

TRAGEDY, COMMUNITY ART, AND *MUSIKORGLASMUS*:
EXAMINING THE LANGUAGE OF NIETZSCHE'S
DIE GEBURT DER TRAGÖDIE

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There is no late nineteenth century book on ancient Greek culture that still succeeds in drawing as large a readership as Friedrich Nietzsche's *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (1872). Glancing over the customer reviews at Amazon.com of current paperback translations, one finds young readers raving enthusiastically about this odd and old-fashioned work.

The popularity of *Die Geburt der Tragödie* is surprising when one considers the many paradoxes that still obscure its exact significance, even after one hundred and thirty-five years of criticism and scholarship. Is *Die Geburt* an extension of Arthur Schopenhauer's metaphysics, or does it contradict them? Does the book contain the first expression of Nietzsche's tragic philosophy, or was it an error he tried to refute afterwards? Was it a pamphlet for Richard Wagner's budding Bayreuth project, or much more? Does it truly prefigure Nietzsche's late work as a 'tragic philosopher', as he would allege himself in his philosophical autobiography *Ecce Homo*, or does it fully belong to the early years?

If its philosophical sense remains ambivalent, the philologists, on the other hand, buried the book a long time ago. Ever since its publication scholars have described it as scientifically worthless because of its many inaccuracies.¹ But in spite of the philosophical difficulties and the historical errors, Nietzsche's book is widely known and read. I want to examine what makes it so easy to read, and misread. Therefore, my initial concern will be its linguistic form. What kind of thinking is Nietzsche making possible through the particular language he uses in *Die Geburt*?

In the first part, I wish to expound the debate from the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century on the topic of "community art," by means of a word count analysis of *Die Geburt*.² Wagner's ideas on the

¹ An overview is provided by Barbara von Reibnitz, *Ein Kommentar zu Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik' (Kapitel 1–12)* (Stuttgart, 1992).

² For the process of lemmatizing and analyzing the digital text of *Die Geburt der*

aesthetic community in particular greatly influenced Nietzsche's book. Next, I will investigate how a socially determined concept of culture, developed during the nineteenth century, gave rise to the strong connection between art and community. This will serve, finally, to elucidate the contemporary validity and use of Nietzsche's vocabulary.

The vocabulary of Die Geburt der Tragödie

The crucial ideas of Nietzsche's book on tragedy are not to be found in his reworking of Schopenhauer's metaphysics, as the predominant interpretation holds, but in his response to Wagner's cultural politics. What Nietzsche borrows from Wagner is the notion that the social and the cultural are intimately interwoven. This is the central statement of what will be called the *community art thesis*. Only from a living community can a living culture and vigorous art forms grow. The community art thesis, characteristically, is couched in organic metaphors, such as life, vigor, and growth. On every page of *Die Geburt* biological metaphors are used for cultural phenomena, starting with the very subject: the birth, death, and rebirth of Greek tragedy. Nietzsche was following nineteenth-century intellectual fashion in employing evolutionary terms from natural history to describe human-led events. The idea that ancient art and literature were 'reborn' in humanist culture from the fifteenth century onwards, for example, had been laid down in the word *Renaissance*, especially by the seventh volume of Jules Michelet's influential *Histoire de France (La Renaissance, 1855)* and Jacob Burckhardt's *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien* (1860).

However, as becomes evident from a simple word count analysis, Nietzsche expands the organic approach up to the point where the whole of his book is suffused with natural vocabulary. Using a computer to look up the most frequent words of *Die Geburt*—while disregarding the function words—some obvious items come up first, such as *Tragödie, Musik, Kunst, Dionysus, Apollo, Socrates*, and their cognate words (*tragisch, dionysisch*). These are the well-known elements of the so-called

Tragödie, I have used the Gutenberg e-text of Nietzsche's book, to be found at <<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext05/8gbt10.txt>>. I would like to thank Gerd Willée (IfK, Universität Bonn), Kim Luyckx and Guy De Pauw (CNTS, Antwerpen) for their much appreciated help.

metaphysical system of the book. The second most frequent words are *Natur* and *Leben*, together with their compounds (*Naturwesen*, *Naturzustand*, *Naturgewalt*; *Volksleben*, *Culturleben*, *Weiterleben*, and so on).

Usually, Nietzsche's nature-centered vocabulary is explained within the framework of his "vitalism" or *Lebensphilosophie*, namely, his belief that all phenomena of human thinking and human culture should be evaluated using physiological criteria. This leads to his famous questions about the health, degeneration, or even diseasedness of various societies and cultures. Applying the life-based interpretation to *Die Geburt*, we could speak of a vitalist aesthetics. Until Socrates made his entrance, Greek culture was 'healthy', and produced the marvelously balanced art form of tragedy, a perfect blend of the Dionysiac and the Apolline. Afterwards, Greek culture degenerated because of its excessive (and mainly Socratic) rationalism.

It is not difficult to uncover the roots of Nietzsche's vitalist aesthetics. Julian Young has identified its immediate precursor as Schopenhauer's ontological (mis)interpretation of idealism. Schopenhauer had developed a peculiar reading of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* by Immanuel Kant (1781), insisting that the whole of external reality can be at most a representation (*Vorstellung*) made by a living being. It follows that all representations are animated by the force of life. Not only is all of material reality the product of the invisible and all-powerful will (*der Wille*). Mental reality, too, is created by the will. Schopenhauer's philosophy of the will is characterized by his emphasis on the absolute validity of the idealist hypothesis. All intellectual activity, it seems, is produced by the will to life.

Under the perspective of vitalism, the Schopenhauerian teachings of *Die Geburt* mainly constitute a drastically new philosophy of art. Even Schopenhauer himself had not ventured to apply his doctrine to artworks. Music, famously, may even temporarily suspend the will's dominion. In Nietzsche's book, however, the Kantian disinterested judgments of beauty, which had laid the basis for mainstream modern aesthetics, are presumptuously tossed aside in favor of a radically interested doctrine of art. No art exists, Nietzsche advances, that is not nourished by some deeply natural drive of humankind. The two main *Kunsttriebe der Natur* (natural artistic drives) he identifies as the Apolline and the Dionysiac. But the truly important argument concerns not merely the use of the Greek gods to interpret art, but the simultaneous use of the perspective of natural history.

Vitalism at the service of Wagner

The standard, vitalist account of *Die Geburt*, as presented above, may be limited in some regards. It can only account for the book's influence within a certain preestablished narrative, namely, the customary account of the history of Western philosophy.³ The book appears as a product of philosophy that has itself generated later products of philosophy. However, this reading leaves out of account why *Die Geburt* was and is such a popular book, and not just such a popular *philosophy* book. *Die Geburt* has been, and, to a certain extent, it still is the *livre de chevet* for Wagner enthusiasts, students of Ancient Greek culture (and tragedy in particular), musicians, writers, dancers, artists, psychologists, and actors.⁴ What is especially astonishing is the mythopoeic power of *Die Geburt*. Many people who pick up the book today are still inclined to believe that it holds a reliable account of Greek tragedy, no matter how many times Nietzsche's views have been criticized for not being historically accurate at all. If we want to find an explanation for the strong persuasive powers of Nietzsche's book on tragedy, I believe we have to look further than the history of philosophy. It is not merely the disputed philosophical contents of Nietzsche's vitalist aesthetics that made the book such a success, but his vocabulary and the style of his argument.

Nietzsche was so persuasive about the nature of Greek tragedy and the possibility of the revival of an authentically tragic art in the present—through Wagner's music dramas—because of the heterogeneous composure of his argument. He takes up the sociocultural argument of Wagner, i.e., the community art thesis that a living art form can only originate in a living community. But then he mixes in various extra components.

Firstly, we must have a look at the community art thesis itself. Wagner developed his argument about art and community in the essays he wrote around 1850, most notably in *Die Kunst und die Revolution* (1849).

³ To cite just two typical examples: Béatrice Han-Pile, "Nietzsche's Metaphysics in the 'Birth of Tragedy,'" *European Journal of Philosophy* 14.3 (2006), pp. 373–403; Julian Young, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge, 1992).

⁴ For a brief overview of artists and thinkers influenced by Nietzsche, consult *Nietzsche-Handbuch: Leben, Werk, Wirkung*, ed. Henning Otman (Stuttgart, 2000), pp. 485–486; and Robert Wicks, "Friedrich Nietzsche," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2004 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2004/entries/nietzsche/>>.

At this point in his life he had not yet converted to Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy. On the contrary, he was preoccupied with the idea of a socialist revolution, that would also effect a profound cultural change. The concept of community art responded to a deeply felt need in the artistic context of the late nineteenth century. Socially and commercially, Western theatre was at its heyday. In Paris, for example, forty-one theatres gave daily performances and another sixty-seven theatres performed once or twice a week.⁵ It was a correspondingly homogeneous form of art. Successful genre formulas such as operetta, melodrama, pantomime, Romantic history plays, and vaudeville drama were reproduced over and over again. Hence Wagner's diatribe at what he considered a perversion of theatre's essence: not to provide nightly entertainments for the bourgeoisie, but to express "the self-realization of free humanity."⁶

Later in Wagner's life, after he had been profoundly affected by reading Schopenhauer, and had met with Nietzsche, the entire community art project underwent an important shift. Wagner no longer believed that all of humanity would liberate itself and would be able to express itself in a new art form. But, if art itself was to be saved from the clutches of commercialism, it was perhaps possible for a small elite (backed by aristocratic patrons) to reinvent the ancient and "sacred" forms of drama, in particular Greek tragedy. The project of bringing together a European elite and of founding a new sacred drama bore a single name: Bayreuth. In this middle-sized Bavarian town, in 1872, the same year that a resolutely pro-Wagnerian tract about Greek tragedy and modern music drama was published by a young and unknown university professor—*Die Geburt der Tragödie*—construction began of the *Festspielhaus*. Not an ordinary playhouse (or *Schauspielhaus*) but a place especially designed to stage a new sacred drama, the *Ring des Nibelungen* cycle.

⁵ See Günther Berghaus, *Avant-garde Performance: Live Events and Electronic Technologies* (Houndmills, 2005), p. 7.

⁶ Wagner quoted in: "Wagner," *Encyclopædia Britannica 2006*, Encyclopædia Britannica Online, 19 Nov. 2006, <<http://search.eb.com/eb/article-9075844>>.

Nietzsche's contribution to the community art thesis

To the argument of Wagner, Nietzsche added at least two distinct and appealing components. The first component is most evident. Nietzsche is a gifted classical philologist, so he is able to flesh out Wagner's argument about the ancient sacred drama of the Greeks. He provides just the right blend of dusty citations, straight from solid German *Allertumswissenschaft*, and a vivid retelling of the ancient phenomena they supposedly refer to. A telling example comes from the first chapter of the book:

Auch im deutschen Mittelalter wälzten sich unter der gleichen dionysischen Gewalt immer wachsende Schaaren, singend und tanzend, von Ort zu Ort: in diesen Sanct-Johann- und Sanct-Veitänzern erkennen wir die bacchischen Chöre der Griechen wieder, mit ihrer Vorgeschichte in Kleinasien, bis hin zu Babylon und den orgiastischen Sakäen.⁷

Barbara von Reibnitz, in her extensive and excellent commentary to *Die Geburt*, has noted that Nietzsche, despite the title of his work, is less concerned about the historical details of tragedy's origins, than about the transhistorical validity of his tragic theory—i.e., the Dionysiac account of music drama. *Die Geburt*, she argues, is not a history of ancient religious phenomena, but the attempt to found a new religion.⁸

⁷ Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* (Leipzig, 1872), § 1. I am quoting from the Gutenberg e-text version of this book, to be found at <<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext05/8gbtr10.txt>>.

"In the German Middle Ages, too, ever-growing throngs roamed from place to place, impelled by the same Dionysiac power, singing and dancing as they went; in these St. John's and St. Vitus' dancers we recognize the Bacchic choruses of the Greeks, with their pre-history in Asia Minor, extending to Babylon and the orgiastic Sacaea." (Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. R. Geuss and R. Speirs, trans. R. Speirs (Cambridge, 1999), p. 17.)

⁸ See von Reibnitz, *Ein Kommentar zu Friedrich Nietzsche*, pp. 78–79: "Für all diese "Referenzmodelle" soll seine Beschreibung dionysischer Erfahrung [...] Geltung haben. Das ist in solcher Allgemeinheit schwer zu widerlegen, erklärt jedoch nichts für die Spezifik ekstatischer Erfahrung, die immer, auch wo sie scheinbar spontan auftritt, durch einen kulturellen und sozialen, meist einen spezifisch religiösen Rahmen bestimmt ist. Selbst innerhalb der griechischen Dionysosreligion, an die Nietzsche ausdrücklich anschließt, ist sein konkreter Bezugsrahmen kaum zu erschließen. [...] Diese Unspezifik hat einerseits ihren Grund in den mangelnden theoretischen Vorgaben der Religionswissenschaft seiner Zeit, zum anderen aber in dem selbst nicht religionshistorischen Erkenntnisinteresse Nietzsches. Die historisch benannte und abgeleitete Erfahrung soll vor allem überhistorische Geltung haben, sie soll wiederholbar sein. Die historische Referenz hat vor allem propädeutische Funktion: Ziel der *Geburt der Tragödie* ist die Stiftung einer neuen Religion, nicht die Historie einer vergangenen."

The second component that Nietzsche adds to Wagner's community art thesis, is the register of the *Trieb*, the (mostly sexual) impulse or drive.⁹ If one reads Wagner's descriptions of how the new "sacred festival drama" (*Bühnenweihfestspiel*, as the subtitle of *Parsifal* states) is going to weld a community together, it sounds impassioned and exciting, even inflaming. But when Nietzsche rephrases the community art thesis within the context of ancient, "Dionysiac" phenomena, he adds a sexually primed style. Drawing again on a word count analysis of *Die Geburt*, another remarkable and highly frequent word is *Lust*.

Lust and its cognates and compounds (*lustvoll*, *Wollust*, *Urlust*, *Daseinslust*) are embedded in a large and diverse semantic field. On the one hand, Nietzsche deploys the word in the literal and sexual sense, such as when Dionysiac celebrations are being characterized by "Wollust und Grausamkeit," or more specifically by "einer überschwänglichen geschlechtlichen Zuchtlosigkeit, deren Wellen über jedes Familienthum und dessen ehrwürdige Satzungen hinweg flutheten."¹⁰ On the other, *Lust* is also used in its figurative and psychological sense, namely to describe the workings of the aesthetic drives (Dionysiac and Apolline). This metaphorical use of *Lust* is stretched so far as to denote a spiritual and cosmic force of nature, namely, "die unermessliche Urlust am Dasein."¹¹

The vocabulary of *Lust* was not absolutely new in the history of philosophy: it is already to be found in Hegel. But Nietzsche was one of the first to make the impulsive aspect of sexuality (the *Trieb*) into a prime motor of his conceptual scheme. The result of the *lustvoll* idiom is that Wagner's description of community art is intensified through an impulsive and sexual register. Although it is impossible within the framework of this paper to explore the full semantic field that grounds *Lust*, I would like to refer to one interesting subset of this field, namely: the words relating to orgy, such as *Orgiasmus*, *orgiastisch*, and that unique and untranslatable compound of Nietzsche, the *Musikorgiasmus*. Towards the end of *Die Geburt*, one can read the inimitable description: "Die Tragödie saugt den höchsten *Musikorgiasmus* in sich hinein."¹²

⁹ Compare Han-Pile, "Nietzsche's Metaphysics," p. 381: "From the onset, the *Birth* is ripe with sexual undertones [...]."

¹⁰ Nietzsche, *Geburt* § 2. "[A]n excess of sexual indiscipline, which flooded in waves over all family life and its venerable statutes" (Nietzsche, *Birth*, p. 20).

¹¹ Nietzsche, *Geburt* § 17.

¹² Nietzsche, *Geburt* § 21. "Tragedy draws the highest *musical orgiastic ecstasy* into itself." For this quotation, I do not use the Cambridge translation because I believe it is already

Musikorgiasmus is the one word that epitomizes Nietzsche's reception of Wagner's community art thesis, and perfectly illustrates the technique of *Die Geburt*. It is impossible to ask what the word *Musikorgiasmus* exactly means. Certainly, one can find a definition by putting together various descriptions from *Die Geburt*. But do not ask what historical or artistic phenomenon could correspond to a *Musikorgiasmus*. The key thing is that the word, as a word and a rhetorical artifice, works. Nietzsche repeatedly takes a number of suggestive but ill-attested anecdotes from classical Antiquity, which he then connects directly to the artistic, cultural, and political dreams of a European elite. This historically strained combination of arguments is finally consolidated by a sexual register that was absolutely new at the time.

The origin of cultures

Nietzsche's version of the community art thesis in *Die Geburt* has been so important and influential because of the marvelously inflammatory language in which it was couched. The argument itself, however, strongly depends on the community art thesis from Wagner's writings, which is a typically nineteenth-century idea. Nietzsche and Wagner reinterpreted the only recently developed concept of 'culture' to foster their own artistic *and* social ends. In order to understand how this was effected and what the consequences could be, it is necessary to delve into the origins of the culture concept.

The first use of 'culture', as it is still understood today, is to be found in the work of Gustav Friedrich Klemm. His *Allgemeine Cultur-Geschichte der Menschheit* (*General Cultural History of Mankind*, 1843–1852) was the first work of modern historiography that extended the concept of history to that of cultural history. Culture not only covered literature and the arts, but also religion, technology, tools, clothing, and social organization.

Klemm had to be so inclusive in his methodology because of a specific late modern event, namely, wide-scale colonization. Non-European art and artifacts were flooding the continent. Scholars such as Klemm (who was an avid collector of primitive art) had to find new conceptual

an interpretation of Nietzsche's words ("Tragedy absorbs the supreme, orgiastic qualities of music," *Birth* 99). Instead, I have opted for the online translation by Ian Johnston (Nov. 2003, <http://www.mala.bc.ca/~Johnstoi/Nietzsche/tragedy_all.htm>).

schemes to make the new material fit in. So they devised an extremely inclusive concept of culture that was abstract enough to cover everything from early medieval European painting to Aztec astronomy. All these things could be termed cultural phenomena. There was, however, a downside to the innovative concept. It was heavily influenced by the emerging study of premodern societies and their artworks. As a consequence it did not and could not account for a particular tendency of contemporary European society, namely, what sociologists have since designated as functional differentiation.

Social science and cultural historiography, such as they originated in the nineteenth century, allowed the social and the cultural to coincide, inspired by the example of the premodern societies discovered through colonialism. This idea was so innovative and appealing that it made scholars overlook the fact that the social and the cultural were becoming more and more autonomous domains in their own European society. It is no accident that Wagner ultimately had to give up his universalist dreams of revolution, and instead opted for Bayreuth, a small but homogeneous community of initiates. The vocabulary of *Die Geburt* is once more very eloquent on this point. The elite Bayreuth community is mirrored in the communal experiences of ancient Greece, expressed through such words as *Jünger*, *Schwärmern*, *Eingeweihten*, *Culterversammlung*, *Schaar*, and more.

The community art thesis of Wagner and Nietzsche was not that original in the nineteenth century, on the contrary, it was very much *dans l'air du temps*. Especially from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, the incorporation of the social and the cultural was a grand project that was shared by many intellectuals. The French pioneers in sociology, Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, characterized a phenomenon such as the potlatch ritual as a “total social fact” (*fait social total*). The Cambridge School of Ritualists (Gilbert Murray, Jane Harrison, Francis Cornford) investigated the ritual origins of Greek art, and theatre in particular, more profoundly than Nietzsche had done. Numerous artists from architecture, the visual arts, and the decorative arts dreamed about a new community as the foundation for a new art, such as William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement, Hendrik Petrus Berlage and Richard Roland Holst in the Netherlands, and Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus in Germany. When we move further into the twentieth century, German Expressionism, French Surrealism, Italian Futurism, and Soviet Constructivism all added their own peculiar artistic communities to the sheerly endless list.

Community art und kein Ende

Apart from the historical and art historical repercussions, how did the community art thesis, as it was expressed by Nietzsche, perform? The purpose of this essay was to draw attention to the incendiary language of the book. Through the analysis of *Die Geburt* by means of word counting—albeit a crude instrument—we saw that the book employs a well-defined vocabulary which prominently features words from the fields of nature, life, art, and community. Such a biologist and communitarian discourse was also part and parcel of the language of National-Socialism, which infamously appropriated the writings of Nietzsche. In his lecture *Otobiographies* (1976), Jacques Derrida warned against the hasty dismissal of this peculiar event. He suggested that Nietzsche's writings were connected to National-Socialism through an obscure "thought machine."¹³ One may think of it as a linguistic space opened up by Nietzsche's writings (his language, rhythm, vocabulary, and style) that somehow tolerated the presence of National-Socialist philosophy on one of its borders. Even if one does not agree with Derrida's rather far-reaching judgment, it must be admitted that his vitalist philosophy has positively influenced a number of biologist doctrines of the twentieth century. Could it be that this semantic space, pervaded by the notion of 'life', has also shapen the domain of subsequent community art discourses?

The social and sexual dimension of Nietzsche's tragedy book has certainly marked later theories of the sociocultural. *Die Geburt* helped form a contemporary theory of art that cannot but conceptualize the artistic process as a social process, characterized by greater connectedness and intimacy between group members. Hence, the greatly increased importance of the artistic *event* over the *work*—a phenomenon that is without doubt greatly indebted to late twentieth-century developments such as environmental theatre, happening, and performance art. But the question may be raised whether these tendencies would have expressed themselves in the same way if they had not been fed by the feverous theories on Dionysiac art which we find in *Die Geburt*. A key event

¹³ See Derrida, *Otobiographies: L'enseignement de Nietzsche et la politique du nom propre* (Paris, 1984), pp. 81–96; "Otobiographies: The Teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name," trans. A. Ronell, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, transference, translation: Texts and discussions with Jacques Derrida*, ed. Christie McDonald (Lincoln, NE, 1988), pp. 23–31.

from postwar performance arts, such as *Dionysus in '69* (by Richard Schechner and the Performance Group), for example, can hardly be imagined without a markedly Nietzschean or 'Dionysiac' interpretation of Euripides's *Bacchae*.¹⁴

Nietzsche's *Die Geburt*, conflating the artistic community with biological metaphors and a sexually primed style, has served as the conceptual and linguistic mould for later discussions and conceptions of art. Discourse analysis not only reveals the components of this linguistic pattern, but also allows for a further question. What kind of art theories were *excluded* from twentieth-century aesthetics because of the popularity of Nietzsche's book? It is evident that non-social theories of art will be the first candidates for such exclusion. Maybe the twentieth century's art theories can be collectively characterized by the explicit or subliminal presence of the social, a heritage from nineteenth-century 'cultural studies' that is impossible to think away. Contemporary artworks, providing elaborate environments for individual spectators (in installation art, Virtual Reality, digital art), may soon bring the social premise to the fore. Is it possible, let alone desirable, to conceive a theory of art that sharply distinguishes the social from the cultural?

¹⁴ See Richard Schechner, ed., *Dionysus in '69* (New York, 1970); Froma Zeitlin, "Dionysus in 69," *Dionysus Since 69: Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the Third Millennium*, eds. E. Hall, F. Macintosh, and A. Wrigley (New York, 2004), p. 57.