

Reality Overtakes Myth: Ivo van Hove's stages *Der Ring des Nibelungen*

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In four successive seasons, from Spring 2006 and to the Fall of 2008, the Flemish Opera (Belgium) entrusted a production of Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen* to Ivo van Hove and his stage designer and video artist Jan Versweyfeld. The conductor was Ivan Törzs. The Flemish Opera as it was called then – its actual name since 2014 is *Opera Ballet Vlaanderen* – is an institution that serves two historical opera houses in the Flemish cities of Ghent and Antwerp. *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre* and *Siegfried* were presented in Ghent, *Götterdämmerung* in Antwerp. Due to urgent restoration works to the building, the Antwerp Opera was not available to host the entire cycle. The timing was unfortunate, because the Antwerp theatre is excellently equipped for Wagner performances. It had originally been conceived at its opening in 1907 to meet the standards of Wagnerian music drama. At that time, the Flemish speaking community of Antwerp aligned itself with Germanic culture as a strategy to counter the dominant position of the French language *Théâtre Royal Français* in the same city. As a result, Antwerp developed a veritable Wagner cult, demonstrated for instance by a yearly tradition of *Parsifal* performances during the Holy Week that was maintained with only small interruptions until 1993. The fact that the ambitious *Ring* cycle that could have marked the centenary of Wagner performances in Antwerp had to move partly to the acoustically inferior Opera of Ghent was a serious set back.

Other strokes of bad luck affected the performances. Drastic budget cuts necessitated diminishing the orchestra's forces until the absolute minimum. The most unfortunate development, however, was the fact that the production has not been revived after its initial run. This turn of events was due mainly to the change of directorship of the Flemish Opera from Marc Cléméur to Aviel Cahn shortly after the production. The sets have been dismantled. Produced in yearly installments and not as a unified production from the start, Van Hove's *Ring* has never been presented in the form of a veritable *Ring* Cycle spanning four successive days. It did not get time to grow, a prerequisite for every successful *Ring*.

The production only exists in memory and in the documentation of a working video recording made by the Flemish Opera's technical services for archival reasons. Due to this cluster of circumstances, it is no wonder that the Van Hove *Ring* failed to leave its mark on the international operatic scene. However, we have all the more reason to treat it as one of the major *Ring* productions of the early twenty-first century. The international press coverage at the time leaves no doubt that the production was recognized as surprising and original by those who had a chance to see it. In part, this impression of freshness, of constant discovery, was due partly to the fact that the production took time to develop. Ivo van Hove stated that he approached the *Ring* from work to work, without the limitations of a rigorously preconceived concept for the whole. At the time of the *Rheingold* première, he declared:

"I approach each part on its own. Until now I have consciously kept Götterdämmerung at bay, although I know what happens in it. But I did not want to be influenced for Das Rheingold by the end. Wagner also does not want us to think as straightforward, because

he only gives everything away in the fourth music drama. I look at what the characters say and what drives them step by step.”¹

The main surprise offered by this *Ring* was the fact that the production was greeted with almost unanimous enthusiasm and approval. Critics expressed their astonishment that Van Hove's projection of the contemporary world, computer technology included, onto Wagner's mythic universe matched so well with the content of Wagner's drama. The most ostensible feature of Van Hove's interpretation is a focus on the challenges offered by contemporary computer technology and new media. The press reactions were almost in agreement that “*it all worked well*”.

- *“Taken as a whole, the performance seems to work rather well, images and text are very much in agreement.”²*
- *“How uncanny and sober the atmosphere may be, the concept sticks. The Ring's upbeat at the Flemish Opera is a brilliantly planned struggle for the power of the Media and the manipulation of knowledge.”³*

Modern technology takes hold of Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen* worldwide. The interest of Van Hove's approach lies in its inclusion of technology in the story as told. In most productions, computer technology is used as an instrument to create the theatrical illusion Wagner may have dreamt of, but could never achieve with the mechanical means of his day. This reasoning lurks behind The Metropolitan Opera's *Ring* production directed by Robert Lepage. The technological means and know how of the contemporary audiovisual industry are called into service of the realization of Wagner's dream – as the title of the documentary film on the production calls it.⁴ The result is a theatrical experience that aligns the universe of the fantasy film industry with the high art aspirations of opera. However, the imagery that results from the match does not stray far from Wagner's own mode of representation.

Although Van Hove's *Ring* does not play in the same league as the Met's in terms of budget, audience attendance and the production's longevity, it has other things to offer in the rapprochement between modern technology and Wagner's mythological imagination. In dealing with the technological world of today, Ivo Van Hove goes to the heart of the matter in his representation of a contemporary world on stage. Laptops, computer screens, media networks are completely at home in the world represented. In *Das Rheingold*, Van Hove turns the mysterious ring that gives the cycle its name into a computer chip that controls a worldwide information network. The implication of this interpretative choice is clear from the start: controlling information systems means power. The reactions by press and audiences alike indicate that Wagner's drama did not seem to resist to such a radical reading:

- *“Despite some of these oddities....it works. Why not possession of an all-powerful computer chip as a metaphor for world control? Certainly, at this performance (June 30), the idea seemed much less risible and far-fetched than a number of other modern takes on the Ring.”⁵*
- *“You have to go a long way (not bothering to stop off in Bavaria en route) to encounter a more confident, audaciously original, more convincingly contemporary*

start to a Ring cycle than that launched by the Vlaamse Opera in Ghent this summer.”⁶

- *“With this cogent Walküre, the Flemish National Opera’s Ring cycle is well on its way. The Belgian theatre director Ivo van Hove is not the first person to bring a 21st-century vision with a twist of science fiction to Wagner’s tetralogy, but his looks refreshingly new and beautifully thought through.”⁷*

Especially for the younger segment of the audience, Van Hove’s contemporary take on the *Ring* appeared as highly recognizable. It facilitated their first encounter with Wagner’s work. The younger generation took it without reservations. Many of them discovered the *Ring* for the first time, without points of comparison in Wagner’s vast reception history. A representation of a world dominated by modern information technology was not only recognizable in its own right, but its combination with Wagner’s antiquated dramatic text caused no problem. It made sense.

- *“In our country, these things would be booed from the stage right away by shocked Wagnerians of the old school. The audience of the Flemish Opera counts among the youngest in the world (with an average age of 35 to 40 years) and gazes on with sympathy how the director Ivo van Hove tells the story of Alberich, who steals the memory stick from the three ladies (in common language: Rhine Daughters) in the computer centre.”⁸*
- *“no matter that it is not the venerating Wagnerians that occupy the parterre and the balconies in Ghent, the attention and excitement with which the uncommon performance on stage is followed remains remarkable.”⁹*

Perspectives on the Ring

Considering the wealth of its content, *Der Ring des Nibelungen* may offer a stage director various lines of interpretation. However, the variety of approaches may be summarized into two main perspectives. On the one hand, the *Ring* cycle could be read as a family history, telling the story of successive generations: the marital tensions between Wotan and Fricka on the one hand, the fate of Wotan’s children on the other: Brünnhilde, daughter of Wotan and the goddess Erda, and Siegmund and Sieglinde, a pair of twins begotten by Wotan with an earthly woman. Siegmund and Sieglinde have a son, Siegfried, who represents the next generation. Wotan’s craving for power leads to the destruction of the family. This dramatic line displays Wagner’s inspiration in the *Oresteian Trilogy* by Aeschylus.¹⁰ Both story lines possess striking parallels. In both cycles, the intrigue is set in motion by the conflict between a father/husband/king with his wife over his plan to sacrifice a young girl to his ambition. In *Agamemnon*, the victim is Agamemnon’s and Clytemnestra’s daughter Iphigeneia, in *Das Rheingold* Freia, the sister of Wotan’s wife Fricka. The ambition of the father/husband/king brings the entire family to ruin, with some sort of redemption at the end. In *The Eumenides*, the goddess Athena and the laws of Athens save Orestes and bring the curse on the family to a close. In Wagner’s concept, Brünnhilde turns the death of all into an act of redemption of a more spiritual kind.

On the other hand, *Der Ring des Nibelungen* could also be approached as a metaphor for the history of the world. Since Wagner's protagonists are gods, they may represent natural forces. In a mythic sense, their actions mark the history of the earth itself, from creation – magnificently invoked in the famous prelude to *Das Rheingold* – over the tensions between the inhabitants of the earth, towards its apocalyptic end. The imagery of The Metropolitan Opera's production directed by Robert Lepage refers to the volcanic landscapes of Iceland, with their shifting tectonic plates, for precisely for this reason.¹¹ The imagery links the story of the gods with natural forces and the movements of the earth. For the same reason, Wagner himself chose to set the drama in an Alpine setting, indicating both its transcendence of any historical locale and its mythical connection with natural forces.¹²

What makes Wagner's cycle both compelling and difficult to put on stage is the ingenious ways in which both perspectives are intertwined. As is well known from musical analysis, the intersection between both perspectives is brought about mainly by the music. Wagner starts his drama with musical themes – the famous *Leitmotives* – that operate on a local level at first, but combine and develop gradually towards the end into a vast musical narrative that leads the drama to its transcendent resolution. At the end, music takes over from *logos*. Wagner did not set the last lines with which he ended the drama as a literary text, but transcended their Schopenhauer derived sense immediately into the realm of the inexpressible through the music. At the time when he composed the last act of *Götterdämmerung*, Wagner was immersed enough in Schopenhauer's musical metaphysics to give precedence to music over visual imagery as a means to reveal the metaphysical will that governs all existence.

The peculiar relationship between both perspectives gives stage directors causes enough for concern. Ivo van Hove solved the problem by cutting the Gordian knot, so to speak, and by focusing entirely on the human side. The gods and the Rhine Daughters are stripped from their mythological baggage and given recognizably human shape. The Rhine Daughters are employees in an office. The gods are managers. The mythic fortress of Walhalla is a penthouse apartment. The *Valkyries* are nurses working in an emergency unit.

Das Rheingold begins in a realistic human environment. The realism set forth in the *Rheingold* prelude is maintained until the end of *Götterdämmerung*. Instead of representing an apocalyptic ending, Van Hove's final image focuses on the human reactions to catastrophe. He stated that he ending reminded him of the images of people collecting themselves after the destruction wrought by hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005. People gather, find each other and search for ways to start over. Van Hove's turned the ending of the *Ring* into a hymn to human resilience.

Ivo van Hove achieves the intersection between the protagonist's family history and a narrative about the world at large through two interpretative decisions. Wotan's ambition, rivaled by the Nibelung Alberich, is world domination. His ambition as a mythological character is global rule. The idea of domination could be coupled to two developments of the contemporary world: globalization and information technology.

Van Hove's take on the *Ring* is to a large extent a study on the theme of globalization. The director stated that he did not want to see the challenges of globalization in pessimistic terms:

*"I do not want to make a Ring with a genesis leading to a vision of the future. The future does not exist anymore. Everything is there. In many places of the world. I want to think positively about globalization."*¹³

In Ivo van Hove's approach, the *Ring* could deal with the challenges and the dangers of the contemporary globalized world, but should not necessarily amount to a vision of doom:

*"I do not want to make a Ring based on cultural pessimism. You can see Götterdämmerung and the sacrifice of Brünnhilde also as something positive. Certainly not, as I see it, as a return to a primeval condition. We may ask ourselves whether it would be that positive if nature would rule. Extremists today often base their beliefs on an ideology of nature. Wotan, however, possesses an ideal of progress. He is not drunk with power, because he uses power to realize things. I try to make a Ring in which people endeavor to create an image of the future in a visionary way. It is not about a Hollywood vision of a happy end, of course. What matters is the idea of the city: how can we all proceed together, how can we create coherence in a fragmented world?"*¹⁴

Wotan's dream of a coherent world is projected on the image of the city. Globalized culture is dominated by the contemporary megacities across the continents, from New York to Singapore. In *Das Rheingold*, the city is installed, with Wotan's and Fricka's penthouse apartment as the centre from which Wotan intends to rule the world. In *Die Walküre*, the scene changes to the underground, the drugs and criminal gangs that destroy the city from within. The famous scene with the Valkyries shows an urban world in ruin. Wotan's dream has failed. On top, young Siegfried's actions in *Siegfried* amount to a terrorist attack on the mansion of Fafner.

Globalization means also technology. The modern information technology transcends boundaries and has the ability to unify the world. The transformations caused by the contemporary technological environment are so wide-ranging as to make all previous conceptions of world history and projections of its future seem obsolete. Since technology surrounds and shapes every aspect of our lives, this transformation happens almost unaware. The focus of this *Ring*, therefore, is to raise consciousness of the nature and challenges of our contemporary existence.

In this context, the mythological foundation of Wagner's work may obtain new meaning. In his prophetic study *Understanding media* of 1964, Marshall McLuhan summarized our lack of awareness of technological innovation in these words: *"in the mechanical age now receding, many actions could be taken without too much concern. Slow movement insured that the reactions were delayed for considerable periods of time. Today the action and the reaction occur almost at the same time. We actually live mythically and integrally, as it were, but we continue to think in the old, fragmented space and time patterns of the pre-electric age."*¹⁵

However paradoxical it may sound, Wagner's nineteenth-century text may offer help in the creation of that new awareness, precisely because the mythological theme dramatizes the extension of consciousness over the limits of space and time. The idea that technology makes us return to a "mythic" way of living – as opposed to the slow patterns of the mechanical age humanity has been accustomed to for millennia – is a compelling starting point to enter the analysis of a production in which technology replaces – and supersedes – myth.

Photograph 1: Götterdämmerung, Hagen and the Gibichungen

When magic becomes technology

Richard Wagner based his dramatic vision on a heavy load of fantasy and make-belief. A giant transforms into a dragon. Sipping from the same dragon's blood makes you understand the language of birds. The taste of the blood even makes you hear the villainous intent behind your adversary's words. As for Wotan outsmarting Alberich in *Das Rheingold*, the story of an apparently invincible sorcerer who gets defeated through the cunning of his adversary who challenges him to change into a toad, is a fairy tale classic. The invincible sword that waits for the divinely appointed hero worthy of its power is a story line that the *Ring* shares with the legends around King Arthur, among others. Armed goddesses fly through the sky on wild horses in many a mythological universe.

In the *Ring*, magical devices account for some of the least credible plot turns. Mime's *Tarnhelm* and Guttrune's potion of oblivion direct the intrigue into directions that would be impossible in realistic drama. Guttrune's potion shares with Isolde's love potion the capacity to change radically the destiny of the protagonists.

Standard Wagner interpretation holds that all these divine powers and magical devices are not necessary to the meaning of the stories that Wagner's music dramas develop. In most commentaries, they are hardly mentioned at all. A classical study like Simon Williams's *Wagner and the Romantic Hero* does not even mention the *Tarnhelm*, the potion of oblivion only in passing. The drink does not seem to have an effect in itself: "*This (the drink of forgetfulness) does nothing more than indicate Siegfried's present state of mind when he meets Guttrune. His surrender to her charms displays an inner lack of resilience and shows him an instant victim of society rather than a hero who will transform it.*"¹⁶

The meaning of these magical devices is usually situated in the inner beings of the characters. John Daverio's assessment that we should give the magical element in the plot of *Tristan and Isolde* its due is rather the exception than the rule. Daverio comments on the uncomfortable feeling of many commentators for a magic device such as the love potion: "*the significance of the love potion is frequently downplayed... what the lovers happen to think as they consume the potion is immaterial compared to what they feel under its influence... Far from emerging from a process of rational thought, the lovers' latent ardor rises to consciousness as a result of a process over which they have no control – a process at least closely akin to magic.*"¹⁷

Stage directors struggle even more with these magical devices than critics do. It is up to them, after all, to make their effects convincing. Therefore, they prefer to work out solutions that are more based on psychology than on magic. For his centenary *Ring* in Bayreuth in 1976, Patrice Chéreau explained Siegfried's downfall as a result of inner character flaws, not as the result of a magical trick: "*in Siegfried, there is this capacity to forget. He is in the whole of the Ring a man who has no memory, consciously or not: he is nor the character of the fable (Grimm), nor a revolutionary hero, but probably both (The reality was more simple, but I did not see it: he is the accomplice of Wotan, dramatically he is the man ready to do anything, the factotum), the precursor of an instinctive fascism, a silly creature and prone to oblivion, and therefore to catastrophes*"¹⁸

The dramatic justification of the effect of Guttrune's potion of oblivion on Siegfried is a challenge. Its consequences in Siegfried's wooing of Brünnhilde in disguise on Gunther's

behalf pushes every director to the limits. Both Pierre Audi and Willy Decker, in their respective productions of Amsterdam and Dresden, brought the two characters of Siegfried and Gunther together on stage in their attempt to convince Brünnhilde of their deceit. Audi made the real Gunther lead the action, with Siegfried acting as a double, lending him only his voice. Decker made Siegfried perform the actual wooing, with Gunther looking from over his shoulders with an anxiety in his eyes that the trick might not work.¹⁹

The magical devices of ancient tales could be seen otherwise than as psychological symbols. They could be taken for the mythological forerunners of modern technology. Humans have always dreamt of extending their action radius towards domains that are physically out of reach. Modern technology makes this extension a reality. In the mechanical phase of its development, technology already broadened the radius of human action. Contemporary information technology goes much further, however. In its development *“we approach the final phase of the extensions of man – the technological simulation of consciousness”*, in Marshall McLuhan’s prophetic words, written in 1964, when the recent developments in computer science and ICT were not yet in sight:

*“After three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western world is imploding. During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man – the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society.”*²⁰

It is in this context of the contemporary technological world, that Ivo van Hove chose to imagine the scenes of Siegfried’s courtship of Guttrune and of Brünnhilde’s wooing by the disguised Siegfried.

Ivo van Hove tells the story in the following way.

Siegfried approaches the court of the Gibichungs. Hagen recounts his exploits to Gunther and Guttrune, while they google the hero and check his heroics. When Siegfried arrives, Guttrune does not welcome him with a drink, but with a laptop. Siegfried enters the program of *Second Life* and starts a virtual flirtation with the image of Guttrune.

Second Life becomes the modern technological equivalent of the magical devices of the potion of oblivion and the *Tarnhelm* combined. On first sight, the equation may seem far-fetched, but on second thought it is plausible enough. What the combination of the potion of oblivion with the *Tarnhelm* brings about in the original comes down to a confusion of identities. Siegfried distances himself from his former self. Identity confusion may be a result of the immersion in virtual reality, where one can assume different identities, and where common notions of identity and individuality may become uncertain and to a certain extent flexible. Through the use of virtual reality, we are offered the possibility to escape from our normal self and act as if we were someone else. New ethical problems about individual responsibility arise when the self may be divided into different identities. Ivo van Hove’s interpretative decision gives realistic credibility to a plot turn that otherwise would not be accountable on realistic grounds.

photograph 2: Götterdämmerung: Siegfried, Gunther and Guttrune

Technology may have a confusing effect on notions of the self. Technology may also be manipulated by those that strive for power over other people's lives. When Hagen remains alone on scene, singing that he'll be there to guard the castle, he takes the laptops, kisses them and demonstrates through sardonic laughter that he is using the effects of technology for his diabolic plan.

The encounter between Siegfried and Brünnhilde continues the same logic of virtual role-playing. The love life of Siegfried and Brünnhilde at the beginning of the first act of *Götterdämmerung* had been set in a closed space, which suggests the exclusion of their relationship from surrounding society. Wagner's idea that sexual love could supersede the power system of the gods and renew the world is suggested by a fleeting reference to John Lennon's and Yoko Ono's hotel act, hinting at the naïve optimistic belief of the 1960s in the redemptive force of sexuality. When Siegfried approaches Brünnhilde in the guise of Gunther, he drags her into the virtual universe he came to inhabit since his arrival at the Gibichung court. By a simple push on a button, he makes the closed walls of their former love nest go up and disclose the computer screens that are omnipresent in the Gibichung environment.

Narrated in this way, the director's decision to transfer the inexplicable story line of magic potions, a transformative helmet and a treacherous exchange of appearances to the realism of the modern technological age may appear, at first glance, as a clever director's trick to find a solution for a notoriously difficult knot in any production of the *Ring*. However, *Second Life* is the perfect illustration of the far-reaching effect that technology may have on formerly accepted notions of human individuality and identity. The idea is justifiably linked to the content of Wagner's *Ring*, because confusion of identity is a recurring theme, ranging from Siegmund's name searching to Siegfried's oblivion of his love for Brünnhilde, to Erda's and Wotan's mutual denials of the other's identity, both reproaching each other that they are not who they think they are.²¹ Modern ICT has brought such problems of identity confusion centre stage. Technology offers possibilities to extend one's sense of self, to live more lives than one and to cross the borderline between the self and the virtual. Identity is not confined any longer to a unified set of character features, motivations and actions, but has gained escape roads to enlarge one's experience and to divert responsibility for one's actions.

The computer technology referred to in the Gibichung scene in *Götterdämmerung* would not be convincing, however, if it would not be integrated into a larger, coherent interpretative system. In Wagner's concept, Siegfried's betrayal of Brünnhilde is a repeat of the fatal exchange of love for power, initiated in the *Ring* cycle by Alberich's theft of the Rhine Gold, but going back in time as far as Wotan's mutilation of the World Tree. In Van Hove's production, Alberich's action is not the theft of mysterious gold, but of a computer chip. The Rhine Daughters are employees in an office that guards a powerful central computer. That computer controls a worldwide information network. The office of the Rhine Daughters could be understood as a global control room. Knowing that no creature would ever exchange love for the possession of the central chip, they tease Alberich with erotic computer images. Alberich becomes obsessed with the girls. In revenge for his unsuccessful attempts to seduce them, Alberich steals the central chip. The system disconnects. All data are deleted.

photograph 3: Alberich and the Rhine Daughters

The decision to turn the Ring into a technological device is the starting point of the ICT reading of the whole. It has the benefit of turning the elusive power of the Ring into a concrete effect. In the original story, one may argue, the object does not possess intrinsic power. It stands apart from the magical devices just discussed. The dreadful effects the Ring generates are due to the convictions that the characters have about its powers. What causes disaster is what the Ring stands for: the exchange of love for power. The towering tragic moment of the entire cycle, arguably, is that instance in which the Ring is almost turned again into a simple token of love. Brünnhilde refuses Waltraute's request to give the Ring back to the Rhine and by doing so to save the power system of the world. She refuses because the Ring represents what is most dear to her: Siegfried's love. This instance in which Brünnhilde intuitively knows that love should transcend all political motives, makes Siegfried's betrayal all the more tragic. The drama has reached its point of no return.

In Van Hove's reading, Alberich's action couples the betrayal of love for power to the control over globalized information networks. By stealing the computer chip that governs the world's information system, Alberich makes a claim on global rule. His action is a serious threat to Wotan's attempt to rule the world from Walhalla, the global city controlled by information technology. Alberich's theft of the crucial chip makes Wotan lose control. It will be imperative for him to neutralize Alberich's technological dominance.

Once the mythological trappings have been turned into technological realities, the humanization of Wagner's characters could proceed further than in productions that preserve the mythological framework. The modern ICT provides almost everything that has ever been dreamt of in the mythologies of the world. The command over time and space offered by modern technology leaves mythic powers far behind. Time and space have been brought within human reach, to a degree that no mythology could equal. In this sense, Ivo van Hove could take Fricka's argument for Wotan's construction of Walhalla very literally. She wanted a place where Wotan could remain at home, while ruling the world nevertheless. Modern technology makes it literally possible to know or even to rule the world from one's home.

In Wagner's concept, Alberich's gold treasure represented capitalistic exploitation of the masses. The possession of technology goes further than the command of economic production means. A single person may cause serious damage. That is how Siegfried is worked out. He stands for the unscrupulous young gamer, fully in command of the latest computer technology, but devoid of any moral compass.

In Ivo van Hove's version of the story, young Siegfried turns the computer chip *Nothing* into a formidable weapon of mass destruction. Fafner is no dragon in Van Hove's world, but a normal man. Siegfried destroys his villa. He encounters Brünnhilde, and discovers his manhood, between the remnants of Fafner's world in ruins. Siegfried is a young computer nerd. His obsession results in an egoism that makes him blind to the surrounding world. When such a character is not kept into control by social forces or by

moral priorities, the solipsistic gamer may lose all perspective and turn into a potential terrorist.

Ivo van Hove was not the first to distrust the childlike naivety of Wagner's hero. Patrice Chéreau did likewise in his suggestion of an anti-Semitic background to the relationship between Siegfried and Mime and in his distrust of Siegfried's lack of memory. Van Hove's Siegfried drives the point to its radical conclusion. Siegfried is dangerous, because he combines the most powerful weapon with a complete lack of knowledge, morals, and normal family bonds, while his first target in life – the murder of Fafner – is not even his own idea. Someone else had whispered it into him, as Fafner knows.

The relationship between Van Hove's interpretation and Wagner's original text can be questioned on several accounts. To what extent does this production change Wagner's text? This question could be addressed on two levels: what is the relationship between conceptual freedom and literalism, and how does the new context influence the way the music is perceived?

Freedom and literalism

The replacement of mythology with modern ICT enabled a fair amount of literalism in the reading of the text. Some textual lines may be literally turned into stage action, for instance the Norns calling each other to throw the rope – "*werfe das Seil*". They do so in this production, not with mythological threads, however, but with computer wires. It is precisely this sort of literalism that makes the production work. The many screens in *Das Rheingold* project images that are directly related to the text. When Donner produces a lightning, the effect is shown on a computer screen. The watery appearance of the original Rhine Daughters is present in the production through images of swimming women on screen as part of the computer games that the office Rhine Daughters play. When Wotan puts Brünnhilde to sleep, he brings her into an artificial coma with the use of advanced equipment and the help of an anesthetist.

The play with literalism may yield surprising results. The representation of the *Ride of the Valkyries* is an example of how literalism may create unexpected surrealism. Ivo van Hove reads the *Ride of the Valkyries* literally on two levels. A first level is the work the Valkyries perform. Wagner's mythological Valkyries collect fallen heroes on the battlefield and bring them to their afterlife in the service of the gods. Ivo van Hove's Valkyries do exactly the same. Only, their fallen heroes are not dead and do not enter their afterlife. They are gravely wounded. The Valkyries nurse them in an emergency unit, such as the field hospitals that are set up after a calamity.

A second feature of the Valkyries is the fact that they are amazons, combative women on horseback. Wagner's Valkyries should fly through the air. This aspect is not followed in Van Hove's *Ring*, but is compensated by a very literal representation of their equestrian skills. They are dressed as modern amazons with leather trousers and boots, and they ride horses - real horses. Gerhilde's call "*hier met dem Ross*" ("*come her with your horse*") is literally answered by the entrance of a Valkyrie on horseback. The poetic image of amazons on beautiful white horses – living horses that convey an overwhelming sense of natural energy - contrasts with the prosaic work of the emergency nurses and surgeons. Like a head nurse, Gerhilde records the presence of the Valkyries in her register. The Valkyries are not only nurses in a recognizably realistic sense, but the poetic luxury of riding horses in an otherwise totally prosaic scene gives a special twist to their actions.

Horses are realistic in themselves, but in this combination, they reflect the Valkyries' otherness, just as the original Valkyries' flight on horseback represents their divinity.

Photograph 4: Die Walküre: the ride of the Valkyries

If such a cluster of unrelated visual images may seem out of tune with Wagner's vision, a reading of the music suggests that it makes sense. The scene of the *Ride of the Valkyries* bursts with life and energy, but functions in its entirety as a static tableau. The famous music performs a double function, mimetic as well as symbolic. The mimetic is located in the rhythm of the gallop, which faithfully imitates the sound and rhythm of a galloping horse. This main mimetic feature is complemented with the representation of the atmospheric context of the scene: the stormy night over the mountains, with clouds chased through the sky. The stormy atmosphere is represented in the continuous figures of sixteenth notes in the strings. The music avoids strong tonal development. There are no modulations to the dominant, no strong closure. Harmonic variation is mainly restricted to transposition. The static nature of the musical construction indicates that the Valkyries all perform the same, prescribed deed. Their actions serve one overarching purpose.

A more subtle symbolic level is written into the rhythmic measure that the music employs. The dotted figure that represents the galloping is mimetic enough, but the measure of 9/8 that structures the rhythm according to a bar in triple time, transposes realism to a poetic level. The ternary structure of the metric pulse lifts the music out of the representation of a real, earthly gallop, and transposes the scene to the clouds. These horses are free from the laws of gravity. The choice of meter stands for the divinity of the Valkyries, the otherness of these mythological creatures. In Wagner's text, divinity is further suggested in unearthly laughter. The Valkyries perform their duty from a divine perspective and with complete emotional detachment. They look at the earth and its inhabitants from on high.

In Ivo van Hove's representation, the meaning of the music becomes even more perceptible. The stormy music indicates a situation of upheaval and disaster. At the same time, the poetic beauty of the horses and the detachment of these nurses from the deeds they perform and the suffering of their patients coincides with the otherness of the characters, as constructed in the music.

Music and the construction of meaning

The viability of a radical opera staging depends on the significance that the music may acquire in its new scenic context. In the pre-Wagner operatic system, music was intended to duplicate the gestural and emotional qualities of the scenic action. Mary Ann Smart justifiably calls it a system of overstatement. Music mimed the gestural qualities of behavior or actions performed on stage.²² The principle of synchronization of music and action reached its end at the *fin de siècle*. Wagner's professed ideal of an invisible theater contributed to the dissolution of the age-long unity between music and action. Mary Ann Smart has demonstrated, however, that Wagner's comment should not be taken at face value and that his own system of leitmotifs preserved many traces of the

former mimetic definition of musical meaning. The system of Leitmotifs in the *Ring* occupies an interesting middle ground between the mimetic representation of bodily action, and the abstraction of the mental concepts that guide the drama and its perception as a whole. A radical staging defies the expectations that have been accumulated through the *Ring's* reception history. Such a staging automatically directs the attention of the listeners to the immediate and immanent qualities of the Leitmotifs, rather than to their presumed conceptual function. The fact that they remain meaningful in a radically realistic setting may be attributed to this middle ground they occupy between the poles of mimesis and abstraction.²³

The preparatory work done by Ivo van Hove's musical dramaturge, Piet De Volder, was marked by a double approach. On the one hand, the Leitmotifs and vocal idioms were subjected to a process of close reading. This stage of the analysis was meant to reveal what is really there in musical terms, free from all associations. On the other hand, the dramaturgical study explored the range of symbolical possibilities of the musical material. It is noteworthy that this method of analysis endeavors especially to transcend all anecdotic significance. Instead, Piet De Volder argues that the Leitmotifs stand for the fundamental tensions of the power play that is at stake on stage. Leitmotifs should be read in the context of the larger framework of the entire drama.

*"Specifically in function of the production of Ivo van Hove, I had been asked to work out a personal characterization of the motifs and to check my own findings with the existing literature. In this domain, too, close reading bears results. The way the motifs have been labeled by Von Wolzogen and others is an attempt to get a grip on one of the many relationships between libretto and music. The first commentators were often satisfied with the connection between a specific melodic gesture and a given from the text. The question why the separate motifs have their specific musical profiles is seldom asked. What does the musical gesture tell us? What is the relationship between the motifs among themselves?"*²⁴

The analysis of the Leitmotiv of the giants offers an example. The motive has a marked mimetic quality. It paints quite graphically the heavy step of the giants. According to Piet De Volder, *"the so-called Giants-Motif is not just 'power music. In the musical context of Das Rheingold, the motif appears to tell us more about the threat to Wotan's power that has been tamed by contracts, about the latent aggression that Wotan tries to control. That is why the music of the giants bears elements of motifs that are connected to Wotan: the spear and Walhalla."*²⁵

The motif of Fafner in *Siegfried* retains the heaviness of the original giants motif, but even gains in metaphorical potential. The weight of the dragon motif indicates that Fafner literally sleeps on his possessions. Piet De Volder links this characteristic of Fafner's music with the sociological concept of "heavy power". This concept stands for the characteristics of power at the beginning of the sedentary age in human history. Heavy power means that power was clearly localized, connected to a place. Heavy power may rule a large territory, but its main target is to keep that domain under control. Heavy power can be symbolized in the images of the closed gate, the city wall, the watchtower... Contrary to the standard examples of heavy power, Fafner displays no ambition to increase his territory. His power only serves to guard the status quo. His transformation into a dragon symbolizes his defensive attitude, his ambition to prevent the world from entering his realm.

Fafner is confident in his power, because he cannot imagine any other way in which power could be used. His adversary thinks along different lines. Siegfried's ignorance has already been recognized in critical commentaries. His portrait in the first and second acts of *Siegfried* is very much tailored to Rousseau's ideal of "natural man." Siegfried is "bound by nothing, he has neither knowledge of the past nor fear of the future".²⁶ In sociological terms, Siegfried incarnates the principle of "light power".²⁷

This kind of power is not bound by territory and does not operate from a center. It may be everywhere. Light power operates out of sight. There is no long term planning involved. Light power acts as an instant operator. Its energies are musically symbolized in Siegfried's horn calls, with which he wakens Fafner to do battle with him: "ruler old style versus gamer":

*"The most interesting in the confrontation between Siegfried and Fafner is not the battle in itself, but the last words of the dying giant, with which he wants to open Siegfried's eyes. Fafner suspects that Siegfried is a hired assassin. Others pull the strings. In his death-struggle, he sounds surprisingly human, but his warnings of Siegfried are to no avail. 'Welcome in a world of hatred and calculation,' as Fafner's message could be summarized. But Siegfried only wants to know more about himself. Nevertheless, the slaying of Fafner offers him a code of entrance into the world Fafner was talking about. Now, he is capable to understand the essential information that the Forest Bird is giving him."*²⁸

The reason why Siegfried is able to kill Fafner lies not in his heroic strength, but in his lack of fear. In this new context, Siegfried's lack of fear is read as a manifestation of light power: the ability to be everywhere, to be invisible, to act on immediate impulse. Siegfried has no plan. Light power has no project. In this way, the contrast between the robust gravity of the Fafner motif and the energy of Siegfried's horn call serves as a musical metaphor for opposing principles.

Does it work on stage? The Leitmotiv of the giants in *Das Rheingold* does not duplicate the heavy step of giants. The characters of Fasolt and Fafner are represented as anything but grave. They look quite ordinary. They behave as ordinary modern businessmen. They shake hands with the gods in a correct, reserved but polite way. What the music conveys to the spectator, however, is an indication of the gravity of the situation. The moment has tremendous significance. The consequences of Wotan's treaty with the designers of his global city will be far-reaching. That is what the music adds to the scene. The music indicates that these businessmen are to be reckoned with, no matter whether their physical steps are heavy or not.

Fafner's power is visually located in his imposing villa. There is no need for a dragon. Siegfried's power is concentrated in an electronic chip he has planted into the skin of his hand. Even when he finds himself before Fafner's house, he continues to play computer games, surrounded by the music of the Forest Murmurs. His attempts to communicate with the birds are replaced by his demonstrations of his computer skills to the members of a street gang. That is how he tries to communicate with them and how he gains their attention.

This *Ring* is entirely set in an urban environment, which stands for the global process of urbanization that the present world is going through. The social and political problems that Van Hove's staging represents are specifically problems of the ecosystem of the world city, such as criminality, poverty, anarchy, and terrorism. *Das Rheingold* represents Wotan's dream of a world city as a system of justice and order. Since the first act of *Walküre*, however, it is clear that the city failed to fulfill its promises. It has

degenerated into a place of destruction. The city has been taken over by rivaling gangs. Siegmund's problem is exclusion. He is represented as fugitive, torn between rivaling criminal gangs, a victim of the oppressive powers of the anonymous city.

Natural imagery is most prominent in the music and the text of *Siegfried*. Wagner conceived this drama as entirely set in nature, from a hiding place in the forest to the divine heights, the "*wonnige Höhn*" of an alpine mountain. In Van Hove's setting, nature has vanished completely from *Siegfried*. The bear he captured to terrify Mime is a computer game with which he pesters Mime's efforts. In the scene of the Forest Murmurs, the birds are represented as members of a street gang. Siegfried's horn call is turned into a demonstration on his laptop. It causes enough curiosity for the gang members to come closer. They are interested in his technology. The vatic bird that instructs Siegfried after his fight with the dragon is a member of the same street gang. The knowledge of the forest bird is not the result of divine wisdom, but of direct experience. Street gangs are literally the eyes and ears of the urban jungle. They are everywhere present. They have seen and know all.

Photograph 5: Siegfried and Forest Birds

Wagner's *Tetralogy* begins, most famously, with nature imagery: pastoral horn calls over a pedal and tone painting that suggests the movements of the Rhine. The association with nature derives from a cluster of signifiers: the *creatio ex nihilo*, the natural scale, the acoustic phenomenon, the pastoral horn calls over a bourdon bass, the mimesis of the movement of the waves, and the pastoral theme, with *siciliano* touches, of the *Weia* singing.

In Van Hove's staging, the first scene is crucial in establishing the codes with which the production should be seen and heard. Van Hove has the habit of enlivening visual tableaux with surface action. He usually augments the number of acting persona beyond those that do the actual singing. In this way, the storm music at the beginning of *Walküre* is worked out as the chaotic action of a violent underground gang. The mimetic function of the music is maintained, but the source of the violent motion is located elsewhere than in depersonalized nature.

The Rhine Daughter's scene at the beginning of *Das Rheingold* represents an office with a group of young female employees. They exercise a strong erotic attraction on Alberich.

The *Rheingold* prelude does not conform to this stage image on first impression, except for the idea of daybreak and a world that is coming to life. But there is more to it. The first visual image is an empty, dark office, with light concentrated in two video screens and in the computer unit that contains the central chip. The screens are usually blank, but on one of them we see a woman swimming under water. The stage image defines the code in which the music will be meaningful for the rest of the cycle. The swimming woman refers to the literal level of the story, the blank screens, and the computer lights to the fundamental source of signification of the universe we are about to enter. The introduction makes it clear that the representation will oscillate between a literal reading and a specific definition of the worldview in which the drama will unfold. That worldview is dominated by the extended consciousness of modern information technology. Even at this point, the message is that the meaning of the music will act as a metaphor for the extended consciousness that humanity established at the threshold of the twenty-first century.

From the start of the performance, Alberich is already on stage. He is interested in the computer technology and looks around before the girls enter the office. The music of the *Rheingold* prelude defines the central computer as the seat of mystery, as the secret reality behind the world of appearances. The music stops being meaningful as a symbol of nature. It retains its quality, however, of suggesting a mysterious level of existence behind the world as it appears. Alberich's action will be about the discovery and the usurpation of that mystery.

The development of the drama will disenchant the mysterious nature of the information network that the "Rhinegold" computer controls. It will not, however, solve the mystery at its most basic level. Where does this network come from? It could not have been the work of the gods. In Wagner's vision, the gods did not possess the gold before Alberich's action made them aware of its existence. The Rhinegold represents a primeval level of being. So what is the computer in Van Hove's universe? It is a system of world control, but still untouched by the ambition for power. The music suggests as much through the pastoral codes in the singing of the Rhine Daughters.

When they enter the scene, their actions underline the latent energy of the music. They play computer games. Images of car races and combat games visualize the energy of the figuration of the strings. When they explain to Alberich what the gold represents, the tranquility of the music is matched on stage by a stop to the nervous action. The meaning of their words is clarified on screen. News flashes from all over the globe indicate that the Rhinegold contains all information of the world. The pastoral *topos* of the singing, marked by the *siciliano* rhythm in which the girls sing their hymn to the Rhinegold, defines the Rhinegold computer system as the representation of a global status quo.

Later in *Das Rheingold*, the Rhine Daughter's music acquires a nostalgic significance. Their voices are heard before the gods enter Walhalla. In this staging, they sing their pastoral hymn on stage, in the glass penthouse where Wotan and Fricka intend to live. The intimate setting enhances the nostalgic nature of the song. The Rhine Daughters are accompanied by diegetic harp playing on stage. It is this image of domestic music making that gives their song its expressive quality of deep longing.

There are a few instances in the story to which Van Hove's interpretative system has no answer to the mythological trappings of the text. One component of myth has no counterpart in modern technology: eternal life, represented in the story by the plot line around Freia. As goddess of love and fertility, Freia brings eternal youth to the gods. The director leaves this plotline undeveloped. Her divine power, however, is essential to an understanding of the hidden agenda behind the giants' request for Freia as payment for their work. Fasolt knows that she contains the secret of the longevity of the gods. To deprive them of Freia would turn them into vulnerable mortals. The moment when the gods seem to age after the departure of Freia with the giants, is a blind spot in the production. The only visual clue Van Hove could offer is a print of an apple issued from a large data printer. This blind spot has no consequences, however. Wagner did not develop the idea about the connection between longevity and Freia's apples any further. Wotan immediately regains his energy to act. For the rest of *Das Rheingold*, the eternity of the gods is no longer an issue. Like any mortal being, Wotan waits for the end since his monologue in *Die Walküre*. This production does not really distinguish between mortals and gods in terms of longevity and individual immortality, but represents all

characters as humans in real life situations. This is probably the most far-reaching result of Ivo van Hove's interpretative choice: by making the magical devices and mythological dimension realistic, he was able to humanize the drama to an unprecedented degree. After the catastrophe that brings the story to a close in *Götterdämmerung*, human life continues. Ivo van Hove took the news images of people gathering after the disaster of the Katrina hurricane as his reference for the closing scene. The computer screens indicate a new beginning in displaying a neutral test screen. The information network can be refigured. People gather around a tree to recover a sense of solidarity and endurance. The tree stands for nature, but not in the sense of an abstract force. In this final image, it is not nature that regains its force for renewal, but humans who discover in themselves a sense of endurance and solidarity. The closing tableau represents an attempt to humanize the most intangible moment in the entire work. In Wagner's vision, continuity of existence is only conceivable if the world returns to its natural state, which means that the world of appearances disappears and reveals the *noumenal* essence of existence. In Van Hove's worldview, the continuity of life resides in the human sense for survival and adaptation. The mythic concept of love that is regained at the end comes down to a sense of humanity restored to its fundamental longing for wholeness.

Photograph 6: Götterdämmerung, final tableau

Two systems of high tech

Van Hove's universe works well with Wagner's mythic drama, press and audiences agreed. A possible explanation for the success of the match may be searched in the nature of Wagner's drama in itself. Wagner's *Tetralogy* is the product of an age of profound transitions. The story line around Alberich hints at the then contemporary challenges of capitalist power, industrialization, and the exploitation of the working class. In her study on *The Persistence of Allegory*, Jane K. Brown has succinctly explained the special status of Wagner's *Ring* as the last stage in the history of allegorical drama, while demonstrating its demise. Allegory means a mode of representation that employs theatrical means to visualize what is invisible. In the Christian tradition this invisible dimension was understood as the divine realm behind the world of appearances. Allegory needs a fixed cosmos to be operative. Wagner retains many features of the allegorical mode, while pointing at a cosmos that is no longer there. The haunting scene of the Norns at the beginning of *Götterdämmerung* is highly symbolic for the disappearance of an ordered universe that may justify existence. The system of meaning that ordered the universe in the divine perspective of the gods dissolves.

The invisible world that allegory should reveal becomes a fleeting one in Wagner's *Ring*. It is impossible to grasp intellectually. Its representation is no longer entrusted to *logos* but to music. According to Jane K. Brown, Wagner's attempt at allegorical theater revealed its impossibility in the second half of the nineteenth century:

*"The same stage practices continued, the same conventions continued to shape plots, but the kind of perspicuous dramatic allegory that really drove the development of Gesamtkunstwerk was no longer viable. Although the term became current in the wake of Wagner, he did not achieve it; instead, he revealed its impossibility. Music, dance, spectacle, and spoken drama were all integrated over the centuries in the service of a particular cultural structure that no longer prevailed in the mid-nineteenth century."*²⁹

Psychology replaced cosmology. That is what *Der Ring des Nibelungen* reveals, according to Jane K. Brown. Ivo van Hove's production drives the point home in its radical humanization of the *Ring's* characters and intrigues. His representation follows the laws of mimetic theater - of Aristotelian as opposed to allegorical theater in Jane K. Brown's dichotomy - and almost completely obliterates all metaphysical perspective. The metaphysical is replaced by the extension of consciousness realized by the information technology of the twenty-first century.

To realize his vision, Wagner employed all high tech available in his time. Van Hove's production shows the high tech of the contemporary world on stage. The tension between the two systems adds a special poignancy to the experience. On stage, the high tech that surrounds us in real life is on display. In the pit, the live playing of Wagner's large orchestra represents the high tech of the nineteenth century. Wagner's enlarged orchestra represents the highest stage in the development and organization of music making in the ultimate phase of the mechanical age. Sound had to be made on acoustic instruments through live playing. Variation in tone color, volume and density of texture could only be realized with the employment of some hundred live musicians, working together in strict discipline. Instruments were still conceived as extensions of the body, music as the result of bodily movement and energy.

In the experience of opera audiences, live orchestral playing is the norm and therefore not surprising as such. The operatic system keeps the historical tradition of live musicianship and acoustic singing intact, whatever may happen on stage. In the world at large, however, manual music making is no longer the norm. The technological world represented on stage indicates that a sonorous world of comparable or even greater complexity may now be realized by a push on a button. The experience in the opera house demonstrates where we come from, and where we are, simultaneously. This *Ring des Nibelungen* reveals the transitional nature of Wagner's text, as a body of words and music that captures some of the dynamic perspectives that continue to shape our contemporary hold on the world.

¹ "Ik bekijk deel per deel. Tot nu toe heb ik *Götterdämmerung* bewust op de achtergrond gehouden, al weet ik wel wat erin gebeurt. Maar ik wou mij voor *Das Rheingold* niet te veel door het einde laten beïnvloeden. Wagner wil ook niet dat we zo rechtlijnig denken, want pas in het vierde muziekdrama geeft hij alles prijs. Ik bekijk stap per stap wat de personages zeggen en wat hen drijft." Stagebill *Das Rheingold*, De Vlaamse Opera (Antwerpen, 2006), 78.

² "de voorstelling als geheel klopt goeddeels, beeld en tekst zijn vrijwel een eenheid." Kasper Jansen, *NRC Handelsblad* (15/6/2006).

³ "So befremdend und nüchtern das Ambiente auch sein mag, das Konzept greift. *Der Ring Auftakt an der Flämischen Opera ist ein brillant eingefädelter Kampf um die Macht der Medien und die Manipulation des Wissens.*" M. Fiedler, *Das Opernglas*, 9 (2006).

⁴ *Wagner's Dream: The Making of The Metropolitan Opera's New Der Ring des Nibelungen*, A film by Bob Eisenhardt and Susan Froemke, *Deutsche Grammophon*, dvd 00440 073 4840.

⁵ John MacCann, *Opera*, 11 (2006).

⁶ Phill Ward, *Opera Now*, 11-12 (2006).

⁷ Shirley Apthorp, *The Financial Times* (9-3-2007).

⁸ "Hierzulande würde derlei von erschrockenen Altwagnerianern womöglich von der Bühne gebuht. Das Publikum der Vlaamse Opera ist aber eins der jüngsten der Welt (Durchschnitt: 35 bis 40 Jahre) und guckt erst mal geneigt zu, wie Regisseur Ivo van Hove die Geschichte von Alberich erzählt, der den drei Damen im Rechenzentrum (vulgo: Rheintöchtern) den Datenspeicher klaut." Wolfram Goertz, *Rheinische Post* (15-6-2006).

⁹ "Nun beherrscht in Gent ohnehin nicht das weihevollen Wagnerianertum Parkett und Balkons, aber es ist schon bemerkenswert, mit welcher Aufmerksamkeit und Spannung das ungewöhnliche Bühnengeschehen verfolgt wird."

Franz R. Stuke, *Opernnetz.de – Zeitschrift für Musiktheater und Oper*:

<http://www.opernnetz.de/seiten/rezensionen/gent>

¹⁰ "There was nothing to equal the exalted emotion evoked in me by Agamemnon; and to the close of *The Eumenides* I remained in a state of transport from which I have never really returned to become fully reconciled with modern literature."

Wagner's reaction in *Mein Leben* on his study of the *Oresteia* in the translation and highly political interpretation of Johann Gustav Droysen is recorded and discussed in: Daniel H. Foster, *Wagner's Ring Cycle and the Greeks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010): 285-286.

¹¹ Excerpt of interview with Robert Lepage in *Wagner's Dream*: "Eighty-five percent of the Ring is directly from the Eddas, and I became completely fascinated by that. If you want to do a fresh new Ring in this day and age, you have to go back to the very roots of it. I found this wealth of information just by digging into the Islandic myths. The inspiration for the set, for example, is the idea of tectonics. The reason why this story was developed out of Iceland is because it's a place that moves all the time. You see things that you can only see then in the Ring. You see these big glaciers and suddenly there is a crack and this lava coming out of the ice. It is the gods expressing themselves." - *Wagner's Dream: The Making of The Metropolitan Opera's New Der Ring des Nibelungen*, A film by Bob Eisenhardt and Susan Froemke, Deutsche Grammophon, dvd 00440 073 4840.

¹² See the chapter "The search for a visual world for the Ring", in: Patrick Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre: The Operas in Stage Performance* (New Have: Yale University Press, 2006): 76-81.

¹³ "Ik wil geen Ring maken met een ontstaansgeschiedenis die leidt tot een toekomstbeeld. De toekomst bestaat niet meer. Alles is er. Op heel veel plekken in de wereld. Ik wil op een positieve manier over globalisering nadenken." Stagebill *Das Rheingold*, De Vlaamse Opera (Antwerpen, 2006), 78.

¹⁴ “Ik wil geen Ring maken die cultuurpessimistisch is. Je kunt de *Götterdämmerung* en het offer van Brünnhilde ook als iets positiefs zien. Voor mijn part zeker niet als een terugkeer naar de oertoestand, want je kunt je afvragen of het zo positief is wanneer de natuur overheerst. Extremisten hanteren vandaag vaak een natuurideologie. Wotan heeft daarentegen een vooruitgangsideaal. Hij is geen machtswellusteling, want hij gebruikt zijn macht om één en ander te realiseren. Ik probeer een Ring te maken waarin de mensen op een visionaire manier trachten om een toekomstvisie te realiseren. Het gaat natuurlijk niet om een Hollywoodachtig visioen van het happy end. Het gaat wel om het idee van de stad: hoe kunnen we met zijn allen samen verder, hoe creëren we samenhang in een versplinterde wereld?” *Stagebill Das Rheingold*, De Vlaamse Opera (Antwerpen, 2006), 86.

¹⁵ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man* (London, 1964-2001), 4.

¹⁶ Simon Williams, *Wagner and the Romantic Hero* (Cambridge, 2004), 95.

¹⁷ John Daverio, “Tristan und Isolde: Essence and Appearance”, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, ed. Thomas S. Grey (Cambridge, 2008), 123.

¹⁸ “Et chez Siegfried, enfin, cette capacité d’oubli. Il est dans tout le Ring un héros qui n’a pas de mémoire – volontairement ou pas: ce n’est ni le personnage de la fable (Grimm) ni un héros révolutionnaire, mais probablement les deux (la vérité était plus simple, mais je ne la voyais pas: c’est l’homme de main de Wotan, dramatiquement c’est l’homme à tout faire, le factotum), le précurseur d’un fascisme instinctif, un être niais et prêt à l’oubli, donc aux catastrophes.”: Patrice Chéreau, “Lorsque cinq ans seront passés,” in: Pierre Boulez e.a., *Histoire d’un “Ring”: Der Ring des Nibelungen (L’Anneau du Nibelung) de Richard Wagner Bayreuth 1976-1980* (Paris, 1980), 101.

¹⁹ For an account of the genesis of both approaches by the dramaturge of both productions, see: Klaus Bertisch, “Wagner in tweevoud: hoe dramaturgie kan leiden tot verschillende theatrale visies”, in: Francis Maes, Piet De Volder, *Opera: achter de schermen van de emotie* (Leuven, 2011), 87-91.

²⁰ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man* (London, 1964-2001), 3.

²¹ The point is made, with a focus on the untruthfulness of language and the instability of identity, in: Jane K. Brown, *The Persistence of Allegory: Drama and Neoclassicism from Shakespeare to Wagner* (Philadelphia, 2007), 226-228.

²² Mary Ann Smart, *Mimomania: Music and Gesture in Nineteenth-Century Opera* (Berkeley, 2004), 1-29.

²³ On the mimetic (i.e. gestural) basis of Wagner’s Leitmotifs, as applied to *Die Walküre*, see: Mary Ann Smart, 171-189.

²⁴ “Concreet voor de productie van Ivo van Hove werd van mij gevraagd om een persoonlijke karakterisering van de motieven uit te werken en daarmee de eigen inzichten met betrekking tot dit materiaal te toetsen aan de bestaande literatuur. Ook in dit domein werpt close reading vruchten af. De benoeming van de motieven door Von Wolzogen en anderen is een poging greep te krijgen op een van de vele relaties tussen libretto en muziek. De eerste commentatoren stelden zich daarbij vaak tevreden met de samenhang tussen een bepaald melodisch gebaar en een gegeven uit de tekst. Veel te weinig echter wordt de vraag gesteld naar het waarom van het muzikale profiel van de afzonderlijke motieven. Wat vertelt ons het muzikale gebaar zelf? Wat is de verhouding tussen de motieven onderling?”

Piet De Volder, “De witte raaf van de muziekdramaturgie: Der Ring des Nibelungen als case”, in: Francis Maes, Piet De Volder, *Opera: achter de schermen van de emotie* (Leuven, 2011), 64.

²⁵ “Het reuzenmotief is niet zomaar ‘power music’. In de muzikale context van *Das Rheingold* blijkt dat het motief ons veeleer vertelt over een bedreiging van Wotans macht die door contracten aan banden is gelegd. Het vertelt ons over de sluimerende agressie die Wotan probeert onder controle te krijgen. Daarom verwijst de reuzenmuziek naar motieven die verbonden zijn met Wotan: de speer en Walhall. “

Piet De Volder, 79

²⁶ Simon Williams, *Wagner and the Romantic Hero* (Cambridge, 2004), 86.

²⁷ Piet De Volder borrows these terms from a sociological analysis of the *Ring* by Walter Weyns, “Moderniteiten zwaar & licht”, in: *Stagebill Das Rheingold*, De Vlaamse Opera (Antwerpen, 2006), 88.

²⁸ “Wanneer we terugkeren naar de confrontatie tussen Siegfried en Fafner, merken we dat niet de strijd het meest interessante is, maar wel de laatste woorden van de stervende reus. Met die woorden wil hij de ogen van Siegfried openen. Fafner vermoedt in Siegfried een huurmoordenaar; anderen hanteren de touwtjes. In zijn doodsstrijd klinkt hij verrassend menselijk maar zijn waarschuwingen aan Siegfrieds adres halen niets uit. ‘Welkom in een wereld van haat en berekening’, zo zou je de boodschap van Fafner kunnen samenvatten. Maar Siegfried wil alleen meer over zichzelf weten. Het doden van Fafner biedt hem niettemin de toegangscodes tot de wereld die Fafner evoceerde. Nu pas kan hij de essentiële informatie verstaan die de Waldvogel hem aanreikt.”

Piet De Volder, 81.

²⁹ Jane K. Brown, *The Persistence of Allegory: Drama and Neoclassicism from Shakespeare to Wagner*, 230.