

VIRTUOS VIRTUELL



FILMOGRAPHIC DATA

director: Thomas Stellmach, Maja Oschmann, DE 2013 **drawing, storyboard, image choreography, ink animation, film layout:** Maja Oschmann **production, project idea, storyline, compositing, stereoscopy, ink animation, technical direction:** Thomas Stellmach **music:** Overture of the opera „The Alchemist“ by Louis Spohr, 1830 **music for closing credits:** Till Mertens **length:** 7,5 min **format:** 35mm **image/sound:** b/w, stereo, awarded the FBW (German Film and Media Evaluation) rating „Of Special Merit“



OVERVIEW OF CONTENT AND FILM AESTHETIC



VIRTUOS VIRTUELL (DE 2013) is a contemporary experimental animation film by the graphic artist Maja Oschmann and the animation film director Thomas Stellmach. What is brought to life (i.e. animated) in this film is not a colourful cartoon or claymation character, but black ink on a white background. Nor is any dialogue spoken; the wordless main actors are running ink and classical orchestra music. Ultimately no consistent narrative plot can be discerned. Rather, in VIRTUOS VIRTUELL abstract pictures are brought into dramatic movement to music in such a way that an idea of a story unfolds in our fantasy.

The film in our minds begins when we draw concrete images, moods and stories from the abstract play of lines and splotches of the ink in combination with the music. Then the cinema in our heads tells a story, perhaps of the root system and growth of a tree, or a threatening encounter between a large tree and a small one. It tells of the movement of flight of a serpentine line swung with virtuosity through swamps of black ink, of the somersaults and acrobatic swirling through the air of this line, of New Year's Eve fireworks and water fountains, of diving into a black sea, of the rapid growth into





the sky of a jungle – or simply of black ink dancing in a white world.

The film-making duo consciously intended to evoke these and other associations, with Stellmach developing a storyline to the music and Oschmann producing painted and filmed ink pictures for each stage of this storyline. Oschmann's pictures and the film sequences that they became have appropriate working titles, such as „tree growth“, „tulips grow“, „fern grows“, „puddle-skipping and underwater world“. Thus, in virtuoso (i.e. masterful) fashion, the film enables an abstract virtual (i.e. not



present in reality) world emerge to before our eyes and ears, one that is perpetually unfolding anew into concrete form through the associative power of the viewer.

Oschmann and Stellmach transfer music – its rhythms, tempi, moods (threatening, cheerful, exalted...) and its drama – to moving images and thus make what is heard

by the ears also perceptible for the eye. By creating a dancelike transition from the ear's sense to that of the eye, their visual interpretation of Louis Spohr's music becomes an achievement in intersensual translation. By contrast with Hansjürgen Pohland's film SCHATTEN, the music for which was composed to the completed images, the music in VIRTUOS VIRTUELL precedes the film.

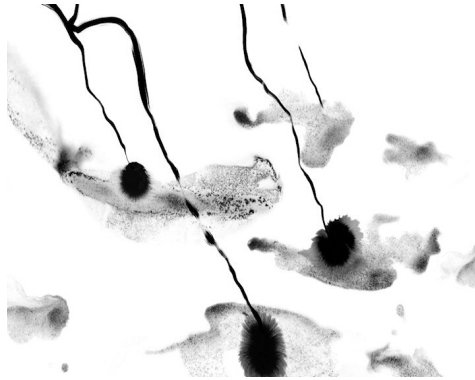
ARTISTIC DESIGN PROCESS

Translation processes working with film snippets

Work on VIRTUOS VIRTUELL began with the Overture to the opera „The Alchemist“ (1830), by the Kassel composer Louis Spohr. Stellmach had the idea of transferring this music to a film in such a way that music for the eyes as well as the ears would result. With a precise analysis of the musical structures the composition of the film's images also began.

To these structures, Thomas Stellmach developed an associative storyline that picks up the dramatic developments in the music and translates them into a loose dramaturgy. Visualisation methods helped the directors with their work on the images; for example, when Oschmann not only hears the Overture while she is drawing to it, but also has the music's frequencies in wave form before her eyes on the computer screen. Or when Oschmann creates image scores or storyboards in which she visually illustrates her interpretation of the music's chronological progression.

The work on the film images designed to the music comprises a combination of both analogue and digital techniques; inspired by the music, Oschmann created ink pictures



by hand and with different materials and filmed the respective progressions of colour with a digital camera at an evenly lit animation table. In doing this, she used various techniques:

She filmed movements on the horizontal surface with a camera, mounted over the action, that viewed the picture from above and which was also moved (i.e. tracking/travelling shot). With ink colouring and different brushes or quills she drew and dabbed on dry or moist paper, she blew the running ink in the desired direction with an airbrush compressor. For a number of scenes she used glass water basins, in which she sprayed ink paint while filming the spread of the colour.



For downward movements of the colours, Oschmann and Stellmach either let the ink run down an upright sheet of glass or sprayed the colour into a 4-millimetre-deep water basin, also upright, so that it slowly

ran downwards. Here the camera films not from above, but views the action from the front. Sometimes Oschmann added oil to the ink and water in order to obtain the visual effect of the oil rolling off the ink-soaked water. A few images in the film were not obtained using analogue media; for these she draw on a graphics tablet with a digital pen.

In analogue ink-blotting spontaneity and chance play as great a role as does artistic control, here supported by digital technology. The film thus depicts an almost impossi-



ble attempt to steer liquids that spread according to their own laws into targeted paths. Countless ink pictures and thousands of snippets of film were created, which Oschmann and Stellmach – always with the music in their ears – selected and finally combined digitally at the computer into a dramaturgically contrived choreography of images.

The work on VIRTUOS VIRTUELL is comparable to that on a filmic collage, for the snippets of film are assembled into ever greater units, until, in synchronisation with the music, they produce a seamless flow of imagery. Using computer software, the transitions between the individual film snippets are also retouched in such a way as to create a spatial proximity and a chronological sequence; a filmic arrangement of space and time in which the musically gui-

ded ink colours perform their very own „dance“.

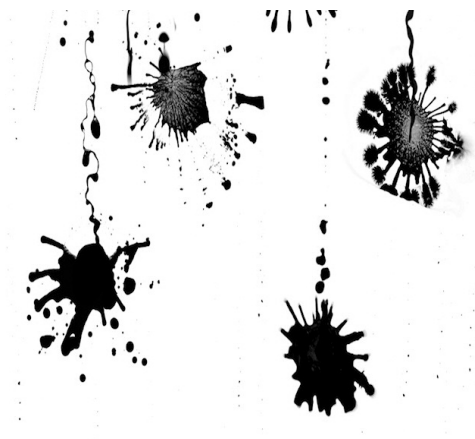
Underlying the film is a recording of Spohr's Overture made in 1993 by the Berlin Symphony Orchestra under conductor Christian Fröhlich. For the credits sequence submerged in the black water, sound artist Till Mertens composed additional new music in 2013. A live performance of the film with the



Kassel State Orchestra under the baton of Helmut Imig took place in 2013 as part of the celebrations of the 1,100th anniversary of the city of Kassel.

The start of the film: dialogue of lines

The beginning of the film indicates the way in which Stellmach and Oschmann use abstract images to establish a micro-narrative with ink characters that establish a rapport through the music. It tells of the encounter between two lines, which sprout from the ground as if they were trees, bran-



ches, climbing plants or lianas. At the same time a thick tree grows threateningly over a delicate plant, leaving it no choice but to flee.

With the first clear note of the strings a thick blob of ink rolls down the white background. A strong line and a strong tree trunk grow powerfully from it as notes from three groups of strings sound. The strings are answered by the higher pitch of flutes, to which a delicate root and then a shoot develops out of a watery little smudge of ink. The strings associated with the thick trunk deepen in sound the further the trunk grows. The little shoot is also forced further out of the earth – by clear-sounding flutes – whereupon the dark strings begin to speak with a deeper voice yet. The delicate liana-like plant now also moves to the voice of the strings and pushes itself further into the air. It speaks in a higher register than the strings of the mighty tree, which bends over the little shoot menacingly and answering with ever darkening string tones.

While remaining in this musical dialogue, the tree and the delicate climbing plant approach each other step by step until they are almost touching. But that doesn't happen, as the weaker one takes evasive action and twists in a serpentine flute dance towards the right. Dark strings, this time with the addition of woodwinds, take the floor, causing thick branches to crash threateningly from above, until they have almost encircled the creeper now fleeing downwards.

The delicate plant reacts to this encirclement as if it wanted to gather all its inky strength before fleeing forwards; to high and fast violin tones a drop of colour from the delicate liana runs underneath several times. But before it can break out the liana is caught in a small spidery tangle as the

strings overwhelm. After the tempo has built up still further, the music discharges itself all at once and the liana uses this to push itself jerkily out of the prison. It plunges and turns with virtuosity, constantly striving to go ever farther to the right with streamer-like movements.

While the whole orchestra dramatically accompanies the flight of the line from the ink and water blotches that keep appearing, the clear strings accompany the streamer-line. At the same time the music relates to the images in such a way as to suggest that the ink line is the expression of the circling movements of the conductor's baton, not in the air, but drawn directly onto paper.



ARTISTIC CLASSIFICATION OF THE FILM

Film-makers

Maja Oschmann (b. 1975) comes not from film but is a visual artist. The visualisation of sounds also plays an important role in her graphic work. Under the title „BILDKLANG“ (PICTURESOUND), Oschmann created series of ink drawings to music, similar to her work on VIRTUOS VIRTUELL, also, among others to Arvo Pärt's „Spiegel im Spiegel“.

The career of Thomas Stellmach (b. 1965) as a director of animation films is more closely connected to narrative short animation films than to abstract experimental films. He became known for his collaboration on the puppet animation film QUEST (G 1996, Dir: Tyron Montgomery), which was awarded an Oscar as Best Animated Short Film.



The film VIRTUOS VIRTUELL, with its idea of a plot progression set to music, shows traces of Stellmach's artistic origins as a director of animation films interested in narrative film.

Music for eye and ear

The film VIRTUOS VIRTUELL is a contemporary experimental film, created in the tradition of visual music. Visual music designs moving images to tones and copies the rhythms, tempi and moods of the music into the image. In this way, it deals with the interconnection of film's basic components (sound with moving image) at a crossroads of the senses. It makes the senses of sight and hearing dance, by relating both senses to one another and mutually strengthening them. Thus images become audible, while music simultaneously becomes visible.

Important pioneers of visual music are the German film-maker and painter Oskar Fischinger (1900 – 1967) and the American film-maker Mary Ellen Bute (1906 – 1983). While Fischinger's and Bute's films create largely colourful, geometric forms to selected music, on the visual level VIRTUOS VIR-

TUELL is on the one hand more playful, on the other more reduced; with archaic inkblot shapes and a minimalistic colour design in black and white. The film's narrative project constitutes an extension of traditional visual music. While the films of the pioneers remained for the most part abstract, Oschmann and Stellmach consciously wove narrative moments and plot and suspense arcs into their otherwise abstract image design.



NORMAL VIEW FILM VIEW CHILDREN'S VIEW



The child's view

Children love to search for the concrete in the abstract and, in this respect, the film VIRTUOS VIRTUELL, with its associative designs, is geared towards them. They can thus see the individual stages of the films as little stories which they read from the images and tones.

The field of aesthetic tension in which the film moves can certainly also be sensed by children; on the one hand the anarchic and hard to control „smearing“ with ink and water. On the other hand, there is the organising power, via the artists and their tools,



with which they try to steer the liquids into paths, in order to create an impression of filmic flow, rather than chaos.

The size of the inkblots on the cinema screen and the autonomy they display as they move across it („all by themselves!“) can trigger enthusiasm on the part of children: Look, the paints are drawing themselves! Look, the paint is following the music! VIRTUOS VIRTUELL gives the impression that everything takes place at the touch of a magical hand, for the hands that influenced the action have all been retouched out of the images during the digital processing.



HANDS-ON: EXPERIMENTS WITH DRAWING AND INK

Drawing to music

Impulses: The effect of music, emotions, colours, patterns, shapes, movement

Material: Mini easels, music, thick coloured pencils or crayons



In an atmosphere free from distraction the children listen to music („Spiegel im Spiegel“ by Arvo Pärt). They close their eyes and tune in to the music. They imagine how the music feels, which colours, shapes and images the music awakens in their imaginations. The music continues to play as each child looks for an easel and begins to draw. The drawing to music takes place before the viewing of the film VIRTUOS VIRTUELL. The aim is to sensitise the children to the relationship between pictures and sounds by having them use drawing to deal with the effect of music. By listening while drawing, they get a feel for tempo, rhythm and moods in the music. In so doing, they incorporate the effect of the music into body

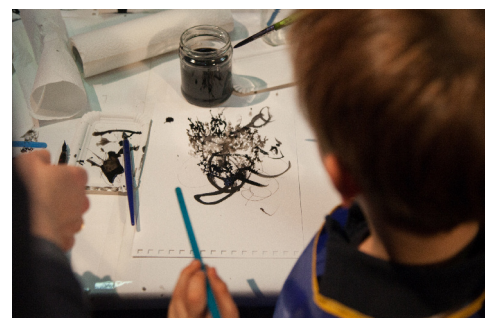
movements and ultimately into pictures. In this way, they experience how music affects the pencils in their hands.

Ink experiments

Impulses: Gaining experience with materials (ink on glass, paper, in water)

Material: Masked tables, art smocks, experiment landscape with inks, brushes, quills, water spray bottles, straws, thick absorbent watercolour paper, glass plates, glass basins

After the children have seen VIRTUOS VIRTUELL, they try out different artistic methods with inks such as those also used by Maja Oschmann and Thomas Stellmach. In one of these they put ink to paper: they draw with quills or brushes, drip, blow with straws, spray with water and paint wet-on-wet. This results in ink running in random





ways – lines, shapes, patterns and structures. The children regularly switch to new sheets of paper in order to preserve their ink pictures, instead of drawing over them completely, or they make a photographic record of the intermediate design stages. In two further ink experiments the children let black ink trickle down between two glass plates. In addition, they trickle small amounts of ink into a glass basin filled with cold water. In these experiments the children observe the respectively different courses followed by the inks and the differences in the spread of the colour.

After completing the ink experiments the children watch the film *VIRTUOS VIRTUELL* once more and can rediscover the experiences they themselves had with ink in the film as well.

FURTHER READING OR VIEWING:

HOMEPAGE

www.virtuosvirtuell.com

www.majaoschmann.de

www.stellmach.com

EXHIBITION

A 3D version of the film is part of the permanent exhibition of the Spohr Museum in Kassel

www.spohr-museum.de

PIONEERS OF VISUAL MUSIC:

Oskar Fischinger:

<http://www.oskarfischinger.org>

Mary Ellen Bute:

<http://www.centerforvisualmusic.org/>

[Bute.htm](http://www.centerforvisualmusic.org/Bute.htm)

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