

## FILMING THE 'RING'

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One of the benefits of the opera boom in recent years has been the opportunity to see opera on television, whether in televised versions of performances in the opera house, or in made-for-tv versions, or even through opera videos, now widely available. Although right from the beginning of cinema film-makers have been aware of what the medium can do to open up the action of a stage drama, it is only comparatively recently that they have begun to direct their attention to taking opera out of its box, so to speak – one thinks of Joseph Losey's *Don Giovanni* and Carlos Saura's *Carmen*, for example. Yet I am surprised that there have not been more filmed operas and, while we have had Hans-Jurgen Syberberg's quirky *Parsifal*, I am even more surprised that no-one has embarked on what would be the most exciting opera of all to film – Wagner's *Ring*.

The *Ring* comes to us now filtered not only through the musical interpretations of the great conductors and singers, but also through the minds of stage producers. We are conscious with this work, as with no other opera, of a century of stage interpretation, and that awareness has been opened up dramatically with the way television makes it possible for thousands of people to experience a staged *Ring* who would never get the chance to go to Bayreuth, or to hear Wagner at (say) Covent Garden. In the past decade television viewers have had no less than three productions to feast their eyes upon – Patrice Chéreau's Bayreuth production from the late 70s, Götz Friedrich's production a decade later, and Otto Schenk's version from New York. Indeed, because it is one of the *Ring*'s glories that it unifies musical and dramatic thought so spectacularly, Wagner aficionados have become as much interested in how the producer interprets the music drama as in the musical performance itself.

Purists will complain that Wagner wrote for the stage and to film the *Ring* would be an error of artistic judgement on a massive scale. The opposite is surely the case. I think that Wagner, with his theories about the 'total art work', would have been mightily interested in the cinema. If it had been available to him, might we have seen at Bayreuth not just an opera-house but an opera-cinema as well with a specially-made wraparound screen in which the audience would be enveloped in the action?

This is fruitless speculation. What is more talk of a panavision-technirama approach runs the risk of overlooking the paradoxical essence of the *Ring*. This work on a colossal scale is really an intense chamber drama, and to film it should mean that to copy the epic spread of a *Lawrence of Arabia* should be done with care. The temptation may be to give the *Ring* a cast of thousands but this should be resisted. Hunding and Hagen do not need armies at their back – a few attendant lords do nicely. Rather the *Ring* needs the intimacy of a Bergman film. Indeed in Friedrich's production of 'Die Walküre' Act I, which echoes Strindbergian drama, the harrowed Sieglinde in her stiff buttoned-up dress recalls no-one so much as Ingrid Thulin in Bergman's *Cries and Whispers*. With this intimacy Wagner has combined to an extraordinary degree a contrast between stasis and action. The long extended segments of speech seem at first to call for a minimalist approach: duration becomes the *raison d'être* of the art work. On these lines I once had the idea of making *Tristan* on standard 8mm, the home-movie gauge: intriguing to contemplate, boring to execute, an idea best left on the drawing-board. While minimalism for the *Ring* would be appropriate for much of the *sprachgesang*, a significant virtue of filming it would be the scope for a maximalist approach, that is to say one that capitalizes on the scenic possibilities of the grander moments: Wotan and Loge descending to Nibelheim, Hunding and Siegmund in battle in the forest, Siegfried breaking through the ring of fire to find Brunnhilde, the destruction of the world at the end of 'Götterdämmerung' – a scene which might be as challenging to do on film as it is on stage. More admirably than any stage production, film could convey the contrast between the intensity of the personal encounters and the grandeur of the orchestral interludes.

One merit of filming the *Ring* is that it takes the stage naturalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century productions to their logical conclusion. If you are going to put Siegfried in a pine forest, why not do it properly, setting him against huge pines with the early sun filtering through the branches? Here it has to be said that the world of the *Ring* has already attracted one notable film-maker: in 1925 Fritz Lang directed a silent version of the Siegfried story. UFA, the German studio, clearly saw the story's visual potential, although Wagner is merely a starting-point as the film's plot, drawing on Germanic legend, develops in a very different way from the opera. However they ignored the spectacular potential of outdoor filming and instead, in line with

Expressionist practice, shot the whole thing in the studio, artificial Black Forest and all, even though the real thing was just down the road. The UFA version does something else as well – it cautions us against the whole enterprise. When I saw it in a film society showing in the 1960s, it occasioned considerable mirth at its supposedly dramatic moments. The dragon slain by Siegfried remained resolutely unafrightening, wooden and risible.

However we need not despair. Film technology has moved on since the 1920s, no aspect more so than that of special effects. Thinking of *Star Wars* and its myriad offspring I conclude that there is no technical challenge in the *Ring* that a little Industrial Light and Magic could not put right. Dwarves into dragons and toads? Easy. A sword shattering to pieces? It'll be seen to right away. The Rhine overflowing its banks and extinguishing a flaming Valhalla? With the right sort of notice, no problem.

Yet special effects need to be kept in their place. Fortunately in the 16 hours of screen time that the *Ring* would take, the need for these tricks is only brief and occasional. They are a contributor but not the main source of visual splendour which would derive from the scenic possibilities of forest and mountain. If wanted you could follow the example of stage producers and take liberties with the stage directions – put Siegfried's childhood with Mime in the desert, for example, as a means of changing the scenery – but this is not necessary and in any case it would be better to maintain unity of place. As an inspiration of how to realize the scenic potential, I thought at first of Anthony Mann's westerns and Kurosawa's samurai films, especially *Kagemusha* and *Ran*. Better still are the films of the Georgian director, Sergei Paradzhanov, whose remarkable *Shadows of our forgotten ancestors* and *Legend of the Suram Fortress*, set respectively in the Ukrainian Carpathians and in Georgia, use spectacular scenery in remote locations to transform folk-tales into visual poems. There is a stunning sequence in *Shadows of our forgotten ancestors* in which a tree spontaneously bursts into flame, providing some clue as to how Wotan might set about surrounding Brunnhilde with a circle of fire. Indeed, in thinking how to film the *Ring* Russian film-makers come particularly to mind. The continuous camera movements beloved of Andrei Tarkovsky would naturally echo the arching structures of Wagner's music. Dziga Vertov's free use in *Man with a movie camera* of superimposition, which is still an unexplored film

technique, and Eisenstein's use of montage in his early films point a way to coping with Wagner's leitmotifs.

Particular decisions would have to be made about how to handle these. Putting aside the question of whether one should attempt at all to convey the motifs visually as well as in the music, which I shall come back to at the end, there are various ways in which their rendering should be approached. The motif of the ring is comparatively simple: I think a huge circular ring of gold superimposed on the action, faded in and out, would be impressive. The curse motif can be conveyed by referring visually to Alberich's action in cursing the ring. This recalling and foreshadowing of persons and events in the opera brings to mind Alain Resnais' two early features, *Last Year at Marienbad* and *Muriel*, in which he rigorously 'mixed his tenses' on film so that the viewer found past events were continually being part of the present. Wagner's musical motifs have, among other things, a similar function: they bind the drama together, bestowing an inevitability on it, determining in the listener's mind what will happen. In the same way images can therefore recall past actions and indicate what is to come.

This is all very well for the motifs which lend themselves to concrete imagery. How is something like 'fate' or 'destiny' to be shown? There are several choices: might one be a symbolic image of some kind (such as a Tennysonian image of a ship in the evening ocean drifting out of the viewer's sight) or, if this is felt to be too literal, an abstract image, say of lines converging on a point (I am thinking of the stargate corridor in Kubrick's *2001*), or even just a flooding of the screen at the appropriate moment with a particular colour so that it glows briefly in a single hue then reverts to normal.

A final point about the motifs is that, as in the music, they need to be integrated into the flow of images. While there will be need on occasion for conventional cutting from one image to another, the bulk of the transmissions should be done in a way that flows with the music. I therefore see fades being used a great deal. For certain things the irrising-in of scenes – for example when Siegmund is telling his story to Sieglinde and Hunding – would be an effective way of introducing sequences of action. In general, the camera should weave and circle through the scenes, not frenetically but in a measured, sustained manner. In scenes where characters slug it out verbally – e.g. Wotan and Fricka in 'Die Walküre' – the American two-shot, cutting back and forth between the

protagonists, would be an appropriate way of conveying tension, but in the scene immediately following, after Fricka has gone and Brunnhilde has entered, Wotan's 'Götternot!' is better conveyed by the camera tracking in and panning to Brunnhilde than in a cut back and forth between the two.

Another matter on which difficult decisions need to be made is the acting style. Realism seems to me out of the question. A grand manner would be required, in fact something on the lines of acting in the silent era with exaggerated gesture and intensity of facial expression – we come back to Lang's Expressionism and the decelerated quality of Cherkassov in Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible*, which incidentally is a blueprint for any film of Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* that ever gets made. There is Abel Gance's *Napoleon* where spectacular filmic excitement combined with theatricality of performance, all in an epic context, not to mention three screens for the climax, give us the 'total art work'.

The acting style of Cherkassov as Ivan or Dieudonné as Napoleon capitalizes on the use of close-up and, unlike a stage production where there is always a distance between performer and audience, filmed close-ups could further intensify our involvement with the story. And just as a film of the Ring would combine scenic intimacy and spaciousness, so some of the time actors would match their voices with the singing on the soundtrack and some of the time completely break free from the constraints of synchronized sound. Most notably this would occur with what might be called the voice-over sequences such as Loge in 'Rheingold' telling the other gods of his travels or Siegfried recapitulating his life story to Hagen in 'Götterdämmerung' Act 3. Here portrayal of the action could revert to a style in which the actors tell the story in visual terms as they did before the advent of sound in the cinema.

I find it easy to get carried away by the prospect of a filmed *Ring*, not because I am eager to see Arnold Schwarzenegger play Siegfried, but because it is on film that the imagination that Wagner's story demands could be realized. It is surely only in a filmed version that the Rhinemaidens could be made convincing. What more exciting opening sequence than to echo the swelling E major on the soundtrack with a morning mist clearing to reveal a mighty river and the camera then descending beneath the waves to

find three mermaids swimming round their pile of gold? Underwater photography, as Jean Vigo knew so well, has its own special poetry.

Yet there is one pitfall I have kept till last. Film can be a very literal medium and with a work like the *Ring*, in which the dramatic staples of sex and violence are rampant, the temptation is to show everything. I am enthused at the prospect of the fight between Hunding and Siegmund being done properly, with its full measure of violent hatred. Less palatable is the thought of having to watch Siegmund and Sieglinde copulating in a woodland grove. Wagner's eroticism derives its deep power from desire repressed or being only consummated off stage: to show his lovers at work, so to speak, could completely undermine this.

Yet film does not have to be literal. There are no problems here that sensitivity to Wagner's intentions and to the language of film could not resolve. There is perhaps a deeper difficulty with literalness which hampers the enterprise – but then it hampers all stage productions too, not just a filmed one. Wagner's music is so all-encompassing that to locate it in time and space inevitably is to diminish it. Thus Wieland Wagner's abstract set design stressing the universality of the drama was good for a while but it made us impatient for something different. Along comes a socio-political interpretation of the *Ring* – hence the impact of Patrice Chéreau's production in the late 1970s. But we soon get irritated by the limitations of that approach. When the New York Met goes back to early Bayreuth naturalism, we are intrigued to see the result but are somehow disappointed. Is it the case even that stage production is only a setting for the music, which contains all we need to know, and is therefore unimportant? In fact have we become besotted with interpretation? If that is true, to film the *Ring* only makes matters worse: in our endeavour to realize the fullest interpretation we run the risk of overwhelming the music with spectacle.

Yet Wagner himself wanted his drama to be seen as much as heard. He strove for a balance between music and spectacle that respected the music as starting-point and end-point, but did not shy away from providing a visual experience. The resources of film-making should be put at the disposal of extending interpretation of this great work. It could open up the action and intensify the drama; the scope for visual splendour is enormous. It is true that the one thing Wagner made no attempt to do was to match

visually the telling of the story through the musical motifs, yet even the making of images in this way could illuminate the drama, especially for the musically illiterate and for Wagner virgins.

The endeavour by the New York Met production to emulate the naturalistic approach of early Bayreuth productions leads me to think that now is just the right time for a filmed version that would realize this approach more completely than could ever be done on stage. So, since epic film-making of this kind has always resembled a circus, who will step forward as 'ringmaster'? And, what is more, since this will be a costly enterprise, who fancies playing the role of King Ludwig?

### **Afterthought (2007)**

Since I wrote the above in 1993 we have had a striking production of *Lord of the Rings*, some of the digital techniques from which could serve a film interpretation of the *Ring*. Secondly, in October of this year I saw the Glyndebourne production of *Tristan* (a wonderful Nina Stemme as Isolde), not at Glyndebourne itself, nor on its tour through Norwich, but on the big screen at Riverside in Norwich. It turned out to be a stupendous experience, bringing a new appreciation of the power of music-drama: the music heard in a large surround-sound space was all-enveloping and the vehemence of seeing the singers in huge close-up brought you right up against the drama.