

BEST OF *Vera Neubauer*

„... she is probably the most prolific independent animator, male or female, in the UK, and has directed a strikingly diverse body of challenging work.“

Leslie Felperon Sharman filmjournalist at Variety and "Women and Animation: a compendium edited by Jayne Pilling"



CANNON FODDER GB 1971, 1'

An unbiased view of the war.

Ein unverzerrter Blick auf Krieg.



ANIMATION FOR LIVE-ACTION GB 1978, 25'

The animator creates a cartoon figure, and the lives of the two protagonists keep crossing. The woman, an ex-wife, and her alter ego explore the possibilities offered by suicide, psychiatry, feminism and motherhood.

Die Künstlerin kreiert eine Comic-Figur und die Leben der beiden Protagonistinnen überschneiden sich ständig. Die Frau, eine Ex-Ehefrau und ihr Alter-Ego thematisieren die Möglichkeiten, die sich durch Selbstmord, Psychiatrie, Feminismus und Mutterschaft erschließen.



MID AIR GB 1986, 16'

Why should women in Europe today want to be witches and practice witchcraft? The opera 'Mid Air' sets out to answer this question.

Warum sollten Frauen im heutigen Europa Hexen sein wollen und hexen? Die Oper „Mid Air“ sucht die Antwort auf diese Frage.

THE LADY OF THE LAKE GB 1995, 19'30''

This film is based on a legend in which a mermaid falls in love with a young man and is allowed to share her life on land with him as long as he doesn't strike more than three times.

Grundlage dieses Films bildet eine Sage, in der sich die Meerjungfrau in einen jungen Mann verliebt. Sie kann zusammen mit ihm an Land leben, so lange er sie nicht mehr als drei Mal schlägt.

WHEEL OF LIFE GB 1996, 16'

Draws on Old Testament texts, a mix of live action and animation, to tell a tale of original sin and destinies controlled by the forces of nature and man. Images of creation and destruction, of pre-history and modernity, of love and hate and of life and death punctuate the narrative.

(Michael Sweet)

An das Alte Testament angelehnte Geschichte von Sünde und Schicksal, über Schöpfung und Zerstörung, Geschichte und Moderne, Liebe und Hass, Leben und Tod.



LA LUNA GB 1999, 26'

A thriller, a dark, yet absurdly comical tale of greed, deceit, intrigue and murder. The tightly knitted combination of live action and animation tells a story of rats who behave like people and of humans locked in a rat race.

Ein Thriller über Habgier, Betrug, Intrige und Mord, eine Kombination aus "live action" und Animation.

Er erzählt die Geschichte von gestrickten Ratten, die sich wie Menschen verhalten und in deren böser Welt es keine Gnade gibt.

HOOKED GB 2002, 9' 30''

Latino life unravelled and re-knitted. A woman journeys through Mexico, Guatemala, Peru and Bolivia meeting others who knit and crochet. They exchange experiences, as do their knitted characters.

Lateinamerikanisches Leben – entwirrt und neu gestrickt. Eine Frau reist durch Mexiko, Guatemala, Peru und Bolivien und trifft andere Frauen, die stricken und häkeln. Sie tauschen ihre Erfahrungen aus – und das tun auch ihre gestrickten Figuren.

WOOLLY WOLF GB 2002, 4' 15''

The little red riding hood doesn't let herself be eaten by the wolf.
„Rotkäppchen“ einmal anders erzählt.

WOOLLY TOWN - WOOLLY HEAD GB 2005, 5' 45

Woolly headed Annie gets ridiculed in return for her made up stories.

Der kleine Wollkopf Annie kann nicht anders, als ständig Ärger zu bekommen, weil sie im Unterricht immer träumt, doch sie versteht sich zu wehren.

THE LAST CIRCUS GB 2007, 16' 50''

We are privy to Godiva's life, made up of dreams, memories and folk tales, reality TV and the daily news, as it flashes before her eyes.

Wir erleben Godiva's Leben, das vor ihr vorüberzieht und aus Träumen, Erinnerungen und Sagen, Reality-TV und Nachrichten besteht.



THE LAST CIRCUS

THE FILMS OF Vera Neubauer

A perky paper girl in a red dress challenges her creator. She scrambles over strips of film, claims to have an independent existence, refuses to be deterred by the adversities of being a woman and constantly questions the position of the author. (ANIMATION FOR LIVE ACTION, 1978)

A film can, flotsam on the beach: a young woman finds it contains THE LADY OF THE LAKE (1995), a variation on the old story of life and possession, a melancholic black-and-white watercolour film full of enchanting “special effects”.

The knitted television shows a romantic movie that is part of the memories of an old woman. One night the Grim Reaper is standing at her bedside. The woman quickly puts in her woollen dentures and invites him for a game of cards. But the devil never sleeps... (THE LAST CIRCUS, 2007)

Paper, crayons, painting colours, photographs and wool; animated drawings, live-action sequences, puppet animation, cut-out techniques as well as computer animation – the application and combination of the most diverse materials and techniques is one of the characteristics of Vera Neubauer’s films. “Sometimes I only discover the key to the entire film during the montage.”*

Born in Czechoslovakia, Vera Neubauer came to London in 1968 and continued her art studies at the Royal College of Art. There was no animation department at the time but there was a film department with the relevant technical equipment. And it was only a matter of time before Neubauer, who did collages, started to “move things around”, work in series and turn towards a time-based medium. The liberated play with heterogeneous

elements – (original) music and voice-over narrations complement the picture plane – already distinguished her first bigger work, **ANIMATION FOR LIVE ACTION (1978)**, that was initially rejected at animation festivals because it defies unambiguous classification.

The films Vera Neubauer made over the following decades in the British animation scene (which enjoyed a brief period of prosperity) in collaboration with the British Film Institute or Channel 4 were not abstract but they weren't classical narrations either. Rather they were a kind of associative spinning of tales that brought forth dark stories or subtle, enigmatic comedies.

Her discussion of social realities, particularly gender relations and gender hierarchy, is another constant in Neubauer's works: an ongoing debate that began with the second women's movement that regards the private as political. Women's very concrete experiences are not only addressed ironically, but with a correspondingly anarchic gesture the perspective is broadened. For example, the slogan "war=men" on the wall of a brick building becomes "war=menstruation envy".

Neubauer also transfers cultural skills that are traditionally defined as female into her artistic practice – as evidenced in the virtuoso knitting and crocheting films she has been doing since the 1990s ("We were living in Wales at the time and I always used to crochet on the train on the way to London").

A total of more than thirty complex, intricate, detailed works – both for children and adults – have been created this way. Vera Neubauer has received awards both in Great Britain and many other countries; retrospectives of the works of the filmmaker, teacher and independent producer (Spectre Films) have been shown at festivals in Germany, Brazil and India as well as **Tricky Women 2007**, to name but a few.

ÜBER DIE FILME VON Vera Neubauer

Ein keckes Papiermädchen im roten Kleid fordert seine Schöpferin heraus. Es klettert über Filmstreifen, behauptet Eigenleben, lässt sich von den Unbildern eines Frauendaseins nicht beirren und stellt fortwährend die Position der Autorin in Frage.

(ANIMATION FOR LIVE ACTION, 1978)

Eine Filmdose, Treibgut am Strand: Eine junge Frau findet darin THE LADY OF THE LAKE (1995), eine Variation auf eine alte Geschichte um Liebe und Besitz, einen melancholischen schwarzweißen Wasserfarbenfilm voller berückender Spezialeffekte“.

Im Strickfernsehen läuft ein Liebesfilm, Teil der Erinnerungen einer betagten Artistin. Gevatter Tod steht eines Nachts an ihrem Bett. Die Alte schiebt sich schnell das wollene Gebiss in den Mund und lädt zum Kartenspiel, aber auch der Teufel schläft nicht.

(THE LAST CIRCUS, 2007)

Papier, Buntstift, Malfarben, Fotografien oder Wolle. Animierte Zeichnungen, Realfilmsequenzen, Puppentrick, Computeranimation oder Legetechnik – Einsatz und Kombination von unterschiedlichsten Materialien und Techniken sind ein Charakteristikum von Vera Neubauers Filmen. „Den Schlüssel für den gesamten Film entdeckte ich mitunter erst während der Montage.“ *

Die gebürtige Tschechin kommt 1968 nach London und setzt am Royal College of Art ihr Kunststudium fort. Eine Abteilung für Animation gibt es dort nicht, aber ein Filmdepartment und die entsprechende technische Ausrüstung. Und es ist nur eine Frage der Zeit bis Neubauer, die Collagen anfertigt, gerne „Dinge herumschiebt“, seriell arbeitet, sich einem zeitbasierten Medium zuwendet. Das befreite Spiel mit heterogenen Elementen – zur Bildebene kommen (Original-)Musik und Off-Erzählungen – prägt schon

ANIMATION FOR LIVE ACTION (1978), ihre erste größere Arbeit, die anfangs nicht zur Teilnahme an Animationsfilmfestivals zugelassen wird, weil sie sich einer eindeutigen Kategorisierung entzieht.

Neubauers Filme, die in den folgenden Jahrzehnten in der kurzfristig prosperierenden Animationsfilmlandschaft Großbritanniens in Kooperation mit dem British Film Institute oder Channel 4 entstehen, sind nicht abstrakt, aber auch keine klassischen Erzählungen. Vielmehr handelt es sich um ein assoziatives Fabulieren, das dunkle Märchen oder Komödien mit Hintersinn produziert.

Eine weitere Konstante in Neubauers Arbeiten ist ihre Auseinandersetzung mit gesellschaftlichen Realitäten, vor allem mit dem Verhältnis (und der Hierarchie) der Geschlechter. Eine anhaltende Auseinandersetzung, die mit der zweiten Frauenbewegung beginnt, die das Private politisch denkt. Mit dem entsprechend anarchischen Gestus werden nicht nur ganz konkrete weibliche Erfahrungen thematisiert und ironisiert: aus dem Slogan „war=men“ auf einer Backsteinmauer wird in erweiterter Perspektive „war=menstruation envy“. Neubauer wendet auch traditionell als weiblich definierte Kulturtechniken in eine künstlerische Praxis – wie die virtuosen Strick- bzw. Häkelfilme beweisen, die sie seit den 90er-Jahren anfertigt („Wir haben damals in Wales gelebt, und wenn ich mit dem Zug nach London gefahren bin, habe ich die Zeit zum Häkeln genutzt.“).

Insgesamt sind so mittlerweile mehr als dreißig komplexe, detailverliebte Arbeiten – für Kinder und für Erwachsene – entstanden. Neubauer erhielt dafür international und in Großbritannien Auszeichnungen, das Werk der Filmemacherin, Filmvermittlerin und unabhängigen Produzentin (Spectre Films) wurde mit Retrospektiven unter anderem in Deutschland, Brasilien, Indien und bei „Tricky Women 2007“ vorgestellt.

THE LAST CIRCUS



HOOKED



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THE LAST CIRCUS



Interview with **Vera Neubauer**

DON'T BE AFRAID OF FREEDOM



Interview with Vera Neubauer

Maša Ogrizek, October 2008

The technique you have recently been using in your animation is knitting, which has a rather unusual if not anachronistic air in the era of high technology. How come you have decided to use knitted puppets?

From very early on I have been - cast as a feminist. It has become a kind of straightjacket that got rather tight. So I figured I might as well do something that was really consequential on this kind of labeling and go all the way. Make it with women's means, really in a very female way. For hundreds of years knitting was the only artistic expression women had, it was the only creativity they were allowed. They were telling stories during the winter months while they were knitting jumpers and socks. So I decided to use knitting as a technique to make *The Last Circus*. I always try to use a technique that will be integrated into the narrative so that it becomes part of it, compliments and enhances it, using the language best suited to a particular story. Because it is knitted it can also be unraveled. A sock can become a puppet.

You said that you were cast as a feminist. Did you declare yourself as one or was it a label put upon on you by others?

I don't like labels. I came from Czechoslovakia and I made films about what I saw and how I thought about my new environment. Because it was a different view on the society I was living in, it was immediately

seen as political. I never considered myself as being political, but at that time the “personal was political” and my work was seen as such and claimed by the women’s movement. It was probably partly because there was so little work around in which women expressed themselves in a way that was both free and anarchic. At that time there was not really any animation that was both independent and talked about issues from real life. In turn, the label, ‘feminist’ made me look at society in a more critical way, examining how women and men were trapped in their own positions. Men were equally caught up in their macho worlds and it was not easy for them to escape it, even if they wanted to.

Your knitted animation THE LAST CIRCUS comprises a series of fairy tale characters and scenes – the enchanted Frog King, Wolf and Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella’s shoes, Three Little Pigs ... which are then incorporated into a new context, thus telling the life story of the dying Godiva.

I use those fairy stories because they were part of our upbringing, they helped to form us. Maybe the children of today don’t have the same stories anymore, but I was brought up on them. They were passed on from grandparents to grandchildren and so on for a reason.

These tales were a kind of a subtle warning for children, a preparation for life. All of those tales have a hidden meaning. The way I try to look at them is to see what is really behind them; what was there before the stories became cushioned, soften for children’s consumption.

What did they really mean? What did the grandmother want to warn her daughter or granddaughter about? What were the taboos that would have been difficult to talk about in any other way? That is why I use these tales. I try to look at them with our current awareness of psychology. I have also used them because fairy tales, like knitting, like the circus and like animation are all unrecognised art forms previously relegated only to children. I wanted to extract the naivety and innocence from them and give them back the recognition of adult material.

I think there is an interesting counterpoint between formal and meaning-related aspects present in your knitted animations. Wool is normally associated to softness and warmth, home and security, while you use it to „knit“ stories in which you lay bare social relations and show how home is often the environment of domination, abuse and violence. Mainstream popular culture – on the other hand – is still producing idealised images of romantic love and motherhood. Is demystification of family life and of stereotypical, socially acceptable images of femininity important?

You are right, the mainstream has always been there as something to work against. No romance lasts 24 hours a day for very long. Excitement, fantasy or passions are indispensable, but every now and then there is

a need for a reality check. I like to play with the juxtaposition of the romantic with the mundane in a similar way as I use the soft material to talk about harsh subjects.

LA LUNA, a metaphorical account of a rat couple begins with the words: »Once upon a time there was him and her«. The ensuing story is rather bloody, violent and unhappy, concluded by the beginning of a new tale: »Once upon a time, there was her«. There is a similar point in your film THE DECISION. Do you consider such a beginning to be a prerequisite for a happy ending, not only in fairy tales but in real life as well?

Yes, I find it important to keep one's own centre so you don't become just instrumental or functional – the mother, the provider, the career – while letting everything else just vanish. So it's important that the woman in my film keeps her personality, makes her own decisions and does not need to consult a witch to find her answers. That is what growing up is all about – being able to make your own decisions. But if you are saying that in *LA LUNA* I am saying that the future is in her standing single and alone, that was not what I meant.

18 I like people being together. Relationships are interesting and important. Love, friendship, trust are all fundamental ingredients in life and not just in fiction.

There is not a lot of talking in your films, but you use human voice as an instrument, a „meaningless“ sound. The music is also very important in your work.

In **THE LAST CIRCUS** Iva Bittova composed the music, she played the instruments and sang it. It was fantastic to be working with her. She comes from the same part of the world as I do and her work is based in the same origins. She has a very intuitive approach and knew exactly what I wanted. It was so natural for us to work together. I love what she does. On **WHEEL OF LIFE** Joji Hirota assembled his instruments in such a beautiful way. We screened the film and he played and sung the woman's voice all in one take. I just watched totally gob smacked. It was an incredible experience. Gary Carpenter used to play me bits of his compositions on the piano in to the phone. I loved that. Alex Balanescu is such a virtuoso violin player, you just love what he does and make it fit. Alan Lawrence and Peter Brewis consider each frame. Either way the process is always trilling and at the end I always feel that I have been given an enormous gift.

You mentioned earlier that you don't feel comfortable in language. Is that because English is not your native language?

I haven't really found the language I felt comfortable enough to express myself in. Not even Czech, because I left Czechoslovakia when I was young and I don't really use it every day. Language is evolving and changing all the time, especially Czech which is wonderfully funny – Czechs are very witty people so naturally it comes out in the language. If you don't live there you miss out on all the new expressions, phrases and jokes. I feel much closer to images. Images don't tie me down as much and the interpretation can be more open.

I find your WOOLLY WOLF - reinterpretation of Little Red Riding Hood - very beautiful and humorous. In it Little Red Riding Hood meets the mean Wolf in the woods, eats it and throws up in her grandma's hut. Grandma uses the vomited threads to knit the white sheep that was previously eaten by Wolf. A black-haired girl in red dress often appears in your other, also earlier works. Is it an alter ego of a kind?

In the beginning, in the very early films I was playing with the duality of the animator and the animated and the “Freudian” power struggle between them. The Little Red Riding Hood character is wearing a red dress.

20 I like red. She has black hair, because I didn't want to have a “blond bimbo” as my protagonist. It's not really me. If I were in there somewhere I would probably be the old woman. (laughter) In THE LAST CIRCUS the

girl and the old woman are the same person, it is about her life and her confusion, between her past, her presence and her hallucinations.

Your work often includes the character of an old woman, no romanticising involved: she has saggy breast, false teeth, thick glasses, growing bald, is handicapped... Why do you consider the character of old woman so important?

When we are young stereotypes or idols are there for us – we are all brought up to be princesses. As we grow older the idols vanish and there is nothing to model oneself on. The old women become invisible. In this society old age is really not to be recommended. The old became poor and ill, they lose their status and basically become powerless. It's not easy to find women who stay powerful to the very end. Men keep their visibility for a while longer, but in reality old age is the same for both.

Halloween is getting closer. Witches in your film MID AIR prepare a magic potion that helps men acquire the ability to menstruate. The shot of bloodstained male underpants drying on the rope below the sky is very powerful both visually and meaningfully. Can you explore this metaphor a bit further to conclude our conversation?


What was going on in my mind at that time? I suppose I was flirting with the idea that because women are menstruating they do not need to draw blood, while men do not have this relationship with their own bodies, so perhaps therefore are more blood-thirsty. But that is just an

amusing discourse of the film rather than a conviction. So the film asks the question: would the world be a much better place if men also were 'cursed' with that affliction.

Witches are still quite ambivalent figures, they still have a rather negative connotations in our societies.

Obviously I wanted them to be powerful – they are learning to fly, they want freedom. I was using them as a positive image. In history they knew their herbs and they had healing powers. They were persecuted because people feared them. In fairytales witches are generally made out to be wicked. Do you have the tale of Deda Vsevjeda (The grandfather who knows it all) here in Slovenia? In this tale there is an old man and he is – as you pointed out in one of your questions – looked upon with respect. People come to consult him for his wisdom. Old women too will have to be respected, considered wise, good and powerful. (laughter)

*Born in Prague, **Vera Neubauer** studied art in Prague, Düsseldorf and Stuttgart and began to study film at London's Royal College of Art in 1969. In addition to her own work as an artist she worked as a teacher at home and abroad until 1999. Today she is also active as a producer with Spectre Films. Vera Neubauer's works have been awarded at countless festivals all over the world.*



Die in Prag geborene **Vera Neubauer** studierte Kunst in Prag, Düsseldorf und Stuttgart sowie ab 1969 Film am Londoner Royal College of Art. Neben ihrer künstlerischen Arbeit unterrichtete Neubauer bis 1999 im In- und Ausland und ist heute mit Spectre Films auch als Produzentin tätig. Vera Neubauers Arbeiten wurden auf zahlreichen Festivals rund um den Globus ausgezeichnet.

