Wagner and Saussure: Toward a Preliminary Framework for Understanding Signification in Wagner

Edwin Spark

Throughout the literature concerned with Richard Wagner's processes of imbuing his dramas with meaning, certain theoretical questions are necessarily broached, often without solution. Chief among these is the question of whether or not the "meaning" we might try to assign to a particular motif (whether the motif is musical, poetic or endemically theatrical, although most commonly only the first is considered) is a property of the motif itself, that is, fully part of it. The same theoretical questions, being concerned as they are with processes of meaning, are found in the semiotic literature. In fact, I claim that the parallels between the two discourses go beyond a basic equivalence of concerns and that there is good reason to imagine that considering both together may be mutually illuminating. The work of Ferdinand de Saussure may suggest different solutions or at least approaches to the theoretical impasses referenced above, and Wagner's work may serve as a useful domain within which to test how much of Saussurean theory relies merely on arbitrariness totally determined in advance rather than on socially determined arbitrariness.

This paper does not seek to provide this illumination, as it is too large a task. Instead, it seeks to motivate that task by considering some parallels between the traditions of work on Wagner and Saussure, and by sketching some consequences of applying to Wagner's work both Saussure's theories and the theories of others who have taken Saussure elsewhere.

The existent literature that applies semiotics to Wagner seems to use Charles Sanders Peirce's theories.[1] Instead, this paper will make use of the theories of Saussure, who established a very different model of signs to Peirce. Most significantly for our

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[1] See, for example, Hubert Kolland, "Zur Semantik der Leitmotive in Richard Wagners 'Ring des Nibelungen,'" *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 4/2 (1973): 197–212.

purposes, instead of beginning with a model of signification, Saussure begins only with a consideration of the sign's arbitrariness,[2] and thus if we can posit the arbitrariness of whatever we wish to consider to be sign, we can make use of Saussure's work, without the empty importation of categories developed for a different domain. It is necessary to remark at this point, however, that the legacy of the work of Saussure is so wide-ranging and the work itself so fragmentary and over-interpreted that it is not really possible to be able to talk of Saussure's ideas, or what we perceive to be those ideas, without always being aware of the fact that these are only ever an interpretation, a reading, an impression of that thought, to an extent far more true than for many other theorists. The most famous work that bears Saussure's name (and his only relevant publication), the *Course in General Linguistics*, was written posthumously by his colleagues from lecture notes taken by his students.[3] Throughout this paper, "Saussure" is used metonymically to refer both to what we have of Saussure's own work and to the multifaceted structuralist tradition that has arisen from interpretations of the *Course*.

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A central aim of Wagner's aesthetics, like most aesthetic theory in the nineteenth century, is unity. For Wagner, this does not only require the creation of unity within the musical work, but rather the aim is to unify the three (very different) arts of music, poetry and staging,[4] creating from them the ultimate goal of Wagner's aesthetics: the so-called *Gesamtkunstwerk*. This must not, however, be understood to mean that the three arts are equivalent, or that they convey the same information; it is precisely because they are

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[2] For Saussure, arbitrary means not logically forced, rather than freely chosen.

[3] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (1916), ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, 1983).

[4] The stage itself is able to be subdivided (scenery, choreography, character action and so forth); however, I leave this to one side (following Wagner), although throughout we must assume competence in the specific production.

not copies, mere encodings of one another,[5] that they each have reason to exist.[6] In fact, understanding the pursuit of unity as the search for concordance runs counter to Wagner's understanding of unity, for unity in Wagner must be understood dialectically, as the mutual transformation of material – or to borrow Ashton Ellis's phrase, its "reciprocally-conditioning evolution"[7] – into a new whole.[8] This is the essence of his critique of number opera – structural repetition and equivalence require occurrences of the structure to be isolated with respect to musical content, which then cannot be dialectically related.[9] Indeed, for a dialectical relation to be possible between the three arts, they must each retain sufficient autonomy that we can sensibly talk of their individual identity. That is to say, although each depends upon the others, we can nevertheless sensibly give each the label "text," by which I mean that each is sufficiently rich in associations, content, and "meaning" that it is a vital and to some extent independently communicating part of the whole. The uses of these arts in the work constitute texts insofar as they are collections of "signifiers" – or at least differentiated "objects," which invite us to ascribe meaning to them (however unsoundly, from some points of view) by forging connections between them.

To make this last sentence explicit, consider the musical text (for the moment, alone), where the "objects" that first come to mind are those generally called "*Leitmotive*," or "leitmotifs." "Leitmotif" (lit. "leading motif") as a term is somewhat problematic, as not all the musical objects designated by it in common practice are motifs in the strict sense of being the smallest identifiable thematic units. Indeed, the "objects" we want

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[5] On this point, it is amusing to note that commentators speak derisively of those who expect the leitmotifs to "semaphore" the stage action. See, for example, Barry Millington, *Wagner* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1984), 210.

[6] Learning this lesson well would avoid trying to equate the any two layers too closely – for example, discounting stagings too closely allied to the music.

[7] Richard Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, trans. William Ashton Ellis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 295.

[8] This is the primary conclusion I take from that famous discussion of musico-poetic periods in Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, 291–95.

[9] See Richard Wagner, *On the Application of Music to the Drama*, trans. William Ashton Ellis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 183.

the term to describe appear to incorporate all possible kinds of recognisable musical "content," including full themes and sequences of chords in addition to strict motifs. In fact, musical connections need not be motivic at all, even with this generalised concept of "motif." Consider, for example, Carl Dahlhaus's analysis of the role of C major in *Das Rheingold*,[10] or Carolyn Abbate's claim that in Wotan's monologue (in *Die Walküre*, Act II) the same musical "gesture" is repeated, separately from what is generally acknowledged to be sparing repetition (or even use) of leitmotifs.[11] However, in deference to a tradition older even than the 1876 première of the *Der Ring des Nibelungen*,[12] I will retain the term leitmotif, at least in the sense in which it is usually applied.

The first significant publication in the history of leitmotif-based analysis is generally considered to be Hans von Wolzogen's pamphlet from 1876, which listed and labelled motifs.[13] This pamphlet guided interpretation of the *Ring*, and indeed Wagner's works more generally, into paths that are questionable, as the existence of such a list cannot fail to make certain implications. For one thing, it implies that both the musical motifs and the dramatic ideas are clearly defined and differentiated. It also implies that the attributions of meaning to the motifs are unambiguous both in content and in suggesting that there is a clear correspondence. Both of these implications are dubious, as we shall see shortly. According to Deryck Cooke, Wolzogen's list also caused problems when others assumed it to be complete,[14] which demonstrates an issue with historic leitmotif-based analysis, but is relevant theoretically only in so far as this assumption necessarily presupposes the motifs have fixed identity (which is already implicated by the presence of a list).

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[10] Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas* [1971], trans. Mary Whitall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 111–13.
[11] Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 187–200.
[12] Arnold Whittall, "Leitmotif," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edition, ed. S. Sadie and J. Tyrrell (London: Macmillan, 2001), 14: 528.
[13] Historical comments are based mostly on Whittall.
[14] Deryck Cooke, *I Saw the World End* (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), 40–3.

These same issues are found in the *Course* with the naïve understanding of language that opens Part I: the view of language as a mere nomenclature, that is, "a list of terms corresponding to a list of things."[15] However, Saussure notes that there is an insight contained in these lists, namely that signs are dual in nature; they consist of a signifier connected to a signified. Both of these, signifier and signified, are abstractions in that despite our frequent pretense, they have no material constitution. Furthermore, both these abstractions and the connections between signifiers and signifieds are arbitrary, in Saussure's sense of not being causally related. Rather than trying to justify these claims here, I will instead explain their musical cognates more thoroughly.[16]

It is a commonplace to say that the motifs are transformed as they recur throughout the course of Wagner's dramas, that what we consider to be repetitions of the motifs are not always exact replications. This means that when we speak of their identity as instances of the same motif, the motif is an abstraction, and it is to these musical abstractions we seek to connect concepts. Similarly, the concepts are abstractions in that they also have no material basis. For example, "Wotan" does not materially exist; the human being we see on stage is also only a representation, the voice we hear only belongs materially to the world of the theatre, not the world of "Wotan." This example may be considered to be a trivialising one, as "Wotan" clearly has no material existence. One might think that if I were to choose a concept, such as "Spring," that in other contexts may be seen as grounded in reality the conclusion would be less certain. But even "Spring" does not materially exist, but instead is a concept created by language (and culture). For example, there is no compulsive reason to choose to divide the year into four seasons and evidence of this arbitrariness is provided by the existence of cultures that don't, not to mention the disputes over how to do so by those that do. Of course, its place in the *Ring* is not simply that of the

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[15] Saussure, 97–8.

[16] A good summary of these ideas from Saussure, from a perspective similar to my own (remembering that one can only ever interpret Saussure) is Jonathan Culler, *Saussure*, revised edition (London: Fontana Press, 1986), 18–29.

season, but it is also true that the metaphorical baggage it carries even before Siegmund starts apostrophising it is arbitrary and culturally determined.

When we claim that a concept is associated with a motif, the "concept" to which we refer is a particular abstraction present in the work. These abstractions reside in their own domain (distinct from our three texts, even – and especially – the staging), one to which I (perhaps slightly disingenuously) will affix the label "the dramatic." That both these abstractions and their connections are arbitrary in Saussure's sense can be seen by considering, for example, Cooke's many disagreements with earlier designations of the leitmotifs, both in terms of what should or should not be considered a motif, and over the concepts that should be attached to them.[17]

These abstractions, even though they primarily dictate relations between signifiers and relations between signifieds, are determined by the connections binding signifier to signified. Because they are arbitrary, neither the concepts nor the signifiers exist independently of the process of signification. The identity, or differentiation, of each signifier and signified results from its readiness to be a part of a process of signification. Each determines the other, within the system of signs, through a process of differential identification. An example for the musical text is furnished by the genealogical relations of the motifs.[18] This familial similarity means that there will exist distinct motifs that are very closely related, and if we also accept that repetition of motifs need not be – and generally will not be – exact reduplication, we are faced with the question of when motifs become distinct. The clearest answer will come from considering distinctness of signification, so we have a system of "differential objects," reciprocally determined by the signifying relation and their relations to other signs.

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[17] See, for example: Cooke, *I Saw*, 37–73.
[18] Made abundantly clear in Deryck Cooke, *An Introduction to Der Ring des Nibelungen* (Decca 443), 581–2.

This means the primary task of analysis concerned with meaning is to elucidate the connections between signifiers, both internally to each text and between the texts. The signifiers of each text are actually engaged in four different kinds of relations: a) those with other signifiers within the text of the work; b) those with instances of the domain of the text outside of the work, that is, relations to the traditions of the medium; c) those with signifieds, that is, concepts in the dramatic domain; and d) those with signifiers of the other texts. Much pre-existing analysis of the way Wagner generates meaning in his works can re-framed with respect to this model, but here we will satisfy ourselves with only a few comments.

The relations referred to in a) include relations with other instances of the same signifier, both in the same part of the work, a consequence of which is the development of the motif, and in other parts of the work, which serves a referential function by linking those parts of the work. In the specific case of the musical text, this distinction is precisely the difference between the two opposing functions a long-standing conception sees the motifs as having: the developmental and the referential. Indeed, following Ernst Kurth, some see this as a distinction between motifs themselves, hence visiting on them two different names: *Entwicklungsmotive* and *Leitmotive* (respectively).[19] However, the description provided here suggests two facts which have not always been realised. First, the difference in function is located in the difference between the relations between objects, not in the difference between the objects themselves. Thus a discussion over whether a particular instance of a motif is used as *Entwicklungsmotiv* or as *Leitmotiv* is misguided: the one object can, and indeed must, be engaged in more than one kind of connection. Second, the difference has nothing to do with whether or not the motifs take on meaning, which is sometimes assumed to be an equivalent distinction, as we are concerned here only with connections of type a), and not c) (or even d), with which they are often conflated).

We also note that the relations in d) are all necessarily mediated through the dramatic – and hence rely on the relations in c) – since they are formed when there is some correspondence

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[19] Whittall, 529.

or identity between the concepts (in the dramatic) related to each of the signifiers. It is this that justifies calling the domain the dramatic, as it is only through it that we can synthesise the texts into the "drama," the ultimate site of all meaning in the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

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This model seems like a kind of extension of Saussure's web of signifiers sliding over the signified, a view which is recalled specifically by a) and c) alone and which comes precisely from the impossibility (once language is autonomous from the "world" – that is, truly a language) of finding a bijective (or in Jacques Lacan's apt, but ugly term "bi-univocal"[20]) correspondence between signifiers and signifieds. In our case, each of our texts slides over the dramatic, and therefore with respect to the others. There are, however, some limits on the sliding. For Lacan, this is due to moments where the layers are tied together at a *point de capiton*, as an upholsterer's button limits the movement of the layers of a quilt.[21] For us, these limitations are correspondences between all three texts (through the mediation of, and therefore including the dramatic). This leads us to the question of naming leitmotifs, as I claim that a well-named leitmotif articulates precisely this act of *capitonnage*. Hence, a name connects an "object" in each text and claims that they each occupy, in some sense, an equivalent position in the network of connections that makes up its text, and the more precise the sense of equivalence is, the better the name. It follows that in any argument over the name of a motif, the task is to show that the concept, the part of the poem, the events or objects on the stage and the leitmotif the proposed name would connect, as well as their connections within each of the texts, correspond better than those implicated by the alternative propositions. Take as an example the *locus classicus* of this kind of argument – Cooke's proposal that Wolzogen's "flight-motif"[22] should in fact be considered as representing "love in its

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[20] Jacques Lacan, *Écrist: A Selection* [1966], trans. and ed. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), 165.
[21] Lacan, 170.
[22] Although, the name did not originate with him. See Whittall, 529.

totality."[23] Cooke's approach is to show that the musical connotations of this motif, both in its later uses and the uses of themes derived from it; the implications of the figure of Freia, to whom he connects the motif in her capacity as Goddess of Love; and the role of love in the poem all correspond to one another better than the musical connotations; the fact of Freia's fleeing in her first entry on the stage; and the concept of flight in the poem correspond to one another.

Some, perhaps even the majority, of the musical motifs will occupy positions in the network without equivalents in the other texts – indeed, none of them will have exact equivalents. This does not, however, imply that names should not be used, as this fact is implicit in all signifying activity; that is to say, what the critics of the "exegetes" have discovered is nothing other than a form of the impasse referenced above: a bi-univocal correspondence between signifiers and signifieds cannot exist, because semiotic systems are not codes. Abbate notes (in 1989) that "scoffing at labels (while continuing to use them) is a ritual feature of most modern Wagnerian analysis,"[24] and impels the analyst to give up labels all together. Not only is this an untenable position, as it prohibits useful discussion of them and their connections – which I claim to be the purpose, or at least primary task, of analysis – by making it difficult to identify them in discussion,[25] but it also fundamentally misunderstands the act of naming. Rather than claiming, as Abbate does, that "Wagner's motifs have no referential meaning" and only "absorb meaning at exceptional

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[23] Cooke, *I Saw*, 48–62.

[24] Carolyn Abbate, "Wagner, 'On Modulation' and *Tristan,*" *Cambridge Opera Journal* 1/1 (1989), 45. In fact, she not only scoffs at these analysts for continuing to use labels, but castigates them for – in spite of their scepticism about naming motifs – still believing that motifs can have inherent meaning.

[25] One could choose to simply number the motifs, as Scruton does for *Tristan und Isolde*, but even this is a kind of labelling. Less pedantically, this approach does not resolve the issue of determining the boundaries between motifs. In fact, it heightens the necessity of doing so, as numbers do not in any way help articulate the connections between the motifs. Numbering the motifs also does not give them labels that are easy to remember or likely to have currency in a different analysis, in which a different set of motifs to be numbered. For Scruton's analysis, see Roger Scruton, *Death-Devoted Heart* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), particularly 75–117.

and solemn moments,"[26] we simply need to realise that meaning is not a property of signifiers, but of their relations, and that this is a necessary consequence of the arbitrariness of signs.

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Let us now examine something of the process by which the "meaning" arises from the connections between signifiers. Following the discussion in *Opera and Drama* on poetico-musical periods, which serves as an exemplar of the dialectical thinking about unity claimed above, Wagner goes on to discuss how these emotively unified units can then be combined "in a continuous, mutually conditioning chain of moments of feeling."[27] In a coincidence highly charged in meaning,[28] Lacan echoes this metaphor in his discussion of the way meaning arises out of (only) the relations between signifiers in his reading of Saussurean linguistics: "it is in the chain of the signifier that the meaning "insists" but none of its elements "consists" in the signification of which it is at the moment capable."[29] That the effect of individual words is contingent on the specific "chain" in which it occurs was at least intuited by Wagner. This can be seen early in the discussion of periods, where he claims that the word "*Lust*" would have to "obtain an emphasis quite other" in the sentence "*die Liebe bringt Lust und Leid*" than in "*die Liebe giebt Lust zum Leben*," precisely because of the different nature of the succeeding words. Significantly, this conditioning due to the insistence of the chain occurs retrospectively. However, in a structuralist understanding of anything (and our discussion, deriving from Saussure, cannot be anything but structuralist), the structure is

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[26] Abbate, "Wagner, 'On Modulation,'" 45.

[27] Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, 294.

[28] To echo Mladen Dolar in Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar, *Opera's Second Death* (London: Routledge, 2002), 90.

[29] Lacan, 170. This conclusion in the case of language can be suggested by considering an incomplete sentence like "On the other hand we have that...". The crucial signifier, absent from this fragment, is already coloured by those we do have. That this conditioning also works in reverse can be seen by considering this sentence (frequently attributed to Oscar Wilde) – "There are two great tragedies in life: one is not getting what you want; the other is getting it" – and the change felt in the meaning of the word "tragedies."

assumed to be synchronic. Hence, when the meaning of a word in our necessarily temporal, linear experience of a chain of signifiers appears to change, we do not feel as if it has actually changed, rather we conclude that we have only just discovered "what it actually meant." This means that the determination of the signifier's meaning can be said to be synchronically retrospective.

We have evidence from Wagner (in as much one can take the prose works as evidence of conviction in anything) for this dialectical understanding at the level of the word and the level of the musical period. It seems then reasonable to consider it at the intermediary level of the motif, suggested as it is by a passage much further into *Opera and Drama*, wherein he describes the mutual conditioning of "melodic moments."[30] In trying to ask this question of our musical "moments," we inadvertently raise questions of musical ontology. Is the work we intend to interpret equivalent to a performance; and if not – that is, if performances and scores are only tokens of the abstract work we intend to interpret – does the meaning of that abstract work have a temporal dimension, or is it hermeneutically stable?[31] Insofar as the work is experienced temporally, the "meaning" of musical (or perhaps better, musico-dramatic) events will be determined retrospectively; the question we face is whether this retrospectively determined meaning is perceived as the "actual" meaning – as we claim with language – or whether it is perceived as new. To put the question more generally, if we claim – to borrow Roger Scruton's phrase – that as they are repeated in the course of the work, the motifs "serve as musical magnets, around which meaning slowly accumulates in the course of the drama,"[32] is that accumulated meaning implicit in the first appearance of the motif?

For the analyst who knows the eventual course of each motif, I do not believe the answer can be anything other than yes. For one who knows its eventual significance and something of the family of motifs derived from it, it is nothing but a conceit to suppose that the first appearance of the "Ring-motif" in Wellgunde's

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[30] Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, 348.

[31] These questions are fraught further by the issues associated with the dimension of performance itself, but this I put to the side.

[32] Scruton, *Death-Devoted Heart*, 78.

chatter can be heard naïvely. Of course, this conceit can be fruitful, in that it is necessary in tracing the evolution of that phrase, but it is merely a conceit, and indeed its very function is to allow us to elucidate the web connections implicit in "the theme itself," allowing us to appreciate the significance of that first occurrence.

This formulation might suggest that for the naïve listener, the significance of leitmotifs evolves in the course of the drama – that is, this formulation implies the knowledge of the individual subject matters; however, "what is important is not that the subject know anything whatsoever."[33] Here we have two available explanations. One is Lacan's generalised argument, which claims that the complex of connotations of a signifier is part of that which it signifies. That is because, in some sense, the use of a signifier invokes the signifier itself as much as any signified; therefore the connotations cross into the realm of the signified. Alternatively, we can consider the use of the orchestra, in particular, when it is used in prophesy, such as in Act III of *Die Walküre*, where the orchestra foretells that it is Siegfried who will wake Brünnhilde. The act of prophesy forces the action of the drama into the past, as the orchestra's knowledge of what is to come transforms the drama into a retelling of something predetermined.[34] Under either explanation, all connotations are predetermined and implicit in the original instance, regardless of the knowledge of the subject.

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This analysis works with regard to the network of connections, within and across the three texts. However, it says nothing of

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[33] Lacan, 171.

[34] This assumes that we take the orchestra's fore-knowledge to be infallible. This is an interesting question, as is that of the exact relation of the orchestral content to the knowledge of the characters, but we, yet again, are compelled to leave these questions aside. In the present instance at least, if the orchestra fails us, we can turn to Lacan.

Grey makes some interesting comments regarding the fallibility of prophesy in the Ring in Thomas S. Grey, "Leitmotif, temporality and musical design in the *Ring*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, ed. Thomas S. Grey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 103.

interpretations of the work. When one claims that the *Ring* is really about the conflict between the Law and Love as ruling forces in society, or that *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* is really about the importance of reconciling both natural intuition and convention in great works of art, it is difficult to accept this as implicit in the texts of the works themselves in the same way.[35] Instead, we might claim that the work is first experienced, and only attains this unifying "meaning" – that is, a totalising *interpretation* – once interpreted. Such a claim places all the motifs, our "signifiers" in all three texts, and all the connections between them in the pre-semantic mode, from a totalising point of view (and demands the return of the scare quotes). This may seem like a departure from the model espoused earlier, and in some sense it is, except that the kind of "meaning" under discussion here is of a different kind; the ideas being dealt with here, aware as they are of the "real" world, have no place in the dramatic domain. In any case, following this claim will allow us to provide a highly intriguing, if speculative, explanation of the experience of the Wagnerian ending.

If we consider our "signifiers" as being pre-semantic and take their relations to one another as our primary analytic focus, Slavoj Žižek informs us that we are reading them in "the Lévi-Straussian mode."[36] In his understanding of myth, Claude Lévi-Strauss articulates an underlying semantic structure of (cultural) oppositions, of which myth is the enactment. Reading Wagner's works in a similar manner matches well with standard attempts to interpret them, particularly the *Ring*, which most commentators take to be, in some sense at least, based on oppositions fundamental to the design and structure of society. Invoking Lévi-Strauss raises this to the level of a general principle; however his opinions on the experience of myth are interesting. For Lévi-Strauss, by enacting the structure of oppositions, myth coheres the simultaneity of contradictions; that is, myths narrate over cultural

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[35] To say nothing of how sensible or otherwise making these particular claims would be.

[36] Slavoj Žižek, "Brünnhilde's Act," *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 4/0 (2010): 29. The invocation of Lévi-Strauss resonates nicely with the rest of this essay, as his work was inspired by Saussure, and the dominance of myth in his project creates an obvious connection to Wagner.

contradiction without resolving it.[37] Nowhere is this coherence more apparent in Wagner than in his endings, which Tanner describes as "a massive musico-dramatic QED,"[38] as in them all feels resolved, even if no conclusions have actually been reached. This, I claim, is precisely the experience of the archetypical Wagnerian ending, that of *Götterdämmerung*. The dramatic substance can hardly be considered resolved, a solution to the opposition is not offered – the sheer volume of literature attempting to explain the final scene is testament to this – but the experience of the work leads us to feel as if it is. The work has, in a manner consistent with Lévi-Strauss's understanding of the function of myth, "papered over" the contradiction without resolving it. Indeed, the work cannot resolve it, at least insofar as it functions as myth, for if a solution were known, a myth making order from the contradiction would not be required.

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Irresolvable contradictions are not only the provenance of myth – they are also the substance of great art and – seemingly inevitably – the theory of art. With that thought I desist, without even attempting to follow Wagner's coalescent example.

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[37] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology, vol. 1*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 228.
[38] Michael Tanner, *Wagner* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 212.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to motivate and explore some of the consequences of the use of the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, and the semiotic and structuralist traditions that have arisen from it, in the analysis of the way Richard Wagner generates meaning in his works.

Most applications of semiotic theory to music get caught on the question of whether or not music (itself) constitutes sign (as such). This paper does not seek to engage with that debate, but instead look at the specific case of Wagner's works, where due to the presence of the non-musical aspects of the work and *Leitmotif* technique, as traditionally conceived, the parallels to Saussure are much more obviously suggestive. Considering this suggestion offers different approaches and solutions to questions relating to

meaning, which have long been a part of the Wagnerian analytic tradition.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Edwin Spark is completing, in 2014, the fifth year of a Bachelor of Music Studies/Bachelor of Arts combined programme at the University of Sydney, which has included focussed studies in Oboe, Musicology and Mathematics. He has a particular interest in questions associated with aesthetics, communication and meaning. This article owes much to courses taught by Dr David Larkin, Dr Bruce Gardiner and Dr Nick Riemer.