

**Hope I die  
before the  
Fat Lady stops!**

**A discussion on Wagner,  
Gesamtkunstwerk  
And  
Quadrophenia**

‘And these children  
that you spit on  
as they to change their world  
are immune to your consultations.  
They’re quite aware of what they’re going through....’  
**David Bowie 1971**

These words are an integral part of the opening credits of *The Breakfast Club* (1985 Dir: John Hughes). Lawrence Groosberg<sup>1</sup>, commenting on that film, phrases it in his essay ‘*Cinema, Postmodernism and Authenticity*’: ‘..is a tragic statement of youth’s continued desire to avoid becoming their parents – parents who beat them, ignore them, pressure them – to avoid growing up because when they do, “your heart dies”...’

There is an inferred difference in this statement between youth and their parents that is more than biological if only by way of the meaning of the generation gap. Adorno<sup>2</sup>, discussing the high art subject of Wagner, utilises a similar statement of difference when introducing his essay ‘Wagner’s Relevance for Today’ thus: ‘...Wagner no longer represents, as he did in my youth, the world of one’s parents, but that of one’s grandparents instead.. I can still remember quite well from my childhood how my mother lamented the demise of Italian vocal art that was caused by Wagnerian style of singing...The opera is beginning to regress to precisely that phase that has shown itself, in light of Wagner, to be outdated...’

One aspect of the post-modern consumer society is the prevalence of the deliberately targeted marketing to western youth and their exploitation through such avenues as rock music and the television and film industries. The ‘generation gap’ was a powerful tool for the advertisers from the 1960’s onwards especially in America and Britain. This ‘generation gap’ effect is also the same force that helped inspire Pete Townsend (The Who) to write those lines from ‘My Generation’: *Hope I die before I get Old* (1967).

In 1967 this was taken at its literal meaning by many critics. This was a controversial statement on everyday life especially as it came from one who was taking a privileged view of life from the heights of commercial success in the rock music industry. It gave all the members of The Who a certain reputation for 'seeking an early grave' and indeed Keith Moon (Drummer) did meet his premature death in 1978 a year before the release of *Quadrophenia* the film. Townsend, though, has survived the drugs and alcohol to live to reach middle age and is now part of the establishment against which The Who's lyrics often implied the alienation of youth. He qualified his statement in later life to read: Staying young at heart even if the body clock continues to tick on. Townsend eventually conforms to society's rules as it were, as he passes to the 'older generation' himself at the start of the twenty first century. Lawrence Grossberg<sup>3</sup> commenting on the youth stars of '*The Breakfast Club*' again states: '...Each one conforms, knows it, struggle against it for a moment to escape it and reveal themselves, and then knowingly accepts their own conformity...each one..is a small simulacrum of James Dean, a rebel without a cause....'. James Dean – the movie star, is the benchmark against which all post-war youth cultures can be measured. But, James Dean is a construct of the Hollywood standard and his 'cult status' carries a mythology all of Hollywood's making except maybe for his spectacular premature death in a car accident in 1955. If it takes 'cult status' to say anything then *Quadrophenia* (Dir: Franc Roddams 1979) is a cult film with 'status' that has endured the generation gaps since its first release and for the last twenty five years.

The purpose of this essay is to discuss *Quadrophenia* the film as Gesamtkunstwerk and compare it in relation to Wagner and in particular *Tristan&Isolde*.

Gesamtkunstwerk was applied by Wagner to this and his other mature works – music dramas as they had come to be referred. This discussion introduces Wagner's notions of music drama and its historical precedence, the significance of Schopenhauer's philosophy and its effects on Wagner's works. The Munich 1998 performance(s) of *Tristan&Isolde* will be discussed as example of music drama et al Wagner.

Roddam's *Quadrophenia* will be evaluated with respect to the music, drama, text and image as Gesamtkunstwerk. Finally, *Quadrophenia* will be evaluated as a music drama relative to the contemporary understanding of the term, especially in light of postmodernist thought. Here the works of Michel Foucault and Lawrence Grossberg as applied to rock music will be discussed.

*Quadrophenia* was released initially as a soundtrack album in 1973 and the first live performance of the combined drama and music was not until 1996 at a Prince's Trust concert in Hyde Park, London. Nevertheless, it was referred to as a 'rock opera' after the original recording had been released. Can rock music and performance be considered opera in the same sense as those historically established composers had produced opera throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe and in particular Germany, France and Italy? Wagner had related his own work as Gesamtkunstwerk – or all-embracing work of art. '...Within it, none of the arts was to be subordinate to any other: each was to speak out in all its fullness, supported and amplified by the others; and what would be expressed at any given moment about any situation or emotion would be totality of what *all* the arts could express...'4

**Grout**<sup>5</sup> has described the two most important attributes of opera thus: '...The first is undoubtedly its luxuriousness. Opera is an expensive affair because it is difficult to stage and perform. It involves the cooperation of a large number of experts from composer, conductor, singers and and so on.. Another inherent feature of opera is its artificiality or stylisation. Opera is always laden with certain conventions, which people agree to accept while at the same time acknowledge them to be unnatural or even ridiculous...'. Grout continues: '...the luxuriousness and stylisation of opera have always provoked reactions. Just as every age has its own kind of opera, so every age has its humbler counterparts of form, designed to appeal to persons of less cultivation.

Wagner extends his notions of opera further to his later or mature works. He refers to these in much of his theoretical writings as music dramas and Wagner has also restructured his works around the Greek tragedy model where a combination of

poetry, drama, costume, mime, instrumental music, dance and song were prevalent with a greater scope for expressing existed than through any of the arts alone. Subject matter would come from myth and it would have a certain religiosity based on human existence. These innovations of both theory and practice were not confined to the music but...’embraced the whole drama and in working them out, Wagner touched on many issues that were fundamentally involved with 19<sup>th</sup> century thought...’<sup>6</sup>

‘...Traditional drama...’ as Brian Magee<sup>7</sup> points out ‘...depicts what goes on between people...whereas the object of the music drama was the presentation of archetypical situations as *experienced by the participants*, and to this dramatic end music was a means albeit a uniquely expressive one...’

To Wagner, the music expressed the inner feelings whilst the outer actions were reinforced by the words and gestures of action between participants. During periods of no spoken dialogue or simple recitative, the music alone would convey feeling. The character’s emotions or what was going on inside them would seem more important than the actual motives of their dramatic actions on stage. Brian Magee<sup>8</sup> expressed this as applied to the music as: ‘...It would explore and articulate the ultimate reality of experience, what goes on in the heart and the soul...To listen to Wagner’s music simply as music, without regard to the words or the drama, is to miss all this...’. This is the essence of Gesamtkunstwerk and although Wagner gives primacy to the music of all the arts it is Gesamtkunstwerk that interests us in this discussion on music, drama, image and the relevance of film as the post-modern Gesamtkunstwerk and our example of *Quadrophenia*.

Having understood the meaning of Gesamtkunstwerk and its application to Wagner we need to address the origins of the theories and practices of Wagner during the period of his mature works. The greatest of these was the philosophical works of Arthur Schopenhauer and Brian Magee<sup>9</sup> states that what Schopenhauer gave Wagner was ‘...a new way of looking at the world, a view that saw all public affairs...as trivial,

a turning away from the world and its values, a view that held up sexual love and the arts, above all the art of music, as the most valuable of human activities...'

Essentially, Schopenhauer's philosophy reworks some of Kant's notions of experience. Kant postulated that the world consists of the actual on the one hand – The phenomenal, that can be experienced and the world that cannot be experienced – The noumenal. Schopenhauer believed that the real world or life is totally bleak and without comfort. Existence is miserable. Those that exist – humans – are selfish, cruel, greedy, stupid, aggressive and heartless. Conception and death mark clearly the beginning and end of this 'worthless life'. However, within this life 'the fullest expression of the individual personality is in a loving relationship...in which.. the barriers.. of selfhood are transcended...and that one loses their sense of self and experiences 'oneness' with the other person in the sexual act. Wagner's ideas on music were to be different to Schopenhauer's up till reading his essay: *The World as Will and Representation* and till then Wagner was content to accept music as equal to the other arts. Schopenhauer believed that music was of prime importance and standing above all the other arts. It represented the will according to Schopenhauer. He had '...put Wagner in touch with his own unconsciousness..' continued Magee. How does this affect our view of Gesamtkunstwerk applied to a film such as *Quadrophenia*? As far as contemporary rock is concerned, the primacy of music is not disputed and especially in the case of *Quadrophenia* where the music came first anyway.

Let us now look at how Gesamtkunstwerk materialised in *Tristan&Isolde*(1854-1858) This is a complicated plot probably taken from a 13<sup>th</sup> century mythological tale and it will not be possible to explain all the aspects of this tale in the constraints of this essay. However, the essence as a stage production are its beginning (Act I) near the end of the tale with 'flashbacks' by the use of Wagner's poetic text. This technique closely resembles the model of the Greek tragedy. Secondly, the hatred of day which is a symbol of the real world to *Tristan&Isolde* and the impossibility of

the situation of forbidden love. Thirdly, the celebration of the night where forbidden love can be consummated in orgasmic passion (Act II). The music, as Magee<sup>10</sup> states it provides a ‘..running commentary on the inwardness of the drama, not only when one is singing but all the time....’ Schopenhauer has referred to this as disclosing the most innermost feelings or secret meanings and provides an insight into the true nature of things. *Tristan&Isolde* ends in death for both characters. In deed both participants are longing for death to overcome them so they can be together in the noumenal world or the ‘eternal night’. Everything about this plot is Schopenhauerian – the act of sexual love as ‘oneness’, the conflict between the phenomenal and the noumenal and so on. The imagery of stage set is an important aspect of any performance of *Tristan&Isolde* and the 1998 Munich production is no exception. Given a post-modern stylisation by the stage director: Peter Konwitschny with comfy sofas and cushions through slide projector and screen as sign for memory (Act III) may be worthy of an essay in its own right.

How does film fit Gesamtkunstwerk? Western cinema progressed beyond the silent era to eventually combine text, sounds, images and music in a modern entertainment and art cinema we know today. This progressive application of technologies and art forms has provided a wide range of films and film genre one of which is the music drama. I will now attempt to establish the meaning of Gesamtkunstwerk in film by referring to the example of *Quadrophenia*.

During the 1950’s and 1960’s there were a range of films that functioned to present the images of a single or multiple rock concert performance. *Quadrophenia*, of course, was written as a sound recording in 1973 and it was several years before it was committed to celluloid by Franc Roddam. The Who had performed the music and lyrics several times before the film was commissioned. Was it opera? That seems a mute point anyway. The label rock opera should not be a problem. Wagner used the term music drama rather than opera and it is possible to apply the same label to *Quadrophenia* without affecting its meaning. The film did have aspects of opera: music, drama, action, costume, etc. but then so do all or most films without being

labelled opera. The fact is that Townsend in any case, did not wish to 'perform' *Quadrophenia* beyond some of the music at concerts. It is in any case, Roddam's craftsmanship that is being examined where Townsend's music is being interspersed with the images and the drama.

In the 1950's, youth culture films were very popular where subjects such as juvenile delinquency, hotrods, etc. appeared at regular intervals out of Hollywood in particular. 1979, however, was a peak time of 'mod revival' in Britain where a nostalgia for a recent past was echoed in the fashions and the music of the time (The Jam, Style Council, The Specials, etc.). This revival became the driving force behind the funding and the release of Roddam's look at the mod culture of the 1960's. The late 1970's revival was not authentic of course. Bands like The Jam were copy bands to a large extent of the R&B and Ska bands of the 1960's. This unauthenticity did not seem to bother the youth that followed these new bands. This was anyway, a time when 'music television' was gaining importance in youth culture and the trend to produce music videos as substitutes for live performances was rife. As Grossberg<sup>11</sup> points out: '.....the changing ratio between sight and sound in representing the alienation of everyday life challenges the very possibility of authenticity...'. Music videos, by replacing the pure primacy of sound only with images of everyday life were conditioning youth to expect the unauthentic, the copy or the cover versions. *Quadrophenia* the film was released during this growth period of music television but the film's commercial non-success bears witness to the fickle nature of the mass audience at which it was originally aimed. *Quadrophenia* had and still commands a minority viewing audience consisting of the revivalist and baby boomers seeking a nostalgic look at 1960's Britain or at least a narrow aspect of the mod culture that existed at the time. *Quadrophenia* was taken as contemporary by the conditioned youth of 1979 seeking their own solution to teen-hood and angst. The everyday plot of the film is not relevant beyond the treatment that it receives by Roddam and his craftsmen as Gesamtkunstwerk. It is impossible though, not to refer to some aspects of the film as they are important in a comparison with *Tristan&Isolde*.



Rock culture is part of everyday life. ‘..to like rock..’, as Michel Foucault<sup>12</sup> explains it, ‘...to like a certain kind of rock rather than another, is also a way of life, a manner of reacting, it is a whole set of tastes and attitudes...’. *Quadrophenia* has its fill of ‘attitudes’ from Jimmy through his parents to his girlfriend, work peers and manager. The film has four themes and Roddam handles the ‘two-times Schizophrenia’ in a compelling manner combining images and introducing each ‘leitmotif’ in turn in the opening sequence. This scene is of course, the end of the tale and every other scene in the film is handled by flashbacks in much the same manner as Wagner handles *Tristan&Isolde*. *Quadrophenia*, though, is not a complicated plot but is still rich in meaning. Each ‘leitmotif’ or theme refers to an identity that fits Jimmy the alienated protagonist. Four identities conveyed in drama, song, music and image. The themes – *Helpless Dancer*, *Bell Boy*, *Is It Me* and *Love Reign O’er Me* – combine to expose the inner conflicts of Jimmy’s identities. Each art form is utilised with the others to develop the drama as well as exposing Jimmy inability to resolve his separate selves which culminates in the penultimate scene the destruction of the motor scooter. This is Roddam’s interpretation of Townsend’s ending on the album (sleeve notes eventually known as ‘the play’), which is a contemplation of suicide on the ‘rock’ off Brighton beach. There is no such ‘rock’ of course there is only ‘Brighton rock’, that manufactured consumer confectionary product. Jimmy’s or rather, Townsend’s ‘rock’ is mythical and it represents to Townsend the noumenal. Roddam does not really utilise this ‘rock’ in quite the same way but instead confines his ending to a representation of the destruction of the past and provides the possibility of a more optimistic future for youth. In any case Townsend has not ruled out optimism and this is maybe where he would differ from Wagner and maybe where low or mass culture differs from high art. Wagner is never optimistic. For *Quadrophenia* is low culture but it is not necessarily Kitsch. It’s cult status is due to its association with mod culture and not necessarily because it was intended as art film. But low culture or not, the fusion of art forms has produced what could be considered Gesamtkunstwerk.

Can all film be described as Gesamtkunstwerk?

Post-modern cinema fuses all the arts to produce a final product- the film that we see. Film is an imitative art and provides analogical reproductions of reality- scene, object, landscape which produces an overall style. This is what Barthe<sup>13</sup> referred to as:

‘...message without a code..’. In addition the treatment of the image by its creator provides an aesthetic or ideological signified referring to ‘..a certain ‘culture’ of the society receiving the message...’. Film then has a denoted message – the analogical and a connoted message – what the meaning is to the audience. Clearly all films will have denoted and connoted messages in the images and film sequences. Not all films have drama or for that matter music and sound. These in fact, complicate the issues of the reading of meaning if such meanings exist and not all films can be

Gesamtkunstwerk. The very application of music on film does not necessarily constitute an expression of inner feelings. There would have to be a conscious desire by the creator to convey such feelings and they would have to combine music, drama and image in such a manner so as to become obvious to the audience as feeling. The ‘musical’ can claim to have the right mix of art forms but would anyone claim that ‘*The Sound of Music*’ as an all-embracing work of art? A further examination of film would have to be undertaken to assess whether there are many films that could meet our criteria. This discussion confines itself to *Quadrophenia* and its historical model in Wagner’s music drama. If one accepts the application of a high culture theory of Gesamtkunstwerk to a post-modern low culture product, then *Quadrophenia* meets our expectations of an all-embracing work of art. In fact, it probably meets Schopenhauer’s notions of music as a prime art form since without Townsend’s gifted input the film would have been all the poorer for it. There would have been no film at all if Townsend had not penned the original music and lyrics. How does *Quadrophenia* fit the statements of Wagner and Schopenhauer as per Magee<sup>10</sup>? He stated that music provided a running commentary on the inwardness of the drama and that music discloses the innermost feelings and the true nature of things. Whilst the

motor scooters, mini-skirts, tee-shirts and mohair suits provide the iconographical signifiers of mod culture the accompanying music from *Quadrophenia* instrumentals to the music & lyrics on 'The Real Me' give a depth to the characters inner feelings. This is especially so on '5.15' where Jimmy confronts the outward world of alienation, deceit and adulthood with an inner struggle to make sense. Townsend's riffs add a textured layer of reverberating aggression through apathy to solace.

'Why should I care' Daltry shouts and continues 'Inside , Outside, leave me alone....'

All this does rely on the understanding, by the spectator, of meaning just as the observation of an avant-garde painting requires an understanding. *Quadrophenia* does retain a 'knowing' audience in the same way that Wagner commands an understanding from most of his audiences and this 'knowing' works on different levels depending on the spectator. To the devotees of Wagner the music drama provides anything to the audience from the popular leitmotif of the prelude and aria to a detailed understanding of the primacy of the music and 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophy. Roddam understands the music drama and produces a richly layered film about youth angst and alienation. Roddam is also no stranger to the opera. He completed a portion of *Aria* in 1987 about a young couple committing suicide in Las Vegas based on *Tristian&Isolde* with accompanying aria. In a post-modern society where mass consumption of low culture is everyday some aspects of the low culture can be elevated to a higher plateau by knowing and *Quadrophenia* is an ideal candidate. Not everything in *Quadrophenia* the film is Schopenhauerian anymore than it is Wagnerian but Gesamtkunstwerk can surely be applied to it.

**References**

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- 12 Michel Foucault, 'Contemporary Music and the Public' in Politics, Philosophy, Culture (Routledge 1988) p316