

Animal Magic: Shape-Shifting Bodies in Lotte Reiniger's *Die Abenteuer des Prinzen Achmed*

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Lotte Reiniger, the German silhouette animator and maker of the feature film *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1926), has long been held in esteem as a key figure of cinema history. *Achmed* takes elements of different tales from the *Thousand and One Nights* and constructs a complex and composite tale of Prince Achmed who is tricked by a scheming magician into flying away on a flying horse. In the course of his adventures he falls in love with the fairy Pari Banu, whom he must rescue from her demon guards on the islands of Wak-Wak. The magician meanwhile sells Pari Banu into slavery as well as seeking to capture Achmed's sister, Princess Dinarzade. Dinarzade's true love is the humble tailor Aladdin, who is transformed into a plausible suitor by the genie of a magic lamp. When the magician spirits Dinarzade away from Aladdin, and Pari Banu is taken by the demons of Wak-Wak, Aladdin and Achmed must join forces and use the magic lamp to win back their brides, though in order to defeat magician, demons and sundry monsters, they need the help of a powerful witch whose antagonism towards the magician persuades her to help the young men. *Achmed* was released eleven years before Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) to great acclaim and is almost certainly the earliest extant animated feature film. Reiniger thus has an unassailable place in global cinema history. Such esteem and admiration notwithstanding, a certain scholarly neglect is evident, in that animation histories and academic work on German cinema have often noted her achievements without engaging closely with her work.¹ The difficulty of the academy appears to be the study of a film-maker whose work is marked by a series of curious paradoxes and has consequently been difficult to locate in scholarly narratives of

¹ See Donald Crafton, *Before Mickey: The Animated Film 1898-1928*, Chicago: U Chicago P, 1993; Paul Wells, *Understanding Animation*, London: Routledge, 1998; and Esther Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde*, London: Verso, 2002, all of which discuss her briefly within the scope of their respective wider surveys and discussions. There are a number of biographical and introductory texts such as Alfred Happ, *Lotte Reiniger 1899-1981: Schöpferin einer neuen Silhouettenkunst*, Tübingen: Kulturamt, 2004; Megan Ratner, 'In the Shadows', *Art on Paper*, January/February 2006, 44-49; William Moritz, 'Lotte Reiniger', *Animation World Magazine*, 1/3 (1996), <http://www.awn.com/mag/issue1.3/articles/moritz.3.html> (accessed 1 August 2013) and Eric Walter White, *Walking Shadows: An Essay on Lotte Reiniger's Silhouette Films*, London: Hogarth Press, 1931. A more sustained reception is now emerging with chapters such as Christiane Schönfeld, 'Lotte Reiniger and the Art of Animation', in *Practicing Modernity: Female Creativity in the Weimar Republic*, edited by Christiane Schönfeld, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2006, pp. 171-90. Jack Zipes and Marina Warner both include short discussions of her work in their recent books: Zipes, *The Enchanted Screen: The Unknown History of Fairy Tale Films*, New York: Routledge, 2011, esp. pp. 73-75 and 83-86; and Warner, *Stranger Magic: Charmed States and the Arabian Nights*, London: Chatto & Windus, 2011, pp. 390-404.

cinema, especially in studies of German cinema which have been dominated by chronologies and historical approaches.² Reiniger's animations seem somehow out of their time, emerging after the main flowering of the German cinema's Expressionist period, and yet indebted to Expressionism in their engagement with magic, not to mention their dependence on shadows for the very form of their narrative depiction. It is nevertheless hard to see her work in quite the same way as the gloomy Gothic chill of the Expressionist cinema of the early 1920s. Her feature film both emerging later and not immediately resembling other Expressionist films, it was not discussed in some of the most important scholarly works on Weimar Expressionist cinema.³ Siegfried Kracauer barely mentions her in *From Caligari to Hitler*, and indeed makes a brief remark which it is impossible not to read as a gendered dismissal of her work as merely craft rather than art: 'in a tiny realm of her own, Lotte Reiniger swung her scissors diligently, preparing one sweet silhouette film after another.'⁴ Kracauer's implied complaint that Reiniger's work is irrelevant to the Weimar period is echoed by her collaborator Walter Ruttmann who asked her 'What has this to do with 1923?'⁵ Her cinema is thus at risk of scholarly neglect in part because of its lack of overt political relevance to the Weimar Republic.

Furthermore, Reiniger's mode of working, with few collaborators in an atelier that had been the garden summerhouse of her patron, Louis Hagen, was far removed from the modern industrial methods practised in the great innovative studios of the Weimar film industry. Reiniger's animation is a fusion of the ancient art of shadow theatre and the cinema, and she was unswerving in her desire to make films for children based on fairy tale, fable, and children's literature. Her artist peers and collaborators, such as Walter Ruttmann, Berthold Bartosch and Oskar Fischinger, were modernist artists working in the medium of film, rather than the feature film-makers of the Weimar film industry, or indeed the animators of fable and folk tale that later worked for companies like Disney or Warner Brothers. Ruttmann, Fischinger and Bartosch worked within an avant-garde, modernist field, exploring shape, rhythm and movement in their animations, frequently without any narrative dimension, let alone one deriving from folk or fairy tales which are cherished as archetypal tales, and which through their evocation of an ancient oral tradition offer us 'the most vital connection we have with the imaginations of the ordinary men and women whose labour created our world'.⁶

² For a discussion of the difficulties of the academy in developing a sustained reception of Reiniger's cinema, see Palfreyman, 'Life and Death in the Shadows: Lotte Reiniger's *Die Abenteuer des Prinzen Achmed*', *German Life and Letters*, 64/1, 2011, 6-18.

³ Reiniger is not discussed at all in Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen*, trans. Roger Greaves, London: Thames & Hudson, 1969 (first published 1952 as *L'Ecran Démoniaque*) or Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary*, London: Routledge, 2000.

⁴ Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1947, p. 128.

⁵ Reiniger, 'The Adventures of Prince Achmed, or What May Happen to Somebody Trying to Make a Full Length Cartoon in 1926', *The Silent Picture*, 8, 1970, 2-4 (p. 3).

⁶ Angela Carter, Introduction to *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, London: Virago, 1990, p. ix. See also Jack Zipes's discussion of current research on the origin of folk tales which suggests that they

Reiniger, by contrast, is seemingly as far from the abstract moving lines and shapes of Ruttmann and Fischinger as it is possible to be. She not only presents unabashed stories – princes, princesses, happy endings and all – but she also pays close attention to figuration with especial care and attention lavished on the many animal as well as human bodies which populate her tales. Reiniger spent a great deal of time at Berlin Zoo observing the animals, the better to create accurate (or perhaps truthful) silhouettes for her films.⁷ In many respects it seems odd or even absurd to describe her silhouette animations as realist, as the tradition of shadow theatres and silhouette art is fundamentally anti-illusionist. Yet there can be no doubt as to the realist origin of her paper cuts and the hours spent watching and sketching are plain to see in her stylized but anatomically grounded figures. Her figuration, which flickers between a realist and anti-realist mode, is just one of the aspects of her film-making which challenge categorization and demand critical attention, even as they present certain difficulties of analysis.

Reiniger's animation is derived from a shadow theatre tradition popular in China, Indonesia, and Turkey, spreading to Europe (particularly France and Italy) in modified form in the eighteenth century. The figures used in shadow theatre performances, especially those of the Chinese and Indonesian Wayang tradition, are highly decorated and ornamented, with a meticulous construction which has seen them elevated to the status of works of art in themselves. Reiniger comments that a number of shadow theatre puppets are exhibited in major museums all over the world.⁸ Although this theatrical technique might be considered a folk art, the sophistication of the plays and performances as well as the skill of the shadow players in handling their silhouette puppets left a very deep impression on Reiniger whose cinema develops out of a sincere and sustained engagement with the global history of shadow theatres. She comments on the religious character of performances, especially in the Wayang tradition of Indonesia, which are based on recitations of the Ramayana or Mahabharata by a highly revered Dalang.⁹ Reiniger is thus quite aware of the mystical significance of shadow theatre as she develops it into her signature animated cinema based on silhouettes and light. She notes particularly that both the Chinese and Turkish shadow theatre tradition have mythical tales explaining how the art form originates in a desire to resurrect in some way, or perpetuate the existence of, a beloved departed person. A ghost or shade is brought to life in the form of a shadow puppet.¹⁰ The Eastern tradition of shadow theatre thus emerges from an attempt to negotiate between the apparent opposites of life and death and, as I shall argue, Reiniger's engagement with such an important traditional Eastern culture is a key part of her aesthetic of the in-between, fluid 'becoming' and metamorphosis in *Achmed*.

emerge with speech itself. Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale: The Cultural and Social History of a Genre*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 2012, pp. 1-20 (p. 2).

⁷ Lotte Reiniger, *Shadow Theatres and Shadow Films*, London: Batsford, 1970, pp. 99-102.

⁸ Reiniger, *Shadow Theatres and Shadow Films*, p. 25.

⁹ Reiniger, *Shadow Theatres and Shadow Films*, pp. 21-25.

¹⁰ Reiniger, *Shadow Theatres and Shadow Films*, pp. 15-16 and 26-27.

Quite regardless of the conceptual challenge of Reiniger's figuration, audiences take an instinctive delight in the dramatic representations of animal bodies and shape-shifting, as in the dynamic sequence in *Achmed* when the witch and the sorcerer duel by transforming themselves into a dazzling sequence of animal creatures.¹¹ The graceful fluidity of metamorphosing animal bodies represents one of the key areas in which Reiniger unites the humble and simple with the conceptual and sophisticated. Her representation of animal bodies and transformative bodily experience in her films points the way to an academic engagement with her work which illuminates both Reiniger's cinematic practice as well as the viewer's pleasure in Reiniger's animal bodies.

In many ways, Reiniger is profoundly unreflective about her own cinematic achievements. Throughout her career she retains an instinctive attitude to story-telling, a childlike love of magical tales, and an intense focus on her *practical* engagement with the techniques of animation. Jean Renoir's comment that Reiniger was 'born with magic hands' is telling in its emphasis on instinctive brilliance and technical artistry.¹² In answer to Ruttman's question concerning what *Achmed* might have to do with 1923, Reiniger answered 'Nothing [...] but that I am alive now and I want to do it as I have the chance'.¹³ And yet in her pioneering technique, her desire to represent in animated form what could not be represented in the live action cinema of her day, Reiniger does create a cinema which offers a conceptual engagement with space, flatness, depth and the periphery of subjectivity. I would argue, too, that *Achmed* can even be read as presenting an implicit political challenge in its implacable refusal to present bodies as fixed entities or to separate the human from the rest of the (super)natural world. Metamorphosing (animal) bodies are Reiniger's bread and butter: 'becoming', desire ('I want to do it') and even bodily immanence (hinted at in her reply 'I am alive now') are fundamental to her art.

¹¹ Internet reviewers write warmly of their delight at discovering Reiniger's film. They repeatedly praise the beauty, intricacy, and delicacy of the animation, and frequently express surprise that such a technically accomplished film should have been made in the 1920s. See for example reviews from Amazon purchasers at http://www.amazon.co.uk/product-reviews/B00005LIQ7/ref=dp_top_cm_cr_acr_txt?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=1 (UK), http://www.amazon.com/Adventures-Prince-Achmed-Carl-Koch/product-reviews/B0000714B2/ref=dp_top_cm_cr_acr_txt?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=1 (USA), and http://www.amazon.de/product-reviews/3898487504/ref=dp_top_cm_cr_acr_txt?ie=UTF8&showViewpoints=1 (Germany; all accessed 11 September 2013). All 42 reviewers in the US, UK and Germany rated the film as 4* or 5*. See also user reviews on the Internet Movie Database, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0015532/reviews?ref_=tt_ov_rt (accessed 11 September 2013) which express similar sentiments and ratings. Reports of the reception on the film's release also speak of a packed-out and enthralled house in the Berlin premiere and months of successful release globally – once distributors had overcome their reticence in showing a feature-length animation which was at that time unheard of. See the Milestone and BFI press kit for their restoration release, especially 'Reception', <http://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/0150/7896/files/PrinceAchmedPK.pdf?1009> accessed 11 September 2013.

¹² Milestone and BFI press kit for restoration release, accessed 11 September 2013. Available at <http://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/0150/7896/files/PrinceAchmedPK.pdf?1009>.

¹³ Reiniger, 'The Adventures of Prince Achmed, or What May Happen to Somebody Trying to Make a Full Length Cartoon in 1926', p. 3.

In this chapter I argue that reading Reiniger with Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of 'becoming', and 'becoming-animal' and Rosi Braidotti's feminist reading of their *A Thousand Plateaus* reveals that Reiniger's fairy tale exploration of human and animal bodies is grounded in an instinctive affinity with philosophical notions of transformation and becoming.¹⁴ Deleuze and Guattari oppose classical discourses of Western metaphysics in which there persists a notion of fixed identity – the subject as one entity, coinciding with consciousness and reason.¹⁵ Nor do they merely seek to overturn or unsettle a binary opposition of self and other; sameness and otherness are uncoupled from a dialectical relation:

Sameness/Difference are not two sides of the same coin, but rather two incommensurable and highly specific modes of being. [...] the subject is a complex, heterogeneous, non-unitary entity and [...] accordingly the Other is not a simulacrum [...] The Other is a matrix of becoming in his or her own right and it generates a new kind of entity on which the same actually depends for their own self-definition. What matters is what occurs in the in-between spaces, the intervals, the transitions between their respective differences.¹⁶

For Deleuze and Guattari's thought, 'becoming' is a 'persistent challenge and an opposition to molar [as opposed to molecular], steady identities: it functions on an anti-Hegelian, anti-developmental, anti-teleological model'.¹⁷ I argue that Reiniger uses the possibilities of animation, and of Eastern shadow theatre silhouette animation in particular, to celebrate the notion of the transforming body, the 'becoming', the '*potentia*', and indeed the immanence of human and animal bodies. While I do not wish to construct a reading of Reiniger's cinema which ties it closely to a political project implied by Deleuze and Guattari's critique of psychoanalysis in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, I would argue that Kracauer's (and Ruttmann's) narrower understanding of political and historical relevance can usefully be expanded in Reiniger's case to consider the powerful implications of her animation as a conceptual cinema of becoming with particular focus on the animal body.

Animated Animals

The representation of animal characters is a significant preoccupation of the animated cinema. In animated film, animals can be effortlessly placed on the same narrative plane as human characters, and so it is an especially appropriate medium for folk tales and fables in which animal characters abound, operating as anthropomorphized actors,

¹⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans Brian Massumi, London: Continuum, 2004, pp. 256-341 (first published in 1980 as *Mille Plateaux*, vol 2 of *Capitalisme et Schizophrénie*). Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*, Cambridge: Polity, 2002.

¹⁵ Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, pp. 70-71.

¹⁶ Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, p. 72.

¹⁷ Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, p. 119.

and challenging notions of a separation between human and beast. As Paul Wells comments:

The animated animal fits within a paradigm of bestial ambivalence, informed by the particular oscillations and cycles by which the elision of human and animal works within animated film and the varying competing scenarios within the naturalcultural divide; [animals function] [...] as a symbolic paradigm to evaluate, and as supernormal stimuli by which to access a deeper, more primal mode of lost knowledge and experience.¹⁸

Furthermore, since its inception animation has been able to convey metamorphoses and transformations with relative ease compared to live action cinema. Indeed metamorphosis might be seen as fundamental to animation; the process of animation itself can be used to change one image into another without using editing, thus constructing ‘a fluid *abstract* stage between the fixed properties of images before and after transition’, as well as ‘[legitimising] the process of connecting apparently unrelated images, forging original relationships between lines, objects etc., and disrupting established notions of classical story-telling.’¹⁹

Reiniger’s fascination with fairy tales goes hand in hand with her joyful representations of animal characters. Her films are rich with dynamic interactions between humans and other animals, whether real or imaginary creatures. Indeed, the precise representation of both naturalistic and magical creatures is a clear example of the ways in which she challenges notions of realism in her animation. Certainly the placement of human and other animal bodies on the same plane as each other is something that Reiniger shares with all kinds of animated films, from the cel animation of the Walt Disney studio to Ladislav Starewicz’s puppet insects and animals which can slide from comfortably anthropomorphized to suddenly and uncannily bestial.²⁰ However, what sets her apart from other animators who also explore the relationship of the human and animal body is her conceptual challenge to representation – her concentration on shape which yet reveals a three-dimensional texture and embodiedness. This exaggerates the interplay between solidity and flatness that exists in other animations by using the outline only; her representation of profiles in transformation and the outer shapes of bodies celebrates both embodiedness and a kind of liberation from the fixed and discrete body. The subject is thus shown to be in a state of perpetual metamorphosis and thoroughly immersed in what Rosi Braidotti refers to as ‘a network of non-human (animal, vegetable, viral) relations’.²¹

¹⁸ Wells, *The Animated Bestiary: Animals, Cartoons, and Culture*, New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2009, p. 93.

¹⁹ See Wells, *Understanding Animation*, pp. 69-76; quotations from p. 69, Wells’s emphasis.

²⁰ Wells, *Understanding Animation*, p. 62.

²¹ Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, p. 122.

Monsters, Bedbugs and Machine-Animals

Reiniger's keen engagement with animal bodies in states of becoming – becoming-animal, or becoming-imperceptible, in Deleuze and Guattari's formulation – is in evidence throughout *Achmed*, which positively throngs with monsters, demons, embodied spirits and machine-animals. Deploying the knowledge and understanding of real animals' bodies gained from her zoo research, Reiniger presents an array of fantastical creatures in various states of hybrid becoming. Thus grounded in her animal observations, the creatures are credible bodies at the same time as they exist across an extreme network of transitions between mammal, reptile, insect, machine, and becoming-imperceptible spirits. Indeed the tension between realism, the fantastic, and the anti-illusionist silhouette technique is laid bare in Reiniger's own guide to the animation of animal bodies written in plain terms for the (young) would-be silhouette animator. Reiniger freely admits that animating an animal body is a challenge that requires 'much study' to 'grasp the rhythm of his motion, register it in your mind and get the feel of it.' Writing of her own efforts to understand animal bodies, Reiniger evokes a comical image of herself as a kind of silhouette 'method' animator:

I remember well, when I was studying at the zoo, how people looked at me astounded when I tried to imitate the animal's movements in front of the cage, trying to memorise its timing, and how my husband burst out laughing when he discovered me crawling on all fours on the floor at home, to get the feeling of the animal's movement into my own bones.²²

Her sincere and fervent delight in this particular effort at becoming-animal – perhaps prowling, crawling, pouncing or taking to the wing at the zoo – undercuts the faint absurdity of the scene. Far from being a necessary but tiresome or embarrassing step on the road to proficient animation, Reiniger declares that such study 'has always been one of the most rewarding experiences in my profession. The richness of discoveries is overwhelming.' Books and photographs do not suffice for this experience of becoming-animal; the observer must take to the streets and the parks to experience 'an unexpected enlargement of understanding' along the way to animating not a copy of a naturalistic movement, but one which involves a process of feeling animal movement 'within yourself, for when you will have to animate an animal you must be that animal, moving as it does'.²³ Reiniger's emphasis on an empathetic infusion of the animal into her very bones as she animates, or brings into life, the animal characters of her film demonstrates a commitment to seeking a kind of bodily immanence which is, as Braidotti puts it, 'open-ended, interrelational and trans-species', '[exploding] the boundaries of humanism at skin level' as she migrates into animal models, allowing the animal into her own body and becoming the animal silhouettes of her film.²⁴ What is more, such a metamorphosing body is rewarded with an expanded sense of

²² Reiniger, *Shadow Theatres and Shadow Films*, pp. 100-01.

²³ Reiniger, *Shadow Theatres and Shadow Films*, pp. 101-02.

²⁴ Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, p. 124.

understanding of nature and, it is implied, of the self. Reiniger's own highly practical account of her animation thus demonstrates her instinctive affinity with adventurous modes of becoming that challenge notions of fixed human identity.

Achmed's adventure begins with the flying horse presented by the sorcerer to trick the Caliph into parting with his daughter Dinarzade, an element of Reiniger's screenplay taken from 'The Story of the Enchanted Horse' in the *Arabian Nights*.²⁵ The flying horse is itself a hybrid of magic and machine. Clearly in both literary and filmic tale the horse requires magic to fly, but is at the same time a machine: there are levers, or pegs for the rider to control the flight, and the rider him/herself does not need to have magical powers in order to operate the machine. Thus the machine-horse seems more like an invention than a magical creation. Another hybrid creature of magic, the fairy Pari Banu, can also fly but apparently only with the aid of her feathered bird costume which is extravagantly winged. Thus, her state of 'becoming-bird' is also unstably located between magic and a technological advantage: it is unclear whether such a costume would enable anyone to fly, or whether it is a magic feathered dress, or whether Pari Banu's own magic means putting on the feathered costume transforms her into a bird. In the case of the machine-horse, Achmed can fly it without magic, though training certainly is required: the dangerous escapade which first brings him to Pari Banu's realm is a flight which he is tricked into making without knowledge of how to make the machine-horse descend. In the film, the lever for descent is placed at the horse's rear end and concealed at the tail (in some sequences this lever appears very obvious, and in others it is not visible at all). In the earlier written story, though Prince Firouz Shah is also tricked into flying off without knowing how to descend, the peg is rather more obvious on the right hand side of the horse's neck, symmetrically placed as if by a more benign designer opposite the peg required for take-off.²⁶ Achmed is thus at a greater disadvantage than Firouz Shah, and his ascent accordingly takes him beyond the sky as such and into space.

For Braidotti, the cyborg hybridities of machines and animal bodies are significant sites of becoming, especially when the animals in question are insects, which in their radical otherness are paradigmatic hybrids of the organic and the machine. Braidotti traces links between woman, insect and technology in science fiction to argue that 'becoming-woman/insect' is specifically gendered in ways that Deleuze does not account for.²⁷ In the case of the machine-horse, Reiniger brushes very lightly against a science fiction genre (with which her 1920s audience would have been familiar) in her fairy tale film; the machine-animal and a hint of space travel briefly assert the role of

²⁵ *Arabian Nights' Entertainments*, edited with an introduction by Robert L. Mack, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995, pp. 796-820. On Reiniger's narrative structure and her *Arabian Nights* sources, see Zipes, *The Enchanted Screen*, p. 84 and Warner, *Stranger Magic*, pp. 393-94.

²⁶ *Arabian Nights' Entertainments*, p. 801.

²⁷ Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, pp. 148-60. See also Elizabeth Grosz's exploration of animal sexuality which focuses in particular on the praying mantis and connections between insect sexuality and a female sexuality construed as monstrous. 'Animal Sex: Libido as Desire and Death', in *Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism*, edited by Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn, London: Routledge, 1995, pp. 278-299 (p. 284).

the machine in her otherwise animal-dominated tale. Faintly robotic microorganisms with insect characteristics, monsters in miniature, however, are of crucial importance to her exploration of ‘becoming-animal’.

Alongside the machine-animal which transports Achmed out into space and on into the realm of spirits and fairies in feather dresses are a procession of unidentifiable creatures which challenge animal boundaries and are part of the human characters’ experience of becoming-animal. Demons and monsters are especially associated with the witch’s fire mountain and the spirit realm of Wak-Wak where monstrous demons attempt to entrap the feathered fairy Pari Banu. The witch dwells in the cave of a fire-mountain, a volcanic inner space, which is poised between inside and outside, prone to instability and eruptions of matter which itself is somewhere between liquid and solid. She herself has a rather animal form with a humanoid, fleshy body with a hairy surface taken to the point of being fringed. Her companions resemble little furry bedbugs or hugely magnified germs: glorious creatures engaged in an elastic becoming from the insect to the bacterial to the furry cuddliness of the mammal.



Fig. 1 The witch and her friendly demon pack. DVD capture.

Reminiscent of the grotesque creatures carved in Romanesque churches, which, as Michael Camille points out, ‘celebrate the flux of “becoming” rather than “being”’,²⁸ her companions appear to represent an entire menagerie of different animals combined to result in a kind of collision of animal characteristics – there are beautiful birds with the faces of dogs/wolves, froglike furry beasts with hippo-ish faces, a hairy snake with a beak, a kind of little monkey with antlers which combs the witch’s hair, a furry,

²⁸ Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art*, London: Reaktion, 1992, p. 9.

faintly spider-like many-legged creature with a bird's head, and furry flying fish with fins and crab claws.²⁹

As they fly, swim and scuttle around the inner volcano these beasts embody a freedom to cross species boundaries and do not appear constrained by their bodies, for their bodies are not one, but are already many, multiple, something that is fundamental to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of becoming-animal:

A becoming-animal always involves a pack, a band, a population, a peopling, in short, a multiplicity [...] what interests us are modes of expansion, propagation, occupation, contagion, peopling. I am legion. The Wolf-Man fascinated by several wolves watching him. What would a lone wolf be? Or a whale, a louse, a rat, a fly? [...] We do not wish to say that certain animals live in packs. [...] What we are saying is that every animal is fundamentally a band, a pack. [...] We do not become animal without a fascination for the pack, for multiplicity.³⁰

The witch's creatures are all in every sense a multiplicity. They are legion and contagion, bacterial and animal, and every aspect of their bodies demonstrates their multiplicity. They might be seen as part of the witch's body, perhaps, friendly parasites; or she might be part of the menagerie, part of the multiplicity they evince with their mythically hybrid bodies. In addition, Reiniger's conception and execution of these figures is marked by a tension between what is observable in the zoological garden, and a fantastical chimera. Indeed, these are creatures influenced by what might be seen (or imagined) through a microscope slide – they are bacterial, viral, perhaps molecular in some senses, and as such they become a multiplicity by a kind of epidemic or contagion; they imply reproduction by infection rather than by a genetic filiation.³¹ Reiniger's creatures are akin to Deleuze and Guattari's 'interkingdoms, unnatural participations':

This is a far cry from filiative production or hereditary reproduction, in which the only differences retained are a simple duality between sexes within the same species, and small modifications across generations [...] We know that many beings pass between a man and a woman; they come from different worlds, are borne on the wind, form rhizomes around roots; they cannot be

²⁹ In her discussion of gargoyles and grotesque creatures carved on misericords, Janetta Rebold Benton argues that composite and fantastic animals represent an expression of licence and individuality on the part of sculptors; an opportunity for artists to cross boundaries and depart from the tight control of Church commissions in marginal and somewhat hidden areas. Benton, 'Gargoyles: Animal Imagery and Artistic Individuality in Medieval Art', in *Animals in the Middle Ages*, edited by Nona C. Flores, New York: Routledge, 2000, pp. 147-65 (pp. 162-63). A further possible explanation for the presence of unnatural composite creatures in medieval churches is that they allude to pagan deities which the Church could not erase and which it tolerated alongside Christian iconography, Ronald Sheridan and Anne Ross, *Grotesques and Gargoyles: Paganism in the Medieval Church*, Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975, p. 8.

³⁰ Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 264.

³¹ Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 266.

understood in terms of production, only in terms of becoming. The Universe does not function by filiation. All we are saying is that animals are packs, and that packs form, develop, and are transformed by contagion.³²

The friendly pack in the witch's interkingdom of the volcano is set against a pack of demons and monsters that must be conquered in order to rescue the bird-fairy Pari Banu and Aladdin's bride Dinarzarde. The demons of Wak-Wak are similarly unfettered by species boundaries. Some of this multiplicity are like furry bats with vulture heads and eagle claws, but there are also many four-legged creatures, some with wings as well, with a variety of different heads – heads based on crocodiles, bulls, jackals, and then some that loosely resemble birds, dogs, or dinosaurs like the triceratops. Another part of the pack is eight-legged with monstrous dog/wolf-like heads. These creatures erupt from a dark cavity to overwhelm Aladdin with a multiplicity of becoming reminiscent of cellular contamination or biological processes of infection.

Such a striking opposition of dark and light creatures might point to an Expressionist sense of fear and revulsion, a dark threat of monstrous others which, unchecked, will engulf a feeble self (Aladdin, for example, manages only to conjure weak pulses of light from the magic lamp as a defence against the wave of demon-beasts). In Reiniger's animation, however, the demons of Wak-Wak and the witch's own menagerie of magical creatures are rather similar creatures – grotesque composites, each with a grinning delight in the spirit battle as a dynamic and exhilarating arena in which the glorious potential of body and spirit is explored.



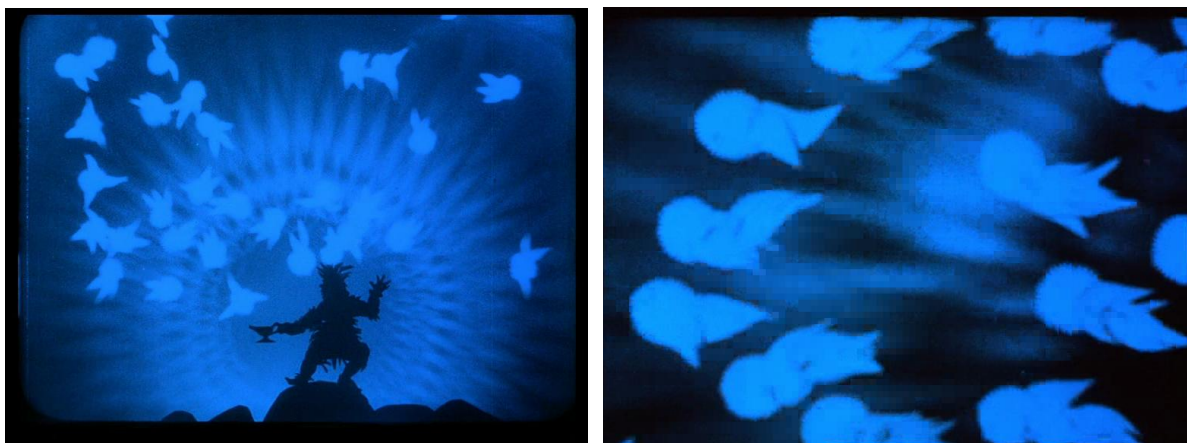
Fig. 2 Aladdin is overwhelmed by an eruption of demons. DVD capture.

³² Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 267.



Fig. 3 The demons of Wak-Wak menace the bird-fairy Pari Banu. DVD capture.

The witch herself with her fringed body rather resembles the larger demon she engages in a personal struggle for the lamp. And even during the battle of dark animal demons and light creatures emanating from the lamp, the nature of the struggle is one in which power comes from getting in amongst the other side, though during the scenes of battle it is sometimes difficult to discern which side has the upper hand. Energy comes from hybridity, from multiplicity, from the seething mass which becomes a moving body like an autumn starling murmuration – an uncanny but at the same time entrancing and beautiful spectacle. While Aladdin cannot quite orchestrate the magical eruption required (he seems to be firing blanks), the more potent witch brings forth ‘Scharen’, as the intertitle puts it, ‘hosts’ of white-light benign spirits which sometimes appear like fish, sometimes like doves or butterflies, and sometimes even like sperm or other microorganisms moving fast in amongst the dark demonic pack.



Figs 4 & 5 The witch brings forth legions of benign spirits from the lamp. DVD capture.

Their fight sees them intermeshed like antibodies and a rampant infection; certainly at this point they seem more microorganism than animal. They eventually become a blurred background to Achmed's fight against the shaggy hydra, perhaps a 'becoming-imperceptible' as they cross to a farther plane of Reiniger's shadow theatre world.

Even the two spectacular individual monsters are not truly one but are legion in their becoming-state. The many-headed hydra monster which takes Pari Banu at the end of the spirit battle is not only a multiplicity to begin with, with many limbs and heads, but grows two more heads for every one that Achmed cuts off, until the witch arrives with the lamp to overcome the regenerative and multiplying capacity of the monster. And as Achmed first encounters Aladdin, he is being attacked by a monster he had mistaken for a tree. Its furry limbs-branches were covered by foliage and fruit which Aladdin had attempted to pick, in the process awakening the monster which transforms from vegetable to animal monstrosity as it shakes off the false skin of twigs, leaves and bananas and gathers its animal body to attack. Again, this creature is a composite, poised as a hybrid between many animal bodies. It recalls an elephant or perhaps a mammoth, as it is furry. The creature has horns, large erect ears, a slightly forked trunk, big clawed yeti-like monstrous feet, and large, gleeful eyes. The elephant is in itself a category of creature that challenges boundaries between the mammalian and the reptilian: part of an obsolete taxonomic order of mammals, the pachyderms, it has huge bulk, tough leathery skin and an alien appearance, while at the same time apparently evincing emotions and responses associated with humans, especially a (mythical and actual) capacity for memory, mourning and grief.³³ The monster thus not only crosses species boundaries, but the animal to which it bears closest resemblance is both other and at the same time an apparently close cousin to humans.



Fig. 6 *Becoming vegetable. DVD capture.*

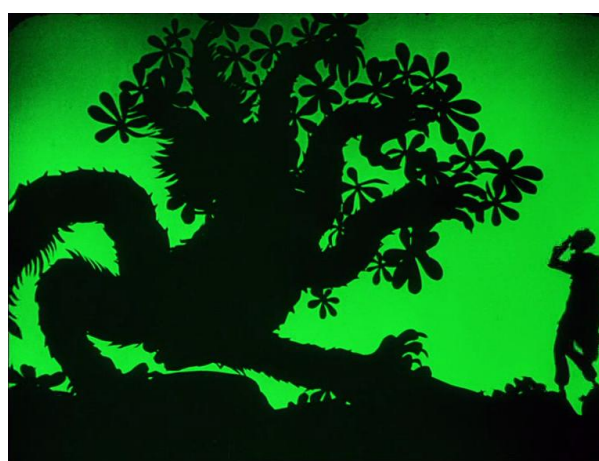


Fig. 7 *Becoming pachyderm. DVD capture.*

³³ On memory in elephants, see Karen McComb et al., 'Matriarchs act as repositories of social knowledge in African elephants', *Science*, 292, 2001, 491-94. On mourning rituals and behaviour related to death, see Karen McComb, Lucy Baker and Cynthia Moss, 'African elephants show high levels of interest in the skulls and ivory of their own species', *Biology Letters*, 2006, 2 (1), 26-28.

Reiniger's mode of representation particularly focuses on skins of various kinds. She thus emphasizes shaggy loose textures, furs, feathers, and fringes as the putative demarcation of her animal and humanoid figures. The elephantine monster is not just multiple in terms of its animal status but has a striking second layer skin of highly intricate divided leaves and banana clusters, exploding even the notion of the animal to cross over to a vegetable 'becoming'. Furthermore, the creature exemplifies Reiniger's approach to the battle of good and evil which sets her apart from her Weimar peers. Her story lacks the clammy fear of the uncanny characteristic of a more rigid attitude to otherness; Achmed's antagonists are certainly defeated, but, there is an intense sense of fun and delight in the grotesque composites, bugs, spirits and monsters that she creates. The elephantine monster complete with wicked gleam in his eye is an impressive creature, an antagonist to be savoured and enjoyed with delighted 'oohs' and 'aahs' rather than the sense of crisis and anxiety that is the dominant note in Weimar Expressionism.



Figs 8 & 9 A wicked gleam in the elephantine monster's eye. DVD capture.

Magical Shape-Shifting

In my final example from *Die Abenteuer des Prinzen Achmed*, I turn to the key sequence of the duel between witch and sorcerer, and argue that it is a clear and dramatic example of Reiniger's representation of 'becoming-animal'. This dynamic sequence of competitive animal transformations is a struggle for magical supremacy between good and evil. Battling for the possession of the magic lamp, the witch and sorcerer counter each other's shape-shifting, by each becoming an animal which is capable of fighting and perhaps defeating the animal form momentarily presented by the antagonist. In this virtuoso sequence where the shape and line of transformation takes place with a crisp fluidity, Reiniger conjures forth lion, snake, scorpion, cockerel, vulture, whale and seahorse/dragon from the supernatural quasi-human bodies of her magical characters.



Fig. 10 Scorpion-becoming-vulture and cockerel. DVD capture.



Fig. 11 Vulture and cockerel. DVD capture.



Fig. 12 Snake and scorpion. DVD capture.



Fig. 13 Scorpion and lion-becoming-cockerel. DVD capture.

As already noted, Reiniger chooses creatures with markedly different skins and outlines to explore a range of bodily states, particularly in terms of the profile of the subject. Feathers, scales and fur all emphasize extremes of difference in the silhouette. Just as the witch and sorcerer shift their bodies, so too does the environment around them shift. As they become sea creatures – the witch a kind of whale and the sorcerer a rather bellicose seahorse – the clear light of the background, the air, as it were, becomes cloudy and a sense of depth and wave conjures a seascape. The sea bodies spin, twist and become faint as if seen dimly through seawater.



Fig. 14 Sea creatures. DVD capture.

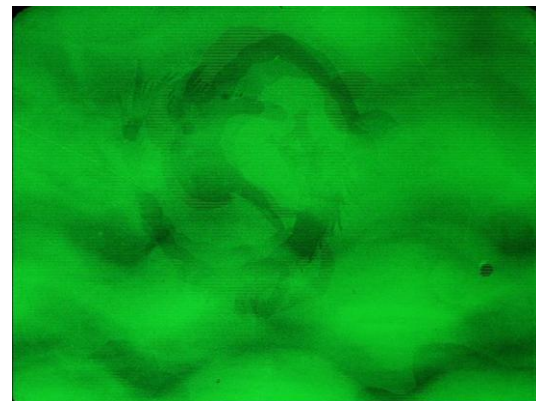


Fig. 15 Becoming-imperceptible. DVD capture.

In the duel, a sequence of about two and a half minutes, a quick response to the other's form and the nimble shape-shifting that both good and evil characters display is vital to their chances of survival, let alone eventual victory. A settled or fixed form of being is anathema to these magicians for whom the supreme expression of their power and skill is the swift and constant shifting between existences. Their virtuoso display is one of constant transformation, of becoming. In the animated form that Reiniger uses such shifts are not presented as they might have been in the live-action cinema of the 1920s by means of skilful choreography or ingenious camera movements. Consider, for example, the clever transformation from inanimate prop to live creature of Paul Wegener's golem in *Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam* (1920) which was achieved by the complete concealment of the statue behind Löw's body as he steps forward to place the magic word in the pentagram star. A swift changeover behind him replaces the statue with Wegener in full costume so that the statue can 'awaken' without a cut. In *Achmed*, by contrast, a graceful fluidity characterizes the shifting bodies, which appear more prominently in a state of becoming other, in a transitional form, than they are identifiably the body of a specific animal. And thus Reiniger foregrounds in this pivotal sequence a rejection of fixedness and the body as exerting one form in a kind of domination of the space it occupies, but celebrates the becoming body, the transitional explosion of becoming that allows the body to persist, to quest, and to mutate across shifting space, forever bridging Braidotti's 'animal, vegetable, viral' network. They conjure not only new bodies to inhabit, however briefly, but also change the very air around them to the sea, like a chameleon changing not its own skin to the colour of its environment, but transforming the very world around it to match, as though there were no separation between the body and the non-body around it, no boundary to the subject, but a molecular continuity across the organic and the mineral.

In Braidotti's reading of Deleuze, she notes that "becoming-woman" marks the threshold of patterns of "becoming-minoritarian" that cross through the animal and go into the "becoming-imperceptible" and beyond', that is to say in some sense (and noting that empirical females are not meant) Deleuze presents 'a generalized "becoming-woman" as the prerequisite for all other becomings'.³⁴ But against Deleuze, Braidotti insists on retaining a notion of sexual difference and a specificity to 'becoming-woman' that is elided in Deleuze.³⁵ Reiniger's duel not only pits the good witch against the evil sorcerer, it is in some ways (but perhaps not in the most conventional understanding of the term) a battle of the sexes. The good witch with a woman's fleshy and fringed body opposes the masculine sorcerer, bony and hard. As the duel progresses, the characters shape-shift across these gender lines, just as they transgress their own bodies and form and re-form into different skins and shapes. The witch-snake crosses over to the space, screen right, that the sorcerer-scorpion had up to that point occupied, doing this by grabbing the scorpion's neck in her jaws and attaching her tail to its tail. Thus circling the creature – or rather the two creatures

³⁴ Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, p. 119; p. 77.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 159-60.

forming a kind of eternal circle – she reverses their positions and becomes a cockerel, a male creature. In the watery phase of their duel, the sorcerer becomes a seahorse, which is itself a creature which challenges a conventional understanding of gender boundaries; having fertilized the female’s eggs, the male seahorse incubates them in a pouch which makes him appear pregnant, his swollen pouch supplying the eggs with prolactin and eventually releasing the young by means of muscular contractions.³⁶ Braidotti refers to the seahorse’s ‘queer sexuality’ and its refusal of a fixed identity, in its hybrid horse-monster (hippocampus) body which ‘displays the dignity of verticality and evokes with uncanny elegance the style of bipeds.’³⁷ Thus the sorcerer, too, becomes a creature which unsettles his own gender and offers his own ‘becoming’ body the potential of shape-shifting as pregnancy and birth.

Furthermore, the duelling creatures frequently spin round as they wrestle, and it is at times difficult to follow which one is the sorcerer and which the witch; they form into one whirring indeterminate creature caught in a chaotic vortex of becoming. Their duel even evokes a wild mating ritual; not the stately ‘dance’ of the hippocampus where a pair will synchronize their movements, but something altogether more frenzied, something which leaves the magical pair of witch and sorcerer tumbling back into their old bodies, exhausted from their spinning transformations, in rather post-coital manner. Intercut with their metamorphosing duel are shots of Achmed and Aladdin watching on in horror or perhaps excitement, their horrified looks and voyeuristic compulsion calling to mind nothing so much as a primal scene with its attendant child’s confusion, or refusal to distinguish, between the erotic and the violent.



Fig. 16 Achmed and Aladdin’s primal scene. DVD capture.



Fig. 17 Staying close to your enemy. DVD capture.

³⁶ Amanda Vincent, ‘A Seahorse Father Makes a Good Mother’, *Natural History*, December 1990, http://www.naturalhistorymag.com/htmlsite/master.html?http://www.naturalhistorymag.com/htmlsite/editors_pick/1990_12_pick_b.html, accessed 29 July 2013.

³⁷ Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, pp. 158-59.



Fig. 18 Crossing gender boundaries. DVD capture.



Fig. 19 Courtship dance or wild libidinal struggle? DVD capture.

The bodies of witch and sorcerer become ‘nomadic’, as Braidotti puts it, arguing that ‘the morphological frame of the nomadic body is open-ended, interrelational and trans-species’.³⁸ And as they reject cohesion and identity itself by transgressing species boundaries, they enact the manner of subjectivity Braidotti reads in Deleuze, a nomadic body ‘freed from the codes of phallogocentric functions of identity’ with a chaotic and scrambled libidinal potential released to become-animal, to form a ‘joyful anarchy of the senses’.³⁹ The shape-shifting wrestling match that ensues between the witch and the sorcerer has the force of an explosion of bodily power, an aggressive battle that seems infused with libidinal energies. Finally the spinning hybrid of witch-creature and sorcerer-creature fades somewhat in blurred and unbounded bodily form into the seascape before falling back, in paradoxical manner, from the sea into clear air and onto land, tumbling down briefly into their conventional bodily forms before finding a new mode of battle. Such a ‘chaotic mass of libidinal affects’ sees them defy corporeal cohesion, which for Deleuze and Guattari is a kind of despotic and phallogocentric discipline imposed on the body.⁴⁰

The witch and sorcerer’s magic also demonstrates the attitude to thinking espoused by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Thinking cannot derive from a mind or consciousness separate from the body, but in their anti-metaphysical subjectivity, thinking is ‘enfleshed, erotic and pleasure-driven’; such unity of mind and body implies in turn that thinking is rooted in bodily energies and active rather than reactive.⁴¹ In Braidotti’s reading, ‘thinking precedes self-reflexivity and rational thought’, it is a ‘pre-discursive moment in which one thinks without thinking about it, a phase in which thinking is just like breathing’.⁴² Magical transformations as presented by Reiniger’s shape-shifting silhouettes demonstrate just such an instinctive unity of body and mind. The witch and sorcerer will their own bodies to defy the ‘laws of nature’, to reject the fixedness of bodily form and dive into a series of

³⁸ Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, p. 124.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, p. 124; Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 165-84.

⁴¹ Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, p. 124.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 125.

libidinal transformations that ultimately reject a corporeal separation from the other, or indeed from that which surrounds the body. Their power is not the mind exerting itself over the body, but the mind or will, or indeed desire, acting in and with the body.

The duel ends with both witch and sorcerer attacking each other with bolts of fire conjured from the body and thrown at the other. As this sequence of their fight progresses, the bolts of fire appear to be the corporeal form of the two magicians and the duel ends with a ball of flame tumbling to earth, which turns out to be the sorcerer, though whether he is exploded by the fire-witch, who after all dwells in a volcano, or he burns with his own burst of fire-energy, or both, is scarcely clear. The witch's exhaustion as she triumphantly returns to Achmed and Aladdin to proclaim the death of their enemy is another sign of the physically immanent magical process where thinking as libidinal energy both resides in the body and bursts the boundaries of the body to cross and recross into a spatial network where bodily identity is almost a redundant notion.

Conclusion

Animals in various states of becoming are the true stars of Reiniger's feature film, from the dynamic virtuosity of the witch and sorcerer's magical duel to the striking, endearing, and arresting mythical creatures that populate deep caves in volcanoes, magic lamps and untamed spirit realms. They dominate the film in the ways that they form a multiplicity, a pack, populating the screen space by a kind of magical contagion. Good or bad, demons or benign spirits, all her creatures evince the same capacity for infectious crossing of boundaries and exist in a state of becoming, of metamorphosis, pouring across the screen like a solid-liquid volcanic eruption, or like a seething mass of insects. Even within the narrative it is only the host of rather animalesque fluttering spirits from within the magic lamp called forth by the becoming-animal witch that can conquer the demonic multitude by infecting them, by attaching to them and attaining another kind of becoming, a molecular becoming-imperceptible. Such dynamic and transforming exploration of animals and animal bodies does not so much overshadow as deepen our engagement with the elegant and ornamented human bodies Reiniger presents, which are also in states of transition and becoming, from the witch and sorcerer, to the becoming-bird fairy Pari Banu, to Dinarzarde who is transported nobody knows where in a floating magic palace and becomes-imperceptible, to Aladdin who is transformed from humble tailor to master of a genie and prince before becoming abject and finally reverting to his new-old status of prince.

Reiniger's multiple and metamorphosing animal puppets anticipate in profound ways some of the insights articulated in a later twentieth-century philosophy of materialist becoming. It is unsurprising that such challenges to fixed notions of being might occur within animation. But what Reiniger does in particular, as distinct from other animators working in other styles, is to locate her engagement with tales of transformation within the Eastern aesthetic tradition of shadow theatre

which uses silhouettes to create a stylized and anti-realist theatrical performance with a mythical and sometimes religious character. Yet the apparently stark and uncompromising opposition of light and dark in shadow theatre nevertheless refuses such opposition to instead develop meanings that are mysteriously located in-between. Reiniger thus works in an Eastern theatrical tradition which celebrates metamorphosing bodies in its exploration of life and death as mystically connected in the shadow (a mythical resurrection, or part resurrection, of the dead). Her silhouettes, however, are shadows cut free from a slavish connection to a bodily 'owner', dead or alive. Such a mystical understanding of life and death, which refuses Western binary oppositions or fixed essences, contributes to the development in her animation of a notion of existence as a dynamic and fluid becoming. While it would be clearly wrong to suggest that Reiniger anticipates the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari and inadequate to read her film as merely illustrating or demonstrating such ideas, it is no accident that their philosophy of becoming-animal, becoming-woman, becoming-imperceptible, their idea of the multiplicity and assemblage should be palpable in the animal constructions of Reiniger's silhouette animation, even though they operate in different philosophical traditions; Deleuze and Guattari write in opposition to, but rooted in, a Western philosophical tradition, and Reiniger's cinema, though not intentionally engaged in philosophical exploration, is indebted to the Eastern aesthetic tradition of shadow theatre and the magical, hybrid, indeed 'mongrel' literary tradition of the *Arabian Nights*.⁴³ Thus both are set against fixed essences and ontological dualism, but rather explore a materialist being-as-becoming, however instinctive such an engagement might be in Reiniger's case. Her cinema is in its aesthetics as in its narrative profoundly engaged in the in-between: between flatness and depth; between planes and embodied states; between movement and stasis; between interiors and exteriors. Her very notion of the subject as margin, as profile, with her furry and feathered skins, and intricate lacy textiles constructs a perfect and perfectly accessible challenge to the viewer to re-think the nature of the body, from a fixed essence to something that is legion and contagion, multiplicity and pack. Poised between the apparent simplicity of an Eastern fairy tale told in silhouette form and the conceptual complexity of an Eastern fairy tale told in silhouette form, Reiniger's becoming-creatures unlock a sense of the body that encourages an instinctive engagement with gendered models of becoming; she celebrates bodily experience even as the body is liberated from a fixed physiology. Reading her film with Deleuze and Guattari's 'becoming-animal' as well as Braidotti's feminist philosophy of metamorphosis illuminates the conceptual challenge that is already

⁴³ Ros Ballaster argues that Salman Rushdie's defence of *The Satanic Verses* as celebrating 'hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, culture, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. *Mélange*, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is *how newness enters the world...* *The Satanic Verses* is for change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining. It is a love-song to our mongrel selves' could equally be applied to the *Nights* and other 'narrative traffic between East and West.' Ros Ballaster, *Fables of the East: Selected Tales 1662-1785*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005, p. 12.

inherent in her magical Eastern silhouettes; at the same time her joyfully metamorphosing animal bodies shed light on how to reconcile the abstraction of an Eastern-influenced ‘becoming-imperceptible’ with an implacable refusal to surrender the animal joy of embodied experience.