

# Magni-Fire

## On Ulrike Ottinger's *Under Snow*\*



In the fall of 2011 a celebration of the lifetime work of Ulrike Ottinger—as film director, cinematographer, author, photographer, theater director, and set designer—commenced in Berlin at a crowded intersection of cultural events. The Ottinger season opened in September with “Floating Food” at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt. Beginning with a scene from her art cinema masterpiece *Dorian Gray in the Mirror of the Yellow Press* (1984), in which Dorian (Veruschka von Lehndorff) and Frau Dr. Mabuse (Delphine Seyrig) partake of a repast served on dishes floating round a courtyard fountain, Ottinger remixed a retrospective of her work as multimedia installation at the border between fiction film and documentary travelogue.

On several occasions at and during the installation of “Floating Food” Ottinger was outspoken in her admiration for Adelbert von Chamisso as fellow explorer, who traveled as botanist on the 1815 Russian expedition to the Bering Sea and the South Sea Islands. In the catalogue there were six citations from his documentary account, *A Voyage around the World with the Romanzov*

*Exploring Expedition in the Years 1815-1818 in the Brig Rurik*. But it was entirely as project that Ottinger was preoccupied with Chamisso's voyage. She expressed the wish to retake Chamisso's trip with camera in hand in the near future.

The Chamisso artifact is readymade for Ottinger. The voyage in a sense already concluded the 1814 story *Peter Schlemihl*, through which Chamisso, who came to Berlin as refugee from the Revolution in France, secured literary fame against all odds. At the end of the story the eponymous hero bestows the botanical samples from his magical trip around the world upon his friend “Chamisso,” who, then, outside the fictional word, would become a recognized botanist by the samples he brought back in 1818. That Chamisso identified his literary discourse with the urban-margin jargon of “Rotwelsch,” a hybrid of German, Yiddish, Romanian, and Hebrew, is already an adventure in the annals of what Deleuze and Guattari termed minority literature. Like the Golem legend, this tale of selling one's shadow to the Devil to secure protection (and projection)

\* Presented as introduction to a screening of *Unter Schnee* at the Arsenal in Berlin, there was talk of translating the piece into Canadian for the local chapter of a British art journal. But the blogger, who runs the Commonwealth organization in Berlin, couldn't even get that right. Offered a spike, I would gladly dedicate it to the routing of yet another loser-friendly imposter making a career of it in Berlin.



Ulrike Ottinger

# S C H N U N T E R E

Ein Film  
von  
Ulrike Ottinger

mit Takamasa Fujima, Kiyotsugu Fujima und Yoko Tawada.  
Komponistin und Interpretin: Yumiko Tanaka. Erzählerin: Eva Mattes.

Eine Koproduktion von Ulrike Ottinger und ma ja de, filmproduktion.  
Gefördert durch: Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg, Der Beauftragte  
der Bundesregierung für Kultur und Medien, Deutscher Filmför-  
derfonds, Japan Foundation, Unterstützt durch: BR Hörspiel und  
Medienkunst, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Goethe-Institut Tokyo.  
Ein Beitrag zu „150 Jahre Freundschaft Deutschland-Japan 2011“  
im Rahmen der Asien-Pazifik-Wochen 2011.

Im Verleih von Real Fiction [realfictionfilme.de](http://realfictionfilme.de)





addresses the links and limits of assimilation, of becoming “like” or image. Out of the mix of fiction and fact in the Chamisso artifact one might conceivably reconstruct a continuity shot with Ottinger’s driving motivation and momentum: the reversal of the prospect of traumatization and internalization as outward bound adventure. Ottinger alternates between bringing back (inside) in her art cinema the missing persons of “Old Europe,” who were at home in and to world culture (and home on the target range of majority intolerance), and going out to meet the other via her documentary travel encounters rising up at new frontiers as the future uncontrollably coming toward you.

“Floating Food” also provided the setting for the premiere of *Unter Schnee* in the auditorium upstairs. Boundary blending between fiction and document the film takes us along on a trip through Japan’s “snow country,” the Echigo district, which remains snowbound into May. Ottinger went into this project anticipating that it would be the summary and summit of her multidisciplinary encounter with East Asia, now out of the past, now with the present. All the cultural attractions of Japan (from rituals and festivals to Kabuki theater performances) continue, re-inscribed but intact, in the snow country. Beyond simple adaptation or survival, then, the denizens of this mountainous coastal region facing Siberia bind by the art of everyday life the impingements upon their continuity of being.

During the period of her installation in Berlin as what the Japanese might consider a “living monument” Ottinger accepted the Hannah Höch Prize in November, together with the prized identification with an artist hero of “Old Europe,” as the occasion to exhibit (at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein) her work as painter in the 1960s, the work she abandoned when she left Paris in 1968 at the height of another Revolution. According to Ottinger, it was a turning point of crisis that brought about the change of art. Was it a crisis of augury like that which beset Aby Warburg and led him to seek in the multi-perspectival “Mnemosyne” project a format less constrained than the art history of painting for holding together the inside view of human sacrifice and the outside chance of its revalorization or reversal? In the film medium Ottinger could register her double take: grief and horror over once-and-future trauma and the prospect of reversal of historical impingement in the opening up of adventure.

The theoretical dimension of her work and sensibility—as evidenced already in the paintings on display at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, like *La vie quotidienne* (1965-66), in which she reclaimed the Golem legend from cybernetics (or vice versa)—informs moments in her recent documentary films of self-reflection on formal problems. The departure of digital editing from analogy with the cut was the thought

for which she found a form in the film before, *The Korean Wedding Chest* (2008). *Under Snow* explores the work of composition between selection and sorting out. Early in the film, we attend the preparation of a menu for many guests by a team of cooks. Each serving is composed over and again in discrete bowls out of items filling separate pans. But then we watch as something left over in one pan is placed at another starting point in the assemblage process. Later on in the documentary we watch the laying out of strips of crepe in the snow, each dyed another monochrome shade. But when the final strip in this series doesn't fit at the end of the line it must be lifted up again and carried to the other end of the composition, combining conclusion with a new beginning.

This work of composition, which Ottinger's camera documents, is then taken up by the camera itself. The exploration of the interior of a temple includes a close-up of one golden detail, on which the camera holds for an inordinately long time. When the camera pulls back we see that the "same" detail was exchanged for one belonging to another view of the temple's interior, before which we have thus been transported. Here the wrenching out of context of one detail or element is at once identified as irreversible and serves as starting point for another scene or composition.

Attention to the destiny of what is left over, whether in excess of or ill-fitting what was planned, supplements the focus on sampling, sorting, selecting in the course of composition and grounds it in the psychic-metabolic processes of memory. At the meal we attend following the kitchen scene, the diner eats samples lifted from many serving bowls. The

camera, also sampling, offers us images of composed dishes, which are intercut with the ongoing scene of the diner's sampling and eating. The sampling dynamic leaves behind compositions in memory, the messenger of time, while leaving out and taking in the composition in parts.

The internal route of this dynamic is marked at the film's opening. We enter the film together with the documentary camera while the voiceover tells of an earlier journey through the snow country and of the traveler's pen drawings and notations, which led to a book-length study of local customs, dialects, industries, and of the snowflakes themselves. This opening evocation of Bokushi Suzuki's 1837 book *Hokuetsu Seppu* (Snow Stories of North Etsu Province) captions the images of the snow country folding out on screen as the pages on which the film stylus inscribes its documentation. But what also drew Suzuki's work of documentation onward was the inner world he discovered when he began studying the snowflakes as compelling formal compositions more closely under his magnifying glass. He discovered inside the recognizable flakes, which as compositions relied on recurring elements and forms, the other realm of snow crystals, in which discrete singularities appeared without end. The different media in the encounter with the snow country are conjoined, then, by magnification, which Walter Benjamin identified as one of the openers, in the genealogy of media, of the so-called optical unconscious. The relationship between iterability and singularity guiding Suzuki's documentation of the snowflakes and their inner world of magnified crystals can be understood, according to Jacques Derrida, as the very *agon* of commemoration. As self-reflexive work of composition or remembering—sorting, selecting, keeping in and letting go—*Under Snow* follows Suzuki's documentary brush on a journey between worlds.

Magnification brings up already at the start of the film the threat of an impasse of reflection caught in the eddying of this inward turn. But then a literary hybrid intervenes to bind the mourning work of composition and convey it unto a cinematic sense of an ending. In the most boundary-blended of her films to date Ottinger actively samples from the documentary and fictional materials to skew, sort out, and compose her film narrative. Following the evocation of *Snow Stories* as model documentary travelogue, two "contemporary" figures arrive by train





for a sojourn in the snow country following as their guide Suzuki's compendium of local legends. Already during their first night the book's page turns and the travelers are transformed by a fox spirit's longing to live her love in the past into a supernatural couple of the Edo period. This pair traverses the film, even or especially the recognizably documentary scenes, soon to be followed by another inter-cutting story of three blind musicians, which in turn yields the fable of their adopted son, who grew up to be the kind of master of song who attracted love and envy in all the wrong places. This story coming at the end of a relay race of the stories Ottinger constructed out of the store of the region's folklore passes the baton to film's self-reflection and overriding affirmation. Betrayed by intrigue the singer is condemned to life as a miner on the island of Sabo. The film does not withhold his plaint: it echoes down the narrow passages and across the ages in concert with the history of oppression and exile. But at the same time the film's highest affirmation of its own medium nature now commences. For the story of the singer son is the only one not enacted or personified in *Under Snow*. The concluding sojourn in Sabo is narrated only by voice-over and subjective camera. Intercut with a museum tour of the former gold mines in which amuse-

ment-park robots are engaged in the now historical labor of this underworld, we follow ubiquitous pans of the coast to concluding images of the turbulent sea.

Here one portion of the yet to be commenced Chamisso film has in a sense been realized. Schlemihl decides to become a miner to lose the loss of his shadow in the underworld and escape further persecution as loser. En route he replaces his flimsy city shoes with appropriately sturdy boots. But these turn out to be "seven mile boots," in which, stepping out of his self-punishing commitment to mining, he traverses step by step long distances on fast forward across the world. What was in effect a condensed genealogy of the techno prospects that the primal industry of mining introduced took Chamisso's first readers on a dream trip to the border of the optical unconscious that, to be sure, yet awaited the film medium for its full projection. In *Under Snow*, the parting shots of the documentary film losing and finding itself at sea offer one cinematic projection that might arise between these lines. [↗](#)

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