Walter Ruttmann (1889-1941)

Born in Frankfurt, Ruttmann studied architecture and design, and started his career as a painter and lithographer before turning to film. His earliest films, *Lichtspiel*: *Opus I-IV* (1921-1925) were composed of animated shapes made of cardboard, wood, and plasticine. Some of these films were hand-colored. They are quite close in conception and execution to the experiments in “absolute film”—or “optical music”—developed by Hans Richter (the *Rhythmus* series) and Viking Eggeling (*Diagonal Symphony*, 1922) in the early 1920s. The success of the *Lichtspiel* series earned Ruttmann commercial film commissions. He designed some special effects for Lotte Reiniger’s silhouette animation *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1926) and made an animated sequence for Fritz Lang’s *Die Nibelungen* (1924).

Ruttman’s fame, however, rests mostly on his participation in *Berlin: Symphonie of a Great City* (*Berlin: Simphonie der Grossstadt*, 1927), an emblematic city film scripted by Carl Mayer and filmed mostly by Karl Freund, which Ruttmann himself edited. Occasionally criticized for its detached, superficial rendition of urban life, the film was successful with audiences and immensely influential on subsequent filmmakers.

Shortly after Berlin, Ruttmann embarked on sound experiments using the capabilities of German-patented Triergon recording process. *Weekend* (1928) was a montage of the noises of a Sunday, from morning to evening, with an intervening excursion to the city outskirts in between, recorded on the soundtrack of a strip of celluloid; a film without images entirely based on sound, it has been celebrated as an antecedent of concrete music and of subsequent “sound art”. *Sounding Wave* (*Tonende Welle*, 1928) and *World Melody* (*Die Melodie der Welt*, 1930) are visual and sound montages.

A nazi sympathizer, during the 1930s, Ruttmann accepted industrial and state commissions, many of them lost nowadays. He made city films of Stuttgart and Hamburg in the style of *Berlin*, the political piece *Stahl*, and collaborated with Leni Riefenstahl in the making of *Olympia* (1936-37).

**List of Works (selection)**

*Lichtspiel: Opus I* (1921)

*Lichtspiel: Opus II* (1923)

*Lichtspiel: Opus III* (1924)

*Lichtspiel: Opus IV* (1925)

*Das wiedergefundene Paradies* (1925)

*Der Aufstieg* (1926)

*Spiel der Wellen* (1926)

*Dort wo der Rhein...* (1927)

[*Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin:_Symphony_of_a_Great_City) (1927)

*Wochenende* (1928)

*Tonende Welle* (1928)

*Melodie der Welt* (1930)

*In der Nacht* (1931)

*Acciaio* (Stahl, 1933)

*Altgermanische Bauernkultur* (1934)

*Schiff in Not* (1936)

*Mannesmann* (1937)

*Henkel, ein deutsches Werk in seiner Arbeit* (1938)

*Waffenkammern Deutschlands* (1940)

*Deutsche Panzer* (1940)

*Krebs* (1941)

**Bibliography and Further References**

Cowan, M. (2014) *Walter Ruttmann and the Cinema of Multiplicity: Avant-Garde, Advertising, Modernity*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.