

BILL VIOLA'S *THE TRISTAN PROJECT* – TERENCE WATSON

“Richard Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* is the story of a love so intense and profound that it cannot be contained in the material bodies of the lovers. In order to fully realise their love, Tristan and Isolde must ultimately transcend life itself.” Bill Viola/Anthony Bond

Whether or not this is what Wagner intended in his music-drama, it is certainly an interesting point for any artist to start from to create a work of art, particularly one that pays homage to one of the greatest works of art in the Western canon.

I drew Members’ attention to this work in the Society’s Newsletter (No. 100, June 2005) when Viola’s work on *Tristan und Isolde* was first seen in its full staging in Paris to mixed reviews.

In his 17 June 2006 review of the installation of the work, 'LOVE/DEATH: The Tristan Project' (re-worked components of the original three and a half hour video) at the Haunch of Venison, London, entitled “Time bending backwards - and a 50ft wall of fire,” (UK *Telegraph*) Martin Gayford tells us that

When Bill Viola first sat down to listen to a recording of Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, he had an unpleasant surprise. "I was just in shock," says the renowned video artist when we meet amid the banks of flickering equipment of a Hollywood editing suite. "There were people just shrieking at the tops of their voices and bombastic music. It felt like one huge tsunami of ego. I thought, 'My God, what did I get myself into?'"

Not an admission calculated to endear himself to committed Wagnerians, nor what one expects of one artist responding to another. However, Gayford also tells us that

Fortunately, after that first adverse reaction, Viola became more and more fascinated by Wagner's masterpiece....

"The more I learned about it, the more I got interested," he says. "I realised that Wagner was trying to make a total work in which everything was contingent on everything else, just as it is in reality. For him, musical instruments were the embodiments of the forces of nature - the non-human world in which passion is raw, surging, seething and uncontrolled - whether it's the sea, a storm or a feeling you have inside you."

Viola made those elemental forces visible.

(According to Gayford, this version of Viola’s *Tristan Project* was not accompanied by any Wagner music, but, as in our Sydney version, “by natural sounds such as water lapping.”)

In his review of the Paris staging, “In Pursuit of a Total Art, the Paris Opera Adds Video to 'Tristan und Isolde,’” (New York Times, 14 April 2005), Alan Riding reports Viola as saying: "The images tell the inner story in a similar way the music tells the inner story of the emotional and, I would say, spiritual life of these people."

In choosing huge screens and surround-sound with which to create his works (museum installations as he calls them), Viola is certainly responding to the scale of Wagner’s work. As the length of each of the two works on view at St Saviour’s Church, Redfern, and the third in the NSW Art Gallery, was only about fifteen minutes each, I found it rewarding to sit through three loops of each work without noticing the hour passing. Maybe that is more a function of my training in sitting through Wagner operas!

I confess to a liking for the Viola works that I have seen so far, after stumbling accidentally into a screening of *The Reflecting Pool* some years ago. I found the slow-reverse-motion technique fascinating as it challenged my sense of time and narrative. It also stimulated a state of contemplation in which my mind generated suggestive ideas and feelings about the work I was watching. With this positive experience, I was keen to experience Viola’s interpretation of this work.

The catalogue/program notes (it’s hard to decide what to call the brochure that accompanies a video installation that partakes of at least two worlds) describe the interesting history of the pieces that were on view in Sydney. The *Project* was originally conceived as a nearly four hour accompaniment to a (not entirely successful) December 2004 semi-staged version of the work in the Frank Gehry designed Disney Concert Hall (which has a wonderful acoustic), with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Later, it was used as part of the *mise-en-scène* for a fully staged performance, also directed by Peter Sellars, at the Opéra Bastille in Paris in April 2005, with other performances in New York in May 2007.

After the Paris performance, Viola edited the material, plus, apparently, some additional footage, into a “series of video art works independent of Wagner’s music” (catalogue notes). That the works are independent of Wagner’s music to

some extent begs the question as to how much they remain a commentary on/accompaniment to the music-drama and how much they are Viola's own meditations on ideas and feelings raised by the Tristan and Isolde story, including the story as mediated by Wagner's imagination.

It is hard to describe the impact of work of art that starts out, as does *Tristan's Ascension (The Sound of a Mountain Under a Waterfall)*, for example, as a film of a huge bucket of water being dumped on a prostrate male figure who then rises and disappears out of the top of the video screen as the film of the water falling is reversed so that the water appears to raise the figure into the heavens. According to the catalogue, Viola sees this as a representation of Tristan's soul ascending, "in the space after death as it is awakened." While it is clear what is happening on the screen with the dump of water playing in reverse, the metaphoric qualities of the moving image are complex. This work has similarities with Viola's 1996 work, *The Crossing*, in which a man walks through a huge fall of water.

What, however, we do not see is the following sequence, as described by Gayford: "Then Isolde herself follows, fluttering like an angel on a Tiepolo ceiling, to the sound of the Liebestod - the death from love and love in death."

Shortly after the water starts streaming upwards, a column of water materialises (probably coincidentally) above Tristan's groin, suggesting a kind of umbilical cord connecting him with the universe. Later the column expands into a torrent that seems to suck Tristan upwards until he disappears. It is almost as if the water is an incarnation of the Schopenhauerian Will that is retrieving Tristan's individual will and re-integrating it into the universal force. One could assume also, I guess, that Isolde's watery ascension is also a return to the universal Will.

I have to agree with Gayford's summation of the effect of Viola's imagery, even if he was fortunate to see more of it than we are:

As a piece of imagery this is extraordinary: primordial and poetic. Without actually illustrating anything, it suggests all manner of things - the flight of seraphim, the rushing waters of the creation and the flood. All of Viola's Tristan pieces are like that. They don't illustrate Wagner's opera but they engage with the underlying symbolism of the composer's world.

Similarly, the *Fire Woman 2005* shows a woman in the foreground of a huge blazing fire falling face-down into what suddenly reveals itself to be a pool of water in which the flames, themselves projected onto a mirror-screen, are distorted. The reflection then reflects the distortions of the flames so that the whole screen is composed of at least twice-reflected-distorted images. The flames eventually die down to leave a screen of black background on which fluorescent light-blue highlights wash to and fro. According to Viola, this scene is seen through the eyes of the dying Tristan who realises that "desire's body will never again be met." This imagery also has roots in an earlier work of Viola's in which a man appears to walk through an immense wall of flame.

In his *New Yorker* review of the 2005 Opéra Bastille production, Alex Ross elucidates Viola's meaning when he informs us that the woman's "plunge coincides with a crucial moment in the score—the moment when the arching phrases of the Prelude are heard again, setting in motion the first great love duet."

The third work, *The Fall into Paradise 2005*, uses a tiny point of light that grows into an image of an intertwined man and woman who fall into a pool of water then slowly rise to the surface, illuminated by bright white light through the surface. We watched them from underneath them as they floated weightless, as befits their ecstatic, transcendent condition. They then rise towards the surface; they embrace passionately and erotically until they reach the surface and seem about to disappear into the world above – perhaps the world of the night and love.

Ross also provides us with an idea of the video segments that we are not seeing in Sydney:

Indelible images appear throughout: Tristan walks through a wall of fire, and afterward embers glow on his shirt like stars; Isolde lights a vast array of candles, one by one; the sun rises in real time through the branches of a solitary tree.... The sunrise sequence unfolds during King Mark's lament for Tristan's betrayal, and the sun first glimmers over the horizon when the English horn lingers dejectedly on the note A. (At each performance, an editor adjusts the pace of the video in accordance with the tempos of the night.) (www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/05/30/050530crmu_music "THE WAVES "Tristan" in Paris, and "Cyrano" at the Met")

Gayford also provides a peek behind the scenes of the filming one of Viola's works – "Tristan's Ascension for example – ha[s] developed into a form resembling a movie. That was a sequence that required dozens of technicians, and much of the paraphernalia of a major film production. 'We dumped hundreds of gallons of water, and had to drop a guy down in the middle of it all.' The performer was a skilled aerial acrobat. Subsequently, the footage was run in reverse and at a reduced speed."

Gayford reports Viola saying: "When you slow something down, you're in more of a dream space, an internal, subjective space. That's the reality I'm really after.' And that, he suggests, is in a way also what Wagner was interested in." One can only agree after experiencing the suspension of time and space that Wagner induces in audience members for the best part of an hour in Act II. Viola's comment also begs a more detailed analysis of Wagner's response to Schopenhauer's interesting views on the nature of space and time.

From my perspective, the three works we had in Sydney seem to attempt a commentary on experiences of transcendence, a not especially fashionable topic in the contemporary art world, but one that Viola is clearly comfortable with, given his interest in Eastern religious and philosophical thought that has influenced his understanding of Wagner who also read extracts of Eastern religious texts in translation, as well as Schopenhauer's interpretation of them. According to his own website, in 1980 Viola and his wife/collaborator "lived in Japan for a year and a half on a Japan/U.S. cultural exchange fellowship where they studied Buddhism with Zen Master Daien Tanaka..." (www.billviola.com/biograph.htm).

In his notes reproduced in the Lincoln Centre's program for the 2007 performance, Viola said that in creating the work he "first listened to various versions of the music but then worked primarily from the libretto to visualize an image world flowing within, and without the dramatic storyline being enacted on the stage," in which the images are "intended to function as symbolic, inner representations." The images "trace the movement of human consciousness through one of its most delicate, poignant states: the surrender to an absolute, all-consuming love." (Elsewhere in the program, you can read a salutary reminder from the acerbic George Bernard Shaw who wrote in 1889: "To enjoy Tristan it is only necessary to have had one serious love affair; and though the number of persons possessing this qualification is popularly exaggerated, yet there are enough to keep the work alive and vigorous" (from John Henken's program note "Shivery and Sweet Infinity" – the title itself being a quote from Friedrich Nietzsche's confession, long after his disaffection with Wagner, of unquenchable desires to experience the work again and again! <http://lincolncenter.org/programnotes/gp-tristan-050207.pdf>.)

There is, indeed, a sense of a more real world behind both *Tristan und Isolde* and Viola's *Tristan Project* that seems to reflect the Hindu notion that the world is an illusion, Maya, behind which lies the true world of undifferentiated being. In Viola's video interpretations, the sense of the infinite is suggested by the end of the regression – a kind of being drawn out of this world into another, represented by the reversal of the flow of time, that may or may not have Freudian overtones of a return to the womb.

Viola tells us that the "images in the three acts contain interweaving, recurring threads but are distinct in reflecting different stages of the lovers' path toward liberation." Viola also gives us more detail of his intentions in each of the "acts" of his work – whether or not it is also an accurate summary of Wagner's intentions is another matter:

Act I presents the theme of Purification, the universal act of the individual's preparation for the symbolic sacrifice and death required for the transformation and rebirth of the self. The mutual decision to drink death [the potion] plunges the lovers beneath the surface to reveal the infinite ocean of an invisible immaterial world.

Act II concerns the Awakening of the Body of Light—the release, through the cleansing illumination of love, of the luminous spiritual form encased within the dark inertia of the material body. The theme is bringing light into the world, but when the outer world finally encroaches on their ecstatic union, a temporal and material darkness descends on the lovers, whose only release lies in the pain of separation and self-sacrifice.

Act III describes the Dissolution of the Self in the stages of dying, the delicate and excruciating process of the separation and disintegration of the physical, perceptual, and conceptual components of conscious awareness. We are plunged into the agony and delirium of death and suffering, replete with visions, dreams, and hallucinatory revelations that play across the surface of a dying man's mind. When the flames of passion and fever finally engulf the mind's eye, and desire's body can never be met, the reflecting surface is shattered and collapses into undulating wave patterns of pure light. Finally, the lovers ascend in turn and are drawn up in peace to a realm beyond the polarities of male and female, birth and death, light and darkness, beginning and end.

Ross contended that Viola "has in common with Wagner a disdain for the rhythms of daily life: in his work, events often happen in slow motion, so that they acquire an atmosphere of sacred ritual." Ross also noted that, while there were no references to the usual scenic images and props of *Tristan und Isolde*, "the film is obsessively faithful to the human and natural elements that Wagner obsessively invokes—faces, eyes, hair, bodies, air, fire, earth, water." (As an aside, Ross was very complimentary of Sellar's production, Waltraud Meier and Ben Heppner's singing and of the playing of the Bastille orchestra under Esa-Pekka Salonen.)

Sellar also has insight into the motivations of Tristan and Isolde that is worth sharing, independent of any relevance to Viola's works. This is his account of the lovers' reaction to each other after they meet in Act II:

Their initial adrenalin rush of danger and exhilaration gives way to disbelief, then to slightly awkward banter, and, finally, to hard work. Isolde asks Tristan directly why he tried to betray her. What possessed him? With her help, and in painful bursts of self-recognition, gradually everything that Tristan sealed off comes pouring out. The allure of brilliant fame, the world's honors, and the flash of success warped his personality, making him a stranger to himself. He hurt his closest friends without realizing it, and the growing disparity between his public image and his always low personal sense of self-worth produced a seething self-hatred. He felt unworthy of the woman whose praises he was singing, and tried to compensate by plunging into military adventurism.

Isolde begins to understand that the man she saw as arrogant and cold was in fact frightened and desperate. But she also has to acknowledge how deeply she was hurt, and how much of that hurt she still carries. The basis for a serious relationship now can only be built as they deal with each other's failures, disappointments, and deceptions, separating the empowering and transforming imagination that sustains romance from the lies, evasions, and falsehoods that poison trust.

At this point, as Sellars says, [t]ogether they step into the realm of night...".

In his catalogue note for the exhibitions, Anthony Bond, Head Curator, International Art, Art Gallery of NSW, wrote that the "love of Tristan and Isolde was so spiritually profound that it was not possible for them to express it adequately through their material form...". It may be queried that the lovers are not able to consummate their love adequately in their material form, given the fairly explicit suggestions by Wagner in his score that they have previously and do again achieve mutual climax in Act II of the music-drama, although possibly with a *coitus interruptus* resulting from Melot's arrival on this occasion.

I read Wagner's text as saying something different: that no truly spiritual love, as Tristan and Isolde grow to share, can exist in a world in which mundane events and limited people continually interfere with the couple's exploration of their inner world. Rather than hang around in the here-and-now, the lovers agree that they would be happier in the Never-neverland of Nirvana, the world of night, where their souls can exist perpetually in a state of climactic bliss with no further worries about temporality and corporeality. This is a different proposition to saying that the lovers are trapped in their own materiality. Bond's proposition does not seem to allow adequate room for Wagner's structural metaphor of day-reality versus night-truth and the lover's preference for the latter because it would allow them to exist in a continuous state of mutual ecstasy.

Peter Sellars, in his notes for the Lincoln Centre performance, is much closer to the mark when he observes: "Together they step into the realm of night, the nocturnal self, the vast space in every human being that has nothing to do with anyone's day job. All thinking, all appearance, all remembrance are extinguished in a night of perfect love "heart on heart, mouth on mouth, merged into one breath." (Sellars' notes are worth reading for a refreshingly down-to-earth (though slightly inaccurate) account of the narrative – you can read them in <http://lincolncenter.org/programnotes/gp-tristan-050207.pdf>.) Sellars may have summed Wagner's point of view accurately when he says: "After love, the last task in a human life is death." Yet, even this interesting comment does not capture the yearning for overcoming the bounds of this life and the entering into another world in which there are no constraints on the experience of love that Wagner's music makes us feel unrelentingly.

The whole of the Act II love duet can be read as an extended "playing at love" or "falling in love" that recapitulates much of the behaviour that lovers in more ordinary situations go through as they become acquainted but that Tristan and Isolde have not previously experienced because of the precipitate way their love is exposed to them. Then the "play" becomes more serious as the lovers comprehend the implications of their feelings and situation. They are certainly very physical in their love, as the music tells us, and conscious of the importance of the mutuality of their relationship, as summed up in Isolde's punning "aria" on the word "und". However, their love-making is relatively conventional until after Marke's narration when Tristan suddenly turns to Isolde and asks her the profoundly significant Wagnerian question "Will you follow me?" Unless, of course, one accepts Wolfgang Wagner's view as conveyed in an interview by Julian Schütt of Marcel Reich-Ranicki, Germany's most popular - and controversial - literary critic, who commented "The older Richard Wagner got, the more intensively his thoughts turned to women, very much to the disapproval of his Cosima. Wolfgang Wagner said to me that there are three coitus scenes in "Tristan and Isolde", and that in the score there were three fermatas, that is three sustained notes" (an interview reported in 2008 on the Sign and Sight website <http://www.signandsight.com/>).

Both lovers now realise that the game has changed because of their actions within the real world and now they have to accept the consequences. However, the consequences do not have to be those of the conventional love triangle, since they have talked about a third way – the way of the night, the escape into eternity. It takes them the whole of Act III to make their way into the "realm of the night", but, from the moment of Tristan's life-changing question to Isolde, there is no doubt but that they will take that path. This analysis of love by Wagner is also profounder than the rather trite

explanation chosen by Viola and Bond – that their love “cannot be contained in the material bodies of the lovers,” which makes them sound like balloons about to explode. Wagner is as much interested in the lovers’ understanding of their love as in their emotions.

If Schopenhauer’s influence is important in shaping the universe of *Tristan und Isolde*, then the notion of the Will, the primal force that shapes the universe must also be of more significance than the love of two mortals, however “intense and profound” it might be. The lovers come to understand that only by being re-absorbed into the Will (the “realm of night”) (not just escaping their bodies) can they achieve a state in which they can love eternally. And one also needs to understand Wagner’s “correction” of Schopenhauer in which the philosopher’s totally anarchic force is re-interpreted as boundless Love to appreciate the lovers’ decision to die.

Echo of an After-image

During my first viewing, the videos at St Saviour’s were accompanied by an obligato dog’s bark from a neighbouring house. While initially annoying, the volumes of the soundtracks later obliterated the barking. However, it did prompt me to ponder whether or not Wagner was distracted, even annoyed, by the barking of his own dogs during creative work. He had a number of dogs, including Peps, Papo, Fips (“But he [Fips] was always more my wife's friend” – *Mein Leben*) and finally Pohl who is buried at Wahnfried in Bayreuth. At the time of the composition of this music-drama, Wagner’s dog was probably Fips (whom he mentions more familiarly while in Paris after leaving the Asyl and the Wesendoncks in Zurich): “...I found abundant refreshment and regular exercise in solitary walks in the Bois de Boulogne, gaily accompanied by my little dog Fips” – *Mein Leben*. There are reports that Wagner also tried out sections of his work on his dogs and only included them if the dogs approved – perhaps by joining in with Wagner as he sang them? I also wondered whether there was some element of synchronicity in a dog barking during a Kaldor Art Projects event – perhaps a cosmic echo of the soundless Jeff Koons *Puppy* on the edge of Circular Quay, also brought to Sydney by the Kaldor Art Projects.