

1-1-2016

Afterword: Gesamtkunstwerk as Epistemic Space

Kevin S. Amidon

Fort Hays State University, ksamidon@fhsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.fhsu.edu/mlng_facpubs

Recommended Citation

Amidon, K. S. (2016). Afterword: Gesamtkunstwerk as Epistemic Space. In D. Imhoof, M. E. Menninger, & A. J. Steinhoff (Eds.), *The Total Work of Art: Foundations, Articulations, Inspirations* (pp. 249–257). Berghahn Books. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvr6955g>

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Modern Languages at FHSU Scholars Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modern Languages Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of FHSU Scholars Repository. For more information, please contact ScholarsRepository@fhsu.edu.

Afterword:

Gesamtkunstwerk as Epistemic Space

By Kevin S. Amidon

In the annals of German academic discipline formation, the year 1910 can claim a position of some significance. Most memorably, Ferdinand Tönnies called the initial conference (*Soziologentag*) of the German Sociological Society (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie*) in Frankfurt am Main, at which Max Weber spoke vigorously for the separation of sociological study from race theory, race hygiene, and eugenics.¹ Now largely forgotten, but nearly as academically star-studded, was the founding of the journal *Logos: Internationale Zeitschrift für Philosophie der Kultur* by a group of major Neo-Kantian academic philosophers. The journal is probably best understood as a significant but ultimately unsuccessful attempt to retain the disciplinarily synthetic ambitions of German academic philosophy in the face of the inexorable rise of the social scientific disciplines like psychology, sociology, and ethnology/anthropology, as well as the powerful fashion for biological argument in all of the human sciences of the day.² In the inaugural issue of the journal, surrounded by shining luminaries including Heinrich Rickert, Georg Simmel, Benedetto Croce, Ernst Troeltsch, Wilhelm Windelband, Edmund Husserl, Hans Cornelius, and Hermann Graf Keyserling, the ambitious young philosopher Leopold Ziegler (1881–1958) published an article with the provocative title “Wagner. Die Tyrannis des Gesamtkunstwerks.”³ It is revealing enough that the most prestigious figures in German academic philosophy would feel it necessary to feature an obviously polemically charged article about Wagner in their brand-new journal of the philosophy of culture. Certainly some these men saw the culture of their day as too often synonymous with Wagner and Wagnerism(s), and perceived that despite the near-flood of commentary on Wagner at the time,

his legacy required further discussion, justification, and critique at the highest academic level. What Ziegler's title further reveals is another achievement of the present volume: it doesn't just clarify Wagner's position as the figure to whom the Gesamtkunstwerk concept sticks most fast, it also explores the ways in which Wagner is to be understood with respect to the contested history of the concept both before and after his engagement with it.

The *Logos* scholars' concern also prefigures what this collection of essays strives to map out across many historical and contemporary moments of cultural activity: that Wagner, and the unstable Gesamtkunstwerk concept that adheres variously to him and his works, have become inescapable moments of any Western artistic-cultural epistemology. To know art is to hear, and perhaps to resist, the siren song of totality. To know art is to see a work conceived intellectually and conceptually, but also instantiated as (embodied) performance, and thereby capable of becoming more than any text or score can notate. To know art is to know that every work fails to contain all its possible performances, but at the same time to acknowledge that every performance fails to exhaust the scope of the work or its conception. Gesamtkunstwerk is thus ultimately a category of knowledge, a conceptual network that reveals the potential boundary conditions of all art in the very impossibility of their clear delimitation. The ironically exasperated title of one of Thomas Mann's last comments on Wagner, coming after innumerable and sometimes politically risky attempts to capture the Wagnerian legacy in essays, lectures, and narratives, might reasonably therefore stand, yet again, as an epigraph for this volume: "Wagner und kein Ende."⁴ At the same time, Mann's expression of Wagner's "bombast, endless peroration, hogging the spotlight, having the last word..."—and statement of their likeness to Hitler's—cannot undermine his own sense that "I simply become young again when things begin with Wagner."⁵ This volume attests, once more, that Mann's characteristically layered

juxtaposition of emotions when facing Wagner and Gesamtkunstwerk represents no vacillation or contradiction or empty ambivalence, but the marker of a search for meaning so ceaseless as to achieve the status of the epistemological.

When considered as whole across the periods, forms, and genres they analyze, the essays in this volume resolve Gesamtkunstwerk's epistemological significance through, paradoxically, its dialectical partner: particularity. This particularity can have many aspects, and the essays explore them, sometimes in multiple ways in the same essay, both conceptually and interpretively. The volume's editors have proposed one scheme for analyzing these particularities, namely that of foundations, articulations and inspirations. But, to give the kaleidoscope a few more turns and promote further reflection on the total work of art (a Gesamtkunstwerk without end?), I propose here a different framework for examining the essays and their epistemological significance. There are, for instance, essays that map the more abstractly conceived conceptual space of the Gesamtkunstwerk's significance and do so in two ways: by exploring the historical and ideological particularity of the term itself and by demonstrating the constitutive tension between performance and work in the musical and theatrical arts and those, like film and architecture, that incorporate performative elements. There are also essays that take more concrete interpretive approaches highlight three elements of particularity that accrete productively to the Gesamtkunstwerk: the moment of resistance to totality that all art can reveal through its production and consumption; the nature of performance as an embodied act carried out by particular artists and performers and experienced by spectators and audiences; and the ways in which the bodies that carry out those performances evince and bear an ineradicable mark of particularity: gender.

Three essays emphasize the ways in which totality is essentially inconceivable without the particularity of individual artistic manifestations. Steinhoff's essay mines Cosima Wagner's cryptic assertions that link arguments about Germans' racial superiority with *Parsifal*'s artistic mission. Out of this material he pursues an argument that while Wagner himself remained ambivalent about the conceptual utility of Gesamtkunstwerk in his own artistic and ideological vision, because he himself neither invented nor deployed it particularly broadly—a point made persuasively by both Vazsonyi and Pederson in this volume—the totalizing concept of Gesamtkunstwerk has the differentiated power to do justice to *Parsifal* as *Bühnenweihfestspiel*: a work so megalomaniacal in its particularity that it and only it has the power to consecrate the stage for other works. In Steinhoff's reading of *Parsifal* as Gesamtkunstwerk, the particular is revealed as a sublation of the general in Wagner's vision: by transcending the commercialism of lesser works of music and drama, and even *Musikdrama*, the work asserts a foundation and undergirding of the unique power and mission of the German nation.

Anger coins an analogical term, *Gesamtglaswerk*, to describe the significance of a highly particular and consciously representative work, Bruno Taut's *Glashaus* at the 1914 German Werkbund exhibition in Cologne. She situates the work as a point of reference within widely proliferating arguments from the twentieth century about the relationship between the creative innovations pursued by individual artists committed to visions of modernism and the repressive, dominating qualities of totalitarian states. She emphasizes that the work's power derives from its ability to create liberating unity, but not repressive totality, out of the specificity of individual experience with the representative modernist artwork: "The way to greater spiritual and intellectual growth—and potential communion with mankind, if not the universe—appears to call for very close looking and experience of something that we cannot see through."

The third essay that focuses on the friction between particularity and totality in the Gesamtkunstwerk is Imhoof's exploration of the dynamics of consumption in the German musical film of the mid-twentieth century. Expanding on twentieth-century critiques of mass culture, he asserts that "musical film especially makes clear the iterative and connective function of mass culture." Mass culture brings individuals together, and binds them conceptually, and the three films he explores—*The Blue Angel* (1930), *La Habanera* (1937), and *The White Horse Inn* (1952)—have the capacity, as he argues, to enable "viewers to link their synchronic experience of movie-going with their diachronic consumption of culture." The experience of modern mass culture is thereby itself revealed as a kind of Gesamtkunstwerk, one that renders at least a semblance of social unity out of the consumption of individual products by individual consumers.

Four essays pursue thematically the ways in which performance expresses out of the totality of a work of theatrical or musical art a manifestation of embodied particularity. Joy Calico emphasizes that, contrary to some longstanding readings of Brecht in which opera is given a primarily negative valence, he vigorously and productively pursued operatic works throughout his career, initiating if never completing some two dozen projects that he specifically designated as operas. She makes a compelling case that Brecht's career, pursued analytically to its logical end, demonstrates that "modernist theater, of which epic theater has long been the standard bearer, may be the illegitimate child of opera." It does so firstly by instantiating a new kind of participatory audience contract that links spectatorship into representative, and therefore potentially political action, and secondly by theorizing a technique of theatrical representation through *gestus* that builds from the particularity of the actor's body as received and perceived by the particular spectator a formal structure of sufficient generality to enable political action.

Goodwin and Menninger take on the complex issue of music's memorializing function after the Second World War. They explore the practice of performers like Yehudi Menuhin and, in particular, Benjamin Britten's 1962 *War Requiem* to analyze how the shared experience of a work of art can retrieve something of the lost particularity of the victims of modern mass slaughter. To borrow a figure used by Imhoof, they reveal that music's ability to memorialize emerges through an iterative dynamics that links individual experience and artistic unity: "Memorial music aims to prompt inward transformation, on the part of each individual listener and that of the audience as a whole."

Trimingham turns to an institution so clearly politically, aesthetically, and pedagogically committed to the greater unity of the many diverse arts that surface-level analogies to Gesamtkunstwerk seem almost facile: the Bauhaus. With the goal of explaining the complex and contested position of Oskar Schlemmer's theatrical practice within the Bauhaus's shifting institutional and aesthetic parameters, she parallels Vazsonyi in reaching back to Schiller's thought about theater and subjectivity. This analysis makes manifest how, in the world of the Bauhaus, artistic principles without embodied performance became empty concepts, but also how individual embodiments of artistic practice had to be conceived through the strictest ideals of formal order. In Trimingham's trenchant formulation of Schlemmer's goals, "theater was a 'powerful force for order' at the Bauhaus, a 'Schillerian tribunal' decisively countering disembodied approaches to design and idealist notions of form detached from living, arguing always for the body and the human being as central to any humanist quest."

In the fourth and final essay that interrogates Gesamtkunstwerk by focusing on embodied practices of performance, Heisler seeks to retrieve the form so often overlooked in studies of music, opera, and theater, despite its deep links to all of them: dance. In a fascinating parallel

with Trimmingham's arguments, he chooses the metaphor (derived from Martha Graham's thought) of "reconciliation" to describe how dance emerges into the sphere of Gesamtkunstwerk. He focuses on what he calls "song-ballets": choreographic approaches to song cycles by twentieth century composers, and in particular on a musical work that incorporates elements in German art from across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: Richard Strauss's *Four Last Songs*. Heisler sums up how these multi-layered song-ballets gather work and performance together through dance's embodiment of formalized movement in a powerful analysis of the work of Maurice Béjart: "Dance brokers reconciliation of distinct ways of being and knowing." As an *epistemic* process, dance thus unites minds and bodies in a kind of productive Gesamtkunstwerk much akin to that represented in Calico's analysis of Brecht's complex relationship to opera.

The four remaining essays in the volume explore the relationship between totality and particularity in the Gesamtkunstwerk more conceptually, focusing less on the consequences of embodiment and more on the relationship of the particular work to the space of its possible performances. Pederson hews most closely to a reading of Wagner's own writings to show the tension in his usage of "Gesamtkunstwerk" and "Musikdrama." She builds Udo Bermbach's claims into an argument that emphasizes the dialectics of freedom and unity, and of art and politics, in the Wagnerian ideal: "Because the Volk is a free association of creative people—an 'artistic fellowship of the future' as Wagner put it in 'The Artwork of the Future'—only an artwork that is created communally can embody the ideals of a post-revolutionary social order." Still, she demonstrates how the stakes of embodiment remain ever present in Gesamtkunstwerk's shadow and reveals where Wagner himself went to ground on a perverse rhetoric of embodiment: where he fantasized Jews as the worms consuming the art's decomposing body.

Vaszonyi, building upon his groundbreaking work on the Wagner “brand,” provides a fascinating and productive critique of Wagnerian ideology. From his reading of Schiller’s ideals of aesthetic education, he derives an approach to Gesamtkunstwerk that emphasizes that work and performance exist only together as concepts: “Any Gesamtkunstwerk that does not involve performance—meaning the *medium* of human, lived, and live experience—is already a departure from and, I submit, a fundamental misunderstanding of the Wagnerian idea.” This relationship lies at the core of how Schiller’s derivation of the political from the aesthetic becomes transformed into Wagner’s totalizing vision and, in concert with the other essays in this volume, how Gesamtkunstwerk retained its political charge through the many manifestations of twentieth century modernism, and retains it yet today.

Rippey’s essay turns to the function of sound—and sound broadly conceived, not just musical sound—as represented in two canonical early German sound films to explore the consequences of spectatorship for political unity. He does this through two films “diametrically opposed” in their political stance, but that parallel each other in representing “the collective experience of sound by formally assembled audiences and amorphous crowds”: Slatan Dudov’s *Kuhle Wampe* (1932) and Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935). Following Lutz Koepnick and others, he posits a “modernization of listening” through reproductive technologies that, while potentially splitting aurality from visuality or other sensory modes, nonetheless enables sound to be manipulated aesthetically in ways that crowds both represented and spectatorial can experience together.

Like Rippey, and finally, Wlodarski’s contribution also focuses on a film, but one that sought to represent what seemed at the time (and not just to Theodor Adorno) to be something that surpassed in its horror the possibility of all representation: the destruction of human life in

the Nazi concentration camps. In her analysis of Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* (1955), and in particular Hanns Eisler's musical score for the film, she contends that in overtly deconstructing the Nazi imagery and soundscape analyzed by Rippey in *Triumph of the Will*, Resnais's film and Eisler's score produce a "political retort to totalitarianism that undercuts Riefenstahl's Gesamtkunstwerk and reveals its illusory facades, all the while consciously acknowledging the continued relevance of Wagnerian techniques to twentieth-century modernist film." At a secondary level then, Resnais and Eisler intertextually achieve a kind of performance of political atonement that brings it into contact with works as diverse as *Parsifal* (as analyzed by Steinhoff) and Britten's *War Requiem* (as explored by Goodwin and Menninger).

Leopold Zeigler's dense critique of Wagner in the inaugural 1910 volume of *Logos*, in fact, resonates deeply with the rich reflections, analyses, and critiques in this volume, and highlights further significant aspects of the essays' explorations of the epistemic space enfolding artist, work, performance, and audience. Gesamtkunstwerk, as Ziegler reads it, is necessarily a colossal contradiction, something that demands what it at the same time undercuts: a *productive* audience. He initiates his argument with a comparison to Mozart's operas and *The Marriage of Figaro* in particular. Analogously to the achievements of this volume's contributors, he turns the surface-level rhetoric of formal synthesis and unity that adheres to the Gesamtkunstwerk concept upon itself. He argues that *Figaro* takes the most discretely embodied forms of human activity and makes out of them great art, in contrast to Wagner's endless mythologizing and theoretically circumscribed universalizing. "In short," he argues, "le mariage de Figaro unifies essentially everything that seems to sin against the Wagnerian theory of music drama's elemental expression of the purely human."⁶ Ziegler then heightens this argument by emphasizing a conflict that even in Wagner's world of mythical universality seems incapable of resolution, or

even sublation, and which Calico, Heisler, and Steinhoff further grant central significance in their analyses: gender polarity. He stages this argument in a directly epistemological fashion as well: “Gender polarity, as the tragic Ur-phenomenon of the world, allows him namely to cognize the impossibility of ever totally resolving the separation of all beings into a multiplicity of individuals.”⁷ Absolute unity would make form itself unnecessary and thereby evacuate art. A core of multiplicity thus remains always at the heart of the unifying formal-artistic impulse, rendering the Gesamtkunstwerk, at its core, a paradox.

In Ziegler’s view, Wagner’s ultimate failure—and the root cause of the simultaneous fascination and meaninglessness of Gesamtkunstwerk (as Vazsonyi discusses)—is to have only created a new formal hierarchy in the name of totality, one that eats away at the very arts it would deign to heighten, transform, or sublimate through unity: “In Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk, the final verdict is rendered upon singing.”⁸ Wagner might wish that the meaning of words, as intensified through the operatic voice, resolve into a higher form of mythic signification through the endless melody of his Leitmotiv technique. However, that wish itself, so Ziegler argues, runs the danger of obviating meaning altogether, rendering the epistemic fantasy of the Gesamtkunstwerk both philosophically and culturally destructive. This is, finally, because it evacuates the process of *productive* listening, the audience’s contribution to the artistic process (a point so effectively emphasized by Vazsonyi and Pederson here). “In that the poet allows music to become stage drama, he robs it necessarily of its most beautiful effect upon the listener: namely that this listener prove himself through his own form-inventing, productive activity.”⁹

Thus we arrive at Gesamtkunstwerk’s vanishing point. Can the unifying, even totalizing formal impulse common to so many artistic spheres in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries render out of distracted spectators, listeners, or audiences something more? Does anything

remain but broken shards of the Gesamtkunstwerk ideal mapped, analyzed, questioned, and constellated across the spheres of music, opera, film, dance, theater, architecture, philosophy, and history in this volume? Is the necessary failure of any such dream – or fantasy – of totality the boundary condition of all art? Here the words Walter Benjamin, perhaps the greatest cultural theorist of the discrete, the fragmentary, the detritus of modernity, can create out of a painting by an artist so tantalizingly analyzed by both Trimmingham and Anger in this volume – Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus* – a conclusion adequate to the spirit of this project: “This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, upon which he turns his back, while the pile of ruins before him grows toward heaven. That which we call progress is *this* storm.”¹⁰

¹ Website, *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie*, accessed 3 March 2015:

<http://www.soziologie.de/de/die-dgs/geschichte.html#c2857>; See also: Robert Proctor, *Value-Free Science? Purity and Power in Modern Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA, 1991).

² See: Herbert Schnädelbach, *Philosophy in Germany, 1831–1933*, trans. Eric Matthews (Cambridge, UK, 1984). Rickert (1863–1936) in particular was centrally concerned with the epistemological stakes of disciplinary knowledge and the utility of concepts in scholarly inquiry. See: Heinrich Rickert, *The Limits of Concept Formation in Natural Science*, ed. and trans. Guy Oakes (Cambridge, UK, 1986).

³ Leopold Ziegler, “Wagner. Die Tyrannis des Gesamtkunstwerks,” *Logos: Internationale Zeitschrift für Philosophie der Kultur* 1.3 (1910/1911), 371–404. All translations by the author. Despite numerous books and several articles in *Logos* and other prestigious academic journals, Ziegler never achieved *Habilitation* or a professorship. He remained a successful private scholar, however, corresponded widely with literary and philosophical figures including the Jünger

brothers, continued to publish widely throughout his life, and closed his career a winner of the Goethe Prize of the City of Frankfurt (1929) and the West German *Bundesverdienstkreuz* (1956).

⁴ Significantly for the spirit of this volume, Mann's text was written in December 1949 (and published 6–7 April 1950 in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*) as a letter to the stage designer and illustrator Emil Preetorius (1883-1973), who had worked and written extensively on Wagner.

Thomas Mann, "Wagner und kein Ende. An Emil Preetorius," in *Miszellen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1968), 212–14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 213. Translation by the author. "...Bramarbasieren, ewigem Perorieren, Allein-reden-Wollen, über alles Mitreden-Wollen..."; "Ich werde eben wieder jung, wenn es mit Wagner anfängt."

⁶ "Kurz, le mariage de Figaro vereinigt ziemlich alles, was sich gegen die Wagnerische Theorie eines reinmenschlichen Vorwurfes für das Musikdrama versündigen kann." Leopold Ziegler, "Wagner. Die Tyrannis des Gesamtkunstwerks," 380. The use of French in the original text serves to refer also to the original Beaumarchais play.

⁷ "Die Geschlechtspolarität als das tragische Urphänomen der Welt gibt ihm nämlich die Unmöglichkeit zu erkennen, die Trennung aller Wesen in eine Vielheit von Individuen jemals gänzlich zu überwinden." *Ibid.*, 386.

⁸ "In Wagners Gesamtkunstwerk ist dem Gesange das Urteil gesprochen." *Ibid.*, 398.

⁹ "Indem der Dichter die Musik Bühnendrama werden läßt, beraubt er sie notwendig ihrer schönsten Wirkung auf den Hörer: nämlich daß dieser sich in seiner gestalterfindenden produktiven Tätigkeit erweise." *Ibid.*, 401.

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte," in *Illuminationen: Ausgewählte Schriften I* (Frankfurt am Main, 1977), 255. Translation by the author; emphasis original.

“Dieser Sturm treibt ihn unaufhaltsam in die Zukunft, der er den Rücken kehrt, während der Trümmerhaufen vor ihm zum Himmel wächst. Das, was wir Fortschritt nennen, ist *dieser* Sturm.”