

Doing Women's Film History: Reframing Cinema Past & Future

Panel: Starting from Elsewhere. Questions of Transnational, Cross-Cultural Historiography

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Studying philosophy and Critical (Social) Theory in Frankfurt am Main in the 1960s was certainly important for my intellectual approach to film history, but more decisive was my interruption of my philosophy studies, my departure from university. My experience of the situation of women at university, especially in philosophy, played a role in this, as did the general atmosphere of the student movement. As a consequence, however, I did not join political groups, but chose to go to the cinema instead of to academic lectures.

I studied film history in the cinema - where else would that have been possible at the time in the Federal Republic of Germany! This influenced the form of my later research and teaching work at university, in many ways. I have always seen film history in the context of cinema and cinema history. A quasi methodological premise was that the perception of films in the cinema - be they new or old films - is the basic prerequisite for studying them scientifically. For this reason, a theory of film was not sufficient for a theoretical approach to film history. What was necessary was a "theory of cinema" - as the late film critic and author Karsten Witte already claimed in 1972: "There may well be a theory of film, but there is no theory of cinema." So before I devoted my attention to feminist film criticism and the question of the female viewer, the female audience, the course had already been set for a theoretical engagement with cinema. Accordingly, researching film history also meant taking a look at cinema in its historical constitution, its variations and its transformations.

History is not just an object of film studies, but they are also themselves a part of cinema history. In the Federal Republic of Germany around 1970, when the first suggestions were made to introduce film science to universities, cinema attendance had dramatically declined - as it had in other countries. At the same time however, a wide range of cinema initiatives formed, concerned with film history and the international film, and with work with the audience. The idea of, as it had sometimes been formulated: "Make your own cinema". But it was another two decades before film professorships were inaugurated, around 1990. When I accepted a professorship in Frankfurt, I considered it an important - political - task to support the cinema movement in its time of crisis and to contribute towards renewing it. In my eyes, research and teaching can communicate an interest in

film history, and in perceiving that history in the cinema. This approach led, among other things, to efforts to introduce students to a cinema-practice.

Although I have mainly focused on film history in the German social and cultural context, I do not see my work as a contribution to any national film historiography. The concept of nation, and of a national film history, merely has a critical function, and for me its use is connected with National Socialism in Germany. In this critical sense, national, that is National Socialist, film history in the early 1970s provided the stimulus for my analytical engagement with film. Not just as the object of ideology criticism, but rather as a possibility to reflect on the theme of reception, and on myself as part of a female audience, an audience that had not arrived at any such self-reflection after 1945. (The “young German film” or the “new German film” also drew their meaning from the fact that they turned against German society, revoking their assent to the “nation”.)

The discovery in the 1980s of early cinema had brought about a change in the critical relationship to German film history - resulting not in any “positively” connoted national history, but rather in the perception of the internationality of cinema, and also of the film, particularly in Wilhelminian Germany. This realization was both a liberation and a condition for understanding cinema as a modern mass culture that was not inextricably bound up with manipulation, propaganda and ideology. A mass culture became conceivable as a counter culture. Particularly because early cinema highlighted the importance of a female audience, a kind of “complicity” that existed between the emancipation of women and the development of cinema.

My writings on the history of Early German Cinema were marked by the feminist criticism and theory of the 1970s and 80s. Like other people, I engaged with the verdict that woman as woman did not exist neither both on screen and in the audience. The reception of influential texts from Great Britain and the US, but also of contributions from France and Italy, took place in the Federal Republic of Germany mainly through the magazine *Frauen und Film*. In 1979, together with Karola Gramann, I wrote the first text for FuF on the Edinburgh Festivals event “Feminism and Cinema” (organized by Claire Johnston, Angie Martin, Laura Mulvey and Lynda Myles). Under the heading “Raus aus den Prokrustesbetten” (Get out of the Procrustean Beds), we tried to summarise the discourse of the representatives of European and US-American feminist film criticism, and to outline the positions of, among others, Pam Cook, Laura Mulvey, Ruby Rich, Christine Gledhill, on the theory and practice of the feminist film. As of 1983, the FuF magazine was published in Frankfurt, initially edited by Gertrud Koch, Karola Gramann and myself. It was in the

growing circle in and around FuF that my texts on film historiography were written; meaning in the wider framework of the women's movement, and in the narrower one of film criticism. The link with film studies at university was only made as a result of exchanges of ideas with US-American and British women academics.

It is understandable, therefore, that the conferences that were held in the English language not only effected a broadening of the horizon, but also represented the first forums for presenting myself as a researcher. There were no such conferences in the German-speaking region. That relatively small group of active feminist film academics, and also scholars from the US, Great Britain and the Federal Republic of Germany, formed a nexus which I was also not able to find later at German universities. The problems of expressing oneself in another language receded for a long time behind the benefits of being able to communicate with others at all, and the advantages of the exchange of ideas. Only later did the exclusion come to the fore: the exclusion of what was not published in English and thus scarcely taken notice of, on the one hand, and of what was not so easily formulated in English, on the other.

I have spoken so far about how much I regard the form and content of film historiography, my film historiography, as being shaped by social practice and life practice. Key words here would be the student movement, the cinema movement, the women's movement, but also the "second generation". Finally I now would like to talk about the influence of theories, or perhaps better, of theory movements.

Certainly philosophy was my first passion; Idealism, Plato, Kant awakened my early enthusiasm. This interest underwent a, so to speak, "materialist" refraction at university: Ernst Bloch, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer had all read their Marx, and their Freud, and had above all opened up philosophy to society and politics. And they were emigrants. In the 1960s they created a space for thought that did not exclude the history of mass murder, in all its conceivable and above all its inconceivable aspects. The philosophy seminars were open to society and politics, but at the same time, or primarily, they communicated the meaning of utopia and aesthetics. What I learnt there was what Adorno termed: "sich nicht dumm machen lassen", not to let yourself be made stupid, namely, not to fall into despair in the face of the horror, nor to flee into the pragmatism of everyday life and survival. It is important for our relationship to society to not only see what is, but equally to think what is possible. To be open to its perception at all. Imagination, sensual, empathetic perception, play, are not luxuries. They might have been transformed into luxuries and correspondingly deformed. The criticism of the "culture

industry” in the *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Dialectic of the Enlightenment) drew attention to the deformation of bourgeois art and culture. But an empathetic perception of mass culture was missing in this free space of philosophy. Which therefore became narrow, and did not itself escape elitist deformation.

Once I had become an enthusiastic cinema-goer, “with skin and hair”, I then found in the writings of Siegfried Kracauer a thinking that had thrown off the bonds of philosophy in the participatory perception of the cinema. His *Theory of Film* and his book on historiography form a kind of diptych in which film and history are mutually reflected. They contain theoretical perspectives on, and considerations of, the historical method which I still regard as being the most relevant in existence on film historiography. Although explicitly oriented around film and photography, his *Theory of film* starts with its perception as a member of an audience, and is permeated by the experience of cinema that was possible in the scattered history of the 20th century.

What can I say about the present? In my field, things have become narrower than ever before at university, when it comes to a film historiography that represents empathetic perception, imagination and thinking in possibilities, as opposed to an adaptation to the constraints of organized research and teaching. Decisive in my view, is that the onetime feminist involvement is sustained as a problematising of forms of film historiography, forms of science. Extremely problematic is the academically widespread lack of distinction between film and medium, between the analogue material and the digital technology, between the reproduction of a celluloid film on DVD and its projection in the cinema. What matters is not just the film, whatever that may be, but above all the mode and potential, the preconditions of its perception.

In the complex context of internationality, centre and periphery, I would like to just underscore one moment concerning globalization. A pivotal moment for the internationality of cinema was that its films could be seen all over the world repeatedly and differently at any time or place. A process of appropriation came about in the perception of the respective audience. Miriam Hansen spoke of the cinema as a “vernacular modernism” in the sense that the non-reproducible, the concrete living circumstances, histories and perceptions, the unconscious and imagination come into their own by way of the reproducibility of the film. With this insight and this concept, film studies as a historical science can present a perspective on the global and globalised presence of “the media”, a perspective that breaks with their progressive development and unquestioned acceptance. As feminist film criticism once broke with the patriarchal structuring of films.

