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Richard Wagner: A Poisonous Drink

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"The drink, the drink! I am poison'd". These are Gertrude's dying words in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In a certain sense, the play appears like a counterpart to Wagner's work, where it is always salvation that flows from the sacred chalice. Before focusing on the consequences of Wagner's oeuvre, I shall therefor briefly dwell on Shakespeare's play, which - as early as the turn of the 17th century - appears to criticize the very images that explain the continuing attraction of Wagner's work until today.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has often been interpreted as a work about incest, that is to say, about an unresolved oedipal relation of a son towards his mother. Yet in the only scene that could be interpreted in this way - the dialogue between Hamlet and the Queen in Gertrude's bed chamber - the ghost of the father appears in order to come between mother and son. This scene seems like an almost paradigmatic translation of Lacan's *nom du père*, particularly if one bears in mind Lacan's dictum that "the Symbolic Father, is, insofar as he signifies this law, the Dead Father".[1] However, there is another possible interpretation of the incest theme in *Hamlet*. In this interpretation the fact that Gertrude shares the conjugal bed with her dead husband's brother is not understood as the actual incestuous crime (which, in fact, it is not). Rather, it is understood as a parable for a far greater transgression - that of a fusion of the sexes, of the abolition of the difference between the Self and the Other. In other words, the actual incest is what Hamlet sarcastically draws attention to when he addresses his uncle and stepfather as "mother". He says: Father and mother is man and wife,/ man and wife is one flesh, and so, my mother."[2] The poisoned drink of which Gertrude speaks and from which she dies, could thus also refer to this kind of incest, to the disappearance of difference itself: the distinction between the sexes. The words Hamlet utters just before he kills the King with the poisoned sword are: "Here thou incestuous, murderous, damned Dane,/ Drink off this potion - is thy union here?"[3]

Such an interpretation acquires even more significance if one knows that the concept of "love" as a fusion of the sexes was relatively new in Shakespeare's time. It did not emerge until the High Middle Ages. At the same time a new concept of the love of God

[1] Jacques Lacan, Ecrits, A Selection, Translated from the French by Alan Sheridan, Tavistock Publications, 1977, p. 199
[2] Hamlet IV,3
[3] Hamlet V,2

developed which also contained the idea of fusion and union of the flesh. [4]The medievalist Peter Dinzelbacher writes:

> "The discovery, or from the point of view of antiquity, the rediscovery of love takes place in two localities: the monastery and the court. This love takes two directions (and will continue to do so throughout subsequent European History): the mystical love of Christ that strives for a conjoining even in life, and the earthly love between the sexes."[5]

This parallelisation or, to put it more bluntly, synchronisation of Christian love (a love that is embodied in the image of crucifixion) and of sexual love, Dinzelbacher continues, "gives love its typically occidental imprint. Love and suffering appear to be almost inevitably linked thereafter."[6]

The interlinking of love and suffering - "passion" in every sense - is not the only thing religion and sexual love have in common. There are other shared features and these lead us back to Gertrude's poisoned drink. Around the middle of the 13th century the idea of transubstantiation became dogma in the Christian Church, despite strong resistance from both laymen and clerics. From then on the bread and wine offered in the Eucharist were no longer symbols for the body and blood of Christ, but were transformed into the real body and the real blood of the Saviour by a quasi-magical act during Consecration. This body and this blood are consumed by the believer during Communion in order to become one with God, that is to say, to become "of one flesh" with Him. In this way the mortal partakes of God's immortality. As regards sexual love, a similar concept emerges. By becoming "one flesh", man and woman lose their sexual distinction, thus their "incompleteness" and thus their mortality. This phantasy appears when Hamlet calls his mother's husband "mother". The interpretation I would like to propose is that when Shakespeare has the queen die of the poisoned drink, he inter alia refers to that chalice in which Christians had hoped to find salvation since the Middle Ages. Indeed, the scene in *Hamlet* where the King dedicates the chalice, is reminiscent of the priest consecrating the chalice during Mass:

> "The King shall drink to Hamlet's better breath
> And in the cup an union shall he throw,
> Richer than that which four successive kings

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[4] Die Urfassung des Hamlet-Stoffes wird in der „Lieder-Edda“ erwähnt; ihre erste Fassung liegt in der *Historia Danica* des Saxo Grammaticus (1150-1220) vor; sie wird also fast zeitgleich mit der Durchsetzung der Transsubstantiationslehre in der Kirche (1215) schriftlich niedergelegt. Das erscheint in diesem Zusammenhang nicht ohne Bedeutung.

[5] Peter Dinzelbacher, Liebe im Mittelalter, in: *Metis*, Zeitschrift für Historische Frauenforschung 1995/Nr. 2, Pfaffenweiler (Centaurus), S. 10. s.a. derselbe: Über die Entdeckung der Liebe im Mittelalter, *Saeculum* 32, 1981, S. 185.208; Gefühle und Gesellschaft im Mittelalter. Vorschläge zu einer emotionsgeschichtlichen Darstellung des mittelalterlichen Umbruchs, in: G. Kaiser, J.-D. Müller (Hg.) Höfische Literatur, Hofgesellschaft, Höfische Lebensform um 1200, Düsseldorf 1986, S. 213-241

[6] ibid.

In Denmark's crown have worn."[7]

With these words he raises the cup and drops a pearl in it. At that moment the drink is magically transformed: but instead of changing into divine blood as it does during consecration in Mass, the wine becomes deadly poison.

Of course, the image of becoming one with God, or of union with another, through the collective consumption or mixing of blood is much older than the Christian dogma of Transubstantiation. It is an image that plays an important role in almost all religions and cultures. I think it can be said to hold generally that behind this image lies the idea that the collective body will be perceived by the individuals as a unit or as complete only if the analogy with a single body has successfully been created - through the imagery of common blood running through the veins of every member of the society, for instance. However, the symbolic role attributed to blood can take very different forms. Thus, in the Jewish religion the strict proscription against touching blood has a unifying function. According to the proscription, only the Creator may dispose over blood, the symbol of life. It is inter alia in this common recognition of His omnipotence with regard to blood that the religious and social community constitutes itself. Apart from circumcision, the proscription against touching blood is the most important of the Jewish ritual laws. This is in complete contrast to the symbolism of blood in Christianity where the community is formed through the communal consumption of blood. Through the act of Communion, the individual unites not only with God but also with the other members of the congregation.

The description of the Christian community as "Corpus Christi Mysticum" is established as early as the New Testament[8]. Through the act of communion, the congregation takes on the semblance of an individual body, an idea which is also

[7] Hamlet, V,2

[8] vgl. 1. Cor. 12,12ff - Es handelt sich um eine Vorstellung, die auch bald auf die politische Ebene übertrragen wird, So schreibt Miri Rubin in Zusammenhang mit der Eucharistie: „In der Geschichte der politischen Ideen gibt es eine lange Tradition der Verwendung der Körpermetapher, etwa im *Policraticus* von Johannes von Salisbury (1159), der an ihr seine Konzeption des Verhältnisses von Monarchie, Administration und Individuum zueinander entwickelt hat. Theologen wie Juristen und Herrschaftstheoretiker beschrieben den Körper, wenn sie über die ausgewogenen Formen einer Herrschaftsverfassung oder das kommunale Ideal städtischer Selbstverwaltung redeten. Kartographen wie Opinius de Canistratis (14. Jh.) projizierten die Topographie der Welt auf den Körper manchmal dem des Königs oder dem von Christus.“ Miri Rubin, Der Körper der Eucharistie, in: Klaus Schreiner u. Norbert Schnitzler (Hg.), Gepeinigt, begehrt, vergessen. Symbolik und Sozialbezug des Körpers, München (Wilhelm Fink Verlag) 1992, S. 30. Ernst H. Kantorowicz beschreibt wiederum in seiner berühmten Studie „The King’ s Two Bodies, Princeton (Princeton University Press) 1957, die doppelte Rolle des Körpers des Königs, der einerseits der irdische Repräsentant Christi und andererseits Symbol der Gemeinschaft der Menschen ist. Deutsch: Die zwei Körper des Königs. Eine Studie zur politischen Theologie. des Mittelalters, übers. v. Walter Theimer u. Brigitte Hellmann, München (dtv) 1990. Im 19. Jahrhundert, mit dem Aufkommen der Pädagogik und einer neuen Ideologie, die die Familie zu einer Art von „kleinem Staat“ deklariert, wird diese Metaphorik wiederum in der Vorstellung von dem Mann als dem „Haupt“ und der Frau, bzw. den Kindern als den „Gliedern“ der Familie eine wichtige Rolle spielen.

reflected in many church buildings.[9] Yet the consumption of blood also implies the suffering, wounded body. That is to say, the analogy with the individual body emphasizes both the unity of the community, and the mortality and vulnerability of the Divine Body become flesh.[10] Through Holy Communion (the consumption of the Divine Body) the believer in turn becomes part of the social body, which is the incarnation of God. As a church dogmatic writes, the Almighty gives Himself in the form of food because:

> "nothing merges with us more intimately than food which, by means of natural heat, transforms itself into our own substance, and becomes one with us ... "He who eats of my flesh and drinks of my blood shall remain in me and I in him *(Qui manducat meum carnem et bibit meum sanguinem, in me manet, et ego in eo)."* But there is a difference between other food and this one: whereas the former transforms itself into us and becomes our own substance, the latter transforms us into itself."[11]

The blood that is shed for the sake of the community and is consumed communally is all the more important for Christian society as it represents the only earthly constitution of the collective. In the Jewish religion the individual belongs to a social community by virtue of birth and this is renewed through circumcision and the observation of the ritual laws. The individual cannot actually be excluded from the community, not even for breaking its laws. This means that the sublimated form of religious affiliation - which is precisely what the proscription against touching blood implies - has an earthly counterpart that is expressed inter alia in the emphasis on blood bonds. By contrast, Christians only become part of the community with baptism, and may be excommunicated for renouncing the faith.

The community is thus formed on the basis of faith, an abstract factor. The social body has no physical but only imaginary or spiritual boundaries. This has paradoxically resulted in Christianity's urge to create an earthly, physically defined community. The urge is revealed, on the one hand, in a passion for suffering (or Christ's mortality). In this context blood comes a signifier that lends a „real“, bodily form to the "spiritual" or

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[9] s.u.a. Bruno Bruno Reudenbach, Gemeinschaft als Körper und Gebäude, in: Klaus Schreiner, Norbert Schnitzler (Hg.), Gepeinigt, begehrt, vergessen. Symbolik und Sozialbezug des Körpers, , a.a.O (s. Anm. 8) S.171-198

[10] Im Mittelalter, so schreibt Miri Rubin, war die „Vorstellung des Leibes alles andere als eindeutig. Eher als s.Bild des Zerrissenen und Enthaupteten, denn als Bild der Einheit und Harmonie belebte der Körper die Phantasie, aber auch den konkreten Alltag der Zeitgenossen: der Körper war nicht unverletzlich. In den Straßen und auf den Plätzen spätmittelalterlicher Städte wurde während der Fronleichnams- und Osterspiele der Körper von Christus auf jede nur denkbare Weise gemartert.“ Miri Rubin, Der Körper der Eucharistie, in: Klaus Schreiner u. Norbert Schnitzler (Hg.), Gepeinigt, begehrt, vergessen. Symbolik und Sozialbezug des Körpers im späten Mittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit, a.a. O. (s. Anm. 8) S. 31

[11] Alessandro Diotallevi, La benefizia di Dio verso gl'uomini et l'ingratitudine degli uomini verso Dio considerazioni, Venice 1716, zit. n. Piero Camporesi, The Consecrated Host: A Wondrous Excess, in: Michel Feher et al. (Ed.) Fragments for a History of the Human Body, New York (Zone Books) 1989, Part I, p. 227

"transfigured" body of God. It is in this function - as a metaphor for the reality of the Imaginary, or transcendental, or spiritual - that blood will later also play an important role in a post-Christian secular context: be it in the racial theories of the 19th century[12], in modern art and film-making[13], or in Wagner's work. Another way in which this impetus to "realise" or materialise the Christian collective body reveals itself is in the Church's missionary zeal and striving for earthly power, the very means by which it will predetermine its own secularisation. No other religion has fought so radically against scientific progress and thereby against one aspect of secularisation. No other religion has, at the same time, given rise to so much scientific innovation. This paradox can only be explained by the fact that the secularisation urge is an integral part of the Christian religion itself. But it takes on a specific form, whose aim is not so much the defeat of religion, but may rather be defined as an attempt at secularising the Christian Message of Salvation. (Again, this would represent a fundamental difference to the meaning of secularisation in the Jewish religious tradition.)

In general one could say that the Christian urge towards secularisation manifests itself in the quest for a worldly, physiological definition of the Christian social body, and one of its consequences will be the Enlightenment concept of the *Volkskoerper* (national body). Another consequence are human race theories where the myth of Christian superiority is converted into the idea of the superior white man. Just how directly these notions are the heritage of Christian thought and in the tradition of the Christian collective body, is of course particularly evident in the anti-semitic theories of race that were formulated from the middle of the 19th century onwards, mainly in the German-speaking countries. Almost every image that becomes active in this context can be said to contain a secularised Christian idea: the *Corpus Dei*, the community of religion and faith, becomes the secular *Volkskoerper*, now maintaining the existence of blood bonds

[12]Francis Galton spricht von „Eugenics as a Factor in Religion“, in: Essays in Eugenics, London 1909; und auch der NS-Rassenideologe Hans F.K. Günther läßt keinen Zweifel daran, daß mit dem Begriff der „Rasse“ eigentlich geistige, spirtuelle Faktoren gemeint sind. Er nennt die „Achtsamkeit auf Rasse und Erbgesundheit“ einen „Ausdruck frommen Sinnes“ und fügt hinzu, daß weder die (von ihm unterstellte) „wirtschaftlich-politische Übermacht der Juden“ noch die Frage einer „jüdisch-nichjüdischen Blutmischung“ den „Kern der Judenfrage“ ausmache: „Was die Judenfrage aber heute so brennend gemacht hat, ist die jüdische Einwirkung auf den Geist des abendländischen Völker.“ Hans F.K. Günther, Rassenkunde des jüdischen Volkes, München (F.J: Lehmanns) 1931, S. 314f

[13]In der modernen Kunst und im Film tauchen Spuren des Blutes vornehmlich dort auf, wo es gilt, der verbreiteten Vorstellung einer „Medialität“ (oder fehlenden „Realität“) des Körpers dessen „reale“ Verletzlichkeit entgegenzusetzen; bzw dort, wo einer imaginären Geschichte oder einem Medium der Simulation (dem Film an sich) der Anschein von „Realität“ verliehen werden soll. Was die Körperkunst betrifft, wären die Inszenierungen von Gina Pane ein Beispiel; s.a. Hans Beltings Intepretationen zu den Werken von Bill Viola und vor allem von Gary Hill: Hans Belting, Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte. Eine Revision nach zehn Jahren, München (C.H.Beck), S. 87-103. Beispiele für die Bedeutung des Blutes zur „Vortäuschung“ von Wirklichkeit sind z.B. auch die Erzählungen von Stephen King (und deren Verfilmung), bzw. - ironischer - ein Film wie „Interview mit einem Vampir“, in dem das christliche Bild der Eucharistie einer Umkehrung unterzogen wird. So reicht der „erfahrene“ Vampir dem Neuling, dem man des Menschenblut noch Grauen einflößt, einen Becher mit Blut hin und sagt dazu: „Stell dir vor, es wäre Wein!“

among the individual members of the community, a concept which is in itself alien to the Christian community of faith, but finds symbolic expression in the Sacrifice of the Mass. In the course of the same development, the "un-believing" and "impenitent" Jew of Christian tradition becomes a "foreign element" and "carrier of infection" contaminating the "Arian "*Volkskoerper*", particularly through sexual intercourse.

The fact that this process of secularisation is accompanied by an increasing sexualisation of the political sphere is connected with various factors. Some of these illustrate why Shakespeares's image of the incestuously poisoned drink is so revealing. For one, this sexualisation of images is part of Christian tradition itself: if God showed himself to the medieval Christian in human form, it is because He was born by a woman. Such imagery corresponded to the concepts of antiquity which saw man as the embodiment of the spiritual, and woman as symbolic of the material, bodily and mortal. Thus, the middle ages often worshipped the human part of God as a female component in the figure of Christ. As a result, so Caroline Walker Bynum has shown, the Saviour's wounds were very often portrayed as "female wounds", or even as breasts giving healing nourishment to the believer.[14] It is from this imagery, and from the concept of the protecting maternal womb, that the view of the Church as a "mother" is derived. The image of a female, because mortal, Saviour reappears in a transformed shape during secularisation. The nation, the *Volkskoerper*, originate in the idea of the collective's "maternal" functions, and therefor find symbolic expression mainly in feminine allegories. The external emphasis on the femineity of the collective, or "*Volkskoerper*", also serves as proof of the fact that the collective body is not of an ideal, transcendental nature, but corresponds to a physical, earthly reality. As the symbol of the "*Volkskoerper*", woman also becomes the custodian of "purity" and thereby of communal unity[15] - especially in the anti-semitic context. In this ideology the crucified Saviour - "victim" of "Jewish crime" - is replaced by woman - "victim" of "Jewish sexual crime" - and the "deicide" who nailed Christ to the cross becomes the "defiler of race" (*Rassenschänder*) corrupting the "Germanic race".[16]

In the course of this shift of emphasis onto worldly ideas, the concept of "purity" acquires a completely new - secular - meaning. While in the Christian context purity related to the "sinless" blood of a Saviour born from a virgin, in the secular context it relates to the concept of the unity or uniformity of the community. It is in this context that the image of incest again plays an important role: incest becomes the precondition

[14] Caroline Walker Bynum, Fragmentation and Redemption, Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion, New York (Zone Books) 1991

[15] Mary Douglas has shown how closely the laws of puritiy of a given community are linked to the urge of creating the unity of the collective body. This urge reappears in a paradoxical way in the secular images of the *Volkskörper*. Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo ...

[16] vgl. Christina von Braun, „Der Jude“ und „Das Weib“. Zwei Stereotypen des „Anderen“ in der Moderne. in: Metis, Zeitschrift für Historische Frauenforschung, Nr. 2, Pfaffenweiler (Centaurus) 1992

for the secular unity and purity of the community. Hence the antithetical reversal of the term "*Blutschande*" (incest) in the anti-semitic context (and only there): whereas the term once referred to the sin of intercourse with one's own blood, it is now applied to the sin of intercourse with "alien" blood, Jewish blood, which is consequently perceived as "poisonous". Parallel to the emergence of this new concept of "sin", a new ideal of love gains predominance, not only in the anti-semitic context, but with particular clarity there. This ideal of love is characterised by symbiosis, harmony, and sameness, and finds its most distinct expression in incestuous love. The love between brother and sister, between the similar and blood-related, acquires a quasi-religious dimension in the literary works of many 19th century authors, particularly in the German speaking countries. Such couples are described as "chosen", and their union is compared to the "unio mystica",[17] which represents another manifestation of the parallel between the love of God and the love of the other sex that originated in the middle ages. However, in the secular context the sexual union with a sister replaces the union with God. By becoming one with a woman, who symbolises the collective body, the individual (embodied by the man) becomes part of the collective body. In many cultures sexuality and eating appear as synonyms, because both are forms of unification. Yet while in the medieval discourse the sacrament of the Holy Communion was a symbol for love, now love becomes a symbol for Holy Communion. To put it in a very abridged form: In the secular context incest replaces communion and the sister/woman appears like a symbol for the symbol itself, the host: At this point the medieval host libel against Jews (*Hostienschändung*) is replaced by the image of the Jewish sexual perpetrator.

At the same time, the incest theme contains the fantasy of abolishing the difference between the sexes. It is a symbolic and literary allegory of the religiously marked ideal that man and woman can become "one flesh". Behind both images lies the fantasy of human "completeness", of time at a standstill and of the omnipotence of immortal beings.[18] In view of this fantasy, one may well speak of a "poisoned drink", particularly if one traces the development of the fantasy from its origins in the High Middle Ages to the 19th century racial theories of the "poisonous blood" of the Jew. Of course (and this may not need to be stressed), these are collective fantasies, but the nature of anti-Semitism is based precisely on the fact that its imagery was perceived not as fantasy, but as reality. It is this abolition of the dividing line between fantasy and reality that constitutes one of Wagner's key functions.

[17] Christina von Braun, „Blutschande“: From the Incest Taboo to the Nuremberg Racial Laws, in Gisela Brinker-Gabler (ed.), Encountering the Other(s). Studies in Literature, History and Culture, Syracuse (State of New York University Press) 1995

[18] In nearly all the texts that treat of the incest theme there is a reference to the Platonic parable of the „Kugelmensch“ (im “Gastmahl“ beschrieben): diesen „vollständigen“, ursprünglichen Wesen, die von den Göttern in zwei Hälften geschnitten wurden und seitdem als „unvollständige“ Menschen nach ihrer verlorenen Hälfte suchen.

All the images that played a role in the secularisation of the "poisoned drink" of Christian "love", become particularly distinct in Wagner: the ideal of pure blood, the female sacrifice (or the transformation of the female body into the host), the legend of the Holy Grail and its healing powers. Even incest as the source of immortality plays an important role in Wagner: his is the first version of the Nibelungenlied in which Siegmund and Sieglinde are brother and sister, twins even, on a musical level voice and echo, image and mirror-image. From the "purity" of the secular union of brother and sister (a union untouched by alien blood) Siegfried is born, the chosen one, half god, half man.

Wagner achieves not only the rewriting and shifting of the Christian images of blood and purity onto a worldly level. It is his other achievement on the aesthetic level that makes him one of the key figures not only of the "Blut- und Bodenromantik" (romanticism of blood and territory), but also of the modern age of mass media - as it too is concerned with the formation of a worldly collective body which originates in Christian dogma.

As a result of the secularisation, a rupture occurs in the concept of the Christian collective body. During this process of becoming increasingly "real", the Christian collective body seems to lose its spiritual and imaginary aspects, i.e. all the aspects that point to transcendence and are contained in the concept of the "transfigured body". Yet they are not actually lost, but follow a development of their own. For on the spiritual level, too, a process of secularisation takes place which I will only sketch out briefly. Thus, it has often been shown just how directly Hegel's concept of "religion as "*Kunstreligion*"" (developed in his "Phenomenology of Mind") corresponds to a Christian phenomenon of secularisation that will later find expression in Wagner's work.[19] Hegel's observation that the self-objectification of the spirit in works of art is nothing but a stage in the "incarnation of the Divine Being"[20], is likewise to be understood as a symptom of secularisation. Art, which was until then a medium for religious messages, is now required to reflect man' self-image. As Hegel observes: "The general requirement on art is that man should recognise his own self in his work"[21]. A similar transformation affects the concept of "*Seele*" (soul) which acquires an increasingly worldly character, a process that culminates at the end of the 19th century in a concept of "*Seele*" which, as "*Psyche*", has become a synonym for the unconscious.

[19] vgl. Hartmut Zelinsky, Der Plenipotentarius des Untergangs“ oder der Herrschaftsanspruch der antisemitichen Kunstreligion des selbsternannten Bayreuther Erlösers Richard Wagner, in *Neohelicon*, IX,1, Budapest, Amsterdam 1982, ders.: Richard Wagner - ein deutsches Thema. Eine Dokumentation zur Wirkungsgeschichte Richard Wagners 1876-1975, Frankfurt/M. 1976 und Berlin 1983

[20] G.W.F. Hegel, Phänomenologie des Geistes, in: Werke in 20 Bdn., Frankfurt/M. 1986, Bd. 3, S. 552

[21] G.W.F. Hegel, Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik I, in: Werke (s. Anm. 20), Bd. 13, S. 52

(The English language is more precise in this respect: it distinguishes between soul and psyche.)

Parallel to this secularised or scientific concept of "*Seele*",a new (and likewise secular) concept of the spiritual collective body develops which I want to describe as the "medial social body". It consists of a tight network of invisible communication threads that hold society together. Whereas the collective body in the sense of the "Volkskörper" is mainly described in terms of "bloodstreams" holding together a society or a nation, it is rather the metaphor of a "nervous system" that is used in describing the unity and completeness of the "medial social body". The choice of image depends on whether what is being described concerns - to use a comparison from computer science - society's hardware or software. In the former case, the nation or community was thought of as a physical body, while the image of "nerves" was more concerned with intellectual or emotional connections between individuals. In the early 19th Century the images were used to in a contrasting sense, but by the late 19th century the two concepts of the social body seem to merge. Thus, to give an example, Alfred H. Fried, one of the first recipients of the Nobel Peace Prize, placed all his hopes for peace (until the very eve of the first world war) on connecting up the world in a two-fold network:

> "Railway and steamships travel throughout the worldand bring culture to the remotest parts of theglobe, like veins carrying blood to the variousparts of the body, while telegraph and telephonehave developed into the nervous system of thecivilised world."[22]

In constituting the "medial social body" the modern media played a central role. That had been true even of the invention of the printing press. Book printing not only led to the material dissemination of texts, but at the same time contributed to the homogenisation of national languages. This centralising effect of the media was reinforced in the 19th century through the emergence of the first forms of telecommunications and also of the technological images, i.e. photography and film. It was no accident that the emergence of these media coincided with the appearance of mesmerism, hypnosis and other trends that centred around "man as a medium" and human suggestibility in general. After all, the "integrating power" of the new media was not only based on the newly developed network, and was not only limited to the homogenisation of communicated content, but it was also closely connected with specific patterns of reception that are characteristic of technological images. I will

[22] Alfred H. Fried, Handbuch der Friedensbewegung, Wien und Leipzig (Verlag der Österreichischen Friedensgesellschaft) 1905, S. 36. Während die Unterscheidung zwischen Blut=Eisenbahn und Telegraphen=Medium/Nervensystem naheliegend erscheint, zeigt der Vergleich bei den „grossen Kapitalien“, die Fried als „das rote Blut des internationalen Handels“ umschreibt (ebda., S. 43), daß es gegen Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts schwer geworden war, zwischen den beiden Formen von Kollektivleib zu unterscheiden. Eine Unterscheidung bestand wahrscheinlich nur für relativ kurze Zeit: von der Mitte des 18. bis zur Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts, als sich der moderne republikanische Nationalstaat herausbildete.

briefly elaborate on these patterns of reception using the example of the cinema, since it is particularly close to Wagner's aesthetic productions.

Since the Renaissance, a notion of the subject had become predominant in the western world whereby seeing is equated with being, i.e. the spectator (the eye) is equated with the self (the I). The role of the spectator was increasingly defined as "male" and the role of the "object" of observation as "female". This development reached its climax, and at the same time the beginning of its decline, with the invention of photography, which represents an eye which (like God) - sees without being seen. (May I remind you that Wagner occupies precisely this space in time, when photography is already common enough to influence the way people see, and the moving pictures have not been invented yet.) Still photography which (according to Roland Barthes and Christian Metz) provides the proof that an instant irrevocably belongs to the past, is succeeded by the moving pictures which are described as the medium of the permanent present. [23]

In other respects too, the invention of movies produces a new way of seeing which is contrary to previous tradition, and will crucially influence a new conception of the subject and the roles of the sexes. In cinema there are two opposite roles with which the spectator identifies: on the one hand he or she identifies with the camera's eye, i.e. with the point of view of the observing "subject", and on the other hand he or she identifies with the actors, i.e. the objects of that view. This means that along with cinema there emerges the fantasy of the exchangeability of gender roles. On a completely different level, this fantasy reproduces and satisfies the phantasm of "completeness" or abolition of gender difference which I mentioned earlier in the context of the incest theme. Thus, the cinematic experience has always been compared to the experience of a return to the pre-linguistic state, or to a loss of the boundaries of the self. In the 1920s, Alfred Polgar called the cinema "the region where the individual ceases to be an individual". He described it as "that dark hotbed of life which is so seldom reached by a word, not even by a word of prayer or by the stammerings of love."[24] With these descriptions Polgar preempted modern film theory which sometimes compares the cinema with a return to the maternal womb, or a return to Lacan's stage of the Imaginary where the individual cannot tell itself apart from the rest of the world. E. Ann Kaplan summarizes this succinctly:

> "The cinema is the closest analog in the realm of the Symbolic to access the maternal body; it allowssubjects to re-experience the pleasures of fusion with the maternal body in fact impossible after the pre-oedipal period."[25]

[23] Christian Metz, Photo Fetisch, in *Kairos*, 4. Jg. 1 u. 2. 1989; Roland Barthes, La Chambre Claire, Note sur la Photographie, Cahiers du Cinéma (Gallimard/Le Seuil) 1980
[24] Alfred Polgar, Das Drama des Kinematographen, in: Das Tagebuch 1927, S. 1752
[25] E. Ann Kaplan, Motherhood and Representation. The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama, London and New York 1992, p. 28

Not only can the cinematic experience be interpreted as the phantasmatic locus of the dissolution of individual body boundaries (and thereby also as the locus of the disappearance of gender difference), but it also becomes a medium of integration into the collective body. Even if (as Kaplan rightly observes) a return to the womb is not possible, cinema allows the fantasy of an integration into the diffuse "maternal body" of the medial society: into a technologically produced, boundless mother who (representing no physiological body and physical boundaries) knows no *nom du père*, and cannot herself impose boundaries. This "maternal body", paradoxical though it may sound, is both part of the Symbolic order (because it can be technologically planned and computed) and at the same time leads back into the stage of the Imaginary. In other words, the "church-mother" has here been transformed into a "cinema-mother", and the latter represents one of the spiritual complements of a community which, as "*Volkskoerper*" (or as social welfare state), has taken over the functions of the"maternal body".

The fact that this kind of fantasy accompanies not only the cinematic experience, but also modern electronic data networks and cyberspace, can easily be shown using a few examples from the large literatures on these subjects. One of the advantages of the Internet, it is often said, is the fact that race, gender and bodily handicaps cannot be seen by the communicating parties.[26] Cyberspace prophets similarly hold out the promise that corporeality can be overcome:

> "Initially you may feel most comfortable with a body similar to your own, but as you spend more and more of your personal and business life in cyberspace, your inbuilt concept of your only and unchangeable body will give way to a far more flexible understanding of the body - you will experience your body as dispensable and generally restricting.[27]

What such statements have in common with Wagner's productions is easy to see. The aesthetics of the darkened auditorium and the concealed orchestral pit, first introduced in Bayreuth, represent a preemption of the cinema, that "region where the individual ceases to be an individual". Back in the 1880s critics like Max Nordau said of Wagner's music that it produced "hypnotic states" in some of the audience, especially among anti-Semites whom he described as representatives of the German form of hysteria, or of passion for the loss of self.[28] "The formlessness of the endless melody", he writes, wholly reflects "the dreamlike wanderings of their own thought."

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[26] vgl. Allucquere Rosanne Stone, Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?, Boundary Stories about Virtual Cultures, in: Michael Benedikt (ed.), Cyberspace: First Steps, Cambridge Mass./London Engl. (MIT Press), p. 81-118

[27] Randal Walser, Gullichsen, in: Howard Rheingold, Virtuelle Welten, Reisen im Cyberspace, Reinbek b. Hamburg (Rowohlt) 1992, S. 288

[28] Max Nordau, Entartung, Berlin 1896, p. 372

> "A floating recitative without beginning or end (...) makes no demands on the mind (...); one can allow oneself to be cradled and carried by it and can resurface at will, with no particular memory of the experience except the voluptuous sensation that one has enjoyed a stimulating hot sound bath."[29]

The fact that the achievement of this effect was not just something that was imputed to Wagner, but was also the conscious aim of his compositions, was something Wagner himself said repeatedly. In a letter to Mathilde Wesendonck he writes:

> "Now think of my music, with ist tenuous mysteriously-fluent juices, that soak through through the subtilest pores of sensation to the very marrow of life, there to overwhelm all that bears itself the least like prudence or timorous self-preservation; to flood away all savour of the feint of the Personality, and leave but a sublime wistful sigh of avowal of impotence."[30]

It is only a small step from this kind of description to the "dark hotbed of life" with which Polgar compared the cinema.

In other words: On the one hand Wagner found an expression for images of the Christian tradition that related to blood and to the "reality" and vulnerability symbolised by that blood. On the other hand, he also found forms of aesthetic transposition that preempted the dissolution of the subject inherent in various ways in modern image and electronic media. This is in itself noteworthy, but is not sufficient to reach an understanding of the fascination for Wagner's work, even after, or outside of, the National-Socialist context. What Wagner is the first to offer in the 19th century is the reunification of the Christian collective body that had split into two separate social bodies with secularisation: on the one hand into the "*Volkskoerper*" which carries on the Christian metaphors of the word become flesh, and on the other hand into the "medial social body" that finds expression in the imagery of a world-wide "nervous system". With the Enlightenment these two concepts of the collective had come into opposition. Unfortunately, it would be beyond the scope of this talk to give examples for this opposition, but one of the crucial contrasts was revealed in the very fact that many Jews, who placed their hopes in assimilation to German society, supported the idea of a cultural community, or "medial social body", that sought an analogy with the individual body in the image of the nervous system. (I would have liked to illustrate this with the example of the psycho-medical theories of the doctor and philosopher from Berlin, Marcus Herz.[31]) Such a conception of "intellectual assimilation" seemed to be easily reconcilable with Jewish literary tradition, and also allowed for a continuing affiliation

[29] Ebda. S. 375f
[30] Richard Wagner to Mathilde Wesendonck, trans., prefaced etc. by William Ashton Ellis, New York (Scribner's) 1905, p. 165
[31] vgl. Christina von Braun, Frauenkörper und medialer Leib, in: H.U. Reck (Hg.) Inszenierte Imagination, Berlin/New York (Springer Verlag) 1996

to the Jewish social community. What Wagner makes clear is that the medial concept of the community represented no irreconcilable contrast with that other collective body that is based on the images of blood. In the words of Nietzsche, who was the first to point out the "deep significance" of the fact that "the emergence of Wagner coincides with the emergence of the Reich":

> "Let us recollect that Wagner was young when Hegel and Schelling led men's minds astray; that he found out, that he grasped firmly what only a German takes seriously - the „Idea", that is to say something obscure, uncertain, mysterious."[32]

It seems to me that in this respect, the "poisoned drink" of Wagner's work and aesthetics continues to work its effect, and that holds true not only for Germany.

translation: Anja Belz, London

[32] Friedrich Nietzsche, The Case of Wagner, translated by Thomas Common, London, T. Fischer Unwin, 1899, p.37