

## **Viking Eggeling and the Quest for Universal Language**

Otto G. Carlsund, GAN, Jean Börlin and the Swedish Ballet of Paris, functioned as a kind of mobile Swedish avant-garde in exile, performing briefly on the European art scene, but still close to important events and figures. Another artist from Sweden who contributed to the experimental film and avant-garde culture of the 1920s was Viking Eggeling (1880–1925). As discussed in the Introduction, Eggeling would in a teleological historiography represent the beginning as well as the end of Swedish experimental film. His contribution is an anomaly in Swedish film and art history, and at the same time ‘the most typical avant-garde’.

Viking Eggeling was born in Lund in 1880.<sup>77</sup> His father was a German immigrant who probably left his home village in Niedersachsen during 1848. In Lund he established himself as a musician, opened a music shop in 1881, and edited a popular song book. Viking was the youngest of the Eggeling children, altogether they were twelve. Young Viking was mostly interested in music and sports, and left school with mediocre skills. At the age of sixteen he left his home in Sweden for Germany, in order to train as a book-keeper. He stayed for a while in Germany, then moved to Switzerland and after that to Italy. He studied art history and was later appointed as a drawing teacher in Switzerland. In 1911 he went to Paris where he engaged in the art life, and met, among others, Jean (Hans) Arp and Amadeo Modigliani. Modigliani painted his portrait in 1916.<sup>78</sup>

During the First World War his life was nomadic; he lived in Italy and Switzerland. He was involved in the Dada movement, and exhibited at Cabaret Voltaire in 1916. Later, in 1919, Eggeling became member of the group “Das neue Leben” together with, among others, Arp and Marcel Janco. He was one of the founders of the group “Radikale Künstler” in Zürich in 1919. He met several new friends and colleagues; Raul Hausmann was probably the most important among the Dadaists for Eggeling.

Hans Richter met Viking Eggeling in 1918. Richter’s role in the Eggeling saga is contentious, but it can be valuable to consider his own version, since it gives a snapshot of the young Swede by one of his contemporaries:

I spent two years, 1916–1918, groping for the principles of what made for rhythm in painting. [...] In 1918, Tristan Tzara brought me together with a Swedish painter from Ascona, who, as he told me, also experimented with similar problems. His name was Viking Eggeling. His drawings stunned me with their extraordinary logic and beauty, a new beauty. He used *contrasting* elements to *dramatize* two (or more) complexes of forms and used *analogies* in these same complexes to *relate* them again. In varying proportions, number, intensity, position, etc., new contrasts and new analogies

were born in perfect order, until there grew a kind of 'functioning' between the different form units, which made you feel movement, rhythm, continuity... as clear as in Bach. That's what I saw immediately!<sup>79</sup>

During the years 1915 to 1917 Eggeling had started to work with the picture scrolls *Horisontal-vertikal orkester* ("Horizontal-vertical orchestra") and *Diagonalsymfoni* ("Diagonal symphony"). Richter accompanied him and later recalled: "In these scrolls we tried to build different phases of transformation as if they were phrases of a symphony or fugue".<sup>80</sup>

The ambition of Eggeling and Richter was to create an abstract visual language, universal and boundless. In 1920 they drafted the proclamation "Universelle Sprache", ("Universal language"). No copy of this manifesto has survived, but Richter later published a summary:

**This pamphlet elaborated our thesis that abstract form offers the possibility of a language above and beyond all national language frontiers. The basis for such language would lie in the identical form perception in all human beings and would offer the promise of a universal art as it has never existed before. With careful analysis of the elements, one should be able to rebuild men's vision into a spiritual language in which the simplest as well as the most complicated, emotions as well as thoughts, objects as well as ideas would find a form.**<sup>81</sup>

Eggeling developed, inspired by contemporaries like Kandinsky, Malevitch and Hausmann, a theory of his own, which he formulated in some brief articles and notes. Another source of inspiration was French philosopher Henri Bergson whose *L'evolution créatrice* (1907) was published in 1912 in a German translation. Amongst Eggeling's posthumous notes there is a manuscript, "Film", which consists almost solely of quotations from Bergson. It was the hope of Eggeling to recreate "*la durée*", the flow of the present, through the cinematic medium. Through reduction he wanted to create a unique language: "Artistic richness is not to be found in an arbitrary innovation, but in formal transformation of the most simple motifs."<sup>82</sup>

Eggeling and Richter at last found some financial support from Ufa in Berlin in 1920, and Eggeling made a first version of a film based upon *Horisontal-vertikal orkester*. These experiments were described by Théo van Doesburg in an article in *De Stijl*, and were also discussed by Eggeling himself in an article, "Theoretical presentations of the art of movement", which he published 1921 in the Hungarian journal *MA*.<sup>83</sup> A Swedish journalist, Birger Brinck-E:son (1901–1937), describes the film in an article in *Filmjournalen*, 1923, as about ten minutes long, consisting of two thousand drawings, and characterises the film as a "symphony of lines".<sup>84</sup> The musical analogy is found

in Eggeling's own writings, and it is obvious that his aim was to create a visual counterpart to music.

*Horisontal-vertikal orkester* is lost and was never shown in public. The support from Ufa was withdrawn after a while, and Eggeling had to produce his next film by himself, together with his assistant, Erna Niemeyer. At the same time he broke with Richter. He suffered from illness as well as financial problems, but was able to finish his work. The film which was to become *Symphonie Diagonale* ("Diagonal symphony"), was made with a simple cut-out technique where he used shapes of tin foil, filmed frame by frame.<sup>85</sup> On 5 November 1924 Eggeling had a private screening of the film, and on 3 May 1925 the film had its first public screening at Ufa Palast in Berlin, together with films by Richter, Léger, Ruttman, Clair and others, under the banner "Der absolute Film". Sixteen days later Viking Eggeling died from septic angina, weakened by infection and a hard life.

Several different copies of *Symphonie Diagonale* exist, and it is difficult to ascertain which version was screened at Ufa Palast. The tragic story of the different versions and the part played by Hans Richter is told by O'Konor and others. This basic material problem leads to questions concerning the interpretative level. O'Konor sees the film in the light of the artistic philosophy of Eggeling where his quest for a universal alphabet of sorts is essential. Another analysis is presented by film historian Gösta Werner and musicologist Bengt Edlund, based on a restoration of the film. Werner describes the film as a sonata:

*Diagonal Symphony* starts with an 'exposition' in which several episodes establish the various pictorial themes or motifs, and in which the dialectical opposition between the determined first and weaker second theme, basic to sonata form, is replicated by means of angular and rounded shapes. Then follows a 'development' characterised by complex, multi-motivic pictures undergoing several changes simultaneously, a kind of visual polyphony. The material of the exposition reappears in condensed form as a 'recapitulation', and finally there is a fairly extended section with further metamorphoses of complex pictures, corresponding to the 'coda', the (optional) closing part of the sonata scheme.<sup>86</sup>

Malin Wahlberg combines the different perspectives in a discussion concerning the concept of 'pure visual rhythm', which she traces in the experimental cinema of the 1920s.<sup>87</sup> The work of Eggeling is, according to her, an important example of the "visualization of musical rhythm".<sup>88</sup>

*Symphonie Diagonale* was acknowledged with great acclaim within the contemporary European avant-garde. Eggeling is often considered with Richter, whose *Rhythmus 21* (1921) was made with the help of Ufa. The difference between the two of them has been formulated as that "the screen was a blackboard



to Eggeling and a window to Richter”.<sup>89</sup> A way to interpret this is to claim that Eggeling was, in fact, more interested in language than the world depicted; the interface was the world. Michael O’Pray sees Eggeling’s geometric shapes as “complex imaginative abstractions reminiscent of both hieroglyphs and at times, mundane objects like combs and jugs, as if they were ‘symbolic traces’ of existent objects”, but without “Kandinsky’s compositional overallness.”<sup>90</sup> Malcolm Le Grice argues that these qualities make Eggeling a forerunner of computer film art.<sup>91</sup> *Symphonie Diagonale* is, according to Le Grice:

**[...] in many respects eminently suitable to have been made by a computer. It is largely linear and composed of simple abstract elements which are put together in a gradual formation of a single complex abstract unit. Not only is the image one which could be output on present computers, but, more importantly, the kinds of relationships and animated developments could have been analysed and programmed.**<sup>92</sup>

A. L. Rees points out that *Symphonie Diagonale* “bridges the two kinds of cine-poems of the 1920s and 1930s, the camera-eye films of Chomette and Dulac and the fully abstract films of the German group”.<sup>93</sup> Rees makes clear that the film is truly intermedial or interartial in its nature: “*Diagonal Symphony* is a delicate dissection of almost art deco tones and lines, its intuitive rationalism shaped by cubist art, Bergson’s philosophy of duration and Kandinsky’s theory of synaesthesia, all of which are referred to in Eggeling’s written notes.”<sup>94</sup>

*Symphonie Diagonale* is now part of the avant-garde canon and acknowledged as an essential element in Swedish film history. But it was a long process becoming part of a Swedish heritage; in fact first, after World War II, when Eggeling became a symbolic figure for the young cineasts and filmmakers. This can be exemplified with the important exhibition and festival “Apropå Eggeling” which was the opening event of the museum of contemporary art in Stockholm, Moderna Museet, in May 1958. In the exhibition catalogue Eggeling was described as the main character of the Swedish film avant-garde.<sup>95</sup> Some years earlier Peter Weiss had published his seminal book on avant-garde cinema, but he treats Eggeling somewhat harshly, mainly noting that his film was the first animated and abstract work, and putting a lot more emphasis on Clair and Léger, not to mention the German expressionists.

Otto Carlsund and Viking Eggeling were two artists who left Sweden for the continent where they were acknowledged, at least Eggeling, while they were forgotten or marginalized in the culture of their native land. They were not outcasts, but they were not admitted into the circle until later. There are several reasons for this delay of the cultural modernisation process; it is partly due to the lack of an urban culture in Sweden, at least in comparison with Berlin and Paris. Certainly it also has to do with the ethnic homogeneity of

Swedish culture and its protectionist strategies towards influences from the rest of the world.

When studying popular Swedish film journals from the beginning of the twentieth century, one can trace a specific ironic mode when confronting modernism. American mainstream film culture was soon the matrix for the understanding of the film medium, and in cartoons and columns the filmic avant-garde of Europe was ridiculed in a harmless but still negative way. ‘Cubism’, ‘Expressionism’ and ‘Futurism’ were terms that were easily attached to everything incomprehensible and foreign.<sup>96</sup> This kind of context turned artists like Carlsund, Eggeling and de Maré into foreigners, and expelled them from the national public sphere.

### **The Lost Arabesques of Reinhold Holtermann**

There is always another history to be told about blind alleys and unfulfilled dreams. The artist Reinhold Holtermann (1899–1960) represents the possibilities of a richer Swedish experimental film culture during the 1920s.

As early as 1922 Holtermann, born in a wealthy family, is said to have been making pictorial collages in the same vein as the ones by contemporaries GAN and Erik Olson, but he probably destroyed these works.<sup>97</sup> He was given a substandard gauge film camera as a gift during this time, and made several home movies.<sup>98</sup> For an event at Konstnärsklubben (“The artists’ club”) in Stockholm, 1928, he edited two reels, *Arabesk I* and *Arabesk II*. The films have been described as “associating elements” in a “half-mechanical rhapsody”.<sup>99</sup> Unfortunately, no copies of the films seem to have survived, and there are no stills to rely on. The films were re-edited into a single work in 1956, probably by art historian and writer Hans Eklund (b. 1921) who assisted producer and filmmaker Lennart Ehrenborg at Artfilm, using one of the few existing optical printers in Scandinavia in that day. The 5 minute version, *Arabesk I & II*, was it seems, destroyed or lost when the production company, Artfilm, was somewhat later sold.<sup>100</sup> There are no physical traces left of the film, not even reviews, but viewers who remember the screenings mention Holtermann’s use of city footage: streets, facades, windows, combined in a collage, often very abruptly edited, with style as parameter rather than narration.

In the Holtermann estate there are several home movies and other films. Reinhold Holtermann shot three types of films. First, he made conventional home movies, portraying his family in Stockholm and on journeys; second, he made short comedies and puppet animations, most of them only a few minutes long, often with a twist of bizarre humour. The ‘features’ involved his family, for example, the little crime comedy “Klockan” (“The watch”) shot at the end of the 1920s.<sup>101</sup> Third, he shot films mostly during his travels as a

- gen". Müllender, Yannik et al (eds.) *Peter Weiss. Grenzgänger zwischen den Künsten*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2007; Hauke Lange Fuchs (ed.). *Peter Weiss und der Film. Eine Dokumentation zur Retrospektive der 28. Nordischen Filmtage Lübeck vom 30. Oktober bis 2. November 1986*. Lübeck, 1986. A Swedish doctoral thesis on documentary filmmaker Stefan Jarl deals briefly with the documentaries by Weiss: Ingrid Esping. *Dokumentärfilmerna som tidsresa – Modstrilogin*. Lund: KFS, 2007, pp. 51–70.
60. Torsten Jungstedt. *Kapten Grogg och hans vänner: Om Victor Bergdahl, Emil Åberg, M R Liljeqvist och Paul Myrén, som alla var med om den tecknade svenska stumfilmen*. Stockholm: Sveriges Radios Förlag/Svenska Filminstitutet 1973; Adam Marko-Nord och Claes Jurander. *Om animation*. Göteborg: Filmkonst 2002; Gunnar Strøm. "Caricatures, Cartoons and Advertisements: The Pioneers of Nordic Animated Film". Fullerton, John and Jan Olsson (eds.). *Nordic Explorations: Film Before 1930*. London: John Libbey, 1999.
61. Jungstedt p. 44.
62. Bo Heurling. "GROGG på film". *Filmrutan*. No. 1 (1971).
63. Jungstedt, pp. 62–66.
64. Nils-Hugo Geber. "Film i alla vrår". *Chaplin*. No. 77 (1967).
65. Martin Coute in *La Nouvelle République* 2 Feb. 1970, quoted in Heurling, p. 30.
66. Anders Wahlgren. "Otto G. Carlsund – ett konstnärsliv", Wahlgren, Anders et al. (eds.). *Otto G. Carlsund 11.12.1897–25.7.1948. Konstnär, kritiker och utställningsarrangör*. Stockholm: Bokförlaget Arena, 2007, p. 52. The significance of the cooperation between Léger and Carlsund is disputed. In Swedish accounts Carlsund is always mentioned as an important collaborator, but in international film literature he is more or less invisible. In a very thorough analysis of the production by Judi Freeman the name of Carlsund is absent; instead she discusses the more well-known collaborators Ezra Pound and Man Ray; Judi Freeman. "Bridging Purism and Surrealism: The Origins and Production of Fernand Léger's *Ballet Mécanique*". Kuenzli, Rudolf E. (ed.), *Dada and Surrealist Film*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996. Furthermore, the most important person besides Léger is, of course, co-director Dudley Murphy.
67. Kuenzli. "Introduction", *ibid.*, p. 4.
68. Sheldon Renan. *An Introduction to the American Underground Film*. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1967, pp. 62–66.
69. Susan McCabe. *Cinematic Modernism. Modernist Poetry and Film*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005, p. 198.
70. Oscar Reutersvärd. *Otto G. Carlsund i fjärrperspektiv*. Åhus: Kalejdoskop Förlag, 1988.
71. Erik Näslund. *Rolf de Maré. Konstsamlare, balettleddare, museiskapare*. Stockholm: Bokförlaget Langenskiöld, 2008.
72. Margareta Sörenson. "Sverige och Svenska baletten". Forser, Tomas & Sven Åke Heed (eds.), *Ny svensk teaterhistoria*. vol. 3, Hedemora: Gidlunds förlag, 2007.
73. Näslund, p. 292.
74. *Svenska Baletten/Les Ballets Suédois 1920–1925. Ur Dansmuséets samlingar*. Stockholm: Moderna Museet 1969; Erik Näslund et al. *Svenska Baletten i Paris 1920–1925. Ballet Suédois*. Stockholm: Dansmuseet, 1995; Bengt Häger, *Ballet suédois*, Stockholm: Streiffert, 1989.
75. Bordwell and Thompson 1994, p. 195.
76. Börlin's career as a dancer was beginning to fade, and he wanted to start anew as a film actor. In *Le voyage imaginaire* (Clair, 1925), he was promoted to a lead role as a clerk who travels in his dreams. He was also – together with other members of the Swedish troupe – engaged in *L'inhumaine* (1924) by Marcel L'Herbier, but he never succeeded to establish himself in this new branch.
77. Peter Wollen. *Paris Hollywood: Writings on Film*. London: Verso 2002; O'Konor 1971; Werner and Eklund.

78. Leone Piccioni and Ambrogio Ceroni. *I dipinti di Modigliani*. Milano: Rizzoli Editore, 1970, p. 95. In his biography of the painter, William Fifield gives his view of the relationship: "Viking Eggeling, who was virgin to them, Modigliani corrupted with drugs", Fifield. *Modigliani. The Biography*. London: W. H. Allen, 1978, p. 191.
79. Hans Richter. "Avant-Garde Film in Germany". Manvell, Roger (ed.). *Experiment in the Film*. London: The Grey Walls Press, 1949. Manvell's anthology became one of the important introductions to the field in post-war Sweden.
80. Ibid. p. 221.
81. Hans Richter. "My Experience with Movement in Painting and in Film". *The Nature and Art of Motion*. New York: George Braziller, 1965, p. 144, here cit. after Justin Hoffmann. "Hans Richter: Constructivist Filmmaker". Foster, Stephen C. (ed.). *Hans Richter: Activism, Modernism, and the Avant-Garde*. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1998, p. 76.
82. Fragment no 6 from "On the Spiritual Element in Man. On Different Methods of Composition", in O'Konor 1971, p. 96. See also R. Bruce Elder. "Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling: The Dream of Universal Language and the Birth of The Absolute Film". Graf, Alexander and Dietrich Scheunemann (eds.). *Avant-Garde Film*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007.
83. Théo van Doesburg. "Abstracte filmbeelding". *De Stijl*. 4: 5 (1921) – see also Ansje van Beusekom. "Theo van Doesburg and Writings on Film in *De Stijl*". Beekman, Klaus and Jan de Vries (eds.). *Avant-Garde and Criticism*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007; Viking Eggeling. "Elvi fejtegetések a mozgóművészetről", *MA*. 6: 8 (1921).
84. Birger Brinck-E:son. "Linjemusik på vita duken. 'Konstruktiv film', ett intressant experiment av en svensk konstnär". *Filmjournalen*. No. 4 (1923).
85. The French title of the film is of Eggeling's origin.
86. Gösta Werner. "Spearhead in a Blind Alley: Viking Eggeling's *Diagonal Symphony*". Fullerton and Olsson (eds.), p. 234. See also Elder.
87. Malin Wahlberg. *Documentary Time. Film and Phenomenology*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.
88. Ibid. p. 69.
89. Frank Stauffacher. *Art in Cinema. A Symposium on the Avant-garde Film Together with Program Notes and References for Series One of Art in Cinema*. San Francisco: Art in Cinema Society/ San Francisco Museum of Art, 1947, p. 50.
90. O'Pray 2003, p. 16.
91. The argument is supported by A. L. Rees. "Frames and Windows: Visual Space in Abstract Cinema", Graf and Scheunemann (eds.).
92. Malcolm Le Grice. *Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age*. London: BFI, 2001, pp. 224–225.
93. Rees 1999, p. 37.
94. Ibid.
95. Also in Denmark Eggeling was used in order to promote experimental or avant-garde film culture. In 1951 Gallery Tokanten had an exhibition on Eggeling including film programmes with work by Richter and Norman McLaren. The event was arranged by an association called "International Experimental Film" (in fact the only event that the organization ever organized) and had Hans Richter as Honorary President. Helge Krarup and Carl Nørrested. *Eksperimentalfilm i Danmark*. København: Borgen, 1986, p. 30. An anecdote concerning the Eggeling heritage was told by Jonas Mekas: In 1979 a pencil drawing by Eggeling was given by donation to Anthology Film Archives: "The sale of this drawing, graciously arranged by another great Swede, Pontus Hultén, paid for one half of the purchase fee for the Second Avenue Courthouse, Anthology Archives' present headquarters", Jonas Mekas. "A Word from the curator". in Mekas et. al. (eds.). *Swedish Avantgarde Film 1924–1990*. New York: Anthology Film Archives, 1991, p. 2.
96. See, for example, Gust. Magnusson. "Futuristiska biograftryck". *Biografen* 2: 22 (1941) where a cartoonist makes fun of the search for meaning in modern film, or the editorial comments to some



A History  
of Swedish  
Experimental  
Film Culture:  
From Early  
Animation  
to Video Art

## **Acknowledgements – 8**

## **The Writing of a History of Swedish Experimental Film – 10**

- Minor Histories of Minor Cinemas – 11
- Minor Cinemas and Experimental Film – 11
- Discourse Analysis and Historiography – 13
- New Film History and Emergent Film Histories – 14
- Practices of Closure: Culture and Memory – 16
- Experimental Film and Intermediality – 19
- National or International Cinema? – 23

## **Swedish Experimental Film until the 1950s:**

## **The Pre-History from Cartoon to Feature Film – 28**

- Film Culture and Experimental Cinema – 29
- The European Context and the Swedish Condition – 30
- Animation Culture: Victor Bergdahl and Early Animation – 31
- Reluctant Modernism: The Swedish Artists  
and the European Modernist Movement – 34
- Viking Eggeling and the Quest for Universal Language – 36
- The Lost Arabesques of Reinhold Holtermann – 41
- Early Film Criticism and Theory – 43
- Young Writers, Early Cinephilia and the Cinema – 45
- The Film Society Movement and the Film Journals – 51
- “Experimental Film is Dead, Long Live Experimental Film!” – 55
- Gerd Osten: Interlude with Dance – 57
- Gösta Werner: Cinephilia and the Art of the Craft – 59
- Arne Sucksdorff: Documentarist in a Poetic Mode – 61
- Rune Hagberg: Film Noir and Post-War Angst – 63
- The Aporias of Early Experimental Film Culture in Sweden – 66