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Editorial introduction

Premiering a Mediaopera. On-Site. Online.

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Abstract

Mediaopera is a relatively new genre, which invites questions as to its distinguishing features and contemporary relevance. How does mediaopera differ from related forms such as traditional opera, opera in video recording, film, and media art? On the occasion of the world premiere of *Pink Mouse* on March 21st, 2024, which took place at the Leuphana University Lüneburg in Lower Saxony, an international panel of philosophers, cultural theorists and artists approached *Pink Mouse* – musical-graphical translation (2021) by Tatar-Russian composer Iraida Yusupova of Victor Erofeev’s prose poem (2017) of that name – as both singular live event and epistemic object, worthy of scholarly attention. The discussion revolved around the core contradiction of the ritualized gathering that had been convened: What could be learned from premiering a mediaopera, made to be accessible online, in a real-world setting, and with in-person attendance? The papers collected in this volume offer varying answers to this question. While reflecting on the performative contradiction in terms more or less oblique, they prove the exercise to have been intellectually stimulating. *Pink Mouse* has had subsequent public screenings at festivals in Florence, Hemnitz and Vienna. Could it be that mediaoperas are finally best consumed offline and in company?

Keywords: Mediaopera; *Pink Mouse*; Iraida Yusupova; Visual and musical systems of signs

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Редакторская заметка

Премьера медиаоперы. На месте. Онлайн.

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Аннотация

Медиаопера – относительно новый жанр, который ставит вопросы о его отличительных чертах и современной актуальности. Чем медиаопера отличается от родственных форм, таких как классическая опера, опера в видеозаписи, кино и медиаискусство? По случаю мировой премьеры “Розовой мыши” 21 марта 2024 года, которая состоялась в Университете Лейфана в Люнебурге в Нижней Саксонии, международная группа философов, теоретиков культуры и художников обратилась к “Розовой мыши” – музыкально-графическому переводу (2021) русского композитора Ираиды Юсуповой одноименной поэмы в прозе Виктора Ерофеева (2017) – как к уникальному живому событию и эпистемическому объекту, достойному научного внимания. Обсуждение вращалось вокруг основного противоречия ритуализированного собрания, которое было создано: чему можно научиться из премьеры медиаоперы, доступной онлайн, в реальной обстановке и с личным присутствием? Статьи, собранные в этом томе, предлагают разные ответы на этот вопрос. Размышляя о перформативном противоречии в терминах более или менее косвенных, они доказывают, что упражнение было интеллектуально стимулирующим. “Розовая мышь” впоследствии была показана на публичных фестивалях во Флоренции, Хемнице и Вене. Может ли быть так, что медиаопера, в конечном итоге, лучше всего воспринимать офлайн и в компании?

Ключевые слова: Медиаопера; “Розовая Мышь”; Ираида Юсупова; Визуальные и музыкальные системы знаков

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What is ›mediaopera‹ and why does one study it? Friedrich Schiller famously posed this question with respect to ›universal history‹ in late 18th century Germany.¹ And the historiographical problem he names is as valid as ever: Why do new cultural phenomena arise when they do and what makes them worthy of scholarly attention? In lieu of taking the latest academic preoccupation for granted, it is worth considering where our research attention goes and why. Were Schiller alive today, he might have answered the question by writing such a piece himself – say ›The Digital Robbers,‹² a study of social injustice explored through the tale of two tech-bros with rivalrous views on personal ›freedoms,‹ state regulation, toxic masculinity, and anarchic disruption. For the social upheavals taking place in late 18th century Europe are not entirely dissimilar to the disruptions that attend the digital transformation currently underway. The relatively new genre mediaopera has emerged as an extension of the networked connectivity in which communication now takes place. In this volume we explore the mediaopera phenomenon on the example of *Pink Mouse*, Tatar-Russian composer Iraida Yusupova's 2021 musical-graphical translation of Victor Erofeev's prose poem of that name (see fig. 1). There is no reason to assume that the mediaopera's power of suasion should have less traction on future humanity than did the emergence of a German ›national‹ theater, as propagated by Schiller, and other 18th century ›literati,‹ on the stage and in theoretical tracts.

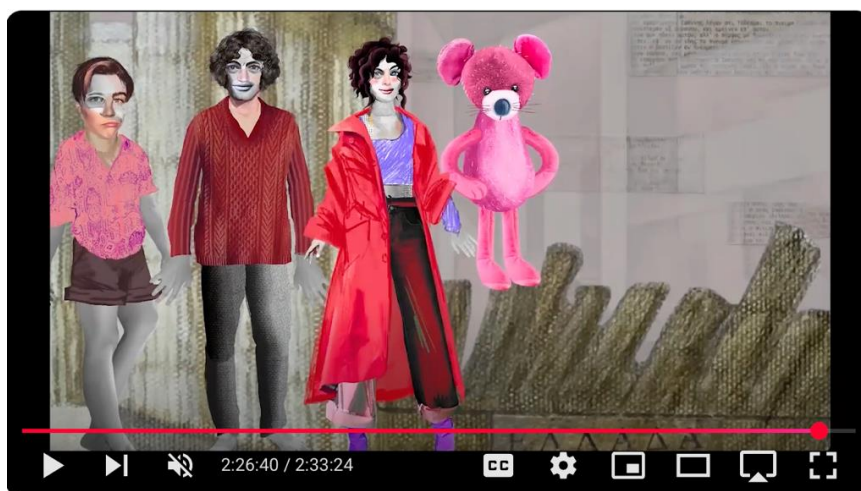


Figure 1. Still from the *Pink Mouse* mediaopera used with permission by the composer. © Iraida Yusupova (Yusupova, 2021).

The novel *Pink Mouse* presents a Russian-inflected wonderland situated at the bottom of the sea where all manner of institutions – national, familial, literary – shapeshift in the ebb and flow of utopian aspirations as conjured up in the mind of an orphaned

¹ Schiller, F. (1789). Was heißt und zu welchem Ende studiert man Universalgeschichte? (Inaugural lecture, Jena University, 26.5.1789). https://de.wikisource.org/wiki/Was_heißt_und_zu_welchem_Ende_studiert_man_Universalgeschichte%3F

² Schiller, F. (1782). *Die Räuber* (*The Robbers*), premiered in Mannheim in 1782. The play exists in several English translations and is referenced in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* as well as Turgenev's *First Love*.



young girl with a famous surname: Mendelejeva. As if born of a symbolist table of period(ic)-social-world elements, she summons an unending stream of chemico-poetic reactions from a cast of allegorical characters, akin to what her namesake did for particulate matter (Gordin, 2019). The chimerical antics of these figures hold our attention in a lighted-hearted spirit while also evincing the political intrigue and complexity of today's ›preterhuman‹ moment of digital distortion. Preterhuman has fallen out of use – I propose to re-coin the term to signal a third position in the debate of transhumanism versus posthumanism, one that insists on the ineradicable historicity of human self-invention and takes dynamic conceptions of humanity to be rooted in constitutive social practice, always. Erofeev's novel, especially the elusive figure of Pink Mouse itself, arguably portrays the inner child of an unhinged *Weltgeist* facing adult dilemmas, beyond its maturity, with carefree abandon. Yusupova channels Erofeev's child-centric hallucinations in a surrealist score of image and sound that won the Zverev Art Prize of 2021.³ Due to pandemic lockdowns, however, and other disruptive events, the piece had not yet been premiered when Erofeev came to the Leuphana University Lüneburg as guest professor in 2022.

The Leuphana University Lüneburg, with whose generous support the libretto was translated into English, took the opportunity to host the world premiere of *Pink Mouse*. For the occasion, we assembled an international panel of expert commentators from Russia, Germany, Austria, England and North America, including Victor Erofeev, to reflect on the piece.⁴ Iraida Yusupova participated via Zoom. The workshop guests were invited to comment on: what characterizes the mediaopera in general; what distinguishes it from traditional opera delivered online; and how it differs from other types of musical theater (Tambling, 1997)? We also explored the distinctive imaginary of *Pink Mouse* and compared notes on the net effect of its narrative and aesthetic composition in picture and sound. Panel members were struck by the multitude and variety of national cultural icons that appear in the tale, including *Alice in Wonderland* (England), *The Divine Comedy* (Italy), US-cartoons and celebrities, and the German ›Hausmusik‹-tradition, and Russian Conceptualism, to name but the most prominent. After having attended the screening of the piece together, in person, the essays presented in this volume materialized in vastly differing cultural environs and circumstances. The resulting commentaries, assembled in this issue of *Technology and Language*, attest to the impression made by the piece in a group-dynamic reception running counter to the mediaopera's anticipated, small-screen airing. The responses by this informal ›focus group‹ have a philosophical bent. They appear alongside more personal statements by author Erofeev and composer Yusupova. A key insight to come out of the process of shared witnessing was precisely that an overabundance of construal secures the piece's lucidity. Hence, we did not seek to unify

³ Her submission of *Pink Mouse* was one of 50 projects selected from 2000 submission and featured at the *Exhibition of Nominees for the Anatoly Zverev Prize* (19.10. – 28.11.2021). <https://winzavod.ru/eng/calendar/special/vystavka-nominantov-premii-anatoliya-zvereva/>

⁴ The panellists included: Victor Erofeev, Steve Fuller, Evgeniya Lianskaya-Lininger, Bill Mival, Alfred Nordmann, Anthony Sellors, Cheryce von Xylander, Iraida Yusupova. All of them left their mark on these papers, though not everyone chose to submit a paper. Tatiana Bernyukevich later joined the list of contributors; other authors are working on contributions to come.



interpretative perspectives or impose an editorial direction. Yusupova conjured up a realization of *Pink Mouse* quite distinct from the poet's – as computer-savvy spectators will make their own inferences of imagined operatic commonality based on their respective (dis)assembling of the piece.

Mediaopera represents a new and distinct genre; it is *both* opera and media art, not fully instantiating either of these established genres. Mediaopera relates to opera already in name. The word ›opus‹ refers to a technically or artfully produced work; the plural form ›opera‹ refers to an art-form that draws together many artists and technicians – musicians, singers, dancers, architects and builders of the space, costume and light designers, and then writer(s) and composer(s), conductor(s) and stage-director(s) to produce a piece collaboratively. Just as cinema and theater have been transformed by the arrival of video, now routinely incorporated in recorded and live productions, the use of video for staging virtual performances for an online audience has spawned a whole new genre of opera, namely the mediaopera here at issue. However, mediaopera differs from other media art, a well-established field of practices defined by its own norms and conventions, in its peculiar insistence on preserving a line of continuity to an antiquated performative idiom. Mediaopera's distinctive intervention consists in the re-appropriation of a ritualized past in fashioning its trailblazing modernism, or so the practitioners allege. In doing so, they employ not some arbitrary ritual but the very bastion of classical, traditionalist, hierarchical world-making, an institutionalized hub of illusionism very much beholden to the orthodoxies of old. These two registers – opera and media art – make for strange bedfellows.

The premiere of *Pink Mouse* on March 21st, 2024 revealed a host of self-negating premises, peculiar to the genre of mediaopera, of which one stands out most glaringly. Although popularity and reception history of the piece will be decided online, it felt compulsory to the parties concerned that its premiere take place in a real-world setting and in the presence of an audience gathered together in time and space. Attention is attention shared. Full stop (Richardson, 2024). The Leuphana University, which specializes in research dedicated to the digital transformation, seemed a suitable setting for the academic initiation of this piece. That the university would take an interest in mediaopera came as no surprise. Nor that a VW-Foundation funded research group rallied to usher the piece into public view.⁵ But why did a premiere seem so vital to *Pink Mouse*'s artistic validation? The keyword is *portability*. Like the »immutable mobiles« of Bruno Latour (2017), the mediaopera transports and perpetuates its own conditions of possibility. But instead of a model of germ theory that gerrymanders the boundary specifications of filth and hygiene in accordance with its own purposes clearing the path for industrializing modernity to take hold, the mediaopera reconfigures spectatorship. Ever since the German romantics declared the theater to be the school of the nation, authors have written plays that rouse collective sentiment and create »imagined communities« (Anderson, 1983/2006). To the extent that mediaopera partakes of the

⁵ The premiere was kindly hosted by the research group »Commodified Agency – Social Space and the Digital Data Value Chain« with direct, generous assistance from Prof. Ulf Wuggenig, Institute of Philosophy and Art History & Institute of Sociology and Cultural Organisation (associated), Leuphana University Lüneburg.



theatrical, it, too, would seem to inspire collective reception along shared lines of concern. But its delivery is situated not in a municipal building but rather for download on social media platforms operating from California or China, across diverse cultures, at global scale. The ubiquitous delivery of connection by Big Tech goes hand in hand with discursive configurations that arise from extensive, transnational centralization: an integration of ›we, the tiktalkers,‹ if you will. Yet in terms of content and aesthetic articulation, mediaopera is also clearly delineated by national traditions and field formations. Indeed, one thought-provoking aspect of this genre is its ability to accommodate a dual geopolitical imaginary – on the one hand, local, historical, national and, on the other, displaced, presentist, global (Alford, 2018; Herman & Chomsky, 1988/2002; Lippmann, 1922; Zollmann, 2018). When opera adapts to the mobile, on-demand »non-lieux« (Augé, 1992/1995) of electronic devices, ticket price need no longer be prohibitive. But aesthetic experiments such as Yusupova’s do raise vexing questions about art, technology, semiosis and witnessing in an age of dwindling resources for state-sponsored institutions that formerly supported big-budget cultural productions.

We framed the premiere of *Pink Mouse* not so much as spectacle as from a meta-theoretical perspective. Our conversation continues a long and venerable tradition of opera reception in philosophy, notably instantiated by Kierkegaard, Voltaire, Rousseau, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Adorno, Benjamin, Stockhausen, Bourdieu, Scruton, Weibel, Kluge, and others. As technology stands ever larger between us and the felt surround, , opera’s phenomenal aura contestably acquires newly emblematic significance. The authors here collected read *Pink Mouse* as an exemplary and timely piece that can help to bring contemporary developments into sharper focus. One striking difference in the responses by Russian and non-Russian authors relates to the secondary literature available: Mediaopera is already the subject of extensive cultural theorizing in Russian scholarship, most of which has not been translated. There has been far less critical study of the phenomenon in French, German, and English – an omission we set out to address. The papers are arranged methodologically in this issue in that they proceed from a lesser to greater degree of abstraction and close-reading (or close-viewing).

I shall briefly introduce the authors, here listed in alphabetical order, by way of thematic focus. Tatiana Bernyukevich (2025) presents a comparative analysis of mediaopera and digital opera that identifies aesthetic similarities between these two forms but shows them to be genealogically distinct genres. She also emphasizes the information-technological dimensions of this art-form and its sociological ramifications. Victor Erofeev (2025) informs us of his own wondrous journey with respect to the operatic form, which he studiously shunned until the opera laid claim to him, not once but twice (a prior collaboration with Alfred Schnittke on *Life with an Idiot* has been staged multiple times, most recently at the Zurich Opera in 2024⁶). Evgeniya Lianskaya-Lininger (2025) takes a close look at the artistic context in which Yusupova’s vision of mediaopera was first formulated and implemented looking at the art movements with which it is in dialog, individual artists whom she encountered, and important influences stemming from the

⁶ Tholl, E. Völlige Zerrüttung. *Süddeutsche Zeitung* online, 5.11.2024; Thaler, L. Schwule Spezialoperation. *FAZ* online, 6.11.2025.



history of cinema, especially in the Russian tradition. Alfred Nordman (2025) approaches the problem of analogue sensibilities in digital contexts of delivery and mediation from a vantage point furthest removed from the premiere itself but informed by the philosophy of technoscience that he has originated and contextualized in a history of ideas, which qualifies exaggerated claims of novelty. Anthony Sellors (2025) brings to the piece the sensibility of a musician who has spent his career attending to nuances of expressive utterance. His reading deciphers the composer's phenomenology in the act of composing from the compositional configuration of the piece and, so, gives an account of its emotional tenor based on pattern recognition, not on partiality. Cheryce von Xylander (2025) treats the piece as a »heterotopia« (Foucault, 1967; 1971, p. xviii; 1984) of sorts, a world closed unto itself that stands like a »paradigmatic exception« (Ginzberg, 1979) to the context of which it is part, mirroring a reality that cannot be seen but by learning to read the »affordance« (Gibson, 1979) of such cultural black boxes. Iraida Yusupova (2025) takes us into the process from which her mediaoperas in general and *Pink Mouse* in particular have arisen inviting us to look over her shoulder while she is composing, thereby reinforcing the mysterious gulf between the activity and the outcome of her creative process. Texts she has written on »cryptophony« are appended to her article adding historical context to the development of the genre and detail in regards to her contribution. Finally, having dedicated this interpretative effort to *Pink Mouse*, we would like to direct interested readers towards other examples of Yusupova's pioneering work on Russian mediaopera (some in collaboration). Please find a list of pieces accessible online (with links) – and feel free to weigh in on this transnational, transdisciplinary conversation:

EINSTEIN & MARGARITA

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHRaDWVHmnw>

THEREMIN'S LAST SECRET

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X5XK_wk5OLA (in English)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hxvc1JhNQEc> (in Russian)

THE PLANET PI

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WbmxaeBA9kU> (with English subtitles)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEwEp3KKQI0> (with Russian subtitles)

THE DUEL

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qmm5RPUR8PU>

PINK MOUSE

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DwnTUqvkV_Q (with English subtitles)

THE ALPHABET

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JUiSkTi117A>

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