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Alberto Toscano

A Night (of the World) at the Opera: History and Excess in Opera's Second Death

Summary:

This essay revisits Mladen Dolar and Slavoj Žižek's book *Opera's Second Death*, exploring the figure of history that arises from their joint intent to, as Adorno once put it apropos of Wagner, realize the fractures that traverse the opera-form. In particular, the essay homes in on the conceptual manoeuvres whereby Dolar and Žižek's limn opera's elective affinities with a psychoanalytic theory of the subject, paying special attention to the ways in which operatic incarnations of voice and femininity stage a thinking of excess with striking political overtones.[1] Dolar's contribution to this co-authored work explores a fracture within history – revealing Mozart's operas as the dramatic site for the antinomies of Enlightenment subjectivity in its sexual and political dimensions, as they emerge in the revolutionary transition between two epochs. Žižek's study of Wagner, in a complementary, which is to say dialectical way, lays bare the fracture of subjectivity itself – in the guise of the asymmetrical difference between sexual positions, but above all in the feminine figure of excess that is so central to opera. It is from this double fracture that this essay tries to reconstruct a psychoanalytic interrogation of how history cuts through the subject and resonates in the voice.

A Night (of the World) at the Opera: History and Excess in Dolar and Žižek's *Opera's Second Death*

History is what hurts.

– Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*

In September 1963, Theodor W. Adorno delivered a talk at the Berliner Festspielwochen entitled 'Wagner's Relevance Today'. While not repudiating the devastating ideological and musicological dissection of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* which he had begun in the house magazine of the Institute for Social Research in the late 1930s and brought to fruition in the book *In Search of Wagner* (1952), Adorno recalibrated his critique, shifting its focus from polemic to potentiality. In the context provided by the emergence of 'informal music' around the Darmstadt school in the late 1950s-early 1960s, Adorno sought to turn the impasses and shortcomings of the master of Bayreuth into a virtuous opening rather than a damning verdict. Echoing the utopian emphasis on the 'not-yet' of his great 'Wagnerian' peer Ernst Bloch,[2] he concluded by declaring that because Wagner's music 'does not, in the end, realize what it has promised, it is therefore fallible, given into our hands incomplete, as something to be advanced, unfinished in itself. It awaits the influence that will advance it to self-realization. This would seem to be its true relevance for our time' (Adorno, 1964/1993, p. 59). In his music criticism, that singular heir of Adorno, Edward Said, revisited the

Festspielwochen talk to emphasise the contemporary need for performances of Wagner to intervene, with musical and dramaturgical acumen, into the operatic material, confronting the potentially suffocating and reified image of a Wagnerian style, as well as the ideological detritus that invariably accumulates around it, not least in what concerns the composer's anti-Semitism. Said lay great stress on Adorno's suggestion that '[i]f Wagner's work is truly ambivalent and fractured, then it can be done justice only by a performance practice that takes this into account and realizes the fractures instead of closing them cosmetically' (Adorno, 1964/1993, p. 58; Said, 2008, p. 169).[3]

Notwithstanding the distance taken towards Adorno's Wagner, or that between the Frankfurt School and the 'Ljubljana School' more broadly, Dolar and Žižek's *Opera's Second Death* is a stellar instance of a theoretical practice that assays what is truly ambivalent and fractured in Wagner, in Mozart, and in opera more broadly, *realizing the fractures* rather than closing them cosmetically. The kinds of cracks and contradictions anatomised in this diptych of essays overlap in part with those that Adorno exposed in *In Search of Wagner* – manifestations in specifically musical and dramatic form of antinomies inhering in the capitalist mode of production at particular historical junctures (the Enlightenment and '1789' for Mozart; the Industrial Revolution and '1848' in Wagner). But they are also, and especially, fractures and ambivalences that pertain to the psychoanalytic theory of a subject made and unmade by negativity – in the impossibility of sexual relation, the demands of hysteria, the lack in desire, the 'undead' nature of the drives, the frightful and liberating realization of the nonexistence of 'the Other'. Albeit differently and otherwise, capital and subjectivity, to paraphrase Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, only work by breaking down. *Opera's Second Death* demonstrates, against all odds and prejudices, that the psychic life of opera may hold many of the clues to our own.

There is a multi-layered dialectical irony in the fact that – as Dolar and Žižek compellingly demonstrate – opera can serve as a privileged testing-ground for a psychoanalytic theory of the subject deeply attuned to the place of history and ideology in the life and death of our fantasies. For opera could also be seen as the exquisitely obsolete site for a fantasy of full subjectivity, and this would lend it an 'aura' (in the sense ascribed to this notion by Walter Benjamin) contrasting with the corrosive effects and emancipatory possibilities of technological reproducibility. As Adorno noted, avant-garde composers tend to keep aloof from opera because they 'feel ashamed of a pathos boasting of a dignified subjectivity which the world of total subjective impotence no longer accords to any individual. They are skeptical of the grandiose in grand opera, which is ideological prior to any particular content, and of the intoxication with power. ... Music in which dramatic events are a priori doused in atmosphere and exalted is aura pure and simple' (Adorno, 1962/1976, p. 77). But is what Adorno pointedly calls the 'antagonism between the disenchanting world and a form that is illusionary to the core' (p. 77) sufficient to relegate opera to the heap of obsolescent artistic forms? This would be to ignore Adorno's own objections to a habitual assumption that vitiates most musical sociology, namely 'that the esthetic state of musical forms and structures will always harmonize with their social function' (p. 77). On the contrary, any reckoning with opera will need to consider how 'the reception of structures can move all the way to a full break with their social origin and meaning' (p. 71). While this lag or non-contemporaneity[4] between social and aesthetic forms is a *sine qua non* for any properly dialectical criticism, it is arguably thematised even more intensely by opera, if the latter is conceived as a genre that was always-already out of time, 'outdated in its very concept' (Žižek and Dolar, 2002, p. ix), and whose original effort to revive the poetic and social functions of Attic tragedy already betrayed the aporia of a modernity that could only exist through a (largely imaginary) repetition of the ancients.

Paradoxically, it is the fact that opera is 'a true postmodern subject par excellence', in Dolar's formulation, which allows philosophical critique to turn to it as a kind of model through which the nexus of subjectivity and historicity may be mined; it is its 'enormous anachronism' which, if properly explored, provides us with precious clues into the psychic and political impasses and possibilities of the present. It is particularly striking in this regard that *Opera's Second Death* is perhaps the most incisive investigation of the connection between the psychoanalytic theory of the subject and a materialist philosophy of history in the corpus of Žižek and his Slovenian partners. In particular what this book proposes, via the infinitely rich 'parallax' of Mozart and Wagner, is an approach to the relation between two 'fractures', two 'ambivalences'. The first,

unfolded in Dolar's essay, is a fracture *within* history – the manner in which Mozart's operas reveal the antinomies of Enlightenment subjectivity, in its simultaneously sexual and political dimensions, as it eventuates in the revolutionary *transition* between two epochs. The second, mined by Žižek in his study of Wagner, is the fracture of subjectivity itself – in the form of the asymmetrical difference between sexual positions, but above all in the feminine figure of excess that is so central to opera, in Wagner, as well as before and beyond him. It is in mining the problems of *transition* and *excess* that this book both provides a uniquely powerful philosophical interpretation of opera, while advancing key dimensions of the theory of the subject that perhaps only an immersion in the sublime non-contemporaneities of this genre – split between myth and technology, speech and sound, its origins (both real and imaginary) and its present functioning – can truly bring to the fore.

The non-contemporaneity immanent to opera as a form – immanent to its disparate materials as well as to its functions and fantasies – is posed in particularly acute terms by its handling of myth. From its formation in the early seventeenth century onwards, beginning with the exquisitely self-reflective figure of Orpheus, opera verifies the dialectical insight that modernity is as much constituted against myth as by it. In opera we encounter both the revival of ancient myths (especially of ancient Greece *as* myth) and the effort to forge singularly modern myths – from the Masonic metapolitics of *The Magic Flute* to the Schopenhauerian epic of the *Ring*. As Umberto Curi (2018) has shown with admirable verve and erudition, *Don Giovanni* itself dramatizes one of the very few properly modern myths, an *atheist* myth.[5] As Dolar suggests, our reception of opera – which is always shadowed by the charm of its desuetude, the aura of aura's vanishing – relies on a redoubled fantasy, the fantasy that opera's creators and audiences truly believed in the 'mythological foundation of community'. As he acutely puts it our fascination with opera is 'mediated and delegated' (Žižek and Dolar, 2002, p. 4). We could even push this argument further: the fantasy is mediated and delegated twice-over, since it relies on disavowing the fact that the workings of myth in Attic tragedy were already a sign of secularization, distantiation, or indeed of the very kind of social crisis and transition that, as Mozart and Wagner differently demonstrate, makes for the ongoing vitality of form. Accordingly, the Lacanian insight that every real community requires a 'grain of fantasy' to constitute itself, can also be taken to suggest that no polity is ever synchronised with itself, and especially not a polity caught up in social and symbolic upheaval. Opera thus relates to Ancient tragedy and myth much as French Jacobins oriented themselves towards the Roman republic, following the Marxian adage that when men 'seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something entirely new, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle slogans and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language' (Marx, 1852/1972, p. 437). Dolar puts this insight to wonderful use, while enriching it with a psychoanalytic theory of fantasy, in his account of the 'dialectics of historical repetition' that bind opera to tragedy (as well as in his exploration of how opera mediates absolutism's combination of feudal form and bourgeois content). Whether in the Florentine Camerata's efforts to conjure up a modern spectacle out of the archaeology of Greek music (Abbate and Parker, 2015, p. 42) or in Wagner's styling himself a German Aeschylus, we encounter the same law: 'if one wants to recreate the assumed past standard and ideal, if one wants to repeat something long gone, one can achieve this only by creating something altogether new'. Opera is marked through and through by this dialectic: 'On one hand, it presents a fabulous past transcending time, beyond time, a past raised to the temporality of the fantasy; on the other hand, it invents new forms by means of which the myth can find dramatic realisation and a corresponding new social function and hence, in its very above-time nature, introduce new temporality' (Žižek and Dolar, 2002, p. 6).

This political articulation between a transcendence of history and the birth of a new time implicates music in a particular way. If, as Lévi-Strauss suggested, music and myth are both 'machines to suppress time', and if, as Dolar details, the mythical and musical suppression of time are indispensable to the creation of *new* time, then opera becomes a unique symptom and battlefield of historical change. The immersive or even manipulative force of opera, when it comes to the obliteration of historical or chronological time, should not, however, make us believe that it is dependent on philosophy or critique to reveal this dialectic. Indeed, the

critical insights generated by Dolar and Žižek in *Opera's Second Death* require us to assume the fact that, to paraphrase Alain Badiou's reflections on politics, *music is a thought* (which is not necessarily to say a language), and one that is particularly capable of thematising its relation to time. Or rather, as the generative centrality of the myth of Orpheus verifies, opera is, among other things, music thinking itself. As Dolar observes: 'Music, in opera, stands in a self-reflective relationship – it performs its own representation, it stages its own power and its effects ... [showing] how it exceeds beyond social and rational structures. It structures the nonstructurable and represents the nonrepresentable (which is the Kantian definition of the sublime)' (Žižek and Dolar, 2002, p. 10). Opera could be said to reveal music's standing as both supra- and infra-societal, its work beneath and beyond language, but also, in a more strictly psychoanalytic register, its fundamental connection to the question of the Other, understood both as the radical alterity that unsettles the subject's self-possession and the anchor for a symbolic order that makes reality and experience intelligible. The psychic life of music in general, and opera in particular, thus turns out to orbit around the question of *pianto* and *lamento*, or, in Monteverdi's own striking formulation, *humiltà o supplicatione*. Opera dramatizes a key scene of subjectivation in the act of appealing, through and beyond speech, to a divine Other, who is foreseen to respond with *grazia, clemenza, pietà*. If the appeal to the Other is a paradigm of the aria, then the aria is an allegory and enactment of a fundamental moment of subjectivity (Žižek, 2010, pp. 166-9).

Lament and appeal were of course singularly potent, and problematic, dimensions of Attic tragedy itself, ones which in their association to unpolitical femininity and disruptive mourning were always singularly troubling for political philosophy, as evidenced in Plato's prescriptive musicology in the *Republic*, and as wonderfully analysed in multiple works by the French classicist Nicole Loraux (Loraux, 1999/2002 and 1997/2006). As Dolar notes, lament and appeal already centre the question of the feminine within any account of opera, and define its unpolitical politics.

Music is the power of the powerless, and its power is all the greater the more the subject has lost the last vestiges of any other power. The lament of the annihilated subject who has lost all succeeds in staging the music at its most sublime. It says: I have no power whatsoever over you, except music – and this is what makes it irresistible. (Žižek and Dolar, 2020, p. 15)

The lament as musical appeal to alterity (infra- and super-, or perhaps better trans-linguistic), also foregrounds the nexus in Lacan between the Other and the voice (alongside the gaze) as 'object-cause of desire'. The enduring power of the aria can thus also be understood psychoanalytically in terms of its capacity to 'present the voice beyond meaning, the object of fascination beyond content ... enjoyment beyond the signifier'. Rather than an epiphany of meaning, this is a matter of 'the immediate fascination with a senseless object' (p. 19).

It is no surprise then that philosophy is recurrently unsettled by, and suspicious of, lament and song more generally, which emphasise a voice beyond meaning. The reterritorialization of the voice onto the text is one manner of banishing a disorienting fascination. In his exemplary investigation of the 'object voice' as delineated by Lacanian theory, Dolar reminds us, with specific reference to the productive antagonism of word and voice in opera ('the dilemma of *prima la musica, e poi le parole*, or the other way around'), why psychoanalysis may be more receptive than doctrinal philosophy to the aria:

Singing takes the distraction of the voice seriously, and turns the tables on the signifier; it reverses the hierarchy – let the voice take the upper hand, let the voice be the bearer of what cannot be expressed by words. *Wovon man nicht sprechen kann darüber kann man singen*: expression versus meaning, expression beyond meaning, expression which is more than meaning, yet expression which functions only in tension with meaning – it needs a signifier as the limit to transcend and to reveal its beyond.[6] (Dolar, 2006, p. 30)

It is in this dialectic with meaning and textuality that the (sung) voice becomes the vehicle of 'surplus-meaning'.

Employing a different theoretical grammar, albeit one not insensitive to Lacanian themes, Stanley Cavell has discussed the (operatic) voice as ‘always before and beyond itself’, linking it to the theme of feminine identity, as well as to the question of how worlds of experience are made and unmade. Inasmuch as a world is constituted as a symbolic order of meaning, the voice is always sundered between orders, or between order and its absence. For Cavell, ‘it is in opera that humans are shown to have at all times more than one register in which their words are uttered, so that the question of the relation between what is said and what is heard, hence the question of who utters, hence of sincerity, is continually posed’ (Cavell, 1994, p. 102), while he takes ‘singing, I guess above all the aria, to express the sense of being pressed or stretched between worlds – one in which to be seen, the roughly familiar world of the philosophers, and one from which to be heard, one to which one releases or abandons one’s spirit’ (p. 144). We could say that it is as surplus, in its excess, that the singing voice can be the site of a (feminine) separation from the world as the condition for the affirmation of a new one. As Cavell reflects, drawing on a Freudian vocabulary:

Say that the apple taken from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil represents in its orality the birth of judgment as such. Then we seem to have a hint here about why opera so attunes itself to moments of separation, as if this is the founding trauma of human experience. If we conceive that singing, in its breaths, incessantly draws in and lets out the world as such, are we not conceiving that there is no worldchanging creation that is not a consequence of destruction? (Cavell, 1994, p. 148)

Cavell proposes ‘that we think of the voice in opera as a judgment of the world on the basis of, called forth by, pain beyond a concept’ (p. 149). But while this pain is beyond a concept, it is not beyond *thought*. On the contrary, it stages the very drama of subjectivation. Singing in opera can thus be conceived as:

calling back the world, or as expressing its inexpressible abandonment; and singing as (dis)embodied within the doubleness of the human expressed as ecstasy – being beside oneself, perhaps in joy, perhaps in grief – a doubleness taken in the sense of singing out of a world in which a world is intervening, one to which perhaps we belong in abandoning ourselves. This presents singing as thinking; thinking as narcissistic reflection; narcissism as capturing both the primitiveness of singing’s orality and the sophistication of singing’s exposure and virtuosic display. The exposure is to a world of the separation of the self from itself... (Cavell, 1994 p. 149)

The permanence of thought (or in Cavell’s own vocabulary, ‘understanding’) *before* meaning – therein lies the philosophical import of music and song (as well as of infancy) for Cavell, as existing ‘in permanent anticipation of-hence in perpetual dissatisfaction with, even disdain for-what can- be said’ (p. 160).

And yet, as Dolar reminds us, there are multiple ways of transcending meaning, and some may fill the gaps and lacks in the subject with ersatz substance, or, to put it otherwise, they may fashion worlds where none are or should be. Here lies the ideological core of opera, which ‘in focusing on the voice, actually runs the risk of losing the very thing it tries to worship and revere’. The operatic aria can turn into ‘a fetish object – we could say the highest rampart, the most formidable wall against the voice. ... The voice as a bearer of a deeper sense, of some profound message, is a structural illusion, the core of a fantasy that the singing voice might cure the wound inflicted by culture, restore the loss that we suffered by the assumption of the symbolic order’ (Dolar, 2006, p. 31).[7] But we may also traverse the ideologies of the voice in view of their fractures, and through the latter catch a glimpse of that ‘night of the world’ which is the ‘truth’ of subjectivity from this Hegelian and Lacanian vantage (and which would put it very much on the side of ‘skepticism’, to employ Cavell’s terminology). As Dolar has it: ‘music evokes the object voice and obfuscates it; it fetishizes it, but also opens up the gap that cannot be filled’ (p. 31).

In Mozart’s operas, as read and listened to by Dolar, the singing voice is not so much the salve for cultural diremption, as the force-field in which a whole dialectic of Enlightenment plays out its variations, in and through an inherently ‘sexual’ politics (p. 43). If the core of opera is to be found in the appeal to the Other, then Mozart’s operas – read here in critical dialogue with Ivan Nagel’s theses on the nexus of autonomy and mercy – show us, refracted through song and sex, the different shapes assumed by alterity, as we move from

a model of sovereign mercy still marked by the equivocation between monarchy and divinity, to a properly secularised or immanent scene of *forgiveness*. In a pre-revolutionary conjuncture, mercy appears as the site of a suspension of the totalising prerogatives of law, of the *troppo dura legge* from the libretto for Monteverdi's *Orfeo*. Psychoanalysis excavates something like a quasi-transcendental matrix for the crucial problem of the political philosophy of the Enlightenment, and of its translation into modern operatic myth. The Mozartian sovereign embodies the existence of an 'Other beyond the law' which differentiates itself from the 'Other of the law'. But there is a secret mercilessness to mercy, a way in which the more it seems to loosen the fetters of legality, the more it binds us to it. As Dolar observes:

The mechanism of mercy, so central to the early opera, displays an image of the Other beyond the law, a sublime image that glosses over and conceals another face of the Other of whim, the face of cruelty, inscrutability, and malice in deities and monarchs. There is another, much less sublime, psychoanalytic name for this mechanism of mercy: the superego. The logic of mercy relies on and engenders the logic of the superego, the other side of the law. (Žižek and Dolar, 2002, p. 24)

The question for Mozart's operas, and for the politics of the Enlightenment more broadly is then perhaps: when it comes to the law, can we ever emancipate ourselves from this other side? Can we think or sing our way beyond the law of the Other (beyond the law)? In the symptomatic figure of Sarastro,[8] from *The Magic Flute*, we see how the escape from the law of violence (the Queen of the Night) is never truly an escape from the violence of the law, from the irrationality of the superego, from the irrational foundation of political rationality – it is not just that autonomy is parasitic on transcendence, on the afterlives of sovereign mercy, but that the latter requires its own obscene underside (above all in the racialised and hyper-sexualised figure of Monostatos) (Cole, 2005). The most interesting recent productions of Mozart's operas, especially those by William Kentridge and Michael Haneke, have brought this negative dialectic of Enlightenment to the fore – the very one that Dolar anatomises as the tension in Mozart's operas between the transcendence of mercy typical of *opera seria* and the democracy of immanence that transpires from *opera buffa*, not incidentally Jean-Jacques Rousseau's predilection.

Mozart is here above all the great *artist of transition* (in a markedly different acceptance to the one given to this idea by Wagner), lending vocal and compositional form to the epochal problem of what mercy and forgiveness might mean in societies undergoing the upheavals of secularisation and democratisation. In *Don Giovanni*, the problem of transition is framed in its most unsettling guise, precisely because the titular character is himself a kind of 'disjunctive synthesis' athwart two epochs, who must be dispatched for the passage between them to be sutured. Don Giovanni is a merciless master for whom one can have no mercy, the 'archaic image of the real master' who demands 'the right to all nights', but also 'the autonomous subject which is the cornerstone of the Enlightenment' (Žižek and Dolar, 2002, p. 47) – a precursor of the Lacanian theme of *Kant avec Sade*, of that 'zone where pure liberty coincides with pure evil' (p. 48). Don Giovanni's paradoxical joining of the old and the new is thus met by the alliance between the *ancien régime* and the modern order:

The punishment for the rebel who took autonomy too seriously is finally dispensed on behalf of the new community, which joins forces with the emblem of the old order, the living dead of the statue. The upcoming new and waning old order enter into a coalition against the common enemy (Žižek and Dolar, 2002, p. 49).

It is telling that, as an allegory of modern politics, *Don Giovanni* is also the story of how drive must be politically disavowed. Don Giovanni is, in the uniquely Lacanian sense – which brings him into resonance with Antigone – an *ethical* figure. By not giving way on his desire, he becomes a subject of drive. His ethics is thus an ethics of repetition: 'Enjoyment turns into a mechanical repetition – what cannot be put into words, repeats itself, what is unique (that is, sensual) can only be repeated' (p. 56). This draws on Kierkegaard's lesson, from his seminal reading of Mozart in *Either/Or*, according to which Don Giovanni represents 'the pure principle of non-identity ... his only identity is eternal transformation, in purely negative determination – his only loyalty is the ceaseless repetition of disloyalty' (p. 53). We could draw from this a

kind of psychoanalytic explanation as to why the enjoyment of this subject 'between two societies', if not exactly beyond words, nevertheless cannot be pinned down; why, as Nagel has it, he manifests 'a negative application of the principle of individual characterization' (quoted at p. 48), standing at the centre of the opera but lacking a musical identity. This vocal evasion of identity allegorises Don Giovanni's discontinuity with any community, the fact that he cannot be incorporated into any enduring social order. This is perhaps why he embodies one of the very few properly modern, which is to say properly atheistic myths.

If Don Giovanni is the dark figure of a subject who repudiates any symbolic alterity or order, in *Così fan tutte* Dolar discerns the dialectic of Enlightenment qua contradictory transition by way of exploring the way alterity is figured, and sung, in the opera. How can we reconcile the modernity of *Così* with the widespread impression that its characters are so many puppets?[9] Rather than dismissing the criticism, we should reflect on the uncanny intimacy between moral autonomy and the mechanical automaton. A favourite phrase of Marx, *le mort saisit le vif*, is adduced by Dolar as the emblem of this paradox of Enlightenment (a paradox further exacerbated in Marx's own figuring of capital as an 'automatic subject'). The machinic or marionette-like character of the *combinatoire* of couples in *Così* is the correlate of the figure of alterity that dominates it, the 'philosopher' Don Alfonso as 'the agent of the gaze and the enjoyment of the other' (Žižek and Dolar, 2002, p. 69), revelatory of the perverse core of sovereignty, but also of the Lacanian lesson that, as Žižek notes elsewhere in this volume, the proper object of fantasy is the fantasized gaze, not the fantastic scene itself' (p. 130). Both ahead of and behind its time, a great opera of transition, *Così* makes patent, at the very moment of the French revolution, through Don Alfonso's machination of sexual desire, the survival and refunctioning of an absolutist fantasy of domination, or rather, 'its ultimate and most subtle transformation, the absent gaze of the master, the intangible enjoyment of an elusive Other. The absolute monarchy as the setting of the birth and rise of the opera survives in its most sublimated and distilled form' (p. 72). In its very non-contemporaneity, *Così* thus provides a unique prism through which to think the libidinal economy of Enlightenment and its emergent biopolitics beyond any comfortingly linear history:

Before machines and automata became useful, before they could serve as the basis of industrial revolution, they inhabited the space of a fantasy, offering themselves to the gaze of the Other. ... Disponibility and transparenance are also the main features of the puppets in *Così* ... There is only a small step from here to the fantasy of the panopticon, this universalized gaze of the Other whose place anybody can come to occupy. Once the mechanism of the mechanism sank in, this place ceased to be the privilege of the king; domination can function without a master, that is, it can function precisely as a machine. The procedures of drill, discipline, control, quadrillage, and so on can separate the place of the Other from the place of the master. The place can be disembodied and operationalized as the empty space of power. On the other hand, the surplus enjoyment that the fantasy ascribed to the Other could gradually get its material and quantifiable counterpart in the measurable profit – it could be economized, canalized, invested, and accumulated. (Žižek and Dolar, 2002, p. 71)[10]

If in Mozart we may find a chilling and perverse figure of alterity and domination beyond mastery, a sovereign gaze that is no longer the gaze of the sovereign, Dolar's Lacanian lens can also allow us to grasp the utopian-ideological dimension of Mozart's musical and dramatic solutions, as well the multiple fractures that 'unfinish' the project of Enlightenment. We thus have the Mozartian ensemble as a kind of miniature *analogon* of the Enlightenment-bourgeois utopia of community, as based on 'universal human reconciliation' – something that, as Žižek notes with reference to *The Marriage of Figaro*, is musically crystallised in a 'sublime instant evoking eternity' (Žižek and Dolar, 2002, pp. 207-8). Whereas the lamenting woman, as we've already noted, has been an abiding figure of political and philosophical disruption, Mozart's musical utopias reveal the feminine side of Enlightenment universality, albeit one that cohabits with a caustic misogyny. The Mozartian 'community can be created only when the female element forms the general ether that as a particularity gives the tone to the whole' (p. 44), while, as evidenced by the musical superiority of Pamina over Tamino in *The Magic Flute*, it is 'only the female element [that] enables the relationship between (self-)knowledge, reason, love, happiness', and the ultimate 'reconciliation of autonomy with nature' (p. 79).[11] This reconciliation – made possible by the persistence in Sarastro of the Other's mercy within the trope of 'autonomy through struggle' – in many ways defines Enlightenment as an

ideology of transition and Mozart's operas as the latter's most dazzling enactments and problematisations. As Dolar explains:

If Mozart stands at the point of intersection of two worlds, two social orders, and even two ontologies that are placed in fragile and contradictory balance, or in other terms, at the intersection of mercy and autonomy ... then one can consider *Die Zauberflöte* an attempt to make the two compatible in a mythical, utopian point of fusion. ... *Die Zauberflöte* solves an eminently political problem: how to resolve the crisis of a rule by creating a new rule. The solution offered by the opera, one that would eliminate the danger of such crises in the future, is that the new power must be based on the cult of wisdom, which had been constitutively separated from it until then ... In Lacanian terms, S1 has to unite with S2: the signifier of the master has to unite with the signifier of knowledge. (Žižek and Dolar, 2002, pp. 81-2)

The Magic Flute is such a beguiling modern myth precisely because of how it stages a resolution of contradictions, between knowledge and domination, the law and the 'Other beyond the law', authority and autonomy, and does so through the seemingly unhistorical medium of the operatic couple. But as myth, it is revelatory of the deadlocks, at once political and libidinal, in the formation of a modern subject – forcing us to ask whether the autonomous subject can indeed jettison the Other and abandon mastery without losing its ground. If that utopian balance and reconciliation is impossible, and Mozart's beguiling solution forever closed to us, will we just be thrown into the human subject as the phantasmagorical night of the world – as Dolar's concluding quote from Hegel might intimate?

In light of this philosophical and psychoanalytic problematisation, the passage from Mozart to Wagner is not just the move between seemingly incommensurable styles, techniques and voices, but between two thoroughly different articulations of music and myth. Wagnerian redemption, about which Adorno articulated such corrosive criticisms, is anything but Mozartian reconciliation, its transcodings of medieval legend widely seen to signal either a pessimistic abandonment of the political altogether (testifying to Wagner's own revolutionary failure and disappointment) or an anticipation of the 'total works of art' that 20th century dictatorships brutally enacted. On the surface of it, Žižek's Wagner is resolutely anti-historical, a challenge to the tendency for critical theories of opera to 'contextualise' his music dramas, especially in what concerns the place of the composer's anti-Semitism in his composition and dramaturgy. Even the psychoanalytically-inflected periodisation that governs Dolar's account is largely absent from Žižek's essay, which seems far keener on unfolding operatic subjectivity in a philosophical register akin to that of Kierkegaard's *Don Giovanni* essay, with which he establishes a rich and intricate dialogue. But, as becomes particularly evident in the pivotal discussion of 'feminine excess', while seemingly aloof from history, this is an essay preoccupied throughout with a certain *historicity*, both displacing and complementing Dolar's concern with opera as an art of transition, the song of a subject riven by political and social crisis. As Žižek clarifies in his self-interview 'Taking Sides':

The crucial point [...] is to distinguish historicity proper from evolutionary historicism. Historicity proper involves a dialectical relationship to some unhistorical kernel that stays the same – not as an underlying Essence but as a rock that trips up every attempt to integrate it into the symbolic order. This rock is the Thing *qua* 'the part of the Real that suffers from the signifier' (Lacan) – the real 'suffers' in so far as it is the trauma that cannot be properly articulated in the signifying chain. In Marxism, such a 'real' of the historical process is the 'class struggle' that constitutes the common thread of 'all history hitherto': all historical formations are so many (ultimately failed) attempts to 'gentrify' this kernel of the real. (Žižek, 1994, p. 199)

The idiosyncratic forging of musical myth in Wagner – a repetition of tragedy in the very context of its modern impossibility – provides, perhaps unsurprisingly, immensely rich material for psychoanalytic theorising about the constitution and aporias of subjectivity. This, we could even say, is a by-product of its disavowal of its social conditions of production, so brilliantly diagnosed by Adorno's *In Search of Wagner*. The lineaments of subjectivity emerge on the background of the repudiation or loss or catastrophe of the

world, the absence of a viable community or polis. This is perhaps why, as Bernard Williams observed: ‘Wagner is most successful in reconciling the mythical and the psychological ... when it is this last element that prevails: when the subjective intensity is so extreme, solitary and unrelated to citizenly or domestic life that in its own way it takes on an authority which is perhaps analogous to that of ancient tragedy’ (Williams, 2006, p. 78). This intensity is especially present in the orientation towards redemption in death that, according to Žižek, defines the *Klage* or complaint of so many Wagnerian heroes.

Once again, opera turns out, as in *Don Giovanni*, to be a matter of drive, and more specifically of the death drive. Lacan’s interpretation of the latter as something other than a meta-biological *telos* provides a crucial clue to the twisted nature of Wagnerian redemption, as well as to the very title of this collection, which is only partially about the oft-announced death of opera. The death drive is not the desire for annihilation but, as Žižek puts it, ‘*the very opposite of dying* – a name for the undead state of eternal life itself, for the horrible fate of being caught in the endless, repetitive cycle of wander around in guilt and pain’ (Žižek and Dolar, 2002, pp. 106-7) – resonating no doubt with the Schopenhauerian shadow hanging over so much of Wagner’s musical characterization. What *Parsifal*’s Amfortas and Kundry are driven by, for instance, is not a death-wish, but the ‘the will to abolish the indestructible rhythmic palpitation of life beyond death’ (p. 111). What they’re seeking is a second death that would redeem them from the death drive. Wagner’s operas in this respect provide a kind of musical and dramatic phenomenology of spirit’s desire for self-obliteration – no longer the Enlightenment utopia of law’s possible compatibility with love but the post-revolutionary phantasmagoria of love’s solidarity with world-catastrophe and death-*qua*-redemption. Hence the relevance for Wagner of Lacan’s treatment (in Seminar XX and elsewhere) of mediaeval ‘courtly love’ as an ‘act of radical transgression that suspends all sociosymbolic links and, as such, has to culminate in the ecstatic self-obliteration and death’ (p. 121). But, especially in *Tristan*, Wagner can also be read as making painfully palpable the aporias of this decadent figure of redemption. Interestingly inverting Dolar’s observation about many of Mozart’s operas, in which the music undermines the ideology of the libretto – for instance, in the valence accorded to Papageno versus Sarastro in *The Magic Flute* – Žižek’s Wagner short-circuits the musical ideology of self-obliteration through the opera’s staging (Žižek, 2010, p. 181; Žižek, 2007). In *Tristan*, Žižek writes, ‘the ultimate truth does not reside in the musical message of passionate self-obliterating love-fulfillment but in the dramatic stage action itself, which subverts the passionate immersion into musical texture’ (Žižek and Dolar, 2002, p. 123).

The most morbidly sublime masterpiece of redemption through death, of love as lethal fusion, thus turns out to also be the critique of this fascinating trope. Crucial to this insight is the difference between a notion of the Real as the absorbing, substantial ground of reality, and the late Lacanian view of the Real as the blockage, the ‘absolute recoil’ of the subject (Žižek, 2014). As Žižek notes apropos of *Tristan* again: ‘the [Lacanian] real is not the abyss of night in which reality disintegrates but the very contingent obstacle that again and again pops up, preventing the smooth run of the ecstatic immersion into the night; this obstacle materializes the inherent impossibility that undermines from within the fantastic immersion into the night’ (Žižek and Dolar, 2002, p. 124). And yet, by contrast with a more recent attempt at an ‘affirmative’ recovery of Wagner,[12] and notwithstanding the hostility towards historicist contextualisation, Žižek provides a potent musical ideology-critique of Wagner, articulated around the fantasy of the ‘redemptive power of the sexual relationship’ (p. 134), as evidenced especially in *Tristan*’s *Liebestod*. Wagner’s politics is not read through the prism of his compositional technique or of his aestheticization of political community but at the level of sexual difference itself. Herein lies what could be termed *the anti-historical kernel of the opera’s historicity*, but also, damningly, the core of Wagner’s fantasy, the site of his ‘ultimate retreat from the real: Instead of reconciling himself with the wound’ – namely, the impossibility of the sexual relationship – ‘he sticks to the dream of fully undoing it’ (p. 164).

Law and love – the twisted entanglement, violent sundering, and utopian reconciliation between these is the hunting ground of tragedy, psychoanalysis and indeed of philosophy itself, at least in the wake of Hegel and Kierkegaard. While, as Adorno himself recognised, there is an implicit ‘critique of violence’ in Wagner’s recognition, especially in the *Ring*, of the brutal foundations of social order,[13] there is also a potentially catastrophic desire for the neutralisation of a ‘wound’ that is at once sexual and political. If, as Žižek glosses,

'[e]quivalent exchange is a deceptive mirage that conceals the very excess on which it is grounded' (Žižek and Dolar, 2002, p. 136), what would a critique of abstraction be which would move beyond a fantasy of restoration? For Žižek, the impasse in any modern resolution of the tension between love and law is dramatized by the way in which 'Wotan concocts the figure of the hero not bound by any symbolic bond and thereby free to deliver the fallen universe of contracts' (p. 137). What is at stake, as in Dolar's reading of Mozart, is the historical shape taken by the Other, here grasped in terms of 'the great ideologico-political crisis of the late nineteenth century, which turned around the malfunctioning of investiture, of assuming and performing the paternal mandate of symbolic authority' (p. 137). As Williams suggests in his own interpretation of the *Ring*, there is a profound and telling ambivalence in Wagner between the recognition that there is no 'politics of innocence' and the ideological hope, borne by the music rather than the words, that politics as such might be transcended, as evidenced by the 'nobility and grandeur' of Siegfried's funeral music:

Not because of what it says (it says nothing) but, all the more, because of what it does, it can carry the suggestion that perhaps there could be a world in which a politics of pure heroic action might succeed, uncluttered by Wotan's ruses or the need to make bargains with giants, where Nibelungs could be dealt with forever: a redemptive, transforming politics which transcended the political. Such ideas had in Germany a long, complex and ultimately catastrophic history. (Williams, 2006, p. 83)

Rather than the ambivalence as such, what Žižek's analysis turns towards is a generative ideological matrix, stemming, as it were, from the subject's doomed political and sexual efforts to 'become substance', to be made whole. Reading Wagner's corpus through a Kierkegaardian prism, Žižek notes that what

defines Wagner's position is ... the underlying deadlock to which these three operas (*Tristan, Meistersinger, Parsifal*) each provide their own solution, the unstable relationship between the ethical universe of socio-symbolic obligations (contracts), the overwhelming sexual passion that threatens to dissolve social links (the aesthetic) and the spiritualized self-denial of the will (the religious). ... Each of these three solutions relies on a specific musical mode that predominates in it: the chromaticism of *Tristan*, the choral aspect of *Meistersinger*, the contrast between chromaticism and static diatonics in *Parsifal*. (Žižek and Dolar, 2002, p. 156)

It turns out that Wagner's deadlock is above all a matter of feminine subjectivity, of the composer's ultimate repudiation of the *emancipatory* (rather than *redemptive*) potential at the heart of 'hysteria'. But it is perhaps the very strength of his fantasy to suture the wound that compels him to dramatize feminine excess so powerfully and affectingly. Whence Žižek's placing of *Parsifal*'s Kundry in a sequence in which she's preceded by Antigone and Joan of Arc. The power and horror of Kundry lies in the fact that in her, '*the feminine excess arrives at its truth: that of the hysterical inconsistency, of not wanting what one claims to want*' (Žižek and Dolar, 2002, p. 192); the frightening inability to locate the substantial subject behind the masks of the hysteric is here the proper place of subjectivity; the subject, as limned by psychoanalysis, is paradigmatically hysterical. Further, we could argue that it is hysteria which provides us here with a further clue as to the distance between historicity and historicism. Here it is worth quoting Žižek at greater length, as he develops how the effort to neutralise feminine excess is itself a negative motor for historicization, and, we could add, a generative deadlock for operatic writing more broadly:

Far from being gender neutral, the uncanny excess of life that condenses the utmost characteristic of humankind (and which, as we have already seen, is the ultimate topic of psychoanalysis) is therefore feminine: Sexual difference is ultimately not the difference between two species of humankind, men and women, but between man ("human being") qua species and its (feminine) excess. Consequently, one should resist the temptation to historicize this disparaging of the feminine, reading it as the expression of the passage from the old matriarchal order (in which the ruling divinity itself was feminine) to the new patriarchal order, from which what was before elevated into the sublime feminine figure appears as the abyss of the feminine excess threatening to swallow the male subject; more than ever, one should insist that the two, the elevation and the condemnation of the feminine, are

two sides of the same strategy of coming to terms with feminine excess. It is rather history itself that should be conceived as the series of attempts to come to terms, through temporal displacement, with the unbearable, eternal antagonism of the feminine; the history of literature (and of real life) from antiquity onward offers a series of figures that try to normalize this excess. (Žižek and Dolar, 2002, p. 182)

Subjectivity, viewed through this lens, is not an ahistorical *a priori*, but neither is it an organic expression of a given historical context. Rather, the subject is born *at the limits of history*, in its cracks and fractures, both as hysterical void and as the interpellated fantasy of wholeness. Wagner's operas are a formidable musical and dramatic phenomenology of this modern subjectivity, especially in their (failing) efforts to bring 'feminine excess' under control. They accordingly provide seemingly infinite materials – especially, if, with Adorno, we enter into the minutiae of their technical construction, undaunted by their monumental scale – for a non-reductive ideological analysis, if we understand ideology (the ideology of music, of the voice, and not just *political* ideology *stricto sensu*[14]) to rest above all on the impossibility of fully confronting the subjective 'night of the world', or, in Žižek's terms, to heroically assume the 'nonexistence of the Other' (p. 223), *the* ethical, philosophical and metapolitical lesson of Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Can this ethics also translate into an aesthetics, into music? In an uncharacteristically Adornian and illuminating moment, Žižek suggests as much in presenting Arnold Schoenberg as the post-Wagnerian composer who sunders music from myth. Reminding us that Lévi-Strauss thought that the latter was most economically captured by the line from *Parsifal – Zu Raum wird hier die Zeit* ('Here time becomes space') – Žižek proposes *space becoming time* as the crucial displacement that defines Schoenberg's revolutionary contribution, in the process advancing a striking redefinition of *expressionism*: 'it is only when the direct, natural (harmonious) expression of the subject is prohibited that this barred subject can effectively express itself in a gesture in which expression is forever linked to its inherent failure' (Žižek and Dolar, 2002, p. 216). Listening to Wagner after Schoenberg (but also after Boulez and Chéreau's radical revisiting of the *Ring*, among several others), might thus also impel us to reconsider the composer of *Tristan* and the *Ring* in the register of the theory of the subject. It is particularly notable in this regard that in his recent *Five Lessons of Wagner*, Alain Badiou, in sustained dialogue with Žižek as well as Lacanian thought more broadly, has proposed an analysis of Wagner's operas as 'creating the present of subjective splitting as such in the music', undoing the Mozartian figure of identity as a *combinatoire*, and dramatically deploying a 'tragic' temporality in which 'the suffering subject ... is nothing other than a split that cannot be made dialectical, that cannot be healed ... an inner heterogeneity without any hope of genuine resolution'.[15] The imperative to 'realize the fractures' in Wagner and the tradition of opera more broadly, can clearly bear multiple philosophical lessons. All will require close listening to that which in history resists contextualisation, to voices untamed by speech or song.

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Note:

[1] This text was originally published in Italian as the postface to Dolar and Žižek, 2019.

[2] On the ‘differend’ between Bloch and Adorno with regard to Wagner, see Daub, 2014.

[3] Said comments that: ‘For what Adorno describes is deeply ironical and almost Brechtian: accentuating the discrepancies in Wagner, and doing it both by deliberate anachronism (not being true to his explicit stage-directions, for instance) and with a sense of freedom about what must remain unresolved, antinomian, bewildering in his work.’

[4] I take this notion from Bloch, 1935/1991. For a methodological discussion of ‘the non-contemporaneity of the contemporaneous’ bearing directly on the field of music, see Dahlhaus, 1977/1983, pp. 125ff.

[5] Curi’s erudite and incisive study draws, among others, on Cacciari, 1971.

[6] On voice and femininity in opera, see also Cavarero, 2003/2005, pp. 117-30.

[7] See also Dolar, 2006, pp. 129, 149 and 197 note 12, for a psychoanalytic critique of singing’s aestheticization of the voice.

[8] Dolar’s analysis could be fruitfully complemented by the political readings of the *Magic Flute* in Illuminati, 1980 and 1999.

[9] The theme of how automation and puppetry, as well as animality, are musically rendered in *The Magic Flute* is fascinatingly dealt with in Abbate, 2001, pp. 55-106, which also includes a critical engagement with Dolar’s arguments in *Opera’s Second Death*.

[10] The dialectic of Otherness and machine is also at the heart of Žižek's revisiting of the figure of the 'Lady' in Lacan's analysis of 'courtly love' (p. 204).

[11] Dolar nicely notes the way in which Mozart also musically 'sides with' Papageno against the ethical authority of Sarastro and his priests, as a prelude to the lesson that 'Morals cannot be put to music; regardless of how praiseworthy they may be, the music will revolt against them' (p. 84).

[12] See especially Žižek's preface to Adorno, 1952/2009.

[13] Adorno, 1952/2009, pp. 106-7: 'In Wagner, law is unmasked as the equivalent of lawlessness. ... The law that defined itself as punishment for lawlessness comes to resemble it and itself becomes lawlessness, an order for destruction: that, however, is the nature of myth as it is echoed in pre-Socratic thought, and Wagner adopts it not just as subject-matter, but in its innermost aesthetic consequences'.

[14] For an immensely rich sociological and musicological analysis of the ideology of the voice, see Salazar, 1980.

[15] Badiou, 2010, p. 91. Badiou defines the tragic in terms of 'the conflict between the appearance of things and something far more extensive, which is revealed in a gap in this appearance, and which has been secretly influencing its fate for a long time. The disclosure of this vast, hidden temporality holding sway over appearance is the time of tragic paradox' (p. 129). It is striking, by contrast with Žižek's conclusion in *Opera's Second Death*, that Badiou also presents the *Ring* as a kind of 'twilight of the Other', writing (under the influence of Chéreau's staging), of 'humanity's gazing out over the scene of destruction, over the end of mythology', and of the *Ring* as the 'relentless story of the obsolete nature of all mythologies' (pp. 105-6).

Bio:

Alberto Toscano is Reader in Critical Theory in the Department of Sociology and Co-Director of the Centre for Philosophy and Critical Theory at Goldsmiths, University of London, and Visiting Professor at the School of Communication, Simon Fraser University. He is a member of the editorial board for the journal *Historical Materialism: Research in Critical Marxist Theory* and is series editor of The Italian List for Seagull Books. He is the author of *The Theatre of Production: Philosophy and Individuation Between Kant and Deleuze* (2006), *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea* (2010; 2017, 2nd ed.), *Cartographies of the Absolute* (with Jeff Kinkle, 2015), and the co-editor of the 3-volume *SAGE Handbook of Marxism* (2021). He has translated books by Furio Jesi, Franco Fortini, Alain Badiou and Toni Negri.

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