

Doctoral School 'Forms of Life and Know-How of Living', Potsdam and Frankfurt/Oder
Doctoral School 'Media of History – History of Media', Weimar
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WAKING LIFE

Cinematic Mediations Between Technique and Life

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Film wakes life in making the photographic world dance. André Bazin claims film to be a “transformation of life into itself”. The idea of a direct affinity between film and life is a foundational figure of film theory and can be traced throughout its historiography and theory. What unifies the various approaches is an emphatic reference to life. But from its very beginning the relationship between film and life is constituted by a paradox: How can the most technical of all arts grant the access to the immediacy of life? This figure is constituted by a dichotomic topography, which situates film between mechanical illusion and vital consciousness, between automatic eye and subjective form, between immediacy and its mediation – shortly, between technique and life. This film-aesthetic dialectic points to the constitutive tension of science and life in modernity. In taking the paradoxical figure of the mediation of the immediate as its starting point, the conference *Waking Life* aims at questioning the manifold relationship between film and life.

The privileged relation to life always implies the technical promise to capture time. Time and movement in the filmic space are not simply to be understood in terms of objective, homogenous time and mechanistic illusion, but rather as subjectively lived duration, as what Henri Bergson called “durée”. For Bazin, “durée” is the decisive criterion of difference between photography and film. He describes film through the paradoxical figure of the “change mummified” and thus points to the fact, that film never stands in a direct timely relation to life, but rather – in what could be called its *indexical latency* – wakes the dead to life.

Yet, the filmic reference to life does not restrict itself to a simple realism of the copy. The objective eye of the camera on the one side registers and shows life “as it is”, but on the other side always reveals the outer-filmic reality in a way unseen before. The life, which film shows us, is not restricted to human life: The “ontological equality” of the filmic image dis-hierarchizes stratifications between humans, animals and things. This affinity to all aspects of the material world constitutes for Jacques Rancière the aesthetic equality of the filmic image as “splendor of the insignificant”. Film unfolds in the tension between aesthetic autonomy and the incarnation of life. Herein appears the romantic vision of a fusion of art and life, which in the medium of film takes the paradoxical forms of the mediation of the immediate and the making visible of the invisible.

Walter Benjamin’s famous formulation of the “blue flower in the land of technique” discovers in the successful coincidence of immediacy and artificiality the kairotic constellation of film: film thus appears as the scene of a dialectic mediation of technique and nature, mechanics and life. Siegfried Kracauer attributes to film – as mediation of the immediate in the face of abstractness of modern life – the historic potential of a “redemption of physical reality”.

Filmic experience, following Kracauer, is always linked to a moment of de-subjectivation: the psychophysical affection of the spectator’s body becomes the starting point of a bodily opening of outer reality. Gilles Deleuze sees cinema due to its automatic and psycho-mechanic qualities as a “mental automaton”, which is capable of manifesting a shock in thought. Stanley Cavell also sees cinema as the art to accomplish the old human wish to escape subjectivity – to watch the world from outside “as it is” without being involved oneself. But this “seeing unseen” only seems to be the recovery of immediacy within our

relationship to the world: the automatic world projection only works at the price of our absence.

The conference *Waking Life* will thus – with the figure of the mediation of the immediate as a starting point – be guided by the idea of an inherent relationship between film and life. From this starting point several lines of thought can be traced:

From a culture-historical as well as from an epistemological point of view, the relation between film and life seems to be divided in two traditions: Besides the above mentioned concept of film as technically created vitality, the cinematographic technology seems from its very beginning also to follow a Gnostic impulse, taking an extrinsic approach to life. The pre-cinematographic studies of movement by Marey and Muybridge are to be placed within this context of a bio-political mobilisation. These two lines of tradition however seem to determine one another. From an aesthetic point of view questions addressing the corporal and affective nature of filmic perception can be asked. "Life" in this context always also designates the social and the everyday aspects of life. In this context cultural as well as anthropological questions concerning the function of film as collective subconscious or cinema as the space for defining or losing identity emerge. In taking the dichotomy of filmic life and photographic death as starting point, questions concerning the media specific significance of the figures of the in-between that populate the thinking about these two media: the ghost, the phantom, the vampire, the revenant and trauma could be addressed. A question, which remains to be solved, is how film can be positioned in respect to the aesthetic avant-gardes, which aim at the transgression of the borders between art and life.

The conference will be held in English and German.

Concept and organisation:

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