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Phantasmagoria

The occultation of production by means of the outward appearance of the product—that is the formal law governing the works of Richard Wagner.¹ The product presents itself as self-producing: hence too the primacy of chromaticism and the leading note. In the absence of any glimpse of the underlying forces or conditions of its production, this outer appearance can lay claim to the status of being. Its perfection is at the same time the perfection of the illusion that the work of art is a reality *sui generis* that constitutes itself in the realm of the absolute without having to renounce its claim to image the world. Wagner's operas tend towards magic delusion, to what Schopenhauer calls 'The outside of the worthless commodity', in short towards phantasmagoria. This is the basis

¹ The term 'phantasmagoria' went into German from English, where it was first used in 1802 as the name invented for an exhibition of optical illusions produced chiefly by means of the magic lantern. In this chapter, its negative connotations stem from Marx's use of the word to describe commodity fetishism. Marx argues that the form of the commodity diverges from the commodity itself as a result of the concealment of the fact that the commodity is the product of human labour. 'The commodity-form, and the value relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this. It is nothing but a definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the phantasmagoric form of a relation between things.' (*Capital*, Vol. 1, Harmondsworth 1976, p. 165). Marx says further that these products of the human brain, like religious ideas, have 'a life of their own'—a life explored in depth by Walter Benjamin in his study of Baudelaire. Both Marx and Benjamin are relevant to Adorno's use of the term here. For a discussion of the concept, see Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno*, Macmillan 1978, pp. 30–1, 40–2, 47. Translator's note.

of the primacy of harmonic and instrumental sound in his music. The great phantasmagorias that recur again and again occupy a central position in his work, one where all movement has its origins. They are all defined in terms of the medium of sound: 'Wondrously, from afar, the dulcet tones resound', as it is put in the *Venusberg* scene in *Tannhäuser*, the phantasmagoria par excellence. Until its dissolution with Schreker, the Neo-German school remained loyal to the idea of 'distant sound', as the source of acoustic delusion; in it music pauses and is made spatial, the near and the far are deceptively merged, like the comforting Fata Morgana that brings the mirage of cities and caravans within reach and makes social models appear magically rooted in nature. The phantasmagorical nature of the *Venusberg* music can be analysed technically. Its characteristic sound is created by the device of diminution. A diminished *forte* predominates, the image of loudness from afar. It is executed by light wood winds. Chief among them is the piccolo flute, the most archaic of all orchestral instruments and one almost entirely unaffected by advances in instrumental technique. It is a musical fairyland, not unlike the one that the young Mendelssohn had created and which the older Wagner still cherished. The *Venusberg* appears to *Tannhäuser* diminished in size. It is reminiscent of the distorting mirror effects of the Tanagra theatre that can still be found in fairgrounds and suburban cabarets. *Tannhäuser* mirrors the bacchanal from the remoteness of heathen prehistory on the dream stage of his own body. The bass instruments that mark the harmonic progression and hence the temporal character of music are lacking; its miniature form stamps this music with the imprint of an age now irredeemably lost. But when, in the *Venusberg* part of the overture, the cellos and the basses enter at B, with the *ritardando*, what they mark is the moment when the dreamer becomes conscious of his own body and stretches in his sleep. The technique of diminishing the sound by eliminating the bass also confers the quality of phantasmagoria on a passage in *Lohengrin*, one which, less obviously than in *Tannhäuser*, determines the character of the whole work. It is Elsa's vision in which she conjures up the knight and thus launches the entire action. Her description of the knight resembles the picture of Oberon: the inward Lohengrin is a tiny fairy prince.

Arrayed in shining armour a knight was approaching,
 more virtuous and pure than any I had yet seen,
 a golden horn at his hip and leaning on his sword.
 Thus was this worthy knight sent to me from heaven. (Act I, sc. 2)

Such bass notes as occur are given once more to ethereal instruments such as the bass clarinets or the harp. The sound of the bass clarinets, which is particularly transparent, never descends below the E flat below the middle C. The horn referred to in the text is conveyed on a diminished scale in the music by a trumpet in *pianissimo*. The entrance of the basses at the words 'with courteous bearing' is equivalent to the one in the *Tannhäuser* passage and serves to relate the music, which had seemed to be floating spell-bound in the air, to the body of the dreaming woman.

'He gave me consolation'—a consolation that derives from the Fata Morgana. The consoling phantasmagoria is that of the Grail itself, and just as Elsa's vision contains motifs related to the Grail theme, so, too, the *Lohengrin* prelude, which is an allegorical representation of the Grail, contains the same technical features as Elsa's vision. Even the caesura in the harmonic progression at the beginning of the *Lohengrin* prelude becomes meaningful in terms of phantasmagoria. The absence of any real harmonic progression becomes the phantasmagorical emblem for time standing still. *Tannhäuser* says in the *Venusberg*:

The time I dwell here with thee, by days I cannot measure,
 seasons pass me, how, I scarcely know,
 —the radiant sun I see no longer,
 strange hath become the heaven's starry splendour—
 the sweet verdure of spring, the gentle token
 of earth's renewing life.²

The standing-still of time and the complete occultation of nature by means of phantasmagoria are thus brought together in the memory of a pristine age where time is guaranteed only by the stars. Time is the all-important element of production that phantasmagoria, the mirage of eternity, obscures. While days and

² Act I, sc. 2.

months run into each other and vanish as in a moment, phantasmagoria makes up for this by representing the moment as that which endures. This is the case with *The Flying Dutchman*. The opera was originally conceived as a One-Acter with its roots in Senta's ballad. Even as a complete work it could be reduced to the moment when the Dutchman steps beneath—one could almost say, steps out from—his picture, as Senta, who has conjured him up as Elsa had conjured up the knight, stands gazing into his eyes. The entire opera is nothing more than the attempt to unfold this moment in time and, in its feebler passages, particularly in the case of a dramatic prop like Erik, the traces of the effort this entailed are all too obvious. The later works have greater success in articulating the phantasmagoria as drama without falsifying it. In *Parsifal* the phantasmagoria is transferred into the realm of the sacred which, for all that, retains elements of magical enchantment. On the way to the Grail the following conversation takes place:

GURNEMANZ: Methinks I knew you aright:
 No way leads through the land to it,' [—to the Grail]
 'And no one could find it,
 Save the Grail lead him there.
 PARSIFAL: I hardly move,
 Yet far I seem to have come.
 GURNEMANZ: You see, my son, time
 changes here to space.³

The characters cast off their empirical being in time as soon as the ethereal kingdom of essences is entered. If, in his last years, Wagner flirted with the idea of metempsychosis, there is scant need to attribute this to the stimulus provided by Schopenhauer's Buddhist sympathies. Phantasmagoria had already enabled the pagan goddess Venus to migrate into the Christian era; she is reborn there just like Kundry, whom Klingsor conjures up as he lies sleeping in the blue light:

Herodias you were—and what besides?
 Gundryggia there, Kundry here! (Act II)

³ Act I, sc. 1.

Even the *Ring* gives evidence of a like intention when Brünnhilde's love for Siegfried turns out to be primordial in nature, referring to his image rather than his empirical self:

I fed your tender being
Before you were begotten;
Even before you were born
My shield protected you:
So long have I loved you Siegfried! (*Siegfried*, Act III, sc. 3)

The only reason why Wagner's characters can function as universal symbols is that they dissolve in the phantasmagoria like mist.

Brünnhilde too is detached from time, sleeping like Kundry, in the abruptly invoked phantasmagoria of the magic fire—the dominant phantasmagoria of the *Ring* and the one from which, musically, the image of the twilight of the Gods is ultimately derived. While the manner of its production is completely concealed in its string sections, harmonically, its progression is most ingeniously that of a state of rest. Not only do the constant harmonic changes produce new progressions; at the same time, systematic modulation through the changing surfaces of the different keys makes the music dance round the basic harmonies which remain constant at any given moment, like a fire that perpetually flickers without ever moving from the spot. As a metaphor for fire, the final 60 bars of *The Valkyrie* provide crucial insight into the nature of phantasmagoria. Wagner's successors have termed them magic, but this is really valid only in the inauthentic sense of theatrical illusion. They belong with the series of dramas whose elements the *Dutchman* first illustrates, and which continues with the storm in the ride of the Valkyries, where the allegory ceases to be mere atmospheric background and actually enters into the action. The final stage is reached in the Good Friday music in *Parsifal* where no more is said of the miracle than that 'forest and meadow glisten in the morning light'. As a natural phenomenon the light touches them, imbuing them with the expression of reconciliation proper to the dew and tear. But Wagner's phantasmagorias are normally worlds removed from such unassuming appearances. One is tempted to derive them from the magic formula of earlier Romantic music; from Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream* music as well as the spirit

passages in *Euryanthe*, the musical visions of *Oberon*, and especially, the chthonic second themes in Schubert. And the heritage of that Romanticism is undeniably present in the dualism of waking and dreaming music that governs the overture to *Tannhäuser*, to name but one example, where the Pilgrims' procession fades away only to conjure up the *Venusberg*, as if in a dream.

But the specific quality of the Wagnerian phantasmagoria can only be discovered once it parts company with the magic music of Romanticism. Paul Bekker has made the extremely important observation that what separates Wagner from earlier Romanticism is that his music no longer contains 'real spirits'. 'By locating the miraculous in the human soul, he endows it with truth in the artistic sense and intensifies the world of saga and fairy-tale into the illusion of the absolute reality of the unreal.'⁴ If we leave aside the dubious notion of 'truth in the artistic sense' and discard the category of interiorization as irrelevant to Wagner, the concept of illusion as the absolute reality of the unreal grows in importance. It sums up the unromantic side of the phantasmagoria: phantasmagoria as the point at which aesthetic appearance becomes a function of the character of the commodity. As a commodity it purveys illusions. The absolute reality of the unreal is nothing but the reality of a phenomenon that not only strives unceasingly to spirit away its own origins in human labour, but also, inseparably from this process and in thrall to exchange value, assiduously emphasizes its use value, stressing that this is its authentic reality, that it is 'no imitation'—and all this in order to further the cause of exchange value. In Wagner's day the consumer goods on display turned their phenomenal side seductively towards the mass of customers while diverting attention from their merely phenomenal character, from the fact that they were beyond reach. Similarly, in the phantasmagoria, Wagner's operas tend to become commodities. Their tableaux assume the character of wares on display. As it flares up into a vast magic conflagration, the little Romantic flame of *Hans Heiling*⁵ is

⁴ Bekker, p. 128.

⁵ An opera by Marschner to a libretto by Devrient that was originally written for Mendelssohn. *Hans Heiling* was a gnome king who unsuccessfully courts a human girl. *Translator's note.*

transformed into the prototype of future illuminated advertisements. Wotan's slogan—

Whoever fears the tip of my spear
Shall never pass through the fire! (*Valkyrie*, Act III, sc. 3)

—could easily be supplemented by copy in praise of a piece of equipment that would enable the cautious but resolute buyer to pass through the fire notwithstanding. The Wagnerian phantasmagorias are among the earliest 'wonders of technology' to gain admittance to great art, and Wotan is not just the allegory of the self-denying will to live, but also the reliable exponent of a natural world that has been perfectly reproduced and wholly mastered. The phantasmagorical style immortalizes the moment between the death of Romanticism and the birth of realism. Its miracles have become as impenetrable as the daily reality of a reified society and hence enter into the inheritance of the magic powers that the Romantics had assigned to the transcendental sphere. But in their magic they simultaneously function as commodities that satisfy the needs of the culture market. The *Venusberg*, which was perfected at the climax of *Tristan* and was recalled yet again as a pale echo in the flower-girl scene in *Parsifal*, arose out of the ordinary theatrical requirements of the ballet. These are the only scenes in which Wagner's work is directly affected by the conditions of commodity production; but it is precisely these scenes in which the music takes the greatest care to disguise its production in a passive, visionary presence. Where the dream is at its most exalted, the commodity is closest to hand. The phantasmagoria tends towards dream not merely as the deluded wish-fulfilment of would-be buyers, but chiefly to conceal the labour that has gone into making it. It mirrors subjectivity by confronting the subject with the product of its own labour, but in such a way that the labour that has gone into it is no longer identifiable. The dreamer encounters his own image impotently, as if it were a miracle, and is held fast in the inexorable circle of his own labour, as if it would last for ever. The object that he has forgotten he has made is dangled magically before his eyes, as if it were an absolutely objective manifestation.

Governed by the logic of dreams, the phantasmagoria succumbs

to its own particular dialectic. This is most fully developed in *Tannhäuser*. With his very first words the enchantment is seen to be a dream:

Too much, too much! Oh that I now might waken! (Act I, sc. 2)

The mainspring of the action is encapsulated in that 'Too much!'. Like the victims of oppression, Tannhäuser is not equal to his own demands for pleasure. Nothing less than the ideal of freedom itself is used to justify his turning towards asceticism:

And yet for earth, for earth I'm yearning,
In thy soft chains with shame I'm burning,
'Tis freedom I must win or die,
For freedom I can all defy. (Ibid.)

This is Tannhäuser's reply to Venus's Feuerbachian promise of bliss:

Thou shalt no more love's timid victim be
Rejoice with love's goddess in harmony! (Ibid.)

His wish is to take the image of pleasure away from the *Venusberg* and return with it to earth: his parting from Venus is one of the authentic political moments in Wagner's works. But, significantly, it becomes ambiguous. For fidelity to Venus is a commitment not to pleasure, but only to the phantasmagoria of pleasure. As he takes his leave, he vows:

To strife and glory, forth I go
Come life or death, come joy or woe! (Ibid.)

But, as it turns out, he keeps his other promise better:

While I have life my harp shall praise but thee alone. (Ibid.)

His betrayal is not that he returns to the knights, but that with his mind still fixed on his dream, he naively sings them the hymn in praise of Venus—the same hymn that exposes him for a second time to the reproaches of the world from which he had once before

fled into the phantasmagoria. But his outburst is a pretence: it leads from the *Venusberg* to the song contest, from dream to song, and the only surviving trace of what had originally led him to rebel is the beautiful song of the shepherd who celebrates the productivity of nature herself, beyond dream and captivity, as the work of the same power that had seemed mere slavery to the enchanted Tannhäuser. Venus is vindicated not by Tannhäuser's treacherous praise, but by the words,

Dame Holda stepp'd from the mountain's heart . . . (Act I, sc. 3)

The socially determined experience of pleasure as unfreedom transforms libido into sickness, and so we see how, with the cry of 'Too much!', Tannhäuser becomes conscious of his own enjoyment as a weakness while he is still in the kingdom of Venus. The experience of pleasure as sickness permeates Wagner's entire oeuvre. Those who refuse to resign themselves—Tannhäuser, Tristan, Amfortas—are all 'sick'. In the story of Tannhäuser's pilgrimage to Rome we hear, to the accompaniment of music of the greatest power, music whose force is surpassed in Wagner only in Tristan's curse:

Then I drew near,—my glances earthward bending,
I made my plaint, despair my bosom rending;
I told what mad desires my soul had darkened,
What longing by no atonement yet appeased. (Act III, sc. 3)

Sickness and desire become confounded in a point of view that imagines that the forces of life can only be maintained by the suppression of life. In the Wagnerian theatre desire sinks to the level of caricature: to that image of bloated pallor that seems the perfect complement to the castrati-like physique of the tenors. In a regression familiar from the process of bourgeois education and known to psychoanalysis as 'syphilophobia', sex and sexual disease become identical. It is no accident that one of Wagner's objections to vivisection was that the knowledge gleaned from such experimentation might lead to the 'curing of diseases that had been contracted through 'vice'. The conversion of pleasure into sickness is the denunciatory task of phantasmagoria. If two of the Wagnerian

phantasmagorias, the *Venusberg* and Klingsor's enchanted garden, are reminiscent of dreamland brothels, these are simultaneously calumniated as places that no one can leave unscathed. And without a doubt all of Wagner's profound ingenuity was required to reconcile us to the flower girls⁶ when he had condemned them from the outset as 'worthless sirens'.⁷ It has been observed that the flutes that are heard throughout the *Venusberg* seldom recur as solo instruments in Wagner's later work. They too are victims of the denigration of pleasure in the phantasmagoria, the same pleasure that it was their function to represent. Nietzsche was well aware of this: 'What do I suffer from when I suffer from the fate of music? From the fact that music has been stripped of its ability to transfigure and affirm the world, that it is decadent music and no longer the flute of Dionysus.'⁸ The Wagnerian Hute is that of the Pied Piper of Hamelin; but as such it is instantly tabooed.

With the anathematizing of the very pleasure it puts on display, the phantasmagoria is infected from the outset with the seeds of its own destruction. Inside the illusion dwells disillusionment. Within Wagner's work this phenomenon has its own highly recondite model: that of *Don Quixote*, a book that Wagner held in particular esteem. The phantasmagoria of *The Mastersingers*, in Act II, puts its hero into the role of the man who fights against windmills. Walther Stolzing who wishes to re-establish the old feudal immediacy, as opposed to the bourgeois division of labour enshrined in the guilds, becomes a potential figure of comedy in the face of a bourgeois reality in which the feudal world is transformed into myth before his very eyes. At the call of the night-watchman 'he claps his hand to his sword and stares wildly before him', while the bourgeois Eva instructs him:

Beloved, spare your anger!
It was only the night watchman's horn. (Act II, sc. 5)

The Beckmesser scene and the scene of the brawl are enacted within the confines of ordinary reality and only a Don Quixote like

⁶ See *Parsifal*, Act II.

⁷ Hildebrandt, p. 377.

⁸ Quoted by Hildebrandt, p. 440.

Walther could experience them as uncanny or nightmarish. However, the bourgeois world generates elements from within itself that objectively assume the very quality of illusion that is created subjectively in the dreamworld of Romantic protest. A pre-established harmony is created between the monad that seeks refuge from the guild-masters in the vanished world of castle, court and troubadour song, and the bourgeois world of the masters themselves which adopts the mask of a bygone age because it does not feel at home in the present. Since the guilds can no longer understand each other's point of view and so accuse each other of the dishonesty that characterizes them all, there is a momentary flare-up of prehistoric anarchy in the street brawl, which is merely a poor substitute for political action; and similarly in the song contest on the Wartburg which *The Mastersingers* had set out to parody. Bourgeois innovation and archaic regression meet in the phantasmagoria, so that objectively the knight's dream is vindicated. The spooky nature of the phantasmagoria in Act III is confirmed by Sachs, and thereby the ultimate ground of the dream is reached:

A goblin must have helped!
A glow-worm could not find its mate;
It set the trouble in motion. (Act III, sc. 1)

The dream of Act II is interpreted by Sachs as the product of repression; but glow-worms are Nature's own Chinese lanterns: phantasmagoria comes into being when, under the constraints of its own limitations, modernity's latest products come close to the archaic. Every step forwards is at the same time a step into the remote past. As bourgeois society advances it finds that it needs its own camouflage of illusion simply in order to subsist. For only when so disguised does it venture to look the new in the face. That formula, 'it sounded so old, and yet was so new', is the cypher of a social conjuncture. When the generous Pogner, who said himself that God had made him a wealthy man, wants to break out of the narrow confines of the petty bourgeoisie and prove that he is not avaricious and small-minded, the only means at his disposal is the farce of the mythic song contest. The impoverished imaginative

world of the bourgeois produces an image of itself in the phantasmagoric, and Wagner's work serves this image as it serves the bourgeois. As the blueprint of a pristine bourgeois world *The Mastersingers* is therefore his central work: 'Thus in the completion and production of *The Mastersingers*, which I at first desired in Nuremberg, I was governed by the idea of offering the German public an image of its own true nature, so botched for it before; and cherished the hope of winning from the nobler, stouter class of German burghers a hearty salutation in return.'⁹ However, this salutation is the expression of gratitude both for the dream and for its destruction, and the asceticism which Wagner takes upon himself for the sake of freedom finally turns against freedom. By appealing to the Virgin Mary he destroys the image of beauty that promises more than an ideal belonging to the past, and when the sacred spear hovers phantasmagorically above Parsifal's head, he incorporates it in a curse:

Let it destroy this fraudulent luxury
In rack and ruin! (Act II)

It is the curse of the rebel who in his youth had stormed the forgotten brothels.

⁹ Richard Wagner's *Prose Works*, Vol. 6, p. 114.