

Dorian Gray in the Mirror of the Yellow Press (Dorian Gray im Spiegel der Boulevardpresse, 1984)

Katharina Sykora

dir., prod., screenplay, photography Ulrike Ottinger; music Peer Raben, Patricia Jünger. 35mm, color, 150 mins. Ulrike Ottinger Filmproduktion, distrib. Basis-Film-Verleih.

Ulrike Ottinger's film *Dorian Gray in the Mirror of the Yellow Press* was considered an important work in the rising German Women's Film Movement, which came into being in the 1960s. However, unlike most of her female colleagues, Ottinger did not dramatize everyday problems of women through realism, but rather created artistic allegories to exemplify wide-ranging political power structures (Meyer; Kuzniar). This placed her in the group of the *auteur* filmmakers of the New German Cinema (Hansen) and the international avant-garde.

Dorian Gray in the Mirror of the Yellow Press is part of the so-called Berlin trilogy, which Ottinger started in the late 1970s, showing urban landscapes of the German metropolis as backgrounds of her narratives. Aesthetically, these films and their protagonists are montages of »realistic« and fictitious components. They ostentatiously show their construction and deconstruction as ongoing melodrama. This creates a meta-level that invests the film's characters and story with excessive theatricality, exuberant emotions, and permanent metamorphoses. The internal emotional conflicts of the conventional melodramatic personae are turned inside out: They emerge as ruptures on the surface of Ottinger's figures and as ongoing narrative discontinuities. Hereby the melodramatic structures of genre, medium, gender, and colonialism become visible as driving forces both in film and society at large.

At first sight, Ottinger's *Dorian Gray* seems to adapt the main character of Oscar Wilde's eponymous novel. It turns out, however, that Ottinger's film has two protagonists of equal power and similar descent: Dr. Mabuse, the female manager of a global



DFF – Deutsches Filminstitut & Filmmuseum /
Ulrike Ottinger Filmproduktion

press imperium, owes her name to the male figure of Norbert Jacques' novel *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler* (1921), which became famous through Fritz Lang's expressionist film adaptation (1922). Like her predecessor, Dr. Mabuse (played by *nouvelle vague* star Delphine Seyrig) is a ruthless and brilliant villain, greedy for power and willing to perfect her worldwide media manipulations. She not only wants to find a person whose scandalous life she can exploit for her magazines and TV shows, but she herself seeks to create such a figure, make it famous, and then destroy it as it pleases her. This Faustian endeavor finds its perfect counterpart in the naive, narcissistic Dorian (played by the famous fashion model of the 1960s, Veruschka von Lehndorff), whose character is an allegorical surface composed of cinematic, literary, and artistic references. On the walls of his modernist apartment hang photos of his »ancestors,« which happen to be portraits of Hollywood movie stars. His personality is a mere accumulation of hollow facets of art and culture. Every day he attends courses in art history and literature, or philanthropic meetings, all of which have no impact on him. The protagonists of Ottinger's film seem to complement each other perfectly. But after a period of symbiosis, Dr. Mabuse and Dorian Gray start an agonal combat for who will kill whom.

One of Dr. Mabuse's strategies to capitalize on Dorian is to pair him off with a beautiful actress, arrange for an erotic encounter, release sex photos of them to the global press, and then follow their melodramatic break up and Dorian's end. To initiate the first meeting of the future couple, Mabuse invites Dorian to an opera in which the young woman has a leading role. This scene inaugurates an interlacing of theatrical and diegetic space, of cinematic and historic time, and of nature and culture. The melodrama on stage functions as a mirror of the power relations between Dorian and Dr. Mabuse (Mueller; Sykora). The setting itself is telling: The stage is not a built architecture but instead consists of different natural environments. A painted frame showing paradisiacal scenes adopted from the symbolist world of 19th century artist Gustave Moreau has been put in front of a seashore or desert. The theater lodge in which Dorian and Dr. Mabuse sit is a curved cave in a bizarre rock face. The opera they watch is historically situated in the times of early colonialism, when the Spanish king conquered the Canary Islands and enslaved the indigenous people while the inquisition proselytized or killed them. The infante de la Cerda, however, falls in love with Andamana, the beautiful princess of the island, and would have lived there happily forever if the inquisitor would not have destroyed their unruly bliss. Furthermore, the opera's three main characters are played by the same actresses who also play in the film (Seyrig, Veruschka, and Blumenschein): The melodrama on stage, therefore, affects the characters in front of it in the same way that Ottinger's film affects the film's actual audience. With the actresses transcending the theatre frame and entering into the filmic space and vice versa, and with the natural and the theatrical space being both stage and frame, content and context, the cinematic mechanisms of naturalization and artificialization become visible. This does not necessarily dissolve the audience's emotions but perhaps even heightens their delight: Breaking up the programmatic invisibility of realistic cinema's construction, the frame uncovers melodrama as a mode that at once stirs strong emotions and imparts aesthetic knowledge to the beholder.

The theatrical »mirror scene« shows how denaturalization and reflexivity are at work in every scene, setting, and figure of Ottinger's film. But while the framing makes the melodramatic structure of the movie visible, the opera scene also suspends affirmative gender roles, »enlightened« media criticism, and one-sided postcolo-

nial reasoning. Both protagonists are double gendered: Delphine Seyrig as Madame Mabuse being both the female performer and personification of a male villain, while Dorian represents the perfect male Dandy impersonated by a real-life female fashion model. On the other hand, Tabea Blumenschein and her alter egos are embodiments of hyper femininity. As versatile figures, they fit in variable historical frames and comply with any international audience addressed by Dr. Mabuse's media. Ottinger's film thus shows global melodrama and global media as congenial power instruments that create perfect fake characters and fake news. These are then distributed worldwide via print, TV, and film through special agents for each country whose selling success is surveyed by a central computer lab. Therefore, Dr. Mabuse's supranational media empire cannot only destroy her creature Dorian but also homogenizes cultures and undermines the distinction between true and false.

Ottinger's film would remain within binary structures if the agonal combat between Dr. Mabuse and Dorian Gray did not disperse in an infinite hall of mirrors. After several mutual murderous attacks, they both mount several comebacks as their own revenants. In the course of their killings and revivals they seem to gradually adopt some of the other's traits. At the end of the film, Dorian shows us the journal of Dr. Mabuse, with the headline: »Dorian Gray Dead.« He seems to have become the master of his own eternal narrative and persona, which is by no means truer than that created by Dr. Mabuse. Therefore, his »last words« in the film are the same as those of his former master: »Operation Mirror can begin.« And we might add: With the rewinding of the film and the next screening of *Dorian Gray in the Mirror of the Yellow Press*, »operation melodrama« can start again and again. Here and everywhere in the world, before any kind of audience (Gledhill and Williams 2018).

References

- Gledhill, Christine, and Williams, Linda, eds. 2018. *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hansen, Miriam. 1984. »Visual Pleasure, Fetishism and the Problem of Feminine/Feminist Discourse: Ulrike Ottinger's *Ticket of No Return*.« *New German Critique*, no. 31, 95-108.
- Kuzniar, Alice A. 2000. »Allegory, Androgyny, Anamorphosis: Ulrike Ottinger's Dorian Gray.« In *The Queer German Cinema*, edited by Alice Kuzniar, 39-156. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Meyer, Eva. 1995. »Ottingers Artefakt.« In *Ulrike Ottinger: Texte und Dokumente*, edited by Freunde der Deutschen Kinemathek, 7-8. Berlin: Freunde der Deutschen Kinemathek.
- Mueller, Roswitha. 1985. »The Mirror and the Vamp.« *New German Critique*, no. 34, 176-93.
- Sykora, Katharina. 1996. »Die Über-Marionette im Kino: Dorian Gray im Spiegel der Boulevardpresse (Ulrike Ottinger, 1984).« *Meteor*, no. 4, 77-82.

