

Venice: a meeting, a plague, a death

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Summary

Death in Venice is based on the novella of the same name by Thomas Mann, except that in the cinema version the main character, Gustav von Aschenbach, is a musician instead of a writer. Owing to poetic license not always within the layman's grasp, Luchino Visconti also wished to identify the artist with Gustav Mahler. Beyond such dissimilarities, however, the film is a feasible recreation of the story and a faithful reconstruction of those times: a Venice divorced from its former splendor and invaded by a plague and yet at the same time still able to evoke the captivating, nostalgic legacy of its magnificent past. An ideal scenario indeed for the musical ideas of Mahler, and perfectly reflected in the *Midnight Song* and the *adagio* of his third and fifth symphonies.

Keywords: *Death in Venice*, Thomas Mann, Gustav Mahler, Luchino Visconti, Cholera

Technical details

Title: *Death in Venice*

Original Title: *Morte a Venezia*

Country: Italy

Year: 1971

Director: Luchino Visconti

Music: Gustav Mahler

Screenwriter: Adaptation by Luchino Visconti and Micola Badalucco of the homonymous novella by Thomas Mann.

Cast: Dirk Bogarde, Marisa Berenson, Bjørn Andresen, Silvana Mangano, Mark Burns, Romolo Valli, Nora Ricci, Carole André and Sergio Garfagnoli.

Color: Color

Runtime: 130 minutes

Genre: Melodrama

Production Company: Alfa Cinematográfica

Synopsis: In the film, Gustav von Aschenbach is a German musician impelled by (at least for the spectator) somewhat veiled reasons to withdraw to Venice for a period of rest. Shortly after his arrival at the hotel, he falls into a kind of obsession brought on by a fleeting sight of a Polish adolescent of noble extraction, whose outstanding beauty seems to him to embody the inaccessible aesthetic pleasures that he has been searching for all his

life. Within a short time, the formerly unimpeachable musician discovers his irresistible attraction to the young Tadzio and thus begins his slow decline to regions known best to those familiar with Dante. Thus, to the plague then bedeviling Venice is added his own personal destruction; death on both the outside and on the inside. Nevertheless, the challenge becomes all imperative; the "asymptotic" approach to that sort of Godhood was what he had always sought and it was of little consequence if his life was to be forfeited in the play-out.

The Novella of Thomas Mann

Death in Venice/ Der Tod in Venedig seems to be a story with a certain embedded autobiographical content. The novella was written in 1912, slightly after Mann had spent some time in the city, where he was to learn of the death of Mahler in (1911)¹. In some way, the death of the composer must have affected Mann, because he decided to give his character the same forename as Mahler and deftly placed a Bohemian orchestral conductor in his maternal genealogy. In contrast, the surname Aschenbach comes from the Mediaeval poet Wolfram von Eschenbach, one of the most outstanding Minnesänger of his times and a curious mixture of

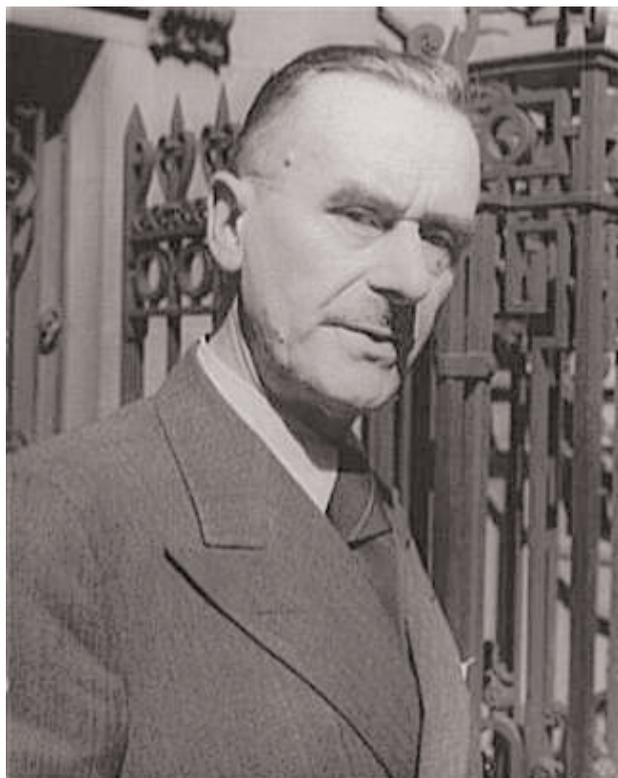


Figure 1: Thomas Mann

knight, troubadour, monk, and warrior from the village of Eschenbach in Baviera endowed with a huge capacity for composition and singing (figure 1).

Gustav von Aschenbach is a well-known German writer and historian who, having apparently lost his inspiration, decides to renew take a long rest and ends up in Venice, in particular at the Venetian Lido. Venice is then a city of intrigue, perhaps fallen on hard times and full of romantic illusion; despite this, however, its fascination remains intact. The main plot focuses on the unbridled attraction of von Aschenbach to the young Tadzio. His passion seems to go far beyond the purely homoerotic and enters the magic realm of a search, through art, for an aesthetic pleasure hinting at quasi-perfect beauty. This artistic treasure, so precious and yet so inaccessible, finally erupts into von Aschenbach's life. In the meeting with Tadzio, we are reminded of a timeless *atelier*, in which Wagner practices the piano for the Tristan and Iseult duo, while Calderón puts the monologue of Segismund to paper; Botticelli samples colour tones for the Birth of Venus, and Miguel Angelo removes all excess from the marble of the *Pietà*.

There are few films in which the secondary actors are so important. Short episodes help us to demarcate the typology of von Aschenbach, such as the unknown man from Munich who initially stressed

his need to take a long rest, the old man ridiculously "transmuted" into a young man aboard the boat, the gondolier, Tadzio's family, the guests, Jaschu, and the street musicians. Many of them are clear references to a more vulgar world, completely different from that of Tadzio, but not so distant for von Aschenbach, who somehow wishes to put an end to the fateful convivance between mediocrity and decadence.

The momentary happiness of the Venetian summer fails to spur von Aschenbach. His irrepressible attraction to Tadzio becomes increasingly unsustainable and rapidly drives von Aschenbach into a state of excitement and underlying passion. To a certain extent this reminds us of "*dove son giunto*", which Arrigo Boito put into the mouth of Verdi's *Otello*.

With its owner on a downwards spiral, von Aschenbach's conservative nature fails to help him contain the forces of the forbidden and occult that stalks him. Nevertheless, a certain vein of stoicism is there to help him to resist by whatever means: for von Aschenbach, Tadzio should remain unapproachable, perhaps owing to his condition as a demi-God, and perhaps because von Aschenbach has a certain fear of rejection and of making a fool of himself or of treading hitherto unmarked pathways. Thus, we have an accumulation of uncertainty and passions as abominable as the Asian cholera itself plaguing the city; this is what finally drives him to desperation.

The death that invades Venice could well claim to have von Aschenbach as one of its victims. Nevertheless, perhaps it is worth his while to take a risk before abandoning that "*plus-de-goce*". All in all, von Aschenbach had always simply wished to attain a state in which maximum beauty would prevail. And death does eventually come, perhaps as a half-solution to meet both exigencies: his love of Tadzio and the straight-laced behaviour demanded by society.

The death of von Aschenbach probably offered some sort of release for Tomas Mann, as could have been the case of the death of the young Werther for Goethe.

The cinematographic version

The film dates back to 1971 and is one of the most acclaimed productions of Luchino Visconti and at the same time an excellent reconstruction of the then waning Belle Epoque. The main characters are Gustav von Aschenbach (Dirk Bogarde) and Tadzio (Björn

Andresen). Even though we are aware of the tangled and mysterious webs that may result from artistic creation, we do not fully understand this, perhaps unfounded, typological correspondence between von Aschenbach and Mahler, apart from the sublime aesthetic pleasure that both attempt to reach. Far from offering any judgement, and purely as a hypothesis, it is likely that the disquiet of the author of the present article is rooted in the true work of the physician and investigator, where action is governed much more by precision than by conjectures. It is true that Mahler's music could not have been more appropriate. The *adagietto* provides a more than suitable background for the image of the ship coming in from the Adriatic, the rice workers along the shore, and that circumspect, slightly timid-looking character, who upon arriving in Venice is so disagreeably irritated by the presence of the ridiculously made up old man ingratiating himself to the youngsters on the deck. How could we imagine that in a question of days that same repulsion would be turned in upon itself after the rejuvenating favours of the barber?

Along the film we follow certain scenes introduced by Visconti, perhaps to foster that "forced" similarity with the life of Mahler and certain presumed characteristics of his personality. We witness the debate between Gustav and Alfred about the psychological bases underlying artistic creation. We learn of the memories of a heart disease and the advice to von Aschenbach to take a long rest soon after he has become installed in his hotel. And we also learn of the death of his young daughter. Evocations of his former family life recur throughout the film and are delightful: indeed, quite the opposite of the unsatisfactory tryst with the girl at the brothel, set to a popular sonata of Beethoven (*For Elise*).

The handling of the shots while von Aschenbach is about to dine and the meeting with Tadzio and his family is unsurpassable as regards scenography. The mere sight of the family group delights von Aschenbach, although not as much as



Figure 2: Image of Tadzio

when he turns his gaze on Tadzio (figure 2), who seems to personify a spontaneous explosion of beauty at its finest. Von Aschenbach's condition as a consummate, exemplary, balanced and unambiguous artist collides openly with the pulses of passion awoken in him by the youth. Thus, for our character all physical contact would be polluting and would drag him to a fearsome hell. It would be impossible for him to remain in a scenario packed with "inadmissible" temptations. The return journey is by train and when it crosses the city we again hear the theme of the *adagietto*. By chance or cause, the trip is a failure and must be cancelled because we learn that his luggage was mistakenly sent to Como. Despite this irritating circumstance, the fact that von Aschenbach does not have to leave the city secretly pleases him immensely.



Figure 3: The man who collapses at the station

A very sick person collapses at the station (figure 3), but this has little effect on von Aschenbach because his return to the hotel takes priority over everything else.



Figure 4: Tadzio's greeting

He is happy and carefree. In the hotel, he opens the window of his room and glimpses Tadzio, who he languidly greets with a gesture (figure 4). In the long run, then, Eros and Adonis have always formed part of his world.

The music is introduced once more and now it is the turn of the *Midnight song*, which Mahler used for the fourth movement of his symphony. Tadzio walks towards the sea while Gustav begins to write.

The day enters its last moments and the melody appropriates the incipient night.

The atmosphere of the film is ideal for charting the rich array of the composer's musical expressions. The last piece of the *Song of the Earth* or the fourth movement of Mahler's ninth symphony would have fit in beautifully along the various scenes, although not for this should merit be taken away from such a fortunate choice.

Returning to the film, rumours about the cholera plague become increasingly worrisome, especially so for a water-enclosed city such as Venice. Von Aschenbach knows he should counsel the Polish family to leave the city but to him such a forward move almost seems a breach of etiquette. Again he falls into the clutches of desperation and begins to flag as he walks the darkened streets and alleys... "My God, what path have I chosen?". And in the midst of such blackness we suddenly catch sight of the face of Tadzio, who the director has ensured fully covers all the requirements of a chiaroscuro worthy of Caravaggio or Rembrandt.

Finally, the Polish family does decide to leave and plan to do so in the afternoon. The beach is almost deserted. Lying back in his chair, von Aschenbach contemplates Tadzio in heated discussion with Jaschu (Sergio Garfagnoli), his young Polish friend. He would have liked to separate Tadzio from such unseemly company, but he no longer has the strength. His breathing begins to flag and he finally lapses into an irreversible silence. In the last scene Tadzio sets off towards the beach and slowly enters the water. He turns for an instant and looks at Von Aschenbach for the last time (figure 5). The camera gradually draws back from the Apollo-like figure, and in the distance we see a ship. The melody of the *adagio* develops into the *attacato* of jealousy, pouring forth through the sadness of the musicians.

*Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine
Et lux perpetua luceat eis.*



Figure 5: Tadzio looks back in the final scene at the beach

Mahler and his music in the film

During his life, Gustav Mahler was essentially known for his work as a conductor while today, in all justice, he is known as one of the most prominent post-romantic composers. This transition is a somewhat sad place of honour, since those fond of romantic ideas did not accept his novel conceptions and the more vanguard and critical members of society at that time in turn refused to forgive him for his ties to more conventional forms. Fortunately, people are able to change their minds and rectify their opinions (figure 6).

The composer came from a Jewish family residing in Bohemia and was the second son of 12 siblings, of which 8 died prematurely. After a short period of time, the family moved to Moravia, where the composer spent his childhood. He started with piano classes at 6 and at 15 he was accepted at the Vienna conservatory. His career as a composer began in 1880 and his renown continued to rise until he received an offer to conduct at the Vienna Opera in 1897. This was an imperial post with no room for Jews; hence his conversion to Catholicism.

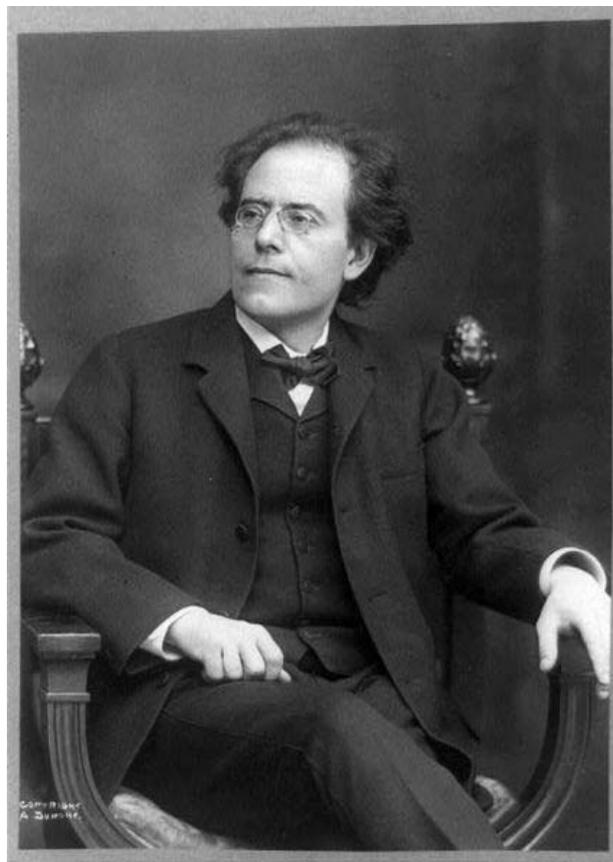


Figure 6: Gustav Mahler

Those of us who delight in his music cannot be but disappointed that his work at the Opera took up so much of his composing time. He would work there for periods of nine months and could only bite into his own projects during the summer, which he would spend at Maiernigg-Wörther See and where he composed symphonies four to eight².

His symphonies follow a line of splendid coloration and brightness. They also reflect the composer's monumental expertise in expressive instrumental, choral and vocal combinations, which often departed almost completely from the romantic symphonic form.

Because his composer was Mahler, the choice of musical pieces for the film must have been a difficult task for the director. The last two movements of the third symphony are of a superlative beauty, as great as that of the fourth symphony, which was written around the theme of the *Midnight Song* of *Zarathustra*. The musicality given by the composer to Nietzsche's text and the use of contralto could have been important issues when deciding^{3,4}.

The *Midnight Song* from *Thus spoke Zarathustra*

<i>O Mensch! Gib acht!</i>	O man! Take heed!
<i>Was spricht die tiefe Mitternacht?</i>	What saith deep midnight's voice indeed?
<i>Ich schlief!</i>	"I slept my sleep-,
<i>Aus tiefem Traum bin ich erwacht!</i>	"From deepest dream I've woke, and plead:
<i>Die Welt ist tief!</i>	"The world is deep,
<i>Und tiefer als der Tag gedacht!</i>	"And deeper than the day could read.
<i>O Mensch! O Mensch!</i>	"Oh man, Oh man"
<i>Tief, tief, tie fust ihr Weh!</i>	"Deep is its woe-,
<i>Lust, tiefer noch als Herzleid!</i>	"Joy- deeper still than grief can be:
<i>Weh spricht: Vergeb!</i>	"Woe saith: Hence! Go!
<i>Doeh alle Lust will Ewigkeit!</i>	"But joys all want eternity-,
<i>Will tiefe, tiefe Ewigkeit!</i>	"-Want deep, profound eternity!"

The fifth symphony corresponds to his second period of production, in which there are no voice parts. Although the work was finished in 1902, it was retouched and the last version appeared in 1911. The *adagietto* is a piece for strings, in the BA form, where the B section is a modulation of the central theme⁵. The array of sensations aroused upon listening to the symphony is so broad that it can barely be described under the umbrella of any single adjective. We seem to become increasingly immersed in an elegiac state brought about by happiness stolen: an attempt to seek beauty in the same place as pain, just as we delight in the richness of autumn colours after a summer that has disappeared for ever from our lives.

Some versions of the composer's life hold that the *adagietto* represents the composer's love for Alma Schindler, whom he married in March 1902. This marriage bore two daughters: Maria Anna, who died at 5 from diphtheria or scarlet fever, and Anna, who later became a renowned sculptor. Shortly after the death of Maria Anna, Mahler was diagnosed with bacterial endocarditis. He never really recovered from this and probably died of it when he was just 50. Her burial was conducted in silence, in accordance with her express wishes.

Referring to Tchaikovsky's sixth symphony, Toscanini praised the honesty of the score. This qualification can also be applied to the work of Mahler, since it is a manifest musical version of the cultural and social tensions prevailing at the time. His collections of songs and his *almost* 10 symphonies (the tenth was not completed) further reflect the tangled existence of modern humankind, our worries and preoccupations, our uncertainties and our fleeting moments of harmonious release.

A "cholera-bound" Venice

When trying to pinpoint the true meaning of the facts, and especially as regards medical issues, we may assume that von Aschenbach would not have died of cholera. The open "secret" about the presence of the disease in Venice is an element that affords greater richness to the imagination underlying the plot, although is less tempting to afford the disease an aetiological role in the composer's death.

From the times of Hippocrates cholera was known as a disease deriving from the "flow of bile". In the seventeenth century, Thomas Sydenham coined the term *Cholera morbus* from the Greek *chole* (bile) and the Latin *morbus* (disease). The aim of this was to distinguish it from "cholera" in the sense of anger. Today, cholera is a disease typical of areas lacking decent running water since it is mainly acquired through the ingestion of polluted water or food. The aetiological agent -*Vibrio cholerae*- first described in 1854 and isolated in culture 30 years later by Robert Koch (1884), colonises the GI tract and secretes a toxin that alters the transport of water and electrolytes across the intestinal mucosa. The symptoms occur over an incubation period of 1-3 days, characterised by an aqueous, profuse and acute diarrhoea (perhaps evacuating 6L of water/hour), with the accompanying rapid dehydration, potassium depletion, anuria, and circulatory collapse. This clinical picture may lead to

Translator's note: taken from http://users.compaqnet.be/cn127103/Nietzsche_thus_spake_zarathustra/IV_79.html

death in more than 50% of sufferers over a short period of time if suitable therapy is not begun. The microorganism adheres to the cells of the intestinal villi by bacterial fimbriae that recognise carbohydrates present at the cell membrane. Cholera toxin binds to receptors on epithelial cells and elicits an increase in cyclic AMP followed by hyperactivation of sodium pumps, thereby causing electrolyte hypersecretion into the lumen, which in turn attracts water and causes diarrhoea. The epithelium itself shows almost no morphological damage^{6,7}.

History tells us that the disease must have arisen in Asia, after which it slowly propagated to Europe, Africa and America. Following the identification of its causative agent towards the end of the nineteenth century, Europe and North America rid themselves of the disease by filtering and chlorinating water sources. Despite the accumulated knowledge, however, cholera continued to attack humans in successive major pandemics. The second half of the nineteenth century saw the fourth and fifth of these, both of which stemmed from outbreaks that started in Southeast Asia. Towards the end of the that century, specifically in 1899, the sixth pandemic occurred, mainly in Calcutta and Mumbai, reaching Europe 5 or 6 years later.

The problems faced by humankind are at the same time the driving force leading to their solution, and cholera was no exception. After an epidemic that occurred in London in 1854, John Snow, the physician of Queen Victoria, noted that the cases had occurred in the surroundings of a pump located on Broad Street, now Broadwick Street. Through statistical estimations he was able to establish the relationship between the quality of the water source and the cases of cholera. According to the chronicles, contagion ended when the pump was removed, although Snow himself recognised that the epidemic had already begun to abate at the time of his intervention. Regardless of this, it is interesting that Snow's efforts were a landmark in the history of Public health and Epidemiology as a science⁸.

Final remarks

The specialist criticism concurs in defining Opera as a synthesis of different modes of artistic expression. Investigation into the reason for this lies outside the scope of this article, but it could be speculated that the notion would have been garnered at a

time when the cinema did not exist or at least was considered to be an unworthy opponent to other art forms. Nevertheless, technology has given us a tool with which it has been possible to amalgamate literary, visual, and musical expression: when combined in a masterly fashion this can lead to true works of art. *Death in Venice* by Luchino Visconti is undoubtedly one of themalthough we would have preferred von Aschenbach as a writer.

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