

THE CASE OF WAGNER AGAINST THE GRAIN: THE DISAGREEMENT BETWEEN NIETZSCHE AND ADORNO, AND ITS RELEVANCE TODAY

João Pedro Cachopo

Every age must strive anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it.¹

To judge by contemporary cinema—think of Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia* (2011), or Terrence Malick’s *To the Wonder* (2012)—the claims of obsolescence as regards Wagner read like a chronicle of an end foretold. Aesthetic and political ambivalence, however, still remains the hallmark of Wagner’s aural effect, no matter how innocent the uses of his music (in cinema or elsewhere) might currently sound to so many listeners and spectators. Against this background, Adorno’s remark (from his 1963’s talk on “Wagner’s Relevance for Today” [“Wagners Aktualität”]) according to which, though “Wagner no longer possesses the boundless authority of the earlier time”, one “cannot ignore the political aspect” remains valid today. If only because, as Adorno puts it, “too much catastrophe has been visited on living beings for a consideration that purports to be purely aesthetic to close its eyes to it.”²

Adorno’s point, briefly stated, is that to take into account the intertwining of aesthetic and political features in Wagner’s operas is actually an inescapable condition of their reassessment, whatever the direction it might take (and Adorno even suggests that this direction might be far more promising in 1963 than by the time he himself had written his *In Search of Wagner* [*Versuch über Wagner*]).³ In any case, to focus on a supposedly pure aesthetic dimension in order strategically to secure Wagner’s oeuvre from the political and ideological accusations raised against it—especially those associated with its posthumous linkage to Nazism—would simply contribute to the unavoidable return of the repressed.

While I willingly agree with Adorno’s point, I will adopt as a starting point a slightly different working hypothesis. It is tied up with the suspicion that the obsessive attempt to unmask the ideological components of

Wagner's oeuvre might amount today to no less conformist positions than those maintained by the composer himself—whose operas, rather than the more or less confused or confusing ideas, should be at issue. This does not mean either to suggest that ideological issues should be totally left aside from discussion, or to assume that the work is absolutely independent from the author. The refusal of reductionism of whatever kind (biographical, sociological, historical...) must not lead to the opposite assumption that artworks should be dealt with as purely ideal entities. Both extremes are partial, and consequently faulty.

Therefore, if one draws a distinction between the composer's more or less explicitly political ideas and the politics of his work, while by the same token not losing sight of how deeply Wagner's operas and their reception were affected by social, ideological and political forces, the conditions are eventually met to acknowledge that the writings of Wagner's critics—not less, at least, than his own essays—are of the utmost importance to discuss the “afterlife” of his work both aesthetically and politically. The avatars of its critical and artistic reception crucially bear on what Wagner's work became and is today. They are the historical constituents of the work itself—not mere instances of an allegedly exterior process of reception. This view prompted me to take “the case of Wagner” as an epitome of such an “afterlife,” rather than, *stricto sensu*, as a reference to the Nietzschean quarrel with the composer of *Parsifal*.

Seen in this context it is hardly surprising that a comparative re-reading of the seminal texts of Nietzsche and Adorno will play a crucial role in this article. And yet, just as I will start out calling attention to a peculiar consonant point behind Lacoue-Labarthe's and Badiou's dissonant pronouncements on Wagner (“Wagner(ism)—between the aestheticization of politics and the politicization of aesthetics”), my aim, regarding Adorno and Nietzsche, is on the contrary to spot their disagreement behind the long-standing presupposition of their compliance (“A barely noticed disagreement,” and “Neither... nor...”). At a first level this article—as its title allows the reader to hint from the outset—is indeed an attempt to revise the assumption that Nietzsche's and Adorno's criticisms on Wagner complement each other. In fact, against this assumption, I will try to make apparent that they differ in practically all aspects and even undermine each other in the most decisive ones.

At end of the article (“Chronicle of an end foretold”) I will argue that such a disagreement sheds light of the very tensions inherent in Wagner's operas to a degree—and this is the crucial point—that prevents any criticism on them from finding a stable vantage point. The aim, to be sure, is not to propose a newly resuscitated apologia of Wagner, but to raise the critical discussion on the set of his works to a level where their ambivalent, though unabated, *untimeliness* might be brought into light.

WAGNER(ISM)—BETWEEN THE AESTHETICIZATION OF POLITICS AND THE POLITICIZATION OF AESTHETICS

Anyone who takes a look on the vast array of texts written by Baudelaire, Nietzsche, Mallarmé, Adorno, Bernard Shaw, Thomas Mann, let alone more recent authors, will easily concede that since more than a century Wagner has been the name of an extremely singular, if not unique, philosophico-literary case. The reasons behind this exceptionality are complex, not the least of which is that Wagner's oeuvre, borrowing from Lacoue-Labarthe, represented “the sudden appearance of what the century had desperately tried to produce since the beginnings of romanticism—a work of ‘great art’ on the scale imputed to works of Greek art, even the scale of great Christian art.”²⁴ So, inevitably, to approach Wagner's work philosophically, or with an eye on literature and art does not mean trivializing its political and social implications or making light of its historicity. At the same time, a strictly historicist reading would be hardly less misleading than an a-historicist—be it symbolist or not—one. As Žižek pointed out, with Wagner in mind, “historicist reductionism and abstract aestheticism are two sides of the same coin.”²⁵ Therefore, if it is certain that rejecting both turns out to be an apt starting point for discussing Wagner, it is not less true that addressing his artistic legacy inevitably implies tackling its political ambivalence.

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Sharing some aspects of Žižek's vision of Wagner, Badiou—in a seminar organized by François Nicolas at the École Normale Supérieure in 2005—critically discussed Lacoue-Labarthe's *Musica ficta: Figures de Wagner* (1991). This talk, along with others, has been recently published under the title *Five Lessons on Wagner* (2010). Badiou's arguments are various, and involve discussing staging, music, as well as ideology. In particular—for my aim is not to scrutinize them all—the assessment of Lacoue-Labarthe's critique of Wagner is of special interest for us here, to the extent that it is a testament to the centrality of political concerns in the current philosophical debate on Wagner:

What, then, *is* the real heart of Wagnerism...? In Lacoue-Labarthe's opinion, it is the Wagnerian apparatus as a vehicle for the aestheticization of politics... What is being elaborated here is a vision of Wagner as a proto-fascist (I'm using the expression in its descriptive sense) inasmuch as he allegedly invented an aspect of opera's closure by assigning to opera the task of configuring a national destiny or ethos and in this way ended up staging the ultimately political function of aesthetics itself.⁶

Lacoue-Labarthe's appraisal of Wagnerism unfolds against a quite broad set of questions, though: it comes in the wake of an inquiry into what is politically at stake in the conceit—and arguable capacity—of “modern music” (since Monteverdi's *seconda prattica* or *stile rappresentativo*) to represent, to give shape, to figure (hence *musica ficta*) to non-musical entities, in a way which is less accurate but far more pervasive than that of the other arts (notably, as said, given that music is admittedly capable of giving shape to a national *ethos*). This potential would find in opera, and particularly in its Wagnerian moment, its peak, which is why Lacoue-Labarthe claims that “Wagner's aesthetic politics... aims at what Benjamin and Brecht, speaking of Nazism, called an *aestheticization of politics*.”⁷

While claiming that an “aestheticization of politics” lies at the heart of Wagner's operas, Lacoue-Labarthe in a way carries on and radicalizes the previous criticisms levelled against Wagner by Mallarmé, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Adorno. These authors—like Baudelaire, to whom the first chapter of the book is devoted—would still have been victims of *Tristan*'s “dangerous fascination,” to put it like Nietzsche. According to Lacoue-Labarthe, Wagner's oeuvre ultimately represents an attempt—which is far from being ideologically innocent—to bring opera to a close, to saturate it by means of synthesizing music and meaning, and to present such a move as a totalizing *Aufhebung* of all the arts (historically construed as a restoration of Greek tragedy), and, what is more, of *Art* itself (conceived of as “great art”):

It is no doubt not impossible to say that ultimately Wagner *saturated* opera... Thus, just as we have been able to describe the ‘Hegelian closure’ of philosophy, we could describe a Wagnerian closure of opera. And even of art itself, or great art, as it was called at the time, because this was its ‘ambition.’... Wagner devotes himself, with the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, to a totalizing sublation, to an *Aufhebung*, of all the arts, and to a *restoration* of ‘great art,’ more powerful because more modern (in fact, via other technical means): a restoration, of course, of Greek tragedy.⁸

Badiou gets away from this type of criticism. It is crucial, however, to understand what is at stake in Badiou's rejection of Lacoue-Labarthe's critique of Wagner. He counters, in the first place, the assumption that Wagner's operas inevitably take on the shape of an “aestheticization of politics,” not at all that their political complexities and ambiguities are to be discussed today. If anything, he seeks to recast Wagner precisely from a political point of view, and consequently to politicize aesthetics, yet without relinquishing an immanent analysis of his works. A totalitarian, anti-Semitic, proto-fascist vision of Wagner, which, by the way, became a dominant cliché during the 80s and 90s, should be matched by a subtler analysis. As touchstones he takes the examples of Chéreau's acclaimed staging of the *Ring*, with Boulez conducting (Bayreuth, 1976), which rendered a demythologized, theatricalised, discontinuous Wagner,⁹ Heiner Müller's “Beckettian adaptation” of *Tristan und Isolde* (Bayreuth, 1993), with the idea of waiting in vain at its core,¹⁰ and Syberberg's film version of *Parsifal* (1982), a provocatively deconstructive reading of the last opera of the composer, staged against the torn up background of German history.¹¹ One concern remains fundamental to Badiou: to dismiss the admittedly too

hasty association of Wagner with grandiosity and grandiloquence in order to favour a more nuanced political assessment of Wagner's operas—a task he incidentally assigned himself with regard to *Parsifal* in another talk, the fifth lesson of the book.¹²

My aim is not to follow this debate—a debate unfortunately interrupted by Lacoue-Labarthe's death in 2007—in all its details and subtleties, nor even adequately to ponder whether it is not the case that Badiou illicitly simplifies some traits Lacoue-Labarthe's approach for the sake of his argument, but rather to meet this Wagnerian encounter between two French philosophers head on with an apparently innocuous point. Badiou and Lacoue-Labarthe, even if for different reasons and with conflicting aims, tacitly agree that Nietzsche's and Adorno's criticisms complement each other or, at least, tend to converge. Indeed, according to Badiou, "the fact that this quarrel [Adorno's] is a replay of the one engaged in by Nietzsche, the initiator of the first great quarrel with Wagner, cannot fail to pique our interest."¹³ Likewise, it is clear for him that the deeper one analyses the musical dimension of all these anti-Wagnerian quarrels the more their unity becomes apparent: "Nietzsche, Heidegger, Adorno and Lacoue-Labarthe all agree in viewing Wagner as someone who forces musical unity upon a variegated mass, upon differences whose essential character of otherness disappears or dissolves as a result."¹⁴ Thus, however antithetical their goals might be—indeed, Lacoue-Labarthe seeks to strengthen the critical stances he works through, whereas Badiou endeavours to disown them—both philosophers construe and cope with the classical criticisms of *The Case of Wagner* [*Der Fall Wagner*] and *In Search of Wagner* [*Versuch über Wagner*] as a unified block. It is precisely this implicit assumption concerning the complementarity of Nietzsche's and Adorno's critical views of Wagner that I will attempt to call into question.

No genuinely new interpretation of any of Wagner's operas, however, will be given in the following pages. And yet, hopefully, they might challenge a little bit the way we look at Wagner's artistic legacy today. So viewed, it is first and foremost intended to question the negative image of Wagner by means of risking an unconventional re-reading of the "Wagner's case classics"—a re-reading, as suggested, aimed at grasping the discontinuity, rather than the continuity, between Nietzsche's and Adorno's criticisms. It might also be said that the aim of this article is to pave the way for a philosophical immanent critique of anti-Wagnerism and to suggest new ways of interpreting and experiencing Wagner's work against the grain.

In the following section, I will focus exclusively on *The Case of Wagner* (hereafter cited in the text as CW)¹⁵ and *In Search of Wagner* (hereafter cited in the text as SW),¹⁶ leaving other texts on the composer by the two philosophers to one side. I decided to consent to this methodologically motivated restriction, despite, for instance, the undeniable relevance of Adorno's late essays on Wagner for a contemporary re-evaluation of his work—especially "Wagner's Relevance for Today" (1963) and "Wagner and Bayreuth" (1966)¹⁷—, because I believe that it is in these two texts that Nietzsche's and Adorno's critiques of Wagner appear at their full strength. As a result of the detailed comparison of the main aspects of both works, the differences between them shall hopefully come into view, enabling an examination of how they might broaden our understanding of Wagner's operas themselves.

A BARELY NOTICED DISAGREEMENT

Going straight to the heart of the matter, let me consider some disparate insights regarding rhythm,¹⁸ style,¹⁹ and form.²⁰ According to Nietzsche, "Wagner has the same effect as continual consumption of alcohol: blunting, and obstructing the stomach with phlegm. Specific effect: degeneration of the sense of rhythm. In the end the Wagnerian calls rhythmic what I myself call, using a Greek proverb, 'moving the swamps'" (CW 184). Indeed, in *The Case of Wagner* the composer continuously faces the charge of failing accuracy, of flirting, as it were, with chaos.

Adorno, on his turn, also criticizes the rhythmical complexion of Wagner's music in the context of a global analysis of its gesture (to which he devotes an entire chapter of *In Search of Wagner*). He does so, however, with quite different preoccupations in mind. Whereas Nietzsche blames Wagner for the lack of rhythmical

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rigour, Adorno maintains that “his music is conceived in terms of the gesture of striking a blow and... [that] the whole idea of beating is fundamental to it” (SW 20).²¹ For him, the “composer-conductor” is enthroned in Wagner’s music, inasmuch as the “beating gesture” dominates his work through and through; abstract rigidity, rather than chaos, characterizes his rhythm: “Wagner’s use of the beat to control time is abstract; it is no more than the idea of time as something articulated by the beat and then projected onto the larger periods” (SW 23). In other words, tackling rhythm and style at once: “The methods by which Wagner blurs all dividing lines, and the monumental scale of both his subjects and his works, are inseparable from his longing to create in the “grand style,” a longing already inherent in the masterful gesture of the conductor” (SW 90).

The issue of style, as anyone familiar with Nietzsche’s texts might remark, was anything but foreign to him. And yet noticing this thematic confluence might be a misleading line of enquiry as well, for whereas Nietzsche maintains that Wagner was unable to achieve style—in fact, he asserts that the composer “disguised as principle his incapacity for giving organic form... [and] establishes a ‘dramatic style’ where we merely establish his incapacity for any style whatever” (CW 170-171)—Adorno criticizes him for aspiring to its grandeur. According to the latter, Wagner “not only took up the bourgeois profession of conductor, he was also the first composer to write music in the grand style” (SW 20). However, this ambiguous “achievement,” hanging on “stylisation” (SW 91), as well as revealing the composer’s “impatience towards everything isolated” (SW 90), appears to Adorno as a problematic feature of Wagner’s work—so problematic as to be attributed to the authoritarian, not to say fascist-like traits of Wagnerism—rather than as a reason for praising it.

The same kind of divergence becomes apparent when it comes to discuss form. According to Adorno, “what predominates [in Wagner] is already the totalitarian and seigneurial aspect of atomization; that devaluation of the individual vis-à-vis the totality, which excludes all authentic dialectical interaction” (SW 40), to the point that “the detail, designed from the outset with an eye on the whole, and without any intrinsic power, drifts into monotony again and again for that very reason” (SW 45). Simply put, Adorno blames Wagner for taking the side of the whole against the detail, for composing every sequence of his music rigorously, all too rigorously. The least one may say is that Nietzsche’s critique follows a quite different path: “every time, the anarchy of atoms, disgregation of the will... Everywhere paralysis, arduousness, torpidity *or* hostility and chaos: both more and more obvious the higher one ascends in forms of organization. The whole no longer lives at all: it is composite, calculated, artificial, and artifact” (CW 170).

Adorno, once again, could not be more at odds with Nietzsche’s interpretation at this point. For him, there is rather an affinity between the alleged formlessness of Wagner’s music, which he considers to be “the product not of chaos, but of false identity” (SW 31-32), and the implicit omnipresence of the whole in it. In fact, he maintains, the primacy of the whole is precisely what condemns the compositional process to become abstract, not the least because “its expressive elements are made to harmonize with each other according to a pre-arranged design” (SW 91). In short, in Wagner’s works an aprioristic conception of form goes hand in hand with an abstract conception of time: “Wagner’s form is an empty shell: the unfolding in time to which it lays claim is inauthentic” (SW 32).

Indeed, to say it straightforwardly, the idea that Nietzsche and Adorno converge, as far as their appraisals of Wagner are concerned, is far less obvious than one tends to assume before comparing and contrasting their texts. In spite of this, my aim is not to posit their divergence as an alternative dogmatic assumption, but to foreground and work through their conflicting views to the extent that they may shed light on Wagner’s own work. Of course, it would be certainly possible to point out many passages in which Adorno takes Nietzsche’s critical insights as a point of departure for developing his own dialectical approach. Just as it would be fair to say that examining Adorno’s critique of Wagner with an eye on Nietzsche’s quarrel with Wagner turns out helpful to tackle the complexity of Adorno’s cultural criticism.²² This said, my point is not to deny that Adorno retrieved many aspects of Nietzsche’s critique of Wagner, but to prevent such an acknowledgment from leading to a misunderstanding concerning the very core of both critiques. At the end of *In search of Wagner*, Adorno differentiates his own criticism of the composer from Nietzsche’s in a quite precise way:

Wagner is not only the willing prophet and diligent lackey of imperialism and late-bourgeois terrorism. He also possesses the neurotic's ability to contemplate his own decadence and to transcend it in an image that can withstand that all-consuming gaze. It might well be asked whether Nietzsche's criterion of health is of greater benefit than the critical consciousness that Wagner's grandiose weakness acquires in his commerce with the unconscious forces responsible for his own decadence. (SW 143)

In the context of this inquiry, such an apparently insignificant twist could not be dismissed as a mere detail, given the extent to which a specific understanding of physiology proved central to Nietzsche's approach to art. Here, I reckon, we reach the core of the problem. Nietzsche's and Adorno's critiques have absolutely different underpinnings. Nietzsche faults Wagner, from the standpoint of what he calls a "physiology of art" (CW 169), for giving musical expression to decadence.²³ In the final analysis, Wagner's work faces the accusation of impoverishing life, of enhancing reactive forces by means of music—as much as Schopenhauer did by means of thought—and of corrupting music itself. These were admittedly his "crucial words," those where his "seriousness begins" apropos of Wagner: "To *the artist of decadence*... I am far from looking on guilelessly while this decadent corrupts our health—and music as well... He makes sick whatever he touches—*he has made music sick*—" (CW 164).

Adorno for his part shows no sympathy for Nietzsche's physiological argument. He rather charges Wagner from the standpoint of the critique of ideology, pointing the finger at the authoritarian and conformist aspects of his work.²⁴ At issue, inevitably, is the "'positive' modification of Schopenhauer's philosophy" in connection with a "theory of regeneration with its racist overtones" (SW 133). Furthermore, given that Adorno's critique remains unavoidably interwoven with musical analysis, emphasis comes to be given to the notion of "phantasmagoria"—"the formal law governing the works of Richard Wagner," which he construes as "the occultation of production by means of the outward appearance of the product" (SW 74). According to Adorno the notion of "phantasmagoria" allows a clearer understanding of how "the process of composition becomes the agent of ideology even before the latter is imported into the music dramas via literature" (SW 28). Brought together, in a "large-scale epic work of art" (SW 86), with the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*—whose proto-fascist resonances Adorno is keen to denounce—"phantasmagoria" is conceived of as the precise artistic counterpart to commodity fetishism: "it mirrors subjectivity by confronting the subject with the product of its own labour, but in such a way that labour that has gone into it is no longer identifiable" (SW 80).

The same false-friendship seems to be at stake regarding the question of effect—presumably the most striking point of convergence between Nietzsche and Adorno when it comes to Wagner. In fact, while Nietzsche points out the *physiologically* harmful effects of Wagnerian art, Adorno emphasizes that it might be *ideologically* reprehensible for fostering "false consciousness." Wagner—whose music Nietzsche places under the sign of Circe—was too shrewd for formulas: so, if "everything that ever grew on the soil of *impoverished* life, all of the counterfeiting of transcendence and beyond, has found its most sublime advocate in Wagner's art [this effect is obtained] *not* by means of formulas... but by means of a persuasion of sensuousness which in turn makes the spirit weary and worn-out" (CW 183).

Conversely, according to Adorno, the "phantasmagorical" character of Wagner's art is to be seen, taking into account the dream-like expectations it raises, "as the deluded wish-fulfilment of would-be buyers" (SW 80). The "ideological effect" of the Wagnerian artwork consisting, first and foremost, in that it lends itself to a manipulative use, which is not at odds with the global commodification of society. So viewed, phantasmagoria is to be understood, in the light of its unromantic side, "as the point at which aesthetic appearance becomes a function of the character of the commodity" (SW 79), inasmuch as, in Adorno's terms:

The absolute reality of the unreal is nothing but the reality of a phenomenon that not only strives unceasingly to spirit away its own origins in human labour, but also, inseparably from this process and in thrall to exchange value, assiduously emphasizes its use value, stressing that this is its authentic

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reality, that it is ‘no imitation’ – and all this in order to further the cause of exchange value. (SW 79)

At this point, the reader might finally wonder whether—before becoming apparent in the writings of Wagner’s passionate critics—those asymmetries, contradictions, tensions are not embedded in Wagner’s own works.

NEITHER... NOR...

It would be no doubt naive to claim originality for the idea that Wagner’s operas are immersed in contradictions of various kinds. That Wagner’s oeuvre constitutes one of the most contradictory artistic undertakings in European modernity has long been acknowledged to the point of having become common sense. If only for this reason one could legitimately ask: what is the point of re-reading Nietzsche’s and Adorno’s seminal texts about Wagner, if the inner contradictions of Wagner’s work seem to constitute the main result of such a comparative effort? Before answering to this question, let me focus on a particular contradiction, which also finds echo in the criticisms developed in *The Case of Wagner* and *In Search of Wagner*: the contradiction between an optimistic reading of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and a nihilistic one.²⁵

Surely, this contradiction is intimately connected with Wagner’s own hesitation concerning the end of his four-part music drama.²⁶ From 1848 to 1874 (when the composer finally composed the final bars of *Götterdämmerung*), he changed his mind several times on how the cycle should come to an end, and on how the final catastrophe should be interpreted by Brünnhilde in her final speech. For the composer and dramatist the matter was not a merely artistic dilemma. In fact it involved Wagner’s innermost political and philosophical convictions, and reflected the way these were about to change, especially in the early 1850s, after the revolutionary uprising in Dresden in May 1849. At least four versions of this part of the speech (before Brünnhilde calls her horse Grane and rides it into the fire) are known, but none of them has been set to music. Nevertheless, two of them—the most philosophically pregnant, despite their undeniable differences—have been included as footnotes in the final printed edition of the text. They reflect Wagner’s readings of Feuerbach and Schopenhauer, and the fact that he passionately embraced both world-views—with all their artistic and political implication—at different, though overlapping moments of his life.²⁷

As far as the *Ring* is concerned, back to our seminal disagreement on Wagner, Nietzsche draws attention to what he calls the translation of the *Ring* into Schopenhauer’s terms. For him this absolutely crucial twist happened *in media res*, around 1854, when Wagner read for the first time *The World as Will and Representation*, and, in Nietzsche’s words, “the ship [of Wagner’s revolutionary optimism, allegorized in the *Ring*] struck a reef; Wagner was stuck. The reef was Schopenhauer’s philosophy; Wagner was stranded on a *contrary* world view” (CW 164).

Even though such a translation involved slight, rather than major changes to the libretto (thanks to the ambiguity of the saga), this changing process constitutes for Nietzsche a crucial clue to understanding Wagner and his work: “translating” the *Ring* into Schopenhauer’s terms would have meant to Wagner that he was redeemed from having been an optimist, from having “believed in the Revolution as much as ever a Frenchman believed in it,” from having “believed that in Siegfried he had found the typical revolutionary” (CW 163). Initially, around 1849, “‘the old God,’ after having compromised himself morally in every respect, is finally redeemed by a free spirit and immoralist [Siegfried]” (CW 160). After 1854, it is Siegfried, like Wagner himself, who is in need of redemption. According to Nietzsche, rather than feeling enthusiasm about Siegfried being a free spirit, the composer is now more inclined to subscribe to the underlying meaning of Wotan’s words from the end of *Die Walküre*, when the god explains the inescapable reasons that prompted him to renounce his plans. He now just wants the end to be soon. In Nietzsche’s pitilessly ironical words: “Only the *philosopher of decadence* gave to the artist of decadence—*himself*” (CW 164).²⁸

All this, once again, seems quite far from Adorno’s reading. Concerning the *Ring* the author of *Negative Dialectics* is rather keen to stress the fact that everything seems to happen in the tetralogy for the sake of

totality, as if all its peripeteia followed each other under the spell of the ruse of reason (however unreasonable this reason might be). In this aspect he states that the *Ring*, despite Wagner's preference for Schopenhauer, is in agreement with Hegel's philosophy of history (SW 119). Indeed, as the philosopher also suggests, even when Siegfried comes across Wotan and shatters his spear, the "sacred register of contracts," he is not countering but still involuntarily following Wotan's will—for at this point the God intimately desires nothing but his own—and the world's—annihilation. According to Adorno, there is no real opposition between Siegfried and Wotan. It is as if the god, standing for the whole, had absorbed the man, and the divine violence manifested itself through Siegfried's action.

The rebel of the particular becomes the executive organ of the totality; that is to say he destroys it without ever discovering a new, different totality. The totality itself, however, is the bad eternity of rebellion as anarchy and unrelenting self-destruction. There is in fact no real demarcation line separating Wotan, the father of the gods, and Siegfried, his lethal rescuer and the antagonist who succours him, and in their union the *Ring* celebrates the capitulation of the revolution that never was. (SW 121)

Overall, the point of illuminating Siegfried's ultimate allegiance to Wotan (the fact that the hero's rebellion against the God's absolute spirit is, in the final analysis, without consequences) is to be able to unravel the illusions underlying a politically and historically optimistic reading of the *Ring*. One might think of Bernard Shaw's *The Perfect Wagnerite*, in which the author's preference for Feuerbach's ending becomes apparent. Even if Adorno shares many of the left-wing convictions of Shaw—besides, he would not be unsympathetic to Shaw's Marxian interpretation of the *Ring* as an allegory of modern capitalism—he cannot but stress the most problematic features of Siegfried (his selfishness, his brutality, his narrowness).²⁹ Furthermore, the very idea of a mythical forerunner of the emancipation of mankind is *per se* worth being handled with reticence.

In their rejection of both optimism and nihilism, Adorno and Nietzsche are not at odds with one another. But again, this is far from meaning that the two critiques coincide. Indeed, Adorno mistrusts Siegfried's tireless vitality, and shows no enthusiasm for his "declaration of war against morality" (CW 163). For him, Siegfried's violent deeds—the presumable manifestation of his will to power, to paraphrase Shaw's comment on Siegfried being "in short, a totally unmoral person, a born anarchist, the ideal of Bakoonin, an anticipation of the 'overman' of Nietzsche"³⁰—are as arbitrary as the power against which Siegfried strives, while remaining unaware that he actually enhances it. In this regard, Nietzsche's critical insights seem to stem from a quite different intuition: the hint that Wotan's renunciation—criticized as such, as a reproachable farewell to the will to live, and not so much as a deplorable dismissal of revolutionary prospects—reflects Wagner's own acquiescence to nihilism, which turns the final scene of *Die Walküre*, from the hindsight of a global Schopenhauerian reinterpretation of the *Ring*, into the "pregnant moment" of the entire cycle.

CHRONICLE OF AN END FORETOLD

The *Ring* remains today an *unsolved problem*. So thought Deryck Cooke, whose unfinished study of Wagner's tetralogy, entitled *I Saw the World End* (1979), cautiously begins with the following words:

At this stage in the history of Wagner studies, any would-be interpreter of *The Ring* faces the immediate question: 'Is your interpretation really necessary?' Perhaps we have interpreted and reinterpreted this masterpiece until we are in danger of interpreting it out of all recognition. Perhaps it is time to leave it alone, and let it speak for itself.³¹

Judging by the length of the book, it seems that Cooke did not give much credit—fortunately for his posthumous readers—to the intimation that it was time to leave the *Ring* alone. And yet, as echoes of the concerns expressed in the above passage still resonate today, it should be said that one of its implicit assumptions—that, seemingly, there is such a thing as a work that once left alone would speak *for itself*—is only too seldom questioned. Such

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an assumption, provided that the historicity of any work of art is to be brought under serious consideration, is of course untenable.

But this alone does not prevent another question from arising—the question as to whether it is possible to avoid “arbitrariness,” when it comes to interpret quite complex an artwork as the *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. After all, as Benjamin intimates while discussing the task of translation, the attempt to do justice to the historicity of an artwork—which entails acknowledging that the work itself, so not only the way it is experienced, interpreted, or criticized, changes throughout history—does not lead to historical relativism. The task, he suggests, is to do justice to the afterlife of artworks in way that prompts the *translator* to reject historicism and a-historicism alike. Both freedom and faithfulness are needed.³² Benjamin, it is true, has literary works in mind, but, *mutatis mutandis*, is not the task of operatic critics, theorists, commentators—and stage directors—akin to that of translators?

Leaving for a moment the field of critical theorization for that of staging practice³³—and paraphrasing the title of a recent essay by Jameson—the question would be whether there is a way of distinguishing between *Regieoper* and *Eurotrash*.³⁴ In other words: is there a way of deciding whether a production succeeds in bringing into view previously unnoticed features of a musico-dramatic work, or simply goes astray in the attempt to “actualize” it? Of course, there is no way of answering such a question but with regard to particular productions. In any case, the simple fact of raising it presupposes that one agrees that a great deal of interpretation is to take place, no matter the risks it involves.

As a result, facing Wagner’s operas and the *Ring* in particular—be it as a critic, a director, or a spectator—means crossing a terrain of perplexities, difficulties, and ambivalences. Undecidable, as Badiou frequently puts it,³⁵ might be a good word to describe Wagner’s work quite *faithfully*—at the cost, however, of slightly enfeebling the very notion of faithfulness. For where, in the final analysis, would faithfulness to a work lie, when the core of that work remains undecidable in itself? Radically put, according to Žižek, “the only way to be faithful to a classic work is to take such a risk [incidentally, of transposing Wagner’s operas to a different, often contemporary, time, or of changing some facts of the narrative itself],”³⁶ or even—borrowing this time from Edward Said—of “accentuating the discrepancies in Wagner, and doing it both by deliberate anachronism (not being true to his explicit stage-directions, for instance), and with a sense of freedom about what must remain unresolved, antinomian, bewildering in his work.”³⁷ Along the same lines, Jameson too, speaking of Kasper Holten’s *Ring* (Copenhagen, 2006-7) ends up by approving the director’s “more brutal interventions” inasmuch as at some points they “heighten the meaning and the drama of the ring itself.”³⁸

One thing is for sure: there is no chance of bypassing a huge array of difficulties while interpreting or staging the *Ring*—unless, of course, we are persuaded that the *Ring*’s afterlife has already come to an end. If this were true, then the very case of Wagner would have reached its own post-history, as Lepage’s technically spectacular, though conceptually anodyne staging of the *Ring* in the Metropolitan Opera House seems to suggest...³⁹ That not being the case, to put it quite bluntly, the controversy aroused by radical interpretations, however doubtful they might be, is still preferable to no interpretation at all. Consequently the point is not so much either, I feel tempted to add, that Wagner’s works are “robust enough to withstand reinterpretations that seem to challenge their very essence.”⁴⁰ Such an observation presupposes that the essence of the works under consideration *remains* the same throughout history, whereas the point is rather that *what remains* has no stable, let alone univocal, essence... Such a claim seems to fit Wagner like a glove, as Adorno himself sharply acknowledged in the 1960s:

[W]orks of art are not complete in themselves. They create a magnetic field [*Spannungsfeld*] of all possible intentions and forces, of inner tendencies and countervailing ones, of successful and necessarily unsuccessful elements. Objectively, new layers are constantly detaching themselves, emerging from within; others grow irrelevant and die off. One relates to a work of art not merely, as is often said, by adapting it to fit a new situation, but rather by deciphering within it things to

which one has a historically different reaction. The position of consciousness toward Wagner that I experience as my own whenever I encounter him, and which is not only mine, is even more deserving of the appellation ‘ambivalent’ than the earlier position—an oscillation between attraction and repulsion. This only points back to the Janus-like character of the work itself. Undoubtedly, every art of significance exhibits something like this, Wagner’s especially.⁴¹

It is of the utmost importance, notably to put this article into the right perspective, to bear in mind that Adorno’s view of Wagner significantly evolved since *In Search of Wagner*, and that the philosopher ascribed his newest—even more ambivalent—appraisal of Wagner to the historical ripening of the composer’s artistic legacy itself (from mid-1930s to early 1960s). In any case, the significance of Adorno’s changing of views notwithstanding, the aim of carrying out a parallel re-reading of Nietzsche’s (later) and Adorno’s (early) critical writings on Wagner was not to come to the conclusion that they both simply missed the point... What is at stake is actually not so much that they were both wrong but rather that they might well be both not seldom right—though not right to the point of precluding other, even if rigorously inverse, interpretations. One should not forget, by the way, that Nietzsche and Adorno are not simply among Wagner’s harshest critics. They are also two of the most insightful interpreters, listeners, spectators—and admirers—of his work. There is no way of getting rid of their criticisms so easily as by means of “contextualizing” them (relegating them to a personal, albeit intellectually motivated, quarrel in the case of Nietzsche, or envisioning them against the background of the rise of Nazism in Germany in the case of Adorno).

Thus, to come to some conclusions, I would say that the purpose of shedding light on the generally overlooked differences between Nietzsche’s and Adorno’s critiques of Wagner is twofold. On the one side, as I stated above, there is the challenge of laying the ground for a philosophically grounded immanent critique—almost in the manner of a *reductio ad absurdum*—of (a certain) anti-Wagnerism (notably one encouraged by authors relying on Nietzsche and Adorno, rather than by these two philosophers themselves).⁴² If, in the first place, the criticisms levelled against Wagner are for the most part based on, or could be traced back to Nietzsche’s and Adorno’s critical claims (as Lacoue-Labarthe suggests), and, in the second place, if these claims are so often not only incompatible, but also even paradoxical (as I try to make apparent), then one may surmise that whenever the most adamant critics of Wagner attempt to denounce the entanglement of his works with the composer’s ideology they themselves end up tangled in contradictions and misunderstandings.

Take, for instance, the oft-repeated leitmotif of anti-Wagnerism—the claim that Wagner’s anti-Semitic ideas, which he indisputably put forth in his theoretical writings, also permeate his work through and through (a claim shared by authors such as Robert W. Gutman,⁴³ Paul Lawrence Rose,⁴⁴ or Marc A. Weiner,⁴⁵ or Michael Mack).⁴⁶ Certainly, I would not reject the claim that Wagner’s ideas should be taken into consideration while interpreting his operas, but a line should be drawn at some point between taking even the most compromising of Wagner’s ideas into consideration and assuming or intimating that they somehow provide the ultimate key to understanding his operas. After all, even Jacob Katz, the author of *The Darker Side of Genius. Richard Wagner’s Anti-Semitism*, observed that “without forced speculation, very little in the artistic work of Wagner can be related to his attitude toward Jews and Judaism.”⁴⁷ It is also true that one might—and even should—wonder what “very little” exactly means. Consequently, it is also worth taking into consideration subtler ways of detecting and putting into perspective how Wagner’s ideas might have found a way into his works (for instance by means of the representation of the body, as Marc A. Weiner claims). But such an analysis, valuable as it is, does not entitle this author or anyone else to generalise the claim that Wagner’s works are linked to the composer’s anti-Semitic ideas so as to enable a global appraisal of Wagner’s work as essentially anti-Semitic. Moreover, it should be added, to get a hint of how ambiguous the issue really is, that even Wotan and the Dutchman—two of Wagner’s “heros”—might be seen as Jew figures as well.⁴⁸ So why should one exclusively consider Beckmesser (from the *Meistersinger*), Mime and Alberich (from the *Ring*), and Kundry (from *Parsifal*) when it comes to tackle Wagner’s Anti-Semitism? And is not Hagen (the murderer of Siegfried) an accurate portrait of a fascist-minded leader?⁴⁹ Should not implications be drawn from this as well, given that Hagen deserved from Wagner the least sympathy? As for the musical dimension of his works: an acknowledged

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master in the art of the great gesture as Wagner was, was he not a subtle miniaturist as well?⁵⁰ And do his operas not lend themselves to Beckettian⁵¹, and even Brechtian⁵², readings?

Of course, one might argue that the purported features enabling those readings are distressingly contradictory. But this is precisely the point: to stress that the contradictions of Wagner's work provide a touchstone, rather than an obstacle, to the task of reinterpreting it against both the grain of history and the spirit of time. So, we do not need to—actually we should not—lose sight of Nietzsche's and Adorno's criticisms in order to value Wagner's work positively. Right on the contrary, I maintain, insofar as the purpose of reappraising the Wagnerian disagreement between these philosophers is twofold: to counter, on the one hand, a strictly negative—unilateral, single-minded, ideologically biased—view of Wagner, and, on the other hand, to prevent an unreservedly positive—unproblematic, apologetic, naively apolitical—one to take the lead. It would be misleading, to say the least, to divert attention from the ambivalence of Wagner's works by praising him simply as a great composer of extraordinary music, who may be said to have paved the way to new trends in twentieth-century music, and influenced other arts so deeply as to appear as a prominent precursor of cinema.⁵³

“Contradiction” might well be an attractive but vain word until one actually delves into the work deemed contradictory. So, if Wagner's operas, to follow Adorno's claim, are still to be experienced and judged as historical *Spannungsfelder*, it is likely that their contradictions will continue to challenge, or even to contradict, our present. Now, all this presupposes that we are able to prevent Wagner's artistic legacy to be *either* so strictly assessed as to be relegated to a never-ending trial before history (as it happens whenever one defines his work as proto-fascist, or proto-Nazi), *or* so loosely interpreted as artistically valuable, but ideologically value-free (as it is the case whenever one explores Wagner's artistic virtues at the cost of making light of the political ambivalence of his work).

As said, nothing as regards Wagner is once for all decided, and hardly anything turns out to be unproblematic. But it might be the case that a possible clue to renew our relationship to his legacy lies where it is less expected: in the unfolding of a long dissensus over the very *criticability* of Wagner's works, in that this dissensus—as in the paradigmatic case of the disagreement between Nietzsche and Adorno—constantly unveils their resistance to any, be it positive or negative, consensually agreed appraisal of their ultimate meaning and value.

JOÃO PEDRO CACHOPO is a post-doctoral research fellow at the Research Center in Sociology and Aesthetics of Music (CESEM) at the Universidade Nova de Lisboa, and the author of *Verdade e Enigma: Ensaio sobre o pensamento estético de Adorno* (Vendaval, 2013).

NOTES

1. Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History." Trans. Harry Zohn. *Selected Writings*. Vol. 4 (1938-1940). Eds Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2003, 391.
2. Theodor W. Adorno, "Wagner's Relevance for Today." Trans. Susan H. Gillespie. *Essays on Music*. Ed. Richard Leppert. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 585.
3. See Adorno, "Wagner's Relevance," 584: "With regard to Wagner the situation has changed generally. Therefore, I would like to present—not as a revision of what I once thought, but as a way of taking into account what has newly come to our attention about Wagner—some divergences from the old text [Adorno has *In Search of Wagner* in mind]."
4. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Musica Ficta (Figures of Wagner)*. Trans. Felicia McCarren. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994 [1991], xix.
5. Slavoj Žižek, "Brünhilde's Act." *The Opera Quarterly* 23: 2-3 (Spring-Summer 2007, 200).
6. Alain Badiou, *Five Lessons on Wagner*. Trans. Susan Spitzer. London and New York: Verso, 2010, 9.
7. Lacoue-Labarthe, *Musica Ficta*, 17.
8. Lacoue-Labarthe, *Musica Ficta*, 117-18.
9. See Badiou, *Lessons*, 4-9, 119-120.
10. See Badiou, *Lessons*, 121-122.
11. See Badiou, *Lessons*, 112-114.
12. See Badiou, *Lessons*, 135-159.
13. Badiou, *Lessons*, 55.
14. Badiou *Lessons*, 57 (my emphasis).
15. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*. Trans. and commentary by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1967 [1888].
16. Theodor W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*. Trans. Rodney Livingstone. London and New York: Verso, 2005 [1952].
17. For an account of Adorno's changing views on Wagner, from the 1930s to the 1960s, see Karin Bauer, "Adorno's Wagner: History and the Potential of the Artwork." *Cultural Critique* 60 (Spring 2005, 68-91).
18. See CW 172, 184; SW 18-32, 90.
19. See CW 157, 167, 170-172; SW 20, 90-91.
20. See CW 170-171, 187; SW 27, 31-32, 40, 45, 91.
21. To be sure, whoever listens to the first measures of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* might probably get this impression. But does this entail that the same person would necessarily disagree with Nietzsche when he claims precisely the opposite with regard to *Tristan und Isolde*? Here we touch the point: to listen to *Die Meistersinger* and to *Tristan* are completely different experiences, and it is not at all easy—admitting that it is possible—to criticize both operas for the same reasons.
22. For a study of Nietzsche's quarrel with Wagner, focused on the question of how Nietzsche's critique influenced Adorno in such a way as to become a model of his own *Kulturkritik*, see Richard Klein, "Die Geburt der Musikphilosophie aus dem Geiste der Kulturkritik: Zu Friedrich Nietzsches Wagner." *Musik-Konzepte / Neue Folge: Musikphilosophie (Sonderband)*. Ed. Ulrich Taddey. München: edition text + kritik, 2007, 19-33.
23. See CW 155-160, 163-166, 169-173, 177-178, 181-185, 190.
24. See SW 20-21, 37, 74-85, 119, 132-145.
25. See CW 163-164; SW 119-131.
26. For a philosophically compelling study of the *Ring* haunted by the problem of its ending(s), see Philip Kitcher, Richard Schacht, *Finding an Ending. Reflections on Wagner's Ring*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
27. For a study of the influence of Feuerbach's and Schopenhauer's philosophies on Wagner's work, focused on how Wagner re-evaluated his political values after actively participating in the Dresden uprising, and on the consequences of this change on his subsequent work, especially with regard to the *Ring* cycle, see Bryan Magee, *Wagner and Philosophy*. London: Penguin, 2000.
28. No matter whether or not we agree with Nietzsche's global appraisal, the fact is that Wagner willingly acknowledged that Schopenhauer's philosophy made him more aware of himself as an artist. Consider Wagner's letter to his friend August Röckel:

It is seldom, probably, that any man has held concepts so widely divergent from his intuitions, has been such a stranger to himself, as I, who am forced to admit that I have only arrived at last at an understanding of my own works of art—that is to say, formed an intellectual conception of them, elucidated them to the satisfaction of my own reason—by the aid of another, who has furnished me with concepts perfectly correlative with my intuitions... In this one passage [Brünhilde's last speech], then, I was blinded by the interposition of my *conscious* intentions. Well, curiously enough, this passage continually tormented me and it required that great revolution in my rational concepts, ultimately effected through Schopenhauer, to disclose to me the cause of my trouble and to give my

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poem a fitting keystone—a sincere recognition of the true underlying nature of things...” (Wagner to August Röckel, Waldheim in Saxony, 23 August 1856. Trans. M. M. Bozman. *Letters of Richard Wagner*. Vol. 1. Ed. Wilhelm Altman. London and Toronto: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1927, 310-311).

29. Neither did Shaw, it should be added, though he, despite his mistrust in Siegfried’s anarchistic behaviour, remained an enthusiast of the first conception of the *Ring*, inspired by the idea of the emancipation of mankind who, after the *night falls on the gods*, would take “his destiny in his own hands to shape it for himself” (Bernard Shaw, “The Perfect Wagnerite: A Commentary on the Niblung’s Ring.” *Major Critical Essays*. London: Constable and Company 1855 [1898], 225).

30. Shaw, “Wagnerite,” 200.

31. Deryck Cooke, *I Saw the World End: A Study of Wagner’s Ring*. London: Oxford University Press, 2002 [1979], 1.

32. See Benjamin, “The task of the Translator.” Trans. Harry Zohn. Selected Writings. Vol. 1 (1913-1926). Eds Marcus Bullock, Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1996, 253-263.

33. For a historically comprehensive and theoretically thought-provoking account of Wagnerian staging, see Patrick Carnegie, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006; for an equally stimulating synthesis, focused on Bayreuth productions from the second half of the 20th century, see Mike Ashman, “Wagner on Stage: Aesthetic, Dramaturgical, and Social Considerations.” *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*. Ed. Thomas S. Grey. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 246-275.

34. Fredric Jameson, “Regieoper, or Eurotrash?” *New Left Review* 64 (July-August 2010, 111-129).

35. Badiou writes, for instance, that:

Wagner has generally been interpreted as someone who submerged discontinuity in continuity (yet another of Lacoue-Labarthe’s leitmotifs), whereas I think that Wagner displaced discontinuity in such a profound manner that it came to act as a new figure of undecidability between narrative drama and music, and that in so doing he invented a new model of the relationship between continuity and discontinuity (Badiou, *Lessons*, 69-70).

36. Žižek, “Brünnhilde,” 201.

37. Edward W. Said, “The Importance of Being Unfaithful to Wagner.” *Music at the Limits. Three decades of Essays and Articles on Music*. London: Bloomsbury, 2008 [1993], 169.

38. Jameson, “Regieoper,” 123.

39. In fact, it is as if Lepage has endeavoured to confirm Lacoue-Labarthe’s diagnosis, according to which Wagner’s artistic legacy has paved the way for mass art by means of a sort of Tolkienization of the *Ring*. The two main traits of his staging—the outstanding modernity of the technical apparatus used, and the conventionalism of its theatrical conception (based on a strictly literal interpretation of the text)—appear to complement each other. The utmost indulgence towards the spectator is obvious: as far as the plot is concerned, everything is made clear, transparent, manifest (even the ravens appear on screen to distract Siegfried from Hagen’s murderous spear); at the same time, the visual effects seem to fit in perfectly with the music—a banquet for the eye and the ear. As any political and/or historical issues are dismissed, no special effort of interpretation seems to be necessary; and so the saga of the *Ring* finally appears to be, incredibly enough, an *unproblematic* one...

40. Barry Millington, “‘Faithful, all too Faithful’: Fidelity and *Ring* Stagings.” *The Opera Quarterly* 23: 2-3 (Spring-Summer 2007, 275). The comment appears at the end of the article in which—it must be clarified—Barry Millington positively assesses some indisputably daring productions of the *Ring*—by Patrice Chéreau (Bayreuth, 1976), Peter Konwitschny (Stuttgart, 1999-2002), and Keith Warner (London, 2004-6).

41. Adorno, “Wagner’s Relevance,” 586-587.

42. See Robert W. Gutman’s constant references to Nietzsche in his *Richard Wagner. The Man, His Mind and His Music*, Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1971 [1968], Paul Lawrence Rose’s very selective borrowing from Adorno in *Wagner: Race and Revolution*, London: Faber and Faber, 1992, 71, or Marc A. Weiner’s integration of arguments by both philosopher’s into his own in *Richard Wagner, and the Anti-Semitic Imagination*, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995.

43. See, for instance, Gutman, *Richard Wagner*, 13: “Unhappily, a proto-Nazism, expressed mainly through an unextinguishable loathing of the Jews, was one of Wagner’s principal leitmotifs, the venomous tendrils of anti-Semitism twining through his life and work.” [My emphasis.]

44. In Paul Lawrence Rose’s radical view:

The questions of Wagner’s antisemitism and Hitler’s exploitation of it are fundamental, but what is ultimately at stake in banning Wagner is the sustaining of the memory of the Holocaust itself. There was a Holocaust, and Wagner’s self-righteous ravings, *sublimated into his music*, were one of the most potent elements in creating the mentality that made such enormity thinkable—and performable (Lawrence Rose, *Race and Revolution*, 192; my emphasis).

45. As Marc A. Weiner sums up part of the argument of his book:

[B]y analyzing a host of corporeal iconographies of difference—racial, sexual, and otherwise—that were central to the Wagnerian artwork and to the culture in which the composer lived, I wish to demonstrate that those strands in the literature on Wagner and those stagings of his works that would disavow (either categorically or implicitly) the role of Anti-Semitism in his theories, *his libretti, and the music he composed for his works for the stage* are either indefensibly wrong or, at best, incomplete (Weiner, *Anti-Semitic Imagination*, 27; my emphasis).

46. According to Michael Mack:

[T]he illuminating analysis of the Nibelungen as anti-Semitic stereotypes can be extended to all those characters who want to keep the ring in order to raise the prospect of progress within the material world. Except for Siegfried and possibly Brünhilde and the Rhine maidens, *all protagonists of the Ring Cycle depict Wagner's racist fear of a European society that has become infiltrated by 'Jehovah's principle of power'* (Michael Mack, "Richard Wagner and the Trajectory of German Transcendental Philosophy" *Telos* 123 (Spring 2002, 102); my emphasis).

47. Jacob Katz, *The Darker Side of Genius. Richard Wagner's Anti-Semitism* [*Richard Wagner: Verbote des Antisemitismus*]. Hanover, London: University Press of New England, 1986, ix-x. For highly informed study of the relation of Wagner's work to anti-Semitism, see Dieter Borchmeyer, "The Question of Anti-Semitism." Trans. Stewart Spencer. *Wagner Handbook*. Eds Ulrich Müller, Peter Wapnewski. Trans. Ed. John Deathridge. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 1992, 166-185.

48. See Borchmeyer, "The Question," 183-84, and Žižek, "Why is Wagner Worth Saving?" *Journal of Philosophy & Scripture* 2:1 (Fall 2004, 26): "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..."

49. As Žižek, again, has pointed out:

Significantly, it is ONLY [sic] 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*)... (Žižek, "Worth Saving?" 24).

50. Now giving the floor to Pierre Boulez:

A careful study of the music makes it clear that we are a long way from any commonplace rhetoric of amplification and redundancy... Wagner's motives run through the work like characters in a novel, sometimes vanishing without trace after a single appearance and sometimes taking on a quite unsuspected importance... The increasingly subtle transformation of the motives, for instance, is not to be simply explained, either by dramatic necessity or by the pleasure of manipulating them for its own sake, the exercise of an acquired virtuosity. It should rather be related to his need to integrate with his work for the theatre all the most demanding and most essential characteristics of 'pure' music without sacrificing the drama to an alien formal structure (Pierre Boulez, *Orientations*. Trans. Martin Cooper. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1986 [1981], 282-283).

51. See Badiou, *Five Lessons*, 122: "One of the ironies Heiner Müller brought out was to show that staging *Tristan* like Beckett would really hold up, that a Beckettian adaptation of Tristan's waiting was possible."

52. See Žižek, "Worth Saving?" 22: "So what if the NEW [sic] 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*...?"

53. In fact caution is needed while evaluating the role that Wagner might come to play in the discussion of the relationship between opera and cinema. It is tempting—perhaps all too tempting—to assign Wagner's work a pivotal role when it comes to discuss such a relationship historically, as well as politically and aesthetically. The result is the intimation, which is quite noticeable in recent scholarly works (see Jeongwon Joe and Sander L. Gilman (eds), *Wagner & Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), that we are *either* to blame Wagner as a precursor of Hollywood kitsch *or* to praise him as a forerunner of cinema's synaesthetic virtues. The schizophrenia of this theoretical landscape, however, eventually prompts the question as to whether we are bound to tumble from a drastically negative into a naively positive view of Wagner... For a both sharply critical and bias-free discussion of Wagner's anti-Semitism in relation to cinema (with an eye on Fritz Lang's *Die Nibelungen*), see David J. Levin, *Richard Wagner, Fritz Lang, and the Nibelungen. The Dramaturgy of Disavowal*.

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Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998. For a compelling analysis of the uses of *Lohengrin*'s prelude in Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, centred on how such an use alters our perception of Wagner's music (allowing an anti-anti-Semitic reading of it), by virtue of the ambiguous association of its ethereal sonority both to the dream of the megalomaniac dictator (initially) and to the collective dream of a humanity freed from authoritarianism (at end of the film), see Lawrence Kramer, "Contesting Wagner. The *Lohengrin* Prelude and Anti-anti-Semitism." *Opera and Modern Culture. Wagner and Strauss*. London: University of California Press, 42-74.