

Oskar Fischinger

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Oskar Fischinger (22 June 1900, Gelnhausen, Germany — 31 January 1967, Los Angeles) was an abstract animator, filmmaker, and painter. He made over 50 short films, and painted c. 900 canvases which are in museums, galleries and collections worldwide. Among his film works is *Motion Painting No. 1* (1947), which is part of the United States National Film Registry.

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Biography

Early life

Born in the German town of Gelnhausen, Wilhelm Oskar Fischinger was the fourth of six children. His father ran a drugstore while his mother's family owned a combination brewery, tavern, and bowling alley. At an early age he dabbled in painting, encouraged by the painters who came to capture Gelnhausen's scenery.^[1] Also interested in music (he took violin lessons), he apprenticed at an organ-building firm until the owners were drafted into the war. The next year he worked as a draftsman in an architect's office, until he himself was called to duty. He was rejected as being unhealthy, and the Fischinger family moved to west Frankfurt. There Fischinger attended a trade school and worked as an apprentice at a factory, eventually obtaining an engineer's diploma.

Early career

In Frankfurt he met the theater critic Bernhard Diebold, who in 1921 introduced Fischinger to the work and personage of Walter Ruttmann, a pioneer in abstract film. Inspired by Ruttmann's work, Fischinger began experimenting with colored liquids and three-dimensional modeling materials such as wax and clay. He

conceptualized a "Wax Slicing Machine", which synchronized a vertical slicer with a movie camera's shutter, enabling the efficient imaging of progressive cross-sections through a length of molded material. Fischinger wrote to Ruttmann about his machine, who expressed interest. Moving to Munich, Fischinger licensed the wax slicing machine to Ruttmann and began working on the first production model. Upon delivery, Ruttmann found that hot film lights often melted the wax to a serious degree. Ruttmann gave up, though during this time Fischinger shot many abstract tests of his own using the machine (some of these are distributed today under the assigned title *Wax Experiments*).

In 1924 Fischinger was hired by American entrepreneur Louis Seel to produce satirical cartoons that tended toward mature audiences. He also made abstract films and tests of his own, trying new and different techniques, including the use of multiple projectors.

In 1926-27 Fischinger performed his own multiple projector film shows with various musical accompaniment. These shows were titled *Fieber* (Fever), *Vakuum*, *Macht* (Power) and later, *R-1 ein Formspiel*. (Keefer 2005)

Facing financial difficulties, Fischinger borrowed from his family, and then his landlady. Finally, in an effort to escape bill collectors, Fischinger decided to surreptitiously depart Munich for Berlin in June 1927. Taking only his essential equipment, he walked 350 miles through the countryside, shooting single frames that were later released as a film in itself: "Walking from Munich to Berlin."

Berlin

Arriving in Berlin, Fischinger borrowed some money from a relative and set up a studio on Friedrichstraße. He soon was doing the special effects for various films. His own proposals for cartoons were not accepted by producers or distributors, however.^[2] In 1928 he was hired to work on Fritz Lang's space epic *Frau im Mond*, which provided him a steady salary for a time. On his own time, he experimented with charcoal-on-paper animation. He produced a series of abstract *Studies* that were synchronized to popular and classical music. A few of the early *Studies* were synchronized to new record releases by Electrola, and screened at first run theatres with a tail credit advertising the record, thus making them some of the very first music videos. The *Studies* were well-received at art theaters and many were distributed to first-run theatres throughout Europe. His *Studie Nr. 5* screened at the 1927 "Congress for Colour-Music Research" to critical acclaim. In 1931 Universal Pictures purchased distribution rights to *Studie Nr. 5* for the American public, and *Studie Nr. 7* screened as a short with a popular movie in Berlin. The effects Fischinger did for other movies led to his being called "the Wizard of Friedrichstraße."

As the Nazis rose to greater power in the 1930s, the abstract film and art communities and distribution possibilities quickly disappeared as the Nazis instituted their policies against what they termed "degenerate art". Fischinger continued to make films secretly, and also found work producing commercials and advertisements, among them *Muratti Greift Ein* (*Muratti Gets in the Act*), and *Kreise* (*Circles*). The color *Muratti* cigarette commercial was a sensation, screening all over Europe. At this time Fischinger also married his first cousin Elfriede. Though Fischinger at times ran afoul of the Nazi authorities, he nevertheless managed to secretly complete his abstract work *Komposition in Blau* in 1935. It was well-received critically, though no German distributor dared to secure the rights to it.

At this time an agent from MGM had screened a print of *Komposition in Blau* and *Muratti* in a small art

theatre in Hollywood, and Ernst Lubitsch was impressed by the films and the audience's enthusiastic response to the shorts. A Paramount Pictures agent telephoned Fischinger, asking if he was willing to work in America, and Fischinger promptly agreed.

Hollywood

Upon arriving in Hollywood in February 1936, Fischinger was given an office at Paramount Pictures, German-speaking secretaries, an English tutor, and a weekly salary of \$250. With no immediate assignment, Fischinger sketched and painted.^[3] He and Elfriede socialized with the emigré community, but felt out of place among the elites.

Oskar prepared the film *Allegretto*, tightly synchronized to Ralph Rainger's tune "Radio Dynamics". *Allegretto* was planned for inclusion in the feature film *The Big Broadcast of 1937* (1936). Unfortunately, he found that Paramount had changed the film project from Technicolor to black-and-white. Also, Paramount printed the black-and-white version intercut with various live action images, so it was no longer totally abstract. Fischinger left Paramount. Several years later, with the help of Hilla von Rebay and a grant from the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, he was able to buy the film back from Paramount. Fischinger then redid and re-painted the cels, and made a color version to his satisfaction. This became one of the most-screened and successful films of visual music's history, and one of Fischinger's most popular films.

All Fischinger's filmmaking attempts in America suffered difficulties. He composed *An Optical Poem* (1937) to Franz Liszt's Second *Hungarian Rhapsody* for MGM, but received no profits due to studio bookkeeping systems. He designed the J. S. Bach *Toccata and Fugue in D Minor* sequence for Walt Disney's *Fantasia* (1940), but quit without credit because all studio artists simplified and altered all his designs to be more representational.

According to William Moritz, Fischinger contributed to the effects animation of the Blue Fairy's wand in *Pinocchio* (1940 film).^[4]

The Guggenheim Foundation required him to synchronize a film with a march by John Philip Sousa in order to demonstrate loyalty to America, and then insisted that he make a film to Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto* No. 3, even though he wanted to make a film without sound in order to affirm the integrity of his non-objective imagery. Secretly, Fischinger composed the silent masterpiece *Radio Dynamics* (1942) which breathes slow pulsating rhythms and astonishing single-frame flickers of painterly images.

Frustrated in his filmmaking, Fischinger turned increasingly to oil painting as a creative outlet. Although the Guggenheim Foundation specifically required a cel animation film, Fischinger made his Bach film *Motion Painting No. 1* (1947) as a documentation of the act of painting, taking a single frame each time he made a brush stroke -- and the multi-layered style merely parallels the structure of the Bach music without any tight synchronization. Although he never again received funding for a film, the breathtaking *Motion Painting No. 1* won the Grand Prix at the Brussels International Experimental Film Competition in 1949. Three of Fischinger's films also made the 1984 Olympiad of Animation's list of the world's greatest films. (The latter two paragraphs only are from the Fischinger biography by film historian William Moritz at the Fischinger Archive (<http://www.oskarfischinger.org>) website.

Lumigraph

In 1950 Fischinger invented the *Lumigraph* (patented in 1955) which others have called a type of color organ. Like other inventors of color organs, Fischinger hoped to make the Lumigraph a commercial product, widely available for anyone, but this did not happen.

The instrument produced imagery by pressing against a rubberized screen so it could protrude into a narrow beam of colored light. As a visual instrument, the size of its screen was limited by the reach of the performer. Two people were required to operate the Lumigraph: one to manipulate the screen to create imagery, and a second to change the colors of the lights on cue.

The device itself was silent, but was performed accompanying various music. Fischinger did several performance in Los Angeles and one in San Francisco in the early 1950s, performing various classical pieces, and many were impressed by the machine's spectacular images. In 1964 the Lumigraph was used in the science fiction film *Time Travelers*, in which it became a 'love machine' (this was not Fischinger's intent, this was the decision of the film's producers). His son Conrad even built two more machines in different sizes. After Fischinger's death, his widow Elfriede and daughter Barbara did performances with the Lumigraph, along with William Moritz, in Europe and the US.

Today one of the instruments is displayed at Deutsches Filmmuseum in Frankfurt, and is still played occasionally. In February 2007 Barbara Fischinger performed on this Lumigraph. Other Lumigraphs are in California. Film and video documentation of Elfriede's color organ performances are at the Center for Visual Music (<http://www.centerforvisualmusic.org>) in Los Angeles, CA.

Further reading

- William Moritz, *Optical Poetry: The Life and Work of Oskar Fischinger*, Indiana University Press, 2004. ISBN 0-253-21641-9

Notes

- [^] Moritz, 2.
- [^] Moritz, 22.
- [^] Moritz, 67.
- [^] Moritz, William. Fischinger at Disney - or Oskar in the Mousetrap. *Millimeter*. 5. 2 (1977): 25-28, 65-67. [1] (<http://www.centerforvisualmusic.org/OFMousetrap.htm>)

External links

- The Fischinger Archive (<http://www.oskarfischinger.org>) Site maintained by the Oskar Fischinger Archive, run by the Fischinger Trust.
- My Statement are in my Work** (<http://www.oskarfischinger.org/MyStatements.htm>) Oskar Fischinger's statement.
- Center for Visual Music (<http://www.centerforvisualmusic.org/Fischinger>) Fischinger Research pages, includes bibliography, Film Notes, gallery with some Fischinger animation drawings; reference material

in online library; online store offering Fischinger material including a new DVD: "Oskar Fischinger: Ten Films"

- Fischinger Bibliography (<http://www.centerforvisualmusic.org/Fischinger/OFBibliography.htm>) at CVM Fischinger Research pages
- Moritz, William. The Importance of Being Fischinger (<http://www.centerforvisualmusic.org/library/ImportBF.htm>) . Ottawa International Animated Film Festival (program), 1976
- Keefer, Cindy. "Space Light Art" - Early Abstract Cinema and Multimedia, 1900-1959. White Noise (Melbourne: Australian Centre for the Moving Image, 2005). Exhibition Catalog.
- Oskar Fischinger at IMDB (<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0279202/>) Contains many errors

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