

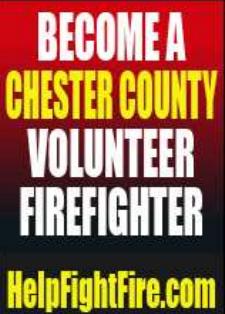


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### Kraftwerk and the Electronic Revolution [DVD]

(Video Music, Inc.) Rated: N/A  
US release date: 2 September 2008  
UK release date: 22 September 2008

by Timothy Gabriele

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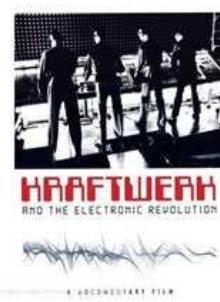
As obvious as it may sound, the best aspect of the new documentary *Kraftwerk and the Electronic Revolution* is the music. The film, it should be noted, devotes equal attention to both of its respective title subjects. Whereas Kraftwerk remains the major focus of the film's study, it also contains intimate details about the Teutonic post-war rock and psychedelic scene from which Kraftwerk and its ilk were spawned (eventually dubbed "Krautrock" as a kind of anti-German slur) and the vast sea of sounds which evolved out of the sonic ground broken in that scene.

The film approaches this material through a collection of talking-head theoretical treatises, participant recollections, and archival performance and production footage which, combined, rises above the inadequacies and simplifications of most broad-scope career-spanning music bios (*End of the Century*) or scene overviews (*American Hardcore*). Yet what makes you want to keep watching is the music.

The fantastic music selection extends across the sequencing of *Kraftwerk and the Electronic Revolution*, touching not only on Kraftwerk's contributions, but the work of Pierre Schaffer, Can, Kluster, Popul Vuh, Klaus Schulze, Donna Summer and Giorgio Moroder, Human League, Gary Numan, and beyond. When unaccompanied by performance footage or photo montages, the music juxtaposes tastefully against scenes from art films of the time like *Fantastic Planet* or short pieces by Stan Brakhage and the Brothers Quay, as if the film were some kind of avant-garde geek wish-fulfillment fantasy.

It's to both the film's detriment and its advantage that most of these sound clips or music videos are painfully brief. On the plus side, the music's isolation from the rest of the audio (which consists of a lot of talking in reverberating sound studios, occasional narration, and a completely unnecessary incidental score by T-Bomb) sequesters each individual composition as a composition *sui generis*. On the other hand, it's questionable whether the film, which spends a lot of time discussing the sounds themselves, would have benefitted from having some of the source material underscore the interviewee montages, especially since much of the music discussed is rather ambient in nature.

While watching *Kraftwerk and the Electronic Revolution*, each sound sample arrives as a sort of alien pylon, an electronic blueprint to the future. More than just an aural divination, it is, as British author Mark



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Prendergrast notes (referring specifically to Kraftwerk's *Ralf and Florian* album), "nostalgia for the future", a musicking, which sounds vitally new even in the shadow of all to follow (the film makes mention of some newer acts, though stops its most immediate chronology in the early '80s when the artists Kraftwerk inspired had surpassed its output.)

Perhaps it's unsurprising then, that much of the music heard in the film currently remains out-of-print, particularly the Krautrock material, which only charted in small, unexpected doses (Kraftwerk's "The Model", Can's "I Want More" and Tangerine Dream's myriad soundtracks) in some cases long after each act's watershed release(s). It seems as though mainstream society, even after the advent of new wave, pop-prog, techno pop, post-rock and beyond, remains unprepared for such bold futurism.

Kraftwerk, perhaps the scene's most well-known name, have never even re-released their first three albums (1, 2, and *Ralf and Florian*), even going so far as to disown them and call them "rubbish." The filmmakers must take exception with this detraction (and rightly so), because they devote an equal amount examining those works as their later, more well-known catalogue.

Though not without its notable exclusions (the genius and omnipresence of Conny Plank for one), it proves an exhaustive study at 180 minutes. One the casual electronic music fan might want to skip, but one devotees of this Web site will surely find quite rewarding. The director's intentions veer more towards the classroom than the movie theater: It avoids interjections of human drama in lieu of high-minded analysis and historicity.

Up until the late '70s with David Bowie's Berlin trilogy, Gary Numan and the new romantic revolution, electronic music was a depersonalized medium, focused more on ideas than egos and the abstract rather than the visceral. British journalist Edwin Pouncey likens this impulse in Kraftwerk to its later manifestations in techno and house music, which discarded the performer in favor of a sensorial relationship between the DJ and the audience. Diedrich Diedrichsen of the German magazine Sounds also weighs in, invoking Barthes' "Death of the Author".

Behind the scenes, a set of notoriously temperamental egos fueled the music, not the least of which being Kraftwerk's epitomical duo of Ralf Hutter and Florian Schneider (who did not authorize this film). Though apart from an extended bonus-feature interview with Kraftwerk's Karl Bartos, the film avoids personalities on the whole and maps a grander schematic, surveying socioeconomics, aesthetics, academics and identity politics.

"We were aware that we weren't raised in the Mississippi Delta; that we weren't raised in Liverpool. Our generation had to come up with a counterpoint to that," Bartos says at one point. This was a radical notion, even for the time. Post-war German youth had been given both the opportunity and the burden of carving a new identity for themselves. Unable to reconcile themselves with the atrocities their parents had participated in (at least tacitly), the vicissitudinary youth movement aligned itself with the American and British occupiers' countercultures, particularly their rock music and left-wing politics.

Concurrently, German art music became obsessed with the sounds of reconstruction, the buzz of machinery rebuilding the war-torn ruins of the German landscape. Karlheinz Stockhausen infamously assembled many of his sound pieces out of found objects, with leftover rubble being the only fragments of nationality worth salvaging after the shame of Nazi rule.

The Krautrock scene merged these two sensibilities, using the spaces available within rock psychedelia to tool around with new devices and abstract, concrete sounds. The results could be alternately bleak and punishing or joyous and exhilarating, but it was Kraftwerk alone that singularly sought to create music that reflected the intrinsic promises of new beginnings and new technologies. Even during their Organisation days, Schneider's flute and the band's motorik rhythms (performed by an alternating cast that occasionally included Bartos and the late Klaus Dinger of Neu!) were often serene, warm and inviting rather than chiding or apocalyptic like many of their peers.

Though the film acknowledges the sincerity of this vision, it also casts its eye towards the caustic and ironic stance of the band throughout their career and the ways in which their utopian caricatures presented threats to the status-quo of rock normality. Prendergrast observes the soft-focus album artwork on *Trans Europe Express* resembles nothing so much as a Hitler Youth picnic, with the perfectly airbrushed Aryan faces of its members shining with a dignity and nobility that had long been absent in the divided nation for years.

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Yet the group's pale-faced jubilance is not meant to symbolize racial purity but rather a post-racial automatism, faux-human, robotic and androgynous. Think less *Übermensch* and more *Mensch-Maschine*. Freelance journalist David Stubbs (once known as "Mr. Agreeable" in the pages of Melody Maker and now online at The Quietus) even goes so far as to hypothesize about the deterioration of gender roles in "Pocket Calculator", with its emphasis on the littleness (and specialness) of its instrument running in stark contrast to big, phallic rock guitars.

It's these kind of anecdotal comments that make *Kraftwerk and the Electronic Revolution* stand apart from other standard-issue music-history documentaries. Though far from the final word on this fascinating array of music, the film imparts quite enough to engage even those who think they know the whole story inside and out.



**Kraftwerk - Radioactivity**

RATING:  8  
EXTRAS:  6

— 18 November 2008

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