Musical signification in Agata Zubel's opera-form *Bildbeschreibung*

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ABSTRACT. Discussions of genres are an important aspect of music semiotics. A genre plays a significant role in social communication, being a powerful code that connects the composer with the listeners. This also refers to the opera genre, which underwent profound transformations in the 20th and at the beginning of the 21st century.

Genre transgressions are a characteristic feature of the operatic oeuvre of Agata Zubel, an outstanding Wrocław-based composer and vocalist. Her output includes three works. The most recent one, *Bildbeschreibung*, based on a text by Heiner Müller (2016), is the subject of this article, the aim of which is to discuss the individual way in which Zubel interprets the principles of this long-established genre. The starting point is the analysis of Müller's dramatic work, which the composer used in its entire form to construct the libretto. This is followed by the discussion of the form and structure of Zubel's opera, expression and the relations between the music and the dramatic text, which significantly affect the constituent elements of the operatic work.

My research aim is to reveal the new genre, thematic, structural and aesthetic solutions that Zubel's opera brings, as well as the specific inter-genre nature and hybridity of her work.

Discussions of genres are an important aspect of music semiotics. A genre plays a significant role in social communication, being a powerful code that connects the composer with the listeners. This also refers to the opera genre, which underwent profound transformations in the 20th and at the beginning of the 21st century, as it no longer satisfied the expectations of composers and audiences. After the Second World War, opera became a field for numerous experiments, as a new preference for mixed genres and hybrid, ambiguous forms developed.

Genre transgressions are also a characteristic feature of the operatic oeuvre of Agata Zubel, an outstanding Wrocław-based composer and vocalist of the middle generation. The opera genre is particularly close to her heart because of her parallel career as a vocalist of worldwide renown. At the same time, however, she has always found it difficult to

accept the artificial nature of opera.[1] This inner conflict inspired the composer to search for new solutions in her subsequent works, employing stage dramaturgy such as in the opera-ballet *Between* (2008), the drama-opera *Oresteja* [Oresteia] based on Aeschylus (2011) and the opera-form *Bildbeschreibung* based on the text by Heiner Müller (2016). In each composition, Zubel interprets the principles of the long-established genre in a different way. The aim of the article is to present her modern approach to the criteria of operatic style in her most recent work.

Bildbeschreibung is an opera that was commissioned by the Klangforum Wien and the Adam Mickiewicz Institute.[2] It was composed in 2016 for two voices, instrumental ensemble (24 musicians) and electronics. Agata Zubel called it an opera-form. In this work, she synthesised all her previous experiences with the dramatic musical form. It is an elaborate musical composition lasting almost two hours. It was premiered in Bolzano during the Transart Festival in 2018, and then performed at the Warsaw Autumn festival in Warsaw and at the Konzerthaus in Vienna in the same year. The composition has so far only been presented in a concert version, but has not been staged.

The opera was composed based on the text entitled *Bildbeschreibung* (*Description of a Picture*) (Müller 2005) by the outstanding German playwright Heiner Müller.[3] The text, written in 1984, was commissioned by the contemporary art festival Steirischer Herbst

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1 The composer has discussed her issues with the opera genre in an interview entitled *Agata Zubel. Mam problem z operą* [I have a problem with the opera], conducted by Anna Skulska for the Polish Radio. Zubel admitted: 'The opera with its artificial nature was a problematic genre to me, and for many years I couldn't come to terms with it. Does it have to be like that, or can it be different? I was constantly searching for answers to these questions in my subsequent works employing stage dramaturgy.' (*Agata…* 2012). See also: Szczecińska (2010a: 3).

2 The work was composed as part of the Polish Music and POLAND 100 Programme – an international cultural programme financed by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage within the Independent 2017–2021 Multiannual Programme.

3 Heiner Müller (1929–1995) was a playwright, prose writer, poet, editor, and theatre director, considered the most important playwright after Bertolt Brecht. In his dramas, he mostly brings to light the problems and complexes of the former East German society and depicts a world that needs thorough reform and moral revival. His oeuvre, which derives from Brechtian avant-garde, goes through various stages from deconstruction to almost total disintegration of a classical text, showing clear influences of Kafka and the Kafkian world. His most important plays include: *Germania Tod* and *Berlin* (1956), *Der Bau* (1964), *Die Hamletmaschine* (1977), *Philoktet* (1979) and *Quartett* (1981). See: (Heiner 2015). Müller repeatedly expressed his sceptical attitude towards the opera as a stage genre. Ironically, his texts drew the interest of musicians and composers. Before Agata Zubel, they had been adapted by such composers as, e.g., Wolfgang Rihm, Georges Aperghis, and Heiner Goebbels. Müller participated in opera revival projects in the 1980s, formulating, among others, the *Sechs Punkte zur Oper*.

Illustration 1. Emilia Kolewa's drawing (1984). Reproduced from: Lehmann, Primavesi (eds) [2003: 121].

in Graz and inspired by a drawing by a Bulgarian stage design student, Emilia Kolewa, who depicted her own dream (See Illustration 1).[4]

In his autobiography *Krieg ohne Schlacht*, the playwright stated that the drawing inspired his imagination with its imperfection and uncertainty (Müller 1992, Wood 2020). He considered his work to be a kind of 'landscape of imagination' (Harbordt 2010) that could be presented in theatrical form. Repeated attempts to stage performances based on it revealed the interpretive potential it hides (*Warszawska…* 2018). Müller's work does not have the typical features of a dramatic text, as there is no plot, no parts or dialogues, thus any stage adaptation requires that an individual key to its hidden meanings must be found. The drama consists of one complex sentence that takes up as many as eight pages, is divided only by commas, colons and semicolons, and finally ends with a dot like a dropping curtain. This one lengthy sentence turns out to be exactly what the title suggests – a description of the picture drawn by the student. It starts with an enumeration of the figures and objects shown in the picture, then the author presents their possible meanings and presumed relationships between them, giving an extensive list of more or less likely speculations as to what could have led to the situations now frozen in stillness on canvas (Sugiera 2008: 171; Wood 2020). The description breaks down the spatial and temporal framework of the picture, suggesting only possible situations

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4 The drawing was included in the book: *Heiner Müller–Handbuch: Leben – Werk – Wirkung* (Lehmann, Primavesi (eds) 2003: 121).

and sexual abuse. The likelihood of violence is alluded to by almost every aspect of the picture: from a tree whose fruit may be poisonous to a woman's blood-stained fingernail or a broken chair. Violence is related to the main characters presented in the text: a man, a woman and a bird.

Description of a Picture contains a number of intertextual relations. From the author's note at the end of the piece, we learn that the text 'can be read as an overpainting of Euripides' *Alcestis* citing the Noh play *Kumasaka*, the Eleventh Canto of the *Odyssey* and Hitchcock's *The Birds*' (Müller 1985: 71). The text – as we can read further on – 'describes a landscape beyond death. The plot is optional, as its consequences are past, an explosion of memory in an extinct dramatic structure' (Müller 1985: 71).

Müller's *Description of a Picture* is a unique kind of work, as it shows neither a logically progressing development of events nor a theatrical plot building towards a final resolution. The author did not specify the characters' names or indicate their parts, he did not include dialogues or stage directions. What we encounter in his work is a constant process of reinterpretation of the situations shown in the picture and verification of the interpretative guesses. The audience is under the illusion that they understand the text. In this way the author engages into a continuous play with the audience in which they constantly have to make choices between equivalent variants and options. According to Müller, *Description of a Picture* is 'an autodrama, a theatrical play that you stage with yourself and play with yourself (quoted after: Sugiera 2008: 173). It is a text that is primarily about imagination (Szwarcman 2018).

The work by the German playwright proved to be deeply inspiring for Agata Zubel. As she admitted: 'Setting it to music with its senses and meanings, taking up the story, the dramatic situation frozen in time, and retelling it in sound was a great challenge' (Dąbrowska 2018). According to the composer's idea, 'he and she – two singer-actors – are stuck in a picture, constantly commenting on the position they have found themselves in or the supposed path that has led to it. The musicians are also part of the picture. The listener gradually discovers new elements. The path arranged across the musically composed space is a passage through the picture' (Zubel 2018).

The libretto is based on Müller's entire dramatic work and preserves the original German text. In Zubel's version it is presented not only by singers but also by instrumentalist-soloists, as the spoken text has been interlaced into their parts, which allowed the composer to construct a 'garrulous' narration woven of sounds and words (Nowicka 2017), so characteristic of the story being related.

The structure of Zubel's opera is different from that of Müller's drama. The latter constitutes an indivisible whole in terms of form; it contains no plot, no parts or

dialogues, and thus to interpret it, the composer had to find her own key to it. Zubel's opera consists of five parts, analogous to large instrumental and vocal-and-instrumental forms, e.g., a symphony. There is no division into numbers and acts or scenes. Apart from the libretto, which provides dramatic action, this dramatic musical work is made up of vocal musical (solo and ensemble) parts, recitation and instrumental parts. The solo parts include arias for soloist-vocalists (the man and the woman) and 'arias' (solo parts) for musician-actors as well as spoken fragments which they recite (speak); there are also sections performed by an ensemble consisting of several solo voices. An important element of the opera-form – as Agata Zubel called her work – are the instrumental parts including a tape-recorded introduction and separate fragments played by individual instruments. As for stage setting, the performances to date (in Bolzano, Warsaw and Vienna) did not provide for this element since the work was presented in a concert form. Thus, the only elements of theatricalisation were the play of light and the spatial arrangement of the musicians (eight soloists playing flutes, bass and contrabass clarinets, alto saxophone (tubax), double trumpet, cello, double bass and keyboard), who were seated on platforms around the audience, while the rest of the chamber orchestra was placed at the front, with the two singers – Agata Zubel (soprano) and Frank Wörner (baritone) – and the conductor before them (See Illustration 2).
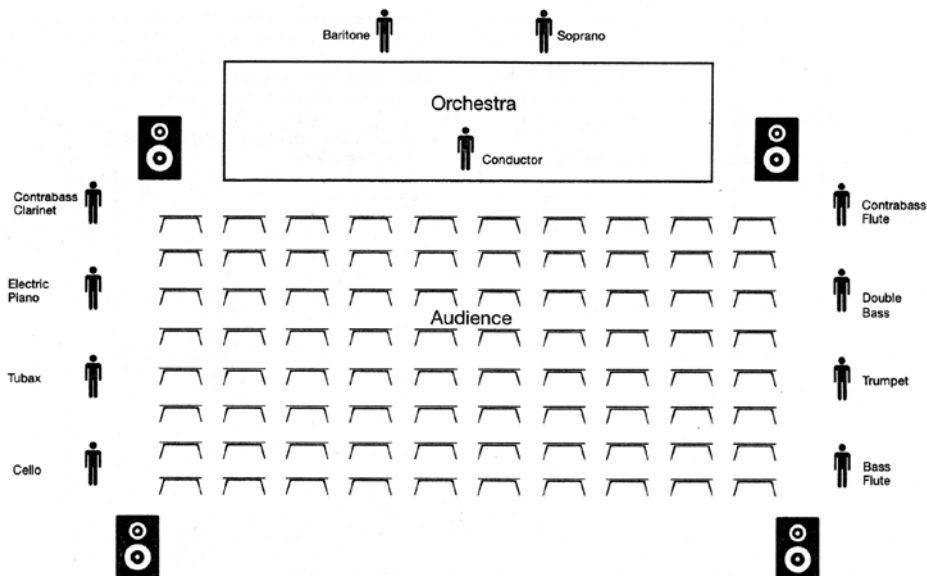

Illustration 2. A. Zubel, *Bildbeschreibung* – arrangement of performers. Reproduced from Zubel [2017: IX].

In the score the composer gives yet another suggestion for the arrangement of musician-actors in the first part of the opera (See Illustration 3).
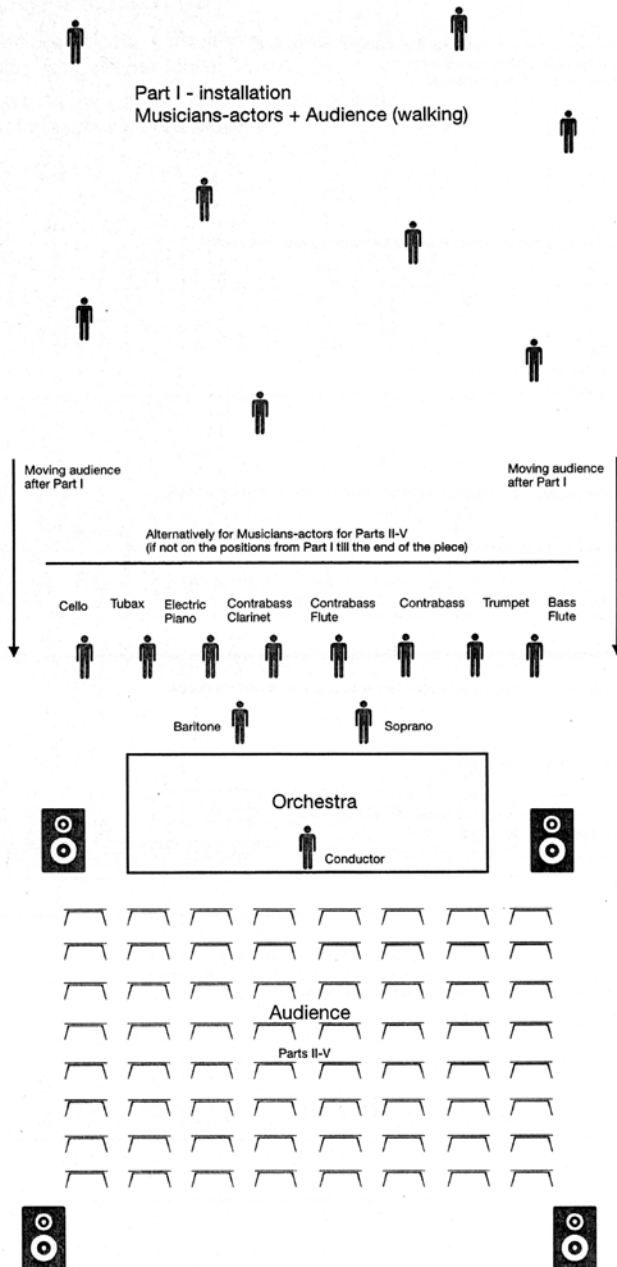

Illustration 3. A. Zubel, *Bildbeschreibung* – alternative arrangement of performers in Part I. Reproduced from Zubel [2017: XI].

This would see the musician-actors positioned across a large space behind the orchestra so that the audience could stroll between them. The first part would then consist of eight 'arias' performed by instrumentalist-soloists, which the audience could listen to in any order, thus forming a kind of installation.[5] Zubel's opera-form has been enriched with an acting element, thanks to which it gained an attractive and dynamic character. The stageability of the work, even in its concert version, determines its theatrical nature.

The five-part composition follows a dramatic structure consisting of: exposition, inciting event, rising action, climax, falling action and resolution. This model and the structure of Müller's dramatic text, which has no plot, are different in this sense. Zubel's work begins with a recitation of the text by the man ('A landscape between steppe and savannah, the sky Prussian blue'[6]), which is followed by virtuosic solo passages performed by the musician-actors, who not only play but also speak or blow the words of the text, sometimes divided into syllables, into (wind) instruments between the sounds (See Example 1).

Example 1. A. Zubel, *Bildbeschreibung*, Part I – a virtuosic passage by the double bassist-actor. Reproduced from: Zubel (2017: 6).

The listener discovers the elements of the picture: the table and chairs, the bird, the tree, the clouds, the sun, the sky, etc., which reveal some mystery, evoke dread and cruelty. In Part II we get to know new characters – the man and the woman, and questions arise: What is going on? What has happened to them? Part III reveals the supposed circumstances that have led to the characters' present situation depicted in the picture.

5   For the arrangements of performers, see the score (Zubel 2017: IX–XI).
6   'Eine Landschaft zwischen Steppe und Savanne, der Himmel preussisch blau' (Müller 2005: 478).

What follows is a moment of reflection on the meaning of the individual elements of the picture and the situations being described, however, due to the ambiguous expressions used in the text, it is impossible to grasp its sense, one may only presume what has happened. Such moments of reflection coincide with fragments containing long rhythmic values in instrumental parts, which separate the sections of text presentation. In this entire part, the composer consistently builds up the tension, the dramatic effect increases until an emotional culmination is reached featuring a duet by the woman and the man (See Example 2).

Example 2. A. Zubel, *Bildbeschreibung*, Part III, b. 141–148 – expressive culmination, duet by the woman and the man. Reproduced from: Zubel (2017: 88).

Part IV includes a few more dramatic twists. In the middle, there is an elaborate aria by the woman accompanied by electronics, there are also several minor culminations, and just before the pause, the instrumentalist-soloists speak the words 'or maybe' (*oder vielleicht*) and 'probably' (*warscheinlich*) alternately, hinting only at the possibility of sexual abuse and murder having been committed. The final, fifth part starts with theatrical gestures performed by the musician-actors, which are not accompanied by any sound. Then, the same musicians speak to their instruments, whilst simultaneously gesturing (See Example 3).

Example 3. A. Zubel, *Bildbeschreibung*, Part V, b. 18–23 – soundless gestures performed by the musician-actors and speaking to their instruments. Reproduced from: Zubel (2017: 176).

A duet by the woman and the man follows, and then the text presented by the instrumentalist-soloists is gradually deconstructed – broken down into individual words. The drama has already been played out, but questions remain: Is everything different? Who ponders over the picture? Are the man and the woman in the picture us? These questions are asked in the final aria by the man and in the coda. The listeners are constantly under the illusion that they understand the content of the drama. Everything is played out in their imagination.

A distinctive feature of Zubel's opera is its emotional intensity. This expressiveness is achieved through articulation, timbre and breaking with established vocal production conventions. The composer broadens considerably the expressive potential of the human voice, often employing quasi-realistic means of expression, such as speech, whisper, tongue slapping or sighing during exhalation; she also uses avant-garde measures, e.g., *Sprechgesang*, vocalisation and speech polyphony, yet without renouncing classical singing. Another technique she employs is the frequent change of vocalisation method used, e.g., singing (vocalise), which includes microtonal deviations, is followed by speech (p. 87 or 102). The composer's experiments with the human voice are an attempt at finding a kind of expression that would correspond to contemporary reality (Nowicka 2017). Articulation plays an important role in constructing the opera's expression and timbral aspect, just as in Zubel's other vocal and instrumental works, being diverse and different

for each group of instruments. The composer often employs non-conventional methods of sound production, e.g., muted sounds, preparation with the use of a pencil rubber or screws, soundless glissando on white keys in the case of the piano, or producing air noise only, striking the keys, tongue ram and a jet-like sound in the case of wind instruments. The sophisticated sound of traditional instruments is enhanced by the use of electronics.

Zubel's opera is characterised by a rich timbre which she achieves, among other things, thanks to the use of numerous percussion instruments including both traditional ones and those more rarely used (cajón, boobams, udu, lion, peng-pong bells, mokubios, ratchest), as well as non-conventional ones, e.g., everyday objects like sticky tape, spring drum thunder tube and sand papers. They are the source of original sounds produced with the use of various means of articulation and different mallets.

When analysing Zubel's opera in terms of word-music relations, it should be noted that the music complements the text, which is the source of dramatic effect. The composer tries to bring out the expression of the word and emphasise the ambiguity of the text. Sometimes she underscores single words carrying meanings and senses. Her music harmonises perfectly with the complexity of thoughts and emotions that Heiner Müller wished to convey, marking its presence where the message cannot be expressed by words.

The opera by Agata Zubel, which has been discussed here, brings up new genre, thematic, structural and aesthetic solutions. This is an example of a genre hybrid. *Bildbeschreibung* incorporates elements of instrumental music genres such as symphony and concert, as well as experimental theatrical forms such as instrumental theatre or installation. The specifically inter-genre nature and hybridity of Agata Zubel's work gives the opera a chance to be freed from restraining patterns and conventions. *Bildbeschreibung* is an attempt to modernise the genre in order to get better contact with a contemporary listener. This composition stems from the need to adjust opera to the times in which we live.

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Muzikos signifikacija Agatos Zubel operoje-formoje „Bildbeschreibung"

SANTRAUKA. Diskusija apie žanrus yra svarbus muzikos semiotikos aspektas. Žanras atlieka reikšmingą vaidmenį socialinėje komunikacijoje, nes yra galingas kodas, jungiantis kompozitorių su klausytojais. Tai pasakytina ir apie operos žanrą, kuris XX a. ir XXI a. pradžioje patyrė esminių transformacijų. Opera tapo daugybės eksperimentų lauku, nes atsirado naujas mišrių žanrų ir hibridinių, įvairialypių formų pasirinkimas.

Žanro transgresijos taip pat būdingos žymios Vroclavo kompozitorės ir vokalistės Agatos Zubel operinei kūrybai. Jos kūrinių sąraše – trys šio žanro opusai. Naujausias iš jų, „Bildbeschreibung" pagal Heinerio Müllerio tekstą (2016), nagrinėjamas šiame straipsnyje. Jame siekiama atskleisti, kaip savitai autorė interpretuoja nusistovėjusio žanro principus. Libreto atskaitos taškas – Müllerio drama, kurią kompozitorė, kurdama libretą, panaudojo visą ištisai. Straipsnyje taip pat aptariama operos forma ir struktūra, išraiška bei muzikos ir dramos teksto santykiai, reikšmingai veikiantys operos sudedamąsias dalis.

Žodžio ir muzikos santykio analizė parodė, kad muzika papildo tekstą, o jis savo ruožtu lemia kūrinio dramaturgiją. Kompozitorė siekia išryškinti žodžio ekspresiją ir sustiprinti teksto dviprasmiškumą. Kartais ji paryškina atskirus žodžius, turinčius specifinę reikšmę ir prasmę. Jos muzika puikiai dera su visa sudėtinga H. Müllerio dramos minčių ir emocijų sfera, ir žymi jų buvimą ten, kur mintis negali būti perteikta žodžiais.

Agatos Zubel operos formoje atsiskleidžia nauji žanriniai, teminiai, struktūriniai ir estetiniai sprendimai. Tai žanrinis hibridas, jungiantis instrumentinės muzikos žanrų (simfonijos, koncerto) elementus su eksperimentinio teatro formomis (instrumentiniu teatru ar instaliacijomis). Susitelkusi į tarpžanrinį operos pobūdį ir hibridiškumą, Agata Zubel sugebėjo išlaisvinti ją nuo varžančių šablonų ir konvencijų. „Bildbeschreibung" – tai bandymas modernizuoti žanrą siekiant priartinti jį prie šiuolaikinės publikos.

REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI:
operos žanras, šiuolaikinė lenkų muzika, Agata Zubel, socialinė komunikacija, muzikos signifikacija.