

PRESS RELEASE

FILM IST. 7-12 / 35mm, colour, 93 mins. and DVD installation by Gustav Deutsch

The theme:

It is only a little over 100 years now since the public were exposed to the first moving pictures – with astonishment and perhaps also anxiety. Six years ago the anniversary of this event was celebrated all over the world. For a brief instant pictures from the earliest days of cinema found their way into the world of cable and satellite television. Then they disappeared again back into the archives.

For a medium, 100 years is not along time. The last few years however have seen accelerating technical developments – digital manipulation of pictures, Internet TV, virtual reality games, CD ROMs and DVDs dominate the media landscape.

At the same time as a throng of competing multi-screen cinemas are opening on the outskirts of our larger cities, back in the centre traditional single-screen auditoriums are closing their curtains forever. Television and computer enable such a flood of pictures into our living rooms every day via cable and satellite that we are unable to select or absorb them. The borders between media fiction and reality are becoming increasingly vague.

The question is: Have we learned to judge the media independently and critically in the last hundred years? Do we know exactly the principles on which optical-acoustic media work? Current socio-political developments say something different. The constantly increasing volume of pictures in the media goes hand in hand with a spectacular loss in quality. The viewing figures have become the be all and end all of television programmers. Politics uses uncontrolled consumer behaviour for its own ends in much the same way as the entertainment industry. In the light of the use of new technology there are consequences the effects of which cannot be estimated.

Only with an intensive engagement with the subject (in art, science and education) and on every level of society will it be possible to deal with the media in an independent, critical and democratic way.

The Project:

The project FILM IST. is intended to be an artistic contribution to the discourse about those questions arising from dealing with a deeper understanding of the way optical-acoustic media work. FILM IST. approaches the principles which lie at the foundation of the media. It does not claim to be a theoretical work but tries, on the basis of a long engagement with the material, to track down some of the building blocks of perception and some of the effects of moving images. The product is neither an analysis nor a documentation but rather an artistic experiment.

The gaze back to the beginnings of the medium is meant to be focused in the present by its use of up-to-date techniques (montage techniques, loops, soundtrack etc.) and at the same time to face in the direction of the future.

I have been working on this project since 1986. The first concrete results were to be seen with the compilation of FILM IST. 1-6. The first chapter of this tableau film (each chapter may be rented separately and put together with others) was dedicated to the science laboratory as one birthplace of film. Scientific material formed the basic material for the compilation of the individual chapters which had the following titles:

FILM IST. 1. Time and Movement; 2. Light and Darkness; 3. An instrument; 4. Material; 5. A Blink of an Eye; 6. A Mirror.

FILM IST. 1-6 was shown at 35 international festivals and won many awards including the Main Prize at the Ann Arbor Film Festival and the Silver Spire Award at the San Francisco International Film Festival.

FILM IST. 7-12

Since 1999 I have been working on the making the next chapters which are concerned with the fun fair and Varieté as the second birthplace of film.

Cinematographic beginnings are bound up with popular culture in a myriad of ways and a number of forms. Before cinema got its own specially made spaces similar to the theatre, it was bound up with the world of 'attractions' and not just in a geographical sense. Often film shows were part of a variety show programme, and the choice of theme and subject reproduced variety acts. Transvesties and slapstick sketches weredirected and filmed by early cinematographs in their 'sunshine' studios with the same actors who appeared in the variety shows prior to the films being shown. Early masters of film such as Georges Méliès often came from the milieu of showmen and magicians.

It was only logical therefore that they would be responsible for inventing tricks and reality alienations which only film techniques could produce – stop tricks, time lapse, superimpositions and reverse action in all manner of combinations.

However, influences did not just come from the world of Varieté and the comic theatre but also from 'attractions' designed to stimulate the pure 'visual excitement' of visitors to fun fairs and shows – the panorama or panopticum.

Above all the appeal of the foreign, the exotic and the unknown were the grounds for exhibiting 'anatomical wonders' (abnormal people or animals) as well as the members of other ethnicities in the so-called 'Völkerschauen'.

Film offered the possibility of capturing these people in living pictures in their far-off countries and to experience these 'first contacts' (uncertain and timid looks from 'savages' into the camera) at home and devoid of danger. Thus film was used as an instrument of colonial appropriation.

The conquest of the landscape by the world-wide spread of the railway, in combination with the film camera, enabled 'phantom rides' to be made through all the remote areas of the world. These far more spectacular and true-to-life moving panoramas, busily created by cameramen around the world at the instigation of the Lumiere brothers more than anyone else, were responsible for the demise of the painted panorama. Even the favorite subject of these panoramas – the battle scene – was taken over by film. Film played an important role in the First World War where it was not only used for observing the enemy but also for propaganda purposes. The first use of mechanical weapons systems was captured on films made for teaching. With the utilisation of film the First World War became the first media war in history.

When the camera was liberated from a fixed position and mounted on every kind of moving vehicle available at the time (from sedan chairs, bicycles, motorbikes via cars to zeppelins) it meant that the age of 'action camera' had begun. Chases, collisions and accidents were amongst the favorite subjects of early detective stories.

Thrills like this together with breaking social taboos, especially in the sphere of sexuality or violence, served from the earliest days of cinema to satisfy viewer desire for pleasure and 'visual excitement'. Due partly to the fact that it was a collective experience and partly to the deputising role of the cinematographic voyeur ('Peeping Tom') – the public was morally exonerated but could give itself up to enjoying the sensational and 'visual excitement' aspects of cinema.

One of the most marked characteristics of the 'cinema of attractions' (Tom Gunning) was the relationship between instruction and spectacle. The border between the two was diffuse. In 1902 Clement Maurice filmed an operation separating Siamese twins carried out by the surgeon Eugene Lois Doyen. Even though it was made for purely scientific reasons, numerous illegal copies of the film were made by one of Doyen's assistants and shown at fun fairs.

The role of the showman who extolled the virtues of his 'wonders' to the funfair crowds was taken over by the film narrator especially in the areas of medicine and ethnology but also in reports of historical events. The commentary and verbal interpretation of pictures was an essential part of the showing. It was only with the introduction of film rental that it became necessary to integrate commentary into the film so that they could be understood on their own. The history of silent cinema is characterised by the many forms and experiments aimed at making the film stories understandable – text inserts, inscriptions in the pictures themselves, letters and telegrammes, newspaper cuttings, scrolls etc. These either take on the role of the narrator as an integral part of the narrative structure or take on an independent narrative function.

It was certainly not to be taken as a matter of course that the spoken word, the dialogue of the silent film, only took place between the actors on screen. On the contrary. Often the protagonists talked directly to the audience and tried to convey what they meant with gestures and mime, similar to the gesture –language of audio-linguistically disadvantaged people.

The body language, gestures and mimes of the actors in the early melodramas was similarly expressive, although in this case there was no direct eye contact with the audience any more. The Italian divas around 1910 attained such an emotional mastery in depicting passion that they can be considered the first real film stars. The fates of these figures in the films not only demonstrate the attempt by women to achieve sexual freedom, they also show the social norms and their constraints. All of them either die or go insane.

Daily life, life in the city and in the country, traffic but also political and religious events were all film subjects from the very beginning. Film as a medium of preserving memory or documenting reality was as questionable then as it is now. Even the very first film ever to be shown in public – L'arrivée d'une train en gare de la ciostat – is to be found in three different versions and thus is not a documentary of the event but a precisely constructed production. Countless reports of political parades and religious processions did not represent reality but were commissioned works for which the events were then enacted. Even when the scenes were documentary in nature, they could only be said to be reflection of reality if the camera was hidden. The presence of the camera in public changed the behaviour of passers-by who reacted to it thus transforming the representation of daily life into a documentary about the making of the film itself.

Conversely, it was often the case that the locations for the shooting of feature film scenes were besieged by curious spectators so that they entered the pictures, making a document from a fiction.

Thus the succeeding 6 chapters of FILM IST. are about the origins of feature and documentary film.

The titles of the chapters are as follows:

FILM IST. 7. Comic; 8. Magic, 9. Conquest; 10. Writing and Language; 11. Emotions and Passion; 12. Memory and Document.

The soundtrack of the film is composed of works from Austrian contemporary musicians who work in the area of electronic music – Werner Dafeldecker, Christian Fennesz, Martin Siewert and Burkhard Stangl. The musicians were involved in the structuring of the film and the individual musical themes were created parallel to the film editing process. In total they were provided with seven hours of raw film material. The musical sounds they created were collected in a 'pool' from which all of them could take what they wanted in order to further develop the work. The sounds which resulted from this process served as the basis for editing the pictures. In fact, the sound sequences which were assigned specific sub-chapters and looped by me as an initial trial, also influenced the picture montage.

FILM IST.7-12 was realised in collaboration with: Netherlands Filmmuseum, Centre National de la Cinématographie, Cineteca Bologna, Cinemateca Portuguesa, Filmarchiv Austria.