

## Wagner as Leitmotif: The New German Cinema and Beyond

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Via the films of Alexander Kluge, Thomas Elsaesser pleads for a phenomenon which he calls "the Holocaust in West German cinema: absence as presence."<sup>1</sup> This notion demands a reassessment of much criticism of the New German Cinema. The claim that the New German Cinema did not completely sidestep the nadir of its nation's history, but that some of its directors treated that history in concealed form, is arresting (and sustainable too, I feel, for Edgar Reitz's *Heimat* trilogy [1984–2004], as I discuss in the last section of this essay). Also present in largely concealed form was Hitler, though this gap in the text remained in keeping with Nazi aesthetics.<sup>2</sup> The onscreen absence of Hitler, still ever present in the historical wings, implied as a corollary the absence from New German Cinema soundtracks of the figure appropriated by Nazi aesthetics, Richard Wagner.<sup>3</sup> A couple of major exceptions, to be explored below, prove the rule.

Wagner may be the cultural figure most resistant to transnational tendencies in identity politics, and to notions of world, or at least internationally nomadic, music. The hallowed counterpoint between Verdi and Wagner is worth recalling in relation to postwar identity politics in Italian and German films respectively. In the former case, Verdi bridged an unsustainable historical parallel between Italian Resistance in World War II and the Risorgimento.<sup>4</sup> This eliding function was underpinned by Verdi's credentials as an icon of democracy and a figure of the people, successfully blending artistic and public life. And Wagner? In the West Germany of the 1970s, Wagner seemed largely beyond redemp-

tion. Instead, film soundtrack references to the German musical tradition concentrated on the historically charged overtones of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, in particular the "Ode to Joy," and a Haydn melody, better known by occupied Europe as the military band arrangement of "Deutschland, Deutschland über alles." Film soundtracks attempted to get beyond the recent patina of reception to restore these works' historical origins. No such attempt seemed feasible with Wagner, with the Promethean exception of Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's film discussed below, and a number of films by Werner Herzog, who in a sense disregards such debates.

SYBERBERG, *HITLER, EIN FILM AUS DEUTSCHLAND (HITLER, A FILM FROM GERMANY, A.K.A. OUR HITLER)* (1977)

This film is an idiosyncratic attempt to approach twentieth-century German history and cultural history via their common link in nineteenth-century Romantic nationalism.<sup>5</sup> Lasting over seven hours, the film avoids documentation, instead lending Hitler's features to a ventriloquist's puppets, even, drastically, to a dog-shaped puppet. The provocative alternate title in English, *Our Hitler*, foregrounds the uncomfortable link between him and us. Ventriloquism is the perfect dramatic means of suggesting the fulfillment of our desires. Against our wishes, we are plunged into audience identification with this Hitler, styled as a film from Germany.

The soundtrack uses music to interrogate the past. Wagner is contextualized alongside other composers from the Germanic canon: Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Liszt, Mahler. Wagner's domination tallies with expectations aroused by the film's title alone, a clichéd parallel that Syberberg challenges. The saturation of the film's soundtrack and its length suggest a dramatic kinship with the composer. But the film's balance diverges from that of opera in heavily favoring orchestral excerpts, which is characteristic of how Wagner's music is used in film (above all, as opposed to how Verdi's and Puccini's works are used).

The Bayreuth pit was unique among contemporary theaters in removing conductor and musicians from complete visibility. The lack of visual distraction for Wagner's audience compounds in Syberberg's film the standard effect of nondiegetic music, offscreen but directing our

emotions, at the very least subliminally. This means we watch *Our Hitler* from the same viewing/listening situation as we would a Wagner opera, with a significant portion of the visuals accompanied by Wagner's music. Still more ambitious than Syberberg's assault on Hollywood as cultural agency is his attempt at the acoustic transformation of Hollywood into Bayreuth, the reclaiming of classical Hollywood's ideal of music being "invisible" to the spectator. Because Syberberg's Wagner is a non-vocal Wagner, it is as if we are watching his stagecraft enact the hidden orchestra—either sunk in the pit or offscreen—with its wash of Wagnerian sound. Apart from Alexander Kluge, none of the New German Cinema directors used classical music so expansively. Purely in terms of dramaturgy, Wagner functions here like the soundtrack of *Laura* (1944): there as here, the "theme" music continually evokes the absent title figure.

With Syberberg, the reduction of Wagner's Romantic aura by the tawdry attributes of Nazism becomes the real object of lament. While not an apologist for Hitler, Syberberg thereby aligns himself with a politically blighted nineteenth-century tradition. In his introduction to the script, he even links Wagner with Mozart as a common site of resistance to Hitler: "Hitler is to be fought, not with the statistics of Auschwitz or with sociological analyses of the Nazi economy, but with Richard Wagner and Mozart."<sup>6</sup> Music per se is viewed as legitimate irrationalism, the converse to Hitler's. Elsewhere Syberberg's Hitler figure, having emerged from the grave of Wagner, acknowledges the alien mold of the cosmic laughter of Mozart. This is a more realistic assessment of the ideological component of musical reception, and of course a Wagner opera, above all the Nordic myth-based *Ring*, is more "available" to ideology than a purely instrumental Mozart piano concerto.

In approaching the late-1970s identity crisis besetting (West) Germany and its filmmakers, Syberberg asks: "How is Hitler to be represented?" His chosen medium of film is closely allied to music. At the end of the opening credits, special thanks are given to Henri Langlois and the Cinémathèque Française, acknowledged as the spiritual progenitors of the film with the publication *Film—The Music of the Future*. The title evokes *Zukunftsmusik*, associated with Wagner and Liszt; film as latter-day *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a commonplace that for Syberberg functions as palimpsest, not effacement. As a re-creation of the Nazis' exploitation

of the media for propaganda purposes, the soundtrack of *Our Hitler* frequently bombards the viewer with acoustic information, with art music examples but one element of a multi-strand soundtrack.

Early in the film, the circus barker lists representative highlights that are absent here because they belong to an "unrepeatable reality": "Stalingrad . . . the Twentieth of July plot . . . Riefenstahl's Nuremberg" (*Hitler*, 43). By implication we are instead to be offered repeatable reality, history primarily as myth, Wagner's Nuremberg, the leitmotifs of history. And yet of course this summary begs questions of representation, with Riefenstahl's Nuremberg no less artistically framed than Wagner's. Any historical unrepeatability of Riefenstahl's Nuremberg implies the uniqueness of her take on the city, both as art and as quasi-documentary. Nazi film had left Hitler as a mythical, and hence limitlessly allusive, gap in the text. Here the unrepresentable figure is reduced in stature, but not in chameleon quality, to Hitler-shaped puppets.

Syberberg's convergence of film and music relates the two as cultural history. His use of nineteenth-century music links with a view of music as an expression of the ineffable, while his film features the visual absence of the historical icon Hitler, a twentieth-century expression of the ineffable. The presence of often static-charged radio culminates in a famous broadcast of "Stille Nacht" on Christmas Eve 1942. Its rendition by German fighters from the uttermost reaches of the expanded Reich feigns a sovereignty that the imminent collapse of Stalingrad was to negate totally. By the end of Syberberg's film, the sentimental words "Sleep in heavenly peace" have been replaced by the death wish of the "Liebestod" from *Tristan und Isolde* (*Hitler*, 247).

The Wagner Syberberg is trying to rehabilitate is permeated with overtones of Nazi-directed reception, unavoidable in postwar German films. Among a host of Wagner quotations, *Our Hitler* avoids the more hackneyed "Hollywood" Wagner (of, say, "The Ride of the Valkyries" or the *Lohengrin* "Wedding March"). Instead the film opts for excerpts that have dramatic and textual significance (via the libretto they imply) for the whole opera or cycle, thereby reinvesting Wagner with musical value. Syberberg's editing of the soundtrack enabled a length of music excerpts which is rare in film. His handling of Wagner in particular is an acoustic equivalent of Wim Wenders's attempts to salvage images from

the pace of Hollywood editing.<sup>7</sup> Wagner's original score remains more intact, less "chunked."<sup>8</sup> Music then functions less as a collage component and more as a primary source, a pro-filmic acoustic event.

At the same time as he confronts stereotypes of Wagner's kinship with Nazi excess, mythological obscurity, and anti-rationality, Syberberg uses Wagner as an iridescent weapon in his attack on Hollywood as cultural agency, a crucial subtext of this film. He tacitly addresses the historical irony of Hollywood film music of the 1930s and 1940s emanating largely from European émigrés (for example Max Steiner, Franz Waxman, Miklós Rózsa), in a style based strongly on late Romanticism, not least on Wagner.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the latter-day exponents of Wagner's musical lineage were in the United States, at the forefront of the dream industry. Syberberg's musical rehabilitation of Wagner from the trivialization of Hollywood then anticipates the attempted reclamation of German history at visual and dramatic levels by Edgar Reitz in his monumental *Heimat* cycles.

How, concretely, does Wagner look and sound with Syberberg? After an opening sequence in which Wagner permeates the soundtrack, potentially as highbrow mood music or operatic film narrative, there follows a section where his music is intercut with Nazi or at least Nazi-fied songs (*Hitler*, 44ff.), so that the effect is of longer- and shorter-term cultural memory. The counterpoint is most striking when one of the narrators, Harry Baer, proclaims that "music . . . overcomes everything" while holding the puppet of Ludwig II. This statement is underpinned by the *Parsifal* Prelude, which yields to an archival record of the song "Today our Germany hears us." The hinge between the two worlds, as it must have been for the febrile imagination of the young Hitler, is the martial music of *Rienzi*. And a still more striking amalgam is created by the repeated funereal drumbeat of the roll call of the 1923 Nazi martyrs and the recurring evocation of the archetypal Germanic hero Siegfried with the "Funeral March" from *Götterdämmerung*. When the Hitler puppet says: "So long as Wagner's music is played, I will not be forgotten" (*Hitler*, 207), this is the musical example chosen. The "Funeral March" ruminates on the life of the dead hero (as a cluster of leitmotifs), and at the point where the exultant theme from Siegfried's Rhine Journey enters, Harry Baer takes up the narration with the words: "Thus spake

the devil" (ibid.). Hitler the historical figure is demonized, shrouded in mythological mist, while the Wagnerian hero Siegfried is projected via Third Reich reception into the realm of the historical. With this degree of precision are the musical entrances planned in this film.

Syberberg quotes *Parsifal* extensively, with the quest for the Grail becoming synonymous with German Romantic striving for the transcendental. The first Wagner excerpt among many throughout the film is the Prelude, and this clearly stakes out Syberberg's Wagner, to be reclaimed from Hitler's.<sup>10</sup> The Hitler puppet's speech quoted in the last paragraph goes on: "(I will not be forgotten.) I've made sure of that. Branded forever in the history of Wagnerian music. The source of our, the source of my strength" (ibid.). Syberberg would ideally remove Wagner from the embrace of both the Right and the Left, although the weight he lends the nineteenth century might have led him back to the historically arresting phenomenon of the latter.<sup>11</sup>

The preponderance of Wagner from the outset stakes out an allusively rich acoustic terrain for this film. The Prelude to *Parsifal* is followed by excerpts from the forging of the Ring scene from *Das Rheingold*, the orchestral flourish and Donner's hammer blow before the entry of the gods into Valhalla, the final scene from *Götterdämmerung*, and a return to the *Parsifal* Prelude, all within the opening fifteen minutes. The unleashing by the Ring of such greed and destruction is perfectly positioned, as André Heller speaks of the legal claims advanced by thirty Hitler heirs (*Hitler*, 31–32).

The film's frames of reference arch still further. Musically the most dramatic of the above examples, a furious drum roll prefacing the gods' entry, is qualified by a yodeling voice, and the sequence of this intruder surrounded by the two Wagner excerpts is the same as that toward the end of the same director's *Ludwig—Requiem for a Virgin King* (1972). While the yodeler deflates the high pathos of Wagner's music, the musical combination signals the director's use of his own leitmotif cluster to combine film narratives. The title to Part 1 of *Our Hitler*, "From the World Ash-Tree to the Goethe-Oak of Buchenwald," links *Die Walküre* to the Weimar of Goethe and beyond. The name "Buchenwald" summarizes Syberberg's own lament, reducing a once highly poetic word to a single connotation and preserving the link between classical Weimar (the Goethe-Oak) and a concentration camp compound. The span

of Syberberg's title, then, reflects his attempt to resuscitate archetypal myths which once fed into a great Romantic tradition and have since been hopelessly compromised. Wagner is a major player in advancing this thesis.

But the salvage operation is reversed with the appearance of *Rienzi*. Although the composer came to distance himself from this early opera, the latter-day orator Hitler embraced it. Its more martial instrumentation blends effectively with the marching songs of the Hitler era which feature in this section of the film. The "Funeral March" from *Götterdämmerung* undergoes similar recontextualization alongside jaunty renditions of military marches and song (*Hitler*, 108–109). Still more arresting are the occasional mini-dramas that Syberberg creates, parallel to and dramatically deriving from the Wagner he is citing. During ravings from the Man of Destiny about the Eros of ruling and of violence, culminating in an invocation of the charismatic leader (*Hitler*, 126), Donner's "He da! He da! He do!" rings out, leading into the orchestral flourish quoted briefly near the beginning of *Our Hitler*. The fanatical voice of invocation is joined by a crowd intoning "Sieg Heil, Sieg Heil," Goebbels's pledge of total submission to the Führer's will, and a hint of the "Deutschlandlied." The intoxication of the voices is matched by the upward surge of the music, resolving in Donner's hammer blow and the thunderclap of the kettledrums. The effect is a flash forward on the soundtrack to the foundations of the Nuremberg Rallies. And the Wagnerian viewer Syberberg is ideally addressing will make the further (dramatic/historical) connection that this music immediately precedes the entry of the gods into Valhalla, the mirage of grandeur penetrated only by Loge's prediction:

Ihrem Ende eilen sie zu,  
die so stark im Bestehen sich wännen.  
(They who delude themselves they will endure,  
are in fact hurtling toward their end.) (*Das Rheingold*, Scene 4)

In a film obsessed with German identity, the length and the textual and dramatic aptness of Syberberg's excerpts reclaim Wagner from Hollywood agency. But they also reclaim Wagner from Nazi appropriation. The Nazis' attempt to model history on Wagner's myths rebounds, with his myths penetrating the outcomes of their brand of history and outlasting their millennium.

## THE DOCUMENTARIES OF WERNER HERZOG

Werner Herzog has continued to engage with Wagner well beyond the lifespan of the New German Cinema. But far more than in feature films, where Wagner's music might be expected on the soundtrack, Herzog employs it in his documentaries, indicating from the start his typically idiosyncratic perception of the genre. To complete a disregard for conventional genre boundaries, particular musical excerpts recur across both feature films and documentaries.

Herzog shares with Syberberg a close relationship with German Romanticism, a movement whose very aims would seem to point away from the direction of documentary. The tension between poetry and visual mimesis indicates the chasm between Herzog's conception of documentary and a more purist ethnography, likely to view "poetry" as an embellishment. And yet documentary theorists have also come to the conclusion that the genre is "a fiction (un-)like any other,"<sup>12</sup> but a fiction for all that. Point 5 of Herzog's Minnesota Declaration asserts that "poetic, ecstatic truth . . . can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization."<sup>13</sup> Herzog's highly personal and unconventional statements about documentary magnify the creative consciousness behind the camera and the soundtrack.

What is the role of sound in the intensification of truth? Throughout the silent cinema era one level of sound was always present, namely music. Music supposedly fleshed out the images, lent them a third dimension, and hence made the viewing position more "heimlich." This is important to remember when we assess Herzog's return to Murnau—his creative adaptation (1979) of Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922)—and the more general return of the New German Cinema to a pre-Nazi generation of German filmmakers. The earlier images were supported by music, and music functioned differently from that emitted through Dolby systems.

The link to Herzog's integration of Wagner into his own dramaturgy is the 1994 TV film *Die Verwandlung der Welt in Musik: Bayreuth vor der Premiere*, largely made up of a series of interviews with creative personnel both on- and off-stage at the Holy Grail of Wagnerians. The title alone, beyond functioning as his definition of opera,<sup>14</sup> indicates how

Herzog's Bayreuth is styled to become the German equivalent of the Hollywood dream factory. Whereas Hollywood transforms the world into images of the mind, the acoustic dream is so potent that it can transform the world into music. That also means that the classical Hollywood paradigm of visual supremacy is supplanted by nineteenth-century German music and music theater. This is established in the opening sequence, where the camera is given access to precious scores in the Bayreuth museum archives. Among these scores we see both *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal*, but the soundtrack remains with the rhapsodic "Liebestod" from *Tristan*, in an unedited continuity of sound (ca. six minutes) that is unusual outside opera films.

*Die Verwandlung der Welt in Musik* features prominent conductors and other artists invited to Bayreuth. Their rehearsals surround an appearance by Herzog, reminiscing about his own production of *Lohengrin*, which had been in the Bayreuth repertoire from 1987 till his making of this documentary. At a rehearsal of the Sailors' Chorus from *Der fliegende Holländer*, the choristers are shot looking ostentatiously away from the stage action to follow their own conductor, who transmits tempi from his over-the-shoulder glances at the orchestra's conductor, Giuseppe Sinopoli. A similar effect is achieved with video monitors capturing different angles on the performance and by a montage of conductors from different productions. Images are dislocated while the body of music, the Wagner tradition, continues, from the early work *Der fliegende Holländer* to the summation of *Parsifal*.

In footage of rehearsals for *Lohengrin*, Herzog gives instructions to children. We hear of what Wolfgang Wagner rejected about Herzog's even grander conception for the production, styling Herzog as something of a latter-day Ludwig II, except that he is channelling his own conceptions through Wagner's opera rather than being a devotee in thrall to the composer's ideas. In this sense this film too has a narcissistic element—Bayreuth as a pretext for Herzog's visions. Paul Frey is interviewed about his role as Lohengrin, but when he actually sings, he is eclipsed in the foreground by the offstage Herzog and the fireman on duty, with Herzog even persuading the fireman to sing, from a viewer's perspective, over the voice of Paul Frey! A racking focus singles out them rather than the real performers, and their schoolboy irreverence

extends to laughter, as the camera moves to a portrait of Ludwig II. Any transformation of the world into music, a claim perhaps applicable in the first place only to an acolyte's view of Wagner above all other composers, is briefly demystified by these pranks. After interviews with Heiner Müller and Daniel Barenboim, the film finishes with the end of *Tristan* and the crowd's response. This, then, is a documentary about staging the music of Wagner.

Elsewhere in Herzog's films, including the documentaries, music frequently becomes a kind of antipode to Beethoven, inasmuch as the outer world is deaf to the inner voices of the exalted and creative individual. Matching his confidence in seeing and articulating images that have never been seen before,<sup>15</sup> Herzog positions his listening viewer as the inner ear of Beethoven, hearing sounds that are only accessible to the happy few. The latter approach is exemplified by *Bells from the Deep: Faith and Superstition in Russia* (1995), in which pilgrims lying on the ice "hear" a sunken town's cathedral.

As an extension of this sonically charged universe, music alone is present for long stretches of Herzog's soundtracks. This ensures that Herzog's figures remain hermetically sealed images, still less anchored by "natural" sound than are singers under the stagelights of an opera house. The quality of an acoustic hothouse is crucial for Herzog's *Lessons of Darkness* (1991/92), with its apocalyptic footage of burning oil wells in the first Gulf War. The lack of ambient sound effaces what cultural anthropologist David Tomas calls "ephemeral and fragmentary histories."<sup>16</sup> When dialogue is also absent, sonic myth is created. Whatever the degree of empathy created with the devotees in Herzog's film *Pilgrimage* (2001), which features music by John Tavener, they are never represented from within or even fully located without, so that their world and the "normal" one (of the viewer) remain parallel, on opposite sides of the lens and of the sound barrier. Music is used here to immunize the viewer against anything other than the ecstatic truth, just as the impossible narrative weight borne by Philip Glass's scores in Godfrey Reggio's trilogy (*Koyaanisqatsi* [1982], *Powaqqatsi* [1988], and *Naqoyqatsi* [2002]) filters out the political commentary that seems to inhere in the images.

Wagner's music strengthens the palpable links between the themes and visuals of Herzog's documentaries and feature films. In *Little Dieter*

*Needs to Fly* (1997), the end of the "Liebestod" from *Tristan und Isolde* enters on cue when the pilot Dieter, recounting his crash landing in a Laotian jungle, uses the word "dream." Unsure whether it is "real" or "unreal," he speaks of death as a thick flow, pointing to floating jellyfish lit by an almost Marianic blue, images that recur in *Invincible* (2001). The musical "thick flow" is Wagner's orchestration of death, and anything further from a documentary depiction of Laos during the Vietnam War is hard to imagine. But when the "Liebestod" also swells at the end of *Schrei aus Stein/Scream of Stone* (1991), it signals that the ascent of a peak in the Andes has had all the glorious insubstantiality of opera. Such irony, viewed in more relaxed mode with the performance of Bellini at the end of *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), matches the sardonic quality attributed by William van Wert to the use of Wagner in *La Soufrière* (1977).<sup>17</sup> The same music used there, Siegfried's "Funeral March," appears behind burning oil wells throughout Section 7 of *Lessons of Darkness*, where it has no trace of irony, but functions rather as a threnody for the West.<sup>18</sup> In this sense Herzog's Wagner is Wagner at the service of Herzog's own transformation of the world through his *Gesamtkunstwerk* of the imagination.

The soundtrack of *Lessons of Darkness* combines long stretches of music as sole presence with a Wagnerian sense of theater, viewed as an aesthetic intensification of truth. The latter tendency is exemplified by *Julianes Sturz in den Dschungel/Wings of Hope* (2000), in which Herzog takes the sole survivor of a plane crash back to the crash site in the jungle and recreates her journey out. (The whole aspect of redemptive reenactment, as also in *Little Dieter Needs to Fly*, demonstrates a kinship between Herzog's documentaries and Wagnerian opera.)

In *Wings of Hope*, the *Rheingold* Prelude begins over the line "Das war wie ein Engel, der auf mich zukam" (That was like an angel approaching), just as there are entries of a Bartók work (*Buciumcana*) when the words "vision" and "dream" are uttered in *Little Dieter Needs to Fly*. Music transports the viewer beyond the visually representable world of the observational documentary. With reference to an angel, Juliane describes the effect of seeing her deliverer, and the Prelude continues for some minutes through to the last of the end credits. In Wagner's tetralogy the E<sub>b</sub> chord sustained in total darkness ushers in the transition from the social world of the theater foyer to the domain of Wagnerian myth. Herzog's use of the music here is almost a concession that for all the

extraordinariness of the story he has recounted, he needs such a device to ensure a more general, mythical level to his documentary.

He prepares this with theatrical montage toward the end of the film. As a whole panel of the ill-fated plane is unearthed, Herzog's voiceover muses on whether this was the emergency exit through which Juliane was ejected (and saved). The music continues to swirl, while the camera takes us through the proscenium arch of the space in the hull, into the *Urwald* beyond, where the new Juliane stands as the unlikely centerpiece, and Herzog retells her narrative. As the camera transports us through the stage curtain of the aircraft shell, the world is transformed into music drama. The effect is far more convincing than the incursion of Herzog's own drama into that of the story-to-be. Herzog interrupts the barely developed Juliane strand as he describes how at the time of the crash he was filming *Aguirre* in a nearby valley, with footage from that film gratuitously spliced into the film in process. So a montage of mythical theme and visuals within the new film does not work to lend it a mythical dimension, but the considered use of Wagner's music over images inherent to the film does, however much these images are constructed around a stage effect.

In these final frames the *Rheingold* Prelude in no sense emerges from the jungle. Instead, it signifies the heightened consciousness and depths of the subconscious released by the extreme situation of Frau Juliane and this setting (back there, at the crash; its restaging calls for Wagnerian grandeur to lend it conviction). It is a clinching example of that isolation of music on the soundtrack discussed above. The sound of Wagner signals the filmmaker's hand in superimposing a mythical layer over the documented reality of the jungle. The same music has a similar dramatic function at the start of *Lessons of Darkness* (on the camera's magic carpet ride over Kuwait City), and above all when establishing the liminal space between civilization and the realm of Count Dracula in *Nosferatu*.<sup>19</sup> The latter example shows Herzog's interest in the integrated effect of Wagnerian theater beyond the opera score, as the figure of Jonathan Harker and the scenery and props are shot as if part of an opera production, for a Bayreuth stage at that.

By this line of reasoning, the documentary *Verwandlung der Welt in Musik* is central to an understanding of the theatrical use of music in Herzog's documentaries. According to anthropologist Steven Feld,

"the idea of sound worlds is that social formations are indexed in sonic histories and sonic geographies."<sup>20</sup> Herzog's use of Wagner at the end of *Wings of Hope* transforms this notion into formations beyond the (merely) social. Feld qualifies this definition, since "we now all live in . . . 'sound worlds' [which] are simultaneously local and translocal, specific yet blurred, particular but general, in place and in motion."<sup>21</sup> This world-music quality facilitates Herzog's approach. In reinjecting Wagner with primarily mythical content, the music transcends the constraints of Germanic myth, and above all its reception as proto-Nazi and pan-Germanic. This far outstrips objections by ethnographic purists that any music other than what the ethnographic subject might perform is a breach of documentary conventions. Such a debate about "authenticity" is bypassed in the name, again, of an intensification of truth, of documenting culture and cultural memory in myth, behind their manifestations in the physical world.

These examples illustrate Herzog's take on opera: "[W]hen the music is playing, the stories do make sense. Their strong inner truths shine through and they seem utterly plausible."<sup>22</sup> We are left then with incompatible paradigms, with operatic ethnography. Herzog's documentaries challenge something more fundamental than genre categories. Their visual and acoustic representations exemplify much broader issues, such as cinematic "realism" and what that could possibly still mean; the relationship between the pro-filmic event and the edited footage and soundtrack; the way we see (while also being addressed through sound) and the way we dream, visions both. From the dramatic, technical, and choreographic issues emerging here, the affinity Herzog clearly feels to Wagner becomes self-evident.

### HEIMAT 3

Edgar Reitz's three *Heimat* series bear comparison with Wagner's works on a number of fronts.<sup>23</sup> Their combined length dwarfs the monumentality of the *Ring*, exceeding three full productions. In over fifty-two hours, they cover eighty years of the history of Europe's most turbulent twentieth-century nation. Their individual dimensions, however, are those of a more chamber-music approach to Wagner. The closest parallel between Reitz and Wagner is probably their shared ground in navigat-

ing nothing less than an intellectual history of the nation, Reitz in the subject matter of his *Heimat* series, Wagner in the ongoing reception of his works. Reitz's view of twentieth-century Germany is full of social comment, with *Heimat 3* starting on the night the Berlin Wall falls and embedding in its plot many issues arising from German unification. But his film cycle also interweaves reflections on and through artforms—art history, literature, film itself, and music, for a start. At the level of content rather than form it is a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The arts permeate German (big city) life, rather than being aesthetic extras, and a commitment to music reflects a longstanding thread of German intellectual history. Music at the core of Reitz's cycle shows a kinship to the prose works of Thomas Mann (with the filtering of Romanticism and philosophy, primarily via Wagner).<sup>24</sup> Where Mann's *Doktor Faustus* featured a diabolical retraction of German humanism as embodied in Beethoven's Ninth, Reitz's central figures cultivate their musicality to the end. Hermann leaves village life at the end of *Heimat 1* to study composition in Munich; he continues to compose and conduct throughout the second and third series. His partner Clarissa originally learns cello before becoming a singer in crossover and avant-garde styles, which challenge the German musical tradition in its national distinctiveness. This mirrors the dilemma of clinging to a concept of "Heimat" while allowing it historical flux. At the outset of *Heimat 2*, Hermann swears that music will be his sole love and his spiritual home.

Three decades on from the timeframe of *Heimat 2*, in a now-united Germany, *Heimat 3* highlights the difficulty of locating "Heimat" within Germany's Europeanization and globalization. Music, "the most German art" in Nazi propaganda, permeates *Heimat 3*, but as with cinema references, Germany is approached as part of Europe. At the acoustic level, Reitz's use of music without nationally specific markers parallels Wenders's global road movies, where U2 and others are prominent on the soundtrack. Hermann is invited to compose a Reunification Symphony. Its six movements seemingly make it a *chiffre* for Reitz's six-part film. But its fate, in never being performed onscreen, is also a comment on reunification not reaching completion in the historical script.

In this ongoing concern with the extreme case of a problematic twentieth-century national identity, reference to Wagner would seem both obligatory and impossibly fraught. About halfway through the final

episode, a rare dream sequence situates Hermann in a liminal space, with a passing parade of ghosts from the past. His reveries in a field (Berlioz?!) precede the funeral of the publican Rudi, the heart and soul of Hermann's birthplace, Schabbach. At the funeral Hermann, still poised on the brink of reality (and in that sense, in an operatic space), surveys the graves of his own family. There is a strong sense of the passing of a town's dynasty, even before an earth tremor disperses the mourners. The brass band continues with its rendition of "Nearer My God to Thee." Reitz is confident that his audience will associate this melody with the sinking of the *Titanic*.<sup>25</sup> The tremor signals the subsiding of old slate quarries which provide the foundation for some of Schabbach. One of them has been converted by Hermann's late brother Ernst into a subterranean vault, where he has stored artworks—above all, art deemed decadent during the Nazi era. Ernst had despaired when parochial politics forced him to pursue a French offer to curate them, and ultimately they are lost altogether, as this tremor causes the vault to be flooded. A shortsighted salvage operation in which concrete is poured in seals the fate of the artworks.

The treasure is referred to on a number of occasions, with overdetermination, as Ernst's "Nibelungen hoard." The flooding of the underground lake destroys the bridge leading to the hidden treasure, and as it disintegrates, the Wagnerian viewer will be acutely aware of a superimposed rainbow. Behind the lost German art treasures—lost first at home, in being deemed decadent, and then abroad in the aftermath of World War II displacement—one suspects this self-reflexive director is further lamenting the fate of so much film of the silent era, not confined to Germany. The notion of German originals having fallen into Russian hands dramatically parallels the tale of the Bosnian boy of Episode 5 who is wrongly suspected of being Ernst's biological son (and the object of deadly envy, in being deemed Ernst's heir). The boy's fate is a grim comment on the primacy up till the millennium of *jus sanguinis*, of German identity determined by bloodlines. His is one of two deaths in the heart of Lorelei territory, and he founders on contemporary rocks resulting from parochialism and greed, "made in Germany."<sup>26</sup> Far beyond Western triumphalism, greed, contested inheritances,<sup>27</sup> and betrayal are the leitmotifs of *Heimat 3*. When a return to German Romanticism (almost taking up Syberberg's project of a quarter century earlier) and

multiple allusions to film history are added to an already complex mix of contemporary society and Germanic myths, the layered quality of the series becomes clear.

*Heimat 3* in no sense attempts to transpose Wagner's *Ring* or its characters into the medium of a film narrative. But narrative links, such as those in the examples above, cry out for commentary, and once thinking along these lines, minor details seem to resonate, too. Although the Magic Fire surrounding Brünnhilde seems remote from the 1990s, in Episode 1 Clarissa does sing "Dido's Lament" at the Paris Opera, the music anticipating her being engulfed by flames from the funeral pyre.<sup>28</sup> When Hermann's older brother Anton dies, relatives discuss traditional burial as opposed to cremation, and Anton's daughter Marlies cannot conceive being suddenly surrounded by flames, as she puts it. Anton is ultimately cremated, and the urn buried in the country churchyard. But the novelty of the new ritual backfires, as Anton's cask melodramatically reappears after being lowered, bizarrely paralleling the final gesture of Siegfried's hand in *Götterdämmerung*.

One aspect of the soundtrack also resonates with the *Ring*. In Episode 4 new music is heard, preceded in the narrative by faultlines of disillusionment appearing within the Simon family dynasty. Scored for clarinet in its higher and bass registers, it is a circular, agitated motif that is strongly reminiscent of the Prelude to Act 1 of *Die Walküre*. Subsequent reappearances are elaborate variations, gradating into inventions. They serve as a unifying thread across a number of scenes in Episode 4, and then recur a single time in Episode 5. They accompany, for instance, Hermann's striding through the mist in the direction of Schabbach, his arrival at the grieving household in the wake of Anton's death, his heading for the gas station where he meets his other brother Ernst, and (in musically much freer form) his visit to his daughter's flat in Munich. In Episode 5, a guitar version accompanies Hermann's approach to the Lorelei, at the foot of which people have assembled to watch the forlorn figure of Matko, the Bosnian boy. His suicide from the top of the cliff (reminiscent of Ernst's earlier death as his plane crashes into the cliff) interweaves three strands, in a manner typifying the film: a latterday performance of the Lorelei legend; a variation of the *Ring*, with the family's feuding, greed, and envy culminating in the sacrifice of a false son,

one wrongly deemed to be the only direct heir; and a contemporary reworking of this in the social reality of Germany at the end of the millennium, a Germany still struggling to accept concepts of identity other than ethnic ones.

The evocation of Wagner, and the way this allusion then emancipates itself while retaining the original link, mirrors Reitz's grand theme of reclaiming German culture. Wagner is rescued from Americanization (with a vulgarized concept of leitmotifs, or the "Ride of the Valkyries" from *Birth of a Nation* through to *Apocalypse Now*) and from Nazi overtones. The latter were classically present in the soundtrack to Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, with music both by and in the mode of Wagner (in Herbert Windt's score). The Wagner allusion on Reitz's soundtrack anticipates the late twentieth century,<sup>29</sup> and this avant-garde quality continues with the inventions (in melody and instrumentation) wrought on the first statement. *Heimat 3* returns to what the New German Cinema was not historically in a position to reclaim, and at one level Reitz's summation of the twentieth century seems to be a salvaging of the nineteenth century. The nation of poets and thinkers, whose remoteness from politics was viewed as a primary facilitator of Nazism, has become an ideal nation of artists, filmmakers, and musicians, and its welcome back to the world stage is not without historical irony. But the embedding of Wagner in the narrative and his ghosting on the soundtrack complement the strong presence of Schumann, Günderröde, and Romantic iconicity (the Lorelei in legend, Caspar David Friedrich in some of the film's images). These function not as antiquated cultural treasures but as the seeding of new cultural blends, as in the film's final frames.

At the very end of the series, Hermann's daughter looks out at the new millennium. She has spent New Year's Eve with student friends, in desolate scenes by the river Main. The friend dying of AIDS prophesies a new "freedom" of gender, with man becoming woman and woman, man. This seems to be an elaborate parallel to the final sequences of Alexander Kluge's film *Die Patriotin* (1979), where Gaby Teichert and her colleagues worry away at Schiller's "Ode to Joy" ("All men shall become brothers"), New Year fireworks illuminate Cologne Cathedral, and finally she gazes calmly out through her window. Kluge's history teacher had sought a positive version of German history. Is this Reitz's

verdict on Lulu/Simone's quest, now located in an era when the rest of the world is far more prepared to contemplate such a possibility? Is the sense of this ending the sum of those eighty years spanned by the three *Heimat* series, viewed in retrospect, rather than with apprehension at the future; or maybe with a Janus-gaze embracing both? The parallel film strand near the end of *Heimat 3* is provided by the former East German character Gunnar behind bars, unable to cope with freedom in the West; seemingly Reitz's attempt to connect his German-German theme with the larger East-West theme of Kieslowski's *Three Colors: White*.

One significant difference is that the New Year's gathering at the Günderrodehaus brings together the extended family, not the quarrelsome dynasty. In German, the "twilight" of Wagner's title *Götterdämmerung* is both crepuscular and pertains to first light. And that, visually and in narrative terms, seems to be Reitz's equivalent of the "redemption" theme at the end of Wagner's epic. "Pure" bloodlines have vanished with the deaths of brothers Anton and Ernst; Hermann had a different father. Hermann's daughter survives, her business acumen and growing maturity equipping her for her insecure outlook. Tears of apprehension reveal her emotion as her son plays Mozart on Hermann's piano, with Mozart, as in Syberberg's *Our Hitler*, having the last musical say. Reitz, too, still seems to need Mozart to act as the exorcist of Wagner.

## NOTES

1. Thomas Elsaesser, "New German Cinema and History: The Case of Alexander Kluge," in *The German Cinema Book*, ed. Tim Bergfelder et al. (London: BFI, 2002), 183.

2. See Linda Schulte-Sasse, *Entertaining the Third Reich* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996). She states, "As a desired object beyond narrative representation, Hitler does not play a diegetic role in any Nazi feature film" (291). And Nazi-era film soundtracks in turn bypassed the most heavily propagandized composers. See Guido Heldt, "Hardly Heroes: Composers as a Subject in National Socialist Cinema," in *Music and Nazism: Art under Tyranny, 1933-1945*, ed. Michael H. Kater and Albrecht Riethmüller (Laaber: Laaber, 2003). He notes: "The gods from the pantheon of German music are missing. There is no Beethoven, Wagner, or Bruckner" (116).

3. On music in the New German Cinema, see Caryl Flinn, *The New German Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); and Roger Hillman, *Un-*

*settling Scores: German Film, Music, and Ideology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

4. See Deborah Crisp and Roger Hillman, "Verdi in Postwar Italian Cinema," in *Between Opera and Cinema*, ed. Jeongwon Joe and Rose M. Theresa, 157-76 (New York: Routledge, 2002).

5. The following analysis is based on sections of chapter 4 of my *Unsettling Scores* (see n. 3), where discussion of the film is not limited to Wagner. A single copy of Syberberg's film was made available for the German circuit, and it was not shown on German television till December 1979. The far more successful U.S. reception was helped by Coppola's distribution and a memorable review of the film by Susan Sontag in the *New York Review of Books*. See Anton Kaes, *From Hitler to Heimat: The Return of History as Film* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 41.

6. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, *Hitler: A Film from Germany*, preface by Susan Sontag, trans. Joachim Neugroschl (New York: Farrar Straus Geroux, 1982), 9. Subsequent references to this script in the body of the text are to *Hitler*, plus a page number.

7. Wenders's longer takes and altogether more meditative approach are characteristic of a number of European directors, as also of an exceptional U.S. director like Terrence Malick.

8. Wagner's score is elsewhere central to Syberberg's dramatic structure—his film *Ludwig: Requiem for a Virgin King* (1972) opens with the first Eb chords of *Rheingold* and finishes with the end of *Götterdämmerung*.

9. See Slavoj Žižek, "There Is No Sexual Relationship," in *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, ed. Renate Saleci and Slavoj Žižek (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 221-23. Žižek traces Wagnerian features of Hollywood classicism that include "the invisibility of the apparatus that produces music," "emotions translated by music," and "narrative cueing" (222).

10. *Parsifal* is one example of dissension within the highest ranks regarding Nazi cultural politics. See John Deathridge, "Strange Love: Wagner's *Parsifal*," in *Western Music and Race*, ed. Julie Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 79-81.

11. On Wagner and nineteenth-century socialism, see Frank Trommler, "The Social Politics of Musical Redemption," in *Re-Reading Wagner*, ed. Reinhold Grimm and Jost Hermand, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 119-35.

12. See Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991). Part 2 (105-98) is headed "Documentary: A Fiction (Un)Like Any Other."

13. See [http://www.wernerherzog.com/main/index\\_html.htm](http://www.wernerherzog.com/main/index_html.htm) (accessed February 2, 2008).

14. For the influence of music on Herzog, and in particular his elaboration of what "transforming a whole world into music" might mean, see *Herzog on Herzog*, ed. Paul Cronin (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 255ff. On the opera stage he encounters "archetypes of emotional exaltation and purity" (259).

15. Andreas Rost, "Kinostunden der wahren Empfindung: Herzog, Wenders, Fassbinder, und der Neue deutsche Film," in *Positionen deutscher Filmgeschichte*,

ed. Michael Schaudig (München: diskurs film, 1996), 373: "I believe, or rather I am certain, that I have particular images, images I can see on the horizon and can articulate, which may be relatively new to the cinema, something that has never been seen before" (my translation).

16. David Tomas, *Transcultural Space and Transcultural Beings* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996), 105.

17. William van Wert, "Last Words: Observations on a New Language," in *The Films of Werner Herzog: Between Mirage and History*, ed. Timothy Corrigan (New York and London: Methuen, 1986), 70.

18. For a fuller analysis of music in this film, see Hillman, *Unsettling Scores*, 146–50.

19. There is a strong sense of liminality, beyond the water imagery, in the same music's bookending of Terrence Malick's *The New World* (2005).

20. Steven Feld, "Sound Worlds," in *Sound*, ed. Patricia Kruth and Henry Stobart (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 175.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Herzog on Herzog*, 259.

23. What follows draws partly on <http://www.rouge.com.au/6/heimat.html> (accessed August 27, 2008), with thanks to *Rouge* editor Adrian Martin.

24. A key issue in Mann's oeuvre informs the title of Episode 13 of *Die Zweite Heimat*, "Kunst oder Leben" (Art or Life).

25. See Edgar Reitz, *Heimat 3: Chronik einer Zeitwende. Erzählung nach dem sechsteiligen Film HEIMAT 3* (München: Knaus, 2004), 552–53.

26. At the head of each episode of the first series the viewer sees a stone bearing the inscription "Made in Germany."

27. Originally Reitz conceived *Heimat 3* as chronicling the last hundred days of the century, under the title of "Die Erben" (The Heirs). See Heiko Christians, "Edgar Reitz's 'Die zweite Heimat,'" *Weimarer Beiträge* 47, no. 3 (2001): 383, n. 8.

28. This in turn immediately follows on from a vast human chain of anti-nuclear protesters bearing candles, "Lichterketten," protecting what they call their meadow of peace and intoning a chorale.

29. See Peter Bassett, *A Ring for the Millennium: A Guide to Wagner's "Der Ring des Nibelungen"* (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 1998), 36: "This startling operatic prelude would be considered audacious if penned by a composer in the late twentieth century—Wagner conceived it in 1854."

## THIRTEEN

## *The Power of Emotion: Wagner and Film*

JEREMY TAMBLING

I start from a film by Alexander Kluge, *Die Macht der Gefühle* (*The Power of Emotion*, 1983), about opera, Wagner, and "emotions." The film moves by an associative rather than a narrative logic; for example, at one moment moving from thinking about objects as opposite of emotions (objects perhaps last longer) to showing details of the Great Exhibition in London in 1851, in Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace. Objects gained their museum, their place for display. The Crystal Palace was burned down a few years after the Reichstag was set on fire (in 1936 and 1933 respectively), says the voiceover, associating these two burnings. It adds that objects lost their Parliament: a statement to be taken in many ways, but associating people with things, that is, commodities.

Later, the film shows another sample of nineteenth-century architecture: the opera house as the "power plant of emotion." Opera is seen to be part of a process of urbanization, a modern phenomenon; this is a topic of Anselm Gerhard's *The Urbanization of Opera: Music Theatre in Paris in the Nineteenth Century*. But as it is said, from looking at the cables that carry electricity through the building, these are in a catastrophic state: emotions, then, are ready to burn up the opera house, in an example of what Derrida calls "archive fever," one of his terms for Freud's death drive; and emotions—affects—have a catastrophic impact within modernity.<sup>1</sup> (Though forced to use the terms "emotion" and "affect" interchangeably here because of Kluge's title, I prefer the term "affect." "Emotion" runs the danger of being almost fetishistic itself, in