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Today, Tomorrow, and In-Between: Straub/Huillet, the Schoenbergs, and the Gendered Micropolitics of Operatic Performance in *Von heute auf morgen*

Abstract

Artists who have confronted the politics of collaborative theater have been both drawn to and repelled by opera, intrigued by its aesthetic possibilities, its suspect politics, and its economic entanglements. Central to opera's fascination has also been its complex and manifestly gendered production of texts, voices, and performances. This essay explores the 1929 one-act opera *Von heute auf morgen* by the librettist-composer team of Gertrud and Arnold Schoenberg, and a collaborative filmic performance of it in the 1996 film of the same name by the directorial-production team of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub (musical direction by Michael Gielen). These two documents of operatic collaboration, along with the paired intertexts made up of the Straub/Huillet – Gielen film version of Arnold Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron* (1974-75), interrogate the complex field of attention to reveal its links to the aesthetics of gender, performance, and agency. Thus emerges an essential performative micropolitics embodying potential resistance to the opera's political economy of gendered domination.

In 1974, the filmmaking team of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet engaged the symphony and opera conductor Michael Gielen to begin a collaborative project that would address concerns central to their careers in a new way.¹ They turned to Arnold Schoenberg's opera *Moses und Aron*, a work for which Schoenberg wrote both the text and the music, and that had developed through halting stages as a play, libretto, and opera that took its final fragmentary form in 1932 (Goldstein 160, 167). *Moses und Aron* had fascinated Straub/Huillet since their attendance at the first fully staged performance in Berlin in 1959, and motivated them to explore how film and opera might work in concert with one another (Byg 141). As complex forms of art and spectacle, film and opera overlap in numerous ways, and Straub/Huillet sought a rigorous approach to how the two forms might be united through formal and technical means commensurate to their respective aesthetic, dramaturgical, visual, and acoustic demands. The result, completed in 1975, was a filmic performance of Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron* that not only embodies Straub and Huillet's thorough and highly theorized approach to filmmaking, but also succeeds as a major recorded performance of an opera that is notoriously complex in its musical structure, dramatic vision, textual density, and visual spectacle.

In 1996 the same team of artists turned to another other opera composed by Schoenberg – with his wife Gertrud Schoenberg as librettist – that was, like *Moses und Aron*, composed with his exceptionally rigorous twelve-tone technique. This vastly different work, which has received less critical interest, is *Von heute auf morgen*. It was composed during late 1928 and 1929 between Schoenberg's inception of work on the libretto of *Moses und Aron* and his completion of the music for its first two acts (Brand, "A Short History" 241). *Von heute auf morgen* had captured Straub/Huillet's interest for many years as well. They had listened to it on record as early as 1965, and studied the score around 1972 at the time they were creating their first film that incorporated

Schoenberg's music directly, their *Einleitung zu Arnold Schoenbergs Begleitmusik zu einer Lichtspielszene* ("Eine Hexe" 87). In *Von heute auf morgen* they redoubled the thoroughness of their technical approach to the union of film and opera, and again produced a significant reference-building performance of a work of striking musical, dramatic, visual, acoustic, and emotional contrast. This paper will construct a reading of *Von heute auf morgen* that explores how the operatic/filmic field of interwoven performance and spectatorship draws out the dynamics of attention in ways that develop potential for resistance to gendered domination. Theoretical scaffolding for this reading will be found in the work of Jonathan Crary, Brandon LaBelle, Kathrine Cuccuru, and Bence Nanay. These scholars trace the resonances of attention through both spontaneous and intentional perception, listening, and aesthetic experience. *Moses und Aron* will be explored secondarily as a historical and aesthetic intertext that contrasts with central elements of *Von heute auf morgen*'s thematics, and thereby throws them into high relief.

Straub/Huillet always insisted that their films – despite the extraordinary care they took with their technique, preparation, and execution – were made to be watched, and even enjoyed, by audiences. They did not seek critical or scholarly recognition for its own sake. By paraphrases and quotes Huillet from one of her rare individual interviews, published in the journal *Frauen und Film* in 1982: "To the suggestion that Straub/Huillet films, too, seem to be built on a strict system, based on renunciation, she replied, 'I hope not *only* that. I hope that one can feel sensuality and pleasure [*Lust*] at the same time. Can sense the fragrance of things'" (13). This sensory metaphor – that one might be able somehow to "smell" a film – points to the care with which Straub/Huillet approached a further field of sense perception that they could in fact build directly into their films: sound. *Von heute auf morgen* represents a culmination of their longstanding interest in co-constructing unified visual and sonic fields of performance and attention in their films.

This led them to take a passionate interest in the technology of reproduction, because they argued that the attention of spectator-listeners could be strained, even attacked, by sound that diverged from the carefully constructed visual field on the screen. When asked by Robert Bramkamp in a 1997 interview “why did you shoot the film with a monaural optical soundtrack?” Huillet answered vividly, emphasizing the spectator-listener’s experience and the significance of an integrated sonic-visual field:

Because we both hate Stereo. And we hate Dolby more. And even more, we hate the so-called Dolby Surround Sound, in which one is bombarded from the rear. Where one suddenly feels gunshots or music on the back of one’s neck. [...] If you have two people on one screen, what sense does it make to hear them from the left and right? (“Eine Hexe” 90).²

These integrated fields function to allow reflection of, and upon, a critical sphere of cinematic thematics that carries, in both *Von heute auf morgen* and *Moses und Aron*, vast significance both for the characters on the screen and for the audience’s relationship to the filmic-operatic work: the dynamics of attention. This exploration of attention includes – and hinges upon, through the representation of gender performance in *Von heute auf morgen* – both attention broadly defined (attention to any object or person) and aesthetic attention (to an artistic work or performance). It enables the film-operas, and in a particularly fascinating counter-intuitive fashion *Von heute auf morgen*, to work as spaces enabling the performance of a politics of resistance to gendered oppression.

To interpret *Von heute auf morgen* as a representation of resistance to oppressive gendered norms may at first seem jarring. It is a short, one-act work with a simple plot, one that on the surface appears unlikely to unsettle traditional gender roles in the nuclear family. The denouement even appears to reinscribe them in a manner directed against discourses and symbols of female liberation during the 1920s. The Woman takes revenge

upon The Man for his dallying at a party with her (female) Friend by attracting the interest of a (male) Singer.³ The plot is symmetrically structured, with an initial conflict after The Man and The Woman return to their modern apartment (in which all action takes place), a central dramatic-structural fulcrum in which the Woman stages a gendered performance as a liberated, modern woman of the times who does not care about traditional family relations, and a final resolution in which the awakened Child – and a visit by The Friend and The Singer – lead The Man and The Woman to a tenuous reconciliation.

Arnold Schoenberg himself, in a well-known letter to Hans Wilhelm (later William) Steinberg, the conductor of the work's 1930 Frankfurt premiere, seemed to authorize a reading of the work that casts its thematics against the “merely modern” or “fashionable...in marriage as in art, in politics, and in points of view on life” (qtd. in Stuckenschmidt 300).⁴ Nonetheless the work's complex figuration of attention, especially in The Woman's gender performance in the central portion, invites an against-the-grain reading that highlights the Woman's agency in demanding, offering, and receiving attention, and resisting masculine domination of these attentive vectors. Straub/Huillet's filmic performance draws out the visual and aural dynamics of this agency with rigorous visual and sonic focus, guiding the spectator-listener's aesthetic attention into the field of attentive performance represented on the screen.

Straub/Huillet sought in wide-ranging ways to use the integrated visual and sonic fields in their cinema to unfold potential resistance to the violent politics of race, class, and gender oppression in their re-readings of the “great” works that provided intertextual grounding for their films. Among the ways they sought to do so, in their unique and highly personal style, was to work with non-professional film actors – including opera singers – to achieve performances that focused attention onto the structures of

representation and communication in their films, in particular by highlighting the significance of the vocal utterance itself. Manuel Ramos-Martinez analyzes this technique succinctly:

[T]he resistance of Straub and Huillet to the relation of captivity between voice and body reproduced by dominant cinemas operates from different grounds than most feminist filmmakers and theorists. And yet their work has relevance for feminist theory and art practices since they also seek to undo militaristic, patriarchal, capitalist modes of speech, punctuation and communication. [...] The cinema of Straub and Huillet makes us see and hear how the cohabitation voice-body is not held at the price of an impoverishment or entrapment of the vocal, but on the contrary makes possible something like a lyrical detonation (6).

For Straub and Huillet, the voice belongs to the body, and is its most powerful political tool. Opera, therefore, provides an especially tense space of potential for the voice, because the form turns not just upon the way characters perceive – or fail to perceive – the smallest and simplest vocal utterances, but also upon vast and sublime moments of vocal transfiguration directed at audiences in the theater. Straub/Huillet's Schoenberg films both contain every level of these dynamics. *Moses und Aron* focuses on the larger-scale question of community life and leadership. *Von heute auf morgen* mines the domestic space for its gendered micropolitics, foregrounding how attention shapes and structures relationships.

Byg highlights Gilles Deleuze's appreciation of Straub/Huillet's most signal achievement in ways that are further significant to understanding the gendered micropolitics of attention that structure *Von heute auf morgen*. Deleuze, in his *Cinema 2*, focuses on the visual in Straub/Huillet's work to draw out film's political potential (here, like many other commentators, masking Huillet's co-equal role behind Straub's name):

Renaiss and the Straubs are probably the greatest political film-makers in the West, in modern cinema. But, oddly, this is not through the presence of the people. On the contrary, it is because they know how to show how the people are what is missing, what is not there... (qtd. in Byg 5).

In showing “what is not there,” Straub/Huillet are allowing potential to emerge, they are making manifest what is otherwise hidden, repressed, oppressed, sublimated, or exploited. I suggest that especially in *Von heute auf morgen*, this making-manifest in their filmic practice has two crucial valences: 1) they show us the constituent “not there” of feminist resistance in the domestic sphere by staging the emergence of the embodied female voice from a position of suppression; and 2) they allow us, as audience, to *hear* the “not there” that is at the core of the politically charged act of *attention*. *Von heute auf morgen*, in staging the eruption of an overt, targeted gender performance as a demand for both perceptual and aesthetic attention, reminds us that gender performance does not vanish into nothingness when not overtly staged. It is always, everywhere, “not there.”

The historical development of *Von heute auf morgen* contains an additional moment of significance related to the “not there” of the female collaborator. As an operatic work, and a focus of Straub/Huillet’s interest, it emerged from a form of collaboration otherwise almost unheard-of in operatic practice: male and female life partners shared materially in the construction of the work. This moment is redoubled through another biographical moment, exile. While especially Straub/Huillet were reticent to admit biographical explanations for their artistic motivations, both they and the Schoenbergs experienced forms of exclusion that led to re-evaluation of identity and eventually departure from the ethnic spaces into which they were born and had originally built identities – Straub/Huillet leaving France in resistance to the violence of the Algerian war; the Schoenbergs departing Germany at the hands of the Nazis (Byg 9).

While Arnold Schoenberg composed the score (and is often given singular rhetorical credit for the achievement in contradiction to substantial scholarly evidence to the contrary), his second wife Gertrud collaborated closely on the libretto.⁵

Symptomatically, she chose to do so under a pseudonym charged with both gendered and racialized resonances: “Max Blonda.” Juliane Brand’s musicological and documentary work brilliantly demonstrates that Arnold and Gertrud Schoenberg saw their work as a substantially co-equal collaboration (“Of Authorship”). In another 1997 interview, this time with Artem Demenok, Straub/Huillet emphasize the importance of Gertrud Schoenberg’s contribution to the opera in their typically polemical voices:

Straub: And here it is something very important, it is a text by a woman. [...]

Schoenberg would most certainly never have made an opera out of a text he despised. [...]. There is no American film with a text as precise, finely worked, and interwoven as this text here. [...]

Huillet: I think that the people who say this text is bad are simply ignorant (“Eine Hexe” 91).⁶

Just as Straub/Huillet’s practice makes no sense without questioning traditional role distinctions between director, screenwriter, and production designer, neither does the Schoenbergs’ without dissolving rigid distinctions between composer and librettist.

In their readings of the Schoenberg(s’) operas, Straub/Huillet – Gielen achieve an approach to attention that reveals it both as a multifaceted formal moment structuring the two operatic works and also as a link uniting the audience’s filmic and operatic experience into a mode of consciousness that can ignite political and historical awareness. In the opera-films, the representation of attention gains further significance because it unfolds in parallel to, and always linked with, the representation of identity. In *Moses und Aron* attention is to the Word of God, to the title characters with access to it,

and to the possibility or impossibility of divine representation; identity is therefore historically conditioned and contingent upon group practices of worship and belonging. In *Von heute auf morgen* attention is paid visually and aurally to and among a small ensemble of only five spoken and sung characters in a closely circumscribed domestic space; identity is therefore intensely interpersonal and localized. The conflicts in *Von heute auf morgen* are therefore necessarily and thoroughly gendered, whereas in *Moses und Aron* the theological-political scope supersedes the exploration of gender relations. The two works between them thus bear out, on the one hand, a vastly scaled macropolitics of historical belonging, and on the other a densely variegated micropolitics of personal and domestic relations.

The work of the theorists Jonathan Crary and Brandon LaBelle, seen further through the lens of a scholarly conversation in analytical philosophy over the past decade that seeks to explore potential differences between aesthetic attention and attention broadly conceived, provides a foundation for close reading of these opera-films that does justice to their density and complexity. Crary's work, especially in his book *Suspensions of Perception*, seeks to understand how the psychological and social investigation of human perception during the rise of modernity focused ever more closely upon techniques and practices of attention. LaBelle, in *Sonic Agency*, argues that it is particularly through the force of acoustic experience that emancipatory potential can emerge. For LaBelle, the concept "listening" therefore inheres the particularly acoustic elements of attention, and he prefers that term. Crary, however, seeks to explore both the acoustic and the visual, thus he prefers the term "attention." Crary's work therefore provides a kind of conceptual envelope around LaBelle's more specific claims. Their arguments are enriched and deepened by the philosophical insights of Kathrine Cuccuru and Bence Nanay (who themselves respond to the work of other philosophers including

Carolyn Dicey Jennings, Wayne Wu, Murray Smith, and Elisabeth Schellekens). This theoretical constellation provides powerful tools for analyzing the two Straub/Huillet – Gielen opera-films.

Crary’s argument begins with a dependent clause pointing to profound historical shifts in the cultural structuring of visual and auditory perception. He also immediately raises operatic experience, focusing his readers upon it as a potentially heightened form of attention:

Whether it is how we behave in front of the luminous screen of a computer or how we experience a performance in an opera house, [...] we are in a dimension of contemporary experience that requires that we effectively cancel out or exclude from consciousness much of our immediate environment (1).

He proceeds to draw direct links to identity:

I am interested in how Western modernity since the nineteenth century has demanded that individuals define and shape themselves in terms of a capacity for “paying attention,” that is, for a disengagement from a broader field of attraction, whether visual or auditory, for the sake of isolating or focusing on a reduced number of stimuli (1).

These forthright introductory statements outlining Crary’s interests enable a definition of attention adequate to the complexities of the operatic-filmic works examined here: attention is, at its core, a focusing of visual and auditory perception.

Attention has, however, two aspects that support and expand its analytical and explanatory power here. Firstly, attention’s focus may or may not emerge from volition or desire. Individuals can choose to be attentive – to “pay” attention – or their attention may, in any number of ways, be encouraged, attracted, drawn, forced, or coerced. In Crary’s formulation: “attention is the means by which an individual observer can [...]

make perception *its own*, and attention is at the same time a means by which a perceiver becomes open to control and annexation by external agencies” (5; emphasis original).

Cuccuru’s discussion of (general) attention frames this idea, in the kind of binary language common to analytical philosophy, as follows:

There are two distinct characteristics of what is ordinarily understood as the act of attending. One is that the act is spontaneous or automatic, that is, *to draw our attention*. The other is that the act is intentional or controlled, that is, *to focus our attention* (163-164; emphasis original).

In aesthetic attention, this distinction is heightened, because aesthetic objects have a vast array of attributes that stand in relation to the spectator-listener. Cuccuru enriches her analytical argument with reflection on this issue:

Moreover, my characterization accommodates the complex relation between automatic and controlled attention seen in aesthetic experience. For example, I purposefully focus on a performance of the [Gregorio Allegri] *Miserere*.... [O]ver the fourteen minutes or so of its performance, my attention shifts throughout, I focus on certain harmonies, I am suddenly drawn to another layer of voices, and then, I find myself fiddling with my concert programme, realizing that I am no longer paying attention at all (172).

In *Von heute auf morgen* the drama is structured around the characters’ unstable fluctuation between these not always clearly differentiable spheres of attention, particularly with respect to the communicative or aesthetic qualities of the voice. The intimate relationships around which the plot is built further demonstrate how fraught these dynamics of spontaneous vs. intentional attention can become, and the opera-film stages them with exquisite care. *Moses und Aron*, with its biblical setting, shifts the

stakes of these questions of spontaneous and intentional attention into the sphere of the historical and theological.

LaBelle's arguments about "sonic agency" enable this understanding of attention – parsed in his terms somewhat more narrowly as "listening" – to be made especially productive for the sphere of the operatic, in which acoustic phenomena provide the formal foundation. While LaBelle focuses his readings on contemporary forms of literature, theater, music, and political resistance, rather than on forms like opera with considerable high-cultural historical freighting, his claims about the power of listening are striking in the context of opera and opera-film. An especially important valence of LaBelle's "listening," and one that Crary's broader "attention" cannot fully encompass, is communication. When individuals listen, it is often in the expectation of meaning. These arguments are especially fruitful for reading *Von heute auf morgen*, in which failures of communication, driven by tense and layered gender performance and heightened aesthetically through the techniques of the operatic voice, stand at the center of the dramatic conflicts:

Experiences of listening are deeply connected to the act of dialogue; conversations amongst friends and family, intimate exchanges, or those between colleagues or neighbors. [...] Yet within such a scene listening is also easily distracted. [...] Listening, I would suggest, is often a listening *after* something or someone; it follows behind this sound that is already moving elsewhere (18-19; emphasis original).

LaBelle goes on to mine this exploration of listening for its emancipatory potential. The challenges inherent in the project lead him to conclude his argument with a range of rhetorical questions, but one in particular gives a clear summation: "Is it possible to cast listening as an activism that may give challenge to existing demarcations of structures of

domination, or against those who seek to dominate others?” (160). I suggest that in the context of *Von heute auf morgen*, this is precisely what engaged listening offers to the lead female character – access to genuine agency.

LaBelle’s reflections on listening are further deepened in the context of opera-film by philosopher Bence Nanay’s analysis of what he calls “musical twofoldness,” a concept that distinguishes attention to the musical work itself from attention to the qualities of any given performance of that work. He argues that the only conclusion one can draw about this twofoldness is that “when we aesthetically appreciate a musical performance, we simultaneously attend to both the features of the performed musical work and the features of the token performance we are listening to” (606). There is no musical-aesthetic attention without embodiment through performance.

The question of musical twofoldness similarly parallels what musicologist Carolyn Abbate explores as a distinction (drawn from the philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch, whom she translated) between the “gnostic” – the reflective, hermeneutic, and epistemological – and the “drastic” – the unmediated, embodied, and performed – in opera. She narrates an experience she had of two performances of the same production of Wagner’s *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* a few days apart in which the tenor Ben Heppner, singing the extraordinarily demanding role of Walther von Stolzing, experienced vocal failure in the first performance, and was unable to sing the sequence of high notes in the “Prize Song.” This moment of failure breaks the veil of gnostic-attentive, knowledge-mediated spectatorship, rendering the performance a drastic sequence of ongoing cognitive dissonance between Heppner’s failing vocal instrument and the brilliant operatic spectacle surrounding him:

Heppner would go on singing knowing what lay ahead. Now the other performers seemed, somewhat psychotically, still to inhabit their roles in Wagner’s jolly

Nuremberg, while Heppner became a unique human being in a singular place and time, falling from the high wire again and again (Abbate 535).

In the second performance, Heppner was once again in strong voice, but Abbate relates that she was unable to attend to the flawless performance without near-hallucinatory imagination of the potential consequences of a renewed vocal break.

This story demonstrates the mutual implication of the gnostic and the drastic. Abbate does not seek to detract from gnostic, epistemologically oriented forms of scholarship, inquiry, and informed spectatorship. She argues, however, that without attention to the embodied, performed carrying-out of music, much of its significance goes missing (513). As a major figure in the feminist turn in opera studies that accelerated dramatically after the publication of Catherine Clément's *Opera, or the Undoing of Women* in English in 1988, Abbate further motivates us to think of how gender is implicated in this drastic sphere. This issue is in play in her readings of *Meistersinger*, for in the opera the main female character, Eva Pogner, is made – by her own father – into the physical prize for the male winner of the singing competition. With respect to *Von heute auf morgen*, the stakes could not be clearer, or more significant for the work, its performance, and its interpretation: the opera overtly stages gender performance as something intensely bound up with the operatic voice and operatic representation. The drastic and the gnostic aspects of operatic experience are both highlighted through the interplay of the complex vectors of aesthetic and perceptual attention between audience, characters, camera, and soundtrack.

Additionally, opera as an artistic form – further heightened through Straub/Huillet – Gielen's techniques of opera-film – foregrounds the tension between the diegetic space of representation and the non-diegetic space of audience perception and reception. In an operatic context, the audience, the musicians, and the singers all pay attention to the

technical, textual, and artistic considerations that support the realization of the work. At the same time, however, the characters performed by the singers on the opera stage further represent, through the multivalent nature of their utterances, the complex nature of attention itself. Those characters produce song linked in various ways to a text. They also interact with one another dramatically, often representing highly stylized linguistic communication. Operatic performers must therefore strive to maintain at all times at least two modes of attention: attention to the technical realization of the work through their singing, and attention to the representation of potentially communicative interaction required by the dramatic text. In all operatic performance, these multiple modes of attention required of the performers can conflict with one another – highlighting the embodied risks of operatic performance. At the same time, however, their potential conflict can become an element in the material of the work itself. *Von heute auf morgen*, both as opera and as opera-film, layers these moments atop one another. Its thematics of vocally mediated attention construct a kind of double twofoldness, because the audience's attention is modulated through the representation of the characters' attention. Its realization as opera-film then re-doubles this double twofoldness through the layering and interlacing of filmic with operatic-musical techniques of reproduction.

The technical instantiation of *Moses und Aron* and *Von heute auf morgen* as filmic performances by Straub and Huillet allows the links between attention and its contributory concepts of identity, distraction, and communication to emerge. Byg describes their directorial demands on the camera as a means of making clear the directions of visual and aural interaction in the film space. The camera never cuts to a place where it might, logically, have the potential to see itself in another shot within the scene (21-22). The camera thus has its power of visual misrepresentation and distraction thwarted, which puts boundaries around the visual spectacle and the camera as the means

to it. This further emphasizes the aural quality of the sound film through the precise localization of both the visual and acoustic phenomena linked to the characters in the filmic space. Benoît Turquety emphasizes the rigor with which Straub/Huillet pursued the acoustic consequences of this representational choice: they chose Jean Renoir's phrase "dubbing is murder" and Jorge Luis Borges's image of the "usurpation of voices" to demand that – as long as the technology of sound film was to be deployed – the filmic space and its represented persons not become estranged from their own sonic world (49). This technical thoroughness enables the characters and their utterances in speech and song to remain linked to their agency, and makes these links available for attentive, critical observation. This is particularly significant in opera, in which the voice always holds the potential to work its way free of the body of the singer-character while still carrying its gendered loadings, and become the focus – like Eva Pogner in *Meistersinger* – of fetishistic interest and economic-institutional exploitation.

Von heute auf morgen represents the high point of Straub/Huillet's technical concern with this unity of image and sound – and bears out the consequences of this unity for the gendered space represented in the diegesis. Gielen meticulously rehearsed the score with the Frankfurt Radio Symphony and the five singers who complete the cast, with the film crew carefully planning each blocked shot. A full concert performance was then given in Frankfurt. During this process, Straub/Huillet divided the score into 62 shots corresponding with caesuras in the music and action, and added two more introductory-credits shots (of the recording studio with orchestra and of graffiti script in German asking "Where does your smile lie buried?") before the commencement of the opera for a total of 64 (Volkmer et al. 14-15; "Eine Hexe" 90).⁷ The shots were then filmed and recorded with complete simultaneity of image and sound – nothing was added or subtracted from the soundtrack in postproduction (Primavesi 111). Brady emphasizes

how revolutionary this strategy of filmed “liveness” was, and that it embodies and heightens significant thematics of technological mediation that structure the opera (329). In Straub and Huillet’s filmic space, then, the characters participating in a communicative exchange must be visually and acoustically embedded within that exchange. Acoustic phenomena and utterances that are non-communicative must also reveal themselves as such. It is through this scrupulously visually and acoustically referential filmic technique, free of the potentially misleading, distracting, even dominating camera and microphone motion that characterizes much filmmaking, that the dynamics of attention start to become representable. In their *Von heute auf morgen*, Straub/Huillet place this rigorous technique in the service of a rendering-into-presence of what the operatic text renders as crucially “not there”: the unity of the female voice and the person who contains it, and therefore of the female voice’s potential to become the focus of attention under the condition of modernity.

Before turning to a close reading of *Von heute auf morgen*, however, a brief discussion of *Moses und Aron* will demonstrate the range and depth of Straub/Huillet’s interest in these thematics and techniques that render attention into the grounding of a performance of resistance. *Moses und Aron* represents them on an epic scale, as questions of religious action and identity among an entire people in a biblical world. Obedience is to God and to the potential representations of God’s laws for the Hebrew people as embodied in Moses’s experience, understanding, and text. Belonging is to the Hebrew people, to its complex identity as a community of interests, ideals, and drives in the historical and cultural world of the Exodus. Moses, whose words are delivered in the opera not in full-voiced song but in *Sprechstimme*, a form of declamation that fascinated Schoenberg in which the singer shapes pitch and rhythm only very approximately to the indicated notes in the score in order to heighten and transform their effect as

communicative speech. This form of vocal representation embodies the stakes of Moses's demands upon the Hebrew people – that they hew to the *Bilderverbot*, the commandment to make no graven images of God, not even through linguistic representation or vocal beauty. Aron's words, on the other hand, are delivered through the full-voiced beauty of the operatic tenor, shimmering like the Golden Calf he allows and motivates the Hebrews to erect and worship. Schoenberg's twelve-tone musical structure enables the representation both of Moses's severity and of the famous "Dance Around the Golden Calf," an operatic ballet scene as famous for its gendered sensual excess as two distant intertexts: the *Venusberg* scene in Wagner's *Tannhäuser* and the "Dance of the Seven Veils" in Richard Strauss's *Salome* (itself an adaptation of Oscar Wilde's play). In *Moses und Aron*, when the Hebrew people attend to what they hear, they are recursively confronted with two linked, but often conflicting, moments linking listening and identity: whom do they obey, and to whom do they belong? In *Moses und Aron*, the impossibility of deciding which of the title characters provides the more successful model of engaging the attention of the Hebrews – the diegetic audience – emerges from the dynamics of attention, and submerges, undecided and undecidable, back into them. For the non-diegetic audience, the experience of being thrown before this undecidability is riveting and unnerving, especially accompanied by Schoenberg's shatteringly intense, often disorienting, but also aesthetically fascinating music.

A deviation that Straub and Huillet make from Schoenberg's score for *Moses und Aron* highlights the constitutive tension in the Hebrews' attention between obedience to God and belonging to their people, their lineage, and their homeland. This deviation does not interrupt an otherwise complete filmic performance of Schoenberg's score. Rather it stands as a prologue to that performance in which a voice-over reads the German text of Exodus (II. Moses) chapter 32, verses 21-28 in Martin Luther's translation. These verses,

which describe Aron's accession to the raising of the Golden Calf during Moses's absence on Mount Sinai, are the biblical basis for much of the second act of *Moses und Aron*. Nonetheless, the voice-over does not read only those verses that become represented in the opera. Rather it reads just past the passage on which the drama is based, onward to a verse that describes the consequences for the Hebrew people commanded by Moses upon his return: that those who *hear* God, and therefore both belong to and obey God ("wer Gott gehört") should stand to him, and then proceed through the camp to kill friends and relatives. The Levites do so, and three thousand die. As Ute Holl describes in reading Straub/Huillet, Schoenberg, Freud, and Benjamin together: "*Gesetzlichkeit* [...] always comes with unconceivable violence" ("The Moses Complex's").⁸ The Straub/Huillet – Gielen reading of *Moses und Aron* thus stands in the shadow of this prologue and its tearing away of the layers of mediation that accrete to attention: listening, communication, identity, and agency. Those who hear are those who belong, and those who obey. They can – where the demands upon their attention drive them toward the violent instantiation of exclusionary identity – therefore be those who perpetrate.

In *Von heute auf morgen*, attention through listening reveals stakes of identity and agency in a similar dynamic fashion, but one explored on an entirely different scale through an entirely different historical moment: the marriage and the family under the condition of modernity. Here too, identity and agency are structured by moments of obedience and belonging: obedience is potentially to the relationship partner and the responsibilities of relationships and families. Belonging is a complex mixture, itself further iterating the complexity of attention itself: belonging can be to the family unit, but also can be a moment of ownership mediated through the web of modern economic relations. The Woman (wife) can desire her female friend's acquaintance, an operatic

tenor, and The Man (husband) his wife's friend, because through their voices, bodies, clothing, actions, and words they command different – and differently gendered – moments of attention. The Straub/Huillet - Gielen film opera of *Von heute auf morgen* therefore instantiates in a unique and intense fashion the classical internal dynamics of Judith Butler's argument about gender performativity: that it instantiates visible, exterior markers of identity that recursively shape and condition interior processes.

In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. [...] This also suggests that if that reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse.... (185; emphasis original).

The Woman's multiple modes of gender performance, which emerge out of and subside back into one another in the course of the drama, necessarily constitute one another. The rapprochement between husband and wife at the end of the work therefore remains troublesome, because it does not – and cannot – resolve the tensions that arise in the drama and the sung text through the complex dynamics of attention. Gender performativity does not stop at the threshold of the domestic space, and the restoration of marital harmony, while humanely satisfying, necessarily carries the seeds of the next iteration of its interruption. The falling away of the sung vocal text into *Sprechstimme* and the speech of a child – “Mama, what are those, modern people?” – at the end of the opera makes this undecidability again manifest (Schoenberg and Blonda [pseud. Schoenberg], measures 1127-1128).⁹

As Patrick Primavesi suggests, this “apocalypse at the family scale” is every bit as powerful as biblical pillars of fire and tablets of The Law, for in it the uncanny, unspoken

tensions of desire and economic relations emerge onto the surface (120-21). Primavesi's reading, one paralleled by Brady's recent exploration of the technological elements in the opera's representational field, must however be extended through attention to the genderedness of the field of attention in the opera: who (or what) "belongs" to whom, "heeds" whom, stands in a relation of ownership or submission, or retains the power of embodied representation to command attention. *Von heute auf morgen* heightens these stakes by staging the operatic voice itself, along with potential means of its technological mediation, as a focus of attention. In *Von heute auf morgen* the tenor who is the focus of The Woman's desire plays upon this power. This foregrounds how vocal utterances can come apart from their potential for communicative function, and is represented in the opera through sometimes almost parodistically heightened listening – and the failures thereof – as a central aspect of attention.

A brief structural reading of *Von heute auf morgen*, both as conceived by the Schoenbergs and as realized through filmic performance by Straub/Huillet – Gielen, will reveal the central moments from which the potential for attention to the main female vocal presence emerges, particularly through her staging of gender performativity as the fulcrum of the drama. The work is loosely structured in five parts. Five characters, all with abstract names, participate: The Man, The Woman, The Singer, The Friend, and The Child. In the first part, The Man and The Woman have just returned from a party, and express their interest in other guests there: The Woman was approached by The Singer, and The Man was enchanted by The Friend, with whom The Woman had rekindled her previous acquaintance (measures 1-328; shots 1-18). The Woman's desire is vocally mediated; The Man's is visually focused. One deviation in the film from the Schoenbergs' stage directions is that The Man and The Woman enter the scene through a glass door from the veranda of their apartment, emphasizing the visual and material

accessibility of their domestic space from outside it (measure 1; shot 1). The Woman further reports that The Singer also approached her as the object of specular desire, noting the “deepness” [*Tiefe*] of her eyes” (measures 201-2; shot 8).¹⁰ The Man’s wandering attention makes the Woman impatient, and she demands that she be listened to, commanding “Hear what I have to tell you” (measure 213; shot 10).¹¹ He does not. In the film this scene is built up from a set of short shots, 8-13, the longest of which is 28 seconds. It is carried out with Straub/Huillet’s subtlest camera technique, which produces tense specular focus. Many directors might use a shot/countershot technique here, but Straub/Huillet’s camera clearly retains the same angle, while attending alternately to The Woman and The Man in varying depth of field. The camera thus stages and models close attention to the visual and acoustic phenomena in the represented space, rendering the possibility of the unity of vocal representation and embodied gender performance. The Woman’s increasing anger causes The Man to react with the high-handed disdain of a domineering husband who, with demonstrative rhetorical violence, refuses to listen: “Do you think you become interesting to me by throwing such words in my face?” (measures 317-19; shot 17).¹²

Already however, The Woman has begun a transformation, one that provides the central thematic fulcrum of the drama. In a passage of operatic *arioso* – song as interior monologue, both informing the non-diegetic audience of emotions and potentially withholding them from other characters on the stage – The Woman communicates to the non-diegetic audience that she will now resist The Man’s domination through gender performance: by changing her appearance into that of the kind of woman who takes “a series of admirers and lovers” (measures 286-88; shot 16).¹³ In the film, she stands facing the camera from in front of the door to the apartment’s unseen space of intimacy, the bedroom. In an intriguing moment of visually mediated gender performance that

highlights the aesthetics of appearance, she sings about how she will achieve her transformation by coloring both her hair and her face in ways that go well beyond cosmetic or even theatrical makeup: “now I’ll color my hair, and paint my face all colorfully. Clothes will come only from the best fashions” (measures 283-86; shot 16).¹⁴ The stage directions note that the man pays no attention as she begins this transition (measures 281-82; shot 15).

In the second section, after The Man has disdained the possibility of vocally mediated desire such as The Woman has been demonstrating toward The Singer, The Woman decides that The Man’s wandering eye must be refocused on her. In measure 329, The Woman turns up the lights, and engages The Man visually (shot 19). He is instantly enraptured – visually: “How is this you look? How can one change so much? Is this elegant creature my wife?” (measures 331-38; shot 19).¹⁵ The Woman immediately turns these words back on him aurally, foregrounding her choice to listen to his words as they express his specular desire: “What is this I hear? How can one change so much? Is this delighted admirer my husband?” (measures 343-51; shot 20).¹⁶ The longest shot in the film, at 2 minutes and 41 seconds, ensues. It starts with a manifest misrepresentation and manipulation by The Man, who tries to pressure The Woman into representing her own capacity to listen in a way that establishes his fidelity to the marriage: “Have you ever heard anything different from me? Haven’t I always been one to honor you faithfully?” (measures 356-62; shot 21).¹⁷ The Woman, of course, strings him along, and draws out further sexist phrases. “Does a beautiful woman need a memory?” he asks (measures 376-77; shot 21).¹⁸ In the annotated rehearsal screenplay of the film, this page is the most heavily covered with vigorous notations from Straub/Huillet (Volkmer et al. 33). Their indications clearly show the significance of the scene in the drama, and the many ways that the filmmakers sought to guide the

singer/actors not only toward exquisitely careful emplacement within the filmic space, but also toward very specific forms of pronunciation and emphasis in the sung text.

As this section continues, the tension heightens. The Man makes a demand that forces the question of identity onto the grounds of obedience and ownership, and The Woman responds with overt resistance. The Man collapses the question of marital belonging not onto mutual agreement, but into ownership, commanding an utterance of implicit submission from The Woman: “Say that you only belong to me” (measures 451-52; shot 23).¹⁹ She refuses, emphasizing that even where she might agree to belong, she insists on retaining agency: “I belong to no one always” (measures 457-58; shot 24).²⁰ Their exchange continues for another 100 measures and several shots until The Woman is fully exasperated. In an *arioso* in The Man’s absence, she makes clear that she will now deploy the most psychologically loaded form of gender performance, also because The Man desires to be dominated himself: “But he wishes to be tortured. So still some hysteria and phrases” (measures 528-31; shot 30).²¹ In this self-conscious representation of “hysteria,” the boundary between attention to communicative utterances and aesthetic attention to the vocal qualities, dress, and appearance of the character is broken down and refigured through the lens of gender. The Woman consciously stages a mental state – figured as illness – that Elaine Showalter describes as “a form of expression, a body language for people who otherwise might not be able to speak or even to admit what they feel” (7).²² The Woman’s interactions with The Man clearly bear the marks of such prior voicelessness. The Woman’s gender performance thus unites Showalter’s “body language” with Deleuze’s “not there” and Butler’s “signifying absences” into an explosive act of performed resistance.

The remaining three sections of the opera and film offer a potential, if tenuous, resolution of these tensions by reversing the course of the conflict. Section three shows

the total breakdown of communication and normative gender roles (measures 534-653; shots 31-37). The Woman refuses to comfort the Child, who is awakened when The Woman noisily handles a bottle of beer that The Man has brought in an attempt to placate her (measures 534-39; shot 31). Here Straub/Huillet's blocking varies somewhat from the Schoenbergs' stage directions, and removes some of the violent charge of The Woman's action with the beer: in the opera she smashes the beer bottle on the floor; in the film she rattles it loudly on a tray. This filmic choice allows the camera, and the attention of the non-diegetic audience, to remain more closely focused on the acoustic consequences of The Woman's act rather than on the visual aspects of The Woman's self-described "hysteria." In this scene, both characters demonstratively fail to "hear" – or heed – each other.

Section four uses an extraordinary technologically mediated modulation of the operatic voice to further concentrate the thematics of attention, and to emphasize how the operatic voice is always an artifact of the technological mediation of the dramatic form. The telephone rings, and The Woman has an extended conversation with The Singer in which he attempts to cajole her to join him and the Friend at a bar. In a scene written by the Schoenbergs only very shortly after the development of the sound film, the function of operatic *arioso*, to grant the non-diegetic audience access to the interiority of the characters through vocal expression, is redoubled and heightened by a scene in which not only the non-diegetic audience but also the diegetic one – The Man – are party to both sides of the telephone conversation (measures 660-758; shots 39-44).²³ At the same time, in an absurd subplot, The Man begins to pack some belongings to take the family to live in a hotel, because The Woman has led him to believe that she has not paid the gas bill, and that they will therefore have no way of cooking and heating the home. Nonetheless The Woman hints that she is not entirely serious in her conversation with The Singer, for

she emphasizes aloud that she is allowing The Man to listen in on the conversation and does not want The Singer to know (measures 744-45; shot 44). The Man then slowly breaks down and realizes that he has become unhappy (measures 768-833; shot 47).

At this point the final and fifth section of the film-opera commences. The woman reverts to her earlier type of gender performance, removing the clothing and makeup that she had previously put on (measure 851; shot 48). The Singer and the Friend show up at the apartment unannounced, and continue their attempts to cajole the couple to carry on with the evening's festivities. Both The Man and The Woman refuse, however, with The Woman repeating – with reversed intention – a phrase she had used earlier during her dramatic gender performance, and that emphasizes her own agency and self-belonging: that she “lives her own life” (measures 493-499; shot 28 / measures 1065-1081; shots 58-59).²⁴ In the latter scene the gender roles are particularly fraught, because The Friend and The Singer seek to convince The Woman that continuing the evening represents “living your own life.” At this point, however, The Woman has made it clear that re-accepting the sphere of marriage and domesticity similarly does not undermine her understanding of her own agency. The opera concludes with the marital status quo restored. The Man and The Woman serve the Child breakfast, declaiming – now in quiet speech, not in song – that despite the claim of The Singer and The Friend that they are “just pale theatrical figures,” they allow “love to direct their performance” rather than “fashion” (measures 1117-1124; shot 61).²⁵ Here then, as the opera closes, the ensemble itself emphasizes the mutual implication of lived experience, communication, performance and attention in both its valences: as perceptive-communicative attention and as aesthetic attention. The Child raises the ultimately undecidable question that concludes the text: “Mama, what are those, modern people?” (measures 1127-1128; shot 62). Modernity is mediated by attention, attention shaped by agency and identity.

Gender, as performance, therefore indelibly marks modern human relations at their very center. The Woman resists domination, expresses agency, and deploys her vocal power with strength and conviction. The power and contingency of human relationships, however, will always require new iterative cycles of the interrogation of attention and its complex, multivalent dynamics.

The Straub/Huillet – Gielen filmic performance-readings of both *Von heute auf morgen* and *Moses und Aron* attempt to trace, explore, and represent attention across the full spectrum of its significance. They do so by rigorously locating the voice within the sounding body, and the body within the space of performance. The intersections of attention's conceptual linkages – identity, agency, obedience, belonging – therefore recursively structure and are structured by the gendered, performed space. For Straub, Huillet, and Gielen, the Schoenberg(s') operas became necessary challenges to the potential of their film art. To rehearse, perform, act, listen – and ultimately to resist – under the conditions of gendered, modernity, attention itself had to be interrogated through to its *ultima ratio*. If domination was to be resisted, ownership had to be rendered into belonging; obedience had to be rendered into a calling to agency. Here lies the micropolitics of operatic-filmic performance, representation, and resistance.

Notes

¹ The author wishes to thank the editors of this volume, two anonymous referees, and Barton Byg for comments and encouragement crucial to the refinement of this essay. Critics generally refer to Straub and Huillet when working (and speaking) together as Straub/Huillet (or close variants) to emphasize their co-authorship and minimize the sexist assumption that Straub, as the male director, represented the primary figure in the

collaboration. I follow Barton Byg's practice ("Straub/Huillet") here. Byg emphasizes the ways in which the team, and particularly Huillet, insisted that their work be perceived as thoroughly collaborative (Byg 11-12). I similarly follow the practice in American scholarship that the Schoenbergs' name be spelled as they themselves insisted after arrival in the United States in 1933, with the Germanic *umlaut* rendered as "oe," unless German sources use the *umlaut*.

² "Bramkamp: Warum haben Sie den Film mit Mono-Lichtton gedreht? Huillet: Weil wir beide Stereo hassen. Und Dolby hassen wir noch mehr. Und noch mehr hassen wir den sogenannten Surround-Dolbyton, bei dem man von hinten beschossen wird. Wo man plötzlich entweder Musik oder Gewehrschüsse auf den Nacken bekommt. [...] Wenn du zwei Leute auf einer Leinwand hast, was mach das für einen Sinn, die von links und rechts zu hören?" Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author.

³ Unlike the vocal score's translation "Husband" [*Der Mann*] and "Wife" [*Die Frau*], which emphasizes institutional relations, I prefer "The Man" and "The Woman" in order to emphasize the implicit gender relations (Schoenberg and Blonda[/pseud. Schoenberg]).

⁴ "wie...das bloß Moderne, das Modische nur 'von heute auf morgen' lebt..., in der Ehe wie in der Kunst, in der Politik und in den Anschauungen vom Leben."

⁵ Martin Brady's otherwise fascinating recent article on "Technology, Liveness, and Presence" in the Straub/Huillet film is unfortunately symptomatic: the title uses "Schoenberg's" in the singular, and the argument barely addresses the manifest questions of gender that suffuse his objects of scholarly interest. Only two passages raise the issue: passing reference (332) to Straub/Huillet's reference in an interview to the "proto-feminist" quality of Gertrud Schoenberg's pseudonymous libretto ("Eine Hexe" 95); and a recapitulation of the point that both the opera and film were collaborations between male and female life partners (338).

⁶ “Straub: Und hier ist es natürlich sehr wichtig, es ist ein Text von einer Frau. [...] Der Schönberg macht doch keine Oper nach einem Text, den er verachtet. [...] Es gibt keinen amerikanischen Film mit einem so präzisen, geschnitzten und verflochtenen Text wie dieser Text hier. [...] Huillet: Ich glaube, die Leute, die sagen, daß der Text schlecht sei, sind einfach ignorant.”

⁷ “Wo liegt euer Lächeln begraben” [Graffiti]

⁸ I choose here to follow translator Michael Turnbull’s suggestion that the term *Gesetzlichkeit* is essentially untranslatable.

⁹ “Mama, was sind das, moderne Menschen?” Citation both of the Schoenbergs’ text and of the published facsimile of Straub/Huillet’s rehearsal screenplay contained in Volkmer et al., pp. 14-71, is done most clearly through the reference they both use: the measure numbers in the vocal score (Schoenberg and Blonda [pseud. Schoenberg]).

¹⁰ While lyric translations are provided in the vocal score (Schoenberg and Blonda), again these literal translations are by the author, in order to emphasize the central aspects of attention and gender performance.

¹¹ “Höre, ich muß dir’s erzählen...”

¹² “Glaubst du wirklich, du wirst mir interessant, weil du Worte gegen mich führst...?”

¹³ “...Verehrer nehm’ ich serienweise und Liebhaber...”

¹⁴ “Nun werde ich mir auch die Haare färben und schön bunt mein Gesicht bemalen, und Kleider trage ich nur mehr vom ersten Schneider...”

¹⁵ “Wie siehst du aus? Wie kann man sich so verändern? Ist dieses elegante Wesen meine Frau?”

¹⁶ “Was höre ich? Wie kann man sich so verändern? Ist dieser entzückte Verehrer mein Gatte?”

¹⁷ “Hast du je etwas andres von mir gehört? War es ich nicht der dich stets in Treue verehrt?”

¹⁸ “Braucht eine schöne Frau Gedächtnis?”

¹⁹ “Sag daß du mir allein gehörst.”

²⁰ “Ständig gehöre ich niemand...”

²¹ “Aber er wünscht, noch gequält zu werden. Also noch etwas Hysterie und Phrasen.”

²² Showalter further emphasizes the central status of visuality in the diagnosis of hysteria as pursued, especially, by Jean-Martin Charcot in the late nineteenth century (32-37), and explores how despite the occasional diagnosis of male hysteria, the disease was closely linked to female bodies and behaviors (33).

²³ This scene is, if not the earliest major telephone scene in opera, one of the most significant. The 1940s and 1950s saw the composition of two further operas with even greater reliance on this dramatic trope: Gian Carlo Menotti’s *The Telephone* (1947) and Francis Poulenc’s *La Voix humaine* (1958). Both retain a place in the repertoire. Mary Ann Smart notes skeptically that the highly controversial scholar Avital Ronell, author of the wildly and provocatively associative *The Telephone Book*, “glorifies” the telephone scene in Poulenc’s opera because it breaks up the reified man/woman gender binary. In *Von heute auf morgen* it appears to do the opposite – but in the service of a humane vision of the complexities of attention (251n6).

²⁴ “So leb ich schließlich doch mein eignes Leben...”

²⁵ “Wir vielleicht schon verblaßte...Theaterfiguren.... Aber...Regie führt bei ihnen die Mode, bei uns jedoch...[d]ie Liebe....”

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