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Utopias of Film (Some Fragments)

Like the Cinémathèque de Toulouse, the Österreichisches Filmmuseum turns 50 this year. It was founded in February 1964 with the express aim to be an *actual museum* of film: a place where the exhibition of the *actual works of cinema* takes center stage (just like the exhibited paintings and sculptures do in a museum of art history). In order to achieve this, a museum needs to respect the unique mode of existence of film, the mode to which cinema owes its historical success – therefore, the central museum space needs to be a *film projection space*. This seemingly simple and very logical tenet is already one of the “utopias of film”, equally so in 2014 as it was in 1964 – and it is “utopian” only because so many other institutions (and discourses in society) seem to think that a museum of film can or should be something else.

In December of that same year, 1964, distressed by the lack of awareness (in Germany) of what the film medium had achieved in the past, Alexander Kluge wrote his essay *Die Utopie Film*: "If literature did not exist, and if instead of literature we had only the annual catalogues of publishers' new releases, no one would be able to imagine the utopia which is contained in the works of Melville, Balzac, Flaubert and Döblin; Joyce would be altogether unimaginable. When it comes to films, imagination finds nothing to lean on in history. The Utopia of film, or in other words, the idea that there could be something other than the unsatisfactory momentary present of cinema, has hitherto not been able to unfold. The promise that film history contains is still basically unknown."

The Austrian Film Museum was the first institution in the German-speaking world whose goal was to give a systematic, comprehensive, and historically reflective representation of the medium of film. Since that time, film museums as well as the overall expansion of film culture (in connection to new distribution channels, to festivals, etc.) have contributed to an improvement of the situation, at least in terms of quantity. But there has to be more doubt than ever whether "the promise that film history contains" (Kluge) is really being perceived.

Much remains inaccessible, and much exists only in a form devoid of context, shorn of essential elements and of its resistant temporality. This is why there is still a need to bring forth the little-known promise of film, and to do it in a way that keeps this promise redeemable – alive, usable, political in essence. (The current modes of fitting moving images into each and every domain of life and of aligning the “filmic” with the dominant temporal structures of society represent the opposite of film’s utopia – and also the opposite of the “heterotopic” qualities of cinema as described by Foucault.)

Beyond this basic premise, the utopia of film also resides in an understanding of cinema which allows its vastly different forms – and their vastly different kinds of intelligence and beauty – to co-exist in a productive manner. This notion doesn’t just measure cinema by the stick of longform narrative movies (as most cinephile discourses do, not to speak of the rhetoric employed by the film industry). If you truly engage with the various types of filmmaking – “feature film”, “documentary”, “experimental film”, “short film”, “home movie”, “newsreel”, “artists film”, “advertising film” etc. – it becomes apparent that such strict compartmentalization is only a means of keeping the transgressive potentials of film at bay. Anyone who

doesn't just want to copy the industrial "sales pitch" that has defined cinema from its very beginning, can easily arrive at such an understanding. Film was *not just* a new art form; film was *not just* a new type of capitalist consumption; film was *not just* a new sort of historical document; film was *not just* a new scientific tool to better penetrate the visible world: As a new cultural technology of the industrial age, it was and is all these things at once. And this legacy is still with us, in each and every great film that comes along (no matter if it attaches itself to only one of these functions). In order to truly pass on its legacy to the future, it will be necessary to keep this "impure genetic constitution" of cinema intact, just as it is necessary to keep the technological-aesthetical parameters (its "genetic code") intact by which the medium made its impression on the world.

Some further notions which bring us another step closer to the program at hand.

The utopia of film is the utopia of a reality which refuses to be staged (Comolli); but it is *equally* the utopia of an artifact which refuses to be mistaken for reality.

Forgive me for being an impolite guest, but there are utopias of film which are essentially unrelated to the mythical (and, by now, ossified and unproductive) notions of French cinephilia.

The utopia of film that I find in 1970s "Minor Cinemas" has been buried faster than that of any preceding era, which is why I have dedicated 4 of the 10 programs to works from this moment in time.

Each of the 32 films selected here can stand on its own feet with its individual qualities, both when seen from a "historical" perspective and from a contemporary point of view. But there are also connections between them. To experience (or enumerate) such connections is the "job" of those who watch the films.

Try to imagine a history of cinema which does not consist merely of easily packaged, shrink-wrapped "classics" which have long since established themselves on the market. Try instead to imagine this history as a continuing infection which is passed from film to film, and at the same time from cinema to society (and back). Imagine a history in which films affect the reality of life and the desires of people and are themselves affected by this reality and these desires. Engraved into cinema are cities, movement, work, war, liberty, fear, sexual desire, exploitation and rebellion, displacement, solidarity, visual pleasure and the delight in blasting what came before.