

European Animation



Animation in Germany

Rolf Giesen



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Animation in Germany

This book provides a comprehensive account of German animation history, as well as an analysis of the current state of the industry in competition with American and cheaper international products in the face of dwindling budgets.

Covering film and TV, 2D and 3D animation, this book considers how Europe has lost its domestic territory of narratives to international competitors. A connection is made between film history and contemporary history: World War I, the Weimar Republic, National Socialism, World War II, the Federal Republic and German Democratic Republic, Reunification, the European Union, Digitalization and Globalization, and a turn of eras initiated by pandemic, war, and inflation.

This book will be of great interest to academics, students, and professionals working and researching in the field of animation.

About the Author

Rolf Giesen, PhD, is a German film historian, screenwriter, lecturer, and collector who specializes in VFX and animation. He has shared his knowledge through numerous university and public lectures, cinemathèque exhibitions, and monographic, historiographic, and lexicographic books such as *Acting and Character Animation*. He received the Award for Outstanding Contribution to Animation Studies, 32nd World Festival of Animated Film – Animafest Zagreb 2022.

European Animation

European Animation explores the current state of animation production in various European countries derived from a social, historic, political, economic and artistic background. The series tells what made animated movies possible in Europe and is a prognosis foreseeing a change in future animation production.

Series Editor

Rolf Giesen is a German film historian, screenwriter, lecturer, and collector who specialized in VFX and animation, Germany.

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Introduction

The first U.S. soldier to enter the Dachau Concentration Camp as liberator was Robert Bernard Sherman. Robert was born on December 19, 1925, to Russian Jewish immigrants in New York City. He was interested in violin, piano, painting, and poetry. On D-Day, he was among the first waves of U.S. soldiers to storm Omaha Beach. On Sunday, April 29, 1945, the U.S. Army received marching orders to liberate Dachau. Sherman led the first squadron, which consisted of eight soldiers. Robert described this experience in his memoirs, published posthumously.¹ He died on March 6, 2012.

Most Germans will not know Sherman by name, but most of them know the songs he and his brother Richard had written for Walt Disney, for *Mary Poppins* and *The Jungle Book*. *The Jungle Book* was the most successful animated feature film ever shown in Germany.

But little did Robert Sherman know that, shortly before the liberation, Dachau was not only the seat of an infamous concentration camp, but also the hoped-for center of National Socialist cartoon film production that was supposed to rival Disney and replace him on the European market. Originally there was a presumptuous plan to make occupied Crimea the central base of German and European animation, and barrack everyone who could hold a pencil there, but by that time the Germans were forced to evacuate the Crimea and abandon the project. So, instead Dachau.

After the fall of the Nazi tyranny, Karl Neumann, whom Dr. Joseph Goebbels, Reich Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda, had appointed to helm the Reich's animation product (including trick film made in Dachau), was interned by the Soviets in a camp near Berlin. In June 1945, Neumann was found dead in the toilet where he had hanged himself.

As apolitical as German animated film may appear to be, it was always overshadowed by contemporary history. After what they termed *Endsieg* (final victory), by 1950, the Nazis planned a stream of feature-length animated films, and in fact one of their former artists finished a feature-length animated film exactly five years after Hitler's death, but it was a black-and-white film that looked cheap against the Disney competition in Technicolor and was graciously overlooked by German audiences.

The division of Germany, result of the Cold War, brought two rival puppet film *Sandmen* – bringing sleep and dreams to children in East and West, respectively (with the East being faster and overtaking the West). Much to the displeasure of the French creators, the first German translation of the *Asterix* comic books addressed the division of Germany into the Ostrogoths and Visigoths. The creators of *Asterix the Gaul*, one of them a Jew, made sure that the German publisher, who at one time even employed Hitler's former secretary, was deprived of the product.

West German advertising television caricatured the German Michel in a crowd of animated dwarfish *Mainzelmännchen* (Little Mainz Men) wearing stocking caps.

In all these years, however, Disney remained the dominant factor in the West German cartoon and merchandising market and, after reunification, in the German market as a whole. Full-length German animation films were soon available, but American distributors ensured that since the German output was mainly aimed at a

preschool audience, they became limited to the afternoon run of the cinemas: reduced to the state of “local production.” These films were very often not produced domestically, but, following the economic laws of globalization, outsourced to Asia, in one case even to Pyongyang, North Korea. (Even this author was asked by the North Korean embassy in Berlin if he could arrange assignments of this kind. He didn’t.)

The impulses from short films produced, for instance, by the film schools in Ludwigsburg or Babelsberg, which were limited to festivals, were hardly taken up by commercial producers at all. Due to lack of funds, 3D animation in particular looked awkward. Totally dependent on public funding, in the midst of a turn of eras and the dramatic consequences of COVID-19 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, German animation is getting into trouble. How will it reinvent itself in the environment of the new media? Actually, German animation is largely unknown in Europe. To him, it is incomprehensible that the biggest country in the European economy is still so weak in the animation industry, with all their competence and talents, Marc Vandeweyer, former director general of Cartoon Media Brussels, complained.²

Consequently, this book is not just about German animation, but about *Animation in Germany*, which includes foreign product that is predominant on the screens and on TV.

A personal remark is permitted: The author of this book was associated with the German animation film industry as screenwriter and consultant for almost 40 years. Some impressions and facts that were previously unknown can therefore be told from personal experience, insofar as this is not prevented by client’s contracts and nondisclosure clauses.

NOTES

1 *Moose: Chapter from My Life*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse Publishers, 2013.

2 Email to the author dated May 31, 2018.

1 The Golem Anticipates *Fantasia*

A GREAT SYMPHONIC FANTASY ANIMATED

Paul Wegener (1874–1948) was a famous German stage and film actor. He joined Max Reinhardt's acting troupe in 1906 and became interested in film before World War I. He understood that movies were more than a novelty, more than an amusement attraction. It was a new art form, and the manipulation of images was to be a part of it. In 1913, it was cinematographer Guido Seeber's trick photography that enabled Wegener to act in a dual role on screen with his own *doppelgänger* in *The Student of Prague* (*Der Student von Prag*), but it was still Wegener's vision. One year later, Wegener originated the *Golem* character on screen. In a 1916 lecture, Wegener was the first stage actor to foresee new developments, interestingly not concerning live actors but animation, dreaming up an entirely new universe of synthetically created images that would transform images into a visual symphony of movement.

You have all seen films in which suddenly a line appears, curves, and changes its form. Out of it grow faces and the line disappears. To me the impression seems highly remarkable. But such things are always shown as an intermezzo and nobody has ever thought of the colossal possibilities of this technique. I think the film as art should be based – as in the case of music – on tones, on rhythm. In these changeable planes, events unreel which are partly identified with natural pattern, yet partly beyond real lines and forms. Imagine one of [Arnold] Böcklin's sea paintings with all the fabulous tritons and nereids. And imagine an artist duplicating this work in hundreds of copies but with each copy having small displacements so that all copies revealed in succession would result in continuous movement. Suddenly we would see before our very eyes a world of pure fantasy come to life. Such effects can also be achieved with specially constructed little models animated like marionettes – in this field there are great achievements nowadays. One also can change the pace of different movements by shooting too slow or too fast, developing a fantastic vision which will produce entirely new associations of ideas. In addition, one can photograph microscopic parts of fermenting chemical substances, small plants, etc. in different dimensions in a jumble, so that the matter from which these visions arise is no longer recognizable. We are entering a new pictorial fantasy world as we would enter a magic forest. We are setting foot in the field of pure kinetics – or optical lyric as I call it. This field will perhaps be of major importance and will open new beautiful sights. This eventually is the final objective of each art, and so cinema would gain an autonomous aesthetic domain for itself.

I don't want to describe this film to you any further. I just want to indicate to you what perspectives are given here. By using all imaginable forms and elements, such as artificial steam, snowflakes, electric sparks and so on, a movie could be created that would become an experience of art – an optical vision, a great symphonic fantasy! That it will happen one day, I am sure – and beyond that, I am certain, later generations will look upon our early efforts as upon childish stuttering.¹

This was 4 years before Walt Disney, after his return from the battlefields of Europe, had decided to enter animation and 24 years (!) before *Fantasia* was released (Figure 1.1).



FIGURE 1.1 Paul Wegener as *The Golem*. (Author's Collection.)

It was a vision of a true parallel world created by the manipulation of a sequence of moving images, an illusion put together by the dream machine and mechanics of the cinema, by projecting a light beam, perceived by the human eye and transferred to the brain. Through the fog of his mind's eye, Wegener described a magic forest of optical lyricism, as he called it.

It is absolutely unique that an actor of all things and at that time embodied synthetic images. Georges Méliès found it easier to star himself in his films instead of hiring a comedian or an actor. These pictures were too tricky for “regular” actors. Wegener, a professional thespian on the other hand, became interested in trick film and played a key role in German silent cinematography.

A DYSTOPIAN WORLD WAR OF FLEAS, LICE, AND RODENTS

Wegener's peaceful vision was sadly overshadowed by the events of war.

Contrary to the myth of the Hooray patriotism that was spread by nationalist circles in August 1914, enthusiasm for war was understandably rather limited:

...this phenomenon primarily affects the nobility, the bourgeoisie, many intellectuals, and, of course, the political leadership: In the working-class districts of the big cities and in the countryside, on the other hand, the mood is often very different. On their spy tours through working-class pubs in Hamburg, the agents of the political police note that those present ask aloud why they should be concerned about the [assassinated] Austrian heir to the throne and why they should give their lives for it. As early as August 1, a Social Democrat in Bremen observed the “most miserable mood” he had

“ever experienced”: “Mothers, women and brides bring the young men to the train and cry. Everyone has the feeling: It’s going straight to the slaughterhouse.”

However, hardly anyone expects how fast times will become difficult. Most soldiers think they’ll be home by Christmas, and the state isn’t in any way prepared for a long war either. [...] With the first terrible experiences at the front, the “baptism of fire,” disillusionment spread among the war volunteers. Theodor Reil from Oldenburg writes to his teacher from Belgium at the end of August: “After a 33-hour train journey and a seven-hour wait, our people had a strenuous march. On the way we saw the first destructions, the terrible fires of the war, burnt-out houses, villages completely destroyed.

At the latest with the defeat in the Battle of the Marne in September 1914, which made a quick victory against France impossible, many felt the same way as the grocer Johanna Boldt. At the beginning of October, she wrote to her husband Julius who was on the Eastern front: “People want nothing more than the end of this unfortunate war. And there is still no prospect of that.”²

Millions of soldiers on both sides vegetate in trenches that zigzag through moon-scapes torn apart by heavy gunfire. One of the soldiers, Adolf Mann from Stuttgart, describes the hellish noise of war in his letters from the front:

A simple infantry shell already reverberates like in a church, and now the artillery is constantly rattling. It is a plethora of the most peculiar noises: firing and impact of artillery shells, infantry shells, rifle grenades, mines. Then the muffled whizzing of the flares – all around comrades swearing, mice rustling.

Soon, the trenches are teeming with rats. The German soldiers call them “grave diggers.”³

World War I conditions were horrific, and death was never far away. If the soldiers managed to survive enemy shelling and the sneaky sniper’s bullet they could just as easily be defeated by an illness such as Trench Foot or Wiegand’s Disease. Fleas, lice, and rodents were rife and would plague the men with disease. [...] Lice sucked the blood of a host infected by trench fever and then spread the fever to a successive host.

Trenches often flooded with rain in which frogs swam. Red slugs would ooze from the mud. At night opportunist rats crept out. Discarded food cans would rattle as the rats crept inside to lick the remains. More horrifically the rodents were sometimes referred to as corpse rats. They bred rapidly in their millions and swarmed through No-Man’s Land gnawing the corpses of fallen soldiers.

The rats would taut sleeping soldiers, creeping over them at night. There were long bouts of boredom and rat hunting became a sport. [...]

Trench conditions were ideal for rats. There was plenty of food, water and shelter. With no proper disposal system, the rats would feast off food scraps. The rats grew bigger and bolder and would even steal food from soldier’s hand.⁴

THE ART OF SILHOUETTE PLAYS AND FILMS

In the meantime, with all these horrors going on, Wegener encouraged and supported one young actress who had listened to this lecture and became the first great female animator of film history, so to speak animating the shadows from the nightmarish realm of the dead as silhouettes. Her name was Lotte Reiniger (1899–1981) – and her art was in the line with the zeitgeist of the day. Lotte adored actors and particularly dancers who she had spent many hours watching perform. She even had access to the private box of Colonel Wassily de Basil for the performances of his *Ballets Russe de*

Monte Carlo. At a young age Lotte had entered the Theater School of Max Reinhardt but just wanted to join the boys-only classes, because they did gymnastics. It was at Reinhardt's school that she developed her paper cutting skills, producing tiny portrait figures with great accuracy, particularly of actors in order to attract their attention. Finally, she turned to the cinema and created the most wonderful silhouette films.

During Germany's postwar financial crisis and hyperinflation, Louis Hagen, a banker acquaintance, had invested in a large quantity of raw film stock as a shelter from inflation; but the gamble hadn't paid off. So Lotte was allowed to use it to make the *Thousand and One Night* fantasy of *Prince Achmed* in the magnificent tradition of the Shadow Theatre that originated from Asia, from China, India, and Indonesia, and is in fact one of the founding pillars of intercultural synergy between East and West.

Production on *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (*Die Abenteuer des Prinzen Achmed*) started in 1923. The story is loosely based on the *Tale of the Magic Horse* from *The Arabian Nights*. At the court of the Caliph of Bagdad, an African sorcerer appears on a flying horse. He offers to exchange the miraculous animal for the hand of the Caliph's Daughter. The sorcerer tricks Prince Achmed, the brother of the princess, into mounting the magical horse and off the Prince rides to an enchanted island faraway. There he surprises the fairy queen Pari Banu at the bath and falls in love with her beauty. He takes her on an adventurous journey, but the insidious magician kidnaps her and presents her to the Emperor of China as a slave. The story has a happy ending, thanks to Aladdin's magic lamp and the friendly Witch of the Flaming Mountains who battles an army of monsters and demons, and the evil sorcerer himself in various animal forms.

The film was screened for the first time on May 2, 1926, as a matinee at the Volksbühne Theater at Bülowplatz in Berlin and then, in July, at the Comédie des Champs-Élysées in Paris, thanks to Jean Renoir's initiative. Distributed by UFA and Lothar Stark, it officially opened on September 3 in a Berlin cinema, the renowned Gloria Palace.

Silhouette film technique is very simple. As with cartoon drawings, shadow films are photographed movement by movement. But instead of drawings, silhouette marionettes are used. These marionettes are cut out of black cardboard and thin lead, every limb being cut separately and joined with wire hinges. A study of natural movement is very important, so that the little figures appear to move just as men and women and animals do. The backgrounds for the characters are cut out with scissors as well and designed to give a unified style to the whole picture (Figure 1.2).

First, Prince Achmed was drawn. After everyone was convinced that he should look like this, he was portrayed in silhouette. Then he was built out of wire, cardboard and rolled lead in such a way that he could perform flexibly and convincingly in the shadow play. He was disassembled into head, neck, shoulders, chest, abdomen, hips, legs, upper and lower arms, knees, hands and feet, then hinged together and jointed, hammered and rolled until he was a neat film silhouette. Masses of tracing paper were now bought to create the environment in which his adventures should take place. Sets upon sets, clouds, castles, forests and seas, landscapes and magical caves piled up around him. He himself was built in twenty different sizes for his world. Then finally he should come alive. To do this, the little puppet was placed on a sheet of glass and lovingly illuminated from below in such a way that all the hinges and joints could no longer be seen and it appeared as a free, independent being in its world of tracing paper, which was

also lit from below. The camera patiently looked at both from above. Now Achmed who was nothing more than a flat puppet was supposed to play. He got help. Frame by frame, his limbs were moved to where they should be, every frame of his tiny movement photographed. He was given friends and enemies to fight with or against. The longer he was acting, the more demanding he became. Countless extras had to be cut out and animated. Sometimes there are fifty little characters in a single scene at the same time.

To give an idea of the length of the work: 52 individual frames are needed for a film strip that rolls by in two seconds before the eyes of the viewer. In all, during the more than three years of work, around 250,000 frames were photographed, of which ca. 100,000 were used in the finished film.⁵

If one considers – we read in a contemporary review⁶ – that each of the acting characters must be flexible in all joints, one can get an idea of what a marvel was achieved. But the technical part alone is not what matters. The main thing is that the spirit of the fairy tale has been happily reborn in a series of cinematic images.



FIGURE 1.2 Lotte Reiniger in the 1920s at work on her (multiplane) animation stand. (Courtesy of Caroline Hagen Hall, Primrose Film Productions Limited, London.)

Reiniger's interest in silhouette films perfectly matched Expressionist filmmakers' fascination with shadows: Fritz Lang, Robert Wiene, Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, and Albin Grau who had designed both *Nosferatu* and the eponymously titled *Schatten* (*Warning Shadows*). Yet she pointed out that there is a difference between a shadow and a silhouette (Figure 1.3):

From the early days of mankind shadows seemed to men to be something magic. The spirits of the dead were called shadows, and the underworld was named the Kingdom of Shadows and was looked upon with awe and horror. [...]

The essential difference between a shadow and a silhouette is that the latter cannot be distorted. A silhouette can cast a shadow. When you see trees or figures against an evening sky, you would say, not that they are shadowed against the sky, but silhouetted against it. The silhouette exists in its own right.⁷



FIGURE 1.3 *Die Abenteuer des Prinzen Achmed* (*The Adventures of Prince Achmed*). (Courtesy of Caroline Hagen Hall, Primrose Film Productions Limited, London.)

Lotte Reiniger was not only a storyteller but also an experimental filmmaker and well acquainted with the leading artists of the time. One of those was Walter Ruttmann:

When the idea for Prince Achmed came up, we definitely wanted to have Ruttmann, whom we greatly admired, and he agreed to it. The scenes were always determined on a case-by-case basis. I wanted his special involvement for magical effects. On the climax of Prince Achmed, we worked together: mostly, when there were longer scenes, I animated my silhouettes alone and gave him the footage to compose his backgrounds, which he photographed at his home. Sometimes I also worked with him in his studio: While he painted, I was animating the characters for e. g. the opening title. That was very difficult because you play these little shadow figures on a glass plate. Glass is slippery. We had to place tracing paper on it to give the figures some resistance. And the figures had to be very small, too, because he only had a small camera field. And for

the last thing, he was always in the studio with us. We worked then on different [multi-plane] sheets of glass, always watching what the other one did. We judged each other by each other. It was fantastic, it was wonderful! So if, for example, the sorcerer was going to conjure up a magic horse, I animated him in black and white, gave him [Ruttmann] the positive and calculated during the shot exactly where the sorcerer should be in the various moments of action according to the number of frames. Then Ruttmann composed the emergence of the magic horse. And I think it's the only time that two artists who are so different have worked jointly.⁸

At that time, Ruttmann had made the decision to set his painting in motion:

In his last paintings, the attempt to depict movement, based on futurism, becomes all too clear. [...] Ruttmann sees speed and tempo as the main characteristics of his time. This results in a different perception of the world: the frozen timeless moment is replaced by the dynamic, temporal happening – the movement.⁹

Ruttmann's Process and Device for the Production of Cinematographic Images was patented on June 27, 1920:

The aim of the invention is to provide a method for producing cinematographic images of non-moving objects based on non-moving frames that have changed between the individual shots. For this purpose, according to the invention, the successive frames belonging to the representation of a kinematic process are taken from several transparent image plates lying one behind the other in the light path, movable against each other, on which the necessary changes, e.g., the position, the lighting and the like; these changes can cover parts of the image or the entire image.¹⁰

Herbert Ihering, a well-known theater critic, had reviewed Ruttmann's *Lichtspiel Opus 1*, considered to be the first abstract or "absolute" work in film history, which was animated in 10,000 frames of colors and shapes in the course of nine months in 1921:

Colored triangles fought colored circles that swelled and shrank. Beams of ray swung. Suns circled. There was only one law that drove them against each other and apart, that allowed the forms to stretch and shrink: the rhythm. A movement game of rare purity. Basically, it was the archetype of the film play (to which only a late development came here): to show forms in rhythmic movement, independent of narrative inhibitions, independent of material stress. Visible music, audible light. This film was not photographed. It was painted. And was transferred directly.¹¹

One thinks of Expressionist paintings, Ihering's even more renowned colleague Alfred Kerr wrote (and surpassed himself in the euphoric enumeration of verbs): But they [the paintings] are rather immobile. Chagall's luminous paradises remain rigid. The glittering futurisms of the latest Parisian petrify motionless – in their frames. But here things dart, row, burn, climb, push, glide step, wither, flow, swell, dawn, unfold, bulge, widen, decrease, ball up, narrow, sharpen, divide, curve, rise, fill, empty, crouch, flower and crumble.

In short: Expressionism in motion. A rush for the pupil – but not a film about and with humans.¹²

Lotte Reiniger: "I first saw Ruttmann's films in a night screening at the Marmorhaus Cinema in Berlin. We had heard that there was an artist coming from Munich who made abstract films. And since we were interested in this particular work, we went

there and watched the films, and were tremendously excited. We were blown away by the musical rhythm of this thing, by the actual representation of a musical movement – visually – that was something completely new for us.”¹³

Ruttmann’s most famous work, however, was not animated. It was a documentary film, *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Grossstadt* (*Berlin, Symphony of a Great City*), made in 1927, which hit the nerve of the time. Finally, Ruttmann felt a call to become a director of feature films but failed. He spent making propaganda films during the final years of his life for the Nazis like *Deutsche Panzer* (*German Tanks*, 1940): *The devastating power of our armored divisions is due to the unique attacking spirit of the troops and the superiority of our combat material*. Not long after finishing this film, Ruttmann died of an embolism, on July 15, 1941, at the age of only 53.

When they saw Ruttmann’s early work, other painters got interested in setting their paintings in motion too. On May 3, 1925, a unique matinee devoted to *The Absolute Film* was organized by the artists’ association November Group in cooperation with the culture film department of UFA at U.T. Cinema, Berlin, Kurfürstendamm. Screened were films by Fernand Léger, Walter Ruttmann, and Dada artist Viking Eggeling (*Symphonie diagonal/Diagonal Symphony*). Eggeling, who was born in Lund, Sweden on October 21, 1880, used foils made to tinfoil that he cut into shapes:

Lighting from below made them appear as if depicted brightly against a dark light. The camera’s fading in and out conveys the impression of the shapes appearing and disappearing. The impression of the shapes getting closer or smaller is created by moving the foil and taking single-frame pictures or by adjusting the camera lens. [...] Through light-dark contrasts, changes in direction and a dramatized form of curves, lines, harps and triangles, Eggeling tries to clarify the aspect of time. At the same time, however, he tries to create shapes that should not be seen as just shapes, but rather as letters, as arabesque writing of a new universal language. An unusual novelty of the film is the jerky change of rhythm and forms, the meaning of which can only be grasped with the help of musical theory. Eggeling’s intention, however, was to make music of the eyes visually comprehensible.¹⁴

The absolute film, on which Eggeling [*sic!* Eggeling] worked for fifteen years and for which he produced tens of thousands of drawings and colored illustrations, was a preparatory work for a grammar of painting which Eggeling [Eggeling] was going to edit. This work was intended to summarize the results of modern light and color theories.¹⁵

Alas, his work remained unfinished. Eggeling died nine days after the matinee of *The Absolute Film* on May 19, 1925.

Experimental filmmakers were lucky if they were allowed to use professional film equipment like Eggeling got from UFA. Otherwise, they worked at home, and the only chance to make some money was to get involved in advertising films.

One who saw the enormous possibilities of animated cartoons in advertising first was Julius Pinschewer (1883–1961). Pinschewer produced animated commercials from 1912 until 1933 when he left Germany. He even saw that his idea of producing advertising films was patented: “In 1910, when for the first time I attended a cinema, the hundreds of eyes fixed to the screen gave me the idea to use film for advertising.” In 1917, he produced an animated anti-British propaganda film (titled *John Bull*) to promote the war effort and drum up the sales of war bonds. At one time or another, most German animators worked for him. Besides Lotte Reiniger, there were

Hermann Abeking, Harry Jäger, Hans Zoozmann, and Rudi Klemm who animated the silhouettes for the first German sound cartoon, *Die chinesische Nachtigall* (*The Chinese Nightingale*) based on a fairy tale by Hans Christian Andersen in 1929.

Even the highly acclaimed abstract animation done by Oskar Fischinger (1900–1967) ended as advertisement for tobacco manufacturers, like the marching and dancing cigarettes from *Muratti greift ein* (*Muratti Marches On*, 1934) and the experimental *Komposition in Blau* (*Composition in Blue*, 1934–1935), both produced in the beautiful three-color Gasparcolor process.

NOTES

- 1 Paul Wegener, *Die künstlerischen Möglichkeiten des Films*. Lecture at Berlin Singing Academy, April 24, 1916. Typewritten original. Collection Kai Möller, Deutsches Filminstitut, Frankfurt/Main.
- 2 Andrej Reisin, *Erster Weltkrieg: Vom Kriegsrausch zum Massensterben*. Norddeutscher Rundfunk, 2014.
- 3 *Die Feldpost von Adolf Mann: Nur die Ratten fühlen sich wohl*. In: Stuttgarter Zeitung, February 24, 2014.
- 4 *Rats and the Trenches of WWI*. Written by Pestie. <https://www.rentokil.co.uk>Blog>Rats>.
- 5 Program for the German premiere on September 3, 1926, Gloria Palace Berlin. Filed at Deutsche Kinemathek Berlin.
- 6 *Vorwärts*. *Berliner Volksblatt. Zentralorgan der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands*, May 9, 1926.
- 7 Lotte Reiniger, *Shadow Theatres and Shadow Films*. London and New York: B. T. Batsford Ltd. and Watson-Guption, 1970, pp. 11–13.
- 8 Heinz Steike, *Walter Ruttmann 1887–1941. Versuch einer Befreiung. Dokumentation über den Maler und Filmemacher*. TV feature, Bayerischer Rundfunk, Teleclub, May 5, 1977.
- 9 Jeanpaul Goergen, *Walter Ruttmann. Eine Dokumentation*. Berlin: Freunde der Deutschen Kinemathek, 1989, p. 21.
- 10 Deutsches Reich Reichspatentamt [Reich Patent Office] Patent No. 338774 - Class 57a, Group 37.
- 11 Herbert Ihering, In: *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, No. 201, May 1, 1921.
- 12 Alfred Kerr, In: *Berliner Tageblatt*, June 16, 1921.
- 13 Goergen, *Walter Ruttmann. Eine Dokumentation*, p. 23.
- 14 Susann Becker/Magdalena Pitt, *Viking Eggeling – Musik für die Augen*. Berlin, 2011.
- 15 *Berliner Börsen-Courier*, May 28, 1925.



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2 Mickey Who?

TROLLEY TROUBLES

But not the Germans or other European producers were dominating the domestic market.

In cartoons, there is no other reality than appearances, wrote Béla Balázs, one of the few serious film theoreticians in Germany who would comment on animation – from America:

Felix the Cat once loses his tail. He wonders what to do about it. This anxious question grows out his head in the shape of a large question mark, demonstrating by graphic means that he is torn by doubts. Felix now gazes pensively at the beautifully curved question mark. He has a bright idea, grabs the question mark and sticks it to his rump for a new tail. The problem is solved. Someone might object to such impossibilities that the question mark was only an abstract symbol! But it appeared in the cartoon as a line and as such subject to the laws of draughtsmanship and none other. The question mark was a line, just like Felix's body, their substance was the same. In the world of creatures consisting only of lines the only impossible things are those which cannot be drawn.¹



FIGURE 2.1 1929 Advertisement for the irrepressible (UFA released) *Felix the Cat*. (Courtesy of J. P. Storm.)

Between 1924 and 1926, UFA imported 35 American *Felix the Cat* films (Figure 2.1). But the character's fame faded with the onset of Black Friday and the advent of sound films. Felix's place was taken then by *Mickey Mouse* and Walt Disney, whom Balázs called "the undisputed king" in this field.

The story behind the first Disney short that ever screened in Germany involved a man named Carl Laemmle. Diminutive Laemmle [Karl Lämmle] was born on January 17, 1867, in Laupheim, in the Kingdom of Württemberg, to a Jewish family. In 1884, he followed his older brother Joseph who had gone to America. In 1906, Laemmle opened one of the first motion picture theaters in Chicago and subsequently became an exhibitor and film producer who fought and broke the patent holding movie trust. Eventually he merged his IMP Company with other partners, among them a certain Patrick Anthony "Pat" Powers (Powers Picture Plays), and in 1912 co-founded the Universal Pictures Manufacturing Company which he helmed until he was ousted in 1936. Laemmle at that time had some hopes to purchase the huge Berlin-based UFA Company (Universum Film Aktiengesellschaft) and its vast theater chain. As a consequence of Fritz Lang's dystopian sci-fi epic *Metropolis* that went way over budget and couldn't possibly recoup the risky investment, UFA was financially shaken and had to look for fresh money and American investors. But Paramount and MGM proved stronger than "Uncle Carl" and joined UFA for some time in a wobbly venture called Parufamet (Paramount-Ufa-Metro-Verleihbetriebe GmbH). Considering his strong ties with and his regular visits to Germany, Laemmle decided to establish his own German distribution company. One of Laemmle's assets was an animation series titled *Oswald the Lucky Rabbit* created by Disney and his partner Ub Iwerks. Laemmle's Matador Film distribution company was based in Berlin and sometime later would transform into Deutsche Universal AG (the German branch of Universal) under the supervision of Austrian-born Paul Kohner.

On July 12, 1927, the first Disney cartoon passed the Berlin Board of Film Censors: It was *Trolly Troubles*, retitled *Oswald und die Strassenbahn* (*Oswald and the Trolley*) (Figure 2.2).



FIGURE 2.2 Advertisement announcing Oswald as the “crazy rabbit” in 1929: *Cartoons you’ve never seen before.* (Courtesy of J. P. Storm.)

When *Oswald* shorts became a success and the name of Walt Disney was noticed in the credits of the Universal releases, another distributor entered the stage. No, not UFA: UFA would stick with *Felix the Cat* by Pat Sullivan and artist Otto Messmer, the true creative force behind that character. Thanks to the support of British International Pictures, Disney’s new distributor was Südfilm AG. Südfilm was a subsidiary of the Emelka Corporation. Emelka or MLK (Münchner Lichtspielkunst/Munich Film Art) was Bavaria’s answer to the Prussian UFA. Südfilm released a variety of films, ranging from *Maciste in the Lion’s Cage* to *Berlin-Alexanderplatz* starring Heinrich George. In 1928, Südfilm purchased a small package of 15 old Disney-made *Alice* comedies via British International, their London-based partner company, from F.B.O. (Film Booking Offices of America) and its successor, R.K.O. Radio. These cartoons were shown with Südfilm feature releases between 1928 and 1929.

In 1930, Gabriel Levy’s Aafa (Althoff-Amboss-Film AG) secured more *Alice* cartoons for German distribution. Aafa lasted until 1934 when its assets were “Aryanized.”

Besides *Felix the Cat*, *Alice* and *Oswald*, there was, up to that time, no other, especially no *German* cartoon star on German screens that would deserve that title.

When *Oswald* premiered on German screens, Disney had already lost the popular character due to copyright machinations of Charles Mintz, the husband of his original distributor Margaret J. Winkler. *Oswald* became a Universal property and was reshaped by Walter Lantz.²

But Walt Disney rebounded. He hit it big in Germany in 1930, when Charles J. Giegerich, since 1929 Disney's representative, was given the task to bring *Mickey Mouse* films to Europe. The Giegerich family originally came from Germany. Giegerich Jr. had tried his luck as an actor in silent films before he became a salesman. The first *Mickey Mouse* cartoons were sold to London in November 1929. Immediately they were recommended by British International Pictures to Südfilm. Although they created some important abstract and silhouette films, the Germans didn't have a comparable cartoon industry, just dozens of small outfits that produced advertising films. They seemed to be reluctant to create a cartoon star of their own or didn't trust themselves to do so, but they loved cartoons. Fortunately for them, German distributors found a way to circumvent the contingency of American short films. Südfilm was the first distribution company to secure the rights from Celebrity Pictures (owned by Laemmle's former partner Pat Powers) to show *Mickey Mouse* on German screens. The first *Mickey Mouse* sound cartoon to pass the Board of Censors on January 17, 1930, was *The Barn Dance*. As everywhere in the world, *Mickey Mouse* was Disney's breakthrough in Germany – in a time of financial and political ups and downs.

On January 10, 1930, the trade press announced *Mickey's* arrival in Germany:

WHO IS "MICKEY"?

Mickey's creator is the American artist Walter Disney, the most inspired trick artist of our time. With his MICKEY MOUSE cartoons, he has edited the first sound trick films, because they are nothing else than one hundred percent sound comedies.

*Mickey, the sound film mouse, is one up on his forefather FELIX, as he has the advantage of voice, sound effects, and musical accompaniment. In Germany, he sure will be soon as popular as Felix. The first MICKEY films are released by Südfilm.*³

Then, on February 15, 1930, the first *Silly Symphony* came out: *Skeleton Dance*, in Germany released as *Die Geisterstunde* (*The Witching Hour*):

Another hit from the *Mickey Silly Production*. An owl is having a conversation with its sitting tree, a ghost dog and two ghost cats intervene as the clock strikes 12, and a skeleton rises from its grave. Before you know it, it quadruplicates and a danse macabre of horrifying comedy begins, culminating – a splendid idea – in a xylophone solo which one of the skeletons plays on skull, vertebrae, and ribs of one of its companions. Then the crows, and the haunting is over; two forgotten feet remain lonely outside till a bone hand grabs out of the grave and collects the desperate parts to join it with the others – The End.⁴

Südfilm started a big, exceptional campaign on behalf of *Mickey Mouse* and placed ads in the trade magazines announcing the character as "MICKY DAS TONFILM-WUNDER" (MICKEY – THE SOUND FILM MIRACLE):

Attention please! Here speaks Mickey on the frequency of sensational success!

What is Mickey? Who is Mickey? Answer: Mickey is the best of the best, the most terrific of the terrific! Mickey is simply unrivalled! Mickey can accomplish anything!

Mickey beats everything! Everybody loves Mickey! Everybody laughs himself to tears about Mickey!⁵

In charge of *Mickey's* German campaign was mainly Karl Ritter (1888–1977), a personal friend of Bayreuth's new first lady Winifred Wagner. Ritter started his movie career as a commercial artist for Südfilm in 1925. The same year he became a member of NSDAP. Between 1933 and 1945, Ritter was one of the leading UFA producer-directors of outspoken Nazi propaganda films: *Hitlerjunge Quex* (*Hitler Youth Quex*), *Unternehmen Michael* (*Operation Michael*), *Patrioten* (*Patriots*), *Legion Condor*, *Über alles in der Welt* (*Above All in the World*), the anti-Russian *GPU*, and the lost, unfinished *Das Leben geht weiter* (*Life Goes On*). (Interestingly enough, while producing special effects-laden pictures like *Stukas*, he became the first German film director to turn to storyboarding whole sequences and discuss them with his favorite process specialist, Gerhard Huttula, a former animation cameraman.)

This is how Ritter saw *Mickey Mouse*:

Mickey is born in the country of Black Bottom, Slow Fox, Nigger Songs, in the country of jazz, in a word: the U.S.A. Mickey is the sound film mouse. Father: Walt Disney, an American artist and cartoonist. A marvelous, ingenious, extremely witty, splendid guy! A whiz par excellence, a virtuoso of humor up to date, a universal genius in all things technical, obsessed by the sense of motion and rhythm as only few of his contemporaries are.

Mother: the animated drawing, like the *Silly Symphonies*, crazy jazz compositions from a strange, enlivened fairy tale nature! There are crickets and grasshoppers dancing, spiders playing dreamlike harp melodies on their webs, flowers and trees, birds and insects begin to live like human children, even clouds, lightning and rain begin to behave like people of today. Godfather: the sound film. One cannot imagine Mickey without sound. Everything Mickey does makes noise, tuneful or else. Mickey plays xylophone on the teeth of a cow, transforms a squeaking mother pig into a concertina, misuses cattails as singing saws, dances to the tunes of the newest hit songs on piano keys, plays the harp on macaroni noodles, hairs of the beard, spider webs. Even when Mickey hangs on a railroad car and thumps with his bottom on the railroad ties it sounds like clownish chimes that move your legs. [...]

Mickey's language is international: Old and young, Chinese or Eskimo and Nigger, white or red, everybody understands him: a new Esperanto [...] the divine language of the laughing human heart!⁶

On Monday, February 17, 1930, 5:00 p.m., Südfilm invited all Berlin cinema owners to a trade show with *Mickey Mouse* and *Silly Symphonies* that took place in UFA's renowned *Marmorhaus* Theater (Marble House), where ten years ago *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* was premiered. Südfilm screened *Ein Schiff streicht durch die Wellen* (*Steamboat Willie*), *Das Dampfross steigt* (*Mickey's Choo-Choo*), *Jedermann seine eigene Jazzband* (*The Jazz Fool*), *Im Tiervarieté* (*The Opry House*) starring Mickey and the first *Silly Symphonies*: *Die Geisterstunde* and *Im wunderschönen Monat Mai* (*Springtime*).

The reviews were enthusiastic:

Even if the screening would have lasted six, eight, ten hours, one would have patiently stayed. It was that beautiful! It is no overstatement that this afternoon belonged to the most entertaining events of its kind. Screened were – one has to use superlatives again,