

RESURRECTING THE STUDY OF A FORGOTTEN ANIMATOR:
A REOPENING OF THE CASE FOR LOTTE REINIGER

Emily Rawson
Loyola Marymount University Honors Program

Abstract

This proposal requests funding to access and view a series of historical German films and to purchase materials for the recreation of key sequences of the animated films of Lotte Reiniger, a historical German animator. From this work, two animated films will be made: a short narrative piece and a longer informational film to investigate and interpret Reiniger's medium and artistic choices in the context of German expressionism. The goal of this work is to recognize Lotte Reiniger's films as artistic achievements worthy of including Reiniger in academic discussions about contemporary innovative German filmmakers – discussions from which she is currently neglected because her work has been branded as impressive feats of craft rather than film art.

Introduction

The profession of filmmaking splits itself between intersectional focuses on developing technology, earning revenue, pursuing art, and reflecting or even influencing the societies in which they are made.¹ Recognizing these four distinct motives in making films, film historians can work to understand films both as accomplishments of innovation in the technical craft and as open texts better understood within the contexts of their crafting: the former interpretation requiring that historians master knowledge of the technology available and previous uses of cinematic techniques, and the latter requiring that historians acquaint themselves with the filmmaker's contemporaries and other successful films being released and viewed in the previous and following years.² These methods of analyzing films have enabled film historians to classify films not only by the times and locations of their making, but by artistic movements and genres, whose definitions and classifications exist to express how the films of a particular era can be both similar and distinct, belonging to each other while also developing and shaping the nature of films as time passes.³

German expressionism is one such classification of films: the term denotes a period where German art – extending beyond film into other mediums – intentionally broke from reality to express darker forces in human nature through the illustration of fantastic story worlds with terrible monsters beyond viewers' wildest imaginations.⁴ This depiction of imaginative worlds

¹ David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Jeff Smith. *Film Art: An Introduction*. (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 2017), 1-4.

² *Ibid.*, 336.

³ *Ibid.*, 327-335.

⁴ Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, ed. Leonardo Quaresima (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 28.

finds a timeless voice in the work of German animator Lotte Reiniger, whose 1926 feature film, *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*,⁵ illustrates incredible transformations and monsters that are both massive and creative, though her work is not typically considered within the canon of German expressionism.⁶ As an animator, she enjoyed relative renown during her life, but her work was revered and academically noted not within the context of her contemporary live action filmmakers, but only as technical feats of craft since her style of cutting silhouette puppets for animation was so unique, and perhaps even discounted as a woman's craft rather than a mastery of filmmaking.⁷ As modern researchers reconsidering the significance and meaning of German expressionism, the question arises as to how to prove that Reiniger can and should be included within the canon of German expressionist filmmakers, and then how to understand her work within this new classification.

Background

German expressionist films first developed in the 1910s before World War I with the work of notable directors like Paul Wegener, and faded out of popularity by the middle of the 1920s.⁸ The 1926 release date of Reiniger's first major production therefore dates her after the end of German expressionism, perhaps contributing to the lack of scholarly recognition of her as an expressionist filmmaker. Yet, due to the prolonged production schedule for animation,

⁵ *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*. dir. Lotte Reiniger. (Germany: Milestone Film, 1926), Film.

⁶ Rachel Palfreyman, "Life and Death in the Shadows: Lotte Reiniger's Die Abenteuer des Prinzen Ahmed," *German Life and Letters* 64, no. 1 (December 22, 2010): January 2011, accessed October 24, 2017, doi:10.1111/glal.2010.63.issue-4.

⁷ Tashi Petter, "'In a Tiny Realm of Her Own': Lotte Reiniger, Domesticity and Creativity," *Animation Studies 2.0 Blog* (web log), October 9, 2017, accessed October 10, 2017, <https://blog.animationstudies.org/?p=2166>.

⁸ Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, ed. Leonardo Quaresima (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 28.

Reiniger would have been working on *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* during the height of expressionism's popularity.⁹ Reiniger's film career may have extended for decades after the end of expressionism, but she began her work during the film period.

Reiniger's status as an animator similarly fails to separate her from the live action expressionist community because she had an extensive number of connections with live action filmmakers, like her husband Carl Koch and friend Jean Renoir.¹⁰ Reiniger also first became involved in filmmaking not by making her own films, but by developing a working relationship with the expressionist filmmaker Paul Wegener. Two of Reiniger's first three film credits are for live action films she worked on under Wegener's direction, crafting dialogue titles and animating creatures like rats for his 1918 film, *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*.¹¹ Other special effects work Reiniger did for live action films include the expressionist films of Fritz Lang and Rochus Gliese.¹² For Lang's famous 1924 epic, *The Nibelungs*,¹³ Lang hired Reiniger and Walter Ruttmann to animate a dream sequence with a falcon to capture the magical and mysterious feeling of the dream.¹⁴ These connections with live action not only served to sustain Reiniger through her film career, but developed Reiniger's storytelling skill and created the opportunities

⁹ Rachel Palfreyman, "Life and Death in the Shadows: Lotte Reiniger's Die Abenteuer des Prinzen Ahmed," *German Life and Letters* 64, no. 1 (December 22, 2010): January 2011, accessed October 24, 2017, doi:10.1111/glal.2010.63.issue-4.

¹⁰ John Grant, *Masters of Animation* (New York, NY: Watson-Guption Publications, 2001), 179-180.

¹¹ Karina Gazizova, "Biography: Lotte Reiniger.," AnimationResources.org, December 21, 2010, accessed September 18, 2017, <https://animationresources.org/biography-lotte-reiniger/>.

¹² Christiane Schönfeld, "Lotte Reiniger and the Art of Animation." In *Practicing Modernity: Female Creativity in the Weimar Republic* by Carmel Finnan. (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2006), 172-174.

¹³ Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, ed. Leonardo Quaresima (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 92.

¹⁴ Karina Gazizova, "Biography: Lotte Reiniger.," AnimationResources.org, December 21, 2010, accessed September 18, 2017, <https://animationresources.org/biography-lotte-reiniger/>.

she needed to even begin her career in animation, crafting films like *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*: Paul Wegener himself instigated her work in silhouette animation, convincing other experimental animators to facilitate the making of her first films.¹⁵

Traditional scholarship does not interpret Reiniger in the context of the influence that German expressionism had on her work, and many pieces neglect the working relationships she maintained with live action filmmakers.¹⁶ While many academics today agree that Reiniger has not enjoyed the amount of study she deserved, most tend to reevaluate Reiniger's work as an example of feminism, arguing that she was previously overlooked in history because of her gender, and her innovative craft should now be praised for how she defied the conventions of male filmmakers and animators.¹⁷ Even in her lifetime, a large portion of the recognition Reiniger received for her work was focused on the practicalities of the silhouette animation she pioneered, leading to Reiniger's publishing of instructional books¹⁸ and commentaries,¹⁹ and eventually her being featured in an instructional documentary.²⁰ These studies fail to recognize Reiniger's connections to live action filmmakers, and they fail to include her work in discussions

¹⁵ Lotte Reiniger, *Shadow Puppets, Shadow Theatres and Shadow Films*. (Boston: MA Plays, inc., 1975), 84.

¹⁶ Rachel Palfreyman, "Life and Death in the Shadows: Lotte Reiniger's *Die Abenteuer des Prinzen Achmed*," *German Life and Letters* 64, no. 1 (December 22, 2010): January 2011, accessed October 24, 2017, doi:10.1111/glal.2010.63.issue-4.

¹⁷ Tashi Petter, "'In a Tiny Realm of Her Own': Lotte Reiniger, Domesticity and Creativity," *Animation Studies 2.0 Blog* (web log), October 9, 2017, accessed October 10, 2017, <https://blog.animationstudies.org/?p=2166>.

¹⁸ Lotte Reiniger, *Shadow Puppets, Shadow Theatres and Shadow Films*. (Boston: MA Plays, inc., 1975).

¹⁹ Lotte Reiniger, "Living Shadows: The Art and Technology of the Silhouette Film." In *The Promise of Cinema: German Film Theory, 1907—1933*. Edited by Anton Kaes, Nicholas Baer, and Michael Cowan. (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016), 470-471.

²⁰ *The Art of Lotte Reiniger*, dir. John Isaacs, prod. Louis Hagen (Great Britain: Primrose Productions, 1970), March 4, 2017, accessed October 11, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKFg-4pH85I>.

of the film movements of her time, as they distinguish her work so drastically from other cinema that her films are no longer analyzed in the context of other German film.

Methods

In order to contextualize Reiniger's films in the wider movement of German expressionism, I intend to view and analyze a series of German expressionist and post-expressionist films, with a wide variety of Reiniger's films. For Reiniger's films, I will focus on her earlier works, up through the end of World War II, taking particular interest in the films she worked on with live action filmmakers. Live action filmmakers whose expressionist works I intend to study include well-known filmmakers like Fritz Lang and F.W. Murnau, and lesser known filmmakers that Reiniger had closer relationships with, such as Jean Renoir, Paul Wegener and Walter Ruttmann.

Since Reiniger's style and technique of silhouette animation is very distinctive to her work, I will also set up an animation workshop to recreate sequences of her films and experiment with the technology she would have used so that I can familiarize myself with the benefits and constraints she would have worked with. Practical experiences with Reiniger's style and technique will aid in my analysis of her work by enabling me to better understand her filmmaking process, and therefore be more capable of properly discerning why she would have made specific decisions in the movements of her animated characters and the layouts of her shots. Once I am able to recreate parts of her work, I can then try to animate in Reiniger's style sequences and narratives borrowed from live action German expressionist films, in order to test how her style lends itself to the traditional expressionist works, or differs from them.

Expected Results/Product

Through this filmic experience, I hope to prove that Reiniger's work has a connection to German expressionism, and I will investigate the nature of this connection in order to develop a stronger understanding of her work. As this research is strongly rooted within the study and crafting of film, I intend to present my research by making two different films. To prove the connection between German expressionism and Reiniger, I first intend to use Reiniger's techniques to make a narrative film under seven minutes that clearly utilizes narrative and compositional strategies from classic German expressionist films. After this experiment, I then hope to compile edits of my test reel with archival footage of Reiniger's works and German expressionist films so that I can make a fifteen to twenty minute informational film analyzing her work, with German expressionist films providing the context for this analysis. Once completed, these two films can stand as both artistic and academic explorations that I can submit to film festivals and to animation summits held by ASIFA – the International Animated Film Association – the British Film Institute, or the Animation Show of Shows.

Conclusion

In analyzing and discussing films, the context of a film's making has significant importance for understanding the film's stylistic choices and its intent. The importance of context for film analysis means that the films of Charlotte Reiniger have suffered in academic circles because they have not often been studied in the context of German expressionism: a movement that was flourishing when she first began her work. While Reiniger's technique of silhouette animation does distinguish her from live action filmmakers, her numerous personal and professional connections to live action expressionist filmmakers indicate a deeper connection that has not been properly explored. To research this connection between Reiniger and German

expressionism and to reinterpret her work in this new light, I intend to view her films alongside classic German expressionist films and the films of her known associates in order to make two films of my own, one narrative and one informational.

Budget

For this project, I request the funding:

- Approximately \$100 to access or purchase historical films/resources that are not available online or for free. While the major films of Reiniger and more famous German expressionist films can be found online – many through the Kanopy streaming account owned by Loyola Marymount – many of Reiniger’s films are not readily available online, nor are the films of her closer friends, like Renoir, Wegener and Gliese.
- Approximately \$200 for tools, materials, and supplies to construct a lightbox (as part of my filming apparatus) and silhouette cutouts for traditional animation in Reiniger’s style.
- Approximately \$500 for a digital camera with which to shoot my silhouette animation.
- Approximately \$1000 to construct a custom computer system that will be specialized to provide an interface for my camera, edit the film, and allow for VFX and compositing work. By customizing my computer, I can maximize cost efficiency while also ensuring that I have the capabilities to handle the massive amounts of files that animated films require.
- Approximately \$300 for photo capturing and editing softwares for the filmmaking.

The final total for this proposal adds up to \$2100.

Itinerary

In the months prior to the approval of this proposal, I can begin my research by watching films that are more easily available for free, like selected works of Reiniger, and the films of

Fritz Lang and F.W. Murnau. Once I have gained approval for this research project, I will need to contact the British Film Institute to obtain rights for the reuse of Reiniger and other filmmakers' work – though recent copyright law has set the precedent for me to legally reuse historic films for academic purposes without obtaining legal permissions – and to investigate other methods for me to access less popular historic films, like those of Jean Renoir and Paul Wegener. I intend to watch these films throughout the spring of this year, putting myself in a position to build and test my animation rig in the month of May, and begin film preproduction by the start of June. I intend to be in production for the shorter narrative film from mid June through late August, with the hopes of finishing all traditional shooting by the end of August, so that through September I may digitally edit the first film. I have elected to digitally edit both films to simplify the process, avoid the extra costs and troubles of shooting on analog film, and to give myself more flexibility for compositing my final films. In October I can begin editing the second film, with hopes to finish by January.

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