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The Schlemmer Frame Collection

Cataloguing Method and Identification Strategies

Description

The “Schlemmer Frame Collection” is the property of Edith Schlemmer, who received it as a donation during the early 1970s from an anonymous man about sixty years of age. Mrs. Schlemmer has kindly made the collection available to the Österreichisches Filmmuseum in Vienna, for preservation, cataloguing, research and access to students and interested people. It came in 67 small envelopes – most of them self-built with semi-transparent paper. The total amount is 2254 items, the majority of which are excerpts from nitrate films; 181 items derive from sound films.

Some envelopes carry imaginary descriptions or titles, like *Griechen*, containing ancient Roman or Greek subjects, or *Wild West*, referring to frames extracted from western films. Others were organized by subject typology, as for instance a series of images of children, named *Kinderaufnahmen*. Similar to this last group was the thematic group called *Farbaufnahmen*, which was mainly constituted by film colored with the *stencil* or *pochoir* technique. Some of the frames were grouped with the name of a leading actor or actress. Finally, 10 envelopes carried – sometimes quite approximately – the rental title of the Austrian distribution. More than 50% of the nitrate frames were preserved in envelopes without any data, in a system that, at a first analysis, could be described as casual or chaotic. A series of sound film fragments was organized in a similar manner.

Origins

Considering the distribution titles mentioned by the collector, the intertitles (all in German language) and some particular types of edge marks (many are Pathé’s, marking copies limited to the distribution outside of specific European Countries), it is possible to state with a high degree

of certainty that the collection was constituted within the German linguistic area (Germany and the Austrian-Hungarian Empire). This assumption is supported by the frames excerpted from war newsreels, of which almost all come from the German or Austrian production. They were not, at that time, shown in hostile countries for war and embargo reasons. An extremely helpful example is *Gräfin de Castro*, a film produced and distributed in Germany under this original title. In Austria, instead, the film was distributed under the rental title *Die Irre*, which our anonymous collector used to identify certain frames. These clues contribute to locate the source of the collection within the Austrian-Hungarian Empire.

Concerning the period of its origin, it can be assumed from the original and identified titles that the heart of the collection came into being between 1911/12 and 1918. Some titles constitute an exception, such as *L'Amour à tous les étages* (France, 1904), *Concours de Gourmands* (France, 1905), *The King of Kings* (USA, Cecil B. DeMille, 1927) and *Dante's Inferno* (USA, Henry Otto, 1924). The sound films were obviously merged with the collection during a later period, probably by the same collector.

An original typewritten letter, pertaining to the 1950s, addressed to Walt Disney and maybe never posted, is preserved within the collection. It informs us that the collection was created in 1913 by a child who gathered the frames which had been thrown away by a projectionist. He then projected them at home for himself and for his friends with a home-made magic lantern. The collector, having become an adult, writes a letter to the creator of dreams, Walt Disney, imploring him to send some scrap frames, maybe because the source he had always relied on was no longer accessible. The friends from his youth are no longer present, maybe deceased in either of the two World Wars, but his passion remains, testifying to the life of a dreamer. The story of this collection and its manner of creation and use demonstrate how futile the division between cinema and pre-cinema is. The frames cut from films were shown, passed on and experienced with a home-made magic lantern. A slide projector *ante litteram*, made to feed an ancient passion in movement. The instrument comes from the eighteenth century, but the images it shows are post-1895. As the characters in *Fanny and Alexander* (SWE, Ingmar Bergman, 1982), *Splendor* (ITA, Ettore Scola, 1989) or *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso* (ITA, Giuseppe Tornatore, 1988) the collector is the passionate child re-using static images as nourishment for his fantasies.

Original value, reflections on reordering and its ends

The procedure of reordering the collection was discussed and considered at length before the first steps were taken. For a while a lingering doubt, determined by a double ethical and organizational dilemma, kept us busy. The fact that the collection was "chaotic" is tied to its original purpose, which, as clarified by the words of its maker, was surely sensational. Seen from this perspective,

what could appear as chaos, a total lack of order, without any historical pertinence in the eyes of an archivist, has a different value and significance. The collector, in this case, proceeded differently than the many historians who inaugurated other collections of frames by taking excerpts from irredeemably damaged films in order to save them from total loss. "Our" collector, instead, cuts in a completely different spirit: he preserves what is beautiful and what affects him. He renews his very personal memories of the past. He assembles a vast collection of little jewels for the cine-amateur or, more accurately, for a magic lantern operator. He gathers a real anthology following his imagination, constituting a group of items with predominantly spectacular, more than historical, characteristics. He "edits" his show, so to speak, selecting not as a researcher or an archivist, but as an aesthete, a *metteur-en-scène* of his private little shows, for relatives and friends (or just for himself). Creating a disposition for these frames, he undoubtedly follows mnemonic and imaginative ways, dictated by the impulse of a moment. There is not the will to create an archival order, only the spectacular need for a montage of attractions which is modified again and again, according to the momentary feelings and sensations of our collector. Maybe he remembered the provenance of each frame and was able reconstruct its story, perhaps enriching it with his own imagination or fantasy, to renew the emotional and affective link with each flower of his treasure. He acted like the head of an itinerant *commedia dell'arte* theater company, which had at its disposition a large number of characters and plots, which, depending on the circumstances, could be reedited in a modular fashion. Like the protagonist of *La Valigia dei Sogni*, he was a historian *ante litteram*. Lacking archival knowledge, he was the archive itself; he was the "plot of the movies" which, condensed in single frames, would be constantly reconstructed and enriched by his own memory and imagination:

Remembrance, thus, is vested in the imaging faculty; and memory deals with images.¹

He did not intend to construct a history of cinema with these frames, or to save fragments, but to create *one* story, or multiple stories. It is in this sense that we believe the Schlemmer Collection should be interpreted and attended to, considering its sensational, aesthetic and emotional attributes, and not only its historical or archival value.² According to this evidence, all reordering operations, dictated by non-spectacular functions, should be considered extraneous to the essence of the collection itself. In this sense, our historiographic work of reorganization, identification and reordering might be considered anti-historic, since it has produced a superstructure that is alien to the original idea of the collection. However, the original aesthetic and special function was indissolubly connected to the personality of the collector, to his memories

¹ Plotino, *Enneadi*, IV, 3, 29, 32 (translated by the authors).

² This is also the position taken by Roland Fischer-Briand in his short text and visual essay which present the Schlemmer Frame Collection: *Cristalliser la passion*, in *Autour des cinémathèques du monde, 70 ans d'archives de film*, CNC, Paris, 2008, p. 138-148.

and his fantasy. Having lost this authorial mark which also characterized the narrative and organizational structure of the frames, the collection presents itself as chaos to the eyes of the historian. With no direct access to the only source of knowledge about the collection, we decided to document its original order, but to reorder it, after scans of all items had been made. This reordering is dictated uniquely by the need to recognize and identify the frames (probably well known to the deceased collector, but not to contemporary users). Thus, the purpose of our work is to increase the usefulness of the collection for the final recognition of all its elements.

The reordering process

As a first step in the process of our archival work, the frames were allocated to new photographic film archival sheets. Following the original order (or disorder) all frames were digitized. Each digital image was given a sequential number which respected the original disposition. Afterwards, by checking and confronting the digital images and the real frames, new groups of material presumably originating from the same films were obtained. A new provisional identification code was then assigned to them. The frames and the respective digitized images were newly regrouped, still maintaining the previous identification code (the original disposition) in the database. During the constitution of these new provisional groups of similar frames we did not follow one single strategy but chose different distinctive approaches.

At first, the adjacent frames were grouped. They presented similar textual and meta-textual characteristics, e.g., in respect to the image content – identical scenographic and architectural elements and/or identical characters – or to the physical peculiarities of the film base – identical colorations, interline, edge marks and edge codes, similar image density, perforations and types of damage and deterioration. This mode of operation also led us to add frames to these groups which were non-adjacent in the original disposition, but which were reasonably related to the same artwork. In subsequent cases groups related to an actor were also formed (for instance Max Linder or Robinet). The final distinguishing method consisted in grouping frames originated by the same production company (Messter, Deutsche Bioscope, Pathé, Eclair, Ambrosio, etc.), and, if possible, from the same year or period, identified by confronting the edge marks to the official FIAF publications³. Finally, some groups were obtained by observing the coloration techniques (stencil, tinted or toned, color groups, etc.).

Subsequently, through confrontation with extra-filmic materials (the Filmmuseum photo collection, magazines, library, censorship visas, etc.) confirmations of the validity of the newly formed groups and correspondence to the available or supposed titles were found.

3 Harold G. Brown, *Film Identification by Examination of Film Copies*, FIAF congress, Berlin, DDR., June 1967, National Film Archive, London, 1967; Harold G. Brown, *Physical Characteristics of Early Films as Aids to Identification*, FIAF, Bruxelles, 1990.

The “editing”

When observing the frames in detail, in several cases one is immediately struck by the peculiarity of the cutting profile: only a part of the frames has been cut out, removing a part of the image. Many of them present cuts which correspond to the interline. This accuracy implies and demonstrates experience, calm and dedication, respect for the work of the others, awareness of the value of the stolen material and attention in the construction of the collection – the passion and care of a person who knows he is taking from others to create something new. A large amount of frames, however, shows an imperfect cut. This curved cut is the distinctive mark of a personality and of a necessity. Our collector cuts with scissors and not with a film cutter and maybe not even on an editing table (they were not invented yet). He keeps the film in his hands when he accomplishes a definitive and unique act. We are talking about an artist of the scissors, a surgeon, someone who works in the same situation as an acrobat, balancing on the rope of a film running in the projection booth, maybe while the spectators are complaining about a break in the projection. He steals and spends a few seconds to collect a pearl which attracts his eye. He acts in the modern spirit of the performance and with his gesture gives uniqueness and authorial quality to what before was just part of a homogeneous group. He is not a historian, but an amateur who pursues his art in the works of others. He does not cut two contiguous frames to save the integrity of the edge marks, or in correspondence with a bad splice. His gesture, even if unintentional, produces a new phenomenon, reflective of a precise personality, of a desire. Even if the same frame was found in another collection, the cut would be different, so the different shape of the frames will be the thing that distinguishes them. Attempting a definition of these frames, we would propose the term “pending moments”; between two instants, a sort of *Ti con Zero*⁴ of cinema. This Bergsonian suspension of the infinite possibilities generates the narrative escamotage for our collector and the primordial fascination for those who see them. Even the critical judgment of the spectator is pending, prevented by the enormous amount of possible pasts and futures which the image implies, and by the lack of narrative texture. So each image becomes a perfect instant which forbids every kind of analysis but in the perspective of a universal and aesthetic insight. They become true artifacts, autographs permeated with the aura of their own time and with the personality of their creator. The act of cutting a frame from one of the numerous film prints in distribution implies the separation from a more or less homogeneous group, a selection, always determined by precise and personal tastes. Sometimes the gesture is triggered by contingent situations (the film breaks at a certain point), but even in this case intentionality is always present. We are, thus, undoubtedly facing authorial choices.

4 Italo Calvino, *Ti con Zero*, Einaudi, Torino, 1977.

Cutting was also in the *esprit du temps*. During those years, in fact, the technique of *collage* was becoming popular in the figurative arts, as, for example, in the artworks of Braque and Picasso. Moreover, the invention of cinema is contemporaneous with the birth of *clipping* at an industrial level, the activity of journalistic excerption dedicated to the users which subscribed to receive monthly what the public press published about a certain topic⁵. Thus, the cut was fashionable during the *Belle Époque*. This activity also had the purpose of giving order to the amount of published information. A few decades later, Aby Warburg used a technique comparable to that of *collage* with his *Mnemosyne Atlas* in order to find archetypes and lines of narrative development within art history.

Through his activity of cutting and modular editing, our collector creates a *unicum*, an artistic performance which, although purely amateur, uses a very precise kind of narrative-visual montage, well known and tested in different environments, and undoubtedly peculiar to this historical period. He produces a real *cabinet d'amateur*⁶, a collection of images exposed for a selected public (of friends, acquaintances or amateurs), which is one of the prototypes of the museum in the modern sense. The creation of a narrative path, generated by means of different editing techniques, is the real authorial mark of this collection. Each frame assumes a unique and original value and receives a precise signification, determined by the sequential succession of the presentation.

A frame is not just a fragment, but a “rudero” of an overall non re-constructible work⁷. In this sense the analogy with the archaeological concept of *lapidarium* is evident, since the frame, being part of a filmic artwork, and preserves part of its characteristics. Its quality of testimony derives from the fact that it was excerpted from homogeneity. It is also necessary to remark that, like all testimonies, it is a fact or an artifact. Here we could give the first differentiation of frame typologies: if it comes from a preserved existing film, it will have determined characteristics, if it comes from a lost film, it will have others. In the first case the frame testifies to peculiar characteristics of the print it is excerpted from, which will not necessarily correspond to the physical characteristics of the print preserved in a film archive (for instance, a surviving black and white film for which a frame exists that testifies to a colored version⁸). In the second case, the frame’s testimony will become fundamental and unique, in one sense representative of the print (or version), but also and at the same time of the entire artwork. In case the film is lost, the frame

5 Anke te Heesen, *Der Zeitungsausschnitt. Ein Papierobjekt der Moderne*, Fischer, Frankfurt am Main, 2006.

6 Victor Stoichita, *L'invenzione del quadro*, Il Saggiatore, 2004.

7 Cesare Brandi, *Teoria del Restauro*, Einaudi, Torino, 1977, p. 32: “[...] rudero, il residuo d'un monumento storico o artistico, che non può rimanere che quello che è, onde il restauro altro non può consistere che nella sua conservazione con i procedimenti tecnici che esige. La legittimità della conservazione del rudero sta dunque nel giudizio storico che se ne dà, come testimonianza mutila ma ancora riconoscibile di un'opera e di un evento umano”. “[...] *rudero*, the residuum of a historical or artistic monument which cannot remain what it is. Then restoration can consist only in its preservation with the required technical procedures. The legitimacy of the preservation of the *rudero* resides in the historical judgement given to it, as a partial, but still recognizable testimony of an artwork or a human event” (translated by the authors).

8 Danish Film Institute DVD: *Himmelskibet and Verdens Undergang*, 2006. This DVD presents two restorations of b/w versions of films which our collection indicates as colored.

thus represents the maximum level of testimony and trust about the image information. This character of uniqueness is related to a notorious problem, well known by all historians, which could be defined as “the impossibility to control the sources”: A unique source which speaks about a determined fact that cannot be checked must be viewed with extreme caution. A frame from a lost film, although being the strongest available testimony, does not speak about the film, but about the version it originates from. The only testimony, thus, offers excellent evidence, but also a partial, non-verifiable one, from which precipitous and unique consequences should not be drawn. Even more important is the fact – and in this the frame acts as a film – that, as an unidentified film, it is a “reperto”, an exhibit denoting a part of a whole, but also a new independent identity and, thus, it is always lost⁹. The research and the identification of the frames in this collection is connected not so much to the problem of ordering this specific collection, but to the overall question of identifying films and reconstructing their peculiar characteristics.

The identification methodology

Prior to giving some methodological statements, we have to premise that whoever finds himself in the situation of having to analyze documents of any kind must provide the possibility to check the sources, methods and stages adopted in his work of historical research, for intellectual honesty and for respecting future researchers and possible critics. What remains for future generations is only trust in people and institutions, which is insufficient for the evaluation and the development of a historical work. It is, thus, necessary to indicate for every frame or recognized group of frames the bibliographic sources and references according to which they have been identified. In case the identification happens via iconographic sources, it is preferable to provide a reproduction of the frame and indicate its provenance. These are procedures also institutionalized in the philology of literature and the figurative arts. Unluckily, the same is not yet true in the field of cinematographic philology. Besides, each activity of reordering similar collections must, prior to the beginning, face the aims and the personality of the collector. Each collection is inseparable from its creator and must be presented with due respect to his/her intentions. It is desirable, therefore, to pose the question: “Who was and what were the aims of the collector?” This work of authorial analysis must be based on the available sources (name, activity, correspondence, period of activities, etc.), or must be argued from the structure and the content of the collection itself (disposition,

9 Cesare Brandi, *Teoria del Restauro*, Einaudi, Torino, 1977, p.16: “[...] l'opera d'arte, non constatando di parti, se fisicamente frantumata, dovrà continuare a sussistere potenzialmente come un tutto, in ciascuno dei suoi frammenti e questa potenzialità sarà esigibile in una proposizione direttamente connessa alla traccia formale superstite, in ogni frammento, alla disgregazione della materia”. “[...] the art work not made of parts, if physically fragmented, will have to continue to exist potentially like a whole, in each of its fragments, and this potentiality will be requested in a proposition directly connected to the surviving formal trace, in each fragment; to physical destruction” (translated by the authors).

indications, selection, cataloguing, cutting methods, etc.).

The necessity for creating new descriptors and groups of frames, homogeneous on the basis of physical characteristics, was also required in the case of the Schlemmer Frame Collection, given its particularly “chaotic” condition. Other collections do not necessarily present similar problems. In a similar case, however, it appears necessary to elaborate a working system to generate descriptors for homogeneous groups. The most useful approach, in our opinion, is phenomenological, since it is based on a perceptive confrontation between different frames. A predetermined list relative to iconographic characteristics does not exist yet (although digital means could constitute a precious resource in the future). Densitometric parameters of the image, tone of the coloration, systems for the physiognomic recognition of faces and backgrounds, measuring the interline and of the perforations (practices sometimes used in the field of figurative arts), if actually developed, could become privileged instruments in the future for the elaboration of similar examples in the cinematographic field. However, the imperfect human eye is the only instrument we can trust for similar groups. An optical microscope and technical experts would have made our job easier, via the detailed (non-invasive) analysis of the chemical composition of the emulsions and of the colorations on the frame.

On the basis of our experience, we can affirm that the synopsis, descriptions and summaries of film plots, contained in the press and in cinema listings of the period are not of great help in identifying a frame. They can help if typological figures appear in the plot, for example a prisoner or a policeman, characters which are recognizable in a series of frames. However, in the absence of a detailed description of the above mentioned characters, the indication remains hypothetical. At most, it is possible to assert that a frame *could* pertain to a certain film. Only in one case the summaries and synopsis can give admissible results: when an actor has also been identified. A frame which shows Max Linder handling a chicken and its eggs can, with high probability, belong to one film, *Max Illusioniste* (France, Max Linder, 1914)¹⁰. The iconographic attribution is fundamental. It starts always within the archive and then moves to other institutions. Obviously, it is not possible to require colleagues, always overwhelmed by daily necessities, to inspect thousands of unidentified frames. It is necessary, thus, to send groups of frames organized per nationality or subject, in order to obtain answers from the researcher active in the field of that precise provenance or competence.

For the authors, being responsible for the project at hand, the purpose in cataloguing, identifying and reorganizing the collection has primarily been its publication, in order to make this heritage accessible for research purposes. Connected to the publication of the Schlemmer Frame Collection is the proposal for a general methodology that could be discussed, modified and used

10 Henri Bousquet, *Catalogue Pathé des Années 1896 à 1914, vol. 1912, 1913, 1914*, p. 740: “Émule Robert Houdin, le célèbre Max veut faire de la prestidigitation. Il tient sous le charme son public, fait éclore, de l’œuf que la poule vient de pondre, une couvée de poussins, puis les fait rentrer dans l’œuf et l’œuf dans le ventre de la mère poule.[...]”

by other experts of this field in similar cases.

This collection could certainly be considered as a database of information about coloration, versions and characteristics of the films it contains. As fundamental that is the use that can be made of it in the educational field, for the richness and variety of edge marks, coloration techniques, etc. It could be compared to a (partial and incomplete) color sample book, like those published by Pathé or Cines. Last but not least, the collection of images of numerous actors and actresses, which could enrich the materials used for recognizing faces and films, is of great importance.

If analyzed historically and in depth, this and other frame collections could ultimately be considered an important resource for film restorers. Moreover, they could contribute to the debate on multiple versions, which has been at the center of the archival debate for many years now.

When most frames will have been identified, the most useful system for public presentation may not be a presentation in historical or chronological order or by title, but rather following authorial, aesthetic, casual and narrative values, so that this a way, at least from a distance, it could resemble the intentions and the use that the author of the collection preferred and pursued. To order a similar collection without the final aim of presenting it would be a violation of its author. It would mean to deprive it of its primary and original function and to make its author, its historical uniqueness and artistic value superfluous. In trying to avoid such a historical absurdity, we have imposed on ourselves the aim of making this collection accessible. This desire, obviously, will not be realized with the same optical-mechanic instruments used by our collector (the home-made magic lantern), for evident safety reasons. Although digital technology permits to emulate what time made obsolete or too fragile, we know that colors, brightness, contrast and general quality of these images will always be hardly reproducible, maybe lost forever.