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SCHÖNBERG AS A FILM MUSIC COMPOSER: *MOSES UND ARON* (1975) BY JEAN-MARIE STRAUB AND DANIÈLE HUILLET

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SUMMARY. The article discusses the issue of using Arnold Schoenberg's music as film music in the adaptation of his opera *Moses und Aron* by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet. The article examines the film soundtrack, by using audiovisual analysis tools, trying to answer the question whether the attempt to adapt avant-garde music to the language of cinema was successful or not. In the further part of the article, the authors relate the results of this analysis to Schoenberg's musical philosophy and musical aesthetics.

Keywords: Schoenberg, opera, *Moses und Aron*, film, film music

Introductory remarks

The subject of our paper will be music film *Moses und Aron* (or *Aron und Moses*, since that's the version of the title one can meet in some reviews), a piece of two French directors, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet. It's worth noting that there is not the only production of this type made by the eccentric pair of directors, known for their radically leftist views and a rather unusual in Western cinema approach to the music. Just before the piece in question they made also short movie entitled *Einleitung zu Arnold Schoenbergs "Begleitmusik zu einer Lichtspielscene"*, and two years after *Moses und Aron* an adaptation of Schoenberg's one-act comic opera *Von Heute auf Morgen* was also produced. Of this entire "Schoenberg trilogy", as we may call it, *Moses und Aron* is the most extensive (107 minutes) and probably the most remarkable work. The film aroused some interest and was even shown at the Cannes Film Festival in 1975 but wasn't entered into main competition[3].

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[3] Feisst, Sabine M. „Arnold Schoenberg and the Cinematic Art" in *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 83(1), 1999 (pp. 93–113), p. 107.

Film music and its interpreting: basic notions

Treating Schoenberg's music as film music is of course for many reasons problematic, if only because the composer himself had an ambivalent attitude to cinema, although he made several attempts to collaborate with some film studios. Theodor W. Adorno called these attempts "brief flirtations"[4] and he even mentions kind of humiliation that Schoenberg suffered from film producers and directors who obviously couldn't accept the fact that composer demanded full control over the actors and that he wanted to make sure they would follow the score's detailed instructions[5], The issue of Schoenberg's attitude towards film is described in quite detail by, among others, Sabine Feisst[6]. For Schoenberg, however, unlike for Adorno himself, who was influenced by the radical leftist environment of the Frankfurt School, film probably wasn't especially important: because he wasn't so much interested in the potential possibilities of influencing a mass audience. It's even more intriguing that the pair of directors decided to reach for Schoenberg's pieces, which is full of almost mystical reflection – so it doesn't really suit radical leftist ideology[7].

First, however, we need to establish in what sense we will speak of Schoenberg's music as film music. We can understand this term – film music – in two ways: first, as music composed specifically for cinema (and in this case, this music is subject to some set of regulations, the most important of which probably are conventions associated with specific movie genres); second, simply as a music – whatever music – which has been used in a movie.

In this second sense, of course, absolutely any music can become film music under certain conditions. Contemporary Western cinema is not limited in this respect by any restrictions, apart from those resulting from the conventions of different film genres themselves and the music typical of them, but these conventions are nowadays treated freely.

Moreover, avant-garde or, more general, non-tonal music of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries used to be also part of the cinema repertoire. But in the case of the movie in question the situation is quite unusual, because it's an extremely faithful adaptation – in terms of both score and libretto – of Schoenberg's opera piece. Paradoxically, this seems to be the biggest analytical and interpretative problem of this movie. As far as we

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4 McCann, Graham. "New Introduction" in Theodor W. Adorno, Hanns Eisler, *Composing for the Films*. New York: Continuum, 2005 (pp. XVII–XLIX), p. XVIII.

5 Ibidem, p. XX.

6 Feisst, S. M. 1999. Op. cit., pp. 93–113.

7 The subject of mysticism of original *Moses und Aron* has been well described by Mark Berry. See Berry, Mark. "Arnold Schoenberg's "Biblical Way": From "Die Jakobsleiter" to "Moses und Aron"" in *Music & Letters*, Vol. 89(1), 2008 (pp. 84–108).

know, only its first scene with the motto**,** taken from the Old Testament, Book of Exodus, doesn't come from Schoenberg – the short citation referring to the story told in Schoenberg's libretto.

We want, however, to return to the problematic nature of this adaptation: opera is, in general, very difficult to be adapted to the shape of the movie. Unlike the musical, where the transfer from the theatre stage to the screen resulted in maintaining the status of this genre as a popular and mass art, which was the very reason for the musical's existence from the very beginning, the situation of opera is way more complicated. During hundreds of years of its evolution into various subgenres, its status changed and evaluated into something what we call nowadays "classical music" or "art music" – although these terms are quite general and superficial. There is no doubt that this change in the status of opera began to occur in the 19th century, in Germany – it was then that, in a sense, "art music" was "invented" since Beethoven's times – and this process came to an end with the rise of the modernist avant-garde.

That is why, in the case of transferring an opera to the screen as a film adaptation, we must reckon with the fact that all of its essential aesthetic and conceptual assumptions, such as the relationship between words and music (because it used to be the main subject of interest in the theoretical discourse surrounding opera through the centuries) will be from then on subordinated to the overriding principle of cinema – which is visuality. Seldom happens in cinema such a situation when the image is secondary to the sound. Such cases exist, e.g. Oskar Fischinger's films or Walt Disney's *Fantasia*, but even in these rare cases, viewers usually have an illusory sense of the secondary nature of the musical element to the image. This is how cinema works: the visual element always has a stronger impact than audial element.

Of course, we must distinguish between simple recording a theatre performance and giving it an audiovisual form from a film adaptation of an opera, such as *Moses und Aron*. The difference is outlined at the very level of concept: the aim of the former text is most often the simple popularisation and redistributing the opera, using some simple cinema tools to make opera more attractive and more readable for the contemporary recipient. The latter type of text is no longer, in a sense, the property of the composer, because the director is responsible for the final conceptual shape of the work. This is a very interesting situation because the composer of the piece thus becomes, willingly or unwillingly, the composer of film music, which means that from then on, the researcher will be asking completely different kinds of questions about Schoenberg's work.

Our task is to look how the accents are distributed between image and music in Straub and Huillet's movie. Later we will try to apply to this analysis some concepts used by musicologists in Schonberg's context. For better clarity, we will do it separately, in two steps.

Moses und Aron (1975) – movie analysis

In the first shot, we see a half-close-up of the silhouette of Moses**.** He is turned away from the viewer, talking to his God, whose voice – as we know – takes the form of a choir. Only along with the words "Meine Zunge ist ungelenk: ich kann denken, aber nicht reden" ("My tongue is clumsy: I can think, but not speak"[8]) does the camera turn away from Moses (who is still filmed partly from behind, in half-profile) and slowly moves to the stairs and further, to the desert landscape, trees, rocks and a serene sky.

The camera moves in a semicircle (which is very characteristic of this whole movie and is also very important), along the horizon line, and on the last words of the first scene it stops on a longer shot of a double hill (while Aaron's name is mentioned for the first time in the libretto). Only when camera moves, the viewer gets the impression that the music somehow predominates the film image. Previously, this impression was partially eliminated, because the static image, frozen on the figure of Moses, gave the strong feeling that we were watching a filmed opera theatre, not a music film. From this point on, Schoenberg's music will start to be somewhat problematic.

The movie is clearly divided into acts and scenes, according to Schoenberg's piece. Among other things, there are dark brown or lilac panels marking the transitions between almost all parts. These panels look quite anachronistic, like those in the early years of early cinema development. They also serve as a lowered curtain during the instrumental parts of the opera [e.g. 0,10,50–0,11,45][9], or during a two minutes long choir interlude between acts [0,47,20–0,49,20], or even in the middle of the scene [0,57,27–0,59,54], completely out of blue, which makes a particularly strange impression. Sometimes they are absurdly extended, but sometimes they are shortened to the little snapshots, inserted with the clear intention of remaining, again, according to Schoenberg's original concept.

In general, the whole movie shots are very long and very static: half close ups on the faces of both characters, and usually in the same way and from the same perspective: for example, in the first act, Aaron is captured

[8] All translations from German to English – M.L.

[9] All movie examples timing according to the version: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LS1RS8biUsg [access: 27.02.2025].

primarily from a half-profile**,** and Moses from the front**.** So, the directors' task is doubly difficult, firstly because of the "regular" difficulties resulting from the very fact of filming the opera, and secondly, because original Schoenberg's piece is also extremely static[10]. We can therefore say that the directors adapt to this slow development of the action and don't try to make it more dynamic. For example, the first scene of the second act, apart from the last verse of the choir, consists almost entirely of one long shot, lasting three and a half minutes and showing a half close up of Aaron standing in front of the geometrical entrance to the cave**.** The last scenes of the movie are constructed in a very similar way: the dialogue between Moses and Aaron in the finale of the second act and in the whole third act – unfinished, as we know, by Schoenberg, so consistently it contains only text. Scenes in question show only and exclusively the faces of both interlocutors in very long shots, and the last act consists only of two static shots: one horizontal (with Aaron lying on the ground and tied up) and one vertical (with Moses standing, leaning on his rod).

Starting with the ending of the first act, the strategy of the directors becomes clear: it consists in the most static and monotonous filming as possible, with strong focus on details, in portrait-like half close ups, with an extremely minimalistic, even ascetic movie space, which makes the entire movement of the film rest on the dense and rich in references and meanings Schoenberg's music – even if potential of this music for obvious reasons can't be fully exploited.

And we could assume that much more appropriate and intuitive directing technique would be to try to liven up the image to the maximum, through for example frequent changes of perspective, angle of screening, zooming in and out. In this way, the point of reference also changes, and we can look at the cinematic reality from the perspective of different characters. Instead, here, the outside viewer's perspective is preserved for most of the time, and the camera rotates primarily in a semicircle (parts of a circle), which is essentially a metaphorical recreation of the opera theatre stage semicircle (e.g. 0,38,45–0,39,30). So, individual characters are also captured in such a way as if many different viewers were looking at them from different places in the traditionally constructed auditorium of an opera theatre.

The other problem are stage directions of libretto. Schoenberg provided his libretto with detailed stage directions, and one could say that Schoenberg in a sense almost transferred fragments of the stage directions to the vocal parts (for example, when choir describes approaching Moses and Aaron,

[10] It was first projected as an oratorio, and sometimes is called an opera sacra, see Berry, M. 2008. Op. cit., p. 85; Kurth, Richard. "Immanence and Transcendence in "Moses und Aron"" in Jennifer Shaw, Joseph Auner (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Schoenberg*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010 (pp. 177–190), p. 177.

how they look, how they move and so on), but do the directors use this libretto's device in a cinematic way? Absolutely not. Nothing like this happens, the shots are, again, long and static**.** Straub and Huillet in general renounce – and consistently so – the implementation of Schoenberg's detailed stage directions. Particularly extensive ones appear in the multi-part third scene of the second act – to such a degree of detail that in the scene of the sacrifice of four naked girls, the composer made the following remark: "nackt, insoweit es die Gesetze und Notwendigkeiten der Bühne erlauben und erfordern" ("naked, as far as the laws and necessities of the stage allow and require"). It's true that this third scene is a slightly more dynamic part of the movie, in general, but still Schoenberg's stage directions weren't considered. And, of course, we can say these are directions intended for stage work, not for the movie, but the problem is that the text of the libretto, although extensive and deep, can't provide much other inspiration in terms of building the cinematic space. Mark Berry says even that the location of the opera is abstract[11].

But, the geometric, sparse camerawork, extracting the circles, the rectangles and rhombuses from the film space, seems to serve Schoenberg's aesthetic well. Not only the elements of the diegetic space, but even the arrangement of the characters within it is subordinated to the principles of absolute regularity and even kind of architectural rhythm**.** Of course, this is only a symbolic reference, but Schoenberg himself referred to geometry rather superficially, as Mitchell Ash points out[12].

The characters of the movie are usually shown isolated, distance from each other, even settled in the group, set in an empty and vast space**,** yet, this empty and vast space is also consistently limited, creating something like an amphitheater stage, fenced with some kind of wall. Though this wall is not entirely captured within the diegesis, so in principle the elements of the enclosure are partially hidden from the viewer. As we said, it looks more like an amphitheater stage than a desert, reminding us again of the movie's theatrical connotations. Very rarely do directors take the characters beyond this limited space.

We will discuss now the main screening technique, which, as was told above, is based on very long shots. Some examples are truly astonishing: almost two-minute shot of the snake into which Moses' rod has turned**,** over half-minute shot of Moses' left hand covered with leprosy. In the third scene of the second act, instead of the expected dance scene, we see just such a

[11] Berry, M. 2008. Op. cit., p. 92.

[12] Ash, Mitchell G. "Multiple Modernisms in Concert: The Sciences, Technology and Culture in Vienna around 1900" in Robert Bud, Paul Greenhalgh, Frank James, and Morag Shiach (eds.), *Being Modern: The Cultural Impact of Science in the Early Twentieth Century*. London: UCL Press, 2018 (pp. 23–39), p. 33.

long shot of a slaughtered ox lying on the altar. There are other examples: the altar steps, the golden calf**,** the fire burning in the darkness**,** a hill looming in the darkness**,** a man waiting on a guard**.** These shots, lasting usually about twenty seconds/half a minute, but sometimes even more than two minutes, are focused on details, which are drawn out in quite an incomprehensible way, and they significantly affect the convention of the entire movie, because at times it oscillates towards something like dreamlike psychedelia. Close ups on details are, however, a very important element, because they remind us of the cinematic nature of the movie – a nature that can be forgotten at times.

The same can be said about the worm's eye perspective and the bird's eye perspective shots – the latter especially in the second scene of the second act. The choir is most often filmed from a bird's eye view, which most likely has a specific meaning**.** Like Schoenberg, directors use *turba* as in traditional passion – as a symbolic exponent of collective opportunistic views, unstable and changeable, but at the same time easy to predict because they are conservative. Of course, looking from above also allows for the isolation or loneliness of the framed figure to be more strongly emphasized (because there is more empty space visible than in the case of a straight shot). And this is probably the reason why in the second scene of the second act, Aaron, who persuades the Israelites to construct a golden calf, is filmed in this very way, since he feels confused and terrified by Moses' prolonged absence.

Very characteristic is the almost complete lack of sounds from the world presented in the movie, from diegesis. As is known, the film's soundtrack is normally divided into three parts: aforementioned sounds of diegesis; dialogues; and music. In this case, music occupies the film exclusively. There are only three moments when we can hear diegesis, and the first one is the sound of Moses' rod hitting the ground. The next one will appear only in the third scene of the second act, when the directors eliminate the music for long twenty seconds so that the sound of blood being poured into a vessel on the altar can be heard [1,23,15–1,23,45].

Very rarely does something happen here that normally is standard in contemporary cinema, that is, combining different elements of the soundtrack – for example, treating the sounds of diegesis as if they were elements of the musical accompaniment. Here, directors don't choose to interfere with Schoenberg's score. An exception is a fragment of the third scene of the second act, where the sound of pebbles and some objects rolling and falling from a rock, refers to the current musical accompaniment [1,24,00–1,24,30]. In general, directors remain completely indifferent to the elements of musical visualization contained in the score. As if in contrast to its complexity and density, the image is very austere, simple, and the only clear sign for the viewer are the geometric forms and some legible details (a snake, a hand, a bottle of water turned into blood, an ox, altar steps).

Only the first act of the opera brings a complete change of perspective: the camera's eye moves beyond the closed circle along which it has been constantly circulating until now and takes in a wide general shot, with the intense colors of blue water and yellow sand – while the chorus sings of the hope of freedom**.** The same colors – gold and blue – will dominate in the scene of the sacrifice to the golden calf, but also the ending of the second act. In turn, part of the third scene of the second act takes place in almost complete darkness, from which only the illuminated, static silhouettes of the characters emerge. Basically, this contrast of bright light and deep darkness, together with the geometrical shapes, are the most characteristic features of this ascetically arranged world of the movie.

References to Schoenberg's musical aesthetics and philosophy

Such a strategy of screening leads us in a sense to question about understanding Schoenberg's ideas. During Aaron's last discussion with Moses, the latter can be heard off-screen, but the viewer can see Aaron's face almost all the time. The procedure is then reversed: we look at Moses' face when Aaron is speaking. We can understand it as a kind of reminder of Berry's interesting thesis that Moses and Aaron are in fact two activities of the same character[13]. Perhaps Berry thinks so because Moses calls Aaron "sein Mund" ("his mouth") in the final monologue of the second act (Aaron also calls himself "Moses' mouth").

If we agree that Schoenberg's aesthetic vision has been radicalized since the 1930s, along with his political views, starting precisely with *Moses und Aron*, as Leon Botstein says[14], we can assume that for equally radical directors Moses is, in a sense, the incarnation of Schoenberg himself, when he obsessively speaks of fidelity to the idea (*Gedanken*) and of faith in abstraction without the need to appeal to sensuality. This is an opinion that Edward Latham would probably agree with, since he suggests something similar in his analysis of *Moses und Aron*, but at the same time writes that in some aspects Schoenberg could identify also with Aron[15]. Lantham goes even further, writing that while Moses embodies a pure idea, Aron – the very

[13] Berry, M. 2008. Op. cit., p. 92.

[14] Botstein, Leon. "Schoenberg and the Audience: Modernism, Music, and Politics in the Twentieth Century" in Walter Frisch (ed.), *Schoenberg and His World*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1999 (pp. 19–54), p. 45.

[15] Latham, Edward D. "The Prophet and the Pitchman: Dramatic Action and Its Musical Elucidation in "Moses und Aron", Act I, Scene 2" in Russell Berman, Charlotte M. Cross (eds.), *Political and Religious Ideas in the Works of Arnold Schoenberg*. Taylor & Francis, New York, 2013 (pp. 131–158), pp. 132–134.

possibility of expressing this idea, translating it into a language, which is legible to the recipient[16]. In the libretto text we read precisely that Moses represents the word, while Aaron translates it into an image (Aaron: "So musste ich ihm ein Bild zu schauen geben" / Moses: "Dein Bild verblich vor meinem Wort!" [Aaron: "So I had to show him an image" / Moses: "Your image faded before my word!"].

However, does Schoenberg not fail in this second function, function of translating an idea into readable language, as Adorno claimed, criticizing him for his hermeticism and opacity in *Philosophy of New Music*? As we remember, in the last words of the completed second act, Moses cries out in despair "O Wort, du Wort, das mir fehlt!" ("O word, you word that I lack!"). In any case, the film undoubtedly captures this relationship between the two characters, hence the technique we mentioned – when the voice of one character is superimposed on the image of the other and vice versa, and this is a technique used very consistently and repetitively by directors.

On the other hand, the film eliminates quite effectively all the most "operatic" or "dramaturgic" elements of Schoenberg's work. Bluma Goldstein considers the group scenes of the second act to be such[17]. In the movie they are not so dramaturgical or operatic. Once again: Schoenberg left very precise stage directions, which in the second act focus primarily on the collective hero. Probably all researchers of Schoenberg's opera notice that the concept of nation, i.e. Israel, is extremely important to the composer. This element was also eliminated from the movie. Because, yes, there is a choir group, and even at one point two choirs, but in the second act they sing primarily from off-screen, and we see only some individual characters, often situated in relation to each other at regular geometrical distances**.**

We will return to the principle of geometry. The geometric figure is one of the axes of the movie's construction, or at least it determines the work of the camera, which is in fact the essence of the film. The camera moves along the parts/arcs of a circle, the characters are situated linearly relative to each other or arranged in figures**,** the presented world includes a semicircular amphitheatrical or temple stage (we are not sure), the altar, the altar steps and the doorway to the cave are rectangular in shape. As Ash claims, this geometric order is specific to the entire concept of Schoenberg's music. He studied the works of Ernst Mach and was certainly influenced by Mach's students, namely Guido Adler and David Joseph Bach[18]. Ash suggests

[16] Ibidem, p. 134.

[17] Goldstein, Bluma. "Schoenberg's "Moses und Aron": A Vanishing Biblical Nation" in Russell Berman, Charlotte M. Cross (eds.), *Political and Religious Ideas in the Works of Arnold Schoenberg*. Taylor & Francis, New York, 2013 (pp. 159–192), pp. 178–180.

[18] Ash, M. G. 2018. Op. cit., pp. 33–35.

similarities between Mach's pure and tempered tuning diagram and Schoenberg's twelve-ton disk[19]. Without a doubt, this figure of the circle is important to Schoenberg, and this has been preserved in the movie and is one of the most important construction principles of it.

The fragmentation of the action also serves Schoenberg's idea, who, as Berry notes, in his way of treating myth is much more romantic than enlightened. Berry means here the way of telling this myth. He refers to Walter Benjamin's well-known idea, according to which a quasi-historical, realistic and coherent story in fact "kills" the essence of myth – which is not served at all by verbal interpretation, extensive and detailed explanation. It needs to be obscure, in a way[20].

From this perspective, Schoenberg's opera appears in two ways: on the one hand, it is an incredibly "talkative" piece, it abounds in the ideas, it is burdened with reflection that the listener is unable to assimilate. On the other – it explains nothing or almost nothing, presents us with an unsolved riddle.

The problem the directors faced was not even the difficulty of filming the opera itself, but it's rather something more like Federico Fellini's problem with film adaptation of *Satyricon* by Petronius – the enormous difficulty of transferring a heavy philosophical charge to the screen. Hence the enormous load of symbolism in the movie, even where Schoenberg himself hadn't anticipated it, noting instead in the stage directions plenty of detailed visual references and stage images. As we said before, the directors mostly ignore them.

Because Schoenberg's music, every bar, every note, as Berry writes, "is derived from the initial note-row, just as everything ultimately must come from the Eternal One"[21], the image adapts to this construction principle by searching for individual details that return in subsequent scenes. These details, on which the viewer stops his/her gaze, have the nature of leitmotifs. Usually, however, it is film music that adapts the rule of leitmotifs (this is one of the most useful techniques of composing film music, in general), and here it has been transferred to the image. In a sense the image and music exchange places and functions in this movie, and, quite counterintuitively to the natural relationship between image and music, the film structure imitates the musical structure. As Michael Cherlin explains,

> Symmetrical pitch arrays, conceived of as forming "inversional balances" about intervallic centers, have long been recognized as a fundamental and pervasive component of Schonberg's compositional language. Pitch mirrors

[19] Ibidem, pp. 34–35.
[20] Berry, M. 2008. Op. cit., p. 93.
[21] Ibidem, p. 95.

> are conspicuous and fairly ubiquitous among the musical structures found in *Moses und Aron*, and they function […] to express or to help to express specific dramatic events. Thus, the correlation of musical structure and dramatic function for pitch mirrors is particularly important[22].

Cherlin thus analyses and classifies different types of such mirror interval structures. What Cherlin calls "mirror imagery"[23] can be also translated into the language of movie, based on parallel, symmetrical shots**.** "Mirror imagery is the means for expressing self-knowledge bound up, through reflection, with knowledge of the »other«"[24]. The principle of symmetry and the dialectical distribution of forces is also connected with this idea of mirroring. As we know, Schoenberg called it *Grundgestalt*. In another text, Cherlin writes:

> In Schoenberg's context, centrifugal forces are those that require expansion; […] they constitute the potential for development within a musical idea. Centripetal forces are those that lead to coherence; they hold the idea together and make us perceive it as a unity. […] In Schoenberg's conception, it is the dialectical opposition of the forces – successfully realized by the composer who brings them to their full potential – that results in the musical work[25].

Since this principle of mirroring also transfers to the level of action and the relations between characters, it becomes relatively easy to transfer it to the screen. The situation is different with movie space. It's also difficult to say whether the directors delved into Schoenberg's philosophy of music, or they acted instinctively, based on the shape of the libretto, but anyway we observe consistent actions in favour of making this world rigorously coherent. Like, the central location of the camera in the movie picture – it moves most often, as we have already said, from the centre of the circle along the fragments of arcs and rarely goes beyond what is determined by the radius of this circle. The world presented in the movie is strictly integrated, thanks to, among other things, its asceticism, and it's extremely rare for us to escape from its limited space. Such exceptions occur in sequences dominated by darkness – as we mentioned, these are only fragments of the central, third scene of the second act, presenting an erotic-thanatoid orgy. Darkness is the

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[22] Cherlin, Michael. "Dramaturgy and Mirror Imagery in Schönberg's "Moses und Aron": Two Paradigmatic Interval Palindromes" in *Perspectives of New Music*, Vol. 29(2), 1991 (pp. 50–71), p. 50.
[23] Ibidem.
[24] Ibidem, p. 51.
[25] Cherlin, M. "Dialectical Opposition in Schoenberg's Music and Thought" in *Music Theory Spectrum*, Vol. 22(2), 2000 (pp. 157–176), p. 170.

easiest way to lead the viewer beyond this rigorous space, although it's also an escapist method. Even the horizon line is limited, as the action appears to take place in some valley framed by forested hills.

Conclusions

As we remember, in the last words of the completed second act, Moses cries out in despair "O Wort, du Wort, das mir fehlt!". These could be the words of Schoenberg himself. If we return to our earlier thought that Aaron is to be the interpreter for Moses of his deep, complex and essentially inexpressible idea into an image, then it is in this very role of interpreter that the directors of the movie *Moses und Aron* put themselves (they tried to be "Aaron" for "Moses" – Schoenberg). They undertook a battle, lost from the outset, to translate into a clear and simple, yet moving image, what is truly profound and moving in Schoenberg's music.

But it cannot be done. The problem is that the film doesn't have the tools to conduct such a discourse. Rather, it constructs a completely new reality, to which Schoenberg's music doesn't fit. And this is not because the directors didn't try to implement the composer's ideas into their image – because we know they did. Nor is it because Schoenberg's music, being too hermetic, is not suitable for cinema. After all, we have examples of very efficient use for the cinema, and with excellent effect, of the music of even avant-garde composers of the 20th and the 21st centuries. The main problem is that – probably guided by the idea of performing a kind of tribute to Schoenberg – the directors didn't decide to treat his music as film music in the slightest. Moreover, they even eliminated almost all elements of the soundtrack that could disturb Schoenberg's composition. They managed to create a conceptually coherent whole, with an image underpinning the musical narrative, but this image in no way updates the original message of this composition, and it doesn't activate the mythical story about the dual nature of human, human's identity and human's relationship to the mystery of metaphysics. The only impression the viewer gets is that in response to Schoenberg's formal and over-intellectualized music the directors were able to respond with an equally dry, precise and enigmatic image.

In this context, it's very meaningful that in the last scene of the second act, when in Schoenberg's piece Moses and Aron perceive the presence of God in the pillar of fire, in Straub and Huillet's movie this moment passes unnoticed. The camera moves indifferently over the monotonous landscape. For a moment, a ray of sunlight illuminates the forested mountainsides. God doesn't appear.

"Unvorstellbarer Gott! / Unaussprechlicher, vieldeutiger Gedanke! / Lässt du diese Auslegung zu? / Darf Aron, mein Mund, dieses Bild machen?" ["Unconceivable God! / Inexpressible, many-sided idea, / will you let it be so explained? / Shall Aaron, my mouth, fashion this image?"].

It seems that the answer to Schoenberg's question is negative.

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