

## Representing a Representation of the Unrepresentable

### Staging – and Filming – *Moses und Aron*

#### I.

*Moses und Aron* may justly be considered the most theological of operas, not least in terms of its conception of music and its powers of representation. There is a good case to be made that its very incompleteness is as much a theological statement of impossibility, at least as the libretto for the third act stands in either of Schönberg's versions, as of biographical fact. Indeed, as so often with Schönberg, there tends to be a dialectical relationship between the two explanations; the one certainly does not exclude the other and may even be held to necessitate the other. For Theodor W. Adorno's negative dialectics are perhaps nowhere more clearly, yet, in a typical further dialectical twist, inscrutably, inscribed than in Schönberg's scores.<sup>1</sup>

The effort to reconcile and/or to resolve, whether in the positive Hegelian terms Adorno rejected, or in the musical terms Adorno and Schönberg rejected, nevertheless remained a strong impulse for Schönberg, just as it had for his most important musico-dramatic predecessor, Wagner. However, whereas Wagner could – just about – still bring off the impression at least of such reconciliation, for Schönberg, it had, tragically, yet ultimately productively, become impossible. Such was modernity; it could be railed against and, in this case, it certainly was. Yet to pretend that a difficulty was not there, however, was never Schönberg's way; to conjure something away in a Straussian phantasmagoria was the path of a *Marzipanmeister* (in Schönberg's savage accusation against the Aron to his Moses).<sup>2</sup> One might think back at least as early as *Gurre-Lieder*, the time taken to complete the work, and the

1 Theodor W. Adorno: *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt 2000).

2 Fragment quoted in Jean Christensen: The Spiritual and the Material in Schönberg's Thinking, in *Music and Letters* 65/4 (October 1984), 337–344, 341.

strangely unconvincing yet, partly for that reason, strangely touching reassertion of the chorus in its final number, “*Seht die Sonne!*,” that reassertion already both negated and prepared by the Speaker’s *Pierrot*-leaning “*Herr Gänsefuß*” excursion. Vividness of description, musical as well as verbal, seemed almost to obviate the need for scenic representation; and yet, Schönberg could not help but be drawn back to such representation, even when his material suggested its impossibility.

## II.

Every note in *Moses* is derived from one single, initial row, just as, in theological terms, everything ultimately must come from God, the only Creator. Law and creation are two sides of the same coin. It seems that the astonishing variety of expression conjured up, from the hushed tones of the Burning Bush to the depravity of the Golden Calf Orgy, can only come forth from such strict organisation. That organisation is also, however held at a mystical remove; the row is not employed thematically. Like God Himself, it is ever present in its ordering capacity but rarely heard “whole.” It is not until the second scene that the row is presented in linear fashion in a single voice, and that is upon Aron’s appearance, suggesting something idolatrous about thematic understanding or employment of a row.<sup>3</sup>

The opera opens with a terrifying nameless presence in the Burning Bush. Schönberg comes perilously close to representing God, at least musically, although the abstract “Voice” – in fact, a chorus and six solo voices – does not appear on stage. Indeed, for that brief introduction prior to the curtain’s rise, we hear pure song, set to the vowel “O” rather than to any human language. Music, it seems, may permit a divine presence that could never be staged, yet we must always be on our guard against a false divinity. And the difficult, perhaps impossible, question remains: on what grounds might we judge? From the moment of human involvement, signalled by Moses’ spoken voice, an unbridgeable chasm has opened up: the human tragicomedy, one might say. With but one exception, Moses only speaks. And, for God to be represented, for the Idea of God to be interpreted, would turn them into a god and idea unworthy of representation or interpretation. Likewise, were God swayed by sacrifice, as Aron considers possible, then that would render Him a particular,

3 For a discussion of such themes in greater detail, see Mark Berry: Arnold Schoenberg’s “Biblical Way”: From “Die Jakobsleiter” to “Moses und Aron,” in *Music and Letters*, 89/1 (February 2008), 84–108; idem: *After Wagner: Histories of Modernist*

*Music Drama from Parsifal to Nono* (Woodbridge 2014), 64–98. Here, I initially reprise my earlier description and analysis of the work as necessary to my argument, albeit integrated into an expanded discussion of the particular concerns of this essay.

tribal god. The orgy around the Golden Calf therefore *must* end in the tragedy of destruction, suicide, and ultimate nihilistic exhaustion. By contrast, God is unimaginable in the literal sense of it being impossible to make Him into an image. Were the Israelites to succeed in seeing Him, He would no longer be their God.

Yet Moses' inability to express his thought is as much a cause for despair as the straying of his people. He does not even appear always to be right: a crucial point, too often missed in wholesale identification of Moses with his artistic creator as well as his Divine Creator. Aron points out to him that the Tables of the Law are "*images also, just part of the whole idea*" (II/5, mm. 1056–1057)<sup>4</sup>; to acquiesce to representation is but to "*yield before necessity*" (II/5, mm. 1070–1071). Likewise, Aron is quite right to argue that the pillars of cloud and fire, which Moses, in a startling transformation of the Biblical narrative, condemns as idolatrous images ("*Götzenbilder*" [II/5, m. 1091]), are actually sent by God. As Adorno pointed out, the only way in which the Mosaic prohibition can be dramatised is through changes in the text. That would not usually matter, but "*where the subject matter dons the authority of a sacred text, it verges on heresy.*"<sup>5</sup> Moses and Aron, then, share elements of truth, if not equally; they likewise share elements of heresy, again not equally.

Accusation of heresy reminds us of Schönberg's Christian as well as Jewish heritage. Never one to make life easy for himself, the young man from Vienna's Second District had converted in 1898 not, like Mahler, to Roman Catholicism, but to Lutheranism. The great Protestant and specifically Lutheran iconoclastic controversy over the Second, allegedly explicatory, Commandment, involving Luther's claim that it applied only to pagans, not to Christians, and its subsequent ejection from the list of ten, is of importance here. The following passage from Exodus makes uncomfortable reading for a Christian artist:

*Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me.* (Exodus 20:4–5)

Schönberg was no Calvinist, but there is at least something of a Reformed, would-be pre-Augustinian fear of antinomianism here. Had Luther, let alone Roman Catholics, made life too easy for themselves, and might Schönberg right

4 All references in parentheses refer to: Arnold Schönberg: *Moses und Aron. Oper in drei Akten* (I resp. II). Edited by Christian Martin Schmidt (Mainz, Wien 1977 resp. 1978) (Sämtliche Werke. Abteilung

III: Bühnenwerke. Reihe A, Band 8, Teil 1 resp. 2). Unless otherwise noted, all translations from German sources are mine.

5 Theodor W. Adorno: Sacred Fragment: Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*, in *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*. Translated by Rodney Livingstone (London, New York 1992), 225–248, 230.

that wrong? Calvin, after all, had drawn a lesser antithesis than Luther between Moses and Christ, old law and new.

Reformation controversy over iconoclasm had fed into the classical German concept of self-cultivation or *Bildung*, the very word incorporating *Bild*, or “image;” but again had that been too easy a path, and might Judaism now answer back? *Bildung* had been the basis upon which Jewish emancipation had proceeded, connecting individual (Kantian) autonomy and the universality of humanism, just as the political Right increasingly saw community as based upon *völkisch* ties of blood rather than cosmopolitan ties of *Bildung*. Schönberg had seen such conflict growing in Mahler’s – and Hitler’s – Vienna; he saw it increase further after 1918 until whatever unity had once been there bowed under the strain. Perhaps something stronger than Lessing’s *Nathan der Weise* was now required; indeed, subsequent events would show unmistakably that Lessing was not enough.<sup>6</sup>

For the First World War and its aftermath had proved a cultural as well as a political watershed in European cultural and intellectual history; it was not only Austria-Hungary that had been dissolved. Dreams of universal brotherhood were not necessarily quite dead; socialist movements strongly argued otherwise. They would nevertheless never quite sound the same again. Similarly, Thomas Mann’s Adrian Leverkühn might not yet have renounced Beethoven and Schiller, but he stood some way on the diabolical path to doing so; so was Germany, as both Mann and Schönberg, whatever their other disagreements, would see. That had been made abundantly clear to Schönberg in the notorious Mattsee incident of 1921. He and his family had been expelled from the village in which they had a holiday retreat, now held by its inhabitants to be restricted to Aryans. Thereafter, Schönberg’s assertion of Jewish identity and his astonishingly prescient conviction that the Jews would soon be confronted by unprecedented acts of violence intensified, as witnessed by a celebrated letter to Kandinsky, provoked by reports of anti-Semitism at the Bauhaus:

*I ask: Why do people say that the Jews are like what their black-marketeers are like? Do people also say that the Aryans are like their worst elements? Why is an Aryan judged by Goethe, Schopenhauer and so forth? Why don't people say the Jews are like Mahler, Altenberg, Schönberg and many others? [...]*

6 For an alternative reading, see Julie Brown’s account of Schönberg’s 1934 “Every Young Jew,” which she describes as “a private, seemingly confessional statement in which he movingly documents how his experiences as a young Jew in Vienna determined not only his conversion to Christianity, but also his wider efforts to

assimilate. Again and again he employs words freighted with both Christian and Wagnerian significance – ‘redeem’ and ‘redemption’ (erlösen, Erlösung) – to describe what he presents elsewhere in the same essay as an essentially secular process of assimilation.” Julie Brown: *Schoenberg and Redemption* (Cambridge 2014), 78.

*You will call it a regrettable individual case if I too am affected by the results of the antisemitic movement. But why do people not see the bad Jew as a regrettable individual case, instead of as what's typical?*<sup>7</sup>

If the Jews were not actually part of European “civilisation” and/or “culture,” then there was all the more reason for them to look to themselves and to their own history and culture – and to their own, jealous God. *Völkisch* nationalism could work both ways – and, of course, did in the foundation and progress of Zionism. It was, after all, not long after the exchange and break with Kandinsky that Schönberg seems first to have become truly interested in Zionism; in March 1924, he was given a series of Zionist pamphlets by a Mödling neighbour, Rudolf Seiden, who also asked him to contribute a statement to a volume of *Pro-Zion!*<sup>8</sup>

If, as political and cultural history alike increasingly suggested, humanism had quite run out of steam, bulldozed by newer and yet older human drives that could not simply be wished away by talk of a Kantian cosmopolis, that may well have seemed to Schönberg, drawing upon his Lutheran and Jewish heritages, to be aesthetically bound up with the hubris of musical and especially Romantic, representation. Music had traditionally been considered imageless and therefore exempt from the *Bilderverbot*; Romantic and post-Romantic dreams of artistic unity rendered this exemption more problematical. Such was not the first and would not be the last instance of tension between the Brahmsian and the Wagnerian in Schönberg’s work. His conception of what was forbidden is expressed in very broad terms in the text (his own) to the first stanza of a 1925 chorus, op. 27, no. 2, *Du sollst nicht, du mußt*:

*Thou shalt not fashion thyself an image!  
For an image limits,  
demarcates, grasps,  
what should remain undemarcated and unrepresented.*<sup>9</sup>

On the one hand, then, the Romantic conception of the autonomous artwork is taken to such an extreme in Schönberg’s opera that it can hardly bear the strain. On the other, the work’s status as a work about itself, about the impossibility, even blasphemy, of music drama in this case, and perhaps in any case, not only shines through, but deals the concept of the artwork, the very concept to which Schönberg clung so strenuously, a savage blow. Moses laments, “*O word, thou word that I lack!*” (II/5, mm. 1133–1136) yet he does not

7 Arnold Schönberg to Wassily Kandinsky, May 4, 1923 (Carbon copy at the Library of Congress, Washington D. C., Music Division [Arnold Schoenberg Collection] | ASCC ID 832); published in Arnold Schoenberg: *Letters*. Edited by Erwin

Stein, translated by Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (New York 1965), 89–93, 89–90.

8 See Julie Brown: *Schoenberg and Redemption*, see fn. 6, 82.

9 Arnold Schönberg: Vier Stücke für gemischten Chor. Opus 27, in idem: *Chorwerke I*. Edited by Tadeusz Okuljar (Mainz, Wien 1980), 37–64, 42 (Sämtliche Werke. Abteilung V: Chorwerke. Reihe A, Band 18).

sing his lament. Unlike, say, Dido, in Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, he does not bid us remember him but forget his fate. His fate is more important than that, more important than him – or so he would have us believe. It is song rather than words that in one sense at least Moses lacks. Such is the Cassandra-like price paid for truth; no one will or even can listen.

As for the mellifluous, seductive Aron, to whom the Israelites will listen, to whose *bel canto* strains the “typical” operagoer is more likely warmly to respond, he betrays the truth. Aron represents, interprets, performs it; he therefore betrays its form and its content. Lazy, we might say Aronic, substitution of images for the Mosaic truth of the Idea must be rejected. Schönberg had made this quite clear in Kandinsky's 1912 *Blaue Reiter* almanac: “The assumption that a piece of music must summon up images of one sort or another, and that if these are absent the piece of music has not been understood or is worthless, is as widespread as only the false and banal can be.”<sup>10</sup>

### III.

And yet, as with the later Wagner, whose naturalistic stage aesthetic lagged behind his musico-dramatic vision, Schönberg seems to have been loath to consider the implications for staging of his works. We are on less firm ground than, say, with Bayreuth in 1876, although even there we know less than one might expect concerning Wagner's staging of the first *Ring des Nibelungen*. Schönberg, of course, never saw *Moses* staged, and only the “Dance around the Golden Calf” was performed during his lifetime, just ten days before his death, at Darmstadt, ill health preventing his attendance. He did, however, write not only the libretto but detailed stage directions.

The fully staged premiere took place in 1957, in Zurich under Hans Rosbaud. Erwin Stein wrote in quite a lengthy account of that performance and the work itself that it “*deeply impressed the audience by its sheer dramatic force. The music is full to the brim with telling invention, even though it is too rich and strange to be fully appreciated at a first hearing.*”<sup>11</sup> He stressed the work's “unimaginable” qualities:

*The disparity between an idea and its realization, which Schoenberg symbolizes in the figures of Moses and Aron, penetrates into every field of human affairs. Things are never as they were expected. Any work of art is an inadequate image of the artist's original conception.*<sup>12</sup>

10 Arnold Schönberg: Das Verhältnis zum Text (1912) (ASSV 3.1.1.4.), English version published as *The Relationship to the Text*, in *Style and Idea. Selected Writings of Arnold*

*Schoenberg*. Edited by Leonard Stein with translations by Leo Black (London 1975), 141–145, 141.

11 Erwin Stein: *Moses und Aron*, in *Opera* 8/8 (August 1957), 485–489, 485.

12 *Ibidem*, 486.

That is an interesting point to bear in mind when Stein comes in his review to consider staging. “*Schoenberg’s vision of the Dance before the Golden Calf;*” he writes, “*is on a huge scale. His visual and musical imagination are combined in the creation of an over-life-size picture of men’s joys and horrors.*”<sup>13</sup> Stein recalled Schönberg, in a letter, having “*expressed apprehension about how producers and choreographers would cope with his stage directions. They are, in fact, very elaborate, and offer a fascinating challenge to a producer’s imagination.*”<sup>14</sup> Stein’s use of the word “*imagination*” twice here seems far from coincidental or lazy, especially given his earlier discussion of an “*unimaginable God*” – “*because any attempt at any image distorts the idea*”<sup>15</sup> – and so on. He points, at least partly in knowing fashion, although doubtless treading carefully given the genuine filial duty he must have felt, to the discrepancy between what he referred to as “*the artist’s original conception*”<sup>16</sup> and the more mundane, even secular task of the stage director, who might perhaps try to “*imagine*” but whose status as “*creator*” would certainly have been denied by Schönberg and indeed by many since, suspicious of or downright hostile to the increasingly important role played by what they contend should be a merely “*re-creative*” artist.

What are Schönberg’s stage directions, then, about which the composer himself, directing an imaginary performance for an imaginary theatre, had expressed apprehension? Listing them all would demonstrate something of their excess, but a taste must here suffice. “*During Aron’s last speech,*” we read, “*processions of laden camels, asses, horses, as well as porters, and wagons come on stage from different directions. They bring offerings of gold, grain, skins of wine and oil, animals, and the like. At many places in the foreground and background, they are unloaded and piled up.*” (II/3, m. 320) Noah’s Ark seems resurrected, as once again, “*processions of all manner of animals pass by.*” (ibidem) The mere musical demands of the work begin almost to seem eminently realisable. “*Simultaneously, preparations for slaughter are to be seen at many places.*” (ibidem) Not just a few: many. And so it continues. Before we have had time to contemplate what we have been seeing and still are seeing, “*butchers enter with large knives and with wild leaps dance around the animals.*” (II/3, m. 395) Soon they will slaughter them and throw them to the crowd, which will devour them raw. Quite how, having slain a youth, tribal leaders manage to mount their horses and gallop off unobtrusively is anyone’s guess. Many a would-be master criminal might become more interested in Schönberg’s work, were the composer to give a clue as to the meaning of a direction that seems less dialectical than paradoxical, or even nonsensical. It does not seem to be a joke, however

13 Ibidem, 488.

15 Ibidem, 486.

14 Ibidem.

16 Ibidem.

Teutonically dialectical the humour. Surrealism is hardly Schönberg's thing; nor is this a wry view upon modern bourgeois mores, as in *Von heute auf morgen*. This is undoubtedly a question that matters, one senses, and this is hardly a place for silliness. Irony? Perhaps, but that is surely more Strauss's realm: the world of *Ariadne auf Naxos* or *Capriccio*.

Moreover, it is not simply the detail of the directions but their scale that seem almost wilfully self-defeating. Stein reported, with apparent irony, although it is difficult to be sure,

*In Zurich there was not enough space for displaying the processions of camels, wagons and asses which are supposed to bring offerings to the idol. These tasks as well as the slaughter of cattle and the roasting of meat, which are part of the offerings, will tax the resources of any opera house.*<sup>17</sup>

In his final sentence, he referred to “a stage that was too small for fully realizing the *Dance before the Golden Calf*.”<sup>18</sup> Was there any such stage, however, in existence, or which could even be semi-realistically envisaged, even if, in the theatre of the mind, it might be “*imagined*”?

Did Schönberg perhaps have the ultra-realist medium of cinema in the representation of his imagination? The Cecil B. DeMille epic Hollywood treatment? After all, the first version of *The Ten Commandments*, glorious Technicolor and all, had been released in 1923. For many of us, that has become almost a byword of absurd, naturalistic effect, if not quite the “*effect without cause*” of which Wagner accused Meyerbeer then perhaps effect with swiftly diminishing returns incommensurate to the unimaginable – in any sense we care to understand the word – cause.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps that is what Schönberg had in mind; it is impossible to know, and that may be just as well.

#### IV.

With that in mind, I should like to consider the filmed version of the opera, made in 1973 by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, albeit with an avowedly Brechtian aesthetic and Marxist revolutionary standpoint. Straub and Huillet – or Straub-Huillet, as they were often known – spoke of their intention of producing “*a film not only on the relationship of the dialectic to the people, but a film on the people*.”<sup>20</sup> That, however, was not necessarily how everyone understood it, again suggesting severe limits to the creative and indeed technological

17 Ibidem, 488.

18 Ibidem, 489.

19 Richard Wagner: *Oper und Drama*. Edited by Klaus Kropfingher (Stuttgart 1994), 101.

20 Sebastian Schadhauer et al.: Entretien avec Jean-Marie Straub et Danièle Huillet, in *Cahiers du cinéma* 223 (1970), 57. Although the film was shot in 1973, Straub-Huillet's conception dated back to the late 1950s.

powers of the imagination. Nevertheless, this film of *Moses*, intentionally and otherwise, has much to tell us about representation and the representation of representation.

It opens, strikingly, with a page from a 1523 Lutheran Bible, the following passage visually demarcated and read out:

*And when Moses saw that the people were naked; (for Aaron had made them naked unto their shame among their enemies:) then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, Who is on the LORD's side? let him come unto me. And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together unto him. And he said unto them, Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, Put every man his sword by his side, and go in and out from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbour. And the children of Levi did according to the word of Moses: and there fell of the people that day about three thousand men. (Exodus 32:25–28)*

That is in one sense an obvious choice, retelling Moses' reaction to the goings on around the Golden Calf; yet, in another sense, it is puzzling, for it is not really what we will see – or hear – in *Moses und Aron*, which moves, seemingly inevitably with a dramatic compulsion of its own, to Schönberg's highly "operatic," indeed inescapably "representational" final confrontation between the two brothers. (The symmetry in the filming of the brothers' first encounter – facing each other in the wilderness, their vocal lines and delivery seemingly engaged in a dialogue of the deaf, orchestral "commentary" perhaps apposite, perhaps not – and their last in the film is visually undeniable, but then it might be a perversely unfaithful staging in which it was not.) What might the film-makers mean in presenting such an alternative, or rather in presenting the *Urtext*, albeit in translation? Answering that question must remain in the realm of speculation, but perhaps there is at least a nod to the difficulties of representation, whether with respect to Scripture, Schönberg's text, or more generally. God is reinstated, an alienating presence even in Schönberg's drama: we see God's name or rather title, "HERR(M)" in Gothic capitals; it stands out, and calls us and Schönberg, deviationists all, participants all in our own idolatry, to attention. That holds even if we do not listen or even notice.

Perhaps that is to find meaning where none is intended – intention is, in any course, not all – but it is perhaps of interest to note that, in the Straub-Huillet script, the reader of the "lesson" – think, for instance, of the reading of the Word given in a service in Bach's Thomaskirche, prior to the performance of a cantata – is described simply as "*eine Stimme*" (a voice).<sup>21</sup> The Voice, with the definite article, at the Burning Bush, will be the next voice heard. (Titles will

21 *Moses und Aron. Beschreibung und Texte*, in *Filmkritik* 19/5–6 (1975), 203–252, 203.

follow, but without sound.) Thus the film will both conform to Schönberg's theological abstraction, yet also prepare it, even question it, in a way he does not. It moves from the human, albeit anonymous, to the divine, before moving away from the latter.<sup>22</sup> Is God, in Feuerbachian fashion, being prepared as an abstraction from man's essence? At any rate, Schönberg's deviation, heretical or otherwise, his editing of the sacred text and his attempt to represent it, are placed at the forefront of this performance.

The drama proceeds in a fashion whose filming seems intended – and in any case manages – to have us ask questions concerning identity and representation. For some time, we see nothing but Moses, albeit a back view. We never see where the Voice is coming from; nor, of course, should we expect to do so in the theatre. When eventually our view broadens, we see the landscape around and especially above Moses. At first, stones suggest that we might be at the site of an old temple, but it becomes clear that what might have been the remnant of an ancient civilisation – shades perhaps of those statues in *Götterdämmerung* to which the characters vainly direct their desperate exhortations? – is actually mountainous scenery. We are not led necessarily to ask whether the voices are in Moses' head, any more than we should be in the theatre. Nevertheless, heightened by the sweet *and* pungent post-Romanticism of the orchestra under Michael Gielen's revelatory conducting (from his audio recording), woodwind both Mozartian and a little rebarbative, not unlike Schönberg's *Suite*, op. 29, the (almost) necessary realism of film arguably offers us both a strong dramatic sense of the impossibility of representation subsequently to be explored and a questioning of whether the attempt might have been necessary in the first place. Schönberg's dialectic is, according to taste or judgement, extended or disrupted. Brechtian means seem almost to have become (part of) the message.

A film – and not just a filmed stage performance – brings particular issues of its own. The tightness of focus on Moses or Aron might be felt to imply a point of view on the part of whoever is making the decisions. The filmmakers, in a strict sense, of course; but do they imply an identity with someone else, even Someone Else? Who is looking down – and that looking *down* may be significant – upon the characters from above? Who is, in quasi-ritualistic fashion (visual antiphony, perhaps tellingly out of sync with the musical to-and-fro), choosing one or the other, especially when both are declaiming? Or, indeed, when one is being declaimed to and we see him as

22 Following the titles, there is also a dedication, initialled by both film-makers, "Für Holger Meins," himself of course a cinematographer. I shall simply note that

here and leave discussion of the Red Army Faction to another day, lest Schönberg's ghost become too exercised by such political blasphemy.

passive or even uninterested recipient of the other's theological and political claims? Is it God who holds the power of choice? Us (in some relationship or none to the Children of Israel)? Or is the power exercised over communication, so crucial in this of all works, some mysterious thing that puts all of us, even the Divinity, in our respective places?

Such questions make their way into the following scenes, messages cast from one antagonist to the Chorus and then from another, strengthening the sense that they are questions we are intended and, more to the point, should be asking. The contest, the *agon*, emerges in almost Monteverdi-like antiphony, St Mark's forsaken in *Verfremdung* for wilderness deracination. Who will prevail? At any rate, the conflict between Moses and Aron, is greatly sharpened by focus and angle; from that very first scene between them, it has seemed more of a contest and less of a dialogue. In a sense, then, the tragedy of representation is present from the beginning. This is, perhaps, still more of a didactic drama, its outcome decided at the outset, than the work "itself." Brechtian, *Neue Sachlichkeit* – by now, *alte Sachlichkeit*? – distancing is a contributory factor, the static nature not just of this tableau but of many later scenes too heightening the arbitrary, the absolute, one is tempted once again to suggest the Divine, change of focus. Representation is here what someone has decided it to be; do we have any say in the matter? The orchestra again offers heightened Romantic contrast, both intrinsically and contextually. Is music perhaps, irrespective of filmic intent, offering redemption, as in Stefan Herheim's celebrated Bayreuth staging of *Parsifal*?<sup>23</sup> Or is it offering illusory reconciliation, such as the young Boulez found in the unduly conciliatory – to him – late works of Berg?<sup>24</sup>

A static presentation of the Chorus can, it seems, work just as well, at least with this particular framework of heavily stylised realism as the more typical individualised realism of the theatrical productions we shall consider, every member doing his own thing. Perhaps that also holds a clue as to why concert performances can work so well, without falling back upon the old canard that this is more oratorio than opera. The Chorus as a receptive mass is a perfectly valid conception, especially when the *Verfremdungseffekt* is part of the representational strategy. Indeed, one could readily imagine such an approach in an actual Brecht work, for instance a collaboration with Paul Dessau such as *Die Verurteilung des Lukullus* (itself initially a radio-play). Trial and condemnation are, after all, very much part of the game here. Trial in, and by the, public, and the gross injustice that might entail, were far from alien concepts to Schönberg.

23 See Mark Berry: *After Wagner*, see fn. 3, 210–233.

24 See Pierre Boulez: Alban Berg, in idem: *Relevés d'apprenti*. Edited by Paule Thévenin (Paris 1966), 307–325, 323.

All of that serves not only to contrast with but to necessitate the orgiastic excess of the Golden Calf scene. Here, at last, with filmic resources, albeit within the very same arena – so, in a sense, retaining part of the productive restrictions of the theatrical stage – we witness something approximating to Schönberg’s hopelessly unrealistic realism. Hosts of animals can now appear for sacrifice. Adorno and Max Horkheimer had, in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, seen “deception in sacrifice” as the “prototype of Odyssean cunning”<sup>25</sup> and thus of instrumental reason. Human sacrifice, which does not actually appear in the *Odyssey*, certainly does in *Moses und Aron*. Moreover, Adorno, when discussing the *Odyssey*, makes the striking dialectical claim that all human sacrifices, when systematically executed, deceive the god to whom they are made: “they subject him to the primacy of human ends, and dissolve his power.”<sup>26</sup> In the film, dance, Wagnerian “gesture,” plays its tragic, Dionysian role in such dissolution of power; it is one of the most striking visual representations in the film. Such visual representation proceeds analogously, indeed in indissoluble relation to, Schönberg’s musical explosion here: the *Aufhebung* of Meyerbeerian *grand opéra*. Both can only ultimately come about via a path of relative austerity. We cannot predict the outcome from the beginning, yet, once we have reached this scene, and indeed the final, tragic encounter between Moses and Aron, we feel their tragic inevitability. As with Hegel’s dialectic (and theories of evolution), there are very weak, if any, powers of prediction; we understand by looking backwards, by waiting for the owl of Minerva to take flight. Or, in the words of Wagner’s *Opera and Drama*, “No phenomenon can in its essence be fully comprehended until it has arrived at its fullest actuality.”<sup>27</sup>

## V.

This opera’s home, like that of any opera, has nevertheless been on stage, although its first full performance came in the concert hall. In notes made for a 1961 Canadian Broadcasting Corporation radio interview, Hans Rosbaud recalled “a very dramatic moment in my career”:

*One night, perhaps at one o’clock, [...] the telephone rang furiously; the radio station of Hamburg [...] asked me if I could conduct the world premiere of Schoenberg’s Moses und Aron. The regular conductor [Hans Schmidt-Isserstedt] had [had] an accident and could not conduct the performance, for which the radio station had invited many important people [...], among other guests, Mrs Schoenberg and her daughter Nuria [...]*

25 Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Translated by John Cumming (London, New York 1997), 50.

26 Ibidem.

27 Richard Wagner: *Oper und Drama*, see fn. 19, 13.

*I asked, "When will this first performance take place?" And they answered, "Exactly in one week [...] Mr Rosbaud, do come, you must come, you cannot abandon us in this desperate situation!"*<sup>28</sup>

Given that Rosbaud's prior knowledge of work was restricted to the "Dance around the Golden Calf," which he had performed with the Berlin Philharmonic – Furtwängler's orchestra renewing its far from negligible and often overlooked advocacy for the composer – during the 1953 Berliner Festwochen, another variety of impossibility seemed to present itself. However, the premiere, just a week later, has proved a great success, Gertrud Schönberg presenting Rosbaud with Schönberg's own baton as a token of gratitude. In those interview notes, Rosbaud also related that Schönberg had discussed the opera with him during a Berlin conversation early 1930s, recalling the composer's remark: "As I don't see any possibility that someone would perform my *Moses und Aron*, I have not imposed at all any reserve concerning difficulties of execution."<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, the acid musical test had been passed. Its scenic sibling – although here, it is not clear which is Moses and which is Aron, the terms having been less reversed than scrambled – would have to wait.

Doubts concerning the possibility of staging were largely silenced, when three years later, Rosbaud conducted the Zurich performance, directed by Karl Heinz Krahl, and designed by Paul Hafering, as reviewed above by Erwin Stein. It might, however, be argued, that staging, a crucial aspect of representation, rendered musical performance still more difficult. The chorus, for instance, required more than 300 rehearsals to master their parts, now having to be performed from memory.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, a precedent had been set, and a variety of approaches would, from time to time and insofar as the quotidian practices of opera houses would permit, be seen. It lies, sadly, beyond the scope of this essay to give a full or even brief account of performance history since 1957. However, I should like as an instructive example to turn now towards one of the most recent stagings, by Romeo Castellucci.

## VI.

This was the first new production, opening in October 2015, of Stéphane Lissner's intendency at the Paris Opéra, a declaration of intent if ever there were one, indeed an act of theatre in itself. The first act took place in front of and, mostly, behind a white curtain, the characters in white too, although

28 Joan Evans: *Hans Rosbaud. A Bio-Bibliography* (New York etc. 1992), 50 (Bio-bibliographies in music 43). Evans writes that the tape-recorded interview was

an interval feature (September 20, 1961) for a CBC broadcast of Rosbaud's 1954 performance. The interview itself is apparently no longer extant. See *ibidem*, fn. 123.

29 *Ibidem*, 51.

30 *Ibidem*.

Moses was sometimes in black too. Who was he? Or, as the Chorus will ask, “*where is Moses?*” (Interlude) Was he the Moses we know from the Bible? Freud’s putative non-Jewish, Egyptian, Akhenaten-following Moses?<sup>31</sup> An all-purpose founding father, or Lycurgus? A dictator? How mutually exclusive were, or indeed are, those identities? Moses heard the Voice of the opening, prior to language (prior even to the nonsense language of Wagner’s Rhinemaidens, for this is the Almighty Himself) and received his inspiration (as an artist) or his command (as a politico-religious leader) in the clearer light of what we might call day. That followed, it seemed, even if the day proved darker – one of many dialectics at work here – than the all-too-light world of obscurity, which may or may not be day’s negation. The wilderness of the first act, the strange, flock-like behaviour of the Israelites – sheep, of course, whether literal or metaphorical, can be white or black – was an object of dim, perhaps in more than one sense, perception.

Commands God issued via Moses, if indeed Moses had not already interpreted them himself, were unrepresentable, incomprehensible, negatively defined, which is why we might have needed Aron in the first place. Words appeared in front of the curtain. Were they prohibitions? Some of them, doubtless. Others had a status more unclear: just like most of what is written in, say, Leviticus, for most of us today. To begin with, we could “process” the words, even if we could not understand quite why they are there, or how we should act upon them. Eventually, we could take in but a few, if any, so quickly did they come and go: we experienced “information overload.” Something akin to Schönberg’s detailed stage directions had, already, been taken to an unheard-of extreme. Whereas Straub-Huillet, like a jealous Old Testament God, narrowed our possibilities of seeing, here there was simply too much to see. Both representations of Schönberg’s work, it seemed, made a telling point concerning the work in particular and representation in general.

Red seeped in briefly, via the mysterious, mystifying technology – God at work, or the necessary curse of modern communication and its theory? – following upon the initially comprehensible conjuring trick of Aron’s rod. As the Book of Numbers has it, “*And it shall come to pass, that the man’s rod, whom I shall choose, shall blossom.*” (Numbers 17:5) Yet we still had to trust both God, Moses, Aron, and probably their popular reception. Should we? After all, there was surely not a single agent, perhaps with the exception of the all-too-remote Divinity which could not, did not, err or mislead. That included Moses, as the Chorus was not entirely wrong to inform him. Red was blood, Aron told us, and

31 Sigmund Freud: *Moses and Monotheism*.  
Translated by Katherine Jones (New York  
1939).

the technology and – still white – costumes suggested something medical. But was that another conjuring trick? Was it perhaps even the Red Sea, a reminder of Pharaoh and the Egypt in which the crowd might wish to place Prince Moses himself?

Black entered. Or rather re-entered, for it had initially appeared as tape reel from which Moses had initially heard the Voice. Recording in itself raises difficult questions, perhaps still more difficult in this particular work; what is it we hear when we hear, say, Boulez or Gielen conducting *Moses und Aron* at home? Philosophical questions, perhaps unanswerable, yet which we feel cannot go unasked, continued to present themselves. Commandments, as any reader of the Pentateuch might have told us, issued thick and fast, perhaps too thick and fast. The thickness and the fastness confused, captured, even enslaved: tape here was black rather than red. Its sacerdotal quality seemed to be confirmed by its colouristic alliance with the black which increasingly invades the stage and all but Moses in the second act. What sort of alliance, however, was that? A Holy Alliance? A *mésalliance*? The epistemological challenge of *Moses und Aron*? Again, how could we know? Such was above all the question work and production continued to ask.

At that point, the obscuring curtain vanished, drama as more conventionally understood coming to the fore. The work's operatic nature, its stageworthiness seemed, as in the Straub-Huillet film, triumphantly reinstated, even suggesting that Schönberg's dialectics might ultimately prove more positive than Adorno's. Whatever the tar-like liquid might have been to Castellucci's painterly imagination – sometimes paint is just paint, and even oil is just oil – its emergence from and apparent subsidence into, religious marking represented an Adornian negative dialectic it would have been merely wilful to ignore. The totemic object of worship raised further questions of identity and representation. Was it Aron, in fetishistic black, "fetish" both old and new in our understanding? Or was it the (real) bull, apparently having undergone several weeks of dodecaphonic training prior to appearing on stage, and mysteriously disappearing from stage? What was not in question, it seemed, was that this representational object of worship was bound to fail.

And yet, we could not write off – as Moses would, in a fit of anger, the words inscribed upon his tablets – what had happened during Moses' absence. Nor should we have done. Physical collapse suggested a Wizard of Oz, or a new lease of life and death for the Feuerbachian psychology of religion so enthusiastically adopted by Wagner, and which he ambiguously retained even in *Parsifal*.<sup>32</sup> Aron and the people had created this new god. If that is what modern

32 See Mark Berry: *After Wagner*, see fn. 3, 26–63.

politics and communications do, it is what ancient politics and communications did too. The (recorded) word of a one, true God might have triumphed briefly, just as Orpheus might once have tamed whatever and whomever it was he tamed, but the rest will not have gone away. Politics and religion, art too: were they all destined, Beckett-like, to end in failure?

The religious rituals we had seen in the meantime, including something akin to baptism – the River Jordan come early? – *seemed* to have had meaning, but did they perhaps have none at all? Schönberg and Castellucci continued to answer questions with questions. It is difficult not to smile when one sees Schönberg's marking of an "erotic orgy." What would an "unerotic orgy" be? A failure? Almost certainly, but are both perhaps not failures? What, after all, might one count as success? There was nothing of the crowd-pleasingly "erotic" or, alternatively, of its conservative-crowd-repelling alternative, to what we saw on stage; it was restrained, perhaps an acknowledgement of the idolatry of artistic representation. The ritual around the Golden Calf that was not golden and was indeed a real calf seemed almost more akin to something from *Parsifal's* Monsalvat. The excess, the twelve-note Meyerbeerian tendencies of the Orgy were countered both scenically and musico-theologically. Such was a world away from Peter Hall's Covent Garden insistence that "*it was essential to Schoenberg's message that the difficult stage directions [...] should not be intellectualized by stylization.*"<sup>33</sup> As Edward Greenfield had explained in his review of that celebrated, 1965 staging, Hall had believed "*the whole point*" to be "*that reason, represented by Moses, was being pitted against instinct, represented by the crowd's depravity.*"<sup>34</sup> Here, by contrast, instrumental reason proved more all-encompassing, inescapable, and yes, Adornian.

Was Castellucci's representation partial, likewise its interpretation? Of course; yet so, for instance, were the saturation in gold – colour, and the lucre of advertising – of Reto Nickler's fascinating production for the Vienna State Opera production, a single representation, has to be partial. Perhaps, as with the work itself, part of the greatness here lies in failure, in the modernistic fragment. Ours is a fractured, fragmented world, which longs all the more for unity, and might sometimes delude itself into believing it has once again found it. Not for nothing did Harry Kupfer, working on his 1975 Dresden staging of the work, consider Moses' thoughts to stand "*on the boundary of atheism.*"<sup>35</sup> There comes a point in any monotheistic faith when the Divinity is pushed so far away, rendered so forbidding, so remote, as to stand in danger of disappearing completely. Back in Paris, compromise then seemed necessary,

33 Edward Greenfield: Aldeburgh/London Report, in *High Fidelity* 15/9 (September 1965), 164–165, 165.

34 Ibidem.

35 From Kupfer's rehearsal notes, in Matthias Herrmann: *Arnold Schönberg in Dresden* (Dresden 2001), 108.

however complete Moses' victory over Aron might seem. Visions of decidedly un-Sinai like, perhaps Alpine mountains appeared like a kitschy mirage, inviting an acrobatic attempt at scaling we witnessed and still more so the failure and collapse we knew to be forthcoming. Was the tent-like image remaining a hint at the religion to come, at tabernacles and temples from which the instrumental reason and domination would henceforth issue?

We did not, then, know entirely what was going on, and that was surely part, at least, of the point. We could certainly tell that what we were seeing was what the director intended us to see; even when "meaningless," this was not merely arbitrary. Was that subsequent doubt part of the point? And so on, and so forth: we might have continued with such thoughts *ad infinitum*, especially in lieu of the completion of a never-to-be-completed work. If Adorno and Horkheimer, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, charted the domination of instrumental reason after Homer, did Schönberg and Castellucci attempt something similar after Moses? Such might indeed be understood to be part of the meaning of Adorno's *Philosophy of New Music*.

Moreover, to hear so fine a performance of the orchestral music under Philippe Jordan advanced that understanding further. There was Wagnerian chamber music, which yet had more than a little hint of the allegedly more "autonomous" writing of works such as Schönberg's *Serenade*, op. 24, and the *Variations for Orchestra*, op. 31, and even perhaps of Hindemith, certainly of Bachian counterpoint.<sup>36</sup> There were Viennese waltzes, of all degrees of straightness, evoking Mahler, Berg, even Strauss, the *Marzipanmeister*. There was, echoing Gielen in particular, all manner of orchestral colour, especially, although not only, in the Golden Calf Scene; the mandolins (Florentino Calvo and Cécile Duvot) registered more strongly than I could previously recall, evoking not only Schönberg's *Serenade*, but also Mahler, not least his attempt at religious synthesis in the *Eighth Symphony*. And it was the opening of the Adagio to Mahler's (unfinished) *Tenth Symphony* that inevitably came to mind in the closing unison. What should we make of that? A gateway to another musical world? A recognition of the necessity and yet impossibility of further synthesis? The more committed the performance of *Moses*, the more negative the way that both opens up and vanishes before us.

Thomas Johannes Mayer's Moses was stentorian, his stage and vocal presence seemingly one physical and intellectual whole. Tragically flawed, noble yet with all the dangers increasingly apparent of charismatic leadership, shading into dictatorship, we saw and heard on one level a political parable

36 Listen to *Götterdämmerung* from, say, Karajan or Boulez, or look at the score, if in doubt of the preponderance of chamber writing in Wagner as well as Schönberg.

all-too-familiar to Schönberg – and to us too, it was not only Walter Benjamin who warned of the aestheticisation of politics, even at the time.<sup>37</sup> A similar warning was also to be heard from John Graham-Hall's Aron. Aron has been portrayed by tenors of many varieties, including *bel canto* “specialists” – the reality is always more complex – such as Chris Merritt, for Boulez no less, and of course many a *Heldentenor*. A great strength of Graham-Hall's performance was his complexity; Aron emerged more as a chameleon than one often sees – or hears. He could adapt, marshal his resources to the situation. Even at the moment of apparent defeat, a Mime-like obsequiousness or infantilism, immediately following upon Moses' outburst, resolved itself into some of Aron's initial composure, faith, and/or advocacy. The power relationship, then, continually shifted, according to circumstances. Such, after all, is political life.

## VII.

Are we, then, no further forward than when we began? In a sense, no, we are not: a situation familiar from the work itself and from Schönberg's struggle with the third act. Perhaps that should come as no surprise given that final despairing cry of Moses: “*O word, thou word that I lack!*” (II/5, mm. 1133–1136) We need the word, yet cannot have it; even if we could have it, it would not help. Art is both necessary and impossible. Necessity and impossibility inevitably evoke and provoke each other. Almost irrespective of the composer-as-would-be-stage-director's intention, although far from irrespective of Schönberg's more artistically productive religious beliefs, we are left with a recognition of impossibility.

More importantly still, however, we are left with a tacit recognition that the impossibility of over-determination itself reveals a necessary, grudging freedom in staging. Technology such as Schönberg could only have “imagined,” if that, might in some ways come to the rescue. Video, for instance, is now commonplace, perhaps too commonplace in opera staging. Yet, like the cinema itself, it often has the effect of making one long above all for human, if not necessarily livestock, presence. Literalism clearly offers no answer. So-called *Regietheater*, an unsatisfactory term at best, may or may not offer an answer; most likely, there is none. At its best, however, such theatre might offer conceptual possibilities that penetrate more deeply towards Schönberg's Idea.

37 See Ansgar Hillach: The Aesthetics of Politics: Walter Benjamin's “Theories of German Fascism” (translated by Jerold Wikoff and Ulf Zimmermann), in *New German Critique* 17 (Spring 1979), 99–119.