

# Wagner and the (Re)mediation of Art: Gesamtkunstwerk and Nineteenth-Century Theories of Media

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## I. Media and cultural history

In the age of information technology and mass media we are inclined to think that concepts such as *multimediality* or *intermediality* are the inventions of our contemporary culture. However, since antiquity philosophers and men of letters have been pondering about the nature and effects of media and communication: observe the countless number of theories on rhetoric, poetics, visual representation and musical composition.

In the nineteenth century there was an enhanced interest in media and art theories. This increased awareness of the relationship between content and form, object and subject, message and medium by the end of the century resulted in such hybrid – or intermedial – works of art as for example the visual poems of Mallarmé or the musical dramas of Richard Wagner. The borders of the different media – literary, musical or visual alike – gradually became blurred, and metapoetics – the act of communication that also communicates something about communication itself – developed into one of the guiding principles of creativity. Artists felt more compelled than ever before to express their ideas not only in works of art, but also in different theoretical writings. A considerable number of essays, letters and books were written on the creative process, or on art as medium of communication and its role in society by poets such as Shelley, Coleridge, Goethe or Schiller, architects like Semper or Schinkel, musicians as Berlioz, Liszt, Schumann or Wagner.

This paper will focus on Richard Wagner's (1813-1883) theories on *Gesamtkunstwerk* and on his ideas about theatre as an ideal medium. On the one hand, it argues that Wagner's concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* can be regarded as a theory on mass media – or rather public media – and therefore it cannot be separated from his social and political ideas. On the other hand, it aims to take under close scrutiny the relation between the idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* and the opera *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (1868), which can be seen as a metapoetical materialisation *par excellence* of Wagner's reflection on art, media and re-mediating cultural artefacts. This paper endeavours to present the idea of multimediality in a cultural-historical perspective and hopes to elucidate the very influential and widely used – though mostly misused – role of the Wagnerian notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the context of his theoretical writings and operas.

## II. Perspectives on the Wagnerian concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* and its nineteenth-century cultural context

### II. 1. *Gesamtkunstwerk* and media

Richard Wagner was one of the most influential nineteenth-century opera composers and men of theatre. Besides his stage works, he also wrote a significant number of philosophical essays encompassing a wide range of topics from music to drama theory, and from politics to social issues. He was one of the first musicians to ponder on the nature of media and on its manifestations as forms of communication between artist and public. One of his best known concepts about the ideal media is *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which is usually translated as “total work of art” or “synthesis of arts.” (Millington, 232)

The term *Gesamtkunstwerk* was first used by the philosopher and writer Eusebius Trahndorff (1783-1863) in his work *Ästhetik oder Lehre von der Weltanschauung und Kunst (Aesthetics of the Study of World View and Art)* (1827). Wagner mentioned the word *Gesamtkunstwerk* in his essay “Art and Revolution” in 1849, where he applied the concept for describing the ideal relationship of music, text and dance in the *drama*, which he regarded the highest art form, the *art-work of the future*. According to Wagner, ancient Greek tragedy was the forerunner of this idealised art-work of the future. He elaborated on these ideas in another essay, “The Art-Work of the Future” (1849), which he dedicated to the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872), who – preceding Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) – exercised a great influence on

Wagner's thought. A few years later, Wagner wrote a synthesis of his ideas about the relation between artist and audience, theatre and art, Gesamtkunstwerk and drama, in a book length essay entitled *Opera and Drama* (1852).

The notion of Gesamtkunstwerk has often been interpreted as the description of the Wagnerian musical drama in which the different types of media (music, text and stage scenery) join forces and interact. According to another popular meaning attached to this term, all kinds of art forms have equal rights and privileges on the stage. However, as Carl Dahlhaus already pointed out, neither the truism that in opera the different media interact, nor the questionable thesis that every media should be equally represented in an opera grasp the essence of Gesamtkunstwerk as it appears in Wagner's writings. Instead,

[its] importance resides in the aesthetic and social demand we raise when we refer to theatre as a 'total work of art': the notion of that theatre, although akin to an event than a work, nevertheless partakes of the ideal of art which was elevated to a metaphysical dignity in the classical and romantic age. [...] Wagner succeeded in imposing on his age the 'revolution of aesthetic values' and in raising for opera the same lofty claims that Beethoven had achieved for the symphony. In so doing, he transformed opera into music drama. (Dahlhaus, 195)

The idea of Gesamtkunstwerk is closely related to Wagner's social-aesthetic utopias. In "The Art-Work of the Future" Wagner not only laid down the founding ideas of the ideal opera, which he called musical drama, but he also elaborated on his ideas about the ideal relationship between artist and audience. Art theory and social theory are inseparably intertwined in Wagner's oeuvre. It would be quite misleading to discuss them separately, since together they form the specific Wagnerian world view which has a strongly overaestheticised character.

One of the prototypes of this aestheticised *Weltanschauung* is represented in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (1868). The state of Art is a direct indication about the state of society and vice versa. Wagner believed that Art has a formative impact on society, and one of the highest purposes of Art should be the creation and representation of the ideals of the universal mankind. The separate artistic media – music, text, dance, painting, architecture – which represent the different human senses – auditive, visual and kinesthetic – can only fulfil their original function if they interact in perfect harmony with each other.

Love is symbol of this ideal communion of arts and people. This was a recurrent topic in all of Wagner's stage works from the earliest *Das Liebesverbot* (*The Ban on Love*) (1834) to his last musical drama, *Parsifal* (1882).

Each separate faculty of man is limited by bounds; but his united, agreed, and reciprocally helping faculties – and thus his faculties in *mutual love* of one another – combine to form the self-completing, unbounded, universal faculty of men. [...] Knowledge through Love is Freedom; and freedom of man's faculties is – *All-faculty*. Only the Art which answers to this 'all-faculty' of man is, therefore, *free*; and not the *Art-variety*, which only issues from a single human faculty. [...] And when every barrier has thus fallen, then are there no more *arts* and no more boundaries, but only *Art*, the universal, undivided. ("The Art-Work of the Future," 25)

Wagner's theories about society and art as ideal media for shaping Man were influenced by the Young Germany movement. The Young Germany was a group of artists and intellectuals, who were active in the period of 1830-1850. Their movement swept all over Europe in the nineteenth century. In Germany Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) was the spiritual leader of the Young Germans who were seeking to liberate politics, religion and arts from the trammels of the old conventions and systems. The movement aimed to criticise not only the state or the religious establishments, but also Romanticism, which they rejected because it lacked political engagement.

Young Germans glorified Love, especially sexual love, which they regarded socially subversive. They positioned Love against established social and political power. Art had to be imbued with frank and free eroticism. In opera this meant that they departed from Weber's Romanticism and turned towards the sensationalism of the French and the hedonistic lyricism of the Italians. Wagner embraced all the ideologies of the Young Germans, which were very much of his taste, and threw himself with fervour in their movement.

What distinguished Wagner's theory of Greek drama and his concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* from the long tradition of classically oriented aesthetics is the strong component of social theory synthesising the ideas of Feuerbach and the "Young Hegelians," forerunners of Marx. In his so-called Zürich-writings (1849-1851), but especially in *Art and Revolution* Wagner draws a traditionally idealised picture of the "combined artwork" of ancient Greek tragedy. Tragedy was a superior art form not only because it united the "separate arts" – poetry, dance

and music – in the service of the drama, but also because it had a strong “communal” (‘gemeinsame’) aspect. The performance of the Tragedy, the event itself, because of its social, ethical and religious role, was able to unite the Athenian people creating a spiritual bond among them through art. In this sense the term of Gesamtkunstwerk might also be rendered as “communal or collective artwork of the future.”

Later in the *Opera and Drama* Wagner’s attention shifts from social theory to history, criticism and aesthetic theory. However, while Wagner never relinquished his conviction of the aesthetic potential of the music drama, as he conceived it, the term Gesamtkunstwerk was abandoned in his later writings (along with much else of Wagner’s “revolutionary” rhetoric). Wagner himself remarks in a foreword written to the essay *Art and Revolution* republished in his Collected Writings (*Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen*): “My ideas drew gradually back from contact with the political excitement of the day, and soon developed more and more exclusively as an *artistic ideal*.” (*Art and Revolution*, 7)

## II. 2. Gesamtkunstwerk and the idealised Greek society

In the introductory section of *Art and Revolution* Wagner lays down the premises of his intellectual quest: “to discover the meaning of Art as a factor in the life of the State, and to make ourselves acquainted with it as a social product.” (*Art and Revolution*, 9)

The pinnacle of the “strong manhood of freedom” was to be found in the Grecian spirit “at the flowering time of its art and polity.” The antique Greek spirit found its perfect expression in the “highest conceivable form of art:” drama. The dissolution of the Athenian State went hand-in-hand with the downfall of Tragedy.

As the spirit of *Community* split itself along a thousand lines of egoistic cleavage, so was the great united work of Tragedy disintegrated into its individual factors. [...] To *Philosophy* and not Art, belong the two thousand years which, since the decadence of Grecian Tragedy, have passed till our own day. (*Art and Revolution*, 11)

The Greek idealised communal existence of men was seen as the supreme form of Being, which was most perfectly represented in the ancient Greek Tragedy. Individualism was regarded as a sign of decay that led to selfishness, inability to give and share, hence it symbolised lack of Love. Philosophy was the medium of individualism, and therefore, it was the opposite of Art. Contemporary society was alienated

from its true essence, commonality, which could be illustrated with the degenerate conditions of the theatre. Wagner laments on “how incapable is our stage to gather up each branch of Art in its highest and most perfect expression – the Drama.” (*Art and Revolution*, 17) Therefore, modern artists need a revolution to save Art and public taste. “Grecian Art was *conservative*, because it was a worthy and adequate expression of the public conscience: with us, true Art is *revolutionary*, because its very existence is opposed to the ruling spirit of the community.” (*Art and Revolution*, 23)

In the Tragedy the Greeks were in intimate connection with their Gods and heroes:

It was the nation itself – in intimate connection with its own history – that stood mirrored in its art-work, that communed with itself and, within the span of a few hours, feasted its eyes with its own nobles essence. (*Art and Revolution*, 23)

Theatre was a medium through which the Greek nation was able to recognise and (re)mediate its own history and its ideals of beauty and freedom. McLuhan argues that the “content” of any medium is always another medium. (2003, 8) Almost the same logic of the “nested media” can be traced in Wagner’s writings: the Greek theatre is regarded as the medium of the drama, the drama appears as the medium of Greek religion and history, which mediated the “content” of the Greek spirit. The aesthetic organisation of the Greek society granted harmonious coexistence between artists and audience, theatre and everyday reality.

This idealised image of the Greek society was not entirely the product of Wagner’s fantasy. Since the beginning of the late eighteenth century it became a recurrent topic of the European philosophical and aesthetic discourse. Drawing on Kant’s theory of disinterested aesthetic character, Schiller argued in his epistolary letter, *Briefe über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen (Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man)* (1795), that because of its disinterested character aesthetic experience is most suitable for the moral and political education of man. Here the Greek state is seen as a political work of art, contrasted to modern bureaucratic political and social systems. Schiller criticised Kant’s view on the dichotomy between emotion and reason, claiming that this division might characterise modern human beings, but it was not valid for ancient Greece, where reason and emotion seem to have been in harmony. In the preface to his drama *Die Braut von Messina (The Bride of Messina)* (1803) he praised the openness of Greek public life

and opposed it to the hierarchical and individualistic modern society. He argues that:

The poet must reopen the palaces, he must place courts of justice beneath the canopy of heaven, restore the gods, reproduce every extreme which the artificial frame of actual life has abolished; throw aside every factitious influence on the mind or condition of man which impedes the manifestation of his inward nature and primitive character. (Schiller, 6)

Hegel developing Schiller's ideas about the ancient Greek society, in his early lectures of Jena in 1805-6, described the Greek *polis* as a work of art, contrasting it to modern state, which, he argued, was hostile to art. This political concept of beauty took a different form later in Hegel's writings on the history of philosophy and law. (Borchmeyer 2002, 61) After his death, some ardent followers of his philosophy known as Young Hegelians, among them Karl Marx and Richard Wagner, hailed the manner in which he demonstrated the need for an organic society, where is no separation between individual and society.

Wagner was an admirer of Schiller's and Hegel's theories about ancient Greece, which undeniably gave him the impetus for his own essays on Art as medium for shaping an ideal society. However, the great historical sin of the Greeks, according to Wagner, was the institution of slavery. Slavery was a sin against nature, because in nature everybody was born free. "The sin of history against nature, just as today it is the sin of our social system, that the healthiest nations in the healthiest climates have brought forth cripples and outcasts." (*Art and Revolution*, 22)

The Barbarians themselves, who subjugated the Greeks, performed the revenge of nature on this historical sin and "all was over with Grecian freedom, strength and beauty." Only a few years before Wagner, Karl Marx had also written on the topic of the "private individual" who was a slave in his *Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie* (1843), and he contrasted the slaves with the men of *res publica*. (Borchmeyer 2002, 62) The affairs of the private, everyday life – namely, work at home and in the fields – was done by slaves, as a result the private individual was not yet emancipated but remained a slave. Whereas the Greek *polis* had slavery at its natural basis, the modern state was founded on emancipated slavery, bourgeois society. "The slave has not become a freeman, but the freeman a slave," Wagner asserts in *Art and Revolution* (22). Wagner argued that since the implementation of slavery caused the downfall of the Greek nation, the contemporary society should not revert to Greekdom, instead it should build up a

new social order based on a less naive principle than that of the ancient Greece. Here again it is hard not observe the influence of Hegel's philosophy about the progress of human history.

Only *Revolution*, not slavish *Restoration*, can give us back that highest Art-work. [...] The Art-work of the Future must embrace the spirit of 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. (*Art and Revolution*, 24)

Further he argued in "The Art-Work of the Future" "the narrow-seeing national-man" has to develop into "a universal and all-seeing *Man*." ("The Art-Work of the Future," 38) It is the irony of fate – and of course the twentieth-century reception of his openly anti-Semitic writings – that in spite of all these ideas emphasising the universality of man, Wagner's oeuvre has been used and misused for the most horrid nationalistic and fascist propaganda purposes. Due to the re-mediation of Wagner's works by his descendants and his nazi admirers, his name and music has constantly been associated in public memory with the destruction and nationalistic expansionism. Witness such movies as the controversial *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), where Wagner's music functions as a "triumph march" for the Ku-Klux-Klan procession, or *Apocalypse Now* (1979), where in the famous helicopter scene leitmotif and background music for destruction is Wagner's *The Ride of the Valkyries*.

### II. 3. Theatre as media – *Gesamtkunstwerk* and the *Greek revival*

Theatre, "the mightiest of all art-establishments," has to be the fostering institution for the Art-work of the Future. The theatre should not operate as a show business concentrating on profit, but instead it ought to be financed by public donations, because only then can it fulfil its true role. In "The Art-Work of the Future," when discussing the essence of architecture, Wagner further elaborated on his concept of the ideal Theatre, which was also the founding idea of his later enterprise in Bayreuth.

The construction of that edifice whose every part shall answer to a common and artistic aim alone, – thus in the building of the *Theatre*, the master-builder needs only to comport himself as *artist*, to keep a single eye upon the *art-work*. [...] For the demand of the collective (*gemeinsam*) audience is the demand for the *artwork*. [...] The performer transplants himself upon the

stage, by means of all visual and aural faculties; while the performer becomes an artist only by complete absorption into the public. ("The Art-Work of the Future," 85)

It cannot be a coincidence that these Wagnerian ideas coincide with the nineteenth-century *Greek Revival* in European – and especially German – architecture initiated by Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1781-1841). Schinkel preferred Greek style to Imperial Roman architecture, because the latter was associated with the French occupiers. Hence the building itself has the role of a media. In Wagner's writings, too, everything that belonged to Roman civilisation was regarded a form of cultural degeneration.

Another famous nineteenth-century architect Gottfried Semper (1803-1879), Wagner's friend, who was also exiled because of his participation in the Dresden revolutionary movements, held the same opinion as Wagner on the role of the Theatre. In his book entitled *The Four Elements of Architecture* (1851), Semper views the origins and function of Greek architecture through similar anthropological lenses that we can find in Wagner's writings about Gesamtkunstwerk. During his stay in Zürich Wagner met with Semper several times and this is the time when he became interested in building his *Festspielhaus*. However, according to Borchmeyer, Semper's plans for a monumental festival theatre in München emphasised the architectonic aspect far more than Wagner could ever have wanted. (Borchmeyer 2002, 69) In a letter that dates from Zürich, 22 October 1850 written to his friend, the painter Ernst Benedikt Kietz (1815-1892), Wagner sketches his ideas about this theatre:

I would have a theatre erected here on the spot, made of planks, and have the most suitable singers to join me here, and arrange everything necessary for this one special occasion, so that I could be certain of an outstanding performance of the opera. I would then send out invitations far and wide to all who were interested in my works, ensure that the audience was decently filled, and give three performances – free, of course – one after the other in the space of a week, after which the theatre would then be demolished and the whole affair would be over and done with. Only something of this nature can still appeal to me. (Wagner 1988, 216-217)

For Wagner – contrary to his architect friend Semper – not the theatre building itself is the end of creation, but it is only a means for the performance. The emphasis in Wagner's case is not on the static nature of the theatre building, but rather on its more abstract dynamic

potential, on its ability to actually create a community from the members of the audience and the actors. The theatre – that is the totality of the building, the play, the performance, the actors and the audience – is a medium through which artistic and social perfection could be achieved.

In *Opera and Drama* Wagner also accentuates the dynamic nature of the Gesamtkunstwerk, which is not seen as a static art form, but rather as an aesthetic (almost physically experienced) action. It is production and re-production at the same time. Here Gesamtkunstwerk is described as a sexual intercourse between a man and a woman. It is the anthropomorphic re-presentation of the ecstatic experience, rapture and transformation through the enactment of love. Or as he writes in one of his letters from Zürich 25/26 January 1854 to his friend, August Röckel: “But the true human being is both man and woman, and only in the union of man and woman does the true human being exist, and only through love, therefore, do man and woman become human.” (Wagner 1988, 303)

#### II. 4. Theatre and Gesamtkunstwerk as an enactment of Love

The same anthropological symbolism is used in *Opera and Drama* where the Gesamtkunstwerk is described as an enactment of love, as the perfect harmonious interaction between a woman and a man:

Music is woman. The nature of Woman is *love*: but this love is a *receiving* (empfangende), and in receipt (*Empfängniss*) an unreservedly *surrendering*, love. [...] Woman first gains her full individuality in the moment of surrender. She is the Undine who glides soulless through the waves of her native element, till she receives her soul through love of a man. The look of innocence in a woman's eye is the endlessly pellucid mirror in which the man can only see the general faculty for love, till he is able to see in it the likeness of himself. When he has recognised himself therein, then also is the woman's all-faculty condensed into one strenuous necessity, to love him with the all-dominant fervour of full surrender. (*Opera and Drama*, 90)

Wagner had considered the dissolution of the individual in an act of Love a necessary condition for the creation of the Gesamtkunstwerk in “The Art-Work of the Future” and *Art and Revolution*. In *Opera and Drama* the merging of the individual appeared as the enactment of Love, as the union of man and woman in order to create a third person, Man.

In this Purely-human are nurtured both the Manly and the Womanly, which only by their union through Love become first the Human Being.

The impetus necessary to the poetic intellect, in this its poesis, is therefore Love,— and that the love of man to woman. Yet not that frivolous, carnal love, in which man only seeks to satisfy an appetite, but the deep yearning to know himself redeemed from his egoism through his sharing in the rapture of the loving woman; and this yearning is the creative moment (das dichtende Moment) of the Understanding. (*Opera and Drama*, 168)

In the third part of *Opera and Drama*, where Wagner tackles the problem of “The Arts of Poetry and Tone in the Drama of the Future,” he describes the Poet and the Musician as two different persons. The Poet is associated with an older man, the Musician with a younger man.

In fact the Musician, in his practical intermediation between the poetic aim and its final bodily realisation through an actual scenic representation, might necessarily be conditioned by the Poet as a separate person, and indeed, a younger than himself—if not necessarily in point of years, yet at least in point of character. This younger person, through standing closer to Life’s instinctive utterance—especially (auch) in its lyric moments,— might well appear to the more experienced, more reflecting Poet, as more fitted to realise his aim than he himself is; and from this his natural inclination towards the younger, the more buoyant man—so soon as the latter took up with willing enthusiasm the poetic-aim imparted to him by the older—there would bloom that fairest, noblest Love, which we have learnt to recognise as the enabling force of Art-work. (*Opera and Drama*, 247)

Here we can already see the change in Wagner’s thought on Gesamtkunstwerk, which nevertheless still appears as a primary goal and an ideal media, but the real mediation – or “practical intermediation” – is bequeathed on music. In “The Art-Work of the Future” Wagner had already depicted Music with the metaphor of “ocean” (34) that binds and separates, that is literally a “medium,” it is “in between” the continents, connects and disconnects them. Music is characterised with the active role of intermediation that binds together the different arts. These ideas preceded Wagner’s acquaintance in 1854 with Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation* (1819).

### **III. *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* – the (re)mediation of German history**

*Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* can be interpreted as an artistic realisation of the theoretical premises presented in the *Art and*

*Revolution*, “The Art-Work of the Future” and *Opera and Drama* about the Gesamtkunstwerk. The relationship of Word and Music, Art and Society, Art as medium and Aesthetic State as a political masterwork are the major topics of this musical drama. In *A Communication to My Friends* (45), Wagner wrote that the draft of the opera had already been conceived in 1845, but he fostered the idea until 1861. The last impulse to write the opera came in Venice, where – according to *My Life*, Wagner’s autobiography – he was sightseeing with the Wesendoncks and he saw Titian’s *Assunta* (*Assumption of the Virgin*) in the Academia, where he suddenly realised that he should write the *Meistersinger*.

In spite of all my indifference, I must confess that the ‘Assumption of the Virgin’ by Titian exercised a most sublime influence over me, so that, as soon as I realised its conception, my old powers revived within me, as though by a sudden flash of inspiration. I determined at once on the composition of the *Meistersinger*. (*My Life*, 208)

He followed this up with accounts of how he conceived “with the greatest clarity” the overture on the train journey back to Vienna, got the composer Cornelius to raid the Imperial libraries for research material, and applied to the publisher Schott – in vain – for financial help. A further visit to Nürnberg in August 1861 had provided “plenty of pretty things to see. At once it resounded to me as an overture to *Die Meistersinger*.”

The plot of the opera revolves around winning a singing contest by a knight, who came to Nürnberg for the sake of Art. As a prize of his victory, the winner gains Eva, the daughter of one of the *Meistersingers*. The love story between Walther von Stolzing and Eva Pogner runs parallel with Walther’s education process to become a *Mastersinger* and to create the perfect work of art. Hence, producing the master song leads to love and unification with Eva. But on the other hand, in order to create the master song, Walther needs the inspiration of love. Performing an artistic act is strongly bound with the following enactment of love. According to the logic of the dramaturgy – very similarly to *Tannhäuser* and to his ideas in *Opera and Drama* – love is linked to the artistic enactment of the master song, while the performance of the master song is itself the enactment of love. As Walther sings in the third stanza of his prize song: “through victory in song, I had won / Parnassus and Paradise!”.

The reference to Titian’s picture in *My Life*, might position Walther’s prize song as an ekphrasis, as the poetic description of

visual arts. Traditionally, the attribute of the ascendant Mary is a garland of stars – which in the poem is given to Walther’s beloved, the Muse of Parnassus, whose image succeeds as Eva in Paradise in the second stanza of the song. By implication Eva is to be identified with Mary. Wagner concentrates in Eva’s figure all the women figures of his previous operas from Venus to Elisabeth, and from Elsa to Isolde. Eva – as her name might also suggest – is the prototype Woman, who represent inspiration and creation at the same time. In spite of the direct Biblical allusion (Genesis 2:9) Eva by no means is the temptress luring Adam (Walther) to his ruin, but is rather the conglomerate of Muse and Saint, who nevertheless is not deprived of human characteristics. She is a type of an ideal human being that Wagner sketched in his theoretical writings. She picks the fruit from the Tree of Life instead of the Tree of Knowledge. It is hard not to realise again the influence of Feuerbach’s philosophy of religion and the artistic reflection of Wagner’s earlier theories contrasting Philosophy (Tree of Knowledge) and Art (Tree of Life). Only true Art that is in perfect harmony with life – the recurrent idea in *Tannhäuser* – is able to fulfil its aesthetic function. Borchmeyer (2002, 280) points out that Walther’s vision is like a mirror image of Albrecht Dürer’s 1504 copper engraving of *Adam and Eve*, a work which Wagner must certainly have known. In this picture Adam is seen offering Eve an apple from the tree of knowledge already poisoned by the serpent. By contrast, in Walther’s song the paradise is not lost, but actually found when Eve offers the fruit of the tree of life to Walther.

In spite of all the similarities between *Die Meistersinger* and Wagner’s earlier writings on Greek theatre and society, there is a remarkable change in this opera. *Die Meistersinger* is more than only an abstract story about the role of art in shaping society or vice versa, since the whole musical drama is grounded in the German history and culture. It is the re-mediation of the cultural memory of Nürnberg that is the main concern in the opera. The ideal context for this act of re-mediation is the open stage theatre at the Festival Meadow, which corresponds to the ideal openness of the Greek amphitheatres. While in *Der Fliegende Holländer* (1843) and *Lohengrin* (1850) the emphasis fell on myth, in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (1868) history displaced myth.

The older Hans Sachs and the young Walther von Stolzing are the embodiments of the “older Poet” and “young Musician” described in the *Opera and Drama*, and only from their ideal co-operation results the production of the *master song*. In *Die Meistersinger* the concept of Gesamtkunstwerk also has the aspect of *Gemeinsamwerk*, whose importance Wagner stressed in *Art and Revolution*. Thus it satisfies his

original idea about the ultimate art form, the total theatrical aesthetic experience – or Gesamtkunstwerk – in which the (re-)mediation takes place not only between the different arts, but also between past and present, as well as artist and the Folk.

Borchmeyer points out that the idea of the Folk as it appears in *Die Meistersinger* must have been influenced by Gervinus's *Geschichte der poetischen National-Litteratur der Deutschen* (*History of German Literature*) (1835-42). According to Gervinus, the goal which mankind must set itself was to lead the *Volk* into the realm of history. (Borchmeyer 2002, 253) In *A Communication to My Friends*, where Wagner explicates the genesis of his operas and their ideology, he wrote that

I took Hans Sachs as the last manifestation of the art productive spirit of the Folk (*Volksgeist*), and set him, in this sense, in contrast to the pettifogging bombast of the other Meistersinger; to whose absurd pedanticism, of *tabulatur* and prosody, I gave a concrete personal expression in the figure of the "Marker" (Beckmesser). (*A Communication to My Friends*, 45)

These lines remind of his ideas about the Folk in "The Art-Work of the Future," where Wagner sets as ideal for his Gesamtkunstwerk the organic and natural creation of the Folk, who is the embodiment of "Life's immediate utterance."

Who speaks and sings, at the same time expresses his feelings by *gestures* and by *motion* – at least whoever does this from sheer instinct, like the *Folk*, – though not the tutored foundling of our song-professors. Where such an art still flourishes, it finds of itself a constant train of fresh turns of expression, fresh forms of composition ("*Dichtung*"). ("The Art-Work of the Future," 57)

A few pages earlier we can read the following:

Where the *Folk* made poetry, – and only by the Folk, or in the footsteps of the Folk, can poetry be really made, – there did the Poetic purpose rise to life alone upon the shoulders of the arts of Dance and Tone, as the head of the full-fledged human being. [...] Tragedy was therefore the entry of the Art-work of the Folk upon the public arena of political life. ("The Art-Work of the Future," 50-51)

The art of the Meistersingers cannot fulfill its original function anymore – being a medium of the Folk – because it is estranged from the people and instead of renewing its creative principles it sticks strictly to the

rules of the *Tabulatur*. It runs the risk of degenerating into an aristocratic art form – remote from the people – and of dying out as all the other arts practised by the nobility. In fact that is why Walther sold his estates and left his castles to find a way back to Art and the Folk, the ideal Society where Art can still fulfil its true function. As Borchmeyer observes, this produces a paradoxical situation: the burghers are turning into aristocrats, while the aristocrat is joining the burghers to revive in the spirit of the people. The citizens of Nürnberg feel proud that they alone still cultivate Art. Pogner remarks with a sense of self-consciousness that “in the far-flung German empire we alone still cultivate art.” (2003, 193)

It is symbolic that on Midsummer Day the Mastersingers leave the hermetically closed Academy for the open public space, the meadow, where the singing contest takes place. Sachs says that

And so you should not regret it  
If each year on Saint John’s Day,  
Instead of making the people come to you,  
You descend from your clouds  
And appeal to the people in person.

The *Herzensegiessungen eines kunstliebende Klosterbruders* (*Outpourings of an Art-Loving Friar*) (1797) written by Wackenroder and Tieck – which undeniably left an imprint on Wagner’s thinking – is a tribute to medieval German art and literature. It has a section in honour of Albrecht Dürer that also contains a eulogy of ancient Nürnberg.

Nürnberg! O town of erstwhile fame! [...] What heartfelt love I feel for the creations of that age, creations which speak so vigorous, powerful, and true a language! How they draw me back to that century of yours when you, O Nürnberg, were the life-teeming school of our fatherland’s art and when a truly fruitful and prodigal spirit flourished within your walls: when Master Hans Sachs and Adam Kraft the sculptor, and above all, Albrecht Dürer [...] were still alive! How often I longed to return to that age! (Borchmeyer 2002, 252)

All this continues to reverberate in Sachs’ declaration of love for his Nürnberg in the so-called *Wahn* Monologue:

How peacefully with its faithful customs,  
Contended in deed and work,  
Lies, in the middle of Germany,  
My dear Nürnberg!

Wagner's Sachs differs both from the title character of Ludwig Deinhardstein's (1794-1859) dramatic poem *Hans Sachs* (1827), who is concerned only with poetry and love, or from the cobbler-poet in the opera *Hans Sachs* (1840) by Albert Lortzing (1801-1851), the two major sources of Wagner's opera. However, Wagner's Sachs is closer to Lortzing's protagonist, who asserts that "Love's happiness, and our German fatherland" inspired his poetry. When he leaves Nürnberg he is consoled by the thought that "German land" may be found "elsewhere." (Borchmeyer 2003, 191) Lortzing's most significant innovation compared to Deinhardstein is that the townsfolk plays a major role in the action just as in Wagner's opera.

After Walther won the contest and Eva gave him the laurel crown, he would be ready to reject the title of the Meistersinger and his admission to the singers' guild as long as he has Eva. He asserts that "I will be happy without Masterhood!". This is followed up by Sachs' final soliloquy, which became one of the most controversial pieces of Wagner's oeuvre. The long monologue ends with the following exhortation:

Beware! Evil tricks threaten us: –  
 if the German people and kingdom should  
 one day decay under a false, foreign rule,  
 soon no prince will understand his people any more,  
 and foreign mists with foreign vanities  
 they will plant in our German land;  
 what is German and true no one would know any more,  
 if it did not live in the honour of the German Masters.  
 Therefore I say to you:  
 Honour your German Masters,  
 Then you will conjure up good spirits!  
 And if you favour their endeavours,  
 Even should the  
 Holy Roman Empire dissolve in mist,  
 For us there would yet remain  
 Holy German Art!

Wagner in *A Communication to My Friends* (46) referred to this speech as a "humorous" and "ironic" discourse. "Sachs champions the Meistersingerhood in a *humorous* address. (...) At that time it took alone the shape of *Irony*." According to Borchmeyer these lines "express the political resignation Wagner felt following the failure of the Revolution of 1848-49, together with his disappointed hopes for the rebirth of the

German Reich.” (2002, 255) Now that the hopes of the German Reich shattered, the only reality that remained was Art. James Treadwell, however, draws a direct line from Sachs’ monologue to “the militarism of Bismarck’s forcible creation of the Second Reich.” (2003, 199) David B. Dennis demonstrates in an article how the Third Reich – and especially Hitler himself – appropriated the *Meistersinger* and turned the opera into a Nazi anthem. (2002, 98-119) Dennis convincingly points out how the Nazi propaganda by concentrating on the figure of Sachs instead of focusing on Walther, re-mediated all the ideas and modernistic tendencies of Wagner’s oeuvre into an icon of cultural conservatism.

It is Walther von Stolzing who performed a *revolution* with his *art-work of the future*, and who united in perfect harmony in his master song the spirit of Art and Folk, the new and old: “Es klang so alt, und war doch so neu.” In *What is German?* (1878) – an essay saturated with anti-Semitism – Wagner expressed similar thoughts to Sachs’ monologue at the end of *Die Meistersinger*:

With the fall of outer political might, i.e. with the lost significance of the Romish Kaiserdom, which we bemoan to-day as the foundering of German glory, there begins on the contrary the real development of genuine German essence (Wesen). (*What is German?*, 6)

Theatre as medium and Gesamtkunstwerk as the act of mediation should be the ideal sphere for both Art and Politics. The true goal of both Art and Politics according to Wagner, should be the creation of a spiritual community, whose individuals live in harmony with each other and their actions are characterised by the unity of Will. Media – and especially the Theatre because of its Gesamtkunstwerk multimedia character – is an effective tool for shaping and developing the sense of communality and unity in society. This context of the Gesamtkunstwerk affects the traditional roles of creator and receiver, because instead of passive aesthetic experience, it enables the active participation in the creation of the art-work. The artistic act and enactment takes place not in a hermetically closed artistic space, but in a social context, therefore the borders between Art and reality become blurred. Wagner argued that the media is not only an external manifestation of social reality, but they are the “message” of the society. Wagner was one of the first intellectuals to consciously reflect on the relation of media as an important factor in society, and to realise its ability and importance in shaping the world-view of the people. Therefore he might be regarded the forerunner of modern media theorists.

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## SUMMARY

In the works of many nineteenth-century European writers and artists there is an increased awareness of the form and medium of the artistic expression which is seen not simply as a convention or as the outer shell of the artwork, but as its guiding tenet. This article focuses on the idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as conceived in Wagner’s theoretical writings and in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, and it aims to discuss the term in the context of nineteenth-century theories of media and aesthetic thinking. Richard Wagner revisited and

re-envisioned the theories of theatre and musical drama of his Romantic precursors and invested the notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk* with a new meaning. He extended its range of function and relevance far beyond aesthetics, claiming along the lines of the Schillerian tradition that an ideal artwork is the product of an ideal community, and likewise, an ideal community can be shaped by its participation in the production of the ideal artwork. According to Wagner the musical theatre was the perfect medium for producing the total and ideal work of art, hence also for shaping the ideal community.

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