

O V E R T H E W A L L

DEATH, OBSESSION + CINEMA



ORPHEUS

an interview with MICHAEL BRYNNTRUP

MICHAEL BRYNNTRUP is a thirty year old avatar of super-8 who moved to Berlin ten years ago to avoid military service. He is self taught, and has completed over twenty films to date, all in super-8, including a feature length version of the Christ story. Casting himself in the lead he collaborated with filmmakers/groups across the country (including clandestine work in East Germany), asking them to choose a sequence from the biblical narrative and shoot it in their own style. Hand processing all of the footage he assembled it to complete Jesus - The Film, finished in 1986. The same year he began work on the first of a series of Death Dances, an episodic serial using a skull as a common motif. A prolific, imaginative and obsessive filmmaker, Brynntrup has produced innumerable installations and 'film actions', participated in festivals across Europe and organized screenings. Most of his work is self financed.

G

E

R

M

A

N

Y

PART ONE: Bryntrup and Hoolboom

(NOTE: Owing to a faulty tape recorder on this interview, much of the conversation with Michael Bryntrup was wiped out. Rather than scrap the interview entirely, it's reproduced here in partial and fragmented form, and supplemented by an additional interview conducted by Steff Ulbrich.)

MH:

People say that Michael Bryntrup is obsessed with two things: the first is death, and the other is cinema. They claim you're racing against death, working obsessively all the time, finishing one film after another.

MB:

I work on two/three films at the same time because I pay for most of the work myself. No agency is waiting for me to finish, so I work on my own schedule. The *Death Dances* began very spontaneously. I had this skull which was a relic from the *Jesus Film*, around which I made *Testamento Memori* (My Last

exhortation at the end is satirized. ('Please publish after my death.') In this film his talent to create his own new images comes to full expression. His face, his hands, the skull, and a 'Chinese' bird cage dangle in the room like silver shadows on a golden background... The study of death even in his childhood has a deeper meaning. His identical twin brother died in childbirth. Speaking in terms of depth-psychology, the guilt of the survivor unconsciously determines his fascination with questions of death.'

MB:

Yes, in another *Death Dance* I had this skull and I hid it under a cloth. This was a kind of experimental film so I started to film and said to my little niece, 'Go look under the cloth' and she discovered the skull. She was four years old, and the experiment was: what will a four year old child do with a skull?

First, she recognized what it was. She ran right away to her mother, so I had to stop shooting. But five minutes later she started to play with the skull and her dolls, and she went outside in the garden

by a window where the skull is waiting. Fascinated, she picks it up and kisses it. A second picture roll was made with hand development, abstract solarizations. *Die Botschaft* brings these two rolls together. All of the *Death Dances* have two elements in common: each centres on a performer, and each uses music, there's no synch sound.

MH:

You often have others make the score?

MB:

Yes. In Berlin the scene is quite close, everyone knows everyone.

MH:

In music, film, or theatre—

MB:

Yes, more and more. Musicians like to do music for a film, and I make images for their stage shows. Sometimes they use my work as a video clip.

MH:

Is that partly how you get your work shown in Berlin?

MB:

Not so much any more, it was very big around 1983. Then there were still some squats and they always hosted cultural events with a cafe or bar in the house. Or we had a show in a disco or everywhere. Now there's lots of galleries and small budget shops who often show work. They like to organize super-8 weeks, everyone sharing an

evening with other friends. The films are shown quite often.

MH:

I thought these films used to exist in a street environment, but that the scene's moved towards festivals and kommunale kinos in places like Kino Eiszeit and the Arsenal, that today the life of an experimental film resides inside a film world, with other filmmakers. Steff Ulbrich said he didn't want to make super-8 work any more because it's in a ghetto, that the only people who see it are other super-8 filmers. Is that so?

MB:

But super-8 is cheap and you can do it on your own, at home, and work spontaneously with friends, and collect material without having to use it. To produce super-8 films is much easier than 16mm. If you make a 16mm experimental film you have the same problem showing it, but you don't have the possibility of

~~FIVE MINUTES LATER SHE STARTED TO PLAY WITH THE SKULL AND HER DOLLS, AND SHE WENT OUTSIDE IN THE GARDEN AND FILLED IT WITH WATER AND DRANK FROM IT.~~

Testament). Should I describe some images?

MH:

It shows you in hand processed negative—

MB:

And I'm fucking a skull—

MH:

And reciting a text.

MB:

It's not really German. It's a very old text and I made strange pronunciations so it's not so understandable, but it's about breathing when giving birth.

MH:

Birgit Hein wrote, 'In some of his films the skull is his partner and his second ego, with whom he talks, plays, kisses, and even has sexual intercourse.

Testamento Memori ironically describes the birth-death theme. Texts with music about breathing techniques accompany his playing with the skull, in which the

and filled it with water and drank from it. It's an episode and I like to work in this form. In films like the *Death Dances* I often edit in camera. They're very situational, atmospheric films, very condensed and compact. I make my other work on the editing table, not before. They're more like thoughts in motion, more rational.

MH:

How many *Dances* are there altogether?

MB:

Eight. They're all very different. They show everything you can imagine doing with a skull. The skull is common to each, it's the motif, the signature. One is very bloody and medieval, another shows a magician conjuring it from thin air and making it float. In *Die Botschaft* (*The Message*), the eighth death dance, a woman walks through a very old monastery, throwing handfuls of feathers into the air. Eventually she comes to sit

O V E R T H E W A L L

screening it spontaneously in a bar as was done last week.

MH:
Because the bars only take super-8?

MB:
It's easier for the bars. Today we don't have the mission of a few years before, we don't march into cafes and unwrap our surprises.

MH:
You would show up and demand that the bar play your films?

MB:
It used to happen a lot but not so much any more. This way we reached another audience.

MH:
You don't do this any more because you don't have to?

MB:
It's a personal development. The people who did it in 1983 aren't interested in doing the same thing. Many haven't continued and are doing other things. With these kind of films there's always a ghetto, a very closed circle.

MH:
Does that trouble you?

MB:
Not really, because I do the films I want to do, I don't care. I hate this term 'experimental' film.

MH:
Why's that?

MB:
Because I saw this 'experimental' film in Toronto, at the Experimental Film Congress, and what they showed was not what I mean.

MH:
How would you characterize what they showed?

MB:
The experimental film they showed is only an episode in film history which began in the early sixties and still goes on, but it's now anachronistic. In the sixties it was worth doing, it was new and had a relation with something outside the circle of film and cineastes because they were dealing with new visions of sexuality and politics, and a new idea of what film could be. But really this is over. In the eighties, there are other films, based on the formal inventions of this time, and the connection outside the films are completely different. Perhaps today's work is a bit more entertaining, but it also has deep connections with the Zeitgeist.

I think these films, what friends of mine are doing, and especially those friends I invited to make episodes for the *Jesus* film, all these living young experimental filmmakers have more to do with early experimental filmmakers like Rene Clair and Lumiere and Bunuel.

MH:
How do you see that connection?

MB:
They are not fixed in structure, in this formalist stuff. They really want to show something, so they show it. And their mentality, the way they think, has more to do with this strange and fresh - how do you say it in English? (Looking it up) 'Freedom, insolent, cheeky, saucy, impudent...', something like that. They have more to do with that. Sure, it's postmodern, it's what you see in architecture, they make quotations, but they have the freedom to do it without thinking about avant-garde stuff. They all work with the super-8 camera, and open the box and take it, and open a book and take a quotation. You open your mind and take it.

MH:
One of the things that struck me about a number of German filmmakers is that they seemed concerned, even obsessed with this question of the new. There's a lot of festivals in Germany, which allows a tremendous exchange of new work and views to take place beneath a critical scrutiny that's always wary of old styles, old themes. I think the new very quickly becomes old in Germany.

MB:
But if I say 'new', I say it ironically. I don't say, "Here is the 'avant-garde', or 'The Head Of It All'"; when you're sailing, the head is the toilet. 'Avant-garde' only exists for historians, retrospectively. If you want to be actual, you have to do your work without thinking of what hasn't been done or taking your place in a line of history. I don't think that every idea is original. The connection which is interesting is that the same ideas grow at the same time in different heads. And my films are a kind of lubricant, they share this sharing. This is really the only point I'm interested insofar as the new is concerned. We don't own our ideas.

MH:
Do you think that there's common themes that characterize super-8 work in Berlin?

MB:
At the moment there are not a lot of films made in super-8 any more. Every year from 1983 to '85, 250 super-8 films were made in Germany, independent films. Now it's half. Our generation from 25-35 started with the super-8 cameras of their fathers, but now they start with video. So there's no real rebirth of the scene.

Lots of people in 1983 -85 made 3 or 4 super-8 films and stopped, this is not what they were born for so it's over. And some changed to video. And when you're 30-35 you think about earning money and not everybody has the drive to go this hard way through the institutions and to be free and independent. So some looked for another job at a TV station and stopped doing their own work. Perhaps they're still dreaming about it.

MH:
Working as hard as you do, does it trouble you always dealing with pieces of the past?

MB:
I accept it, I speak about it.

MH:
Because there's already a kind of death there, these images are from a time that's over, that's finished. And to be obsessed, to be surrounding yourself with this dead time, does this trouble you?

MB:
Why should I be troubled? I accept the situation as it is. That's the way of life.

MH:
No, that's the way of film.

MB:
Yeah okay. But every time-structure speaks about ending, about death, and my *Death Dances* speak of narrativity and on this crypt of cinema. Taken altogether its ribbons make a kind of shroud, a world of doubles already dead. If you like I can show you another *Death Dance*, no one's seen it yet. (He projects *Death Dance 9*)

MB:
The *Death Dances* are a bit of a lexicon, showing a skull in many hands, many situations. They're playful and serious at the same time, and I always strive for this balance, this place between. There is the possibility that people will think about themselves if you have a balance.

G

E

R

M

A

N

Y

MH:

In this film, like *Death Dance 8*, you've used a hand processing technique to show the film's material. This charges the work with a strong emotional current which runs throughout the film.

MB:

Actually I have another version with self-developed material but the image was too poor, too grainy. I refilmed it using two projectors, one showing the abstract roll and the other showing the magician. They ran one on top of the other while I refilmed onto a single strip, gaining the heightened color and grain that comes from re-photography. This was important for its optical sense, its emotion.

MH:

In traditional art terms one speaks about figures and grounds. The ground is the material, flowing through everything, hand processed and abstract. And the figure is the magician, who conjures up the bird and then the skull, and then makes the skull rise and float. Because you've filmed him in a studio setting, with black behind, nothing exists apart from the world he's conjuring up, the world he's created, the world on view. He's so very much alone in this world. It's a bit existential, everything in it exists by his own hand.

MB:

Yes, the film you saw in Osnabruck, *Death Dance 8*, was shot outside, in a special location. Then there are three, four films I made here (at home) using studio black.

PART TWO:**Steff Ulbrich and Michael Bryntrup****SU:**

Over the years I've noticed an increasing use of the skull in your films. This began as a series of xeroxed passport photos where repeated enlargements revealed a skull waiting in your eye. Then there was Testamento *Memori*, the first of your *Death Dances* (*Totentanze*), which shows you fucking a skull, and in each of the succeeding *Death Dances* you use the skull in some way.

MB:

Death is a theme that emerged quite early and runs through nearly all my films. For me the skull is especially interesting because its symbolic charac-

ter is charged by different parties.

Drawing classes love to use it as a prop, but it's also a sign of fashion, people put them on necklaces. The skull is present in nearly every youth culture - rockers, skins or punks. It's difficult to define exactly, it provokes, but also quotes a condition which defies explanation: the subject of death.

SU:

How do you develop the ideas for your *Death Dances*?

MB:

For me super-8 favors a fragmentary procedure. It's not script writing or preparing a film for three years and shooting it in 14 days. You collect your material with your handy camera. Or you just walk into the world for a day to shoot things you've just thought of, something you've just conceived. Then you outline a small story, an episode, that fits into super-8. The death dances are all episodes or chapters based on a single performer. Like Ichgola (main actor in *Death Dances 6*) for example. I've seen her stage act and we know each other privately quite well. She has similar things in mind, grotesque and weird things but funny at the same time. We'd thought about making a dirty little movie, a *Death Dance* with a lot of meat and blood and a strange guy collecting it. Of course I'd been to the slaughterhouse before, getting eyes of pigs and some guts. But the actual film happened quite unexpectedly, like the good weather. We met at Ichgola's. Her room is a real treasure-chest, a collection of curiosities. We got this and that out and ready, but we didn't know at all where to shoot. We opened the map of the city, but of course everything is pretty limited if you're surrounded by a wall: it's hard to find interesting places to shoot, especially if the theme is nature. So we picked out the tiny blue dots on the map, little ponds and suchlike. Then we headed directly for one of these dots but couldn't find it. It seemed to be a printing mistake on the map. We asked around and later came up with a pond between buildings. Though this wasn't on the map, we shot it, and if you watch the footage it seems to be total solitude, marshland, endless nature before the horizon. In fact we had to cut out poles and wires by finding clever angles. That's how Ichgola's *Death Dance* was produced. The story

developed at the location, more or less. And the other *Death Dances* are similar: each shows the interaction of a protagonist with a surround which includes the skull.

SU:

Your work foregrounds das Deutsche (Germanness). Why insist on your German past?

MB:

In *Der Rhein - Ein Deutsches Marchen* (*The Rhine - A German Fairytale*) I didn't make a statement on National Socialism but on the Germany of the 'economic miracle'. It's that time which has shaped us and in which we grew up. That belongs to my person and to the present time. I can't imagine reappraising an aspect of German history, not even the persecution of homosexuals during the Third Reich, even in the form of documentary fiction. I regard it as completely unnecessary to present my opinion on that; I don't consider myself competent to do so. There are other things which are closer to myself and more concrete. Persecution of homosexuals still exists today and I think it's important to report this as I've experienced it myself.

SU:

But you don't seem to deal with homosexuality apart from a certain attitude.

MB:

I think it's clear that my films have been made by a gay filmmaker. Without making explicitly gay films, my work includes certain gay moments. Take the *Stummfilm*, for example. You see these cards which introduce sign language for the deaf when suddenly and inexplicably the sign representing homosexuality appears. This is one level. The *Tabuilm* is much more personal. I speak a lot about my own coming-out. Or the *Death Dances*, I consider them very gay, especially in the age of AIDS.

SU:

What was your aim with the *Tabuilm* (*Taboo Films*)?

MB:

The *Tabuilm* don't ask, "What did Michael Bryntrup do on the 12th of May, 1989?" They are concerned with what a diary is. Does it include taboos? What are the conditions for diary writing? What is already predetermined by the diary medium? It seems that only in retrospect, through history, that events gain meaning and become categorized. This is the

main point in my *Tabu I-IV* films.

Tabu I, the first diary, focuses on my surgery. The second gathers material under a separate theme, confusion and coming out. The third diary makes it clear that the *Tabu*film is a film, just that, the single pages of the diary become animated, something is moving inside the diary itself, and in the fourth diary, a concrete situation is recorded as in screenplays. Its long ending brings the viewer back to the present, to the act of watching the film. I think the act of the diary is important, that history is made in the present. You don't organize your life by means of a diary, you create a diary and your life as well, again and again.

SU:

You presented your diary as a guestbook at the premiere party, but no one wanted to write anything in it.

MB:

Privacy is one of the last taboos. I wanted to confront people with it when I asked them to write in my diary. Finally it's always you who sets the taboo. You decide how far you want to go: to respect privacy or leaf through the diary or even write something in it. This play happened in front of a mirror. My work is never easy-going or purely sympathetic. Those who watch my movies always have to reflect on themselves as well. Take the long ending as an example: they realize the movie isn't over yet, that they are sitting on a hard chair getting a sore butt. I drag them out of the illusion which every film creates, away from fascination. I try to work on a structure which returns people to themselves. I don't offer figures of identification. The viewer can only identify with him/herself.

SU:

So you don't make entertaining movies?

MB:

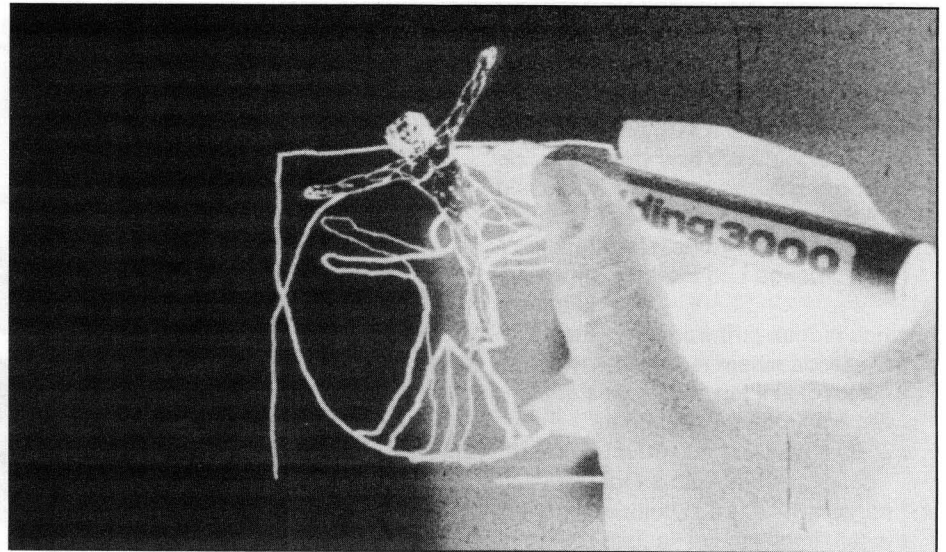
Well, I don't want to make films without an edge, which will be forgotten in a minute. My films require work while watching them.

SU:

Is that why you use these coded, mysterious symbols?

MB:

Symbols always show two faces. Their history accumulates different meanings, so in the present their meaning is both particular and open to interpretation. For example, the hand is a theme that runs through most of my work. Perhaps it has



HÖLLENSIMULATION

something to do with the fact that my hand came into consciousness as my first body part. And in puberty, a friend I desired sexually made a remark about my beautiful hand. The hand is a medium, something intellectual, it leaves behind a sign, a mark of its passing, like the markings of the palm. Maybe the hand is only a microcosm representing the entire body, the entire life, the entire world.

The skull is another story. It's linked for me to the awakening consciousness of individualism. This also explains my preference for mannerism, which is the period in history when the event of the individual occurred. Especially interesting is the rejection of formalism, the rejection of theories which tried to cover nature and vision by law. It's interesting that mannerism defined itself by what it rejected, which means it was negative first of all. But at the same time it managed to show all that a centralized perspective left behind, its free spirit of fantasy lived in the borders, the margins of this perspective.

And my work is the same. Something outrageous and comic happens. You might follow the storyline with interest, but after the film's done you just shake your head and wonder: What the hell was that? And this is the point, to guide people on a complicated path to another state of mind, a path they'll understand much later on. I don't want to make a statement here and now, which you might answer somehow with arguments,

and then this would have to be discussed, and we'd have to come up with a joint resolution. Not all that crap which represents the stability of the whole system, but simply to point towards a region in every human being, in every subjectivity, where other things count besides words.

**MICHAEL BRYNNTRUP
FILMOGRAPHY**

- 1981/82 *September, Wut, eine Reise* (Spielfilm, 82 min.)
- 1983 *Todesstreifen - ein Deutscher Film* (Triple Projection 9 min.); *The Rhine - A German Fairy Tale* (14 min.)
- 1983/4 *Orpheus* (22 min.)
- 1984 *Silent Movie for the Deaf* (8 min.); *Aus Vier Jahreszeiten* (4 min.); *Firm hand-voluntary self control* (17 min.)
- 1985 *Musterhaft - das Ende, ein Intermezzo* (8 min.)
- 1985/6 *Jesus - The Film* (20 authors, two versions: 84/125 min.)
- 1986 *My Last Testament* (8 min.)
- 1986/7 *Veronika (vera ikon)* 11 min.
- 1987 *Höllensimulation - frei nach Platos Höhlengleichnis* (8 min.); *Pause* (3 min.)
- 1988 *The Ivory Elephant, Death Dances 1-3* (10 min.); *Taboo 1-IV* (28 min.)
- 1989 *Das Zauberei, Death Dance 5* (6 min.); *Der Hieronymus, Death Dance 6* (7 min.); *Death Dance 7* (7 min.); *The Message, Death Dance 8* (10 min.); *Death Dance 9*.