Performance, media, authenticity: Technologies of (re)production and the Metropolitan Opera’s new Ring

Directed by Robert Lepage, the Met’s new Ring of 2010-12 has been marketed for its faithfulness of storytelling and its technological “completion” of Wagner’s vision. Outer analogies to the 1876 Bayreuth premiere of the Ring can be traced both in the production’s emphasis on technology and its pursuit of pictorial realism and theatrical illusionism—something revealed most clearly in the soothingly familiar costumes. Yet this lecture argues that Lepage’s most authentic feature is its failure of what Adorno has called the theatrical “phantasmagoria” of total illusion. By viewing the production through the lens of “reperformances” as recently advocated by performance artist Marina Abramovic, I will question whether a unified illusionist effect is worth pursuing in our world of digitally available virtual realities. More fruitful than Lepage’s notion of an authentic illusionist vision is his expansion of Wagner’s concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk: through his fully kinetic unit-set, Lepage has included both (mechanical) sculpture and (abstract) dance. What is more, his interactive video projections may pave new ways for the integration of cinematic media into staged opera. It is in these “hypermedial” features, not in his attempt at a “transparent” technological remediation of the Bayreuth premiere, that the promise of Lepage’s approach lies.