

Capilano University

Gesamtkunstwerk:
The Artwork or the Cave of the Future

Malibu Taetz

MOPA 409-02

Professors Michael Thoma and Jack Silberman

21 October, 2018

malibutaetz@my.capilanou.ca

Malibu Taetz

MOPA 409-02 Visual Theory

Professors Michael Thoma and Jack Silberman

21 October 2018

Gesamtkunstwerk: The Artwork or the Cave of the Future

In the 1800s, the Industrial Revolution was forever changing the way that people related to society and to themselves. While mass-produced mechanically manufactured goods led to the growth of productivity and economic increase in Europe, with it came the mass exploitation of human beings as commodities themselves, robbing life of meaning for many people and devalued artistic expression. Out of the smoke of this mechanized revolution arose reactionary romantic movements among artists, novelists, craftsmen, and many other people, resisting the influence of unrestrained industry. At the same time in history something else emerged – a vision large enough to synthesise and unite all of the others: the idea of the “Total Work of Art” or *Gesamtkunstwerk* as envisioned by Richard Wagner. In this essay, I will be arguing that while the other romantic movements of the age gradually faded, Wagner’s vision of *gesamtkunstwerk* has been given new life in the modern movie franchise, and has become so powerful that it is now in danger of becoming a new Plato’s Cave.

The modern concept of *gesamtkunstwerk* originates with the person of Richard Wagner, and in order to better understand it, we must understand a little bit of the world he encountered. Wagner was born in Leipzig Germany in 1813 and developed a love for music and the theatre from an early age. In 1848, a wave of revolutions swept over much of Europe, as people of the working classes fought for democracy and freedom of the press. Wagner, living in Dresden at the time, took part in the May Revolution, and in consequence was forced into a life of exile and debt for the next 14 years (Gray 417-420). During this time, he wrote much of his well-known essays and works including *Art and Revolution* (1849) and *The Artwork of the Future* (1849). The concept of synthesizing the artforms had been present in 19th century German thought for some time before Wagner, including from the composer Carl Maria von Weber (Strunk 63). However, in *Art and Revolution*, Wagner presented a vision of the Total Work of Art as an already universal thing that did not need synthesizing. He argued instead that it had been broken

off into many isolated forms as a result of greed and commerce, and it was the job of the artist to put the “individual factors” back together (Wagner 35).

Wagner believed that this true art had come into being in Ancient Greece in the form of Drama, writing that it was “the abstract and epitome of all that was expressible in the Grecian nature” (Wagner 52). He argued that the fall of Athens meant the fall of Drama, and as a result, “Art became less and less the expression of the public conscience” (Ibid.). For Wagner, the Roman colosseum with its “absolute physical reality” replaced the Greek theatre, and its 2,000-year-old legacy was the making of all people into slaves (Wagner 36). Into this had stepped Christianity, which sought to console rather than to fight, and meant “the giving up of all spontaneous attempt to escape from [this] misery; for the undeserved Grace of God was alone to set it free” (Wagner 37). However, Wagner argued strongly for the ultimate and inevitable triumph of art, since art was in our nature and that nature could not be contained.

In this inevitable revolution, Wagner proposed “it is precisely the Theatre, that should take precedence of every other institution in this emancipation; for the Theatre is the widest-reaching of Art's institutes, and the richest in its influence” (Wagner 62). In Wagner’s own vision of the *gesamtkunstwerk* presented in *The Artwork of the Future*, the three basic elements of art - Dance, Music, and Poetry - would be united with everything from painting to architecture to bring about “the highest conjoint work of art” where “each separate branch of art is at hand in its own utmost fulness.” (Wagner 184). Wagner goes further to say that this total work actually goes beyond the branches of artwork itself to include us: the Spectator. He writes: “the public, that representative of daily life forgets the confines of the auditorium, and lives and breathes now only in the artwork which seems to it as Life itself, and on the stage which seems the wide expanse of the whole World” (Wagner 34).

This knitting the audience themselves into the *gesamtkunstwerk* is coupled with Wagner’s vision of a “great dramatic aim” where “all division of this enjoyment, all scattering of the forces [are] centred on one point” (Wagner 52). The understanding of Wagner’s Total Artwork as incorporating the audience into a unified goal will form the basis of what will follow in this essay.

The remarkable thing about Wagner, and perhaps the thing that sets him apart from his contemporary thinkers, is that he didn't just write about his vision for *gesamtkunstwerk*, but he went out and actually created it. The thing he created for a long time defied an adequate descriptive word. Wagner rejected the term "opera" outright. He also ultimately gave up the term "music drama" (though this is the term that I will use to refer to Wagner's own creations of *gesamtkunstwerk*, since it has stuck in later years). I will argue that what Wagner was actually creating was movies, before there was cinema. In 1872 he built the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, which produced as close to a cinematic experience conceivable before cinema. The audience's seats were darkened and the orchestra was hidden. Emotional musical themes accompanied the actors as they played out Wagner's spectacular *Der Ring des Nibelungen* cycle of music dramas beneath huge set pieces and unprecedented special effects. (Spotts 11).

This kind of experience would not be replicated again until the advent of film. I would further argue that Richard Wagner should be considered the first auteur. He pioneered the idea that a conductor could interpret a musical score, and emphasized the importance of this in the creation of art (Sadie 645). In his music drama "Tristan und Isolde" Wagner broke entirely with musical tonality in a way that had never been seen before, introducing dissonance to heighten the emotions of his dramas. This innovation was so powerful that it divided the musical community completely for the next 100 years between tonalists and atonalists, a dichotomy which is still largely present today (Bernstein 64).

In short, Wagner's *gesamtkunstwerk* was something that had never been seen before, and was to profoundly impact the world it entered with an influence that is difficult to overstate. Wagner himself wrote in a letter:

"Child! This Tristan is turning into something terrible. This final act!!!—I fear the opera will be banned ... only mediocre performances can save me! Perfectly good ones will be bound to drive people mad" (Grey, 116).

He was not far off the mark. The composer Claude Debussy called Wagner "this old poisoner" (Lockspeiser 179), and Charles-Valentin Alkan said "Wagner is not a musician, he is a disease" (François-Sappey 198). It is interesting to look at how Wagner responds to his critics in *Art and Revolution*:

“they cry down the only natural release from their bewitchment, as "Chimeras" or "Utopias;" just as the poor sufferers in a madhouse take their insane imaginings for truth, and truth itself for madness” (Wagner 59).

In a sense, Wagner was turning the tables and placing his opponents in Plato’s Cave, with their backs to the light, refusing to see the truth of his Total Art Form. This sentiment is very attractive when one considers the other revolutionaries Wagner’s ideas and music dramas inspired. People like Friedrich Nietzsche, for whom Wagner exemplified the idea of art presented in his *Birth of Tragedy Through the Spirit of Music* (1872), and William Morris, the writer, architect, painter and textile designer who brought about the arts and crafts movement in England and led to the establishment of early British Socialism with Friedrich Engels.

But Wagner’s critics and contemporaries weren’t the only people to recognise the power of his Total Work of Art. His music dramas, with their retelling of ancient pagan German myths was to be perceived by Adolf Hitler, who took them as the embodiment of the “heroic Teutonic nature” of his imagined Aryan race (Spotts 141). Wagner’s own outspoken antisemitism in publications such as *Jewishness in Music* (1850) didn’t help to counteract the matter. This is a dark chapter following the birth of *gesamtkunstwerk*, but it is important to remember, especially in light of Wagner’s comparing his adversaries to those railing against the truth. It begs the question: who was in the cave now?

When I first began this study, I had certain more extreme ideas about Wagner’s direct connection to the horrors of Nazi Germany, which I would like to address briefly before moving on. Hitler sought to make Wagnerian music the anthem of the German people, and this legacy continues to affect the world in such ways as Wagner’s music being banned in the State of Israel (BBC). But there is a tendency to think of this music as intrinsically evil, which has led to unsubstantiated claims such as that his music accompanied people in concentration camps to their deaths. In fact, some of Wagner’s writings are certainly not aligned to the Nazi ideology, such as the passage in *Art and Revolution* where he says the *gesamtkunstwerk* “must embrace the spirit of a free mankind, delivered from every shackle of hampering nationality; its racial imprint must be no more than an embellishment, the individual charm of manifold diversity, and not a cramping barrier” (Wagner 53).

But the aim of this essay is not to determine whether Richard Wagner's views aligned with those of Nazi Germany. It is concerned with the *gesamtkunstwerk*, by which Wagner threw open the doors to a new art form which continues to profoundly influence the world in manifold ways. In 1882, the music critic Eduard Hanslick wrote these words:

“For a later age, which will be able to look back at the Wagner epidemic of our days in a spirit of calm evaluation, if also one of incredulous astonishment... the future cultural historian of Germany will be able to give authentic testimony... of how strongly the delirium tremens of the Wagnerian intoxication raged amongst us, and what sort of abnormalities of thought and feeling it occasioned in the 'cultured' people of its time” (Grey 411).

At the end of the Second World War, the romantic movements that had spawned in reaction to the Industrial Revolution were all but dead. Were then the predictions of Hanslick correct, and society was now able to look with “calm evaluation” on the *gesamtkunstwerk* that had previously “raged among us”? I would argue a resounding “No” – that the Total Work of Art lived on and became more powerful than ever before in Hollywood movies. Movies are the new *gesamtkunstwerk*. They match Wagner's vision incredibly well. The cinema is a synthesis of dance, music, poetry, painting, architecture, and every other art form in a way that no medium before it reached. The spectator enters the liminal space and truly “forgets the confines of the auditorium” (Wagner 34). And it is all united under the single vision of the director.

However, today movies do not merely remain as movies. More than 70% of the movies planned by the Walt Disney Company for the next 5 years are built off of the company's previous or acquired material (Baxter-Wright). Today the concept of *gesamtkunstwerk* goes beyond movies and takes the form of franchises. Franchises like *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* incorporate more than just the arts into their *gesamtkunstwerk*, but extend outward to include food, clothing, toys, gaming, and even vacations (Lemke 3). In essence, the goal of the modern franchise is to incorporate every area of life into their “Total Work of Art”.

Wagner's idea of bringing the spectator into the world is now taken to a new level with the advent of video games. The implications of this technology alone are so monumental that it would require another essay to cover them. But for the purposes of this essay, I would like to draw attention once again to Wagner's definition of *gesamtkunstwerk*, which has not changed through all of its reimaginings. All elements must be united to one goal. If, as in video games, the spectator virtually becomes one of those elements, then the spectator, too, will be united to one goal. This I think is extremely important to recognise.

The emergence of franchises is connected to the modern interest in "secondary worlds", a term coined by JRR Tolkien (Tolkien 112) which has since become prevalent among fantasy fiction writers and I believe is applicable to many aspects of modern society. The concept of "world building" essentially goes back to William Morris. In addition to his revolutionary work in textiles and architecture, he was also the first to write novels that took place in a world entirely of his own imagining (Sprague 28). The work of Morris had a direct influence on CS Lewis and JRR Tolkien, who went on to refine the idea into the fantasy genre that we know today. It took some time for Hollywood to catch on, but now the worlds of Lewis and Tolkien have become two of the largest franchises existing today, selling movies, clothing, video games, spinoff series, cookbooks, and just about everything imaginable (Lemke 4).

I would argue that once Hollywood discovered the power of a secondary universe as a franchise, they have begun to apply it to everything. We are now at the stage where we can no longer watch a movie without asking the question: "which universe does this belong to?". The ongoing debates among fans about what is "canon" in the *Star Wars* or *Marvel* universes is an obvious example of this. But this is a way of thinking, I believe, that is now prevalent in all films. An example of this thought process is the following: which universe does *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011) belong to? The answer is that it takes place in Victorian London. Is this, then, the same universe as *Sweeney Todd* (2007)? The answer is no, that is a different Victorian London universe.

The 2018 trailer for Disney's *Ralph Breaks the Internet* (2018) pushes the limits of this mindset even farther. What began as a synthesis of a plethora of arcade games into one universe

has now gone on to synthesise something much more abstract into its own universe: the internet. This carries the potential for this universe, this *gesamtkunstwerk*, to incorporate literally *everything*. At least everything that Disney could afford to buy, which arguably is everything.

I believe this enfranchisement has led to a reframing of our minds in which we are constantly asking the question “which universe?”. But what happens when we encounter different “versions” of our own universe? The different worlds presented to us by politicians and corporations and religions? Even the US government has been active in creating their own successful “America’s Army” franchise (Lemke 5). Willing suspension of disbelief is now taken to a new level. We must ask ourselves “which worlds are we willing to inhabit?”. In the words of John M Harrison:

“The act of narcissistic fantasy represented by the word “L’Oreal” already exists well upstream of any written or performed act of fantasy. JK Rowling & JRR Tolkien have done well for themselves, but – be honest! – neither of them is anywhere near as successful at worldbuilding as the geniuses who devised “Coke”, or “The Catholic Church”” (Harrison).

Wagner’s vision of the *gesamtkunstwerk* took some time to be realized in a medium of its own. In the above essay, I have shown to the best of my abilities that it has now been fully realized in the movie franchise, and that the limits of this realization continue to be pushed every day. Wagner’s vision is as beautiful as it is powerful, and movies are overflowing with all the beauty and power for good or for evil as Wagner’s original music dramas. If we are truly seeing a new *Gesamtkunstwerk*, then I would continually emphasize that to understand it we must go back to Wagner’s definition: it incorporates all things into one united goal, and it also incorporates the spectator. If one has any doubts about the real-world power this has, it is important to remember how Wagner’s own *gesamtkunstwerk* was taken and incorporated into the unified goal of Nazism.

And so I will conclude with a question: has the Total Work of Art, which began as a reaction to the dehumanizing ideals of the Industrial Revolution, now been recuperated to serve the same thing? To ask it another way: if, as Marshal McLuhan asserts, “the medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1), has this new Total Medium we’ve created become so powerful that it has sucked us back into Plato’s cave, unable to see the world except by its light? I can’t give the answer to these questions, nor is it possible to predict what form the *gesamtkunstwerk* of our own future will take. But since, like Pandora’s box, it has been irrevocably released to us, I think it is all the more important to look at its own origins and history to prepare ourselves for its potential.

Works Cited

- Baxter-Wright, Dusty. "Disney Has Released the First Live-Action Aladdin Trailer!" *Cosmopolitan*, Cosmopolitan, 12 Oct. 2018. Accessed 16 Oct. 2018. www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/entertainment/news/a39437/disney-future-release-dates/.
- Bernstein, Leonard. *The Joy of Music*. Amadeus Press, 2004.
- Burton, Tim, director. *Sweeney Todd: the Demon Barber of Fleet Street (2007)*. Warner Bros, 2008.
- François-Sappey Brigitte, and Jacques Arnould. *Charles Valentin Alkan*. Fayard, 1991.
- Grey, Thomas S. *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Harrison, M John. "Uncle Zip's Window." *RSS*, 27 Jan. 2007, 10:14AM. Accessed 17 Oct, 2018. web.archive.org/web/20080410181840/http://uzwi.wordpress.com/2007/01/27/very-afraid/.
- "Israel Public Radio Apologises for Playing Richard Wagner Music." *BBC News*, BBC, 3 Sept. 2018. Accessed 16 Oct. 2018. www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45393904.
- Lemke, Jay. "Critical Analysis across Media: Games, Franchises, and the New Cultural Order." *University of Michigan*, 2004. Accessed 20 Oct. 2018. <https://goo.gl/aqgzUw>
- Lockspeiser, Edward. *Debussy: His Life and Mind*. Cambridge University Press, 1978.
- McLuhan, Marshall. *The Medium Is the Message*. Gingko Press, 2005.
- Merriman, John M. *A History of Modern Europe: from the French Revolution to the Present*. W.W. Norton, 2010.
- Ritchie, Guy, director. *Sherlock Holmes: a Game of Shadows*. Roadshow, 2011.
- Sadie, Stanley, and John Tyrrell. *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Vol. 4, Grove, 2001.
- Spotts, Frederic. *Bayreuth: a History of the Wagner Festival*. Yale University Press, 1996.
- Sprague, De Camp L. *Literary Swordsmen and Sorcerers: the Makers of Heroic Fantasy*. Arkham House, 1976.
- Strunk, Oliver. *Source Readings in Music History. the Romantic Era*. Faber, 1981.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. *Tree and Leaf: Including the Poem Mythopoeia*. Houghton Mifflin, 1989.
- Wagner, Richard, and Mary Whittall. *My Life*. Translated by W. Ashton Ellis, Da Capo Press, 1992.