The Influence of Richard Wagner on 20th century Literature

Aesthetic and Poetic Dimensions

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Budapest, 2018
1. **Aims of research**

The topic of my dissertation is supposed to be the rather vaguely defined category of Wagnerian “influence” on 20th century literature. The scholarly reflection on the European culture of the last decades of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century often emphasizes how extremely popular Wagner’s works were in that era.1 Wagnerism was undoubtedly a very strong cultural phenomenon at the time – a clear sign of which were the full house performances of Wagner’s last stage work, *Parsifal* that took place in most major theatres and opera houses around Europe on New Year’s Eve 1913, the first time, the work premiered outside Bayreuth (legally at least, as the Metropolitan opera already performed *Parsifal* in 1903, defying the composer’s will). Although the enthusiasm about the composer’s works and ideas was far from being unanimous, the frequent occurrences of anti-Wagnerian tones also shows his strong presence in the cultural milieu and discourse of the era.

From this one may assume, that Wagnerism could also have an influence not only in music, but in literature as well. Even so because Wagner himself had not restricted his activity exclusively to music, he claimed to restore the original unity of art forms by establishing musical dramatic *Gesamtkunstwerk* as the “artwork of the future”. 2 In this respect, Wagner’s monumental musical-dramatic works could also appear as a challenge for literary authors as well.3 Therefore Wagner’s “influence” on literature should refer to the reactions of the authors to this challenge. Many articles and monographs argue how important a role Wagner played in many author’s ideas about poetry or art in general. Nevertheless Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe points out that the perception of challenge mostly relies on the theoretical problem posed by the idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* as the renovation and consummation of art.4 Therefore the case is not that Wagner’s artistic excellence and “originality” would have caused bloomian anxiety in anyone. Though many important researches have been carried out in this particular field, they

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4 The term *musica ficta* is used by the French scholar not in its sense familiar from medieval music theory, but in its literal, Latin meaning of “imagined music”, suggesting that poets like Mallarmé mostly regarded Wagner as an exteriorization of their own views about art, usually not thinking of his actual musical-dramatic output as a challenge to them.
tell much more about Wagnerism as a cultural phenomenon rather about the actual “influence” of his works.

At the same time, we know for sure that many authors were also well aware of the composer’s works besides referring to ideas attributed to him. Therefore one might raise the question, whether it’s possible to talk about more direct, intermedial connections between Wagner’s works and certain literary texts. Could some poetic phenomena of these literary works be paralleled with some Wagnerian techniques? A considerable amount of scholarly works from the fields of musicology or literary criticism asserts exactly that the answer to this question is positive. On the other hand it is extremely rare, close to nonexistent that this assertion would be confirmed by precisely performed comparative analyses. Especially one Wagnerian term (though invented not by the composer rather by his analysts), *Leitmotif* is claimed as being used in literary texts. One could hardly find an author active in the first half of the 20th century who was never “accused of” using *leitmotifs*. In case of some authors like Thomas Mann, Marcel Proust or James Joyce, assuming that they applied Wagnerian *leitmotifs* in their works even became a sort of a cliché. In spite of all this, in the scholarly works making these assertions it is hardly ever clearly defined what the term *leitmotif* should exactly refer to within literature, not to mention in what respect it is equivalent with the technique analyzed by Wagner scholars. The only scholarly work I know presenting actual comparative analyses (between Wagner’s *Ring* cycle and Thomas Mann’s *Joseph and his brothers*) and thereby arguing how *leitmotif* could function similarly in the media of musical theatre and narrative text is the 2010 book of the German scholar, Dorothea Kirschbaum, *Erzählen nach Wagner*.\(^5\) Similarly to Kirschbaum I am mostly interested in the structural analogies between musical drama and novel. One of the key similarities is undoubtedly that both are essentially storytelling art forms, therefore in my dissertation I attempt to find out, how the Wagnerian *leitmotif* works as a narrative device and whether the narrative strategies represented by the recurring motifs of Mann, Proust or Joyce are based on similar mechanisms indeed.

1. **Structure of the dissertation and the methodology of research**

In search of the parallelisms between Wagner’s work and the analyzed literary texts I concentrated on one particular aspect, the genesis of narrative meaning. In the first major part of my dissertation (Chapter II) I focussed on the storytelling strategies applied by Wagner. First of all I briefly summarized how the term *leitmotif* had appeared in mid-19th century German music criticism and how it became associated particularly with Wagner’s oeuvre, thanks mostly to the analyses and interpretations of the composer’s works by Hans von Wolzogen. Although Wagner himself did not approve the term, it still has become generally used and accepted in Wagner analytics and criticism since Wolzogen, maybe because it synthesizes the whole Wagnerian narrative poetic strategy in one simple term. According to Wagner’s own theory (explicated in *Opera and drama*, a major theoretical work just preceding the final concept of the *Ring* cycle) “melodic moments” (*melodische Momente*) should be attached to the “basic motifs” (*Grundmotive*) of the dramatic action. These musical motifs then could be anchored in the recipients’ memory and therefore become able to evoke or anticipate acts which already occurred in the past or only yet to be realized in the future. That is to say, musical themes become capable of representing actions, objects, personae or relations *in their absence*. They can refer to things which do not appear on stage at the given moment.

For my argumentation this has two major consequences. Firstly, that the Wagnerian *leitmotifs* should be regarded as *signs* in a semiotic sense, for they have a representative capacity or they *stand for* something else, which equals the definition of *sign* similar in virtually every major school of semiotics. And secondly, that the orchestra (to some extent at least according to the composer’s own theory as well) functions as some kind of a narrative voice, because it is able to comment on the action represented on stage. It is also capable of explaining reasons and motivations, revealing hidden relations, and referring back to events of the past or forward to the dramatic future. So besides that providing extra information it is also capable of distinguishing between the two temporal aspects of storytelling, namely the *time of story* (*erzählte Zeit, temps de l’histoire*) and the *time of narration* (*Erzählzeit, temps du récit*).⁶ Therefore I must agree with Dorothea Kirschbaum, who argues that from a

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narratological perspective, the orchestra by Wagner serves as an equivalent of an omniscient, heterodiegetic narrator. I also have to mention that Thomas Mann already treated Wagner as an epic author and saw his musical drama as a forerunner of the modern novel.

So the examination of the possible functional analogies between the recurring motifs by Wagner and by the supposedly “Wagnerian” 20th century novelists must be based on the concepts of narrative semiotics. In the major analytic parts of my dissertation I attempted to describe Wagnerian leitmotif in narrative semiotic terms and then investigate, whether the narrative strategies of Mann, Proust or Joyce could be described similarly from the same perspective.

However one can only speak about signs if one takes their interpretation into consideration as well. Nevertheless, in case of such monumental and complex artistic creations such as Wagner’s works or the novels of the above mentioned authors, the number of possible readings could be virtually infinite. So I have to find a common basis, something functionally identical in all possible interpretations to successfully describe the operation of leitmotifs as narrative signs. In my opinion this common ground is that both Wagner’s musical dramas and the analyzed novels (and virtually every narrative creation) are inviting their recipients to perform a series of interpretive actions. Of course, the outcomes of these actions can be fundamentally different, but the functional process is still structurally similar – the actual “routes” will differ, but they all are results of decisions or choices made at similar “intersections”. This function relying within the signs themselves could be called interpretant after the American semiotician, Charles Sanders Peirce. According to Peirce’s theory, three different types of interpretants can be distinguished – the immediate interpretant, represented in the physical, empirical form of the signs themselves; the dynamical interpretant, which can be defined as the sign’s actual effect on the interpreting mind; and the final or ultimate interpretant, which comes into being as the “purpose” of the whole process of signification. Unfortunately, however, the American scholar, despite the nearly unparalleled diversity of his academic activity, never theorized about narration. His thoughts, though can be applied quite well to this field as well, since his three interpretive functions can be perfectly matched with the three levels of narrative meaning construction, described by the Lithuanian-French

7 KIRSCHBAUM, 71.
10 Ibid. 498.
schor, A. J. Greimas. These levels are the structures of *manifestation*, which represents the organization of *signifiers* into a narrative text; the *surface structures*, on which *narrative grammar* emerges; and finally *deep structure*, which serves as a basis for the conditions of existence and for the logical status of the fundamental elements of *narrative meaning*.\(^{11}\) As a first step I examined how Wagnerian *leitmotifs* construct these structures, and then accordingly tried to find out whether the construction of narrative meaning in the texts of Mann, Proust and Joyce operates in the same way.

2. Results and conclusions

This twofold analysis resulted in the realisation that Wagner’s narrative technique can be paralleled with the analyzed novels indeed, since a very similar process occurs in all of these cases. At first, certain motifs become marked (*level of manifestation*), i.e. certain units are presented as characteristic, allowing the recipient to recognize them by their following occurrences. The recurring of these motifs then organizes certain actions or relations into paradigmatic sets (*surface*), and these are defining the context in which the predicates of the text/work could be interpreted as *narrative utterances*.\(^{12}\)

Taking the *renunciation* (*Entsagung*) motif from Wagner as an example, it reveals a common semantic core behind different actions performed by different actors (Alberich, Siegmund and Wotan) in different dramatic contexts, according to which the given figures get into some kind of *junction* with something. In *The Buddenbrooks* bourgeois virtues and their counterpart, *frivolity* (*Leichtfertigkeit*) play the same role, in *The Magic Mountain* the problems of “time” or “death” are presented as paradigmatic among many others, in *Joseph and his brothers* the motif of the “pit” (*Grube*) functions similarly, by Proust the “sides” (*côtés*) seem forming such a semantic constant, by Joyce it could be the question of loyalty or infidelity.

Wagnerian *leitmotifs*, however, go another step further, forming an even more complex semantic system. Taking their similarities and contrasts into account, one can

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\(^{12}\) In Greimas’ theory *narrative utterances* always represent a *junction* between two *actants*. See *On Meaning*, 76 and 82.
reconstruct a whole coherent network of meaning. For instance in Ring, the motifs of “Spear” (Speer) and “Sword” (Schwert) and other musical materials related to them form a coherent meaningful structure behind the entire cycle in terms of freedom vs. boundedness, power vs. love or nature vs. civilization. The recurring motifs also create similar semantic structures in the analyzed novels as well. In Buddenbrooks the bourgeois, the businessman appear on the on hand, and the artist on the other as archetypal figures, in The magic mountain the main semantic categories behind the whole story could be the systems of oppositions including above and below, health and disease, life and death, circular or linear progression of time and so forth. In Joseph the reader may find out that the motifs of the “pit” and “death” are closely related to the themes of “fratricide”, “sacrifice” and “deception” among many others – at the end of the novel cycle however we also come to know that the heroes, especially Jacob, mostly misinterpreted all the signs. The “mythic associations” – which operate exactly the same way as the Wagnerian leitmotifs – often lead the characters astray, and in fact everything happens differently and for a different reason as in former occasions. Thereby Mann – who admittedly wanted to re-function myth using irony – conquers the peak of irony in terms of narrative poetics as well, as he uses leitmotif – a technique originated in mythopoetics – to deconstruct myth and leitmotif.

In Proust’s cycle the Narrator also faces a challenge of interpretation and understanding, and in the very last episode (the Guermantes-matinee) he has to realize that the relations he formerly conceived as meaningful (the sides), are irrelevant, and that the “gladsome moments” of his life could be relived through involuntary memory. In other words he has to go along the same way as the interpreter of Wagnerian leitmotifs, and he becomes able to create anything meaningful only after revealing the complete meaning in his own life. In Ulysses, the frequent re-appearances of certain “word-motifs” (see Curtius) provide the context for the roles of the characters designated by the intertextual antetypes. These motifs help the reader find out whether the roles of Ulysses or Don Giovanni/Masetto would eventually fit to Bloom, Penelope or Zerlina to Molly, or Telemachus or Hamlet to Stephen etc. This adequacy or non-compliance of certain characters to certain roles, and the series of events in the novel as a whole to certain pre-texts surely represents a kind of meaning. Also the motif of “flower” (appearing already in the name of the main character, Bloom) is attached to the topics of “love”, “loyalty”, “death” and “faith/religion”. At the very end it also

13 MANN, Thomas, KERÉNYI, Karl, Gespräch in Briefen, Zürich, Rhein-Verlag, 1960. 100.
see also HAMBURGER, Käte, Thomas Manns biblisches Werk, München, Nymphenburger, 1981. 27 and 123.
seems as it would have represented the connection between Leopold and Molly Bloom all along.

However, the fact that the recurring motifs play an important part in the construction of these meaningful structures would not prove any kind of direct connection between Wagner and the analyzed novels. For one might convincingly argue that these layers could be identified in every narrative text or work. In my opinion though, the special feature in Wagnerian and also in literary leitmotif is that it also reflects upon the process of narrative meaning creation. The recurring musical motifs in Wagner’s scores literally split the understanding of the complex structure described above into successive phases. One may experience the emergence of markedness of certain musical material, the first level of paradigmatization through the perception of recurrences and finally the conglomereration of a global meaning through the identification and systematization of relations between the motifs (second level of paradigmatization) as steps of a process following one another in a linear temporal order. In case of the analyzed novels, the recurring motifs also have a strong, self-reflective capacity. In Buddenbrooks, the leitmotifs raise the question of the narratability of either change or permanence. In The magic mountain, the problem of time-handling (in life and in narration) appears also on a metapoetic level. In Joseph, the motifs seem to be ironically showing that the basis of recurrence is not actually permanence and immutability, rather change and variation. By Proust, the Narrator seems having been constructed as a textual mirror image of both the author and of the reader. The Narrator therefore becomes a reader and a writer at the same time by understanding the true meaning behind the recurrences. In Joyce’s Ulysses, the motifs constantly refer to the intertextual predecessors of the heroes, thereby forcing the reader to reflect upon his/her expectations evolving according to the pre-texts.

Leitmotifs therefore never merely create narrative meaning, but also reveal the process of its genesis every time. I hope my analyses successfully show that it also holds true for Wagner’s works and for the analyzed novels as well. Of course it cannot be asserted with all certainty that the authors actually were actually thinking about Wagner by developing their narrative strategies, but at least a coherent narrative line can be drawn between the German composer’s and their storytelling technique. What else could we call “influence” eventually?
3. Publications of the author relevant to the dissertation topic

Papers in conference proceedings and in periodicals

„Néhány gondolat a 20. századi Wagner-rendezések politikai vonatkozásairól.”

„Az elbeszélés redundanciája mint identitásképző erő – avagy a narratív szituációk modellálásának értelméről Thomas Mann József és testvérei c. regényében.”


„Végtelen dallam az operában és a regényben - Wagner és Proust zenei prózája”


Conference presentations

*Intermediality a storytelling and representation – Leitmotiv as a device for integrating media in wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk.*


*Endless Melody in Opera and Novel. The Musical Prose of Wagner and Proust.*

Emerging Paradigms: New Methodologies in Word and Music Studies.

*The Gesamtkunstwerk and the Zeitroman - Mediation and semiotization of time by Richard Wagner and by some 20th century novelists.*

ICMS 13. International Congress on Musical Signification, Canterbury Christ Church University, University of London. 2016. 04. 4-7.


Young Musicology Prague, Department of Music History, Institute of Ethnology, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, 2016. 09. 5-8.