

“The Dream Organ”: Richard Wagner as a Proto-Filmmaker

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EXCERPT 1

When Richard Wagner died in February 1883, the cinematographic pioneer Eadweard Muybridge was in the midst of an American lecture tour, presenting screenings of moving images to enthusiastic acclaim.¹ The previous year in France, Étienne-Jules Marey had invented an important predecessor of the film camera, and the Lumière family founded their photographic company.²

That Wagner’s lifetime overlapped with the birth of cinema is a telling fact. In many ways, Wagner’s art is profoundly analogous to the art of film, and his work was to exert a deep influence on the new medium as it developed. One might argue, in fact, that Wagner is best understood as a proto-filmmaker: a Romantic artist whose ideal art was an intricate fusion of musical, dramatic, and visual information, capable of communicating a narrative with enormous visceral power. The first part of this essay draws on Wagner’s music dramas and theoretical writings to gain perspective on his proto-cinematic qualities—or the fact that, as Wolfgang Wagner once put it, his grandfather would want to work in Hollywood if he were alive.³ This discussion relates not only to specific techniques in Wagner’s craft, but to ideological themes in his work that underscore his broader context in Romantic art and philosophy.

The second part addresses the historical impact of Wagner on the film industry, particularly in Germany and in America—where Wagnerian traditions were an artistic bequest of the composers, writers, and filmmakers who fled the Nazis and settled in Hollywood. Through this cultural transference, Wagner’s art attained a new kind of influence—one with important implications for both his legacy and the powerful medium that fulfills many of his ideals.

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EXCERPT 2

When the war ended, Wagner’s creative approach was anathema to many in Europe and elsewhere. The notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which could sweep audiences away with its effects and narrative authority, was chillingly linked with memories of Nazi manipulation. German filmmakers increasingly turned to the model of Brecht, constantly reminding the audience that they were watching an illusion and refusing to provide the integrated pleasures of Wagnerism. One such filmmaker was Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, who repeatedly made the connection between Wagner and Hitler—whom he called “the greatest filmmaker in the world”⁴—in his epic film *Our Hitler: A Film from Germany* (1977). He addressed the same subject matter in *The Confessions of Winifred Wagner* (1975) and his fascinating, enigmatic film of *Parsifal* (1982). In other art forms,

movements such as Brechtian theater and the Darmstadt School of composition emphasized the importance of creating works free of sentimentalism and manipulation. For many artists and critics, no figure more fully summarized what they were rebelling against than Richard Wagner.

In America, where the use of Wagnerian norms in film did not carry the same implications, Hollywood kept alive a sensibility that had become deeply discredited in Germany. When Wolfgang Wagner said in the 1970s that his grandfather would want to work in film, he specifically said *Hollywood* film. Wagner's tradition was by then firmly identified with American filmmaking. It is one historical paradox among many that this enduring Wagnerian legacy should have come about because of the mostly Jewish composers and filmmakers who fled the Third Reich.

The Wagnerian influence on Hollywood scores waned in the late 1960s and '70s. To some extent, this was due to the refreshing aesthetic influence of a new generation of filmmakers who scored their movies with newer sounds including rock and folk songs. From a dramatic vantage point, the great films of this era-- *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Graduate*, *The Godfather* among many others—often examined morally complex situations with a profoundly non-judgmental stance. No one can call Wagner's work non-judgmental; his music provides emphatic answers and insights about everyone and everything in his narratives. American film of this period, then— whose tolerance for ambiguity was deeply linked to the politics of the time— had no room for the Wagnerian orchestra. Wagnerian scores made a grand return with the *Star Wars* films (1977, 1980, 1983) and other mythic fantasies. Indeed, to this day, the films that most often make use of the Wagnerian scoring model are science-fiction and fantasy films: narratives in which cosmic and earth-shaking forces are at play, fully meriting an emblem as definitive as a *leitmotif*.

But if Wagnerian harmonies no longer surged on film soundtracks in the '60s and '70s, that hardly meant that Wagner's influence on Hollywood had been lost. In the first place, the values which filmmakers like Eisenstein had associated with Wagner— about the integration of sight and sound, or about the nature of myth— went far beyond musical idiom. And Wagner's ideas about music and narrative— in passages such as the ones quoted in this article— did not relate to the *sound* of the music so much as they did the *role* that music played.

Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) is mostly scored with rock songs and ethereal electronic instruments. There is, however, one track that recalls the sound of symphonic Hollywood film scores: the 'Ride of the Valkyries' from *Die Walküre*, the soundtrack for an unforgettable scene in which American bomber planes rain down destruction on a Vietnamese village. "I use Wagner!" shouts Robert Duvall as the war-crazed Lieutenant Kilgore. "...My boys love it." As the planes hurtle through the clouds, the soldiers nod and grin in time to the music, picking off fleeing Vietnamese as though they were target practice. The choice of music implicitly suggests both Nazi aggression and Hollywood action fantasies as the soldiers fight their senseless war. For the purposes

of this discussion, though, it is equally important to note that the opening track of the film – “The End,” by The Doors-- eventually functions as a *leitmotif*.

Notes

¹ See Brian Clegg, *The Man Who Stopped Time: The Illuminating Story of Eadweard Muybridge - Pioneer Photographer, Father of the Motion Picture, Murderer* (Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, 2007): 187—192.

² See David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996): 4, and *Impossible Presence: Surface and Screen in the Photogenic Era*, ed. Terry Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001): 72—73.

³ Quoted in John C. Tibbetts, *Composers in the Movies: Studies in Musical Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005): 222. Wolfgang Wagner made the comment in 1977 to Tony Palmer, who directed the television miniseries *Richard Wagner*.

⁴ Quoted in Bert Cardullo, *Soundings on Cinema: Speaking to Film and Film Artists* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008), p. 258.