
DAS STAHLTIER

During the moving off, the ground spins, slowly at first, then faster and faster. The world stands fast.
 Martin Loiperdinger, 'L'Histoire de l'Animal d'acier', in *Cinémathèque no.5*, spring 1994

Henri Langlois was one of the first programme planners to share in the rediscovery of films made under the Third Reich, even if he vigorously opposed the projection of certain films in which the anti-Semitism was too virulent (e.g., *Jew Süß*). In the new projection room on Rue d'Ulm, inaugurated 1st December 1955, he mounted a retrospective devoted to German cinema, simply entitled 'Images of German Cinema, 1896-1956'. From 9 February to 23 March 1956, spectators (re)discovered successes and classics of that production, as well as forgotten titles such as Willy Zielke's *The Steel Animal*, a film censored by the Nazi authorities and of which La Cinémathèque française conserves a print thanks to a loan from Leni Riefenstahl.

The Steel Animal, a sponsored film for the hundredth anniversary of the German railway, is perhaps the most singular film made under the Third Reich. Its hybrid aesthetic combines a reconstitution in costumes of the wild epic of the rail pioneers; a documentary framework made up of portraits of railway workers filmed at their daily labour, removed from any political heroization¹; and a purely visual experiment, directly inspired by the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity). Described as a 'fanatic of the image' in an interview granted to *Der Film*, Zielke affirmed his desire to free himself from the style of educational documentaries and to shoot an 'absolute film'². A trained photographer, he enjoyed extensive artistic liberties and delivered particularly innovative and mastered visual experimentations featuring dynamic geometrical compositions, with diagonals and broken lines, attentive to the luminous properties of glass and steel. Peter Kreuder's syncopated melodies accentuate the wild rhythm of this modernist poem. *The Steel Animal* is thus surprising proof of the existence of avant-garde films contemporary with National Socialism.

Nonetheless, bogged down in bureaucratic mazes, the film was censored by the *Reichsbahn's* central management and by the Berlin board of control. Banned in July 1935, it would not be released until 1954, and then, largely amputated. The exact reasons for this censorship have not come down to us, but the film's aesthetic content, attaching little importance to the political or advertising context of its production, would doubtless have played a determining role.

Concerning *The Steel Animal*, Henri Langlois wrote:

The regime had lost its will and was no longer interested in anything but maintaining order. This order and organization that, when applied to the cinematographic profession, turn it over to obscurantism, materialism and a mindless state. The further one advances in the regime, the worse the films become. What will remain of all that in the future? Very little, with the exception of one film: Zielke's Steel Animal, the Hitlerian Lola Montès affair³ and which was, moreover, banned.

¹ The actors were railway workers filmed on their workplace, going about their daily business.

² This expression, recorded in the filmmaker's work plan, refers to the famous projections organized by UFA in 1925 at which international avant-garde films were presented.

³ Here Langlois refers to the recent release of the Max Ophüls film (on the screens in December 1956), reviled by the public (one cinema had to call the emergency services) but defended by filmmakers (Jean Cocteau, Roberto Rossellini, Jacques Becker, Jacques Tati), critics, and writers, and immediately became a 'cursed film'. Similarly, Zielke's film was hailed by his peers at the private screening that preceded its being banned.

CINEMA AS A MEANS OF RESISTANCE

Programming
Thanks to Henri Langlois

The Steel Animal / Das Stahltier

Germany, 1935 – 74 minutes

Direction and script: Willy Otto Zielke

Production: Deutsche Reichsbahn

Photography: Willy Otto Zielke et Hubs Flöter

Music : Peter Kreuder

Cast: Aribert Mog, the workers of the Munich-Freimann repair workshop

In a German city, a factory is running at full capacity. The engineer Klaassen goes off to meet the crew at the marshalling yard and relates the sometimes tragic history of the inventors of the railway.

A print was deposited in the collections of La Cinémathèque française in the late Forties. In 1993, the film was preserved from this original print, and a show print was duplicated.

