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The Politics and Aesthetics of Operatic Modernism

The drive we call modernism was first articulated in 1859 and most plausibly (though not decisively) dispatched, finally, in 1999. Its impresario was Charles Baudelaire, who offered the term “modernity” (modernité) as a vessel for those aesthetic values that embody “the transitory, the fleeting, the contingent, one side of art, of which the other is the eternal and the absolute.” Baudelaire coined the term in his essay “The Painter of Modern Life,” which focuses not on one of the canonic painters (Eugène Delacroix, Gustave Courbet, the young Édouard Manet), about whom Baudelaire had much to say, but rather on Constantin Guys, who specialized in pen-and-ink representations of the fast pace of modern Parisian life. Baudelaire’s modernité can mean both modernity and modernism, to the enduring consternation of his translators. It cannot mean “modernization,” however. Baudelaire embraced the urban culture of speed and change and the new ways of engaging it through aesthetic forms. But he despised Eugène Haussmann’s Paris of rationalized spaces and authoritarian control. Baudelaire’s modernité is an aesthetic drive, a cognitive and political style, even when not expressed through a specific form or genre. We tend to favor the term modernism when recognizing this aesthetic stamp, but this usage often assumes a formal genre—painting, architecture, music, literature, etc. Modernism/modernity as a style thus suggests that the world can be grasped and articulated, even if only fleetingly, through the senses.¹

Confidence in such a claim has long been shaken. The general arguments of postmodernism are the obvious place from

which to trace this erosion, but the overall question as to whether the postmodern constitutes a rejection of the modern or a rescue of its innermost principles has long reached a stand-off. In this context, we might propose the date 1999 and Clark’s recent work as the points of modernism’s most recent, most serious challenge. Twenty years ago, Clark’s book *The Painting of Modern Life* extended Baudelaire’s paradigm to the art of Manet and his followers. Clark’s more recent and more pessimistic work, however, has come to argue that the cruelty of the modern world, a world that follows the rules of “modernization,” has overtaken and invalidated modernist hope. Modernism, “so cold and optimistic,” has been defeated, reduced to evermore-unreadable ruins.²

Baudelaire and Clark both understand the modern in terms of the contingent. “Modernity,” affirms Clark, “means contingency.” Such contingency is structural and temporal, social and historical. Modernism thus remains contingent on a valid claim and hope of emancipation and hence connected to the Enlightenment and its bonding of knowledge and freedom. When modernism chooses to pursue freedom through aesthetic principles and practices, it is asserting the aesthetic—that is, the sensory and the stylistic—as constitutive and indeed restorative of human energy, creativity, and indeed, freedom. At the same time, modernism criticizes and revises the Enlightenment’s confidence in the transparency and comprehensibility of the world. In this sense, we might also understand psychoanalysis, for example, as a modernist endeavor.

Modernism covers many genres. The modernism that Clark calls “cold and optimistic” might best describe the anti-ornamental architectural modernism that governs the work of Adolf Loos in Vienna and Mies van der Rohe and his followers “from the Bauhaus to our house,” from Germany to New York to Brasilia and beyond. The liberation from ornament carried the claim of transcending history. Thus, the legacy of architectural history becomes synonymous with historicism—the heavily burdened style in which past models are imitated both for their structural and symbolic qualities. Schorske has recently reaffirmed the ahistoric-

osity of this sort of modernism, describing the modernist turn of the early twentieth century as “thinking without history.”

But does the equation of modernism with a- or anti-historicity perhaps protest too much? If, for example, we understand psychoanalysis as a modernist endeavor, we cannot reasonably deny its historicizing practice and thus call it a- or anti-historical. Indeed, the psychoanalytic process is nothing if not historical in its exploration and reintegration of the past. In the same vein, even the most radical breaks with history on the part of early twentieth-century modernism evince fundamental dialogues with history and its referents, as, for example, Arnold Schoenberg does with Johann Sebastian Bach. Loos himself, as his compatriot Hermann Broch wryly commented, held no hope of living up to his own claimed liberation from ornament. “Herr Loos,” Broch wrote, “still parts his hair, instead of shaving his head, and adorns himself with a tie.” Modernism’s desire to get beyond history remains historically constituted and contingent, no matter how “cold and optimistic” its formal claims to historical transcendence may appear to be. Fin-de-siècle or early twentieth-century modernism shares this irony with realism, its predecessor, and postmodernism, its successor. The question that Clark’s recent analysis implicitly asks and then answers in the negative might be posed as, Can modernism retain inherited languages, styles, and modes of representation and still tell the truth in and to an era of increasing violence and injustice?

opera, modernism, and the question of nationalism  My argument has to do with a subcategory of fin-de-siècle European modernism, namely, operatic modernism. Operatic modernism unfolds as a highly self-aware practice with specific historical referents, contingencies, and purposes. Like the master category “modernism,” the operatic version is at once historically contingent and desirous to move beyond aspects of its own pre-history that are at once superannuated and overwhelming. Operatic modernism is


European, international, and emancipatory where its leading historical and political referents are German, nationalistic, and hegemonic. The historical contingency that I propose is embarrassingly neat in relation to the calendar. I would give operatic modernism a fifty-year span stretching from 1883 to 1933, even more precisely from February 1883 (Richard Wagner’s death) through January 1933 (Adolf Hitler’s accession). Operatic modernism seeks emancipation from the hold of Wagner, Wagnerism, and its nationalist mythology. This is the side of Wagner that Baudelaire did not see and could not yet really know when he championed the modernism of Tannhaeuser in Paris in 1860. Understandably, Baudelaire welcomed Wagner and his modernism to Paris as an international phenomenon, unaware that the nationalist undercurrent to Wagner’s modernism was in fact already scorning the city and the language from which he had felt rejected as a younger man.

Operatic modernism fits within a paradigm widespread in the history of modernism but not in the history of opera. The suggestion is that operatic modernism after Wagner might be understood as postnational rather than national—in other words, that the desire for an authentically French, Hungarian, or Czech opera not be understood to mimic the desires and claims of (German) music drama or musical-dramatic nationalism. Though the operas of Bela Bartok, Antonin Dvorak, and—most impressively and systematically in recent years—Leos Janacek have entered the canon and the repertory of opera houses, they still tend to inspire and submit to rhetoric of the national, the folk, and the ethnic. Recent scholarship, specifically that of Frigyesi on Bartok and Beckerman on Dvorak and Janacek, has overturned these categories and placed these composers squarely within the European program of post-Wagnerian, postnational modernism. Thus, the musical and political agendas of Bartok, Dvorak, and Janacek (more names could be added) reemerge with idioms and claims more internationalist than folkish or nationalistic.5

The same correction may be later in coming in the case of some German canonic works. Johannes Brahms and Gustav Mahler are candidates, for their own careers and oeuvre as well as for their championship of Dvorak. Brahms embraced a decidedly

5 See Judit Frigyesi, Béla Bartók and Turn-of-the Century Budapest (Berkeley, 1998); Michael B. Beckerman, New Worlds of Dvorák: Searching in America for the Composer’s Inner Life (New York, 1993); Janáček as Theorist (Stuyvesant, N.Y., 1994).
German tradition but almost always disavowed national claims—perhaps not in the *Schicksalslied*, written in the wake of 1870, but most definitely, and most ironically, in *A German Requiem* (1868). Brahms and Mahler’s choice not to write operas expressed the will to escape the compositional shadow of Wagner. German operatic modernism also produced composers and works that might be well understood to argue for the same postnational position—no matter how overwhelming the Wagnerian model may have been. Into this model we might place the young Richard Strauss, specifically his operas *Salome* (1905) and *Elektra* (1909).

Not that these two works are similar, despite their obvious parallels (one act, one femme fatale, etc.) *Salome* is all surface; it glitters; it is hyperdecorative. It shares the same ideology of the surface that Oscar Wilde’s text promotes and that the character Salome finds so strangely appealing in John the Baptist’s body—specifically in his skin, hair, and mouth. For Salome, the mouth is the thing that can be kissed, dead or alive. It has nothing to do with the source of speech and voice, in other words with the mouth of the prophet or the mouth of the singer. The clarinet glissando that opens this opera glides the plot and the audience along, much like the clarinet roll into which Ferde Grofe orchest rated the opening of George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*. Strauss’ *Salome*, like Wilde’s, finds eros on the surfaces of the body, and reproduces it on the surfaces of its own media—Wilde’s words and Strauss’ music. Wilde’s chosen language is French; Strauss’ orchestral idiom, with its ostentatious pleasure in sound, is also Gallic in its sonic references, a cross between the music of Camille Saint-Saens and Igor Stravinsky. Famously, Strauss recommended that his score be conducted “like Mendelssohn,” a remark by which he presumably meant to advocate a light, lyrical baton, suitable more to Salome’s youth than to her debauchery. But in skirting the distinction between the light and the superficial, perhaps unwittingly, Strauss also ratified the standard anti-Mendelssohnian pieties of Wagner himself, who in *Judaism and Music* (1850), *Die Meistersinger von Nuernberg* (1868), and elsewhere associated the superficial and the inauthentic with the Jews and the French as the carriers of toxic non-Germanness. Neither *Salome* the opera nor Salome the character claims to have any truths to tell.

In *Elektra*, however, only the depths matter, those of the psy-
che together with those of the polis. The avant-garde of *Salome* thus finds contradiction in the modernism of *Elektra*, as if in a kind of body-mind opposition. In *Elektra*, the dead King Agamemnon speaks most powerfully, through the overwhelming and blunt power of the orchestra, with emphasis on the double basses. As in Sophocles’ play and William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the dead king signifies the unraveling of the social order. Now, however, no restored legitimacy is at hand. Political entropy goes along with the unhinging of language and reasoned communication. Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s post-Nietzschean take on the Mycenean royal family is also the take of the fin-de-siècle Cambridge classicists led by Eric R. Dodds, Jane Harrison, and Gilbert Murray. Surely this is one reason why Hofmannsthal was taken seriously throughout his career by British classicists; why, just after World War I, a decade after the premiere of *Elektra*, Murray helped to anchor the British cell of the International Friends of the Salzburg Festival, Hofmannsthal’s grand project of Austrian and European cultural redemption. Unlike the early work of Friedrich Nietzsche, for whom Greek tragedy provided the model for its rededication in Wagner, and by extension in German music drama, Hofmannsthal and Strauss’ post-Nietzscheanism offers no national, or international, way out of the entropy of patricide and reactive violence. On this point *Elektra*’s operatic opposite is Hans Pfitzner’s *Palestrina* (1917), which strives ardently and pedantically to show the way back to a model of German national and nationalist opera. No one would call *Palestrina* a modernist work. Against the so-called emancipation of dissonance, a rubric often attached to the modernism of Strauss as well as that of Schoenberg, Pfitzner strives musically and dramatically for the restoration of consonance, understood as the redemption of German national style. For this endeavor he was warmly appreciated by Thomas Mann, at the antimodernist moment of Mann’s *Reflections of a Non-Political Man*, published in 1918.

The postnational purposiveness of operatic modernism has important political implications for a later period. In this regard, twentieth-century operatic modernism comes to stage a possible exception to the history of modernism, namely, the extent to which operatic modernism, in the name of opera itself, resists fascist appropriation—after 1922 in Italy and after 1933 in Germany. In a still underexplored historical case of a dog that did not bark,
opera did not serve these regimes. Opera did not significantly participate in what has been called “reactionary modernism.” Wagner and Wagnerism accompanied Nazi theatricality to be sure, and Strauss served the regime briefly in 1933/34 as president of the Reichsmusikkammer. Notwithstanding the political and musical-dramatic Kitschfest that is Friedenstag, Strauss wrote no Nazi operas; his forays into neoclassicism in the 1930s and 1940s recreate a private world with no articulated links to the neoclassicism of Albert Speer, to name the most obvious counterpart in the regime.6

Friedenstag may be the exception that proves the rule of Strauss’ aesthetic distance from the regime. Friedenstag’s kitsch may deliver it to fascism but it is not a fascist work. In this respect it may share textual and contextual attributes with Arthur Honegger’s Antigone (1927), as analyzed by Jane Fulcher in this same volume. Its descent into kitsch may be understood to result from the joint collapse of its politics and its music drama, and thus of its modernism. Premiered in July 1938 in Munich, the opera offered a sonically violent demand for peace. The story of a town rescued from destruction in the final minutes of the Thirty Years’ War has sources in Pédro Calderon de la Barca and came to Strauss via Stefan Zweig, his Jewish one-time librettist with whom he could no longer work after 1933, and Joseph Gregor, Zweig’s opportunistic and politically eagerly compromised successor. The opera’s aesthetic and ideological slippage runs through Zweig’s sentimentality to the völkisch bombast of Gregor’s intervention to the equally bombastic texture of this most unfortunate product of Strauss’ neo-Wagnerism.7

Perhaps the most surprising consistency in the picture of operatic modernism’s distance from fascism emerges in Italy. Opera, most specifically Italian opera, plays a surprisingly scant role in and for the fascist regime. This important fact has been doubly obscured, in the first place by a possibly naive assumption that Italy’s

leading art form would have served its country’s long-lived regime, and in the second place by a tendency in recent scholarship that commits the associate fallacy of understanding both Italian fascism and Italian opera in terms of spectacle and thus associating the one with the other.

Benito Mussolini was not interested in opera. He favored the kind of spectacle that could be matched with new technology—film and sound amplification—and that could reach at least 30,000 spectators at once. The confines of the theater had no place in his fascism of immense scale. No new Aidas and no new Meistersingers were offered to the regimes. If German opera emigrated (Schoenberg, Paul Hindemith, Erich Korngold), Italian opera slept (Pietro Mascagni, Francesco Cilea, Riccardo Zandonai).

The problem of Giacomo Puccini—specifically, the problem of Turandot (1926), Puccini’s Friedenstag—remains. It takes the form of a double contingency that renders the work unanalyzable. Puccini died in 1924, leaving the work uncomposed beyond the middle of the third act, having reached the turning point of the suicide of the slave-girl Liu. The second contingency has to do with the likelihood that, having in fact composed Liu’s suicide, Puccini already rendered the opera unfinishable in any manner that would transcend the grasp of kitsch. Kitsch, as Broch defined and deepened it as a category of political, philosophical, and aesthetic analysis, is an ethical problem posing as an aesthetic one. In Turandot, the violent scene of Liu’s torture and suicide places into question the happy ending that we know Puccini had planned, and which his surviving notes describe as a grandiose love duet a la Tristan (“E poi, Tristano,” he jotted). In this manner, the union of Princess Turandot and Prince Calaf is indeed founded in torture and death, a viable metaphor for the spectacular and emotional—that is, the aesthetic—claims of the fascist regime. But the question now becomes, Is this still modernism?

MODERNISM, MUSIC TRAUMA, AND THE OPERATIC VOICE

There is something continuous running from operatic modernism’s initial

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8 Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini’s Italy (Berkeley, 1997); Jeffrey Schnapp, Staging Fascism: 18BL and the Theater of Masses for Masses (Stanford, 1996); Harvey Sachs, Music in Fascist Italy (London, 1987); Steinberg and Suzanne Stewart, “Fascism and the Operatic Unconscious,” in Victoria Johnson, Jane F. Fulcher, and Thomas Ertman (eds.), Opera and Society in Italy and France from Monteverdi to Bourdieu (New York, 2006).
emancipation from Wagnerism to its autumnal resistance to fascism. Operatic modernism’s character and historical, political resilience can be understood in terms of an aspect of voice. This voice is sometimes but not always given body by female singers in female dramatic roles. As a rhetorical voice, it can also be given to other kinds of sources, such as, for example, the orchestra. But in such cases as well, this voice remains constituted by a subversive or transcendent ability to speak the truth in the face of unjust power. As the world of power is assumed and represented as a world of men, the side of truth telling, subversion, and transcendence tends to be associated with women. This subversive femininity is the rhetorical and political survivor of the violence of Wagnerism, of what I have elsewhere called music trauma. Music trauma, like music drama itself, operates consistently by taking voice—literally and as a political metaphor—away from women. Wagner’s most literal instantiation of this act occurs in the actual muting of Kundry in the final act of Parsifal. His most momentous one occurs in the evolution of the great finale of Goetterdaemmerung and a fortiori of the Ring cycle. Here, Wagner scrapped the initial plan to have the transcendent heroine Brunnhilde bring the drama to a close through her performative declaration of the power of love and instead awarded this utterance, in the form of a privileged leitmotiv, to the orchestra alone.  

Post-Wagnerian opera was in an important sense posttraumatic opera. The prefix “post” always indicates the dynamic of repetition with difference—in other words, the friction between retention and transcendence. Thus, it would seem counterproductive of these works to reinstate Wagnerism with another, mirror-Wagnerism—to reinstate a nationalist opera in other languages, to replace the operatic hegemony of Bayreuth and Vienna with that of Paris or Prague. Operatic modernism after Wagner did not appear to seek alternative national operatic voices. Modernist operas from Paris, Budapest, and Brno wanted to be Italian operas, insofar as Italian opera defined for the long nineteenth century the ability to honor the human voice, literally and metaphorically. Consider

Claude Debussy and Bela Bartok, who each wrote one opera, and
Janacek, who wrote many. Their operas all invest attention and
hope in the human voice, specifically the female voice, as an agent
of restoration. Thus, Melisande (in Debussy’s *Pelleas et Melisande*
[1902]), Judith (in Bartok’s *Bluebeard’s Castle* [1911]), and Jenufa,
Kat’ya, and Emilia Marty (in Janacek’s *Jenufa* [1899], *Kat’ya Kabanova* [1921], and *The Makropoulos Case* [1926]) share an in-
vestment in the female voice as the bearer of truth.

This is not to suggest that the leading women’s voices in these
operas strive stylistically to recapture a *bel canto* or other classifiably
Italianate vocal manner. Quite the contrary. Their Italian forebears
told emotional and political truths through their voices. Melis-
ande, Judith, Jenufa, Katya, and Emilia Marty share an insistence
on truth telling through a kind of musical refusal of easily adopt-
able vocal styles. Their vocal styles occupy negative musical space.
From that negation of ornament—itself a modernist position—they begin to build patterns of truthful utterance. This rebuilding
can be understood as a form of posttraumatic recovery. If trauma
connotes the wound that incapacitates the functioning of the self,
then voice is the corresponding metaphor for the authentic and
resilient self. In opera, and specifically in Italian opera, as Wagner
knew and feared, that metaphor becomes literal.

The notion of repetition with difference is key to the relation
of modernism to history. Modernism was not a disavowal of his-
tory or the past but a refusal of the opposition between retention
and transcendence, or between conservatism and revolution, to
deploy the terms of political history. Modernism’s drive for free-
dom did not entail a disavowal of history so much as distance from
the reactionary aspects of history. Disciplining itself with that pro-
duction of distance, modernism gained ballast precisely by not al-
together disavowing the temptations of historicism or even of nos-
talgia. Modernism’s house has more rooms than its curators or
guardians have tended to avow.

Like that of Wagner, the legacy of the nineteenth century was
not overcome easily. Modernism that not only seeks to understand
but also to incorporate its own nostalgia may prove surprisingly
resilient, aesthetically as well as politically. In that light, I propose
the conferral of a probationary membership in the club of musical
modernists to a conscientious candidate too routinely rejected by
modernist adjudicators—Erich Wolfgang Korngold’s *Die tote
Stadt, a work that may be nostalgic but is in any case explicitly about nostalgia.

NOSTALGIA, DELUSION, AND THE AGE OF CINEMA  With Franz Schreker and Alexander Zemlinsky, Korngold completes a trio of subaltern Viennese modernists (in the shadow, that is, of Schoenberg, Alban Berg, and Anton Webern). Korngold was born in Brunn/Brno, the Moravian capital that was also Janacek’s home city. He spent his adolescence and early career in Vienna, where his father Julius Korngold was Eduard Hanslick’s successor—in every way—as chief music critic of the Neue Freie Presse and the general nemesis of “new music.” Korngold’s emigration to the United States and to Hollywood in particular caused what Gilliam has elegantly called his second exile, his banishment from “serious music.”

A prodigy like Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and Felix Mendelssohn, Korngold’s early, one-act operas premiered when he was still in his teens. His first biography, which appeared in Vienna when he was twenty-five, followed the Viennese premiere of his major three-act opera Die tote Stadt in March 1921, three months after the work’s simultaneous world premiere in Hamburg and Cologne.

The opera’s literary source is Georges Rodenbach’s 1892 novella Bruges la morte, a tale of melancholy, symbols, and corporal relics. Rodenbach’s protagonist, Hugues, has built a private cult of saintly memory around his deceased wife, replete with a portrait and a salvaged lock of hair. He meets a dancer, Jane; attraction and repulsion ensue; finally he strangles her with his dead wife’s hair and murmurs “Bruges la morte.” This Gothic tale is also a deeply Catholic one, relying on the Catholic longue durée’s cult of corporal relics as well as on fin-de-siècle Catholicism’s mix of decadence and symbolism.


11 On Catholicism, decadence, and symbolism, see Ellis Hanson, Decadence and Catholicism (Cambridge, Mass., 1997). I. Hanson locates decadence at the coincidence of religion (mainly Catholicism), aesthetics, and eroticism. See also Clark, Farewell to an Idea, which quotes Camille Pissarro on Paul Gauguin, “But there you are, they [Japanese] are not Catholic, and Gauguin is” (79–80), and reports, “Pissarro was fond of calling [Jean-François] Millet ‘too Biblical,’ and shaking his head at the fact that he, a Jew, found that a fault” (126).
Korngold took to the text on the recommendation of his father. The librettist was given as Paul Schott. In his 1922 biography of the twenty-five-year-old composer, Hoffmann wrote that Schott’s libretto was “conflicted and insecure in its intentions: on the one hand committed to serve the original’s mood of dream and fantasy, on the other hand to emphasize the purely external stage effects.” Hoffmann turned out to be uncannily right for the uncannily wrong reason. In New York in 1975 (on the occasion of Frank Corsaro’s much-heralded production at the New York City Opera), it was revealed that the name “Paul Schott” stood for a fictitious amalgam of the publisher Schott and the opera’s protagonist, no longer named Hugues but Paul. Die tote Stadt’s libretto was in fact written by Korngold himself, with the heavy helping hand of his father. It was the father, in his so-called “spirit of optimism,” who persuaded Korngold to transform the middle section of the work, including the murder of the dancer, now named Marietta (opposite the dead wife, now named Marie), into a dream sequence. The dream sequence now stretches from the last part of Act 1 through two-thirds of Act 3, thus binding and compromising the three-act structure that Korngold had adopted for the first time. Paul’s awakening and recovery turn out to be, at least in part, an act of obedience to his father’s “optimism.”

The awkward structure of the three acts argues for a reception of Die tote Stadt as a swollen one-act opera with pauses taken for the sake of the singers as well as the audience. I would call the work a Gothic operetta, in full recognition of the category’s contradictions. Among these contradictions is one of scale. The Gothic aspect of this work engorges its operetta-like rhythms, melodies, and music-speech alternations. As a result, the work strays into the gigantic, to paraphrase Broch’s quip about Wagner. The dead city is now Vienna. Viennese nostalgia is duly represented by waltzes, which are as present in Die tote Stadt as in Johann Strauss’ Fledermaus (1874) and Richard Strauss’ Der Rosenkavalier (1911). In fact, however, the waltzes resemble those of another Strauss opera, Elektra, which is more replete with waltzes than his waltz-opera Der Rosenkavalier, but in a disguised, distorted, and highly ironic manner. Elektra’s wild and ultimately suicidal ritual dances turn out to be waltzes, a gesture, indeed a

12 Rudolph Hoffmann, Erich Wolfgang Korngold (Vienna, 1922), 91.
joke, through which Strauss comments more on the burdened subtexts of the Austrian fin de siècle than on the lighter side of Mycenean trauma. Indeed the juxtaposed orchestral, rhythmic, and emotional textures of the two Strausses, Johann and Richard, play out one crucial aspect of the Oedipal ambivalences of Korngold’s modernism. Nostalgia for the world and “Vienna” of Julius Korngold would demand three-quarter time with a delayed third beat. Korngold provides so much of it that it is almost embarrassing; indeed, it is the listener’s very pleasure that embarrasses. In the most portentous moments, he has his characters burst into speech, but these utterances are heavy and desperate. Most central to his musical-dramatic practice is a principle evocative of Richard Strauss and Brahms—the invasion of 3/4 time by 4/4 time. The effect is sensual but also confusing and even painful. This practice defines the opera’s central, diegetic song, Marietta’s lute song “Glueck das mir verblieb” and its reprises. The song, hauntingly beautiful, at once an indulgence in nostalgia and a critique of nostalgia, guides Paul from melancholy to mourning and recovery at the end of the opera—perhaps too easily.13

Paul supplies Marietta with the song, strongly associated with the memory of his dead wife, which she obligingly sings for him. Marietta thus gives literal voice to Paul’s own fantasy of his dead wife’s return, matching its purple words to a lumbering, massaged and manipulated waltz: “Joy that remains to me, / Hold me close, my true love. / Evening falls away—/ You are my light and day. / Ardently heart beats against heart—/ Hope wafts heavenward.”14

The second verse concludes with the promise that lost love will be restored by “Auferstehn” (resurrection). Marietta’s first scene with Paul is followed by the appearance to him of Marie, his dead wife. Paul asks for her forgiveness; it is not clear for what crime or sin. The opera’s Catholic world intensifies in the opera’s


14 Viennese opera impresario and commentator Marcel Prawy declared this aria his favorite, calling it in his memoirs the “beloved companion of my life” (Marcel Prawy erzählt aus seinem Leben [Munich, 2000], 34). After I gave the initial version of this essay at the conference “Opera and Society” in March 2004, a member of the audience who arrived late expressed the hope that I had not been unkind to “Glueck das mir verblieb,” since she was so fond of it. The comment resounds both for its love for the piece (which I share) and its anxiety and amour propre regarding the piece’s alleged sentimentality.
second act, the dream sequence, which takes place in a square in Bruges. To Rodenbach’s world of relics, symbols, and sensuality, Korngold adds spectacle and the memory of grand opera, specifically Giacomo Meyerbeer’s *Robert le Diable* (1831). The “resurrection motif” from that opera becomes its musical tag in this one. Marietta leads a group of performers into the square, including a *commedia dell’arte* troupe (thus confirming Venice as Bruges’ *Doppelgänger*, as Marietta is Marie’s), into the street following a rehearsal of Meyerbeer’s opera. This scene defines itself diegetically as bearing the imprimatur of Meyerbeer’s opera in the way that Jacques Offenbach’s *Contes d’Hoffmann* (1881) does so in the shadow of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* (1787). Korngold thus momentarily offers himself as Meyerbeer’s Doppelgänger (a branch of Korngold’s family was based in Berlin, the seat of Meyerbeer’s illustrious family, the Beer family). The parallel includes not only their making of operatic spectacle but also their backgrounds as central European Jews.15

*Robert le Diable* becomes Die tote Stadt’s operatic double in a series of compelling ways. It is, first of all, a neomedieval conceit, the story of the tenor Robert’s redemption against the forces under the control of Bertram (bass). Bertram is in fact the devil, fighting for the ratification of his legacy. Acting as Robert’s friend and companion, he is also Robert’s father, an identity revealed only in the fifth and final act. In the Act 3 cloister scene, at the apogee of Bertram’s attempts to bring his son over into a diabolic alliance, he summons a group of nuns from their graves and into the guise of seductive, dancing maidens.

Korngold’s invocation of Meyerbeer and the pageantry and symbolism of grand opera in general, *Robert le Diable* in particular, uncovers two additional associations. First, this grand opera with its reliance on both spectacle and medieval conceits enters a decidedly Catholic world. For Wagner, Meyerbeer’s grand opera offered, ostensibly, a dual and thus a particularly toxic dose of inauthenticity—the Catholicizing spectacle of a Berlin-born Jew. Korngold’s Meyerbeer, or, rather, Meyerbeer’s Korngold, however, offers a Catholicizing citation as a mark of a certain sophisticated operatic cosmopolitanism, if only in terms of the very choice

of Meyerbeer over the more predictable operatic father of Wagner himself. The Meyerbeer tag connects Berlin, Paris, and Vienna as it connects Bruges and Venice. Moreover, by invoking Meyerbeer, Korngold also necessarily invokes Wagner. The inclusion of Meyerbeer functions slyly and necessarily as the exclusion of Wagner and Wagnerism. Indeed, the scene’s Venetian ornaments themselves deliver an additional hidden joke at Wagner’s expense; Wagner, whose aesthetic rejected all of Venice’s theatrical traditions, died there, overlooking the Grand Canal.

Street spectacles return to *Die tote Stadt* throughout Paul’s dream sequence, each time intensifying their Catholic obsessions. The church on the square empties a procession of Beguines to the chiming of church bells and a clocktower; a more intensely conceived procession in Act 3 includes a chorus of clerics and children singing of the mystical body of Christ—*Mysterium corporis*. In Act 3, Marietta brusquely questions Paul’s attachment to the churchly apparitions: “*Du bist ja fromm?* You are pious?” After a night of sex, Paul kills Marietta for her alleged violation of the memory of Marie, but it is, tellingly, Marietta who has questioned Paul’s own piety.

The murder of Marietta is followed immediately by Paul’s awakening from the nightmare. Marietta herself returns. At this point, the opera’s audience as well as an attentive director have not only the right but also the obligation to question the relation of dream and reality and to wonder on which side of the ostensible dream/reality border the opera lies. The given narrative notwithstanding, Paul may in fact have murdered Marietta, in which case her reappearance and his ensuing recovery, involving the opera’s entire conclusion, would be the scene of delusion.16

Paul’s recovery—from Marietta, from the dream sequence culminating in her “murder,” from Marietta’s repetition of Marie, and from his melancholy over the death of Marie—ensues via a repetition with difference of “Glueck das mir verblieb.” Paul resolves to leave Bruges forever and in the opera’s concluding music sings, “Joy that remains to me / Farewell, my dearest love / Life departs from death... / Here is no resurrection.”

16 Alfred Hitchcock’s film *Vertigo* (1958) evinces a similar ambiguity, and Hitchcock, as many have observed, owes his own attention to the themes of sexual violence and the femme fatale to Weimar film. See Maria Tatar, *Lustmord: Sexual Murder in Weimar Germany* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), 7, 36–39.
Paul appears suddenly to have read Sigmund Freud’s 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia” and learned its therapeutic lesson—that the ego is recovered in the passage from melancholy to mourning. This third-act and eleventh-hour transformation, dramatically and psychologically speaking, inevitably seems hasty and undermotivated. Its repetition of the music and most of the words of Marietta’s song offers a repetition with little musical variation or development but with perhaps too much psychic difference to prove convincing. Paul, who now seems not to have killed Marietta but only dreamed as much, now appropriates her song and voice in a way that recalls Wagner’s silencing of Brunnhilde and Kundry.

Like most modernist works of the period (including the operas of Richard Strauss), Die tote Stadt surfaced in northern Germany. Its premiere occurred December 4, 1920, simultaneously in two cities—Protestant, Hanseatic Hamburg, which Korngold, fascinatingly, referred to as “his city,” and where he chose to attend the premiere, and Catholic, Rhenish Cologne. Its success and the frequency of its early performances made Korngold, for a brief time, the second-most-performed opera composer in Europe, after Richard Strauss. The same success fueled the resentiment of some of the more ascetic musical modernists. In the ensuing decades, Korngold’s emigration to the United States and his composition of film music produced his “double exile.” In Los Angeles, fellow émigré composer Ernst Toch quipped maliciously, “Korngold has always composed for Warner Brothers, only he was at first unaware of the fact.” This view informs contemporary analyses as well. In Koepnick’s summary, Korngold remains “a stylistic conservative who in his last Hollywood picture [Deception (1946)] masqueraded as a modernist who piped a number of postromantic sounds through the ducts of Fordist mass culture.” For Korngold in 1920, for Die tote Stadt and modernist audiences in Germany in 1920, the cinematic context had other connotations.  

In February 1920, ten months prior to the double premiere of Die tote Stadt, the film The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari opened in the Berlin Marmorhaus on the Kurfuerstendamm to commercial and critical success. It traveled internationally, opening for example in

17 See Peter Heyworth, Otto Klemperer: His Life and Times (New York, 1983), 153, for an account (and a tacit endorsement) of early hostility to Die tote Stadt. Lutz Koepnick, The Dark Mirror: German Cinema Between Hitler and Hollywood (Berkeley, 2002), 154.
New York and Boston in early 1921. A review in the Boston Evening Transcript in April 1921 praised its depiction of “a nightmare of cubism,” thus contributing to an ongoing understanding of the film’s visual world as a riff on contemporary painterly modernism. Caligari’s sui generis, cinematic importance seems first to have been declared in France. Out of the French cult that evolved around the film (reminiscent perhaps of the Revue Wagnerienne and the early French cult of Bayreuth), the term “Caligarisme” entered currency, analogous perhaps to “Kafkaesque” and referring, in Kracauer’s words, “to a postwar world seemingly all upside down.” The connection between Die tote Stadt and Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari, however, is more immanent than that.\(^\text{18}\)

Kracauer’s 1947 study From Caligari to Hitler traces the film’s evolution with the help of an account provided by one of its two writers, Hans Janowitz. His co-writer, Carl Mayer, was the son of a businessman from Graz who abandoned his family and property to become a “scientific gambler.” In Janowitz and Mayer’s screenplay, the psychiatrist Dr. Caligari exhibits a hypnotized sleepwalker, Cesare, at a country fair. The sleepwalker “predicts” the death of a spectator and then, still under Caligari’s spell, murders him. The story’s young hero, Francis, uncovers the plot, discovering Caligari himself to be the director of a nearby psychiatric clinic. As citizens of Austria-Hungary, Kracauer asserts, with some opacity, Janowitz and Mayer “were in a better position than most citizens of the Reich to penetrate the fatal tendencies inherent in the German system. The character of Caligari embodies these tendencies; he stands for an unlimited authority that idolizes power as such, and, to satisfy its lust for domination, ruthlessly violates all human rights and values.”\(^\text{19}\)

Yet the film was not made according to the basic structure and political thrust of Janowitz and Mayer’s story. A 1970 memoir


\(\text{\textit{From Caligari to Hitler, 64–65.}}\)
by the last surviving production designer, Hermann Warm, confirmed that Mayer and Janowitz remained entirely absent from the set during the four weeks of shooting in 1919. The eventual director, Robert Wiene, attached a framing device whereby Francis, a young patient in Caligari’s clinic, told the story. Thus the identification of the chief doctor and Caligari becomes a paranoid delusion, and the true doctor, the voice of authority, retains his legitimacy. According to Kracauer, “While the original story exposed the madness inherent in authority, Wiene’s Caligari glorified authority and convicted its antagonist of madness. A revolutionary film was thus turned into a conformist one.” Only the uncertain and subtly menacing countenance of the doctor at the film’s conclusion, as he utters the words, “Ah! He thinks I am Caligari . . . Now I know how to help him,” hints at the survival of Janowitz and Mayer’s noninverted structure.20

In Kracauer’s view, Janowitz and Mayer were two young, relatively untested writers assembling a story out of residues from their own Oedipal memories, Mayer’s addressing his actual father, as suggested above. In Janowitz’s case, a memory informed the film’s actual plot. On an October evening in 1913, Janowitz strolled through a street fair in Hamburg and “followed the fragile trail of a laugh” belonging to a young girl. . . . The following day big headlines in the local press announced, “Horrible sex crime on the Holstenwall! Young Gertrude . . . murdered.” The event prefigured the Caligari murders; the film is set in a north German town called Holstenwall. These sets of lived residues clearly formed the authors’ portrayal of compromised authority. That authority subsequently intervened, in the form of Wiene and the Ufa studio, to re-invert the story’s hierarchy of power, reason, and legitimacy—at least mostly.21

Similar inversions inform Die tote Stadt and its evolution during the months of Caligari’s whirlwind first run. Writing the libretto with his father, Korngold followed the latter’s advice to shape the story in a more “optimistic” way. The result is a frame that closes and relieves the brutal inside story but leaves its eros and violence largely unexplained. These qualities produce Paul’s murder—or, more accurately, “murder” of Marietta, which according

21 Ibid., 61–67.
to the frame is only dreamed. The act is a Weimar garden-variety sex crime, or Lustmord. The opera’s conclusion removes the sting of violent sexuality and murder by leading Paul out of his dream—the bulk of the opera—and into recovery. It represents a substantial relief for the audience, unless the audience is led to suspect—as may or may not be the case in the closing frames of Caligari—that the concluding frame is in fact lying, while the horrific inner plot is telling the truth.22

Caligari’s visual and sensual world has a filmic antecedent in the work of the Russian modernist Yevgenii Bauer, specifically his three films Twilight of a Woman’s Soul (1913), After Death (1915), and The Dying Swan (1916). The post-Soviet rescue of these films adds to the archive of early cinematic attention the figure of the femme fatale and its varieties. Bauer’s films were decried as “cosmopolitan” and kept out of view in the Soviet period. Twilight of a Woman’s Soul follows a rape survivor who has killed the rapist but then faces abandonment by her husband. After Death, from a story by Ivan Turgenev, Klara Milich (1882), explores the psychological effects of the dead upon the living. The Dying Swan engages a Dorian Grey problematic in exploring a painter’s obsession with a mute ballerina as a vehicle for the potential depiction of death on canvas. The pictorialization of the mute dancer provides a particularly strong allegory for the cinematic itself, specifically to the form we still refer to, despite Miriam Hansen’s authoritative banishment of the term, as “silent” cinema. The filmic apparatus, as many critics have noted, also supplies a basic allegory and pun around the issue of “projection” and its dual denotation of the literal projection of image onto screen as well as the psychoanalytic phenomenon related to displacement and transference.23

Caligari’s image world consistently honors this double valence of projection. The imposition of Wiene’s narrative frame establishes the now insane Francis’ projection of the mad killer “Dr. Caligari” onto the persona of the (now sane) clinic director. Conceivably, though not necessarily, Francis’ commitment to the asylum followed his own murder or abuse of a woman, whom he now projects into his story as his beloved Jane, a near victim of

22 Tatar, Lustmord.
Caligari and the latter’s murdering somnambulist. (Recall that Jane is also the name of the Rodenbach’s character in *Bruges la morte*, renamed Marietta by Korngold.) The scene of that near murder, midway through the narrative—now Francis’ narrative—involves the visual projection of the knife-wielding Cesare looming ever-larger onto the surface behind the girl’s bed. Cesare does not actually kill Jane (supplying an alternative to Francis’ possible past crime) but rather kidnaps her, fleeing “over roofs and roads” (Kracauer) until he drops her, unharmed physically, and dies of exhaustion. The possibility that Cesare might function as a projection of Francis’ own deranged and/or criminal past gains strength from the moment in the closing narrative frame when Francis asks a fellow inmate for her hand in marriage (she refuses, claiming she is of royal blood).

The aura of *Caligari* that informs *Die tote Stadt* and clearly oriented its initial audiences in late 1920 and 1921 adds ballast to its modernism and to its nostalgia alike. Film, in 1920, represented the cutting edge of the radically new. Sensibly, the dramaturgy and production history of *Die tote Stadt* have been closely allied to a cinematic aesthetic, with a heavy use of film projections. These cinematic contexts may reflect an argument, conscious or not, for the modernity of *Die tote Stadt* despite the more evident nostalgia of its dramatic content and musical idiom.

The standard music-historical account of the twentieth century is all about Schoenberg and, as we have seen, exultantly exclusive of Korngold. The German verb via that best describes Korngold’s inclusion in a modernist operatic discourse is *rutschen*, denoting the untranslatable, unarticulated, and largely physical maneuvers by which people insinuate themselves into better theater seats than the ones printed on their tickets. Korngold’s *Rutsch* into the modern is quite justified by the thrust of *Die tote Stadt* into the post-Wagnerian discourse occupied by Debussy, Bartok, and Janacek, a momentum that became more urgent and more scattered as it fell under the shadow of Dr. Caligari. The uninvited presence of Korngold in a roster of modernists may help us to understand the capacities of operatic modernism as well as, conceivably, modernism in general. We might be persuaded to work with an understanding of modernism as the courage of ambivalence, the refusal to accept inadequate alternatives, the mark of an intransigence that totalities and totalitarianisms cannot contain.