

A close-up, profile view of a man with a beard and mustache, looking out through horizontal window blinds. He is wearing a white shirt and a dark tuxedo jacket. His hand is visible in the foreground, resting on the blinds, wearing a ring with a red stone and a silver band. The background is a blurred cityscape with tall buildings.

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## THE WAGNER FILES WAGNER'S LIFE AND WORK AS TRANSMEDIA

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# THE WAGNER FILES: A CROSSMEDIA GESAMTKUNSTWERK?

*Would Richard Wagner, had he lived today, have considered crossmedia collaboration as a means of exploring and elaborating on his furious and epic music? Nicolò Gallio visited Visions du Réel, where the files were presented.*

WORDS NICOLÒ GALLIO • PHOTOS FALCO SELIGER

On May 22nd 2013, the 200th anniversary of the birth of the German composer, the notion of a “total work of art” became reality thanks to the producer Christian Beetz of Gebrueder Beetz Filmproduktion, he chose Wagner as the subject of an episode in his series *The Culture Files*, a documentary format that explores the unsolved mysteries of European cultural icons in the context and style of a modern day TV crime drama. It also features the lives and deaths of Pier Paolo Pasolini, Zarah Leander, Heinrich von Kleist and Ludwig van Beethoven.

The Wagner File is first and foremost a docudrama co-produced with SWR/ARTE, directed by filmmaker Ralf Pleger and starring Samuel Finzi and Pegah Ferydoni as Richard Wagner and his second wife, Cosima. But the project was also developed as a crossmedia event, which was presented on April 23rd in Nyon, at Visions du Réel. Beetz showcased the 90-minute film and Wagner File – The App which is funded by Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg, Media and MDM and designed for iPad and iPhone. It features archive documents and pictures, interviews and audio re-





*The Wagner Files*, Ralf Pleger, 2013. Courtesy of Falco Seliger

cordings, all of which provide a more immersive exploration of Wagner's world. An extraordinary highlight is the "music machine" created by American music animator Stephen Malinowski, who has worked for artists such as Björk; he transforms the overture to *The Flying Dutchman* note by note into animated circles, lines and squares.

**Without his art Wagner would have been defined today as "a small time criminal", "a crude anti-Semite" and a "cross-dresser".**

In addition to that, Knesebeck Publishing House is due to release a graphic novel written by Andreas Völlinger and illustrated by Flavia Scuderi.

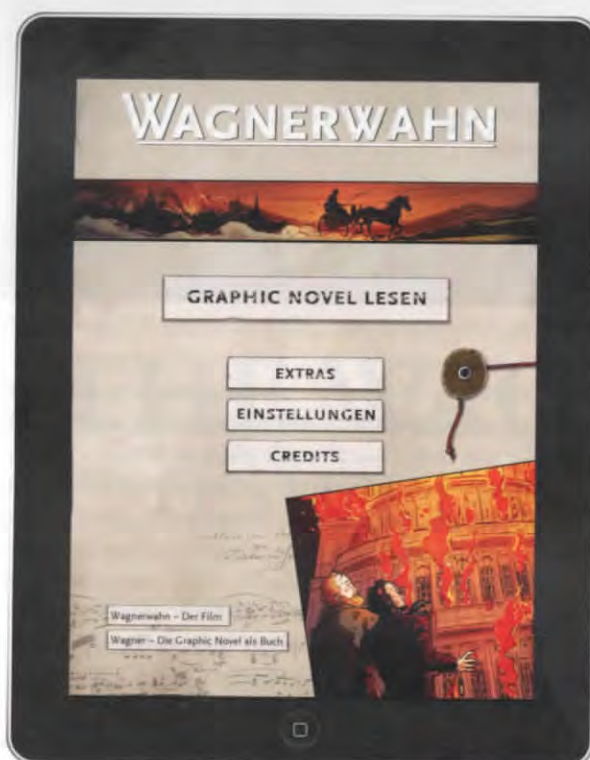
The film's structure displays a multilayered approach in its exploration of the life of the composer. According to Beetz: "The aim of the project is to reach a wide audience across the different media, focusing on young people: it will be broadcast on TV and distributed in the education sector." So the objective was to find someone who could create a style attractive to younger audiences yet underpinned by a deep analysis of Wagner's work, which would be provided by international experts. The solution was found in a director with a vast and concrete knowledge of classical music: Ralf Pleger, a German filmmaker born in 1967, with

a background in Musicology, whose previous works fused together glossy style, vibrant editing and a clear understanding of the role that classical music plays in films.

The documentary reflects the layering of linguistic codes; it's a hybrid film, mixing docudrama and detective conventions, interspersed with the animated sequences of artist Flavia Scuderi and enriched with digital maps and split screens. The dynamics between Richard and Cosima are intercut with some powerful scenes that combine Wagner's crescendos with epic camerawork that ascends up and over the Swiss peaks.

If the acted sequences are set in a sort of post-World War II limbo, reminiscent of the classic Hollywood melodrama, the investigation scenes take place in a modern multimedia lab, a real investigation room in which historians, biographers and musicians, such as Simone Young (Wagner conductor and music director of the Hamburg Opera), Philippe Jordan (Wagner conductor and music director of the Paris Opera) and Oliver Hilmes (author of the bestselling biography on Cosima), dissect Wagner's opus and his larger than life persona: a renowned composer but also a controversial character. According to leading experts who have studied his life, without his art, he would have been defined today as "a small-time criminal", "a crude anti-Semite" and a "cross-dresser". >





To add depth to an already complex set of material, which took two years of production and one year of shooting, Pleger avoided simply producing re-enactments of Wagner's past: "I wanted to stage the scenes like fictional interpretations of the facts and not to pretend that they were the facts themselves," explains the director "I opted for a different look, like those melodramatic films from the 1950s/1960s Hollywood. We tell a story about scandal, focusing on the investigation room because a stronger reference to modern crime scene procedures is something that, nowadays, everybody understands and is familiar with."

Although he knew Wagner's music, from having studied his work, Pleger approached the project by reading biographies and diving into real sources: Cosima's biography and Wagner's letters in particular. He tried to get into the minds of the couple, delving deep into their emotions, studying their behaviour and using their own words to write their dialogues in the fiction.

"In the documentary we have two levels," says Pleger. "The first one is related to the facts according to the experts and includes the female narrator, whose voice is provided by the actress Regina Lemnitz. There is no speculation here. The second one is created with the scenes with the actors: this is an interpretation, more artificial than conventional re-enactments, because it is based on the codes of melodramas, which weren't natural at all."

**Broadcasters are focused on people of about 60 years old and want to have total control on the projects, but they still think about them in terms of traditional slots. On the other side, the Arthouse market looks at the 55 and over range. So how do we reach younger audiences?**

Consequently, Finzi and Ferydoni's constantly overacted and stressed performances are alternated with more scientific reconstructions, animations and digital inserts that break the narrative flow of the burning emotional exchanges between Richard and Cosima and result in the climatic finale.

*The Wagner Files* was shaped as a collective effort that brought together creative people from different fields. Beetz knew how to find the creative balance because he had already been involved in large scale crossmedia events such as *Farewell Comrades!* Interactive, the fall of the Soviet Empire as told by the people who experienced it. This project took three years to be developed and consisted of a TV series, web format and a book. His production company had been



involved in more than 100 documentary films for the national and international markets since 2000, winning the Grimme-Award for *Farewell Comrades!* and receiving an Oscar Nomination for Best Documentary Short for *Open Heart* directed by Kief Davidson. However, he felt that his role was shifting from traditional film producer to content producer, and now has a clear understanding of how the whole process has changed through four steps: content – audience – storytelling – media.

“The tough part of the development, aside from financing, is to find the right team and to convince filmmakers, game designers and web developers to work together,” says Beetz. “I strongly believe that collaborations and partnerships are the key to developing complex projects, but there’s a need to change approach. Broadcasters are focused on people of about 60 years old and want to have total control on the projects, but they still think about them in terms of traditional slots. On the other side, the Arthouse market looks at the 55 and over range. So how do we reach younger audiences? The educational market has a huge need of contents, but we need emotional ways to attract people and engage them, and we also have to face new production challenges, such as finding a price for the web-based side of these projects – and public funds for them as well, just like the ones already in place for the film industry. It is a learning-by-doing process, but we need to go that way.” –

The Wagner File can be found at:

<http://www.gebrueder-beetz.de/en/productions/the-wagner-file-tv>



*The Wagner Files*, Ralf Pleger, 2013. Courtesy of Falco Seliger

[www.polishdocs.pl](http://www.polishdocs.pl)



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