

Introduction: The *Gesamtkunstwerk* as a Synergy of the Arts

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Coined by Richard Wagner as a means to reshape musical theatre and recover the synthesis of the arts at the core of Greek tragedy, the concept of the total work of art played a prominent role in the Symbolist and Aestheticist practices, for instance, in the poetics of synesthesia cultivated by Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Parnassians, and Rimbaud. Similarly, avant-garde experiments blurred borders between the verbal and visual arts and introduced multimodal artistic forms using typography, colors, typefaces, and texture and emphasizing the material and visual aspects of language. The strategy of blending artistic languages, when welded to a political and existential function, sought to create a new relationship between art and life and to restore the public function of artistic creation as opposed to mass culture, technology and entertainment, yet, at the same time, dependent on them. Although Wagner used various technological innovations to implement his aesthetic program, he nonetheless defined the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as an organism standing in sharp contrast to the mechanized nature of industrial modernity and, thereby, revealing the Romantic roots of his aesthetics. A utopian impulse inherent in the conception of the total work of art as a vehicle of mass participation and social reorganization was used by certain totalitarian regimes to propagate ideas of national unity and homogeneity. Wagner's work deeply influenced various controversial forms of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the twentieth century – from the delirious aestheticism of Nazi and Stalinist propaganda, to Eisenstein's cinema, Brecht and Artaud's theatre, and Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph des Willens*, to Stravinsky and the *Ballets Russes*, Kandinsky and *Blaue Reiter*, and on to Walt Disney's theme parks and Andy Warhol's camp recycling of mass culture (see Wilson Smith, *The Total Work of Art*; Roberts, *The Total Work of Art in European Modernism*; Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*). As Wolfram Bergande observes, “[t]oday ... the whole of the industrial consumer culture of globalized capitalism with its magic world of marketing and advertisement, so abhorred and condemned by the early Wagner,” becomes the actual *Gesamtkunstwerk* (131). The *Gesamtkunstwerk* is thus a perfect example of how utopia can easily be transformed into dystopia, of how the avant-garde can be

absorbed by the mass media, and ultimately, how the sublime can easily become kitsch (see Colombi and Fusillo).

In his critique of Wagner, Theodor Adorno (*In Search of Wagner*, 1952) argued that, in the context of capitalist modernity, the artwork loses its autonomy, is ascribed an exchange value and becomes a commodity. Similarly to the commodity, the artwork conceals traces of its production and appears as a result of spontaneous performance. For Adorno, Wagner's music is an epitome of the modernist anesthetization of commodity. Matthew Wilson Smith pointed out that Wagner's conception of the "Total Work of Art" was related to technological aspects and functions of the theatre as conceived by Wagner, a radical reconceptualization of performance and tensions between the organic and the mechanic, the nature and the machine. Smith distinguishes between two forms of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the 20th century: the "iconic" *Gesamtkunstwerk* is "dependent upon the concealment of mechanical production so that the artwork as a whole may shine forth as a pseudo-organic synthesis and a totality," whereas the "crystalline" *Gesamtkunstwerk*, on the contrary, exposes mechanisms of its production and lays bare its artificial nature (Smith 79). An example of the latter, montage, which Brecht considered the main aesthetic principle of the modern art, serves as both a device of estrangement, a work of art displaying itself as an artefact, and as a means of achieving unity through juxtaposition and mixture. Smith discusses the *Gesamtkunstwerk*'s metamorphoses in the 20th century mass culture and refers to the characteristic combinations of entertainment and arts as a "total entertainment." In this way, the "total work of art," refashioned as a theoretical concept, is applied by Smith to different but typologically and functionally similar phenomena of modern and postmodern culture.

After Matthew Wilson Smith's study, the research on *Gesamtkunstwerk* was further developed in a collective book edited by Danielle Follett and Anke Finger, *The Aesthetics of the Total Artwork* (2011). The authors trace the genealogy of Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* to Romanticism, and especially to the brothers Schlegel's concept of "progressive universal poesy" (*Athnaeum*, fr. 116), which would contaminate philosophy and art, nature and society. Their definition of *Gesamtkunstwerk* involves three levels, aesthetic, political and metaphysical:

On a primary and material level, this merging may refer to the lack of boundaries between the different arts and genres, as in multimedia, operatic and synaesthetic creation, as well as to the blending of "poesy" with philosophy and criticism. This first, aesthetic level is necessarily intertwined with the next level, the political: the transgression of the borders between art and life or between art and society in a creative endeavor often conceived as collective and interactive, that invites creative "audience" participation, and often aims towards

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some kind of societal transformation and indeed is sometimes outright utopian and/or revolutionary. Finally it may involve an aspiration toward a more metaphysical sort of borderlessness, a merging of present, empirical reality with a non present, or not-yet present, envisioned totality, unity, or absolute, – an aspiration that is manifested, among other ways, in the often ritualistic nature of many total artworks projects. (4)

Naturally, the three levels cannot be present at the same time and in the same degree of consistency: the key word in this passage is “aspiration.” As the art curator Harald Szeemann argues, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* does not exist, as a matter of fact: it is a trend, a commitment, an obsession (“ein Hang, eine Bekenntnis, eine Obsession”: 16; cf. also Imhoff, Meininger and Steinhoff) which characterizes the entire Romantic and post-Romantic aesthetics. A related, crucial question is the concept of totality: Oliver Schefer clarifies that the German expression *Gesamtkunstwerk* designates the “gathering,” the collection of various, different parts, or a collective work, and not a harmonic unity, a coherent wholeness (the term *gesamt* is quite different from the term *total*); of course this feature will be especially prominent in modernism, in its aesthetics of the collage and bricolage, but even in Wagner’s more organic vision, totality and fusion of arts are always a utopia, a never ending process. If we think of the complex and long story of his theatre in Bayreuth, and of his theoretical writings of 1849 (*Art and Revolution*, and *The Artwork of the Future*), full of socialist and utopian thinking taken from Proudhon and Bakunin, Wagner’s idea of totality appears as basically still the Romantic (and sublime) search for infinity.

Follett’s and Finger’s conception of *Gesamtkunstwerk* as “an aesthetic aspiration toward borderlessness” implies different typologies (immersive vs self-ironical) and is applied to various artistic genres (polyglot poetry, avant-garde theater, music, visual arts, architecture, cinema), and various artists (Mallarmé, Schoenberg, Gropius, Moholy-Nagy, Klee, Gene Kelly). Openness, chance, fragmentation and contingency play an important role in this brilliant picture of the 20th century *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which, however, does not engage adequately with the contemporary transformations of the digital age, and with the dynamics of intermediality and transmediality.

The total work of art has been reconceived as a peculiar version of intermediality – a practice that subverts any essentialist vision of artistic languages, aims at a complex fusion of perceptions, and is amplified by new media and the syncretic and hybrid nature of cyberspace (Schröter; Colombi and Fusillo). In his *Four Models of Intermediality* (2012), Jens Schröter relates the “synthetic intermediality” (16) to the genealogical tradition of artistic synthesis of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* and the artistic practices of the 1960s (notably Happening and Fluxus). The

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synthetic intermediality is defined by Schröter as a process of “fusion of several media into a new medium – the intermedium – that is supposedly more than a sum of its parts” (16). One can again identify something similar to the utopian tension characteristic of the concept; the fusion between art and life that goes back to the Romantic revolution and that animates any avant-garde experience, or, in Schröter’s words, “a revolutionary and utopian attitude regarding the triumph over “monomedia” as a social liberation (or at least its preliminary stages) in terms of the return to the “holistic types of existence” (ibid.).

The slippery concept of totality thus becomes two-fold, at once subsuming the complex web of perceptions, energies, and stimulations that alight upon the spectator of performance art, video art, and installations, while simultaneously evoking a comprehensive, anthropological vision of human identity. A fusion of arts, media, and cultural practices becomes a distinctive feature of “the total work of art,” as it is conceptualized and discussed in contemporary critical discourses. Since time immemorial a poetic or dramatic work has been recited, written, printed, illustrated, accompanied with music or dance, adapted to painting, stage and film, i.e. existed as part of an artistic synthesis. Media share common (transmedial) features (such as themes and motifs, narrativity, descriptivity, and fictionality), quote and thematize other media, and various artefacts are remediated and transferred across media. Whereas new technologies (photography, film) made available new forms of reproduction and spread of images, the experiments of avant-garde art highlighted the material (graphic, acoustic, visual) aspects of language and the interplay of word and image. Further, digital technologies intensified the interplay and hybridization of old and new media forms and genres. The study of new inter-, trans- and multimedia forms reveals the undiscovered or unexploited potentialities of media as vehicles of aesthetic, cultural and social functions.

In our contemporary mediascape, the dissemination of media features along different platforms is so complex and articulated that even typical postmodern concepts such as hybridity and contamination are no longer able to capture this phenomenon. Narratives are conceived to be adapted and rewritten by various media: it is the “convergence culture,” as defined by Jenkins – a new category, very different from the simple juxtaposition, explored in Follet’s and Enger’s book. To analyze various new forms of media and narration, a “media-centered” (Grishakova and Ryan 3) or “media-conscious” narratology (Ryan and Thon) is needed. Ryan and Thon adopt the term “storyworld” coined by David Herman to describe the constantly expanding transmedial

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narrative worlds. Being a representation that transcends media, the term offers a new point of convergence and a new narratological potential, since we face now “serial storyworlds that span multiple installments and transmedial storyworlds that are deployed simultaneously across multiple media platforms, resulting in a media landscape in which creators and fans alike constantly expand, revise, and even parody them” (Ryan and Thon, 1). Platforms, sites, and spaces where storytelling takes place (narrative environments) foster different types of narration. Similarly, by offering affordances or putting restraints on storytelling, various media and communicative channels avail of differing narrative forms and features (Grishakova and Poulaki, 15-16).

“Transmedialization” is not a homogeneous process, however. It may refer to transfer and transmission of media-*neutral* features across media or, in other words, *demediation* (Baetens and Sánchez-Mesa, 5), or, alternatively, to proliferation and multiplication of narrative and other media-*sensitive* forms. Obviously, specific meanings of “intermediality” and “transmediality” depend on a specific understanding of “medium” (the fact that has often been ignored in ongoing discussions on these concepts) – as either 1) a material or 2) semiotic (communicative) platform or format, as 3) a cultural practice or 4) a system of aesthetic expression, or an artistic (semiotic) “language.” Respectively, the constituents of inter- or transmedial relation, interplay and transfer, will be different in all four cases. “Media” as material and communicative formats or as expressive aesthetic systems include micro- and meso-level features and entities (iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs; letters, music notation, graphic elements and figures, electronic signals, etc.). On the other hand, “media” as cultural practices (film, literature, photography, etc.) involve macro-level (social, cultural) constituents and frameworks.

In all its various forms and guises, intermediality manifests itself as both an impulse for integration and synthesis – and as a conflicting tendency towards disintegration, fragmentation or dissemination. In these new media configurations, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* can no longer be considered a Hegelian synthesis of arts, or a Romantic and Wagnerian fusion of languages: that is the reason why we prefer the term “synergy,” which implies an interplay and cooperation of different media, without any hierarchy and any organicist connotation, and, therefore, captures well the idea of open textuality of the digital age.

This book aims at revealing the vitality of modern and contemporary *Gesamtkunstwerk*, mapping its presence in various arts and media. The first area is literature: we start with a concept which is at the core of contemporary culture: the landscape, involving aesthetics, ecology, anthropology, agricultural economics, and several other fields. Travel literature and the plurimedial representation of Tahiti offer an interesting example of *Gesamtkunstwerk avant la lettre* (the first occurrence of our term being Trahndorff's *Aesthetics*, 1827), showing multiple intersection between art and life. Our second step is a Wagnerian and a profoundly intermedial writer, Marcel Proust, in his exploiting of a popular performative genre, the *féerie*, while the third step is a contemporary genre, the graphic novel, which shows the permeability of artistic boundaries and the cultural relevance of *Gesamtkunstwerk* in our age, through the key category of divas. The second area is the moving image: the starting point is the theory of cinema, which is often considered a technological realization of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*; its obsession with realism, and with a perfect reproduction of reality, coexists with a contrasting, self-reflexive drive: this tension assumes new paradoxical dynamics in the digital cinema, whose intensified aesthetics deals with impossible, sublime issues, and exploits the neuropsychological reactions of the audience. After this theoretical overview, the next step analyzes a special case of synergy of arts in cinema: the interaction between sound and image, and in particular between the non-original musical score and the literary source, with a special focus on the dynamics of reception. TV series are certainly a key product of contemporary imagery, and their new configurations in the so-called post-TV produce a form of total entertainment, which can evoke the aura of shared experiences and events, in a complex tension between authorial projects and transmedial dissemination. Finally, the impressive interplay between cinema, theatre, and painting which characterizes Peter Greenaway's *Tulse Luper Project* (a very self-reflexive *Gesamtkunstwerk*) offers the ideal passage to the section on visual arts: first photojournalism, with its web of allusions to canonical images and works of art, and then video-art, a highly idiosyncratic intermedial genre, a polar opposite to the narrative cinema. On the one hand, video-art shows how vital the performance of Wagner's opera can be nowadays, oscillating between a sublime, metaphysical and iconic *Gesamtkunstwerk* (Bill Viola's *Tristan und Isolde*) and a post-modern, fragmented and crystalline one (the Fura dels Bauls' *Ring der Nibelungen*). On the other hand, a famous video-artist like Matthew Barney expresses in his works (especially *Cremaster*), which are at the same time installations and cycles of movies, the powerful ambivalence of the

Gesamtkunstwerk as form, made at the same time of nostalgia for a lost, androgynic unity, and disintegration into the mass culture. Finally, the last section is about digital narrative, dealing with some key points: video-games and their immersive, totalizing, Wagnerian orchestration (the case study is *Dead Space*); a quite unique example of a book, *S.*, which is at the same time a mix of analogic and digital media, of highbrow fiction and lowbrow mass culture. As last step, the non-human turn, and the expansion of our understanding of inanimate dimensions through the non-linear totality of digital media (again a video-game as case study; *Everything*).

This is a multifold and multifarious interdisciplinary itinerary: the synergy of arts inevitably requires a synergy of methods, approaches, gazes; an eclectic and diffractive perspective. Certainly, our purpose is not to provide a new definition of such an elusive concept, like the *Gesamtkunstwerk*: it is rather to show and analyze its metamorphoses in different media and arts, from modernity to contemporary transmediality.

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