

Dossiê Wagner e o Teatro

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Apocalypse Staged: Theme, Genre,  
and Wagner's *Ring* in the  
Anthropocene

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## Abstract

This paper reads several recent stagings of Richard Wagner's *Ring* cycle (1876), from the 1980s to the present, as hermeneutical of Anthropocenic thinking in the humanities, due in part to the work's dramatization of an apocalypse. Humanistic inquiry on the end of the world during the Anthropocene has focused on global climate crisis and fundamental capitalism, two benchmarks of interpretation for the apocalypse of Wagner's *Ring*. These stagings of the *Ring* set the work in fantasy worlds via new technology and staging practices, but they also contest the *Ring* as a supposedly fixed cultural product. By reflecting an end of the world concomitant with the ones we imagine most often today, these stagings present a world marked by profound loss, shifting senses of place and space, and a general reinstatement of humanity's relationship to the earth. These stagings of the *Ring* include the infamous centenary production from Patrice Chéreau, the dialectical stagings that followed in the 1980s by Götz Friedrich and Harry Kupfer, as well as more recent stagings of *Das Rheingold* from Catalan directors' collective La Fura dels Baus (2007) and Marcelo Lombardero at the Teatro Argentino de La Plata (2021).

Keywords: Richard Wagner, Anthropocene, *Ring*.

## Resumo

*Este artigo lê várias encenações recentes do ciclo do Anel de Richard Wagner (1876), desde a década de 1980 até o presente, como hermenêutica do pensamento antropocêntrico nas ciências humanas, em parte devido à dramatização de um apocalipse na obra. A pesquisa humanística sobre o fim do mundo durante o Antropoceno concentrou-se na crise climática global e no capitalismo fundamental, dois pontos de referência de interpretação para o apocalipse do Anel de Wagner. Essas encenações do Anel colocam a obra em mundos de fantasia por meio de novas tecnologias e práticas de encenação, mas também contestam o Anel como um produto cultural supostamente fixo. Ao refletir um fim do mundo concomitante com os que imaginamos com mais frequência hoje em dia, essas encenações apresentam um mundo marcado por perdas profundas, mudanças nos sentidos de lugar e espaço e um restabelecimento geral do relacionamento da humanidade com a terra. Essas encenações do Anel incluem a infame produção centenária de Patrice Chéreau, as encenações dialéticas que se seguiram na década de 1980 por Götz Friedrich e Harry Kupfer, bem como as encenações mais recentes de Das Rheingold do coletivo de diretores catalães La Fura dels Baus (2007) e Marcelo Lombardero no Teatro Argentino de La Plata (2021).*

Palavras-chave: Richard Wagner, Antropoceno, Anel.

**R**ichard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1876) has become a conduit for understanding the end of the world since its inception, particularly at the end of *Götterdämmerung* with its multitude of catastrophes: the Rhine flooding and the razing of the Gibichung Hall and Valhalla. Yet, in its many forms since the late nineteenth century—on various opera stages as well as television and computer screens—the end of the world that the *Ring* dramatizes has acutely changed, especially as of late. *Ring* cycles over the past fifty or so years have grappled with the work's apocalyptic themes and ending in such a way as to engage the increasingly relevant questions and concerns of those living in the Anthropocene, the proposed geological time period in which humanity has significantly impacted the natural world and, essentially, sped up its decline by changing its climate in near-irreversible ways. The awareness of our position in the Anthropocene has changed our collective reading of the *Ring* in such a way that we understand its themes as unequivocally relevant to the apocalypse we already imagine (and have been imagining) is shortly arriving.

The *Ring* holds many meanings within its sixteen hours of music, from its thematic lessons in love and death to the consequences of broken contracts and oaths as well as, ultimately, the destruction of nature and its implications for humanity. In short, the work presents a dramatized apocalypse, or as Wagner put it in a letter to Franz Liszt: the *Ring* holds both the beginning and ending of the world.<sup>1</sup> This thematic, especially, is redolent of many humanistic concerns today: that global climate crisis and its causes—particularly capitalism and neoliberalism—have stripped the world of its natural resources and, subsequently, its inhabitability. This article reads four recent stagings, from the 1980s to the present, as presenting ideological conclusions of Anthropocene concerns about the end of the world, in which not only current stagings of the *Ring* set the work in new, fantastic worlds via new technology and staging practices, but so too do they contest the *Ring* as a supposedly fixed cultural product by reflecting an end of the world concomitant with the ones we imagine most often today, marked by profound loss, shifting senses of place and space, and a general reinstatement of humanity's relationship to the earth.

The Anthropocene encompasses the past hundred or so years, yet the conception of the term itself is much younger. So, it might seem anachronistic to label Wagner's *Ring* an "extinction story that implicates people," to quote environmental philosopher Thom Van Dooren (VAN DOOREN 2014: 4). Scholars engaging the Anthropocene today trace its origins to the 1780s, notably the same period in European history when much of German Romanticism and Jena philosophy was germinating, two intellectual and cultural movements by which

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to Franz Liszt, 11 February 1853. *Richard Wagner Sämtliche Briefe Band V September 1852-Januar 1854* (Leipzig: Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1993), 185-190.

Wagner was heavily, even famously, influenced. The *Ring* cycle, perhaps more than most of Wagner's other music dramas, seems implicitly to participate in those intellectual-cultural movements as a response to the conditions of the Anthropocene. While Wagner's works display a deep interest and awareness of the human condition, few other than the *Ring* cycle dramatize how an entire world changes and ends due to the selfish deeds of men—a veritable allegory for humanism's creation of the Anthropocene. However, that the *Ring* satisfies the conditions of an "extinction story" is not an uncontested interpretation among those that have appeared on stage and in scholarship. The extinction in the *Ring* might be that of the gods alone—a theological reading that seems shared by the recent scholarship of Richard Bell and the Wieland Wagner stagings at Bayreuth in the 1950s and 1960s (BELL 2020). Twentieth- and twenty-first century productions, however, are contemporaneous with the emergence of Anthropocene thinking itself, and they tend to present entirely new fictitious worlds on the brink of apocalypses similar to our own: as we will see in the bright, decadent space-worlds in Marcelo Lombardero's *Das Rheingold* at the Teatro Argentino de La Plata (2012), and in the Valencia *Das Rheingold* (2007) by the Catalan directors' collective La Fura dels Baus that presents much a darker apocalypse, perhaps post-apocalypse, on a world separate from our own.

The *Ring* cycle has always invited political readings of its drama and music, although the focus of those readings has changed over the course of its history in scholarship and on the stage. Long before Karol Berger's and Roger Scruton's recent critical interpretations, George Bernard Shaw famously analyzed the work as a socialist allegory: where Alberich and Mime represent factory bosses, Nibelheim is a factory manned by proletariat workers, and so forth (BERGER 2016, SCRUTON 2016, SHAW 1898). The greater narrative of the work, then, displayed an overwhelmingly anti-capitalist story where greed, legalism, and total sovereignty are inevitably defeated by humanity's bid for a more egalitarianist social structure. Shaw's interpretation was one of many early readings of the work, and it was not the only to find in Wagner's music drama an ultimately political meaning at its core—in fact, Berger and Scruton both continued this hermeneutic tradition in their studies of the *Ring*, as did earlier studies by Bryan Magee (MAGEE 2000) and Mark Berry (BERRY 2006). While these more contemporary interpretations of the *Ring* share their views of the ending as prescriptive of a new body politic, the Anthropocene stagings on which I will focus, on the other hand, offer a different cosmology of both the natural world and the implied state of the gods at Valhalla.

What follows in this article is a shift in reading the *Ring's* apocalyptic theme between Wagner's own *Götterdämmerung* to socialist-tinged East German stagings and, more recently, twenty-first century adaptations (notably outside of Germany) where the earth's demise appears tightly bound to humanity's impact on the world—not as some unavoidable or preordained catastrophe. While Wagner's end of the world might appear wholly in our imaginations, not

unlike the mythologies at play in Wagner's *Ring* and elsewhere, Anthropocene *Ring* cycles (of the 1980s to the present) present more real threats to both earth and humanity, in the forms of nuclear warfare and of sovereignties in decline, or of capitalism both fundamentally and broadly. Our apocalypse today is of course not only imaginary, but made real on the stage especially, as much as reading the libretto and listening to the music of the *Ring* makes its message come to life already.

## Wagner's Apocalypse

Before considering the *Ring* in its Anthropocene configurations, it is worth explaining the apocalypse that already exists in Wagner's score and libretto—a central theme that exists not only at the work's end, but throughout its four music dramas. Yet, it is the ending that culminates the thematic's various permutations throughout the work. The ending of the *Ring*'s final drama *Götterdämmerung*—Brünnhilde's Immolation that redeems the treacherous curse of the ring and the folly of men—famously underwent several revisions by Wagner throughout the 1850s. *Ring* commentators and analysts have since labelled these endings according to their philosophical content; for example, Wagner penned endings in 1852 and 1856 that came to be known as Feuerbachian and Schopenhauerian, respectively.<sup>2</sup>

These endings, though, prescribe different kinds of apocalypses as well. For example, in the Feuerbachian ending in 1852, Brünnhilde mimics Feuerbach's secular assessment that the gods are human constructions. Their end, then, suggests their replacement by a human society built around sexual love.<sup>3</sup> The 1856 Schopenhauerian ending differs, and Brünnhilde sings that "grieving love's profoundest suffering" opens her eyes, so she "[sees] the world end" (SPENCER 1993: 363). The final ending of *Götterdämmerung* combines parts of these endings, according to Slavoj Žižek: Brünnhilde performs a single act (her immolation)—one of "supreme freedom and autonomy" in Žižek's words—that embodies her love for Siegfried (ŽIŽEK 2010: 196). Brünnhilde's deed thus offers the utopian hope that Wotan prophesies in *Siegfried*, and (perhaps paradoxically) also ends the world.<sup>4</sup> Žižek analyzes Brünnhilde's immolation as suicide, as if

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2 The influences of philosophers Ludwig Feuerbach and Arthur Schopenhauer on Wagner's music dramas are well documented. See Magee, *The Tristan Chord*. Also see Slavoj Žižek, "Wagner, Anti-Semitism, and 'German Ideology,'" in *Five Lessons on Wagner*, 161-225 (London: Verso, 2010). Žižek also finds the 1852 ending displays Mikhail Bakunin's influence on Wagner.

3 See Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington, *Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung: A Companion* (Thames & Hudson, 1993), 362-3, for a complete English translation of each of the ending sketches.

4 Žižek, however, asks about the authenticity of Brünnhilde's task, a question that he uses to ask about *Parsifal*'s ideology. Warren Darcy argues that the ending is definitively Schopenhauerian, despite the final revision (DARCY 1994).

her death only reflects her amorous link to Siegfried and her contentious relationship with her father, Wotan. Yet the *Ring's* message at the end, while achieved by Brünnhilde alone, prescribes global catastrophe and apocalypses that doom entire collectives of people (and gods). The theme of apocalypse, especially in Žižek's reading, also walks hand in hand with the concept of utopia—a possible way to read the ending of the *Ring* from Wotan's *amor fati* in *Siegfried* Act III to the finale of *Götterdämmerung* is as one of hopeful optimism born from the ashes of immolation.

The apocalypse, however, is not only found in the very finale of the *Ring*, in Brünnhilde's Immolation scene that closes out *Götterdämmerung*. In fact, in scene 4 of *Das Rheingold*, the apocalypse is preordained by the prophecy delivered to Wotan from Erda, the ancestral, chthonic representative of the earth who rises up halfway onto the stage. Indeed, this scene and Act III, scene 1 of *Siegfried*—Erda's only other scene in the entire tetralogy—provide the work its primary narrative signposts for apocalypticism. In the first case, Erda warns Wotan of the coming twilight of the gods, because “alles was ist, endet” [everything that is, ends]. This is enough to cause Wotan to relinquish the ring in this scene and continue across the rainbow bridge to Valhalla, her thoughts echoing in his mind as he imagines the future project of the Wälsungs (heard in the orchestra's first iteration of the sword motif). In their second scene together, Wotan, as the disguised Wanderer, travels to Erda in the deepest reaches of the earth and awakens the prophetess. This time, the shoe is on the other foot: Wotan prophesies a different ending, one where Brünnhilde redeems the twilight of the gods—where apocalypse ostensibly leaves room for utopia in the wake of fiery catastrophe. In other words, the apocalypse of Wagner's world is prepared throughout the entire tetralogy, and it is not limited to the final events of the last drama, although the various versions of the ending that Wagner worked out display his shifting sense of how to portray the apocalypse narratively.

Apocalypticism, surrounded as it is by the philosophies of other contemporaneous thinkers in Wagner's sketches, is one that takes many forms in European philosophy in the Anthropocene—the closing of the circle of History (Hegel), the completion of metaphysics (Nietzsche), and the end of philosophy (Heidegger).<sup>5</sup> Thomas Mann, similarly, claimed that Wagner's works prescribed an end of politics (MANN 1963: 65). In Anthropocene humanistic inquiry, the concerns have shifted to perhaps more concrete challenges posed by the apocalypse. Humanist critical thinkers have thus been drawn to questions of space, place, and the geopolitics tied to them. For example, Doreen Massey, in *For Space* (2005), asks her readers to imaginatively refuse the distinction between *place* as meaningful and lived, and *space* as meaningless, abstract, and outside

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5 Later critiques exist that are clearly related, such as in Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

everything else (MASSEY 2005: 6).<sup>6</sup> It is significant, then, in the case of the Ring, that Valhalla doesn't already exist at the beginning of the work, but instead needs to be constructed. The Rhine and the World Ash Tree, too, imply a formlessness of pre-humanity and pre-ideology "space" and yet could easily be construed as meaningful "place," where politics lurk. Massey argues, in fact, that the spatial is already political; so, the Ring's multiple spaces offer different ideologies already, as in Wotan's Valhalla, the Rhine with its guardian Daughters, or the forest where Siegfried comes of age. Anthropocenic thinking about time and space (which are also various responses to structuralist notions of time and space) allows us to conceptualize the legacies of the Ring's characters and events as incomplete and evolving, but always politically differentiated.

Massey relates our conceptions of time and history with the possibilities of geopolitical space in a way that makes sense to modern humanists, too. For example, a dampening stasis in our perception of space (say, in conceptualizing the borders of nations) leads to a similar perception in historical pasts (an inability to understand history as leading to anything other than our current geopolitical situation) and future possibilities (an inability to conceptualize radical future differences in geopolitics). This is, further, to step outside of the perceptions of idealist time and history and instead open the possibility of different temporalities by reimagining the relationship between time and space.<sup>7</sup> Massey puts it succinctly: "For the future to be open, space must be open too" (MASSEY 2005: 12). If this is the case, then perhaps the end of the *Ring* can be hopeful—that is, open to different possibilities of emotion and experience, despite Wagner's prescribed redemption through love. We saw this already in Wagner's Feuerbachian ending, so perhaps directors might try to let their production reiterate those themes, even if the words and music suggest something else. John Deathridge notes, however, in his new translation of the *Ring* librettos, that: "There is no specific message about the future," because Brünnhilde's monologue and the orchestral music that follows it are "beyond reading" (DEATHRIDGE 2018: xx). Because Valhalla and the Gibichung Hall are literally razed, they are transformed into space, ideology burns away along with the embers of meaningful place. Scholars and operagoers might find in this space a kind of vacuum, "beyond reading," and yet Anthropocene thinkers might find meaning in what's left over from the *Ring*'s apocalypse—the post-apocalypse

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6 This is a common distinction made in ecocritical humanities, and it isn't surprising that Massey, a social scientist and cultural geographer, posed this hypothetical question to interested readers in 2005.

7 Poststructuralists like Louis Althusser assumes a formation where changes in time are always indicative of changes in space, and vice versa. Post-Marxist philosopher Ernesto Laclau calls the reduction of time to space "spatialist," echoing Wagner's Gurnemanz (LACLAU 1999: 42). This is something that someone like Fredric Jameson might disagree with; Jameson sees the reconceptualization of space from vertical to horizontal as the move from modern to postmodern.

it implies. In some recent stagings, the post-apocalypse is no longer implied, but made real on stage.

## Apocalypse Staged

Adaptations of Wagner's work for stage and cinema display a history of varying readings of the *Ring's* political, often revolutionary, central narrative meaning. Per opera scholars such as David Levin, Jean-Jacques Nattiez and James Treadwell, stagings can provide a dialectical reading of a theatrical work, especially a canonical one like the *Ring*, much the same way a scholarly or philosophical commentary can (LEVIN 1997, 1998, 2007; NATTIEZ 1980, 1992; TREADWELL, 2003). An adaptation, however, can probe the work's themes in more dialectical terms, for example, by setting it in new times and places or by directing its characters and drama towards different affective ends. In many cases, the technological means of a given staging's production can hold clues to the potential purpose of its reading, and this is particularly so in cinematic remediations of canonical operas—and this is not limited to Wagner's *Ring* or other music dramas, as evidenced by the work of Marcia Citron (CITRON 2000 and 2017). Remediation of opera to cinematic or televisual formats, too, can reinscribe the meaning of a canonical work, and this is noticeably another function of Anthropocene responses in culture writ large.

Many opera directors have centralized the work's ending and its apocalypse in their adaptations. A few recent productions are emblematic of these Anthropocene concerns about the end of the world, particularly in the worlds they build and how they build them. The first is the setting of *Das Rheingold* (2007) by the Catalan directors' collective La Fura dels Baus (Carlus Padrissa and Roland Olberter are the stage director and set designer, respectively) in Valencia. This dimly lit production sets us on an alien world inundated with cyborg technologies. Padrissa's direction makes extensive use of projected video to position the drama's strange sci-fi locales. For example, in between the first and second scenes, we see a dark, black and grey planet earth projected on the video screen behind the stage. The earth spins slowly before it dissolves into a linear diagram of a faceless human sitting with its knees to its chest, which continues to dissolve more as Wotan and Fricka arrive on stage in silvery spacesuits, propped up on unnecessary mechanical apparatuses that elevate them above the stage. The scene is murky and green; Valhalla not built yet; they exist in a particular spatial vacuum that espouses no ideology (yet) and that still contains reminiscences of a previous earth and, for us in the audience, their costume suggests a history and perhaps evolution of technology in this fictive world.

Scene four of this *Rheingold* similarly lacks any signs that they exist in "a place" yet. As Erda's (here sung by Christa Mayer) music precedes her appearance



onstage, the lights dim considerably, somehow even more than usual for this already dark staging. The screen behind the action shows its darkened earth, slowly coming into full view. Then Erda appears, as in Wagner's suggestions, to half her height on the stage. She wears a mesh black dress with a black veil and a black cone-shaped hat. The earth projected onscreen behind her crackles and comes apart during her prophetic monologue, where she explains the inevitability of apocalypse. The earth continues to spin slowly as it moves farther and farther away, perhaps signaling the future consequences that holding onto the ring bears for the natural world. As Wotan responds, a gold ring appears onscreen, twisting and turning around the desolate globe. Olberter's Erda has much in common with other productions (such as Patrice Chéreau's infamous centenary staging at Bayreuth) being from an already destroyed planet and appearing separate from the fate of the gods, a fate seen in the post-apocalyptic earth as it floats hopelessly away. Olberter's setting of Erda and Padrissa's setting of *Das Rheingold* seem to ask similar questions of Wagner's world: *whose* earth is this? If Erda is its representative, what is her spatial relationship to it and, further, what is ours? This seems a fundamentally Anthropocenic version of the apocalypticism the *Ring* initiates and yet would have been unavailable to Wagner in his own time—not because of the technological impossibilities, but because our conception of the end of the world has altered radically to consider not only the fate of the earth's inhabitants, but the fate of the earth herself.

The second Anthropocene production is Marcelo Lombardero's *Rheingold* (2012, Argentina), another spawn of the science fiction genre. Lombardero's production, however, is as bright as Padrissa's is dark. Its gods are draped in white, and Valhalla is brightly lit, as if it were the inside of a pristine luxury office building. Lombardero, like Padrissa, builds his world with the use of video projections. At the end of *Das Rheingold*, the projected video takes its viewers up the exterior of the huge building to reveal its place above the clouds, a shot reminiscent of Cloud City from *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980). This opulent Valhalla doesn't sell the science fiction elements alone, though. The gritty, rocky Nibelheim provides a stark counterpoint, perhaps analogous to Yoda's home planet Dagobah in *Empire*, a vastly different palette from Cloud City. The perhaps not-too-subtle reference to other well-known science fiction settings offers the possibility not only to play with the central theme of the *Ring*—in this case an apocalypse that is transported to a post-Anthropocene cosmos—but also allows a nascent mixing of genre, in which we take the *Ring*'s message today with the caveats that its artistic descendants, such as *Star Wars*, have in turn influenced the *Ring*'s meaning today as a kind of palimpsest of displaced and replaced mythological worlds and tropes.

Erda's role (here sung by Isabel Vera) provides an interesting challenge for this production, as for her to emerge from a trap door in the stage would undercut the setting of Valhalla in scene 4. Instead, Lombardero projects her

image on the back wall of the Valhalla set, and the gods and giants receive her as if she is some intergalactic, faraway transmission from an intergalactic space of incomplete ideology. Here, Erda's prophetic doomsday message and the character herself are, again, spatially differentiated from the gods and Valhalla. Erda's character becomes part of the technology that implicates a changed relationship between humanity and nature. Lombardero's Erda shares no part of the stage with the gods, and insofar as she can be read as connected with the natural world and the earth, Lombardero's setting begs the question of its world: where does it take place, if not our earth? Is Erda still bound to this earth, or another? Perhaps like the earth in the Valencia production, this earth is already well past devastation, so Erda's prophecy comes from the experience of an apocalypse already past. Here, post-apocalypticism is not merely the setting of the story, but a new Anthropocene lesson emerges: that apocalypses can recur, at least for any humankind that fails to avoid them.

Erda's proposed question, in my reading, invites us to think through the nature of the world being set on stage: whose is it, if not our own? A similar question is posed towards a set of assumptions that, in Timothy Morton's book *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, plague Anthropocene inhabitants: that there can be any such singular thing as "the world" at all. Morton's work is contemporaneous with (roughly a year after) Lombardero's setting of the *Ring*, so both initiate Anthropocene inquiry from similar angles. Lombardero's production asks if the doom of Erda's prophecy exclusive to the world of the gods, where the luxurious Valhalla rises thousands of feet into the air? Or is a different world implied as well, one from which a distraught Erda sends out an interplanetary S.O.S. to warn others of a doom that may spread to them? If there is a singular "world", according to Morton, the answer to whether it is worth saving or not is not always or immediately ethically clear; Lombardero's Erda, too, might be shadowed by such thoughts while she simultaneously sings her doomsday prophecy.

Such twenty-first-century, science-fiction *Ring* productions conform with the interests and attitudes of Anthropocenic ecological humanities writers who wonder about our relationship to the end of the world, the nature of that world, and the implications and condemnations inherent to those questions. The *Rings* in this section share, if nothing else, pessimism for the future of the planet, or at least pessimism about humanity's reliance on nature. Instead, they offer glimpses of hope for the ravaged earth, which, in a very literal sense, is still standing. Lombardero's Erda warns the gods of an end to *their* world but not hers; Padrisa's *Ring*, as grim as it is stylistically, nonetheless presents an earth that will outlast the gods despite being swallowed up by the ring and its symbolic thirsts for power.

The realization that the earth will outlast us has been a primary component of Anthropocene scholarship (and this is to say nothing of this belief's position in many global indigenous cosmologies, religions, and philosophies). During this

moment in the humanities and in humanistic thinking, staging the *Ring* also highlights the themes of Wagner's story concerned with climate change and, often in the same productions, the sense with which climate change and human impact will spell the end of time and history—or, in the case of some *Ring* productions, already has. Examples of these are found elsewhere in the work's staging history, in seminal European productions of the 1980s: Götz Friedrich's second *Ring* and Harry Kupfer's Bayreuth staging, both of which predate Anthropocene-centered humanism, but offer a bridge between the *Ring*'s already extant concern with apocalypticism and the Anthropocene version of the end of the world that began to come into view in the latter twentieth century.

While the earth is a primary concern in more contemporary Anthropocene productions, those productions of the 1980s postulated dialectical stagings of the *Ring* that presume it tells not a story of apocalypse and utopia, but of its aftermath. Here, time and history often become the very props and stagecraft that tell the story of the *Ring*. Götz Friedrich's second *Ring* production (1984-85, Deutsche Oper Berlin and later Tokyo, Washington, and London) and Harry Kupfer's Bayreuth productions (1988-92) both thematized the ecological catastrophe inherent to the Ring cycle's narrative, achieved primarily by playing with time as itself a prop of dramaturgy. With his designer Peter Sykora, Friedrich set the action in a massive "time tunnel," a kind of shelter where "survivors of a nuclear Armageddon re-enact the play of the *Nibelung's Ring* in an attempt to understand man's downfall" (ASHMAN 2008: 264). Friedrich's time-tunnel links the *Ring*'s events tightly, as literally and spatially claustrophobic. Sykora called the time-tunnel a purgatorial space that connected events "reaching from early Christian catacombs to an atomic waste-storage area" (CARNEGIE 2006: 353).<sup>8</sup> Patrick Carnegie argues it presents a "play within a play" (CARNEGIE 2006: 352). Friedrich's Berlin production thus managed to spatially confine the events of the Ring to a single claustrophobic space while temporally expanding their set of associations and consequences, an act that itself metaphorizes human impact on the environment. Further, Friedrich's time-tunnel sought to continue the long legacy of psychological settings since Adolphe Appia, where the action and sets of the work seemed too fanciful to be real, yet too real to be a dream. While Erda and Wotan meet in their own sort of "play within a play," Friedrich throws the drama and its entire dramatis personae into a theatrical hyper-space.

In Friedrich's *Rheingold*, Erda appears in complete view, a technique perhaps borrowed from Chéreau's production. However, a blindfold covers her eyes, her vision impaired perhaps in exchange for greater metaphorical sight. During her prophecy, Erda stares directly at Wotan, stating that Friedrich's time-tunnel works like the spaces where Erda sees everything through closed eyes, while she dreams

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8 Peter Sykora, "The Spatial Concept," in the program book for the 1989 production of *Die Walküre* at the Royal Opera House, London.

offstage and sees worldly events. Erda navigates the space of the time-tunnel, a space laden with histories past and future, with the utmost precision and comfort despite this blindness. Insofar as Erda's character already represents the natural world and the earth itself, this Anthropocene vision of the earth sees beyond the boundaries imposed by apocalypticism. Yes, Friedrich presents an earth quite capable of surviving and outlasting the apocalypse, reiterating that trope from ecocriticism, but does so by presenting a reading of the *Ring's* apocalypse that exists, necessarily, outside of Wagner's prescriptions in the score and libretto. Indeed, we can only take ecological catastrophe to mean something for everything else, not Erda, but the gods, humans, giants, and Nibelungen. This is confirmed in *Siegfried*, when Friedrich's Woodbird appears, hovering triumphantly above the time-tunnel, her persona unbound by the confines of the otherwise claustrophobic time-tunnel, outside of the play within a play.

Harry Kupfer's 1988 Bayreuth production, conducted by Daniel Barenboim, similarly takes place after a world-ending catastrophe. Kupfer, like Friedrich, stages the "rolling wheel of history" as well as economic catastrophe and its aftermath. In this misanthropic setting, Kupfer and his designer Hans Schavernoich crafted a "Weltstraße," a street of world history, the limits of which remained hidden and ever-extending beyond the proscenium, similar to the perception created by the time-tunnel (CARNEGIE 2006: 353). Humanity struggles here against time and the very teleological nature of history and, as the drama unfolds, narrativity. Kupfer's *Ring* highlights the connection between the abandonment of love theme and its purported relationship to the telos of global extinction. The ending of Kupfer's *Götterdämmerung* seals this: people walk on stage, some dressed in tuxedos and cocktail dresses, others as mid-century working- and lower-class families. Each family carries with them a television set, which they set down and stare at intently. Brünnhilde's immolation is reduced to a television program, while a small boy from a wealthy family approaches a girl from a poorer one and takes her by the hand. He turns on a flashlight as the two tread into the future, leaving their technologically incapacitated parents behind. Barenboim punctuates the moment with a soft, quiet orchestral presence, perhaps at the cost of what is usually a more saccharine sound-world at the end.

In both of Erda's scenes, the oracle comes up from under the stage as prescribed in Wagner's staging directions, to half her height. In *Das Rheingold*, while all of the other characters appear as apocalyptic caricatures of a *Werktreue* [authentic to Wagner's intentions] setting, Erda remains almost unchanged. If, in settings like Friedrich's, we find meaning in how Erda is staged differently than Wagner's instructions, Kupfer provides a counterexample, despite the similarity in their post-apocalyptic themes. Kupfer's Erda remains in the ground, a one-dimensional representation of the earth past its expiration date. If there is a less generous reading to be made, it is that Kupfer was simply not up to the challenge or enigma that staging Erda presents. But Kupfer is too good of a director and knew his Wagner too well to claim that Erda was a substantial

challenge he couldn't figure out. So, then, something is left unsaid in his staging of the prophetic as dialectical with the rest of his setting.

Wagner's *Ring*, more than his other music dramas and relative to most other operas in the Western canon, seems particularly suited to a science fiction or post-apocalyptic resetting of its characters, locations, and events. There is a tempting popular culture analogy to explain why that is, which also explains the proliferation of operatic science fiction, as in "space operas," in the late twentieth century. The epics created in that time period were science fiction and reiterated Wagnerian themes: think of the *Star Wars* films, the *Dune* novels, the *Star Trek* television series, and so on. At the same time, Cold War geopolitical differences, which cultivated competing conceptions of time and space, may explain those genres' popular success up to the present day. Only more recently has there been a greater cultural shift toward fetishizing alternative histories of the past in media beyond the literary and mythological, i.e., the fantasy and high fantasy epic genres in film and television, and in the *Ring*'s staging history we see this especially in the China National Opera House's *Das Rheingold* (2016), an Anthropocene production that basks in the implied magic of Wagner's worlds, perhaps to the point of excess and ultimately, ignorance in regards to the closeness that Wagner's apocalypticism might share with our own today. This is, of course, another option for inhabitants of the Anthropocene: to ignore the end of the world completely.

Another reason the *Ring* seems especially like science fiction today is historical, related to our contemporary Anthropocene attitudes towards world and climate. Writer and novelist Amitav Ghosh argues that the extreme weather precipitated by climate change in the modern era have caused artists to conceive, on a massive scale, the science fiction, fantasy and horror literary genres in place of what was once called simply "romance" and "melodrama" (GHOSH 2016: 24, 66). Today, ecological catastrophe means something different than it did for Wagner, and the worlds we imagine are different, too—perhaps new genres are also on the way. Given the proliferation of the science fiction genre in films and books in the early half of the twentieth century up to the present day, this might not surprise us, partly revealed as it is by the time-tunnels and Weltstraßen of Wagnerian stagecraft. In stagings where history or time is made a prop or set, Marx's theories of history seem to lurk in the wings, not only in obvious socialist settings like Kupfer's or the earlier Chéreau's. Given the cultural milieu of post-Atomic Age or post-Cold War Europe, it's perhaps not surprising that other directors broached socialist *Ring* cycles, given the work's previous association as a socialist, revolutionary allegory extending back to Shaw in the late nineteenth century.

## Conclusion

These four stagings represent a shift in reading the *Ring*'s apocalypse between various stages of the Anthropocene, from Wagner's spiritual redemption of

humanity to the stark geopolitical landscape of Cold War stagings in East Germany and, most recently, the mournful stagings of the twenty-first century, where the earth is present only at a distance. In other words, the apocalypse has changed throughout the Anthropocene and this is reflected in these stagings, too—where Wagner’s version of the end of the world appears both mythic and biblical, the *Ring* cycles of the 1980s wondered about the contemporaneous threat of nuclear holocaust and its aftermath, and the imaginative *Ring* cycles of today now propose a measuring stick for our apocalypse, aware of the earth already ravaged, of sovereignties in decline, or techno-capitalists on trial. As is the case with current ecocriticism in the Anthropocene, the apocalypse today is thus not merely relegated to our imagination, or the imagination of scripture, but is omnipresent in the way we read and adapt texts, especially those that thematize the end like the *Ring*.

Opera staging throughout the twentieth century to the present has seemed an opportunistic vehicle for rereading and remediating canonical works, as seen in the scholarship of David Levin especially (LEVIN 2007). On the one hand, this may be simply a function of the nature of opera programming, whereby the insistence of institutions to put on, say, a new version of Verdi’s *Rigoletto* every other year presumes we ought to set it in new ways—that it requires inventive dramaturgy to reinvigorate its musical and dramatic content. While few other forms of art have shared this changeability in Western culture, it might also be the case that opera is especially initiated by those same functions of the Anthropocene—which heighten our awareness of mass loss, our changing notions of space and time, and our orientation to preserve the earth—to keep retelling old stories in new genres. The proliferation of remediation in other cultural products is encountered today with special vitriol—the constant remaking and serializing of films and the adaptations of countless novels into films are often met with critical and social disdain, particularly due to the role that major studios play in the process. While it may seem a short-sighted “cash grab” this cultural phenomenon, however, is foreshadowed by hundreds of years of operatic restagings (which are met with similar vitriol for numerous, different reasons ranging from a place of “pure” aesthetics to cultural gatekeeping and elitism). If opera can foreshadow culture, and here we can take the *Ring* as an example, these remediations might also be hermeneutical of an insistence to reinscribe meaning on older forms in the Anthropocene. Where Ghosh argued for new genres—or rather, new names for old genres—that emerged in the nineteenth century, today we might be in the midst of a different process, one intimately brought on by the fear of a coming apocalypse. Rather than new genres, we find in the operas of the past a shared catharsis in our reenactments of world’s endings and, as Wagner might remind us, its beginnings.

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