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ARNOLD SCHÖNBERG'S *PIEROT LUNAIRE* AND THE AFTERMATH: FROM JIKKEN KŌBŌ TO BRUCE LABRUCE

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SUMMARY. The history of Pierrot and his reception in various artistic genres covers more than 400 years. From his minor role as a commedia dell'arte figure, Pierrot emancipated himself to become the eccentric main character, asserting himself in the visual arts, in nineteenth-century pantomimes, in musical settings, in film, in ballet and in various genres of popular culture such as manga and anime. To evaluate the two adaptations of Schönberg's *Pierrot lunaire* that are in focus here—the Japanese stage version by Jikken Kōbō (Experimental Workshop, 1955) and the film version by Bruce LaBruce, *Pierrot lunaire: Butch Dandy* (2014)—it is helpful to take a look at the history of their reception. Cultural-historical interdependencies and genre transgressions constantly give rise to new facets of Schönberg's key work composed in 1912, while the question remains as to how far these adaptations serve the work or merely use it for their own purposes.

Keywords: Pierrot lunaire, Schönberg, Jikken Kōbō, Bruce LaBruce, reception

When Schönberg composed and premiered *Pierrot lunaire* in 1912, the figure of Pierrot already had more than 300 years of history behind him. Pierrot's "biography" can be traced in theater, pantomime, poetry, the visual arts, photography and music. In the more than 100 years following the premiere, the medium of film and various genres of popular culture were added, including rock, pop, manga and anime. The subject of Pierrot has been, and continues to be, artistically revisited regularly, with the transgression of geographical, cultural and linguistic boundaries leading to creative redesigns.

The two adaptations of Schönberg's *Pierrot lunaire* mentioned in the title, firstly the production by the Japanese art collective Jikken Kōbō under director Tetsuji Takechi in 1955 and secondly the film version by Bruce LaBruce, entitled *Pierrot lunaire: Butch Dandy*, in 2014, are part of this rich artistic and

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receptive history. Knowledge of some of the most important milestones in Pierrot's reception can be helpful for understanding and evaluating the degree of novelty of these productions. Pierrot's figure can be described as chameleon-like. His origins as "Pedrolino" in the Italian commedia dell'arte were followed by a series of transformations, which were also attributable to various cultural customs in the countries in which the Italian impromptu theater would establish itself. This molding of Pierrot's character at cultural interfaces continued in the later Japanese (and global) reception of Pierrot.

A journey through the history of painting shows how Pierrot changed his face, sometimes within the *oeuvre* of the same artist. While Antoine Watteau portrays Pierrot in *Les Comédiens Italiens* (ca. 1720) as active and surrounded by his fellow actors, in *Pierrot, dit autrefois Le Gilles* (ca. 1718/19) he presents him with slumped shoulders and a depressed expression. Jean-Honoré Fragonard's *Enfant en Pierrot* (ca. 1785) is significant with regard to the social suitability of the Pierrot costume. A boy, probably from a wealthy family, poses in a Pierrot costume. Pierrot is "infantilized," so to speak, made suitable for children and young people, a transformation that we encounter again in pop cultures as well as in the manga and anime genres of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The images by Adolphe Willette in *Pauvre Pierrot*, which are accompanied by explanatory texts, are closely related to the comic strip and Japanese manga. Willette features a Pierrot in a black tailcoat, whom we encounter again in Otto Erich Hartleben's poems and, in a modified form, in Takechi's Jikken Kōbō production and in LaBruce's film.

A brief digression into the history of manga illustrates the cultural ties between Japan and Europe from the opening of the Meiji period onwards. Japanese manga was inspired by caricaturists working in Japan in the nineteenth century. Alongside Charles Wirgman (founder of the satirical newspaper *The Japan Punch* in 1861), Georges Bigot, who made a career in Japan as a young artist and, together with Wirgman, heralded the birth of modern Japanese manga, played a key role (Polak and Cortazzi 3). Despite this, there was also a tradition of illustrated narrations dating back to the Nara period, and the term "manga" in turn goes back to Katsushika Hokusai, who first used the word in 1814 for sketch-like illustrations. The history of Japanese manga up to the Pierrot manga of the twenty-first century, including the science fiction-like *Satsujin piero no shitsumon* (questions about the killer clown), is therefore multifaceted. It is hardly surprising, and interesting in the context of this essay, that the figure of Pierrot can also be found in Bigot's drawings, even together with Mr. Punch in the farewell cartoon for the aforementioned satirical newspaper (Bigot). Another example of cross-cultural inspiration is Aubrey Beardsley's *Pierrot with Mandolin* (1894), a faceless back view of Pierrot that

is stylistically based on Japanese ink drawings. In Ethel Wright's painting entitled *Bonjour, Pierrot!* (1893), the protagonist, sitting on a bench next to his dog, is assigned to a bourgeois or working-class environment. The setting of the Pierrot subject in a bourgeois or working-class milieu, which we find in the successful first silent film adaptations from 1907 onwards (e.g., *L'Enfant prodigue*), but also in LaBruce's film, is already present here.

In 1918, Pablo Picasso painted a sensitive and vulnerable Pierrot. With the emblematic book on the desk and the contrast between light and dark, his Pierrot looks like the portrait of a melancholy poet or scholar, quite unlike his *Pierrot assis* from 1961, a self-satisfied, cheerful Pierrot. The cubist *Pierrot à la guitare* (1919) by Juan Gris appears shadowy, almost like a doppelganger. The cross-fades in the picture can be found again as an artistic device in different *Pierrot lunaire*-films, naturally also in LaBruce's film. Inspired by Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, which fascinated the surrealist painters, the focus is increasingly directed towards Pierrot's inner life and repressed parts of his personality. This new, psychoanalytically oriented perspective was also adopted in the Jikken Kōbō performance in 1955. Notwithstanding all their colorfulness, Yasuo Kuniyoshi's expressionist paintings *Tired Clown* (1946) and *The Clown* (1948) appear melancholy, even somber, in stark contrast to Mira Fujita's pleasing, superficial pop art series of Pierrots (e.g., *Pierrot the Clown*, 1980f.). With the heavily overweight *Pierrot* (2007) by the Colombian Fernando Botero, a social outsider or a victim of a capitalist consumer society is once again brought into the picture.

Pierrot's chameleon-like nature is reflected even more clearly and subtly in the genres of literature, pantomime, silent film and sound film. As in the history of painting referred to above, just a few examples will be picked out, which in turn establish a connection to the aftermath of Schönberg's *Pierrot lunaire*. In Molière's comedy *Dom Juan ou le Festin de Pierre* (1665), Pierrot still leads an existence in a supporting role, which will soon change. Without touching on the milestones in between, we jump to the nineteenth century, which brings a victorious rise in the French pantomime and an eccentric type of Pierrot, embodied by stars such as Jean-Gaspard Deburau and Paul Legrand. Their performances are captured for posterity in the legendary photographs by Nadar, and in addition, the modern appearance that is still associated with Pierrot today was created. In *Pierrot au Sérail. L'Apothéose de Pierrot dans le Paradis de Mahomet* (1855), Gustave Flaubert and Louis Bouilhet take Pierrot on a trip to a seraglio and, after his death, even to Mohammed's paradise. This blending of cultural and religious spheres is a loose anticipation of later adaptations of the Pierrot subject in other cultures.

The pantomime *Pierrot sceptique* (Joris-Karl Huysmans and Léon Hennique, 1881) depicts an arsonist and murderous Pierrot, comparable to Paul Margueritte's *Pierrot assassin de sa femme* (1882) and Jean Richepin's *Pierrot assassin* (1883). The latter pantomime featured Sarah Bernhardt in the leading role as an androgynous Pierrot—a role model for many Pierrots to come. To put it pointedly, the Pierrot texts, especially those of the late nineteenth century in France, are a cabinet of horrors of the human psyche; (almost) every conceivable anomaly and perversion is put on paper or on stage.

In 1890, Pierrot became—similarly to the above-mentioned painting by Ethel Wright—bourgeois, so to speak. The pantomime *L'Enfant Prodigue* (Michel Carré fils, 1890, followed by an adaptation for silent film in 1907) shows the family life of Monsieur and Madame Pierrot and the challenges they face with their wayward son. Pierrot's character becomes more harmless, sunnier, less "lunaire" and more "solaire"—more "normal" at least. The sunny or "solaire" Pierrot characters, who can be found in the later twentieth century and up to the present day not only, but above all, in pop culture (such as the above-mentioned paintings by Mira Fujita), could be considered descendants of the married couple, of Mr. and Mrs. Pierrot.[2] In 1919 we meet Horiguchi Daigaku and his *Gekkō to Pierrot* (*Moonlight and Pierrot*). The Japanese poet and translator was influenced by French symbolism, with this reference closing the circle to the aforementioned significance of intercultural interfaces, and in particular the influence of France on Japanese culture at this time. The leap to the year 2003 is not intended to conceal the extremely intensive reception of Pierrot that took place in between but is due to the necessary limitation in the context of this publication. The 2003 novella *Jūryoku piero (A Pierrot a.k.a. Gravity Clown*) by Kōtaro Isaka was made into a film in 2009 and became very well known. Both the theme and the style of the film make use of a popular aesthetic.

For obvious reasons, this journey through the history of paintings, literature, pantomime, silent film and film, both in European and Japanese cultures, could only show a few selected examples here. If one includes these and other examples that are not mentioned here, Pierrot's many facets become apparent: unhappy lover, unsuccessful actor or poet, *fin de siècle* dandy, bourgeois figure, eccentric, obsessed with the moon, obsessed with eroticism, outcast from society, psychopath, murderer, victim of Columbine's narcissism, tormented by feelings of guilt, suffering from fear of death, among others.

[2] For example, Dan Dediu, Jan Järvlepp and Giorgio Gaslini set a monument to a *Pierrot solaire* in their compositions.

In 1954, Schönberg's *Pierrot lunaire* had its Japanese premiere, with Jikken Kōbō (Experimental Workshop), founded in 1951, as its producer. The art collective was made up of well-known personalities from the fields of painting, composition, poetry, criticism, musical performance, photography and music, including the composer Tōru Takemitsu. In 1955, a stage version of *Pierrot lunaire* was performed, created by a collaboration between Jikken Kōbō and the director Tetsuji Takechi. The performance was in Japanese, and the full title of this stage version was *Pierrot lunaire (tsuki ni tsukareta peiro)*, which means "Pierrot, tired / exhausted of the moon." Takechi stages a psychologically charged love triangle, which is certainly encouraged by the text by Giraud and Hartleben. More idiosyncratic is the focus on Pierrot's repressed sexuality, which can be understood as a reaction to Sigmund Freud's works becoming known in Japan. The playbill let the audience know about the content: "Pierrot suppresses his desire and love for Columbine. Soon, Harlequin appears and tricks Pierrot; being in his element, Harlequin betrays Columbine. Taunted by Harlequin, Pierrot knifes her to death. Yet, Columbine remains alive for eternity within Pierrot himself…." (Tezuka 186).

In Takechi's staging, a Kyōgen performer took on the role of Pierrot, the soprano singer slipped into the role of Columbine and simultaneously took on the speaking voice, and a Nō performer played Harlequin. In contrast to the usual, Columbine took on the main musical role in this production, and the roles of Pierrot and Harlequin were purely pantomime. This extravagant constellation of characters may well remind us of Pierrot's beginnings in the theater, where he was assigned only a supporting role. Conversely, we also encounter the idea of an "upgrading" of Columbine elsewhere, for example in Paul Ernst's *Komödianten- und Spitzbubengeschichten* (1928) and in Michel Tournier's *Pierrot ou les secrets de la nuit* (1989), where Pierrot is named as the main character in the title, but Columbine, in her narcissistic ego addiction, becomes the pivot of the action. Of course, this is not intended to claim any direct influence but merely to give an indication of the different ways in which the Pierrot story can be interpreted.

In connection with the introductory historical outline of the reception of the figure of Pierrot, it should be noted that the idea of theatricalizing Schönberg's *Pierrot lunaire* was not new at the time when Tackechi staged it, nor is it a characteristic of a receptive avant-garde. Immediately after the 1912 premiere there were already a number of scenic performances (including ballet, dance, actors, etc.), which in turn were nothing more than continuations of a tradition associated with the Pierrot subject as early as the nineteenth century. The innovation in Jikken Kōbō's production was therefore not in the

choice of means itself—in fact, the performance was described as "an avant-garde work of dance, or more like a sort of mime-like act choreographed by Takechi Tetsuji" (Tezuka 201)—but in the synthesis with the Nō theater. At first glance, this seems culturally logical. However, it is even more than that: The explicit connection with the Nō theater is artistically logical. If we look at the theatrical art forms of Japan as a whole, the Pierrot subject is closest to the Nō and the associated Kyōgen. There are two striking connections between Nō and Kyōgen and commedia dell'arte. Firstly, Kyōgen means "mad words" or "wild speech"; as a comedic theater form for the entertainment of the audience it is related to commedia dell'arte. Secondly, the use of masks, which also distinguishes a Nō play or Nō-kyōgen from Kabuki, has to be mentioned. Obviously, in its comedic mixture of song, dance and pantomime, Kabuki also has parallels with commedia dell'arte but dispenses with the masks.

Besides the relationship between Nō-Kyōgen and commedia dell'arte there is another, perhaps even more surprising relationship: Miwako Tezuka refers to the similarities between Schönberg's speaking voice and the use of the singing voice in a Nō play (cf. Tezuka 198). Furthermore, in addition to the interconnections established so far, all roles in Nō theater are played by male actors. The linguistic alienation effect and androgyny thus create a further link between Nō and Schönberg's *Pierrot lunaire*. If we look for additional links between *Pierrot lunaire* and the Nō theater, the color white, which is historically linked to Pierrot's makeup and dress, offers itself as a connotative bridge. However, this connotation only works from a European or Western cultural perspective. Not all masks in Nō theater are white by any means. In Europe, however, at least since Japan opened up during the Meiji period, a white face has been associated with Japanese culture. A connection was made on the one hand with the partially white masks of the Japanese theater, and on the other hand with the strongly contrasting makeup of the geisha. In passing, it should be mentioned that the Jikken Kōbō performance did not use the traditional Nō masks stylized over centuries, but modernized ones tailored to the Pierrot subject.

This "Gesamtkunstwerk" by Jikken Kōbō was groundbreaking for the reception of Schönberg's *Pierrot lunaire* in Japan; it was followed by a series of *Pierrot lunaire* performances, whereby theatrical versions, often in conjunction with the Nō play, have become something of a tradition. It is worth mentioning here only *pars pro toto* the Nō version directed by Akiko Nakajima, entitled *Mugen Noh—Pierrot lunaire* ("mugen" means limitless, infinite) from the anniversary year 2012.

With the following discussion on Bruce LaBruce's *Pierrot lunaire: Butch Dandy*, we leave Japanese culture with its special aesthetics and turn to the genre of film. In 2011, Canadian filmmaker Bruce LaBruce staged a theatrical adaptation of *Pierrot lunaire* in Berlin, and three years later, in 2014, his film based on this stage version was presented at the Berlin International Film Festival and honored with the Teddy Award. LaBruce is regarded as a specialist in queer and transgender themes, as an "Ikone des schwulen Underground-Pornos und des Queercores" (Buss), as an icon of gay underground art porn and queercore. He not only transferred Schönberg's work into a contemporary context but also reenacted a real murder that took place in Toronto's transgender milieu in 1978. A brief summary of the plot reads as follows: Pierrot is a woman dressed as a man who pretends to be a man to Columbine. Columbine's father, unlike his daughter, sees through the masquerade and rejects Pierrot's connection to his daughter. Pierrot must then prove his masculinity to Columbine's father (and to his lover Columbine as well). The means chosen are drastic: He murders and castrates a taxi driver and adorns himself with the man's male attributes. This scene in the film is combined with a Shakesperean quote: "A cock, a cock, my kingdom for a cock!" (LaBruce 36:49-36:53).

The film *Pierrot lunaire: Butch Dandy* is a combination of excerpts from the theatrical adaptation of Schönberg's *Pierrot lunaire* and newly shot scenes in a realistic setting (e.g., a nightclub setting). Schönberg's composition is accompanied by techno sounds underlaid with verbal explanations of the murderous story, faded in like explanatory remarks in a silent film. Aesthetically, LaBruce's film refers to silent film, black-and-white film, surrealism and video clips, aesthetic means familiar from the 1988 *Pierrot lunaire* film version by Eric de Kuyper and the 1999 film version by Oliver Herrmann (*Eine Nacht. Ein Leben* / *A Night. A Life*; with Pierre Boulez and Christine Schäfer). What is actually new in LaBruce's film adaptation, however, is the realistic way in which his Pierrot story is brought into the picture and the crossing of the line between eroticism or erotic obsession and pornography.

From a musicological perspective, two considerations were initially of interest: firstly, how LaBruce adapted Schönberg's relatively complex work for the film, and secondly, how this film fits into the previous history of Pierrot's reception. The following observations are based on the film itself and on LaBruce's own statements and interviews.

Pierrot is portrayed by LaBruce as a murderer who is driven to commit this crime by discrimination in a working-class environment. A key role is played by Columbine's father, who is described as conservative and as a "fat capitalist pig father" (LaBruce 12:13-12:16). According to LaBruce's statements

in an interview with Philipp Schmidt, these focal points of the film are a direct reference to Schönberg, who wanted to make theater "for the masses" (Schmidt 7:24-7:28). Pierrot's violent and spectacular behavior was chosen by Schönberg for the same reason, and in La Bruce's opinion, Schönberg's *Pierrot lunaire* is a harbinger of the future "slasher genre" (Schmidt 8:06-8:11). Some doubt might arise as to whether a profound reception has taken place here. It seems quite audacious to make Schönberg the father of the slasher genre, as we had already encountered a kind of horror cabinet of the human imagination in nineteenth-century literature (e.g., *Pierrot Sceptique* and *Pierrot assassin*).

In the course of the conversation, Philipp Schmidt points out that Schönberg's music was a kind of "high class," "elite music" (Schmidt 9:11-9:19) that was only comprehensible to an educated audience. In the interviewer's opinion there is a strong contrast between the filmic subject and Schönberg's underlying music, which is "not really popular music" (Schmidt 9:21-9:23). LaBruce contradicts this and replies that Schönberg's music was popular in his time, stating as proof that Schönberg used popular elements such as "certain waltzes of the time" (Schmidt 9:44-9:47). Presumably in response to Philipp Schmidt's questioning looks, he repeats his thesis that Schönberg wanted to create "a very popular kind of theatrical form" (Schmidt 9:54) with *Pierrot lunaire*. The interviewer gives up trying to convince LaBruce and simply asks whether it was the popular aesthetic of Schönberg's music that inspired LaBruce to integrate club music into the film. LaBruce confirms this vividly, referring to a musicologist who had advised him and who had pointed out the parallel between "Berlin techno and Schönberg's music at the time" (Schmidt 10:30-10:37). (Note: The name of the musicologist is not revealed in the interview.) To add a touch of humor: Perhaps one day we can expect a presentation on relations between Schönberg's *Pierrot lunaire* and Berlin techno music at a Schönberg conference. In addition, the question arises as to whether Schönberg's *Pierrot lunaire* is already too subtle and multilayered both on a textual level and in regard to the music to be useful as "background music" (Schmidt 2:46-2:49) for a straightforward story like that told in LaBruce's film.

As the above historical outline of the history of Pierrot has shown, neither the demonization of Pierrot nor the placement of his character in a working-class milieu or a society shaped by capitalism is new. Staged Pierrot performances and adaptations for film have a long history, with directors or choreographers interweaving contemporary or political themes with Schönberg's *Pierrot lunaire*. Cultural boundaries are not always crossed, as in the Jikken Kōbō performance, but genres are often (more or less) fruitfully intermingled.

Examples include Reinhild Hoffmann's ballet version (Steirischer Herbst 1983) and the performance choreographed by Marlene Monteiro Freitas (Wiener Festwochen 2021). The numerous and successful Japanese *Pierrot lunaire* performances also prove that staged versions do have an appeal for audiences. Nevertheless, there is a small "but" to this statement: Schönberg's music is practically always pushed into the background by the actions onstage, and if the audience is not presented with specific intellectual challenges, as is the case in the Jikken Kōbō performance, for example, staged performances can have the taint of a mere "prettification" of music that is still demanding today. For this brief outline of the reception history of Schönberg's *Pierrot lunaire*, the following applies in any case: to be continued.

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