

Mahler in Venice?

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One of the flashbacks where Dirk Bogarde as Aschenbach, without moustache, looks uncannily like Mahler. With him is Marisa Berenson as Frau von Aschenbach.

VISCONTI's *Death in Venice* is a European version of a biopic about the dying days of a fictional composer around the turn of the nineteenth century, based on the eponymous story by Thomas Mann, except that the composer isn't fictional, but an imaginary evocation of Gustav Mahler, whose music is borrowed for the soundtrack - with the result that the *Adagietto* from the Fifth Symphony became his most famous piece. The film is an *homage* to the late romantic artist, and a creative betrayal of Mann and Mahler, but the guilty party is Mann himself, who venerated Mahler as 'the man who, as I believe, expresses the art of our time in its profoundest and most sacred form' (in a letter Mann wrote to Mahler after hearing the first performance of his Eight Symphony). His hero, the writer Gustave von Aschenbach, is his own *homage* to Mahler, to whom he gives the real composer's physical characteristics: "Gustave von Aschenbach was somewhat below middle height, dark and smooth shaven, with a head that looked rather too large for his almost delicate figure. He wore his hair brushed back; it was thin at the parting, bushy and grey on the temples, framing a lofty, rugged, knotty brow - if one may so characterise it. The nose-piece of his rimless gold spectacles cut into the base of his thick, aristocratically hooked nose. The mouth was large, often lax, often suddenly narrow and tense; the cheeks lean and furrowed, the pronounced chin slightly cleft." One of the delights of the film is Dirk Bogarde's embodiment of the character, whom Visconti turns back into a composer, adding in Mahler's slightly dragging gait which was due to a club foot.

Visconti, turning Aschenbach back into a composer, also reads Mann's later work into the earlier, weaving into the narrative allusions and even scenes

derived from Mann's great novel of music, *Doctor Faustus*, where the composer hidden behind the character of Adrian Leverkühn is another story. The relationship between Visconti and Mann recalls Michel Butor saying at the end of his essay on Baudelaire: "Some people may think that, while intending to write about Baudelaire, I have only succeeded in speaking of myself. It would certainly be better to say that it was Baudelaire who spoke of me." In short, just as Mahler spoke of Mann through the novella, here Mahler and Mann speak of Visconti, and Mahler's music becomes the icon of the dying bourgeois artist who sixty-odd years later is still dreaming of his death.

Nor was *Death in Venice* the first story in which Mann gives evidence of musical inspiration. *Tonio Kröger* evokes the Wagnerian leitmotif through the repetition of key phrases and descriptions, like that of the wild flower in Consul Kroger's buttonhole. It also evokes Mahler's burlesque music: "Here in his room it was still and dark. But from below life's milling, trivial waltz-rhythm came faintly to his ears", or, "I see into a whirl of shadows of human figures who beckon to me to weave spells to redeem them; tragic and laughable figures and some that are both together."



Aschenbach with Alfried (Mark Burns), the 'Schoenberg' figure invented by Visconti

The overt references to Mahler are too numerous to list, but we may mention the flashbacks which show Aschenbach with his wife playing with their daughter in a country field, and then later, mourning over her coffin. These scenes, interpolated into the story by Visconti, are taken from Mahler's biography. Then there's the scene in which Aschenbach argues with Alfried, a character invented by Visconti, in which Alfried challenges Aschenbach over the question of the ambiguity of their art. 'The artist,' says Aschenbach, 'has to be exemplary, he has to be a model of strength, he cannot be ambiguous.' 'But art is ambiguous,' replies Alfried, 'and music is the most ambiguous of all the arts. It is ambiguity made a science. Listen to this chord,' he continues, playing a *Tristan*-like chord on the piano, 'or this one. You can interpret them any way you like; you have before you an entire series of mathematical combinations, unforeseen and inexhaustible, a paradise of double meanings, in which *you* more than anyone else romp and rove like a — like a calf in clover. Don't you hear it?' he shouts, as he plays the opening of the last movement of Mahler's Fourth Symphony, 'It's yours, it's all your music!'

The character of Alfried seems to be based on Schoenberg, one of Mahler's staunchest supporters, and these scenes recall Alma Mahler's description of him in her memoirs — he "delighted in paradox of the most violent description" — but we are also put in mind of Adrian Leverkühn, the tragic hero of Mann's *Faustus*, who, at the age of 15, discovered and explored the mathematical relationships of the keyboard. 'Relationship is everything,' he says to his friend Zeitblom, 'and if you want to give it a more precise name, it is ambiguity . . . You know what I find?' he asks, 'That music turns the equivocal into a system. Take this or that note. You can understand it so or respectively so. You can think of it as sharpened or flattened, and you can, if you are clever, take advantage of the double sense as much as you like.' Mann himself indicated the connection between the novel and the story. In *The Genesis of a Novel*, the diary of the exile years in California during the Second World War when he wrote *Doctor Faustus*, he observes that "Ideas about death and form, the self and the objective world, may well be regarded by the author of a Venetian novel of some thirty-five years ago as recollections of himself." (This intertext spills over into 'real life'. When the novel was published, his near neighbour Schoenberg, another exile, was outraged by Mann's ascription of his own compositional methods to a fictional figure who suffered from madness, and accused T.W. Adorno, Mann's musical advisor, of betraying him.)

The confusions engendered by the Alfried character are perplexing. Some of the accusations he makes against Aschenbach seem out of joint. He calls him 'immune to feeling' when he plainly isn't. However, the point of Alfried's criticisms, when seen in the light of Mann's perennial themes, is that Aschenbach is emotionally dishonest with himself, and this makes him suspect. He is like the magician in Mann's later story, *Mario and the Magician*, a hypnotiser who is able to manipulate people, make them do absurd, even degrading things, but although he makes them into fools, it is he — not they — who is to be pitied. (The theme also relates to *Tonio Kröger*: it is necessary for the artist to die to life for the sake of art, to cultivate the flow of art. 'mounting in the ardour of creation to a certain climax and effect and then as artfully breaking off . . .' This achievement of aesthetic illusion is, I submit, a crucial aspect of Mahler's music, even if Mahler himself does not seem wholly to deserve Alfried's criticisms.)

One of the most important references is to Esmeralda, the name of the boat on which Aschenbach arrives in Venice, and of the girl he goes with in the flashback to a brothel. *Heterae Esmeralda* was one of the butterflies of which in *Faustus*, Leverkühn's father had spoken to him and his friend. Many butterflies deck themselves out in beauty and splendour, but are shunned by all Nature nonetheless - because they are foul and inedible. They are, said Leverkühn the father, "tragically safe". Thus it occurs to Adrian to describe the whore he encountered in his fateful visit to the brothel as an Esmeralda: 'A brown wench puts herself nigh me, in a little Spanish jacket, with a big gam, snub nose, almond eyes, an Esmeralda, she brushed my cheek with her arm.' This scene is translated into the film where the whore enacts the gesture, her arm brushing against Aschenbach's cheek.

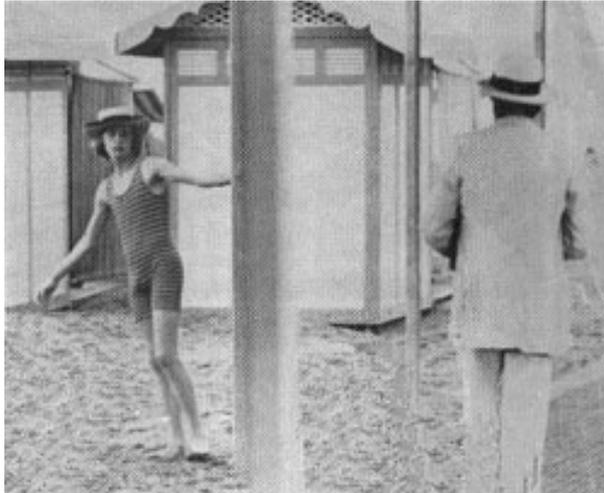
But here the double intertextual reference is to Nietzsche, for it was an event in his biography on which the brothel scene in *Faustus* is based; and this takes us back to the soundtrack music a moment earlier in the film — the fourth movement of Mahler's Third Symphony, a setting of Nietzsche's 'Midnight Song' — 'O Man, take heed! What does the deep midnight say? I slept! From the deepest dream I have been woken! The world is deep, and deeper than the day thought! Deep is its woe! Joy, deeper still than heart's sorrow! Woe says: Perish! But all joy wills eternity, deep, deep, eternity.' Clearly Visconti has re-created not only the visual aspects of Venice, 1911 — that richness of the decor, the tempo of movement across the hotel lounge — but also the intellectual world of Thomas Mann, the *Weltanschauung* shared by Mahler. *Death in Venice* draws in these strands to become an allegory on the moral existence of that quasi-mythical figure, the alienated bourgeois artist, whom no-one described more acutely than Mann himself, the solitary, like Tonio Kröger: "A solitary unused to speaking of what he sees and feels, has mental experiences which are at once more intense and less articulate than those of a gregarious man... Solitude gives birth to the original sin in us, to beauty unfamiliar and perilous - to poetry. But also, it gives birth to the opposite: the perverse, the illicit, the absurd."

The most repeated complaint against the film is that, in the words of one critic, the free emotionalism of the music 'quite contradicts the implications of severity and rigour with which Mann endows his Aschenbach. This seems to make a nonsense of the decadent liberation the ailing composer feels in contemplating the pure perfected loveliness of the young Tadzio, a beauty that owes nothing to art and everything to nature'. Is this so? One is inclined to answer, 'Precisely, don't you see it?'

Let us trace the intellectual development of the story. While Aschenbach sits at dinner on his first evening in Venice, there is an aural flashback to a conversation between himself and Alfried. Alfried denies the artist the ability to create 'from the spirit': all is merely labour. 'Do you really believe,' he asks Aschenbach, 'in beauty as the product of labour?' 'Yes yes, I do,' replies Aschenbach at the very moment that the picture cuts to Tadzio, as if immediately to mock his faith. On the soundtrack Alfried continues, as if referring to Tadzio 'That's how beauty is born, like that, spontaneously. In utter disregard for your labour or mine, It pre-exists our presumption as artists.' A moment later the flashback continues in both sound and picture, as Alfried says, 'Your great error is to consider life, reality, as a limitation.' Aschenbach protests, 'Isn't that what it is? Reality only distracts and degrades us.' Alfried again disagrees: 'No, Gustave, no. Beauty belongs to the senses,' and produces the argument about ambiguity.

This, then, is the theme: if Aschenbach recognises his infatuation with the boy Tadzio, a symbol of untouchable preexisting beauty, an Esmeralda, then he must recognise the fraudulence of his artistic strivings, for artistically he strives after what he considers to be a pure, Apollonian order. The term is, of course, Nietzsche's. In *The Birth of Tragedy* he describes Apollo as a moral deity who demands self-control and an artificially restrained and discreet world of illusion in art. Into this world must penetrate the Dionysian clamour that expresses the whole outrageous gamut of Nature in which the individual

must forget his limits and moderations, must lose himself in the vortex and become oblivious. Tadzio stands to Aschenbach much as Parsifal stood to Wagner — an innocent, holy and chaste saviour — that Parsifal who was the exact opposite of Wagner himself. In the novella, Mann gives us a passage from Plato to chew over: 'But detachment, Phaedrus and pre-occupation with form lead to intoxication and desire, they may lead the noblest among us to frightful emotional excesses, which his own stern cult of the beautiful would be the first to condemn. So they too, they too, lead us to the bottomless pit. Yes, they lead us thither. I say, us who are poets — who by our natures are prone not to excellence but to excess.



Tadzio (Bjorn Andresen) swings on a post, unwittingly taunting Aschenbach

Visconti shows Aschenbach's slow seduction beautifully. Aschenbach smiles slyly to himself as he sees Tadzio's friend kissing him on the cheek, and then begins to eat succulent strawberries with delicate relish. The camera pans across the beach, and we overhear an Englishman warning his family. 'It's very dangerous, you shouldn't eat any fresh fruit in this hot weather, only cooked vegetables'. But Aschenbach is already doomed. Much later, he meets Tadzio on the path to the beach. Tadzio swings seductively on the pillars that support the awning. Gustave makes as if to imitate his action — or does he suddenly feel weak and grab the pillar to support himself? A moment later, he rests against a beach-hut from faintness. Later still Tadzio draws Aschenbach through the streets of Venice where the rubbish is being burnt and the putrid smells of organic disintegration dissolving into rich fertile humus horrify, but fascinate the ailing old man.

In the last flashback, as a symphony of his meets a riotous reception, Alfried lays the final accusation at Aschenbach's feet. 'You cheat, you magnificent swindler!' he calls him. 'What more do they want from me?' pleads Gustave. 'Your beauty, absolute severity, purity of form, perfection, the abstraction of the senses. It's all gone, nothing remains, nothing. Your music is stillborn, and you are unmasked!' Alfried yells. Presumably this accusation is what the film critics found perplexing, but what does the argument amount to? By achieving perfect form and balance, says Alfried, Aschenbach has succeeded in totally deceiving his audience. He has so perfectly balanced the ambiguities of music

as to create an inscrutable object — the positive and the negative cancel each other out. He has created an object which simply stares back, forbiddingly.

This turns out to be the key to the film's curious way with the music, above all the famous Adagietto. This short movement is not used as background music, but is played through prominently four times, almost in its entirety, and each time governs the shape and rhythm of the picture and of the cutting. Visconti creates an immensely rich set of visual counterpoints to the music. Yet each time the emotional connotation of the images is quite different.

The first time through it is serene and restful, as Aschenbach arrives in Venice at dawn. The second time through it begins in a mood of sweet parting as Aschenbach passes Tadzio on his way out of the hotel and mutters, 'Farewell Tadzio, it was all too brief, may God bless you',



continuing after the episode at the station, in a mood of triumphant, joyous, sunlit return. The third time through it begins mournfully, over the flashback in which Gustave and his wife lament their lost daughter, and continues through Aschenbach's bizarre transformation at the barber, and into the walk through the fetid city, which ends in his sinking to the ground and laughing bitterly over the final bars of the music.



The final time through it accompanies the stillness of the almost empty beach, the disturbing fight between Tadzio and his friend and Aschenbach's dying. Visconti has shown us that this music, far from being freely emotional, is

really quite indifferent to any particular emotion whatsoever. It is a triumph of perfect formal balance. What he presents is not unlike the famous experiment of the 1920s by the Soviet director Pudovkin, who took a close-up of the actor Mosjoukin with a completely passive expression on his face, and then intercut it with a bowl of soup, a young woman lying dead in her coffin, and a child playing with a teddy-bear. The audience to whom it was shown was amazed at the subtle varieties of expression which seemed to pass over Mosjoukin's face. It is the context which provides the meaning, and the context includes the perception of the viewer. This is not at all like the conventional use of music in the cinema, which seems to be based on quite opposite notions about musical expressivity.

The most human within us protests against the idea that music — art — is devoid of emotion. Yet there is a story told of the conductor Mengelberg that he once had an orchestra play the Mahler Adagietto through 20 times at a rehearsal in order to get them to play it without any trace of sentiment but *with perfect poise* at the performance. It does not occur to us that all the artist has done is to create a matrix into which we pour our own molten feelings, produces the means for us to find some sense and shape in our feelings. But here, again. Nietzsche's ideas come into focus: he believed, not that music *expresses* emotions, but that emotions are used to *symbolise* music, that we bring our emotions to music in order to fill it out, to make it intelligible to ourselves.

It is sometimes said that art is illusion. Music, for example, creates the illusion of the play of emotions. For Nietzsche this was not the case. Art, he said, may create the illusion of illusion, because we play with it and let it be so to us. But this idea suggested the possibility of fraudulence to the late romantic artist: hence Mann's worry about the artist's inherent emotional dishonesty. Visconti's film ends with a vision which reflects this. Taking one sentence from Mann's text which has hardly more than evocative significance — 'A camera on a tripod stood at the edge of the water, apparently abandoned; its black cloth snapped in the freshening wind — he erects an unforgettable image in which the camera, which he has included somewhere in every one of the beach scenes, comes to stand for illusion itself, for the aesthetic business of creating a spectacle and pleasurably deceiving the audience into being deceived.

