Wagner's Illusion or the Holy Land of Capital
PETER WEIBEL

A CYBER-OPERA

Wagner's failure is still of great interest even today, for the very reason that he is so successful among the bourgeoisie. This success cannot be attributed merely to his artistic essence - his music that is, to put it mildly, in the words of Nietzsche, too affected and only suited as an irritant for tired nerves - but rather to his ideological effect. The bourgeoisie takes pleasure in the failure of a revolutionary who exchanged social rebellion for emotional release at a very early age. "Wagner never calculates as a musician, from the standpoint of some musician's conscience: what he wants is the effect and nothing but the effect. And he knows on what he has to have this effect!" (Nietzsche) Similar to music and direction made in Hollywood, in spite of, or perhaps precisely because of, all his acoustic gesticulative amplifications and instrumental rhetoric, Wagner's musical faculty of language is aimed at the psychologically picturesque, the suggestive essence of drama and melodrama. Hence, as Nietzsche said, his music appeals "to something a noble artist should never appeal to — the masses! The immature! The blase! The pathological! The idiots! The Wagnerians!" and Queenians. For the best thing to be said about Wagner's music is that it is magnificent kitsch for the intellectual classes and Wagner himself an ingenious Freddy Mercury for the highly sophisticated music world. It is embarrassing to have to put up with this yearly Bayreuthian balderdash, something that Nietzsche loathed even back in his day.

The situation is quite different with Wagner's philosophical positions, which are still deserving of our attention today and which are, in our opinion, the true reason for Wagner's appeal — albeit with a perfectly suited partner in the rousing emotionalism of his music. This hypertext opera is an attempt to propose a new interpretation of Wagner's synthesis of the arts — namely, the theory of delusion. Wahnfried is thus the indicative name of Wagner's ultimate domicile. This cyber-opera does not lay claim to a monopoly of interpretation but rather, in accordance with the structure of the non-linear network of hypertext, offers several different simultaneous interpretations on 6 channels or windows that can be accessed and controlled locally (in the Brucknerhaus) and non-locally (outside the Brucknerhaus). Whilst it is usually the set designer who has the sole monopoly on visually producing his and the director's

interpretation parallel to the music, offering one and the same set for each movement and each musical passage, and thus blockading the spectators' and listeners' desire to create their own interpretations with his weighty stage monopoly, the technological hypertext method makes it possible to navigate one's way through multiple interpretations. The acoustic, visual and textual hypertext architecture serves, as it were, as a panoramic electronic stage set, ever changing and incessantly ramifying. The local and non-local audience is liberated to become an interpreter ranking as director, set designer and conductor. The users are able to get their own idea of Wagner by drawing on the available information tracks providing individual fragments such as Wagner's theory of the synthesis of the arts, Wagner and women, Wagner and politics, Wagner and ideology, Wagner's life, and Wagner's contemporaries.

Wagner's music, his delusion and his synthesis of the arts are interpreted as text. So, to start off our reading on Wagner, we will turn to another unrecognised text, as written by the forty-year-old Irish music critic, George Bernhard Shaw, hunched over two works in the Reading Room of the British Museum in 1885 — "Capital" by Karl Marx and the "Tristan" score by Richard Wagner. For the passionate socialist Shaw saw in Wagner, who had taken part in the revolt in Dresden together with the anarchist Bakunin, a rebel in the Holy Land of the capitalist age. "Rheingold" was to him quite simply money in "Capital". Shaw's "Rheingold" analyses see Wagner's work as a criticism of contemporary capitalist consciousness. The tragic course of the "Siegfried" revolution, with the Emperor Bismarck actually coming in the stead of the anarchist Siegfried, who perished, as a transformation from the revolutionary Wagner to the conservative old Wagner who only some 20 years later appended the "Götterdämmerung" to the "Ring". He based his essay "The Perfect Wagnerite", a commentary on the "Ring des Nibelungen" (1898), on the early revolutionary pamphlets such as "Man and Present Society" and "Art and the Revolution" both from 1849. But these essays, divested of their pathos of human revolution and expressive rhetoric, essentially display the rhetoric of a conservative revolution as prepared by Carl Schmitt, the author of "Total Enemy — Total War — Total State" (1937), "Nature and Development of the Fascist State", "Political Romanticism" (1925) and, above all, "State Motion People — the Tripartite Structure of the Political Unit" (1933), and then completed by Hitler. Wagner's transformation from a seemingly anarchistic rebel to an antisemitic saviour, or to be more precise, Wagner's proposal that he himself and his music should be seen as a saviour, is apparent even at the stage of this early political romanticism. He made himself into a cult guru, the leader of a sect that, like all other totalitarian groups, needs a local centre, a place of worship, a holy place: Bayreuth. Albeit furnished with an enormous power - the power of music.

Wagner's political romanticism is a theory of delusion owing its origin to a trivial appropriation of Nietzsche's theory "of consciously intended appearance". One of the reasons for Wagner's early friendship with Nietzsche is based upon this theory of the "Will for Appearance". "The birth of the tragedy from the spirit of music", dedicated to Wagner and celebrated in art as a conscious creation of aesthetic appearance, must be seen as being complementary to the 1873 fragment, "On Truth and Lies in the Extra-moral Sense". Nietzsche has a positive appreciative attitude to appearance: "My philosophy of inverted Platonism: the further from veritable being, the more pure, beautiful, better it is. Life in appearance as the goal"; Wagner's simplification of this theory of delusion beyond the truth and over and above good and evil as a lie to and of life led to Nietzsche's dissociation from Wagner. Sachs's delusory monologue in "The Meistersinger" reveals the core of Wagner's theory of delusion according to which life is not all about truth or falsity but rather that it is all about which conceptions are life-promoting, what actually asserts itself. Delusion is acknowledged as a condition of life. From this it was not hard to deduce the vitalistic lunatic system of National Socialism. In his work "The Philosophy of Pretence", written in 1876-78,

but not published until 1911, the philosopher Hans Vaihinger devised a theory of fiction from the point of view of expedience and life-promotion referring to Kant Lange, Nietzsche and Wagner. In a short essay in the Bayreuth writings Carl Schmitt explicitely praises and concurs with Wagner's theory of delusion and Vaihinger's interpretations. So, the attempt to see capital as Rheingold and the revolution as a myth, this fusion of socialism and mythology, did not lead to liberation but rather became impoverished in the aesthetic schmaltz seeking higher spiritual pacification and liberation of a bourgeoisie deprived of all mystique. Wagner's art was not committed to helping the disenfranchised and oppressed but rather to achieving salvation of the capitalists — for Christian needs even in death as did Jesus. The failed social revolutionary flees to the realm of mythical ideas of salvation, the yearning for death shared by his clientele, the bourgeoisie historically doomed to fall. Hence, Wagner's ideological transformation lands up in the delusion of the synthesis of the arts - political aesthetic utopia.

Material: Inside the hall:
— a piano, a pianist, a singer
— Peter Weibel, a computer terminal hooked up with the Internet
— four video projectors equipped for data conversion
— a sound system.

In the lobby:
— two multi-media terminals (2 computers. video mixer, monitors)

Internet:
— Internet link-up via WWW and I.R.C. server

Software:
— multi-media information software on "Wagners Wahn", a production of Ars Electronica (also available on CDROM), including historical data, music samples, statements recorded on video, all in a hypertext structure
— WorldWideWeb pages on Wagner
— on-line chat channel link to the Internet
— Wagner's Wesendonck Songs.

Performance: Internet:
For the duration of Ars Electronica information about Richard Wagner will be available to the public via Internet.
For the duration of the performance a worldwide online discussion on "Wagners Wahn", with Peter Weibel as chairman and participant will take place via I.R.C. server.

Brucknerhaus Lobby:
Two multi-media terminals enabling visitors to access the Ars Electronica software "Wagners Wahn" will be located here. At the same time, video inserts of the Wagner WWW info pages prepared for this occasion and inserts from the on-line discussion held via Internet as well as of the stage action will be played on these terminals.

The information paths taken by the users of the "Wagners Wahn" software become part of the performance in the hall.

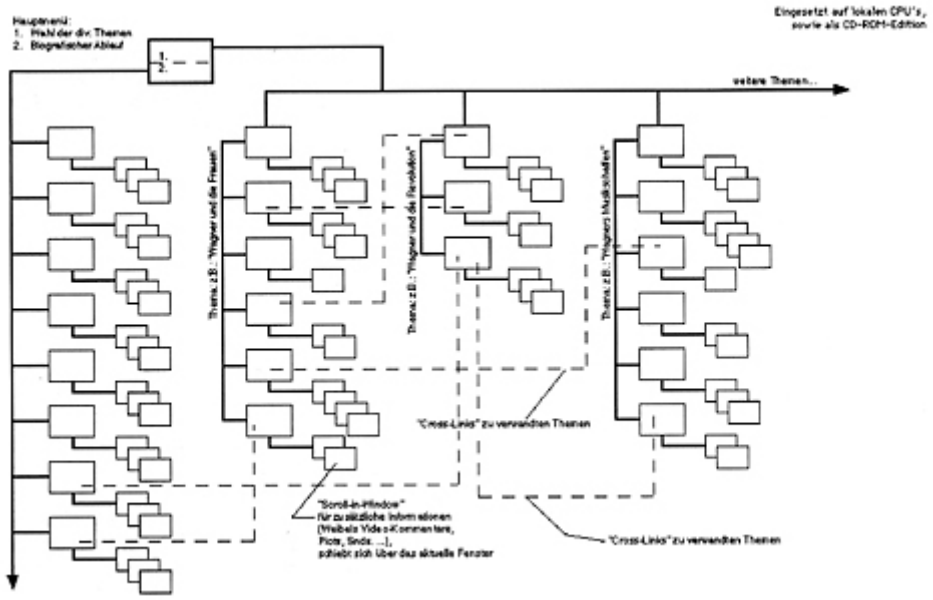
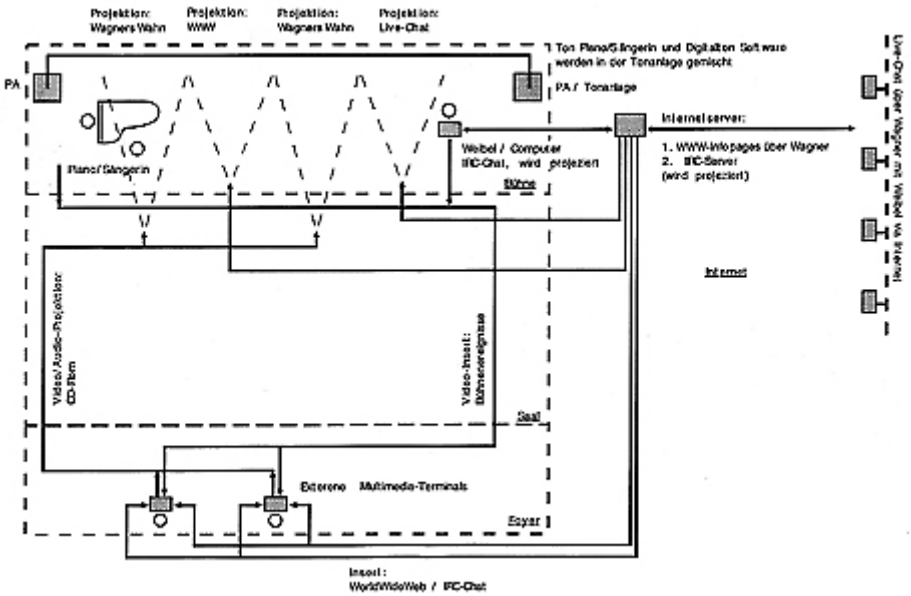
Brucknerhaus Hall:
During the recital of Wagner's Wesendonck Songs, video projections of the CD-ROM "Wagners Wahn" (fed in from the multi-media terminals in the lobby), projections of the

WorldWideWeb pages on Wagner as well as of the on-line discussion held on the topic form a telematic stage decoration.

Konzept / Conception: Peter Weibel

Software-CD-ROM-Entwicklung / CD-ROM software development: Orhan Kipcak

Mitarbeit Software / Software Assistance:

Helmut Kaplan, Kaya Kipcak, Michael Pölzl, Katharina Copony, Kai Pongratz

Videorecardings / Video Recordings: Gerd Heide