

The original artwork [pictured in black and white at bottom] used to produce the 1975 Marvel cover [pictured in color below] is, like a number of other original illustrations for comic books, fetching large sums from collectors.

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Who Knew?

Remember when parents struck like Darth Vader at their kids' comic book collections? "Trash" is the word they used, and out the comics went. Little did anyone realize that he might be throwing out a valuable collectors piece.

More to the point, as Mr. F. Peter Phillips shows in the following illustrated essay on Richard Wagner is how the "comix" have been used to graphically portray his epic "Rng Cycle." Phillips shows how popular culture and its forms (comic books and cartoons) have been incorporated in the *Gesamtkunstwerk* concept and have added still another dimension to the legacy of Wagner's operas.

It wouldn't have surprised Wagner who said after the first production of the Ring in 1876, "Next time, children, everything different." An open mind and a willing heart have always been prerequisites for enjoying any of the fine arts.

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Harry L. Wagner, Publisher
Wagner Society of New York

Wagner in Comix and 'Toons

By F. Peter Phillips

Recent publications have revealed an aspect of Wagner-inspired literature that has been grossly overlooked—Wagner in graphic art (i.e., comics) and in animated cartoons. The Ring has been rendered into comics of substantial integrity at least three times in the past two decades, and a recent scholarly study of music used in animated cartoons has noted uses of Wagner's music that suggest that Wagner's influence may even more profoundly imbued in our culture than we might have thought.

1

During the years 1982-85, Numa Sadoul and France Renoncé produced a four-volume treatment of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, published in German by Verlag Schreiber & Leser individually and later in a splendid box set. Each thin and full-sized (32cm x 24cm) book is devoted to a single opera. The style is fine pen-and-ink with washes of color, and the only words are Wagner's. Each poem is beautifully lettered and rendered in full. "Word balloons" are rarely used; instead, the verses are set forth in large chunks, in the middle of the page (with illustrations along the margins) or else the verses are set along the side—next to the pictures relating to the events described. (See Fig.1 right.)

The style of the drawings is very attractive, fantastical, and sharp. *Rheingold* is set in a primitive world of half-naked goddesses, toad-like dwarfs, and giants covered in lengthy hair. Loge has three fantastically painted faces on his head. Act I of *Walküre* takes place in an idyllic 1500s world, Siegmund in doublet and codpiece. Brünnhilde is sent on her Act II mission bedecked in full armor, making the scene more shocking when Wotan relieves her of it at the end of Act III. Siegfried is a 19th century dandy, and the Wanderer sports a sloping beret reminiscent of *Der Meister* himself. The end of Act III is excitingly erotic as only comics can be. The complicated world of *Götterdämmerung* is set in an imaginary, perhaps futuristic, world of distrust and cunning. These volumes pose an interesting comparison with the 1989–90 four-volume comic of *The Ring of the Nibelung* drawn by American superhero artists Roy Thomas and Gil Kane and published by DC Comics Inc. In his seminal theoretical work, *Understanding*



Fig.1

Comics (Harper Perennial, 1994), Scott McCloud distinguishes between "individual pictures" and "sequential art," a series of pictures that are deliberately juxtaposed to convey narrative information, the latter constituting comics. This distinction becomes quite clear when one compares Sadoul/Renoncé with Thomas/Kane. The former is an extension of the aesthetics of Beardsley, gorgeously detailed but static pictures, each satisfying on its own terms, and illustrating an event that subsists in the words, independently of the picture—in short, an event that the picture portrays. By contrast, the juxtaposed pictures in the DC Comics do what DC Comics are known for—they don't just tell the story, they *are* the story. Frames are wittily devised to compel the reader's eye in the direction of the narrative. page panels are interrupted by triangles and irregular slashes of line.

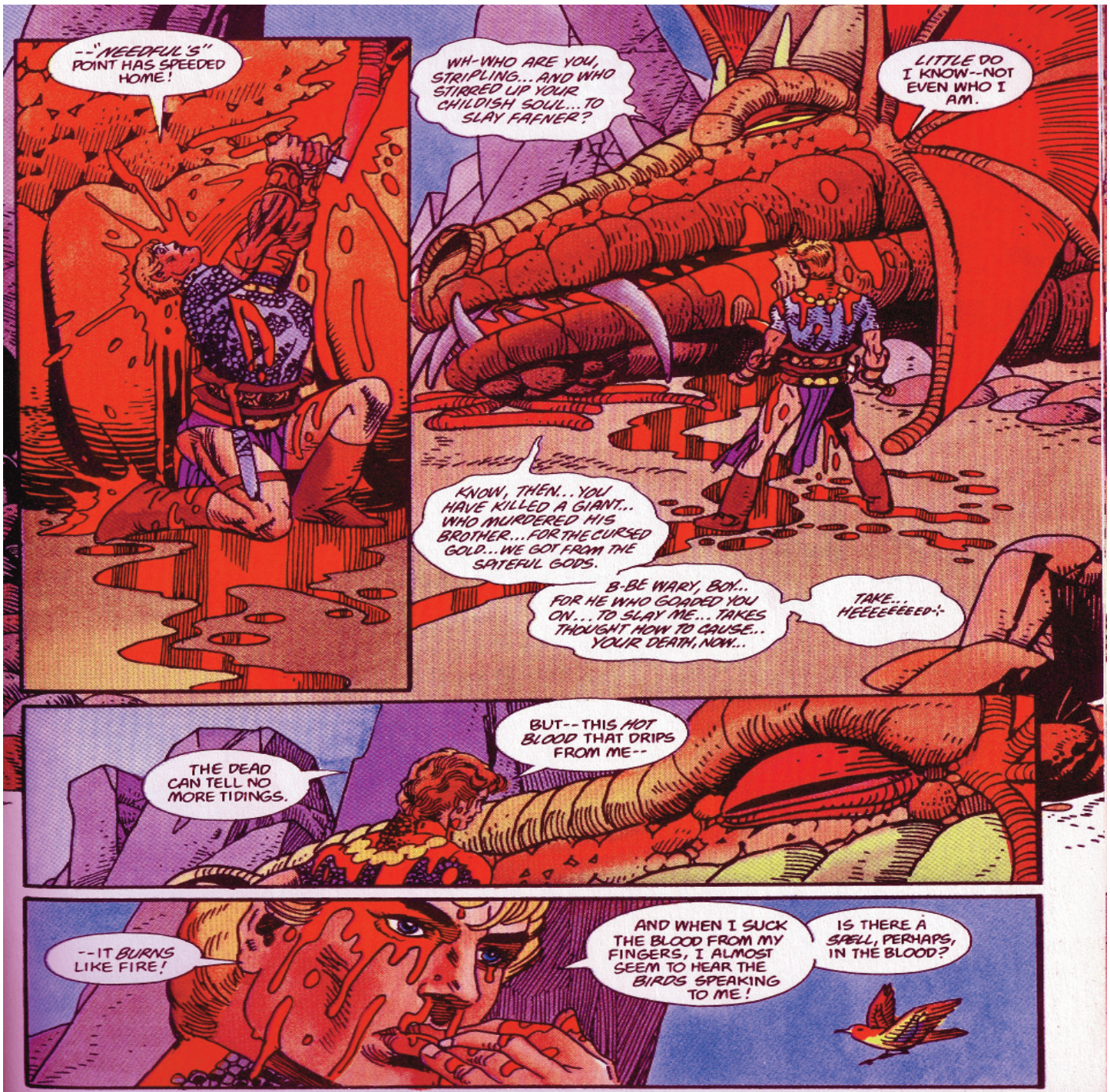


Fig. 2

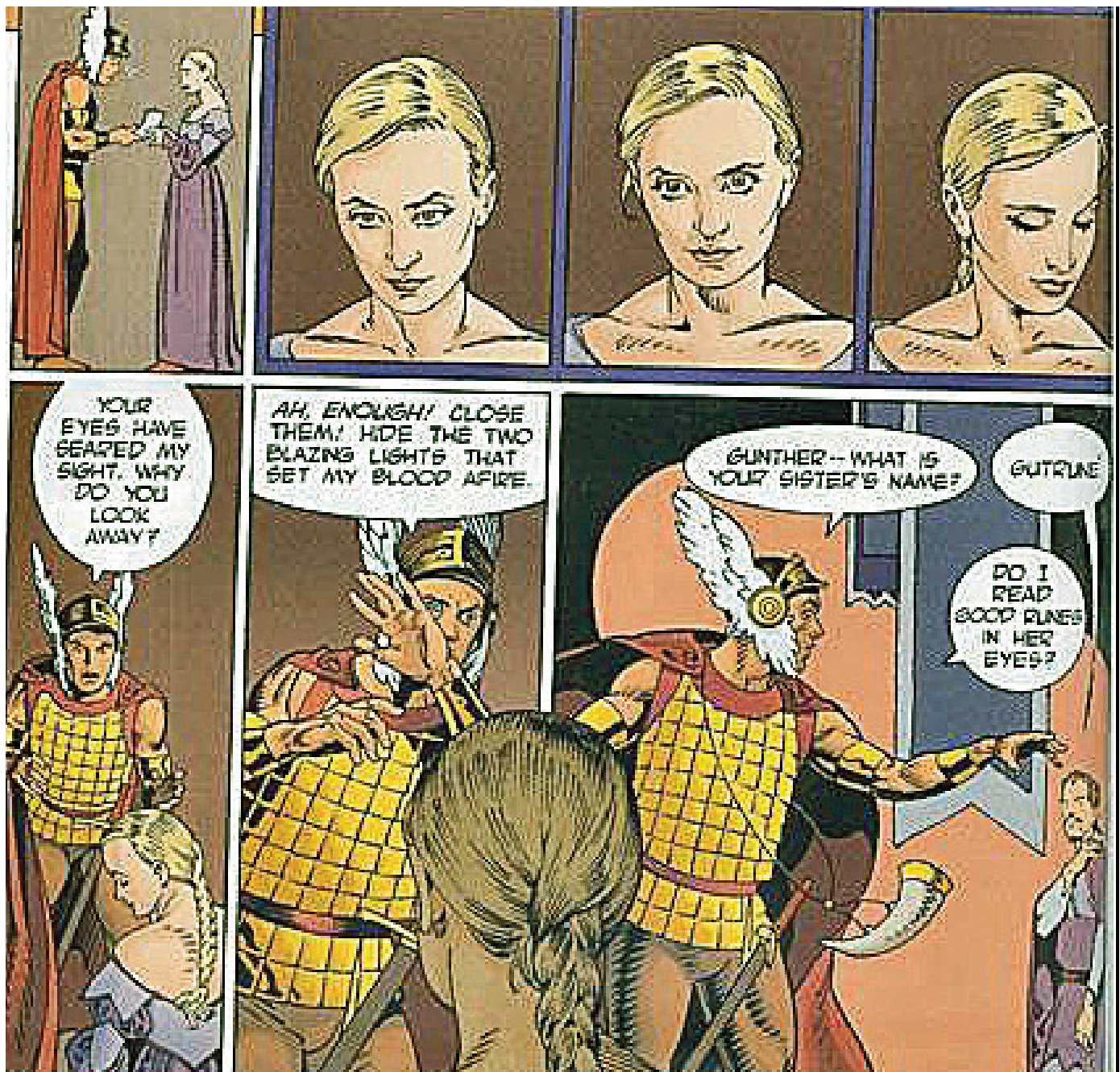
Gone are the olden days of DC, when "Batman" existed in three rows of two square frames each. Here, departing characters recede through diminishing panels; full-page panels are interrupted by triangles and irregular slashes of line. (See Fig. 2. above.) This *is* story telling.

The story told, however, is only that fraction of Wagner's story that fits the DC Comic aesthetic. No subtle pen-and-ink here—it's all word-balloons of Wotan saying things like "I hold unholy the vow that binds unloving hearts, wife" and Fricka replying "What nonsense are you babbling?" The setting is unimaginatively the setting Wagner called for (which is to say a late 20th century depiction of what a 19th century playwright thought Norse mythology might look like). Yet what familiar treats are offered by these masters of action comics! In *Rheingold* alone, Froh's entrance is accompanied by the sound "KR-RAKKOOM;" Mime is beaten to the sounds "KIKK!" "WAK!" "BOK!" and "THAK;" and when Alberich-the-frog is stepped on he emits the sound "GRONNX."

Moreover, bearing the warning "Suggested for Mature Readers," these volumes feature bare-breasted Rhinemaidens; a naked Brünnhilde atop Grane at her immolation; a blond and disturbingly lowan-looking Siegfried and Siegmund; and an especially hot finale for *Walküre* Act I. As a whole, unfortunately, this set is far less insightful (if somewhat more consistently action-packed) than the work it relates.

P. Craig Russell's two-volume *The Ring of the Nibelung* (Dark Horse Comics, 2002) is written in English paraphrase as well, but remarkably imagined and deeply involving. The pictorial renderings of the characters are eccentric and naturalistic rather than heroic. The framing is flexible and, while never distracting, often original (See, e.g., Fig. 3).

Fig. 3



One of the most effective is a motif of drips of liquid. It is introduced in *Rheingold* at the moment of Wotan's "great thought." (See Fig. 5).

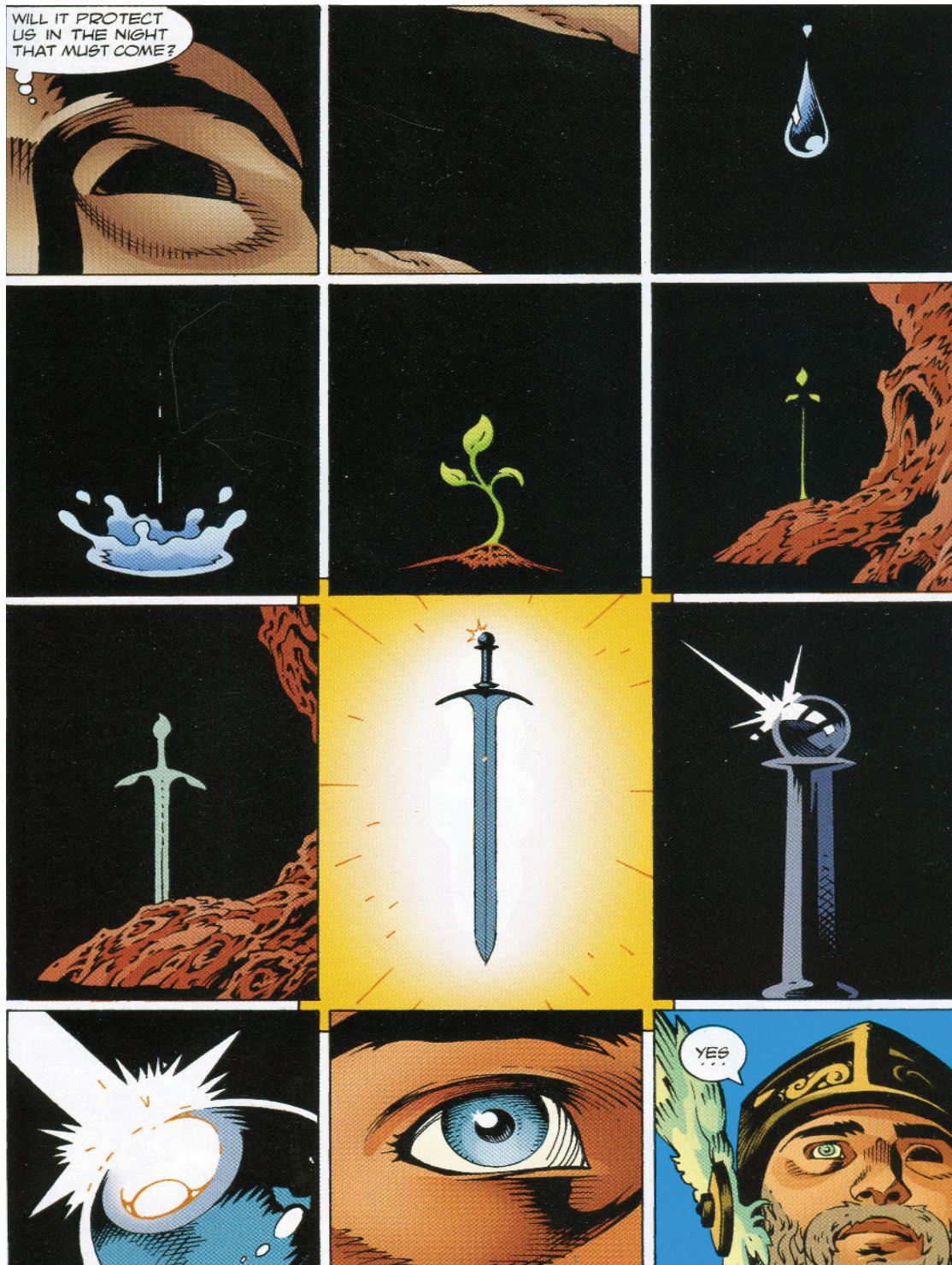
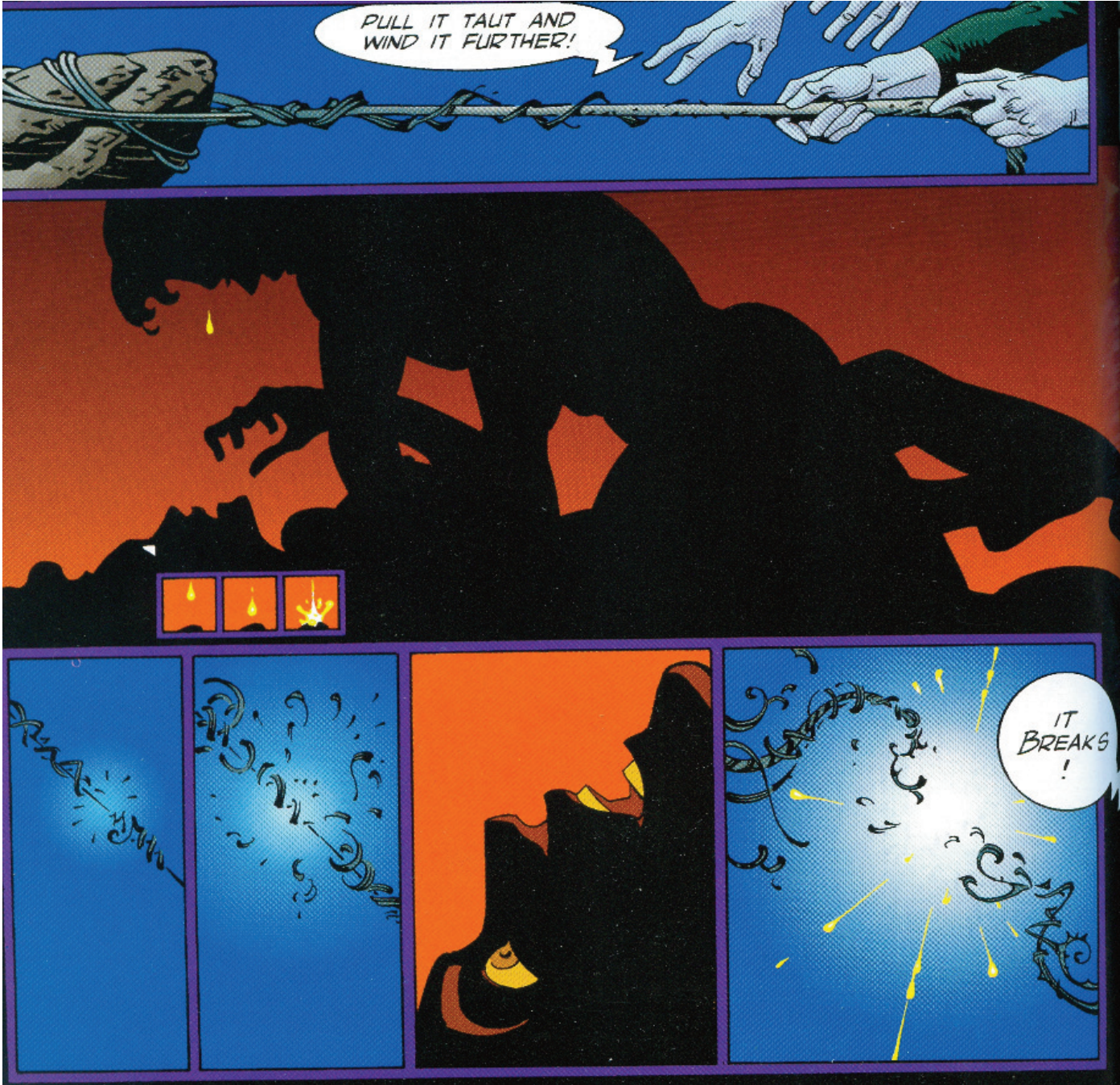


Fig. 5

and occurs with shockingly appropriate effect when the Norns' rope breaks. (See Fig. 6.)

Fig. 6



The depiction of the last moments of *Götterdämmerung* involve the same visual motive, with perhaps a bit too much romance for me, but with every possible credit to Russell for depth of thought, interpretive precision, and taste.

2

Daniel Goldmark's 2005 volume, *Tunes for 'Toons* (University of California Press) is a responsible and scholarly study of the music composed—or ripped off in many cases—for use in animated cartoons during the period from the 1930s to the 1950s. Those of us who grew up with *Looney Tunes*, *Tom and Jerry*, and *Silly Symphonies* can only sit and pout at the prospect that Mr. Goldmark not only had the idea to do this, but got paid for doing it. And he clearly had fun —musical examples listed at the beginning of the volume range from "W.A. Mozart, Sonata in C major for piano, K. 545" (on page 2) to "Melody for 'Oh Bwunhilda, you're so lovely'" (on page 139). And the title of Chapter 2 is "'You Really Do Beat the Shit Out of That Cat': Scott Bradley's (Violent) Music for MGM."

Goldmark is sharp and thorough enough to document a 12-tone scale used in Scott Bradley's score for MGM's *Puttin' on the Dog*. Bradley later wrote: "I hope Dr. Schoenberg will forgive me for using his system to produce funny music, but even the boys in the orchestra laughed when we were recording it." (p. 70) He also notes that Bradley quotes *Tristan* early in the cartoon. And he does not rest with a terrific analysis of Warner Brothers' well-known 1957 *What's Opera, Doc?* It is even more startling to learn that Wagner was by far the most quoted classical composer in cartoons. "Other favorites include Rossini, Mendelssohn, Liszt, Chopin, Franz von Suppé [and how!], Brahms, Johann Strauss, Schubert, Schumann, Tchaikovsky, and Beethoven," but Wagner was clearly the most quoted (p. 109). Wagner's popularity in the United States, the familiarity of his melodies, and the intentional flexibility of his motifs made his music perfectly fit for animated cartoons.

Even more surprising is the music within the canon that was chosen for this purpose. A study of the car-

toons scored by Carl Stalling reveals that, "[during Stalling's twenty-plus years at Warner Bros., Wagner cues appear in 120 different cartoons." The most frequently cited works were the Bridal Chorus from *Lohengrin* (22 cartoons), the *Rienzi* overture [!!] (21 cartoons), the *Tannhäuser* overture and *Götterdämmerung* (each in 16 cartoons), and *Walküre* (15 cartoons). (p. 141)

3

An artist's impact on society is often more evident in popular culture than in scholarly or artistic treatments. Verdi was notoriously cautious when rehearsing arias of his new works, for fear that the Venetian gondoliers would sing them before the premieres. (He loved hearing them sung afterwards, of course.) The three comic books and the study of cartoons here reviewed suggest that Wagner is not merely the subject of expensive revivals in elite opera houses, but resides in the very weavings of our world, claiming a formidable grasp on the popular imagination.

Those who may still doubt this conclusion are referred to <http://www.accoutrements.com/products/11444.html>, a web page describing a "Richard Wagner Action Figure." The manufacturer's description:

"Wilhelm Richard Wagner was a man of many talents and interests, but his true passion was for the opera. Today he is primarily known for writing and conducting some of the most influential operas in history. This 5" (13.3 cm) tall, hard vinyl action figure comes with a removable baton. Illustrated blis-tercard."

It's for sale at

<http://www.mcphee.com/items/11444.html>