

The Apollonian and Dionysian

by Daniel Orsen

Much has been written about Nietzsche and Wagner (much of it by Nietzsche and Wagner), so I will sidestep the chronicles of their personal and intellectual relationship and focus instead on a subject important to both men; the Apollonian and the Dionysian. As we shall see, the Apollonian and Dionysian distinction was part of a perennial philosophical discourse that was taken up with renewed vigor by 19th-century German philosophers. Nietzsche and Wagner both preferred the Dionysian to the Apollonian, but as they matured they increasingly disagreed on what the Dionysian actually is. Preference for the Dionysian and disagreement on what actually is Dionysian remained themes in Modernism and Postmodernism. And in our current cultural moment, called Post-postmodernism by some, a reassessment of the Apollonian and Dionysian debate, and Wagner's outsized impact on that debate, is warranted.

Wagner first wrote about the Apollonian and Dionysian in his treatise *Art and Revolution*, published in 1849. Nietzsche articulated the idea with significantly more breadth and depth in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872)¹, his youthful, exuberant, overflowing fountain of prose in praise of Wagner. Either you are swept up by it or you will drown in the first few pages. I was swept up by it. Many, including the older Nietzsche, heavily criticized *The Birth of Tragedy* - but I think it's great. Or rather, I think the first section, which is an abstract discourse on art, is great. The second section, in which Nietzsche funnels all that discourse down to anoint Wagner as the best thing since encased meats, has many of the lesser qualities of a sausage.

Nietzsche represents and synthesizes many ideas and qualities in the terms Apollonian and Dionysian. Before going further I want to enumerate what all he means by those

terms. Nietzsche unfurls his meaning rhetorically across several chapters of *The Birth of Tragedy*; here it is distilled.

Apollonian: likened to an imagistic dream state; represents the cosmological/aesthetic qualities of measured restraint, form, and logic; evokes the “principle of individuation” (ie. you and I are different); plastic arts, sculpture, and poetry; epitomized by the imagistic art form of sculpture; “*mere appearances*” (Nietzsche’s own words).

Dionysian: likened to a state of intoxication/ecstasy; represents the cosmological/aesthetic qualities of excess, emotional power, and unbridled passion; evokes the “mysterious primal unity” (ie. you and me and everyone else are all part of the universe), epitomized by the non-imagistic art form of music; “*a quite different reality that lies beneath*” (Nietzsche’s own words).

Nietzsche’s argument in *The Birth of Tragedy* is threefold. First, that Greek tragedy arose out of the duality of the Apollonian and Dionysian elements. Second, Socratic rationalism and optimism stifled the Dionysian and thereby caused the end of Greek tragedy. Third, Richard Wagner is the man who will overcome Socratic rationalism and optimism, restore the balance between the Apollonian and Dionysian, and revive tragic drama².

Nietzsche and Wagner were both unduly influenced by Arthur Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche quoted extensively (and problematically²) from Schopenhauer in fleshing out the ideas of the Apollonian and Dionysian:

This extraordinary contrast, which stretches like a yawning gulf between plastic art as the Apollonian, and music as the Dionysian art, has revealed itself to only one of the great thinkers, to such an extent that, even without this clue to the symbolism of the Hellenic divinities, he conceded to music a character and an origin different from all the other arts, because, unlike

them, it is not a copy of the phenomenon, but an immediate copy of the will itself, and therefore complements *everything physical in the world* and every phenomenon by representing *what is metaphysical*, the thing in itself.” (Schopenhauer, *Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, I. p.310 [Nietzsche’s citation])

Nietzsche’s Apollonian and Dionysian distinction is clearly based on Schopenhauer’s distinction between “representation” and “will,” or as he puts it in this passage, between “*everything physical in the world*” and “*what is metaphysical*.” Schopenhauer, for his part, was influenced by and directly responding to Kant’s distinction between the “phenomenon” and the “thing in itself”/Dich an sich. Schopenhauer wrote in *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 1, that “Kant’s greatest merit is the distinction of the *phenomenon* from *the thing in itself*,” but he adamantly disagreed with how Kant introduced these ideas and found his philosophical system untenable.³ Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation* is in many ways an attempt to fix Kant’s ideas of the *phenomenon* and *the thing in itself*. In laying out the Apollonian and Dionysian distinction, Nietzsche quotes Schopenhauer quoting Kant, all of whom harken back to Plato’s distinction between the physical realm and the Realm of Forms/Ideas. Perhaps I am missing the trees for the forest, but it appears that all of these philosophers were getting at the same idea. Nietzsche’s ideas about the Apollonian and Dionysian were a new iteration in a perennial philosophical discourse which has always been a tangle of phenomenology, ontology, and aesthetics.

Something new that Nietzsche brings into the Apollonian and Dionysian is a dash of the Hegelian dialectic - the idea that the Apollonian and Dionysian are in conflict and that “the continuous development of art is bound up with the *Apollonian* and *Dionysian* duality — just as procreation depends on the duality of the sexes, involving perpetual strife with only periodically intervening reconciliations.”³ (*The Birth of Tragedy*, Section 1)

With that dialectic in mind I would like to return to the second portion of Nietzsche's argument - that Socratic rationalism and optimism stifled the Dionysian and thereby caused the end of Greek tragedy. From the moment *The Birth of Tragedy* was published, philologists and classicists set themselves to debunking Nietzsche's counter-history of Greek tragedy.⁴ But as Paul Raimond Daniels points out, Nietzsche's key ambition in delving into antiquity was to enable a critique of modernity.⁵ The idea that Socratic rationalism and optimism brought an end to Greek tragedy proved to be prophetic for German Music and, more broadly, Western civilization. But that was not a prophecy Nietzsche made. He saw the Enlightenment as a Socratic period in which the Apollonian gained too strong of a grip, and Wagner as the hero-artist to break that grip and save German culture. Nietzsche was largely correct in his critique of the Enlightenment, but he could not predict nor fathom that there would be an even greater wave of rationalism and optimism to follow Wagner in the 20th century.

Nietzsche was also correct in identifying the Dionysian element as integral to Wagner's operas - at least Wagner would say so. Wagner was in revolt against the extant operatic forms, specifically set pieces such as arias and duets, large choruses, and melismas (multiple notes for a single syllable). He thought those operatic forms and practices to be contrary to real life. In Wagner's view, writing one-note-per-syllable much more resembles real human speech, and life does not happen in set pieces or with massive choruses showing up. Those things only get in the way of real, unbridled human passion.

But here lies a paradox. If the Apollonian is "*mere appearances*", and the Dionysian a "*quite different reality that lies beneath*," is not Wagner's vision for opera without melismas, choruses, and set pieces, more in line with the Apollonian "*mere appearances*"? And aren't the arias and ensembles of Mozart, which are seemingly artificial and would never happen in "real life," more in line with the Dionysian because

they reveal the deepest drives and desires of the characters and the full meaning of what is happening in the drama, in other words, the “*quite different reality that lies beneath?*”

Ultimately, I think that both the traditional operatic forms and the freer forms of Wagner are both capable of conveying the full power of the Dionysian in their own ways, and that Wagner’s operas have an Apollonian form all their own which comes from the structure of the stories and the building blocks of key areas and motifs. But Wagner could not operate within the constraints of arias, duets, recitatives, choruses, etc. And Wagner being Wagner, he had to aggressively articulate his position before composing his new kind of opera.

The Divergence

The notion of the Apollonian and the Dionysian became a major point of contention between Wagner and Nietzsche. Both remained strongly in favor of the Dionysian but increasingly disagreed about what that was.

Nietzsche, well read in the German Idealists, took after Ludwig Feuerbach’s materialist spin on Hegel.⁶ Feuerbach is the missing link between Hegel and Marx, and was also influential for Wagner in his most revolutionary days during the 1840s. Feuerbach’s materialism amounted to a denial of all metaphysics; this material world in which we live, breath, and die is the only real world. Nietzsche, whose most famous quote is “*God is Dead*” (*Zarathustra*), worked from this viewpoint. For Nietzsche, God, heaven, hell, and all religious and metaphysical beliefs are natural perhaps, but they are nonetheless creations of the human mind that falsely augment material reality. In other words, religious and metaphysical beliefs are, for Nietzsche, “*mere appearances*” - that is, *Apollonian*. And they need to be done away with for man to progress towards the one true world, the material world as it is. Which is to say that the physical, the material, is in fact the “*quite different reality that lies beneath*” - it is the real *Dionysian*.

Wagner took the opposite and more intuitive view; that the physical world is *Apollonian* and the metaphysical world *Dionysian*. Wagner would never go so far as to confess a belief in God, but took after Hegel in believing that there was *something*, in fact a lot of *something*, behind the material world. Ultimately he adopted what I would call a Christian philosophy (rather than theology), which animated *Götterdämmerung* and *Parsifal*. *Götterdämmerung* ends with Brunnhilde's agape-love sacrifice to redeem the fallen world, which was corrupted by the selfish, love-forsaking and power-seeking act of Albericht stealing the Rhinegold. In *Parsifal*, the drama centers on the human *need* for redemption, and the questions of *why* that redemption is needed and *how* it can be attained. And while Wagner's answers to those questions are not doctrinally Christian, he thought redemption was possible and necessary, promoted an ethic of *Mitleid* (compassion) rather than the "*will to power*," and utilized Christian iconography, which was more than enough to make Nietzsche's mustache bristle.⁷

The Apollonian and Dionysian in the 20th and 21st century

The quest for the Dionysian was taken up anew by the Modernists, the generation of artists that followed Wagner, such as Schoenberg, Joyce, Eliot, and Kandinsky. Socraticism - the scientific progress, optimism, and rationalism of the early 20th century - was a threat to their Romantic ethos and metaphysical beliefs (a wide gamut of religious, spiritual, occult, etc.). Their answer was to make their art difficult, to encase it in a thorny shell to protect it from the conscious, rational mind and directly affect the subconscious mind. Schoenberg's atonality, Joyce's stream of consciousness, Eliot's opaque allusions, and Kandinsky's abstract shapes were all part of this project. By making opaque and nearly indecipherable harmonies, melodies, sentences, and images, they hoped to circumnavigate the rational mind which dissects, analyzes, quantifies, and ultimately, strips away all metaphysical efficacy and meaning, leaving behind only that which can be dissected, analyzed, and quantified, such as frequencies, wavelengths, and

decibels. In terms of the Apollonian and Dionysian, the Modernists had a “Wagnerian” conception of the Dionysian, and strove to protect it by making the Apollonian difficult - to the point of nearly disintegrating it.

This was countered by the Post-Modernists, the likes of John Cage and Roy Lichtenstein, who were the artistic embodiment of Nietzsche’s “Dionysian materialism.” They strove to destroy the distinction between art and not-art and create forms that were without content and utterly devoid of meaning, while at the same time arguing that, as John Cage put it, “the grand thing about the human mind is that it can turn its own tables and see meaninglessness as the ultimate meaning.”⁸

Deep.

We are several decades past the advent and heyday of Postmodernism, so one must ask; whither the Dionysian today? Is there a distinct “Post-post Modern” concept of the Dionysian, a “*quite different world that lies beneath,*” be it material or metaphysical, in art today? And, whither the Apollonian? Whither Form? Both Wagner and Nietzsche were down on it, and the Modernists did not reject it outright but certainly put it through the wringer while confounding the conscious mind. The Post-Modernists for their part, while trying to destroy the distinction between art and not-art, were stomping on the shards of artistic forms.

What is the Apollonian good for? Why do the greatest works of art seem to have a synergy of the Apollonian and Dionysian? Why has Western Art been rejecting the Apollonian, as though it were chafing under a starched collar for the past century and a half? Finally, since the Apollonian has been neglected for so long, and the Dionysian has even been having a rough go of it recently, is a revival of the Apollonian possible and perhaps even imminent?

These questions should be considered by every artist and person invested in our culture. And as we do so I would also encourage us to consider the case of Wagner. Not because he had much to say about the Apollonian and Dionysian and was the main character of *The Birth of Tragedy* - he did and he was - but because Wagner is always worth studying, if for no other reason than as an artist in the midst of change. Wagner was both a product and instigator of one of the most dramatic cultural changes in Western history, and in the midst of all that change he thought critically about culture and art, and was uniquely conscious amongst artists of what he was doing and why he was doing it. If we have a question about art and culture, Wagner asked it himself and answered it in prose and probably in practice. And whether or not his answer was right or wrong, or whether we agree or disagree with it, it was immensely impactful and is part of the cultural heritage we have to deal with now when confronting that same question. As Nietzsche wrote in *The Case of Wagner*, “Wagner sums up modernity. There is no way out, one must first become a Wagnerian.”

¹ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music*. trans. Kaufmann. New York: Random, 1967.

² Schopenhauer’s frustration with life derives from his insight that ‘all willing springs from lack, from deficiency, and thus from suffering’. His opposition to life is an opposition to the human will, especially conceived as an inseparable part of the world as will. Nietzsche’s tragic aesthetics is instead a celebration of willing, a revaluation of willing through the aesthetic power of the tragedian. Indeed, it is a startling presage to Nietzsche’s mature philosophy of the will to power – the idea that the healthy, life-affirming human being self-determines her happiness not through utilitarian measures of suffering and pleasure, but to the degree she is self-empowered to create and destroy values.

Daniels, Paul Raimond. “*The Birth of Tragedy*: Transfiguration Through Art.” *The New Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*. Ed. Tom Stern. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Online.

³ Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Representation: Vol. 1*. trans. E.F.J. Payne. New York: Dover, 1966.

⁴ Hanson, Jeffrey, Ph.D., Personal interview. 13 May 2021.

⁵ *The Birth of Tragedy* enacts Nietzsche’s opposition to Schopenhauer’s philosophy of will-denial, and here Nietzsche’s mature philosophy of the will to power and the revaluation of values may be seen in nascent form. All this, however, is aligned to his key ambition in delving into antiquity: to enable a critique of modernity. And here,

through his portrayal of Socrates and the death of tragedy, Nietzsche positions modernity as a paradigm which forsakes the strength underlying the aesthetic transfiguration of suffering by advancing the optimism of scientific discovery.

Daniels, Paul Raimond. "The Birth of Tragedy: Transfiguration Through Art." *The New Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*. Ed. Tom Stern. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Online.

6 Scruton, Roger. *The Ring of Truth: The Wisdom of Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung*. Great Britain: Penguin, 2017.

7 "Any degree of levity of melancholy is better than a romantic turn to the past and desertion, an accommodation with any form of Christianity whatsoever."

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Ecce Homo*. trans. R.J. Hollingdale. New York: Penguin, 1992.

8 Cage, John. *Silence: Lectures and Writings, 50th Anniversary Edition*. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2011.