

Lawrence A. Rickels, *Ulrike Ottinger: the Autobiography of Art Cinema*. Minneapolis, MN and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, 207 pp.

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The work of Ulrike Ottinger has, in the pages of *Screen* and many other scholarly books and journals, provoked a good deal of controversy as well as critical acclaim among film theorists. Ottinger has been making films – among them *Madame X: eine absolute Herrscherin/Madame X: an Absolute Ruler* (1978), *Bildnis einer Trinkerin/Ticket of No Return* (1979), *Freak Orlando* (1981), *China: die Künste, der Alltag/China: the Arts, Everyday Life* (1986), *Johanna d’Arc of Mongolia* (1989), *Südostpassage/Southeast Passage* (2002) and *Prater* (2007) – at a prolific rate since the late 1970s, despite the funding difficulties that invariably accompany such an uncompromising vision and style. Her whole body of work (feature film, ethnographic documentary, photography, sculpture and video art installation) has in recent years in Germany and many other European countries, at last received the recognition it deserves, culminating in the screening of *Southeast Passage* at Documenta in Kassel in 2002 and in the highly successful retrospective of her work in Berlin in 2007. Nevertheless, in the UK film world there has been, in the last fifteen years, a relentless disparaging of the seriousness, tenacity and ‘high-mindedness’ with which a filmmaker like Ottinger pursues her erudite obsessions. For this reason, with the exception of an academic and arthouse audience, her later films have failed to find the acclaim in the UK that might otherwise be expected. Yet Ottinger’s cinema has always held a key position in film theory, culminating in the great attention paid to her work in the 1980s and 1990s by feminist film scholars. Ottinger’s work has helped to shape feminist film theory from its earliest days, in essays by Annette Kuhn, Miriam Hansen, Teresa De Lauretis, Kaja Silverman, Gertrud Koch, Janet Bergstrom, Sabine Hake, Brenda Longfellow, Mandy Merck and Patricia White. As Ottinger herself often remarks, her work gives rise to hostile reactions. In the early years this often came from feminists themselves, who found her attitude to sex and power too cruel or too coldly unsentimental, her defiant antirealism too intellectual, her provocative lesbian desires – fixed unrelentingly on the fashionable and beautiful bodies of some of her best-known actors (Tabea Blumenschein, Delphine Seyrig, the model Verushka) – too disconcertingly amorous, too bold, adventurous and unapologetic. While her work is now retrospectively credited with being at the forefront of queer cinema, this too has not been without controversy. Writing in *Screen*, Kristen Whissel has argued forcefully that the lesbian desires and fantasies enacted in films like *Johanna d’Arc of Mongolia* are predicated on an orientalist exoticization of other women, and that Ottinger uncritically replicates an eroticized imperialist gaze in the encounters with Mongolian people.¹

1 Kristen Whissel, ‘Racialized spectacle, exchange relations, and the Western in *Johanna d’Arc of Mongolia*’, *Screen*, vol. 37, no. 1 (1996), pp. 41–67.

Lawrence A. Rickels's book is to be welcomed in that it considers Ottinger's work in its entirety and refuses to make simplistic distinctions between her early films, her move into a more anthropological oeuvre (culminating in the works which have focused directly or indirectly on China, its cosmopolitan past and its postcommunist present), and the transition from the cinema to the art gallery as the site for reception. Rickels's engagement with Ottinger marks a break with existing writing on her work, and indeed with the established writing styles of film theory, in a number of ways. He interweaves analysis of the film texts with an account of his own role in her life: as witness to the filmmaking process; as one who has had the opportunity to talk with her on many occasions; and as an art critic commenting on those parts of her work which inhabit the gallery world. Indeed questions of authorial reflexivity and of how to write about work like this from a position which is almost inside the work itself are foremost in Rickels's project. He is wary of the journalistic voice and goes to great lengths to dissociate himself from this, even though few would interpret his writing on Ottinger in this way. He clearly comprehends the importance of serious journalism to the public success of films and artwork such as Ottinger's. Ticket sales and extensive cinema distribution are naturally dependent on the opinion of critics, and Ottinger has shown herself to be a lucid, vociferous and engaging subject in interview. Nevertheless, Rickels fears the simplifications of journalism, while labouring to invent a style that takes into account his proximity to the artist and her world. He becomes something of an ethnographer himself: hanging about on set, observing how Ottinger works; including in the book several of his interviews with her; listening closely to what she says about her work, about its production and its reception; in effect responding to the work by extrapolating its thematics. Frequently this entails some lengthy digressions, usually on psychoanalytic topics or on areas in which Rickels himself has expertise, in particular allegory, the iconography of the devil and the history of European literature. But Rickels's greatest influence is Walter Benjamin. It is the writing of Benjamin, the jarring, collage effect of his word-images, statements and quotations, which provides some kind of framework for Rickels. This is not just a question of style. Rickels shares with Benjamin a political aesthetics which requires the use of certain shock tactics in writing, and which is concerned with memory, temporality, history, and the importance of breaking through or cutting into the clichés of required or standardized responses to art and culture. Although Benjamin's influence is sometimes a little overt, combined as it is with his presence in the environment of the work being created (itself a Benjaminian stance), it pushes Rickels to develop his distinctive argument across the different forms and media which Ottinger utilizes.

The question, then, is how Rickels understands this body of work dating back to the late 1970s. He offers no quick summary of his argument, which in many ways is buried quite deep in the text and is implicit rather than explicit. I would say that he brings Ottinger into the

heart of a tradition of work which is closely related to the writings of both Adorno and Benjamin, as well as to the art of surrealism, expressionism and the European avant garde. But the key connection with Benjamin lies in Ottinger's immersion in allegory. Formally Rickels sees her work as functioning by means of a collage effect, or through the invention of a distinct image language akin to that which Benjamin strove to develop. And Ottinger's rich interweaving of memory flashes, of fantasy and dream material; her fascination with objects (especially photographs) which have faded or are seemingly neglected or half-forgotten and which somehow belong to another epoch; her observations about everyday life made strange or slightly twisted; her most recent film about the history of the Prater park in Vienna, a precursor of Disney theme parks, a place of urban amusements, of thrills and ghost rides; all of these fit so closely with Benjamin's writing in *Berlin Childhood* and *One Way Street* that the connection, once Rickels has made it, seems self evident. But the connection goes further: Ottinger reworks the *flâneur* theme and gives it a lesbian-feminist twist in her astonishingly prescient work *Ticket of No Return* (described, Rickels reminds us, by the film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum as 'one of the few true masterpieces of the contemporary German avant-garde cinema'). Like Benjamin, Ottinger also has a fascination with femininity, fashion and with the kind of beautiful, anonymous woman who can drink her way through the city streets, immersing herself in its bars, cafes, gay milieu and lowlife. The Benjamin connection is also vivid in Ottinger's obsession with allegory, with baroque, gothic and aesthetic forms which are never transparent but instead somehow half-buried, almost dead. Rickels reminds us of her collector's eye, her fascination with other people's collections of bric-a-brac, mementoes, objects which have a life of their own, which function as collective memory.

The connection is again apparent in what Rickels argues is the underpinning of Ottinger's art, which is the centrality of exile; including, one might add, exile from a normative heterosexualized subjectivity. Far from espousing an unthinking orientalist vision in her travels, Ottinger examines the traces of people's movements, forced or otherwise. *Exile Shanghai* documents the Jewish community in that city, those who fled Nazi Germany to make lives for themselves there. In *Southeast Passage* she traces back the journeys of those who more recently moved from east to west Europe, visiting Odessa (and its steps) and other overlooked places. Ottinger refutes the criticism of her work as orientalist by insisting on her interest in nomadic peoples, from wandering Jews to the tribes of Mongolia. In my view, Ottinger is interested in what Mary Louise Pratt has famously called 'contact zones',² colonized places of mingling and of encounters with others, typically used for the production of knowledge which will invariably be exploited by the colonialist powers. But, as Pratt argues, what actually happens in those contact zones is not always and entirely aggressive or exploitative. Ottinger brings a queer camera to other spaces; her aesthetic of travel and of

2 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1992).

movement is not simply an imperialist eye,³ even though she parodies the eager tourists' search for novelty and excitement in *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia*.

Ottinger will simply not play the good feminist, or indeed the good lesbian filmmaker; she stretches our progressive political sensibility to the limits; she fetishizes female beauty to the point of obsession; her cinematic desires are seemingly cruel and capricious (as in her witty SM masterpiece *Madame X*); she takes a slice of the other and renders it strange, interesting, but still marginal. For some she is simply too interested in 'peoples', old and young, beautiful and ugly, male, female and transgender, but all maybe seen, through her own distinctive vision, as 'collectibles'. There is criticism that she is not political enough, although one might say that in producing certain kinds of theory-informed ethnographic films she opens up debate about precisely these issues. Rickels points finally to Ottinger's constant referencing of media itself, to her own chosen media, to the history of cinema which leaves its traces across her own body of work. He shows Ottinger's work belongs both to the past and to the future. She memorializes classic cinema (Tabea is arguably her Garbo), drawing on that history as she endeavours to resolve questions about form and image in documentary practice.

Rickels has produced a marvellously rich account and analysis of Ottinger's work, contributing to our engagement with it by bringing into his text an oblique, or perhaps buried, use of the word autobiography. He argues that there is the (Benjaminian) sense in which Ottinger's aesthetic is one which gives her 'films' the chance to produce an autobiography of themselves as 'things' (it is this quality which has also encouraged art critics to see her work as a forerunner of Matthew Barney's). And as Rickels also points out, there is the similarly buried (or rather hidden away) autobiography of Ottinger herself. Half-Jewish, as a baby and young child in Nazi Germany she was hidden away from the Gestapo in an attic with her mother. Being in such close proximity to her mother, Ottinger revealed in later years, she came to share her desire for travel and escape; a desire also for cultural mix, cultural translation and a cosmopolitan ethics of otherness.

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Andy Medhurst, *A National Joke: Popular Comedy and English Cultural Identities*. New York, NY and London: Routledge, 2007, 228 pp.

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The key moment in *A National Joke* concerns what Medhurst calls 'the seaside incident' (pp. 20–25). Medhurst recounts a joke he was told by a barman in a bar on Brighton pier. The joke is, as Medhurst admits, offensive in both sexual and racial terms, and precisely the kind of