

Multiplying Perspective

Reflections on the Role of a Curatorial Perspective within Academic Film Studies

Alejandro Bachman

French Cinephiles have repeatedly conceptualized their passion for cinema as a biography that could be read in relation to the films that one has seen. In his book on the relationship of film and education—*The Cinema Hypothesis*, Alain Bergala distinguishes between the films that one has seen early on in one’s life and those that are encountered later. In addition, he also distinguishes between “individual” encounters with specific films versus those interactions that occur in the context of institutionalized spaces of learning: “We all know that with the books, films, musical pieces that have mattered in our lives, we have encountered them individually, on an intimate scale, each in his own way, even if the encounter took place in what appeared to be a collective context or an institutional setting” (Bergala 2016, 39) Bergala thus articulates something that will be central to the following paper, namely that our experience of films can be personal and intimate and at the same time is often embedded into an institutional context that provides an encounter with the medium that is never free from certain interests, preconceived conceptions, and educational goals.

Taking this remark as a starting point, this essay aims to examine the role that institutions can play in restoring the astonishment and mystery of encountering cinema. The specific institution that will structure this analysis is the Austrian Film Museum, and its efforts to include a curatorial thread that explores the ways in which cinema and film is taught and written about in academia. Two comprehensible manifestations of these efforts—namely, the book *Film Curatorship. Archives, Museums, and the Digital Marketplace*, edited by Alexander Horwath, the director of the Film Museum together with Michael Loebenstein, Paolo Cherchi Usai and David Francis, and a series of seminars and lectures¹ which have taken place at the Film Museum as part of the curriculum of the Theatre, Film, and Media Department of the University of Vienna since 2003—will be looked at more closely to examine the new perspectives they bring to watching and thinking about film. These efforts—the publication and the series of seminars—can thus be seen as providing yet another perspective on a whole series of proposed perspectives one encounters in one’s biography as a cinephile.

The following attempt to conceptualize the Film Museum’s efforts to bring a curatorial perspective into academia aims to add a layer to the idea that our biographies can be read along the lines of the films we have seen. Allowing myself to speak of my own “biography of perspectives,” I could talk about my early passion for films, where my fascination mostly derived from watching films in spite of my parents prohibition to do so, to a hermeneutic, semantic approach to films in the context of my studies at the University of Mainz, to a

perspective that would focus on the visceral qualities of the film experience at the University of Wellington, New Zealand. Upon leaving university and having to find out how to make a living by working within the so called “film business,” an economical perspective is added to an understanding that mostly perceived film as an art, such as assessing the market value of screenplays for Studio Canal. When beginning to work at an institution such as the Film Museum, yet another perspective is added—a curatorial one. It is important to note that what is suggested here is not that one perspective takes over the space of another, but rather that perspectives accumulate and intertwine, are re-arranged and fuse over the years and in the course of encounters with institutions (as well as, of course, individuals). What exactly does the curatorial perspective entail and in how far does it allow for a new *angle d’attac*; what can it add to an understanding of film, and which elements, layers and approaches can it offer will be articulated on the following pages.

Film Curatorship: Hands-On Theory

What is film curatorship? At the end of a long series of discussions, carefully chosen case-studies and articles, the four editors of the above-mentioned book come up with a possible definition: “The art of interpreting the aesthetics, history, and technology of cinema through the selective collection, preservation, and documentation of films and their exhibition in archival presentations” (Cherchi Usai et al. 2008, 231). While the first part of the definition would suggest a smooth, friction-free integration of film curatorship into an academic discourse which in itself entails various methods of “interpreting the aesthetics, history, and technology of cinema,” the latter part touches upon the specific approach of a curatorial perspective: Film curatorship articulates its interpretation of cinema through a set of practices, namely “the selective collection, preservation, and documentation of films and their exhibition in archival presentations.” It seems to make sense to stress this point in order to clarify how far a curatorial perspective differs from what is being taught at university. Indeed, it is the encounter with film in the context of a museum institution—in the fields of collecting, preserving, restoring, documenting and exhibiting film on a daily basis—that produces the framework from which the act of interpreting cinema is derived. Thus, in order to actually develop a curatorial perspective one needs to be in contact with the practicalities of curating, which take place in institutional spaces such as the museum. Bringing the curatorial perspective to students who spend most of their time within the structures of classical academia basically means bringing the museum itself to academia, fostering curatorial thinking that is itself the product of a museum structure to the university.

Since those who have taught the seminar of “Film Curatorship” (Alexander Horwath, Michael Loebenstein and myself) are (or were) staff of the Austrian Film Museum, this means that we have, in a certain sense, offered the Film Museum in its entirety to the students. This meant giving them an insight into the different departments—the archive and its different collections, the restoration department, the education and research department, the program- and shipping department, the DVD- and book-publications—and, most importantly, to lure them away from the institutional context they are used to, and bring them to the Film Museum. The 24 hours of seminars are spent in their entirety at the Film Museum, or—to be more accurate—in its exhibition space, the Invisible Cinema 3. Besides being a space specifically designed to watch films in their original format and under ideal conditions—an aspect I will return to at a later point—the cinema can also be understood as the core of the institution, as the nucleus from which the aspects of preservation, restoration, education and exhibition are thought of, and into which these areas of curatorial practice flow back cyclically.

Since its foundation in 1964, the cinema space was considered to be at the heart of an institution that was meant to provide for film the same respect and care as other museums offered to their respective art forms. Introductions, publications, discussions and all the things that one can find at the Film Museum today, were secondary priorities at first. The central idea of the Film Museum’s founders Peter Konlechner and Peter Kubelka was to exhibit films in the best possible manner—respecting the original formats, language and projection speed. There was no interest in showing objects such as screenplays, costumes, editing tables, posters—elements that are part of the production and marketing processes of film. Instead, the central aim of the Film Museum was to present film itself, in the best possible manner. As early as 1958 (Kondor 2014, 42), Peter Kubelka had been working on a concept to build the ideal cinema. It was to be completely black and would provide a perfect viewing position to each visitor. While the first version of this “Invisible Cinema,”

as he called it, saw the artificial light of day in New York upon the founding of Anthology Film Archives, a second version was built in Vienna in 1989, followed by a third version in 2002.

Why then can the cinema at the Austrian Film Museum be considered as the centre of an institution whose dealings with the medium of film encompass such varied practices as preserving, restoring, teaching, researching and exhibiting film? Because the central goal of the Film Museum is to exhibit film in its original format in a cinema space, there are inevitable consequences for the collection policy of the institution. It will collect film only in its original format and will not start to preserve DCPs of films made in the analogue era. It will undertake its preservations with the sole intent of creating an analogue film print (as opposed to a DCP), and it will mark a preservation as completed only when a film is shown in its original format. It will try to conceptualize its educational activities so that younger people can learn not only of the formal and aesthetic qualities of the cinematic format, but also the material history of the medium and the specific qualities of the cinema space.

In order for this interlocking of different curatorial activities to become visible, the students have to be at the institution itself, spend time within the cinema space, and be able to meet colleagues from all departments of the Film Museum. They must comprehend both the architecture of the place and its infrastructure, and they must experience film as it is being exhibited in that institution; getting crucial insights into the different layers of curatorial work that lie behind these exhibitions. They must become aware that film curatorship can be regarded as just another theory (whose definition stands at the beginning of this chapter) but one that actually exposes deeper layers of meaning when one encounters the hands-on day to day work at such an institution.

Film Experience: History, Apparatus, Passivity

So how would the student's presence in the cinema multiply the possible perspectives of thinking about the film medium? How could one define the presentation dynamics of a cinema that is capable of playing 8mm, 16mm, 35mm and DCPs formats of films? How does this add to a student's possible approach to the medium and is that perspective absent from regular academic film studies?

A first possible dimension can be traced in the following remark that Alexander Horwath makes about a museum's task: "In relation to film, a museum essentially needs to preserve, show, and interpret *not just* an object/artefact, but *a system*, more specifically: *a working system*" and later adds "in film, the 'artefact' to be transmitted into the future is not just (but also) the strip, not just (but also) the apparatus, not just (but also) the screening space; what needs to be transmitted into the future *is the set of relations between them while they are in performance*—the working system" (Cherchi Usai et al. 2008, 85-89). To emphasize what is being put at stake here: In the Film Museum's understanding, film is not to be understood as an object (be it in the form of a celluloid print or a BluRay, DVD or harddrive containing a DCP) and it is also not to be understood as just the images we see (may that be on a screen in a cinema or a tablet interface), rather it is seen as a working-system, an event, where different elements (such as the filmstrip, the projector, the dark space and the architectural setup of projection, audience and screen) have to interact with each other "to make film happen."

Why then would one insist on looking at film in such a way when generations of film scholars have written volumes of books, essays, reflections on film without having seen them in a cinema? The counter question to this proposition would be: Why do most art historians insist on working in the presence of the original paintings when writing on an artist? Because there is a specific awareness that an artwork only unfolds its multiple dimensions of meaning (and thus of perspectives to be looked at) when the images that we see are put into a relation with the materials these images appear on and the technologies they are based on. As Malcolm Le Grice puts it: "The technologies of cinematic production are not 'neutral' in relationship to the ideas produced and promoted through them. The technologies already embody (cultural) intellect, motive, ideology and consequently all artefacts produced through these technologies have the characteristics of dialogue with this embodied 'intellect.'" (2009, 236).

To encounter the films in an exhibition space in their original formats—in the context of a working system—means to be provided with an experience that both entails the historicity of a film's aesthetic as well as well as the apparatus' role in forming the experience of watching films². The two-hour discussion with the

students at the end of each seminar was specifically dedicated to discovering how this seminar differed from the encounter with the medium in their ongoing studies at the university: it confirmed that most students had not given any thought to these two elements. Encountering films in the cinema after being sensitized to the apparatus and its materiality linked the images they encountered on the screen to both the technology that made these images possible, as well as to the space that shaped that encounter. In a seminal text that was always on the reading list, Volker Pantenburg states: “one moves on sandy soil if one wants to talk about *the* cinema experience—just as *the cinema*, it does not exist” (2010, 42). In its seminars, the Austrian Film Museum places all of its screenings in the cinema, making this the starting point for the relationship between film, apparatus and aesthetics. On a regular basis, the seminar also entailed visits to other institutions, using other modes of exhibiting film—such as the MuMOK (Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien)—and thus placing the cinema experience into relation with other apparatuses, which were then verbalized in discussions with curators from these respective institutions³.

In general, about half of a seminars’ overall duration were spent in the cinema watching film in the context of curated programs that would later be reflected upon. It might be surprising, but this rather small act already marked a decisive deviation from the student’s experience in their academic studies, where they would never see a whole film together, would never see it in its original format, nor talk about these aspects and mostly spent their time at university talking about theoretical texts or analyzing carefully chosen extracts of films.⁴ While these forms of teaching film may make sense on various levels, they also formulate a certain approach to film, an approach that stresses the active participation of the viewer, that emphasizes the act of analysis and intellectual thought in the encounter with film and at the same time leaves out an element that is essential to our understanding of film curatorship; namely, that film is an experience. The cinema as a space for film fosters an understanding of the value of passivity in aesthetic experience, freeing the students from the constant demand to analyse, interpret, react—and instead places the act of watching a film as something of educational value within itself. As the philosopher Kathrin Busch notes in her book on passivity: “Taking into consideration passivity is based on the idea that acting and producing cannot be disconnected from the impulses, affects and invocations, which they answer to” (2012, 11). The seminars on film curatorship take their queue from this conviction: to study film is first and foremost also an act of experiencing them. The cinema space, as the Film Museum understands it, is not only history’s most dominant form of this practice, but also its most insistent one when aiming to understand how film itself thinks and how it articulates itself for us both sensorially and intellectually.

Programming: For a Different Understanding of the Medium’s History

After emphasizing the centrality of the cinema as a space of experiencing film within the seminars, we must now talk about what exactly is being shown in these screening sessions that take up approximately half of the seminar’s time. While the actual programs change every semester and are always dependent on the day’s or session’s topic, there is nevertheless a core guiding principle that we have tried to follow and which would make up for yet another multiplication of perspectives.

While one might detect a slow broadening of modes and genres, which are taken into consideration in academia, there is nevertheless a prevailing understanding of film, its history, and its aesthetics which is mostly based on the most commercially valuable and dominant forms, namely the feature length documentary and fiction film. Working in an institution such as a Film Museum, one quickly comes to understand that those forms that are generally perceived as fundamental for our understanding of cinema only make up a small quantity of cinema’s actual history. Film collections around the world tell a very different story, and are largely made up of films from the realm of amateur film making, including works from the early period (that which Tom Gunning has called “The Cinema of Attractions”) of the medium’s history, encompassing industrial film, advertising, avantgarde and experimental cinema, outtakes from major works of film history or such curiosities as a compilation made by an anonymous film projectionist who stuck together images of naked women he had cut out of a vast array of films.

The carefully curated programs during our seminars try to do two things at the same time: Firstly, these films are projected in the cinema, thus giving them a second life on the screen and in the student’s minds.

Secondly, and just as importantly, we try to program these films in such a way that their interrelationship with the more prominent works in the medium's history becomes visible, standing side by side in one and the same program and eliminating the hierarchies between that which is deemed important and that which is deemed expendable.

After a couple of programs of this kind, ideas of what film is gradually change. Film is now not only an art form or a way of documenting the real world, it also becomes a vessel for personal memories that are in dialogue with historical events—as is the case in amateur filmmaking. Through the inclusion of industrial films and advertising, film's function as an organizer of daily life as well as a tool to spark consumption and market economies becomes visible in a way that is seldom included in academic thinking about film. Being confronted with films like these represents a moment of alterity with regards to what is considered worthy of our interests and intellectual rigor in academia. Here are films that no one has written about, whose auteur cannot be named, whose historical significance has not yet been determined. These films are surely part of the medium's history but have largely been neglected, precisely because the beginnings of film studies have been based on concepts such as the auteur, important periods and the premise that film is an art form; theoretical constructs that leave little space for the stepchildren of the medium's history.

These film programs, I would argue, allow for a multiplication of perspectives on the medium of film in two ways: on the one hand those works and cinematic forms that were unknown to the students provide the opportunity for a fresh way of seeing. What counts first and foremost in an encounter with unknown materials is not what we have read, have understood, have already categorized about it, but the experience of watching itself and the effort to contextualize. On the other hand, the intertwining of such works with better known works, such as, let's say, Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Mépris* (1963) or Dziga Vertov's *Človek s kinoapparatom* (1929), provokes a different understanding of the medium's history, one that does not jump from one masterpiece to the next until we finally reach the present, but rather provokes a sequential understanding of history, as Siegfried Kracauer has suggested in *History: The Last Things Before the Last*.

Programming film thus becomes an educational act in these seminars, yet another possibility to reject the usual understanding of the medium's history as a chronological progression. A film program and its potentially endless possibilities to form constellations between films carries the potential of making the spectator look at the medium differently, to include forms that have not yet been brought to his attention and to bring them into a relationship with that which is already familiar to him/her. It is important to note that this way of programming, as well as the choice of this film over that, is not something that the lectures randomly decide upon, but is in itself rooted in the film collection of the Austrian Film Museum. Thus, through these programs, the students also get a better understanding of what a museum's collection entails, what it is made of and the challenges it poses to those taking care of it.

Archivist, Programmer, Restorator, Educator, Artist: Film is in the Eye of the Beholder

By this point, one could rightfully ask: does the Film Museum's aim of integrating a curatorial perspective into the academic study of film consist only of bringing the students to the cinema and showing them films and/or film programs that bring into dialogue the neglected parts of the medium's history and a few classics that every student of film knows? In the last part of this paper, I will try to outline the "everything else" that makes up these seminars. Nevertheless, I have decided to articulate the role of the cinema and film programs first, since they are—as I have tried to outline at the beginning—the core of the institution's mission as the Film Museum understands it. Coming back once again to the cinema space, we have always tried to make students perceive it as a "chamber of echoes," where different voices are heard, overlap, and form cacophonies. Indeed, this could serve as a metaphor for what is attempted in these seminars on a larger scale: for the duration of a seminar and in the cinema space, the voices of the films themselves interact with the voices of the students and the voices of the lecturers—as well as those of our guests, who come from various spheres of curatorial practices.

While each semester tries to create an arc that provides a multilayered perspective on the practice and theory of curatorship, single sessions try to point out one aspect of it. A day might start with a conversation via skype with a director of a different Filmmuseum, trying to establish how different the actual curatorial

work of a director is in a state-sponsored institution such as the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia, or in a more club-like structure such as in the Austrian Film Museum. Part two of such a day could then be led by the Film Museum's head of collections, who would talk about the changes that the trademark logos of film studios have undergone over the course of cinema's history, referring to—and showing elements from—the film collection as well as the paper, poster and photo collections, talking about the value of these materials in terms of historical research but also about the actions that have to be undertaken to catalogue, preserve and make these material accessible. At the end of the day, two colleagues from the restoration department would try to give an introduction to the theoretical discourses surrounding their trade, while at the same time exemplifying the nuts and bolts of the restoration process—by showing a print before and after the process, discussing steps that were taken, problems that surfaced and choices that were made. The next day could start with a film program and theoretical discussions about media specificity or the cinematic dispositif, followed by a “nuts and bolts” discussion with the head of the programming department to get an understanding of the amount of work that goes into finding screenable prints, the network of archives behind these processes as well as the changes that the industry's transfer to digital has caused. At the end of the day, we might be in the lucky position of having a guest from the MoMA film department and finding two hours to talk about one of the oldest film heritage institutions and its curatorial concepts in the present.

Including artists in these seminars on curatorship is also of central importance; for example, Gustav Deutsch, who has been working closely with and in archives to make works such as the *Film ist.*-series. What becomes visible in the encounter with filmmakers is a poetic perspective on the medium⁵ and a concept of the museum collection that does not only preserve the objects for future generations but actually re-infuses them into the present; becoming a source for artistic work. Screening *Film ist. 1-6* on a 16mm print after such a discussion can certainly be described as a new experience. One suddenly does not only see a smart found footage film about possible ontologies of the medium, but a poetic act of giving shape to an archive of images, a poetic approach to organizing a world of images, an act of interpreting the history, technology and aesthetics of cinema.

Conclusion: Curatorship and Experience

It has proven a good didactic concept to compress these 24 hours of seminars into one week. Bringing the students to another place, showing them films in the cinema and confronting them with multiple curatorial perspectives within a condensed time-span can create an experience that allows for one institutional perspective (the university) to step aside for a moment and bring another into play—not to overwrite the other, but instead to bring into focus what lies at the core of linking curation to academic studies. Fundamentally, our perspectives on—and consequently, our interpretations of—a medium are highly influenced by the institutional context they are set in.

The way the Film Museum has tried to bring a curatorial perspective into play was to create a seminar that tried to intensify the multi-layered perspectives that can be found under the roof of a Film Museum. These are influenced and shaped not by watching excerpts of films on DVDs, reading lists, theoretical discourses and the need to have good marks, but by seeing films in their original format, taking care (that is what “curare” means) of them in the acts of preservation, restoration, education and exhibition and knowing about their material, economic and theoretical realities. To clarify: this is not to say that one perspective is more valuable, or more relevant than the other, but rather to suggest how very differently they turn out depending on the relationship one has with the object they aim to interpret—be it by writing a theoretical book or curating a series of films.

Film curatorship brings to academia an alternative and complimentary way of looking at film. While it does take theoretical approaches into account, it also tries to opt for a perspective that includes the material realities of the films as they become visible in cinema screenings and through the discussions with the representatives of a museum institution. It has the capacity to broaden our understanding of the medium's history, to include forms of film that are commonly not part of academic discourse, to infect our thinking about moving images with reflections on the influence of the apparatus, materiality and experience and to place our understanding of film in another institutional context that is not the university. At the end of the week, the

university's perspective might become the dominant one again, but the last couple of years have proven that several cinephiles' biographies have been shaped by an encounter with a different cinema institution and its perspectives.

References

- Bergala, Alan. *The Cinema Hypothesis: Teaching Cinema in the Classroom and Beyond*. Vienna: Austrian Film Museum, 2016.
- Busch, Kathrin. *Theorien der Passivität*. Hamburg: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2012.
- Cherchi Usai, Paolo, Francis, David, Horwath Alexander and Loebenstein Michael. *Film Curatorship - Archives, Museums, and the Digital Marketplace*. Vienna: Filmmuseum, 2008.
- Fossati, Giovanna and Annie van der Oever, eds. *Exposing the Film Apparatus: The Film Archive as a Research Laboratory*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016.
- Kessler, Frank. "Programming and Performing Early Cinema Today: Strategies and *Dispositifs*." In *Early Cinema Today: The Art of Programming and Live Performance*, edited by Martin Loiperdinger, 137-146. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011.
- Kondor, Ester. *Aufbrechen. Die Gründung des Österreichischen Filmmuseums*. Vienna: Austrian Film Museum, 2014.
- LeGrice Malcom. *Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age*. London: Palgrave BFI, 2009.
- Pantenburg, Volker. "Migrational Aesthetics: Zur Erfahrung in Kino und Museum." *Montage AV* 19, no. 1 (2010): 37-53.

Endnotes

1 At the centre of this series lies a recurring seminar entitled "Film Curatorship" which was divided into two parts: Part I was called "Film Material: To Preserve and Project," Part II was called "Film begets Film. Programming and Utilization." Since 2015 the series continues with seminars dedicated to specific elements within the concept of Curatorship, such as the practice of Found Footage filmmaking, the educational potentials of film, or the exhibition of films in different contexts, such as the school, the cinema and the gallery space.

2 Frank Kessler has written on the twofold purpose of screening early films for audiences today in museological screenings: "On the one hand, they pursue a didactic or scholarly project of providing a framework for today's spectators to appreciate these films as historical objects, that is with regard to their original viewing context, their functions and what they may have meant to their audience at the time. On the other hand, such screenings also want to offer a specific aesthetic experience, which is obviously different from the one viewers are used to nowadays when going to the movies, but which for that very reason should give them a new and unexpected kind of pleasure" (2011, 137-146).

3 Conceptualizing film history as a history of technology has been central in this seminal book in the context of thinking about/teaching cinema with a focus on its apparatus (Fossati and van den Oever 2016).

4 What is being stated here is based on conversations with the students after the seminar and describes their experience of studying film. While a number of universities actually collaborate with cinemas and museums and integrate screenings of prints in their original format into the teaching practice, this surely is not the case for the majority of film departments.

5 Such as Gustav Deutsch's and Hanna Schimek's approach to the archive which is inspired by Aby Warburg's concept of the Mnemosyne.