

Spectators? Between the Cinema and Social Networks

Spectators are a constitutive part of film, whether they find themselves in a cinema, at a film presentation in a café, or in some other public place assembled for ‘public viewing’. Today, audiences can also form across social networks. In other words, film is inconceivable without spectators, both as a construction of meaning and as social practice. By way of new forms of presentation and distribution, today the audience is changing and diversifying, and new forms of spectatorship are emerging as has occurred throughout the history of film. The Eighteenth International Bremen Film Conference takes up these transformations and looks at the spectator between the cinema and social networks.

Film and its forms of presentation have always been directed at an audience. The audience is addressed in various ways by film itself: in the early cinema by direct address, by way of complex narration, point of view, sound design, or all of these combined. The cinema as a concrete location also addresses the spectator as architecture, as an institution, and as a special “dispositive” of communal film perception. In the cinema, the spectators are assigned a place (in the dark). What happens in this darkness (as action and reaction of the spectators) has always been the subject of speculation. Very early on it led to numerous warnings from concerned citizens and politicians, and the first scientific studies of the cinema audience, for example Emilie Altenloh’s study *Zur Soziologie des Kinos* (1914) or the studies of the Payne Fund from the early 1930s. From early on films themselves also dealt with audience activities, and usually reacted to warnings about the cinema with irony or by self-reflexively staging film perception – as a mass audience or a lonely spectator.

In film theory, great utopian hopes were linked to the constitution of a mass audience. Beyond these utopias, there was also a differentiated range of thought about various forms of spectator activity. For example, the spectators were attributed a dream-like state (Siegfried Kracauer) or a second layer of attention beyond the screen (Roland Barthes). But not all spectators are alike: historically, the spectators of the theater are distinguished from those of film. Feminist film theory inquired about female spectatorship. Spectators have been and still are conceived as readers, and film pedagogy speaks in this context about film literacy. If film theory is based on the image, the spectators are conceived as beholders, who also react to the speed of changing images and the moving image physically, cognitively, and emotionally. Such approaches often culminate in complex models of film reception in opposition to the social practice of concrete historical spectatorships rather than approaches based on historically and locally-oriented research on reception. New media, with their concept of user interaction, have explicitly or implicitly accused the film spectator of passivity and ignored a more differentiated approach to spectator activities that not only refers to an active film perception or reception, but also to the communicative interaction between spectators. In the context of the discourse of social networks, the appropriation of films stands at the foreground, without exactly being able to establish what is actually appropriated beyond the storage of data.

Alongside such descriptions of the cultural dimension of the spectator’s experience, there are to this day attempts at a qualitative and quantitative grasping of the spectator in the sense of a cultural reaction to the film, but also in terms of its economic importance at the box office or on secondary film markets. Films are initially shown to specific or representative audiences of spectators in test screenings before they are shown in the cinema. The qualitative importance of a film is partly determined by spectators and users and negotiated between the press, the media,

and cultural institutions. Film critics, curators, and bloggers are spectators that can lend the films a memory—or not. The individual spectator can also leave the cinema and in so doing express his or her own attitude toward the film. Quantitative statistics on spectatorship in contrast only measure the financial success of a film as an economic factor. However, the success at the box office allows for inferences about cultural identities, and films can thus come to symbolize the culture of an entire nation.

If we understand the cinema as a social location of different forms of spectatorship, leisure activities and the social behavior of a historical mass audience, during the first half of the twentieth century, and the context of capitalist relations of production move to the center of attention. During this period, the cinema competed with the theater, opera, and concert for a social position as a central cultural institution, a site of pleasure, of social reproduction, and community building. With the spread of other communication media (television, radio, the Internet) the importance of the cinema as a mass medium becomes relative. At the same time, audiences are becoming more differentiated and specialized in cultural and social terms. In the age of social networks, this development is pushed even further. Just as every user of the Internet can become a producer, a writer, an author, today all spectators can create their own public for films or by the use of social networks invite audiences to film performances at private, public, or virtual sites.

The Eighteenth International Bremen Film Conference will deal with the transformation of spectatorship. From the current situation of transformation, we will be taking a look at the history of the spectator and the current changes will be reflected upon from a historical perspective. The conference will consist of lectures, discussions, film screenings, and performances. To mark the start of the conference, on Thursday, January 17, the 15th Bremen Film Prize will be awarded for achievements promoting European film. The prize is donated by the Kunst und Kultur Stiftung 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 Eighteenth International Bremen Film Conference. The goal is for younger scholars to discuss their own work and exchange ideas and opinions with colleagues. We would request that those interested in participating send an abstract of 200 words or less by **November 1, 2012** 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 due course. Please send your CVs and abstracts to Winfried Pauleit.