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Hollywood's Wagner The Return to/of the Ordinary

Richard Wagner's *Tannhäuser* brings on an unexpected climax in Andrew L. Stone's screwball comedy *Hi Diddle Diddle* (1943). After much wacky scheming unfettered by the law of narrative logic, the small-time swindler Col Hector Phylffe (Adolphe Menjou) has ended up with a group of friends in the apartment which his wife has just redecorated. As wallpaper, Genya Smetana (Pola Negri), a Wagnerian opera diva, has chosen an idyllic family scene from the life of her favorite composer. A multitude of squares, each with an individual wooden frame, depict Richard Wagner together with Cosima and their three children, peacefully enjoying their picnic beneath a tree in a meadow while he is deeply engrossed in one of his works. Positioned in front of this picturesque décor, one of the guests turns to the opera diva to confess that they have a lot in common. He, too, he explains, is a Wagnerian singer. Asked by Pola Negri where he sang Wagner, he replies »I sang Tannhauser at college,« adding »I was the third pilgrim from the left in the pilgrims' chorus.« So as to show her what he means, he sits down at the piano and begins to play the overture which musically anticipates the melody of this chorus, replacing the words of the libretto, however, with »la, la, la.«

All the others soon join him in song with the exception of Adolphe Menjou. He is sitting by himself in the front section of the living room, divided from the others by a panel that is also adorned with the same wallpaper motif. Instead of an ecstatic praise of redemption, described by the pilgrims in Wagner's libretto as a »fromme Weise, die der empfangnen Gnade Heil verkündet,« we get a performance that reduces the pathos of the famous tune to passionate invocation. Once Pola Negri's trained voice begins to override the others, causing them, in turn, to amplify their voices, the camera shifts to a medium close-up of Menjou. He is pouring himself a drink, shaking his head at the cacophony and then, as if the wall behind him had given him a clandestine signal, he turns his head to the painted scene to take note of the fact that Wagner is as disturbed as he. The cartoon figure, designed by Fritz Freleng, begins to cover his ears with his hands, then stretches these out as if in supplication, with Menjou imitating his gesture to indicate that he is helpless. Once more we return to the singers who are becoming ever more passionate in their performance, causing the cartoon Wagner to move into action. After he throws the score he has been reading down in anger and starts stamping his feet, Cosima, having herself arisen in surprise, tries to calm him. Menjou, in turn, pours himself another drink, as disturbed by the sud-

den visual commotion on the panel wall as by the sustained musical dissonance in the back of the living room.

As the camera moves into a long shot, we finally see both sites simultaneously (the singers around the piano and the lone drinker), but also the multiplication of the cartoon scene, serving as backdrop to both. In tandem with the music, this plethora of individual framed scenes is becoming increasingly busy. Having sustained the visual juxtaposition between cartoon animation and live sing-along, the camera briefly moves into the comic strip scene itself, isolating the coachman as he blows his horn and then Wagner's dogs as these begin to howl while also covering their ears. We then return to the living room, and, in shot/reverse-shot editing, are shown first the singers, hamming it up, and then the hallucinatory scene their performance engenders. Wagner and his family flee to the coach, the outraged servant runs to retrieve the picnic dishes, the horses neigh to signal their own readiness to leave the scene. In the final tableau of *Hi Diddle Diddle* we see Menjou raising his glass to the Wagner family as though to signal his compassion with their plight, while with ironic passion the singers reach the final chord of the *Pilgrims' Chorus*. The long shot reveals that in the background, Wagner's coach is driving toward the furthest point in each of the painted squares, desperately trying to escape the frame. With the help of the cartoon insert, Stone transforms a chorus about the mercy a penitent may gain as his reward into a debunking of the heroic pathos *Tannhäuser* is known for. The words of the script are effaced, invoking cultural recognition of the tune rather than Christian pardon of the actual words in the score. Pola Negri and her friends can sing along with the tune precisely because, as they admit to each other when embarking on this wacky performance, they don't know the words. At issue is not an ideology of redemption through death but the pleasure of coming together in song.

Along with Menjou, we, as the audience of this outrageous spectacle, may be transfixed, yet our astonishment is predicated on the marked distinction between the overwhelming emotion the music seeks and the comic distance to this effect both the unskilled performance and the cartoon visualization affords. With the plot of *Hi Diddle Diddle* revolving around a US navy sailor who marries his sweetheart during a 48 hour shore leave, this audacious refiguration not only signifies how engrained Wagner was in the American cultural imaginary of the early 40s. It also references the use to which the American war effort put this popularity, notably Charlie Chaplin's inclusion of the Prelude to *Lohengrin* in *The Great Dictator* (1940), Walt Disney's inclusion of the Prelude from *Die Meistersinger* in *Der Führer's Face* (1942) as well as the inclusion of various Wagner motifs in the documentary series *Why We Fight* (1943–1945), directed by Frank Capra and Anatole Litvak.¹ Yet by virtue of its excess, the anarchic humor of Stone's citation not only undermines the political passion to which Nazi propaganda, such as Leni Riefen-

1 Fritz Freleng also directed Bugs Bunny for Warner Brothers' cartoon, using *The Ride of Valkyries* from *Die Walküre*, as Neil Lerner discusses in his piece *Reading Wagner in Bugs Bunny Nips the Nips* (1944), in *Wagner & Cinema*, edited by Jeongwon Joe and Sander L. Gilman (Bloomington 2010, p. 210–224). As Scott D. Paulin notes in his article in the same volume, *Piercing Wagner*:

stahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935), put their own appropriation of Wagner. The fact that the creator of *Tannhäuser* is forced to leave the scene of this dissonant performance of his *Pilgrims' Chorus* can also be seen as a trope for the way no composer/author owns his music/text. Any subsequent recycling can self-consciously mis-read an intended effect, refiguring its ideological force. It can pay tribute to the passion the music arouses even, or especially, out of context.

Stone's screwball citation of *Tannhäuser* serves as my point of departure for an exploration of the way Wagner's operatic *Gesamtkunstwerk* has found a resilient refiguration in modern American popular cinema. A promising route for rethinking Wagner after Freud, thus the wager of this essay, entails looking at the cultural survival of his work through the lens of its subsequent recycling in film scripts and soundtrack scores. To put it succinctly, after Freud, one of the places to look for Wagner is in classic Hollywood. It is here that an aesthetic engagement with the serious discussion of symbolic law's curtailment of drives and fantasies of transgressive desire that psychoanalysis introduced into modernist discourse are brought into conversation with Wagner's romantic narratives about wounds which come to be healed through self-sacrifice. Yet even as light-hearted a film as *Hi Diddle Diddle* plays to a household knowledge of psychoanalytic concepts when it culminates in a home rendered *unheimlich* by virtue of an animated wallpaper. We are called upon to understand this transformation of an ordinary living room into an extraordinary hallucinatory space as the realization of several intersecting fantasies. On the one hand, the cartoon of the Wagner family is a wry comment not only on the cacophony this motley chorus produces but also the way in which, enrapt by their own singing, they remain oblivious to the world beyond their narcissistic pleasure. On the other hand, it signifies a magical belief in an omnipotence of thought on the part of the one figure who does see the phantasmagoria and interacts with it. As Menjou's fantasy projection, the cartoon visualizes his response to the singing he is not partaking in.

This visual conjoining of a performance (filmed on the set of a studio and lip-synched while the camera was running, with the sound post-synched after the shooting) with animation film reflects on the uncanny power of the cinematic image in general. It aligns it with the visual language of dreams. Only in this medium can cartoon figures and live actors, by virtue of editing, be spliced together. The journalist leads in a performance of the *Pilgrims' Chorus* that is sung initially in English although the words are almost impossible to make out. We simply get a sense that some of the people gathered around him are admitting to each other that they do not know the words to the tune which is so familiar to them. The falling away of the German words brings a further psychoanalytic concept into play. The 'la, la, la' these ungifted singers have recourse to foregrounds a vocal articulation of a culturally familiar tune, breaking into and undermining the Wagnerian libretto's pathos-laden narrative about redemption. At the same time, the tempo of the *Pilgrims' Chorus* is speeded up in the scene so that, in the context of the war effort

The Ring in Golden Earrings, the citation of Wagner by wartime Hollywood to signify Nazi Germany »may be one of the most familiar points of intersection« between the two (p. 226).

which the film explicitly supports, it appears almost martial. With the journalist pounding away at the piano, the singers pit their aggressive appropriation of the tune against a libretto propagating the need for restraining sensual excess. Given the fact that the film premiered in 1943, this mode of vocal utterance is violently ludic: a surplus, both political and psychological, that refuses to be contained.

Nietzsche, in his »Der Fall Wagner,« not only anticipates a conceptual line of association to Freud when he notes: »Die Probleme, die er auf die Bühne bringt – lauter Hyteriker-Probleme – das Convulsivische seines Affekts, seine überreizte Sensibilität [...] Alles zusammen stellt ein Krankheitsbild dar.«² He also preempts Hollywood's affinity to Wagner's mastery of hypnotic ploys when he adds, »er will nichts als die Wirkung. Und er kennt das, worauf er zu wirken hat! [...] Wagner's Musik ist niemals wahr – Aber man hält sie dafür: und so ist es in Ordnung.«³ Indeed, mainstream cinema has emerged as a vibrant *Gesamtkunstwerk* of the 20th century precisely because it, too, puts its money on effects, banking on its knowledge of what the audience wants. It, too, makes no claim for truth, except the truth of the cinematic affect.

The point of connection between the two media is the dramatization of psychological states common to both, with the performance of music and gestures moving beyond the limit of spoken language.⁴ To think about Wagner's work after Freud's discussion of psychic processes thus not only means asking how his libretti can be reinterpreted through the lens of films that have recycled him but also the debt to psychoanalysis these refiguration are predicated on. Specifically, this essay will explore how a set of three films (two American and one British production) engage with an imagined conversation between both based either on musical citation or thematic repetition. In Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), a reference to Isolde's *Liebestod* is embedded in the score which accompanies the hero's attainment of erotic bliss. Albert Lewin's *Pandora and the Flying Dutchman* (1951), in turn, takes from *Fliegende Holländer* the portrait of a mythic figure as catalyst for its tale of redemptive self-sacrifice. Finally, in *The Lady Eve* (1941), the *Pilgrims' Chorus* from *Tannhäuser* proves to be seminal for the happy resolution of this screwball comedy as well. The explicit relation between each set of texts, be it musical or thematic, is taken as an invitation to discover what, given this intertextual conversation, the consequence of it might be. Each of these films taps into Wagner's hypnotic drive, transforming his musicalized gestures into the lynchpin of their cinematic hallucination – a fatal erotic desire, a portentous portrait, a song predicting pardon.

2 Friedrich Nietzsche: Der Fall Wagner. Ders.: Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe. Hg. von Giorgio Colli u. Mazzino Montinari. Bd. 6. München 1980, p. 22

3 Ibid., p. 31.

4 As Eva Rieger: Wagner's Influence on Gender Roles in Early Hollywood. In: Joe/Gilman, Wagner and Cinema (footnote 1). She argues that for Wagner »music needed to express everything which language could not, with the goal of combining both« (p. 133). His concern with maximizing the dramatic action on stage, with only the performance itself revealing the full qualities of his works, can be taken in hindsight as a sign that he was thinking in cinematic terms before the advent of film technology.

Yet each does so by introducing a moment of significant difference that not only reflects on but also refracts Wagner's libretti through the lens of Freud's thinking.

Wagner through Freud

As Freud laconically notes, a »happy person never phantasies, only an unsatisfied one.« If, then, all fantasies are motivated by unsatisfied wishes, he adds, each individual fantasy work is to be understood as fulfilling a wish; it functions as »a correction of unsatisfying reality.«⁵ Imaginative activity, furthermore, straddles several temporal moments. While linked to current impressions, a fantasy often remembers and as such repeats a memory from the past in which the wish at issue was allegedly fulfilled. The act of producing this new fantasy, in turn, is aimed at a moment in the future when the wish it gives voice to might again be fulfilled. Applying this formula to the three libretti by Wagner one finds precisely this equation between discontent and the work of fantasy. By imagining a scene from an indistinct past, a dissatisfaction with the present is not only brought into focus. This recollection also allows the characters to formulate how they might escape their current discontent. A melody of bliss haunts the fated love between Tristan and Isolde, allowing them to imagine for themselves an existence beyond the war inflected symbolic laws of their world. A ballad about a wan mariner, seeking death, allows Senta to imagine escaping into a future different from the pecuniary marriage her father wants for her. The »frohes Geläute [...] meinem Ohr so lange fremd« which Tannhäuser again hears in his dream, compels him leave the Venusberg so as to return to the woman who represents this lost emotion.

In all three cases, it is the resilient incursion of fantasy which forces Wagner's characters to recognize that they must change their present situation. Yet the desire they seek to fulfill is modeled on a previous musical text, takes its shape from something heard or dreamed of in the past. If the work of fantasy, thus, first and foremost serves as a correction of actual life by envisioning an imaginary replacement, the disillusionment with the present and an over-valuation of the past prove to be mutually dependent. Only because the vanished days can be nostalgically reconceived as superior to the present do they serve as a template for what satisfaction might again look like in the future. This past satisfaction is, however, as much a fantasy as the belief that it might be retrieved. In that the work of fantasy offers intimations of a plenitude to be regained in the future, it not only casts the dreamer as the hero or heroine of the imagined scene. As Freud notes, it also places the dreamer »under the protection of a special Providence,« making him or her invulnerable.⁶ As dissatisfied as daydreamers may be with their current living conditions, by virtue of fantasizing their discontent in relation to a piece of song

5 Sigmund Freud: Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming [1908]. In: Idem: The Standard Edition. Vol. IX. London 1959, p. 146. For a similar discussion, see also his essay *Family Romances* (1909) in the same volume, p. 237–241.

6 Ibid., p. 150

familiar to them they prove their immunity to danger. They are about to enter into a predetermined script. Or put another way, as long as they fantasize they can believe in their invulnerability.

The compensation fantasy affords becomes most poignant for Freud when thought in relation to the fact of human mortality which, as the experience of vulnerability par excellence, we seek to deny by reducing death »from a necessity to a chance event.« As a result, Freud suggests, we look to the world of fiction for what we have lost in life: »There we still find people who know how to die – who, indeed, even manage to kill someone else. There alone too the condition can be fulfilled which makes it possible for us to reconcile ourselves with death: namely, that behind all the vicissitudes of life we should still be able to preserve a life intact [...] In the realm of fiction [...] we die with the hero with whom we have identified ourselves; yet we survive him, and are ready to die again just as safe with another hero.«⁷ What is lost and refound in the world of fiction, is, thus, an ambivalent attitude toward mortality – an acknowledgement of death's necessity as this is coupled with a conviction that one is immune to this fate because one can be redeemed into a fictional world beyond the ordinary struggle between life and death.

All three of Wagner's libretti can be reduced to such a core fantasy, with the heroes and heroines correcting the lack they experience in the public world of the present by imagining an intimate scene of past wholeness to replace it. As Eva Rieger notes, this scenario is clearly gendered: »Wagner loves to create extreme binary oppositions between the great representative world of power and the inwardly turned world of love. In other words, the male public sphere versus the private and erotic female sphere.«⁸ However, while the Wagnerian hero may initially appear as the active agent around whom the fantasy scenario resolves, with the heroine the bearer of his emotion, the masculine and feminine positions are mutually implicated. In the fantasy they share, the heroine's function is to fulfill the hero's wish to find redemption for the guilt that has unmoored him from the ordinary world. She is meant to heal his sense of being wounded, doomed, and abandoned. In that her willingness to sacrifice herself is tantamount to his spiritual release, she is both a projection of his transgression and its solution. She embodies both the sinful desire for which he is suffering and the restitutive desire he seeks as its antidote.

Yet precisely because they are doubled, all three heroines are also shown to be pursuing a fantasy which, though ultimately supportive of the hero's wish, has an aim of its own. Isolde is split between the revengeful widow, obsessed with administering her lethal *Sühnetrank* and, once she has drunk of the love potion, she becomes instead the enraptured beloved willing to transgress the law of marriage. Senta is split between the obedient daughter, whose marriage will procure wealth for her father, and the hysteric who recognizes in death a freedom from all bourgeois bonds. *Tannhäuser* pits the sinful sensuality of Venus against the spiritual purity of Elisabeth such that they can be read as two sides of femininity which can-

7 Sigmund Freud: Thoughts for the Times on War and Death [1915]. In: Idem: The Standard Edition. Vol. XIV. London 1957, p. 291.

8 Rieger, Wagner's Influence on Gender Roles (footnote 4), p. 143.

not be severed from each other, only mutually sacrificed. In the fantasy they share with the Wagnerian hero, all three women are willing to die because they know themselves to be under the protection of a special providence. They are fulfilling a song that will immortalize them. While their own death desire matches the fantasy of redemption this piece of music evokes, they are not merely the instrument by which this wish can be fulfilled. They take on an active role in this will to death. Isolde's wish to kill her former enemy is the catalyst for the *Liebstd* fantasy both she and Tristan embark on after Brangäne has secretly exchanged the potions. Precisely because Senta insists on her dream of death can the Dutchman make his fatal proposition to her. By taking death upon herself, Elisabeth makes Venus and her claim on Tannhäuser disappear.

In that their shared fantasy revolves around a wish for self-expenditure as a replacement for an unsatisfactory reality, conceived as a return to something prior that has been haunting them, Wagner's heroes and heroines above all anticipate the repetition compulsion which Freud, in his late writings, came to align with the death drive. If the first aspect of fantasy work discussed so far, pertaining as it does to the work of compensation, is seminally informed by a desire to retrieve an imagined condition of past plenitude, a second aspect involves the way death in general is implicated in the pleasure this affords. Privileging a condition beyond the present (with its contradictions and inconsistencies), the dreamer seeks to become a ghostly shadow of his current self. Positing a past sense of integral being is, furthermore, reminiscent of pre-natal stasis and as such stands in stark contrast to the change and tension which constitutes the animation of all organic life. In Freud's thinking, the death drive thus supports two fantasies, both grounded in the rhetoric of repetition. On the one hand it entails the desire to return to a more originary inanimate state. On the other hand it veers toward an obliteration of those tensions on which all social existence is predicated. In the psychic life of the individual these tensions are most prominently figured as the struggle between the reality principle (curtailing narcissistic enjoyment) and the pleasure principle (aimed at sustaining this self-satisfaction).

Seminal for Freud's speculations on the death drive, which (as a third position) subverts both the reality and the pleasure principle, was, in turn, the observation that patients, suffering from traumatic neurosis, compulsively returned in fantasy to a traumatic situation in an endeavor to master it retrospectively. The work of fantasy did not, in these cases, seek an avoidance of unpleasure but rather its repetition, retrieving from the past certain experiences that allegedly contained no satisfaction. This discovery led Freud to make his claim for the existence of a drive more »primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle« and independent of it.⁹ Compelled to rethink his definition of instincts in line with repetition compulsion, Freud came to see in them an urge to restore an earlier state of things which the individual had been obliged to abandon, whether in order to

9 Sigmund Freud: Beyond the Pleasure Principle [1920]. In: Idem: The Standard Edition. Vol. XVIII. London 1955, p. 23.

sustain narcissistic pleasure or to abide by the laws of the reality principle. In that this meant admitting to the conservative nature of all living substances, this conceptual reformulation stood to contradict his claim that psychic processes are regulated by a will to sustain life as this requires change and progress. Factoring into his thinking about repetition compulsion the fact of mortality, Freud nevertheless became convinced that instincts sought to return to the initial state from which they had departed by taking familiar *as well as* new paths: »If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything living dies for *internal* reasons – becomes inorganic once again – then we shall be compelled to say that »the aim of all life is death« and looking backwards, that »inanimate things existed before living ones.«¹⁰

If the work of fantasy is found to be accompanied by a conservative instinct that strives to return to a prior inorganic state, then the idea of invulnerability, so fundamental to it, takes on a new spin. The pleasure principle, which, as an agent of wish-fulfillment, fantasy unequivocally supports, simply devises »ever more complicated detours before reaching its aim of death.«¹¹ To trust, in fantasy, in one's immunity against danger, avoids all short-circuiting of the normal processes of sustaining life by deferring death. In Freud's later writings, the struggle between Eros (life instinct) and Thanatos (death instinct) is key: »One group of instinct rushes forward so as to reach the final aim of life as swiftly as possible, but when a particular stage in the advance has been reached, the other group jerks back to a certain point to make a fresh start and so prolong the journey.«¹² Two competing fantasies thus prove to regulate psychic life, both predicated on repetition. By veering back toward the inorganic state before life, the death drive aims at an absence of tension. This repetition sustains the fantasy of restoring the wholeness before the processes of differentiation set in which regulate the development of the psychic life of each individual. Yet the erotic drive also has recourse to repetition, namely when it retrieves a past traumatic experience so that, by working it through, it can be cast off and replaced with something new. The first form of repetition strives to return to a tensionless state beyond life so as to put an end to all repetition, while the second returns to and repeats a previous situation or person in order, by virtue of this doubling, to sheds the affect connected with it.

In other words, if the preservation of life is predicated on balancing pleasure and discomfort, fantasy working under the auspices of the death drive imagines a state in which the tension between these two has once more been obliterated. Yet a form of death is also at issue in the repetition compulsion whose aim is not a return to a tensionless state *per se* but rather the obliteration of a particular contention as part of a cycle of transformations. The renewal which a process of working through affords also requires a death of sorts. It makes use of repetition as a moment of transition rather than as a move beyond all tensions. A radical subversion of fixed categories thus proves to be inherent in Freud's notion of the death drive. To preserve life against death, the self, which comes into being after an initial expe-

10 Ibid., p. 38.

11 Ibid., p. 39.

12 Ibid., p. 41.

rience of division from the maternal body (qua primordial loss), must continually struggle against reaching its end prematurely. Like skin, earlier selves must be shed or transformed to make way for a version of the self more apt to deal with an ever changing present. In that the preservation of life is thus predicated on a steady process of substitutions, recalling but also supplanting past selves, death, though the vanishing point of life, also proves to be its sustaining force. As Barbara Johnson notes, »there is something else involved that puts in question the very separability of the pleasure principle and the reality principle, something that continuously generates effects that can be explained by neither.« If Freud speculatively calls this something death drive, she adds »this death instinct is to be understood as what ceaselessly escapes the mastery of understanding and the logic of binary opposition by exhibiting some »other« logic one can neither totally comprehend nor exclude.«¹³

My claim is that, by refiguring Wagnerian elements, each of the three films chosen for my crossmapping brings this »other logic« on screen, troubling any simple opposition between wish fulfillment and a move beyond the pleasure principle. At issue in each case is how popular cinema appropriates the affinity both Wagner and Freud have for a conception of fantasy work as articulating an urge to short-circuit life's movement toward death. While Freud ultimately binds all desire, whether sexual, aggressive or melancholic, to a desire for death, specific to Wagner is a scene of atonement through death which comes to be negotiated over a heroine's willingness to sacrifice herself. Yet, as Slavoj Žižek astutely notes, fantasy does not simply realize a desire in a hallucinatory way, rather it »constitutes our desire, provides its co-ordinates; that is, it literally »teaches us how to desire.«¹⁴ The fantasy of lethal love beyond the symbolic rules of the ordinary in *Tristan and Isolde*, the fantasy of redeeming a mariner doomed to eternal life in *Fliegende Holländer*, the fantasy of pardon through atonement in *Tannhäuser* all offer concrete scenes that allow Wagner's heroes and heroines to articulate their desire as a narrative of fated love.

Along with the work of compensation and the repetition compulsion subtending the death drive, a third aspect of fantasy needs, thus, to be taken into account. According to Žižek, desire is shown to emerge »when drive gets caught in the cobweb of Law/prohibition, such that »fantasy is the narrative of a primordial loss, since it stages the process of this renunciation, the emergence of the Law.« By negotiating the curtailments the reality principle poses on pleasure, fantasy proves to be »the very screen that separates desire from drive: it tells the story which allows the subject to (mis-)perceive the void around which drive circulates as the primordial loss constitutive of desire.«¹⁵ In the case of Wagner and his cinematic reappropriations, the scene fantasy constructs is one which relegates the *jouissance* we are deprived of somewhere else; in a state beyond the struggle between the pleasure principle and the discontent imposed on narcissism by the laws of ordinary reality. Yet if the world of fiction – be it opera's libretto or cinema's screenplay – is the site where fantasy is deployed so as to articulate and regulate the antagonism between

13 Barbara Johnson: *A World of Difference*. Baltimore 1987, p. 13.

14 Slavoj Žižek: *The Plague of Fantasies*. London/New York 1997, p. 7.

15 Ibid., p. 32.

intimate desires and public demands, asking how Hollywood refigures this struggle through Freud's notion of the death drive also entails looking at how these films deconstruct the opposition between a desire for self-expenditure and the life sustaining instinct, between redemption through death and recuperation through transformation. It means drawing attention to the way they trouble a difference which in Wagner's texts was never stable to begin with.

Isolde's *Liebestod*

In many Hollywood productions of the 1940s and 50s the citation of Wagner's *Liebestod* supports a narrative in which an ecstatic embrace of death articulates the desire to move beyond the ordinary with its diurnal obligations and curtailments. In Jean Negulesco's *Humoresque* (1946), one of the critically most discussed examples, the hysteric socialite Helen Wright (Joan Crawford) commits suicide to the strains of this melody, walking into the ocean below her beach house on Long Island. Initially the music comes from a radio broadcast of her lover, the violinist Paul Boray (John Garfield), performing a version of Isolde's final aria, then, as she moves further along the beach and is thus unable to hear the radio transmission, it transforms into an extra-diegetic soundtrack. As Marcia J. Citron notes, »one can almost interpret the music-image interaction as a complex dialogue between music and Helen's emotions,« as if these were composing the continuation of the music, attributing to Wagner's melody a »psycho-diegetic« function.¹⁶

In order to underline the transfiguration of his hero as he moves into a state of supreme erotic ecstasy, Hitchcock, in the peripeteia of *Vertigo*, makes use of Bernhard Herrmann's brief citation of the *Liebestod* motif in precisely this manner. Having re-discovered in Judy (Kim Novak) a woman who uncannily resembles Madeleine – his former beloved whom he believes he was unable to prevent from jumping off a church tower – Scottie (James Stewart) has forced upon her a lethal make-over. Unaware that he has been misused by his friend Gavin Elster in a scheme to kill his wife, and thus oblivious to the fact that both women are, in fact, the same, Scottie makes Judy over to resemble the dead woman, forcing her once more to wear her elegant gray costume, dye her hair blond and pin it up into a bun. Judy initially resists changing back completely into the Madeleine Elster she had previously impersonated, insisting on a margin of difference. When she returns to her lover, waiting for her in her hotel room, her hair is still open. Scottie, however, can only be satisfied with a perfect replica, obliterating (in line with the death drive's reduction of all tension) all difference between model and copy. He sends her to the bathroom to fix the last imperfection. Wagner's *Liebestod* cadence sets in as Scottie is impatiently waiting for Judy to reappear, finding its first musical acme as she passes over the threshold, and, cast in green light, slowly walks toward him in the guise of a dead woman returned from the grave. Along the lines invoked by

16 Marcia J. Citron: »Soll ich lauschen?«: Love-Death in Humoresque. In: Joe/Gilman, Wagner & Cinema (footnote 1), p. 175/176.

Isolde in her final aria, they transcend death in the long embrace that follows. The commonplace room, scene of this magical transformation, disappears and as a rear projection we see once more the stable in front of a Spanish mission, where Scottie held Madeleine in his arms just before she ran from him (allegedly to commit suicide when, in fact, Elster throws his murdered wife off the tower instead).

Once more, Herrmann's score re-iterates the rising cadence of the *Liebestod* motif, using it as a psycho-diegetic indicator not only of Scottie's *jouissance* but also Hitchcock's significant refiguration of the libretto. Scottie is in the position of Wagner's heroine, flooded with waves of desire. Like Isolde, asking »Hör ich nur diese Weise, die so wundervoll und leise [...] in mich dringet«, he alone seems to hear Bernhard Herrmann's citation of this song, while Judy is fully engrossed in their kiss. Scottie is also the only one to notice the phantasmagoric change in scenery as the camera, panning around the couple in a 360° angle, cinematically re-enacts the swelling waves of musical bliss in which Isolde imagines herself to be drowning: »ertrinken, versinken – unbewußt – höchste Lust.« While the libretto leaves open whether, in sinking gently onto Tristan's body, Isolde is fusing with him in death or, by virtue of extreme identification, simulating his demise, Hitchcock's *mise en scène* deconstructs the opposition between actuality and psychical reality on which this uncertainty is based. While the camera revolves around the couple, engulfed in their lethal embrace, Judy (recalling Tristan's corpse) is presented as an inanimate body, energetically propped up by Scottie's arms. They are, like Wagner's *Nachtgeweihte*, in a world beyond the ordinary (*Welten entronnen*), yet our astonishment feeds on the necrophilia this fantasy is predicated on.¹⁷ The »höchste Lust« Scottie sinks into, unconscious, is one explicitly shown to draw life from Judy. What he desires is to take possession of death by virtue of an embodiment of a woman resurrected from death.

While *Vertigo*'s re-figuration of a *Liebestod* contingent on hallucinatory vision ultimately hinges on this gender cross-over, it initially reduplicates the positions of the libretto. Let us recall that Isolde is able to captivate Tristan (on the ship forcibly taking her to his master King Marke) because she has herself been tricked by Brangäne's exchange of magic potions. At the end of act 1 both she and Tristan are arrested in a shared gaze – »von Schauer erfaßt [...] in höchster Aufregung.« Re-enacting this moment of romantic recognition, *Vertigo* also destabilizes the difference between death wish and *Liebesglut* on which the success of Brangäne's substitution is predicated. When Scottie meets Madeleine for the first time in Bernie's, the *mise en scène* underscores that at no point during the sequence can he actually see her. At first he gazes at her from a distance, then, as she approaches the bar where he is sitting, he turns away, only to catch her reflection in the mirror next to the exit. Accompanying Elster, who, having engaged Scottie to spy on her has told him to come to the restaurant, she is self-consciously performing for his eyes alone. Put another way, in contrast to Wagner's libretto, he is bewitched, she is not.

17 As Hitchcock explains: »To put it plainly, the man wants to go to bed with a woman who's dead; he is indulging in a form of necrophilia«; see François Truffaut: *Hitchcock*. Revised ed. New York 1983, p. 244.

Furthermore, in Hitchcock's refiguration, Elster, in contrast to King Marke, is the one masterminding the hallucination; he is thus also in the position of Brangäne. Because he needs Scottie to attest before court to the fact that his wife committed suicide, he has set Judy up to impersonate a death driven Madeleine Elster who in fact doesn't exist, so that with her fatal allure she might bewitch Scottie.

Like Tristan, Scottie falls in love owing to a deceitful trick («tückische List»), while Madeleine only pretends to be in unison with this supreme joy of love («höchste Liebeslust»). She, too, desires death, though not Isolde's drive to revenge her husband but rather, as an accessory to murder, the death of Elster's wife. And like Isolde (who faints when discovering Brangäne's sleight of hand), she knows that the sudden change from hate to love is the result of a magic potion: in *Vertigo* the cobweb of fantasies revolving around Madeleine's obsession with death which Elster feeds Scottie to capture his desire. The seminal transformation the film plays through is based on the fact that the double vision Isolde only has in the first act, straddling revenge and *Liebesglut*, is maintained throughout the film narrative. Madeleine sustains the conflict between giving in to the fantasy of a deluded man and knowing the consequences this will have. In contrast to Isolde, she remains doubled throughout; split between a death driven Madeleine devised by Elster and Judy impersonating her. The ironic distance Hitchcock thus introduces into the *Liebestod* fantasy imposes upon us a double vision as well. Even as we sympathize with her helplessness at being drawn into the lethal fantasy of another, we are awed at Scottie's insistence (and therein he is a repetition of Wagner's *Nachtgeweihte*) on not relinquishing his desire, whatever the consequences.

Scottie's *Liebesglut* fantasy, as in the libretto, also serves as a psychic compensation. Like the injured Tristan, whose battle wounds Isolde heals, Scottie is a vulnerable hero. Overcome by vertigo while chasing a criminal over the roof tops of San Francisco, he had inadvertently caused the death of his partner who was trying to protect him. Falling in love proves to be a vertiginous repetition compulsion meant to redeem him from the guilt he feels regarding this earlier traumatic scene by escaping into a world beyond all diurnal obligations. The fact that this will result in two further deaths uncovers the toxic side-effects of psychic substitutions. The outings of Hitchcock's lovers around San Francisco recall the mutual rapture of Wagner's *Nachtgeweihte* in the garden in front of Isolde's window, and his consistent use of rear projection, drawing attention to the artificiality of the background, signals that they are moving in a fantasy world not reality. Cinematically foregrounded is thus a point implicit in Wagner's libretto. The desire which the *Liebestod* fantasy provides coordinates for is predicated on a willingness to be duped by the illusion of satisfied desire. While Isolde faints upon discovering Brangäne's replacement, Tristan recodes the ruse that exchanges death for love, calling out: »O Wonne voller Tücke, O truggeweihtes Glück!« The persistence with which Scottie lives out his romantic fantasy, drawing Madeleine with him into a hallucinatory world outside reality, anticipates the destructive effect which losing this illusion will have. At the same time, the fantasy is so overpowering that Judy is increasingly unable to distinguish between her impersonation of a suicidal woman and her love for the man she is duping.

As in Wagner's libretto, the first stage in the *Liebestod* fantasy that has propelled the two transgressive loves outside the laws of diurnal reality comes to an end with the re-appearance of the figure of paternal authority. Like King Marke, who interrupts the *Nachtgeweihte* at the height of their nocturnal bliss in act 2, Elster intervenes in the passionate embrace in the stable in front of the Spanish mission, which Scottie will re-imagine in Judy's hotel room. Seeing his signal from the top of the church tower, his partner in crime breaks away from her lover, insisting: »it's too late, it's not fair, it wasn't suppose to happen this way, it shouldn't have happened.« Still split between the murder scheme and her passion, Madeleine leads Scottie up the stairs of the tower, certain that his vertigo will prevent him from reaching the top where Elster is waiting with the corpse of his wife. The damage caused by the re-introduction of the reality principle into their *Liebeslust*, even if in the form a criminal act, also brings with it the repetition of psychic injury, comparable to the wound Melor's sword inflicts again on Tristan's body at the end of act 2. Forced to witness the fatal fall of another for which he is once more inadvertently responsible, Scottie falls into a state of melancholia from which only the repetition of the fantasy of *Liebesglut* he enjoyed with Madeline can offer a viable escape. Yet because the re-enactment seeks to retrieve a passion whose point of departure and whose aim was death (the dead policeman and Elster's dead wife), the second fantasy Scottie embarks on repeats rather than transcends death.

When Scottie unexpectedly meets Judy again, a second *Liebestod* fantasy sets in, bringing both aspects of repetition compulsion into play. At this point the gender cross-over so seminal to Hitchcock's refiguration of the libretto sets in. Traumatized by his vulnerability, Scottie seeks to transcend the death he caused by retrieving a relation that brought satisfaction in the past which, as the rear projections signaled, was a fantasy to begin with. What *Vertigo* underlines is that this drive to repeat a past scene is predicated on undoing the difference between recovery and destruction. The death Scottie transcends, as he moves toward the scene in which Isolde's *Liebestod* is explicitly cited, is at the expense of his beloved. Judy, in turn, allows herself once more to be drawn into his lethal desire, now herself recalling the wounded Tristan who floats to Isolde's coast in the backstory of Wagner's libretto. Initially willing to play the part of a suicidal woman who never existed, she now copies her own impersonation of this specter. The moment she walks across the threshold as a repetition of her former self, fully ceding to Scottie's lethal desire, her life-sustaining pleasure transforms into a death drive. Comparable to Tristan, who tears away his bandages in the final act in defiance of being cured, Judy chooses to wear the necklace that Scottie knows belonged to Madeleine. By thus unconsciously disclosing to him the ruse, she, too, defies survival, unless life means sustaining their lethal love.

Both are unable to escape from repetition compulsion not despite the work of fantasy but because of it. Compelled to go back into the past one last time, Scottie forces Madeleine to return with him to the tower, hoping that a re-enactment of the first scene of loss will provide a cathartic cure. This time he can get to the top and there, next to the church bell, he repeats the scene that took place in the

stable below. Locking her once more in his embrace, he is now the one to say, »it's too late. There's no bringing her back,« while she once more opens her eyes during their kiss, as though expecting again a sign from a third party. Taking from Wagner the dramaturgic logic of tragedy that transforms accident into fate, a dark figure does emerge from below and, and as she did in response to Elster's signal during the scene in the stable, Judy once more takes flight. Only this time to escape Scottie's embrace means falling from the tower.

Restaging Wagner's *Liebestod* through Freud's conception of the death drive, *Vertigo* foregrounds the circular argument. To retrieve a prior scene of fantasy whose result was the loss of love means re-enacting this loss. If Elster gave life to this lethal fantasy, the nun, who emerges as an embodiment of the reality principle, brings it to an end, repeating the past scene by breaking the illusion. »I heard voices,« she explains. Then, at the sight of Judy's fall, she adds »God have mercy,« while Scottie moves to the edge of the tower, his arms imitating the posture of the corpse below. In his transfiguration, bliss and despair can no longer be distinguished. Working through two prior traumatic scenes leaves him hovering between life and death, reality and fantasy, standing and falling: looking at Judy's corpse as it repeats both Elster's wife and the policeman. Where the figure of paternal authority in Wagner is fallible, *Vertigo* refigures him as transgressive, illustrating that the *Liebestod* he orchestrates is not pitted against the reality principle but an expression of it. At the same time, Scottie can be framed because the fantasy Madeleine embodies for him provides co-ordinates for his own necrophilic desire.

Vertigo puts on display how a desire to be released from a past that haunts the present transforms into being consumed by this haunting. This recalls Tristan and Isolde, who are consumed by a scene from the past, in which his gaze caused her to forego the revenge she had intended, hoping that by curing him he will disappear and, as she confesses to Brangäne in act I, »mit dem Blick mich nicht mehr beschwere!« The fact that Hitchcock's citation of Isolde's *Liebestod* in Judy's hotel room places Scottie in the position of Wagner's heroine is significant in drawing attention to something else left implicit in the libretto. What was neatly severed when a love potion replaced a death potion is shown to be mutually implicated. Not just is a love beyond the constraints of the law predicated on returning to a prior state of deanimation. In Scottie's version of *Liebestod*, forcing Judy to copy a dead woman is both a form of *Welten-Entronnenheit* and revenge. Scottie gets what Wagner's Isolde initially wanted; the *Liebesglut* was only a detour. He discloses the duplicity inherent in Isolde's final aria, sung over the dead body of Tristan.

As of Wagner's lovers, so too of Hitchcock's one can say: Their *Liebeslust* was a form of inflicting death, not, however, with the sword of the person who betrayed her lover, and in a manner that shows not him but fate to be responsible. The bliss of Wagner's final tableau is given a correction under the auspices of the reality principle, whose voice brought about this collateral damage. As we watch the survivors emotional agitation, we, too, are in awe, but the »Rührung und Entrücktheit« which the libretto dictates to the audience is exchanged for an appeal to us to take note of the consequence of not ceding one's desire. So unlike

in tone to the ludic excess of the closing scene of *Hi Diddle Diddle*, this inclusion of ironic distance into our cinematic enjoyment is, however, also the signature of Hollywood's intervention.

The *Flying Dutchman's* portrait

At the beginning of Albert Lewin's *Pandora and the Flying Dutchman*, set in a coastal village of Spain in 1931, the voice-over narrator Geoffrey Fielding, a British archeologist, explains that he just stumbled upon a curious manuscript, written in hand in 17th century Dutch. It purports to be the actual confession of the legendary flying Dutchman. That night, a strange yacht is found moored in the harbor, drawing the film's eponymous heroine, Pandora Reynolds (Ava Gardner) under its spell. The glamorous night club singer from Indiana is deeply dissatisfied with her life and thus recklessly toys with the emotions of others. One man has already killed himself out of love for her, another, Stephen Cameron, pushes the prized race car bearing her name into the ocean so as to prove his devotion. Because of this she accepts his marriage proposal, and yet, from the moment she notices the lights of the foreign yacht, her desire lies elsewhere. Stephen was the one to first recall the legend of a cursed man, coming on shore every seven years to live for six months among mortals in the hope of finding a woman who loves him enough to die for him. And it is this legend which will serve as the coordinate for her as yet undefined desire. That very evening she goes to the beach, casts off her clothes and swims naked to the yacht.

Surprised to find no crew on board, she looks for something to wrap around her bare body, and, removing a piece of sailcloth from one of the windows, notices a man with his back to her, standing in front of a canvas, painting. Once she has entered his cabin and the mysterious stranger has turned around to face her, their shared gaze signals a deep mutual recognition. After returning from the dressing room, where he told her she could find a bathrobe, she walks up to the portrait, only to discover that by some extraordinary coincidence she could have posed for it. Hendrick van der Zee (James Mason) replies that, in fact, he has been painting a picture of the legendary Pandora. Even more surprised to find not only her face but also her name in this portrait, Lewin's heroine gives voice to the point that connects the film to Wagner's libretto. »It's not me as I am at all, but it's what I'd like to be,« she explains. By representing a fantasy of perfection, the painted face allows her to imagine a future self. Asking him why she isn't like that, Hendrick explicitly references Freud's theory of fantasy work. Discontent, he suggests, appeases itself by fury and destruction. How perfectly he has hit the mark is shown when she, angry that he should have discovered how deeply unfulfilled she is, defaces the portrait. Hendrick, unfazed by this action, retaliates by claiming that she has added the element of chance necessary for him to perfect his work. With a few strokes he changes the appearance of the face, and, as the camera returns to the portrait, we see that he has covered it with a white oval matrix.

Pandora can now claim with certainty that this face is not hers, yet it is precisely the split between the portrait and the living woman she has violently provoked that opens up the fantasy space where she can embody the narrative of feminine sacrifice he needs for his redemption. Once more their eyes meet before the voices of Stephen and Geoffrey, who have come with a boat to fetch Pandora, interrupt their tacit understanding. It is useful to recall the analogous scene in *Der Fliegende Holländer*, in which Senta, waiting for her father to return, is lost in the fantasy inspired by the portrait of the pale, legendary mariner. The ballad she sings provides the coordinates for her desire as well. Once the stranger who has followed her father on shore crosses her threshold, the wish she has been formulating in response to this painted image will come to be fulfilled: »Wann wirst du, bleicher Seemann, es finden? Beter zum Himmel, dass bald ein Weib Treue ihm halt!« Indeed, he is a phantasmatic realization of her dream to escape the confines of domesticity. When they gaze upon each other for the first time, they recognize a shared desire. Because of the ballad, offering its commentary on the fascinating portrait, he is long familiar to Senta. She can accept his demand because she has already been interpellated by the portrait. Even before the mariner appeared, she had already proclaimed: »Ich sei's, die dich durch ihre Treu' erlöse!«

In Lewin's cinematic version, a portrait also inspires his heroine to open herself up to an existence beyond the ordinary, in a radical gesture that splices together self-expenditure with self-determination. The seminal difference, of course, consists in the fact that the interpellation comes from a portrait of herself. The film makes the narcissism explicit that Wagner's libretto implies. If Senta projects her domestic discontent onto the image of a wan mariner's cursed existence, recognizing herself in the image of a stranger, Pandora is faced with an image of what she could realize, recognizing herself in the image a stranger has made of her. What the film also takes from the libretto is the logic of a love at first sight that lets Senta utter a cry of astonishment when the Dutchman walks over her threshold, standing »wie festgebannt [...], ohne ihr Auge vom Holländer abzuwenden.«¹⁸

The minute the dark-clad man at the easel turns toward her, Pandora also has a sudden intimation that their meeting is not a coincidence. Life suddenly seems to be defined by an external law of necessity which fully corresponds to an internal one. Having been chosen for each other, they can do nothing other than accept this bond. The film's explicit debt to Freud is that while in Wagner's libretto the portrait and the ballad have prepared Senta for her fated encounter with the wan mariner, in the film's script this involves a moment of psychic externalization. Seeing Hendrick next to a portrait of how she would like to be, brings an intimate knowledge that Pandora had long been carrying within herself to light. Though the death which the legend prescribes means something different for each – in his case the redemption from a curse, in hers a release from her dissatisfaction – they share the desire this fantasy regulates.

18 See Mladen Dolar: *At First Sight. Sic I. Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*. Edited by Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek. Durham 1996, p. 129–153.

In another sense the gender cross-over renders visible a point raised by Wagner's libretto. Although we ultimately discover that Hendrick's portrait of Pandora is based on that of the wife whom, three centuries ago, he murdered because he thought she was unfaithful, it also foregrounds a doubling of the woman on whom all redemption depends. While Senta is, from the start, ready to relinquish her role as Erik's bride, Pandora only gradually sheds the persona of the reckless *femme fatale*. During a nocturnal meeting with Hendrick, she reflects on this transformation, explaining, »it's as if everything that happened to me before I met you didn't happen to me but someone else.« Indeed, the script explicitly recasts the legend along the lines of Freud's repetition compulsion anticipated by Wagner. Pandora not only explains that she feels she has known him before and, having met him, has again become the person she once was. The film also offers the backstory which illustrates in a flashback how this encounter retrieves the traumatic scene of murder for which he has been punished with eternal immortality, such that by virtue of repetition he may finally find closure in death.

As in *Vertigo*, the heroine embodies a dead woman returned from beyond the grave, and yet, what the film takes from Wagner's libretto is that this American Pandora isn't simply fulfilling the script someone else has designed for her. The two moments of difference the film includes foreground the fact that in her willingness to share Hendrick's death fantasy Pandora is also making a self-determined choice to free herself of the ordinary. By having the narrative revolve around the portrait of the heroine, not the hero, at issue is not only the fact that she must give her life but that he must also accept this gift. During the same nocturnal beach scene, she admits »I'd die for you without the least hesitation,« and he responds in kind: »I'd give up my salvation.« Lewin thus gestures toward a possibility the Wagnerian libretto merely suggests, namely that of the hero relinquishing his demand for another's sacrifice. While the opera's eponymous hero mistrusts Senta until she actually commits her act of suicide, Hendrick at this point of the narrative turns from Pandora, hoping she will decide in favor of a marriage to Stephen. The point of including this dramaturgic twist is not, however, to undermine the force of tragedy but rather to underscore that at issue is the heroine's agency. Once Geoffrey, the archeologist, has given her his translation of the mariner's confession, Pandora finally has the commentary she requires to fulfill the fantasy that her portrait raised; she now has the text of the ballad long familiar to Senta. Though predetermined, the choice of death she makes is shown to be her own conscious decision.

The dramatic resolution is staged as repetition with a difference. Once more Pandora appears in Hendrick's cabin wrapped in a piece of sailcloth, and, having again put on his bathrobe, she once more notices the portrait. To indicate that the entire narrative was merely a detour toward resolving their first encounter (itself a repetition of a historically earlier moment), he has restored her face. Together with the portrait of his lost wife which Hendrick had originally used as the model for his painting, we are given a double portrait of Ava Gardner. The miniature is actually a photograph of this star in 17th century costume, augmenting her painted depiction on the canvas. The film recasts their love at first sight as a story about the remar-

riage of a couple, separated for centuries, meeting again. Their final embrace recalls Wagner's *Liebestod* in that it is predicated on their shared belief that their restored love will transcend death. Where ordinary life was imperfect, they are now under a spell outside time, unending. Yet Lewin's cinematic reversion includes an acknowledgement of the separateness of the other. Just before the yacht is destroyed by the storm that has been brewing, the fated lovers find the words to explain themselves to each other. Hendrick can now admit that, after her confession on the nocturnal beach, he turned from her because he discovered that he loved her too much to demand her death. Only now that she has returned, basing her choice on his written confession, can he accept her gift of self-sacrifice.

While *Pandora and the Flying Dutchman* offers its own specifically cinematic spin on the economy of death inscribed in fantasy, this can nevertheless be seen as analogous to the phantasmagoria with which Wagner's libretto ends. There the survivors partake in a shared hallucination which fulfills Erik's dream. After Senta has leapt into the ocean and the Dutch ship has sunk, they see the fated couple reunited far off on the horizon, »beide in verklärter Gestalt; er hält sie umschlungen.« If this phantasmagoric double portrait is cinema *avant la lettre*, Lewin refigures it by including a narrative frame to his version of the legend. The film, as already mentioned, sets in with Geoffrey in his study, noticing that fishermen have brought two corpses to shore. Once he has arrived on the beach, the camera moves into a close up of the two corpses, showing only their hands entwined and Omar Khayyam's *Rubaiyat*, opened on the page with the motto for the film: »The moving finger writes, and, having writ, moves on: nor all thy piety nor wit shall lure it back to cancel half a line. Nor all thy tears wash out a word of it.«

At the end of the film, the narrative returns to Geoffrey's studio. The archeologist, having kept the book open on the same page, looks at it once more before offering his restorative closure. Speaking in a voice-over directly to us, he insists that »the book came to me from the other side with a message not of death but life.« The film ends with the camera once more moving into a close up of this commemoration of the eternal life of poetic inscription. The story of Pandora and Hendrick, having been inserted as a flashback into this narrative frame, brings to the screen an extended version of the libretto's concluding phantom image of a couple ecstatically embracing. If, on the film's diegesis, the eponymous couple returns to the inorganic state of death before life, on the extra-diegetic level, under the aegis of aesthetic refiguration, they return to a life beyond ordinary space and time recast into cinematic images.

The *Pilgrim's* song of pardon

With *The Lady Eve* (1941), we return, once more, to *Tannhäuser*, even while the resolution of Preston Sturges' comedy of remarriage is predicated on a reconception of Wagner's notion of forgiveness. The point of connection is a scene which splices together two separate moments from the libretto. Together with his newlywed wife,

Lady Eve (Barbara Stanwyck), the rich but socially awkward Charles Pike (Henry Fonda) is speeding through the night in a Pullman train. Sitting next to him on their sleeping berth, the bride suddenly begins to laugh. The situation, she explains, seems »so derivative,« reminding her »of that other time« when, at the age of sixteen, she eloped with a stable boy called Angus. While storm and lightning rage outside, Charles, who has grown sullen, paces up and down the cabin, then finally sits down again. Accompanied on the soundtrack by the melody of the *Pilgrims' Chorus*, he begins to lecture his wife: »If one thing distinguishes man from beast it is the ability to understand, and understanding, forgive. Surely the qualities of mercy, understanding and sweet forgiveness.« Eve, at this point, interrupts to ask him »sweet what?« so that he is compelled to repeat the moral concept at issue. Ruefully admitting his gratitude for her frankness, he suggests they forget the whole affair, and she proceeds to embrace him, confessing that she fell in love with him because, from the moment they met, she knew she could trust and confide in him.

The psycho-diegetic inclusion of Wagner's melody which continues to resound in the background to indicate a shared scene of repentance and forgiveness is, of course, deeply ironic because we know that Eve is really a con-artist named Jean, who has devised this false confession to punish her deluded husband on their wedding night. Slyly she proceeds to whisper into his ear, »I wonder if now would be the time to tell you about Hermann?« Charles abruptly retracts from her arms, asking in anger »Who was Hermann?« The *Pilgrims' Chorus* breaks off and the camera moves to a sign outside the train, declaring »Pull in your head. We're coming to a tunnel.«¹⁹ What follows is a long list of the names of men Eve purports to have had sex with, casting herself as a rapacious American Venus in a scenario we know to be driven by vengeance.

She had fallen in love with Charles a few months earlier on an ocean liner returning to New York from South America on which she, together with her father, were operating as card sharks. Although he, too, had been struck by a deep sense of familiarity, he had dropped her immediately upon discovering her actual profession. To pay him back for not having allowed her to explain herself, she had made use of a different confidence game. Impersonating as the British aristocrat, Lady Eve, she had made him fall in love with her again, though, like Hitchcock's Scottie, he seemed oblivious to the fact that she was the same dame. During this wedding night she now raises the specter of excessive feminine transgressions so as to make the ordinary forgiveness he had previously denied her impossible. To signal that she has exhausted her fury, the tumultuous music on the soundtrack finally slows down, the train comes to a halt, and Charles, still in his pajamas, opens the door of their Pullman car, throws his suitcase out into the dark night, then exits himself, only to slip in the mud outside and land on his back.

19 While the tunnel is a clear reference to the sexual act being interrupted by this conversation, the fact that the name which sets off the list of lovers in Eve's tall tale of illicit eroticism should be Hermann is one of many coded references in the film to the political moment the film emerged, gesturing as it does to Hermann (Wilhelm) Göring, founder of the Gestapo. As in *Hi Diddle Diddle*, the choice of *Tannhäuser* serves as an oblique comment on Nazi totalitarianism.

On the diegetic level of the film, the scene recalls Tannhäuser in act 1, bored with the life of pure pleasure the Venusberg offers him, yearning to flee her kingdom and return to the world he left behind. Angered at his disobedience, Venus throws him out and, like Charles, he lands on his back as she notes: »Auf der Schwelle, sieh da! Ausgestreckt liegt er nun, dort, wo Freude einst ihm geflossen.« As scornful as the duped husband in *Lady Eve*, he retorts, »Der heut von dir scheidet, o Göttin, der kehret nie zu dir zurück.« By citing the *Pilgrims' Chorus*, the score (which, as in *Vertigo* takes on a psycho-diegetic function), in turn, references the message proclaimed in the third act: »Der Gnade Heil ist dem Büßer beschieden, er geht einst ein in der Seligen Frieden.« In Wagner's libretto, the sinner had gone to Rome, hoping that his repentance would be crowned by blessing, only to find that the Church will not pardon his sexual transgression. For Tannhäuser, the word redemption is now merely »der Verheissung lügnische[r] Klang« and, certain that he has lost all chances of salvation, he wants to return to the Venusberg. The approach of a funeral procession, however, stops him. Upon hearing the mourners call out the name of his first love, Elisabeth, he turns from Lady Venus, who, with Tannhäuser again lost to her, disappears from the scene.

His salvation is thus staged as the demise of a sensual love deemed sinful, such that, imploring the dead woman to pray for him before God, he, too, can die peacefully. If, by privileging the spiritual purity Elisabeth represents, Tannhäuser is able to shield himself against the magic of the seductive Eve, the demise of all three is also conceived as a rebirth. As Tannhäuser dies, »Morgenrot erhellt vollends die Szene.« As Eva Rieger notes, the opera is typically structured around a gendered binary opposition that allows Tannhäuser to live out his passion and actively seek happiness, while »Elisabeth is not permitted to live out her emotions, and her short upheaval ends with selfless love and a longing for death.«²⁰ Sturges' appropriation of the *Pilgrims' Chorus*, in turn, may not be quite as playful as in *Hi Diddle Diddle*, but it, too, serves to undermine the pathos of Wagner's redemption fantasy, drawing particular attention to the instability of the gendered opposition between sinful sexuality and spiritual purity on which it is predicated. While both *Tannhäuser* and *Lady Eve* set out to fathom the true essence of love, the film's premise is that the sensuality of Venus (for which the Wagnerian hero is cursed) and the purity of Elisabeth (whose self-sacrifice redeems him) are inextricably intertwined.

As Jean, openly admitting to being an adventuress, had warned Charles on the ocean liner just before he gave her the photographs incriminating her as a card shark, he should be worried about falling in love with a girl in the middle of an ocean, because »the best ones aren't as good as you probably think they are and the bad ones aren't as bad. Not nearly as bad.« By obliquely admitting to having a sinful side, Jean raises a point implicit in Wagner's libretto, when, in response to Tannhäuser's praise of sensual bliss, Elisabeth finds herself »im Widerstreit mit Hingessenheit und ganzer Befremdung.« She admits that his lascivious song touches something in her and, for this reason, speaks out in favor of the singer even while

admonishing that »ein furchtbar mächt'ger Zauber« has captivated him. By using Barbara Stanwyck to play both Jean and Lady Eve, the film, in turn, explicitly deconstructs a conception of feminine desire that neatly severs the sensual from the merciful by underlining the moral sincerity of the con-woman. At the same time, it also ascribes to its hero not only Tannhäuser's willingness to be captivated by feminine allure but also the moral rigidity of the Landgraf. Charles falls prey to Lady Eve's charms precisely because his strict sense of propriety would not permit Jean to explain herself. As such he combines in his person what Wagner's libretto is at pains to keep separate, namely a refusal to acknowledge the beloved on her own terms and a proclivity to be duped by her ruse.

Because, in *Lady Eve*, Elisabeth and Venus prove to be the »same dame,« the notion of forgiveness negotiated over feminine self-sacrifice takes on a different tone. In the first part of the film, Charles had proposed to Jean, explaining that from the moment he met her he felt that they have always been known to each other and he always loved her. When she returns to him in the guise of the alluring Lady Eve, she draws him into her fabricated charm because she recalls the woman he has foolishly repudiated, playing back this fantasy to him. Now she is the one to admit that he is intimately familiar to her, even as we are called upon to note the duplicity. Where in Wagner's libretto, Tannhäuser's recollection of his former bliss with Elisabeth is what prompts him to leave the realm of feminine seduction, in the film the fact that the sophisticated Lady reminds him of the con-woman is what allows Charles to fall for her impersonation. Put another way, the woman whom he initially feels he always loves proves to be a con-woman even though her love for him is sincere, while the moral purity he projects onto the sophisticated Eve is disclosed by herself to be nothing other than his wish-projection. In contrast to Wagner's libretto, in which the self-sacrifice of Elisabeth, »rein und engelgleich« cancels out Venus' dangerous charm, Sturges script insists that the pure cannot be severed from the impure; not only because they are mutually implicated but because they are part of the duplicity which, as Jean had admitted from the start, is part and parcel of the adventure of love.

If in the opera as well as the film, the salvation of the hero hinges on discovering the essence of true love embodied in the return to a first woman, the question both also revolve around is what it means to reach such a state of pardon. Indeed, at issue in both is the fantasy of returning to a prior state of bliss which might undo the guilt that came to call forth a desire for restitution in the first place. In his discussion of tragedy, Stanley Cavell has recourse to both aspects of repetition compulsion theorized by Freud when he notes that »the reason consequences furiously hunt us down is not merely that we are half blind, and unfortunate, but that we go on doing the thing that produced these consequences in the first place.« To avert tragedy, he adds, what is needed »is not rebirth, or salvation, but the courage, or plain prudence, to see and to stop.«²¹ Lady Eve refigures the tragic pathos of *Tannhäuser*, by using repetition not to transcend all tension in death, but rather

²⁰ See Rieger, Wagner's Influence (footnote 4), p. 145.

²¹ See Stanley Cavell: The Avoidance of Love. A Reading of *King Lear*. In: *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare*. Cambridge 1987, p. 81

to find redemption beyond the tragic self-sacrifice of the woman. Like Elisabeth, to whom Tannhäuser returns from the Venusberg (act I) and from Rome (act III), Jean marks the point of departure and conclusion of Charles' pilgrimage. As at the beginning so, too, at the end of *The Lady Eve*, Charles is on an ocean liner, only now he is fleeing New York, and, once again he walks into the dining room with a book in hand. Jean is again sitting at a table near the door with her father, only this time, upon seeing her, Charles immediately takes her in his arms. Overjoyed he explains, »If you knew what it meant to find you again.«

Without further delay he drags her to her cabin and in front of the door they once more embrace. She asks him fondly: »Why did we have to go through all this nonsense?« It remains unclear whether he has seen through the trick or whether he still refuses to comprehend. If, to Wagner's chorus, he had given a speech about understanding and sweet forgiveness, he is now the one to say, »Will you forgive me,« and she replies, »the question is, can you forgive me.« And while at the moment of his moral failure, when he would not let Jean explain herself, Charles had pretended to have seen through her duplicity, he now refuses any complete disclosure. »I don't want to understand,« he hastily adds, »I don't want to know. Whatever it is, keep it to yourself.« We can be certain that they will work it out because that minimum of difference between the two lovers, acknowledging the separateness of each, is preserved. As Jean closes the door behind her, both already beyond the threshold inside the dark cabin, they confess to each other that they are married without explaining to whom.

The point of her false confession on the train was to show him that »sweet forgiveness« must be something two people share. The one demanding pardon is never only bad and the one meant to forgive never only good. That for which, on their wedding night, she was meant to ask pardon was not his to ask. That for which he needed to ask pardon he could not yet know. The repetition with which the film concludes recalls and undoes both the false confession and the abrupt breaking off of their conversation that night. Because, by virtue of repetition, they can now redeem each other, no one needs to die. *The Lady Eve* thus transforms the double death in Wagner's libretto into a scene of recognition in which death comes to be transcended in the sense that both lovers relinquish that part of their former selves that produced their tragic separation in the first place. Charles can now embrace the con-artist in his wife, Jean has satisfied her desire for revenge.

In contrast to the other texts discussed, redemption here entails escaping not life but the loop of lethal repetition. Where in Wagner's libretto, Elisabeth's self-sacrifice makes Venus disappear, in the film's script we find the two women conflate into one body. And where Elisabeth's death puts an end to the magic of Venus, Jean's re-appearance undoes her sadistic impersonation as Eve such that both lovers can accept a margin of delusion as part of what it means to be in love. Being human is no longer measured by one's ability to confess or forgive, because, like the clear distinction between moral purity and sin on which the Wagnerian fantasy scene was predicated, these terms are mutually implicated. In that both protagonists pardon and are pardoned by each other, guilt and innocence belong to both.

Redemption emerges as a willingness to forgive without determining its object because it is conceived as an ongoing process. But if this pardon is, as in Wagner *Tannhäuser*, a form of rebirth, it anticipates a dawn we don't see. We remain outside the door that slowly closes on us, screening out the lovers' consummation of their interrupted wedding night.

All three films discussed take from the operas they cite Wagner's fascination with redemption conceived through Freud's discussion of repetition as an articulation of the death drive. All three can be read as case histories in psychic disturbances that achieve a cure of sorts through self-sacrifice, pitting against the harsh laws of the ordinary a desire beyond pleasure. Yet if, in all three films, the heroine emerges as the lynchpin for these fantasy scenarios of restitution through death, her passivity comes to be troubled. Though the stake in the hero's salvation, she proves to be driven by a desire of her own. In *Vertigo*, Judy's fate is shown to be orchestrated by others and yet she is a willing player in this refiguration of Wagner's *Liebestod*. In *Pandora and the Flying Dutchman*, self-sacrifice is the fate the heroine explicitly chooses herself, while in *The Lady Eve*, Jean is the one to orchestrate accidental encounters that make love inevitable. The resolution of all three is contingent on resolving a doubling of the heroine which stands in for her split between her desire and the demands love imposes on her. While, in *Vertigo*, Judy's imitation of her impersonation of Madeleine sadistically conflates both women in death, Pandora's embrace of death allows her to successfully shed a former self. *The Lady Eve*, in turn, offers a third position in that, as Jean and the Lady she pretended to be come once more to be fused, a margin of difference is preserved such that she both is and isn't »the same dame.« If, in the first two cases, the heroines accept their lover's fatal desire, in the last, the heroine orchestrates a rebirth.

Even while Hollywood productively refigures Wagner, it thus offers a diagnosis of the transfixed rapture in which his works culminate. Reconceived through the lens of Freud, the films discussed draw the grand pathos of his redemption fantasies back into the ordinary, disclosing the illusion on which they are based: In *Vertigo* the necrophilia of Hitchcock's hero Scottie is shown to be the dark kernel of his sublime hallucination of Madeleine. In *Pandora and the Flying Dutchman* the destructive side of passion is shown to have produced those lethal consequences which both Hendrick and Pandora ultimately face. In *The Lady Eve* the cruel blindness toward the other at the heart of Charles sanctimonious attitude is humbled to point a way out of tragedy.

At issue in all three is a secularization of Wagner's mythic terms, undermining their ideological force, even if not as aggressively playful as in *Hi Diddle Diddle*. If this foregrounds Wagner's investment in the tragic, it does so to either trouble a notion of redemption based on sacrifice or to reconceive salvation such that the repetition compulsion on which it is predicated might be rerouted and death not transcended but averted. Asking how Wagner reappears in Hollywood allows us to focus on a passage not beyond the world but back into the ordinary, in the form of aesthetic figurations that openly declare themselves to be illusions: animated figures on the screen, produced by projected light. And if all fantasy work, according

to Freud is predicated on the return to some prior knowledge, Wagner returns to the screen with a difference, richly strange and familiar at the same time.

Stefan Börnchen · Georg Mein · Elisabeth Strowick (Hg.)

JENSEITS VON BAYREUTH

RICHARD WAGNER HEUTE

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