

## Copernicus on Film ... Again

Journal for the History of Astronomy

2019, Vol. 50(1) 116–117

© The Author(s) 2019

Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](http://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/0021828618823981

[journals.sagepub.com/home/jha](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/jha)

*The Secrets of De Revolutionibus*. Film directed by Michał Juszczakiewicz and produced by Nicolaus Copernicus Foundation (Truszczyń, Poland, 2018). 53 minutes. Available from the Nicolaus Copernicus Foundation ([copernicus@ekoprusia.home.pl](mailto:copernicus@ekoprusia.home.pl)).

Treating the history of astronomy minus the technical aspects, simplifying historiographic issues, and targeting lay audiences can be very demanding. Such approaches can easily generate erroneous conceptions of history, can reduce controversial issues to one-dimensional dichotomies of “good” and “evil,” and can reinforce stereotypes about how science develops. We can easily imagine hearing, at a dinner party, someone profess that “Copernicus was a genius of astronomy who discovered that the Sun is at the centre of the universe, thereby proving Ptolemy wrong and the Bible false.” Such utterances can provoke good writers or film-makers to didactic passion, to turn the weapons of reason against historical stereotypes. But they also point towards the cultural complexity that surrounds the “Copernican Revolution” and the processes that led to the publication Copernicus’ *De Revolutionibus orbium coelestium* in 1543. The documentary film under review takes up this challenge and presents a story that cannot be reduced to a struggle between a “good” genius and “evil” authoritarian groups (followers of Ptolemy, Aristotle, the Church, or the Jesuits).

The events that led to the publication of *De Revolutionibus* as well as its reception among European scholars and political authorities in Europe have long been featured in the Western historical imagination. We might pick up the trail with Arthur Koestler’s notorious *The Sleepwalkers* (1959), a non-fiction book worrying about the impending dangers of a Cold War. Koestler was a popular political novelist and essayist who wrote a history of how Western society had perceived the universe from the Greeks to Newton. His thesis was that modern science threatens culture and society, that early scientists were antisocial personalities, and that “the intellectual giants of the scientific revolution were only moral dwarfs” (p. 352).

Koestler’s lamentation inspired other popular works, including John Banville’s *Doctor Copernicus* (1976), a historical novel providing a psychological account of Copernicus’ life, from childhood to the late years, his illness and death. And it provoked newly professionalizing historians of science to respond. Giorgio de Santillana and Stillman Drake reviewed Koestler’s book in *Isis* (September 1959), mercilessly laying out its contradictions and misrepresentations of the founding fathers of modern science, including especially Copernicus. Such Koestler-bashing continued, more recently, in *The Book Nobody Read* (2004), Owen Gingerich’s autobiographical account of his efforts to survey all existing copies of *De rev* and to study its early readers by deciphering the marginal notes.

If Gingerich's *Book Nobody Read* is one of the best tools for laypeople to understand the genesis, printing, and reception of *De Rev*, we have now a continuation of this genre in a new documentary film, *The Secrets of De Revolutionibus*. Directed by Michał Juszczakiewicz, this Polish production was supported by the Nicolaus Copernicus Foundation, the Michał Juszczakiewicz Art Agency, the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education, the Office of the Marshal of the Warmian-Masurian Province, and Municipality of Lubawa.

This documentary begins with Copernicus' encounter in 1539 with Georg Joachim Rheticus, professor of mathematics in Wittenberg, and continues the story until just after publication of *De Rev*, combining each specific passage of history with interviews of major Copernican scholars, including Gingerich, André Goddu, Pietro Daniel Omodeo, Jerzy Sikorski, Janusz Małek, and Jarosław Włodarczyk. The talking heads explicitly review historiographical problems that have arisen concerning the events that led to the publication of the *De Rev* and its early reception. This combination of historical reenactments and scholarly interviews remains balanced throughout the film. The choice to focus the story on the encounter Rheticus–Copernicus and the vicissitudes related to the publication of *De Rev* is novel for the genre of Copernicus movies. Viewers are introduced to sixteenth-century scholarly networks as well as to historically documented accounts of psychological aspects of Copernicus and Rheticus, including Copernicus' reluctance to publish and Rheticus' naïve enthusiasm towards heliocentrism. The film thus introduces viewers to the most recent historical research on scholarly networks in Renaissance Europe even as it does not ignore the idiosyncratic psychology of individual actors.

For this reviewer, *The Secrets* constitutes the best informed documentary film made to date on Copernicus. Jacob Bronowski's British television series, *The Ascent of Man* (1973), provided a brief account of Copernicus and the importance of heliocentric theory, in the sixth episode titled "The Starry Messenger." There, Copernicus is seen as an isolated genius of his age. Similarly, Carl Sagan's now legendary American television series, *Cosmos: A Personal Voyage* (1980), depicted Copernicus as a lone genius who put aside the dark ages of science characterized by the reactionary Ptolemy and the obscurantist Catholic Church. Indeed, the only nuanced Copernicus film before *The Secrets* was the short documentary produced by Charles and Ray Eames in 1973 to celebrate the 500th anniversary of Copernicus' birth, titled *Nicholas Copernicus*. Only 10 minutes in length, *Nicholas Copernicus* focused on the entire life and not just the Rheticus years. *The Secrets* revives the tone of the Eames documentary and explains in more depth the most interesting part of Copernicus' activity, drawing, of course, on recent scholarship not available in 1973.

In sum, its well-balanced combination of historical accuracy, scholarly achievement, and psychological accounts gives *The Secrets* a pleasant whiff of fiction, employing the language of lay viewers without leaving the ground of historical evidence. People seeking an up-to-date and accurate account of the importance of Copernicus and his theories should see this film, as should those who issue pronouncements about Copernicus at dinner parties.

ALBERTO BARDI  
bardia01@doaks.org

Dumbarton Oaks, Harvard University, United States of America