

KUNSTHALLE BERN

No Dandy, No Fun

Film portraits of an enigmatic figure of fiction: Valérie Knoll and Hans-Christian Dany have curated for REX a film series about the dandy. Its starting point was their exhibition *No Dandy, No Fun* at the Kunsthalle Bern, which opened in October 2020 but which very few people saw because of the pandemic. Now it is being revived, so to speak, in filmic form. The two have put together a programme comprising eleven canonized, forgotten and controversial feature films, which are as eccentric, sophisticated, self-reflective and unfathomable as the character of the dandy himself. In their introductory text, Knoll and Dany go in search of a figure that constantly eludes us.

Hans-Christian Dany. Valérie Knoll

Ninety years after the death of George Bryan Brummell (1778–1840), Virginia Woolf asked the question, ‘why are women so much more interesting to men than men are to women?’ Woolf recognised the first of the dandies to be an exception to this rule, and dedicated a miniature biography to him, which was broadcast by the BBC on 20 November 1929.

Just five weeks earlier, the New York stock exchange had crashed on Black Friday 1929. It was an emblematic moment for the figure of the dandy. The Great Crash ushered in the most momentous economic crisis of modern times. With it began the end of an epoch. It was the dawn of a period of transition, where events began developing towards a future that could not yet be made out. It is precisely in such periods of decadence, when there seems to be no hope, that dandies emerge like zombies crawling from their graves. In the gap between what was and what is to come, with all its moments of despair, dandies come into their own. While fear grips those around them, they move about untouched, gliding serenely through the general collapse, just as Brummell had once sauntered phantom-like amid the crumbling English aristocracy.

In her radio broadcast, Woolf asked why precisely this wraithlike half-wit of a dying society, who left behind nothing but rumours and debts, could make such an enduring impression. Woolf admired the fact that Brummell was no lickspittle. And she appreciated his philosophy of life, which was to take for himself what was denied him because of his background. But she soon turned to his last years, when the bankrupt dandy had fled London for exile in France. Up until this turning point, his life had, according to Woolf, seemed to promise a better future, one where human beings no longer had to be born rich in order to share in the good life. But, she asks, what became of him? He ended up in a poorhouse, abandoned and in rags, dying, like those around him, forgotten before he had been laid in his grave.

Brummell’s life ended in misery, but afterwards things worked out quite differently. He became history. Why?

The fact that he had taken so many liberties had left an impression. What had an even greater effect, however, was that he remained a kind of ghost. He won the attention of others almost by magic, and

KUNSTHALLE BERN

no one knew who was hiding behind his masks. Although inscrutable himself, he still remained engaged with others, reacting to them much as they reacted to him, and communicating with them, even though he never revealed himself.

By remaining a fully-formed fictional figure instead of abandoning himself to the current of his own self, he created a model character, the dandy. He remains aloof. He never shows his true self, and also never uses his identity in an argument. Dandies reject any subjective intercourse with the world. They do not tweet their opinions, or reduce political issues to them in order to make their mark in public. They reject the privatisation of the political.

But back to the original nineteenth century figure, who once again appears relevant in a time that seems increasingly to be abandoning politics as a self-disciplined means of dealing with collective problems.

Another thing that lost none of its power after Brummell's death, and was constantly being disseminated, were the many rumours that he helped to spread about himself. These stories were not always to his credit, but it was precisely their ambivalent nature that kept them in circulation. To this day, the legends around the legend constitute the model that sets the standard for all later forms of dandyism.

The fact that Woolf considered Brummell's failure to be the distinguishing characteristic of his life did nothing to dampen her fascination for him. Rather, it elevated the ambivalent figure at the very moment of his dramatic exit. And such narratives of failure are popular: they reflect our own fears, which we like to project onto others. In this respect, the dynamic of the dandy anticipated some aspect of cinema, where fleeting, flickering figures live, die and kill, just for me.

However, Woolf did not reduce Brummell to his failure. Rather, she emphasised that dandies were a human beings, and that it was others who turned them into images. The actual figure, and the way in which that figure is seen by others, his actions, and how they are perceived, exercise a reciprocal influence on each other. In this way, dandies become stories that never come to an end. But what is it that these stories without an end tell us?

Not least, they tell us that dandies don't exist. Those trying to approach the idealised individual never get near the projected image. It is impossible to become a dandy. But in failing, those who tried kept changing the image of what a dandy could be, each time adding another variation to it. Quite a few dandies even wanted to destroy the image that existed of themselves. This turned them into iconoclasts, especially when it concerned their own case. To put it in rather less heroic terms, they had a self-destructive streak. Quite a few dandies took their own lives. The methods by which they sought to rid themselves of themselves were manifold.

In their search for self-dissolution, they tinkered about with their outward appearances. They disguised who they were with masks, turning themselves outwardly into other people and hiding the signs of their inherent identity, or drowning it in alcohol. And when nothing worked, they took things to extremes and attempted suicide, sometimes successfully. They were determined to be nothing and

KUNSTHALLE BERN

to want nothing. But what does it mean to be ‘nothing’? Dandies’ attempts at disappearing often begin by conceiving of their own body as an object, which can be altered and controlled, almost as if it were a marionette. It is a fantasy of having complete mastery of oneself. But this attempt at escaping oneself by duplicating oneself as a dummy runs up against a limit: for every marionette also plays itself.

As a performers trying to escape themselves, dandies mistrust the world of appearances; but they also mistrust themselves. To everything they take to be false they oppose their own artificiality, which acts as if it were clustered around an inner void. Many dandies are perfectly aware from the start that their attempts at escape are doomed. They are plagued by the threat of defeat, and yet they see no other way out.

However, from these various abortive attempts at escaping themselves dandies cultivate a certain attitude. As a result, they give the impression of being performers and, at the same time, desperate people who turn their adversity into a virtue. The fact that the person they are supposed to be is a blind spot for them, is for them not a shortcoming but an opportunity to become what they are not. Their self-transformations stand in sharp contrast to contemporary injunctions to optimise oneself. Dandies undertake their efforts without hope of success, and are free of any aspirations sanctioned by society. Even Brummell was lazy as sin. He embodied the idea of forging one’s own luck; but he was a blacksmith who never picked up a hammer.

What is more, dandies tend to withdraw from the world. Instead of seeking to connect with their own time, dandies prefer to travel down the motorways of their present like phantom drivers. Although they are fascinated by the here and now and follow contemporary events carefully, they behave anachronistically. They travel outside of or parallel to time. This is not the same as rejecting progress. But dandies ask themselves: does progress require the new, or a constant affirmation of the spirit of the times? Many even go a step further and speculate that the new is preventing progress. For a long time, saying something like this was taboo and considered a form of cultural pessimism. Meanwhile, it is hardly controversial to point out that 999 out of 1000 things that come with the label ‘new’ do not make the slightest contribution to progress. Economically the new may add value; ecologically it has for a long time been a catastrophe.

Dandies, by contrast, were pioneers of sustainability, since they did as little as possible and re-used old things. Again, their attitude appears worth considering today, at a time when it is better to renovate and reshape what exists than to produce anything new – which soon becomes old again, and uses up considerable resources. By relying on, in his Arcades Project, the principle of montage to present old texts, even Walter Benjamin came to the insight that ‘I have nothing to say. Only to show’. And then he indicated the thoughts of a long-dead dandy: ‘it is important to note that, for Baudelaire, the new makes no contribution to progress’. There is much that is already here; we just don’t use it. And sometimes we make progress by walking around rubbish dumps.

KUNSTHALLE BERN

This film programme brings together exceptional cinematographic experiences in order to penetrate the complex figure of the dandy. The main characters of these films are dandies in the broadest sense of the term. What almost all the films have in common is a story about the wanderings of a loner who cannot find their place in the present. A king who refuses to accept the thinking of his own time. An extra-terrestrial who will not recognise the history of the inhabitants of earth who oppress him. A speculator who dreams of destroying the false world in which he so successfully operates. A melancholic who no longer wants to be the happy-go-lucky character that others expect him to be. A woman who does not fit into her reality and discovers another through alcohol. These are films about estrangement and the desire to follow one's own way, instead of simply going along with everyone else.

Valérie Knoll and Hans-Christian Dany have been working for years on the subject of the dandy and his future. Recently they co-curated the exhibition *No Dandy, No Fun* (2020) at the Kunsthalle Bern. A book of the same title, which develops the ideas in the exhibition further, will be published soon by Sternberg and MIT Press.

Valerie Knoll was director of the Kunsthalle Bern from April 2105 to March 2022. Hans-Christian Dany lives in Hamburg and writes books on drugs, cybernetics, art and fashion.