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IFTR 2013: **Global/Local – Wagner/Bayreuth**

Too much has been said and written about Richard Wagner and the Bayreuth Festival to state something really new about it. Even worse, as Nicolas Vazsonyi has commented, many authors have a tendency to succumb to an idealizing language. Vaszonyi calls this ironically “‘permalore’, the Wagnerian version of permafrost: a narrative web of such glacial density that impedes alternative accounts.” It is hardly surprising, then, that the question of authenticity has been constantly raised and politicized in the critical discussions – a process, that, not least, reveals the great awareness of Wagner and his heirs in creating a public persona and forging a myth in an attempt to monopolize a codified and often dressed tradition of biography, interpretation, and aesthetic tradition. It is especially important in this year, when Wagnerians all over the world celebrate the 200th anniversary of their *Meister*’s birth, and when they are already gathering for the opening ceremony of this year’s festival at the *Grüner Hügel*, that theatre scholars who, I suppose, have not been able to get tickets for Bayreuth, question these patterns of writing and thinking – not out of jealousy, however, but in order to include some newer perspectives on 19th century opera deriving from global history, sociology, anthropology, and ethnography.

It is worth noticing, that one of the leading proponents of global history, Jürgen Osterhammel, opens his panorama with a short chapter on opera as *the central* form of artistic expression of the 19th century: With Paris as its metropolis and along colonial or commercial trade routes, he follows the building of opera houses in the Americas and Asia according to models from Paris, London, and Italy; along the touring activities of a new type of international star singers, as well as the proliferation of renowned composer’s works in these areas. The Opera houses of New Orleans (the French Opera House, 1859), New York (the Metropolitan Opera House, 1883), Manaus (1891-1896), and Hanoi (1911) had special significance as symbols of cultural connectivity or cultural hegemony. Both, in Europe and beyond, theatre buildings reached unprecedented sizes and became significant elements in the cityscapes of metropolitan, provincial, or colonial capitals. Solo singers as Swedish Jenny Lind (1850 United States) and Australian Helen Porter Mitchell (better known as Nellie Melba, 1887 Europe) toured worldwide. Composers (Gaetano Donizetti, Rossini, Wagner, Verdi, Bizet, Puccini) and conductors (Giuseppe Donizetti who became musical director in Istanbul in 1828) travelled extensively. Their works were applauded in all major and minor opera venues of the world and, until today, have constituted the backbone of modern repertoires. Although Osterhammels account remains cursory and his list of touring musicians could be easily extended by dozens of other names, he identifies opera as Europe’s prime cultural export of the time, which from the 1830s onwards appears as a phenomenon of increasing globalization. This account is supported, for example, by more detailed studies on European Opera by Philip Ther, and the recent work of Vaszonyi I already mentioned in the beginning.

Of course, no true Wagnerian would doubt these pan-European, trans-Atlantic, and colonial connections of the European opera market, the circulations of scores, scripts, singers and musicians, impresarios and conductors, troupes, but also stage designs, costumes, and stage technologies. But the traditional frameworks of Wagner as the Romantic genius, national composer, anti-Semitic nationalist, precursor of modernism in music and theatre aesthetics, as well as Bayreuth and Wahnfried as the centre of reference and temple of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in opposition to the alleged commercially driven opera market still dominate academic and public discussions.

During the last twenty years, historians, sociologists, and ethnographers have intensely discussed new approaches towards late 19th and early 20th century political, and especially, economic integration. Often based on post-colonial and post-structuralist positions, they have developed concepts such as “diasporas”, “networks”, “-scapes”, or “multiple modernities” in order to “destabilize the very notion that cultures and societies are contained and indeed defined by the nation state.” (Ulrich Beck, cf. Gisela Welz) This, however, has also thoroughly made it difficult, if not impossible, to stick to the traditional theory of modernization and to neglect, or simply ignore, the multiple arenas where modernity is being negotiated. While European philosophers in the late 19th century with their obsession for history( in fact: national history) could erect a “grand dichotomy” or “great divide” between themselves and their ‘primitive others’ (equating primitivism with non-Western, non-rationalist sources of knowledge, ways of organizing society, and economies), historians, sociologists, and ethnographers have thoroughly deconstructed this narrative. This has led scholars such as Arjun Appadurai and, especially, Bruno Latour, to claim that we should re-read the historical genesis of modernity and engage in the project of an “anthropology of the West”.

What I find so interesting in this approach, is that it forces us to encompass the connections between the genuine modern discourses, technological innovations, and social dynamics in combination with a reassessment of modern thinking, which seems to be unable to grasp these interrelations. It is a profound re-reading of modern history, which allows us to deepen our understanding of the interconnectedness active in modern societies – beyond the national, ideological, and epistemological boundaries created simultaneously with these modern societies, along with its institutions like markets, legal systems, and not least, arts.

Bruno Latour’s suggestions are, of course, a provocation to the traditional concepts of historiography, social theory, and Western epistemology, much in line with concepts and ideas of postmodern theory. I do not wish to address all of them here. However, his work is also an attempt to *overcome* postmodern relativism and regain its critical insights for a productive reorientation reaching from the study of the history of science to the imagination of alternate models of political organization.[[1]](#footnote-1) From a theatre-historiographer’s point of view, the Latourian concept of an ‘Anthropology of the West’ and his critique of the traditional modernization narrative offers some highly interesting perspectives in conceptualizing various models for analysing global and transnational theatrical phenomena, because it constitutes a generic relational approach towards the understanding of how social structures emerge, evolve, and transform – from the micro-level of direct interaction up to the macro-level of globe-spanning institutional circuits. Unlike more established approaches such as Foucaultian Discourse Analysis or Wallerstein’s World Systems analysis, Latour is not interested in how broader regimes of knowledge and ideas ‘influence’ individual identities and actions, but how these regimes are constructed and reproduced through local processes of action and semiotization. It therefore dissolves the global/local dichotomy and replaces it with the notion of networks – actor-networks to be precise. For, as Latour has continually emphasized in explaining his approach, networks are rather “a mode of inquiry”[[2]](#footnote-2) than “things in the world that have the shape of a net.”[[3]](#footnote-3) This ‘mode of inquiry’ is interested in how individual or collective actors perform or induce discernible actions, or transformations, which always take place locally, but can trigger effects far beyond the reach of one single locale through so-called “chains of interaction” with other mediators which reproduce a certain local transformation in different locales. His account on the expansion of microbiological knowledge and laboratories presented in his study on French microbiologist and chemist Louis Pasteur is a case in point here. As a consequence, it is possible, and indeed necessary, to both “localize the global”, but also “distribute the local” through its various connected local reproductions.[[4]](#footnote-4) The question, then, whether a certain action appears only within a limited scope, or globally, relies on the number and quality of trans-local connections of the actor in question, as well as on their stability.

This allows studying the implementation, or ‘institutionalization’, not only of natural phenomena, but also of aesthetic concepts and positions as socially relevant ‘actors’, or ‘actor-networks’, within the various frameworks of political, philosophical, economic, legal, and organizational relations. Latour’s ‘sociology of associations’ and ANT focus not only on linguistic and textual manifestations of social structures, assuming that these structures already exist, but put the main emphasis on (a) their gradual and processual production from ‘propositions’ to ‘institutions’; (b) their materialization through palpable objects and actions; as well as (c) refraining from more or less subtle *a priori* definitions of their objects of research in order to retain a maximum of self-reflexivity over the research process itself. It is specific practices, Latour and other proponents of ANT are interested in. They propagate a great awareness for avoiding jumping between scales, cause and effect, or the dichotomy of individual or systematic agencies.

As Manuel Castells, who has coined and popularized the notion of a ‘network society’, argues, “[t]he prevalence of networks in organizing social practice redefines social structure in our societies.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Due to their flexibility and adaptability compared to more hierarchical and centralized “apparatuses”[[6]](#footnote-6) of social organization, the network model, which has always played a role for “personal interactions” and “solidarities”,[[7]](#footnote-7) has become the paradigm of social formation in times of globalization. Through the omnipresence of modern communication and transportation technologies it

[…] breaks with the two reductionist metaphors on which sociology was based historically: the mechanical view of society as a machine made up of institutions and organizations; and the organicist view of society as a body, integrated with organs with specific bodily functions. Instead, if we need a new metaphor, the sociology of the network society would be built on the self-generating processes discovered by molecular biology, as cells evolve and develop through their interaction in a network of networks, within the body and with their environment. Interactive networks are the components of social structure, as well as the agencies of social change.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In Latour’s reading, however, networks have always been the driving mechanism behind any formation of social relations. Modern technologies have only forced contemporary social scientists to realize, that we have never been modern in the original sense:[[9]](#footnote-9)

Of course, Latour’s and ANT’s approach is strongest in analyzing scientific and technological innovations, because it is in these fields that the interweavements he is interested in as a sociologist and philosopher of science and technology, are strongest. In fact, his sociological, historical, and anthropological work on the history of modern sciences and the agency of non-humans has contributed substantially to the development of a variety of different approaches in re-reading modernity as a period of transnational and transcultural exchanges. This is mirrored in the debates on Global Histories and the application of anthropological and ethnographic methods in a variety of disciplines in the humanities. Contributions such as Nancy Fraser’s *Transnationalizing the Public Sphere*,[[10]](#footnote-10) George E. Marcus’ ‘multi-sited ethnography’,[[11]](#footnote-11) as well as Tony Bennett’s claim for a ‘non-tautological definition of culture’ and the agency of intellectual practice[[12]](#footnote-12) certainly provide important methodological considerations for the expansion of Latour’s project of an alternate non-modern epistemology towards other fields of research. In the fields of theatre and performance studies, Shannon Jackson has recently introduced a discussion of visual and performative arts as social practice and anti-institutional deliberation.[[13]](#footnote-13) Although not all of these approaches draw directly from Latour’s Antropology of the West or ANT, they mark an increasing interest for relational reconsiderations of nowadays understanding of the modern period, as well as a shift towards an explanation of ‘the social’ in or of the arts.

What, then, would it mean to re-write the history of Wagner, Wagnerism, and the Bayreuth Festival from this perspective? I can only suggest a few point for discussion here, and summarize some of its implications:

First, As Udo Bermbach has suggested, Wagner’s concept of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* and the Bayreuth Festival were developed as a radical reformatory, social (or even early socialist) project engaged in the re-mapping of society. Exemplary for many similar artistic, scientific, and political movements of the time, it acted within and reacted to the wider framework of the socio-political transformations of modernization. In fact, as Bermbach and others point out, Wagner aimed at establishing a utopian bourgeois counter-culture through the Bayreuth Festival and his *Gesamtkunstwerk*, through the production of a new, collective mythology and the “invention of traditions”, as Eric Hobsbawn has called it. The important point here is that the emerging industrialized modern society was a constant work in progress at the time, as was the Bayreuth Festival. Latour suggests to analyze such projects using the form of a making-of, in order to identify the various alternative paths it could have taken and to better understand, how an organization or institution became naturalized in a certain form, but not to presuppose the outcome as we know it today.

Secondly, the traditional narrative on Wagner is that of a Romantic genius, fighting for his idea of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* against the odds of modern societies, autocratic states, and capitalist markets that corrupted the arts. I am exaggerating here, but only a little. From an institutional perspective however, the story appears somewhat different: Only with a change in the various national legislations and bilateral treaties on intellectual property rights for written or printed scores and librettos after the ratification of the Berne convention after 1886, the work of a composer, and especially in Wagner’s case, became really profitable. A pitty for him, he died three years earlier, but through the royalties for his work, the Wagner family was able to stabilize the finances of the Bayreuth Festival until the outbreak of World War I and amass a great fortune, which, however, was ruined by the hyperinflation of the Weimar Republic. As the various attempts and struggles of the Wagner family to influence German legislation in the light of the international Parsifal productions before 1913 show, intellectual property rights remained a decisive instruments for Cosima and the Bayreuth Circle to monopolize aesthetic positions and to secure their role as keepers of the “original” Wagner tradition. This also reveals that the great artistic success of Wagner’s works needs to consider their function as a commodity within the globalized theatre and opera markets of late 19th and early 20th century, as Tracy Davis and Christopher Balme have recently discussed with regards to British theatre entrepreneurs and their profiting from the colonial expansions of the Empire.

Third, and finally, Wagnerism as a transnational discourse on opera, theatre, the arts and society remained an important element in the alignment of the Wagner tradition not only within Germany, but throughout Europe and the United States. Wagner’s own tours throughout the continent in order to raise money for the Bayreuth Festival before 1876, his constant publishing of essays and comments in the national and international press of the time, the establishment of the *Bayreuther Blätter* (1878) and Wagner Societies (founded by Emil Haeckel in 1871), as well as the touring activities of Angelo Neumann (1882-1889), Bernhard Pollini (1892 in London), Anton Seidl (as leading conductor of the Metropolitan Opera with tours throughout the continent starting from 1885), Georg Paradisi (1898) and Richard Henneberg (1876 in Sweden and Scandinavia) secured a maximum of public interest and debate. Faithfulness to the *Meister* became an important feature for interpretations of his music, while the political interpretation and customization of Wagner by the Bayreuther Kreis, their *völkisch* ideologies, and, later, Nazi propaganda, still haunts the myth of Bayreuth. However, as Wagner’s own writings and those of his adherents in the *Bayreuther Blätter* show, the Wagnerian publications until 1914 and the activities of the Wagner societies can more appropriately be characterized as those of a political party, than of a solely aesthetic movement. Supporting the colonial adventure of Bernhard Förster and his wife Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche (1886), sister to Friedrich Nietzsche, agitating against vivisection and the vaccination experiments of Louis Pasteurs, and trying to gain a leading cultural role within the newly founded German Empire with its colonial aspirations, Wahnfried and the members of Wagner societies worldwide can certainly not be reduced to the role of operatic aficionados.

To sum up, the study of Wagner’s Bayreuth Enterprise, which can certainly be more productively be studied as a network of various, quite loosely connected organisations and institutions, will certainly provide for a series of interesting case studies dedicated to the idea of an anthropology of the West, because it is through Wagner that a cornucopia of modernizing pressures, currents, and processes of institutionalization of what has become the widely accepted notion of theatrical modernism can be studied in its process of becoming. Of course, the processes are implemented locally, but they take on global importance through their embedding into global trends so important for the genesis of 19th century’s cultural and economic integration and expansion.

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1. See, for instance: Latour 2010 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, for example: Latour, p. 799 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Latour, p. 799 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Latour 2005, pp. 183–187, 191f [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Castells 2000, p. 695 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Castells 2000, p. 695 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Castells 2000, p. 695 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Castells 2000, p. 696 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Latour, pp. 802f [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Fraser 2005 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. George E. Marcus 1995 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Bennett 2007 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Shannon Jackson 2011, pp. 11–14 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)