

Ulrike Ottinger in the Mirror of the Cinema

This interview was held last February in Berlin. The film maker, Ulrike Ottinger (UO), spoke about changes in contemporary society, women and the cinema, East and West Europe, literature, theatre, and explained the content of her image archive.

Miren Eraso (ME) How did you begin your artistic life, first in Paris and then in Berlin?

Ulrike Ottinger (UO) I started very early. My mother had a profession in which she had to travel a lot and, as a child, I travelled with her. When I was nine she gave me a little Retina Kodak-camera. I could photograph all these interesting people that I met. So I started to discover the “other”. Then, I played theatre in Konstanz. At that time a lot of interesting directors were coming back from emigration, there was a lot of French culture around, with the French military being stationed at Konstanz. Because my father was a painter, we had a lot of contact with artists. But then, it took a long time for me to find out what I really wanted. I went to Paris, starting as a painter first. Then I did what was called at that time in French, “action”, later called performance. In Paris I became highly interested in cinema.

ME You passed from painting to cinema in a natural way. What kind of links have you made between visual art and film making?

UO In Paris I was in a group of young French painters, a kind of post-surrealist group. I had several exhibitions at this time, our style was called “*peinture narrative*”, inspired by “*bande dessinée*” —a sort of comic strip. I was one of the “habitues” of the Cinemathèque and there I saw not only the classics of film history, but also Cocteau and all the American independent directors, and French and international avantgarde cinema. This was quite important, and then, finally, I slowly started to turn to cinema - with difficulties because of the technical side, and especially because of the financing of such projects.

ME I’d like to repeat some of your comments about your first film, *Laocoon & Sons*¹, made in 1973:

*“Fairy tales are coming
Fairy tales are here to stay
I am a picture
I am a fairy tale
And this is the sound of music
This is Laocoon and Sons
Laocoon and Sons is a story for all seasons.
One or two or three or hundred voices tell this story
For the pleasure of your eyes and ears.
These are women’s voices.”*

In my opinion, these words summarise some of the features of your work, as well as some of the characters in your films. Let’s turn to the question: What does “I am a fairy tale” mean? Are you the embodiment?

UO Of course. I would call it autobiography of cinema. I have never worked directly with my biography, but it is normal in an artistic life that all your experiences and your interests become important for your work. My films are inspired by literature, travels, experiences - inspired a lot by everyday life. But you can’t explain how you bring these

different elements together; it is like a *mosaic* which exists in your mind but you can't explain how the form and the final choice is made. It is also an aesthetic question.

ME If *Laocoon and Sons* is a story for all seasons, what is the sense of myth in our contemporary society?

UO I think that it is interesting to know about myths and the function of them, and transfer them into our time with new contents, and maybe also with other forms, or with the same form but with a new myth. Travelling from the past to our time you find archetypes; images so strong that they remind people of things, even if they do not have the historical knowledge, somehow - this is the way all publicity works. Sometimes people don't know why they feel strongly about some images or films. I'm becoming a little bit of a specialist in the archaeology of these old forms, how they have changed and transformed into our time. I'm highly interested, I'm fascinated... I'm working with this of course ironically, in an amusing way, as in *Madame X*² but, at the same time, I take them seriously.

ME In *Madame X*, as Karsten Witte said, you try to evoke fear in those who put up resistance against the fascination of this ritualised and totally aestheticised power - more frequent in men's imaginary than in women's. This reminds me of the topic of the pleasure of vision, when Laura Mulvey called on the first feminist video artists to fight the pleasure provided by male-orientated cinema.

OU I'm against all ideologies, but I'm not against theory, I'm against ideologies and dogmas, they are not helpful, neither in art nor in real life. So, if you work in cinema, you have to find interesting images, and of course they are seductive, but maybe they have to be seductive, so I'm not against that. But you have to take the comment of Laura Mulvey in the context of when this statement was made, when you had clearly to oppose a lot of things that were happening.

At this time I made a kind of comedy showing that the women's movement was becoming a new dogma, a new ideology. But I thought that the women's movement had more freedom and was partly open to the artistic scene. It seemed to offer more alternatives than a lot of women have had at that time.

ME Going back to the poem again, the chorus, a group character in Greek theatre, has strong importance in your films. Could they be considered as collective identities of today?

UO They have always different forms, *Ticket of No Return*³ is a "portrait of a woman drinker", in which three ladies appear, named: "Statistic", "Common Sense", and "Social Question". They make commentaries on everything what happens - as in a Greek chorus - from their perspectives of statistics, social questions and common sense. In Germany, when these three ladies appeared, some of the public became nervous, they didn't like it because they felt their comments weren't nice. But I remember the same film in Great Britain, with the premiere in London at a big cinema, and people couldn't stop laughing. There is something about cultural differences, perceptions, and different senses of humour. But I also have three figures in *Dorian Gray*⁴, on the "stage" of the opera they are the Goddesses of Destiny while in the multinational media center they are secretaries who have names of real computers with enormous capacity: "Susy", which means in German "Suchsystem"(research system), "Golem" and "Passat". In *Dorian Gray* Madame Doctor Mabuse is the head of a big multinational enterprise, and Dorian Gray is young, rich and handsome with an exotic past. In the opera Madame Doctor Mabuse is the "great inquisitor" of the city of Sevilla, and Dorian Gray is the

infant Don Luis de la Cerda. I always work with the mythology of the past and transfer it to the present which thus becomes more complex.

ME Speaking about fairy tales, in this sense, why do you stress the presence of oral transmission in this poem? In most of your films oral transmission is very important.

UO Oral transmission is the oldest form of rhapsodic poetry - even Shakespeare worked in this tradition, you should recite it loudly because of the rhythm. I have a lot of experience with those wonderful rhapsodies from Mongolia and Africa, where this tradition is still alive. In fact, written language is spoken language. Different languages have their culture, their writings and their music. I like to use different languages in the films. In my new film *Twelve Chairs*⁵ I refused to translate the dialogues from Russian, because the actors were from Odessa, and they transport this wonderful musical colour. This was my first film based on literature. And I had to find the adequate form and find the specific way to transform it into a film. The most emotional and direct parts were transformed into lively dialogues between the actors, and the literal comments from the book, *Twelve Chairs*, observe the action from a highly ironic point of view. It is a fantastic book where you can find everything: new and old, fantasy and reality.

I am not so happy about usual commercial cinema which only works with exploitation of emotions. It is a kind of brutal materialism. I think we have to reflect reality in our work. And we have to work with reality, put it into an artistic frame. This is what is not happening in many new documentaries, and also in fiction films, which often works with emotions, at a time where emotions are being lost.

ME *Twelve Chairs* has been classified by the critics as a picaresque novel, whereas, in fact, it shows the relationship between economics and politics at the beginning of communism in Russia. But you have established the action in a capitalist society. What are the relationships you make between both periods?

UO In times of big changes most people feel insecure, most people lose something, all these times of big changes are very challenging for daily life, and this is often seen by artists and they work with these situations. So, what happens in *Twelve Chairs* is that they are describing these *bizarre* daily life situations between the old Tzarist Russia and the revolutionary Russia. I was really fascinated with the grotesque, especially in Russian literature and theatre where they use an artistic and aesthetic form of grotesque to talk about the impossibility and hardship of everyday life. Before this film I made the film *Southeast Passage*⁶. I travelled from Berlin to the Southeast European countries, which are very poor and struggling with all kind of new and old problems. Officially they are no more behind the "Iron Curtain", but in a way there is a new curtain, a social curtain, maybe even higher than before. So, in our times, radical changes are as big as in the time between pre-revolutionary Russia and the socialist period in the Soviet Union. Structurally it is quite similar, but in fact there are a lot of things which are now possible but were not at the time. I wanted to do a kind of filmed dialogue between that time and our time. I think the film works very well in countries that are going through a phase of social changes and otherwise. For example in Berlin, we are the nearest Western City for the people of East and Southeast Europe and here we are aware of it and maybe we understand a little bit better these changes.

Mobile Image Archive

ME I know that you have displayed some of your documents in the exhibition held in Witte de With last year. I think that the large number of films - fiction and documentary - that you have made, shows the richness of your visual world, which is full of multiple references: pictorial, literary, historical, ethnographical, anthropological or musical. This complex universe shows the magnitude of the work you have carried out. But we already know that that vast world hides lots of conversations, travels, readings, documents, photos, memories, cuttings, letters and so on. How many documents, oral stories, lived experiences, books, and photographs have you used in your research? I suspect that your files hide the testimony not only of the past, but of the future.

UO What I am trying to do in my screenplays - which are enormous books like big, old bibles - is a miniature form of the film with dialogues, my photographs, collections of postcards, collected items, all kind of materials what I call "image archive". I worked on the exhibition for Witte de With over years, and Catherine David used to come and looked carefully with me at this enormous collection. I divided the ten rooms at the *Witte de With* museum according to the different themes: The first was about *Freak Orlando*⁷, which was a film that I made with stories about outsiders, minorities, freaks, and also related to colonial terror and atrocities of national socialism and inquisition. In one of the episodes, I worked with Goya's "Caprichos". He is one of my heroes, because he artistically analysed the atrocities of his time and the late Spanish inquisition in "Desastres de la Guerra". Related to these themes are also processions of all kind. For example, I made photos of the "Semana Santa" in Málaga. The next theme was the sculptures of bones in churches which I had photographed in the Czech Republic and Eastern Europe. After the reunification of Germany I made *Countdown*⁸, a documentary which deals with reality. It is not a very spectacular film, it doesn't show all the people swaying flags on the wall, it shows tiny differences, already signs which became later on so important. I'm interested in noticing what is changing. These big umbrellas as cigarette publicity "Test the West" appeared in the café houses in East Berlin and in the countryside. The publicity was colourful and aggressive. All these kind of ironic things that are so obvious, you have just to pick them up, and give them a frame. Then I worked together with Eva Meyer, a German philosopher and artist, on a compilation of texts from Walter Benjamin. We tried to reflect what was happening.

ME But how do you cross from reality to fiction (if this still exists) and vice-versa?

UO *Countdown* was completely different - not so spectacular as my fiction film which is imaginary. They look completely different, but my approach is the same. I also exhibited the theatre work I did with Elfriede Jelinek. I put her first piece *Clara S.* (Clara Schumann) on stage - she works so fascinatingly in modern literature. And there were two rooms showing my fiction films and documentaries on Mongolia, a lot of photos of chamanistic seances and portraits, and so on. I did a sort of cabinet with all kinds of portraits I had taken from actors, friends and other people during my travels or documentary work. I also made photonovelas. In the last room, we placed a wonderful oriental divan, I arranged a diorama with about 220 slides on screen, presented in different combinations. At the end of the show, you understood, in a way, how different themes come together in different contexts.

ME The footage of your films is unusual, and they are undertaken in such a way that we can consider them as non-commercial cinema. In your opinion, how can non-commercial cinema survive in a contemporary commercialised world?

UO Less and less. The seventies and the eighties were still different, there were unusual things accepted, even expected. At this time commerce and art were not opposite to each other. The radical split between commerce and art cinema had already started in the late eighties. The high commercialisation became very strong from the middle nineties until now. My feeling is that, with the new economy, people understand that there are some dangerous differences in this new system that is also highly bureaucratic in the European Union. I'm absolutely not anti-European but the problem of the high bureaucratisation is that things are becoming so normative. And art always needs a kind of osmotic power, and this doesn't exist any more. Also in European cinema they are trying to become as strong as Hollywood, speaking in terms of commercialisation. I think this is quite unrealistic - what we call in good Yiddish "Luftgeschäfte", a business with nothing than air.

ME To finish, tell us what your plans are for the future?

UO I have several fiction films ready to shoot, I have a lot of ideas for documentaries - the problem is finding the money. I have a wonderful vampire grotesque that I would like to do in Vienna and in some Eastern countries. At this moment I'm going back to a project which I developed at the beginning of the nineties, *Diamond Dance*. I continue doing several exhibitions, for example in Spain, in Castellón (at EACC, from 8th April to 19th June 2005) and Valladolid (at Museo de la Pasión, from 12th July to 21th August 2005). And you know, when you get older you have an *oeuvre*, so you are also busy with this. Last year I had ten or eleven retrospectives all over the world.

ULRIKE OTTINGER is a filmmaker based in Berlin. For information about films, texts, photographs, and biography visit her web page at <http://www.ulrikeottinger.com>

SYNOPSIS OF THE REFERENCED FILMS

¹ *Laocon and Sons*. Once upon a time there was a country known by the name of Laura Molloy. Laura Molloy was the name of this country. Only women lived in Laura Molloy. Esmeralda del Rio was a woman. One day, Esmeralda del Rio had the idea of undergoing a series of transformations, which were to take her very far. So far did she go that she had no way of knowing how far she had gone. Two things were certain: Esmeralda del Rio was blonde and in her own way she practised a kind of magic which I would like to call 'blonde magic'.

² *Madame X*, a harsh, pitiless beauty and the cruel uncrowned ruler of the China Sea, launches an appeal to all women willing to exchange their comfortable and secure but unbearably dull lives for a world of dangers and uncertainties, but full of love and adventure. Women of the most diverse nationalities and walks of life respond to her call. All of their accumulated discontent unites to form a powerful whole, and they sail off with a favourable wind.

³ *Ticket of No Return*. She purchased a ticket of no return to Berlin-Tegel. She wanted to forget her past, or rather to abandon it like a condemned house. She wanted to concentrate all her energies on one thing, something all her own. To follow her own destiny at last was her only desire. Berlin, a city in which she was a complete stranger, seemed just the place to indulge her passion undisturbed. Her passion was alcohol, she lived to drink and drank to live, the life of a drunkard. Her resolve to live out a narcissistic, pessimistic cult of solitude strengthened during her flight until it reached the level at which it could be lived. The time was ripe to put her plans into action.

⁴ *Dorian Gray in the Mirror of Yellow Press*. Our organisation will create a human being who we can shape and manipulate according to our needs. Dorian Gray: young, rich and handsome. We will make him, seduce him and break him. Frau Dr. Mabuse, boss of an international media empire, has devised an unscrupulous plan for further expansion.

⁵ *The Twelve Chairs*...Her son-in-law, Ippolit Matwejewitch Worobjaninow, is a former nobleman and a dandy who is currently wasting away as a small town magistrate in charge of civil marriages. He eagerly takes up the quest to find the treasure. Meanwhile, over the years, the twelve chairs have been dispersed all over the country. However, Worobjaninow is not the only one in pursuit of the treasure. Hot on its trail are Ostap Bender, a clever and colourful conman, as well as Father Fjodor, a priest to whom the wealthy

aristocrat has also confessed her secret. Thus begins a wild chase that ranges from North to South, West to East, across water and land, from the country to the city.

⁶ *Shouteast Passage*. Structured in three parts, the film records cultural encounters with the camera: a journey from Berlin through Eastern Europe, and two urban expeditions, one to Odessa and one to Istanbul. With an impressive eye for detail and respect for the individuals she meets, Ulrike Ottinger presents a portrait of the people on the edge of Europe who have failed to benefit from the end of the Cold War.

⁷ *Freak Orlando*. In the form of a "small theatre of the world", a history of the world from its beginnings to our day, including the errors, the incompetence, the thirst for power, the fear, the madness, the cruelty and the commonplace, in a story of five episodes.

⁸ *Countdown* follows a chronological sequence. The movie was shot in Berlin and environs over a ten-day period leading up to the unification of the currencies on July 1, 1990. The film thus ends on the date marking "the first stage of German reunification".