

Katrin Rothe: “The world would be a better place if everyone would do at work things they believe are good for society”



The German screenwriter, producer, and filmmaker **Katrin Rothe** was a prominent guest at the 8th edition of the [Novos Cinemas International Film Festival](#), which organised the first retrospective in Spain dedicated to Rothe's unique body of work. In addition to screening some of her most notable works, including ***1917 – The Real October*** (2017) and ***Johnny and Me*** (2023), the German artist led a workshop-lecture, offering insights into her creative process and the inspiration behind her distinctive style. Her approach often involves a blend of hand-drawn and digital animation with documentary elements. We took the opportunity to delve into her career and politically engaged artwork during her visit to Pontevedra.

You developed an early interest in working with film material. In your graduation film, *Until Grass Grows* (1996), we can already see the drive to alter and manipulate the pictures. Why are you attracted to this artisanal way of filmmaking?

I have an artistic background. I've been drawing all my life, since childhood, as a way of expressing myself. I actually wanted to become an artist, and when I found out that drawings could move, it was a huge turning point.

This revelation occurred during my first year at art school. I was genuinely drawn to the concept of moving graphics and what lies in between the pictures. The idea behind my graduation film was to 'scratch the memories' within those pictures, as an attempt to get the past back. I used a rostrum camera, employing a technique similar to stop-motion. By manipulating the material, one can create entirely new pictures in a fascinating way, forming an entirely new world.

So it was never your goal to become a filmmaker in the first place?

No, I wanted to become a visual artist. I wanted to work with drawing because it always helped me focus and take control of my thoughts. In my hometown, we had a remarkable puppet theatre that offered plays for adults and featured really experimental works. Back then, I didn't realise how special it was. For me, it seemed quite normal to have this kind of art form, with visuals on stage. I initially envisioned creating visuals for rock bands. However, during those times, it wasn't easy to achieve. It was only when I worked on my graduation film with animation that I suddenly realised it was exactly what I had wanted to do since childhood — like an experimental puppet theatre in a dark room.



Your work combines different genres and styles. Now, we know it all started with animation, but where does the documentary interest come from? How did you decide to combine those two?

I create artworks that address issues around me. My first student film was about overcoming the death of close ones, and a later one dealt with clichés about East Germany. Themes have always been crucial to my work. After finishing school, I initially wanted to find a job in the animation industry. However, I struggled to come to good terms with the style of children's animation, as my drawings tended to be a bit rough and unconventional. I simply tried to find an alternative way, so I applied to a TV call for newcomer filmmakers, and my project was selected. It was a documentary about young academics searching for a job, where the job interviews were presented through animation. I really like this blend of real-life documentary and animation because it enhances both mediums, making it easier to explain and convey different aspects.

When would you say your art became truly politically engaged?

In 2012, I was evicted from my flat where I had lived for 16 years due to gentrification in the centre of Berlin. I decided to document the process, which became a great lesson on politics and capitalism. With my first film, I was nominated for a very prestigious German TV prize, so this attracted considerable attention for this new project. When it was finished, it was widely discussed in the media, highlighting that it wasn't just the poor struggling with rent in Berlin, but also the middle class. The film became a tremendous success. All political parties wanted to organise a screening and have a discussion with me. Suddenly, my films became highly political. Before the fall of the Berlin Wall, I took part in many demonstrations, but there was never a direct connection to my artwork. This film brought everything together, and suddenly, I became a political filmmaker.

How did you transition from very personal stories to addressing a monumental historical event like the Russian Revolution in 1917 – *The Real October*?

I was eager to explore the origins of the comfortable life we enjoy today — eight working hours a day, weekends, holidays, and more. There were people who fought for these privileges in the past. Growing up in East Germany, I learned a lot about the Russian Revolution, but I felt the need to offer a new perspective on it from today's standpoint. I envisioned what it must have been like to be an artist during that period. I was particularly intrigued by the active role artists played in those events, with writers crafting slogans for party leaders and **Vladimir Maiakovski** disseminating news through poems among the working class. Artists also contributed significantly to the education of soldiers who were reluctant to go to the front. Then I thought about using the art of the Russian Revolution to tell the story, drawing inspiration from constructivist artists like **Kazimir Malevich** for the animated parts.



After the revolution, artists were somewhat disappointed with the outcome, and I believe that is also a recurring theme in your films.

It's like that every time. After the revolution, they were arguing over trivial side issues — what monuments to create or destroy, and what to do with the soldier councils. Ultimately, the Bolsheviks took over. I wanted to convey that it's not about fighting the person next to you, but about looking for the

true enemy. With my latest film, ***Johnny and Me***, I tried to introduce this dialogue into today's conversations. The film explores an artist's life filled with power and success, but also disappointments and controversies, all while presenting a dialogue with the past.

Why did you choose John Heartfield to personify this idea?

He did satire, revealing the true faces of Nazi leaders before anyone else, and seamlessly blended various media. Images are incredibly powerful, and satire has the potential to reach more people. After the Second World War, he became world-famous and was closely monitored from both sides; his art was genuinely feared as a weapon. There's much to learn from him. Additionally, his collage style complements my own approach to working with paper and drawing.

There is a moment in the film when the censors are discussing Heartfield's satires, and they say: "Art is not something to laugh about". You always seem to include humour in your films.

I believe all my films have a touch of ironic satire. It's a way to grapple with the world. I'm genuinely concerned that we might be heading towards a society where jokes and art come under control. There are already signs of this. In East Germany, artists like Heartfield were forced to create works supporting the socialist government, resulting in flat and dialectically limited pieces. It wasn't an open society, and it's dangerous if such control happens again.

Why did you opt for a graphic designer as his counterpart in *Johnny and Me*?

At first, she was an animation filmmaker, but over time, she evolved into a graphic designer who does not know if what she does is right. She's good at her job, but she finds herself creating advertisements for things she dislikes. The story revolves around a person undergoing a crisis with her profession.

Do you ever happen to question your own work and its meaning?

You're always confronted with these questions. It's about following your intuition. The world would be a better place if everyone would do at work things they believe are good for society.

