Wagnerpunk:
A Steampunk Reading of Patrice Chéreau's Staging of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1876)

Carmel Raz
(Yale University, Connecticut, USA)

Abstract:
Director Patrice Chéreau describes the nineteenth century as "our mythology and our past, containing our dreams" (Chéreau 1980: 430). His 1976 opera production of Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1876), considered perhaps the most influential *Ring* cycle of all time, evokes a nineteenth-century dreamscape: gods, giants, dwarves and mermaids in dinner jackets and petticoats scheme against the backdrop of steel dams and massive cogwheels. Traditionally, critics have seen this production as a continuation of the Marxist legacy of George Bernard Shaw's *The Perfect Wagnerite* (1898). Viewed instead as an early representative of steampunk, the social critique, environmental concerns, and retro-futuristic ideas featured in this staging become contextualised within a coherent framework – one that explores contemporary social and technological anxieties through the metaphor of an epic fantasy world.

Keywords: Patrice Chéreau*, Der Ring des Nibelungen*, magic, myth, nineteenth century, opera, Richard Wagner, staging, steampunk, technology.

*****

In 1980, following a scandalous opening run three years earlier,[1] the last performance of Patrice Chéreau's production of Richard Wagner's operatic tetralogy, *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring of the Nibelung*, 1848-1878), was met with a 45-minute standing ovation. Commissioned by Richard Wagner's grandson, Wolfgang Wagner, to mark the *Ring*'s centennial, Chéreau's revolutionary staging presented these operas in the context of the composer's own era, supplanting decades of modernist, determinedly apolitical Bayreuth productions that distanced the operas from their association with Nazism. Chéreau's staging reads the nineteenth century through and back into the work of Richard Wagner (1813-1883), the overarching musical figure of his age.[2] However, Chéreau does not attempt to recreate the experience of a nineteenth-century viewer.[3] Instead, he uses the music and libretto of the *Ring* as a vehicle to explore the nineteenth

_____

century with twentieth-century hindsight, while inviting viewers to consider their present age through a clearly fantastical allegorical reading of an earlier period.

In 1980, a year after Chéreau's production closed, American author Kevin Wayne Jeter published *Morlock Night*, a sequel to H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895). These events appear unrelated: the first comes from the temple of Wagnerian high culture in Bayreuth, Germany, the second from the funky, irreverent pop culture scene of San Francisco, USA. Yet, in retrospect, both works heralded a new era: the thirty-one-year-old Frenchman's *Ring* was hailed as "the turning point in European opera production" (Neher 2010), and as a "deconstructive landmark" (Schiff 1999: 95). Meanwhile, nineteenth-century-inspired science fiction and fantasy literature such as *Morlock Night*, for which Jeter later coined the term 'steampunk',[4] would become an increasingly popular sub-genre of science fiction over the next few decades, influencing literature, the visual arts, and lifestyle subcultures.

I argue that Chéreau's response to specific elements in Wagner's tetralogy significantly parallels other contemporary interpretations of the nineteenth century, many of which have since been grouped under the steampunk or neo-Victorian rubrics. Thus Chéreau's evocation of the nineteenth century, so as to explore the roots of what he terms "the ambiguity of our social and moral power systems" (Chéreau 1980: 430),[5] parallels the resurgent interest in the Victorian period that began in the 1960s and 1970s.[6] This trend has been well documented in the domains of literature, cinema, stage, and visual art (see Kucich and Sadoff 2000: xi). In particular, according to Cora Kaplan, most highbrow historical fiction written in the last third of the twentieth century is characterised by its "juxtaposition of heavily ironised late twentieth-century cleverness of the Victorian reference as imitation, citation or rewrite" (Kaplan 2007: 88). Chéreau's production can be understood as expressing a similar process through the intersection of iconic nineteenth-century music with late-twentieth-century stage production.[7]

I will concentrate on three elements of Chéreau's production that bring this staging into dialogue with steampunk: the presentation of nature and futuristic technology; aspects of costume and set design; and the foregrounding of alternative narratives dealing with race and class. Finally, I argue that the steampunk paradigm is an especially fruitful approach to

_____

Chéreau's *Ring*, as it provides late twentieth- and twenty-first-century viewers with an aesthetically coherent framework that integrates the social critique, environmental concerns, and retro-futuristic ideas of this production within the context of a culturally familiar epic fantasy world.

The characteristic trait of steampunk is the projection of contemporary technological fantasies onto nineteenth-century mechanical means, mixed with a subversive, fanciful re-imagining of the nineteenth century's social conventions, gender roles, and cultural ideals. While both steampunk and neo-Victorianism deal with the nineteenth century, cultural artefacts with a steampunk orientation typically replace historical settings with an ideologically charged fantasy world, re-imagined with a late twentieth- or early twenty-first-century sensibility.[8] By focusing on real and imagined nineteenth-century technologies, steampunk novels criticise the West's exploitation of natural resources through the Industrial Revolution (and continuing industrial revolutions in the developing world). The use or misuse of resources tends to be directly related to a vision of industrial progress, with technology as a significant generator of personal and social power structures, often represented by magic.[9] Steampunk also subverts nineteenth-century expectations in the domains of gender and race by featuring strong, technologically proficient female heroines,[10] or by imagining alternate colonial histories.[11] Steampunk's intimate relationship with the nineteenth century is achieved through a number of recurring visual and narrative motives. A short list of these icons includes cogwheels, gears and clockwork mechanisms, steam-powered devices, monocles, goggles, and mechanical prostheses, "much like a slightly rusty version of the chrome cyborg" (Barratt 2010: 174). Through sharing these references across the domains of fiction, visual art, and scene subculture, steampunk succeeds in creating a neo-Victorian cultural unconscious, a mythological iconography tapped by works across the genre.

Richard Wagner's *Ring* cycle is perhaps the supreme manifestation of nineteenth-century Europe's obsession with myth, folklore, and epic dimensions.[12] Consisting of four operas: *Das Rheingold* (*The Rhine Gold*, 1869), *Die Walküre* (*The Valkyrie*, 1870), *Siegfried* (1876), and *Götterdämmerung* (*The Twilight of the Gods*, 1876), Wagner wrote the libretto and the music between 1848-1874, basing his saga on ancient German and Nordic myths, chiefly the *Nibelunglied*, the Old Norse *Eddas*, the *Völsungasaga*, and the *Thidrekssaga*. The story centres on a magic ring

_____

that grants its owner the power of world domination, forged by the Nibelung Alberich from gold he steals from the Rhinemaidens. Alberich was required to renounce love in order obtain the gold, entailing a deadly curse that follows him and all future owners of the ring. He promptly uses the ring to enslave his brother Mime, as well as his fellow Nibelungs. Wotan, leader of the gods, soon robs him, and in turn reluctantly forsakes the ring in payment to the giant brothers who build his Valhalla castle. Both Wotan and Alberich then scheme to regain control of the ring, setting in motion the events that take place over the remaining three operas, as their offspring become unwitting pawns in the quest for the cursed ring. In the last opera, *Götterdämmerung*, Wotan's grandson Siegfried regains the ring, but is almost immediately killed. The ring is finally returned to the Rhine, and Valhalla is destroyed.[13]

The operas feature dwarves, giants, gods, demi-gods, mortals, Rhinemaiden mermaids, and valkyries as well as a magical ring, an invisibility cap, apples of eternal youth, an invincible sword, and various other mythological symbols. The fantastical nature of the tale and its reliance on folk elements initially led to very literal stagings based on Wagner's own premiere production. However, the tetralogy has also had a long reception history of allegorical readings, the most important being the socialist interpretation suggested by George Bernard Shaw in *The Perfect Wagnerite* (1898). Shaw claims that *The Ring of the Nibelung* "could not have been written before the second half of the nineteenth century, because it deals with events which were only then consummating themselves" (Shaw 1898: 12).

From the initial rise of the curtain in *Das Rheingold* to its final fall in *Götterdämmerung*, Chéreau's production is a fable of the industrial revolution and the price that the desire for power exacts from nineteenth-century social structures. He combines a small number of traditional mythological stage props, such as swords, helmets, and shields, with nineteenth-century European signifiers. The characters, cast as businessmen, bourgeois families, miners, and prostitutes, are surrounded by an array of cultural artefacts ranging from steam-producing machines to giant cogwheels, goggles, hard hats, frock coats, and petticoats. Transplanting Wagner's fantasy world into this setting evokes the temporal multiplicity of a neo-Wilhelmine dreamscape, an effect alluded to by Chéreau in calling the nineteenth century "our mythology and our past, containing our dreams"

_____

(Chéreau 1980: 430). Chéreau's *Ring* opens with what the director describes as an

> object on stage which could perhaps be a dam but which
> could also be many other things. It is a menacing
> construction, a theatrical machine to produce a river, and an
> allegorical shape which today generates energy. It is perhaps
> a mythological presence, the mythology of our time.
> (Chéreau 1980: 428)

This dystopian Rhine indeed foreshadows the decline to come: nature has been subjugated, and her creatures – even the Rhinemaidens – are corrupt. The dam itself is a massive steel structure, a nineteenth-century futuristic nightmare. Alberich and the Rhinemaidens appear tiny as they scramble about its slippery surfaces, and the otherwise bare stage reinforces the sensation of industrial domination. No trees remain in the landscape, nor does water run under the dam. As a stage prop, the dam fits neatly into the lineage of retro-futuristic post-industrial revolution creations by employing steam for its "self-referential evocation of technology-driven modernity and industrial trash" (Kreuzer 2011). Chéreau's machine signals a loss of innocence through the transformation of water to steam. In this reading, the Rhinemaidens were never innocent to begin with, and the dam symbolises both their own spoiled nature and the despoiled state of the Rhine.

By depicting the Rhinemaidens' rebuff of the Nibelung Alberich as coming from the advanced industrialised world represented by the dam and the girls, Chéreau prepares us for the inevitable replacement of one form of technology by another. Alberich, who cannot survive in the Rhinemaidens' environment, steals the gold and plots revenge, forging a ring out of what once was part of the Rhine. This interpretation of the decline of one form of technology (or power) in favour of another echoes the steampunk concept of technological Darwinism, which explores the "inevitability of the loss of control, as technology evolves beyond the confines of one person" (Tidhar 2005). The rusty deserted dam at the beginning of the third act of the last opera, *Götterdämmerung*, displays the relentless progress of time and technology, as ownership of the ring has since passed from Alberich to Wotan, the giant Fafner, Siegfried, and Brünnhilde, none of whom can

_____

control its malignant powers. Technology in this case has indeed assumed a "mythical force that shapes and controls narrative causality" (Tidhar 2005).

Technology also permeates Chéreau's approach to the ring itself, manifested in his presentation of bodily extensions and the concept of a man-machine hybrid, or cyborg.[14] Although many of the gods in Wagner's libretto are closely associated with magical objects,[15] the magic ring becomes a primary object of desire, because it is a transferable magical/ technological agent granting the power of bodily modification to anyone, not just gods and their offspring. Chéreau thematises the technological source of these physical modifications in his presentation of the giant Fafner's later transformation into a steel dragon, a ring-enabled hybrid state between man and machine. Perhaps taking his cue from the libretto's metaphorical threat of Alberich's golden fist, "mit goldner Faust / euch Göttliche fang' ich mir alle!" (by my golden fist / I'll capture all you godly ones!) (Wagner 1883: 140), Chéreau's staging unforgettably emphasises the ring's cyborg quality, as Wotan cuts off Alberich's finger in order to obtain it.

In parallel to the amalgamation of man with machine, Chéreau's sets, designed by Richard Peduzzi, consistently hybridise nature with elements of technology. Beyond the representation of the Rhine river as a steam-churning dam, Peduzzi places gigantic abandoned cogwheels on the edge of the stage (in *Rheingold*) or suspended in the background (in *Die Walküre*) – omnipresent objects that face the audience without participating as props in the dramatic action on stage. While locating the action in the Industrial Revolution, these obsolete mechanical parts refute Theodor Adorno's critique of Wagner's works as phantasmagoria; the 'means of production' are ostentatiously displayed on stage, emphasising the function of the stage as illusion-creating machine.[16]

This iconography has a direct correlate in steampunk, which places an almost fetishistic emphasis on the visibility of cogwheels, mechanical parts, and fantastical clockwork contraptions, as well as on vapours arising from steam-powered technology (Onion 2008: 139). The decorative cogwheels flanking Peduzzi's sets symbolise nineteenth-century progress, evoking the inevitability of turning wheels, the fragility of mechanical action, and "Victorian technologies, real or imagined" (Bowser and Croxall 2010: 16). The ubiquity of visible cogs and spring mechanisms in steampunk design concretely manifests the pervasiveness of modern

_____

technology. Witnessing the inner workings of machines reminds us of our own deeply entwined dependency on technology, with its potential for triumph as well as catastrophe. Seen in this light, the abandoned, immobile cogwheels on stage evoke the *failure* of the *Ring* characters to control their destiny, as well as the human and environmental price of the nineteenth-century project of technological progress. As visual symbols, the cogwheels support the set and costume design in evoking a hybrid temporality. Chéreau describes his guiding principle as creating a mythology of the nineteenth century, through a technique similar to the medieval master painters who depicted historical Romans dressed in contemporary costume. Thus, it is "unimportant that there is a tuxedo on stage, but it is important that there is a tuxedo next to a breastplate" (Chéreau 1980: 430). Whether in the form of a spear-carrying god wearing a dinner jacket, a dwarf with modern glasses, or a rustic hero manipulating a futuristic metal forge, the blending of elements from different eras creates a critical heterochronous space, inviting the viewer to analyse new meanings generated by the juxtaposition of different times, cultures, and technologies.

Gundula Kreuzer describes the ambivalence in the *Ring* as veering between "the archaic and the ultra-modern, past and future, superhuman myth and human-designed progress, unspoiled nature and industrial society" (Kreuzer 2011). In her list of binary oppositions, quoted here only partially, she also emphasises the tension between an intentionally archaic-sounding opera libretto and explicitly modern musical techniques. In creating his hermetic presentation of Norse mythology, Wagner incorporated *Stabreim*, or alliteration, the principal versification technique of medieval Germanic poetry, into his libretto.[17] No such anachronism is found in the domain of his music, where Wagner uses extended chromaticism as well as his own new technique of transforming musical motifs to reflect developments in the plot. Thus, Wagner's libretto, constrained by its fanciful archaism, stands in constant tension with his rich musical characterisations. The music typically supplements the information revealed in words or stage instructions. For example, Valhalla, residence of the gods, is initially represented by a strongly diatonic, consonant musical motif, which morphs into darkly chromatic minor as the fate of gods stands in doubt. The underground kingdom of Nibelheim is represented by a gloomy, repetitive motif accompanied by the rhythmic clanking of hammers, while the Nibelung Mime is represented by plaintive minor-mode motifs featuring vocal

_____

ornamentation that many have interpreted as a distinctly anti-Semitic parody.[18]

The sophistication and depth of these musical portrayals allows us to identify with even the most marginalised of Wagner's characters. Thus, even though the libretto consistently represents the Nibelungs as foils of the gods, the music suggests empathy for their plight. Shaw's comparison of Nibelheim to "a white lead factory, or a chemical works [...] or any other of the places where human life and welfare are daily sacrificed" seems especially apt when one hears the monotony and despair conveyed by the repetitive musical motif of the enslaved underground miners (Shaw 1898: 22). This reading may reflect Wagner's own early utopian-socialist leanings: Wagner was exiled from Dresden following his participation in the failed Dresden Revolution of 1849.[19] However, it is equally possible that in constructing a finely detailed musical and mythological universe, Wagner found himself creating nuanced characterisations that transcended the sentiments in his libretto. A similar ambiguity emerges from the interaction between Mime and Siegfried, and the humiliation of Alberich by Wotan: the libretto presents the brothers as one-dimensional stage villains, yet musically the pair are rendered as fully tragic creatures.

Chéreau's staging emphasises the ambivalence inherent in Wagner's own rich musical characterisation of heroes and villains alike. He follows Wagner's explicit directions in representing the exploited classes as nonhuman races: both the Nibelung dwarves and the giants are decidedly nonhuman in size. There are important precedents for Chéreau's socialist reading, as both Joachim Herz's Leipzig *Ring* (1973-76) and Goetz Friedrich's London *Ring* (1974-76) explored Marxist themes: Herz dispensed with the non-human characters by presenting the Nibelungs as workers and the giants as master masons, while Friedrich's overtly Shavian production took an opposite approach, with Fasolt and Fafner dressed as "space-fiction astronauts with ray guns" (Carnegy 2006: 351). Carnegy's analysis of the London *Ring* emphasises that while "myth and modernity shook hands, the production conveyed little sense of the *Ring*'s roots in the mid-nineteenth century" (Carnegy 2006: 352). Indeed, Chéreau's tiny underground miners have a specific legacy of received nineteenth-century social commentary. From a steampunk point of view, Chéreau's Nibelungs evoke H.G. Wells's (and later K.W. Jeter's) Morlocks, creatures of diminutive size and intelligence, "mechanical servants […] subterranean for

_____

innumerable generations" (Wells 2001: 59-60).[20] The small size of the Nibelungs highlights their exploited position in the universe of the *Ring,* serving as a metaphor for the oppression and dehumanisation of the working class in this Industrial Revolution dreamscape. Played mostly by children and midgets costumed in brass helmets, goggles, and gas masks, the miserable underground dwarves are factory workers, described by Chéreau as a "*gedemütigtes Volk*" (*humiliated race*) (Chéreau 1980: 435), the first to be enslaved by the technology of the ring.

However, Chéreau extends a different approach to his portrayal of the two main Nibelung characters in the *Ring*: Alberich, who foreswears love in order to steal the gold, and his brother Mime, a smith who raises Wotan's abandoned grandson, Siegfried. Although Alberich and Mime are Nibelungs, Chéreau casts them as adults of full stature, distinguishing them from the silent chorus of underground dwarves and possibly reflecting his claim that "Alberich and even more so, Mime, correspond to Jews in Wagner's imagination" (Chéreau 1980: 434).[21] In his words, the brothers are "not completely evil, but rather, Alberich chose to be so because that was the only path left to him" (Chéreau 1980: 434). This rehabilitation is achieved onstage through the directorial depiction of the Rhinemaidens as spiteful prostitutes who physically abuse and sexually tease an all-too-human Alberich to intense frustration. Instead of Shaw's nineteenth-century understanding of the trio as "thoughtless, elemental, only half real things, much like modern young ladies" (Shaw 1898: 16), Chéreau breaks with traditional Wagnerian staging and refuses to exculpate the Rhinemaidens of their guilt in what is to follow.

This radically unconventional approach also extends to Chéreau's staging of Siegfried's relationship with Mime. As early as 1840, Friedrich Engels described the mythological character of Siegfried as "der Repräsentant der deutschen Jugend" (the representative of German youth) (Mayer 1920: 137). Such nationalistic associations were only heightened by the success of Wagner's Ring, with the hero typically presented as a paragon of courage and Germanic ideals. For example, in the Wagner Society's newsletter of 1897, Siegfried is described as the "Verkörperung der Volksseele, als reinster Vertreter der arischen Rasse" (embodiment of the soul of the people, as the purest representative of the Aryan race) (Graewell 1897: 110). A year later, Shaw declared Siegfried "a born

_____

anarchist, the ideal of Bakoonin," appropriating the German nationalist hero for his own Marxist ideals (Shaw 1898: 41).

Chéreau completely refutes the tradition of an idealised Siegfried.[22] Although Wagner writes Siegfried's substantial bullying of Mime into both the score and libretto, Chéreau's directing and casting choices present the 'hero' in the worst possible light. Sung by the forty-year-old Manfred Jung, Chéreau's Siegfried is a dangerous brute, delivering lyrical lines while grasping Mime in a chokehold, and throwing a hammer at the Mime's head while singing "zergreif' ich den Quark!" (I shatter the trash), a gesture not indicated in the libretto. Mime, on the other hand, as portrayed by Heinz Zednik, is a frail, elderly man wearing glasses and a plaid dressing gown, who seems genuinely distressed by his unsuccessful attempts to ingratiate himself with his adopted son. While Siegfried ultimately kills Mime after the latter attempts to poison him, Chéreau sees such cruelty between the two that he notes, "there are all too many reasons for Mime to want to murder Siegfried" (Chéreau 1980: 435). Through portraying Alberich and Mime with unusual sympathy, Chéreau's staging compels his audience to witness alternate nineteenth-century histories long suppressed by the traditions of Wagnerian staging.[23] Chéreau's direction emphasises the humanity of the *Ring*'s villains, using Wagner's own operas – without altering a word or a note – to criticise the spirit of both the composer's personal anti-Semitism and the social norms of his day.[24] Through this act, he highlights the malice with which the gods, representing the German bourgeois, treat both the oppressed Nibelung working-class and the stand-in Jewish characters.[25]

The degree to which this is a revolutionary stance can be read in the outraged critical response to Chéreau's humanisation of Alberich. Writing about the Bayreuth premiere, Jane Boutwell claims that conservatives sympathetic to the Nazi era were appalled by the depiction of Mime as an elderly Jew, which they understood as "an unpleasant public reminder of Wagner's anti-Semitism" (Boutwell 1977: 84). Along similar lines, a (probably unconscious) racial bias pervades the chapter 'Basic Errors of Interpretation' in Uwe Färber's *The Centenary Ring in Bayreuth*, published in the same year. Färber derides Alberich's "natural, friendly face", claiming that, "what we hear with unmistakable clarity in the case of Alberich is a torturer and sadist" (Färber 1977: 14). At the same time, Färber protests that "the producer has made an opposite error of interpretation: Wotan, the son of light, has been turned into a despot!"

_____

(Färber 1977: 15). Färber tries to justify his anguish at the reversal of the Wagnerian status quo on musical precepts, claiming that listening to the ring motif "with its opening interval of a second, expressive of grief, and the stabbing shrillness of a final major third, [is enough] in order to convince oneself of Alberich's uncanny and demonic nature" (Färber 1977: 14). He then reminds us that Alberich is "not without good reason known as Black Alberich and Night Alberich" (Färber 1977: 14). Reading Färber's arguments, one is struck by the unfortunate racial implications of this association of black with evil and light with good. Chéreau's subversive message had clearly hit its target.

        In summary, Chéreau's successful blend of Wagner's *Ring* with criticism of the nineteenth century has achieved quasi-mythological status, having been referenced, subverted, and imitated by countless *Ring* productions since its 1976 premiere. As David Schiff notes, opera productions since Chéreau's *Ring* regularly explore hybrid temporalities, non-realistic settings, and surreal stagings (Schiff 1999: 92). Late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century viewers are no longer satisfied with a simplistically evil version of 'Black Alberich', and have a greater tolerance for flawed heroes, nuanced and complex scenarios, and psychologically aware interpretations of stage classics. Unlike Chéreau's original audience, only a handful of currently active operagoers have had firsthand experience with the generation born before 1900. This increasing distance causes the mythical aspect of Chéreau's *Ring* to begin to take precedence over the critical dimension, as the experienced nineteenth century recedes in communal memory and is replaced by a shared, collective memory that is constantly being criticised, enriched, and transformed.

        The reception of the *Ring* itself had cultural resonance extending far beyond the borders of the German state: William Blissett describes the cultural phenomenon of Wagnerism as "arguably the greatest single fact to be reckoned with in the arts during the past century" (DiGaetani 1978: 12). With reference to Great Britain, musicologist Joseph Kerman has highlighted "the general reliance of Victorian England on German music and musical thought" (Kerman 1980: 316), and John DiGaetani has written about the central role of Wagner in late nineteenth-century British collective cultural memory (DiGaetani 1978: 12). Taking this into account, any contemporary reading of mid- to late-nineteenth-century European artistic culture can be considered to engage with Wagner to some degree, just as

_____

even the most 'archaic' *Ring* production reflects a very nineteenth-century interest in the revival of Norse mythology, ideas about nations and nationalism, and the growing influence of technology and industrialisation.

In 1976, Chéreau broke new ground by abandoning any pretence at transcending the culturally specific moment from which both Wagner and the *Ring* emerged. Today, more than thirty years after his production closed, the time is ripe for an investigation of the culturally specific moment that gave birth to Chéreau's staging. Therefore, ideas from steampunk and neo-Victorian scholarship have significant potential to contribute to the field of opera and performance studies. For example, reading Chéreau's *Ring* through the steampunk paradigm sheds light on the artistic choices of later productions. This is perhaps most clearly manifested in Kasper Bech Holten's sensational *Ring*, staged in 2007 at the Royal Danish Opera. Holten's production begins in the 1920s and works its way toward our day and age, featuring decidedly familiar contemporary signifiers, including onstage movie projections, elevators, hospital beds, cameras, and laboratory coats. However, Holten features at least three clear gestures of homage to Chéreau's production: whereas Chéreau's Wotan memorably cut off Alberich's ring and finger, Holten's Wotan brutally chops off the dwarf's whole arm. In Chéreau's *Siegfried*, Fafner transformed himself into a giant steel dragon contraption, operated by black-clad stagehands. Holten's dragon has become a two-story machine, featuring a speaker and a few cables extending above ground, and an elaborate control room operated by the wheelchair-bound giant underneath. Finally, Holten takes Chéreau's concept of decentring the traditional opera libretto to a completely new level: his plot is structured as the flashback of Wotan's daughter, Brünnhilde. Notably, Holten chose to retain the directorial concepts most closely associated with steampunk: bodily transformation, technology, and alternative narratives. Chéreau's influence on a younger generation of stage directors has ensured that his vision of the nineteenth century continues to speak to us through contemporary *Ring* productions. At the same time, Chéreau's critical take on the nineteenth century, with unforgettable iconography and humane characterisations, has guaranteed that his *Ring,* re-released on DVD in 2001, retains its freshness and impact for today's generation of opera enthusiasts.

_____

Notes

1. According to Peter Davis, "howls of rage greeted Patrice Chéreau's
    production of Wagner's *Ring* at the 1976 Bayreuth Festival" (Davis 1983: 55),
    while Colette Godard describes the events as "polemic on an international
    scale" (Godard 1977: 40).
2. Wagner's influence on nineteenth-century musical culture is impossible to
    overstate and has extended throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries
    into domains ranging from film music (Adorno 2005: 96), to literature and
    philosophy (Magee 2000: 81), and to politics, most notoriously the Third
    Reich (Rose 1992: 9).
3. This was the case in Otto Schenck's production, which debuted at the
    Metropolitan Opera of New York in 1986 with three-dimensional realisations
    of designs by Wagner's original painter, Josef Hoffmann.
4. "Personally, I think Victorian fantasies are going to be the next big thing, as
    long as we can come up with a fitting collective term for Powers, Blaylock
    and myself. Something based on the appropriate technology of the era; like
    'steampunks,' perhaps" (Jeter 1987: 57).
5. This and all subsequent translations from Chéreau and other German language
    sources are my own.
6. I use the terms 'Victorian' and 'neo-Victorian' to describe the spirit of
    contemporary exploration of nineteenth-century European and American
    cultural and social values, broadly speaking.
7. Even musically, this *Ring* production rewrites traditional Wagnerian clichés
    by featuring French modernist composer and conductor Pierre Boulez's style
    of "Mozartean clarity" (Boutwell 1977: 85).
8. A twenty-first-century novel set in Victorian England can be said to be neo-
    Victorian, but it is only steampunk if it includes prominent elements of
    fantasy and technology.
9. Lavie Tidhar describes the underlying theme of steampunk fiction as
    expressing "that moment whereby technology transcends understanding and
    becomes, for all intents and purposes, magical" (Tidhar 2005).
10. One prominent example is the steampunk comic *Girl Genius* (2000-ongoing),
    starring Agatha Clay, a student, mechanic and inventor.
11. Examples include Chris Roberson's *Mirror of Fiery Brightness* (2008), which

_____

takes place in a nineteenth-century Brazil colonised first by the Middle Kingdom (China) and later by Imperial Nippon (Japan).

12. Wagner's choice of a mythological topic directly relates to the interest in Greek culture and folklore in general that swept over Europe in the first decades of the nineteenth century, a movement that brought mythology to the forefront of cultural consciousness. For example, George Eliot describes the revival of interest in Greek mythology as "an introduction for which we are chiefly indebted to the Germans […] a great step in advance of the superficial Lucian-like tone of ridicule adopted by many authors of the eighteenth-century" (qtd. in Kissane 1962: 7). Wagner's selection of Nordic texts is also an explicit response to Herder and Schlegel's call for new national and nationalist mythologies.

13. For a detailed summary of the plot of the *Ring*, please refer to J.K. Holman's guidebook *Wagner's Ring: A Listener's Companion and Concordance* (1996).

14. Barratt notes a number of common elements in the steampunk visual and fictional world, including "exposed gears […] and other apparatus used to enhance human ability" (Barratt 2010: 175).

15. Wotan relinquishes one of his eyes for his spear and his wife, Fricka, thereby achieving leadership of the gods, while the god Donner's hammer, another physical extension, allows him to conjure storms at will. Wotan's daughters, the valkyries, on the other hand, are "women who can only have relationships with men once the men are dead", and Brünnhilde's femininity is only revealed to Siegfried once he removes her magical armoured encasement, at which point she loses her divinity (Schmid 1980: 382).

16. Adorno criticises Wagner's works as "the occultation of production by means of the outward appearance of the product [...] the outside of the worthless commodity, in short, phantasmagoria" (Adorno 2005: 74).

17. Jeffrey Buller discusses five reasons for Wagner's use of *Stabreim* in his libretto: to invoke archaism; to enable flexible, non end-rhymed speech; the musical sound of repeated consonants; his belief that vowels affected emotion while consonants affected the intellect; and the belief that alliteration could mirror the use of motifs in the text (Buller 1995: 60).

18. Paul Lawrence Rose claims that Wagner encoded the Jewishness of the *Ring* villains into musical gestures that would have been recognisable to his contemporaries (see Rose 1992: 70-71).

19. The integrity of Wagner's commitment to Socialist values has been questioned by voices across the political spectrum, ranging from his son-in-

_____

law, National-Socialist sympathiser Houston Stewart Chamberlain (Chamberlain 1900:137), to Theodor Adorno (Adorno 2005: 127).

20. Wells takes his satire of class distinctions to its logical extreme: "above the ground you must have the Haves, pursuing pleasure and comfort and beauty, and below ground the Have-nots, the Workers getting continually adapted to the conditions of their labour" (Wells 2001: 51).

21. This interpretation has a broad consensus: Theodor Adorno claims that "all the rejects of Wagner's works are caricatures of Jews" (Adorno 2005: 13), while Hartmut Zelinsky goes as far as to claim that in all his operas, Wagner's villains represent Jews (see Fest 2000: 36). Marc Weiner sees in Alberich and Mime an expression of the stereotype of the secular, successful Western Jew and the miserable, poor Eastern Jew, respectively (Weiner 1995: 144).

22. In Chéreau's words, "no longer Shaw's Bakoonin [...] he is an immature young man [...] an incomplete person" (Chéreau 1980: 420-421).

23. Adorno includes Wagner's original (and later deleted) stage description of Mime: "small and bent, somewhat deformed and hobbling. His head is abnormally large, his face is a dark ashen colour and wrinkled, his eyes small and piercing, with red rims, his grey beard long and scrubby, his head bald and covered with a red cap" (Adorno 2005: 14).

24. Chéreau states, "I believe, like many others, that Alberich and even more so, Mime, corresponded to Jews in Wagner's imagination" (Chéreau 1980: 434).

25. Chéreau sees the Gods as representing "the bourgeois family, the original clan of the nineteenth-century" (Chéreau 1980: 390).

Bibliography

Adorno, Theodor W. *In Search of Wagner*. London & New York: Verso, 2005.

Barratt, Caroline Cason. 'Time Machines: Steampunk in Contemporary Art', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, Special Issue: *Steampunk, Science, and (Neo)Victorian Technologies*, 3:1 (2010), 167-188.

Boutwell, Jane. 'Chéreau's Ring', *Performing Arts Journal*, 2:1 (1977), 84-90.

Bowser, Rachel A., and Brian Croxall. 'Introduction: Industrial Evolution', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, Special Issue: *Steampunk, Science, and (Neo)Victorian Technologies*, 3:1 (2010), 1-45.

Buller, Jeffrey. 'The Thematic Role of *Stabreim* in Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*', *The Opera Quarterly*, 11:4 (1995), 59-93.

Carnegy, Patrick. *Wagner and the Art of Theatre.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.

Chéreau, Patrice. 'Kommentare zu "Mythologie und Ideologie"', in Herbert Barth

_____

        (ed.), *Bayreuther Dramaturgie: Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Stuttgart &
        Zurich: Belser, 1980, 375-437.
Chamberlain, Houston S. *Richard Wagner*. London & Philadelphia: Dent &
        Lippincott, 1900.
Davis, Peter. 'Ring of Fire', *New York Magazine*, (January 24, 1983), 55-56.
DiGaetani, John L. *Richard Wagner and the Modern British Novel*. London &
        Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1978.
Färber, Uwe. *The Centenary Ring in Bayreuth: A Critical Examination of the
        Tetralogy Which Marked the 100th Anniversary of the Bayreuth Festival*,
        Stewart Spencer (trans). Berlin: Bote und Bock, 1977.
Fest, Joachim. 'Richard Wagner – Das Werk neben dem Werk: Zur ausstehenden
        Wirkungsgeschichte eines Großideologen', in Saul Friedländer and Jörn
        Rüsen (eds.), *Richard Wagner im Dritten Reich: ein Schloss Elmau-
        Symposion*. Munich: Beck, 2000, 24-39.
Godard, Colette, and Michael Nee. 'Patrice Chéreau: "Poets Invent the Future"',
        The Drama Review, 21:2 (1977), 25-44.
Graewell, Harold. 'Germania oder Siegfried?' *Bayreuther Blätter*, 4 (1897), 106-
        111.
Holman, J.K. *Wagner's Ring: a Listener's Companion and Concordance*. Portland,
        Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1996.
Jeter, K.W. 'Letter to the Editors', *Locus Magazine*, No. 315 (1987), 57.
Kaplan, Cora. *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticisms*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh
        University Press, 2007.
Kerman, Joseph. 'How We Got into Analysis', *Critical Inquiry*, 7:2 (1980), 311-
        331.
Kissane, James. 'Victorian Mythology', *Victorian Studies*, 6:1 (1962), 5-28.
Kreuzer, Gundula. 'Wagner-Dampf: Steam in *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and
        Operatic Production', *The Opera Quarterly*, 27:2-3 (2011), pages
        forthcoming.
Magee, Bryan. *Wagner and Philosophy*. London & New York: Penguin, 2000.
Mayer, Gustav. *Friedrich Engels: eine Biographie*. Berlin: Springer, 1920.
Neher, Erick. 'New Productions at the Metropolitan Opera, Fall 2009 Season', *The
        Hudson Review*, 62:4 (2010), 623-630.
Onion, Rebecca. 'Reclaiming the Machine: An Introductory Look at Steampunk in
        Everyday Practice', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1:1 (Autumn 2008), 138-163.
Rose, Paul Lawrence. *Wagner: Race and Revolution*. New Haven: Yale University
        Press, 1992.
Sadoff, Dianne F. and John Kucich. 'Histories of the Present', in John Kucich and

_____

Dianne F. Sadoff (eds.), *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century*. Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, ix-xxx.

Schiff, David. 'We Want Magic: What Makes Opera Magical in the Age of the Movies?', *The Atlantic Monthly*, 284:3 (1999), 92-96.

Schmid, Carlo. 'Mythologie und Ideologie', in Herbert Barth (ed.), *Bayreuther Dramaturgie: Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Stuttgart & Zurich: Belser, 1980, 375-437.

Shaw, George Bernard. *The Perfect Wagnerite: A Commentary on the Niblung's Ring*. London: Constable, 1898.

Tidhar, Lavie. 'Steampunk', *Internet Review of Science Fiction*, 2:1 (2005), accessed 11 June 2011, http://www.irosf.com/q/zine/article/10114.

Wagner, Richard. *Siegfried*. Boston: Charles Ditson and Co., 1880.

—   *Das Rheingold*. Mainz: B. Schott's Söhne, 1883.

Weiner, Marc A. *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination, Texts and Contexts*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995.

Wells, H.G. *The Time Machine: An Invention* [1895], Nicholas Ruddick (ed.). Peterborough, Ontario & Orchard Park, New York: Broadview Press, 2001.