Destinies of Manon

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The North American philosopher Stanley Cavell (1926-2018), who made a name for himself as one of the great experts on classical Hollywood cinema, was also an enthusiastic, incisive and original theorist of the relationship between cinema and opera. In his essay "Opera and the Lease of Voice," a chapter in his 1994 book *A Pitch of Philosophy*, Cavell provocatively asserted that "cinema is or was our opera."[1] This idea resurfaces in the later essay "Opera in (and as) Film," where he states that ours is not "an age of awaiting the creation of new operas, but it is an age of awaiting the creation of new *productions* of operas, whose fame comes from what is in effect their new readings of, potentially, the entire heritage of opera."[2]

For Cavell, the connection between opera and cinema is more complex than it superficially appears. They share not only a set of formal characteristics as multimedia art forms but also a deeper affinity: both opera and cinema are artistic attempts to overcome skepticism – human beings' solipsistic doubt, bordering on despair, that we can ever successfully communicate with or express ourselves to others. Cavell views skepticism not merely as a philosophical trend but also as a "cultural trauma", haunting modernity from its inception and entailing a "crisis of expression, a sense that language as such, reason as such, can no longer be assured of its relation to a world apart from me or the reality of the passions within me." He concludes, "nothing less than such a trauma could meet the sense of language requiring as it were a rescue by music."[3]

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[1] Stanley Cavell, "Opera and the Lease of Voice," *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 129-169 (here 136). This work is funded by FCT– Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, I.P., under CEECIND/08782/2023.

[2] Cavell, "Opera in (and as) Film" [2000], in *Cavell on Film*, ed. William Rothman (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), 305-18 (here 309).

[3] *Ibid.*, 306.

Examining momentous changes in seventeenth-century Europe, Cavell identifies Shakespearean tragedies, Descartes's philosophy and the birth of opera as responses to – and, as such, manifestations of – this crisis. Three centuries later, in the early twentieth century, cinema continues this struggle. What cinema inherits from opera is an essential sense of combativeness, which Cavell describes as "a flame that preserves the human need, on pain of madness of melancholy, for conviction in its expressions of passion."[4] However, since the two art forms operate differently, a competition also emerges between them. If opera aspired to a transfiguration of language through singing, cinema sought a similar transfiguration through moving images: cinema's "magnification of gesture" substituted opera's "intensification of speech."[5]

In this essay, my interest in Cavell lies not so much with his interpretation of cinema's operatic inheritance, which has already inspired much literature on opera and film over the last few decades, lending his approach a somewhat teleological outlook. Instead, I am drawn to one of the strategies he employed to test his ideas: using as the touchstone of his reflections – alongside the subgenre of opera film and the constellation of movies with explicit allusions to the operatic universe – a category of films in which

> … a particular opera enters into the substance of a film, where the competition between an opera and the attention given it in the film becomes an essential part of the film's theme; or, to say it otherwise, where understanding the relationship between the film and the opera to which it weds itself sets the primary task of the understanding of the film.[6]

Within this category, *Moonstruck* (1987) by Norman Jewison and *Meeting Venus* (1991) by István Szabó are exemplary. For Cavell, the fact that Puccini's *La bohème* (in *Moonstruck*) and Wagner's *Tannhäuser* (in *Meeting Venus*) play crucial roles in the film narratives – the main characters evolve and mature in an explicit dialogue with an opera – is both key to

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4 *Ibid.*, 307

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*, 312.

interpreting the films and an invitation to broader considerations about the competition between the two art forms. These films confirm Cavell's insights into how opera and cinema grapple with skepticism, isolation, or alienation, and allow him to elaborate on the contrasting strategies they employ. Whereas in opera tragedy takes the lead, cinema goes in the opposite direction, confirming its capacity to "provide a happier, anyway less fatal, ending."[7] Cavell's draws these insights from close readings of these films by focusing on their common trait: the fact of having a specific opera at their center.

It is a film of this kind, where *a particular opera enters the substance of a film*, that I explore in this article. Indeed, Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* (1893) plays a pivotal role in *Lady of the Tropics* (1939), a film written by Ben Hecht and directed by Jack Conway. Yet, while following Cavell's lead in using what will emerge as a *mise-en-abyme* as a touchstone for my reflections, I will steer the conversation in a direction incompatible with his proposed metanarrative wherein cinema both continues and replaces opera as a genre. In recent scholarship, this metanarrative has been an implicit *leitmotiv* and Cavell an explicit reference. In *When Opera Meets Film*, Marcia Citron credits Cavell with the identification of film "as the successor to opera."[8] Taking a more nuanced approach in *Vocal Apparitions: The Attraction of Cinema to Opera*, Michal Grover-Friedlander elaborates on Cavell's ideas, suggesting that cinema, with its multifaceted fascination with opera, incorporates opera in ways that enable it to experience a sort of rebirth within the cinematic medium. The metaphor of the phoenix, highlighted in the chapter on Fellini's *E la nave va*, encapsulates this vision, suggesting that "opera can be reborn *in cinema* without losing what is *operatic* about it."[9]

As intriguing as the image of a phoenix-like rebirth may seem, it is also problematic due to its adherence to a teleological imaginary, where cinema is perceived as a means for opera's survival or rebirth. Implicitly, this perspective has shaped our understanding of the two art forms in a manner that oversimplifies their interaction, holding them captive to a shared essence that their mutual influence should invite us to question.

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7 Cavell, "Opera and the Lease of Voice," 135.

8 Marcia Citron, *When Opera Meets Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 57.

9 Michal Grover-Friedlander, *Vocal Apparitions: The Attraction of Cinema to Opera* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 152 (the italics are from the original).

2.

Lady of the Tropics premiered in 1939 with Hedy Lamarr, Robert Taylor and Joseph Schildkraut in the leading roles. It was a moderate success, earning MGM a relatively modest sum of about 100,000 dollars (about 2.19 million dollars in 2024). The screenplay is loosely based on *Histoire du Chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut*, a novel written by Antoine François Prévost, better known as Abbé Prévost, and published in 1731. Hecht's true inspiration, however, was Puccini's opera, with the reference to the literary source serving as a strategic maneuver, since the most famous operatic adaptations of the novel – by Massenet and Puccini – were still under copyright protection.

However, *Lady of the Tropics* is far from being a conventional film adaptation. It has little in common with earlier film versions of *Carmen* – by filmmakers like DeMille, Lubitsch, and Chaplin, among many others – which stayed largely true to Mérimée's novella and Bizet's opera.[10] Hecht reimagines the "original" story of Manon to the point of making it almost unrecognizable. Therefore, despite being based in Prévost's novel and inspired by Puccini's opera, *Lady of the Tropics* defies adaptation-oriented categories.

At the same time, the literary-operatic reference remains apparent in *Lady of the Tropics*. In addition to being named Manon, the female protagonist inherits from her literary and operatic predecessors an aura of seduction, mystery and deceit. Furthermore, the film includes a pivotal scene in which two of the three main characters attend a performance of none other than Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*. This was what initially captivated me in the film, because it provided another example of the *mise-en-abyme* that intrigued Cavell in *Moonstruck* and *Meeting Venus*, while maintaining a subtle connection with the tradition of filmed opera. Although *Lady of the Tropics*

[10] Numerous filmmakers have reimagined the tragic tale of Carmen on screen. And they did so in the most varied forms, which include full-fledged opera films, such as Francesco Rosi's (1984) and Peter Brook's (1983) features, Otto Preminger's musical *Carmen Jones* (1954), Carlos Saura's flamenco-inspired rendition (1983) or, more recently, Robert Townsend's contemporary take, *Carmen: A Hip Hopera* (2001), produced by MTV. The silent era also saw significant achievements from directors like Cecil B. DeMille (1915), Charlie Chaplin (1915) or Ernst Lubitsch (1918). While *Carmen* was a favorite subject among the filmmakers who turned operas into films during the twentieth century, several other operas could be cited as examples. With their realistic plots, operas by Verdi and Puccini, particularly *La traviata* and *Tosca*, have also frequently been subject to cinematic treatment.

may not be categorized as an opera film, but rather as a movie where the memory of an opera is relevant to its interpretation, it remains, unlike *Moonstruck* and *Meeting Venus*, an adaptation, albeit loosely, of a preexisting literary-operatic work.

Thus, I underline the connections to Prévost's novel and Puccini's opera before discussing Hecht and Conway's film, not because the operatic and literary references are particularly pronounced in the film, but to position my analysis within the broader conversation about the relationship between cinema and opera. This conversation is not only about the influence of opera on cinema but also the influence of cinema on opera, specifically the potential repercussions of the interpretation of a given film for the understanding of a given opera. It is this hermeneutical short circuit that I want to emphasize as an alternative to the metanarrative presented by Cavell.

3.

Set in French Indochina in the 1930s, *Lady of the Tropics* (1939) tells the story of Manon DeVargnes (Hedy Lamarr), a young woman of both Asian and European heritage who dreams of a life in Paris, and Bill Carey (Robert Taylor), an American *bon vivant*, who falls in love with her. Their paths cross in Saigon, where Bill accompanies his girlfriend and her parents on a leisure trip. Unlike with many of Manon's previous lovers, Bill's affection for her is genuine. He wants her – as he declares in a scene where Manon is about to marry a local prince (but doesn't) – "for keeps".

Against the advice from the local priest (Ernest Cossart), who warns Bill about the dark, unknown side of the mixed-race young woman, he defies social conventions and marries Manon in Saigon. However, their plans to return to New York, where Bill resides, is thwarted by Pierre Delaroch (Joseph Schildkraut), a powerful local official and businessman who refuses to accept the departure of his former lover. Pierre intervenes with the US ambassador, causing an indefinite delay in issuing Manon's new passport. Bill refuses to leave his wife, accepting work for a few weeks in another city to support the couple. With Bill away, Manon, in exchange for the promise of the coveted visa, agrees to a seemingly innocuous invitation from Pierre:

one last trip to the opera to attend a performance of Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*.

More than seeking Manon's company, Pierre desires to be seen at the opera with his former lover. Anticipating that their presence at the theater will be documented in the local press, Pierre orchestrates a plan to ensure that this news reaches Bill, igniting his rage and, Pierre hopes, leading to the couple's separation. Bill indeed loses his temper upon learning about Pierre and Manon's evening together, especially once he connects the dots between his new job outside of Saigon, secured through Delaroch's influence, and the opportunity for the former couple to rendezvous during his absence. After a heated confrontation with Manon – captured dramatically, with Bill portrayed in a low-angle shot contrasting with Manon's vulnerable position on the floor – he storms off to Pierre's mansion seeking vengeance. Arriving by taxi before Bill, Manon engages in a brief conversation with Pierre before brandishing a pistol and, much to his astonishment, fatally shooting him point blank. Convinced that she saved Bill from committing murder and being incarcerated, but also persuaded that he would never forgive her alleged betrayal, Manon takes her own life. Rushing to meet her with plans for their escape, Bill arrives too late, cradling the dying Manon in his arms.

A story of adventure, love and tragedy, *Lady of the Tropics* portrays the death of the woman as a sacrifice for the man she loves. Yet she is not merely any woman; she is a Eurasian woman, while he is American, a white, young and forthright New Yorker. Throughout Manon is presented in an ambiguous light. Her actions and motivations remain dubious, and her appearance, especially her attire, exudes a blend of glamour, exoticism and seduction. Whether wearing a black gown, as in her initial appearance, or adorned in exotic garb as a "typical" Asian bride, Manon embodies the so-called "yellow peril".

Gina Marchetti has convincingly argued that *Lady of the Tropics* belongs to a constellation of Hollywood romances – alongside D. W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919), Josef von Sternberg's *Shanghai Express* (1932) or Henry King's *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing* (1955) – in which the fascination with Asian-American romantic entanglements serves as a symbolical canvas for projecting identity anxieties. As Hollywood turned its attention to the Far East, especially prior to the aftermath of World War II, Asian characters provided a relatively neutral portrayal of the "other."

Marchetti notes that these films sought to deal with the "fundamental contradiction within the American psyche between the liberal ideology of the 'melting pot' and the conservative insistence on a homogeneous, white, Anglo-Saxon, American identity" using "Asians, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders as signifiers of racial otherness to avoid the far more immediate racial tensions between blacks and whites or the ambivalent mixture of guilt and enduring hatred toward Native American and Hispanics."[11]

In *Lady of the Tropics*, these complexities are explicit and implicit. On one hand, the racist depiction of the East is overtly articulated by Father Antoine, who cautions against marrying an Asian, if only because the Oriental race is "as inscrutable and mysterious as its hats and its Gods." In the same vein, albeit with a hint of self-deprecating sarcasm, Delaroch crudely attempts to dissuade Manon from her marriage with Bill, remarking, "We are the same… You have the face of the West, but your soul is full of Eastern smoke." At the same time, the film does not conceal Hedy Lamarr's whiteness, using clothing and narrative to convey her exoticism. The avoidance of yellowface, a practice that was common in Hollywood at the time, does not mitigate the exacerbation of racial tensions, as in the scene where Bill and Manon encounter her former schoolmates, portrayed in stark contrast to her, in unflattering attire, with covered hair and childish giggles.

Another noteworthy aspect is the choice of source material and cast. Two points are particularly relevant here and deserve further discussion, intertwining racial and identity themes with the opera-cinema debate: firstly, the portrayal of the deceitful Asian woman as a contemporary incarnation of Manon, and secondly, the deliberate creation of this character with Hedy Lamarr in mind.

4.

The myth of the enigmatic and treacherous woman has its own cinematic tradition, notably within Hollywood's film noir genre. In *Lady of the Tropics*, this myth is accentuated by its association with Asia. As Marchetti notes, "race, in this case, serves as another ideological rationalization of a fantasy of

11 Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discourse Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1993), 5-6.

female duplicity."[12] However, the literary antecedents of this fantasy can be traced back to at least the eighteenth century, with its echoes resonating in opera. Long before the Duca di Mantova sang "La donna è mobile" in Verdi's *Rigoletto*, Don Alfonso warned in Mozart's *Così fan tutte* that all women behave the same. In this context Manon stands out as *prima inter pares*. She epitomizes the ideas of volatility and untruthfulness, to which Auber, Massenet and Puccini sought to give musical and theatrical form in their operatic renderings of Prévost's famous novel.

Originally part of the seven volume *Mémoires et aventures d'un homme de qualité* (1728-1731), *L'histoire du Chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut* was deemed scandalous upon its publication due to its dubious moral and unedifying episodes. Set in the eighteenth-century France, the novel focuses on Des Grieux, a young nobleman who falls in love with the charming girl named Manon. They run away and start living together in Paris. Yet Manon seems to value wealth and comfort at least as much as love, and Des Grieux, despite being a nobleman, is very young still. When situations of financial crisis put their love to the test, especially because his father does not accept their marriage, she vacillates and their relationship is punctuated by several betrayals and separations. Despite his jealousy and frustration, Des Grieux persists in his love to the point of following her to North America, after she is accused of prostitution and condemned to exile in Louisiana. After a brief period of happiness in New Orleans, they have to run away again and she ends up dying of exposure and exhaustion in the desert.

Although the narrative revolves around Manon, the novel provides scant insight into her character. There are two narrators: the main narrator, the so-called *homme de qualité*, chronicling his memories; and Des Grieux, who recounts his story to the main narrator. According to Jean M. Goulemot, "Des Grieux's first-person narrative compels us to accept a double reading contract, according to which the scribe faithfully reports Des Grieux's words and actions, while also assuming – second contract – that the chevalier recounts the words and deeds of the actors and their loves with equal fidelity."[13] Consequently, the reader's perception of Manon is filtered by two male voices. Her words are never conveyed, as her voice is never

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12 *Ibid.*, 72.

13 Jean M. Goulemot, "Préface", in Prévost, *Histoire du Chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut* (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 2005), 20 (my translation).

heard in direct speech. This silence extends to her physical appearance – which is ironic, to say the least, given the novel's emphasis on Manon's beauty and charm. As for her expectations and memories, they are pure and simply effaced. More than one and a half centuries had to pass before Manon says anything about her youth. "Yet happy, so happy I once was!", she finally sings in Puccini's opera, "our little home rang with carefree laughter and with my merry friends I often went dancing! [Eppur lieta, assai lieta un tempo fui! La queta casetta risonava | de mie folli risate, | e coll'amiche gioconde | ne andava sovente a danza!]"

In the novel, Manon's silence becomes the pretext for all suspicions. Manon appears, in Des Grieux's account, as opportunistic, unfaithful, unreliable and, above all, untrustworthy. These suspicions persist in the operatic adaptation and the film. In *Lady of the Tropics*, Manon is caught lying on multiple occasions. Hecht's screenplay underscores the ambiguity of the character, which in a way explains why the screenwriter chose Puccini over Massenet, whose *Manon* (1884) was equally popular at the time. While Massenet's opera faithfully recalls the core episodes of Prévost's narrative, Puccini's rendition stays true to its spirit: his Manon is overtly problematic and inspires less trust.[14] For example, in Massenet's opera, Manon is undecided about leaving Des Grieux and she feels guilt over striking a deal with her brother and his father. By contrast, in Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* – which the composer discussed with the librettists to the tiniest details, having dismissed several versions before accepting Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa's treatment – any signs of guilt or remorse are omitted. Despite expressing solitude and abandonment in her final aria, Manon never explicitly declares her love for Des Grieux. Nonetheless, Puccini believed in the authenticity of Manon as a character and woman. He writes in a letter to Ricordi:

> Manon is a heroine I believe in and therefore she cannot fail to win the hearts of the public. Why shouldn't there be two operas about Manon? A woman like Manon can have more than one lover. Massenet feels it

[14] In fact, Massenet's opera was more faithful to the original novel. The libretto, written by Henri Meilhac and Philippe Gille, recounts the tragedy of Manon in five acts, including a second act portraying the couple's life in Paris.

> as a Frenchman, with powder and minuets. I shall feel it as an Italian, with desperate passion.[15]

Hecht seemed to share this sentiment – that Manon, flaws and all, was a compelling character. Viewed through the lens of an American screenwriter, she would inspire empathy and admiration from the audience. It was indeed his idea to adapt Manon's tale into a film, transforming it in a tragic love story between an American and a woman of mixed race set in Saigon in the early twentieth century. In other words, it was Hecht who took the initiative to combine the literary archetypes of the *femme fatale* with the fascination surrounding Asian-American relationships. Finally, it was also Hecht who recognized that Hedy Lamarr was the perfect actress for such a role. Or rather, that such a character – an exotic, operatic *femme fatale* – was tailor-made for Hedy Lamarr.

5.

In the aftermath of the success of *Algiers*, which marked Lamarr's debut in Hollywood, MGM producer Louis B. Mayer convened a meeting with collaborators and friends to discuss the next film for the emerging star."[16] Born Hedwig Kiesler, into a bourgeois family, the Austrian actress had her cinematic debut in Gustav Machaty's controversial, yet highly successful film *Ecstasy* (1933). She would go on to be celebrated for her portrayals of exotic characters, from *Algiers* (1938) and *Lady of the Tropics* (1939) to *White Cargo* (1942) and *Samson and Delilah* (1949). In *Lady of the Tropics*, however, she not only embodies this Hollywood fantasy, where the allure of exoticism and mystery intertwine, but also embraces a role in which reality and fiction blur.

Like the Manon of the novel and operas, Lamarr also fled from a lover: Fritz Mandl – an arms manufacturer that came to be known as the "merchant of death"– whom she married in 1937, following the scandalous success of *Ecstasy*. Similarly to Manon's flight, which, at the end of Act 2 of

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15 Quoted in Julian Budden, "Manon Lescaut (ii)," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, ed. Stanley Sadie, *Grove Music Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

16 According to an anecdote relayed by Hecht to Orson Welles, who then shared it with Peter Bogdanovich, someone declared in this occasion, "This lady is exotic – let's put her in China or someplace like that." Orson Welles and Peter Bogdanovich, *This is Orson Welles*, ed. Jonathan Rosenbaum (London: Harper Collins, 1993), 1-2.

Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* ends in a failure, jewels play a decisive role in Lamarr's escape. Without them, such a flight on the brink of World War II would not have been as successful as it was. As Ruth Barton observes, "these jewels were her insurance, the kind that would withstand the consequences of the war."[17] Lamarr recounts the episode of her flight in her autobiography with cinematic details and analogies:

> I had the keys to Laura's battered car, and I reached the railway unchallenged ... The platform was deserted when I bought my ticket and started a twelve-minute wait. Like a novice spy, I imagined the stationmaster was scrutinizing me. And there was a telephone by his elbow. Somehow I managed to turn my back on him, and my studied casualness until the train did arrive and I did board it were not wasted on me in a later motion picture with Paul Henreid (*The Conspirators*).[18]

Lamarr's escape from Mandl occupies a pivotal place in her life. It was through this event that she met Louis B. Mayer in London, who then signed her to MGM. In Hollywood, her reputation as a *femme fatale* preceded her. The least we can say, considering Hedy's cold beauty, irresistible charm and the story of her marriage with and flight from Fritz Mandl, is that the affinity between her and Manon's destinies "was too good" – too filled with dramatic intimations – not to become a film. A film, Hecht appears to have felt, in which the ghost of the operatic Manon blinked at the actress he had cast for the role.

Cavell observed that in cinema the actor takes precedence over the character, whereas in theater the character takes precedence over the actor (with opera presenting a more intricate scenario, where the singer-actor is subsumed into a voice that cannot be identified with the character).[19] *Lady of the Tropics* would not be the same film without Hedy Lamarr. The story could be the same, the director could be the same, the screenplay could be

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17 Ruth Barton, *Hedy Lamarr: The Most Beautiful Woman in Film* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 56.

18 Quoted in *ibid*.

19 Cf. Cavell, "Opera and the Lease of Voice", 137 ("on film the actor is the subject of the camera, emphasizing that this actor could (have) become other characters [...], as opposed to theater's emphasizing that this character could (will) accept other actors"), and "Opera in (and as) Film", 309: "In a play in a theater, the character takes precedence over the actor; in a film the actor is the subject of the camera and takes precedence over the character."

the same. Yet the film, as envisioned by Hecht and directed by Conway, would emerge as an entirely different entity. This acknowledgment holds significant implications in a conversation about how a film incorporating an opera can reshape our perception of that opera, especially when there is a strong affinity between the character and the performer. While Manon acquires a voice in the operas of Auber, Massenet and Puccini, she only attains a distinct image and gaze in cinema. This is not to diminish the importance of opera's visual dimension, but to underscore that, unlike in opera, where performance after performance new singers give voice and body to the characters, in film, *that* performance becomes *the* film, rendering it inseparable from *those* actors.

Manon DeVargnes will always be Hedy Lamarr – the Austrian actress who embodied the Hollywood diva, whom many considered expressionless, impassive and calculating, the woman who knew the power she held over people and used it to her advantage. But also the woman who never allowed herself to be controlled, the actress who guided her career on her own terms and even the inventor who, with composer George Antheil, patented a radio signaling device. Another irony awaits us here: if Mandl sold weapons to the Nazis, Lamarr, with this invention, supported the allies, for this technology played an important role during World War II in maintaining the security of military communications.

6.

The scene in which Manon DeVargnes and Pierre Delaroch attend a performance of Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* is decisive for my beyond-Cavellian reading of the film's mirroring play between the cinematic Manon and the operatic Manon. With Bill out of town, Manon hopes to obtain the much-desired passport and accepts Pierre's invitation. Between the dialogue scene at Pierre's mansion (where he convinces her to accept his last invitation to go to the opera), and the scene at the opera (where the views alternate between box, audience and stage), we see a poster for that performance, where unmistakably – even for those who would not recognize Puccini's music – the title of the opera is featured: *Manon Lescaut*.

What happens during the following ninety seconds? On stage, we are catapulted into Act 2. Des Grieux has found Manon – after she abandoned

him in favor of the old, rich, and despicable Géronte, with whom she now lives, surrounded by luxuries. At this moment, Manon recognizes her betrayal and asks for forgiveness. "T'ho tradito", she sings on stage. But only viewers familiar with the opera will grasp the intricacies of the operatic plot. Meanwhile, what cannot fail to catch the eye of any viewer is this: Manon and Pierre are seen from the audience in a box, where Manon is moved to tears. Pierre consoles her. Or does he secretly and perversely wish to provoke her? "You see," he says, "he forgives her." Finally, Manon can't bear it anymore and asks him to leave.

How can we interpret this scene? At first glance, it seems that Manon identifies with the character on stage and feels remorse. According to this interpretation, Manon DeVargnes recognizes that she, like Manon Lescaut, has sinned (or will sin) and has hurt (or will hurt) Bill. However, apart from the apparent identification between the cinematic Manon and the operatic Manon, there is no evidence suggesting that Manon betrayed Bill. Later, Bill discovers Pierre's cigarette case in his robe, which triggers his fury more than the news of Manon accompanying Pierre to the opera. But this merely indicates that Pierre, after escorting Manon home from the opera, went up to the couple's apartment; it does not prove that Manon betrayed Bill. Pierre may well have seized an opportunity when Manon was distracted to place the cigarette case in Bill's robe pocket.

However, an alternative interpretation is conceivable. What if Manon DeVargnes's emotional turmoil is less about a sense of guilt and more about realizing she shares a common fate with Manon Lescaut? In the movie, Manon continually arouses suspicion – from the priest, Pierre, Bill and ultimately the viewers – regarding her character and feelings. Even Marchetti has no doubt that Manon betrayed Bill.[20] Yet, perhaps it is disillusionment rather than remorse that brings tears to Manon's eyes in the opera house scene. Such an interpretation would also cast a different light on her suicide. Even before realizing that Manon shot herself and is dying, Bill reaffirms his love and plans for their escape. However, the very notion that Bill, regardless of any wrongdoing on her part, could believe in her love never occurred to Manon. That is why she commits suicide.

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[20] Marchetti describes this plot twist as follows: "As the newly-weds sink deeper into poverty, unable to get a visa to leave because of Delaroch's malicious influence, Manon eventually gives in to Delaroch's plot to exchange sexual favors for a passport." Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril,"* 74.

7.

In *Opera, or The Undoing of Women*, Catherine Clément critically examines the demise of the genre's female characters.[21] From Carmen to Tosca, Violetta to Lucia, Cio-Cio San to Manon – although Clément does not mention the latter – all these women meet tragic ends. What drives the fascination with an artform where the death of the female character appears inevitable? If this is the central question of Clément's book, we might add another: what happens to this predicament when an opera is adapted to film?

At first glance, the transition to film does not alter Manon's fate. There is no conversion of tragedy into comedy or rescue by a happy ending, as pointed out by Cavell in his analyses of *Moonstruck* (in relation to *La bohème*) and *Meeting Venus* (in relation to *Tannhäuser*). The character still dies in the end. And, even worse, she dies because of her love for a man – to save him. Like Manon Lescaut, Manon DeVargnes dies feeling abandoned. Like Carmen, her exuberant sexuality becomes her condemnation. Like Butterfly, she commits suicide. Like Tosca, she is a posthumous victim of the villain's cunning. It could be argued that the most glaringly problematic aspects of the operatic portrayal of women persist in *Lady of the Tropics*.

But this isn't the film's final statement about Manon. And her death, I submit, is not entirely in vain. Not because she saves Bill, but because her suicide dispels the suspicion that surrounds her. This suspicion has followed her from Des Grieux's narrative in Prévost's novel up to the shrugs of Father Antoine in Hecht and Conway's feature. By taking her own life, Manon leaves no room for doubt about the authenticity of her love, irrespective of whatever actions and emotions she might have committed or experienced in the past. So viewed, Manon's suicide invites us not to take the character's flaws for granted. In her literary and operatic incarnations, she mirrors the desires and anxieties of male characters. She retains this role in the film but also gains a complexity that reflects back on the interpretation of the opera.

Ultimately, it is not only our knowledge of the opera that informs our reading of the film. Our reading of the film also prompts us to question

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

what we thought we knew about the opera. This is not to imply that the role of the cinematic adaptation is to elucidate the operatic original. On the contrary, what I find captivating in *Lady of the Tropics* is that it challenges the conventional perception of Manon – arguably one of the most vilified among the operatic heroines.

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Cavell's assertion that we live in an era of awaiting new productions of operas over the creation of new operas carries a Hegelian undertone. Opera, he suggests, belongs to the past, even if it persists in the present. For Cavell this does not imply that opera is consigned to a conservative stance. On the contrary, we still expect the *new – new* productions that, as he eagerly reminds us, have the potential to prompt a reevaluation of the "entire heritage of opera."[22] This principle embraces not only staged and filmed opera, but also that unique category, to which *Lady of the Tropics* belongs, where the substance if not the subject of an opera is incorporated into the cinematic adaptation.

In his analysis of *Moonstruck* and *Meeting Venus*, Cavell not only brings the parallel between the film and the opera to bear on his interpretation of the former, but, as I argued above, also explores his theory about cinema's takeover of opera's cultural role. While I concur that interpreting a film in which an opera provides a key to its interpretation has implications for a broader discussion on the relationship between the two art forms, I refrain from such a metanarrative in my analysis of *Lady of the Tropics*. My interest lies not only in how considering the opera enriches our understanding of the film, but also in how the film can nurture and complicate our understanding of the opera.

Cinema can fundamentally reshape our perception and experience of opera. This claim is not new, but contains ramifications that merit further reflection. As a medium, film has long reshaped how opera is received and produced. Through film adaptations, traditional interpretations of traditional operas are renewed, deepened or challenged. In the case of *Lady of the Tropics* and *Manon Lescaut*, this transformation concerns first and

22 Cavell, "Opera in (and as) Film," 309.

foremost Manon as the archetype of the operatic *femme fatale*. Despite repeating the trope of the female sacrifice, despite its latent racism, despite its various flaws, *Lady of the Tropics* highlights the complexity of Manon's character – her many desires, her many actions, her many destinies.

This is not solely attributable to Hecht's screenplay, Conway's direction or Lamarr's performance taken individually, but rather to a combination of factors, including the myth surrounding the actress, coming together and made possible by the cinematic medium itself. Manon evolves throughout the film – and beyond it. The boundaries that separate reality from fiction are permeable, which is why underscoring that Manon is embodied by Hedy Lamarr is so crucial. Lamarr's myth, along with the enigma of her life, the strength of her character and the irony of her declarations will accompany the operatic and cinematic Manons of the future.

As a mythical entity that can be reimagined across various arts and media, Manon remains independent from any of her instantiations. There is no original Manon. Her destiny remains open. Drawing on Cavell's methodology – which involves examining how and with what effects *Manon Lescaut* enters the substance of *Lady of the Tropics* – I thus depart from his conclusions. Cinema has the potential to dismantle rather than to perpetuate the fantasies that connect opera and film via notions of inheritance, identity, and destiny. No destiny, I maintain, is preordained – neither Manon's nor opera's.