

Tom Ribitzky
Lesson Plan for Teaching the Tristan Legend with Film

Link to Playlist: <https://www.kanopy.com/playlist/4107376>

Clip 1: *Wagner & Me* - Explanation of Tristan Leitmotif

Watch this explanation of how the Tristan leitmotif revolutionized music, and consider the ways in which this innovation responds to some of the elements in the legend (instability, disorder, sickness, etc.). There are reports from the earliest audiences who claimed that listening to this music made them feel sea-sick and nauseated. Compare the effusive praise for Wagner's interpretation in this clip with Nietzsche's (hilarious and entertaining) takedown of it:

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Case of Wagner*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*. New York: Vintage, 1967. Print.

§1: "That other orchestral tone which is now the fashion, Wagner's, brutal, artificial, and 'innocent' at the same time – thus it speaks all at once to the three senses of the modern soul – how harmful for me is this Wagnerian orchestral tone!" (157).

§5: "For that one does not resist him, this itself is a sign of decadence. The instincts are weakened. What one ought to shun is found attractive. One puts to one's lips what drives one yet faster into the abyss" (165).

§5: "Wagner's art is sick. The problems he presents on the stage – all of them problems of hysterics – the convulsive nature of his affects, his overexcited sensibility, his taste that required ever stronger spices, his instability which he dressed up as principles, not least of all the choice of his heroes and heroines – consider them as physiological types (a pathological gallery)! – all of this taken together represents a profile of sickness that permits no further doubt. *Wagner est une névrose*"^[*](166).

§6: "Nothing is cheaper than passion. [...] Nothing corrupts taste more surely" (168).

§8: "Just look at these youths – rigid, pale, breathless! These are the Wagnerians: they understand nothing about music – and yet Wagner becomes master over them. – Wagner's art has the pressure of a hundred atmospheres: stoop! What else can one do?" (172).

§8: "...Wagner is a tyrant; his pathos topples every taste, every resistance. – Who equals the persuasive power of these gestures? Who else envisages gestures with such assurance, so clearly from the start? The way Wagner's pathos holds its breath, refuses

to let go an extreme feeling, achieves a terrifying *duration* of states when even a moment threatens to strangle us—” (172).

§11: “It is full of profound significance that the arrival of Wagner coincides in time with the arrival of the ‘*Reich*’: both events prove the very same thing: obedience and long legs. – Never has obedience been better, never has commanding. Wagnerian conductors in particular are worthy of an age that posterity will call one day, with awed respect, *the classical age of war*” (180, italics in original).

First Postscript: “One pays heavily for being one of Wagner’s disciples. I observe these youths who have been exposed to his infection for a long time. The first, relatively innocent effect is the corruption of taste. Wagner has the same effect as continual consumption of alcohol: blunting, and obstructing the stomach with phlegm. Specific effect: degeneration of the sense of rhythm” (184).

[*] “Wagner is a neurosis” (French).

Clip 2 - *Melancholia* - Overture:

Listen to Wagner’s *Tristan* overture in full, and notice how some of the visuals highlight elements of the story, namely the apocalyptic and cosmic nature of the lovers’ passion. The director Lars von Trier said of the final shot, where the planets collide into each other, that this was supposed to be seen as a “Hollywood kiss.” Is that how you see it? What are the ethical implications of a love that is pursued at the expense of the world? Where do aesthetics intersect with (or collide with) ethics here? Does the *Tristan* legend (and, for that matter, this film) aestheticize and glamorize depression? Given von Trier’s controversial remarks about Hitler while answering questions about this film, and considering Hitler’s own enthusiasm for Wagner, what is it about this apocalyptic narrative that lends itself to deeply disturbing reactionary and authoritarian politics? (Consider also how the lovers’ physical beauty, in every version, makes them superior to other people -- what kind of political stance would valorize this belief?).

For more on the ethics of this film, see also this clip of Zizek defending it as having an optimistic message: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eUIjoYDKETM>

Clip 3 - *Romeo and Juliet* - Banquet Scene:

First read the initial dialogue between Romeo and Juliet (1.5.91-108), which forms a sonnet in the midst of so much miscommunication and linguistic violence, a corollary to the intense physical violence that the play opens with. Shakespeare sections off this bit of dialogue so that it stands alone as a single poem, separate from the discourse that marks much of the rest of the play. Pay attention to how the director Franco Zeffirelli

organizes space in this banquet scene. How does the spatial configuration of the dancers shed light on the linguistic “spaces” (a formal sonnet as a space apart from the other vulgar language)? Notice how the lovers are outsiders, orbiting the circle of dancers--not quite welcome in their world, so to speak, which is why they create a world of their own, in secret. To what extent do Tristan and Isolde, as well as Vis and Ramin, do the same thing? In every version of this story, including this banquet scene, pay attention to how love becomes a religion to replace all religion. It is a transgression that violates both religious and secular law--but it is, as Romeo says, a “trespass sweetly urged.” What role do law and religion play in each of these works? How does it enhance and inhibit this love? Tie this concept with Nietzsche’s idea of “transvaluation of values.”

Clips 4 and 5: *Romeo and Juliet* - Romeo and Juliet Die:

How do the Tristan lovers and Romeo and Juliet equate death with sex? From the moment they meet, their passion is illustrated in terms of doom and destruction--but this is a doom that they erotically desire. If the Elizabethans understood death as a euphemism for orgasm, how are we to hear Romeo’s final lines (“With a kiss, I die”)? What is the role of the potion here, and how is it similar to the potion in *Tristan*? (Both “potion” and “poison” are used interchangeably in the Middle Ages, and start to be differentiated in the Early Modern period--we see Shakespeare here exploring their similarities and fatal differences). Is Juliet’s death also erotically charged? Kneeling on the ground, we see her stab herself in her lower abdomen--pay attention to the look on her face as she falls on Romeo’s body (is that a smile?).