

## REVIEW ESSAY

# In the Wake of Wagner

On Anders V. Munch's doctoral thesis *From Bayreuth to Bauhaus: The Gesamtkunstwerk and the Modern Art Forms*<sup>1</sup>

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*The following article is a (re)written version of an official opposition given at Aarhus University. The other members of the assessment committee were professor Thordis Arrhenius, Oslo, and professor Carsten Thau, Copenhagen.*

### I

The road of the total work of art as travelled *From Bayreuth to Bauhaus* is the subject of a monumental book written by Anders V. Munch (AVM). He explains the overarching project of the thesis as an analysis addressing the historical-discursive dimension of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*:

My investigation will chart and investigate the dream of the total work of art as both a subject of discourse and as an object of reflection, this goes to say, that I will only follow the phenomenon from the age of romanticism and see how it is inherited by the art of today. The specific works of art that can be regarded as total works of art interest me less than the pure dream in all its possible and impossible forms. When the use of the concept wanes I will also stop my pursuit of it. My examination is of a historical and conceptual nature and not so much an exercise in classification and analysis. My goal is not to bring forth and recognize total works of art in our present day, rather it is to track what became of them and in what form the mode of thinking is still valid.

The hypothesis is, in all its simplicity, that the transformation and realization of Wagner's vision into not only one version of the common work of art, but a plurality of art forms had a profound and significant effect on the modern art forms that came to characterize modernism in its continuing evolution through experimental and transgressive works of art. The thoughts of Wagner must therefore also be able to shed light on crucial elements in the modern way of thinking about art and its historical development. Seen in a wider perspective it is possible to chart the transformations in the idea of a total work of art as a romantic/modern concept of art. The hypothesis may even be made more

wide-ranging with the suggestion that the thought behind the total work of art is the key to understanding the concept of modern art and aesthetics that has moved beyond the conventional barriers of traditional art.<sup>2</sup>

The impressive treatise was published in 2012, but in the course of writing it AVM had no opportunity to take into account a similar, but much shorter book authored by David Roberts (released in 2011).<sup>3</sup> At any rate a comparison can be helpful to spell out AVM's contribution to the subject. On this basis I will subsequently raise some historiographical questions<sup>4</sup> and at last – before my conclusion – more specifically discuss the notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* applied to the classical Hollywood movie and its use of background music. Neither AVM nor Roberts is really dealing with this part of the Wagner legacy – in my opinion an important component.

The material selected by the two authors cannot avoid indicating differences between the two books. Roberts' work is characterized by the author's background in literature whereas AVM – as the title of his book suggests – deals substantially and in great detail with the Wagner legacy as inherited by design and architecture. A major merit of AVM's contribution is due to its special attention to this field, and the key concept of the “distributive” *Gesamtkunstwerk* derives from this context. Coined in conjunction with the monumental and the momentary total work of art it will undoubtedly prove to be a useful and productive concept, referring to notions of unifying art forms disseminating to and ennobling larger areas of everyday life and at the same time releasing art from enclosed isolation.

Naturally, many references are shared by Roberts and AVM – for example the Reform Theatre Movement (Alphonse Appia, Georg Fuchs, Gordon Craig) – but the non-German contributions to the total work of art play a more important role in Roberts' presentation than in AVM's (although Roberts is a Germanist): artists affiliated with Joséphin Péladan's *Salon de la Rose + Croix*, authors like Stéphane Mallarmé, Marcel Proust, Romain Rolland, Gabriel d'Annunzio, composers and musical theorists as Hector Berlioz, Joseph d'Ortigue and Guiseppe Mazzini. Roberts is also stressing the catholic tradition of mystery play (especially Paul Claudel) and drawing attention to the Salzburg Festival as an Austrian counterpart to Bayreuth undertaking to revive a Baroque, Habsburg inheritance (cf. also Hugo von Hofmannsthal).

The total work of art is generally postulating an analogy between aesthetic synthesis and social reintegration, intensifying and combining the powers of art in a gesture of communal and eventually transcendental redemption. Mostly it was as antagonistic to aestheticism as the activist,

political avant-garde. Furthermore, according to Roberts the total work of art shared the opposition to museums making art historical “objects for contemplation, divorced from social and religious context, the avant-gardes, by contrast, were drawn to the idea of art not as work but as performance, whose horizon is the ever-renewable present of collective participation”.<sup>5</sup> This is in line with AVM’s notion of the momentary *Gesamtkunstwerk* that has no objectified and durable existence.

David Roberts pays more attention to the political dimension of the subject than AVM, although it is by no means absent in his book. Roberts is stressing how politics and arts presupposed a loss of religion. At the same time, however, they both laid claim to the inheritance after the dissolution of the alliance between art, throne and altar. Art was liberated from the past, treasures were returned to the people, palaces transformed to museums, churches became goals for aesthetic pilgrimage.

Many artists and art historians have regarded it as an obstacle for the development of visual arts if they try to affiliate themselves with literature, poetry or music: in their opinion no art forms had so far achieved perfection in their union, and confusion and lack of limitation merely adds up to dilettantism. Up until our time the dominant, trendsetting accounts of modernism have regarded the story of modern art as a progress towards an abstract art purged of all elements foreign to the specific medium (cf. Clement Greenberg). AVM as well as Roberts are going against these traditional, key assumptions about the separation of the arts as a consequence of an internal logic of differentiation. And both are pointing out that the importance of the total work of art for modern art has been badly underestimated assigning it to a role as a Romantic remnant of the past. According to Roberts

Modern art is art with a bad conscience, haunted by the dream of self-redemption projected into the artwork of the future. In this sense we can speak of the idea of the total work of art as both specter and founding myth of aesthetic modernism, the redemptive dream of the avant-gardes that brought the totalizing aesthetic and political revolutions of the first third of the twentieth century into the closest proximity.<sup>6</sup>

## II

In order trace the itineraries of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* it must have a kind of identity, a reasonably delimited character. But the trouble is exactly its volatile and elusive character. By framing the phenomenon historically you can give it some kind of definiteness – also without subscribing the

Nineteenth Century credo that the essence of a subject is to be explained by its origins. At any rate, writing a history, art historical or otherwise, beginnings and endings are of special importance. Within the closed narrative structure nothing is coming before the beginning, it has no cause, but is the cause of the following story. The end, on the other hand, is in principle a result of what is going before, but is itself closing the causal nexus. Somehow the beginning is a kind of Creation and the end a sort of Last Judgment. At any rate there are few accounts of an art historical development that just comes to a stop; normally the end is exploited in a kind of assessment.

*From Bayreuth to Cyberspace* – actually the subtitle of a book about the *Total Work of Art*<sup>7</sup> – suggests a view that perhaps seems far-fetched if it really tried to update the Wagnerian conception. Conversely it is possible to undertake a kind of infinite regress pushing phenomena back into history – or even prehistory (cf. dubious interpretations of cave paintings as a kind of ritual theatre). In that case the total work of art is understood in terms of a general human need for redemption by orchestrating expressions in so many aesthetic registers as possible. A less absurd option would be to let all-encompassing baroque stagings be the starting point; in that way divine and ecclesiastical or secular mastery of the cosmos could be seen as superseded by the people's own power manifestation – Wagner's democratic design of the Bayreuth *Festspielhaus* (Otto Brückwald, 1872) could set the stage for a comparison with the *Das Markgräfliche Opernhaus* (Joseph Saint-Pierre /Giuseppe and Carlo Galli-Bibiena, 1748) in the same city.

When Roberts chooses to include more non-German figures in his account of the story it has to do with the fact that he is identifying two parallel – in different ways blending – developments, one German, one French, respectively originating in romantic idealism and the French Revolution, the last stressing political festivals presenting – not representing – the republican spirit of the people. Modern art has traditionally been identified with modernism, purifying and separating the arts, and with avant-gardes associated with advanced innovation, revolutionary experimentation and even iconoclasm – leaving behind more romantic and idealistic traditions as being mystic, religious-redemptive, or socially utopian. Both of the twin lineages are in many ways linked, just like symbolism for example being perhaps a more important source for abstraction than cubism.

AVM's more unidirectional story begins with German romantic idealism, but like Roberts he is not postulating an intrinsic necessity in the

development he analyses. Reasonably AVM is stressing that the *Gesamtkunstwerk* can be – and was – invested with many different political and ideological agendas. Wagner simply opened up a Pandora's box. You could easily be tempted to let The Third Reich be a kind of *Götterdämmerung* of the total work of art. Roberts, as a matter of fact, seems at least inclined to see a rather fatal affinity between the total work of art and political totalitarianism. Friedrich Nietzsche's reinterpretation of the Sublime plays – with good reason – a major theoretical part in his account. While Edmund Burke derived the Sublime from self-preservation maintaining a certain safety and distance and Immanuel Kant regarded it as a conquest over terror, Nietzsche's Sublime is a surrendering the subject to a collective Dionysian intoxication, the shattering of all forms and abolishment of boundaries, the individual's horrified joy in its own annihilation merging in an ecstatic oneness with a world beyond individuation.

AVM's narrative maintains an open field of possibilities and accordingly exhibits rather frayed boundaries. The treatise seems to prepare its final cadence several times but apparently has a hard time to come to a closure because so much material after Bauhaus – despite the title of the book – is included with reference to its relevance in a wider perspective. If AVM had chosen the Third Reich as the end point, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* would have been invested with a more or less latent totalitarianism that eventually – over time – would reveal the essence of the phenomenon. Or conversely: If the new Babylon (with The Situationists) were located at the end of the development, you would get the impression that the phenomenon here came into its own as a true avant-garde. Finally, if it all culminated in the modern branding as distributive synthesising strategy, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* would reveal its affinity to commodification and consumption worship. In fact, if you try to distil a more clear-cut narrative from AVM's presentation, it must be the story of a (reinterpreted) diffusion of a Romantic notion of the total work of art into design and architecture from the late Nineteenth Century – a kind of distributed aestheticising that especially after the Second World War is commercialized as consumption branding.

In his considerations concerning historical development AVM is summoning two actors to the stage: Hans-Georg Gadamer and Michel Foucault. In an academic context they belong to a group of usual suspects – but the combination is perhaps a little unusual: Gadamer, on one side, with his emphasis on tradition as a relay between past and present is keen to see continuity and tradition as the guarantor of understanding,

The *Wirkungsgeschichte* is not epiphenomenon, something secondary, and the time distance is not a yawning abyss between us and what we wish to understand; we are participating in and creating the tradition and the impact of historical distance is a productive one, it opens new sources for interpretation and unsuspected contextual meanings by expanding the framework of understanding. Foucault, on the other side, sees history as a sequence of fractures, discontinuities – a succession of paradigms or epistemes that set divergent agendas. Perhaps it is not by chance that AVM tends to emphasize a similarity between the two philosophers, their common denominator being their distrust in notions of origins. Generally AVM is obviously more inclined to see similarities between phenomena rather than differences. Significantly, he subscribes to interpretations that emphasize the connection between Wagner's early and late conceptions and between Bauhaus' first (more or less expressionist phase) and the later, more constructivist, period.

Although AVM denies straight lines running between the treated phenomena, he seems insistent to maintain continuity: This applies throughout the long stretch from Romanticism to the modern art forms – an extensive process that in itself – just by its scale – is prone to give priority to links and connecting lines. Probably this is a reasonable corrective to traditional notions of the development of modern art mentioned above. But the long time lapses, the *longue durée*, probably strengthen a certain tendency to pull modern art back into romanticism; shorter time segments would more easily have called attention to differences. However, the emphasis on continuity leads to fine observations rewriting and nuancing parts of modern art history that would otherwise typically have been described with an emphasis on breaks. In general AVM is thinking more in similarities than differences and displays a certain fondness for analogies. The result of this is that he is less concerned with what distinguishes arts than what brings them together – in a way a thought pattern compatible with his subject.

### III

Following the track from Bayreuth to Bauhaus it certainly belongs to the story that Wagner didn't fit into the *Neue Sachlichkeit* of Bauhaus – regardless of for example Wassily Kandinsky's admiration (or the alliteration). Melodious, emotional expressiveness in the Romantic vein was anathema. Bach and Bauhaus were more in tune with each other, and Bach, rather than Wagner, was the hero of Bauhaus.<sup>8</sup> Lyonel Feininger who designed the cover for the Bauhaus 1919 manifesto wrote polyphonic

music in the form of fugues, and Oskar Schlemmer praised Johann Sebastian Bach's Passions.<sup>9</sup> Bach's *Fortspinnung* could be interpreted as a kind of mechanical drive that like jazz made possible an association to contemporary machine aesthetics (Bertolt Brecht saw jazz musicians as a kind of engineers).<sup>10</sup>

With an ideal of transparency and clearness the *Neue Sachlichkeit* distanced itself from the heavy and muddy chords of Late Romanticism that often make it impossible to distinguish the different instruments from each other. Paul Hindemith wrote music for mechanical organ for Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadisches Ballet* (1922), and occasionally, Paul Hindemith demanded that the piano was used as percussion or treated as a machine (and in one instance he stated briefly: *Tonschönheit Nebensache*).

This lack of conformity is not mentioned by AVM. Neither is the classical Hollywood film's dependency on Wagner discussed – in my opinion one of the most important impacts of the composer on the Twentieth Century. To some extent notions of the culture industry as emanating from or even originating in the spirit of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* could find confirmation by some circumstances concerning film music. In fact movies have never really been silent – not only had the noise of the projector and the undisciplined public to be overpowered – but motion without sound tends to be perceived ghostlike. With the coming of the sound movie the orchestras at the great movie houses were gradually taken over by the industry for extensive background music. Many of the musicians and composers coming to Hollywood were émigrés from Central Europe and trained within a Late Romantic tradition of heavy Wagner-Tchaikovsky-Rachmaninoff-sound. Among the more highly esteemed of those composers was Dimitri Tiomkin who had organized one of the mass spectacles after the Russian Revolution (*The Storming of the Winter Palace*, 1920); when he received an Academy Award in Los Angeles in 1955 he acknowledged the heritage of Wagner by thanking the composer posthumously.

The film as a kind of total work of art<sup>11</sup> was not allowing the incoming elements to exist as unchallenged entities: film music had an inherent tendency to avoid closure – not unlike what happened in the rhapsodic program music of Wagner's followers where the music tended to become a succession of themes and intermediate passages conducting from one motif to another. Applied to the narrative flow of pictures the film music of this tradition became even more fragmented and modulating, often sliding into the diegetic sound and imperceptibly setting in or fading out. A simplified Wagnerian system of leitmotifs were common, loosely associated with

characters, events, symbolic objects, forming patterns of overlaps and associations, transferred from major to minor and vice versa.<sup>12</sup>

The background music's ability to cover up the joints of the film montage, its capability for *suture*, is no doubt exaggerated by Claudia Gorbman in her book *Unheard Melodies* – you almost get the impression that the music only works by failing to be perceived.<sup>13</sup> However: I think it may be clarifying in this context to look more closely at the kind of music that, far from drawing attention to itself, managed to promote a general “suspension of disbelief”.

It could be expected that non-diegetic background music would work against the classical film language that endeavoured to hide its own mode of operation. But the opposite is true: in the same way as the so-called continuity cutting is well suited to fill out the gaps between the shifting camera angles the music was able to smooth out the ruptures and promote and intensify the emotional participation of the spectator. Belonging to the level of enunciation non-diegetic music served to sustain the “contract” with the viewer, involve him or her into the fiction. This, I think, was the internal reason for the traditional hegemony of the Wagnerian music form. Carl Dahlhaus' characterization of the Wagnerian music drama does away with the metaphor that presents Wagner's work as a massive architecture, an objectified structure.<sup>14</sup> Instead of seeing these music dramas as gigantic symmetric buildings, he prefers to think of them as extensive musical webs or tissues unfolding in time. It is a restless *Verwandlungsmusik* without caesura and resting points, promoting the narrative without maintaining a distance. It shuns divisions and is a *Kunst des Überganges*, a music of becoming and change. The invisible orchestra with its *Mischklang* – that was the aim of the design for the orchestra pit in Bayreuth – prevented the individual instruments to stand out within the heavy orchestration. It seems to me that in the classical Hollywood film Wagnerian music was adapted as a kind of musical Realism geared to hide the artistic technique – indeed contrary to the self-conscious artifice of most modern art.

In a discussion of Wagner's operas Luca Zoppoli is interpreting Wagner's use of leitmotifs as a kind of explicit, omniscient authorial narration: they provide *Vorausdeutungen* for later events or references to past events.<sup>15</sup> Rarely they provide access to the thoughts and associations of the characters. Although the dramatic text is basically tied to the present, and the music is unable to distinguish between present and past, the constant temporal references in Wagner's work are, in my opinion, shaping a kind of epic past tense rather than dramatic present tense.<sup>16</sup>

Zoppelli also argues that the leitmotif technique – when functioning as character identification – is comparable with Homer's repeated epithets that due to an oral tradition established repeated characterizing adjectives and phrases, thus providing a stable world, beyond variability and relativity. As an artist Wagner tried to create a utopian audience, representing an organic unity of the kind that the mythical poet was imagined to have faced. In the same way film music has often been conferred the ability to bind the isolated viewers together in a kind of community.

However, I think Zoppelli gives his points a wrong direction when he attempts to establish an explicit omniscient authorial agency in Wagner's opera music. I would rather suggest that this agency is implicit – and that in the cinematic context it has become a kind of seamless Realism. The relative imperceptibility of film music suggests a non-diegetic presence, but in a way that is postulated to emanate from the diegesis. It serves a kind of emotional mimesis. This does not exclude it from supporting or even shaping universalized existential statements on a very abstract level or supplying the images with an atmosphere of momentous destiny. But in all these matters the music has the character of flowing life energy, an underlying nature.

In my opinion the impact of Wagner on classical Hollywood film is in no way intangible and calls for further research. But after all it is probably just too tempting to attribute significance to the fact that Disneyland's central *The Sleeping Beauty Castle* (first in Anaheim, L.A. 1955) is modelled primarily on *Neuschwanstein* (Christian Jank and Eduard Riedel, 1872–1884) – the fairy-tale-like castle that Wagner's patron Ludwig the Second of Bavaria erected in the Pre-Alps and decorated with paintings visualizing scenes from the composer's operas. The film adaptation of Wagnerian music, however, points to ambiguities in the Wagner reception that are a persistent theme in AVM's account.

#### IV

The distance between Bayreuth and Dessau is moderate and to request an additional *grand tour* to Hollywood would certainly prolong the travel. Most readers would already be exhausted by the travel as the route is laid down by AVM. But AVM's thesis is an impressive piece of work, in scope as well as in scale. It has swollen to Wagnerian proportions – the text comprises more than 600 pages and in a way mimes its subject in its endlessness.

It is a demanding task AVM has set for himself – unlike many doctoral theses that confine themselves to digging into small limited corners of

reality. Definitely, it is not the case here. *In der Beschränkung zeigt sich erst der Meister*, Goethe remarked: only in the limitation does the master reveal himself. *Less is more*, was Mies van der Rohe's shorter version (he was the last director of *Bauhaus*). But one might be tempted to change Goethe's *bon mot* to *In der Beschränkung zeigen sich die Meisten*: Most people reveal themselves by their limitation. Neither one nor the other formulation is valid for AVM. The art of limitation is no match for him, but he is certainly not limited in his vision: Undeterred, he has embarked on truly impressive views and panoramas.

The treatise has its obvious strength in its richness of substance, but is in danger of miming its unbounded subject despite the alleged filter in the form of the Wagner impulse. From time to time, the presentation seems rather circuitous. The abundance of references and relationships often converge, so that you are not sure which *Stellenwert* can be assigned to individual traits in relation to the Wagner track that after all is not always followed so closely.

AVM writes an academic, but clear language, without affectation, but not without personality. It is characterized by his Germanic orientation, and from time to time one can regret the absence of more terse formulations that could serve as beacons or buoys the reader could cling to facilitating orientation while going through the overwhelming body of text. A certain degree of monotony is also the result of an extended use of repeated words and phrases.

Closer analyses of selected individual works may in my opinion have helped to create more friction between theory and practice, and the presentation tends to concentrate on the self-understanding of the involved actors – although it is certainly also part of the story. Often it is hard for the reader to maintain the major lines in the descriptions of the changing discourses. It would have been easier to follow if the intermingling of the aesthetic and political discourses – the latter are slightly underexposed – were pinned out in a way that emphasized the main concepts and their ability to work as magnets to attract differential semantic series of equivalences from different registers, the opposed terms being parallelized, displaced or dissolved. It would also have facilitated the overview if the aesthetic categories were related to the possible hegemony of different art forms, so that an implicit *paragone*, rivalry between the arts, came more to the foreground.

The thesis often has an almost encyclopaedic nature. AVM is obviously extremely well-read and knowledgeable, and his extensive erudition in a wide field certainly deserves respect. He has gained a great familiarity

with sources and independently worked through an enormous amount of material of both primary and secondary literature and generously transmitted his findings to the reader. The thesis is unique in a Danish context and it is beyond dispute that the book will stand as a standard reference in the field for a long time.

As usual, and not only in academic work, weaknesses and strengths are closely related. But to put grievances in perspective: AVMs dissertation stems from a very exciting and promising project and is an enormous and impressive performance, carried out with care and accuracy. The text is travelling widely around and is distinguished by not only treating individual stations of the journey of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, but is providing a comprehensive panorama of the entire field extracting Wagner's concept from the historical development. Much of the content of the thesis is familiar to many scholars, but the exciting material has in varying degrees been reinterpreted in relation to a tradition that is highlighted more than usually. The author has tracked down many relevant and illuminating passages in the studied materials and in this way contributed to the field from his chosen viewpoint. From this Olympic perspective, the thesis is thus offering a very interesting and useful re-writing of the history of modern art.

### Notes

1. Anders V. Munch, *Fra Bayreuth til Bauhaus: Gesamtkunstwerk'et og de moderne kunstformer* (Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2012).
2. Munch, 628.
3. David Roberts, *The Total Work of Art in European Modernism*, signale (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011).
4. I have given a general introduction to the topic in *Kunsthistoriografi*, eds. Hans Jørgen Frederiksen, Maria Fabricius Hansen, and Anders Troelsen (Aarhus: Department of Art History, Institute of Aesthetics, Aarhus University, 2009).
5. Roberts, 258.
6. Roberts, 255.
7. Matthew Wilson Smith, *The Total Work of Art: From Wagner to Cyperspace* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).
8. Hermand, Jost and Frank Trommler, *Die Kultur der Weimarer Republik* (Darmstadt: Nymphenburger Verlagshandlung, 1978), 299.
9. Karin Maur, ed., *Vom Klang der Bilder: Die Musik in der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Prestel, 1985), 175.
10. Hermand and Trommler, 315.

11. Sergei Eisenstein is among the film directors that regarded the movie as a modern total work of art. In 1940 he staged *Die Walküre* at the Bolshoi Theatre (undoubtedly, the production was to be seen in the context of The Hitler-Stalin pact, cf. Roberts, 229).

12. Cf. Hans Emons, and Helga de la Motte-Haber, "Filmmusik. Eine systematische Beschreibung", in *Musik in den Massenmedien Rundfunk und Fernsehen*, ed. Hans-Christian Schmidt (Mainz: Schott, 1976).

13. Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1987). For a critique of Gorbman see Birger Langkjær, *Den lyttende tilskuer: Perception af lyd og musik i film* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 2000), and Peter Larsen, *Filmmusikk: Historie, analyse, teori* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2005), 198ff.

14. Carl Dahlhaus, *Vom Musikdrama zur Literaturoper: Aufsätze zur neueren Operngeschichte* (Munich: Piper, 1989), 150ff.

15. Luca Zoppelli, *Opera come racconto: Modi narrativo nel teatro musicale dell'Ottocento* (Venice: Marsilio Editore, 1994).

16. For a more comprehensive presentation – with the baroque opera as contrast – see Anders Troelsen, "Operaens arkitektur. En analyse og nogle overvejelser i anledning af et samspil mellem Mozart, Losey og Palladio", Working Papers from the Centre of Cultural Research 37–96, Aarhus University, 1996 (cf. also "Sans og samling. Om forholdet mellem musik og billede", unpublished manuscript, 2004).