Nature and Myth in Richard Wagner's Ring - An Anthropological Perspective

Richard Wagner functioned as a burning-glass, focusing the artistic, political and philosophical currents of his century. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that he was also familiar with anthropological themes and ideas. In *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, Wagner employs anthropological, mythological and philosophical topics, ideas and characters in a way which often contravenes their original intent. Hence, contrary to common readings of the *Ring’s* message, nature is not restored when the ring is given back to the rhinedaughters, but sinks back into the primeval state of *physis*, together with humankind and their institutions. Humans and their nature vanish together when greed for possessions and powers destroys not only the archaic world of the gods, but the cosmos in its present form. - In the *Ring*, Wagner takes leave of the political optimism of his younger years, as it became manifest in his vision of a communal “art-work of the future”. The pessimism informing the *Ring*-cycle testifies to its actuality, as is shown in the recent discussions on the “Staatendämmerung” following the European sovereign debt crisis.

Thomas Bargatzky