CHAPTER 5

CRISIS DISCOURSE AND ART THEORY:
RICHARD WAGNER’S LEGACY IN FILMS
BY VEITH VON FÜRSTENBERG AND KEVIN REYNOLDS

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Just as the history of cinema is haunted by the Middle Ages, the history of medieval cinema is haunted by the works of Richard Wagner. The symbiotic relationship between the medieval and the cinematic, as encapsulated in the compound “medieval cinema,” finds its early parallel in “Wagnerian medievalism.” After all, Wagner’s operas are drawn almost exclusively from medieval sources, characters, and stories, and recent research has confirmed one of the long-standing topoi of the debate on cinema’s origins, that is, that his works’ aesthetics is proto-cinematic. 1

The present chapter offers a fresh look at Wagner’s theoretical writings in support of Jeongwon Joe’s claim that Wagner’s operas prefigure and develop a “cinematic imagination.” 2 Curiously, the academic discourse on “Wagner and cinema” has paid much less attention to his theoretical writings than to the libretti and their various examples of dynamic image sequencing. The theoretical writings suggest, however, that the cinematic aspect of Wagner’s work is merely one part of the larger concept of a “true and living art,” as he called it in Art and Revolution in 1849. 3 Stemming as it does from the March Revolution of 1848, Wagner’s theory of art is highly political, calling for universal cultural reform in the face of a most acute social crisis.

As I argue in this chapter, the specifically Wagnerian media utopia is animated strongly by medieval forms of imagination as the composer
perceived them. While he did not believe that a media utopia had been fully realized in the Middle Ages, he was nevertheless convinced that the period was the last to offer a glimpse of the “living artwork.” Hence, it is my task to shed some light on the utopian thrust articulated not only in his theoretical writings but also in selected operatic scenes; scenes which previous research has neglected entirely in terms of their relevance for Wagner’s proto-cinematic aesthetics.

In a further step, I examine the legacy of Wagner’s utopian thinking in medieval film. Profound crises and historical turning points, I argue, are also the subject of two Tristan films, Veith von Fürstenberg’s Feuer und Schwert [Fire and Sword] (Federal Republic of Germany/Ireland: Cinefox, 1982) and Kevin Reynolds’s Tristan & Isolde (US/Germany: 20th Century Fox, 2006). The first stages a late medieval cultural catastrophe, the second portrays the foundation of an early medieval culture. Although both films seek to free themselves from Wagner’s overpowering influence, they relate back to him in significant ways. The two films engage with the Wagnerian legacy in political terms as well as in specific moments of artistic and communicative practice. Finally, this chapter examines whether the affinities between Wagner and Hollywood are as strong as one might expect considering Wagner’s actual influence on American film.4

Political Anthropology and Film Aesthetics: Richard Wagner’s “Living Work of Art”

Wagner believed the mid-nineteenth century to be a “civilization which disowns all manhood [humanity].” Therefore, he expected the “Art-work of the Future” to “embrace the spirit of a free mankind” and rehabilitate the human senses.5 To do so, it had to escape from the “impassable waste of stored-up literature.”6 At the beginning of the twentieth century, Béla Balázs voices similar hopes expressly for the cinema:

The discovery of printing has gradually rendered the human face illegible…In this way, the visual spirit was transformed into a legible spirit, and a visual culture…into a conceptual one…Now another device is at work, giving culture a new turn towards the visual and the human being a new face. It is the cinematograph.7

Not only does Balázs here contrast a conceptual culture with a visual one, but he also distributes these two cultures on opposite sides of the dividing line between the premodern and the modern. From early on then, medievalism is clearly an integral part of a media theory that does not limit itself to media alone, but instead aims at an overall cultural reform,