Illustration 1:
Herzog & de Meuron, Tristan und Isolde,
Berlin State Opera, Act 3, April 8, 2006. Photograph by Monika Rittershaus.
In the mid-1930s, faced with the double threat to European culture posed by Fascism and Stalinism, Walter Benjamin attempted to reassess art on the basis of the popular, technically reproducible media of photography and film. To do so, he made use of their political advantage: the transformation of individual contemplation into a collective perception and thereby the transformation of society as a whole. And it seems no accident that he refers to architecture as the art form whose reception has always taken place in a state of dispersion and adaptation. With regard to the new media of today and their immersive potential, this text proposes a reassessment of Benjamin’s concept of an ‘optic unconsciousness’ and a ‘collective, dispersed, haptic perception’, updated by the contemporary shift from mechanical to digital reproduction. If Benjamin set his political hopes on architecture and the city, on their function in everyday life and on their dispersed, unconscious reception by the masses, where then do the emancipatory, participatory, and critical potentials for the appreciation of digital reproductions and immersive environments lie today? Preliminary answers might be drawn from a case study of an atmospheric stage set by Herzog & de Meuron.

1. Dive into Immersion

The term ‘immersion’, literally ‘diving into’, has taken on two different meanings in contemporary aesthetic discourse: both denote a shift into another form of reality, the loss of the present here and now in favor of an alternative mental state. Both further underline the emotional participation of the observer by reducing the (critical) distance between him or her and the observed. The two notions, however, take diverse positions on the degree of absorption of the viewer: on one side, immersion is pictured as a total enclosure by a medium, as an illusionistic image space, which presents a seamless totality capable of capturing the viewer’s perception, and which addresses primarily digital virtual realities (cf. Grau 2003: 13f.). While this strand of ‘im-

1 “On the one hand, they [virtual immersive spaces] give form to the ‘all-embracing’ ambitions of the media makers, and on the other, they offer the observers, particularly through their totality, the option of fusing with the image medium, which affects the