

Upholding Tradition

The Master's Program in Film Heritage at the Film University Babelsberg "Konrad Wolf"

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Introduction

Launched in the winter of 2015, the Master of Arts (M.A.) degree program in "Filmkulturerbe" [Film Heritage] at the Film University Babelsberg "Konrad Wolf" in Potsdam, Germany, is perhaps the youngest academic program dealing specifically with audiovisual heritage. It constitutes, moreover, one of only three such programs in the country together with the Goethe University Frankfurt's "Film Culture: Archiving, Programming, Presentation" M.A. program, launched just two years previously, as well as the longer-established B.A. and M.A. programs in "Conservation and Restoration" offered by the HTW—University of Applied Sciences in Berlin. While they share a common overall focus on the preservation of audiovisual heritage in the broadest sense, the "Film Heritage" M.A. distinguishes itself from the other programs due not only to its content and structure but also to the Film University's unique history and interdisciplinary structure. The following article provides an overview of the program as well as a rundown of the key events and milestones leading to its formation.

The Film University

The Film University Babelsberg "Konrad Wolf," as it has been known since 2014, was founded as the German Academy for Film Art in 1954, and

was initially a training facility for the state-run East German film industry (Brombach, Ebbrecht, Wahl 2015, 79). It was the first and, until 1966, the only film school in Germany, East or West, and it would remain the sole film school in the German Democratic Republic.

In 1969, two years after it had formally added training programs for television to its portfolio, the institution was renamed Deutsche Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen [Academy of Film and Television]. In 1985, the moniker "Konrad Wolf" was added in tribute to the celebrated East German director who had died three years previously. This name would remain unchanged until the Academy attained university status on the eve of its 60th anniversary.

Since the year 2000, the Film University has been located in Potsdam-Babelsberg's "Medienstadt," opposite the famous Babelsberg Film Studios, whose history dates back to 1911. Aligning the university geographically with the historic studio in this way thus placed it at the very heart of Germany's film heritage; an act which has since gained added relevance.

From Film School to "Research Center for Film Heritage"

While the "Film Heritage" M.A. program was launched only in late 2015, the course of events which cumulatively led to its creation can be traced

back some four years prior, beginning with the integration of Filmmuseum Potsdam within the Film University in July 2011. While not the first German institution to bear this title, Filmmuseum Potsdam, formerly the Filmmuseum of the GDR, was the first museum in Germany to combine collections (encompassing all manner of film and film-related objects dating back to the origins of cinema in the late 19th century) with dedicated exhibition spaces and an in-house repertory cinema. Its opening in 1981 predated that of its West-German counterpart, the German Film Museum in Frankfurt, by three years.

The decision of the local Ministry for Science, Research and Culture to incorporate the Filmmuseum Potsdam within the Film University was an attempt to save the museum following a period of severe financial difficulty that had jeopardized its continued existence. While the fusion was initially viewed by some as a form of “downgrading” that could injure the museum’s status as a cultural heritage institution within the region (Stracke-Neumann 2011), it has nonetheless proven significant in two principal regards: The combination of film heritage and academic institutions in this manner lent a form of scholarly certification to the museum and its work, setting Filmmuseum Potsdam, as the only film museum in Germany that is part of an academic institution, apart from its contemporaries such as the aforementioned German Film Museum in Frankfurt (itself a part of the German Film Institute since 2006), the Filmmuseums in Munich and Düsseldorf or the Deutsche Kinemathek–Museum für Film und Fernsehen in Berlin. Additionally, the merger managed to establish film heritage on the Film University’s agenda for the first time.

The “scholarly certification” of the Filmmuseum’s activities began with the appointment of Dr. Michael Wedel, Professor for Media History at the Film University since 2009, as the Filmmuseum’s co-director alongside Bärbel Dalichow, who had served as sole director since 1990. It was in this function that Wedel, a veteran teacher of the “Preservation and Presentation of the Moving Image” M.A. program from his time as assistant to Thomas Elsaesser at the University of Amsterdam, first banded the idea of an academic degree program focused on film heritage, something which was already well-established internationally, but at that time still lacking in Germany.

The next major event leading to the formation of the “Film Heritage” program was the appointment of Dr. Chris Wahl as Professor for Audiovisual Cultural Heritage through an endowment from the German Research Foundation’s Heisenberg program (Filmuniversität 2013). Wahl considered the foundation’s decision to award him the fellowship “logical” as it reflected the increasing government and public awareness of film heritage in Germany, particularly in light of the onset of digital technology in the production of moving images and its impact on their preservation and exhibition. For Wahl, the establishment of an academic study program devoted to film heritage formed a “central aspect” of his professorship as it would serve as a step towards opening up the discourse on film heritage in Germany beyond the film archives. As he saw it, the Film University was the prime location for the “triad” of “teaching, research and public events on film heritage” he envisaged (Busche 2013).

Wahl’s own long-nurtured preoccupation with film heritage had led just a few months earlier to the launch of a pioneering weblog, “Memento Movie” (www.memento-movie.de), funded by the German Federal Government’s Commissioner for Culture and Media. The blog, which Wahl continues to edit together with co-founder Jürgen Keiper, serves as a virtual discussion platform for audiovisual heritage issues. Since its inception, a number of websites have emerged in Germany that focus on the latest political, cultural and technical developments in film heritage matters both in Germany and abroad. Notable examples include the accompanying website to the “Film Heritage in Danger” campaign initiated by film historian and journalist Dr. Klaus Kreimeier (filmerbe-in-gefahr.de), filmdokumente-retten.org as well as its English-language counterpart Save-German-Film-Documents.org by historian Dr. Dirk Alt, and Kinematheken.info launched by filmmaker Helmut Herbst and film critic Daniel Kothenschulte.

In the years before the M.A. program was launched, Wahl was active in organizing symposia and workshops on film heritage, he also inaugurated a German-language book series on the subject,¹ and successfully applied for funding for the multipart, DFG-sponsored research project “Regional Film Culture in Brandenburg,”² where part of the focus was placed on the Film University’s own archive of films made by its past students.³

When Bärbel Dalichow retired in 2013, the position of Filmmuseum Potsdam's director was remodeled as a professorship at the Film University, effectively combining the roles previously held by Dalichow and Michael Wedel (Nowak 2013). In July 2014, Dr. Ursula von Keitz, formerly a Professor for Film and Media Studies at the universities in Bonn and Konstanz, was appointed Professor for Film Research and Film Education in the Museum and director of the Filmmuseum. Von Keitz was also no stranger to film heritage matters, having served as head curator and deputy director of the German Film Institute from 1998 to 2000, and head of an ongoing, DFG-sponsored research project on the history of documentary filmmaking in Germany between 1945 and 2005 (Filmuniversität 2014). In her new dual role, von Keitz would not only oversee the Filmmuseum's operations but also provide courses at the Film University, instigate and head research projects, supervise doctoral theses as well as other activities normally associated with a university professor.

Von Keitz's appointment coincided with the decision by the Ministry for Science, Research and Culture to upgrade the Academy of Film and Television, as it was then still known, to a full-fledged university in recognition of its expanded academic profile. Aligning vocational and academic education and research, and augmented by Filmmuseum Potsdam, the Film University in its present form can be considered the only institution of its kind worldwide.

By now, all the necessary components were firmly in place—an in-house film museum, two professors sympathetic to film heritage issues, university status—and in October 2015 the “Film Heritage” M.A. program welcomed its first students.

The Program

Spanning four semesters, the “Film Heritage” M.A. program takes an “integrative and interdisciplinary” approach to the issues surrounding the global audiovisual heritage and film's pertinence to 20th century culture as well as its influence on current digital media culture.

While the “Conservation and Restoration” programs at the University of Applied Sciences in Berlin take a predominantly material-based approach to the preservation of audiovisual media that is more firmly rooted in conservation science

than in film or cultural studies,⁴ and the Goethe University's “Film Culture” program centers on the, “technical, [...] administrative, economic and legal aspects of archiving, programming and presentation of commonly used film and AV media formats,”⁵ the “Film Heritage” M.A. concentrates on the position of film, and audiovisual media in general, within the wider framework of cultural heritage, and the ever-changing interaction with, and use of, film heritage, and its process of canonization. From this starting point, various aspects of film heritage are explored, from “the safeguarding, evaluation, restoration, and reconstruction of films” through cataloging/contextualization, programming/editing and education to “the artistic, scientific, and commercial use of archive material.” In the course of their studies in the first two semesters, students are introduced both to the core theoretical concepts as well as to the various practical fields which they can then explore in greater depth during a three-month work placement at one of the university's institutional partners that constitutes the core of the practice-oriented third semester. The fourth and final semester is reserved for the completion and subsequent defense of the students' Master theses.

Courses taught on the current program syllabus in the first two semesters focus on topics which include: “Cultural memory and cultures of remembrance;” “Theory and history of archives, libraries and museums;” “Film history;” “The study and use of sources in media history;” “Media archeology;” “Media law and politics;” “Documentary and artistic use of archive material.”

The combination of theory and practice is mirrored in the content and structure of each individual course, where lectures and seminars are accompanied by regular excursions to museums and archives (e.g. the film storage vaults and printing and processing laboratory of the Federal Archive in Hoppegarten on the eastern border of Berlin), visits to major film festivals (e.g. *DOK Leipzig*, *Il Cinema Ritrovato*), and participation in workshops and symposia. Additionally, students have the possibility to earn credit points by contributing to a range of projects organized by the Film University's and Filmmuseum's staff including the retrospective of the annual student film festival, *Sehsüchte*; the annual UNESCO World Day for Audiovisual Heritage, as well as, from 2018 onwards, a local edition of the annual “celebration of amateur film

and filmmaking,” *Home Movie Day*.

With only few exceptions, all of the courses were created especially for the program and are offered exclusively to its students, allowing for a close-knit, intimate teaching atmosphere and a fluid exchange between the students and teaching staff.

Students and Staff

A maximum of ten students are admitted to the program each year. While the program is primarily aimed at students coming from a background in film, media or communication studies, the 25 students admitted in the first three years stem from a variety of different disciplines including practical filmmaking (cinematography, production design, editing), photography, fine arts and conservation science, and this is indicative of the wide appeal that film heritage has attained in Germany in recent years. The teaching language is German (a conscious decision to provide an alternative to the pre-existing English-language programs in other countries). The program, however, is open to applicants from all nationalities and over a quarter of the current students hail from countries outside Germany including Italy, Spain, Serbia, Estonia, Greece, South Korea, and Mexico.

In addition to the two professors, three non-professional staff members are currently assigned to the program: Dr. Philipp Stiasny, Johanne Hoppe and, from December 2016, the author of the present article.⁶ This core teaching staff is augmented by guest lecturers for specialized topics. Regular, more extensive input is provided by Dr. Paul Klimpel (legal issues), Jürgen Keiper (online platforms for film heritage), Dr. Bettina Henzler (education and media literacy) and Birgit Acar (festival and cinema programming). Individual lectures have previously been provided by experts such as film critic and filmmaker Rüdiger Suchsland, historian and producer Felix Moeller, scholar and film editor Dr. Richard Misek (University of Kent), scholar and documentary filmmaker Eva Knopf (University of Hamburg / Filmakademie Baden-Württemberg), art historian Prof. Dr. Bénédicte Savoy (Technical University of Berlin), film historian and archivist Dr. Nico de Klerk (formerly of the EYE Film Museum in Amsterdam), author and curator Ralph Eue, Klaus Kreimeier, film scholar Prof. Dr. Vinzenz Hediger (Goethe University Frankfurt), film historian and author Dr. Olaf Brill, and film restorers Julia Wallmüller and Anke Wilkening.

Partners

The University’s prime location gives it access to a broad network of collaborators and partner institutions in both the Brandenburg area and the neighbouring capital Berlin. The connection to Filmmuseum Potsdam sets the program apart from others which are offered by separate entities (higher education establishments and film heritage institutions) working in close collaboration e.g. the partnerships between the Goethe University and the German Film Institute or the University of Amsterdam and the EYE Film Museum. External institutional partners, meanwhile, include the online video platform alleskino.de, the German Broadcasting Archive, the Arsenal—Institute for Film and Video Art, the DEFA Foundation, the Deutsche Kinemathek—Museum für Film und Fernsehen, the Cinematheque of the German Historical Museum, Zeughauskino, the Archive of the Academy of Arts, Berlin, and the Cinematheque of the Berlin Central and Regional Library. More recently, institutions based in other parts of Germany have partnered with the program including CineGraph (Hamburg), the Goethe Institute (Munich) and the Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau Foundation (Wiesbaden).

A further, unofficial partner of the program is the Brandenburg Center for Media Studies, a Potsdam-based research institute founded in 2016 by all the higher education institutions in Brandenburg with a media studies focus. With the Film University currently serving as managing partner, and Chris Wahl as deputy director, the Center acts as a support body for media-related research and educational activities including doctoral and post-doctoral research projects,⁷ as well as conferences and workshops, publications, and seminars and lectures. Particular attention is paid to the subject of media history and memory culture, thereby creating synergies with the “Film Heritage” M.A. program.

Outlook

Just as the university’s aforementioned institutional partners may serve as a stepping stone for future graduates of the “Film Heritage” M.A. program to pursue a professional career in the industry, so too does the Center for Media Studies offer just one possibility for those who wish to pursue further

education and expand their own academic profiles at the Ph.D. level. As of September 2016, the Film University itself provides as an alternative to a regular academic Ph.D. degree in “Media Studies” the possibility to study for an academic artistic Ph.D. degree in “Film Heritage.” This unique degree combines a dissertation with a thematically linked artistic research project, the format of which is not restricted. Thus, possible projects for future candidates may include anything from film restoration or reconstruction projects, through found-footage or documentary films, exhibitions or film programs, to interactive multimedia or VR projects, and beyond.

References

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Stracke-Neumann, Susanne. “Chance für neuen Schub? Filmmuseum Potsdam wird in Hochschule ‘Konrad Wolf’ integriert.” *M-Online*, June 2011. Accessed August 15, 2017. <https://mmm.verdi.de/beruf/chance-fuer-neuen-schub-3137>

Endnotes

1 See publisher’s website: “Film Erbe,” edition text+kritik, accessed August 15, 2017, <https://etk-muenchen.de/search/SeriesDetails.aspx?Series-ID=FE1900#.WYn6u4Uvg30>

2 See “Regionale Filmkultur in Brandenburg,” Filmuniversität Babelsberg Konrad Wolf, accessed August 15, 2017, <http://www.filmuniversitaet.de/de/forschung/schwerpunkte-projekte/3-filmkulturerbe/regionale-filmkultur.html>

3 The Film University’s increasing interest in its own heritage has led most recently to the establishment of an internal task force for developing an optimal infrastructure for the digitization, dissemination and long-term preservation of past, present and future student films.

4 An informal collaboration with the University of Applied Sciences exists from the beginning of the “Film Heritage” M.A. program, allowing for a mutually beneficial exchange between the institutions that complements their respective programs e.g. students of the “Film Heritage” program participating in courses offered on the University of Applied Sciences’ “Conservation and Restoration” program during periods of self-directed study.

5 From the program description on the university’s website. For more information, see: “Filmkultur: Archiving, Programming, Presentation (Master of Arts),” Goethe Universität Frankfurt am Main, last accessed August 8, 2017, <http://www.uni-frankfurt.de/46560655>

6 Detailed information (in German) about the current staff, their academic and professional backgrounds as well as their individual areas of specialization can be found at the time of writing on the corresponding section of the Film University’s website.

7 Alexander Zöllner, a Ph.D. candidate at the Film University whose research focusses on the history of the first German film archive, the “Reichsfilmarchiv,” was among the first recipients of grant funding from the Center.