



Ulrike Ottinger.
Courtesy Ulrike Ottinger
Filmproduktion.

Ottinger, Ulrike (b. 1942)

by Richard C. Bartone

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Avant-garde German filmmaker Ulrike Ottinger creates both fictional fantasy worlds that shatter traditional gender constructions and documentaries that examine marginalized peoples.

Born Ulrike Weinberg on June 6, 1942 in Konstanz, Germany, Ottinger studied painting and photography at the Academy of Arts in Munich from 1959 through 1961. She moved to Paris, where she worked as a painter and photographer before returning to Germany in 1969 to start Visuell, a film organization that she ran until 1972.

With the money earned from painting in Paris, she made her first film, *Laokoon and Söhne (Laocoon and Sons, 1972-1973)*, starring Tabea Blumenschein, an underground film actress, set and costume designer, and Ottinger's lover at the time.

Ottinger again collaborated with Blumenschein on *Madame X--eine absolute Herrscherin (Madame X: An Absolute Ruler, 1977)*, now a cult classic and regularly referred to as the "lesbian feminist pirate movie." In this work, six women abandon the oppressive, dull, and materialistic life to seek freedom, danger, and love on the ship Orlando led by Madame X. Lesbian lust permeates the journey and erotic alliances lead to jealousy and death.

Although she refers to herself as an ethnographer, Ottinger makes films that take two distinct paths: documentaries and tales of the fantastic.

The tales are set in futuristic, colorful worlds, populated by extravagantly dressed characters wearing vibrant and surreal costumes, adorned with jewelry. The stunning and otherworldly *mise en scène* of her films have been characterized as lesbian punk and traced to surrealism and the Baroque grotesque. Fiercely independent, Ottinger writes, photographs, designs, and produces her films, which helps account for their distinctive style.

The sexual attractions and tensions between women in her work are always present but never overt, allowing lesbian audiences the viewing pleasure of recognizing the sometimes subtle codes of lesbian desire.

The fantastic landscapes in *Freak Orlando (1981)*, *Dorian Gray im Spiegel der Boulevardpresse (The Image of Dorian Gray in the Yellow Press, 1984)*, and *Bildnis einer Trinkerin (Portrait of an Alcoholic, 1979)* are populated with outcasts and informed by a distinct camp aesthetic. Characters are self-consciously arranged. They posture and strike poses in a visual composition that creates an artificial theatrical space.

Freak Orlando, a loose adaptation of Virginia Woolf's novel, contains midgets, giants, transvestites, and obese and limbless men and women, as well as Orlando, who is an androgyne, both male and female.

Many feminists took offense at what they saw as the exploitation of the human body in this film. But the

posturing of freaks in striking settings lets viewers look in awe at images both beautiful and repulsive. Ottinger, concerned with the oppressed position of the "other," noted that it is "deeply disturbing seeing someone of our own species" who is so radically different, but she includes these images to break our resistance to viewing and accepting different bodies.

Feminists have also been critical of "beauty fetishism" in her films, and especially the image of Madame X as a leather-clad dominatrix with a whip. Ottinger dismisses these criticisms, noting that the characters are exaggerated and ironic stylizations.

Ottinger's films shatter traditional gender roles and identity with androgynous and gender ambiguous characters. Using role reversals, women in *Madame X* and *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia* (*Joan of Arc of Mongolia*, 1988) are adventurers of sea and land. In *Johanna* a matriarchal Mongolian tribe captures the passengers from the Trans-Siberian railroad train and initiates them into a new female culture.

In *Dorian Gray im Spiegel der Boulevardpresse*, the title character, played by ex-fashion model Veruschka von Lehndorff, is coerced into a life of decadence by a female media-mogul, Frau Dr. Mabuse.

Ottinger's documentaries record her encounters with marginalized people and cultures. *Taiga* (1992), an eight-hour film, focuses on northern Mongolia's nomadic tribes, while *China--die Künste, der Alltag* (*China--The Arts--The Everyday*, 1985), presents almost five hours of daily existence in remote areas of China. These films depict both universal and traditional aspects of life; as a result, the status of these people as outsiders, or "others," is shattered.

The outcasts in *Exile Shanghai* (1996) are Sephardic, Russian, German, and Austrian Jews, who tell of their journeys to Shanghai during the Nazi era and their eventual settlement in the United States. When one of the Jews briefly mentions a relative with AIDS, Ottinger suggests a connection of outsiders from generation to generation.

Countdown (1991) records life in Berlin in the final ten days before monetary unification. The film concentrates on the minorities and nomads of Berlin, including Romanians, Turks, Poles, and homosexuals, and explores their exclusion by the government from a voice in unification issues. The constant examination of outsider status in Ottinger's films has been recognized by glbtq audiences.

Ottinger returns to a fantastic fictional world in *Die Blutgräfin* (*The Bloodcountess*), a vampire film presently under production in Vienna.

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