

1925-1926

Germany

Lotte Reiniger: *Die Abenteuer des Prinzen Achmed* (The Adventures of Prince Achmed)

Die Abenteuer des Prinzen Achmed (*The Adventures of Prince Achmed*) is regarded as the earliest surviving animated feature film. The plot is an adaptation of "The Story of Prince Ahmed and the Fairy Paribanou" from Andrew Lang's *The Blue Fairy Book* (1889), which translated Middle Eastern and Asian fairy tales and folklore into English for the first time. The subject matter suited Lotte Reiniger's distinctive and delicate cutout silhouette style, which has the feel of traditional Asian shadow puppets.

Prince Achmed is also known as the first film to use a form of multiplane camera (the traditional way of giving two-dimensional animation a feeling of depth), 10 years ahead of Walt Disney and Ub Iwerks in the USA. Created in 1925, the film failed to find a distributor for a year until, with the support of Reiniger's artist friend, Jean Renoir, it was shown at the Cannes Film Festival whereupon it became a hit with critics and public alike.

This ambitious project was funded by a wealthy banker, Louis Hagen, to whose children Reiniger was teaching art. Hagen, no doubt wanting to keep an eye on his investment, had a studio built for the production above his garage in Potsdam. Reiniger enlisted the help of several other important animators from her circle in Berlin, including Walther Ruttmann and Berthold Bartosch. The fact that these rather serious-minded artists agreed to work on such basically populist material demonstrates the close friendship that existed between the group of German animators at the time (and also perhaps a scarcity of paid work). Ruttmann produced the abstract backgrounds while Bartosch worked on special effects along with Reiniger's husband, the director and producer Carl Koch.

The survival of the film is a story in itself. All original copies were destroyed during the bombing of Berlin in World War II, but a print was later found in the British Film Institute's archive in 1954. Further prints made from this were unable to reproduce the original colors as these had been handtinted, a process for which the instructions were not discovered till a later date, when, finally, in 1970, the restored film was screened in its original glory. Further restoration was undertaken in 1998 to produce the remastered copy now available on DVD.



Die Abenteuer des
Prinzen Achmed (The
Adventures of Prince
Achmed), 1926



Cutout animation

Cutout can be the simplest and quickest technique of all and the results are somewhere between cel animation and stop frame. The drawing is cut out and then cut into sections, which are put on a background and then moved frame by frame. It can be done using physical cutouts or cutout images inside a computer animation package.

Multiplane camera

The multiplane camera was used to give an illusion of depth to traditional 2D animation. To achieve this, pieces of artwork were moved past the camera at various speeds and at various distances. Some areas of artwork were left transparent so that layers below could be seen behind them.

Biography

Lotte Reiniger

Lotte Reiniger's unique style means that her work, unlike that of some of the other great animators, is instantly recognizable as her own. Her delicate cutout silhouette technique carried her through a long and productive career that spanned 60 years and many different countries, and enabled her to work simultaneously within the mainstream and avant-garde sectors of animation. Her passion for producing animated versions of fairy tales has perhaps influenced the course of mainstream animation and its association with stories of this type. Beginning her career as part of the group of ambitious and influential animators working in pre-World War II Germany, Reiniger was a central figure in the avant-garde movement, despite being distinct from the others in the group due to her generally more accessible figurative style and more traditionally narrative-led subject matter.

Born in Berlin in 1899, as a child she developed the seemingly self-taught technique of cutting out freehand paper silhouettes, often producing portraits of people and animals that she used in her homemade shadow theater productions. Later she developed a keen interest in cinema, firstly in the stage-magic-style special effects films of Georges Méliès and then in the work of Paul Wegener, the German expressionist director of *The Student of Prague* (1913) and *Der Golem* (1915, also remade in 1920). After attending a lecture by Wegener about "trick" films (or special effects, as we now call them), she knew that was what she wanted to be involved in.

Reiniger persuaded her parents to let her enroll in Max Reinhardt's theater school in Berlin as she knew Wegener was a member of the

acting troupe there. In an attempt to get to know him, she made cutout silhouette portraits of the school's actors in their most famous roles. Due to her skill at creating these silhouettes, this plan worked splendidly and she was soon creating captions and title cards for Wegener, animating wooden rats in his *Der Rattenfänger von Hameln* (*The Pied Piper of Hamelin*, 1918), and even taking small roles in his films.

Wegener introduced her to a group who were setting up an experimental animation studio called the Institut für Kulturforschung (The Institute for Cultural Discovery), including animator Berthold Bartosch and the writer and director Carl Koch. Wegener suggested that Reiniger's silhouettes might have potential for interesting animation, and, after learning the techniques from Bartosch, she started to produce her own films, the first of which was *Das Ornament des Verliebten Herzen* (*The Ornament of the Lovestruck Heart*, 1919), concerning two lovers and an ornament that changed according to their moods. Her attraction to fairy tales soon became apparent as she produced *Aschenputtel* (*Cinderella*, 1922) and *Dornröschen* (*Sleeping Beauty*, 1922). She was also known for creating, along with avant-garde animator Walther Ruttmann, a dream sequence featuring a silhouetted falcon in Fritz Lang's movie, *Die Nibelungen* (1924).

With financial backing from Louis Hagen, Reiniger was presented with an opportunity to make a feature film; the result was *Die Abenteuer des Prinzen Achmed* (*The Adventures of Prince Achmed*, 1926). The movie director and actor Jean Renoir helped to promote *Prince Achmed* in France where, as in other countries, it

eventually achieved commercial and critical success. Renoir described Reiniger's work as "a visual interpretation of Mozart," an apt description as music and operas, along with fairy tales, were favorite themes of hers. In the 1930s she produced an adaptation of *Carmen* (1933), as well as *Papageno* (1935), based on Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*, and then *Helen La Belle* (1957) from Offenbach's music, and *A Night in a Harem* (1958), again from Mozart. She also contributed a silhouette animation to Renoir's *La Marseillaise* (1938).

Further films made in Germany were the animated *Doktor Dolittle und seine Tiere* (*Doctor Dolittle and His Animals*, 1928) and the live-action *Die Jagd nach dem Glück* (*Running After Luck*, 1929). The latter, codirected with Rochus Gliese and starring Renoir and Bartosch, featured a 20-minute silhouette sequence. This film was unfortunately completed just before the advent of sound and was then hastily and unsuccessfully dubbed before its release.

Like fellow animator Oskar Fischinger and many other artists, Reiniger and her now husband Koch fled their native country when the Nazis came to power in the 1930s. As no country would take them as refugees or asylum seekers, they were forced to keep traveling around the world for six years, returning to Germany several times. Nevertheless they carried on working in Italy, France, and Great Britain during the prewar and war years, until they settled in London in 1948.

During their many years in England, Reiniger and Koch produced a huge volume of work including films for the BBC and the GPO Film Unit, such as *The King's Breakfast* (1936).



Beauty, 1954

established a company called Primrose
ons. Among the many acclaimed
films they made during their time in
were a series of fairy tales for producer
gen Jr. (son of the financier of Prince
, including *The Gallant Little Tailor*
and *Jack and the Beanstalk* (1955).
Carl Koch's death in 1963, Reiniger
break from making films and spent a
of years as a near recluse. In the late
there was a revival of interest in her work
was invited to visit Germany for the

first time since her move to London. She was
presented with several awards honoring her
career. Later she was also invited to lecture in the
USA, during which time she described herself as
"a primitive caveman artist." Despite this rather
deprecating view of her own art, the enthusiastic
reception she received persuaded her to start
work once again.

In 1976 Reiniger went to Canada where she
made *Aucassin et Nicolette* and later *The Rose*
and *the Ring* (1979) for the National Film Board.
In her last decade she spent time lecturing and

teaching around the world. Her final film was *Die*
vier Jahreszeiten (*The Four Seasons*, 1980),
made for the Filmmuseum Düsseldorf the year
before she died.

1926

Germany

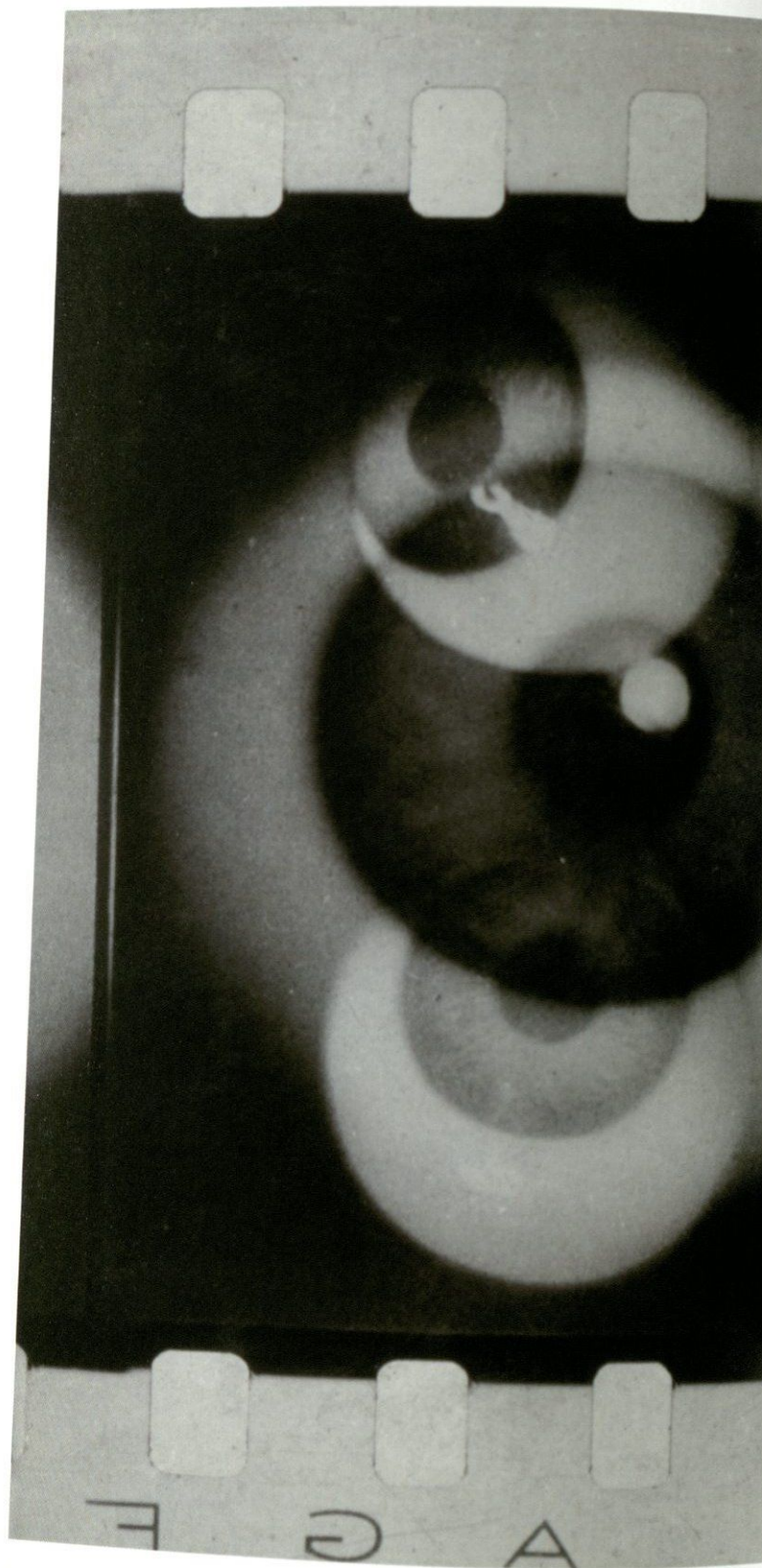
Hans Richter: Filmstudie (Film Study)

After early involvement as an artist in the cubist and Dada movements, Hans Richter befriended Swedish animator Viking Eggeling and the two began experimenting with animation in 1918. Richter made three early abstract animated films in the 1920s: *Rhythmus 21* (1921), *Rythmus 23* (1923), and *Rythmus 25* (1925). These consisted of minimalist animation of geometric shapes moving and growing, the forms increasing in complexity through the series. Although interesting and ambitious attempts to give modernist imagery the dimension of time, the rather primitive animation technique meant that they fell short of the ideal level of precision required for this kind of cold, mathematical style.

For the rest of his career, Richter incorrectly claimed that *Rhythmus 21* was the first ever abstract animated film, when in reality the Italian futurists Bruno Corra and Arnaldo Ginna had created experimental work in 1911 and Walther Ruttmann produced the more sophisticated *Lichtspiel Opus 1* in 1920.

In 1926 Richter produced *Filmstudie (Film Study)*, a richer and more dreamlike work in which, as in Léger's *Ballet Mécanique (The Mechanical Ballet)*, he combined live action with animation, mixing surrealist imagery—disembodied eyeballs and multiple exposed faces—with geometric animation. This time Richter used more advanced camera tricks, such as superimposition to overlay patterns, and utilized the focal properties of the lens to blur and smear the imagery.

In 1940, like many of his fellow artists at this time, Richter emigrated from Germany and moved to New York, where he went on to make the live-action, surrealist classic feature films *Dreams That Money Can Buy* (1947), *8 x 8: A Chess Sonata in 8 Movements* (1957), and *Dadascope* (1961).



Filmstudie (Film Study),
1926