

Why is Wagner Worth Saving?

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Editor's Note: You will find printed in a previous issue of this journal (Vol. 1: Issue 2) a companion interview to this article. At the conclusion of this interview Žižek generously offered the journal this additional essay as a way of illustrating many of the issues that had been discussed. See also in this issue Joshua Delpech-Ramey's brief essay clarifying the connection between his interview and this article.

With Romanticism, music changes its role: it is no longer a mere accompaniment of the message delivered in speech, it contains/renders a message of its own, “deeper” than the one delivered in words. It was Rousseau who first clearly articulated this expressive potential of music as such, when he claimed that, instead of merely imitating the affective features of verbal speech, music should be given the right to “speak for itself” - in contrast to the deceiving verbal speech, in music, it is, to paraphrase Lacan, the truth itself which speaks. As Schopenhauer put it, music directly enacts/renders the noumenal Will, while speech remains limited to the level of phenomenal representation. Music is the substance which renders the true heart of the subject, which is what Hegel called the “Night of the World,” the abyss of radical negativity: music becomes the bearer of the true message beyond words with the shift from the Enlightenment subject of rational *logos* to the Romantic subject of the “night of the world,” i.e., with the shift of the metaphor for the kernel of the subject from Day to Night. Here we encounter the Uncanny: no longer the external transcendence, but, following Kant’s transcendental turn, the excess of the Night

in the very heart of the subject (the dimension of the Undead), what Tomlison called the “internal otherworldliness that marks the Kantian subject.”¹ What music renders is no longer the “semantics of the soul,” but the underlying “noumenal” flux of *jouissance* beyond the linguistic meaningfulness. This noumenal is radically different from the pre-Kantian transcendent divine Truth: it is the inaccessible excess which forms the very core of the subject.

In the history of opera, this sublime excess of life is discernible in two main versions, Italian and German, Rossini and Wagner - so, maybe, although they are the great opposites, Wagner’s surprising private sympathy for Rossini, as well as their friendly meeting in Paris, do bear witness to a deeper affinity. Rossini’s great male portraits, the three from *Barbiere* (Figaro’s “*Largo il factotum*,” Basilio’s “*Calunnia*,” and Bartolo’s “*Un dottor della mia sorte*”), plus the father’s wishful self-portrait of corruption in *Cenerentola*, enact a mocked self-complaint, where one imagines oneself in a desired position, being bombarded by demands for a favor or service. The subject twice shifts his position: first, he assumes the roles of those who address him, enacting the overwhelming multitude of demands which bombard him; then, he feigns a reaction to it, the state of deep satisfaction in being overwhelmed by demands one cannot fulfill. Let us take the father in *Cenerentola*: he imagines how, when one of his daughters will be married to the Prince, people will turn to him, offering him bribes for a service at the court, and he will react to it first with cunning deliberation, then with fake despair at being bombarded with too many requests... The culminating moment of the archetypal Rossini aria is this unique moment of happiness, of the full assertion of the excess of Life which occurs when the subject is overwhelmed by demands, no longer being able to deal with them. At the highpoint of his “*factotum*” aria, Figaro exclaims: “What a crowd /of the people bombarding me with their demands/ - have mercy, one after the other /*uno per volta, per carita!*!”, referring therewith to the Kantian

experience of the Sublime, in which the subject is bombarded with an excess of the data that he is unable to comprehend. The basic economy is here obsessional: the object of the hero's desire is the other's demand.

This is the excessive counterpoint to the Wagnerian Sublime, to the "hoechste Lust" of the immersion into the Void that concludes *Tristan*. This opposition of the Rossinian and of the Wagnerian Sublime perfectly fits the Kantian opposition between the mathematical and the dynamic Sublime: as we have just seen, the Rossinian Sublime is mathematical, it enacts the inability of the subject to comprehend the pure quantity of the demands that overflow him, while the Wagnerian Sublime is dynamic, it enacts the concentrated overpowering force of the ONE demand, the unconditional demand of love. One can also say that the Wagnerian Sublime is the absolute Emotion - this is how one should read the famous first sentence of Wagner's "Religion and Art," where he claims that, when religion becomes artificial, art can save the true spirit of religion, its hidden truth - how? Precisely by abandoning the dogma and rendering only the authentic religious emotion, i.e., by transforming religion into the ultimate aesthetic experience.

Tristan should thus be read as the resolution of the tension between sublime passion and religion still operative in *Tannhäuser*. The entreaty at the beginning of *Tannhäuser* enacts a strange reversal of the standard entreaty: not to escape the constraints of mortality and rejoin the beloved, but the entreaty addressed at the beloved to let the hero go and return to the mortal life of pain, struggle, and freedom. Tannhäuser complains that, as a mortal, he cannot sustain the continuous enjoyment ("Wenn stets ein Gott geniessen kann, bin ich dem Wechsel untertan; nicht Lust allein liegt mir am Herzen, aus Freuden seh'n ich mich nach Schmerzen"). A little bit later, Tannhäuser makes it clear that what he is longing for is the peace of death itself: "Mein Sehnen draengt zum Kampfe, nicht

such ich Wonn und Lust! Ach moegest du es fassen, Goettin! (wild) Hin zum Tod, den ich suche, zum Tode draengt es mich!" If there is a conflict between eternity and temporal existence, between transcendence and terrestrial reality here, then Venus is on the side of a terrifying ETERNITY of unbearable excessive *Geniessen*.

This provides the key to the opera's central conflict: it is NOT, as it is usually claimed, the conflict between the spiritual and the bodily, the sublime and the ordinary pleasures of flesh, but a conflict inherent to the Sublime itself, splitting it up. Venus and Elisabeth are BOTH meta-physical figures of the sublime: neither of the two is a woman destined to become a common wife. While Elisabeth is, obviously, the sacred virgin, the purely spiritual entity, the *untouchable* idealized Lady of the courtly love, Venus also stands for a meta-physical excess, that of the excessively intensified sexual enjoyment; if anything, it is Elisabeth who is closer to the ordinary terrestrial life. In Kierkegaard's terms, one can say that Venus stands for the Aesthetic and Elisabeth for the Religious - on condition that one conceives here of the Aesthetic as included in the Religious, elevated to the level of the unconditional Absolute. And therein resides the unpardonable sin of Tannhäuser: not in the fact that he engaged in a little bit of free sexuality (in this case, the severe punishment would have been ridiculously exaggerated), but that he elevated sexuality, sexual lust, to the level of the Absolute, asserting it as the inherent obverse of the Sacred. This is the reason why the roles of Venus and Elisabeth definitely should be played by the same singer: the two ARE one and the same person, the only difference resides in the male hero's attitude towards her. Is this not clear from the final choice Tannhäuser has to make between the two? When he is in his mortal agony, Venus is calling him to join her again ("Komm, o komm! Zu mir! Zu mir!"); when he gets close to her, Wolfram cries from the background "Elisabeth!", to which Tannhäuser replies: "Elisabeth!" In the standard staging, the mention of the dead

sacred Elisabeth gives Tannheuser the strength to avoid Venus' embrace, and Venus then leaves in fury; however, would it not be much more logical to stage it so that Tannheuser continues to approach THE SAME woman, discovering, when he is close to her, that Venus really is Elisabeth? The subversive power of this shift is that it turns around the old courtly love poetry motif of the dazzlingly beautiful lady who, when one approaches her too much, is revealed as a disgusting entity of rotten flesh full of crawling worms - here, the sacred virgin is discovered in the very heart of the dissolute seductress. So the message is not the usual desublimation ("Beware of the beautiful woman! It is a deceptive lure which hides the disgusting rotten flesh!"), but the unexpected sublimation, elevation of the erotic woman to the mode of appearance of the sacred Thing. The tension of *Tannheuser* is thus the one between the two aspects of the Absolute, Ideal-Symbolic and Real, Law and Superego. The true topic of *Tannheuser* is that of a *disturbance in the order of sublimation*: sublimation starts to oscillate between these two poles.

We can see, now, in what precise sense *Tristan* embodies the "aesthetic" attitude (in the Kierkegaardian sense of the term): refusing to compromise one's desire, one goes to the end and willingly embraces death. *Meistersinger* counters it with the ethical solution: the true redemption resides not in following the immortal passion to its self-destructive conclusion; one should rather learn to overcome it via creative sublimation and to return, in a mood of wise resignation, to the "daily" life of symbolic obligations. In *Parsifal*, finally, the passion can no longer be overcome via its reintegration to society in which it survives in a gentrified form: one has to deny it thoroughly in the ecstatic assertion of the religious *jouissance*. The triad *Tristan-Meistersinger-Parsifal* thus follows a precise logic: *Meistersinger* and *Tristan* render the two opposite versions of the Oedipal matrix, within which *Meistersinger* inverts *Tristan* (the son steals the woman from the paternal figure; the passion breaks

out between the paternal figure and the young woman destined to become the partner of the young man), while *Parsifal* gives the coordinates themselves an anti-Oedipal twist - the lamenting wounded subject is here the paternal figure (Amfortas), not the young transgressor (Tristan). (The closest one comes to lament in *Meistersinger* is Sachs's "*Wahn, wahn!*" song from Act III.) Wagner planned to have in the first half of Act III of *Tristan Parsifal* to visit the wounded Tristan, but he wisely renounced it: not only would the scene ruin the perfect overall structure of Act III, it would also stage the IMPOSSIBLE encounter of a character with (the different, alternate reality, version of) ITSELF, as in the time travel science fiction narratives where I encounter MYSELF. One can even bring things to the ridiculous here by imagining the THIRD hero joining the two - Hans Sachs (in his earlier embodiment, as King Mark who arrives with a ship prior to Isolde), so that the three of them (Tristan, Mark, Parsifal), standing for the three attitudes, debate their differences in a Habermasian undistorted communicational exchange.

And one is tempted to claim that the triad of *Tristan-Meistersinger-Parsifal* is reproduced in three exemplary post-Wagnerian operas: Richard Strauss' *Salome*, Puccini's *Turandot* and Schoenberg's *Moses und Aaron*. Is not *Salome* yet another version of the possible outcome of *Tristan*? What if, at the end of Act II, when King Mark surprises the lovers, he were to explode in fury and order Tristan's head to be cut off; the desperate Isolde would then take her lover's head in her hands and start to kiss his lips in a Salomean *Liebestod*. (And, to add yet another variation of the virtual link between *Salome* and *Tristan*: what if, at the end of *Tristan*, Isolde would not simply die after finishing her "Mild und leise" - what if she were to remain entranced by her immersion in the ecstatic *jouissance*, and, disgusted by it, King Mark would give the order: "This woman is to be killed!") It was often noted that the closing scene of *Salome* is modelled on Isolde's *Liebestod*;

however, what makes it a perverted version of the Wagnerian Liebestod is that what Salome demands, in an unconditional act of CAPRICE, is to kiss the lips of John the Baptist (“I want to kiss your lips!”) - not the contact with a person, but with the partial object. If *Salome* is a counterpart to *Tristan*, then *Turandot* is the counterpart to *Meistersinger* - let us not forget that they are both operas about the public contest with the woman as the prize won by the hero.

Salome twice insists to the end in her demand: first, she insists that the soldiers bring to her Jokanaan; then, after the dance of seven veils, she insists that the king Herod bring her on a silver platter the head of Jokanaan - when the king, believing that Jokanaan effectively is a sacred man and that it is therefore better not to touch him, offers Salome in exchange for her dance anything she wants, up to half of his kingdom and the most sacred objects in his custody, just not the head (and thus the death) of Jokanaan, she ignores this explosive outburst of higher and higher bidding and simply repeats her inexorable demand “Bring me the head of Jokanaan.” Is there not something properly Antigonean in this request of her? Like Antigone, she insists without regard to consequences. Is therefore Salome not in a way, no less than Antigone, the embodiment of a certain ethical stance? No wonder she is so attracted to Jokanaan - it is the matter of one saint recognizing another. And how can one overlook that, at the end of Oscar Wilde’s play on which Strauss’ opera is based, after kissing his head, she utters a properly Christian comment on how this proves that love is stronger than death, that love can overcome death?

Which, then, would be the counterpart to *Parsifal*? *Parsifal* was from the very beginning perceived as a thoroughly ambiguous work: the attempt to reassert art at its highest, the proto-religious spectacle bringing together Community (art as the mediator between religion and politics), against the utilitarian corruption of modern life with its commercialized kitsch culture - yet at the same time drifting towards a

commercialized aesthetic kitsch of an ersatz religion, a fake, if there ever was one. In other words, the problem of *Parsifal* is not the unmediated dualism of its universe (Klingsor’s kingdom of fake pleasures versus the sacred domain of the Grail), but, rather, the lack of distance, the ultimate identity, of its opposites: is not the Grail ritual (which provides the most satisfying aesthetic spectacle of the work, its two “biggest hits”) the ultimate “Klingsorian” fake? (The taint of bad faith in our enjoyment of *Parsifal* as similar to the bad faith in our enjoyment of Puccini.) For this reason, *Parsifal* was the traumatic starting point which allows us to conceive of the multitude of later operas as reactions to it, as attempts to resolve its deadlock. The key among these attempts is, of course, Schoenberg’s *Moses und Aaron*, the ultimate pretender to the title “the last opera,” the meta-opera about the conditions of (im)possibility of the opera: the sudden rupture at the end of Act II, after Moses’ desperate “*O Wort, das mir fehlt!*”, the failure to compose the work to the end. *Moses und Aaron* is effectively anti-*Parsifal*: while *Parsifal* retains a full naïve trust in the (redemptive) power of music and finds no problems in rendering the noumenal divine dimension in the aesthetic spectacle of the ritual, *Moses und Aaron* attempts the impossible: to be an opera directed against the very principle of opera, that of the stage-musical spectacle - it is an operatic representation of the Jewish prohibition of aesthetic representation.

Is the buoyant music of the Golden Calf not the ultimate version of the bacchanalian music in Wagner, from *Tannhäuser* to the Flower Maidens’ music in *Parsifal*. And is there not another key parallel between *Parsifal* and *Moses und Aaron*? As it was noted by Adorno, the ultimate tension of *Moses* is not simply between divine transcendence and its representation in music, but, inherent to music itself, between the “choral” spirit of the religious community and the two individuals (Moses and Aaron) who stick out as subjects; in the same way, in *Parsifal*, Amfortas and Parsifal

himself stick out as forceful individuals - are the two “complaints” by Amfortas not the strongest passages of *Parsifal*, implicitly undermining the message of the renunciation to subjectivity? The musical opposition between the clear choral style of the Grail community and the chromaticism of the Klingsor universe in *Parsifal* is radicalized in *Moses und Aaron* in the guise of the opposition between Moses’ *Sprechstimme* and Aaron’s full song - in both cases, the tension is unresolved.

What, then, can follow this breakdown? It is here that one is tempted to return to our starting point, to Rossinian comedy. After the complete breakdown of expressive subjectivity, comedy reemerges - but a weird, uncanny one. What comes after *Moses und Aaron* is the imbecilic “comic” *Sprechgesang* of *Pierrot Lunaire*, the smile of a madman who is so devastated by pain that he cannot even perceive his tragedy - like the smile of a cat in cartoons with birds flying around the head after the cat gets hit on the head with a hammer. The comedy enters when the situation is too horrifying to be rendered as tragedy - which is why the only proper way to do a film about concentration camps is a comedy: there is something fake in doing a concentration camp tragedy.

Is, however, this the only way out? What if *Parsifal* also points in another direction, that of the emergence of a new collective? If *Tristan* enacts redemption as the ecstatic suicidal escape FROM the social order and *Meistersinger* the resigned integration INTO the existing social order, then *Parsifal* concludes with the invention of a new form of the Social. With Parsifal’s “Disclose the Grail!” (“*Enthuellt den Graal!*”), we pass from the Grail community as a closed order where Grail is only revealed in the prescribed time a ritual to the circle of the initiated, to a new order in which the Grail has to remain revealed all the time: “No more shall the shrine be sealed!” (“*Nicht soll der mehr verschlossen sein!*”). As to the revolutionary consequences of this change, recall the fate of the Master figure in the triad *Tristan-*

Meistersinger-Parsifal (King Marke, Hans Sachs, Amfortas): in the first two works, the Master survives as a saddened melancholic figure; in the third he is DEPOSED and dies.

Why, then, should we not read *Parsifal* from today’s perspective: the kingdom of Klingsor in the Act II is a domain of digital phantasmagoria, of virtual amusement - Harry Kupfer was right to stage Klingsor’s magic garden as a video parlor, with Flower Girls reduced to fragments of female bodies (faces, legs...) appearing on dispersed TV-screens. Is Klingsor not a kind of Master of the Matrix, manipulating virtual reality, a combination of Murdoch and Bill Gates? And when we pass from Act II to Act III, do we not effectively pass from the fake virtual reality to the “desert of the real,” the “waste land” in the aftermath of ecological catastrophe which derailed the “normal” functioning of nature? Is Parsifal not a model for Keanu Reeves in *The Matrix*, with Laurence Fishburn in the role of Gurnemanz?

One is thus tempted to offer a direct “vulgar” answer to the question: what the hell was Parsifal doing on his journey in the long time which passes between Acts II and III? That the true “Grail” are the people, its suffering. What if he simply got acquainted with human misery, suffering and exploitation? So what if the NEW collective is something like a revolutionary party, what if one takes the risk of reading *Parsifal* as the precursor of Brecht’s *Lehrstuecke*, what if its topic of sacrifice points towards that of Brecht’s *Die Massnahme*, which was put to music by Hans Eisler, the third great pupil of Schoenberg, after Bert and Webern? Is the topic of both *Parsifal* and *Die Massnahme* not that of learning: the hero has to learn how to help people in their suffering. The outcome, however, is opposite: in Wagner compassion, in Brecht/Eisler the strength not to give way to one’s compassion and directly act on it. However, this opposition itself is relative: the shared motif is that of COLD, DISTANCED COMPASSION. The lesson of Brecht is the art of COLD compassion, compassion with suffering which learns to

resist the immediate urge to help others; the lesson of Wagner is cold COMPASSION, the distanced saintly attitude (recall the cold girl into which Parsifal turns in Syberberg's version) which nonetheless retains compassion. Wagner's lesson (and Wotan's insight) about how the greatest act of freedom is to accept and freely enact what necessarily has to occur, is strangely echoed in the basic lesson of Brecht's "learning plays": what the young boy to be killed by his colleagues has to learn is the art of *Einverstaendnis*, of accepting his own killing which will occur anyway.

And what about the misogyny which obviously sustains this option? Is it not that *Parsifal* negated the shared presupposition of the first two works, their assertion of love (ecstatic courtly love, marital love), opting for the exclusively male community? However, what if, here also, Syberberg was right: after Kundry's kiss, in the very rejection of (hysterical-seductive) femininity, Parsifal turns into a woman, adopts a feminine subjective position? What if what we effectively get is a dedicated "radical" community led by a cold ruthless woman, a new Joan of Arc?

And what about the notion that the Grail community is an elitist closed initiatic circle? Parsifal's final injunction to disclose the Grail undermines this false alternative of elitism/populism: every true elitism is universal, addressed at everyone and all, and there is something inherently vulgar about initiatic secret gnostic wisdoms. There is a standard complaint of the numerous *Parsifal* lovers: a great opera with numerous passages of breathtaking beauty - but, nonetheless, the two long narratives of Gurnemanz (taking most of the first half of Acts I and III) are Wagner at his worst: a boring recapitulation of the past deeds already known to us, lacking any dramatic tension. Our proposed "Communist" reading of *Parsifal* entails a full rehabilitation of these two narratives as crucial moments of the opera - the fact that they may appear "boring" is to be understood along the lines of a short poem of Brecht from the early 1950s, addressed to a nameless worker in

the GDR who, after long hours of work, is obliged to listen to a boring political speech by a local party functionary: "You are exhausted from long work / The speaker is repeating himself / His speech is long-winded, he speaks with strain / Do not forget, the tired one: / He speaks the truth."² This is the role of Gurnemanz - no more and no less than the agent - the mouth-piece, why not - of truth. In this precise case, the very predicate of "boring" is an indicator (a vector even) of truth as opposed to the dazzling perplexity of jokes and superficial amusements. (There is, of course, another sense in which, as Brecht knew very well, dialectics itself is inherently comical.)

And what about the final call of the Chorus "Redeem the Redeemer!", which some read as the anti-Semitic statement "redeem/save Christ from the clutches of the Jewish tradition, de-Semitize him"? However, what if we read this line more literally, as echoing the other "tautological" statement from the finale, "the wound can be healed only by the spear which smote it (*die Wunde schliesst der Speer nur, der sie schlug*)"? Is this not the key paradox of every revolutionary process, in the course of which not only violence is needed to overcome the existing violence, but the revolution, in order to stabilize itself into a New Order, has to eat its own children?

Wagner a proto-Fascist? Why not leave behind this search for the "proto-Fascist" elements in Wagner and, rather, in a violent gesture of appropriation, reinscribe *Parsifal* in the tradition of radical revolutionary parties? Perhaps, such a reading enables us also to cast a new light on the link between *Parsifal* and *The Ring*. *The Ring* depicts a pagan world, which, following its inherent logic, MUST end in a global catastrophe; however, there are survivors of this catastrophe, the nameless crowd of humanity which silently witnesses God's self-destruction. In the unique figure of Hagen, *The Ring* also provides the first portrait of what will later emerge as the Fascist leader; however, since the world of *The Ring* is pagan, caught in the Oedipal family conflict of passions, it cannot even

address the true problem of how this humanity, the force of the New, is to organize itself, of how it should learn the truth about its place; THIS is the task of *Parsifal*, which therefore logically follows *The Ring*. The conflict between Oedipal dynamics and the post-Oedipal universe is inscribed within *Parsifal* itself: Klingsor's and Amfortas' adventures are Oedipal, then what happens with Parsifal's big turn (rejection of Kundry) is precisely that he leaves behind the Oedipal incestuous eroticism, opening himself up to a new community.

The dark figure of Hagen is profoundly ambiguous: although initially depicted as a dark plotter, both in the *Nibelungenlied* and in Fritz Lang's film, he emerges as the ultimate hero of the entire work and is redeemed at the end as the supreme case of the *Nibelungentreue*, fidelity to death to one's cause (or, rather, to the Master who stands for this cause), asserted in the final slaughter at the Attila's court. The conflict is here between fidelity to the Master and our everyday moral obligations: Hagen stands for a kind of teleological suspension of morality on behalf of fidelity, he is the ultimate "*Gefolgsmann*."

Significantly, it is ONLY Wagner who depicts Hagen as a figure of Evil - is this not an indication of how Wagner nonetheless belongs to the modern space of freedom? And is Lang's return to the positive Hagen not an indication of how the XXth century marked the reemergence of a new barbarism? It was Wagner's genius to intuit ahead of his time the rising figure of the Fascist ruthless executive who is at the same time a rabble-rousing demagogue (recall Hagen's terrifying *Maennerruf*) - a worthy supplement to his other great intuition, that of a hysterical woman (Kundry) well before this figure overwhelmed European consciousness (in Charcot's clinic, in the art from Ibsen to Schoenberg).

What makes Hagen a "proto-Fascist" is his role as the unconditional support for the weak ruler (King Gunther): he does for Gunther the "dirty jobs" which, although necessary, have to remain concealed from

the public gaze - "*Unsere Ehre heisst Treue*." We find this stance, a kind of mirror-reversal of the Beautiful Soul which refuses to dirty its hands, at its purest in the Rightist admiration for the heroes who are ready to do the necessary dirty job: it is easy to do a noble thing for one's country, up to sacrificing one's life for it - it is much more difficult to commit a CRIME for one's country when it is needed. Hitler knew very well how to play this double game apropos the holocaust, using Himmler as his Hagen. In the speech to the SS leaders in Posen on October 4 1943, Himmler spoke quite openly about the mass killing of the Jews as "a glorious page in our history, and one that has never been written and never can be written," explicitly including the killing of women and children: "I did not regard myself as justified in exterminating the men - that is to say, to kill them or have them killed - and to allow the avengers in the shape of children to grow up for our sons and grandchildren. The difficult decision had to be taken to have this people disappear from the earth."

This is Hagen's *Treue* brought to its extreme - however, was the paradoxical price for Wagner's negative portrayal of Hagen not his *Judifizierung*? A lot of historical work has been done recently trying to bring out the contextual "true meaning" of the Wagnerian figures and topics: the pale Hagen is really a masturbating Jew; Amfortas' wound is really syphilis. The idea is that Wagner is mobilizing historical codes known to everyone in his epoch: when a person stumbles, sings in cracking high tones, makes nervous gestures, etc., "everyone knew" this is a Jew, so Mime from *Siegfried* is a caricature of a Jew; the fear of syphilis as the illness in the groin one gets from having intercourse with an "impure" woman was an obsession in the second half of the 19th century, so it was "clear to everyone" that Amfortas really contracted syphilis from Kundry. Marc Weiner developed the most perspicuous version of this decoding by focusing on the micro-texture of Wagner's musical dramas - manner of

singing, gestures, smells - it is at this level of what Deleuze would have called pre-subjective affects that anti-Semitism is operative in Wagner's operas, even if Jews are not explicitly mentioned: in the way Beckmesser sings, in the way Mime complains.

However, the first problem here is that, even if accurate, such insights do not contribute much to a pertinent understanding of the work in question. One often hears that, in order to understand a work of art, one needs to know its historical context. Against this historicist commonplace, one should affirm that too much of a historical context can blur the proper contact with a work of art - in order to properly grasp, say, *Parsifal*, one should ABSTRACT from such historical trivia, one should precisely DECONTEXTUALIZE the work, tear it out from the context in which it was originally embedded. Even more, it is, rather, the work of art itself which provides a context enabling us to properly understand a given historical situation. If, today, someone were to visit Serbia, the direct contact with raw data there would leave him confused. If, however, he were to read a couple of literary works and see a couple of representative movies, they would definitely provide the context that would enable him to locate the raw data of his experience. There is thus an unexpected truth in the old cynical wisdom from the Stalinist Soviet Union: "he lies as an eye-witness!"

There is another, more fundamental, problem with such historicist decoding: it is not enough to "decode" Alberich, Mime, Hagen etc. as Jews, making the point that the *Ring* is one big anti-Semitic tract, a story about how Jews, by renouncing love and opting for power, brought corruption to the universe; the more basic fact is that *the anti-Semitic figure of the Jew itself is not a direct ultimate referent, but already encoded, a cypher of ideological and social antagonisms*. (And the same goes for syphillis: in the second half of the 19th century, it was, together with tuberculosis, the other big case of "illness as a metaphor" (Susan Sontag), serving as an encoded

message about socio-sexual antagonisms, and this is the reason why people were so obsessed by it - not because of its direct real threat, but because of the ideological surplus-investment in it.) An appropriate reading of Wagner should take this fact into account and not merely "decode" Alberich as a Jew, but also ask the question: *how does Wagner's encoding refer to the "original" social antagonism of which the (anti-Semitic figure of the) "Jew" itself is already a cypher?*

A further counter-argument is that Siegfried, Mime's opponent, is in no way simply the beautiful Aryan blond hero - his portrait is much more ambiguous. The short last scene of Act 1 of *The Twilight* (Siegfried's violent abduction of Brunhilde; under the cover of *Tarnhelm*, Siegfried poses as Gunther) is a shocking interlude of extreme brutality and ghost-like nightmarish quality. What makes it additionally interesting is one of the big inconsistencies of *The Ring*: why does Siegfried, after brutally subduing Brunhilde, put his sword between the two when they lay down, to prove that they will not have sex, since he is just doing a service to his friend, the weak king Gunther? TO WHOM does he have to prove this? Is Brunhilde not supposed to think that he IS Gunther? Before she is subdued, Brunhilde displays to the masked Siegfried her hand with the ring on it, trusting that the ring will serve as protection; when Siegfried brutally tears the ring off her hand, this gesture has to be read as the repetition of the first extremely violent robbery of the ring in the Scene 4 of *Rhinegold*, when Wotan tears the ring off Alberich's hand. The horror of this scene is that it shows Siegfried's brutality naked, in its raw state: it somehow "depsychologizes" Siegfried, making him visible as in inhuman monster, i.e., the way he "really is," deprived of his deceiving mask - THIS is the effect of the potion on him.

There is effectively in Wagner's Siegfried an unconstrained "innocent" aggressivity, an urge to directly pass to the act and just squash what gets on your nerves - as in Siegfried's words to Mime in the Act I

of *Siegfried*: “when I watch you standing, / shuffling and shambling, / servilely stooping, squinting and blinking, / I long to seize you by your nodding neck / and make an end of your obscene blinking!” (the sound of the original German is here even more impressive: “*seh’ich dich stehn, gangeln und gehn, / knicken und nicken, / mit den Augen zwicken, / beim Genick moecht’ich den Nicker packen, / den Garaus geben dem garst’gen Zwicker!*”). The same outburst is repeated twice in Act II: “*Das eklige Nicken / und Augenzwicken, / wann endlich soll ich’s / nicht mehr sehn, / wann werd ich den Albernem los?*” “That shuffling and slinking, / those eyelids blinking - / how long must I / endure the sight? / When shall I be rid of this fool?”, and, just a little bit later: “*Grade so garstig, / griesig und grau, / klein und krumm, / hoeckrig und hinkend, / mit haengenden Ohren, / triefigen Augen - / Fort mit dem Alb! / Ich mag ihn nicht mehr sehn.*” “Shuffling and slinking, / grizzled and gray, / small and crooked, / limping and hunchbacked, / with ears that are drooping, eyes that are bleary... / Off with the imp! I hope he’s gone for good!” Is this not the most elementary disgust, repulsion felt by the ego when confronted with the intruding foreign body? One can easily imagine a neo-Nazi skinhead uttering just the same words in the face of a worn-out Turkish *Gastarbeiter*.³

And, finally, one should not forget that, in the *Ring*, the source of all evil is not Alberich's fatal choice in the first scene of *Rhinegold*: long before this event took place, Wotan broke the natural balance, succumbing to the lure of power, giving preference to power over love - he tore out and destroyed the World-Tree, making out of it his spear on which he inscribed the runes fixating the laws of his rule, plus he plucked out one of his eyes in order to gain insight into inner truth. Evil thus does not come from the Outside - the insight of Wotan's tragic “monologue with Brunhilde” in the Act II of *Walkure* is that the power of Alberich and the prospect of the “end of the world” is ultimately Wotan's own guilt, the result of his ethical fiasco - in Hegelese,

external opposition is the effect of inner contradiction. No wonder, then, that Wotan is called the “White Alb” in contrast to the “Black Alb,” Alberich - if anything, Wotan's choice was ethically worse than Alberich's: Alberich longed for love and only turned towards power after being brutally mocked and turned down by the Rhinemaidens, while Wotan turned to power after fully enjoying the fruits of love and getting tired of them. One should also bear in mind that, after his moral fiasco in *Walkure*, Wotan turns into “Wanderer” - a figure of the Wandering Jew like already the first great Wagnerian hero, the Flying Dutchman, this “Ahasver des Ozeans.”

And the same goes for *Parsifal* which is not about an elitist circle of the pure-blooded threatened by external contamination (copulation by the Jewess Kundry). There are two complications to this image: first, Klingsor, the evil magician and Kundry's Master, is himself an ex-Grail knight, he comes from within; second point, if one reads the text really close, one cannot avoid the conclusion that the true source of evil, the primordial imbalance which derailed the Grail community, resides at its very center - it is Titurel's excessive fixation of enjoying the Grail which is at the origins of the misfortune. The true figure of Evil is Titurel, this obscene *pere-jouisseur* (perhaps comparable to giant worm-like members of the Space Guild from Frank Herbert's *Dune*, whose bodies are disgustingly distorted because of their excessive consumption of the “spice”).

This, then, undermines the anti-Semitic perspective according to which the disturbance always ultimately comes from outside, in the guise of a foreign body which throws out of joint the balance of the social organism: for Wagner, the external intruder (Alberich) is just a secondary repetition, externalization, of an absolutely immanent inconsistency/antagonism (of Wotan). With reference to Brecht's famous “What is the robbery of a bank compared to the founding of a new bank? “, one is tempted to say: “What is a poor Jew's stealing of the gold

compared to the violence of the Aryan's (Wotan's) grounding of the rule of Law?"

One of the signs of this inherent status of the disturbance is the failure of the big finales of Wagner's operas: the formal failure here signals the persistence of the social antagonism. Let us take the biggest of them all, the mother of all finales, that of *The Twilight of Gods*. It is a well-known fact that, in the last minutes of *The Twilight*, the orchestra performs an excessively intricate cobweb of motifs, basically nothing less than the recapitulation of the motivic wealth of the entire *Ring* - is this fact not the ultimate proof that Wagner himself was not sure about what the final apotheosis of the *Ring* "means"? Not being sure of it, he took a kind of "flight forward" and threw together ALL the motifs. So the culminating motif of "Redemption through Love" (a beautiful and passionate melodic line which previously appears only in Act III of *Walkuere*) cannot but make us think of Joseph Kerman's acerbic comment about the last notes of Puccini's *Tosca* in which the orchestra bombastically recapitulates the "beautiful" pathetic melodic line of the Cavaradossi's "*E lucevan le stelle*," as if, unsure of what to do, Puccini simply desperately repeated the most "effective" melody from the previous score, ignoring all narrative or emotional logic.⁴ And what if Wagner did *exactly the same thing* at the end of *The Twilight*? Not sure about the final twist that should stabilize and guarantee the meaning of it all, he took recourse to a beautiful melody whose effect is something like "whatever all this may mean, let us make it sure that the concluding impression will be that of something triumphant and upbeating in its redemptive beauty." In short, what if this final motif enacts an *empty gesture*?

It is a commonplace of Wagner studies that the triumphant finale of *Das Rheingold* is a fake, an empty triumph indicating the fragility of the gods' power and their forthcoming downfall - however, does the same not go also for the finale of *Siegfried*? The sublime duet of Brunhilde and Siegfried which concludes the opera fails a couple of

minutes before the ending, with the entry of the motif announcing the couple's triumphant reunion (usually designated as the motif of "happy love" or "love's bond") - this motif is obviously a fake (not to mention the miserable failure of the concluding noisy-bombastic orchestral *tutti*, which lacks the efficiency of the gods' entry to Walhalla in *Rhinegold*). Does this failure encode Wagner's (unconscious?) critique of Siegfried? Recall the additional curious fact that this motif is almost the same as - closely related to - the Beckmesser motif in *Meistersinger* (I owe this insight to Gerhard Koch; Act III of *Siegfried* was written just after *Meistersinger*)! Furthermore, does this empty bombastic failure of the final notes not also signal the catastrophe-to-come of Brunhilde and Siegfried's love? As such, this "failure" of the duet is a structural necessity.⁵ (One should nonetheless follow closely the inner triadic structure of this duet: its entire dynamic is on the side of Brunhilde who twice shifts her subjective stance, while Siegfried remains the same. First, from her elevated divine position, Brunhilde joyously asserts her love for Siegfried; then, once she becomes aware of what Siegfried's passionate advances mean - the loss of her safe distanced position - she displays fear of losing her identity, of descending to the level of a vulnerable mortal woman, man's prey and passive victim. In a wonderful metaphor, she compares herself to a beautiful image in the water which gets blurred once man's hand directly touches and disturbs the water. Finally, she surrenders to Siegfried's passionate advances and throws herself into the vortex.) However, excepting the last notes, Act III of *Siegfried* - at least from the moment when Siegfried breaks Wotan's spear to Brunhilde's awakening - is not only unbearably beautiful, but also the most concise statement of the Oedipal problematic in its specific Wagnerian twist.

On his way to the magic mountain where Brunhilde lies, surrounded by a wall of fire which can be trespassed only by a hero who does not know fear, Siegfried first encounters Wotan, the deposed (or, rather,

abdicated) supreme god, disguised as a Wanderer; Wotan tries to stop him, but in an ambiguous way - basically, he WANTS Siegfried to break his spear. After Siegfried disrespectfully does this, full of contempt in his ignorance for the embittered and wise old man, he progresses through the flames and perceives a wonderful creature lying there in deep sleep. Thinking that the armored plate on the creature's chest is making its breathing difficult, he proceeds to cut off its straps by his sword; after he raises the plate and sees Brunhilde's breasts, he utters a desperate cry of surprise: "*Das ist kein Mann!* /This is no man!" This reaction, of course, cannot but strike us as comic, exaggerated beyond credulity. However, one should bear in mind a couple of things. First, the whole point of the story of *Siegfried* till this moment is that while Siegfried spent his entire youth in the forest in the sole company of the evil dwarf Mime who claimed to be his only parent, mother-father, he nonetheless observed that, in the case of animals, parents are always a couple, and thus longs to see his mother, the feminine counterpart of Mime. Siegfried's quest for a woman is thus a quest for sexual difference, and the fact that this quest is at the same time the quest of fear, of an experience that would teach him what fear is, clearly points in the direction of castration - with a specific twist. In the paradigmatic Freudian description of the scene of castration (in his late short text on "Fetishism"), the gaze discovers an absence where a presence (a penis) is expected, while here, Siegfried's gaze discovers an excessive presence (of breasts - and should one add that the typical Wagnerian soprano is an opulent soprano with large breasts, so that Siegfried's "*Das ist kein Mann!*" usually gives rise to a hearty laughter in the public?).⁶

Secondly, one should bear in mind here an apparent inconsistency in the libretto which points the way to proper understanding of this scene: why is Siegfried so surprised at not encountering a man, when, prior to it, he emphasizes that he wants to penetrate the fire precisely in order to find there a woman? To the Wanderer, he

says: "Give ground then, for that way, I know, leads to the sleeping woman." And, a couple of minutes later: "Go back yourself, braggart! I must go there, to the burning heart of the blaze, to Brunhilde!" From this, one should draw the only possible conclusion: *while Siegfried was effectively looking for a woman, he did not expect her not to be a man*. In short, he was looking for a woman who would be - not the same as man, but - a symmetric supplement to man, with whom she would form a balanced signifying dyad - and what he found was an unbearable lack/excess. What he discovered is the excess/lack not covered by the binary signifier, i.e., the fact that Woman and Man are not complementary but asymmetrical, that there is no yin-yang balance - in short, that there is no sexual relationship.

No wonder, then, that Siegfried's discovery that Brunhilde "is no man" gives rise to an outburst of true panic accompanied by a loss of reality, in which Siegfried takes refuge with his (unknown) mother: "That's no man! A searing spell pierces my heart; a fiery anxiety fills my eyes; my senses swim and swoon! Whom can I call on to help me? Mother, mother! Think of me!" He then gather all his courage and decides to kiss the sleeping woman on her lips, even if this will mean his own death: "Then I will suck life from those sweetest lips, *though I die in doing so*." What follows is the majestic awakening of Brunhilde and then the love duet which concludes the opera. It is crucial to note that this acceptance of death as the price for contacting the feminine Other is accompanied musically by the echo of the so-called motif of "renunciation," arguably the most important leitmotif in the entire tetralogy. This motif is first heard in the Scene 1 of *Rhinegold*, when, answering Alberich's query, Woglinde discloses that "*nur wer der Minne Macht versagt* /only the one who renounces the power of love/" can take possession of the gold; its next most noticeable appearance occurs towards the end of Act 1 of *Walkure*, at the moment of the most triumphant assertion of love between Sieglinde and Siegmund - just prior

to his pulling out of the sword from the tree trunk, Siegmund sings it to the words: “*Heiligster Minne hoechste Not* /holiest love's highest need.” How are we to read these two occurrences together? What if one treats them as two fragments of the complete sentence that was distorted by “dreamwork,” that is, rendered unreadable by being split into two - the solution is thus to reconstitute the complete proposition: “Love's highest need is to renounce its own power.” This is what Lacan calls “symbolic castration”: if one is to remain faithful to one's love, one should not elevate it into the direct focus of one's love, one should renounce its centrality.

Perhaps a detour through the best (or worst) of Hollywood melodrama can help us to clarify this point. The basic lesson of King Vidor's *Rhapsody* is that, in order to gain the beloved woman's love, the man has to prove that he is able to survive without her, that he prefers his mission or profession to her. There are two immediate choices: (1) my professional career is what matters most to me, the woman is just an amusement, a distracting affair; or (2) the woman is everything to me, I am ready to humiliate myself, to forsake all my public and professional dignity for her. They are both false: they both lead to the man being rejected by the woman. The message of true love is thus: even if you are everything to me, I can survive without you, I am ready to forsake you for my mission or profession. The proper way for the woman to test the man's love is thus to “betray” him at the crucial moment of his career (the first public concert in the film, the key exam, the business negotiation which will decide his career) - only if he can survive the ordeal and accomplish successfully his task although deeply traumatized by her desertion, will he deserve her and she will return to him. The underlying paradox is that love, precisely as the Absolute, should not be posited as a direct goal - it should retain the status of a by-product, of something we get as an undeserved grace. Perhaps, there is no greater love than that of a revolutionary couple, where each of the two lovers is

ready to abandon the other at any moment if revolution demands it.

What, then, happens when Siegfried kisses the sleeping Brunhilde, so that this act deserves to be accompanied by the Renunciation motif? What Siegfried says is that he will kiss Brunhilde “*though I die in doing so*” - reaching out to the Other Sex involves accepting one's mortality. Recall here another sublime moment from *The Ring*: in the Act II of *Die Walkure*, Siegmund literally renounces immortality. He prefers to stay a common mortal if his beloved Sieglinde cannot follow him to Walhalla, the eternal dwelling of the dead heroes - is this not the highest ethical act of them all? The shattered Brunhilde comments on this refusal: “So little do you value everlasting bliss? Is she everything to you, this poor woman who, tired and sorrowful, lies limp in your lap? Do you think nothing less glorious?” Ernst Bloch was right to remark that what is lacking in German history are more gestures like Siegmund's.

But which LOVE is here renounced? To put it bluntly: the incestuous maternal love. The “fearless hero” is fearless insofar as he experiences himself as protected by his mother, by the maternal envelope - what “learning to fear” effectively amounts to is learning that one is exposed to the world without any maternal shield. It is essential to read this scene in conjunction with the scene, from *Parsifal*, of Kundry giving a kiss to Parsifal: in both cases, an innocent hero discovers fear and/or suffering through a kiss located somewhere between the maternal and the properly feminine. Till the late 19th century, they practiced in Montenegro a weird wedding night ritual: in the evening after the marriage ceremony, the son gets into bed with his mother and, after he falls asleep, the mother silently withdraws and lets the bride take her place: after spending the rest of the night with the bride, the son has to escape from the village into a mountain and spend a couple of days alone there in order to get accustomed to the shame of being married. Does something homologous not happen to Siegfried?

However, the difference between *Siegfried* and *Parsifal* is that, in the first case, the woman is accepted; in the second case, she is rejected. This does not mean that the feminine dimension disappears in *Parsifal*, and that we remain within the homoerotic male community of the Grail. Syberberg was right when, after Parsifal's rejection of Kundry which follows her kiss, "the last kiss of the mother and the first kiss of a woman," he replaced Parsifal-the-boy with another actor, a young cold woman - did he thereby not enact the Freudian insight according to which identification is, at its most radical, identification with the lost (or rejected) libidinal object? We BECOME (identify with) the OBJECT which we were deprived of, so that our subjective identity is a repository of the traces of our lost objects.

Notes

1. Gary Tomlison, *Metaphysical Song*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999), 94.
2. Bertolt Brecht, *Die Gedichte in einem Band*, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1999), 1005.
3. When, in his *Der Fall Wagner*, Nietzsche mockingly rejects Wagner's universe, does his style not refer to these lines? Wagner himself was such a repulsive figure to him - and there is a kind of poetic justice in it, since Mime effectively is Wagner's ironic self-portrait.
4. Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).
5. This love-duet is also one of the Verdi-relapses in Wagner (the best known being the revenge-trio that concludes the Act III of *The Twilight*, apropos which already Bernard Shaw remarked that it sounds like the trio of the conspirators from *Un ballo in maschera*). Gutman designated it as a farewell to music drama towards the rediscovered goal of the ultimate grand opera. See Robert Gutman, *Richard Wagner*, (New York, 1968), 299.
6. As if referring to this scene, Jacques-Alain Miller once engaged in a mental experiment, enumerating other possible operators of sexual difference which could replace the absence/presence of penis, and mentions the absence/presence of breasts.