

Chloe Wyma, "Ulrike Ottinger: Bridget Donahue," *Artforum*, April 2019.

ARTFORUM



Ulrike Ottinger, *Das perfekte Ebenbild und seine unaufhaltsame Mechanik* (*The Perfect Image and Its Unrelenting Mechanics*), 1977, C-print, 35 3/8 × 23 5/8"

Ulrike Ottinger

BRIDGET DONAHUE

Taken on the set of filmmaker Ulrike Ottinger's swashbuckling s/m fantasy *Madame X: An Absolute Ruler* (1977), the photograph *Das perfekte Ebenbild und seine unaufhaltsame Mechanik* (*The Perfect Image and Its Unrelenting Mechanics*) captures a saucy tableau on board the corsair Orlando. A female pirate—sporting fetishy, elbow-length gloves; a black bralette; and an irrepressibly blonde, Boris Vallejo-worthy mane—wields a stake over actress Tabea Blumenschein, cast as the flesh-and-blood, leather-clad figurehead bedecking the ship's bow. Moments later, the pirate will ecstatically plunge her blade into the speciously motionless ornament. The figure will then awaken and put her assailant in a chokehold, asphyxiating her with cyborg strength.

Beginning as a painter in the 1960s, Ottinger emerged in the following decade as a leading maker of postmodern German film. Loosely plotted, image-driven, and disposed to camp and grotesquerie, her early works occupied a singular place between the New German Cinema (a style heavily associated with, if not overdetermined by, famous male auteurs such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Werner Herzog, and Wim Wenders), and the activist, documentary-oriented women's film movement, which cohered around the journal *Frauen und Film* (*Women and Film*). The latter couldn't abide the problematic pleasures of Madame X. As the film historian Miriam Hansen has recounted, its burlesque depiction of Sapphic violence—already a perverse pastiche of the internecine battles within second-wave feminism—became a lightning rod for debates about feminist aesthetics: “Ottinger’s highly stylized exploration of the erotic fringe, her foregrounding of sado-masochistic and fetishistic tendencies as culturally constructed (and constructing) signs, obviously presented a challenge to essentialist positions which would condemn such tendencies as ‘naturally’ male.”

Ottinger’s eponymous exhibition at Bridget Donahue, her first New York gallery show in nearly two decades, featured photographs, most of which were production stills from the numerous films she made in the course of her storied career. (Also in the exhibition was a suite of map collages from 2011 that, despite their large scale, felt relatively minor.) The stills are not epiphenomenal, but in fact are foundational to Ottinger’s cinema; she has described them as “visual notes” that help her imagine and crystallize her ideas in time-based media. Many of the exhibition’s most unforgettable images—*Jacobs Pilger* (*Jacob’s Pilgrims*); *Das Gastmahl der verfolgten Wissenschaftler und Künstler* (*The Feast of Persecuted Scientists and Artists*); *Zwerge und einer Bartfrau* (*Narcissistic Hermaphrodite Accompanied by a Dwarf and a Beard*)—came out of Ottinger’s time-warping genderfuck fairy tale *Freak Orlando* (1981), a Rabelaisian pageant of flagellants, false messiahs, carnies, and showgirls.

In *Aller—jamais retour* (*Go—Never Return*), 1979, Blumenschein—immaculately coiffed and attired in a tomato-red pillbox hat and matching funnel-neck coat—raises her white-gloved hand against a cloudy, water-streaked pane of glass. Made during the filming of Ottinger’s *Ticket of No Return*, the image is about artifice, surface, and shimmer. Coterminous with the picture plane, the glittering transparency partitions the viewer from Blumenschein’s fatally glamorous protagonist. She doesn’t look through the window so much as at it with her bleary, heavily mascaraed eyes. In the movie, Blumenschein plays an alcoholic socialite—a woman of “exquisite beauty” and “harmonious Raphaellesque proportion”—who buys a one-way plane ticket to Berlin with the sole objective of drinking herself to death. *Aller—jamais retour* is as easy to look at as *Ticket of No Return* is difficult to watch. Wrested from the latter’s procedural debauchery and flaneurial drift, the image—like the best of Ottinger’s pictures—demands narrative elaboration while also asserting its own powerful erotics.

— Chloe Wyma

Richard Brody, “Style As Women’s Freedom: The Photographs of Ulrike Ottinger”, *The New Yorker*, March 1, 2019.



STYLE AS WOMEN’S FREEDOM: THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF ULRIKE OTTINGER

By Richard Brody

March 1, 2019



“Moby Dick,” 1979, from the film “Portrait of a Drinker.”

Photographs by Ulrike Ottinger / Courtesy Bridget Donahue, New York City

The modern cinema of the sixties and beyond is a photographic cinema, recalling the highly inflected images of silent movies in order to affirm the personal touch, the omnipresence of the filmmaker as more than an unobtrusive transmitter of reality or mere stager of the script. The German director Ulrike Ottinger, one of the crucial modern filmmakers (and unfortunately one of the least-known), is also an exemplary photographic creator, as seen in the selection of her still photographs that are on display, until March 3, at Bridget Donahue, and in her movies (from which most of the images are taken)—particularly two that she'll be presenting at Metrograph in the next few days, "Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia" (1989) and "Ticket of No Return" (1979).

When "Johanna d'Arc" had a weeklong run at moma two years ago, I wrote about the mighty substance of Ottinger's brazen stylization—the combination of the dashing adventure, the ethnographic devotion, and the quest for self-definition that her flamboyant and exquisite aestheticism embodies. (In addition to directing and writing the script, Ottinger does her own cinematography.) For Ottinger, the play of imagination is an essential realm of freedom, a way for women to defy and liberate themselves from the misogyny that's embedded as deeply in consensus styles as in consensus politics. She does something similar in the earlier film—albeit in a more local and explicitly sociocritical vein.



"Go - Never Back," 1979, from the film "Ticket of No Return."

The original, German title of “Ticket of No Return”—“Bildnis einer Trinkerin” (“Portrait of a Female Drinker”)—points clearly to the subject of the film and highlights its protagonist. An unnamed woman—young, cynical, world-weary, and described as possessing a stifled heroism—travels to Berlin (which is to say, West Berlin, divided at the time by the Wall) to “follow her destiny.” The woman is played by Tabea Blumenschein, a multifaceted artist and a real-life diva of Berlin nightlife. In a voice-over, it’s said that “Her passion was to drink, to live in order to drink,” and the woman parodies a simple tourism brochure in following, step by step, her self-devised drinking tour of the city—in order for her to live out to the ultimate extreme “a narcissistic pessimistic worship of loneliness.”

The Drinker, clad in a splashy red suit and hat (only the first of her many colorful and sharply styled outfits, all designed by Blumenschein) arrives in Berlin’s airport along with a trio of gray-suited technocrats: three women named Common Sense, Accurate Statistics, and Social Issue, all of whom follow the Drinker throughout the film to deliver rationally moralizing critiques of her behavior (declaring that the “emancipated woman” is apt to drink too much). Conversely, technological modernity baffles the Drinker, as reflected in Ottinger’s sumptuously graphic, furiously expressive cinematography, with the cold comedy of her Tati-esque views of the gleaming airport corridors and the alluringly alienating forms of its metallic accoutrements, through which the red-clad Drinker strides with a theatrical bravado.



“Die Kalinka Sisters,” 1988, from the film “Johanna d’Arc of Mongolia.”

The film is filled with the Drinker's episodic adventures high and low—inviting a street woman into a luxurious café and befriending her, getting thrown out of the café, and making local news for her antics; drinking champagne in a theatre under women's disapproving stares, finding a mambo party in a lavish salon, getting fired from a job as a receptionist for drinking the boss's fancy wine on the job, and taking part in an outdoor circus hard by the Wall. (It's apparently ill-advised to try tightrope-walking while drunk.) The Drinker continues to pursue her determinedly reckless rounds in more lavishly eye-catching costumes ranging from a tight white dress with red buttons to a flowing chrome-silver gown, and Ottinger films her wanderings in images of a bold compositional floridity, rendering in richly textured detail the constellation of pill-like lights in the café, the grungy garbage-strewn industrial waterfront, the silvery chill of a whale-shaped riverboat.

The modern cinema, with its photographic sensibility, also reconfigures cinematic performance, shifting the emphasis away from the novelistic psychology of characters to the gestural iconography and visual presence of actors. (The characters serve rather as guides: following the Drinker quasi-documentary-style, Ottinger offers a visual catalogue of Berlin sites and moods.) Emphasizing modes of self-dramatization, the director elicits performances of extravagant theatrical exaggeration (which also include scenes of pure theatre, such as several cabaret performances of songs, spun out in taut long takes).



"Café Möhring: reflection in the mirror," 1979 from the film "Ticket of No Return."

Blumenschein's revelatory performance captures the Drinker's energetic, contemptuous self-degradation in arch and precisely timed gestures, and accompanies her gleeful and self-scourging haplessness with self-aware winks, as if at an unseen observer, that are reminiscent of Lucille Ball's mannerism-repertory. The Drinker's debasement is also a form of exaltation; her mishaps are also her glory. There's a crucially feminist tone and import to the movie's higher loopiness, which is reminiscent of that ofcomediennes such as Ball, Gracie Allen, and Judy Holliday, the films of Elaine May, or the performances by Juliet Berto and Dominique Labourier in Jacques Rivette's 1974 film "Céline and Julie Go Boating." As a street woman tells the Drinker, "Society doesn't want us, madam; they drove us nuts, but I don't want them either, madam." Ottinger's leap of absurdity is as much an expression of the tangle of confusion into which women are driven as it is an explosion of pent-up defiance at a repressively rational order. It's a smiling rage at the idea that anyone should find the notion of women's emancipation, or, simply, equality, anything other than self-evident.

Baillie Vensel, “The Radical, Gender-Bending Photographs of Ulrike Ottinger”, *Hyperallergic*, February 27, 2019.

HYPERALLERGIC

[ART](#)

The Radical, Gender-Bending Photographs of Ulrike Ottinger

In the German artist and filmmaker’s work from the ’70s and ’80s, Glinda the Good Witch becomes a bearded queen in a shopping mall, and that’s just the beginning.

Baillie Vensel



In Ulrike Ottinger's transgressive photographs, on view at Bridget Donahue Gallery, gender bends freely: Glinda the Good Witch becomes a bearded queen in a shopping mall; Dorian Grey becomes a sleek, feminine power broker; and a pearl-clad pirate wears cut-and-pasted body hair on her bare chest.

Taking in these clusters of photographs is like barreling down an escape hatch into a realm where traditional power structures are flipped on their head. Born in Germany in 1942, Ottinger has made narrative and documentary films since the 1970s; her still images range from travel snapshots to mashups from her highly stylized cinematic worlds. Included in this exhibition — Ottinger's first in New York in nearly 20 years — are shots from her experimental femme-fatale allegory *The Enchantment of the Blue Sailors* (1975), stills from her lesbian-pirate film *Madame X* (1978), and real-life images documenting a snowy market in Odessa. They're featured alongside more recent works, including four big map collages made in 2011. As a whole, Ottinger's works propose campy re-imaginings of history, fantasy, and legend. They cycle between documentary and the surreal, resulting in the best kind of escapism — where reality and fiction are so intertwined, you can't imagine them without one another.

These glorious, queer fantasies aren't without darkness. Among them are images of dagger-wielding, leather-clad heroines and a cult-like nude dinner party laced in barbed wire. We're reminded that gender is as amorphous and changeable as violence and danger are imminent.

Ottinger's images harken back to an era when gender-bending was a clandestine activity and queerness was almost universally considered freaky. Images from her aptly titled 1981 film, *Freak Orlando*, embody this best: a set of monks triumphantly hold chickens wearing babydoll heads as masks, and a circle of nymph-like characters in billowing gowns gaze at their genitals in a pool of water. Ottinger's images are carefully crafted to queer as a verb; they're imbued with the angst of being oneself in a world intent on oppressing your personhood.

It is this crossroads of acceptance and misunderstanding that connects contemporary queer photography to Ottinger's imagery. LGBTQ+-focused photographers working today — like Angal Field, Matthew Leifheit, and Elliot Jerome Brown, Jr. — often make tender images, crafted to do justice to their subjects' identities and bodies, to represent them in all their complexity and humanity. They do this by using the image as a container for the complications of being a person in this world and allowing the limits of the frame to give each participant rights to refuse the viewer's gaze. Although these contemporary photographers trade in Ottinger's brash alternate world-making for softness, their work is still steeped in the disorienting light-headedness of feeling like an outsider, fighting to live your own truth.

Ottinger's images present a queerness that isn't interested in individualism but rather in creating a universal force, like gravity or hate, bound by neither the body nor society. By rewriting legend and myth, she invents an enchanting world where gender's basic function is cast as a tall tale.

Johanna Fateman, “Ulrike Ottinger”, *The New Yorker*, February 13, 2019.



THE NEW YORKER

Ulrike Ottinger

Donahue

DOWNTOWN Ottinger, a German filmmaker and artist, deserves to be much better known. If you’ve seen her indelible film “Johanna D’Arc of Mongolia,” from 1989, in which documentary and ethnographic modes abut exquisitely staged satire, it will come as no surprise that the stills lining the walls in this welcome mini-survey are almost stupefyingly beautiful, despite their sometimes dark heart. Dungeon scenes from the carnivalesque “Freak Orlando,” from 1981, echo the most tortured visions of Goya; a shot from a lesbian pirate film “Madame X”, from 1977, sets a human sacrifice on a ship’s prow. Works of a very different tone occupy the center of the gallery: vintage world maps, which are augmented, and also complicated, by postcards. The souvenir images — brutal relics of colonialism, attached with red cord or visible behind flaps cut into continents — convey Ottinger’s critical eye for disrupting hegemony. — J.F. (*Through March 3.*)

“Ulrike Ottinger in Conversation with Paul Clinton”, *Mousse Magazine*, June 2018.

MOUSSE



Ticket of No Return

Ulrike Ottinger in conversation
with Paul Clinton

MOUSSE, June 2018

Over the course of more than twenty films, Ulrike Ottinger—the first female director to film in Mongolia, who studied with Jean Rouch and filmed Yvonne Rainer roller-skating on a pirate ship has used absurdism and stylized documentary making to investigate colonialism, ethnography, sexuality, and gender. Her work is currently showing at Glasgow International 2018, following numerous exhibitions and screenings over the last decade, including at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin; CCA Singapore; and the Museum of Modern Art, New York. She talks to Paul Clinton about queerness, ideology, and feminist insubordination.

Paul Clinton The long duration of your films doesn't make them an obvious fit for a gallery, but their theatricality and lack of linear narrative situate them oddly in cinema. How do you approach showing film in an exhibition?

Ulrike Ottinger For a long time, my films were not seen in museums, only cinemas. But over the last decades, the art world got more interested in film, with artists becoming directors.

The exhibitions involve the cooperation of different media. In Glasgow we showed three shorts in the exhibit, alongside photography, documents, and drawings. The full features are in a special cinema. But films are also an amalgam, combining media, including installation.

For 'Floating Food' [at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 2011], I included a thematic installation so that in that large room, each film could be seen in isolation. I always make something artistic out of the problem of viewing film in a gallery. I like to have difficulties.

PC How did you select the works for Glasgow International?

UO We focused on location. I showed the Berlin Trilogy [*Ticket of No Return* (1979), *Freak Orlando* (1979), *Dorian Gray in the Mirror of the Yellow Press* (1984)]—central works. I made these films in Berlin between 1979 and 1983. I arrived there in '73 to document a happening by Wolf Vostell. The capital was very different from western Germany where I grew up. Immediately, I decided to make these films, but then it took a while.

I've included photographs I made in Berlin. They are not stills but were taken during filming, rehearsals, some long before, when finding locations. All the scenes were staged in original Berlin places. Locations tell me a story. Sometimes it's the history of the place, its architecture, but it can also be my fantasies. Although I'm working artistically, I don't change much of the place, sometimes nothing. But there's a dialogue between the locations and the staged situation.

PC You came to prominence during the New German Cinema, alongside R. W. Fassbinder, Volker Schlöndorff, et cetera. But you weren't acknowledged in that history. Did you identify with them?

UO We were all very different, but at that time there was just a handful of filmmakers so we all knew each other. I was closest with Werner Schroeter and Fassbinder. I felt an affinity with Schroeter's use of music because sound is important to my films. But my work has specific associations with literature and ethnography. We saw each other's films, but I didn't identify with them.

PC Many see your work as split into two halves: the early fiction films and later, stylized ethnographic documentaries. But *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia* (1989), even if it divides between those genres, continually confuses them. What is the relationship between fiction and documentary in your work?



UO Even the fictional Berlin Trilogy is ethnography. It is an analysis, but artistically realized. I'm fascinated by why people do things. For me, there is not a big difference between devising a scenario or making a documentary. My documentaries work with collective fantasies. The Mongolian nomads do not have a naturalistic art. Their art is really stylized with a lot of fantasies, in the form of *épopée*, songs, and painting traditions.

Chamisso's Shadow (2016) was made in the Bering Strait, northeast Siberia. These people too, from their religious ideas and mythologies, have a lot of fantasies relating to daily life. They have a hard existence, but fantasies are essential to explaining the world they live in. Fantasy is underestimated in documentaries.

When I was young, I was in Paris and got to study under all these great ethnographers who were also great poets.

PC You mean Michel Leiris?

UO Leiris, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Marcel Mauss, the filmmaker Jean Rouch. These were not ethnographers who questioned people in an inquisitory way, intrusively. This was important.

PC It's not simply that documentary is a kind of fiction, although that's there too.



UO Yes, but this also has to do with the people being filmed. There's always a conspiracy between me behind the camera and the people in front of it: we both know that we are filming. They show me what they want to show. It's a cooperation and a presentation. I'm not seen, but I'm visible as a visitor in the reactions of those on screen.

In Mongolia the people I filmed would suggest what we should record: "Can you hear the reindeers are coming? You should shoot this." Or as they packed their belongings to move their yurts, they would spontaneously provide a commentary: "Now we are putting a stone on the other side of our things, to help the yak to balance." It's daily life, but life as they explained it to us. Normally, in a documentary, you would not show this, but I always did to foreground the process.

PC Does the development of a project differ between fiction and documentary?

UO There is no big, "I'm starting." My half-life before involves becoming interested in several questions. Later I realize how to bring them together. I collect photographs, objects, literature, ideas. Then I start a working book, where I make a collage, drawings.

Sometimes I write dialogue. There's often irony, even in character names, such as Lady Windermere (in *Johanna*). She represents connoisseurs who benefited from colonialism and the knowledge it brought them.



In that film everyone is on a train, traveling on the same track: lawyers, businesspeople, artists, scientists. Despite our differences, we all have to travel on routes built by those who came before us, and this is interesting.

PC You've said that narratives are an unsuitable means for understanding cultures other than your own. What did you mean?

UO I think misunderstandings are more important. Narratives preserve concepts and forms from your own culture. But misunderstandings, even if sometimes they create barriers, can be productive.

While making *Johanna* ... actress Irm Hermann was washing her clothes and put[ting] them to dry on a string. For the Mongolians, this is absolutely forbidden, because putting fabric on a string is something you do as an offering for the gods. It was an unbelievable misunderstanding but was quickly solved and became a comic scene.

PC You think those misunderstandings are less possible when you use a narrative?

UO Yes. For that film, I wrote a Mongolian epic that was adapted by two local singers and is still part of their repertoire. But the wonderful thing is that Mongolian epics leave room for little incidents of the day. They were laughing at the actors and crew because we were anxious about traveling on wild horses, so



they put this into the song. When you can laugh, conflict is less likely. In this way, they made fun of the foreign and the different.

PC There is a definite queer politics in your films: the fluid sexualities and genders. But queerness is also there in your resistance toward norms, even those within feminism. Your all-female pirate film, *Madame X: An Absolute Ruler* (1977), is a parody of power struggles in women's liberation, of the kind you would expect under patriarchy. What was the reaction to that film when it was released?

UO In the States, the film almost became a figurehead of the women's movement. But this was a very ideological time, especially in Germany. One German group really hated it. Perhaps it was too early to make a comedy about conflict in women's liberation. But I hate strict ideology because it stops you from thinking, questioning, and finding out. I like playfulness, including with gender—not limiting ourselves by being too serious.

PC Are you deliberately linking cultural and racial difference to gender and sexual difference?

UO Yes, because this is an ethnographic approach. The important thing about film is [that] it allows you to play with these structures.

PC Your films are visually opulent, fantastical, but your Berlin Trilogy satirizes the dangers of escapism and media sensationalism. Isn't that a contradiction?

UO Cinema comes from sideshows, the circus, and these appear in my films. But attraction can be used in other ways: naively, or to persuade. My films use images ironically.

Dorian Gray in the Mirror of the Yellow Press (1984) is about indoctrination but also the history of the homunculus. I'm playing with how the media and cinema build a person, taking it back to this history. The press baron, Madame Dr. Mabuse, tries to create her own creature, Dorian Gray. The figure of the invented man recurs over time: in expressionistic films, in Fritz Lang. The media today uses unbelievable methods to manipulate, but it was always tried, except now the instruments are increasingly refined.

PC Your focus on spectacle seems to say that one can never really know other people or another culture beyond their signs and appearances. But is it also true that the absurdism in your films invites all viewers to recognize their own foreignness—the self as strange?

UO Of course—we are always the other. We are the other, and others have an interest in us. It's a matter of viewpoint. When I visited the nomadic Mongolians, they were not used to foreigners. They asked me about



cities and the animals kept there. The idea of animals kept for pleasure, not slaughter, was unfamiliar, and they couldn't understand how I looked so well fed. One man said, "You are a great storyteller." He thought it was a fairy tale—that's important in my films.

I bring my workbook material on Mongolian culture, and the people I film go through it with me. They say what they have or no longer use. It's an important start for conversation and for them to comment on your interest in their culture and the kind of environment you will create for it.

PC There's a lot of justifiable anxiety about cultural appropriation. Is that something that concerns you?

UO I'm not making a film about a people, I'm doing a film with them. In Mongolia we worked collaboratively. There was even an elderly woman who helped me to create scenes of old rituals. Many minorities in 1980s China had big problems with the state, including the nomads. These were tensions I covered in *China. The Arts—The People* (1985), so there was another reason to film.



PC It's fifty years since the May 1968 riots in Paris, which took place while you were there studying. Why are you revisiting that time in your new film?

UO I was twenty when I went to Paris. There I became friends with many postwar refugees on the literary scene and fantastic artists like Raoul Hausmann, Man Ray, Philippe Soupault, Tristan Tzara, the Surrealists. I was still a painter. Parisian Pop art had just started, and I went in that direction. The Lenbachhaus, Munich, are currently displaying some of those works.

I had no interest in films before I moved to Paris, but there I went to the cinemathèque three, four times a week and got an education in world cinema. I also engaged with politics—especially the politics of colonialism. The early '60s saw a schism within France about its colonies, around the end of the Algerian war. This was followed by Vietnam and May '68. I'm not a fan of May '68. It was an important protest, but significant questions were lost in ideological divisions between Maoists, Leninists, and Trotskyists. These fights took over, and it became very destructive.

PC You also look at Calligrammes—the bookstore and poems.

UO This was a wonderful shop, owned by Fritz Picard, who in 1930s Berlin had been a famous editor. He lost his library in the war, so in Paris he made this unbelievable bookshop—Librairie Calligrammes—where everybody with a name in culture went. If people came from other countries, they headed straight there: it was an information exchange.

PC And how are you approaching the film?

UO It will be poetic, like a calligram (a poem in which words are laid out to form an image). There are no interviews, but I am filming little episodes of today, and I have watched about three hundred films and gathered documents about '60s Paris. It includes citations and a diary-like text. A combination of the old and the new, as always in my theater.

Richard Brody, “Johanna D’Arc of Mongolia” and the Question of Substance of Style”, *The New Yorker*, May 26, 2017.

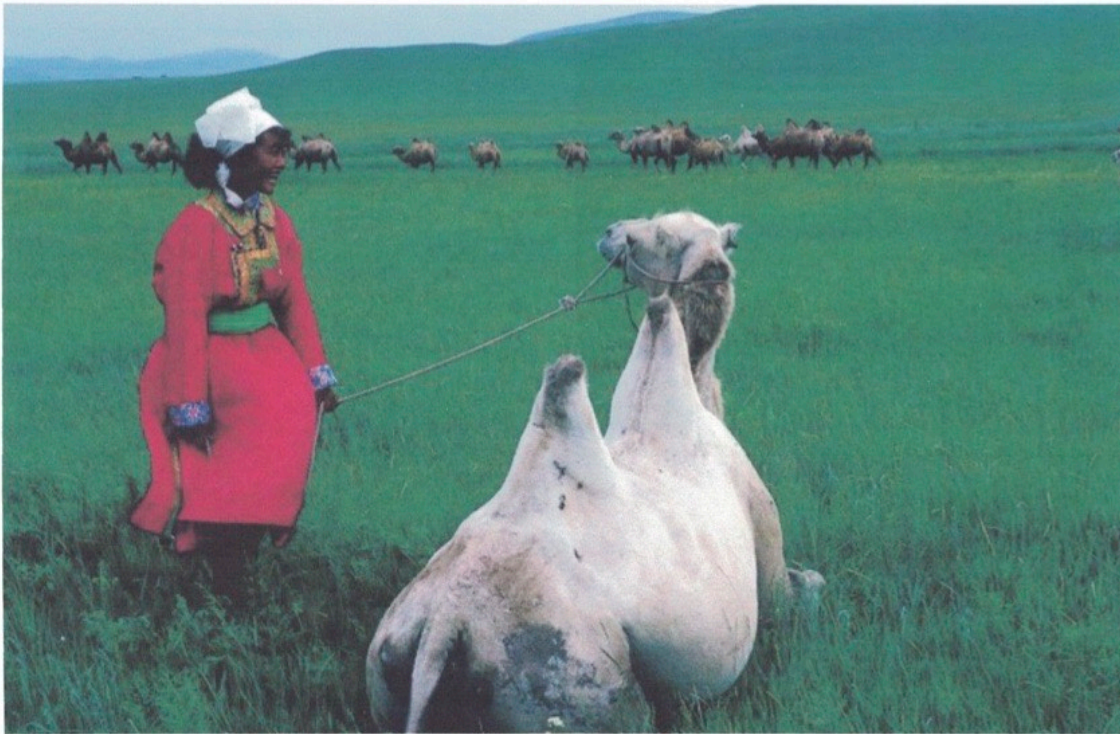
THE
NEW YORKER

RICHARD BRODY

“JOHANNA D’ARC OF MONGOLIA” AND THE QUESTION OF THE SUBSTANCE OF STYLE



By Richard Brody May 26, 2017



A scene from Ulrike Ottinger's film "Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia," from 1989, now showing at MOMA.

COURTESY ULRIKE OTTINGER/SAMMLUNG GOETZ, MÜNCHEN

With Sofia Coppola making her return at Cannes with “The Beguiled” and David Lynch making his own return with “Twin Peaks: The Return,” the substance of style is in question again. A rare and remarkable film that makes this question its very subject has just started its welcome weeklong run at MOMA: “Johanna d’Arc of Mongolia,” by the German director Ulrike Ottinger, from 1989. It’s a sumptuously stylized yet ardently observational film

that builds its wild contrasts into its plot, about a train ride of legendary proportions aboard the Transsiberian, a virtual Orient Express filled with an exotic collection of international travellers with mysterious backgrounds and fabulous personalities.

The train is a virtual theatre for their personalities, their idiosyncrasies, and, for that matter, their literal theatricality—the group includes Fanny Ziegfeld (Gillian Scalici), an American Broadway star; three Russian chanteuses, the Kalinka Sisters; and Mickey Katz (Peter Kern), a wealthy heir who's also a Yiddish theatre star, all of whom enthusiastically display their kinky, kitschy artistry for the pleasure of their fellow-travellers along with their spotlighted, florid manners. The doyenne of the group, Lady Windermere (Delphine Seyrig, in her final film performance), is a polyglot and literary high-society ethnologist; a German woman (Irm Hermann) is a reserved and shy teacher; and Giovanna (Inés Sastre) is a young backpacker in quest of “adventure” whom Lady Windermere befriends and takes under her wing.

And adventure they all get. The overheated, heartily mannered revels aboard the train, alternating between the gourmand Mickey's grandiose culinary extravagances and the improvised musical soirées, come to a rapid halt, along with the train itself: in Inner Mongolia, a seeming troupe of bandits force the passengers off the train and won't let it go before taking the women hostage and bringing them to their encampment. The scene of their capture is a small masterwork of cross-cultural bewilderment, as the voyagers look out the window of the train and observe with delight the lines of colorfully costumed locals, riding horses and camels, that emerge above and along the sandy hills until Lady Windermere informs them that the groups appear arrayed rather for battle.

The Mongol warriors who capture them do so gently; they're under the command of a young woman, Princess Ulan Iga (Xu Re Huar), who—as Lady Windermere, who speaks Mongolian, explains—rigorously observes their culture's sacred laws of hospitality. In effect, “Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia” becomes, at that point, an anthropological wonder-theatre, with the Western women of the train getting, in effect, a front-row seat on the domestic, religious, and political ceremonies and practices of the nomadic Mongolians, and then becoming integrated into them.

Already aboard the train, Ottinger proves herself to be a director with an enchanted sense of composition. Filming lavish meals in a fancy dining car or Katz and the Kalinka Sisters in a klezmer romp, Lady Windermere in a fanciful peroration or a bread peddler at a station stop, Ottinger has an unrestrainedly lyrical sense of composition that blends lucidly analytical observation with a sugar-spangled touch of wonder, and that sensibility is put to an all the more severe test and an all the more spectacular—and intellectual—use during the travellers' enforced stay in Mongolia. With a discerning, rapturous curiosity, Ottinger films a formalized reconciliation between two warring tribes, the slaughter of a lamb (accompanied by a remarkable chant by a dozen red-robed women), the celebratory performance of a song by an elderly singer accompanying himself on a single-stringed bowed instrument, the fording of a

stream by a troupe of riders on horseback or camels, the construction of a yurt for summertime residence, the lighting of grand night fires, and the driving of herds across the plains.

She catches faces and gestures, clothing and accoutrements, tones of voice and the routines and gestures of work and pageantry alike—as well as mysteries and incomprehensions, dangers and uncertainties. The teacher puts herself at mortal risk by hanging laundry on a clothesline; Giovanna catches the eye of the princess, who befriends her and then invites her to share her yurt. There's a muffled element of rueful comedy in the dramatic setup—as if viewers themselves would need to be held captive in order to spend an hour or so observing the lives of Mongolian herders.

There's an element of reserve in Ottinger's approach to the characters; she's a respectful outsider, and her observations are impressionistic, not intimate. She films, along with the styles and manners of Mongolian society, the strong but imprecise influence that exposure to Mongolian culture has upon the Western women forced to observe it and participate in it. Her approach to their experiences is similarly fragmentary—full in its approach to detail but dramatically gappy and fitful. Ottinger's art is more deeply stylistic and intellectual than it is dramatic. The dramatic organization of a movie is essentially mathematical; the stylistic tone is essentially poetic. The difference is that the former can be learned or imposed, whereas the inventions of style are personal, spontaneous, inimitable, and unteachable. Form can be mastered; style is what one either has or doesn't. Style is a crucial part of personality, of personhood, of character—but “Johanna d’Arc” suggests that, like personal identity itself, it doesn't emerge in isolation but is informed by culture, beliefs, heritage, landscape, a grand social realm that each person involuntarily represents and transforms. Ottinger seeks, through style, the deep background from which it arises, and finds a superb, simple cinematic correlate for that idea. For all its outwardly probing observation and decorative delights, the movie concludes with an abstract touch that's as breathtaking as any of its sights and sounds.



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

ANGELA McROBBIE

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.

doi:10.1093/screen/hjp007

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

BRETT MILLS

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

Hildegund Amanshauser and Susan Mackervoy, "Ulrike Ottinger", *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, Issue 16, Autumn / Winter 2007, 28-37.

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Narcissistic Hermaphrodite Accompanied by a Gnome and a Bearded Woman, location photograph from *Freak Orlando*, 1981, c-print, 98 x 68.8cm

**'The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible':
On the Work of Ulrike Ottinger¹
— Hildegund Amanshauser**

At the end of *Dorian Gray im Spiegel der Boulevardpresse* (*Dorian Gray in the Mirror of the Yellow Press*, 1984), Dorian Gray walks through the underground sewer landscape of Berlin and into the headquarters of the media group. Slowly he unties a packet and takes out a knife, leaps onto the conference table and stabs Frau Dr. Mabuse, the director of the media group, in front of the assembled media representatives who were in the process of reporting their current circulation figures. In the next scene we are in a cemetery where a camel is leading the funeral procession. Frau Dr. Mabuse bows before the grave: 'Dorian, for me you're still alive.' Next scene: Dorian Gray reads the headline 'Dorian Gray Dead' in the *Daily Mirror* and says to his servant, Hollywood, 'Stop everything — I want to dictate the end of the story.' In the credit sequence Dr. Mabuse speaks again and asks the question: 'Why did I always have to kill my most talented pupils?'

Ottinger's films, like all her artistic works, resist linear readings: it is not possible to tell the story of what happens in them because they do not follow a linear plot. Instead every frame of the film is carefully composed down to the tiniest detail as they interweave multiple layers of meaning. The films are full of references to literature, mythology, films, music ethnology and history; they are full of discontinuities and contradictions. Collage and montage, transformation and metamorphosis are amongst Ottinger's favourite artistic methods and devices; the boundaries between fact and fiction are blurred, as are the boundaries between the sexes. Ottinger works with a visual (and audible) language which constantly shifts and adjusts in the attempt to do justice to the complexity of the world we live in, displaying, ordering and presenting it as if in a cabinet of curiosities. She is a brilliant narrator, telling stories about people and the world they live in. 'Cinema,' she says, 'is realised fiction, bringing together the imagination of the filmmaker, the power of the image and sequences of images, and the imagination of the viewer.'²

Ulrike Ottinger not only directs her films but also acts as cinematographer and producer. She started out as a painter in Paris in the 1960s, and is a photographer, having developed a vast archive of images over the years.³ She also worked as a performer in the 1970s, and as a theatre director, staging plays by Elfriede Jelinek and Johann Nestroy, amongst others. Ottinger made her first film, *Laokoon & Söhne* (*Laocoon & Sons*), in 1973, and from the 1970s onwards she has organised exhibitions alongside her film production. Her screenplays are elaborate collections of photographs, images, texts, quotations and sketches, clearly displaying the artist's associative mode of working and her rigorous method of research.

Ottinger's exhibition 'Stills' took place at David Zwirner gallery in New York in 2000 and 'Sessions' at Contemporary Fine Arts in Berlin in 2001. In 2002 she took part in documenta 11 in Kassel with the 363-minute documentary video *Südostpassage, eine Reise zu den neuen weißen Flecken auf der Landkarte Europas* (*Southeast Passage*,

1 Oscar Wilde, quoted by Ulrike Ottinger in the screenplay for *Madame X — An Absolute Ruler*. Ulrike Ottinger, *Drehbuch zu Madame X — eine absolute Herrscherin*, Basel and Frankfurt a.M.: Stroemfeld and Roter Stern, n.d.

2 Ulrike Ottinger, 'Der Zwang zum Genrekino', *Kinemathek 86*, Berlin: Freunde der Deutschen Kinemathek, February 2001, p.40.

3 See Ursula Blickle, Matt Gerald and Catherine David (eds.), *Ulrike Ottinger: Image Archive*, Nürnberg: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2006.

A Journey to the New Blank Spots on the European Map). By this point Ulrike Ottinger had finally achieved her breakthrough on the international art scene – a breakthrough she had achieved as a filmmaker in 1977 with her first long feature film, *Madame X: Eine absolute Herrscherin* (*Madame X – An Absolute Ruler*). Following Manifesta in Ljubljana in 2000, documenta 11 was one of the most prominent examples of the invasion of exhibition space by documentary and semi-documentary videos. The art world's belated 'discovery' of Ulrike Ottinger in this context was both timely and appropriate. Works by other filmmakers such as Chantal Akerman and Harun Farocki were also receiving increased exposure in the artistic world at the same time. On the one hand this was connected with a trend towards conformity in the production of cinema and television films – a trend these filmmakers were (and are) resisting. On the other hand, artistic practices referring to the history of film and documentary practice had already become established in the art world in the previous few years – the work of Stan Douglas or Diana Thater, for example. This created a receptive environment for the work of Ottinger and others, and prepared galleries and their visitors for this exacting style of filmmaking. In the exhibition 'Hautnah' ('Up Close') at Goetz Collection at Munich's Villa Stuck, Ottinger's photographs *Im Kontext von Freak Orlando* (*In the Context*



of *Freak Orlando*, 2002) were shown alongside works by Chantal Akerman, Matthew Barney, Robert Gober, Jürgen Klauke, Yayoi Kusama, Cindy Sherman and others, framing them within the context of the art world.⁴

Ulrike Ottinger has made twelve long films in all, six of which could be described as documentaries. Here I will be focusing on four early feature films – *Madame X – An Absolute Ruler* (1977) and the *Berlin Trilogy* comprising *Bildnis einer Trinkerin* (*Ticket of No Return*, 1979), *Freak Orlando* (1981) and *Dorian Gray* – along with the recently released documentary *Prater*. If we subscribe to the thesis that history must

Dorian Gray (*Veruschka von Lehndorff*), location photograph from *Dorian Gray* in the *Mirror of the Yellow Press*, 1983, c-print, 48.4 × 70cm

⁴ See also Laurence A. Rickels, 'My last interview with Ulrike Ottinger', in Atom Egoyan and Ian Balfour (eds.), *On the Foreignness of Film*, Cambridge and London: MIT Press: 2004, pp.422 – 36.

constantly be rewritten from the perspective of the present, then today rewriting the history of 'the modern' and modernism is a matter of particular urgency: the history familiar in the West was written in the spirit of the Cold War, and has very particular political, geographic and gender-specific points of emphasis.⁵ If we also take seriously documenta 12's attempt to begin this rewriting, focusing in particular on periods such as the 1970s and the production of art by women artists in different regions of the world, then within this discourse Ottinger's early feature films seem to me both interesting and illuminating.

Madame X — An Absolute Ruler was produced in the spirit of second-wave feminism. Ottinger tells a pirate story; it is a story of personal and social emancipation, but also of power, domination and imprisonment within an enclosed space. Eroticism and sexuality play a pre-eminent role in the narrative. Seven women from different geographic regions and different social spheres follow the call of the 'harsh, pitiless beauty' Madame X, who promises them discovery, gold, love and adventure on the sea. They are 'willing to exchange their comfortable and secure but unbearably dull lives for a world of danger and uncertainty, but full of love and adventure'.⁶ And so they board the pirate ship *Orlando* (named after Madame X's late lover) on the China



The Messenger of the Inquisition, location photograph from *Freak Orlando*, 1981, c-print, 68.6 × 98cm

Sea. The ship's figurehead is an exact reproduction of Madame X, a robotic figure who represents the apparatus of power. Because the female seafarers gather here they accept this system. They experience many adventures and become entangled in countless erotic intrigues among themselves. In the battle for supremacy – which is primarily sexual in nature – Madame X kills nearly all the women. They return to the boat in various forms and put out to sea once more. 'At the end of the film all the figures are transformed, they undergo various deaths in the spirit of the pirate genre, they are stabbed, strangled, whatever. The deaths are transitional stages. Something has to die

5 An argument proposed, for example, by Viktor Misiano at the Lunch Lecture at documenta 12 in Kassel on 10 July 2007.

6 U. Ottinger, *Drehbuch zu Madame X — eine absolute Herrscherin*, op. cit., n.p.

so that something else can come into being... The film begins and ends with a departure. But the circumstances have changed.⁷ This film was initially received with some scepticism by the women's movement: although it did express the mood for heading in a new direction and for casting off the traditional, repressive structures under which women suffered, at the same time it showed the women stumbling into new structures of a similar kind. Nonetheless, it quickly became a cult film, especially in the USA, with countless pirate copies in existence.⁸

The Berlin trilogy starts with *Ticket of No Return*. This film, too, begins with a departure – this time by a lone woman, another exceptional beauty like Madame X. She leaves the Villa Rotonda and travels to Berlin with a ticket *aller jamais retour* (a no-return ticket). 'She wanted to forget her past, or rather to abandon it like a condemned house.'⁹ Now she wanders through Berlin, drinking. Colour plays a central role in the drama of the film, which concentrates mainly on the primary range. The clothes of the protagonist, who is called 'She' (played by Tabea Blumenschein), change from red to yellow to blue. In the final scene, the death scene, she walks down a mirrored corridor in a silver dress and the mirror floor shatters beneath her white stilettos. 'This is an image for the transitional situation between life and death,' says Ulrike Ottinger.¹⁰ In this film she very consciously works with claustrophobic fantasies: glass doors that do not open, liquids on glass and reflections in mirrors play all a major role. As she says, 'I was trying to find images for the reflective, the flowing, the dissolving.'¹¹

Freak Orlando, Kleines Welttheater in fünf Episoden (*Freak Orlando, a Small Theatre of the World in Five Episodes*) is 'a history of the world from its beginnings to our day, taking the example of freaks, including the errors, the incompetence, the thirst for power, the fear, the madness, the cruelty and the commonplace, as a small "theatre of the world" in five episodes.'¹² From the mythology festival in the department store at the beginning and through to the 'ugly person of the year' competition in Italy via a religious festival, the main figure Orlando develops through various stages – from Orlando the pilgrim to Frau Orlando the entertainer (played by Magdalena Montezuma) – accompanied throughout by Helena Müller as the Tree of Life Goddess, the department-store announcer, Siamese-twins Lena and Bunny Helena (Delphine Seyrig) and Herbert Zeus as the department-store manager, priest, chief psychiatrist and psycho-pharmaceuticals salesman (Albert Heins), who finally wins the 'ugly person of the year' competition as the only 'normal person'. The story takes place in Berlin, the Freak City, and is set frequently in the city's industrial areas with the Wall visible as a symbol of separation and imprisonment. This journey through history is marked by constantly repeating cycles. As Ottinger says, 'Inquisition, fascism, repressive psychiatry. The various methods of repression available change according to the time. But the structures in fact remain frighteningly similar.'¹³

Dorian Gray in the Mirror of the Yellow Press is the third film of the *Berlin Trilogy*. It tells the story of a wealthy dandy, Dorian Gray (Veruschka von Lehndorff) – a bored young man who falls into the clutches of Dr. Mabuse (Delphine Seyrig), the head of a media group who builds him up into a celebrity and then destroys him. The story is inter-cut with an opera which relates the conquest of the Canary Islands by the Spanish Infant Don Luis de la Cerda (also played by von Lehndorff *alias* Dorian Gray); it tells the tale of his encounter with the beautiful local ruler Andamana (Tabea Blumenschein) and how she is murdered by the Grand Inquisitor (also played by Seyrig *alias* Dr. Mabuse). Dorian Gray falls in love with the actress who plays Andamana, and the intrigues of this love story are followed by the tabloid press, which is presented as the modern-day Inquisition. The end of the film has already been discussed. Like the three ladies who accompany the Queen of the Night in *The Magic Flute* (1791), Dr. Mabuse

7 'Ein Werkstattgespräch. Die Collage ist die Form, in der man heute denkt, Ulrike Ottinger im Gespräch mit Peter Kremski' ('Workshop conversation: Collage is the form we think in today. Ulrike Ottinger in conversation with Peter Kremski'), *Kinemathek* 86, *op. cit.*, p.289.

8 *Ibid.*, p.288.

9 See www.ulrikeottinger.com (last accessed on 1 August 2007).

10 'Ein Werkstattgespräch', *op. cit.*, p.281.

11 *Ibid.*

12 www.ulrikeottinger.com.

13 'Ein Werkstattgespräch', *op. cit.*, p.285.

has three companions – Susy, Golem and Passat, the names referring to computer programmes for monitoring circulation figures across the globe. Hollywood, Dorian Gray's servant, is – as he says – both mother and father to him. The press headquarters, where the latest circulation figures are displayed on many monitors connected to kiosks all over the globe, is a very impressive setting – as is the room where the press ball takes place, its surface made entirely of newspaper and decorated with huge mounds of scrunched-up newsprint. Here again we encounter a woman as absolute ruler, representing the power of the media groups. '[T]he tabloid newspapers exert not so much a direct force as a temptation. The temptation is to make use of these media – media which suppress important information. "Politics is our taboo, X = U, X = U" (quotation from a song at the press ball in the film). Here a number of factors come together in a very dangerous way: people with intelligence making use of psychology solely to achieve higher circulation figures. This is currently replacing a whole philosophy today – the drive to achieve dominance of the international market, and in a very skilful way.'¹⁴ *The Berlin Trilogy* shows three very different stories: the story of one woman who is trapped within herself; the history of the repression of particular groups; and finally the analysis of a contemporary system of power.



The Fishmeal, location photograph from *Madame X – An Absolute Ruler*, Malnav Island, 1977

To conclude I will take a look at Ottinger's most recent film, *Prater*, which premiered in February this year. As an example of a documentary, this film provides a connection with Ulrike Ottinger's current production – although I am aware that I am missing out some important intervening works.¹⁵ After Ottinger's epic documentaries – *China. Die Künste der Alltag* (*China. The Arts – The People*, 1985), *Taiga* (1992) and *Southeast Passage* – which are huge landscape and cultural panoramas lasting as much as eight hours, *Prater* is a small-scale piece of just 104 minutes, a fast-moving sequence of images, finely worked in all its details. The course of one day, from midday through to night,

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.165.

¹⁵ Such as *Sohanna d'Arc of Mongolia*, which Homay King discusses in this issue.



in today's Prater Park in Vienna, which is threatened with closure, is interwoven with its history, its music, its appearances in literature, film and photography. The Wurstelprater funfair within the Prater is the world's oldest amusement park, founded by Nikolai Kobelkoff, a Russian without arms or legs who fell in love with a Viennese woman. Brief excerpts from *Freak Orlando*, including the dwarves and the lady without arms and legs – almost like a sister-figure for the park's founder – connect these characters with the kind of place where they have always been at home. Several journeys through the Ghost Train and a ride on the Ejection Seat, interviews with Prater families about the history of their family businesses, special appearances from Elfriede Gerstl, Elfriede Jelinek and others, are combined in a panorama of the park's 100-year-plus history. For decades the Prater was a place where young people were taken to celebrate after their confirmation. In 1905 a merry-go-round owner opened Vienna's first silent movie theatre here, which later became the first talking movie theatre. 'The attractions here are called "illusion businesses" and that's true of cinema as well. It, too, works with the strategy of enticement, to which the viewer must add his own imagination to make it work. With this film in particular I thought anew about the themes of illusion and imagination, imitation and simulation, or techniques of simulation. Early cinema was a cinema of attractions, and it was born in the travelling carnival.'¹⁶ In the film, undercutting the documentary process, Barbarella (von Lehnendorff) appears as an evil Barbie doll, shoots a small monkey with her bow and arrow and throws herself into the arms of a black monster, which is followed by a scene showing a King Kong puppet show. In Ulrike Ottinger's words: 'The fiction comes frighteningly close to reality, and reality is a construction, sometimes an illusion.'¹⁷

The same is true of Ottinger's entire oeuvre, and especially of the relationship between her documentaries and fictional films. In genre terms there is a clear division between the two categories: on the one hand the landscape, the towns and the people are the protagonists; on the other the people and landscapes are created by the artist's imagination. Yet Ottinger insists that these are not fantasies but very real observations: 'My imagination intervenes by connecting the different things with each other.'¹⁸ Her documentary method is characterised by attentiveness and respect for others: the films often exhibit a slowness which gives nature and people the time they need to unfold.

Many of Ottinger's films, including the fictional ones, are stories of journeys, narrating a departure for new and entirely unfamiliar shores. These shores are dangerous – places where power, violence and cruelty lie in wait. The stories tell of love and sexuality – not hetero-normality but the normality of other gender definitions and sexual practices. They tell of beauty and the beauty of what is often labelled as ugly, the physically or socially marginalised, the forgotten, the dwarves, the entertainers and transvestites. Ottinger tells of the breadth of the landscape, the chaos of the cities, the beauty and diversity of markets, of music and literature. She creates a repertoire of figures, many of whom we meet again in different films: the drinking woman with the shopping trolley, the three women (who may appear as conference delegates, Dr. Mabuse's assistants, or as three naked men, the dying virtues of the free press), people with bird heads, birds with human heads, the twins Right and Left, the Siamese twins, the two-headed woman, the woman without arms and legs, the Tree of Life (a naked woman who grows out of the ground with branches sprouting from her arms), the narcissist looking into a mirror, the two old men in black robes who stroke each other's beards, or the naked dwarf leading a huge mastiff on a leash, both of them spotted like Dalmatians. Ulrike Ottinger's films are themselves like journeys: you have to enter into them and enjoy them, knowing that you will never be able to understand and decode them entirely. They are like operas or theatre plays, because they always show the frame, the viewpoint, the presence of the author behind the camera and her questions, the artificial and the constructed. They are a huge sensual pleasure; they tell not only of beauty, seduction and sexuality but also of power games, violence and torture, of proximity and distance, of the present and its history. They attempt to find images for the complexity and increasing invisibility of the world's hidden structures.

previous
Aller – Jamais Retour,
 location photograph
 from *Ticket of No Return*,
 1979, c-print,
 68.8 × 98cm

The Perfect Splitting
Image and its Unstoppable
Mechanics, Irena von
 Lichtenstein, Tabea
 Blumenschein, location
 photograph from
Madame X – An Absolute
Ruler, Mainau Island,
 1977, c-print,
 98 × 68.8cm

16 Ulrike Ottinger, interview with Stefanie Schulte Strathaus, 2007, www.ulrikeottinger.com.

17 *Ibid.*

18 Ulrike Ottinger interviewed by Jochen Brunow, *Kinemathek* 86, *op. cit.*, p.107.

Translated by Susan Mackervoy





*My Gorilla (Veruschka
von Lehndorff),
location photograph
from Prater, 2006*

Ulrike Ottinger's Chronicle of Time
— Eva Meyer

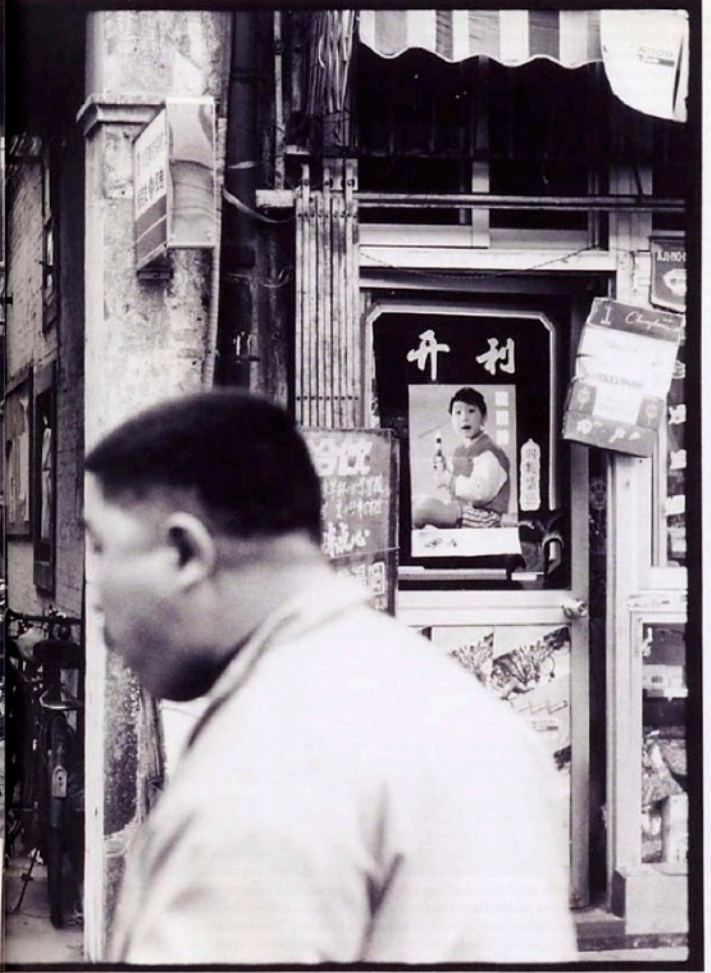
Misunderstandings are part of communication, yet when they occur between cultures, differences are made comprehensible. What is important in this process is not simply the recognition of difference, for this would merely confirm a cliché. Ulrike Ottinger sympathises with all things foreign because they take her beyond the boundaries of recognition — this makes her films the medium of a cognition that involves imagination and registration, critique and concern. Whether she makes fiction films or documentaries — or, from time to time, shifts them to the acoustic field of an audio montage — she steadily works on pushing her images beyond clichés, on freeing them. She accumulates visual and acoustic impressions that she frames and reframes. She keeps contradictions open by giving them time until they force us to change our viewing and listening habits.

In Ottinger's work, story is no longer understood as a sequence of actions. It is understood spatially instead of temporally, as a set of differences and resonances whose heterogeneous association lies in the moment of interruption that allows us to alternate between stories and to fall into time. We are put into the flow of things, no longer connected via responses, and so we discover the power of images and sounds — a power they possess exactly because they no longer depict things but recreate them. This involves a form of touching that is a part of seeing and hearing, so much so that it changes with the time it takes to see and hear. Sequences meet in an extraordinary manner in the montage. For example, in Ottinger's *Exile Shanghai* (1997) a place is recorded on a map, but evolves over time.

You hear something that you do not see: a story about the exile of European Jews in Shanghai during World War II. At the same time your gaze wanders around scenes of everyday life in presentday Shanghai, as if it were all happening now. However this *now* is postulated rather than actualised, which is exactly what makes it confusing. This *now* designates a negative place: things are perhaps there, but you cannot see them. You miss a commentary illustrating your sense of reality, though it is exactly this that provides you with the reality of difference. Are seeing and hearing two modes of perception that are capable of confirming and complementing each other, and also of contradicting and excluding one another? In either case they cannot be mapped onto each other in the *here* and *now* without leaving a remainder. They enfold the gap of time.

There are a number of ways to bridge the gap that separates us from other times. Its opposite extremes are nostalgia and aloofness, though in between there is the wondrous ability of hearing and seeing, of establishing contact across time. When we hear something that does not present itself to our gaze, because it seems to be performing for a fictitious gaze, an image comes into being that we do not see and that robs us of our habitual position as a viewer. We realise we are not in the picture, and that no one can ever possess it or grasp it completely. Or, to be more precise, this picture goes on and on, regardless of whether someone is looking at it or not. It reveals to us what our eyes cannot see — it places us in time.

From here on, time is no longer represented as a succession of discrete points. I no longer see how time passes. Instead I hear countless interruptions that connect with each other and throw me into the infinite of the universe. To have been robbed of my position as a viewer means to have lost my habitual place and to hardly know where to go any more. Even worse, there suddenly are too many places I can go. In view of these



possibilities, it becomes a matter of establishing a place where I can bridge the times without bringing them together in the *here and now*. To be sure, the *there* can connect with the here and the past with the present, yet this connection doesn't ease their sequence in time. Rather, it detracts from this sequence by wandering through its differences and making a variety of places and moments emerge from the continuum of acoustic and visual impressions. The connection does not attempt to classify what is visible and audible as either real or fictitious – for instance, inventive angles of view move from realm to realm allowing a convergence to occur. We are no longer dealing with a simple transfer between the visible and the audible: hearing becomes a function of the eye, a perception of perception itself that connects to its reverse – imagination, memory, knowledge.

For this reason alone, Ulrike Ottinger's *Exile Shanghai* does its subject justice. Instead of reworking a fictitious or real present, she synchronises both forms into one. By shifting the visual and acoustic framing of the film into the continuum of audio montage, she invites us into an acoustic field of images that, by way of a double approach, connects one now with another. She layers them in a montage that brings together the dramatic and the comical, the ordinary and the extraordinary. The individual elements change with the temporal relations they become part of, and they do so not only according to their subjective variations, but also, and especially, according to the moments that, freed from their spatial and temporal contexts, show us the changeability and instability of circumstances.

The chapters in the lives of the people telling their stories appear torn into fragments, each of which seems to wrest its duration from time, as well as plunge into it. These individuals lose their personal and collective unity to the extent that they mix with the outer world of their exile. This world interrupts them with ads, reports, documents, news items, catalogues and notes, and in so doing doesn't merely refer to diverse practical interests in time, but embeds them in the course of the world, going back to 200 B.C. It is no coincidence that the first German word in the film – seen on a Chinese shop sign – is 'Versatzamt', a word that not only refers to the plight of exile but also reconstitutes the fragmented character of the story, what it means to embrace the course of things rather than their ownership.¹

No one can face the struggle against the power of time by oneself. That is why both recollection and hope – our experiences of time – wander from one to the other in such a way that an interval can establish between them. If this interval comes before the connection, the difference between them becomes irreducible. It is exhausted neither by assigning similarities and nor by making an inventory. To be more precise, this difference constitutes a third, new element: a false continuity in time. This doesn't mean that the discontinuous prevails over the continuous, but rather that we hear and see how the cuts and breaks in this montage form a continuum which is fed from the outside in order to present time itself.

Robert Bresson reminds us that silence is an achievement of sound film because it only becomes audible when sounds and voices are interrupted. The silent film, on the other hand, evokes sounds and voices. Silence is not simply the absence of noise; like a visible emptiness, an audible silence requires context and preparation so that the synchronisation of interruption and false continuity succeed. In other words, exile.

Exile always involves a blind spot: the loss of the viewer's habitual position. This blind spot doesn't rob the eye of its gaze. On the contrary, it produces an opening for the gaze and exerts pressure on it. This gaze isn't one that captures; rather, the gaze itself is captured and set in motion. It is like a swaying, suspended, fluctuating fragment of people whose grounds are constantly uncertain. Therefore exile, understood as loss, is the constitutive perspective for Ottinger's way of seeing as adventure. The reversal of exclusion as adventure aligns the Shanghai exiles with all the other characters in Ottinger's cinema. Whether pirates of feminism (*Madame X – An Absolute Ruler*, 1977), new nomads in Eastern Europe (*Southeast Passage*, 2002), Russian actors taking up roles within the improvisational settings of documentary film (*Twelve Chairs*, 2004), waylaid travellers in Mongolia (*Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia*, 1989), sideshow freaks across the ages and stages of the theatre of the world (*Freak Orlando*, 1981), or the lady

previous
Exile Shanghai,
Wangpoo River, 1996,
montage with old
photograph

1 Versatzamt means 'pawn shop', though in this context it also suggests an 'office of displacement'.

drinker who tours the Berlin landscapes as the sites of her own narcissistic disturbance (*Ticket of No Return*, 1979), each outsider in Ottinger's films simultaneously affirms an insider view alongside a new frontier for vision and understanding. The viewer 'in exile' may well change place in space, though he or she does not really come from any one place. He or she has lost the position of a viewer and, because of this, his or her experience goes deeper than recollection, which in turn is relegated to the past. It is in the course of this continuous displacement that a gap widens and widens, until it takes over the position of a viewer who does not jump over the gap but literally plunges into it.

The viewer loses the power to bridge the times by defining him- or herself in relation to them and, as usual, by imagining things – things that have already been said or shown. These imaginings tend to make the viewer blend immediate perceptions with recollections, and to such a degree that a current perception can turn into a recollection. This is not just about perception working in a practical and fast way – what Henri Bergson calls the grafting of individual contingencies in the course of an impersonal perception – but also the contraction of the real by our memory when it stretches single moments until they merge. Indeed, we attain a more sensuous and concrete illusion of life as a result. We have moved our point of view to the image itself, which now takes



Rain, location
photograph from
Exile Shanghai,
China, 1996

on more depth, emanating the light that seems to illuminate it. But if this connection becomes central, the world comes to a standstill. Time and life are frozen, so that 'I' can remember them better.

How is someone supposed to tell of their own exile if his or her tale is immersed in the light of a happy ending? The montage has to integrate that person's recollections into the course of the world. It has to activate a transition: a fold or the interval of the conjunction *and*. With it, one image is fixed to another – and so on and so forth, nothing more. Linked with *and*, perceptions and recollections succeed one another, but their succession is not subject to a categorical order, as is the case with 'because', or 'if I remember well, this is to be understood as follows', and so on. If, however, I use *and*

to add a recollection to a current perception, the latter can connect to the former, though not without pointing to the abyss of non-existence that may open between my perceptions. It restores my astonishment in the fact that something begins when what is said; something is said rather than having always been there. It may well be that the discontinuity (or forgetting) so essential for time seems most threatening. But that is exactly why it can be counteracted by continuity. For continuity is essential for time and seems to be retained for the purposes of montage.

Because of this, we can simply report facts while keeping our distance from them. If all the focus and force of the montage is invested into the connection, thereby giving it a rhythmic character with extremely clear links, then the material of the story in between the links becomes an integral part but not an illusion. By virtue of this, the montage achieves extreme accuracy and diversity. It is not just about conjunctions. The use of tenses, the position of images, antithesis and other devices each serve the same purpose: they provide an arrangement that is exact, elastic and rich in nuance. This profusion of links and segmentation allows for a great diversity of subjective presentations, as well as an astonishing agility when it comes down to contemplating the facts, or withholding and addressing other doubtful matters. The series of similar processes and their resumption both seem to be phenomena that are paratactic rather than syntactic. Whether an overall presentation is replaced by a constantly renewed compilation of individual scenes with a similar structure, whether an extended action is replaced by the constantly renewed repetition of the same action, or whether a process unfolding in segments is replaced by a constant going back to the point of departure followed by the detailed treatment of the different segments and motifs, the strategy is always to avoid rationally structured summarisation and instead to give pre-eminence to halts, jerks, juxtapositions and backs-and-forths, in which the causal, modal or even temporal relations dissipate in favour of a narrative time.

This is not a story about the development or history of an individual, or about the revelation or resolution of a conflict. Rather it is a chronicle of the events of a journey that is an extension as opposed to a representation of time or continuity. At the end you often find yourself at the beginning again. The end of *Exile Shanghai* is one such an example, when emigration again becomes imminent due to liberation or occupation by the communists, depending on your perspective. We are not dealing with a simple circular movement here, for we have now been provided with the possibility of a beginning that can reflect its own content, its themes, its situations and protagonists. The story has the ability to revolve around itself, and all that is inexplicable about it – the reality of a break.

The montage clearly uses jumps, conflicts, resolutions and resonances, though as a rule they are selected and coordinated so as to transform the fleeting and uncertain present into a consistent and describable past – a past that due to the nature of the medium always appears as a present. Pier Paolo Pasolini relates this synthetic understanding of the montage to death, for death, so to speak, completes the montage of our lives. Yet this is contradicted by the nature of the medium, which gives us time itself as a mode of perception. Its breaks and disproportions address a viewer who is no longer the centre of his or her own perceptions, and thus is taken on an aberrant journey in time.

Every present is haunted by a past and a future, for this journey is a *Versatzamt* that incessantly alters its angles and coordinates, swaps its verticals and horizontals and even integrates what comes before and after so as to escape its present, the simple representation of time. Take, for example, the people telling their experiences: we learn what they were before they entered the montage and what they will be afterwards. But it is not enough to eradicate fiction in favour of bare reality, as the montage goes beyond the boundary that marks *before* and *after*. According to Gilles Deleuze, time is now a perception that must perceive its boundaries in order to enter into and emerge from the montage, and enter into fiction as a present that cannot be separated from its *before* and *after*. By doing so, we by no means attain a reality that exists independent of the montage, but a chronicle of time that co-exists with it.

Exile Shanghai, Hog Kew, Shanghai, 1996, montage with old photograph





The Kailinka Sisters,
location photograph
from *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia*, 1988,
c-print, 42.5 × 62.5cm

Encounter in the
Grasslands, location
photograph from
Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia, 1988,
c-print, 59 × 90cm

Sign in the Void: Ulrike Ottinger's *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia* – Homay King

Ulrike Ottinger's films teeter between fiction and documentary, and between an attitude of knowing critical distance and seeming sincerity. At first glance this tension appears to map neatly onto her career, with the ironic pastiches of the early *Madame X: An Absolute Ruler* (1978), *Ticket of No Return* (1979) and *The Image of Dorian Gray in the Yellow Press* (1984), followed by the experimental ethnographic styles of such films as *China: The Arts — Everyday Life* (1986), *Taiga* (1992) and *Exile Shanghai* (1997). In his text 'My Last Interview with Ulrike Ottinger: On Southeast Passage and Beyond', Laurence Rickels notes that shortly after the release of *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia* (1989) critics hastened to mark a 'before' and 'after' point in Ottinger's career. But as Rickels implies, this gesture to some extent belies Ottinger's 'dual — and in every film moment double — investment in fictional art cinema and documentary film'.¹

Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia seems to occupy the fulcrum of this binary opposition in Ottinger's oeuvre. Its two-part structure folds over an internal fulcrum, making the film metonymic of the oeuvre as a whole. The film's two sections dramatise a clash not only between cultures, but also between filmmaking styles. The first hour of the film introduces a motley group of European, Russian and American travellers aboard the Trans-Siberian Railway. These characters, like many of their predecessors in Ottinger's work, seem to typify or allegorise particular imagos and worldviews. The film takes a detour when, in a scene reminiscent of Joseph von Sternberg's *The Shanghai Express* (1932), the train is brought to a halt in the middle of the Gobi desert by a nomadic tribe of Mongolians who have barricaded the tracks with sand. The Mongolians, led by the magnificent Princess Ullun Iga (played by Xu Re Huar), take the women as hostages, and for the bulk of the film's duration the travellers remain with them to witness a peace accord with a warring tribe, followed by a celebratory summer festival with song and dance, feasting, recitations and an archery competition. During this time, an erotically tinged friendship is sparked between the Princess and Giovanna (Inés Sastre), a young backpacker who is the Johanna of the film's title. The film's short coda returns us to the train, where we learn that the Mongolian Princess in fact resides mainly in Paris. Dressed in a Chanel suit, she explains that she visits Mongolia in the summer months from time to time 'in order to preserve in some measure the illusion of free, nomadic life'. The opening scenes of the film are shot with a high degree of artifice, including carefully composed framings and a *mise-en-scène* so anti-illusionistic that brushstrokes are actually visible on the sets of the train station. The carnivalesque scenes in the desert, by contrast, are filmed in a more 'documentary' style: distant framings that highlight the expansive location, long takes that emphasise observation rather than construction, and moments of silence and stillness.

An obvious point of entry for thinking about *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia* is the question of how the two halves of the film relate to one another. In her article 'Observing Rituals: Ulrike Ottinger's *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia*', Julia Knight suggests that the film establishes 'parallels' between its two halves.² Brenda Longfellow, in her text

1 Laurence A. Rickels, 'My Last Interview with Ulrike Ottinger: On Southeast Passage and Beyond', in Atom Egoyan and Ian Balfour (eds.), *Subtitles: On the Foreignness of Film*, Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2004, p.422.

2 Julia Knight, 'Observing Rituals: Ulrike Ottinger's *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia*', in Ingeborg Majer O'Sickey and Ingeborg von Zadow (eds.), *Triangulated Visions: Women in Recent German Film*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1998, p.111.

'Lesbian Phantasy and the Other Woman in Ottinger's *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia*', in turn suggests that its binary oppositions – 'fiction/documentary; artifice/authentic; west/east' – are not as rigid as they seem.³ In the ostensibly 'fictional' first half of the film, 'documentary' appears by proxy in the photographs that adorn the train's walls, and in the anthropological and historical data recited by Frau Mueller-Vohwinkel (Irm Hermann). 'Fiction' appears within the Mongolian scenes in the form of narrated tales and pantomimes, which Ottinger often films in a frontal presentation that emphasises their theatricality. The artifice of the train segments complements rather than contrasts the formal staging of the Mongolian sequences – as Janet Bergstrom says, speaking of *China: The Arts — Everyday Life* in 'The Theatre of Everyday Life': 'What we see is already on display'.⁴ The long takes and slow pans that dominate the second half of the film are reminiscent of Michelangelo Antonioni and other directors of the European New Wave, and invoke a style that, while certainly indebted to Neorealism and *cinéma vérité*, in no way asserts the ontological character or facticity of their referents.⁵

Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia seems to be a film that is ultimately about various modes of signification. Ottinger herself has suggested that the film is about 'different kinds of narration'.⁶ The binary opposition that Ottinger is deconstructing is not simply that between a cultural West and a natural East, but that between a semiotically rich West and a semiotically primitive East. Like Roland Barthes, Ottinger acknowledges that her Mongolia is an empire of signs, a construction rather than an essence.⁷ Indeed, Knight suggests that the coda reveals that 'what the film persuaded us was "authentic" is in a sense as artificial as the first part of the film ... the whole film is revealed as an elaborate fiction'.⁸ However, an awareness of its own status as fiction and sign, *Johanna* seems to say, may be a useful first step, but is not in itself sufficient. Ottinger's film is puzzling, for it seems to insist simultaneously on the signifying distance of what it shows, and on its phenomenological reality. The film finally is about the challenges and possibilities of a world in which both these concepts of the filmic signifier – seemingly mutually exclusive – are in play at the same time.

Many interpreters of Ottinger's films argue that their depictions of race are laced with irony, and that they illustrate an openness to alterity that is tied to a feminist and queer appropriation of traditionally patriarchal visual pleasure.⁹ Knight suggests that *Johanna* 'represents difference while obliterating "otherness"': Roswitha Mueller states that Ottinger's films express 'an insistence on difference based on inclusiveness'.¹⁰ Others have suggested that the film does not so much critique as replicate colonialist narrative patterns of travel, exploration and kidnapping, substituting a fantasy of colonial dominance with one of utopian matriarchy, which is ultimately no less problematic.¹¹ Such readings are persuasive: indeed, Ottinger at times seems to justify

3 Brenda Longfellow, 'Lesbian Phantasy and the Other Woman in Ottinger's *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia*', *Screen*, vol. 34 no. 2, Summer 1993, p. 127.

4 Janet Bergstrom, 'The Theatre of Everyday Life: Ulrike Ottinger's *China: The Arts — Everyday Life*', *Camera Obscura*, no. 16, September 1988, p. 47.

5 In a discussion with Ottinger, Mandy Merck notes stylistic similarities between Ottinger's first China documentary and Antonioni's *Chung Kuo Cina* (1972). See Annette Kuhn, 'Encounter between Two Cultures: A Discussion with Ulrike Ottinger', *Screen*, vol. 28 no. 4, Autumn 1987, p. 77.

6 Janet A. Kaplan, 'Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia: Interview with Ulrike Ottinger', *Art Journal*, vol. 61 no. 3, Fall 2002, p. 7.

7 Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1982, p. 3.

8 J. Knight, 'Observing Rituals', *op. cit.*, p. 110.

9 For a reading of *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia* that situates it in these terms, see Longfellow, *op. cit.*

For readings of *Madame X — An Absolute Ruler* that follow similar lines of argument, see Patricia White, 'Madame X of the China Seas', *Screen*, vol. 28 no. 4, Autumn 1987, pp. 80–95; and Sabine Hake, '"And with Favourable Winds They Sailed Away": Madame X and Femininity', in Sandra Frieden et al. (eds.), *Gender and German Cinema, Volume 1: Gender and Representation in New German Cinema*, Providence and Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1993, pp. 179–88. For readings of *Ticket of No Return* that centre on female subjectivity, see Miriam Hansen, 'Visual Pleasure, Fetishism and the Problem of Feminine/Feminist Discourse: Ulrike Ottinger's *Ticket of No Return*', *New German Critique*, no. 31, Winter 1984, pp. 95–108; and Kaja Silverman, 'From the Ideal-Ego to the Active Gift of Love', *The Threshold of the Visible World*, New York: Routledge, 1996, as well as 'Narcissism: The Impossible Love', in I. M. O'Sickey and I. von Zadow (eds.), *Triangulated Visions. Women in Recent German Film*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1998. On *Dorian Gray in the Mirror of the Yellow Press*, see Roswitha Mueller, 'The Mirror and the Vamp', *New German Critique*, no. 34, Winter, 1985, pp. 176–93. For a reading of *Exile Shanghai* that highlights the significance of a lesbian, feminist perspective, see Amy Villarejo, 'Archiving the Diaspora: A Lesbian Impression of Ulrike Ottinger's *Exile Shanghai*', *New German Critique*, no. 87, Autumn 2002, pp. 157–91.

10 J. Knight, 'Observing Rituals', *op. cit.*, p. 111; and Roswitha Mueller, 'Telling Wander Tales', <http://www.ulrikeottinger.com/de/tueb-mueller.html> (last accessed on 11 June 2007).

11 See Katie Trumpener, 'Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia in the Mirror of Dorian Gray: Ethnographic Recordings and the Aesthetics of the Market in the Recent Films of Ulrike Ottinger', *New German Critique*, no. 60, Autumn 1993, pp. 77–99; and Kristen Whissel, 'Racialized Spectacle, Exchange Relations, and the Western in *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia*', *Screen*, vol. 37 no. 1, Spring 1996, pp. 41–67.

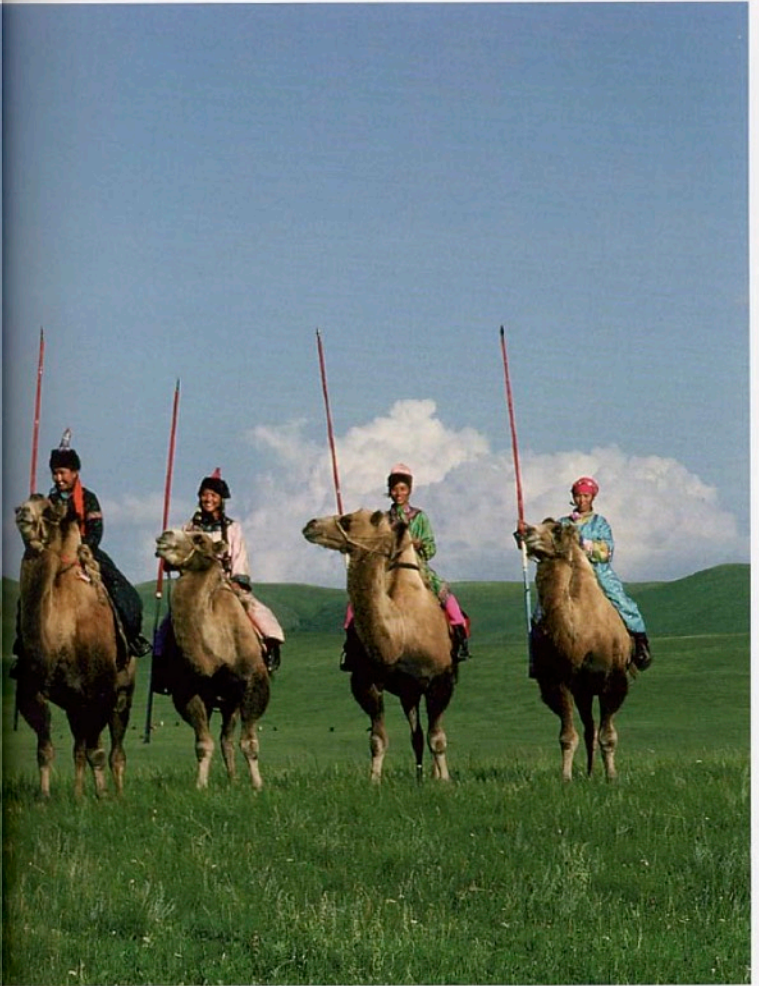
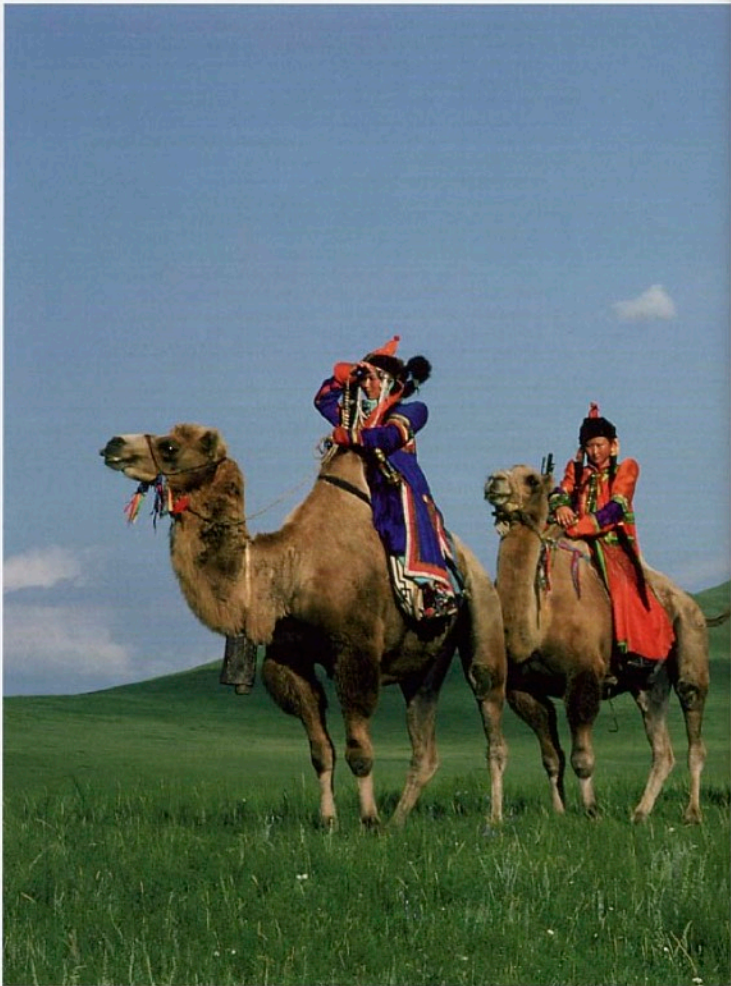
the film's narrative premise by insisting on the Mongolians' complicity and agency in the representation, both at the level of production and within film's diegesis, in a way that could be seen as glossing over what is in fact a one-sided history of Western imperialism. Still, an interpretation of Ottinger's work that considers the relation between the two differing conceptions of the cinematic sign that inform these readings has the potential to reveal under-looked possibilities for thinking about alterity and representation. The key to such a reading is to consider the film's two sections as in dialogue with one another rather than as antitheses.

In the film's prologue, the four main women on the train are introduced one by one in short scenes that highlight their defining characteristics. Lady Windemere (played by Delphine Seyrig), a British ethnographer, throughout the film serves as a translator of both language and custom for the other women. She provides the opening voice-over, spoken as images of trees in a snowy tundra stream past a train window. This segment immediately provides a clue that the film will be about signification. Relating a story of early Chinese travellers and merchants who ventured into Mongolia's 'slumbering wilderness', Lady Windemere says:

With ingenious means they placed signs in the land of the void. An initial attempt to tame the wilderness with the aid of cultivated nature. They made clearings in the coniferous forests in the shape of huge written sign, which they then planted with oaks. The written signs altered their colours with the changing seasons and could be seen from a great distance. The attempt to place a sign in the void, a mark... Here the fears of the travellers whom the wind otherwise carried unchecked across the endless green plains of the taiga were allayed for a moment.

The voice-over neither approves nor criticises the travellers' signifying activity, it only points to its desired purpose. The oak trees symbolically parallel the function of the voice-over: they both are 'signs placed in the void' that are intended to 'allay fears' by indexing co-ordinates for their recipients. The temporal cues in this voice-over – an 'initial' attempt, the alteration of the signs with the 'changing seasons', the final 'for a moment' – indicate that this process is temporary, and does not divide neatly into a 'before' and 'after' of signification. During the voice-over, Ottinger's camera traces a path across the objects in Lady Windemere's car: a blue-and-white porcelain vase, an open trunk filled with clothing, a painting of the Madonna and child, a mask, a doll in antique Chinese military costume. They are likewise signs placed in a void; soon some of these objects will be activated through exchange. The remainder of the voice-over indicates that the train is also a sign intended to ensure against the anxiety of disorientation: a line that can be traced 'as easily as you can travel with your finger across the map'. At this point, Ottinger's camera also traces a line, not through the tundra, but back to where the shot began, with a medium close-up of Lady Windemere seated by the train window. This camera movement suggests that the film will partake of a less linear conception of space and time than does the railway.

The next segments introduce Frau Mueller-Vohwinkel, a German teacher armed with a Baedeker's guide; Fanny Ziegfield (Gillian Scalici), an American Broadway musical actress; and Giovanna, a backpacker travelling second class who represents youth culture. Mueller-Vohwinkel reads from her Baedeker's and sighs, 'I know there are relevant facts behind all this greenness'. There are framed photographs depicting the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway on the wall behind her. Her credit appears printed on a card, as do the others, in this case with a book behind it. It now becomes clear that Frau Mueller-Vohwinkel exemplifies the captioning, explanatory voice of the travel guide and of written language; when she looks out the window, she turns the landscape into an interpretable photograph like those on the wall behind her. Each woman, we now understand, is associated with a specific order of the signifier. The next sequence introduces Fanny Ziegfield: her mode of signification is song. She eats a wafer, noting that some printer's ink has transferred onto it from a newspaper wrapping. Her orality, it seems, is no less a part of the symbolic order than the written word. Giovanna appears next, lying in a berth listening to a walkman. The camera pans by the other patrons in her second-class car: Mongolians in fur caps, Chinese soldiers and women in headscarves. Asian string music plays over a garbled radio signal as the



passengers sing along and livestock neigh in the background. Along with the walkman, this soundtrack identifies Giovanna as a figure of listening and receiving. Together, she and Lady Windemere form the two mutually dependent points of focalisation in the film, one the speaker and the other her diegetic addressee.

Lady Windemere, for her part, is identified with two different semiotic registers: verbal speech, as in her voice-over narration, and the language of objects, as indicated by the camera's panning over the items in her train compartment. She proves fluent

*The Mongolian Princess
Xu De Huar with her
Female Riders, location
photograph from Giovanna
d'Arc of Mongolia, Innes
Mongolia, 1987, w-print,
48.7 x 68.5cm*

in the latter, prompting her companions to offer gifts to the Mongolians when the train is stopped. Giovanna gives up her walkman; Frau Mueller-Vohwinkel later cedes her cutlery set. The Mongolian women appropriate the fork and spoon as aesthetic objects, using them as props in a dance: what was once a tool becomes a symbol. Likewise, when Frau Mueller-Vohwinkel later presses bills of currency onto the wall of a lamanistic temple, the money is taken out of its usual economy and inducted into a different order of value. Such moments can be read in terms of what Gaylyn Studlar calls in her book

In the Realm of Pleasure a 'masochistic aesthetic': a removal of the phallic term as arbiter or general equivalent of meaning that results in a free play of forms and values, unmoored from their usual rubrics.¹² Longfellow suggests that the film as a whole participates in such as aesthetic with its 'refusal of identification with a paternal order'.¹³ The establishment of this signifying cacophony early in the film, with the introductions of the women, primes us to think through its implications during the Mongolia half of the film.

In one scene on the train, the travellers are treated to a cabaret show by the Kalinka Sisters, a Yiddish singing trio who perform World War II-era standards. These cabaret numbers instruct us in how to read the Mongolian performances later on: as neither more nor less authentic cultural artefacts. The Kalinka Sisters' rendition of '*Bei Mir Bist Du Schön*' recalls the Andrews Sisters and references the film's own assortment of languages; tenor Mickey Katz's rendition of 'Toot, Toot, Tootsie Goodbye' refers to Al Jolson's performance in *The Jazz Singer* (1927) and all its concomitant historical and political associations (as well as his namesake's membership in Spike Jones's band). We are meant to understand that the Mongolian epopees and dances have undergone analogous displacements and layerings of meaning, and that they are just as semiotically rich. In turn, the sincerity of Ottinger's camera encourages us to read the cabaret performances as more than pastiche or ironic citation. They have as much ontological and phenomenological weight as the Mongolian songs. We are meant to see each set of performances as neither fully ironic nor fully in earnest, as neither pure pastiche nor pure ethnography.

A similar effect is achieved with Mickey Katz's lavishly aestheticised Zakuska supper, a scene that forms a counterpart to a feast scene in the film's second half that begins with the slaughter of a sheep. The epic similes of Katz's monologue – 'a rosebud wreath of turnips, a silver necklace of miniature onions, butter-lilies on a shimmering black pond of bread, iridescent peacock's tails of leek stems encircling the white, shining tundra' – analogise the meal to ornament, landscape and the work of art. When the food finally appears, its centrepiece is a large taxidermy swan, surrounded by a mosaic of snacks. The sheep-slaughter scene likewise depicts the ritualised display of animal bodies, accompanied by lyrical expression, in this case singing. The two scenes are filmed quite differently: Katz's dinner sequence is shot in medium close-up, inter-cut with reverse shots of the waiter, whereas the Mongolian scene is filmed using a static long shot, with a few cuts to medium close-ups from the same angle. However, these differences are what allow the analogy its full force. The earlier scene instructs us in how the later one is to be read: not as raw, uncivilised barbarism, but as an equally codified activity. In turn, and as importantly, the slaughter scene retroactively informs its predecessor, reasserting the materiality of flesh and land. The 'white, shining tundra' of Katz's monologue is neither strictly linguistic fiction nor strictly material fact. Like the sign always already placed in the verdant expanse, it is both.

With its layering of fact and fiction, its casting of non-professional actors and its fusion of formal artifice with documentary naturalism, *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia* could be seen, from a certain angle, to follow in the footsteps of Gillo Pontecorvo's 1966 film *The Battle of Algiers*. In a move that corresponds to Gilles Deleuze's prescription for a new political cinema – 'the storytelling of a people to come' – it puts fiction in the mouths of found subjects.¹⁴ This technique has been revived in recent films such as Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000), a film that asks its participants to engage in a game of exquisite corpse, and Claudia Llosa's *Madeinusa* (2006), a film that shares *Johanna*'s fairytale-like enunciation and feminist concerns. A final binary opposition that such films deconstruct is that between fantasy and reality. These terms do not map neatly, à la *Wizard of Oz*, onto the two halves and regions of *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia*. If the space of the train is fantastic and virtualised, then so too is the real-world space of the Gobi desert. And if the space of the Mongolia steppe has phenomenological gravity, then so too does the railway. Ottinger's insistence on this chiasmus makes *Johanna* less a way station on the road from fiction to documentary than a circuit for their endless interchange.

12 Gaylyn Studlar, *In the Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

13 B. Longfellow, 'Lesbian Phantasy', *op. cit.*, p. 134.

14 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, p. 223.

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Roberta Smith, “Art in Review; Ulrike Ottinger”, The New York Times, July 7, 2000.

The New York Times

ART IN REVIEW; Ulrike Ottinger

By **ROBERTA SMITH**

July 7, 2000

David Zwirner Gallery

43 Greene Street, SoHo

Through next Friday

Goethe Institute of New York

1014 Fifth Avenue, near 82nd Street

Through July 21

For those unfamiliar with the three-decade career of the photographer, writer and underground German filmmaker Ulrike Ottinger, these two exhibitions make a memorable introduction to her strange and various sensibility, which ranges effortlessly and extravagantly between ethnographic documentary and Surrealist feminist fantasy, sometimes within the same film.

At the Goethe Institute, the artist's photographs from "Taiga," her 1992 film (and 1993 book) about the disappearing world of the Shaman and Tuvan peoples of the Taiga region of northern Mongolia, feature majestic landscapes, pristine white yurts and the inhabitants, who ride both horses and tamed reindeer.

At Zwirner, stills from Ms. Ottinger's loosely plotted feature films line the walls, revealing a penchant for over-the-top spectacle and campy melodrama that has been likened to that of Fellini and Bunuel, but is distinguished by its relentlessly Baroque sumptuousness and high-spirited feminism.

For American viewers, a suite of photographs from "Ticket of No Return" (1979), showing a well-dressed alcoholic played by Tabea Blumenshein, an Ottinger regular, will bring to mind Cindy Sherman. The scenes from "Madame X -- An Absolute Ruler" (1977) and "Johanna D'Arc of Mongolia" (1988) may evoke Matthew Barney. The most riveting images are several from "Dorian Gray in the Mirror of the Yellow Press" (1984), which frame elaborately costumed actors within an ornately painted proscenium arch set in rugged terrain.

Most disturbing are those from Ms. Ottinger's rarely seen 1981 cult classic "Freak Orlando" (which will be screened tonight at 7 at Anthology Film Archives in the East Village). Wildly sensational in the use of dwarfs, Siamese twins, a two-headed pig and a limbless woman, these images attest to a vision as transgressive and perverse as it is celebratory and inclusive. ROBERTA SMITH