysis […] of the organization of experience. When applied to fiction it involves analysis of the formal conventional organization of novels.' Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 30.

Lodge names his categories 'Contradiction, Permutation, Discontinuity, Randomness, Excess and The Short Circuit'.[67] Contradiction is first on many lists of metafictional strategies, having the metafictional benefit that it actively prevents the binary resolution of a text. As Waugh puts it, 'In metafictional texts that employ contradiction, there can be no final certainty',[68] a state of affairs which is antithetical to both realism and modernism.[69] Uncertainty may be generated by contradictory causal logics, which make it impossible to fully explain events as either simultaneous or happening in sequence, or by the presence of contradictory statements, the truth statuses of which are impossible to resolve, creating an effect that is akin to that of the 'liar paradox', in which a 'liar' makes the logically impossible claim that 'I am lying', in this case the self-proclaimed 'liar' being the novelist themselves. In relation to this, Waugh also identifies the category of Paradox as referring to a particular type of simultaneous contradiction.[70]

Bleeding has eased. Had to catheterise a clot though, nearly passed out. Still shaky. Sci-art need a recorded piece for installation. Its doable, but far more involved than they're expecting. Much correspondence. A friend's concerto gig. Sounds amazing, mild panic at not having music of my own yet. Me and Sally meet with a potential director, the first of a few. Still developing the first draft, but it's shaping up. Got to rearrange Christmas visit to Mum and Dad to meet another director. Supposed to be easing the catheter use, but it's hard to be confident about it.

Lodge's categories proceed with Permutation, another strategy intended to resist simple 'either/or' statements. Rather than choosing what to relate and what to disclude, permutational writing enumerates many different instances of a single event or thought – either actual or potential within the fictional world – a process which 'subverts the continuity of texts, a quality we naturally expect from writing'. Lodge observes that

> It is the continuity of realistic fiction, derived from spatial and temporal contiguities, that enables the world of the novel to displace the real world in the reading experience.[71]

67 David Lodge, *Working With Structuralism: Essays and Reviews on Nineteenth- And Twentieth-Century Literature* (London, Boston, Henley: Ark Paperbacks, 1986) p. 13.
68 Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 137.
69 'In realist or modernist writing, textual contradictions are always finally resolved, either at the level of the plot (realism) or at the level of the point of view or 'consciousness' (modernism).' ibid.
70 ibid. p. 141
71 Lodge, *Working With Structuralism*, p. 14.

Sci-art chat about gallery space politics. Asking my friend: 'could you put me in touch with this singer?'. They do. I ask if they'll be Acantha in the opera, they're amazing, and they want to do it! Sally submits the first draft libretto on the last day of the year. It's astonishing that it's all there. Start the new year by getting my gait assessed. I'm going to start running again. Term's in session. Will I still contribute to the session of narrative? Of course. Some slides as prompts. I get it. They want the presentation performance again. Glad it's popular.

The further categories of Randomness and Excess also serve to disrupt realist continuity. Randomness through the arbitrary organisation of a text, which can be introduced into both the writing and reading process, as exemplified by William Burroughs's 'cut-ups' and B. S. Johnson's loose-leaf open-ordered novels respectively.[72] In relation to Excess, Lodge gives the example of Richard Brautigan's *Trout -Fishing In America*, a novel 'notable for its bizarre similes, which frequently threaten to detach themselves from the narrative and develop into little self-contained stories.'[73] On the other side of the coin, Alain Robbe-Grillet achieves disruptive effect by rejecting metaphor in favour of descriptions of excessive technical detail, thus 'presenting the reader with more data than he [*sic*] can synthesise', leaving them unable to properly visualise the very objects he is describing.[74]

I write to a potential singer, see what they make of Attis. At the GP. More resistant infection. We go through the story so far to find an antibiotic angle of approach. Need to coordinate more sci-art workshops. I get onto it. The author gets in touch. They're finished on their other project if I still need a librettist. I tell them it's too late but we could try to make something else. Pinter at the Pinter series. The Room, Family Voices, Victoria Station. Envy of brilliant things already complete. Got to organise upgrade examiners.

Lodge's final category of The Short Circuit refers to a novel's attempt to close the 'gap' between the fictional text and the real world 'in order to deliver a shock to the reader and thus resist assimilation into conventional categories of the literary.'[75] This can be achieved by representing 'the apparently factual and the obviously fictional'[76] within the same text, a strategy which often involves real, historical people appearing as characters in the fictional world, even in some cases the author themselves.

72 See William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, *The Exterminator!* (San Francisco, CA: Dave Haselwood Books, 1967), and B.S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates* (New York: New Directions Books, 2007).
73 Lodge, *Working with Structuralism*, p. 14.
74 See Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Jealousy*, trans. by Richard Howard (Richmond, UK: Calder Publications, 2008).
75 Lodge, *Working with Structuralism*, p. 15.
76 ibid.

Revised proposal has the old title so there's email managing to do. Fighting to get the libretto together means all prior info about the proposal was up in the air. The process doesn't sit with the programme structure. I write to a different producer about work with the author. They're interested. I tell the author and suggest some clips, including Robert Ashley to look at, they're bowled over. More emails managing the upgrade – 'the examiners need to be told this:'. Producer meeting about new libretto. We meet another director. Acantha's singer wonders whether they have been forgotten about.

In addition to these categories, Waugh adds 'objects trouvés' and 'intertextual overkill'.[77] The former refers to the strategy of including elements of other texts – both fictional and real – embedded within the novel. The latter can result from the excessive application of the former or from the inclusion of a plethora of different genres of language, again both fictional and real. As well as the potential to purpose these elements towards disruption and discontinuity, such use of 'found' texts

> functions as a reminder of the impossibility of defining a stable 'norm' of literary discourse when the incorporation of *any* discourse into the literary frame assimilates it to the alternative world of fiction and detaches it from the normal referential functions in the everyday context.[78]

What is more, the metafictional over-doing of intertextual materials undermines the authority of the author, creating an environment

> in which not only is Literature as sacred system challenged, but also the Artist as inspirational alchemist. Instead, texts/writing is explicitly seen to produce texts/writing. Linguistic codifications break down into further linguistic codifications.[79]

They have, but not by me. I try to chase up. Films from the sci-art team, watch as prep. Sci-art workshop day. Indy opera company need a reference to a tight deadline. I get onto it. Small changes to the libretto. We need a team meeting. The slowest of co-ordinations. I receive a new chair. Again. No word on upgrade examiners yet. To Stroud to work on sci-art audio production. Working with a mate so it's not too stressful. No real opera music yet, which is.

77 Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 137.
78 ibid. p. 143.
79 ibid. p. 145.

This commentary is itself heavily intertextual of course, being that its performance of an academic genre requires overt quotation and engagement with a range of discourses, upon which it draws and to which it contributes, as well as its referring to the many different registers and realms of a creative process. This commentary is not fiction of course, referring entirely to real people and concepts (and real fictions), and true events, but in being a finite, constructed text, it nevertheless prioritises – *has to* prioritise – certain aspects over others, omitting yet others entirely. It also has a tone of voice, or tones of voices, fabricated entirely from written language, and a sociocultural frame, or frames. None of which undermines its being non-fiction of course, these attributes are common to all written non-fiction, but the status of non-fiction is very different to a claim of 'reality', which I hope, by this point, we have our suspicions about.

But I have to work from a libretto or I don't know what I'm writing. 'Soon', I tell myself. And now you. Full team meeting cancelled due to illness. Upgrade submission delayed. Full team meeting rearranged. Sci-art meeting. Narrative session soon. Upgrade examiners identified. More Pinter. A Slight Ache and The Dumb Waiter. The latter is incredible. Singer meeting. An old friend, a great conversation but no opera outcome. Film maker emails to ask if they can make a film about me. I can't get back to them yet, I can't even think about it. It's a nice idea, but how the hell would I fit it in.

2.1. ...In Action

Having cast the postmodern novel as contradictory, discontinuous and overwrought, and the author as a self-confessed 'liar' who has resigned from the alchemists' guild, we move on to some examples of metafiction taken from primary sources. In order to provide as comprehensive a set of examples as possible, the following are taken from novels that represent a wide spectrum of metafiction, viewed from an interpretational perspective. As such, and for various reasons, not every work represented here would qualify as a fully fledged metafiction when considered in its entirety. Nevertheless, each specific example is metafictional in its effect, and in Hutcheon's terms, these moments are all self-reflective, if not necessarily self-conscious.

Eventually I'll tell them and they understand. Dates for upgrade viva? Flat out on writing the upgrade, it's massive and involved. Bringing in Halliwell and Morris now, opera as akin to the novel – diegetic. About discursive distance. Composing with discursive distance? Libretto needs more time but producers are reluctant. I invoke mention of a dramaturgical phase to buy time. Meet a potential dramaturg to set the wheels in motion. Company finally agree to Acantha's singer's involvement. They're relieved no end, it had been silent. Sally is teaching in Europe but libretto work is ongoing.

We will begin with Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Pale Fire*, which revolves around a poem written by the character John Shade and edited by the character Charles Kinbote, the novel's narrator. It opens with a foreword by Kinbote, followed by a presentation of Shade's full poem '*Pale Fire*', followed in turn by Kinbote's critical commentary on the poem and concluding with his index to that commentary.

Opera workshop discussion has reignited after the initial stall. Supervisors like the performance presentation, submitting it in the upgrade. Me to Sally: Opera wise the deadlines are deranged – a week of workshops in July, then full vocal score draft on Oct 8 followed by a sing-thru and final vocal score on Nov 8. Can't quite believe how terrible that is, but there's nothing to be done but try to meet them. I'll have a go. Huge emails about all this. Hours of writing. Different sensibilities are not issues to be addressed.

What proves to be the plot of the novel is divulged within the details of the commentary – which, it transpires, is as focused on Kinbote's personal concerns as it is on the poem itself – and reinforced by the many enumerated details of the index. The reader cannot help but be aware of how this novel is constructed: traditionally the foreword of a book is a non-fiction introduction, but in the case of *Pale Fire* it is written by a character from the novel who is the poem's editor or the novel's narrator depending on the ontological perspective. This foreword introduces a poem which also exists in ontological flux, both within and without the fiction, written by the fictional Shade and the real Nabokov respectively. The commentary 'inadvertently' expresses the plot while referring to lines of the poem which require cross-referencing by the reader, all fleshed out through a further matrix of reference in the index, itself rendered non-linear by the alphabetised nature of the host form.

Meeting ensemble, meeting dramaturg. Still infected, still catheterising. It's just become naturalised. I re-perform my first year presentation for the session on narrative. Supervision reports? Huge email to the team with latest libretto and character descriptions. No music yet, but I don't let on, I know I can do it. Upgrade wrangling. Concerns it omits important stuff. I just thought it wasn't what I'm trying to do. I set to shoring it up. Sally's got to break from libretto to prep for her own doctoral performance. Dramaturg is maybe on board. I remember afternoon walks to get away from the old house.

The book is in equal measure a novel telling a story, a highly subjective commentary on a real-fictional poem, and a critique of the construction of forms both fictional and non-fictional. It

encourages the reader to 'jump around' the text which, combined with the many blurrings of ontological status, makes the construction of the work eminently apparent while also creating a potent aesthetic and dramatic effect in relation to the content of the novel's story. *Pale Fire* has been called a poioumenon, a term coined by the literary critic Alastair Fowler to refer to a specific type of metafiction in which the story is about the process of creation (sometimes the creation of the story itself). Fowler describes poioumena as being 'calculated to offer opportunities to explore the boundaries of fiction and reality—the limits of narrative truth.'[80]

Dramaturgy should buy us some time. Can be a painful process though. It's not like Sally's had any support or recognition to this point. I tell producers we need more time. They know this. Without moving the performance date I'll have less than a year to write the music. Upgrade text submitted, with the performance presentation as the 20 minute piece. Other producer is interested in something from me and the author. Sally's first session with the dramaturg. Ensemble really want to be involved but the conversation seems arms length. I try to invigorate it a bit. Producer says they'll meet. Will I come and give another talk to the CMC?

Pale Fire is in one sense what is known as a frame narrative, being that the presentation of the fictional elements are 'framed' within the form of a 'critical commentary'. Such nested fictions – referred to in art and literature as 'mise en abyme' (literally 'placed into abyss') – are a common characteristic of metafictional texts, whereby a character in the story tells a story themselves.[81] William H. Gass's *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* evokes the nature of these characteristically recursive structures[82] with the line 'imagination imagining itself imagine'.[83]

Yes with lots of caveats, and it can't be giving away what the opera's about. Immense emails between Sally and dramaturg, it's a fraught process and they're not of a mind in many ways. Sally won't be knocked off course though. Hospital. It's been a little while. Turns out I have an e-coli that's not bothered by the Trimethorpim I'm on. Decided on one catheterisation a day, before bed. Welcome in a way, frightening uncertainty in another. First dramaturgy document filed. I've started writing the music. Guarding my mornings from meetings an emails. Thank god I'm at this point at last.

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80 Alastair Fowler, *The History of English Literature (*Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 372.

81 Such a telling is said to occur at the intra-diegetic level.

82 As well as being a staple of metafiction, the property of recursion is a cornerstone of Noam Chomsky's theory of grammar in natural language, which in turn inspired Fred Lerdhal and Ray Jackendoff's book *A Generative Theory of Tonal Music* (Cambridge Mass. and London, England: The MIT Press, 1996).

83 William H. Gass, *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* (Normal, Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998), p. 34. Please note: this edition of Gass's text has no page numbers so I have considered the first page to be page 1.

An interesting example of a fiction within a fiction can be found in M. John Harrison's *The Course of the Heart.*[84] Within the story, the character Lucas Medler writes the fiction 'The Course of The Heart' with the complex intention of it somehow 'curing' or 'saving' or 'comforting' his dying former-wife, Pam Stuyvesant. The tale works its way through history, themed around the 'Coeur', a metaphysical object that represents the possibility of spiritual revelation. However, in an extra dimension of ontological problematising, the efficacy of the nested fiction is founded in part on a tacit agreement between Lucas and Pam that the text refers to a real, if secret, history, with the Coeur's supposed reality being essential to the story's quasi-therapeutic properties. This depiction of characters who are complicit in determining the reality status of a text gives us pause to reflect on our own complicity in relation to the novel itself.

The libretto's still in flux, but some things won't be up for grabs. Starting with world building material in case individual lines change. Dramaturgy doc is in, welcomed outright by some but I don't think they understand what the piece is trying to do yet. Sally and me won't let it get overrun though. Some stuff that makes sense other stuff that feels antithetical to the aims. Sometimes when people say something will 'read' better, all they mean is it's recognisable. Yes, because we've all seen it before. There are other ways. Sally email to producer. Graciously standing her ground, while incorporating some changes. The upgrade viva is delayed. The producer finally meets with Sally.

Where *The Course of the Heart* contains a single nested fiction, a novel can of course feature any number of fictional recursions. In the Gothic novel *Melmoth the Wanderer*, written by Charles Robert Maturin in 1820, the events of the story are told to us via the main character's reading of a manuscript. This fictional manuscript itself contains moments where characters are told stories by other characters that sometimes themselves involve stories being told, and within some of which further manuscripts are read.

How it's taken so long I've no idea, but good that it's happened. Big email exchange with the author, continuing our dialogue. Would be amazing to still make something together. Revised deadlines. Premiere pushed back. All is possible! Workshops *this* Autumn. Final libretto deadline in a month though, so intensive work there still. Back and forth and back and forth, tiny lyrical details, every one an improvement. Hospital. Six cups of water and a flow rate test. I hear newcomers asking questions I can by now answer about how things work. Switched to Nitrofurantoin. Nightly catheterising. Still composing, but I need to get to word setting.

84 M. John Harrison also having been the original librettist for what was later to become *She Described It to Death.*

In Sally O'Reilly's novel *Crude,*[85] two characters native to the land of 'Academia', a society governed and driven by intellectual concerns, stumble across a 'country fayre' where they enjoy traditional entertainments and rituals, taking the living history of their environment as a cue to reflect on the trajectory of technology and its relationship to magic. The two spend the night huddled round the embers of a hog roast, near a pile of hay, and in the morning pick up the conversation again, with one saying 'There are, in my opinion, some things we can learn from the ancient peasantry'.[86] Not long after which a man appears from behind the haystack, dressed like a high end courier rather than a farmhand, and asks them to move on. He removes a thin layer of hay from the stack to reveal an inflatable cone beneath, which he deflates and then loads, along with the stacked hay, onto a brown truck bearing the legend 'Academic Historical Re-enactment Stores'. This is a particular flavour of fiction within a fiction, being that our sense of the ontological status of the fayre – as an everyday traditional reality – is conditioned by the understanding of characters who themselves turn out to be mistaken. The reveal that the fayre itself exists within the frame of a 're-enactment' represents the relationality of all social constructs, real and fictional, chiming with Goffman's point that any seemingly real frame 'can just as well be a dramatization of events as the events themselves'.[87]

That's when things really start to happen. GP. Itchy hands and feet. Maybe mild psoriasis. Cream prescribed. Another new libretto draft. Almost daily updates. Acantha's singer gets in touch to say they've heard nothing from the opera company. I'm just stunned. Organisations move slowly, sure. But at least seem enthusiastic! GP. Hives by now. They think it's pollen allergies because of the unusually hot weather. The hives are excruciating when they happen. I move out to Mum and Dad's in case it's the pollen where we are. It isn't though.

On the matter of ambiguous and unstable ontologies, Muriel Spark's *The Hothouse by the East River* presents us with a world 'in which the characters are both dead and not dead, and their world both exists and does not exist', taking what in human terms is the ultimate ontological boundary of life and death as an analogy for the boundary between fiction and reality.[88] Building on the question 'do fictional worlds exist?' this parallel seems to suggest the question 'if fictional worlds do exist, in what sense are fictional characters alive?' and 'if they exist but are not alive, are they dead?', the

85 Sally being the librettist of *She Described It to Death*, and not to be confused with the author of the novel *Dark Aemelia*.
86 Sally O'Reilly, *Crude* (London: Eros Press, 2016), p. 191.
87 Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, pp. 560 – 61.
88 McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction,* p. 34.

idea that they might exist but be neither alive nor dead making for an almost supernatural take on fictional ontology. In essence, Spark's characters exist in the same the state as any fictional character who 'both exists and does not exist', a 'non-entity who is a somebody' but the metafictional aspect arises from the text's acknowledgment and intentional deployment of this feature.[89] For me, these ideas have strong resonance with Damien Hirst's 1981 artwork *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, where the body of a dead tiger shark is preserved, fully intact and floating in a tank of formaldehyde solution. We know the shark is dead, but it is impossible to entirely reconcile that knowledge with our sense of its aliveness.

We've got a mouse. Sweet little thing. Stuck it's head round my workroom door late last night. Upgrade viva tomorrow, but I'm just composing composing, tomorrow can stay tomorrow. Think I've become allergic to Nitrofurantoin. It's not clearing the infection and the hives are getting worse. Pain enough for tears. Examiners are happy with the upgrade text, footnote device and all. Presentation performance won't tick any box though, so I'll have to submit further stuff when some music's written. New libretto draft, better and better. Sci-art rehearsal and gig. Two days out of opera comp. Can we have a photo for the brochure? School, not sci-art.

Christine Brooke-Rose's *Out* provides similar ambiguities, with the narrative unfolding

> in such a way that it is often unclear if a series of events takes place or is only imagined by the main narrator, if events imagined are in preparation for a situation about to occur or if they refashion an event that has already happened, which of the several versions provided for a single event actually happened (if any), and so on. In other cases, the events' broad outline is clear, but contradicting versions of its details are provided, again without resolution.[90]

All of which ensures that the reader finds the fictional reality incoherent, highlighting by contrast that coherence in those terms is not an innate, given property of a text, but is itself an effect produced by particular linguistic structures which have become naturalised within the novel.

Newest libretto draft and character breakdowns. We need a workshop for my upgrade stuff maybe? Maybe

89 Waugh, Metafiction, pp. 90-91.

90 Rodrigo Vidaurre, 'Is there a story? That's another story', *AAA: Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, Vol. 39, No.1 (2014), pp. 21-41, (p. 22).

not. Need to discuss. Acantha's singer told dates too late and now maybe has a clash. No need for this to happen! I try to sort it out. This is time out of writing music, from now on, everything but writing music is time out of writing music. GP for diabetes test. I mention the Nitrofurantoin as well, but it's not the agenda. Producer emails to remind us libretto deadline is tomorrow. Hear nothing about any of the other things. Like a bank that only communicates when you're overdrawn.

Then there is the issue of unconventional narration, exemplified by John Barth's short story *Lost in the Funhouse*, which forces the methods of its construction upon the reader. For every passage that tells part of the story is another that explains the novelistic conventions at work in that telling – the function of italics and why they should be used sparingly, the intention of the convention whereby proper names are represented only by an initial or blank, that 'description of physical appearance and mannerisms is one of several standard methods of characterization used by writers of fiction.'[91] Both story and technical analysis are delivered to the reader by a range of different narrators, each concerned with the mechanisms at their disposal. For example, a narrator explains to us the roles of the beginning, middle and end of a story, using their conventional value as a measure by which to judge the story itself, and to identify what ought to happen next to remedy the problems of form the narrator has identified. As well as the moment to moment disruption this metafictional strategy causes, overall it has a cumulative effect, the production of realist effect becoming increasingly hampered by a cognisance of realist intent. Although the story's title refers in part to some of its events, it is also metaphoric of the reader's experience of mentally navigating the structural and conceptual convolutions of the work.

Except we're not overdrawn. Full libretto et al sent. Amazing. Sally writes of it: 'Matt has, of course, seen it and is really happy with it. (Even though I had to get rid of most of the formal things that he wanted in there at the beginning - they were making it impossible to cohere into a whole thing on its own terms.)' We ask for feedback before its shared around. That'll stop people defaulting to the dramturg's position. Let's see what people actually think. Pro strats. Bring supervisors into the loop. We talk workshops.

In Donald Barthelme's *Game*, the narrator and a character referred to as 'Shotwell' 'live under the ground and watch the console'.[92] If certain events take place on the console they are to turn their keys simultaneously so that the 'bird flies'. The effect of this short story relies in part upon the narrator's limited knowledge of their situation. Within the fiction it is implicit that this lack of

91 John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse* (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), pp. 73-74.
92 Donald Barthelme, 'Game', in *Sixty Stories* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 2003), pp. 56-60 (p. 56).

knowledge is down to their work being of a type that is conducted on a 'need to know' basis. However, in the metafictional sense, Barthelme finds ways to render this limited knowledge as analogous to the reader's relationship with any text, knowing only what we are told, seeing only what the text decides to show us, the story's title invoking the idea of rule-driven play between the writer and reader. One way Barthelme foregrounds this idea is to draw attention to the particular nature of narratorial epistemology, as demonstrated in this passage:

> Each of us wears a .45 and each of us is supposed to shoot the other if the other is behaving strangely. How strangely is strangely? I do not know. In addition to to the .45 I have a .38 which Shotwell does not know about concealed in my attaché case, and Shotwell has a .25 caliber Beretta which I do not know about strapped to his right calf.[93]

This particular power of a narrator to know what they do not know draws our attention to the idea of knowability itself.

Coordinate with neglected singer of Acantha. They are incredible and so far totally undervalued. They've heard nothing from producers since officially coming on board. Months. Finally got clearance to cast and record Josella. Paying for the recording myself 'cause it'll all be much quicker and I'll own the rights. Let ensemble know about Autumn workshops. Get them involved alongside School players, so pointless having different lots for workshop and gigs. GP. Taken off Nitrofurantoin and given standby Cyprofloxacin. Hives ease. Must write more music. Libretto still develops. So much productive discussion. Micro details now. And music. Producer handover, one to the next. A nice meeting, helps make things feel like they're moving.

As well as unconventional interventions by the narrator, metafiction often sees the author themselves take part in a novel's proceedings. Dennis Potter's *Hide and Seek* centres on the character Daniel Miller, who believes himself to be a character in a book. Miller also believes that the book's author is forcing him to act out their own perversions. Miller tells the novel's other characters that they too are being written by an author, but within the fictional world he is considered to be psychologically unstable. The events and dialogue of 'Part One' of the novel paint a picture of the author as an unjust and immoral god, but in 'Part Two' the author comes forward to put their side of the story, as it were, saying:

93 Ibid. p.57

> I am surely correct in my assumption that I have after thirteen thousand and more words worked myself into a position where, for at least a few paragraphs or so, I can emerge from behind the misleading radiance of third-person omnipotence and begin to address you, the reader, more directly.[94]

Bad new dramaturgy document. Not just misunderstanding the point, but the tone is patronising. Basic errors. Lots of exchanges to sort it out. New libretto draft. Sally meets with me and new producer, old producer signs off. Opera continues to be made. Hives almost gone now. Bad infection though. Acantha's singer still not heard from production team. You couldn't make someone feel less wanted if you tried. I explain there's been a handover, will chase up. Feel for them. Trying to catalyse a conversation between producers and ensemble. It just won't move, makes you feel like your brain is being magnetically inhibited its so hard to understand.

An interesting detail of Potter's direct address to the reader is that he makes no apology for his treatment of Miller, explaining that when a fictional character comes to realise they are being authored 'it is usually because of the personal weakness or secret obsessions or (perhaps worst of all) blatant sentimentality of the author.'[95] Potter assures us that he is in no such feeble state of mind, and that his character will continue to be treated as the novel's material demands, harshly reminding us that Miller 'remains an aggregation of words.'[96]

Still need a director. None of them quite fitted yet. This narrational, discursive distance stuff is to drive something *else* though. To be used metafictionally. Is the research-practice just about metafiction? Seems more basic. But what do I know about it? Should start reading and investigating! 'Have you had time to think about doing another talk event for us?'. No. Libretto tweak. Starting to think about workshops and casting. Productions in their own right. Check in with Acantha's singer, still they've heard nothing from producers. Singer is an incredible catch, mesmerising.

At first this creates a kind of sympathy for Miller, encouraging a sense that he is to the author as a mortal is to Zeus, giving the reader pause to reflect on the fact that they too are at the mercy of the authors of our world. Never one to allow things to be so simply reduced, however, Potter then goes on to tell us about 'an increasing Philistinism in the literary world', that being that critics, and therefore audiences, share

94 Dennis Potter, *Hide and* Seek (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 38.
95 ibid. p. 39.
96 ibid.

> the vulgar – indeed preposterous – error of supposing that what one writes in fiction or drama is (how extraordinary!) what one *is*. As though words were as much a part of one's body as an eye or a leg or an arm or an even more private member![97]

In the process of making this point, however, the supposedly real author addressing us becomes increasingly angry and paranoid, and over the following pages transforms into a much more clearly fictional author whose own frailties *have* led him to impose such misery on Daniel Miller. Ultimately, Potter puts us in a position where, in order to form an understanding of his novel, we are forced to ask ourselves what we believe about the nature of authorship, as much as what we believe about the worlds its processes create.

It's my birthday. I'm 43 all of a sudden. Curry and board games at home with a very good crew, lots of compo support. Producers are applying to PRS, need my membership number. 2nd year presentations coming up. Got to write mine. Feels so counter-intuitive to write anything but music, but I can get it done quick. No tech, just cardboard and marker pens. Neat. Still no music to play at it. Emails with the author. Give my presentation, all goes well. Nice to have a legit break from composing, tiring. See some fellow composers, nice to have the solidarity. They've been writing 75 mins over three years, me the same in about 1.

In Martin Amis's *Money,* the obtrusively named main character, John Self, meets a character called 'Martin Amis' who is a novelist. This can be seen as foregrounding that property of literary fiction described by the critic Paul de Man as:

> The self-reflecting mirror effect by means of which a work of fiction asserts, by its very existence, its separation from empirical reality, its divergence, as a sign, from a meaning that depends for its existence on the constitutive activity of this sign...[98]

Richard Foreman in Wimbledon. Josella's broadcast vocal part is written. Need to organise rehearsal and recording of it. Big emails bring producer up to speed on new plan for upgrade materials and workshops. 'Basically there isn't the time to not be writing at any point'. Ensemble, have they heard anything? Still not booked for workshops – will be end of November now. Might need a conductor other than the conductor.s

97 ibid. p. 40.

98 Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, Second Edition (London: Routledge, 1983) p. 134.

Chasing up over Acantha's singer. Ensemble have heard nothing. I try to jump start things. Old friend texts to say another old friend has killed themselves. The second in five years. What is going on in the world.
BIG emails about casting. That production-within-the-production is ramping up. Conductor conversations.
It's getting hot. I don't cope well in heat. Hospital. Another sort of e-coli. Back onto Trimethorprim, day and night, then just night, long term. It's planned I'll stop catheterising for the second phase.

However, relating Amis's inclusion of encounters between himself and John Self in the fiction to de Man's description, Lodge points out that

> What is self-evidence to the deconstructionist critic is, in fact, by no means obvious to the average novel reader. But by arranging an encounter – several encounters – between himself and his character within the story he is writing, Martin Amis makes that 'self-reflecting mirror effect' concrete and explicit.[99]

In this way, Lodge casts metafictional foregrounding in a softer light, not only capable of brash criticality, but also of generously including the reader, granting them an insight into novelistic form without requiring them to understand any concomitant theoretical descriptions.

Repeat of the operation is mooted. Acantha's singer has finally heard from producers. Such a relief, the role is written for them really. Reminder I'm due to resubmit upgrade. Will be a few thousand words to write too. Composing hard every day though. Music is happening. GP. New antibiotics aren't working. Friend's funeral. Lots of old faces, some looking older than others. Working on Josella's Broadcast with the singer. Conductor wrangling. Anna Morrissey proposed as director, we plan to meet. Receive a home demo of Josella's Broadcast, it sounds so good! Singer is perfect for it, really intoxicating track. Metafiction's definitely my subject matter. Postmodern literary theory is so rich in what I'm interested in! Keep reading – theory and novels! Submit new upgrade text and score. Please let that be an end to this phase! Me and Sally meet with Anna M. She's brilliant and she gets it! Pencil in two dates for auditions.

As well as examining the relationship between fiction and reality, metafiction also concerns itself with the relationship between fiction and other fictions. The term 'intertextuality' refers to the idea that the meaning of a text, in our case a novel, is produced partly through its relationships with other texts, a concept embodied by Christine Brooke-Rose's *Textermination*. In it, a great number of canonical characters from literary fiction – including Emma Bovary, Emma Woodhouse, Captain

99 Lodge, 'The Novel Now', p. 154.

Ahab, Odysseus and Huckleberry Finn – leave their own fictions to attend a convention at the San Francisco Hilton hotel. The purpose of the gathering is to communally pray for their continued existence in the minds of readers. Over the course of the novel the convention descends into chaos as characters from many different cultures, genres and historical periods become entangled in contemporary political and academic affairs.

Will we have extracts for those auditioning? Sadly not, but that shouldn't hold us back. Something contemporary and in English will do the trick – get ready to hear numbers from Jonathan Dove's flight everybody! Volvox will need group casting. Will have to devise sessions for that. Upgrade examiners are happy for me to proceed – lucky for the opera house really! Anna M confirmed as director, amazing! Got to move into another gear again on the composition front, it's going on all the time, don't forget that, but there's so much else. Sally writes a new synopsis and character outlines for the purposes of casting.

In its particular approach to destabilising fictional ontologies, *Textermination* can be seen as a literalised foregrounding of the processes of intertextuality that are the natural, and perhaps naturalised, state of a text. In their original canonic context, *Textermination*'s characters are treated as if hermetically sealed within their fictions, but in existing in the minds of readers they also exist in complex relation to other fictions, as well as to the constructions and discourses of reality. This is a messy existence, not contained by the frame of any single fiction, with the reader acting as a site for the ideas, attitudes, themes, narratorial voices, archetypes and stereotypes of each novel to intermingle with those of its counterparts, in turn conditioning the reader's response to other novels and the world in general. Essentially, the set of all novels represents a fictional meta-text that is itself in dialogue with the real world. *Textermination* plays out this formulation in gloriously chaotic fashion, celebrating existences that do not adhere to their given frames. And what event could be more wryly appropriate to host this activity than a 'convention'.

Supervision arranged. Mum and Dad visit for the day. Composing until they get here. Composing once they're gone. Workshop planning ramping up. The other production-within-the-production. Lunch with Anna M. So good to talk through about staging and design! Very natural conversation too, greatly reassuring. Work with Josella singer as prep for studio recording. Then to a gallery where Sally's 'Adaptation Station' is installed. Producers need 200 words, a 'music creator statement' for funding app. It's not much to write, but it's not writing music. Emails with a friend about piano music we might collaborate on. Can't come to anything yet but we've been thinking on it for a while.

Moving to the materiality of a novel's text, Raymond Federman's *Double or Nothing* exhibits endless typographical experiment. The layout of the text is in constant flux, sometimes creating a pictographic representation of a thematic object, sometimes set out in geometric patterns that resonate with some quality of the manner of description. And it 'continually rehearses possible narrative strategies',[100] sometimes using bold text to include optional descriptive details which the text could function without. but that confer a different tone upon it:

> Once upon a time **two or three weeks ago,** a rather stubborn and determined middle-aged man decided *to record*, **for posterity,** exactly as it happened, word by word and step by step, the story of another man **for indeed what is *great* in man is that he is a bridge and not a goal,** a somewhat paranoiac fellow **unmarried, unattached, and quite irresponsible,** ...[101]

All this interfaces with the fact that the novel is itself 'a commentary on the practice of writing fiction.'[102] The book begins with a page that asserts 'THIS IS NOT THE BEGINNING', the following nine pages being numbered 0 – 000000000, followed by a 'footnote' double page numbered 000000000.0, the first page of which is a dense discussion of the necessity of a fourth author figure, in addition to the 'first', 'second' and 'third' who represent a subdivision of the author into different writerly functions, to ensure that the writing's organisation is 'clear' to the reader, concluding with the assertion that 'the *real fictional discourse'* is about to begin, followed by the second 'footnote' page which is a rectangular block made of the word 'n o o d l e s', with a plus shape, two triangles and minus sign 'cut out' of it from top to bottom, in reference to the fact that the correct allotment of dehydrated provisions is crucial to the creative undertaking in hand. All of which is followed by two block-grey pages, themselves finally followed by the headline 'BEGINNING'.

Supervision. Good to talk with someone about the composing. Workshop planning too of course. Writer friend asks for thoughts on fictional beer names. I offer 'Shale Fracker', 'Roustabout', 'Ferman's Whatchamacallit', 'Witch Finder General' and 'Bedwetter Double IPA'. What age to play Attis and Bract? A good question, and a massive email exchange. AV checks begin. Have ideal singers for Attis and Bract in mind. Fingers crossed. Want to write Attis's last aria in collaboration with the singer, but it probably won't be able to happen. Sally is away on a course, learning how to repair white goods. Meanwhile I'm at The

100 Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 95.
101 Raymond Federman, *Double or Nothing* (Urbana-Champaign, Illinois: Fiction Collective Two, 1998), p. 0.
102 Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 95.

Intelligence Park.

Such attitudes can also be found in Christine Brooke-Rose's *Thru*, which often takes on the visual language of diagrammatic analysis – arrows, bracketed categories, 'flow charts' – but is as likely to suddenly include musical terminology and the dynamic 'hairpins' of a score, alongside untethered acrostic forms, and all within the context of its wild fictional discourse on semiotic discourses. Gass's *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife* includes a page of text printed as the mirror of its opposite,[103] as does G. Cabrera Infante's *Three Trapped Tigers*,[104] and further typographic vandalisation can be found in B.S. Johnson's *Albert Angelo*, where holes are cut into a few consecutive pages, strategically lined up to allow a preview of a fragment of a paragraph to come, with the reader 'forced to reflect upon the conventions not only of narrative suspense […] but also of the contextual basis of 'meaning' both inside and outside fictional texts.'[105] In the most recent edition the holes are sadly absent, despite the fictional text itself still referring to them.[106]

Kind of indescribable but amazing if you've got the staying power. Not everybody had. I'm composing Scene 7. I can't quite believe I've got this far in 5 and a half months. I'm always quick but this is ridiculous. Thank god though. It's a big scene, double some of the others, but still, on paper only it and one more to go. Annual progress report. All good. Potential workshop dates. End of the year now but that's perfect. Will have a lot to test. Great space too. Someone asks for a proposal for a piece. I break to write one.

Infante's *Three Trapped Tigers* also includes a section titled 'Some Revelations' that turns out to be comprised of four blank pages.[107] As well as the title's framing of our relationship with this lacuna, it also resonates with a famous moment in Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, where a description of the Widow Wadman comprises a single blank page on which the narrator encourages the reader to draw their own image of a desirable woman.[108] Although Sterne's novel dates from the mid-eighteenth century much of its manner provokes metafictional readings, and in the case of this blank-page description our attention is called to the

103 Gass, *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*, p. 3.
104 G. Cabrera Infante, *Three Trapped Tigers*, trans. by Donald Gardner and Suzanne Jill Levine with the author (London, Boston: Faber and Faber, 1990) . 285.
105 Waugh, *Metafiction*, pp. 96-97.
106 At points, Johnson also arranges the page into two columns, the left- and right-hand representing the character's internal and external thoughts respectively.
107 Infante, *Three Trapped Tigers*, pp. 279-283.
108 Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy: An Authoritative Text, The Author on the Novel, Criticism* (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1980), pp. 330-31.

fact that, unlike in the real world, in a novel, the thing to which a word refers does not exist independently of the word itself.[109]

Don't want to down tools on composing but you've got to stay in the mix, think ahead for after the opera. I never hear anything further. Marketing meeting. Nice people, good angle on things. Barbican hosting a feminist literary festival. One event focused on Ursula Le Guin's Carrier Bag theory of fiction that Sally used for our opera – very prescient! I look forward to seeing our timely opera next year. Not long now. 'Following the start of term, we are writing specifically to all students in connection with the UK's forthcoming exit from the EU.'

And words can be disruptive in their own right, requiring only a few choice choices to heighten the apparent artificiality of a text, as exemplified by obtrusive character names. Where traditional fiction uses names to 'disguise the fact that there is no difference between the name and the named thing',[110] metafiction takes this fact as its focus, identifying in it another opportunity to antagonise convention, hence 'proper names are often flaunted in their seeming arbitrariness or absurdity.'[111] In Philip K. Dick's novel *Valis*, the author himself acts as the first person narrator, but the third person narrator is a modality of the author named 'Horselover Fat'. Later in the book it is revealed that this name derives from the Greek meaning of Philip – 'fond of horses' – and the German meaning of Dick – 'fat'. This synthesis ensures the name acts in a more sophisticated way than if it were present purely to support an arch tone, as it functions in relation to the author's identity, identity crisis being a central theme of Dick's work. That the name seems initially arbitrary but is later revealed to be meaningful, engages, and then re-engages, the reader with the notion of names and identity. Thomas Pynchon's 'Oedipa Maas' and 'Reverand Wicks Cherrycoke' are similarly jarring while to some extent relating to diegetic themes, but Neal Stephenson takes postmodernism to its logical extreme with his central character 'Hiro Protagonist', and in this case the name choice seems designed purely to consecrate the ironic tone of the entire text. These names undermine realism in a very particular way, their unfamiliarity disrupting our sense of realist immersion. Since we know that a real person can hypothetically be named anything, the fact that these names seem 'unusual' draws our attention to the constraints of the naming conventions of everyday reality, and in turn all such conventions.

109 In turn suggesting the Saussurean linguistic theory that argues that 'It is not the relationship between words and things that allows language to signify, but the difference between elements of the linguistic system.' Lodge, 'The Novel Now', in *Metafiction*, ed. by Currie, pp. 145-60 (p. 147).
110 Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 93.
111 ibid.

Recording Josella - couldn't have gone better! So good to be out in the world, in studios and School and rehearsals, and not worrying about catheterising. More casting planning. School account's been credited by 'PaperCut'. What? Workshop developments – ensemble on board with dates and half School players. Great news. Same band for the show, perfect all round. GP. Head cyst getting bigger. The third needing removal. Workshop dates finalised. LOTS of docs over to marketing. Opera house web page description is so off-track, I get onto it. Mis-prime an audience and the piece can suffer just 'cause they were expecting something else.

Aside from obtrusive names, Anthony Burgess's *Enderby Outside* provides a particularly striking example of obtrusive linguistic construction, confronting the reader with a shamelessly contrived repetition of the word 'onions':

> Then, instead of expensive mouthwash, he had breathed on Hogg-Enderby, bafflingly (for no banquet would serve, because of the known redolence of onions, onions) onions.
> 'Onions,' said Hogg.[112]

Rather than moderating the effect, the grammatical correctness of the execution further breaks fictional immersion by its heralding of the author's virtuosity. The fact that the final 'onions' leaps from the non-diegetic to the diegetic register also serves to make the effect a little more piquant.

Adding to the list of singers to audition. Composing time is getting proper tight, more squeeze to come too. Music supervision soon. To go over actual score, maybe the realest things have seemed yet. People are actually going to play and sing this stuff! Trying to offer School good casting descriptions so School singers can be considered. Producers got onto this side of things SO LATE! I shouldn't have assumed they were on it. Trying hard to stay focused on the composing though. Holding musical worlds in your head while you discuss bureaucracy. Audition day! Some brilliant people. Including my ideal for Attis.

Another metafictional staple is to draw the reader's attention to the impact of arbitrary linguistic structures, an attitude exemplified by Walter Abish's *Alphabetical Africa*. The novel is written under the arbitrary constraint that all words in chapter one must begin with the letter 'a', adding subsequent letters one chapter at a time until in chapter twenty six all letters are available, the process being reversed in the second half of the book, ending up back at 'a' words only in chapter

112 Anthony Burgess, *Enderby Outside* (Harmondsworth and New York: Penguin, 1979), p. 41.

fifty two. The reader quickly becomes aware of the ways in which the arbitrary constraint directs the story itself – the narrator cannot refer to themselves in the first person until chapter nine when the letter 'i' is introduced, and though a character may be 'abducted' before chapter eleven, there is no possibility of their being 'kidnapped' until that point – creating the sense that language itself is dictating the tone, type and order of events as much as the imagination of the author. All of which is apt to elicit in the reader the unsettling thought that their own ideas might also be limited by the language available to them.

Attis seems a lot realer now. Me and Anna M meet with potential Attis. Ideal Attis accepts! We plan to collaborate. Sally's drafting marketing text. Finding School singers for workshops. Materials and descriptions. Another hospital again. Head cyst assessed. Making audio for Anna M. Full Midi of the whole opera. Not small as jobs go. And not writing music. Opera house summer magazine ask for a Q&A. Phone interview. Bract is cast. He'll be great! Big back and forth with Anna M for the design team. Important stuff but mild panic about not writing music. Supervision reports?

From the perspective of the research-practice, the attraction of metafiction is that by self-examining the makeup of literary-fictional reality it attempts to help us 'understand how the reality we live day by day is similarly constructed, similarly "written."'[113] As an approach, it represents the possibility of making a work a that is both narrative and critical of narrative methods, two fundamental aims of the research-practice.

Would I write a magazine article about the opera? Would be good if there were an opera to write about! Japanese food then The Mask of Orpheus. Stunning. Like being dragged through the ocean by your hair. Begin planning Volvox casting method and dates. Death in Venice. Not really for me. Seems so self-indulgent as a piece. Feels like an opera about the composer really. And the appropriated gamelan. All a bit gap-year. Supervision. We go through music and it's a pleasure to have the chance to talk about it. Encouraging session to have pre-workshop.

2.2. ...In Relation to Opera

In one sense, identifying opportunities for metafictional play in opera is as simple as identifying opera's tropes and conventions. Self-consciously drawing attention to these aspects – through parody, or exaggeration, or by rendering them overtly dysfunctional in some way – will, to an extent, achieve a basic metafictional effect. This is very much the mode of operation of my previous opera

113 Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 18.

work, however, and I wanted to take the opportunity of the research residency to conduct an in-depth appraisal of the operatic form in order to support the making of a more artful metafiction, something nuanced that could achieve significant critical effect. I felt that if I could gain a deeper understanding of the formal tensions at the heart of opera, it would be possible to compose a work within which many instances of metafiction could each serve the same fundamental purpose, driven by a unifying principle by which they could act as a body, as well as contributing discrete moments of impact.

To the workshop conductor: how do you want the score laid out? Onto producing materials for the workshop. It'll be weeks of this now, not writing. Good to be having them though. Full marketing team meeting. Goes well. Getting worried about score deadlines. Need to keep composing *and* produce scores. Put out feelers for copyists. Found someone to help me prepare workshop materials. Paying them myself but it's worth it. Only way to get the job done. Meet repetiteur for the workshops. Super on the ball. Ongoing back and forth making workshop materials. Rep wants PDFs. Can have them rough, then neat later.

In order to get beyond self-evident details, the research-practice concerned itself with the slippery relationship between opera, diegesis and mimesis. The difficulty of placing opera firmly in either of these camps seemed to point to exactly the kind of intrinsic formal tension that metafiction thrives upon. This section of the commentary aims to give the reader an overview of the conceptual environment from which *She Described It to Death* emerged, providing important context for the The Categories section that follows.

Wants list of singers. Send them over with synopsis etc. Anna M needs the audio in a different format. Get onto that. Everyone wants their workshop music. Discussion of theatre set up for the actual performance. Are the orch in the pit? A lot depends on live sound but we still don't have those team members. Percussion wrangling. I'm fielding the coordination of everyone too. Devising the workshop schedule while fighting to have the materials ready. Workshop singers are cast! Coordinate with all of them over times and materials. So much email. Everyone's getting paid. Brilliant on the School's part, supervisor saw to it.

Since *She Described It to Death* is an opera that tells a story, we will consider diegesis and mimesis in those terms. As such, diegesis is a mode of representation where the events of a story are relayed to an audience by a narrator, rather than their being acted out for the audience to witness themselves, which is the mimetic mode. Although the distinction between diegesis and mimesis comes down to the presence or absence of narration, it should not be taken that mimesis is

performed without mediation, and perhaps a more useful description of the relationship between the two modes is that mimesis creates the effect of unmediatedness, whereas the quality of mediation is an essential component of diegesis.

Makes a huge difference in so many ways. Email with the accordionist. Massive email to all concerned. Sets out the whole of the workshops. Never done this before but it seems good. I'm sorting all materials. Getting them printed myself to be sure we have them. Two copies of everything. This month has been relentless. Meet with the rep. Slight amendments to schedule. Nothing too tricky but emails emails. Have to tell potential copyist that there's no budget for such. Don't know what I'll do, can't compose and score-make. Will have to wait until after the workshops though. Final workshop schedule out to all.

There is some confusion around the usage of 'diegesis' and 'diegetic' in scholarly contexts, but in this commentary I shall use diegetic to mean both 'of diegesis' (as 'mimetic' means 'of mimesis'), and to refer to those elements that are part of the fictional reality, and I shall use 'non-diegetic' to refer to those elements that are not part of the fictional world but in some way enable its representation – the font of a book, the lighting rig of a theatre, the boom mic of a television production.[114] The deckchair in which the character Aschenbach sits in Britten's adaptation of *Death In Venice* is diegetic, the surtitles via which we may read his words are non-diegetic. An important particularity of diegesis is that the narrator is both non-diegetic *and* fictional, they exist outside of the reality of the fiction without being part of 'actual', or in the terms of Berger and Luckmann, 'everyday' reality, occupying a space between the realm of the story and the realm of the audience.

Workshops. Happening. Exhausting and brilliant. Exposition and development. Can we give students access to your performance presentation for a session on narrative? Of course. Very popular whilst being illegitimate as an upgrade submission! Staging R&D sessions. Possible live sound person. Wranglings though. I want to write Scene 8 with the tech in place. But I don't hold out much hope. Meet up with an old friend. Couple of beers and he has a very persistent cough. No joke. This is December 2019. Emails with the author. Feels like they're losing interest on future collaboration.

The fact that opera singers perform actions and emotions suggests a mimetic mode of representation, since in diegesis those actions and emotions would only be described to the audience, but at the same time, the events being represented do not, for the most part, claim to

114 For a full and detailed account of the situation please see Stefano Castelvecchi, 'On “Diegesis” and “Diegetic”: Words and Concepts', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 73, No.1 (2020), pp. 149-71.

involve singing, yet often everything is sung, a situation which couldn't be more counter-mimetic. A common view of opera then, is that it is a hybrid of diegesis and mimesis, capable of both modes of representation and overall constituting a more complex narrative system which results from dynamic interplay of the two.

Meet same old friend. Still coughing. Costume emails. Volvox casting planning. Still negotiating the ensemble with producers. Sticking points. People were excited by the workshops, which is nice. Me too. Just so little time to finish and so much not in place. And infections that won't budge. I receive my contract. Quite hilariously late on really! White Card presentation date confirmed for the design team. How am I going to produce score and finish composing? Producers say we can afford a copyist for vocal score. A ray of hope! Bring a copyist on board. Composing in parallel to their work.

An important point to make is that the research-practice is not concerned with those narrators who would be listed in the dramatis personae of an opera, or the non-character singers who might deliver an oratorio directly to an audience. Such figures might deliver the prologue to a work, existing in the cracks between fiction and reality,[115] or perform in the manner of a Greek chorus,[116] offering an omniscient perspective unavailable to those characters fully subsumed into the fictional world. However, although these narrators can without doubt be employed to metafictional effect, in opera-making terms they are governed by the librettist where from a compositional perspective it is more relevant to focus on forces of diegesis which are produced by the effects of the music and staging of a work. Carolyn Abbate illustrates such an idea with her conception of 'voices' of musical narration. These voices are not literally the vocal or instrumental performances, nor a sense of the 'presence' of the composer in the work, but 'modes of subjects' enunciation.'[117] Music, she says, 'has […] moments of diegesis – musical voices that distance us from the sensual matter of what we are hearing, that speak across it.'[118] When discussing these moments of diegesis Abbate refers to them as 'isolated and rare gestures in music, whether vocal or nonvocal',[119] going on to suggest that opera music 'is not narrative, but [...] possesses moments of narration, moments that can be identified by their bizarre and disruptive effect.'[120]

115 As in Benjamin Britten's *The Turn of the Screw,* and our own *She Described It to Death* (although our prologue is delivered by text to be read by the audience, a narrator is nevertheless invoked).
116 As with the reporters in Mark Anthony Turnage's *Anna Nicole*
117 Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Centur* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. ix.
118 ibid. p. xii.
119 ibid. p. ix.
120 ibid. p. 29.

Email to thank singing department for arranging workshop singers. Details in the eye of the storm. I query two points of the contract. And never hear about it again. Maybe Volvox comes out of an existing vocal group? I set out what we need for the character. Real mess with communication. Ensemble conductor ruled out. Lots to manage. Lots of music to write. Try to stay calm. Still no audio crew. Workshop with Attis's singer though. 'Configuration and design principles' document shared. Great but needs a response. Acantha's singer tells me she's heard nothing more. Again. No contract and it turns out no provision of accommodation for rehearsal. This is late in the day. Sally's birthday party. Fancy dress as characters from fiction. I go as Bill Masen from John Wyndham's The Day of the Triffids, as portrayed in episode 2 of the 1980 BBC TV version. We try to arrange our own accommodation for Acantha's singer. With friends.

Abbate gives an example from Delibes opera *Lakmé* to illustrate the nature of these unusual moments. At one point in the opera, the title character performs an aria called the *Air des Clochettes* (the Bell Song) which takes the form of a diegetic song, a song that exists within the fictional world and that the characters are therefore aware of as music. This placing of the sung music within the fictional frame[121] creates an effect that Abbate thinks of as arising from the music's 'audible flight from the continuum that embeds it',[122] a description which refers to the music's sudden traversal of the opera's non-diegetic/diegetic boundary, bridging the two ontological regions and in doing so heightening our awareness of them. It seems worthy of note that at such a point the music becomes simultaneously non-diegetic and fictional, one of the defining characteristics of a literary narrator.[123] Such observations aside, the compositionally important point here is that when opera's music is placed in particular relation to its fictional frame, sitting both within and without it, the music attains a quality that Abbate calls its narrational 'voice'. This voice, then, is not a sound but a relationship, its utterances eliciting in the addressee a quality arising from their being able to recognise the opera's self-reflectiveness.

Receive 360 degree audio/visual of the Stonehenge piece. Eons ago. Geological time. Finding a new conductor. Have a preference but will have to go on the list, right of veto to producers and ensemble. Writing music all hours of the day. Getting closer. Vocal score up to Scene 3. Reply from casting producer. 9 days and no movement in the meantime. At some point someone will tell *me* that we're up against the clock. Will practice biting my tongue in preparation. Discussion of marketing image begins. Hospital. Low flow rate test

121 Bolstered by the fact that some of its text is non-semantic.

122 Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, p. 29.

123 Although the degree twhich a literary narrator's fictionality springs from their direct involvement in the fictional world being represented is variable – their fictionality might be of the kind where they are also a character in the represented world, but equally they might not exist diegetically at all, and their fictionality is of a different, more difficult kind.

and still infected. Prescribed Tamsulosin and more Trimethoprim. I'm sure it's ineffective against this though. Opt out to re-florinate instead. Vocal Score at Scene 5. Intensive back and forth about Volvox auditions. Sally sends me a photo of a dogs ear. The folds look astonishingly like Donald Trump.

In Abbate's terms, the 'disjunction between the phenomenal song and the opera-body is part of the musical sound made by distance', 'distance' being a property commonly attributed to narration.[124] In a literary context, the term refers to the effect created by mediation, which ensures that the reader has no direct access to the events being told and as such is 'distanced' from them. Metafictional texts are able to discuss themselves because they take advantage of the distance inherent in diegesis to take a step back, as it were, to a perspective where they can 'see' themselves within the frame. In Abbate's context, the term refers to the effect generated by the sudden clear distinction between the diegetic and non-diegetic registers of the music, the non-diegetic orchestra seemingly remaining 'outside' the fiction while the diegetic voice enters into it, and there becoming apparent a 'distance' between the two. We find the notion again in the work of Jelena Novak, who focuses on the relationship between voice and body in opera, the totality of which she calls the voice-body, she says:

> Opera is usually intended to be viewed in performance, and there is something about its liveness that I would like to call the gap (a break, an imbalance) between the singing body and the voice. The gap occurs when what I see (the body) and what I hear (the voice) at the same time do not respect the usual forms of mutual representation.

Going on to explain that:

> The voice comes from the “real” live body, but that live singer, unlike a ventriloquist, does not exist in the symbolic order of the spectacle's represented fiction. In ventriloquism one has a ventriloquist and a dummy. In opera, these two functions – the emitter of the voice and the transmitter of the voice – are explicitly divided, while coinciding in the same singing body.[125]

124 Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, p. 29.
125 Jelena Novak, *Postopera: Reinventing the Voice-Body* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 19.

Workshop with Attis's singer. So good! Will be able to write a bespoke final aria! Late night composing. Break and see news of a novel virus in China. I assume it will spread far. I devise Volvox audition method involving the workshop rep. It goes down well and means I won't need to be there. All time for composing. White Card showing. Well done by Anna and design team. It's a tough piece to explain in brief. Clearly too ambitious for the budget though. 'Dear all As the UK officially leaves the EU today, I wanted to take this opportunity to write to everyone in our Guildhall community – students, staff, and alumni...'

Within this conception, the 'gap' is an emergent property of the the fact that the voice-body itself exists in both the non-diegetic and diegetic realms simultaneously, and as such the term evokes the 'distance' between those two realms and the 'discursive distance' potentiated by that relationship.[126] This is a property at the heart of Michel Van der Aa's opera *One*, a full description of which can be found in the following sub-chapter. Although there are many other theorists working in the same areas as Abbate and Novak,[127] here I focus on their work because it explicitly describes ontological perspectives that can be shown to be complementary in the context of metafiction – a demonstration which illuminates the relationship between opera and the subject matter of the research-practice.

Anna needs a breakdown of timings for the opera. I make a doc for her. Sound out the copyist on also working on full score. Pay them myself. They agree. Questions from Anna. Who sings what in the south? I send a full breakdown. Back and forth about the marketing image. Examples of collage and text styles. Friend emails about an opera being staged at School. We agree to go. Exchange about Volvox staging, how it relates to Attis's final aria. Initial upset but quickly resolved. Email Attis's singer on a point of technique. Swift, brilliantly helpful reply. Composing very nearly the end of the piece!!

Both Abbate and Novak's 'distances' spring from relationships that draw attention to opera's innate ontological duality, the relationship between the music and the fictional frame and between singer and character respectively. Stated in these terms we can see the structural similarity of these relationships, each a pairing of a non-diegetic and a diegetic element. However, where Abbate and Novak agree that 'distance' is a centrally significant feature of operatic form, they differ in their opinion of how commonly its effect can be seen. Abbate identifies 'distance' as unusual, existing

126 'Discursive distance' is a term that represents the idea that a narrator mediates between author and audience. As the narratologist Mieke Bal puts it, the process whereby 'the writer withdraws and calls upon a fictitious spokesman, an agent technically known as the *narrator*.' Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Third Edition (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2009), p. 9.

127 Almén, Kramer, Maus, Meelberg, Micznik, for example. For a useful overview of the area see: Russell Millard, 'Telling Tales: A Survey of Narratological Approaches to Music', *Current Musicology*, No. 103 (2018), pp. 5-44.

only in rare moments where music bridges opera's non-diegetic and diegetic realms, but Novak's identification of it as a condition of the voice-body renders 'distance' ever-present, simply by the fact of the voice-body's presence.

Vocal score will be a tiny bit late, but won't affect full score. Given the all clear on that. Strong workshops have benefited confidence in the score here. Sally and Anna exchange swathes about staging and design, leaving me out to protect composing time. Much appreciated. And Sally knows what's what. I'm halfway through Scene 8. Aka, the final scene. What to share with Volvox auditionees? Anything is fine by me. Liaising with the rep – time taken now saves time being there.

While these seem to be contradictory positions, taking a metafictional perspective allows us to synthesise them into a formulation of the sort: distance is a latent property of the operatic form, as in Novak's example, and as such there exists the potential to foreground it, as in Abbate's. In this conception, distancing effects – the kind of effects characteristic of diegesis – are not in themselves rare, they are in fact the ground state, the background radiation of opera. What is rare, are moments in which a work itself highlights this state and makes it perform as the material focus. Abbate's example of the Bell Song can then be seen to exemplify a point at which the musical material draws attention to the same essential feature of 'distance' that can be identified as the active ingredient in Novak's concept of the voice-body, the 'gap'.

Need to prepare Volvox score excerpts for next week. Performing my presentation at the narrative session then too. Presentation performance. Final aria draft to Attis's singer. They're happy with it! Copyist has caught up entirely. Just waiting on the end of Scene 8 which I'm writing now. Friend emails to remind me of our invention of the marzipan-pipes. They won't feature in the opera though. Rep comes through with Volvox prep. Sounds like a tabloid headline. More news of a fast spreading virus in China. Possibly beyond. Opera house marketing image looks great! We sign off on it. I've written it. It's finished. Everything.

So, the innate disjunct between singer and character is an expression of the border between non-diegetic and diegetic realms, and as such can be purposed to achieve musical narration by taking that border as its subject, which is a metafictional act.

Acantha's singer writes to say that they can't be part of it any more. Due to illness. I write to give them support and commiserate. Perhaps we'll do something else together one day. GP. Still got an infection. Give a urine sample for testing. Volvox auditions. We come out of it with a casting too. Need to recast Acantha now

though. Producers want full rep and singer recording of the opera. It's a huge job for the rep. Answering all the questions in the copyists online document. This is the form of things from here. I speak to singers and producers.

And although Novak's voice-body is an ever-present expression of opera's ontological duality, Abbate's 'voices' of musical narration nevertheless stand out as special because of their uncommon self-conscious character.

Propose I mock up the whole opera, adding my vocals to the Midi version. People agree and I get to work. New vocal score deadline and its all there. Real landmark. Conductor has been decided. Not my preference. On my way to opera at School but friend calls to say its been cancelled. I wonder if its the virus. It turns out that it is. The whole place needs to shut down for cleaning and testing. I'll have finished doctoral writing up before I leave my part of town again. Having had two vaccine injections that as yet do not exist.

Another supporting factor is that, as we have seen in the social construction of reality, the 'everyday' conventional features of any reality are prone to become naturalised within their frame, and can be rendered if not invisible then certainly not 'seen-in-the-moment'. As Novak herself has pointed out: 'Both in opera studies and in the majority of operatic pieces the singing body is often taken for granted. It appears as the invisible within the visible and the inaudible within the audible.'[128] An in-the-moment awareness of the diegetic aspect of opera is also audience specific of course, with some opera goers more sensitised to it than others. For some, even pronounced diegesis may go unnoticed, for others it is apparent even in conventional works, a case which brings to mind Currie's idea of 'unconscious metafiction'. In a move that seems to echo Umberto Eco's imagining of the 'model' or 'ideal' reader – a reader capable of fully cooperating in the act of meaning production of a text – when addressing the act of interpretation in opera, Abbate conceives of the 'listening spectator,' a self-aware audience who recognises their position and is alert to the relationship between what is seen and what is heard.[129] Nevertheless, however ideal or otherwise the audience, there is a significant difference between being aware of opera's diegesis and the opera itself also being seen to be aware of it.

GP. Urine tests are back. The infection is e-coli resistant to Trimethoprim again. Fosfomycin this time. A one

128 Novak, *Postopera*, p. 10.

129 Carolyn Abbate, 'Opera; or the Envoicing of Women', in *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, ed. by Ruth A. Solie (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 225-58 (p. 251).

shot powder. Please let it work. 'The School remains closed as a precautionary measure', Midi mock up with vocals completed. That's a full rendering of the opera. Anna comes over to go through it before taking it into staging R&D. Radio 3 might want an interview. They want to know my age, never had the age question before. Nothing comes of the interview. Dates for new Acantha auditions. Making full score with copyist. Well into it now. Forging ahead. Emails about who to credit for the opera's recorded parts.

Thinking on opera's ontological duality in relation to literary texts, I am reminded of Waugh's notion of the 'creation/description' paradox, which refers to the fact that the words of a novel are responsible for both creating and describing the world they represent – to some degree the world is the words. Since the objects to which a text refers are absent,[130] and the text's ability to represent them is as much down to how it refers to its own structures of language as it is to the real existence of the referent, the resulting, irresolvable ambiguity of the objects projected by such sentences creates a situation where it

> is not a matter […] of *choosing* between alternative states of affairs, but rather of an ontological oscillation, a flickering effect, or, to use Ingarden's own metaphor, an effect of "iridescence" or "opalescence".[131]

Ingarden himself extends the idea to encompass entire worlds:

> It may also happen that ambiguity is sustained in a number of sentences with a certain consistency; then this opalescence applies to entire spheres of objects, so that, in a manner of speaking, two different worlds are struggling for supremacy, with neither of them capable of attaining it.[132]

Checking how various audio will be made. Coronavirus continues to spread in the UK. Still trying to engage the live sound team.' The School has formed two taskforces' Starting to think about a potential lockdown. Pretty sure rehearsals will have to be postponed but no official word yet. In an email I write 'Everything seems so reactive at the moment, which almost guarantees we'll be behind the curve in terms of the rate of infection.' Headline: 'UK over-70s to be asked to self isolate for up to four months'. 'We are suspending all face-to-face teaching at Guildhall from the start of tomorrow'.

130 Writing of the 'absent referent', the irony is not lost on me that this commentary refers to an opera, a world of characters and events, that in the fullest sense has never existed.
131 McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, p. 32.
132 Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1979) p. 245.

These descriptions seem strongly resonant with the nature of operatic existence we have discussed above, and the idea of this 'shimmering', 'opalescent' condition brings to mind the physicist Paul Dirac's description of the principle of quantum superposition: 'Any state may be considered as the result of a superposition of two or more other states'.[133] In this analogy, the vocalic-body would be indicative of the most general state of the system, comprising a superposition of singer and character, with the potential to be more of one than the other at any given point in the opera, depending on the material attitude.

Full score continues to move ahead. Full team email from producers: opera house is closing, provisionally for one month. We'll be kept up to date. I can't visit Mum for mother's day. Record a video of my playing Bach solo cello suite 1 Allemende. Sally opens The Open Arms, her online virtual pub repository of writing, art and music. UK goes into lockdown. Second cystoscopy cancelled accordingly. Final model showing can't go ahead. Me and copyist work out the key assignments for a sampler part. Don't know what else to do.

In an analytical sense, this analogy is of course limited, being obviously derived from an inexpert and inevitably unnuanced understanding of the principle of quantum superposition. In a compositional sense though, such metaphors can be invaluable, providing the composer with evocative feeling-and-thought-tools that are pithy enough to hold in the head while working on other details, allowing the composer to remain in constant contact with their materials in the midst of a complex process. All by way of saying that language constructs the frame of 'composition' as much as it does any other. Using language to construct the reality of a making practice is as fundamental a composerly act as it is to conceive a chord, or an orchestration, and in this respect my use of the term 'superposition' conferred great benefit upon the composing of *She Described It to Death*.

The opera house remains closed. 'At present, there is not yet a further update'. We work on full score and I begin developing a board game called Pickpocket. Based on the classic Coppit. Neighbour emails a list of places to source vegetables locally. Full score deadline soon. We'll meet it. I write a text as 'pub bore' for the open arms. Day before the full score deadline. Me and copyist shore up final details.

Returning to the concepts of Abbate and Novak, Abbate operates within the field of narratology, and Novak works from the perspective of postdramatic theatre. Where the term 'narratology' refers

133 Paul Dirac, *The Principles of Quantum Mechanics*, Fourth Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 12.

to an analytical framework, the terms 'postdramatic' and 'metafiction' act to identify the formal characteristics of their subject. Postdramatic and metafictional attitudes both originate from the desire to question and resist conventional textual hierarchies, in theatre and the novel respectively, and they often exhibit similar features. In the context of the research-practice, however, there is a crucial, fundamental difference between the two.

Producer calls to tell me the opera is cancelled. I expected a postponement for some reason. But no, fully cancelled. Thinking on my feet I ask that the opera house waive its proprietary rights should someone else want to produce the premiere another time. They agree. No point getting upset, got to keep on the ball. Composer survival basics. Contingency is a way of life. We don't submit full score. Continue work on it to even finer resolution. The Open Arms invites recorded audio submissions from musicians, framed as the pubs 'live music'.

She Described It to Death is designed to resemble to some extent a conventional opera, including a clear plot, in order to use this resemblance as a frame to push against, as material for metafiction to act upon. To achieve this, the textual hierarchies involved in sustaining such a conventional fictional reality must be to some degree permitted to exist, which is antithetical to the postdramatic mode. In other words, to function as intended, our opera requires the very framework that postdramatic theatre seeks to dismantle. This is not to say that postdramatic ideas are of no relevance to the making of *She Described It to Death* in general, contemporary opera owes much to these ideas and an opera maker cannot help but recognise their influence, but since this field, and theatre in general, is not the focus of the research-practice, this commentary will refrain from further discussion of it in the interests of properly addressing those matters that are.[134]

Email with Attis's singer. Sad to tell her its fully cancelled. She hadn't been told yet. She's been amazing.

That metafictional and postdramatic modes may exhibit similar outcomes despite their different modes of operation does, however, lead to an important point in the context of the research-practice. While from a making perspective the different modes of postdrama and metafiction are definitive, from the perspective of an audience it is important to ask: what distinguishes the two? As we might expect from our survey to this point, overt self-consciousness is the most distinguishing feature of metafiction. An opera influenced by postdramatic attitudes might use fragmentation or

134 For a full overview of the subject though, see Hans-Thies Lehman, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jürs-Munby (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

genre disruption for purely sensorial reasons, for example, but unless there is a sense that the opera itself is aware of such features then they are not metafictional. Similarly, a post-opera might do away with narrative entirely, but to perform metafictionally this abolition must be seen to comment on the opera itself, with a metafictional logic beyond it being simply a natural part of the mode.

Sally and I apply for a 'Culture in Quarantine' commission for the BBC. Working with Attis's singer. We've come up with a good piece I think.

Another related matter might be framed as the question 'to what degree is opera innately metafictional?'. The relevance of this being that if the medium itself tends towards the metafictional then every opera will share this tendency, whether it is intended to be a metafiction or not. This is an equivalent question to 'is the novel innately metafictional?', the answer to which, as we have seen, is that metafiction is a tendency latent within the novel which can be foregrounded to greater or lesser degrees. Given that opera's representational apparatus is very apparent though, and in order to avoid assuming a false equivalence between operatic and literary forms, one might ask 'is an opera more innately metafictional than a novel?'. In a theoretical sense, the fictional realities of a novel and an opera are both sustained by medium-specific naturalised conventions that render each of their representational apparatuses 'invisible' in the context, locked away beyond the fictional frame, which suggests parity in this respect. On the other hand, although the representational mode of a novel might be innately no more or less plausible than that of opera, one wonders if its artifice might be less intrusive simply because it involves fewer media than opera, and no in-the-moment human intervention – essentially, there is less that needs ignoring to support its constructed reality, and none of what needs to be ignored is physically autonomous. Since ultimately the degree to which these things intrude will vary by 'reader' it is difficult to reach a firm conclusion in that respect, but from a making perspective, it is clear that there would be a distinct difference between an opera that sought to foreground its artifice and one which did not, regardless of how intrusive its apparatus of representation.

Play testing Pickpocket with friends. The park is thronged at the moment. I'll stop jogging there for a bit. Switch to at-desk cardio workouts. Official opening of The Open Arms.

Approaching things from a slightly different angle, one might also wonder if opera's position outside of the 'everyday language' of Berger and Luckmann would perform some of the heavy lifting of

metafiction before we even hear a note sung, but again, the internal conventions of its frame constitute its own 'everyday language', and while it seems reasonable to suggest that the heightened artifice of opera might nevertheless predispose it to metafiction, this is self-evidently the case for all fictional forms, and leaves us with no more than the truism 'fiction potentiates metafiction'.

Editing and reworking the vocal score piano part into stuff for solo piano. Sending it to my pianist friend.

Continuing with the discussion of diegesis in opera, Michael Halliwell's *Opera and the Novel, The Case of Henry James* suggests that opera is a natively diegetic form where the orchestra performs the function of narrator. Halliwell's work deals with the operatic adaptation of literature, partly comprising 'an examination of the function and, indeed, fate of the fictional narrator during the process of the transformation of fictional narrative into operatic narrative', founded on a belief that 'opera, a unique, and often uneasy, fusion of the narrative and the dramatic, is fundamentally closer to fictional narrative than drama, and that it is essentially diegetic rather than mimetic.'[135] For example, Halliwell suggests that theatrical adaptations of *The Wings of the Dove* have been largely unsuccessful because the dramatic mode is incapable of strongly depicting the interiority central to Henry James's writing. He contrasts this with the observation that Douglas Moore's opera of the same is considerably more successful since it 'has the advantage of having a pervasive and constant narratorial presence – the orchestra – through which access into the psychological state of each character is granted and the impression of interiority achieved'. There is also great synergy between Halliwell's conception of opera-as-diegetic and the phenomenon of voice-body that Novak describes, particular in relation to Halliwell's suggestion that the linguistic text of a libretto as voiced by the singers should be viewed not as mimetic representation but as having a nature equivalent to that of quoted speech within a novel. With this in mind, Waugh's statement of the 'creation/description' paradox of the novel, suggests a way of looking at the voice-body as analogous to the words of a literary-fiction, both creating and describing (to the audience) the contents of its world and capable of achieving neither without the other.

Mild panic about suddenly having no musical existence. American ensemble want to make a video of an arrangement of a piece of mine. Another friend wants to make a video at home of playing something else of

135 Michael Halliwell, *Opera and the Novel: The Case of Henry* James (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, (2005), p. 45.

mine. I'm very grateful. Talk with supervisor. Thinking through how we might still put the opera on in some form. No luck with Culture in Quarantine. A relief in a way. As much a panic response as anything. I'm making a prog punk band for The Open Arms. Make the most of this limbo. Will be nice to make something autonomously.

Focusing on the purely instrumental side of opera, Halliwell's claim that an opera orchestra has access to the interiority of opera characters is more specifically a claim that the orchestra performs as a literary-style narrator, which would grant it access not only to knowledge of character interiority, but render it potentially omniscient.[136] Post-Wagner it is easy to assume that the orchestra has such a capacity, it is certainly talked about and employed as if it does, but Christopher Morris' *Reading Opera Between the Lines* provides a deeper perspective on how this was not always, and came to be, the case, via an examination of the evolution of the orchestral interlude in opera.

Vicious migraine yesterday. My first in over twenty years. My pianist friend is into the score I sent. We're going to make a record. Him playing and recording at home. Piano score editing. Things move quickly. I want to pay him and we agree on an amount. It's very generous on his part – actual music making again! Forensic full score proof reading between me and the copyist. One prog punk track done. I'm calling the 'band' The Something Puffs. An old name, enjoyed by an old friend no longer with us. Playing guitars, programming everything else, singing vocals.

The orchestral interlude began as 'peripheral to the dramatic, vocal, and visual appeals of the staged scenes' without any sense that the music 'knew' much more than the general mood of the drama at any point, and how the melodies went of course.[137] At that time opera was structured as a set of 'closed numbers', but as the form changed and smoother transitions became desirable (supported by changing audience attitudes to listening) it became clear that much as the original role of such transitions was ostensibly 'to maintain musical continuity during scene changes, to mobilise the art of transition by dovetailing one scene into the next', this had the knock-on effect of transitions taking on 'a narrative-interpretative function that is reinforced by the expansion of reminiscence motifs to what Wagner called a “tissue of principal themes”'.[138]

136 'Potentially' since a deliberately limited narrator perspective is also a common literary device.
137 Christopher Morris, *Reading Opera Between the Lines: Orchestral Interludes and Cultural Meaning from Wagner to Berg* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 2.
138 Morris, *Reading Opera Between the Lines*, p. 8.

Exhilarating to be back in the context of a band even if it is only me. Can do whatever I like. High velocity mess. A mix of sophistication and brute force, just what I like. Piano score floodgates have opened. Working super fast. Maybe I should have a mind to start the doctoral Writing Up. If things weren't cancelled I wouldn't be though. Just get some music done and into the world, then switch to it. Email some performer friends about a remote piece idea I have. Phone call with the urology consultant. Piano scores all ready already. We move into home recording.

This evolution seems to implicate the interpretive aspect as much as it does any intrinsic narrational capacity of the music itself. Development of orchestral interludes was supported by changes in the listening attitude of audiences, and it is hard to imagine that an increasingly attentive opera audience is not primed to read increasingly long, more prominent entr'actes as more significantly relating to the drama of the opera in which they are set. As Abbate, summarising the semiologist Jean-Jacques Nattiez, says: 'music is the pretext for narrative behaviours on the part of listeners.'[139] This chimes with the narratological work of Monika Fludernik, which is partly focused on the idea that narrativisation is a process imposed upon a text by an audience in their attempting to read it as narrative.[140] Tempering this slightly, Vincent Meelberg suggests that narrativisable properties must be present in the object of interpretation, rather than it being possible to narrativise just anything, which can be seen as an attempt to reclaim some sense of authorship from Fludernik's more 'linguistic turn' oriented position.[141] Most relevant from a compositional perspective though, is that arguments as to where the narrativity of music resides are neither here nor there when trying to activate its effects. If narrativity is innate to music then it can of course act as a narrator, but this can be resisted by an unreceptive audience. An audience who are trying to read music as narrative, on the other hand, can be acted upon by the music as if it were narrative even if in some conceptual sense it could be argued that it is not.

The pandemic is ongoing. I can't see it being done any time soon. Work on vaccines is underway. George Floyd has been murdered by American police. Officials aren't calling it a murder yet, but they will, and that's how it seems. Horrible footage. The Black Lives Matter movement mobilises in Britain and the US. 'The School stands with all Black communities and everyone fighting against racism and discrimination in the UK, US and around the world'. Need to submit a timeline for doctoral Writing Up. More proof reading of full

139 Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, p. 29.

140 See Monika Fludernik, 'Natural Narratology and Cognitive Parameters', in *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*, ed. by David Herman (2003), pp. 243-67 (p. 244).

141 See Vincent Meelberg, *New Sounds New Stories:Narrativity in Contemporary Music* (Leiden, Netherlands: Leiden University Press, 2006), p. 36.

score and parts. More migraines. Close together. Can't understand why, came on from nothing. Takes of piano recordings start to arrive. Sounding amazing. Feels like I might exist as a composer for a bit more. Anna M emails, thinking of where we can take the opera instead. I'm keen to leave it for a bit. Planning to talk with the original ensemble about it. But later. Submit doctoral timeline to culminate with submission at the end of the year.

As well as the valuable presentation of opera-orchestral lineage, Morris' analysis of interludes includes passages which speak overtly of the narratorial capacity of the opera orchestra. When discussing the interlude *The Walk to the Paradise Garden* from Delius' *A Village Romeo and Juliet*, he notes that 'in this sense the theme in ”The Walk” begins to construct a narrating subject that “knows” what Sali and Vreli do not', and 'It is as if the music's relationship to the lovers has become infused with a distance that speaks *about* rather than *from* them.' The latter of these comments resonates entirely with the narratological concept of discursive distance, a property essential to any narrative text, and as we have seen, something very much present in notions of the 'voice' of musical narration.

Lucky to be working from home. Friend's home-made clarinet version of some of my chiptune is so energised! Hell of a challenge to play too. More piano recordings. After the opera making process this is like lightening. Two The Something Puff's tracks made. Onto the third. Writing and playing the guitar is a joy. Making stimulus audio for the remote piece. Tracks to record along too. Send out the audio stimuli to everyone who's up for making this remote piece. Video test for clarinet chiptune. People are just bringing it at the moment! All The Something Puffs tracks made! I send to a friend: 'This is my new outfit, a musical cockroach designed to survive the art-pocalypse to come'. The Something Puffs 'set' uploaded to The Open Arms. Me and Sally watch The Stone Tape. My back is so bad at the moment.

On another point of 'music-as-narrator', since the question of whether music can perform narration is concerned partly with whether the music can 'know' about the fictional world, and the internal, psychological state of the characters – a self-conscious trait if ever there was one – we are essentially dealing with an epistemological issue, and as we have seen in McHale's description of the shift from modernist to postmodernist literary fiction, epistemological issues can be 'pushed' until they 'tip over' into being issues of ontology. In other words, if the problem of opera music's 'status-of-knowing' is treated as material in itself, fed back into the system somehow, then it can be used as a focus for posing more overt questions about what an operatic reality is, how it is constructed.

On the verge of migraines a lot of the time. It would have been the opera premiere today. Me and Sally have a couple of beers and listen through the mock-up I made. The BBC Symphony Orchestra want to share the video of clarinet chiptune. They are welcome of course. Skype with the copyist. Another old friend. It's been quite a job. Another old friend again. Wants to play a Puffs track on the radio – I make them a shorter edit for the purpose. From home to the radio in no time. Genuinely excited about it.

On another epistemological point, Abbate makes the intriguing suggestion that 'Music makes distinctive sounds when it is speaking (singing) *in a narrative mode*, but we do not know *what* it narrates',[142] then, in reference to this idea, offers a particularly provocative comment of Adorno's: 'that music might *narrate*, without narrative *content*.'[143] This idea bears a striking resemblance to Marshall McLuhan's description of the electric light: 'The electric light is pure information. It is a medium without a message, as it were'.[144] In his context, however, McLuhan appends the important condition: 'unless it is used to spell out some verbal ad or name', going on to explain that 'This fact, characteristic of all media, means that the "content" of any medium is always another medium. The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph.'[145] While it may be the case that the medium of music is without narrative content,[146] from a metafictional perspective, the analogy of light being used to 'spell something out' is intriguing, and perhaps can help us get some way to justifying the first part of Adorno's comment.

Would happily just do the Puffs from now on. Not the sort of music anyone gets to make a career out of though! Final score and parts proofing notes. More piano audio. Made a Puffs email address so I can make a Bandcamp page at some point. Final piano audio. It's a whole album now. Sounds like nothing I've heard before, a real hyrbid of me and my friend, but more than the sum of those parts too. We know someone who'll master it for us for a reasonable fee. Discussion turns to titling. I watch Alex Cox's film version of Jorge Luis Borges's Death and the Compass. Bought an old label maker on eBay. Going to collage all the Puffs artwork. Piano album title agreement: Premonitions of the Unbuilt City. Reading McHale on postmodernist fiction. Gearing up to switch mode now that some music has been made. Into the Writing Up proper now. Trying to conceive something metafictional.

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142 Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, p. 27.

143 ibid.

144 Marshall McLuhan, 'The Medium is the Message', in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London and New York: Routledge Classical, 2003), pp. 7-23 (p. 8).

145 ibid.

146 Being that 'Music is a medium that rests on semantic indeterminacy, which has elsewhere been referred to as "floating intentionality"' Ian Cross and Ghofur Eliot Woodruff, 'Music as a Communicative Medium', *The Prehistory of Language*, ed. by Rudolf Botha and Chris Knight (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 77-98 (p. 87).

To put it simply: might not the medium of music be organised in such a way as to 'spell something out', not about the opera's narrative content perhaps, but about itself, about its own role in the medium of opera? Taking its cue from the self-reflective materials of literary metafiction, in this conception what the music 'narrates' would be its own processes of construction and mediation, potentially even achieving self-conscious of its own narrational status. Combined with Goffman's notion of frames – which represents the possibility of myriad relationships between the music and other operatic media[147] – self-conscious music would provide an incredibly diverse and flexible meta-toolkit. All of which points toward the question: under what conditions might music achieve meta-referentiality in its own right?

Trying to find a label for the piano record. Three places, one 'no' so far. Pandemic looks to be shifting gear. Getting worse. Working on the Writing Up. Gonna try and make it audio and text, like my presentation. Create discursive distance between the two. I can sing anything that's a quote - get primary source interviews too. Mess around with reverb and editing when it gets metafictional. Nonclassical like the sound of the piano record. Had to book a physiotherapy session for my back. First assessment on the phone. Think it could explain the migraines. Maybe switching exercise from running to the cardio workout thing. Booked for an in-person soon. Not soon enough, lots of unavoidable sitting and typing.

Although the perspectives discussed so far help to identify the intrinsic tensions of operatic form, in order that they might be targeted by metafictional strategies, they all speak to metafiction via the framework of diegesis, considering whether and when opera music can perform as a narrator and in turn how this creates metafictional effect. As well as the fact that there are, of course, other dimensions in which metafiction can manifest, such an angle of inquiry does not comment directly on what metafiction might be in music *in its own right*, not in relation to any extramusical aspect of the opera.[148] Not to mention that discussions of diegesis are often bounded by narratological frameworks that have arisen from literary theory, rather than any natively musical considerations of form.

Making collages for Puffs artwork. Scanning for the Bandcamp page layout too. Recording free talking on Writing Up subject matter, then transcribing. Only one response for the remote piece. Might have to leave it. Don't want to pester anyone and there's no fixed time-frame. Got to complete an ethics approval application

147 And which chimes completely with McLuhan's point that every medium is also content depending on the framing.

148 In *Unsung Voices* Abbate discusses the purely instrumental piece *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, but even here the effect she describes is in relation to an extramusical text. Morris discusses the purely instrumental interludes of opera, but again, in reference to our knowledge of the fictional text.

for primary source interviews. Dammit, wish I'd thought of it earlier. Time's tight now. Friend wants to include a Puffs track in a magazine playlist. Very kind and I'm so into the Puffs! First physiotherapy session. Walking distance to the place. Feel battered but in a good way. Please let it help.

Metafictional effect is generated in a novel when the text can be seen to refer to its own artificial construction. In the general sense, musical structures are built on self-referentiality, with repetition, thematic development and audible transformation of previously heard material being essential to the musical mode. However, although such structures cannot help but be expressions of the musical construct, they do not necessarily 'speak' of their constructedness, perhaps lacking the distance necessary for metafictional self-reflection – music in its own right is not fictional, how could it ever be meta-fictional?

The full score and parts are fully, microscopically proofed now. She Described It to Death, a complete chamber opera. About 90 minutes I reckon. Lots of screen work. Eyes are so tired. Back so sore. The Something Puffs Bandcamp has gone live. Hand write all the lyrics to scan and include. I send the opera score to the original ensemble, just so they can see it. They still want to make it happen and the conversation begins. Maybe we could record it and make a video. Opticians. Need a new prescription.

To address this matter we can turn to Werner Wolf's notion of 'intermediality', which focuses on creating a more fundamental understanding of metafiction by proposing it as one aspect of the umbrella concept 'metareference', a term he defines as 'a special, transmedial form of […] self-reference produced by signs or sign configurations which are (felt to be) located on a logically higher level, a “metalevel”, within an artefact or performance.'[149] As *The Living Handbook of Narratology* has it: 'Metareference thus denotes a signifying practice that generates self-referential meaning and actualizes a secondary cognitive frame in the recipient, thus eliciting a “meta-awareness”'.[150] Crucial to the reach of this idea is that Wolf's definition is not medium specific, with metareference serving as a 'term for all meta-phenomena occurring in the arts and media'.[151] As part of his work Wolf has conducted a series of metareferential readings of instrumental music that are of great significance to the research-practice, being that, as well as directing us towards a specifically musical

149 Werner Wolf 'Metareference across Media: The Concept, its Transmedial Potentials and Problems, Main Forms and Functions', in *Metareference across Media*, ed. by Werner Wolf, Katharina Bantleon, Jeff Thomas (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009) pp. 1-85 (p. 31).

150 Birgit Neumann, Ansgar Nunning, 'Metanarration and Metafiction', in *The Living Handbook of Narratology* <https://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/> [accessed 2 August 2021].

151 Wolf, 'Metareference across Media', p. 12.

metafiction, the ideas involved provide an additional context in which to consider operatic diegesis.

Editing the WU audio and text, playing with how they relate to each other. Starts with a prologue about the WU form itself. Now working on the introduction that follows. Physio. Given exercises. Seems to be helping. Piano record officially picked up by Nonclassical! More physio. Better still. Got an elastic cord for the exercises. Perquisites. The Other Rock Show on Resonance FM want to play the Puffs. Made up about that. More Physiotherapy. Someone from The Alphabet Business Concern got in touch, Cardiacs label basically. Been enjoying the Puffs. I can't believe it. Love Cardiacs.

As Wolf points out, when it comes to metareference 'the all but absence of this term in musicology, leads to the expectation that music should be relegated to the area *beyond* 'metaland'.[152] Nevertheless, he argues that 'music is in fact able to approach the condition of metareference, albeit only to a limited and often debatable extent and with more difficulties than other media'.

Spoke to a friend who wants to collaborate on an installation. We decide on a synth realisation of In-C. Physio again. Really starting to improve. Can I talk at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland next month. On Zoom. Absolutely, would be my pleasure. In-C MIDI arrangement built to run soft synths. Emailed over to the project HQ. Email with ensemble about a cost breakdown for recording the opera. Ethics application approved. Reading Barthes's The Rustle of Language. Still making WU first draft audio and text. Back tooth broke as I ate. Serrated edge is agony on the tongue. Don't have a dentist. Got an emergency appointment for tomorrow. Notification of what I'll need to submit for the final doctorate. Fees kick in for me next month. Ask an old friend if they'll make artwork for the piano album. They will. Sally is writing and filming a pantomime for The Open Arms. All at home. Will write incidental music and music for some of the songs.

Wolf describes discrete instrumental compositions as 'semiotic systems'[153] and differentiates between 'narrow' and 'broad' definitions of such: 'intracompositional' where an element of a composition refers to another of its own elements, and 'extracompositional' which involves reference to other compositions or media. In addition to this, two types of self-referentiality are possible: one that simply 'points' at itself, and one that 'creates a self-referential *meaning*, in other words, elicits a *cognitive process or reflection* on itself, on other elements of the system or on the system as a whole.'[154]

152 Werner Wolf, 'Metafiction and Music: exploring the Limits of Metareference', in *Selected Essays on Intermediality by Werner Wolf (1992-2014)*, ed. by Walter Bernhart (Leiden, Boston: Rodopi, 2018) pp. 295-316 (p. 297).
153 Wolf's explanation and justification for this term is too detailed to cover here, but can be found in: Wolf, *Metafiction and Music: exploring the Limits of Metareference*, p. 311.
154 ibid.

Wolf uses the term 'metareference' to describe these meaning-generating 'statements', and points out that, as we have seen in the context of metafiction,

> metareference also requires the actualization of such potentials by recipients who are willing and able to cooperate, for it is in the recipient that the essence of metafiction, the eliciting of a medium-awareness, takes place.[155]

Considering 'metaelements' – individual components within a work that act metareferentially – Wolf identifies four 'pairs of oppositions', three of which we will outline here, with the fourth, *fictio* vs. *fictum* warranting more in-depth consideration in The Categories:[156]

1. intracompositional vs. extracompositional metareference, which we have described above.
2. explicit vs. implicit metareference: for example, the difference between a narrator directly addressing the reader and a novel's typography being unconventional in such a way that a reader familiar with the conventions can understand that element as an indirect metareferential statement.[157]
3. critical vs. non-critical metareference:[158] as well as drawing attention to the constructedness of a medium, metareference can also be used to assert 'the “truth” of a story', for example, which can be considered a non-critical function since it does not problematise the text's own artificial status.[159]

Tooth filed down. Dentist was really friendly. More to come. I want to submit before fees kick in but I'll never manage it. No work lined up and the pandemic making everything unstable. Got some savings but could do with hanging on to them as long as possible. Had an idea for a collaboration with a different ensemble. Sounded them out on it. They're interested in principle, but I'd need to get the money together. Back burner for now. Zoom with the RCS. Very nice bunch. Don't envy freshers starting this year. All distance and pandemic. American ensemble share the first draft of the video of their arrangement of my chiptune track. Honestly its wonderful. And like an existence in the world. Dental check up. Gonna need 6 fillings. Could have been worse the length of time I've left it.

155 ibid. p. 314
156 ibid.
157 The latter can be overlooked of course, and may require other markers in order to ensure its reception.
158 Derived from work on metafiction by Linda Hutcheon and Wolf himself.
159 Wolf, *Metafiction and Music*, p. 316.

In addressing the idea of metareferential music, Wolf points out that while

> In literary fiction, the application of the concept of metareference in all of its typological subforms does not present difficulties. In the realm of music, a comparable ease can only be found where music appears together with words.[160]

Jstor won't log me in. I borrow Sally's. Looking for Ruwet's paradigmatic analysis stuff and theories around enchantment. Dental hygienist. Getting ready for the fillings. Asked to contribute to the training session on narrative next term. Plenty of fodder for that. Dentist. First two fillings. Fine but my jaw aches from holding my mouth open. Phone call with urology consultant. Things are okay, Fosfomycin saw off the last infection just before the first lockdown. Need further tests but can wait until pandemic is dealt with. First vaccine just approved. First hopeful point for a while.

Metareference becomes 'quite problematic' in the case of purely instrumental music, with 'the virtual impossibility of explicit musical statements' leaving us 'with the variant of *implicit metareference* as the only one we can explore for metamusic', a task Wolf undertakes in reference to J. S. Bach's *Kleine Harmonisches Labyrinth* (Little Harmonic Labyrinth).[161] Wolf suggests that Bach's piece implies a metareferential statement along the lines of 'listen to what extent and in what short time one can lose tonal orientation!',[162] achieving this through a combination of rapid modulations, chromatic lines and enharmonic ambiguities that audibly deviate from the tonal conventions of the period. Another supporting metareferential feature observed by Wolf is that:

> the salient deviation principle that operates in this composition as a marker of metareference can also be seen on the level of the motivic coherence or rather in the relative lack of such coherence.

Noting that:

> this composition appears to be surprisingly heterogeneous with only very loose and unobtrusive motivic unity.[163]

160 ibid. p. 317.
161 ibid.
162 ibid. p. 318.
163 ibid. p. 319.

Its unthematic nature further ensures that the focus of the work becomes 'the foregrounding of the musical system of tonality, which is metareferentially laid bare as such.'[164] It is also important to note that the work's title itself acts as a metamarker, with Wolf suggesting that the recourse to language

> arguably indicates a feeling, on the part of the composer, that a clear thematization of the metareferential content of his composition was perhaps necessary in order to ensure the establishment of a metalevel in the listener's mind[165]

...although it seems equally likely that, having used the notion of unconventional harmonic procedures as a focus for the act of composition, Bach then found himself with a convenient title, rather than the title necessarily representing Bach's keenness to put across what is essentially Wolf's point. Regardless of Bach's relationship with his title though, the title text certainly acts as a potential metamarker, drawing the listener's attention to the convoluted nature of the harmonic aspect of the music that they 'may feel justified in 'suspecting' some kind of metaquality'.[166]

Phone call with the director of opera. Apologetic and reiterating that they'll waive proprietary rights if I find a new producer. Certainly won't happen at the moment. Whole thing is ready when it's the right time though. Zoom supervision about the WU draft. We agree its not a helpful format, but something of the flavour is right. I'll have to redesign. Record the voice of an ogre for Sally's pasnto video. Adaptation of Puss in Boots. Received an email from RCS Human Resources. My email interface lists the sender as 'Human'. Making the 'Pads' song from Sally's panto. Got her to sing it too! 'Please be aware that term 2 tuition fees are due on or before 04/Jan/2021'

In summary, Wolf identifies the potential for metamusic in 'all kinds of compositions that are based on salient deviations and all compositions that sport some sort of virtuoso use of musical material and point to music' citing 'theme with variations' as an example where the listener can apprehend the metacomment 'listen to what I have made out of a simple tune'.[167] He goes on to include performative virtuosity, where the command of an instrument, or improvisatory skill, invokes the 'metadomain' by foregrounding the medium over the musical system, another resonance with the

164 ibid.
165 ibid. p. 320.
166 ibid. p. 321.
167 ibid.

work of McLuhan.

Stitching together the panto soundtrack, so many brilliant contributions. Community effort. Sally wrote and filmed stop-motion for it. A month's work all told. Redesigning the WU. Think I've hit on something good. Two columns, one academic one personal. Different tones and metafictional. Can demonstrate a lot. The other version would have been huge and unwieldy. Hours of audio. Dentist again. 2 more fillings. Ensemble in touch to pick up opera recording costing conversation. Big back and forth about the details, all dependent on how we'd do it. Supervision. We agree on the new WU approach. Time to really get my head down.

Giving further examples, Wolf mentions musical quotation and stylistic homage as kinds of extracompositional metareference, but acknowledges that these do not necessarily enable a work to make critical statements. He does, however, suggest that, as in fiction, parodic forms have great critical potential, being that they can speak of music history, genre and style and 'the ironic distance thus created correlates with the cognitive distance that is always implicated in metareference.'[168]

Gonna apply to the Arts Council. Developing Your Creative Practice. Desperate times etc. Get collaborators on board for the app. Mentors in production. To write the Right Hand Column I'll need to know what was happening at every point. Go back through all emails and year planners for the last 3 and a bit years. This is gonna take a bit of doing. Such a big job to reassemble this stuff but even harder to make it up. Like Barthes in The Rustle of Language, it's the mundane, insignificant detail that makes the difference.

Although the rather narrow scope of Wolf's assessment might seem disappointing, it sets out a number of ideas which are invaluable when thinking about composing a metafictional opera, the details of which will be addressed in The Categories of this commentary. The pan-medial nature of metareferentiality also sits nicely in relation to Byron Almén's assertion that it is important to develop idiomatic ideas of musical narrative, rather than expecting concepts imported from literary theory to necessarily function in a musical context, he writes:

> ...because narrative was first conceptualized in relation to literature, we have largely failed to recognize the distinction between narrative *proper* and narrative as manifested in literature. Lacking such a distinction, a clear understanding of any specifically *musical* manifestations of narrative, should they exist, would be

168 ibid. p. 324.

impossible.[169]

Won't be able to attend the session on narrative. Can use my materials though. They say no problem. They know I'm up against it. Get reference for DYCP. Having to write big chunks for that too. But future proofing is essential. Slogging through old emails. Found myself actually laughing with delight that I'm not in the midst of that any more. Got to November 2019. Phew. Like Dad's 'sit up all night and watch the van method'. It's snowing! And laying! The email chains feel like insects preserved in amber, a resource unavailable in previous eras. Contract still never signed.

In decoupling formulations of musical narrative from the criteria of literary theory, Almén suggests that it is possible to develop meaningful descriptions of natively musical narrative functions, and that in addition to these medium specific functions there are also fundamental narrative qualities which transcend such boundaries. The concept of metareference liberates metafiction from its medium specificity and as such can perform as Almén hopes.

What sunlight this morning. Reflecting rosey off the remains of the snow. I'll write the RHC mostly without names. Events and contingencies rather than any personal hierarchy. Now I'm at the point where I'm collating all the historical emails, I also have to start keeping this diary in parallel so that the more recent present is accounted for too – this metafictional stuff is so convoluted! But I knew that of course. Seems like the tone might change too. So uncomfy all this desk sitting work, going to have a bath to make it easier to keep going. Pro strats.

Influenced by the discourses and concepts of metafiction and narration described in this and the previous chapter, *She Described It to Death* was composed from the position that it is in principle possible for all the media involved in constructing the operatic reality, and all the relationships between those media, to be composed in such a way that they are apprehensible as actively engaged in performing metacommentary. This formulation puts particular emphasis on the 'visibility' of the narrational quality, and the visibility of the self-reflective agency of the operatic apparatus in biasing the mode of representation towards diegesis.

Collating with Chopin Nocturnes and Debussy string quartets on. I'm up to June 2020 now, but only in Gmail, School email still to come. I can see my email to Sofia, written when I was already four days into collating all this stuff. The process had led me to thinking about all the people involved, but by chance it now

169 Byron Almén, *A Theory of Musical Narrative* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2017), p. 12.

serves as another point of temporal recursion as I write about coming across it, having not long written about writing it. The form writes itself. Spoke to a friend who gave me some useful feedback about the commentary form.

Before we come to the final aspect of metafiction that is relevant to the research-practice, the next section will present some concrete examples of metafiction in opera.

Finished the Gmail collation. Switched to my DYCP grant app. Got through the development plan bit. Mate called me while I was listening to Huey Lewis and the News and we had a good laugh about how weird that band is. Then talked about doctorates. They wanted to know how to approach theirs. Told them that he can write it any way he likes, it's all about finding examiners who'll be into/sympathetic to that style/method. Back is still bad from all this sitting and typing. Helped Sally fit a sleeve edge to the shower door, which tightened me up. Beautiful sunshine again though, albeit very wintry still.

2.3. ...In Action in Opera

In order to bring opera primary sources into the research-practice I decided to focus on some operas with which I was already familiar, conducting fresh readings of them in the light of my newly developed theoretical and conceptual understanding of metafiction. I chose not to research these operas any further than I already knew them, with the intention that this would put me in a better position to read and judge their effects directly, in relation to my own making sensibilities, rather than in relation to their conceptual intent as set out by the composer or the analytical writing of others. As an experienced opera maker I represent a specialist audience, and the readings below often require a 'model reader', so it should be taken that they identify metareferential potentials that in reality may or may not come to be actualised by an audience. As with the examples of literary metafiction, there is no claim that these works are metafictional in the fullest sense, but rather that the elements I identify have potentially metareferential qualities of the sort that *She Described It to Death* hopes to employ to achieve its metacommentary.

Emailed to Nonclassical about potential release dates for Premonitions. Managed to get that DYCP stuff written yesterday, including the budget. Spoke to someone yesterday who'd been to A&E to get checked for chest and night palpitations. Doctor said there's a lot of that about due to pandemic anxiety. I'll try and include my notes to self in this too. In caps maybe, to differentiate. I keep finding things I've written in emails that will provide such good fodder for the right hand column.

I have avoided examples of diegetic music of the type described in Abbate's work on the 'voices' of opera since we have already reviewed their mechanisms and effects in detail. It should also be acknowledged that adaptation, a staple of opera making, is in itself an intertextual act, and thus has metareferential potential. However, discussion of adaptation is deferred until The Categories since, although the idea is important in *She Described It to Death*, the opera's libretto was not adapted from a pre-existing text and engages with intertextuality in a less general fashion.

'There's all the narrator theory stuff of course, but my current, immediate experience is far more connected with the ideal vs reality of making, and the issues of institutional narrative involved in trying to make an opera for ROH - which I'm thinking has the potential to be a good final angle on the writing...' SO MUCH OF THIS MATERIAL DISCRETE IN THE PROCESS. Back is absolutely wrecked today. Got a text from Mum saying that her and Dad are due to get vaccinated tomorrow. I WONDER WHAT THE WORD COUNT OF THE COLLATED EMAILS IS, COULD MENTION THAT TOO.

Michel van der Aa's *One* is an opera for one performer and their digital audio-visual double. The work explores notions of identity and self, manifested in a way that also resonates with the ontological duality of singer/character that is the essence of operatic form. Van der Aa creates an environment which feels particularly metareferential not only because of the irrealism of the character portrayal, and the opportunity thus afforded us to reflect upon the nature of identities both real and operatic, but in the way that the technological aspect is produced to blur our understanding of which is the real, or perhaps primary, entity of the spectacle. There are points at which we cannot be sure from which of the bodies the voice emanates, and this is especially the case in the DVD version of the piece, where both bodies are digitally rendered by the medium of video, and the 'double's' audio can be perfectly synthesised into the overall sound of the piece. In this version, the 'second self' exists in a frame within the frame, a digital double within a digital medium. The audio technology is also used in relation to the live voice in a way that creates the effect of an augmented 'voice instrument', with all of these elements coming together to produce a strong sense of metareference to mediality itself, and human identity in relation to such mediation.

Interesting to notice my own use of capital letters to denote my own notes within the email collation – the phrase THIS EMAIL CHAIN ENDS HERE, has come to be iconic in the collation. Reflecting on the role of memory in all this. Like what it was like being at the hospital. Am I just imagining how I felt at the time. Don't remember. 'I'd be very happy to contribute to the narrative session in Feb - I've been thinking it might

be interesting to start with the question “What is the difference between a story and a true story?”' Copy pasting emails into the collation and then having to reformat my text because all the emails are some sort of sans serif at 11 point, rather than Times New Roman at 12 point is so annoying and tedious!

Division of a single character into multiple performers is also a feature of Harrison Birtwistle's *The Mask of Orpheus*, in which the main characters, Orpheus, Euridice and Aristaeus, are each portrayed by three performers: one representing their human selves, one their heroic selves and one their mythic selves. More than this though, the structure of *The Mask of Orpheus* is extremely rich in discontinuity. The events are not only non-linear in their telling, but sets of events happen recurrently and often simultaneously, sometimes playing out contradictions to be found in the many versions of the source material. These excesses of dramatic information are matched by the unrelenting, dense complexity of the music, which feels like a slow moving tidal wave that threatens to engulf the piece and the audience. As we have seen, contradiction, discontinuity and excess are key metafictional strategies, and the experience of this opera is akin to reading certain of the more hardcore metafictions. It should be noted, however, that the opera's features are more likely to spring from a postdramatic imperative than a metafictional one, an argument reinforced by the fact that, where metafiction might orient the reader in order to reveal how their orientation is actually fragile or illusory, *The Mask of Orpheus* displays no sign that it wishes its audience to experience anything but disorientation to begin with.

JUST REPLIED TO SUPERVISOR INCLUDING THIS: I'm just coming to the end of a gargantuan trawl through two email accounts, collating everything from September 2017 until now in order to enable me to write the right- hand, messy column of my commentary as a first person, present tense account that should prove a very stark contrast to the suspended temporality of the left-hand theoretical, conceptual column. It's been a quite unpleasant task, but I think it will enable a degree of accuracy and detail in the writing that would be impossible to invent, so it's crucial groundwork. HAVING CAUGHT UP WITH MYSELF, I WAS ABLE TO WRITE THIS SO THAT IT'S INFORMATIVE TO THEM BUT ALSO A REALLY USEFUL, NOW METAFICIONALISED ACCOUNT OF WHAT I'M CURRENTLY DOING!! THINGS ARE STARTING TO GET SUITABLY CONVOLUTED.

In Thomas Adès's adaptation of Luis Buñuel's film *The Exterminating Angel,* the opera's bourgeois, high-society characters return from an evening at an opera that is referred to as having been written by the composer Thomas Adès, a device that perfectly fits Lodge's category of The Short Circuit. As well as this single instance of metafictional play, the opera as a whole creates a strong

metareference to cultural discourses around the relationship between societal class structures and the arts. These themes – reminiscent of those addressed in Richard Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos,* which itself contains an opera within an opera and competition between so-called 'low' and 'high' art forms – are represented explicitly and implicitly through the setting and the behaviours and interactions of the characters. The discourse thematised in the opera is the same discourse implicit in the cultural context of its production, that context being a 'high-end', 'main stage' opera. This generates a critical, metareferential distance in the work that places the anti-bourgeois position of the filmic source material in dialogue with the cultural baggage of the operatic form.

Started thinking about what tone of voice for this column. Emails collated. Now to consolidate them into a single document – doing it by month so that when I write the right-hand column I can just go through them one by one. Back is really bad from it though**.** Just occurring to me that this thing will catch up with itself and naturally become a poioumenon. Thinking of taking from La Celestina / The Prestige and discreetly jumping from now to now without any explanation.

The operas of Gerald Barry feel distinctly metafictional to me, particularly *The Triumph of Beauty and Deceit* and *The Intelligence Park*. In both, Barry's hyper-inorganic vocal material not only resists any suggestion of naturalism, but, rather than the musical setting enabling the text of the libretto 'to speak', as would be the goal in traditional opera composition, it often feels more like a technical obstacle that the singer must overcome. This subjugation of the text to the musical systems of the work can be seen as both an overt subversion of convention and a metareference to the artificiality of the fiction's own medium. In true metafictional style, the plot of *The Intelligence Park* is also concerned with the creative act of composition for voice, featuring a composer and a singer as two of its main characters, and the characters of *The Triumph of Beauty and Deceit* are the embodiments of abstract concepts, whose preoccupation is the self-reflective debate of their own natures and relationships.

Maybe the form could be to write it in month chunks, sometimes interrupted by breaking to match up with the structure of the left-hand column? Watched A Sinking Feeling. Snow overnight, very cold this morning. In the month-by-month phase, up to Nov 2018. Friend made the point that the things I make for myself – chiptune, SK1, Puffs – are all totally different to my professional output. God, this collation is getting tedious, and having to remember and find the time to keep this diary as well as getting through the other stuff is really wearing thin too – I just have to remind myself that at this point, writing this diary is actually equivalent to writing the commentary, because this can go straight in, so thank fuck for that.

Object Collection call their work *It's All True* an 'opera in suspension'. It is a theatrical piece for four actors, drums and electric guitar and bass. The musical material is taken from the live-recording back catalogue of the band Fugazi, sections of which Object Collection's composer Travis Just and writer/director Kara Feely have transcribed and built into a structure of their own. This is not a plotted piece, but a collage of feedback, off the cuff comments and originally-impromptu political ranting. The work's metareferential quality comes from the way that the heavily political text of the piece resonates with the political discourses associated with the mode of its making, potentiating metacommentary on issues of narratorial control and the implications of medial recontextualisation of real, unplanned and in-the-moment utterances. Although its metareferential effect undoubtedly requires a recipient who is aware of its processes of construction, the material provenance of *It's All True* was well advertised in all associated publicity and programme/sleeve notes, and for such a recipient the work's critical dimension is extremely apparent.

Learned about the shoebill! Just reached December 2020 in the full collation! Did an Iceland for Mum and Dad, they've opted for Prawn Alfredo! Just spoke to Nonclassical. Possible April/May release, on CDs - I need to buy an amount from the label into the bargain, but I'd much prefer CDs to a purely digital release. Spoke with an ROH producer. Got onto the possibility of making a recording of the opera at the Linbury, unstaged. Very, very cold today, put the heating on early. Valentines day. Got Sally some nice chocolates and submitted my DYCP app. Made soup for lunch.

Benjamin Britten's *Owen Wingrave* features a role listed as 'Narrator, the ballad singer'. This 'character' performs a song at the beginning of the opera's second act, the text of which tells a tale that relates to the opera's themes of pacifism and familial obligation. The a cappella music for this ballad is markedly different from that of the rest of the opera, being of a harmonic and melodic character that can easily be read as representing the genre of 'folk music', an area well known to be of interest to Britten, as demonstrated by his output in general. *Owen Wingrave* was made for television, and the opera takes advantage of the fact that this moment of genuine narration can be made audible on the soundtrack without the performer being physically represented. So, the narration is performed by a disembodied singing voice that exists purely in the non-diegetic register of the opera, already drawing attention to the idea of diegesis, but in addition, the musical aspect is composed to resemble a real folk song, suggesting that, since a crucial part of folk music is its social origin, this song is part of the reality of the fiction, perhaps having emerged to document a

significant moment in the fiction's local history. Unlike the case of diegetic music, none of the characters of the opera – bar the ambiguous narrator – hear the song, but we can infer that they may *know* it since its musical style implies that it is part of the social fabric of the fictional world. This relationship between musical style and fictional ontology generates an effect that feels strongly metareferential, speaking of the sociocultural mechanisms of genre and notions of 'authenticity', as well as highlighting the narratorial register itself. The term 'fakelore' refers to contemporary stories and songs made and presented in such a way as to seem like genuinely traditional folklore, but implicit in *Wingrave's* narrator's ballad is a distinction between real and fictional fakelore, again conjuring Goffman's idea of there being no objectively 'real' reality, only ever shifting relationships between frames.[170]

First testing of the two columns in Open Office, looks good but I'll have to find out about the requirements of archiving etc. Also, it will be tricky to know when to try and put the final form together, because editing either column will be extra tough when they're side by side, to maintain structural, relational integrity. Finally started work on the writing of the left hand column. Writing the introduction – which has become the 'background'. It makes more sense and allows for proper context for the rest of the commentary in a neat, economical form.

When it comes to the metafictional potential of objects in opera, I can offer an example from my own output. *The Virtues of Things* is a chamber opera set in the workshop of a family of opera prop-makers who, afflicted with an illness which makes them 'allergic' to the significance of their own props, cease to be able to discern between their real world and the fictional worlds of the props they make. One moment of *Virtues* that is particularly salient to the research-practice exemplifies the ontological bridging potential of an object, in this case a bell jar, which results in the hallmark metafictional effect of mise en abyme.

Just wrote: Right hand column – what about the tone of an internal monologue to self? Can be much more expedient than explaining everything outwards, and will give a more immediate feel of thought process and psychological/emotional state. It will remove the possibility of playing omniscient narrator though, or if I do it will be extra weird in its tone, and probably break the sense of it being real in-the-now. Although maybe it would be cool to have the original tone as kinds of right hand footnotes?!

170 'Fakelore' also refers to reworkings of traditional folklore intended to better suit contemporary sensibilities. For more information about this idea in relation to folksong, see Dave Harker, *Fakesong: The manufacture of British 'folksong' 1700 to the present day* (Milton Keynes and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1985).

In the fiction of the opera, the bell jar was made by the De Selby family to feature as a prop in an opera about science during The Enlightenment, titled *The Father of Chemistry*, which is attributed to the fictional composer 'Miller'. The character Eames is placed within the bell jar as an eccentric way of demonstrating its functionality, while Peg De Selby (soprano) explains to him its role in Miller's opera. As Eames enters the contraption, the acoustic performance of the soprano and orchestra is replaced by pre-recorded audio of the same, produced to sound muffled, as if we are hearing it from the perspective of the encapsulated Eames. The soprano and orchestra then mime to the recording of themselves,[171] which is deliberately muffled enough that the words are unintelligible without recourse to the surtitles.[172] The moment is further emphasised by being the only electronically produced event in the opera's music.

Been putting together the table of contents, to make a kind of map. Feels like progress even though it's not the writing as such. Still working on the beginning of the intro in 'background'. The longer it takes me to finish, the more of this diary stuff there is to incorporate, so the more unmanageable that side of things becomes. Got to start thinking about getting in touch with the GSMD librarian about what forms of submission are acceptable.

So, a fictional character is cajoled into a bell jar which we, the real audience, the fictional characters of *Virtues* and the intra-diegetic characters of *The Father of Chemistry's* production company all agree is a prop. The bell jar, then, has the same fictional status in the real world and two further fictional worlds. Overtly electronic means are used to create the illusion of an in-world acoustic phenomenon, the muffled quality of which directs us to the auditorium's surtitles while the soprano mimes to a recording of herself such that the audience know that she, the singer, is silent, while they can yet hear the voice of the fictional character she portrays, from the perspective of the character in the bell jar. This matrix of ontologies hinges on the equivalences of the real and fictional bell jar props. Although this event is convoluted to describe, its resultant phenomena are direct and easily apprehended in performance, which is possible because the fictional framing of its elements present clear explanations for what is happening both in-world and in the reality of the audience, facilitated by the bridging function of the prop.

171 The ensemble were on stage for the performances in Snape and Leeds, and partially visible from some seats in the Linbury Studio Theatre of Royal Opera.

172 Which were Royal Opera House policy at the time.

Method or technique or device or thing, what is it?! Just working on the 'libretto making' section, working through Sally's index cards that distil my pre-existing thoughts – there are so many of them. Have to represent this stuff though, too relevant to leave out. Also just been thinking what primary sources of literary metafiction to include later on – got to have some Potter in there, so Hide and Seek, but also Muriel Spark, and Barthelme, and Le Guin and Barthes and Christine Brooke-Rose.

Having established the relevance of metafiction to the research-practice by looking at what it is, how it operates, how it relates to opera, and performed readings informed by this understanding, the next section describes some other reasons why this approach represents a deeply effective way to achieve the aims of the research-practice.

Realising that the right hand column is going to arrive at this stuff towards its end, while what it's talking about will be in the left hand column much earlier, between the two of them in parallel its like a palindrome, a kind of palindromic poioumenon. Must mention that here even if it isn't 100% accurate, it's too characterful a phrase and a point to leave out. Just asked Sally to write a bit about how the index cards became a plot etc. Just written: 'At some point say 'I remember thinking', then quote something that is parallel to it in the R hand column.' I do remember thinking that I should explain why metafiction at some point.

2.4. Why metafiction?

As we have seen, there are many reasons why metafictional attitudes are a good fit for the making of *She Described It to Death*. To begin with, metafictional devices were already a common feature of my work, and metafiction operates naturally as a research-practice being that it is by nature a practical exploration of theory, taking the border of fiction and criticism as its subject. Where opera studies and literary theory have a well established connection, the common ground tends to be narratological, and where metafictional effects occur they are either unconscious, limited to only a few categories or are actually generated by postdramatic attitudes, so a research-practice focused on the practical applications of metafiction should be able to contribute a fresh perspective. But there is another important reason why metafiction is useful in the context of our opera, in order to discuss it though, we must first identify our particular brand of metafiction.

Just thought, I must remember to refer to the red, orange, green dice system we had in place when Sally was working on the libretto and I was composing. Just started reading Albert Angelo. Never read any B.S. Johnson before and he comes up a lot in the textbooks, and there's a section in two columns just like I'm planning to write the commentary.

Although all literary metafiction is designed to unmask so-called realism, its manifestations represent a range of attitudes, as Waugh puts it:

> ...there are two poles of metafiction: one that finally accepts a substantial real world whose significance is not entirely composed of relationships within language; and one that suggests there can never be an escape from the prisonhouse of language and either delights or despairs in this.[173]

As you might expect, metafiction of the latter pole is far more disruptive in its methods. The difference between the poles might be described as the difference between destabilisation and destruction: locking the patio doors while realism is in the garden or bulldozing the house while it is still asleep.

And the Albert Angelo RHC is an inner monologue. And I can include it in the LHC primary source examples where it'll look like its where I got the idea for the commentary and then it'll be clear over here in the RHC that it was a coincidence, unless the reader assumes I'm lying, of course, perhaps they'll trust the RHC less than the LHC because it's not in the academic form, where no one would dream of making anything up. Just just just just.

She Described It to Death occupies a point on the metafictional spectrum nearer to the former pole, accepting that its reality is not composed solely of language. Partly this is because, unlike the novel, opera's representational apparatus affords far more than language to work with, and partly because, in order for the opera to draw attention to the social construction of reality, it is necessary that it contains an apprehensible representation of a 'paramount' reality within itself, and though such realities are a construct, they are also not maintained entirely by language. Not to mention that one of the themes of the opera is the search for meaning beyond the tyranny of language, as highlighted by Acantha's line:

> Let me lead us to a place I know
> where meaning can be found in complex, nameless
> things,

173 Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 53.

Soon followed by the final line of the opera, sung in duet with Attis:

> Let us escape.

...infusing the moment with irony since, as Berger and Luckmann point out, paramount reality is where we return when the opera's curtain falls.[174]

So, in the vein of the less disruptive flavour of metafiction, we hope to create a situation where our audience's existence in 'everyday', 'commons sense' reality continues 'with a new awareness of how the meanings and values of that world have been constructed and how, therefore, they can be challenged or changed' as we aim 'to unsettle […] convictions about the relative status of 'truth' and 'fiction'.[175] Metafiction, in the form of a novel or an opera, offers the potential to undermine confidence in the supposed 'reality' of 'everyday reality' since:

> The study of how to uncover deceptions is also by and large the study of how to build up fabrications . . . one can learn how one's sense of ordinary reality is produced by examining something that is easier to become conscious of, namely, how reality is mimicked and/or how it is faked.[176]

I wanted to change the tense of a word in relation to our collaborative practice but Sally didn't like it. Pointed out that past tense makes it local, like the libretto is the sole focus of her practice, whereas the sensibility we share is more broad and established. She's standing cooking and explaining as I type, I'm telling her I'm putting this in! Wondering if the RHC might actually have to be interleaved.

Mimicry by definition requires that its target is apprehensible, and in offering 'both innovation *and* familiarity through the individual reworking and undermining of familiar conventions' metafiction

174 'The transition between realities is marked by the rising and falling of the curtain. As the curtain rises, the spectator is 'transported to another world,' with its own meanings and an order that may or may not have much to do with the order of everyday life. As the curtain falls, the spectator 'returns to reality,' that is, to the paramount reality of everyday life by comparison with which the reality presented on the stage now appears tenuous and ephemeral, however vivid the presentation may have been a few moments previously.' Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, p. 24-25.

175 Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 34.

176 Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, p. 251.

can naturally fulfil this requirement.[177]

Remembering I cut out small pictures of all the instruments of the ensemble to help me visualise the music. Reading about the dominant of modernism being epistemology and the dominant of postmodernism being ontology, in McHale. Re-reading Waugh now.

Inclusion of the familiar alongside the unfamiliar is of fundamental importance in our context, with the feature of 'recognisability' playing a large part in both the critical and practical efficacy of the opera, making it well suited to the context of its production, which we will come to in a moment, and to addressing the issues of narrative and storytelling set out in the Background section of this commentary.

So difficult to get on with the reading and writing work, trying to read about the relationship between 'play' and metafiction, but the bins are all overflowing, so I do that, but the food bin's caked in harissa so I have to go back down and wipe down the edge of the big bin, then wash the little food bin and reline the landfill bin, then wash up breakfast, brush and floss my teeth, all with a million hand washes in between for fear of UTI's, then update this diary since I know I haven't for a few days.

As discussed in that section, corporate storytelling benefits from the fact that, in having become a naturalised part of everyday reality, it has the opportunity to act on the vulnerable human subconscious, with its surreal and cynical logic often going unnoticed, passively and casually consumed as pockets of 'entertainment' or 'news' via the taken-for-granted matrix of screens and print. In short, its recognisability is essential to its effect. With this in mind, I was motivated to try and make an opera that uses its own naturalised conventions, its own recognisabilities, to embody that essential property of the object of its criticism, with the aim that such self-reflectivity in the work might be able to induce the same in its audience and makers.

Just got the Mark Currie metafiction book with some David Lodge and Muriel Spark on their way. Turns out you can't get a copy of David McElroy's *A Smuggler's Bible* for under a hundred quid coz it's out of print. So many metafictional novels out there and I've read so few by comparison – but I can't have read more *and* written an opera! Every time I want to get out of the word processor windows I have to close so many of them. Like I can't escape the various frames of the writing. Just been writing about analogy as a creative tool, afforded by language.

177 Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 12.

In relation to recognisability, there is also another important factor to consider, that being the context of the opera's production. In these terms, having recognisability as an in-built feature of the work creates a situation where the creative collaboration can be more synergetic.

Puffs EP was on The Other Rock Show's 'Albums of last year' show. Very kind, and very satisfying. I'm already writing the next one around all this. Found myself writing: Then strategies and examples!!! Recursion, nesting, frames etc. To support some of the methods in the writing of this section etc. and also write in such a way as to reinforce the strategies described! Just got through Mark Currie's *Metafiction.* Sally had her jab two days ago. Noticing how my blue highlighting made a 'book within a book' in the Currie – should mention that at this point in the RHC. Thinking about typographic demonstrations of the materiality of the text in the LHC, don't know if the librarian/archivist will allow such things, but the point is the subject matter of metafiction makes an argument for it, so maybe it will be okay – this is about the text's relationship with the conventions of academic writing.

A major requirement of the Royal Opera House is that, whatever the critical function or radical intent of a work, it should be accessible to a general opera audience, rather than an audience who are perhaps more acclimatised to 'experimental' work, for example. 'Accessible', 'audience' and 'experimental' are ubiquitous terms in the arts but are in fact extremely difficult to qualify, often used as if they represent a simple, singular idea when in fact they are applied in a multitude of contexts in relation to an extremely complex matrix of political, philosophical, ideological and economic positions, all of which puts their definition well beyond the scope of this commentary. In our case, though, we can say that when it comes to judging the degree to which a work is 'accessible', the producer is arbiter.

But if autoethnographic fiction is permissible – actual *fictions* – in the academic text, then why not typographic devices, the fictions are self-acknowledged of course, but how could the typographic devices be anything but? They couldn't happen by accident. Conceived the idea of 'premonitions' as a theme – seed them throughout the RHC, 'see' and quote bits of the parallel LHC, wonder if its premonitions of the opera, then wonder if they were all about the piano record when that happens, then unify the L and R HC at the end of the conclusion, not a premonition any more, actually happening 'now'. Think the two columns will have to be alternating. Not in parallel. Maybe if the fonts and style are super distinct from each other reading strategies present themselves well enough – as well as in parallel anyway.

A producer performs not only a practical, organisational role, they are also responsible for representing the attitudes of their company in the making process. If a producer finds the intent or manner or tone of a work opaque or disagreeable in the terms of the company they cannot assent to its production, and are bound to seek to change it in order to avoid the risk of ultimately presenting an opera which fails to reflect the company's values. In the specific context of ROH, it seems that 'accessibility' is considered to be in part a function of 'recognisability', so the more their 'general opera audience' are believed to be able to recognise elements of an opera as 'operatic', the more 'accessible' it is deemed to be. This reflects the idea that the tighter a work clings to convention, the broader, in one sense, its reach, since conventions are by definition ubiquitous and universally understood within their cultural context. Although certain valuations of this idea undoubtedly result in deeply problematic social attitudes, here I only have scope to provide illumination for the research-practice, since a full investigation of these potential problems would require a research-practice of its own.

Got my first vaccination booked. Got to go the Crystal Palace FC ground for it. Get the sociological frameworks in there. Goffman, Berger and Luckmann, such a natural overlap between fictional and real constructions. Everything's relational. Identify strategies for the reader, examples and types. I can feel it coming together. Try and write nicely. Not bland, make some metaphor's of your own. Nonclassical have moved the piano record to the end of June.

In our context though, unfamiliar elements are like children in a newsagent, not to be trusted unless accompanied by a responsible convention, the presence of which allows them to get hold of the sweets and stickers they came for. The recognisable affords and supports the unrecognisable.

Great to have The Course of the Heart in here. Was a shame Mike couldn't write the libretto at the time, but I wouldn't change it now, Sally absolutely nailed it. And still talking with Mike about making something together is amazing. That Christine Brooke-Rose stuff is astonishing. She shows you your own language in a new light. Had my jab. Just waiting on side effects. Woah. Rough today. Arm is heavy. Headache. Day off definitely.

So the fact that metafictional attitudes achieve their criticality in part by retaining certain recognisable conventional features is advantageous: it represents the possibility that the collaborative dialogue can be focused on how to realise the work rather than how to change it. Both

types of conversation involve compromise of course, but there is a big difference between a conversation that results in the organic evolution of detail in the interests of clarity and a conversation containing the heavy implication that a general reworking of material might be required purely in the interests of recognisability.

Tough couple of days but back on it. Body's grumbling in all sorts of weird ways. In relation to opera now. Got to get this bit right. Start back with Abbate, not so narratological now, but narration in relation to metafiction's important grounding. And ontological duality, Novak's hot on that. Got to get onto intermediality though, that's where the meta-stuff sits. Can't believe I haven't seen Mum and Dad for over a year. They're talking about coming up in a couple of weeks, now they're all vaccinated. Interweaving the right hand column instead. Will still do the trick, different readying strategies. Such a big composition job.

Smaller, ongoing compromises are in fact essential to a collaborative process, and in presenting a world of choice as to how different parameters of form are weighted, metafiction affords a flexibility ideally suited to creative negotiations, which inevitably involve reasonable adjustments to all aspects of the representational materials. In my experience, for example, unusual narrative structures are more readily accepted if emotional intensity is maintained as a feature, but this emotional intensity can itself be driven by many unconventional structures, as long as causality is clear. So, although as an audience I greatly enjoy experimental opera and music theatre, and in general it is more than arguable that those attitudes can result in phenomena that fulfill the criteria of metafiction, what such approaches do not necessarily provide are the recognisable conventions that allow *She Described It to Death* to achieve its specific aims while functioning smoothly in its specific context.

Now just some examples and I'm there. All things I know well, so that should help. Never made these readings before though, genuinely interested to do it. Not 'taxonomy', 'categories'. That's what it is. So nearly done with Metafiction bit, then all set to write the categories – get across how all this actually fed the composing. There'll need to be more theory in it, but self-contained sections, easier to think about the structure. Can't wait. Tie up 'why metafiction'. So desperate to get to The Categories but got to shore up properly. Don't take decisions for granted.

When it comes to the potential pitfalls of this approach, common complaints about metafiction are that the distance it creates can render a work 'cold', or that the constant disruption and presence of the author can stifle the reader. If mishandled, parody can become pastiche, recursive structures

can become superficial and arbitrary, and self-awareness itself can become a purely formal exercise. I can appreciate the root of these kinds of criticism, metafiction certainly has the potential to fall into all of these traps, nevertheless the fact remains that metafiction, and metareferential works in general, describe a very wide spectrum, and ultimately any detrimental effects are not inevitable but arise at the intersection of the author's judgment and the reader's sensibility. There is no innate issue with metafiction, the challenge of making it is the same as with any creative endeavor: you have to judge it well, but you rarely know what that means until later.

Done it. DONE. IT! Set up for the categories now. Got their own theory but I know it. Just re-reading Levine and remembered affordances. You can kind of put the whole thing down to it. I can write opera just thinking about affordances. And what genre affords, and convention, of the opera, or this commentary or anything. Opera composing as composing relationships. Research process delivering new things. Can't believe I'm finally at The Categories. Seems extra weird that no-one's seen the opera.

What follows is a categorised breakdown of some of the metafictional devices to be found in *She Described It to Death*.

3. The Categories

This chapter and the next operate in tandem. 'The Categories' presents a wide selection of the metafictional music to be found in *She Described It to Death* in order to provide clear, detailed points of reference for the next chapter, 'Process Under the Microscope', which takes a range of these examples as the focus for critical reflection on the specific thought processes and methods involved in taking each from initial idea through to realisation, including providing examples of alternative, less gentle, metafictional compositional approaches to the same idea, and attempting to evaluate the relative success of each in the context of the research-practice.

The libretto and a full synopsis of *She Described It to Death* can be found in the appendices of this commentary. To give a flavour of the opera though, it plays on the conventions of a range of social genres and sub-realities, including opera itself, to portray a world in which, what seem to us, remarkable behaviours have become naturalised. In one sense it is a conventional opera: there is a clear plot, words are almost always sung, and love, lust, loss and a search for meaning offer us a familiar welcome. Modes of narration and oration saturate the world though, often via mediating technologies, coercing and cajoling conventional motivations into unconventionally complex relationships that resist the paradigm of binary oppositions. The events of the opera emerge not as expressions of fatalism or the singular will of any individual, but out of contingency and chaos. The characters include humans, but they live indefinitely, governed by hidden councils of birds, gnats, trees and algae. The plot structure is linear but leaves us unable to predict its direction and is not impelled by warlike intentions. To muddy the ontological waters, fictions are permeable, and the opera-world contains sub-worlds built out of other fictions, fictions from our real world.

Crucially, *She Described It to Death* is not trying to disavow, or demolish opera, it is trying to really *be* an opera, to the extent that at points we can *see* it trying to be an opera. It likes intelligible events, but it also likes fluctuating superpositions. It likes seriousness, and absurdity, and the absurdity of seriousness. It wants to remind us that, like reality of all kinds, opera is constructed to mask the chaotic, fluid, random nature of existence. Its conventions are not encumbrances though, they are the base from which its defamiliarisation proceeds.[178] In general, the opera's metastatus is attended to by characters who are poets and writers, in a world where writing is outlawed. In

178 'The defamiliarization proceeds from an extremely familiar base', Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 13.

particular, it is shot-through with potentially metareferential devices, the musical variety of which comprise the focus of this section.

Each of the following compositional categories takes a particular literary concept, or family of concepts, as its stimulus. I came to think of myself as composing with the relationships between the musical and extramusical components of the opera as much as composing the internal relationships of the music itself – thinking about how the sound of a diegetic doorbell could be composed to create a relationship between the object and the opera's ontological dimension, or how to compose a sound that sits in relation to a diegetic chainsaw in such a way as to exist on the cusp of music and mimesis, for example.

Thinking on Almén's understandable criticism of imposing literary theory onto music, it should be made clear that, although such theory has been drawn upon to inform the composing process, the efficacy of the resultant musical devices does not rest upon the degree of their equivalence with their literary stimuli. Moreover, the capacity of these devices to produce discrete metafictional effects can be judged, albeit subjectively, without recourse to literary theory.

Before moving on to the categories themselves, it is timely to clarify the technical definition of 'discrete, immediate devices, as opposed to macro-structural relationships', as stated in the research objectives section. An exemplary macro-structural device is leitmotif, where a musical object is attached to a particular character, idea, or event and recurs at various points of the opera to comment upon the psychological and emotional state of that with which it is associated. Each instance of leitmotif functions in relation to all the others, operating across the entire duration of a work. Distinct from this, then, a discrete, immediate device is one which functions in-the-moment, without reference to earlier or later points in the structure as a whole.

Finally, it should be noted that the following is indicative rather than exhaustive, and many of its examples could reasonably fit into a number of categories. However, since the effect of any of these devices is as much down to the recipient as the composer, the intention here is not to try and cover every inch of the opera, but to set out enough significant examples to demonstrate its principles of composition and to prime the reader to be as aware as possible of its metafictional aspect.

3.1. Description, Syntagms & the Narration of Fictional Time

(featuring both literal & social suffocation)

When thinking of musical analogies to literary description it is easy to imagine music that somehow imitates the character of that which is being described, an essential quality of its behaviour, attitude, shape, material, decoration or patina, perhaps. One of the most distinctive features of literary description, however, is its relationship with the flow of fictional time. As Roland Barthes says of description:

> ...it has no predictive mark; "analogical," its structure is purely summatory and does not contain that trajectory of choices and alternatives which gives narration the appearance of a huge traffic-control center, furnished with a referential (and not merely discursive) temporality.[179]

Since the reality of a novel is purely linguistic, if the words describing the world do not refer to, or imply, a temporal dimension – when describing the physical attributes of a room, say – then diegetic time cannot be made to advance. Even descriptions of action do not convey diegetic time 'at-speed', since any event represents an inexhaustible source of information, of which a total description would be impossible at any length.

It struck me that, since the negation of a sense of temporal flow requires concerted effort in musical terms, emulating this particularity of literary description might produce an outcome that would 'stick out', not least as it would be atypical of my musical language as a whole, which tends to be pushing forward, as it were. This would represent an attempt to capture in music the character of description itself, rather than what is being described, an act which felt as though it had the potential to achieve a metareferential outcome since its intended statement would be about the medium not the content.

From a conceptual perspective, Roman Jakobson's work on paradigmatic analysis proved a useful thought-tool. In Jakobson's framework language is considered to have two axes, the paradigmatic

179 Roland Barthes, 'The Reality Effect', in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 141-48 (p. 143).

and the syntactic, the latter referring to the chaining of syntagms. A syntagm is a modular unit of text that can be combined with other syntagms to construct longer units, and a paradigm is a familial set of syntagms. For example, the Roman alphabet is a paradigm from which the syntagms of English words can be made. The lexicon of English words in turn provides the paradigm from which the syntagms of English sentences can be constructed, and so on. So for Jakobson, language functions through two mechanisms, the selection and combination of syntagms.[180] As Lodge describes it, 'To construct any sentence we select certain items from the paradigm of the language and combine them according to its rules.'[181]

In Jakobson's theory, selection from the paradigmatic axis is produced on the basis of 'equivalence', a term which he uses as a shorthand for the relational properties of 'similarity and dissimilarity, synonymity and antonymity'.[182] Thus a lexiconic paradigm comprises the set of words that represent the many different potential inflections of the intended meaning of the selection. Some words of the paradigm are close in feel to each other and others proceed from the same essential idea but evoke quite different tones and connotations – take 'child', 'toddler', 'kid', 'brat' and 'squirt', for example. Although in the basic context of conveying meaning such selection would clearly not produce antonyms – one would not select 'adult' to mean 'child', for instance – and in contemporary terms the idea of 'opposites' has less traction in general, the fact that any meaning naturally implies contrasting and counteracting meanings is self-evident: in suggesting the meaning 'long' we cannot help but imply its relational partner 'short'.

Describing poetry, Jakobson asserts that 'The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination', deriving 'the indispensable feature inherent in any piece of poetry' from the 'equivalence' of its rhythmic elements:[183]

> word stress is assumed to equal word stress, as unstress equals unstress; prosodic long is matched with long, and short with short; word boundary equals word boundary, no boundary equals no boundary; syntactic pause equals syntactic

180 Eliza Krupińska, 'On Ruwet's Semiotically Oriented Theory of Music', *Interdisciplinary Studies in Musicology*, No. 14 (2014), pp. 249-58 (p. 249).
181 Lodge, *Working with Structuralism*, p. 11.
182 Roman Jakobson, 'Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics', in *Style in Language*, ed. by Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1960), pp. 350-77 (p. 358).
183 ibid.

> pause, no pause equals no pause. Syllables are converted into units of measure, and so are morae or stresses.[184]

Through these equivalences, patterns can be built that are nothing to do with the semantic content of the words, with Jakobson noting that 'Measure of sequences is a device which, outside of poetic function, finds no application in language.'[185] The musicality of these terms is reinforced by Jakobson's claim that 'Only in poetry with its regular reiteration of equivalent units is the time of the speech flow experienced, as it is – to cite another semiotic pattern – with musical time.'[186] So, in addition to the principle of equivalence we can see that Jakobson also identifies the 'Regular repetition of equivalent units' as a concept central to the poetic mode.[187]

With the above in mind, it may come as no surprise that the linguist and music analyst Nicolas Ruwet took Jakobson's ideas as the basis for a 'semiotic structural theory of music'.[188] Ruwet identifies musical 'units' (syntagms) – essentially note-collections discernible by their repeated use – and describes their combination along the syntactic axis in relation to a version of Jakobson's equivalence, stating that:

> Musical syntax is a syntax of equivalences: the various units have between them all sorts of relationships of equivalence – relationships which can unite, for example, segments of unequal length – one segment will seem to be an expansion, or a contraction, of another – and also segments encroaching on one another[189]

In the context of paradigmatic analysis, the repeat of a syntagm need not be in close proximity to its previous iteration,[190] with the analytic system being predicated on differentiating between varieties

184 ibid.
185 ibid.
186 ibid.
187 Another central property beyond our immediate discussion is introversive semiosis, essentially the idea that linguistic or musical units refer only to themselves: 'Since a musical sign does not refer to any object outside the musical structure, and all its references are enclosed within the higher structure to which the sign belongs as its component, we are dealing here with introversive semiosis. In other words: music is its own repository of musical meanings', Krupińska, 'On Ruwet's Semiotically Oriented Theory of Music', *Interdisciplinary Studies in Musicology*, pp. 253-4.
188 ibid. p. 254.
189 Nicholas Ruwet, 'Methods of Analysis in Musicology', *Music Analysis*, Vol. 6 No.1/2, trans. by Mark Everist (1987) pp. 3-9+11-36 (p. 32).
190 And can involve transformations.

of repetition. However, the repetition of a syntagm in immediate proximity to itself emphasises the paradigmatic axis by discluding the effects of the combinatorial syntactic axis – the 'sentence' proceeds without change, without recombination. Since, in terms of diegetic time, the syntactic axis is responsible for the effect of 'forward momentum' – as evidenced by the fact that 'Plot is a syntagmatic concept and consequently involves the experiencing of time'[191] – its exclusion seemed to me to represent the potential of achieving my aim of negating the sense of diegetic temporal flow.

3.1.1. Southern Suffocation

I approached the idea from a few different angles at various points of *She Described It to Death*, but a good example, and what I think of as one of the 'purest', instances can be found in Scene 3 between bars 17 and 32 (p.43). At this point in the opera we witness a new character lurch onto the stage and suffocate themselves with a carrier bag.[192] The music is intended to suspend a sense of forward movement and create an atmosphere of claustrophobic anxiety and uncertainty, offering no implication of how long the situation might last or how it might resolve. In this instance, the type of musical material I composed to achieve the required effect is a short, invariant, harmonically static, aggressively orchestrated cell which is then repeated in immediate proximity to itself for about thirty five seconds, the entire duration of the staged event.

The whole passage is unwaveringly loud. Piano and snare drum double each other on an alternating semiquaver/semiquaver-quintuplet pattern, with use of the piano's high register designed to render the material belligerent and nerve-jangling. In addition, a stress pattern of sets of three and two semiquavers runs across the barline, accented whole-tone dyads marking the pattern in the piano, as well as accents in the snare drum part. Although the stress pattern forms a counterpoint with the bar-long syntagm, its effect is intended to imbue the material with an unsettled, unwelcoming energy, rather than disrupting the sense of the syntagm as a single, repeating object. A cup muted trombone adds its nasal energy to the mix as the most overtly contrapuntal element, not as hardline in its commitment to the syntagm, but certainly not negating its dominance, and as constrained in tone and material as everything else. All of the micro-deviations contribute to a singular, consistent character, rather than counteracting the constancy of the syntagm in general.

191 Yuri M. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, trans. by Ann Shukman (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 151.

192 They are then brought back from the dead with a simple injection, the next surprise of the piece.

The chord is C, D, E flat and F sharp throughout,[193] with some fluctuations in the voicing, again to sustain an unstable energy rather than to disrupt the syntagm, the constant D and F sharp being held tones, with the F sharp occasionally dovetailing from clarinet to bassoon. The harmony is based around the strong presence of a diminished triad, which, without further harmonic context is ambiguous in terms of its function, providing no implication of a 'home' key or tonic. Arnold Schoenberg makes the distinction between chord progression and chord succession, the latter being an 'aimless' harmonic chain without 'a definite goal', perhaps oscillating between two chords, or cycling around a few more back to the first.[194] More than this, 'a *succession* of chords may be *functionless*, neither expressing an unmistakable tonality nor requiring a definite continuation.'[195] Although this is obviously in the vein of the kind of 'stasis' I was hoping to create, in this case I decided to pare back even further, utilising one, fixed chord, abstracted from a functional context, with the idea that this would create a more 'aggressive' dramatic effect by denying the audience any harmonic relief or release.

I think of this as non-directional music, in that its rhythm, gesture and harmony provide no information about its trajectory, creating a state in which, as Barthes puts it: 'nothing could indicate why we should halt the details of the description here and not there'.[196] Since there is no text to adhere to at this point, it is apparent to the audience that the delimiting factors of this material are the aesthetic or rhetorical decisions of the composer. Decision-making on the composer's part can only be known by an audience in hindsight though: until this musical material changes, who knows how long the composer may have decided to make it last. This in-the-moment suspension of musical causality is my attempt to render the quality of literary description. In order to reinforce this quality, the specific material aspects and arrangement of the section are designed to be stressful to listen to, with the idea that a listener who hopes this moment will not go on for too long will have more occasion to notice that they are unable to predict its duration. A double bass joins halfway through to make the small concession of some low end, but it does as much to say 'this is still happening' as it does to say 'don't worry, not much longer'. It should be said that the thirty five or so seconds of this passage would feel very short in the music of some composers, but in the context of my restless musical language such a monolithic stretch should feel substantial.

193 No idea why it is F sharp and not G flat, I assume my composer licence will be revoked.

194 'A *succession* is aimless; a *progression* aims for a definite goal.' Arnold Schoenberg, *Structural Functions of Harmony*, ed. by Leonard Stein (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 1.

195 ibid.

196 Barthes, 'The Reality Effect', p. 145.

In conceptual terms, this approach seems to contradict Jakobson's claim that it is the 'regular reiteration of equivalent units' that allows the flow of time to be experienced, being that here we purpose an extremely regular reiteration of such in order to try to dispel a sense of time. Jakobson is referring to 'real' temporality though, the effect he describes operates in the non-diegetic time of the reader or speaker of poetry, whereas the temporal flow I am trying to impede is that of the fictional register. Also, Jakobson is referring to poetry of a certain kind, where each abstract rhythmic event is simultaneous with a changing phonetic and semantic content, so even a limited rhythmic pattern moves in the dimensions of formant and meaning. In the case of our musical example we are dealing not only with a limited rhythmic set, but also a limited syntagm, equivalent, in the everyday sense, to repeating a single word, or a very short 'sentence' comprising an alternation of two words, perhaps. By electronic means it is possible to increase the frequency of any rhythm to the point where it becomes a static pitch, and our process feels analogous to this but across the non-diegetic/diegetic boundary – the repetition of a short, self-similar syntagm in non-diegetic time is at a frequency high enough to suspend in-world time.

In reality, this effect is of course countered by the fact that on-stage action is unfolding in a way that creates a clear sense of the flow of diegetic time.[197] These methods are not intended to be flawless renderings of their concepts though, more they are founded on the belief that, in engaging with those concepts, particular and striking operatic effects can be produced. Compositional experience warns against being so tied to a fixed aim that one cannot appreciate the richness of results beyond the narrow band of its intent. The ultimate goal is, after all, to achieve metafictional effect, and although the music cannot suspend the flow of diegetic time single handedly, there is nevertheless a strong effect achieved at the level of the relationship between the music and the staging, precisely because the tension between their modes of representation draws attention to the music's role.

This relationship can be considered in terms of 'distance', one of the themes of narrational analysis. In this instance, I would say there is a kind of mid-distance: the musical behaviour is clearly not imitative of the action, but it creates a space within which the events can unfold that is emotionally and psychologically resonant with them. So I see the dramaturgy here as empathetic, rather than ironic, describing the emotional state not the action, and with a meta-effect that arises from the

197 This is an assumption about the staging. Since the opera was never produced it is difficult to know exactly how the staging would have worked, but in order to carry out the libretto's stage directions it seems impossible that the flow of diegetic time would be impeded, as the action is intended to represent a struggle.

music's sudden refusal to progress, which draws our attention to the music in its own right, alongside its dramaturgical function.

3.1.2. Bract Storms Off

An even more focused variation of the above material can be found between bars 417 and 437 of Scene 6 (p.290). At this point the character Bract has stormed off to find the algae Volvox, who might be able to countermand Bract's imminent relocation to the world of John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*. The tone of this passage is remarkably solemn compared with the tantrum that precedes it. As mentioned earlier, the majority of the opera's music is considerably more contrapuntal and directional than in these examples, so coupled with the shift in tone this moment should provide something of a jolt and, for those listeners who remember, recall the above events of Scene 3.

In this instance, the syntagm is a bar long phrase, again featuring an oscillating pulse figure doubled by the piano and percussion, but this time without the counterpoint of a pattern of accents and entirely contained within the bar. The suspension of harmonic direction is aptly created by two suspended chords, a B flat sus4 in the strings, piano and accordion which, rather than resolving to either B flat major or minor, instead has a C sharp sus4 superimposed over it by the wind. There is also a tape part which artificially elongates Bract's final sung note (an F). The bar-length syntagm is used to construct a longer, five bar syntagm, the only demarcation of which is the wind chord pausing for three beats at the end of the block. This longer syntagm is repeated four times amounting to a total duration of about forty seconds.

An added difficulty in imagining the effect of this section is that it is a scene transition, and I have no way of knowing what it would actually have involved in terms of staging. In my mind though, this is a moment of great discursive distance, the unexpected solemnity of the tone of the music combining with its suspension of diegetic time and complete lack of any imitative qualities to create an abstract space which gives the audience room to notice their real surroundings and to reflect on the experience of the opera, both as a fiction and as a cultural artefact.

3.1.3. Antagonistic Interlude

Moving from the suspension of diegetic time to musical narration of its passing, syntactical thinking is also behind the instrumental interlude between Scenes 2 and 3 (p.35, b.31). In Scene 2 we

witness a conversation between Birds and Gnats, their voices represented by synthesizers and their words by projected text. This plays out over a backdrop comprising a digitally slowed version of the music of Scene 1. As this highly synthetic scene gradually fades, the acoustic instrumental interlude begins.

The rhythmic syntagm for this instrumental section is a pattern of seven crotchets followed by a crotchet rest, performed homophonically by every instrument except the percussion. This acts as the building block for a longer syntagm within which it repeats three times before a final bar of four crotchets followed by a minim rest. In combination, the rhythm and pitch gestures of this longer syntagm work to set up an unmistakable pattern which is then interrupted. The whole syntagm is repeated with occasional, unpredictable variations of tempo, articulation and phrasing. In contrast to this are the kick drum and bongos, which agitatedly mutter away in the background throughout. Rather than giving impetus to the music though, the percussion serves to reinforce the sense that the other material will take as long as it takes, refusing to be spurred on.

This material is conceived to be tense and slightly antagonistic. In contrast to the previous examples, the syntagm quickly suggests its direction. The music then plays on the audience's ability to anticipate its gesture by drawing it out, as if self-importantly enjoying any irritation this might elicit. The unpredictable irregularities of pacing and phrasing are intended to further needle the listener: rather than offering relief from the predictability, these bursts demand attention, making it harder for the audience to switch off and passively 'wait it out'. The pitch content is composed to seem like an amateurish, dysfunctional attempt at 'atonality', with the double bass's reiterated D suggesting the composer has read somewhere that such an underpinning can be used to stabilise non-diatonic harmony. Staccato articulation lends a snippy inflection to the music, 'we won't get to the end any quicker just because you're huffy' it says.

The tone is intended to serve the dual purposes of dramaturgy and metareferential effect. In dramaturgical terms, it simply sets up the fractiousness of the scene to come, but in terms of metafiction it has two objectives. The first is to create a metareference to the making process itself. My intention was that this material would seem deliberately clunky and irritating, to the extent that it might draw the audience's attention to the idea of there being a decision making process behind the music.

The second metareferential effect relates to the music's narrational status. The character of this interlude is easily read as representing the passing of diegetic time, particularly since it happens in the context of a scene change. This is a common function for music in opera, film, television and radio of course, and in itself does not confer upon the music the status of narrator. As much as anything, it is our understanding of the convention that allows us to interpret what the music is doing. An essential quality of narration that is not necessarily conferred upon music by this convention is that we know that a narrator *knows* they are narrating.

To achieve this state I have tried to compose music that not only provokes us into an awareness of its making and that its subject is temporality, but also suggests that its meta-subject is its own role in the conveying of temporality. As well as its clock-like features, the music uses fluctuations of pacing to playfully flaunt its ambiguous relationship with diegetic time, foregrounding the distance produced by the narration. It is my hope that all these qualities can combine to generate a further quality of 'marking-out-time-ness' that is conspicuous enough to create a sense not just of the music denoting the passing of fictional time, but of it acknowledging itself as the denoter.

Another aspect which I felt would support the intended conspicuousness of the interlude is that its music is nothing like any of the music that precedes it. Obviously in dramaturgical terms it creates a tone that the audience can assume must be relevant, but neither the music-drama to this point or the context of scene transition offer an immediate explanation as to what its relevance must be. Denied obvious cues as to the relationship between the music and the fiction I hoped the audience would have further cause to think about the medium of music itself.

3.1.4. Fatigued Diatonicism

A similar affect is attempted at the end of Scene 5 (p.212, b.262), but this time alongside staged events. At this point the libretto instructions read: *Actions on stage represent time passing*. There is no singing from the performers, this is a duet for music and mimed action. The scene is set in the north of the Great City, where moribund social conventions drag on for hours. We witness Acantha and her guests, Axil and Isidium, engaged in a protracted, dull conversation. The action is intended to be performed as if six hours of diegetic time were passing, at the end of which a caption appears reading 'six hours later'. It is a more humorous scene than the previous examples, and the music attempts to narrate the passage of time accordingly. Previously we have seen Axil and Isidium both

earnestly expound on nature in a tone parodic of serious opera, and the music of this section plays partly on the memory of that earlier parody.

The violin, cello and double bass form a kind of slightly sickly, slightly unctuous, slow procession that gradually loses momentum until it is entirely enervated. Harmonically, it plays on the double bass's alternation between E flat and A flat to create a chain of faux perfect cadences, the other strings loitering around D, E flat and E natural. The violin and cello change pitch every three-four bar, sometimes this is in sync with the bass, sometimes not. Meanwhile a short, high piano dyad, a ninth comprising C and D, marks every thirteen semiquavers, a pulse entirely independent of the strings. As the section moves on, the double bass increasingly delays its shift from 'dominant' to 'tonic' until eventually holding the E flat.

As well as the harmonic not-quite-rightness, the tone of this section derives partly from its bald playing on a recognisable style of classical music, giving the impression of a fatigued diatonicism that doesn't really know where to go, and gradually gives up trying to work it out, bringing us to a suspended eternity-in-miniature. In addition to this narration of Acantha's perception of the flow of time, the music uses light parody to refer to the idea of the stagnation of the fictional social conventions, being that parody

> ...renews and maintains the relationship between form and what it can express, by upsetting a previous balance which has become so rigidified that that the conventions of the form can express only a limited or even irrelevant content.[198]

a description that fits perfectly with the state of social interaction depicted in this part of the opera. The intention of the music, then, is not to pass comment on the stylistic subject of the musical parody itself, but to use the tone this sets as a wry dramaturgical metaphor for the scene, while the stagnation of the flow of music that produces this metaphor also creates a sense of suspended temporality. The idea of parody is explored more fully in the following section, alongside the concepts of heteroglossia and genre.

198 Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 68.

3.2. Heteroglossia, Genre & Parody

(featuring an algae, a soap box & a public piano)

Heteroglossia is a concept developed by Mikhail Bakhtin in his investigation of the nature of novelistic form. He uses the term to describe the property that many varieties of language existing together within the same text. He writes:

> The novel as a whole is a phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice. In it the investigator is confronted with several heterogeneous stylistic unities, often located on different linguistic levels and subject to different stylistic controls.[199]

Bakhtin breaks down the compositional-stylistic unities of the novel into:

> Direct authorial literary-artistic narration (in all its diverse variants);
> Stylization of the various forms of everyday oral narration;
> Stylization of the various forms of semiliterary (written) everyday narration (the letter, the diary, etc.);
> Various forms of literary but extra-artistic authorial speech (moral, philosophical or scientific statements, oratory, ethnographic descriptions, memoranda and so forth);
> The stylistically individualized speech of characters.

Of which he says:

> These heterogeneous stylistic unities, upon entering the novel, combine to form a structured artistic system, and are subordinated to the higher stylistic unity of the work as a whole, a unity that cannot be identified with any single one of the unities subordinated to it.[200]

199 Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M.Bakhtin*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), pp. 259-422 (p. 261).
200 ibid. p. 262.

Where Saussurean linguistic theory – the structuralist foundation of paradigmatic analysis – identifies the site of meaning production as the internal relationships of language (*langue*), Bakhtin identifies meaning production as being situated in the specific things that are *said* with language, its particular constructions (*parole*). As Lodge says, for Bakhtin 'the word is not, as in Saussure, a two-sided sign – signifier and signified – but a two sided *act'*.[201] So, for Bakhtin, language is naturally dialogic:

> ...every word is directed toward an *answer* and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates. The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer's direction.[202]

It is Bakhtin's view that the power of novelistic form resides in its ability 'to do justice to the inherent dialogism of language and culture by means of its discursive polyphony'.[203] This heteroglossia enables what Lodge calls 'the continuous critique of of all repressive, authoritarian, one-eyed ideologies.'[204] The idea being that:

> As soon as you allow a variety of discourse into a textual space – vulgar discourses as well as polite ones, vernacular as well as literary, oral as well as written – you establish a resistance […] to the dominance of any one discourse.[205]

In addition to which, it is important in our context to note that 'Metafiction flaunts and exaggerates [...] the fact that novels are constructed through a continuous assimilation of everyday historical forms of communication.'[206]

As well as being the seed from which contemporary intertextuality grew,[207] Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia also spawned an understanding of genre that has had a great influence on cultural discourse in general, and specifically on *She Described It to Death*. In keeping with his understanding

201 Lodge, 'The Novel Now', p. 156.
202 Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', p. 280.
203 Lodge, 'The Novel Now', p. 156.
204 ibid. p. 157.
205 ibid.
206 Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 5.
207 The work of Julia Kristeva being instrumental in this development.

of language, rather than genre simply being an immutable receptacle to be filled, Bakhtin views genre as performed. In this conception, the performance of a genre amounts to assenting to reproduce its conventions. As such, genre need not be confined to artistic endeavours and can include the everyday. Everyday genres include things like writing a letter of application, ordering a taxi, keeping a diary and the sales patter of a market stall holder, for example. Academic writing and speaking are genres too, and the degree to which an academic text can dissent to reproducing the conventions of academic form is of particular significance in relation to artistic research-practices, which might more naturally strain at those boundaries than scientific research, for example. It is easy to see how genre relates to Goffman's idea of frames, with the set of conventions of any frame likely to include linguistic aspects.

The following examples all create their meta-effect by overt reference to genres, either those beyond opera or opera itself. Much of our opera's genre play is driven by the libretto, with the genre signifiers being embedded in the text, the character's performances of various genres also creating the nested frames of performances within performances. In these cases though, the compositional challenge is a significant one: how to support the sense of genre itself, not just the dramatic tone of the moment – in other words, how to render genre as the music's subject matter, and have the music seen to be performing genre. In some examples the genre has associated musical styles to work with, in others it falls upon the composer to invent a musical style that speaks of the genre in question. As a general point, the fact that the roles are conceived (and had been cast) for a range of voice types, including but not limited to those of the operatic 'fach' system, is in itself is a kind of heteroglossia.[208]

3.2.1. Volvox

The character Volvox is at the heart of many examples of heteroglossia and genre play in *She Described It to Death*. Volvox is a sentient algae, played by four singers, who enjoys manipulating the perception and behaviour of the human characters via control of their informational environment, and in particular playing on their susceptible collective unconscious. An important feature of the making process was that all of Volvox's unusual voice writing was tested in workshop sessions, where it was found to be very effective, both in terms of singer usability and effect. Also, Volvox's vocal settings are almost entirely homophonic in texture. This decision was initially motivated by

208 'Fach' being the German name for the system which classifies operatic voices by range, 'weight' and 'colour'.

practical concerns about the intelligibility of the text, being that contrapuntal settings are more demanding to take in, regardless of how well they are executed. Since one decision or another needed to be made in terms of characterisation, the logic was that it may as well be one that would help the clarity of the text, particularly since Volvox relies upon the manipulative power of its words.

3.2.1.1. Volvox to Self/Audience

Our first encounter with Volvox is at the beginning of Scene 4 (p.92, b.3), where it 'speaks' directly to the audience, describing itself and its relationship with humans.[209] We hear this material attitude only once, when Volvox is talking to the audience, or itself depending on your perspective, never when it presents itself to the human characters. The setting runs across a constant quaver rhythm, often extending reiterated vowels across the pulse. Specific pitch is indeterminate but indicated as to the range it should be in, with each of the four voices oscillating gradually up and down in phase with each other. It also has what I thought of as a 'holding pattern', whereby it cycles around the sounds 'mm-mm-eh-ah-ah' where it would otherwise have paused, as a way to give the character a certain creaturely energy and to make this mode of speech as distinct as possible from those of the other characters, and within its own repertoire. The vocal writing here is driven by the idea that the algae has had to fabricate a voice with which to produce human speech, with the pulsing rhythm and sweeping pitch taking their cues from the LFOs and sine waves that operate at the heart of analogue synthesis.

One of the important ideas behind this section was to create music and vocal writing that was hard to place in terms of genre. Volvox uses genre to manipulate others, so it struck me that when talking to itself, as it were, it might be dramaturgically useful if its mode of speech existed as far from definitive genre markers as possible. Although this probably defaults the music to 'contemporary classical' or 'new music' in the context, fortunately those are particularly amorphous terms. The instrumental music of this section is designed to support the same aim, emulating the oscillating wave gesture with distinctive colours – largely due to the ongoing rototom glissandi – but doing its best to resist being pinned down as far as genre is concerned. This introduction of Volvox is the first step in metareference to the idea of genre in general, and genres of singing in particular.

209 Volvox is referred to as 'it', rather than 'they', for two reasons: Firstly, Volvox is metaphorical of media organisations, and 'it' affords more direct analogy in that sense. Secondly, Volvox is portrayed by four singers, in reference to the fact that algae are composite entities, which in turn is part of the character's metaphoric function. The term 'they' would afford less analogy with media organisations and confuse the reading of multiple performers comprising a single organism.

3.2.1.2. Volvox's Game Show

Later in Scene 4 (p.115, b.125) Volvox uses a warped game show to manipulate the character Bract. Since game shows are a genre in themselves there is an associated musical world to draw on, and I opted for a 1960s chintzy, slightly gawky, American flavour. The theme tune plays and, since Bract can hear the music and knows he is in a game show, we suddenly find ourselves in both non-diegetic and diegetic territory, with a voice-over announcing 'and now, everyone's favourite southern treat, it's algae tiiiiime!' followed by dubbed wild applause. The musical underpinning, or 'walking' bed, that follows the main theme – as is the convention of some game show music, providing backing to the host's spoken introduction prior to their introducing the contestants – takes a stereotypical four-four groove and vandalises it slightly to last for nineteen quavers, providing an unconventionally irregular rhythmic kink, rather than the more regular twenty quaver, four-four-then-six-four phrase that it could have been. In our context, this of course is a meeting of the genres of game show and classical music, the scene appropriately underpinned by such a mash-up. This music becomes even more warped later on, but that will be addressed in the Operatic Objects & Affordances category. Here, the slightly off-kilter rhythmic pattern works in tension with the conventional harmonic and melodic attributes to give the music a jagged edge.

Meanwhile, over the top of this bed, the four singers of Volvox perform 'sprechgesang, in the manner of a cheesy radio DJ'. This vocal part was written through computer analysis of a recording of myself performing the part as intended.[210] I then transcribed the pitch content of the analysis and notated it with rough, indeterminate pitches and glissandi markings to achieve the sense of flow without overcomplicating the pitch material – which is astonishingly detailed when analysed. It would be possible to transcribe this material in more detail, but considering that the intended effect is simply a collective impression of a stereotypical radio DJ, it seemed unnecessary, and the notation is more to act as an intuitive guide to the pitch direction and gestural flow of the voice. With this in mind, I also provided the singers with the recording of my performance for further reference. Between the notation, the recording and the textual indication of the stereotype in question the effect was immediately what I had hoped. Notably, the stereotype helped the effect no end, since stereotypes epitomise conventional thinking, and therefore universal attitudes, it proved that the singers already knew exactly the intended effect. The degree of intuitive functionality of this notation is almost certainly variable by cultural context of course, and singers from other parts of

210 Using the note-based audio editing software Melodyne.

the world than the UK may need more guidance than is currently given. However, since *She Described It to Death* has not yet been performed anywhere at all, I reserve the right to cross that bridge should a production come to it.

This mode of Volvoxian speech is entirely different from that of our first encounter with the algae, which again builds the metareference to genre by demonstrating the way in which performative choice is a very deliberate part of Volvox's mode of engagement A character's deliberate performance of a genre can be seen as a performative frame within a frame, singers performing an opera-character performing a radio-character. Also relevant is that the text of Volvox's first section, at the beginning of Scene 4, explicitly talks about archetypes, those typical examples of a thing, as opposed to stereotype's crude generalisation. Both, in political terms, are concepts that can be used for the purposes of manipulation, and the overt discussion of such in the text is a metafictional ploy in itself.

In this sense, another point of potential metareference is the idea of Volvox using genre, archetype and stereotype to manipulate Bract in the fiction, while these elements, as the subject matter of the opera, are in some sense also being deployed to manipulate the audience. There are no deliberately composed metamarkers that refer to this aspect however, so it is hard to know to what degree it might have any metareferential effect.

3.2.1.3. Volvox as Opera Chorus

Volvox disappears for Scenes 5 and 6, and when it returns in Scene 7 (p.304, b.34) its vocal mode is conventional singing, the four singers acting as a miniature chorus. Having established, through text and demonstration, that Volvox deliberately chooses different manifestations of speech depending on context, we find ourselves in a very particular ontological position. Being that Volvox is presenting itself to Attis, and that in such relations it uses archetype, stereotype and genre in the interests of manipulation, we are faced with a question: since it is fair to assume that 'opera singing' is one of the many 'voices' in Volvox's tool kit, is the singer's representation of Volvox at this point in the mimetic or diegetic mode? It could be that Volvox has chosen 'operatic' as the most manipulatively rich manifestation of its voice in the circumstances – the power of opera to affect humans is, after all, a given in the context – or it could be that the representation of Volvox has been subsumed by the operatic form itself, and we no longer hear its speech mode directly, its voice

being mediated to us by conventional singing as with all the other characters.

The fact that the opera character Volvox can be considered to be choosing to speak operatically has obvious metareferential potential, not so much blurring the non-diegetic / diegetic boundary as creating a superposition of the two representational modes. This in turn refers to the way in which Volvox is simultaneously an embodied metaphor for other media and itself a manifestation of the operatic medium.

Although from this point Volvox's musical material, both sung and the associated instrumental music, might seem to sit clearly in the genre of classical music, working with extended harmony based around tonal centres, it actually draws a lot on the influence of the genre of late 1970s / early 1980s TV sci-fi music, specifically Christopher Gunning's fantastic score for the BBC's 1981 adaptation of John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*, a fiction of great relevance to *She Described It to Death.* Later in Scene 7 (p.347, b.237), when Volvox attempts to take narrative control of the other characters, the music directly quotes important melodic and harmonic fragments from Gunning's score, using its iconic G sharp, D, A chord that rises a minor third, as the lynchpin of the section, with the same in the tape part, a mangled sample from the soundtrack. What makes this generic influence more nuanced to read is that such music is itself influenced by certain classical musics – for me Gunning's score has inflections of Ligeti, Lutosławksi and Penderecki – but to those listeners who are familiar with the genre of 80s TV Sci-fi, perhaps even with the TV programme in question, I think there is a good chance that they may recognise its influence in the opera's music. The libretto at this point also makes intertextual reference to works of film and television, Buñuel's *The Phantom of Liberty*, the TV sci-fi *Sapphire and Steel* and Dennis Potter's play *Brimstone and Treacle* providing the scenarios that Volvox projects onto our characters. All of which is in itself a kind of heteroglossia, undermining the singular dominance of the genre conventions of the host medium, as do many other of the examples in this category.

3.2.2. Acantha Speaks Bract's Language

The notions of genre and heteroglossia come together in the passage beginning in bar 252 of Scene 6 (p.256). In this section we see a conversation between Acantha, a native of the north of the Great City, and Bract a native of the South. Earlier, we have seen that characters from the south speak with a range of explosive mannerisms, whereas in the north the idiom is universal and bland. Bract's

particular 'speech' manner is composed with the melodic style of music hall song in mind, but with slight adjustments to the conventional tonality of the mode to allow it to sit within the opera's music-body as a whole.[211] Despite these adjustments, Bract's idiom sticks out, and is like no other in the opera. When conversing with Bract we see Acantha switch between monotone quasi-recitative and what can be easily discerned as her version of Bract's sing song manner. Her line 'I've added a line about bending the knees not the back', beginning at bar 254, provides a good example.

In the framework of opera convention, it can be taken that the melodic attitude of Bract's music is a diegetic representation of a certain quality of his speech, but in the non-diegetic sense it serves as metareference to a sung genre other than opera. This is reinforced by the fact that Acantha and Bract's relationship is based on her writing song lyrics for Bract's mining workforce, so the textual content of their conversation is in part about writing songs. Also, even though this melodic representation of Bract's idiom is a narrational mediation of his unheard diegetic speech – essentially, an idiom of music standing in for an idiom of speech – Acantha's adoption of Bract's idiom in order to better communicate with him nevertheless tells us that there is an idiomatic equivalence between their speech at these points, regardless of what the specific idiom actually is. This feature grants us knowledge of an aspect of the fiction not via the semantic information of the text, or the emotional and psychological tone of the music, but via the way that the musical structure relates to itself.

3.2.3. Axil & Isidium are Operatic

In Scene 5, the characters Axil and Isidium visit Acantha at her home (beginning p.192, b.157). In the conventional northern way they suck mineral stones before exchanging social platitudes in the form of rhyming couplets about nature (p.198, b.217). This exchange serves to demonstrate the stagnation of social intercourse in the north of the city, with the generic poetry acting to keep citizens at a distance from each other, standing in for any semblance of actual conversation or direct personal engagement. Here parody plays an important role in the dramaturgy and metareferential impact of the opera. Parody can be thought of as a kind of 'mimicry which retains the form or stylistic character of the primary work, but substitutes alien subject matter or content.'[212] In our

211 I was thinking in particular of Fred W. Leigh and Charles Collins's *Don't Dilly Dally on the Way* (often called 'My Old Man Said Follow the Van') and Frederick Loewe and Alan Jay Lerner's music hall-esque *Get Me to the Church on Time*, from *My Fair Lady*.

212 G.D. Kiremidjian, 'The Aesthetics of Parody', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 28, No.2 (1969) pp. 231-42 (p. 232).

case the form is opera itself, and the alien content is the treatment of poetry as superficial in that context. Important to understand is that as well as the stylisation of the poetic text itself, the delivery of this text involves stylised diegetic *performance*. The characters of Axil and Isidium assume what is, in the fictional world, a customary manner associated with the social presentation of these texts, and it is from here that the parody proceeds.

In keeping with the idea that parody is 'a matter of substituting elements within a dimension of a given text in such a way that the resulting text stands in an inverse or incongruous relation to the borrowed text,'[213] the scene juxtaposes the heightened emotional intensity of opera – enabled by music of a kind that would conventionally accompany a text that was trying to convey some vital aspect of the human condition – with a performance of heavily stylised poetry consisting of unrecognisable depictions of nature that has evolved for the very purpose of avoiding deep human contact, for example:

Lo, the year unfurls its mellow afternoon
when worms coax leaves to quite their stalks,
And swallows drawn to the harvest moon
herald cuckoos' transformation into hawks.

The way that the music and performers portray this moment reads, non-diegetically, as a parodic performance of the genre of opera itself, playing on the comedic trope of using the operatic mode to over-dramatise mundane or seemingly inconsequential events.

The music is deeply solemn and portentous, intended to create an atmosphere that might befit an alchemist's laying bare of the secrets of transmutation. A low trombone 'A' brings a more epic, orchestral feel to the small ensemble while only the rhyme of the couplet has the power to transform each fraught, swooning, monolithic chord. The orchestration alternates between full strings and winds and the more chamber pairing of accordion and piano, reflecting the reality of the site of this revelation, the surface detail of the piano's demisemiquaver arpeggios standing in for the wild banks of flutes and clarinets that such auspices ought to command.

213 Susan Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989) p. 185.

In the context of the research-practice, parody's relevance is that it upsets the balance between form and content and 'forces us to be aware of form as an artifice or as an artificial discipline which is brought into relation with a radically different phenomenon, that of natural experience itself.'[214] This reminder that the relationship between form and content is artificial represents the possibility of avoiding the kind of stagnation 'that occurs when a content totally appropriates a form paralysing it with fixed associations which gradually remove it from the range of current viable artistic possibilities.'[215] In dramaturgical terms, this in turn speaks of Acantha's situation, trapped in the stagnated social conventions of the north, while the nested performance of an operatic parody within the opera generates metareference to both the operatic medium and the performativity of genre in general.

3.2.4. Attis on the Soap Box

The character Attis is responsible for two significant performances of what we might call 'everyday' genre within the opera. The first is her soap box oration in Scene 1 (p.5). This scene is essentially a monological exercise in persuasive rhetoric, where she tries to convince the people of the south that they are being manipulated and oppressed by the animals and plants. The music supports her endeavour with a structure that gradually transitions from representing the chaos of the environment to embodying the thematic musical figure of her vocal setting, suggesting the idea that her words are motivating a change in the fictional political landscape via the metaphor of the musical environment.

3.2.5. Attis the Salesperson

Attis's second performance of an everyday genre occurs in Scene 6 (p.237, b. 141) where she adopts the manner of a door-to-door salesperson, pushing a contraption – The Conversation Piece – that will, she hopes, re-acquaint northern citizens with more engaged, diverse and meaningful social interaction. Attis attempts to sell her product to Acantha in Acantha's own living room, and this setting informs the musical material of the section, which is orchestrated for solo piano in order to create a reference to the genre of 'parlour music'. The rhythmic language of the music expresses a clear underlying pulse, giving plenty of impetus to the delivery, and in general the music is sprightly and constantly on the move – the piano chord is here, now it's here, now it's over here, as if to keep the customer engaged without giving them a clear opportunity to interrupt the patter, and perhaps

214 Kiremidjian, 'The Aesthetics of Parody', p.233.
215 Waugh, *Metafiction*, pp. 68-9.

if the flow is just a *little* too quick to grasp they might just go with the pitch. The harmony is built entirely from major and minor triads to add a touch of familiarity that might help to put the potential customer at their ease, culminating with a cadence of a diminished chord on F sharp resolving to B major, as if the climax of an act of prestidigitation.

For Attis's soap box oration, the music performs a metaphoric function in relation to the genre, which is more metareferential to the structural capacity of music than to genre itself, the music's genre being that of the overarching genre of opera. For Attis's sales pitch, however, the music plays a much more metareferential role. Using the domestic setting as a supporting metamarker, the music tries to invoke the idea of 'parlour music' in order that the relationship between this idea and Attis's performance of 'door to door salesperson' can make metareference to the fact that genre is as much an everyday category as an artistic one, and that all genre is performative. In general, these representations of everyday genre contribute to the overall generic heteroglossia of the opera.

3.2.6. Josella's Broadcast

There are two instances of Josella's Broadcast in *SDItD,* played on the radio first in Scene 3 (p.91, b.161), then at the beginning of Scene 5 (p.157, b.27), listened to by Bract and Acantha respectively. Within the fiction, these recorded sections perform a function that is a cross between a tourist advertisement and a public information broadcast, being that they are intended to encourage citizens to relocate from their own, overcrowded, world to various destinations in the form of other fictional worlds – John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* in the case of Josella, with our character being based on Josella Playton from that novel.

Each broadcast comprises Josella's voice accompanied by a harp, with Josella's text – written by herself in the fiction, since she is a poet in our world (being the author of the novel *Sex is my Adventure* in Wyndham's novel) – reporting in the first person about her life in *TdotT,* in a manner deemed by the City's governing organisations to be enticing. In each instance, the sound is entirely diegetic, being produced by in-world sound systems. The southern and northern versions of the broadcast clearly use the same voice recording but are contextualised by differing harp parts, arranged to appeal to the behavioural demographic of their respective parts of the city. As well as

her 'transworld identity'[216] and 'ontological metalepsis',[217] the ontological ambiguity of Josella's Broadcast is sustained partly by its reference to genre.

Non-diegetically, we hear this broadcast as sung text accompanied by harp music. However, since the genre of 'public information broadcast' conventionally *could* involve music, and the broadcast is located entirely diegetically in terms of its production, written and performed by an in-world poet and listened to by lone characters who comment only on its semantic content, it is impossible to resolve the issue of whether the musical aspect is part of the non-diegetic or diegetic registers. To put it another way, we have no idea whether Bract or Acantha hear singing and a harp, or unaccompanied spoken text, or unaccompanied singing. There are two layers of genre, 'public information broadcast' nested within 'opera', and it is ambiguous as to which level of representation the singing and harp belong.

This ontological ambiguity is possible because of the implications of the nested genre. Without it, each instance of Josella's Broadcast is a moment of almost pure mimesis, the narrational distance being incredibly sleight as we witness the characters listening to (not being described as listening to) audio played back on equipment that they recognise as part of their world (the same equipment that we recognise as playing it back).

3.2.7. The Agency of Gossip

In Scene 7 we find in the libretto the stage direction:

ACANTHA is brought on stage by rumour

At which point in the opera we encounter three characters listed simply as 'Gossips' (p.342, b.193). In the opera world, the Gossip's can use their hearsay and mild slander to literally manipulate physical reality so, at the Gnats bidding, they gossip about Acantha heading to their location until she appears onstage. The strategy that the music employs to support this moment is twofold: set

216 Umberto Eco's terminology for characters who have migrated from one fictional world to another. See Umberto Eco, 'Lector in Fabula: pragmatic strategy in a metanarrative text', in *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1979) pp. 200-60 (p. 223).

217 The term denoting 'jumps between narrative levels that involve actual transgressions or violations of ontological boundaries (such as transmigrations between the primary storyworld and [embedded] fictional texts or imaginations).' Jan Alber, *Unnatural Narrative: Impossible Worlds in Fiction and Drama (*Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press 2016), p. 203.

the Gossips as offstage (but amplified) spoken text and pare the music back to almost nothing – a held low D pedal doubled by accordion and double bass. The intention is that the performers of these instruments will minimise the audibility of, and stagger, their changes of bow/bellows direction to produce as seamless a pedal tone as possible.

For me, the strength of this setting is that it renders the genre immediately recognisable in a way that sits well with the stereotypicality of the textual aspect. In an opera about the manipulatory potential of archetype and stereotype it seems necessary to have at least one moment of quasi-naturalistic representation of such. The sustained, low pedal note ensures that the genre of 'opera' is well maintained without getting in the way of a more 'mimetic' representation of the nested genre of 'gossip'. Also, this genre performance operates in a manner that contrasts with other instances of embedded genres in the opera, all of which are performed by main characters who we have more contextual information about. We have no reference point for where the Gossips sit in either the representational symbolic order or the physical spacetime of the opera, and this adds to the sense that they represent omniscient forces in the fictional world, again without impeding the intended mode of representation. Although this example does not demonstrate an application of genre reference different to those that precede it, I include it since, in discussing opera composition, it is easy to overlook the composer's decision to simply get out of the way of the libretto.

3.2.8. The News Xylophone

The final examples of this category occur in Scene 8. The last line of the opera has been sung and the instrumental coda that follows includes two musical metareferences to the real world, acting as heralds of our return to it and foregrounding the stark difference between artistic representations and, as Kiremidjian puts it, natural experience. The first happens at bar 235 (p.427), when the quiet, gently rocking major-second between the violin and cello is interrupted by a fraught, discordant, sustained tutti blast. The piano's lowest register grumbles underneath, sustain pedal down to make a textural wash, and the xylophone cuts through with a single pitch on a agitated, disjointed rhythm. The xylophone part is actually derived from the tape part to follow, which uses a sample made from a tiny fragment of the soundtrack to the BBC *The Day of the Triffids*, itself featuring a similar xylophone figure. At its entry, however, before the tape part fades in, the live xylophone has incredibly strong connotations of television news broadcasts, to the extent that I find it hard to imagine this reference going unnoticed.

3.2.9. The Public Piano

Hot on the heels (b.238) of this reference to real-world genre and media, a solo piano figure attempts to conjure the genre of 'public piano' performance. This is influenced by a musical style that was often being hammered out on the pianos dotted around St. Pancras International railway station when I passed through during the period of the opera's composition. In this tonal style, both hands are in octaves, the right hand playing the 'melodic' element, which is a repeated 4/4 phrase that is harmonically recontextualised by an on-the-beat pitch progression in the left hand – typically something along the lines of a tonic that descends a major third, then a further minor third, then rises a major second then moves back to the tonic, a bar for each 'chord' except the penultimate, which lasts for two bars, possibly with a suspension and resolution to the major third in the right hand. The harmony of my recreated fragment of this style jars with the sustained chord of the rest of the ensemble in order to suggest a real world less conveniently ordered than that of the opera. Although I appreciate that it is unlikely an audience will read this fragment specifically as my self-identified genre 'public piano', the musical world from which the players of this style draw is very different to that of the opera, so its presence still has the potential to speak of existence beyond the boundaries of the opera itself, hopefully framing the opera's last line – 'Let us escape' – with a sense that escape itself is only another shift of frame. The characters' construct ceases to exist and we are returned to the construct of 'paramount', everyday reality.

3.3. Foregrounding the Animator & the Author

(featuring gemstones, atoms & teamwork)

In some ways this is the most straightforward category as it operates within territory well covered by opera studies. These examples all foreground the presence of the performer in some way, thus problematising the innate diegetic/mimetic tension of opera as discussed earlier with reference to the work of Abbate and Novak. One way to think of this is in terms of allowing the 'grain of the voice' to show through, to use Roland Barthes' famous metaphor, which refers to the trace of the body in the sound of the voice.[218] Moments of vocalisation, for example, whereby the sung text is without semantic content, allow the presence of the performer to become more prominent, since, without the need to process semantic information, the listening-spectator is afforded more 'space' to appreciate the presence of the performer and, in the sound quality of their voice, the signature of its physical source. In addition to this, in moments of vocalisation where the song is not diegetic, not recognised as singing by the characters, the character takes a further step back because, since we understand that in the fiction they are not singing, the ongoing vocal production can only be attributed to the performer.

The aria *Der Hölle Rache kocht in meinem Herzen*[219] from Mozart's *The Magic Flute* provides a familiar example. Its climax involves an incredibly technically challenging arpeggiated passage sung on non-word vowel sounds. As well as the phrase lacking semantic content, it is also extremely virtuosic, requiring great effort and skill on the part of the performer, and this combination ensures that we cannot help but be aware of the singer themselves, their presence being arguably more vivid at this moment than that of the character. Even in moments of diegesis, where we understand that the character *is* singing in the fiction, the 'body' of 'voice-body' can be foregrounded by non-semantic text. In Lakmé's diegetic Bell Song, for instance, Abbate points out that while performing the song's final vocalisation, imitating the sound of a bell, the character 'becomes *explicitly* a body emanating sonority.'[220]

In relation to these ideas, Novak likens the voice-body to a ventriloquism act in which both dummy

218 See Roland Barthes, 'The Grain of the Voice', *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 179-89.
219 Commonly known as the 'Queen of the Night' aria.
220 Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, p. 9.

and ventriloquist coincide in the same physical entity. This kind of metaphor is often useful as a compositional tool, the economy of the encapsulating image allowing the composer to hold in their head an important property of their materials while engaged with manipulating the set as a whole. With this in mind, I wanted to develop a similarly useful mental diagram that would include the composer and librettist in the equation, not just in the general sense of having 'written' the opera, but as a part of the matrix of character representation. My question was: how might we extend the ontological model of voice-body duality to include those agential in character representation who exist neither in the diegetic or non-diegetic realms, but in the real world itself?

In this respect, Erving Goffman's work on the 'conversational paradigm' offers a useful framework. In seeking a more nuanced understanding of the notion of *speaker*, Goffman creates the subdivisions 'animator', 'author' and 'principal', which together constitute the 'production format' of an utterance. He describes the animator as follows:

> In canonical talk, one of the two participants moves his lips up and down to the accompaniments of his own facial (and sometimes bodily) gesticulations, and words can be heard issuing from the locus of his mouth. His is the sounding box in use, albeit in some actual cases he can share this physical function with a loudspeaker system or telephone. In short, he is the talking machine, a body engaged in acoustic activity, or, if you will, an individual active in the role of utterance production. He is functioning as an "animator".[221]

An important point about the animator is that they may *or may not* be responsible for formulating the text that they animate, or for 'staking out' their own position through it. This is where the 'author' and 'principal' come in. The author is 'someone who has selected the sentiments that are being expressed and the words in which they are encoded', and the principal is 'someone whose position is established by the words that are spoken, someone whose beliefs have been told, someone who is committed to what the words say.'[222] To give an example that involves these three roles, consider that a politician (the animator) might deliver a speech scripted by someone else (the author) to represent the position of their party leader (the principal).

221 Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), p. 144.
222 ibid.

In operatic terms, I am proposing the singer as the animator, the librettist and composer as the author, and the character as the principal. This equation leaves the relationship between singer and character in place while bringing the composer and librettist into the picture. The significance of this framework in the context of the research-practice is that it more accurately maps onto the metafictional mentality of the making, helping to engage with the idea that structures which induce in the audience an immediate, in-the-moment awareness of the performer may also have the potential to induce in them a similar awareness of the composer and librettist. This shift in perspective is undertaken in the interests of composing of course, and I imply no claim as to the analytical capacity of the framework. Nevertheless, it without doubt enabled a clearer thought process on my part in relation to my compositional aims.

In the following examples, there is no explicit attempt to write the composer or librettist into the fictional world in the vein of Lodge's 'short circuit', rather, the musical materials were composed with the idea that they might foreground the animator in such a way as to elicit the idea of their foregrounding being the result of a compositional decision by the author.

3.3.1. Gemstones!

The very first event of Scene 3 (p.41) is Bract's cry of 'Gemstones!'. Bract runs a market stall selling the mineral stones that citizens of the City suck for the purposes of recreation and nutrition. The musical setting of the word is on the relatively high[223] pitch of middle C, without instrumental accompaniment, and the first syllable is marked with a pause and the textual instruction 'Hold as long as possible...'. The previous, edgy interlude, itself primarily conveying metareference to the idea of music narrating the passing of diegetic time, climaxes and stops at the point of Bract's utterance. Bract is written for conventional operatic baritone voice, this is his first appearance in the opera, we have been told nothing about him in advance and the libretto gives us no way to anticipate what this scene will be about.

Thinking back to the two previous categories, the overall effect is in part to suspend the flow of fictional time[224] while making reference to the genre of 'market trader'. In the context of this category, though, the suspension of the first vowel sound of the word denies the audience any semantic content, a fact which combines with the complete lack of context to leave us in the

223 In the context of a baritone voice.
224 Which could or could not be reinforced in the staging.

moment with the 'meaningless' sound of a sung vowel, produced by a trained operatic voice, projected, and for a duration, beyond the capability of most humans. As well as inevitably foregrounding the performer, this moment also makes metareference to opera culture via the emblem of the 'operatic voice', a notion which itself includes the idea of the composer.

3.3.2. Acantha's Vocalisation

In Scene 8 (p.414, b.98), Acantha performs a diegetic vocalisation as a way to 'call out to atoms in ancient tongues'. At this point, Volvox has been narrated almost out of existence, now present musically as a low, quiet drone. The textual direction to Acantha's performer is 'Abstract vocalisation, delicate, not spectacular, in dialogue with Volvox's drone'. This moment was conceived with a specific singer in mind, their having been cast before the composition of this scene. The singer in question comes from an experimental, and improvising, Jazz background but has also performed a lot of contemporary classical music. Their voice is identifiable as sitting outside the conventions of opera, and they are known for their astonishing 'extended' vocal techniques, through which they can make insect-like and digital seeming sounds. This moment, where the characters seek to escape the oppressive linguistic boundaries of their world, is designed to make the most of singing which is unconventional to opera and rare in any context.

In handing over control of the musical material to the singer, animator, principal and author are situated in the same physical body. The lack of semantic content and overt virtuosity of the performance act as we have described, but my hope is that the grain of the voice will also include the sense of the performer's agency as well as the trace of the singing body, creating the potential of a metareference to the composer by their absence from the immediate decision making process.
An important factor at this point is that, however much the animator and author are foregrounded, the vocalisation is diegetic in the same way as Lakmé's vocalisation of a bell. That the character considers themselves to be performing a vocalisation rebalances the overall effect into something more complexly metafictional.

3.3.3. Volvox is Composite

The next example foregrounds virtuosity of a different kind. The character of Volvox is played by four singers, working as a team to perform the body and voice of the algae, and the sheer act of coordination involved in the portrayal – both in terms of appearing to be a coherent, single physical entity and in negotiating the almost total homophony of the vocal writing – foregrounds the

animators at all times. Within this, the many different guises that Volvox chooses to adopt, and the way in which these manifestations are supported musically, speaks of decision making behind the character's decision making.

In keeping with *SDItD*'s interest in complex ontological states, however, it is notable that, in reality, the chlorophyte Volvox, a member of the green algae family, *is* a composite entity, so this representation is not of the same order as those where a single human character is represented by multiple performers. The four singers do not represent different 'aspects' or 'ages' or 'times' of Volvox, but are metaphoric of the physical reality of its biological form. On the other hand, casting a Volvox as a manipulator of humankind stems partly from the fact that a singular-yet-composite entity reads, in the context of the opera, more directly as metaphoric of the relationship between individual media bodies and the hyper object of 'mass media'. In fact, Volvox was originally conceived as a Portuguese Man O' War, the stinging, jellyfish-like organism made up of many small units ('zooids'), but ultimately, a multi-part green algae was more thematically fitting, being that it would share ancestry with some of the plants that govern and administrate the City.

3.3.4. Umming & Erring

When Attis arrives at Acantha's house in Scene 6, Axil and Isidium are flustered by her suggestion that modern conversation is 'a bit dull', and leave in a hurry. In their haste, Isidium finds it difficult to find the requisite rhyme for Axil's polite signal of egress: 'Is that really the time? My, how it does fly', after some difficulty managing only 'Like a fly, does it not. I really must... fly.' This point in the libretto looks like this:

ISIDIUM

(*Hastily*) Like a … fly, does it not. I really must …
[*thinking sounds*] … fly.

The 'thinking sounds' were not originally part of the libretto, but I requested they be added when composing as I knew they would represent the opportunity for formal play. The thinking sounds in question are 'mm', 'err', 'erm', 'um' and 'ah' (p.227, b.69), parts of formulaic language known as 'filler' words, which are used to signal that the speaker is thinking rather than having finished

speaking. These words are set as sprechgesang, doubled by a clarinet and cello pitch cluster and a turn of an orchestral ratchet, on a rhythm spread out enough to allow the performer space to act flustered but frequent enough that they will seem harried.

Although the filler words used here do convey information, there is only one message: 'I am thinking', or in our case 'I'm struggling to think of anything!'. Thus, having immediately apprehended the meaning, the listener's attention is free to 'observe' the pure sonic aspect of the words. This combines with the homophonic coordination of voice and instruments to foreground the animator. The slightly comedic tone of the ratchet is dramaturgically apt, but also, in being a more abrasive and unexpected sound, draws further attention to the ensemble itself, bringing them into the frame as animators. Sprechgesang weights the filler words more towards realism, but this only serves to bring the artificiality of the rhythmic coordination into sharper relief. All of which creates a moment which I hope is conspicuous enough to elicit the sense of an author having constructed it.

3.4. Operatic Objects & Affordances

(featuring a door knob, a doorbell and Adorno)

Since props are a conventional feature of the operatic medium, exploring the metareferential potential of objects is necessarily germane to the research-practice. As we have seen, in my previous opera, *The Virtues of Things*, objects are made to function as 'ontological bridges', nodes at which the diegetic/non-diegetic boundary is dissolved. For *Virtues* though, the process of composing was purely intuitive, and I hoped to use the research-practice to develop a conceptual apparatus with which I could more deliberately manipulate this aspect of my work.

In the areas of metaphysics and social theory, conceptual frameworks that place objects on an equal footing with humans are well established. Object Oriented Ontology, for example, rejects the hierarchical privileging of human existence over that of nonhuman objects, and Actor-Network Theory suggests that all social and natural phenomena are the result of the interplay of a shifting network of objects, ideas and processes, within which humans are again no more significant than any other factor. Writing of the position of objects within Actor-Network Theory, Bruno La tour says:

> In addition to 'determining' and serving as a 'back-drop for human action', things might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on. ANT is not the empty claim that objects do things 'instead' of human actors: it simply says that no science of the social can even begin if the question of who and what participates in the action is not first of all thoroughly explored, even though it might mean letting elements in which, for lack of a better term, we would call non-humans.[225]

In operatic terms, this amounts to a physical matrix within which props are considered to participate equally with humans, instruments, lights and sets. It is not immediately clear, though, how this assertion might transform a working understanding of operatic objects. It is easy to imagine how a performer might use a prop, but more difficult to understand how the prop might act with agency

225 Bruno La Tour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 72.

of its own, particularly in the case of supposedly inert objects.[226] The idea of 'affordances', used in both Actor-Network Theory and design theory, however, provides an elucidating perspective in this context.

'*Affordance* is a term used to describe the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs.'[227] These potential uses are not limited to those intended by the designer: 'we may hang signs or clothes on a doorknob, for example, or use a fork to pry open a lid, and so expand the intended affordances of an object.'[228] By extension, the properties of any structure, whether physical, linguistic or conceptual, afford other properties again: 'Enclosures afford containment and security, inclusion as well as exclusion. Rhyme affords repetition, anticipation, and memorization. Networks afford connection and circulation, and narratives afford the connection of events over time.'[229] An important feature of this thinking is its ability to explain how physical affordances come to shape the social world, as Caroline Levine starkly puts it: 'A panoptic arrangement of space, wherever it takes shape, will always afford a certain kind of disciplinary power; a hierarchy will always afford inequality.'[230]

Fictional forms offer an additional frame of reference in which to consider an object's affordances. Eighteenth-century 'circulation novels' provide a good example of this since they are narrated by things, such as coins, coats, corkscrews and watches.[231] In this context, the narrating object's affordance of being easily, or routinely, passed from one person to another, in turn affords a narrational perspective that naturally traverses societal boundaries, enabling the social critique vital to the genre. This is one way in which a real-world affordance, in this case circulation, can fulfil the needs of a fictional form. On the other side of the ontological coin, certain of a fictional object's affordances may be impossible in reality – a fictional cup, for instance, might have the affordance of conferring eternal youth upon those who drink from it. A fictional object, then, has two distinct sets of affordances, fictional and real, or diegetic and non-diegetic. In our example of the magical cup the distinction between fictional and real affordances is obvious, but, as we will see, it is possible to conceive of an object and situation in which this distinction is less certain, a fact which can be

226 As opposed to those with a motorized or sound emitting mechanism, for example.
227 Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 6.
228 ibid.
229 ibid.
230 ibid.
231 Alber, *Unnatural Narrative*, p. 74.

compositionally taken advantage of to produce metafictional effect.

Musical imitation, or mimesis, is also an important factor in this category. When I reviewed the relevant discourses, however, I found it difficult to figure their compositional implications. One issue is the stark contrast between performing and explaining imitation. While from a compositional perspective it is quite straightforward to conceive music that will effectively imitate a non-musical sound, behaviour or process, from a theoretical perspective, substantiating how or why the imitation is possible presents a significant challenge. In other words, composers and listeners can already 'do' imitation, it is just hard to say how come. Nevertheless, I gleaned enough from theory to develop one useful thought-tool.

Theodore Adorno suggests that:

> ...there can be no doubt that music achieves - as no other art does - a pure objectification of the mimetic impulse, free of any concreteness or denotation; nothing but the gesture, codified and placed above the physical world, yet at once sensual.[232]

Max Paddison describes this 'mimetic impulse' as 'a mode of “identifying with” rather than necessarily as “imitation of” or “representation of” something external.'[233] Which reminded me of E.H. Gombrich's writing on the idea of substitutes. When considering why a broomstick might be able to function as a child's hobby horse, Gombrich discusses what he calls the 'minimum image', a term that refers to the minimum similarity an object must have to be able to stand in for another object. He writes that substitutes:

> ...reach deep into biological functions that are common to man and animal. The cat runs after the ball as if it were a mouse. The baby sucks its thumb as if it were the breast. […] In a sense the ball 'represents' a mouse to the cat, the thumb a breast, to the baby. But here [...] 'representation' does not depend on formal

232 Theodore Adorno, *Towards a Theory of Musical Reproduction: Notes, a Draft and Two Schemata*, ed. by Henri Lonitz, trans. by Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), p. 170.

233 Max Paddison, 'Mimesis and the aesthetics of musical expression', *Musical Analysis*, Vol. 29, No.1/3 (2010), pp. 126-48 (p. 127).

> similarities, beyond the minimum requirements of function. The ball has nothing in common with the mouse except that it is chasable. The thumb nothing with the breast except that it is suckable.[234]

Most striking here is that 'chasable' and 'suckable' are affordances. In this light, the 'minimum' of Gombrich's 'minimum image' can be conceived as something like: the simplest form of the substitute that still retains a key affordance in common with the substituted. In the context of a hobby horse, the stand-in has the minimum affordance of 'ridability' in common with a real horse.[235] In the case of Camille Saint Saën's *Carnival of the Animals*, a lion's roar and music share the affordances of 'audibility' and 'gesturality', and the latter can be rendered in such a way as to demonstrate this, bolstered by the affordances of a descriptive title.

In this conception, and in the context of the research-practice, imitation is afforded by an audience's appreciation that a definitive affordance of the music is also a definitive affordance of that which the music imitates. Once the minimum requirement is met, it is then possible to elaborate upon the 'image' to render it with higher fidelity. With this in mind, further mention of imitation in this category should be taken to refer to the human capacity to intuitively perform and apprehend imitation via the recognition of affordances.

3.4.1. The Chainsaw Synth

Our first example occurs in Scene 3, in the south of the City (p.82, b.117). A southern citizen bursts onto the stage 'with a chainsaw, brandishing it at someone offstage and acting like the cock of the walk'. The intention is that this chainsaw would not be represented by a real chainsaw, but something with a physical resemblance to one, without the mechanism to produce any sound of its own, and perhaps made of very obviously the wrong materials.

The music at this point is for synthesizer and a low floor-tom, introduced in bar 118 with a siren whistle that helps to set a slightly cartoon, outlandish tone. The synthesizer is specified to be an Arturia 'Mini', the Arturia company's software modelling of the Minimoog analogue synthesizer. The synth is set to its '24 VCO Unison' patch with the delay turned off. This patch is a heavy, saw wave

234 E.H. Gombrich, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse or the Roots of Artistic Form* (London and New York: Phaidon, 1978), p. 2.

235 Or perhaps more accurately, they have a common 'goes-between-the-legs'-ness.

sound, the sharp grain of which can be played to imitate a running engine. Since the synth is monophonic, if two pitches are played simultaneously it will respond to the higher input. This means that by holding down a very low pitch and intermittently playing short, high phrase bursts, the sound leaps up and returns down quickly, attaining the sonic and gestural quality of a running engine that is being aggressively revved up. This effect is also supported by the fact that the higher pitches are more intense in colour, and the synthesizer is set to portamento movement, whereby it glissandos between pitches, giving a more natural shape to the gesture, in keeping with the actual sound of an engine speeding up and slowing down. Furthermore, the floor-tom is on a constant, erratic tremolo, with the instruction that it should ad lib. it's dynamic, 'joining the synth to imitate a chainsaw'.

The synth part is notated in free time, with higher phrase bursts, 'roughly' of the written rhythm, alternating with low, free sections of an indicated number of seconds that are marked 'Short taps to keep the engine ticking over, rhythm with that effect in mind'. During this passage, which is conceived as a choreographed, quasi-dance moment, the performer wields their chainsaw menacingly and with great bravado and sadistic enjoyment. All of this contributes to a synth instrumental that is at once both an entirely synthetic sound of the ensemble and clearly imitative of the engine of the chainsaw – to the degree that it has engine-ness about it even without the onstage image. In this way, the synth sound straddles the diegetic and non-diegetic registers, but rather than blurring their boundary, as would an ontological bridge, it acts to heighten our awareness of that boundary, drawing attention to the presence of the ensemble and the question of what music can be made to represent, and creating strong metareference to the music itself, as well as foregrounding the artificiality of the representation in general.

3.4.2. The Tape Warps

Once Bract has introduced himself in Volvox's game show in Scene 4, the music, including the vocal parts, begins to warp (p.124, b.160). Proceeding from the recognisable base of the game show's melodic underscore, the music imitates the sound effect produced when a recording is slowed down and speeded up. Dramaturgically, the idea is to represent the fact that Volvox is using the social frame of the game show genre to warp Bract's perception of reality.

In musical terms the effect is very simply conceived. The music 'slows down' by getting lower

pitched with longer note values and 'speeds up' by getting higher pitched with shorter note values. In addition, the singers are encouraged to mimic the effect of an artificially slowed recording by extending the consonants of the text as well as the vowels.[236] The reason that an effective imitation is possible, is that a definitive signifier of the process of a tape warping happens to be a particular quality of sound – sound which carries the trace of a physical process, perhaps akin to the 'grain' of the voice. Thus, to enact the imitation, music need only perform with the same sonic properties that result from the process of a tape warping, its key pairs of affordances – slow-low-ness and fast-high-ness. As well as its dramaturgical impact, this musical effect foregrounds the opera's means of sound production via reference to a physical affordance of the technology of sound reproduction.

3.4.3. Sucking Stones

As part of the social conventions of the north of the City, Acantha and her guests, Axil and Isidium, partake of 'sucking stones' (p.194, b.176) which are, in the fiction, pieces of mineral-rich rock, small enough to fit in the mouth. In reality, I imagine the production would have used something along the lines of a gobstopper or boiled sweet, something edible with a hard outer layer that does not easily dissolve. This moment represents the happy coming together of affordances: that the stones/sweets are suckable and that the opera is amplified. Through this convergence I realised that what was originally included in the libretto to illustrate social features of the world could also become a moment of musical metafiction in its own right.

The opera's amplification is, for the most part, not for the purposes of making the piece louder as such, but to allow for finer definition and greater blending of the acoustic and electronic elements of the sound. Once amplification is involved though, the volume can, of course, be turned up at any point. Essentially, the sound of the performers moving the 'stones' around their mouths is intended to be amplified a lot more than the rest of the opera, so that every tiny detail can be heard. The audience are inevitably aware that this sonic close-up is impossible without technological intervention, so their attention is drawn to the representational apparatus of the opera. The music itself is very pared back, a single clave again slowly marking out time, and short bursts from the clarinet and trombone failing to catalyse a change of material. From the perspective of genre, such tiny and 'mundane' aspects of human sound are unconventional to opera, so, coupled with the musical attitude, this moment further reinforces the parodic tone that accompanies the entirety of

236 A technical detail picked up on by the brilliant repetiteur during sessions with the singers.

Axil and Isidium's visit.

3.4.4. The Conversation Piece

We first encounter The Conversation Piece in Scene 6 (p.229, b.88). It is a 'contraption' built by the character Attis in order to provoke interesting conversation in citizens of the north of the City. Attis is trying to sell the product door-to-door as a way of it infiltrating northern society. You press a button on The Conversation Piece and it will offer you a conversational strategy, or you can select a category from it's menu and it will offer you a stimulating piece of information on the topic. The CP's voice and functional beeps emanate from the device itself, so it is entirely diegetic in that respect. It speaks with Attis's voice, since in the fiction she made it herself. In the real-world we would record Attis's performer speaking the lines and produce the recording to have an artificial feel, most likely through the use of bit depth reduction.

The fact that Attis and TCP have the same voice in itself draws attention to behind-the-scenes making processes, the metareferential aspect being that there are two registers in which these processes can be considered to have taken place: the fictional, where Attis must have taken time to design and make TCP, and the real, where Sally, myself, Attis's performer and the opera's design and manufacture team must have done the same. The CP is also an ontological bridge, being that it is seen to exist as a working machine, speaking its content on button prompt, in both diegetic and non-diegetic realms. Ideally, the prop would be built to be fully functional in the real sense, and this is entirely physically possible, but it is most likely that matters of time and budget would prevent such a realisation, so in reality, playback of TCP's beeps and speech might need to be triggered from the sound desk. However, it is the *appearance* of equivalent diegetic and non-diegetic existence that creates ontological bridging, so this should still have the desired effect.

The beeps that emanate from TCP when its buttons are pressed also produce metafictional effects in the context. Each button press results in a different composition of 'beep', the sound of which is that produced by early video game sound chips. These beep compositions are imitative and referential miniatures in their own right. The sounds of Big Trak, a 1980's programmable toy truck, Star Wars droid R2D2, and the ZX spectrum version of the game *Pipemania* can be heard, alongside general reference to retro video game FX.

Although it is unlikely that most audience members will be able to identify these objects of imitation precisely – although some without question will – the general reference to video games and popular cultural forms should nevertheless be clear. Along with the fact that the sounds are diegetic, this creates the potential for metareference to genres outside of opera. In addition to which, the choice of characterful, diverse beeps – which, after all would have worked perfectly well as single, repeated monotone beeps – again foregrounds the presence of the composer, which in this case also implicates the fictional Attis, being that she is the maker of TCP. Those familiar with my broader output might also find metareference to my chiptune work, but that would be a minority of the audience at most.

On top of this, TCP's penultimate beep is a statement of the melody associated with Attis's sung setting of 'The Conversation Piece', and its final beep is an arpeggiated statement of the harmony from Acantha's earlier lament about Josella, placed just before Acantha accidentally reveals that she knows of John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*. Both of which create a metareference to the non-diegetic register of the opera. Further to all of this, when we next encounter Attis and TCP at the beginning of Scene 7, The Conversation Piece actually *sings* in duet with Attis (p.301, b.16). As before, this will be achieved by having the singer performing Attis pre-record the contraption's sung part. The sung text comprises the first lines from iconic novels, these resonate with Attis's self-professed difficulty in precipitating a new beginning for the City, which in itself already provides a point of intertextual metareference.[237]

In relation to its previous spoken delivery, and in the context that only Attis and TCP are present at this point, we are now also faced with a shift of ontology. It seems most likely that, since it is singing in duet with Attis, TCP would be singing in the same ontological register as her, which would be the conventional, non-diegetic register. As much as anything, it would just be far stranger if it were singing in the diegetic register, and since there are no markers to suggest this, it is more straightforward for an audience to assume that TCP's voice has simply become subsumed into the narrational layer of the opera. Nevertheless, the fact that an ontological shift has occurred foregrounds the ontological duality of opera. In this way, The Conversation Piece demonstrates its existence as a non-human voice-body.

237 The novels are Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, George Orwell's *1984*, and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*.

In my earlier example of the ontological duality of operatic props, I pointed out that the deckchair in which Aschenbach sits in *Death in Venice* is an ontologically different deckchair to the one in which the singer performing Aschenbach sits, even though they are a single physical object. A deckchair, however, does not have the necessary affordances to represent ontological duality in the same way as the human voice-body since, as Novak rightly points out, the duality comes down to the ontology of the emitter and transmitter of a voice coinciding in the same physical body. A deckchair of course has no voice, so its duality cannot be 'heard'. In being its own diegetic sound source, though, The Conversation Piece *does* have this crucial affordance.

3.4.5. Acantha's Doorbell

Another object of *She Described It to Death* that is conceived to have the affordances necessary to qualify as a voice-body is Acantha's doorbell, in this case the idea being taken in a different direction again by the fact that it is naturally wordless.[238] The factor, or metamarker, that draws attention to the doorbell's role of voice-body is that it is activated twice, each time by different visitors to Acantha's house. Each time the doorbell is activated its chimes are different, and in each case they operate as part of the non-diegetic musical material of that moment as well as being a diegetic doorbell. In the first instance (p.192, b.175) the chimes comprise the melodic pitch row from which the music of the ensuing scene is built, and in the second (p.218, b.17), the pitch oscillator that characterises the majority of Attis's sung material, which, to muddy the waters further, is also akin to the 'ding-dong' gesture of a traditional doorbell.

As with The Conversation Piece, the ideal would be that the prop doorbell was in reality fully functional and able to produce the two different chime compositions in alternation without external technology. Again though, although it would be possible to make a doorbell like this, the constraints of budget and time would most likely be prohibitive. Since the prop can be rigged to emit the composed chimes by remotely controlled, in-built speaker, however, the effect can be rendered in a way that would be indistinguishable from the real thing from an audience perspective, reinforced by the plausibility of the existence of such a doorbell. With this in mind, the following assumes a doorbell of the ideal form.

It is important to establish that there are about six minutes between the first and second uses of the

238 Although it could have been rigged to emit any sound at all, and a recorded, sung 'ding-dong' would have another metafictional tone again.

doorbell, and on the first occasion there are also fifteen seconds between the chimes sounding and the ensemble taking up the same pitch material, solo claves slowly marking time in the interim. In the flow of the opera, then, the audience is gradually acquainted with the doorbell's full set of properties.

At its first sounding, the doorbell is entirely diegetic since there is no contextual reason to assume otherwise – the characters react in the way we might expect, without comment, and the melodic nature of the sound sits comfortably within the conventional repertoire of the genre of 'doorbell chimes' – but soon after (for anyone who remembers the chimes well enough) this status is brought into question by the introduction of the same material in the ensemble and voices. So, by the second instance it may be apparent that the doorbell also exists non-diegetically, but at the same time, the second set of chimes play on a thematic of Attis that is itself conventionally doorbell like in the context. Even though the second instance is different to the first, this in itself does not read as definitively non-diegetic as it is in keeping with those doorbells that play a different, or randomly selected, tune each time they are activated. On the other hand, by this point we have had the opportunity to notice that the musical materials involved are drawn from another dimension, which is unrealistic. In these ways, the doorbell entangles itself in the diegetic/non-diegetic boundary, shifting position in relation to the unfolding context. As with The Conversation Piece, this fluxing ontology constitutes metareference to operatic duality, alongside that metareference generated by nested genre, in this case the genre of 'doorbell chimes' being situated within the overarching genre of opera.

On a related but more general note, it would of course be possible to create an opera that makes it apparent to its audience that there is a difference between what they and the characters hear in relation to diegetic sound. This is a general affordance of the operatic medium which a libretto could be tailored to exploit. Such an approach was discussed during the making of *She Described It to Death*, but an appropriate outlet for it never quite came to light, primarily because the manoeuvre requires a textual component that, in our case, would have disrupted other important plot and thematic elements. An opera could certainly be built around such a premise though, and would be fundamentally metafictional in its form. Although this seems like an obvious point now, the clarity with which I am able to make it is the result of the research-practice, an evaluation of which follows.

4. Process Under the Microscope

This chapter takes some of the examples set out in The Categories and conducts a more forensic examination of the compositional process behind them. As we have seen, this process begins with researching literary metafiction in order to understand its origins, objectives, taxonomies, and techniques. Although any fictional media may possess metafictional qualities, metafiction as a theory-practice began in literature, so, in order to delimit the research-practice, and since it seemed likely to be of personal interest, I chose to focus on that field.

The thinking behind this approach was that such an understanding would provide the necessary foundation upon which to build a compositional method, while also hopefully steering the composing in a particular direction. This hope was fulfilled, as the research made apparent something that is of fundamental importance in the context of the research-practice: since they are often describable by abstract, universal terms, many of the compositional principles of postmodern literary theory, as exemplified by, but not limited to, Lodge's principles of contradiction, permutation, discontinuity, randomness, and excess – are applicable not only beyond literary forms, but beyond narrative media in general.[239]

We are as likely to encounter them in non-fictional frames as we are in, say, film and theatre: contradiction might be found undermining an insurance claim, and permutation and excess are regulars at the pizza parlour. Of specific relevance in our context is that these compositional principles easily lend themselves to music composition, which naturally has its own means of embodying such properties – as an experienced composer it is not difficult to conceive of music that exhibits discontinuity, for example, although an appreciation of different 'flavours' of any property is essential, as we will see later in this chapter.

As an undergraduate student I was taught by the composer Edward Cowie.[240] In a lecture that has stayed with me, he discussed what he referred to as the 'universal dynamics of form', a subject which dealt with just such multivalent compositional principles but, at least initially, from the other side of the coin, asking how we might take musical concepts like 'retrograde' and 'inversion' and

239 Lodge uses the term 'principle of composition' when describing the ways in which postmodernist writing 'tries to defy' Jakobson's theory which asserts that 'any discourse must connect its topics according to either similarity or contiguity'. Lodge, *Working With Structuralism*, p. 13.

240 Cowie was a visiting professor at Canterbury Christ Church University in the Spring term of 1996.

apply them to actions such as drinking a glass of water. This was his way of addressing the idea that terms of this kind need not be singularly wedded to a medium, that any abstract universal which has been attached to the structures or processes of a particular discipline can be reattached to any other. Although through this process we might discover that we feel a particular term is more apt in one context than another, the important point is that the transplantation allows for a compositional exploration and experimentation with the potential to yield valuable and unexpected results. In our context it is tempting to think of this process as a kind of transliteration – that rendering the same formal quality in a different medium might be said to be in some way equivalent to rendering the same word in a different alphabet. Fortunately, the efficacy of the compositional technique does not rest on the validity of such complex metaphorical juggling, or rather, the validity of it is, as has been discussed earlier in relation to quantum superposition, that such metaphors can be powerful compositional tools in themselves, regardless of their ultimate technical accuracy in relation to their native discipline.

Thinking of the compositional principles of postmodern literary theory as universal dynamics of form provided a basis for the composition methods that are set out in this chapter, but the application of such thinking does not in itself result in metafictional effects of course. As we have seen, metafictional status requires a 'self-conscious' quality, and the fact that a piece of music might be described as 'discontinuous', for example, does not necessarily suggest anything beyond that.

In chapter 2 we discussed the question of opera's innate metafictionality, essentially reaching the conclusion that our being aware of opera's artifice and an opera deliberately foregrounding its artifice are two different things, and it is the latter which may constitute metafictional effect. This self-reflective quality of metafiction is the seat of its critical power, and activating that quality requires a wilful overcoming of naturalised conventions. For opera music this means either finding a mechanism by which it can be seen to 'comment' on itself, or in which it can interact with or operate upon the theatrical and dramatic registers of the work in order to foreground the constructedness of the multimedial matrix as a whole. Since in opera these effects are usually reliant on context, we will explore them more thoroughly in the specific examples to follow; but first there is another important piece of background to cover.

At the beginning of chapter two we looked at the difference between gentler and more extreme

forms of metafiction and I noted that 'where the latter's metafictionality is unquestionable, in that whatever the reader might call it, its effects cannot be overlooked, the former's might be debatable, or the characteristics in question even go unnoticed for some'. This is partly due to the fact that metafiction itself is a tendency within the novel rather than a sub genre of its own, and as such postmodern works (in particular) often utilise metafictional and realist devices alongside each other, creating a much different effect to more extreme metafictional works that do everything they can to signal their own artificial status and undermine any sense of realism.

Initially, in the earliest stages of the research-practice, the author M. John Harrison (Mike) was on board to write the opera's libretto. I did not know Mike personally prior to this point but was an avid reader of his work and took the opportunity of the programme to contact him and ask if he would be interested in collaborating on an opera. He was intrigued and we met to discuss what that might mean. Our conversation ranged around the kind of approaches in which I was interested and we seemed to find common ground. At the time my research was in a fledgling state so I was unable to present all of my thoughts as part of a clear metafictional framework, but at the very least they were all clearly metafictional in their attitude, something which Mike, as an experienced author of sixty years, would of course have recognised. Unfortunately, I do not have an exact record of that conversation as it took place in quite a noisy space, but the index cards discussed in the 'Making the Libretto' section of this commentary, that were made later in the process, derived from the same ideas.

Unfortunately, Mike fell ill and, in order to dedicate his reduced energies to the completion of his then current book, understandably stepped away from the opera. This was some months after our initial meeting, and in opera-making terms left quite a tight time frame in which to not only find a new librettist, but to develop a libretto quickly enough to allow me time to compose the music. Fortunately, Sally O'Reilly, a writer with whom I had already made two chamber operas, agreed to step in at the last minute and create a libretto in a very short amount of time, which she did, in collaboration with myself as outlined in the 'Making the Libretto' section of this commentary. Sally's contribution was invaluable and exceptional. An original libretto, written in not much more than two months, that had a subject matter perfectly suited for metafictional treatment and great scope for formal play.

This libretto was ready in time to allow me ten months to write an 80-90 minute chamber opera, which is far from ideal, but possible. Had we not been able to engage Sally – someone with whom I have an established collaborative method, which enabled a more efficient process – I am confident that either the libretto would not have been finished nearly in time, or it would not have been so suited to my creative sensibilities, or both. The significance of the change in librettist, however, is that Sally, as a writer and art practitioner, had engaged with the extreme side of metafiction some time ago, and in the process had come to personally find it 'overcooked',[241] and as a result has crafted her writing to inhabit what she considers to be a more ambiguous region of the spectrum. A discussion of the implications of this change of librettist, then, is self-evidently germane in the context of the broader research-practice, as well as this chapter's detailing of my compositional process.

It is of fundamental importance that a research-practice adheres to its theoretical objective while pursuing its practical ends, or at least recognises when these objectives have changed, so it was essential to consider whether a shift to a less extreme metafictional attitude would constitute a compromise in this sense. Such a discussion was of course had with Sally when considering her potential involvement in the opera, which resulted in ideas and attitudes that I will try to represent here now.

An important point to make in this regard is that from the perspective of the research-practice, 'extreme' and 'gentle' are not hierarchical terms in regard to metafiction, they are simply different qualities of it. Thus, any form of metafiction which affords investigation into and development of a compositional method would be equally legitimate. So the question was, are extreme and gentle metafictional attitudes equally productive in our context? The answer is that since, as we have seen, all degrees of metafiction adhere to the same fundamental compositional principles – their range of effects and qualities being determined by a combination of the particular principle employed and how overtly it is applied – they all have the potential to become meaningful as the focus of a research-practice concerned with such principles.

Both approaches have things to recommend them: the benefit of extreme metafiction is that it is incontrovertible, and as such it is both easy to identify and, in not putting the interpretative onus on

241 As she described it to me in person.

the reader as much as its gentler cousin, makes for a clearer-cut discussion. On the other hand, this unequivocal, clear-cut-ness precludes the investigation of the 'slipperiness' that can be such a critical part of the more ambiguous metafictional mode.

Where arguably it would be ideal to cover both approaches, in reality the production of a final opera to strict deadline is as necessary a requirement of this research residency programme as an adherence to the research objectives, and since a focus on gentler metafiction – what I came to think of as 'cusp' states of the mode – does not represent a compromise, it simply did not make sense to reject the involvement of a librettist who could provide a brilliant and apt libretto soon enough to ensure time for me to produce an opera score of a suitably high quality. With this decision made, it is then only reasonable to compose music which, from the librettist's perspective, is in keeping with the attitudes of the text – attitudes which, after all, I share, while also enjoying others. As much as anything, to disregard the librettist's perspective would be antithetical to my own collaborative opera-making practice, which is a crucial element of the research-practice, albeit that it is necessarily otherwise tacit in this aspect of the commentary.

A further point of great importance for me is that cusp metafiction is not an easy option. In many ways I felt it far easier to appreciate what extreme metafictional music would require, and, as well as being of personal interest, I believed the ambiguous region of the metafictional spectrum represented an opportunity for me to explore different compositional territory, territory I found harder to grasp, and this in itself felt apt as the driving force of a research-practice. Also, discluding more extreme metafictional music from the opera itself does not prevent it from being part of the research-practice, as will be demonstrated in the examples that follow. Finally, but of no less importance, it should be noted that the libretto of *She Described It to Death* is partly concerned with the emotional and psychological angst brought about by naturalised social convention, and when considering the best musical support for such ideas I cannot help but think that while extremity might be nuanced on its own terms, it cannot be made to perform nearly as insidiously as something which can creep up on you.

With the above context in mind, we will now look in-depth at four examples from The Categories in order to understand the full composition process. Each example provides a range of versions of the same idea, with each version representing different points on the 'extreme'/'gentle' spectrum of

metafiction, before going on to evaluate the success or otherwise of each example. This is followed by an overall evaluation in terms of the research-practice, and finally a discussion of other avenues of exploration that have suggested themselves through the process.

In terms of the workflow represented here, although there was no libretto to begin with, I did sketch purely musical ideas early on inspired by my conversations with Mike, and that material became folded into later work with the final text. The more extreme metafictional attitude was present in some of this work and is factored into the following.

4.1 Antagonistic Interlude

Composing this interlude began with the universal dynamic of 'discontinuity', drawn, of course, from Lodge's principles of composition. The decision to work with this principle was based on the fact that the interlude was intended to sit at a point in the opera where it seemed dramaturgically useful to create a sense of the audience being deliberately excluded from the opera's events (which are not depicted here by any other of the opera's media), leaving them 'in the dark' as to what is going on while the music suggests, with a touch of contained mania, invisible mechanisms at work and an undercurrent of nervous tension. In this context, the discontinuity would hopefully contribute a noticeable disruption of the already tense material, adding a further, unmistakable layer of intent to the music, which in turn might draw the audience's attention to the idea of who, or what, might be the agent of that intent, be that actors within or without the fiction, or both.

To achieve this, the fundamental musical idea was as follows: express a clear pulse/gesture in order to create the sense of a mechanism, something which could be understood to be potentially regular, then, having established this understanding, disrupt that notional regularity. The instability of the music would generate dramatic intrigue while also potentiating its interpretation more specifically as a representation of unknown events or actions occurring elsewhere. The music was planned to have an overall sense of melodic shape, but pitches would be chosen to give the sense that some lines were following others in the moment, as if trying and failing to provide a unified front, a metaphor for the covering up of systemic uncertainty.

Having sketched material to create the 'mechanism' described above,[242] the next phase of composition began by repeating it to form a longer section and applying 'discontinuity' to its pulse rate and pitch gesture/phrasing pattern:

	Full score, p.35 – audio example 1a
b.31 – 37	the pulse rate and phrase pattern are established
b.37	the phrase stops short of completion
b.40	acceleration of pulse up to b.41 which is 24bpm faster (there are no further accels.)
b.45	previous pulse rate returns (no decel.)
b.47	first part of the phrase momentarily at a much higher pulse rate
b.48	phrase pauses for a single pulse unit and...
b.49	restarts, then...
b.50	pauses for four pulse units
b.52	end of the phrase comes early, having skipped a section
b.53	phrase restarts and immediately pauses for one pulse unit before going on
b.58	phrase stops halfway through, for 16 pulse units
b.62	whole phrase at four times the original speed

On reflection, I felt the music lacked impetus. The discontinuity was apparent and provocative, but at the same time enervated the interlude, which was not the intention, and it needed to feel more nervous. I added a percussion part to address this. The percussion operates at a much higher rhythmic frequency than the pitched instruments and, until the penultimate moment where it peters out as a foil to the final, unexpected high-energy burst, is not subject to the same discontinuity. It was intended that the constant, higher frequency nature of the percussion would by contrast highlight the intermittency of the other material, while itself adding a driving, nervous energy apt to the dramaturgical aims of the interlude (audio example 1b).

With all of this in place, the matter of tempo becomes central. Reflecting on the interlude now, I feel that the tempo is considerably too high, failing to exploit the kind of cusp discontinuity that might be achieved by a pulse rate slow enough to make each event feel momentarily singular or isolated, coupled with the unpredictable pauses and phrasing variations.

242 Which can be heard in bars 1 – 37 of audio example 1a

Although the percussion performs its intended purpose, it too would benefit from a much slower tempo, and perhaps even being pared back to be almost entirely on the pulse itself as well, maintaining the impetus of the music with occasional, well-placed, interstitial events, rather than incessant movement. These modifications can be heard in audio example 1c.

It is easy to think of extremes as being fast and loud, for example, but here I feel that slow, sparse and almost-too-drawn-out would be far more unexpected and conspicuous, and as such might push the material more towards the more overt end of the metafictional spectrum, particularly since it is already unlike anything around it. Another modification which might potentiate a more extreme metafictional effect would be to limit the interlude's variety too. Perhaps, in a way, the variation gives an audience too much to occupy them, leaving less space for them to wonder about the intent of the music. This space might be created by simply repeating the incomplete phrase of the mechanism, at the slower tempo, with pared back percussion and very little, if any, variation at all (audio example 1d).

Also, this interlude is not only free of text, it is designed to be a blind spot of the libretto, so a more extreme metafictional attitude in the music would not act in a way that is antithetical to the intent of the opera's librettist. Such a situation could be better exploited with the simple modifications described above, and if the opera is ever performed I will rewrite this section accordingly.

Thinking about the broader implications of all this, it is possible to conceive of an opera where lots of musical material is recapitulated at extreme tempi at later points across the whole arc of the piece. Such moments could be deployed to suit dramaturgical concerns while in themselves also creating a context within which the music might be seen to 'comment' on itself by foregrounding its plasticity, and particularly if the rate seems (sometimes) arbitrary, untethered from or incongruous with the dramatic element. This approach would also bring into play Lodge's principle of permutation.

Another broader compositional idea that came to light while composing this interlude is that of 'mistakes'. Cutting the interlude's 'mechanism' phrase short naturally opened up the possibility of restarting it from any point, and those instances where I decided to restart with a repeat of the uncompleted phrase naturally had the air of 'trying something again'. This idea is covered in more

detail later in the 'Moving Forward' section of this chapter.

4.2 Tape Warping

Having worked with some of Lodge's principles by this point, it seemed a natural progression to try to find a method for extending that lexicon. The question was how to do so in a substantial way, where the legitimacy of any term was not simply that it referred to an abstract process, event, behaviour or action that might be embodied in music, but that it derived from something specific about the opera.

We have already touched on the efficacy of metaphor as a creative tool, and since metaphor is such an essential part of collaborative discussion – when trying to illuminate for each other, across disciplines, our take on the character of a scene, for example – the making process naturally produces its own lexicon of terms, all focused on describing aspects of the material in hand. Having realised that this might be an apt way to generate new compositional principles, the next step is to identify such terms. This is a simple logical progression of course, but often the most powerful tools of composition are simple in their fundamental concept while yielding complex results when applied skilfully, and the apparent simplicity is a product of a well-developed reflective compositional practice which allows for the conscious formulation of such concepts in the first place.

Through this process, then, the composing of this section began with an exploration of the idea of literalised metaphor. The metaphor in question having emerged from our attempts to describe Volvox's actions towards Bract at this point: we came to say that Volvox was 'warping' Bract's reality around him. Thus 'warping' was applied as a compositional principle, afforded a self-conscious meta dimension by the music sharing physical characteristics with the sonic phenomenon of a warped tape recording, as described previously in The Categories. A rendition of this section can be heard in audio example 2a, this covers p.125, bb. 162 – 201 in the full score.

Even speaking purely hypothetically, if executed well enough this effect ought to be so readable that it immediately draws attention to the musical process in its own right, outside of its role in the drama. But more than this, in actual performance the music requires such a high degree of coordinated skill and effort on the part of the singers and orchestra, and involves such highly

stylised, 'unnaturalistic' material that both the non-fictional agents of the representation and the material itself cannot help but find themselves in the spotlight.[243] Nevertheless, there are nuances to the situation that warrant consideration when evaluating this passage.

Audio example 2a isn't nearly as convincing or well performed by myself and the virtual instruments as it would be in an actual production, but nevertheless it seems evident that the material could be better written to 'sell' the idea even more. In seeking to make the effect fluid, it feels somewhat rushed, and I think a more protracted slowing down and speeding up would give the audience more time to appreciate that the effect is referring to the physical media of recording. This is a case where verisimilitude in one respect – that a warping tape often oscillates between speeds quite quickly – hampers verisimilitude in another, that being the clarity of the meta-reference when encountered in the full theatrical situation. As an opera composer it is always important to remember that an opera audience have a lot to take in at any one time, and managing the degrees of this is part of the skill of opera composition, being particularly important in the context of new work being seen for the first time. This is, of course, not to say that audiences should never be overloaded with information, only that overloading them accidentally is very different from overloading them deliberately.

One of the main shortcomings of the opera's version of the effect is that it is hard for the slowed down and speeded up versions to perceptibly retain their harmonic relationships while primarily comprising horizontal, line-led material, as opposed to more vertical, chord block writing. It seemed crucial to the effect that the lead line of the game show music be clearly present throughout, since a warped tape would of course retain this eminently identifiable feature. However, on reflection it seems that the predominance of horizontal material – or rather, the lack of chordal material – makes it more difficult to appreciate the specific reference to warped tape, particularly with the pacing of these shifts being as quick as it sometimes is. With this in mind, were I to write this section again, I would rebalance the material to have fewer melodic parts, in the interests of clarity using doublings for those which remain, supported by more straightforward blocks of shifting parallel harmony. This would be well supported by carrying out the warping more gradually and steadily, as mentioned above, and also by orchestration which ensures a grit and grain to the parallel chord blocks, ensuring they are not pristine, which would work against the portrayal. Even though the musical effect of this version would be a lot clunkier than the actual sound of a tape

243 That is, 'unnaturalistic' within the naturalised conventions of operatic realism.

warping, in the context the reference itself may well be clearer than it would be in its current state.

Looking at more wholesale alternative approaches, the obvious candidate would be to warp an actual recording of the Volvox game show musical bed,[244] as well as the voices (audio examples 2b, 2c).[245] However, although the effect would be unmistakable, and the dramatic metaphor no less apparent than in the orchestral/sung version, the orchestra and voices are still better distanced to *refer* to the apparatus of recording technology than that technology itself, which is a key factor in my decision to try to create an acoustic analogue.

That matter aside, if I were to take the recorded route, a central question would be whether both orchestra and singers were pre-recorded. It would be possible to have the orchestral part recorded and slowed down while the singers continue to perform live, which would retain more than enough visible effort to keep the performers foregrounded. Or the inverse of course, with the singers miming while the orchestra performs its 'warping', which does provide an excellent metafictional device due to the resulting separation of the voice and body of the vocalic-body, as well as generating a momentary hierarchy where it is clear that the orchestra is the only live 'voice'. If well performed the effect could be uncanny, particularly given that the whole opera is amplified and it would be possible to mix the sound so as to have minimal discrepancy between the perceived point of origin of mimed and live sound. However, in a way, the former approach might actually provide the most striking effect, since leaving the singers 'voiceless' is actually a more obvious strategy in the context of opera where singers are commonly the focus, whereas it is more unusual to leave the orchestra in their equivalent of that state.

There are, however, three reasons that the recorded option would be less suitable from my perspective. The first is simply that I have already written a similar mechanism in *The Virtues of Things*, and wanted to take the opportunity of the research-practice to cover new ground. The second is as above, that the acoustic rendition is better placed in terms of the music's referential objectives. The third is that, as well as the fact that the sheer physical effort of performing the acoustic version is itself naturally foregrounding of the non-fictional means of sound production, the physicality of it is also aesthetically and thematically more resonant with the energy and attitude of

244 A 'bed' is the term given to the music of a game show which continues to play once the main theme has finished, while the host introduces the game or the contestants. It is usually a loop of backing material from the theme.
245 Due to my limited audio editing skill, this version is more digital sounding than would be ideal.

the libretto, and therefore provides a significant extra layer that I would consider to be missing in any of the the recorded versions.

Overall, I think the version found in the opera is effective in metafictional terms. It is an extreme manipulation of the musical material that foregrounds performers, and its 'warpedness' is overt. The music's specific reference to the phenomenon of a tape warping reads perhaps less clearly (although is far from being illegible) than if the music were re-written to include a more substantial chordal aspect.

Thinking ahead, as with the disruption via extremely slow tempo discussed in the previous example, the warping of material via recording could be applied as a general principle of metafictional composition throughout an opera. The skill would be to understand how this device might be employed with substance, rather than 'superimposed' upon the libretto without further relevance to its themes and ideas. This could be extended to recorded material that is clearly from outside the opera world itself, bringing something of the quality of Lodge's 'short circuit' and Waugh's 'found' materials to the piece. Exploration of these ideas in conjunction with a permutational investigation of hybrid live/recorded moments would undoubtedly add further dimensions to the method.

4.3 Josella's Broadcast vs. the Chainsaw Synth

The composing of Josella's Broadcast began with the principle of permutation, although, as we will see, this turned out to be somewhat of a red herring in the context. The libretto requires two versions of Josella's Broadcast, as if made to appeal to different audiences within the fiction. To achieve this, I planned to write a central monody for the voice and then arrange accompaniment parts using differing harmonic languages. As well as being known to be an effective musical method, this had the added benefit that the harmonic aspects would feel like different rationalisations of the same voice part, which would be strongly resonant with the themes of the opera. The decision to make the part sung rather than spoken came from the idea that this would provide provocative ambiguity as to whether the singing were diegetic or non-diegetic. With all this in mind, I composed the vocal monody to contain a lot of semitone shifts of pitch, knowing that this would easily play into both chromatic and triadic rationalisations of it. The vocal part itself (p.432 of the score) is notated without metre or rhythm with the intention that these aspects would be decided

collaboratively with the singer performing the part who, as stated in the notes regarding the making of Josella's Broadcast, should not be performing any other role in the opera (p.433).

In the case of our production, I worked with the singer songwriter Serafina Steer to make Josella's part. She and I have collaborated a lot over the years and have an established working method. Her performance of the solo monody without accompaniment can be heard in audio example 3a, followed by the two differing arrangements in audio examples 3b and 3c. The choice of harp as the instrument was due to this being Serafina's instrument, and her being keen to perform the whole 'track' herself. The thinking at the time was that she might release both versions as a double 'A' side single around the time of the opera's production, to add another metafictional layer to it, but of course the production was cancelled before that point was reached. I was happy to work with the harp because it did not prevent me from making two distinct arrangements, and I felt at the time that it would also help to further blur the lines as to whether the character Josella was responsible for the music in her broadcasts or whether it was to be considered a continuation of the opera's non-diegetic music. The production was cancelled before Serafina and I had the opportunity to record her performance of the harp part, so the realisations in the audio examples are made with a virtual instrument.[246]

The point of permutation in postmodern literature is, broadly speaking, that it prevents a singular resolution of events, offering up many alternatives without necessarily providing any way for the reader to judge which, if any, are 'true', or 'really' happened, or perhaps even offering up many contradictory ways to make such a judgement on top of the many versions of events themselves. This represents an issue with the permutational approach to Josella's Broadcast: the two permutations are rationalised within the fiction – in that frame they exist because of the machinations of an organisation that wishes to manipulate the populace. As such, these permutations are not designed to prevent singular resolution of these events, this is non-metafictional, non-disruptive permutation. In this case there is then nothing that the music can do on its own to make the situation more ambiguous – even with greater distinction between their arrangements there would be no way to suggest that one or other variation was the 'truth' of the matter – and any metafictional effect would have to be achieved by resorting to other modes of

246 Which had its own benefit when making the more chromatic arrangement since it did not have to observe the real practicalities of harp pedalling/tuning.

disruption or foregrounding.

This at least *could* be attempted by more extreme divergence between the two iterations, in addition to the harmonic distinction – between the scale and type of forces, between degrees of perceived tempo, density, texture, between vocal productions of the recording etc. However, in the context of the research-practice, the intention had been to explore permutational metafiction. The compositional mistake was to have become too close to the terminology, to have failed to step back and appreciate the context, and reflect on the obvious facts that a) permutation might be effective in one medium and not another, and b) that although a dynamic of form might be used as a postmodern principle of composition, its application as such requires specific treatment, it cannot simply be plugged in without consideration and expected to perform.

In the broader context of the opera, Josella's Broadcasts are undeniably metafictional: the character of Josella has been migrated from John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* into our opera, and once in our opera has been relocated to an alternative, intradiegetic representation of *The Day of the Triffids*, from where she is reporting back to the citizens of our operatic world. Permutation does not play a part in this however, and more than that, even if it did, in the context music could only perform a supporting role, rather than itself contributing metafictional effect. This is a failure on my part to appreciate, while composing, the work being done by the fictional frame, which subsumes the permutational aspect to be intra-fictional, not metafictional, in a way that the music cannot overcome. The music still performs an important function in supporting the drama and fabula of the opera, it just does not constitute metafictional exploration in the way I had intended.

In contrast to this is the Chainsaw Synth solo (p.82, b.117 of the full score and audio example 3d). As described in The Categories, in this section a synthesizer provides the sound of a fictional chainsaw in such a way that it sits on the cusp of diegetic/non-diegetic representation. Once the idea had been conceived and the appropriate synth sound found, the part was written via transcription of a recorded improvisation. The notation is open enough to leave room for the keyboard performer to tailor their exact performance to their own sense of the 'impersonation' in hand and to the on-stage action, should they be able to see it. In metafictional terms, the music is simple and effective, drawing attention to the non-diegetic apparatus of the operatic representation while maintaining a significant connection with the real sound of the object in question. Where the metafictional

potential of the music of Josella's Broadcast is nullified by its diegetic context, the Chainsaw Synth fully exploits the fictional frame and, crucially, the resultant effect is metafictional largely because of the music.

4.4 Umming & Erring

When it comes to the difference in outcome between extreme and gentle metafictional attitudes, this section provides a clear example (p.227, bb.69-75). The music was conceived to deploy the filler words 'err', 'erm', 'um', 'ah' in a way that would disrupt the flow of the opera's plot and semantics, in doing so creating a state where the artifice of the form would come to the fore, via the material itself and the performance that material would require. Here, discontinuity and excess are the most pertinent principles of composition, with the latter applied to the parameter of 'duration' to control how extreme the effect is.

Axil and Isidium's music involves lots of slow pulses, marked out or implied in both the vocal and orchestral parts. For Umming & Erring to have the desired effect I knew that the pulse would have to be removed. Irregularity would be the source of the discontinuity, an aperiodic arresting of fluid forward momentum. Another musical feature that I considered to be essential in this section was homophony between singers and instruments. For the text and musical events to occur precisely simultaneously for even a short duration requires obvious coordination, which is the root of homophony's artificiality. Although a sustained spell of unsynchronised umming and erring might be effective to a degree, simultaneity affords a more striking result, as well as being more overtly playful, a character that is well suited to the intended tone of the scene.

With these fundaments in place, I set about sketching a range of different versions of this section. The main variables were temporal density – how frequently on average the homophonic events occur – the presence or absence of auxiliary (non-homophonic) material, and the duration of the section as a whole (audio examples 4a - 4c). To me, although the effect is less stark when it includes auxiliary material, starkness having been part of the plan, these events bring a useful anxiety of their own, and along with variation of dynamic and the introduction of pitch lines within the homophonic elements support the elongation of the section without compromise to the intended metafictional effect. It became clear, however, that auxiliary material hampers the effect when the section is

shorter, and as such they were ruled out of the version to be found in the opera itself. It seems that any temporal density is effectively disruptive as long as it is irregular, so governing the flow is a matter of compositional 'feel' rather than there being a more or less apt approach in general. Unsurprisingly, the most overall definitive parameter is the duration of the section in general, which makes intuitive sense – the longer the section, the more we are taken out of the conventions of realism and afforded space/distance to consider the mechanisms of the representation. However, although this material has no innate ending point, and can be arbitrarily long, the length of the section is governed by its impact on the efficacy of the other parameters: it is difficult to establish something as irregular in too short a time frame. This lower limit is particularly relevant in terms of performing gentler metafiction with these materials.

The challenge was to match the sensibilities of the opera as a whole while still having metafictional impact at this point. In order to achieve this outcome it seemed necessary to compose the section so that it was short enough to not destroy the balance of the scene while being irregular and halting enough to draw our attention to the artifice of the form. Destroying the balance of a scene would of course be a potentially metafictional move in itself, but on the other hand, in the context of our opera as a whole, if this agitated section were too prolonged it would be easy to lose the quality of the 'doldrums' that has been established as the dramatic foil to what is about to unfold. This, then, is a challenge of more 'cusp' metafiction.

Despite this, I do feel that the version I opted for is unnecessarily short-lived. To me, it does fulfil the above criteria, but any metafictional effect it creates would be momentary to the point that perhaps it would not 'stick', as it were, particularly as the manner of the disruption is actually quite charming. Certainly any impact it has will not be very hard-hitting and the same idea could without question be rendered to be far more extreme in its metafictional effect. With that said, it is in keeping with the mode of the opera in general, which it needs to be, and it would not take too much rearrangement for it to generate a greater metafictional impact – audio example 4b, which is about ten seconds longer than the opera's version and allows for auxiliary material, would be a good candidate I think.

4.5 Moving Forward

Much has become apparent through the processes represented in this commentary. The blatant artificiality of opera does not in itself make for metafictional effect. It in fact creates an environment in which significant compositional effort is required to ensure that metafictional devices are distinct from the conventions of operatic realism. Virtuosic vocal writing provides a good example of this issue of operatic metafiction, since although it may bring the performer to the fore, at the same time it is completely in keeping with traditions in conventional opera. Although certain notable operatic moments which exemplify this feature have been analysed in the terms of metafiction,[247] and, as we have seen, one may make the case for the category of 'unconscious metafiction', this not only places the onus entirely on interpretation, but also, from a making perspective, would leave the composer with the paradoxical task of deliberately conceiving inadvertent effects.

In terms of opera's instrumental music, metafictional strategies such as discontinuity, or an ambiguous, non-directional chord, for example, can be read in purely dramatic terms, so their metafictional potential can be undermined simply by their dramaturgical congruence. There is perhaps an argument, therefore, that a degree of dramaturgical incongruence is a necessary feature of metafictional opera music. On reflection, I think this is a good description of the effect I hoped to achieve with the Antagonistic Interlude: as much as anything else it needed to feel hard to pin down in terms of its immediate dramaturgical function, in order to support the metafictionality of its other characteristics. Another matter to consider in this context relates to musical genre tropes and polystylism. It is convenient, for instance, that game show-style music is apt to the scene where Volvox first manipulates Bract, since as well as providing a clearly apprehendable referent for the tape warping effect, it also naturally points to other genre worlds beyond opera. Materials of this type perform metafictional work easily, but it is important to note that however many different tropes one refers to, the set nevertheless represents only metafiction of a particular type. Unless it is part of the opera's concept, over-reliance upon such materials can limit the range of flavours of metafiction available to the composer, and as such available to perform a greater and more nuanced range of dramaturgical functions in the opera. Fortunately, as we have seen, there are other ways to approach metafictional music in opera – benefiting greatly from the fact that opera music is already nested in a fictional context, in relation to a body of text. They can be more difficult

247 The aria 'Der Hölle Rache kocht in meinem Herzen' (commonly known as the 'Queen of the Night' aria) from Mozart's *The Magic Flute* is a prime example.

to activate without resorting to blatant excess, so the onus is on the composer to appreciate that their results are different in their metafictional quality, providing different ways to address a metafictional intent.

The compositional principle of excess is also generally difficult for a gentle metafiction, since excess is by definition never subtle – unless one could somehow create the sense of an excess of subtleness, but it is hard to see how this would in itself be incontrovertible. The devices and methods found in *She Described It to Death* do, then, tend to be of a shorter duration than they would if rendered to be more extreme, but it is important to note that they, and all of Lodge's principles, are entirely scalable, and the same approaches could be deployed in future work for much more excessive durations. Knowing this from the beginning of the process would inform the kind of conversation that might be had with librettists and other collaborators.

Another significant dimension to consider is the impact of paratextual material associated with an opera, as touched on in my reading of Object Collection's *It's All True*. Careful preparation of these materials can prime an audience to be receptive to any particular aesthetic or dramatic aspect of a work. Our production never reached the point of disseminating posters or e-flyers etc., but the project did have concept artwork on which Sally and I collaborated with the Royal Opera team. The artwork is a collage of images and a text quote from the opera, presenting each element as if it had been torn out from somewhere else, with the intention that this already alludes to the idea of frames and realities shaped by words. The potential to use paratext as a metamarker is far greater than this though, and in the future I would like to explore it further. The original idea to have Serafina Steer release Josella's Broadcast as a single prior to the production of *She Described It to Death* was an attempt to extend the opera's reality into our own, perhaps even activating a sense of Lodge's 'short circuit' for those of the audience who had heard Serafina's single before seeing the opera. Although our production never reached this point, this idea exemplifies the direction in which I would like to take future work.

Of all the ideas that arose through the composing of *She Described It to Death* that are not explored within the opera itself, the formal, structural and emotional-psychological qualities of 'mistakes' or 'blooper reels', and the metafictional potential therein, is something I would like to work with. I mean this not simply in the manner of something like 'The Play That Goes Wrong', but in the purely

musical sense, an investigation of the possibility of creating structures which in themselves seem to be struggling with a musical objective, 'retaking' it and admitting other 'errors' in the process, and how these structures might be deployed in a less one-to-one causal relationship with the libretto and staging, in a way that draws attention to the musical aspect and exhibits a more complex resonance, thematic or otherwise, with the plot and events portrayed.[248]

248 'The Play That Goes Wrong' is a metafiction of the 'play-within-a-play' variety in which an inept school drama group present a catastrophic staging of an in-world fictional 1920s murder mystery play.

5. An Epilogic Evaluation

In many ways it's difficult to judge the success of the research-practice. Not least of the impediments is the fact that *She Described It to Death* has, as yet, not been performed, its first run having been cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic. An audience is required to fully actualise the effects of an opera, in order to complete the matrix of meaning production and move beyond the assumptions of the composer.

However, some avenues of assessment are still open to us. I did explore the implications of postmodern literary theory in the paradigm of opera composition. By which I mean I read and thought about postmodern literary theory as part of my composing practice, and it without doubt came to bear on the way I wrote the opera. On reflection I would say that one of the most notable implications of postmodern literary theory for opera composition is that an engagement with it creates a great sense of the materiality of the operatic medium. Composing under the influence of metafictional concepts feels like being in 'the matrix', as it were, able to see the zeros and ones of opera, as well as what they construct in the representational register.

Postmodern literary theory also offers the composer an alternative perspective, or mentality, to that of postdramatic theatre, while still supporting the generation of effects capable of undermining naturalised conventions. In terms of outcomes, the distinction between metafictional and postdramatic approaches is not always particularly pronounced, their effects in isolation are often very similar, sometimes indistinguishable. But it is precisely the fact that the fundamental distinction is of attitude rather than outcome that makes metafiction so useful. I enjoy postdramatic work as an audience, but from a making perspective it doesn't suit my personality. Metafiction provides a good alternative that still supports the making of genuinely critical, exploratory work, and is synergetic in less overtly experimental production contexts.

And metafictional thought seems particularly useful for making work which is odd, uncanny perhaps, the familiar defamiliarised, which is what I want to achieve in opera. Metafiction upsets recognisable convention by taking it at its word, forcing it to work out until it sweats, interrogating it with a smile until it cracks under the pressure, rather than hanging, drawing and quartering it before the show has begun. The metafictional show *is* convention's anxiety dream. “No need to shoot

convention", metafiction whispers in your ear, "give it enough rope and it'll hang itself."

When it comes to making 'an opera that is unorthodox in form while being accessible and entertaining', I can vouch for the success of the first point at least. We're led through the opera by a plot for sure, but its direction is completely unpredictable – and not because it has 'more twists and turns than a getaway driver's car',[249] but because it emerges from the interaction of characters without a unified goal, in relation to myriad social and political forces. Musically, the opera is a patchwork quilt of styles, genres, material attitudes and tones, an off-kilter gyroscope generating an unstable, yet coherent, heteroglossic field. At the opera's climax we slip sideways from looming combat into... something else, I'm not sure what – and that's another important point, this opera isn't meant to be didactic or dogmatic. It wants to be part of a discussion: of the idea that narrative is a poisoned chalice from which it is our nature to drink, that communal action might require finding peaceful ways of negotiating intractably complex social realities, and of the personal challenges of trying to accommodate a process of inclusive social dialogue that is perpetual and imperfect. While these are not new ideas, the attempt to represent them in the medium of a recognisable and entertaining, dare I say it even mainstream, opera, requires demonstrable recalibrations of convention which in themselves constitute an unorthodox approach. The point is not that more overtly experimental work is not 'for' certain demographics of people and we must compensate for this, I'm from a working class background and enjoy the gamut of art and music. The point is that people who happen to enjoy more recognisable, 'mainstream' forms of opera should not be denied complex, irreducible and unconventional experiences into the bargain. At the very least, it's unnecessary.

On the technical front, I feel I have developed ways of 'generating metafictional effects, particularly in the form of discrete, immediate devices, as opposed to macro-structural relationships.' Some are more subtle and almost certainly will not be apprehensible to everyone in an audience, but I think sufficient of them are overt enough not to be missed. Whether they are techniques as such, I'm not sure. They're certainly methods. Whatever we call them, for me, the compositional application of the concepts of universal dynamics of form, 'frames' and 'affordances' are the most fundamentally transformative outcome of the research-practice. They represent structural, formal attitudes that are brilliantly suited to opera, being that they can be applied to any material aspect of the operatic

249 I saw this 'review' on an action film poster many years ago.

apparatus, and focus on the relationship between all the components of any given moment. This view of opera composition as composing with relationships, not just musical materials, has arisen from the research-practice's immersion in postmodern literary theory and the sociological frameworks there entangled.

With this in mind, I am confident that this research-practice contributes to a wider body of knowledge in the field of opera studies. The opera itself is the embodiment of unconventional thinking in the field, and the written component offers genuine and substantial insight into what it is actually like to compose opera of a particular scale and cultural context. It not only describes the process in its fullest sense, but also represents the feeling, contingency and multi-dimensional thinking involved in opera-making through the metaphor of the commentary's formal structure, alongside description of the technical compositional aspect. In this respect, I am reminded of Brian McHale's writing about mimesis in postmodern literature. When discussing the fact that postmodernist fiction eschews the conventional mimesis of realism, he proposes instead a kind of ontological mimesis, saying: 'What postmodernist fiction imitates, the object of its mimesis, is the pluralistic and anarchistic ontological landscape of advanced industrial cultures.'[250] In this conception, a metafictional landscape can be thought of as mimetic of a real-world ontological condition, and I hope this overall effect is achieved by *She Described It to Death*. Extending this idea, I intend that this commentary is mimetic of the experience of composing opera. In addition to this, in a more conventional sense, the research-practice has developed quintessentially operatic compositional thought-tools which are apt to be taken on and applied by other composers to produce their own results.

As we have said, *She Described It to Death* is less hardcore a metafiction than it might have been. There are certainly ways of realising its libretto with a more unforgiving strain of metareference, but there are a few good reasons why our opera is not of that persuasion. First and foremost, our librettist is not herself inclined towards extreme metafiction, preferring a more ambiguous strain. Not to say that she does not appreciate such things, or has never written with them in mind, but simply that they aren't a key part of her own practice at the moment, and that is of fundamental relevance. Secondly, exploring more 'cusp' metafiction provided just an apt focus for this research-practice as its more overt cousin, particularly since cusp states are not an easy option in the context.

250 McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, p. 38.

And finally, much as this commentary creates a sense of metafiction being the primary focus of the opera, in reality it is only one of many aspects that are important to the piece. If metafiction had been allowed to dominate more holistically it might have left little breathing room for other significant dimensions of the work. As we have seen though, metafiction is a broad spectrum, and it just happens that *She Described It to Death* sits toward the less aggressive end.

At this point, I wonder how much to say about the mode of this commentary in general, but having read the whole thing I'm sure you know very well what it's up to – a poioumenon that embodies and demonstrates metafictional ideas rather than just talking about them, that interweaves genres of writing and tones of voice, that 'compromises' the 'hermetic seal' of the muso-academic with the 'messiness' of 'real life', that foregrounds the natural intertextuality of academic writing and so on. Ultimately, it also seeks to perform a metacommentary on the nature of artistic research-practices, and the challenge of synthesising the two elements to prevent the endeavour becoming simply research-plus-practice.

In another sense, this commentary is an attempt to represent that the 'real life' that took place while research-practice-ing is a life that, alongside illness and operations, was largely comprised of non-musical work, including the deluge of exchanges necessary to coordinate the opera's production, and these factors influence the opera's manifestation at least as much as the ideas of either music or literary theory. To give a simple example: if one wishes to write something vocally experimental, the material is best developed in dialogue with the singer in question. The more closely collaborative this process can be, the more nuanced and sophisticated the potential outcome. If the singer is not cast until after the score deadline, however, such collaborative writing won't be possible, and the music itself will turn out differently than it might have. The broader point here being that extramusical factors play a key part in the manifestation of all new operas, with logistics often having significant impact upon creative choices.

And the commentary involves its own logistics: it took two and a half weeks to collate all the emails for the four year period of the research-practice, to enable me to write the personal strand in the immediate, first person present, to make it as distinct as possible from the atemporal academic strand. Then here, on the other side of it all, I've set myself the challenge of trying to reconcile the two tones of voice. The challenge for you, of course, was developing a reading strategy. How did you

do it? Read all the text in order, allowing the two types to alternate, getting the benefit of that effect? Or did you read swathes of one type of text and then go back over the other, to allow for greater coherence on the technical side of things? Or did you ignore one aspect of the text entirely? It's certainly possible to read the commentary that way, although if you're one of my supervisors or examiners it's probably less likely that you would have considered that an option.

Much as I dread to ask, did you enjoy it at all? I know this kind of thing isn't to everyone's liking, metafiction as a literary mode certainly isn't. Or maybe you like the idea but feel I haven't handled it well enough to work properly for you. I do sympathise, but that's the nature of making. You give it your best shot but it's going to be wrong for someone. There is of course a big difference between matters of taste and matters of bad execution, and I want to take this opportunity to assure you that, however you feel about this text, I put everything I had into it, and I worked hard to make it purposeful and of a high quality. While it does want to probe the doctoral form it has no intention of being deliberately frustrating, and I hope that you found the unconventional aspects to be rich in themselves as well as contributing to the effect as a whole. Which is the same hope that I have for the opera itself.

As you might have gleaned from the non-academic thread of the text, when the opera was cancelled I wanted to find a way to do something with the music I'd spent so long writing. I teamed up with a friend and made a solo piano record from it, which is due for release on the Nonclassical label shortly after this commentary will have been submitted. The piano music is itself a kind of narration of the opera music, filtered through various processes of editing and improvisation, a once removed account of something that, as yet, has never been. At one point I was considering titling the doctorate 'How to Make an Album for Solo Piano' or some such, but it seemed too wilfully awkward to be helpful in the context. Nevertheless, the point stands. Looked at in real terms the musical output of this operatic endeavour is currently an album of solo piano music, because making is not always (ever) a smooth, deliberate process. It's contingent, affected as much by a clash of dates as by a musical style, and opera making is, for want of a better term, mega-contingent. There are so many people, and organisations, involved in the collaboration in so many different capacities that the neat idea of a composer having a vision of an opera and then making that happen is nothing short of nonsensical. As nonsensical, in fact, as the idea that reality is singular, natural and seamless. It is, of course, a variegated fabrication made up of yet other

fabrications, reduced and rationalised into 'stories' that we tell ourselves, with titles like *She Described It to Death*, 'analytical commentary', and 'whatever you're about to do now that you've finished reading'.

6. Appendices

6.1. Ursula Le Guin: 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction'

It was our intention that *She Described It to Death* would resist over-simplistic, conflict-based narrative directions. Ursula Le Guin's 'Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction', which describes an anti-patriarchal, anti-conflict attitude towards fictional narrative, came to be a touchstone of the making process, helping to support a collective understanding of the unconventional narrative of the piece in the creative team and producers. I reproduce it here to provide deeper context for that important aspect of the work.

The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction

Ursula K. Le Guin, 1986[251]

In the temperate and tropical regions where it appears that hominids evolved into human beings, the principal food of the species was vegetable. Sixty-five to eighty percent of what human beings ate in those regions in Paleolithic, Neolithic, and prehistoric times was gathered; only in the extreme Arctic was meat the staple food. The mammoth hunters spectacularly occupy the cave wall and the mind, but what we actually did to stay alive and fat was gather seeds, roots, sprouts, shoots, leaves, nuts, berries, fruits, and grains, adding bugs and mollusks and netting or snaring birds, fish, rats, rabbits, and other tuskless small fry to up the protein. And we didn't even work hard at it–much less hard than peasants slaving in somebody else's field after agriculture was invented, much less hard than paid workers since civilization was invented. The average prehistoric person could make a nice living in about a fifteen-hour work week.

Fifteen hours a week for subsistence leaves a lot of time for other things. So much time that maybe the restless ones who didn't have a baby around to enliven their life, or skill in making or cooking or singing, or very interesting thoughts to think, decided to slope off and hunt mammoths. The skillful hunters then would come staggering back with a load of meat, a lot of ivory, and a story. It wasn't the meat that made the difference. It was the story.

It is hard to tell a really gripping tale of how I wrested a wild-oat seed from its husk, and then another, and then another, and then another, and then another, and then I scratched my gnat bites,

251 Ursula K. Le Guin, 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction', in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), pp. 149-54.

and Ool said something funny, and we went to the creek and got a drink and watched newts for a while, and then I found another patch of oats…. No, it does not compare, it cannot compete with how I thrust my spear deep into the titanic hairy flank while Oob, impaled on one huge sweeping tusk, writhed screaming, and blood spouted everywhere in crimson torrents, and Boob was crushed to jelly when the mammoth fell on him as I shot my unerring arrow straight through eye to brain.

That story not only has Action, it has a Hero. Heroes are powerful. Before you know it, the men and women in the wild-oat patch and their kids and the skills of the makers and the thoughts of the thoughtful and the songs of the singers are all part of it, have all been pressed into service in the tale of the Hero. But it isn't their story. It's his.

When she was planning the book that ended up as Three Guineas, Virginia Woolf wrote a heading in her notebook, "Glossary"; she had thought of reinventing English according to a new plan, in order to tell a different story. One of the entries in this glossary is heroism, defined as "botulism." And hero, in Woolf's dictionary, is "bottle." The hero as bottle, a stringent reevaluation. I now propose the bottle as hero.

Not just the bottle of gin or wine, but bottle in its older sense of container in general, a thing that holds something else.

If you haven't got something to put it in, food will escape you–even something as uncombative and unresourceful as an oat. You put as many as you can into your stomach while they are handy, that being the primary container; but what about tomorrow morning when you wake up and it's cold and raining and wouldn't it be good to have just a few handfuls of oats to chew on and give little Oom to make her shut up, but how do you get more than one stomachful and one handful home? So you get up and go to the damned soggy oat patch in the rain, and wouldn't it be a good thing if you had something to put Baby Oo Oo in so that you could pick the oats with both hands? A leaf a gourd a shell a net a bag a sling a sack a bottle a pot a box a container. A holder. A recipient.

The first cultural device was probably a recipient …. Many theorizers feel that the earliest cultural inventions must have been a container to hold gathered products and some kind of sling or net carrier.

So says Elizabeth Fisher in Women's Creation (McGraw-Hill, 1975). But no, this cannot be. Where is that wonderful, big, long, hard thing, a bone, I believe, that the Ape Man first bashed somebody with in the movie and then, grunting with ecstasy at having achieved the first proper murder, flung up into the sky, and whirling there it became a space ship thrusting its way into the cosmos to

fertilize it and produce at the end of the movie a lovely fetus, a boy of course, drifting around the Milky Way without (oddly enough) any womb, any matrix at all? I don't know. I don't even care. I'm not telling that story. We've heard it, we've all heard all about all the sticks spears and swords, the things to bash and poke and hit with, the long, hard things, but we have not heard about the thing to put things in, the container for the thing contained. That is a new story. That is news.

And yet old. Before–once you think about it, surely long before–the weapon, a late, luxurious, superfluous tool; long before the useful knife and ax; right along with the indispensable whacker, grinder, and digger– for what's the use of digging up a lot of potatoes if you have nothing to lug ones you can't eat home in–with or before the tool that forces energy outward, we made the tool that brings energy home. It makes sense to me. I am an adherent of what Fisher calls the Carrier Bag Theory of human evolution.

This theory not only explains large areas of theoretical obscurity and avoids large areas of theoretical nonsense (inhabited largely by tigers, foxes, other highly territorial mammals); it also grounds me, personally, in human culture in a way I never felt grounded before. So long as culture was explained as originating from and elaborating upon the use of long, hard objects for sticking, bashing, and killing, I never thought that I had, or wanted, any particular share in it. ("What Freud mistook for her lack of civilization is woman's lack of loyalty to civilization," Lillian Smith observed.) The society, the civilization they were talking about, these theoreticians, was evidently theirs; they owned it, they liked it; they were human, fully human, bashing, sticking, thrusting, killing. Wanting to be human too, I sought for evidence that I was; but if that's what it took, to make a weapon and kill with it, then evidently I was either extremely defective as a human being, or not human at all.

That's right, they said. What you are is a woman. Possibly not human at all, certainly defective. Now be quiet while we go on telling the Story of the Ascent of Man the Hero.

Go on, say I, wandering off towards the wild oats, with Oo Oo in the sling and little Oom carrying the basket. You just go on telling how the mammoth fell on Boob and how Cain fell on Abel and how the bomb fell on Nagasaki and how the burning jelly fell on the villagers and how the missiles will fall on the Evil Empire, and all the other steps in the Ascent of Man.

If it is a human thing to do to put something you want, because it's useful, edible, or beautiful, into a bag, or a basket, or a bit of rolled bark or leaf, or a net woven of your own hair, or what have you, and then take it home with you, home being another, larger kind of pouch or bag, a container for

people, and then later on you take it out and eat it or share it or store it up for winter in a solider container or put it in the medicine bundle or the shrine or the museum, the holy place, the area that contains what is sacred, and then next day you probably do much the same again–if to do that is human, if that's what it takes, then I am a human being after all. Fully, freely, gladly, for the first time.

Not, let it be said at once, an unaggressive or uncombative human being. I am an aging, angry woman laying mightily about me with my handbag, fighting hoodlums off. However I don't, nor does anybody else, consider myself heroic for doing so. It's just one of those damned things you have to do in order to be able to go on gathering wild oats and telling stories.

It is the story that makes the difference. It is the story that hid my humanity from me, the story the mammoth hunters told about bashing, thrusting, raping, killing, about the Hero. The wonderful, poisonous story of Botulism. The killer story.

It sometimes seems that that story is approaching its end. Lest there be no more telling of stories at all, some of us out here in the wild oats, amid the alien corn, think we'd better start telling another one, which maybe people can go on with when the old one's finished. Maybe. The trouble is, we've all let ourselves become part of the killer story, and so we may get finished along with it. Hence it is with a certain feeling of urgency that I seek the nature, subject, words of the other story, the untold one, the life story.

It's unfamiliar, it doesn't come easily, thoughtlessly to the lips as the killer story does; but still, "untold" was an exaggeration. People have been telling the life story for ages, in all sorts of words and ways. Myths of creation and transformation, trickster stories, folktales, jokes, novels…

The novel is a fundamentally unheroic kind of story. Of course the Hero has frequently taken it over, that being his imperial nature and uncontrollable impulse, to take everything over and run it while making stern decrees and laws to control his uncontrollable impulse to kill it. So the Hero has decreed through his mouthpieces the Lawgivers, first, that the proper shape of the narrative is that of the arrow or spear, starting here and going straight there and THOK! hitting its mark (which drops dead); second, that the central concern of narrative, including the novel, is conflict; and third, that the story isn't any good if he isn't in it.

I differ with all of this. I would go so far as to say that the natural, proper, fitting shape of the novel might be that of a sack, a bag. A book holds words. Words hold things. They bear meanings. A novel is a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us.

One relationship among elements in the novel may well be that of conflict, but the reduction of narrative to conflict is absurd. (I have read a how-to-write manual that said, “A story should be seen as a battle,” and went on about strategies, attacks, victory, etc.) Conflict, competition, stress, struggle, etc., within the narrative conceived as carrier bag/belly/box/house/medicine bundle, may be seen as necessary elements of a whole which itself cannot be characterized either as conflict or as harmony, since its purpose is neither resolution nor stasis but continuing process.

Finally, it’s clear that the Hero does not look well in this bag. He needs a stage or a pedestal or a pinnacle. You put him in a bag and he looks like a rabbit, like a potato.

That is why I like novels: instead of heroes they have people in them.

So, when I came to write science-fiction novels, I came lugging this great heavy sack of stuff, my carrier bag full of wimps and klutzes, and tiny grains of things smaller than a mustard seed, and intricately woven nets which when laboriously unknotted are seen to contain one blue pebble, an imperturbably functioning chronometer telling the time on another world, and a mouse’s skull; full of beginnings without ends, of initiations, of losses, of transformations and translations, and far more tricks than conflicts, far fewer triumphs than snares and delusions; full of space ships that get stuck, missions that fail, and people who don’t understand. I said it was hard to make a gripping tale of how we wrested the wild oats from their husks, I didn’t say it was impossible. Who ever said writing a novel was easy?

If science fiction is the mythology of modern technology, then its myth is tragic. “Technology,” or “modern science” (using the words as they are usually used, in an unexamined shorthand standing for the “hard” sciences and high technology founded upon continuous economic growth), is a heroic undertaking, Herculean, Promethean, conceived as triumph, hence ultimately as tragedy. The fiction embodying this myth will be, and has been, triumphant (Man conquers earth, space, aliens, death, the future, etc.) and tragic (apocalypse, holocaust, then or now).

If, however, one avoids the linear, progressive, Time’s-(killing)-arrow mode of the Techno-Heroic, and redefines technology and science as primarily cultural carrier bag rather than weapon of domination, one pleasant side effect is that science fiction can be seen as a far less rigid, narrow field, not necessarily Promethean or apocalyptic at all, and in fact less a mythological genre than a realistic one.

It is a strange realism, but it is a strange reality.

Science fiction properly conceived, like all serious fiction, however funny, is a way of trying to describe what is in fact going on, what people actually do and feel, how people relate to everything else in this vast sack, this belly of the universe, this womb of things to be and tomb of things that were, this unending story. In it, as in all fiction, there is room enough to keep even Man where he belongs, in his place in the scheme of things; there is time enough to gather plenty of wild oats and sow them too, and sing to little Oom, and listen to Ool's joke, and watch newts, and still the story isn't over. Still there are seeds to be gathered, and room in the bag of stars.

6.2. *She Described It to Death*, Full Synopsis

Sally O'Reilly, 23 August 2019

What is the opera about?

She Described it to Death is about narration and a search for meaningful relationships in a dysfunctional society. It is set in an unidentified city, where the birds and animals have contrived to alter destructive human behaviour by gifting them longevity and banishing writers. But this has only served to dehumanise citizens. People experience nothing but frustration and the violence of exchanges fraught with lethargy or aggressive self-interest.

The plot follows an outsider, Attis, as she attempts to bring people together. The audience witness the grim talents of Volvox, a sentient algae, intent on keeping things in a state of dysfunction. We also see Attis meet Acantha, a writer in hiding, who we suspect might be able to alter this state of affairs. The question is whether she can be coaxed or coerced into action…

Short synopsis

The plants and animals have taken control of the City through cunning means. They have gifted humans the science of regeneration, with which to regrow limbs and organs as necessary. Humans now live as long as trees. The trees hope that humans will become as placid and wise. The birds have exiled writers into their own writings, in an attempt to bury existing forms of knowledge that have proved so destructive.

The effect of these measures is the collapse of communication and a chronic over-population problem. People in the north, distanced from death, become vague and inert. They swap poetic platitudes. People in the south taking advantage of the new science, court every risk going and generate violent drama with every exchange. With such rife dysfunction, the City is entirely controllable by the birds and gnats, which act as bureaucrats, police and surveillance, with the help of a sentient algae called Volvox.

Volvox manipulates desire and thought via the subconscious, over the radio and through individual interventions. Its current task is to oversee the latest resettlement drive, tricking citizens to relocate into novels, where cities are emptier and resources more bountiful. An opportunistic southerner called Bract agrees to relocate to John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*. Acantha, a writer in hiding who works with Bract on illicit mining projects, talks Bract out of wanting to go. He must now track down Volvox and cancel his relocation package.

Meanwhile, a stranger in town, Attis, has been appealing to southerners to relearn the art of constructive discussion. When this fails, she turns to the north, visiting households and demonstrating a contraption to help with the art of conversation. She calls on Acantha, but gains no ground there.

Eventually, Attis, Acantha, Bract and Volvox all meet. Volvox knows there is a writer-in-hiding among the group. Punishment, Volvox announces, is banishment to actual hell. Acantha realises that the only way to avoid this is to fully reveal her powers as a writer. She flatters Volvox into an anaesthetised state and starts describing it to death. Attis realises how this works and joins in. Volvox is turned to dust. Bract, ever capitalising, finds a way of turning the dust to diamonds.

Exhausted by the drama, Attis reveals that she is herself an exiled writer. Acantha understands that Attis has given her powers of description for a reason. She identifies a place where meaning is found in small things. They both escape the drama of the city for the peaceful profundity of the everyday.

6.3. *She Described It to Death*, Complete Libretto

Sally O'Reilly, 2020

PROLOGUE

A space of projection

The prologue is projected within the set (not as surtitles). The following could need reformatting, depending on how the text appears (a word or a sentence or a paragraph at a time, scrolling or fading in, etc.…)

PROJECTED TEXT

The beleaguered plants and animals of the great City had only been trying to help.

The trees thought humans should be more like them. And so they revealed the secrets of their longevity and taught the science of regeneration. Now humans would live for hundreds of years and, released from routine mortal fear, would be gentle and just.

The birds thought humans should be more like them.
And so they banished all writers into their own writings. Writers, they decreed, had deposited their thoughts in books and then walked away. Now humans would sing their thoughts with all their bodies, and everyone would be accountable and considerate.

But humans were not like trees. Neither were they like birds. The people of the great City became ancient, but they did not become wise. The population grew and grew. And Volvox, the algae, thrived in the fracas that it helped to maintain.

An outsider arrives. She can see what has come to pass, and tries to help…

SCENE 1: Attis on the Soapbox

A public space with passers-by, in the south

ATTIS is trying to capture the attention of passersby. She might have been there for some time already. A few people gather and then move on. A few congregate and hurls insults at her.

ATTIS

Southerners! For centuries you have suffered under a cruel regime. [1] You have been coerced into contradiction, tactlessness, [2] vagueness. You have been tricked [3] into a civil war of words. [4] The south has all but destroyed itself with hurtful speech. [5]

Let me tell you [6] this: the source of your suffering is the animals and plants. Yes! They have collaborated [7] against you, [8] attacked your capacity to communicate, destroyed that which made you strong. The birds [9] sent your writers and orators mad, driving them into their own writings and leaving you without wordsmiths. [10] The gnats spread rumours and gossip, the algae stirred up contradictions and lies, until no one knew what to think. [11] And so everyone gave up trying.

The following are interjections at the marked points in the foregoing.

SOUTHERNERS

[1] Bollocks!

[2] A hundred bollocks!

[3] Get her off!

[4] I'll show you war!

[5] You lie like a rug!

[6] Lock her up!

[7] What? My arse can't hear what your arse is saying!

[8] Don't show us yer tits!

[9] Has she gone yet?

[10] Bollocksmiths!

[11] I know what I'm thinking right now!

ATTIS

I hear you say: no! The plants and animals help us. They provide transport, infrastructure. And so they do: not out of love for you, but to control you further. To rule over your every thought and action. And yes: the trees have revealed the secret of longevity. The shrubs did show you how to regenerate. Without them you would be dead at ninety. But this is yet more wickedness. They knew that without the daily threat of illness and death you would be weakened in spirit, in speech, in enterprise.

They have ruined you by devaluing your survival. The plants and animals have turned you into fighting cocks. You are their sport. But you can reclaim your grace, poetry, wisdom, charity. Recover your humanity!

SCENE 2: The Birds and the Gnats Confer

A place that is unknowable to humans

We do not see the BIRDS or GNATS, but hear them as sound from the orchestra. The text appears somewhere other than the surtitles. (This could be a projection, a series of placards held up or some sort of manual running ticker-tape device.)

BIRDS

If we could move to point six on the agenda now: the human overpopulation crisis and relocation programme.

GNATS

Point five.

BIRDS

Minute that, if you would. Gnats change point six to point five. Do you have a report on general uptake for entry into Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House on the Prairie?

GNATS

It's John Wyndham's The Day of the Triffids. You're still in last month.

BIRDS

How time flies!

GNATS

We've submitted the uptake figures for the Wyndham Triffids package. As you'll see it's very popular among C2s and DEs in the south, making significant inroads into overcrowding in those sectors. Most think they're relocating to the television series, rather than the novel, but we don't anticipate there will be a problem once they arrive.

BIRDS

The gist is the same? Deadly plants, deserted cities with intact infrastructure?

GNATS

Yes. It's been marketed as a 'fresh start' bundle in the south. In the north we're spinning it as fashion, going forwards.

BIRDS

T'riffic. Have you actioned that last point?

GNATS

We're still waiting for an SR117b to be signed off.

BIRDS

And do you have the draft update from Volvox about recruitment on the ground?

GNATS

Volvox reports that footfall is steady and targets look achievable. Precise figures can be made available.

BIRDS

Fine. Which brings us to item seven…

GNATS

Six.

BIRDS

Item six. The dossier on the activist.

GNATS

As we report, this individual is attempting to alert fellow humans of our programme and has somehow recovered significant rhetorical

capacities. There's no traction as of yet, but it's a situation to be monitored… The Phthiraptera and Cimex are investigating.

BIRDS

Which ones are they again?

GNATS

The lice and the bedbugs.

BIRDS

Of course. Yes, let's root out the activist's sources of knowledge and diplomacy. We don't know yet if she's a writer herself, so let's see where she leads us, before we banish her. Are we agreed?

GNATS

Agreed. There's absolutely no danger of her being taken seriously by humans in the meantime. There's far too much in what she says. She'll be considered a lunatic.

BIRDS

Good. So, on to item eight. Six? Seven: upgrading the tree-fungus communication network…

SCENE 3: In the South: Josella Hooks Bract

A marketplace in the south

BRACT is running a stall in a busy indoor marketplace. [This might be represented by cut-outs of crowds or similar.] His market trader calls continue throughout the scene.

BRACT

Gemstones!
Get yer gemstones!
Topaz.
Rubies.
Diamonds.
Three of your five a day.
Get yer minerals here!
Tasty, healthful gemstones!

SOUTHERNER 1 lurches on stage. They have a carrier bag on their head. They careen about wildly then stand still a moment, looking exhausted. They purposely start to hyperventilate. This goes on until they suffocate.
BRACT does not go to help. This is not so dramatic an occurrence in the south.
SOUTHERNER 2 runs on stage. They are more annoyed than worried. They feel for SOUTHERNER 1's pulse. There is no pulse. They sigh, pull out an instrument and administer a drug. SOUTHERNER 1 resuscitates.

SOUTHERNER 2

Ok, ok.
I'll have the kids this weekend.
Pull that trick again, and you'll stay dead.

SOUTHERNER 2 irritably helps SOUTHERNER 1 off the stage.
SOUTHERNER 3 and SOUTHERNER 4 approach.

SOUTHERNER 4

I'm moving out.

I'm … moving … out!

SOUTHERNER 3

There's an overpopulation problem.
Everywhere's full.

SOUTHERNER 4

Then I'll move into the kitchen cupboards.

SOUTHERNER 3

But she already relocated.

SOUTHERNER 4

Doesn't change what happened.

SOUTHERNER 3

She *can't* come back.
She … *can't* … come back.

SOUTHERNER 4

Doesn't change anything.

SOUTHERNER 3

It's over. That's a change.

SOUTHERNER 4

Doesn't change the past.
I just want an apology.

SOUTHERNER 3

Like *that* changes anything.

SOUTHERNER 4

It changes everything.

SOUTHERNER 3

Big dog's cock.

SOUTHERNER 4

It'll change my mind.

SOUTHERNER 3

Your mind is not everything.

SOUTHERNER 4

It is to me.

SOUTHERNER 3

(*Sighs*)
Sorry … I'm not perfect.

SOUTHERNER 4

(*This is clearly not enough*)
I'm moving out.
I'm … moving out.

SOUTHERNER 4 storms off.

BRACT

Garnets. Topaz. Rubies.

SOUTHERNER 3

(*Greedily*) Oh yes. Rubies. Give me rubies.

SOUTHERNER 3 hands over some money; BRACT hands over a gem bag.
SOUTHERNER 3 leaves, greedily stuffing a ruby into their mouth.
SOUTHERNER 6 runs on stage with a chainsaw, brandishing it at someone offstage and acting like the cock of the walk. SOUTHERNER 5 arrives carrying a boombox.

SOUTHERNER 5

(*shouting to offstage*)

That's it. Hop along bawling.

Next time we'll cut them both off.

Space-taker.

SOUTHERNER 6

Sphincter with a shit hairdo.

SOUTHERNER 5

(*To Southerner 5*) What now?

Chuck a few hammers at skyscrapers?

SOUTHERNER 6

Bored of that.

SOUTHERNER 5

You're bored of everything.

SOUTHERNER 6

Just the skyscrapers.

Hammers at elderlies?

SOUTHERNER 5

(*A point of interest*) They still have meat in their bowels.

SOUTHERNER 6

Six centuries on?

Disgusting.

They deserve a hammering.

SOUTHERNER 5 and SOUTHERNER 6 make to leave.

BRACT

Garnets.

Topaz.

SOUTHERNER 6

(*To Southerner 5*) Your splash.

SOUTHERNER 5

Pinchfist.

SOUTHERNER 5 pats pockets, looking for money. They have none.

SOUTHERNER 5

(*To Bract*) We'll be back.

SOUTHERNER 5 leaves the boombox with BRACT.

BRACT turns the boombox on and tunes the radio. We hear the end of some music. An Opal Radio ident plays.

RADIO ANNOUNCER

You're listening to Opal Radio. Coming up later: the stunning sounds of war. But right now we have the latest news on an upcoming resettlement opportunity. You heard it here first, folks, on Opal Radio.

DEPARTMENTAL SPOKESPERSON (i.e. VOLVOX)

Here at the Department of Resettlement, we're working to find you the best deals for a fresh start. This month's special relocation package is just right for those who want to spice up their life. Let's meet Josella, a typical resident of John Wyndham's The Day of the Triffids. She could be your new girl next door!

JOSELLA

Towns and cities have come undone like drunks.

Central precincts are laid out cold,

their electricity and neon lost in the confusion.
In suburbs doors gape, posts tilt,
tattered nets lament outside windows
for ring roads littered with miscarried traffic.

Free as creatures in this ruin,
killer plants serenade us
as we hold each other vividly
on unmade beds in deserted penthouses,
our bodies abandoned to the rhythm
of wrecked storm doors.
Liberty dilates our thirsty openings.
Our pleasure flows from the same chaotic source
that ferments weather, war and solar flares.

BRACT

I'd give my kidneys
to mount a subplot
with that one.

JOSELLA's broadcast ends. A shorter Opal Radio ident plays on the boombox, segueing to some other music, which plays underneath the following.

SCENE 4: Volvox Goes to Work on Bract

A marketplace in the south

Sound continues to play from the boombox. It is joined by sound from the orchestra.
Four figures rush in, configure themselves as VOLVOX and surround BRACT.
BRACT continues waiting and does not hear VOLVOX as it sings.

VOLVOX

Being but a simple algae,
there are many things I enjoy about humans.
I love the complicated system
of chambers, trapdoors and levers
that govern their behaviour.
My favourite is the collective unconscious,
a long, dark tunnel hung with two-dimensional archetypes
and thickly carpeted with myths,
which I just love to deface and soil.
Control this chamber,
and humans become biddable
at a level so deep they cannot feel it.

I also like to muck about with the tiller
that steers humans into a self-righteous pack.
They soon develop a sense of invincible power
and become convinced of their inalienable right
to act out their impulses.
Set two such fleets on contrary courses,
and they will tack against one another viciously
until the bottom falls out of their civilisation.

But my greatest indulgence
is tending to the garden of their dialogue.
Sew a bit of bias here,
a generalisation there and there

spray it liberally with confusion and contradiction,
then sit back and enjoy a bumper crop of toxic altercation.
It really is a lot of fun to watch.

The sound on the boombox stops; the orchestra continues.
BRACT becomes aware of VOLVOX.

GAMESHOW VOICEOVER

And now, everyone's favourite southern treat:
it's algae time!

VOLVOX

(*To Bract*) Welcome to Volvox the algae,
microscopic and giant,
fresh as a daisy and ancient as rocks.
A little gnat tells me that you aspire to relocation,
which can only mean one thing:
it's time for the double-dare triple jeopardy round!
So, tell all the people watching … what's your name?

BRACT

Bract.

VOLVOX

Good southern name that. And what do you do for a living Bract?

BRACT

I'm in gemstones.

VOLVOX

A mining man, eh? An important job, breaking the planet apart to feed the city. Sounds like you'd be missed if you relocated. Are you sure you're sure about this? Could you survive in The Day of the Triffids?

BRACT

Well, it was just a thought—

I'm not totally—

VOLVOX

But could you thrive there?

BRACT

Of course! I'm—

VOLVOX

Could you dominate The Day of the Triffids?

BRACT

I could dominate.

I could *totally* dominate!

VOLVOX

Wonderful, wonderful.

He who dares, and keeps daring, wins.

You're going to snort blowfish, cycle a desert, run the sniper, kidnap a general. All kinds of crazy stuff… And when you've convinced me you really, really want it, you get to be relocated.

So, are you ready for the first, gentle warm-up?

Good.

Here comes your first double-dare triple jeopardy challenge.

Bract…

(*Tense pause*)

I want to you to make your own mother eat an anti-bacterial wipe!

BRACT is handed a wipe. He prepares himself for the challenge.

Lights go out.

SCENE 5: In the North: Acantha Suffers Guests

Acantha's house, in the north

ACANTHA turns on the radio. We hear the end of a song.

RADIO ANNOUNCER

And now, a broadcast from Josella in John Wyndham's The Day of the Triffids – *the* place for expatriotic splendour!

The music of this iteration of the broadcast is different to that of Scene 3.

JOSELLA

Towns and cities have come undone like drunks.
Central precincts are laid out cold,
their electricity and neon lost in the confusion.
In suburbs doors gape, posts tilt,
tattered nets lament outside windows
for ring roads littered with miscarried traffic.

Free as creatures in this ruin,
killer plants serenade us
as we hold each other vividly
on unmade beds in deserted penthouses,
our bodies abandoned to the rhythm
of wrecked storm doors.
Liberty dilates our thirsty openings.
Our pleasure flows from the same chaotic source
that ferments weather, war and solar flares.

ACANTHA turns the radio off, saddened.

ACANTHA

Foolish girl!
Misguided siren!

You seduce the very agent
of your undoing.
You sell your song
to prospectors and colonisers
who'll pollute your world
with the torpor of drawn-out lives.
With survival's triumph muted,
all else will lose its shine.

There, where death still has the final say,
you tell the story of your life
through every small event.
You shout out your conquests
for all the universe to know.
Here, I conceal myself for centuries,
suspended plotless in the north.
With death no longer a frequent guest,
poetry plays host to vanity and greed.

Dear, foolish girl.
Do not trade a quick death
for a slow and bloodless life.

ACANTHA starts tending to her plants. She sings to them. She is visibly upset, but becomes steadier as she works.

ACANTHA

Water, photons, carbon dioxide
become
glucose, oxygen
(*Repeats*)
Water, photons, carbon dioxide, glucose, oxygen.

The plants grow as ACANTHA sings photosynthesis to them. The doorbell rings. ACANTHA puts down the watering can, goes to the door and lets in two visitors.

ACANTHA

Isidium, Axil.
Is it that time again?

ISIDIUM

Not too prompt I hope?

ACANTHA

(*Wearied*) Wednesday, half past ten.
Come in, take a pew.

AXIL

(*Ostentatiously*) For the welcome Acantha,
I humbly thank you.

ACANTHA takes their coats and hangs them up.

ACANTHA

A tidy home is a tidy home.

They all sit down.

AXIL, ISIDIUM

A tidy home *is* a tidy home.

ACANTHA

Would you like a sucking stone?

AXIL, ISIDIUM

I would love a sucking stone.

ACANTHA passes round a dish of gems. Everybody takes one and rolls it around their mouth a while. Gem stones clack against teeth, lips are smacked. After a while, ACANTHA passes round a dish in which to discard the gems.

AXIL

To taste the savoury taint of ancient rocks
is humbling to my tender mortal mouth.

ISIDIUM

A blessing in our bellest of epochs
but madly squandered in the bloody south.

AXIL

Let's not speak of termagants and vandals,
their senses dull to all but punch and jibe.

ACANTHA

(*Faint sarcasm*) Indeed, why talk of adventures and scandals
When there's so much weather to describe.

ISIDIUM

Yes! Apologies for tedious irrelevance
when we could be enjoying the elements.

AXIL

Lo, the year unfurls its mellow afternoon,
when worms coax leaves to quit their stalks,

ISIDIUM

And swallows drawn to the harvest moon
herald cuckoos' transformation into hawks.

ACANTHA switches tack. She has something on her mind.

ACANTHA

Talking of turns, do you mind if I pry:
is it only *my* body that's going awry?

AXIL and ISIDIUM don't understand.

ACANTHA

Feel you swelter deep, raw inner dry?

Still no response.

ACANTHA

Memory loss or compulsion to cry?

ISIDIUM responds, trying to understand, building on the only fragment she recognises.

ISIDIUM

I weep at the beauty of dew-dangled fronds,
of spider-filled corners and panthers in chase,

AXIL

of blind baby mice and lily-choked ponds,
the ostrich's smile, the python's embrace.

The music continues; actions onstage represent time passing.
A CAPTION appears. It says 'six hours later…'
CAPTION goes.
AXIL and ISIDIUM are still discussing nature and the weather. ACANTHA is bored witless.

AXIL

I thrill at the mallard's lustrous neck,
the ammonia hum of shire horse flares

ISIDIUM

the secretary bird's competent peck,
the shuddering pelt of wrestling bears.

ACANTHA hands round the sucking stones again.

SCENE 6: Attis Doorsteps Acantha

Acantha's house, in the north

ATTIS approaches ACANTHA's front door. She is carrying a suitcase.

ATTIS

The south is not ready yet, but the north…
There must be someone who'll listen,
Someone who remembers…

ATTIS rings the doorbell. ACANTHA answers it, relieved at the interruption.

ATTIS

Good afternoon. My name's Attis. I'm calling on people in the northern wards to let them know all about an exciting new invention.

ACANTHA

Thank you. I'm rather busy. Have a lovely afternoon.

ATTIS pushes her way in, using the suitcase to stop ACANTHA closing the door on her.

ATTIS

A party!
What a stroke of luck.

ISIDIUM and AXIL are embarrassed by the confrontation.

ATTIS

Tell me, do you find modern conversation a bit dull?

ISIDIUM and AXIL start making their excuses. In their confusion they keep the sucking stones in their mouths.

AXIL

Is that really the time? My, how it does fly—

ISIDIUM

(*Hastily*) Like a … fly, does it not. I really must … [*thinking sounds*] … fly.

Flustered, ISIDIUM and AXIL leave. ACANTHA does not try to stop them.

ATTIS

(*Breezily, in sales mode*) Do you get a bit bored with socialising? Then let me introduce you to the Conversation Piece. It's going to be all the rage.

ATTIS places the suitcase on a chair and opens it. It contains a contraption.

ATTIS

You know when you're in a social group and no one's really saying anything? It's just pretty noises?

ACANTHA is amused by the newcomer. She lets her go on, while not wanting to give herself away as anything other than a normal northerner.

ATTIS

It really can get dull, can't it? It's not our fault though. Since the banishment of writers and orators we've had no role models. We've lost the knack of content. And let's face it, form can wear a bit thin, can't it?

ACANTHA

I haven't really thought about [it.]

ATTIS

Our conversational muscle has become feeble through neglect. But this device can build it back up.

ACANTHA

(*Vacuously*) How nice.

ATTIS

You know the scene: someone says something and everyone agrees. I'm not suggesting that you start arguing. This isn't the south. But the Conversation Piece can prompt you to say something a little bit different.

ATTIS presses a button.

CONVERSATION PIECE

Tell the person how you really feel about what they've just said.

ATTIS presses another button.

CONVERSATION PIECE

Assert the opposite.

ATTIS presses another button.

CONVERSATION PIECE

Ask someone a difficult question on the subject.
Be totally irrelevant.
Repeat some gossip. If you don't know any, make some up.

ACANTHA

(*A flash of annoyance*) And how is your box of tricks any different to Volvox?

ATTIS

(*Surprised pause*) Very good! You're a natural.
(*Moving on*) With the Conversation Piece, anyone can become a

bottomless pit of exciting conversation.
Especially if they consult its database of interesting observations.

ATTIS presses a button.

CONVERSATION PIECE

Imagine how much deeper the ocean would be if sponges didn't grow in it.

ATTIS

It also has literary settings. There are celebrated opening lines, famous last words, and pithy quotes about real human predicaments. Let's find something topical.

ATTIS changes a setting in the suitcase.

CONVERSATION PIECE

Anybody who has had a great treasure has always led a precarious existence.

ACANTHA

(*Startled*) John!

ATTIS

(*Surprised*) Yes. It's from John Wyndham's The Day of the Triffids. Have you—?

ACANTHA

(*Sternly*) Never.

ATTIS is encouraged by these glimpses of ACANTHA's abilities.
BRACT enters noisily, shouting to someone we can't see, out in the street.

BRACT

… at least my arsehole's not got taste-buds.

(*To Acantha*) Let myself in.

BRACT stops short when he sees ATTIS.

ACANTHA

Bract, I'll be with you in a moment.

I was just seeing … someone to the door.

BRACT

(*To Attis*) Tara then, tally-turds and twaddle to you too.

Dum-de-dum dum-de-dum-de-(*raspberry noise*)

ACANTHA

She's not a northerner.

BRACT

(*Sniffing at Attis*) No southerner neither.

ATTIS packs up her suitcase. ACANTHA watches her with interest.

ATTIS

I'll pop back when you're less busy.

There are so many other settings to show you.

ATTIS leaves.

ACANTHA

You'll be here for the new work song.

ACANTHA retrieves a piece of paper from somewhere very secure and proffers it to BRACT.

ACANTHA

I've added a verse about bending the knees, not the back.

I know to you the miners are merely tools, so think of it as a form of maintenance, like adding oil to an engine or—

BRACT

I'm relocating.

ACANTHA

I'm sorry. I can never follow the southern train of thought. What are you saying?

BRACT

I'm relocating to Day of the Triffids.

ACANTHA

You can't leave!
Who else will I talk to?
Who will commission me?

BRACT

Commission yourself.
Like the old writers.
Or send me a … what was it called … a letter?

ACANTHA

You don't read!
And there's no postal system!

BRACT

Shouldn't stop you writing though.

ACANTHA

(*changing tack*) And what about the mine?
You'd be throwing away years of effort.
Just when the work songs were starting to boost profits.

BRACT

Too late. The birds— Volvox—

I won a competition.

ACANTHA

What possessed you?

BRACT

That poem— That smashing bit of tit—

ACANTHA

Tell me you're not referring to Josella's broadcast.

BRACT

I'm going to track her down and—

ACANTHA

Don't say another word. Please!

You don't know what you've got yourself into.

BRACT

Got myself into a hot orgy of a world.

I'll go find her and—

ACANTHA

Spare me the details of your cramped imaginings.

Oh dear. Bract. Listen.

Josella is me.

BRACT

(*Dismissive*) Yeah right.

ACANTHA

(*Speaking plainly for Bract's benefit*) I knew John Wyndham, back in the old-ways days. He based Josella on me. I was working in the morgue. People did then. I was a toxicologist. I wrote poetry as a balm against death's daily presence. Pretentious nonsense. John liked the erotic bits. With my knowledge of the body it was unsexy but accurate. Poor John. He was wonderful. I was not quite as wonderful as he would have liked. When he wrote Josella he edited me a little. All writers did that. No person ever ended up in a novel intact. Josella retained my more obviously attractive qualities. Go there, track her down and you'll find me. Younger by hundreds of years, but essentially me.

BRACT

She's you?

[*Fragmented, with repetitions*] A shitter of all twists.

Like shagging an aunt.

I'm not having that.

I'm not shagging aunts.

I'd rather vomit up fish forks.

You've shat on my fantasy.

You've buried it!

I'm not going.

It's all o[ff.]

BRACT leaves, still saying the word 'off'.

SCENE 7: All Converge at Volvox

An unpopulated outer district in the south

ATTIS is sitting with the suitcase looking dismal.

ATTIS

How to persuade a beginning?
How to awaken a change?
How to inspire a new plot
in this confusion I've made?

ATTIS presses a button in the suitcase. It plays back first lines of novels. She sings along.

ATTIS, CONVERSATION PIECE

It was the best of times, the worst of times. [Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*]
It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen. [Orwell, *1984*]
It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs. [Plath, *The Bell Jar*]

ATTIS doesn't notice VOLVOX approaching, attracted by the literature. VOLVOX joins in.

ATTIS, CONVERSATION PIECE

It was near the end of her story…

ATTIS, CONVERSATION PIECE, VOLVOX

… and the beginning of ours. [invented first line]

ATTIS is startled.

VOLVOX

Why the fishface, Attis? (*Aside*) Apologies to the fishes. (*To Attis*) You must have been expecting me, no?

ATTIS

Volvox, I assume. You vile stain in the dirt.

VOLVOX

You've been a naughty girl, haven't you?
Volvox is going to have to punish you.
Because of your meddling in matters that don't concern you, we, the more-than-humans, have made a little change in the laws of nature.
From now on anyone caught reading will be exiled to actual hell.

ATTIS

Reading!
How will you police reading?
It's obvious a text has been written,
but who can say if it's ever been read?

VOLVOX

I can always spot a reader.
A reader's eyes are fuller.
She glances at chairs before sitting,
and goes to bed early or gets up late.
Her underwear is made of embossed calfskin.
Mites and silverfish live beneath her fingernails.
Her brain is made of water and takes on any shape introduced into her head.
But all that's academic.
I just heard you.

ATTIS

I wasn't reading. I was remembering.

VOLVOX

No one remembers any more.

Northerners absent-mindedly lather up words like soap.
Southerners live in a state of amnesiac repetition.

ATTIS

Thanks to you.

VOLVOX

Aw shucks, I can't take all the credit.
But I'd like to know how you've slipped the halter—

We hear a tape part of BRACT as he approaches, saying the vowel sound of the word 'off' from the end of the previous scene. BRACT runs onstage, out of breath. He's travelled a long way, quickly. He finishes the word 'off'.

BRACT

…off.
Volvox. It's all off. I can't relocate. I need you to cancel my relocation package.

VOLVOX

Too late. It's already with the birds. You'll probably wake up tomorrow in The Day of the Jackal—

ATTIS

Triffids.

VOLVOX

(*Dismissively*) Triffids. Jackals. Locusts…

BRACT

No! You've got to— I'm not— The only reason— I thought Josella—
But she's Acantha— I really don't want— She's not what I—

VOLVOX

Josella the poet is Acantha, you say?
Have we a writer at large?

BRACT

That's not the point.
I'm telling you, it's all off.

VOLVOX

You hear that, gnats?

GNATS

Of course we did.
It's all minuted.

VOLVOX

Let's bring in this Acantha.

GNATS

Actioning that.

ACANTHA is brought onstage by rumour (pre-recorded, or performed by members of the orchestra).

GOSSIP 1

I just saw Acantha leaving her house.

GOSSIP 2

I'm not being funny or nothing, but I hear that she … you know.

GOSSIP 3

That she what?

GOSSIP 2

That she … goes down south.

GOSSIP 3

No! She's not like *that*.

GOSSIP 1

I don't know. She has a glint in her eye, that one.

GOSSIP 2

Like someone who slips down south regular.

GOSSIP 3

Do you think?

GOSSIP 2

No smoke without fire.

GOSSIP 3

She is a bit stand-offish. I always thought she was hiding something.

GOSSIP 2

I reckon she goes down south for a bit of rough.

GOSSIP 1

That'd be the place to go for that.

GOSSIP 3

And she certainly knows how to get what she wants.

GOSSIP 2

I bet she's on her way south right now. Got the urge.

GOSSIP 1

You're right! Look – there she is!

GOSSIP 3

It is, it's her! Shhh!

ACANTHA appears, obviously against her will.

VOLVOX

Well, look who it isn't!

ATTIS

(*Confused*) It's you!

ACANTHA

(*Angry*) You!

ATTIS

(*Pointing to Bract*) It was him!

ACANTHA

(*To Bract*) You!

BRACT

(*To Attis*) Who *are* you?

VOLVOX

Well, well, well.
A mysterious triangle.
What intrigue lies therein?
Let me guess…

VOLVOX accessorises the characters with props, some suitable, some not.

VOLVOX

You're (*to Acantha*) a woman torn between family and personal ambition. You're (*to Bract*) the husband who wants everything to stay as it is. She's (*to Attis*) a poor chambermaid— a cruel employer— a

spoiled princess—?

ACANTHA

This really is interesting, and I'm delighted to have met you at last, but I must be getting back—

VOLVOX

You're [Acantha] a maiden aunt and you're her barely legal nephew [Bract]. You've both fled your family to finally claim the ecstasy that you know will be yours. And you're [Attis] the manager of the inn?
(*Pause*)
You're [Acantha] a casually racist businessman. You're [Bract] mumsy, a taken-for-granted housewife and carer for your teenage daughter, who is in a permanent vegetative state. You're [Attis] a demon that's been invited into their home under false pretences?
(*Pause*)
You're all three a special force of elemental operatives guarding the continuum of time. You're [*Attis*] about to be attacked by a pillow haunted by the swan that feathered it?
(*Pause*)
Well, if it's none of those, I can only surmise that you're all writers and therefore readers and I must hand you over to the birds for immediate rendition to actual hell.

BRACT

(*Defiantly*) *I'm* no writer.

ATTIS

(*Morosely*) Nor me since I got here.

ACANTHA remains quiet, seeing which way things will go.

VOLVOX

Sounds like a confession to me.

The jury has conferred and finds you all guilty of reading and writing.

ATTIS

(*Horrified*) A violation of human rights!

VOLVOX

Go tell it to the humans.

You could always appeal once you're in hell.

ATTIS

(*With dread*) Which hell?

Infernal torture, with red-hot pokers and boiling tar?

Or the subtle anguish of a stench that uncoils the mind?

Or a banal, bureaucratic, cyclical hell?

BRACT

Whichever, it might pain me,

but I can't die there.

What's the problem?

ACANTHA

(*To Volvox, coolly*) You know your sentence makes no real difference.

Hell is already here in the city, in every thought and conversation.

Hell is the inability to gather the meaning beneath the noise.

VOLVOX wheels around as it realises ACANTHA is not a regular northerner.

ATTIS too is surprised; BRACT is not.

VOLVOX

You've tried though, haven't you Acantha?

Or is it Josella?

You've tried to describe the so-called human condition.

ACANTHA

I did once, Volvox,
but now there's no one capable of listening.
Because you, almighty Volvox,
have done such an excellent job.
You've rusted the tools,
corrupted the stores,
reduced the craft of expression
to fifth-rate ranting and swooning.

VOLVOX

It's so nice to be properly appreciated.

ACANTHA

Oh you are, Volvox.
I have long admired the extent of your power.
Every thought policed by you,
every deed condemned,
our very existence punished by you.

VOLVOX becomes woozy on the flattery.

VOLVOX

(*Tipsy*) Do you really think me that mighty?

ACANTHA ramps up her hypnotic method.

ACANTHA

You have implanted desires
and so can predict motivations,
structure speech and control actions,
while leaving people apparently free
to do as they seem to want.
Cunning Volvox.

VOLVOX is very woozy now.

VOLVOX

(*Drunkenly*) Yes, I am rather cunning, aren't I.

ACANTHA continues, drawing VOLVOX down, down, under her spell.

ACANTHA

A cunning not seen since the time of legends.
Volvox takes its place in the pantheon of gods,
as the architect of the patterns by which we live.

VOLVOX

(*Almost totally gone*) It is with great honour that I accept…

ACANTHA

Volvox is everything.

VOLVOX is now entirely insentient. ACANTHA is in control.

BRACT

(*Alarmed*) What have you done to it?

ATTIS

(*Admiring*) How have you done it?

SCENE 8: Describing Volvox to Death

An unpopulated outer district in the south

ACANTHA

(*To Attis*) Flattery reels them in,
but I'd always finish the job with poison.
(*To Volvox*) A shock of copper sulphate.
A shock of lithium hypochlorite.
(*To Attis*) Add another dose when I give the signal.

BRACT

No! Don't kill it!
I need to cancel my relocation package.

ACANTHA ignores him and signals to ATTIS.

ATTIS

A shock of copper sulphate.
A shock of lithium hypochlorite.

BRACT

No! Don't! (*this line only, concurrently with ATTIS*)
My package! (*solo*)
My relocation package!

ACANTHA

We introduce algae-eating fish,
and disintegrate cell walls with enzymes.
We flush the ponds with fresh water cleaned of sewage.

ACANTHA signals to ATTIS.

ATTIS

A shock of copper sulphate.

A shock of lithium hypochlorite.

VOLVOX

Dissolved oxygen increases, pH drops.
Half-life shrinks to hours.
Vacuoles, nuclei, mitochondria collapse.
I-am-Volvox crumbles into selfless dust.

ACANTHA

The dust hangs briefly in sunlight,
before dispersing in breezes,
settling in hollows, corners, grooves.
Some hides in attics or under beds,
but most is escorted to the city boundary
and cast out.

BRACT wants in on the action.

BRACT

A man sieves carbon atoms from the dust
and compresses them over aeons into diamonds.

BRACT continues making diamonds.
ATTIS follows BRACT's example and gets involved.

ATTIS

The dust is considered unsavoury, trivial:
house moss, beggars' velvet, slut's wool.

ACANTHA

Dust is the unmaking of things.
It stands at the edge of the visible,
the threshold of existence.
(*Pause*)

Until we deploy the electrons
from the tip of a splinter of diamond

BRACT reacts to some of his diamonds being interfered with.

ACANTHA

in the atomic force microscope.
Then we can look inside the dust.
A new world appears.

ATTIS

Life within death.

VOLVOX

[Abstract vocal drone]

ACANTHA

We peer into below the underneath,
and call out to atoms in ancient tongues
unheard since the assembly of the first stars.

ACANTHA sings abstract sounds, in a duet with VOLVOX's drone.
ATTIS takes over the narration.

ATTIS

Here a writer can find peace,
in the heart of matter where
stories can't be plotted
and heroes have no traction.
Where there's no friction or mistakes
and dread has no momentum,
since an ending never comes.
Without an end there are no means,
nor is there direction.

Lacking means there are no ways.
Without direction there are no shapes,
no relations to relate,
an empty slate of blame,
no spite, no debt, no duty.
No importance whatsoever.
Here, at last, this exiled writer
can evade her sentence
and rest.

ATTIS lies down as if to sleep.

ACANTHA

You?
An exiled writer?
Here?
(*Pause*)
(*Gesturing to the world*) So all this is you.
(*Pause*)
And I am yours.
(*Pause*)
(*With resolve*) And you have given me these powers
for a purpose.

ACANTHA rouses ATTIS.

ACANTHA

Let us leave these senseless particles and forces.
Let me lead us to a place I know
where meaning can be found in complex, nameless things,

VOLVOX's abstract sounds cease.

ACANTHA

where passing time does not steal from hope,
where dead mothers live on
in the thickening of a voice pulled from sleep,

ATTIS

in the blend of moonlight and headlamp beams,

ACANTHA

the pause before the starter motor coughs.

ACANTHA, ATTIS

Let us escape.

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