Few modern German cultural figures have been as admired and universally influential on opera, theater, and art theory as Richard Wagner. Year after year in opera houses around the world, his gods ascend to Valhalla only to fade away in the twilight of their own contradictions in a great variety of productions, although each staging keeps its eye on the worshipped performances at Wagner’s original theater in Bayreuth. This theater, designed by Otto Brückwald (exterior) and Karl Brandt (interior), drew from...
plans that Wagner had worked out with Gottfried Semper. Semper’s views on architecture and its capacity to integrate other arts echoed Wagner’s own emerging ideas on what would become his theory of the Gesamtkunstwerk (total work of art). While the term was not originally Wagner’s—the philosopher Karl Friedrich Eusebius Trahendorff first used it in 1827—his theoretical development of an ideal integration of all of the arts continues to impact to this day conceptualizations of art and performance well beyond the operatic sphere.

And yet as powerful as the term and as popular as the operas have been, it is undeniable Adolf Hitler and other National Socialist leaders’ celebration of Wagner (aided during the 1930s by Winfried Wagner, the composer’s daughter-in-law) that has impacted every subsequent analytic approach to the Gesamtkunstwerk and its various iterations. Criticism of the composer’s reactionary tendencies began in his own lifetime, including Nietzsche’s conclusion that Wagner’s operas were essentially addictive and, like a drug, blunted the critical capacity of the audience. But by far the best-known critic was Theodor Adorno. His In Search of Wagner, written in the heat of exile in 1937–38 but not published until 1952, slashes and burns its way through various aesthetic strategies and reactionary themes raised by the composer. While grudgingly acknowledging the complexity and importance of the operatic works, Adorno’s extraordinary and willful text lays at Wagner’s feet the racist, capitalist, imperialist, and authoritarian roots of twentieth-century German fascism.

Juliet Koss takes us from Wagner to Adorno in her complex and ambitious book Modernism after Wagner. Koss problematizes from the beginning any easy association between Wagner and Hitler, in spite of their clear historical connections. Rather, she insists that Adorno and critics who have followed have underplayed or ignored altogether both the historical roots of Wagner’s main ideas about the Gesamtkunstwerk and the historical trajectory of the term. Koss insists on a more nuanced reading, showing how the heart of Wagner’s understanding of integrated arts shifted in the hands of prominent modernist artists and theoreticians when confronting new audiences. Theater architecture forms a key piece of her evidence, and she intriguingly shows how our attention to the arrangement of space can reveal much about the continuity or transformation of Wagner’s contributions. That said, this book is not an architectural history per se. Instead, it looks to architecture, design, film, and cultural theory to assert that the important concept of integrating the arts stems from Wagner and is carried forward as a leitmotif of modernism. She argues that “modernism itself must be understood in reference to the theoretical elaboration and historical development of the Gesamtkunstwerk”;

The scope of Koss’s project is its own model of scholarly integration. Much of German art history and cultural studies remain confined to specific media or discrete political periods. Books that take on a broad chronological and geographic comparative perspective, such as Kathleen James-Chakraborty’s German Architecture for a Mass Audience, tend to be exceptions given the complexity of managing the questions and historical conditions of radically shifting German society. Koss covers much theoretical ground between 1848–49 through the 1930s, with her architectural and visual evidence weighted to examples from Wilhelmine to Weimar. In the process, she reevaluates well-known cases, such as that of Oskar Schlemmer at the Bauhaus, but also brings forward lesser-known lights, particularly Max Littmann, a prolific Munich theater designer. Her chronological structure lays out the transformation of the concept of integrating the arts in an ideal or critical form. Beginning with Wagner and his own efforts to build Bayreuth (after his failure to construct a theater in Munich), she moves to Peter Behrens and Joseph Maria Olbrich’s artist community at Darmstadt and Littmann’s projects in Munich; the 1908 Munich Exhibition and Adolf von Hildebrand’s influence on Georg Fuchs’s plans for a modern theater; new concepts of spectatorship and the audience with the rise of cinemas; and theatrical events at the Bauhaus, punctuated by Schlemmer’s contributions. Throughout, Koss keeps her focus on how artists and audiences understood the integration of various media and modes of viewing. She argues that these cultural participants understood the relationship between viewer and work variably—as empathetic, tending toward abstraction, distracted, or estranged.

Koss gives us much to chew on in this complex mix of cultural theories and visual and architectural practices. For the Gesamtkunstwerk itself, she shows through close attention to Wagner’s writings that he did not understand the term as it is commonly used in art history and elsewhere, that is, as a total synthesis of artistic media. Instead, Wagner argued that only by bringing the various artistic media together could each achieve its true nature, its own highest form of expression. These utopian projections contained undertones of the democratic individualism that drove Wagner to participate in the Dresden uprisings and befriended the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, and this utopianism envisioned a regenerated collective that Koss relates to his political context—he developed the concept while in exile. Semper first spatialized these ideas in his project for Wagner’s unbuilt theater in Munich, which importantly included the first sunken orchestra pit that takes away from the audience. This hid the musicians and made the connection between spectator and performance more direct or, as theorized, more active. While subsequent interpretations of the architecture claimed that exactly this effect hid the production of music from the audience, lulling them with a seductive and magical environment, Koss persuasively points here, as elsewhere, to the meaning of the practices in the moment of their inception. She contributes to the debate on modern spectatorship and the importance of the embodiment of the viewer and performer in certain spatial relationships, including architecture.

Adorno’s essay haunts Koss’s text and in many important ways plays the implicit foil for her arguments. He shows up initially in the second footnote of the introduction, but remains relatively unreferenceed after that. Germanists will wait in
some anticipation for his appearance, which makes a satisfying bang in the concluding chapter. Koss pulls no punches in her critique of Adorno’s historiical collapse of Wagner into Hitler. She gives him his due in terms of helping us understand Wagner and putting him at the heart of central philosophical and cultural debates, even as she highlights his shortcomings: “Simply put, Adorno helped bring a discussion of Wagner’s life and work into postwar cultural discourse. Hostile, anachronistic, and intensely personalized, Adorno’s arguments nevertheless usefully link cultural and intellectual history to historical and political events” (260). For Koss, it is Adorno’s political emphasis on authoritarianism that is at the heart of his essay and misreading of Wagner’s theory and work, forged as they were in the fires of revolutionary Europe. Still, it seems that in the process she underplays some of the critique of the commodity form that is also at the heart of Adorno’s book and his theory of fascism.

The phantasmagoric for Adorno, as for Marx, was not only a description of how production became veiled in an attempt to stave off political conflict. It also described the essential character of the commodity, which resulted from and was propelled by contradictions within the mode of production became veiled in an attempt to stave off political conflict. It also described the political rallies and cultural aesthetics unreflectively, a process that Koss notes that Brecht described as Einfühlung (empathy) (257). That this term had originally been used to label an active engagement is Koss’s point: audiences, terms, and the relationship between spectator and performer are historically contingent and must be approached in all of their complexity.

Yet Brecht’s formulation, which is shared by the majority of art historians, is too neat a description for the 1930s. Nazi audiences may have been bedazzled and intoxicated, but “passive” hardly describes the very aggressive attempts of the party to draft the faithful as active participants in their own spectacle. Here, too, a more nuanced analysis is needed, which, for example, extends the important issues of spectatorship and space raised by Koss and brings them to bear on Nazi spectacles such as the annual party rallies in Nuremberg, the traveling propaganda exhibitions, the Thingplatz theaters, or the art parades in Munich.1 While Koss does not venture into this historical territory, Modernism after Wagner provides a far-reaching and extensive analysis of theaters, artistic performances, and, in particular, cultural theorizing, which expands from Wagner’s original conceptualization of the Gesamtkunstwerk. She has done a great service by bringing this unrecognized development within modernism to light and, in the process, highlighted many structures and performances that were not well illuminated in the literature. As seen in her consideration of examples from the Nazi period, she challenges us to extend historically specific analysis of spectatorship and production to our own research into the relationship between viewers and works of art. Through such means, we may achieve a more nuanced and critical understanding of German culture and its impact on modern society.

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Notes
3. See in particular, Adorno, In Search of Wagner, 81–85.
5. See, for example, Stefan Schweizer, “Unserer Weltanschauung widrigen Ausdruck geben”: Nationalsozialistische Geschichtsbilder in historischen Festzügen (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2007). More broadly, Eric Michaud provides an introduction to the variety of ways that ritual and performance were central to National Socialist politics. While I find his analysis overly generalized, it is useful in this context. See Michaud, The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany, trans. Janet Lloyd (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2004).