Alexander Horwath:
Persistence and Mimicry: The Digital Era and Film Collections

Author's Note:
The following text was presented as a lecture at the Cinémathèque francaise on 14 October 2011, in the framework of the symposium "Révolution numérique: et si le cinéma perdait la mémoire?", co-organized by the Cinémathèque française and the CNC.
As will become obvious for the reader, I have kept the lecture format intact (and the text itself unchanged, including the title). The constraints of time – as allocated by the symposium schedule – play a certain role here: Near the end of the writing process I realized that I would not be able to expand on some issues the way I had originally planned to; in turn, this allowed the lecture to allegorize one of its themes – the restricted time of film – in an unforeseen manner. A more important "format" aspect relates to Part 2 of my talk: the inclusion of a film programme at midpoint (if I remember correctly, it was one of only two or three lectures at the symposium that included any film projection, and it was the only one that included complete works of cinema). Obviously, the "essay format" can only hint at this aspect; for purposes of documentation, Part 2 of the text consists of a listing of the three works shown during the lecture at the Salle Henri Langlois.
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1.
If I had a diary of my working life in the field of film culture, 2011 would surely receive a special caption as the year when everything became *really* hectic. Although the "film/digital predicament" has been with us for quite some time now as a central topic of debate, the past 12 to 18 months have seen a definite and exponential rise in the amount of conferences, studies and questionnaires, strategy papers, political consultations, journalistic interest, and so on – a hustle and bustle of activities dedicated to the question of what the future will hold for our discipline. The preliminary title I was given for my contribution to this symposium had a similar thrust: "The future of a film collection in the digital era". And the related paragraph in the English introduction to the symposium asks questions such as this: "What *will become* of the cinematheques in this new order? How *will they be able to continue* carrying out their founding missions? Will all these archives be able to *keep pace with the race* for new technologies?" Such anxious "futurism" and hectic activity are typically signs of a memory crisis, something that art history and film history know very well, since they were each born of

such crises and have strongly responded to later instances of such crises. What surprises me about the response of film-collecting institutions to this current moment is, therefore, not its intensity (which is somewhat understandable) but its relative uniformity: Especially in Europe, this discourse is often perfectly aligned with the precepts, terms, and so-called needs of the bureaucratic state and the cultural industries. This applies both to the fearful version of the discourse, which draws a dystopian picture of the incredible losses that we are about to face in our heritage, and to its progressivist variant, which envisions a new Renaissance via the universal medium and its applications. At the moment, my gut reaction to all this tends to take the shape of one single word: Relax!

However, gut reactions are never enough. And my call for relaxation should not be misconstrued as an invitation to lean back and do nothing. Quite the opposite: a lot can and must be done. But when it comes to the choice of *what to do exactly* in relation to film collections and the digital era, the differences begin. These differences are strongly tied to the *different models, names, and histories* of film-collecting institutions, which are usually put under the simple umbrella of "film archives". In conjunction with these different institutional models, there are also *political* differences concerning the aims, practices, and social functions of film archives, museums, and cinematheques. And even the question of *what it actually is* that these institutions collect, preserve, and present is subject to different interpretations. I am highlighting these various types of differences for two reasons: firstly, in order to raise some scepticism towards any uniform discourse in our field; and secondly, to make clear that the "position" I am offering here is very much related to a specific institutional model that I represent, to a specific politics that I find necessary, and to a specific notion of what it is that we collect, preserve, and present. There are obviously other ways of looking at this, and, like mine, they are all socially and culturally constructed. There is no "natural flow of things" in culture and society, and an awareness of this fact as well as an acknowledgment of the concrete choices we make under the guise of so-called political and economic imperatives would certainly improve the credibility of the debate.

Before I go into detail, I will offer two very basic assumptions that can probably be shared by a majority of heritage institutions, no matter what their other differences are. Assumption Number 1: There is a common interest in preserving human culture not only as an abstraction, as a *musée imaginaire*, but in such a way that its manifold historical forms can be fully *grasped* and *activated* a few hundred years from now. For this to happen, they need to persist both as *artefacts* _and_ as *practices*, especially in cases like film, where the form is not represented by an object but by a performance. Assumption Number 2: The various results of *digital culture* are not seen as external to human culture, nor as its enemy. Since they are not external, I expect heritage institutions to preserve these digital forms so that they can also persist as artefacts and practices, as functioning systems in their own right. And to give you an example of why digital culture is not seen as an enemy, I will briefly look at our own experiences as film-

collecting institutions. More precisely, I will look at the humble history of digital culture at the Austrian Film Museum. The dates will vary in other institutions, but I'm sure there is a roughly similar history. In 1986 the Film Museum began using a digital database to administer its catalogue of films and film literature. In the mid-1990s it began to offer DigiBeta transfers of film materials in order to service requests from broadcasters. In 1997 the Museum began to scan items from its film stills collection both for internal and external use, and in 1998 it launched a website to inform the online community about its activities. In 2002 we put the catalogue of the library holdings online. We also began to selectively collect born-digital works, and started a small-scale service for researchers and students to consult the growing study collection of DVDs. In 2003 we began to screen born-digital media, in SD formats such as DigiBeta and later also in HD formats and files. In 2005 we began to release our own DVDs, with the aim of providing a catalogue-type access medium for selected items in the collection. In 2006, in partnership with two other film cultural institutions, we began to set up a Digital Film Restoration facility for archival and museum purposes. In order not to bore you, I will stop here, and only add that in 2009 the Museum created its first DCP to enable one of the works in the collection to be screened at a music festival, and that by 2013 we want to be able to provide DCI-standard projection of works that were created for such a type of presentation.

So we are looking at a quarter-century of interaction between a small film-collecting institution and digital culture. In comparison with other such institutions, some of these dates may appear as pretty "late", others as relatively "early". But this is not my point. My point is that, even though this institution included digital tools in its daily archival work because they proved useful, even though it included digital formats in its information and education work because they allowed the Museum to bring its concerns to new media communities, and even though it included digital works in its programmes because some filmmakers had turned to this form of expression, the basic mission and concerns of the institution did not suffer the least bit during this quarter-century. Not once did it fall under the delusion of being anything but a museum that represents film – and, therefore, represents films as films. Since we are speaking about a medium that will have had a major presence and far-reaching influence in human culture for a period of at least 120 years, there should be no doubt about the cultural and political legitimacy of such a mission. And just as film originally unfolded in a complex process of media hybridization, media mimicry, or remediation, and just as, to this very day, film itself has participated in the unfolding of other media through similar remediations, a museum of film will also try to represent these folds and histories – by giving time and space to anything from the chronophotographic works of Étienne-Jules Marey and Magic Lantern shows, to Television productions and Expanded Cinema performances, to what James Benning now calls his "HD films" or whatever the industrial cinema system will chose to make public as a DCP only.

This is another way of saying that a film museum, like any other serious-minded museum, has no reason to obsess about the future or give in to the trembling fear that its collections will

suddenly lose their legitimacy and viability in the face of the new digital paradigm. I suggest that for a museum it is quite enough to be alert and act responsibly in the present – which includes acting responsibly towards the artefacts and practices of the past *as well as* those of the present. And for this I suggest a two-fold approach: to be pragmatic enough in one's close observation of current developments and at the same time confident enough to rely on certain kinds of knowledge that are themselves based on centuries of archival and museum experience. A third element ties these two approaches together, and this is the question of the social functions of a film museum and the type of social space it can be.

Quite belatedly, I must add a parenthesis here, an explanation: When I say "film museum", I am not referring to exhibition spaces which relate the history of film via models and technical apparatus, paper and textile objects, video clips on monitors or flat screens, and so on – spaces like the *Musée du Cinéma* in this very building. Instead, I am referring to institutions that define *this* space, the cinema auditorium, as the actual museum space. This is the space where film itself can appear – the work that is *not an object* but an event in time. It is the space where a museum of film can turn its film collection into actual films – into projections which are also performances between humans and technology. This means that we do not really collect film reels as museum objects; we collect film reels and technology which represent the *potential* for museum performances. End of parenthesis.

So far, I have not really addressed what goes through our heads all the time during this and other, similar conferences. Why am I avoiding such obvious words as "obsolete" or "transition", meaning the widespread rhetoric that film is falling into obsolescence at this very moment, and that we are now witnessing the transition of analog to digital in all things, including cultural heritage? I have avoided those words because to speak that way is to adopt a loaded discourse from the realm of commerce, industry, and consumer marketing, and carry it over unquestioningly into all other realms of life, including politics, education, art, history, and archival or museum work. I am not trying to argue that such things are not happening in the commercial arena and in large parts of personal filmmaking and exhibition. But I *am* arguing that this is no reason to obliterate alternative readings of the situation and alternative practices that exist elsewhere, the largest of these "elsewheres" being the obvious presence of a full 120-year history – the material memory and reality of all films projected until October 14, 2011.

I wholeheartedly welcome the unfolding of film's memory and reality into multiple other media platforms which create not only new spaces of consumption and commerce but also new types of memory, engagement, and intellectual exchange. This has happened with Television and VHS before, so it is definitely not a new phenomenon as such. Already in the late 1970s and 80s, for instance, film collecting in non-film formats spread to millions of private homes (where it had already existed – in the shape of small-gauge film formats – since the 1920s). The Internet is, of course, not just a form of access, but also a new type of public archive for film,

and therefore, to use Michel Foucault's expression, a new "system that governs the appearance of statements". As Hal Foster has shown, an archive is never affirmative or critical *per se*; but since it structures the terms of discourse, it also limits what can and cannot be articulated at a given time and place.[i] Which is why I am convinced that another mode of collecting and engaging with film, one that is less in thrall of the currently governing discourse, remains equally necessary. This mode, which I suggest to call the film museum mode, is not free of its very own limitations, but it is the complementary ground for any attempt at historicity and at imagining alternative forms of experience – alternative to whatever is hegemonic at any moment. According to Rosalind Krauss and Julia Chang, when a form falls into obsolescence, it also re-emerges as an evocation of the utopian ideals that the form held in promise at its advent. It is freed from the technological cell we're in – from its function as a device to spur consumption. Beyond its potentially melancholic evocations, it can be utilized to demonstrate a site of resistance.[ii]

Now, please get ready for our programme of films. It will last for roughly 4 minutes.

2.

1/48″ (2008, Jorge Lorenzo Flores Garza)
35mm, colour, sound, 1 frame (1/48″)

Recreation (1956, Robert Breer)
16mm, colour, sound, 2 minutes

Schwechater (1958, Peter Kubelka)
35mm, b/w & colour, sound, 1 minute

3.
The fact that analog film is now leaving the main stage of the culture industry helps it achieve more clearly defined contours. It helps film become more specifically recognizable in all its unknown potentials, aesthetics, and histories. The developments in personal filmmaking and in the visual art world have made this very obvious over the past two decades. But we also need to consider the notions of film heritage that exist today. Therefore, I have to speak about the

industrial and non-industrial viewpoints which shape the field of film-collecting institutions to this very day. I believe that the industrial perspective shapes the field a bit more today than it did at the beginning of the film archive movement. It includes that relatively recent trend in European cultural administration for which, in lieu of a better word, I have invented a French

neologism. The word is "animateurisme culturel" – and I think of a political Club Med when I use it, not of animated films.

The industrial viewpoint in museums and archives would generally be the one that identifies with or mimics the socially dominant notion of film. – It goes something like this: Film is a relatively expensive product of the culture industry. It is good for the economy, meaning the job market and consumer spending, and it supports national identity. It reflects our world in a figurative, narrative, and directly accessible manner, and should definitely play a stronger role in education. It can sometimes really "click with critics and audiences" and will, in that case, receive a higher cultural standing. It can sometimes be "art", and is often "just entertainment". It lasts between 80 and 180 minutes, and is meant to be viewed on an evening out about town or cuddling at home with your loved ones. It must be deposited in the national archive in due time after its primary exploitation is over, so that the archive can keep the memory of all the above for future generations. And since this cinema and its mode of exploitation are going digital really fast in 2011, we need to be ready when it arrives, hopefully by 2012. Time is of the essence. And our motto is this: "The technologies of archival preservation and presentation will have to change so that our concept of film can remain the same."

The non-industrial viewpoint in archives would see the above as only one of many applications of the film medium, knowing full well that this is a minority position in our society, but persisting against all odds. – It goes something like this: Film is a tool of perception and of measuring movement in time and space. It is a form of thought, separate from ways of thinking in language, in still images, or in software, but often connected to them. Film is of use in the natural sciences, including medicine, and in the work of ethnographers, sociologists, and all sorts of historians. It can be narrative and figurative, or not, depending on its use. It is not a window but a construct, like all other artefacts in human history. It can belong to the peep-show as in Edison's case, to the jukebox as in the case of Scopitones, or to the mobile phone system, and not only to the cinema system. It plays a central role for the military and for the economy, meaning as an instrument of surveillance, rationalization, or propaganda. It can be made by a single person, as a work belonging to the plastic arts, or as a diary or family album. Its length ranges from one frame to eternity, as in some conceptual films. Its audience is extremely varied and often unquantifiable, and its value doesn't depend on some received cultural standing, which is mostly zero. Instead, its value depends on the concrete use that is made of it at a given time, in a given context. Films are being made all the time, and a production budget is not a requirement. They are rarely deposited in the national archive or

anywhere else, so it is the archive's job to seek them out, select them, and create contexts for them. Their memorial functions as well as their aesthetic and social potentials are vast, but not always clear to us, so we keep them for future generations. And as some of these kinds of film

went digital in 1982 or 1994 or 2006, we already started to collect and preserve their succeeding digital forms a long time ago. Time is on our side. And our motto is this: "The dominant concepts of film won't change just because their attendant technology changes. But old and new technology should always be used to trigger conceptual change."

It is quite obvious that no publicly funded archive, cinematheque, or film museum on earth represents either of these two viewpoints in a pure state. At least on some level, both viewpoints will exist in every film-collecting institution. I believe they are constantly at odds with each other. Let me give you two examples of how this struggle typically works out:

Even though some of us might find the non-industrial viewpoint more interesting, more honest, and more adequate to our curatorial mission, we also want to be accepted in the wider cultural sphere and sometimes participate in a cocktail-party conversation without seeming too obstinate, esoteric, or weird. So maybe we will soon work on that great and almost forgotten experimental film from the 1980s in a shiny new Digital Restoration Lab – and be proud of having joined the non-industrial with the industrial viewpoint.

And even those of us at the cocktail party who see their work and their institutions as parts of the cinema industry chain, and who are happy to share the same memories and concepts of film with the so-called rest of the world, even we will sometimes look beyond those wonderfully photo-shopped *Journeys to the Moon* for 30 bucks-per-frame, and beyond the familiar milky way of digitally re-mastered cinephilia. In such moments, we will admit that there are many further galaxies to explore in our engagement with the *patrimoine*. So maybe we'll soon dedicate a lot of web-space to those thousands of orphan works, amateur films, and state-sponsored propaganda shorts that have been sitting in our archive so silently – and be proud of having joined the industrial with the non-industrial viewpoint.

End of irony. And, sadly or happily, also nearly the end of my talk. No more time to close in on the various meanings of mimicry, persistence, and "animateurisme", or to mention those new purists in our field who represent the illustrious view that "digital film is pure content".

No more time to go into manifesto mode, and tell you that from now on – instead of spending billions for digitization projects that primarily serve the industry – public cultural budgets and political energies need to be activated in order to ensure the continued production of film stocks and printing and projection machinery as well as the perpetuation of all related professions and systems of training. All this mainly for museum and heritage purposes, so that

film, like many other historically influential art practices, can be preserved and kept visible *as such* and not only as a digital version of itself. This is an art museum position, of course, but I

think it should be strongly pondered by film-collecting institutions. At the same time – if I had more of it – I would argue that as soon as we've reached this art museum model, we need to get *beyond* it, because film transcends the notions of ownership and cult value which still persist in the art museum. And I would mention the Swedish Film Institute, which should be truly congratulated, because as far as I know they were the first to bring a fully functioning commercial film lab into the public fold by purchasing the necessary equipment and enabling some of the highly specialized staff to continue their work under the new umbrella. And the Institute did so *before* starting to build their preservation facility for Digital Cinema. I would then go on and suggest that the term "laboratory" is actually a great metaphor in the wider sense of what film museums and participatory archives may strive to become. And I would have expressed my hope that in such a laboratory in the digital era, a film museum can produce new kinds of "friction" between its collections, its audiences, and the sounds and images of today, making those things and relations strange and beautiful, rather than cute and familiar (so they can go with the flow and fit the current conventions of how a moving image should look and sound).

And finally, I would have loved to return to the films I showed you, to their idea of leisure and recreation, and to the general feeling in our discipline that "the clock is ticking". I would have mentioned *The Clock* by Christian Marclay, a rich 24-hour work of non-cinema (but about cinema) which some of you may have seen at the Venice Biennale this summer and which may never be preserved by a film archive. I would have said that to *really preserve* film and its unique kind of historicity in the era of "losslessness" and "immemory", museums also need to preserve *a way of accessing film* that corresponds to its temporal mode of transience and continuous loss. To put it somewhat melodramatically: An understanding of film, of its era, and of the concepts of history that were held by this era, can persist as long as the individual film may still be viewed in its restricted duration and its distinct clocking of time by images. The experience of a film's length of time and of its irrevocable passing during that time is a precondition for the "time of film" to be remembered at all.

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[i] Hal Foster, "Archives of Modern Art", *October* no. 99, Winter 2002, pp. 81-95.

[ii] Julia Chang, "Analog Signal", http://www.columbia.edu/~sf2220/Thing/web-content/Pages/analogsignal.html (accessed 9 October 2011).