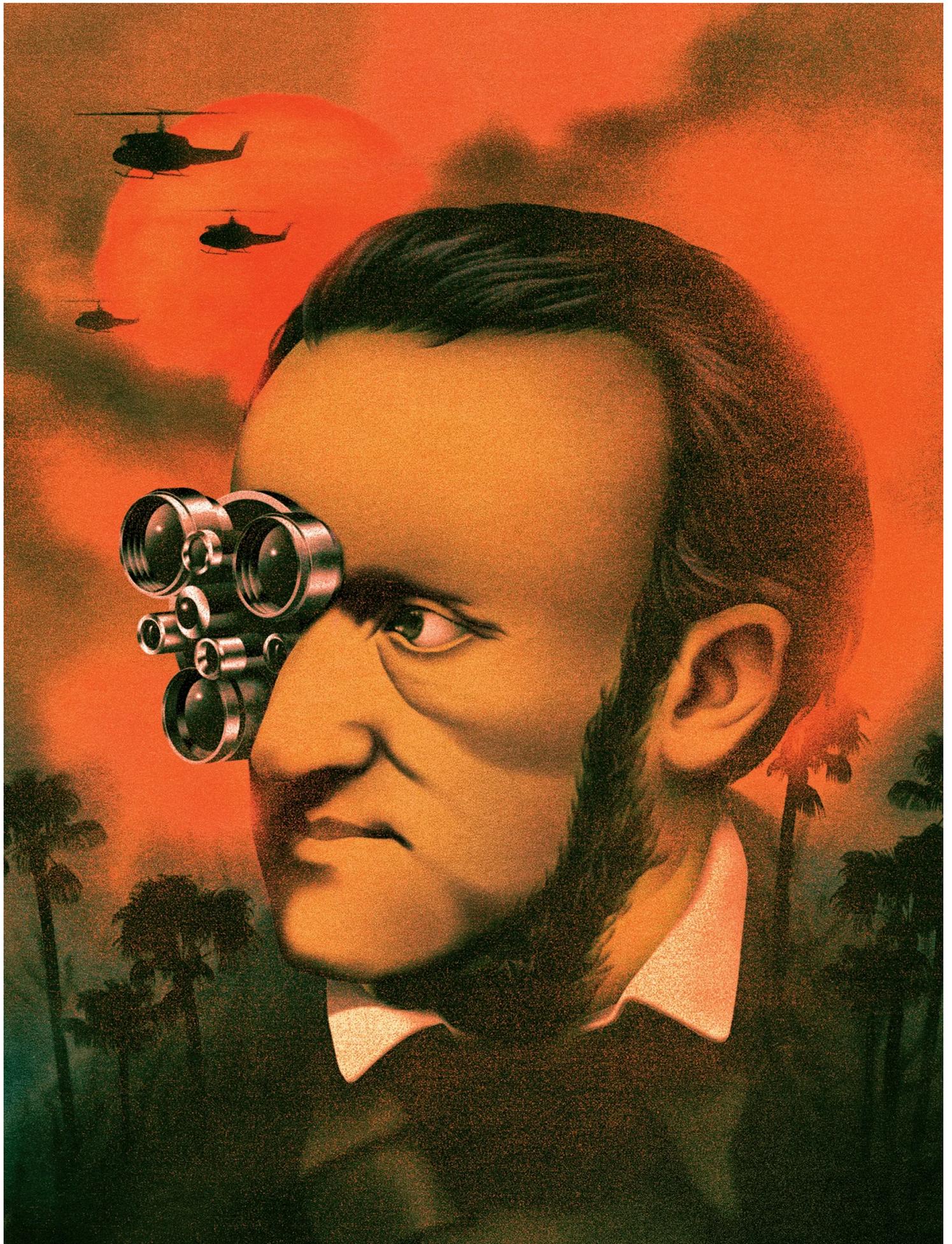


ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE
ARTS

HOW WAGNER SHAPED HOLLYWOOD

The composer has infiltrated every phase of movie history, from silent pictures to superhero blockbusters.

By Alex Ross
August 24, 2020



Film composers have honed Wagner's leitmotif system to a near-exact science. Illustration by Max Löffler

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In February, 1915, D. W. Griffith's silent film "The Birth of a Nation" opened at Clune's Auditorium, in Los Angeles. It was advertised as the most amazing motion picture ever made—the "eighth wonder of the world." Subsequent showings featured orchestras of up to fifty musicians playing a multi-composer score assembled by the movie-music pioneer Joseph Carl Breil. The film, set during and after the Civil War, is based on "The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan," a baldly racist novel by Thomas Dixon, Jr. In the movie's climactic scene, Klan members ride forth on horses to save a Southern town from what the film characterizes as oppressive African-American rule. The score for this sequence is dominated by Richard Wagner: a passage from his early opera "Rienzi," followed by a modified version of "The Ride of the Valkyries," from "Die Walküre." At the moment of triumph—"Disarming the blacks," the title card reads—Wagner gives way to "Dixie," the unofficial anthem of the South. Another card spells out what kind of nation Griffith wants to see born: "The former enemies of North and South are united again in common defence of their Aryan birthright."

"The Birth of a Nation" set the pace for a century of Wagnerian aggression on film. More than a thousand movies and TV shows feature

the composer on their soundtracks, yoking him to all manner of rampaging hordes, marching armies, swashbuckling heroes, and scheming evildoers. The “Ride” turns up in a particularly dizzying variety of scenarios. In “What’s Opera, Doc?,” Elmer Fudd chants “Kill da wabbit” while pursuing Bugs Bunny. In John Landis’s “The Blues Brothers” (1980), the “Ride” plays while buffoonish neo-Nazis chase the heroes down a highway and fly off an overpass. Most indelibly, Francis Ford Coppola’s “Apocalypse Now” (1979) upends Griffith’s racial duality, making white Americans the heralds of destruction: a helicopter squadron blares the “Ride” as it lays waste to a Vietnamese village.

Action sequences are only one facet of Wagner’s celluloid presence. A colorful—and often shady—array of Wagner enthusiasts have appeared onscreen, from the woebegone lovers of Robert Siodmak’s noir “Christmas Holiday” to the diabolical android of Ridley Scott’s “Alien: Covenant.” The composer himself is portrayed in more than a dozen movies, including Tony Palmer’s extravagant, eight-hour 1983 bio-pic, starring Richard Burton. But the Wagnerization of film goes deeper than that. Cinema’s integration of image, word, and music promised a fulfillment of the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk, or “total work of art,” which Wagner propagated at one stage of his career. His informal system of assigning leitmotifs to characters and themes became a defining trait of film scores. And Hollywood has drawn repeatedly from Wagner’s gallery of mythic archetypes: his gods, heroes, sorcerers, and questers.

“The Ride of the Valkyries” from the opera “Die Walküre,” has been featured in hundreds of films and television shows throughout the past century.

This contradictory swirl of associations mirrors the composer's fractured legacy: on the one hand, as a theatrical visionary who created works of Shakespearean breadth and depth; on the other, as a vicious anti-Semite who became a cultural totem for Hitler. Like operagoers across the generations, filmmakers have had trouble deciding whether Wagner is an inexhaustible store of wonder or a bottomless well of hate. But that uncertainty also mirrors the film industry's own ambiguous role as an incubator of heroic fantasies, which can serve a wide range of political ends. When Hollywood talks about Wagner, it is often—consciously or not—talking about itself.

When the lights went down at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus in 1876, for the première of the “Ring of the Nibelung” cycle, a kind of cinema came into being. The Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick, no friend of Wagner's, felt that he was looking at a “bright-colored picture in a dark frame,” as in a diorama display. The composer had intended as much, saying that the stage picture should have the “unapproachability of a dream vision.” The orchestra was hidden in a sunken pit known as the “mystic abyss”; its sound wafted through the room as if it were transmitted by a speaker system. The inaugural performances took place in a near-blackout. From the Festspielhaus, according to the media theorist Friedrich Kittler, “the darkness of all our cinemas derives.”

Bayreuth's technical achievements predicted cinematic sleights of hand. In the “Ring,” magic-lantern projections evoked the Valkyries on their flying steeds; in “Parsifal,” the Grail glowed with electric light. Clouds of steam generated by two locomotive boilers smoothed over changes of scene, in anticipation of the techniques of dissolve and fade-out. Wagner's music itself provides hypnotic continuity. When the action of “Das Rheingold” shifts from the Rhine to the area around Valhalla, the stage directions say, “Gradually the waves turn into clouds, which

resolve into a fine mist.” In the score, rushing river patterns give way to shimmering tremolos and then to a more rarefied texture of flutes and violins—what the scholar Peter Franklin describes as an “elaborate upward panning shot.” In the descent into Nibelheim, the realm of the dwarves, the sound of hammering anvils swells in a long crescendo before fading away. This is like a dolly shot: a camera moves in on the Nibelungs at work, then draws back.

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The convocation of the nine Valkyries in Act III of “Walküre” is Wagner’s finest action sequence—a virtuoso exercise in the massing of forces and the accumulation of energy. At the beginning, winds trill against quick upward swoops in the strings; horns, bassoons, and cellos establish a galloping rhythm, at medium volume; then comes a trickier wind-and-string texture, with staggered entries and downward-swooping patterns; and, finally, horns and bass trumpet lay out the main theme. Successive iterations of the material are bolstered with trumpets, more horns, and four stentorian trombones, but the players are initially held at a dynamic marking of forte, allowing for a further crescendo to fortissimo. When two tarrying Valkyries, Rossweisse and Grimgerde, finally join the group, the contrabass tuba enters fortissimo beneath the trombones, giving a sense of powerful reinforcements arriving.

Wagner figured in silent-film scores from the outset. The “Ride” was employed for battles and horses; the “Magic Fire” music, during which the god Wotan encloses the Valkyrie Brünnhilde in a ring of fire, accompanied flickering flames. The “Flying Dutchman” overture served for seas and storms, “Tannhäuser” and “Parsifal” for religious scenes, and, of course, the “Lohengrin” Bridal Chorus for weddings.



“Honey, if the government won’t contact-trace Kimberley’s pool parties, I will simply do it myself.”

Cartoon by Maddie Dai



[Open cartoon gallery](#)

Given those habits, the use of the “Ride” in “The Birth of a Nation” was hardly unusual, but modern viewers have to wonder about the agenda behind the selection. When Griffith read Dixon’s novel, the ride of the

Klan especially seized his attention: “I could just see these Klansmen in a movie with their white robes flying.” The idea of Wagnerian accompaniment may have occurred to him early. According to the film’s star Lillian Gish, Breil and Griffith squabbled over the “Ride”; Griffith wanted to make adjustments to the music, but Breil said, “You can’t tamper with Wagner!” Griffith apparently won the argument. As the Klan hordes assemble—a famous shot shows scores of white-clad horses and riders traversing an open field—we hear a bit of the “Rienzi” overture. Then, as the riders undertake their rescue missions, the rearranged “Ride” pipes up. The galvanizing effect of this sequence on audiences of the day can be gauged by a report from a screening in Atlanta: “Your spine prickles and in the gallery the yells cut loose with every bugle note.” “The Birth of a Nation” is credited with bringing about a revival of the Klan, which had terrorized African-Americans after the Civil War.

Matthew Wilson Smith, in [a penetrating essay](#) on the film, concludes, “Griffith’s use of Wagner married some of the most reactionary energies of Bayreuth to groundbreaking techniques of filmic integration.” This is a reasonable assessment, although it bears mentioning that W. E. B. Du Bois, in his 1903 story “Of the Coming of John,” had used Wagner in a diametrically opposed way—as an expression of the inner yearning of a Black man who will die at the hands of a horse-riding white mob: “A deep longing swelled in all his heart to rise with that clear music out of the dirt and dust of that low life that held him prisoned and befouled.” Du Bois might have pointed out that Dixon and Griffith’s racism had no need for a German antecedent. If anything, the influence moved in the opposite direction: the Nazis admired and emulated American laws that curtailed the rights of African-Americans and other minorities.

The insertion of “The Ride of the Valkyries” into “The Birth of a Nation” tells us more about the cultural arrogance of American white supremacy than it does about Wagner’s nefarious impact.

In the sound era, the lush production values of golden-age Hollywood called for a sonic carpet extending from the opening titles to the final frame. Max Steiner, who scored some three hundred films between 1930 and 1965, honed the leitmotif system to a near-exact science. In “Casablanca,” “As Time Goes By” is famously sung by Dooley Wilson, but the melody also courses through Steiner’s score, undergoing expressive permutations. The composer Erich Wolfgang Korngold, the doyen of the swashbuckler picture, subjected leitmotifs to sophisticated development, variation, combination, and compression.

Wagner’s own music rumbled through action-adventure pictures (“The Lion Man”), historical epics (“The Viking”), romantic dramas (“The Right to Live”), gangster movies (“City Streets”), science fiction (“Flash Gordon”), Westerns (“Red River Valley”), and horror (Tod Browning’s “Dracula” and “Freaks”). Frank Borzage’s 1932 adaptation of “A Farewell to Arms” ends with Gary Cooper holding the lifeless body of Helen Hayes and exclaiming “Peace!” while “Tristan und Isolde” swells. Less sentimental is Borzage’s nightmarish montage of war scenes, scored to a mishmash of the “Ride” and other “Ring” motifs. From “The Birth of a Nation” onward, the “Ride” has almost always signified male derring-do, ignoring the femaleness of the Valkyries. One exception can be found in Josef von Sternberg’s 1934 “The Scarlet Empress,” about the rise of Catherine the Great: a Valkyrie fantasia accompanies Marlene Dietrich’s climactic horse charge into the palace of the tsar.

Comedians treated Wagner more irreverently. In the Marx Brothers’ “At the Circus” (1939), Margaret Dumont hires a snooty French conductor and his orchestra to perform at her estate, in Newport, Rhode Island.

Groucho and company—circus performers who wish to eliminate this rival group so that they can collect a paycheck from Dumont—direct the Frenchmen to a barge at the water's edge, then cut them loose. In the closing shot, the musicians play the “Lohengrin” Act III prelude while floating obliviously out to sea—a fine metaphor for the predicament of classical music in a pop-culture age.

The onset of the Second World War inevitably darkened Wagner's Hollywood image. For most of the thirties, the studios shied away from anti-Nazi messages, unwilling to offend German sensibilities. Warner Bros.' 1939 thriller “Confessions of a Nazi Spy,” with a score by Max Steiner, marked a turning point. When the film was rereleased, in 1940, with a documentary-like epilogue about recent German victories, the score was augmented with distorted allusions to the “Ride” and other “Ring” themes. During the same period, the cliché of the Wagner-loving Nazi took hold. In the 1940 drama “Escape,” a Nazi general (Conrad Veidt) has an affair with a widowed aristocrat (Norma Shearer) who is becoming conscious of the evil of the regime. When Veidt plays Wagner at the piano, Shearer says, “Oh, do play something else.” He says, “I thought ‘Tristan’ was our favorite opera.” She responds, “Perhaps I've heard it too often.”

Shortly after America entered the war, Frank Capra set to work making propaganda films that explained the country's mission to young recruits. As part of his research, Capra watched Leni Riefenstahl's “Triumph of the Will” (1935), and his first reaction was to tell himself, “We can't win this war.” In his memoir, he wrote of Riefenstahl's film, “Though panoplied with all the pomp and mystical trappings of a Wagnerian opera, its message was as blunt and brutal as a lead pipe: We, the Herrenvolk, are the new invincible gods!” (“Triumph of the Will” contains a ninety-second excerpt from “Die Meistersinger,” in a

sequence devoted to old Nuremberg.) On reflection, Capra decided that Nazi sound and fury could be turned against itself. The result was “Why We Fight,” a series of seven films that mixed sober history lessons with taunting commentaries on Fascist and Imperial Japanese poses. A team of skilled Hollywood composers, including Dimitri Tiomkin, Alfred Newman, and David Raksin, worked on the project.

“Prelude to War,” the first episode of “Why We Fight,” quickly delivers a musical answer to the series’ guiding question. As the narrator speaks of a battle between a free world and an enslaved one, the orchestra quotes Siegfried’s principal theme from the “Ring,” in muted, menacing form. The theme recurs dozens of times in the series, in dissonant variations. These creative manglings give the enemy a readily identifiable sonic tag and also supply a forward-thrusting energy. Even as Wagner is being painted black, he lends a heroic dimension to the proceedings. From time to time, we hear patriotic American tunes orchestrated in a Wagnerian mode. The U.S. side, too, had its fantasies of invincibility. “Why We Fight” opens with a statement that by war’s end the American flag should be “recognized throughout the world as a *symbol of freedom* on the one hand, of *overwhelming power* on the other.”

Hollywood was too addicted to Wagner’s sonic zest to demonize him entirely, as the case of cartoons shows. The music historian Daniel Ira Goldmark counts more than a hundred Warner Bros. cartoons with Wagner on their soundtracks. During the war, when cartoons were deployed for propaganda purposes, some of those references took on an anti-Nazi charge. In “Herr Meets Hare,” Bugs Bunny finds himself in the Black Forest, where he confronts a Hermann Göring type. Carl Stalling’s score dresses Göring in a frantic cluster of Wagner themes.

Yet citations in “Hare We Go” and “Captain Hareblower” bear no trace of Nazi evil. In one anti-Japanese cartoon—“Bugs Bunny Nips the Nips”—Wagner is actually converted to the Allied cause. Stalling’s score uses the Siegfried motif to signify the prospect of Bugs’s rescue by an American warship—a rescue that he ultimately refuses, in favor of the company of a sexy female rabbit. The film-music historian Neil Lerner has noted the uncomfortable alignment of an Americanized Wagner with a gratuitously racist depiction of Japanese people.

When Charlie Chaplin watched “Triumph of the Will,” his immediate impulse, according to Luis Buñuel, was to burst into laughter. The orator onscreen seemed to be an insane variation on Chaplin’s Little Tramp persona, down to the toothbrush mustache. The experience unnerved him, though, as it did many leftist filmmakers who witnessed the technical virtuosity of German cinema being applied to sinister ends. In 1940, Chaplin released “The Great Dictator,” a lavish satire of Hitler’s histrionics. Inevitably, Wagner is on the soundtrack, yet Chaplin makes the surprising choice to detach the music from the Nazi context. The ethereal prelude to “Lohengrin,” suggesting the sacred power of the Holy Grail, is heard twice in the film, serving first to puncture Nazi iconography and then to amplify a message of peace.

Hitler is caricatured as Adenoid Hynkel, a nincompoop of a Führer who jabbars mock-German and is more than a little fey. He prances about, tinkles on a piano with candelabra all around, and, at one point, holds a flower in an Oscar Wilde-like pose. When his propaganda minister, Herr Garbitsch, raises the idea of killing all the Jews and making Hynkel “dictator of the world,” Hynkel becomes so excited that he scurries up the drapes and exclaims melodramatically, “Leave me, I want to be alone!” As the high, thin, shining music of the “Lohengrin” prelude begins, Hynkel slides down the drapes and prowls across the

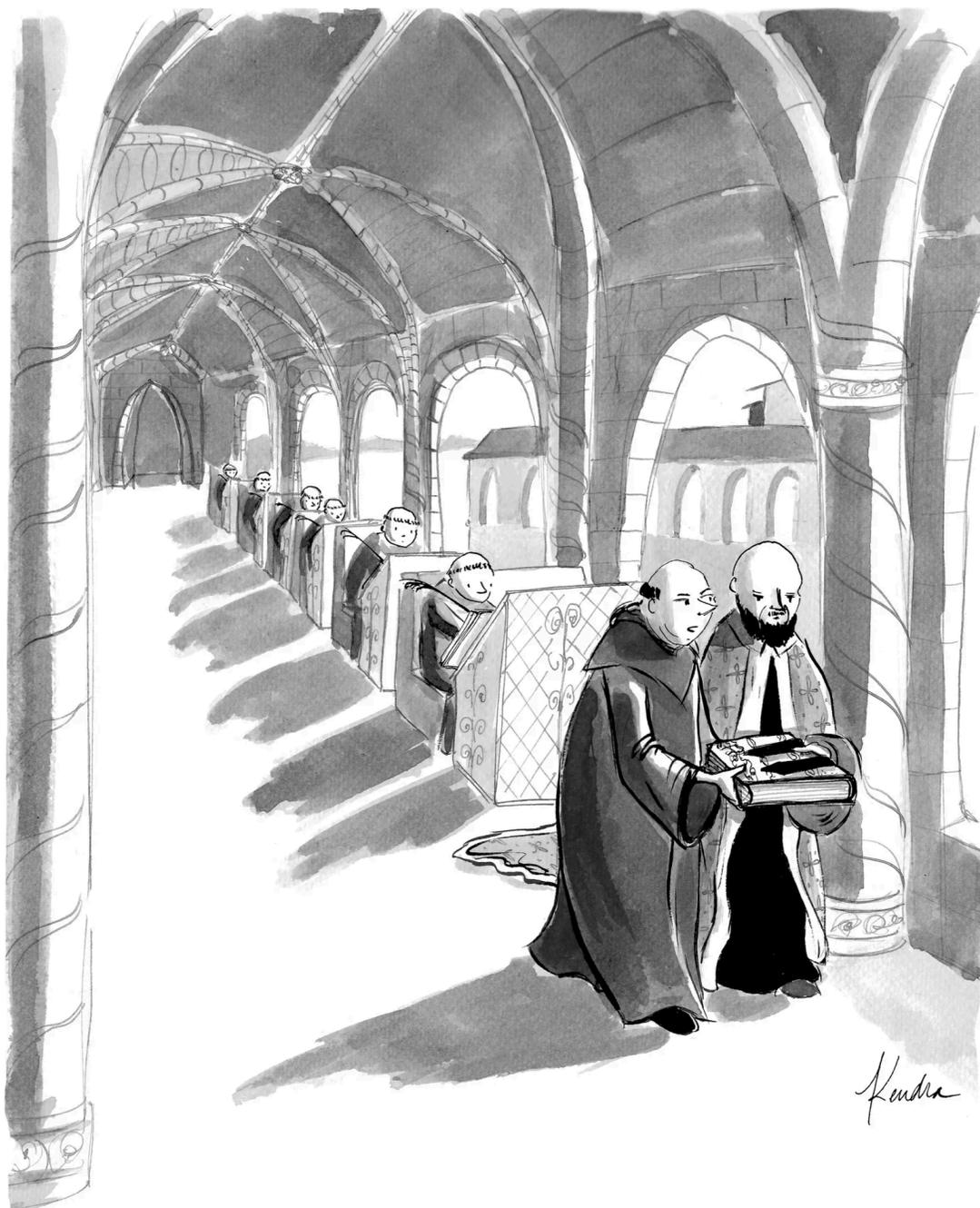
floor to an enormous globe. “Emperor of the world,” he murmurs. He plucks the globe from its stand and spins it on a finger, laughing hysterically. A singular ballet ensues, as Chaplin bounces the ball from hand to hand, off his head, off his foot, and, twice, off his butt.

A parallel story arc shows the travails of a Jewish barber, identical in appearance to Hynkel. The oppressor and the oppressed switch roles: Hynkel is mistaken for the barber and sent to a concentration camp; the barber finds himself addressing a Hynkel rally, his closing speech a stirring critique of capitalist ruthlessness and a plea for brotherhood. After the crowd cheers, he sends a message to his girlfriend, Hannah, who is in exile. The music of “Lohengrin” returns as the barber reaches his peroration: “We are coming into a new world, a kindlier world, where men will rise above their hate, their greed and brutality. Look up, Hannah!” Hannah—in a field, listening to the barber on a radio—gazes in wonder. “Listen!” she exclaims, her eyes shining. “Lohengrin” swells all around her, as if playing from on high.

As the film scholar Lutz Koepnick writes, Chaplin uses Wagner to both “condemn the abuse of fantasy in fascism *and* warrant the utopian possibilities of industrial culture.” For some viewers, Chaplin’s idealism may seem wincingly naïve, just as his lampoon of Hitler may seem to trivialize Nazi horrors. Yet naïveté is at the core of Chaplin’s enduring appeal. Sergei Eisenstein, who made his own cult of Wagner, once called Chaplin “the true and touching ‘Holy Innocent,’ whose image the aging Wagner dreamed of.”

In the postwar era, the motif of Wagnerian evil ran rampant. In movies on war and spy themes, a liking for the composer is nearly as

reliable an indicator of Nazi affiliations as a swastika armband. In “The Boys from Brazil” (1978), Josef Mengele savors the “Siegfried Idyll” while supervising a scheme involving Hitler clones. Conversely, when the Franz von Papen character in “5 Fingers” (1952) says, “Wagner makes me ill,” the audience learns that he is not wholly evil. By metaphorical extension, the composer became a favorite musical selection for sadists and cold-blooded killers. In Jules Dassin’s noir “Brute Force” (1947), a prison guard who follows a pseudo-Nietzschean philosophy of “the weak must die” puts on a recording of the “Tannhäuser” overture as he prepares to torture a prisoner in his office.



“The monks are pretty cheap—the ink is where they get you.”
Cartoon by Kendra Allenby



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At the same time, Wagner could still serve older, more innocent symbolic functions. In William Dieterle’s “Magic Fire,” a fairly ridiculous 1955 bio-pic, Alan Badel portrays Wagner as a manic

Romantic in the grip of a controlling muse, spouting dialogue like “Tristan is *dying*—and you ask me how I am!” The composer beloved by cinematic torturers still led countless brides down the aisle, including Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell in “Gentlemen Prefer Blondes,” in which the Bridal Chorus from “Lohengrin” morphs into a reprise of “Two Little Girls from Little Rock” and “Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friend.”

The Central European émigré directors who were a potent influence in wartime and postwar Hollywood knew Wagner better than their American counterparts did, and they often used him as a marker of a damaged, poisoned past. In Billy Wilder’s “A Foreign Affair” (1948), set in occupied Berlin, American authorities investigate the Nazi past of a cabaret singer, played by Marlene Dietrich. They watch a newsreel of a gala performance of “Lohengrin,” at which Hitler is seen kissing the singer’s hand. “They certainly fiddled big while Berlin burned,” one observer snaps. “‘Lohengrin,’ you know, swan song,” another says.

The otherworldly bliss of “Tristan” plays a nobler but still darksome role in Jean Negulesco’s “Humoresque” (1946), a melodrama with a streak of noir. A dissipated socialite (Joan Crawford) falls in love with a rising violin soloist (John Garfield) who comes from a lower-class immigrant background. His vacillating responses to her advances send her into terminal despair, and she commits suicide by walking into the ocean. As she goes to her end, a radio broadcasts the violinist performing an arrangement of Isolde’s final monologue, the so-called Liebestod. The female lead has all the characteristics of the femme fatale, and her death is necessary for the maturation of the male protagonist, as the musicologist Marcia Citron has argued. Nonetheless, the disconcerting

intensity of Crawford's performance suffuses the film—restoring the dire, desperate Romantic aura that tends to fall away when Wagner goes to Hollywood.

For decades before Coppola's "Apocalypse Now," aerial warfare had been stirring thoughts of the Valkyries and their "air-horses," as Wagner called them. In Proust's "Time Regained," the Germanophile dandy Robert de Saint-Loup watches a zeppelin raid on Paris, circa 1916, and exclaims, "The music of the sirens was a 'Ride of the Valkyries!'" During the Second World War, an Arturo Toscanini performance of the "Ride" was associated with B-17 bombers in flight. The Nazis employed the same conceit: in a German newsreel, the "Ride" underscores a segment documenting a paratrooper assault on Crete.

Given that history, the "Ride" seems a foreordained choice for the helicopter operation in "Apocalypse Now." The idea of an air-cavalry unit blasting Wagner originated in the mind of the film's screenwriter, John Milius, who had heard that American forces in Vietnam were using music to galvanize troops and demoralize the enemy. Years later, he recalled, "They didn't play Wagner, they played rock 'n' roll and stuff like that. But I really thought the Wagner would work." Nothing if not ambitious, Milius's script gestures toward other exalted cultural artifacts. The chief literary point of reference is Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness." Willard, a Special Ops soldier, is sent on a mission to track down and kill a renegade officer named Colonel Kurtz, who, like Conrad's villain, has gone mad in the jungle and created a private empire.

Milius, a Jewish American with conservative leanings, did not intend an antiwar message. He began work on "Apocalypse" in the wake of the Arab-Israeli War of 1967, during which he had excitedly followed the

Israeli advance. He told the writer Lawrence Weschler, “Tracking that victory day by day, I was throbbing to the Doors—‘Light My Fire’ was the big hit that summer—and of course to Wagner.” Although some scholars have linked the helicopter scene to the Ku Klux Klan assault in “The Birth of a Nation” (the air-cav men have the bearing of horsemen), Milius was apparently unaware of Griffith’s use of the “Ride.”

At the outset of the sequence, Lieutenant Colonel Kilgore, the leader of the air-cav unit, explains his methodology to Willard’s men, throwing in a racist slur:

KILGORE: We’ll come in low out of the rising sun, and about a mile out we’ll put on the music.

LANCE: Music?

KILGORE: Yeah, I use Wagner—scares the hell out of the slopes. My boys love it.

The music kicks in, and shots timed to Wagner’s downbeats show speakers affixed to the aircraft. That strict rhythm is broken when the camera focusses on the two Black members of Willard’s company, played by Albert Hall and Laurence Fishburne. Their disbelieving faces highlight the subtext of the scene: white Americans are assaulting a nonwhite village to the music of a racist composer. Another irony is that this pageant of masculine savagery is driven by music that once had feminist connotations.

The version of the “Ride” that we hear in “Apocalypse” comes from the Decca label’s celebrated recording of the “Ring,” with Georg Solti

conducting. Coppola took about five minutes of music from the first hundred and forty-three bars of Act III of “Walküre,” making a few cuts and telescoping some sections. The sound designer and editor Walter Murch played a crucial role in creating a seamless flow of sound and image.

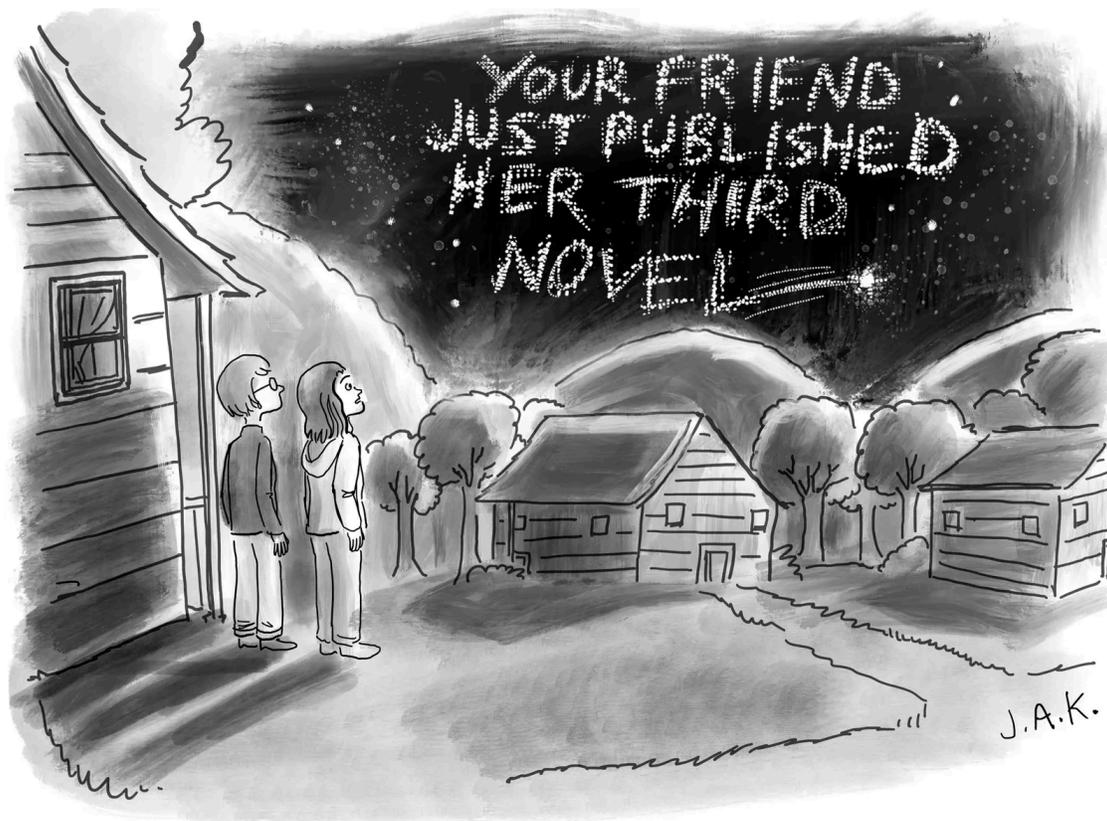
The entrance of the main Valkyrie motif coincides with a wide shot of fourteen helicopters in flight. The soldiers ready their guns; Kilgore nods to the music. Another wide shot coincides with a gleaming B-major chord, after which the trombones take over the theme. Then comes a brilliant stroke: one bar before the trombones complete their phrase, the camera cuts to the Vietnamese village that is about to be struck. The adrenaline rush of men, machines, and music abruptly ceases as the camera lands in a quiet courtyard outside a school. Milius had specified in his screenplay an armed Vietcong stronghold, but Coppola paints a more idyllic scene, with children singing as they come out to play. A female Vietcong soldier suddenly appears, ordering an evacuation, and Wagner seeps in from a distance. The trombones finish their statement, and the Valkyries enter with their “Hojotoho!” The first missile is fired when the Valkyrie Helmwig reaches a sustained high B. Houses explode, and villagers are mowed down.

The operatic bravado falters amid the chaos of battle. Copters land; soldiers jump out. A young Black soldier is badly wounded when a comrade fires into a house and sets off an explosion. Tellingly, Wagner drops out at the moment the soldier falls. The sight of blood gushing from his leg shuts down the Valkyrie fantasy.

An indictment of American hubris is intended, yet the visceral impact of the filmmaking saps the movie’s capacity for critique. “Apocalypse” soon became a military fetish object, its Wagner scene influencing real-life behavior. A Black Hawk helicopter blared the “Ride” at the time of

the American invasion of Grenada, in 1983. Eight years later, a PsyOps unit played it ahead of the Battle of 73 Easting, in the Iraqi desert, during the first Gulf War. Speakers mounted on Humvees boomed out the “Ride” at Fallujah in 2004, during the second American war in Iraq.

In a Wagnerian *mise en abyme*, Sam Mendes’s film “Jarhead” (2005), based on Anthony Swofford’s memoir of military service during the first Gulf War, has a scene in which young marines thrill to a screening of “Apocalypse,” singing along with the “Ride” and pumping their fists in the air. Murch also edited “Jarhead,” and found himself in the peculiar position of showing the defeat of his and Coppola’s complex, multivalent scheme. The cut to the quiet village fails to have a sobering effect on the marines. When the Wagner resumes, one of them shouts, “Shoot that motherfucker!”



“It really makes you feel insignificant.”
Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein



[Open cartoon gallery](#) 

It is an astonishing cultural transformation: the “Ride” remade into an anthem of American supremacy. This displacement is of a piece with other troubling historical continuities of the postwar era: Nazi scientists migrating to America, Gestapo-style torture techniques resurfacing in Iraq, the cult of the sculpted body perpetuating Riefenstahl’s Aryan ideal. Eric Rentschler, in his book *“The Ministry of Illusion”* (1996), writes, “Contemporary American media culture has more than a superficial or vicarious relationship with the Third Reich’s society of spectacle.” Nothing in film history demonstrates that idea as vividly as “Apocalypse Now,” in which the German will to power gives way to God-bless-America imperialism.

Wagner’s influence is nowhere more enduring than in the realm of myth and legend. He manipulated Teutonic and Arthurian myths with consummate dexterity, understanding how they could resonate allegorically for modern audiences. “The incomparable thing about myth is that it is always true, and its content, through utmost compression, is inexhaustible,” he wrote. Wagner’s master array of borrowed, modified, and reinvented archetypes—the wanderer on a ghost ship, the savior with no name, the cursed ring, the sword in the tree, the sword reforged, the novice with unsuspected powers—lurks behind the blockbuster fantasy and superhero narratives that hold sway in contemporary Hollywood.

It is probably no coincidence that the superhero emerged in the nineteen-thirties, at a time when totalitarian regimes were overrunning Europe and Russia. The objectification of the young male body in Communist and Fascist propaganda probably influenced the trend: liberal-democratic societies, derided as weak, required warriors of power. The chiselled and buxom torsos of comic-book characters seem to be descended from the fin-de-siècle sketches of Wagner heroes and heroines by such illustrators as Arthur Rackham and Franz Stassen. The philosopher Slavoj Žižek has observed that the motif of concealed identity, a staple of comics and superhero movies, recalls Lohengrin, the knight with no name. Like Lohengrin's ill-fated bride, Elsa, girlfriends of Superman and Batman jeopardize the relationship when they ask too many questions.

Modern fantasy began with the release of George Lucas's "Star Wars," in 1977, which paid homage to the "Flash Gordon" and "Buck Rogers" serials of the thirties. The project drew Wagner comparisons almost from the outset. Susan Sontag had coined the term "pop-Wagnerian" to describe Nazi-era German films; Pauline Kael applied it to the second "Star Wars" installment, "The Empire Strikes Back." As in the serials, the sci-fi future of "Star Wars" is given neo-medieval, chivalric features. Lightsabres stand in for swords; Darth Vader is a Black Knight with a hidden identity. The critic Mike Ashman has noted various similarities to the "Ring." When the hero Luke Skywalker seizes his father's lightsabre, he is like Siegfried mending Siegmund's sword. And when Yoda, the wizened Jedi master, trains Luke in a swampy forest the scenario recalls the dwarf Mime's relationship with Siegfried, except that Yoda is on the side of good.

A more unsettling echo comes at the end, when Luke, Han Solo, and Chewbacca, having led the Rebellion to victory, are honored at a temple ceremony. Fanfares give way to a vigorous march version of John Williams's "Force" theme, which recalls Wagner's Siegfried motif. Lucas chooses a curious visual design for this scene. The camera watches from behind as the trio proceeds down a long stone walkway, with troops arranged in rigid rows, toward a dais behind which imposing pillars rise. The shot has two clear cinematic predecessors: the hero Siegfried's entrance into Gunther's court in Fritz Lang's silent epic "Die Nibelungen," and Hitler's march through the Nuremberg parade grounds in "Triumph of the Will." Although Lucas has denied that Riefenstahl influenced the scene, the likeness seems too close to be accidental. To be sure, his heroes break out in goofy grins, undercutting the solemnity of the tableau. But this aw-shucks appropriation of Fascist style makes the allusion no less strange or disturbing. As in "Apocalypse Now," but without critical distance, American-accented heroes absorb the iconography of an evil empire.

Fantasy films flooded the global marketplace at the beginning of the twenty-first century, with Wagnerisms strewn throughout them. Peter Jackson's "Lord of the Rings" trilogy, in line with J. R. R. Tolkien's novels, is inconceivable without the central conceit of the "Ring"—the all-powerful trinket that corrupts all who covet it. Lana and Lilly Wachowski's "Matrix" trilogy (1999-2003) brushes against "Parsifal," Wagner's mystical final opera, with its themes of initiation and enlightenment. In the first film, the young computer hacker Neo is drawn into an underground movement led by a man named Morpheus, who divulges that the everyday world is an illusion manufactured by a master race of machines. Morpheus's summary of the Matrix—"It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth"—invokes the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, who had an

immense influence on Wagner's later work. As Žižek points out, Morpheus's concept of the "desert of the real" is equivalent to the wasteland that lies behind Klingsor's seductive magic garden in "Parsifal." Morpheus is like the sage old Gurnemanz in the opera, leading an adept into secret knowledge. The science-fiction commentator Andrew May pinpoints the apparent clincher: at the climax of the film, Neo stops bullets in midair, reenacting Parsifal's feat of arresting Klingsor's spear mid-flight.

Democratic mass culture prefers to consider itself exempt from the forces that made Wagner vulnerable to exploitation by the Nazis. Fantasy artists like to believe that they are creating allegories of liberal good versus reactionary evil. A scene in the 2011 Marvel Studios film "Captain America: The First Avenger" explicitly inserts Wagner into that binary opposition. Johann Schmidt, a Nazi operative turned global terrorist known as the Red Skull, is working away in his mountain laboratory, with bits of the "Ring" playing on a Victrola. As at Hitler's Bavarian retreat, alpine peaks are visible through massive windows. Captain America, a scrawny kid who has been scientifically beefed up to superhero proportions, hunts down the Red Skull, laying waste to his laboratory. Wagner is a monster from the European past who must be ejected, but only after the sound designers have obtained a thrill or two from the roar of the "Ring" orchestra—much the same trick that Capra pulled in "Why We Fight."

Any myth is vulnerable to ideological simplification and distortion, as the political scientist Herfried Münkler has argued. Superhero narratives in which unheralded individuals acquire exceptional abilities can speak for marginalized communities, but they may also encourage

the sort of grandiose self-projection that the Wagner operas inculcated in the hordes of fin-de-siècle youth who daydreamed about fulfilling Lohengrin, Siegfried, or Brünnhilde roles. In “The Matrix,” the newly enlightened Neo is given a choice between two pills: a red pill, which will make his knowledge permanent, and a blue pill, which will restore the veil of illusion. Members of the American far right, who have a few Wagnerites in their midst, have made that fable their own: their “red-pill moment” is when they cast aside multicultural liberalism.

The chief lesson to be drawn from the case of Wagner is that the worship of art and artists is always a dangerous pursuit. In classical music, the slow, fitful learning of that lesson has had a salutary effect: contemporary European productions of Wagner’s operas routinely confront the darker side of his legacy. Perhaps it is time to contemplate the less fashionable question of how Hollywood films and other forms of popular culture can be complicit in the exercise of American hegemony—its chauvinist exceptionalism, its culture of violence, its pervasive economic and racial inequities. The urge to sacralize culture, to transform aesthetic pursuits into secular religion and redemptive politics, did not die out with the degeneration of Wagnerian Romanticism into Nazi kitsch. ♦

Published in the print edition of the August 31, 2020, issue, with the headline “Wagner in Hollywood.”



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By Justin Chang

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