

# THE DEATH AND LIFE OF THE TOTAL WORK OF ART

Henry van de Velde and the  
Legacy of a Modern Concept

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# THE CREATIVE DESTRUCTION OF THE TOTAL WORK OF ART

## From Hegel to Wagner and beyond

Wolfram Bergande

*They are artists [...]; [...] they give utterance to the inner essence, they prove the rightness of their action, and the ‚pathos‘ which moves them is soberly asserted and definitely expressed in its universal individuality [...].*

G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, „*The Spiritual Work of Art*“<sup>1</sup>

*O holy Antigone! on thee I cry! Let wave thy banner, that beneath it we destroy and yet redeem!*

R. Wagner, *Opera and Drama*<sup>2</sup>

*Did actually anybody ever seriously believe in this theory? In the addition of painting, music, word and gesture, which to pass off as the fulfillment of all artistic craving Wagner had the ingenuousness?*<sup>3</sup>

Th. Mann, *The Essayistic Work: Autobiographic Notes*

Hegel's philosophy, notably his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, held in Berlin in the 1820s, and the late *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, casts a long shadow on the philosophies of art that followed, a shadow which is high-contrast especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It has been wondered whether Richard Wagner had been influenced by Hegel's or Hegelian philosophy, particularly with respect to Wagner's three early, so-called Zurich writings, namely his *Art and Revolution*, written in 1849, his *The Artwork of the Future*, which was published in 1850, and his *Opera and Drama*, published in 1852. Sometimes it is argued that there are traces of Hegel's philosophy in Wagner's early writings (e.g. in Lippman 1958: 210; Fornoff 2004: 191, 196 Fn. 79, Schild 2002: 167). Wagner himself tells in his autobiography *Mein Leben* that he read Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (Wagner/ Gregor-Dellin 1989: 442). And according to some earlier Wagner scholarship, Wagner once studied parts of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, allegedly with the only "negative" (Glaser 1905: 409, referring to Pecht 1894<sup>4</sup>) success of keeping Wagner from further investigation into the "Scheinphilosophie" (ibid.) – sham philosophy – of Hegel and others, right until he would have come in touch with "the only great thinker among his contemporaries" (ibid.), which would be Schopenhauer. What is beyond doubt is that Wagner dedicated his *The Artwork of the Future* to the Left-Hegelian philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach. And his revolutionary ideas of the Zurich period are obviously rooted in the Left-Hegelian *Zeitgeist* prevalent in Germany in the 1840s, including authors as influential as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.<sup>5</sup> This seems to be rather little evidence for a strong impact of Hegel on Wagner. Yet in his Zurich writings, that is before Wagner became influenced by Schopenhauerian ideas, Hegel's late lectures are palpably present, just as his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. As a matter of fact, that the early Wagner had gained a merely superficial knowledge of his reading of Hegel is evidently wrong, as will be shown below, and as it could be further supported by more recent scholarship on Wagner's *Ring* (cf. Corse 1990; cf. also Schneider 2013).

I would even venture to say that it is mandatory to read the Zurich writings against the background of Hegel's *Phenomenology* and his late lectures on aesthetics and religion, and this because of at least four reasons: First, like in Hegel's aesthetics, the early Wagner starts from a systematic hierarchization of the arts, with poetry ranked highest. From this starting point, Wagner develops his idea of integrating the single art disciplines: architecture, sculpture, painting, dance, singing and dramatic poetry, into just one artwork. This fusion necessitates in particular a "Gefühlswerdung des Verstandes" (Wagner 2008: 215), a melting of poetic thought and understanding into feeling, feeling as it is expressed in music. Second, like Hegel, Wagner's Zurich writings presuppose that modern occidental

subjectivity is shaped by two decisive factors: by the heritage of Greek antiquity and by Germanic, Protestant Christianity. Third: Hegel essentially defined subjectivity as negativity, that is, as spiritualized negativity, as a negativity that is *aufgehoben*, sublated, and put to work in the Protestant conquest of the world. For Hegel, death is the absolute form of negativity, and its sublation and transfiguration the absolute achievement of Christian religion – leading to an absolute subjectivity, a *Weltgeist* which realizes itself as collective self-consciousness in universal mankind. Influenced by Feuerbach, the early Wagner of course rejects the Christian negation of sensuality, even in the form Hegel gave to it. Nevertheless, negativity and death are likewise important features of his conception of the artwork to come: negativity as destruction of the existing conditions of human life, and death as transfiguration of a meaningful life.<sup>6</sup> For on the one hand, the fusion of the arts in the artwork of the future depends on negativity. It necessitates the “Selbstvernichtung” (Wagner 1850: 1297), the self-annihilation of the existing single arts, and their annihilation will be *ipso facto* the birth of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Thus the total work of art is a genuine case of creative destruction. On the other hand, Wagner projects the redemption of mankind onto his total work of art, yet to redeem mankind means to free it from the external necessities that determine life. Death however is, like it is in Hegel’s Lordship-Bondage-Dialectic of the *Phenomenology*, the absolutely negative, the ultimate necessity, the truly unconquerable annihilation of individual human life. In his later lectures on aesthetics Hegel, as to him, had written the world history of the arts as a history of divine beings which appear to master death. Yet eventually he claimed that it is only Christian religion and no art or art-religion - *Kunstreligion* - whatsoever that can conquer death. For the Romantic subjectivity which has conquered death (‘Romantic’ in the terminology of Hegel), for a subjectivity whose essence it is to originate from the death, i.e. from the mortification of the sensuous, art, necessarily bound to the sensuous realm, becomes a thing of the past. For Wagner, by contrast, the artwork has a future only as a precisely sensuous *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The fourth reason to read Wagner’s Zurich writings in a Hegelian perspective is that they undertake to solve those problems of modernity which are central to Hegel’s dialectical reconciliation, too, namely: how to combat modern possessive individualism, what Wagner denounces and deplors with the term “egoism” (Wagner 1895: 78), how to do away with the utter mechanization of human life, how to heal the uprooting of individuality from nature, beauty and happiness, and how to compensate the disintegration of human communities.

## The way of all flesh

Given these structural similarities between Hegel and Wagner and given that it is in his Zurich writings where Wagner prominently develops the concept - not the term - of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the total or universal work of art, we should understand this notion as a critical reaction to Hegel's diagnosis of modernity and the role art plays in it. The gist of my argument in this paper therefore is that Wagner's notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, termed as "artwork of the future" (Wagner 1850 & 1895), must be read as a critical response and follow-up to Hegel's solution to the problematic contradictions of modernity. When in 1899 Henry van de Velde in a famous essay in the journal PAN takes up Wagner's idea of a synthesis of the arts, he will bear witness to these contradictions, without providing, it is true, more convincing answers than Hegel or Wagner did. At the heart of the contradictions of modernity lies the problem of how to deal with the negativity, destructivity of man. Neither Hegel nor Wagner did provide concluding answers. Instead, Wagner together with his notion of the total work of art can appear as an intellectual ancestor of the two totalitarian systems of the 20th century, Communism and Fascism. Wagner's utopian total artwork failed to become universal, instead it turned totalitarian – it seems as simple as that.

The candidate list of what may count as a total work of art is very long, it includes the works of Mallarmé, Scriabin, Stravinsky, Taut, Schlemmer, Hofmannsthal, Brecht, Artaud, Disney (all of which are discussed in the well-informed monographs of Smith 2007 and Roberts 2011). Eventually, it also includes designed artifacts like the ocean liner RMS *Queen Mary 2* (Sloterdijk 2005: 305), not to mention the non-artworks which have been considered metaphorically as total art works: Stalin's Soviet Union and its 1937 show trials "[...] which literally liquidated the gap between art and life" (Roberts 2011: 211; cf. Groys 1988), Hitler's Reich (cf. Smith 2007) or, lately, North Korea. Today – I would argue – the whole of the industrial consumer culture of globalized capitalism with its as it were magic world of marketing and advertisement, so abhorred and condemned by the early Wagner, turns out to be the only *real-existierendes Gesamtkunstwerk*: the "tremendous cos-mos of the modern economic order", the "iron cage" of modern capitalism, as Max Weber called it in 1905, "which determine[s] the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force" and which "perhaps [...] will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt." (Weber 2005: 123) As Weber remarks at the end of his *Protestant Ethic*, this is a way which was already shown in Goethe's *Faust II*. There Faust turns from the beauty of Helena in Greek antiquity to the

economic conquest of the world. Wagner criticizes this turn in *The Artwork of the Future*: “Pluto”, the Greek Good of wealth, figured by Faust in the King’s festive procession, replaces “Zeus and Apollo” (Wagner 1850: 145, transl. W.B.).

If globalized capitalism is our total work of art, then the reason for that may be that it found other, more manageable ways to deal with the negativity inherent in human life. Freudian Psychoanalysis teaches that there is a natural destructivity in mankind. This destructivity is heated up by civilized societies which must force their members to repress and internalize it in order to maintain themselves, societies which are, as Thomas Hobbes already stated, based on a death threat, literally civilizations of death. The repression and ever mounting pressure of this destructivity causes an *Unbehagen in der Kultur*, as Freud famously called it, an uneasiness or feeling of discontent in civilization (Freud 1930). So the essential question seems to be: how to deal with the negativity that according to Hegel and Freud essentially defines subjectivity, a potentially self-destructive negativity? As I want to show, both Wagner’s notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and the utilitarian capitalism Max Weber describes as inspired by the protestant work ethic can be interpreted and compared as providing an answer to this question. This approach of mine entails that destructivity, whether creative or not, is a feature of any work of art, whether total or not.

To do so, I have to go back to Hegel’s Lordship-Bondage-Dialectic in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, because it is there that Hegel explains the negativity which defines subjectivity as a negativity experienced in the face of death. In this famous passage, Hegel uses the motive of liquidity and liquidation which will also be a guiding metaphor for Wagner. Hegel represents the subject which experiences this negativity as the mythological character of the Bondsman. Threatened with death by the other subject, the so-called Lord, in a life-or-death-struggle, the Bondsman finally gives in and submits himself to servitude. In this servitude, writes Hegel

*[...] its whole being has been seized with dread; for it has experienced the fear of death, the absolute Lord. In that experience it has been quite unmanned, has trembled in every fibre of its being, and everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundation. But this pure universal movement, the absolute melting-away of everything stable, is the simple, essential nature of self-consciousness, absolute negativity, pure being-for-self [...] (Hegel 1977: 117).*

The consciousness which is Bondsman has experienced the fear of death, of the absolute lord; it is reigned by fear and trembling; everything stable, everything which has a *Stand*, a standing, melts away; thus the subject which is Bondsman

becomes totally shapeable, moldable, it melts into an inner, implicit “pure being-for-self”. The “absolute melting-away of everything stable” translates the German: *das absolute Flüssigwerden alles Bestehens*. “Flüssigwerden” literally means: becoming fluid. This may mean: moldability, formability, plasticity – not exclusively, but also in the artistic, creative sense. Moreover, it may also mean death, liquidation in the sense of killing somebody, putting him or her to death. It also connotes liquidation as financial operation, as the winding-up of a business or the settlement of capital assets, the sell-out or the closing sale. The subject in the role of the Bondsman faces absolute negativity, death, but it does not become annihilated, it does not die. Rather, it incorporates this negativity by liquidating its attachment to its natural existence, that is to its individual body and the surrounding natural world.

Now importantly, according to Hegel this liquidation of the subject translates into the field of the arts, more precisely into what Hegel calls absolute spirit, namely art, religion, and philosophy. If the subject becomes totally liquidated, totally up-rooted and alienated from its natural basis, and if therefore indeed modern self-consciousness essentially originates from this mortification of its natural sensuality, then the arts can no longer realize let alone represent what this non-sensual subject essentially is. From this logical and world-historical point on, only Christian re-ligion can. Hegel succinctly puts this in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*: through the crucifixion and mortification of the body of Christ, the marble of the sculptures of the Greek gods gets literally mortified, it is liquidated, that is put to death and spiritualized. With Hegel, the holy spirit of Christianity does not rise from the twilight of the pagan idols, but from their creative destruction. In the transition from classical Greek art to Christian religion, art, which necessarily realizes itself in a sensuous object – art becomes absolutely fluidized. And this means: art becomes more-than-fluid, superfluous, expendable, it literally disappears – it is, as Hegel notoriously claims, a thing of the past, nota bene: if and only if considered in its highest vocation, namely the vocation to bring, through sensuous objects, to the mind of the subject what the subject essentially is. So, as to Hegel, the negativ-ity essential to subjectivity liquidates the human sensuousness. Hence art, too, goes the way of all flesh.<sup>8</sup> It is as a rebound to this conception of Hegel’s that Wagner’s *The Artwork of the future* must be read – even though Wagner does not mention Hegel’s name. For Wagner, modern science and philosophy and its anaemic “*Gedankenkunstwerke*” (Wagner 1850: 24), thought-artworks, took exactly the wrong way. Sensuous life must not be put to death, liquidated, spiritualized, as we find it in Hegel. Here Wagner obviously sides with or rather follows the sensualist and materialist cri-tiques of Hegel by Feuerbach, Marx and Engels and other Left-Hegelians. For Wag-

ner, it is rather the unspoiled immediacy of natural life that must be recuperated. The marble of the Greek sculptures must return to the flesh and blood of a living individual human being. Now this immediacy, Wagner fancies, can be revived precisely through the free, artistic union of all human beings, paralleled by the integration of all single arts into the community of artists and their cooperative artwork. It is “[t]hrough the chinks of the iron-mailed, or monk-cowled, Middle Ages [that] there shone at last the glimmer of the marble flesh of Grecian bodily beauty, [...]”<sup>10</sup> (Wagner 1895: 171). What is necessary is “the disenchantment of the stone into the flesh and blood of man; out of immobility into motion, out of the monumental into the temporal.”<sup>11</sup> (Ibid.: 173) And it is only

*[...] where the marble creations of Phidias shall bestir themselves in flesh and blood; where the painted counterfeit of Nature shall quit its cribbing frame on the chamberwalls of the egoist, and stretch its ample breadths on the warm-life-blown framework of the Future Stage, - there first, in the communion of all his fellow-artists, will the Poet also find redemption.*<sup>12</sup> (Ibid.: 141)

Wagner’s deviation from Christian religion, his romantic return or regression (cf. Geck 2012<sup>13</sup>) from spirit to natural life will accordingly be taken up by Friedrich Nietzsche in 1872 in his *The birth of tragedy*: “Man is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art: the artistic power of all nature here reveals itself in the tremors of drunkenness to the highest gratification of the Primordial Unity. The noblest clay, the costliest marble, namely man, is here kneaded and cut, and the chisel strokes of the Dionysian world-artist are accompanied with the cry of the Eleusinian mysteries [...]”<sup>14</sup> (Nietzsche 1909: 27f.) It is to the point to interpret Nietzsche’s *The birth of tragedy* as a “challenge” (Roberts 2011: 201) to Hegel’s aesthetics, as Roberts does in his *The total work of art in European modernism*. And very similar to Nietzsche, Wagner, in Opera and drama, in plain terms denies the spiritual and creative dimension of the Christian mortification of the sensuous flesh and blood which is so essential for Hegel’s philosophy of art and of religion. For Wagner, it is just an erroneous ideology of renunciation and escapism: “This dying, with the yearning after it, is the sole true content of the Art which issued from the Christian myth; it utters itself as dread and loathing of actual life, as flight before it, —as longing for death.”<sup>15</sup> (Wagner 1895: 159) In contradistinction to this, Wagner praises Greek antiquity for its handling of death:

*For the Greek, Death counted not merely as a natural, but also as an ethical necessity; yet only as the counterpart of Life, which in itself was the real object of all his viewings, includ-*

*ing those of Art. The very actuality and instinctive necessity of Life, determined of themselves the tragic death; which in itself was nothing else but the rounding of a life fulfilled by evolution of the fullest individuality, of a life expended on making tell this individuality.*<sup>16</sup> (*Ibid.*: 159f.)

Indeed, Christianity sucks its “enthusiastic exaltation” (Wagner 2008: 185, transl. W.B.) out of the pain of a “dying sick person.”<sup>17</sup> (*Ibid.*, transl. W.B.) Accordingly, Christian music, the “chorale of the church” communicated “an emotional expression, whose substance was fear of the Lord and desire of Death.”<sup>18</sup> (*Ibid.*: 244, transl. W.B.) Yet this desire of death of Christianity finds no redemption. Far from really sublating the body into spirit, the Christian subject cannot die. For Wagner it is a kind of zombie. It is an “[...] objectless and self-devouring fervor of the soul, all ignorant of its source, [which] is nothing but itself; nothing but longing, yearning, tossing, pining—and dying out, i.e. dying without having assuaged itself in any ‘object’; thus dying without death, and therefore everlasting falling back upon itself.”<sup>19</sup> (Wagner 1895: 116) As a result, with Christianity music becomes modern in the negative sense of the term, which for Wagner is the “modern-jewish” (Wagner 1850: 80; transl. W.B.) sense. Music indeed becomes “[...] her own direct antithesis: from a heart’s concern, a matter of the intellect; from the utterance of unshackled Christian soul’s-desire, [to] the cashbook of a modern[-jewish] market-speculation.”<sup>20</sup> (Wagner 1895: 118)

What music should be, by contrast, is “the immediate expression of the feeling” (Wagner 1850: 38, transl. W.B.), and it is precisely the natural liquidity of the tone of music which is the perfect embodiment of this expression of feeling. As was already stated, the liquidity or fluidity of the musical tone is a *Leitmetapher* – a key metaphor – here for Wagner: the musical tone has a liquid essence, “flüssiges Wesen[...]” (*ibid.*: 76). Using the same guiding metaphor, he at one point denounces the abstractions of philosophical and poetic thought as a vaporously fluid matter, “dunstig flüssige Masse” (*ibid.*: 112). Therefore, engaging with Wagner’s liquidity obviously cannot mean to sublimate the body-consciousness into a spiritual liquid-ity like Hegel’s. Rather, it means to submerge it, to melt it down in the volatile psychotic flow of what Freud called the primary process of the psyche. Now, as such the Wagnerian liquid feeling can only result from the above mentioned art-association, an association of artist which actually and literally is no association, nor a cooperation; it is no *Verein* nor a *Gemeinschaft* nor a *Gesellschaft*, but a “Kunstgenossenschaft”, which Wagner opposes to what he calls an “artificially systematic” community (Wagner 1850: 99, transl. W.B.). A *Genossenschaft* in German is a collective of members who share a right to enjoy something, as the noun *Genosse*,

meaning fellow or associate, is related to the verb *genießen*, to enjoy. The *Genossen* share a jouissance right, a *Genussrecht*, so *Genossenschaft* might best be translated as right-to-jouissance association. What is enjoyed is, of course, the universal art-work which human life has become.

In *The Artwork of the Future* Wagner does not get tired of denouncing the altruistic philanthropy of his time as covered up “egoism” (Wagner 1895: 99), an egoism which is diametrically opposed to the *Genossenschaft*. “Under the pressure of the deadly, ruling *Weltgeist* common to all, whose essence is luxury and fashion”, nothing truly universal can be achieved, except of an atmosphere of “mutual envy and hatred.” (Wagner 1850: 124, transl. W.B.) The “spirit of speculation and haggling [*Schacher*], the only common thing in the modern world” (ibid.: 126), brought “mutilation and insincerity into Art” (Wagner 1895, 99), and it makes that “each *isolated art-variety* would give itself the airs of universal Art; while, in truth, it only thereby loses its own peculiar attributes.” (Ibid.) Instead of enjoying mutual love, contemporary man lives in “egoistic division.” (Wagner 1850: 126, transl. W.B.) He “consumes” (ibid.: 46, transl. W.B.) his fellow human beings in a most carnal way – as Wagner claims here with Feuerbachian overtones. Still, Wagner believes that as the false dramatic poetry of his time pushes towards its “self-annihilation, its absorption into life, into the living art-work of the future”<sup>21</sup> (ibid.: 129, transl. W.B.), so will the contemporary state as a system of organized egoism and so will the isolated art disciplines and artists push towards their absorption into the *Kunstgenossenschaft* of the total artwork. Indeed “their own desistence [...] is already of itself this Art-work, their death immediately its life.” (Wagner 1895: 156) What Wagner seems to posit here, in *The Artwork of the future*, is a creative destruction of the existing state of affairs not into a new spirituality, but into a new sensual, so to speak ‘art-religious’ life. Wagner’s answer to the negativity of subjectivity hence is not its integration and transformation into spiritual life, as Hegel would have it, but its maximum self-elimination from life, life understood as fully self-present and overabundant wealth of sensuous immediacy. The self-annihilation of the societal and artistic egoism will create the fullest realization of unmitigated life, the ultimate parousia, the “redemption of the utilitarian man as such into the artistic man.”<sup>22</sup> (Wagner 1850: 151, transl. W.B.) Yet the conditions for the artwork of the future

*cannot arise alone, but only in the fullest harmony with the conditions of our whole Life. Only when the ruling religion of Egoism, which has split the entire domain of Art into crippled, self-seeking art-tendencies and art-varieties, shall have been mercilessly dislodged and torn up root and branch from every moment of the life of man, can the new religion step*

*forth of itself to life; the religion which includes within itself the conditions of the Artwork of the Future.*<sup>23</sup> (Wagner 1895: 159)

Wagner's wordings here testify to his revolutionary – and also: crypto-religious – desire for redemption, and to the violence it implies. All in all, the modern society of competing egoisms, based on the subjection of the individuals to an internalized death-threat, shall be replaced by a society based on free mutual love. Yet in Wagner's conception the excluded death re-enters the scene as it is indeed the ultimate redemption of life: "The last, completest renunciation of his personal egoism, the demonstration of his full ascension into universalism, a man can only show us by his Death; (...) *The celebration of such a Death is the noblest thing that men can enter on.*"<sup>24</sup> (Ibid.: 199) So even if it may have seemed that the self-annihilation of Christian death, of egoism and of the single art disciplines eliminates death from the *Gesamtkunstwerk* once and for all, this is strictly speaking not the case. Rather, and disquietingly, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* seems to continually feed on the redemptive destruction of the individuals taking part in it. The structural parallels to the terror of the French revolution or the paranoid mass murder of Stalin's show trials seem quite evident here. What is more, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* thus appears to coincide, at least in this respect, with its abhorred opposite, the bad-infinite, self-exhausting self-absorption of the "undying fund of Property" of modern capitalism, as Wagner calls it, which will "[...] ever re-engender and swell out the fodder for its comfortable chewing and devouring, by the natural law of five per cent." (Ibid: 206) Wagner had started out to eliminate death from life through the self-elimination of modernity. However, as one must read in *The Artwork of the Future*, death remains the last resort of the total work of art. As Wagner himself admits this is a rather "tragic element of the artwork of the future"<sup>25</sup> (Wagner 1850: 214, transl. W.B.) – even though occasionally it may be "comic" (Wagner 1895: Endnote 44 to page 201), just like the Hegel of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* states that it is precisely in (ancient Greek) "comedy" (Hegel 1977: 450) that the death of the tragic "hero" (ibid. 443) is eventually consummated, namely into the "negative power" (ibid. 452) of the "individual self". In and through this power, the (Olympian) "gods [...]" vanish" (ibid.). According to Hegel, whom Wagner obviously follows here, comedy leads to an ultimate consummation of the Religion of Art:

*At the same time, the individual self is not the emptiness of this disappearance but, on the contrary, preserves itself in this very nothingness, abides with itself and is the sole actuality. In it, the Religion of Art is consummated and has completely returned into itself. Through the fact that it is the individual consciousness in the certainty of itself that exhibits itself*

*as this absolute power, this latter has lost the form of something presented to consciousness, something altogether separate from consciousness and alien to it, as were the statue, and also the living beautiful corporeality, or the content of the Epic and the powers and persons of Tragedy. This unity, too, is not the unconscious unity of the Cult and the mysteries; on the contrary, the actual self of the actor coincides with what he impersonates, just as the spectator is completely at home in the drama performed before him and sees himself playing in it. (Ibid.)*

In fact, while some biographers belittled and ridiculed Wagner's reading of the *Phenomenology* (see above Glasenapp 1905, following Pecht 1894), there can be no doubt that Wagner had thoroughly studied the passages on *Die Kunstreligion* (Religion in the Form of Art) in the *Phenomenology*, from which the Hegel-quotation above is taken.<sup>26</sup> It is especially the section on *Das geistige Kunstwerk*, The Spiritual Work of Art, which Wagner clearly took up, and as it seems almost on a one-to-one basis. This becomes particularly evident in his Endnote Nr. 44 to *The Artwork of the Future* which has just been referred to. There he further explores the tragic respectively comic element or rather outcome of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. In doing so, he conspicuously repeats Hegel's argument about comedy as the consummation of the spiritual work of art. Furthermore, he projects it on his political idea of an artistic communism understood as the consummation of modern egoism:

*Whilst we here have only touched upon the Tragic element of the Artwork of the Future, in its evolution out of Life, and by artistic fellowship, we may infer its Comic element by reversing the conditions which bring the Tragic to a natural birth. The hero of the Comedy will be the obverse of the hero of the Tragedy. Just as the one instinctively directed all his actions to his surroundings and his foils—as a Communist, i.e. as a unit who of his inner, free Necessity, and by his force of character, ascends into the Generality—so the other in his role of Egoist, of foe to the principle of Generality, will strive to withdraw himself therefrom, or else to arbitrarily direct it to his sole self-interest; but he will be withstood by this principle of generality in its most multifarious forms, hard pressed by it, and finally subdued. The Egoist will be compelled to ascend into Community; [...]”<sup>27</sup> (Wagner 1895: Endnote 44 to page 201).*

As one can learn here, for the *Gesamtkunstwerk* tragedy and comedy are meta-terms in which the aesthetic and the political (and the religious) are fused, the egoist, i.e. the “jewish-modern” capitalist, being the comic last man of history. When later in his life Wagner gives up on his early revolutionary ambitions, this fusion dissolves. Is a crypto-religious aestheticism, after or beyond the political, all that will have remained from Wagner's Zurich writings?

## Consummatum est?

Let's leave Wagner at this point and see how the Protestant work ethic reacted to the imminence of a death threat which, according to Hegel, liquidates the subject. With respect to death as absolute nothingness, Wagner had at one point and sarcastically remarked that only the "God of the Christians" could make something out of "nothing", could create *ex nihilo* (Wagner 1850: 104f., transl. W.B.). The artwork of the future, by contrast, and rightly so, would revert to the wealth of life. But one may conjecture that this nothingness of Protestant Christianity is not nothing, that it is not sheer negativity, but rather a consummated, contained negativity, negativity turned against itself and put into practice, as we learn from Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Sometimes it may have caused unacknowledged resentment and feelings of guilt, it is true, but most importantly and continuously it fueled capitalist production. According to Weber, the solution to Hegel's problem of absolute negativity provided by the Protestant work ethic of Calvinism, Methodism and other Protestant Puritanisms was the doctrine of predestination. By (dis)grace, God had always already elected for salvation the chosen few and damned to perdition the larger rest. Psychologically, the believer is thus put into a position where he might always already be dead. Which is an *unbehagliche*, uneasy position, to say the least. How can he or she possibly manage this indeed ultimate death threat, which is even more extreme than the one retold by Hegel's Lordship-Bondage-dialectic, since the threat might have always already become reality? How can one ever be sure of one's salvation? Besides, the sublime violence at work here – the violence of the old-testamentary, monotheistic religion of law, veiled as it is e.g. in the infamous Abraham-Isaac-sacrifice episode of Genesis 22, 1-19 – appears as projected reversal of the oedipal death wish which Freud exemplarily discovers in one of his patients (Freud 1999: 238). Freud's male patient dreams of his father in the way that he (the father) would not know that he (the father) is already dead – according to the wish of the dreamer, as Freud complements. Analogously in his religious illusion the Puritan believer does never know whether he is always already dead respectively damned – according to the unfathomable resolution of his divine father, as we would have to complement. But let's return to the above question: how can one ever be sure of one's salvation if there might always be a divine death wish targeted or executed on oneself?

By employing a twofold strategy, writes Weber: "On the one hand it is held to be an absolute duty to consider oneself chosen, and to combat all doubts as temptations of the devil, since lack of self-confidence is the result of insufficient faith, hence of imperfect grace." (Weber 2005: 66f.) One cannot fail to notice the self-sustaining

super-ego logic of this religious, probably genuinely monotheistic injunction which thrives on the very motives which it bans (cf. Freud 1930: chap. VII) and whose most extreme versions probably all stem from the monotheistic or rather ‘Mosaic’ (Assmann 2009) respectively ‘Sinaitic’ (Sloterdijk 2013: 29ff.) form of subjectivation. In any case, its result is an extraordinary fictionalization of the whole of individual and collective life, a fictionalization which surely also must have been at the basis of many artistic creations. As Weber states: “[...] the Calvinist [...] himself creates his own salvation, or, as would be more correct, the conviction of it.” (Weber 2005: 69) And strictly speaking, one might add, he does so in an Old Testamentarian way: *ex nihilo*. The other part of the strategy, we learn from Weber, is the following: “On the other hand, [...] intense worldly activity is recommended as the most suitable means. It and it alone disperses religious doubts and gives the certainty of grace.” (Ibid: 67) It is “[...] the most suitable means of counteracting feelings of religious anxiety, [...]” (ibid.). Facing the total anxiety of an imminent damnation, the Protestant believer submits to “a systematic self-control which at every moment stands before the inexorable alternative, chosen or damned” (ibid.: 70f.). To achieve this, “the destruction of spontaneous, impulsive enjoyment” becomes “the most urgent task” of Puritan asceticism, and “the most important means” to do so is to “bring order into the conduct of its adherents” (ibid.: 73) – by the way, an order which the proto-communist Wagner harshly denounces: “Nothing has been more destructive of human happiness, than this frenzied haste to regulate the Life of the Future by given present laws.” (Wagner 1895: 206) In that manner, one may conclude, each single product of modern occidental man’s worldly activity becomes a projection screen for the total fiction of this “inexorable alternative, chosen or damned”. In a similar way, the consumer goods of today’s capitalist production show two sides: at face value, a totally fictional, narcissistic jouissance, on the reverse side the anxiety-loaden pressure of the world market, i.e. of today’s Last Judgment according to Marx’ and Engels’ *German Ideology*. Such is the answer of utilitarian capitalism to Hegel’s problem of liquidation, and today’s aesthetization of the life world is one of its results.

Now both answers, Wagner’s as well as the one of Protestant utilitarianism, are present in Henry Van de Velde. In his *General remarks on a synthesis of art* of 1899 van de Velde bears witness to the unresolved tension between the two extremes, between a society of serving and self-serving egoists and the utopian ideal of a beautiful and happy life, between an anxiety-driven consumerism and a redemption of life through art. Can this tension ever be fully solved? Van de Velde, as to him, oscillates between a blunt endorsement of utilitarianism and industrialism on the one hand – “Life is utilitarian” (Van de Velde 1899: 267, transl. W.B.) – and

a somewhat naïve ideal of a good life stemming (and not fully emancipated) from Nietzschean aristocratism. Naïve it is in at least one important respect, namely in that van de Velde claims that “beauty and happiness have their own life” (ibid. 269, transl. W.B.), that they would thrive and that they could be enjoyed even under the rule of a foreign power. In general this idea proves to be false (and van de Velde himself made the painful experience when he was expelled from Germany in 1917), especially if this foreign power, meta-psychologically speaking the Freudian super-ego, is an inalienable inner agent which constitutes the subject as subject in the first place. This objection, which must be made to van de Velde’s *aperçus*, is in the spirit of Adorno who in his *Aesthetic Theory* remarks that Art Nouveau was pseudo in that it kept society and the aesthetic apart: “Its [Art Nouveau’s] lie was the beautification of life without its transformation; beauty itself thereby became vacuous and, like all abstract negation, allowed itself to be integrated into what it negated. The phantasmagoria of an aesthetic world undisturbed by purposes of any kind became an alibi for the subaesthetic world.”<sup>28</sup> (Adorno 2013: 348)

### **Killing softly**

To resume, Wagner’s Zurich writings, standing in the shadow of Hegel’s philosophy and trying to work through some of its major unresolved issues, bequeath us a double legacy, in any case one which transcends retro-utopian aestheticism. On the one hand, the idea of consummating the internalized death threat – which, following notably Hobbes, Hegel, Marx, and Freud, constitutes modern society as an order of relative political and economic subjection –, the idea of consummating this social negativity in a secular *Kunstgenossenschaft* utterly failed. This becomes evident in the totalitarianisms of the 20th and 21st centuries, in all of which the fusion of politics and art(-religion) proved to be fatal, indeed murderous. Wagner’s ‘right-to-jouissance association’, his *jouissociation*, as it were, could not achieve, in a materialistic way, the Christian spirit’s consummation of death, i.e. the death of death. Instead of that, through the real historical advent of the modern “consumerist metamorphose of the ‘subject’” (Sloterdijk 2005: 329, transl. W.B.), consummation turned into consumption. Accordingly, Wagner’s *jouissociation* gave way to post-modern consumer society and its wastefully inalienable “right to the de-struction of consumer goods” (ibid.), right ‘until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt’ (M. Weber). To some, this kind of creative destruction by post-modern capitalism might appear as the however least inappropriate way to channel the destructive negativity mounted in human societies through an uncannily civilizing subject(ivat)ion. It is extremely doubtful, though, whether the “world interior space

of capital” (ibid.) as we know it will be able to contain the death drive silently at work within human civilization any longer than in the short run. If hence Wagner’s 19th century sensualist utopian ideas of immediacy, beauty and happiness are to be deconstructed, then, on the other hand, the revolutionary fervor which fueled them in his Zurich Writings is still appropriate today, especially in that it may target a certain all-to-modern, i.e. nihilistic complicity of state-monopolistic capitalism and monotheistic patriarchy, a complicity which was “very far from being solved” (Hegel 1986: 245, transl. W.B.) by the time of the late Hegel and which even today masks a “collision” between the two, between “state” and “religion” (ibid.: 242, transl. W.B.), between “formal constitution” and “ethos” (ibid.: 244, transl. W.B.). “It is from this contradiction and from the ruling unconsciousness thereof that our time suffers.” (Ibid.: 246, transl. W.B.) Among today’s legitimate heirs of Wagner’s Zurich writings are therefore the members of the Russian punk band *Pussy Riot*. The invocation of Mary in their 2012 “Punk Prayer” art performance in Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior – “Mother of God, chase Putin away!” – echoes the one by Wagner quoted as one of the epigraphs of this text: “*Heilige Antigone, dich rufe ich nun an! Laß Deine Fahne wehen, daß wir unter ihr vernichten und erlösen!*” (Wagner 2008: 199) For the current Russian President doubles in fact Kreon as interpreted in *Opera and Drama*. According to Wagner, Kreon succeeds to the dead usurper Eteokles in safeguarding the “practical sense of the nature of Property” of the citizens of Thebes, a property “which everyone was only too glad to enjoy alone [*allein genießen*], without sharing it with another. Each citizen who recognized in Property the guarantee of wanted quiet, was ipso facto an accomplice of the unbrotherly deed of Eteocles, the supreme Proprietor.”<sup>29</sup> (Wagner 1900: 185; cf. Wagner 2008: 193) Rooted in this exclusive, sole enjoyment by virtue of private ownership is the “conflict” between morality and utility, which differentiates into the two distinct social spheres of “religion” and the “state”:

*Morality (Sittlichkeit), which in Society had heretofore been something warm and living, in Religion remained merely something thought, something wished, but no longer able to be carried out. In the State, on the contrary, folk acted according to the practical judgments of Utility; and, if the moral conscience came by an offence,—why! it was appeased by religious observances quite innocuous to the State.*<sup>30</sup> (Wagner 1900: 186; cf. Wagner 2008: 194)

Here, i.e. in an anti-social, exclusive enjoyment, is also the source of what Wagner denounced as the “undying fund of property”: capital, the absolute subject of modern society, thriving on the liquidation of life. On the imaginary stages of *Opera and Drama*, it is Antigone’s both undivided and sharing, sublimely “pure Universal

Love”, realized as her “self-annihilation in the cause of sympathy” (Wagner 1900: 189), which will eventually have made her the “destructor of the State” (ibid.: 190): “[T]he love-curse of Antigone annulled the State!” (ibid.: 189) It is to hope, with or against Wagner, that *Pussy Riot’s* Nadeschda Tolokonnikowa and Marija Aljochina, who were wrongfully imprisoned in forced labor camps, because of their rightfully nocuous action against the regime of the Russian state, will have a less annihilatory fate.

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## Notes

- 1 Hegel 1977: 444.
- 2 Wagner 1900: 190.
- 3 Mann 1968: 36, transl. W.B.: „Ja, hat überhaupt je jemand ernstlich an diese Theorie geglaubt? An die Addition von Malerei, Musik, Wort und Gebärde, die Wagner für die Erfüllung aller künstlerischen Sehnsucht auszugeben die Unbefangenheit hatte?“
- 4 “Bei einem Besuche, den ich ihm eines Tages machte, fand ich ihn in Feuer und Flammen über Hegels Phänomenologie, die er gerade studierte, und in seiner ercentrischen Art mir als das erste aller Bücher pries. Zum Beweis las er mir eine Stelle vor, die ihm eben besonders imponiert hatte. Da ich sie nicht ganz verstand, bat ich ihn, sie noch einmal zu lesen, wo wir sie dann beide nicht verstanden. Er las sie also zum dritten- und viertenmal, bis wir uns endlich ansahen und fürchterlich zu lachen angingen, wo es denn mit der Phänomenologie ein Ende hatte.” (Pecht 1894: 294)
- 5 Windell (1976: 31f.) claims that “Wagner’s theoretical treatises of the early 1850s all owe much to Feuerbach, [...]”. Windell reflects upon Hegel’s presumable influence on Wagner (see particularly *ibid.*, 37ff.) by relating Wagner’s early views to a general notion of Hegel’s dialectics, as does Schneider (2013: 114-117). However, Windell does not comment on the importance of the concept of death in Hegel’s theory of subjectivity and his aesthetics or on how Wagner might have taken up this topic. – See also Caldwell 2009: 145ff.: “Wagner combined the drive for a new society based on destruction and self-creation – a revolutionary conception – with a questioning of the ideal of life itself once the foundation of life’s meaning provided by religion had disappeared.” As a “Feuerbachian[...]”, he was “closely intertwined with the radical movement in Germany before 1848”. (*Ibid.*: 146) – Dinger (1892), paraphrasing what he considers to be the “*Kunstlehre Wagners in der Junghegelschen Periode*” (*ibid.*, 91-107), offers no hint as to a presumable influence of Hegel on the early Wagner. – In the context of Wagner’s *A communication to my friends*, the translator of Wagner’s *The Art-Work of the Future*, Ellis, sees “[...] no warrant for believing that Wagner ever studied Hegel’s system of philosophy, excepting in so far as it had been transformed by Feuerbach, [...]” (Wagner 1892: 346, translator’s footnote). – Corse (1990) traces the dialectics of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, particularly the Lordship-Bondage-Dialectic, and Hegel’s philosophy of history in Wagner’s *Ring*, however without paying attention to the *Kunstreligion*-chapter of the *Phenomenology*. – Schild (2002) gives a comprehensive comparison of all of Wagner’s theoretical writings with Hegel’s conception of art and religion in his lectures on aesthetics and his *Encyclopedia*; he only mentions (see Schild 2002: 158) but does not discuss the *Kunstreligion*-chapter of the *Phenomenology*. – Lichtenfeld (1965) does not thematize the possible impact of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* on Wagner.
- 6 Caldwell (2009: 98) referring to a letter by Feuerbach to Karl Ritter of November 19, 1849 observes that “[t]he one book by Feuerbach recommended by Wagner to his friends was the 1830 work on death and immortality, with its many poems and images related to death.” This fits into the general biographical picture of the early Wagner who already as a pupil was, to a considerable degree, obsessed with death, as shows the plot of his *Leubald* (WWV 1, 1826-1828) in which more than half of the protagonists die.
- 7 Rendered less violently: their “self-abrogation” (Wagner 1892b: 149).
- 8 The preceding two paragraphs are identical with two paragraphs in Bergande 2014 (forthcoming).
- 10 “Durch das eisengepanzerte, oder mönchisch verhüllte Mittelalter her, leuchtete der lebensbedürftigen Menschheit endlich zuerst das schimmernde Marmorfleisch griechischer Leibeschönheit wieder entgegen: [...]” (Wagner 1850: 165)
- 11 “Entzauberung des Steines in das Fleisch und Blut des Menschen”, “aus der Starrheit in Bewegung, aus dem Monumentalen in das Zeitliche” (Wagner 1850: 169)
- 12 “[...] erst [...] wo die marmornen Schöpfungen des Phidias in Fleisch und Blut sich bewegen werden, wo die nachgebildete Natur aus dem engen Rahmen an der Zimmerwand des Egoisten, in dem weiten, von warmen [sic] Leben durchwehten, Rahmen der Bühne der Zukunft üppig sich ausdehnen wird, - erst da wird in der Gemeinschaft aller seiner Kunstgenossen, auch der Dichter seine Erlösung finden.” (Wagner 1850: 117)
- 13 Geck (2012) is just right when he argues that Wagner’s ideas of a new/old “*Kunstreligion*” (Geck 2012: 179) was “regressive in the sense of Hegel” yet “in line with romantic thought” (*ibid.*: 180, transl. W.B.: „[...] im Sinne Hegels regressiv gedacht, lag jedoch auf der Linie romantischen Denkens [...]“).
- 14 “Der Mensch ist nicht mehr Künstler, er ist Kunstwerk geworden: die Kunstgewalt der ganzen Natur, zur höchsten Wonnebefriedigung des Ur-Einen, offenbart sich hier unter den Schauern des Rausches. Der edelste Thon, der kostbarste Marmor wird hier geknetet und behauen, der Mensch, und zu den Meisselschlägen des dionysischen Weltkünstlers tönt der elesinische Mysterienruf: [...]” (Nietzsche 1988: 30)
- 15 “Dieses Sterben, und die Sehnsucht nach ihm, ist der einzige wahre Inhalt der aus dem christlichen Mythos hervorgegangenen Kunst: er äußert sich als Scheu, Ekel und Flucht vor dem wirklichen Leben, und als Verlangen nach dem Tode.” (Wagner 2008: 167f.)
- 16 “Der Tod galt dem Griechen nicht nur als eine natürliche, sondern auch sittliche Notwendigkeit, aber nur dem Leben gegenüber, welches an sich der wirkliche Gegenstand auch aller Kunstanschauung war. Das Leben bedang aus sich, aus seiner Wirklichkeit und unwillkürlichen Notwendigkeit, den tragischen Tod, der an sich nichts anderes war als der Abschluss eines durch Entwicklung vollster Individualität erfüllen, für die Geltendmachung dieser Individualität aufgewendeten Lebens.” (Wagner 2008: 167f.)
- 17 Der “verdorbene und verkrüppelte Mensch” der Gegenwart: aus dem “schmerzlichen Leidensblicke des sterbenden Kranken” saugt das Christentum seine “schwärmerische Begeisterung” (Wagner 2008: 185).
- 18 Wagner schreibt über den “kirchlichen Choralgesang” als einen “Gefühlsausdruck”, “dessen Inhalt Furcht vor dem Herren und Sehnsucht nach dem Tode war” (Wagner 2008: 254).
- 19 Eine “gegenstandlose, sich selbst verzehrende Gemüthsinbrunst, [...] [die] nur sie selbst ist, Verlangen, Sehnen, Stürmen, Schwächen – Ersterben, d.h. Sterben ohne in einem Gegenstande sich befriedigt zu haben, also Sterben ohne zu sterben, somit immer wieder Zurückkehr zu sich selbst.” (Wagner 1850: 77)
- 20 In the English translation of the following passage quoted here, the adjective “jüdischer” (jewish) is lacking respectively omitted: So “(...) war daher die Musik zu ihrem geraden Gegenteil geworden: aus einer Herzensangelegenheit zur Verstandessache, aus dem Ausdrucke unbegrenzter christlicher Gemüthssehnsucht zum Rechenbuche modernjüdischer Börsenspeculation.” (Wagner 1850: 80)
- 21 Ihre “Selbstvernichtung, ihr Aufgehen in das Leben, in das lebendige Kunstwerk der Zukunft” (Wagner 1850: 129).
- 22 “Erlösung des Nützlichkeitsmenschen überhaupt in den künstlerischen Menschen” (Wagner 1850: 151).
- 23 “Nicht vereinzelt können diese Bedingungen [des Dramas der Zukunft] [...] entstehen, sondern nur im vollen Zusammenhange mit den Bedingungen aller unsrer Lebensverhältnisse. Nur wenn die herrschende Religion des Egoismus, die auch die gesammte Kunst in verkrüppelte, eigensüchtige Kunstrichtungen und Kunstarten zersplitterte, aus jedem Momente des menschlichen Lebens unbarmer-

- zig verdrängt und mit Stumpf und Stiel ausgerottet ist, dann aber die neue Religion, und zwar ganz von selbst, in das Leben treten, die auch die Bedingungen des Kunstwerkes der Zukunft in sich schließt.“ (Wagner 1850: 139)
- 24 „Die letzte, vollständigste Entäußerung seines persönlichen Egoismus, die Darlegung seines vollkommenen Aufgehens in die Allgemeinheit, gibt uns ein Mensch nur mit seinem Tode kund, [...] Die Feier eines solchen Todes, ist die würdigste, die von Menschen begangen werden kann.“ (Wagner 1850: 210)
- 25 Ein „tragische[s] Element des Kunstwerkes der Zukunft“ (Wagner 1850: 214).
- 26 See also endnote number 5 here above. Schild 2002, in his comprehensive and learned comparison of Wagner’s and Hegel’s conceptions of art, does not discuss the *Kunstreligion*-chapter of the *Phenomenology*; as a result and not surprisingly, he ends up with some similarity (Schild 2002: 167) and quite a few „essential differences“ (ibid.: 171ff.) between the two.
- 27 „Wie wir hierbei das tragische Element des Kunstwerkes der Zukunft in seiner Entwicklung aus dem Leben und durch die künstlerische Genossenschaft berührt haben, so dürfen wir auf das komische Element desselben durch Umkehrung derjenigen Bedingungen schließen, welche das tragische als notwendig zur Erscheinung brachten. Der Held der Komödie wird der umgekehrte Held der Tragödie sein: Wie dieser als Communist, d. h. als Einzelner, der durch die Kraft seines Wesens aus innerer, freier Nothwendigkeit in der Allgemeinheit aufgeht, sich unwillkürlich nur auf seine Umgebung und Gegensätze bezog, so wird jener als Egoist, als Feind der Allgemeinheit, sich dieser zu entziehen oder sie willkürlich auf sich allein zu beziehen streben, in diesem Streben aber von der Allgemeinheit in den mannigfaltigsten und abwechselndsten Gestalten bekämpft, gedrängt und endlich besiegt werden. Der Egoist wird gezwungen in die Allgemeinheit aufgehen, [...]“ (Wagner 1850: footnote to page 214)
- 28 „Dessen [des Jugendstil] Pseudos war die Verschönerung des Lebens ohne dessen Veränderung; Schönheit selber wurde darüber ein Leeres und ließ wie alle abstrakte Negation dem Negierten sich integrieren. Die Phantasmagorie einer von Zwecken ungestörten ästhetischen Welt verhilft der unterästhetischen zum Alibi.“ (Adorno 2000: 382)
- 29 „[...] ein praktischer Instinkt vom Wesen des Eigentums, das jeder gern allein genießen, mit einem anderen aber nicht teilen wollte; jeder Bürger, der im Eigentume die Gewährleistung gewohnter Ruhe erkannte, war ganz von selbst der Mitschuldige der unbrüderlichen Tat des obersten Eigentümers Eteokles.“ (Wagner 2008: 193)
- 30 „In der Religion blieb die Sittlichkeit, die vorher in der Gesellschaft etwas Warmes, Lebendiges gewesen war, nur noch etwas Gedachtes, Gewünschtes, aber nicht mehr Ausführbares: im Staate handelte man dagegen nach praktischem Ermessen des Nutzens, und wurde hierbei das sittliche Gewissen verletzt, so beschwichtigte man dies durch staatsunschädliche Religionsübungen.“ (Wagner 2008: 194)