

The “Migration of Consciousness”

Understanding Robert Ashley’s *Perfect Lives* through Music Video

Charissa Noble

Charissa Noble is a musicologist, composer, and vocalist who has worked with many emerging composers within the experimentalist and performance-art scene of Southern California, including Kristopher Apple in his production of Palnj and Blair Robert Nelson in his production of #hackingimprovisation. In addition to her performing activities, she has earned her BM in Music Composition and Theory at the Biola Conservatory of Music, her MA in Musicology at San Diego State University, and commenced her doctoral studies in Fall 2014 at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her work as a composer and vocalist has greatly informed her research interests, which include exploring how technology has redefined boundaries between the disciplines of art, music, and philosophy; examining how cultural hegemony is impressed upon different vocal techniques and styles; and discussing multimedia works from the standpoints of both individual experience and post-structuralist cultural theory. She presented her research on Robert Ashley at the 2014 Society for Minimalist Music’s Fourth International Conference at California State University, Long Beach, and presented on music video and post-structuralist thought at the 2012 San Diego State Student Research Symposium. Her interest in exploring intersections between music, critical thought, and cultural practice has galvanized her volunteer work; in Summer 2013 she designed a summer music camp for students from Title 1 schools in the La Mesa-Spring Valley School District. The camp invited students to participate in alternative forms of musical activity that required no previous musical instruction or possession of conventional musical instruments; students used their voices and bodies and built their own instruments from recycled materials, with the goal of everyone feeling welcomed and valued in the group music-making. Upon completing her PhD, Charissa plans to teach and to continue her activities in experimental performing and in community outreach.

In a 1981 interview during a production of *Perfect Lives*, his opera for television, Robert Ashley said, "I'm learning how to write American opera; I don't think it has been written before, and I don't think that what I'm doing is the end of it, but I think that I'm on the right track."¹ By that time, English-language operas by Leonard Bernstein, Samuel Barber, George Gershwin, and Carlisle Floyd had graced American stages, and the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) had also commissioned original operas by American composers Gian Carlo Menotti and Norman Dello Joio for television broadcast.² Since Ashley was well aware of the work of these composers, his statement probably had more to do with what he considered to be "American" in the genre of opera than the nationality of the composers. The implicit question raised in Ashley's statement is, what is it that makes an opera "American"? Had American opera composers found a native idiom and expression, or would their work continue in the vein of their European predecessors? American opera had been entrenched in European operatic forms and styles in terms of singing style, musical features, libretto topics, and performance venues. Ashley envisioned a new operatic paradigm for America: narrative vocal works on the scale of opera in the European tradition that would draw from aspects of American culture. This meant that nearly every aspect of opera—vocal style, orchestration, notation, libretto, and medium of distribution—underwent major renovation in the hands of Ashley and his collaborators.

What I would like to discuss are the ways in which Ashley's critical theory about American culture is aesthetically demonstrated in his television opera *Perfect Lives*. Since Ashley eschewed many conventions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century opera, a less-conventional analytical approach could shed more light on the aesthetics and critical ideas at play in this work than some of the more familiar ways of examining opera, such as mapping character motives onto the music's tonal progression. As unlikely as it may seem, using analytical methodologies that have been applied to music video can be a fruitful way of examining how Ashley's critical ideas inform the aesthetics of his opera. Considering the shared cultural context and aesthetic affinities between *Perfect Lives* and music video, not only is such a comparison relevant, it raises interesting questions about notions of genre, aesthetic experience, and consciousness. But, before presenting such a

¹ Melody Sumner, Kathleen Burch, and Michael Sumner, *The Guests Go in to Supper* (Oakland, CA: Burning Books, 1986), 105.

² Jennifer Barnes, *The Rise and Fall of Television Opera* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2003), 1–9.

comparison or conducting such an analysis, it is important to have some background information about how Ashley came to the central ideas of his theory and how he began to connect these ideas to particular aesthetic practices. Such insight can be gained by examining pivotal moments in Ashley's career, by summarizing his cultural theory, the "migration of consciousness," and by inquiring into the social-historical context of both music video and *Perfect Lives*.

Ashley's interest in developing a musical style based on the American vernacular went hand-in-hand with his musical development. His musical education began with private piano lessons and continued with studies in music theory at the University of Michigan and composition at the Manhattan School of Music. While there, Ashley encountered professional difficulty and misunderstanding, and he eventually decided to return to Ann Arbor.³ Upon his return to Ann Arbor, his interests took a definitive turn toward electronic composition. He began working with light and sound artist Milton Cohen on a project dubbed the "Space Theater," for which he composed electronic music that was coordinated with light shows. While working on the Space Theater, he became involved in a lively community similar to Greenwich Village in its vibrancy of ideas and artistic activity. From 1961 to 1966, Ashley and others who had collaborated with Cohen mounted a music festival that they called ONCE (although they were able to mount the festival every year from 1961 to 1966). The ONCE founders initially brought in mostly European composers, such as Karlheinz Stockhausen, to perform at the festival but eventually began to mount more of the performances themselves.⁴ They formed a loosely organized ensemble called the ONCE group, which created theatrical performances reflecting Brechtian theatrical principles. The ONCE group's pieces were characterized by the desire to break through the "walls" of the stage and critically engage the audience, which they often did by framing language as musical composition on stage.

An example of how they used the stage to present language as musical composition is the piece *Unmarked Interchange*, which calls for its members to perform multiple activities simultaneously, with the guideline that the activities be reenactments of "well-known cultural events or rituals."⁵

³ Kyle Gann's *Robert Ashley* provides a substantial biography of Ashley and the reader is encouraged to consult this source for further questions about Ashley's life and time at the conservatory.

⁴ Richard James, "ONCE: Microcosm of the 1960s Musical and Multimedia Avant-Garde," *American Music* 5, no. 4 (Winter 1987): 359–390.

⁵ *Ibid.*

In the 1965 performance, the group selected the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers film *Top Hat* for their source material and projected moments from the film onto a screen.⁶ Ashley constantly changed the sound levels as a way to direct audience attention to different activities that transpired around the theater. (Some of these activities included more literal reenactments of the film's dialogue and dance numbers, while others were more abstract, such as a part when performers simply ate watermelon.) Ashley's contribution to the production highlighted the mechanics of the medium, and since it made the dialogue on the different stages impossible to synthesize into one single plot, it framed language as aesthetic sound rather than as communication of a story.

His work with the ONCE group sparked Ashley's interest in presenting speech as a musical event, and he had the opportunity to further develop his idea of language as music while working in a research lab at the University of Michigan. Ashley cites this period of his life as one of the most important to his compositional development.⁷ While working at the lab, he noticed certain manners of speech that were melodic in a more natural way than *Sprechstimme*, yet still distinct from regular speech.⁸ This fascinated him, and he began formulating the idea that speech could be a more intuitively "American" way of singing, in that it reflects the American principles of pragmatism and directness. His early operas, such as the *in memoriam* . . . pieces, demonstrate his initial uses of speech as the primary sound in his musical composition. These works feature eight men and eight women seated in a circle, each with their own series of physical tasks or spoken lines to be performed. Many of the spoken lines are common phrases, such as "Listen to this. It's terrific!" or "T'ch, *my God!*" The reframing of ordinary speech as a musical event in *in memoriam* . . . *Kit Carson* reveals that at an early point in his compositional career, Ashley offered speech as an alternative to the bel canto style of singing for American opera.⁹

Ashley's interest in transforming artistic media was a central compositional concern as well as a salient part of his ideology. In his autobiography

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Frank J. Oteri, "Robert Ashley at home, in conversation with Frank J. Oteri," NewMusicBox.org, accessed October 2012, http://www.newmusicbox.org/assets/24/images/ashley_interview.pdf.

⁹ Here, the term "bel canto" is used to mean a singing style that uses particular breathing and phonation techniques as vocal pedagogues, such as Richard Miller and James McKinney, have described. These techniques are most commonly associated with opera, but to use the term "operatic singing" would be misleading, as bel canto is also used in chamber, theater, and choral music and in other contexts. For more discussion on *in memoriam* . . . *Kit Carson*, see Mariellen Sandford, *Happenings and Other Acts* (London; New York: Routledge 1995), 151–153.

and several interviews, he explains his belief that the format of the staged production is foreign to how Americans generally experience art or entertainment. According to Ashley, Americans have little context for events like orchestra concerts, recitals, or operas; going to one of these events is an exotic experience for most Americans, and he attributes this sense of foreignness to the format's establishment in eighteenth-century Europe.¹⁰ Ashley observes that the primary medium for the contemporary dissemination of art and entertainment in the United States is television, not only in terms of the pervasiveness of the appliance itself. Ashley explains that, unlike a staged work or even a film, television is not an event that is set apart from everyday life. Americans often will watch television for extended periods of time and watch it sporadically in the midst of social or domestic activity. This prolonged aesthetic experience, he notes, includes a greater degree of viewer control, as the viewer selects the programs and may change channels at any time.¹¹ The practices of watching television are fundamentally different from those of the stage with regard to how the viewer engages the medium; Ashley posits that these differences have contributed to the development of distinct idioms and conventions particular to television.¹² For Ashley, regardless of American subject matter, setting, or musical characteristics, the European connotations of the stage overwhelm any explicit American features of an opera. Reciprocally, television acts as an extension of the American consciousness in that it highlights the individuality of personal experience. In light of his observations about the social context of television, Ashley became convinced that television was the only viable medium for American opera.

Ashley's interest in the elements of media and speech led him to develop a cultural theory about America. Ashley was deeply interested in philosophy and metaphysics, and he used his compositions as vehicles for his critical discourse. He called the theory that underpins his operas the "migration of consciousness."¹³ In Ashley's theory, he uses the term "consciousness" to encompass identity and worldview, both of which he links to speech. He posits that as American consciousness diverged and eventually broke from European, it became increasingly fragmented.¹⁴ Ashley's choice

¹⁰ Bianca Michaels, "Opera for the Media Age: Composer Robert Ashley on Television," *Opera Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (2006): 537.

¹¹ Sumner, Burch, and Sumner, *The Guests Go in to Supper*, 101.

¹² Michaels, "Opera for the Media Age," 537–539.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Ashley's ideas and subsequent work nod to the longstanding tradition of American artists (such as Henry James, Albert Bierstadt, and John Steinbeck) who have responded to the "Old World/New World" dialectic and the deeply embedded correlation between land and identity in American New

of the term "migration" to depict the changes in American consciousness can be briefly explained by the ideas forwarded by Mary Carruthers in *The Book of Memory*. Carruthers discusses the mind's propensity to understand its own processes through the analogue of space. She elaborates on the long history of spatial heuristic devices as a way to organize and understand concepts.¹⁵ In Ashley's spatial analogue for his theory, he cites three phases in the development of American consciousness—linear, fragmented, and more fragmented with new meanings—and uses the westward migration of Americans as a metaphor to clarify his theory.¹⁶ Each phase of American consciousness is allegorized by a region of the United States and the type of human connection to that land that he believes that region engenders. Ashley explains that the Europeans who settled in America understood life as a series of linear, causal events, and spoke in a way that he calls "anecdotal."¹⁷ An "anecdote" can be described as a linearly unfolding narrative that would be commonly known among a community, which contributes to an understanding of life based on heritage and cultural identity. He locates this phase of American consciousness and speech within the geography of the East Coast. This region was temporally, geographically, and culturally closer to the Old World, and so Ashley characterizes the human connection with this land at that time as "architectural." He reasons that the physicality of

World consciousness. Though there is no direct acknowledgement of this debt in Ashley's interviews and extant writings, he participates in the ongoing dialogue between land, consciousness, and aesthetics that informs much of American art. For specific and thorough discussion of Ashley's work and the notion of landscape, see Arthur Sabatini, "The Sonic Landscapes of Robert Ashley," *Land/Scape/Theater*, eds. Elinor Fuchs and Una Chaudhuri (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 322–346.

¹⁵ The ideas forwarded by Mary Carruthers in *The Book of Memory* can also shed light on Ashley's choice of the term "migration" to depict the changes in American consciousness. In *The Book of Memory*, Carruthers discusses the mind's propensity to understand its own processes through the analogue of space. She elaborates on the long history of spatial heuristic devices as a way to organize and understand concepts. She explains: "Thus, what we would call an allegorical connection, and seek to attach to some real content (though that reality is conceptual rather than material), is understood here . . . as primarily a convenience, made necessary by the epistemological condition that no human being can have direct knowledge of any 'thing' . . . First of all, human memory operates in 'signs'; these take the form of images that, acting as cues, call up matters with which they have been associated in one's mind. So, in addition to being signs, all memories are also mental images." Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 117–118.

¹⁶ Sumner, Burch, and Sumner, *The Guests Go in to Supper*, 104–109.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

structures and monuments convey the idea of the past as a living part of the present.¹⁸

At the time he was composing these operas, Ashley believed that America was then in the second phase of consciousness.¹⁹ He observed that much of American speech consists of clichés and aphorisms, which he regards as remnants of anecdotes that were once common knowledge but are now lost. He reasoned that the disconnect between the sayings and their original stories demonstrates that American speech is no longer based in linearity, and that the American worldview no longer interprets life as a trajectory that grows out of the past and moves into the future. Additionally, the American view of the self is not based on heritage, but on defining moments of personal experience. He describes this phase of consciousness as "fragmented," similar to poststructuralist philosopher Jean-François Lyotard's "*petits récits*" ("little narratives"). Lyotard suggested that remnants of personal experience reveal the dissolved metanarrative of modernity.²⁰ In Ashley's theory "fragmentation" refers to the rupture of contemporary consciousness from its earlier phase and its resultant contemporary piecemeal nature, manifested in speech. He geographically associates this phase with the Midwest.²¹ Ashley describes the people/land relationship in this phase of consciousness as primarily "agricultural," which displays the dissolution of organizing life around Old World monumental structures (literal or metaphorical) and the subsequent appearance of wide-open spaces—spaces that facilitate the cultivation of individual identity and meaning.

The third phase is in the near future, when Americans will assign new meanings to their fragments of worldview, self-understanding, and speech. According to Ashley, this fragmented way of viewing the world and the self will be reconstructed into constellations of meaning that are highly personal, and fragments of speech will be appropriated and assume individualized meanings.²² Ashley does not characterize this region and epoch in American

¹⁸ Robert Ashley, *Atalanta Strategy*, directed by Lawrence Brickman (New York, NY: Lovely Music, 1984), VHS.

¹⁹ Ibid. This statement was made in 1981.

²⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 98.

²¹ Sumner, Burch, and Sumner, *The Guests Go in to Supper*, 104–109.

²² This idea bears similarity to McLuhan's idea of the retribalization of people through technology; it also anticipates the use of social media as a means of collecting and appropriating cultural fragments as expressions of identity and worldview. Additionally, Kay Dickinson, Angela McRobbie, and Sarah Thornton have forwarded the idea that youth culture in the 1990s and early 2000s is characterized by "pastiche" and by an indiscriminate and eclectic appropriation of past and present cultures. Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium Is the Message* (New York,

consciousness by a tangible relationship of people to landscapes, such as architecture or agriculture. Instead, he says this phase is represented by "genealogy." By this time in American cultural history, Ashley speculates that people's sense of being uprooted and transplanted will have become so strong that a search for one's present identity within events and personalities of the past will be a more significant "structure" (indicator of consciousness and culture) than physical landmarks.

Ashley's music does not explicitly explain his theory as much as demonstrates it. Each of his three television operas embodies one of the phases of consciousness. The first phase of American consciousness is demonstrated in *Atalanta*, which is vaguely set on the East Coast. This opera stylistically presents the Old World concept of linearity and culture of anecdotal speech through long arias and cascading vocal lines. These arias are sung in the conventional bel canto style of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century opera, and some parts are even in Italian. Additionally, the instrumentation of this opera draws from an orchestral palette that evokes the European operatic tradition, even though the instruments are mostly electronic.

In the second opera of the trilogy, *Perfect Lives*, Ashley uses fragmented anecdotal speech to represent the second phase of American consciousness. This work is set in the Midwest, and unlike the previous opera, it has no long arias. Instead, *Perfect Lives* is comprised of short songs, some of which are only a few measures, resembling a string of casually chanted aphorisms or clichés.²³ (Two examples of these curtailed, stylized, stock expressions are "Don't you read the Bible, man?" and "If that's the way it's gotta be, that's the way it's gotta be.") The vocal style is different from *Atalanta* as well. Rather than florid bel canto singing, Ashley's narration in *Perfect Lives* is delivered in a singsong manner that mostly follows the contours of regular speech, not unlike the style in which beat poetry is often read. When compared to the arioso style of *Atalanta*, the short lines in *Perfect Lives* and their recitatorial delivery demonstrate the "fragmentation" stage of consciousness, which according to Ashley is temporally and geographically situated in the middle of his proposed consciousness migration.

N.Y.: Random House, 1967), 1-14. Kay Dickinson, "Music Video and Synaesthetic Possibility," in *Medium Cool: Music Videos from Soundies to Cellphones*, eds. Roger Beebe and Jason Middleton (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 13-19. Angela McRobbie, *Postmodernism and Youth Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994). Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1996).

²³ Cole Gagne, *Soundpieces II: Interviews with American Composers* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1993), 16-33.

The final opera of the trilogy, *Now Eleanor's Idea*, is a tetralogy of operas: *Improvement*, *Foreign Experiences*, *eL/Aficionado*, and *Now Eleanor's Idea*. The tetralogy, set in the Southwest, represents Ashley's prediction about the future of American consciousness and speech. He projects that Americans in this phase will begin to reinterpret the meaning of speech fragments and make connections between these fragments that will be individually determined, based on subjective understanding of the sayings, and informed by personal experience. Stylistically, this is evident in Ashley's free use of diverse vocal styles and languages; he uses chanting, conventional singing, and regular speech, and he draws from both the Spanish and English languages, giving the listener a sense of an aural collage. The musical and linguistic connections that Ashley makes among different styles and languages demonstrate the future stage of his theory, in which Americans construct new meanings out of the fragments of their experiences.

Of the three operas, *Perfect Lives* is the most complete reflection of Ashley's theory because it is the only one that has been realized for television, which was crucial to the presentation of Ashley's "American" opera. *Perfect Lives* is about a nightclub singer and a piano player who come together in a small town for a music gig. They end up entangled in a ploy by two locals to steal all the money from a bank for one day and then return it as a kind of existential joke. However, understanding the opera's plot is ultimately less important than understanding the theory the opera presents. Much of the language in the opera is arranged to emphasize its sonic properties rather than to convey a clear, linear narrative. *Perfect Lives* reflects the conventions of its medium on several levels. It is designed as a television series, consisting of seven episodes that are each a commercial half-hour.²⁴ Ashley uses the medium idiomatically by imbuing his opera with abrupt changes in scene and character activity, warped visual content that treats literal subjects (for example, cows or a sidewalk) in an abstract manner, superimposition and juxtaposition of images, and manipulation of the alignments of visual and musical textures. As with the texts and singing style, the visual content of *Perfect Lives* also reflects the idea of fragmentation: its pieces are connected only by Ashley's constant narration.

Ashley's narration, only intermittently broken by Jill Kroesen and David Van Tieghem's unison vocal interjections, plays a central role in the opera's musical and visual events. The story Ashley recounts is fragmented

²⁴ "Commercial half-hour" is standard terminology in the television industry, used to mean the amount of time of a television show including commercial breaks. In the United States it was originally 24:40. During the 1980s, however, it was reduced to 22:00.

and consists of many non-causal, divergent episodes that are told in non-chronological sequence and linked only through seeming chance encounters. Moreover, Ashley's delivery of the story in brief vignettes, aphorisms, and abstract observations—things that, he divulged to an interviewer, were all "something that I have said or has been said to me"—reflect the fragmented nature of the narrative.²⁵ He also adopts the perspectives of different characters, which he traverses in a seamless manner. Without a conventional storyline to structure the events or the music, it is Ashley's uninterrupted speaking that guides the audience through the opera and offers the sole source of large-scale continuity.

Though Ashley's voice is ubiquitous, his physical presence is not; his voice is constantly separated from and rejoined with his bodily representation. The disembodiment of Ashley's voice occurs so frequently that it functions on a structural level, providing a sense of cadence when his voice and body are reunited. Examining how this device delineates structure in *Perfect Lives* can provide a way to understand the various levels at which this opera presents the fragmentation phase in Ashley's theory of the migration of consciousness. The structural use of the disembodied voice is common in popular music videos, which are also characterized by the fragmentation of sound, image, and text. For example, typically a singer is shown during introspective moments when philosophical deductions are made concerning the song's topic. Conversely, other characters or scenes appear during moments that recount more detailed, specific events described in the lyrics. This oscillation between the singer and the video's other characters often mirrors the song's transitions between verse and chorus.²⁶ Similarly, *Perfect Lives* uses the visible departure and return of Ashley's person to mediate the episodic musical and textural structure, ambiguous storyline, and frequent changes in perspective. Videographer John Sanborn remarked that *Perfect Lives* is "like a rock song," in that one does not really know "what the opera is all about, but that you get a certain feeling."²⁷ In this way, *Perfect Lives* and music videos both consider a topic or "feeling" rather than tell a linear story, and both use the disembodied voice to mark structure.

Ashley's work has not yet received extensive analytical treatment regarding its use of the disembodied voice (nor has the work of many other experimental, mixed-media artists, such as Joan Jonas and Christian

²⁵ Robert Ashley et al., *Four American Composers*, directed by Peter Greenaway (New York, NY: Mystic Fire Video, 1991), VHS.

²⁶ Carol Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 18.

²⁷ Ashley et al., *Four American Composers*.

Marclay), despite the fact that both film and television scholarship have thoroughly explored this device. Conventional television and film operas, like those of Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, have also relied heavily upon the disembodied voice. Marcia Citron points to the use of the disembodied voice as an extension of the aria tradition of "inward singing," which traditionally serves to further the narrative and provide the audience with insight into the characters' thoughts and motivations.²⁸ But, how can we interpret the use of this device when it doesn't seem to develop characters, or when it appears in works that do not have traditionally-defined characters or cohesive narratives, as in the case of *Perfect Lives*? In this light, music videos—which were initially criticized for their refusal to conform to narrative norms—become relevant sources for understanding what is at play contextually, theoretically, aesthetically, and experientially in works such as Ashley's television opera.

In her book *Experiencing Music Video*, scholar Carol Vernallis discusses how the fragmentation of narrative in music videos reflects the socio-historical context of an emerging postmodern worldview, in which discontinuity, collage, and pastiche are central to how people relate to the self and to broader culture.²⁹ Although some videos suggest a more linear narrative, Vernallis believes that even these videos tend to leave more questions than provide teleological answers about the relationships among images, text, and music. According to Vernallis, the open-ended nature of videos is strategic: just as most popular songs convey an emotional experience or topic rather than recount a linear narrative, videos present images that promote the consideration of the song's topic rather than suggest a coherent story.

Considering the aesthetic and technological similarities between popular music videos and Ashley's *Perfect Lives*, it can be instructive to adopt an analytical strategy that has been used to identify structure in multimedia, non-narrative, fragmented works, such as music videos. Vernallis considers music videos not as diegetic entities that enlist all musical and visual elements in support of a coherent story, but as works comprised of independent media that work in counterpoint to demonstrate, rather than describe, a topic that the song presents. Vernallis begins her analyses by selecting one prominent visual/sonic device in the video that marks pivotal moments. These moments serve as the structural framework, in which the

²⁸ Marcia Citron, "Subjectivity in the Opera Films of Jean-Pierre Ponnelle," *The Journal of Musicology* 22, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 203–240.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, ix–xv.

relationships among the sounds, images, and texts can be more closely examined. Though she does not explicitly use the term "disembodied voice," she describes other structural features that function in strikingly similar ways to the disembodied voice in *Perfect Lives*. Because Ashley and his vocal narration play the most significant role in *Perfect Lives*, Vernallis's methodology may reveal how the disembodied voice marks structure in the opera.

After identifying a video's pivotal moments, Vernallis determines whether the constituent elements of the video act in "conformation, complementarity, or contestation" with each other. She then considers how the cognitive effects created by these three types of media relationships demonstrate the song's topic.³⁰ Vernallis describes how conformation is prompted by the disembodied voice by observing that the separation of the voice and body facilitates the independence of the camera's motion and the soundtrack of music videos, thereby opening possibilities for the visual material to work with the sound in a less causal manner. She describes how the disembodied voice also allows the viewer to explore how visual melodic motifs complement each other. Complementary motifs do not always appear together, but their recurrence creates a sense of unity and invites the viewer to associate these different moments in the video.³¹ Additionally, Vernallis discusses ways in which the disembodied voice creates space for "contestation," and how contestation functions as a way to weaken causality between music and image. This disruption, according to Vernallis, creates a fluidity of power relations among the different components of the video and compels the viewer to take nothing for granted.³² This analysis can provide a model for examining the relationships among sound, image, and text that occur between instances of the disembodied voice in *Perfect Lives*.

Perfect Lives was conceived as a song cycle that Ashley eventually cobbled into an opera.³³ In the opera the original songs became different sections of each episode. These sections are divided by periods of time during which Ashley's voice is separated from his body. Bordered by these sections of Ashley's disembodied voice, each song demonstrates the relationships between sound, image, and text discussed by Vernallis. The songs that have one or more of these types of relationships yield more dimensions of

³⁰ Ibid., 156–166; 194–198.

³¹ Ibid., 215.

³² For example, Vernallis's analysis of Madonna's music video for the song "Cherish" notes instances of each of these three types of relationships that occur between the separation and reunion of Madonna's voice and body. Ibid., 221.

³³ Cole Gagne, *Soundpieces II*, 16–33.

interpretation, and thus serve as the best examples of Ashley's theory at work. In these songs, the relationship between visual content, melodic motives, vocal style, and text can be interpreted as an example of conformation, complementarity, or contestation. The fragmentation in *Perfect Lives* parallels the middle stage of Ashley's theory of the migration of consciousness—the move away from linearity to fragmentation—and points toward the final stage, at which point new connections can be made.

The opera begins with Ashley's voice narrating in a flowing, hypnotic manner. He tells a brief descriptive story about the dedicatee of the first episode of *Perfect Lives*, "The Park." The piano plays a slow stride bass in an irregular meter, which obscures the bar line and makes the music seem somewhat formless. The effect is emphasized since the listener expects the metric regularity associated with stride piano. Furthermore, the lilting quality produced by the irregular meter makes the music seem like it could go on endlessly.³⁴ On screen is an abstract sketch of a street: neon lines on a black background mark the road and telephone wires. The title of the opera and episode then appear, and other instruments used in the opera (the Polymoog and LinnDrum) are introduced. A steady drumbeat that persists throughout most the episode begins, and synthesized strings play a short swell at several durational intervals. Raoul de Noget (played by a silent Ashley), the nightclub singer who gets entangled in the locals' ploy to rob the bank, is shown sitting in his motel room, pouring himself a drink "in a plastic fluted glass, *sans ice*."³⁵

One of the first songs begins shortly after the camera leaves Raoul in his room, and Ashley is revealed for the first time as the narrator. Dressed in a different outfit than Raoul, he stands behind a microphone in a room that resembles a recording studio. The song is brief, yet it possesses instances of conformation, complementarity, and contestation among its sound, images, and text. Shortly after Ashley's voice and body are reunited, the words "Of Course/A Travelling Man" appear on the screen, and a group of high-pitched, synthesized descending tones chime softly, following a drum flip played by the electronic percussion. The text and visual image are in conformance early in the song: Ashley's voice is momentarily disembodied when he speaks the line, "He sits on the bed, both feet on the floor," and the scene dissolves to reveal Raoul in his motel room seated just as Ashley had described. At the same time, a synthesized string patch gently swells and then fades out,

³⁴ Kyle Gann, *Robert Ashley* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 60–64.

³⁵ Ashley, *Perfect Lives*, 3.

creating a sense of conformance between the sonic and visual transition. The continuation of the piano's leisurely stride pattern over the string swell echoes the flow of the seamless visual transition, which gives the piano part a complementary role in this scene.³⁶ However, the style of vocal articulation that Ashley adopts for this song is in contestation with the floating, dovetailed transitions in the instruments and the images; his speech is punctuated with short phrases, measured pauses between the phrases, and an emphasis on the metric regularity of his speech; each line of text possesses five syllables:

He sits on the bed [pause]
Both feet on the floor [pause]
He studies the ashtray [shorter pause]
and tries to rule out [shorter pause]
preference . . .

The metric regularity of Ashley's speech is emphasized by the drum flip, which marks the beginning of "he sits on the bed" and accents the pause after "preference," giving the percussion a complementary role in relation to the rhythm of Ashley's speech.

However, the drum flip is in contestation with the flow of the other instruments (i.e., the chimes and string patch) that seem to float arrhythmically over the rest of the musical texture. The drum flip is also in contestation with the visual transitions. While it appears to be loosely coordinated with moments of separation and reunion of Ashley's voice and body, the gradual dissolve between images makes it difficult to determine precisely when one image disappears and another appears. The definitive, hard edge of the drum flip directly contests the gentle visual transitions and makes the drum seem out of sync with the rhythm of the sequence of images. The direct juxtaposition and the respective rhythmic stability of both the drum and the visual transitions also create a tension that suggests polyrhythmic independence of the two elements. The independence and occasional contestation among the different instruments, musical figures, visual components, vocal style, and poetic meter in this song create a sense of fragmentation.

Another song that occurs later in "The Park" starts with a discussion of "permanence and impermanence" and is quickly followed by the reunion of Ashley's voice and body along with the appearance of the words "Allowed/Early Summer." The contestation between Ashley's speech and the

³⁶ Ibid., 63.

piano is initially the most noticeable feature of the song: the pace of Ashley's speech is slow and measured, while the piano's texture is busy and features virtuosic figures that follow one another in rapid succession. However, since there is little change in the tempi of Ashley's narration and the accompanying piano figures, their contestant relationship moves into the background, while the subsequent instances of conformation and complementarity are brought to the foreground.

The topic of the text in this scene is the delineation of "permanence" and "impermanence." Ashley's discussion of impermanence includes a list of "transitory categories," which are "physical, mental, and those things which are neither physical nor mental."³⁷ After the last item is listed, his voice is disembodied and there appears a field with rolling waves of grass against a stormy gray sky. The storm includes rain, but the rain curiously falls only in the far right quarter of the screen: the part of the screen that Ashley had occupied before the image of the field. The continuity of screen composition between the two seemingly unrelated images achieves the effect of complementarity. What is striking about this moment is the juxtaposition of the sonic contestation between Ashley's voice and the piano part with the visual complementarity between the two successive screen compositions. In other words, the relationship between the two sonic elements does not mirror the relationship between the visual elements. All of these disconnected elements highlight one connection between the two images: the space occupied by Ashley, literally and figuratively in the falling rain. The emphasis placed on the absence of Ashley's body in this moment creates tension that anticipates later resolution.

Following the disembodying of Ashley's voice and the subsequent visual transition to the field, Ashley says, "On the permanent side of this great division of reality was a notion they referred to as space. And by that term they meant neither conceptual space nor space as given by our senses. They meant connections."³⁸ The contour of Ashley's vocal inflection places "connections" at the end of the phrase, which gives it emphasis. As Ashley delivers these lines, a new percussion instrument begins a subtle crescendo that culminates on the word "connections," complementing Ashley's phrasing. The visual flow between images during these lines and the percussion's crescendo also demonstrates complementarity: the rhythm of the rolling grass matches the waving tree branches in the next scene, where a

³⁷ Ashley, *Perfect Lives*, 14.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 14–15.

bride and groom walk together through a park. The relationship between text and image suggests yet another instance of complementarity: the notion of connection discussed in the text is tangentially represented by the connection made between the bride and groom. The crescendo of the percussion initially seems as though it is also complementary to the tension built by the absence of Ashley's voice from his body. However, this instrument abruptly disappears from the musical texture before Ashley's body and voice are reunited, thwarting the viewer's expectation.

The conformance and complementarity between the opera's elements early in the work hints at a linear narrative and fixed characters, but as the opera continues to unfold, it fails to satisfy these expectations. Ashley draws his viewer into a broad cultural experience, described by post-structuralist thinkers as the fragmentation of metanarrative, linearity, and fixed meaning. Yet, Ashley does not abandon meaningful interaction between the constituent media in his opera. The contrapuntal approach to sound, image, and text in *Perfect Lives* highlights their interaction in a way that reflects our cognitive experiences. The two primary elements that Ashley regards as having shaped our consciousness—language and media—are not invisible, pristine vessels that carry contents of meaning; they indelibly shape our experiences, so much so that Marshall McLuhan suggested that the medium *is* the message.³⁹ As the interaction of the constituent media in *Perfect Lives* demonstrates, our interface with language and media in postmodern society has changed how we perceive ourselves and the world around us. This is the essence of Ashley's invitation to the viewer of *Perfect Lives*: to become critically aware of how media and language have changed and continue to change our consciousness. The visual use of written words and sounds, the sonic use of images, the musical use of speech, and the different conflicting, consonant, or complementary ways in which all of these elements interact concretize the discontinuity of how we experience ourselves and our world. On the other hand, they also show how, in spite of the discontinuities we experience, it is possible to construct meaning from them.

The applicability of Vernallis's methodology to both music videos and *Perfect Lives* complicates our understanding of genre boundaries. Sanborn said that television executives would "not even touch" *Perfect Lives* based solely on the fact that it was an "opera."⁴⁰ Ashley reshaped the

³⁹ McLuhan and Fiore, *The Medium Is the Message*. Reader should note that this summarizes the received view of McLuhan's work, but that he does not say the quote verbatim.

⁴⁰ Kevin James Holm-Hudson, "Music, Text, and Image in Robert Ashley's video opera *Perfect Lives*," (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1992), 232.

traditional genre of opera to reflect contemporary American media consumption, cultural practice, speech, and consciousness, but television networks did not share his vision. One wonders whether a different label for Ashley's work—such as Kevin James Holm-Hudson's term "epic music video"—would have elicited greater receptivity.⁴¹ Though this question can lead only to speculation, its inversion yields an interesting inquiry: given the new aesthetic parameters that Ashley sought to establish in *Perfect Lives*, could popular music videos be considered miniature operas? In interviews before and after the production of *Perfect Lives*, Ashley forwarded radically inclusive ideas of what constitutes "opera."⁴² The significant departures of *Perfect Lives* from operatic convention, as well as its aesthetic affinity with music video, suggest that a more fluid interpretation of genre is possible: one in which *Perfect Lives* could be considered an extended music video, or music videos could be considered condensed operas. This fluidity not only opens the discourse for reevaluating the boundaries that separate music video and opera, but also challenges traditional distinctions among all genres.

Perhaps more significant than its challenge to the concept of genre, *Perfect Lives* challenges the notion of consciousness. Postmodern philosophers have extensively discussed the fragmentation of consciousness, and some (for example, Derrida) have decided that fragmentation makes meaning impossible. Ashley's theory of the migration of consciousness presents an alternative view. The motion that is implied by the word "migration" implies that fragmentation is a phase that we pass through, which will eventually lead us to make our own connections. As the digital age unfolds, Ashley's idea that fragmentation will yield a more expansive network of personal connections seems increasingly relevant. By simply challenging our classifications of genre, Ashley fragments the metanarrative that governs how we perceive musical works; he also presents us with an opportunity to formulate new connections among different kinds of musical activity. Though *Perfect Lives* represents the fragmentation phase of the migration, Ashley continually reminds his audience that fragmentation is ultimately about connection. He does this by creating a variety of media relationships, while also establishing a persistent drive toward cadences marked by the disembodying and reunion of his voice and body. The last few

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Robert Ashley, "And So It Goes, Depending," and "Perfect Lives: An Opera-for-Television," in *Words and Spaces: An Anthology of Twentieth Century Musical Experiments in Language and Sonic Environments*, eds. Stuart Saunders Smith and Thomas DeLio (Lanham: University Press of America, 1989), 5–18.

lines of the song "Allowed/Early Summer" summarize the point of the opera and Ashley's theory: "On the permanent side of this great division of reality was a notion they referred to as space. And by that term . . . they meant connections. They decided that such space is irreducible and not transitory, and that it exists as long as one is alive. They wondered, naturally, what becomes of it."⁴³

⁴³ Ashley, *Perfect Lives*, 15.

Bibliography

- Ashley, Robert. "And So It Goes, Depending." In *Words and Spaces: An Anthology of Twentieth Century Musical Experiments in Language and Sonic Environments*. Edited by Stuart Saunders Smith and Thomas DeLio. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989.
- . *Atalanta Strategy*. Directed by Lawrence Brickman. New York, NY: Lovely Music, 1984. VHS.
- , John Cage, Philip Glass, and Meredith Monk. *Four American Composers*. Directed by Peter Greenaway. New York, NY: Mystic Fire Video, 1991. VHS.
- . Notes to *Atalanta (Acts of God): an opera*. Lovely Music CD 3301, 1997.
- . *Outside of Time: Ideas About Music*. Translated by Ralf Dietrich. Cologne: MusicTexte, 2010.
- . "Perfect Lives: An Opera-for-Television." In *Words and Spaces: An Anthology of Twentieth Century Musical Experiments in Language and Sonic Environments*. Edited by Stuart Saunders Smith and Thomas DeLio. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989.
- . *Perfect Lives*. Directed by John Sanborn. New York, NY: Lovely Music, 2005. DVD.
- . *Perfect Lives*. Santa Fe: Burning Books, 1991.
- . *Robert Ashley*. Accessed July 7, 2012. <https://www.robertashley.org>.
- Barnes, Jennifer. *The Rise and Fall of Opera for Television*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2003.
- Carruthers, Mary J. *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Citron, Marcia. "Subjectivity in the Opera Films of Jean-Pierre Ponnelle." *The Journal of Musicology* 22, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 203–240.
- Dickinson, Kay. "Music Video and Synaesthetic Possibility." In *Medium Cool: Music Videos from Soundies to Cellphones 2007*. Edited by Roger Beebe and Jason Middleton, 13–19. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.
- Gagne, Cole. *Soundpieces 2: Interviews with American Composers*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1993.
- Gann, Kyle. *American Music in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1997.
- . *Music Downtown: Writings from the Village Voice*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006.
- . "PostClassic: Kyle Gann on music after the fact." Accessed July 1, 2012. http://www.artsjournal.com/postclassic/2010/07/ashley_in_the_rear-view_mirror.html.

- . *Robert Ashley*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012.
- Holm-Hudson, Kevin James. "Music, Text, and Image in Robert Ashley's Video Opera *Perfect Lives*." PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1992.
- James, Richard S. "ONCE: Microcosm of the 1960s Musical and Multimedia Avant-Garde." *American Music* 5, no. 4 (Winter, 1987): 359–390.
- Jordan, Randolph. "The Visible Acousmetre: Voice, Body, and Space Across the Two Versions of Donnie Darko." *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* 3, no. 1 (2009): 47–70.
- Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- McLuhan, Marshall, and Quentin Fiore. *The Medium Is the Message*. New York: Random House, 1967.
- McRobbie, Angela. *Postmodernism and Youth Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Michaels, Bianca. "Opera for the Media Age: Composer Robert Ashley on Television Opera." *Opera Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 534–545.
- Oteri, Frank J. "Robert Ashley at home, in conversation with Frank J. Oteri." NewMusicBox.org. Accessed October 2012.
http://www.newmusicbox.org/assets/24/images/ashley_interview.pdf.
- Sabatini, Arthur J. "Robert Ashley: Defining American Opera." *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 27, no. 2 (May 2005): 45–60.
- Sandford, Mariellen R. *Happenings and Other Acts*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Smith, Stuart Saunders, and Thomas DeLio. *Words and Spaces: An Anthology of Twentieth Century Musical Experiments in Language and Sonic Environments*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989.
- Sumner, Melody, Kathleen Burch, and Michael Sumner. *The Guests Go in to Supper: John Cage, Robert Ashley, Yoko Ono, Laurie Anderson, Charles Amirkhanian, Michaeleppe, K. Atchley*. Oakland, CA: Burning Books, 1986.
- Thornton, Sarah. *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1996.
- Vernallis, Carol. *Experiencing Music Video: Aesthetics and Cultural Context*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.