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A Sound Selection

Film Curatorship, Canonization, and a Film Program

I am aware that the sort of wordplay represented by the title of this two-part program only works in English. Nevertheless, I would like to hope that even for non-English readers more than one wave of meaning will spill back and forth between the title and the films I have selected. The act of looking at and listening to these works will be the sounding board for what I have in mind.

For one thing, the title not only relates to the films I have chosen, but also to the mission I've been given as a participant in this year's Film Mutations festival: to contribute in a more general manner to a discussion about the ethics, aesthetics and politics of (film) curatorship.

Considering how rarely curators have to justify or legitimate their choices (compared to other professions such as doctors, judges, politicians – or artists), one might ask by which standards a *sound selection* should be measured. To list only a few equivalents for the adjective *sound*: When is a selection of films ever "proper" or "solid" or "healthy" or "substantiated" or, of all things, "curative"? As far as I'm concerned, taking language seriously (including, of course, its playful uses) is the first step towards taking film and film curatorship seriously as well (including their playful uses). I have therefore tried to make a solid, substantiated and curative selection.

One of several issues in the (still relatively small) field of film curatorial studies is the question of the *combined program* – that "feature-length" entity which consists of several "short" films. Sometimes it seems as if this were almost the *only* issue worth discussing, because on the surface it adheres most tightly to the model of the art exhibition as practiced by art curators: Different works are brought into close vicinity to each other and can easily be perceived and discussed as parts of a visible whole (the curator's "argument", his/her interpretation of a topic). One needs to replace *spatial* with *temporal* vicinity, of course, but that's another story. Whenever "exemplary cases" of film curatorship are being debated or a curator is asked to show his/her "method" or approach, the combined program of shorts is often the chosen format. My own selections for Film Mutations 2008 were a case in point, and the program at hand is also partly indebted to it. This format has a strong *performative* aspect; it allows the curator to quickly demonstrate an argument and – even though the time is limited – to bring a

number of “rare”, “surprising”, “unknown” works to the table (thereby proving his/her “personality” and prowess in navigating uncharted terrain). As a kind of performance, it is also a “festival-friendly” format; and it is “audience-friendly” insofar as the viewer can scan and evaluate the range of the selected works in less than two hours, whereas it takes many evenings, weeks or months even, to properly follow a real program of films (one that can honestly be compared to an art museum exhibition).

I am making this distinction for polemical reasons, and I certainly don’t want to dismiss the “feature-length program of shorts” as a lesser or invalid approach. As a performance, it obviously has very real qualities and effects, but I do want to imply that there is also something unreal about it. In the larger scheme of things, film curatorship is not so much a question of putting this or that short before or after one another, but of developing (or, rather, making contributions towards developing) three basic qualities which have far-reaching consequences. For lack of time and space, I will just briefly name them here; hopefully the discussions at the festival will allow us to expand a little further on these “real world” issues.

1. Film curatorship as the development of a *long-term program*, month by month, year after year, until it can be understood as *programmatic*, as an *agenda*, as a *set of objectives*.
2. Film curatorship as the physical assembly and “curative” treatment of works (artifacts) with the aim of *shaping, preserving and interpreting a collection* as the basis for long-term programs/agendas. With a certain shift in meaning, this quality or definition can be applied even if there is no institutional collection at hand, and even if it proves impossible to create one: in such cases, it could mean the *knowledge of, the research into, and the caring about existing collections elsewhere* (= the concrete places and contexts in which individual artifacts or groups of films are being held and preserved).
3. Film curatorship as the activity of creating (or preparing the ground for) a *film culture and film politics* that are larger than any individual film program or film institution. This needs to be a constant activity, it has no “finish line”, no matter how “healthy” or “hopeless” the situation appears to be. There is also something of a paradox here: In the absence of film culture & politics, the individual performative or long-term program has no real space (I often feel wounded, misunderstood, irrelevant when I become aware of this); vice versa, the continuous creation of individual or long-term programs will be the only way to bring about a film culture & politics (I often feel strong, exhilarated, enthusiastic when I become aware of this); and thirdly, the existence of a film culture & politics does not per se mean one should be happy with it – as with each individual program, it is the *specific* objectives and realities of any film cultural politics that need to be addressed (I am often led to believe that I am working in a strong film culture structured by healthy film politics, but in most cases it is only officially so). This whole paradox – or dialectic – also needs to be sounded for other, more complex results. Here are a few

English, German and French equivalents for that verb: *to sound* is to *fathom*, to *plumb* something / etwas *ausloten*, *sondieren* / *sonder*, *examiner*, *explorer* quelque chose.

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It doesn't take a long and detailed education in film history to know that **Jean Vigo** (1905-1934) and **Dziga Vertov** (1896-1954) represent two of the few indispensable "moments" or, rather, "energies" that this medium has brought forth. On the other hand, since almost nothing can be taken for granted anymore in our traditional institutions of culture and education, there may still be a sense of discovery – and hopefully even excitement – among some viewers when encountering these works for the first time (or for the first time in 35mm projections). In the case of Vertov, the term "works" is a massive overstatement: In this program, you will only see *one* excerpt from *one* of his many important films. In the case of Vigo, you will see 50 percent of his output: two works from a total of four which he created between 1929 and his death in 1934. Vigo is the best-known representative (in cinema) of the "Short Career" – a category that has long been part of cinephile myth-making but which has recently gained a more legitimate air through some art world projects, research activities and exhibitions that are attuned to the specific character of the artistic career "cut short" (cut short by design, because the artist followed a different path, or because of the artist's death and other external reasons). On the face of it, Vertov's career was much longer than Vigo's, but considering the limited period in which his artistic intentions and main talents were somewhat in tune with the surrounding political and production framework (1922-1934 at the most), we can surely speak of a career cut short as well.

Gerhard Benedikt Friedl (1967-2009) is an exemplary case of the "Short Career" in contemporary cinema. I actually think he is *the* exemplary case (and not just of the short career phenomenon). Since he is still not very well known outside of Germany and Austria, his inclusion in this program also seemed like a sound and curative choice. In fact, the whole program has been conceived around him and his two major works of historical-materialist docufiction, *Knittelfeld* (1997) and *Did Wolff von Amerongen Commit Bankruptcy Crimes?* (2004), because I believe that their *potential* role in contemporary cinema can be compared to the *actual* role that Vertov's and Vigo's films played around 1930.

To the readers who have never heard of Gerhard Benedikt Friedl, this may appear as a preposterous statement. The "film situation" around 1930 and the one we experience today seem to have few shared characteristics, so how can we even begin to compare them so bluntly? While it was "obviously" possible in the relatively "limited" or "manageable"

conceptual framework of film culture around 1930 to recognize the achievements of Vertov and Vigo right away (that's how film historiography likes to think of it), it seems far from obvious how to recognize such figures today – and if we do recognize them, it seems they are always already mediated, bandied about, and celebrated at the major film festivals and in the international film magazines. The problem here, of course, is the “we” and the “international”, and the fact that “we” no longer seem to be able to relate the *actual* to the *potential*. We can no longer imagine a “we” of film culture that is just a small group of enthusiasts, scholars or cinephiles, and not a pressure group of international (or industrial) dimensions. We seem to have become incapable of imagining greatness that is not yet confirmed as such by the two or three accepted modes of reaching an international film cultural consensus (that's why, for instance, I cowardly felt the need to speak of Friedl's *potential* role compared to Vigo's and Vertov's *actual* one). And we seem to have forgotten that everything we accept as *actual* greatness now was once sheer *potential*, that it was probably most alive during that very moment, and that it was never obvious at all if it would become a widely shared and accepted case of greatness.

Let's imagine, then, that the inclusion of Vigo's and Vertov's works in this program is not only due to the childish impulse of wanting to say and show how unbelievably great they are. Let's imagine that they are sheer potential and not yet actual “classics”. For instance, let's think of Friedl's works as classics for a change and of Vigo's and Vertov's films as new and unknown forces striving to attain a similar level of greatness. Or let's look at the (political) sense of place in Vigo and Friedl, and at their spatial politics – how politics become form (in highly different, but similarly adamant ways). Let's try and compare them both to Vertov who, for a period, was not only *against* (the bourgeoisie and its old-fashioned dramatics; world capitalism and its attendant forms of entertainment; religion and other types of opium), but also *for* (communism; the new man; a new type of bio-aesthetic). Let's be clear that Vigo was also *for* many things (revolt, for one), and that it is much, much harder to deduce from Friedl's films what *he* was for. Let's also propose that the film cultural “we” around 1930 from which our notion of Vertov's and Vigo's greatness originally derives was maybe just a small group of cinephile enthusiasts, not a pressure group of international (or industrial) dimensions. This can be debated, of course, and a precise historiography of film culture would give us facts and arguments both for and against my proposal.

What can also be debated is my use (and the general usefulness) of the term “greatness” whose moment in the sun seems long past, at least in the humanities and in film studies. I think, however, that contemporary film curatorship would not be well served if, aside from its many scholarly and sometimes esoteric tendencies, the question of showing “great works” were no longer of interest. There should also be debate, even conflict (because it is a political issue), about the relation of *actual* and *potential* in film cultural work (assuming again that “we”

have begun to see such a relation). They should not be regarded as opposites, and neither of them should ever be assigned a fixed place. I think each serious curator and critic grapples with this issue which is close to a paradox:

To show, preserve and write about a "great work" which is not yet widely accepted as such is always a critical *and* an affirmative statement. It is critical towards the "status quo" and affirmative towards the "outsider" work which it proposes as a "candidate". It prompts the audience or readership to consider and co-realize the candidate's passage from *potential* to *actual*; it tries to lead the way for this passage – from prophetic beginnings ("you haven't heard of this, but...") to successful canonization and acceptance ("It has become obvious by now that this is an indispensable..."). Wanting others to share the high estimation of your candidate work and the pleasures it holds is only normal. Also, your own star may rise in tandem with that of your candidate (which is not necessarily a "careerist" thing, but a question of basic self-esteem). But there is also the ground from which your statement took its original force: your critical view of the "status quo", of what is commonly perceived as valid and *actual* ("classics", "widely accepted"). One would think that such a view should prevent the curator/critic from pushing or nudging the candidate towards the threshold of the *actual*. If the *actual* is the thing to oppose – the conservative, limiting, rotten domain of all the things and ideas that are currently "in effect" – why would we want our candidate to become part of it? Or do we think that the *actual* is not so bad after all, that it just needs to include more of our "high potentials" in order to turn out pretty OK?

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Sound is also a substantive: *noise, ring, chime, tone / der Laut, das Geräusch, der Schall, der Klang / le son, le bruit, le timbre, la consonance et la dissonance.*

The first seeds of this program were planted by a colleague of mine, Volker Pantenburg, who was a guest curator in Zagreb at last year's Film Mutations festival. When he wrote about Friedl shortly after the filmmaker's death, he arrived at a surprising and – in a good way – disturbing conclusion: that here is a modern-day filmmaker who, without any warning or hesitation, seems to have re-invented or re-imagined the medium of sound film completely, coherently and convincingly – a full 70 years after it first raised its head on a worldwide scale. I agree with Volker, and his comment made me think of Vigo and Vertov, whose short careers both consist of "late silent" and "early sound" films. It also made me think of *L'Age d'or* (1930) by Luis Buñuel which could have stood at the centre of a third program (of many more to come), together with *La Marche des machines* (1928) and *Autour de la fin du monde* (1930) by Eugène Deslaw who was born in Kiew, Ukraine, and died in Nice, France.

I think that beside the question of *potential* and *actual*, I have also always been interested in the relation between Exile and Golden Age. This is the fantasy: All my life, I have wanted to find out how to belong to both at once, and remain safe and sound all the same.

A SOUND SELECTION: PROGRAM 1

A propos de Nice 1929/30, Jean Vigo

35mm, b/w, silent, ca. 31 min at 20 fps

Knittelfeld 1997, Gerhard Benedikt Friedl

16mm, color, sound, 34 min

Zéro de conduite 1933, Jean Vigo

35mm, b/w, sound, 43 min

A SOUND SELECTION: PROGRAM 2

Entuziazm (Simfonija Donbassa) [REEL 1] 1930, Dziga Vertov

35mm, b/w, sound, Reel 1: ca. 22 min

Hat Wolff von Amerongen Konkursdelikte begangen? 2004, Gerhard Benedikt Friedl

35mm, color, sound, 73 min

Catalogue download: <http://www.filmskemutacije.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/filmske-mutacije-cetvrti-festival-nevidljivog-filma-katalog.pdf>