

Knut Hickethier, Eggo Müller en Rainer Rother (red.)

*Der Film in der Geschichte. Dokumentation der GFF-Tagung*

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In 1994, at the dawn of cinema's centenary, the GFF-conference held at the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin was devoted to the relationship between film and history. 'Film and history' as a topic is, of course, 'ein weites Feld', to use Theodor Fontane's famous phrase. In the three years between the conference and the publication of the proceedings, the editorial team has obviously made every effort to shape and focus the subject more closely. As the editors point out in their introduction, the title of their anthology should to some extent be taken literally: the key question navigating the very diverse thematic interests assembled in this collection is not so much, how film stands towards history, but how the process of aesthetical production in film stands in history. What at first gaze appears to be a rather subtle if not hair-splitting distinction, implies in fact a very precise methodological directive. It asks to interpret films (made for cinema and television) as cultural products defined by but also actively partaking in the discursive formation of their historical moments. This particular critical angle disregards a number of other issues within the constellation 'film and history', which have been the focal point of previous German-language books on the subject, including filmic representations of history (see Hans A. Marsiske (ed.), *Zeitmaschine Kino: Darstellungen von Geschichte im Film*. Marburg, Hitzeroth, 1992), film as a historical source (see Rainer Rother (ed.), *Bilder schreiben Geschichte: Der Historiker im Kino*. Berlin, Klaus Wagenbach, 1991. Including contributions by Marc Ferro, Michèle Lagny, Pierre Sorlin, and Robert A. Rosenstone, the four international historians most closely associated with this particular field of investigation) or the methodology of film history (see Knut Hickethier (ed.), *Filmgeschichte schreiben. Ansätze, Entwürfe und Methoden*. Berlin: Ed. Sigma, 1989).

The accent on the historical function of aesthetic processes in film is meant to shed new light on four areas of research, corresponding to the four sections of the book. Its first section offers seven attempts at an integrative historical periodization of film and television. Two English contributions by William Uricchio and Thomas Elsaesser (both expanded versions of articles published some time ago in the GBC newsletter) trace conspicuous 'a-symmetries' in our understanding of film history. In the light of the fact that already by the late nineteenth century television was conceptually fully in place, Uricchio considers the emergence of cinema a mere detour in the history of technical communication, whereas Elsaesser measures the gap between scholarly and fan discourses on film and television as an indicator of the different kinds of knowledge circulated by the popular media, but also to critically comment upon their mutual ignorance and the lack of exchange between professionally produced 'official' and tacitly amassed 'unofficial' knowledge on the history of the media. Both Elsaesser and Uricchio claim for a revisionist 'media archaeology', which is also an apt characterisation of the approaches taken in Ulrike Hick's well researched overview of nineteenth century visual media as cinematic predecessors, and Knut Hickethier's comparative view on film and television as historically constructed 'media dispositifs' of cultural memory. The trenchantly argued essays by Joan Kirstin Bleicher on the spatialisation of (historical) time and the vanishing of the past in television's eternal present, and by Eggo Müller on the historical function and periodical integration of post-war West German television, put this project into closer analytical practice. Complemented by Jan Berg's more speculative, but no less thoughtful, forecast on the future media landscape and the critical climate within it may flourish in and beyond the year 2000,

this first section offers a rich kaleidoscope re-framing a hundred years of film history.

The comparatively loose and, measured against the book's objective, awkwardly under-represented second part includes three case studies on the historical moulding of film theoretical concepts: Joachim Paech tracks the influence of nineteenth century 'Einfühlungs-Ästhetik' on early film theory, Volker Roloff locates Foucauldian 'heterotopical' traces in the Godard's pre-1968 films, and Jürgen Felix gives his version of David Lynch as a post-modern filmmaker.

Four of the six essays comprised in the section devoted to the historical reception of film endeavour to redirect our view on what in retrospect is surely the most traumatic, but to an increasing extent also the most controversial period of Germany's cinematic past, the years between 1930 and 1945. Helmut Korte and Irmbert Schenk argue for a refinement of this view in respect to the often neglected problem, how German propaganda films were actually perceived by its historical audiences. Both Schenk's psychoanalytically motivated polemic and Korte's methodologically more elaborate communication model point to the gap between, on the one hand, the all too easily uncovered ideological strategies of films such as *DAS FLÖTENKONZERT IN SANSSOUCI* (1930) or *KOLBERG* (1945) in terms of narration and subject matter, and, on the other, the 'conflictual complexity' of their formal qualities, whose multiple readability needs to be reconstructed against the backdrop of 'perceptual dispositions' and 'imaginary investments' virulent in their historical audiences. Along with a cogent recontextualisation of Leni Riefenstahl's films within pre-fascist dance, photography and mountaineering culture, elegantly conducted by Thomas Koebner, and the detailed analysis of the museum sequence in Kautner's *UNTER DEN BRÜCKEN* (1944), accomplished with much

art-historical erudition by Thomas Meder, the essays of this section are themselves documents of a historical reception process insofar as they testify to a general (and largely internationally driven) shift in perspective towards the fissures and frictions within the allegedly so monolithic body of 'Nazi cinema'.

The mediation of history in film through aesthetic forms and generic formulas is discussed in the book's final section, which pays special attention to the documentary genre in two contributions on the role of memory (Eike Wenzel) and 'Vergegenwärtigung' (Heinz-B. Heller) in post-war documentary filmmaking, and also includes a parallel interpretation of the use of close-ups in the depiction of historical revolutions in Eisenstein's *OCTOBER* (1928) and Sergio Leone's *GIÙ LA TESTA* (1970). The most successful illumination of the cultural interplay between historical changes in media technology, aesthetic forms, and theoretical framing is to be found in Yvonne Spielmann's analysis of structuring elements in visual discourse from classical montage concepts to the digital layering of 'visual clusters' in present media products.

In view of the quality and persuasiveness with which especially Spielmann's concluding essay resonates with the overall aspiration of the volume, it seems particularly unfortunate that those sections primarily concerned with the development of concrete theoretical concepts on the basis of historical analysis have been given far less space than the ones on periodization and historical reception. Whereas the structure of *Der Film in der Geschichte* thus may appear somewhat implausibly – but maybe symptomatically – out of balance, its individual contributions are, with only a few exceptions, instructive and inspiring reading for everyone at times discontent with straightforward reflectionist or source-fetishist accounts of the complex and often convoluted ways, in which film and history intersect.

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