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Experimental Document Analysis—an analytical framework for document design

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In this paper, I will discuss an analytical model for documentation analysis, the experimental document analysis. I will demonstrate how it can be used not only on future documents but also on documents already made. I will look at a historical case of an opera from the 18th century and outline a number of questions which I believe are relevant for documentation scholars but have not yet been answered. It also leads to a suggestion for a new approach in documentation studies, focusing more on basic comparative research in documentation processes.

1. What is experimental document analysis

An experimental document analysis is an analysis focusing on the choices deliberately or accidentally taken in the documentation process, in which the document is “designed” as part of the process of making the document, how it is formed by the agents who make the document, in other words focusing on possible alternative forms of the document to be created. It also means that one can make an experimental analysis of documents already made and even go back in history to study the documentation processes in the past and bring any documentation process into the experimental lab and take a closer look at the situation and the conditions under which it was made. Any document is made in a specific situation under a number of conditions by somebody.

2. Making a satisficing document?

In many situations “in the face of real-world complexity” a document designer cannot wait for the ultimate best solution but needs to be a satisficer. Herbert A. Simon said: “Design is about decisions that are ‘good enough’ alternatives, that satisfice.” (Simon, 1996, 27) A *satisficer* is a person who accepts “good enough” alternatives, not because less is preferred, but because there is no choice within the given conditions. (Simon, 1996, p. 29). An opera on stage in a specific place is a complex document. An opera director/impresario, making a successful opera every night, may need to be a satisficer to earn his money and keep the opera house running. There is a deadline, the time for the performance to start on stage. The opera director needs to make some hard decisions on alternatives given the capacities he has at hand and consider if that would be good enough for the audience to go and buy a ticket for the performance and not least to continue to go to other performances at his theatre.

3. Opera—an artistic documentation form—a short history

Opera has developed since the late 16th century in Europe into a specific kind of artistic documentation form, a part of the classical music world.

It started out with Monteverdi Orfeo 1607, followed by Lully, Purcell, Händel—one libretto—one score. It was especially at the large courts and opera houses that one could afford to have a single opera made by one composer, but it

was very often combined with other artistic performances like theatre, dance, masque procession, and concerts made by different ensembles and artists. Henry Purcell made *The Fairy Queen* (1692) as a kind of semi opera with five acts performed in between other shows of theatre, dance etc. In the 18th century smaller operahouses were often forced to use what was available of text, music, singers, musicians, set design etc. in the local theatre/troupe, and made a so-called *pasticcio*, not a parody but an opera consisting of parts of pre-existing works, a kind of “opera patchwork” (Over & z. Nieden, 2021).

From 1800 and onwards, opera is considered to be a work by one composer like Verdi, Mozart, Bellini based on a libretto, like the *Othello*, *Magic Flute*, *Norma* etc. It follows the Beethoven paradigm, (Goehr, 2007) with an understanding of the social role of the composer as a god-blessed genius. Until 1800 the composers produced a score as part of a collective project together with the librettist, performers etc. When the composition is considered to be a personal unique expression of the artist, the composer, one could discuss whether a performance was a “werktrue” performance, a performance true to the score. The performance was now a matter of “interpretation” of a work. It comes together with the introduction of the copy-right: and the concept of werktrue opera production and publishing the “true original” version of the opera in critical editions.

4. Opera—a multimedia document

Opera is a documentation form, a way of demonstrating, showing a piece of drama on stage set to music. It has, since 1600, developed as a specific genre, as a genre of artistic documentation, of music documentation. An opera production is a specific kind of multi-media document done by a set of agents using a specific set of means in different modes.

Agents

As one will see, all the agents listed below are necessary to make an opera. The question of who is the most important and prominent creator of the opera document is in principle an open question.

Librettist

Although one would expect to have the composer as the primary and most important agent in opera, a composer has no job to do if there is no libretto, if there is no text to set to music. In other words, one needs a librettist to provide the text for the composer.

Composer

At the same time, one surely needs a composer to set the music to the dramatic text.

Singers

Without singers there will be no opera. Throughout the history of opera, singers have had different positions in relation to how much influence they have had on the opera, for instance on which aria to sing etc.

Musicians

Without musicians, there is no opera performance. Today, the large opera houses have their own orchestras, but in the 18th century, there could be a shortage of musicians and one needed to consider which musicians were necessary as a minimum.

Director, Set Designer

To direct how the opera should be performed, how to act on stage, one needs a director.

Impresario

Finally, one needs an impresario or an opera manager to run the opera house as a business, to sell tickets etc.

Means

Any opera is a complex document, created deliberately by a combination of different means, used by the aforementioned agents. First of all, you have the verbal means, the verbal text to work as a libretto, to provide the words to be sung, but also the dramatic plot, to give the opera a story, a topic as well as creating the roles, making a group of actors/singers.

Then you have the audio means, the tones set together by the composer in a score, enabling the singers to sing the text in a special musical way as well as enabling the musicians to accompany the singers, but also the voice, provided by the singers, to combine the text and the music into singing. In opera, there are usually two ways of singing/delivering the text. There is the recitative, which is very close to talking instead of singing, and where you clearly hear the words spoken. In the arias the focus is more on the way the singing is performed in a musical sense than understanding the words being sung. It is especially clear in the tradition of bel canto, the Italian tradition of singing beautifully, in which it is difficult to understand the words, but the singing in a musical sense is virtuosic.

Thirdly, there are the gestural means. An opera is also a dramatic performance, a musical theatre, in which the singers move around on a stage and make gestures as actors or dancers.

Fourthly, you have the visual means, including both costumes for the actors/singers as well as a set design to make a complete opera.

Finally, there are logistical means, a social organization and a physical stage as well as an auditorium for the audience. It can take place in a physical house specifically dedicated to opera, an opera house, but in the 17th–18th centuries many operas were done by opera troupes/companies, traveling from town to town, using different physical spaces for their performance.

5. Making a satisficing opera?

No matter what kind of opera one wants to produce, it will always be a question of how to make a satisficing opera. It will always be a matter of choices of means in different ways, a matter of designing a multimedia document in the best possible way, in a satisficing way, to find the best mode of combining the different elements. There is no single perfect solution to making a satisficing opera. Throughout the history of opera since its beginning around 1600, different kinds of standards and criteria for a satisficing opera have been in power.

Today we expect to hear and see the same opera as we did last time, in the sense that we expect to hear the same text, the same music, the same arias etc. The set design and the costumes can be different, but most of the elements in the opera are supposed to be the same every time one produces a specific opera. We have had this understanding of an opera as a musical *work*, made at one time by one composer, for more than 200 years. As mentioned above, that understanding of a work came along with the introduction of the copyright of a work around 1800. Before 1800, there was a lot of “borrowing” of parts of already made musical works into new works without giving credit or paying for the loan, resulting for instance in the pasticcio operas as mentioned above. After 1800, it was no longer accepted to take parts of other musical works into one's own work, until we today see it happen in modern electronic music with the so-called mash-up, where you mix many different pieces of music together in one musical stream.

Back to the starting point of this paper, the experimental document analysis and the question about making a satisficing opera. It will usually be difficult to track the choices of the different elements in a modern opera-production in which you reproduce an existing opera and use the published score with the known parts, arias etc. The possibilities for choice between alternatives are usually limited to the set design, maybe a shortening of the score, but not much more than that. In the case of the pasticcio opera in the 18th century, one has a unique possibility to get a bit closer to the design process of an opera and to make an experimental document analysis, to make an experimental opera analysis.

6. Pasticcio opera—the case of *Dido Abbandonata*

The opera *Dido Abbandonata* is based on a libretto made by Pietro Antonio Domenico Trapassi, known as Pietro Metastasio (1698–1782). He was probably the most used librettist in the 18th century. The first libretto he made was *Dido Abbandonata*—a classic plot about Dido, the Queen of Carthage, and Aeneas, the Trojan hero. Dido is in love with Aeneas but is abandoned by Aeneas, and therefore Dido commits suicide in her despair (Over, 2021).

It has been set to music by more than 50 different composers, Domenico Sarro, Giovanni Lampugnani, Thomas Albinoni, Paolo Scalabrini, Johann Adolph Hasse, Guisepppe Sarti etc. The first composer was Domenico Sarro, who wrote his opera in 1724. After that several composers set the same libretto to music, but in some cases, they also made changes in the text, especially in the different arias. This provided opportunities for making it into a pasticcio opera by taking the music by different composers into a kind of patchwork-score, in which most of the recitative music was the same, but the arias could be by different composers. The choice of arias depended often on which singers were in town and which arias they had in their suitcase, *aria di baule* (Over, 2021, p. 292f.). When the soprano Giustina Turcotti joined the Mingotti troupe in 1746, she might even have had special music composed for her. The Mingotti troupe, Pietro and Angelo Mingotti (impresario) was one of the many traveling opera companies/troupes in Europe, making a lot of pasticcio opera in the 18th century (Over, 2021).

So who made the opera, who designed it, really? Yes, it was the composer, but only to some extent and even not only one composer, but several composers. One might claim that the librettist is more important, but the singers are also playing a significant role by the fact that the choice of arias depends on what they have in their *baule*. Even the musicians can play a role in the final outcome of the opera production. In the case of Mingotti troupe in the 18th century, it was not always certain which musicians they had at their disposal.

Today the set designer will also have an impact on how the environment, the setting for the opera on stage, will look. That was also the case in the 18th century, but in a different way. At that time, it was not so much an artistic vision from the director but a matter of what kind of scenery they had on the local theatre/stage. If it was a scenery from Hellas it could work, but if they only had a scenery from Rome, it would also work at least as an ancient scenery.

Finally, the impresario like the Mingotti brothers would have a decisive role in forming the final opera production. They were responsible for having a performance ready for the audience every night in order to make a living for all the people involved, the singers, musicians etc. Why is all this interesting in a documentation studies context?

7. The situation today—making satisficing documents today

Today we have a very different situation as far as opera is concerned. The conventions and expectations of the opera audience today are very different from the similar ones in the 18th century, but the bottom line has not changed; the deadline is still there. A modern opera house still needs to make a satisficing opera within the budget and resources they have at their disposal at a certain time. The same is the case with a film company or a newspaper company, living with a deadline and a certain set of resources. In health care, the doctors and nurses etc. are in principle in the same situation, having to make a diagnosis document as well as possible and not least make a satisficing treatment of the patient, a healthy person as a live document, as a satisficing documentation of the health care system. If the health care system can provide a satisficing number of cured people, one can conceive the cured patients as a satisficing document. In all cases, across history, cultures, and sectors, it is a matter of the conditions for making a satisficing document. In the experimental document analysis, we can set up a situation for the document production, in which we in principle may consider the choice of agents, means and modes in the documentation process. We can discuss the critical “if...” questions, what if the choice of agents were changed or the choice of means and the modes one is using to make the documents, and in this way we come back to the design of the document.

8. The role of agent(s) in the documentation process

What difference does it make to the final document if we change the composer, the singer or the set designer in an opera-production? What difference does it make to have another writer make a novel? What difference does it make to have another doctor in a diagnosis process, in the process of documenting a diagnosis? These kind of questions are the questions to be answered by opera directors, publishers, editors, hospital directors and others choosing the agents to do satisficing documents. It also leads to the question of quality of the document. Is it possible to talk about good and bad documents? Back in the 18th century, the audience would also talk about a good or a bad opera. If it was a bad performance, it would not be shown another evening. In between good and bad stands the question about whether it is good enough?

9. The role of means in the documentation process

One can continue to discuss what difference it makes to use analogue means instead of digital means or vice versa. What difference does it make to use some colors instead of other colors in a painting? What difference does it make to use other words, to translate to other languages when writing a text? What difference does it make to use geometric graphics instead of numbers, a formula? In an experimental lab it is possible to experiment with different means, but in real life it is often not

possible to make experiments. Yet, it is possible to consider *if* it was possible to test it out. If one looks at novels made into film, it is possible to consider which kind of difference it makes to use visual means instead of verbal means.

10. The role of modes in the documentation process

Finally, one can discuss what difference it makes to use different modes/genres when documenting the same topic and one may question if it is possible to talk about the same topic. Within the arts, one can choose to substitute one art form with another art form, from literature to film or within an art form, but you can also consider different kinds of commercials or administrative documents.

11. A new path for documentation studies, a comparative path

In the last 20 years, we have had diverse case studies in documentation studies presented at the DOCAM conferences, and that is very good indeed. It is especially good because it can function as a starting point for a forthcoming comparative approach, in which we could do more comparative studies of different empirical cases from different perspectives. I believe this could give us more basic knowledge about documentation processes, which could be very useful not only for coming design of documents, but also as part of the general knowledge of human life, how we communicate and inform each other through our documentation. This might also open up a broader understanding of what documentation is about. It is not only about writing and written documents with a verbal text. It can be about a stone, a painting, a song, a piece of textile, a dance etc.

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