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Some Critical Perspectives on Lotte Reiniger

William Moritz [1996]

Lotte Reiniger was born in Berlin on 2 June 1899. As a child, she developed a facility with cutting paper silhouette figures, which had become a folk-art form among German women. As a teenager, she decided to pursue a career as an actress, and enrolled in Max Reinhardt's Drama School. She began to volunteer as an extra for stage performances and movie productions, and during the long waits between scenes and takes, she would cut silhouette portraits of the stars, which she could sell to help pay her tuition. The great actor-director Paul Wegener noticed not only the quality of the silhouettes she made, but also her incredible dexterity in cutting: holding the scissors nearly still in her right hand and moving the paper deftly in swift gestures that uncannily formulated a complex profile.

Wegener hired her to do silhouette titles for his 1916 feature, *Rübezahls Hochzeit* (Rumpelstiltskin's Wedding), and for his 1918 *Der Rattenfänger von Hammeln* (Pied Piper of Hammeln) she made not only titles but also animated rat models (since the real animals refused to follow the piper). Through Wegener she met Hans Cürlis and Carl Koch of the Institute for Cultural Research, which produced educational films. They helped her make

her first independent animation film, *Das Ornament des verliebten Herzens* (Ornament of the Loving Heart), in the fall of 1919. On the basis of the success of this film, she got commercial work with Julius Pinschewer's advertising film agency, including an exquisite "reverse" silhouette film, *Das Geheimnis der Marquise* (The Marquise's Secret), in which the elegant white figures of eighteenth-century nobility (urging you to use Nivea skin cream!) seem like cameo or Wedgwood images. These advertising films helped fund four more animated shorts: *Amor und das standhafte Liebespaar* (Cupid and The Steadfast Lovers, which combined silhouettes with a live actor) in 1920, Hans Christian Andersen's *Der fliegende Koffer* (The Flying Suitcase) and *Der Stern von Bethlehem* (The Star of Bethlehem) in 1921, and *Aschenputtel* (Cinderella) in 1922.

The success of these shorts convinced the banker Louis Hagen to finance the production of a feature-length animated film, *Die Abenteuer des Prinzen Achmed* (The Adventures of Prince Ahmed), based on stories from *The Thousand and One Nights*. Production on this feature took three years, 1923 to 1926, with a staff of six: Reiniger; Carl Koch (now her husband); the experimental animators Walter Ruttmann and Berthold Bartosch, who

did “special effects;” Walter Türck, who manipulated a second level of glass for animation of backgrounds, etc.; and Alexander Kardan, who kept track of the exposure sheets, storyboard and such technical details. The young theater composer Wolfgang Zeller wrote an elaborate symphonic score for the film, which launched him on a long career as a film composer.

The great success of *Prince Ahmed* encouraged Reiniger to make a second feature, *Doktor Dolittle* (based on Hugh Lofting’s book¹), which premiered in December 1928 with Paul Dessau conducting a musical score that included music by himself, Kurt Weill, Paul Hindemith and Igor Stravinsky.

At *Prince Ahmed*’s French premiere in July 1926, Carl and Lotte met Jean Renoir and became life-long friends, which involved their collaboration on Renoir’s features, *La Marseillaise*, *The Grand Illusion* and *Tosca*. Renoir also appeared as a actor in a 1930 live-action feature Lotte co-directed, *Die Jagd nach dem Glück* (The Pursuit of Happiness), which also starred Berthold Bartosch in a love story set in the milieu of a carnival shadow-puppet theater. This feature, no less than *Dr. Dolittle* and *Prince Ahmed*, fell victim to the new fad for talking pictures: shot as a silent film, *Pursuit of Happiness* was converted into a sound film using the voices of professional actors, but the lip-synch was far from perfect, and though critics praised Reiniger’s script, direction and animation,² the film could not compete with the sharp, elaborate UFA musical *Love Waltzes*, with Lilian Harvey, or the impressive Conrad Veidt war film, *The Last Company*, which opened in the weeks preceding Reiniger’s feature.

Reiniger returned to making her silhouette shorts, of which she completed

some thirteen before the war, and after the war, living in England, she made some twenty-three more, half in color, most of which were shown on British and American television. In 1970, after the death of her husband, she wrote a definitive book, *Shadow Theatres and Shadow Films*.³ She also made additional advertising films, several documentaries, live shadow-theater performances, and gave various workshops before her death on 19 June 1981.

Such a distinguished biography – and a filmography of more than seventy items – begs the question of why Lotte Reiniger remains rather undervalued. Despite the occasional nod to her as having made one feature-length animation film before Walt Disney (when indeed she made two), most critics today still tacitly assume that silhouettes constitute a secondary or inferior form of animation, so that Disney’s cartoon *Snow White* counts as a real first animation feature.

As with most other animation pioneers, one key factor in Reiniger’s neglect must be the unavailability of good quality prints. When Reiniger fled to England in the 1930s, her original negatives remained in Germany, and most were dispersed or lost at the end of the war. While many of her films are available in England, not all of these represent an excellent reproduction of Reiniger’s original art: some have virtually lost their backgrounds through repeated duping from available prints, others are coupled with modern soundtracks (which cause the animation to move a third faster at “sound speed”) that banalize the narrative with kitsch music and redundant voice-over. Only a few Reiniger films are available for rental in the U.S., none in superb editions except the National Film Board of Canada’s *Aucassin and Nicolette*,

which is hardly Reiniger's best work – not that it is a bad film, by any means, but the convoluted medieval adventure story, with its battles, escapes and disguises, does not lend itself easily to imaginative touches (though Lotte manages a few, such as the rats cavorting on the prison bed before the humans arrive), and the realism of the tale (which might as well have been done by live actors) tends to raise a “realism” question about the silhouettes in relation to the multi-color backgrounds.

The early critics of Reiniger's work recognized the special power of the pure black-and-white silhouette: Béla Balász in his essay “The Power of Scissors” noted that any literary text seemed hardly competitive with the imaginative quality of the silhouette.⁴ Rudolf Arnheim, in his review of the *Doctor Dolittle* feature, went so far as to claim that all children's films should be made in the silhouette technique, because the imagination of a child can make a monster more frightening, an exploit more daring and extravagant, a maiden more beautiful (or more personally human in their own image) than the literal representations in puppet or cartoon, which automatically limit and impoverish the visionary, fantastic mental imagery of the viewer.⁵ When Lotte Reiniger began to use multi-color backgrounds (and in some cases figures) due to the demands of television in the mid-1950s, her films also entered the terrain of the “cartoon” film which gives more information than necessary for imagination – but while perhaps they can not match the brilliance of the early Reiniger films, they are still superior to many other conventional animations.

The genre of silhouette films also constitutes for Reiniger a kind of feminist

validation of a women's folk art form. Although silhouette cutting had enjoyed a general vogue in the era before photography and lithography allowed easier forms of recording and reproducing portraits, after the middle of the nineteenth century it came to be practiced more and more by women who were not allowed access to other art training but who learned scissor-craft as part of their household duties.⁶ So Martin Knapp's 1914 *German Shadow and Silhouette Pictures from Three Centuries*⁷ shows a preponderance of women artists in the 1900s: Maria Lahrs, Elisabeth Wolff-Zimmermann, Charlotte Jancke-Sachs, Greta von Hörner, Dora Brandenburg-Polster, Lotte Nicklaß, Gertrud Stamm-Hagemann, Cornelia Zeller, Magda Koll, Johanna Beckmann, Lisbeth Müller, Hildegard von Bayer, and Hertha von Gumpfenberg – to whom could be added Lore Bierling, a Munich silhouette artist who also made animation films according to the German edition of Lutz's *Animated Cartoons*, which contains four elegant illustrations from her “many” silhouette films (though I have never met anyone who had seen one).⁸

Looking at the 300 plates in Martin Knapp's book, we can discern some of the aesthetic challenges of this genre. In Emma Eggel's “Kriemhild viewing Siegfried's Corpse” (an illustration for the *Nibelungenlied* from the 1880s), the complexity of the hall in which the hero lies obviously demonstrates a bravura intricacy of cutting in decorative elements that might not be necessary for the narrative aspect of the image: pencil-thin curving lines vaulting the ceiling, a pine-tree with hundreds of needles outside one wall, and seven niches with tiny but fully-detailed holy pictures in them – these aside from the perspective of tiles and the

main figures, of which Kriemhild is caught rushing in, strands of her hair fluttering behind her. Eggel's "The Holy Grail" confirms this with the complicated bowed leading of arched stained-glass windows, and a delicate balance of thirteen swirling angels in flight. Dora Brandenburg-Polster's 1911 "Battle", in a more modern, expressionist style, still meets a challenge for intricacy and dynamics, with ten foot-soldiers encircling a man on horseback with no less than 20 spears menacing the steed who rears and twists, its whirling mane and tail contrasting to the jagged trajectories of the spears. Maria Lahrs' similarly expressionist 1910 "Fishermen at Königsberg" delights in capturing the abstract rippled reflections in the water. Whether in light, open compositions such as Cornelia Zeller's "Storm" and "Dragon-Kites" with the sky as a blank matrix for jagged and twining lines, or in the dark, thick "Pierrot's Death" of Lotte Nicklaß with its textured stage curtains, tutu, ruffs and flowing black robes, the silhouette artist strives to infuse the stiff, frozen image with a balance of pattern and positive/negative space, with implied energetic dynamics, and with an "impossible" sense of intricacy and fluidity that defies our assumptions about scissors and paper.

Lotte Reiniger, when taking this tradition into the animated film, needed not only to fulfill these expectations but also to devise a time-based dynamic that choreographed and balanced these elements as they developed within scenes, made transitions, and expressed something about the various characters and narrative twists. The opening sequences of *The Adventures of Prince Ahmed* demonstrate that she succeeded brilliantly.⁹

The first appearance of the evil Sorcerer shows him unfold in medium close-up, his eyes rolling, his fingers articulating like spider legs; the light void that surrounds him at first yields to his conjuring, filling with polymorphous oozes of organic forms (created by Walter Ruttmann with Oskar Fischinger's wax-slicing machine) that finally resolve into the magic horse. The Caliph's birthday festival opens with elaborate architecture along a horizon line from which appear diagonal lines of multi-national courtiers bearing gifts; the diagonal composition remains constant for these characters each time they are seen. In details such as Dinarzade's lacy curtains and veil, the Caliph's palanquin and the mane of the magic horse (as well as the architecture of the Caliph's palace) we see the impossible intricacy. In the arrest of the Sorcerer (similar in design to Dora Brandenburg-Polster's "Battle") the irregular trajectories of the guards' spears encircling their victim depicts the dynamic tension of the moment. Prince Ahmed's flight into the stratosphere is supported by multiple layers of soft clouds and hundreds of stars moving in perspective. The palace of Peri Banu, with its carved jali screens, lacy curtains and pierced lanterns again astonish with their impossible intricacy. And Peri Banu's bath in the forest pool (with reflections of the palm trees, and rippling reflections of Peri Banu herself, as well as her servants and a doe – recalling Maria Lahrs' "Fishermen") provides an ecstatic moment of bravura animation magic. These sensitive and spectacular effects continue throughout the film – the gorgeous sinuous layers of the Chinese mountain landscape, for example, or the exquisite miniature image of Ahmed inside the Sorcerer's conjuring hair-ball

(like the holy niches in Egge's "Kriemhild").

While Reiniger definitely designed and directed her films, and to her belongs the full artistic credit for their successes, another mark of her genius lies in her choice of experimental animators like Walter Ruttmann and Berthold Bartosch to work for her. On one hand Ruttmann's soft, sensuous paintings on glass and his jagged expressionistic lightning and his exciting pulsating effects in the climactic duel between the Sorcerer and the "Ogress", and Bartosch's dizzying multiplane starscapes and hypnotic waves in Peri Banu's waters all add just the right complementary virtuosity and variety to Reiniger's cutout figures and backgrounds. On the other hand, Reiniger's support of these film artists helped them to develop and continue their own work, for Ruttmann produced his abstract films *Opus 3* and *Opus 4* under Reiniger's aegis, and the experience Bartosch culled from *Prince Ahmed* and *Dr. Dolittle* made possible the refined layering and luminous effects in his own subsequent masterpiece *The Idea*.

In a famous conversation at the animation stand,¹⁰ Walter Ruttmann asked Reiniger:

"Lotte, why are you making a fairy tale film like this?"

"I don't know either", she replied.

"What has it got to do with the year 1923?" he pursued.

"Nothing at all. And why should it? I'm here, living in the year 1923, and I have the chance to make this film, so naturally I'm going to do it. That's all it has to do with the year 1923."

"That doesn't seem right to me", he insisted.

But despite his socialist principles, Ruttmann continued to work on *Prince Ahmed*, because 1923 was a bitter year of

the German inflation, when a loaf of bread cost thousands of marks.

This anecdote has been interpreted to suggest that (a) Reiniger's films are just children's films with no broader significance, and (b) Reiniger herself had no political conscience. Neither of these assumptions is true. Not only did she surround herself with communists and socialists (including Ruttmann, Bartosch, Carl Koch, the Institute for Cultural Research, Paul Dessau, Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya, Bertolt Brecht, Jean Renoir) but believed enough in those humanitarian ideals that she could not stay in Nazi Germany and emigrated at great personal danger and discomfort – not able to get a permanent visa to another country, she spent several years traveling back and forth between France and England on visitor's passes. Although her artform, silhouette animation, lent itself to children's films and fantasy works, she thought consciously of a socialist responsibility to infuse these films (which would be seen by young, impressionable minds) with constructive and thought-provoking ideas. In Renoir's *La Marseillaise*, Reiniger's shadow puppets do not appear as the "ombres chinoises" of the idle aristocracy, but rather as a political theater of the revolutionaries, presenting a satirical parable "King and Nation". *Das gestohlene Herz* (The Stolen Heart, 1934) presents a similar anti-Nazi parable: an ogre who wants to control everything, own everything, steal everything others find meaningful, especially since this means violation of privacy, hoarding and joy in others' misery; the musical instruments rebel, refuse to be silenced, trap the ogre in his own web, fly home to their lovers, watchmen, chamber players and women at their sewing. I, personally, have always

imagined that there was something of the advanced socialist tolerance for birth control and abortion rights (suppressed by the Nazis) in the satirical literalness of the mad proliferation of little Papagenos and Papagenas at the end of Reiniger's 1935 *Papageno*.

In the 1920s equal rights for women and homosexuals formed part of the agenda for socialists, and Reiniger also treated those issues with good consciousness. The kind, resourceful and powerful African magician in *Prince Ahmed* (somewhat inaptly called an "Ogress" in the new English-language titles) represents a traditional priestess of the old goddess religions, who uses her healing powers for good, as opposed to the evil male Sorcerer who exploits people with magic tricks for his own benefit. The good and capable woman wins out over the sleazy male trickster.

In Reiniger's *Carmen* (1933), we see another kind of feminist re-interpretation: her Carmen is inventive and self-sufficient, while the "macho" José keeps being tripped up by his own vanity, quite literally when he enters with his nose in the air and stumbles over his own sword. The smoking Carmen (freedom for women to smoke was then a feminist issue as well) aggressively seduces him, steals his clothes while he sleeps, and resourcefully pawns them to buy herself a new outfit. His mad attempts to stab her all fail. The similarly vain toreador blithely knocks her down as he passes, but Carmen gets revenge by outshining him in the bull ring: bravely feeding the bull a rose from her mouth and converting the blood-sport back into its ancient Cretan-goddess religious ritual by somersaulting over the bull's horns and dancing with him.

The little-seen *Der scheintote Chinese*

(Seemingly-Dead Chinaman) was originally animated as an episode for *Prince Ahmed* but was omitted from the feature not only to reduce the running time (which some distributors feared might be too long for children's attention span) but also because men were nervous about the homosexual content. Reiniger had read the essay by Sir Richard Burton, English translator of *The Thousand and One Nights*, about "The Sodadic Zone" and how important homosexual relationships were in the world of *Prince Ahmed*. She also knew Kurt Hiller, who was not only a key member of the Socialist party but also of Magnus Hirschfeld's homosexual liberation movement in Berlin. "Of course, I knew lots of homosexual men and women from the film and theater world in Berlin, and saw how they suffered from stigmatization", she told me. "By contrast, I was fascinated by how natural love between members of the same sex was depicted in the *Arabian Nights*, so I thought, let's be casual and honest and truthful about it. In movies like *Different from the Others*, poor Reinhold Schünzel and Conrad Veidt had to grovel and suffer; I suspect that when the Emperor kisses Ping Pong, that must have been the first happy kiss between two men in the cinema – and I wanted it to happen quite calmly in the middle of *Prince Ahmed* so children – some who would be homosexual and some who would not – could see it as a natural occurrence, and not be shocked or ashamed."¹¹

Lotte Reiniger did not talk much about her ideas, or the meanings of her films, partly perhaps because, like many emigrants from Nazi Germany, she suffered not only a dislocation of language (which made it difficult to express things precisely or correctly), but also a spiritual displacement – the terrible task of always

trying to (always having to) explain how things were before the Nazis, how things were during their reign of terror, how things were afterwards. But she was confident that what she really had to say was contained in her films, so it is imperative for us to revive them, study them and show them more often. Perhaps,

if the original negatives were destroyed, the quality and details of backgrounds should be reconstructed by computer enhancement, with the original music and written texts also restored. But until then, Reiniger's films, even in their present condition, remain one of the chief treasures of animation. 🎞️

Notes

1. Hugh Lofting, *The Story of Doctor Dolittle* (New York: Frederick Stokes, 1920).
2. The collected reviews reprinted in *Lotte Reiniger: Eine Dokumentation* (Berlin: Deutsche Kinemathek, 1969), 59–63.
3. Lotte Reiniger, *Shadow Theatres and Shadow Films* (New York: Watson-Guptill, 1970).
4. Béla Balász, "Die Gewalt der Schere", *Der Geist des Film* (Halle, 1930), 122–123.
5. Rudolf Arnheim, "Lotte Reinigers Schattenfilm", *Die Weltbühne* 52 (24 December 1928): 961.
6. Joseph and Yehudit Shadur, *Jewish Papercuts: A History and Guide* (Berkeley: Judah L. Magnes Museum, 1994).
7. Martin Knapp, *Deutsche Schatten- und Scherenbilder aus drei Jahrhunderten* (Dachau: Der Gelbe Verlag, 1914).
8. Konrad Wolter, *Der gezeichnete Film* (Halle: W. Knapp, 1927), 109, 197, 210, 212.
9. A scene-by-scene description of *Prince Achmed* with frame enlargements for each scene was published in Alfio Bastiancich's excellent *Lotte Reiniger* (Turin: Centro Internazionale per il Cinema di Animazione, 1982), 12–70. A German picture book with 32 full-page plates from *Prince Achmed*, originally published in 1926, and re-published in 1972 [Lotte Reiniger, *Die Abenteuer des Prinzen Achmed* (Tübingen: Ernst Wasmuth, 1972)], shows how much detail has been lost from the backgrounds in many scenes.
10. Recorded in Alfred Happ's "Die Mozart Schmitte Lotte Reinigers", *Mozart, die großen Opern in Scherenschnitten von Lotte Reiniger* (Tübingen: Heliopolis, 1988), 320.
11. Interview with Lotte Reiniger, London, 1970. *Anders als die Andern* (Different from the Others), a 1919 feature by Richard Oswald, contained an appearance by Magnus Hirschfeld pleading for tolerance and equal rights for homosexuals; see *Richard Oswald, Regisseur und Produzent* (Munich: Text + Kritik, 1990), 25–35. Information also appears in James Steakley, *The Homosexual Emancipation Movement in Germany* (New York: Arno, 1975) (English-language), and *Eldorado: Homosexuelle Frauen und Männer in Berlin 1850–1950* (Berlin: Berlin Museum, 1994).

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