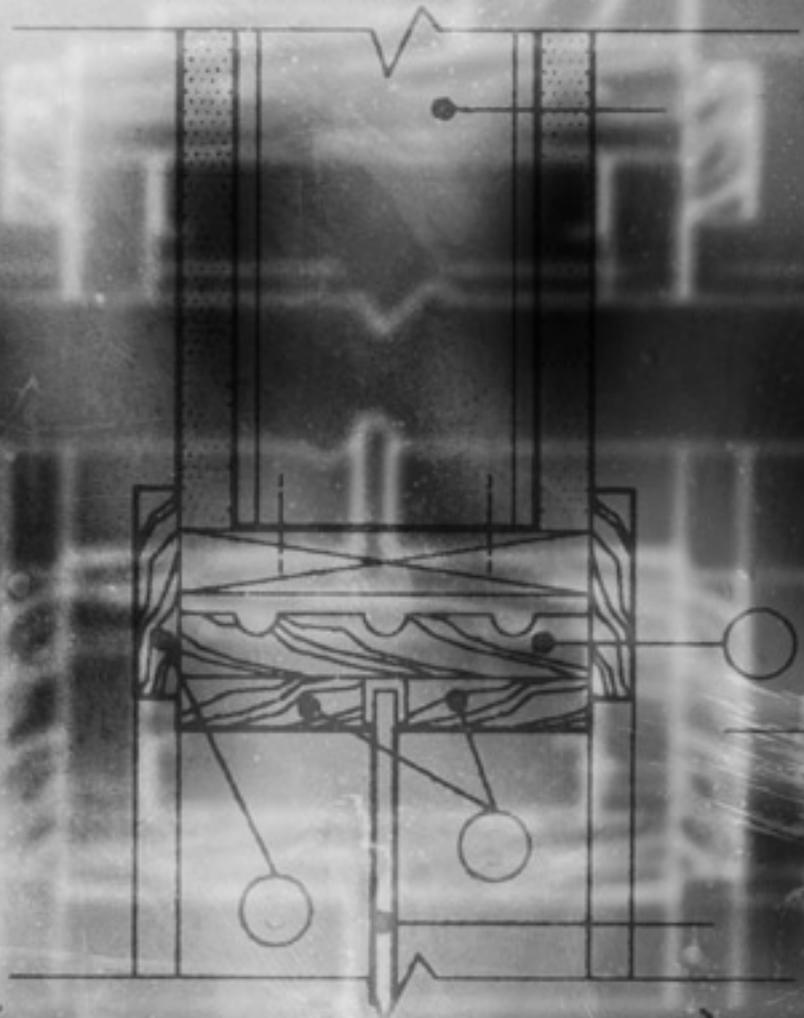
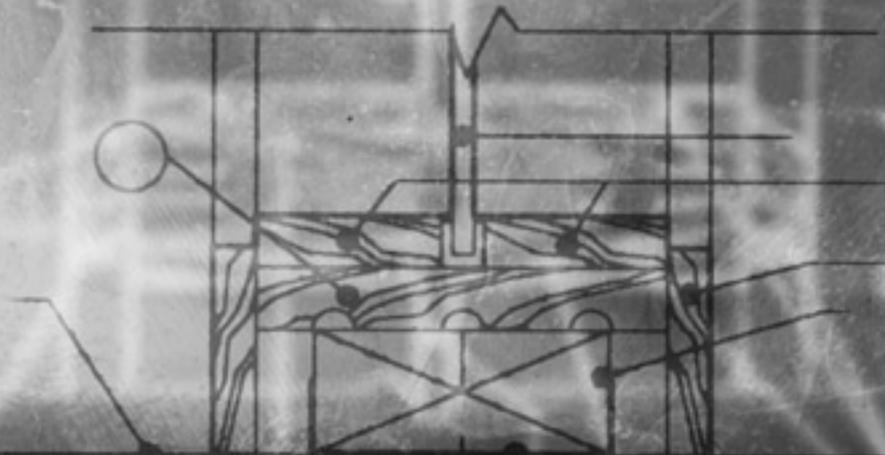


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Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*: Visconti's film and Britten's opera

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*Wer die Schönheit angeschaut mit Augen
ist dem Tode schon anheimgegeben.*

(August von Platen-Hallermünde 1910: 94)

Resumo Seriam as adaptações do conto *Morte em Veneza*, de Thomas Mann, para filme e ópera simples variações midiáticas do texto literário? Ao investigar a questão, o artigo sugere que a "fidelidade à obra" não deveria ser o único critério de avaliação de tais adaptações, pois, apesar de compartilharem o mesmo objeto, o filme de Visconti, a ópera de Britten e o mencionado conto apresentam histórias singulares. Baseando-se no desenvolvimento das personagens tanto no filme, quanto na ópera, o artigo explica como, mediante diferentes tratamentos estéticos e abordagens semióticas, Visconti e Britten adicionaram interpretações próprias e valiosas. O artigo demonstra que, apesar das diferenças midiáticas envolvidas, a qualidade das adaptações dialoga com as sensações oferecidas pelo conto de Mann. O filme e a ópera podem ser, assim, classificados como referências bastante apropriadas, praticamente reverências à obra do autor alemão.

Palavras-chave linguagens musical e cinematográfica, abordagens semióticas, adaptações em filme e ópera

Abstract Are Visconti's film and Britten's opera but media variations of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*? This article suggests that the idea of a faithful rendition to the novella cannot be the sole criterion for comparison. Despite their shared subject matter, novella, film and opera each tells its own story. Analyzing the development of characters in each media version, the article explains how Visconti's film and Britten's opera have added, through different aesthetic treatments and semiotic structures, something of their

own. Although there are obviously different mediatic and methodological techniques, the article suggests that the quality of both film and opera is in accordance with the perceptual sensations offered by Mann's novella. Film and opera are, therefore, congenial references, textually interwoven obeisance to Thomas Mann.

Key words cinematographical and musical languages, semiotic techniques, film and opera adaptations

PRELUDE: A THEME WITH VARIATIONS

"Der Tod in Venedig – ein Thema mit Variationen": this is the title of Hans Mayer's famous essay.¹ The variations are changes of media reaching from Thomas Mann's novella of 1913 to Luchino Visconti's film of 1970 and Benjamin Britten's opera, which premiered two years later, sixty years after the appearance of the novella. There is also Wolfgang Koeppen's 1954 novel *Death in Rome* which uses the last sentence of *Death in Venice* as its second epigraph, effecting a narrative response and yet another literary reaction to Thomas Mann's novella. Are these but media variations of the same subject matter? According to Mayer (1980: 370), this is the very proof that

all investigations of the reciprocal influences between literature and film have been, up until now, only superficially considered. Now, as before, the simplistic concept of 'turning a book into a film' runs rampant. As if Visconti had just 'filmed' Thomas Mann's novella. Or as if *Death in Venice* were 'operaticized' by Benjamin Britten.

However, this has been the precise starting point of most critical opinions about the adaptations for a long time. And the adaptations, of course, can not, under such circumstances, stand up to comparison with the original. According to one representative critic, Terence J. Reed,

almost everything about the Visconti film falls short of the intention and achievement of Thomas Mann. Additions, omissions, and changes by the director destroy the web of associations which the writer had so carefully built up with the most intricate detail-work". (Reed 1984: 173).

The opera composer, in Reed's opinion, must have had even greater difficulties with the literary text than the film director because he had no choice but to bring

1. This essay of 1975 is reprinted in Hans Mayer's book on Thomas Mann (1980) which I will refer to in the following.

the inner thoughts of the protagonist to musical expression through the singer, and in the process many subtly suggested nuances of the story are unavoidably lost (ibid.: 174). All the same, admits Reed with a generous gesture, Britten has, in his latter theater work, achieved "a duplication which is most faithful to the author" (ibid.: 175).

If this alone, the "faithfulness to the author," is the criterion for comparison, Visconti's or Britten's works would naturally fall to the rank of third-rate mock-ups – deemed inadequate in terms of medium, by literature enthusiast and professional critic alike, who would find the finely worked web of allusions, of references to the ancients and philosophical connections replaced by a moving-picture story which imposes specific images outright on things which had looked totally different in the reader's imagination.

In the majority of cases of less ambitious adaptations of literary material into other media, these critics might not be so far off (think of Geissendörfer's filming of the *Magic Mountain*, or Schlöndorff's Proust film). If the new interpretations and revisions annoy them, it is because these adaptations retain so little of what was valuable in the texts. But Visconti's film or Britten's opera – in these cases Hans Mayer (1980) was absolutely right – are no mere slick media mock-ups of the originals, no more than if "Alban Berg had just 'operaticized' Büchner's *Woyzeck* or Wedekind's *Lulu*" (ibidem).

I propose to test this by investigating the meaning and shape which the relationship between Aschenbach and Tadzio takes on in Visconti's and Britten's versions. So, instead of adding still another interpretation of the novella to the big pile, instead of tracing the filigreed composition of themes and motives one more time and cataloguing them as to their central connection to the work as a whole (Renner 1985),² let us content ourselves with a more limited look at an issue which is significant to the structural effect of the novella: the constellation of the protagonists which is so strikingly different in the three different media versions. I will concentrate on this in order to highlight the differences in this one respect, thereby attempting to answer the question of whether – and to what extent – these differences are necessary products of specific media requirements.

2. On *Death in Venice* see, above all, the first part of the second chapter on "Fiktionale Autorreflexion im Werke: soziale und familiale kommunikative Beziehungen und Projektionen" (Renner 1985: 38-55). A specially selected bibliography for the novella is given in Reed's critically annotated edition of the text (Reed 1984: 182).

About a generation ago, Friedrich Knilli, in the first edition of his book on the semiotics of film, remarked that the major difference between a literary work and a film lies in the fact that the film – because of its specific medial properties – is limited to pictures and these are “always concrete, never abstract” (Knilli 1971: 42). This observation may sound trivial today, but it gains new significance with a text such as *Death in Venice*, which is so marked by abstraction and which offers ideas, concepts, allusions, and richness of thought and contemplation in such great quantity. The outer action, which is transferable into film, is minimal, “and between Aschenbach and Tadzio, there occurs, if one chooses to believe in the so-called hard facts, nothing at all” (Mayer 1980: 370).

The articles written about Visconti's film are of infinite number, and they contain some sharp analysis – but almost all of them ignore Siegfried Kracauer's warning, that “if film is an art at all, then it is one which should not be confused with the prevailing arts” (Kracauer 1964: 69). Hardly an article systematically considers that comparative analysis is based on texts in different media and different semiotic structures, and that it demands, therefore, different methodological techniques as well.

Which technique does Visconti use to express, or make visible, the complicated relationship between Aschenbach and Tadzio, a relationship in which “abstraction” is artistically interwoven with the “realistic”, with “real” ambiance and the daily news? And, what is more, without any direct dialogue either, because neither Aschenbach nor Tadzio, ever, in any place, overcomes the barrier of silence.

Visconti follows the novella precisely on this point, offering speechlessness and eye-contact, not a fragment of a face-to-face conversation, but the utmost in suspenseful intensity of communication (Renner 1985: 38). Kracauer, as it is generally known, once said that films gain in interest when the concentration and extent of the spoken word is diminished (cf. Kracauer 1964: 152). The cinematic manifestation of Aschenbach's and Tadzio's relationship provides a particularly good opportunity to test this thesis. Where there is no “dialogue” to begin with, this relationship must be “described” by means other than the spoken word, with those techniques so often ear-marked as specifically belonging to film: camera angles, the use of visual and musical “leitmotifs”, cutting and montage techniques.

The literary story is told in the third person. The distance of the narrator, his commentary, his learned allusions, his interspersed reflections and theoretical observations, his mild irony: all are central to the novella. None of them, however, are

stylistic tools of film. Correspondingly unequivocal is Irving Singer's verdict (1976: 1356): "The visual, in its single-minded devotion to apparent reality, leaves no room for irony in this movie". Without the narrator's distance, without his ironic breaks in description, the observer's distance from the running pictures on the screen is made more difficult. Thus the relationship between Aschenbach and Tadzio can, may, *must*, appear, from the beginning, more "physical", more concrete, in the film than it does in the novella, according to the demands of semiotic theory and media practice.

The observer in the movie theater cannot "read" Aschenbach's thoughts; he can understand his inner impulses only to the extent that Dirk Bogarde is able to make them visible in his mimic creation of the role. This also contributes to the film's troubles with the critics. "Visconti's camera remains outside of Aschenbach, noting the mien of a feeble old man with such tenacity that the physical image imposes its statement upon the inner life of the character", judges David Grossvogel (1971: 54), one critic among many, in his reaction to the premiere.

The critics were horrified, first and foremost, not to find in the film the unreal *Ephebe* of the novella, but a thoroughly earthly boy, recognizably made of flesh and blood. "No words need be wasted over the abandonment of a still almost naive, boyish Tadzio, in favor of an adolescent who is anything but naive", snaps Terence J. Reed (1984: 174). And Joachim Günther formulates categorically that something like the "Tadzio secret" cannot be filmed at all: "It might be better to search for the Tadzio secret of the book herein that this role can never be played without losing its finest essence, with which the picture medium is incompatible" (Günther 1971: 96).

The desperately exacting Jean Améry alone saw the intermedia discrepancy positively, by remarking that there can be no such thing as faithfulness to the original work in film. Visconti was much more concerned with making the "angel of death" Tadzio visible "in the form of a boy of totally otherworldly beauty, whose mysterious narrow smile, expressing something like a mockery of death, still must conjure homoerotic tenderness out of the rawest masculine normalcy" (Améry 1971: 809).

Améry's voice was lost in the general outrage expressed in the reviews and in the backbiting displeasure of Germanist articles. Their conviction prevailed: this novella could not be adequately translated into the medium of film. The unspoken expectation was thus revealed: the *exact same story* was supposed to have come out of the translation. The specific tools of film, used to balance out and overcome the downright "concrete", are not taken into consideration here in the least. This is

precisely the aspect which interests us, for it touches at its core the difficulties of cinematic depiction of Aschenbach's and Tadzio's relationship.

The tools of film include, to begin with, the *camera angles*. Among the critics, the most debated issue is the question of whether Visconti, by the order and sequence of his camera angles, suggested an entirely different interpretation of Tadzio and Aschenbach's relationship than Thomas Mann had described.

This touches, for example, on the question of close-ups: what effect do they have on our perception? How, for example, is Aschenbach's inner commotion in response to the Polish boy's face and form to be reproduced in pictures? How is his fascination to be expressed as a pure product of the mind? How can his obsessive gaze at pure beauty, in August von Platen's sense, be organized into a sequence of camera angles? Hans Vaegt, for example, remarked (1980: 164) that there is no place in Thomas Mann's text where Tadzio smiles at the poet. Visconti, as it seems, had wanted to find a concrete visual correspondence for the indirectly affected intensity between the two in the novella. Out of the same consideration Tadzio is consciously depicted as older than in the book. He must take a more active role in the communication, he "flirts", so to speak, with the older man, whose gaze is fixed upon him, and half aware of his own attractiveness, he becomes virtually a "seducer".

His glances, seconds Geoffrey Wagner (1975: 343), are "explicit, the boy almost propositioning Aschenbach..." "He and the boy", continues Wagner with a quote from Paul Zimmerman (*ibidem*), "exchange lengthy glances whose sexual explicitness turns Aschenbach into a foolish dirty old man and the boy into a pretty little tease". Alexander Hutchinson, in his critique of the film (1974: 40) describes him as an "agent of license": "His invitation is blatant". Claretta Tonetti (1983: 146) on the other hand, defends "the frequency of glances and their great intensity on the screen" by saying "that even in Mann" — that is in the novella — "the rapport between Tadzio and Aschenbach is at least ambiguous".

The controversy shows how intensely the theme was discussed, most of all in the U.S., a society tied to its "puritanical inheritance", wherein men are more readily allowed to shoot each other than to touch each other (except under the cover of rough games or of the unconsciousness of drunken camaraderie, but then, all the more intensely). It is, however, indisputable how sparsely Visconti made use of the close-up — that cinematic device so often used in the realm of passion and love stories. He uses it, in fact, "only, where he wants to emphasize a dramatic high point — like the effect of Tadzio's smile upon Aschenbach" (Seitz 1979: 560).

The relationship develops gradually. Step by step, shot by shot. The almost expressionless, almost unchanging facial expression of Tadzio is placed directly next

to the confused, then fascinated, then increasingly obsessed face of Aschenbach. Right at the beginning we see Tadzio, separated from his family, framed by a painted window, set semiotically in relationship to Christian figures. Tadzio does not look at Aschenbach directly in this scene. He cannot be understood as a "seducer" from the very beginning, as David Glassco opined in crude superficiality, rather he has at first far more of the aura of a pre-Raphaelite picture (cf. Kane 1972: 79).³

First at dinner, and only gradually, does the audience become aware of Aschenbach's transformation, the tension between inner turmoil and quiet, charmed, even entranced observation, a tension, "whose rising inner suspense is produced technically by means of alternating shots and angles" (Seitz 1979: 560) – a technique, by the way, which will be significant for the whole of the film. Why then does the impression – so irritating to the critics – prevail that the film is so much more explicit, so singularly erotic, and so obviously sexual? Does it rest perhaps, at least in part, on the film's "leitmotif of eyecontact", and *its* effect upon the audience? If it cannot be, as we have shown, the technique of the close-up, is it then not a result of specific medial effect requirements that Tadzio takes on a much more active role suggestive of interaction, that he impresses by his physical presence alone, that he – be it only very fleetingly – looks at Aschenbach and returns his glances?

A cinematic depiction of their relationship requires that it be made *visible*. To make passion visible, Visconti makes the camera move back and forth between Aschenbach and Tadzio, just as an ebb and flow. The camera, as Irving Singer (1976: 1350) writes, serves "as an erotic go-between, a messenger, an obliging servant as in so many courtly and romantic love stories".

The distance of the shot and the duration of the angle also have their importance for effect and perception. While Aschenbach only brushes Tadzio with a very short glance in the first scene, a flash of one second, the length of the shot is gradually increased, lasting sometimes between three and five seconds. In the (few) close-ups, the play of the features should be considered: we notice the growing discrepancy between Tadzio's unchanging, enigmatic, even mask-like looks, and Aschenbach's increasingly disturbed and disintegrating countenance.

And finally, there is the color motif. Visconti presents Tadzio, with the help of color symbolism, as a death figure: blue, the "color of fatal providence", red, the "color of life, of seduction and sensuality", but also of blood and death, black and white (Seitz 1979: 298). Visconti combines the visual leitmotif of eye contact with a leitmotif of colors, as cinematic correspondence to the novella's verbal leitmotifs.

3. "From the first, Aschenbach is obviously attracted to Tadzio in an erotic fashion..." (Glassco 1983: 170).

And there is the motif of dance as compared to the original Tazio's dance in front of Aschenbach on the way to the beach. This dance scene has garnered a surprisingly small amount of attention by the critics, and if noticed at all, then only in disparaging fashion as further proof of Visconti's vulgarization of the "pure" spiritual relationship into a dubious physicality. Glassco (1989: 171), for example, blinded by a forest of phallic symbols, can no longer see the poles around which Tazio dances. Dance as abstract movement or lascivious seduction? Visconti uses it as a stylistic film device to lend the ambivalence in Aschenbach and Tazio's relationship fitting media expression.

In his observations on dance in René Clair's films, Kracauer (1964: 73) writes, that dance is "the second type of specifically cinematic movement", which mirrors our real world in that it stylizes it into the imaginary. Because dance in Visconti's film takes place in a so-called other world, in an unreal dream world, the relationship between Aschenbach and Tazio is also transferred to a level other than the purely physical: not as its fulfillment, but as the *longing* for fulfillment. And wasn't this the Thomas Mann's intention?

In his work notes at this time, as reported in Mendelssohn's biographical *opus magnum* on the "Magician", one finds the sentence:

Eros ist für den Künstler der Führer zum Intellektuellen, zur geistigen Schönheit, der Weg zum Höchsten geht für ihn durch die Sinne. Aber das ist ein gefährlicher, lieblicher Weg, ein Irr- und Sündenweg, obgleich es einen anderen nicht giebt.⁴

To this he adds a quotation from Georg Lukács' 1911 volume of essays, *Die Seele und die Formen*, which Hans Mayer considers a important first step towards an understanding of the novella:

Den Dichtern wird ein solcher Aufschwung immer versagt bleiben. Ihr Aufschwung ist immer die Tragödie... Im Leben (und der Künstler ist ein Mann des Lebens!) muß die Liebe Sehnsucht bleiben: es ist ihr Glück und ihre Tragödie.⁵

Aschenbach's road of error and sin, his dangerous and charming road to the

4. "Eros for the artist is the guide towards the intellectual, towards spiritual beauty, the road to the ultimate goes for him through the senses. But this is a dangerous, charming road, a road of errors and sins, although there is no other."
5. Here quoted from Mayer (1980: 380). "Such stimulus is always forbidden to poets. Their stimulus is always tragedy... In life (and the artist is always a man of life!) love must remain longing: it is its happiness and tragedy."

sublime, leads him on Tadzlo's tracks through the dark, always endangered Venetian labyrinth. Eventually the road turns into a chase. The chase is a cinematic topos for heightening suspense and, according to Alfred Hitchcock, "the ultimate expression of the cinematic medium".⁶

Visconti's variations on this stylistic device, in his cinematic transformation of the novella's shy chase scenes, is revealing. The tension is heightened here, on the one hand, by the fact that Aschenbach is never filmed on the same level as Tadzio. The two are always seen in opposite corners of the picture, in diagonal perspective: the one far in the fore of the picture, and the other far away, or, in one especially suggestive shot, Aschenbach below in a darkly shadowed corner and Tadzio a step above, in the white light of the sun. Relying on genuine cinematic devices, this shot succeeds in symbolizing exactly the relationship's definition.

On the other hand, suspense is created by changes in the streets of Venice as the action proceeds: the guests depart, the dangerous epidemic spreads, the streets become dirtier and dirtier, once again a cinematic sign for decline and degeneration – the degeneration of Aschenbach as well. There is order versus degeneration, health versus sickness, the strict governess as protective shield on the one hand, and the feverish poet on suspicious travels on the other – and no bridge or connection, no possibility of fulfillment or union: in art, as in life, "love must remain longing".

The scene itself becomes a sign. The old Venice topos which is played upon in the book is expressed by the filmmaker using his own tools. The labyrinth of streets and Aschenbach's errors and confusion; the sea without horizon and Aschenbach's own boundary breakdown of self: all this is translated cinematically by Visconti (cf. Seitz 1979: 289-301). The cinematic sign character of the place of action is most noticeable in the scenes in which Aschenbach intends to depart. On the way to the train station, he seems troubled, melancholic, and depressed. In the background, more and more old deteriorating buildings line the road, even the poet, his face clouded, is finally completely surrounded by these "dark shapes". In sharp contrast to this is the scene of his return to the hotel. Aschenbach stands triumphant in the boat, the dark buildings of the city have suddenly disappeared to be replaced by the sun-drenched sea. The symbols, associated earlier in the film with Tadzio, appear again, and, without Tadzio himself appearing in the scene, the audience "sees" Aschenbach's thoughts. They are set in the picture by means of suitable medial tools, and they ring true.

6. Quoted here from Kracauer (1964: 72) ("Verfolgungsjagd [als] der endgültige Ausdruck des filmischen Mediums").

Adding to the visual, the music also contributes to lend intensity to Aschenbach's and Tadzio's relationship. "We perceive, whenever music comes into play, structures where we had not seen any before", is the word in Kracauer's *Theorie des Films* (1964: 187). Visconti takes Mahler's Adagietto of the Fifth Symphony as a sign for the unconscious longing for death (Vaget 1980: 167). It is well known that this Adagietto refers, in its melodic line, to one of the five Friedrich Rückert poems which Mahler put to music in 1905, a poem, "which has as its theme isolation, love, and death" (Seitz 1979: 547), a thoroughly obvious leitmotif music for *Death in Venice*, one would think. Yet the choice of precisely this piece was greatly criticized in the reviews. It is known in music history as a Romantic salon piece, "which could never replace Aschenbach's credo of antidemonic dignified art" (Mayer 1980: 382).

But what if Visconti did not want the music to be understood as an expression of the Apollonian (Vaget 1980: 167), but rather as an expression of the Dionysian, of the powerfully emotional, the suspect subverbal? Must it not be understood as part of the semiotic instruction of the film's action? An instruction which shows the audience the decisive phases of Aschenbach's path away from his work ethic, and, led by Hermes *Psychagogos*, towards death? Doesn't the music, as expression of Aschenbach's inner world of thought and feeling, parallel – in a thoroughly fitting cinematic manner – the dream passages which Visconti, not deeming them filmable, left out?

Visconti's own and rather lax reasoning for his decision to make the poet Aschenbach into a musician was that one could show a musician working more easily in film and simultaneously present his results acoustically. This reason, noted by Claretta Tonetti (1983: 143), with its media theory orientation, has, of course, a valid art-historical basis as well.

The Aschenbach figure was, as is well known, conceived as an "amalgam of the artistic lives of Thomas Mann and Gustav Mahler", as an attempt at overcoming the paralyzing antinomy between eros and ethos, sweetness and nobility (Mayer 1980: 378, 381). His music, this "sensual art of exactness and ecstasy" (ibid.: 380), acoustically conveys to the audience, via its conscious quotation in the film, the effect of the boy upon his observer – and the balance of tension between sterility and sexuality, between art and life.

Aschenbach's music is called "sterile" by his student Alfried in the much disputed twenty-second scene of the film, wherein Visconti stages Thomas Mann's art-historical reflections as an argument between master and student: To Aschenbach's "L'atto creativo e un atto spirituale", Alfried answers: "No, Gustav... la bellezza appartiene ai sensi... Soltanto ai sensi". The convocation of wisdom and nobility,

restraint and spiritual discipline is, he says, a mistake in questions of true art: "Il male è una necessità, è l'alimento stesso del genio!"⁷

"That is authentic Thomas Mann", comments Hans Mayer (1980: 382) on the scene which Terence J. Reed (1984: 174) experiences as "embarrassing in every sense of the word". Visconti blends Aschenbach with Leverkühn, Tazio with Esmeralda. The famous flashback of the ninth sequence, the Esmeralda scene from the *Faustus* novel, is inserted right into the part wherein Aschenbach asks the hotel manager about the rumors of the threatening sickness. Once again it is introduced by a semiotically significant musical motif: Beethoven's "Pour Élise", dedicated to a far-off, beloved, unreachable woman. Tazio plays the piece with just one hand, the inexperienced boy cannot play harmonies yet. Esmeralda, not much older, but experienced in the ways of love, plays the piece with two hands.

For Visconti, Mahler's music is a genuine expression of the end of the bourgeois era, and thereby another code for the end of a society which he found portrayed in Thomas Mann's book. His Aschenbach is thus no longer the successful writer at the height of his fame, representative of his epoch, representative of bourgeois society, just knighted on his fiftieth birthday for his work – he is only a lonely man, an unsuccessful musician, an artist in a creative crisis. He does not fit into the society which surrounds him, the society which – in spite of, or precisely because of, its exactly detailed sumptuousness, its elaborate hats, its overflow of bouquets, its whirl of voices, which one hears but does not understand – is remarkably abstract in the film. Its realism becomes unreal, shadowy, mere decor – it is a society which is about to die out, which is almost no longer of this world. Aschenbach is not a part of this society, not even as an artist.

Concretization of the symbolic into the personal occurs even in the demythification of the Tazio figure. Tazio is never described in the novella without allusions to antiquity, in the rhythms of hymnic song: "His face... with... the lovely mouth, the expression of sweet and godlike seriousness, recalled Greek sculpture of the noblest period" (51); "[...] the head of an Eros, in blended yellows of Parian marble" (52); "[...] and lovely as some slender god, [...] this spectacle aroused a sense of myth, it was like some poet's recovery of time at its beginning, of the origin of forms and the birth of gods" (60).⁸

7. Quoted here from Mayer (1980: 382). "The creative act is a spiritual act." "No, Gustav... beauty belongs to the senses... Only to the senses." "Evil is a necessity, it's the very nourishment of the genius."

8. The page numbers refer to the following edition: Mann, Thomas. *Death in Venice*. Trans. Kenneth Burke. Introd. Erich Heller. New York: The Limited Editions Club, 1972.

Cinematic correspondences to this level of classical mythology are hardly present in Visconti's film. In one scene, Tazio is wrapped in a beach towel with an edge design which is reminiscent of the decorations on Greek vases. In this way, he has thrown a toga around himself while he walks to the beach.

His face is "framed with honey-colored locks" in the book (51); "as with the ancient statue of the "boy pulling out a thorn", [his hair] fell in curls over his forehead" (52): "My Phaedrus" (74), the *Boy with a Thorn*, the boy as Dionysos. In the film, Tazio does not have curls. Bjørn Andresen's natural beauty fits the taste of the times at the beginning of the 1970s: yet another concretization, this time from the mythic into the aesthetic and the virginal erotic.

The relationship of Aschenbach and the boy has, of course, a different meaning, interpretation, and effect in the film than in the book. It is, as Visconti intended (cf. Wagner 1975: 343), a story about love without sexuality – which, of course, in the "permissive society" of the 70s, was often misunderstood.⁹ But did he, as Hans Vaegt (1980: 162) and some other critics asked, rob the story thereby of its point, did he amputate it "by turning the tragedy of Aschenbach into a longwinded film about a progressively more decrepit-looking aging homosexual who dies inexplicably on a fling in Venice"?

In answer to these critics, Hans Mayer changes step in his interpretations – much like the author about whom he writes. In this he is not dissimilar to Mann, even in the public organization of his life (although he renounced "the severe happiness" of giving himself "a constitution" through the founding of a family, as Thomas Mann put it in *Königliche Hoheit*). "The film", resumes Mayer (1980: 383), "shows the self-debasement of an aging man, but not an artistic tragedy in the sense of Lukács and Thomas Mann". Right on the next page however, one finds the "all-clear" signal: "Aschenbach dies nobly, not degraded" (ibid.: 384). "The great debasement does not occur. The dying Aschenbach of the film repeats Thomas Mann's thesis. 'We are neither wise nor noble by birth. The morality of form, fame, fidelity, the claim to education: all lies!'"

Can we not finally be done then with this question which runs like a red thread through the secondary literature? Is Visconti's film a work in its own right, a new polycoded text along the lines of Mahler and Mann as Franco Mannino holds, who collaborated as composer on the film? Or a faithfully rendered illustration of the original work as Seitz (1979: 505) proposed? A textual transformation wherein alterations necessarily proceed from the change of codes? "Cinematic illustration",

9. Monica Stirling, for example, refers to this in her book on Visconti (Stirling 1979: 214).

Gabriele Seitz (1979: 558) resumes her hypothesis of a faithful interpretation, "will select those elements which constitute the story... which approach more concrete images, whereas the more abstract textual components... will be pushed into the background".

This is certainly not false – we have shown it with the example of Aschenbach and Tadzio's relationship. But can we explain everything with the differences between specific media and codes? Is it only because of the code change that Aschenbach and Tadzio's relationship seems much more sensual, more sexually concrete in the film than the way Mann described it in the novella? Or are those critics right, who maintain in their *sancta simplicitas* that the film is mainly about the "private erotic experience of an aging *fin-de-siècle* composer, who represents nothing but himself" (Seitz 1979: 542)? Don't these critics miss the profundity of Visconti's aesthetic treatment of the original?

I have attempted to demonstrate this profundity with examples of the music, the dance, the dream sequences, with the example of contrasts between close-ups of Aschenbach in the process of physical and emotional degeneration and of Tadzio's eternally far-off grace. Without more precise descriptions of obligatory and optional semiotic changes within transformations between different arts (cf. Hess-Lüttich 2000), the aesthetic judgments of many critics run the risk of superficiality.

INTERLUDE: THE LANGUAGE OF MUSIC

This is even truer in the comparison of the novella with Benjamin Britten's opera, a comparison which can hardly rest on more pertinent and thorough preparations. The relationship between language and music is, in music theory, not a particularly popular subject, which, in any case, all too easily evades exact analysis. Or do we know precisely what is described when we read the following example: "The composer... speaks directly to the feeling through the melody, the still unreal, preconscious, the premonition" (Behr 1983: 34)? Theodor W. Adorno wrote as early as 1963, in his "Fragment über die Sprache" (in *Quasi una Fantasia*): "Music is like language... but music is not language. Its similarity to language leads the way into the interior, but also into the *vague*" (Adorno 1997: 251).

Why is this so? Is it because music lacks a thorough denotative stratum of meaning (Gruhn 1979: 265)? Or the other way around: What do music and language have in common? In search of a musical-semiotic answer, Peter Faltin suggests that "the similarity of music and language does not rest on the real function of language, nor on providing communication, but rather on one aspect of language,

on its ability to articulate and share thoughts" (Faltin 1985: 178). It is obviously not easy to grasp the relationship between language and music precisely; and even more difficult, to speak concretely, not vaguely, about music; and hardest of all, to speak about opera, about the union of codes of music, language, and theater into an aesthetic whole, a union of "text and music... two sign strata that refer to each other but which remain separate" (Gruhn 1979: 265). As it seems so difficult to speak about music in a non-metaphorical manner, which is the well-established language of musical critics, semiotics may provide the analytical instruments for describing opera as a "poly-coded text" (cf. Hess-Lüttich 1982; 1994).

This is the starting point of an excellent study on opera as textual *Gestalt*: Klaus Kaindl (1995: 41) suggests an integrated approach to analyse the various media of the performance as a holistic complex of signs. This means looking at the functional relations of the verbal and non-verbal subtexts. The interdisciplinary approach profits from models developed in literary theory, linguistics, theatre studies, musicology, psychology, and translation theory. It allows understanding the complexity of the textual structure of a message composed of language, music, stage, voice, and sound. Its *Gestalt* is determined by certain theatrical conventions of the libretto with its linguistic condensation according to modes of articulation, pitch, and interval, but also of all the other simultaneous channels of signifying, of visual scene, of body language, and their combination with musical components of tones, voice qualities, rhythm, tempo, harmony, melody, sound etc. (Kaindl 1995: 257). It is the specific interrelation of all these aspects which amounts to the enchantment of opera up to the present day, the powerful effect of what Thomas Mann referred to as "Beziehungszauber" of a "Gesamtkunstwerk" (Richard Wagner).

The process of semiotic transformation from the score to the stage is even more complex in the case of operas made from literary texts. What sort of influence does a literary original have upon an opera? On the one hand it has been maintained that the literary, especially the dramatic text adds "homogeneity, drama, and harmony to the prevalent theatrical situation, which music alone is no longer able to provide" (Gerhartz 1982: 54). The extramusical original is a means "through which musical ideas may attain a greater transparency" (Faltin 1985: 77). The primacy here lies with music.

Its aesthetic meaning is primarily syntactic. The notion that meaning is a matter of semantics alone, and that signs without a *denotatum* lack meaning fails to take into account that, according to Charles W. Morris (1975: 283), each one of the three dimensions of a sign conveys meaning in its own specific way. He discusses the question of how signs can be meaningful if they seem to lack precisely the semantic dimension

with reference to aesthetic signs. The syntactic categories giving meaning to musical signs are repetition, sequence, continuation, transition, contrast, similarity, difference etc. (cf. Faltin 1985: 129; cf. Linder 1998: 89). These categories have in common that they refer to relationships between elements rather than to anthropomorphisms. Music is not based on tones but on relationships (cf. Grossmann 1991).

The opposing position presents the theory that the primacy lies with language if we correctly understand Wolfgang Rihm's somewhat opaque formulation (1979: 30): "Like a chemical formula, which makes invisible elements visible through coloring, music can make the textual aura visible, that is, audible". Michael Behr (1983: 51) proposes the theory that "the languages of music, word, and gesture become one language, wherein each explains the other respectively".

Thus, if one refrains from analyzing the individual codes involved in order to understand the "message as a whole", this may lead to a position which hopes to understand music meaning "something", say, the literary model of an opera. Yet the meaning of a literary text should not be confused with the meaning of the piece of music made from it. Each calls for a different analytical operation based on a common theory of *semiosis* rather than a theory of *signs* (cf. Tarasti ed. 1996).

Following Lucy Beckett (1994: 103), and leaving the meta-level for a moment, Ulrich Weisstein (1999: 160) takes a third position covering the middle ground in the area of musical and verbal form. Discussing the varieties of verbo-vocal utterance in opera, he suggests a *catalogue raisonné* with some four intermediate categories regarding the relationship of language and music in opera: (1) mimetic speaking as in spoken segments of the libretto, e. g., in the German *Singspiel* (Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* being a case in point); (2) conventional speaking as in *recitativo secco* or *recitativo accompagnato*, which are meant to be perceived as spoken; (3) mimetic singing, especially in monologues, introspective soliloquies and the like; (4) conventional singing which, as a mode of expression, is as natural to the *dramma per musica* as speaking is to the legitimate theatre. Silence, therefore, can be justified and condoned, if it serves a specific and manifest dramaturgical end, as in the concept of the silent role of Tadzio as a dancer in Britten's opera *Death in Venice*, adapted from Thomas Mann's novella *Der Tod in Venedig* (1912).

BENJAMIN BRITTEN'S OPERA *DEATH IN VENICE*

This applies directly to the relationship between music and words in *Death in Venice*, Benjamin Britten's last opera (1973, libretto by Myfanwy Piper), which features, in its great final section, a tribute to his friend and lifelong partner Peter

Pears. It is another variation of Britten's life theme of threatened adolescent innocence, a theme, as Kühnel (1985: 249) notes diplomatically, "which might have its roots in the disposition of his personality". In his essay on Britten's homosexuality and his long relationship with Peter Pears, Jan Schmitz (1999: 38-47) has found adequate words to describe the difficult situation of an artist who tries to find his place in society as an outsider and respected composer (cf. also Elias & Scotson 1993). Nowhere in his works will one find openly gay figures however, love relationships between men and women rarely occur either. But signs referring to a different world are numerous. They reach beyond the "official meaning" and can be read by those able and willing to understand them. In this respect – very much like the works of Thomas Mann – it is indeed "a form of camouflage that has appeared in homosexual literature since antiquity" (Schmitz 1999: 41).

The overall structure of the opera is typical for Britten's work: two acts with seventeen scenes counted as I.1-7 and II.8-17, each with titles such as "Munich", "On the boat to Venice", "The journey to the Lido", "The first evening at the hotel" etc. Interestingly, the "Ouverture" entitled "Venice" (the only orchestral interlude of the whole work) follows after the first two scenes. The first act ends with Aschenbach watching nearly naked boys playing on the beach. The title of the scene is "The Games of Apollo". During the heavenly, supernatural sound of his song (the role of Apollo is written for a counter tenor), Aschenbach becomes aware of his feelings for Tadzio, the most beautiful of the boys: "then realising the truth at last": "I love you". The second act begins with an Aschenbach soliloquy. But then, in the second scene at the barber, the word "sickness" is mentioned for the first time. The scene entitled "The dream" (II.13) is again mythological and refers to "The games of Apollo" (I.7). The act ends with Aschenbach's death.

Words and their ability to express thoughts are indeed one important theme of this opera. The combination of the musical motif and the libretto produces a complex, greatly interwoven relationship of codes, which is not easy to analyze. Britten has chosen precisely those texts as source material wherein language plays a "problematical" role, wherein forms and requirements for communication themselves are aesthetically problematized.¹⁰ In these texts, each in its own way, the relationship between language and reality, truth and illusion, is the central theme (cf. Corse 1987: 111).

10. On literary texts of this type from the Middle Ages to the present, see Hess-Lüttich (1984; 1985). From among Britten's works, those on Shakespeare's "Midsummer Night's Dream", Melville's "Billy Budd", Crabbe's "Peter Grimes", and James' "Turn of the Screw" come to mind.

What is not said with language or what cannot be said with language, Britten "says" with music. Aschenbach's inability to *speak* with Tadzio takes on a more central thematic weight in the opera than in the novella: it is staged as a choreography of cruising, of eye-contact, of staring at each other, of secret observation, of hidden erotic messages, of gazing. An analysis of the different medial versions of Aschenbach's and Tadzio's relationship (perhaps even more so in Luchino Visconti's film *Morte a Venezia*) produces immediate information about the theme of language, but also about the *language of gaze*. When one looks at the libretto, it becomes obvious that Aschenbach hardly says anything that is not exactly the same in the novella. If Aschenbach's role is then understood completely differently by the opera audience than by the novella reader, it is due less to the words of the text than to their translation into body language and its "commentary" through the music.

Everything described in the third person in the novella is reformulated into direct speech in the opera. Aschenbach's thoughts and encounters with others are "reformulated into free recitations, arias, ensembles and short duets" (Sutcliffe 1979: 103). The result has a radically different effect on the way we perceive the work. The ironic distance between narrator and protagonist is absent. Aschenbach's thoughts cannot be commented upon verbally. This minimizes the distance for the recipient as well.

This is not a blemish, a "Schönheitsfehler", as Terence Reed (1984: 174) complains, but a requirement of the medium. The function of the commentator is taken up by the music. Similarities in the form of motifs constitute their own web of references. Right at the beginning we hear motifs in the music which correspond to the written words in the novella: the quickly repeated ostinato tones, which introduce the opera, stand, according to James Sutcliffe (1979: 102), for "Aschenbach's pounding temples", for the nervous restlessness of his feelings. The melodic motifs in the recitations, the chromatic passages which reach over an octave, symbolize the sand which flows through the hour glass (cf. Evans 1979: 528).

There are ten passages in the opera where Aschenbach is accompanied by piano, a technique which refers back to early Italian opera, above all in seventeenth-century Venice.¹¹ The piano accompaniment emphasises Britten's notion of the spiritual alienation envisioned by Thomas Mann, the distance with which Aschenbach creates the image of himself. His gestures illustrate the impression: with every recitation he takes his notebook and pencil out of his pocket and begins to write. Peter Evans remarks in *The Music of Benjamin Britten* (1979: 526): "Outside his writings

11. For the music-history reference, see White (1983: 269).

[Aschenbach] can communicate only with himself, and from the start we see him isolated from – even while at the mercy of – events around him".

Aschenbach's habit of writing down all his reflections literarily becomes even clearer than in Thomas Mann's depiction. Because he is always analyzing himself, his personal role gains more weight than the depiction of his thoughts in the novella. Reed (1984: 174) experiences this facet precisely as the inadequacy of the opera version: "Aschenbach often has to say more about himself than he is actually supposed to know". The disadvantage is, of course, "made up for by the motif work of the composer, who, with great ingenuity has created equivalents for Thomas Mann's narrative and mythic relationships" (ibidem).

The notebook is Britten's invention, a means to make Aschenbach's distance from the "world" visible in image and leitmotif. It suggests that we, too, see through Aschenbach's eyes whatever occurs on the stage. Very differently than in the film, the distance and difference between what we see and hear and Aschenbach's imagined realm of perception are greatly diminished.

A more exact analysis of the musical motifs throws an even sharper light on Aschenbach's and Tadzio's relationship. Generally considered a characteristic feature of Britten's late style, the tritone (an augmented fourth, which is an interval of three whole tones) is introduced as a symbol of irresolvable conflict, of the "diabolus in musica", and as a musical metaphor for "death and the devil" (cf. Karbusicky 1990). In *Death in Venice*, it determines according to James Sutcliffe (1978: 97) even

the entirety of motives with which the opera begins – in Aschenbach's voice as well as the orchestra accompaniment – and the spiritually uncertain condition of an increasingly unfruitful poet is rendered in the music's unstable, hardly determinable tonality.

The close chromatic motifs are musical proof of the negative influences which bring on Aschenbach's end. They create a spirit of anxiety, which mirrors and expresses Aschenbach's inner tension without the use of words.

How is the depiction of Aschenbach to be compared to that of Tadzio? In music, we recall, it is not the tones or single notes, but rather their relation to each other, which creates something like "meaning" (cf. Faltin 1985: 128). This goes for the depiction of the two protagonists as well. Britten's semiotic techniques in depicting Aschenbach gain their significance precisely when seen in contrast to those used to characterize Tadzio. This is true as well for the composition of motifs. Aschenbach's motifs consist for the most part in smaller chromatic intervals whereas

Tadzio's motifs are composed in larger ones. They appear more open to us, "happier", more relaxed. Moreover, the Tadzio motif is moreover musically associated with the "panorama-landscape motif" (Corse 1987: 143), which tells the audience that Aschenbach relates Tadzio to nature, especially to the ocean.

The unbridgeable distance between Aschenbach and Tadzio – bridged only by long looks, furtive glances, signifying gaze – is also emphasized by a broader musical boundary which Aschenbach cannot overcome. Both figures are associated with separate and different groupings of accompanying instruments. Whenever Tadzio appears, the vibraphone rings, in sharp contrast to the piano which accompanies Aschenbach's recitation. While Aschenbach's appearances are sometimes accompanied by the whole orchestra, Tadzio is constantly backed up by percussion instruments. This technique, in the judgment of the critics, lends Tadzio an almost "otherworldly" coloration.

Each role has its own tonality. With Aschenbach, it revolves around E, with Tadzio around A. In their tonalities, the roles reflect their respective relationships to the figure of Apollo, on the one hand (with E as central tone), and of Dionysos, on the other hand (with A as central tone). The fifth A-E is, by the way, the distance between the most closely related traditional types of tones as well. It was called a "perfect fifth" as far back as the Middle Ages, and was, for a long time, next to the fourth and the octave, one of the three intervals upon which a musical phrase could end. It is therefore both an interval of a close relation and of an approaching end. Thus even the interval between Aschenbach and Tadzio's central tones becomes a musical sign for their relationship to each other: their silent communication through eye-contact only, their "language of gaze".

Britten thought it was important to transpose musically the complete inaccessibility of a "real" relationship between Aschenbach and Tadzio, the impossibility of their spiritual and physical union, of even their nearness to each other. The contrast between the role of Aschenbach and that of Tadzio as a silent dancer is certainly a means thereto. Terence Reed, still bound to his idea of a "version true to the poet", strongly criticized this transformation, because in its "exaltation of a healthy athletic Tadzio, who is victor in the 'sun festival' games of the inserted ballet sequences [...] the opera seriously tends away from the meaning and interpretation of the novella" (Reed 1984: 174). In contrast Myfanwy Piper defends, according to White (1983: 270), these differences in direction precisely by a conscious emphasis on the distance between Aschenbach and the beloved boy: "In the book he has no contact with Tadzio [...] nor does he in the opera, and we have emphasized this separateness by formalizing [his] movements into dance".

The formal structure of the dance enables us to see Tadzio, through the eyes of Aschenbach as well, on a symbolic level (cf. Corse 1987: 135, for more details). Neither of them ever speaks to the other, much less touches the other, but the dance, full of sexual intensity, is the sign of the physical attractiveness of the boy and of his untouchability, of the tension and distance between Aschenbach and Tadzio. The "language of dance" corresponds to the "language of gaze". In comparison to the novella and especially to the film, the opera version – with its specific combination of codes – expresses this distance more strongly – notwithstanding the subtle suggestion of their relationship through musical signs and eyes watching: the A-E central tones and the choreography of cruising.

The associations with classical myth are also incomparably stronger in the opera than in the film, and thereby closer to the novella.¹² There are, for example, the simple, but noticeable vocal assonances ("Aou!"), which run through the whole opera. We hear them first from the gondolier, who can be identified as the Charon figure, and whose "aaoo" tones can thus be identified with death. Then we hear them again in the calls of Tadzio's friends when they say his name. And again in the Dionysos choir, which puts the *Ephebe* in musical relation to the god.

Tadzio is connected with Death and Dionysos, with Hermes as "psychopompos"; his elevation to a mythical figure is not only tonally affected but is also strengthened through the choice of accompanying instrumentation. The percussive instruments, many of Asian origin, create their own "chamber orchestra" with a remarkably exotic sound, as if from far-off Eastern lands.¹³

In addition, Britten inserted two dance scenes, which depict Aschenbach's dreams of fear and desire. In the first dance (scene I.7), Apollonian games are played. Tadzio is associated with mythological figures much more clearly here than in the film, in that he takes part in these games and wins. Despite all the sensuality of the game and erotic power of the dance, the impression of Tadzio's inaccessibility remains. Even while dreaming, Aschenbach cannot speak with Tadzio. James Sutcliffe (1979: 61) writes of Britten's intention "to create a (dance-)world to which Aschenbach can never find contact, but which recalls to his memory the dreamed-of ideal images of the ancient Greek world".

12. On the multiple mythological references in the novella, see Mauthner (1952), and also Wysling (1969), Dierks (1972), Reed (1984), Renner (1985).

13. From Thomas Mann's work notes, it can be reconstructed that he carefully calculated the association with the Far East – cholera comes from the Ganges Delta of India, and Dionysos took his "procession from India to Greece" (see § 20 in Nietzsche's "Die Geburt der Tragödie," *Werke*, v. 1: 113). Cf. Reed (1984: 154; 177).

The second dance (scene II.13) presents the Dionysian dream. Britten roughly follows the book, however introducing dance as representing dream and accentuating the mythic allusions of the novella even more intensely. The *leitmotif* of numerous allusions to Hermes in the novella is taken up in the opera: a mythical *psychopompos*, who guides Aschenbach to Venice and to death, takes some seven roles in the opera (Kühnel 1985: 253): the mysterious traveller in Munich at the cemetery entrance (I.1); the "elderly fob" on the boat during the passage to Venice who anticipates Aschenbach's appearance at the end; the old gondolier as a true Charon figure who takes him against his will to the Lido in his black coffin-like gondola ("Passengers must follow / Follow where I lead / No choice for the living / No choice for the dead"); the fawning manager at the hotel; the barber who will later make him up as the "elderly fob" like the one on the boat (I.2); the Neapolitan strolling musician mocking his audience; and, of course, Dionysos, the counterpart of Apollo, in his dreams.

The configuration of Apollo and Dionysos stands for the whole complex of Nietzschean tensions between principles which form a central and well described theme of Thomas Mann's works (Cf. Pütz 1971: 225-249; Koopmann 1975; Härle 1988; Böhm 1989: 321; Deuse 1992.) They symbolise not only the situation of the artist reflecting his work (represented by the famous yet controversial scenes with discussions on art and – deadly – inspiration in Visconti's film). They also represent the protagonist's situation after he met a boy of unearthly beauty, unreachable, only to be gazed at, but also to be followed when he, as *thanatos eros*, leads the way to death: "Ihm aber war, als ob der bleiche und liebliche Psychagog dort draußen ihm lächle, ihm winke; als ob er, die Hand aus der Hüfte lösend, hinausdeute, vorschwebe ins Verheißungsvoll-Ungeheure. Und, wie so oft, machte er sich auf, ihm zu folgen" (Mann 1967: 399).

This emphasis on myth is not, as is well known, rare in musical theater, a circumstance which some, Michael Behr (1983: 18) for example, trace back to the fact that "the drama of the unconscious soul is presented through myth". Whatever that may mean precisely, it is certain that the medium of opera with its complicated complementarity of codes lends itself to a more abstract level of interpretation than the narrative text does. In other words, the rules of narrative and the novelists' points of view demand another mode of perception in response to that which is represented, just as the sequentiality of film does.

While the objectifying presentation of action on the stage prevents too direct an association with "the story", reading stimulates the imagination to limitless individual fantasies, and montage and editing techniques of cinematic language encourage observers to identify with what they see. The eye contact of the pro-

tagonists, their "language of gaze", becomes "true" in the film, and graphic. In the opera, we "read" Aschenbach's thoughts and feelings, interpreting, "adapting", giving meaning through Britten's music, never aware of mere "facts". We follow the subtle dramaturgy of the work's overall structure and take Aschenbach's perspective, as the whole plot is focused on this figure. It is the only one present on stage from beginning to end, while the scenes constantly change. As Jürgen Kühnel (1985: 250) has pointed out, this means a radical break with traditional structures of opera, theatre, and drama with respect to scenic space and time. Within the scenes changing, time may be accelerated by dramaturgical means which Britten and his librettist had learned from their TV production of the earlier opera *Owen Wingrave*. There they had already experimented with the possibilities of simultaneous scenes, with successive movements of figures through connected spaces, and with the technique of time acceleration within certain scenes.

As one example of this technique, Kühnel (1985: 251) mentions scene I.6 "The foiled departure". Aschenbach approaches Venice by gondola, the gondolier singing his "Aou! Stagando, aou! Aou!" Aschenbach leaves the gondola "at the landing place" and "starts walking through the streets". While constantly being addressed by beggars, dealers, and tourist guides, he feels increasingly "unhappy and uncomfortable" (Arioso: "While the scirocco blows / Nothing delights me"); so he decides to leave Venice: "Enough, I must leave". Returning to the "landing stage", he enters another gondola heading back to the Lido while the gondoliers sing their typical song. When Aschenbach reaches the Lido and leaves the gondola, the scene is suddenly interrupted: after a "passage of time", Aschenbach appears in the lobby of the hotel, together with the manager who fawns and wheedles around him. Once again Aschenbach's eye lights upon Tadzio – for the last time, he thinks: "For the last time, Tadziù, / it was too brief, all too brief – / may God bless you". Here again comes a "passage of time", and we see Aschenbach back in the gondola, and hear the gondoliers singing their song.

In a short conversation with the porter at the station, Aschenbach learns that his luggage has been misrouted. He decides to stay in Venice. The gondola returns to the Lido, the gondolier sings his "Aou!" in the background of one of Aschenbach's soliloquies. The manager awaits him in the hotel lobby and takes him "to his room and opens the window on the beach". After the manager leaves the room, Aschenbach looks out of the window: "Tadzio, Jaschu, and a few other boys are seen playing in a distance". The scene is closed by an Aschenbach Arioso "Ah, Tadzio, the charming Tadzio, / that's what it was". Despite the changing settings and the two time passages, the scene has a clear structure of a double *cursus* (Kühnel 1985: 252):

Gondola Lido to Venice
 Venice:
 the streets
 A. deciding to leave
 gondola Venice to Lido
 hotel lobby
 the manager
 Tadzio

Gondola Lido to Venice
 Venice:
 the station
 A. deciding to stay
 gondola Venice to Lido
 hotel lobby
 the manager
 Tadzio

The dramaturgical constellation of the *dramatis personae* has a clear structure as well. There are three groups of figures who stand for different but interwoven levels of dramatic action: (1) the "real" figures of the gondoliers, the hotel staff, travellers, dealers, beggars etc.; (2) the mythological figures (see above); (3) the boys on the beach. Kühnel includes Tadzio in this third group, but in a way the boy stands alone, as Aschenbach does, both forming a dyad of intense communication through their gazes, but gazes alone. This is what Visconti had visualised so adequately by means of film, by close-ups, cuts etc.

According to Kühnel, the three groups of figures correspond with three levels of action: the level of reality, the level of mythology, and the level of reflection. This triadic structure is reflected in the sign structure of the work: (1) scenes with figures of the *dramatis personae* come with orchestra and recitals, so do (2) those with mythological figures (but *arioso* in character, plus chorus); (3) the level of reflection is represented by Aschenbach's soliloquies (with Thomas Mann's prose), accompanied by piano; the dance scenes with Tadzio are structured by percussion – another indication that they stand on their own and should not be subsumed under the scenes with the boys on the beach.

* * *

Thomas Mann's novella and Visconti's film in its own way live by the tension between outer appearance and inner action, between vanity and passion, degeneration and eternity. This tension is completely different in Britten's opera. As is well fitting to the musical medium, the sensual and spiritual, erotic and aesthetic relationship between Aschenbach and Tadzio is transformed to a symbolic relationship. More precisely, it is condensed to a symbolic relationship, transfigured into an abstract thought process. Yet structurally, the two congenial works are comparable, because they both make specific use of film sign systems, which allow

for optimal transformation of narrative, especially of prose in the semi-dramatic genre of a novella.

Despite their shared subject matter, novella, film, and opera each tells its own story. Their comparison is revealing for their respective interpretations. The idea of a faithful rendition of the novella cannot, therefore, be a criterion to judge whether the film or the opera is "successful" or "unsuccessful". Both artists, Visconti and Britten, have added something of their own, each in his own medium. To reduce their works to mere copies, reworkings or adaptations of an original, would be doing them an injustice. They are congenial references, textually interwoven obeisances to Thomas Mann as the citizen artist and to his lifelong theme, to Bajazzo and *poeta doctus*, the "Magician" and artist of ambivalence, to Tonio's longing for the "bliss of he commonplace" [Wonnen der Gewöhnlichkeit] (*Tonio Kröger*) and Leverkühn's "ambiguity as a system" [Zweideutigkeit als System] (*Doktor Faustus*). They honor, of course, also the only possible suitable stage, Venice, that "ambiguous city".¹⁴ Its "ruin and radiance, sensuousness and fate [...], implausible beauty and irreversible foundering" (Papst 1955: 341 [especially]) have inspired poets to song from time immemorial up to the present.¹⁵

O Venice! Venice! when thy marble walls
Are level with thy waters, there shall be
A cry of nations o'er the sunken halls,
A loud lament along the sweeping sea!

14. A formulation from Georg Simmel's Venice essay of 1907, printed in *Zur Philosophie der Kunst* (Potsdam 1922: 72). See on this also Thomas Mann's letter to Erika and Klaus Mann of May 25th, 1932, in: Mann, Erika (Ed.). *Briefe 1889-1936*. Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1961, p. 317; also Thomas Mann's own comments on the novella, in: Wysling, Hans (ed. with collaboration by M. Fischer). *Dichter über ihre Dichtungen: Thomas Mann* (part I: 1889-1927). Frankfurt/Main: Fischer/Heimeran, 1975, p. 435.
15. The Venice of decline alone had a hypnotic effect on several generations of poets from Lord Byron, de Musset and August von Platen to Wagner, Nietzsche and Barrès, to Rilke, Werfel, and Hofmannsthal. Venice as a theme of art and literature is a task worthy of thorough investigation, which has recently been undertaken by Bernard Dieterle (1995). The final quotation comes from Byron's "Ode on Venice" (1818).

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