# Franco Evangelisti's *Die Schachtel* and its filmic transposition by Gregory Markopoulos

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The multimedia art work, based on the interaction of words, images and sound, emerged over several decades in a development involving music quite as much as the other performing arts. In their exploration of the performing space, actors' body language and vocal possibilities, the protagonists of avantgarde theatre – from Jerzy Grotowski and Tadeusz Kantor to Julian Beck, from Peter Brooks to Eugenio Barba and Carmelo Bene – made the boundaries of theatre permeable, opening it up to issues being faced in sculpture, dance and music. A complementary process took place in the musical domain with the theatralization of performance. In *Water Walk* (1959) and *Theatre Piece* (1960) John Cage showed how scenic action can be derived directly from the music, how sound and image can refer to a unitary principle, and how gesture and sound can be linked by a scale of audiovisual values. *Variations V* (1965) and *HPSCH* (1969) contemplate forms of interaction between the various components, attributing a key role to electronic technologies. In these same years Mauricio Kagel developed the concept of "instrumental theatre" and made some short films based on pre-composed scores – for example *Match für drei Spieler* (Bizzaro 2007).

In these and other composers, the experimentation carried out in music theatre played its part in a process of convergence of the arts which can be considered a feature of the avantgardes in the second half of the 20th century (Adorno 2003 and 1995).

*Die Schachtel*, "azione mimo-scenica" composed by Franco Evangelisti in 1962-1963 on an idea of the artist Franco Nonnis, represents a significant episode in the 'proto-history' of multimedia art. The aesthetic and technical coordinates had been outlined in Luigi Nono's *Intolleranza 1960* and Aldo Clementi's *Collage* (1961). Both these works relied on a collaboration between composer and artist: Emilio Vedova in the first case and Achille Perilli in the second (De Benedictis 2001, 2007 and 2009; Lux-Tortora 2002; Tortora 2003). Nono and Clementi started out from a recognition of the limits facing music theatre, even when it relied on the expressionist aesthetic. Nonetheless Nono – who had taken an interest in Majakovskij and Mejerchol'd thanks to the mediation of Angelo Maria Ripellino and subsequently, on his own initiative, in Václav Kašlík and Josef Svoboda of the National Theatre, Prague – did not entirely renounce a representative approach to drama. For his "scenic action" he established some topics (intolerance, oppression, torture, the scission of the ego) that served as centres of gravity for the sung text, the music and the staging. Whereas Clementi opted for a radical formalization of the audiovisual text: *Collage* has neither a plot nor characters, but it does trace the stages of a physical or alchemical process, the transformation of matter through to the appearance of the *homunculus* and its definition by means of a complex of signs. This work belongs in the tradition of mechanical ballets but at the same time goes beyond it in making use of technical innovations that had featured in *Intolleranza 1960* (self-propelled surfaces and projection of slides) as well as expedients from pre-war experimental theatre (scrims, short films, silhouettes, marionettes and dummies).

In *Die Schachtel* Evangelisti, as earlier Clementi, did without sung words, sharing the latter's conviction that "vocalism and plot are bound up with one another" (Clementi 1964: 65). He chose to collaborate with an artist to avoid any dealings with a librettist, whether real or imaginary, and the consequences this entails: "The subject comes not from a poet but from a *painter* because I believe that the *theatrical action in music* can only survive as a fusion between the visual act and sound that is not the result of poetic texts" (Evangelisti 1964: 67). Nonetheless, far from disappearing, the word as a dimension of the audiovisual texture comes into play as both visual content (inscriptions or projections of newspaper cuttings) and acoustic content (in the form of a voice over, recording of a count down, report of the

shares index). The use of words, albeit in ambiguous forms and removed from their customary contexts, makes it possible to circumscribe the work's semantic domain and recognise references to the real world. In fact the title itself clarifies the composer's intention: the 'box' is an allegory of a totally regulated world in which individuals are functional, automated components, endowed with "liberties" that are mere appearance (Marcuse 1964; Ferrari 1996 and 2000). Evangelisti does not give up the physical presence of people on stage, but rather than resorting to emblematic characters, as Nono did, he uses mimes as anonymous representatives of mass society. At the formal level they mirror the community of audio-spectators, who thus perceive themselves as part of the situation being represented.

The significance of *Die Schachtel* for the development of the multimedia arts regards first of all the score. Evangelisti drew eight horizontal bands on large oblong sheets of paper and labelled theme as follows: music, mimes, mimes' voice, voice over, tape, general action, lighting, projections. The musical part is the most detailed, while for the others he merely put in sporadic indications. This disparity may reflect the natural prevalence of his own sphere of competence, but it may also denote his intention to allow more liberty for the visual component. Clearly it detracts from the score's normative status, but it does not invalidate the fact that here the audiovisual event is conceived as a performing unit whose various features are integrated in the temporal dimension. A second significant aspect is that the multiple authorship – a salient feature of the multimedia arts, even if not a necessary condition (Balzola 2004) – was spread out over time. In fact we can identify at least three people who were responsible for the visual dimension: the painter and set designer Nonnis, who first outlined the subject (possibly with the title) and subsequently published a "guide for a production" (Nonnis 1964); the choreographer Tatiana Massine, who prepared the mimes for a short film made in the television studios of the Bayerischer Rundfunk, Munich, in May 1968; and Gregory Markopoulos, one of the leading figures of the New American Cinema, who did the shooting and editing (a copy of the film is in the Franco Evangelisti archive in Rome. My warmest thanks to Irmela Heimbächer Evangelisti for allowing me to view this source). The context in which this production came about is emblematic for the way in which several art forms overlapped. In the first place it dates from the same period as the recording of *Die Schachtel*, with the soloists of the Munich Kammeroper conducted by Eberhard Schoener (DGG Avantgarde 2561 106), which made the work known to an international audience. Markopoulos made his film as part of a project which also involved the staging (at the Haus der Kunst) and a film

of *(A)lter (A)ction* by Egisto Macchi (Tortora 1998). In this work, which had a notable success with critics and was broadcast several times on German television networks, Markopoulos used an editing technique that aimed at achieving a fusion of the spatial and temporal dimensions.

Franco Nonnis's "guide for a production" provides an indication of the audiovisual texture, laying out the components in four columns: "speaking and sound effects", "mimic action", "lighting" and "projections". If on one hand this can be viewed as a precursor of Evangelisti's multi-layer score, on the other it gives a certain amount of additional information that is invaluable for grasping the sense of the visual components. Thus in attempting to put on the work it is advisable for both the conductor and director to consult each of these documents and coordinate the performance choices and timings. From what I have been able to establish (e-mail exchanges with Robert Beavers and telephone conversation with Eberhard Schoener in December 2009) it does not seem that Markopoulos studied these sources. Nonetheless the film's organization, that can be evinced in spite of the fragmentary form, does correspond in a significant way to the stages outlined by Nonnis and Evangelisti:

A: Presentation

B: Liberatory reactions
B1: The inter-subject reaction or moment of individual liberty
B2: Neurosis as acceptable way of escape
B3: Lyrical escape
B4: Reaction as response to collective psychology

C: Finale
Glorification of the system
Collapse of the box

Markopoulos's film is not to be seen as the shooting of a staged production of *Die Schachtel*, but rather as an autonomous product arising more or less directly out of the project of Nonnis and Evangelisti. As such, it confronts us with an ambiguity: on one hand it is one of the possible realizations of the scenic and musical composition, whose general framework is laid down but which remains open to a whole range of solutions for the details; on the other hand it represents a reduction of the potential of the original creation. In fact one salient feature of *Die Schachtel* is the synchronic configuration of diverse visual events (the mimes' movements, lighting, projections of photographs and written words), which is indeed matched by a multiplicity of acoustic phenomena (music, the mimes' vocal utterances,

voice over, a count down from a space station, city noises); to adapt a phrase of Boulez, one might refer to a 'polyphony of polyphonies'. The compression of simultaneous events, which in the theatre can take place all over the scenic space, onto a television screen conditions the equilibrium of the audiovisual texture – irrespective of the fact that, given the score's aleatory characteristics, the construction of the relationships between linearity and stratification is in part assigned to the performers, or more exactly the details emerge during the realization of the performance. In order not to make excessive use of long shots Markopoulos tends to reposition elements which in the score occur simultaneously in a horizontal perspective; in fact the passage from one artistic genre to the other brings about a change in the spatio-temporal relationships. The filmmaker seems to be aware of these limits and tries to get round them by using two techniques he had developed over the previous decade: dense editing and overlaid images. One of the aesthetic premises for his work is the centrality of the single frame; in fact he pays the same attention to this feature as a composer pays to sound as the primary component of music. This treatment of primary elements can be seen to have a certain affinity with serial composition and, as in the latter, creates the conditions for a new conception of form:

> I propose a new narrative form through the fusion of the classic montage technique with a more abstract system. This system involves the use of short film phrases which evoke thought-images. Each film phrase is composed of certain select frames that are similar to the harmonic units found in musical composition. The film phrases establish ulterior relationships among themselves; in classic montage technique there is a constant reference to the continuing shot: in my abstract system there is a complex of differing frames being repeated (Markopoulos 1971a: 7-8).

Markopoulos was particularly aware of the relationship between image, word and sound, as is seen in his use of Tchaikovsky's *Manfred Symphony* in *Twice a Man* (1963), Bartók's *Cantata profana* in *The Illiac Passion* (1964-1967) and Beethoven's Overture to *Fidelio* in *Sorrows* (1969). He saw the lack of a "poetic unity" among the dimensions of audiovisual creativity as the chief reason for the regression of the language of cinema. The principles of discontinuity, parataxis, alliteration and reiteration he adopted in editing the sequences also have to hold good for verbal expression and music. In this way he can arrive at that "lyricism of the independent, silent spaces" (Markopoulos 1971b: 88) evoked by the writings of Arnold Schönberg.

There are elements of contiguity between the film of *Die Schachtel* and Evangelisti's artistic credo which, while probably being due to the specific historical moment, are none the less significant for that. I mean the practice of aleatory editing, which evokes the notion of "fields of possibility" (Evangelisti 1991: 28), and the use of the black screen, which may be read as the visual counterpart of silence. Here too we are confronted with a recurrent problem in the cinematic adaptation of music theatre: the establishment of the point of observation (Kühnel 2000). This element takes on a specific importance in *Die Schachtel*. Like its predecessors *Intolleranza 1960* and *Collage*, the work exploits the whole of the scenic space, i.e. frontality represents a particular moment, subordinated to certain functions. I would argue that the structural transformation that originated in the change of medium does not necessarily imply a departure from the conception of Evangelisti and Nonnis: at least in certain cases it can actually lead to a more appropriate treatment. This apparent contradiction vanishes once one recognises in Nonnis and Evangelisti's project an immanent tendency towards a fully realised multimedia status, a "digital" approach; in such a perspective an electronic version of the work, which facilitates the integration of the different dimensions, would not be in the least out of place. As Philip Auslander has shown with plentiful examples, there is no ontological opposition between live performance and technological reproduction (Auslander 1999).

In order to focus on these convergences and discrepancies I am going to concentrate on the scene of the "car race", one of the key moments in *Die Schachtel* in terms of both form and contents. The participation of the mimes in a competition which is apparently devoid of rules or any ultimate goal is one of the allegories that Evangelisti and Nonnis employ to represent a society in which the triumph of the exchange value increases the psychological isolation of its members and their sense of alienation. The scene in question is designated IIA in Nonnis's 'guide' and B1 in the score, which gives the additional indication "structure 3". The latter refers to one of the types of musical style which Evangelisti had perfected in *Random or not random*, a composition for orchestra whose techniques are copiously adopted in *Die Schachtel*. "Structure 3" consists of 17 bars in 4/16 whose performing speed is not specified and which can be separated from each other by moments of silence. Thus here freedom of interpretation regards the temporal dimension: the tempo of the individual bars and the insertion and duration of silences. This type of composition is well suited to audiovisual dramaturgy: the music is associated with a precarious situation, the excess of stimuli and neurotic states. We have to keep in mind that B1 fea-

tures two other acoustic strata: a tape with traffic noises that plays throughout the scene and a voice over declaiming a "Speech on personality" comprising brief utterances and slogans. The sense of this 'speech' can be interpreted in various ways; one immediate association is with George Orwell's 'Big Brother' in *1984*, which enjoyed considerable popularity during the protest movements in and around 1968. In the annotations to the score conserved in the archive of the Internationales Musikinstitut in Darmstadt, fragments of this speech are inserted into the zones of silence between bars. Whereas Markopoulos opted for a solution which is more economic but no less effective in terms of dramatic dynamics: essential fragments of the speech were communicated either by the voice over or as written text on a black background or superimposed on the images.

Markopoulos adopted expedients that are not unusual in staging works of music theatre. He created a dramaturgy of images which, while being coherent with the approach of Evangelisti and Nonnis, has the properties of an autonomous performing project. However, since this is a film rather than a production for theatre, the expedients take on a different connotation; they can be seen as components of an audiovisual structuring which considers the indications of the 'guide' and score as mere suggestions rather than objectives to be achieved. The situation at the beginning of *Die Schachtel* is described in the score in the following words: "Society as undifferentiated auditorium, the placid certainty of one's own seat, standard stimuli, common reactions all equally controlled". The 'guide' indicates two modalities for evoking the situation: slides of a crowded auditorium projected onto the stage centre and wings, with the aim of mirroring the audio-spectators in the work itself; sudden beams of light cast on the mimes who are seated, immobile, in the 'chassis-box' placed frontally on the stage. Evangelisti separated the two visual strata, collocating the former in "structure 2" which involves only the use of visual material (crowded auditorium, pages of a newspaper, advertisements, written text). Whereas Markopoulos chose to gradually visualise the mimes by means of frames which alternate or superimpose shots of the musicians in the act of playing and words on a black background: "*Masse*", "*kontrolliert*", "*Reaktion*", "*genormt*" [mass, controlled, reaction, normalised]. The gradual revelation of the mimes in the box – the work's fundamental 'situation' – thus takes on a precise semantic profile thanks to the insertion of words which are taken from the title of the scene or are associated with it. In addition the filmmaker anticipates the theme of the car race by repeatedly inserting frames of two mimes filmed in the act of driving (3' 33" - 4' 07" in correspondence with bars 13-15 of "structure 1"). At this stage such a modality is

still neutral, and in a certain way extraneous to the context, devoid of any sense of dramatic direction. Its meaning becomes clearer at the beginning of "structure 3" (5' 20") through the combination of the gestures of the mimes, traffic noises and the phrase enounced by the voice over, "*Grosse Revolution durch das Automobil!* [The automobile has brought about a revolution]". We can note that Markopoulos maintained the idea of "structure 2" merely with images, collocating it at the end of a process in which the gap in the sound due to the pauses is systematically 'filled up' by the images; a complementary procedure is deployed in those moments in which he shifts the audio-spectators' attention to the music, denying a visual dimension by means of a black screen.

In scene B1 the semiotic process becomes more dense and acquires a specific direction. The voice over takes on the function of a television presenter, and at the same time that of a commentator in a Brechtian didactic drama. The exclamation "Grosse Revolution durch das Automobil!" is heard in a silence, just before the instrumental sounds of "structure 3" begin, together with the tape of the traffic noises. Synchronized with the start of the music, the mimes, lined up in the chassis and viewed front on, begin to perform driving gestures (accelerations, braking, gear changes, swerving). By means of the words spoken by the voice over and those written up on a black screen or superimposed, Markopoulos orients the semantic plane towards the theme of revolution. It is an indisputable fact that the spread of the motor car has represented a revolution in people's habits and social relations; nonetheless in *Die Schachtel* the declaration is shrouded in an aura of falsity since it is inserted into a socio-political context in which freedom of movement and increased activity entail a stripping out of the existential contents, a standardization of behaviour and a stronger subjection towards the power structures. To the director the automobile 'revolution' appears as the surrogate, if not indeed a mockery, of a revolution in social inter-relations which has not taken place, and indeed appears rather remote. In correspondence with the sharpening of the semantic perspective, the time required to bring into focus the principal visual stratum (the mimes seen driving) increases and, in spite of the interpolation of elements of the other three groups of images (musicians playing, words written up and photographs), the representational technique becomes more linear and narrational.

Markopoulos divided this scene up into two parts: the first is focused on the exaltation of the automobile; the second concerns the obsession with success and the desire for escape. The caesura is represented by a shot of the mimes launching themselves forwards, an image that is repeated and

alternated at first with a close up of the mimes side-on and then with an image of the crowd in a stadium; at the end of this process, a sort of cross-over fade, the voice over enounces three times in a row the phrase "*wir können im Endspurt noch den Sieg erringen* [we can still snatch victory with the final sprint]" (from 7' 30" to 8' 27", in correspondence with bars 11-14 of "structure 3"). The last part features the mimes' attempts to get out of the box, which are finally blocked by the voice over crying "Halt!", followed by the image of a political demonstration.

For the following scenes too (B2, 3 and 4, corresponding to structures 4, 5 and 6), Markopoulos's choices can in part be linked to the typical problems of producing music theatre and in part concern specific aspects of the medium. B2 revolves around the acceleration of the rhythm of modern life and the anxiety this generates. In the chassis the mimes move in jerks, frenetically asking each other the time or pointing to a wrist watch while the count down from a space station proceeds inexorably. The scene ends with the voice over saying "Short and full time" (in English). In the film version B3 is divided up into two parts, each with its own editing technique, choreography and thematic associations. The first part represents a situation of panic, with the mimes trying desperately to escape; the shots are interspersed with inscriptions denoting negative emotions – "*Trauer*", "*Angst*", "*Hass*" [sadness, fear, hate] – and finally, when the mimes kneel down in submission, an image of a hearse full of coffins, pushed by soldiers. In this first part the director has created a complex counterpoint, treating the audiovisual materials on an equal footing: rapid snatches of music, shots of the mimes first in agitation and then in slow motion, written words, images of the hearse. From the score one can see that Evangelisti grouped the bars together in units that vary in length (from 3 to 6 bars), specifying at the end of each group the emission of a certain phoneme by a mime; in Schoener's interpretation these moments are marked by a silence. Although he does without the vocal interventions of the mimes, Markopoulos keeps to the score's macro-rhythm, as we see among other things from the placement of the scene's turning-point at the end of bar 12. Here there is a brief reprise of the count down in which however "six" becomes "sex" (reinforced by the change from a man's voice to a woman's), introducing a 'semantic modulation' towards the area of eroticism. This thematic change is borne out, almost didactically, by the appearance of the word "Liebe"; nonetheless it is an alienated love, doomed to fleeting, cold and unsatisfying contacts. This is the most explicitly narrative passage in the film.

"Structure 6", corresponding to scene B4, uses a notation that resembles the one Evangelisti used in the fourth piece of *Random or not random*. In the few cases in which the parts contain indications of pitch, the sounds have to be distorted; generally some indication is given of register, type of movement for the sound (glissando) and non conventional performing styles (noise of keys, air blown without producing a note, speaking into the instrument, legno tratto or battuto, tapping finger pad on key, etc.). The aim is to create a magma of sound in which timbre, dynamic, density and tempo are in continual modification. The score also prescribes the superimposition of three scenic elements: updates of the shares index, the report of the closing stages of a horse race and fragments of previous scenes. Nonnis's 'guide' indicates that the mimes should become increasingly dissociated, joining, individually or in groups, the three documentary narratives and swapping between them. The increasingly frenetic process culminates in a disaggregation of the bodies of the mimes, lit up in sections for brief instants. Markopoulos takes advantage of a silence in Schoener's interpretation, which corresponds to a sort of reprise of the beginning (bar 20), to divide this scene too into two parts. For the whole of the first part we see a mime scribbling down numbers in an imaginary notebook while the financial and sporting reports are heard; in the second part the mimes go back, randomly and without any reciprocal interaction, to the activities of driving, telling the time and escape enacted in previous scenes.

The final scene is supposed to represent the glorification of the system and at the same time prepare for the collapse of the box, which occurs once the curtain has come down following the question from the auditorium: "*So recht oder nicht?* [Is this how it is or not?]". Markopoulos's version departs from these indications, concentrating on the mimes imprisoned in the box, which now begins to look like the living room of an apartment. In terms of the music Evangelisti recalls passages from the preceding structures, and accordingly the director inserts frames of Schoener conducting. In semantic terms the repetition of the injunction "*Bleibt ruhig, Freunde!* [Keep calm, friends]", alternating with the word "*Beruhigungsmittel* [tranquilliser]", helps to produce an atmosphere of calm resignation. Markopoulos opts for an open-ended finale: immediately after the repeated question "*So recht oder nicht?*" the mimes are shown sitting in the chassis in civilian clothes, looking at the audio-spectators as if they were in front of a television.

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