

What is Cinema? Selection, Screening, Experience

“What is cinema?” André Bazin’s famous question targets the theory and history of film. But it also asks about the institutions that contour and shape the contexts for film production and distribution as well as forms of presentation and film experience. Taking this historical question as a starting point, the Seventeenth International Bremen Film Conference will try to explore how cinema is conceived in contemporary life.

For a long time, the cinema held a privileged status as a site for screening films. Here, the magic of film and the aesthetic experience of the spectators can develop. Film first encounters the audience after a long period of preparation (planning, shooting, financing, and marketing). The first encounter between a film and the audience is a ritual that continues today, staged by nationwide film starts. Cinemas provide the optimal technical conditions for film viewing. At the same time, the interplay of expectations and ritual practice in this site is charged with an aura that is associated with the cinema itself in the spectator’s memory. A special form of this ritualized first encounter is the complex system of film festivals.

While the first encounter between film and audience is generally controlled by film production and distribution, alternative forms of film screening have also taken shape over the course of the cinema’s history. In the 1930s, cinémathèques were founded by film lovers who were interested in seeing films again. In the 1950s, independent commercial cinemas organized to defend themselves against the power of large distributors. This appropriation of film by spectators and cinema operators alike has shaped our understanding of film as an artistic good and as a cultural legacy, providing a foundation for a critical engagement with the history of film and film education.

This perspective was expanded once again in West Germany during the 1970s. While the reencounter with films now was also fostered by way of television, all across the country *kommunale Kinos* (roughly translated: municipal cinemas) were founded with the slogan “Showing different films in different ways.” This motto was directed against the established film market, and not only claims to foster a reencounter with film history, but also seeks to promote the first encounter between the film and audience for political film, auteur cinema, and film from all around the world. Like the cinémathèques, the *kommunale Kinos* thus claimed the status of a cultural and/or educational institution. Their focus was less directed at collecting and archiving film, and more on creating a public for film beyond the established film market and initiating public discussion.

Since the 1990s, *kommunale Kinos*, cinémathèques, and art film houses increasingly find themselves in competition with art institutions. Thanks to advances in digital projection and data storage, it has become easier to show films in galleries and museums. In so doing, the fundamentally different spatial and temporal conditions of the art context displace the classically ritualized situation of the cinema and lead to the formation of new presentation arrangements that in turn have an effect on film production. Due to the financial power of the art market, filmmakers increasingly cater to both the cinema and the art world, while artists are beginning to make films for the cinema. In this context, there is the question of what kind of viewing does justice to film, but also the question of how to locate the legacy of the film avant-garde. Not only competition, but also productive collaboration can take place between art and the cinema where curators and cinémathèque directors collaborate with one another, for example at Documenta XII.

17th International Bremen Film Conference**Jan. 19–22, 2012**

The Internet, mobile media, and social networks compete with the cinemas for an audience, offering alternative possibilities for première showings and viewing older films. With the current shift to digital cinema projection, other components are also in a process of transformation. In this situation, cinémathèques and *kommunale Kinos* are faced with the question of their legitimacy, especially if they are supported by public funding.

Cinema institutions are reacting to these challenges with an altered conception of their role. This includes re-evaluating their realms of activity (selection, screening) from “programming” to “curating” film. In addition to the classical tasks of educating on film history, creating a public for films beyond the mainstream, and initiating discussion, an emphasis is now placed on the creative act of personal film selection by curators. Their film knowledge and taste forms the seal of quality for a film evening or a selection of films. Furthermore, the cultural and educational mission of the cinema is being newly re-evaluated. In the course of the generally increasing dominance of the media in culture and society, cinema institutions have taken on an important role in education, for they are traditionally considered experts and conveyors of film and audiovisual culture. Film education in particular has been recognized as a new task by the cinema institutions and made a fixed component of their work.

Finally, the following questions need to be posed: how can a cinema in the media age look as a social and real location? What unique characteristics apply to the cinema in contrast to other institutions? What links can be established with virtual forms of cinema (film on demand, online film festivals)? How can film culture—in the sense of participation and interactivity—take place in various locations?

The conference will explore the subject *What is Cinema?* in lectures, discussions, working groups, and with an extensive film program. In cooperation with Museum Weserburg, an exhibition will show work by British filmmaker John Smith. To open the conference, the Fourteenth Bremen Film Prize will be awarded on Thursday, January 19 to an individual who has made an outstanding contribution to European film. The prize is funded by the Kunst- und Kulturstiftung der Sparkasse Bremen.

Program for Graduate Students and Doctoral Candidates

The organizers invite graduate students and doctoral candidates from the realm of film and media studies to participate in the internal working groups at the Seventeenth International Bremen Film Conference. The goal is for younger scholars to discuss their own work and exchange opinions and ideas with colleagues. We would request that those interested in participating send an abstract by **October 15, 2011** (of 200 words or less) on their own research, which should lie in the subject area of the conference (in German or English) and a CV. The organizers will choose a limited number of scholars to participate. For these participants, a travel subsidy will be provided. The working groups take place alongside the conference, and a detailed program will be available in a timely fashion. Please send your CVs and abstracts to Winfried Pauleit.