

Situated Cinemas: Films and their Screening as Agents of Contemporary Participatory Democracy.

Wrap-Up by Sebastian Mühl

The workshop „Situated Cinemas: Films and their Screening as Agents of Contemporary Participatory Democracy“, organized by Prof. Dr. Anna Schober-de Graaf, took place at Alpen-Adria-University Klagenfurt on 8th June 2018.

Participating speakers: **Allister Gall** (UK), Lecturer in Media Arts, Cinema Activist, University Plymouth; **Massimiliano De Serio** (I), Film Director, Co-Founder of the Piccolo Cinema, società de mutuo soccorso cinematografico, Torino, Italy; **Fritz Hock** (A), Director of the K3 Film Festival, Villach; **Andrej Sprah** (SI), Head of the Research Department at the Slovenian Cinematheque and Assistant and Professor of Film Theory, Academy of Visual Arts Ljubljana; **Nika Autor** (SI), Documentary Filmmaker, Part of the collective Newsreel Front; **Christian Kravagna** (A), Professor of Art History, Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna; **Sebastian Mühl** (D), Art and Film theorist, Offenbach am Main.

Based on the assumption that today's cinema is being situated in various forms and social spaces, the workshop „Situated Cinemas: Films and their Screening as Agents of Contemporary Participatory Democracy“ looked at different forms and models as well as production forms and distribution formats which are symptomatic for situated cinema. One central question concerned the role these practices play with regard to participatory and activist processes in democratic societies.

The workshop developed a broad perspective on different cinematographic scenes and focused on various phenomena of a so-called situated cinematic practice: collaborative film, a cinema of imperfection and practices of mutual aid, the traditions of Newsreels as forms of a committed cinema, contemporary Film Festivals and activism, and finally a mobile refugee cinema. All the presentations shared the idea that participatory models in cinema could be identified as markers for a committed cinematic practice that supports activist approaches in contemporary societies. However, all the talks shared the strong commitment for a non-institutional and more informal approach towards a practice of cinema as a whole.

1) In her introduction, Anna Schober pointed out that film theory had always connected cinema with an ideal of a democratizing form of art, whereas the experience of cinema not only proposed the possibility for an emancipatory transgression of established social bonds and the formation of aesthetic communities of choice, but also created a political subject that would be more equal to each other. In a general way of speaking, cinema creates and transforms established ways of how the world is experienced, and therefore it works as a renegotiator or mediator of sense. As Schober pointed out,

society cannot read itself without the staging of its representations through different forms and media. Therefore, society becomes legible through representational aesthetic forms. Cinema works as one possible agent of such aesthetic representation, it makes society legible and more transparent to itself.

However, reflecting on the more direct political dimensions of situated cinema, the spatial situations of cinematic expressions contribute to a more specific idea of cinematic agency. By intervening in specific public spaces, situated cinema actively transforms these spaces. It not only creates a public space, it might also transform this space.

2) In the first presentation of the workshop, Allister Gall centered upon various questions related to contemporary activist cinema and a so-called cinema of imperfection. As Gall argued, there is an emancipatory dimension in what he identifies as informal or amateur approaches in contemporary film production. The so-called „Imperfect Cinema Project“, established by Gall in 2009, explores different aspects of collaborative film production and the implications given for social emancipation processes. In the ongoing projects and workshops initiated by Gall, participants are being equipped with portable cameras. They are then involved in open processes of footage recording which not only trigger new experiences of the everyday, but also its possible transformation in the light of creative lifeworld transformations and non-alienated experiences.

The idea of turning the subject of film experience into an active filmmaker, to turn the cinema-viewer into the cinema-producer, not only proposes a participatory and more democratic film production culture, but more essentially recurs to an emancipatory and liberating ideal of creative production as opposed to standardized modes of experience. At the same time, the activation of the subject takes place in the name of a cinema of imperfection. This cinema stands against more professionalized and sophisticated forms of cinema. It can be seen as an aesthetic form in which emancipatory claims are expressed. As Gall argued, the cinema of imperfection is characterized by an overcoming of the passive subject of cinematic consumption and its potentially alienated social bonds. As Gall further pointed out, collaborative film can also be seen as a means for more direct social communication through the medium of cinema. It can open up spaces for ephemeral moments of liberated communication and intersubjectivity.

However, the discussion led to the question of authorship which remains an urgent problem in the context of contemporary collaborative film. It remains ambivalent who is the director and author of a collaborative films both on a theoretical and practical level. Indeed, the problem of shared authorship leads to complicated questions concerning the status of the film material, and it further exposes the hidden power relations inscribed in the social and institutional roles embodied by the participants of collective film productions.

However, the idea of participation as expressed in the turning of cinema-viewers into cinema-producers can also be seen more critical. The emancipatory claims connected

with this cinematic model refer to an ideal of creative activation of formerly passive subjects and film consumers. However, the discussion led to the point that creativity cannot be seen as the unblamable realm that escapes all processes of alienation and reification in contemporary capitalist societies. Further, creativity is easily subject to exploitation under the signs of a capitalist culture that focuses on the productivity of creative labour, aesthetic forms of individual expression, and the authenticity of the self.

3) In widening up the discussions on collaborative film, Massimiliano De Serio presented a paper on Cinema as a Form of Mutual Aid. Working as a filmmaker and director, De Serio emphasized that cinema always involves processes in which people help each other to find the right images and stories which can be made useful for social collectives to make sense of their own. As De Serio pointed out, highly mediatized societies fundamentally refer to stories and images taken out of cinema. Thus, cinema provides a reservoir not only for cultural experience, but also brings the staging of society to the light. It has an educating and possibly emancipating social function. Finally, cinema creates a common space in which cultural experience is also archived and preserved against its potential amnesia or loss.

Beyond this scope, cinema is also related to mutual aid in further ways. The narration of cinema can be seen as a way that gives specific groups of people political recognition and voice. This counts not only for documentary practices in cinema, but even fictional films can be seen within this scope. However, cinema helps people to find out and speak about their cultural identities and it provides a language for individual and collective expression. The situatedness of cinema therefore lies in the social relations that connect the film with the subjects it stages within its own narration. These subjects are essentially part of the idea of a socially committed situated cinema.

As De Serio further pointed out, there is also a cathartic dimension in documentary cinema. Staging people means also to play a role in front of the camera and at the same time being oneself in relation to his/her factual identity.

With regard to the Piccolo Cinema project in Turin, Italy, De Serio finally proposed yet another reading of a cinema as mutual aid. Here, the material production processes of cinema are at stake. De Serio argued that the Piccolo Cinema works as a shared space for discussion and debate where people are also provided with the help and competences of professional filmmakers when they want to launch their own amateur film projects.

4) The third presentation by Fritz Hock, who is Director of the K3 Film Festival in Villach, Austria, focused on the role of film festivals in contemporary film cultures. Hock mainly spoke about his personal experiences as an organizer of film events in Vienna and other cities. He argued that film festivals and screenings play an important role for the constitution of a public, especially with regard to contemporary tendencies that

relocate film screenings more and more into private spaces. As Hock pointed out, the experience of film is essentially an activity that not only involves the screening of films but also refers to discussion and debate about the images seen on screen. Thus, it is the film festival that brings the public dimension of cinema to the light. Hock initiated a so-called „audience award“ for his festivals. In it, the audience is invited to actively be involved in the processes of criticism and judging on films.

Finally, Hock pointed out the necessity of mixing mainstream and avant-garde programming in contemporary film festivals. This is not only due to an economic and financial necessity, but it also discloses a more democratic form of renegotiating film between the poles of highbrow and lowbrow culture.

5) In a survey on the history and contemporary phenomena of Newsreels production, Slovenian film theorist Andrej Sprah presented Newsreels as a form of contemporary committed cinema. As Sprah suggested, Newsreels can be identified as a major form of committed cinema during the first half of the 20th century. Even though there was a mainstream tradition in the production of Newsreels, there could also be identified a so-called counter model of alternative Newsreels that focused on alternative information or propaganda. As Sprah suggested, the conceptual roots of Newsreels lie in the early Sowjet cinema of Dziga Vertov and his notion of cinema truth. Vertov's ideas had been taken up again in the 1960's by filmmakers such as Jean-Luc Godard or Chris Marker, but also in the context of American Newsreels formats. There was even a tendency towards a strongly sophisticated Newsreels production in Latin America. Thus, the cinema of Cuban filmmaker Santiago Àlvares played an important role in the renegotiation of Newsreels as an artistic form of cinematic expression within the traditions of Latin American film culture.

However, Newsreels focused on both the reappropriation of archival footage as well as the reediting of fragments of the common life through cinematic montage. In political terms, Newsreels showed a great interest in the breaking up of the monopoly of state information, whereas in aesthetic terms, they can be identified as being situated between the poles of an aesthetic art and a politically inspired activism or propaganda.

In his survey, Sprah presented two strands of Newsreels traditions, a so-called politically engaged cinema and a so-called militant cinema. In militant cinema, political activism is at the very heart of the Newsreels production. Militant cinema therefore shows a strong commitment for the representation of political counter-knowledge, or counter-information. It can be called a form of direct activism or interventionist cinema. On the other side, engaged cinema shows a stronger interest in the aesthetic and mediatized dimensions of Newsreels. It is less concerned with the direct political agency of film but it also reflects on the aesthetic status of moving images as an autonomous form of art that keeps its own politics of aesthetics.

In relation to contemporary practices of Newsreels production, there is an ongoing interest in Newsreels following up the rise of contemporary protest movements during the last decade. Filmmakers such as Sylvain George from France and Jem Cohen from the US are both interested in the representation of contemporary class struggles, but they also seem to be concerned about the reappropriation of the history of Newsreels and their inherently historicized aesthetics.

6) Following Sprahs talk, Slovenian Filmmaker Nika Autor, who is part of the collective Newsreel Front, presented some of her recent works. Newsreel Front is a politically engaged film collective based in Ljubljana and formed by members from very different backgrounds. In her films and film installations, Autor is concerned with the politics of migration but also shows an interest in the renegotiation of the politics of memory in contemporary post-socialist societies. In her talk, Autor presented recent films which show an interest in the reappropriation of the politics of historical Newsreels. In *Newsreel 63 – The train of shadows*, produced in 2017, Autor edited original footage shot by refugees and immigrants traveling by train along the Balkan route from Belgrad to Ljubljana. Autor presents the visual fragments of an ongoing refugee crisis from the perspective of those directly involved in the migration processes. At the same time, and more implicitly, her film refers to the collapse of infrastructure in former socialist countries by exposing the deteriorated train networks along the Balkan route. Finally, the filmmaker inscribes herself into a history of cinema that pictures trains as one of the most significant symbols within the tradition of cinema since the invention of the art of moving images in the late 19th century.

7) In the final presentation of the workshop, Christian Kravagna from Vienna presented his recent collaborative film project *Fluchtkino. Das mobile Fluchtkino für Geflüchtete und Einheimische*. Produced since 2014, this docudrama and non fictional road movie reflects on the situation of refugees from Syria and Africa during their migration along the South-Eastern European routes. In this film, refugees are staging their own role as migrants and talking about their entangled perspectives, whereas the local residents from villages in southern Austria are shown in the process of trying to deal with the new situation at the wake of the arrival of refugees in their local communities. The film is very much concerned with the difficulties of telling experiences and mediating perspectives within a political situation that not only calls for a greater awareness for the situation of the refugees, but also would need different forms of representation of the refugee crisis as a whole. The situatedness of cinema in this project mainly refers to the exposure of very specific speech situations that are reflected in this film. Finally, the *Fluchtkino* project is also physically situated in a specific way. The film is basically screened in local situations whereas the local residents and refugees that are staged in the film are exposed to a kind of feedback structure. The *Fluchtkino*, in other words, is screened at the same social contexts where it is produced.

Considering the broad range of perspectives that were presented in the workshop, contemporary situated cinema projects itself on various different levels and contexts.

It cannot simply be theorized in relation to the physical sites of its appearance or screening, but also needs to be reflected with regard to the social relations that are established and embodied in collaborative and participatory formats. However, there are questions that remain open. The workshop mainly focused on various aesthetic forms and media that are characteristic for contemporary situated cinema, but there is still reflection to be done in relation to the political goals and democratizing ambitions of participatory and collaborative filmmaking. Hence, there are different suggestions on how to understand the political dimensions of situated cinema as an activist practice: as participatory and collaborative film production, as a sharing of production means and free distribution of films, as the establishing of counter-narratives and the giving of voice and recognition to the unheard and non-represented. However, it still remains unclear whether participatory and collaborative practices in situated cinema can be called inherently more democratic. Further, the notion of democracy itself would need more specification. It could be spelled out in different ways and terms: as the creation of a common public and the management of the social, or as the differential and disruptive process of breaking up with institutionalized modes of representation and the government of social collectives. Whether the examples presented in the workshop tend towards one side or another is a question that needs to be reflected further on in the discussions following up the workshop.

Sebastian Mühl, 21.06.2018.