

Johnny & Me - a journey through time with John Heartfield

Original Title: Johnny & Me - eine Zeitreise mit John Heartfield

LOGLINE

Johnny & Me - a journey through time with John Heartfield

The graphic designer Stefanie is in a creative crisis. Boring advertising assignments and a boss who does not value her work. On a visit to a museum, she is magically attracted by the satirical photomontages of the world-famous colleague and Nazi opponent John Heartfield. Then the miracle happens. She ends up in his studio, where she finally picks up scissors and paper again. An adventurous journey through Heartfield's extraordinary life 100 years ago begins.

100min, D, AT, CH, 2023



Festivals: Annecy 2023, DOK Leipzig 2023, FANTOCHE 2023, ANIMAGE Brazil 2023,

Director: Katrin Rothe

Genre: Hybrid, animated documentary

Format: 16:9 (4K, DCP, MOV)

World Sale: newdocs. Elina Kewitz

Theatrical release Germany: January 2024, Real Fiction Filmverleih e.K., Joachim Kühn

Production Companies: HANFGARN & UFER, Mischief Films, Dschoint Ventschr

TV Stations: RBB, Arte, SRF

World Premiere: Juni 2023, ** Annecy Festival 2023 ** competion category - Feature film contrechamp

Contacts: end of document, page 17



This collage inspired director Katrin Rothe to make this film

SYNOPSIS:

Bertold Brecht called him one of the most important European artists. Rosa Luxemburg personally handed over the party book to the communist of the first hour in 1918. George Grosz and Kurt Tucholsky are among his closest friends and artistic companions. He gave himself an English name in protest against German warmongering. For the Nazis, however, the father of political photomontage John Heartfield quickly became one of the most dangerous enemies of the state. For years he is a fugitive in Europe, and later finds no safe home even in the socialist GDR. The graphic artist Stefanie, plagued by a creative crisis and self-doubt, is fascinated by John Heartfield's work, which she discovers in an exhibition. Through a time tunnel, she ends up in a studio where the artist, who has become a cartoon figure, takes her on a journey through his eventful life. A loving friendship develops between the two colleagues. And Stefanie takes up scissors and paper again.





Stefanie is engaged in studying Heartfield's satirical photomontages against the Hitler regime.



John Heartfield sits in the studio and talks with Stefanie, who, like him, works as a graphic designer.



In 1918, John Heartfield established the animation department at Ufa. All flashback scenes were shot in 2.5D cut-out animation using stop motion in Berlin..



In 1950, Comrade Jobst and Comrade Geffel speculated that John Heartfield might have been infiltrated as an ene-

my spy into the newly established DDR (German Democratic Republic). They initiated a party review procedure.



In London, John Heartfield kept several rabbits. The rabbit enclosure gradually took over the entire front yard. Despite the post-war period being marked by hunger, he did not slaughter the rabbits. In London, he met his partner Gertrud Fietz.



The live-action scenes were filmed in a Vienna studio.



Trailer

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gy_PuADA73Q

Interview with director Katrin Rothe,

https://filminstitut.at/interview/im-gespraech-mit-katrin-rothe Karin Schiefer, Januar 2022

Making of video 10 Minuten

by Angela Christlieb.

https://vimeo.com/866317845?share=copy

PW: HEARTFIELD

Website

https://heartfieldfilm.com



CV KATRIN ROTHE, author, director, animation direction



2019 - March 2023 Research, Script, Direction "Johnny & Me" D, CH, A, 100 min

Nov. 2020 Lecture at Barkley University (California, USA)

March-May 2020 Episode of "Meine Wende - Unsere Einheit" (My Turn - Our Unity)

2019 Exhibition Films: 50 Years of Robotron and Al

Live-Animation Festival BAUHAUS 100 at the Academy of Arts Berlin

Performance at the Museum Opening in Weimar "Itten. Without Color, Nothing Works."

2019 Solo Exhibition at the German Institute for Animated Film (DIAF)

Archival and Literary Research on John Heartfield's "Making Of & Making For"

2018 Exhibition Participation: Museum of Modern Art Seoul, South Korea, "Flip Book - Extraordinary Animations of the 21st Century," "Art and Politics" Tricky Woman, Vienna

June/July 2018 Artist in Residence at DIAF in the Technical Collections Dresden

2017 Cinema and Festival Tour with "1917 - Der wahre Oktober" (25 Festivals), including Official Selection at Annecy 2017, International Moscow Film Festival, and Mostra Sao Paolo. Won 1st Prize at Russia Abroad 2017 and participated in international animation feature competitions: FICAM, BIAF, and ANIMANIA

2015 to 2016 Author, Director, Producer of "1917-Der wahre Oktober" (Animated Documentary)

2014 Grimme Award for the film "Betongold - How the Financial Crisis Came into My Living Room"

2013 1st Prize at Duisburger Filmwoche + Der lange Atem, 3rd Prize from DJVBB for the film "Betongold"

2010-2017 Teaching assignment at FH St.Pölten (Austria), Seminar "Animation as a Non-Fictional Means of Expression"

2011 Nomination for the German/Polish Journalist Award for the film "Polen für Anfänger - Ein Roadmovie mit Kurt Krömer und Steffen Möller" (Poland for Beginners - A Road Movie with Kurt Krömer and Steffen Möller)

"The Ex Is Me" (TV Movie, 90 min)

2007 Grimme Award for the four-part documentary "Stellmichein"

2004 "Dark Lipstick Looks More Serious" (TV Documentary, 60 min, Nominated for the German Television Award and prix Europe). First use of animation to depict job interviews.

Since 2001 Freelance Media Professional, Founder of Karotoons

1st Prize Flash Attack Award 2001 and nominations for "Croatian Tales of Long Ago"

1999-2001 DAAD Stay in Tokyo, Emerging Talent Fellow of the State of Berlin

1999 Master's Degree at UdK under Prof. Heinz Emigholz, Documentary Film Practice under Elfi Mikesch

1991-1998 Study of Film & Video Fine Art at CSM London and "Experimental Film Design" at the University of the Arts Berlin

1989 High School Graduation in Gera (East Germany)

INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR KATRIN ROTHE

Interview: Karin Schiefer, January 2022, translated from German https://filminstitut.at/interview/im-gespraech-mit-katrin-rothe

Ultimately, we can learn a lot from certain old, white men.

John Heartfield is one of the prominent graphic artists from the inter-war period in Germany. His posters and book covers gained popularity with a broad audience, while his satirical collages made him a politically controversial figure. Heartfield's life story resembles a journey through the political upheavals of the last century. Katrin Rothe, whose film style combines documentary and animation, explores in "JOHNNY & ME" (formerly titled Burnout with John Heartfield) the viewpoint of a contemporary graphic designer. Through an animated Heartfield figure, the film examines the interplay between art and political stance.



"JOHNNY & ME" engages with one of the essential German graphic artists of the 20th century. Was he a companion on your artistic journey, or did you discover him more recently, leading to your decision to create a film project about him?

KATRIN ROTHE: I've been aware of John Heartfield since the early 1990s. Specific collages like one featuring a hyena running across a battlefield or Hitler portrayed as a puppet have left a lasting impression on me. He always came across as a Dadaist to me, particularly in his work. I rediscovered him a few years ago when I was searching for a German artist from the 1920s and 30s. I was surprised that I hadn't explored his work earlier, especially since he was a collage

artist, and I incorporate forms of animation into my documentary films. I use an analogue collage technique because I find it very suitable for telling stories and layers of history.

It was an incredible discovery to realize that he was one of the first German animators and established the animation department at UFA. He approached his work with great playfulness, picking elements from various art forms and blending and crossing them, which I find very inspiring and what I enjoy doing.

One of the communist ideals was the education of ordinary people. Heartfield's idea was to produce cheap books with covers containing a photo and a one-line message. He was also one of the first artists to take a stand against the Nazis. As their influence grew, his commentary became sharper, ultimately leading to him being one of the first artists who had to flee in 1933. He initially worked from his exile in Prague, during which time he created his most powerful works, earning him international acclaim. However, these works also led to diplomatic interventions that resulted in his expulsion. Heartfield became stateless.

At the start of World War II, he went to London, where he, as a German, became an enemy alien. Even when he moved to East Germany after the war ended, his conflicts with the political system continued. He had high hopes for a professorship, but with the onset of the Cold War, he remained caught between the fronts as a Communist and a returnee from the West. The party, a new type of centralized party, distanced itself from individuals like Heartfield.

Was he motivated by political idealism when he went to East Germany?

KATRIN ROTHE: Current analyses don't provide a definitive answer to that question. It's essential to remember that during the Cold War, to work in Western countries, one had to completely disavow communism. Someone as well-known as Heartfield was constantly under surveillance in England. It would have been difficult if he had tried to renounce his political beliefs. His images were powerful tools against Hitler, and he played a significant role in shaping Hitler's public image. His decision to go to East Germany was likely driven by a hope for a better professional future, especially considering that he was quite poor in London. I would describe it as pragmatism rather than idealism. It's worth noting that he was only rehabilitated in 1957, ten years before his death, after facing a party expulsion procedure that had previously blocked his professional prospects since major contracts in East Germany were exclusively state commissions. In his later years, he was celebrated as an artist.



John Heartfield's (1891-1968) life story was closely intertwined with the political developments in Europe, particularly in Germany. Could you give us a brief overview of that?

KATRIN ROTHE: Initially, he spent some years of his childhood living in a forest hut, where the local mayor supported his politically persecuted family. However, one day, his parents disappeared and ended up in a psychiatric hospital. Heartfield was then raised by foster parents, underwent an apprenticeship as a bookseller, and was heavily influenced by the events of World War I. Within artistic circles, these experiences found expression in playful-aggressive nonsense and political art. Heartfield was connected with artists like Otto Dix and George Grosz, who was a close friend of his. Political Dada in Berlin gave rise to a highly productive and inspiring working environment. Heartfield created numerous books and pioneered a new form of book cover design for them.

His satirical works quickly gained him great fame. How was it possible, with the media available in the 1920s, to achieve such rapid dissemination of his

work?

KATRIN ROTHE: He was well-versed in both graphic design and photography, as well as the new technological possibilities of the time. Heartfield knew how to make it work. The Workers' Newspaper, for example, extensively used images, catchy phrases, and sometimes explanations. They aimed to condense the political situation or significant decisions into a single image with a text line, calling it photomontage to distinguish it from other techniques. Heartfield wasn't alone; he had colleagues who were equally engaged in this form of expression. During its heyday, this newspaper had a circulation of two million copies. Heartfield's collages were particularly memorable. Additionally, he designed many flyers and propaganda posters. He always tried to incorporate and enforce his philosophy, influenced by American advertising and his own political education. This is one of the aspects that also concerns me in my film: How do you go about implementing good ideas as a graphic designer? What does it mean to be provocative, both among your own people and your adversaries? In "JOHNNY & Me," there is a living character named Stefanie, a contemporary graphic designer who immerses herself in Heartfield's world. She creates a Heartfield figure and engages with his work, leading to flashbacks of Heartfield's earlier life story, crafted from coloured paper, cardboard, and other materials.

I'm also interested in exploring what his considerations could mean for graphic design today: To what extent do I adapt? Where do I work? Do I absolutely refuse to collaborate with an adversary? Where do I team up with someone? I can express all of this through the character of Stefanie.

My cinematic approach is very tactile. Heartfield, too, was someone who did everything by hand. He enlarged, glued, cut, and crafted, and Stefanie does the same. Our digital world offers so many possibilities, and I find it beautiful to remember and question the current work, where the sensory experience has been lost.



Does the term ,burnout' also imply that Stefanie, as a graphic designer, is in a crisis of meaning? (Comment: Working Title of the film was Burnout with John Heartfield)

KATRIN ROTHE: It's only when she's alone in the basement, dealing with her own problems, that she becomes aware of the lack of political engagement in her work. In the film, Heartfield says to her, "Maybe you haven't done too much, but you've been working on the wrong things and haven't asserted yourself." Asserting oneself is an essential part of creating good art. One doesn't come without the other. I believe our blend of digital and analogue works well, especially when I occasionally show a small snippet. Of course, for Heartfield, who risked his life through his work, the stakes were much higher, involving existential questions. What's crucial is that we have a connection to what we do, and the tactile and sensory aspects are essential elements in that process.

What different techniques will we encounter in ,JOHNNY & ME'?

KATRIN ROTHE: We animate Heartfield's life. There are animations depicting his past from the twenties and thirties. Then there's the character of John Heartfield himself, which Stefanie creates, and it suddenly starts speaking, moving through the studio, and commenting on his own life. It's actually a straightforward idea. This way, the artist can speak for himself. What I have him say is the result of thorough research, comprising quotes and dialogues based on documents.

How long have you been working on this film project about John Heartfield?

KATRIN ROTHE: It began at the end of 2017. In 2018, I conducted research in the archives, and in 2019 and 2020, I wrote the book. In mid-2020, we received the first round of funding and started developing the character. The character of John Heartfield was created through close collaboration between me and a designer I've been working with for a long time. The additional funding for the Gender Incentive was a nice bonus for us. It has been a long-standing reality for me to work with many women. I had female professors during my education, always stood my ground, and enjoyed collaborating with women. I made sure that the extra funding we had benefited women as well. An interesting aspect of this film is also the female perspective on a male artist. One might ask why, as a female artist who has just broken through the glass ceiling, am I focusing on an old white man? My answer is that I want to learn from him. John Heartfield is definitely someone from whom we can learn how to persevere in adverse circumstances. Ultimately, there is much we can learn from certain old white men.

Did the idea for the film also stem from a desire to continue the chronology after your film ,1917 – Der wahre Oktober ?

KATRIN ROTHE: Das war gewiss ein Anlass. Ich wollte der Frage nachgehen, wie es nach der Revolution in Russland KATRIN ROTHE: That was certainly a factor. I wanted to explore what happened after the Russian Revolution, but I also had the desire to delve into a German topic. I began searching for an artist whose personality would align with the collage and animation techniques I had used in ,1917'. John Heartfield had an incredible life story, a political artist and animator who mixed genres in a fresh and unconventional way and maintained a strong creative spirit well into his later years. It was a perfect match. This creative spirit is what I've set as the headline for this film, and I hope it resonates with the audience, inspiring someone to go home and say, "Now, I'm going to cut something out too."

In ,1917 – Der wahre Oktober, you let artists who witnessed this historic moments speak, offering a perspective on the October Revolution beyond textbooks. Is it a general aim in your work to discover unconventional perspectives on historiography and storytelling?

KATRIN ROTHE: It's never my primary goal to present a "different" perspective. With Heartfield, it was simply that I discovered contradictions. There were certain historical narratives and omissions, and it didn't quite fit together into a coherent picture. When I bring this person to life, I need to understand who he was as a person. This motivated me to delve deeper into research, and it's more gratifying to find that there are now publications that similarly examine this era, whether they are looking at the 1930s or the 1950s during the Cold War. I see myself as part of that, perhaps not a new generation but a new type of work that revisits history. Many are interested in the 1920s because they see parallels with the present and wonder if there are lessons to be learned. Heartfield's life as an artist demonstrates that it's worthwhile to resist, stay true to oneself, and lead an upright life without always conforming to the supposed mass opinion. My film shows what it means to live in a dictatorship, how it deals with art, and how it evaluates satire. Art should always be meaningful, and there's a very simple, often somewhat hollow-sounding phrase that holds profound significance: Art must be free.

ARTISTS STATEMENTS (SELECTION)

STATEMENT STEPHANIE STREMLER, Actress



With the role of Stefanie in Johnny & Me, I was allowed to be part of the film's creation process very early on. Katrin Rothe and I met in the park at Corona time, with the first versions of the Heartfield character, and asked ourselves in improvisations how to bring today's world together with the time in which Heartfield lived. How can we make a difference today through political graphics that will appeal to young people? Was Heartfield a kind of founder of social media with his responsive actions? What would Johnny be doing today, and how does Heartfield influence the character Stefanie so that she finds her way out of artistic and professional crisis? I love these experiments. The animated John Heartfield became a real partner for me. The artistic work of the animators and puppet makers, who had already spent a whole year creating hands, feet, faces, all kinds of poses and ages of the character, made my dear cardboard partner come alive. In the workshop where we were shooting, the team had gathered all the documents, articles, intelligence files, photos and works as facsimiles. There was a lot of tinkering on the set, we could cut everything apart and reassemble it - in the spirit of Heartfield, whose

CV

Born in 1977 in Aachen. Acting training at the Ernst Busch Hochschule, Berlin. Engagements at the Staatstheater Kassel and the Deutsches Schauspielhaus in Hamburg. Participation in numerous experimental and short films, in the international off-theater scene, guest roles at the Maxim Gorki Theater Berlin, episodic roles in Tatortreiniger and Kroymann. Protagonist in "Die Spielwütigen" by Andres Veiel (2004). Helmi Trash Puppet Theater, Helene Hegemann's, "Axolotl Roadkill" + Terminator II at Schauspiel Hannover. 2013 "Dust on our hearts".

MANUEL HARDER, Heartfield's voice

It was hot and all the texts had long been recorded when I walked into a small dark room of an apartment in Vienna's 3rd district in the summer of ,22. "You are being animated there," Katrin Rothe had written to me. And there I saw what was being animated: These many small body and face parts of John Heartfield, finely cut out and sorted in composing boxes. Lovingly reassembled again and again, my voice placed on these analog lip movements in digital precision work. I found the story of this creative fighter Heartfield, told by a little paper doll, very appealing, both poetically and in terms of content. To be involved in such a coming alive, in such a telling, impressed me very much. To face this with my voice and to approach it playfully, I felt as my work - always observing this strange little, newly created cardboard companion!

CV

Various works for radio, film and television. Manuel Harder has been a permanent ensemble member at the Deutsches Theater Berlin since the 2017/18 season.

HANNES STARZ, Montage

The big challenge in editing was to find a balance between the animated episodes from Heartfield's life and the live-action film. Katrin and I were in constant exchange with the animation team. Our editing influenced the storyboards with facial expressions and gestures for the Heartfield puppet, which had yet to be animated, and vice versa. And although many animation scenes were already pre-produced when I started editing December 2021, there were many passages in the film that were only rough drawings and only gradually animated and thus came to life. That pushed our imagination to its limits again and again. It was a long process, with stages in Vienna and the Berlin animation studio. This way of working and the constant contact with all the cardboard, the editing knives, the lovingly built rooms for the animations, and the fact that a lot of things happened at the same time also made the approach to editing collage-like. The film suddenly developed a life of its own and became what it is: a loving cinematic collage about Heartfield's life and his way of working, from which not only the character Stefanie could learn, but all of us.

TONINA MATALAS, Background design

I first worked on the color concept for the film. Heartfield traveled to many cities and exhibited everywhere: Berlin, London, Prague, Geneva, Paris, Russia. So each place had its own color palette, with variations in saturation and hues to match the mood of the scene and the script. The backgrounds were built up with layers of colored paper, like a collage, and some parts with painted paper, some with texture, scratched, and burr effects. All techniques that can be associated with the Dada style, but in this case with a certain organization of depth, light and shadow, to show that we are in a reality where the characters really lived. So I was able to intuitively find a balance between tradition and the film about John Heartfield. I was able to develop a world, and in this case it was one of the most exciting and attractive works I've ever done.



CAROLINE HAMANN, Storyboard

Storyboarding for me began with getting to know our protagonist. The young John Heartfield was fearless, humorous, driven, non-stop creative. Contrast that with the older Heartfield, scarred by life in exile and the harassment of bureaucracy. In the animated flashbacks - there are over 55 minutes of them in the film - the task was to create these qualities in the storyboard by means of image composition, gestures, facial expressions.

ANNE SOPHIE RAEMY, costumes + puppet coordination

The design and realization of the costumes and puppets for Johnny & Me was a multi-layered, creative, and highly material-oriented process. Working with various materials was incredibly fulfilling, and it has inspired me to pursue similar projects in the future.

LISA NEUBAUER, animator

I animated between 2 and 12 seconds a day, depending on how much of the character's body was visible. When the characters moved a lot, the left hemisphere of the brain was in demand, because that requires full concentration. When I was animating faces, talking or with doubtful facial expressions, with wrinkles and the peculiar language of the eyes, I was able to get into the character more intuitively, and it might be that in the flow I could sometimes get more than ten film seconds out of my sleeve at a time. I think I like John Heartfield. He's spontaneous but with concept, he's ornery, he's alive, and he's not an expert. He's just himself.



Nancy Denney-Phelps GSM +32 499 763 723 https://www.awn.com/blogs/sprockets

Animated documentaries can tell stories that would be impossible to bring to the screen with live action. German animator Katrin Rothe has used the medium to its full potential in her 100-minute documentary *Johnny & Me*.

The film tells the story of the German antifascist and pacifist John Heartfield, a 20th Century visual artist who pioneered the use of art as a political weapon. Some of his most famous photo montages were anti-Nazi and anti-fascist statements. He rose to number 5 on the Gestapo's most wanted list, working inside and in the shadow of the Third Reich. His only crime was his "art as a weapon" that used integrity and humor to reveal the fascist lies of dictators.

John Heartfield is considered the father of modern photo montage, a form of collage.

Who is the *Me* in Johnny & *Me*? She is Stephanie, a graphic artist plagued by a creative crisis and self doubt. She becomes fascinated by John Heartfield's work, which she discovers at an exhibition. Journeying through a time tunnel, she ends up in a studio where the artist, who has become a cartoon figure, takes her on a journey through his eventful life. A loving friendship develops between the two colleagues. As a result Stephanie takes up scissors and paper and begins to create again.

Director/animator Katrin Rothe, a two-time Adolph Grimme Award winner, loves to work with paper and cut-out animation. When I asked her why she wanted to bring the story of an almost forgotten political cut-out artist to life on the screen, she told me "I know his anti-Nazi images . . . His anti war and anti fascist motives are still (or once again) important . . . I really have to make an animated biography about him. I chose a female perspective - from a graphic designer. What can we learn from this pacifist communist? There is something I need to tell about this 'old white man'".

Johnny & I will premier at the Annecy International Animation Festival on Wednesday, 12 June at 14:30 (2:30 PM) in Pathé 2. After the screening you will be able to meet Katrin and 18 members of her team who helped bring this remarkable story to life.

I love good animation and storytelling and am a history buff so I highly recommend *Johnny & I*. I also recommend that you check out Katrin's previous film, about the Russian Revolution: *1917 Movie* (http://1917movie.com).

See you in the screening room at Annecy on 12 June. I am looking forward to seeing *Johnny & Me* a second time.

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CREDITS

Author and Director: Katrin Rothe

Cinematography: Thomas Eirich-Schneider

Cast: Stephanie Stremler

Voice of John Heartfield: Manuel Harder

Puppetry and Voices of Comrades: Michael Hatzius und Dorothee Carls

Music: Micha Kaplan und Thomas Mävers

Editing: Hannes Starz, Katrin Rothe

Assistant Director: Katharina Biro

Storyboard & Main Designs & Artwork: Lydia Günther, Tonina Matamalas, Caroline Hamann, Gyula Szabo

Side Character Design: Konrad Weiße (D)/ Benjamin Swiczinsky (A) Puppenbau & Kostüm: Anne-Sophie Réamy, Werner Kernebeck, Lisa Sinram

Animators: Lisa Neubauer, Lydia Günther, Jonathan Schwenk, Malte Stein, Mandy Müller (D)/ Amélie Cochet, Kerstin Zemp, Igor Kuzmic (CH)/ Wolf Matzl, Birgit Scholin, Rosanne Janssens (A)

Production Management: Bettina Morlock (D)/ Susanne Berger (A)/ Sereina Gabathuler (CH)

Producers: Gunter Hanfgarn, Andrea Ufer, Ralph Wieser, Sereina Gabathuler, Werner Schweizer

Production Companies: HANFGARN & UFER, Mischief Films, Dschoint Ventschr

Funding: BKM, Medienboard Berlin Brandenburg, Filmförderungsanstalt, DFFF (D)/ Osterreichisches Filminstitut,

Fisa, Filmfonds Wien (A)/ BAK, Zürcher Filmstiftung, Studienbibliothek (CH)

Sender: RBB, Arte, SRF



Left: team live action Vienna, right: visit Studio Cou-out-Animation Berlin

CONTACTS

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Pressebilder 300dpi: download website

Making-Of (German only): https://vimeo.com/866317845?sha-

re=copy

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