

Circling Opera in Berlin

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Chapter I: Introduction – Opera and Aura

*Benjamin's pronouncement about the decline of aura pertains more exactly to opera than to almost any other form. Music in which the dramatic proceedings are a priori doused in atmosphere and exalted is aura pure and simple.*¹

– Theodor Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*

On a typical night at the opera, the musico-dramatic synthesis that takes place on stage is “doused in atmosphere,” as Adorno puts it, but the proceedings off-stage are no less extravagant. A bejeweled crowd congregates in front of a stately façade, and inside, marble tiles and mirrors intensify the white light that emanates from the innumerable chandeliers. The auditorium itself is upholstered in velvet, and the crowd behaves in accordance with an implicit sense of ceremony. A gilded aura permeates the entire affair.

My dissertation is a study of this lavish tradition as it persists in contemporary Berlin. I focus on extra-musical context, with chapters on opera house architecture, the politics of public subsidies, the experience of being in the audience, and the currency of a good scandal. I hope to show how these contextual constraints help shape opera into a meaningful field of experience.

This mosaic of operatic affairs doubles as a critique of the doctrine of aesthetic autonomy. The notion of aesthetic autonomy first emerges in European thought in the late 18th century, when aestheticians begin to regard works of art as inviolable objects that serve no secondary purpose.² In the burgeoning market economy, these functionless

¹ “Benjamins Wort vom Verfall der Aura trifft die Oper genauer als fast jede andere Form. Musik, welche a priori dramatische Vorgänge in Atmosphäre taucht und überhöht, ist Aura schlechthin.” Theodor Adorno, *Einleitung in die Musiksoziologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), 261.

² On the ideological genesis of aesthetic autonomy, see Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990), 1–30; Carl Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*, translated by Roger Lustig (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 1–17; Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, translated by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 35–54; and Martha

vessels of beauty come to exemplify the inverted logic of commodity fetishism, in which exchange-value eclipses use-value. As members of the bourgeois public begin to pay for access to museums and concert halls, they learn to value individual works of art as objective distillations of the autonomy that they crave in their own lives.³

The value of any commodity is contingent on its outward appearance and the context of its presentation. When the use-value of a commodity is vague—as in a work of art—the object in question is even more likely to rely on atmospheric charm. As Schopenhauer observes in the early 19th century, this axiom extends all the way into the presentation of self: “Like cheap commodities, the lives of men are shellacked in a deceptive shimmer.”⁴ By examining the context in which operatic works take place, I hope to show how the notion of aesthetic autonomy prolongs its outmoded existence by ensconcing itself in a luxuriant aura.

The doctrine of aesthetic autonomy is, in many ways, a naïve ideology, but it continues to regulate experience in the world of opera.⁵ This ideological commitment manifests itself in every facet of operatic culture. In each of the following chapters, I examine a different aspect of opera in Berlin, and in each case, contextual details reveal themselves to be instrumental variables in the elaborate operatic superstructure and its associated belief system. Though incomplete by any measure, this portrait of operatic affairs will extend the conventional parameters of opera studies into a web of extra-

Woodmansee, *The Author, Art, and the Market: Rereading the History of Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

³ For an exposition of the presumed correspondence between freedom in art and freedom in life, see Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, translated by Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967).

⁴ “Freilich ist am Menschenleben, wie an jeder schlechten Waare, die Außenseite mit falschen Schimmer überzogen.” Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (Leipzig: Brodhaus, 1879), 383-4.

⁵ On the emergence and persistence of the work of art concept in Western music culture, see Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

musical constraints that quietly reinforce both the integrity of the cultural field and the illusion of aesthetic autonomy.

§

Berlin has 3.4 million residents. In the year that I lived in Berlin, the citizenry spent over € 100 million in public subsidies to support 465 operatic performances.⁶ These performances took place across three opera houses: the Deutsche Oper, the Komische Oper and the Staatsoper Unter den Linden. Each company rotates through its own repertoire from September through June.⁷ In 2004, the three companies, formerly independent of each other, were brought under one administrative directorate, the *Stiftung Oper in Berlin* [Opera Foundation of Berlin]. That same year, the affiliated ballet companies and production workshops were merged.

The Deutsche Oper is located in the western neighborhood of Charlottenburg. The opera house has its own U-Bahn station, the walls of which are decorated with opera-themed mosaics. The theater itself, designed by Fritz Bornemann in the early 1960s, is assertively modern, with good acoustics and sightlines and all the charm of a convention center. The wedge-shaped auditorium has a seating capacity of 1,865, making it the largest of the three. The year that I arrived, the Deutsche Oper received € 38 million in public subsidies.⁸

⁶ Stiftung Oper in Berlin, “Zahlen und Fakten der Spielzeit 2005/06,” www.oper-in-berlin.de/info/zahlenfakten.php3?id_language=1 (accessed February, 2006).

⁷ The repertory system, in which an opera company rotates through different productions night-after-night, contrasts with the *stagione* system, popular in the United States, in which an opera company focuses its energy on producing one opera at a time.

⁸ Stiftung Oper in Berlin, “Zahlen und Fakten der Spielzeit 2005/06,” www.oper-in-berlin.de/info/zahlenfakten.php3?id_language=1 (accessed February, 2006).

The Komische Oper backs up against Unter den Linden, the central boulevard of the former East Berlin. The theater, dating from the 1890s, had been an operetta venue before being damaged by Allied bombings in 1944 and 1945.⁹ In 1947, the house reopened with a new name—the Komische Oper, after the French *opéra comique*—under the leadership of Walter Felsenstein, an Austrian theater director. Felsenstein shaped the opera company into a unique establishment, where opera and operetta were performed, always in German, with intense theatricality. The Komische Oper became a staging ground and laboratory for unconventional production values, and so it remains today. The auditorium is the smallest of the three (seating 1,270) and the company receives the smallest portion of public subsidies (just below € 30 million).¹⁰

The Staatsoper Unter den Linden, which lies a few long blocks to the east of the Komische Oper, first opened in 1742 at the behest of Frederick the Great.¹¹ It has been rebuilt three times, most recently reopening in 1955. Designed by Georg Wenzeslaus von Knobelsdorff, the Staatsoper has a stately outward appearance and an austere, semi-elliptical auditorium that seats 1,396. Under the baton of Daniel Barenboim since 1992, the Staatsoper receives a subsidy on a par with the Deutsche Oper (about € 38 million).¹² The opera house will be closing for extensive renovations in 2010, with plans to reopen in 2012.

⁹ Built by Ferdinand Fellner and Hermann Helmer, the theater was originally known as the Theater Unter den Linden. The name was changed to the Metropol-Theater in 1898, then nationalized and renamed the Staatliches Operettentheater in 1934.

¹⁰ Stiftung Oper in Berlin, “Zahlen und Fakten der Spielzeit 2005/06,” www.oper-in-berlin.de/info/zahlenfakten.php3?id_language=1 (accessed February, 2006).

¹¹ From 1742 until 1918, this house and company were known as the Königlichen Hofoper [Royal Court Opera]. Thereafter, it came to be known as the Staatsoper Unter den Linden (or, more simply, as the Staatsoper). Throughout its history, the house has also been referred to as the Lindenoper. For the sake of clarity, I refer to the building and the company as the Staatsoper Unter den Linden.

¹² Stiftung Oper in Berlin, “Zahlen und Fakten der Spielzeit 2005/06,” www.oper-in-berlin.de/info/zahlenfakten.php3?id_language=1 (accessed February, 2006).

Berlin is also home to the Neuköllner Oper, a small company known for provocative productions. Beyond opera, the city supports 8 professional orchestras, 50 theaters, and 120 museums.¹³ Every February, Berlin hosts the largest film festival in the world (*Berlinale*), and in May, a major theater festival (*Theatertreffen*). In 2006, the year that I lived in Berlin, the city also hosted the World Cup.

§

My own interest in the Berlin opera scene began in June of 2003. At the time, I had vague plans to write my dissertation about music in Romania. I stopped in Berlin on my way further east, with the sole intention of reviving my very basic knowledge of German. I attended a performance of Ligeti's *Le Grand Macabre* at the Komische Oper, and I found myself awestruck by the wild production values. Barrie Kosky's memorable staging featured a pile of naked corpses and an enormous supernumerary wearing nothing but a dunce cap. The outrageous visuals were, for me—a native New Yorker accustomed to the inert production values of the Metropolitan Opera—both captivating and bewildering.

I returned to Berlin the following summer. Within the first week of my visit, I saw Achim Freyer's production of *Salome* at the Deutsche Oper, in which every character was dressed like a clown, and at the Staatsoper, a staging of *The Magic Flute* that ended with reconciliation between Sarastro and the Queen of Night. The interpretive license exhibited in these productions stoked my interest in the Berlin opera scene, but the summer season's *pièce de résistance* arrived the following week: the premiere of Calixto

¹³ Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg, *Die kleine Berlin-Statistik 2007* (Berlin: H&P-Druck, 2007), 18.

Bieito's production of *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* at the Komische Oper. I could never have anticipated the seething despair that played out on stage. The opera was set in an ultraviolent, contemporary brothel. Bieito's interpretation, which included rape and mutilation, was shocking, and, to my mind, sort of persuasive. Nevertheless, the activity on stage was ultimately less intriguing to me than the community that congregated to soak up the scandalous spectacle.

After an emphatic applause, the audience rose to its feet, twisting and stretching after two hours of inactivity (there had been no intermission). The nervous atmosphere evaporated quickly, and the audience filed into the aisles and out of the auditorium. I moved with the crowd, and made my way out to the street. As I walked back to Friedrichstasse, I wondered how I might ever make sense of this peculiar variety of operatic experience.

§

With a new dissertation topic in mind, I returned to Berlin in the summer of 2005. With the support of the DAAD (*Deutsche Akademische Austausch Dienst*) and visiting scholar status at Humboldt University, I began a year of ethnographic fieldwork. In spite of the specificities laid out in my grant application, my research was initially no more specific than “opera in Berlin.”

My fieldwork began with days in the library and evenings at the opera. I read about the history of opera in Berlin, and I also paid attention to the ways in which opera infiltrated the non-operatic world: on U-Bahn station posters, in guidebooks for tourists,

and in *Tipp* and *Zitty*.¹⁴ When I went to performances, I struck up conversations with fellow members of the audience. I watched the behavior of the crowd as closely as I watched the activities on stage. Before bed, I recorded the day's observations on my newly inherited Sony Vaio laptop.

In March, I stole my way into a position better suited to ethnographic fieldwork: an apprenticeship in dramaturgy at the Staatsoper. I worked at the opera house full-time, devoting most of my energy to translation projects and research that would inform future productions. The job itself was illuminating, but more importantly, I was well positioned to carry out my own research. Members of the administration were happy to help me with my strange requests: to provide me with outdated press packets and audience surveys, to answer my questions on tape. I was given free access to performances, rehearsals, and the company's archives. At home, I continued to write up my fieldnotes, which became more consistently interesting.

While working at the Staatsoper, I frequently spoke with the chief dramaturg about (what I perceived to be) the peculiarities of opera in Berlin. He repeatedly referred me to an essay by Pierre Bourdieu (this dramaturg had been a sociologist). More specifically, he referred me to a footnote in which Bourdieu articulates a model for analyzing aesthetic reception in a differentiated society:

The laws governing the reception of works of art are a special case of the laws of cultural diffusion: whatever may be the nature of the message – religious prophecy, political speech, publicity image, technical object – reception depends on the categories of perception, thought and action of those who receive it. In a differentiated society, a close relationship is therefore established between the nature and quality of the information transmitted and the structure of the public, its 'readability' and its effectiveness being all the greater when it meets directly as possible the expectations, implicit or explicit, which the receivers owe chiefly to their

¹⁴ *Tipp* and *Zitty* are popular biweekly magazines that chronicle happenings in Berlin.

family upbringing and social circumstances (and also, in the matter of scholarly culture at least, to their school education) and which the diffuse pressure of the reference group maintains, sustains and reinforces by constant recourse to the norm.¹⁵

In this passage, Bourdieu identifies the mutually dependent relationship between the meaning of a given work of art and the expectations of the audience.¹⁶ This relationship is strangely configured in Berlin, where the opera-going public seems to enjoy having their expectations vexed. With this contradiction in mind, I began to focus my observations on how particular aspects of operatic experience relate to implicit and explicit expectations.

I continued to work at the Staatsoper into early July, the end of the opera season. For the month of June, the opera company was, with the rest of Germany, swept up in the World Cup. Plans for a soccer opera—with music by Herbert Grönemeyer and stage direction by Robert Wilson—fell through, but the company turned its attention toward the tournament all the same. The stage crew and chorus crowded around televisions in the *Kantine*—the company’s dining hall—during intermissions. I tried to follow that tournament as closely as possible, but I finished dead last in the opera company’s betting pool (having overestimated the potential of the United States).

All told, I attended more than thirty performances and a number of rehearsals and special events at the Staatsoper.¹⁷ I also saw nine performances at the Deutsche Oper, ten at the Komische Oper, and three at the Neuköllner Oper. And in an effort to view the

¹⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, “Outline of a sociological Theory of Art Perception” in *The Field of Cultural Production*, translated and edited by Randall Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 295-6.

¹⁶ Bourdieu’s model resonates with a pithier formulation by Constantine Constantius, the fictitious visitor to 1840s Berlin in Søren Kierkegaard’s *Repetition*: “A proper theater public...wishes, as soon as it has read the poster, to be able to know in advance what is going to happen that evening.” See Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, translated by Howard H. Hong and Edna V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 159-160.

¹⁷ See the appendix for a full list of the operas that I attended in Berlin.

Berlin opera scene within a wider European context, I attended opera productions in Dresden, Stuttgart, Bayreuth, Salzburg, Bad Wildbad, Prague, Budapest, Verona, London, and Paris.

Parenthetically, by the end of my time in Europe, I had come to know the Staatsoper Unter den Linden especially well, and as a result, I focus on this one company in the pages to come. I do discuss other opera companies, in Berlin and elsewhere, but my dissertation is meant to be a case study of a particular company. I do, however, make claims—about the behavior of an opera audience, or the effects of cultural subsidies, for example—that seem (to me) to be relatively consistent with operatic culture the world over.

I flew back to the United States in August of 2006. After several false starts and reformulations, my dissertation began to take shape. I found myself drifting away from a conventional ethnography, and towards a more interpretive and philosophical project. Out of my empirical research, an argument concerning certain precepts of aesthetic theory materialized as my thesis.

§

The meaning of opera—for those involved in its production and reception as well as those who know it only by association—extends well beyond the confines of the stage. Opera is about music and drama, but it is also about wealth, privilege and edification. Nevertheless, in academic circles, the word opera usually connotes a menagerie of

discrete works of art, sortable by composer, era, nationality, etc.¹⁸ As a field of academic inquiry, opera studies is primarily dedicated to the analysis and interpretation of particular works.¹⁹

The compulsion to focus on the work itself resonates with bourgeois society's longstanding commitment to aesthetic autonomy. In the late 18th century, as the public begins to pay for novels, concert tickets, and entry to painting exhibitions, works of art join other commodities in the public marketplace.²⁰ Among commodities, art is thought by many to be unique in its capacity to shed every trace of functionality while retaining an enigmatic sense of purpose. A member of a concert audience finds himself free to assess the beauty of a given artwork on its own terms, without falling back on some secondary purpose. In this act of aesthetic judgment, the individual affirms his own sense of subjectivity.

In the German-speaking world, philosophers and musicians vaunt this new mode of experience. Philosophers begin to endow aesthetic reflection—and in some cases, art itself—with metaphysical significance. Kant himself identifies disinterested aesthetic reflection as a necessary catalyst for full-fledged subjectivity.²¹ Schopenhauer and

¹⁸ In a ten-year span ending in 2008, *Cambridge Opera Journal*, one of the leading publications in the field of opera studies, published 111 feature articles; 95 of these articles are devoted either to the study of a particular opera, or, less commonly, a small and well-defined set of operas. The remaining 16 articles address a variety of subjects, including dance, performance art, and the voice of Giuditta Pasta. Across these two sub-sets, a handful of articles grapple with social and institutional contexts, but the overwhelming centrality of particular works as objects of study suggests that the notion of aesthetic autonomy still exercises a regulative force over Anglo-American opera scholarship. See *Cambridge Opera Journal* 11.1–20.3 (1999–2008).

¹⁹ There are, of course, exceptions to this characterization; see, for example, the recent collection of essays *Opera and Society in Italy and France from Monteverdi to Bourdieu*, edited by Victoria Johnson, Jane F. Fulcher, and Thomas Ertman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

²⁰ For more on the bourgeois public's new disposition towards art, see Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, translated by Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 27–43.

²¹ This claim is a distillation of my own reading of the *Critique of Judgment*. See Immanuel Kant, “The Principle of the Formal Purposiveness of Nature Is a Transcendental Principle of Judgment,” in Immanuel

Nietzsche carry this torch to almost comic heights, though Wagner deserves special recognition for actualizing this newfangled religiosity in his music, his writing, and his self-themed summer festival.²² The cult that congregates in Bayreuth is, however, merely an extreme instantiation of a much wider phenomenon. As Walter Benjamin contends, the idea of aesthetic autonomy flourishes as a way of embalming art (i.e. forestalling its disintegration with rites of purification):

The value of the ‘authentic’ work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value. The cult of beauty reacts to its own decline with the doctrine of *l’art pour l’art*, that is, with a theology of art. This gave rise to what might be called a negative theology in the form of the idea of ‘pure’ art, which not only denied any social function of art but also any categorizing by subject matter.²³

Within this negative theology, art is believed to be individuated, pure, and undying. This peculiar way of thinking persists through the 20th century, having made its way into most of my own conversations about opera in Germany. Almost everyone I spoke with

Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, translated by Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), 20–26. For more on the subjectivizing power of aesthetic reflection, see Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom: Essays on Aesthetics and Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1–47; and Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 15–40. For a more general account of this transformative moment in aesthetic theory, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Subjectivization of Aesthetics through the Kantian Critique,” in *Truth and Method*, translated by W. Glen-Doepel, translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 37–70.

²² See, for example, an excerpt from Schopenhauer’s discussion of music in *The World as Will and Representation*: “For everywhere, music expresses only the quintessence of life and its happenings, not those happenings themselves, the details of which thus do not always affect it. It is, in fact, music’s exclusive universality, together with its extreme precision that gives it the status of a panacea for all our suffering,” and with respect to Nietzsche, the famous remark in *The Birth of Tragedy* in which the author preaches a form of aestheticism that would loom over all existence: “We have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art—for it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally justified.” Following Schopenhauer, Wagner believes that music is uniquely suited among the arts to give expression to the divine: “As pure Form of a divine Content freed from all abstractions, we may regard [music] as a world-redeeming incarnation of the divine dogma of the nullity of the phenomenal world itself.” See Arthur Schopenhauer, “The World as Will and Representation,” in *Music and Aesthetics in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*, edited by Peter Le Huray and James Day (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 328–9; Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, edited and translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1968), 52; Richard Wagner, “Religion and Art,” in *Religion and Art*, translated by William Ashton Ellis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 223.

²³ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 224.

believes that opera deserves special recognition (and government support) as a cultural treasure, a sacred tradition counterposed to the exigencies of everyday life.

Like religious icons in Medieval paintings, autonomous works of art come to be haloed.²⁴ As Samuel Weber points out, Kant's notion of the beautiful requires a delineating contour to set apart the autonomous interior of an artwork:

What allows the work quite literally to *take place*, that is, to localize itself and thereby to acquire a distinct shape, is something that does not properly 'belong' to the work as an internal component but 'only externally as an adjunct (*Zutat*)', as a *parergon*...[that] emerges as the essential condition and enabling limit of the *oeuvre* itself.²⁵

Benjamin identifies the halo around a work of art as its aura, "an ornamental halo [Umzirkung], in which the object or being is enclosed as in a case."²⁶ For Benjamin, an autonomous work of art is inseparable from its aura. In his best-known essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin argues that the incursion of technical reproducibility into the world of art coincides with the decline of aura.²⁷

However evocative, Benjamin's notion of aura is not easy to pin down.²⁸ The airy quality of the word itself resonates with the ineffable idea that Benjamin is trying to

²⁴ On the significance of aureoles in early Christian iconography, see the dated but authoritative survey by Adolphe Napoléon Didron, *Iconographie chrétienne* (Paris: Imprimerie royale, 1843), 22–165. It is worth noting that the decline of halo-imagery in painting (during the High Renaissance) coincides with the rise of a new kind of auric delineating contour: the gilded, separable frame. On the history of the frame, see Paul Mitchell and Lynn Robert, *A History of European Picture Frames* (New York: Merrell Publishers, 1997).

²⁵ Samuel Weber, "The Unraveling of Form," in *Mass Mediauras*, edited by Alan Cholodenko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 22–3. See also Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, translated by Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

²⁶ Walter Benjamin, *On Hashish*, translated by Howard Eiland et al (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 58.

²⁷ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 221.

²⁸ As Theodor Adorno remarks in a letter to Benjamin, "I am convinced that our own best thoughts are invariably those that we cannot entirely think through. In this sense the concept of the aura still seems to me to be incompletely 'thought out'. One can argue about whether, indeed, it should be fully thought out as such." See Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928–1940*, edited by Henri Lonitz, translated by Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 321.

isolate. In Greek, aura meant breath or breeze.²⁹ The word was taken up by poetic Romans, who noticed its similarity to the Latin *aurum*, or gold.³⁰ In the collusion of these two words, aura took on another meaning: the glitter of gold. Aura is also the root of the word *aureole*, which refers to the golden disc surrounding figures in religious iconography, or more generally, to a halo.³¹

In the “Work of Art” essay, Benjamin defines the aura of a work of art as a “unique phenomenon of distance, however close it may be,” a formulation meant to evoke “the cult value of the work of art in categories of space and time perception.”³² Following Benjamin, Theodor Adorno describes aura as “the sorcery that emanates from music” and “whatever goes beyond [an artwork’s] factual givenness.”³³

Against this rather mystical conception, I believe that aura can be seen in the material context surrounding opera performance. In other words, I believe that Benjamin’s notion of aura correlates to a concrete (i.e. not figurative) phenomenon. Though observable, context can be experienced passively, thereby bolstering the illusion of autonomy in the spectacle itself. Aura seems to emanate exclusively from the work itself because the audience is not keyed to the subtle yet constitutive effects of context.

I use the word context to refer to the world in which operatic culture comes to life. I do not mean to imply a simple bifurcation between a given work of art and the

²⁹ “aura,” in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. 1989, <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50014860> (accessed January 2009).

³⁰ Robert A. Brooks, “Discolor Aura. Reflections on the Golden Bough,” in *The American Journal of Philology* 74.3 (1953), 273.

³¹ Benjamin brings the two words together in the end of an essay on Baudelaire. See Walter Benjamin, “Some Motifs on Baudelaire,” *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 192-4.

³² Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 243.

³³ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor, edited by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 339, 45.

surrounding context. On the contrary, I hope to show how aesthetic perception takes place in a manner that *merely appears* to be consistent with a Manichean division between work and context.³⁴ In spite of its uncomplicated outward appearance, the work/context dialectic is bathed in vitalizing aura, the necessary supplement to aesthetic reflection.³⁵

Benjamin emphasizes that auratic art takes place “imbedded in the fabric of tradition,” claiming further that “the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual functions.”³⁶ Adorno, too, acknowledges that an authentic work of art must be met in its place, on its own terms:

An authentic relation to the artwork demands an act of identification: The object must be entered and participated in—as Benjamin says, it is necessary “to breathe its aura.” But the medium of this relationship is what Hegel called freedom toward the object: The spectator must not project what transpires in himself on to the artwork in order to find himself confirmed, uplifted, and satisfied in it, but must, on the contrary, relinquish himself to the artwork, assimilate himself to it, and fulfill the work in its own terms.³⁷

Benjamin and Adorno agree that aura occupies the space between the spectator and spectacle. For both authors, aura is airy and invisible, but somehow reminiscent of a particular time and place. Neither explains how aura makes its way into our experience, how we go about breathing it in. In yet another definition of aura, however, Benjamin provides a clue:

³⁴ For a critical survey of ontological theories of art (i.e. theories which seek to explain the objective qualities of art), see Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 13–87.

³⁵ For an elucidation of the necessary supplement as a theoretical concept, see Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 141–164.

³⁶ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 223–4.

³⁷ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor, edited by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 275.

If we designate as aura the associations which, at home in the *mémoire involontaire*, tend to cluster around the object of a perception, then its analogue in the case of a utilitarian object is the experience which has left traces of the practiced hand.³⁸

Mémoire involontaire, a term coined by Proust, refers to the memories that we accumulate in a state of distraction.³⁹ In contrast to experiences *committed* to memory (*mémoire volontaire*), half-noticed sensations and repetitive activities find their way into the less-accessible reaches of the *mémoire involontaire*. For Benjamin, aura coincides with a particular sort of enchantment that springs from the *mémoire involontaire*: “To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return. This experience corresponds to the data of the *mémoire involontaire*.”⁴⁰

The fact that Benjamin associates aura with the *mémoire involontaire* is, in a way, inconsistent. In the “Work of Art” essay, Benjamin *contrasts* auratic works of art with those that one consumes in a state of distraction. As he sees it, the decline of aura correlates with the rise of art that is easily reproducible, or made with reproducibility in mind.⁴¹ Instead of mourning the decline of aura, Benjamin embraces photography, film and architecture as art forms that can be consumed *en masse*, in a state of collective distraction.⁴² According to Benjamin, the old mode of aesthetic reception—cultic,

³⁸ Walter Benjamin, “Some Motifs on Baudelaire,” *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 186.

³⁹ Proust introduces the concept in a famous episode involving the taste of a madeleine. See Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, translated by C.K. Scott Moncrieff (Hertfordshire, UK: Wordsworth Editions, 2006), 61–64.

⁴⁰ Walter Benjamin, “Some Motifs on Baudelaire,” *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 188. The sentiment expressed here is, to my mind, the dialectical counterpart to Adorno’s suggestion that “the spectator must...relinquish himself to the artwork.” While Adorno pinpoints the *act* by which a work of art is subjectivized, Benjamin describes the *effect* of this act in the mind of the spectator.

⁴¹ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 224.

⁴² *Ibid.* 234–241.

contemplative immersion—is readily appropriated by fascists. The new mode of aesthetic reception—distraction—is of the masses and useless to fascists.⁴³

In reality, fascists did not discriminate, appropriating both auratic and reproducible art.⁴⁴ In any case, in the “Work of Art” essay, Benjamin describes post-auratic art as that which a crowd consumes in a state of distraction. Though distracted, the crowd remains receptive to those memorable elements of experience that do not require contemplation, those experiences that enter into the inventory of the *mémoire involontaire*.

Benjamin thus characterizes aura in the same terms that characterize post-auratic art. This is not exactly a contradiction because, in the former case, Benjamin is not describing art itself, but rather its *aura*. For Benjamin, “authentic” art—or »*echten*« *Kunstwerks*, as he writes in German (with the guillemets in place)—requires a ceremonial atmosphere, a persuasive but unassuming context that sustains the spell of aesthetic autonomy:

Where there is experience in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine with material of the collective past. The rituals with their ceremonies, their festivals...kept producing the amalgamation of these two elements of memory over and over again. They triggered recollection at certain times and remained handles of memory for a lifetime. In this way, voluntary and involuntary recollection lose their mutual exclusiveness.⁴⁵

During a ceremony or festival, individual experience is imbedded in a ritualized, collective experience. In an opera house, in the 19th century or today, a crucial portion of the spectator’s experience takes place in stepping through the vestibules and stairwells, in

⁴³ Ibid. 218

⁴⁴ On the cultural policy of the Nazi regime, see Michael Kater, *The Twisted Muse: Musicians and Their Music in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 7–39.

⁴⁵ Walter Benjamin, “Some Motifs on Baudelaire,” *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 159–60.

paying for an expensive drink, in the act of faintly registering the stage direction while focusing on the music and narrative. Such experiences are distracted, an outer shell that gives shape to the public's shared belief in the work of art as the thing-itself.

The twist in Benjamin's theory—the analogous characterizations of aura and post-auratic art—has led several of his interlocutors to reconsider the decline of aura. Jürgen Habermas, for example, has argued that secular illumination—Benjamin's term for revelatory experience in the modern, disenchanted, and unreflective world—both preserves and demystifies the effects of aura: “Benjamin's theory of art is a theory of experience (but not the experience of reflection). In the forms of secular illumination, the experience of the aura burst the auratic shell and became exoteric.”⁴⁶ In a similar but more succinct formulation, Samuel Weber has suggested that “aura thrives in its decline.”⁴⁷ Benjamin describes aura as “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction,” but the opposite is also true: the experience of aura is reborn and elevated in the distracted mode of aesthetic reception.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Jürgen Habermas, “Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin,” translated by Philip Brewster and Carl Howard Buchner, *New German Critique* 17 (Spring, 1979), 47. For Benjamin's elucidation of secular (or profane) illumination [*profane Erleuchtung*], see Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism,” in *Selected Writings: Volume 2, 1927–1934*, edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, essay translated by Edmund Jephcott, (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1996), 207–221.

⁴⁷ Samuel Weber, “Art, Aura and Media in the Work of Walter Benjamin,” in *Mass Mediauras*, edited by Alan Cholodenko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 101.

⁴⁸ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 221. On the congruity of aura-perception and distraction, Howard Eiland makes the point that while distraction materializes as a prominent mode of aesthetic reception in the context of new technology, the modern audience is, in effect, merely habituating itself to a new set of rituals and traditions: “Reception in distraction is conditioned, first of all, by the dynamics of modern technology, by the technologization of things—the accelerated pace of life, the rapid transitions of modern media, the press of commodities and their programmed obsolescence, and so on. At the same time, it is a covert measure of the ability to perform new tasks of apperception, for *successful* reception in distraction presupposes that a mastery of certain tasks has become habitual.” Howard Eiland, “Reception in Distraction,” in *boundary 2* 30.1 (Spring, 2003), 56–7.

The alleged decline of aura is one of several overstatements or miscalculations in Benjamin's essay; indeed, as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Michael Marrinan argue in the editorial preface to *Mapping Benjamin*, "The central theses of Benjamin's *Artwork* essay have not come true."⁴⁹ Gumbrecht and Marrinan are, however, quick to point out that "this particular text has...successfully engaged several generations of scholars in intense debates, despite a failure of the historical prognostication that Benjamin took to be its central function."⁵⁰ There are probably a number of reasons that Benjamin's essay has become so influential, including its breadth, novelty, and the author's "courage to present predictions about the future development of culture and its technical arrays."⁵¹ For me, with respect to this project, the allure of Benjamin's essays stems from the fact that he recognizes history and context as independent variables in aesthetic perception: "The manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well."⁵² I agree with this premise, and I believe that the concept of aura encapsulates an essential co-determinant of aesthetic perception within a particular set of historical and contextual parameters.

Benjamin does not take this line of argument very far in the "Work of Art" essay, but he does introduce a vocabulary that bridges Kantian aesthetic theory with dialectical materialism. The concept of aura is especially valuable in this regard, insofar as it gives a name to those aspects of aesthetic perception do not correlate with reflection. In keeping

⁴⁹ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Michael Marrinan, eds., *Mapping Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Digital Age* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003), xiv.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid. xiii.

⁵² Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 222.

with the Marxist preamble to the “Work of Art” essay, Benjamin recognizes the presence of an impersonal, materialist spirit hovering over the dynamics of aesthetic perception. The major shortcoming of Benjamin’s essay is, by my measure, the fact that this spirit remains ethereal, confined to the vague and atmospheric connotations of aura. I believe, on the contrary, that the phenomenon that Benjamin refers to as aura corresponds to the social and material conditions of aesthetic perception that quietly encourage the illusion of an unmediated relationship between the spectator and the work of art.

My observations in Berlin suggest that the experience of aura is still an intractable component of operatic culture. Aura is inextinguishable, at least for the time being, because works of art require it; as Adorno rightly insists, “one cannot abolish [aura] and still want art.”⁵³ Beginning with the widespread commodification of art in the late 18th century, works of art have retreated into unassuming cocoons of atmospheric charm. This inward retreat keeps art at a permanent distance, just beyond the grasp of obvious utility. The incursion of reproducibility has led to new habits in aesthetic reception, but these new habits merely recontextualize the experience of aura.⁵⁴ In the old-fashioned world of opera, on the other hand, aura is still generated with chandeliers, marble floors, glimmering dresses, perfume, velvet curtains, airy auditoria, ritualized behavior, and extravagant production values.

In the chapters that follow, I examine the context that enrobes the Berlin opera scene. Each chapter approaches opera—understood both as a cultural institution and as a

⁵³ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor, edited by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 45.

⁵⁴ In contrast the elegiac tone of the “Work of Art” essay, Benjamin elsewhere regards aura as an adaptable and persistent phenomenon: “Aura undergoes changes, which can be quite fundamental, with every movement the aura-wreathed object makes.” See Walter Benjamin, *On Hashish*, translated by Howard Eiland et al (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 58.

field of experience—from a different angle. In each case, I hope to show that meaning coalesces in and according to context. By looking away from the stage and examining the context directly, I hope to escape the hypnotic charm of pure aesthetics, and the correlating tendency to exaggerate the autonomy of individual works of art.

§

With respect to theory and methodology, this study is heterogeneous, with roots in the sociology of music, ethnomusicology, and musicology. My graduate course work and my own research have brought me into contact with a number of disparate models of music scholarship, and I have found it to be practical and rewarding to draw selectively from each of them. My idiosyncratic theoretical orientation is also indebted to the interdisciplinary tradition of critical theory, and more specifically, to the works of Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin. My relationship—or more precisely, my dissertation’s relationship—with each of these intellectual traditions is, in all four cases, complicated. I will attempt to disentangle this complicated nexus presently.

I arrived in Berlin in 2005 as a visiting scholar in the *Musiksoziologie* program at Humboldt University. I was honored to have Dr. Christian Kaden—chair of the *Musiksoziologie* program at Humboldt—as my academic sponsor in Berlin, and I participated in his weekly graduate seminar. I was delighted to have discovered such a welcoming academic community, but it was a little unusual for me to be affiliated with a sub-discipline of music scholarship that has no counterpart in the United States.

In retrospect, it seems somewhat fitting that my dissertation research would have taken place under the auspices of this exotic field of inquiry. *Musiksoziologie* is premised on the belief that “music should be seen not as a reified artifact, but rather as part of the complex web of connections formed by the conditions of production and reception, as an event brought into being by social and socio-economic structures.”⁵⁵ This disciplinary mission statement, articulated by Christian Kaden, resonates rather well with my own objectives in this study.

Sociological perspectives on musical life have been with us since the inception of sociology itself: Georg Simmel devoted his very first publication to the study of music (“Psychological and Ethnological Studies on Music”), and Max Weber published an entire book on the rise of rationalization in music (*Rational and Social Foundations of Music*).⁵⁶ *Musiksoziologie* coalesced as a well-defined sub-discipline of music scholarship in the German-speaking world in the 1950s and 1960s, with sweeping contributions from Kurt Blaukopf, Theodor Adorno, and Alphons Silbermann.⁵⁷ Each of these authors inspired subsequent research, though Blaukopf and Silbermann have been more influential within the field of *Musiksoziologie*. The sub-discipline has coevolved with sociology—rather than musicology or ethnomusicology—and as a result,

⁵⁵ Christian Kaden, “Music and Sociology: Perspectives, Horizons,” in *Musicology and Sister Disciplines*, edited by David Greer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 274.

⁵⁶ Georg Simmel, “Psychological and Ethnological Studies on Music,” in *The Conflict in Modern Culture, and Other Essays*, translated by K. Peter Etzkorn (New York: Teachers College Press, 1968); Max Weber, *Rational and Social Foundations of Music*, translated and edited by Don Martindale, Johannes Riedel and Gertrude Neuwirth (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1958).

⁵⁷ See Kurt Blaukopf, *Musiksoziologie: Eine Einführung in die Grundbegriffe mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Soziologie der Tonsysteme* (Köln: Kiepenheuer, 1952); Theodor Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (New York: Continuum, 1989); Alphons Silbermann, *The Sociology of Music* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977). See also Kurt Blaukopf, *Musical Life in a Changing Society: Aspects of Music Sociology*, translated by David Marinelli (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1992). The aforementioned volumes were first published in German in 1950, 1962, 1963, and 1982, respectively.

contemporary research in *Musiksoziologie* tends to anchor itself in sociological theory (e.g. symbolic interactionism, systems theory, political economy).⁵⁸

For a variety of reasons, the sociology of music remains undeveloped as a field of inquiry in the United States.⁵⁹ Over the past four or five decades, only a handful of American scholars—including Howard Becker and Peter Etzkorn—have worked at the juncture of sociology and music.⁶⁰ In the UK, by contrast, a number of prominent sociologists—including Simon Frith, Peter Martin, Robert Witkin, and Tia Denora—have devoted considerable attention to the study of music.⁶¹ The British encampment in the sociology of music is small but wide-ranging, spanning urban ethnography, cultural studies and critical theory.⁶²

Although I admire much of the work being done under the headings of *Musiksoziologie* in the German-speaking world and the sociology of music in UK, my own thinking on music and social context is inspired primarily by the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. While many of the aforementioned sociologists have questioned various precepts of classical aesthetics, Bourdieu has been the most articulate and influential scourge of the Kantian legacy. His monumental study of French cultural

⁵⁸ Christian Kaden, “Music and Sociology: Perspectives, Horizons,” in *Musicology and Sister Disciplines*, edited by David Greer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 274–87.

⁵⁹ Philip Bohlman enumerates some of the reasons that “music sociology’s bulwark remains in Europe” in “Ethnomusicology and Music Sociology,” *Musicology and Sister Disciplines*, edited by David Greer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 288–98.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Howard Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); and K. Peter Etzkorn, “Social Context of Songwriting in the United States,” *Ethnomusicology* 7.2 (May, 1963), 69–106, as well as Etzkorn’s introduction to *Music and Society: The Later Writings of Paul Honigsheim*, edited by K. Peter Etzkorn (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1973).

⁶¹ See, for example, Simon Frith, *The Sociology of Rock* (London: Constable, 1978); Peter Martin, *Sounds and Society: Themes in the Sociology of Music* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995); Robert Witkin, *Art and Social Structure* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995); and Tia Denora, *After Adorno: Rethinking Music Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁶² For a concise account of the socio-musicological tradition in the United States and Britain, see Tia Denora, “Formulating Questions – The ‘Music and Society’ Nexus,” in *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1–20.

practice—*Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*—is framed as a critique of aesthetic autonomy.⁶³ Before his death in 2002, Bourdieu published dozens of articles, essays, and books that elucidate a comprehensive theory of aesthetic production and reception dispossessed of idealism and sentimentality.⁶⁴ I agree with many of Bourdieu's conclusions, and when I seek to relate my own perspective to sociological aesthetics, I frequently cite Bourdieu.

Despite the fact that I see an affinity between my own research and the sociology of music, I would hesitate to describe my dissertation as sociological. Contemporary sociology privileges measurable data and verifiable results; in this study, by contrast, I mix measurable data with personal interpretation. I believe that the methodological and presentational biases of sociology preclude certain kinds of research, including research that concerns itself with vague ideological commitments. Sociological methods can certainly inform our understanding of aesthetic autonomy, but within a given field of cultural production and reception, data sets will necessarily fail to illustrate how an ideological doctrine operates at a microscopic level, how it might insinuate itself into every capillary of elite cultural practice. This sort of trace-work requires an epistemology that does not hew to the positivistic expectations of contemporary sociology.⁶⁵

With respect to scientific objectivity, ethnomusicology is a less restrictive theoretical framework than *Musiksoziologie*. As Philip Bohlman has observed,

⁶³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 485–500.

⁶⁴ See, for example, Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, translated and edited by Randall Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); and Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline to a Theory of Practice*, translated by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

⁶⁵ There are certainly exceptions to this characterization of sociology; in *Distinction*, for example, Bourdieu complements his analysis of quantitative data with close readings of the aesthetic preferences indicated by his survey respondents. For a sampling of more recent, Bourdieu-inspired studies in the sociology of culture, see Craig J. Calhoun and Richard Sennett, editors, *Practicing Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

ethnomusicologists tend to be skeptical of the systematizing logic that still characterizes

Musiksoziologie:

Whereas both ethnomusicology and music sociology have endeavored to problematize the nature of music by situating it in as many social contexts as possible, music sociologists have been far more concerned with fixing the categories, while ethnomusicologists have frequently devoted themselves to unraveling such categories.⁶⁶

Ethnomusicology has always been rooted in empirical research, and as Alan Merriam conveyed in *The Anthropology of Music*, “ethnomusicology aims to approximate the methods of science, insofar as that is possible in a discipline which deals with human behavior and its products.”⁶⁷ Nevertheless, in the years since Merriam’s conditional pledge to the scientific method, the discipline of ethnomusicology has kept pace with the “interpretive turn” in social-scientific research, a paradigm shift that, as Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan describe it, “refocuses attention on the concrete varieties of cultural meaning, in their particularity and complex texture.”⁶⁸ Within ethnomusicology, Bonnie Wade has observed an evolution “from analytical description of musical texts, to thicker musical and cultural description and, more and more, to cultural interpretation.”⁶⁹ Both *Musiksoziologie* and ethnomusicology have been receptive to this paradigm shift, but the two sub-disciplines have taken the “interpretative turn” in different directions. In the simplest terms, *Musiksoziologie* is still invested in *explaining* music and musical contexts, while ethnomusicology is now more concerned with *understanding* music and

⁶⁶ Philip Bohlman, “Ethnomusicology and Music Sociology,” in *Musicology and Sister Disciplines*, edited by David Greer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 288.

⁶⁷ Alan Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 37.

⁶⁸ Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan, “Interpretive Social Science: A Second Look,” in *Interpretive Social Science: A Second Look*, edited by Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 5–6.

⁶⁹ Bonnie Wade, “Fifty Years of SEM in the United States: A Retrospective,” in *Ethnomusicology* 50.2 (Spring/Summer 2006), 196.

musical contexts.⁷⁰ I would describe my dissertation as an attempt at understanding opera and aesthetics in Berlin, and in this respect, I identify with ethnomusicology.

My dissertation is not a conventional ethnography, but it is rooted in the principles and practices of ethnomusicology. I sympathize with Alan Merriam's suggestion that "we wish to know not only what a thing is, but, more significantly, what it does for people and how it does it," and in the pages to come, I hope to show what a particular context does for people, and how it affects experience.⁷¹ I also fixate on the question that Bruno Nettl identifies as the central concern of ethnomusicology: why a particular society has its particular music and music culture.⁷² Specifically, I try to work out why a debt-laden European capital accommodates and bankrolls an incorrigible operatic culture. I devoted eighteen months to ethnographic fieldwork in Berlin, where I conducted formal and semi-formal interviews, collected data, and adhered to the

⁷⁰ On the nature of the distinction between explanation and understanding in the context of music scholarship, see Jeff Todd Titon, "Knowing Fieldwork," in *Shadows in the Field*, edited by Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 25–41. Parenthetically, social scientists have been engaged in an ongoing debate on the explanation/understanding dichotomy for over 100 years. In the late 19th century, a number of theorists—including Wilhelm Dilthey, Max Weber, and Georg Simmel—begin to conceptualize a mode of understanding [*Verstehen*] that contrasts with the compulsion to explain in a scientific fashion [*erklären*]. This epistemological distinction—often couched in terms of antipositivism and positivism—resurfaces again and again over the next century. In West Germany in the 1960s, for example, several prominent antipositivists (including Adorno and Habermas) engage in a public debate with their positivist counterparts (including Karl Popper and Hans Albert), leading to collection of essays on the subject. In spite of dissent from several splinter factions (including the Frankfurt School), German sociology in the late 20th century drifts in the direction of a positivistic American paradigm, more interested in explaining empirical data than in understanding cultural phenomena. See Theodor Adorno, et al., *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, translated by Glyn Adey and David Frisby (London: Heinemann, 1976); Georg Henrik von Wright, *Explanation and Understanding* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971); and Fred R. Dallmayr and Thomas A. McCarthy, *Understanding and Social Inquiry* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1977).

⁷¹ Alan Merriam, *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 209.

⁷² Bruno Nettl, *Heartland Excursions: Ethnomusicological Reflections on Schools of Music* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 8.

participant observation model of research. More importantly, in being there, I experienced and internalized the dizzying topography of the Berlin opera scene.⁷³

When I flew back to the United States and began the writing process, I modeled my writing on earlier work in interpretive social science. I revisited ethnographies by Anthony Seeger and Theodore Levin, and I perused essays on ethnographic theory by anthropologists Johannes Fabian, Victor Turner, and Clifford Geertz.⁷⁴ Seeger's *Why Suyá Sing* is, for me, the archetype of an uncluttered musical ethnography, while Levin's *The Hundred Thousand Fools of God* infuses ethnographic writing with personal narrative, a strategy that I admire and emulate. Fabian's critique of anthropological figurations of time is the inspiration for my unorthodox conception of the ethnographic present.⁷⁵ Turner's meditations on performance and ritual underpin my reflections on the opera audience (Chapter IV), and *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Geertz's classic collection of essays, is a wellspring of insight that informs every chapter of my dissertation.

⁷³ As Jeff Todd Titon has observed, fieldwork in contemporary ethnomusicology tends to be more concerned with understanding than with the acquisition of data: "Fieldwork is no longer viewed principally as observing and collecting (although it surely involves that) but as experiencing and understanding music." See Jeff Todd Titon, "Knowing Fieldwork," in *Shadows in the Field*, edited by Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 25.

⁷⁴ Anthony Seeger, *Why Suyá Sing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Theodore Levin, *The Hundred Thousand Fools of God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974); Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1973).

⁷⁵ The ethnographic present refers to use of the present-tense in ethnographic writing, a stylistic convention that, for better or worse, flattens the passage of time. My dissertation focuses on contemporary culture, but in a number of places, I discuss emergent phenomena (e.g. the commodification of art) and specific events (e.g. the Opera Ball) from the distant past. But as Benjamin persuasively suggests in the "Work of Art" essay, "The transformation of the superstructure...takes place far more slowly than that of the [base]." Within the operatic superstructure, a blurry line distinguishes the past from the present, so I decided, in this study, to respect the persistence of *la longue durée*. See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 217–218.

A handful of studies have subjected Western art music to social-scientific scrutiny, but three stand out as exemplary. Bruno Nettl's *Heartland Excursions* is a reflective and thought-provoking study of a Midwestern music conservatory, an environment in which the author considers himself indigenous.⁷⁶ Nettl's ethnography strings together telling vignettes and personal observations that serve to defamiliarize the beliefs and practices of an institution that most of his readers know all-too-well. A similar defamiliarization of a Western art music institution takes place in Christopher Small's *Musicking*.⁷⁷ Small begins with the compelling postulate that "music is not a thing at all but activity, something that people do." With this lens in place, Small turns an ordinary trip to a symphony concert into 200 pages of thick description. The author laces his study with philosophical asides, but the book is still sleek and lucid. My own skepticism of musical ontology is inspired by Small's critique, and the whole study stands as a model for my dissertation. A third source of inspiration has been *Rationalizing Culture*, Georgina Born's ethnographic portrait of IRCAM.⁷⁸ Born documents and analyzes the institutional culture that came to characterize the musical avant-garde of the late 20th century. Born's presentation is firmly empirical, but it confronts its subject matter with a strong authorial voice and an uncompromising gaze. Throughout her study, Born strikes an unlikely balance between meticulous description and ideological critique.

⁷⁶ Bruno Nettl, *Heartland Excursions: Ethnomusicological Reflections on Schools of Music* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

⁷⁷ Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998).

⁷⁸ Georgina Born, *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez, and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-Garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

Neither *Heartland Excursions* nor *Musicking* cites ethnographic interviews, and *Rationalizing Culture* incorporates direct quotations rather infrequently. As Born writes in her introduction, “An ethnographic study of a well-known institution is a sensitive business, especially given the responsibility to respect informants’ confidences.”⁷⁹ The sensitive nature of her fieldwork leads Born to generalize events and statements when it does not adversely affect her research.⁸⁰ Having conducted my own fieldwork in a tense and secretive institutional context, I have similar reservations and I cite specific interviews sparingly.⁸¹

The fact that my dissertation proceeds without many quotations is one of several ways in which it deviates from ethnomusicological conventions. A second deviation inheres in the fact that I focus on extra-musical context, and in this respect, my dissertation fails to conform to the basic definition of ethnomusicology put forth by Jeff Todd Titon in *Worlds of Music*: “the study of people making music.”⁸² Thirdly, as Bruno Nettl writes in his credo for the discipline, ethnomusicologists tend to “pay special attention to the musics of lower socio-economic classes, colonized peoples, [and]

⁷⁹ Ibid. 11.

⁸⁰ Ibid. 11.

⁸¹ I do not mean to suggest that the Staatsoper Unter den Linden deserves more or less confidentiality than any other musical community. That said, my rapport with members of the Staatsoper administration is based, in part, on my willingness to be discreet. Furthermore, as a researcher with a “native” knowledge of opera, my subjective position is not comparable to that of a *typical* ethnomusicologist. In *Heartland Excursions*, Bruno Nettl describes classical music as “the first music I heard, the music with which I grew up, and which, in the aggregate, I have heard most often throughout my life.” I feel the same way, and to some extent, I choose to present my findings in a subjective manner because a more deferential or dialogic style (i.e. conventional ethnographic writing) would be disingenuous in the context of this project. See Bruno Nettl, *Heartland Excursions: Ethnomusicological Reflections on Schools of Music* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 9.

⁸² In his elaboration of this definition, Titon suggests that the process of making music includes making or constructing “the *idea* of music,” in addition to the production of sounds that become music. To a certain extent, then, his definition can be said to characterize the argument about aesthetics that runs through my dissertation, but such a characterization would require a liberal interpretation of both his definition of ethnomusicology and the parameters of my dissertation. See Jeff Titon et al, eds., *Worlds of Music: An Introduction to the Music of the World's Peoples* (Belmont, CA: Schirmer Cengage Learning, 2009), xvii.

oppressed minorities.”⁸³ By contrast, my dissertation is about opera, an elite Western tradition that has never been the subject of an article in *Ethnomusicology*.⁸⁴ Generally speaking, ethnomusicology is an ecumenical discipline, devoted to studying “all of the world’s music.”⁸⁵ Nevertheless, burdened with such a vast dominion, ethnomusicologists have tacitly entrusted the study of Western art music to musicologists.⁸⁶

In other words, with respect to musical genre, my dissertation is more commensurate with musicology. Ethnomusicology might accommodate the study of opera, but musicology furnishes a more substantial bibliography on the subject. Musicologists catalogue every opera and every blip in operatic history, and then mine them for meaning. My own inquiry into contemporary operatic culture draws on this extensive body of work.

As Joseph Kerman writes in *Contemplating Music*, musicology has come to be known as “the study of the history of Western music in the high-art tradition.”⁸⁷ In recent decades, musicology has also embraced academic criticism, an interpretive approach to music pioneered by Kerman, Rose Rosengard Subotnik, Susan McClary, and a handful of other scholars.⁸⁸ Kerman defines criticism as “the study of the meaning and value of art

⁸³ Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-One Issues and Concepts* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 13.

⁸⁴ See *Ethnomusicology* 1.1–53.2 (December 1953–Spring/Summer 2009).

⁸⁵ Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-One Issues and Concepts* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 13.

⁸⁶ Exceptions include Nettl’s *Heartland Excursions*, mentioned above, as well as Henry Kingsbury, *Music, Talent, and Performance: A Conservatory Cultural System* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); and Mari Yoshihara, *Musicians from a Different Shore: Asians and Asian Americans in Classical Music* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007).

⁸⁷ Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 11.

⁸⁸ Kerman more or less inaugurated the criticism movement in musicology with the publication of *Opera as Drama* in 1956. Subotnik and McClary followed suit with a host of interpretive essays in the 1970s and 1980s. See Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) and *Write All These Down: Essays on Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Rose Rosengard Subotnik, *Developing Variations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) and *Deconstructive*

works.”⁸⁹ He goes on to acknowledge that ethnomusicology, unlike conventional musicology, “encompasses the meaning and value of music along with everything else about it,” but he also distances himself from the ethnomusicological tendency to consider “the meaning of a musical genre to its culture and value of a musical activity to its society.”⁹⁰ As a musicologist prepossessed with the idea of aesthetic autonomy, Kerman concentrates on the meaning and value of individual works.

Musicology is, on the whole, still invested in the notion of autonomous art. In her foreword to *Music and Society*—an influential collection of essays edited by Susan McClary and Richard Leppert and published in 1987—the sociologist Janet Wolff attempts to explain why this ideological commitment persists in musicology, even as it disintegrates in art history, literary criticism, and other branches of the humanities.⁹¹ Wolff begins by surveying the ongoing interdisciplinary movement to historicize the notion of aesthetic autonomy, and then notes “the relative absence of music from this critical work,” a sober echo of Joseph Kerman’s sardonic suggestion that “musical thinkers travel at a respectful distance behind the latest chariots (or bandwagons) of intellectual life in general.”⁹² In the end of her essay, Wolff identifies two facets of musicological research that safeguard the ideology of aesthetic autonomy: the technical nature of music analysis, which inhibits interdisciplinary feedback, and the abstract, non-

Variations (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); and Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

⁸⁹ Ibid. 16.

⁹⁰ Ibid. 16.

⁹¹ Janet Wolff, “Foreword: The Ideology of Autonomous Art,” in *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception*, edited by Richard Leppert and Susan McClary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 8.

⁹² Ibid. 1; Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 17.

representational nature of music itself, which insulates it from socio-cultural interpretation.⁹³

In the twenty years since Wolff's assessment, musicology has thawed considerably. A number of prominent musicologists—including Subotnik, Leppert, Richard Taruskin, Gary Tomlinson, and Lawrence Kramer—have repudiated the doctrine of aesthetic autonomy.⁹⁴ The discipline is no longer under the spell of positivism, and the criticism movement has evolved into a sophisticated and self-assured branch of musicological scholarship.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, musicology still tends to restrict itself to the study of Western art music.⁹⁶ By failing to significantly expand its range, musicology lends legitimacy to the rather untenable notion that Western art music deserves a private pedestal. In other words, however self-critical, a musicological study that finds its object in a discrete work of art, wholly within an elite and exclusive tradition, will necessarily contribute to the discipline's standing as a safe-haven for the ideology of aesthetic autonomy.

⁹³ Janet Wolff, "Foreword: The Ideology of Autonomous Art," in *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception*, edited by Richard Leppert and Susan McClary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 9–13.

⁹⁴ See, for example, Rose Rosengard Subotnik, "On Grounding Chopin," in *Developing Variations* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 141–165; Richard Leppert, *The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation, and the History of the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Richard Taruskin, "Preface: Against Utopia," in *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), ix–xvi; Gary Tomlinson, *Metaphysical Song: An Essay on Opera* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 127–156; Lawrence Kramer, *Musical Meaning: Toward a Critical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

⁹⁵ See, for example, Robert Fink, *Repeating Ourselves: American Minimal Music as Cultural Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); and Scott Burnham, *Beethoven Hero* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); as well as the assortment of essays in Andrew Dell'Antonio, ed., *Beyond Structural Listening?: Postmodern Modes of Hearing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

⁹⁶ To be sure, the self-imposed purview of musicology is increasingly speckled with studies of Western popular music, jazz, and film music. See, for example, the program of the 2008 Annual Meeting of the American Musicological Society, which includes 122 individual papers on Western art music, and 8 papers categorized as "Other," a catchall that encompasses "popular musics, world musical cultures, film music, and interdisciplinary topics." American Musicological Society, *AMS Newsletter* 38.2 (August 2008), 26.

Though narrow in its overall scope, musicology does lavish attention on opera. In coming to know the genre and contextualizing my own observations, I have relied on musicological research and, most especially, the pocket industry known as opera studies.⁹⁷ For general inspiration, I return again and again to Kerman's *Opera as Drama*, as well as Carl Dahlhaus' *Nineteenth-Century Music* and the magisterial *History of Italian Opera* edited by Lorenzo Bianconi and Giorgio Pestelli.⁹⁸ I also find myself revisiting *Opera Through Other Eyes*, a collection edited by David Levin that includes essays by a number of eminent non-musicologists, from Theodor Adorno to Slavoj Žižek and Friedrich Kittler.⁹⁹ Recent books by Carolyn Abbate and philosopher Stanley Cavell have pushed opera studies into the realm of subjective interpretation and bolstered my decision to frequently write in the first person.¹⁰⁰ On the specific subject of opera in Berlin, my bibliography includes historical studies by Robert Braunmüller, Thomas Wieke, John Rockwell, Sabine Vogt-Schneider, and many others.¹⁰¹ None of the aforementioned studies deal with present-day Berlin, but a number of scholars have written about recent opera productions in Germany.¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Opera studies is, for the most part, a branch of musicology. Philosophers, literary theorists, and historians have all made substantial contributions to the field, but it all takes place at the editorial discretion of musicologists. On the make-up of opera studies, see David Levin, *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 1–7.

⁹⁸ Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, translated by J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Lorenzo Bianconi and Giorgio Pestelli, eds., *History of Italian Opera* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998–2003).

⁹⁹ David Levin, ed., *Opera through Other Eyes* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).

¹⁰⁰ Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); Stanley Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

¹⁰¹ Robert Braunmüller, *Oper als Drama* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2002); Thomas Wieke, *Vom Etablissement zur Oper* (Berlin: Haude & Spener, 1993); John Rockwell, "The Prussian Ministry of Culture and the Berlin State Opera, 1918-1931," Ph.D. dissertation (University of California – Berkeley, 1972); Sabine Vogt-Schneider, "Staatsoper Unter den Linden" oder "Deutsche Staatsoper"? *Auseinandersetzungen um Kulturpolitik und Spielbetrieb in den Jahren zwischen 1945 und 1955: Eine Studie* (Berlin: E. Kuhn, 1998).

¹⁰² See, for example, David Levin, *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Michael P. Steinberg, "A Season in Berlin, or, Operatic Responsibility," *New German Critique* 95 (Spring/Summer 2005); Alexandra Garaventa, *Regietheater in*

My dissertation draws on all of the musicological research mentioned above, but the end result it is not musicological, at least not in any conventional sense. Musicology is primarily retrospective, and musicologists seldom concern themselves with truly contemporary music culture.¹⁰³ Furthermore, musicology, like opera studies, is preoccupied with specific works of art. By dealing with contemporary society and focusing on extra-musical context rather than specific works, my dissertation clearly distinguishes itself from mainstream musicological research.

All told, my bibliography reads like a shuffled card catalogue. As I hope to have made clear, my dissertation incorporates elements of music sociology, ethnomusicology, and musicology. For better or worse, these three fields of music scholarship seldom interact, and they often find themselves defined in opposition to each other.¹⁰⁴ In spite of the diverse set of philosophical and methodological conventions at play in my dissertation, I have endeavored to keep the text internally coherent by having it all relate back to the concepts of aura and aesthetic autonomy. In this respect, one last field of inquiry—critical theory—looms over every page of my dissertation.

Critical theory is an interdisciplinary school of thought associated with the affiliates of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt am Main, including Max

der Oper: eine musiksoziologische Untersuchung am Beispiel (Munich: Martin Meidenbauer, 2006); Gundula Kreuzer, "Voices from Beyond: Verdi's Don Carlos and the Modern Stage," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 18 (2006), 151-179; Patrick Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Clemens Risi, "Shedding light on the audience," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 14 (2002), 201-210; Udo Bermbach, et al., eds., *Schwerpunkt Regietheater* (Würzburg: Königshausen u. Neumann, 2005).

¹⁰³ See, for example, the program for the 2009 Annual Meeting of the American Musicological Society, which includes 144 individual papers, only one of which deals with music in the 21st century. See American Musicological Society, *AMS Newsletter* 39.2 (August 2008), 25-26.

¹⁰⁴ See, for example, Don Michael Randel, "The Canons in the Musicological Toolbox," in *Disciplining Music: Musicology and its Canons*, edited by Katherine Bergeron and Philip Bohlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 10-22; and Philip Bohlman, "Ethnomusicology and Music Sociology," in *Musicology and Sister Disciplines*, edited by David Greer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 288-298.

Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin, and Jürgen Habermas.¹⁰⁵ Founded in 1923, the Institute quickly became a cauldron of intellectual activity, loosely committed to the dialectical critique of society and socio-cultural phenomena.¹⁰⁶ As a philosophical paradigm, critical theory braids German idealism, Marxism, Weberian sociology, and psychoanalysis into an inextricable helix. However convoluted, this theoretical framework lends itself to socio-aesthetic research.

I came to be interested in critical theory after reading Theodor Adorno's dazzling studies of Mahler and Beethoven (the latter collected and published posthumously).¹⁰⁷ These two books inspired me to rethink musical meaning. For Adorno, a musical work is like an opaque crystal ball, meaningful by virtue of its enigmatic nature. He sharpens his gaze so as to see an intricate negation of society within the texture of the work. This interpretive strategy epitomizes the logic of aesthetic autonomy, elevating a mundane ideological commitment into a revelatory form of analysis.

In his writing about music as well as his more philosophical work, Adorno develops a critical vocabulary consistent with his theory of aesthetics. This vocabulary supplements the German philosophical tradition with dozens of neologisms, including several stemming from his long correspondence with Walter Benjamin.¹⁰⁸ *Aura*, for example, first comes into print in Benjamin's drug protocols (i.e. notes written under the

¹⁰⁵ On the history of critical theory, see Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research of Social Research, 1923–1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

¹⁰⁶ See Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 188–243.

¹⁰⁷ Theodor Adorno, *Mahler: A Musical Physiognomy*, translated by Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Theodor Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann, translated by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

¹⁰⁸ In the context of this study, I am especially interested in the word *aura*, but other well-known neologisms coined by Benjamin include constellation, force-field [*Kraftfeld*], dialectical image [*dialektisches Bild*], now-time [*Jetztzeit*], and shock (which he spells *Chock*, a peculiar combination of the German *Schock* and the French *choc*). For more on this idiosyncratic vocabulary, see Roger Behrens, *Adorno-ABC* (Leipzig: Reclam, 2003).

influence of hashish) in the late 1920s.¹⁰⁹ Benjamin elaborates his conception of aura in a number of subsequent essays, including “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”¹¹⁰ Adorno, in turn, appraises the concept in a series of letters with Benjamin, and eventually works it into the rigorous, rambling pages of *Aesthetic Theory*.¹¹¹

At a theoretical level, my dissertation is an attempt to adapt this critical vocabulary to a particular field of cultural production. Specifically, I hope to show how aura, a quintessentially abstract concept, comes to be experienced in the context of the Berlin opera scene. With this objective in mind, I try to restrict the philosophical compass of my dissertation to critical theory. I am especially interested in Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, but I also refer to his musical writing, including his lectures on the sociology of music and his well-known essay, “On the Fetish-Character in Music.”¹¹² I cite several essays by Benjamin, as well as his unfinished study of 19th-century Paris, now known as *The Arcades Project*.¹¹³

I also refer to a number of scholars closely associated with Adorno and Benjamin, including Bertolt Brecht, Ernst Bloch and Jürgen Habermas. As one of the preeminent figures in 20th-century theater (especially in Germany), Brecht continues to exercise an

¹⁰⁹ Walter Benjamin, *On Hashish*, translated by Howard Eiland et al (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 19–34.

¹¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 221–224.

¹¹¹ Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940*, edited by Henri Lonitz, translated by Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 128–140, 321–327; Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor, edited by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 56, 72, 105, 112.

¹¹² Theodor Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (New York: Continuum, 1989); Theodor Adorno, “On the Fetish-Character in Music,” in *Essays on Music*, edited by Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

¹¹³ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, edited by Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

enormous influence over contemporary production values.¹¹⁴ As a friend of Benjamin, Brecht is also involved in an important intellectual debate within critical theory. In the simplest terms, Benjamin embraces a few of the playwright's ideas about theater—including a belief in the political efficacy of art—but Adorno repeatedly cautions Benjamin against Brecht's impatient politics.¹¹⁵ As the editors of *Aesthetics and Politics* observe, "The complexity of this triangular relationship confers on [Adorno and Benjamin's late] correspondence much of its fascination."¹¹⁶ Bloch, a friend to Benjamin as well as Adorno, concerns himself with a recognizable array of concepts, including commodity fetishism, musical meaning and utopianism.¹¹⁷ His scholarly writing includes dozens of essays on aesthetics and the nature of musical experience. I cite Bloch just twice, but his essays on music exemplify an interpretive approach to aesthetic phenomena that I hope to have emulated.¹¹⁸ Habermas, an independently-minded disciple of Adorno, has pushed critical theory into a more rigorous engagement with history. His theory of the public sphere directly informs my own thinking on audience dynamics (Chapter IV), and his essay, "Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism," is the one of the most lucid accounts of Benjamin's intellectual legacy that I have encountered.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ I discuss Brecht's impact on contemporary theater in Chapter V. For an assortment of his theoretical essays on theater, see Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, edited and translated by John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964).

¹¹⁵ See, for example, Walter Benjamin, "What is Epic Theater?," in *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books), 147–154; and Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940*, edited by Henri Lonitz, translated by Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 108.

¹¹⁶ Ernst Bloch, et al., *Aesthetics and Politics: The Key Texts of the Classic Debate Within German Marxism*, edited by Rodney Livingstone, et al. (New York: Verso, 1980), 102.

¹¹⁷ See, for example, Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, translated by Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988).

¹¹⁸ See, for example, Ernst Bloch, "Arrivals and Overtures," in *Literary Essays*, translated by Andrew Joron (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 184.

¹¹⁹ See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, translated by Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989); Jürgen Habermas,

An appreciation of critical theory requires some familiarity with earlier German philosophy, and to that end, I occasionally allude to Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Marx, and Nietzsche. In a 1918 essay, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy,” Benjamin predicts that “the central task of the coming philosophy will be to take the deepest intimations it draws from our times and our expectation of a great future, and turn them into knowledge by relating them to the Kantian system.”¹²⁰ Indeed, in the years to come, Benjamin, Adorno, and the other affiliates of the Institute proceed intellectually in a manner that repeatedly circles back to earlier philosophy (especially Kant). Leibniz’s theory of an elemental form, the monad, resurfaces as a conceptual model for the work of art, and Hegelian dialecticism inflects every serious endeavor within critical theory.¹²¹ Adorno chooses to write his *Habilitationsschrift*—a lengthy monograph comparable to a doctoral dissertation—about Kierkegaard, though for my purposes, Kierkegaard is most interesting for having written *Repetition*, a philosophical argument in the form of a visitor’s diary in Berlin.¹²² As I mention above, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche contribute to the Romantic amalgamation of aesthetics and metaphysics—the kiln in which the ideology of aesthetic autonomy hardens—and I cite their work accordingly.¹²³ Critical theory is rooted in Marxism, and I refer to *Capital* to clarify

“Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin,” translated by Philip Brewster and Carl Howard Buchner, *New German Critique* 17 (Spring, 1979).

¹²⁰ Walter Benjamin, “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 1913-1926, edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 100.

¹²¹ G.W.F. von Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics: Correspondence with Arnauld, and Monadology*, translated by George R. Montgomery (La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 1950); and G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

¹²² Theodor Adorno, *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic*, translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, translated by Howard H. Hong and Edna V. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

¹²³ See, for example, Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (Leipzig: Brodhaus, 1879); Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, edited and translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 2000).

certain terms.¹²⁴ With regard to aesthetic theory, the foundational text for all subsequent Western philosophy, including critical theory, has been Kant's *Critique of Judgment*.¹²⁵ Many of the key concepts in my dissertation—including autonomy, reflection, and aesthetic form—first take shape in Kant's third critique. In this respect, my dissertation—in accordance with Benjamin's prophecy—ultimately relates back to the Kantian system.

In addition to the aforementioned philosophers, I cite several contemporary theorists, including Samuel Weber, Andreas Huyssen, and Winfried Menninghaus. Weber, who studied with Adorno in Frankfurt, has become one of the most prominent interlocutors of Benjamin.¹²⁶ Of the many scholars writing about collective memory in contemporary German culture, Huyssen stands out for having written two of the most persuasive books on the subject.¹²⁷ Menninghaus, a literary theorist who teaches in Berlin, has written with exceptional insight about the limits of aesthetic theory in Benjamin and Kant.¹²⁸

Finally, in keeping with the eclectic spirit of critical theory, I refer to a few philosophers who are not conventionally associated with this tradition, including José Ortega y Gasset, M.M. Bakhtin, and Elias Canetti. Ortega y Gasset, a Spanish philosopher who garnered international renown for his 1929 book *The Revolt of the*

¹²⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, translated by Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Books, 1990-1992).

¹²⁵ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, translated by Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987).

¹²⁶ See, for example, Samuel Weber, *Mass Mediauras*, edited by Alan Cholodenko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

¹²⁷ See Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995); and Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

¹²⁸ See, for example, Winfried Menninghaus, "Walter Benjamin's Exposition of the Romantic Theory of Reflection," translated by Robert J. Kiss, in *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*, edited by Beatrice Hanssen and Andrew Benjamin (New York: Continuum, 2002); Winfried Menninghaus, *In Praise of Nonsense: Kant and Bluebeard*, translated by Henry Pickford (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

Masses, is helpful to me for having written “Meditations on the Frame,” a brilliant and concise essay on the nature of painting frames.¹²⁹ Bakhtin and his neologisms—including chronotope, dialogic, and carnivalesque—have become increasingly popular with contemporary theorists, who recognize his keen sense for the implicit spatio-temporal dimensions of literature.¹³⁰ Lastly, I look to Canetti’s *Crowds and Power* to establish a theoretical foundation for Chapter IV of my dissertation (“In the Audience”).¹³¹ Canetti’s epic study resonates rather well with critical theory, as evidenced by the accordant tone of Adorno and Canetti’s 1962 public conversation on the subject of crowds and power.¹³²

Ultimately, I would hesitate to pin my dissertation to a single intellectual tradition. As I hope to have made clear, I am indebted to earlier work in *Musicsoziologie*, ethnomusicology, musicology, and critical theory, and I would like to believe that to each of these disciplines, my dissertation offers something in return.

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My study begins with a visit the opera house. In Chapter II, I reflect on the ways in which setting participates in shaping operatic experience. Architecture and interior design have subtle but regulative effects on the opera-going public. To be more specific,

¹²⁹ José Ortega y Gasset, “Meditations on the Frame,” translated by Andrea L. Bell, *Perspecta* 26 (1990): 185-190.

¹³⁰ M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

¹³¹ Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, translated by Carol Stewart (New York: Continuum, 1981).

¹³² See Theodor Adorno, “Crowds and Power: Conversation with Elias Canetti,” in *Can One Live After Auschwitz?: A Philosophical Reader*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann, translated by Rodney Livingstone and others (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 182–204.

the Neoclassical edifice, plush interior, and glimmering vestibules together transport the public into a state of mind receptive to the utopian conceits of operatic storytelling.

I then turn to the dynamics of cultural administration. I begin Chapter III by showing how cultural subsidies tend to sustain the socio-economic interests of the ruling class. I then summarize the cultural economy of Berlin and the place of opera within that economy. Opera in Berlin seems to thrive in administrative disarray. I show how this disorganization serves the interests of the opera-going public.

Chapter IV is a look at the opera audience. The Staatsoper audience proves to be unremarkable as opera crowds go (i.e. well-behaved, wealthy, established, etc.), with one exception: the equanimity with which they greet avant-garde production values. In addition to demography and aesthetic preferences, I reflect on the more general experience of being in an opera audience. Though mostly silent and immobile, the audience is engaged in a formative social ritual.

In Chapter V, I examine the prevalence of *Regietheater*, or director's theater: productions that foreground the role of the stage director. The productions of *Salome* and *Die Entführung* that I witnessed early on were not unusual. Again, the citizens of Berlin seem to be acclimated to experimental production values. After surveying the prehistory of *Regietheater*, I attempt to make sense of the phenomenon that sparked my initial interest in the Berlin opera scene.

I conclude with a few remarks on Peter Mussbach's staging of *Die lustige Witwe* [*The Merry Widow*], a recapitulation of my thesis, and a first-hand account of the world within a work of art.

Chapter II: The Opera House

*The most successful ideological effects are those that have no words, and ask no more than complicitous silence.*¹

– Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline to a Theory of Practice*

I walk from my apartment in Prenzlauerberg to the Staatsoper Unter den Linden in the half-slumber of any commuter. My workday begins a little after 10 in the morning, an hour that feels early in Berlin. The winter sun is pitched low in the sky. The sun is brilliant but not warm, and it stays in my eyes for the whole twenty-five minute walk.

I stop at a café, where I buy a “kaffee-to-go.” In my neighborhood, the idea of taking your coffee with you is new and popular, but often maligned as a symptom of Americanization. My street is prime battleground in the conflict between fashion and the shame of selling out. Fifteen years ago, this strip was all but abandoned. It lies just east of the where the Wall once was. The empty apartment buildings lured a young crowd of punks and artists.

Today, that crowd has moved further east to Friedrichshain, and many of the buildings have been renovated. Space-age strollers now outnumber mangy dogs. Boutiques with pricey apparel keep appearing, though they still channel a style distinctly Berlinisch. Café crowds are young and chic. The streets signs have been changed from Kastanienallee to CastingAllee, that capital C doubled-over à la Coco Chanel.

The real transformation begins after I descend into Mitte and make my way down Rosenthalerstrasse. Here things get very *Schiki-Micki* (the Germans’ adorable term for up-market style, derived from “chic” and “Mickey Mouse”). A silver storefront brighter

¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline to a Theory of Practice*, translated by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 188.

than the sun welcomes you to the cosmos of Hugo Boss. I pass a maze of frivolous shops in the Hackesche Höfe and a tapas restaurant to arrive at the local center of commerce, a bustling corner overseen by Starbucks. There is no indication anywhere that this is the heart of the old Jewish quarter.

Figure 1: The path of my commute from Prenzlauerberg to the Staatsoper Unter den Linden. Background image: Panorama Berlin.



I walk through Hackescher Markt and inevitably someone collides with me and moves on, expressionless. The plaza is crowded, and I have never figured out how to navigate my way through a crowd of Germans. Their sense of walking is incomprehensible to me. As Heinrich Heine once quipped, “if someone steps on my foot in Paris, I know it is a Prussian.”²

Under the S-Bahn tracks, I round the quiet corner to the Friedrichsbrücke. At one end of the bridge a diminutive gypsy plays an accordion, and at the other end an old German woman plays a Mozart sonatina on an amplified Casio keyboard. Although they are easily within earshot, the buskers ignore each other. The arc of cacophony mirrors the arc of the bridge.

Across the bridge, nestled into a bulge in the Spree River, is Museum Island. The island is a Unesco World Heritage Site. I look up in momentary awe at the Berliner Dom, then continue my stride past the loggia of the Alte National Galerie. I cut across the muddy, vacant quadrangle behind the Berliner Dom, step over a foot-high iron fence, and begin a diagonal path across the Lustgarten (The path behind the Berliner Dom is muddy because so many people walk off the designated path. By contrast, hardly anyone ventures off the paths that form a grid over the Lustgarten. The grassy Lustgarten is raised above the sidewalk grid, so to initiate a diagonal path one would have to take an awkwardly high step. I think about this step every time; the effort never passes unconsciously. Such effort is unpopular and the grass of the Lustgarten stays green).

To my left the Palast der Republik redistributes sunlight in rectangular parcels aglow like molten iron. I shield myself from the profane light and turn to my right,

² Jules Laforgue, *Berlin: the City and the Court*, trans. by William Jay Smith (New York: Turtle Point Press, 1996), 21.



Figure 2: The reflective paneling of the Palast der Republik, the former capital building of East Germany. The building has now been completely dismantled, and it set to be replaced by a palace that resembles the palace that once occupied the same plot. Photo: Nicholas Berger.

towards the façade of the Altes Museum. There, behind some Ionic columns, is a colossal neon sign that reads (in English): “ALL ART HAS BEEN CONTEMPORARY.”

As I walk across the Lustgarten, I think about the meaning of the neon text. The sign—an installation by the Italian artist Maurizio Nannucci—seems to be reminding us that the art inside the museum was once of its own time. It plays on the irony of gracing a museum of ancient art and antiquities (the Altes Museum is the temporary home of an Egyptian collection, including the famous bust of Nefertiti). But Friedrich Schinkel’s design for the museum itself was never exactly contemporary. Evocation of



*Figure 3: The Altes Museum in the evening, adorned with a neon installation by Maurizio Nannucci.
Photo: Museumtechnik Berlin.*

the past is definitional to Neoclassicism.³ We are made to feel that this place is old and mythic.

I reach Unter den Linden and walk over the Schlossbrücke under the watchful eyes of naked marble statues. Across the street and beyond an empty lot is Schinkel's Bauakademie, overlaid with fabric. On the fabric is a depiction of what the building looked like before and will look like after its restoration. Berlin suffers a Sisyphean fate of perpetual rebuilding, and, perhaps in an effort to curtail the blight of construction, covers every major project with an image of its past and future self. This never stops looking weird to me.

³ Though not necessarily a singular past: at the Altes Museum, the Ionic columns are based on the Athenian Stoa, the dome is modeled on the Pantheon in Rome, and the eagles perched above the portico represent the Kingdom of Prussia.

I stroll past the German Historical Museum, the Maxim Gorki Theater and the Neue Wache war memorial to the front of Humboldt University, my academic home in Berlin. An ostentatious statue of Frederick the Great on horseback looms above the heavy traffic of Unter den Linden. I look across the street at the end of my commute, the opera house.

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Figure 4: The Staatsoper Unter den Linden in an anonymous engraving dating from the mid-19th century. Reprinted from Georg Quander, ed., Apollini et Musis (Berlin: Propyläen, 1992), 349.



I seldom think about the meaning of the places I walk by and through. I think about not spilling my coffee. But that I am asleep to my surroundings does not compromise their constitutive effect on my experience. Through casual observation and dull repetition, I accumulate a composite impression of Berlin.

In walking this path, day after day, I collect images and ideas that swirl into a nexus in my mind. As I reminisce, as I write, I take this cloud of impressions and coerce its condensation. Clifford Geertz describes the move from fieldwork to ethnographic writing as a move from a persistent effort to find one's feet on foreign soil to the pretense of having found them:

Finding our feet, an unnerving business which never more than distantly succeeds, is what ethnographic research consists of as a personal experience; trying to formulate the basis on which one imagines, always excessively, one has found them is what anthropological writing consists of as a scientific endeavor.⁴

As I set words to the page, I pin down observations of foggy provenance: sensorial blips that congeal into ideas only as I write them down. I retrace my steps through Berlin and the words unfold like a city map all splayed-out on the floor. It looks as if I had been on sure-footing the whole time.

In truth, of course, I was very often lost. Eventually, though, I could walk to the Staatsoper without thinking about the route. Indeed, I could amble there half-asleep. I had come to know this path and other paths and a great many landmarks along the way. I knew the inscriptions on a few monuments and which bakeries sold the best pretzels. And my path was optimized for late morning sunlight.

On occasion, a subtle spatial detail can persuade or instigate behavior directly (like the raised lawn of the Lustgarten). More often, however, the influence of setting on

⁴ Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description," *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 13.

human action is a tricky variable to isolate. Although it would be difficult to delineate a causal relationship between the built environment of Berlin and the culture of Berlin, we can see a correlation between them, in the street signs, the stylish shops and the countless construction sites.

In this chapter, I retrace my steps in and around the Staatsoper: up to the façade, through to my seat in the auditorium, betwixt and between the rococo stairwells and antechambers. Each of these spaces participates in shaping operatic experience. The scale of the opera house is not subtle, but its persuasive character is. In recounting my experience of the opera house, I hope to reveal something about the place underfoot—and something about how this place prefigures many of my steps.

The Staatsoper is, in many respects, a quintessential opera house. Throughout the world, theaters designed for operatic performances tend to be Neoclassical in outward appearance, with spacious and velvety interiors crowned by grand chandeliers. If I were to describe my experience of a modern theater—the Deutsche Oper in Berlin or the Opéra Bastille in Paris, for example—my account would be very different. Nevertheless, the Staatsoper is, to my mind, an exemplary case study for coming to understand the subtle efficacy of theater design and décor.⁵

I begin each section of this chapter with a description of my own experience attending performances at the Staatsoper. Each of these descriptive passages leads to an interpretive account, in which I attempt to situate my own experience within a wider historical and theoretical context.

⁵ For a comprehensive and well-illustrated survey of theater architecture, see George C. Izenour, *Theater Design* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

The first section is about the façade. The exterior of the Staatsoper resembles a temple. As such, the façade designates a threshold between the surrounding, mundane world, and a sacred world within. The opera house is modeled on temple architecture, but it also banks on vague associations with antiquity and grandeur.

Then I go directly to the heart of the interior: the auditorium. Like the façade, the auditorium is stately and spare (as opera houses go). The interior is not, however, squarely Neoclassical in style; both the auditorium and the surrounding vestibules blend Neoclassical and rococo stylings with bland functionalism (this admixture is especially pronounced in the opera house's latest incarnation, dating from 1955). The auditorium itself is emphatically inner-directed: a cavernous womb of red velvet and gold. The strong evocation of interiority resonates with modern dualistic thinking, and predisposes the audience to a particular type of viewing experience.

Finally, I move into the maze of hallways, stairwells and foyers. These spaces are essential to operatic culture, but easy to dismiss as ancillary. They form an ornamental corona that encircles the deep interior (the auditorium). At the same time, they quietly undermine the simplicity of an interior/exterior dialectic.

Because I focus throughout on architecture and interior design, visual reference is essential. To that end, I have included several illustrations. The Staatsoper is not exactly as it was in 1742, but in this particular case minor changes are less interesting than those original facets of the opera house's design that persist after twenty-seven stormy decades. With this premise in mind, my textual and visual references span the 270-year history of the Staatsoper.

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My walk to the opera is different in the evening. Most of the sights recede into the night, though restaurants and shops stay lit. The night under the reign of artificial light accentuates the commercial and diminishes the residential, in a chiaroscuro of public and private.

I arrive at the opera house hungry. The timing of opera always conflicts with dinner. It is trouble enough to wrap up the day, change into a suit, and walk to the opera by 7:30. A real dinner is impossible; I never have time.

A pretzel vendor stands by the main entrance to the opera house. For some reason relating to the masonry under foot, salted pretzels are here verboten. The other varieties of pretzels—buttery and sugary—are, by my measure, inadmissible. So I remain hungry.

I have to wait in front of the opera house to meet my date. To divert my attention from the pretzel man, I wander away from the crowd. The sidewalk between the doors and Unter den Linden is really too small, so the opera congregation is uncomfortably dense. I climb the steps up onto the portico. Here I find another set of doors. This was once the entrance for the King and the highest strata of elites. They had their own entrance, their own hallways to circulate through during intermissions, and their own balconies in the auditorium. Today, everyone enters through the doors below, the division of classes having become a subtler affair.

The façade of the opera house looks resentful of time. Since opening half-finished in 1742, the Staatsoper has recovered from a fire and two bombings, only to fall into disrepair under the East German government. And so it remains today. It is still

imposing, but if you look closely, you can see that it might buckle under its own weight. The building looks encumbered with memory.

The portico is the base of six Corinthian columns. Between the columns hang vertical banners declaiming the title of tonight's opera. Beams of artificial light clash with the Neoclassical stateliness of the façade. I make out the word *Norma* backwards and upside-down from behind the translucent banners.

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In 1740, within the first year of his reign, Frederick the Great commissioned his friend Georg Wenzeslaus von Knobelsdorff to build him a *Zauberschloss*—an enchanted palace—for the performance of Italian opera. The building would display a Corinthian portico with a dedication on the gable reading *Fredericus Rex Apollini et Musis* [from King Frederick to Apollo and the Muses]. The theater—the first free-standing opera house in Europe—was to be one of many buildings in the *Forum Fridicanium*, a collection of buildings around Unter den Linden that would provide Berlin with a civic center.⁶

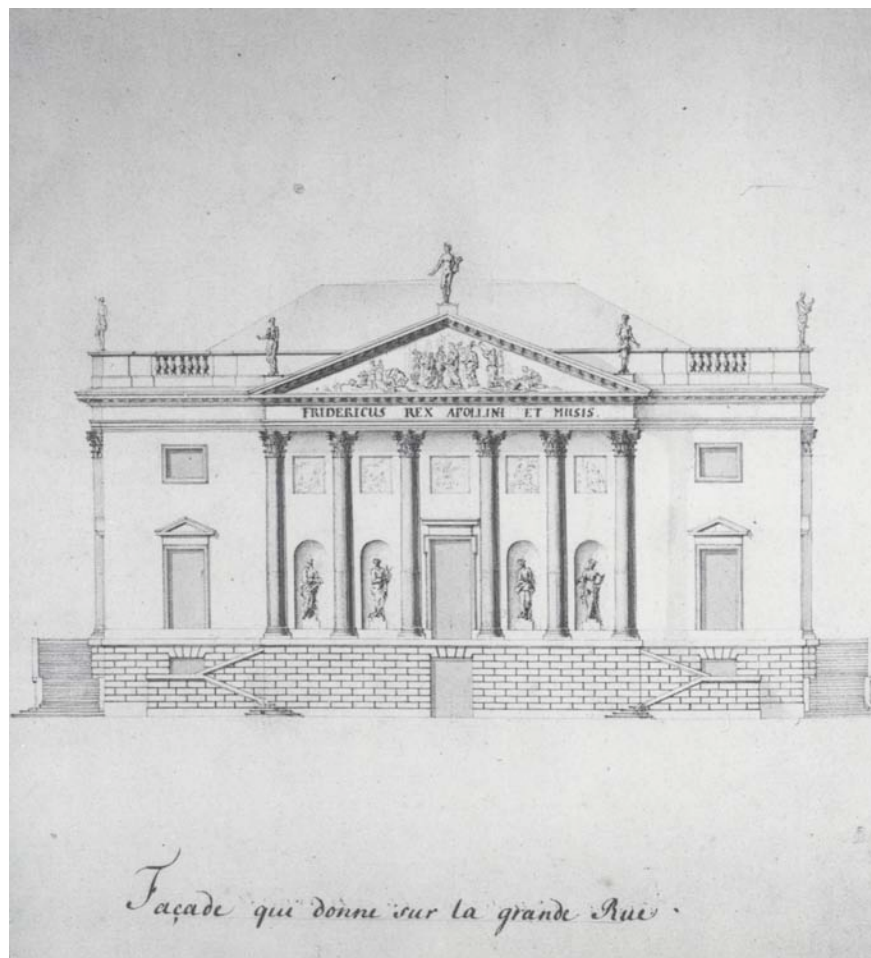
Although the façade of the opera house recalls ancient Greece, the derivation is indirect. Frederick had sent Knobelsdorff to Italy to collect design ideas (and later, to collect singers). The exterior of the theater owes its style to Palladio's 16th-century

⁶ Josef Paul Kleihues, ed., *750 Jahre Architektur und Städtebau in Berlin* (Stuttgart: Gerd Hatje, 1987), 59.

revival of classical architecture, as based on the *Ten Books* of Vitruvius. For specific models, however, Knobelsdorff looked to the English followers of Palladio.⁷

The result is the first instance of Neo-Palladianism in Berlin, a penultimate step in the city's transformation into an *ersatz* Athens in the hands of Friedrich Schinkel.⁸ On the roof stand statues of Apollo and two of the Muses, Euterpe and Terpsichore.

Figure 5: Knobeldorff's plan for the façade. Reprinted from Georg Quander, ed., *Apollini et Musis* (Berlin: Propyläen, 1992), 344.



⁷ Ibid. 59-60.

⁸ As an architectural movement in Berlin, Neoclassicism does not reach full stride until the end of the 18th century. Nonetheless, the Staatsoper can be seen as an immediate predecessor to full-fledged Neoclassical structures, including Schinkel's Altes Museum. In addition to architectural style, the Staatsoper shares a certain provenance with every modern museum: the word museum is from the Greek *mouseion*, or temple to the Muses.

The opera house opens onto Unter den Linden, one of the main boulevards in Berlin. The building has never had any immediate neighbors, making its absurd scale all the more pronounced. Off to the left is a quiet park, populated with trees and statues of three Prussian generals from the Napoleonic Wars, and further to the left, the Opern-Palais, a former palace (*Das Prinzessinnenpalais*) that now, as an outdoor café, serves overpriced fare to tourists and opera-goers. To the right of the house is Bebelplatz, an expansive city square. Behind to the left is the non-descript home of the administrative offices of the Staatsoper. And behind to the right is the Hotel de Rome—a chic, modern hotel built in the former headquarters of Dresdner Bank—and St. Hedwig’s Katholische Kirche, often cited as a testament to Frederick’s religious tolerance.⁹

Figure 6: The Staatsoper and St. Hedwig’s Cathedral, circa 1750, in an illustration by Georg Balthasar Probst. Image: Wikimedia Commons http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Probst_Hofoper_Berlin.jpg.



⁹ Despite this reputation, the church stands forever in the background of the opera house. The church is a dome unto itself—as if someone had stolen it off of a cathedral, hoping to retain its symbolic power while leaving behind the congregation. The dome was then plunked behind the opera house and adorned with an incongruent façade that resembles the Pantheon of Rome.

Befitting its dedication, the Staatsoper resembles a temple in both form and function. Although visual reference to a Greek temple might strike a first-time visitor, the specific appearance of the building quickly fades into context. In its subservience to function, architecture tends to withdraw without ever disappearing; it creates space no less than it occupies space.

In lectures delivered in the 1820s at Humboldt University (then called the University of Berlin), across the street from the Staatsoper, Hegel recognized the capacity of architecture to act on us subtly, by creating space:

It is architecture that pioneers the way for the adequate realization of God, and in this its service bestows hard toil upon existing nature, in order to disentangle it from the jungle of finitude and the abortiveness of chance. By this means it levels a space for God, gives form to his external surroundings, and builds him his temple as a fit place for concentration of spirit, and for its direction to the mind's absolute objects.¹⁰

Hegel argues that architecture is uniquely suited among the arts to encourage contemplation of the divine. The capacity to create space for the “concentration of spirit” is not, however, unique to religious temples.

The ascension of art as an alternative to religion in modern Europe brings with it the sacralization of the theater. It would not suffice to model the Staatsoper on a Greek amphitheater. It had to be modeled on a temple. Through times ever more disenchanted, the Staatsoper would act as a temple to art and an idyllic past.

In general, a social landscape will have mundane dwellings, places where people live and work, to which an architectural figure at the hallowed center provides an antidote. Thereby a cosmology is structured into the landscape, one that lends meaning to the lives of the inhabitants. As philosopher Karsten Harries elaborates:

¹⁰ G.W.F. Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, trans. Bernard Bosanquet (London: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1993), 90-91.

Just about every traditional village or city illustrates this figure-ground relationship. A sacred figure on the ground of the profane, such architecture helps gather a multitude into a genuine community by providing it with a center. Individuals gain their sense of place, both in space and time, by relating their dwelling to that center.¹¹

In the Middle Ages and Renaissance, it was the cathedral. And the church remains a sacred figure, but one among several. Since the Enlightenment the church has shared the stage with the theater.

Like a church, a theater must stand apart from everyday life. In describing a movie palace, André Bazin emphasizes the need for theater design to resist both nature and everyday life:

There can be no theater without architecture... Whether as a performance or a celebration, theater of its very essence must not be confused with nature under penalty of being absorbed by her and ceasing to be. Grounded on the reciprocal awareness of those taking part and present to one another, it must be in contrast to the rest of the world in the same way that play and reality are opposed, or concern and indifference, or liturgy and the common use of things.¹²

The Greeks built amphitheaters into the earth; today, a theater must distinguish itself from nature more explicitly. A temple—with inorganic straight lines and orderly proportions—is a more emphatic remonstrance of nature.

A temple is a threshold to the divine *and* a monument to the past. The figuration of the sacred is always entwined with temporal associations. As Harries elaborates in his interpretation of sacred architectural figures, experience of the sacred has an analogy in the escape from quotidian time:

[The] architectural reading of figures on the ground has a temporal analogy: the everyday with its mundane concerns may be considered a ground illuminated by festal times. The ability or inability to celebrate

¹¹ Karsten Harries, "Theatricality and Re-Presentation," in *Perspecta*, Vol. 26, (1990), 34.

¹² André Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, trans. by Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967-71), 104.

festivals is closely linked to the ability or inability to establish places that let a multitude understand itself as a community, joined by a common destiny.¹³

As I mention above, Neoclassicism is by its nature oriented towards the past. When a building is modeled on a temple in a Neoclassical (or Neo-Palladian) style, the spirit of the past is ever-present.

The Staatsoper invites the public into an idyllic and imaginary epoch: grand, enlightened, and innocent of Berlin's historical misdeeds. In walking through the doors of this colossal time machine, the public glides into a backwards gait: facing the past, with their backs to the future. As M.M. Bakhtin observes of literature in which "the present and even more the past are enriched at the expense of the future," wistful participation in this sort of temporal reorientation "empties out the future, dissects and bleeds it white."¹⁴ Once inside, the drama on stage is free to re-calibrate the public's withdrawn sense of time into a vague promise of future happiness. The total effect resembles that which Bakhtin refers to as historical inversion:

The essence of [which] is found in the fact that mythological and artistic thinking locates such categories as purpose, ideal, justice, perfection, the harmonious condition of man and society and the like in the *past*. Myths about paradise, a Golden Age, a heroic age, an ancient truth, as well as the later concepts of a "state of nature," of natural, innate rights and so on, are all expressions of this historical inversion. To put it in somewhat simplified terms, we might say that a thing that could and in fact must only be realized exclusively in the *future* is here portrayed as something of the *past*, a thing that is in no sense part of the past's reality, but a thing that is in its essence a purpose, an obligation.¹⁵

¹³ Karsten Harries, "Theatricality and Re-Presentation," in *Perspecta*, Vol. 26, (1990), 40.

¹⁴ M.M. Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and the Chronotype in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 147-8.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 147.

The crowd at the Staatsoper walks into the building and there they remain for a few hours, anchored in an unreal sense of the past by the interior design, their ritualized behavior, and the archaic strains of Gluck or Verdi or Strauss. The stagecraft, by contrast, looks modern, lest the collective sink into mere nostalgia. The warmth of an imaginary past is enjoyed passively, while the spectacle itself begins to reconstitute the bled-white future. As Ernst Bloch remarks regarding Berlin in general, “Other cities are often mere ghosts of a better past; hollow Berlin is possibly—there is no choice—the ghost of a better future.”¹⁶

§

By the time my friend arrives outside the opera house, we have only enough time to get to our seats. My eyes adjust from the darkness outside to the brilliance of the halls and then to the shadowy second balcony. We slither to our seats as the audience applauds the conductor.

The interior cannot resemble that of a Greek temple, which typically consists of an altar and the sky above. But a ritual is about to unfold: on any given night, I can pretty well expect to see a woman sacrificed on the raised and hallowed stage. Maybe Desdemona or Carmen or Lucia, or Eurydice or Gilda or Isolde.

But tonight the sacrifice is Norma. The production is drab, and my mind wanders. I have my lorgnettes (purchased for 7 Euros at a flea market in Friedrichshain). The theater is cavernous and round, windowless and all-encompassing. I marvel at the

¹⁶ Ernst Bloch, “Berlin as Viewed from the Landscape,” in *Literary Essays*, translated by Andrew Joron (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 371.

ornate chandelier and the painted ceiling. A few seats away, a man snores, as if this were his living room. I look down to the orchestra, where a crowd populates a sea of red velvet cushions. Each figure is in its place; like the cilia of a cell, barely perceptible movements making the whole undulate.

I lean forward over the balcony, into the voluminous chamber. A little vertigo neutralizes my strange compulsion to glide off the edge. I recall an episode of *Danger Mouse* that I saw when I was about six (*Danger Mouse* was a cartoon on Nickelodeon in the 1980s). In this particular episode, the title character and his intrepid sidekick, Penfold, find themselves miniaturized so as to explore the inner reaches of Colonel K., a gruff chinchilla. In his lungs they discover an airy abyss, where a diffuse swarm of white blood cells hang-glides to re-oxygenate.

Figure 7: The latest renovation plans for the auditorium of the Staatsoper. These renovations, which will cost more than € 200 million, are set to begin in 2010. Image: Stephan Braunfels Architekten.



I wake from my daydream and I am back in the opera house. Images of soaring corpuscles fade away, but the sense of being inside a body echoes a little longer. In an admittedly cartoonish way, this auditorium is how I picture my own interiority. The center is a vast hollow, a space for the spirit to lurk. Red velvet cushions are the folds of inner flesh. The contour of the space is curved but secure, like a rib cage. On the floor below, a multitude organizes itself like a fleet of microbes. Above is a tangle that reigns over the whole, illuminating. The only window out is through the proscenium: a monocular optic (with a soundtrack) that represents a world outside.

§

*What stands within the windowless house is the true.*¹⁷

– Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

I would not expect everyone in the audience to have had daydreams about the similitude between an auditorium and an intuitive (if unscientific) idea of interiority. But everyone has experienced the assertive *inwardness* of the theater: no windows, concave walls that echo back, a taboo on entering or exiting and a pillowy décor that enrobes and nurtures, like a nest or a jewelry box.

The resemblance to a body is not such an outlandish metaphor. In his third book on architectural principles—the book devoted to temples—Vitruvius begins by acknowledging architecture’s debt to the human body. The proportions and symmetries of temples derive from that most sacred of forms:

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 532.

Nature, therefore, has made the human body so that the different members of it are measures of the whole, so the ancients have, with great propriety, determined that in all perfect works, each part should be some aliquot part of the whole; and since they direct, that this be observed in all works, it must be most strictly attended to in temples of the gods, wherein the faults as well as the beauties remain to the end of time.¹⁸

Here, Vitruvius elucidates the origins of fundamental principles of spatial coherence as derived from the human body. He goes on to provide guidelines for building temples, including proportions and materials, guidelines that have been adhered to for centuries by architects of theaters, museums, universities and government buildings.

Of course, the interior of a modern theater cannot emulate the interior of a Greek temple (since the latter had no interior). The interior of Palladio's Teatro Olimpco—the first Western theater with a roof, dating from 1585—is lined with columns and overseen by statues of antiquity. Painted on the ceiling is a bucolic blue sky strewn with wistful white clouds. The ceiling partitions off outside and inside. Inside, we find a world within, replete with a heaven above. No one mistakes the ceiling for the sky; rather, the interior usurps some of the exterior's dominion.

The expansion of indoor theaters coincides with the expansion of humanism in Europe. As playwrights of the 17th century begin to furnish the public with increasingly psychological drama, the audience finds itself inside, sheltered from nature. During this prehistory of bourgeois individualism, the inclination to dwell within oneself waxes as does the inclination and opportunity to dwell within enclosed buildings. In 1637, the same year that the first public opera house opens in Venice, Descartes publishes his *Discourse on Method*, wherein he gives voice to a division of inside and outside that would characterize modern thought.

¹⁸ Vitruvius Polio, *The Architecture of Marcus Vitruvius Pollio in Ten Books*, trans. by Joseph Gwilt (London: John Weale, 1860), 64.

The 17th and 18th centuries witness the codification of modern subjectivity. An ideological centrifuge begins to whirl, and in the center congeals the idea of private, autonomous and reflective selfhood. The outside world—the world outside the subject—recedes. Kant articulates this modulation in philosophical terms with his so-called “Copernican Revolution,” which positions subjectivity as the unimpeachable center of experience.

This sense of subjectivity emerges in concert with the bourgeois public sphere. Bourgeois subjectivity is reinforced as an idea by analogous figures on a grander scale. The bourgeois individual can be thought of as a closed ring encircled by concentric rings, like the aftermath of a pebble plunked into a pond. The closed rings of the conjugal family, the private sphere and even the public sphere reverberate with the central idea of subjectivity (and an even smaller ring: pure individuation, or the monad). Habermas argues that the family unit prefigures the other rings:

For the experiences about which a public passionately concerned with itself sought agreement and enlightenment through the rational-critical public debate of private persons with one another flowed from the wellspring of a specific subjectivity. The latter had its home, literally, in the sphere of the patriarchal conjugal family.¹⁹

Although one sphere may have preceded the others, that should not be misconstrued as a causal vector. Rather, in a recursive dynamic, each level of individuation resonates harmonically with the other levels.

The public sphere never emerges as a fully public space because it contains within itself an idea of inclusiveness and, necessarily, exclusiveness. The public sphere is like a bubble, in this case a bubble blown from the wand of the private sphere. To become *truly*

¹⁹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 43.

public, the public sphere would have to expand to include everyone in its interior. But a bubble always has an outside.

Habermas illustrates these dynamics with concrete manifestations. For example, the *salon* becomes a fixture of bourgeois homes. A living room no longer suffices: it remains, but is supplemented by the outward looking *salon*. The *salon* is a room that compensates for the privatization of the home, as a place to entertain the public. The enclosure of the home, of private property, was itself a public display, and “the line between the private and public sphere extended right through the home.”²⁰

The sacralization of the interior requires a porous shell, a series of antechambers that all open to the outside. This side-effect proliferates in the 19th century. Walter Benjamin elaborates the outwardness of the domestic interior in a passage from the *Arcades Project*:

The domestic interior moves outside. It is as though the bourgeois were so sure of his property that he is careless of façade, and can exclaim: My house, no matter where you choose to cut into it, is façade. Such façades, especially, on the Berlin houses dating back to the middle of the previous century: an alcove does not jut out, but—as niche—tucks in. The street becomes room and the room becomes street. The passerby who stops to look at the house stands, as it were, in the alcove.²¹

The idea that the street itself becomes the threshold of the interior is central to Benjamin’s unfinished history of the 19th century. The street does not evoke the heart of the interior, nor does the domestic interior become truly public. They meet in an ambiguous in-between space, the interior as façade and the outside as alcove. It is the emerging middle class that seems to thrive in these in-between spaces.

²⁰ Ibid. 45.

²¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 406.

Habermas narrates the whole arc: the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere and its subsequent transformation into a corrupt vicissitude of itself. We can also focus in on the peculiar, short-term expressions of this dynamic. Benjamin's *Arcades Project* collects, orders, and displays instances of interiorization with the care of a lepidopterist. His so-called dialectical portraits of Paris in the 19th century illustrate how ideology permeates everyday life, in manifestations mundane, bizarre and, above all, diverse.

Benjamin's Paris is a prism that he polishes one facet at a time. He attends to detail while never neglecting consideration of the whole. This results in a refracted portrait of modernity in general, beyond Paris of the 19th century. One aspect of this modernity is the isolation of the individual:

Under the reign of Louis Philippe, the private individual makes his entry into history. For the private individual, places of dwelling are for the first time opposed to places of work... From this derive the phantasmagorias of the interior—which, for the private individual, represents the universe. In the interior, he brings together remote locales and memories of the past. His living room is a box in the theater of the world.²²

Here, we return to the theater. The private individual finds in his living room a theater to the world. The same private individual will find in his box at the theater many of the trappings of his living room. In Proust's memorable description, the boxes of the Paris Opera resemble "so many little drawing-rooms, the fourth walls of which had been removed."²³

As I suggested above, the theater comes to function as a sacred center, a perfected analogy to the mundane home. Like the private home, the theater has an insistent interiority and a necessary supplement, a whole web of foyers that wrap around the

²² Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 8.

²³ Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, translated by C.K. Scott Moncrieff (Hertfordshire, UK: Wordsworth Editions, 2006), 885.

sacred center. I will return to the foyers below, but the important point here is that the architecture of the theater furnishes interiority. The inner sanctum of the theater is opposed to the real world, opposed to the outside world. Here we find “phantasmagorias of the interior,” more lavish than those of the home.

Some of the phantasmagoria takes place on the stage: melodrama, myth, oceanic voices, costumes and breathtaking sets. Staged operas do transfigure reality, but only in the context of a space that sustains the spell. The unreality extends off-stage, in the sublime scale, the abundance of velvet, the chandelier, the painted ceiling. Each of these features takes up the cause of creating a world opposed to the quotidian.

Some things have changed about the interior of the Staatsoper (and opera houses in general) since the 18th century. The mechanism of lighting has changed from oil to gas to electric. The floor plan allows better sight lines all around. The orchestra is now in a pit. Here I comment on features of the auditorium so well adapted that they, like the crocodile, have had no occasion to evolve.

§

The interior of the Staatsoper lacks the ornate décor of the foyers. The color scheme is simple: bone-white and voluptuous red. The 1396 seats in the auditorium of the Staatsoper are upholstered in red velvet. The drapes that cover the doors to the boxes are red velvet. And the curtain that cloaks the stage is red velvet.

Of course, this is normal. Only opera houses exceptionally poor would diverge from this fashion (or those enamored of their own wealth: the Metropolitan Opera has a gold curtain). Red or gold, velvet is luxuriant.

But velvet conveys something more than wealth. Velvet is used to nestle one's treasures. Blushing, cushiony surfaces line the interiors of jewelry boxes and violin cases. In the flourishing market of the 19th century, every little commodity begs to be enfolded in velvet. Our own bodies come to be encased in velvet in the most precious and lonely domicile, the coffin. As individuals come to treasure their own individuality, the spaces wherein they dwell compel velvet walls:

The nineteenth century, like no other century, was addicted to dwelling. It conceived the residence as a receptacle for the person, and it encased him with all his appurtenances so deeply in the dwelling's interior that one might be reminded of the inside of a compass case, where the instrument with all its accessories lies embedded in deep, usually violet folds of velvet.²⁴

Like the 19th-century home, the opera house auditorium is as warmly wrapped as a sheathed dagger.

The velvet does not simply envelop the auditorium: it also affirms your presence there. When you drag your palm along a banister upholstered in plush velvet, it captures your act in a new shade of red. As Benjamin notes simply: "plush—the material in which traces are left especially easily."²⁵ The material environment looks back at you: "The interior is not just the universe but also the *étui* of the private individual. To dwell means to leave traces. In the interior, these traces are accentuated."²⁶

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 8.

²⁵ Ibid. 222.

²⁶ Ibid. 9.

We all know that the traces recorded in velvet will fade away. The interior does not replace the world; it provides a sanctuary from it. The traces in the interior are especially suited to echoing back without impinging on the irreproducibility of the event. Going to the opera is an escape from the drudgery of everyday life. Creases in velvet avow the auratic experience while submitting to its ephemerality.

One reason to go to the opera is to see and be seen. This is a social calculus but also a ritual of inclusion. We all know the well of joy that simmers when we are able to say, “I was there.” We revel in a collective privilege to have been there. Dozens of lorgnettes shimmer like little stars in the rapt affirmation of a coherent universe. The taboo on photography or recording is notable here; such reproductions would compromise the ritual. As it stands, the experience is documented only by the blurry media of memory and velvet.

§

My gaze is drawn to the chandelier like a moth to a flame. If I have to arch my neck back, the brilliance freezes me in that uncomfortable position. The facets shimmer with an intensity I have never seen in the night sky. In the past, it may have been a sensible way to keep a spacious room lit. Today, however, function is overwhelmed by form. The chandelier is as efficient in its demonstrable function as a bow tie.

The chandelier is symbolic, the crown of the interior.²⁷ Its architectonic beauty transforms mere material into an artificial organism. In another band of concentric metaphors, the chandelier is a synecdoche of the theater, which is itself a refracted image

²⁷ The German word for chandelier is *Kronleuchter*, or, literally, “crown of candlesticks.”

of society. As André Bazin puts it, expanding on a Baudelaire aphorism, “‘The Theater,’ says Baudelaire, ‘is a crystal chandelier.’...this artificial crystal-like object, brilliant, intricate, and circular, which refracts the light which plays around its center and holds us prisoners of its aureole.”²⁸

The ascendancy of artificial light coincides with the Enlightenment and the rise of bourgeois subjectivity. In a gothic cathedral, the gift of light still penetrates from the outside. Stained glass windows enhance the glory of natural light. Beginning in the Baroque, light does not just glimmer above but swells up from within. In his essay about Leibniz and the Baroque, Deleuze explains how the hermetically sealed monad—the

Figure 8: A view of the auditorium of the Staatsoper in 1844. Reprinted from Georg Quander, ed., Apollini et Musis (Berlin: Propyläen, 1992), 355.



²⁸ André Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, trans. by Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967-71), 107.

paragon of interiority—does not turn its back on light, but turns inward to the white light of reason:

The Baroque is inseparable from a new regime of light and color...yet this is not in opposition to light; to the contrary, it is by virtue of the regime of light...

More exactly, since monads have no openings, a light that has been “sealed” is lit in each one when it is raised to the level of reason. A whiteness is produced through all the tiny mirrors.²⁹

Insofar as divinity is discerned in this white light, it is by allegory. The coherence of multiplicity in totality is represented in the intricacy of a chandelier that produces one radiant form.

The theater, as the perfect interior, comes to be self-sufficient, with its own internal cosmology. The Greek theater was open to the sky. Palladio’s Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza takes the next step, blocking off the heavens but replacing it with a representational image. Subsequent ceilings represent the heavens more symbolically, with personifications of gods amidst the clouds. The next transformation is the chandelier, the non-indicative allegory of the heavens.

The chandelier glows throughout the auditorium, and rather than dissipating, light compounds in bouncing back off the concave walls. The keystone of the interior is the dome. In its shape and scale, a dome renders a space a sanctuary, an enclosure that keeps the inside in and the outside out. This the theater adopts from the church. Here again we see evidence of Harries’ argument: the theater as a sacred counterpart to the home:

Consider the traditional understanding of the church as a house (*domus*—*Dom*) in which the community joins in sacred celebration, a building which both is and signifies a house, but by also signifying an ideal

²⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. by Tom Conley, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 32.

architecture, casts a special light on ordinary houses and on the activities they serve.³⁰

In the words themselves we see a correlation. Both the home and the theater are characterized by their allocation of space.

The acoustic function of the dome is to echo back, to create a chamber wherein internal activity is preserved and amplified. A dome locks in sound with a nurturing touch. In other words, as Adorno argues in “Natural History of the Theatre,” the dome supplants the outside with a closed circuit within:

Even though theatres, whether ancient or modern, have been crowned by domes ever since the Renaissance, they only fulfill their strict function in the opera. It is not just that they shut out the sky and replace the sun, moon and stars with a simulacrum of themselves in the form of a chandelier. More importantly, they create the only acoustic space in which opera should properly be heard. The dome conceals the dialectic which is liberated by opera. It is a partition wall and a reflector all in one. Music, which as chorale once aspired to reach God’s ears, now bounces back from the ceiling. But although unyielding, the dome’s soft rotundity gathers up the sound which would simply be dissipated in the open air. Having gathered it in, it sends it back transformed.³¹

The inner-directed space does not merely trap sound; to the contrary, it engenders transcendence.

Like velvet, the dome promises to witness our experience, to send back confirmation of the purchased aesthetic without committing the affair to mere commodity status. The experience will be remembered but never represented with perfect fidelity.

Adorno continues:

Thus the dome, which is what separates our closed theatres most clearly from the open amphitheatres of antiquity, contains the promise that whatever happens here will not be forgotten, but will be preserved, so that

³⁰ Karsten Harries, “Theatricality and Re-Presentation,” in *Perspecta*, Vol. 26, (1990), 34.

³¹ Theodor Adorno, “The Natural History of the Theater,” in *Quasi una Fantasia*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (New York: Verso, 1998), 76.

one day it will return as an echo, subtly transformed, and will welcome us in the sphere of this finite cosmos.³²

This finite cosmos is modern cosmology. With the Enlightenment the balance shifts from appeals to the infinity beyond to an asymptotic infinity, wholly within the dominion of man.

§

Having daydreamed through much of the first act, I escape from *Norma* immediately following the first act, while the audience is still in thrall. The ushers have not opened the doors or tied back the curtains so I do it myself. Again my eyes have to adjust to the oppressive light of the hallway. With my friend I circle around the ring towards the stairs, to descend three flights to the *Konditerei* for drinks.

The halls feel eerie. The halls are bereft of people, inhabited only by young ushers as stiff and glassy-eyed as zombies, dressed in ridiculous uniforms that remind me of Bela Lugosi playing Dracula. The audience is still hailing *Norma* inside. The halls feel *utterly* empty, as I have come to expect these spaces to be bustling. I associate these halls with a disorderly crowd, a place where people unwind from the ritual inside. When the halls are empty, the air is dead and the gilded cornices drip with kitsch. And I feel like a criminal for catching the space off guard, uninhabited by its public. We hope to be first in line for wine.

By the time we arrive in the *Konditerei*, down three flights of stairs, other fugitives from the auditorium have lined up ahead of us. So we settle into our place and

³² Ibid. 77.

eye the pre-set tables (not for us); on each, a patron number, champagne, and miniature pastries. The crowd begins to swarm in.

The room fills with smoke and chatter. The noise and mirrored walls make the space disorienting. I look through the mirror behind the bar at the crowd behind me. The frame around the mirror is intricately carved with floral cornices under a patina of metallic-gold. When I reach the front of the line, the barista barks at me impatiently. I stammer my order despite a feeling of gut-evisceration, the same feeling that envelops me when, as I step out of a car, the car starts to move.

My friend obtains a drink despite similar discomfort, and we wander over to an unobtrusive corner (a corner in the middle of the room, since beams divide the room into several chambers). I stand up straighter than is comfortable and we exchange shrugs over the production so far. I swirl my wine and sip, feeling besieged by artifice.

§

The proscenium that frames the stage of the Staatsoper is not especially ornate. The décor of the auditorium is, in general, reduced to essential elements: chandelier, velvet, and not much else. This *relative* austerity has always distinguished the Staatsoper from other opera houses, especially in the era of its christening.³³ Like the Neo-Palladian exterior, the sensible simplicity of the auditorium is ahead of its time.

³³ As I mention above, the opera house has been rebuilt or renovated many times. In each case, the interior, the exterior and the antechambers have been, to varying extents, refashioned. In keeping with Knobeldorff's sensible plans, the interior has never been excessively ornate. The most recent rebuilding—completed in 1955, under the leadership of architect Richard Paulick—is, by far, the least embellished rendition (lacking individual boxes, a ceiling fresco, and an elaborate proscenium). On the history of the various renovations, see Manfred Haedler, “‘Mein entzückendes Zauberschloß’: Die Baugeschichte der

The auditorium expresses inwardness in opposition to the spaces that surround it: the maze of entranceways, ballrooms, stairwells, foyers, cloakrooms, halls and the konditerei. Not coincidentally, these spaces retain more of the early-Rococo character that the auditorium forfeits in its pursuit of insularity.

Architect Francesco Algarotti lends his support to this dialectic (i.e. between an austere auditorium and a florid periphery) in his 1756 “Essay on Opera.” The essay was his contribution to a wide-ranging public debate over opera aesthetics. Algarotti, an architect, brings an economical aesthetic to the layout of the theater: he argues that a semi-ellipse should replace the bell shape of the seats and that columns between boxes should be eliminated, both in the service of better sight lines. Algarotti goes on to insist that an architect save his inclination for décor for the antechambers:

An architect will find opportunities of displaying his talents and judgment in directing the workmanship as well as the ornamental parts of the boxes and of the rest of the theatre. That artist will justly merit our praise who will order carving in wood to be light, but with taste at the same time, and he will be indulged in displaying all the pomp and magnificence of his art on the outside, in galleries, niches, balconies etc...³⁴

Just as the vocal lines should purge extraneous ornament, the interior should banish excessive flourishes in the gilding. Algarotti traveled throughout Europe, and found few opera houses that live up to his standards. He does cite one, the Staatsoper, as exemplary:

The theatre which was dedicated some years ago in Berlin to Apollo and the Muses does not fall far short of this idea, and is ranked among the first-rate ornaments of that imperial city.³⁵

Lindenoper,” in *Apollini et Musis 250 Jahre Opernhaus Unter den Linden*, ed. Georg Quander (Berlin: Propyläen, 1992).

³⁴ Francesco Algarotti, *An Essay on the Opera*, ed. by Robin Burgess [anonymous translation] (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, Ltd, 2005), 64.

³⁵ Ibid. 64.

The interior does achieve a nice balance of modesty and grandeur. But Algarotti's favor is not impartial. In the years that the Staatsoper was being built, he was a close friend of Frederick the Great. It is unlikely that he did not have some influence on the design of the opera house.

Nonetheless, Algarotti is not alone in his estimation. That the Staatsoper continues to be rebuilt and renovated attests to its sensible layout more than its beauty. The auditorium privileges purity over excessive ornament. A British visitor to the house in 1780s admitted: "I have seen Operas with much more brilliancy of gas and gilding; but none nearly so convenient to the human mind and sense."³⁶

Ornament collects like silt around the periphery. In the auditorium, velvet, chandelier and proscenium are requisite, but mirrors, gilded vines arching over doorways, the portrait gallery, and a shiny marble floor are all pushed to the outside. The opera house does not banish ornament; to the contrary, it pushes ornament outward so as to sharpen the purity of the interior. The phantasmagorias of the interior—including the stagecraft itself and its echo chamber, the auditorium—rely on the labyrinthine structure that surrounds it. André Bazin makes the point clear:

These few square feet of light and illusion are surrounded by machinery and flanked by wings, the hidden labyrinths of which do not interfere one bit with the pleasure of the spectator who is playing the game of theater. Because it is only part of the architecture of the stage, the décor of the theater is thus an area materially enclosed, limited, circumscribed, the only discoveries of which are those of our collusive imagination.

Its appearances are turned inward facing the public and the footlights. It exists by virtue of its reverse side and of anything beyond, as the painting exists by virtue of its frame.³⁷

³⁶ Thomas Carlyle, *The History of Frederick the Great, Vol. IV* (New York, Peter Fenelon Collier, 1897), 367.

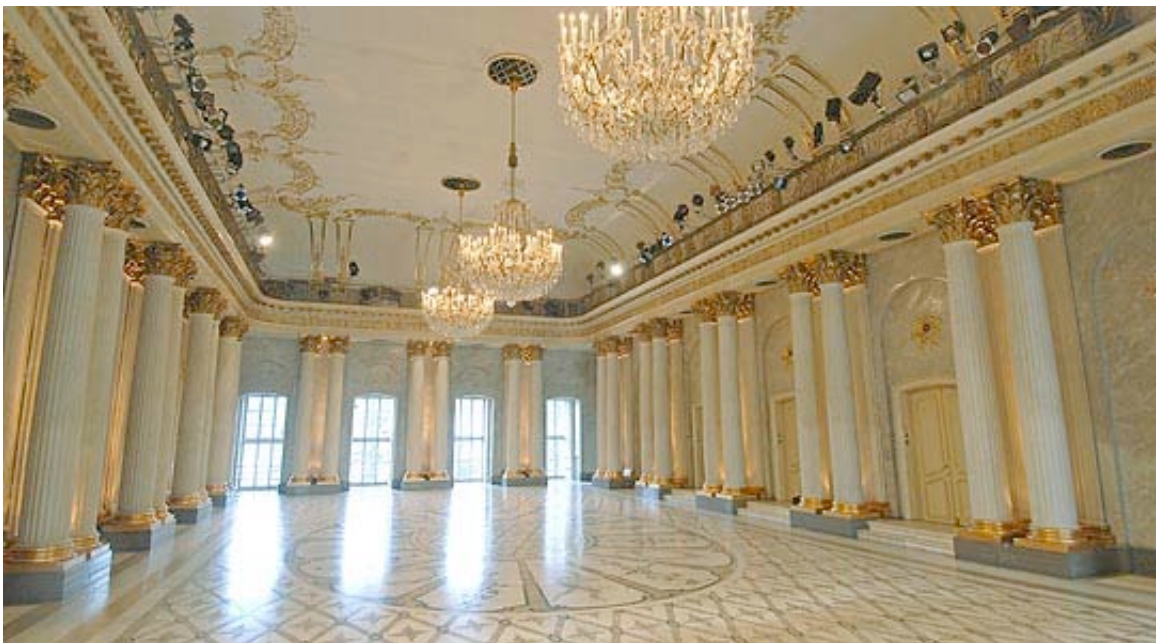
³⁷ André Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, trans. by Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967-71), 104-5.

Though hidden, the elaborate machinery around, above, and beneath the stage contributes to the spectacle. In plain sight, the antechambers that surround the auditorium play a no less surreptitious role in sustaining the spell.

At the Staatsoper, the foyers, casino (café), halls and stairwells bombard you with atmosphere. Little chandeliers and marble floors glimmer, mirrors and gilded trimmings shine. Reflections multiply glitzy attire, jewelry, and sequins. These ornamental spaces deflect sustained focus, but not haphazardly. They evacuate time and perception of their everyday functionality. Walking through a corona, you cannot but orient yourself towards the hallowed center.

The web of vestibules and cafés in the opera house acts like the frame around a painting. When I look at a painting, I configure the image in relation to the frame. My gaze moves between the frame and the painting, but the ultimate resolution, the one I commit to memory, is the painting alone. At the opera, a frame surrounds the

Figure 9: The Apollonsaal, the second-story foyer of the Staatsoper. Image: Staatsoper Unter den Linden.



auditorium, though fluctuations between experience of the frame and experience of the work of art last quarters of hours rather than quarters of seconds.

Picture frames all share an explicit function: to set apart the image, closing it off from everything around: “The frame adorns a painting because it isolates it, sets it apart from the surrounding mass of other objects, and commends it to our attention as an exceptional object.”³⁸ If, however, one hoped *only* to isolate an image, it would be as easy as lining its trim in duct tape. But a frame does more than isolate.

In addition to establishing a boundary, a frame should render the interior aesthetic:

The frame therefore raises at these borders an aesthetic barrier that protects the artificial world created by the painter from the reality beyond and thus protects our collusion with the artist’s fiction. To do so, it may not absorb too much of our attention. It should attract it only to send it on, should invite us to look past the frame, pass through it, into the picture.³⁹

A frame has to attract our attention, and then deliver us inward. Once inside, the world reverses; not chaotically, but as a meticulous negation of the mundane, non-aesthetic world. A work of art, as José Ortega y Gasset describes it in a short essay on the picture frame, is “an aperture of unreality that opens magically unto us in our real world.”⁴⁰ We might set off for the opera still calibrated to clock time, but at some point, we have to transition into a disposition that does not smirk at operatic time (to say nothing of cardboard swords and melismatic conversations). On this transformation of disposition, Ortega y Gasset declares: “My spirit leaps from reality to unreality as if from

³⁸ Karl Philipp Moritz, “Preliminary Ideas on the Theory of Ornament,” in *Theory of Decorative Art*, ed. by Isabelle Frank (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 259.

³⁹ Karsten Harries, *The Broken Frame* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1989), 68.

⁴⁰ José Ortega y Gasset, “Meditations on the Frame,” trans. by Andrea L. Bell, *Perspecta* 26 (1990), 188.

wakefulness to dreams.”⁴¹ His spirit does not drift into aesthetic reflection; it leaps. The frame mediates this leap, at once the springboard and the chasm to cross.

The frame around a painting establishes a spacious interior with a ribbon of controlled disorder. Tangles of gilded vines and seashell cornices stand apart from blank white walls and whatever lies within. The labyrinth is convoluted, but one can see that there is a beginning and an end. Metallic sheen accentuates glimmer at the expense of intelligibility:

Thus the gilded frame, with its bristling halo of sharp-edged radiance, inserts a ribbon of pure splendor between the painting and the unreal world. Its reflections, acting like excited little daggers, incessantly cut the lines that we unwittingly string up between the unreal painting and the surrounding reality.⁴²

A rectangular band of painted wood transports us from inattention into half-conscious excitement, a non-specific awareness that something special is just beyond. What had once been an asymptote to which aesthetics aspired—the imitation of nature—is overcome and cast in gold or plaster.

Between the Rococo gilding overhead and the tessellated patterns in the marble floors underfoot, visitors to the Staatsoper glide through intermission as though confined to the frame. Mirrors compound the decentralized brilliance of so many chandeliers.

Intermission is the self-effacing but necessary supplement to aesthetic contemplation:

Pictures live housed within their frames... Each has need of the other. A picture without a frame has the air about it of a naked, despoiled man. Its contents seem to spill out over the four sides of the canvas and dissolve into the atmosphere. By the same token, the frame constantly demands a picture with which to fill its interior, and does so to such an extent that, in

⁴¹ Ibid. 188.

⁴² José Ortega y Gasset, “Meditations on the Frame,” trans. by Andrea L. Bell, *Perspecta* 26 (1990), 189–190.

the absence of one, the frame will tend to convert whatever happens to be visible within it into a picture.⁴³

At intermission, we acknowledge, with animated conversation or impartial shrugs, that whatever has just taken place in the auditorium is some kind of art. We buy into the autonomy of that art when we return for the final act, despite the sometimes pressing compulsion to leave.

The passage of time—marked by the conductor in the auditorium and our own clocks and watches in the outside world—is here measured by some unseen spirit. Just as time begins to calibrate itself to cigarettes and sips of wine, ominous bells pierce through our interruptible conversations. As Adorno remarks in the “Natural History of the Theatre,” a conversation in the foyers has only a wisp of ontology:

If you speak, you at once forget what you have said. You have heard nothing of what is said in front of you or behind you. You are merely cocooned in the hum of voices in which without your assistance, the harmony of the spheres can safely be heard...

But in the intelligible world of the foyer you are but shadows. You have left your body behind in the auditorium...⁴⁴

There are, of course, those who go to the opera *primarily* to circulate through the crowd. If the insular auditorium resembles a living room, then the web of antechambers is the perfected city itself, replete with resident flâneurs. As Benjamin observes, the flâneur thrives in disorienting nooks and recesses: “The city is the realization of that ancient dream of humanity, the labyrinth. It is this reality to which the flâneur, without knowing

⁴³ Ibid. 187.

⁴⁴ Theodor Adorno, “The Natural History of the Theater,” in *Quasi una Fantasia*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (New York: Verso, 1998), 75.

it, devotes himself.”⁴⁵ In the opera house, their counterparts squirm in the auditorium and find their home in halls, stairwells and the *konditerei*.

The glimmering vestibules of the Staatsoper dissolve our memories of everyday life; the clatter of heels on marble contributes to a pleasant white noise. As Winfried Menninghaus explains in reference to the meaning of the arabesque frame in the 18th century, the art of demarcation emerges in concert with autonomous works of art:

As an art of the border and a borderline art, the arabesque frame is designed to confirm and to reinforce the identity of the artwork and thus to demarcate the field of aesthetic autonomy. As such it is a reaction to a new problem in aesthetics, for it is only with the emergence of the modern autonomous system of art that precise demarcation between inside and outside becomes an urgent desideratum.⁴⁶

Upon arrival, during intermission, and after the last act, the spaces between the façade and the interior carry us across the increasingly expansive chasm between reality and determinate unreality.

§

Having made our way down the crowded stairwell, and having retrieved our coats through the bustle before the cloakroom, my friend and I part ways in front of the opera house. She heads toward the U-Bahn that runs along Friedrichstrasse, and I begin my morning walk in reverse. In the midst of the crowd and under a wash of light, I do not feel the cold night air until I set off along Unter den Linden. By the time I cross over to the Lustgarten, I am totally alone. As I reinvent a diagonal path across the raised lawn,

⁴⁵ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 429.

⁴⁶ Winfried Menninghaus, *In Praise of Nonsense: Kant and Bluebeard*, translated by Henry Pickford (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 76-7.

the sound of late-evening traffic dissipates behind me. Images and melodies from the performance parade through my mind until a shiver from the cold awakens me to the moonlit landscape. As I cross the quadrangle behind the Berliner Dom, I listen to the sound of my footsteps impressing themselves into the mostly-frozen mud. I would feel lonely were I not so preoccupied by the cold inactivity of the molecules in the surrounding atmosphere.

Chapter III: Opera and Administration

*Notulis crescentibus crescat Fortuna Regis.*¹

– J.S. Bach, *The Musical Offering*

In the spring of 2006, the Staatsoper began planning a production of *La Clemenza di Tito*—scheduled to open in June of 2007—and I was asked to collect historical and literary materials that relate to the story of Titus.² At that point, I knew only that Mozart had set a libretto by Metastasio about Titus and his court. As the title (*The Clemency of Titus*) suggests, the libretto portrays the Roman Emperor in a kind light. Under the threat of assassination and betrayal, Titus maintains an attitude of perfect generosity and benevolence.

My research quickly led to Suetonius and his *Lives Of The Twelve Caesars*. This historical survey is the primary source of the Emperor's glowing reputation. The chapter on Titus begins by declaring that he was “the darling and delight of mankind.”³ Suetonius goes on to elaborate the brief but memorable reign of Titus with similar warmth: “[Titus] was by nature extremely benevolent.... Once at supper, reflecting that he had done nothing for any that day, he broke out into that memorable and justly-

¹ “As the notes grow so may the fortune of the King.” Bach wrote this explanatory note to accompany the fourth canon of his *Musical Offering*. The entire collection—two ricercars, ten canons, and one trio sonata—consists of contrapuntal variations on a theme by Frederick the Great. In 1747, Bach visited the Prussian court in Potsdam, and upon arrival, Frederick asked the composer to improvise on a given theme. Bach obliged, but later revised and extended the extemporaneous variations. In the fourth canon, the notes double in length with the entry of the second voice.

² Titus Flavius Vespasianus, Roman Emperor from 79–81, not to be confused with his father, also Titus Flavius Vespasianus, now known as Vespasian (r. 69–79), or Titus Andronicus, the wholly fictional protagonist of Shakespeare’s tragedy of the same name.

³ Suetonius Tranquillus, *The Lives Of The Twelve Caesars*, trans. by Alexander Thomson (London: George Bell and Sons, 1893), 465.

admired saying, ‘My friends, I have lost a day.’”⁴ This is the sympathetic sovereign celebrated in Metastasio's libretto.

Titus did, however, display a darker side. Suetonius mentions that before his accession to the throne in 79, Titus was known for cruelty, corruption and licentiousness. The people of Rome expected that Titus “would prove another Nero.”⁵ A few years earlier, Titus had led the Roman army in the siege of Jerusalem. According to Josephus, a Jewish historian under the patronage of the Flavian court, Titus led the campaign in a heroic but cruel fashion. He allowed the torture and crucifixion of 500 Jews each day and sacrificed thousands of Jews to celebrate his brother and father's birthdays.⁶ It is difficult to reconcile this account with the radiant, uncomplicated reputation of Titus that survives today.⁷

If Suetonius is to be believed, Titus earned this warm reputation only in the space of his very short reign: two years, two months, and twenty days. By way of explanation, Suetonius points to a few instances of judicial clemency and a ban on double indemnity.⁸ Suetonius also mentions the eruption of Vesuvius in 79, and the fires and plague in Rome the following year: “Amidst these great many disasters, [Titus] not only manifested the concern which might be expected from a prince, but even the affection of a father for his

⁴ Ibid. 471.

⁵ Ibid. 469.

⁶ Flavius Josephus, *The War of the Jews*, trans. by William Whiston <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext01/warje10.txt> (accessed May, 2008), Book V, Chap. 11.1, Book VII, Chap. 3.1.

⁷ Unsurprisingly, Titus has not been celebrated as a benevolent sovereign in Judaic texts. According to the Book of Gittin in the Babylonian Talmud, Titus had sex with a prostitute in a temple, atop a sacred scroll, during the siege of Jerusalem. In retaliation, a gnat, under the guidance of God, crawled into Titus' nostril and buzzed incessantly, eventually leading to Titus' insanity and death. When they opened his skull after his death, the gnat had grown to the size of a young dove, with claws of iron and a beak of brass. See Isidore Epstein, ed., *Babylonian Talmud*, “Book of Gittin,” translated by Maurice Simon, <http://www.come-and-hear.com/gittin/index.html> (accessed May, 2008), Folios 56-7.

⁸ Suetonius Tranquillus, *The Lives Of The Twelve Caesars*, trans. by Alexander Thomson (London: George Bell and Sons, 1893), 472.

people.”⁹ Lastly, Suetonius cites the Emperor’s massive expenditure on public spectacles, including those in the newly built Colosseum (known at the time as the *Amphitheatrum Flavium*):

In munificence, he was inferior to none of the princes before him. Having dedicated his amphitheatre, and built some warm baths close by it with great expedition, he entertained the people with most magnificent spectacles. He likewise exhibited a naval fight in the old Naumachia, besides a combat of gladiators; and in one day brought into the theatre five thousand wild beasts of all kinds.¹⁰

However benevolent in the face of treason, I suspect that Titus ultimately won over the Roman public with wild beasts and naval reenactments.

In his libretto, Metastasio focuses on the virtues of Titus as expressed in an intimate, courtly setting. The opera was commissioned to celebrate the name-day of Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI in 1734, and as a work with a ceremonial purpose, the story was expected to cast a warm light on sovereignty. Fifty-seven years later, Mozart adapted the same libretto for a similar occasion: the coronation of Holy Roman Emperor Leopold II. The interval between these productions witnessed some forty different adaptations. One of these settings, by Johann Adolf Hasse, was the first opera staged at the newly completed Staatsoper in 1743.¹¹ The recently anointed Frederick II, who personally supervised operatic affairs, recognized a kindred spirit in Titus.¹²

⁹ Ibid. 471-2.

¹⁰ Ibid. 470.

¹¹ The *very first* production at the Staatsoper, Carl Heinrich Graun’s *Cleopatra e Cesare*, took place the previous December in the still unfinished building. Construction ended in October, 1743, and the opera house reopened with a costume ball (*Redoute*) and *La Clemenza di Tito*. See Manfred Haedler, “Chronik des Opernhauses Unter den Linden,” *Apollini et Musis 250 Jahre Opernhaus Unter den Linden*, ed. Georg Quander (Berlin: Propyläen, 1992), 369.

¹² See, for example, “Épître sur l’usage de la fortune,” written in 1740, in which Frederick sings praises of Titus (in rhyming couplets) as an exemplary sovereign: Frederick II, King of Prussia, “Épître sur l’usage de la fortune,” in *Œuvres de Frédéric le Grand*, 14, <http://friedrich.uni-trier.de/oeuvres/14/91/text/> (accessed May, 2008).

The seventeen centuries separating Titus and Frederick make comparison a bit tenuous, but at the very least, we can see that both rulers seem to have been attuned to the logic of cultural subsidies. They both understood that extravagant spectacles would satiate public desire while flaunting the magnanimity of the sovereign. As Frederick himself writes in *Anti-Machiavelli*, “The surest sign that a country, under a wise government, is happy, abundant and rich, is when the fine arts and sciences are born in its center.”¹³

At the Staatsoper, as at the Colosseum, seating is explicitly tiered according to class.¹⁴ In a precise arrangement of concentric arcs and rings, the public forms an animate corona around the king. As a temporary supplement to the court itself, the public contributes its presence to the royal décor:

Their homage consists in *being there*, their faces turned towards the ruler, gathered round him, but not approaching him too close, dazzled by him, fearing him and looking to him as the source of all things.... They have, as it were, colonized the sun; they show other men that it is habitable.¹⁵

If not fixated on the royal box, the collective gaze is directed towards the performance.

The spectacle is intended to underscore the legitimacy of the sovereign—in fact, it would be difficult to imagine a more overt celebration of enlightened despotism than *La*

¹³ Frederick II, King of Prussia, “L’Antimachiavel, ou examen du prince de Machiavel,” *Œuvres de Frédéric le Grand*; 8 <http://friedrich.uni-trier.de/oeuvres/8/303/text/> (accessed May, 2008).

¹⁴ See J.C. Edmondson, “Dynamic Arenas: Gladiatorial Presentations in the City of Rome and the Construction of Roman Society during the Early Empire”, in *Roman Theater and Society*, edited by William J. Slater (Ann Arbor : University of Michigan Press, 1996), 69-112; Walter Rösler, “‘Die Canaille bezahlet man zum Plaisir.’ Die königliche Schaubühne zu Berlin unter Friedrich II.,” in *Apollini et Musis: 250 Jahre Opernhaus Unter den Linden*, edited by Georg Quander (Berlin: Propyläen, 1992).

¹⁵ Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. by Carol Stewart, (New York: Continuum, 1981), 400. Canetti’s description of the royal court has an interesting precursor in Étienne de la Boétie’s *The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*. The 16th-century French essayist identifies the royal court as a congregation of men who “accept servility in order to acquire wealth.” The despot uses the courtiers as a corona to his power; the courtiers sacrifice their own independence to live for splendor and hope of favor, in the shadow of terror: “These wretches see the glint of the despot’s treasures and are bedazzled by the radiance of his splendor. Drawn by this brilliance they come near, without realizing they are approaching a flame that cannot fail to scorch.” See Étienne de la Boétie, *The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, trans. by Harry Kurz, introduction by Murray N. Rothbard (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1997) 80, 84.

Clemenza di Tito. Friedrich finds his place in the royal box, located at one focal point of the elliptical auditorium, a point where the spectral fairy dust that radiates from the stage accumulates like auric silt.

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Berlin, a city in dismal financial straits—beset with high unemployment, a debt of € 60 billion and no industry to speak of—spends over € 100 million every year to subsidize its three major opera houses. During the year that I lived in Berlin, there were more opera performances there than in any other city in the world.¹⁶ The three opera houses in Berlin also received the highest public subsidy in the world.¹⁷ In the United States, € 100 million would cover the entire annual budget of the National Endowment for the Arts.¹⁸

¹⁶ There were 465 operatic performances in Berlin during the 2005-2006 season, compared with 355 performances in Paris and 338 performances in Vienna. These figures include the Staatsoper Unter den Linden, the Deutsche Oper and the Komische Oper in Berlin; the Opéra Bastille and Opéra Garnier in Paris; and the Wiener Staatsoper and Volksoper Wien in Vienna. The figure in Vienna rises to 464 if you include operettas and musicals. Stiftung Oper in Berlin, “Zahlen und Fakten der Spielzeit 2005/06,” www.oper-in-berlin.de/info/zahlenfakten.php3?id_language=1 (accessed February, 2006); Jeannine Cardona and Chantal Lacroix, “Chiffres clés édition 2007,” *Statistiques de la Culture*. www2.culture.gouv.fr/deps/chiffrescles2007/global2007.pdf (accessed March, 2008); Statistik Austria, “Aufführungen der Spielzeit 2005/06 an den Bundestheatern, Wiener Privattheatern und Vereinigten Bühnen Wien nach Werkkategorien,” www.statistik.at/web_de/statistiken/bildung_und_kultur/kultur/theater_und_musik/021280.html (accessed March, 2008).

¹⁷ In Vienna, the Staatsoper and Volksoper received a combined € 85 million, and the Paris Opéra received about € 94 million. Milan's La Scala and London's Royal Opera House at Covent Garden each received less than € 50 million. Statistik Austria, “Gebärung der Bundestheater, Wiener Privattheater und Vereinigten Bühnen Wien und der österreichischen Länderbühnen und Stadttheater 2005/06.” www.statistik.at/web_de/statistiken/bildung_und_kultur/kultur/theater_und_musik/021286.html (accessed March, 2008); Jeannine Cardona and Chantal Lacroix, “Chiffres clés édition 2007,” *Statistiques de la Culture*. www2.culture.gouv.fr/deps/chiffrescles2007/global2007.pdf (accessed March, 2008); Barbie Nadeau, “Money and Monuments,” *Newsweek*, 26 December, 2005.

¹⁸ National Endowment for the Arts, “President Bush Signs Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2008 with \$144.7 Million for National Endowment for the Arts.” [press release] <http://arts.endow.gov/news/news07/Budget2008.html> (accessed March, 2008).

The arrangement in Berlin is partly the result of historical inertia: when the Wall came down in 1989, there were two opera houses in the East (the Staatsoper Unter den Linden and the Komische Oper) and one in the West (the Deutsche Oper). All three opera houses continued to operate. Today, Berlin cannot afford to subsidize three houses, especially three houses that do not bring in much revenue. But it remains politically hazardous to suggest eliminating one of the houses. In the last couple years, funding has been scaled back, and the ballet companies and production workshops have been consolidated.

By any standard, however, the overall subsidy remains generous. The Berlin government continues to lavish money (that it doesn't have) on an unpopular and expensive art form. I have asked an array of Berliners—including opera administrators and people who have never been to the opera—about the current arrangement. Almost everyone tells me that subsidies for the arts are taken for granted in Germany; they often add that the United States, by contrast, lacks this cultural value.

Like opera itself, public financing is a tradition. Artistic institutions throughout Germany and the rest of Europe rely on subsidies, but the situation in Berlin is extreme. Spending so much money on opera may not seem like a sound fiscal policy, but there is some economic incentive. Berlin has lost almost two-thirds of its manufacturing jobs since 1990 and now relies on tourism to keep the economy puttering along.¹⁹ In the words of the former intendant of the Komische Oper, Albert Kost, “The politicians have

¹⁹ Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg, *Die kleine Berlin-Statistik 2007* (Berlin: H&P-Druck, 2007), 59–60.

to find money to invest. The cultural life of Berlin is really the only big thing [the city has going for it].”²⁰

Although few politicians or administrators question the idea that the state should support opera, they bicker constantly over the amount and the distribution of this money. The Berlin opera scene seems to exist in a perpetual state of crisis. If the debate over finance subsidies, a gory staging will make its debut and fan the flames of controversy.²¹ In this maelstrom opera carries on, and money continues to flow from the city government to the three opera houses.²²

Like the tangled roots of a shrub, a convoluted bureaucracy provides the opera scene with both nourishment and stability. The network of power involved in opera administration is Byzantine, a fact that vexes any attempt at reorganization. By channeling power through an elaborate and cyclical bureaucracy, the opera world prolongs its privileged existence.

To my mind, opera subsidies in Berlin provide us with a great example of how ideology enlists the support of the general public while serving the interests of the elite.²³ The government officials and opera house administrators talk in platitudes about the

²⁰ Rudolph Rauch, “Barenboim in Berlin,” *Opera News*, Vol. 64 Issue 11 (May 2000), 46.

²¹ In recent years, the organizational and financial problems of the Berlin opera scene have repeatedly garnered international press coverage. In addition to off-stage controversy, three particular productions stand out for attracting international attention: *Idomeneo* at the Deutsche Oper, *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* at the Komische Oper, and *Don Carlo* at the Staatsoper. All three feature graphic torture scenes.

²² In Germany, municipal and regional governments share the cost of cultural subsidies, and the federal government contributes less than 15%. Berlin is a city-state [*Stadtstaat*], meaning that the city must pay for itself, without drawing on the support of the surrounding region (i.e. as Munich draws on the financial resources of Bavaria).

²³ In this respect, the opera industry in Berlin is an exemplary “Ideological State Apparatus.” Louis Althusser uses this designation to refer to institutions that regulate ideology in a manner more persuasive than coercive. Althusser contrasts the singular, repressive State Apparatus (e.g. government, military, police force) with a plurality of institutions that promote the interests of the ruling class primarily through ideology (i.e. schools, churches, opera houses). See Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, translated by Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 121-176.

importance of tradition and cultural heritage. On this point, the public does not disagree, at least not enough to protest. As a cultural institution, opera is gift-wrapped in rhetoric about freedom and creativity. It should not surprise us that the value of this gift would manifest itself symbolically for the general public and materially for the elite. When I asked the deputy business manager of the Staatsoper if he was worried that the city would continue to cut opera subsidies, he told me that they would cross that bridge when they came to it. For the time being, however, “the people who decide [to subsidize opera] earn a lot of money. The people who visit the opera, they earn a lot of money. If I like opera, and I decide, then of course I have an interest in lower ticket prices.”

Opera in Berlin began under the auspices of enlightened despotism, when Frederick the Great commissioned the construction of an opera house in 1740. Although the Staatsoper opened to the public early on, it continued to operate as a top-down cultural institution, privileging the interests of the sovereign over those of the public. After World War I and the abdication of the Hohenzollern dynasty, opera became the province of the state and began to display the trappings of public administration. Nonetheless, the executive branches of government (both state and federal) continued to exercise influence over the opera scene, especially during the Nazi era. After World War II, bureaucracy spread like a virus in both East and West Berlin, while overextended executive control became something of a taboo. Today, opera administration in Berlin looks to be mired in bureaucracy. In its heart, however, the Berlin opera scene is not answerable to bureaucratic standards; to the contrary, it draws its power from secret reserves of enlightened despotism.

In this chapter, I explore the dynamics of cultural administration in the exaggerated context of the Berlin opera scene. I begin by surveying the cultural economy of contemporary Berlin, and the contentious place of opera within that economy. Then I address the organizational structure of opera administration in Berlin. As we shall see, there is an ideal, functional form of bureaucratic administration, but the opera world is a far cry from this ideal. I shall not explain how decisions are made, per se, focusing instead on illustrating how convoluted the system is, and showing how these convolutions serve the interests of the elite.

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By the mid-19th century, Berlin began to grow into a hub of commerce and industry. In 1871, when Berlin became the capital of the newly unified German Republic, industrial jobs already accounted for almost 60% of the workforce.²⁴ The city and economy grew at a rapid pace into the early 20th Century. After World War I, however, the economy expanded and contracted in manic fits and starts. Despite several bouts with hyperinflation, the intermittent prosperity of the 1920s saw the population of Berlin balloon to well over four-million. The Great Depression hit in 1929, and unemployment rates rose as high as 40%, sowing economic desperation that would fuel the Nazi's rise to power.²⁵

The cultural economy of contemporary Berlin began to take shape after World War II. By 1945, the city had lost almost half of its population, and the infrastructure had

²⁴ Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg, *Die kleine Berlin-Statistik 2007* (Berlin: H&P-Druck, 2007), 59.

²⁵ Eric Own Smith, *The German Economy* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 5.

been ravaged. Corporations relocated to less isolated parts of West Germany. The East German government invested in industry, but as a divided city, Berlin was no longer a major center of finance and manufacturing.²⁶

The fall of the Wall and the transition into re-unification (known in German as *Die Wende*) led to monumental challenges for the economy. The industry that remained in East Berlin struggled to compete with Western firms. Manufacturing jobs disappeared throughout the city and now account for less than 15% of workforce.²⁷ The unemployment rate has doubled since 1990, peaking at almost 20% in 2005.²⁸

Without an adequate tax base, the spending habits of the Berlin government have led to an enormous debt, surpassing € 60 billion in 2006. In addition to restoring the infrastructure (e.g. abandoned apartment buildings in the East, two systems of public transportation, etc.) and nursing a populace of 3.4 million that takes welfare for granted, the government must set aside billions of euros every year to repay debts and accrued interest.

Berlin also spends about 2% of its budget on cultural subsidies.²⁹ This amounts to about € 400 million every year. This money is distributed over an expansive cultural landscape. Berlin is home to over 120 museums and 50 theaters.³⁰ The state also supports eight professional orchestras. This lush cultural scene is the result of re-unification. The city is not eager to close any museums or theaters, even those that do

²⁶ Wolfgang Rupf, "Der Wirtschaftsstandort Berlin," *Berlin: Die Hauptstadt*, ed. Werner Süß and Ralf Rytlewski (Nicolai: Berlin, 1999), 390.

²⁷ Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg, *Die kleine Berlin-Statistik 2007* (Berlin: H&P-Druck, 2007), 60.

²⁸ Wolfgang Rupf, "Der Wirtschaftsstandort Berlin," *Berlin: Die Hauptstadt*, ed. Werner Süß and Ralf Rytlewski (Nicolai: Berlin, 1999), 402; Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg, *Die kleine Berlin-Statistik 2007* (Berlin: H&P-Druck, 2007), 45.

²⁹ Senatsverwaltung für Finanzen, "Haushalt und Finanzen Berlins. Ein Überblick," http://www.berlin.de/imperia/md/content/senatsverwaltungen/finanzen/haushalt/haushalt_und_finanzen_berlins_ein_berblick_februar_2008.pdf (accessed March, 2008).

³⁰ Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg, *Die kleine Berlin-Statistik 2007* (Berlin: H&P-Druck, 2007), 18.

not fit into the new social geography of Berlin. For example, there is a cluster of major museums in a very quiet corner of Berlin known as Dahlem. The tree-lined streets of Dahlem are not so far from the commercial center of the former West Berlin. Today, however, the center of Berlin is further east, and tourists seem unwilling to venture so far into the *Vorstädte*. I always enjoyed visiting Dahlem's Museum of East Asian Art, in part because I could wander the galleries in total solitude.

About one quarter of the city's cultural subsidies go to opera. The three opera houses employ almost 2,000 people, not including several-hundred guest artists every year. State expenditure on opera exceeded € 115 million in 2002; since then, the budget has come down a little every year, to € 101 million in the 2007-2008 season.³¹

As a percentage of the total budget, Berlin's support for culture is comparable to other states in Germany. The distribution of funds according to the type of institution (i.e. theaters, museums, concert venues, etc.) is also similar to that of Germany as a whole.³² Of course, most German states do not rely so heavily on borrowed money to cover their expenses.³³

The primary justification for spending 2% of the annual budget on cultural subsidies is tradition. The expectation that the state will support cultural life is pervasive in Europe. In fact, as a percentage of the GDP, cultural subsidies in Germany are rather low compared with those of other members of the European Union.³⁴

³¹ Stiftung Oper in Berlin, "Zahlen und Fakten der Spielzeit 2007/08," www.oper-in-berlin.de/info/zahlenfakten.php3?id_language=1 (accessed March, 2008).

³² Bernd Wagner and Norbert Sievers, "Country Profile: Germany," *Compendium: Cultural Policies and Trends in Europe* (Council of Europe: Strasbourg Cedex, France, 2007), 38.

³³ Berlin ranks 2nd (behind Bremen) among the sixteen German *Bundesländer* in debt per capita. See Susanne Hagenkort-Rieger und Jeannette Nagel, eds., "Die Bundesländer: Strukturen und Entwicklungen" (Statistisches Bundesamt: Wiesbaden, 2006), 114.

³⁴ Government expenditure on recreation and culture in Germany was equivalent to about .7% of the GDP in 2002. This is a less than in (for example): Italy, France, Belgium, Netherlands, Czech Republic, Spain

There are also pragmatic reasons for Berlin to support the arts. Berlin is the third most visited city in Europe (after Paris and London), and tourism pumps over € 5 billion a year into the city's economy.³⁵ People tend to visit Berlin because of its reputation as a cultural cynosure. The combination of a good quality of life and cheap real estate makes Berlin a magnet for creative individuals and industries. In this context, maintenance of cultural subsidies might pay off in the long run.

In 2003, the recently-elected mayor of Berlin, Klaus Wowereit, referred to the city as poor but sexy. The quip has become something of a slogan. Wowereit, a Social Democrat, is not so interested in Berlin's legacy as a center of manufacturing and finance. He would prefer to see Berlin live up to its potential as the cultural capital of Europe.

After being re-elected in 2006, Wowereit affirmed his personal interest in cultural affairs. The mayor restructured Berlin's secretariat, eliminating the Ministry of Culture. More precisely, he folded the Ministry of Culture into the Chancellery. Wowereit then appointed himself as the *de facto* successor to the Secretary of Culture.

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As the acting Secretary of Culture, Wowereit is also chair of the advisory board that oversees the *Stiftung Oper in Berlin* [Opera Foundation of Berlin]. The Stiftung is the central administrative organ of the Berlin opera scene. Created in 2004, the Stiftung

and Denmark. See Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, "Government Expenditure on Recreation and Culture," *OECD Factbook 2006*, <http://lysander.sourceoecd.org/pdf/fact2006pdf/10-02-02.pdf> (Accessed March, 2006).

³⁵ Tanja Mühlhans, et al, eds. *Kulturwirtschaft in Berlin: Entwicklung und Potenziale* (Berlin: Senatsverwaltung für Wirtschaft, Arbeit und Frauen in Berlin; Senatsverwaltung für Wissenschaft, Forschung und Kultur, 2005), 14.

“combines the three opera houses, the Staatsballett Berlin, and the stage services company as individual entities under its administration as a legal corporation.”³⁶

The city government had been hoping for a more efficient system of operatic administration. Prior to the establishment of the Stiftung, the three opera house did not cooperate, or even coordinate their schedules. The government channeled money into all three companies, and opera simply gushed over the city like water from an open fire hydrant. The Stiftung is the city's official attempt at irrigation.

Now, Klaus Wowereit has taken centralization a step further. He stands at the helm of both the city of Berlin and its opera scene. The repercussions of his leadership in either sphere will not be clear for some time, but there are some good signs: the city of Berlin balanced its budget in 2007, and all three opera companies carry on despite diminished subsidies. Nevertheless, the mayor cannot quell the persistent din of pessimism and warnings of an imminent crisis in the opera world.

Berlin is familiar with opera crises. The opera scene is always clamoring for attention. During the economic roller coaster of the Weimar era, the city endured the so-called *Opernkrise*. Although controversy has been a fixture in the Berlin opera scene, the 1920s were superlative in this regard.

As it does today, Berlin subsidized three opera houses in the 1920s: the Staatsoper, the Städtische Oper (the precursor to the Deutsche Oper) and the Kroll Oper (an autonomous off-shoot of the Staatsoper). During the 19th century, Berlin had been something of a backwater in the opera world. Although several prominent composers cycled through the administrative ranks of Staatsoper—including Spontini, Meyerbeer and Richard Strauss—the opera scene never garnered the international reputation of

³⁶ Stiftung Oper in Berlin, “Stiftung Oper in Berlin,” <http://www.oper-in-berlin.de> (Accessed March, 2008).

opera in Paris, Vienna, Milan or Bayreuth. In the 1920s, for the first time, Berlin's opera scene began to flourish. Erich Kleiber conducted at the Staatsoper, and Bruno Walter led the Städtische Oper. Otto Klemperer oversaw the exceedingly adventurous program at the Kroll Oper. Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* premiered here in 1925, as did Kurt Weill's *Dreigroschenoper* in 1928.

Of course, the city could not afford three opera houses. And the prevalence of avant-garde production values fueled the contentious atmosphere. Brian Gilliam summarizes the tense state of affairs in terms that still resonate:

“Die Opernkrise” was the catchword of the day. Reduced budgets, worries about declining ticket sales, and fear of the increasing popularity of film made running an opera house an especially daunting task during the decade following the First World War.³⁷

Ultimately, the economic and political crises of the Weimar era trumped the *Opernkrise*. After assuming power in 1933, the Nazis took direct control of the Staatsoper and Städtische Oper. The last operatic performance at the Kroll Oper took place in 1931, and after the Reichstag fire in 1933, the vacant opera house became the home of the National Socialist government.

In recent years, “Die Opernkrise” has regained currency as a catchword. Newspapers in Berlin frequently refer to the present state of affairs as such.³⁸ Ever since re-unification, everyone in Berlin has known that something would have to change in the opera scene. But as the economy tanked, the city continued to fund all three opera houses. The budgets of the Staatsoper and Komische Oper skyrocketed to bring them in

³⁷ Brian Gilliam, *Richard Strauss: New Perspectives on the Composer and His Work* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 262.

³⁸ See, for example, Frederik Hanssen, “Opernkrise – Wowereit spielt auf Zeit,” *Tagespiegel*, September 18, 2007; Rolf Lautenschlager, “Opernkrise eine Frage der Zeit,” *Die Tagzeitung*, September 17, 2007; Eleonore Büning, “Milchmädchenstiftung,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 18, 2006.

line with the Western wage standards of the Deutsche Oper. In the meantime, the federal government diminished the generous flow of discretionary subsidies earmarked for culture in the national capital.

Debate reached a fever pitch around 2000. The Secretary of Culture, Christoph Stölzl, led a campaign to combine the Staatsoper and Deutsche Oper. This plan was met with indignation by the opera companies. Daniel Barenboim, the conductor at the Staatsoper, threatened to quit if the plan went through.³⁹ The situation grew tenser still as rumors of anti-Semitism surfaced in the wake of comments by Christian Thielemann, the conductor of the Deutsche Oper, and Klaus Landowsky, a conservative Berlin politician.⁴⁰

In 2003, after a several years of contentious debate, the new Secretary of Culture, Thomas Flierl, came up with the Stiftung idea. Under his plan, the opera houses would lose about 10% of their work force, but retain artistic autonomy. Protest continued—especially from the Staatsoper—but the city government went ahead nonetheless.⁴¹ After the establishment of the Stiftung in 2004, the intendant of the Staatsoper, Peter Mussbach, predicted the demise of at least one house, adding that "the politicians...know full well that three opera houses cannot survive."⁴²

The leadership of the Stiftung fell to Michael Schindhelm, who had been a theater intendant in Basel. After an unpleasant three years—he complained of being bullied by Mayor Wowereit—Schindhelm left Berlin in 2007 to become the cultural minister of

³⁹ Rudolph Rauch, "Barenboim in Berlin," *Opera News*, Vol. 64 Issue 11 (May 2000), 46.

⁴⁰ Roger Cohen, "Berlin Operas Are Feuding, With Anti-Semitic Overtones," *New York Times*, October 21, 2000.

⁴¹ Alan Riding, "Opera War in Berlin: Melodrama in 3 Acts," *New York Times*, March 4, 2003.

⁴² Alan Riding, "Curtain Rises on New Act in Berlin's Opera Wars; Three Fiefs Must Learn How to Share, and to Live on Less," *New York Times*, March 2, 2004.

Dubai.⁴³ Today, the prognosis for the Berlin opera scene remains dire. The new chair of the Stiftung, Stefan Rosinski, has declared bluntly that three opera houses cannot exist on the subsidy as it stands.⁴⁴

As I write this chapter, the crisis carries on. At a press conference in April of 2008, Klaus Wowereit confirmed his intention to not renew Peter Mussbach's contract at the Staatsoper in 2010. Mussbach responded by calling Wowereit a fox (in a bad sense), and accusing both Wowereit and Daniel Barenboim of using Mafia tactics to oust him.⁴⁵ Shortly thereafter, Barenboim withdrew as conductor of several upcoming performances of Mussbach's production of *Don Giovanni*.⁴⁶ Finally, in May 2008, Mussbach and the managing director, Georg Vierthaler, each resigned under duress.⁴⁷

§

When I mentioned my intention to write a chapter of my dissertation about finance and organizational politics in the Berlin opera scene to Francis Hüsers, a dramaturg at the Staatsoper, he laughed. He told me that it would take an entire book, at the very least, to disentangle the ongoing controversy.

The bureaucracy is convoluted and misshapen. Klaus Wowereit's usurpation of the Ministry of Culture has not diminished the constant sparring. The entire power

⁴³ Manuel Brug, "Michael Schindhelms klassischer Job in Dubai," *Die Welt*, March 4, 2007.

⁴⁴ "Mit 99 Millionen Euro lassen sich drei Opern nicht machen," quoted in Rolf Lautenschlager, "Opernkrise eine Frage der Zeit," *Die Tagzeitung*, September 17, 2007.

⁴⁵ "Opern-Streit: Intendant wirft Wowereit Mafia-Methoden vor," *Die Welt*, April 14, 2008.

⁴⁶ "Barenboim bestreikt Don Giovanni," *Die Welt*, April 15, 2008.

⁴⁷ "Mussbach und Vierthaler verlassen Berliner Staatsoper," *Der Tagesspiegel*, May 25, 2008.

scheme does not form a pyramid—the ideal shape for a bureaucracy, according to Max Weber—but a range of inharmonious peaks.

If I set out to explain the distribution of power in the Berlin opera scene, an entire book would not suffice. The system as it exists is unmappable. With so many stubborn vessels of power, the opera scene is like a prolonged game of chess where all the pawns behave like kings. Opera itself, however, is not known to be efficient. It has always been a symbol of excess and luxury, and as an aesthetic pastime, functionless.⁴⁸ If it were beholden to an efficiency-minded bureaucracy, opera would probably dissolve. As a dysfunctional bureaucracy, however, the opera establishment in Berlin persists, like an unconquerable many-headed hydra.

The diffuse administration of the Berlin opera scene is always evolving, and much of the decision-making takes place behind closed doors. An administrator at the Staatsoper told me that the public does not and cannot know how decisions are made in the opera world, nor would they expect to know. As he explained it, the artistic integrity of the institution requires a certain amount of secrecy.⁴⁹

Although bureaucratic thinking has infected much of the world, the amount of red tape in Germany is truly mind-numbing, especially for a foreigner. In the wry words of *The Economist*, “if Eskimos have dozens of words for snow, Germans have as many for bureaucracy.”⁵⁰

The first and most influential theory of bureaucracy comes to us from Max Weber. In *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, Weber analyzes legitimate

⁴⁸ To be more precise, insofar as opera lives up its designation as an aesthetic phenomenon, it is, in Kantian terms, purposively purposeless.

⁴⁹ This perspective contrasts with expectations in the United States. Basic financial records of major opera companies in the United States are generally accessible to the public.

⁵⁰ “Breathe or be strangled,” *The Economist*, October 11, 2003.

claims to authority, arriving at three pure types: legal, traditional and charismatic.⁵¹

Weber's scheme promotes legal authority (in the form of bureaucracy) over both traditional and charismatic authority for modern society.⁵²

Weber describes a bureaucracy as the purest form of legal authority. The effectiveness of a bureaucracy, according to Weber, rests on the integrity of several inter-dependent variables. These include established legal standards, an impersonal order of offices with associated responsibilities to be filled according to competence, and obedience within (and only within) the bureaucratic hierarchy. Finally, the bureaucracy should form something of a pyramid, with a single authority at the helm.⁵³

Weber defines legal authority in contrast to traditional and charismatic authority. In a traditional regime, decision-making is based either on the unreflective continuation of established practices or on the arbitrary whims of the leader.⁵⁴ A charismatic leader does not draw on rational law or tradition, but on his or her own persuasive rhetoric. Weber cites prophets and other religious leaders as prime examples.⁵⁵

Weber admits that these categories are ideal types, and in real life, we are likely to see combinations of all three. And regarding legal authority, Weber is attentive to the potential hazards of letting a bureaucracy grow unchecked. Bureaucracies have a

⁵¹ Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. by A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), 328.

⁵² Ibid 337. In his own words, "Experience tends universally to show that the purely bureaucratic type of administrative organization—that is, the monocratic variety of bureaucracy—is, from a purely technical point of view, capable of attaining the highest degree of efficiency and is in this sense formally the most rational known means of carrying out imperative control over human beings."

⁵³ Ibid. 329-30.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 344.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 358.

tendency to self-replicate *ad infinitum*, like fractals, and have the capacity to crush individuality, given their “spirit of formalistic impersonality.”⁵⁶ Nonetheless, Weber's model aptly describes how most bureaucracies would like to be seen, if not how they actually operate. Given the charge of distributing power in a complex society, a good bureaucracy seems to make sense.

Weber's scheme has been influential in academic circles as well as in the maintenance of actual bureaucracies. Superficially, at least, governmental and corporate cultures throughout the world still adhere to the ideals formalized by Weber.⁵⁷

As an idealization, however, Weber's notion of bureaucracy is susceptible to caveats. Ernest Mandel points to the fact that as an ideal type, Weber's vision of bureaucracy underestimates the contingency of reason and efficiency: “Bureaucratic apparatuses do not operate in a social vacuum. What is 'rational' and 'efficient' for one social class or layer might be quite contrary to the interests and feelings of another.”⁵⁸ On the other hand, although Weber's categories are abstract, he draws on particular observations to generate his scheme. Mandel continues:

Weber's theory of bureaucracy is, to a large extent, a rationalization of the growth and expansion of the Prussian state, with its specific – and contradictory – ties to an absolute monarchy, on the one hand, and a liberal, cultured bourgeoisie on the other.⁵⁹

In aspiring to universal validity, Weber's scheme is at once over-reaching and naïve about its own particularity.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 440.

⁵⁷ Kenneth J. Meier and Gregory C. Hill, “Defining Bureaucracy,” *The Oxford Handbook of Public Management*, eds. Ewan Ferlie et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 52.

⁵⁸ Ernest Mandel, *Power and Money* (New York: Verso, 1992), 181.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 183.

The administration that oversees the Berlin opera scene is far from an ideal bureaucracy. It fails to meet the basic criteria of Weber's delineation. At the same time, however, the administration benefits from the fact that it resembles a bureaucracy. As such, the system is difficult to infiltrate, alter, or depose.

The first criterion in Weber's definition of a bureaucracy is a set of established legal standards. Although cultural policy is perpetually under discussion in Germany, there are, in general, no "legal provisions governing cultural financing [that] would indicate the specific amount and/or means to distribute public funds."⁶⁰ Without definitive standards, cultural subsidies seem destined to inspire debate. The situation in Berlin is complicated by commitments made by the federal government after reunification. These commitments, made in various legislative steps, have been vague and inconsistent. The federal government has been generous to Berlin—subsidizing the renovation of the Museum Island and the Staatsoper—but the cash-strapped capital still feels slighted.⁶¹ The establishment of the Stiftung brought new provisions and an aura of formality to the opera scene; the Stiftung even has its own little constitution.⁶² Nevertheless, Michael Schindhelm, the first chair of the Stiftung, readily admits that the foundation has not followed its own guidelines.⁶³

Weber's ideal bureaucracy also requires the appointment of competent, obedient servants to administrative offices. Needless to say, this requirement clashes with the

⁶⁰ Bernd Wagner and Norbert Sievers, "Country Profile: Germany," *Compendium: Cultural Policies and Trends in Europe* (Council of Europe: Strasbourg Cedex, France, 2007), 28.

⁶¹ In November, 2007, the federal government promised € 200 towards the renovation of the Staatsoper, though many people in the Berlin opera scene, including Klaus Wowereit and Daniel Barenboim, were hoping for more, namely that the federal government would take over the Staatsoper *in toto*.

⁶² See Stiftung Oper in Berlin, "Gesetz über die „Stiftung Oper in Berlin“ Vom 17. Dezember 2003," <http://www.oper-in-berlin.de> (Accessed March, 2006).

⁶³ Michael Schindhelm, interviewed by Christine Lemke-Matwey and Rüdiger Schaper, "Ich bin der Kofi Annan der Oper," *Tagesspiegel*, 8 November, 2006.

fiery personalities in the opera world. The intendants of all three opera houses seem more interested in vexing expectations than in fulfilling well-defined responsibilities. When the city asks the opera companies to cooperate with each other or boost ticket sales, they oblige only under duress.

On the question of competency, however, the most glaring incongruity is at the very top. Klaus Wowereit is well qualified to be mayor, but not Secretary of Culture. During Wowereit's first term in office, the Secretary of Culture, Thomas Flierl, helmed the advisory board to the Stiftung (though Wowereit did not hesitate to involve himself). Now, Mayor Wowereit has a well-qualified Undersecretary of Culture—André Schmitz, who worked previously at the Deutsche Oper and the Volksbühne—but the mayor himself oversees the Stiftung.

Inconsistencies between competence and the established hierarchy infiltrate the bureaucracy down to its lowest rungs. As an intern in the dramaturgy department, I knew my place within the operatic hierarchy. Nonetheless, in regard to competence, I was the only native English speaker in the Staatsoper administration. At one point, an artist's biography arrived on my desk. The artist had translated his own biography for inclusion in an English supplementary program. The translation displayed grammatical errors, false cognates and a generally awkward style. I retranslated it, and sent it back for approval. Ultimately, the artist rebuked my translation and stuck with his own. Later, I was told by a dramaturg that, if I wanted to work in the opera world, I would have to defer to the whims of artists, regardless of competence or good sense.

Finally, the administration of opera in Berlin fails to meet Weber's most basic standard for a true bureaucracy: a distribution of power that resembles a pyramid. There

is no impersonal office that oversees the Berlin opera scene. To the contrary, dozens of offices wrangle over authority within the system.

Consider, for example, the controversy surrounding a Hans Neuenfels production of *Idomeneo* that premiered at the Deutsche Oper in 2003. This production briefly features decapitations of Mohammed, Jesus, Buddha and Neptune. Neuenfels, an inveterate *enfant terrible*, declared this gesture to be his own protest “against any form of organized religion or its founders.”⁶⁴ The decapitations alone did not stir much of a controversy. But after the publication of caricatures of Mohammed in Danish newspaper and the subsequent backlash, the worried intendant of the Deutsche Oper, Kirsten Harms, cancelled a few revival dates of the *Idomeneo* production. A commotion ensued, the cancellation being seen by many as self-censorship in response to a vague fear of

Figure 10: The scandalous scene of Hans Neuenfels' production of *Idomeneo* at the Deutsche Oper. Photo: tagesschau.de.



⁶⁴ George Jahn, “Berlin Opera House Re-Stages 'Idomeneo',” *Washington Post*, December 18, 2006.

terrorism. German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the federal Undersecretary of Culture, Bernd Neumann, both condemned Harms' decision, as did Mayor Wowereit.⁶⁵ When the uproar convinced Harms to reinstate the production, the German Minister of the Interior, Wolfgang Schäuble, brazenly invited Muslim leaders from around the country to accompany him to a performance (they declined).⁶⁶

This scandal brings to the surface many of the competing claims to power within the opera administration. The singers and musicians must respect the wishes of the director. But under perceived pressure from the Muslim community, the intendant challenges the autonomy of the director. Ultimately, however, the local and federal governments exert unofficial power on the intendant. In the meantime, the opera-going public doesn't seem to care; the revivals go ahead without incident.

Opera is by its nature a tense collaboration of bullish personalities. As in many governmental and corporate bureaucracies, a fractious oligarchy reigns despite the appearance of a legitimate and rational organizational structure. In this case, the unwitting conspirators uphold tradition by never letting us mistake their endless squabbling for reasonable debate; under the weight of reason, the operatic tradition would crumble in seconds.

⁶⁵ David Fickling, "Merkel voices concern over opera cancellation," *Guardian*, September 27, 2006.

⁶⁶ George Jahn, "Berlin Opera House Re-Stages 'Idomeneo'," *Washington Post*, December 18, 2006.

Chapter IV: In the Audience

*The public's well-padded resistance to any attempt to make it give up those two old stalls that it inherited from grandpa should not be misinterpreted as a brand-new assertion of its will.*¹

– Bertolt Brecht, February 6, 1926, “Mehr guten Sport,” *Berliner Boersen-Courier*

The young poet Jules Laforgue arrived in Berlin from Paris in 1881. His only responsibility was reading aloud in French to Empress Augusta. This position allowed him time to write and to wander the city. Laforgue lived in the palace of the princess, about fifty meters to the east of the Staatsoper Unter den Linden (then known as the Königlichen Hofoper). For most of the year, the opera house blocked his view of the setting sun.

Laforgue left Berlin in 1886 and died of consumption the following year, four days after his twenty-seventh birthday. He left behind a manuscript about imperial Prussia that would be published as a little book in 1922. He had taken copious notes on every aspect of life in Berlin. His observations are dispassionate and meticulous, written to stave off boredom. The cast of characters is extensive, from the doddering Kaiser Wilhelm to the flower vendors along Friedrichstrasse.

Laforgue devotes one short chapter to the Opera Ball, a gala held every winter at the Staatsoper. According to the Laforgue, the elaborate affair revolves around the Emperor:

The Opera Ball is not a costume ball; it is a gala civilian ball given for the public and presided over by the Emperor and the court, with tickets for 10 francs. It always takes place in February—a little sooner or a little later—depending on the Emperor's health. The public includes a number of out-of-town people who have come to Berlin especially for this occasion, the

¹ Bertolt Brecht, “More Good Sports,” in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, edited by Anton Kaes, Martin Jay and Edward Dimendberg, 536-538 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 537.

only one on which the Emperor may be seen close up. If the Sovereign cannot come, according to tradition, to open the ball in person, the public, which has until the last minute hoped that he might appear, sinks into an incredible gloom.²

The Opera Ball is a chance for the public to breathe the recirculated air of the court. If the Emperor cannot be there, the gala loses its focal point and its unofficial purpose.

Only the sight of the Emperor will assure the crowd that this night is exclusive and unique.

But Kaiser Wilhelm will probably be there, so there is no cause for gloom. The public that attends the Opera Ball “is a rather strange mixture.” Laforgue continues:

On one hand, the aristocracy and the army come quite freely, since the court is there; the aristocracy occupying the boxes and the dress circle and watching the public circulate without mixing with it and leaving a little after the court leaves—and the army, keeping apart, as it always does. On the other hand, the civilian public that moves about and dances is very mixed: one encounters actors from little theatres and a number of civil servants. It so happens that one whole segment of good Berlin society, not drawn from the nobility nor the army but made up mainly of wealthy intellectuals, feels it vulgar to set foot at the Opera Ball.³

However vulgar, the Opera Ball is never raucous. Even in the drunk hours of the early morning, the public behaves itself to a fault. In Laforgue’s rather backhanded formulation:

However mixed this public may be, its behavior is always impeccable. Every German is in fact born dignified, and, as soon as he dons a dress coat, he makes not a single gesture that does not spring from an attentive study of the conduct of his superiors.⁴

As Laforgue's tone suggests, the good behavior of the public might also be seen as obsequiousness. Prussian culture has long endured (and benefited from) a reputation as a

² Jules Laforgue, *Berlin: the City and the Court*, trans. by William Jay Smith (New York: Turtle Point Press, 1996), 126-7.

³ Ibid. 127.

⁴ Ibid. 127.

militaristic culture. Deference to authority extends to the great multitude for whom, unlike the wealthy intellectuals, attending the Opera Ball could never have been a consideration:

As on every similar occasion in this good Berlin in which one lives in a little state of siege, the area around the Opera, on that evening, has been cleared with great care by the mounted police, and, as always, one finds on the edge of the sidewalk this row of poor people, with wan complexions, tow-colored hair, watching open-mouthed and never dreaming of jeering nor uttering the slightest word of protest.⁵

The dreary order of the populace is mirrored by the dreary order of the built environment. In the 1880s, the façade of the Staatsoper is no longer a stately shade of white (“a little Greek temple blackened by time”).⁶ Inside, the relative austerity of the opera house does not impress Laforgue (“no painted ceilings, statues, nor decorations but just a surface riddled with ugly gilt mouldings”).⁷ The house must appear especially drab in comparison to Garnier's new opera house in Paris.

At around eight in the evening, the public flows into the auditorium, the floor of which has been raised to create a giant ballroom that stretches across the stage. The crowd is dense, in anticipation of the court. The uniforms worn by the military men are immaculate, but attempts at personal style tend to fail. A typical man wears an ill-fitting dress coat and a silk top hat “so old-fashioned that one of our country coachmen wouldn't be seen in it.”⁸ And, in Laforgue's estimation, the women are worse:

What can one say about women's clothes? In vain does a Frenchman arrive in Berlin with the resolution of ridding himself of all preconceptions; he is forced by the evidence to admit that the notion of German bad taste, especially with regard to feminine apparel, is not an idle invention...

⁵ Ibid. 127-8.

⁶ Ibid. 128-9.

⁷ Ibid. 128-9.

⁸ Ibid. 130.

What is especially striking in this clothing is its lack of unity, harmony and discretion. The incongruity among the different pieces often becomes grotesque.⁹

However inadequately, the crowd is dressed up for their annual brush with royalty. The court arrives around nine, and finds its place in the balcony. The Royal Family fills two boxes; the other boxes and the dress circle are populated with ambassadors, attachés and other *hoffähig* [worthy of the court] personae. The public gawks at the poise and splendor of the court (“The Opera Ball is one of the very rare occasions when the Princesses wear their tiaras and their diamonds”).¹⁰

After another half-hour, we come to “the ball's most interesting moment and its justification.”¹¹ The inharmonious mob divides as sharply as the Red Sea for the procession of the court. Accompanied by a polonaise, the court circles the hall twice:

[The Sovereign] makes his greatest effort to stand erect once more, not drag his feet when he walks, and to brighten up his eyes and smile. As always, he gives his arm to the Crown Princess, but one can see that it is rather the arm of the Crown Princess that strongly supports his.¹²

Soon thereafter, the court retires to its perch in the boxes and the public begins to dance.

All eyes remain fixed on the Royal Family. The public watches as the Emperor pays a visit to “the diplomatic box to sit down between two ambassadors’ wives, and chat for some twenty minutes.” The public looks on, marveling at the show of wit and

⁹ Ibid. 130-1.

¹⁰ Ibid. 132.

¹¹ Ibid. 132.

¹² Ibid. 133.



Figure 11: The Opera Ball, circa 1875, in an anonymous woodcut based on a drawing by Knut Ekwall. Kaiser Wilhelm I can be seen in the left foreground. Image: German Historical Institute, <http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/print_document.cfm?document_id=1269>.

charisma, the winning personality that oversees the Empire. Laforgue is not so readily charmed:

Chat, alas. The public that sees the Sovereign move his lips, smile, laugh, curl his moustaches, and sees these ladies also smile in a delighted way, that public is deceived. The entire conversation is limited to the Emperor's vague French monologue. It is useless to answer him, the fatigue of his mind being at least as serious as his hearing.¹³

The appearance of a good-natured monarch contents the crowd, though the Emperor and the public remain as ignorant of each other as ever. After thirty minutes more, the court takes its leave, followed shortly by the aristocracy. The majority of the crowd continues

¹³ Ibid. 133-4.

to drink, and pageantry gives way to revelry (“The public that has come to dance at last feels itself at home and dances as if it were”).¹⁴

Time unravels, and the crowd finds itself free from good sense and sobriety. Those with stamina continue to dance and drink, and their physiognomies gleam like porcelain dolls (“All this society is lively, unfettered by brilliance or bright chit-chat. All cheeks are pink; all eyes shine, even through glasses”).¹⁵

The next day, those late hours will undoubtedly have faded into a splotchy haze, but on the whole, the event will be committed to collective memory. In a condescending but tender tone, Laforgue concludes his account with a forecast of the Opera Ball's afterglow:

Tomorrow's newspapers will report at length of this event, dragging out their elegant enameled French clichés with provincial insistence.

Tomorrow too, all Germany will know that the Emperor has again opened the Opera Ball, that he looked well and chatted with the greatest vivacity. For all Germany, this is the presage of an assured prolongation of life for yet another year.¹⁶

Reassured, the German public sets out to fulfill this bland and conservative prophecy. The lavish party has instilled faith in the status quo. The court charades elegance and good sense, and the public, drunk and distracted by glitz, drink it up.

§

This chapter is about the present-day audience of the Staatsoper Unter den Linden. I begin with the Opera Ball because Laforgue's description testifies to the

¹⁴ Ibid. 136.

¹⁵ Ibid. 136.

¹⁶ Ibid. 136.

remarkable inertia of operatic culture. The opera house, having been rebuilt twice since the 1880s, is again off-white and weathered by time. Opera remains a social pageant, a place to deploy charm and display wealth. Behavior and dress are still governed by a semi-official code of etiquette. There is a limited capacity, and those inside are the lucky witnesses to an inimitable event.

The Opera Ball is, of course, an *extra-special* event. There is no stage production to occupy the limelight. In the absence of its usual centerpiece, the opera house hums with the ambient chatter of the crowd in addition to music. The constant circulation of warm bodies and the purr of happy voices stir up a feeling of *communitas*. Wine and hor d'oeuvres become the blood and sustenance of a collective body. The main event, the procession of the court, lasts only a few minutes, while tipsy conversation carries on for hours. Seats—classic agents of discipline and class identification—disappear beneath a dance floor. The crowd itself dances indiscriminately across the fourth wall (the imaginary barrier between the auditorium and the stage). And as another foreign visitor to Berlin reports, the orchestra performs from the balcony and the public enters the auditorium *through* the royal box.¹⁷

Laforge is undistracted by opera, and free to scrutinize the crowd. He recounts the crowd's garish style, their drinking habits, and their idolatry of the court. His observations read like an old-fashioned ethnography—a bystander's account of a yearly ritual. Laforge is uninhibited by cultural relativism, and he has an unsparing eye for detail. The crowd he describes is something other than a devoted flock of art consumers; they seem smitten with glamour for its own sake.

¹⁷ Amy Fay, *Music Study in Germany* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1891), 307.

If the Opera Ball resembles an annual holiday, a typical evening at the opera is more like a Sunday at church.¹⁸ In the latter case, the mood is celebratory but regulated. The public's restive energy is directed towards the stage. The individuals in the audience become indistinct; however stylish or witty, they transform into pixels in the interior lining of the auditorium. Like a somnolent school of fish, the audience appears and behaves as a collective, the mass alter-ego of the lively crowd that flutters through the vestibules at intermission.

Though predictable in its appearance and behavior, an attentive audience is a strange thing. For most of the evening, the members of audience remain in the dark, silent and immobile. The collective character of their behavior—the applause, the implicit dress code, the uniform gaze—belies the anonymity of their involvement with each other. After the curtain call, the crowd disperses over the cobblestones in every direction. As Elias Canetti describes an orchestral concert (in terms equally applicable to the opera): “We have grown accustomed to its results, but, to an unprejudiced mind, there are few phenomena of our cultural life as astonishing as a concert audience.”¹⁹

§

The present-day audience of the Staatsoper Unter den Linden is, for the most part, unexceptional. In demographic terms, the opera-going public of Berlin resembles those

¹⁸ The Opera Ball is similar to other festivals, where one commonly finds cultural dynamics accentuated or reversed. In either case, an atypical matrix of power—albeit temporary, symbolic and tacitly administered from above—engenders a feeling of physical and psychical *communitas*. On the nature of festivals, see M.M. Bakhtin, “Introduction,” *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 1–58; and Victor Turner, “Social Dramas and Ritual Metaphors,” *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 23–59.

¹⁹ See Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. by Carol Stewart, (New York: Continuum, 1981), 37.

of London, Paris, New York and Vienna: wealthy, established and cosmopolitan. There is some variation from evening to evening, but in my experience, the standard deviation is minimal.

My own impressions notwithstanding, the marketing department of the Staatsoper tracks the demography of the audience with more precision.²⁰ According to a survey conducted in 2004, the gender divide of the audience is about even.²¹ The vast majority of the public is white (though the survey does not bother to ask). The age of the audience is well distributed, with slightly denser concentrations in the higher age brackets (26% of the audience is in their sixties, and 26% are retired). The mean age of the audience is 46.5, four years older than the Berlin average of 42.4.²²

The income distribution reported in the survey is significantly higher than the Berlin average. The statistics are inexact, but the average income of the respondents is about twice that of Berlin in general. Survey respondents report an unemployment rate of 1.6%; the Berlin average hovers between 17.5% and 20%.²³

About half of the respondents list a Berlin postal code as their home address.²⁴

This implies that a significant portion of the audience does not live in Berlin. According

²⁰ I rely here on an unpublished survey, entitled “Publikum in Rampenlicht 2004,” commissioned by a consortium of Berlin theaters, under the auspices of Berliner Spielzeit AG and under the leadership of Susanne Benedek of the Komische Oper Berlin and Prof. Dr. Jürgen Tauschnitz of Fachhochschule Lausitz. The profile of the Staatsoper audience is drawn from a sample space of 960+ respondents. See Jürgen Tauschnitz, et al., “Publikum im Rampenlicht” (2005).

²¹ Ibid. 50.

²² Ibid. 51-2, 56; Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg, *Die kleine Berlin-Statistik 2007* (Berlin: H&P-Druck, 2007), 8. Incidentally, the mean age is the only statistic in the survey that strikes me as possibly aberrant. My own experience suggests that the audience is a bit older. A possible explanation is the timing of the survey. It was conducted sometime between March and July. In May and June, a disproportionate percentage of tickets are sold at reduced prices to students.

²³ Ibid. 56; Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg, *Die kleine Berlin-Statistik 2007* (Berlin: H&P-Druck, 2007), 14, 61.

²⁴ Jürgen Tauschnitz, et al., “Publikum im Rampenlicht” (2005), 56. Within Berlin, the audience hails from every corner the city. Although this is true of the Staatsoper audience, conventional wisdom has it that the

to two members of the administration, the percentage of foreign tourists in the audience varies according to the time of year. The presence of foreigners peaks during the annual *Festtage* (held from late March through early April), at which point they make up about half of the audience.

Three sections of the marketing department's survey focus on questions of aesthetic preference. The first of these sections lists about twenty adjectives (e.g. interesting, accessible, contemporary, etc.) and asks the importance of each in an *ideal* offering at the Staatsoper. The next section presents the same adjectives, and asks how well they describe *actual* offerings at the Staatsoper.²⁵ And a third section provides fifteen statements (e.g. "A visit to the theater should be thought-provoking;" "Theater should be educational."), and asks to what degree the respondents agree. In all three sections, the members of the audience agree that opera should be sophisticated, classical, and multifaceted, and that opera should provide an escape from everyday life. Less dignified qualifiers—including humorous, light and merry [*lustig*—receive divided support. And only a small minority of the audience wants their opera to be political.²⁶

The audience is also divided about qualities that might connote avant-garde production values. The words "surprising" and "adventurous" [*experimentierfreudig*] generate luke-warm responses, while "contemporary" and "modern" garner equal amounts of enthusiasm, ambivalence and disapproval. This distribution of values reflects both the ideals of the audience and their perception of the Staatsoper.²⁷

core audience of the Deutsche Oper lives in the (former) West (Charlottenberg, Schöneberg, Wilmersdorf), and the audience of the Komische Oper lives further east (Mitte, Prenzlauerberg, Kreuzberg).

²⁵ Ibid. 30–1. The correlation between these two sections is very strong; in other words, the Staatsoper seems to live up to the ideals of its audience.

²⁶ Ibid. 18–36.

²⁷ Ibid. 18–36.

In Berlin, experimental productions are common, conventional *mise en scène* is rare, and the audience is acclimated to this arrangement.²⁸ Actually, the production values of the Staatsoper are rather tame when compared to those of the Komische Oper, or those of the small Neuköllner Oper. The Staatsoper seems to have found an equilibrium between convention and experimentation.

The equanimity with which they greet avant-garde production values is the most distinguishing characteristic of the Berlin opera audience. In general, the audience is unexceptional and the stagings are bizarre. This contrast can be jarring. One of my friends wore a fuzzy fleece jacket to a grotesque production of *Don Carlo*. I felt a little embarrassed. At the time, the irony escaped me; a fuzzy jacket is inappropriate, but staging a lurid *auto-da-fé* is fine.

For the present chapter, the most interesting question in the marketing department survey speaks to the belief system of the audience. Respondents are given a long list of abstract personal values, and asked to indicate those that they believe to be important. Above all, the respondents value freedom, individuality, and independence [Unabhängigkeit], as well as education and cultural life. To a slightly lesser degree, they recognize the importance of discipline, playfulness and ambition. The audience is more or less indifferent to religion and obedience [Gehorsam].²⁹

To an outsider, this hierarchy might seem confusing, or even backwards. The opera audience, is, after all, engaged in a quasi-religious ritual that requires the utmost obedience. Their behavior does not convey freedom, individuality, and independence. As soon as the conductor enters from the wings of the orchestra pit, the audience

²⁸ I examine the prevalence of avant-garde productions in Berlin in detail in Chapter V.

²⁹ Ibid. 37-41.

launches into applause. After the applause dies down, the audience becomes a silent mass. Any communicative interaction within the crowd is forbidden until the end of the first act. There are a handful of permissible speech acts—clapping, and the occasional *bravo* or *brava*—but these are all directed at the stage and must only occur at given times. In this context, a jeer can sound sociopathic, or even diabolical, and a misplaced whisper can earn the scorn of everyone in the vicinity.

The audience turns its attention to the stage. The sound of the orchestra wells up from a dark pit. By some unseen mechanism, the giant velvet curtain pulls back to reveal an artificial world. Characters sing to each other, or out towards the mute audience.

Each member of the audience sits in his or her place, a seat designated by a unique number. Contact with one's neighbor is limited to elbowing each other for use of an armrest. The audience is crowded, but individuals do not interact with the surrounding sea of people. Nor do they sink into rumination. The thing to behold, the presumed crux of operatic experience, takes place on stage. They sit still, hoping to be captivated by the performance.

No one in the audience will stand up and dance, even if the music is really moving. Nor will anyone sing along or tap their feet. If such impulses do arise, they will be suppressed by an overwhelming sense of the impropriety of such behavior and fear of reproach. Any emotional response to the performance must conform to the small repertoire of appropriate actions.

Those qualities that we associate with individuality—free expression, creativity, style—sink into darkness at the opera. A member of the audience acts far less like an individuated subject than a bundle of fragmented reactions. The silence of the opera

audience is meaningful; docility and impeccable behavior are constitutive aspects of operatic experience. An opera audience is an obedient and penitent thing, a collective that does not think for itself.

In my view, the discrepancy between the ideals and the behavior of the audience is the expression of an unresolved dialectic: like most of Western society, the audience covets autonomy and freedom—the affirmative dimension of an ideological feedback loop that also leads to alienation and disenchantment. The audience seeks shelter from the rising tide of alienation in a collective experience, even while aesthetic reflection (in this context) reinforces the sanctity of autonomy.

This dialectic is instrumental to the way most of us think about and experience art. We regard art as an end in itself, and works of art are seen as hallmarks of individuality and free expression. At the same time, we flock to museums, concert halls and theaters *en masse*, and we tend to talk about art as something of communal interest and universal value.

Each member of the audience pays for an accentuated form of experience, at once personal and collective, liberating and controlled. An evening at the opera bottles a dialectical experience—individual autonomy and collective effervescence—into a single potion. The meaning of opera attendance resides within this purchased dialectic, and in the capacity for this dialectic to transcend the commodity packaging that gives it life.

The Berlin public had their first opportunity to pay for admission to the Staatsoper at the 1789 premiere of *Hiob*, an oratorio by Carl von Dittersdorf.³⁰ Prior to that occasion, visitors to the opera house paid nothing for admission; Frederick the Great bankrolled the entire affair. By the time of Frederick's death in 1786, however, the bourgeois public was willing to pay for assured entry. As Jürgen Habermas explains (in reference to the emergence of public concerts in the 18th century), a ticket represents more than the price of admission:

Admission for a payment turned the musical performance into a commodity; simultaneously, however, there arose something like music not tied to purpose. For the first time an audience gathered to listen to music as such—a public of music lovers to which anyone who was propertied and educated was admitted. Released from its functions in the service of social representation, art became an object of free choice and of changing preference. The “taste” to which art was oriented from then on became manifest in the assessments of lay people who claimed no prerogative, since within a public everyone was entitled to judge.³¹

In this passage, Habermas recognizes the twofold significance of an admission fee: the transformation of the work of art into a commodity and the actualization of aesthetic autonomy. These two historical forms emerge in concert.

As Marx characterizes it, a “commodity is, first of all, an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind.”³² As a useful object, with a correlating use-value, a commodity is not a mysterious thing. In the marketplace, however, commodities circulate in a manner that “reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the

³⁰ Manfred Haedler, “Chronik des Opernhauses Unter den Linden,” *Apollini et Musis 250 Jahre Opernhaus Unter den Linden*, ed. Georg Quander (Berlin: Propyläen, 1992), 370.

³¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, translated by Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 39-40.

³² Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, translated by Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Books, 1990-1992), 125.

socio-natural properties of these things.”³³ Marx borrows the term “fetishism” from “the misty realm of religion” to describe the tendency to mistake commodities for “autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own.”³⁴

Aesthetic contemplation of an autonomous the work of art is a special case of commodity fetishism. In paying for admission to the opera, the audience is invited to behold an ephemeral, thing-like event with no overt purpose. This sort of commodity, “released from its functions,” purges itself of use-value. What remains is a distilled aesthetic form, a measured dollop of unreality: “Only through fetishism, the blinding of the artwork vis-à-vis the reality of which it is part, does the work transcend the spell of the reality principle as something spiritual.”³⁵ The commodity character of an artwork augments its capacity to appear autonomous, “with a life of its own.” As Walter Benjamin observes, the perceived foreignness of a work of art, or its aura, coincides with a certain creaturely quality: “To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return.”³⁶

In Kantian aesthetics—a point of departure for Habermas, Adorno and Benjamin—aesthetic reflection is, by its nature, free from interest and purpose.³⁷ If you look upon an object, and you are unencumbered by ulterior motives or desires, your subsequent feeling of delight or aversion “cannot be other than subjective.”³⁸ For Kant, however, specific aesthetic judgments also seem to suggest universal agreement:

³³ Ibid. 164-5.

³⁴ Ibid. 165.

³⁵ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor, edited by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 341.

³⁶ Walter Benjamin, “Some Motifs on Baudelaire,” *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 188.

³⁷ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, translated by Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), 53, 66.

³⁸ Ibid. 44.

For if someone likes something and is conscious that he himself does so without interest, then he cannot help judging that it must contain a basis for being liked [that holds] for everyone. He must believe that he is justified in requiring a similar liking from everyone because he cannot discover, underlying this liking, any private conditions, on which only he might be dependent, so that he must regard it as based on what he can presuppose in everyone else as well.³⁹

As Kant makes clear, however, this intuition of universal agreement is, in actual practice, illusory.⁴⁰ Like a commodity, or perhaps *as* a commodity, an object of aesthetic reflection conjures up a fictitious (though not necessarily false) matrix of social relations.

As Habermas subsequently points out, aesthetic taste reveals itself to be particular (i.e. not universal) only in the context of the public sphere. In recognizing the incongruity between presumed universality and a manifest variety of opinions—in reference, say, to the quality of an opera—individuals develop a newly refined mode of subjectivity:

Inasmuch as culture became a commodity and thus finally evolved into “culture” in the specific sense (as something that pretended to exist merely for its own sake), it was claimed as the ready topic of a discussion through which an audience-oriented (*publikumsbezogen*) subjectivity communicated with itself.⁴¹

Habermas rightly emphasizes the *setting* of aesthetic reflection: however personal they might be, judgments of aesthetic quality take place in meaningful social contexts. Even in the privacy of one’s own bedroom, the spirit of society enters into the experience of

³⁹ Ibid. 53-4.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 86. “A judgment of taste requires everyone to assent; and whoever declares something to be beautiful holds that everyone *ought* to give his approval to the object at hand and that he too should declare it beautiful. Hence the *ought* in an aesthetic judgment, even once we have all the data needed for judging, is still uttered only conditionally. We solicit everyone’s assent because we have a basis for it that is common to all.”

⁴¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, translated by Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 29.

reading a book.⁴² Benjamin, too, recognizes the connection between the autonomy of an artwork and its indebtedness to a social context: “The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition.”⁴³ In an opera house, the presence of tradition is unmistakable. In being old-fashioned, an evening at the opera retains aura, “its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.”⁴⁴

It would seem, then, that an opera audience (literally) buys into the doctrine of aesthetic autonomy. Indeed, in my many conversations with fellow members of the audience, the idea of the hallowed work of art emerges repeatedly as the magnetic center of operatic experience. The audience believes—in accordance with Kantian aesthetics—in the quasi-mystical power of art (or, more precisely, in the transcendental subjectivity of aesthetic judgment). Echoing Benjamin, the audience also believes that the sanctity of the work of art takes hold in relation to context: the voluminous auditorium, the radiant chandeliers, the distinguished crowd. That said, recognition of the fitting context does not undercut their emphasis on the thing-itself, the work of art.

As Pierre Bourdieu argues in *Distinction*, however, there is reason to doubt the veracity of this belief system.⁴⁵ Bourdieu’s study of taste in the context of contemporary French society (contemporary, in this case, is the 1960s and 1970s) doubles as an empirical critique of Kantian aesthetics.⁴⁶ In his “anti-Kantian” aesthetic theory,

⁴² The ghostly presence of society in the act of reading is at the heart of Benedict Anderson’s illuminating account of nationalism, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 2006).

⁴³ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 223.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 220.

⁴⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

⁴⁶ Bourdieu is by no means the first to question the precepts of Kantian aesthetics. Friedrich Nietzsche, for example, criticizes Kant and his followers for the asceticism implied by the aesthetic disposition: “If our

Bourdieu shows how taste correlates with class and reinforces class boundaries.⁴⁷ For the most part, he abstains from philosophical aesthetics, committing himself to “a sort of deliberate amnesia, a readiness to renounce the whole corpus of cultivated discourse on culture.”⁴⁸

Bourdieu shows how taste and the manner in which taste expresses itself correlate with social standing. According to Bourdieu, the aesthetic disposition that Kant theorizes is not universally valid. Kant gives voice to a way of thinking about aesthetics that befits his elite social position: “The aesthetic disposition is one dimension of a distant, self-assured relation to the world and to others which presupposes objective assurance and distance.”⁴⁹ In Bourdieu's view, the aesthetic disposition is not merely a way of thinking but an instrument in legitimating power. Legitimate taste (i.e. the shared preferences of elites) presumes access to the culture that legitimates taste:

The dependence of the aesthetic disposition on the past and present material conditions of existence which are the precondition of both its constitution and its application...can only be acquired by means of a sort of withdrawal from economic necessity.⁵⁰

Taste fortifies a circle around the elite; the elite are corralled closer together, and everyone else is kept out.

For Bourdieu, then, the notion of disinterested aesthetic reflection is a front; in fact, elites have a vested interest in sustaining their social standing, and taste is an

aestheticians never weary of asserting in Kant's favor that, under the spell of beauty, one can *even* view undraped female statues 'without interest,' one may laugh a little at their expense.” See Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann and RJ Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 104.

⁴⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 54.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 485.

⁴⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 54.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 53-4.

important mechanism in this effort. Art is not purposeless; on the contrary, “art and cultural consumption are predisposed...to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences.”⁵¹

Bourdieu’s critique does not disprove the concept of aesthetic autonomy so much as localize it to a particular sphere of relevance. The primary function that Bourdieu ascribes to taste—legitimizing social differences—does little to illuminate aesthetic preference *within* a given community (e.g. the audience of the Staatsoper). If, at intermission, someone were to share her opinion of the production so far, in a manner that betrays neither interest nor purpose beyond the opera itself, I would believe her to be honest, though I would also believe her opinion to be ideologically conditioned. In this respect, the aesthetic disposition is not incompatible with Bourdieu’s critique.

But even as delimited in Bourdieu’s critique, judgments of taste do not sufficiently account for the social context in which aesthetic experience takes place. In an opera house, for example, the experience for each member of the audience involves far more than a contemplative engagement with the work of art. As I describe above, members of the audience interact with each other. These interactions—including both the silent clustering in the auditorium and the cacophonous bustling during intermission—anchor the aesthetic experience within a ritualized tradition. Some of the discussions that take place at intermission reflect back on the stage production, thereby establishing a sphere of inter-subjective communication. In my eavesdropping experience, however, most intermissions resemble the Opera Ball, where a sonic façade of chattering and clinking overwhelms the innocuous content of each conversation.

⁵¹ Ibid. 7.

However profound or superficial, conversations at intermission are, to a certain extent, part of a symbolic ritual that reinforces socio-cultural values. The entire operatic experience, including the relationship between the spectator and the stage production, resonates with a particular set of expectations. As Christopher Small makes clear in *Musicking*, his thoughtful interpretation of an orchestral concert experience, the allocation of social space in the performance hall “presents us in a clear and unambiguous way with a certain set of relationships, in which the autonomy and privacy of the individual is treasured.”⁵² Akin to the spectators of the Balinese cockfight famously described by Clifford Geertz, each member of an opera audience participates in a ritual that enables him “to see a dimension of his own subjectivity.”⁵³

The ritualistic trappings of opera are, of course, well known.⁵⁴ As Émile Durkheim evinces in a comparison of religious rites and dramatic representations, the two activities share the same basic characteristics: “Alien to utilitarian aims, they make men forget the real world in order to transport them into another in which their imagination is more at ease; they entertain.”⁵⁵ Durkheim is attentive to the symbolic function of ritual,⁵⁶ but more importantly, he recognizes in ritual practice a phenomenon that will help to elucidate the social context of opera attendance:

⁵² Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998), 43.

⁵³ Clifford Geertz, “Notes on a Balinese Cockfight,” *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1973), 450.

⁵⁴ Even Adorno—who usually deemphasizes the social context of aesthetic reflection, focusing instead on the objective character of artworks and the distilled, negative image of social relations locked up therein—frames his short essay, “The Natural History of the Theatre,” around the vestiges of cultic ritual in the contemporary theater. See Theodor Adorno, “The Natural History of the Theatre,” *Quasi una Fantasia*, translated by Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1998), 65-78.

⁵⁵ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, translated by Carol Cosman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 283.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 282: “So here we have a collection of ceremonies intended solely to awaken certain ideas and feelings, to link the present to the past, the individual to the collectivity. In fact, not only do these ceremonies serve no other ends, but the faithful themselves ask nothing more of them.”

...the very idea of a religious ceremony of some importance naturally awakens the idea of festival. Conversely, every festival, even one purely secular in origin, has certain features of the religious ceremony, for it always has the effect of bringing individuals together, setting the masses in motion, and so inducing that state of effervescence, sometimes even delirium, that is not unrelated to the religious state. Man is transported outside himself, distracted from his ordinary occupations and preoccupations. And we observe the same displays in both cases: cries, songs, music, violent movements... It must be observed that there is no rejoicing in which the serious side of life has no echo. Basically, the difference lies rather in the unequal proportions in which these two elements are combined.⁵⁷

An opera audience seldom works itself into a state of delirium. The members of the audience do, however, experience a milder form of collective effervescence.

Aesthetic reflection is, in a certain respect, a lonely endeavor. To inculcate a feeling of autonomy is also to rupture a familiar social nexus. As though it were conscious of its complicity in alienation, opera takes place in a setting that quietly resists the atomistic order of modern life. The audience experiences the stage production as individuals but also as a crowd.

§

A crowd lacks the grandeur and mystique of a great collective. A nation or a social class extends beyond the horizon; the number of people is inestimable by sight. The same might be said of an ethnic group or a city. A crowd, on the other hand, does not stretch to the horizon; it does not require abstract thought to encapsulate it. Even at a massive demonstration, if you climb up a lightpost, you can usually see the end of the crowd. A great collective also lasts a long time. The transformation of nations or ethnic

⁵⁷ Ibid. 285.

groups usually takes place over the course of centuries. A crowd might congregate and disperse in the space of an hour.

At ground level, on the other hand, a crowd is a less coherent vessel of identity and agency than an individual. Nothing seems so discrete, so self-contained, as one's own body and mind. By contrast, a crowd can expand, contract, morph, or even divide like an amoeba. Even a crowd with relatively well-defined boundaries—like an opera audience—cannot approach the hermetic disposition of an individual.

Crowds are also known to cause trouble. Insofar as they exhibit will, crowds often act against the covenant of good behavior established between individuals and society. Difficult to grasp and a bit ominous, crowds show up at every juncture of history. However occasional or unpredictable, they often function as intermediaries between personal experience and what is perceived to be universal.

There is no canonic theory of crowds.⁵⁸ Historians, ethnographers and theorists tend to cluster around nations, communities and ethnic groups, or give themselves over to biography. Crowds are short-lived and difficult to document; their violent and spontaneous bursts are out-of-sync with academic methods of observation. Of those socio-theoretical studies that *do* foreground the crowd, the most helpful to me has been

⁵⁸ A basic bibliography on crowds would probably include several disparate strains, ranging from influential 19th-century treatises—Charles MacKay, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* (New York: Harmony Books, 1980); Gustave le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (London: Transaction Publishers, 1995)—to social psychology—Sigmund Freud, *Mass Psychology and Other Writings*, translated by J.A. Underwood (London: Penguin Books, 2004); C.G. Jung, *Psychological Types* (*Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Volume 6*), translated by R.F.C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971)—and a wide variety of socio-political analyses of the dynamics between individuals and collectives—José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993); David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Knopf, 1977); Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991); Serge Moscovici and Willem Doise, *Conflict and Consensus*, translated by W.D. Halls (London: Sage, 1994); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000)—as well as those texts by Durkheim, Benjamin, Habermas, and Canetti cited elsewhere in this chapter.

Elias Canetti's expansive *Crowds and Power*.⁵⁹ Canetti's study (first published in German in 1960) sets out to explain crowd behavior in general and to establish a typology of crowds.

Canetti begins with a hypothesis on the primordial roots of the crowd. He suggests that an innate fear of being touched haunts all human interaction with strangers; that “there is nothing that man fears more than the touch of the unknown.” This fear can be seen in the manner in which people navigate sidewalks in avoidance of each other, or in the shock and anger stirred up by any invasion of personal space.⁶⁰

This fear is overcome only by the warm embrace of a crowd. According to Canetti, “It is only in a crowd that man can become free of this fear of being touched. That is the only situation in which the fear changes into its opposite.” In a crowd, an individual frees himself from a constant, insulating cloak of fear; he “surrenders himself” to the collective. The swarm is dense, in bodies and in “psychical constitution.” The experience levels individuality and status; “All are equal there; no distinctions count.”⁶¹

Although Canetti begins with this warm introduction, he is no less attentive to the duplicitous nature of crowds. A momentary rush of *communitas* comes at a cost. People give themselves over to a higher authority; to some degree, they forfeit their sense of self-possession and autonomy. Individuals become susceptible to manipulation. The will of a crowd is often unpredictable and indifferent to the interests of individuals, society, or even the crowd itself. After all, a typical crowd knows itself to be fleeting, and is beholden to the logic of self-preservation that governs individual and civic behavior. A crowd's capacity to channel fear into rage is notorious:

⁵⁹ Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. by Carol Stewart, (New York: Continuum, 1981).

⁶⁰ Ibid. 15.

⁶¹ Ibid. 15.

The destructiveness of the crowd is often mentioned as its most conspicuous quality, and there is no denying the fact that it can be observed everywhere, in the most diverse countries and civilizations. It is discussed and disapproved of, but never really explained.⁶²

In Canetti's view, a destructive crowd breaks windows and overturns cars to throw the known world into disarray. Everyday objects express a certain acquiescence towards laws and customs. In destroying objects, the crowd is attacking the establishment. Objects that demarcate boundaries (windows and barricades) and objects marked with status or ideology (cars and books) are especially vulnerable. A crowd can also direct its destructive energy towards people, resulting in riots, lynchings and other forms of mob violence.⁶³

Destructive crowds show up all over the globe, in various forms, disaffected for a variety of reasons. Throughout the world, however, the destructive crowd has a predisposition to set fires. A fire is the perfect focal point for an unhappy crowd, a transfixing sight that levels indiscriminately, reducing everything to ashes:

Of all means of destruction the most impressive is *fire*. It can be seen from far off and it attracts ever more people. It destroys irrevocably; nothing after a fire is as it was before. A crowd setting fire to something feels irresistible; so long as the fire spreads, everyone will join it and everything hostile will be destroyed.⁶⁴

Crowds have always basked in the light and warmth of sacrificial flames. One of the most infamous fire-lit crowds in history congregated right outside the Staatsoper, at about 11:30 in the evening, May 10, 1933. On the square then known as Opernplatz (today as Bebelplatz), tens of thousands of Berliners looked on as students heaped “un-German” books onto a pyre. The ceremony was part of an orchestrated, nation-wide effort, which

⁶² Ibid. 19.

⁶³ Ibid. 19-20.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 20.

has come to be known as the *Bücherverbrennung*. There were book burnings in most German university towns that evening. In Berlin, the event included a speech by the Nazi Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, as well as the impromptu rants of a few student leaders. Except for the inner circle, the crowd was relatively docile, subdued by the cold, wet weather.

The event was covered extensively in the media, in Germany and elsewhere. A Berlin newspaper, *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, reported “a mighty flame blazing skyward, [that] flooded the faces of the crowd in extravagant light. The flames were mirrored in the windows of the Staatsoper.”⁶⁵ The reflection of the flames in the windows of the Staatsoper sounds darkly ironic. A barbaric ritual takes place outside an opera house, an emblem of civilization.⁶⁶ We all know, however, how opera—especially Wagner—would come to be associated with the Nazi administration. By May of 1933, the Nazis were actively cultivating this association: at the behest of the government, the Staatsoper was in the midst of an epic Wagner festival and had begun to fire all the Jews in the company.

For the most part, opera in Germany has outlived this association.⁶⁷ Opera is still an emblem of civilization, and the opera audience is presumed to be civilized. The crowd that congregates within the opera house does not outwardly resemble the wretched crowd that beheld the *Bücherverbrennung*. As Canetti points out, however, the behavior of a

⁶⁵ Gerhard Sauder, *Die Bücherverbrennung: zum 10. Mai 1933* (Munich: Hanser, 1983), 180.

⁶⁶ This public square is also across the street from Humboldt University, and directly adjacent to the latter’s law school.

⁶⁷ Daniel Barenboim, the artistic director of the Staatsoper, has positioned himself at the center of this question. He is well known for breaking the taboo on Wagner performance in Israel, leading the orchestra of the Staatsoper (the Staatskapelle) in an encore presentation of the “Prelude and Liebestod” from *Tristan und Isolde* at the Israel Festival on July 7, 2001. And in 2002, for the first time since 1933, the Staatsoper staged a complete cycle of Wagner’s mature operas (i.e. from *Der fliegende Holländer* through *Parsifal*), under Barenboim’s baton, with productions by Harry Kupfer.

concert audience, in its own way, epitomizes a crowd's capacity for weakness and deference to authority. Social dynamics are obfuscated by the presumed supremacy of the work of art. Canetti's description focuses on the man at the helm of the crowd—the conductor—rather than the crowd itself:

There is no more obvious expression of power than the performance of a conductor... Someone who knew nothing about power could discover all its attributes, one after another, by careful observation of a conductor. The reason this has never been done is obvious: the music the conductor evokes is thought to be the only thing that counts; people take it for granted that they go to concerts to hear symphonies and no-one is more convinced of this than the conductor himself.⁶⁸

The conductor is thought to be the diviner of the only thing that matters: the work of art. With small gestures, and his back turned to the audience, the conductor conjures a solar system that revolves around him. The role of the spectators is willfully blank: “The immobility of the audience is as much part of the conductor's design as the obedience of the orchestra. They are under a compulsion to keep still.”⁶⁹ The crowd gives themselves over to collective sheepishness.

Naturally, I would not want to overstate the parallels between the opera audience and the crowd at the book burning. I only mean to emphasize the deep passivity of spectatorship. Locked in rapt captivation before a spectacle, members of the audience are not well positioned to express the freedom that they covet so dearly.

Within Canetti's typology of crowds, an opera audience falls into the category of the “stagnating crowd.” This type of crowd is distinguished for its density within a determinate space, as well as for its patience:

⁶⁸ Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. by Carol Stewart, (New York: Continuum, 1981), 394.

⁶⁹ Ibid 395. It is worth noting the resemblance to Adorno's interpretation of the conductor. See Theodor Adorno, “Conductor and Orchestra,” *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1989), 104–117.

The *stagnating* crowd is closely compressed; it is impossible for it to move really freely. Its state has something passive in it; it waits. It waits for a head to be shown it, or for words, or it watches a fight. What really matters to it is *density*.⁷⁰

Canetti's identifies the spectators at sporting events and the pilgrims to Mecca that stand before God in the valley of Arafat as paradigmatic cases of stagnating crowds.⁷¹ In either case, the crowd is characterized by patience and passivity. In the case of the theater audience, these qualities are accentuated, while density is slightly diminished:

They all sit there like a well-drilled herd, still and infinitely patient. But everyone is very well aware of his own separate existence. He has paid for his seat and he notices who sits next to him. Till the play starts, he leisurely contemplates the rows of assembled heads. They awaken in him an agreeable but not too pressing feeling of density.⁷²

When the performance begins, the crowd sinks further into collective obsequiousness. In their quiet demeanor, the public express sympathy with a long tradition: "...all outward reactions are prohibited. People sit there motionless, as though they managed to hear *nothing*. It is obvious that a long and artificial training in stagnation has been necessary here."⁷³ Only in the aftermath of each act does the audience express itself in applause, "a brief, chaotic noise in exchange for a long, well-organized one."⁷⁴

§

In Jules Laforgue's description of the Opera Ball, the public seems to be there for two reasons: to behold the royal court; and to dance, drink, and enjoy the circulation of

⁷⁰ Ibid. 34.

⁷¹ Ibid. 36-7.

⁷² Ibid. 36.

⁷³ Ibid. 37.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 37.

warm bodies. The former activity requires a watchful, attentive crowd, penitent in the radiant aura of jewels and tiaras. To enjoy the latter host of activities, on the other hand, the crowd slips into a chattering and distractible disposition. The incongruity between these two modes of experience—one observant, the other participatory—does not faze the crowd. The two activities merge in the festive atmosphere; each justifies and complements the other.

A typical evening at the opera presents the audience with a similar dialectic, though the polarity is less pronounced. Aesthetic reflection is presumed to be subjective, though in the setting of an opera house, social ritual pervades the entire affair. Kant and Habermas both recognize the impulse in aesthetic judgment to share the experience with some sort of community, though for Kant this impulse remains hypothetical and confined to the imagination,⁷⁵ and for Habermas, this impulse limits itself to inter-subjective critique.⁷⁶ To my mind, this impulse reaches beyond the imagination, beyond communicative relations. The boost of subjectivity that accompanies aesthetic reflection awakens an awareness of the diminishing mechanical solidarity of modern life. The reassuring presence of the crowd—“an agreeable but not too pressing feeling of density”—provides an antidote to the alienation that coincides with seeing a dimension of one’s own subjectivity.⁷⁷ As I mention above, the advent of paid admission at the Staatsoper, in 1789, brings this dialectic into full swing: the opera house becomes an increasingly public congregation of increasingly private individuals. This dialectic is still

⁷⁵ See “On Taste as a Kind of *Sensus Communis*,” in Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, translated by Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), 293-296.

⁷⁶ See the passages quoted above and the surrounding discussion in Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, translated by Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989) esp. 27-51.

⁷⁷ Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, translated by Carol Stewart (New York: Continuum, 1981), 36; see also Clifford Geertz, “Notes on a Balinese Cockfight,” *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1973), 450.

intact today, though only by the grace of the Berlin government that underwrites opera as a special kind of commodity fetish: the valuable tradition. For a wealthy, cosmopolitan public, the opera house remains the setting of a ritual that reaffirms aesthetic autonomy while subtly nestling the crowd of strangers in a cloak of communal experience.

Chapter V: The Meaning of *Regietheater*

*This theatre is no ordinary Temple of the Muses. It prefers being something like a dissecting room, or at least a special laboratory, where the possibilities of right behavior can be dramatically and politically tested and made into models. Estrangement, then—to come closer to the thing itself—takes place primarily by way of the exotic, or by way of a model which transforms contemporary events into history or the historical into the contemporary.*¹

– Ernst Bloch, “Entfremdung, Verfremdung”

*January 9, 2006, about 8:30 PM...*²

The curtain comes down just before the immolation of the heretics. They have been stripped naked, bound, gagged, doused in gasoline, and strung up by their ankles. As lighters get lit, the curtain falls, leaving the actual burning of flesh to the imagination. The audience will have something to think about as they slurp raspberries and liqueur at intermission.

The audience stays quiet for two or three seconds, then applauds. No one gasps.³ As we file out from the third row of the orchestra, I see some half-smiles, some lip-bitten glowers, and some glazed-over eyes. But as we make our way downstairs and into the gilded, rococo *Konditorei*, the facial expressions visible to me—supplemented by

¹ Ernst Bloch, “Entfremdung, Verfremdung: Alienation, Estrangement,” translated by Anne Halley and Darko Suvin, *The Drama Review* 15.1 (Autumn 1970), 124.

² These introductory observations are drawn from my fieldnotes. The occasion is a performance of Verdi's *Don Carlo* at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden, directed by Philipp Himmelmann. The opera, based on Schiller's *Don Karlos, Infant von Spanien*, was initially set in five acts to a French libretto by Camille du Locle and Joseph Méry, with the title *Don Carlos*. There were many subsequent revisions to the score and libretto, resulting in a variety of production options. This Staatsoper production—entitled *Don Carlo*—was performed in four acts, in Italian with German supertitles.

³ The premiere of this production—on June 13, 2004—was a bit more scandalous. There were boos from the crowd—which is not altogether unusual for a Berlin premiere—and the press dismissed the production as blustery provocation. See, for example, Niklaus Hablützel, “Ganz allein in Verdis Dorf,” *Die Tageszeitung*, June 15, 2004; Klaus Geitel, “Bei Königs gibt's zu Hause auch nur Rührei,” *Die Welt*, June 15, 2004; Eleonore Büning, “Der Küchentisch als Lebensmitte,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Feuilleton, June 16, 2004; Frederik Hannsen, “Skandal! Königin beim Bügeln erwischt!,” *Die Tagespiegel*, June 15, 2004, <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/art772,2076176> (accessed August 2008).

mirrors—seem to soften, reinhabited with life. The atmosphere in the room is more giddy than glum.

My friends and I compare the gruesomeness to other productions. I cannot stop thinking about the poor supernumeraries. We try—not without a sense of obligation—to find meaning in the immoderate staging. The set is simple: a banquet table in the center of the stage, with ominous colors as a backdrop and glowing white light underfoot. The contemporary, generically elite wardrobe indicates that this is not 16th-century Spain. The torture takes place in the foreground, while the soloists feast and bicker in the background. The *mise-en-scène* brings to mind the infamous photographs of Abu Ghraib, images slow to fade away in the German media.⁴ My friends and I conclude that, in this

*Figure 12: The auto-da-fé in Phillip Himmelmann's production of Don Carlo.
Photo: Staatsoper Unter den Linden.*



⁴ Philipp Himmelmann continued to explore the operatic potential of Abu Ghraib imagery in his next project, a production of *Macbeth* at the Semperoper in Dresden in 2005: “Regisseur Philipp Himmelmann nimmt seine szenische Inspiration von der jüngsten Mutter aller Gräueltaten, den Geschehnissen in Abu Ghuraib.” See Georg Friedrich Kühn, “Anschwellender Bluttausch,” *Deutschlandfunk Kultur Heute*, <http://www.dradio.de/dlf/sendungen/kulturheute/425687/> (April 10, 2005; accessed August 2008).

final scene, the director is reminding us that petty domestic disputes sometimes coexist with acts of unspeakable violence.

The *Konditerei* is drenched with cigarette smoke. We look around at the audience. It is a Monday in January and pouring outside, so there are few tourists here. The Staatsoper Unter den Linden typically welcomes more foreigners than the other houses in Berlin, but tonight the public is German.

When the first bell rings, no one seems to hear it. I try to read the facial expressions of the prim, elderly couple at the next table. Conversations all around have long since diverged from the production upstairs. Many people must be on their second cigarettes. The room has its own collective rhythm that cadences just as the second bell sends the crowd back to their seats.

We make our way back to the auditorium. In my seat again, I wait for the curtain. I think myself a sponge, ready to soak up this decidedly foreign experience.

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This production of *Don Carlo* is an example of *Regietheater*.⁵ This designation came into prominence in the 1970s as a way of characterizing theater productions that foreground the role of the stage director. Since that time, the German-speaking world has witnessed a proliferation of audacious production values on stage. *Regietheater* is simply the catchword for this movement.

⁵ The term *Regietheater* is applicable to works for the stage, musical or otherwise. In reference to operatic productions in particular, the term *Regieoper* is sometimes employed.

The word *Regietheater* is usually invoked with some polemical thrust. It might be decried as the abrogation of tradition, or promoted as an alternative to the leaden adherence to convention seen at the Metropolitan Opera. In other words, *Regietheater* can register as an accusation or a selling point, depending on the context.

Regietheater typically implies a radical interpretation, in contrast to some notion of conventional staging. Of course, innovation and convention do not correlate to a simple, linear continuum. Most stage productions—in Germany and elsewhere—display some sort of negotiation between the work as written and the vision of a director. *Regietheater* privileges the vision of a director, though not necessarily to the detriment of the work as written. An innovative approach to staging might lead the audience to a deeper understanding of the original work; or it might lead the audience astray, into a funhouse of superficial provocations.

As a catchword, *Regietheater* is battled around in the wake of every production that stirs up controversy. In Berlin, the perceived merits or deficiencies of any new production feed an unending debate over the place of opera in the city's cultural life and economy. These controversies often spill over the walls of aesthetics and into politics.

In this context, any serious discussion of *Regietheater* must admit that the word itself is difficult to define. There is no given threshold whereupon a conventional staging crosses over into *Regietheater*. My own definition of *Regietheater*—a way of characterizing theater productions that foreground the role of the stage director—is imprecise, but it should suffice as a point of reference for the present chapter.

This chapter is my attempt to explain the prevalence of *Regietheater* in contemporary Berlin. By any measure I can fathom, Berlin is the world capital of

experimental opera. Each opera company is each well-stocked with productions that would make most New Yorkers blanch. No other city sees so much operatic mischief or controversy. And as I show in Chapter IV, the opera-going public of Berlin is accustomed to this arrangement.

Following a historical overview of theater innovation in Germany, I return to the difficult task of defining *Regietheater*. I review some of the staging techniques associated with *Regietheater*, a cast of known culprits/innovators, and a few paradigmatic productions (including the aforementioned *Don Carlo*).

When I was in Berlin, I asked dozens of people why *Regietheater* has become so prevalent. I listened to a variety of thoughtful explanations, including the faucet of unconditional public subsidies, the resurgence of a rich dramaturgical tradition, and the ever-present allure of the new. I examine several of these speculations here, and then offer a supplementary explanation of my own.

Many of the people I spoke with—and a number of scholars—describe *Regietheater* as a way of bringing the past into the present. A visionary director can take a familiar opera and unlock its potential as contemporary theater. Music critic Anne Midgette articulates this view with journalistic pith:

The basic premise of *Regietheater* is that opera is a living art; that it can have a theatrical immediacy and contemporary relevance; and that it doesn't have to be preserved in the same, unchanging state in order to maintain its validity.⁶

Through *Regietheater*, old opera becomes modern. I think that this account is suggestive, but more convincing in reverse. Opera is already of the past; the music, the melodrama and the social pageantry all trade on the warm glow of a bygone era. In fact, opera is

⁶ Anne Midgette, “The Age of the Director (V): Bring On the Eurotrash!” <http://www.andante.com/article/article.cfm?id=19168> (accessed May 2008).

tethered to the past, even in Berlin, where the past is haunted. In this context, in the shadowy past of Berlin, opera allows itself to be shellacked in a modern glaze.

Regietheater makes the past approachable, at least for an evening.

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New opera calendars go up every month in Berlin, wheat-pasted to the station walls of the U-Bahn and the S-Bahn, and wrapped around columns of advertising known as *Litfaßsäulen*.⁷ These posters feature colorful production stills and the upcoming schedule of each opera house. The schedule itself conveys sheer abundance – the 2005-2006 opera season included 99 different productions in 465 performances.⁸ The pictures, on the other hand, illustrate the eclecticism of the Berlin opera scene.

The posters include two or three production stills from each opera company. These photographs distill opera into a director's artform. A well-chosen photograph captures only the *mise-en-scène*, and maybe an expressive gesture. Sound and tempo vanish, in complicitous silence with the stage director (who never dictates the sound or the tempo). Silent and arrested in time, the opera docket looks wild and of no particular tradition. The posters advertise opera in Berlin as an artistic estuary, where disparate traditions whirl and collide.

The path to the eclecticism of today begins in 1767, when Gotthold Ephraim Lessing is hired as a dramaturg in Hamburg. The founders of the National Theater enlist

⁷ On July 1, 1855, a publisher named Ernst Litfaß presented Berlin with one-hundred columns, or *Säulen*, to provide space for advertisements and announcements. These peculiar landmarks are still used today.

⁸ Stiftung Oper in Berlin, "Zahlen und Fakten der Spielzeit 2005/06," www.oper-in-berlin.de/info/zahlenfakten.php3?id_language=1 (accessed February, 2006).

Lessing to help realize their vision of a distinctly German theater tradition. Lessing plays a peculiar role: he is the resident dramatist, but he also watches the theater at work and provides critical feedback. For two years, Lessing publishes reflections on the plays presented at the National Theater, following “every step of both the writer’s art and the actor’s art.” Collectively, these dramatic notes are known as the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*.⁹

With Lessing’s appointment, criticism is incorporated into the artistic process, on the premise that criticism would make art more artistic. I remember, as a child, asking my father how soap works. He told me that, in the simplest terms, soap makes water wetter. This explanation—paradoxical but compelling—became a helpful heuristic for me. Criticism, for example, is like soap: an intervention that compounds the inherent quality of its object.¹⁰

This new discipline—dramaturgy—quickly gathers steam in Europe. A *Vienna Dramaturgy* is published in 1775, and a *Mannheim Dramaturgy* in 1779.¹¹ Theaters hire dramaturgs to iron out (or at least explain) the wrinkles that arise between the written page and live performance. Adaptation for the stage becomes a more conceptual endeavor.

⁹ For a thorough introduction to the *Dramaturgy*, see Mary Luckhurst, “Gotthold Lessing and the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*,” *Dramaturgy: A Revolution in Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). For the text itself, see Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, translated by Helen Zimmern (New York : Dover Publications, 1962).

¹⁰ Lessing himself would not describe criticism in these terms. Lessing is a Neoclassicist and a proponent of Aristotelian poetics. For Lessing, criticism does not contribute to the quality or substance of art. In his actions as a dramaturg, however, Lessing exemplifies this new ideal for criticism. A generation later, the early Romantics—including Schelling, Novalis and the brothers Schlegel—identify criticism as a productive component of the artistic process. On the centrality of criticism in early Romantic aesthetic theory, see Walter Benjamin “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism,” *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 1913-1926, edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 2004).

¹¹ Mary Luckhurst, “Gotthold Lessing and the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*,” *Dramaturgy: A Revolution in Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 37.

A German theater tradition codifies rather swiftly. In the late 18th century, two central figures of the German Enlightenment—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller—both write plays and work for theaters. They also write about theater and its transformative potential for society.¹² Goethe and Schiller raise the stakes for the audience, as theater is absorbed into the concept of *Bildung*.

Bildung is a cultural value that coalesces at the height of German Idealism. It means education in a grand sense; the process of cultivating an identity for oneself. The word also connotes a harmonious balance of knowledge, culture and moral character. In its ideal conception, *Bildung* includes a serious engagement with art. For Schiller, “art itself is the medium for the education [*Bildung*] of the human race to true political freedom.”¹³ As this concept sinks into the German ethos, a halo of profound significance hovers over art, and artistic institutions inculcate a sense of civic responsibility. *Bildung* encompasses the fate of the nation and operatic affairs, and these neighboring spheres sometimes bleed into each other.¹⁴

As the discipline of dramaturgy develops into the 19th century, the dialectic between the work of art and its realization through performance continues to generate debate. Musical and theatrical canons begin to form, and the public begins to regard particular performances as mere manifestations from an ideal catalogue of artworks. In

¹² For an interesting collaborative effort, see Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller, “On Epic and Dramatic Poetry,” *Goethe: The Collected Works, Vol. 3*, edited by Victor Lange et al (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

¹³ Jürgen Habermas, “Excursus on Schiller’s ‘Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man’,” *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, translated by Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 45. For the complete treatise, see Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, translated by Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967).

¹⁴ On the importance of *Bildung* in German ideology and cultural life (esp. music), see Celia Applegate and Pamela Potter, “Germans as the ‘People of Music’: Genealogy of an Identity,” *Music and German National Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

response, performance declares itself to be autonomous, and no less sacrosanct than the timeless works of art. Carl Dahlhaus credits this transformation to Richard Wagner:

Wagner...proposed that the theatrical event was not merely a means of presenting a work of art whose substance resides in a musico-literary text, but itself constituted the work of art, with literature and music serving as handmaidens. This claim entailed nothing less than an aesthetic revolution that challenged not only the century's credence in texts but its social prejudices as well. Wagner was able to persuade an audience that took its cues from the cultured classes to identify drama—the highest species of art following the demise of the verse epic—with a transitory theatrical event, so that “appearance” was declared to be “essence.” The impact of this historical process can scarcely be overestimated. (One of its upshots in our century is *Regietheater*, or “stage director’s theater,” even if the proponents of this principle show little awareness that it originated with Wagner.)¹⁵

Wagner’s conception of *Gesamtkunstwerk* requires that the constituent artistic elements come together in an actual event. This elevation of performance undercuts the doctrine of *Werktreue* (the desire for historical authenticity) and paves the way for directorial tinkering on the opera stage.¹⁶

Thus far, I have mentioned three important developments in the history of German theater production (and the prehistory of *Regietheater*): dramaturgy, *Bildung*, and identification of the event as the thing-itself. These developments do not originate in Berlin, where the overbearing presence of the Prussian court diminishes cultural dynamism. The city is not, however, entirely blind to innovation, and creative energy seeps into the groundwater as the long 19th century runs its course. After the dissolution

¹⁵ Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, translated by J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 196.

¹⁶ In the mid/late-19th century (i.e. Wagner’s time), *Werktreue* is still a relatively young ideal. The desire for historical authenticity emerges in concert with the formation of a canon, beginning in the early 19th century. The productive opposition between *Werktreue* and the autonomy of performance persists to the present day. On the emergence of *Werktreue*, see Lydia Goehr, “*Werktreue*: Confirmation and Challenge in Contemporary Movements,” in *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 243-286.

of the Prussian Empire and the birth of the Weimar Republic, Berlin quickly rouses itself into an artistic frenzy.

The directors and impresarios of Weimar-era Berlin experiment with the basic tenets of theater. Max Reinhardt, the director of the Deutsches Theater from 1905–1930, finds new ways to stir the audience. He introduces, for example, use of *hanamichi*, a catwalk from Japanese kabuki that extends from the stage out past the proscenium and into the audience. Actors walk across the imaginary fourth wall and into closer contact with the public.¹⁷ In 1919, Leopold Jessner begins his reign as intendant of the Staatstheater on Gendarmenmarkt with a production of Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell* set in an expressionist forest of abstract shapes and severe angles. Most of the action takes place on a giant green staircase. The audience interrupts the premiere, and the play continues only after the police intervene. With Jessner as a chief proponent, expressionism flourishes on the stages of Berlin throughout the 1920s.¹⁸

In the restive atmosphere of the Weimar Republic, theater becomes increasingly political. In 1918, Jessner calls on the directors of Berlin “to march purposefully to the beat of the new course,” then asking, in a tone that typifies the uncertainty of Weimar’s future, “Why should it remain utopian today to believe that the theater will now finally be allowed its true destiny and become an authentic general public good?”¹⁹ Erwin Piscator produces plays that document the class struggle (for a mostly bourgeois audience). To help convey the timeliness of his message, Piscator incorporates technology (including

¹⁷ Clemens Risi, “Shedding light on the audience,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 14 (2002), 207.

¹⁸ Michael Patterson, *The Revolution in German Theater, 1900-1933* (London: Routledge, 1981), 88-90.

¹⁹ Leopold Jessner, “To the Directors of the German Theater,” in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, edited by Anton Kaes, Martin Jay and Edward Dimendberg, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 533.

film, radio, loudspeakers and phonographs) into his productions.²⁰ Figures on the right also seek to instrumentalize theater for political gain. In 1931, the dramatist Arnolt Bronnen—who collaborated with Brecht on a 1923 production of *Pastor Ephraim Magnus*, before drifting to the right—describes his own vision of a people's theater in rather fiery language:

Theater can arise anew only on the basis of the people. But what, within the organic totality of the people, can theater still be today? If from the outset one excludes the ideas of amusement and relaxation—for the only relaxation known to the hero is activity—what remains of an institution that is not inflamed in the face of battle and does not pour its blood into the process of creation? [...]

Nationalism recognizes the theater only as a site of cultic rites...cultic theater for this people—a theater of ideas and godly service.²¹

Bronnen foretells the pageantic theater of the Third Reich, but his tone—urgent, humorless and pseudo-populist—replicates that of the (predominantly leftist) agitprop of the 1920s.

The most influential figure of politically-committed theater is, of course, Bertolt Brecht. Having already made a name for himself as a playwright and director, Brecht moves to Berlin in 1925 to work as an assistant dramaturg at Reinhardt's Deutsches Theater. Inspired by Piscator, Brecht develops the radical precepts of epic theater. As Brecht imagines it, epic theater would reverse many of the desired effects of classical theater. He aims to denaturalize the theatrical experience, and jolt the audience out of passive consumption. In classical drama, the audience identifies with the characters on

²⁰ For a firsthand account of Piscator's intentions and techniques, see Erwin Piscator, "The Documentary Play," in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, edited by Anton Kaes, Martin Jay and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 543-545.

²¹ Arnolt Bronnen, "German Theater, German Nationalism," in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, edited by Anton Kaes, Martin Jay and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 345-346.

stage, and after a vicarious adventure, experiences catharsis. Brecht would prefer the audience to see the play as a play, not becoming involved in the fate of the characters. He coins the word *Verfremdungseffekt* [alienation or estrangement effect] to describe this break from sympathetic theater, hoping that an alert audience will observe the proceedings on stage from a critical distance. In opposition to the realism of the Stanislavski method, Brecht devises a particular type of acting—*gestus*—that reduces character portrayal to specific intentions. Brecht channels these techniques into *Lehrstücke*, didactic plays that bypass atmosphere and psychology to focus on the presentation of social contradictions.²²

Brecht laces his productions with playful asides and, in his collaborations with Kurt Weill, acerbically tuneful music. As a result, his plays succeed as engaging provocations rather than political anthems. Brecht is forced into exile in 1933, first to Scandinavia, then to the United States in 1941. He returns to Berlin in 1949, choosing to live in the East. In command of his own company, the Berliner Ensemble, Brecht continues to explore the potential of political theater. After his death in 1956, Brecht remains a source of inspiration and controversy. His plays are performed widely, especially in Germany (both East and West before re-unification), and the doctrine of epic theater continues to inspire dramatists worldwide.

Back in the 1920s, opera in Weimar burns as brightly as the theater scene in general. Erich Kleiber leads an adventurous program at the Staatsoper, including the world premieres of Berg's *Wozzeck* in 1925 and Milhaud's *Christophe Colomb* in 1930. The set designs of Emil Pirchan keep pace with expressionism and the *Neue*

²² Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: the Development of an Aesthetic*, edited and translated by John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964).

Sachlichkeit.²³ Across town in Charlottenburg, the Städtische Oper (the precursor to the Deutsche Oper) propels itself into competition with the Staatsoper, primarily on the magnetism of music director Bruno Walter. But the most daring productions take place at the short-lived Kroll Oper.

From 1927–1931, Otto Klemperer oversees this autonomous offshoot of the Staatsoper. Klemperer begins with his own austere staging of *Fidelio*, set on a geometric staircase designed by Ewald Dülberg. Subsequent productions include provocative interpretations of 18th- and 19th-century repertoire and of contemporary operas by Krenek, Schoenberg, Hindemith, Stravinsky, Janáček and Milhaud. Klemperer and dramaturg Hans Curjel recruit Bauhaus artist László Moholy-Nagy and surrealist painter Giorgio de Chirico to design sets. The confluence of talent does not, however, translate into ticket sales, and the experimental program invites critical battering from conservatives. The Kroll Oper closes in 1931, and the theater itself becomes the home of the National Socialist government after the Reichstag fire of 1933.²⁴

The opera scene changes dramatically as soon as the Nazis take power. Within months of Hitler's appointment as chancellor, the Staatsoper dismisses Jewish employees—including Klemperer—and launches into a complete cycle of Wagner's operas. The Staatsoper falls into the hands of Hermann Göring, and the Städtische Oper (known as the Deutsches Opernhaus during the Third Reich) becomes the jurisdiction of Joseph Goebbels. Most scholars agree that the Nazi era does not engender much

²³ The *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or "The New Objectivity," is a general term for an artistic movement that sought to curtail the decadence of expressionism and reassert the importance of function over form. This movement, which overlaps with Bauhaus architecture and *Gebrauchsmusik*, culminates in Weimar-era Berlin.

²⁴ For a critical history of the Kroll Oper, see Thomas Wieke, *Vom Etablissement zur Oper* (Berlin: Haude & Spener, 1993). For a more general account of the Berlin opera scene during the Weimar Republic, see John Rockwell, *The Prussian Ministry of Culture and the Berlin State Opera, 1918-1931*, Ph.D. diss, University of California – Berkeley, 1972.



Figure 13: László Moholy-Nagy's design for a Krolloper production of *Tristan und Isolde*. Reprinted from Georg Quander, ed., *Apollini et Musis* (Berlin: Propyläen, 1992), 183.

theatrical innovation, though Gundula Kreuzer has pointed to a couple of high-concept productions that refrain from pronouncing innovation with visual flare.²⁵

After World War II, two revamped institutions transform the operatic landscape in Germany: the Komische Oper in East Berlin under Walter Felsenstein and the Bayreuth Festival under Wieland Wagner. As directors, both Felsenstein and Wagner aim at psychological truth, though their respective paths to truth could not be more dissimilar.

The home of the Komische Oper, a few long blocks down Unter den Linden from the Staatsoper, has been an operetta venue since the late 19th century. Arriving in 1947,

²⁵ Gundula Kreuzer, "Voices from Beyond: Verdi's *Don Carlos* and the Modern Stage," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 18 (2006), 151-179.

the Austrian-born Felsenstein creates a new opera company to occupy the repaired theater. The name of the company derives from the German translation of *opéra comique*, though the word “komisch” also means weird. The repertoire of the Komische Oper includes comic and tragic opera as well as operetta, all presented in colloquial German under the banner of *Musiktheater*. Felsenstein pursues the meaning of music and drama together, on the premise that “music theater exists when a musical action with singing human beings becomes a theatrical reality that is unreservedly believable.”²⁶ He wants the audience (and the performers) to believe that the characters *should* be singing. When the music and text truly work together, the quality of the drama should not require caveats.²⁷

The rather conventional sets and costumes seem to roll back the innovations of the Weimar era, but Felsenstein is not interested in vague imagery. He declares that “anything abstract is inadmissible.” He also hopes to transcend rote naturalism, for the “the stage must be a poetic effusion, a poetic expression, an image, an allegory; for if reality is reproduced photographically, it obviously loses every poetic quality.” Ultimately, Felsenstein aspires for an enhanced form of realism, where “the illusion on the stage must be perfect, without any gaps.”²⁸

In spite of their shared belief in musico-dramatic synthesis, Felsenstein has little taste for Richard Wagner. Felsenstein directs six productions of Wagner operas between

²⁶ Walter Felsenstein, *The Music Theater of Walter Felsenstein*, translated and edited by Peter Paul Fuchs (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975), 15.

²⁷ On Felsenstein and his work, see Robert Braunmüller, *Oper als Drama* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2002). In 2008, Arthaus Musik released a DVD box set of several productions directed by Felsenstein, along with supplementary materials: *Walter Felsenstein Edition*, DVD Box Set, directed by Walter Felsenstein, conducted by Fritz Lehmann et al., Komische Oper Berlin (Halle: Arthaus Musik, 2008).

²⁸ Walter Felsenstein, *The Music Theater of Walter Felsenstein*, translated and edited by Peter Paul Fuchs (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975), 131.

1927 and 1943 (i.e. before his arrival in Berlin), but none thereafter.²⁹ To this day, the Komische Oper almost never performs Wagner, a tradition reinforced by the ample selection of Wagner operas at the Staatsoper and the Deutsche Oper.

Felsenstein is, of course, not alone in his aversion to Wagner. The composer's inglorious association with the National Socialism accompanies his reception everywhere. Wagner's damaged reputation is especially worrisome for the keepers of the Bayreuth Festival. Wieland Wagner, the composer's grandson, reopens the festival in 1951. His productions dispense with the visual appurtenances of Teutonic pride. Inspired by the turn-of-the-century productions of Adolphe Appia, Wieland unclutters the stage.³⁰ All that remains is suggestive emptiness and abstract sets, a mythic atmosphere as the only backdrop for Wagner's introspective dramas. In this simple manner, the young Wagner reestablishes the Bayreuth tradition while putting some distance between himself and his literal-minded predecessors.³¹

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Regietheater becomes a catchword in the 1970s. Dramaturgy, *Bildung* and directorial autonomy are now taken for granted, or at least lie within the public's horizon of expectations. Directors begin to fiddle with these expectations, armed with the myriad theatrical techniques of the 20th century. Opera companies resurrect the experimental and

²⁹ Patrick Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 315.

³⁰ On Appia's spare approach to Wagner, see Adolphe Appia, *Music and the Art of the Theatre*, translated by Robert W. Corrigan and Mary Douglas Dirks, edited by Barnard Hewitt (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1962).

³¹ For a detailed account of Wieland Wagner's productions at Bayreuth, see Patrick Carnegy, "Wieland Wagner: opera as mystery play," *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

heterodox spirit of the Weimar years, culminating—in terms of public visibility—in Patrice Chéreau's centenary *Ring* at the Bayreuth Festival.³²

Many of the most controversial productions involve Wagner. In addition to Chéreau's *Ring*, two disciples of Felsenstein—Götz Friedrich and Harry Kupfer—direct combustible productions at Bayreuth. In a 1979 feature article, *New York Times* critic Joseph Horowitz sums up Friedrich's *Tannhäuser* (p. 1972) and Kupfer's *Der fliegende Holländer* (p. 1978) (both had been presented the previous summer):

Whether or not Felsenstein's influence amounts to anything resembling a school, the Bayreuth productions of Mr. Kupfer and Mr. Friedrich have much in common. Unlike Wieland Wagner's stagings, both are busily theatrical, with animated, realistic acting and a wealth of detail. More to the point, they are shaped by meticulously rationalized interpretations that explicitly purport to modernize the issues at hand. In the "Dutchman," Mr. Kupfer turns Wagner's plot into Senta's fantasy in order to substitute a case study in schizophrenia for a Romantic legend prescribing redemption through love. In "Tannhäuser," somewhat toned down since its premiere, Mr. Friedrich infers up-to-date political lessons by portraying the Landgrave's court as an ugly totalitarian dictatorship that repudiates free-thinkers.³³

Such productions sustain a spell of contemporaneity in the old-world society of Bayreuth. In Frankfurt, another early hub of *Regietheater*, conductor Michael Gielen and dramaturg Klaus Zehelein recruit Ruth Berghaus, a director and choreographer who presided over the Berliner Ensemble in the 1970s. She stages *Parsifal* and the *Ring* (in 1982 and 1985–1987, respectively) in a tone of "analytic inquisition whose severity was matched by what

³² Chéreau's 1976 cycle, under the baton of Pierre Boulez, places the action in the Industrial Revolution. The productions—which would be televised around the world—earn plenty of scorn and admiration. They can be seen on DVD: *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, DVD, directed by Patrice Chéreau, conducted by Pierre Boulez, Bayreuther Festspiele (Philips, 2001). For a sampling of the great many interpretations of Chéreau's *Ring*, see Pierre Boulez and Michel Fano, "A Conversation," translated by Thomas Repensek, *October* 14 (Autumn 1980), 101–120; Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Tétralogies, Wagner, Boulez, Chéreau: essai sur l'infidélité* (Paris: C. Bourgois, 1983); Michael P. Steinberg, "Die Walküre and Modern Memory," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 74.2 (2005), 703–713; Caryl Clark, Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, eds., *Opera Quarterly*, 41.1 (2008).

³³ Joseph Horowitz, "Wagner in a Bold New Style," *New York Times*, March 4, 1979.

sometimes came across as an almost comic subversion of the high seriousness of the Wagnerian oeuvre.”³⁴

The emergence of *Regietheater* has come to be associated with Wagner and politics.³⁵ Alex Ross, for example, surmises that, “Regietheater first became popular as a way of evading unsavory political associations created by the work of Richard Wagner.”³⁶ In Michael Steinberg’s formulation, “The radical restarts proclaimed by Regieoper held first and most urgently for the repertoire most tainted ideologically, for Wagner of course above all.”³⁷ Opera directors do cope with Wagner’s legacy, but it is worth remembering that many of the early examples of *Regietheater* gain notoriety for political reasons quite separate from the composer. Friedrich, Kupfer and Berghaus are all East German directors, stirring up trouble in West Germany. Opera companies in the West hire these directors, in part, to “exploit the frisson associated with the wrong side of the Iron Curtain.”³⁸ In both East and West Germany, opera directors take cues from avant-garde theater directors (e.g. Peter Zadek, Claus Peymann, Peter Stein) and playwrights (e.g. Peter Handke, Heiner Müller) who have nothing to do with Wagner, at least not yet.³⁹ The composer and his troublesome wake certainly contribute to the rise of

³⁴ Patrick Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 364.

³⁵ On the relationship between *Regietheater* and Wagner, see Udo Bermbach et al., eds., *Schwerpunkt Regietheater* (Würzburg: Königshausen u. Neumann, 2005).

³⁶ Alex Ross, “Verdi’s Grip: Why the Shakespeare of Grand Opera Resists Radical Stagings,” *The New Yorker*, p. 80-87 (24 September 2001).

³⁷ Michael P. Steinberg, “A Season in Berlin, or, Operatic Responsibility,” *New German Critique* 95 (Spring/Summer 2005), 58-9.

³⁸ Patrick Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 343.

³⁹ Peter Stein would attempt a *Ring* cycle for the Paris Opera in 1976 (cancelled after *Die Walküre*) as well as *Parsifal* for the Salzburg Easter Festival in 2002; Heiner Müller directs *Tristan und Isolde* at Bayreuth in 1993.

Regietheater, but, as James Treadwell wisely advises, “It is always dangerous to claim uniqueness for Wagner, since that is so clearly what he himself would have us do.”⁴⁰

In Berlin, the braided legacies of Felsenstein and Brecht generate a steady stream of theatrical provocations, only occasionally involving Wagner. The Staatsoper, under the leadership of Hans Pischner from 1963–1984, engages a rotating cast of audacious directors, including Berghaus, Kupfer, and Horst Bonnet (a former assistant to Brecht and Felsenstein). In 1981, Harry Kupfer becomes the intendant of the Komische Oper, and in West Berlin, Götz Friedrich (who defected in 1972) takes on the same responsibility at the Deutsche Oper.

Episodes of *Regietheater* begin to sprout up all over Europe. At the Paris Opera, for example, intendant Rolf Liebermann restores some of the former grandeur to the troubled company while delicately introducing avant-garde production values.⁴¹ Opera companies in Vienna and London also begin to integrate *Regietheater* into their repertoires, and small theaters gain wide recognition for adventurous productions (e.g. Theater Bielefeld, Welsh National Opera). The United States, however, remains resistant; writing for the *New York Times*, Donal Henahan refers to Jean-Pierre Ponnelle’s production of *Der fliegende Holländer*—a rather understated example of *Regietheater*, staged in San Francisco and New York—as a “lurid, antimusical travesty.”⁴²

The tide of *Regietheater* continues to rise after the fall of Berlin Wall. Some opera directors still wring out parallels to National Socialism and GDR repression. Other

⁴⁰ James Treadwell, “Reading and Staging Again,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 10.2 (July 1998), 206.

⁴¹ Harold Schonberg, “Paris, Once the Worst, Enjoys a Renaissance,” *New York Times*, February 26, 1975.

⁴² Donal Henahan, “Must Balanced Books Lead to Artistic Mediocrity?,” *New York Times* (May 6, 1979).

directors look for new foils.⁴³ In most cases, however, the impetus for innovation seems to well up from some invisible place. At any rate, the present-day opera scene in Berlin seems to be fully saturated with *Regietheater*.

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At this point, I think it would be helpful to delineate a few concrete qualities associated with *Regietheater*. Directors seldom make substantial alterations to the music or the libretto; more often, they offer a new interpretation, change the setting, jolt singers into actorly performances, enhance the visual splendor, and/or incite a scandal. Under any designation, these five interrelated techniques thrive in Berlin.⁴⁴

Interpretation. In bringing an opera to the stage, a director necessarily furnishes an interpretation. In some cases, the director will uphold recent conventions and play to the expectations of the audience. This mode of interpretation is exemplified by the many productions at the Metropolitan Opera by Franco Zeffirelli and Otto Schenk. In Berlin, by contrast, directors tend to strive for originality. When I asked the chief dramaturg at the Staatsoper about production values in the Berlin opera scene, he told me that a segment of the public has come to expect personal interpretations that accentuate

⁴³ Harry Kupfer, for example, feels the need to defend *Die Meistersinger* against the encroachment of Americanization, declaring that, “we must finally stop apologizing for *Die Meistersinger*. I will mount every barricade to defend this work against the non-culture [*Unkultur*] that confronts us today.” See Harry Kupfer, “A conversation with Harry Kupfer,” *Wagner's Meistersinger: Performance, History, Representation*, edited by Nicholas Vazsonyi (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2003), 40.

⁴⁴ Unless otherwise noted, examples are taken from the repertoire of the Staatsoper Unter den Linden. In this delineation, I intentionally sidestep the question of authorial intent, or *Werktreue*. Traditionalists often accuse directors of defying the wishes of the composer or librettist, while directors claim that the passage of time necessitates creative mediation. Most of the composers and librettists in question are dead, and no one can know how they would want their works presented today. Authorial intent is an interesting question in the rhetoric surrounding *Regietheater*, but it does not reveal itself in any concrete manner. With this in mind, I focus on less enigmatic characteristics.

dramatic tension. Directors oblige by mining the given material for unresolved contradictions and embellishing the story with conceits of their own invention.

As I mention above, *Regietheater* builds on Wagner's reconfiguration of opera aesthetics, when, as Dahlhaus explains, "appearance was declared to be essence."⁴⁵ In the late 19th century, directors begin to claim aesthetic autonomy for the performance. As David Levin explains, operatic staging becomes, in some instances, "a complex and autonomous (rather than merely derivative or decorative) expressive form."⁴⁶

In *Don Carlo*, for example, Philipp Himmelmann localizes the action in an assertively private sphere, making the grim political machinations and unspeakable violence seem almost mundane. Himmelmann also restores the darker tone of the source material, Schiller's *Don Karlos*. At the discretion of the director, the opera reveals itself to be a point of departure as well as a destination. In Levin's account, "This production illuminated and clarified the piece's dramaturgical stakes."⁴⁷

Levin elsewhere likens directorial interpretation to reading, so long as the word reading retains the playful meaning bestowed upon it by the past several decades of literary theory. In reference to Wagner's legacy in Germany, Levin contrasts literalist production values with a more radical tradition, "those who are committed to re-reading Wagner, reading him against the grain."⁴⁸ This notion of reading is helpful in grasping

⁴⁵ Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, translated by J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 196.

⁴⁶ David Levin, *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 27.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* xi–xii. For additional academic takes of this production, see Gundula Kreuzer, "Voices from Beyond: Verdi's Don Carlos and the Modern Stage," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 18 (2006), 151–179; and Michael P. Steinberg, "A Season in Berlin, or, Operatic Responsibility," *New German Critique* 95 (Spring/Summer 2005), 51–66.

⁴⁸ In delineating this more radical tradition, Levin cites Otto Klemperer's and Jürgen Fehling's 1929 production of *Der fliegende Holländer* at the Kroll Oper, Chereau's *Ring*, and the views espoused by

the potential inadequacy of passive production values in conveying the meaning of a given opera. As Andreas Homoki remarks regarding his own production of *Der Rosenkavalier* at the Komische Oper, Hoffmansthal's irony "must be read to be understood."⁴⁹ Homoki's production takes place across several centuries, and the set slowly turns upside-down such that the entire Rococo salon ends up in total disarray. The performers deliver their melodious lines with willful precision, though they seem bewildered by the indifference of the environment. The melancholic irony of *Der Rosenkavalier*, so often overshadowed by pleasantness, moves into the foreground. Without misrepresenting the music or the text, Homoki offers a reading that compels the audience to rethink their own presuppositions about the meaning of the opera.⁵⁰

Setting. Fanciful settings are native to opera. Librettists tap into the allure of the unfamiliar; a bit of distance allows for allegory while bolstering the utopian element.⁵¹ In reference to the correlating pattern in literature, Bakhtin speaks to the authenticating effect of temporal or geographical displacement:

In order to endow any ideal with authenticity, one need only conceive of its once having existed in its "natural state" in some Golden Age, or perhaps existing in the present but somewhere at the other end of the

Wieland Wagner. See David J. Levin, "Reading a Staging/Staging a Reading," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 9.1 (March 1997), 51.

⁴⁹ Andreas Homoki, "Ewigkeit im Augenblick: Ein Gespräch mit Andreas Homoki über seine Inszenierungskonzeption zu *Der Rosenkavalier*," <http://www.komische-oper-berlin.de/> (accessed May 2006).

⁵⁰ I attended the premiere of this production on April 2, 2006. Insofar as I could gauge their collective response, the audience seemed to appreciate Homoki's interpretation.

⁵¹ Canonical operas are seldom set in the time and place of their premiere. Instead, they are set in the distant past (e.g. *Guillaume Tell*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Die Meistersinger*, *Boris Gudonov*), the less distant past (e.g. *La Traviata*, *Tosca*, *La Bohème*, *Der Rosenkavalier*), the quasi-mythic past (e.g. *Norma*, *Der Freischütz*, *Tristan und Isolde*, *Pelléas et Mélisande*), the Orient (e.g. *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, *Aida*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Turandot*), Spain (e.g. *Le Nozze di Figaro*, *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, *Il Trovatore*, *Carmen*), the dominion of Greek mythology (e.g. *L'Orfeo*, *Iphigénie en Aulide*, *Elektra*, *Oedipus rex*), and other lands of make-believe (e.g. *Die Zauberflöte*, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, *The Invisible City of Kitezh*, *Bluebeard's Castle*). Exceptions to this pattern tend to fall within well-defined movements that expressly repudiate fanciful settings, including *opera buffa* (e.g. *Così fan tutte*, *L'elisir d'amor*), *Verismo* (e.g. *Cavalleria rusticana*, *Pagliacci*), and *Zeitoper* (e.g. *Johnny spielt auf*, *Neues vom Tage*).

world, east of the sun and west of the moon, if not on earth then underground, if not underground then in heaven.⁵²

Opera directors, in turn, change the setting anew for a variety of reasons: to jilt our expectations, to make the scenarios recognizable, or to put pressure on the assumptions upheld by the given setting. A director might move the action to the present-day, or to the time of the premiere (e.g. *Der Rosenkavalier* in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna). Some scenarios strip away any particular sense of time or place. In *Tristan und Isolde*, for example, Stefan Bachmann situates the drama in a white plasticine shell (designed by the architecture firm Herzog & de Meuron) that morphs into suggestive but non-specific settings. Harry Kupfer describes his production of *Die Meistersinger* as taking place “[in the past], today, and nowhere... Nürnberg could be temporally and geographically anywhere and everywhere.”⁵³ Other productions take place in kitschy wonderlands. Doris Dörrie transports *Così fan Tutte* to the 1960s; Guglielmo and Ferrando return

Figure 14: Stefan Bachmann's production of *Tristan und Isolde*, with a set by Herzog & de Meuron.
Photo: Monika Rittershaus.



⁵² M.M. Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and the Chronotype in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 147-8.

⁵³ Harry Kupfer, “A Conversation with Harry Kupfer,” *Wagner's Meistersinger: Performance, History, Representation*, edited by Nicholas Vazsonyi (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2003), 49.

disguised as hippies instead of Albanians. Peter Mussbach's *Die lustige Witwe* finds itself amidst the wreckage of plane crash in Antarctica, where the cast encounters dozens of enormous penguins. Displacements can also be more specific and sobering. Dmitri Tcherniakov envisions *Boris Gudonov*, for instance, in the ambit of the despotic president of Russia, circa 2010.

Acting. In the late 1940s, Walter Felsenstein endeavors to undo the stylized and unreflective acting practices of opera singers. He expands rehearsal periods and focuses on making the behavior on stage believable. Felsenstein's students inherit this ethic, though they also learn the rather incommensurable methods of Brechtian acting.⁵⁴ Directors take additional cues from theatrical traditions no less stylized than old-fashioned operatic acting, but presumably more expressive (e.g. Robert Wilson's affinity for Japanese kabuki). Nuanced acting has become quite common in the Berlin, to the point where the histrionics of an imported bel canto diva can seem more out of place than intentional *Verfremdungseffekten*.

Visual splendor. With access to the music and text somewhat restricted, directors are disproportionately invested in appearances. In fact, many directors associated with *Regietheater* began their careers as set designers, including Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, Achim Freyer, and Herbert Wernicke. Some visual environments are defined by abstract collocations of light and color, such as Robert Wilson's *Erwartung* and Peter Mussbach's staging of Hans Werner Henze's *Phaedra* (with lighting by Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson). Other productions feature less austere visual invention. Doris Dörrie's

⁵⁴ On the persistence of Brechtian acting in Germany, see the special issue of *TDR* devoted to Brecht: Susanne Winnacker, ed., "German Brecht, European Readings," *TDR* 43.4 (Winter 1999).

Turandot, for example, includes an enormous teddy bear and a pastiche of Japanese pop imagery, while Achim Freyer's staging of the *Salome* at the Deutsche Oper dresses the set and the singers in garish circus apparel.

Scandal. By intent or accident, many operas in Berlin incite scandal. The opera-going public is accustomed to provocation, so genuine controversy erupts only in the most extreme circumstances. The Catalan director Calixto Bieito has earned notoriety for his blood-soaked and sexually explicit productions of *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* and *Madame Butterfly* (in German) at the Komische Oper. And Stefan Herheim has rattled the nerves of the Staatsoper audience by staging an absurdist *La Forza del Destino*. The most reliable architect of a *succès de scandale*, however, is Hans Neuenfels, an *enfant terrible* with more than forty years of experience. His *Idomeneo* at the Deutsche Oper, which I discuss in Chapter III, features, most notably, beheadings of Mohammed, Jesus, Buddha and Neptune.

Figure 15: Doris Dörrie's production of *Turandot*. Photo: Monika Rittershaus.





Figure 16: Maria Bengtsson as Konstanze in Calixto Bieito's production of *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* at the Komische Oper. Photo: Monika Rittershaus.

A spirit of willful confrontation permeates German theater, especially since the 1960s.⁵⁵ While Schiller and Brecht hope to stir the audience into critical reflection, recent playwrights and directors make these provocations visceral. Of Himmelmann's *Don Carlo*, Michael Steinberg writes that the *auto-da-fé* scene "upset the audience, as it should have."⁵⁶ I agree that opera should, at times, confront the audience with unpleasantness, though my own experience at *Don Carlo*—watching shock turn to glee at intermission—sustains my suspicion that *Regietheater* is not, in its heart, all that confrontational.

⁵⁵ Peter Handke's 1966 stage piece "Offending the Audience" expresses this attitude rather succinctly. See Peter Handke, "Offending the Audience" *Kaspar and Other Plays*, translated by Michael Roloff (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1969).

⁵⁶ Michael P. Steinberg, "A Season in Berlin, or, Operatic Responsibility," *New German Critique* 95 (Spring/Summer 2005), 64.

I spoke with dozens of Berliners about *Regietheater*. I would ask why the opera scene in Berlin seems so experimental, so given to controversy. A few people repudiated my premise: the rest of the opera world is, after all, drifting in the same direction. But most people that I spoke with—friends, students, professors, musicians, singers, directors, opera administrators—agreed with my premise, and offered thoughtful hypotheses. I find many of these explanations compelling, though they all require caveats. I review several of these hypotheses here, along with my reservations. I then offer an additional explanation, unarticulated by any of my informants.

Public subsidies. Almost everyone points to subventions as a precondition of *Regietheater*. Without the constraints of ticket sales or persnickety donors, opera companies are free to experiment. There is, in fact, some correlation between subsidies and *Regietheater*. Berlin received the highest opera subsidy in the world in 2005/2006, while opera companies in Amsterdam, Paris, Vienna, Zurich, Oslo, and Stockholm all received even higher subsidies per capita.⁵⁷ Each of these cities embraces *Regietheater*, though none to the same degree as Berlin (Amsterdam comes close, but on a much

⁵⁷ See De Nederlandse Opera, “De Nederlandse Opera: Annual Report 2007,” http://media.dno.nl/uploads/pdf/jaarverslag_2007.pdf (accessed October 2008); Jeannine Cardona and Chantal Lacroix, “Chiffres clés édition 2007,” *Statistiques de la Culture*, www2.culture.gouv.fr/deps/chiffrescles2007/global2007.pdf (accessed March, 2008); Statistik Austria, “Gebärung der Bundestheater, Wiener Privattheater und Vereinigten Bühnen Wien und der österreichischen Länderbühnen und Stadttheater 2005/06,” www.statistik.at/web_de/statistiken/bildung_und_kultur/kultur/theater_und_musik/021286.html (accessed March, 2008); Opernhaus Zürich AG, *Geschäftsbericht 2006/2007*, http://www.opernhaus.ch/pdf/spielzeit07_08/GB.pdf (accessed October 2008); Statistisk sentralbyrå, “5.2 Økonomiske nøkkeltal for tilskotsteatra. 2003-2006,” *Kulturstatistikk 2007*, http://www.ssb.no/emner/07/nos_kultur/nos_d382/tab/tab-5.2.html (accessed October 2008); Kungliga Operan AB, *Årsredovisning 2007*, <http://www.operan.se/upload/PDF/OperanRedovisning2007.pdf> (accessed October 2008).

smaller scale). In the United States, by contrast, opera companies do not receive much public support, nor do they delve into uncharted production values.

I suspect that this correlation is more of a necessary condition than a cause. There are cities that receive ample public subsidies that do not indulge directors to such a great extent (London and Milan, for example).⁵⁸ In Salzburg, the rising tide of *Regietheater* is met with hostility year-after-year; the audience forgives the directorate of the summer festival because the quality of the music persists at such a high level. As Thomas Ertman points out, the prevalence of *Regietheater* requires an explanation with more sociological nuance than economic determinism:

The degree to which this *Regietheater* has been able to establish itself and gain acceptance from regular opera-goers has varied substantially between Germany and France on the one hand and the more conservative Austria and Italy on the other, despite roughly similar degrees of public subsidization (and hence independence from immediate market pressures). To explain these differences, it is necessary to look beyond production conditions to the significance attached to opera attendance among different social groups in these countries.⁵⁹

Cultural subsidies seem to be conducive to *Regietheater*, but finances alone do not explain the propensity for operatic experimentation, in Berlin or elsewhere.

Controversy as a selling point. Opera companies in Berlin are responsible for a portion of their operating budget, albeit a small portion. A scandal can help attract an otherwise improbable clientele. Bieito's production of *Die Entführung*, for example, did indeed generate ticket sales for the Komische Oper, which typically sells less than two-thirds of its capacity annually. I myself managed to lure friends to *Le Grand Macabre* by

⁵⁸ Barbie Nadeau, "Money and Monuments," *Newsweek*, 26 December, 2005.

⁵⁹ Thomas Ertman, "Conclusion: Towards a New Understanding of the History of Opera," in *Opera and Society in Italy and France from Monteverdi to Bourdieu*, edited by Victoria Johnson, Jane F. Fulcher, and Thomas Ertman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 360.



Figure 17: Lucio Gallo and Sylvie Valayre in Peter Mussbach's production of Macbeth at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden. Photo: Staatsoper Unter den Linden.

György Ligeti at the Komische Oper and *Die gelbe Prinzessin (La Princesse jaune)* by Camille Saint-Saëns at the Neuköllner Oper with promises of scandal. Excepting the most scandalous productions, however, *Regietheater* is neither more nor less profitable than conventional staging (or what stands for conventional staging in Berlin).

Overexposure. Many people I spoke with suggested that, after seeing *Carmen* and *Die Zauberflöte* so many times, the opera-going public develops an appetite for novel interpretations. This explanation always struck me as a little too precious: it brings to mind a German village coming together to sing the Hunter's Chorus from *Der Freischütz*. In reality, the German public does not go to the opera any more than the rest of Europe. In February and March of 2007, a team of researchers, under the auspices of the European Commission, conducted 26,466 face-to-face interviews in all 27 member-states. The study found that 19% of Germans have seen at least one ballet, dance

performance or opera in the past twelve months. This percentage is on a par with France, Italy, the UK and Europe as a whole, and significantly smaller than those of several smaller countries. So, at least by European standards, Germans are not overexposed to opera.⁶⁰

An avant-garde tradition. Berlin has a history of theatrical innovation, especially during the Weimar years, and, regarding opera, at the Kroll. Berlin is not, however, unique for having such a rich history. In fact, except for a few decades in the early 20th century, the history of theater in Berlin is rather unremarkable. Rome, Moscow, London, Paris and New York certainly have comparable avant-garde theater traditions, but none of these cities ends up with Berlin's opera scene.

The will of the leadership. A charismatic impresario can certainly shape the artistic profile of a theater, or even a city. Max Reinhardt and Wieland Wagner substantiate this point. More recently, Klaus Zehlelein and Gerard Mortier have earned reputations for transforming conservative institutions into havens of *Regietheater*. As I show in Chapter III, however, the politics of opera administration never begins and ends in one office. However charismatic an impresario may be, adventurous programming seldom succeeds in an unreceptive atmosphere; see, for example, the abrupt conclusions to the reigns of Daniel Barenboim at the Paris Opera, Peter Sellars at the National Theater in Washington DC, and Pamela Rosenberg at the San Francisco Opera.⁶¹

⁶⁰ TNS Opinion & Social, "QA4.1 How many times in the last twelve months have you seen a ballet, a dance performance or an opera?" *Special EuroBarometer N°278: European Cultural Values* (European Commission, 2007), <http://www.culturestatistics.net/EU%20Cultural%20Values.pdf> (accessed October 2008).

⁶¹ "Daniel Barenboim is dismissed as Chief of the New Paris Opera," *New York Times*, January 15, 1989; Robert D. McFadden, "Peter Sellars, Director of Theater In Kennedy Center, Takes a Leave," *New York Times*, August 10, 1986; Anthony Tommasini, "San Francisco Losing Backer Of New Music," *New York Times*, July 1, 2004.

Vergangenheitsbewältigung. This cumbersome German word means “coming to terms with the past.” *Regietheater* has come to be associated with Germany’s ongoing confrontation with its former self. Many of the people I spoke with cited the compulsion to work through the past as a constitutive component of *Regietheater*. Michael Steinberg articulates this position succinctly:

Regieoper contains a theory of history. It argues for the defamiliarization of the past; the desentimentalization of the past and its alleged securities, among them the operatic canon. The performance of canonic work is a return of and to a certain past; the director's concept defamiliarizes that past to provide, if successful, a reorientation and a newness, a *raison d'être*, to the dialogue of past and present.⁶²

Steinberg sees in Berlin’s catalogue of experimental productions a theory of history that does not resign itself to passive observation. *Regietheater* takes the operatic canon and decouples it from archaic innocence.

This type of explanation usually correlates with the tendency, mentioned above, to see the “unsavory political associations created by the work of Richard Wagner” as the primary impetus for *Regietheater*.⁶³ Indeed, the composer’s own grandson is motivated, in part, by a desire to put some distance between his own productions and those of the recent past. At the press conference marking the reopening of the Bayreuth Festival in 1951, Wieland Wagner announces his family’s new vision: “We have destroyed the ‘Bayreuth Style’ because Germanic gods are of no more interest to us. We want to get away from the cult of Wagner; our goal, on the other hand, is a cultic theater.”⁶⁴ Wieland would like to see his grandfather’s operas retain their cult value despite the sobering

⁶² Michael P. Steinberg, “A Season in Berlin, or, Operatic Responsibility,” *New German Critique* 95 (Spring/Summer 2005), 58.

⁶³ Alex Ross, “Verdi’s Grip: Why the Shakespeare of Grand Opera Resists Radical Stagings,” *The New Yorker*, p. 80-87 (September 24, 2001).

⁶⁴ Cited in David Levin, *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 20.

incursion of history. In other words, Wieland is hoping to prevent the dissipation of aura even as he renegotiates the festival's relationship with the past.⁶⁵ Wieland certainly succeeds—his grandfather's operas are, to this day, consecrated as modern myths, and a visit to Bayreuth is, for many, still a pilgrimage.⁶⁶

Wieland Wagner's productions may have been willfully abstract, but subsequent directors raise the interpretive stakes with productions that recast Wagner's operas in more specific contemporary settings:

Producers like Friedrich and Kupfer had begun the process of refracting Wagner through a modern lens. In doing so they demonstrated that Wagner's belief in the timeless universality of myth was absolutely right.... As Boulez has argued, 'It is impossible to interpret the past with any degree of profundity except by setting out from the present, filtering it through a genuinely up-to-date way of thinking'.⁶⁷

This impulse to interpret the past is, at the same time, the means by which directors and the audience step away from the past. The production values formerly associated with Wagner—Viking helmets, naturalistic sets, stilted acting—have grown threadbare, ruined by Nazis. A new interpretive mandate allows directors to rescue Wagner from the dustbin of history.⁶⁸

Though well-suited to the weary atmosphere of post-1945 Germany, the notion that staging might mediate the passage of time predates World War II. Levin describes

⁶⁵ As I mention in Chapter I, Walter Benjamin associates aura with "the cult value of the work of art in categories of space and time perception." See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 243.

⁶⁶ For two thoughtful discussions of Wagner and myth, see Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Myth and Music," in *Myth and Meaning* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 20-24; and Theodor Adorno, "Myth," in *In Search of Wagner*, translated by Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1991), 85-96.

⁶⁷ Patrick Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 354.

⁶⁸ Even Adorno, who shows little warmth towards Wagner, believes that the composer's works deserve some kind of rescue or redemption [Rettung]. See Theodor W. Adorno, "Selbstanzeige des Essaybuchs 'Versuch über Wagner'," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 13, edited by Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), 506.

the Kroll Oper production of *Der fliegende Holländer* as an attempt to retain the contemporaneity locked-up in the opera itself:

Fehling and Klemperer did not so much 'update' *Der fliegende Holländer* as not backdate it.... [They] raised the spectre that the work's meaning is not fixed but malleable, that its signification might extend beyond the Master's authorisation.⁶⁹

Levin identifies those practitioners now associated with *Regietheater*—Chéreau, Berghaus, Neuenfels, Peter Sellars, Robert Wilson—as players in the resurgence or revival of the spirit formerly channeled by the Kroll Oper.⁷⁰ Using the phrase “archeological dramaturgy,” Levin describes the current wave of directorial innovation as “a willingness to explore and even render (rather than suppress) opera’s representational unruliness.”⁷¹ In these terms, Levin encapsulates the view that *Regietheater* is a form of historical mediation, a way of coping with the past. Even if *Regietheater* is the resurgence of an old spirit, that spirit is distinctly amenable to Berlin after 1945.

§

I find this last account of *Regietheater*—as a way of mediating historical trauma—to be the most compelling explanation of its prevalence. The humiliation and

⁶⁹ David Levin, “Reading a Staging/Staging a Reading,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 9.1 (March 1997), 48.

⁷⁰ David Levin, *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 23-4; David Levin, “Introduction,” in *Opera through Other Eyes* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 17.

⁷¹ Levin’s use of the word “archeological” follows a discussion of Foucault’s interpretation of Chéreau’s *Ring*. Parenthetically, in reference to my use of the word “current,” it is worth noting that most of the director’s associated with the rise of *Regietheater* in the 1970s and 1980s—Neuenfels, Kupfer, Chéreau, Sellars, Wilson—are still working as opera directors and they remain in great demand. See David Levin, *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 22. See also Michel Foucault, “19th Century Imaginations,” translated by Alex Susternic, *Semiotext(e)* 4.2 (1982), 182-190.

guilt associated with Nazism and the Holocaust still haunt German culture. I suspect that some directors and spectators do feel the need, as Steinberg postulates, “to rethink matters of taste and pleasure.”⁷² Wagner is especially difficult to confront, but “the historical distance required for Wagner seemed equally required for Lortzing, and indeed for Donizetti – for whatever *Grosspapa* sang in the bath.”⁷³

I also agree with the basic premise, articulated by Steinberg, that “the performance of canonic work is a return of and to a certain past,” and that “the director's concept defamiliarizes that past to provide...a reorientation and a newness.”⁷⁴ I do not believe, however, that these “reorientations” should be too closely correlated with thoughtfulness. In their explanations of *Regietheater*, Steinberg and Levin (and many of the people I worked with at the Staatsoper) privilege the thoughtful spectator, the kind of spectator who appreciates the thoughtful interventions of a director. Steinberg associates *Regietheater* with the imperative “to rethink matters” and “the director’s concept,” while Levin repeatedly refers to the movement to “rethink” or “reconceptualize” opera.⁷⁵ Within such cerebral parameters, *Regietheater* is, to my mind, too readily associated with critique.⁷⁶

A provocative production might engage certain members of the audience, and in those circuits of aesthetic reception, the production itself could become, in Levin’s terms,

⁷² Michael P. Steinberg, “A Season in Berlin, or, Operatic Responsibility,” *New German Critique* 95 (Spring/Summer 2005), 59.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 58.

⁷⁵ Ibid. 59; David Levin, *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 3-7.

⁷⁶ See, for example, David Levin, *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 32: “Dramaturgy can pose the challenge of applied criticism, transplanting textual theory and analysis from the library and the classroom into the rehearsal room and onto the stage.” This idea is not itself worrisome unless it assumes a posture of political progressivism (as literary theory often does). Progressive dramaturgy does not isomorphically translate into progressive politics, especially within an operatic tradition that has never spurned the patronage of the ruling class.

“a complex and autonomous (rather than merely derivative or decorative) expressive form.”⁷⁷ I believe, however, that the appearance of novelty *typically* provides the public with a justification to disengage. In Germany, and especially in Berlin, the past is haunted by bad spirits; on the opera stage, an unreflective restoration of the past would be distasteful. State-sponsored *Regietheater* incorporates historical mediation into the spectacle. The audience is thereby absolved of any immediate culpability in coming to terms with the past. Instead, members of the audience—“kaleidoscopes equipped with consciousness,” as Baudelaire terms desensitized modern subjects—watch passively as an enigmatic reading of the past is staged in a series of visuals, sometimes shocking, but mostly pleasant.⁷⁸

The audience of the Staatsoper is not especially interested in critique. As I note in Chapter IV, they are far more interested in escapism and edification than provocation or politically-engaged opera. The opera-going public is well-educated when compared with the population at large, but they do not necessarily crave (or even register) the aesthetic complexities that Levin or Steinberg distill in their own readings. To cite just one example: during a production of Donizetti’s *L’elisir d’amore* [*The Elixir of Love*] that I attended, a character mentioned the myth of Tristan and Isolde.⁷⁹ At that moment, the recitative accompanist arpeggiated the unmistakable (and out-of-place) “Tristan Chord” from Wagner’s opera. This being a comic opera, the audience could have laughed, but

⁷⁷ David Levin, *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 27.

⁷⁸ Walter Benjamin, “Some Motifs on Baudelaire,” *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 175.

⁷⁹ Donizetti’s opera, which predates Wagner’s *Tristan* by a quarter-century, also revolves around the *Tristan* myth.



Figure 18: Ruth Berghaus' 1972 production of *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* is the oldest production in the Staatsoper's current repertoire. Photo: Monika Rittershaus.

instead, the joke flew by, unnoticed. I cannot know for sure whether the audience chose to stay silent, but it seems at least as likely that they simply did not get the joke. It would be a mistake to overestimate this public's horizon of expectations.

As I see it, the weakness of the aforementioned explanation (i.e. *Regietheater* as archeological dramaturgy) emerges out of an elision between the new and the meaningful. In his discussion of operatic production values, David Levin draws a distinction between strong and weak readings. In his terminology, "A strong reading is one that accounts for the most meaning of a given text," while displaying "intelligence, coherence and imagination." This seems like an apt definition of a strong reading. He goes on, however, to describe a strong reading as "surprising, illuminating previously invisible points in the text and thus asserting some distance from prevailing and predictable accounts." In contrast, "a weak reading fails to do so, and instead tends to

embrace a prevailing understanding of the work's meaning.” This seems like a leap to me. A performance does not need to be unconventional in order to be meaningful.⁸⁰ In many ways, opera comes to be meaningful *precisely because* it recycles plotlines and leitmotifs, all in the context of a ritualized tradition. A typical opera audience appreciates convention and repetition—think about the peculiar institution of the encore, in which the audience interrupts the plot to hear those high C’s and stock embellishments a second or third time. *Carmen*, to cite just one full-length example, is so imbued with convention that, as Adorno observes, “Everyone on the stage knows from the outset that Carmen is the heroine. It is as if they had already seen the opera.”⁸¹ Nevertheless, the audience comes back again and again, thirsty for more of the same: “Yesterday I heard – would you believe it? – Bizet’s masterpiece, for the twentieth time.”⁸²

A visit to an opera house is always already a visit to the past. This has always been true: the Neoclassical architecture, the plotlines and the gallant customs take their cues from a half-imaginary past. The outward appearance of novelty does not necessarily compromise the pleasantness of nostalgia. In a passage from *The Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, Theodor Adorno accurately describes the operatic tradition as a form of historical tourism:

The force that binds people to the opera entails the memory of something long-forgotten, that legendary golden age of the bourgeoisie, whose golden aura itself is only the belated product of the tarnished years that followed. The medium of this unreal memory is the familiarity of

⁸⁰ Levin recognizes that “weak readings veer between two interpretative poles, either offering what would appear to be no interpretation or offering an inane one.” He also allows that “conservative productions can be inventive in their literalism,” but he does not elaborate. In any case, this last quadrant (i.e. conservative/strong) is basically an empty set in contemporary Berlin. See David J. Levin, “Reading a Staging/Staging a Reading,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 9.1 (March 1997), 51-2.

⁸¹ Theodor Adorno, “Fantasia sopra Carmen,” in *Quasi una Fantasia*, translated by Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1998), 53-64.

⁸² Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Case of Wagner,” in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 2000), 613.

individual melodies, or, as in the case of Wagner, of insistent motifs. The consumption of opera becomes to a large extent an exercise in recognition, not unlike that of hit songs, only less precise.... Opera lovers watch over the tradition as though it were a valuable possession.⁸³

Regietheater does not wash out this type of operatic experience. On the contrary, the operatic canon retains some of its nostalgic warmth precisely *because* the director overlays the naked spirit of the past with a new luster. As Schopenhauer observes in *The World as Will and Representation*, “Like cheap commodities, the lives of men are shellacked in a deceptive shimmer; what suffers always conceals itself.”⁸⁴

Regietheater is, in my view, an attempt to reinvent art in response to the decline of aura. As I hope to have made clear by now, the operatic tradition is drenched in aura; in Adorno estimation, “Music in which the dramatic proceedings are a priori doused in atmosphere and exalted is aura pure and simple.”⁸⁵ For Adorno, “Aura is not only—as Benjamin claimed—the here and now of the artwork, it is whatever goes beyond its factual givenness, its content.”⁸⁶ This great beyond is, to my mind, not as transcendental,

⁸³ Theodor Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (New York: Seabury, 1976), 81–82. Citing an adjacent passage in Adorno’s analysis, Levin draws a very different conclusion: “The project of a new mise-en-scène is implicit in Adorno’s critique.” Levin then goes on to declare that this new mise-en-scène, “reconceived in a newly concentrated mode that is impatient with habit and invites reflection,” would shift the terms of prestige associated with opera from “residual cultural affiliation” to “an experience of aesthetic complexity.” As I understand Adorno’s critique—which centers on listening, not watching—new mise-en-scène would not curtail the operatic tradition’s ongoing subservience to social function. In fact, opera has survived as a viable means of cultural affiliation, despite Adorno’s prognostications to the contrary (“The official life of opera can teach us more about society than about a species of art that is outliving itself and will hardly survive the next blow,” *Ibid.* 83) and the rising tide of *Regietheater*. For Levin’s commentary, see David Levin, *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 28.

⁸⁴ “Freilich ist am Menschenleben, wie an jeder schlechten Waare, die Außenseite mit falschen Schimmer überzogen: immer verbirgt sich was leidet.” Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (Leipzig: Brodhaus, 1879), 383–4.

⁸⁵ “Musik, welche a priori dramatische Vorgänge in Atmosphäre taucht und überhöht, ist Aura schlechtin.” Theodor Adorno, *Einleitung in die Musiksoziologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), 261; see also Theodor Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (New York: Seabury, 1976), 77.

⁸⁶ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor, edited by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 45. As I mention in Chapter I, Benjamin’s elucidation of aura is not entirely clear, but he seems to imply that post-auratic art would preserve and transform aura itself, or as Habermas describes it, “the experience of the aura burst the auratic

as vaporous, as Adorno would have us believe. It inheres in the radiant interior design, in the ideological gift-wrapping from the government, and in the muted collective effervescence in the audience. But aura can also spring directly from the stage, out of any element of the performance that goes beyond the content of the artwork. An actor, for example, might contribute to an artwork's aura with a bewitching performance. In naturalistic theater, "aura is tied to [the stage actor's] presence."⁸⁷ Writing in the mid-18th century, Francesco Algarotti—cited in Chapter II for his thoughts on theater design—believes that actors "ought to be thrown back at a certain distance from the spectator's eye and stand within the scenery of the stage in order to make a part of that pleasing illusion for which all dramatic exhibitions are calculated."⁸⁸ Modern audiences, however, are conditioned to photo-realism and moving images, and for them the most overt cues of theatrical aura—a naturalistic set, a *deus ex machina*, an actor's presence—lose verisimilitude (especially after the corruption of these cues by the Nazis). After 1945, Wieland Wagner and Walter Felsenstein reconfigure the appearance of opera (the former with broad, abstract strokes, the latter with an unprecedented attention to detail). Intermixed with Brechtian methods—alienation effects, montage, gestural acting, and most of all, political potential—the German operatic tradition comes to resemble the ideal of post-auratic art that Benjamin spells out in the "Work of Art" essay. But as Adorno

shell and became exoteric." On this point, see Samuel Weber, "Art, Aura and Media in the Work of Walter Benjamin," in *Mass Mediauras*, edited by Alan Cholodenko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 101; Jürgen Habermas, "Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin," translated by Philip Brewster and Carl Howard Buchner, *New German Critique* 17 (Spring, 1979), 47.

⁸⁷ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 229.

⁸⁸ Francesco Algarotti, *An Essay on the Opera*, ed. by Robin Burgess [anonymous translation] (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, Ltd, 2005).

recognizes, “One cannot abolish [aura] and still want art.”⁸⁹ *Regietheater* does not extinguish aura so much as repackage it. The weird sets, the gaudy colors, the sex and nudity, the semblance of a director’s concept—all of these elements contribute to a new décor for opera, a framework within which an old tradition remains viable.

Innovative productions may well achieve ephemeral autonomy, but the music and the text remain intact, constantly haloed by the embellishments by the director. Beneath the provocations, the operatic tradition endures, like a monument in a city park that endures beneath an excitable flock of pigeons. As Andreas Huyssen observes, monuments seldom provoke thoughtful confrontations with the past:

Recalling Robert Musil's observation that there is nothing as invisible as a monument, Berlin—and with it all of this memorial-crazed Germany—is opting for invisibility. The more monuments there are, the more the past becomes invisible, and the easier it is to forget: redemption, thus, through forgetting.⁹⁰

With each new production, the operatic tradition persists under a new guise, an additional veil. The tradition remains nostalgic, old-fashioned and exclusive, despite the appearance of constant renewal. An innovative production of *Die Meistersinger*, for example, might stir an especially reflective member of the audience into a thoughtful dialogue with the past, but the very same production will shield the rest of the audience from self-reproach as they whistle the prize song on the U-Bahn home.

⁸⁹ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor, edited by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 45. As I mention in Chapter I, Benjamin’s elucidation of aura is not entirely clear, but he seems to imply that in post-auratic art would preserve and transform aura itself, or as Habermas describes it, “the experience of the aura burst the auratic shell and became exoteric.” On this point, see Samuel Weber, “Art, Aura and Media in the Work of Walter Benjamin,” in *Mass Mediauras*, edited by Alan Cholodenko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 101; Jürgen Habermas, “Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin,” translated by Philip Brewster and Carl Howard Buchner, *New German Critique* 17 (Spring, 1979), 47.

⁹⁰ Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 32.

Chapter VI: Conclusion – How Things Come to Life

*The task of a philosophy of art is not so much to explain away the element of incomprehensibility, which speculative philosophy has almost invariably sought to do, but rather to understand the incomprehensibility itself.*¹

– Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

On a sunny morning in early May, eighty or ninety members of the Staatsoper staff congregate outside a windowless warehouse in Moabit. The meeting place is in the middle of Berlin, but this particular street is eerie and quiet. The Wall once ran behind this strip of warehouses, on the opposite shore of the Spandauer Schifffahrtskanal. This neighborhood has never been lively—the East German government razed part of a graveyard (*Invalidenfriedhof*, the graveyard of invalids) to make space for this segment of the Wall—and the landscape now consists of cracked pavement, disused railyards, and corrugated metal. Sunlight is overabundant and unwelcoming.

Today is the *Konzeptionsgespräch* for a new production of *Die lustige Witwe*. Members of the artistic, administrative, and production staff carpool or bicycle from Unter den Linden to this rehearsal space to hear the stage director elucidate his plans for the upcoming production. In this case, the stage director is Peter Mussbach, the intendant of the Staatsoper.

When someone with a key finally arrives, we file inside. A few people begin to unstack chairs and set them up in six or seven rows. I join in, but somehow end up without a chair for myself. When the presentation begins, I am standing in the back of the room. In the front of the room, just behind Herr Mussbach, stand two hollow-bodied costumes: an enormous penguin and an atmospheric diving suit.

¹ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor, edited by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 347.

A week ago, I asked the head of the dramaturgy department if he would tell me a bit about this production. When I walked into his office, he handed me three folders filled with sketches and photographs of airplane crashes, diving suits, and penguins. He then asked me if I had any idea how this imagery might relate to *Die lustige Witwe*. The correlation was lost on me, so he reminded me of the story, in which the aristocracy of Pontevedro (an imaginary grand duchy in the Balkans) whirls itself into a comedic frenzy. Elaborate dance sequences and catchy music compensate for the thin plot. The Viennese operetta is as velvety and indulgent as a *Sachertorte*. Mussbach, it turns out, would be satirizing the decadent mood of *Die lustige Witwe* by staging it in the icy wastelands of Antarctica. The cast would emerge from an airplane crash ready to drink champagne; as Walter Benjamin writes of modernity in the “Work of Art” essay, “Mankind...can [now] experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.”²

Now, in the warehouse, I see this concept actualized in the forms of a giant penguin and an archaic diving suit. Mussbach is an energetic and charismatic speaker, and his presentation almost convinces me that *Die lustige Witwe* should include penguins. He summarizes the plot and to a certain extent spells out his interpretation. Mussbach also informs us that this was Hitler’s favorite operetta, and at one point he mentions Air Force One and the American occupation of Iraq (but I fail to grasp their relevance). We are introduced to the production team, and they, in turn, describe the set design, choreography, and costumes. When the presentation comes to a close, I have only a vague sense of how this might all come together.

² Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 242.

In the end, the constituent parts would never congeal into a coherent whole. At the premiere, on June 17, 2006, the audience boos and hisses. The director's critique of decadence disappears beneath a veil of disjointed provocation. Instead of dancing grisettes, Mussbach supplies convulsing androgynes. The divers, still inexplicable to me, briefly take the stage in the second act, and the penguins, though cute, arrive only ten minutes before the final curtain. In the days to come, the press pans every aspect of the staging.³ And in October, the magazine *Opernwelt* names Mussbach's production the worst opera of the year [*Opern-Ärgernis des Jahres*], and the Staatsoper removes the production from its repertoire.⁴

There were many problems with the production, but I was especially disappointed by the director's misuse of penguins. A more thoughtful staging might have explored the species' incredible range—penguins can convey (or can be enlisted to convey): humor, dapper elegance, helplessness, solidarity, even fortitude.⁵ In this case, however, the penguins were merely cute. The audience was exhausted and resentful by the time that the penguins arrived on stage, and cuteness alone could not restore the public's lost sense of enchantment. As Wolfgang Fuhrmann titled his review in the *Berliner Zeitung*, "Die Pinguine kamen zu spat" ["The Penguins Came Too Late"].⁶

In more general terms, Mussbach's production failed because it spurned the expectations of the audience. Whether a production panders to the audience or unfolds according to its own formal logic, the meaning of that work is ultimately inseparable

³ See, for example, Frederik Hanssen, "Wenn in Absurdistan die Post abgeht," *Der Tagesspiegel*, June 19, 2006; and Manuel Brug, "Peter Mussbachs Berliner Operetten-Crash," *Die Zeit*, June 20, 2006.

⁴ "'Lustige Witwe' hat ausgelacht," *Der Tagesspiegel*, October 18, 2006, <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/art117,1870003> (accessed January 2009).

⁵ Concerning the interpretive range of penguins, the editorial board of New York Times, in ever-didactic fashion, published a warning against excessive anthropomorphism in 2005. See "Penguin Family Values," editorial, *New York Times*, September 18, 2005.

⁶ Wolfgang Fuhrmann, "Die Pinguine kamen zu spat," *Berliner Zeitung*, June 19, 2006.



Figure 19: The penguins take the stage in Peter Mussbach's production of *Die lustige Witwe*.
Photo: Monika Rittershaus.

from the terms of its reception. If a work of art can be said to follow its own logic—thus establishing itself as autonomous—it would nonetheless be meaningful only to the extent that its logic originates in a social context. In Adorno's concise formulation, "Autonomous music is not *absolutely* cut off from the context of effects: it *mediates* this context through its formal law."⁷

At the Staatsoper, the public does not expect naturalism. They do, however, expect respectful interpretations. A successful staging, whether conventional or avant-garde, would enhance the music and drama, like a translucent lacquer that accentuates the sinuous grain and the irregular burls of an oak table. In this production of *Die lustige Witwe*, the music and libretto are subordinated, recast as embellishments to the director's nebulous vision. The staging overshadows the work of art, and thereby undercuts both

⁷ Theodor Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann, translated by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 42.

aesthetic illusion and the hopeful expectations of the audience.⁸ The penguins waddle in vain and the performance never rises above ambulatory chaos.

§

Opera is an airy and outwardly useless commodity. All music, including opera, is intangible;⁹ as Christopher Small observes in *Musicking*, “Music is not a thing at all but an activity, something that people do. The apparent thing ‘music’ is a figment, an abstraction of the action, whose reality vanishes as soon as we examine it at all closely.”¹⁰ And as an artistic pursuit, opera is thought to be profoundly useless, an example of *l’art pour l’art*.

As I show in Chapter IV, this peculiar sort of commodity—the autonomous work of art—has come to be associated with the codification of modern subjectivity. In an advanced capitalist economy, commodities without any clear relation to use-value begin to resemble “autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own.”¹¹ This phenomenon, which Marx terms commodity fetishism, is at its most robust in artistic affairs, where use-value is especially scarce.¹² In short, the work of art converts the space vacated by use-

⁸ In my experience, opera-going publics are predisposed towards positivity because they pay a lot for their tickets and do not want to be disappointed. I saw dozens of “scandalous” productions in Europe, but I heard boos on only five occasions: Mussbach’s *Die lustige Witwe*, Hans Neuenfels’ *La forza del destino* (Deutsche Oper), Katharina Wagner’s *Il Trittico* (Deutsche Oper), and Stefan Herheim’s productions of *La forza del destino* (Staatsoper) and *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (Salzburg Festival).

⁹ The visual component of opera is, in practice, as intangible as the music. The audience is not allowed to touch the set, in the same manner that museum patrons are not allowed to touch the art.

¹⁰ Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998), 2.

¹¹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, translated by Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Books, 1990-1992), 165.

¹² The feeling of immediacy that accompanies aesthetic reflection is, in Adorno’s estimation, the result of an ideological substitution of pure exchange-value for pure use-value: “If the commodity in general combines exchange-value and use-value, then the pure use-value, whose illusion the cultural goods must

value into something spiritual.¹³ As works of art come to life, spectators begin to pay—as they might pay for entry to a zoo—to have these creaturely things return their gaze. In beholding one of these animate commodities, a spectator might “see a dimension of his own subjectivity,” to once again borrow a phrase from Clifford Geertz’s account of a Balinese cockfight.¹⁴ Such acts of recognition are, as I mention in Chapter I, central to Benjamin’s conception of aura: “To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return.”¹⁵

In sum, commodity fetishism is an animistic spell, and the marketplace is a theater of deceptive appearances, a phantasmagoria.¹⁶ Things come to resemble little animals scattered across the savanna. Most of the time, these things—including ineffective art—merely dwell, or interact with each other, oblivious to our watchful eyes.¹⁷ On a good night at the opera, however, the thing-itself comes to life and

preserve in a completely capitalist society, must be replaced by pure exchange-value, which precisely in its capacity as exchange-value deceptively takes over the function of use-value. The specific fetish character of music lies in this quid pro quo.” See Theodor Adorno, “On the Fetish-Character in Music,” in *Essays on Music*, edited by Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 296.

¹³ “Value,” according to Marx, “transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic.” As pure exchange-value, the work of art is blind to socio-economic reality. As such, the work of art is transformed into a purely negative social hieroglyphic. In Adorno’s summation, “Only through fetishism, the blinding of the artwork vis-à-vis the reality of which it is part, does the work transcend the spell of the reality principle as something spiritual.” See Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, translated by Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Books, 1990-1992), 168; and Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor, edited by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 341.

¹⁴ Clifford Geertz, “Notes on a Balinese Cockfight,” *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1973), 450.

¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, “Some Motifs on Baudelaire,” *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 188.

¹⁶ Phantasmagorias were popular spook-exhibitions in the early 19th century, based primarily on shadow-casting magic lanterns. Marx uses of the word metaphorically in *Capital*, in reference to commodities endowed with exchange-value. In the realm of music, Adorno famously likens Wagner’s music to a phantasmagoria. See Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, translated by Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Books, 1990-1992), 165 (*phantasmagorische* is here translated as “fantastic”); and Theodor Adorno, “Phantasmagoria,” *In Search of Wagner*, translated by Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1991), 74-85.

¹⁷ Commodities dwell as they wait to be exchanged, and interact with each other as exchange-values: “As soon as [a table] emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and

confronts the audience with a semblance of subjectivity, like a thoughtful gazelle that looks you in eye.

The idea of aesthetic autonomy originates in these moments of subjective recognition.¹⁸ In the 18th century, aestheticians begin to grapple with the question of autonomy; as Terry Eagleton suggests, “It is this notion of autonomy or self-referentiality which the new discourse of aesthetics is centrally concerned to elaborate.”¹⁹ Thereafter, aestheticians tend to correlate autonomy with the work-itself, with the contemplative mind of the spectator, or with some dialectical oscillation between these two poles.²⁰

Contrary to this tradition, I believe that the perception of aesthetic autonomy is necessarily conditioned by unconscious encounters with contextual elements that encircle the work of art. In each of the preceding chapters, I examine a different aspect of operatic affairs in Berlin: architecture and interior design, finance and administration, audience dynamics, and production values. I focus on the extra-musical in order to highlight the constitutive but subtle dynamism of context. In other words, I hope to have shown how the meaning of opera develops out of the interplay of multiple variables, beyond the specific character of the music or libretto.²¹

evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will.” See Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, translated by Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Books, 1990-1992), 163-4.

¹⁸ But as Adorno might say, the opposite is no less true (i.e. subjectivity originates in aesthetic reflection). In *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Terry Eagleton describes the doctrine of aesthetic autonomy, or “the aesthetic,” as “the very secret prototype of human subjectivity in early capitalist society, and a vision of human energies as radical ends in themselves which is the implacable enemy of all dominative or instrumentalist thought.” See Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1990), 9.

¹⁹ Ibid. The word “new” refers to the discourse on aesthetics that begins with Baumgarten in the 18th century and continues to the present-day.

²⁰ On this the Subject-Object dialectic in modern aesthetics, see Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor, edited by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 163-175.

²¹ In questioning the importance of the “specific character,” I mean to suggest that *Norma* is, to some extent, interchangeable with *Tosca*. The distinctions that musicologists and critics attend to—e.g. which

Benjamin's concept of aura, an "ornamental halo...in which the object or being is enclosed as in a case," is the organizing principle of my entire study.²² Each chapter is devoted to a different segment of the convoluted halo that enrobes the operatic tradition. This halo is ornamental, but it is also inextinguishable. Aura is both a symptom of the autonomous work of art *and* a necessary condition of the work's autonomy. The fact that the Benjamin's concept is, in Adorno's words, "incompletely 'thought out'," makes it susceptible to modification.²³ For me, the word aura encapsulates the indissoluble mixture of ether and actual context that encircles every work of art. The marble staircases, the subsidized tickets, the solemn mood in the auditorium—these unassuming components of operatic experience form the delineating contour that shapes the work of art into a thing with a subjective visage. The spectators absorb "the associations which, at home in the *mémoire involontaire*, tend to cluster around the object of a perception," then integrate these unconscious associations into a supernatural halo that serves to spiritualize the work itself.²⁴

In the aforementioned staging of *Die lustige Witwe*, the most conspicuous aspect of the opera's ornamental halo—the production itself—crystallizes into an opaque shell and occludes the work of art. Anthropomorphism—a reliable device in aesthetic enchantment, from fairy tales to *Die Zauberflöte* to Disney movies—comes too late. Of course, a luminous production does not, unto itself, lead to reverie. If the aura falls apart, in any segment of its circuitous arc, aesthetic reflection flounders. At Bayreuth, for

version of *Les Troyens* makes it to the stage—do not much matter in a macroscopic study of operatic culture.

²² Walter Benjamin, *On Hashish*, translated by Howard Eiland et al (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 58.

²³ Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, *The Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940*, edited by Henri Lonitz, translated by Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 321.

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, "Some Motifs on Baudelaire," *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 186.

example, the discomfort exacted on me by my wooden seat made it impossible to lose myself in *Götterdämmerung*. The unceremonious behavior of the audience at a Metropolitan Opera production of a *Rigoletto* obliterated my lofty expectations (a rambunctious school group was seated directly in front of me). And at a Los Angeles Opera, the exorbitant price of my unsubsidized ticket stung like a splinter as I strained to see *Lucia* from the last row of the balcony. On occasions such as these, the failure of a circumstantial facet of operatic experience disallows aesthetic reflection. What should be absorbed in a state of distraction—the context that delineates the work of art—becomes the object of my attention. On a good day, the context slips out of view, like the frame around a painting, as it subtly contours experience.

§

Die lustige Witwe was a fiasco, but no one really noticed. In the early summer of 2006, the World Cup swept through Berlin; *Fußball* infiltrated every conversation and every occasion. I found myself watching each and every game—Togo losing to Switzerland (0 – 2), Mexico tying Angola (0 – 0). Public telecasts became a daily routine: we watched games in bars, restaurants, theaters, parks, a miniature stadium outside the Reichstag, and in the Stadtbad Oderberger Straße, a decommissioned city bathhouse around the corner from my apartment. The German populace, typically reticent about displaying national pride, came out in full force, bedecked in black, red, and gold.

Even the opera community was preoccupied. An enormous television was installed in the Staatsoper's *Kantine*, then removed for becoming such a distraction, and finally reinstalled after considerable protest. The Staatsoper's attempt at a "soccer opera" never materialized, but the Komische Oper did stage a "soccer oratorio." The opera season culminated in a July 7 recital featuring Anna Netrebko, Rolando Villazón, and Plácido Domingo, a preamble to the tournament's final match two days later.²⁵ When asked about the parallels between opera and soccer, Domingo pointed out that "both disciplines involve a lot of screaming, though opera is a bit more technical in this respect."²⁶

In this climate, almost no one noticed the latest operatic scandal. Mussbach's production of *Die lustige Witwe* died a very quiet death on the fourth of July, the same night that Germany lost to Italy in the semi-finals. The penguins went into storage, and there they remained until the following summer.

I flew home in August, and I spent the subsequent year converting my fieldnotes into an embryonic dissertation. In that span of time, I realized how many questions I had never thought to ask, how many documents I had failed to photocopy. I also missed Berlin. So I booked a flight, then set off for a visit in August of 2007.

In the weeks leading up to my trip, I corresponded with my former colleagues at the Staatsoper. I scheduled a couple of meetings, and made plans to see the early-September world premiere of Hans Werner Henze's *Phaedra*. I was also asked to

²⁵ Two years later, the same trio performed in Vienna a couple of days before the final match of the Euro 2008 Championships. This tradition began in Rome on July 7, 1990—the eve of the World Cup finals—when Domingo, José Carreras, and Luciano Pavarotti performed together for the very first time. The Three Tenors, as they came to be known, performed together in the days leading up to the next three World Cup finals, in Los Angeles ('94), Paris ('98), and Yokohama ('02), respectively.

²⁶ Bettina Brinker, "Oper und Fußball haben viel gemeinsam," *Hamburger Abendblatt*, July 7, 2006.

volunteer for the *Nacht der Offenen Tür*, a family-friendly event in which the Staatsoper opens its doors for free backstage tours, a dress rehearsal, and a variety of concerts. I readily agreed, not knowing any of the details. On the day of my flight, the coordinator of the dramaturgy department, Ilse Ungeheuer, sent me a concise explanatory email: “Excellent, you will be a penguin!”

I intuited from this strange declaration that the administration of the Staatsoper had finally found a suitable use for the wonderful penguin costumes from *Die lustige Witwe*. Indeed, once in Berlin, I learned that I had unwittingly volunteered to waddle around the Staatsoper in a cumbersome, sweltering costume for four hours. I couldn’t help but wonder why the penguins were being resurrected for this occasion. I asked Ilse, and she answered: “Why not?” The same rationale had been an insufficient justification for the use of penguins in *Die lustige Witwe*, but for a crowd interspersed with children, the beautiful costumes would presumably contribute to a collective sense of wonder. I was easily convinced.

I met the other volunteers in a rehearsal studio on Thursday afternoon. For the *Nacht der Offenen Tür*, two days hence, we would be shuffling in and around the opera house from about four in afternoon until eight in evening. The penguins arrived in two enormous steamer trunks, like cargo directly off an ocean liner. We began to sort through the lifeless birds, each of us looking for a proper fit. I eventually found one marked 192 cm, hoisted it off the ground, unzipped the spine, and stepped inside. The heavy material, which felt like a blend of Goretex and vinyl, immediately compounded the warmth and humidity of August. I slipped my arms into the flippers, then made my

way over to the mirror. I peered through a mesh screen below the beak and saw in my reflection a pretty convincing semblance of a penguin.

For the next hour or so, we practiced waddling in various formations. Our director, a majorette, choreographed an ensemble routine in the style of Busby Berkeley. I was the tallest penguin, and thus designated the patriarch of the rookery. At the end of the rehearsal, we shed our costumes and stored them on a long wardrobe rack, where they hung like some weird pelagic bounty.

On Saturday, I arrived at the Staatsoper at four in the afternoon. We suited up, and began our first march. We waddled through a back-hallway of the administration building, down a short but treacherous staircase, and out into the sunlight. A small crowd was congregated around a makeshift stage behind the opera house. We had been instructed to stay in character, but a couple of the penguins quickly left the procession to mingle with crowd. For some reason, this struck me as wholly inappropriate, and I reaffirmed my own commitment to a naturalistic performance. The majorette corralled the errant penguins back into formation, and we marched along the side of the opera house towards Unter den Linden. We were met with smiles and appreciative honks from passing traffic. We performed our awkward dance routine, and earned a warm applause. I had the sense, however, that the crowd was sufficiently smitten by the mere sight of us.

After about twenty minutes, we returned to our dressing room in the administration building. My costume was unzipped and slumped around my waist as I quickly drank two bottles of water. After a ten-minute break, we set off for another tour. This strenuous cycle continued for about three more hours. At the end of our final march, I was happy to have been a penguin but ready for a shower.

My experience as a penguin was amusing, but it was also, to my surprise, illuminating. In Mussbach's production, the penguins were instrumentalized in the service of an incoherent aesthetic totality. At the *Nacht der Offenen Tür*, by contrast, each penguin became an end in itself. I waddled with purpose, and I think I conveyed that sense of purpose to the spectators. I had, in some sense, looked out on the world from within a work of art.

A beautiful penguin costume is, in many respects, incomparable with *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. But for a wide swath of the world's population, the penguin would be the more likely object of aesthetic reflection. The animal vestment also short-circuits the perception of aura: I could turn the penguin's gaze directly towards the spectator. Context, in this peculiar case, is not so important.

Figure 20: The author in a penguin costume at the Staatsoper's *Nacht der Offenen Tür*.
Photo: Nicholas Berger.



Nevertheless, the wide-eyed children who watched our procession might retrospectively associate wondrous penguins with the Staatsoper Unter den Linden. In this instance, the work of art would come to be associated with a particular time and place. Looking through my mesh mask, I could see these associations developing. For one especially adorable little girl—she looked like Susie from *Calvin and Hobbes*—aesthetic reflection came in three steps. She began by staring intently at my costume. Her curiosity then turned suddenly into rapture, as if she had solved some ancient riddle. Finally, she began to scrutinize the surrounding landscape, searching for some contextual explanation for this otherworldly phenomenon. Of course, there was no explanation to be had. But in the years to come, the sight of the opera house, however familiar, might bring to mind a vague premonition, just below the surface of memory, that this place accommodates a rare variety of enchantment.

Appendix: Operas that I attended in Berlin

* premiere
[]: rehearsal

At the Staatsoper Unter den Linden

Die Zauberflöte

June 12, 2004

Music: W.A. Mozart
Libretto: by E. Schikaneder

Conductor: Julien Salemhour
Director: August Everding

La Bohème

October 7, 2005; June 18, 2006

Music: Giacomo Puccini
Libretto: Luigi Illica &
Giuseppe Giacosa

Conductor: Dan Ettinger
Director: Lindy Hume

Così fan tutte

October 11, 2005; March 26, 2006

Music: W.A. Mozart
Libretto: Lorenzo da Ponte

Conductor: Dan Ettinger
Director: Doris Dörrie

Otello

November 1, 2005

Music: Giuseppe Verdi
Libretto: Arrigo Boito

Conductor: Adam Fischer
Director: Jürgen Flimm

Carmen

November 21, 2005; July 3, 2006

Music: Georges Bizet
Libretto: Henri Meilhac &
Ludovic Halévy

Conductor: Dan Ettinger
Director: Martin Kušej

Tosca

November 26, 2005

Music: Giacomo Puccini
Libretto: Luigi Illica &
Giuseppe Giacosa

Conductor: Dan Ettinger
Director: Carl Riha

Die Meistersinger

December 1, 2005

Music & Libretto:
Richard Wagner

Conductor: Daniel Barenboim
Director: Harry Kupfer

Turandot

December 13, 2005

Music: Giacomo Puccini
Libretto: Giuseppe Adami &
Renato Simon

Conductor: Dan Ettinger
Director: Doris Dörrie

Boris Gudonov

Music and Libretto:
Modest Mussorgsky

December 14, 2004

Conductor: Daniel Barenboim
Director: Dmitri Tcherniakov

Don Carlo

Music: Giuseppe Verdi
Libretto: Camille du Locle &
Joseph Méry

January 9, 2006

Conductor: Fabio Luisi
Director: Philipp Himmelmann

Il Barbiere von Siviglia

Music: Gioachino Rossini
Libretto: Cesare Sterbini

January 20, 2005; February 3, 2006

Conductor: Julien Salemkour
Director: Ruth Berghaus

Faustus, the Last Night

Music & Libretto:
Pascal Dusapin

January 28, 2006

Conductor: Michael Boder
Director: Peter Mussbach

L'Italiana in Algiera

Music: Gioacchino Rossini
Libretto: Angelo Anelli

February 7, 2006

Conductor: Massimo Zanetti
Director: Nigel Lowery &
Amir Hosseinpour

Macbeth

Music: Giuseppe Verdi
Libretto: Francesco Maria Piave

March 13, 2006

Conductor: Michael Gielen
Director: Peter Mussbach

Don Giovanni

Music: W.A. Mozart
Libretto: Lorenzo da Ponte

March 15, 2006

Conductor: Daniel Barenboim
Director: Thomas Langhoff

Tristan und Isolde

Music & Libretto:
Richard Wagner

[March 27; April 5]; April 8, 2006*

Conductor: Daniel Barenboim
Director: Stefan Bachmann

Madame Butterfly

Music: Giacomo Puccini
Libretto: Luigi Illica &
Giuseppe Giacosa

March 28, 2006

Conductor: Vello Pähn
Director: Eike Gramss

Parsifal

Music & Libretto:
Richard Wagner

April 14, 2006

Conductor: Daniel Barenboim
Director: Harry Kupfer

L'Elisir d'amor

Music: Gaetano Donizetti
 Libretto: Felice Romani

April 24, 2006

Conductor: Gustavo Dudamel
 Director: Percy Adlon

Der Freischütz

Music: Carl Maria von Weber
 Libretto: Friedrich Kind

April 29, 2006

Conductor: Julien Salemkour
 Director: Nikolaus Lehnhoff

La Traviata

Music: Giuseppe Verdi
 Libretto: Francesco Maria Piave

May 18, 2006

Conductor: Paolo Arrivabeni
 Director: Peter Mussbach

Norma

Music: Vincenzo Bellini
 Libretto: Felice Romani

May 25, 2006

Conductor: Alfred Eschwé
 Director: Annegret Ritzel

La Forza del Destino

Music: Giuseppe Verdi
 Libretto: Francesco Maria Piave

June 15, 2006

Conductor: Michael Gielen
 Director: Stefan Herheim

Die lustige Witwe

Music: Franz Lehár
 Libretto: Viktor Léon & Leo Stein

June 20, 2006; June 27, 2006

Conductor: Max Renne
 Director: Peter Mussbach

Phaedra

Music: Hans Werner Henze
 Libretto: Christian Lehnert

September 6, 2007*

Conductor: Michael Boder
 Director: Peter Mussbach

Viva la Mama

Music: Giuseppe Verdi
 Libretto: Francesco Maria Piave

April 18, 2009

Conductor: Neville Dove
 Director: Hinrich Horstkotte

Orlando Paladino

Music: Joseph Haydn
 Libretto: Nunziano Porta

[April 22, 2009]

Conductor: René Jacobs
 Director: Nigel Lowery &
 Amir Hosseinpour

At the Deutsche Oper

Salome

Music: Richard Strauss
Libretto: Hedwig Lachmann

June 10, 2004

Conductor: Marc Albrecht
Director: Achim Freyer

Pelleas et Melisande

Music: Claude Debussy
Libretto: Maurice Maeterlinck

October 23, 2005

Conductor: Jacques Lacombe
Director: Marco Arturo Marelli

La Forza del Destino

Music: Giuseppe Verdi
Libretto: Francesco Maria Piave

November 11, 2005

Conductor: Patrik Ringborg
Director: Hans Neuenfels

Il Trittico

Music: Giacomo Puccini
Libretto: Giuseppe Adami &
Giovacchino Forzano

February 1, 2006

Conductor: Stefano Ranzani
Director: Katharina Wagner

Lucia di Lammermoor

Music: Gaetano Donizetti
Libretto: Salvatore Cammarano

March 11, 2006

Conductor: Gianluca Martinenghi
Director: Filippo Sanjust

La Sonnambula

Music: Vincenzo Bellini
Libretto: Felice Romani

March 25, 2006

Conductor: Daniel Oren
Director: John Dew

Tannhäuser

Music: Giuseppe Verdi
Libretto: Francesco Maria Piave

March 30, 2006

Conductor: Ulf Schirmer
Director: Götz Friedrich

L'equivoco Stravagante

Music: Gioacchino Rossini
Libretto: Gaetano Gasbarri

April 22, 2006; April 27, 2006

Conductor: Alberto Zedda
Director: N/A

At the Komische Oper

Le Grand Macabre

Music and Libretto:
György Ligeti

July 13, 2003

Conductor: Matthias Foremny
Director: Barrie Kosky

Die Entführung aus dem Serail

Music: W.A. Mozart
Libretto: Christoph Friedrich Bretzner

June 20, 2004*; November 6, 2005

Conductor: Kirill Petrenko
Director: Calixto Bieito

Madame Butterfly

Music: Giacomo Puccini
Libretto: Luigi Illica & Giuseppe Giacosa

September 25, 2005*

Conductor: Daniel Klajner
Director: Calixto Bieito

Jenufa

Music & Libretto:
Leoš Janáček

October 30, 2005

Conductor: Kirill Petrenko
Director: Willy Decker

Così fan Tutte

Music: W.A. Mozart
Libretto: Lorenzo da Ponte

December 21, 2005

Conductor: Kirill Petrenko
Director: Peter Konwitschny

Don Giovanni

Music: W.A. Mozart
Libretto: Lorenzo da Ponte

December 23, 2005

Conductor: Marcus Bosch
Director: Peter Konwitschny

Maria de Buenos Aires

Music: W.A. Mozart
Libretto: Lorenzo da Ponte

January 22, 2006*

Conductor: Kirill Petrenko
Director: Katja Czellnik

Der Rosenkavalier

Music: Richard Strauss
Libretto: Hugo von Hofmannsthal

April 2, 2006

Conductor: Kirill Petrenko
Director: Andreas Homoki

Die Liebe zu drei Orangen

Music & Libretto:
Sergei Prokofiev

May 7, 2006

Conductor: Michail Jurowski
Director: Andreas Homoki

At the Neuköllner Oper*Die gelbe Prinzessin*

October 26, 2005

Music: Camille Saint-Säens

Conductor: stefanpaul

Libretto: Louis Gallet

Director: Florian Lutz

Die Perlenfischer

April 7, 2006

Music: W.A. Mozart

Conductor: Andrew Hannan

Libretto: Christoph Friedrich Bretzner

Director: Rainer Holzapfel

Held Müller

May 13, 2006

Music: Thomas Zaufke

Conductor: Hans-Peter Kirschberg

Libretto: Peter Lund

Director: Bernd Mottl

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