

THE END OF BORIS. CONTRIBUTION TO AN AESTHETICS OF DISORIENTATION

by
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The Emergence of the Opera—An Outline

Boris Godunov was tsar of Russia in the years 1598–1605. He came to power after Fyodor, the son of Ivan the terrible, died without heirs. Boris was Fyodor's brother-in-law, and in fact, even during Fyodor's life he was the omnipotent ruler of Russia. Ivan the Terrible had had his eldest son executed, whereas his youngest son, Dmitri, had been murdered in unclear circumstances. In the 16–17th centuries, as well as among the 19th-century authors the prevalent view was that it was Boris who ordered Dmitri's murder (some present-day historians believe that Dmitri's murder too was ordered by Ivan the Terrible). In time, two pretenders appeared, one after the other, who claimed the throne, purporting to be Dmitri, saved miraculously. Boris' story got told in many versions, in history books and on the stage. Most recently, on 12 July 2005 *The New York Times* reported the 295-year-late premiere of the opera *Boris Goudenow, or The Throne Attained Through Cunning, or Honor Joined Happily With Affection* by the German Baroque composer Johann Mattheson.

Boris' story prevailed in three genres: history, tragedy, and opera. In the nineteenth century, the three genres culminated in N. M. Karamzin's monumental *History of the Russian State*, in Alexander Pushkin's tragedy *Boris Godunov*, and in Modest Mussorgsky's opera *Boris Godunov*. Each later author in this list liberally drew upon his predecessors. In her erudite and brilliant

book, Caryl Emerson (1986) compared these three versions in a most illuminating way.

An early version of the opera (1869) ends, as fit to a royal tragedy, with the scene of Boris' death. Mussorgsky later revised this version (1874) adding, among other things, a final scene, shifting the focus away from Boris and giving the opera a powerful new shape. In this scene we witness an essentially grotesque mob of vagabonds in the Kromy Forest. We will discuss these different endings at some length.

In the rest of this section, I will elaborate on the different roles of the monk Pimen and the two corrupt monks Varlaam and Misail in the plots of the two versions. From Pushkin, Mussorgsky adopted the figure of the elderly monk and chronicler Pimen, as well as the two mendicant monks Varlaam and Misail, who ran away from their monastery, seeking alms for their monastery as it were, and got drunk with the money they collect. These three figures appear only once both in Pushkin's play and in the earlier version of the opera, at crucial points of the plot. In the expanded version, they reappear toward the end. Pimen becomes a key figure here; but Varlaam and Misail too make a significant contribution of their own to the final scene.

Both in Pushkin and Mussorgsky, Pimen appears for the first time in a dark cell of the monastery at night, writing by the light of an oil lamp the chronicles of Russia, as he witnessed them. Only one episode was left, the hideous murder of the tsarevich in Uglich, where he happened to be present that day. Emerson claims that by his stories, Pimen – whose main role is to tell stories – becomes a dangerous figure, who gains influence over the course of history. This is true in a very important sense. Still, I believe that his influence on history **happened** as a kind of dramatic irony, despite himself. Emerson's description is more appropriate to Pimen's second appearance; but even here, there is considerable uncertainty as to his intentions.

Pimen's apprentice, Grigory, is haunted by nightmares, which

Pimen interprets as an expression of the latter's ambition. He recommends fasting to counter it; and urges him not to feel sorry for having renounced the vain pleasures of this world at such a young age. He even intends to trust him with his life's work, Grigory being such a bright youth, who even mastered reading and writing. After that, despite his explicit intentions, he initiates a dialogue sequence that falls on the fertile ground of Grigory's ambition, planting in his mind the idea to assume the identity of the murdered tsarevich, and claim the throne. It all begins with Pimen complaining that we have sinned by making a regicide our tsar. Grigory enquires about the details of the murder which, as mentioned above, Pimen happened to witness. Grigory asks how old the tsarevich was at the time of the murder. Pimen reflects for a moment, and then concludes: If he were alive today, he would be exactly your age, and a tsar (Pushkin 1946: 153). Thus, unawares, Pimen sets the wheels of history in motion.

Boris' downfall was not caused by Divine punishment from outside the plot, but by his own thoughts and character. In Aristotle's view, the unraveling of a plot must be motivated by character; that is, "that which reveals moral purpose, showing what kind of things a man chooses or avoids" (*Poetics*, Chapter 6). Motivation is, then, psychological rather than physical. "As in the structure of the plot, so too in the portraiture of character, the poet should always aim either at the necessary or the probable" (Aristotle, Chapter 15). Victory or defeat on the battle field depends too much on the relative force of the armies, rather than on character. But the ups and downs of the battle field sometimes do depend on character. Cassius dies not because he loses the battle, but because he misinterprets its outcome. Thus, for instance, in Pushkin's tragedy we see the pretender bewail his dead horse. One of his followers (incidentally also called Pushkin) comments in an aside: "That's really something to regret! / A horse! When our entire fighting army is smashed to bits!" (1946: 170; Nicholas Rzhevsky trans.). What defeats Boris is not a physical power, but Dmitri's very name (that is, his own

conscience), and the people's wish that Dmitri rose from the dead and be restored to the throne ("He is armed with a terrifying name", says the dying Boris to his son (1946: 172)).

The saintly monk Pimen and the corrupt runaway monks make one impressive appearance on stage, near the beginning of Pushkin's tragedy, never to return. In the later, expanded version, Mussorgsky brings them back to stage – Pimen in Boris' death scene, the runaway monks in the Kromy forest scene, creating a frame that tightens the plot. As we shall see in a moment, their appearance is most significant, and tilts the balance of the play in the direction of the transcendent. This difference is in harmony with the general conceptions of the two authors. Pushkin's play has strong overtones of social and political criticism. Mussorgsky tones down these overtones, and foregrounds those elements that have affinity to ritual drama – even in the parts adopted from Pushkin) albeit, as we shall see, with a twist).¹

The runaway monk Grigory assumes the murdered tsarevich's identity, and claims his throne. The Russian people believe that he is genuine; and Grigory knows how to take advantage of the fact that both the Lithuanians and the Poles have political interest to believe that he is genuine: he provides them with a pretext for military intervention in Russia. Likewise, the Catholic Church hopes to convert the pravoslav Russians. Consequently, he receives all the help in the world.

A story circulates in Russia about an old blind shepherd, to whom Dmitri appeared in his dream, and was miraculously cured at Dmitri's grave. This story clearly proves that Dmitri is dead and buried, and that the claimant to the throne must be a fake. But, by the same token, the story suggests that God regards the murder particularly hideous, and made the child one of his saints. In Pushkin's play, the story is told by the Patriarch, advising the tsar that it could be used to expose the falseness of the pretender. This advice embarrasses the boyars and makes the king's forehead break out in

sweat. In the opera, we receive the same story almost word by word, with minor omissions. Nevertheless it undergoes very significant changes. First, in Pushkin's play the episode occurs in the middle of the action, as one of a series of embarrassing incidents, whereas in Mussorgsky's opera it occurs in Boris' death scene; in fact, it is the immediate cause of Boris' heart attack that brings about his death. Second, instead of by a tactless patriarch, it is told by Pimen, turned a kind of prophetic figure, whom Shuysky introduces as follows:

He is a man of wisdom,
A man of irreproachable life,
Who wishes to tell you a great secret.

Pimen's story about the miraculous recovery of the blind shepherd is "beyond good and evil". There is no indication whether he came to comfort or admonish; whether he came to say "don't worry, Dmitri is dead and buried", or that Dmitri's murder was such a hideous crime that he became a saint. It is to be considered a "great secret", "focusing upon the tragic human at a level beneath, or prior to any rationalization whatever" in Francis Fergusson's (1955: 29) words.

Varlaam and Misail, two comic figures, participate – both in Pushkin and Mussorgsky – in a farce that would be funny were it not so serious. And it also sets in motion the wheels of history. When Grigory arrives at the Lithuanian border in their company, and while they are getting drunk in the inn, Grigory plans his flight across the border. Two policemen arrive with a warrant for Grigory's arrest, and ask who can read. Grigory, quick to understand, volunteers to read, 'reading' Varlaam's description instead of his own. When the cheat is discovered, he draws a knife, and in the ensuing bewilderment jumps out through the window and runs across the border. In the expanded version, Mussorgsky brings the two corrupt monks back to stage in the Kromy Forest scene, but in a transformed image. He

even causes them to meet Grigory turned tsarevich, but they don't recognize each other (see below).

Closure and the Grotesque

In what follows, I will consider the effects of two alternative endings of Mussorgsky's opera *Boris Godunov*, and the possible interactions of these endings with a solemn and a grotesque quality, respectively.²

As I said, an early version of the opera (1869) ends with the scene of Boris' death. Mussorgsky later revised this version (1874) adding, among other things, a final scene in the Kromy Forest, shifting the focus away from Boris and giving the opera a powerful new shape. In this scene, we witness a mob of vagabonds who get hold of one of Boris' boyars, deride him and threaten to tear him to pieces. They perform such mock-rituals as a mock-coronation, and a mock-wedding with the oldest woman in the mob. After Mussorgsky's death, Rimsky-Korsakov re-orchestrated and revised *Boris Godunov* "in a heroic endeavour to make the opera more audience-friendly". Among other changes, Rimsky-Korsakov reversed the order of the last two scenes, ending the opera, again, with Boris' death. For nearly a century, only Rimsky-Korsakov's version was performed, Mussorgsky's version was even lost, and only recently rediscovered by David Lloyd-Jones.

Why is one ending more "audience-friendly" than the other? And why do some of our contemporaries (musicians and audiences), and apparently Mussorgsky himself, prefer precisely the ending that is supposed to be less "audience-friendly"? The last two scenes, the death scene and the Kromy Forest scene, display opposite stylistic modes. The former is in the high-mimetic, the latter in the low-mimetic mode. The former is characterized by majesty, 'noble' feelings and acquiescence in death. The latter is comic and extremely frightening at the same time—in one word, grotesque. The grotesque is the co-

presence of the laughable and what is incompatible with it: in this case, fright as to the imminent fate of the boyar, and disgust as to wedding a woman over one hundred years old. The second part of the scene is dominated by a pack of children who deride and abuse a 'holy' simpleton. At the end of the scene, the simpleton remains alone on stage, wailing for the desolate Russian people.³

Barbara Herrnstein-Smith's notions of closure and anti-closure are relevant here.

Closure occurs when the concluding portion of a poem creates in the reader a sense of appropriate cessation. It announces and justifies the absence of further development; it reinforces the feeling of finality, completion, and composure which we value in all works of art; and it gives ultimate unity and coherence to the reader's experience of the poem by providing a point from which all the preceding elements may be viewed comprehensively and their relations grasped as part of a significant design. (Herrnstein-Smith 1968: 36)

Herrnstein-Smith is mainly concerned with devices of "structural closure". In the present instance, however, one powerful ingredient in this closural effect is what she calls "thematic closure", or "closural allusion". When a tragedy (or opera) ends with death, "it creates in the [audience] the expectation of nothing", "it announces and justifies the absence of further development"; it ends the great mental (and interpersonal) conflicts, generating a sense of "stability, resolution, or equilibrium". It inspires the audience not only with pity and awe, but also with certitude. Likewise, going away typically **ends** a scene, even may metaphorically allude to death ("passing away"). Again "it announces and justifies the absence of further development".

When the death scene is **followed** by the Kromy Forest scene, the effect is very different. The majestic effect of Boris' death, and

the sense of equilibrium generated ("calm of mind, all passions spent", in Milton's phrase), are sabotaged by the grotesque mob of vagabonds and pack of unbridled children. The audience is shaken out from the "calm of mind" achieved. Toward the end of this scene, the victorious pretender makes a short appearance and issues a royal statement, and then marches out of the stage, followed by the mob. This could, perhaps, serve as a second closure, compensating for the violation of the previous closure. But Mussorgsky sabotages this too. The simpleton remains on stage alone, ending the opera with a monotonous, wailing chant, which doesn't **end** the opera – it makes it **die away**. In this final episode, the music imitates a repeated plaintive, sobbing sound, with gradually decreasing tempo, loudness, as well as harmonic and melodic complexity. It does not come to a conclusive end – it rather "sobs itself out of existence", so to speak. Boris' death scene, by contrast, ends on a longish, stable, serene, chord.⁴

Let us have a closer look at the score.

The image shows a page of a musical score for the opera Boris Godunov. It features three systems of music. The top system is a vocal line with lyrics in Russian, French, and German. The middle system is a piano accompaniment with a *pp* dynamic marking. The bottom system is another piano accompaniment with a *pp* dynamic marking. The score includes the instruction "Занавес медленно опускается. Rideau descend lentement. Vorhang fällt langsam." and ends with "Fine." and a publisher's mark "W. 8118 B. (348)".

Figure 1: The last thirteen bars of the opera Boris Godunov, beginning with the last two bars of the Simpleton's lament

Figure 1 shows the last thirteen bars of the opera, beginning with the last two bars of the Simpleton's lament, followed by the orchestral ending. Though the whole section has a vague A minor character, it is highly chromatic (that is, it contains notes not belonging to a major or minor scale; it proceeds in half steps). Such music is usually perceived, on the one hand, as exceptionally emotional, and, on the other, is likely to generate an exceptionally weak closure, if at all. The little that is left of the A minor scale is exploited to generate an unstable, 'dying away' quality. The Simpleton's last note is a G sharp, which is the 'leading note' of the A major or (melodic) A minor scale. A 'leading note' lies a semitone (half tone) below the tonic (the keynote) and 'leads' towards it. Whereas the tonic is the most stable note of a melody to end with, the 'leading note' is the least stable one. In the present instance, harmonically, it is part of a so-called 'augmented' chord, which, too, is exceptionally unstable. This chord is preceded by a long series of modulations, that is, gradual changes from one key to another (of which Figure 1 shows only the last two bars). In this series, each chord is a regular major chord, but in a different key: each later chord is one semitone lower than the preceding one. Here, this modulation is the basis of the stretch's chromaticity. Modulation consists of three stages: the source scale, transition, and the new scale; here at least a short period is required to establish the new scale in the listener's perception. Now in Mussorgsky's series of modulations only the first one is long enough to accomplish the establishing stage; in the rest, each new chord occurs before the preceding one could be established. Thus, if chromatic modulation usually undermines stability, in this one the sabotage is exceptionally strong.

When the Simpleton is finished, the orchestra resumes in the (lower) 'bass' key the two 'sobbing' alternating notes one semitone apart. Such a semitone interval is perceived as exceptionally unstable, as belonging to neither a major, nor a minor scale (but to a so-called 'church mode' [see below], in this case the 'phrygian'). After one

bar of unaccompanied 'sobbing', the opening theme is repeated in the higher register (forming an enclosing frame, so as to prevent the fluid structure from falling apart), along with the obstinate 'sobbing' notes in the lower register ('ostinato'). From the second bar of this orchestral section on, a three-quarter-long A-note accompanies this ostinato during three bars, further repeated an octave lower in the next four bars. This is an 'organ point' (a low, sustained tone that remains steady in the bass of a composition while other voices move about above it). In the fifth bar, this A is foreshortened, only one-eighth long. The A note, as we have said, is the tonic, and lends some stability to this fluid structure. Now the successions of three bars and five bars, unlike, e.g., four bars, are asymmetric and thus less stable. What is more, after establishing a succession of three-quarter-long notes, the last item is only one-eighth long, arousing a feeling of deficiency or incompleteness. From here on, we hear only the unaccompanied, obstinate 'sobbing' sounds. In this way, an intense feeling of 'dying away' is generated, further enhanced by the slowing down of the notes and the gradual toning down of the music. After the disappearance of the sustained A notes, which took care of the A minor scale, tonality is lost sight of, ending the opera on a note that is not the tonic (the keynote).

The series of 'obstinate sobbing sounds' consists of endlessly-repeatable alternating F–E, F–E eighth notes. According to Leonard B. Meyer (1956: 136), a prolonged tone at the end of a passage may indicate "lack of forward motion" – a sense of completeness. Composers are wont to give, verbally, a general *ritardando* directive to performers, that is, to gradually slow down the tempo. In the present instance, Mussorgsky actually **wrote out** the delay, so as to have control over its disruption as well. In the last-but-one bar we have a pair of quarter notes (that is, twice as long as the preceding pairs), followed by a half-note F, again doubling the duration. Having lost sight of the underlying musical key, this sustained F is perceived as the closing note of the work, but this too turns out to be

deceptive: this half note is followed by an eighth-note E, sabotaging again this minute *pseudo* closure.

Such an ending arouses a "sense of combined continuity and stability" (Herrnstein-Smith 1968: 245) – closure and anti-closure at the same time. Such anti-closure is felt to be very modern. Indeed, Herrnstein-Smith points out that anti-closure is prevalent in much modern poetry and music. But she also elaborates on a point which suggests that the implications of such an ending reach far beyond the sense of modernism and the perceptual frustration generating it. This point may throw new light on the whole opera.

In terms of Wilson Knight's conception of "Imaginative Interpretation", the successive scenes of majestic death and grotesque mob in *Boris Godunov* constitute, "in the dramatic and visual consciousness", a simple contrast of order and disorder, of stability and chaos, closure and anti-closure. Just as in *Julius Caesar*, social anarchy after Caesar's death is vividly visualized through the mob tearing Cinna the poet to pieces (the archetypal grotesque act), the unruly mob in *Boris* most vividly presents to the imagination the social chaos after the Tsar's death. By the same token, it violates "the feeling of finality, completion, and composure" achieved by the solemn death scene. Closure is violated, then, on two levels. The Kromy Forest scene violates the closure achieved through Boris' death; and the Simpleton's monotonous, wailing chant dies away, rather than closes the final scene.

Such an ending of successive closure and anti-closure, both in the macro- and micro-structure, induces the audience to perceive human existence in a wider perspective in an immediate vision. To suggest the rationale of this, we must return to Barbara Herrnstein-Smith's notion of anti-closure in modern music and poetry. This musical and poetic practice is part of a "new aesthetics" which, in turn, reflects a particular view of human life. I have quoted Herrnstein-Smith saying that closure "gives ultimate unity and coherence to the reader's experience of the poem by providing a point from which all the preceding

elements may be viewed comprehensively and their relations grasped as part of a significant design". Consequently, owing to its lack of closure, the opera leaves us with a sense of thwarted significance, a sense of "no goal toward which to move". "Underlying this new aesthetic", says Leonard B. Meyer, "is a conception of man and the universe"; "the denial of the reality of relationships and the relevance of purpose [...] rest[s] upon a less explicit but even more fundamental denial: a denial of the reality of cause and effect" (Herrnstein-Smith, 1968: 178). Tragedy, with its closure indicated by the fall of the tragic hero, as conceived by Aristotle, reflects a meaningful universe governed by a logic of cause and effect; modern music and poetry, with their anti-closure, reflect an incoherent universe, in which the logic of cause and effect does not hold. This characterisation of the universe is not conveyed by some verbal message, but by presenting to immediate perception a structural failure comprising verbal, visual and musical elements simultaneously: "Where conviction is seen as self-delusion and all last words are lies, the only resolution may be in the affirmation of irresolution, and conclusiveness may be seen as not only less honest but less stable than inconclusiveness" (Herrnstein-Smith, 1968: 240–241). Such anti-closure does not **tell** about irresolution; it **shows** irresolution ('perceiving as' rather than 'saying that'). Hamlet, Donne, and Yeats used **words** to convey a certain world feeling of disorientation: "The world is out of joint"; "Tis all in peeces, all cohaerance gone"; and

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world ...

One cannot put on stage such a state of affairs concerning the world. 'The dramatic and visual consciousness' cannot grasp such a state of affairs in a single act of immediate perception. The Kromy Forest scene does, perhaps, dramatise the statement "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world". But it does much more than that: the grotesque

on the one hand, anti-closure on the other, arouse what Thomson (1972) calls "a sense of confusion and emotional disorientation". This feeling interacts with the closing words uttered by the Simpleton.

THE SIMPLETON

(Jumps up, looks around, then sits down on his stone and sings, rocking to and fro)

Flow, flow, O bitter tears,
weep, O Christian soul,
soon the enemy will come
and darkness will fall,
darkness, terrible darkness.
Woe unto Russia,
weep, weep, O Russian people.
Hungry people!
*(Offstage the dull toll of the alarm continues.
Seeing the light from the conflagration, the
Simpleton shudders.)*

Some critics have commented on the basic incoherence of this long scene. In her admirable book on *Boris Godunov*, Caryl Emerson writes:

From this perspective the incoherence of that scene begins to make another sort of sense. The tramps in Kromy respond to each new political threat by carnivalizing it. The mock coronation and mock wedding ceremony for the boyar Khrushchov – not to mention the very real threat of his torture unto death – are not consummated. Targets are forever changing, old victims are abandoned for new, and *all* victims (boyars, Jesuits, tramps) come together in the great hope represented by the Returning Tsarevich⁵. (Emerson, 1986: 203; italics in original)

The entrance of the 'Tsarevich' might dramatize a new sense of stability achieved (just as in *Julius Caesar* through the emergence of Octavius Caesar as the new authority). But here, as I said, the Simpleton's closing lament sabotages closure (and the sense of stability, as well as 'the great hope').

The Grotesque and the Apocalyptic

In Pushkin's tragedy and in Mussorgsky's 1869 version, the mendicant monks Varlaam and Misail appear only once: in the Inn Scene, the scene at the end of which Grigory runs across the border to Lithuania, to become the pretender tsarevitch. In the 1874 version, Mussorgsky reintroduces them in the Kromy Forest scene, generating the impression of a structural framework that contributes to a sense of integration of the dramatic action. Emerson comments on this reappearance as follows:

It is therefore appropriate that this Pretender be introduced to the Russian forest by Varlaam and Misail, carnivalized clowns who had assisted Grigory's transformation into Dmitri during the Inn Scene with traditional carnival tools: wine, rhythmic puns, buffoonery, obscenity, and parody of the verbal formulas of both church and state. (Emerson, 1986: 203)

To be sure, the two monks are not aware in the Inn Scene what Grigory is up to; nor are they aware that Grigory and the alleged Dmitri are the same person. This is, rather, a kind of dramatic irony, perceived rather than stated.

Varlaam's and Misail's melody at their entrance in the Kromy Forest scene has a queer effect, to say the least. For decades I have been haunted by a strange feeling concerning this music. The nearest approximation to characterize this queer effect would be something

between the 'apocalyptic' and the 'grotesque'. In recent years, I have been trying to piece together an explanation for this impression. A grotesque effect is a sense of confusion and emotional disorientation generated, among other things, by some incongruity, such as the co-presence of the laughable and something that is incompatible with the laughable: what arouses pity or fear or disgust, for instance. The easiest way to account for such an effect would be by appealing to the contents. However, such a quality can be perceived in the music itself, before understanding the words as they are sung. Nonetheless, the semantic elements and dramatic context too may contribute to this quality.

The co-presence of what is laughable and what is incompatible with it is suggested, for instance, by a letter that Mussorgsky wrote in November 1877 and in which he recalled how the two mendicant monks Varlaam and Misail had provoked "laughter" only until such time as they "appeared in the scene with the 'vagabonds' [i.e., the Kromy Forest Scene], for only then did people realise what dangerous animals these apparently ridiculous figures are". Mussorgsky may have referred, e.g., to the episode in which the two monks incite the mob to hang the two Polish Jesuits, for being Poles and Roman Catholic.

There is, perhaps, a point when these two conflicting perceptions (the laughable and the dangerous) are balanced. Accordingly, the grotesque quality would be experienced only by those members of the audience who perceive those opposite qualities simultaneously. The text attached to the music is awe-inspiring, even apocalyptic. In this immediate context, it is the apocalyptic element that represents what is incompatible with the laughable.

VARLAAM and MISAIL (to the right, offstage)
The sun and moon have gone dim,
the stars from heaven have fallen,
the universe hath trembled at Boris's brutal sin.

Strange beasts are abroad,
 begetting others just as horrid,
 eating human bodies,
 in praise of Boris's sin.
 God's people suffer and are tortured,
 tormented by Boris's lackeys,
 prompted by Hell's power,
 to the glory of a satanic throne.

Now Boris' and his lackeys' cruelty may be great. Nonetheless, this apocalyptic vision is out of keeping, and may have a comic element in it. But the music, too, does something to the text, reinforcing the transformation of awe to grotesque (at least, in some performances, such as the one conducted by André Cluytens [EMI CMS 567877 2]).

In his illuminating discussion of "Intonation and Music", Fónagy (2000: 125–126) points out that a radically narrowed pitch range and a frozen melodic line may suggest anguish in music and intonation, and mentions Varlaam and Misail's entrance in the Kromy Forest scene of *Boris Godunov*.⁶ I suppose he refers to the repeated *tam-ta-ta, tam-ta-ta, tee-tee-tam* melody and rhythm, which display both a radically narrowed pitch range and a frozen melodic line. I would add that the discrete, emphatic, 'steady-state' sounds generate a solemn, perhaps somber quality. The two are singing in unison for some time, further simplifying the effect. At the same time, the musical thread played by the strings (and later by the choir) displays "a lively pace, rapid changes, and sudden rises from low/mid to high level" which, according to Fónagy, may be typically associated with **Joy**.

Harai Golomb points out (personal communication) a diatonic effect too, that is, an effect relating to a major or minor musical scale. The term 'church mode' refers to one of the eight scales prevalent in medieval music, each utilizing a different pattern of intervals and

beginning on a different tone. The major and minor scales (which, as we know, differ in the order of the whole steps and the half steps) are just two of them. In later Western music of the past few hundred years, only the major and minor scales prevailed; we have mental schemata for handling only them. Departure from these scales is usually perceived as devious, out of the way. Varlaam and Missail's frozen melodic formula *tam-ta-ta, tam-ta-ta, tee-tee-tam* provides an illuminating instance of this. It displays a conspicuous minor-scale tendency; but the two (slightly higher) *tee-tee* sounds belong to neither a major, nor a minor scale, but to one of the other 'church modes' (the 'Dorian'). The effect of such a departure is strikingly out of the ordinary: incongruous and reinforcing whatever grotesque or apocalyptic elements are present.

Though I am usually working within the Bartlett tradition, which gives great priority to cognitive schemata, Cognitive Poetics (as I understand it) would demand to go one step further. I was wondering whether the effect discussed here is merely a matter of 'past experience' producing schemata, or are there some inherent reasons for the unsettling effect discerned in Varlaam and Misail's tune. In fact, I have been wondering for long whether it was merely an historical accident that only two of the eight church modes prevailed in Western musical tradition. Bill Benzon, who commented in some detail on my foregoing argument in this section, provided the missing information, without knowing of these musings of mine. The important point, he says, about the diatonic system of Western music – which Meyer hammers on – is that it is organized around the tonic, about the drive to the tonic. The tonic is more than simply the bottom note of the scale, it is home base. Modal music isn't like that. Its sense of 'home base' is not nearly so strong. In this way, I submit, the 'modal lapse' may contribute both to the disorienting effect of the grotesque, and to the apocalyptic element in it (the element incompatible with the laughable). Given the apocalyptic nature of the lyrics, says Benzon, what better musical device to use

than one that takes you outside the diatonic system, the system that provides the orientation grid of the mundane sonic world? At the same time, it may suggest some medieval, ecclesiastic atmosphere to the modern listener.

Naftali Wagner comments at this point that modality is characteristic of Mussorgsky's writing in general, and may be intimately related not only to the style of ecclesiastical, but also of folk music. Modality in *Boris* is closely related to folk music. It is true that modality weakens the relationship to the tonic (keynote) that governs the major and the 'harmonic' minor scales, but this is, in his view, a general matter of style.

Wagner's comment compelled me to go one step further in my argument, and to apply here a principle I developed in relation to rhythmic configurations in poetic rhythm. Sound configurations (rhythmic or melodic) have no specific meanings but, at most (sometimes conflicting) general potentials, whose unique character may be individuated in specific contexts (Tsur 2012: 142–143). In different specific contexts, different specific meanings may be realized. The church modes may have the general potential of 'ecclesiasticalness', 'medievalism', or 'folkishness'. But the very fact of **deviation** from the the major or minor scale is a violation of congruity, and is prone to reinforce any grotesque or apocalyptic element if present (even though in itself it has no grotesque or apocalyptic meaning). In Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, the context may realize all four potentials of the church modes mentioned above: ecclesiasticalness, medievalism, folkishness and deviation. As to the latter potential, it is best summarized in Bill Benzon's words quoted above: "Given the apocalyptic nature of the lyrics, what better musical device to use than one that takes you outside the diatonic system, the system that provides the orientation grid of the mundane sonic world?" In other words, we are dealing with deviance as disorientation. Note, however, that the fourth potential is essentially different from the other three mentioned above. The effect of these potentials (of ec-

clesiastical, mediaeval and folk music) is due to past experience, to the linking of certain musical scales to the contexts in which they were typically used in the past. The effect of a sudden leap from the major or minor scale to one of the church modes, by contrast, is due to an immediate impression: it does not depend on social or institutional contexts in the past; it is perceived as conspicuous violation of an order established, for good cognitive reasons, within composition and tradition. The distinction between qualities that arise from external contexts and those generated by the subversion of some internal order is noteworthy. Here, one may cautiously apply Coleridge's dictum that "nothing can permanently please which does not contain in itself the reason why it is so, and not otherwise" (*Biographia Literaria*, Chapter 14). Finally, one must realize that the qualities that arise from external contexts, those that are "a general matter of style", are prone to mitigate rather than enhance the disorientation effect generated by deviance from the dominant scale.⁷

The present article has explored emotional disorientation in *Boris Godunov*, not merely as an element of the explicit contents, but as a perceptual quality of the whole ending. Such quality is typically generated by a drastic interference with the smooth functioning of cognitive or psychodynamic processes. I have pointed out three different kinds of interference with the audience's smooth responses, both to the action and the music. A straightforward means to arouse emotional disorientation is the grotesque, by the co-presence of the laughable and what is incompatible with it (that is, by two defense mechanisms disrupting each other). In respect of melody, the solid framework of diatonic scales is disrupted by a sudden exit to the Dorian or Phrygian scale or chromaticity. One of the most important conditions, according to gestalt psychology, for perceiving a stimulus pattern as unified and coherent is closure – in music, in the visual arts as well as in poetry. In *Boris Godunov*, closure is sabotaged on several levels: in the order of scenes (the Kromy Forest scene following Boris' death scene); in the order of episodes in the

last scene (the Simpleton's wailing that follows the royal entrance and exit of the new Tsar); and in the micro-structure of the Simpleton's wailing. These effects of emotional disorientation reinforce each other in the audience's perception, and interact with a reality run wild, which is "all in peeces, all cohaerance gone" – conveyed by the explicit contents.

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Notes

- 1 On my website there is a fragment of a projected paper that conceives of the opera as a piece of ironization of ritual drama. <http://www.tau.ac.il/~tsurxx>
- 2 The sound files for this article are available online at <http://www.tau.ac.il/~tsurxx/BorisNetfolder/Boris.html>
- 3 In Pushkin's tragedy and in Mussorgsky's 1869 version the urchins' episode occurs in an earlier scene, during Boris' lifetime. This enables the Simpleton to utter the following spine-chilling lines:
The boys took away my kopeck,
Order them to be murdered
Like you murdered the little Tsarevich.
In the 1874 version Mussorgsky transfers the episode to the Komy Forest scene, enhancing its grotesque effect. Since this takes place after Boris' death, these lines are, perforce, omitted. He also needs the Simpleton in this scene for the final wailing that generates an anti-closure. In Claudio Abado's recording this episode occurs in the earlier scene, reintroducing the Simpleton in the last scene for the final wailing only.

- 4 Listen online to the Simpleton's wailing and the end of Boris' last speech. The discussion of the Simpleton's lament was written with Netta Ladar.
- 5 Emerson's Bakhtinian "carnivalized" reading of the scene (following Likhachev) considerably overlaps with, and is certainly more elaborate than, my "grotesque" reading. Still, I believe, my reading has something new to offer too.
- 6 The Simpleton's sobbing minor seconds could be another case in point.
- 7 I could not cope with my intuitions regarding the music of Boris without the generous help of some innocent colleagues who are much more knowledgeable in music than me: Naftali Wagner, Harai Golomb, Bill Benzon and Netta Ladar. To my regret, I could not utilise all their illuminating comments. I made the selection according to mainly two criteria. Some of their penetrating comments exceeded the needs of the intuitions I wanted to account for; and I wished to reduce the comments to what, in my judgement, the nonprofessional educated reader is capable to understand with the help of the music excerpts on my website. I am, of course, responsible for all the faults.

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<http://www.semioticon.com/virtuals/poetics/index.html>

http://www.tau.ac.il/~tsurxx/Structural_Resemblance/within_thine_own.html

Recordings

Modest Moussorgsky: *Boris Godounov*. Two Complete Versions: 1869 & 1872. 5 CDs. Conductor: Valery Gergiev. Philips 462 230-2.

Modest Moussorgsky: *Boris Godounov*. Conductor: Claudio Abado. Sony S3K 58 977.

Modest Moussorgsky: *Boris Godounov*. Conductor: André Cluyten. EMI 5 67877 2.