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‘A face like music’: Shaping images into sound in *The Second Mrs Kong*

DAVID BEARD

Abstract: Premiered at Glyndebourne in October 1994 and subsequently performed in the UK, Austria, Germany and Holland, *The Second Mrs Kong* was the result of a collaboration between the American writer Russell Hoban and British composer Harrison Birtwistle. The opera’s reception has tended to emphasise the disparity between Hoban’s diverse and eclectic interests, which emerge not only in the libretto but also in his novels and essays, and Birtwistle’s more introspective and linear approach. Possible connections between Hoban’s aesthetics and Birtwistle’s music have generally been disregarded. I argue, however, that the opera’s main aesthetic concerns – namely, the mediation of images through ideas and the workings of image-identification in diverse media – are shaped by a productive exchange between librettist and composer. The clearest expression of this interaction is the love between Kong, who embodies ‘the idea of King Kong from the 1933 RKO film, and Pearl, a character drawn from Vermeer’s iconic painting *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. The representation of these visual icons in *The Second Mrs Kong* is inflected by Birtwistle’s own views on images, by his attempts to find musical analogues for visual techniques, as revealed especially in his sketches, and by his lively engagement with Hoban’s ideas.

Hoban’s images

In several novels that predate his libretto for *The Second Mrs Kong* (1994), American writer Russell Hoban showed a vivid interest in iconic images and in the ways such images inspire identification from viewers.¹ Such concerns were evidently uppermost in his mind when, in 1993, he began work on the text of the opera for Harrison Birtwistle. This interest is clearly illustrated by the work’s focus on ‘Pearl’, the now-iconic subject of Vermeer’s painting *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, and the equally iconic Kong, the protagonist of the 1933 RKO film *King Kong*. The appeal of such subjects resided not only in their representation of the ‘beauty and the beast’ dichotomy central to the original *King Kong* film, but also in their potential to illustrate how visual images function, and the ways consumers of culture respond to them.² Pearl is now a postcard image, reproduced innumerable times and available in gift shops around the world and on the Internet. Similarly, Kong’s image continues to be replicated, most recently in Peter Jackson’s 2006 remake of the original film. But Kong differs from Pearl by virtue both of his filmic, and therefore narrative, presence, and in the almost mythical status he has acquired since 1933.

¹ Some ideas in this article were first presented at a BBC Study Day on *The Second Mrs Kong* held at the Royal Festival Hall, London, in November 2004. I would like to thank Jonathan Cross and Ann McKay at the BBC Symphony Orchestra for inviting me to speak on that occasion. I am also grateful to Cardiff University for generous financial support, and to Danijela Špirić-Beard for her assistance with preparing the music examples.

² ‘It was beauty killed the beast’ are the last words uttered in the original *King Kong*; this formulation, also used in the original advertising for the film, returns in various forms throughout the opera.

The two images are therefore likely to elicit different responses from viewers. While Pearl may prompt personal thoughts and intimate feelings not specifically connected to a narrative, Kong will probably evoke an epic story of unrequited love, loneliness and death.³

The Second Mrs Kong opens in The World of Shadows where an eclectic array of imaginary people (fictional and mythical figures from different media and times) is assembled: they are all dead. Ferrying the dead to this world is Anubis, the jackal-headed god from Egyptian mythology, who indulges each of the occupants of his world by allowing them to re-live certain moments from their past. The central scene in Act I re-enacts the moment when Vermeer painted Pearl: in this scene Pearl first becomes aware of Kong's existence when she hears his voice emerging from the Mirror that Vermeer asks her to use. We are then introduced to Kong, who appears as a rather forlorn and anxious character, searching for the meaning of his existence and denying his own death. He has heard Pearl through the Mirror and his desire is aroused. Meanwhile, now living in 'a stockbroker's high-tech penthouse', Pearl surfs television and video selections. Encountering an excerpt from the 1933 *King Kong* film, she is inspired to reach Kong via the Internet and their relationship unfolds. Assisted by Orpheus, Kong decides to return to the World of the Living to find Pearl.

Act II begins with Kong and Orpheus leaving the World of Shadows. During their journey they are distracted by four female temptations, one of whom tears off Orpheus's head. When Kong and the Head of Orpheus arrive at the entrance to the World of the Living, Kong is tested once more, this time by the Sphinx, Madam Lena. Surviving these trials, Kong and Orpheus arrive in 'a bad part of town' via a manhole cover. While telephoning Pearl to ask for her address, Kong and the Head of Orpheus are set upon by Kong's nemesis, Death of Kong (played by Anubis). Kong wins the fight and rushes to meet Pearl, who awaits his arrival nervously. Despite their declarations of love, however, the couple are unable to touch, the Mirror informing them that theirs is a love 'that cannot be fulfilled'.⁴ The opera dissolves into a stream of voices and echoes, joined by Orpheus and Eurydice, as well as other characters for whom love has proved illusory.

The libretto for *The Second Mrs Kong* is shaped by Hoban's personal, intense and ongoing response to both the original *King Kong* film and the Orpheus myth, evident in his novels *Turtle Diary* (1975) and *The Medusa Frequency* (1987), as well as his collection of essays *The Moment Under the Moment* (1993). As Hoban comments in *Turtle Diary*, the original *King Kong* film teems with reflected images of heads, faces and physiognomic responses to dramatic events, most arrestingly the representation of Fay Wray's scream, first rehearsed on a boat sailing to Skull Island and then seen

³ Since the appearance of Tracy Chevalier's novel *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (London, 2003) and the eponymous film directed by Peter Webber (2004), however, it is possible that Pearl's image may also evoke a narrative for certain viewers.

⁴ Russell Hoban, *The Second Mrs Kong: An Original Opera Text* (London, 1994), 34. All quotations from the libretto are from this edition, indicated by a page number in brackets.

‘for real’ when she is taken away by Kong.⁵ In the opera Orpheus’s head is severed from his body and carried by Kong from the World of Shadows into the World of the Living, while Kong and the audience view selected moments from the film: the first of these screenings focuses on Kong’s face as it confronts an approaching train, a sight that terrifies the train’s driver. Hoban has also often been concerned with the difficulty of fixing a visual image in the mind. In *The Medusa Frequency*, for example, Hoban construes the Orpheus myth in terms of the human mind’s inability to preserve an event or mental image (such as the loss of Eurydice); he terms the resulting gap ‘the indeterminacy of being’, a discontinuity in which an idea or person reappears while progressively becoming more vague. In this novel, for example, the central character associates spherical objects with recurring but unstable impressions of the head of Orpheus.⁶

In *The Second Mrs Kong*, however, images often originate in voice and imagination. Faces begin as imagined rather than seen. Despite their larger-than-life visual manifestations, Kong and Pearl are initially introduced to one another through word alone. Unable to see one another, they communicate at first through the mind of Vermeer, who has temporarily brought Pearl into the World of Shadows where Kong resides. This distance is maintained in the Internet dating scene (Act I scene 3), during which Kong mouths the familiar operatic trope of the voice as love object, whereby the characters fall in love with one another’s voices: ‘In these words I hear the voice of Beauty and I am afraid’ (18). Kong’s singing voice, which breathes life back into the Kong that we saw die at the end of the film, also allows the development of love requited (in the original film Kong’s love remained unrequited).

Hoban’s tendency to circle back to recurring themes such as the head of Orpheus in different works echoes Birtwistle’s habit of presenting the same musical objects from different perspectives. For Birtwistle this repetition often takes the form of verse/refrain schemes: string quartet movements and songs that function as ritornello to each other; or a chorus that is also a refrain.⁷ Like Hoban’s faces, recognisable objects reappear in Birtwistle’s music unexpectedly, ‘like digging things

⁵ Fay Wray’s gestures seem to draw self-consciously on an established, generic silent-film style, from her flirtations on deck to her wilting terror in the hands of Kong. As Mary Ann Doane has observed of silent cinema in general, ‘the absent voice re-emerges in gestures and the contortions of the face – it is spread over the body of the actor’; Doane, ‘The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space’, *Yale French Studies*, 60 (1980), 33–50, here 33.

⁶ In Hoban’s novel the head of Orpheus comments: ‘From the very first moment that beauty appears to us it is passing, passing, not to be held’; *The Medusa Frequency* (London, 1987, rpt. 2002), 68. Hoban’s association of image with idea is even parodied in the novel when its subject, a novelist, encounters an unusual man in an art gallery who comments: ‘I speak only in pictures. With me the image is everything, carrying within it as it does the proto-image, the after-image, and the anti-image. This is why here I have come [*sic*] to speak to the Vermeer girl and to hear what she will say to me’. (86).

⁷ See, for example, *Pulse Shadows*, in which, according to Birtwistle, ‘the string quartets and the songs . . . are both functioning as the ritornello to the other’; quoted in Ross Lorraine, ‘Territorial Rites 1’, *The Musical Times*, 138/1856 (October 1997), 4–8, here 8.

out of the ground'.⁸ He has described the fugue at the end of *Pulse Shadows*, for example, as 'a bit like a found object . . . I don't know whether it's a fugue or not'.⁹ In other words, Hoban's concern with ideas and images in flux resonates with Birtwistle's compositional techniques. Highlighting this very point, Robert Adlington has suggested that 'Hoban's obsession with remembering and forgetting, and the "indeterminacy of being" that is endured by all ideas due to the vagaries of memory, surely finds a parallel in Birtwistle's sectional musical form'. According to Adlington, it is the music's 'structural ephemerality – the focus on moment-to-moment fantasy – that makes it so much in tune with post-modern scepticism about organic logic and forms, and correspondingly undemanding (in terms of specific obligations or expectations) on listeners'. He concludes that 'Birtwistle's music in *Mrs Kong* thus gives a very particular resonance to Vermeer's observation that Pearl's face is "like music, partly now and partly remembered"'.¹⁰

Birtwistle's images

There are several reasons why a libretto about the emotive power of images would have appealed to Birtwistle. Visual metaphors have long been his favoured medium for describing his music: at various moments Birtwistle has invoked landscapes and processions in relation to orchestral pieces, and he has made extensive use of instrumental choreography and other spatial devices in his ensemble works.¹¹ The composer's penchant for imagery is further reflected in his interest in the visual arts: witness his recent illustrated talk on Paul Klee's influence on his music, and interviews detailing his views on artists such as Piero della Francesca, Brueghel, Vermeer, Cézanne, Picasso, Klein, Bacon, Rothko, Barnett Newman and Pollock.¹²

⁸ Birtwistle on his settings of Celan's poetry, in 'A Conversation with Harrison Birtwistle', interview with Robert Adlington, *Aspects of British Music of the 1990s*, ed. Peter O'Hagan (Aldershot, 2003), 111–18, here 115.

⁹ Arnold Whittall describes it as 'an imaginary fugue' in his 'The Mechanisms of Lament: Harrison Birtwistle's *Pulse Shadows*', *Music and Letters*, 80 (1999), 86–102, here 97.

¹⁰ Robert Adlington, 'Harrison Birtwistle's Recent Music', *Tempo*, 196 (April 1996), 5.

¹¹ Choreography and spatial distribution of performers are used in *Verses for Ensembles* (1969), *Secret Theatre* (1984), *Ritual Fragment* (1990), *Panic* (1995) and *Theseus Game* (2003). The presentation of musical motifs in *The Triumph of Time* (1971) is compared by Birtwistle to Brueghel's etching of a procession of disconnected objects (see Michael Hall, *Harrison Birtwistle* [London, 1984], 175–6). Ideas stemming from studies by Erwin Panofsky and Günter Grass of Albrecht Dürer's engraving *Melancholia* inform the composer's programme note to *Melancholia I* (1976). In the programme note to *Silbury Air* (1976), Silbury Hill in Avebury, Wiltshire, is offered as a metaphor for musical processes (see Hall, 177). Geological strata are evoked in comparison to the musical layers in *Earth Dances* (1986). And *Exodus* '23-59-59' (1997) is said to consist of 'gateways' and 'windows', 'which are framed and self-contained glimpses, like a curtain opening for a moment and then closing again'; quoted in Ross Lorraine, 'Territorial Rites 2', *The Musical Times*, 138/1857 (November 1997), 12–16, here 16.

¹² Birtwistle originally delivered his illustrated Klee lecture, 'Ears & eyes', together with members of the London Sinfonietta, at the Hayward Gallery, London, on 7 and 8 March 2002. The talk, which was advertised as addressing the question 'Can there be a direct connection between painting and music?', was later repeated at the Lucerne Festival in 2003

These artists attract Birtwistle both for their use of subject matter ‘to express paint and painting, rather than the other way around’, and for what he describes as their ‘formality’.¹³ Although visual analogies may offer valuable insight into Birtwistle’s musical processes, and possibly into his music’s meanings, the two media remain separated by a wide gap. Most conscious of this rift is Birtwistle himself: fully aware of the differences between the creative processes in the two media, he has declared his envy of the immediate connection painters have with their final image.¹⁴

This awareness may stem from the fact that in the late 1960s Birtwistle began experimenting with treating a musical line or contour in ways somehow comparable to Klee’s concepts of ‘taking a line for a walk’ and guiding a viewer through the details of a picture (Birtwistle’s equivalent concept is ‘listening to a painting’).¹⁵ Around the same time Birtwistle sought to develop a musical analogy for organic processes visible in the natural world, influenced by the graphic models of plant and animal mutations in D’Arcy Thompson’s *On Growth and Form*, one of the composer’s favourite books.¹⁶ Birtwistle attempted to systematise his use of related contours in two sketchbooks, one of which, dated 2 April 1970, is titled ‘Modual Book. The Triumph of Time’. Contour tables in this sketchbook were used to generate melodic lines for at least one piece that he began sketching that year.¹⁷

An early attempt at directing musical line through the agency of contour is *Nomos*, composed in 1967–8. In this work an expanding seven-note shape is played by an amplified wind quartet, repeated fourteen times, leading to the climax of the piece when the most expansive form of the shape is reached (Ex. 1).¹⁸ However, as Adlington has observed, this compositional idea results in a problematic musical image, since the twofold possibility of conceptualising such a melody – either as an abstract phenomenon that may, potentially, be visualised, or as a

footnote continued from previous page

under the new title ‘Eyes to Hear, Ears to See’. Birtwistle’s interest in Klee (discussed in Hall, *Harrison Birtwistle*) is most directly expressed in *Carmen Arcadiae Mechanicae Perpetuum* (1978), which is a response to Klee’s *Twittering Machine*. For his thoughts on Klee and other painters, see Lorraine, ‘Territorial Rites 1’ and ‘Territorial Rites 2’.

¹³ Lorraine, ‘Territorial Rites 1’, 8.

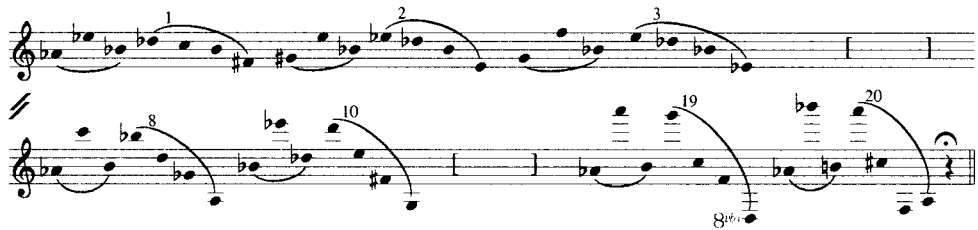
¹⁴ ‘I’m more envious of that than anything’. He has also commented: ‘There’s no equivalent of throwing paint in music, is there?’; Lorraine, 7, 4.

¹⁵ Lorraine, 4. This idea is articulated in several orchestral works that the composer has compared to landscapes and processions. As Jonathan Cross has remarked, in such works the listener may be equated ‘with the spectator/composer: we listen passively as the procession passes in front of us’; *Birtwistle: Man, Mind, Music* (London, 2000), 213.

¹⁶ D’Arcy Wentworth Thompson, *On Growth and Form*, abr. and ed. John Tyler Bonner (Cambridge, 1997). Michael Hall discusses the relevance of D’Arcy Thompson’s book to Birtwistle’s instrumental piece *Medusa* (1969) (*Harrison Birtwistle*, 50–1).

¹⁷ Three-, four- and five-note contours were extracted from the ‘Modual Book’ for use in *Nenia: The Death of Orpheus* (1970). These contours indicate degrees of rise and fall rather than specific interval sizes or pitches. Ideas for *The Triumph of Time* (1970–72), *Prologue* (1971) and *An Imaginary Landscape* (1971) also appear in the two sketchbooks.

¹⁸ For a more comprehensive account of this process and a discussion of the sketchbooks, see my doctoral dissertation ‘An Analysis and Sketch Study of the Early Instrumental Music of Sir Harrison Birtwistle (c. 1957–77)’, 2 vols. (University of Oxford, 2000). See also David Beard, ‘The Endless Parade: Competing Narratives in Recent Birtwistle Studies’, *Music Analysis*, 23 (2004), 89–127.



Ex. 1: Birtwistle, *Nomos* (1967–8), extracts from an expanding seven-note shape played by amplified flute, clarinet, horn and bassoon, bars 35–96 (phrasing added).

dramatic agent – creates a perceptual tension as each vies for supremacy, one option most plausible at one moment, the other at the next, ‘depending on the form that the melody takes’.¹⁹

Mediation and identification

In the light of these compositional dilemmas and of an examination of Birtwistle’s sketches for the opera, *The Second Mrs Kong* emerges both as a retrospective of the composer’s earlier preoccupations and as a dramatisation of his desire to ‘mediate’ visual images through musical ideas. Closely related to the opera’s interest in mediation is the mechanism of identification, for it is through identifying with images of themselves, and of one another, that Pearl and Kong hope to attain true selfhood. The question is how this desire for mediation/identification manifests itself in the opera, and whether Birtwistle’s interest in mediating images through musical ideas betrays an identification of his own, with Hoban’s text.

The concept of identification is central to psychoanalytical theory. Lacan’s notion of the mirror stage, the moment when a child first catches sight of its reflection, which initiates an early phase of ego construction, is particularly useful in understanding the character of Pearl, as is Kaja Silverman’s re-reading of Freud’s castration model in light of Kristeva’s thoughts on the mother–child relationship.²⁰ Silverman observes that ‘not only is her [the mother’s] face the visual mirror in which the child first sees itself, but her voice is the acoustic mirror in which it first hears itself’.²¹ Extending the idea of a mirror stage, Lacan and Christian Metz have articulated a distinction between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary cinematic identification’. Primary identification describes the experience of spectators who desire to locate themselves in the (cinematic) images they perceive, while the less direct, less narcissistic action of secondary identification draws in fantasy and metaphor in order for a spectator to occupy an alternative subject position, rather than unconsciously and seamlessly seeing themselves reflected in an image.²²

¹⁹ Robert Adlington, *The Music of Harrison Birtwistle* (Cambridge, 2000), 158.

²⁰ See Jacques Lacan, ‘The Mirror Stage’, in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1977).

²¹ Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1988), 150.

²² Christian Metz, ‘The Imaginary Signifier’, *Screen*, 16/2 (Summer 1975), 14–76, here 58.

Throughout *The Second Mrs Kong*, Hoban and Birtwistle show their principal characters identifying with various pictorial and cinematic images in order to dramatise the distinction between these images and the often quite abstract ideas associated with them. Identification is both channelled and challenged through various media, including a mirror, the Internet, video, film, television and telephone. Crucially, Kong’s preoccupation with searching for the idea behind his image, and the attendant oscillation between self and other, mirrors the relationship between text and music in the opera, which has been described as ‘intermittent’ rather than ‘coherent’.²³ What for some critics seemed to be a lack of fit between music and stage action could instead be seen in terms of these psychoanalytic modes of identification. Where a traditional correspondence between music and drama might be considered as equivalent to Lacan’s primary narcissism, Birtwistle and Hoban forge a different kind of relationship between music and libretto, more akin to secondary identification.

Interpreting Pearl

In the *King Kong* film the fictional film-maker Carl Denham’s implicitly colonialist ambition is to teach Kong to fear. He achieves this goal by presenting Kong with an image of perfect beauty, the face of Ann Darrow, a sight that both sparks Kong’s desire and leads to his terrifying downfall. In the opera Pearl replaces Darrow – a choice influenced by the fact that Hoban sees in her eyes ‘the terror of Creation’.²⁴ To Hoban the image of Pearl symbolises the transience of beauty. In Act I scene 2, when Pearl models in Vermeer’s studio, Vermeer instructs Pearl to look into a mirror in order to retain her pose. The Mirror, which informs Pearl that she will meet Kong in the future, sings with two voices, an on-stage soprano and an off-stage, pre-recorded tape of the same singer (its Echo). This acoustical device (most likely Birtwistle’s idea) conveys Pearl’s perception of her own image. It also realises musically and theatrically the fragmentation of Pearl’s identity, dispersed among the seventeenth century, the present moment, and the future – what Hoban refers to as ‘the discontinuity of image’.²⁵

The moment when Pearl views her own image in the Mirror bears some of the features of both Lacan’s and Metz’s primary identification. But, crucially, it is through the Mirror that Pearl also first hears the voice of Kong. This invokes Julia

²³ Adlington, *The Music of Harrison Birtwistle*, 36. Adlington’s criticisms are directed specifically at the use of ‘dramatic crescendo’ or ‘apprehensive pause’ to mark ‘watershed moments in the plot’, while ‘between these moments the music goes its separate way, repeatedly ignoring the slapstick paciness of the action on stage in favour of an intense, brooding lyricism’. However, towards the end of this discussion, he concludes that ‘the consistent complication of representation in Birtwistle’s theatres may have the effect not of a retreat from reality but of enforcing a renewed engagement with it’ (37).

²⁴ Hoban, ‘Kong and the Vermeer Girl’, introductory note to the libretto of *The Second Mrs Kong*, n.p. [v].

²⁵ Hoban, [v]. For a discussion of the processes through which an image both invites and constructs a viewer’s interpretation of its content, see Peter Wagner, *Reading Iconotexts: From Swift to the French Revolution* (London, 1995).

Kristeva's suggestion that the 'ideal identification with the symbolic upheld by the Other . . . activates speech more than image. Doesn't the signifying voice, in the final analysis, shape the visible, hence fantasy?'²⁶ Later in Act I scene 2 the iconic image of Pearl from Vermeer's painting is made visible to the audience. In the original production (Glyndebourne, October 1994) replicating images of Pearl's face were projected on a large screen at the rear of the stage as the chorus sang 'Pearl, Pearl, the Vermeer girl, hundreds of thousands of beautiful Pearls', accompanied by densely layered textures in the orchestra. This moment not only exposed the commodification and reification of Vermeer's painting, it also resonated with Jean Baudrillard's description of television images occupying 'gigantic spaces of circulation, ventilation and ephemeral connections'.²⁷ The visual information overload at this moment in the opera resembled Baudrillard's obscene and negative 'ecstasy of communication'; but, more importantly, it illustrated his predicted loss of the image, in which 'the total instantaneity of things' precludes reflection and metaphor.²⁸

Interpreting Kong

If the preclusion of reflection and metaphor is symbolised in the opera at this moment by Pearl, elsewhere it is the character of Kong who is linked with the inert media image and the neutralisation of self. Such, at least, is the implication of Kong's nemesis, 'D.O.K' (Death of Kong), when he sings: 'The idea of Kong is that he's dead' (30). Even Hoban states that Kong's face symbolises the desire for what cannot be. However, the operatic Kong, by virtue of his singing voice and operatic status, resists these negative forces, in particular the sense that his cinematic form, like Baudrillard's contemporary subject, 'can no longer produce the limits of his own being, can no longer play nor stage himself, can no longer produce himself as a mirror. He is now only a pure screen, a switching center for all the networks of influence.'²⁹ Unlike his cinematic ape counterpart, the operatic Kong is a modern, Western subject, troubled with existential questions.³⁰ At times, however, an audible, primitive Other emerges in the form of Kong's notated, pre-linguistic cries: 'Ah-nah-ee-ay-ou-ay-ou-ay-ou-ay-ou'. These are initially heard when Kong first

²⁶ Julia Kristeva, 'Freud and Love: Treatment and its Discontents', *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York, 1986), 253, cited in Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, 119.

²⁷ Jean Baudrillard, 'The Ecstasy of Communication', trans. John Johnston, in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (New York, 1998), 145–54, here 150.

²⁸ Baudrillard, 150 and 149 respectively, where he also remarks: 'What used to be lived out on earth as metaphor, as mental or metaphorical scene, is henceforth projected into reality, without any metaphor at all . . . the instantaneity of communication has miniaturized our exchanges into a succession of instants' (147–8, 149).

²⁹ Baudrillard, 153.

³⁰ In the original production, Kong was sung by the tenor Philip Langridge in a white T-shirt and the lower half of a gorilla costume.

appears, storming round the stage, banging on doors.³¹ His operatic quest to realise his desires for love and selfhood mirrors the one in the film and occasionally demands the suspension of his rationalising tendencies (‘I will not listen’ he sings at the start of Act II when he meets the Four Temptations). Although the original film’s colonialist perspective is not altogether lost, the modern operatic Kong does detect the lie in his former manifestation when, in Act I, he sings: ‘Sometimes I dream . . . a jungle painted all on glass’ (14). Furthermore, Kong’s opening dialogue with Inanna (a failed beauty queen) reveals a certain resignation to his destiny as nothing more than ‘an idea’. In order to comprehend what that idea is, Kong must engage with his character in the film, hence those moments in the opera when he views himself on screen.³² On the first such occasion (Act I scene 2) Kong fails to recognise anything of himself in the image on screen. As he sits in the corner of the stage viewing a projection of the 1933 film that has just been delivered to him, he comments: ‘I’m not the giant head, the giant hand, the little puppet moving on the screen – there never *was* a giant ape!’ (14).³³

This particular idea of image reception, turning the subject into a spectator of itself in order to reveal what Therese Davis terms ‘the instability of the face as a representation of the self’, resonates with Martin Scorsese’s film *Taxi Driver* (1976).³⁴ Birtwistle has alluded to Bernard Hermann’s soundtrack, and in particular its melancholic, bluesy saxophone, in connection with *The Second Mrs Kong*, but the film’s narrative, and especially its central character, Travis Bickle, may also have influenced the opera’s conception.³⁵ In one of *Taxi Driver*’s most important scenes, Bickle (Robert De Niro) stares into a mirror where he is faced by an imagined Other who demands: ‘You talkin’ to me?’ This defining image again illustrates Lacan’s and Metz’s secondary identification: fantasy and metaphor are required in order for a spectator to occupy an alternative subject position to his or her own, creating a sense of disruption, since a subject will inevitably flick back and forth between self and other. In *Taxi Driver* this effect is further enhanced by the New York setting, since New York is often constructed as ‘the ultimate city of alienation and disconnection, the definitive nighttown [*sic*], a place that, however much a dark reflection of the real city, is even more the external projection of one man’s interior struggles’.³⁶ Something similar is echoed in Act II scene 3 of the opera, when Kong

³¹ In a revision of Act II scene 1, Kong’s cry is also given to Orpheus when his head is removed by the Four Temptations.

³² Similarly, concerning the function of the film interlude in Berg’s *Lulu*, in which Lulu is shown in prison, Silvio José Dos Santos has observed that ‘Lulu *has to see* her reflected image to regain her identity’; ‘Ascription of Identity: The *Bild* Motif and the Character of Lulu’, *Journal of Musicology*, 21 (2004), 267–308, here 295.

³³ As this line indicates, Kong is represented in the film by more than just a puppet: there is a robotic face for close ups (which is noticeably different from the face of the puppet), and a robotic hand and foot.

³⁴ Therese Davis, *The Face on the Screen: Death, Recognition and Spectatorship* (Bristol, 2004), 2.

³⁵ Birtwistle discussed his interest in Hermann’s soundtrack for *Taxi Driver* during the BBC Study Day on *The Second Mrs Kong* already mentioned. A bluesy style is also required of the saxophone that accompanies Madame Lena’s attempted seduction of Kong in Act II scene 2, while in scene 3 the same instruction applies to Inanna’s vocal line.

³⁶ James Sanders, *Celluloid Skyline* (New York, 2001), 395.

arrives in a hybrid city, part London, part New York. However, whereas Bickle desires the altered image of himself because it will bring him the attention he seeks, Kong's cinematic image precedes the operatic character and is not something he desires to be.³⁷ Kong struggles to identify with his image on screen; when he does, it is, in a Platonic sense, less with his image and more with the idea behind it.

When Kong's opponent Death of Kong enters the World of the Living, in Act II, he forces Kong to witness his dying moment on screen. Kong's experience of viewing himself on screen centres on a (mis)-recognition of himself as distinct and distanced from the image he sees.³⁸ Such a response seems appropriate, since this is a moment of public as well as private memory that has a specific historical and cultural context. Culturally, this moment reworks the myth of Orpheus returning to the Underworld to bring back Eurydice – a subject that is frequently revisited in Birtwistle's music, most obviously in *Nenia: The Death of Orpheus* (1970), *The Mask of Orpheus* (1983) and *26 Orpheus Elegies* (2003) (settings of Rilke's *Orpheus Sonnets*). An indication of the historical context is given in Hoban's notes to the libretto, where he comments: 'When I think of Kong it's 1933 that I remember: Ethel Waters singing 'Stormy Weather' on the radio and jobless men at our back door offering to do any chores for a meal'.³⁹ But this moment also resonates with contemporary depictions of death in the media, what Davis has called 'the generalization of death that occurs in the image-cultures of contemporary media'.⁴⁰ In this context, the scene establishes an important dialogue between the vocal (and critical) impulse evident in Kong who is particular to the opera, and the universal representation of the mythical, iconic Kong in the film. This reflexive relationship between film and opera may invoke Adorno's interpretation of mimesis. As Max Paddison points out, Adorno views mimesis as a mediated process in which 'The "image" is given its power to speak . . . through its articulation and organization within the form and structure of the work'. At the same time, the musical idea (what Adorno refers to as the 'sign') 'aspires . . . towards conceptual thought but, in failing, becomes itself an expressive image of communication'.⁴¹ Bearing this process in mind, an analysis of existing sketch material for *The Second Mrs Kong* may cast revealing light on the mediation of Kong's cinematic image through Birtwistle's music.

³⁷ The parallels with the character of Kong further extend to Travis's description of himself as 'God's lonely man' (compare Kong's 'lost and lonely child of all the world') and his implacable sense of destiny: 'My whole life is pointed in one direction. I see that now. There never has been any choice for me'; cited in David I. Grossvogel, *Scenes in the City: Film Visions of Manhattan Before 9/11* (New York, 2003), 81.

³⁸ As Kaja Silverman notes, 'even an image which seems self-evidently part of the individual it depicts – which seems nothing more than his or her reflection or photographic imprint – can be claimed by that individual only through identification. And identification, as the writer of the *Écrits* [Lacan] cautions us, inevitably turns upon misrecognition'; Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, 213.

³⁹ Hoban, 'Kong and the Vermeer Girl', [iv].

⁴⁰ Davis, *The Face on the Screen*, 5.

⁴¹ Max Paddison, *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music* (Cambridge, 1997), 114; the references are to Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Christian Lenhardt (London, 1984), 164.

Kong's identification with Pearl

Hoban and Birtwistle depict Kong and Pearl not only through identifications with their own media images; the two principals also aspire to selfhood by identifying with one another. One of the ways Kong attempts to forge a self is through his relationship with Pearl's portrait. When Kong first sees her face, it is in the form of a photographic image of Vermeer's painting sent to him over the Internet (at rehearsal figure 136 in the score); in the first production this appeared to the audience on a giant computer screen.⁴² Hoban's stage directions suggest that the music 'registers the impact of the photo on Kong' (18), but the music seems to create a more general sense of suspense and perhaps arousal, signalled by densely saturated textures in the upper register. Appropriately, although somewhat disturbingly, this musical gesture can be interpreted as pointing to both Kong's and the audience's engagement in an act of fetishistic scopophilia. When the picture fades, the music seems to suggest Kong's feelings: a languid alto saxophone solo with Baroque-like sighing figures unfolds across sustained accordion chords while Kong asks: 'What am I, that you should think of me? What can I be to you?' (18).

While this music presents Kong's subject position and encourages our identification with him using conventional operatic and cinematic techniques, it also suggests that Kong's doubts about his identity are associated with his efforts to identify with Pearl. In his working copy of the libretto, Birtwistle annotated Kong's question with the words 'and starts', perhaps suggesting that he intended to initiate a musical process of some kind at this moment.⁴³ What 'starts' in the music is a fast-moving demi-semiquaver pulse, first established in the violas at reh. 139, spreading to the upper strings and woodwind and reaching a climax at reh. 143–4, where the declarations of love begin. Although it is unclear precisely what this new musical texture is intended to signify, it functions as musical underscore to the image of Pearl that must be lingering in Kong's mind. As a kind of signifier without a signified, the underscore may be connected to Kong's memory of Pearl's portrait, seemingly implying that the meaning of her image for Kong is, in Barthes's terms, obtuse rather than obvious.⁴⁴

While the aspects of Kong's struggle I have outlined so far reflect relatively conventional modes of musical representation, including bluesy saxophone and musical underscore, elsewhere the opera develops more complex representational models. Such frameworks emerge when Birtwistle seems to engage directly with Hoban's ideas. In order to examine these models and their links with the librettist's

⁴² All references are to the full score published by Universal Edition (London, 1994), pl.n. UE 16549.

⁴³ Microfilm 0537-0338, dated 14 May 1993. The sketches and drafts for both the text and the music of *The Second Mrs Kong* are housed in the Birtwistle Sammlung at the Paul Sacher Foundation, Basle, Switzerland. Although I have examined all the sketches directly, specific references in this article relate to the copy stored on microfilm, also in the Birtwistle Sammlung in Basle.

⁴⁴ The concepts of 'obvious' and 'obtuse' images ('obtuse' being defined by the presence of a supplement that has no clear meaning), are derived from Roland Barthes, 'The Third Meaning', in his *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1985), 41–62.

aesthetics in some detail, I will focus on three specific moments in the opera. The first is set in what Hoban terms a ‘place of memory’, and it amounts to what can be called a ‘synchronic image’. Here Birtwistle responds to Hoban’s idea, discussed earlier, that Pearl’s image is ‘partly now and partly remembered’.

The synchronic image: ‘The place of memory’

VERMEER: In her face I see time’s ancient shadow reaching forward, reaching back (10).

It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been [*das Gewesene*] comes together in a flash with the now [*das Jetzt*] to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural [*bildlich*].⁴⁵

The scene in *The Second Mrs Kong* that most obviously suggests an image that is ‘partly now and partly remembered’ is Act I scene 2, in which the ‘place of memory’ is constructed. This is a private, inner space, represented on stage by a transparent cube, where Vermeer re-lives the moment when he painted Pearl.⁴⁶ Vermeer’s interiority is constructed by these visual cues, and also by the music.

One of the ways in which Birtwistle translates Hoban’s idea of an image floating between temporal moments into sound is by engaging with conventional operatic means of expressing the inner self, specifically a lamenting gesture voiced by instruments with human-sounding timbres, a device favoured by Verdi. Referring to it as a form of ‘weeping interior voice’, Melina Esse has observed that in Verdi’s operas ‘these “voices” are typically not granted extended lyrical melodies; rather, they obsessively harp on a falling semitone, imitating the sound of a body racked with sobs’.⁴⁷ In *The Second Mrs Kong* the sighing gesture is melancholic and gently resigned, and it appears as a rising motif, C – D flat, first heard in Vermeer’s line ‘Pearl. Such a simple name’ (Ex. 2). Following a unison *c'* in the violins, when Vermeer describes his new model as ‘a pearl’ (reh. 67), the motif re-emerges as a series of drawn-out gestures, in suitable low- to middle-register instruments, passing from bassoon to tenor saxophone, clarinet and, finally, the cellos.⁴⁸ In the sketches the motif can be traced back to the moments when Pearl first appears (reh. 60) – the first violins move from a *c''' – d'''* dyad to *d flat''' – e flat'''* (these dyads are circled and ‘Pearl Vermeer’ written above them)⁴⁹ – and when Vermeer declares his name to Pearl (reh. 63), his vocal part emphasising *d flat* and *d'*. Further suggestions

⁴⁵ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), 463.

⁴⁶ This moment is anticipated in the World of Shadows, where Anubis warns Vermeer that ‘no matter how many times you remember, it always ends the same’, while Inanna suggests that ‘this time it’s going to be different, I can feel it’ (4, 9).

⁴⁷ Melina Esse, ‘“Chi piange, qual forza m’arresta?” Verdi’s Interior Voices’, *this journal*, 14 (2002), 59–78, here 60.

⁴⁸ The motif also appears later in Vermeer’s vocal part, from reh. 77–6, when he addresses Pearl: ‘Look into the mirror [*c'*] it will help [*d flat'*] you hold the pose [*c'*].’

⁴⁹ Microfilm 0536-0576.

The image displays a musical score for two vocal parts and an orchestral arrangement. The top section features Pearl and Vermeer's vocal lines. Pearl's part begins at measure 66 with a tempo of approximately 63 and a 3/8 time signature. Vermeer's part follows, with lyrics: "what is your name, please? Pearl. Such a sim-ple name. But a". The bottom section shows an orchestral arrangement for Clarinet B, Tenor Saxophone, Bassoon 2, Violins 1,2,3,4,5,6, Violins 7,8,9,10,11,12, Violins 13,14,15,16, and Violoncellos 1,2,3,4. The orchestral parts include dynamic markings such as *ppp*, *p*, *mp*, and *pp*, and performance instructions like "pont" and "ponte".

Ex. 2: Birtwistle, *The Second Mrs Kong*, Act I, reh. 66–67⁷, inverted sighing gesture (C – D flat).

of the motif's significance and possible meaning are given by its reappearance when the Mirror informs Pearl and Kong that they must remain apart forever (Act II, reh. 98). At this moment, a *C* pedal in the accordion, double basses and contra bassoon underpins piccolo and first violin parts that continually return to *d*^{'''} and *d flat*^{'''}, while the Mirror's sustained notes on the second syllable of 'ever' hover *in medias res*, implying the longed-for mediation that the sighing idea represents (Ex. 3).⁵⁰

In her reading of Verdi's representation of interiority, Esse also examines the physical gestures that singers have used to the inner states of female characters, concluding that 'the surface gestures of melodrama lie at the core of the Verdian

⁵⁰ These pitch relations are explored further in the opera's companion instrumental piece, *The Cry of Anubis* (1994), where the pairing of pitches D and E is given an assertive role (see the timpani and tuba solos in bar 214; these pitches are also the last in the piece), while the darker, more melancholy quality of the chromatic C – D flat motif is elaborated in *The Shadow of Night* (2001), where it is transposed to B flat – B natural – B flat, which invokes the sighing formula at the opening of Dowland's 'In Darkness Let Me Dwell'.

Piccolo 1 *p* *poco a poco molto cresc.* *(al fine)*
 Contrabassoon *p*
 Accordion *p* *mf*
 Mirror *mf* *f*
 Echo *mf* *f*
 Violas *mf* *f*
 Double bass 1 + 2 *p* *mf*

-selves to-ge-ther and a-part for e-ver.
 (ev-)er

98

Ex. 3: Act II, reh. 98⁻³-98⁺³, Mirror: 'See in my silver-shadowed waters yourselves together and apart for ever'.

interior’.⁵¹ Hoban’s libretto instead uses Vermeer’s hesitant speech as a means of suggesting an appropriate mode of performance (for example: ‘I forgot what I was going to say. (*pause*) Pearl?’). Both Vermeer’s identification with Pearl’s image and his idea of her as ‘partly now, partly remembered’ are characterised by mental and physical hesitancy – such hesitancy has also traditionally been read in Vermeer’s painting, especially in Pearl’s smile. This ambiguous aspect of Pearl’s image proves troubling both to the operatic Vermeer, who sings ‘On her face, I see a question’, and to the fictional author in Hoban’s *The Medusa Frequency*, who continually probes the images of Pearl in his study for meaning, finding her face ‘full of questioning and uncertainty’.⁵²

Hoban’s ideas clearly influenced Birtwistle in his setting of the scene, not least in his deployment of the sighing motif, which composes out the hesitations of Hoban’s dialogue. The use of gongs (from reh. 67–8) may also symbolise the instability of memory, via the acoustical impermanence of the timbre.⁵³ While both the sighing motif and the gongs reflect Vermeer’s thoughts and physical condition, a series of descending woodwind scales (reh. 72) depart from the scene depicted on stage, anticipating instead Kong’s fall as it will appear to Pearl when she views it on screen (reh. 117) (Ex. 4), while the scene as a whole is punctuated by anguished alto and tenor saxophone gestures that anticipate the alto saxophone’s evocation of Kong’s yearnings on seeing Pearl’s face (from reh. 138).⁵⁴ In response to Hoban’s idea, therefore, Birtwistle’s music consciously mixes elements that symbolise past, present and future.

A closer look at these musical ideas as they first appear in the sketches, however, suggests that they are in fact different facets of an underlying compositional principle, namely the continual permutation of a small number of related shapes. Sketches for the horns, tubas, lower strings and accordion during this scene indicate that their chords are based on two primary types: either $\langle [2-][2-][3+] \rangle$ or $\langle [2-][2-][2-] \rangle$.⁵⁵ The resulting pitch sets often include C and D, suggesting a link to the sighing motif. In fact, the cellos and double basses that accompany Vermeer’s line ‘In her face I see time’s ancient shadow’ stem from reorderings of two chromatic four-note sets, which are closely associated with the sighing motif:

⁵¹ Esse, ‘Verdi’s Interior Voices’, 76. Esse’s reading focuses on the character of Amelia in *Un ballo in maschera*, and specifically on the staging of her Act II aria.

⁵² Hoban’s fictional author finds it ‘impossible to know what her look might have been a response to . . . her face full of questioning and uncertainty. Was there also fear? Fear of what? What had she to fear from him?’; Hoban, *The Medusa Frequency*, 14.

⁵³ Gongs are associated with the idea of impermanence at other moments in the opera, most notably when Kong kills Death of Kong (Act II, reh. 71⁺¹).

⁵⁴ The association of the falling scales both with the past and with the idea of things ‘that cannot be’ is first established when, in Act I scene 1, Anubis sings to the dead: ‘Have I not fed upon the carrion of your longings and your crazy dreams of love that cannot be?’ (1).

⁵⁵ Microfilm 0536-0587. The pitches are arranged in linear order across two staves, seven sets on each staff. The numbers in square brackets refer to interval classes: 2—indicates an interval of class 2 or less, whereas 3+ refers to an interval of class 3 or more. Within the opening \langle and closing \rangle signs, interval classes are listed in the order they appear in the sketches, read from top to bottom in vertical collections and from left to right in linear configurations.

The musical score is divided into two systems. The first system includes staves for Vibraphone, Cymbalom, and Violins 1-8. The Vibraphone part begins with a triplet of eighth notes and continues with a descending scale. The Cymbalom part has a dynamic marking of *pp* and also features a triplet. The Violin parts are marked with *p:ppp* and *ppp*. The second system continues the same instrumentation. The Vibraphone part starts with a dynamic marking of *mp*. The Cymbalom part has a dynamic marking of *pp*. The Violin parts continue with *p:ppp* and *ppp* markings. The score concludes with a final dynamic marking of *p:ppp* in the bottom staff.

Ex. 4: Act I, reh. 72⁺¹-72⁺⁹, falling scales anticipating Kong's fall as it eventually appears to Pearl.

The musical score for Ex. 4 consists of nine staves. The top two staves are for Vibraphone and Cymbalom, and the bottom seven are for Violins (numbered 1-8). The Vibraphone part begins with a triplet of eighth notes (G4, F#4, E4) and continues with a descending scale of eighth notes. The Cymbalom part plays a similar triplet and descending scale. The Violin parts (1-8) all play a descending scale of eighth notes, with some parts including triplet markings. Dynamic markings include *mp* for the Vibraphone and *p:ppp* for the strings. The key signature has one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 8/8.

Ex. 4: *Continued.*

C, C sharp, D, D sharp, and C sharp, D, D sharp, E (both $\langle [2-][2-][2-] \rangle$ therefore). The falling scales linked to Kong's death (in the strings, accordion, vibraphone and cymbalom, from reh. 72) unfold eight-note modes, each comprising two four-note sets separated by an interval of 5 or 7.⁵⁶ Commonly occurring shapes here are $\langle [2-][2-][2-] \rangle$ and $\langle [2-][3+][2-] \rangle$. This suggests a possible intertextual reference to Max Steiner's soundtrack for the original 1933 film, in which the principal leitmotif consists of three descending chromatic notes. (Although used in varied ways throughout the film, the motif is ultimately associated with Kong's fall and death, at which point it is extended to seven descending notes.) While it is possible to imagine an association between the related shapes and Vermeer's desire for Pearl (since they invoke Steiner's musical interpretation of Kong's desire for Ann Darrow), the scene is more important for the way it conveys the idea of impermanence. This notion, triggered by Pearl's image, finds an apposite metaphor in Birtwistle's mediation of abstract musical ideas (the use of musical shapes) through the representational needs of the scene, expressed by the sighing motif, falling scales, saxophones and gongs.

⁵⁶ Microfilm 0536-0592.

The diachronic image: Birtwistle's film music

While the scene in the 'place of memory' explores synchronicity, expressed through the layering of ideas representative of past, present and future, elsewhere images are represented as unfolding in real time. Given the suggestion of more literal temporal unfolding, I have defined this model as a 'diachronic image'. The origin for this idea is what Hoban describes as 'the moment under the moment', which is connected to a separation between the artificially continuous experience of 'reality' and the discontinuous thoughts and memories that come and go beneath this experience. Hoban uses film as a metaphor to illustrate this idea:

The flickering of a film interrupts the intolerable continuity of apparent world; subliminally it gives us those in-between spaces of black that we crave. The eye is hungry for this; eagerly it collaborates with the unwinding strip of celluloid that shows it twenty-four pictures per second, making real by an act of retinal retention the here-and-gone, the continual disappearing in which the lovers kiss, the shots are fired, the horses gallop . . .⁵⁷

Birtwistle responds to Hoban's ideas during a short passage of film music composed to accompany the climactic scene from the film: Kong on top of the Empire State Building being shot at by airplanes, laying Ann Darrow to rest on a ledge before falling to his death. This scene is screened in Act II scene 2, as *Death of Kong* seeks to reinforce Kong's demise. As late as January 1994 (the libretto was finalised in February) the intention was not to have music accompany the film. In a working copy of the libretto we read: 'We see, by rear projection, silent footage from the 1933 film while *Death of Kong* does the roar of the airplanes and the chatter of the machine guns'.⁵⁸ By February this had become: 'We see Kong defying the airplanes, being shot down, and falling. All music and sfx [sound effects] will be in score. Footage possibly in slow motion for dramatic emphasis.'⁵⁹ The idea of showing the film in slow motion was ultimately abandoned, but both the decision to place all sound effects in the orchestral score and the idea of transforming the original clip into an example of silent film remained.⁶⁰

Having decided to compose his own 'soundtrack', Birtwistle did something that was, within the context of his compositional practice since the mid-1980s, utterly uncharacteristic: he sketched a scenario for the entire section (Fig. 1). Twenty-eight pitch events are written along two staves. Usually each event comprises a single

⁵⁷ Hoban, *The Medusa Frequency*, 87. By extension, in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' Walter Benjamin observed that, although the cinematic image 'cannot be arrested', 'the spectator's process of association in view of these images is indeed interrupted by their constant, sudden change'. For Benjamin, this constituted 'the shock effect of the film', an effect that would both overturn habitual modes of viewing and reveal the alienating conditions of modernity to the masses; *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (London, 1992), 231.

⁵⁸ Working libretto, microfilm 0537-0367, dated 13 January 1994.

⁵⁹ Working libretto, microfilm 0537-0369, dated 4 February 1994.

⁶⁰ In the original 1933 film Steiner did not provide music from the arrival of the planes until the moment when it is obvious that Kong is seriously wounded, at which point the music accompanies his farewell to Ann Darrow. Otherwise, the scene is characterised by the eerie sound of the planes, the drone of their engines and crackle of machine gunfire.

four-note shape in one of the staves, but at times two shapes coincide (this is indicated by vertical lines). Along the upper staff the pitch material is placed in a high register, always above the top line, while pitches in the lower staff are written an octave below.⁶¹ The pitch material in the sketch does not relate closely to the version in the final score, suggesting that several undisclosed compositional stages significantly transformed the sketch into the film music. The first four-note set, on the top line of the sketch (A flat, D flat, D, G) is transformed at reh. 58 into a five-note set (C sharp, D, D sharp, F, G). The first set on the lower line of the sketch is marked 'Trp-hrns'. Although the boundary pitches here roughly correspond to those of the trumpets at reh. 59–60 (*g'* to *g''*), they do not relate to the pitch material or range of the horns. The comment at event 24, 'could be played by vla vlc', suggests that some pitches were realised in different octaves to those notated in the sketch. Judging by the location of this remark, it is likely that Birtwistle chose to end his 'film score' at this moment, with the boxed material cascading through lower register instruments as a representation of Kong's fall.

Birtwistle's 'film music' is characterised by a dense body of straining orchestral sound, as if attempting to hold an object high, keeping it in suspension. With the exception of the machine-gun imitations on woodblock (queued to synchronise with gunfire in the film), it displays only subtle shades of contrast; the dip and rise in the lower staff at events 10 and 11 of the sketch may relate to scales in the oboes and saxophones at reh. 59⁺⁵ of the completed score. Overall, the sense of diverging and coalescing shapes evident in the embryonic sketch is almost completely lost in its realisation, submerged under a dense orchestral fabric, rather like Hoban's image of twenty-four pictures per second merging into one. Birtwistle's interpretation of this film scene combines both literal and expressionistic elements, reflecting Kong's own description offered in Act I scene 2: 'The airplanes buzzed and stung, his blood ran out, his strength was gone' (18). A sense of straining to resist an inevitable fall is powerfully evoked.

On a different, less dramatically specific level, the music also seems to be reaching for something unattainable, almost as if the film and the opera were trying to come together as one. Kong's cries of defiance on the tower are a reminder of what Michal Grover-Friedlander has called 'the attraction of cinema to opera': it is as if Kong is breaking into song.⁶² Perhaps paradoxically, the obviously representational elements in the orchestra are merged with a sense of the music pursuing its own direction, a disposition that more than hints at Adorno and Eisler's view that the relationship of music and image should not be organised around similarity but should instead embody 'question and answer, affirmation and negation, appearance and essence', a dialectic 'dictated by the divergence of the media in question and the

⁶¹ In the lead-up to the arrival of the planes in the 1933 movie, Steiner's music is densely scored and contains perhaps the greatest concentration of ideas in the film as a whole, with prominent brass dissonances whose clustered shapes may well have inspired Birtwistle's original conception for his own soundtrack.

⁶² Michal Grover-Friedlander, *Vocal Apparitions: The Attraction of Cinema to Opera* (Princeton, 2005).

The image shows a handwritten musical score sketch on ten staves. The notation is dense and includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The score is divided into two main sections by a double bar line. The first section contains measures 1 through 17, with some measures circled. The second section contains measures 18 through 25, also with some circled measures. There are several annotations and markings throughout, including a large 'P' in the middle of the second section and some illegible handwritten text. The overall style is that of a working draft or sketch for a film score.

Fig. 1: Birtwistle, *The Second Mrs Kong*, sketch 0536-0862, sketch for the 'film sequence' of Kong's fall from the Empire State Building (Act II scene 2).

specific nature of each’.⁶³ The paradoxical quality of Birtwistle’s music is also indicative of the persistence of an ‘imaginary’ Kong (in the Lacanian sense) beyond his ‘symbolic’ depiction on the screen.

Lawrence Kramer has observed a similar divergence in mixed media in general:

The process of mixture involves an attempt by one medium, usually the imagetext, to think its other, and a response in which, however indirectly or implicitly, the other, usually music, thinks for itself. The musical remainder is often obscure or marginal, forgotten in the mutual reinforcement of each medium by the other, but it is always there, always capable of emerging as the most compelling, most revealing, most chastening or animating force in the mixture.⁶⁴

I would argue that something like what Kramer is describing characterises Birtwistle’s sketch for the film scene, which can be interpreted in two ways. One possible interpretative path takes us away from the sketch itself, concentrating on its significant transformation into the score. The second focuses on its existence as an autonomous, self-contained gesture. These two opposing possibilities constitute a dialectic through which to consider Birtwistle’s music for the film scene as a whole.

A likely explanation for Birtwistle’s desire to go beyond his original precepts is suggested by his interest in Klee’s *Notebooks*, specifically the transformations from sketch to final artwork, in which intuitive ideas are progressively systematised (what Birtwistle has referred to as ‘composed intuition’).⁶⁵ From the mid-1980s on, Birtwistle has also often reflected on how ‘decisions about where to go derive from the context of where you are at any moment’.⁶⁶ In an interview with Michael Hall in 1983 Birtwistle elaborated on this thought, providing an indication of what the concept ‘idea’ means to him and how to go beyond it:

You can create a formal position before the event, an elaborate schemata, and that you can call your idea. That’s what you’re trying to express. You have a duty to that schemata, a duty to that initial idea. But in the process of composition you make contexts which are not necessarily concerned with it. Other things are thrown up which have a life of their own and are just as important. You now have a duty to two things . . . one is concerned with the text, the other with the music.⁶⁷

In order to have a clearer understanding of what Birtwistle’s ‘initial idea’ might be, it is necessary to return to the sketch for the film clip.

⁶³ Theodor W. Adorno and Hanns Eisler, *Composing for the Films* (London, 1994), 70.

⁶⁴ Lawrence Kramer, ‘The Voice of Persephone: Musical Meaning and Mixed Media’, in *Musical Meaning: Toward a Critical History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2002), 173–93, here 187.

⁶⁵ Cited in Lorraine, ‘Territorial Rites 1’, 7.

⁶⁶ Cited in Lorraine, ‘Territorial Rites 2’, 16.

⁶⁷ Hall, *Harrison Birtwistle*, 145; the context is a discussion of the chamber opera *Yan Tan Tethera* (1983). Michael Hall later used the phrase ‘the sanctity of the context’ to describe this new approach; see Hall, ‘The Sanctity of the Context: Birtwistle’s Recent Music’, *The Musical Times*, 129/1740 (January 1988), 14–16.



Ex. 5: Sketch 0536-0867, type (a) shapes for the xylophone and cymbalom (Act II, reh. $61^{+2}-65^{-3}$).

Birtwistle's sketch reveals the conceptual presence of an unfolding process. The series of shapes in the sketch reflect interval rather than pitch choices. Each shape consists of three different intervals which sort shapes into three types:

- (a) $\langle [4+][3-][4+] \rangle$
- (b) $\langle [3-][4+][3-] \rangle$
- (c) $\langle [3-][3-][3-] \rangle$

The two strata (upper and lower staves) are both proximate and resistant to one another. Type (c) only appears on the lower staff, where the material is prone to cluster and knot, in contrast to the more open spacing of shapes on the upper staff. However, this distinction is undermined at various moments when two contrasting shapes are brought together, as distorted mirror reflections (see events 1, 5 and 15), while at 22 and 26-8 type (b) shapes coincide, with an exact mirroring of $\langle [2][5][2] \rangle$ at 27, and a near-exact pairing of $\langle [1][7][1] \rangle$ with $\langle [1][6][1] \rangle$ at 28.

This passage is unique, as a comparison with Birtwistle's obsessive use of four-note sets throughout the opera proves. Conceivably there are practical reasons for the employment of four-note shapes; this number of pitches fits conveniently into each hand of the accordion part (a part that lends a distinctive timbre to the opera's sound world, especially through its role as a kind of continuo instrument), and it may potentially be related to sub-groupings of the woodwind, brass and string sections. Nevertheless, an intriguing relationship can be established between the three notes of Max Steiner's primary leitmotif, which permeates his entire score for the 1933 *King Kong*, and the three intervals common to Birtwistle's shapes. Usually, one type of four-note shape is employed rather than two or three, as in the film sequence. For example, the xylophone and cymbalom chords from reh. 61^{+3} to 64, prior to the film music, are based on variations of the (a) shape (Ex. 5). Following the film sequence, the violin chords from reh. 73^{-1} to 74 are also based on the (a) type (Ex. 6; the lower six lines constitute the numbering system that governs the order in which the eight chords are eventually used).⁶⁸ An example of simultaneous variants of type (a) is given in Example 7, in which pitches are reordered and transposed into different octaves, here used to form a contrapuntal cantabile woodwind texture accompanying Kong's line: 'Sometimes I dream the misty mountains of an island that I've never seen, sometimes a jungle painted all on glass'.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Elsewhere in the opera, four-note sets formed from three large intervals are commonly used, for example to generate the xylophone, vibraphone, marimba and cymbalom material from reh. 122 to 126.

⁶⁹ In the score, this texture is doubled by crotales, glockenspiel, vibraphone and cymbalom.

7	3	1	5	2	6	4	8
5	7	3	1	6	2	8	6[4]
1	7	5	3	4	8	2	6
5	1	7	3	2	6	4	8
1	7	3	5	4	8	6	2
7	1	5	3	6	2	8	4

Ex. 6: Sketch 0536-0883, type (a) shapes for the first violins and numbering determining the order of their use (Act II, reh. 73⁻¹-74).

Re-ordered to form:

Ex. 7: Sketch 0536-0629, type (a) shapes in two layers used to generate woodwind, crotales, glockenspiel and marimba counterpoint (Act I, reh. 99-101⁺³).

In general, the application of these shapes across the work is characterised by a certain static quality resulting from the desire to explore varied divisions of a particular interval space. While aspects of this practice may be traced back to the late 1970s, notably to *Silbury Air* (1977), the tendency earlier had been either to vary a generic chord or to apply interval series (such as 5, 6, 7) above or below a particular line of pre-determined pitches. In *The Second Mrs Kong*, however, interval shapes generally do not revolve around such pivots, but are detached; where pivotal lines are used, they will invariably also have been generated by the permutation of four-note sets. Examples 8a and b illustrate this permutation in relation to the rather Berg-like string melody that accompanies Pearl’s line: ‘A Kong who never was, waiting in the shadow of the future’ (Act I, reh. 84-5). Furthermore, the evidence of the film sketch, as well as a similar outline for the fight between Swami Zumzum and Mr Dollorama (two incidental characters) in Act I, suggests a consciousness of shapes unfolding both within prescribed time frames and across a broader temporal span, in contrast to the more disconnected application of similar devices in *Silbury Air*. The sketch for the film scene might even be regarded, in an Adornian sense,

2 5 2 2 2 7 2 2 6 2 1 2 6 2 2 6 2 3 2 4 2 2 2 2 5 2 4 2 2 4 2 5 2 4 2

Re-ordered to form:

Ex. 8a: Sketch 0536-0605, type (b) shapes used to form a melodic line in the cellos and violas (Act I, reh. 84⁻¹-85⁺⁴).

Cantabile sostenuto

p *mp* *mf pp*

Ex. 8b: Act I, reh. 84⁻¹-85⁺⁴, vlc. (adapted from the reordering in Ex. 8a).

as a mimetic part to the opera's whole, since it seeks, within a limited time frame determined by the length of the film clip, to establish a relationship among the many varying shapes that have evolved throughout the opera. And I would suggest that it is highly relevant that these processes seem to intensify in response to the film extract.

While it is certainly possible to speculate about these processes as metaphors for the various conflicts and 'desiring resolutions' integral to both the film clip and the opera as a whole (Kong and Pearl; Kong as idea; image and idea), or to interpret them as Birtwistle's response to Hoban's concept of the instability of images, it is equally important to acknowledge that these ideas were conceived in a non-verbal musical domain, and that a vital and determining characteristic of Birtwistle's aesthetic is a compositional concern to manipulate contour across the work, almost in spite of the drama unfolding on stage.⁷⁰ Moreover, it is the transformation of

⁷⁰ A more recent work that relates closely to the film music sketch from *The Second Mrs Kong* is the piano piece *Saraband: The King's Farewell* (2001), which manipulates three- and four-note shapes in each hand.

shapes through unknown compositional stages and their mediation in extreme registers and straining timbres that evinces metaphorical interpretations, rather than their ‘archetypal’ status in the sketch plan. Nevertheless, descriptions of the sketch’s content do invite description in terms such as ‘mirroring’ or ‘distorted mirror image’. It is through the study of the sketch, then, that the musical manifestations of the primary and secondary identification processes fundamental to the opera’s meaning are rendered perceptible. In this sense, the sketch stages a narrative central to the opera’s dramatic trajectory, traced through a series of misrecognitions (events 1, 5, 10 and 15) and resulting conflicts (9-11 and 24) leading to recognition (27) and an acceptance of difference (28).

There is an important aspect of the film sequence, however, that the preceding discussion risks glossing over. The function of the film scene and the subsequent fight between Kong and the Death of Kong is to freeze the narrative as attention focuses on a display of masculine aggression.⁷¹ On stage, the film clip is intended to encourage Kong to identify with his cinematic counterpart as he engages in a contest of will and strength, but this clip also invites a voyeuristic gaze on the part of the audience. Encapsulating the ‘beast’ that is the counterpart to Pearl’s ‘beauty’, the film scene both goes against the aesthetic focus on beauty situated in Pearl’s portrait and questions the possibility of disinterested spectacle. The divergent elements in Birtwistle’s music reflect this tension: while certain aspects of the music suggest complicity with the notion of disinterested spectacle by underlining Kong’s plight (the machine-gun fire, straining timbres and extremes of register), a feeling that the music ultimately ‘goes its own way’ implies a resistance to the cinematic image and its effects.

Images of infinitude

The drive towards the union of Kong and Pearl is essential to the opera, since these two, more than anyone else on stage, embody the opera’s aesthetic desire to mediate image through voice and idea. Although this mediation is ultimately impossible, both libretto and music offer an endpoint (not a true resolution) via a musical image of infinitude: a vision of endless song and, by association, of enduring love. Hoban’s answers to Pearl and Kong’s existential questions, which merely reiterate ideas that they had already sensed but were unwilling to accept, buttress this image of infinitude because they are ineffectual: the Mirror’s words to Kong that he is ‘the lost and lonely child of all the world’, which echo his own admission of this fate after killing the Death of Kong, do not weaken Kong’s desire to be with Pearl.⁷²

The image of infinitude delineated in the opera’s final scene is therefore paradoxical: the same yearnings will endure, but they must be construed differently.

⁷¹ In the fight between Kong and the Death of Kong, Birtwistle’s score seems to mimic the action on stage, drawing heavily on percussion and ‘stabbing’ chords.

⁷² In the same passage Pearl is informed she is ‘the face that Vermeer painted, forever partly now and partly remembered’.

While certain musical devices connote increased synthesis (for example, from reh. 52⁻¹ the chords in the woodwind mirror the unfolding string texture),⁷³ this multiplication of vocal lines and orchestral layers suggests plurality and yearning rather than unity and closure. Following Inanna's short aria, from reh. 79, descending lines unfurl in the orchestra, each generated from four-note shapes using intervals larger than interval class 3. While the falling contours imply an allusion to Kong's death (one made more explicit in the opera's closing bars), the prevalence of a commonly shared musical shape echoes the equilibrium established at the end of the film-music sketch. There is even a sense that the orchestra finally recognises Pearl when it shadows her line: 'Why do I feel so nowhere and so not at all?' (31–2). Although this points to a greater sense of subjective presence within the orchestra and an apparent recognition of Pearl and her fate, such melodic elements are soon associated with a more abstract process, namely repetition.

A watershed moment in this process occurs when Pearl, awaiting Kong's arrival, finally begins to interrogate her own image (reh. 84), asking the Mirror, 'How do I look? Let me see myself'. Birtwistle's sketches reveal that his original intention had been to introduce a 'very fast under current [*sic*] which gets slower + slower to end of opera'.⁷⁴ Ultimately, he initiated a series of unchanging ostinato patterns, beginning with a four-note motif in the flute (*b''*, *c'''*, *f'''*, *e flat'''*) that is restated three times and shadowed by the lower woodwind.⁷⁵ Pearl's moment of critical engagement is also marked by an increase in tempo, the introduction of 'stabbing' semiquavers in the strings, and a noticeable agitation in her voice. She approaches the Mirror but it turns away, informing Pearl that her appearance is the way it has always been, 'unchanged through all the years' (32).

When Kong begins knocking on the door of Pearl's apartment, asking to be let in, she delays him while trying to make sense of her reflection in the mirror: 'I don't know what I'm seeing . . . I'm afraid of what I saw' (reh. 86). Pearl's distrust of her reflection brings her closer to Kong, who of course rejects his own cinematic image, and this is marked by the continual return of their parts to pitches D flat and G flat: musically, this is the closest Kong and Pearl have come to one another.⁷⁶ Contrary to Pearl's earlier acceptance of her reflected image in Act I, during the scene with Vermeer, this critical response signals a separation between the operatic Pearl and her reflected image, an idea that in the closing stages of the opera is embodied musically by elements that are both fixed and free. For example, the duets between Kong and Pearl, like those for Orpheus and Eurydice, are set in a free tempo, independent of the conductor, but they are underpinned by a low E pedal (a reference to the opening of *The Mask of Orpheus*, where Orpheus recalls fragments of his past over E and F pedals). And the orchestra's multiple melodic lines allude to a distinction Birtwistle had earlier established, in his instrumental piece

⁷³ The sketch for this section (microfilm 0536-0851) shows the woodwind chords at the top and the string texture immediately below.

⁷⁴ Microfilm 0537-0346.

⁷⁵ Microfilm 0537-0010.

⁷⁶ There seems to be no obvious significance in this choice of pitches.

Ex. 9: Sketch 0537-0038, ostinato (Act II, reh. 102⁻¹–105⁻⁴).

Secret Theatre (1984), between an extended melodic texture (or cantus) and a repetitive rhythmic ensemble (or continuum).⁷⁷

At the moment when Mirror informs Pearl and Kong that they cannot be together, a six-note ostinato begins (see Ex. 9). The motivic cell appears seven times, while variation is introduced by the ostinato's irregular migration from horn to cello to cor anglais to alto saxophone, determined by the use of random numbers.⁷⁸ A further ostinato in the horns and trumpets follows, a five-note cell beginning on D, a pitch associated throughout the opera with the idea of memory. This ostinato becomes progressively slower and eventually terminates on E, only to be followed by a nine-note cell in the horns, which rises chromatically from E to G sharp and returns to E. Although this extended sighing motion reintroduces a more overtly representational and vocal character into the orchestra, in general Birtwistle's ostinati establish a more indirect identification with Hoban's repetitive answers to Pearl and Kong and, in conjunction with the multiplication of lines, connote some sort of equilibrium, almost a 'steady state'.

Conclusion: 'An arm's length' approach?

It should be clear by now that the concern with images in *The Second Mrs Kong* runs deeper than merely an interest in multi-media or the 'focus on moment-to-moment fantasy' that Adlington has connected with 'post-modern scepticism about organic logic and forms'. The importance of the concept of identification for Birtwistle is reflected in the different musical processes associated with Kong and Pearl, which structure the opera in highly distinctive terms. The result is not so much an 'imagetext', in Kramer's terms, in which music would appear to retain the upper hand, but a dialectic of two different media and minds, related by shared intent.

⁷⁷ For a more detailed explanation of the terms 'cantus' and 'continuum' and their use in *Secret Theatre*, see Michael Hall, *Harrison Birtwistle in Recent Years* (London, 1998), 26–35.

⁷⁸ Numbers also determine the order of the five different durations used (1 unit=1 semiquaver).

Given the extent to which Birtwistle's music responds to Hoban's libretto, it may seem surprising that the music–text relationship in the opera has been viewed with a degree of criticism. Birtwistle has been accused of an 'arm's length approach', resulting in music that flirts moodily with both drama and words, 'occasionally responsive and even pictorial', according to Adlington, 'but more often haughtily indifferent'.⁷⁹ Adlington is uneasy about the 'very subtle relation' between voices and orchestra, while 'text articulation and sensitivity to the libretto's focal moments' appear to be low on the composer's priority list.⁸⁰ I hope to have shown how music responds to key dramatic moments in the action and to the symbolic layers of the libretto.

The fact that the music's surface features are related at a deeper level, however, may jar with the libretto's eclectic styles and images. This need be a problem only if the relationship between words and music is expected to be immediate and self-evident, on the level of Lacan's primary narcissism. Once we open up the possibility that Birtwistle's responses to the libretto's ideas has more in common with 'secondary identification', then the charge of an 'arm's length approach' evaporates. Any sense that the vocal parts are not clearly related to the orchestra (at least until the end of the work), for example, may acquire meaning as an underlying metaphor for Kong's quest to locate the idea behind his image.⁸¹

The Second Mrs Kong is also revealing in terms of its revision of Birtwistle's earlier working methods. In particular, his interest in marshalling contour and shape, evident in works from the late 1960s and early 1970s, can be seen to retreat from the middleground to the background, and therefore to a more abstract, conceptual level. It is the location of these abstract forms in the context of an opera that dramatises the mediation of images through ideas, however, that illuminates the reasons behind Birtwistle's practice. The focus on the concept of identification in *The Second Mrs Kong* does not deny the gulf between visual and aural media: on the contrary, it explores and perhaps even widens it. What is more, it promotes the opera house as a space particularly suited to exploring the relationship between these media, while reaffirming opera's penchant for presenting old stories and especially old images from new and unusual perspectives.⁸²

⁷⁹ Adlington, *The Music of Harrison Birtwistle*, 36. See also Tom Sutcliffe, review of the Glyndebourne production of *The Second Mrs Kong*, *The Musical Times*, 136/1829 (1995), 373–5; and Ivan Hewett, 'The Second Coming', *The Musical Times*, 136/1823 (1995), 46–7.

⁸⁰ Adlington, 'Harrison Birtwistle's Recent Music', 4.

⁸¹ Compare, for example, Birtwistle's previous opera, *Gawain*, where the instrumental parts are closely related to the vocal lines, as emerges from a study of the sketches; see David Beard, 'The Shadow of Opera: Dramatic Narrative and Musical Discourse in *Gawain*', *twentieth-century music*, 2 (2005), 159–96.

⁸² Copies of manuscripts from the Harrison Birtwistle Collection at the Paul Sacher Foundation, Basle, are reproduced by kind permission. Excerpts from Birtwistle's *The Second Mrs Kong* © Copyright 1994 by Universal Edition (London) Ltd., London. Reproduced by permission. All rights reserved.