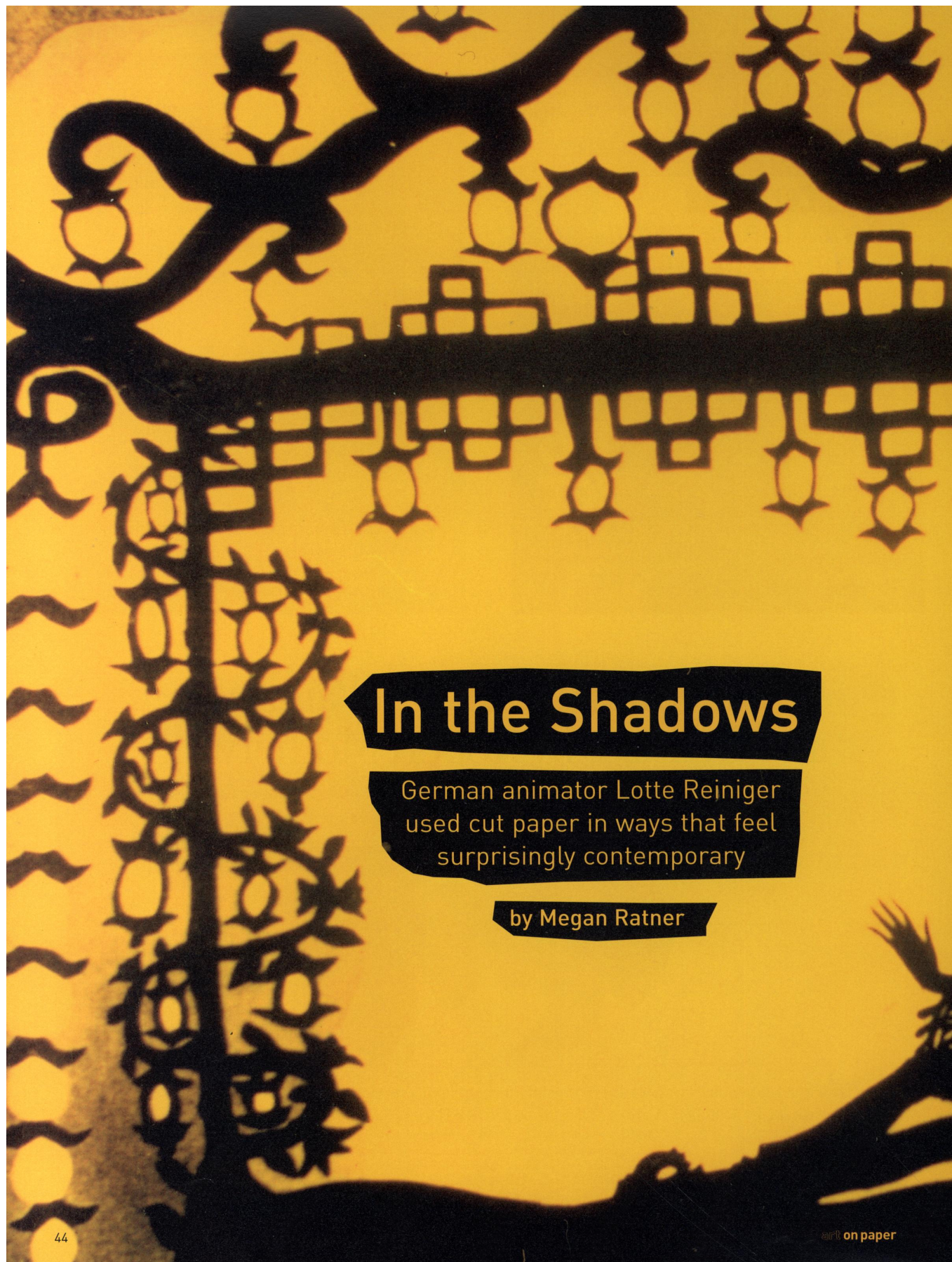


In the Shadows
by Megan Ratner

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In the Shadows

German animator Lotte Reiniger
used cut paper in ways that feel
surprisingly contemporary

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“I believe in the truth of fairy-tales more than I believe in the truth in the newspaper,” said Lotte Reiniger, the German film artist who in 1926 created *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*, the first feature-length animation film. Her stated aim: to make a world unto itself. Using scissors and masses of black paper, she fabricated paper silhouettes of extraordinary delicacy and subtlety, each as graceful as a little black dress. Her use of silhouette capitalized on both the strength and fragility of paper, but more important, Reiniger made paper move. Despite many other productions over her long career, *Prince Achmed* remains her signature work. Walter Schobert, curator of the German Film Museum in Frankfurt, numbers it among the “greatest films of the 20th century.”

The only daughter of a banker and a homemaker, Reiniger set great stock by her birth in the last year of the nineteenth century. Except for the fact that she worked in film, her techniques and sensibilities reflected the earlier century more than her own. She described her childhood as “extraordinarily” happy, her artistic interests celebrated and encouraged by both her parents. Theater captured her imagination early on, but after her first

film, she was hooked; she had in the meantime discovered her “unsettling gift” for making silhouettes. Though inspired by shadow theater, Reiniger’s figures appear to have none of the stiffness of their non-film predecessors. “Film is movement,” she noted, often comparing filmmaking to ballet. “It’s the combination of curves and diagonals that gives ballet and animation their sweet tenderness and their striking directness.” While using literal light and shadow, Reiniger also relied on the shadings of music: the fine variations in her animations often parallel the tone and stress of musical notes rather than the hiccoughs of flip-book style animating techniques. She rather modestly noted that, “even with primitive materials, one can work small wonders.”

The Adventures of Prince Achmed made her name as a filmmaker and remains the most available of her films. Intricate and romantic, it follows a familiar fairy-tale trajectory of an Arabian prince who must leave his father to prove himself worthy to assume the throne. It took three years of round-the-clock work, all of it financed by Berlin banker Louis Hagen, who even allowed Reiniger and her husband/collaborator Carl Koch to set





Above: Lotte Reiniger and team at work on *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*; all other images: stills from *Prince Achmed*, 1926

up shop in his mansion just outside Berlin. Koch—the gregarious, worldly half of their long-standing union—saw to all the technical matters of her films; Reiniger handled the aesthetics.

She began by carefully storyboarding every scene in detail, creating color drawings that would guide her in making the silhouettes. Reiniger broke the figures down into separate parts, then cut each limb and torso from black cardstock. These were hinged on thin wire so that every joint was able to articulate a great number of movements. She hated the imprecision of some animation. “Hands are practically the only way to show a silhouette figure’s emotions,” she explained. “Without all five fingers, it’s not so good.” In fact, her contribution to the elegance and dexterity of animated figures is enormous. She also made a point to include animal silhouettes because in animation films, “man and beast are on the same level, which would be impossible on a theatrical stage.” As part of her research, she spent hours at the zoo, then returned to her studio where she would get down on all fours to imagine what it would feel like

to be a particular animal.

Koch handled the technicalities of animating with other members of the crew. They constructed a wooden “Tricktable” (one German term for animation is “Trickfilm”) that measured about four feet by three feet, its glass surface lit from below. A frosted glass shade diffused the uniform, steady light. Koch suspended the camera above the table on a wooden arm that could be adjusted vertically and horizontally. All the shots in the film were made individually, with the figures lovingly moved inch by inch. Each second of the sixty-five-minute film required twenty-four separate shots: in total, Reiniger and her crew produced 250,000 frame-by-frame stills, of which 96,000 were used. Her methods, somewhere between puppetry and drawing, were inexpensive and deceptively simple, relying, she added wryly, on “wood and patience.”

The background for the moving figures was usually quite large and remained stable, the figures’ movements restricted to the two-dimensional plane, parallel to the camera. The scenery,

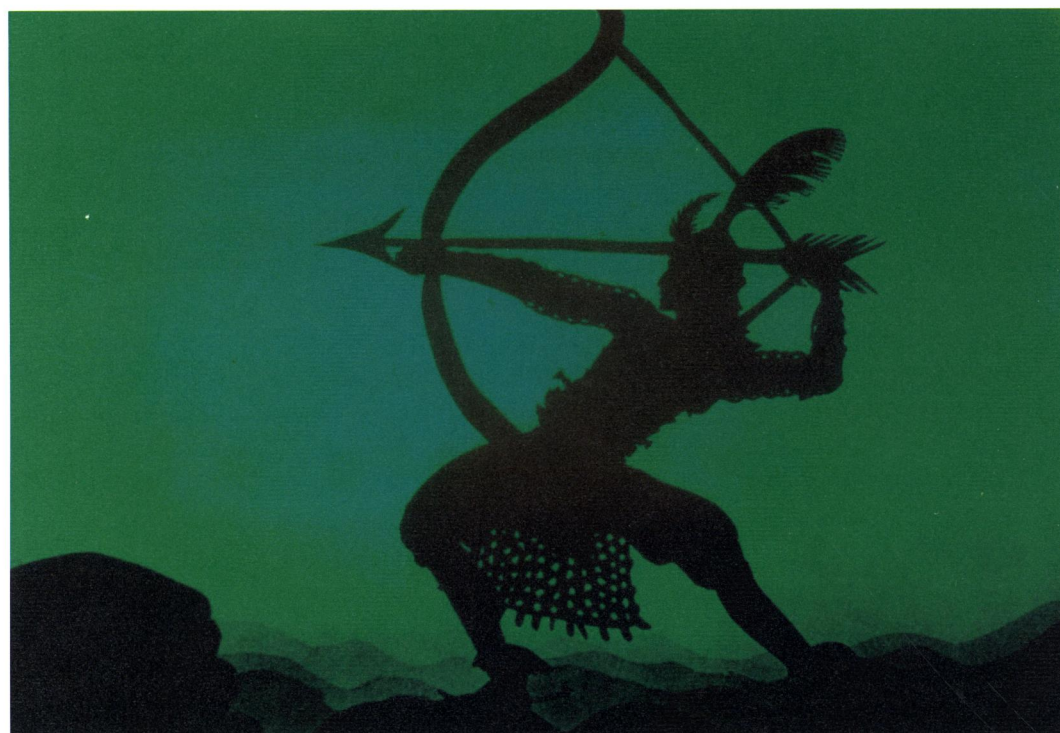
rather than the camera, moved in traveling shots. To create variations in the lighting, and an illusion of depth, Reiniger constructed the backgrounds out of black cardboard and semi-transparent tissue paper. Although the limbs and face were in profile, her figures' torsos were not, encouraging the perception of weight and depth. She cut out various sizes of her main figures, slipping in a larger silhouettes for close-ups. Set against the nuanced background layers, the backlit figures appeared graceful and fluid.

By choosing to work in silhouette and then only in black, Reiniger set herself an enormous challenge. In a 1931 essay on her work, poet Eric Walter White noted that "the problems she has to face and solve in any of her silhouette films are very similar to those before Picasso when he sets out to paint one of his synthetic Cubist paintings." Across the Atlantic, Walt Disney's studio was producing animated cartoons from drawings that obeyed the rules of perspective, fooling the eye to see three dimensions. Reiniger was skeptical of Disney and his "factory-style, over-technicized" productions. "Our films may be more modest," she admitted, "but they bear a more individual mark." And she felt that the stark black figures stimulated audience imagination more than lush colors.

László Moholy-Nagy, Fritz Lang, Georg Wilhelm Pabst all came to a private screening of *Prince Achmed* in 1926. Bertolt Brecht and Jean Renoir were immediate fans and, later, good friends of both Reiniger and Koch. The public, too, went wild

for it, and so did the critics, one reviewer noting: "We're in the realm of pure film, film that doesn't rely on mimicking reality but rather it creates a world of entirely new forms." Reiniger continued making movies despite the Nazi rise to power. The Nazis never banned her films, but they did put a stop to any financing of them and forbade members of her crew to work. The Third Reich trade journal *Deutsche Filmzeitung* disparaged her films as "romantic and unrealistic." In a private conversation, Reiniger was told, "We need healthy produce for the German people. What you make is a caviar in which we have no interest." Reiniger and Koch retained their German passports, but with only a few German marks to their name, and with life in Berlin "unbearable," they reluctantly left for London in the fall of 1935, where she lived on and off until her death in 1981.

Reiniger's work remains of its time, however, her emphasis on process strikes a contemporary note. Ironically, her ideas





seem less visible in contemporary animation than in other forms of art. Kara Walker's work immediately comes to mind, because she too recognizes the power of silhouettes, using their very daintiness to show the distinctly undainty realities of American history. But the artist whose work is most relevant is Thomas Demand. Demand doesn't use silhouettes in the paper reconstructions that he photographs, but his work does echo Reiniger's fascination with paper's opacity, with its inherently baffling ability to absorb, filter, and block light. Demand's illusions are based on the same principles that Reiniger followed:

using careful cutting and ingenious lighting, she transported even the plainest paper from flatness to depth. Her insistently simple materials combined with the deliberately fanciful stories resulted in work both fresh and oddly familiar, even now. When asked how her work related to the realities of 1923, Reiniger replied "Why should it?"

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