



Kurt Weiler – The Art of Puppet Animation (Double DVD)

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In Defence of Imagination – Kurt Weiler and his Films

As a young lad in exile in Britain, Kurt Weiler met a man who helped him make his way in life. The man was called Peter Sachs, and he was the chief artistic worker at the London-based animated film studio of Larkins & Co. Sachs had worked with the Hungarian George Pál as the latter was head of the Philips advertising film workshop in Eindhoven, he loved the avant-garde films of Oskar Fischinger, and considered the Bauhaus one of the greatest creative centres of modern art. Weiler and Sachs met for the first time in a camp that the British had set up for "enemy foreigners," most of whom were Germans, at the beginning of World War II. Scarcely anyone was interested in the fact that many of these Germans had fled their country for political or racial reasons. Kurt Weiler himself had left his home town of Lehrte at the age of seventeen in January, 1939, since as a German Jew there was a very real danger that he would have been dragged off to prison or concentration camp. Many of his relatives, including his parents, were to become victims of the Nazis' criminal politics.

Sachs, with whom he happened to go for a stroll in the camp, asked how he envisaged his future. Weiler replied that he wanted to be a painter, though he had had to interrupt his studies in this field at the City School of Arts and Crafts in Oxford when the war began. Sachs promised to help him, but the conversation was initially without result. After his release, Weiler had to work for the railways and as a gardener and a waiter. Sachs happened to bring a party of his colleagues to one

of the restaurants where Weiler was employed. "A few days later," said Weiler, "I started working for him as an assistant editor and director."¹

Kurt Weiler proudly brought a few of his home-made puppets to Larkins & Co, but Sachs advised him to throw them away. The figures, said Sachs, were too naturalistic: "Everything that a puppet can do can be trumped by what a person does. And if you try to compete with people in an animated film, you will always lose." Sachs, scorning Weiler's offering, seized a water glass, placed it in front of the young man and said to him "If you can move this glass as if it were a drunk man, then you are an artist." Weiler understood what Sachs was trying to tell him: the art of animated film does not consist of pedestrian imitation, but rather in metaphorically condensing, rendering strange and abstracting from reality. This approach made Sachs into a trail blazer in modern animation film far from the work of Walt Disney. For four years, Kurt Weiler was under this tutelage and participating as an animator in the play of form and décor. Under the artistic supervision of his master, he largely worked on short and mid-length cartoon advertising films, but also tried his hand at animated model films and model animated films.

In the early 1950s, Kurt Weiler, who yearned for the language of his childhood and youth, returned to Germany and the newly founded GDR. He hoped to make a fresh start at the DEFA, the state-run film company. But, as he would later say with irony, he "had the English disease," meaning that as a returnee from the West, he was treated with suspicion - and he was very quick to leave the DEFA studio. He did not, however, so swiftly abandon his dream of making films. And when the opportunity presented itself, he made a first puppet animation film at the Puppet Theatre of the Weißensee Building-Union. *OSKAR KULICKE AND THE PACIFIST* (1952), produced by the Berlin Free German Youth's film company and made in primitive conditions in wooden barracks, drew upon a satirical series by Martin Böttcher (text) and Herberst Reschke (illustrations) from the journal "Deutschlands Stimme". It was, in form and content, perfectly in keeping with the canon of its days and the Cold War. The leading characters are the blond, cheekily coiffured foreman bricklayer Kulicke and his pacifistic counterpart Petermann, who, unable to defend himself, is forced into American uniform. Even in this early, two-and-a-half minute experiment, a blatant, didactic advert for the building up of the GDR's People's Police, Weiler is already using stylised elements; a long arm with the label "US" grabs the fellow who won't bear arms. The latter's white flower, a symbol of pacifism, lies isolated in the street that is filmed in a total shot. The US Americans are characterised by a flag depicting a beetle, a reference to the legend that the USA was damaging agriculture in the GDR by dropping potato beetles on it. The burgeoning Socialist future, on the other hand, is symbolised by the stylised images of new apartment buildings that are unmistakably those of East Berlin's splendiferous Stalin Allee.²

Was it this film that again opened the gates of the DEFA to him, or was it, rather, the tenacity with which Weiler tried to get his foot in the door in the world of cinema? Whichever it was, between 1952 and 1953 he managed to acquire a post at the DEFA studio for Synchronisation, and then another at the Studio for Popular Scientific Films. Here, together with animation cameraman Erich

¹ This and all subsequent quotations from Kurt Weiler are drawn from an interview for the DEFA-Foundation given by the director to Ralf Schenk on 14. 6. 2001 in Kleinmachnow.

² Cf: R.W.: Kulicke und Petermann in *Neue Film-Welt*, Berlin/GDR, issue 10/1952, pp 28f.

Günther, with whom he cooperated over many years, he made his first "professional" puppet animation *DIE WIPPE* [The see-saw] (1954). This is again a satire about US-American occupying soldiers, who this time enter a building site and are transported by a bricklayer and his colleague in an ungentle manner over a boarded fence marked "No Trespassing". The West, whence these troublemakers come, is metaphorically reduced to a sleazy nightclub with a tired jazz pianist and naked statues as cloakroom stands. The East, by comparison, is a peaceful and future-oriented building site. The boarded fence dividing the two worlds anticipates the Wall that was yet to come.

Although *DIE WIPPE* certainly met the demands of the GDR's cultural politics, Kurt Weiler found himself exposed to aesthetic objections. His building workers, it was complained, had trowels that were "dry", free of mortar, and this was therefore an "unrealistic representation" that was to be rejected. The film was not certified for release. The director would later often encounter such demands for more realistic design that rejected metaphor and alienating techniques. Weiler's 1954 text for the journal *Deutsche Filmkunst*, "Gedanken zum Puppentrickfilm" [Thoughts on puppet animated films]³ rejected such invective at this early stage: "Gestures and movements of the puppets are stylised and concentrated," wrote the director, warning "if one attempts to design and move a puppet naturalistically, the puppet film's very reason for being ceases to exist." Equally he insisted that "the cultural heritage of painting, sculpting, and, most particularly, toy design," should play into puppetry, he made a case for "connecting with outstanding visual artists," for including pantomime elements, and he stressed the unity of puppet and décor, which not least of all requires incorporating elements of "German architecture and, most importantly, our German style of ornament."

When, in April 1955, the Dresden DEFA-Studio for Animated Film was opened, Kurt Weiler seemed to have at last found his artistic home. At the very foundation stage of the studio, he was entrusted with the directorship of a team for creating puppet animated films. The other two teams were directed by his colleagues Herbert K. Schulz and Johannes Hempel. Weiler had already come in to earnest conflict with the latter in the preceding years. Hempel, who took his lead from the German animated film tradition of the Diehl Brothers, maintained the position that "puppet animated films are a miniature form of motion pictures" and must offer "direct and unbroken imitation of humans."⁴ On this Kurt Weiler remarks: "To me this was an antiquated artistic approach. The difference in our thinking was extreme." His first children's films, however, including *THE STOLEN NOSE* (1955), *EINE UNGLAUBLICHE GESCHICHTE* [AN UNBELIEVABLE STORY] (1956), *DER HEIMLICHE WEG* [THE SECRET WAY] (1956) and *KÄPT'N SPATZ* [CAPTAIN SPARROW] (1957) do not reflect these contradictions. In most of them, Weiler used a central figure whom he would send out for one adventure after the next. The young Sparrow, with his check shirt, brown dungarees, blond mane and cap at a jaunty angle, was a figure that very young viewers could identify with: he was full of curiosity, a sense of justice, and rather impudent. This was no boring goody-two shoes. In *THE STOLEN NOSE* he and his siblings learn that animals in the winter forest need human help; in *DER HEIMLICHE WEG* he saves his brother, who has been illegally hunting for birds and is caught in a wild boar trap; in *EINE*

³ Kurt Weiler: Gedanken zum Puppentrickfilm. Eine Anregung zur Diskussion [Thoughts on puppet animation films] in *Deutsche Filmkunst*, Berlin/GDR, issue 5/1954, pp 17ff.

⁴ Jörg Herrmann: Die ersten Schritte [The first steps] in *Die Trick-Fabrik, DEFA-Animationsfilme 1955–1990* [The animation family, DEFA animated films, 1955-1990] Ralf Schenk/Sabine Scholze (ed.) Bertz Verlag 2003, p. 80.

UNGLAUBLICHE GESCHICHTE he and his go-cart tow off a broken-down car whose radiator grill is reminiscent of a huge set of dentures. Music and sets in these films are uncontroversial, the grandmother's living room is like a Biedermeier refuge, plants, animals and landscapes are only cautiously stylised. The partially rhyming commentary often recaps the action as it takes place, and concludes by drawing together the morale of the story. "Apart from the first film," Weiler later commented, "this was pretty dreary stuff."

Although he found the practical work fun, Weiler found himself increasingly forced into the defensive in essential matters relating to future approaches. The Damocles sword of formalism hung over the animated film studio. Ideological trench warfare soured the atmosphere. Experimental forms and processes were frowned upon. According to Weiler "Modern art in the GDR was virtually unheard of, except among the emigrants. Many politicians were considered illiterate in matters of art. I could see no light on the horizon and was very depressed." When his potential opponent Johannes Hempel was to be appointed artistic director of the studios, Weiler felt he could do nothing but leave Dresden and look for a new employer. He went to work for the German advertising and announcement society (DEWAG) and began to make a series of advertising and public education puppet animation films.⁵ After the DEWAG was dissolved in 1962, Weiler found a home at the DEFA-Studio for popular scientific films in Potsdam-Babelsberg, though he occasionally returned to the Dresden Animated Films Studio as a guest.

It was during this period of searching that Weiler made the acquaintance of Achim Freyer, the set designer and painter from the Brecht Theater. They were introduced by the creator of the East German Sandman, Gerhard Behrendt. Their first joint work was the film commissioned in 1960 by Deutscher Fernsehfunk, EIN BAUER UND DIE GENERALE [A farmer and the generals]. Freyer created the puppets, two caricature generals and a farmer, a giant of a man with a tiny head. This immediately caused displeasure and had the film banned.⁶ Weiler didn't let the censorship trouble him, but stayed close to Freyer for a decade until Freyer left for the Federal Republic. "He complemented me. He did visually what I tried to do as a director. His puppets were charming and could be moved beautifully. I suddenly felt the difference to my earlier films: It was like day and night."

Freyer was never satisfied by conventional material, and in the history of GDR animated films he was something of a radical innovator. For the anti-war parable HEINRICH THE DYSFUNCTIONAL (1965), he designed, in a manner similar to the legendary staging of Brecht's "Mother Courage and her Children", almost bare scenery with nothing but the outlines of old maps shimmering through. The army, with which the eponymous hero, a German prince from the 16th century, heads off to conquer Poland, is metaphorically reduced to a single eight-legged horse with five riders. Heinrich himself appears as a wandering set of armour with rosy, porky cheeks and much too skinny legs.

⁵ Including short satires for the board of the Free German Trade Union Federation's work safety department on themes such as punctuality in the workplace (FERDINAND, 1964), work-safety (INNERBETRIEBLICHER TRANSPORT, [workplace transport] 1966) or order and cleanliness in the workplace (ORDNUNG UND SAUBERKEIT AM ARBEITSPLATZ (1964). These introduced the satirical puppet figures of workers Ferdinand and Max. Narrators included cabaret artist Gerd E. Schäfer. Films for Dresden's Hygiene Museum included ANTISMOKER (1964) und LEO ODER WER RASTET DER ROSTET [Leo, rest and rust] (1971, with Peter Blümel). Weiler's work NIMM RÜCKSICHT UND DAS TASCHENTUCH [Be courteous and the handkerchief] (1967) was released on a DVD by the museum that accompanied the volume *Kamera! Licht! Aktion! Filme über Körper und Gesundheit 1915 bis 1990* [Cameras, lights, action! Films about the body and health, 1915-1990] (Dresden, 2011).

⁶ The ban related to the system-independent interpretability of the story: a farmer feeds two generals – this didn't relate to the West alone, but also to the East.

Several figures have double heads that smile at the front and look wicked or mean-spirited at the back. The backdrop to this conquest consists of rusty metal parts. The viewer sees a meadow made of nails with the heads of screws as flowers. This gives the film a corresponding severity. The city of Krakow appears in the form of an unconquerable fortress. Its entrance is made of two egg boxes. To coherently reduce the world in a metaphoric manner that indicates the nature of the universe being displayed is something in which no DEFA animated film had hitherto succeeded.

Besides Freyer, Weiler's close colleagues included other avant-garde artists of the GDR, particularly visual artists or people from the theatre, which at the time benefited from greater artistic freedom than did film. Weiler managed on occasion to find these artists new work and help them out of phases of politically motivated non-activity. This was also the case with Achim Freyer, of whom Weiler said, he met during a period in which he had "really crazy trouble". The composer Friedrich Goldmann, a student of Karlheinz Stockhausen and erstwhile close confidante of Heiner Müller and Ruth Berghaus, composed experimental music for *WITH A FLEA IN THEIR EAR* (1970), a satirical comment on capitalist-socialist convergence theory, whilst Freyer created bright, fable-style animals that move in a fixed building-block environment and even dared to employ didactic devices reminiscent of the V-effekt introduced in Brecht's theatre. Set designer, graphic artist and sculptor Werner Frischmuth created a complete zoo from empty packaging from the pharmacy and elsewhere for children's fable *BALTHASAR THE LION* (1970). The transformation of the original material into various animals takes place in front of the viewer as real film material and stimulates imaginative imitation.

Puppet design for *THE PRESENT, A LEGACY OF IDIOCY* (1974), an historic excursion into the world of the Hohenzollern in which Weiler polemically attacks the indoctrination of young people prior to World War I, was the work of set designer and poet Einar Schleaf. He used authentic, original puppets that he borrowed from a museum. For those children figures whose individuality has been lost to political propaganda, he employed the round-faced, hearty Käthe Kruse puppets that had been commissioned by the Nazis for the Olympic Games in 1936. The skinny outsider whose head need not first be opened up and de-garbaged, since he is prepared to think and resist, was symbolised by a jobbing-worker puppet from the Erz Mountains. For the set design of the 2D collage film *REKONSTRUKTION EINES BERÜHMTEN MORDFALLES* [Reconstruction of a famous murder case] (1975), the Biblical Cain and Abel story, Weiler engaged one of Benno Besson's closest colleagues, the set designer Ezio Toffolutti, who made images of the Berlin Pergamon altar, and reconfigured the interaction between those characters whilst placing them on a background of drawings and photos. Toffolutti also created the atmosphere of *EIN GEMACHTER MANN ODER „FALSCHER FUFFZIGER“* [A made-man, or, the cheating swindler] (1978), in which Weiler, using photos, headlines from West German papers, dollar and DM notes, Barbie dolls, large format real eyes and lips and other graphic elements, created a façade of glitter and glamour behind which deception and murder takes place.

Apart from his early children's and advertising films, Kurt Weiler always considered himself a political director; not only the forms of his work but also the material and themes often transgressed against comfortable canonical norms. As with his role models Jiří Trnka and Jan Švankmajer, whose pessimistic-surrealistic world view he did not, however, share, he liked to move on philosophical terrain. In *MACHEN IM JAHRE 2001 ALLES DIE MASCHINEN* [MACHINES WILL DO IT ALL IN

2001] (1966), he thought about the relationship between humans and technology; in NÖRGEL AND SONS (1967) and its two following episodes, NÖRGEL AND SONS - WHOLESALERS AND BY THE ITEM (1968) and I, NÖRGEL (1969), he reflects on the creation and role played by money, and doesn't fear to introduce a mass of quotations from Marx into the voice-over. In THE APPLE (1969), he attempts to illuminate the history of science in a fifteen-minute animation film. He is interested in the question "who benefits" and under which conditions discoveries become new, productive forces. In ERINNERUNG AN EIN GESPRÄCH [RECOLLECTIONS OF A CONVERSATION] (1984), a parable about war and peace, he elected legendary King Pyrrhus as his protagonist. He also drew demanding material from the classics; Shakespeare's A WINTER'S TALE (1972, JOINTLY SCRIPTED WITH B.K. TRAGELEHN) as a puppet animation; Wilhelm Hauff's THE TALE OF CALIPH STORK (1984), was a 2D parable that Weiler intended the powers of the GDR should understand as a cinematographic cautionary tale: "The chief figure was a leader who stopped at nothing when it came to knowing the cares and concerns of his people." For the score he engaged Günther "Baby" Sommer, a well-known representative of the European jazz avant garde who made the voices of the humans-turned-into-storks into an impressive-sounding free-jazz concert.

With HEINRICH THE DYSFUNCTIONAL, if not before, Kurt Weiler's films became total works of art. The cleverly stylised puppets and 2D figures were animated on backdrops that exuded their own, idiosyncratic poetic charm and in themselves became decisive characters. Weiler loved to capture the acting protagonists in a total shot, to transport them into an artificial world, the nature of which reflected their inner aspects. In many films the heroes depart on a journey to unknown universes where they go through rites of passage. This is as true of DAS TAPFERE SCHNEIDERLEIN [THE BRAVE TAILOR] as it is of the chicken, sheep and hippopotamus in DIE NUSS [THE NUT] (1972), who, because of the apocalyptic predictions of the chicken, flee home and wander the globe for a year, admiring Dutch windmills and Egyptian Sphinxes, before finally returning home. Weiler's most beautiful and imaginative picaresque film is doubtless THE HUNT FOR TURLIPAN THE BIRD (1976), which he created with graphic- and set designer Gabriele Koerbl contributing the puppets and sets.

Weiler took his inspiration for this film from a text by poet Peter Hacks and Claude Debussy's composition "Afternoon of a Faun". The story is that of a dean in Salamanca who leaves the city to search for the legendary bird, the Turlipan. Mocked by his colleagues as a madman, he indeed returns without the fabled bird, but, Weiler insists, the trip has by no means been in vain. On his travels the researcher enters a place of operatic décor: a series of wondrous, brightly coloured worlds which, had he remained at home, he would never have seen. Gabriele Koerbl took high inexhaustible pleasure in creating bright meadows of flowers and oceans from scraps of cloth, forests from toilet-, hair- and toothbrushes and cliffs from porcelain shards. At one stage the dean flies through a sea of pink balloons (which certainly brings erotic adventures to mind and indicates Koerbl's proximity to the theatrical worlds of Ruth Berghaus). Finally he sees through his telescope a landscape of hills and roads where long lines of traffic are moving – a vision of endless faith in technology and progress. For a country such as the GDR, whose people were essentially incarcerated, a film such as THE HUNT FOR TURLIPAN THE BIRD is almost a subversive act of liberation. It is doubtless one of the greatest and most lasting achievements of the DEFA.

In the late 1980s, Kurt Weiler filmed some Aesop fables: *A HEROIC SAGA* (1985) and *ZEUS, ADLER, MISTKÄFER* [Zeus, eagle, dung beetle] (1988, with Rolf Hofmann), warning of new wars in which there could be no victor. He took part in the international project *ONE PEOPLE* (1989), a joint Jewish and Muslim cinematic call for peace in the Middle East. Further plans, such as the fairytale of the frog king, the Biblical saga of Jonas and the Whale, and the adaptation of Aristophanes' "Peace" remained unrealised. In autumn 1990, Kurt Weiler summarised his credo in a long interview for the journal "Film und Fernsehen"⁷: "In the GDR," he said with regret, "I suffered from the fact that resistance to my work came from people to whom I felt politically affiliated." Furthermore, "all art must first be original, and thus elitist. If art is understood at once, it has no other view of things than does the average audience." What remains for us viewers is our respect for his art and for the vital and rebellious spirit of this man who is now in his nineties. Many of his films opened the gates of knowledge and the imagination in a wonderfully playful way and thus belong among the best things created in German animated film in the second half of the 20th century. So Weiler can rightly be considered one of the central figures of the animated film avant garde whose intellectual and aesthetic aura reaches out far beyond the sunken half-land of the GDR.

Ralf Schenk, February 2012

Ralf Schenk, film journalist and author, employee of the "Berliner Zeitung" and of "film-dienst", member of the Berlinale selection committee and co-editor of "Die Trick-Fabrik" (2003), on the history of the DEFA-Studio for Animated Films.

⁷ Eine Chance für Phantasie. Aufgezeichnet von Rolf Richter [Giving imagination a chance, with Rolf Richter] in: *Film und Fernsehen*, Berlin, issue12/1990, pp 23ff.