

Images of Time and Timelessness: A Musical Reading of *Death in Venice*

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This essay is based on an old, well-known question in aesthetics: how to represent time in its fleetingness without halting, appropriating, objectifying, or transcending it? The question inspires a reading of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* as the account of a transformation in which a wish to *overcome* time turns into the erotic desire of being delivered *to* time. As such, the story reflects the tension between two competing views of music: music as an Apollonian play of time-transcending, auditory forms, and music as the Dionysian art *in* time. A phenomenological reading of Luchino Visconti's adaptation of the novella complicates this plainly dualistic opposition. The essay traces how the aesthetic suspension of time is contrasted with, but also depends on, the spectator's real-time experience. Similarly, the two classical, competing views of music stand in a complex dialectical relation to each other and reflect our existential relation to time.

Like the harmony of the spheres, the time that is not our time—time in general—is excluded from immediate sensory perception. Yet, as it is filled with things, episodes, and actions, we can abstractly distinguish between its worldly effects and time as the cause that transcends experience. Still, it is hard to conceive of time in itself without imaginatively turning it into an abstract state of timelessness, a static, eternal realm of time. To be sure, many great thinkers have questioned the “out-there-ness” of time and have regarded it, rather, as a universal *post rem* or *a priori* form of intuition. Even within the confines of human experience time causes philosophical puzzlement. It dictates our whole lives, imposes its monomaniac regime of irreversibility on everything it touches, but eludes our grasp whenever we try to engage in it, in and of itself. At first sight, its intangibility may facilitate a common desire to bracket time or our consciousness of it. Who has never longed for a world in which the persons and things we love simply stay the way they are? On the other hand, we are also obsessed with time, as we love punctuality and as we delight in races against the clock. The obsession with exact time can easily be exposed, however, as yet another attempt to control its unceasing and unforgiving movement. It is as if time plays with us, being both present and absent, not only in and to our experience but even in our thoughts. Time does not just fly—it plays hide-and-seek.

In and Out of Time

In its play of presence and absence, the experience of time is closely related to the fear of death. To appease this fear, it is often said that death needs to be given a face. Following Emmanuel Levinas and Philippe Ariès, Rudi Visker argues that naming or representing death symbolically separates it from life and fends it off as a heterogeneous element. The correct way to exorcize the dead and keep them from haunting the living consists neither in explaining death philosophically nor in calculating its medical probability. To be a successful image of death, not even resemblance is needed. All that is required is for us to put it boldly in its proper place—on the shelf—thereby isolating it from life (Visker 2007, 140–54). Similarly, time can be represented symbolically. Successful images of time offer a handle on its otherwise uncontrollable fleetingness; by bringing it under our explicit attention and making it graspable to the senses they enable us to relate to time and vicariously help us deal with life's transience. The question, however, is what kind of time such images relate us to. When time is placed “out there,” is it not transfigured into something else—a timeless object—just like symbols of death are purported to do? To what extent, then, is it still an image of *time*?

Music—not the celestial, inaudible music of the spheres but our own earthly music—has often been considered to be the perfect medium to represent time. According to Arthur Schopenhauer, however, music offers an escape from the threat of time by taking us *out* of it. It creates a safe realm of timelessness while we play or listen. Schopenhauer (1969) thought of music, on the one hand, as the purest art in and of time,¹ but also held it capable, on the other hand, of engendering the aesthetic experience in which “the individual . . . is pure will-less, painless, *timeless* subject of knowledge” (179; emphasis mine). Other philosophers maintain that music does not take us *out* of time but rather delivers us *to* it: for them, music is an attempt to come to terms with time and to control its powers. Theodor Adorno (1995, 66), for instance, often pointed out that music structures time:

The self-evident, that music is a temporal art, that it unfolds in time, means, in the dual sense, that time is not self-evident for it, that it has time as its problem. It must create temporal relationships among its constituent parts, justify their temporal relationship, synthesize them through time. Conversely, it itself must act upon time, not lose itself to it; must stem itself against the empty flood.

Music, in his view, *deals* with time, rather than escapes it.

Through music we can interfere with time's pace, slow it down or speed it up, stop and repeat it as much and as often as we like. Since it allows us to manipulate time, music seems to be able to go against its grain. It cuts time—slices out of the continuum of history and holds them fixed, saves them from the omnivorous appetite of the past. Music, in this sense, lives in the realm of the aesthetic “as if”—as if time were not so unforgiving. This is why, according to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2011), we sing or play refrains: in doing so we create our own territory and keep our fear of death at bay. Their “plateau” on the refrain opens accordingly:

A child in the dark, gripped with fear, comforts himself by singing under his breath. He walks and halts to his song. Lost, he takes shelter, or orients himself with his little song as best he can. The song is like a rough sketch of a calming and stabilizing, calm and stable, center in the heart of chaos. Perhaps the child skips as he sings, hastens or slows his pace. But the song itself is already a skip: it jumps from chaos to the beginnings of order in chaos and is in danger of breaking apart at any moment. (343)

And yet, if we conceive of music primarily as a container of time, we risk denying it as a phenomenon *in* time. Time might be held captive in acoustic structures but music also unfolds in time and is enfolded by it. We can understand Adorno's remark in this sense: if it is music's primal goal to overcome time's merciless hold over it and to afford us a glimpse of what it would mean to reverse the odds, it does so primarily by structuring time, not by halting it. Repetition, for instance, takes place *in* time and yet it challenges the irreversibility of it. Thus, music aims at a kind of timelessness—it seeks to overcome time—not by escaping or stopping it but by playing with it—indeed, by domesticating it.

Deleuze and Guattari (2011) push the argument for music's time-bound nature even further and contest music's repeatability itself. Repetition makes the refrain *un*musical, they say, because it renounces the developmental nature of music as a becoming in time. “The refrain,” the authors maintain, “is rather a means of *preventing* music, warding it off, or forgoing it” (331; emphasis mine).² In the same vein, Vladimir Jankélévitch (2003, 20) suggests that the idea of perfect repeatability in music classifies, just like the idea of musical symmetry, as a “spatial projection of the temporal process of becoming.” Reflecting on music's temporal nature he wonders: “Thus, is repetition in music not a priori a shock, are the refrains and ritornellos of strophic song, or the periodic recurrences of rondo form, not also a shock?” (21). Influenced by Henri Bergson's concept of *durée*, Jankélévitch takes the irreversibility and the diversifying effects of time seriously, the consequences of which naturally extend to the very nature of music. Even though we can recognize a theme or a whole piece of music

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when played more than once, it can never be exactly the same precisely because it is repeated *in* time. Thus, Jankélévitch provides an answer to his earlier question:

Independent from any memory, the pure fact of succession and the pre-erite, in other words the naked past-ness of the past, prevents the “same” from remaining exactly the same; this continuous conditioning, in the process of Becoming, assumes the form of a continuous alteration. This is why the da capo is a ravishing surprise, why a theme does not give up all that stirs us in its meaning until it is recognized again. (24)

This answer not only implies that music, like everything else in life, is subjected to time’s irreversibility; it also confirms Adorno’s earlier suggestion that music lives *by virtue of* a struggle with time—a struggle that, though it can never be won, proves more than fertile for the sake of music itself. “For if it is entirely temporal,” Jankélévitch (2003, 97) writes, “music is at the same time a protest against the irreversible and (thanks to reminiscence) a victory exacted from the irreversible, a means of resuscitating the same in the form of the other.” Apparently, as much as music is an art in and of time, it is always also on its way out. It cannot help but try to overcome its time-bound condition.

Vanity

A look into iconology suggests the same, deep connection: traditionally, music has always been linked to time and its dreaded companion, death. *Tempus fugit* and we better be aware of it. Music renders time tangible, makes it perceptible not just to the ear but also, through its instruments and scores, to the eyes. As such it has become a particularly strong pictorial symbol of life’s transitoriness, as is prominently shown in the vanitas still lives of seventeenth-century Flemish and Dutch painters.

Vanitas tableaux typically consist of objects symbolizing either the passing of time or death itself, such as hourglasses and clocks, musical instruments and scores, skulls, withered flowers, bubbles, rotten fruit, and many more. Each depicted object in Pieter Claesz’s famous *Vanitas with Violin and Glass Ball*, for instance, symbolizes the finiteness of worldly activities and pleasures: the violin and bow take up a prominent place in the composition as the rival art of painting, yet they are muted by the painter. The glass is overturned, empty, and the book remains prominently closed, overshadowed by a skull—the accompanying quill and holder remain forever still. A candle is extinguished, a solitary walnut cracked, and a watch

lies upside down with its mechanism exposed, as if someone had tried to unravel the secret of time. Reflected in a glass ball, the image of the painter looks frail and quasi-transparent, ready to burst like a bubble and vaporize in the air.³ Even though these images are non-temporal themselves, they do evoke the idea of passing time, of mortality and the ephemeral nature of human existence. They remind the viewer, in accordance with the then prevailing Calvinistic spirit, that it is vain to search for beauty or happiness in *this* life. Pious humbleness and serene devotion: these are the keys to the afterlife. “*Memento mori*,” vanitas paintings say: remember your own mortality, do not use up time as if it were unlimited but aspire for the timeless world beyond—accordingly, do not waste time on the mundane, fleeting joys of music making.



Example 1: Pieter Claesz, *Vanitas Still Life with Violin and Glass Ball*, c. 1628, oil on panel, 36 x 59 cm. Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg.

However, didn't music also contain that particular *promesse de bonheur*, essential to the appeal of the afterlife: the promise of eternity, a utopian escape from time? Isn't it precisely music's tendency to conceal time or its attempt to overcome it, rather than its mundane use of it, that makes it such an appropriate symbol of vanity, perhaps even of hubris? Indeed, the iconological relation between music and time is ambiguous: does the image of music, in vanitas painting, symbolize the plain consumption of time or rather its ingenious aspiration to create its own realm of timelessness *within* time? According to Wayne Martin (2006) such ambiguity is characteristic of

the genre of vanitas painting. Their semiotic structure consists of different layers of meaning and results in so-called “dialectical polysemy.” By accumulating multiple symbolic codes, one set of meanings, i.e. the connotations of pleasure and accomplishment, is balanced by an opposing set of meanings, i.e. vanity and death, to the effect of a subtle critique that works both ways. “Like the Book of Ecclesiastes,” Martin writes, “the still-life tradition catalogs and celebrates the very worldly pleasures and accomplishments which it at the same time submits to a critique” (564).⁴ Apparently music owed its central place in vanitas painting precisely to its ambiguous relation to time—or, perhaps more accurately, to its treacherous aspiration to a “false” kind of timelessness. For the pious Calvinist, music’s vanity shone through either way: it either appeared as a sheer waste of time or as a vain challenge to time itself.

Throughout Western history, the tension between music’s transcendent aspirations and its worldly pleasures has elicited ambivalent reactions, not in the least from philosophers and church fathers, often leading to elaborate censorial claims. The ancient Greeks solved this ambiguity pragmatically by simply assigning music to two different gods. Under the reign of Apollo, music was perceived as a crystalline structure that seals up time and turns it into a stabile, intelligible order. Under the influence of Dionysus, music revealed a seemingly irreconcilable aspect: as a time-devouring medium it embodied life in its most transient, bodily form and was therefore closely connected to death. And yet, according to Friedrich Nietzsche (1993), the Dionysian art, even though it implied the dissolution of the *principium individuationis*, unmasked the Apollonian principle as the true antagonist of life. That is to say, by making the Dionysian bearable for human ears and eyes, Apollo was the greater deceiver because he lent a blissful aura to the delusive idea of a world beyond time:

Apollo overcomes the suffering of the individual by means of the luminescent glorification of the *eternity of the phenomenon*; beauty triumphs over the suffering inherent in life; pain is, in a certain sense, deluded away from amongst the features of nature. In Dionysiac art and its tragic symbolism, the same nature addresses us with its true, undisguised voice: “Be like me! The Primal Mother, eternally creative, eternally impelling into life, eternally drawing satisfaction from the ceaseless flux of phenomena!” (80; emphasis in the original)

Music, according to Nietzsche, does not offer an escape from time in the Schopenhauerian sense. Being both Dionysian and Apollonian, it inherits all the ambiguities that circle the experience of time in life. Still, in *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche regarded music more as a Dionysian than as an Apollonian art. The inevitable question is therefore not whether music

embodies time rather than timelessness, but *how* it does so. How can music represent “the ceaseless flux of phenomena” without at once hypostatizing it, if only by making it repeatable, and thus isolating it from life? How can it retain its Dionysian nature without being ultimately neutralized by its Apollonian appearance?

Death in Venice

Time’s Janus-faced appearance is a prominent theme in Mann’s early novella *Death in Venice* ([1912] 1989). The story has often been read as a moral tale about the Apollonian ideal being shattered by the destructive forces of Dionysus. According to this interpretation the main character of the story, the famous writer Gustav von Aschenbach, gradually falls prey to a moral decline during a holiday at the Venetian Lido.⁵ As soon as the stunning appearance of the young Tadzio catches his eye, Aschenbach is infatuated with the boy and becomes increasingly intoxicated by his own desire. His blatant incapacity to react properly to the situation soon amounts to an emotional paralysis that hinders the healthy channeling of his forbidden desire, and this, slowly but steadily, strangles him. Meanwhile, Venice is struck by a devastating cholera epidemic and turns into the mirror image of Aschenbach’s inner state: both are heading straight, like the title ominously foretells, for a fatal ending.

Put like this, the story reveals itself as a clear instance of the age-old conflict between the intellect and the passions and is indeed easily translated into Nietzschean vocabulary as an example of the clash between the Apollonian and the Dionysian principle. Inspiring Aschenbach’s pedophilic desires, the Dionysian is understood as an immoral force of decay, whereas the emblem of his professional success evokes the Apollonian realm. This, however, is a distorted use of Nietzsche’s terminology since he never defined the terms as morally good or bad, nor did he consider the Greek tragedy as a contest to be won either by Apollo or Dionysus. An interpretation concerned with the experience of time, on the other hand, can preserve the genuine ambiguity of the story and avoid moral one-sidedness. Thus, Aschenbach, who has always lived the static life of a disciplined man, rediscovers time as an essential part of his life. The confrontation with illness and death makes him acutely aware that his time is continuously ticking away, whereupon he feels an increasing need to give in to his passions.

As a fictional representation of the experience of time one can wonder whether *Death in Venice* is not a variant of the vanitas-genre. Could it be read as a literary still life, a novelistic *memento mori*? Is it meant to de-

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liver a moral message, a reminder that no one is immune to the workings of time—that time cannot be deceived with idle tricks and gimmicks? A short passage in the novella supports this reading as it explicitly refers to a typical vanitas-object: the hourglass. Near the end of the story Aschenbach remembers that

long ago, in his parental home, he had watched the sand filter through an hourglass—he could still see, as though it stood before him, the fragile, pregnant little toy. Soundless and fine the rust-red streamlet ran through the narrow neck, and made, as it declined in the upper cavity, an exquisite little vortex. (Mann 1989, 61)

Just like music, the hourglass traditionally symbolizes life's transience and therefore often serves as an image of death. In Mann's *Doctor Faustus* the motif of the hourglass pops up several times, always in connection to the main character's appointed death. Hourglasses not only display the present in the trickling sand, they also visualize the future and the past by keeping the two neatly separated yet simultaneously present inside the two glass bulbs. This makes them a remarkably strong symbol of time's omnipresence. However, the passage just quoted does not refer to the object as a straightforward symbol of time as such. Aschenbach's recollection of the hourglass is far more ambiguous than the traditional, moralistic understanding of vanitas symbolism suggests. As he marvels at the object, he realizes that it does not draw attention to the passage of time but rather conceals it by hiding the sand's movement inside, the escape of the fine streamlet being hardly visible. Only in the end does the little vortex reveal time's true fleeting nature, as an insight that comes too late. It is not clear which aspect of time the hourglass symbolizes here: does it stand for time's omnipresence or rather for its tricky concealment? Or, is it meant to remind of our desire for control over time? After all, the hourglass is an instrument designed by man, to be turned upside down, again and again, just as long as we want.

In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche (2001) introduces his famous idea of the eternal recurrence of the same, a passage very well known by Mann. The demon who first utters the idea uses the image of an hourglass to evoke a distorted version of the more common anxieties about time:

[the demon] "This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The

eternal hourglass of existence is turned over again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!" [Nietzsche] Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? (194)

The dilemma is reversed, it is no longer the thought of death's inescapability that is frightening but the idea that time will never cease, that death will never come as a relief. In the hands of the demon the hourglass becomes an instrument of torture, it is turned *against* man to keep time going, always and forever.

On further consideration these vanitas symbols prompt more and more questions. What does the saying "*tempus fugit*" actually teach us about time? Is it to be handled with care or to be feared as an enemy? Should we try to stay out of its haunting hands, use it sparingly, or should we conscientiously use up every minute as if it were our last?⁶ These are precisely the questions that suffuse Aschenbach's time in Venice. For his whole life, in order to attain the disembodied, panoramic view of a true historian, he has systematically neglected an entire range of time-bound pleasures, only to get paralyzed by the revenge of his severely suppressed emotions, having forgotten how to engage in life:

Aschenbach had once given direct expression—though in an unobtrusive place—to the idea that almost everything conspicuously great is great in despite: has come into being in defiance of affliction and pain; poverty, destitution, bodily weakness, vice, passion, and a thousand other obstructions. And that was more than observation—it was the fruit of experience, it was precisely the formula of his life and fame, it was the key to his work. (Mann 1989, 10–11)

Only in Venice, upon the encounter with Tadzio, does he realize that his so-called Apollonian way of life has been a pose all along, a streak of vanity based on an illusory and even dangerous ideal. Moreover, the hourglass reminds him that his time has actually been ticking since the very beginning, deeply hidden inside his dry, sedentary life. Only now, when looking back, can he see that he has in fact always participated in time, albeit it without taking the slightest delight in it, simply because there is no life outside it. There is no way either, however, to retrieve all the time lost to his experience. His last, frantic efforts to turn back the clock merely result in embarrassing traces of hair dye and the artificial smell of cosmetics, now mixed with the shameless odor of disinfectant that penetrates the city.

If the story centers on the removal of the life-denying Apollonian veil, shouldn't we conclude that Aschenbach's attempts to embody his emotions are fundamentally healthy, rather than a sign of moral decline? Aschenbach indeed wonders,

... has not form two aspects? Is it not moral and immoral at once: moral in so far as it is the expression and result of discipline, immoral—yes, actually hostile to morality—in that of its very essence it is indifferent to good and evil, and deliberately concerned to make the moral world stoop beneath its proud and undivided scepter? (Mann 1989, 13)

The moral seems to be reversed: timelessness equals death, whereas time is the condition of real life. Isn't Aschenbach's fall from the Apollonian paradise, therefore, a return to life rather than the victory of death—doesn't he die willingly, perhaps even happily? This is hard to say, given the fact that after his supposed illumination in Venice Aschenbach immediately falls back on evenly idle ways to camouflage time with make-up and hair dye, the very attributes of fakery that he had so much despised before. Moreover, in his *Lebensabriß*, Mann (1930, 754) referred to *Death in Venice* as "*die Tragödie einer Entwürdigung*," which hardly supports an interpretation in terms of a moral resurrection.

It is difficult to formulate a straightforward interpretation of the story, especially if one seeks to decipher and spell out its moral content without misusing Nietzsche's terminology one way or the other. All interpretations seem to get entangled in the paradox that circles the experience of time: as a force ruling over our lives it is something we seek to escape, while we regret not having lived it more consciously when we risk falling out of it for real. Time, like timelessness, is bound up with life *and* death. Thus, regardless of how we interpret the story morally, it seems safe to conclude, for now, that a reading in terms of the conflict between the Apollonian and the Dionysian principle will be misleading as long as it is presented as a clean dilemma with a clear outcome. A phenomenological approach, on the other hand, allows for a subtler, dialectical understanding of the story by taking into account the sensory perception of time and not merely its symbolic representations.

Death in Venice—The Film⁷

Although the adaptation to film required considerable changes and adjustments, Visconti succeeded in preserving the ambiguity of Mann's original story as he keeps the protagonist wavering between life-denying and life-affirming forces. In Visconti's hands it is precisely the *experience* of time that becomes palpable as a crucial key to the story. The heart of the matter, therefore, lies in the question of whether Visconti's adaptation can be considered successful on account of the temporality of the cinematographic medium. How do the music and the moving images on the screen affect

our understanding of the story? In my view, Visconti's use of the filmic medium brings about a layer of meaning that complements and deepens the narrative.⁸

In the novella (Mann 1989) music is mentioned only a few times. There is a reference to the music of strolling players (57) and another one to flute music in an orgiastic dream (65). Each of these scenes bathes in an oppressive atmosphere dominated by the life-threatening power of Dionysus. In Visconti's film more music is added to the story, yet it does not unambiguously confirm nor contradict these Dionysian connotations. Furthermore, since film consists of *moving* images, the question needs to be raised of how this influences our perception of Aschenbach's pursuit of timeless, ideal beauty, and how it connects to the *vanitas*-theme that is normally associated with *still* lives. As I shall try to demonstrate, it is through specific audiovisual effects that Visconti's *Death in Venice* captures the unassailable reality and irreducibility of time, both closely connected to the fear of running out of time, *and* to the longing for timelessness, i.e. the desire to escape from the shackles of time. Both drives are acutely present in Aschenbach's long chain of hesitations and it is only when we look at their deep entanglement that we can truly comprehend his frustrations. In what follows, I analyze the film's moving images and music from the point of view of the spectator, as they heighten the viewer's sensitivity to precisely those elements in the story that relate to Aschenbach's changing experience of time. That is to say, rather than imposing a clear interpretation, the film makes the spectator *feel* the tensions that make up the nucleus of the plot. It does not merely represent the double mode of experiencing time but presents it in a way that cannot be released from the images and the music itself.

The importance of the music is emphasized by Visconti's decision to make Aschenbach into a composer instead of a writer. Throughout we hear parts and even entire movements of Gustav Mahler's third and fifth symphonies, mildly suggesting that they are Aschenbach's own creations.⁹ Most prominent is the fifth symphony's famous *Adagietto*, which resounds at least four times at key moments in the story. Furthermore, Mahler's setting of Nietzsche's *Mitternachtslied* from *Also sprach Zarathustra* plays a pivotal role.¹⁰ This song is heard only once, in the middle of the film, where it literally underscores the hinge point of the story when Achenbach fails, semi-deliberately yet irrevocably, to seize on the occasion to be cured from his infatuation. The last lines of the verse couldn't be more appropriate, not only because they illustrate Aschenbach's failure but because the song's words draw attention to the paradoxical nature of his desire in relation to time: "*Doch alle Lust will Ewigkeit—, —Will tiefe, tiefe Ewigkeit!*"

The *Adagietto* introduces and concludes the film. While the opening credits roll it resounds for almost three full minutes before the first shot appears on the screen. It continues as we see the hazy panorama of the Venetian sea, blinking in the twilight of a glorious sunrise and providing the most enchanting setting for the slowly approaching boat that brings Aschenbach to his final destination. From this very first moment on, both the music and the images set the pace: this story will be slow—very slow. *Adagietto* means “slightly faster than *adagio*” (but still rather slow) and as a dynamic indicator it refers not only to the music but also to the visual tempo on the screen. Visconti’s images are anything but typical for a “*motion picture*” as they display a strong tendency to slow down. Not only the panoramic opening shot but nearly all the following scenes—notoriously those in the hotel lobby and those on the beach—evoke a particular kind of nostalgia: the yearning for a standstill.

The camera moves sluggishly inside static settings of practically immobile persons and objects. Alternately, the images look like landscape paintings, still lifes, and portraits in the most traditional sense of the genre, for instance the first shot of Tadzio, and they hardly conceal the artificial poses and the weariness of their models. We can almost smell the museum-like mustiness of the hotel lobby where the guests are waiting endlessly for dinner to start. Here, the atmosphere of profound boredom is only worsened by the out-of-tune scraping of a local string quartet, which fossilizes the scene to the extent that the images really appear to be heading back to their still ancestors, fleeing from the immense weight of waiting. This remarkable tendency to slow down is acutely palpable by contrast with the real portraits of Aschenbach’s wife and daughter. When he takes them out of his luggage and kisses them, these images give the impression, ironically, of containing more life, albeit it in the past, than the entire next scene in the lobby. The curious aspiration of the film’s moving images to escape from their own temporality by searching for the point where they become stills again persists throughout—a tendency that certainly accounts to a large extent for the often heard critique that the film is too long and, above all, too slow.

Not surprisingly, Mahler’s *Adagietto* does not help in this regard. The movement illustrates with great precision how music can slow down time—in fact, the composer added the instruction “*sehr langsam*” to this movement. The broadly spun out melody drags the chords along, changes them like arpeggios spread out over a long stretch of time. Passing from one note to the other we can only anticipate what lies within each momentary horizon of time as there is no momentum or cadence to project us further into the future with a sweep of *élan*. In this sense the *Adagietto*

can be heard as a vivisection, a close-up of the musical experience: in slow motion it allows us an intimate view of the music's deepest inside while still at work. We experience the isolated pulse of time that usually passes by unnoticed. Precisely by *not* going fast, by *not* making grand gestures but flirting with the idea of prolonging every moment into eternity—by pushing every note onto the very brink of timelessness, but never beyond—does the music draw our attention to its vital dependence on time. We get to hear how every note is called into existence by the preceding one and only then can lead us to the following, their links utterly arbitrary yet forever knitted together into one particular fabric of musical time. While every note keeps the music in the moment, each one of them also seems to yearn heartbreakingly for the next, calling out for continuation and, as we silently assume about most music, heading towards an eventual resolution.¹¹

Dialectical Plays of Time and Timelessness

In Visconti's hands, Mahler's *Adagietto* makes one wonder to what extent music can possibly slow down before it stops being music. Evidently, it cannot come to a complete standstill, lest it stop being music. But how long can one chord be spun out, how long can a melody survive on one single note? What is the minimal input we need in order to hear music?¹² The feeling of excessive slowness—yet not timelessness—is enhanced by the images prompting a similar question: how long can one single shot remain immobile before it stops being a “moving image”? How long does it take for a film shot to return to its cradle and become photography again?¹³

How can music span time without falling apart in meaningless bits and pieces? Or, how can the arch of expectation be stretched without the listener losing the thread? These are important questions for all music, not only for slow or long movements. Adorno, as we have seen, refers to the formal aspect of music as that which sews together all the notes and makes for a coherent whole, a being in time. “*Zeitkunst*,” he writes,

the temporal art, is equivalent to the objectification of time. This applies to the individual events, or musical content, to the extent that they come together in a context by means of the organization of their sequence, rather than dissolving as they pass away; and to the temporal dimension itself, which aims, potentially, at its own self-transcendence, based on the strength of the unity of what occurs within it.

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Music's formal organization not only makes a composition into a whole, in doing so it also transcends the "real time" of its own performance. Some have said, therefore, that musical form necessarily also appropriates time—a fact that Adorno obviously didn't fail to notice:

If time is the medium that, as flowing, seems to resist every reification, nevertheless music's temporality is the very aspect through which it actually congeals into something that survives independently—an object, a thing, so to speak. (Adorno 1995, 66)

Objectification through structures and forms allows the listener to grasp time as embodied by the music and to achieve a unified experience of it. In other words, by reifying time, musical form overcomes time's otherwise ungraspable fleetingness but also turns it into a kind of timelessness.

In Visconti's film the music and images make time graspable as well, yet, I maintain, not primarily by appealing to an all-embracing form. The effect is equally dialectical as the one described by Adorno but it is achieved by virtue of a play of presence and absence that closely resembles the experience of time in life. By testing the limits of the temporality of their medium, the music and images evoke the idea of timelessness as the object of their desire and fear. They embody the *Midnightsong's* punch line in an unexpectedly literal sense: "*Doch alle Lust will Ewigkeit.*" Precisely by *not* arriving at a complete standstill but by approaching it ever so closely, the music and images, in all their slowness, evoke the idea of being out of time. In doing so, however, they draw attention to the thin line that separates them from it and thus demonstrate the impossibility—and, ultimately, the undesirability—of absolute stillness. Instead, they become even more palpable as being radically situated *within* time.

This dialectical mechanism draws on a common experience of time in life, when by the desire to forget, escape, or reverse time we are made most aware of its obstinate irreversibility. Just like Aschenbach, the music and images can only aim at a crystalline world beyond time, asymptotically, without ever being able to fully reach that final point, unless they cease being the temporal medium they are. Thus they evoke a realm of timelessness as the other side of the line that is permanently there—sometimes astonishingly close, but always, like Tadzio in the *Mitternachtslied*-scene, just beyond reach—only to the effect of throwing Aschenbach back into the real world of longing. It is this real world of longing, then, that we hear and see, *through* the aspirations to a timeless, Apollonian world beyond.

The story can be understood accordingly, as the account of the transformation of Aschenbach's purely aesthetic, distant fascination for Tadzio's Apollonian beauty into an erotic desire for proximity. Urged by a strong

sense of death approaching, he starts to engage in the daily routines at the Venetian Lido. Soon he no longer wishes to contemplate the object of his desire as a timeless ideal but wants to engage in it, touch and feel it, incarnate his desire *within* his life. Precisely by being confronted with the frigidity of the Apollonian ideal—the plain fact that timelessness excludes life, and thus equals death—he becomes aware of his strong need to participate in life. The more death gets a hold on Aschenbach, the more he becomes aware of his own time ticking away. He increasingly realizes how his former refuge into a timeless world of beautiful forms will not help him escape from death. Consequently, he feels less and less inhibited to live every minute as if it were the last. In this sense, the story recounts how the longing for an Apollonian ideal is inevitably bound up with the Dionysian lure of the “ceaseless flux of phenomena.”

The film conveys this complex connection by tying the spectator down to the here and now of the filmic experience itself. Neither the story, nor the excessive visual beauty or the intoxicating, opulent music, allow the audience to be entirely carried away into a strictly separate aesthetic realm. Rather, the excessive slowness elicits an almost bodily experience of *real*, un-transfigured time passing; it installs impatience in the spectator, the subtle frustration of eager anticipation, or at least a subliminal sensory awareness of the impossibility to accelerate or transcend the film’s pace, as it is only *in* the moment that the images can be seen and the music heard. The film, then, asks its spectators to engage in it, to pay close attention to its every detail, without offering a real escape route to an aesthetic realm where time is objectified or domesticated. Indeed, there is no transcendence, no transfiguration or forgetfulness of time. It is the flow of time itself that we are asked to experience while the music and images linger on.

Two Musical Images of Time

Phenomenologically, the film works by virtue of effects of *contiguity*—it makes palpable the quasi-physical pull of “almost-continuity” between time and timelessness—instead of relying on a reifying mechanism of form that unifies what is and remains essentially heterogeneous. It is the promise *and* the all-too-real danger of this “almost” that allows timelessness to shimmer through, rather than the detachment of the illusory “as if” that creates a timeless realm as a product of the aesthetic imagination. This difference is important, since the “almost,” dialectically, heightens our attention to the insurmountable presence of the moment, whereas the “as if” soothes our longing by separating us from it. In the face of death, then,

Aschenbach catches sight of a kind of timelessness that does not, like his former Apollonian world of timeless beauty, lock him out of his own life but instead makes him conscious of the momentous here and now of his experience.

The distinction resembles an opposition between two modes of temporality described by Deleuze and Guattari (2011). The first mode—*Aeon*—refers to the so-called “plane of consistency” where only relations of speed and slowness obtain, while the second—*Chronos*—indicates a “plane of transcendence” that consists of proportional relations of structure and development (288–98). With regard to music, they indicate different modes of organizing time: “to the transcendent, organizational plane of Western music based on sound forms and their development, we oppose the immanent plane of consistency of Eastern music composed of speeds and slownesses, movements and rest” (298). On a deeper level, the opposition between *Chronos* and *Aeon* reflects two conflicting modes of conceptualizing time that underlie the practices of composing, performing and listening. On the phenomenological level, however, music’s transcendent and immanent plane are always competing, so that either the former is felt to dominate the latter, or the latter is perceived as undermining the former. In order to rehabilitate the dimension of “becoming,” i.e. the immanent plane, the authors seek to deflate the role of musical forms and structures in what they see as a typically Western conception of musical time:

the whole becoming of Western music, all musical becoming, implies a minimum of sound forms and even of melodic and harmonic functions; speeds and slownesses are made to pass across them, and it is precisely these speeds and slownesses that reduce the forms and functions to a minimum. (298)

Whether or not the authors are phenomenologically accurate in claiming that a heightened awareness of the immanent mode of consistency necessarily reduces the appreciation of music’s formal aspects, is open to debate. What matters most for the present discussion is that the mere possibility to distinguish between the two modes reveals a tension that can be felt in *all* music and that is relevant even to our understanding of non-temporal art works. In his essay on Rembrandt’s portraits, for instance, Georg Simmel (2005) similarly distinguishes between two modes of representing the relation between life and death in art, thereby revealing a fundamental difference between the underlying conceptions of death. Given the remarkable parallel to the two conceptions of the relation between music and timelessness that we have distinguished—the “as if” versus the “almost”—it is worth quoting him at length:

Now, his way of experiencing death speaks out of Rembrandt's conception of the human being only there, where he draws this conception up from the ultimate depths; not in an elegiac or emotionally emphasized sense, because the latter originates precisely there, where death appears as a violation of life from the outside, as a fate that has waited for us at some point on the course of our life, unavoidable as a fact, not as a necessity out of the idea of life itself but as that which contradicts it. If death is conceived of in this way—as an extraneous power over this life—then it attains the atrocious, deplorable character against which one either revolts heroically, or toward which one lyrically subjugates oneself, or with which one has nothing to do inwardly. (71–72)

Death, when conceived of in sharp opposition to life, is a stranger with whom we have nothing to do. This is frightful, as it seems to be utterly arbitrary and unrelated to who we are as a person. Death, in this sense, is “out there”; it is a murderer. When understood as an intrinsic part of life, however, death becomes more personal and less frightening. It is our own death as it reveals itself gradually within our lives.

According to Simmel, it is the nearness of death, its being “almost” present, that is palpable in Rembrandt's portraits, and this is precisely what makes them so touchingly accurate. They do not “signify” death by symbolically referring to it, but instead represent individual lives as embracing life and therefore also death:

Rembrandt's figures have the half-light, the muteness, the questioning into the darkness; exactly that which in its clearest, finally, absolutely dominating appearance is called death, and which, regarded superficially, precisely to that extent appears to contain less life. In reality, they contain precisely thereby the *whole* life. (Simmel 2005, 74; emphasis in the original)

Life and death, Simmel maintains, are no strict opposites. Instead, death inhabits life the way time inhabits it: hidden at first, but more and more visible as time goes by. Death as we commonly know it is nothing more than that little vortex, the last stage in which it fully reveals itself, but as it is part of life, it is also in time. The parallel with Aschenbach's reflection on the hourglass is striking. “It seems to me beyond doubt,” Simmel writes,

that death *inhabits* life from the onset. Indeed, death reaches macroscopic visibility—absolute domination, so to speak—only at the moment of death. But life would be different from birth on, and in each of its moments and cross-sections, were we not to die. (71; emphasis in the original)

Similarly, Visconti's film installs an almost physical awareness of the complex relation between the experience of time, and the longing for and fear of transcending it. All are present yet not strongly opposed—rather, they dialectically reinforce each other. It is no surprise, therefore, that even the moment in which Aschenbach eventually passes away is stretched out in time. Only when bystanders come to his aid do we see that the unavoidable has taken place; that the long, drawn out “almost” of his death has finally given way to the full presence of its “now.” Indeed, Aschenbach's two dominant preoccupations—his desire to petrify time and his fear of succeeding all too well in that task—have reinforced each other in a dispute that could only be decided by that ultimate gesture of time. Not coincidentally, the little streamlets of hair dye trickling over the deceased Aschenbach's forehead evoke strong iconic reminiscences of Christ with the thorn crown. Aschenbach—the former Apollonian artist—is now wholly exposed: the hourglass is broken and finally releases what was always hidden inside. The warm blood of a human being has replaced the trickling sand. In dying, he is revealed as a fully incarnated, true being in time.

Who wins? Apollo or Dionysus? Depending on how we approach it, music can show itself as a structure transcending time or rather reveal its radical being *in* time. Traditionally, western aesthetics has prioritized the first: it is only by creating the auditory illusion of “timeless” time that music attains its place among the fine arts. The according ideal of “disinterested” listening turns music into the *object* of an aesthetic experience and so reifies its musical time. The other conception of musical time is less discussed, perhaps also less appreciated as the basis for an aesthetic mode of perception, yet it surely is just as real in listening practices. It asks the listener to engage in music without objectifying its flow or hypostatizing its forms. It is only in this second mode of listening that we can truly experience what Jankélévitch called the “delightful shock of repetition,” as we recognize time as it is in us, not “out there.”

Notes

1. “I might still have much to add on the way in which music is perceived, namely in and through time alone, with absolute exclusion of space” (Schopenhauer 1969, 266).
2. Wittily, the authors oppose the refrain to “music”: “Music is a creative, active operation that consists in deterritorializing the refrain. Whereas the refrain is essentially territorial, territorializing, or reterritorializing, music makes it a deterritorialized content for a deterritorializing form of expression. Pardon that sentence: what musicians do should be musical, it should be written in music” (Deleuze and Guattari 2011, 331).
3. Pieter Claesz, *Vanitas Still Life with Violin and Glass Ball*, c. 1628, oil on panel, 36 x 59 cm. Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg.

4. Vanitas painting derived its name from the opening sentence of the Book of Ecclesiastes: “*Vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas.*”
5. For example: “Underlying this complicated process which, in Mann’s phrase describing *Death in Venice*, ‘turned the intoxicate song into a moral fable,’ there is the dualism of a book which deeply influenced Mann’s whole way of looking at life and art, Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* . . . In the orgiastic dream that destroys the last shreds of Aschenbach’s self-esteem Apollo is routed by Dionysus, Aschenbach cannot preserve ‘his own god’ against the onslaught of barbaric lust and the ‘stranger god’ becomes ‘his own’” (Becket 1973, 579).
6. Similarly, Wayne Martin (2006, 5) asks: “What lesson does one take from the insistent reminder of the vanity of worldly pleasure and accomplishment? What ethics is prescribed by a skull? Here we may be tempted to close the semiotic structure by presupposing a Christian moral: Lay up your stores in heaven; live not for pleasure but for final judgment; pursue the good rather than delight . . . however, the paintings sometimes resist or at least question such hopeful closure.”
7. Luchino Visconti, *Death in Venice*, 1971.
8. Many reviewers and theorists did not find Visconti’s adaptation successful at all. See, for instance, Hutchison 1974, 36: “The film does not provide, with regard to aesthetics, the subtlety, the depth of analysis that the novella *Death in Venice* can accommodate.” Or Vaget 1980, 171: “Thus the film has reduced and considerably simplified the complexity of Mann’s case against Aschenbach.”
9. Visconti’s motives for turning Aschenbach into a composer ranged from personal preferences over biographical and interpretive considerations to purely filmic concerns. He meticulously modeled his protagonist after the image of Gustav Mahler, just like Thomas Mann had paid tribute to the recently deceased composer by adorning Aschenbach with Mahler’s first name and fine physiognomy. As many have noticed, this particular adaptation is not entirely unproblematic from a dramatic point of view. How could the composer of such dazzling, sensual music ever be so fatally incapacitated when confronted with his own emotions? In fact, the music seems to take over the task of embodying Aschenbach’s emotions every time he fails to do so himself.
10. The *Mitternachtslied* is part of the fourth movement of Mahler’s third symphony, indicated as “*sehr langsam—Misterioso.*”
11. This description is closely connected to Husserl’s (1991, 5–53) analysis of the perception of melody in terms of protention and retention. Our present focus, however, is not on how we come to hear a series of notes as a melody but on the experience of music as an embodiment of time. In the philosophy of music, the borderline between phenomenological descriptions of the musical experience and metaphysical claims about the nature of music has oftentimes been blurred. The danger to slip from one into the other has lurked especially in discussions concerning the perceived movement in and of music. See, for instance, Victor Zuckerkandl’s (1973, 94) ambiguous description of the “motion of tones”: “We have understood the dynamic qualities of tone as the particular kind of unfulfillment peculiar to each tone, its desire for completion. No musical tone is sufficient unto itself; and as each musical tone points beyond itself, reaches, as it were, a hand to the next, so we too, as these hands reach out, listen tensely and expectantly for each next tone. To be auditive *in* the tone now sounding means, then, always being *ahead of* it too, on the way to the next tone. Inasmuch as we thus continually participate in the transition from tone to tone, we hear each interval as a step, as motion” (emphasis in original). It is important to keep in mind that the present account does not intend to make any metaphysical or ontological claims about the nature of music itself, but always and only refers to the products of different modes of perception, as shaped by particular concepts of time.

12. Evidently, Mahler's *Adagietto* is not particularly experimental or groundbreaking in this regard. It is only within the context of the present discussion about time and in relation to Visconti's use of the music that it becomes paradigmatic for such a line of thought. In fact, many twentieth-century composers, for instance John Cage, to name but the most obvious example, have been much more explicit and radical in testing music's dependence on time, whereas this was surely not on Mahler's mind when he wrote his fifth symphony.

13. A similar remark ought to be made here: most probably, Visconti was not intentionally experimenting in this sense, whereas many contemporary video artists, for instance Bill Viola, actually do test the medium with this particular question in mind. Visconti's *Death in Venice* becomes interesting in this regard mainly because of the particular story that it tells and the central role of time in it. It is noteworthy, though, that Visconti was working on an adaptation of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* right before he started shooting *Death in Venice*. Unfortunately, this project was canceled before the actual filming ever took place.

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