

ARTICLE

# Crisis and Correspondence: Style in the Nineteenth Century

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In his manifesto *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (1850), Richard Wagner characterised the nineteenth century as a time of crisis. Echoing Saint-Simon, he defined this crisis as a discrepancy between the spirit of the age and the actual, historical conditions. Evoking some of the most potent concepts of modern thinking—Zeitgeist, genius, and the Gesamtkunstwerk—Wagner outlined an aesthetic theory by which the artwork (including architecture) simultaneously reflects and shapes its context, serving both as a mirror of its age and an agent of change.

Wagner's seemingly paradoxical notion of art provides an apt introduction to historicist thinking. Obsessed with the idea of correspondence (or the lack of it) between art and its times, nineteenth-century thinkers such as Heinrich Hübsch, Carl Bötticher and Gottfried Semper all responded to the perceived crisis. While Hübsch and Bötticher sought to alleviate the crisis by redefining this correspondence for a modern world, Semper presented a far more radical alternative. Not only did he see the current crisis as inevitable; he welcomed it as a necessary dissolution of an old order, out of which a new architecture could emerge. He thus anticipated modernists, such as Sigfried Giedion, for whom historicism was a necessary melt-down; an apocalypse, preparing for the advent of modernism. In this essay, I propose that crisis and style are intrinsically linked in modern thinking. To look closely at this coupling may throw new light not only on historicism but also on the noticeable unease with which the notion of style is treated in contemporary architectural history.

'[T]he crisis will come to an end ... as soon as we can bring ourselves to fill the eminent role assigned to us by the march of civilization.'

—Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon (1821)

The problem with modernity, wrote the composer Richard Wagner in *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (1850), is that it lacks consistency [*Zusammenhäng*]. While ancient Greek society was marked by a perfect match between its inner beliefs and its outer manifestations – displayed, for instance, in its art and architecture – modern society displays nothing but caprice, its art bearing little relation to neither the people nor the age. The nineteenth century, according to Wagner, was a time of 'bad coherence', suffering under the 'errors, perversities, and unnatural distortions of our modern life' (Wagner 1895a: 71).

Wagner's diagnosis was not particularly original. Hegel's lectures on aesthetics, for instance, published in 1835, proposed that the perfect correlation between spirit and matter had existed only in ancient Greek art, never to be attained again. 'Art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past' was Hegel's famous verdict on behalf of art in the modern age (Hegel 1975: 10). To the philosopher Hegel, this did not constitute a

crisis, however. The fact that the spirit no longer found adequate expression in artistic form only meant that it had evolved into a higher state: philosophy. It had been 'transferred into our *ideas* instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality', Hegel proclaimed optimistically. To the artist Wagner, however, the situation seemed far less sanguine. As he saw it, the loss of coherence between art and its times was symptomatic of a crisis that threatened to undermine modern society; a crisis that had to be fought and overcome.

What lurks beneath Wagner's analysis is the idea of the Zeitgeist: the notion that every age has a particular character which pervades its doing and making. 'The spirit of the age weaved and bound together the most diverse characteristics [...] into the whole that confronts us', as Johann Gottfried Herder put it (2004: 39–40). The Zeitgeist, in its turn, is based on the distinctly modern belief that there is – and must be – a strict correlation between historical conditions and historical expression. In this essay I will examine this belief, calling it, with Gottfried Semper, the principle of correspondence.<sup>1</sup> This principle allows two conceptual operations. On the one hand, it allows the historian to establish a taxonomy of such correspondences throughout history – in nineteenth-century art history, usually referred to as styles. On the other hand, it allows the artist and the historian alike to denounce any age (including his or her own) that does not display such a correspondence as a time of crisis. Style

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and crisis, therefore, are interrelated opposites, forming poles between which modern architectural thinking was shaped and articulated.

### Organic vs Critical History

Even though the notion of *Zeitgeist* is a brainchild of German idealism and romanticism, its most operative legacy emerged in France, among proto-positivist thinkers such as Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte. In a rather rambling collection of letters and essays, called *Du système industriel* (1821, part of which was in fact written by Comte), Saint-Simon described history as an oscillation between organic and critical periods (Saint-Simon 1976: 153–86). While the former were periods in which all social forces formed an organic unity, the latter were periods of crisis in which the correspondence between society and its beliefs had broken down. The Middle Ages had been an organic period, its science, art, social structure and religious belief all in perfect correlation. The modern period, on the other hand, was in a critical state, its material and social structures no longer fitting its knowledge and beliefs. The nineteenth century constituted a transitory and mongrel stage of world history, in which the metaphysical beliefs of previous eras were lost, but had not yet been replaced by something new. The political, social and spiritual upheavals of modern Europe were all symptoms of this crisis, Saint-Simon proclaimed, a crisis of correspondence in which society's political, cultural and epistemological structures no longer matched its actual historical stage of development. 'So long as the political order does not conform to this national tendency, society will necessarily be in a state of crisis', he wrote (1976: 175), seeing radical political and social reform as the only possible solution to the 'frightening prolongation of the crisis' that was evident all over the enlightened world (1976: 153).

If the notion of a mismatch between an age and its manifestations inspired political reform, it also lent itself to reflection on cultural phenomena, including art and architecture. Within the organicist aesthetics of German idealism and romanticism, for instance, the epoch and its artworks formed an organic totality, marked by a necessary correlation between part and whole. Throughout history, the *Zeitgeist* had guaranteed the synchronic coherence of all cultural expressions, tying them together as a whole, as Herder said. The problem with the modern age, however, was that this coherence was lacking – a lack that brought Wagner to describe the present as 'un-natural', missing the organic coherence of previous eras (Wagner 1895a: 69–72, 77–88). Only art sprung from the actual needs and forces of the present could heal this schism, he thought, and thus transform the present into a true, organic epoch. The problem was, however, that these needs and forces were rather hard to pin down. 'Where are the life-conditions which shall summon forth the Necessity of this Art-work and this redemption?' Wagner wrote, lamenting the fact that the confused state of contemporary society made its *Zeitgeist* notoriously resistant to artistic representation (1895a: 195). This task would

be completed only by the artist of the future, he argued. By yet again anchoring art within the inner will of the people, the lost coherence between art and epoch would be restored, and art would yet again fulfil its role as an organic embodiment of its time.

### The *Zeitgeist*'s Imprint: New Notions of Style

In architectural thought of the nineteenth century, the correspondence between epoch and art was identified by a very specific concept – that of style. As Caroline van Eck has shown, the significance of the term changed from rhetorical genre to epochal character around 1800, a change that was fundamentally linked to the idea of correspondence outlined above (van Eck et al. 1995: 89–107). In the German debate on style, this link is very visible. '[S]tyle crystallized organically out of the time and the circumstances', wrote Rudolf Wiegmann in 1829 (1992: 106), insisting that style was the outward expression of the spirit of the age. Franz Kugler, a few years later, presented style as an imprint of human relations, expressing the 'feelings and consciousness of a people and an age' (Kugler 1834: 2). Even Heinrich Hübsch, who usually avoided such idealist vocabulary, conceded that style indicated a true correlation between form and purpose. Greek architecture 'was truth in the fullest meaning of the word', thought Hübsch, because 'every architectural element was formed and used in a way consistent with its true purpose' (Hübsch 1992: 77–78). True style (or natural style, as Hübsch called it) could only emerge if the architect 'was well acquainted with the needs of his time', and could match material and cultural requirements with corresponding architectural forms (Hübsch 1992: 81). Carl Bötticher, similarly, called attention to the principle informing all 'true styles', insisting that once the modern age managed to define a similar correspondence for itself, a 'third style' would evolve with historical inevitability (Bötticher 1992: 150–51).

The theorist who most firmly identified the understanding of style as a matter of temporal-aesthetic correspondence was Gottfried Semper, who dedicated two huge volumes and a host of other writings to the topic. For Semper, style signified the correlation between the given and the made, or in other words, between the material, cultural and spiritual factors of a particular epoch and its artistic creation. 'Style means giving emphasis and artistic significance to the basic idea and to all intrinsic and extrinsic coefficients that modify the embodiment of the theme in a work of art', runs one of Semper's famously convoluted definitions (Semper 1989b: 136). The meaning is plain enough, however. If material and cultural conditions vary over time, so must artistic expression, in so far as art is a product of historically specific factors, or 'coefficients', as Semper liked to call them. This was what his infamous 'formula for style' was trying to show. The work of art and architecture is the 'uniform result or function of several variable values that unite in certain combinations' wrote Semper, an insight he expressed in the mathematical equation  $U=C(x, y, z, t, v, w \dots)$  where 'U' stands for style, and 'x, y, z' for the different coefficients influencing it. As soon as the coefficients change, so does the final result,

and if not, the result is by definition faulty (Semper 1984: 241). When 'antiquarian' architects continue to build like the ancient Greeks, despite the difference between our age and theirs, it is an example of such a fault (Semper 2004: 78). The lack of correspondence did not result merely in a few inferior buildings, however. For Semper, as for Hübsch and Bötticher, it was symptom of a far-reaching crisis in modern art and society alike. To look more closely at these evocations of crisis may bring out some important nuance in nineteenth century thinking on architecture, throwing new light on the modern notion of crisis as well as its antidote: style.

### Hübsch's Crisis

Hübsch rose to fame with his battle cry of 1828, 'In what style should we build', yet his notion of crisis went back farther. Already during his travels in Greece and Italy between 1817 and 1824, Hübsch tells the readers of his *Bauwerke* of 1838, he was pondering the crisis in contemporary architecture and how to solve it (Hübsch 1838: 2). The encounter with classical architecture confirmed for him that all true styles were based on the same principle of correspondence between given historical conditions and built architectural form. Instead of converting him back to neo-classicism, however, the experience convinced him that modern architecture had to be fundamentally different from the Greek. '[T]he formative factors that condition today's architecture are completely different – indeed almost diametrically opposed to those that affected the Greek style', wrote Hübsch, 'and yet we build in the Greek style [...]. How is this possible, if what I have said up to now is true?' (Hübsch 1992: 76). In other words: if the principle of correspondence applied to every genuine historical style, it also demonstrated the shortcomings of the present, in so far as the nineteenth century had failed to use its own 'formative factors' as the basis for its own style.

While Hübsch drew a somewhat gloomy conclusion from his travels, he also observed something else, which may have consoled him. Modernity was not alone in its critical state. In fact, history was full of examples of similar break-downs between artistic expression and underlying historical conditions. One such example he found in Rome's old basilica churches. Early medieval Rome was a time of crisis, Hübsch thought, in which social and spiritual upheavals led to a poor fit between the time and its art. The basilica church was a symptom of this crisis. Originally built as a Roman assembly hall and market, the basilica type was later adopted for totally different purposes and modified according to new needs. Instead of ending up as a stylistic bastard, however, the early Christians somehow managed to retain the organic connectedness between form and purpose, developing the basilica type into a new and genuine architectural style. As Hübsch recalled,

I eagerly adopted Rome's old basilicas as my guide: They seemed to me to originate from a similar crisis as the one we see today. With unselfconscious artistic naiveté, they [the early Christians] sought

to elevate their new aspirations to another level, so that the overall forms retained an organic connectedness, even when the details – through the use of antique fragments – included much that was disharmonious.<sup>2</sup> (Hübsch 1838: 2)

Like the early Christians, nineteenth-century architects were confronted with the difficult task of fitting new needs into old types. There was a critical mismatch, in other words, between the given conditions and the cultural aspiration. The early Christians solved this crisis, not by inventing a new type but by radically reshaping an old one to fit their requirements, physically and spiritually. They thus created a new style as an organic continuation of an old, drawing living Romanesque out of dead Roman, so to speak. The basilica church showed how a true architectural style could emerge from crisis, providing, Hübsch thought, a profoundly inspiring example for the modern age.

If Hübsch occasionally indulged in cultural analyses of style, his 1828 manifesto promoted a rather more worldly approach. A new style cannot derive from the past 'but only from the present state of natural formative factors', he declared, defining these factors as building material, 'technostatic experience', and climatic protection. Only as an afterthought did he add, 'the more general nature of our needs based on climate and perhaps in part on culture' (Hübsch 1992: 71). Yet even within this relatively constricted definition of style, the idea of correspondence remains the guiding principle. Modern style – like Greek style – had to be based on contemporary conditions: on 'the present state of the formative factors', as Hübsch put it (1992: 83). As today's formative factors were totally different than those of the Greeks, modern architecture obviously had to be and look different (Hübsch 1992: 76). Yet both eras were governed by the principle of correspondence, without which architecture would be only 'senseless form'. Only by ridding architecture of its inherited store of obsolete forms, and developing forms adequate to modern society, could it regain its significance as a public art. In one startling passage, he writes:

The building of the new style will no longer have a historical and conventional character, so that emotional response is impossible without prior instruction in archaeology: they will have a truly natural character, and the layman will feel what the educated artist feels. (Hübsch 1992: 99)

In this remarkable statement, Hübsch entrusts the Volk with the intuitive recognition of 'true form'. Only by communicating directly with the emotional life of the people (to use an expression from Sigfried Giedion many years later) could architecture yet again become meaningful. Here, as Barry Bergdoll points out, Hübsch far transcends the materialist position into which he is often inscribed (Bergdoll 1983: 3–13). Instead, he approaches a distinctly modern notion of the *Zeitgeist* as the immediate relationship between a people, an age, and its art.

### Bötticher's Crisis

Hübsch was not alone in envisioning a new style emerging from the needs and means of modern society. Whether these needs were defined in materialistic or idealistic terms, most writers agreed that 'we should strive to attain a living art that faithfully reflects and is nourished by the character of its own time' (Wiegmann 1992: 111). The modern age should not imitate history but work in a manner analogous to that of previous epochs. A theorist with a particular interesting vision of what this might mean was the Berlin scholar Carl Bötticher, famous for his studies of Greek tectonics. In a lecture given at the 1846 Schinkelfest, Bötticher lamented the unprincipled eclecticism of contemporary architecture. Like Hübsch, however, he consoled himself by identifying historical predecessors for the contemporary crisis. He found three. Firstly, Indian cave architecture was incoherent because the 'creative invention' of its makers was unable to dominate its raw material. As a result (analogous to Hegel's symbolic stage), this architecture was unfree and fettered, incapable of communicating its spiritual content in an adequate way. Arab architecture was next. Incapable of understanding the antique style, wrote Bötticher, the Arabs 'destroyed its art-form by covering the structural skeleton, carpet-like, with the geometrical patterns of their own floral world, thus overlaying their buildings with an opulent but meaningless coating' (Bötticher 1992: 153). After these xenophobic demonstrations, Bötticher turned to home ground. The misunderstood attempts during the Renaissance at clothing German architecture in an antique style were as reprehensible as those of the Indians and Arabs, he thought. 'No lengthy critique of such a meaningless welter of forms is called for: the senseless and bizarre formations that were produced are too well known and too displeasing', Bötticher shuddered (1992: 153). The problem with all these periods was that they lacked unity between inner principle and outer appearance, between *Kernform* and *Kunstform*, to use Bötticher's famous terms from a slightly different context (Bötticher 1844: 53). Without such a correspondence, architecture fails to be meaningful. Crisis, consequently, is a regular occurrence in the history of architecture, arising every time the principle of correspondence is not heeded. As Bötticher writes, 'History itself has marked such an attempt as a destruction of everything that makes architecture into an art. Wherever it has made its appearance in architecture, it has signalled the death of the idea of form' (1992: 152).

Even though Bötticher promised to discuss three crises in the history of architecture, he promptly went on to a fourth, namely the contemporary. Like the Arabs, nineteenth-century architects kept clothing their buildings in random coatings, irrespective of the cultural and material make-up of the building. The result was meaningless, because the work lacked organic coherence between its inner principle and its outer form. Yet the nineteenth century suffered under an even more fundamental problem. As long as the present did not have a new set of 'factors' upon which to base a new style, it inevitably relied on a historical vocabulary. This was the terrible predicament

of the contemporary age, thought Bötticher; it was condemned, as it were, on two fronts. On the one hand, it could not repeat historical motifs in a meaningful way, and on the other, it could not do without them. If trying to eliminate historical style, 'we would find ourselves alone in an immense void, having lost all the historical ground that the past has provided for us and for the future as the only basis on which further development is possible' (Bötticher 1992: 151). Trying to find a way out of this impasse, Bötticher adopted a Hegelian formula. While neither the Greek nor the Gothic style allowed for further development (trying would be like attempting to perfect perfection, Bötticher wrote), the present nevertheless needed both, as the dialectical antitheses from which a new synthesis would emerge:

[A]nother art will emerge from the womb of time and will take on a life of its own: an art in which a different structural principle will sound a more ringing keynote than the other two. Another style will be born, but only after the other two have made their contributions. Because this style will have as its origin and its basis the inner principles of the two other styles, it cannot exclude either of them; but will embrace both and allow them to serve it jointly. (Bötticher 1992: 157)

Cleverly including past styles into the 'present formative factors' from which modern style had to emerge, Bötticher seemed to offer nineteenth-century architecture the possibility to have its cake and eat it too. While waiting for the new material that would engender a wholly new style for the modern era, the need for old styles should be considered a real and relevant factor in contemporary architecture. Bötticher called this a 'true eclecticism', seeing it, at least temporarily, as a solution to the crisis.

### Semper's Crisis

The nineteenth century's 'frightening prolongation of the crisis' consisted in the fact that the present conditions, rather like Hegel had predicted, seemed to be beyond external representation. From this point of view, modernity was condemned to a perpetual mismatch between its historical essence and its outward appearance. Despite hopes that a new material would relieve the crisis of contemporary architecture, both Hübsch and Bötticher admitted that the problem went deeper. Only 'the advent of a new and totally different period', as Hübsch put it, could alleviate the critical mismatch between the era and its art (Hübsch 1992: 175). But how would such a 'different period' come about?

The theorist who would confront the crisis most directly was Gottfried Semper. Like Wagner, Semper spent much of his life in exile after their mutual engagement in the Dresden uprising of 1849. He shared (at least for a period of his life) not only Wagner's radical politics but also the composer's gloomy diagnosis of modernity as a time of 'bad coherence'. The present was suffering from a lack of correspondence, Semper thought, between political,

social, and cultural conditions. The confusion in architecture and the arts was but a symptom of this, 'a clear manifestation of certain anomalies within existing social conditions' (Semper 1989b: 130). Nowhere did these anomalies present themselves more clearly than in the Great Exhibition of 1851, with its array of mass-produced goods. The commerce and chaos horrified Semper and brought him to conclude that present conditions were 'dangerous for the industrial arts, and decidedly fatal for the traditional higher arts' (1989b: 135). Unlike most of his contemporaries, however, Semper did not see this crisis as altogether destructive. Evoking astrological imagery, he described the present as a cosmic nebulae where new stars are born from the cosmic dust of old systems. Contemporary art is in a similar state, he thought, a precarious balance between destruction and regeneration:

These phenomena of artistic decline and the mysterious phoenixlike birth of new artistic life arising from the process of its destruction are all the more significant for us, because we are probably in the midst of a similar crisis. (Semper 2004: 71)

While there was no doubt that nineteenth-century architecture found itself in a crisis, thought Semper, the crisis could potentially bring forth something new. To understand how was the task of his magnum opus *Der Stil*, a grand if ultimately unsuccessful attempt at redeeming the crisis of modern society by means of style.

If the crisis, as Wagner had stated, consisted in the discrepancy between the age and its outward appearance, the solution seemed simple enough. '[T]he crisis will come to an end [...] as soon as we can bring ourselves to fill the eminent role assigned to us by the march of civilization', wrote Saint-Simon (1979: 153). Semper followed suit. We need, he declared, 'to make artistic use of *our* social needs as factors in the style of *our* architecture in the same way as has been done in the past' (Semper 1989c: 179). But what exactly are the needs of the present? Can they be defined at all? And even more importantly, how can they be embodied in architectural form? These were the pressing concerns underlying *Der Stil*, whose subtitle *Practical Aesthetics* indicates its operative ambition. In a grand, comparative overview of human making and the various factors influencing it, Semper attempted to unravel the secret of style and operationalise it for the modern age. Probing into materials, craft techniques (everything from weaving to ceramics and metalwork), ethnography, religious belief, topography, meteorology, and art history, Semper tried to show how artistic form corresponded to the cultural, material, and spiritual factors of its time and its place. The drooping shape of the Egyptian situla, for instance, reflects the requirement of its material (ceramic), the use to which it is put (to fetch water from the shallow banks of the Nile and be carried on a yoke), and the society from which it emerged (the autocratic and hierarchical society of ancient Egypt). The Greek hydria, on the other hand, although it is also a ceramic vessel, is totally different. It is shaped to fetch water from springs and be carried

on the head, hence its generously receiving mouth, stable proportions, and wide foot. With its upward-striving posture, the hydria represents a culture based on individual freedom, symbolising the democratic, freedom-loving spirit of Greek society:

How significantly the soaring, spiritual, and lucid essence of the spring-worshipping Hellenes emerges symbolically from this subordinated artistic form, in contrast to the situla, which expresses the physical law of gravity and balance in a way quite opposite but no less appropriate to the spirit of the Egyptian people! [...] The basic features of Egyptian architecture seem to be contained in embryo in the Nile pail, and the formal relation of the hydria to certain types of the Doric style is no less striking. (Semper 2004: 469–70)

These kinds of analyses (and *Der Stil* is full of them) demonstrated to Semper's mind the universal validity of the principle of correspondence. By looking carefully at architectural form and the intrinsic and extrinsic factors influencing it, one could understand not only the work itself but also the epoch and the society that had produced it. To do a similar analysis on behalf of contemporary society was the aim of *Der Stil*, and also of Semper's 'Ideal and Universal Collection', developed in the 1850s (Semper 1852). If one could identify the basic factors driving modern society, one would have the keys to a true, contemporary style. 'The future will settle everything', Semper enthused: 'The shackles would fall by themselves if the urge that drives the present became more generally aware of its aim. Here is victory and freedom!' (Semper 1989b: 130, 148).

But, alas, modernity resisted analysis. The contemporary coefficients of style were notoriously elusive, making it impossible, it seemed, to proceed analytically towards a new style. Not surprisingly, *Der Stil* remained incomplete, overestimating, perhaps, the power of analytical reason (Hvattum 2004: 189–92). Semper must have suspected this for some time, for every once in a while his writings hint at a different approach – a reverse equation, so to speak. The turbulence of the modern condition – the crisis, if you like – makes it difficult to define, let alone represent, its cultural coefficients. As a consequence, modernity is 'passing into the formless', Semper wrote ominously (2004: 71). As frightening as it may be to witness this disintegration, it does allow for something new to emerge – 'a new formation in the making', as he wrote. In Semper's case, this 'new' was not simply new coefficients resulting in a new style, but a more radical upheaval in which the principle of correspondence was, as it were, transcended, or at least temporarily reversed. Instead of art being the passive result of given factors, Semper hinted at a future in which art (and architecture) was an active force in shaping society; shaping the very preconditions which defined it, so to speak. This, of course, is the dream of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as Wagner conceived it: an aesthetic leap by which society is not only mirrored but transformed by means of art.

### Sublimating Style: The Gesamtkunstwerk

The aesthetic leap of the Gesamtkunstwerk takes us back to the two strands of historicist thinking touched on in the beginning of this essay. German idealist and romantic philosophy construed the epoch as an organic whole, endowed with its own, unique character. Style was the unifying fingerprint of this epochal organism, growing out of its historical conditions of becoming. Within this framework, the task of the present was to achieve an organic coherence between style and socio-historical conditions, and in this way, consolidate itself as a true epoch. Positivists such as Saint-Simon shared many of these insights, yet added an operative ambition of their own. For Saint-Simon, as for generations of revolutionary thinkers succeeding him, the organic coherence of the epoch was not only a matter of historical analysis but of contemporary implementation. The sublimation of modernity into an epoch proper was something that could be planned and implemented, for instance by means of art. This is precisely the role of the Gesamtkunstwerk in its Wagnerian sense:

In common, too, shall we close the last link in the bond of holy Necessity; and the brother-kiss that seals this bond, will be the *mutual Art-work of the Future*. But in this, also, our great redeemer and well-doer, Necessity's vicegerent in the flesh,—*the Folk*, will no longer be a severed and peculiar class; for in this Art-work we shall all be *one*,— heralds and supporters of Necessity, knowers of the un-conscious, willers of the unwilful, betokeners of Nature,—*blissful men*. (Wagner 1895a: 77)

The Gesamtkunstwerk, as envisioned by Wagner, was simultaneously a manifestation and an actualisation of modern society, sublimating the modern era into an aesthetic totality. Through the Gesamtkunstwerk the modern nation was to be constituted aesthetically; the Volk was not only to be articulated but also *formed* by the total work of art. As Wagner proclaimed: 'It is for Art [...] and Art above all else, to teach this social impulse its noblest meaning, and guide it towards its true direction' (1895b: 56). A kind of sublimated reciprocity reveals itself here between art and the conditions from which it springs. The Gesamtkunstwerk was to emerge out of the depth of a united people, yet it was also to serve as the means by which to bring about such a unity. It was a means of redemption; a vehicle for salvation from the 'baleful state' of modernity, actualising the new conditions of humanity and inaugurating a new art (Wagner 1895a: 210). The artist, then, was to transform contemporary society from a critical to an organic epoch in the Saint-Simonian sense, bringing about a metamorphosis of the mass into a Volk, a civilisation into Culture (Bryant 2004: 158–59). Semper picked up several of these ideas, and although the Semperian Gesamtkunstwerk does not overlap with Wagner's in all respect, they both conceived the Gesamtkunstwerk as the sublimating agent that would bring together art, society, and Zeitgeist in one great, redeeming gesture

(Hvattum 2004). Semper's prophetic statement sums up the argument:

For everything will only remain an eerie phantasmagoria until our national life develops into a harmonious work of art, analogous but richer than Greek art in its short golden age. When this happens, every riddle will be solved! Where are they who have thought of the possibility! (Semper 1899a: 78)

The Gesamtkunstwerk represented a solution — the only solution, according to Semper — to the modern crisis. At the same time it was itself a product of crisis, entirely dependent on the disintegration of art. When Wagner proclaimed that the old art-forms had to be 'used up', and Semper longed to accelerate the disintegration of art, they both envisioned a kind of apocalyptic meltdown that would overturn art's representational status and allow it, momentarily, to take on a transformatory role. This idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk as an agent of change — a harbinger of redemption in modern society — makes it, as much recent scholarship has pointed out, a profoundly modern phenomenon, central to the modernist agenda in the twentieth century (Bryant 2008; Koss 2010; Munch 2012). From Walter Gropius' total building to Sigfried Giedion's desire to 'grasp life as a totality' (Giedion 1995: 87), the history of twentieth century architecture is full of attempts to heal modernity's alleged crisis by means of more or less 'total' works of art.

The Gesamtkunstwerk derives from, yet transcends, the principle of correspondence; allowing, as it were, a momentary reversal of cause and effect. In Wagner's revolution, art shapes the epoch rather than the other way around. If style and crisis form a Hegelian antithesis, the Gesamtkunstwerk could be considered the synthesis transcending the opposition. Wagner's dialectics thus anticipates key themes in twentieth-century architecture, where the Gesamtkunstwerk was called upon to resolve crisis and sublimate style into a living and reciprocal correspondence between art and its times. This line of thinking would have repercussions far into twentieth-century modernism. Although the *term* style is largely abandoned, the principle of correspondence from which the term derives is upheld. From Giedion's exalted plea for architecture to be 'an inner expression of the life process' (Giedion 1995: 88) to Manfredo Tafuri's dystopic characterisation of late modernism as 'a readable diagram of an intolerable situation' (Tafuri 1980: 97), modern architecture remains firmly tied to its Zeitgeist.

If history is envisioned as a succession of coherent epochs — organic wholes in which all expressions of life adhere to a dominant Zeitgeist — then the discrepancies of the present seem all the more conspicuous. In a sense, the principle of correspondence inevitably entails a notion of crisis. To be sure, the sense of crisis expressed by Saint-Simon, Wagner, Hübsch, Bötticher, and Semper was in response to a time of great upheaval, both political and

cultural. But this disorder must have seemed particularly acute when seen against the background of a past construed as coherent and organic. The cry for a unified and unifying 'style of our time' was caused, then, not only by a chaotic present but also by a particular notion of the past which made the present seem by definition deficient and crisis-ridden (Koselleck 1985). Even the Gesamtkunstwerk, called upon to transform the relationship between art and epoch, ultimately remains within the logic of correspondence. The Wagnerian artwork of the future inevitably ended – as did all the great *Gesamtkunstwerke* of the twentieth century – as style.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Semper used the term *Übereinstimmung*, defining style as the 'Übereinstimmung einer Kunsterscheinung mit ihrer Entstehungsgeschichte, mit allen Vorbedingungen und Umständen ihres Werdens' ['correspondence of an art-object with its genesis, with all the pre-conditions and circumstances of its becoming'] (Semper 1979: 402).
- <sup>2</sup> 'Rom's alte Basiliken ergriff ich mit Eifer als Wegweiser: sie schienen mir in einer gleichen Krisis – wie die heutige – entstanden: man suchte damals in ganz unbefangener künstlerischer Naivität das vorliegende neue Ziel auf dem nächsten Wege zu erreichen, so dass die Hauptformen einen organischen Zusammenhang erhielten, während sich freilich – durch die Verwendung antiker Fragmente – viel Unharmonisches einmischte' (Hübsch 1838: 2). Author's translation.

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