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**OPERA AND THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF MEANING:
A CULTURAL STUDIES ANALYSIS OF "AIDA"**

by

Dawna A. Ventura

A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Sociology and Anthropology

**Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario**

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Opera and The Social Production of Meaning:
A Cultural Studies Analysis of "Aida"

submitted by Dawna Ventura, B.A.
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

Valda Blundell, Co-supervisor

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Chair, Department of Sociology and Anthropology

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ABSTRACT

This thesis demonstrates how expressive aesthetic cultural forms such as opera can be examined using an anthropological approach informed by the interdisciplinary field of cultural studies. Proponents of cultural studies suggest that hegemonic ideologies are frequently encoded in the discursive strategies employed in "texts" and that these ideological encodings (re)produce the dominant or "preferred" attitudes in society at a particular moment in history. Guiseppe Verdi's opera *Aida* will be "read" as a text to demonstrate some of the ideological encodings in this opera.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Between 1980 and 1989 I was employed by a Canadian non-governmental organization and as a result I travelled extensively within three countries in Southern Africa. This work provided me with opportunities for informal anthropological experiences including my participation in several indigenous ceremonies and rituals in Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland. Interpretation of these events provided by local acquaintances and friends led me to appreciate the significance of performance theatre and music, not only as modes of entertainment, but also as mediums for the expression of the historical and mythological pasts of local African cultures.

Understanding these events was useful to me given specific social and political tensions that confronted me while I was working in countries in close proximity to the Republic of South Africa at a time when apartheid policies were in place there. I found that public responses with regards to apartheid policies were sometimes manifested in informal and formal dramatic episodes, frequently through allegorical disguise.

These experiences in Southern Africa motivated and inspired me to conduct graduate research on contemporary genres of performance theatre in industrialized societies, particularly opera which has been a long standing interest of mine. This thesis represents the culmination of that research.

Opera has received the attention of a number of disciplines; indeed it calls for a multidisciplinary approach especially when one understands the multiplicity of art forms that must be brought together to produce opera (Lindenberger 1984). According to Lang "no other genre has ever been the subject of so many theorizing prefaces and exegesis as opera" (1971:15). Along with other anthropologists interested in aesthetic expressive forms my primary concern is with the role that opera plays in a given society, particularly the role that opera, as an art form, plays in reproducing culturally distinctive ways of understanding the world. When it comes to understanding the social functions of opera it appears from my research that most writers about opera pay little attention to the social role of this art form. More specifically, they do not focus much attention on the role of opera as a medium for the articulation of knowledge, in particular knowledge that reflects the dominant views held by a group at a particular historical moment in time.

The purpose of this thesis is to contribute to our understanding of the role of opera in society, especially its

role in (re)producing knowledge. A related goal that I will elaborate in Chapter 2 is to open up the study of opera to the methods and perspectives developed in cultural studies, an interdisciplinary field that has been influenced by anthropology and in turn has influenced it. That is to say, not only does this thesis hope to contribute to a more critical anthropology informed by cultural studies, but it also provides an example of how anthropologists can study contemporary expressive aesthetic cultural forms.

As this thesis will demonstrate, an anthropology of art informed by cultural studies envisions opera as symbolic production, that is, as a system of signifying signs which, firstly, reproduces meanings that reflect the dominant interests of a particular historical period and, secondly, as socially produced in a given context. An anthropology of art informed by cultural studies conceptualizes art forms as "texts"¹ that are socially produced in a given historical context.

¹ The concept of "text" will be explicated in Chapter 2.

My focus in this thesis is on Guiseppe Verdi's operatic composition *Aida*.² I intend to argue that *Aida* reveals more about its own time (the late nineteenth century) than the much earlier period in which it is purportedly set. The question of when *Aida's* story is set cannot be ascertained precisely, although Nagler (1981) suggests that the writer of the original story had at his disposal an Egyptian dynastic past that comprised some three thousand years.

This particular opera has been selected over others as my focus because it reflects *Aida's* international currency as one of the most spectacular examples of Grand Opera ever produced in operatic history. My choice also demonstrates a desire to study an opera from the latter part of the nineteenth century, when the end of the Great Romantic Period was fast-approaching and the intellectual climate in Europe was on the threshold of realism. Robinson (1985) notes that realism was not merely a political phenomenon, but also the dominant artistic impulse. Artistic creativity was both oriented toward and reflected the social realities of the day. It is my idea that the opera *Aida* is also representative of some of the social realities of its own time, particularly as

² I will use italics to distinguish opera titles from characters who might have the same name.

these "realities" relate to the interests of the dominant class.

As noted above my own fondness for opera has also motivated this entire project, and implicit is an obvious lack of neutrality that cannot be reconciled with the demands of positivist social sciences. However, as one of the leading proponents of a cultural studies perspective on art, Janet Wolff, notes in her discussion of the futility of claims to aesthetic neutrality when studying various cultural productions, "by virtue of choosing a particular art to study one has already made an evaluative, aesthetic judgement. So much for neutrality" (1993(a):105).³

The argument to be advanced in this thesis, then, is that *Aida*, as an example of symbolic production, can be analyzed using a cultural studies approach and that such an analysis helps us understand the social role of this opera in producing certain forms of knowledge. Such an analysis takes into account a number of premises. Firstly, as noted above, opera must be analyzed within its context. Opera does not emerge in a vacuum: as a genre it has a history and it is the creation

³ Janet Wolff also elaborates her conception of aesthetics as a discipline with its own social history and the implications this holds for a sociology of art in The Social Production of Art 1993(b).

of human beings who are part of a specific society and cultural setting and share common cultural traditions and constitute/comprise "authors", so that opera is not the product of (a sole) genius. As a totality opera's "authors" are influenced by the musical conventions of a give time and place (Martorella 1982). Secondly and following from this, opera is a socially produced text. Finally, opera works to influence works to influence the way in which audiences make t . . . world meaningful.

Cultural studies integrates both a production and text based approach as a comprehensive way to understand the potency of this cultural event as a communicative system of knowledge. Such analysis calls into question certain social, political and economic variables that, collectively, impacted the outcome of the cultural product. Therefore, i want also to consider why *Aida* emerged when it did and toward this end I will examine the lives and agendas of the key people involved in its "authorship" to determine their role in bringing this opera to life.

Finally, I want to add that I make no claim to a knowledge of musical notation and an interpretation in this direction will not be offered. Basically, my thesis is narrative-oriented, that is, I am interested in the libretto of the opera that should make this research amenable to those people who want to know more about opera but are not adept at reading musical patterns and notation.

Defining Opera

Before proceeding to indicate how this thesis is organized I want to address the question of what opera is. For many people opera represents many different things. However, anybody in the West who is even remotely familiar with opera is aware that it involves a combination of words and music, usually performed in the formal setting of the opera house, or in exceptional cases in large stadiums or amphitheatres, as was the case for the 1988 mega-production of *Aida* at Montreal's Olympic Stadium, and more recently Puccini's *Turandot*.

According to Orrey, opera is defined in the seventeenth century as "dramma per musica - drama through music" (1987: 7). Contemporary definitions do not depart radically from this three-hundred-year-old definition. For instance, The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines opera as "dramatic performance or composition of which music is an essential part" (1982: 714). In each of these definitions we are reminded of the interdependent relationship between music and text, after all "music alone cannot create 'dramatis personae'; to do so it must align itself with words" (Lang 1971: 15). In articulating their views on how to undertake an analysis of opera, musicologists Parker and Abbate emphasize that it is this important relationship between the music and text that "has made it idiosyncratic and special, certainly different and fundamental" (1989: 7).

Furthermore, at the most basic level, we know that opera is stage performance which as Peacock suggests is "not necessarily more meaningful than other events in one's life, but it is more deliberately so; a performance is, among other things, a deliberate effort to represent, to say something about something" (cited in Schechner 1990: 208).

Thus, in his consideration of a more appropriate definition of opera on the basis that the word opera harbours too many built-in prejudices and begs too many questions, Orrey (1987) argues for the term "lyric stage" to capture the performative aspects of opera which the former definitions fail to explicate.

Other writers, such as music historian Robert Donington endeavour to neutralize the relationship between text and music (perhaps in response to the voluminous scholarship that reinforces the text's inferior status). Donington conceptualizes opera as "a drama with essentially characters and situation unfolding through words, music and staging to a resolution which will be the more convincing the more inevitably it grows out of those characters and situations" (1990: 189).

It appears from the writings of music historians and musicologists that opera is defined and redefined according to the direction one wishes to take in conducting one's investigations. Therefore it is appropriate that my own conception of opera should also provide a sense of the

objective of this thesis and I seek one that is compatible with an anthropologically-informed cultural studies. Moreover, because my thesis is oriented toward the exploration of *Aida* as a text which (re)produces meaning, a working definition that more accurately reflects my overall aim is called for.

Earlier I suggested that a cultural studies approach would envision opera as symbolic production, that is a system of signifying signs that generate meaning. To this end, I define opera for the purpose of this thesis, and with music as an adjunct, as a culturally and temporally specific mode of articulating a particular view of the world – opera enacts and reenacts a specific body of knowledge. Significantly, I want to know whose body of knowledge is being articulated or whose interests are being served by the meanings promoted through this opera.

THESIS ORGANIZATION

The organization of this thesis is as follows: Chapter 2 discusses the theoretical perspective and methods which inform this thesis and elaborates the way I draw upon cultural studies as well as the way I see cultural studies reforming anthropology. As we shall see, the methodology that I will use combines content/interpretative analysis informed in particular by three critical theorists whose writings are central to a cultural studies perspective on aesthetics.

These writings are by Susan McClary, Edward Said and Michael Cormack.

Chapter 3 provides a brief overview of the rise of opera in Italy and France as well as a discussion of its development through to the end of the nineteenth century. A comprehensive genealogy is not intended, rather a glimpse into the emergence of various genres in both the Italian and French traditions. Of importance is an understanding of Grand Opera, which is *Aida* par excellence! This chapter is especially important because it locates *Aida* within the history of opera and indicates, in particular, how grand opera, of which *Aida* is an example, emerged.

Chapter 4 turns to my analysis of *Aida* drawing on the theoretical work reviewed in Chapter 2. The focus in Chapter 4 is on the production of *Aida* by multiple authors within a particular social, political, economic and ideological context. Stated succinctly, in this chapter I want to understand whose interests were being served by the opera.

Chapter 5 will provide a partial textual reading of the *Aida* libretto in an effort to trace some of the ideological determinations that give this form its meaning. In other words, I will attempt to demonstrate how *Aida* rearticulates and reconstructs a set of "preferred" attitudes and views that embody stereotypes and images pertaining to the racial other, gender relations, and class and power relations.

Chapter 6 will provide my concluding remarks together with a review of some notable performances of *Aida* in the twentieth century as a way of pointing to future directions in which the study of opera could proceed. I will also provide a brief discussion of European style opera in North America and finally, look at the question of why people keep returning to see the same opera over and over again.

CHAPTER 2

ANTHROPOLOGY AND CULTURAL STUDIES

As I indicated in the introduction, this thesis examines the opera *Aida* from a cultural studies perspective. I have also suggested that anthropologists with interests in contemporary cultural productions are drawing upon a body of critical theory including ideas developed in the interdisciplinary field of cultural studies. I will review the key concepts and approaches that inform the analysis I will offer in subsequent chapters and in the process I will also consider, albeit briefly, the origins and development over the past half century of cultural studies.⁴

⁴ For a history of Cultural Studies see Graeme Turner, 1990, British Cultural Studies; Richard Johnson, 1986, "What is Cultural Studies Anyway?" in Social Text:Theory/Culture/Ideology, Vol. 16, pp. 38-80; and Simon During (Eds.), 1993, A Cultural Studies Reader. For a review of cultural studies in Australia, Canada and the United States, see also Blundell, Shepherd and Taylor, (Eds.), 1993, Relocating Cultural Studies.

Origins of Cultural Studies

Cultural studies first appeared in Britain following World War II. From its beginnings, cultural studies was conceived as an intellectual and political project, one that focused on cultural products in contemporary Western states, unlike traditional anthropology which has usually focused on non-industrialized non-Western cultures. As a field of study, cultural studies grew from and contested Leavisism which was essentially an elitist approach to the examination of literary texts circulating in Britain between the two world wars. Scrutiny of the moral and aesthetic content of literary texts was the objective of these critical theorists (Turner 1990). Indeed, the approach was named after its founder, F.R. Leavis (Straw 1993).

Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart are the two most familiar names associated with the development of cultural studies through the 1950's and 1960's. It was Williams who had the most profound theoretical influence on cultural studies which began with the publication of his book Culture and Society in 1958 (Turner 1990). This particular work sought to establish connections between cultural productions and cultural relations (Turner 1990). Important for the development of cultural studies was Williams' articulation of a three-tier conception of culture, including culture as a whole way of life, which will be explored later on.

Williams and Hoggart's interests were extremely compatible with their New-Left political concerns at the time which were "socialist in orientation, strongly anti imperialist and anti-racist, broadly supportive of the nationalization of major industries and the abolition of economic and educational privilege" (Blundell, et al, 1993:6). Williams and Hoggart wrote provocatively about their lives growing up in working class surroundings in The Long Revolution (1965) and The Uses of Literacy (1957) respectively. These works had in common a concern with "the social and cultural plight of the working class and with redefining traditional elitist notion of education, and with defining a 'common culture' expansive enough to include popular or mass culture" (Schulman 1993: 55). Moreover, cultural forms read as texts were examined "in light of the structures that produced them - those of culture itself" (Turner 1990: 24).

During the late 1960's a more systematic expansion of cultural studies was instituted with the opening of The Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) as a postgraduate and research institute. It was also during this period that cultural studies aligned itself with Marxism. According to Schulman, "Marx's emphasis on class relations was fully compatible with the Centre's focus on popular culture as a reflection of the working class's implicit struggle for

self expression" (1993: 55). A Marxian influenced conception of ideology entered cultural studies at this time.

Categories of Cultural Studies

What are the categories of cultural studies' interests? While they are diverse and many, cultural studies is interested in gender, history, discourse and textuality, nationhood and national identity, colonialism and post-colonialism, politics of aesthetics, pedagogy and global culture in a postmodern age (Hall 1986; Johnson 1986(a)). Its methods are typically evaluative and interpretative and include semiotics, deconstruction, ethnography, interviews, content analysis and textual analysis (Schulman 1993; Blundell 1992; Hall 1986; Johnson 1986a).⁵

If culture is the object of study in cultural studies then we must ask how culture is conceptualized. Indeed the concept is a long contested one in the cultural studies tradition. As Williams (1983) pointed out, "culture" is one of the most complicated words in the English language. In the

⁵ Johnson notes the ever changing nature of cultural studies in response to the passage of time as it encounters new historical events. Johnson suggests that cultural studies can never be a discipline. For a discussion see Johnson 1986(b).

early years of cultural studies "it sat uncomfortably on the fence between the two very different conflicting definitions of culture - culture as a standard of excellence and culture as a whole way of life" (Hebdige 1993:358). The former orientation derives from an appreciation of the aesthetic, while the latter one, as I intimated in Chapter 1, is deeply rooted in anthropology and refers to that component of culture that is related to social process. Williams' approach to defining culture is not so "much concerned with what culture is, rather how people use the term in contemporary discourse" (Tomlinson 1991: 5). He invokes a three category conception of culture as follows: 1) culture is a description of a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development; 2) culture as indicative of a particular way of life; a people, period, group, or humanity in general and 3) as reference to the words and practices of intellectual and especially artistic creativity (Tomlinson 1991).⁶

In cultural studies, then, culture is understood as "both a way of life encompassing ideas, attitudes, languages, structures, of power, institutions and a whole range of

⁶ The second category clearly embraces the anthropological Tylorian conception of culture as a complex whole.

cultural practices, artistic forms, texts, canons, architecture, mass produced commodities, etc" (Hall 1986: 112). For cultural studies culture is lived; that is, there is an "organic connection between lived (or personal) experience and the more general theoretical positions people adopt as part of their academic or professional credo" (Schulman 1993: 52).

Cultural Studies and Anthropology

We have seen that an anthropological conception of culture has influenced cultural studies in its early phases. I want to further explore the question of what other premises anthropology and cultural studies share and then move on to how a mature cultural studies has in turn influenced contemporary anthropology.

I have shown that cultural studies draws on the anthropological view of culture as a whole way of life. Moreover, anthropology and cultural studies also discard popular Western notions of culture that reflect preoccupations with questions about taste and breeding (Blundell 1992). For example, a popular western conception of culture would direct the study of opera to, among other things, questions surroundings whether or not opera is strictly a high culture activity.

The second point of convergence between anthropology and cultural studies is the way those expressive cultural forms

often thought of as art are conceptualized. As Blundell notes both cultural studies and anthropology take a broad (and non-elitist) view of art (1992). Blundell adds that "cultural studies is primarily interested in the aesthetic forms that people produce or encounter in their everyday lives, and so it has studied those forms sometimes called the popular arts (or popular culture) as well as mass media forms such as television" (1992: 33).

Anthropology and cultural studies also share the view that expressive forms or art must be understood as part of the broader social context, that is, art is contingent in nature. Importantly, cultural studies does not accept that art is the product of individual genius. I have already alluded to this notion in my Introduction (thesis organization) where I suggest that *Aida* is the product of multiple authors. This foregrounds the idea that "not only is the category of art socially produced (and contested), but the way in which art is produced, consumed, and made meaningful is (considered to be) dependent on extra-aesthetic characteristics and development in the wider social world" (Blundell 1992: 33).

Finally, proponents of cultural studies and certain practitioners of the anthropology of art emphasize the constitutive nature of art. That is, art is ideological in nature. Thus, a semiotics influenced cultural studies is interested in how aesthetic, expressive cultural forms that are produced in capitalist societies play a role in the

production and reproduction of ideological meanings (Blundell 1992). Certain perspectives within anthropology are also oriented toward the signifying nature of art. Specifically I am thinking about the work of Clifford Geertz, whose semiotic perspective on culture is articulated in The Interpretation of Culture (1973) and with specific regards to art, in his paper "Art as a Cultural System" (1976). For Geertz, the meanings encoded in cultural forms signify in specifically aesthetic ways that differ from linguistic signification (cf. Blundell 1992: 27). Moreover, art forms act semiotically by giving material form to a particular way of experiencing the world. As Geertz writes with regards to art forms:

[It] is not that they appeal to some universal sense of beauty...[but that] certain activities everywhere seem specifically designed to demonstrate that ideas are visible, audible and one needs to make up a word here - tactile, that they can be cast in forms where the senses, and through the senses, the emotions, can reflectively address them. The variety of artistic expressions stems from the variety of conceptions that men [sic] have about the way things are, and is indeed the same variety (1976: 1499).

Despite these important congruences between anthropology and cultural studies there are also some notable differences between them. One of the main differences concerns their respective arenas of interrogation. To reiterate, cultural studies is interested in contemporary nation states of the west, while, until recently and for the most part, anthropology has been linked with studies of non-industrialized, non-western societies.

A second difference is that much anthropological work on art has been functionally informed, that is, inherent is a view of culture as "unchanging and [consisting of] isolated ways of life where there is consensus about cultural ideas" (Blundell 1989; 33). Cultural studies does not share this static view, seeing culture as a process of construction and contestation.

I have attempted to provide an overview of the fundamental differences between the older, functionally informed anthropology and cultural studies. I will now move on to how a mature culture studies, through new modes of analysis, has influenced, indeed re-formed contemporary critical anthropology.

Relevant Concepts from Cultural Studies

In addition to the concept of culture, cultural studies introduces other key theoretical concepts to critical anthropology when doing analysis on western art forms that facilitate understanding of the (contested) meanings encoded and decoded in aesthetic cultural productions. To that end, the concepts that are integral to the forthcoming analysis are discussed and defined as follows:

Ideology: Since ideology is a very important concept in this thesis, some review is necessary in terms of the concept's origins, its development over time and different ways of conceptualizing it.

According to Raymond Williams "ideology first appeared in English in 1796, as a direct translation of the new word 'ideologie' which had been proposed in that year by the rationalist philosopher Desutt de Tracey" (1976: 154). At that time, it was conceptualized as a science of ideas to distinguish it from ancient metaphysics and this definition remained in popular use until the nineteenth century (Williams 1976; Cormack 1992).

During the mid-1800's the concept emerged in the work of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, specifically in The German Ideology. Marx and Engels moved away from ideology as mental science to a notion that emphasized ideology as "false consciousness". Here ideology was "only the ideas of the dominant class who make the perfecting of the illusion of the class about itself their chief source of livelihood" (Williams 1976: 155). In other words, the concept as employed by Marx and Engels refers to the "ideas of the dominant group in a society which, when taken as natural by subordinated groups, constitutes for them a set of ideas that work against their interests" (Blundell 1992: 44). Thus, a critical Marxian definition of ideology as delineated above consists of the Dominant Ideology in society. The influence of this conception of ideology is manifested in the work of Marxist structuralists such as Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes and to an extent Manneheim (Cormack 1992; Berger 1966).

Influenced by structural anthropology and post-Freudian developments in psychoanalysis, Louis Althusser's conception of ideology focuses on the material existence of ideology "which refers to ideology's embodiment in the structures and institutions of society, a significant departure from the traditional view of ideology as beliefs and ideas" (Cormack 1992: 10). Also integral to Althusser's notion is how we as individuals are constituted by ideology. That is "our sense of ourselves and our role in society are ideological constructions, maintained by an ever-present working of ideology. Althusser uses the term subjectivity to describe the seeming natural coherence of an individual" (Cormack 1992: 11).

Cultural studies is interested in how ideology can be identified, not only in texts but also in institutions and in everyday practices such as language. That is, cultural studies seeks to understand the encoding and decoding conventions in texts to illuminate the potency of ideological meanings at both the level of emotions and cognition. As such, Cormack's conception of ideology which deviates from the critical conception offered by Marx is useful for this thesis:

Ideology is a process which links socio-economic reality to individual consciousness. It establishes a conceptual framework which results in specific uses of mental concepts, and gives rise to our ideas about ourselves. In other words, the structure of our thinking about the social world, about ourselves and about our role within that world, is related by ideology ultimately to socio-economic conditions (1992: 13).

I would add to this that as I reviewed *Aida*, it became increasingly clear that opera inscribes certain perspectives which derive from, but are not exclusive to, the French intellectual climate. Thus, my observations of *Aida* are analogous to those of literary critic Lennard Davis regarding novels, who writes:

Novels do not depict life, they depict life as it is represented by ideology. A novel's depiction of space, character and dialogue as well as the mechanisms of plot are all simplifications in the name of ideology, deeply implicated in a particular view of life (1987: 24).

Cultural studies practitioner Michael Cormack developed a model of ideological analysis in his book Ideology (1992), which is intended to provide readers with a sense of how ideology works through various aesthetic, expressive cultural forms and events.⁷ Cormack's five category method of textual analysis, which examines the content, structure, style, mode of address and absences, can be modified according to the subject of enquiry. Cormack exemplifies his method through the analysis of select case studies such as a television commentary, a newscast, a film, and journalistic coverage of

⁷ Cormack's book Ideology, 1992, provides a brief overview of the concept of ideology and demonstrates how it can be used to analyze cultural phenomena. His analysis includes a range of cultural products from the mass media, television, news telecasts, films, etc.

a special event like the dismantling of "The Wall" in the 1980's. Cormack argues that his method is but one of many ways to access ideology and to understand how it works to inscribe certain notions that act upon our unconscious in ways that can make the "artificial seem real and natural" to borrow the term from Roland Barthes (1972).

I will end this section on ideology with the cultural studies suggestion that ideology is also hegemonic, that it is encoded in discourse, and finally that texts are partial representations of discourse.

Hegemony: This concept, developed by Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist, first emerged in cultural studies in the 1970's. According to Gramsci, hegemony is "cultural domination or more accurately, cultural leadership which is not achieved by force or coercion, but is secured through the consent of those it will ultimately subordinate" (cited in Turner 1990: 67). This notion does not imply a passivity on the part of people to act upon the world, as Marxist structuralists would have us believe, but rather it advances culture as a site for negotiation, contestation and resistance. For Gramsci, "hegemonic forces constantly alter their context as social and cultural conditions change; they are improvised and negotiable, so that counter-hegemonic strategies must also be constantly revised" (Straw 1993: 5). Gramsci's notion equipped cultural studies with an analytical tool through which popular culture could be reassessed as a

site of resistance and negotiation, and it displaced a concept of ideology which viewed culture as an "ideological vehicle for inflicting dominant paradigms and certain culture and class-based assumptions advantageous to the status quo" (Schulman 1993: 55).

Discourse: The concept refers to regulated systems of statements through which knowledge is produced (Blundell 1989). James Clifford notes that "our very perception of the world is mediated through discourse, in that the rules and concepts of discourse mould the way we experience reality" (1986:10). Discourses are always socially constructed and they frequently serve the interests of a particular group in society. As this concept pertains to self interests, as well as ideology, Blundell articulates the following:

Discourses often mask such self-interest when the rules and concepts they embody and the knowledge they generate are promulgated and experienced as the natural order of things. That is to say, like the meanings encoded or decoded in art forms, discourses are also, and always, ideological in nature (although they can be ideological in different ways), promoting views of the world that either promote or work against unequal social relations (1989: 25).

The concept of discourse is very important in my analysis in Chapter 4 where I discuss some of the nineteenth century French writers about the Middle East and Africa many of whom considered themselves accredited sources, indeed scientists. As primary producers of knowledge about non-European cultures, the magnitude of their influence cannot be treated lightly. Their constructions of non-Europeans can be understood in

terms of the integral connections between such discourse and the wider social, political and economic circumstances at the time. These writers participated in the construction of a world view, or hegemonic ideology, that promoted unequal social relations between Europeans and non-Europeans.

Text/Context: For both aesthetic analysis and semiotic analysis the object or site of one's analysis is a text (Turner 1992). Turner notes that "the term is appropriated from literary studies and depends upon an analogy between the close analysis conventionally applied to literary texts and the close analysis cultural studies applies to popular cultural texts (1992: 23). The earlier conception of text was eventually expanded to include other cultural forms such as rituals, dress, behaviour, as well as produced texts such as television, advertisements, etc. Advocates of cultural studies suggest that the meanings encoded in cultural forms frequently serve the interest of the dominant class and as such, textual analysis provides access to these meanings and therefore insight into ways in which power relations are (re)produced and naturalized in contemporary societies. As such, discursive strategies, that is the encoding/decoding conventions in a text, are frequently the object of cultural studies analysis.

As this view of texts makes clear texts must be viewed in contexts because they encode meanings that circulate more widely in society and also enter into people's own

subjectivity/consciousness. That is to say, the ideas texts embody must be understood in the wider social context(s) that produced them.

METHODS

One approach to analyzing *Aida* is to provide an interpretive "textual" analysis (or "reading" or deconstruction) of the text of the opera to demonstrate how it reflects and reproduces ideas, specifically the ideology of the dominant class. These ideas are encoded in the text through its inception and in the narrative via language and non verbal symbolic practices. Such an analysis takes its lead from three scholars who have conducted textual analyses that focus on the ideological dimensions surrounding the particular subjects of their studies.

The first scholar is musicologist Susan McClary, whose seminal work *Carmen* (1992), an operatic composition by Georges Bizet, with text by Merimee Prosper, has influenced my analysis of *Aida* in two important ways. Firstly, McClary's work provides a wealth of information about the critical social tensions of nineteenth-century France. *Carmen* premiered in Paris in March 1875, only four years after the first performance of *Aida* in Cairo (Gammond 1980). Thus, McClary was interested in, as I am, the critical political, economic and social circumstances confronted by the French at the time. Secondly, McClary also considers similar questions

to those I wish to raise concerning race, gender and class and questions about how these categories are manifested through opera, that is what ideological meanings are (re)produced through opera. McClary's socially grounded insights serve as a guide for me by indicating the questions that should be investigated in an analysis of opera that is focused on what kinds of knowledge are being generated.

The second scholar is cultural/literary critic Edward Said, specifically his books Culture and Imperialism (1993) and Orientalism (1979). In the case of the former work, Said devoted an entire chapter, aptly entitled "Consolidated Vision" to the exploration of *Aida*, and he has therefore provided me with insight in terms of the interconnectedness of the political and economic relationship between Egypt and the two rival imperialist regimes during the 1800's, France and Britain. Said's second work, Orientalism, seeks to identify "persistent tropes by which Europeans and Americans have visualized Eastern and Arab cultures" (Clifford and Marcus: 12). It is Said's view that orientalism is identifiable in much Western discourse. That is to say, orientalism is a western construction of a particular view of a world, an ideology that is a potent force in the production and reproduction of racism. Orientalism will be further discussed in Chapter 5, and used as a framework in which the issue of racism will be taken up as it pertains to *Aida*.

The third scholar was acknowledged earlier, Michael Cormack, a proponent of cultural studies. It is Cormack's notion of ideology that is critical for the purposes of this thesis. Moreover, Cormack's own method of textual analysis which I mentioned earlier, has been employed in part, specifically as it relates to the use of descriptive language. Cormack, like Said, is also interested in the narrowing effect of discourse. Both scholars endeavour to show how discourse embodies a particular world view, that is how ideology is encoded in discourse.

Cormack's method of analysis provides important insights into how language functions in a regulatory capacity, or in the "maintenance of a living dynamic relationship with myth" (Anselmi and Gouliamos 1994: 144). For the purpose of this thesis, myths surrounding the categories as mentioned earlier, that is, the racial other, gender and class, are the focus of analysis in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 3
AN OVERVIEW OF THE RISE OF OPERA
IN ITALY AND FRANCE

This chapter investigates the broader historical context which influenced *Aida's* production as opera. There are many books written about the history of opera and a comprehensive genealogy of this cultural form would necessitate volumes.⁸ Therefore, the overview offered in this chapter of the conditions leading to opera's emergence in Italy and France will be a very abbreviated one. Specifically, in this overview I want to point to the ways that changing social formations and class relations influenced the rise of specific genres of opera. I will begin this overview in Italy because, by all accounts, it was here that opera, as a combination of music and words, first emerged.

⁸ For a comprehensive history of opera see Weinstock and Leslie, 1941, Opera, a History of its Creation and Performance: 1600-1941. An in depth discussion of the rise of opera in Europe is also contained in Robert Donington, The Opera, 1978.

ITALY

While there appear to be ongoing debates between music historians and musicologists concerning opera's ancestry, the earliest universally accepted direct ancestors of opera appear in the seventeenth century in Italy (Orrey 1987; Mordden 1978; Walsh 1994). However, opera did not simply appear out of nowhere, and it is necessary to look back into Italy's history to understand the influences that impacted the development of this combination of music and drama to arrive at opera in the early seventeenth century. Moreover, our understanding of opera is enhanced by knowing something about the different cultural settings in which it emerged, as well as something about those individuals who are acknowledged as the greatest influences upon the evolution of different genres of opera. Finally, I want to restrict this overview to the exploration of the rise in opera in only Italy and France. This is not to trivialize the contribution toward its development from other countries such as Germany or Spain, but the scope of this thesis does not permit a comprehensive examination of all European brands of opera over a period spanning some four hundred years.

Walsh suggests that "the emergence of opera was part of a generalized European cultural revolution against what we have conveniently tagged the Middle Ages, as modern secular Europe began to emerge from the Latin gothic dominance of the church" (1994:51). The impact of Greek drama and religion

cannot be ignored in discussing the rise of opera in Italy, for these two sources played a pivotal role in opera's creation. Historical documents and chronicles contain manuscripts of liturgical plays dating back to the tenth century (Martorella 1982). Orrey foregrounds the religious nature of ancient Greek dramas in that "the medieval church seeking every means to promote the Christian message was quick to realize the capacity of drama to bring home the message to an illiterate congregation" (1987: 4).

Religious education aside, these early liturgical plays were also a very popular source of entertainment throughout Italy. Apparently, the ancient manuscripts indicate that these plays contained all the ingredients of opera, for example, costumes, scenery, song, and music, although at the time songs were only sung in Latin.

The liturgical plays appear to have held their own until around the thirteenth century and to have gradually evolved into the "Mystery Plays" which then spread quickly throughout Europe (Martorella 1982; Orrey 1987). Pertinent to the development of a specifically Italian brand of opera were the particular mystery plays called the Sacre Rappresentanzoni which eventually moved away from the influence of the church and became increasingly elaborate. The mystery plays are thought to have directly led to oratorio and opera (Martorella 1982; Orrey 1987; Donington 1978 and Grout 1965).

The late Renaissance period is extremely important for the evolution of opera for it witnessed the rise of the solo performer and the professionalization of artists (Martorella 1982; Orrey 1987). What is more, the growing prestige associated with art production meant more and more people were engaged in experimenting with music in drama or plays.

It was also during the Renaissance that a group of individuals, the Camerata who considered themselves classicists, evolved the idea of the recitative, "a simple vocal line sung in a free, declamatory style, with simple instrumental support" (Mordden 1978:17). In other words, the camerata emphasized the solo voice. Some of the members of the camerata included Peri, Caccini, Rinuccini, and Galilei (the father of the famous Italian astronomer). The camerata developed the notion of chamber operas which according to Grout were "short, limited in range of musical effects, and calculated to appeal to invited guests of aristocratic tastes and education" (1965: 78). As Corse observes, "the camerata saw the primary function of opera as the declamation of poetry, with music offering only a supporting role. Their goal was to recreate Greek drama. For these theorists poetry was a supreme intellectual achievement that music could aspire to but never match" (1987: 12).

By all accounts the camerata were an elite group of people who produced operatic compositions for the express purpose of the Italian nobility and aristocracy. Their operas

reflect a preoccupation with mysticism, the supernatural, and mythology. Though their abilities with respect to musical notation is, for some scholars, questionable, the camerata's contribution toward the development of Italian opera is significant in terms of literary reforms because it greatly impacted the work of Claudio Monteverdi, who is acknowledged by many as the founding father of opera in Italy (Donington 1978; Grout 1965; Orrey 1987).

According to Orrey, Monteverdi "assimilated a new monodic style and a balletic quality" (1987: 16) that is best represented in his famous opera *Orfeo*. Monteverdi's awareness of the potency of instrumental music as an affective, persuasive device resulted in the introduction of a vast array of new musical instruments into his operatic compositions. Indeed, Monteverdi's preoccupation with the musical dimension of opera would indicate that it was about this time that the music assumed a superior position in relation to the opera text (libretto), unlike the camerata before him. Monteverdi's operas also took the form of pastorals or dramas drawn from either classical myth or from earlier Italian sources (Orrey 1987) and he, like his predecessors, catered primarily to an Italian elite.

A very important development during the 1600's was the establishment of public theatres or opera houses, with the first opening in Venice in 1637 (Walsh 1994). The construction of this first opera house was a decisive factor

for it moved opera out of the royal courts once and for all, thus establishing this mode of entertainment as a commercial venture within the domain of the general public for local consumption. Between 1637 and 1700, many more opera houses were constructed throughout Italy to meet the ever-increasing demand for opera (Orrey 1987).

The 1600's also boast two other important developments. The first was the development of the aria, the emotional centres of an opera, and the second was the appearance of the Italian Castrati. One cannot really discuss opera of this period without addressing the castrati, particularly in view of the fact that seventeenth century Italian opera made use of them to the total exclusion of females (Grout 1965). Who were these individuals? Why were they needed in opera? Where did they come from?

The castrato is not a unique phenomenon; history documents many references to eunuchs among singers of both Italian and German origins prior to the seventeenth century (Grout 1965). These male singers, who as boys had aspirations to become opera singers, voluntarily had their testicles deformed or removed. During the 1700's, they were the norm in the Opera Seria (Italian serious opera); in fact the castrati were used also because of the shortage of women singers due to the fact that as a general rule women were forbidden to perform on stage. Interestingly, McClary states that "women who sang in public or who tried to publish their poetry were

regarded as courtesans and were pressured to grant sexual favours in exchange for being permitted to participate in cultural production" (1988: 14). As a result of this general taboo with respect to artistic expression by women, the castrati flourished in Italy between 1650 and 1750 (Grout 1965). From 1750 the popularity of castrati declined in Italy as audiences demanded more naturalism in operatic production. Moreover, castrati were not used in Opera Buffa (discussed below). Apparently, the castrati were never encouraged by the French, so Napoleon's rule in Italy meant the dispersal of castrati from the opera houses all together and the use of castrati was effectively banned in 1796 (Littlejohn 1992: 101).

From its beginnings, opera was meant to be a synthesis of all arts, and since the 1600's it has changed shape so often that any attempt to homogenize it would be deceptive (Lindenberger 1982). During the 1700's, a variety of different styles was developed which resulted in distinct brands of Italian opera, but the most well-known were opera seria and opera buffa. Moreover, the role of the impresario during the 1700's in Italy cannot be overlooked, because almost all operas were produced as the result of an impresario of an opera house selecting a composer to write an opera. In Italy the impresario had enormous powers, for it was he who selected the libretto while the composer had little say about the text, stage direction and production. Because these were

commercial ventures the impresario had to be keenly aware of what his audiences wanted, for anyone who had the money to pay for a ticket was a member of the audience.

Two individuals who dominated the reform and production of opera seria were Metastasio and Zeno (Lang 1971; Grout 1965). The subject matter of the opera seria "represents a relatively small range of well-known material, for the most part, Greek mythology, Roman history and incidents from famous literary works (Lindenberger 1982: 263). Nowadays, opera seria is a particular brand of Italian opera that we "are more likely to read about than to see or hear" (Littlejohn 1992: 94).

Opera buffa (comic opera) actually developed out of opera seria. That is, opera seria, with its preoccupation with mythological themes, was not received very favourably by Italian audiences. Recognizing that reforms were needed to generate support, the impresarios commissioned "intermezzos" (a naturalistic short opera in one act or two where the characters were not gods or nobility and there were no artificial voices such as castrati). Because Italian opera seria were organized in three acts an intermezzo was performed between acts one and two, and then between acts two and three. Soon impresarios realized that people were only coming for the intermezzos so this genre was predominantly produced and became known as opera buffa.

Restoration Italy is perhaps the most remarkable period in the history of opera in terms of the number of operas produced as well as the number of opera houses constructed, both in Italy and throughout Europe.⁹ As well, this was a nationalistic era, whereby "most composers felt impelled to reach the public not by drawing them into a work, but by extending a work to meet the people" (Mordden 1978: 11). It was also the age when a distinct Italian brand of romanticism was formulated (Kimbell 1981), and the Italian opera of the period turned its back on the use of mythology and the supernatural for its subject matter.

Guiseppe Verdi represents the epitome of opera of the 1800's, rivalled only by his contemporary in Germany, Richard Wagner. Interestingly, these two individuals were born in the same year, 1813 (Gammond 1980). Verdi's turn to the human subjective themes such as love, hate, greed, envy, jealousy, and in his earlier works, political themes such as patriotism, loyalty and oppression, demonstrate his orientation toward realism. He was interested in reenacting real life situations and circumstances that confronted human beings. Many of his political operas, such as *Attila* and *Nabucco*, although set in different countries, manifestly represent the social tensions

⁹ According to Littlejohn, nineteenth century operas dominated the seasonal repertoires of many of the leading international opera houses in 1988 and 1989, with approximately two thirds of the one hundred operas listed representing nineteenth century operatic productions (1992: 20-25).

surrounding what was at the time a disintegrated Italy, occupied by various imperialist regimes.

Since the 18th century, all types of opera have appealed to the various levels of Italian society. In fact, the link between opera and a privileged or elite class has been largely an American phenomenon. As Michael Broyles' comments:

From the moment Italian opera was first introduced in New York in 1825 by the Park Theatre, which had engaged Manuel Garcia's company, it was identified as a fashionable entertainment for the upper class. Prices for box seats and the pit were double, to \$2 and \$1 respectively, although the gallery price remained at twenty-five cents (1992: 299).

FRANCE

If it was Monteverdi who put Italian opera on the map in the early 1600's, in France it was Lully who was the greatest influence upon the rise of French opera during the last half of the seventeenth century. Lully was actually born in Italy but went to live in Paris as a boy (Gammond 1980). According to Walsh "opera in France flourished with the coming of the Baroque and the French wanted operas that looked and sounded like ballet" (1994: 54). Lully's first Tragedie lyrique, a large-scale stage work with continuous music somewhat analogous to opera seria appeared in 1673 (Gammond 1980). Between that date and 1686 Lully composed thirteen of these in which he continually aimed for the subordination of music, poetry, staging, and dance to overall dramatic unity.

In 1672 Lully obtained sole rights and authority for Academies d'Opera throughout the realm. Moliere, a

playwright, dancer and actor, attempted to block Lully's privilege, but Lully had the power of the throne behind him. Lully then consolidated his absolute control over all aspects of French stage music. In 1677 when Lully tried to prevent the use of music in marionette theatres there was an uproar. For his own productions Lully had control over the libretto, staging, choreography, the large orchestra of strings and winds, and the female and male singers, both soloists and chorus.

Like the Italians of the Renaissance the French were also drawn to mythology, the supernatural and mysticism for their opera subject matter (Donington 1978), but there were also striking differences. For instance, as mentioned above, Lully's operas, together with others produced by his French contemporaries, adopted a more literary approach to drama - that is, these composers sought first and foremost overall dramatic unity, with a highly stylized blend of dancing, comedy and spectacle. Another one of Lully's achievements was that he established the opera as an institution of the state - that is the Paris Opera (Grout 1965: 131).

Lully's operas continued to be performed in France long after his death, well into the middle of the eighteenth century, in both French and other European opera houses (Grout 1965). He is acknowledged as the founding father of French opera and his monumental contributions toward the development of opera resulted in a specific national style that was unique

to the French. According to Grout, Lully's greatest contribution to French opera was that -

He established the fundamental pattern of French opera that created a type which incorporated elements from every musical and dramatic form that had already proved itself in France. These forms were the French classical tragedy as exemplified by the works of Corneille and Racine, the pastorate, the Italian opera, and the French ballet (1965: 123).

Until the French revolution the Paris Opera had been a symbol of privilege because the right to produce operas there had to be purchased, as had been the case of Lully. The audience, though, paid to see productions at the Academie Royale de Musique (the Opera). Also, unlike most Italian opera houses whose performances usually ran for one or two months during certain seasons, the Paris Opera remained open for most of the year, with performances four times weekly. Perhaps little known is the fact that two days before the fall of the Bastille in 1789 a mob of hostile Parisian citizens demonstrated in front of the Paris Opera and consequently the theatre was closed and did not open until the instalment of Napoleon as Emperor in 1806 (Orrey 1987). At that time, the less formal Opera-Comique was the preferred genre by the public. Opera-comique consisted of spoken dialogue instead of recitative (sung lines). This genre actually began with Jean Jacques Rousseau - the famous philosopher - who wrote *Le Devin du Village* (1752) modelled on a famous Italian opera buffa. As translated English ballad operas (the first one was *The Beggar's Opera* of 1728) became ever more popular on the

continent, the usage of spoken dialogue set musical pieces became the norm in opera-comique.

One of the most important genres in post-revolutionary France was French Grand Opera which, according to Grout, arose "in response to the demands from a rapid increase in middle class audiences" (1965: 299). Moreover, these monumental stage spectacles were also "motivated by the desire to glorify the French Revolution, the nation, or the empire" (Grout 1965: 200). Grand opera represented the epitome of dramatic extravaganza, a commercial undertaking that had to pay its own way due to little government assistance. Supported by the middle class, grand opera came to be identified as a strictly bourgeoisie activity (Adorno 1994; Grout 1965).

According to Lindenberger "a growing middle-class public needed entertainment in public places where individuals could easily be seen and, since status was no longer marked by birth, where their presence could gain them social prestige" (1984: 228). The changes in social formations in post-revolutionary France are significant particularly in terms of the potential consequences for the audience of grand opera and as this relates to ideological production. That is, more and more unsuspecting people would be subjected to hegemonic ideology which could enter their consciousness as the natural, indeed inevitable order of things. As I will show in Chapter 4 it was no accident that *Aida* was produced in the grand opera style typical of this particular time in France's historical

past. This idea will lead to Chapter 5 where I will argue, through the provision of exemplars, that *Aida* is an example of ideological production.

Three individuals are acknowledged as the creators of grand opera in France. Eugene Scribe (a well known librettist for the opera-comique before developing the grand opera libretto formula); Louis Veron (head administrator of the Paris Opera between 1831-35) and Giacomo Meyerbeer, whose operatic compositions such as *L'Africaine*, and *Les Huguenots* are standard repertoire all over the world today (Littlejohn 1992). Meyerbeer drew on various national styles of opera - Italian, German, and French - and genres of opera, particularly those involving dialogue, to create his own unique approach.

The term grand opera is frequently used in contrast to opera-comique, which not only reflects differences in style and presentation, but, as I have shown above, also contains implications in terms of class associations and social status. Stanley Sadie describes this particular genre as follows:

[It was] of large proportions, in four or five acts, usually with a historical or quasi-historical background...chosen to provide a succession of colourful scenes and the maximum scope for spectacle. It unfolded a drama of passionate human relationships impinged upon, most often with fatal results, by inexorable forces, usually involving the conflict of two people, religions or classes and having some relevance to contemporary conditions. The grand opera sought to illuminate neither the historical forces it depicted, in the manner of a true historical drama, nor the psychology of its characters, in the manner of a tragedy. Its dramatic focus was the action of the one on the

other, and both were kept simple to increase impact (1980: 580).

Conclusions:

In this chapter we have seen that opera emerged from liturgical plays that can be traced back to the ancient Greek dramas. Moreover, certain rituals and conventions have gradually become affixed to opera. Various qualitative aspects concerning presentational styles and modes of address reflect a culture-specific flavour or cultural signature that identifies art forms, including opera, with one particular national tradition (Anderson 1979). For example, Italian opera buffa and the French grand opera are genres that emerged in response to historically specific intellectual climates, tastes and demands, as well as changes in social formations. Opera represents a vast array of symbolic systems working together, including spoken and sung dialogue and the recitative, as well as non-verbal symbolic forms.

As I will return to in Chapter 6, in today's opera world the nineteenth century operas still appear to be the most popular, as Littlejohn's analysis of the 1988-89 repertoires of the leading opera houses in the world has confirmed (1992).¹⁰ In North America, grand opera continues to be

¹⁰ The complete analysis is contained in Littlejohn, 1992, The Ultimate Art, pp. 20-27. The author conducted research in 1988-89 of fifty-five cities in the world on the standard repertory of operas. While he concludes the standard repertory changes more over time than one probably realizes, he has

popular despite the fact that it is one of the most extravagant and expensive of opera genres to produce. The required elaborate sets and costumes, skilled musicians and conductors, and the "big star" tenors and sopranos command compensation that reflects their current status in the performing arts; \$10,000 per performance is not uncommon (Littlejohn 1992), and as such opera seats are of necessity inflated in price to cover overhead. While opera companies do secure some funding from government, the production of opera, including those grand style ones such as *Aida*, *William Tell* and *Turandot* at leading international houses around the world would die a fast death were it not for the support from wealthy patrons, subscribers and philanthropies.

provided a list of 100 operas most frequently performed around the world. While this list includes operettas, musicals, and other light operas, the top twenty-five are relatively secure in their position as operas most frequently performed.

CHAPTER 4

AIDA AND ITS SOCIAL PRODUCTION

This chapter considers *Aida* as a socially produced text in a historically specific context. The exploration of the political, economic and socio-cultural tensions at the time this opera was written and first performed will illuminate the integral connections between this opera and the current (ideological) processes in the wider social context. I argue that *Aida* reflects the then current imperialist power of the French. I will also return to the idea articulated in Chapter 1 that *Aida* is the product of multiple authors. As such I will examine the key participants, that is the web of affiliations that gave the opera life. Some of the questions that will guide the development of my analysis here include, but are not limited to, the following: What was the purpose behind the creation of this opera? Who were the collaborators on the project? Who commissioned the opera and why? From what intellectual climate do these individuals derive? What were the critical social and political tensions in the wider society at the time? Whose national interests were being served?

There is no question that in terms of staging, costumes and design, *Aida* is sheer spectacle, one of the biggest and

most elaborate projects ever undertaken by Verdi. That it is Verdi's greatest musical achievement is debatable as much depends upon the question of taste. However, we do know that ever since its debut in Cairo in 1871, "Aida has been acclaimed as a spectacular opera, the epitome of Grand Opera in the French tradition" (William Mann cited in John 1980: 15).

The unfamiliar opera fan might conclude that *Aida* is simply about a tenor and a soprano who want to consummate their love (Said 1993) and are destined toward some tragic fate and leave it at that. However, as I intend to show, the opera is about much more than this. The opera is also implicitly, an opera about loyalty, power, oppression, love, jealousy, hate, betrayal, and death. These all too human subjective elements are recognizable in many of the operatic works of Verdi, and in those of many of his contemporaries. For instance, Bizet's *Carmen*, Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* and Strauss's *Die Fledermaus*, are only a few of the still popular operas that reflect these thematic preoccupations, themes that either manifestly or latently reconstruct the "preferred" attitude that was characteristic of the particular European intellectual climate of the time.

Briefly, *Aida* reveals a plot that focuses on the impossible relationship between an Egyptian man and an Ethiopian woman, the latter considered a racial inferior in the eyes of the Egyptians. The tension surrounding political

relations between Egypt and Ethiopia is a constant throughout the opera. As in most operas of Verdi's time, the unlikely couple are quickly heading for tragedy. A more detailed description of the opera that illuminates the developments as they unfold in relation to the above mentioned subjective forms will be provided in Chapter 5.

One important misconception on the part of some scholars about *Aida* is that it was conceived or commissioned for the opening of the Suez Canal or for the inauguration of the Cairo Opera House (e.g. Clement 1988; Gammond 1980; Bleiler 1962). Had these scholars reviewed the exchange of correspondence between and among the various parties over the period 1869 to 1871, translated and documented by Hans Busch (1978), they would have come to a different basis for this (mis)conception. Temporal considerations alone would not have permitted completion of *Aida* in time for either Egyptian national event. While it is true that Verdi was requested to compose a musical composition for the opening of the Cairo Opera House, the request was for only a hymn, not an entire operatic composition (Said 1993; Orrey 1987; Osborne 1969). In terms of the temporal sequence, both the Cairo Opera House and the Suez Canal were inaugurated in November 1869 (Richmond 1977; Osborne 1969) and Verdi did not receive the outline of the *Aida* text until the spring of 1870, as the following excerpt from a letter from Verdi to Camille Du Locle in Paris, dated

May 26, 1870, confirms:

...I have read the Egyptian outline. It is well done; it offers a splendid 'mise-en-scene' and there are two or three situations which, if not very new, are certainly very beautiful. But who did it? There is a very expert hand in it, one accustomed to writing and one who knows the theatre well. Now let's hear the financial conditions from Egypt, and then we shall decide... (cited in Busch 1978: 17).

Pertinent for my analysis are the following questions - who did it and what can be made of the assumption that the person was an expert. The excerpt is also important because it demonstrates beyond doubt that the storyline was formulated by a person other than Verdi. However, while the extract does not explicitly state that it was the *Aida* storyline to which Verdi is referring, a subsequent letter, dated May 19, 1870, from Du Locle in response confirms that it is. He writes:

...The Egyptian libretto is the work of Viceroy and Mariette Bey, the famous archaeologist. None else has put a hand to it. It has been edited and printed in Egypt as I told you...(cited in Busch 1978: 17).

In order to advance my argument that the imperialistic power of the French is echoed throughout the process of producing *Aida*, I will begin with the provision of some background/biographical data on the key participants in the creation of *Aida*. Implicit in this sequential ordering is a gradual increment in the level of input and influence by the parties, as I perceive it. Such information is pertinent for a grasp of the intellectual climate from which these people derive as well as their own personal agendas and professional

and political goals. Following my research I have concluded that, while Verdi and Ghislanzoni (the translator of the libretto into Italian) played an important part in terms of the musical dimension of the opera, *Aida* represents the collaboration of three other individuals to realize not only specific personal and professional objectives, but also the attainment of French nationalistic political ends.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Ghisolani Ghislanzoni: This individual was the translator for *Aida* who translated the French prose draft into Italian verse for music (Busch 1978). Although Ghislanzoni translated and/or composed over sixty libretti during his lifetime, he never really had a lucrative career, with most of his compositions being completely unknown today. Ghislanzoni had a long established friendship with Verdi and collaborated and on one occasion, even performed in one of Verdi's "political" operas, *Ernani*, during the 1840's.

Giuseppe Verdi: For opera fans, Giuseppe Verdi is probably one of the most well-known and popular Italian operatic composers of the nineteenth and perhaps the twentieth centuries. He produced twenty-eight operatic compositions (Gammond 1980) with some of those from the middle part of his career considered the great masterpieces; for instance the most well known are the romantic three - *La Traviata* (1853), *Il Trovatore* (1853), and *Rigoletto* (1851). These three

operas, and *Aida*, have consistently been in repertoire since their premieres, but it has only been since 1950 that Verdi has been recognized as the great Italian opera composer of the nineteenth century. Verdi was an exponent of the Italian political cause¹¹ and many of his operas, including *Aida*, are thought to actually reflect much about the oppressive situation in Italy at the time despite the fact that most of his operas are set outside Italy at the time of European-state building. Until its independence in the late 1800's, historically Italy had been a disintegrated country, with many European imperialist regimes occupying various Italian provinces and states in the country. The 1800's in Italy is especially significant in terms of the many attempts on the part of the Italian people to achieve unity, frequently

¹¹ Verdi was associated with the Italian "Risorgimento", a political body which represented a movement of renewal and revivification in Italy during the 1800's, a rising-up-again of the Italian people. Verdi's operas "Nabucco" and "Atilla", first performed in 1842 and 1844 respectively, though set in countries outside of Italy, reflect and reenact Verdi's preoccupation with issues such as oppression, patriotism, racism, the "homelands", etc. These operas had such strong political connotations that they frequently set off patriotic demonstrations following performances. For an in depth analysis of Verdi's political involvement in the Italian struggle for liberation see David Kimbell, 1981, Verdi in the Age of Italian Romanticism.

through protest and on occasion mass insurrection.

Verdi's influence upon the *Aida* storyline, plot and the development of the characters appears to be only minimal. The exchange of correspondence in Busch (1978) would indicate that Verdi made a few modifications to the opera narrative, though these do not radically depart from the original plan. The letters would also suggest a reluctance on Verdi's part to alter the original storyline because he had never set foot in Egypt and took as credible sources on Egypt the input of two French men, the first, Auguste Mariette, an established and reputable archaeologist, and the other, Simon du Locle, a man held in high esteem in French theatre and with an accomplished record of operatic compositions. Both of these individuals were highly regarded and, particularly in the case of the former, privileged himself as an expert on the description of Egypt and its culture (Osborne 1969).

This opera has themes that Verdi was well acquainted with. The fact that he would be provided with a lucrative salary also appealed to him. Verdi had never been to Egypt nor had any of his previous works been set in Africa. However, he would have been aware of the huge success during the previous five years of Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine*, with a fantastic libretto about an African slave girl. Furthermore, Verdi could also receive his education about Egypt from the many influential and popular writings circulated in Europe at the time, with one of the most respected being Les Descriptions,

a multi-volume work from Napoleon's expedition to Africa during the late 1700's, as well as a vast array of popular novels such as those by Flaubert, Chateaubriand, Lamermont, and Victor Hugo.

There are those who speculate that Verdi's operas, including *Aida*, were a reflection of his private life, but there is no reason to believe that this is the case (Lang 1971). According to Julian Budden, Verdi was an "extremely private man who avoided publicity about himself at all costs; he guarded his independence and redirected all attention away from his private life in order to focus entirely upon his works" (1984: 16).

Khedive Ismail Pasha: As representative of the Sultan of Turkey in Egypt, this individual was a descendant of the Turkish House of Mohamed Aly¹². At the time Egypt was legally a territory of the Ottoman Empire and continued to be up until its colonization by the British in the late 1800's. Until the occupation by the British, all the representatives for Egypt had been appointed by the various Sultans of Turkey and were all Turkish born (Richmond 1977). The honorific

¹² Richmond 1977, pg. ix, provides a chronology of all the Khedives, Sultans and Kings of Egypt from the Turkish House of Mohamed Aly.

title of "Khedive"¹³ was conferred upon Ismail in 1867 by the Sultan of Turkey which effectively gave him additional political and economic clout as the Turkish representative for Egypt (Zedwe 1991).

Khedive Ismail was educated in Paris (Busch 1978) and according to historian Behru Zewde "was a man to all intents and purposes [who] considered himself a European" (1991: 36). Ever since the celebrations surrounding the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the Khedive had been anxious to secure Verdi's cooperation in the writing of a work especially for Cairo. Moreover, the Khedive had just built himself an opera house in Cairo and wanted to import European style opera. As a matter of fact, the Khedive had the Cairo Opera House inaugurated with a production of Verdi's *Rigoletto* (Osborne 1969). Apparently, the Khedive pursued Verdi relentlessly, but not because the man had any special talents, rather he wanted one of the best known and popular composers of the time from one of the three reigning musical and operatic nations: Italy, France or Germany (Lindenberger 1984). In his desire to

¹³ The title "Khedive" is the Persian word for 'prince'. This honorific title, conferred only by the reigning Sultan of Turkey, frequently bestowed additional political and economic powers, particularly in terms of Egyptian relations with the European powers.

create a new identity for Egypt, the Khedive wanted to secure only reputable European composers to help his agenda along.

According to Zedwe, the Khedive was a very ambitious man who "saw Egypt's destiny in Africa" (1991: 36), albeit a Europeanized one as we shall see below. The Khedive was determined to bring the country 'out of the darkness and into the light' with a very rapid and costly development program oriented toward the modernization of Egypt. The following passage demonstrates the Khedive's aspirations and desire to "Europeanize" his country in the shortest possible time:

As an autocrat with extravagant ideas and ambitious plans for the progress of his country, he modernized and enlarged commerce and industry, reformed and augmented Egypt's political administration, its courts, schools, and universities, and brought his country the Suez Canal. He assisted the eminent Egyptologist Auguste Mariette in founding and directing a museum for the preservation of Egyptian antiquity; and under his direct orders the Cairo Opera House was built by Italian architects within six months. "My country is no longer in Africa' he once said... 'I have made it part of Europe'" (Busch 1978: 6).

This passage attests to the blatant attempts on the part of the Khedive to put Egypt on the map as a modern society and to align his country with the great imperialist powers in Europe. He aspired to create a new image for Egypt, one that would reflect Egypt as a revived ancient civilization, a new sophisticated nation that could serve as an exemplar for all other African nations.

While the Khedive's ambitions might have appeared admirable to some, his over-zealousness, extravagance and lack

of patience, would eventually lead to his deposition in the late 1870's (Zedwe 1991). The Khedive was a long-time friend of Auguste Mariette, the famous French archaeologist, and Ferdinand de Lesseps, the architect of the Suez Canal.

Camille du Locle: This contributor was the son of a famous French sculptor and he began his career as translator of libretti for the Paris Opera. Conati argues that Du Locle "was the driving force behind the campaign which finally led to the choice of Verdi from the list of composers including Gounod and Wagner" (1984: 50). Du Locle also collaborated with Verdi on the text *Don Carlo* which premiered at the Paris Opera in 1867. He was also commissioned to write the libretto for another well-known opera, Bizet's *Carmen* (Said 1993; McClary 1992).

In 1868 Du Locle made a trip through Egypt with Auguste Mariette, the archaeologist mentioned earlier, and this association apparently resulted in the idea for *Aida* (Busch 1978). A long time friend of both Verdi and Mariette, the Khedive of Egypt "entrusted Du Locke the task of fashioning a libretto out of an Egyptian story and finding a composer for it" (Nagler 1981: 87). At the time Du Locle was Manager of the Opera-Comique and he needed a project that would ensure him the Directorship. *Aida* represented such a project.

Auguste Ferdinand Mariette: Mariette was an eminent French Egyptologist who wrote the "original" story for *Aida* (Busch 1978). The son of a municipal employee, Mariette began

his career as a writer, dabbling in novelettes and articles. When he became a school teacher in England at the age of eighteen, he became fascinated with Egyptian history and language (Busch 1978: 436). Mariette returned to France and obtained a bachelor's degree in letters in the 1840's. In close contact with Charles Lenormant, a professor of Egyptology, Mariette worked independently for some seven years on Egyptian language, mythology and history (Busch 1978). He eventually secured employment at the Department of Egyptian Antiquities at the Louvre and this provided him with the opportunity to travel to Egypt in 1850, with a mandate to acquire Coptic manuscripts (Busch 1978; Bleiler 1962).

It was during this first trip that Mariette made some remarkable discoveries, for instance the Serapis Temple and the Apis Tombs near Memphis. Later excavations of the Temple of the Sphinx, temples and tombs of the Pharaohs at Giza, Abydos, Sakkara and Thebes and a variety of other material artifacts and treasures (Osborne 1969; Busch 1978, Said 1993), catapulted Mariette to the status as a leading expert and authority on Egyptian antiquities. These discoveries resulted in his being appointed Assistant Director of Egyptology at the Louvre. In 1857, the title of "Bey" was conferred upon Mariette by the Khedive of Egypt, and in 1879, another honour, "Pasha" (John 1980; Bleiler 1962). Mariette and the Khedive collaborated and established the Boulag Museum of Antiquities, which interestingly, was backed by Ferdinand de Lesseps, who

as mentioned earlier was the Suez Canal architect (Busch 1978: Osborne 1969; Bleiler 1962).

Where did Mariette get the idea for the story of *Aida*? Was it an original story, as Mariette and Du Locle would have us believe? What evidence is there to suggest otherwise? Whether *Aida* is an original story has been debated among many scholars interested in opera. Some, such as Mary Jane Matz, believe that *Aida* is the offspring of the drama *Nitteti* (Busch 1978: 435). Charles Osborne, is convinced that this *Nitteti* is the ancestor of *Aida* (Osborne 1969: 378). My intention is not to resolve this debate by conducting my own comparative analysis of two texts. However, Julian Budden argues that "there is no evidence whatsoever to suggest that Mariette or the Khedive of Egypt knew of *Nitteti* and that Camille du Locle never referred to it and credited only Mariette with the invention of the Egyptian story (1985: 435).

While I have never read *Nitteti*, Giacomo Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine*, an opera first performed in Paris in 1865 (Gammond 1980) some six years prior to the premiere of *Aida* in Egypt, bears an uncanny resemblance to *Aida*. Meyerbeer spent most of his career living in Paris, and Du Locle, the manager of Paris' Opera-Comique, would have also been acquainted with Meyerbeer's works. This operatic composer was one of the most respected grand opera composers during the heyday of this genre, in the mid 1800's, and it is conceivable that Mariette could have appropriated it from Meyerbeer.

I will conclude this biographical overview by returning to the idea in Chapter 2, that is, that texts are socially produced. In this opera, *Aida* materialized out of the relationships between and among multiple authors, that is the last three individuals listed, and was not the product of individual genius. I will turn next to the argument that this social production can be linked to specific French and Egyptian national goals.

HISTORICAL, POLITICAL AND SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT

Throughout the 1800's the two leading imperialist powers were Britain and France, and these nations were constantly on the lookout for ways to exert their authority and influence in the Middle-East and Africa. Early in the 1800's, Napoleon had conducted an expedition to Egypt (he sailed there on a ship called "the Orient"). According to Said, Napoleon was "motivated by a desire to capture Egypt, to threaten the British, to demonstrate French power....but Napoleon and his scholars were also there to put Egypt before Europe, in a sense to stage its antiquity, its wealth of associations, cultural importance and unique arena for a European audience" (1993: 118). Though Napoleon's venture into Egypt was unsuccessful (Richmond 1977) it appears to have had an impressionable influence on the rapidly growing body of French discourse on the Middle East and Africa, a discourse that effectively began with Volney's Voyage en Egypte et en Syria

published in 1787, a work that served as Napoleon's "bible" for his Egyptian expedition (Said 1993; Richmond 1977).

Volney was an avid traveller in the Middle East and by all accounts he appears to have considered himself an expert, indeed a scientist (Said 1993). Volney wrote with hostility of Islam and in 1788 published another widely circulated book in France entitled The Turks (Said 1979). As a scholar in his own right, Volney was influential in the development of images and stereotypes surrounding Middle Eastern cultures through his writings. Napoleon made many references to Volney's work in his many volumes of Les Descriptions.

The myth of Egypt as one of the greatest classical civilizations was deeply embedded in European consciousness, primarily as a consequence of Napoleon's military expeditions to Egypt in the late 1700's and later excavations of several Egyptian sites, undertaken by famous French archaeologists. Napoleon's influential Les Descriptions is one of the most best known attempts to describe Egyptian life and culture to surface in France during the first half of the nineteenth century. Such discourse had far-reaching implications for the way the French and other European cultures came to view non-Europeans. Moreover, as Said (1993) suggests, the long arm of this discourse extended to the work of Auguste Mariette and other archaeologists which eventually resulted in a scientific Egyptology for France.

Throughout the nineteenth century excavated antiquities were sent to France from Egypt for exposition at the Louvre, together with reconstructions through paintings and other art works, which put Egypt on display before a European audience. As I will elaborate in Chapter 5, Edward Said makes the interesting observation that it was through Napoleon's Les Descriptions that the Egyptians were ascribed a specific oriental status, which was rearticulated and augmented through the writings of subsequent archaeologists, notably Mariette and Champignon (1993).

The European takeover of Egypt appears to have begun in the early 1840's when "Egypt was deprived of effective control of their destiny in the legal and economic fields and her social and administrative situation appears to have entered in a period of rapid change in a new direction (Richmond 1977). This appears to have been precipitated by the invocation of the "Firmans of 1841" , which were in effect laws formulated by the Europeans, but endorsed by the Turks in Turkey which were enforced upon Egypt. These new laws articulated radical policy changes with respect to the administration and economic status of Egypt, and appear to have been precipitated by the mounting debt of Egypt to the Europeans. As a result these Firmans reasserted Turkish sovereignty over Egypt and effectively prevented any hopes the Egyptian people had for complete autonomy. While Turkey had political power in Egypt, the Europeans had an economic stranglehold on Turkey, since

Egypt was still legally part of the Ottoman Empire. Richmond adds that :

The main European motive in fastening this anomalous condition on Egypt was to appease their own mutual antagonisms, and they maintained it primarily as a factor in the balance of power in Europe. As time went on, however, the financial worlds of Britain and France, the most interested European powers, came to see more and more clearly that, in addition to providing a framework for their countries' competitive struggle for influence and strategic positions in the eastern Mediterranean, the Firmans held a further advantage for them. It was that Egypt's lack of sovereignty made it easier for them to gain control over the wealth which their developing capitalism was generating in Egypt (1977:79).

With the installation of these "Firmans", the European presence in the Middle East and Africa appears to have reached a natural apogee.

If there was any one event that made Egypt especially vulnerable to the imperialist powers, it was the construction of the Suez Canal which effectively augmented the already insurmountable financial Egyptian indebtedness to France and Britain, which travelled down through the successions in Egyptian power under the Turkish House of Mohamed Aly. The Suez Canal which linked the Mediterranean with the Red Sea, was the product and possession of a European consortium (Lindenberger 1984). Under the authority of the Sultan of Turkey in 1859, the construction of the canal was financed by the French architect Ferdinand de Lesepes, who sold shares in it. Unable to generate interest from the British at the time, he was forced to sell shares in Paris where most were

purchased (Richmond 1977). Eventually, work had to be suspended due to delays and serious financial over-expenditures - in other words money ran out and the construction came to a halt due to the inability of the architect to generate new interest from other European powers.

When Ismail Pasha became Viceroy, and later Khedive, he inherited not only a huge debt to the Europeans for the purpose of technological development, but also for an unfinished Suez Canal. What is more the cotton boom was nearly exhausted and from the mid 1860's the Egyptian treasury sank further and further into debt. Collectively, these factors sealed Egypt's fate as a potential colonial possession by either the British or French (Richmond 1977; Zedwe 1991). As Richmond states "loans from Europeans were of political significance, since both France and England had political and strategic designs on Egypt and both were prepared, particularly France under Napoleon III and England under Disraeli, to pursue them by financial means' (1977: 102).

As the two main forces vying for power in Egypt, Britain and France saw in Egypt, specifically the Suez Canal, the opportunity to generate vast amounts of wealth with the new trades routes permitted by this waterway. To this we could add that geographically, Egypt was in an ideal situation, a mid-point between Europe and Asia. Therefore, Egypt could serve as a political and economic intermediary for France or Britain, that is they could represent the Europeans in Asia.

What is more, Egypt was in grave monetary debt to both Britain and France and both countries were looking to colonize the country. Given the political and economic context, it should not come as a surprise that the French would want to ingratiate themselves with the Egyptians. Moreover it is not a coincidence that at this time in history the two French men Mariette and Du Locle should write an opera about Egypt that paid homage to Egypt's greatness as a revitalized or modernizing nation. The first performance of *Aida* was to take place in the new Cairo Opera House, also built by Europeans, with all the trappings of Western cultures, which also inscribes that teleological perspective that Egypt had "turned the corner" and was becoming just like the French (Wolff 1993a).

My view here is at odds with that of Said (1993) who I think overestimates the contribution Verdi made to the narrative of *Aida*. While Said understands that the libretto was based on a short story by Auguste Mariette, the famous archaeologist, he overlooks the fact that it was Simon du Locle who wrote the libretto, with the Italian translation by Ghislanzoni. Said treats Du Locle as a mere intermediary, a go-between for Mariette in Egypt and Verdi in Italy, thus trivializing the influence of a French Du Locle, who had travelled to meet Mariette and journeyed throughout parts of Egypt with him. Misrepresentations and distortions of an Egyptian way of life, as reflected in the text and also in

non-verbal forms such as staging, scenery, costumes, probably get their force from the perceptions that Mariette and Du Locle formed during their travels in Egypt. Moreover, they probably had also been exposed to the influence of other famous French writers such as Victor Hugo and Flaubert who appear to have had definite views about the "racial other".

This is not to suggest that Verdi was some innocent victim of an orientalist wave or mentality that appears to have swept over Europe during the 1800's. Though not as blatant as some of his contemporaries, some of Verdi's works also echo an orientalist flavour, for instance in his incorporation of a gypsy characters in two works, *Il Trovatore* and *The Force of Destiny*, which premiered in 1853 in Rome and 1863 in St. Petersburg, respectively (Simon 1960).

Another issue concerns the length of time it took Verdi to write the opera. Said believes that Verdi worked on this opera for two years (1993: 116). Verdi received the outline of the story in May 1870 (cited in letter from Verdi to Du Locle, in Busch 1978: 17) and completed the opera within six months (Busch 1978: 120). Said's miscalculation came as a surprise to me in view of the fact that he too utilizes Busch at length where translations of letters are provided as well as another well-known scholar on Verdi, Julian Budden. Had Said continued reading the various letters in Busch he could not have possibly made such an error.

What is more, the contractual agreement contained a stipulation that Verdi must complete the opera in plenty of time for a January 1871 premiere at the Cairo Opera House (Osborne 1969). Unfortunately, the Franco-Prussian war broke out and threw a wedge into the original opera timetable. As a result, the first performance in Cairo did not debut until December 1871, one year after Verdi had completed the opera in its entirety. In the interim, the opera music, text, costumes, and scenery, were trapped in Paris due to the war (Busch 1978: 120).

Furthermore, as Said's analysis unfolds, he credits different people with composing the libretto. The first was Ghizlānzoni, who was only responsible for the translation of the libretto (1993:116). Said later bestows this honour on Mariette himself. I suspect that Said is somewhat confused about what exactly a libretto is and what the production of an opera entails.

Despite these inconsistencies in Said's treatment of *Aida* his analysis in Culture and Imperialism has had an important impact on my understanding of the Franco-British rivalry for paramount influence in Egypt during the 1800's and of the role of the Suez Canal in establishing which imperialist power would ultimately occupy Egypt.

Some background on Early Performances of Aida

Before I move to the next chapter I want to provide some description of some of the earliest performances of the opera. As mentioned the first performance of *Aida* took place in December 1871 (Gammond 1980), one year after the original date set due to the Franco-Prussian war. Apparently, the performance was the "most publicized opera of its sort in operatic history" (Bleiler 1962: 36). The Khedive spared no expense for the premiere; he offered the best salaries for an all-star cast and even paid the way of many rich Europeans to attend the performance. Lindenberger notes the colonialist "comedy" inherent in the whole project, observing that in addition to the Suez Canal, which was a European possession, "the opera house itself could have passed, except for the palm tree, for any of the neo-renaissance opera houses being built throughout Europe at the time" (Lindenberger 1982: 270).

Journalists flocked to report on this first production and for all intents and purposes *Aida* made a positive impression:

The plush, ornate Cairo opera house had been in use for three years. Paying fantastic salaries, Ismail Pasha, the Khedive of Egypt, had lured first-rate talent to his theatre, and provided his singers with the most elaborate decor money could buy. The costumes and scenery for *Aida* were ordered from Paris: Amneris wore a coronet of real gold, and Radames was armed with solid silver weapons. The whole effect was so overwhelming that until recently, opera houses presenting *Aida* have copied costumes, props, and scenery of the original performance as closely as possible with few changes (Bleiler 1962: 36).

By all accounts, from the many descriptions I have read of the Cairo premiere, particularly those related to the staging, scenery and props, one would be hard pressed to distinguish the opera as a production for the purpose of entertainment and 'he opera as a means of paying homage to the archaeological exploitations of Auguste Mariette and his predecessors. In fact, Nagler points out that:

For decades the spirit of Mariette hovered over the opera in every part of the world...Following the Cairo model, Aida remained an exotic showpiece, not even Toscanini and Caruso could change that. The budgets permitted horses, elephants and camels on stage for the triumphal march and who could not point proudly to the 'authentic' decors and costumes (1981: 88).

Aida next went to La Scala in Milan in 1872 (Gammond 1980). Verdi himself was extremely involved in most aspects of the La Scala production and Weaver and Chusid state:

[For this performance] Verdi insisted that the orchestra pit be sunk out of the sight of the audience [an idea from Richard Wagner]. He established the pitch to be used, the seating arrangement of the orchestra in the pit, selected the section leaders in the orchestra, organized the musical and staging staffs at La Scala for the production, insisted on a conductor rather than the first violinist trying to lead the orchestra from his chair, auditioned, trained and rehearsed the singers, checked on the historical authenticity of costumes, scenery, and props, determined the intermissions to be no longer than twenty minutes (1979: 146).

Following the first Milan performance, Verdi stated that "the audience reacted favourably. I don't want to affect modesty with you, but this opera is certainly not one of my

worst. Time will afterward give it the place it deserves" (cited in John 1980: 39).

The opera then went to New York in 1873 (Gammond 1980) where it received mediocre reviews (Bleiler 1962), then on to Covent Garden in London in 1876 (Gammond 1980) where it was not received favourably at all. Apparently British audiences were at the time more inclined toward Wagnerian operatic compositions over those of Wagner's Italian and French counterparts (John 1980).

I will now turn to the *Aida* libretto itself, to demonstrate ideological production through the provision of three exemplars pertaining to racism, gender and class and power relations.

CHAPTER 5

AIDA AND THE PRODUCTION OF MEANING

To demonstrate as convincingly as possible that *Aida* both constitutes and reproduces the dominant or preferred attitudes of a particular group, this chapter will provide a partial interpretive analysis of the opera text. In other words, the *Aida* libretto will be "read" to identify the hegemonic ideologies it encodes. The analysis will focus on three exemplars, under the following headings: "the racial other"; gender; and power and class. Some of the broad questions that guide this analysis in each category are: How is the "racial other" described - how and in what context does this opera encode orientalism in Edward Said's sense? How is gender treated, that is, do the discursive strategies encode images and stereotypes that can be linked to the intellectual currents of the nineteenth century? Finally, how are power and class encoded in the text? What does this tell us about hegemonic relations between Europeans and non-Europeans?

As I indicated, the objective of this chapter is to demonstrate how the discursive practices revealed in this text function to reaffirm the historically specific views of the dominant class. By no means is this a definitive reading of the operatic text, rather I am offering only one interpretation, as cultural studies puts it, it is a

"preferred reading", from a vast array that could be offered depending upon the direction one is coming from. In terms of the organization of this chapter, the analysis will proceed according to each category as delineated above.

First, however, I will provide a synopsis of the opera to provide the reader with a superficial glimpse into some of the ways the above categories manifest themselves in the opera:¹⁴

The story: Aida is not only the name of the opera, but of a specific character in the opera, an Ethiopian slave woman who has been taken into captivity by the Egyptians. The opera opens with Ramfis (a priest) and Radames (a soldier with military aspirations and the lead tenor) discussing Ethiopia's anticipated invasion of Egypt. Radames wants command of the army to defeat the Ethiopians, but also wants the hand of Aida in marriage. Radames rationalizes that if he can lead the army to victory then he can request the hand of Aida as reward. A twist in the plot arises because of the Egyptian Princess Amneris's desire to have Radames for herself. Aida, who loves Radames is in despair - she cannot reconcile her feelings for an Egyptian man with loyalty to her father and her own country.

¹⁴ This synopsis represents a condensed version in my own words based on references to the works of Walsh 1994; Lindenberger 1984; Gammond 1980 and Bleiler 1962. Further, a 1983 video production of Aida by David Levine has also been used for an appreciation of the non-verbal dimensions of this opera, that is the scenery, staging, costumes, and props.

Radames gets command of the army and goes off to war with the Ethiopians. During his absence, the Princess Amneris manipulates Aida into revealing her feelings about Radames. Radames eventually returns to Egypt in triumph together with Ethiopian prisoners, among whom is Aida's father, the King of Ethiopia, though the Egyptians do not know his true identity. Radames asks the King of Egypt to be merciful who agrees to release the prisoners to Ethiopia, except for Aida and her father. The King offers Radames the Princess's hand in marriage as reward for his defeat of the Ethiopians.

Radames and Aida are devastated because they cannot be together. They arrange a secret meeting to discuss their plight. However, Aida's father has asked her, in loyalty to her own country, to get information out of Radames about the route the Egyptian army will take to invade Ethiopia. Aida does not want to betray Radames, nor her country, but her father will disown her if she does not comply with his request. The father overhears her meeting with Radames by the Nile and learns of the route, which Aida has convinced Radames to reveal to her. Radames then learns that Aida's father is King of Ethiopia and feels that he has betrayed his country by telling Aida the route. Fearing for Aida's life, Radames begs her to flee and also agrees to let her father escape with her. Radames decides to remain in Egypt and face his fate for betraying his country.

Meanwhile, the Egyptian Princess has overheard most of the exchange and Radames is arrested for treason. He is tried and despite the many pleas of the Princess to Radames to renounce his love for Aida, he refuses, and thus, is sentenced to live entombment. Radames is placed in the tomb unaware that Aida has sneaked in to die with him. The tomb is sealed and in their last dying breath, the two star-crossed lovers sing their farewell to earth.

There is no reason to believe that the characters in this opera were modelled after real figures in Egyptian or Ethiopian history. However, Clement (1988) observes that there

are some resemblances with respect to the two lead female roles, that is Aida and the Princess Amneris. Apparently, there were two figures in Egypt's dynastic past that coexisted in an antagonistic relationship due to the fact that they were both keen on the same man, the King. The two individuals are Queen Hatshepsut, the King's wife, and Nefertiti, who was also married at the time (1988). Clement suggests that the two heroines of the opera "are somehow the heiresses to the two greatest figures of women that Egypt has left us" (1988: 117). Apparently, Queen Hatsheput survived to rule Egypt and Nefertiti was banished to the desert and died there (Clement 1988). Similarly, the Princess in the opera is condemned to live, Aida is condemned to die (Clement 1988).

THE RACIAL OTHER

This section focuses on how racism is encoded in the libretto of *Aida*. Since I will be drawing on Said's book *Orientalism* the issue of what exactly Said means by orientalism will also be discussed. I will then move on to how orientalism as ideology is manifested in the discursive strategies employed in *Aida*.

Before I proceed to Said, however, I want to reemphasize the objective of the opera *Aida*, namely, that it was created for the express purpose of glorifying the Egyptians at a particular time in history, a period when two leading imperialist powers, Britain and France, were actively looking

to exert their influence in the Middle East and Africa. I have discussed the important role of the Suez Canal and what this waterway represented in terms of trade potential for the European powers, and also how Egypt, as a geographical midpoint between Europe and Asia, could serve European interests in two vital ways. To recapitulate, firstly, Egypt was strategically positioned to handle trade and generate vast amounts of wealth between Asia and Europe. Secondly, Egypt had to be "Europeanized" to both act as representative for the Europeans in the Middle East and Africa and also to serve as a role model for the other non-European countries. The musical composer, French writers and the Cairo Opera House itself, as well as the pomp surrounding the first performance, would indicate that Egypt had been mobilized onto the evolutionary path toward "progress" - progress as conceptualized by the Europeans that is.

The point I want to emphasize here is that ever since Napoleon's expedition to Egypt in the late 1790's and the wealth of discourse that materialized from that event (Les Descriptions and other novels and reports by notable French scholars, travellers, writers), definite attitudes and beliefs about the Egyptians had become widespread and are recognizable in the works of popular writers of nineteenth century such as Volney, Flaubert, Victor Hugo and Lamermont, to name a few. Much of this discourse does not cast Egypt in a very favourable light - after all they were foreigners, Arab and

Moslem, and though the Europeans admired the Egyptians for their artistic abilities and impressive architectures, they still perceived them as a backward country. An example from Steegmuller's Flaubert in Egypt is a compilation of notes taken by Flaubert during his journey in Egypt. These notes and letters describing Egyptian culture bear a close relation to passages in the novels Salamambo, Herodias, and the Temptation of Saint Anthony and are testimony to the kinds of impressions held by Flaubert, who was one of the more popular novelists in France at the time:

Everyone who wears clean clothes beats up up everyone who wears dirty ones, or rather none at all...you see many gentlemen sauntering along the streets with nothing but a shirt and a long pipe. Except in the very lowest classes, all the women are veiled, and in noses they wear ornaments that hang down and sway from side to side....on the other hand if you don't see their face, you see their entire bosoms (cited in Steegmuller 1972:30).¹⁵

There are many other examples from the authors as noted above in numerable works that reflect definite discursive practices that give Middle-Eastern and African cultures a particularly "oriental and exotic" flavour. French writers

¹⁵ Steegmuller's text reproduces English translations of Flaubert's letters to various individuals in Europe. These letters were written during his extended journey to the Middle-East and Africa and cover the period October 1849 to June 1850.

and scholars privileged themselves as narrators -- credible sources and primary definers, since many of them had travelled to foreign lands and had "experienced" their cultures first hand. As such, they were in a position to represent others (Hall 1992) and as I have argued in Chapters 2 and 4, the discursive practices during this period encoded presumptions about culturally different others.

McClary adds that the Napoleonic expedition, with the several volumes of Les Descriptions, the writings of the "savants"¹⁶, and works that derive out of the travels etc., eventually led to a saturation of "exoticism" in many of the operatic compositions coming out of France from the mid 1800's onwards (1992). It appears that this proclivity of the French to "exoticize" non-Europeans became increasingly pronounced as the period of European colonization in Asia grew nearer, grew nearer, particularly from 1850 onwards. Adorno's comments would support McClary's observations; he states that "opera of the period has always shown an endless love for

¹⁶ The savants were a group of Napoleonic explorers who were self-taught, that is they learned everything on their own since at the time there was no modern, scientific knowledge about Egypt. This group was very influential in terms of the dissemination of discourse throughout France with respect to the description of Egyptian culture and life.

those who are of foreign blood or are otherwise 'outside'" (1994: 28). Adorno (1994) cites some examples as follows: Delibes' *Lakme*, Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine*, Verdi's *Il Trovatore* and Bizet's *Carmen*.

My point here is that it would not have been in France's political and national interests for Mariette and Du Locle to cast Egypt in a negative light in the opera. But they still needed to encode Egypt as inferior so that domination of them by the West would seem natural and inevitable and this two-fold goal is accomplished by valorizing Egypt's "golden age" from which contemporary Egypt has devolved. The comments of Richard Dyer, who is a proponent of cultural studies, are nevertheless useful here although he was writing about films:

Most of the contradictions developed in films are over-ridingly bought off by the nostalgia or primitivism which provides them with the point of departure. Far from pointing forwards, they point back, to a golden age – a reversal of utopianism that is only marginally offset by the narrative motive of recovery of utopia (1993: 282).

The notion of the "golden age" is therefore useful throughout the analysis of this chapter, particularly as it relates to how evolutionary presumptions are also encoded in the *Aida* libretto.

I now turn my discussion to Said and his notion of orientalism, and will demonstrate further how racism is encoded in the text. In his book *Orientalism*, Said invokes a genealogical approach to describe "retrospectively and continuously structures of orientalism through references of

the works done by Sacy, Renan and from the massive Description de l'Egypt" (Clifford 1988: 257). Said (1979) suggests that orientalist discourse is recognizable in writings as far back as Homer, Dante, Aechylus, to name a few. Said articulates a definition of orientalism on the basis of three loose meanings as follows:

1) Orientalism is a mental state, a style of thought "based upon the epistemological and ontological distinction between the Orient and the Occident; 2) an academic designation - orientalism is what people do - it is a practice - anyone who leaches, writes about, or researches the Orient and finally 3) it is a corporate institution designed to deal with the Orient in a systematic way it is a western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient (Said 1993: 2-3).

Pertinent for my analysis is the second category, orientalism as a practice, and how and where this opera encodes and (re)produces orientalism. Said recognizes that language is a "highly organized and encoded system, which employs many devices to express, indicate, represent, etc," (Said 1993: 21). Said is interested in how discourse acquires referential power in cultures and his book, Orientalism focuses on the writings of many French and British writers beginning with the eighteenth century. Through analysis of select writings Said attempts to "isolate and discredit an array of 'oriental' stereotypes; the eternal and unchanging East, the sexually insatiable Arab, the 'feminine' exotic; mystical religiosity and corrupt despotism" (Clifford 1988: 257). Said (1979) holds in suspicion all dichotomizing

concepts that reconstitute the human condition and cultures by way of contrasts. Said argues that dichotomizing concepts inscribe perspectives of the other that operate to establish images of an "us versus them" mentality. I have already discussed the French proclivity to "exoticize" or "orientalize" Middle Eastern cultures and the way this tendency saturated much of the discourse then circulating throughout France. I have also shown through the provision of an excerpt by the French man Flaubert, how this exoticization of "the other" is achieved and encoded in discourse.

Moreover, this tendency was not exclusive to writings. It is recognizable in many of the paintings, particularly after the mid 1800's (Meyers & Copplestone 1985). For instance, one of the most well known painters of the period is Jean Auguste Ingres and his oil "The Turkish Baths" which emerged in 1863. Furthermore, Edward Manet produced "Olympia" and toward the latter part of the century, Paul Gauguin, had an especially keen interest in the cultures of the Middle East. According to Meyers & Copplestone (1985), Gauguin left his family and Europe for an extended period in search of a more spiritually vital environment. Gauguin rejected, or attempted to reject, Europe's whole artistic tradition in favour of the freely expressive modes of "primitive" peoples.

Another fairly well known artist of the period who attempted to popularize the exotic side of his work was Theodore Chasseriau who painted scenes of North Africa and

Near Eastern life (Meyers and Copplestone 1985). Closer to the present time, the exhibition Egyptomania and Egypt in Western Art 1730-1930, which opened at the Louvre in 1994 and then travelled to Ottawa and Vienna, exemplified Egyptian influences in a wide range of artistic expressions and articles (see Keillor 1993). In discussing the role of art, Berger (1972) recognizes that the art of any period tends to serve the ideological interests of a dominant group.

Turning to the opera libretto of *Aida* I want to identify where this practice of "exoticizing" actually occurs and the extent to which the discursive practices operate in this text to inscribe non-Europeans, in this case the Ethiopians, as inferior subjects. That is, by investigating the discursive practices contained in the libretto we should be able to recognize what ideological forces are operating and how these work to rearticulate images and stereotypes surrounding the racial other, that is, racism. Moreover, discursive conventions and codes define relationships, create identities/non identities; they both influence and participate in the construction of our view of the world.

I start from the position that the Egyptians are no longer inscribed as savages, but their nonsavageness is located in a glorified mythological past. Moreover, evolutionary presumptions influence these representations, in that the Ethiopians remain savages; that is, ideologically they take the place of the savage Egyptians. It is the

Ethiopians who are the racial inferiors and are positioned and exoticized in this opera, not the Egyptians. I will show that despite Egypt's prior representations as inferior in the earlier part of the 1800's, which privileged them as (ancient) exotic, and natural, this inscription is replaced in the opera text by the representations of Ethiopians as savages.

The synchronic structure of this text is one of dichotomizing concepts; it is ordered around distinctions that set up two conditions whereby we, as audience members, derive meaning. The first condition pertains to value, that is the reality of this opera is presented by way of contrasts that casts one particular group in a favourable light to the detriment of the other. Secondly, the particular concepts employed in the opera text function to reenact ideology that comprises stereotypical constructions reflecting an 'us verses them' mentality.

How are the Egyptians described in this text, around what specific terms? How are the Ethiopians described? In the case of the former, adjectives that connote power are frequently exercised. For example, words for the Egyptians such as glorious, great, heroes, valiant, honour, noble and wisdom are employed.¹⁷ The Ethiopians, on the other hand, are described as invaders, wretched, enemy, warriors, rivals

¹⁷ The libretto I consulted is contained in Bleiler, Ellen (Ed.), 1962, pgs. 48-91.

and savages. They are also "as savage as a tiger" (Act 1, Scene 2) and "hordes of barbarians" (Act 2, Scene 1). By virtue of these distinctions images of both the Egyptians and Ethiopians are defined by positive and negative ascriptions. In other words, derogatory references in respect of Ethiopia are easily understood as part of an implied opposition which contrasts them with Egypt. Moreover, as Cormack (1994) has shown throughout his own analysis in Ideology, within a scheme of dichotomizing concepts unflattering statements merely rearticulate and give force to the obvious.

In this particular case, ideological production of an "us versus them" mentality begins at the level of the discursive conventions employed to articulate differences between the Ethiopians and Egyptians.

Aida is the primary figure to carry the burden of exoticism in this opera; the others of course are the Ethiopian prisoners, Aida's father and the Nubian slave girls. Aida is the gentle, black servant to the Egyptian Princess Amneris. Her lineage is also one of royalty, though implicit in the opera is the fact that Ethiopian royalty is not to be equated with Egyptian royalty, by virtue of the silence associated with the former. That is, it is not until the final act of the opera that the royal status of Aida's father, as King of Ethiopia, is revealed to the Egyptians (Radames, the captain of the guard). I would add to this that the dance of the half dressed Nubian slave girls, who sing of the

greatness of Egypt, also encodes racism.

In summary, then, the ideological encoding in this text is racist. That is, the text is structured around dichotomizing concepts that provide the Egyptians with a superior status through contrasts with the Ethiopians. Implicitly the text reproduces a naturalness of power dichotomies and also reproduces superiority of the West over Egypt by privileging Egypt's former "golden age".

GENDER

How are relations between men and women encoded in *Aida*? What ideological forces are at work in respect of gender issues and how do these function to rearticulate stereotypes and images surrounding nineteenth century constructions of femininity and masculinity? Does this text seal women in a subordinate position to men? To address these questions it is useful to first consider the intellectual current surrounding the position of women in French society in the nineteenth century, since this will simultaneously reveal much about the position of men.

The nineteenth century, particularly for an extended period following the French Revolution, was a time of radical transformation and change. In her work on *Carmen* (1992) McClary investigates the French intellectual climate of the 1800's to understand what it reveals about attitudes toward women in society. Her insights are applicable to my interest

here in similar questions regarding *Aida*. Accordingly, McClary states that:

The majority of middle-class women in [Europe/France] in the nineteenth century complied with hegemonic ideals of femininity; they withdrew from participating in the public sphere, and some even denied themselves sexual expression in conformity with the images proliferating in conduct manuals, novels and operas. But many women rejected the prescribed role of "angel in the house"....As Peter Gay writes, 'Man's fear of women is as old as time, but it was only in the bourgeoisie century that it became a prominent theme in popular novels and medical treatises. Men's defensiveness in the bourgeoisie century was so acute because the advance of women all around them was an attempt to recover ground they had lost' (1992: 37).

Importantly, this passage attests to the fact that much of the discourse on women circulating at the time depicts women as paragons of virtue, out of sight, confined to their own private spheres where they willingly subscribed to male dominance. Not all women merely acquiesced, according to McClary, many actively sought to take a firm stand to assert their feminine sexuality and eventually, "the 'femme fatale' shows up in opera as well - with a vengeance" (McClary 1992: 37). A corollary of this was the preoccupation of the French with prostitution, which was written about by many writers at the time, like Zola, Hugo, etc., and also made its way into the paintings of the period. Thus, two competing ideologies surrounded women and make their way into the *Aida* text as well, that of virtuous versus sinner, or the madonna/whore construct. For Berger, "women are depicted in quite a different way from men, not because the feminine is different

from the masculine, but because the 'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him" (1984: 63). I will now demonstrate that the ideological encodings in *Aida* as they relate to women are the product of the dominant attitudes held in French society.

I begin by returning to Berger and his notion of "the gaze" and will examine how the women in this opera, are objectified. First of all, there are only two lead female parts in the opera (given above), an opera which comprises a very large cast of characters. As noted earlier, this is readily understood if we examine other operas from the period that are testimony to the prevalence of male roles in opera over those of female parts. For instance, in the twenty-five operas enumerated in Appendix 1, the male/female ratio in nearly all cases is more than double. This is an indication of the general view of the period that performing on stage was within the province of men's work, given, as mentioned earlier, that many women of the bourgeoisie period resigned themselves to their private spheres of life, away from the 'gaze' of men. Another fact that emerges from the operas of the nineteenth century is that as a rule women die, men survive. Moreover, women who routinely die are those considered inferiors, "racial others", working class women and women of questionable virtues and moral standards. McClary adds that "because romantic interest typically motivates the

plots, the "other" is usually female, and closure occurs when the difficulties between the two forces dissolve, leading to marriage/death, etc" (1988: 58).

The two lead female vocal roles are those of the characters of an Ethiopian slave and an Egyptian princess. Aida, the slave, is the emotional impetus of the whole opera, she is a gentle, black woman whose role reflects the difficulties of breaking down racial, class and national barriers. Implicitly, Aida is the "seductress" of the text because, as an racial inferior, she has "bewitched" an Egyptian man (who represents her oppressor) into wanting her. Aida must make a choice - the Egyptian or her own country. Her physical attributes are introduced by her Egyptian lover through references such as "goddess" and "beauty" (Act 1, Scene 1). As such she has become the text's "femme fatale" and an object of sexual desire, with the unsuspecting Egyptian doomed to be her victim. Aida is both a madonna, through the references to her as a goddess, but simultaneously a whore, since she is a potential traitor to her own country.

It is obvious that we are listening to the story of an unfortunate woman. Aida's role is defined by whether or not she can be with a man, not as an independent woman who could survive on her own. As such, Aida's fate hinges on whether or not she can have a man; she is an emotional woman whose happiness will be determined by somebody else. On the other hand, the Egyptian Princess Amneris is presented as a proud,

rational-thinking woman who places her country before her heart. Amneris's role is masculinized, that is she possesses all the qualities typically associated with men. Amneris is portrayed as strong, competitive, assertive, and for most of the opera aggressive and independent. Her insensitivity is manifested in her interaction with Aida when she manipulates Aida into sharing with her the secret of her bond with Radames. Moreover, in the final act she sends Radames to his death for not complying with her requests, and thus reasserts the power of the masculine over the feminine, the rational over the irrational. Thus the power of men over women is manifested not only through male-female encounters, but also through woman-to-woman interactions (Aida and Amneris).

Clement makes the very interesting observation regarding operas that "when men die or are defeated, it is because they have some unremarked traits deriving from a femininity unerringly detected by the opera" (1988: 22). This appears to be the case in this opera as well. Aida's lover, Radames, goes to his death, not so much because he betrayed his country, but rather because he has fallen victim to the emotions generally associated with Western constructions of femininity. That is, he is weak, emotional and irrational because he has lost his heart to a woman.

This discussion has demonstrated that the text encodes problematic attitudes toward women that derive from the intellectual climate at the time in France. I will now turn

to class and power relations to examine how these are encoded in the text.

POWER AND CLASS RELATIONS

As a text, *Aida* is a closed structure, that is it has a beginning, middle and end, unlike a photograph that is a non-temporally ordered phenomenon (Cormack 1994). The diachronic structure of the text tells us something about the main theme that runs the course of this opera, power relations, defined and expressed through Egypt's antagonistic relationship with Ethiopia. According to Cormack "the most important evidence is the opening and closing of a text, the opening declares the agenda, sets limits on its contents. It sets out the problem, or plot, which the text answers" (1994: 26).

The display of Egyptian power and state-consciousness is not a mere adjunct in this opera. The opening of this opera commences with the possibility of war between Egypt and Ethiopia. This is easily recognized in the discussions between Radames and the Priest. Thus, an audience is first confronted with the threat of violence. Moreover, not only is there the threat of violence, but manifestly there is the question of who will lead the Egyptian army and importantly, who will win the war. As Cormack states "the essential point of ideological interest is that the opening declares the purpose of the text and the ending signifies the answer to the problem (1994: 30). In other words who is superior/inferior?

How does the text close? Radames and Aida are entombed, their fate is sealed; Radames is to die for his refusal to marry the Princess Amneris and his love for an Ethiopian slave; Aida because of a love for an Egyptian man. Moreover, Ethiopia has again been defeated in war with the Egyptians. Thus, Ethiopia is defeated by Egypt in both love and war and the power of the latter is reaffirmed.

Despite the way these characters die in the opera, live entombment was not a common practice in Egypt's long history. Nobody seems to know where Mariette got this idea, or why he decided to incorporate it in the opera, particularly since he appears to have been obsessed with the idea of presenting an "authentic" Egyptian opera.

Power manifests itself in a variety of other ways in this opera, particularly in terms of the non-verbal dimensions. Most productions of *Aida* still invoke the use of elaborate stage scenery. While the use of animals has all but disappeared, the staging is quite elegant in comparison with most other operas currently produced. In the video production by Levine (1983) of *Aida* from the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City, the staging includes scenery depicting huge Egyptian columns, busts and a sphinx, pyramids in the background scenery, and huge bodies of lions. The artistic creations are emblems of overwhelming royal power in Egypt's dynastic past. They immediately bring to mind the sheer amount of labour which must have been necessary to create

them. As Meyer and Coplestone suggest, "power made itself manifest in the ancient world not only through the ability to control large amounts of labour, of the kind required to build the Gizeh pyramids, but through access to precious materials and a monopoly of the reservoir of skill" (1985: 13). In other words, lots of labour was needed to construct the great Sphinxes and the pyramids. Of what did this labour comprise primarily Jewish and "black" labourers.

The threat of violence is also a constant in the opera. Over fifty percent of the opera text surrounds the issue of power and control via war. One entire act, the Triumphal Scene, is carried out in celebration of Egypt's greatness and political strength. What does the use of violence suggest? It naturalizes the use of power (force) to control culturally different others and, as I argued regarding the encoding of racism in this text, it also encodes the idea that some cultures are inferior in that they represent a lower stage of cultural evolution. That is to say, the text encodes evolutionary presumptions that depict culturally different others as inferior because they are the unchanged vestige of earlier, more "savage" ways of life. Just as the Egyptians overcome the Ethiopians in this opera, so will Europeans overcome contemporary Egypt by assimilating Egypt to a European way of life.¹⁸

¹⁸ There are, to be sure, other readings regarding the encoding of power in *Aida*. For example, while Verdi was writing *Aida* the pope proclaimed the dogma of

1992).

In the absence of actual statistics representative of ticket sales of live opera performances, video productions and tape or compact discs of opera, I can only assume that opera is maintaining its level of popularity. Or it may be diminishing particularly in view of the attempts being made to bring opera and rock music together, which I have alluded to earlier. McClary suggests that the fact that the opera house continues to thrive is an indication of the appeal and influence opera must still exert on a specific audience (1988:18).

Assuming that nineteenth century operas continue to draw the crowds, it raises the question of why people continue to return to see the same operas over and over again. Littlejohn asks this question, but cautions that we can only speculate why cultural phenomena such as opera continue to survive (1992). I believe, as Littlejohn suspects, that one of the primary reasons that people continue to go to the same performances is that these individuals genuinely like opera, and more especially, they love the big musical numbers such as the duets, arias, and ensembles. These people do not care so much about the intelligibility of the librettos, rather they are there to hear the singers and the mega-emotional outbursts through song. As Littlejohn suggests, "the nineteenth century roles were designed to show off the skills of brilliant

I have demonstrated how some of the discursive strategies employed in this text reproduce constructions and stereotypes surrounding racism, gender and class and power. Like so many operas of the nineteenth century, *Aida* conveys important knowledge that comprises hegemonic ideologies which can be directly linked to the dominant French attitudes that are manifested in much of the discourse circulating at the time. This opera also embodies the celebration of racism, imperialism/colonialism and gender politics just as many of the other operas of the nineteenth century do (McClary 1992).

A final twist in the whole story surrounding the creation of *Aida* is that France never did achieve political and economic control over the Egyptians. The British occupied Egypt some two decades after the premiere of *Aida* in Cairo.

papal infallibility, which irritated governments of the European Catholic countries and cost the pope much needed support (see Weaver and Chusid 1979:37) Some analysts have interpreted the portrayal in *Aida* as a call for the separation of church and state powers. As Weaver and Chusid write (1979: 37): "In *Aida*...all of Verdi's usual Risorgimento themes are present: the aria 'O patria mia', the chorus calling for war, the antagonism between king and priests, and the oppressed people. But...they are slightly distanced by the non-European setting."

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this thesis I have suggested that aesthetic forms such as opera are situated within a cultural context and that they can be examined from an anthropological approach informed by the interdisciplinary field of cultural studies. My objective in this thesis has been two-fold. Firstly, to demonstrate that the opera *Aida* was a socially produced text. It was not the sole creation of one artistic genius; rather it was conceived and produced by multiple authors who had their own vested interests in its conception. As such the opera was contextualized and examined to illuminate the integral connections between the authors of this opera and the wider political, social, economic and ideological circumstances at the time in Europe and Egypt.

Secondly, I have demonstrated how hegemonic ideologies are encoded in the discursive strategies employed in the text and how these ideological encodings in the opera libretto operate to (re)produce the dominant or "preferred" attitudes in society at a particular moment in history. Through the provision of three exemplars that focus on racism, gender, and power and class relations, I have shown how the dominant attitudes of the French intellectual climate have been encoded in the text.

I want to now briefly look at some notable productions of *Aida* in the twentieth century especially in terms of transformations, indeed many would say gross violations, as a way of providing some direction for future studies on opera using a cultural studies approach. I will conclude this thesis by considering the question of why people keep returning to see the same opera .

Some Notable Performances of Aida in the 20th Century

Twentieth century productions of *Aida* abound and as Said observes "*Aida* has been performed more times than any other work at the New York Metropolitan" (1993: 114). What is more, Littlejohn's statistics rank *Aida* fifteenth among one hundred operas surveyed in the repertories of some of the world's leading opera houses in terms of the frequency of performance (1992:21). Since World War II various productions of *Aida* appear to swing back and forth between monumental, grand opera spectacles and more intimate productions that focus more on the dramatic side of the opera. Some notable productions of *Aida* in the twentieth century, though not to imply qualitative superiority over others are worth mentioning.

One of the most well known and talked about was Wieland Wagner's 1961 production of *Aida* at the Deutsche Oper in West Berlin. Wagner, preoccupied with the use of symbolism, recognizably Freudian symbolism, incorporated a giant phallus in the bedroom of the Princess Amneris. Innovative as he

believed he was, Wagner came to be known as an individual to who seriously violated the opera, not only in terms of the drama itself and text, but also the musical compositions. Wagner's rationale behind the use of a phallus is provided in Nagler, who "found the analytical playing on the priapic libido quite unappetizing" (1981: 89). Wagner states that the "gigantic phallus is Amneris's constant dream....she wanted to save Radames from sentencing because only in his person can the dream of the gigantic phallus become reality" (cited in Nagler 1981: 90).

Two of the biggest efforts to recreate the historical Cairo premiere of *Aida* were by Franco Zefferelli in 1963 in Milan and Fillipo Sanjust at the Hamburg Opera House in 1970 (Nagler 1981; John 1980; Bleiler 1962). Both directors offered *Aida* straight out of the museum, with the latter production considered the more ostentatious of the two.

Zefferelli's Milan production attempted to recreate *Aida* in the Cairo fashion; the only thing missing was "spectators dressed in the fashion of Napoleon III" (John 1980: 90). Zefferelli was "obsessed with the idea that the pharaohs and the society he was dealing with, was a saturated, dying world, with symptoms of decay" (John 1980: 91). This particular Zefferelli production (he also made the opera into film some years later) is believed to have been in response to Wagner's previous "abuse" of the opera.

Fillipo Sanjust's 1970 production in terms of staging, design and cast is comparable to that of the Montreal production at Olympic Stadium in 1988. Both are considered two of the biggest productions ever mounted in the twentieth century, but the Olympic Stadium, based on my own comparison of descriptions was by far the grandest. According to Littler, an opera critic who wrote about the performance in the magazine Opera Canada, it was the largest theatrical stage production ever performed in Canada; it drew an audience of some 60,000. Apparently the experience was only one-dimensional, a visual one because the acoustics at the stadium were poor. It seems that on the unusually large stage, the performers could not be heard (1988). Props for this extravaganza included a fourteen foot python, two tigers, a lion and a camel named "humpy", as well as a vast array of polyurethane sphinxes and pyramids (Littler 1988: 28).

Aida has also infiltrated popular culture in a number of interesting ways. With the advent of modern technology, opera's horizons broadened with the introduction of the gramophone, which as Orrey points out "took the golden voices of Caruso, Melba and others into the homes of people who could have never heard these singers in the flesh" (1972: 236). The long playing record, compact discs and tapes have provided increasing opportunities for people to partake in opera, and as well, through stereophonic recording techniques "have brought the sound spectrum to an almost demanding degree of

perfection - a perfection unattainable in live performances" (Orrey 1972: 237).

Aida was first introduced to film during the early 1900's, a silent film version (Bleiler 1962). With the advent of sound tracks, more operas were set to film; *Aida* was made and this resulted in a production starring Sophia Loren in the title role with soprano Renata Tebaldi's voice (Bleiler 1962). Other operas that have been brought to film are *La Traviata* by Zefferelli, *Carmen* by Francesco Rosi, *Don Giovanni*, etc. Tambling argues that the "comparative fewness of opera films may be explained in commercial terms, and in terms of the elite nature of the operatic form" (1987: 17).

According to Bleiler, in 1952, some Broadway producers decided that the opera "might contain a thing or two for them, especially entitled My Darlin' Aida, prehistoric Egypt was not deemed a good box-office appeal, so the locale was shifted to a Tennessee plantation, just before the Civil War...Radames became Ray, a gallant southern officer, Aida and her father were Northerners, of course" (1962: 36). This example goes far in demonstrating how an opera text or any other theatrical story, or novels, can be appropriated and modified to reflect a specific spacial and temporal ordering that carries with it a whole new symbolic field that generates entirely new meanings.

There are many other stage productions that could be described. As mentioned, *Aida* is still one of the most popular

operas ever written and continues to draw the crowds. James Levine, conductor at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City has produced *Aida* for video, in 1983, and accordingly, the production appears to be somewhat toned down compared with other stage productions during the past twenty five years I have read about. However, while Levine dispensed with the use of pythons, tigers, elephants and camels, two horses drawing a cart did cross the stage during the Triumphal Scene, Act 2.

General Discussion on Opera in North America

Opera has been around in North America for over two hundred years. According to the Encyclopedia of Music in Canada, the first North American written as well as produced opera was Canadian, in 1790 (1992: 973). *Aida's* first performance in North America was in the United States in 1873 (Gammond 1980) and in Canada possibly not until 1911.¹⁹ Until the advent of television, opera in North America was only available through either live performance, or radio broadcasts. Toscanini's NBC broadcasts of the 1940's from the Met are perhaps the most well known and remembered. The radio broadcasts were significant for they took opera out of the grand opera house of New York, making it available to a

¹⁹ Keillor (1988) provides an overview of musical activity, including European opera, during the 1870's in Ottawa, Canada.

growing population of immigrants to the United States. Many of them were from Europe and it provided a link with their own cultures. Adorno would have us believe that it is this sense of nostalgic idealization and identification that is the only reason that opera has been able to maintain its popularity all over the world (1994). Perhaps he is right.

The only real measure to gauge the popularity of opera are ticket sales for live opera performance, or the sale of opera compact discs or videos. I can find no market research in North America that states categorically that opera has increased in popularity. However, Weber believes that opera is growing in popularity. Specifically he states "in spite of the competition of film and television, opera has succeeded in retaining and even increasing its audiences throughout the Western world" (1994: 111). The market research conducted by Hodgson in Britain in 1990 would support these findings, at least for a time following the *Nessun Dorma*/ Pavarotti World Cup theme. The sale of compact discs increased, as well as attendance at outdoor park performances, although the event did not effectively impact live opera attendance²⁰ (Hodgson

²⁰ Hodgson's study investigated whether or not the rise in popularity in opera in Britain was directly connected to the World Cup. While the World Cup event did increase the market for both video and audio records of opera music, it did not attract any new audience for live operatic performance.

1992).

In the absence of actual statistics representative of ticket sales of live opera performances, video productions and tape or compact discs of opera, I can only assume that opera is maintaining its level of popularity. Or it may be diminishing particularly in view of the attempts being made to bring opera and rock music together, which I have alluded to earlier. McClary suggests that the fact that the opera house continues to thrive is an indication of the appeal and influence opera must still exert on a specific audience (1988:18).

Assuming that nineteenth century operas continue to draw the crowds, it raises the question of why people continue to return to see the same operas over and over again. Littlejohn asks this question, but cautions that we can only speculate why cultural phenomena such as opera continue to survive (1992). I believe, as Littlejohn suspects, that one of the primary reasons that people continue to go to the same performances is that these individuals genuinely like opera, and more especially, they love the big musical numbers such as the duets, arias, and ensembles. These people do not care so much about the intelligibility of the librettos, rather they are there to hear the singers and the mega-emotional outbursts through song. As Littlejohn suggests, "the nineteenth century roles were designed to show off the skills of brilliant

voices" (1992: 180). The point Littlejohn is making is that singers generally want to show off their vocal capabilities, particularly high calibre singers, and these operatic compositions provide them with the opportunity to do so. What is more, these individuals can attract big audiences, and large crowds enhances popularity, not to mention one's own purse.

There are other considerations that may have something to do with why these operas are still available to be seen. Littlejohn reminds us that opera impresarios have a personal stake in keeping these operas alive: "they have devoted their careers to studying them and their taste to admiring them" (1992: 180). I am also inclined toward's Adorno's (1994) idea, to reiterate, that people derive some sense of nostalgic identification with opera. Many people who go to opera are first, second, or third generation italians, Germans, Spaniards, French, etc.. and the opera provides them with some link to their ancestral pasts. I know that from my own experience, opera generates memories of the Italian neighbourhood I grew up in as a young child. I believe it reestablishes identities and connections with the past for many other people as well.

Will European opera survive? It was born in a particular time in history, according to the specific tastes and demands of certain European cultures. It has been around in Europe for over four hundred years, in North America for over two

hundred years or so. However, there is every indication that opera is holding its own, although the ever increasing costs of tickets to attend live opera could price the middle class out of the opera house. However, the available technology in society today allows people the experience of going to the opera or the "classical world" without ever leaving the comfort of their own living rooms.

APPENDIX 1

NOTABLE OPERAS BETWEEN 1800 - 1900

Opera/Composer <u>Year</u>	Librettist and/ <u>or based on</u>	Male/Female Spectrum (lead roles)
<i>Fidelio</i> Beethoven 1814	*French libretto by Jean N. Bouilly	5-2
<i>Barber of Seville</i> Rossini 1816	*Based on comedy by Pierre de Beaumarchais	5-2
<i>Oberon</i> C. von Weber 1826	*Based on tale "Huon de Bordeaux	7-2
<i>William Tell</i> Rossini 1829	Based on play by Schiller	7-3
<i>Norma</i> Bellini 1831	*Based on play by Louis Soumet	3-3
<i>I Puritani</i> Bellini 1835	*Based on drama "Tetes Rondes et Cavaliers"	4-2
<i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i> Donizetti 1835	Based on novel by Walter Scott	5-2
<i>Les Huguenots</i> Meyerbeer 1836	*Based on text by Eugene Scribe	10-3

<i>Ernani</i> Verdi 1844	*Based on novel by Victor Hugo	3 1
<i>Rigoletto</i> Verdi 1851	*Based on play by Victor Hugo	5 3
<i>La Traviata</i> Verdi 1853	*Based on play by Alexander Dumas called "La Dame aux Camelias"	4 3
<i>Il Trovatore</i> Verdi 1853	Based on play by Antonio Gutierrez	4 3
<i>A Masked Ball</i> Verdi 1859	*Based on Eugene Scribe's "Du Le Bal Masque"	5 3
<i>The Force of Destiny</i> Verdi 1862	Based on story by Angel Perez de Saadedra	8 3
<i>Mignon</i> A. Thomas 1866	Based on Goethe's "Wilhelm Meister"	5 2
<i>L'Africaine</i> Meyerbeer 1865	*Based on story by Eugene Scribe	7 2
<i>Don Carlos</i> Verdi 1867	Based on story by Schiller	6 4
<i>Aida</i> Verdi 1871	*Based on story by Auguste Mariette	5 2

<i>Carmen</i> George Bizet 1875	*Based on story by Merimee Prosper	6-4
<i>La Gioconda</i> Ponchielli 1876	*Based on play by Victor Hugo called "Angelo tyran de Padoue"	5-3
<i>Lakme</i> Leo Delibes 1883	*Based on novel by Philippe Gille after "Le Mariage de Loti"	3-5
<i>Manon</i> Massenet 1884	*Based on novel by A. Prevost called "Les aventures deu Chevalier des Grioux et Manon Lescaut"	5-1
<i>Pacliacci</i> Leoncavallo 1892	Based on text by Leoncavallo	4-1
<i>Andre Chenier</i> Giordano 1896	*Based on story of life French poet	7-3
<i>La Boheme</i> Puccini 1896	*Based on novel by H. Murger called "Scenes de la vie de Boheme"	8-2

Notes:

* Denotes French librettist and/or text based on an original French story.

Sources: Gammond 1980; Lang 1971; Simon 1960

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