DANCING SILHOUETTES: LOTTE REINIGER’S *THE ADVENTURES OF PRINCE ACHMED*: A CRITICAL STUDY

By

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ABSTRACT

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Lotte Reiniger’s *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* has been relegated to a curiosity in film history textbooks for some time. Known as the first surviving animated film, it is talked about but rarely seen. However, it is more than just a point in a film history timeline. The film is a beautiful work of art that engages with the time period in which it was made in a critical and political way. The subject matter, silhouettes as animation, the political atmosphere of Weimar Republic Era Berlin and the role of the spectator are all explored in this thesis in an effort to raise *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* out of its obscurity.
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Figure 1: Title Card of *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1926) dir. Lotte Reiniger
Lotte Reiniger’s *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* is the first surviving feature length animated film to ever be produced. Released in 1926, Reiniger beat Walt Disney, the most well known animator in animation history, by more than ten years. Unfortunately, this is how many historians and students of film reference this work. However, *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* is more than just a point on a timeline. It is a visual masterpiece that represents one avant-garde artist’s unique vision of escapism. In this thesis, I aim to pull the film out of the historical timeline and produce two clear readings of the masterpiece that give the film context and elevate it as a film worth studying. I will also explore the historical circumstances in which Lotte Reiniger made the film and the techniques she employed as they are related to my readings. I will not just be elevating the film out of obscurity, but also make a case for Lotte Reiniger herself as a unique avant-garde artist living at the most interesting time in German art history, the Weimar Republic era. Even though she did not produce anything that was overtly political, her work can be seen as a visual protest against live action photography.

In the first section, I will be focusing on Lotte Reiniger’s source material, *The Arabian Nights.*¹ This source material is just as complicated as the artist working on the material. With no clear origin or author, *The Arabian Nights* lends itself to heavy interpretation and adaptation. Reiniger adapted and interpreted freely but she did not just borrow specific stories from *The Arabian Nights*, she also appropriated its structure. I will also discuss how borrowing and recreating the Orient is problematic, especially when it comes to borrowing *The Arabian Nights*. The Orient is a loaded term that describes a place similar to the countries that make up the Middle East, but never completely originates from it. *The Arabian Nights* is a fictional depiction that has been twisted and legitimized by subsequent translators, authors and Orientalist
historians. Seen through *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*, the Orient is more Reiniger’s invention then it is any other artist that has come before her.

In the second section, I will shift my focus in order to deal with the artistry of the film itself. Beyond its subject matter, the film is a work of art that originates completely out of the animator’s hands. *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* is different from what came before and after it because of the unique circumstances that Lotte Reiniger found herself in and the influences she cultivated around her. Because of her avant-garde influences and her experimentation, she created a film that on the surface was a simple fairy tale but underneath becomes something more textually complicated.

Informing this writing is the central idea that *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* is a unique work of art that needs to be shared with as many people as possible. Lotte Reiniger was a vibrant artist who is mostly forgotten due to other successful film animators. However, she is discovered from time to time by animators and artists hearty enough to dig through a plethora of silent film gems. With this thesis, I hope to reach a few more people so that they too can see the film and wonder at its artistry.
The Adventures of Prince Achmed can trace its source material to a very popular collection of stories, One Thousand and One Nights (Galland, 1704-1717), or as it is better known, The Arabian Nights, which revolves around a series of tales told to a murderous king who marries women, beds them and kills them in the morning. These murders happen unabated, resulting in many women dying until a protagonist, Scheherazade, appears. She takes it upon herself to take the noble path and marry the king in an effort to save her fellow women from death. Scheherazade accomplishes putting off her death by telling the king glorious and adventurous stories every night, stopping at the precise moment of anticipation and climax in order to prevent herself from being killed in the morning.

Underneath this simple frame tale lies a complicated history. Both the collection of tales and the history of The Arabian Nights are as labyrinthine as the Reiniger adaptation. Before we can discuss this text, we must have a global conception of its meaning. (Dudley 462) The collection was first published at the turn of the eighteenth century after being translated by an Orientalist scholar, Antoine Galland. Galland was a government minister stationed in several Middle Eastern countries as a translator. He learned Arabic and acquired the habit of collecting manuscripts from the different countries he travelled to. He collected everything from mathematical manuscripts to works in philosophy and literature. When Galland was in Turkey, he acquired a manuscript containing stories know as “Sinbad the Seaman.” (Arabian Nights: An Encyclopedia 558) He eagerly translated this manuscript from the original language. He was, however, not satisfied by this minuscule manuscript. He suspected that there were more adventure stories like Sindbad the Seaman in Arabic storytelling culture. He inquired to his colleagues and through several negotiations, he acquired several volumes of stories that would eventually be called Mille et une Nuits (1704-1717) or Thousand and One Nights. (Irwin 558)
However, there was a problem with the manuscript. It was far from complete. It did not contain all one thousand and one nights, even though the title and the frame tale refer to this number several times. Instead the narrative cuts off midway through one of the minor stories of the collection around night 281. The source material that Galland was working from was only 40 stories and three volumes. (Irwin 47) In Arabic storytelling tradition, one thousand and one was a mere stand in for wanting to convey an infinite time period. It was more literary than saying “forever.” (Mahdi 17) However, Galland, like many scholars, translators and readers after him, took this title literally. Galland had a conundrum on his hands. How does he come up with a number that is at least closer to that impossible goal? He first decides to insert the stories of Sinbad the Seaman, combining these two major manuscripts in his possession. Then he invents stories that he could trace back to what he was told by one of his companions while he was in the Middle East. The result of this is that the most famous stories, “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves and “Aladdin and the Magic Lamp,” are both not original texts within the manuscript he produced. In fact there is no concrete text to trace the story back to. (Irwin 47) One must also wonder who this Middle Eastern companion was and how he communicated these stories to Galland, as there is no textual evidence to establish his existence. (Marzolph 197) In The Arabian Nights studies, these stories are commonly referred to as orphan stories as they have no manuscript that they can be traced back to.

While Galland did invent stories without abandon, he did not cover his tracks very well. Contemporary scholars can tell almost right away whether or not the stories come from the manuscript or were made up without having to consulate the original manuscript in most cases. In the original stories, Scheherazade would enter at certain points and cut off the story, only for her to reappear at the beginning of the next night and start the story up again. She is present as
the story teller and her point of view is privileged. She is a character that the reader can never fully forget. However as the reader progresses through the stories, Scheherazade starts to appear less frequently. “Aladdin and the Magic Lamp,” usually positioned in the later part of the book, is told completely without her interruptions or her commentary. In other words, it is a story not broken up over the course of several nights. (Burton 695-794)

While several of the manuscripts that Galland worked with are lost or poorly preserved, it becomes apparent that he added these stories as a way to artificially inflate the night numbers. (The Arabian Nights: An Encyclopedia 558) This would not necessarily be a problem if it were presented as a novel extracted with inspiration from these manuscripts or he made some indication that these stories were combined from many different sources. He decided not to take that route. Instead, he presented the writing as a translation, implying that all of the stories contained in the book were faithful interpretations of tales that were original to a source. (Kabbani 26) By calling it a “translation,” Galland was able to assert that these stories were characteristic to the Middle East. The Arabian Nights stories were taken as seriously as his more faithful translations, such as the science and math manuscripts he translated in sketching the impulses and daily life of the Middle East, a group of countries that most Europeans will never travel to in the eighteenth, nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. These stories were taken as definitive insights from a man who had been there and seen these stories enacted or told. However, it was a mere interpretation of what a French translator thought the Middle East was like. From the beginning of the publication of the book, The Arabian Nights was filtered through a European sensibility and seen as a reflection of this foreign culture. The Arabian Nights becomes a twisted narrative of what was actually there. The Arabic culture these stories were supposed to be represented by did not exist except within the imagination of a French scholar
and translator. The Orient was concretely outside of the geographical location it seemed to depict.

When the book was published, it immediately caught the attention of Western Europe. Within a couple of years, the book was translated into all of the major European languages: French, German, Spanish, and English. (Irwin 559) As these stories were translated, the book changed. Stories were eroticized and exoticized for adult audiences or toned down and added moral lessons for children’s editions. Stories were added and deleted. In one translation, a small story about “breaking wind” was elaborated on while it was forbidden in more conservative translations. This story was called “How Abu Hasan Brake Wind.” (Burton 392-394) Edward William Lane (1801-1876) and Sir Richard Francis Burton (1821-1890) both created definitive English editions complete with extensive annotations concerning the manners and habits of Middle Eastern men and women. Each translator took into account their own specialized audience and tweaked the stories to fit the said audience. Lane took out anything that he found morally reprehensible, because his edition was published in small installments in popular magazines. (Schacker-Mill 173) However, Burton dwelled on the sexual descriptions and translated these passages with flowery language, because his audience was a sophisticated subscription based audience that could afford to buy whole volumes at once instead of getting them a little bit at a time. (Byatt XV) These additions and deletions resulted in major differences between translations and the stories being told. Morals were disregarded or made more apparent depending on the audience. The stories were modernized with allusions to guns, chewing tobacco and other small trinkets that would never have existed in the time frame of the stories. (Irwin 48) The end result of these publication twists made not just by Lane and Burton but by others who continually translated the manuscript into multiple languages, was that Galland’s
translation was never treated as definitive. Galland’s version of the stories was a mere starting point in which to improvise from and impart the translator’s own perspective and audience. There is no sacred text in which anything treated as definite.

Burton and Lane’s annotations and observations gave credence to this text as a viable source of the manners and ways of the Orient. (Schacker-Mill 165) These translators explained how men greeted one another, their religious practices and even their cleaning habits. Europeans now had an accessible avenue into the mysterious Orient from someone who had actually been there. The stories became a stand in for actually traveling to these mysterious countries. The distinction should be made that it was never a native that translated these stories. No man or woman born in the Middle East ever interpreted these stories for the European readership. Sir Richard Burton, for example, was an Englishman who joined the English army and was stationed in India but then made a name for himself by publishing travelogues of Mecca, Medina, Ethiopia, as well as unexplored countries in Africa. (Byatt XV) He can be seen as the prototypical English adventurer. While he was proficient in many languages and explored many countries, Burton saw them through a decidedly European point of view. He is not an exception. Edward Lane was more bookish than Burton was. He only traveled to Egypt and spent a couple of years visiting cafes with native Egyptians and learning Arabic from a couple of guides. Once he traveled back to England, he was in need of a profession. Therefore he published Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians (1836) which capitalized on the copious notes that he made while visiting with the men in Egypt at the cafes. In order to reach a wider audience with his knowledge, he decided to take a commission to translate The Arabian Nights for a newspaper service. He combined his previous book, implying that modern Egypt and ancient Arabic society were the same. (Irwin 24) A space of 500 years had passed from the composition of the
manuscript and Lane’s travels. Therefore the implication that these societies had not changed in such a vast time was decidedly false. This did not stop Lane or Burton from inserting these notes. They assumed an unchanging Orient. Lane, Burton, Galland, and many others who translated this text are defined as Orientalist scholars by Edward Said in his influential book, *Orientalism* (1978). Lane and Burton defined what it was to be a European by contrasting their habits with the Arabic man or woman. The European was sophisticated in contrast to the barbaric Arabic man who kidnaps, hunts, and believes in magical beings. Orientalist authors “views the Orient as something whose existence is not only displayed but has remained fixed in time and place for the West.” (Said 108)

The fervor created by the publication and subsequent translations of *The Arabian Nights* keep a hold on Europeans’ collective imaginations for generations. Many authors who are a part of the classical canon were directly influenced by *The Arabian Nights* including Voltaire, William Thomas Beckford, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Henry Melville, Lord Alfred Tennyson, and Jorge Luis Borges. (Irwin 237-292) The tales pass from just stories in a book into myths and fairy tales on the same level as the Brothers Grimm’s 1812 collection of Germanic fairy tales. *The Arabian Nights* get told again and again with a tweak here or there, but with the core of it intact. Aladdin will always have his magic lamp. Scheherazade will always be telling stories to save her life. Sinbad will always be sailing. But what happens beyond this is the place of the story teller to tease out and elaborate. This is somewhat unique in literature history. Adaptation and retelling does not occur with the Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (1478) or other iconic books. They stay intact. Because the authors who are telling new *The Arabian Nights* stories are doing so from a time and place so completely removed from the historical and geographical origination of the tales, there is more license to invent. They were never treated as
sacrosanct or unadaptable. The Orient becomes less a place than a topos or a set of references. (Said 177) This is why these stories lend so well to Lotte Reiniger’s artistry and her shadow puppets.

Another aspect of *The Arabian Nights* that lends itself to reinterpretation is its narrative structure. It is labyrinthine in its complexity. The first layer is about a villainous Sultan who marries a woman every night, beds her and kills her in the morning. Scheherazade soon appears in the story as a very intelligent woman who tells stories that do not end at the end of the night. Instead the narrative gets cut off in the middle or at an important twist to give reason for the Sultan to spare her life another day so she can continue the story. This is what is called the frame story of the book. Scheherazade is a constant presence, but she fades in and out as the stories need her to. The second narrative layer involves the stories she tells. These stories can touch on a myriad of subjects such as religion, travel, the meaning of life, marriage, lust, or the care of animals. While the most famous tale is “Aladdin and The Magic Lamp,” it is just one of many others. Sometimes there are other layers to the stories. One character can move from being a main character in one story to being a minor one in the next story. A character can tell a story to illustrate some point or meaning that the story is trying to convey. The result is that the reader could be at one time four worlds removed from the frame story, only to get snapped back into Scheherazade’s world at the climax as she shuts down the story for another night. These same characters can jump from region to region, introduce magic, talking animals, and other fantastical elements. They are a normal part of the fantasy world Scheherazade is creating.

This structure can be maddening if someone sits and tries to read it from cover to cover. However, like the Grimm’s fairy tales, this structure also encourages readers to jump around and go from one section of the book to another. If the reader gets bored with one story, then they are
free to go on to another and then jump back to the previous story. Reading *The Arabian Nights* is different each time because of this ability to jump from one to another episode without any continuity repercussions. Scheherazade will be there to always guide you through.

Reiniger uses not just the stories but the structure of how these stories are constructed in her film adaptation. She mimics the reading experience of these stories as closely as she can while making them completely visual. However, she tweaks the tales almost from the beginning, manipulating them until they become her own. She is the German filmmaker version of Antoine Galland. Reiniger translated these stories into a visual story without the use of many words or phrases. She manipulates these stories and transforms them just like she transforms paper into intricate Oriental worlds. With each new snip and adjustment these stories move further from the direct lift from the source material and enter into original storytelling. She made Arabian Nights stories appeal to her audience just like Burton and Lane did before her. These stories are just as much hers as they are anybody else’s. Adaptations are not copies of the original source, but a renewal of the material through new eyes. Reiniger’s eyes were ones that saw the world through her history of puppetry and her exposure to the Berlin avant-garde social world.

In *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*, instead of Scheherazade providing the frame story, it is another character from one of Scheherazade’s stories, Prince Achmed, who becomes the the focus of the frame narrative, that fades in and out as the film necessitates. However instead of just taking this character out of the story, Reiniger conflates two different stories with two different princes and combines them as one. The first story is “The Ebony Horse,” which actually originates in Sir Richard Burton’s translation of the stories. (Burton, 361-391) “The Ebony Horse” is about a prince, named Al-Kasur, who is tricked onto a magical mechanical horse that has the ability to fly, by an ugly Persian scholar mad at him for not allowing him to marry the
prince’s sister. Al-Kasur then travels to Italy and Greece, becomes enslaved, captures the princess of this foreign land and brings her back to his own country several times before he actually succeeds in keeping her there. Reiniger films the prince tricked into riding a magical mechanical horse that he cannot figure out how to get down from and inserts a magician with the same motivations as the Persian scholar.

However, instead of the prince going to Italy and Greece, he goes to a different place: Waq-Waq island, which is really a substitute for India. This is where the original story comes into place. Reiniger transforms the story into the real “Prince Achmed and the Faerie Pari-Banu” story. In this story, Prince Achmed chases after an arrow he shot until it leads him to a cave. In this cave, he meets Pari-Banu who is the daughter of a djinn, or what is known by Western European audiences as a genie. Pari-Banu has lured him there because she is in love with him. They marry and he lives with Pari-Banu. However, Achmed misses his father and asks to visit him. He starts visiting his father once a month. His father, who happens to be a king, gets suspicious and has a sorceress follow him to his new dwelling. Once the king finds out that he has a djinn as a daughter-in-law, he starts requesting presents from them, which leads Prince Achmed to go on dangerous excursions in order to get the retrieve them. One present the king asks for involves procuring a djinn family member. Once the king sees the djinn, he is so taken aback that he forgets his manners and the djinn kills him. Thus Prince Achmed becomes king and his djinn wife is now a queen. (*Arabian Nights: An Encyclopedia* 80-81)

Reiniger takes a portion of the story and adapts it into the story of “The Ebony Horse.” She takes the part where Achmed spies on Pari-Banu, but instead of Pari-Banu tricking Achmed, it is the opposite. Prince Achmed actually steals Pari-Banu, which fits in better with the story of “The Ebony Horse.” Another aspect she takes from this story is Prince Achmed’s ability as a
great archer whose arrows are an integral part to him getting out of several scrapes in the last part of the film. Other than the names, the spying and the archery, the rest of the source story is discarded.

This is where the stories that Reiniger inserts start to multiply at an alarming speed. The next story in question that she adapts is “Hasan of Basra.” She takes Hasan’s story and borrows from it at several times of throughout the film, blending “The Ebony Horse” with Hasan’s story seamlessly. Prince Achmed in The Adventures of Prince Achmed is really three protagonists from The Arabian Nights stories: Prince Achmed, Al-Kasur, and Hasan. Reiniger takes all three protagonists and makes them into one brave hero.

Hasan’s story is similar to Aladdin’s plot line in his story, but Reiniger deals with Aladdin more directly later in the film. Hasan is tricked by an evil magician to get an elixir for him located on a very tall mountain. Hasan barely escapes and ends up in a palace with several women. One day, he is given keys to the palace rooms and told he can open every room, but one. Of course he opens that door and finds a beautiful djinn princess who transforms from a bird to a woman with the shedding of her feathers. Hasan steals the feathers of her costume, so she is unable to fly away, just like Prince Achmed does to Pari-Banu in the film. Hasan persuades this djinn princess to marry him. The djinn princess eventually escapes and flies off to the Waq-Waq Islands, leaving a note to her husband as to where he could find her. He travels to these islands. The islands of Waq-Waq show up in several stories, but are most present in this story. The defining feature of these islands is that trees produce women who fall from the trees when ripe and squawk “waq, waq.” (The Arabian Nights: An Encyclopedia 735) He journeys into these islands with the help of an ugly old woman, who would later be transformed into the Witch in the film. Hasan tricks several djinns with the help of the old woman, fight off his djinn princess’s
protectors and rescues the djinn princess. He brings her back to Baghdad where they live “happily ever after.” (The Arabian Nights: An Encyclopedia 207-210) This story provides the film with most of its dynamic activity. The stealing of the feathers, the returning to Waq-Wa island and journeying with the old woman all appear in the film, and provide space for Reiniger to render her beautiful creatures into nimble action.

Once Prince Achmed has his faerie princess Pari-Banu, “The Ebony Horse” story shows up again. Prince Achmed captures Pari-Banu and they travel to China where they fall in love with one another. However, this love is short lived, because she is soon captured by the magician and sold to the Chinese Emperor. These actions are similar to the Persian scholar’s actions in The Ebony Horse. Once she is there, the magician battles with Prince Achmed. Because the magician has magic on his side, he defeats him and puts him under a very heavy rock.
This rock happens to be in a valley with a witch. This witch seems to be more out of the Germanic Grimm Fairy Tales than *The Arabian Nights*. Witches play an integral part in many Grimm fairy tales, but are mostly absent from *The Arabian Nights* tales because the supernatural creatures are usually called djinns and are also usually male. There are old women present but they usually do not have magical powers or are called witches. This particular witch has flying bats as her minions. These minions free Prince Achmed from his trap and bring him to the witch. As the witch questions him, she realizes that they have the same enemy: the magician. The witch
vows to help Prince Achmed defeat this menacing magician. They scheme to get Pari-Banu back from the Chinese Emperor and succeed by invading the castle with the witch’s minions and a special suit that gave Prince Achmed archery powers. The creation of the witch, who acts more like a Germanic witch then anything present in the Middle East, suggests that Reiniger freely adapted from myth narratives.

With the addition of the witch to his aid, Prince Achmed is successful in rescuing Pari-Banu from nearly becoming the bride of a Chinese Emperor. For the moment, he seems to have outwitted the magician. However, this victory is short lived. Pari-Banu is soon kidnapped by the demons that she was a custodian for on her homeland of Waq-Waq. The demons are upset that she has abandoned them for love. They rip her from the clutches of Prince Achmed and whisk her back to Waq-Waq island. This island is framed by mountains that move. They move so that Prince Achmed can no longer get through them. The only way that he can get through these impenetrable islands is through a magic lamp.
This is where Aladdin finally comes into the narrative. Prince Achmed meets Aladdin on the edge of a mountain. Aladdin is in great despair. Prince Achmed sets aside his quest in order to listen to Aladdin tell his own story. This is the point of the film where the structure mimics its source literary material. Adaptation does not just have to be the plot itself but can also take the structure as well. The borrowing of the structure is not necessarily the easiest aspect of literature to borrow, but Reiniger proves here that it is not impossible. Multiple times in the stories of *The Arabian Nights*, characters sit and listen to stories in the middle of an important journey. Sometimes the stories have a point and serve an allegorical purpose and sometimes they do not and are just there to divert attention for a time. As a result the stories fold in on themselves,
much like *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* does, going back to a previous story line after having introduced another one.

Aladdin’s story of how he found the magic lamp, used it to his advantage and then lost it, serves two purposes within this film. The first purpose is to show that the magician, Prince Achmed’s villain, is more pervasive than just troubling the prince alone. The magician is a universal source of evil with no discrimination except for money and power. The magician persuades Aladdin to go down into a cave and retrieve the magic lamp. However, when he does it, Aladdin realizes that the magician is just here to get the magic lamp and not let him out of the cave at all. Aladdin is then stuck in a cave with the magic lamp. Only when he can light it does he realize what he has. A djinn comes out of the lamp and grants him any wish that he dares to ask for, which involves getting him out of the cave, building a palace overnight and winning the affections of a princess. This princess happens to be Prince Achmed’s sister, Dinarsade. Dinarsade is another reference from *The Arabian Nights*, and an appropriation that Reiniger commits. Dinarsade is actually Scheherazade’s sister in the literary frame tale. Dinarsade asks Scheherazade to tell her stories the first night. Instead of serving this function, she becomes a princess of another sort, one who is lusted for and coveted by the hero in this story, Aladdin. This is the second function of the story, to remind the audience that while Prince Achmed has been away, his family is still present and living without him.

One day, Aladdin wakes up to see that the palace, the lamp and Dinarsade have all disappeared in a “poof.” Aladdin has become destitute once again and is in search of his lost possessions. As the story circles back to the present, which has Prince Achmed listening patiently to Aladdin tell his story, Prince Achmed is given even more motivation to defeat the magician and bring back his sister. This story is known to most modern audiences due to the
loose adaptation of the story in made by Disney’s lead animators and directors Clements and Musker in 1992 (*Aladdin*). However, Reiniger’s *Aladdin* is truer to the story in the collection. For one, Aladdin is in China by the end, which is where the story was originally set. For another, the djinn is not necessarily as essential to the story as it is with the Disney version of the story. He is merely a tool for Aladdin to get exactly what he wants. Usually djinns only served metaphorical or specific functions in the stories instead of having character traits like being a conduit for getting a princess. They had no distinct personality of their own. (*The Arabian Nights: An Encyclopedia* 534-536) The djinns, which will come up again later in the story, are truer to its presence in the tales than what we think of when we think of a genie, which come from our exposure to *Aladdin* (1992) and the television series *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965-1970) from television popular culture.

Once Aladdin tells his story of how he lost the lamp, Prince Achmed knows exactly who would have the lamp: the magician. It is here that Reiniger passes into pure fabrication. As she had to pull from many stories to make this film, one climax from one story would not be able to satisfy the audiences or her artistic sensibilities. Prince Achmed calls on the witch to help defeat the magician so that they can get the lamp back. The witch then calls on the magician to battle her. They have an epic battle of transformations and light where the magician is defeated. The lamp is now back in the possession of the heroes and they can open the impenetrable mountain. Once the mountain is open, Prince Achmed, the witch, and Aladdin must battle the demons of Waq-Waq in order to get Pari-Banu back. After a long sequence of battling the black silhouetted demons, the witch pulls out the magic lamp and conjures several thousand djinn to do her bidding. It is the battle of the black demons versus the white djinn. These djinn are just what they need to overcome the black demons and get back Pari-Banu. Once the very last one is defeated,
Prince Achmed and Pari-Banu embrace in happiness. These two battle scenes are more cinematic than literary. On the page, a battle like this would not be nearly as aesthetically impressive as it is on the screen.

It is not just Prince Achmed and Pari-Banu who experience the happy ending. Aladdin’s palace comes floating back, and inside the palace is Prince Achmed’s sister, Dinarsade. The two couples bid farewell to the witch, who gets to keep the magic lamp, and they go back to Baghdad to be with Prince Achmed’s father, the king. The king welcomes all of these traveling figures with open arms. They have become one big happy family at last.

Figure 4: The intricate design of the Chinese scenes is on display here. Still from The Adventures of Prince Achmed (1926) directed by Lotte Reiniger
Lotte Reiniger borrows from more than just *The Arabian Nights* tradition. She borrows from the rich artistic tradition of silhouettes. In her own account of the history of silhouettes, she points out that the origins of puppets came from many different places. These places are China, the Middle East, and Java. Each place had their own distinct traditions of how the puppet should look and behave. For instance in China where the silhouettes were for the upper classes and the puppets are intricately designed with translucent colors that can be seen through a fine silk screen. (Reiniger 15-18) Reiniger mimics this intricate design in her China scenes with Pari-Banu and the evil Chinese emperor. Pari-Banu’s headdress resembles a many-tiered candelabra. The dress she wears is a traditional gown made all the more elegant because it is full of fussy details. This is in contrast to the history of silhouettes in the Middle East. In the Middle East, the plays were for the common people and were a popular form of entertainment. Therefore the silhouettes are cruder and made with animal hides and right angles. (Reiniger 25-27) She mimics this in *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* by giving Aladdin, a peasant from the Middle East, a simple figure and a plain hat. He is not richly decorated. The contrast of forms not only designates the two figures as two distinct characters with vastly different origin stories, but calls upon the rich history of silhouette making that Reiniger cares about preserving.

Reiniger combines, twists, conflates, morphs and inserts several stories and resources in order to make this one epic story. She has no problems constructing her film narrative with these methods, because the source material itself to be encourages this. To be influenced is an active source of inspiration. Reiniger was influenced by *The Arabian Nights*, just as many iconic authors before her had been. Her interpretation of a set of tales foreshadows other directors choosing to adapt and change other iconic stories. Orson Welles decided to adapt many Shakespeare plays into one film: *Chimes at Midnight* (1965). Decades later Terry Gilliam would
try and fail to adapt *Don Quixote* (Miguel de Cervantes 1605) which would result in a documentary, *Lost in La Mancha* (Fulton and Pepe 2002) that compared the book itself to the process of filmmaking. Just like Reiniger, each of these directors used their source material to create new and refreshing ideas that would translate to their generation.

Her approach “collaged” aspects of several different stories and pieced them back together in order to create a completely original work. She chose what she needed and discarded the rest. Although one can concretely point to her source material, it does not mean she did not come up with a film adaptation that is completely her own. Other adaptations of these stories chose to emphasize different aspects of the stories that she chose to ignore. She chose to conflate two princes, create a magician influenced by three very different villains, insert characters that have no bearing on their original intention, Dinarsade, and create characters completely out of thin air like the witch that come from a different story telling tradition. The result of this is an adventure story with many more intricacies than one expects out of a story expected to entertain children.
The emergence of silent cinema and its exhibition practices arrived around 1896 when the Lumièrè brothers first showed the “Arrival of the Train into the Station” at a small café in Paris. The legend goes that at this first showing, the audience was scared of the train coming towards them. They thought it would come out of the screen and run them over. The spectators jumped out of the way of the train and gasped. When they had realized that the train was not coming towards them, but trapped in the image being projected on the wall, they applauded and marveled at the scary and new technology. From this well worn story, the passive spectator theory beholden to the will of the director, or the cameraman, emerges. The spectator is unable to control the train passing through the screen and becoming a part of the room. Therefore all the spectator can do is hide and get out of the way of the rushing inevitability.

However, Tom Gunning has debunked this simplistic overview of the audience at the beginning of cinema history. In his influential study, “The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde,” Gunning shows that there was evidence that the first film audiences did not act like this at all. The audience was made up of sophisticated city dwellers who were used to the visual tricks at a fair or a boardwalk. They came in knowing that they were about to see modern technology at work. Their shock and their awe was not nearly as dramatic as the urban legend tells us it was. Gunning proposes that this audience and many other audiences were used to what he termed a “cinema of attractions” (Gunning 868). This “cinema of attractions” is a cinema that is a series of visual shocks or effects. These visual shocks can include sudden explosions, sleight of hand tricks where something suddenly turns into something completely different, drawings that at one moment stay still and at another walk off of the page, and the exploration of far off and exotic locations. These films showed off the abilities of the filmmaker to get that particular image on the screen. For instance, in George Méliès’ short film
“Prolific Magic Egg,” (1903) Méliès himself appears in the film changing an egg into at turns a larger egg, a balloon, a human head, three human heads, a clown and then all the way back down to a simple egg again before he eats the egg, lies down and turns into a skeleton. This action happens within a minute and a half. The short films made during this time exist as fleeting moments of entertainment. Just like the small egg, these films were gone in a flash.

Part of the reason that they were produced like this was that they were displayed in one of the most popular exhibition circuits: the vaudeville theater. A short series of films would be shown between juggling acts, bawdy songs, and Chinese acrobats among other attractions. In fact many of the first filmmakers and innovators of the film medium came from the vaudeville circuit such as Winsor McCay who put on his magical drawing techniques on display for many live audiences. (Bendazzi 15) Another entertainment option was for spectators to enter a penny arcade where they would see a series of short films if they placed a penny into a mechanism and pressed their eyes into the viewer. These venues and method of exhibition allowed these shorts to be nothing more than a moment of entertainment that resists or precludes a complex narrative structure. They would see more than one within a short amount of time only to then carry on with their entertainment after five or less minutes. This is a small amount of time to go through any type of story that would grab a casual spectator’s attention. Short films focused on the technology and gave the audience something to be fascinated by. This proved to be immensely successful, especially with the working classes. These working classes were willing to spend as much as a nickel to see an elephant getting electrocuted, a woman fan dancing, and a series of drawings that evolve and fold into each other. These films such as “Annabelle, Serpentine Dance” (Dickson 1895), “Electrocuting an Elephant” (Edison 1903), and “Humorous Phases of Funny Faces” (Blackton 1906) attracted crowds of spectators eager to watch these fantastical
feats. That momentary reaction of awe was harder to achieve as the decade wore on. Tom Gunning hypothesized the “hey day” of the “cinema of attractions” was the first decade of the silent era, from 1893 to 1906 or 1907. (Gunning 64)

By 1907, technology was advancing fast enough that shorts could be longer and could be shown in bigger venues. However, this advancing technology was also an expensive process and it could not sustain the churning out of product that allowed the spectator to see something new every time they came to these penny arcades. The people behind the camera started to come up with narrative strands in their shock cinema. The shock of the short may be the spectator watching a realistic train robbery, but attached to this train robbery emerged a closeup of the robber, a cutting to the train station that the train was supposed to have arrived at, and the appearance of a woman crying. All of these things in The Great Train Robbery (Porter 1903), an early production which indicated narrative emerging out of the cinema of attractions, advance the idea that many film producers wanted to keep the audience engaged not just in the crime spectacle but also to sympathize with the victims and to see more of them. A good way to keep these films more commercially viable is to tell a story visually. As a result of this, narrative begins to dominate these short films and eventually, they evolve into features. Narrative and length built the early Hollywood, French, and German studio systems. As a result, serials, which play a lot like our modern conception of television episodes which induced the spectator to come back every week in order to see the outcome of their favorite phantom or intrepid, adventurous girl, became a staple in this era. In order to sell one’s services to these big companies a filmmaker needed to have a story.
However, the “cinema of attractions” did not completely disappear. In a footnote in his influential article on the first audiences of the Lumière brothers, Gunning talks about his choice to use the word “attractions.” He says:

The term attractions refers backwards to a popular tradition and forwards to an avant-garde subversion. The tradition is that of the fairground and carnival, and particularly its development during the turn of the century in such modern amusement parks as Coney Island. The avant-garde radicalization of this term comes in the theoretical and practical work in theatre and film of Sergei Eisenstien, whose theory of the montage of attractions intensified this popular energy into an aesthetic subversion, through a radical theoreticisation of the power of attractions to undermine the convention of bourgeois realism. (869)

In other words, there are vestigial indications of the “cinema of attractions” present in the cinema that existed outside of the dominant studio system mode of cinema. The filmmakers that existed outside of the dominant studio system of Hollywood or Germany needed to find a way to differentiate themselves from more conventional movie making. They wanted to promote their ideologies, their theories about art and their formal experiments. Therefore avant-garde movements of the Soviet montagists such as Sergei Eisenstein, surrealists such as Buñuel and Dalí, and early animators such as Walter Ruttmann and Hans Richter engaged in the “cinema of attractions” in order to shock the bourgeois audience out of complacency. These filmmakers wanted their audiences to engage in the act of looking.

In the act of looking, the spectator is aware not just of the image onscreen, but also aware that they are processing the images. The spectators are not sucked into the story or lulled into complacency that a traditional narrative creates. The spectators are always present in the
presentation. This distances the spectator from the image, but also allows the filmmaker to create a dialogue with the spectator. By juxtaposing a scene that depicts the graphic slaughter of a cow for meat and a group of people who are being chased by soldiers and shot down in a meadow. In *Strike* (1925), Eisenstein was able to create a dialogue with the audience that would not have existed if he had shown the soldiers shooting a mob of people. The spectator knows that these two things do not exist within the same plane, but by juxtaposing these images, we are forced to make a connection and internalize essence. Eisenstein illustrates that this slaughter was not just graphic and upsetting, but it was systematic and heartless just like the everyday killing of a cow for meat. In this film sequence, Eisenstein engaged in montage, a technique that he is known for and one that uses to keep an active dialogue with the audience present in their minds.

Other filmmakers employed a myriad of strategies to distance the spectator from the image presented in the film. Although montage is the most famous technique, German filmmaker Lotte Reiniger employs techniques that existed in the “cinema of attractions” era in *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1926). She recalls Georges Méliès with her use of sudden flashes of hand tinted color, fantastical images, and quick cuts that allow the eye of the spectator to be overwhelmed with the scene at hand. In a late radio interview, Reiniger describes going to see Georges Méliès’ short films as a child and realizing that she wanted to be involved with filmmaking from that point on. (Greene)
In *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*, as the villain (The magician) and the supernatural helper of the heroes (The witch) ready themselves for the climatic battle, the thrill of watching them mimics what Georges Méliès demonstrated in many of his films including, *The Triple Conjurer and the Living Head* (1900), *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) and *Prolific Magic Egg* (1903). Their fight consists of a quick succession of all the different animals into which they evolve and begin to act like. A scorpion, eagle, rooster, whale, and sea creature all appear and disappear as they both try to out conjure their enemy. The film gives the spectator one moment to recognize the creatures and then each change as the bright colors flash and switch behind them. There is a mini-narrative located within this fight: the magician and the witch meet each other on mountain tops, a fight begins and at the end there is a winner. However, narrative structure is not the point
of the sequence; instead I am suggesting the point of the fight is to dazzle the spectator and to show off the skill of the filmmaker. Just like George Méliès was present in most of his films and performing the magic tricks himself, Reiniger flaunts her skill as a silhouette maker and her ability to manipulate her characters into many different figures. As the spectator sees the rapid succession of morphing of the figures into different animals, it becomes apparent that the narrative is secondary and spectacle is primary. The incredible skill involved with not just cutting out these animals, but also making them move in a semi-realistic fashion becomes the focus of the scene instead of who is winning and who is losing. In fact, the spectator is unclear as to who is on top until the last moments when the magician lies on the top of the mountain, dead. This is just one example of the myriad of ways that the “cinema of attractions” defines the visual spectacle in The Adventures of Prince Achmed.
Figure 6: Achmed and Pari-Banu escape on a horse to China. Still from *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1926) directed by Lotte Reiniger
The big fight scenes are not the only places where the shock of visual or engaging spectacle comes into play. This concept is also be present in scenes that seem to be more integral to the story, at least on the surface. In a scene where Prince Achmed first declares his love to his faerie princess, Pari Banu, they are located in a forest in China. While action is indeed happening in the foreground involving Prince Achmed slowly winning the heart of his beloved, the eye is drawn towards the background of the scene. The background is set up as an ornate representation of Chinese painting. Slopping hills, weeping willows, and other small details all suggest the otherworldly “Oriental” aspect of the film. This sumptuous background frames the lovers and creates a moving painting. The spectator is not supposed to doubt that these the lovers are meant for each other, because they are located within this beautiful exotic space. It becomes a part of the story just as much as the declaring of love that is happening in the foreground.

Not only is Reiniger using the flash magic of George Méliès, but she is also giving us a peak at an exotic land that may never have completely existed outside of painting and other artistic expressions. She uses the traditions of the previous decade in order to engage the spectator and create a space that allows the spectator to marvel at the artistry instead of actually engaging with the story. If it would have been possible for the spectator to be engaged with the story, the motivations and emotions of the characters would been seen through in an instant. Just by describing several scenes in the film, one can see the ridiculous nature of the story. However, once the spectator is watching the film, the problems of narrative cohesiveness, ethical issues and character motivations all fade away in the dazzle of how the film looks. As a result of this there are no substance to many of the scenes in the film. Several scenes exist because they are gorgeous representations of the world Reiniger created. To further illustrate this motivation, one needs to merely look at the sheer amount of chase scenes within the film. The first major chase
happens when Prince Achmed falls in love with Pari Banu. Once the magician meddles in the
love of Prince Achmed and Pari Banu and gives Pari Banu to a Chinese Emperor, the Chinese
Emperor chases her several times in order to demonstrate his lust for her. Prince Achmed and the
magician chase each other. The witch chases Prince Achmed with her bat-like creatures. This is
just a sample of the chases sequences. They take up a third of the running time. Reiniger uses
these chase scenes for three reasons: to create a forward motion to the story, to show off the rich
backgrounds of the world around them, and to exhibit her ability to make her characters move
fluidly. Because all three motivations are intertwined and reinforce one another, the narrative
cohesiveness breaks down in these scenes. Reiniger pauses her narrative filmmaking in order to
allow the spectator to enjoy her fine cutting.

She also does not seem to want to the audience to be swept up by the love affair in the
film. She wants you to see that these figures can act this way because they are in a world so
completely divorced from the one that exists outside of the movie theater. It creates its own
logic, one that is internal to the film. As the spectator is watching Prince Achmed woo Pari Banu
by kidnapping her, the spectator is aware that this is not what someone would normally do in a
realistic world. However, Reiniger surrounds the lovers with such exaggerated motifs and
landscapes that she calls into question the spectator’s preconceived notions of realistic. Within
this world, it is plausibly acceptable romantic behavior. But the spectator does not have to accept
this as true in order to keep watching the film. Reiniger cuts to another scene, to another
kidnapping, in order for the viewer not to be lulled into momentary complacency. Her directional
sleight of hand is present. The visual shock of a chase between the magician and Prince Achmed
that immediately follows this romantic interlude described earlier appears in quick succession.
She does not allow the spectator to rest or to catch his or her breath. Instead her rapid cuts and
the overwhelming spectacle of the court scenes allow the spectator to be simultaneously divorced from the spectacle yet also inside and apart of it. She is creating a contradictory space for the spectator. The spectator both accepts what is happening and questions it at the same time. In effect it is the opposite of what Jean-Louis Baudry posits in his article on cinematographic apparatus. He says that “individual images disappear, only to be highlighted by the movement of one image into another.” (Baudry 289) The movement between the two sequences is too slow. The camera lingers on the background of the image too long. Then the sudden burst of movement is too jarring to be completely understood. Why would the magician be there at that very moment? How could he traverse long distances in order to be in China? These questions arise in the spectator’s head but are never answered. Reiniger is too busy showing that these characters can move in a world that is not our own in order to resolve glaring plot holes. This is similar to the effect elicited from A Trip to the Moon (1902) directed by Georges Méliès. While the spectator must have suspend disbelief to watch A Trip to the Moon, they are still put at a distance from it. The spectator marvels at the moon itself, and the small movements of the men on the side of the frame striking moon men on the head with umbrellas in order to defeat them instead of focusing on the main characters. As the spectator tries to create a thorough narrative thread, the film resists such categorization. The same thing happens in The Adventures of Prince Achmed. The spectacle interferes with the exposition and pauses it in order for the audience to marvel at the artistry involved with creating these images. Reiniger is able to recreate the “cinema of attractions” by combining techniques of her predecessors with her own technical skill.

Reiniger was able to borrow heavily from the “cinema of attractions” because animation was within its founding decade, which mirrored the first decade of live action cinema. The first
completely animated short did not appear until 1908, a year after Tom Gunning posited that narrative strains started to take hold of live action cinema. Because animation required a massive amount of labor on the part of the animator, technical innovation was also slow. In *Fantasmagorie* (1908), Emile Cohl produced over 700 drawings for his two-minute short. Because of the length and the novelty of the film, as this was the first completely animated film, it was important to show off his skill instead of create any narrative cohesiveness. It needed to be shown that it could be done and that the animator was in ultimate control of their product even if it did not involve real human beings and settings. As a result, the main character of the film morphs, twists, dies, gets reborn, creates mayhem and tries to woo a woman in a feather hat in rapid succession. These surreal, morphing figures are enough to sustain enjoyment and diversion without ever feeling sympathy with the character. The character is disposable and a mere conduit for the animator’s skill. It is after all just a figure being manipulated by the hand seen at the beginning of the short.

Building upon the presence of the animator in the animation itself, Winsor McCay inserted his full body and presence into his first two animated shorts, *Little Nemo* (1911) and *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914). By inserting himself, live action, and mixing animation with live photography, McCay creates a division between what is narratively possible. In *Little Nemo*, the short starts out as a traditional narrative. He bets a couple of people that he can make an entirely animated film. He then goes to his workshop and produces these drawings, one at a time. Once he is finished, he shows the film to the people he bet against. This is where the narrative breaks down and also where the film crosses over into animation. Once again, it becomes a series of morphing, twisting figures growing small and bigger as the animator manipulates them. There is no reality to either figure that he draws. Each body motion is unrealistic and the facial features
are exaggerated. For several minutes, this is all that is seen on the screen. Once the figures are complete morphing, the animation stops, and McCay comes back on the screen to settle the bet. Narrative coexists easily along with the rupture.

Figure 7: Still from Cinderella (1922) directed by Lotte Reiniger

These three early animation shorts address the skill and the amusement spectacle that is inherent in the “cinema of attractions.” Early animation becomes just as much about the line of the animation and the skill of the animator executing this line as it is about any narrative structure. Audience consciousness of the short film as animated becomes a part of the entertainment. (Leslie 14) The spectator is aware at all times while watching these films that what they are seeing is not real life. Many hands appear at the beginning of many short animated
films as a result. The animator is present in every frame whether or not he or she is visually present. Emile Cohl’s hands appear at the beginning of Fantasmagorie, and Reiniger’s paper hands appear at the beginning of one of her films, Cinderella (1922). This is one indication that both the animators and the audience know that these animations are being manipulated by humans and are a spectacle. These animations only exist within the hands and skills of their animators. Also this is one way to maintain the artistic resonance of the emerging medium. It is an artist experimenting, not necessarily a source of entertainment for the audience member. Because of this experimentation, the artist is less interested in submerging the audience into plot conceits. As a result of this, the audience is always aware they are watching a film.

The consciousness of the limitations of narrative became a part of not just animation but also a part of avant-garde cinema that emerged in the twenties, especially in Germany. Several filmmakers and artists, such as Paul Wegener, Robert Weine, Walter Ruttmann, Hans Richter, and Viking Eggeling were interested in creating a gulf between the capacities of narrative and non-narrative film in order to explore modernity and political situations. This was a complex and turmoil filled time in Germany, known as the Weimar Republic (1919-1933). World War I devastated the country’s sense of independence and dominance. It bruised the “ego” as well as disfigured the metaphorical “id” of the collective unconsciousness. These filmmakers saw that they could not reconcile the immense poverty and death with standard filmmaking. They could not justify the prevailing narrative in more established filmmaking studios such as Hollywood. They looked back what had come before not just in filmmaking but in literature, theater, and painting in order to make sense of the chaos they were thrown into. For instance, Bertolt Brecht adapted one of his early famous plays, The Threepenny Opera from a play originating in 1728. (Rayns) He was able to see parallels between what was happening in London in 1728 and in
Berlin in 1928. As a result of this frequent borrowing, the political motivations, and the needing to make sense of the chaos, Berlin became an interesting place to start an artistic career. Lotte Reiniger entered into this world, eager to create her art in this swirling world of activity as well as digest the theories of the filmmakers she looked up to.

Lotte Reiniger started working with Max Reinhardt’s avant-garde theater troupe, first, as an actress. However, she quickly found out that she was not a natural actress. She wanted to stay with the theater troupe, so she made herself valuable by creating shadow puppets of all the actors and actresses. They were dazzled by the creations that she had been creating since childhood. She was able to watch back stage while Reinhardt’s crew created chiaroscuro lighting effects on the sparse stages and grand actors. These crew members made false stars twinkle, clouds pass over the fake moon, and intense shades of light and shadows that were all dependent on the character’s mood. (Eisner 48) She would later use these techniques that she witnessed on the stage and translate it to her silhouette films.

Through Max Reinhardt, she met Paul Wegener. Paul Wegener was the star of Max Reinhardt’s theater company. Wegener was interested in exploring how the new medium, film, could change acting. His moment in film history would be solidified by his eventual appearance as the titular Golem in The Golem, (Wegener 1914 and 1920) an early example of German Expressionism. Reiniger was drawn to Wegener because he presented his ideas on filmmaking in a speech that he made in 1916. In this speech he explores what he calls an absolute film. “Wegener… imagined an empty surface on which phantom-like forms would come into being, and on which, in continual evolution, cells would burst open disclosing other cells which would revolve faster and faster until they looked like a fireworks display.” (Eisner 36) He uses several ideas that he presented in his live action films, such as the later version of The Golem, but he
would leave this idea to be completely imagined by Reiniger and her colleagues. Before Wegener attempted a second version of *The Golem*, he directed and starred in a film called *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* (1918). This film adapted the popular folk tale of a man who hypnotizes a multitude of rats with his pipe and who then leads them out of the town. In order to make the film work, Wegener would need a bunch of rats who could be trained to follow him down the road. After several failed attempts, Reiniger attempts her first animation, wooden rats moved one frame at a time. Even at this early stage in her career, Reiniger is associated with folk tales. This would become known popularly as stop motion animation. While this was not the first film to attempt this technique, it was the first film Reiniger realized the potential for making inanimate objects animated. Not only did she help with the stop motion animation, she also produced silhouette title cards for the film. This gave her the first opportunity to see her silhouette creations projected in a film. While these silhouette title cards were not animated, Reiniger gained experience in filmmaking and became interested in the potential to further her silhouette making skills. (Reiniger, 82-84)

Through working with Paul Wegener, Lotte Reiniger was introduced to an experimental animation studio and several soon-to-be influential filmmakers: Carl Koch, Walter Ruttmann, and Hans Richter. Many of these artists were associated loosely with the Bauhaus movement. While Bauhaus was mostly associated with architecture, many artists took their ideas and applied them to their own medium. Bauhaus revolutionized how an artist should be seen. In their manifesto outlining their ideas and rules of the Bauhaus, they pointed out that art is not a profession, there is no essential difference between the artist and the craftsman and that their aim was to create a unified work of art. (Gropius 436-438) Walter Ruttmann and others wrote manifestos on creating a unified film or an absolute film. A film where there were no actors, no
intrusions of the outside world, that everything was created for the celluloid and on the celluloid. It did not exist outside of the celluloid. These filmmakers seemed to be converted by Wegener’s influential speech and to truly believe, at least at this time, that absolute films could only be achieved through animation. (Leslie 50)  

All of these artists were interested in making the absolute film. “Films must become drawings brought to life.” (Leslie 46) These filmmakers saw that only pure cinema could be produced through animation as there was no obvious presence of a human being in the frame. It was the most manipulable and the most controllable medium. Many artists and theorists from this time were interested in making sense of the chaos around them. Effects of World War I, the economic depression, mechanical innovation and the failure of their government to maintain control complicated the Germans’ sense of history. These social issues resulted in a time period that was rapidly modernizing and at the same time trying desperately trying to hold on to the traditions of the folklore of the past. Hans Richter commented in his book The Struggle for the Films: Towards a Socially Responsible Cinema that “content and form are affected by the economy, by the political situation, by the level of technical development and by the changes in public taste as well as by artistic abilities… The cinema developed and perfected its technology on the basis of certain social needs.” (Richter 25) This close association between the craftsman and the artist as well as rapid technical advances produced filmmakers like Lotte Reiniger and Hans Richter.
Reiniger produced several short films before attempting to achieve a long enough film to be considered feature length with her silhouette images. With each film she developed her artistry until she created an apparatus she called a trick table. The trick table that she used for *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* was a complicated construction. It had a wood frame which supported two layers of glass that Reiniger placed her silhouettes on. On the bottom layer is the main action and where her main characters rested. The second layer of glass was where the
background images resided and where the tricks of lightning or twinkling stars were produced. Above both of these plates of glass was the camera that was switched on, recorded a position and then switched off in order for a movement to be achieved. Carl Koch, who had become Reiniger’s husband, operated the camera as Reiniger moved her figures. The trick table was put in an attic with a low ceiling. As a result, Reiniger was moving her figures while resting on her knees. Several hours were needed in order to create a complete sequence. She moved the figures instead of moving the camera when she wanted to tilt up. A smooth movement, a smooth camera, was not something that she could count on. Instead she made her own movements, her own tilting, her own panning and her own closeup shots by making the figures bigger or smaller or using what she would call pan-rails which would allow the background to move while the figure would stay still. She created her own filmic language, a language that was partly borrowed, partly improvised and partly new. With this filmic language she was able to show Prince Achmed ascending into the sky or create a monumental and climactic battle between two magical creatures. She combined her technical know-how with her artistic inclinations to produce, The Adventures of Prince Achmed.

Consequently, Reiniger cannot be completely divorced from the film itself. Her presence is located within every movement that the Prince and the other characters make. Even if her hands cannot be seen like in her earlier short, Cinderella (1920), they are still there. She is the guiding force behind the characters and sometimes it seems their only guiding motivation. It does not seem obvious for instance, that the Prince Achmed would be so easily tricked onto the Mechanical Horse without Reiniger putting him on it. Without her, her characters would not become alive. She studied animal movements by going to the zoo. She would say that the movement of the figure had to be within the body of the animator in order for the figure to truly
move. She had to become the rooster or the hawk or the dancer in order to make their movements make sense.

Figure 9: Still from *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* directed by Lotte Reiniger 1926

As she is animating these figures and making herself a part of the film, Reiniger is also deleting herself as a human. This is a world without any humans. Her figures mimic human attributes but decidedly are not. These figures are a rich black, only some of their facial features are depicted, leaving out cheek bones or eyebrows or sometimes noses. When the figures move, one does not necessarily see the lifting of a foot or the bend of a knee. They are one moment in
one position with both feet planted on the ground and in the next one of their legs are spread in
order to move in unison with their other courtiers. There is no in between movement that can be
based on human physiology. However, “this deletion does not lead to nothingness but to
movement” (Leslie 10), and the spectator mind completes the movement or adds the intermediate
movements between the two figures. In animation, movement is the sole principle of life.
However, the mind can also point out that this movement is not human. These characters will
always be just approaching humanity without ever fully achieving it. Emotions that are not
grandiose do not exist on these characters’ faces. No subtle emotions exist within this world.
They will only be these silhouette figures that do not have life until the animator chooses to once
again imbue them with life. In this way, Reiniger will never be very far from her own creations.
Only through her manipulating her figures come to life.

Therefore movement becomes an important aspect of this film and animation in general.
It is the rule of life. It is the only way to get a vase of flowers to move; otherwise it just sits there
with no reality to it at all. In fact, physical reality is played with and molded in animation. It is
mocked and revered at the same time. Reality becomes a mere representation of filigree
silhouettes and stark colors. Animation reality sets its own logic during this historical phase of
filmmaking. Only within animation can a woman be both a bird and a woman at the same time.
When Prince Ahmed first sees his love, Pari-Banu, she flies on screen in a bird costume. This
costume is so complete that one does not suspect that it will soon become a woman. The bird
soon lands, sheds its feathers and becomes a beautiful naked woman. Within this animated
world, it is par for the course that live action photography could not adequately depict this. At no
moment in live action photography does one suspect that one figure is both bird and woman. It
will only be one and then the other. In animation, nothing is real, therefore everything is real. It is the paradox underlying all completely fabricated worlds. This is the absolute film.

Lotte Reiniger struggled to find a venue to show her finished work. Every major theater turned her movie down. She finally found a theater in Northern Berlin named Volksbuehne. (Pidhainy 13) She was able to get Wolfgang Zeller, the composer of the score, to perform with his orchestra and Bertolt Brecht helped to publicize it with his connections as a newly popular playwright. When it came to the day of the premiere, the theater was overcrowded, the police threatened to shut it down, the lens to the projector broke right before the screening commenced, and the smell of smoke rattled Reiniger into thinking her print was being destroyed in the projector, it wasn’t. (Pidhainy 13-14) Despite the setbacks, the German press praised her work (Pidhainy 14). This did not lead to success in her own country. The German film industry did not know how to sell her film, even at one point selling it as a detective film. She had to go outside of industry in order to really achieve anything that resembled success. In Paris, she premiered at a theater, which ran the film for three months before being transferred to another theater that ran it for an additional six months. Because of these setbacks, it would take the film fifty years to earn back the money that was invested in the film. (Raganelli)
Lotte Reiniger went back to making short films. She and her husband, Carl Koch, left Germany in the early thirties. They were determined to get away from the growing influence of fascism. She was not Jewish, but still felt that the Fascists were harming her home country too much for her to continue to be a part of it. They were restricting the artistic endeavors that she grew to love so much. They traveled around Europe, with Carl Koch getting work writing scripts for directors like Jean Renoir, while Reiniger got commissions for anyone willing to pay for her whimsical designs including, at one point, the face cream company, Nivea. After the second World War and a return to Germany in order to take care of her mother, Reiniger saw a career resurgence. She had found her perfect medium in television. Television had exploded on to popular culture and became a way to entertain children for long stretches of time as early as 1945. Her silhouette films were shown frequently on both British and American Public Programming. (Raganelli) Fairy tales and myths continued to be her main source of inspiration,
using *Peter and the Beanstalk, Hänsel and Gretel*, and *Sleeping Beauty* tales in order to create her beautiful silhouette worlds. She was able to use this stable medium to finally settle down in Britain and create a new animation table that she would use for the rest of her life. Just like her previous “trick table,” she wanted to use this new table to make another feature length film on her own terms. However, that day never came. She was unable to find secure funding for films. However most devastating to this was in 1963, when Carl Koch passed away. She lost her devoted assistant, cameraperson and cheerleader. After this devastating death, Reiniger would rarely animate more silhouette films, choosing instead to create shadow puppet theaters that she would tour with and other theatrical ventures. She would also lecture on the art of puppetry, happy to share the knowledge that she had in this medium. (Raganelli) She would receive several awards and galleries in Germany would mount her silhouettes in exhibitions dedicated herself solely. Her silhouettes from *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* were displayed in art galleries and the film played from time to time in art theaters in muddy copies with most of the color washed out, but she passed before her work major contribution to film history, especially animation history was recognized and re-evaluated. It was not until DVD technology was available would her film get completely restored, reviving the vibrant colors of the background and the original score by Wolfgang Zeller.11

There were many obstacles that prevented Lotte Reiniger from becoming as important of a figure as Disney was to the animation world by creating more feature length animated films. Some of the obstacles were due to her personal life. During her peak creative years, she was financially unstable and moving around chasing film commissions with her husband. She had to take care of her mother during the war which necessitated her moving back to Germany. (Raganelli) Because of the constant movement, she had to take commissions that could be
executed with just herself and her small portable trick tables. Out of necessity she needed to refine her animation techniques, making them as lean and easy to execute as possible. However, it still took her several weeks of long hours to execute one short film. Time was not on her side. While she employed a couple of assistants from time to time, she mostly dependent on herself and her husband in order to make her silhouettes move.

Complicating the precarious financial situation was her conflicting loves. She loved animating films, but she also loved the theatre. She discovered silhouettes by way of the puppet theaters of her youth. She was drawn to shadow theaters more and more as she grew older. She researched the history of shadow puppetry, put on dozens of puppet shows with her colleagues and toured Europe talking about the importance of preserving the tradition of shadow puppetry, and created a fascinating book about her process.¹²

However, the most significant reason she never returned to feature length filmmaking was the changing atmosphere in which animation was perceived. This change was completely evolved within the industry itself. Animation studios became a presence in the film industry around the time Reiniger put her finishing touches on her Prince. (Bendazzi 62) Disney, the Fleischers, and several animators and businessmen created animation studios to produce short films to program and market along with feature length live action films. They became indelible to the film-going experience. By the mid-thirties, a film goer would experience a newsreel, a short film, and an animated film before seeing the main feature. These cartoons, as they became to be known, appealed to the children in the audience and the childish tendencies of the adults. They were similar to what Émile Cohl started with his Fantasmagorie (1908). In many of them the protagonists were animals with distorting figures and a seemingly incapacity to die even when faced with many options to. In 1929, Steamboat Willie (Disney) unveiled Mickey Mouse
as one of Disney’s most valuable creations. In this seven minute short, Mickey stretches himself in order to stay in front of the steamboat wheel while he is met with resistance from the very large boss figure. A goat can eat a musical score and a guitar and magically become a phonograph that Mickey can manipulate in order to get Minnie to dance. He creates an orchestra out of the animals hanging out on his boat in order to entertain his love, Minnie. He is able to make a skinny cow fat by stuffing a pitchfork’s worth of straw into her. Potatoes shrink to one-third their size as Mickey peals them. All of these distortions of the real world can trace their origins back to Cohl.

Despite their origins and their surface similarity, there is some difference between Mickey in Steamboat Willie and the figures of Fantasmagorie. Even though Mickey is not named in the short and neither is Minnie or any of the other characters, he has characteristics that make him distinct from the rest of the characters in the film. He is wearing his shorts with two big round buttons on them, his tail wraps around him and becomes a personality itself, and his wide eyes, prominent nose and two round ears all define him as a personality in a way that the boss figure does not have. He is clearly the protagonist of the short and when he is tossed carelessly down the stairs and forced to load up the animals instead of driving, we feel sympathy for him. Mickey was not alone. Characters like Betty Boop and Koko the Clown started showing up in repeated cartoons and their personalities began to be more fleshed out and realized. The evolution towards more commercially viable and human appearing animation starts here.

A factor contributing to this evolution was the need to keep up with the demand and make the animated shorts affordable. Therefore, studios developed and perfected cel animation. The cel process involved drawing characters on transparent celluloid sheets which were placed over painted background scenes. (Bendazzi, 20) This animation technique is similar to the way
Reiniger worked and how she was able to animate her figures. However, she did not do this as a time saving measure, like the studios did. She used it as a personal signature and developed her system as an extension of her artistic expression.

The studios, such as Walt Disney Studios or the Fleischer Studios, used this technique to achieve the exact opposite. They took the cel animation technique and broke it down. Each animator would be responsible for only one part of the overall frame. One animator would draw the background, another would draw the hammer, another would draw the mouse raising the hammer and the last would draw the cat that was about get smashed by the hammer. This process resembled putting together a model-T car in the Ford Motor Company. Not one person can take credit for this image. It was actually four people. To the casual viewer of these cartoons, there was no indication that four people had animated it in the final image. The result was a streamlining of technique that resulted in bland animation and no individual artistic flourishes. Many animators would work long hours at drawing tables in factory-like conditions, drawing the same thing over and over again. The originality of the hand, on display in Émile Cohl or Winsor McKay’s output, disappeared. Unless a viewer was looking closely at the titles, Disney’s mouse figures could easily transform into the Fleischer’s mouse figures. They both had distinctive big eyes, small mouths, outsized shoes, and moved in a way that could be described as “herky jerky.” Animation moved out of the founding stages and into the studio system that plagued live action filmmaking, in which big production movies were made more by committee then having an individual style. Becoming an animator meant getting rid of any identity as an artist. One became just another cog in the machine, even if that machine had a mousy squeak.

Walt Disney became the cultural figure that most represented animation history for the general public. Despite his unseen factory of dozens of people working at drawing tables for
little money and no credit, he became the face of animation. Disney would barely ever pick up a
pen to draw his figures, but would rely on others to make his company the leading animation
studio. For his first feature length film, he tripled his staff and produced about two million cels,
which only 250,000 cels were used. (Leslie 134) Only the most uniformly perfect cels could be
deemed worthy.

Animation proved to be a good business for Disney. His goofy mouse, Mickey, was
attracting several serious funders. These serious funders wanted animation that reflected more of
the reality around us. Therefore in 1937, Walt Disney would release Snow White and the Seven
Dwarfs, a picture based on a Brothers Grimm folk tale and starring a very beautiful drawing of a
woman with human features. While some aspects of the humans in the film are exaggerated, the
spectator never lost sight of the characters’ all too human emotions. Their faces were expressive,
their wants and needs were driven by human desire and greed, and at the end of the picture there
is something of a moral, which involves the faults of vanity and true love. Many young women
could dream to be just like Snow White with a Prince Charming of their own. Escapism into the
animated picture had reached its heights. The subversive aspects of animation had given way to
conformism. Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs was such a huge success that Walt Disney would
continue to focus on films based on folk tales in the animated world and leave his Mickey
Mouse’s nonrealistic world behind, for the most part. 14 Disney would separate himself almost
completely with what became before him. This immense success results in Disney becoming the
figure to emulate, not Walter Ruttmann, Émile Cohl or most importantly, Lotte Reiniger. These
important animators disappeared into largely historical references.

Disney’s technique became the industry standard because it was a model that made
money. It was easily reproducible, able to employ many people of varying abilities towards a
singular vision and mimicked the actions of real life films already had in place for several decades. Reiniger’s animation technique, by contrast, was not easily reproducible. It required nimble hands and slow stop motion-like animation with figures that are not immediately expressive. Her technique took time and time always meant money in the filmmaking world. Therefore her influence on animation was not immediate and nor was it widespread. The Adventures of Prince Achmed surfaced from time to time, but a full scale restoration of the film did not occur until 2001 by Milestone Video Releasing Company. The film was present in most textbooks and became a point on an animation time line dominated by more successful entrepreneurs, such as Disney. It was talked about instead of seen. The film was a strange blip in the straight-forward evolution in animation from chaotic improvisation to an assembly line of fantasy.

Evolving technology is not a bad development, especially when it comes to animation. In the mid-nighties, computer technology evolved enough to be able to be used in animating figures. At first crude and not more than rotating blocks, the technology evolved fast enough to become an industry standard. It became so widespread that many studios who pioneered the cel animation technique began making it obsolete by shutting these arms down and focusing on computer-generated imagery or CGI. With this domination and artistic evolution, emulating several different animation styles became easier. What at one time would involve years and years of work became a couple months of labor. More and more often animators would reference diverging animation styles in their work. They are able to mimic, borrow, and comment on traditional techniques just like Reiniger did in her work. This is what is happening with Reiniger’s animation at the moment. Rebecca Sugar, creator of an animated show called the Steven Universe (2013-present) on Cartoon Network, has borrowed Reiniger’s techniques and
has been vocal about her influence on her work. “She’s fascinating to me, because she was doing something when animation was so new that there really wasn’t a precedent for what it had to look like or be, and she invented something that’s never really been done again in that beautiful of a way.” (Jusino) Sugar uses the intricate paper cut designs to tell the history of one of her characters, Ruby. She uses this technique as a way to demarcate a world completely outside of the one she created in her universe.
Another set of examples are the cycle of animated short films known as *Bendito Machine* I-V (Malis, 2006-2014). Created by Jossie Malis, these short films use the same visual style as Reiniger in order to sketch a universe perpetually scarred by technology. By using black figures set in profile against stark color designs, he is able to use this visual style to produce a new myth that incorporates our modern anxieties of political influence, technology advancements and ecological disasters. He considers his films silhouette films even if he did not make them out of paper:

“Yes, I consider my films silhouette. Independent of the technical resource, they are based on designs previously developed on paper, using original drawings mixed with real references, or even real persons profiles in some cases. The only difference is that I use a Wacom to made them instead of paper and a cutter, but the principle, at least for me, goes through the same process. With digital animation its possible to speed up the process, but
in my case it doesn’t translate to that because I’m used to work with a flexible schedule and I use to work by myself in a slow pace.” (Malis)

Independent filmmakers are now able to create complicated animated worlds while still being able to comment on what has come before them. More than ever, animation is not seen as being relegated to a children’s world. Just as Prince Achmed eventually discovers how to work the mechanical horse that he is stuck on, so are modern animators learning to recreate Lotte Reiniger’s sumptuous world and use it comment on our modern society.

“When animation finds its own form, and not a borrowed form, when it concedes flatness not the fakery of depth, it really gets deep into actuality, its own and ours.” (Leslie 199) Lotte Reiniger creates a reality all her own. She fabricates, exaggerates, borrows and translates her figures and world until it is completely unique and her own. She uses figures completely outside of time and space to comment on her current world. She is able to position the viewer into a questioner and admirer of art. She cannot but become a part of the pictures herself. She overwhelms the viewer with the sumptuous visuals that she produces with her nimble hands. She asks her viewers to “take a leap out of now.” (Leslie 27) Her flat characters develop a work that we as spectators can merely peak into. We become like Prince Achmed when he first sees his love, Pari Banu. Our eyes widen and we cannot take our eyes off such a beautiful piece of film artistry.
End Notes:

1. For most of my textual references of *The Arabian Nights*, I will be using the Robert Burton translation, reissued by The Modern Library in 2004.

2. Galland was the first translator of the *The Arabian Nights*, known to his audience as *Mille et Nuits* in 1704. (Irwin 42) He continued to publish 12 more volumes in the following years until the last one was published after he had passed in 1717. For a more detailed history of Galland and the difficulty of translation, see Robert Irwin’s *The Arabian Nights: A Companion*. (2004)

3. There were many more translators in many different languages. Burton and Lane were however the most popular during their times. Their translations are still being actively published while other translations are forgotten.

4. “A frame story is a story constituting a frame for inclusion of one or more stories.” (*The Arabian Nights: An Encyclopedia* 554) This means that a story is started then paused in order to tell another story only to come back to the original story once the story within a story is finished. The device originates in literature but has lent itself well the medium of film as well.

5. The most pressing and ever present political situation that Germans of the Weimar Republic Era were dealing with was losing World War I and the aftermath of this. Inflation, huge loss of life, shell shock, and underemployment plagued almost every citizen of Germany. Both Siegfried Kracauer Lotte Eisner deal with this time period and how the films of this era
reflect the growing anxiety and the eventual rise of Nazism in *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947) and *The Haunted Screen* (1952).

6. Max Reinhardt was a theater director and actor starting from 1907 in Berlin. He had his own theater where the performances changed every night and he was so popular that according to Lotte Eisner “that in solid middle-class families everybody skipped the newspaper headlines to read Alfred Kerr’s article on the previous night’s performance.” (47) He has been called by many as the father of Expressionist cinema because many of his collaborators would borrow his techniques for the stage, such as chiaroscuro lighting, and adapt them to the cinema. This created a distinctive look that Expressionist films have been known for ever since. (Eisner 44-48)

7. There are two versions of *The Golem* that Paul Wegener produced. The first version was made in 1914 and is now presumed lost. The 1914 version seemed to have mixed the legend of the Golem of Prague with modern day Prague. In 1920, Wegener made another version that sticks closer to the legend. This version is the one that is viewable today. (Eisner 41)

8. *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* is also one of Wegener’s films that has not survived. It exists only in bits and pieces. Luckily Reiniger’s silhouette opening titles still exist and can be seen reproduced in her book *Shadow Puppets, Shadow Theatres, and Shadow Films* (1970).

9. Walter Ruttmann wrote several manifestos about film, however the most significant one on his early career was an essay he wrote in 1919 or 1920 titled “Painting with Time.” He saw moving painting (or an animated film) as the ultimate reflection of the age’s defining characteristics: speed and tempo. (Leslie 46)

10. Walter Ruttmann would reject animation as anything that had any political resonance. He would decide to take a more Vertovian approach and made *Berlin: Symphony of a City*
(1927), using abstract montage techniques to display real people going about their business on the streets of Berlin.

11. In 2001, Milestone Film and Video released a completely restored *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* onto DVD. This restored version was very difficult because a number of setbacks. There was no original German version still available and no camera negative had been preserved. A colored nitrate positive was found at the National Film and Television Archive at the British Film Institute. This was what this restoration was based off of. Some of the color had been preserved, but luckily there were hand written instructions on how to render the rest of the color to the original. The intertitles were gone, so the restorers had to rely on censorship titles from Germany. The complete original score by Wolfgang Zeller was found and preserved in the library of Congress in Washington, D.C. (Pidhainy, 4)

12. See Lotte Reiniger’s *Shadow Puppets, Shadow Theatres, and Shadow Films.*

13. The first patent for the cel process was made by Earl Hurd in 1914. However, John Randolph Bray hired Hurd and made him partner in the Bray-Hurd Patent Company in order to acquire the patent. Thus both of these people are connected to the invention of the process. (Bendazzi 20)

14. One exception to this is the 1940 production of *Fantasia.* While it could be considered a collection of short films animated with Mickey Mouse as its protagonist, the film does not have a plot that is sustained for the entire run time. It is also without any dialogue, choosing instead to use traditional classical music and visuals in order to show emotions.

15. In 2013, Disney chief executive Bob Iger spoke at a shareholder’s meeting saying that “none of the studio’s animation companies was working on 2D, hand-drawn material for the big screen. While Iger did not rule out returning in the future to the style which made the
company famous, the long gestation period for Hollywood animated productions means a
gap of several years before any new film might emerge.” (Child, 2013) This was followed by
a layoff of most of the 2D animation staff, many of whom had. (Amidi 2013)

Books and Web Resources Cited


Films Cited


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