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“HOW GERMAN IS IT?”

Muratti und Sarotti: The History of German Animation 1920-1960

Directed by Gerd Gockell

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As animation continues to dissipate throughout the entertainment matrix, blurring distinctions between reality and fantasy, its brief history has come under close scrutiny as if to isolate and redeem its particular DNA. Encyclopedic overviews, case studies, cultural study deconstructions have now been joined by documentary films. Most adhere to a numbingly predictable formula: live action talking heads providing anecdote and authentication, excerpts from the work, disembodied narration explaining how these parts fit together. Gerd Gockell's *Muratti and Sarotti*, a totally animated, innovative feature-length documentary, turns this format on its ear. It is itself a work of art about a specific, tumultuous period, when new forms of animation were being explored, when artists were forced to flee their native land because of esthetics and “racial” laws, a time when animation was dangerous.

An e-mail exchange with the director informs many of the comments which follow.

The title, *Muratti and Sarotti*, suggests an ironic pairing of advertising art for frivolous consumer products (cigarettes and chocolates) with the troubled history of this form-giving culture in the middle of the last century. It suggests a view of animation history as a running fence dividing (or bridging) the marketplace of commercial vulgarity with the ideals of high modernist purity. To what extent does formal experimentation have a claim on our judgment of art, and how do we process social or political values, however deeply embedded in the content of entertainment. Underlying the specifics of this narrative is the nettlesome dynamic of national character as reflected in its art: is it “Aryan” or “degenerate”? Today we might consider how in the U.S. “family values” and “obscenity” joust for attention.

The backstory is familiar but bears repeating. The radical cultural upheaval brought on by the end of World War I pushed European artists to start from scratch and explore animation based on various fine art tendencies (Futurism, Cubism, Constructivism). The work of Hans Richter, Oskar Fischinger, and Walter Ruttmann was abstract, often analogous to musical forms, while others (Lotte Reiniger and Berthold Bartosch) created stylized pictorial narratives on mythic and political themes, using experimental techniques. This work flourished in the same Weimar cultural climate that nurtured the Bauhaus, satirical graphics, cabaret, theatre and cinema; it was cosmopolitan, engaged in dialog with artists throughout

Europe and the Soviet Union. When Hitler came to power in 1933 and declared war on modern art most of the artists fled, some eventually arriving in America and England where their influence on the arts continued. Fischinger (*Allegretto*, his masterwork, was made in 1936 for Paramount) and Richter (the Dadaist who ended up teaching film at City University of New York) in particular are often credited as ambassadors of experimental film to America. (1)

Muratti and Sarotti considerably broadens this story by describing what happened to those who stayed, those who survived the war, those who returned to Germany and worked on either side of the Wall. This particular history resonates today because much of it has been a secret, wiped away by a collective amnesia purposefully induced first by a fascist regime, then by two conquering ideologies, de-Nazification and Communism. Another agent in this story of laughter and forgetting is the amoral marketplace of capitalism which sponsored so many of the artists in question before and after the Third Reich. Though part of a larger cultural re-assessment begun in the 1990's with re-unification, *Muratti and Sarotti* should not be considered an isolated, peculiarly German story: it also indirectly forces one to question our own media culture which seems so gullibly manipulated by government and business interests.

The film's design is dominated by its master scene: a gloomy room, stripped of color, vaguely redolent of the 1920's, filled with archival boxes, film cans, archaic signage and labels, and photos of "forgotten artists." As the stop motion-controlled camera slowly tracks through this hoard of data it seems to come alive as drawings slither in and out of boxes, puppets loom and stalk about, film reels idly spin -- all suggesting a kind of séance honoring the ghosts of an untold animation history. The room serves as the film's homebase: its beginning, its re-occurring chapter sequences and conclusion.

We hear contemporary witnesses: animators, directors, co-workers and family members, delivering anecdotal oral histories. Instead of conventional, live action chattering heads, they are represented by black and white snapshots which bob and twitch in sync. Gockell says this technique was an expedient way to use audio-only recording, but the result is a felicitous minimalism that serves to reduce the testimony to a kind of imagined memory, neither overwhelming, nor trivializing or hijacking the narrative with the putative authority of live cinema. These witnesses are parts of an argument: making intriguing comparisons, shedding light on unknown artists and lending insight to those we thought we knew all too well.

The history begins with Julius Pinschewer's animations advertising baking powder in 1911, continues with Richter's *Rhythmus* in 1921 (like Ruttmann's *Opus* films, a pure expression of "visual music"), then moves to Fischinger's marching cigarettes, returning often to examples of artists who applied their formal

experiments in techniques to both entertainments and commercials, without much concern for who was paying the bill.

In reconsidering these extraordinary examples of formal invention, we are often mesmerized by their clockwork precision: multiples of abstract shapes are synchronized into a perfect, though mechanical corps de ballet. This was an art that worshipped industry -- the machine as objective, optimistic, democratic principle, stripped of useless, traditional decoration. Its beauty derived more from optical play than narrative substance.

Both Richter and Ruttmann shared strong leftist sympathies in the 20's and branched out into experimental documentary cinema based on montage editing strategies. After 1933, Richter was forced to flee, first east to the USSR, then to Holland where he made industrials for Phillips, then to New York. After his ground-breaking *Berlin: Symphony of a City*, Ruttmann's politics turned toward the right; his last film, *Metal of Heaven* melds the earlier precisionism into the Riefenstahl-inspired folk heroics of the "Nazi Esthetic." When I heard that phrase I couldn't help but wonder where to draw the line between those squads of marching murattis and the scary mass rallies of Nurenberg. Gockell thinks Ruttmann was a "politically-blind artist," like the Constructivists in the USSR under Stalin who were unaware of the propaganda value inherent in their work.

The animated cartoon industry, like all businesses, came under close scrutiny by the Nazis, forcing Jewish artists to flee. (2) Even the "German Disney," Wolfgang Kaskeline, was deprived of running his studio because his "Aryan" lineage could not be verified. *Snow White*, greatly admired by Josef Goebbels who planned to create similar folklorish imitations, yet ironically was considered too degenerate (dwarfs?!) and was not released until well after the war. While a blatantly anti-Semitic cartoon was produced in Holland it is surprising that the only completed production by the officially-sanctioned German animation studio was *Poor Hansi* (1943) which seems as innocent as a *Silly Symphony*. (3) But Gockell feels war-weary German audiences would read a more subtle message in the story of the poor canary who returns from his cage after being buffeted by the world's hostility: "stay at home and be happy with the things you have." More ambivalent perhaps is the case of Hans Fischerkoesen who maintained his independence from the party and produced three wartime cartoons of high quality which created a warm, cosily receptive audience before the propaganda newsreels. (4)

Among those who did not stay home was Peter Sachs, who emigrated to London and eventually found work at the Larkins Studio where, according to interviews with Bob Godfrey and Kurt Weiler, he had a great influence by introducing modern design concepts as well as engaging principles of movement

(Godfrey quoting Sachs: “make your movements either very big or very small; nothing medium.”). But his work as director, designer and animator in the English studios was rarely given proper credit.

The other means of escape was to stay in Germany and practice an “Inner Emigration,” a kind of passive resistance. This concept was hotly debated in the period just after the war by writers like Thomas Mann who argued that it was a means of evading war guilt. Today, as numerous other societies confront their past (e.g. South Africa) the term is less charged, and even suggests a kind of heroic commitment to art. One such emigrant was Hans Fischinger, frequent collaborator with brother Oskar. He built a stand and made the lovely *Color Dance*, similar to *Allegretto*, yet with a more hand-rendered look, without any real financial backing. He was drafted and died on the Eastern front. Herbert Seggelke, an amateur experimenter, drew directly on film leader in 1943, as Berlin was being bombed, to create the abstract *Stroke and Point*, synchronized to a sprightly jazz score.

After the war the focus shifts to the contrast between East and West. The consolidated productions of DEFA tended to place heavy emphasis of correct party ideology, using only approved techniques and scripts. While in the West many smaller studios sprang up to continue advertising production. The artists who returned to the East, like Weiler, felt they had a mission to engage in uplifting Cold War issues, while West German animators were more caught up in their “economic miracle.” Either way, animation culture recovered, yet seemed to go into a creative decline, reversed only in the 1960’s with the advent of “underground” experimentalists such as Helmut Herbst and Franz Winzentsen who delivered the pungent insight that his generation was like the “yeast” that unwittingly sparked the current revival of German animation.

The anti-American resentment of some of the postwar witnesses sounds exotic, only if we fail to grasp the conditions of a military and cultural occupation. Thus we hear Kaskeline bemoan the advent of our advertising agencies for banishing fairy tales, and Bruno Böttge run down cel animation as a “degenerate” example of “American barbarism” while defending more traditional techniques using puppets.

Gockell’s history sheds light into so many crevasses of German animation and its offshoots, yet resists easy categories and conclusions. Absolute animation was born and thrived in the cultivated chaos of Weimar but then endured a twenty-year hibernation before its resurrection both in Germany and elsewhere.

CONCLUSION

Gerd Gockell's most recent film, directed with Kirsten Winter, is an expression of the purist tendency of experimentation, filtered through the historical prism constructed in *Muratti und Sarotti*. It appropriates Walter Ruttmann's 1930 sound collage, *Weekend*, and adds overlayers of impressionistic filmed images and surface textures which impart a disturbing narrative structure. We glimpse seemingly random, dreamlike sequences that illusively synchronize with the track, suggesting the beginning of a hopeful decade, people and industry on the move, yet culminating with waves of bombers, aerial views of a devastated Berlin and (I think) footage of an atomic test blast. Distressing the film's surface is a perfect metaphor for memory's scar tissue: Gockell has again performed a feat of cinematic archeology, "restoring" a "Lost Weekend" of a forgotten, apocalyptic hallucination. Ruttmann's personal path remains a mystery, but his art survives to nourish a new generation of artists.

1. Canemaker's personal account of Oskar and Elfrieda Fischinger:

<http://www.iotacenter.org/Elfriede/OntheRoad.htm>

2. Cartoon animation in the Third Reich:

<http://www.cyranos.ch/animat-e.htm>

3. Reynard the Fox in occupied Holland:

http://mag.awn.com/index.php?ltype=Special+Features&category2=Production&article_no=941

4. William Moritz on Hans Fischerkoesen:

<http://www.awn.com/mag/issue1.7/articles/moritz1.7.html>