

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Opera and the Politics of Postdramatic Theatre: Frank Castorf's Bayreuth *Ring*

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Abstract

This article considers Frank Castorf's Bayreuth Festival production of Wagner's *Ring* (2013–17) and its relationship to postdramatic theatre, including the latter's fraught relationship to conceptions of the political. Framework and context are provided by Castorf's theatrical practice, both prior to and following German reunification; by Wagner's nineteenth-century revolutionary and post-revolutionary experience, both historical and as dramatised in the *Ring*; and by Hans-Thies Lehmann's theoretical writing on postdramatic theatre. The production was a story of fascinating collisions: on the one hand, between different, often opposing, conceptions of drama and theatre; on the other, between different, yet in some ways complementary, political experiences. Interpretation proceeds by means of detailed description and analysis of the staging and a broader theoretical discussion. Compelled to reconcile themselves, at least in part, with ideas of musical drama and the work concept, Castorf's postdramatic aesthetics underwent significant challenge. In the wake of this production, ideas of Wagner staging and, more broadly, staging of opera in general have similarly undergone transformation.

Keywords: Wagner; Frank Castorf; Bayreuth; *Der Ring des Nibelungen*; Regietheater

I

Staging of Wagner's operas – or 'dramas' – has always proved controversial.¹ Indeed, controversy dates back to the composer-librettist-dramaturge-theorist-director's own stagings. In retrospect, Wagner stakes a good claim to have invented the role of the modern opera director: not only with respect to his own works but also with those of other composers.² Nowhere has controversy fanned more flames than at the Bayreuth Festival and in its Festspielhaus, which Wagner founded and had built expressly to stage the *Ring*. Moreover, even in a history littered with controversial productions, few have provoked such angry debate as that which opened in 2013 as a centrepiece for

¹ There is no better, nor more readable, guide to the first century and a half of this story than Patrick Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre* (New Haven, 2006). Also useful, albeit with more limited compass, are Oswald Georg Bauer, *Richard Wagner: The Stage Designs and Productions from the Premières to the Present* (New York, 1983) and Dietrich Mack, *Der Bayreuther Inszenierungsstil, 1876–1976* (Munich, 1976).

² See, for example, Keith Warner, 'Gesamt Werk Kunst: A Few New Thoughts', *The Wagner Journal* 3/2 (2009), 49–61; Mark Berry, *After Wagner: Histories of Modernist Music Drama from 'Parsifal' to Nono* (Woodbridge, 2014), 210–11, 251–4.

the bicentenary celebrations of Wagner's birth, directed by the (East) German director Frank Castorf. Wagner's operas, Castorf, performers and audiences emerged changed, even transformed, by the encounter: by new critical standpoints afforded as the Valhalla mists of operatic tradition were dispelled and by compromises necessitated as much as by the violence and rupture of Castorf's – and Wagner's – thunderclaps.

For Bayreuth had always been a compromise. In theatre, in performance, everything is: even for artists so apparently uncompromising as Wagner, Castorf and many of those working at Bayreuth in between. Wagner's initial plan for the *Ring*, performance art *avant la lettre*, had been to erect a temporary theatre on the banks of the Rhine in order to celebrate a successful revolution, which, failure in 1848–9 notwithstanding, would have come to pass by the time of the premiere. The work, as he told Theodor Uhlig, would explain 'to the men of the revolution the *meaning* of that revolution, in its noblest sense'; its performance would be followed, in one of several pyromaniacal homages Wagner would pay to his anarchist revolutionary comrade-in-arms Mikhail Bakunin by burning not only the theatre but also the score.³ 'However extravagant this plan may be', the hopeful composer went on, 'it is nevertheless the only one upon which I can wager my life, my writing, my energies. Should I witness its achievement, so shall I have lived gloriously; if not, so shall I have died for the sake of something beautiful.'⁴

How seriously one is to take such protestation is an open question. Not for nothing did Nietzsche insist that Wagner was ultimately an actor.⁵ The pages of Wagner's autobiography are replete with the hustle and bustle of actual theatrical life, in a manner and intensity foreign to most composers of what we might still call the Austro-German (instrumental and orchestral) tradition.⁶ Conflict between, on the one hand, the *Ring*'s emphatic status as a musicodramatic work and, on the other, the abiding theatricality both of its creator and of its potential future in performance had been signalled. Both the gathered congregation of Wagner's *Bühnenweihfestspiel* ('stage-festival-consecration-play') *Parsifal* and his temple of art, Bayreuth itself, represented the former pole, namely that of the composer's authority and *Werktreue*. Sooner or later, however, other possibilities were bound to re-emerge, especially against a backdrop of post-Holocaust suspicion of totalising tendencies within German idealism, as well as more straightforward German nationalism and opposition thereto.

Notwithstanding crucial antecedents such as the East German director Joachim Herz's Leipzig *Ring* (1973–6), it was Patrice Chéreau's centenary *Ring* (1976–80, conducted by Pierre Boulez), only the third Festival production – and the first *Ring* – since Bayreuth's postwar reopening entrusted to a director from outside the Wagner family, which made the greatest impact on the operatic world and beyond.⁷ This plunging of Wagner's drama back into the political and social conflicts of the nineteenth century ensured that Wagner and the *Ring* would never be the same again. David J. Levin has gone so far as to speak of a 'neutron bomb for opera production'. It was, Levin continued, in homage to Boulez's celebrated incendiary declaration of several years earlier, 'one that

³ Letter to Theodor Uhlig, 11/12 November 1851, in Richard Wagner, *Sämtliche Briefe*, ed. G. Strobel, W. Wolf, H.-J. Bauer and J. Forner, 35 vols. (Leipzig, 1967), IV: 176.

⁴ Wagner, *Sämtliche Briefe*, 176.

⁵ See postscript to Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Der Fall Wagner', in *Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, 15 vols. (Berlin, 1988), VI: 41.

⁶ Richard Wagner, *My Life*, trans. Andrew Gray, ed. Mary Whittall (Cambridge, 1983).

⁷ See Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Tétralogies: Wagner, Boulez, Chéreau. Essai sur l'infidélité* (Paris, 1983) and, for a revealing recent study, Alexander K. Rothe, *Staging the Past: Richard Wagner's Ring Cycle in Divided Germany during the 1970s and 1980s* (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2015). The Chéreau *Ring* was preceded by Götz Friedrich's *Tannhäuser* (1972–8) and August Everding's *Tristan und Isolde* (1974–7).

left the opera houses standing, but exploded some of their most settled practices'.⁸ Worldwide screening on television played an important part: the latest in a lengthy line of examples of participation and critique by Wagner, his works and their staging in novel technological endeavours.⁹ The BBC showed it one act at a time, not unlike one of its plays for the day: drama, then, and musical drama at that, for a worldwide audience inconceivable to Bayreuth during its first century.

Chéreau's staging proved highly controversial as drama, far from universally accepted as a legitimate method of staging Wagner. It more or less inaugurated a parade of controversial Wagner productions at Bayreuth, rescuing the festival from the doldrums of Wolfgang Wagner, a highly talented administrator, but no artistic match for his deceased brother, Wieland.¹⁰ The idea of Bayreuth as a theatrical workshop (*Werkstatt*) was renewed: it was still a venue for model Wagner performances, ever faithful to musical and poetic text, yet not now necessarily to stage directions and 'intended' *mises en scène*.

Henceforth, there was at least fruitful tension, if not outright contradiction, between those tendencies, at Bayreuth and within opera production more broadly. In 2013, immediately before Castorf's *Ring* opened, Clemens Risi identified the 'performance practice' of opera as 'moving in three different directions'. First, the 'initially cautious' deconstructionist, for which he cited as an example a *Meistersinger* from the Intendant of Berlin's Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, Frank Castorf. It was played with actors rather than trained opera singers, much like Castorf used non-actors in place of actors in many plays. Combining texts of Wagner and others, Nietzsche included, with Ernst Toller's 1919 *Masse Mensch*, all within two-and-a-half hours, this, Risi writes, was so far something of an exception in the operatic world. A second direction was characterised by continued, 'obstinate' demands for *Werktreue*. The third, '*Regietheater* in opera', retained 'the musical dramaturgy of the work while at the same time radically questioning, re-examining and recontextualizing the layers of meaning of an opera – layers that are conveyed by all the available texts: the libretto, the full score, and discourses about the work's staging practice'.¹¹ Bayreuth had come to stand somewhere between the second and third; it stood and still stands adamantly opposed to the first. With Wagner's authoritative musicodramatic text there could and can be no tampering – although even then, in certain cases, there remains the fraught questions of which version of a score to use, and whether 'traditional' cuts may be acceptable.

II

Wagner's lengthiest theoretical work, *Opera and Drama*, argued the supremacy of musical drama over the non- or anti-dramatic, yet unquestionably theatrical, 'outrageously coloured, historico-romantic, devilish-religious, sanctimonious-lascivious, risqué-sacred, saucy-mysterious, sentimental-swindling, dramatic farrago', into which nineteenth-century opera had descended in the guise of Giacomo Meyerbeer and Parisian *grand opéra*.¹² For Wagner, drama must supplant opera as it actually existed, as mere theatre. Many of his successors, whether in opera or spoken theatre, agreed. By contrast, there

⁸ David J. Levin, *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky* (Chicago, 2007), 18. On Wagner, Boulez and their shared fondness for incendiary operatic declarations, see Mark Berry, "'Blow the Opera Houses into the Air!' Wagner, Boulez, and Modernist Canons", in *Oxford Handbook to the Operatic Canon*, ed. Cormac Newark and William Weber (Oxford, 2020), 403–19.

⁹ See Gundula Kreuzer, *Curtain, Gong, Steam: Wagnerian Technologies of Nineteenth-Century Opera* (Berkeley, 2018).

¹⁰ On Wieland Wagner, see Oswald Georg Bauer, ed., *Wieland Wagner: Sein Denken: Aufsätze, Reden, Interviews, Briefe* (Bayreuth, 1991); Till Haberfeld, *Wieland Wagner: Revolutionär und Visionär des Musiktheaters* (Berlin, 2017).

¹¹ Clemens Risi, 'Performing Wagner for the Twenty-First Century', *The Theatre Quarterly* 29 (2013), 349.

¹² Richard Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, ed. Klaus Kropfinger (Stuttgart, 1994), 100–1.

lies at the centre of Hans-Thies Lehmann's widely accepted conception of postdramatic theatre a crucial reinstatement of the distinction between theatre and drama. Put simply: not all theatre is dramatic theatre. Even when postdramatic theatre might be considered once again as drama, it remains marked by the break. In Hegelian terms, we might call this 'secondary' dramatic theatre. If comparison with the modern and postmodern suggests itself, that should come as no surprise, for Lehmann's conception is rooted in that very distinction, not only with respect to use – or even abuse – of text but also with aesthetics of 'space, time and the body'.¹³

Theatre and drama, synonymous in much popular usage to the extent that 'postdramatic theatre' will sound a mere nonsensical provocation to many, had never stood in perfect harmony. However, a qualitatively new, modernist divergence, at least in spoken drama, is of importance here. Some playwrights, such as Luigi Pirandello, began to pride themselves on the unstageability of their works; some directors, such as Edward Gordon Craig, began to pride themselves on revealing the unstageability of dramatic works from the past, even as they staged and acted in them.¹⁴ Brecht's epic theatrical distinction between what was represented and the mode of representation constituted a crucial mirroring of the disjunctures of reality, without ever abandoning the dramatic.¹⁵ For Lehmann, writing in the late 1990s, much theatre in the wake of Brecht, often avowedly post-Brechtian, 'brought with it a new multiform kind of theatrical discourse', in part shaped by 'the spread and then omnipresence of the *media* in everyday life since the 1970s'.¹⁶ Such theatre was 'precisely not a theatre that has nothing to do with Brecht but a theatre which knows that it is affected by the demands and questions for theatre that are sedimented in Brecht's work but can no longer accept Brecht's answers'.¹⁷ With the 'end of the "Gutenberg galaxy" and the advent of new technologies', Lehmann wrote, 'the written text and the book' were 'being called into question. The mode of perception is shifting: a simultaneous and multi-perspectival form of perceiving is replacing the linear-successive'.¹⁸

That claim now seems both remarkably far-sighted and necessarily dated. There can be no denying the consequences of new technologies for perception and indeed artistic creation and performance, insofar as the latter two may now be distinguished; by the same token, a concomitant hunger for 'liveness', for the discipline and opportunity of immersion in, say, a Wagner drama has also in many respects grown. Likewise, texts have often reasserted themselves, in the theatre and via new, digital technologies. We can read, listen to and watch Wagner almost anywhere in the world, at any time: not necessarily even to the liking of a director such as Castorf, at least in the beginning. Reassertion of theatre and drama against passivity, against consumption, may or may not have been a necessary dialectical move; it would nevertheless be difficult to deny the artistic phenomenon. Certainly much recent and contemporary theatre has been interested in deconstructing ways of seeing and hearing in an age of mass media. Theatre, at any rate, as 'a complex', or at least a differently complex 'system of signifiers', was at the heart of what Lehmann proposed – doubtless in retrospect with exaggeration, yet hardly without cause – as a new

¹³ Karen Jürs-Munby, 'Introduction', to Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (London and New York, 2006), 1. Lehmann's book was originally published as *Postdramatisches Theater* (Frankfurt, 1999). The German edition was significantly cut for English translation.

¹⁴ Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 49.

¹⁵ On Brecht's relationship to Wagner and opera more generally, see Joy H. Calico, *Brecht at the Opera* (Berkeley, 2008); Calico, 'Epic Gesamtkunstwerk', in *The Total Work of Art: Foundations, Articulations, Inspirations*, ed. David Imhoof, Margaret Eleanor Menninger and Anthony J. Steinhoff (New York, 2016), 81–94.

¹⁶ Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 22.

¹⁷ Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 27.

¹⁸ Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 16.

dispensation, for him still greater than the caesura between Brecht and his predecessors.¹⁹ Every text, even a performance text, might now be understood, after Roland Barthes, to pose the problem of its own possibility.

There is not space here, nor would it be particularly helpful, to begin to outline the implications of that shift; nor, indeed, to discuss the ways in which it might be considered unsatisfactory. However, briefly to say something of the challenges opera in general and Wagner in particular presented may be helpful. In some ways, opera might have experienced less of a problem than much literary drama from an attack upon or disregard for conventional literary narrative, though whether that would extend to Wagnerian drama is another question. Some operatic traditions had never placed such store on dramatic narrative in the first place and had always played fast and loose with notions of textual authority, be they verbal, musical or theatrical. It is probably no coincidence that early eighteenth-century *opere serie* with strikingly different dramaturgical concerns have experienced so strong a renaissance over a similar period, although many factors have been at play in that respect. If Bayreuth, its house lights dimmed, all eyes on stage, sought to emphasise dramatic and theatrical texts and single-minded audience communion, that signified reaction to alternative conventions.

The impossibility of 'realising' any drama, but perhaps especially any Romantic and modernist drama of note, onstage had, in a sense, always been recognised, though not perhaps by Wagner's widow, Cosima, who had sought, like Canute without the knowing irony, to hold back the tide of alternative stagings to the Master's. That the Master had known and grappled with that problem all along arguably, ironically, transformed Cosima-as-executor into the most unfaithful of all his would-be executants. Wagner had, to quote Patrick Carnegy, 'wanted to establish a "fixed tradition" because he needed to defend his own imaginings against misunderstanding and perversion'.²⁰ Perpetuation of that 'fixed tradition' was ultimately to prove just such a misunderstanding and perversion. As ever in the idealist tradition, dialectics continued to multiply and to complicate.

Moreover, the *Ring* text, Wagner's conception of a festival theatre, and certain Bayreuth directors – if hardly the Bayreuth Festival as a whole – have worked, in the sense of Walter Benjamin at his most Brechtian, explicitly quoting Brecht's *Umfunktionalisierung* (functional transformation), towards 'transformation of the forms and instruments of production'.²¹ The dialectical approach, for Benjamin, had 'absolutely no use for such rigid, isolated things as work, novel, book', and, were this friend of Theodor Adorno not reluctant to engage with music he might have added, 'for musical drama too'. Much the same might be said, we might also add, for its staging. Such an approach must instead 'insert them into the living social contexts'. When, however,

a work was subjected to a materialist critique, it was customary to ask how this work stood vis-à-vis the social relations of production of its time. This is an important question, but also a very difficult one. Its answer is not always unambiguous. And I would like now to propose to you a more immediate question, a question that is somewhat more modest, somewhat less far-reaching, but that has, it seems to me, more chance of receiving an answer. Instead of asking, 'What is the attitude of a work to the relations of production of its time? Does it accept them, is it reactionary? Or does it aim at overthrowing them, is it revolutionary?' – instead of this question, or at any rate before it, I would like to propose another. ... I would like to ask, 'What is

¹⁹ Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 16.

²⁰ Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*, 149.

²¹ Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, 4 vols. (Cambridge, 1996–2003), II: 773–4.

its position in them?’ This question directly concerns the function the work has within the literary relations of production of its time. It is concerned, in other words, directly with the literary technique of works.²²

The question is likewise concerned, we might further add, with techniques in all artworks and their staging, interpretation and more.

III

Enter Castorf, then, at Bayreuth for a new *Ring* in 2013: bicentenary of Wagner’s birth and thus a year with greater expectations even than a ‘typical’ new-*Ring* year. After Chéreau and his unlamented naturalistic successor, Peter Hall (1983–6), the East German director Harry Kupfer had (1988–92) made something of a stir, albeit largely within the dramatic parameters of Chéreau and of Kupfer’s other work. Otherwise, by the time of Castorf’s enlistment, Bayreuth had gone two decades without a *Ring* receiving much in the way of either critical acclaim or controversy, so far as staging was concerned. Productions from Alfred Kirchner (1994–8), Jürgen Flimm (2000–4) and Tankred Dorst (2006–10, a late replacement for Lars von Trier) had come and gone. During the latter part of that period, its *Parsifal* stagings, led by Christoph Schlingensief (2004–7) and Stefan Herheim (2008–12), had garnered most renown. The latter swiftly achieved the status of a classic to rank alongside Wieland Wagner’s; the former’s reception proved more mixed and often downright negative.²³

Wim Wenders was first appointed to direct this new *Ring*; his withdrawal, echoing that of von Trier, was announced in April 2011. Unconfirmed rumours of Castorf’s involvement first surfaced at the Festival opening in July of that year: very short notice for a *Ring* anywhere, let alone at Bayreuth, where the tetralogy is performed as one immediately, rather than in instalments.²⁴ This was not Castorf’s first foray into opera; he had directed *Otello* at Basel as early as 1998. Operetta, in the guise of *Die Fledermaus*, had come a year earlier (1997) in Hamburg. He had also worked on Wolfgang Rihm’s *Jakob Lenz* at the 2008 Wiener Festwochen. Other progenitors of sorts had been *Die Nibelungen II – Born Bad*, after Friedrich Hebbel, at the Berlin Volksbühne in 1995, and the aforementioned touring *Meistersinger*.

That said, directing a *Ring*, especially at such short notice, marked a step change, particularly given the Bayreuth necessity to present the musico-poetic text in its entirety, neither cut nor supplemented. Like Wotan, like Wagner – especially the Wagner of Bayreuth, compelled whether he liked it or no to deal with Ludwig II and Bavarian politics – Castorf necessarily knew more than a little about political accommodations. If Bayreuth were Wagner’s Valhalla, would Castorf rebuild it or burn it to the ground? Would he enthrone Wagner–Wotan, a new god Siegfried–Castorf, or none at all, turning, like Chéreau, to those ‘men and women’, who, ‘moved to the very depths of their being’, remain at the end of *Götterdämmerung*? Such choices, perhaps not coincidentally, mirror Wagner’s different attempts, as much superimposed on as supplanting one another, to complete the *Ring*.²⁵ Salvation, as Samuel Weber has observed, is ultimately to be found – might it also be lost? – ‘not in Wotan’s “eternal work”’, that is Valhalla or Bayreuth, ‘but in ... “masked revival”’, such as Castorf’s or indeed any production, ‘as a

²² Benjamin, ‘The Author as Producer’, 769–70.

²³ On Herheim’s *Parsifal*, see Berry, *After Wagner*, 210–33.

²⁴ Joachim Mischke, ‘Der neue “Ring”: Castorf soll es richten’, *Hamburger Abendblatt* (25 July 2011).

²⁵ For a recent summary, see Mark Berry and Nicholas Vazsonyi, ‘Introduction’, *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner’s ‘Der Ring des Nibelungen’* (Cambridge, 2020), 20–2.

self-consciously artificial, artifactual *Gesamtkunstwerk*. ... Securing the sacrality of the stage ... demands a structure that both situates and protects it. In this way the ties between Wotan and Valhalla mirror those between Wagner and the Bayreuth Festspielhaus – as the material and specific location of each individual performance.²⁶

On the face of it, the imperative to produce the *Ring* in full might be considered a backward turn for Castorf to something approaching ‘conventional’ *Regietheater*, a further accommodation such as the post-revolutionary Wagner had struck both with tendencies within himself and in a world that had failed to turn in the way he and other 48ers had hoped and expected. Should we accept Risi’s typology as outlined earlier – there are well-founded pragmatic–analytical reasons for doing so – this would represent an unaccustomed third way, willing or otherwise, for the anarchistic Castorf, who had long been accustomed to greater scope for interventions. Dialectically, however, that need not be the case. The modernist may reassert itself in the postmodernist and the dramatic may reassert itself in the postdramatic, as Lehmann has always insisted.

Similarly, the text will often find a way to reassert itself, to challenge its deconstruction; there is more than one way both to deconstruct and to (re)construct. Before, however, we turn to Castorf’s confrontation and compromise with Wagner, we should look at what is meant by dramatic and postdramatic and at how they might relate to Castorf’s work and reputation. Definition, alas, is no help here. No more than, say, with romanticism or modernism can we assemble a checklist; at best, we can point to tendencies in the historical movement. Perhaps, however, Hugh Honour’s oft-quoted claim that the Romantics were ‘united only at their point of departure’ will prove of use in considering those working in postdramatic theatre, Castorf included.²⁷

IV

Even prior to reunification, Castorf had shown little in common with East German directors such as Herz and Kupfer (mentioned previously). Castorf came from a different generation from either and had no evident interest in opera. He was viewed with suspicion by the German Democratic Republic (GDR) authorities. His 1981 production of *Othello* at the Theater Anklam, his first staging as senior director, played in semi-darkness, dialogue apparently reduced to barely audible mutterings in English, and was condemned in Stasi reports as equally offensive ‘to Shakespeare and to the public’, undermining ‘socialist cultural politics’ by emphasising ‘the impossibility of communication along with a blighted view of humanity’.²⁸ When Castorf took charge of the Volksbühne in 1992, it was very much as an East German, though not necessarily as would have been expected. Castorf, Siegfried Wilzopolski has argued, does not see theatre as a means of solving problems; rather, it ‘amplifies problems and destroys every alternative’ – which may, yet perhaps need not, suggest nihilism of some variety. Instead of resolving contradictions, Wilzopolski continues, Castorf’s theatre ‘intensifies them beyond acceptable limits.’²⁹

²⁶ Samuel Weber, ‘The *Ring* as Deconstruction of Modernity: Reading Wagner with Benjamin’, in *Sound Figures of Modernity: German Music and Philosophy*, ed. Jost Hermand and Gerhard Richter (Madison, 2006), 116.

²⁷ Hugh Honour, *Romanticism* (New York, 1979), 19; Berry, *After Wagner*, 3–6.

²⁸ Robin Detje, *Castorf: Provokation aus Prinzip* (Berlin, 2002), 84–5, quoted in Marvin Carlson, ‘Frank Castorf and the Volksbühne: Berlin’s Theatre of Deconstruction’, in *Contemporary European Theatre Directors*, ed. Maria M. Delgado and Dan Rebellato (Abingdon and New York, 2010), 103–4.

²⁹ Siegfried Wilzopolski, ‘Famous or Dead? The Volksbühne Theater under Frank Castorf’, lecture given at ‘Why Theater? Choices for a New Century: An International Conference and Theater Festival’, held at the University of Toronto, 1–4 November 1995, quoted in Brandon Woolf, ‘Frank Castorf’s Art of Institutional Dis/avowal: A Volksbühne Elegy’, *Theatre Survey* 59 (2018), 252.

Political order sets rules, whereas theatre provides exceptions: disorder, shading at least into chaos.

Castorf has shown no theatrical interest in purveying the dubious wares of *Ostalgie*, of nostalgia for the old 'East'. Asked whether he missed the GDR, he answered scornfully that it had perished quite logically, 'in its own decadence'.³⁰ That was one of his more polite responses. On the other hand, when moving to his office on Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, Castorf hung a large portrait of Stalin on the wall and (Brandon Woolf tells us) erected 'three massive letters – "OST" – at the building's highest point, perched prominently for the whole town to see, and to encourage – or demand – that a new (re)public engage the many associations that word might evoke. "The Volksbühne is important because it is a GDR institution that survived," Castorf explained. "But we do something that the GDR, as a state, did not do."³¹ The question was as much what it meant to operate a public theatre, ensemble included, in this new society, founded upon the ruins and something approaching the conquest of the old, and Castorf's (East Berlin) Volksbühne proved arguably to be *the locus* for such discussion. 'Each play', Castorf claimed, in his opening season, 'could be reread from the perspective of ... immanent "left critique of a left Utopia."³² The Volksbühne's work, Lehmann noted, was 'surrounded by an atmosphere of politicized discussion and formations of like-minded people'. He cited a Castorf programme note's claim that it was 'a special characteristic of artists from the former GDR, unlike their West European postmodern counterparts, that they considered themselves, "however ironically", as "failed politicians" making a contribution to ideology.'³³ Stalin would return, as we shall see, on stage at Bayreuth; so too, essentially, would the rest of this and, more importantly, the reasons, albeit transformed by the passage of two decades, for having put him and 'East', with its multiplicity of meanings, on show. His *Ring* should not be reduced to an attempt to present 'Ost-Theater' to the West, but it may partly be understood to have been doing that and to have been enriched by the attempt.

Perhaps the time was right for Castorf as well as for Bayreuth. Critical voices, as is their wont, were beginning to ask whether his best years were now behind him, though that had already happened before: on his appointment to the Volksbühne in 1992, many thought it too late in the day, declaring that the political importance of his work in Karl-Marx-Stadt and Anklam could not be repeated.³⁴ (It could not, of course – any more than Wagner could repeat *Lohengrin* in the *Ring*, as opposed to responding to the questions it had failed to resolve and to those of a new, post-revolutionary age.) A 2000 doctoral thesis expressed scepticism with respect to envisaging 'a new chapter in Castorf's theatrical career'. Oddly, the author, Katya Bargna, noted that 'rumours of an opera debut in Basel (with Verdi's *Otello*) have been silenced' – it had by then taken place – and asserted that Castorf's 'brief interlude with operetta remained strongly anchored in the "theatrical" rather than the "musical".'³⁵ It is interesting, though, to note the prescience with which Bargna imagined that this new chapter might involve opera and an anchoring in 'the "musical"', for which we might partly understand the demands of that musical dramaturgy proposed previously by Clemens Risi: a turn, broadly conceived, towards '*Regietheater* in opera'. Acknowledging both the high stakes and the specific nature of operatic collaboration, Castorf declared that if what he, with set

³⁰ Hans-Dieter Schütt and Frank Castorf, *Die Erotik des Verrats: Gespräche mit Frank Castorf* (Berlin, 1996), 26.

³¹ Woolf, 'Castorf's Art of Institutional Dis/avowal', 253.

³² Woolf, 'Castorf's Art of Institutional Dis/avowal', 252.

³³ Frank Castorf, programme note to *Golden fließt der Stahl*, cited in Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 122.

³⁴ Rüdiger Schaper, 'Frank Castorf im Gespräch: "Es ist spannend, wenn Menschen sich angestoßen fühlen"', *Der Tagesspiegel* (8 September 2019).

³⁵ Katya Bargna, "'Der Weg ist nicht zu Ende, wenn das Ziel explodiert": Frank Castorf and the Survival of Political Theatre in the Postmodern Age' (PhD diss, University of Sheffield, 2000), 283.

designer Aleksandar Denić and conductor Kirill Petrenko, had formulated did not show the ‘explosive power’ of Chéreau’s *Ring* (which he had not seen, even on video, yet knew by reputation), it would have ‘failed’.³⁶

Description and analysis of a stage production will always involve compromise and approximation. Even were one to have seen and somehow taken in everything from each of its performances, how then to mould that material, along (perhaps) with director’s notes, broader context and so on, into a single account? Should one even try? In practical terms, what one can do is state which versions one saw – in this case, I saw performances of Castorf’s *Ring* in 2014, 2016 and 2017 – and steer a course between organisation of one’s observations as a whole and highlighting of important developments. That difficulty – arguably, also opportunity – is compounded for a production running over several years, in this case five years from 2013 to 2017 inclusive, during which changes were made to the production as part of Bayreuth’s *Werkstatt* principle – and not, it seemed, always at the director’s behest. ‘I can say many positive things about over the past year’, Castorf remarked in an interview prior to the first, 2014 revival: ‘Aleksandar Denić and I had only a little time for our *Ring*-concept. There was great pressure, because ... Wim Wenders ... had cancelled late. This pressure, as is often the case in politically and socially revolutionary situations, generated a certain liberality. There suddenly came into being, as in Cairo’, during the Arab Spring, ‘a remarkable revolutionary atmosphere. The rulers abdicated, because they had no choice. Then they stood with their backs to the wall. However, that is all over now. Now they try to roll it back.’³⁷ So continued the struggle – with Wagner, with the gods of Bayreuth and the Wagner family, with the post-*Wende* dispensation: intersecting dramas and theatre of their own.

The following outline and analysis of my own responses will necessarily be written from a highly subjective standpoint. That will arguably be the case for engagement with any theatre, indeed any artwork; it is the more extremely or remarkably so with postdramatic theatre such as this, confounding expectations with seeming intention and disregard. Is the attempt to make sense, to interpret, doomed? Perhaps; yet, like attempts at political and aesthetic revolution and at so many other things, that does not mean we wish to avoid it or are able to do so. I have decided to present my own responses, formed not in a vacuum but in dialogue with the world around me, rather than to consider explicitly those of others, whether in newspapers, online criticism, or elsewhere. That is not to dismiss other standpoints (far from it), nor to claim that they have had no impact upon me, but rather to attempt to retain focus within the necessary bounds of an essay.

V

Where, then, to start with the staging itself? It is Wagner’s question as well as Castorf’s – and that of this article. The *Ring*, like the Bible, is noteworthy for presenting two Creation myths, which may or may not be entirely compatible: one at the opening of *Das Rheingold*; one, told in the retrospect of epic narration, in the Norns’ Scene of *Götterdämmerung*. Wagner’s idealism nonetheless adheres to conventional chronological ordering. Castorf’s notably did not. Here, *Das Rheingold*, the work from the epic past of the *Eddas*, stood separately, in the present. It was, however, a different present, in geographical, narrative and ‘real’ senses, from that of *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*, which may be understood to follow on from *Die Walküre*, albeit with a gap of more than the traditionally understood generation. Castorf’s *Rheingold* was set at the Golden Motel on the Texan Route 66 (seen in [Figure 1](#)). It brought oil, trickling as gold throughout this *Ring*, to the

³⁶ Interview with Wolfgang Höbel, ‘Meine Grundtechnik ist: Zerschlagen’, *Der Spiegel* 30 (2014), 111.

³⁷ Höbel, ‘Meine Grundtechnik ist: Zerschlagen’, 111.



Figure 1. *Das Rheingold*, dir. Frank Castorf, 2014 © Bayreuther Festspiele, Enrico Nawrath. (colour online)

fore; yet it also stood separate, both acknowledging its separation in Wagner's tetralogy – the age of gods, as opposed to heroes and/or humans – and pressing disjuncture beyond anything intended by or even conceivable to its creator.

As Lehmann has noted of Shakespeare's rejection of much in Aristotle, such as the demand for the right 'magnitude' of tragedy, this anticipates the postdramatic:

The impression of an open world without borders ... is nearly always present in Shakespeare's theatre. Empires of thought and matter – wide and inexhaustible, endless in their various aspects, from those encompassing the world to the most banal – are travelled by this theatre with the breath of *Welt-Zeit*, back and forth, between fairy tales and reality, dream and triviality, the cosmos and the inn, between Lear and Falstaff, the sublime and the inebriated, tragic and comic.³⁸

Taken a step or several further: do we need or want any grand narrative – Hegel's or Marx's, say, as much as Wagner's – to cohere? Irrespective of the answer, should we not ask the question of these drama(s) in Wagner's own theatre? Relating to the world, to different worlds even, is not necessarily the same as representing it or them as whole(s). However, the world of *Das Rheingold*, if not necessarily its relationship to the world(s) of the remaining *Ring* operas, seemed self-contained, manageable – and, as we shall see, 'managed'. Perhaps that is why, even among the disgruntled, this production

³⁸ Jürs-Munby, 'Introduction', 11; Hans-Thies Lehmann, 'Shakespeare's Grin. Remarks on World Theatre with Forced Entertainment', in *'Not Even a Game Anymore': The Theatre of Forced Entertainment*, ed. Judith Helmer and Florian Malzacher (Berlin, 2004), 104, quoted in Jürs-Munby, 'Introduction', 12.

received at least grudging praise from all but the most irreconcilably *werktreu* of audience members. Back then, or perhaps forward, to the Golden Motel: a staging post, as motels are, reflective of wherever it is that Wagner's gods find themselves prior to entry into Valhalla.

As is typical of Castorf's work, much was presented in video projection. Some, as we see in Figure 2, was filmed live. Some was not, immediately granting the privilege, curse, and/or illusion of further information – as a production may elect to 'reflect' or further to dramatise the work, to undercut it, or to do something else entirely. A screen at the top of the motel relayed events elsewhere – including to the audience – some of which replicated what one could see on stage either readily or with difficulty, some of which would otherwise have remained unseen, unknown. There were stills too; where had they come from? Did those events, those scenes, happen at all? Hyperreality and its complicated relationship to overabundance already questioned, faded quality and distorted colour to the film further suggested that all was not as it seemed. Discrepancies on- and offstage *seemed* to creep in, whether by design or the spectator's own unreliable narration. The contemporary representational difficulty of why the image tends to seduce the spectator more than the 'real' – 'the electronic image lacks lack' – was of the essence.³⁹ Just how many narratives or standpoints on narratives could we see, let alone take in, simultaneously? It was no good throwing up one's hands in despair, and saying *just the one*: the world inside or outside did not work like that anymore; it probably never had. One might sometimes be relatively certain concerning discrepancies: people present on film who were not on stage in what one could see being filmed. At other times, one did not and, given the mass of information, could not know. Fricka underwent brief, mediated reinvention as a 'blonde' of a variety favoured by a pleasure-seeking yet ruthless, playboy Wotan – both sisters, Fricka and Freia, his bed-partners – as by politicians such as Donald Trump in their own 'reality' shows. That world of 'entertainment' was never distant: we participated, however great the discomfort, whilst we disdained. That prepared the way, partly through affinity, partly through shocking contrast, for the moment of greatest dramatic power, in which, far from coincidentally, Castorf proved entirely 'faithful' to Wagner, the motel bed stripped to its frame, a PVC-clad Freia hidden from view by golden bars. Filming and voyeurism rendered its simplicity all the more sickening.

Theoretically, one might have looked away, but it is difficult to imagine having done so. In a letter to Schiller, Goethe complained of people far too often wanting to see a novel onstage as soon as they had read it – 'how many bad plays have arisen!' – and likewise to see illustrations from the novel, 'etched in copper'. It was all part of an audience desire, to which modern artists all too readily conceded, to 'find everything completely true', to understand everything as 'perfectly present, dramatic'.⁴⁰ When cameras were positioned all around me (as, say, one of the *Rheingold* gods), or when, in the audience, I watched those cameras and their creations as well as the 'original' performance and the original text, I was led both to observe the situation and to engage in Goethe's critique; perhaps, even, to engage in critique of Goethe's critique, and so forth. Multiplication of media had both broadened the possibilities here and dulled our awareness: doubtless part of the reason for heightening our awareness in an explicitly aesthetic situation.

A keen student of Ludwig Feuerbach's humanism, Wagner saw human beings reduce themselves by transferring their best qualities to a being external to themselves: first God and/or the gods, then the state, capital, even the delusions of 'love'. Such images and our consumption of them offered, knowingly or otherwise, a neo-Feuerbachian

³⁹ Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 171.

⁴⁰ Letter of 23 December 1797, 'Briefwechsel Schiller-Goethe', Friedrich Schiller Archiv, www.friedrich-schiller-archiv.de/briefwechsel-von-schiller-und-goethe/1797/391-an-schiller-23-dezember-1797/.



Figure 2. *Das Rheingold*, dir. Frank Castorf, 2014 © Bayreuther Festspiele, Enrico Nawrath. (colour online)

inversion for our age; as befitted a post-Adornian, administered world, dialectics were unremittably negative. At first glance, like much of the mass culture it depicted, the production may have seemed to be all about sex and concomitant exploitation. One might say the same about Wagner's first scene 'itself' from the standpoint of what Wagner called Alberich's *liebesgellüste* ('erotic urge') towards the Rhinemaidens.⁴¹ Wagner remarked that he had 'once felt every sympathy for Alberich'; in his turn against the Rhinemaidens, Alberich represented 'the ugly person's longing for beauty'.⁴² In work and staging alike – a crucial coming together – there had been no golden age; this, one of the most tenacious and perhaps necessary of myths, had been fatally undermined by an 'ugly' man rejected by Rhinemaiden hedonists from a 'beautiful' world, their antics filmed for our consumption. Delights may have been won from the 'Rhine' waters, yet those waters, a mere paddling pool, had, like the electronic image, no depth; they too lacked lack. Once absent from Wagner's stage, the 'girls' continued to be part of Castorf's, of ours. Alberich's rejection was repeated in their dismissal of an Everyman figure, who appeared in different guises through this *Ring's* entirety. Played by Castorf's assistant and dramaturge, Patric Seibert, he was in this case a member of staff, serving cocktails to the girls in their hotel room. He wished to become part of their narrative, or rather would like to welcome them into his; instead, they thrust a 'Do not disturb' sign in his face. There was a hint here of the introduction of a 'real' person into the drama, albeit one who was not actually real at all: we might call it unreal reality theatre.

⁴¹ Letter to Uhlig of 11/12 November 1851, in *Sämtliche Briefe*, IV: 175. Wagner at this time often disdained the traditional upper case for nouns.

⁴² Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack (eds.), *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, trans. Geoffrey Skelton, 2 vols. (London and New York, 1978–80), 2 March 1878, II: 33.

Rhinegold reimagined as oil powered all of what we saw: forecourt petrol pumps; the material of American popular culture; the motel's final-scene 'rainbow' rebranding; even, perhaps, something narcotic, when Donner's mysterious 'clearing' of the air left pleasure-seekers in the motel bar in a state of trance-like animation, eye close-ups leaving the spectator in little doubt that something stronger than alcohol was being served. After all, every character claimed to see a rainbow, even to walk upon it, in order to reach somewhere they stood already. Perhaps the same might be said, in Feuerbachian manner, of the illusory sacerdotal fortress of Valhalla in the *Ring* 'itself'. Inclusivity signalled a definite step forward for contemporary mores: in the pool and in the bar, Rhineboyz joining our 'fun-loving girls'.

Freia's ransom from the giants took place, yet almost as an afterthought, everyone – even she – having lost interest. There were too many other narratives to write, to watch, to consume. Freia's golden apples, for which we should read stereotypical female 'assets', had in any case passed their sell-by date for Wotan, now that a fur-clad, televisual Erda, knowingly trashy in Nadine Weissmann's moving performances, had made her melodramatic entrance, delivered her 'character's' lines and submitted to Wotan in the shower cubicle. Privacy of a sort was permitted for rape: no filming allowed. It operated, however, solely on behalf of the rapist.

VI

Just as the opening of that *Rhinegold* presented a place of transience, so did the close. The gods could not be immortal, for we were all, like Marx and Wagner, students of Feuerbach now. On moving to a different world for the rest of the *Ring*, we were bidden to reflect on the widely, if far from universally, accepted impermanence of capitalism, a claim regarded strictly as the province of the 'extreme' Left during the age of liberal triumphalism extending from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the 2008 financial crash.

Marx, then, was back, as Derrida had always insisted.⁴³ At first, however, his – and socialism's – presence were understated, at most implicit. For *Die Walküre*, we moved, as visual clues gradually informed us, to Stalinist Azerbaijan in 1942 (see Figure 3): an agrarian, yet industrialising, society, in which Denić's set transformed Hunding's traditional house into an oil well. This was a society in which all, Wotan included, hoped to discover the oil that powered the rest of the cycle, both inciting and frustrating revolutionary hopes. Fricka now came armed with a whip of conjugal enforcement. An initially bookish Seibert (Everyman, assistant director) seemingly willingly – yet driven by what compulsion? – took the caged place of farmyard fowl; was animalised; and, following rescue, transformed by the experience, reinvented himself as businessman once oil had been hit. All this took place against the new score's more 'Romantic' canvas, vocally and orchestrally heightening the force of Castorf's and Wagner's contradictions.

Rhinegold had theoretically taken place later in time, yet Castorf's disjunctive paradoxically, even dialectically, rendered *Rhinegold* all the more distant as pre- and/or alternative-history. It invited one to think about time – for Thomas Mann, 'the unit of narration, as it is the unit of life ... [and] "of music"' – rather than passively accepting conventional chronology.⁴⁴ Dramatic theatre's concern with structuring of time had been somewhat undermined, or at least transformed, by Brecht, even by Chekhov; something similar had taken place in some twentieth-century opera; for instance, Luigi Nono's *Al gran sole carico d'amore* and *Prometeo*. To impose such a disjuncture, to make the audience ask what, if any, the connection might be, was to invite one to ask both what Wagner was

⁴³ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx: L'État de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale* (Paris, 1993).

⁴⁴ Thomas Mann, *Der Zauberberg* (Frankfurt, 1952), 680.



Figure 3. *Die Walküre*, dir. Frank Castorf, 2014 © Bayreuther Festspiele, Enrico Nawrath. (colour online)

doing and why. His *Rheingold* world of gods and giants is not identical to that of the succeeding three dramas, although there is, of course, much complex interconnection and interaction. We see in it, at least to a certain extent, where things might lead.

In Castorf's staging, however, we were now set on a different historical and ideological trajectory, one set in the Eastern bloc, as many – not those who lived under 'actually existing socialism' – had once called it. Perhaps we were giving socialists such as Wagner and Marx a try after all, permitting thoughtful rather than unheeding deconstruction. If the neoliberal world of the Golden Motel were so rotten, what alternatives might there have been? Angela Merkel's grim, neoliberal claim that not only her government's but also any government's actions were now 'alternativlos' hung over proceedings, ready to be dispelled by Donner's hammer like those *Rheingold* mists, albeit without that ever happening.⁴⁵

Video showed, to widespread initial bewilderment, Russian and Azerbaijani scripts, an issue of *Pravda*, even hints at socialist realism – as well as other (purposely?) strange images, such as a woman eating a cake and a local patriarch drinking shots of vodka and making telephone calls. There was assimilation, then, as Soviet 'progress' confronted Central Asian Baku. It eventually transpired that the patriarch may have been Wotan; there was certainly similarity to the god as revealed on stage. Yet it was never certain whether similarity had shaded into identity, unreliable, mediated narration again to the fore. The gods' return to a new, older, alternative world proved intriguingly consonant

⁴⁵ Merkel's (partial) transformation from multiple repetition, from 2009 onwards, of the quasi-Thatcherite 'without alternative' (TINA: 'There is no alternative'), to similar repetitions, in the wake of the 2015 'migrant crisis', of the more hopeful 'Wir schaffen das' ('We can do this'), makes for an interesting counterpoint.

with ancient mythological conceptions. Adopting local dress, customs, commercial practices, indeed leading the latter, they did what they have always done when assuming human form. Wotan's loss of his 'local' beard, seen first on film when drinking vodka, transgressed and inverted the ancient dramatic taboo of dropping his mask: Wotan-as-actor revealed as the real character.⁴⁶ At last, we beheld him, like Hunding facing his death, in all his godlike terror. I also recalled with Wagner, student of Feuerbach, that human beings had made these gods, as we also had others, more abstract, such as capital, law and 'love'.

For a modern audience, one might say the same of Wagner and romanticism. Here, the production fared less well, at least on the surface, though this might have been read as commentary on the relationship between the decline, even death, of character and other (postmodern?) forms of subjectivity.⁴⁷ It certainly had something in common with a postdramatic move against the 'depth' of speaking – in this case, singing – figures.⁴⁸ Wotan's delivery of his second-act monologue was, presumably on purpose, stationary, even un-directed: not only deconstruction of the plethora of action in Castorf's *Rheingold*, but a contemptuous reinstatement of 'opera'. Film enabled close-ups of Sieglinde's exaggerated, 'operatic' expressions when preparing Hunding's potion. Fricka's 'mad' behaviour witnessed in Figure 4 was again conventionally, even pejoratively, 'operatic'. It stood in stark contrast with the alternative yet related tradition of Wotan merely standing and delivering: 'park and bark'. However, once the non-Brünnhilde Valkyries had departed the scene, diminishing returns set in for the rest of the third act. The *Lenz* of Volsung love and Siegmund's rejection of Valhalla having passed without scenic notice, so too did the relationship between Wotan and Brünnhilde. Refusing and failing to listen to each other made an important point, yet 'real' action continued to lie with oil strikes, not Siegmund and Sieglinde. This was less, it seemed, a Brechtian strategy of alienation than mere impatience, with obscure (post)dramatic results.

VII

It was important, however, to be reminded on film that Hitler was also in pursuit of Azerbaijani oilfields. Stalin's victory and the failure of Operation Edelweiss in the wake of Stalingrad implicitly prepared the way for the world(s) of *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*. Castorf and Denić – the latter's spectacular set designs arguably as important as much of the action – took us to an *alternative* present day (to ours and/or *Das Rheingold*'s). What if the *Wende* had not come, if the 'West' had not won, or if that victory, such as it was, had taken different form?

Siegfried revolved between two sets, clearly intended, at least in part, as two sides of the same societal coin, whether synchronic or diachronic; we may recall Lehmann's observation about Shakespeare's worlds. Pressing vulnerable Left buttons concerning quite how far one might go with historical socialism, Figure 5's alternative Mount Rushmore – Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Mao – provided a backdrop both to the caravan and to pursuit of the ring Mime had inherited from Alberich (not that the latter had given up). On the other side, as seen in Figure 6, lay a magnificent recreation, a simulacrum

⁴⁶ See Oliver Taplin, 'Masks in Greek Tragedy and in *Tantalus*', *Didaskalia* 5/2 (2001), www.didaskalia.net/issues/vol5no2/taplin.html (accessed 7 October 2021); Stephen Halliwell, 'The Function and Aesthetics of the Greek Tragic Mask', in *Intertextualität in der griechisch-römischen Komödie*, ed. Niall W. Slater and Bernard Zimmermann (Stuttgart, 1993), 195–211.

⁴⁷ Elinor Fuchs, *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater after Modernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1996).

⁴⁸ Gerda Poschmann, *Der nicht mehr dramatisches Theatertext: Aktuelle Bühnenstücke und ihre dramatische Analyse* (Tübingen, 1977), 204–5.



Figure 4. *Die Walküre*, dir. Frank Castorf, 2017 © Bayreuther Festspiele, Enrico Nawrath. (colour online)

convincing both in fidelity and infidelity – *Regietheater* itself conceptually staged? – of (East) Berlin’s (Al)exanderplatz: S-Bahn and U-Bahn stations, World Clock, post office, fountain and invented-yet-real restaurant.⁴⁹ The sheer scale of both sets, not just as stage objects (although certainly including that) but also in terms of conceptual reference and possibility, created to an extent I had not hitherto experienced a sense of awe at the epic quality of *Siegfried*’s drama, and epic literary traditions more generally, albeit highly mediated.

Was this ‘Domesticating Wagner’, as Michael Tanner entitled a chapter on Wagner staging from Chéreau onward?⁵⁰ Far from it. Given Castorf’s evident impatience with the romanticism of *Die Walküre*, it was intriguing to see the fairytale of the boy who learns fear receive such a probing and, in many respects, sympathetic treatment. There was no doubting the distance that had been travelled by the close, nor the genuine, neo-Feuerbachian, revolutionary hope felt on occasion, especially at the ends of the second and third acts. Hope was not unalloyed at either of those points; nor is it in Wagner’s drama, the nihilistic ecstasy of the words to Siegfried and Brünnhilde’s duet combining in highly disconcerting, double-contrapuntal – that is, counterpoint in the score, but also counterpoint between words and music – virtuosity. The production nonetheless celebrated with an uncanny second affinity, to borrow again from Hegel, the particular character of *Siegfried* as the *Ring*’s ‘scherzo’: as complex an idea after Beethoven as after the post-Dresden uprising in 1849 or after the Leipzig uprising in 1989.

⁴⁹ One thought – at least I did – that the sign read ‘Alexanderplatz’; the stage certainly appeared to depict Alexanderplatz. In fact, the ‘Al’ was missing.

⁵⁰ Michael Tanner, *Wagner* (London, 1996), 48–62.



Figure 5. *Siegfried*, dir. Frank Castorf, 2017 © Bayreuther Festspiele, Enrico Nawrath. (colour online)

Liminality is an idea crucial to the drama, to the epic tradition in which it stands, and perhaps also to realisation in performance. Of particular importance is the liminal status, with concomitant dangers and emancipatory potential, of the forest in which *Siegfried* takes place. That may be in turn related to the interest of many Germany Romantics in the Roman officer turned Germanic chieftain, Arminius or ‘Hermann’ (a speculative Teutonisation), who from the Teutoburger Wald had halted Roman advances into Germania. ‘Assuredly he was the deliverer of Germany’, the admiring Tacitus had recorded in his *Annals*. Arminius ‘had defied Rome, not in her early rise, as other kings and generals, but in the height of her empire’s glory.’⁵¹ Wagner too rejoiced in the memory of those events, even when telling Cosima in rather gloomy terms: ‘So far, we have been great in *defence*, dispelling alien elements which we could not assimilate; the Teutoburger Wald was a rejection of the Roman influence, the Reformation also a rejection, our great literature a rejection of the influence of the French; the only positive thing so far has been our music – Beethoven.’⁵² Hence perhaps this post-Beethoven scherzo? The implication was that things would, at least might, change, although by then (1872) the strong, pessimistic-Schopenhauerian element in Wagner’s rereading and rethinking of the *Ring* suggested resignation. Enter the resigned Wanderer, a more fitting hero for a

⁵¹ Publius Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals and the Histories*, trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb (London, 1876), 78.

⁵² Gregor-Dellin and Mack (eds.), *Cosima Wagner’s Diaries*, 19 February 1872, I: 459.

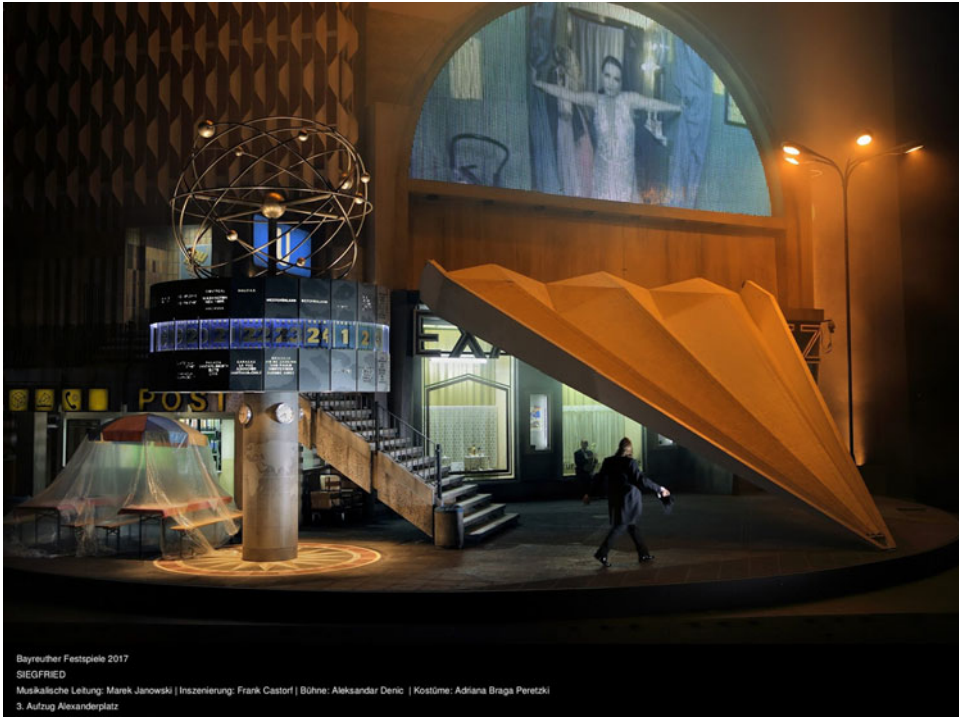


Figure 6. *Siegfried*, dir. Frank Castorf, 2017 © Bayreuther Festspiele, Enrico Nawrath. (colour online)

frustrated revolutionary age than the rebel Siegfried, born in that forest, whatever the hopes invested in him.

At an immediate, scenic level, in Castorf's production the revolving stage did its work. Was this a forest, albeit a distinctly dried-out version, or an urban interchange? It seemed imbued with transience, possibility and implicit potential for thwarting revolutionary potential. East Berlin seemed at least on first acquaintance to be going well enough. But was it actually East Berlin at all? One may have responded, not entirely without reason: 'it is what it is', just as Castorf's new 'OST' at the Volksbühne was what it was, or the mysterious (Al)exanderplatz crocodiles, increasing by one in number each year of the production. Their sheer absurdity exerted a power of its own: in and of itself, but also over Bayreuth, Valhalla, Wagner, romanticism, revolution, post-revolutionary drabness, over anything and everything, stage action included.

Even if there were no explanation, such riddles seemed designed to make us seek one: like Mime, though, perhaps we never asked the questions we needed answered. More nihilistically, perhaps there were no such answers, even questions. Images of what seemed to be political leaders speaking came and went on video screens above: was that Siegfried? Mime? The Wanderer? Or were they just faces of no one in particular, onto whom we (literally) projected what we expect, desired, or had been led to believe? Projections fused with the figures on the mountain, heightening the old friend of unreliable, now frankly historical, narration. What did it mean to see Siegfried's face projected not onto revolutionary Lenin or even Mao but 'establishment' Stalin; and Wotan, his eye damaged, yet playfully winking, onto Stalin's? Perhaps nothing at all; it was arguably up to a dazed audience in an apparently post-revolutionary age to create meaning, or not. On the other hand, as Lehmann suggests in the brief epilogue to *Postdramatic Theatre*, 'the politics

of theatre is the politics of perception'.⁵³ Gods and heroes alike – continued to take on new, often disconcerting form. It was difficult to resist Beckettian gloom. Revolutions from Wagner's in 1848–9 – further back to the French Revolution too – to those of 1917–18, 1945–9, 1989 and so on, even perhaps 1933, had all failed in their respective ways. 'Revolution', for historians such as Reinhart Koselleck a *Grundbegriff* or 'fundamental concept' of modern socio-political vocabulary, seemed fundamental above all in its recurrent failure.⁵⁴ Our alleged supposed revolutionary hero, Siegfried, proved as brutal as any, his Brezhnev era, Afghan War (a post-9/11 world knew only too well where that would lead) Kalashnikov, heard to terrifyingly loud effect in the theatre in the killing of Fafner. Meanwhile, oil continued to do its work. Seibert, initially Siegfried's chained bear, found himself covered by it.

Wotan's rejection of Erda at the station restaurant proved a dramatic focal point, Seibert's Everyman waiting on the unhappy, unequal couple. During the third-act Prelude, Erda on film offered a varied reprise of some of her *Rheingold* actions – not unlike one of Wagner's famous narrations (in which we learn more about previous acts and from different standpoints), or the narrative thrust of that Prelude itself, in which Wotan finally resolves to dismiss Fate.⁵⁵ Having worried with her assistant about which wig to wear, she made a last-minute substitution to the god's favoured blonde in preparation for her final encounter, her final appearance on stage (or anywhere else). Once again, Wotan treated the earth goddess just as he would any other woman. Having had her fellate him, he contemptuously slipped her some banknotes and ran after Siegfried, leaving her to settle the bill. Unafraid to sound, as well as look, hurt, damaged and cowed, Weissmann cut a movingly pathetic figure under the table at her last hurrah, all the more so for a resolute lack of sentimentality.

Brünnhilde seemed unlikely to fare any better once woken by her 'hero'. As she donned her wedding dress – a signal, like the ring, that she would believe in 'marriage' to Siegfried until the end – we knew already that he would betray her, as we knew he would the revolution itself. Initially, he cruelly abandoned her even as they and the orchestra sang of their union, opting instead to possess a Woodbird straight out of the Rio Carnival. In 2017, however, in an inversion of previous years' action, Siegfried returned to Brünnhilde and they 'traditionally' embraced. The year 2016 offered a mid-point, in which Brünnhilde separated Siegfried and the Woodbird; having taken control, she then embraced her lover. Was Castorf reconciling himself to Wagner, to the Romanticism of the forest whose liminality we saw and felt but whose trees, whose green, whose Caspar David Friedrich depths, we may have sensed only in the orchestra? Perhaps the Bayreuth audience now needed to deconstruct the 'Castorf Ring', which, like Wagner's, it knew too well; perhaps Castorf did too. Either way, we, the director included, were asked difficult questions about female agency and violence towards women onstage. Brünnhilde, no longer a victim, would live to fight another day.

VIII

That day would be *Götterdämmerung*, so no one, least of all she, should have felt unduly optimistic. There was no lack of apocalyptic atmosphere to the grand denouement. Denić's set designs, Adriana Braga Peretski's costumes and Rainer Casper's gloomy lighting worked with, even intensified, Wagner's world-weary E flat minor opening chords.

⁵³ Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 185.

⁵⁴ Neithard Bulst, Jörg Fisch, Reinhart Koselleck and Christian Meier, 'Revolution, Rebellion, Aufruhr, Bürgerkrieg', in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, ed. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck, 8 vols. (Stuttgart, 1972), V: 653–788.

⁵⁵ See, for example, Dieter Borchmeyer, *Richard Wagner: Theory and Theatre*, trans. Stewart Spencer (Oxford, 1991), 297–8.

Exhaustion in a well-nigh Beckettian sense ruled: *Fin de partie*? The Norns' Scene struck what was in many ways a highly faithful note of extravagance and vagrancy, of Fate and street gossip, as they made their way across the stage to a peculiar little shrine, almost Marian, yet clearly anything but, whose function remained mysterious in apparent Beckettian meaninglessness. It both attracted and repelled – like Wagner, one might say, like the production 'itself'. Not only the Norns but also many of their successors, Wagner's characters and Castorf's additions, would continue to enter it and, perhaps just as important, continue to attempt to leave it. Replete with plastic refuse, born of the oil that had run through the tetralogy, it suggested exhausted consumerism and a related, deadly, contemporary far-Right politics, which, as a poster declared, preferred 'Oma' (grandma) to 'Roma'. There were also glimpses of an eternally televised non-revolution identical with all late capitalist lives: witnessed in Andreas Deinert's and Jens Crull's video footage, both on a particular television screen within the shrine and on larger screens elsewhere onstage. East and West *both* led here: state capitalism, for that was what it had always been, as well as neoliberalism. There was no escape. Hopes for an alternative historical path had ended up precisely where 'reality' had, with nationalist-racist movements such as the Alternative für Deutschland and Pegida, nowhere stronger than in the (East German) Saxony in which Wagner had been born and had grown up. The world will always have changed during revival, reinvention, restaging – whatever we wish to call it – of productions, but it did so in particularly notable ways from 2013 to 2017: the 'refugee crisis', the rise of far-Right 'populist' movements and so on. Certain horrors and moments of reflection sharpened in focus, again as they had for Wagner in the post-revolutionary reaction of the 1850s.

It seemed, then, that the end of this *Ring*'s world was truly nigh, though even that 'hope' would be frustrated. Writing on Chéreau's production for a Bayreuth programme note, Günter Metken had described Valhalla as 'no longer the undamaged place it once was', with 'something of the unhealthy air of Venice ... It is one of those choice apparitions of death conjured up by the previous [nineteenth] century, in order to repress the rapacity of daily life.' He proceeded to liken the entry of the gods into Valhalla – like Castorf's Golden Motel, by now another world – to a *tableau vivant* of Bruegel's *Parable of the Blind*.⁵⁶ Those words seemed also rather well to fit both this *Götterdämmerung*, and its relationship to Chéreau and Wagner alike. For Castorf's *Götterdämmerung* was a world that could be read, intentionally or otherwise, as having taken its leave also from Chéreau's: a world of rituals in a post-religious society that knew no morality, found it impossible even to 'know'.⁵⁷ Yet still, in this nihilist hell, its characters must continue to do something; the second act – Wagner's, Chéreau's and now Castorf's – continued to offer up desperate, pointless evocations to gods long since deceased.

That had been presaged at the opening, when we saw Castorf's Norns dressed up for a ball to which they *knew* they were neither invited nor capable of attending. Yet what else was there to do? They could sing, and did – not that it made any (dramatic) difference. Likewise Siegfried showed himself no better than any of the previous leaders we had seen, his elevation clear from demeanour, costume and further 'political' speech. Wotan may have dismissed Erda as Fate, but what did and could that mean here? Not very much in a world in which perpetual rule by petrochemical works and Wall Street seems inevitable. That the former was an East German factory whose slogan, 'Plaste und Elaste aus Schkopau' ('Plastics and Elastics from Schkopau'), was a long running joke for Westerners with respect to poverty of aspiration and achievement, heightened

⁵⁶ Günter Metken, 'Eine neue Ära der Bilder', *Programmhefte der Bayreuther Festspiele* (1978), IV, 3–4.

⁵⁷ Pierre Boulez and Patrice Chéreau, 'Commentaires sur "Mythologie et Idéologie"', *Programmhefte der Bayreuther Festspiele* (1977), VI, 81.

the sense both of capital's adaptive grip and its ultimate absurdity. From the Western Rhine to the Eastern Elbe – the sign used to be seen from the motorway on the bridge over the Elbe near Vockerode – even the most backward state enterprise could, like Rheingold's Golden Motel, be rebranded and yet remain the same.⁵⁸ Privatisation works, according to the covert logic of neoliberalism, if not its overt ideological claims of progress. All the while, a New York Stock Exchange carelessly concealed in cloth awaited its deliberately underwhelming revelation (and would-be revolution).

The second act was thus set for another attempt at revolution that failed, as a mediated rerun both like and unlike that which had had Wagner flee into Swiss exile. At least something had *happened* then. There was much of the nihilism of post-crash 'anti-capitalist' protestors here, neither knowing nor caring what they want, save for attention. There certainly seemed to be real crisis here, real hunger, Seibert's fast-food van failing to cope with demand. Or was that just another illusion, another 'drama' in a postdramatic age, in which members of the crowd held placards announcing crisis and hunger, in some cases acted as if their lives were at stake during pillaging, then perhaps returned home afterwards to watch it all on another screen? 'The people' had not, hitherto, been entirely absent from this *Ring*. Their inclusion, not only in the person of Seibert's character(s) but also on video (a community in *Die Walküre's* Azerbaijan, for instance), and its collision with a world of cruel gods, dwarves, heroes and so on had throughout proved an important device not only of 'reality' but also of dramatic interaction between those 'kinds' of being Wotan's strategy had always been to keep apart. They were nevertheless far more present here; such, after all, is the nature of the work, in which the *grand opéra* chorus is reinstated, *aufgehoben* (i.e., in Hegelian terms, its negation negated).

In one sense the question posed by this *Götterdämmerung* seemed classically Marxist and, more broadly, socialist. In a world of abundance, the genuine achievement of the bourgeois mode of production was, to quote Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto*, to have been 'the first to show what man's activity can bring about. It has accomplished miracles surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals; it has conducted expeditions that put in the shade all former Exoduses of nations and crusades' – how to achieve redistribution?⁵⁹ Hence the importance of food as a visual motif in Castorf's production. It was doubtless not (quite) for nothing that a pram, full of potatoes, rolled down the steps, absurdly echoing Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* and its mutiny against Tsarism. Film and its history (and, in this case, Soviet film's influence over capitalist Hollywood) became part of the postdramatic action, perhaps irrespective of meaning, certainly irrespective of the ability of either 'side' in the sometime battle of capitalism and socialism to feed its people. For the modern world has long been able to feed itself, provide for the needs of its inhabitants, many times over, and yet has not. Wotan proved conspicuous in his wastefulness in all three preceding dramas. What did he care if he ordered several times over at the (Al)exanderplatz restaurant, money being no object? Yet there were many for whom the denial of food, indeed that of other necessities and freedoms too, most certainly was an object. So long as the Gibichung regime provided for the people, Gunther and Hagen retained their loyalty. The frantic nature of provision as the crowd was worked up by Hagen (Figure 7) seemed suggestive both of the relationship (increasingly stretched) between supply and demand and of fascistic frenzy, all too familiar by the later 2010s. Redistribution would clearly require revolutionary transformation of some sort, even

⁵⁸ I am grateful to Björn Heile for his patient elucidation of some of that sign's resonances for a West Berliner.

⁵⁹ Karl Marx, 'Manifest der kommunistischen Partei', in *Die Frühschriften*, ed. Siegfried Landshut (Stuttgart, 1971), 528.



Figure 7. *Götterdämmerung*, dir. Frank Castorf, 2016 © Bayreuther Festspiele, Enrico Nawrath. (colour online)

though the value of such attempts had long since been called into question on either side of the (now-fallen) Iron Curtain.

In that connection, it was difficult to see, when Siegfried, its leader, had disowned or remained merely oblivious to such a project, how this crowd might yet lay claim to revolutionary potential. Many of its individuals seemed more preoccupied with culinary and sexual excess; fake radicalism had always been a good path to sexual advantage. Petty flags of different ‘nations’ underpinned the violence as members of the crowd set upon each other and, perhaps most crucially, the poor Everyman who must serve them. Film both relayed the action and bade one take pornographic pleasure in watching the goings-on, as with ‘the news’ more generally. There was certainly no doubting the onstage, unmediated brutality of the behaviour of these true followers of Siegfried and Hagen towards Seibert. Was he, however, ‘just’ an actor too? His ‘death’ at the beginning of the third act was knowingly, visibly stage-managed – film showing him smear himself in ketchup, presumably from his van, and leave himself for dead, awaiting the Rhinemaidens to bundle him into their car. They too then endured brutal attack by Siegfried.

And so, when the Immolation Scene came, when Brünnhilde threatened in [Figure 8](#) to set Wall Street alight, nothing really happened. The contrast could hardly be starker with what Wagner, friend of the pyromaniacal Bakunin, had hoped would come to pass. Writing barely a year after fleeing Dresden for revolutionary exile, Wagner envisaged a cleansing fire spreading from European city to city, until it enveloped the world:

recall that day during the Dresden uprising when you met me on the Zwinger promenade and asked me in trepidation and with some concern whether I was not afraid that, at best, the result would be mob-rule? – ... these people were still tied to the



Figure 8. *Götterdämmerung*, dir. Frank Castorf, 2014 © Bayreuther Festspiele, Enrico Nawrath. (colour online)

apron-strings of politics ... were not yet the people they really are ... it was this alone that subjugated them and made them appear to you as they did – men who were drunk on politics, and who blustered their way through the streets of the town – which they might have set fire to, with all the judicial splendour of our fair city of Dresden, had it only been granted them to act in accord with the fury they felt in their hearts. I have seen these people again in Paris and Lyons, and now know the future course of the world. – Until now we have encountered expressions of enslaved human nature only in *crimes* that disgust and appal us! – Whenever murderers and thieves now set fire to a house, the deed rightly strikes us as base and repugnant: but how shall it seem to us if the monster that is Paris is burned to the ground, if the conflagration spreads from town to town, and if we ourselves, in our wild enthusiasm, finally set fire to these uncleansable Augean stables for the sake of a breath of fresh air? – With complete level-headedness and with no sense of dizziness, I assure you that I no longer believe in any other revolution save that which begins with the burning down of Paris ... Just wait and see how we recover from this fire-cure: if necessary I could finish painting this picture, I could even imagine how a man of enthusiasm might here and there summon together the living remnants of our former art and how he might say to them – who among you desires to help me perform a drama? Only those people will answer who genuinely share that desire, for there will no longer be money available, but those who respond will at once reveal to the world, in a rapidly erected wooden structure, what art is!⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Letter to Theodor Uhlig of 22 October 1850, in Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (eds.), *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, trans. Stewart Spencer (London, 1987), 218–19.

Such was, of course, not to be, and the course the *Ring* project took would reflect Wagner's own conflict – as well as the post-1848 world's more generally – between resignation in the face of revolution's failure and hope that it might be reignited. The Immolation Scene itself and Wagner's various attempts, verbal and musical, at rewriting it, bear witness to that. With Castorf, however, all was shown to be worse than any revolutionaries remaining had feared. No more had the end of this miserable world come – and come whichever seemingly different historical path we might have taken – than a revolution had saved it and us. Various characters or figures onstage went through the revolutionary motions: a Rhinemaiden even dropped a Picasso out of the Wall Street window for safekeeping; or perhaps, on reflection, to generate a more brazen display of power to the plebs below. The Rhinemaidens survived; they even gave *Hagen* a kitschy funeral on the river, perhaps the Rhine. Video continued its quasi-orchestral task of commenting on, elucidating and frustrating the action; it had done so in the Funeral March too, *Hagen* marching back through a 'Romantic' landscape. Was there perhaps a hint of Edgar Reitz's *Heimat 3* to all this: the need to tie things up after the fall of the Wall, yet no real ability to do so?

As Herbert Marcuse put it in his self-reflexive critique of Marxist aesthetics, *The Aesthetic Dimension*:

If art were to promise that at the end good would triumph over evil, such a promise would be refuted by the historical truth. In reality it is evil which triumphs, and there are only islands of good where one can find refuge for a brief time. Authentic works of art are aware of this; they reject the promise made too easily; they reject the unburdened happy end.⁶¹

Rejection of the catharsis of unburdened tragedy, or gnawing away at it out of post- or non-revolutionary *ennui*, turned the dialectical screw once more. What a world is ours. The final, distinctly unsettling feeling, mixed with exhilaration at the conclusion of such an experience, was much as Boulez, at work on this work in this theatre, had said it should be: 'Wagner refuses any conclusion as such, simply leaving us with the premises for a conclusion that remains shifting and indeterminate in meaning.'⁶² Relative lack of stage drama – a drama of the underwhelming – offered the ultimate postdramatic sign-off and contrast to Wagner's score, if not to necessarily inadequate 'traditional' representations of the drama. Romantic and post-romantic idealism and their aspiration to totality – the *Gesamtkunstwerk* – were dealt, through a dialectic of the underwhelming, a Nietzschean hammer-blow: Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* subjected to the cunning and punning of Nietzsche's *Götzen-Dämmerung, oder, Wie man mit dem Hammer philosophiert*.⁶³ Indeed, the *Ring* and its attempt to create, as well as to destroy, an entire 'world' offered to postdramatic theatre more generally a brazen example of the idol of totalisation.⁶⁴ How, then, does one stage the end of a world? The question seemed as unanswerable in the Bayreuth Festspielhaus as on the streets outside; yet its answer seemed more necessary than ever.

⁶¹ Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, trans. Herbert Marcuse and E. Sherover (London, 1979), 47.

⁶² Pierre Boulez, 'A Performer's Notebook', in *Orientations: Collected Writings*, ed. Jean-Jacques Nattiez, trans. Martin Cooper (London, 1986), 279.

⁶³ Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Götzen-Dämmerung, oder, Wie man mit dem Hammer philosophiert', in *Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgi Colli and Mazzino Montinari, 15 vols. (Berlin, 1999), VI: 55–161.

⁶⁴ Mark Berry, 'Characters in the "World" of the *Ring*', in *Cambridge Companion to Wagner's 'Ring'*, ed. Berry and Vazsonyi, 159–84.

IX

Where did that leave Wagner and Castorf? A host of critical voices, initially sceptical and in many cases downright hostile, declared their minds changed as they lived with the production over its five years. (The present writer counts himself amongst them.) Many have now spoken of it in the same breath as Chéreau, as a staging after which the work, its reception, its potentialities will not be the same again. It seems also to have proved a staging post for Castorf and his team, for whom opera, its necessary collaboration with musicians in the pit and on stage, and the challenge of operating with the constraints of the musical work concept – even when relaxed a little more than at Bayreuth – would seem to have afforded further challenge, even liberation. Gounod's *Faust* was staged in Stuttgart in 2017 as part of a larger *Faust* project, in which both parts of Goethe's epic were staged in one very long evening as Castorf's farewell to the Volksbühne, following a quarter of a century: almost exactly the same period of time Wagner worked on the *Ring*. That company's own future has been weighed in the neoliberal balance, the unlamented tenure of Chris Dercon, who abolished the ensemble in favour of using the theatre as a 'space' for visiting artists, terminated following artist occupation.

A 2018 *From the House of the Dead* for the Bavarian State Opera in Munich, where Wagner has long been considered a 'house god', came as an intriguing pendant to the *Ring*: a thought-provoking alternative to *Parsifal*. A more fragmentary work emerged in some ways more conventionally, more in keeping with 'itself', than so emphatic a drama as the *Ring*. Many clues and connections, some perhaps red herrings, others undoubtedly playing with a Trotskyist alternative, presented further puzzles to piece together. *La forza del destino* at Berlin's Deutsche Oper incited near riots at its 2019 premiere, audience members rising to their feet to demand that Castorf be silenced and Verdi be granted his opportunity to speak. Walter Braunfels's *Die Vögel* also saw the rare light of day in late 2020, broadcast online from a well-nigh empty Munich theatre on account of coronavirus restrictions. At the time of writing, *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* and *Boris Godunov* remained as future plans.

For the traffic of 'influence', or at least transformative encounter, has not been one-way. One might argue that it has necessarily travelled faster and fiercer from Wagner to Castorf, or indeed that it would be unduly reductive to speak of only two directions; the dimensions of the chess game are doubtless more than we can yet perceive. Wagner's orchestral writing and his formal methods created models of organisation and implications that did not previously exist, whether in the aesthetic or, should we consider such a thing to exist, the non-aesthetic realm. Many changes in the perception of reality have arisen in part through aesthetic transformation, which is certainly not to be divorced from technological developments. Likewise, confrontation with a Wagner score, if undertaken in a remotely seriously fashion, would seem to have changed Castorf in Bayreuth just as much as it had changed Boulez and Chéreau.

Heiner Müller, a crucial influence on Castorf, offered a celebrated observation that 'the essential thing about theatre' was 'transformation. Dying. And fear of that final transformation is general; one may rely on it; one may depend on it.'⁶⁵ Müller must have been especially fascinated by that element of Isolde's mysterious *Verklärung* or transfiguration when directing his 'anti-illusionist' *Tristan und Isolde* at Bayreuth (1993–9).⁶⁶ For Wagner too, in a passage moving from generalities to specific reference to the fourth scene of *Das Rheingold*, told his fellow composer and revolutionary August Röckel: 'We must learn to die, and to die in the fullest sense of the word; fear of the end is the source of all

⁶⁵ Alexander Kluge and Heiner Müller, *Ich bin ein Landvermesser: Gespräche, Neue Folge* (Hamburg, 1996), 95.

⁶⁶ Margrit Frölich, 'The Void of Utopian Potentials: Heiner Müller's Production of *Tristan und Isolde*', *The German Quarterly* 72 (1999), 159.

lovelessness, and this fear is generated only when love itself is already beginning to wane.⁶⁷ The world had neither died nor been transformed in Castorf's *Ring*. And yet, drama, be it Brechtian, Wagnerian, even Aristotelian, had emerged stronger: not despite postdramatic treatment, but rather on its account.

'From the beginning', we read in Lehmann, when he returned some years later to the theme of postdramatic theatre, yet this time in explicit relation to politics, 'the articulation of the tragic was closely connected to basic questions of the political, the *polis*, to history, power and conflict. Today is no exception to this rule. There can be no private tragedy. Where we find the tragic, we hit upon the political.'⁶⁸ That surely includes tragic avoidance of 'necessary' tragic outcome, of catharsis. In that history of modern revolution in which Wagner's life and work continue to play out, such had been the case all along.

Writing for Bayreuth, in which revolution and counter-revolution were entwined from the outset, Boulez extolled in a 1977 programme essay the virtues of the 'amazing' *Götterdämmerung* scene in which Alberich visits Hagen ('Schläfst du Hagen, mein Sohn?'). It moved him, he wrote, 'for reasons that are probably not directly related to the drama', but which we may read as related to its reception history, both before and after Chéreau (and Castorf). Wagner, Boulez wrote, 'seems here to be conducting a kind of dialogue with his own double'. (Was this perhaps a seed of Boulez's 1985 *Dialogue de l'ombre double*?) Its ultimate subject, Boulez thought, was:

a questioning of the future, an uneasiness about generations to come. Will my concerns and my achievement be understood in years to come? Shall I survive in those who follow me? The whole scene reveals a deep uncertainty about communication, and the sense of doubt in the final 'Sei treu!' is heartrending. ... I cannot help but think that this anguished questioning, which is essentially about the ring, refers in fact to the whole work and its future validity.⁶⁹

It is not enough to say that the best way to remain truly faithful is to be unfaithful. To be *werkuntreu* is no better measure of 'future validity' than to be *werktreu*. Infidelity covers a multitude of sins; sometimes a sin is just a sin. We can be sure, however, that, for Wagner's work to have retained such validity another two centuries after his birth, it will have needed to continue its questioning of our concerns, aesthetic and political, as well as to have been questioned by them.

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⁶⁷ Letter of 25/26 January 1854, in *Selected Letters*, ed. Spencer and Millington, 306–7.

⁶⁸ Hans-Thies Lehmann, 'A Future for Tragedy? Remarks on the Political and the Postdramatic', in *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political: International Perspectives on Contemporary Performance*, ed. Karen Jürs-Munby, Jerome Carroll and Steve Giles (London, 2013), 90.

⁶⁹ Boulez, 'Performer's Notebook', 251.

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