

Aida and the Empire of Emotions (Theodor W. Adorno, Edward Said, and Alexander Kluge)

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For Alexander Kluge¹

Let's start with the facts: two lovers are buried alive, their lungs are full of gas from the crypt; they are cramped with hunger and, as they perish, decay does its unspeakable work on their bodies. In the end, there are two skeletons, one now indifferent to the other. I am describing the end of an opera as Thomas Mann described it in a chapter from *The Magic Mountain* on the "Fullness of Harmony."² His point in 1924 was simple but critical. Surrounded by his desert-island disks, Castorp listens to a record of the last scene of Verdi's *Aida* over and over again, yet oblivious to the facts: he hears only the beauty and power of the music. Whatever the suffering of *Aida* and Radames, no trace of it reaches his ear. Or does it: is the fullness of harmony really enough for Castorp to forget the facts?

1.

This essay investigates how Theodor W. Adorno, Edward Said, and Alexander Kluge read Verdi's opera *Aida* with respect to the theme of being buried alive, where being buried alive can occur not only to characters in an opera but, according to a discourse of fate, also to the opera itself. To write about being buried alive but living as it were to tell the tale, the three critics ask whether a residue of resistance in the opera remains that allows the opera to escape a totalizing discourse of fate or fatality that threatens to destroy it. I begin by presenting the more familiar views of Adorno and Said, although hopefully in a new light. After that, I present and develop the less familiar view (in an Anglo-American musicological context) of the Frankfurt filmmaker and critical theorist, Alexander Kluge.

To focus on the work of these three exemplary critics is to show what it means to offer a critical reading of an opera that takes *Aida* as its example. This is the focus of my essay. To offer a critical reading is to refuse to take the opera at face value, which means in part, as it appears on the stage. The point is, nothing should be taken at face value, and certainly not a work of art. The three critics refuse in interestingly different ways. Adorno and Kluge read the opera against its grain first, with the aim, second, to find buried in

its tomb the fragile terms of its resistant meanings or gestures. How they differ from one another is more subtle than how they jointly differ from Said, who engages the first task but not, as far as I can tell, the second. In general, critical theorists seek in an opera its aesthetic-political contradiction, blind spot, or tragic knot in order to undo it. The rescue of the opera, if such is possible, depends on how the knot is undone.

The knot may be variously undone. One way is to show how the woman protagonist who, though almost completely undone by the opera, may still be heard as undoing that which undoes her. Another way is to refuse the opera's triumphant ending to subvert the inevitable closure to which the opera seems at first sight musically and dramatically to lead. A third way, which I develop here as the authorial thread of this essay, disrupts the explicit alliances that are set up between opera and nationhood, especially to the extent that these alliances suggest a history of fated nations. For critical theorists, the social significance of a great artwork—and *Aida* is exemplary—lies in its immanent potential to rescue itself from being experienced as merely “a thing of the past,” which is to say, as a “museum piece” that no longer has meaning for us in the present.

2.

In January 1929, the young Adorno positively reviewed a new Frankfurt production of *Aida* conducted by Clemens Krauss.³ He commented particularly on the liveliness of the production by which he meant its non-dustiness. 1929 was a year in which opera was often proclaimed to be in a crisis, in fact to be in a moribund condition. Adorno wondered whether it was still possible to produce traditional operas in the grand old style. Authentic productions, he maintained, were only increasing the alienation audiences were apparently feeling towards the works themselves. Asking what contemporary directors ought to do to bring opera back to life, he suggested they should do perhaps what some Russians were then doing, when, in the montage style of the *revue*, they interrupted the traditional production of operatic illusions with near documentary images of contemporary life. “Perhaps,” he wrote, “the scenic rescue of works like *Aida* happens only if the immanence of the scenic structure is blown up, by interspersing it with intentions from other more current spheres.”⁴

Adorno did not pursue the thought much further in this brief review. Instead, with an “and yet” [*aber doch*] already characteristic of his prose, he turned his attention to the *music*, to seek there some trace of what the genre once stood for. He found what he was looking for in what he described as

Aida's most beautiful music: "Aber das schönste war doch die Musik der Aida"—"But the most beautiful [compared to the other singers] was still the music of Aida." Whether he was praising only the singer in the production or only the music she sang isn't entirely clear. He could have written: "But the most beautiful was the *singing* of Aida." I believe, however, that he was aiming for both meanings at once. This becomes more evident in the final lines of his review. Here, he wrote that when he heard Aida's beautiful music and the beautiful singing thereof he heard the beauty only as a trace, which means that it no longer presented itself immediately to the ear. This idea fitted a view that he would develop later on in his life: under the critical condition of advanced bourgeois society, beauty had to conceal itself, for fear that were it overtly to appear it would be silenced before even the first note had been sung. To hear the music as trace was also, for Adorno, to hear it archaically, as a secure (Proustian) memory of something long past. "This Ethiopia!," he thus concluded: "It sounds as if one had been there a thousand years ago, so distant and sure, as only memory can be." And then he added: anyone who must live in Egypt with its "high priests, pyramids, and generals" will find themselves "buried alive there before they have even begun to live."⁵

I would like to pursue Adorno's thought further with a question: if the beautiful music had to conceal itself given a modernist condition of crisis, had it always had to conceal itself? In other words, had the opera always been aware of its fate? If it had, then arguably the most beautiful music had always had to be identified (at least in part) with the lyrical music of its protagonist, the Ethiopian slave, whose fate to be buried alive was certain before even she began to sing. In other words, Aida was always the angel of death as she was always the angel of love, long before she furtively entered the tomb.

More even than this, but pursuing the same terms, Aida embodied the larger fate of the history in which her life and death were entangled: hence, both the fate of her country at war as well as the fate of an opera that had never made it quite clear whether, given the complex circumstances of its creation, it was an opera about Egypt, Italy, or France. (Surely, it was about all three.) As far as I can tell, there has been almost no interpreter who has resisted the inclination to determine to which single nation this opera properly belongs. Yet, most interestingly and despite its title, no one has ever described *Aida* outright as an Ethiopian opera, as though, despite sympathies expressed to the contrary not least by the composer, the Ethiopians, being the "underdogs" or "savages," were never really to be counted as a legitimate side in this nationalist or colonialist war. In later life, as we shall read below, Adorno even once forgot something essential and identified Aida as Egyptian.

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To identify an opera with a particular nation has so often been an identification of assumed success: the opera names the victor in advance and the desire for victory necessitates the destruction of any person or people that gets in its way. In these terms, *Aida* is less a reflective opera *about* a war between two nations and more an engaged, one-sided opera of colonialist achievement. From the very first moment (Act I, scene 1) Ethiopia is chosen for destruction because, to recall the rationalization sung by the high priest Ramfis in militaristic echo of words once uttered by the King of Prussia,⁶ God has already taken Egypt's side. "Fur dai Numi votati alla morte"—the libretto says: God's will is to be obeyed; the death and devastation of the barbarians is inevitable, predetermined. The victory for the Egyptians will therefore be "easy"—"*facil vittoria*."⁷

3.

In his book on culture and imperialism, Edward Said identified *Aida* as an Egyptian opera, thereby arguably overlooking the fact that the Egyptians, in this opera, are the aggressors.⁸ Said argued that the opera was one less of nationalist achievement than of Western, imperialist domination. So conceived, it displayed a false alliance between pleasure and power and it displayed it loudly, with all its musical pomp and political circumstance. I use the phrase "pomp and circumstance" to bring to mind Shakespeare's *Othello* (also made into an opera by Verdi) in which betrayal and warring ambitions try to destroy the love of the lovers. "I had been happy," Othello recalled when it was already too late (Act III, scene 3), leaving him to bid "Farewell the plumed troops and the big wars, That makes ambition virtue! O, farewell . . . Pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war!"⁹

For Said, the fact that *Aida* displayed the false alliance between pleasure and power is what allowed the opera, first, to present itself as a perfected aesthetic image of a glorious civilization, yet, second, to embody what was also its "curious falsity." Said borrowed this phrase from Joseph Kerman with the intention more adequately to describe its cause. Why, he asked, does the opera strike the listener as curiously false?, and answered by showing how the opera offered both an aesthetic sphere for fantasy and a social sphere of fear, which, in their intertwining, triggered a deep sense of alienation in the audience.

Verdi once said that to "copy reality can be a good thing, but to invent reality is better, much better."¹⁰ This proclamation lies at the heart of the problem, why the opera could not easily be assigned a singular national character, just because its Egyptian character was an invention of the French made to serve the interests of Italy. For all Verdi's attempts to be authentic,

Said noted, Verdi was able, with the help of his librettist, as well as his stage, costume, and instrument designers, to pick and choose his authenticities, to select what suited the construction of a civilization entirely severed from the actual interests of contemporary Egypt. That the opera was commissioned by the Khedive to celebrate the recent opening of the Suez Canal and even more the erection of his new and altogether European opera house apparently interested Verdi very little.

Said remarked that Verdi's indifference to Egypt gave him the aesthetic freedom to create a perfect operatic illusion or "to pursue his artistic intentions with what appeared to be an uncompromising intensity."¹¹ The operatic illusion Verdi created was not, however, purely aesthetic but was constituted also out of a political imaginary in which one national power was constructed by another. In this construction, the pleasure allied with power was stereotyped, clichéd, and false. It was the imperialist construction of an idealized "East," in which the orient was portrayed as a distant place of promise, of exoticism and extravagance, of monumental aura created out of the archeological or Egyptological plunder sitting in the museums of the Parisian West. With the antique vision of Egypt divorced from any contemporary one, the aesthetic substance of the opera was effectively divorced from its social substance. For Said, this double divorce jointly explained the work's "curious falsity."¹²

Unlike Adorno, however, Said did not say that he heard an archaic trace of beautiful music in an opera that was constructed to appear to its audience as dead on arrival. Even if it left the audience alienated, it seemed to offer nothing to Said to mitigate that alienation. Although the deadness became most apparent in the final, "deadlocked" scene, the entombment of a dead civilization was present before even the first note had been sung. Said deeply resented the fatalistic picture the opera presented of a society already fallen: what was meant to be alive in the opera, the love and the military ambitions, were buried *a priori* in Verdi's idealized construction, as though the imperialist conquest of the East was already complete. The fact that Egypt was still a living society was apparently for Verdi just a mildly annoying fact. Said equally resented the fact that by displacing a living people into a dead civilization, and thus denying them a living voice, the imperialist power presumed, with false claims of authenticity, to write a people's history on its behalf.¹³

However, although Said refused the opera for its falsity, he did not leave it at that. As noted earlier, he identified the opera as Egyptian, although now that we know his argument, this seems a little surprising. For his argument suggested that it was not only the Ethiopians who were silenced or absented in the work, but also the Egyptians given how far their image

was also produced entirely in and for the West. Perhaps I am missing the subtlety: maybe, by calling the opera Egyptian and not Ethiopian, Said was calling attention to how far dominating powers will go to create entirely artificial visions of the Other, visions that, although thoroughly exotic, are also entirely alienating. This means, dialectically, that to declare the opera aggressively Egyptian was really to mark it as imperialistically French. This, ultimately, is how I read Said's dialectical strike against the opera: that in failing to be about what it purports to be about—namely, an opera about the plight of the Ethiopian/Egyptian Other—it became a disquieting opera entirely about a Western Us that is or should be self-alienating.

If, for Said, *Aida* showed the lie of Western or European imperialism, for Adorno, it demonstrated the lie of bourgeois society. Said wrote of *Aida* as promoting an imperialist vision of the East; Adorno wrote of the opera as offering a “bourgeois rest and recreation spot” (*bürgerliche Erholungsstätte*).¹⁴ Like Said, Adorno noticed how the work was divorced by the composer from the immediacy of the particular social conflicts. Yet the divorce troubled him less, or at least it opened up a space for critique. For only in an aesthetically detached and generalizing state could a work become a cipher of social meaning, a perfect, even if a crass, mirror of the catastrophes of domination toward which bourgeois opera and society were tending. And only in such a detached state could a work show any resistance toward the inevitability of a historical narrative in which it seemed to be enmeshed.

Although there was certainly something shared by the arguments of Said and Adorno, there was a difference. One difference turned on how far each critic wanted to claim that the work, being a late work of Verdi, was somehow conscious of its imperialist tendency and bourgeois fate from the outset. For construed as a late work, a work perhaps of pessimism and anxiety, the opera must always have been aware of its own implicit tendency to accept the terms of its fate. Said did not accept this construal and seemed to think that the imperialist tendency exhausted the work's meaning without its being challenged from inside the work. Adorno did accept this construal and accordingly looked within the work for its own, internal expression of resistance. Hence, his reference to the archaic trace of the most beautiful music, a reference that he placed deliberately in the last lines of his own review (a technique he often used), to gesture toward a future hope that was not, however, to be identified with the opera's redemptive ending. Hearing redemption in an opera and finding a gesture that might rescue the opera and the society of which it is part were not, for Adorno, the same thing. Indeed, precisely this difference separated a positive from what he termed a negative dialectic.

The work of Roger Parker is useful here in further elucidating the theme of lateness. He has also written about *Aida* as a late work and of how it showed a loss of confidence and a pessimism that threatened constantly to be revealed in Aida's "long sigh."¹⁵ Parker cites two relevant sources: the first speaks of that "long sigh from Aida [that] threatens to reveal everything," where, as for both Said and Adorno, "everything" refers to far more than just Aida's love for the equally ardent Radames. The second source, from a letter of 1869 to Camille Du Locle, describes how, with Rossini's *William Tell*, opera assumed a sense of fatality, as if something were halting the "flow of the music."¹⁶ Since *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, what Verdi heard in opera was a melody that was no longer "free" and "secure." As we know, what Verdi heard, Wagner also heard. Both composers desired that opera be given back its "single breath" of music, to use Wagner's phrase, or its "single jet," to use Verdi's, to fight the modern tendency for operas to be constructed haltingly or discontinuously as "patchwork."¹⁷

What is meant, however, by the use of the term "fatality"? Blandly, it suggests that opera in general was following the wrong course and needed to change that course. From a grander perspective, it suggests that opera was heading toward a decline given the peak of development it had allegedly reached with Rossini. Both these perspectives assume that history is not random, that the operatic genre tracks some sort of teleological course. It is the grander perspective that one so often finds in the writings of Richard Wagner and the late Verdi, where the thought is, that if the contemporary tendency to produce only fragmented or pessimistic works is to be overcome, then now is the right historical moment for opera to transform itself into unified music drama. The unified music drama would be the redemption of the overall genre. However, the lingering worry did not go away for either Wagner or Verdi, that, at any given time, it might be *too late* for the genre to be so redeemed or *too late* to produce unified works. As Parker suggests, such anxious questions lay behind the composition of *Aida*, putting into question what sort of work it was: a work blind to, or conscious of, its own fatality or of the genre's fateful character altogether. Like Adorno, but not with his particular terms, Parker has also aimed, as a contemporary critic and commentator, to break through and to break free from the fateful discourse and moribund productions of nineteenth-century opera.

More than once Verdi balked at the idea that his music, any of it, would be assigned a national character, and this despite his having composed many a loud and rousing chorus, one, the most famous (from *Nabucco*) almost achieving the status of a national anthem. Verdi proclaimed that his music was written for the sake of music alone, for the sake of the pure art of opera.¹⁸ Nevertheless, it is undeniable that Verdi also always wanted to

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show political sympathy toward the “underdogs,” for those who were not yet the victors in nationalist wars. He thus composed his music in the hope that the underdogs would eventually be the victors, that at least Italy would win its independence and unification in the context of the Franco-Prussian and Hapsburg wars. In this light, Verdi arguably had good reason in 1870 to give the beautiful music to Aida, just so that she, as an Ethiopian, would alone express the hope of the Italians. For this reason, to brand the opera “Italian” is also to brand it “Ethiopian.”

The fact that Verdi seemed to give Aida the most beautiful music was what Adorno interpreted at the dialectical extreme. For Adorno, implicit in the very idea of nationalist victory, or in the mentality or emotion associated therewith, was always the tendency to dominate, whichever side wins in war. To make the point more forcefully, Adorno effectively distinguished Aida the *individual* from even the “underdog” nation to which she belonged, to mark her as the *individual* alone fated to be ostracized. For innocent victims or individuals, there is no victory in war. With her beautiful music, Aida *alone* came to express the condition of the outcast, removed from the space in which she would take a side. Ethiopian, Egyptian—perhaps this was not a Westerner’s blindness, as Said suggested. Perhaps the difference really makes no difference. Indeed, it is consistent with Adorno’s view to say that, in her fated role, Aida was made to assume the guilt and suffering of *both sides* because nothing was allowed to remain at stake for her in the battle between opposed nations. To make of her an outcast was to displace the guilt of both fighting sides onto the shoulders entirely of the one who was denied a patriotic voice. This perhaps explains why Aida sang the most beautiful music, as though, from the first note, her fate to be buried alive was already decided and somehow even known to her. However, in this music and insofar as Adorno heard in it an archaic trace, hearable by anyone, he liked to say, who still had ears open enough to hear it, there lay the potential seeds that would outlast her destruction. These were seeds that would allow her finally to escape from the *displacement of guilt*, and, if her, then humanity, too. Hence, humanity’s general cry implicitly expressed for its liberation from having to take sides in wars too often fought (as we know in our own times) for the wrong reasons.

4.

The displacement of guilt, suffering, and responsibility is what, after the Second World War and to this day, remains most often at stake in the broken narratives produced by the Frankfurt critic, theorist, and filmmaker Alexander Kluge. This is evident particularly in his essay-film of 1983/84 (appearing both as a book and on screen) titled *Die Macht der Gefühle*

(a title I translate just below), as well as in the experimental stories and commentaries he has written to accompany this essay-film.¹⁹ His work has everything to do with opera and operas like *Aida*. With Adorno, Kluge moves this opera from its earlier war-ridden context to the catastrophic context of a later war, the Second World War. He speaks of telling parallel stories (*Parallelerzählungen*) in which all the destructive irony of historical repetition comes to the fore, but where there are concrete or material and often sadly ironic ruptures in the repetition. In the case of *Aida*, whereas earlier the Ethiopians sang for Italian victory, they were later seen in 1935–36 at war with the would-be conquering Italians, the Ethiopians seeking their release from the Italy's grip.

Kluge, as Adorno, is interested in society's structures and emotions that come to be lived, absorbed, and condensed in all manner of distorted and disrupted forms, in the intense or "congealed" experiences of singular subjects.²⁰ His phrase "die Macht der Gefühle" is well translated as "the power of feeling" or "of emotion." The English word "power" misleads, however, if it suggests that Kluge is speaking only about an emotion's intensity or strength. With the word "Macht," he intends also to capture the authority that an emotion has over us, how it is able to hold us like an empire in its (colonial) grip. I think we should also preserve in translation the plurality of the phrase "die Gefühle," because Kluge is speaking not only about emotion as a general state but also about the hold that particular emotions have on us. "There *really* is," he writes, "this *Macht* and there *really* are also the emotions."²¹ I am tempted also to translate his title as "the grip of emotions" or even more imaginatively as "the strong arm of emotions," where, as another interpreter has suggested,²² it is as though the emotions were anthropomorphized, i.e. given a life, history, and agency of their own. Emotions are the sorts of things that, in Kluge's words, "have (or take or claim) their own time." (He uses the term "haben.")²³

Thinking about Kluge's grip of emotions, one is better positioned to understand Adorno's idea of displacement and aesthetic distancing. Kluge writes of how a given emotion seizes an entire society for perhaps a hundred or even a thousand years. But he also writes of how, in the short span of a human life, a singular individual may come to experience that emotion as belonging to her alone, as if, like *Jenůfa*, to recall another of Kluge's own references, an individual had really lived through twenty-eight wars.²⁴

In his *Die Macht der Gefühle*, Kluge says that "emotions have gravitations [*Gravitationen*]." Next to this line, he places another in large type: "IN UNHAPPY STORIES THE EMOTIONS WEIGH MORE HEAVILY."²⁵ Then he summarizes *Aida*'s plot with extraordinary, intentional abbreviation: the bloody war between the Egyptians and the Ethiopians lasted a hundred years. After which he suggests that it was the hold that this war had on its peoples—the emotions of nationalism and patriotism—which prevented

Aida's and Radames's love from ending happily.²⁶ His title *Die Macht der Gefühle* refers as well to the *Empire of Emotions* or to *die Macht des Schicksals*, hence, he tells us, to *la forza del destino* (the force of destiny), a Verdian title that fits "almost all operas."²⁷ Aida asks "what power [or force] so binds me to him!"²⁸ Yet, the point of Kluge's work is to throw radical doubt on the belief that there really is ever so absolute a power that binds anyone, or that there really could be a destiny that so overdetermines a person's life. The power Radames has over Aida symbolizes the power the Empire has over her, and Kluge wants to subvert this power. More likely, he says, there are "a hundred thousand different *reasons* [*Gründe*]" why we do things, any of which we might choose in hindsight, to interpret in terms of destiny.²⁹ This is one of Kluge's central points, as it is for the present essay, because it leads Kluge to rewrite every operatic story of automatically assumed fate as a mode of social critique.

With certain large emotions, their grip is over a society as a whole. In so holding the society, however, they hold the happiness of any particular individual or any couple in love at ransom. Put otherwise, even if an emotion has held a country in its grip for a hundred years, it may pick out a single individual to make her feel as if the consequences of having that emotion are seen in her life alone. I use the feminine pronoun here because, for Kluge as much as for Adorno (and so many others engaged in recent modernist and postmodernist critique), the lonely individual, who is made to experience a history's crimes as her own, is usually a woman. For Adorno it was self-consciously the unnamed woman of Schoenberg's *Erwartung*; before that, it was the exotic Carmen, Butterfly, or Aida. Since Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, Adorno wrote, opera has always loved exogamy, foreign blood, or what is otherwise "outside." He made a list: "Halévy's *La Juive*, Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine*, *La dame aux camellias* in Verdi's version [*La Traviata*], and the Egyptian princess Aida [here is the error], Delibes's *Lakmé*, as well as the 'long march of the gypsies' (*der Zug der Zigeuner*) culminating in *Il trovatore* and *Carmen*." All these figures are "strangers or estranged." Around them suffering is "enflamed" and "powerful emotions explode." This is how "conflict with the established order" comes about.³⁰

For Kluge, the feminine figure is also Senta of *Der Fliegende Holländer* and Gilda of *Rigoletto*. It is just as often Tosca, Carmen, or Aida. It is rarely if ever Isolde, though it is not obvious why not. Adorno also excluded Isolde from his almost Leporellian list of operatic conquests. In Kluge's list, as in Adorno's, the death of the soprano is different from that of the tenor. Whereas the male death is treated as a contingent fact of politics and history, the female death is made to bear all the weight of inevitability. It is *she* who is made to tie the tragic knot of the opera, although it is also *she*

who must then sever it. (The tragic knot of opera was something with which Verdi was much concerned.³¹) In Kluge's view, the woman is slave, worker, foreigner, gypsy, Jew—metaphorically the outcast, thereby also representative of dominated nature, shown, however, not in her refusal to conform to the status quo but instead in her inability (wished for by her and by us) to be domesticated or tamed. Whereas the *ability* or *attempt* to domesticate the woman signifies the social *possibility* and sometimes also the *actuality* of her disempowerment, her *refusal* to be domesticated signifies her hope, as ours, for her, as for our, liberation from domination. (According to the dialectic of enlightenment, this liberation only occurs if nature is liberated too. This is why themes of domesticated outcasts and dominated nature are so often deeply intertwined in the Frankfurt school of critical theory to which both Adorno and Kluge have both significantly contributed.³²)

Partially following Nietzsche in his essay "Fantasia sopra Carmen," (and "fantasia" is a crucial term) Adorno described how all the operas of exogamy have eulogized the escaping or bursting out of civilization into the unknown, although not so that the outburst was then automatically absorbed, as in Wagner's operas, into a glorified view of love. Perhaps this is why Isolde was left out.³³ To capture both the suffering and hope situated with the outcast, Kluge writes more specifically of how fantasy remains outside the public sphere and of how it is given to the figure of the gypsy. Given the authoritarian drive of the public sphere, it is in the sphere of fantasy that we seek our escape from domestication.³⁴ For Kluge, as for Adorno, we constantly seek in our fantasy or in our emotions our escape from what is fixed as public or established, to break out of what is given to us as the self-evident natural order of our commonplace world. However, the escape is fragile, tentative, splintered, sudden, and surprising. Any severing of the tragic knot, when and if it occurs, is achieved in something small, minute, in something almost unheard, which is to say, anywhere and in anything but in a triumphant gesture. This is a position that returns us to Nietzsche's thought that only by moving his ear away from German song with all its redemptive leaps and songs of love and death was he able to hear a "cheerfulness" in a song that was "African" (but really "French"). Even if fate also hung over Bizet's music from *Carmen*, there was a moment of happiness, Nietzsche noted, that was "brief, sudden, and without pardon."³⁵

If *Aida* was an opera that, for Said, revealed the lie of imperialist domination, and, for Adorno, the lie of bourgeois society, for Kluge, it revealed the lie of patriarchy. Here are three sides of the critical coin, each portrayed through musically informed, dissonant interpretations, counter stories, or contrapuntal interventions. Each critic reads the verbal and musical lines of the opera between the lines or behind the scenes. This is how each aims

to be true, without being blindly true, to the work (*werktreu*). Thomas Mann's description, with which this essay began, prompts one to ask about the advantage of one's being deliberately oblivious or partially oblivious to the facts. For the critical theorist, it is one thing for an opera to present itself factually, another aesthetically. The different presentations do not necessarily coincide, as Said made explicit, but weigh against each other potentially to produce a critical or dialectical argument.

For each critic, the primary aim is to expose the necessary lie of aesthetic illusion, set against the assumption that opera has and should have the capacity to disturb the audience in social terms. However, while Said seems less tempted to find something noble in the lie of art, Adorno and Kluge suggest that something truthful or hopeful about and for society might still emerge from *Aida*'s ashes. For them, the contradiction or "curious falsity" in the artwork is constructed through the discourse of inevitable death, yet in the tomb a residue remains of something still alive. "The past," Kluge writes in quotation of Christa Wolf who is quoting William Faulkner: "is not dead; in fact, it is not even past."³⁶ Adorno agrees: the past remains a repository for our lost or destroyed meanings, meanings still offered to us in our experience, although, given the administered condition of modernity, they are offered only in the most concealed pleased pains of our spectatorship.

In Kluge's work, the woman is often sister, mother, grandmother, who might seek to be what she cannot be: namely, *die Patriotin* (the complex title of another of his films) but who is made to absorb or personalize the guilt of the society as a whole, thereby relieving the society of the guilt it should but refuses collectively to feel. *Aida* cries out a question to herself alone, for not even the suffering of Amneris will allow this other woman, an Egyptian, yet to understand it. "Ah!" *Aida* cries in descending tones (Act I, scene 1): "non fu in terra mai da più crudeli angosce un core affranto"—never on earth has there lived a person—as she—who has had to bear so cruel and deep an anguish.

The personalization of the political is one of Kluge's central themes, which is evident also in the theoretical work he has done with his co-thinker and writer, Oskar Negt. One reads in their shared work of a counter public sphere (*Gegenöffentlichkeit*) in which resistance is expressed to the heavy weight of history that is placed on the shouldering lives of outcasts, who, like *Aida* but not yet Amneris, look as though they only survive as the entombed or living dead. Just at the moment (Act I, scene 1) when Amneris is publicly proclaiming the victory of "our leader," *Aida* withdraws to express her fright.³⁷

In other terms, though a site of the living dead, the counter public sphere is the site of resistance to social administration and to the grip therefore of the latter's most powerful emotions. However, conceived as a sphere, it runs

the danger of being sustained as a site of resistance only if those excluded unconsciously accept the displacement of society's guilt onto their own lonely, outcast selves. However, it is not so obvious that, by existing in a counter sphere, the outcasts do not play into what the established public sphere demands of them, that they speak their resistance in childlike, wild, or anarchic voices that are silenced somehow before they have even uttered their first word. Kluge was once criticized for using the term *die Patriotin* with too much seriousness; it was claimed that he had not realized sufficiently the contradiction contained in the very term—that women as outcasts are automatically excluded from the structures of patriotism or the patriotic emotion that grips the society as a whole.³⁸ Whether or not this is a valid criticism of Kluge's work, the observation runs deep insofar as the very idea of a counter public sphere is beset by a comparable contradiction. Just as *die Patriotin* must as an outcast be denied that very description, so too must any act or feeling of resistance—any counter-emotion (*Gegenemotion*) as one might name it—be refused identification with any so-called counter *sphere*. For so identified, first, the counter public sphere runs the risk of becoming congealed in its own structure and, second, the emotion used to characterize the sphere threatens to lose its “counter” or resistant quality. This is why Adorno and Kluge always stress that a sphere as such, even a counter one, can never be a guaranteed site of resistance. Resistance is found only in the dialectical particularity of that which remains genuinely excluded from a sphere: thus in a particular grimace or a smile or in a sideward glance of an eye that almost goes unnoticed. The difference is subtle: in *Aida*, it is a matter of listening to what in this overall spherical opera of pomp and circumstance is (almost) unheard.

Despite his overt theorizing of the counter public sphere as a site of counter production, Kluge has sought to counter any tendency toward social or aesthetic congealment in his own produced works by using radically broken and disjointed montage. His preoccupation with experimental form, with its inherent risk and surprise, explicitly subverts the tendency to rigidify the counter public sphere as a guaranteed site of resistance. Similarly, his central concept of experience (*Erfahrung*) is employed to break down traditional linear narratives, intent as its use is to challenge patterns of human lives lived as though they were being lived only in a state of mere survival. For Kluge, mere survival is not enough.

In the works of both Kluge and Adorno, the concept of experience is linked to the idea of sacrifice, an idea that, like the traditional bourgeois operas themselves, suggests a double character. Thus *Aida*, though it could also be Senta, sacrifices herself as much *to* the society that denies her her freedom as *for* the man she loves. One might well differentiate a sacrifice *to* from a sacrifice *for*. Senta sacrifices herself *for* the *Dutchman* and (almost)

to her father Daland who has sold her to the first man seemingly willing to pay the material price. Aida sacrifices herself *for* Radames and (almost) *to* her father when he asks her, through her acts alone, to save the Ethiopians. Amonasro sings: “Per te soltanto risorger può”—“through you alone will a conquered and tormented people be given back their life” (Act III, scene 1). He tells her that if she acts correctly she will be able to assume the public position that Amneris now has; she refuses that public place, desiring rather only “Un’ora di tal gioia, e poi morir!”—one hour of joy, and then to die.

Critics often suggest that all these kinds of operas are about the conflicts men and women equally face between patriotic duty or family and love. The conflicts, however, are different. The male lover is typically given a public trial to see whether his reason will finally release him from the grip of his emotion. The female lover is often forced by intense distress or madness to make her decision in private or in solitude. If the public-private distinction does not adequately capture the point, one may also say that, whereas for the man, his freedom to choose his outcome is rarely denied him whereas, for the woman, the outcome seems always to have been decided from the start or long before. This is why she (and Lucia is a good example of this too) is denied the use of her reason that might release her either from the grip of her emotion or from her belief that she is fated to die. As much as Kluge is interested in couples in love, he pays more attention to the sacrificial life of women.

At the opera’s beginning, and long before the final act, Aida sings of how her tears mourn her sad, unlucky love. That she already mourns is symbolic of what the French theorist, Catherine Clément, at roughly the same time as Kluge, described as the opera’s inevitable “undoing of women.”³⁹ Here, the stress, now in Kluge’s terms, is given to the inevitability of a woman’s being undone by the grip of a depersonalized emotion that pits her between her father, her country, and her lover. Her private emotion is displaced by a public one from the very first moment of the opera. What is decided by the end was in truth decided long ago.

The personalization of the political is the plight of the one who is denied a public role; the feeling that pervades the society is absorbed by one sacrificial person alone. Her raw experience fights against the grip the feeling has on her. But she cannot win and knows she cannot win. This is why she lives as though in a state of mourning. Although as outsider who cannot win, she nevertheless wants to believe that her own private emotion might in the end loosen the hold that the nationalism, patriotism, and intolerance has over her society as a whole.

In a contrary act now of what I shall describe as *depersonalizing the personal*, she might decide that it makes more sense for her to die in a redemptive act that will show us the inevitable course not only of the opera itself but also the fated history in which she, as the opera, is enmeshed. This marks a

decisive change in the direction of the argument I have been presenting so far, a move that pulls us temporarily (but only temporarily) away from any reading of resistance in this work. Kluge writes that “in every opera *that is about redemption* a woman will be sacrificed in the fifth act.”⁴⁰ The middle clause of this sentence (in my italics) is the one that matters. Rather than hearing an outsider singing in soft lyrical tones, we are now made to hear a world-redemptive heroine trying to save a society from which she *alone* is excluded. As an outsider who would become savior, she chooses to identify no longer with the “I” but with the public “Other” that is fated to become the victorious “All.” In Kluge’s view, this tragic identification leads only to a false redemption.

For Kluge, it does not matter that the opera *Aida* has only four acts: only French grand operas typically have five. However, it does matter that *Aida* seems freely to choose to enter the tomb to die together with Radames and that she resists being buried alive by embracing death in a swoon. Verdi described *Aida*’s call to the angel of death—*di morte l’angelo*—as sung in a delirium, but in her delirium she achieves something we do not expect. Verdi gives her the high and decorporealized tones of an angel; he disembodies her voice to make it appear that she actually escapes what should, according to the ancient ritual, have been the proper form of her death: starvation in the Egyptian tomb. For this reason, her father Amonasro is mistaken to tell her (in Act III) that he foresees in her “a terrible image” of a ghost rising from among the ashes. For, in entering the tomb, somewhere between a human and phantom state (as Radames suggests), she gives her flesh and bones away in pure, disembodied song and thus in something other than “a terrible image.”

Kluge observes that according to the ancient rituals of being buried alive, *Aida* and Radames must stand in darkness; they cannot be given any means (the fire from a torch, say) to bring about their own deaths. Yet there remains a difference in their respective deaths. In the libretto, *Aida*’s but not Radames’s death is specified, although given drafts of and changes to the libretto, the present argument does not do full justice arguably to the interpretive complexities of this issue. Nevertheless, blandly stated, the difference fits the idea that *Aida* dies because, in this “fated” opera about lateness or too-lateness, she was always going to die or somehow had always been dead. Even in his opening aria in Act I, Radames describes *Aida* not in human terms but already in celestial terms, as a goddess of divine form, an inspiration of a dream that will lead him to victory, to which the completely human Amneris responds by asking him whether he has not just heard a joyful tale that stirs him. Here, *Aida* and Amneris stand to Radames in ways similar to how the fully human Erik and the non-human Dutchman stand to Senta. Senta, like Radames, also fatefully sees a picture and hears a tale. To see *Aida* as already dead or as a person whose death is inevitable, might be to

interpret her image as the product of the ultimate male gesture in the overall silencing of women. However, the image is not just that. If it were, it would threaten to make Radames solely responsible and more consciously solely responsible for Aida's fate than he seems to be. Given the present reading of the opera, it is not only women who are silenced but everyone else insofar as Aida's final acceptance of her fate, as Senta's, is an act performed on behalf of All. It is the "All" that is the true modern (totalizing or totalitarian) subject of so fated a work as this.

To hear Aida sing her song as a song of acceptance is no longer to hear what Kluge and Adorno want to hear, namely, that at the very moment when she sings her victorious song of fate she still manages to show her resistance. In the victorious reading, her resistance is transformed through "pity" into complete acceptance. Where earlier she asked whether she was mistaken to weep, later she sings only her hymn of death. Adorno and Kluge believe she should have stuck to the more doubting question.

Kluge is right to observe that the lovers never stop being at odds even when they sing in and proclaim their complete accord. When Radames enters the tomb he remains the patriot however much he sings of taking Aida's side. In the opera, Radames is not, as Aida is, excluded when the libretto specifies that "all" shall sing. In an early scene of military might, when all the other voices proclaim the cry of war, Aida sings in uncanny lyrical tones that separate her from them. While she hails the angel of death, he tries to move the "fatal stone" from the tomb. Even if he tries this out of kindness, to save her from a punishment that is (meant to be) his alone, he still acts non-deliriously as she does not. Realizing he cannot move the stone, he resigns himself to death: "it's over," he sings, after which he joins her in singing the hymn of death. Nevertheless, the point remains that the certainty of death belongs, as it always belonged in this fated reading, to her alone. Initially excluded from the All, she finally becomes, in a remarkable transfigurative act, the representative of the All, the role Radames once claimed for himself.

This *transition in roles* is arguably marked musically at the most moribund moment in the opera. This is when Radames enters the tomb and sings on a single tone until the moment he utters the name "Aida" as if, having recognized his failure to be the victor in the war, he hands his voice over to her for her to proclaim the "ascension" now in their shared hymn of death. It is she who now on behalf of he and everyone else, too, becomes the victorious figure in a story in which nations are at war. Though they do not know she is in the tomb, the chorus of priests and priestesses sing as if they do know and thus of the spirit of life and of the peace that she has now made possible for Egypt. If this is seen as Aida having changed sides, then this is as it must be if the victory was always certain. Maybe Adorno was right after all to name Aida an Egyptian.

If the opera ends with a transition of roles between the lovers, it also arguably ends with a role-transition between the two female protagonists. When Aida assumes the place of Radames, so Amneris, with her dark mezzo tones, assumes the private and distraught “outsider” place, lying as she does prostrate above the tomb to sing the last notes of peace on her own single moribund note. When Adorno heard Aida’s most beautiful music, perhaps it was, after all, not only the music of Aida he heard but also, in this substitution of roles, the music of the Egyptian voice of Amneris in her final sad refusal to take sides with lovers who have been turned into the victors of this war.

5.

I have just told a story of the opera’s ending that makes Radames look far more ordinary or less heroic than the world-redemptive Aida. I tried to show how from one perspective Aida alone achieves a final grace in her willingness to die. Rising from the ashes or from the tomb, neither the tragic Schillerian connotations nor the redemptive Christian connotations can be ignored.⁴¹ I have told the story this way to make explicit something these operas always tend to do: to trick the audience into believing that even for the outcast there is a happy ending if only she would agree to becoming the tragic or epic heroine.

However, there is another reading, one more “counter,” that allows Aida (or Amneris) to remain the outcast, singing of her resistance to the victorious song. This is the reading Kluge wants to find when he hears the resistant strains in the silent space of the work, behind its aesthetic surface. What he hears are Aida’s early dark words foretelling her “terrible sentence” but *not yet* expressing glory. The prophetic words, however, are heard at the end only by those who find, like Amneris, that they cannot celebrate the lovers’ hymn of death. Most hear the early prophetic words displaced by later words of glory.

“What the opera is silent about!” Kluge writes: “The people will not stand by while a couple in love is buried alive.” However, he knows only too well that people generally do stand by, because though they may cry at the tragic end they are deceived or confused by the opera’s aesthetic reconciliation that tells them in the end, in “the fifth act,” that the woman refused to die as others would have her die—alone. She rather chose to die with joy, for love, for a “fullness of harmony” that symbolized a freedom for and of the All. Her death was a heroic act of forgiveness or an act of acceptance of a guilt that no one *other than she* could overcome. “Smiling through tears,” the audience thus leaves the opera house believing that all has turned out well even if it remains mildly disturbed by the lie of bourgeois, imperialist,

or patriarchal domination to which she, as the audience, has been subjected. The audience knows about her death, his death, or even about the couple's death, but not enough to care. To bury is to forget. As Said argued, it is not for nothing that we are deceived by this opera into thinking that it all happened so long ago, since what happened "so long ago" is dramatically stripped of any relevance it might have for us in the present.⁴² Such are the dangers of the sort of aesthetic distancing that allows us to forget the facts and to treat the work as simply "a thing of the past."

Kluge says he understands why we will all return to see this opera at least eighty-four times.⁴³ Each time we know how it turns out. But why, he asks, are we so content to leave its ending in place, the knot tied as it has always been tied? He doesn't want us to accept the terms. Said wants us to reflect back on our own imperialist assumptions and not to glorify that which we hear as "Egyptian," "African." Adorno wants us to hear the archaic residue of beautiful music so that we will not hear any song merely as a triumphant one. Yet, as both critic and artist, Kluge goes further than both Adorno and Said, to produce parallel, counter, or even overlapping works of art in which the original work is juxtaposed or overlaid with critical commentary. Through "associative montage," Kluge rearranges the relations of opera's traditional narratives, to disarm or dismantle (*abrüsten*) the happy endings. "For years I have tried through literary and filmic means to change the stories of the operas."⁴⁴ He wants to unsettle the contentment we feel even as we are made to cry: to dismantle the happy ending of the bourgeois satisfaction. More, he wants to show his profound modernist disbelief in "the tragic," given his view that redemptive optimism and tragic endings have come to signify two sides of the same bourgeois or patriarchal coin.

Even if Kluge's own works sometimes have happy endings themselves, the works and the endings are no longer about the provision of bourgeois or prepackaged satisfaction. The works are intended to show the hunger that still exists for genuine experience (*Erfahrungshunger*).⁴⁵ He seeks the potential surprise that is still possible in experience and, with this, shows his refusal to accept the traditional discourse of modern tragedy that allows spectators all too readily to accept their own social or historical fate. With Adorno, he says he would like to write "imaginary opera guides" for traditional operas, to contravene our operatic and cinematic habits: the way we look and listen.⁴⁶ It is also almost as though he desired to reintroduce into the present one element of the original "Ethiopian story" by Heliodorus, when, having been condemned to die in a ritual sacrifice, the lovers escaped this fate, allowing them to fulfill the other "oracle" behind the story that found them happily married at the end. Their escape from sacrifice differed from Aida's final song of acceptance. It reflected an earlier moment in the opera

when Aida begged Radames to escape with her. From this we learn that it makes all the difference in the world to speak of a woman as having been buried alive singing her song unto death as opposed to her having *almost* been buried alive, having escaped at least one of the established patterns of tragic or sacrificial expectation.

Kluge rewrites many works and specifically their endings to change the aesthetic and social terms of the whole. He takes sides with the sort of conditions of life that refuse the sacrificial and grandiose. Perhaps, he argues, there is a local happiness in living a more ordinary life if one sticks to the “thousand” contingent reasons why we do things and feel things without seeking a necessity to our acts and feelings according to a higher rationale. Here, a happy marriage might be the achievement of precisely this close escape and thus an ironic bourgeois strike against so much of nineteenth-century opera conceived as a fated art.

Critique is performed by an interpretation that exposes a work’s internal contradictions by reading an opera against its grain. The distortion of facts or the hammering exaggeration of interpretation is central to critique. Critique is also performed when modern artists rewrite old works in the form of new works, new works that show what is at stake in trying to produce the works of old. Kluge produces new works that refuse precisely to be works of the past from the first moment of their existence. These works one may well call counter-works, following in a tradition of the *anti-work works* that Adorno identified with some of Arnold Schoenberg’s and Samuel Beckett’s productions. However, like the counter public sphere, a counter-work does not guarantee that resistance will be expressed, only that a space of possibility is opened up in which it *might* be. What a counter-work tries most to do is subvert the tendency toward becoming a resolved or fully-fledged work. To produce such a work is no easy task. There is no formula and no fixed set of counter-emotions to which one can appeal to sever the grip of those emotions that have brought about, to use Ramfis’s words, our “terror, thunder, and death” (*terror, folgore, morte*).⁴⁷

When after the Second World War, Adorno wrote that authentic experience or writing poetry was no longer possible, he submitted too completely to the tragic discourse of historical fate. After corresponding with Paul Celan he realized he had been wrong to so submit even if his first extreme expression had carried a particular weight. Thereafter, he tried to articulate the terms for the continuation of experience and poetry.⁴⁸ Kluge assumed the second approach from the start. He does not ask whether experience is still possible in a society under the grip of total administration. Whatever the condition of society, experience, in its hundreds and thousands of variations, is inescapable.

Kluge appeals to the inescapable fact of experience to loosen the grip of deep melancholy that attends a human existence that feels that it is living only in the “rivers of blood” of our once proud European cities—cities, to use more of Amonasro’s words, that are now “ruined and beaten.” Kluge looks and listens to opera to refuse its fiction, its illusion, its implied fatalism, to reopen the space for experience, for experience of what is most raw, most real, most painful, but also sometimes pleasurable. One cannot simply put pleasure aside. However, even as raw or real, experience is never pure, as we see every time Kluge juxtaposes the real with the unreal, or personal with public emotions.⁴⁹

Kluge intersperses scenes of operas with images of opera houses—“the power-stations of emotions” as he describes them—lying now in the rubble.⁵⁰ For Adorno, too, *Aida* is one of the bourgeois operas of secular “pomp” that held the bricks of the old European opera houses in place. Being a bourgeois genre heading toward crisis, it was not surprising when, during the Second World War, the bricks tumbled down. After the war Adorno sought the terms of opera’s uneasy survival, a survival that was not intact, which was a fact brought home to any audience that still went to the bourgeois opera seeking the shelter it once provided, yet unable to rid itself of the feeling that something had been lost. An audience, Adorno insisted, will try to build its own bomb shelter out of the rubble of the nineteenth century, though the emotion or force (*Kraft*) uniting the audience will only be (paradoxically) a secure memory of something that few present there can actually remember.⁵¹ Once more, though experience lay ruptured in the ruins, the trace of what once was had not disappeared altogether, even if only few could still hear it. Earlier in his life, Adorno stressed the archaic trace; later, he stressed the longing or residual desire that shapes a contemporary experience that is only too aware of loss. Nevertheless, the desire, he argued, yields only a most fragile sense of security.

Kluge writes that the strongest provocation for emotion is war. “Actually war is the strongest provocation facing all projects of power [*Macht*], so long as it testifies to the fact that no power can arrest it, and historically so far no power has been able to arrest it.” Against which he concludes: “I *want* to tell stories about why emotions are *not* powerless.”⁵²

Here is one such story. On April 7, 1945, Kluge was not yet an adult. He heard an Italian broadcast of *Aida* in his home on the German radio.⁵³ The war was approaching its end and the radio still the primary medium of the news. His war at this moment was an audible war. Kluge sat with his father listening “to the distorted mystery music . . . from far off and a little garbled.” His father told him what was going on in “brief German sentences.” By one o’clock the lovers were being buried alive in the tomb. Kluge and his father discussed what it might mean, medically, to be buried alive. The next day there was an air raid and Kluge was now with his father in the shelter.

He could not help but recall *Aida's* tomb, though the reality of his own experience cut into the recollection. Whereas Aida saw the delivering angel of death, the child heard the real planes delivering their real bombs from above. The juxtaposition in his experience of irreal air waves with real air raids later gave him the material for his art.

There are surprisingly few writers in the last two centuries who have not written about taphephobia, the fear of being buried alive. As fear transmuted into fantasy, it enters into writing with every conceivable literal and metaphorical significance. Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Premature Burial," to offer but one example, tells of how the protagonist traverses the shadowy and vague space between life and death. The protagonist becomes lost in "worms, tombs and epitaphs," in the "phosphoric radiance of decay," in "spectacles of woe," where memory becomes man's dominion. Being buried alive, or should one say, being *almost* buried alive and living to tell the tale is incontrovertibly the stuff of art.

It would be truly surprising to discover that Freud had not written about taphephobia, but I don't think he did. Nevertheless, he did write about the related fear of claustrophobia, where this fear is not so much of being enclosed in a small space as of coming out, in association with the fantasy, of the space, of the tomb, of the womb—of being born. Kluge shows a scene of a man, in conversation with a woman, who cannot believe what he tells her, that though he has sung the opera eighty-four times he is always able in the first act to suspend what he knows will happen at the end. One might say of this singer that he is a man without claustrophobia who has no fear of being born, which is why he is able to sing each time in this state of suspended disbelief. In Kluge's account, this is an expression of hope. The man asks the woman: are you against success? She says no, but still she reminds him that the opera does not turn out well. The man says, as if in repetition of Adorno's earlier "*aber doch*"—and yet it could have come out differently—" *könnte doch aber*." In this conversation, it is he and not she who gestures toward the possibility.

But does he see the right sort of possibility? Here is the tensest moment in the conversation, as in the entire argument of this essay. Does the singer who sings with hope that the ending might be different actually break out of the fateful terms of the work or does he not rather only suspend those terms temporarily given a need to dramatize his performance? Is his "*könnte doch aber*" or Adorno's "*aber doch*" enough? One way to read the gesture is through the result it brings about. At the extreme, it leaves us in a negative space of possibility where no attempt is made to fill in that space with concrete or substantial suggestions as to how life *ought* to be lived. Whereas Adorno declared, after Auschwitz, that life is no longer lived, Kluge argues that we cannot avoid living life. Adorno thought that offering the new terms of life risked putting us back where we were before. Kluge wants to take the risk

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anyway. Adorno warned, however, against our being too optimistic about the outcome, which leaves us with only the gesture itself, with the potential power of art to tell us that the ending, our ending, like the work itself, *could* be different. For both Adorno and Kluge, to refuse the terms of the *work* of art is not automatically to refuse the terms or potential of *art* that resists the totalizing *workhood*. In the present argument, it is the beautiful music that Adorno heard that gives us something that prevents the fatal stone from closing down the operatic work altogether.

It is an age-old or archaic gesture to appeal to music—both literally and as social metaphor—as that which saves us and saves society from falling apart. In a marvelous story entitled “God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater,” Kurt Vonnegut wrote that until the last scene of the opera “everything was fine.” But then he continued:

the hero and heroine were placed in an airtight chamber to suffocate. As the doomed pair filled their lungs, Eliot called out to them, “You will last a lot longer if you don’t sing.” Eliot stood, leaned far out of his box, told the singers, “Maybe you don’t know anything about oxygen, but I do. Believe me, you must not sing.”

Castorp listened to the beautiful music but he listened oblivious to the facts. He was quite happy for the singers to keep on singing. Said, contrarily, was rather too aware of the facts and found that he could hardly listen to the opera anymore at all. Adorno and Kluge saw the curious falsity Said saw, but they also saw a space of possibility in the voice that refused the heroic role. In my view, the latter offers the most dialectical reading of the work given that it does not silence a work that is troubling but seeks potential within its own concealed space to make contemporary and challenging productions worthwhile. Opera survives, in this view, not as the art of the future—by no means—but rather as an art of the potential.

6.

A last unraveling thought. In his book of 2004, Michael P. Steinberg argued that critics have long been prone to dismiss nationalism *in toto*, as if nationalism were always of a dominating and destructive kind.⁵⁴ He sought to show, and to show in Verdi’s operas in particular, that some forms of what he called benevolent nationalism actually give a space *from the inside* not only for the retention but also for the renewal of individuality. Not every voice of a people, he rightly insisted, is a totalitarian voice of *das Volk*. From which he concluded that resistance or subjectivity does not always have to be located in the ruined or shadowy lives of exiled individuals. Steinberg’s argument is

extremely important. It suggests that seeking either redemption in a principle of fate or destiny or in some sort of anti- or counter-redemption in the lonely figure of the outcast—be she/he a woman, a Jew, or a gypsy—might be to think on either side of the same false coin—a Janus-faced coin that forces more a collaboration than a separation between the gazes of the outside and the inside, thereby preventing any genuine change from coming about. Given this worry, one might also ask whether it has not been a mistake all along to interpret an “Italian” opera, as I have done here, too much in these polarized, outcast, foreign, and oh so very German terms. On the other hand, whether *Aida* is an Italian opera and what it means to say that it is remains an open question, as open in fact as the question whether critical theory belongs only or too much to Germany and to the more catastrophic moments of its history.

Notes

1. This essay originated as a lecture for the conference “The Public Spheres of Alexander Kluge,” German Department, Princeton University, December 2004. I thank Patrick Calleo, Karen Henson, Alexander Kluge, Gertrud Koch, Roger Parker, Hans Vaget, and an anonymous reader for helpful comments.
2. Mann 1995:636.
3. The review was published in Adorno [1929] 1984:140–41. There is no published English translation. In this essay, all translations are my own unless specified otherwise.
4. Adorno 1984:140.
5. Adorno 1984:141.
6. For further detail on the words of the King of Prussia, see Rose 1980:12.
7. All quotations from the Italian libretto by Antonio Ghislanzoni are from *Aida* (New York: Dover Publications, 1989); translations are my own.
8. Said 1994:111–32. Paul Robinson also introduces this point to counter Said’s reading of the opera in 1993:133–40. See also Locke 2006:45–72; and Herbert Lindenburger’s chapter on Orientalism and Otherness in 1998:160–90. For extensive details on the background to the opera, see Budden 1992:161–259.
9. Arrigo Boito, the librettist for Verdi’s *Otello*, adapted this line in the opera in Act II, Scene 5.
10. Quoted in Rose 1980:10.
11. Said 1994:116.
12. Said 1994:113.
13. For a differently focused article on the death-like character of the opera, also inspired by the work of Said, see Cruz 2002:177–200.
14. Adorno 1978a:33, my translation. For a complete translation, see “Bourgeois Opera,” in Levin 1993:25–43.
15. Parker 1980:13 and 31–33.

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16. The letter is printed in full in Busch 1978:4–5.
17. I pursue this theme in detail in a companion essay, “Undoing the Discourse of Fate. The Case of the *Der Fliegende Holländer*” (2005:1–22).
18. Busch 1978:296–299.
19. Kluge 1984:176. All translations of Kluge’s text are my own. The text of the film more or less corresponds to the text from the book. Quotations are drawn from the book.
20. Gertrud Koch makes this point with the term “congealment” in “Alexander Kluge’s *Phantom of the Opera*” (1990:79).
21. “Die Macht gibt es wirklich, und die Gefühle gibt es auch wirklich,” Kluge 1984, “Vorwort.”
22. See Lutze 1998: 117–18.
23. “Gefühle haben ihre eigene Zeit,” Kluge 1984:211.
24. “Alle ihre Gefühle haben Übersicht über 28 grosse Kriege,” Kluge 1984:70. For more on this displacement, see Hansen 1981–82: esp. 55. The extension of time embodied in the generalized figure of woman is also discussed in relation to the figure of Kundry by Carolyn Abbate in 2001:108 and by Stanley Cavell in 1994:156. Both refer to the line at the end of Goethe’s *Faust II*: “Jungfrau, Mutter, Königin, Göttin, bleibe gnädig!”
25. “IN DEN TRAUERIGEN GESCHICHTEN WIEGEN DIE GEFÜHLE SCHWERERER,” Kluge 1984:213.
26. Kluge 1984:69.
27. Kluge 1984, “Vorwort.”
28. “Qual poter m’avvince a lui!,” my free translation.
29. Kluge 1984:78.
30. Adorno 1978a:32. For a contemporary critique of exogamy in Kluge’s work, see Koch 1990.
31. See this marvelous letter from Boito to Verdi in 1889 (July 7) on knots in comedy and tragedy: “In comedy there’s a moment when the audience says ‘It’s finished,’ but when on stage the action has to continue. A knot can’t be unraveled without being loosened first, and when it’s loose, the solution can be foreseen and the interest is gone before the knot is. Comedy unravels the knot; tragedy breaks or severs it” (Conati and Medic 1994:140–41). Cf. also Nietzsche’s comment from sec. 153 of *The Gay Science* [1882] 2001: “*Homo poeta*.— I myself, having made this tragedy of tragedies all by myself, insofar as it is finished; I, having first tied the knot of morality into existence before I drew it so tight that only a god could untie it—which is what Horace demands!—I myself have now slain all gods in the fourth act, for the sake of morality! Now, what is to become of the fifth act? From where am I to take the tragic solution? Should I begin to think about a comic solution?”
32. Adorno and Kluge were in regular contact in Frankfurt in the 1960s.
33. Adorno 1978b:299, translated in Livingstone 1992:54 as “*Carmen* too is one of those operas of exogamy which begin with *La Juive* and *L’Africaine* and proceed via *Aida*, *Lakmé* and *Butterfly* to Berg’s *Lulu*. All of them celebrate eruptions from civilization into the unknown.” Cf. McClary 1992 for a more contemporary development of this view.
34. Kluge 1981/1982:215.
35. Cf. section 2 of Nietzsche’s *The Case of Wagner*, in 1967:158–59.

36. Cf. Kluge 1990a:20.
37. Negt and Kluge 1993.
38. Cf. Helke Sander 1990:59–68, esp. 65.
39. Clément 1989: esp. 116ff.
40. “In jeder Oper, die von Erlösung handelt, wird im fünften Akt eine Frau geopfert,” Kluge 1984:68.
41. I am thinking here of Schiller’s play *The Bride of Messina* where the relation of heroic death to destiny is explored in great detail.
42. In his film, *Die Macht der Gefühle*, Kluge shows a clip from Ernst Lubitsch’s silent film *Das Weib des Pharaoh*. In this scene, the people are angry with the lovers. They feel betrayed the more they think the lovers have willingly relinquished their role as representative in this time of war in favor of love. The lovers are stoned by the crowd. However, in my reading at this moment, I am interpreting their love as rather symbolizing the peace with which the war is meant to end.
43. Kluge 1984:78. Recall Nietzsche’s remark in the opening sentence of his *The Case of Wagner*, that he has only heard Bizet’s masterpiece twenty times. “Ich hörte gestern—werden Sie es glauben?—zum zwanzigsten Male Bizets Meisterstück.”
44. “Seit Jahren versuche ich mit literarischen und filmischen Mitteln die Opern erzählungen zu ändern,” Kluge 1984:176.
45. Kluge 1984:178. Cf. Gertrud Koch’s observation that “Kluge believes that opera and film correspond to different needs: whereas opera invokes the feeling for irreparable tragedy, the majority of films imagine themselves obliged to offer a happy ending” (1990:81). Kluge takes the term *Erfahrungshunger* from Michael Rutschky’s classic essay on “the Sixties.”
46. Kluge 1984:176.
47. Gertrud Koch describes Kluge’s position as “pragmatic utopianism” in contrast to Adorno’s more redemptive model. In part she draws this distinction to mark the difference between the continuing needs of opera (for Adorno) and the new needs of film (for Kluge) (1990:86–7).
48. I have discussed this matter in detail as many other matters pertaining to critique in my *Elective Affinities: Musical Essays on the History of Aesthetic Theory* (2008:197–203).
49. For more on Kluge’s “antagonistic realism,” see Lieberman 1988:4–22, esp. 12.
50. Kluge 1984:68 (“Das Kraftwerk der Gefühle”). In her chapters (part II) on Kluge, Caryl Flinn also pays much attention to the theme of rubbles and ruin in Kluge’s work on opera (2004). Taking her cue from the work of Walter Benjamin (given Benjamin’s influence upon Kluge), she describes Kluge’s technique in the compelling terms of “explosive historiography.”
51. Cf. Adorno 1973:266.
52. Kluge 1984, “Vorwort.”
53. Kluge narrates his own story far better than I. The translation of the story appears in “Kluge on Opera, Film, and Feelings” (1990b:89–138).
54. Steinberg 2004:178–86.

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