Brevity Format Program

The Short Film and Its Exhibition by Laura Walde

Brevity – Format – Program.

The Short Film and Its Exhibition

Thesis
presented to the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
of the University of Zurich
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by
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Accepted in the fall semester 2021
on the recommendation of the
doctoral committee composed of
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Zurich, 2022

Acknowledgements
In short, this book would not have been possible without

Fabienne Liptay, Malte Hagener

and

Erika Balsom, Johannes Binotto, John Canciani, Kris Dittel, Nina Fischer & Maroan el Sani, Carla Gabrí, Louis Henderson, Maike Mia Höhne, Wouter Jansen, Delphine Jeanneret, Stefan Kruse Jørgensen, Nathalie Oestreicher, Volker Pantenburg, Sorayos "Yossi" Prapapan for information, films, constructive discussions, critical feedback and valuable encouragement

Valerie Dirk, Iris Fraueneder, Carla Maria Losch, Jacqueline Maurer for changes in perspective

Andrew Blackwell for numbers (and explaining them to me)

Heidi Käch for being my remote lockdown writing buddy

the whole festival crew of Internationale Kurzfilmtage Winterthur for keeping the fire burning, and especially Matthias Sahli for providing me with archival files on short notice

Katrin Gygax and Marianne Hofstetter for the finishing touches

Anna, Annina, Ennio, Heidi, Jacqueline, John and Lenny for being the village it takes …

Shortcuts – An Introduction

> "They're just diddy wee films."[1]
>
> "Nobody except for a couple of experimental movie makers really liked the short film anyway. Everyone actually wanted to make feature films. But since the world didn't need so many features, one had to pass the time by making shorts."[2]

In the 2021 trailer of the Glasgow Short Film Festival, Scottish actor Jonathan Watson struggles to say the lines "are you a fan of the finest up-and-coming filmmakers that Scotland and the rest of the world has to offer, then look no further than the Glasgow Short Film Festival." This small but defining word – short – keeps slipping his mind. On the phone with what is presumably his agent, Watson complains that he was under the impression this was a trailer for the Glasgow Film Festival, not for a festival that shows "just diddy wee films, things about your granny or your drunk dad. Guaranteed, there will be some foreign animation that nobody understands. Aye, that will be winning a prize, don't you worry about that." The festival's trailer goes to show how the short film community often self-reflexively plays with preconceived ideas of the short film as being only a minor film form and a pretentious spectacle made for a niche audience.

The short film is indeed a paradox creature: For film students, it is the main format to learn and develop their skills, even though most of them have never consciously watched any short films before entering film school (as I learned from many conversations with students over the past decade). Apart from the examples of early films and a handful of avant-garde classics, short films are hardly ever taught as part of the university curriculum for students of film studies. There is an international community of short film enthusiasts (I count myself among them) who move in the same circles to the beat of the yearly recurrence of a compact number of festivals, but the average cinephile would not be able to name the last winner of Berlinale Shorts, the Academy Award for short live-action films or the European Film Award.

Short audiovisual content – from advertising to music videos to comic sketches – is a ubiquitous part of our networked media consumption, but why does the short film as an individual format of artistic cinematic expression continue to be a niche phenome-

1 Actor Jonathan Watson in the trailer for the Glasgow Short Film Festival 2021. James Price, *Glasgow Short Film Festival 2021 Trailer*, 2021, https://vimeo.com/511814887.

2 Director Christoph Schwarz in the "Making Of" of the 18th edition of Internationale Kurzfilmtage Winterthur 2014. Christoph Schwarz, *A Look Back at the 18th Edition of Internationale Kurzfilmtage Winterthur*, 2014, https://vimeo.com/111622335.

non? Too often still, short films are quickly dismissed as the unprofessional work of cinema trainees or, at the other end of the spectrum, as the elitist highbrow exercises of experimental artists.

This bias extends to professional levels as well. Historically, film studies have predominantly been imbricated with cinema history and the short film has thus garnered only peripheral attention in academic circles and by film critics. For this reason, there is still a lack of vocabulary to conceptualize the short film as an autonomous cinematic form of expression and to talk about it in a concise and reflected manner in both film criticism and film theory. Angela Haardt, director of Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen from 1990 to 1997, summarizes this as follows in the festival's 50th anniversary publication in 2004:

> Short film is a relational term born of negation, i.e. not full-length. It ends up being classified under various genres, but these classifications fail because of the inadequacies of the meagre terminology that has been developed for the medium of film in general, and because of the manifold forms taken by short films in particular. For this reason, short film has never been able to develop a congruent history; it falls apart into individual histories of genres and their subgroups, or is seen as part of national histories (and mostly neglected there) [...].[3]

In the wake of paradigmatic shifts in film exhibition, there is a critical need for conceptual work to engender new terms and address new discursive practices in thinking and talking about short films. This study would like to contribute to this by focusing in particular on the epistemological potential and the cultural, social and political impact of brevity in film.

With regard to brevity, the most fundamental consideration is that the short film's duration is brief only in relation to commercial standards: viewed as a single work, the short film is determined primarily by its non-compliance with the normative duration of the so-called full-length film, with "full-length" being defined as "having a length as great as that which is normal or standard for one of its kind."[4] I emphasize the relative nature of the short film – "short" or "brief" being, after all, purely relational terms – because in the process of thinking about how to contribute to a conceptualization of the short film that would be specific to this overwhelmingly diverse format, it has become increasingly clear that it is in effect impossible to talk about *the* short film. The format's manifestation and its modes of production and exhibition are too diverse. Short film as a collective term, after all, is not a singular genre that can be discussed from various theoretical perspectives.[5] Rather, the only defining feature is its relative brevity. It is on this basis that this study will explore the circulation of short films in different institutional contexts with a specific focus on the epistemological potential of brevity in film.

3 Angela Haardt, "A Different History. 50 Years of Short Film in Oberhausen," *Catalogue 50. Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen*, 2004, 73.

4 *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "full-length (adj.)." Accessed January 6, 2018. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/full-length.

5 In one of the few monographs on short films before their great success as part of the digital realm of entertainment, Katrin Heinrich in 1997 discusses them under the specific technical term of *Gattung*, a concept which shares a strong structural proximity to the notion of genre (indeed, there is no lexical differentiation between *Gattung* and *Genre* in English). In my view, this amounts to not much more than a deferral of the problem, as Heinrich's indiscriminate move does not address the issue that the short film's diverse and highly idiosyncratic manifestations mean that it cannot be discussed on a theoretical meta level. Heinrich simply narrows the focus of her attention to live-action, narrative fiction films as a genre and almost completely bypasses the main feature of the form: its brevity. See Katrin Heinrich, *Der Kurzfilm: Geschichte, Gattungen, Narrativik* (Alfeld: Coppi-Verlag, 1997).

In brief, one could argue that the short film follows a Socratic method: it raises questions without the desire to find or give a straightforward answer. In its conciseness and variability, it conspicuously exposes our limits of knowledge and understanding. Nevertheless, based on this association between the short and the disruptive (in the sense of questioning established codes and paradigms of what is deemed full-length and therefore "normal"), the short film format can be a fruitful starting ground for thinking about the potential of institutional and hegemonic critique with and through the art of filmmaking today and of reconsidering questions of access and circulation in both film exhibition and academic film studies.

Given the fact that cinematography is historically rooted in the short form, it is a curious situation that short films have yet to establish themselves within the discourse of film studies. This has certainly to do with a lack of access and, in consequence, a lack of canon. "Short films are easy to ignore because they are hard to see," write Eileen Elsey and Andrew Kelly in their introduction to the guide of short film production.[6] While this was factually true 20 years ago when their book was published and not many websites and short film festivals had yet existed, their statement is still accurate today on a structural level: without an institutionalized form of access to short films – via canons, libraries, press reviews, university curricula, streaming platforms – short films will continue to lack visibility. There exists a flagrant imbalance between the mass of short films that are produced every year, by film students, amateurs and professionals, and the relative paucity of public perception for them.[7] Ever since short films as supporting films were permanently removed from cinemas in the 1960s, short films have neither reached large audiences as part of a theatrical exhibition, nor have they ever profited from wide distribution in the home entertainment sector on carriers such as VHS, DVDs, Blu-rays or as part of (subscription) VOD or platform programming.[8] On account of widespread digitization and digital recording having become the norm, short films are now widely available online, promoted through the arrival of (mostly) non fee-based services such as YouTube and Vimeo.

However, this does not alleviate the problem that much of the history of short film before the advent of the World Wide Web is still mostly unavailable, as much of this filmic heritage has not been properly archived in the first place – neither by the filmmakers themselves nor systematically by national film archives – and the demand from stakeholders outside the short film industry (such as film historians or the general cinephile public) has not been high enough. While short films by directors who are famous today are often digitized or even restored at high cost in order to be made available in high-quality resolution as supplements to major retrospectives or special collectors' edition box sets, there is no longer any commercial interest in establishing widely accessible public platforms for distributing short films.[9] Or for other marginalized works, for that matter:

6 Eileen Elsey and Andrew Kelly, *In Short: A Guide to Short Film-Making in the Digital Age* (London: BFI, 2002), 1.

7 As just one example: the Sundance Film Festival received a total of 8740 short film submissions in 2018. For each edition, they select an average of 60 to 80 films to be shown in their programs. See Carlos Aguilar, "Sundance 2018 by Numbers," *SydneysBuzz* (blog), January 16, 2018, https://blogs.sydneysbuzz.com/sundance-2018-by-numbers-f45b6d4f2f26.

8 Apart from some (S)VOD services active on national levels only (especially in France and the UK), Mubi and Kinoscope are presently the only larger international curated platforms that regularly include short films in their programming. In the case of Mubi, the platform even releases short work by well-known directors as premieres before they hit the festival circuit.

9 This was somewhat different in the late 1990s/early 2000s before the widespread use of broadband internet networks, when media companies were dependent on inexpensive short material, "e-shorts," to fill their websites. See Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

> Increasingly dealing with the constraints of storage and restoration costs, archivists are faced with the choice of what it is that they are trying to conserve, the question of canon-formation, and the balance between preservation and access. Caroline Frick (2011) argues that the industry has had the lion's share of preservation and access, while, as Jane Gaines (2007) points out, there has been a tendency to ignore or sideline women's work—in a province where sidelining is in effect a death sentence. Many colonial films, African-American films, and other marginalized practices have suffered equally. The work of the archive is as much one of systematic forgetting as it is of remembrance.[10]

The inclination towards "systematic forgetting," in the words of Sean Cubitt, is one that short film aficionados around the world are passionately (but rarely systematically) resisting. However, there is hardly any financing to be secured for international, publicly accessible platforms for short films, which effectively results in poor access to these works and the fact that there is almost no sustained collective memory of the achievements of the short cinematic form.[11]

Opening Ceremony of Internationale Kurzfilmtage Winterthur, 2015.
© Eduard Meltzer / IKFTW

The only way to see, and consequently analyze and write about, short films is via personal connections to archives and short film festivals, and even they only have limited means to systematically maintain their own archives. Internationale Kurzfilmtage

10 Sean Cubitt, "The Ethics of Repair: Reanimating the Archive," in *Compact Cinematics: The Moving Image in the Age of Bit-Sized Media*, ed. Pepita Hesselberth and Maria Poulaki (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 62.

11 Efforts by Maike Mia Höhne, director of Berlinale Shorts from 2008 to 2019, to establish a global short film database with international partners have yielded no results so far. Her idea was to establish "a database that can be accessed by teachers and schools, curators and scholars. An archive of short films, video works and media art for all audiences. A canon of the short form, easily accessible and comprehensive." This quote is taken from an invitation to participate in a workshop to discuss these ideas during 68th edition of Berlinale (on February 16, 2018) sent to the author. I participated with a short presentation of my PhD project, then still in its very early stages.

Winterthur, where I have been a curator and programmer since 2012 and which acts as a partner to the research project *Exhibiting Film: Challenges of Format*, marks an exceptional case with regard to the systematic archiving of short films in a custom-built database.[12] Founded in 1997, Kurzfilmtage Winterthur has developed into Switzerland's largest and most significant short film festival. The festival team has consistently kept all preview copies ever submitted to the festival, in the formats of VHS, DVD, on flash drives, and in 2012 started to digitize the complete archive of, at that moment in time, approximately 25,000 short films. Each film has an entry in the festival's database, complete with all relevant film information regarding cast, crew, and exhibition formats, contact details of the filmmakers and distributors, as well as thematic tagging. Since then, the archive has roughly tripled in size (with 75,000 database entries in September 2021). It is envisaged that the entire archive will be made available to professionals, from curators to academics, via a custom-built online research and viewing platform to be directly linked to the database in the near future. The idea behind this massive undertaking is that structured access to these films has to be provided and proactively fostered in order to put a spotlight on the short film as a worthy object of analysis.

Apart from difficulties in getting hold of short films, a lack of canon proves to be another potential obstacle for critics and scholars when working with and discussing short films. This is not a call for the establishment of a short film canon, as the problematization and de-authorization of canons in general has been an important step away from the longstanding hegemony of a male and auteur-centered references in art and film studies in recent decades. The fact remains, however, that it is simply not efficient to write about films that hardly anyone has seen or even could see if they had the desire to do so. "A typical strategy of critical writing is assuming readers are familiar with a certain set of works; [...] Once a set of texts is considered institutionalized, referencing those works is economical and brief," writes Janet Staiger.[13] Writing about short films, then, can paradoxically never be economical or brief. It requires a substantial amount of descriptive and contextualizing information before the author can even begin to tackle theoretical issues.

This certainly also applies to this study. Not only do the analyses of particular examples include details concerning the background and context of production, but the two first chapters will also initially deal extensively with historical, conceptual and terminological issues directly connected to the effects of brevity on film production, exhibition, circulation and theorization. In the paragraphs delineating a brief history of the short film format, I will trace the intimate bond between technical formats – from 16mm and digital formats – and the history of short film production. This is not least due to economic factors: both the use of 16mm and 8mm used to be the preferred formats for school and artistic productions; and to this day, it cannot be taken for granted that short films are distributed as DCPs (which replaced 35mm as the industry standard). These two realities are closely connected to monetary issues. Until a few years ago, it was the customary practice to screen short films in uncompressed high-resolution format, and many of them came with a simple stereo audio-mix instead of 5.1 surround sound. There is a direct correspondence between the use of substandard formats and short film's place in the offside of commercial and popular cinema culture. Interestingly enough, however, it was also short works, in the context of the gallery, that brought

12 The research project *Exhibiting Film: Challenges of Format* ran from September 2017 to September 2021 under the direction of Prof. Fabienne Liptay at the University of Zurich (Department of Film Studies). It was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation and included two doctoral dissertations, one of which resulted in this study on the format and exhibition of short films. See the project's website "Exhibiting Film: Challenges of Format," accessed October 16, 2021, https://exhibitingfilm.allyou.net/.

13 Janet Staiger, "The Politics of Film Canons," *Cinema Journal* 24, no. 3 (1985): 8f.

obsolete analog formats back in vogue. The relations of dependency, influence and hierarchy are thus not necessarily historically stable, but contingent on various factors.

The conceptual triangle of *brevity – format – program* lays the foundation for my contribution to what I will come to call a *poetics of the short film format*. The use of the theoretical term poetics is connected to my proposal of thinking of the short film not simply as a collective term for films with a length of less than 30 minutes, but as a particular kind of concept that extends beyond the formal feature of length and includes the process of production. In *Toward Fewer Images*, a book dedicated to the complete oeuvre of Alexander Kluge, Philipp Ekardt speaks of a "genuine poetics of smallness that generates [Kluge's] work. Poetics is understood here in the sense of an explicit or implicit set of rules which structure the making of a work of art, i.e., the formal features of the resulting work, but also the process of production."[14] I want to argue that it is possible to transfer this idea of a "poetics of smallness" to the short format per se, so as to reflect on the short format as not simply an outcome, but as a process or a creator of a specific aesthetic, discursive and political form.

After delineating the reasons why I prefer to speak of a poetics instead of a theory of the short film in the first chapter, I will discuss each of these three fundamental terms in detail in their historical development and epistemological potential in the second chapter. I argue that these concepts, when unified in the idea of the short film as a format, are fundamentally a negation of relations of power – be they social, cultural, economic, or political. Taken as a format – rather *than film* of short duration – the short film is not intended to be an audiovisual artefact that stands on its own, but rather an element within a specific relation of dependencies, which include a film's own network of meaning-making as well as the other films within a program and, on a higher level, the institutional context that determines these relationships. It is the concept of brevity and its underlying notions of limitation, shortage and the undermining of a standard (i. e. "full-length") and its "embeddedness" in a programmatic and social context that constitute the format of the short film.[15] In this embeddedness, I include my own position as a curator and programmer for Internationale Kurzfilmtage Winterthur and the methodological decision to compile short films into fictitious programs for their analysis in Chapters 3 and 4.

The concept of brevity has been studied primarily in Anglo-American literary theory since the beginning of the 20th century, and in recent years an interest in short, concise and small forms and formats has also become noticeable in film and media studies. Within these discourses, brevity is conceptualized not only quantitatively, but qualitatively as well with regard to formal elements and exhibition strategies. Brevity has an influence on various levels of creation (by way of shorter and, consequently, often more cost-effective production), exhibition (with shorter times of reading or viewing, which allows greater freedom in terms of circulation, distribution, sharing and potential combinations in a broad spectrum of forms of presentation) and circulation (due to their small, often highly compressed data sets or material requirements).

Michael Niehaus examines the affinities of the "small" and the format in a manuscript for a lecture entitled "Kleine Formate" ("Small Formats," 2017), which he held as part of the research project "Kulturen des Kleinen" ("Cultures of the Small") at the Uni-

14 Philipp Ekardt, *Toward Fewer Images: The Work of Alexander Kluge* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018), 304f.

15 I borrow the term "embeddedness" from an argument that economic historian Karl Polanyi and social economist Mark Granovetter make with regard to economic behavior, namely that said behavior and the institutions associated with it cannot be isolated from social relations (as the neoclassical tradition in economic theory would have it), but must take into account "that the behavior and institutions to be analyzed are so constrained by ongoing social relations that to construe them as independent is a grievous misunderstanding." Mark Ganovetter, "Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness," *American Journal of Sociology* 91, no. 3 (1985): 482.

versity of Paderborn in 2017.[16] He names characteristics such as "inconspicuous," "mobile," "fast," "variable," "withdrawing," "manageable" and "pluralistic" as inherent to all things small or short.[17] One could add procedures and effects that position the small, as a relational concept, in comparison to longer or larger forms, such as measures of compression, intensity, conciseness, or omission, or notions of the provisional or the absolute, the epiphany, the isolated, the precise, the exact or the detail.

In the section on *brevity*, I will consider historical, rhetorical, stylistic and structural concepts such as *brevitas* and *kairos* or contingency, efficiency and acceleration in the modernist conception. In theories of the literary short story, which can look back on a fair amount of critical and academic analysis, the short form is consistently recognized as having made a remarkable contribution to discourses related to the *minor*, the *other* and the *subaltern*. This section will then also address the cultural work that the short film has made with regard to colonial and postcolonial contexts. Newer approaches from film and media studies have brought forward concepts such as *lightness*[18] or *compactness*[19] to grasp the impact of brevity in film on a theoretical level.

From an economic point of view, brevity manifests contradictory qualities: on the one hand, short films are less expensive to create due to lesser demands on the amount of time it takes to finish them and the fewer number of people who are involved in their production. On the other hand, the lack of commercial structures for distributing these works means that there is hardly any potential for financial revenues, apart from winning competitions or selling licenses to television and online platforms, which only happens for a very small percentage of the entire output of short films. The question of value(s) and currency – both in an economical and a cultural sense – will constitute a common thread throughout the book and will be discussed at great length in Chapter 3.

Unless declared otherwise, I use the term *format* in a way that differs from its use in designating the size and shape of objects or the technical protocols of data sets. In a broader semantic context, formats refer to the determination of a specific relationship under which media operate in various contexts, be they institutional, aesthetic, social or political. In his definition of the term, art historian David Joselit for example maintains that the format of a work of art does not result in reification, but rather consists in the way a particular work of art – a picture, a film, a book – is situated within specific relations.

The core of Joselit's theory on format, I want to argue, therefore also lies in its political dimension, in the way in which formats become effective in a social environment. In this context Joselit uses the term *currency*, which is established in any system dominated by a dynamic of exchange and the definition of value when it comes to cultural differences. He does therefore not only think of currency in a monetary sense, but also as a political, cultural and social quantity: "I will argue," he writes, "that images produce power – a current or currency – that is activated by contact with spectators. The more points of contact an image is able to establish, the greater its power will be."[20] Based on the short film format's broad and fast circulation in different institutional contexts – at festivals, online, in galleries and museums – as well as its embeddedness in a specific

16 Other projects to mention here, many of which I will discuss in more detail in Chapters 1 and 2, include the SNF-funded project *Ultrashort – On the medial logic of the shortest a/v forms* at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts (2014–2017) and the post-graduate program *Literatur- und Wissensgeschichte kleiner Formen* at Humboldt University of Berlin (2017–2026).

17 Michael Niehaus, "Kleine Formate. Vorüberlegungen" (Manuscript, November 25, 2017), https://kw.unipaderborn.de/fileadmin/fakultaet/Institute/kunst/Forschung/Kulturen_des_Kleinen/Paper_Niehaus_Kleine_Form.pdf; translation mine.

18 Paola Voci, *China on Video: Small Screen Realities* (London: Routledge, 2012).

19 Pepita Hesselberth and Maria Poulaki, eds., *Compact Cinematics: The Moving Image in the Age of Bit-Sized Media* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

20 David Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), xvi.

programmatic context, I believe Joselit's concept of the format, which I will discuss at length in Chapter 2 alongside other approaches to this highly technical term, offers a rewarding basis for formulating a new conceptual vocabulary customized to the specificities of short films.

The *program* as the third term of the conceptual triangle has determined the approach to the analytical second part of the thesis. Rare is the instance in which a short film is viewed as a singular artwork on its own, without other works accompanying it within the scope of a program at a festival or as part of an exhibition in dialogue with other films. There are two types of relations that are relevant in a discussion of the presentation of short films within a program. First, there is the question of how the films relate to each other, which types of connections among them emerge and which kind of organizational principle – hierarchical or heterarchical – gives them coherence. Second, via the concept of the program, I will be able to discuss the activities related to making short films visible – *programming* and *curating* – as discursive practices that have an impact on both the production of new work as well as on their exhibition.

Much like the curator in the art world, the curator/programmer of short films has evolved into a cultural gatekeeper who discovers, legitimizes, contextualizes and builds up films and filmmakers, even movements or so-called (new) waves. This becomes a critical role especially when factoring in that the short format is still widely used in cultural environments of developing countries and by minority filmmakers. With the stamp of quality and the added value that comes with a selection, it is part of the core practice of programmers and curators both in the festival and the gallery context to make a statement about the artistic and cultural merit of the films, and to highlight or make a comment on a specific argument by way of combining films in a particular order. Programming and curating affirm or disrupt cultural conventions and epistemological frameworks by processes of selection and exhibition.

If the individual short film per se is not the only object of analysis, but rather the format entangled with aesthetic, discursive and political prospects and limitations, then one of the main questions that has to be answered when thinking with and writing about short films is the issue of how to bridge the gap between conceptual work and analytical description. One answer to the problem of synthesizing concept and analysis is to always think of the short film not merely as a singular object of analysis, but as part of a larger exhibition context. Apart from non-programmatic online platforms such as YouTube or Vimeo, short films are rarely watched as singular works. The sometimes hierarchical, sometimes heterarchical relations between films as part of a program is essential to a theory of the short film. For this reason, I have decided to expand on the analysis of single short films and to compile two short film programs that will serve as a basis for exploring specific issues related to relations of power – correlating to issues of exhibition and institution, of economic(s) and shortage, of minority and privilege – that the short film as a format inherently addresses.

In order to transfer the conceptual considerations to analytical objects, these two programs stand in as paradigms for what constitutes the short film format when viewed from a particular thematical approach. Chapters 3 and 4 present fictitious compilations of short films grouped into a program dealing with the subjects of value (economic, social, cultural) and with the crossing of boundaries (institutional, technological, epistemological), respectively. Essentially a discursive trick, what I propose is a form of film historiography by way of exhibition: these two fictitious programs, i.e. this selection and analysis of films in a particular order, could be presented in an actual, curated festival setting.

For this reason, the "verbal architectures," to use Thomas Elsaesser's expression, that typically frame this specific exhibition context is also referenced in these two

chapters.[21] Each analysis is preceded by a curatorial statement of less than 300 words that outlines the curatorial impulse behind the program and is an important cornerstone for a festival or any curatorial project, serving a "double function of performative self-confirmation and reflexive self-definition [...] that mold the event's sense of its own significance and sustain its self-importance."[22] In addition to this curator's introduction, the basic information typically included in a program's paratexts – regarding director, length, country of origin, language, distribution and the synopsis – are given for each film.[23]

To lead by example and show that short films are valid objects of analysis, it is a matter of importance to me to link abstract considerations with actual works. I will discuss and analyze each example in detail with references to the conceptual interests outlined in Chapters 1 and 2. Central questions that tie the films together in all these programs are, among others: What can be seen and how can it be seen? Where do these images come from and who is allowed to speak? What are the norms and standards – social, cultural, political, economic – these films address, subvert, question or comply with? The close readings of the films, my active engagement with the ways image, sound and editing relate to each other firmly anchors my approach in the tradition of a film studies analysis. I do not simply summarize a film's artistic "position," its basic argument, but strive to demonstrate in detail how these short films visualize a certain idea on a given topic and how their brevity determines the angle from which they present it.

The first thematic program carries the title "For What It's Worth" and compounds economic parameters and epistemological concerns as essential elements of the short film format, given its peripheral and hybrid position in the cinematic universe and in film studies. The program will consist of only two films, namely *This Action Lies* (USA/Switzerland 2018) by James N. Kienitz Wilkins and *All That Is Solid* (United Kingdom/Ghana 2014) by Louis Henderson. The notion of "value" in this selection of films has implications in a monetary as well as in a moral sense: Both these works raise questions regarding the subsistence and survival of (short film) artists and the market value of artworks. Are artistic results or objects, and the labor that went into them, worth less when they are short or small, or maybe even invisible? Short films are non-marketable in an economic sense, which results in migration to the art sector for short film makers who are "successful." Is there thus an inherent critique of capitalist ideology inscribed within this format? And how are these questions related to the production and use of knowledge in a capitalist free-market economy? How can brevity be used to critically assess knowledge as privatized and hierarchical, normalized and hegemonic?

The second program, "Foreign Images," deals with the other major takeaway from the conceptual first two chapters, namely the short format's effortless crossing of boundaries, be they institutional, technological, social and political. All films in this selection address this topic through the lens of migration, one of the most dominant motifs in today's public discourse. The foreigner, and the refugee as one of its representatives, is a living human being, but at the same time she is a political concept, a symbol of disturbance in contemporary sociopolitical debate and an aesthetic trope. Images migrate, too, from one technical format to the next as well as between institutional boundaries. The short film is neither solely lodged in the history of cinema nor exclusively part of the

21 Thomas Elsaesser, *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 95.

22 Elsaesser, 95. For a film studies' methodology based on curatorial approaches, see also Gabriel Menotti, *Movie Circuits: Curatorial Approaches to Cinema Technology* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020). Especially Chapter 3 ("Projection Studies") of Menotti's book offers applied, non-theoretical solutions to approach and analyze epistemic and epistemological configurations of media use.

23 If the film has been shown as part of Internationale Kurzfilmtage Winterthur, I reprint the festival's catalogue synopsis. If the film has never been exhibited in Winterthur, I take the distributor's official synopsis.

art world. It is a foreign, exotic concept to many viewers, even cinephiles, and a moving – in the emotional sense – topic for connoisseurs, who ardently endorse the short format's potential. The program includes four films, namely *Bab Sebta* (France/Morocco 2019) by Randa Maroufi, *The Migrating Image* (Denmark 2018) by Stefan Kruse Jørgensen, *Freedom of Movement* (Germany 2018) by Nina Fischer and Maroan el Sani, as well as *Atlantiques* (France/Senegal 2009) by Mati Diop.

Given my emphatic encouragement of treating short films as worthy subjects of analysis in film studies, and in view of the fact that most of these films are rarely written about, I decided to include more examples of films. Each chapter thus includes what I label "spotlights": concise discussions of short films that illustrate a conceptual point of the first two chapters.[24] In the words of Laura U. Marks, "as much as possible I engage with these films and videos as I engage with theoretical writings. I rely on them to draw out and critique ideas with which I am working."[25] These "spotlights" give me the opportunity to expand the number of films to analyze and add illustrative examples to the heavily conceptual first part of my study. These examples include the following 5 films: *I Hope I'm Loud When I'm Dead* (United Kingdom 2018) by Beatrice Gibson addresses the subject of poetics, poetry and short film. *Distance Film* (Austria 2020) by Siegfried A. Fruhauf illustrates the complexity of brevity, being the briefest film in a selection of many "longish" short films with a running time of only 4 seconds. *Death of the Sound Man* (Thailand 2017) by Sorayos Prapapan is a political comedy that I read as a celebration of the special license bestowed upon the inconspicuous and marginal. *Main Hall* (Austria 2013) by Philipp Fleischmann examines the correlation between length, (technical) format and institutional boundaries. And lastly, *The Beast* (South Africa 2016) by Samantha Nell and Michael Wahrmann, is a film that deals with cultural appropriation as both a degrading and also empowering gesture and the imbalance of power between different social, demographic and cultural players.

This approach of placing films in a programmatic context in the last two chapters allows me to consider the idiosyncrasies of the selection, as I can reflect my own position as compiler of these programs with regard to, for instance, themes and topics, access to the films, gender and cultural backgrounds of the filmmakers, the dramaturgies of the programs, etc. As a curator and the program coordinator of Internationale Kurzfilmtage Winterthur since 2013, I have compiled numerous curated programs for out-of-competition strands and selected films for the festival's international competition. The first chapter therefore also includes an in-depth exploration of the festival's structure. This passage may seem pedantic to those readers who are familiar with the processes involved in organizing an international film festival, but given that there are no standardized protocols or even a common lexicon to speak about them, it seemed necessary to address these infrastructural procedures and policies.

For the selection of films discussed in the scope of this study, the focus lies on films made by professional filmmakers. During the course of research, I noted a tendency of discussing short or brief forms in scholarly publications with a heavy focus on technological innovations, "viewser"-generated content and a transmedial perspective.[26]

24 I borrow and reverse T. J. Demos' idea of including "transits" in his book *The Migrant Image*: "Intended as short critical passages, these transitional sections elaborate on the theoretical and methodological underpinnings and implications of my analysis, rather than offering extensive readings of artworks." T. J Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), xv. My "spotlights," in contrast, offer a reading of a specific artwork to reinforce and illustrate a conceptual idea.

25 Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), xv.

26 See, for example, the articles collected in the sections on "Polyphonic Archives," "Pleasure & Productivity," "Mobile Cinematics," and "Urban Ecologies" in Hesselberth and Poulaki, *Compact Cinematics*. Also, most of the contributions in Pepita Hesselberth and Carlos M. Roos, "Short Film Experience," *Empedocles: European Journal for the Philosophy of Communication* 5, no. 1 (January 1, 2015).

I emphatically wish to think and write about films made by professionals who consciously chose the short format over the mid-length or feature-length film for a variety of reasons.

However, I also observed my own tendency to select films from filmmakers who regularly work in the art context. On the one hand, this certainly has to do with the close interrelationship between these two fields, given that the films' short durations make this format highly suitable for exhibition in both contexts. "Conciseness, authenticity, connectivity and coherence – these virtues of the short film serve many more purposes on top of rejuvenating cinema. Above all, they are brilliant translators between media," writes Alexander Kluge, whose films, thoughts and writings act as an éminence grise throughout this study.[27] On the other, this tendency also reflects my own fascination with experimental and essayistic approaches to filmmaking. Therefore, in selecting films to discuss as part of this thesis, I consequently made a conscious effort to also include films from directors who only identify themselves as filmmakers and do not screen in an exhibition context. A range of objective considerations, too, have guided the process of selection, such as the diversity of the filmmakers' geographical and ethnical background and the gender ratio balance.

While protocols of compilation and curation and my own involvement with them are an essential topic of the study, audience reception or the quasi-curatorial strategies of private short film viewers online is not. This discourse would require a different approach and it is not directly relevant to the research questions I formulated, which must be addressed before the interaction between film and audience takes effect.

To recapitulate, the central questions to be answered are how the short film format, in different moments of time, realized its potential as a "minor" film form, and how its power is intimately connected to the format's small, often highly compressed data volumes and brief viewing times, which allow for a greater freedom of circulation, diffusion, sharing, and combination in a broad spectrum of distribution channels and exhibition spaces.

As mentioned before, my own interests and predilections for certain types of films is by default reflected in the choice of films – I am sharing what I love and what has inspired me, to paraphrase Martin Scorsese on film curation as an act of generosity.[28] Many other great works of brief duration could have been chosen and I will make sure to write about many more of them in the future. But for now, a very small selection of shorts must suffice as a brief introduction to the vast and marvelous cinematic cosmos that is the short film.

27 Alexander Kluge, "Kurze Filme, lange Filme. Ein Erfahrungsbericht," in *Kurz und klein: 50 Jahre Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen*, ed. Klaus Behnken (Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen, Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004), 177; translation mine.

28 Martin Scorsese, "Il Maestro. Federico Fellini and the Lost Magic of Cinema," *Harper's Magazine*, March 2021, https://harpers.org/archive/2021/03/il-maestro-federico-fellini-martin-scorsese/.

CHAPTER I

In Lieu of Theory

Wake up, it's time to begin // The forgetting. Direct modal statements // Wither under glass. A little book for Ari // Built to sway. I admire the use of felt // Theory, like swimming in a storm, but object // To anti-representational bias in an era of // You're not listening. I'm sorry. I was thinking // How the beauty of your singing reinscribes // The hope whose death it announces. Wave

Mean Free Path[1]

Storm birds, descendants of the dinosaurs in a // different way than we, swim opposite to the troughs // of low pressure, westward across the Atlantic. Their capacity // for theory is shown by the elegance of their wings. // They give a wide berth to the cloud of plastic particles, // which are microscopically small, but slice alveoli // like shards of iron or glass. Where is the seat of their // confident knowledge? What does the "poetic force // of theory" mean for them?

Theory, Like Swimming in a Storm[2]

Poiesis and the Poetic Force of Theory

Brooklyn-based poet and novelist Ben Lerner collaborated with German filmmaker Alexander Kluge on a collection of texts, images, and conversations to publish *The Snows of Venice. The Lerner-Kluge Container* in 2018. A line from Lerner's first collection of poetry, *The Lichtenberg Figures* (2004), caught Kluge's attention: "The sky stops painting and turns to criticism."[3] It is quoted as the only line from a longer poem to which Kluge responded with a short prose text of his own: "The raid by the airplanes, this action by ARMED INDUSTRY, ENGINEER-CENTERED HEAVENLY POWER,

1 Ben Lerner, *No Art: Poems* (London: Granta, 2016), 200.

2 Alexander Kluge and Ben Lerner, *The Snows of Venice* (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2018), 175.

3 Ben Lerner, *The Lichtenberg Figures* (New York: Copper Canyon Press, 2013), 22.

contains a strong VEIN OF CRITICISM."[4] Kluge responds to Lerner's personification of the sky as a critic with an answer of what said sky could be finding fault with: he describes an Aleppo under attack, with the firmament denouncing the hold of callous engineering over the people living on the ground. This exchange of poems, texts and conversations gradually formed into a book which included images by Gerhard Richter, R. H. Quaytman and Thomas Demand that entered into a dialogue with the texts.

Reportedly, Lerner was influenced by the films and the writing of the stellar German polymath Kluge when writing *The Lichtenberg Figures* and toyed with the thought of sending his unknowing mentor a copy of his first publication, but never acted upon it.[5] When Kluge received a German translation of the book from a friend a decade after its original publication, he was inspired to write a response in the form of a series of short texts that he subsequently sent to Lerner by email. This message remained in the poet's spam folder for some time, only to be discovered by a lucky coincidence.[6] This narrative leading up to their collaboration manifests a poetic quality in its emotional impact on the reader, from the communication between generations and across an ocean to the improbable intervention of fate in the chance discovery of Kluge's email. Lerner's and Kluge's poetic encounter and their apparent interest in criticism and theory as discursive exercises that are not coming into play only ex post facto, but rather constitute an essential part of their artistic practices, serves as my point of departure to outline a poetics of the short film format in lieu of a theory of the short film.

Etymologically, poetics comes from the Greek *poiesis* and refers to the act of making or bringing into existence, not the finalized form of a work of art or a product. In literary theory, "poetics" is traditionally associated with Aristotle's normative and prescriptive account of the rules governing the creation of poetry (including drama, lyric poetry and epic poems) and, in the 20th century, with the writings of the Russian formalists and new historicism's notion of "cultural poetics." The main tenet of a "poetics of culture" seeks to establish relationships between texts and the sociohistorical contexts of their production, maintaining that texts not merely document history in a "uni-directional – from social discourse to aesthetic discourse" trajectory, but that there is a reciprocal interplay: texts are both informed by and actively shape their sociocultural contexts.[7]

Going back some 60 years, the Russian formalists' idea of *poetics* was much more text-centered as opposed to new historicism's emphasis on historical, social and cultural contexts of production. *The Poetics of Cinema* (1927) was the title of an edited volume by Boris Eikhenbaum, one of the first attempts to determine the specific characteristics that make film an art form.[8]

In his neoformalist approach to film studies, David Bordwell makes a case for two domains of poetics – analytical and historical – that takes the finished work as its point of departure. These two domains derive norms regarding the construction of films and the effects they should elicit.[9] Bordwell's and Noël Carroll's opposition toward "Theory" with a capital T as a predetermined, fixed set of assumptions brought to bear upon artistic phenomena is explicitly stated in their edited volume *Post-Theory* (1996),[10] and to describe his methodological framework as a poetics is a way of circumventing the term

4 Kluge and Lerner, *The Snows of Venice*, 58; capital letters in the original.

5 Kluge and Lerner, 58.

6 Adam Heardman, "Alexander Kluge and Ben Lerner: The Snows of Venice," *Art Monthly*, June 2018, 36.

7 Stephen Greenblatt, "Towards a Poetics of Culture," *Southern Review* 20, no. 1 (1987): 12.

8 Boris Eikhenbaum, ed., *The Poetics of Cinema*, trans. Richard Taylor, Russian Poetics in Translation, no. 9 (Oxford: RPT Publications, 1982).

9 See David Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2008); David Bordwell, "Historical Poetics of Cinema," ed. R. Barton Palmer (New York: AMS Press, 1989), 369–98.

10 David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996).

theory without reducing the analysis of films to "a new positivism limited to the production of shot lists, filmographies, and a naïve, theory-free description of films."[11] Poetics, in Bordwell's understanding of the term, consists in a close reading of the primary filmic text, uncovering "underlying concepts, constitutive or regulative, governing the sorts of material that can be used in a film and the possible ways in which it can be formed" at various levels of generality or specificity.[12] This does not mean that theoretical considerations are disqualified, but rather that a specific theoretical school should never constitute an a priori framework. In this regard, my own line of argument is certainly consistent with Bordwell's. However, the strategic concept underlying my recourse to poetics embraces a decidedly political slant that the term in its Aristotelian genealogy does not contain, and which demands a more detailed explication of the interplay between poetics and theory for the scope of this thesis.

Originating in the Greek root *theōria* (θεωρία) meaning "to look at, to view or behold," a theory of the short film would presuppose a generalizing model of explanation or a particular body of knowledge pertaining exclusively to the short film based on its finalized brief form as opposed to any kind of longer moving image work. The various manifestations of short films and their modes of production and exhibition, however, are too diverse and idiosyncratic to be subsumed into a consistent and rather abstract theory of the short film. What I am aiming for when I propose a *poetics of the short film format* is to retain a steady reminder of the processes of activation and continuous negotiation that feed into the creation and exhibition of short films. While theory and poetics in the formalist sense are targeted at explaining the features of a finished work, a poetics of the short film format as I propose it must include the measures that feed into both production as well as exhibition.[13] Accordingly, I fail to agree with Jean-Luc Godard's conclusion about the short film when he writes that it "does not have time to think" and is therefore a type of "anti-cinema."[14] Rather, to paraphrase another famous dictum of Godard's from *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, I maintain that the short film constitutes its very own "form that thinks."[15]

I want to propose that the format, which is one of the three concepts of my conceptual triangle, belongs to the same semantic field as *poiesis* in that it involves a form of activity or a "constellational form of production," to quote John Roberts on poiesis as a form of self-determined labor.[16] This does not imply any kind of straightforward connection between poetics, which focuses on individual instances of artistic output, and the format, which as a conceptual category is only useful in connection to notions of standardization and repetition. What interests me in regard to both poetics and formats is their processual dimension. Roland Meyer suggests that instead of finding a definition

11 Volker Pantenburg, *Farocki/Godard: Film as Theory* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 54. For a historical summary of the changing attitudes toward the relevance of theory from a European and Anglo-American academic tradition, see the introduction "The Politics of Film Theory and Its Discontents" in Nico Baumbach, *Cinema/Politics/Philosophy*, Film and Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 7–24. Also, the first chapter "Le film qui pense" in Pantenburg, *Farocki/Godard*, 33–72.

12 Bordwell, *Poetics of Cinema*, 15.

13 In this regard there is a clear overlap between my understanding of poetics and Volker Pantenburg's conceptualization of cinematic images as theory, that is of having a cognitive and critical potential, the way he outlines in *Farocki/Godard. Film as Theory* (2015, originally published as *Film als Theorie. Bildforschung bei Harun Farocki und Jean-Luc Godard* in 2006).

14 Jean Luc Godard, "Take Your Own Tours," in *Godard on Godard: Critical Writings by Jean-Luc Godard*, ed. Jean Narboni and Tom Milne, trans. Tom Milne (New York: Da Capo Press, 1986), 110. Godard's engagement with the art of the short film on the occasion of his visit to the festival of Les journées internationals du film de court-métrage in Tours (which ran from 1955 to 1968) resulted in a less scathing critique of the form than this quote might initially suggest. After a critical general outline of what he perceives to be the weaknesses of the short format, Godard highly praises the achievements of Agnès Varda (*Du côté de la côte* (1958), Jacques Demy (*Le bel indifferent* (1957), Jacques Rozier (*Blue Jeans*, 1958) and Alain Resnais (*Le chant du Styrène*, 1959).

15 "Une pensée qui forme. Une forme qui pense." In Jean-Luc Godard, *Histoire(s) Du Cinéma. Chapter 3(a) La Monnaie de l'absolu* (Gaumont, 1998).

16 John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade* (London; New York: Verso, 2007), 65.

of what a specific format is, he likes "to ask what formatting as a repeatable and standardizable pictorial practice does and how it becomes productive in the field of visual culture."[17] Latin "formatus, -a, -um" is the perfect passive participle of "formare": to form, make, prepare. The format, as literary scholar Michael Niehaus summarizes, is "not autonomous, but heteronomous; something has been 'done' to the formatted, so to speak."[18]

In *The Man Without Content*, his meditation on the status of art and the artist as creator in modernity, Giorgio Agamben explains how in ancient Greece there existed two different categories to grasp the reality surrounding us, namely *poiesis* and *praxis*: "[Ce]ntral to praxis," he writes, "was the idea of the will that finds its immediate expression in an act, while, by contrast, central to poiesis was the experience of production into presence, the fact that something passed from nonbeing to being, from concealment into the full light of the work."[19] Agamben delineates how, starting with the qualitative shift in the Romans' translation of *poiesis* into *agere*, which clearly designates a "voluntary production of an effect," through the labor theories from John Locke via Adam Smith to Karl Marx, the two originally distinct terms gradually merged into *praxis*, that is into the idea of a productive, purposeful and willed action that would eclipse *poiesis'* original conception as "being a mode of truth understood as unveiling, ἀ-λήθεια [aletheia]."[20] In its modern use, *poiesis* came to be used in the narrow sense of pertaining to literary or artistic composition, but its original meaning undeniably included a notion of criticism and theory that reflects on the way of how something comes into existence.[21]

It is interesting to note that David Summers, whose work I will mention again in the section on *Format*, uses a quote from Plato's *Symposium* about the term *poiesis* in the epigraph of his introduction to *Real Spaces*, which reconciles the theoretical approach to art history with a decided focus on the actual production of artistic cultural artifacts around the world:

> You know that *poiesis* is more than a single thing. For of anything whatever that passes from not being into being the whole cause is composing or poetry; so that the productions of all arts are kinds of poetry, and their craftsman are all poets … But … they are not called poets: they have other names, while a single section disported from the whole of poetry – merely the business of music and meters – is entitled with the name of the whole.[22]

17 Roland Meyer, "Formatting Faces: Standards of Production, Networks of Circulation, and the Operationalization of the Photographic Portrait," in *Format Matters: Standards, Practices, and Politics in Media Cultures*, ed. Marek Jancovic, Axel Volmar, and Alexandra Schneider (Lüneburg: meson press, 2020), 149.

18 Michael Niehaus, "Kleine Formate. Vorüberlegungen" (Manuscript, November 25, 2017), 9, https://kw.unipaderborn.de/fileadmin/fakultaet/Institute/kunst/Forschung/Kulturen_des_Kleinen/Paper_Niehaus_Kleine_Form.pdf.

19 Giorgio Agamben, *The Man without Content* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 68f.

20 Agamben, 69.

21 For a careful and in-depth discussion of how Martin Heidegger conceptualized the term *poiēsis* at different times of his career, especially during the period at the University of Marburg (1923 to 1928) and in the early 1930s, before the lecture course in 1935 that resulted in the publication of *Introduction to Metaphysics* in 1953, see Alexander Ferrari Di Pippo, "The Concept of Poiesis in Heidegger's An Introduction to Metaphysics," *Thinking Fundamentals, IWM Junior Visiting Fellows Conferences* 9 (2000): 1–33; Robert Sinnerbrink, "Technē and Poiēsis: On Heidegger and Film Theory," in *Technē/Technology. Researching Cinema and Media Technologies – Their Development, Use, and Impact*, ed. Annie van den Oever (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014); Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2000). On the intersection between a critique of waged labor in Modernism and the social and theoretical implications of poesis as self-determined work, see the chapter "Modernism, Repetition and the Readymade" in Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form*, 49–79.

22 Plato, *Symposium*, 205B–C, quoted in David Summers, *Real Spaces. World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (London: Phaidon Press, 2003), 15.

Summers, too, seems wary of abstract theoretical approaches that solely attempt to describe the meaning of an isolated cultural artifact. Instead, the art historian suggests that rather than asking "What did this mean, and how do the forms in which it was realized express that meaning?", the question should be phrased as "Why did people continue (or not continue) to make images of the Virgin Mary or Quetzalcoatl, or even unidentifiable personages, in the way they did?"[23]

Transferred to this book's subject of the short film, the question to ask, then, is less what brevity in film signifies, but rather how brevity as an external or self-imposed constraint shapes the production of an artwork, how it impacts the distribution channels a film is likely to take and, consequently, the spaces in which an audience interacts with a short film. Here, a poetics of the short film is not rooted in the genealogy of an Aristotelian normative poetics, but rather takes a much broader notion of poetics as a form of creation that allows for a reflection of its own entanglements with cultural, institutional, epistemological and economic contexts.

The questions I raise when arguing that within specific circumstances the short film is to be conceptualized as a format can only be answered by looking how relations of power – social, cultural, economic, political – are being negotiated in a multifaceted process involving several stakeholders – producers, consumers, institutions. To explore the "how and why" behind this process generates more insights than trying to bring down the highly diverse forms and expressions of the short film to a common denominator. In an essay Alexander Kluge was commissioned to write for a conference dedicated to his work, he states that the "informative content of a theory does not suffice. The expression, that is to say, how theory expresses itself in life's concrete situations, the HOW of theory comes to the fore. Only by narrative means are emotion and result connected, and theory is formulated in this connection."[24] In this essay, he outlines a conceptual triangle of his own between *poetics – power – theory.* Kluge concludes that "[t]heory is related to but not exactly the same as philosophy and the pleasure in thinking. It distinguishes itself by being goal-oriented, not interested in collecting, ordering, and observing alone. Theory is above all not merely objective; neither is it neutral."[25] Unlike theory that is solely providing (biased, according to Kluge) guidelines for the explanation of certain phenomena, Kluge's concept of the poetic is political: The poetic – from Greek *poiesis*: doing, making – is an active gesture, one that becomes political and bears potential for resistance:

> Like a force of water, narrative expression finds its way. [...] These powers become engaged as motors of progress—in an attitude of self-consciousness, Enlightenment, and avant-garde—only if one wins them over to progress, if one persuades them, against their original nature, to put stock in courage. Poetic power becomes political in a precise moment of emergency. Theoretical power becomes practically relevant in the same moment. The POETIC POWER OF THEORY is an alliance—hard enough to find—out of which emancipation of any kind becomes subjectively possible.[26]

23 Summers, 17.

24 Alexander Kluge, "The Poetic Power of Theory," trans. Leslie A. Adelson, *New German Critique* 47, no. 1 (February 1, 2020): 10. The symposium "Alexander Kluge: New Perspectives on Creative Arts and Critical Practice," October 11–13, 2018, at Cornell University, was organized by Leslie A. Adelson and Jacob Gould Schurman.

25 Kluge, 9.

26 Kluge, 10.

For Kluge, poetic power is expressed in narrative terms, regardless of the medium or its format, and he links this power to the elementary forces of nature such as water or an animal's fight-or-flight reaction. Furthermore, Kluge maintains that as the basic form of all *poiesis*, narration is always dialogic, even if the poet – the artist – is using a monologic form.[27]

Kluge does not expand on this thought in more detail, but in his essay the above-mentioned quote is followed, without further comment, by a stanza from Ben Lerner's poem *Mean Free Path* and a short prose text of his own (both of which I used as epigraphs to this chapter), which would suggest that he uses the notion of the *dialogic* in the Bakhtinian sense here. The premise of the "dialogic imagination" is that no *poiesis* exists in a vacuum, that no form of utterance is neutral but rather enmeshed in a network of meaning-making that has already been there previously and to which any thought, declaration, or action is simply adding another layer of meaning. Bakhtin's central argument, and one that Kluge's notion of the poetic force of theory sympathizes with, claims that neither an abstract or "formal" nor solely an ideological analysis of any utterance or *poiesis* is sensible, as all discourse is "a social phenomenon – social throughout its entire range and in each and every of its factors."[28]

Dialogism, as the fundamental trope that permeates Bakhtin's whole work, consistently raises questions regarding a network of hierarchies between a word and its signified or between the speaker and the addressee. In Bakhtin's word, "no living word relates to [an] object in a *singular* way: between the words and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme, and this is an environment that it is often difficult to penetrate."[29] In his definition, the dialogic orientation of language pervades every level of utterance, from the highly personal expression to the use of different social and professional jargons within the same language or between various languages that might belong to the same culture, what Bakhtin calls the same "socio-ideological conceptual horizon."[30] Bakhtin condemns contemporary linguistics and language philosophy for their advance toward "*unity* in diversity" and their insistence on a monologic context of an utterance that is suspended from any historical, political, cultural or social frame of reference.[31] In "Discourse in the Novel" he introduces the concept of heteroglossia – literally "a mixture of tongues" – as an extension to the notion of dialogism to emphasize that the dialogic nature of discourse produces a clash of social forces when different voices interact.

There is a decidedly productive gesture in this antagonism between different and heteroglot voices, as it requires active participation in the process of making the other understand your meaning, an "active understanding, one that assimilates the word under consideration into a new conceptual system" and that "establishes a series of complex interrelationships, consonances and dissonances."[32] Bakhtin's idea of an accomplished novelist, one who realizes the potential of her art form, finds a kindred notion in Kluge's poetic force of theory, where in a moment of strained encounter between two different powers – the poetic and the theoretical – a dynamic friction is created that can set something in motion.

27 Kluge, 11.

28 Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 259.

29 Bakhtin, 276.

30 Bakhtin, 275.

31 Bakhtin, 274.

32 Bakhtin, 282.

It is interesting to note that Bakhtin sets dialogism in prose apart from dialogism in poetry ("poetic" in the narrow literary sense), noting that the poetic use of "alien discourse" is inherently more restricted in this genre. Consequently, Bakhtin himself would not seem to grant poetry itself a poetic force in the Klugean meaning of the term. Instead, Bakhtin's idea of the poet is that of an artist able to produce an artwork that is self-contained, an expression of pure artistic intention without mediation. "In genres that are poetic in the narrow sense, the natural dialogization of the word is not put to artistic use, the word is sufficient unto itself and does not presume alien utterances beyond its own boundaries. Poetic style is by convention suspended from any mutual interaction with alien discourse," writes Bakhtin.[33]

Bakhtin's is a quaintly romanticized idea of poetry, one that produces an interesting clash with an argument forwarded by Kluge's poet-novelist-collaborator, Ben Lerner. In his essay "The Hatred of Poetry," Lerner traces the rejection of poetry from Plato's call for the banishment of poets from the Republic through the avant-garde's disillusionment with the actual revolutionary potential of the form to a contemporary type of nostalgic criticism that accuses poetry of failing to be democratic and inclusive, of failing to produce an "I [that] contain[s] multitudes," to quote Walt Whitman.[34] It is Lerner's thesis that the loathing of poetry – and he himself has contempt for it, must have it – is rooted in the fact that the art form's implicit aspiration to transcendence, to the kind of artistic purity Bakhtin seems to locate in poetry, is impossible to achieve. Bakhtin's idea of poetry as language that is a "pure and direct expression of [the poet's] intention"[35] is what Lerner would call Poetry with a capital "P," which designates an abstract potential of the medium that cannot be actualized in an individual poem itself.[36] According to Lerner,

> Poetry arises from the desire to get beyond the finite and the historical – the human world of violence and difference – and to reach the transcendent or divine. You're moved to write a poem, you feel called upon to sing, because of that transcendent impulse. But as soon as you move from that impulse to the actual poem, the song of the infinite is compromised by the finitude of its terms.[37]

Lerner maintains that the hatred of poetry and its defense are ultimately two sides of the same coin, as they both pay tribute to the abstract, utopian capacity inherent in Poetry that actual poems cannot possibly fulfil. Lerner would not sustain Bakhtin's take on poetry as "contained discourse" in which a fully realized artistic intention is literally possible in actual poems. "Poetry," Lerner maintains, "is a word for a kind of value no particular poem can realize: the value of persons, the value of a human activity beyond the labor/leisure divide, a value before or beyond price."[38]

While it is constructive to think Bakhtin's dialogism/heteroglossia in conjunction with Kluge's poetic force of theory, his definition of the poetic genre (which resembles more precisely the highly subjective and personal formal type of the lyric than of poetry

33 Bakhtin, 285.

34 Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, 1820–1865*, ed. Nina Baym, Robert S. Levine, and Arnold Krupat (New York, London: Norton, 2007), Section 51, 2253.

35 Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 285.

36 Ben Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2016), 14.

37 Lerner, 12f.

38 Lerner, 73.

in general) is rather incompatible with an art form that potentially bears political stakes.[39] In this sense, Bakhtin's and Kluge's use of the term seem conflicting. This, however, is an issue of lexicon, not of reasoning. Kluge's stance of the poetic as inherently dialogic and discursive, as a "form of practice saturated with theory,"[40] finds an analogy in Bakhtin, where "the actual life of speech, every concrete act of understanding is active [...] Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other."[41] Only in relation with each other, in a continued interplay between agreement and dissonance, in a collision and a balancing out of forces between production (*poiesis*) and observation/understanding (*theory*) can the notion of an aesthetic politics become relevant. In the words of Kluge: "The power (Macht) of the poetic and the power (Macht) of theory—if one dissolves the word power (Macht) into the labor contained in it, petrified concepts are secretly changed."[42]

The Klugean idea of a poetic force functions as a foundation from which I address the individual parts of the conceptual triangle. From this perspective on the poetics of the short film, *brevity, format* and *program* all need to be conceptualized in terms of the processes they initiate regarding the production and (re)organization of knowledge. I profess that I will not be able to close all the gaps that open up during the process of thinking about the short film as a type of moving-image practice placed within a particular creative and institutional framework. Instead of asking what a short film is, I reframe my question into what short films do, thereby artfully shying away from a theory of the short film via a poetics of the short film format.

39 The fact that young African American poet Amanda Gorman's recitation of her poem "The Hill We Climb" by far received the most media attention and sparked a wave of enthusiasm for poetry following Joe Biden's inauguration as the 46th President of the United States and the heated debate about the rights of translation into Dutch by a "white author" could be cited as an example for the political power of contemporary poetry. See Alison Flood, "'Shocked by the Uproar': Amanda Gorman's White Translator Quits," *The Guardian*, March 1, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/mar/01/amanda-gorman-white-translator-quits-marieke-lucas-rijneveld.

40 Kluge, "The Poetic Power of Theory," 14.

41 Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 282.

42 Kluge, "The Poetic Power of Theory," 14.

SPOTLIGHT
I Hope I'm Loud When I'm Dead

UK 2018, 20'50'', color, English

Director, Script: Beatrice Gibson
Cinematography: Sean Prince Williams, Ben Rivers, Nick Gordon, Beatrice Gibson
Editing: Ben Crooks, Beatrice Gibson
Distribution: LUX, London, https://lux.org.uk/

By turns raucous and reserved, I Hope I'm Loud When I'm Dead ponders the future of a world in flux as seen through the eyes of motherhood, accented by poets CAConrad and Eileen Myles.

Film still *I Hope I'm Loud When I'm Dead* (Beatrice Gibson, 2018)

For the first spotlight on a particular short film, I want to highlight Beatrice Gibson's *I Hope I'm Loud When I'm Dead*, which has a thematic link to poetry, but also a formal connection to *poiesis* in how I came to discuss it in this chapter as a political and resistant action that creates new meaning.

I Hope I'm Loud When I'm Dead is a synthesis of voices and images gleaned from different, consistently credited sources. The starting point for the film was a musical score by pioneering electronic composer and accordionist Pauline Oliveros, with which the film opens over blurry, confusing images edited together too quickly to make much sense to the viewer. The voice of the filmmaker is heard, who recounts a highly personal and unsettling panic attack she is experiencing on the subway. Her monolog is intercut with black and white images of (Gibson's own) children, of violent protests, of moments of mass panic and examples of climate catastrophes. "I can still feel my body except it's like the skin is gone. It's all nerve, edgeless, pulsating," the voice says. It is confusing, and intense for the audience to watch.

Then a hard cut to the eve of the inauguration of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States. In New York, Gibson sits with poets CAConrad and Eileen Myles in the latter's apartment, chatting and apparently engaging in one of the (soma)tic rituals Conrad is

famous for. On the soundtrack, we hear a crowd cheering and parts of Trump's speech. Conrad shuffles a deck of tarot cards. What will the future hold? Trump declares: "Together we will determine the course of America and the world for many, many years to come." Then, another hard cut, and CAConrad is seen in close-up, reciting their poem in full that also gives the film its title. Part of "I Hope I'm Loud When I'm Dead" reads:

> poetry
> can be
> of use
> the field of flying
> bullets the hand
> reaches through
> loving the aftertaste
> finding a deeper
> third taste
> many are
> haunted by
> human cruelty through
> the centuries
> I am haunted by
> our actions since
> breakfast
> you said too much poetry
> I said too much war[43]

Conrad's poem and Gibson's short film address similar topics: they are both a celebration of the profoundness of poetry, the many layers that are uncovered one after the other – *revealing an aftertaste, a deeper third taste* – and of the importance of play and creativity. They celebrate the banalities of everyday life – *our actions since breakfast* – and the opacity of poetic language as a reservoir for discovery and new knowledge, as an intense experience that challenges the straightforward usefulness of everyday speech. Polyvocal resistance, these poems and Gibson's film seem to suggest, is another answer, one opposed to Trump's monomania, to the question of what the future holds.

In a letter to Eileen Myles, Beatrice Gibson writes:

> In the two years following the birth of my daughter, Britain voted to leave the EU, Donald Trump got elected as US president, Grenfell Tower in London burnt to the ground, the #metoo movement happened and I suffered an acute bout of hormonally and politically induced anxiety. [...] When I met you, and partly in response, I was consciously trying to widen the predominantly male influences that had informed my films. I was consciously seek-

43 CA Conrad, "I Hope I'm Loud When I'm Dead," *The Toronto Quarterly*, April 26, 2013, http://thetorontoquarterly.blogspot.com/2013/04/poetry-month-2013-ca-conrad-i-hope-im.html.

> ing out a community of voices that I could pass onto my daughter that would draw a picture for her of a more inclusive and diverse world but, also, of a world that valued feeling as much as it did fact.[44]

One of the elements of short films consistently praised by filmmakers is their shorter response time. Their temporal proximity to events of international impact imbues them with a sense of urgency; they are a timely response to events happening on a global and personal level. Gibson's film collates material from different sources and in different formats. The intimate shots of her family at the beach or taking a bath on 16mm – a historically popular format not only for artists, but also for home moviemaking – are juxtaposed with contemporary news footage documenting issues of global concern: migration, climate change, mass protests against political leaders. It is a stark contrast between these worlds; almost unimaginable that they should exist simultaneously.

Poetry, too, can synthesize the highly personal with the utterly political when it is presented in such a polyvocal, or heteroglossic, manner as it is in *I Hope I'm Loud When I'm Dead*. Different voices merged into one film create a Whitmanian "I that contains multitudes." Far from the fetishization of auteur-cult, Gibson's short film creates a community through the mingling of different voices.

Film still *I Hope I'm Loud When I'm Dead* showing Eileen Myles (Beatrice Gibson, 2018)

Like the kinship between Alexander Kluge and Ben Lerner across generations and an ocean, Gibson's film is concerned with mentors and artistic genealogies. "As the presence of Conrad and Myles suggests, these films [AN: *I Hope I'm Loud When I'm Dead* and the companion piece *Deux sœurs qui ne sont pas sœurs*] leave behind the references to male avant-gardists that populate many of Gibson's

44 Beatrice Gibson, "Filmmaker Beatrice Gibson on the Importance of Eileen Myles' Essay 'Painted Clear, Painted Black,'" *Frieze*, February 19, 2019, https://www.frieze.com/article/filmmaker-beatrice-gibson-importance-eileen-myles-essay-painted-clear-painted-black.

previous works [...] to espouse a different citational politics, a citational politics of difference," writes Erika Balsom, a friend of the director.[45] The voices Gibson cites belong to poets Alice Notley, Audre Lorde and Adrienne Riche. All quotes are clearly referenced: "This is Alice speaking now," the voice says before citing an external source. Even though she is frequently exhibited as an artist in galleries of contemporary art with her films, Gibson's handling of references in this case firmly anchors her in the world of cinema: "I think that one of the great things about the commercial, mainstream film industry is the fact that the crediting system is actually really explicit, in the art world that's often not the case, you often encounter quite elaborate productions without any credits at all, which is something I really don't agree with. Labor should be named," says Gibson.[46]

While Gibson pays homage to the accomplished female and queer voices that came before her and who shape her sense of self, the next generation is addressed too, as both novice and teacher: "Dear Laizer," Gibson reads in a letter addressed to her daughter in the film, "I wanted to put all these voices in one frame for you, so that one day, if needed, you could use them to unwrite whoever it is you're told you're supposed to be." And later, already dressed in the black outfit with the brightly colored red lips that will be an important part of the climactic last scene, she says: "The person who teaches me the most, though, is you. Your jammy, buttery fingers as they pull me away from my desk. Because of you I am tone of voice. All nerve. Edgeless. Pulsating. I can breathe." The pulsating edgelessness associated with the panic attack at the beginning of the film is now transformed into a symptom of hopefulness.

The reordering of priorities – play before work – demanded by Laizer is symptomatic for Gibson's working mode at large. Her poetics manifests itself as a constant process of activation and negotiation, of questioning and rewriting: What to do with the material – the images and the voices? How to cope with feeling alien and overwhelmed? "In a wider sense, I didn't know what film I was going to make [...] at the very beginning and the elements become apparent the more I go along and the more I struggle with the material," Gibson says.[47] In the final scene, she resolves her struggle in a playful homage to yet another female influence, namely French director Claire Denis. Together with her son Obie, who wears a Mexican *lucha libre mask*, she dances uninhibitedly and rampantly to Corona's 1995 smash hit "Rhythm of the Night," just as Denis Lavant's character did in *Beau Travail* (1999).

Gibson struggled to find an ending, one that would bring together the different threads of her film – birth and death, motherhood and anxiety, the influence of (female) voices and of finding your own

45 Erika Balsom, "Edgelessness," in *Beatrice Gibson: Deux Soeurs*, ed. Axel John Wieder (Bergen, Berlin: Bergen Kunsthall; KW Institute of Contemporary Art; Sternberg Press, 2020), 13.

46 Beatrice Gibson, "Togetherness feels like a sensible way forward": An Interview with Beatrice Gibson, Vladimir Seput, Mubi Notebook, March 4, 2019, https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/togetherness-feels-like-a-sensible-way-forward-an-interview-with-beatrice-gibson. Short films' crossing of boundaries between the worlds of art and film/cinema will again be a topic of Chapter 2 (in the section on *Program*) and Chapter 4.

47 Gibson.

voice. When Obie got obsessed with Lavant's dance and wanted to recreate it daily over a long period of time, she decided that this would be the perfect conclusion.[48] Those viewers who know Denis' original might remember that this final scene constitutes a very open ending because the timeline of the film is jumbled. The penultimate scene strongly suggests that Adjudant-Chef Galoup, played by Lavant, will commit suicide back in France. This last scene, however, shows him dancing alone in a nightclub introduced earlier in the film when he was stationed in Djibouti. Gibson declares "it's about totally letting go or total abandon. [...] I had one chance and I had to fully go there and fully let go."[49] Only ostensibly without a deeper meaning, Gibson's final scene shows an intense moment of celebrating bodies in movement. That is the "deeper third taste" of Gibson's poetic last scene; it is a child's spontaneous and powerful reaction to a piece of film art and should, in this very moment, be felt rather than pondered over.

48 Beatrice Gibson during a Q&A session after the program "The Future Is Sisterhood" at 23rd Internationale Kurzfilmtage Winterthur, on Friday, November 8, 2019.

49 Gibson, "Togetherness feels like a sensible way forward": An Interview with Beatrice Gibson.

Coming into Being – Very Brief Histories of the Short Film

In paying tribute to the rhetorical figure of *brevitas* in that this thesis will be as brief as possible, but as long as necessary, I will at this point include a distinctly short historical overview on how short film has been produced, circulated and viewed since the birth of the medium. While this might not be an original or creative way to dive into the world of short films, I feel it is necessary to address some historical facets given that short films, as a format distinct from feature-length productions, have rarely been discussed in film studies in monograph form.[50] As mentioned in the introduction, the fact that the short film defies definition also makes it difficult to trace its genesis, but there are nonetheless some stepping stones from which a poetics of the short film can be constructed. "A continuous and consistent history [...] cannot be substantiated, and to claim it would be to drive a taproot into the ground instead of creating a profitable network of references."[51] In order to begin casting such a net of observations and references to write the histories – plural – of short films, I will put a distinct focus on moments of institutionalization and processes of efficiency in regard to short film production and distribution. I will also establish a historical dimension to my conceptualization of the short film as a format.

Corinna Müller has made a particularly interesting attempt for a theoretical model of film history by defining historical phases according to the progression of film length. Far from being a banal objective measurement, she claims the lengths of films do not merely reflect technical limitations, but rather are "structure-forming for many film-historical phenomena. It had an impact on the film industry, its organization and modes of production, on the cultural-historical evaluation of the medium of film, on narrative techniques in films, on the structure of cinema programming and its aesthetics of reception, and thus also on audiences."[52] Focusing on the example of Germany, Müller identifies four phases of standard film lengths that were directly connected to cultural expectancies toward the new medium, to infrastructures of filming and projecting, and to aesthetic and narrative innovation: 1) the early period of ultra-short films beginning in 1895, usually with film lengths of around 60 meters; 2) the time of short films and short film programs from 1906/07 onwards, with lengths ranging between 80 and 300 meters; 3) the time of mixed programs of longer works and short films beginning in 1910/11; and, finally 4) the rise of the feature film (more than 2000 meters) as the dominant mode after the end of World War I.[53]

50 Most accounts specifically focus on a particular genre or historical period. As Angela Haardt mentioned in her essay commemorating the 50th anniversary edition of Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen, "the history of short film is usually subsumed as part of national film histories." Angela Haardt, "A Different History. 50 Years of Short Film in Oberhausen," in *Catalogue 50. Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen* (Oberhausen: Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen, 2004), 73. Cynthia Felando provides an extensive history of live-action short films in *Discovering Short Films: The History and Style of Live-Action Fiction Shorts* (2015), which for the most part just addresses the US-American context. A good source for a discussion of the history of the short film with a particular focus on the British context is Eileen Elsey's and Andrew Kelly's *In Short. A Guide to Short Film-Making in the Digital Age* (2002). In April 2001, the German online portal Filmdienst published a thematic special issue on short films, including accounts tracing the history of the form in the German context and Katrin Heinrich offers some cursory thoughts on a historical timeline in her monograph on the short film as a "Gattung" (which in English cannot be distinguished from the term genre): Katrin Heinrich, *Der Kurzfilm: Geschichte, Gattungen, Narrativik* (Alfeld: Coppi-Verlag, 1997). Pepita Hesselberth and Carlos M. Roos edited a special volume on "Short Film Experience" for Empedocles: European Journal for the Philosophy of Communication, see Pepita Hesselberth and Carlos M. Roos, "Short Film Experience," *Empedocles: European Journal for the Philosophy of Communication* 5, no. 1 (January 1, 2015).

51 Christoph Schulz, "Wieder keine Poetik des Kurzfilms – wider eine Poetik des Kurzfilms," in *Kurz und klein: 50 Jahre Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen*, ed. Klaus Behnken (Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen, Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004), 162; translation mine.

52 Corinna Müller, "Variationen des Kinoprogramms. Filmform und Filmgeschichte," in *Die Modellierung des Kinofilms. Zur Geschichte des Kinoprogramms Zwischen Kurzfilm Und Langfilm 1905/06-1918*, ed. Corinna Müller and Harro Segeberg, Mediengeschichte des Films, Band 2 (München: Wilhelm Fink, 1998), 44; translation mine.

53 Müller, 45.

In her article, Müller traces the interdependencies between length and other historically relevant developments in film history and theory by establishing, for example, that the change from ultra-short films (shown as only one element of a whole program of attractions at fairs or as part of vaudeville performances) to short films coincides with the establishment of movie theaters, which warranted an adjustment in film length as it was not feasible to show 50 to 80 films to fill a whole program slot. The second and third phases between 1906 and 1918 – the prime time of short films – are the years Müller describes as essentially being the most "cinematic," because in their exhibition and thus also their formal possibilities, short film programs no longer had to fit into the vaudeville context nor prove their cultural prestige by emulating the length of a stage play.[54]

The short film may have its historical roots in the first film ever shown, yet it was not born in 1895. The short film as a category has existed only since it came to be distinguished from the feature film.[55] To paraphrase Thomas Elsaesser's take on a poetics of obsolescence, the short film is a retroactive invention that essentially signals a distinction or a rupture not in a technical sense (as in the change of format from analog to digital), but rather on the level of exhibition practice and cinematic institutionalization.[56] This shift was accompanied by the immediate subordination of the short film to the longer "feature film," which is also indicated by the term "feature" itself, designating a "special attraction" or a highlighted attribute.[57] "A feature film was a film that cost more to make, more to buy, more to rent, and sometimes, even though not always, it cost more to see. That usually meant longer films and after 1909 'feature' was the term generally used for any multireel film," writes Eileen Bowser in her account of the history of the American film industry from the establishment of storefront nickelodeons up to the premiere of Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* with full orchestra accompaniment in 1915.[58] The film industry itself cultivated this discourse of distinction in their advertising for feature films by pointing to high production values, large budgets and narrative complexity on the production side, as well as to prestigious exhibition locales (such as opera houses and venues for classical theatre) that would attract a higher-income, mainly middle-class clientele. As some sort of diminutive entertainment wedged between newsreels and the main attraction, the short film nonetheless remained an important part of cinema culture well into the 1950s.

54 Müller, 74.

55 Some would even argue that one can only really speak of short films after 1905, when films began to measure more than 15 to 20 meters (one to two minutes of length). This is a semantic phenomenon that is again recurring in digital times as authors make a claim for the distinction between short films and other forms of short audiovisual content. See, for example, Elke Rentemeister et al., eds., *Ultrashort reframed* (Luzern: Hochschule Luzern - Design & Kunst, 2015). Also, the article on so-called "micro movies" by Lisa Gotto, "Micro Movies. Zur medialen Miniatur des Smartphone-Films," in *Kurz & Knapp: zur Mediengeschichte kleiner Formen vom 17. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. Michael Gamper and Ruth Mayer (Bielefeld: transcript, 2017), 349–66.

56 See Thomas Elsaesser, "Media Archaeology as the Poetics of Obsolescence," in *At the Borders of (Film) History: Temporality, Archaeology, Theories*, ed. Giuseppe Fidotta, Alberto Beltrame, and Andrea Mariani (Udine: Forum, 2015), 106.

57 Thomas Elsaesser also remarks on the hierarchical component of distinguishing a newer format from an obsolescent one and points out that this relation is complex: "In other words, the obsolete occupies an ambiguous place, from which we may well wish to take an inner distance: either ironic or emphatic, or both. Given its previously negative connotations, obsolescence might even join those self-ascriptions, where a minority proudly refers to itself by the abusive or offensive terms the majority insinuates under its breath: the obsolete understood as the *bad-ass* or *steam punk* among the shiny new media gadgets of the digital era." Elsaesser, 106; emphasis in the original. I will expand on the idea of a subversive quality of that which is deemed inferior in the discussion of *brevity* in Chapter 2. Adrian Martin writes about the dismissive condescension that the designation "short film" or, even worse, "shorts" entails. See Adrian Martin, "Jumping from the Feature-Length Bridge," *Empedocles: European Journal for the Philosophy of Communication* 5, no. 1 (January 1, 2015): 20. But the quippy label "shorts" is actually a good example for a term that has turned into a positively connoted and lovingly used one within the tightly-knit short film community. Internationale Kurzfilmtage Winterthur, for example, used the slogan "In Shorts We Trust" for its 2019 advertisement campaign, and the short film competition strand of Berlinale has been called "Berlinale Shorts" since 2008. See "Berlinale Shorts," accessed October 16, 2021, https://www.berlinale.de/en/festival/sections/berlinale-shorts.html.

58 Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907–1915*, History of the American Cinema (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 191.

Classical short films were an integral part of advancing the innovative use of new technological developments (such as sound production strategies), and the contemporary film industry did not overlook the form's significance to their trade. In 1926, the professional newspaper *Variety* initiated a series of reviews that put a spotlight on short films, and the *Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences* introduced the category of "short subjects, comedy" and "novelty" as early as 1932. The end of the classical Hollywood system, which included the production and distribution of short films in its vertical integration, and the emergence of television as a new mass medium contributed to the departure of the short form from theatrical venues.[59] With pressure rising to generate revenue by selling advertising time before the feature, showing short films has, economically speaking, simply become inefficient. Even though less expensive when it comes to production, the short form is proclaimed as being uneconomical (inefficient) and thus, quite paradoxically, as wasting precious time. I will expand on this essential point in more detail in Chapter 3.

In parallel with the status of the short film as a (albeit important) sidekick to the main attraction of the feature film in what constituted classical cinema in the studio era, the short film has established itself as part of a trajectory alternative to the commercial film industry, fostered, among other things, by the development of low-cost, substandard film gauges, that is, everything below the width of 35mm – which itself became the standard gauge for theatrical exhibition as early as in 1909.[60] The history of short film's visibility is intimately connected to the circulation of technical formats, especially the success of 16mm in non-theatrical exhibition and, later on, the digitalization of leisure time with the advent of the World Wide Web. The lower costs associated with 16mm film and the more easily available 16mm projection equipment for non-theatrical, that is private or educational, screenings of films meant that the short film was widely distributed from the mid-1950s onwards in the form of educational or industrial films – or "useful cinema" – at schools, universities, in factories or community halls. In their more artistic rendition, short films were also non-theatrically shown in private cine-clubs or in artists' spaces.[61]

Both the historical avant-garde in the 1920s and 30s and the post-war avant-garde experimented with short films, thus heralding a heyday of short artistic films that distinguished itself from the more pedestrian uses of the format as part of family, amateur or utility productions. It is then also not surprising that short film history has found its way into academic textbooks and critical discussions almost exclusively as part of avant-garde film history, where the fact of their brief duration is usually not a point of analysis. Malte Hagener notes that the practices of the avant-garde were constitutive of what would become the blossoming film culture from the 1920s onward:

> Screening societies and cine-clubs, magazines and pamphlets, exhibitions and gatherings laid the groundwork for film schools and archives, for art house cinemas and journals, and for festivals and exhibitions. Contrary to received wisdom which sees the avant-garde as a short-lived and ultimately failed attempt at establishing an alternative film aesthetics, this book [AN: *The Emergence*

59 See Achim Forst, "Feiern und verkaufen. Der Kurzfilm (über)lebt auf den Filmfestivals der Welt," *Filmdienst* 54 (2001): 21; Cynthia Felando, *Discovering Short Films: The History and Style of Live-Action Fiction Shorts* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 31.

60 John Belton, "Historical Paper: The Origins of 35mm Film as a Standard," *SMPTE Journal* 99, no. 8 (1990): 652.

61 See Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson, eds., *Useful Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). On the use 16mm in artists' films, see Erika Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 82ff.

> *of Film Culture*, 2014] considers it as a social and political force aimed at transforming the very essence on which our discipline still depends.[62]

Films outside the standardized production practices of industrial filmmaking and the configurations of film experience that they entail allow us to reflect on how knowledge of film culture is standardized and canonized, but also challenged. When I conceptualize the short film as a format, my epistemological interest lies exactly in examining how short films bear on the (re)ordering of knowledge. For each point of my conceptual triangle – *brevity, format* and *program* – I will delineate how they are related to technological and institutional issues and knowledge production.

It is with this conviction in mind, given the close affinity between avant-garde and short forms, that my thesis will outline the short film format as a pivotal influence on film culture, which deserves more attention from both scholars and critics. The notion of an "alternative film aesthetics," or what A. L. Rees called a play with "ciphers of resistance to normal vision" in *A History of Experimental Film and Video,* was central to the practice of avant-garde film and is to this day considered to be one of the inherent characteristics of the short form.[63] As yet another affinity between brevity and a commitment to intervention into established orders, Rees identifies a prevailing strand of political urgency in the history of experimental film and video art from the 1960s onwards that he connects to the earlier pre-war avant-garde which laid the basis for a practice that combines experimentation, both in production and exhibition, with socio-political activism.

After the decline of the studio system with its in-built promotion of upcoming talent, it was the newly established film schools that continued to develop short films as a suitable format for training young filmmakers.[64] The choice to produce a short film is one born of logistics and efficacy: both the time students can invest in their production as well as the budget their school can allocate to these films is highly restricted. Furthermore, the exhibition platforms for student works are typically connected to festivals dedicated to short films, which regularly also offer training and educational programs for upcoming filmmakers. The development of feature films within an educational context is simply not feasible.[65] As a reflection of this trend of film schools taking over the promotion of young talent, the *Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences* introduced the Student Academy Awards in 1973. The production of short films is a vital component of film school curricula to this day. Not least due to this correlation between short film and student film, it follows, however, that films of brief duration have garnered a somewhat negative reputation as being merely five-finger exercises, as a necessary but involuntary and therefore forgettable step on the road to making feature-length films. While this might certainly be true in the case of so-called "calling card films" made to demonstrate a young filmmaker's skills to potential producers or investors, it is an unfair generalization of the short form to write it off as a simple training exercise for whatever bigger, more important works come next.

62 Malte Hagener, ed., *The Emergence of Film Culture: Knowledge Production, Institution Building and the Fate of the Avant-Garde in Europe, 1919-1945* (New York: Berghahn, 2014), 9.

63 A. L. Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, BFI, 2011), 6.

64 Notable film schools that were founded during this time include the Institut des hautes études cinématographiques (1943), UCLA (1947), the National Higher School of Film, Television and Theatre in Łódź (1948), the Bejing Film Academy (1950), the Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen 'Konrad Wolf' (1954), the London Film School (1956), NYU Tisch (1965), and the Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin (1966). Earlier film schools include the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in 1919, the University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts in 1929, and the Deutsche Filmakademie Babelsberg (1938 to 1944, an institution run by the Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda).

65 The Bachelor program in "Video" of the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, for example, does not allow their students' films to exceed a maximum duration of 15 minutes.

Not only the historical avant-garde, but also a whole range of artists and filmmakers from different generations have taken to the short form, which often allows for greater authenticity related to independent production processes, as their means of expression. It is no coincidence that the Oberhausen Manifesto, as a protest against the petrification of funding schemes and aesthetic innovation was signed at the eponymous short film festival in 1962. Altogether the group produced an impressive number of short films. Among them is Alexander Kluge, who was co-initiator of the manifesto and is an important reference throughout this book as a filmmaker who has conceptualized a poetics of the short or small form.[66] The manifesto stipulates the importance of governmental funding for short films: "One of the three demands of our manifesto referred to the need to permanently secure the production of short films as the 'natural field of experimentation for revitalizing film'. We intended to produce feature-length films in the future. But we believed that the elementary basis for this would be that we would always be able to return to short film in between again," Alexander Kluge recalls.[67]

In an introduction to a program shown in Oberhausen in 1966, German film historian Enno Patalas makes the interesting observation that the new use of the term "Kurzfilm" in the 1950s in Germany (as opposed to the older designation "Kulturfilm") was a political statement, modelled after the French "court métrage". According to Patalas, that term was used polemically in France to clearly differentiate short films from the productions of the conservative feature film industry. With the emergence of the *Nouvelle Vague*, Patalas claims, the differentiation between "court métrage" and "long métrage" went back to being merely "metrical" (that is, only related to objective length), as this generation of directors also reformed the cinematic language of the feature film, and the "court métrage" as a critical category lost its significance. Accordingly, Patalas suggests that we might need to be more conscientious in our use of language and to differentiate between "Kurzfilm" (relating to an aesthetico-political stance) and "kurzen Filmen" (which merely relates to the total length of a film without expressing a difference in kind).[68]

As with film schools, short film festivals emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, the oldest being the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen, which was founded in 1954 as part of the local adult education center. To this day, festivals are the most important exhibition platform for short films, as a space where professionals – from filmmakers to curators to the rare buyer of short films for television broadcasting – a dedicated cinephile audience, and efforts in media education for children and youth to foster the next generation of film lovers come together in a clearly defined space and time. It is impossible to conceptualize the format of the short film without the real space of the festival. For this reason, I will trace the emergence of the festival space as an alternative platform to traditional cinema exhibition later on in this chapter.

66 It is a myth that the Oberhausen group would later form the generation constituting the *New German Cinema* movement (*Neuer Deutscher Film*), as with the exception of Alexander Kluge, the major filmmakers whose names are associated with it (for example Volker Schlöndorff, Werner Herzog, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Wim Wenders) were not among the 26 signees. In a publication discussing the main tenets of the Institut für Filmgestaltung at the Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm (Ulm School of Design), which was founded in 1962 by Alexander Kluge, Detten Schleiermacher and Edgar Reitz as a direct result of the manifesto, Kluge notes that there is an official history of *New German Cinema* as well as an underground history which is based on a "dramaturgy of brevity": "The so-called New German film is measured in the public eye by its successful films. The roots of these successes, however, lie in its sidelines. From 1962 to 1980, the Institut consistently dealt with these sidelines. The main approach is, in simple terms: radical brevity [...]." Klaus Eder and Alexander Kluge, *Ulmer Dramaturgien: Reibungsverluste: Stichwort, Bestandsaufnahme*, Arbeitshefte Film 2/3 (München: Hanser, 1980), 5; translation mine.

67 Alexander Kluge, "Kurze Filme, lange Filme. Ein Erfahrungsbericht," in *Kurz und klein: 50 Jahre Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen*, ed. Klaus Behnken (Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen, Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004), 170; translation mine.

68 Enno Patalas, "Der Kurzfilm ist keine starre Kategorie," in *Kurz und klein: 50 Jahre Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen*, ed. Klaus Behnken (Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen, Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004), 158.

Short films began to receive more visibility in the 1980s, the 1990s and the early 2000s in three completely different public contexts. Television in the 1980s introduced the short form to a large audience in the form of advertising and music videos. The 1990s brought an expansive introduction of film and video art – which at the time were predominantly of the short form as well – into the spaces of art galleries or museums for modern art. The early 2000s saw the rise of the *e-short*, to use Barbara Klinger's term, as a response to users' appeal for entertainment and the technological constraints of pre-broadband internet.[69]

While I will not include any form of advertisement or the genre of the music video in my analysis,[70] the position of the short film at the nexus of festival and art world in what observers have come to call, respectively, "other cinema,"[71] "othered cinema,"[72] "cinéma d'exposition,"[73] "gallery film,"[74] or "differentiated cinema,"[75] will become an important cornerstone for a theory of the short film as a format and its various interrelations within both a set of cultural, political, economic and social sphere of practices and a framework of superordinate and associated institutions.[76] The section on *Program* in Chapter 2 will focus on this in more detail.

The current boom of the short format began around the turn of the last millennium and shows interesting parallels to the contexts of early film production and distribution at the turn of the 20th century, as becomes clear in an article on early film about the affiliation between short forms and the logics of efficiency in modernity by literary scholar Ruth Mayer:

69 Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 191–238.

70 I do not wish to diminish the significance of the music video to the technical and aesthetical development of the short form, but in its original function of promotion of a cultural product (a song) within the institutional framework of television, the music video as a format considerably differs from the short film format as I want to analyze it against the non-commercial background of the short film festival. For discussions of the history and aesthetics of the music video, see for example Carol Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video: Aesthetics and Cultural Context* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Roger Beebe and Jason Middleton, eds., *Medium Cool: Music Videos from Soundies to Cellphones* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Henry Keazor and Thorsten Wübbena, eds., *Rewind, Play, Fast Forward: The Past, Present and Future of the Music Video* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2010); Diane Railton and Paul Watson, *Music Video and the Politics of Representation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011); Carol Vernallis, *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Holly Rogers, *Sounding the Gallery: Video and the Rise of Art-Music* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Henry Keazor and Thorsten Wübbena, *Video Thrills the Radio Star. Musikvideos: Geschichte, Themen, Analysen* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2014); Martin Lilkendey, *100 Jahre Musikvideo: eine Genregeschichte vom frühen Kino bis YouTube* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2017); Lars Henrik Gass, ed., *After Youtube: Gespräche, Portraits, Texte zum Musikvideo nach dem Internet* (Köln: Strzelecki Books, 2018).

71 Raymond Bellour, "Of An Other Cinema," in *Art and the Moving Image. A Critical Reader*, ed. Tanya Leighton (London: Tate Publishing, 2008), 406–22.

72 Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*.

73 Jean-Christophe Royoux, "The Time of Re-Departure: After Cinema, the Cinema of the Subject," in *Art and the Moving Image. A Critical Reader*, ed. Tanya Leighton (London: Tate Publishing, 2008), 340–54.

74 Catherine Fowler, "Room for Experiment. Gallery Films and Vertical Time from Maya Deren to Eija-Liisa Ahtila," *Screen* 45, no. 4 (2004): 324–43.

75 Ian White, ed., *Kinomuseum: Towards an Artists' Cinema* (Köln: König, 2008).

76 For case studies and general overviews, also with a focus on Swiss filmmaking, see François Bovier and Adeena Mey, eds., *Exhibiting the Moving Image: History Revisited* (Zurich: Jrp Ringier, 2015); François Bovier and Adeena Mey, eds., *Cinema in the Expanded Field* (Zurich: Jrp Ringier, 2015); François Bovier et al., eds., *Minor Cinema: Experimental Film in Switzerland* (Zurich: Jrp Ringier, 2019).

> The short forms' relevance in modernity is closely related to the trend towards acceleration in knowledge formation, to the emergence of a global public sphere and global markets, and to the development of new media technologies and mass media. More than ever before, scarcity in form means speed in transmission. Both the information society's rhetoric of efficiency and the entertainment industry's regime of diversification demand compact and condensed effects.[77]

The same holds true for the turn of this millennium. The development of online distribution strategies favored, at least in the early period, short content because of these films' smaller file size, which made them easier and faster to upload, download or stream.[78] While high-speed broadband internet is by far not a given for a majority of the world's population, today considerations in the Global North regarding data size have less to do with the velocity of transfers than ecological issues, as the streaming of video files produces a considerable carbon footprint.[79] In 2020, film scholar and curator Laura U. Marks founded the *Small File Media Festival* to celebrate the pleasures – both aesthetic and conscientious – of highly compressed media files that use low bandwidth. On their website, a quote by Jussi Parikka reads as follows: "Size matters, and small is better, tiny is best, which is not merely to argue for a different aesthetics or narrative structures (that too) but also for an understanding that all media is media ecology – and as such, directly related to infrastructures with environmental costs."[80]

It is a fact that outside of film festivals, the internet has become the major public platform for short films, and with the emergence of free as well as fee-based viewing platforms such as YouTube, Vimeo or Mubi, the short film has found a kind of online repository.[81] Indeed, many filmmakers who are not contractually bound to a distributor choose to upload their films to a non-fee based online platform approximately two years after completion, when a film's run of the festival circuit comes to an end. The major issue for short film aficionados and film scholars to this day, however, is that no organized platform yet exists that would resemble a publicly accessible archive. From the 71 platforms Barbara Klinger lists in her discussion of the e-short that emerged in the early years of the online short film boom (1999-2002), only 11 are still operational, but apart from the Star Wars Fan Site *theforce.net*, none of these sites feature original short content anymore.[82]

Projects like *UbuWeb* have significantly fostered the attention paid to experimental film by making many films accessible – albeit illegally – to scholars and students for the

77 Ruth Mayer, "Clipästhetik in der Industriemoderne. Das frühe Kino und der Zwang zur Kürze," in *Kurz & Knapp: zur Mediengeschichte kleiner Formen vom 17. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. Michael Gamper and Ruth Mayer (Bielefeld: transcript, 2017), 258, translation mine.

78 Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex*, 195ff.

79 For an excellent overview of the current state of research on this topic and in-depth discussion of certain aspects, see for example Nadia Bozak, *The Cinematic Footprint Lights, Camera, Natural Resources* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012); Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski, eds., *Signal Traffic: Critical Studies of Media Infrastructures* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015); Sean Cubitt, *Finite Media: Environmental Implications of Digital Technologies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); Sy Taffel, *Digital Media Ecologies: Entanglements of Content, Code and Hardware* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019).

80 Jussi Parikka, "Small File 2020," *Small File Media Festival* (blog), May 12, 2021, https://smallfile.ca/sfmf2020/.

81 On the shifts from collective to private access to moving images and the correspondences between film culture, cinephilia and digital configurations of film spectatorship see Malte Hagener, "Cinephilia and Film Culture in the Age of Digital Networks," in *The State of Post-Cinema*, ed. Malte Hagener, Vinzenz Hediger, and Alena Strohmaier (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 181–94.

82 Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex*, 237f. Still online, but in many cases discontinued as short film sites, are *theforce.net, heavy.com, ifctv.com, liketelevision.com, metv.com, newvenue.com, sho.com, shortspan.com, sightsound.com, studentfilms.com, 3btv.com* (all accessed July 2, 2021).

first time.[83] Among professionals, that is curators, scholars and archivists, a heated debate is being led about the merits and disadvantages of online access to historical film material. Some polemically denounce unrestricted access to moving images as a "neo-liberal turn in film archive and museum politics," which exchanges the care for historical artifacts for the marketable generation of content and dismisses the social, critical and political obligations of museal institutions.[84] Others argue in favor of a democratic, also unmediated access to collections as one of the functions of archives and museums, especially when it comes to opening doors for professional research.[85]

Before I turn to the conceptual cornerstones of the short film, then, the question of where and how short films are encountered in a public and institutional setting must be addressed. Using as a general example Internationale Kurzfilmtage Winterthur, where I have been a programmer and curator since 2012, will allow me to attend to some of the issues concerning the processes of selection and the presentation of short films in the context of a program.

The Short Film Festival

The festival is the most important public platform for the appreciation of short films and essentially a defining component of the short film as an art form. "If we cannot even determine what short film *is*, we have no choice but to attend festivals and to see what is shown, claimed and observed as such there. The short film seems to be in essential need of a festival," writes Christoph Schulz in a publication celebrating the 50th anniversary of Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen.[86] So what determines a short film festival?

To date, Marijke de Valck's dissertation on the phenomenal rise of the film festival as a cultural format published in 2007 is still the reference book for anyone working in film festival studies.[87] For de Valck, "[f]estivals are cultural canon builders, exhibition sites, market places, meeting points, and city attractions. Therefore, they are constantly dealing with a variety of agendas."[88] She traces these agendas in their historical development and in the mechanisms at play in today's festival circuit by presenting four case studies of Europe's major festival players – Berlin, Venice, Cannes and Rotterdam – and by focusing on one important node for each example: space or location, cultural criteria and cultural prestige, the role of the media, and a new specific form of cinephilia.[89]

83 See for example Erika Balsom, *After Uniqueness a History of Film and Video Art in Circulation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 85–93.

84 Alexander Horwath, "The Market vs. the Museum," *Journal of Film Preservation* 70, no. 11 (2005): 5.

85 See for example, Nicola Mazzanti, "Response to Alexander Horwath," *Journal of Film Preservation* 70, no. 11 (2005): 10–14.

86 Schulz, "Wieder keine Poetik des Kurzfilms – wider eine Poetik des Kurzfilms," 162; translation mine, emphasis in the original.

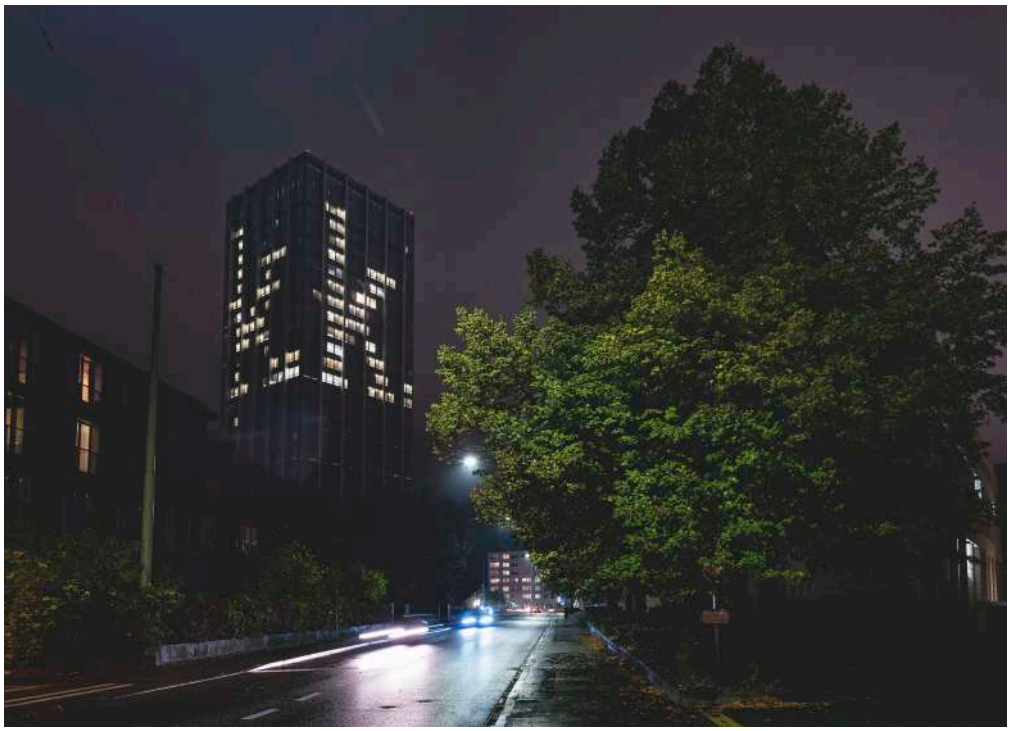
87 For an excellent overview of the history, theory and method of film festival studies and the practices involved in writing about festivals as a cultural phenomenon, see the edited volume of Marijke de Valck, Brendan Kredell, and Skadi Loist, eds., *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice* (London. New York: Routledge, 2016). For an original approach of "queering" film festival studies and problematizing the debates that are typically focused on major festival positions, see Antoine Damiens, *LGBTQ Film Festivals: Curating Queerness* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020). While Damiens specifically writes about LGBTQ festivals, some of his insights are transferrable to other types of festivals at the fringes of festival culture, to which I would empathically count the short film festival.

88 Marijke de Valck, *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), 102.

89 All of these nodes could also be discussed in terms of David Joselit's types of relations (work to citizen, community to institution, institution to state, state to globe) at play in a cultural format. See David Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 59ff. I will return to Joselit's types of contact that determine the format of an artwork in Chapter 2.

Even though de Valck comes from a traditional film and theater studies background, she applies different network and system theories (most prominently Latour's Actor-Network Theory) as tools to analyze film culture beyond what are customarily used as frameworks for cinema theory, such as semiotics, structuralism, psychoanalysis, and other theories in the tradition of literature studies. This allows her to move beyond the mere analysis of film as "content" and to also include political, spatial, economic and cultural ambitions as an integral part of how films are seen, analyzed and valued.

De Valck herself does not clearly distinguish between the terms *curator* and *programmer*, but the figure responsible for the selection of films and for compiling the programs is discussed in significant detail via a chronological assessment of the attitudes toward shaping the content and presentation of film festivals. De Valck divides the history of film festival programming into three phases: "Before Programming as We Know It," followed by "The Age of Programmers" and finally "Institutionalization, Standardization and Self-Referentiality."[90] For the first phase, which lasted from the inauguration of the first edition of the Venice International Film Festival in 1932 until the year of the great upheaval of the Cannes Film Festival in 1968, the competitions of festivals consisted of films submitted by governmental bodies to showcase their national cinema. De Valck states that during these initial thirty-six years, "programming, as we know it today, was not yet a core activity as film festivals were not responsible for the selection of their flagship competitions."[91] Only with the second phase – the "age of programmers" – did programming become a central concern for film festivals. This historical trajectory clearly shows a tendency towards institutionalization, which allowed film festivals to shift from the category of cultural event to that of cultural format, a term I borrow from art historian Dorothea von Hantelmann.



The Sulzer high-rise branded with the logo of Internationale Kurzfilmtage Winterthur.
© Eduard Meltzer / IKFTW

90 de Valck, *Film Festivals*, 27ff.

91 de Valck, 27.

Von Hantelmann attributes the success of large-scale exhibitions and the interest of the (tourist) masses in visual arts to the "cultural format" of the exhibition itself, which in her view mirrors the economic and social frameworks of modern Western societies. She defines four parameters to essentially constitute the exhibition as a cultural format: "(a) the instantiation of a linear notion of time [AN: i.e. the notion of evolution and progress as teleological]; (b) the increased valorization of the individual; (c) the exceptional importance attributed to the production of material objects; and (d) their subsequent circulation through commerce."[92] Von Hantelmann persuasively argues that any type of artwork wanting to meet with international success has to either intentionally or involuntarily reproduce these core values of what she defines to be "Western democratic market societies."[93] If, according to von Hantelmann, "the individual, the object, the market, progress, pluralism" are the main criteria for the success of the exhibition as a (Western) cultural format, the film program undeniably constitutes a very different cultural format, one that is bound to have a more difficult standing in contemporary cultural consumption.[94] Film exhibition addresses the audience as a monolithic entity, not prioritizing the individual and her specific expectations regarding temporal and physical interaction with the artwork. The exhibition practices and protocols of theatrical movie releases are incompatible with the criteria that turn art exhibitions at museums into a flourishing business.

It makes sense to speak of the festival as a cultural format only if certain parameters are set by a festival with regard to its self-understanding as a producer of cultural value through curatorial practices of selection, often conducted by – albeit precariously – employed professionals, by hosting competitions and awarding prize money and recognition, by garnering media attention and producing publications – "verbal architectures" – to substantiate their claim on expert knowledge etc. Also, the festival must be acknowledged as an institution within a larger ecosystem of cultural producers. [95] This ecosystem contains the following other major institutions:

1) Distributors dedicated to short films (the oldest being the *Agence du Court Métrage* founded in 1983 and the *Kurzfilmagentur Hamburg* founded in 1992), including national film institutes with designated commissioners and agents for short films (as is the case for many European countries).

2) Magazines such as the French *Bref* (since 1989) or *Short Film Studies* (a peer-reviewed journal founded in 2011 by Richard Raskin) or television programs such as ARTE's *Kurzschluss / Court-circuit* which started in 2001, offering interviews with filmmakers and coverage of festivals and themes relevant to the short film industries, as well as broadcasting programs of short films for which they bought the television rights.

3) Alliances such as the *Short Film Conference*, a non-profit organization founded in 1970 to foster collaboration within the international short film community by organizing workshops and conferences at festivals.

4) Markets to promote the economic status of short films (mostly targeting distributors and buyers for television), of which there are only two significant ones for the short film industry: the *Clermont Ferrand Short Film Market*, established in 1986 (the short film week itself was founded in 1979 and became a competitive festival in 1982) and the *Torino Short Film Market* founded in 2016.

92 Dorothea von Hantelmann, "The Rise of the Exhibition and the Exhibition as Art," in *Aesthetics and Contemporary Art*, ed. Armen Avanessian, Luke Skrebowski, and Éric Alliez (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011), 179.

93 von Hantelmann, 190.

94 Dorothea von von Hantelmann, "What Is the New Ritual Space for the 21st Century?," The Shed, April 8, 2020, https://theshed.org/program/series/2-a-prelude-to-the-shed/new-ritual-space-21st-century.

95 Thomas Elsaesser, *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 95.

Conceptually, I would argue that festivals which do not participate directly in cultural value production through practices of cultural legitimization are individual, albeit recurring, cultural events rather than cultural formats.[96]

De Valck argues that the second phase (1968 until the 1980s) is the most influential phase for the history of film festivals. She singles out 1968 as the starting point for this era, when both the cinephile public and many acclaimed filmmakers of the younger generation became dissatisfied with the organization of film festivals. The French Minister of Culture André Malraux fired Henri Langlois as the head of the Cinémathèque française in February 1968. As it represented the appreciation of film heritage and film culture beyond commercial cinema, the outrage among cinephiles and filmmakers over the dismissal of Langlois, the Cinémathèque's founder, was great. On initiative of François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Alain Resnais, Claude Berri and Claude Lelouch, a series of protests during the Cannes International Film Festival in May of the same year demanded not only the reinstatement of Langlois as director of the Cinémathèque, but also a restructuring of the festival's organization, which they accused of paying more attention to hosting glamourous events than to the art of film. The festival was prematurely terminated and no prizes were awarded to the films in competition. According to de Valck, "the result was significant and caused a snowball effect throughout the festival circuit. In the 1970s, film festivals were reconceived as independent organizations with professional programmers who picked films and constituted program selections."[97] One implication of this intervention was the establishment of the *Quinzaine des Réalisateurs* in 1969 – a section of the Cannes festival showcasing films that are too artsy, radical, marginal or "young" for the official selection. The Berlinale also established a similar strand of competition, the *Forum des Jungen Films,* in 1971.

The consideration of the practices that inform the selection process at film festivals is an important part of defining the format of an exhibition. For this reason, I will consider the roles of curators and programmers in great detail in the section on *Program* in Chapter 2. This quasi-ethnographical approach to writing about film festivals has, according to Diane Burgess, been a central trope in the development of film festival research and will dominate the following reflections, given my own entanglement with and participation in these processes.[98] I have been a curator and programmer for the festival since 2012, which in the parlance of the festival means I have compiled (curated) programs for out-of-competition strands as well as selected (programmed) films for the international competition. What are the processes that go into the selection and compilation of this particular exhibition format?

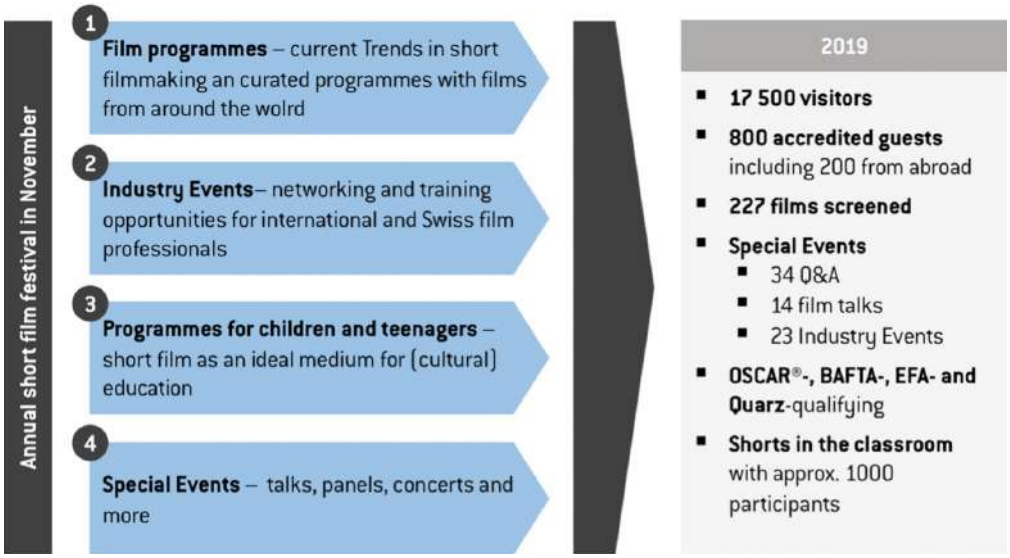
Founded in 1997, Internationale Kurzfilmtage Winterthur is Switzerland's largest and most important short film festival and one of the most renowned events of its kind worldwide, also leading to its admission into the ranks of festivals that are Oscar, BAFTA and European Film Award-qualifying. A selection at Kurzfilmtage also qualifies for a submission to the Swiss Film Award hosted by the Swiss Film Academy. With roughly 17,000 visitors and close to 800 accredited industry guests, it is a popular festival for the typical cinephile audience as well as an important hub for the domestic and inter-

96 For a discussion of how cultural prestige is built from a sociological perspective, see Marijke de Valck's essay in which she uses Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of the *field of cultural production*, of *social, cultural* and *symbolic capital* as well as of *habitus* to explain film festivals as sites for cultural legitimation: Marijke de Valck, "Fostering Art, Adding Value, Cultivating Taste. Film Festivals as Sites of Cultural Legitimization," in *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice*, ed. Marijke de Valck, Brendan Kredell, and Skadi Loist (London, New York: Routledge, 2016), 100–116. Regarding the work of film archives with reference to Bourdieu, see Bregt Lameris, *Film Museum Practice and Film Historiography: The Case of the Nederlands Filmmuseum (1946–2000)* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 46ff.

97 de Valck, *Film Festivals*, 28.

98 Diane Burgess and Brendan Kredell, "Positionality and Film Festival Research. A Conversation," in *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice*, ed. Marijke de Valck, Brendan Kredell, and Skadi Loist (London, New York: Routledge, 2016), 159.

national short film scenes, offering a wide range of training and networking opportunities geared specifically toward short film professionals, with events that attract numerous industry guests from Switzerland and abroad.



An overview of Internationale Kurzfilmtage Winterthur 2019

The festival pays great attention to addressing the concerns and needs of various audience segments: Both the competition selection and the out-of-competition strands feature a diverse collection of films that range between accessible, formally unadventurous films to highly experimental ones that might present as a challenge for an audience less versed in the semiotics of artists' films. As a general rule, the programs included in the *Hors Concours* section showcase contemporary short filmmaking that appeals to a cinephile audience. The programs of the *Focus* sections and the competitions are more heterogeneous, but expect a certain familiarity with what David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson would call nonnarrative formal systems, especially what they designate as "abstract" and "associational" forms.[99] Several programs also target younger audiences with the explicit aim of gently introducing the next generation of cinephiles to a cinematic language beyond mainstream moving image production.

The festival has annually received an average of 4,200 short films for the international competition and a steadfast number of roughly 340 short films for the national Swiss competition for the past 10 years.[100] Many festivals use platforms such as *FilmFreeway, Reelport* or *Shortfilmdepot* to receive submissions, but Kurzfilmtage requires filmmakers and distributors to submit their films via a custom-built form on the festival's own website. While it saves time for submitters to register their productions on platforms that service a wide range of events at a click of the mouse, Kurzfilmtage insists on personal interaction designed to ensure the film submitters takes a minimum amount of time to read the rules and regulations and, in the best case, considers whether their film fits the festival. Kurzfilmtage accepted submissions via Reelport between 2005 and 2013, but has since discontinued its collaboration with this platform in order to contain an ever-rising flood of submissions. Reducing the number of submissions might seem counter-intuitive from a PR point of view, where bigger is usually better, but

99 David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, "Nonnarrative Formal Systems," in *Film Art. An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 102ff.

100 IW = International Competition; CH = Swiss Competition. 2011: 4,283 IW, 331 CH; 2012: 4,077 IW, 312 CH; 2013: 4,712 IW, 338 CH; 2014: 3,851 IW, 358 CH; 2015: 3,919 IW, 291 CH; 2016: 4,012 IW, 319 CH; 2017: 4,187 IW, 337 CH; 2018: 4,400 IW, 363 CH; 2019: 4,438 IW, 367 CH; 2020: 4,589 IW, 384 CH; 2021: 4,210 IW, 395 CH.

this reduction in submitted films (from 4,712 in 2013 to 3,851 in 2014 for the international competition) is conducive to ensuring the quality of the selection process. It is the festival's position that expanding the programming staff to meet the increase in submissions is not feasible, as this would eventually compromise the festival's "curatorial signature."

Another common option for keeping the number of submissions in check, one taken over from the American model and originally more prevalent in the feature film festival category, is charging a submission fee. This is of course highly problematic in that it restricts access for filmmakers with very limited financial means, who may be part of an underprivileged demographic or originate from a developing country. It is counterintuitive to the self-conceptualization of most international film festivals as liberal, cosmopolitan forces fostering cultural participation to formally exclude large sections of global culture, especially since there are still other additional hurdles that these filmmakers have to overcome over which the festival has no influence (such as slow internet connections, which impede the smooth upload of preview or screening files to the festivals' servers). Winterthur has so far managed to refrain from asking for submission fees. However, considering the steady rise in the number of submissions, the introduction of a fee or some other form of gatekeeping are a constant point of discussion at the festival headquarters.

Once submissions have been received, the programmers of the international and Swiss competitions diligently watch all submitted films. Various festivals have different strategies for selection, but in the case of Kurzfilmtage, each programmer receives an allotted number of films to watch over the course of several months. Each programmer then brings a selection of films that they consider a valuable entry for a competition program to the so-called "marathon," the informal designation for the intense period of communal viewing and discussion in which all eight programmers collectively watch the others' selections and decide on the approximately 40 films that will constitute the festival's international competition. On average, then, less than one percent of the submitted films will be selected for the competition. The reason the festival restricts its number of programmers to eight is because the more input there is from various sources, the more heterogeneous the program becomes. And while heterogeneity in a competition program is not essentially undesired, a certain sense of programmatic cohesion makes a festival's reputation and is thus an important symbolic currency for industry and general audiences.[101]

Internationale Kurzfilmtage Winterthur was founded by a circle of friends with left-wing alternative sympathies and the inclination toward uncommonly flat hierarchies in its organizational setup is still upheld to this day. The artistic director coordinates the various curated and programmed strands, ensures the overall quality of the selection and is responsible for strategic considerations, but he or she is no *primus inter pares* among the programmers and has no additional influence whatsoever over the final selection. Major strategic considerations that inform the selection of films for a program, apart from their thematic fit for curated programs, include the balanced representation of gender and geographical origin of the filmmakers, a film's positioning in the festival circuit in the case of competition programs (premiere status), and the mixture of genres.

101 It is for this reason that I believe an in-depth analysis of (diachronic or synchronic) programming strategies as Bregt Lameris so brilliantly did it for the EYE Filmmuseum is not valid in the context of film festivals. Even though they certainly have what one could call a "curatorial signature," a festival's institutional character is not – or should not be – strong enough to warrant a strict curatorial or programming policy based on certain set parameters, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to work out specific aims or historical trajectories for festival curation. For festivals subscribing to what the former head of the film section of Switzerland's Federal Office of Culture, Nicolas Bideau, called the "intendant model" (one person responsible for all funding or, in the case of festivals, selection decisions), such an analysis might garner some insight. See Martin Blaney, "Swiss Film Chief Calls for End to 'Watering Can' Funding," August 8, 2005, https://www.screendaily.com/swiss-film-chief-calls-for-end-to-watering-can-funding/4023962.article. For most festivals, however, a reliance on programming policies would probably go against their self-conception as sites of discovery.

The flood of submissions that the widespread digitization of filmmaking and distribution made possible is a logistical challenge for most festivals with a supra-regional or even international appeal. A notorious example of a festival which tried to solve this problem with the help of big data analysis and algorithms is the Swiss Festival shnit, which is based in Bern but runs satellite festivals – or what they call "playgrounds" – in Buenos Aires, Cairo, Cape Town, Hong Kong, Moscow and San José.[102] According to an interview with the founder and director of shnit, Olivier van der Hoeven, the festival receives roughly 10,000 submissions each year. With the help of an algorithm that van der Hoeven developed with a team of British software programmers, a digital tool helps the programmers to find what van der Hoeven calls "relevant films," also taking into consideration the films that have not even been directly submitted to the festival. The algorithm takes its data from online sources such as festival catalogs, reviews or award notifications and rates the films according to predefined criteria governing a film's significance on the festival circuit. Van der Hoeven says: "We see, for example, that a film ran in competition at two festivals, maybe even won an award. Based on this information, the film has more relevance than a film that was only shown out-of-competition."[103] From this bulk of films, the algorithm selects the 1,000 most "relevant" entries which are then watched by the human festival programmers who are responsible for the final selection.

Van der Hoeven naturally emphasizes that the algorithm is only a supplementary tool to help navigate the unmanageably high number of submissions and contends that the curatorial function remains firmly in the hands of his programming team. This does not, however, diminish the problematic nature of surrendering to a machine a process that is supposed to reflect value judgements. On the distinction between human and algorithmic curatorial faculties, Gaia Tedone writes that

> In the context of [...] theoretical investigations and practical experiments, the role of the algorithm is often paralleled to that of the online curator. This is because algorithms are accountable for the organization and arrangement of visual content on the Web through activities such as searching, collating, grouping, sorting, analyzing, visualizing. Within online platforms, they sort out content according to criteria of relevance for users as well as manage the interactions between them. While this view rightfully attributes curatorial capacity to algorithms, the danger is that it reduces the activity of curating to a purely computable task, discarding the fact that the latter also involves cognitive faculties, such as contextualizing, interpreting, reflecting, sensing out, imagining, criticizing and inserting humor.[104]

It is not surprising that van der Hoeven's algorithm has met with great rejection from the festival community and has not been pursued further. Apart from not including activities related to cognition or emotion, a curatorial algorithm runs the risk of creating a

102 This is the current list in January 2021. The roster of participating cities keeps changing regularly, see "Worldwide.Shnit.Org," accessed October 16, 2021, http://worldwide.shnit.org/.

103 Regula Fuchs, "Was für einen Filmgeschmack hat ein Algorithmus?," *Der Bund*, September 26, 2016, https://www.derbund.ch/kultur/kino/was-fuer-einen-filmgeschmack-hat-ein-algorithmus/story/30006146; translation mine.

104 Gaia Tedone, "Human-Algorithmic Curation: Curating with or against the Algorithm?," in *Proceedings of the 7th XCoAx International Conference on Computation, Communication, Aesthetic & X* (7th xCoAx, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 127.

monopolized "power of connectivity," to use David Joselit's expression, which equates retrievability with value.[105] David Joselit coined the expression "Epistemology of Search" for the value-creation via searchability in ecosystems of information overload of which the World Wide Web is a paragon. He notes that "in informational economies of overproduction, value is derived not merely from the intrinsic qualities of a commodity (or other object), but from its searchability – its susceptibility to being found, or recognized (or profiled)."[106] This is not, according to Joselit, only a process that happens after the artwork has entered circulation, but one that informs the aesthetic configuration of the artwork when rather than creating new content, existing content is continuously (re)formatted: "What I want to suggest is that what matters more in our contemporary digital world is not making content, but configuring it, searching for it, finding what you need and making meaning from it."[107] What Joselit describes here is a blurring of artistic and curational functions in the epistemological dimension of the artwork.[108] Images contain a form of knowledge that is not as self-evident as the indiscriminate and ubiquitous use of visual content in Western cultures would suggest. Artistic/curatorial interventions are "politically urgent" when they manage to visualize or expose the "framing" relations between knowledge and citizenship – what Joselit would call their format – and by "authorizing" or de-authorizing these relationships.[109]

Compared to the competitions, the programs of the curated strands at Kurzfilmtage often appear to be more homogeneous and exhibit a greater dramaturgy owing to the fact that usually a single curator or a team of two are responsible for the selection of the films. The *Focus Programs* make up the main section of the curated strand and are comprised of a *Main Focus*, a *Country in Focus* and a *Person in Focus*. The most extensive of the thematic sections, the annual *Main Focus* consists of a range of programs dedicated to the same overarching subject, which could be a geographic region, a social phenomenon, an artistic trend, or some other thematic or formal point of view. The *Country in Focus* showcases films from a specific country from both a current and a historical perspective. Especially in regard to countries that can neither boast of a long cinematic tradition nor rely on stable funding for film productions, short films are ideal for discovering the cinematic treasures of a little-known film industry. The *Country in Focus* section aims to highlight cinematic languages and cultures that are rarely featured on the big screens of the Global North. The *Person in Focus* section consists of a retrospective and a 90-minute moderated masterclass dedicated to the oeuvre of a specific filmmaker who, given the emphasis on the exchange with the audience, must be alive and willing to travel to the festival. These could be emerging young talents or artists looking back on many years of working with the short film format. Outside of these three main sections of the *Focus*, Kurzfilmtage features additional individually curated programs which add to the diversity of the festival's offerings.

The festival explicitly fosters professional exchange among filmmakers and the dialog between artists and the audience. Given the relative unfamiliarity of the typical cinephile audience with the short film format and the fact that the selections in Winterthur often require viewers to fully engage with non-narrative, often experimental and hybrid films, the exchange between filmmakers and audience is part of an educational

105 Joselit, *After Art*, 84.

106 Joselit, 58.

107 David Joselit, The Epistemology of Search, A+R+P+A Journal Issue 02, November 13, 2014, http://www.arpajournal.net/the-epistemology-of-search/.

108 For Mieke Bal, all cultural activities are paradigmatically curatorial because any act of showing/performing/exhibiting is also a speech act, which is only deceptively objective, but in reality shapes the thought processes and experiences of the one who encounters it. See Mieke Bal, *Lexikon der Kulturanalyse*, trans. Brita Pohl (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2016).

109 David Joselit, *Heritage and Debt: Art in Globalization* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020), 254.

strategy that should help the audience access this type of filmmaking. *Kijken is een kunst (Watching is an Art)* was the title of a series of courses at the Dutch Filmmuseum, and it is an art that needs to be learned.[110] Therefore, each competition screening and most of the curated programs are followed by a Q&A or, in the case of curated programs, even longer in-depth conversations called "Context Talks." The festival covers all travel expenses and offers accommodation to all invited guests and filmmakers attending the festival, in order to include as many industry professionals from diverse backgrounds and from as many regions of the world as possible. The festival collaborates with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), which apart from contributing aid in economic, environmental and governance projects abroad also sponsors the cultural development of a series of countries from the Global East and South. Internationale Kurzfilmtage Winterthur endeavors to include films from these developing regions and to invite the filmmakers to attend the festival, thereby increasing the visibility of their artistic output and fostering professional networks between film industries of different developmental stages.

For the festival's curators (as well as other industry professionals and scholars, for that matter), an archive of approximately 75,000 films can be accessed via the festival's database. Most of these films are digitally available as compressed preview files; the database registers all important meta data and tags the films according to genre and content via an extensive list of keywords. As mentioned above, the fact that there are hardly any institutional short film archives hampers access to these films for students, scholars and programmers alike. A lack of canon and historical awareness of the short form are the result. On the other hand, archives and the specific practices involved in building and maintaining them are not objective repositories of information, because they include decisions about relevancy and traces of the political mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, which incidentally also account for the conceptual proximity between formats and archives.[111] "At the borders of history, then, lies data-mining and information-management," Thomas Elsaesser maintains.[112] Or in other words: representation depends on retrievability.

As long as there are hardly any systematic collection and targeted evaluation processes in place for short films, the lack of data sets prevents the empirical analysis of powerful larger trends.[113] The custom-built FileMaker database of Internationale Kurzfilmtage Winterthur is unique in that it allows for certain statistical queries. Since 2000, the database has stored all major information related to the films, their programming as part of the festival and their directors. The personal impression of many short film programmers, for example, that short films are getting longer is confirmed by a statistical analysis of the average length of all submissions from 2000 to 2021: While

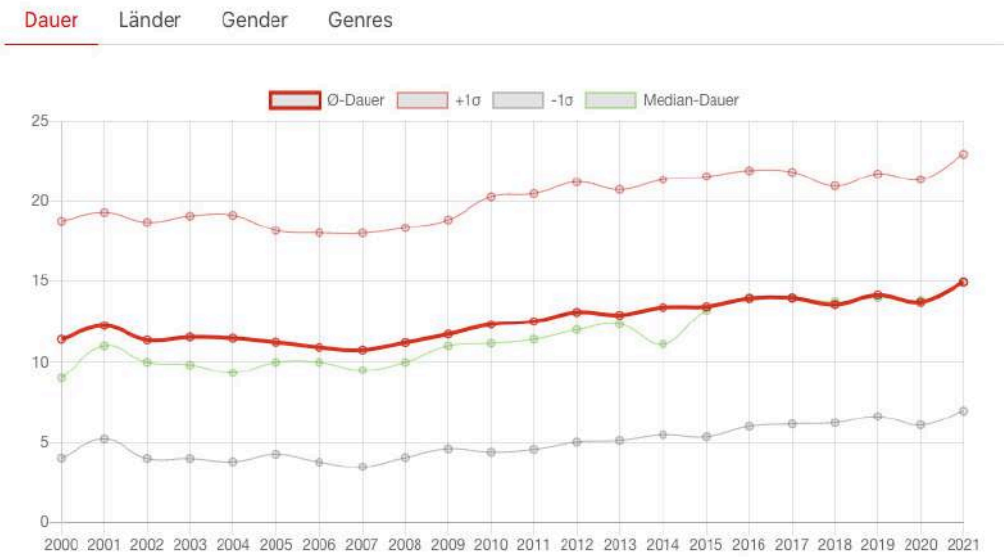
110 On the various educational strategies of the film museum, see Lameris, *Film Museum Practice and Film Historiography*, 107f.

111 On the archive as "an expandable symbolic structure, in which every single image becomes a standardized and interchangeable element within a structure of relations and differences" in the anthropometric identification system created by Alphonse Bertillon, see Meyer, "Formatting Faces: Standards of Production, Networks of Circulation, and the Operationalization of the Photographic Portrait," 55. On an etymological discussion of the archive ("from Greek *arkheion*: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded") as a site of political power and on the connections between archives and human memory, see Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996). On the archival and canon building practices of Anthology Film Archive's *Essential Cinema* series, see Benoît Turquety, "Der Künstler, die Anthologie, die Pädagogik. Peter Kubelka und der Kanon des Essential Cinema," in *Orte filmischen Wissens. Filmkultur und Filmvermittlung im Zeitalter digitaler Netzwerke*, ed. Gudrun Sommer, Oliver Fahle, and Vinzenz Hediger (Marburg: Schüren, 2011), 109–21.

112 Elsaesser, "Media Archaeology as the Poetics of Obsolescence," 108.

113 The research project "Film Circulation on the International Film Festival Network and the Impact on Global Film Culture" (2017-2021) led by Skadi Loist (University of Rostock/Film University Babelsberg Konrad Wolf) is the first of its kind to use large data sets accrued by six major film festivals to develop new methods for visualizing circulation patterns of films throughout the festival circuit. Clermont-Ferrand Short Film Festival is one of the players that provided information from their festival databases. See "Film Circulation – Film Circulation on the International Film Festival Network," accessed October 16, 2021, http://www.filmcirculation.net/.

the average length of a short film in 2000 was 11 minutes and 24 seconds, in 2021 the films had an average length of 14 minutes and 21 seconds – a difference of almost three whole minutes.[114] The relatively constant development of the standard deviation (σ) of roughly seven to eight minutes points to an interesting observation in that both the "longer" as well as the "shorter" short films have shown a tendency to increase in duration.[115] The same holds true for the films that were actually selected for competition, albeit to a lesser degree and with more variation between the years. The general trend shows an increase in average length from approximately nine minutes and 30 seconds to 14 minutes for films in competition.[116] It is not surprising that the factual selection contains slightly shorter films, as the desire to display the broadest range possible of new films means that longer works usually are more contested by the selection committee. For every film of 20 minutes and above, at least two shorter ones could have been picked instead.



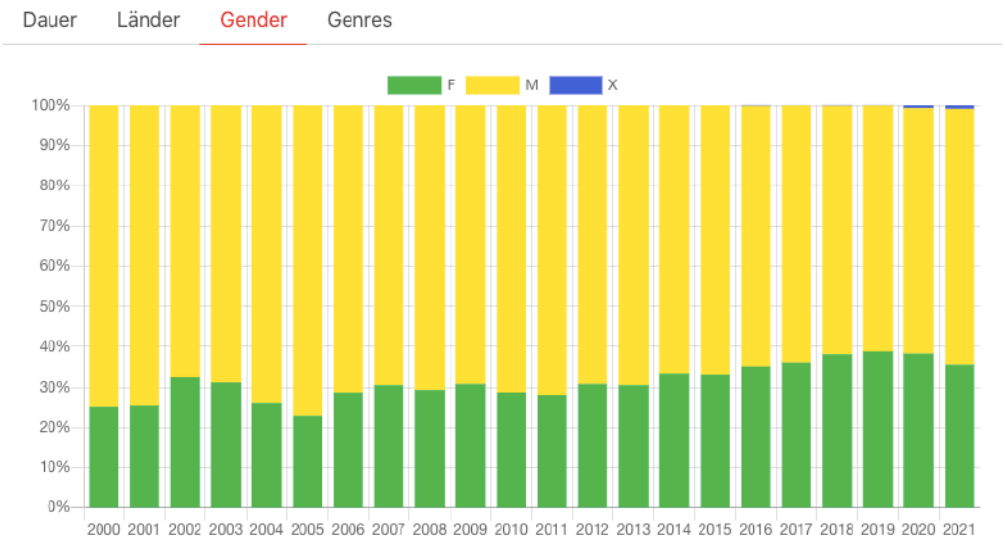
Average length of submitted films from 2000–2021

There is no straightforward answer as to why short films tend to become longer. Presumably it has to do with the decreased cost of digital hardware and its easier handling when it comes to storage and post-production: this invites filmmakers to pay less attention to the mass of material they shoot and points to the difficulty of condensing the material in the editing process. The curatorial signature of a festival like Kurzfilmtage also invites submissions by filmmakers who deal with social and political issues and for whose films a duration of under 15 minutes might feel inadequate given the complexity of the subjects they address.

114 The median ranges from nine minutes in 2000 to 14 minutes and 27 seconds in 2021. The average and median length between 2015 and 2021 are virtually the same, with only a difference of maximum 10 seconds between the two values.

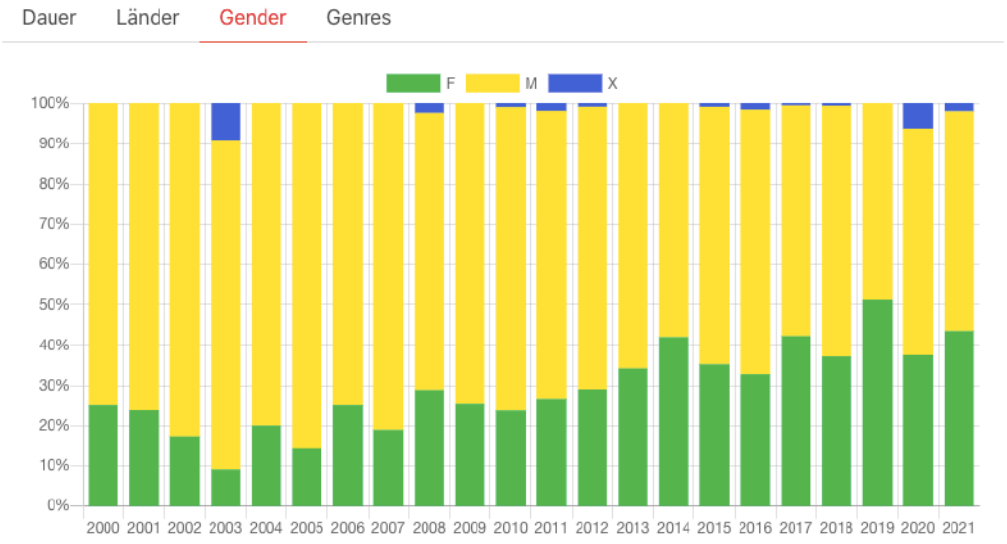
115 See Andrew Blackwell, "Statistiken - Einreichungen," accessed October 16, 2021, https://db.kurzfilmtage.ch/statistik. I wish to thank Andrew Blackwell from *Ballet Mécanique* for his help in visualizing this data.

116 For the full data, see Andrew Blackwell, "Statistiken – Auswahl," accessed October 16, 2021, https://db.kurzfilmtage.ch/statistik?screened_at_festival=true.



Gender ratio of submitted films from 2000–2021

Another hotly debated issue in the festival scene is gender equality in filmmaking. Ever since the allegations against Harvey Weinstein became public in October 2017 and major festivals started signing gender parity pledges in 2018, the representation of female directors and people of color in competitive festivals selections has received much attention from the industry, the press and the audience.[117] Given that the short film format is the main teaching tool at film school where gender disparity is less accentuated (at least for the educational context in Switzerland) and that it demands less time and production money, it is not surprising that the average number of films directed by women in international short film festival selections has traditionally been higher than for feature films.[118]



Gender ratio of films selected for the festival from 2000–2021

117 For a list of festivals which have signed the pledge, see "Festivals That Have Committed to the Gender Parity Pledge," accessed October 16, 2021, https://womenandhollywood.com/resources/festivals-that-have-committed-to-the-gender-parity-pledge/.

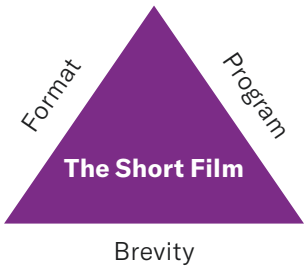
118 See "Gender Equality," accessed October 16, 2021, https://www.bak.admin.ch/bak/en/home/cultural-creativity/film1/filmfoerderung/gender-filmfoerderung.html.

That there has been a paradigm change in the past decade for a better gender ratio in the selection procedure is nevertheless evident when looking at the statistics of Winterthur as an example: Before 2013, when the current artistic director John Canciani took up his post, the average percentage of female filmmakers in the selections was more or less steadily around 30 %. With Canciani, a conscious effort to offer more diverse programming in terms of filmmaker gender and cultural background became noticeable: the average of female-directed short films rose directly to 34.19 % and has since surpassed the 40 % mark 5 times.

With these preliminary remarks on the notion of a *poetics* of the short film format and the *short film festival* as a cultural format as a basis, I will now outline the conceptual triangle of *brevity – format – program* in the second chapter. As mentioned in the introduction, these concepts are fundamentally connected to a critical engagement with notions of dialogism, of standardization and of selection. To discuss the epistemological potential and cultural, social and political impact of brevity in film in detail in the chapters to come, I felt it necessary to lay the groundwork with these explications on the history of the term poetics, on the histories of short films, and the history of Internationale Kurzfilmtage Winterthur.

CHAPTER 2

The Conceptual Triangle



As I will illustrate in this chapter, I locate the poetics of the short film at the intersection of *brevity, format* and *program*. There are numerous ways of conceptualizing this triangle, so rather than working toward the codification of an essence of the short film, I will focus on the way these three terms correspond to each other in terms of their affinities to issues of *limitation, restriction* and *institutionalization*, and how their relationship is at times frictionless, at others full of tension. The correspondences between questions of brevity, format and program constitute what Michael Gamper and Ruth Mayer called an "aesthetic logics of idiosyncrasy" [ästhetische Eigenlogiken], pointing out that the position and relevance of small forms is only evident upon reflection on the circumstances of their production and their use – their poetics, so to speak.[1] In an essay in which he fuses the short film with the notion of the short circuit, Johannes Binotto quotes Michel Foucault when he labels the short film as a "heterotopia," as a site where the codes of language and perception and their codification come under attack. Binotto takes recourse to the notion of heterotopia to explain that the main appeal of the short film as an art form is that it combines utterly incomparable approaches, languages, codes and aesthetics under one and the same name.[2]

In order to be productive as a conceptual tool, I believe that, to circumvent the risk of complete arbitrariness in outlining a poetics of the short film, the proposed triangle must necessarily be precisely localized within a determined, historically situated context. Therefore, after conceptualizing these three terms in their historical and theoretical context, the points of negotiation between format and brevity, between brevity and program, and between format and program have to be linked to a specific example, an individual poetic moment of doing and unveiling that ties the conceptual concerns to an artistic practice, a praxis. Chapters 3 and 4 will therefore deal with specific instances of

1 Michael Gamper and Ruth Mayer, eds., *Kurz & Knapp: zur Mediengeschichte kleiner Formen vom 17. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2017), 11.

2 Johannes Binotto, "Instabile Verbindungen: Zur Explosivität kurz(geschlossener) Filme," *Journal der Kunsthochschule für Medien Köln* Dezember, no. 7 (2016): 3.

compilations of films that demonstrate some of the arguments in this chapter. It is for this reason that I decided to curate fictitious programs instead of analyzing existing historical ones from other curators.

Brevity

On an early Sunday morning in August 1976, Claude Lelouch raced through the almost deserted streets of Paris with a camera mounted on the hood of his Mercedes Benz 450SEL 6.9. *C'était un rendez-vous* (F, 1976), the legendary film that was the result of this frenetic undertaking is an 8-minute continuous shot of Lelouch's daring joyride.[3] Covering a distance of roughly 10.5 kilometers, it begins in a tunnel of the Paris Périphérique, somewhere close to the metro station Porte Dauphine, and ends on Montmartre with a view of the city and Sacré-Cœur in the background. According to Lelouch, the idea for this short film was born when he realized he had one reel of 35mm film left from the shoot of his latest project, *Si c'était à refaire* (F, 1976).[4] In order to let the film end in the title-giving *rendez-vous* with his girlfriend, Lelouch had to cover the distance of 10.5 kilometers in less than 10 minutes – the length of approximately 300 meters of 35mm color film. In *C'était un rendez-vous*, the distance of a particular route, the time to cover this distance by car and the length of an analog film strip are put in direct relation to each other and condition the structuring model for the film. Lelouch's example could also be used to demonstrate that in many languages, the term *short* designates not only a temporal, but a spatial category, too.[5]

3 To the delight of short film enthusiasts and car aficionados around the world, a DVD edition of the film was issued in 2003 with a digitally remastered version of the film, which is rare in the case of a single short movie. The film is also mentioned in books and articles and has attained a certain cult-following due to the fact that it could only be seen upon securing a pirated copy between the years of its premiere in 1976 and its re-release on DVD in 2003. The film was included in a program dedicated to cars in short film, entitled *VRROOOM! Cars*, which was curated by John Canciani as part of the 16th edition of Internationale Kurzfilmtage Winterthur.

4 See Lelouch's statement on the intentions behind shooting the film on the website of his production company, *Les Films 13*. Claude Lelouch, "C'était un rendez-vous," *Les Films 13* (blog), accessed October 16, 2021, http://www.lesfilms13.com/, http://www.lesfilms13.com/cetait-un-rendez-vous/.

5 The affinity between small or subpar gauges, short length, easy portability and DIY and amateur film practices is discussed in Ricardo Cedeño Montaña, *Portable Moving Images: A Media History of Storage Formats* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2017), 43f.

Film still *C'était un rendez-vous* (Claude Lelouch, 1976)

I open this chapter on the notion of brevity and the theoretical conceptualization of the short film with Lelouch's example because it points out the most essential aspect in the discussion of brevity, namely that the term is inherently relative (i.e., in proportion to something larger) and generally relational (i.e., it rarely stands on its own, but is usually connected to other elements of the same type in a larger context).[6] Concerning brevity, it is the inherently self-contradictory trajectory – the proverbial "less is more" – of short and small works that I want to analyze in more detail. By offering less context and explanation, a short film often opens up gateways to many different readings; by reducing content, it expands on the possibilities of experiencing the artwork; by claiming less of the audience's time, it invites them to dedicate more (repeated) attention to the brief artwork.

These tensions result in what Thomas Althaus, Wolfgang Bunzel and Dirk Göttsche call a "productive disruption" in the introduction to their edited volume on the position of "small prose" in modern literature, which, as the title indicates, they see as located on the fringes and thresholds as well as in the gaps of the established literary system. They write that

> [s]ince the 18th century, the fascination of short prose has lain in its ability to present itself paradoxically as a 'genre beyond genres,' as a literary medium that explodes or subverts authoritative textual norms, while at the same time forming its own traditions and remaining bound to the literary system it seeks to challenge in a gesture of transgression.[7]

As with the short film, which is caught in a constant process of negotiation with the longer, commercially more viable feature film, short prose must necessarily form part of the established literary system in order to enter into a relationship with it, be that

6 For a more detailed discussion of Lelouch's short film and its relation to questions of format, see Laura Walde, "Der Kurzfilm als (kleines) Format," *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft* 12, no. 22 (2020): 67–73.

7 Thomas Althaus, Wolfgang Bunzel, and Dirk Göttsche, "Ränder, Schwellen, Zwischenräume. Zum Standort Kleiner Prosa im Literatursystem der Moderne," in *Kleine Prosa. Theorie und Geschichte eines Textfeldes im Literatursystem der Moderne*, ed. Thomas Althaus, Wolfgang Bunzel, and Dirk Göttsche (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2007), xi.

through a complementary, supportive, subversive, parasitic or openly hostile gesture. "[S]hort films remain outriders within the commercial industry, whether as scouts, spies, or saboteurs," writes Tom Gunning.[8] Althaus et al. rightly note that this blurring of established systemic boundaries that short forms – be they literary or cinematic – so frequently engage in also poses difficulties for the analysis of these forms, as with them we enter "the predicament of trying to reconcile opposing efforts of categorization, namely to systematically analyze and conceptualize something that intentionally eludes schematization and attempts to escape the network of conventional terms."[9]

In an essay commemorating the 50th anniversary of Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen, Angela Haardt, the festival's director from 1990 to 1997, comes to a similar conclusion with respect to the short film as a "relational term born of negotiation," an entity that cannot be systematically theorized as "classifications fail because of the inadequacies of the meagre terminology that has been developed for the medium of film in general, and because of the manifold forms taken by short films in particular."[10] Defining something as short or brief necessarily presupposes an – albeit often implicit – comparison to a larger, longer or more extensive version of the same artifact. Short films, for example, are short only when measured against the commercially dominant standard of the theatrical feature-length film. Brevity therefore lacks a determined categorical status. For this very reason it is productive to think about the small, brief, or short in connection with the notion of the format. In the following pages, I want to expand on some thoughts that literary scholar Michael Niehaus sketches out in the manuscript to a lecture he held on the topic of "small formats" at the University of Paderborn in 2017. He writes that

> [t]he individual formatted product is observed in terms of its compatibility for fitting into a larger structure; it is not unique, but has – in relation to this larger structure – functional equivalents; [...] it is often referred to as a 'building block', which is coherent in itself and thus represents a unit, but nevertheless (like a module) can be used and moved around in different ways. Of the characteristics ascribed to 'the small' in its essentiality, the plural, the mobile, the variable and the fast can easily be named for all the aspects one would like to study from the perspective of its being formatted.[11]

Expanding on Niehaus' reflections on the small – taken to be synonymous for the brief and short in the context of this study – as a formatted element of a series, the brevity of the short film comes to stand at the interface of format and program.

Brevity throughout History

The idea that brevity is somehow related to a notion of formatted content – in the sense of it being fitted and trimmed to serve a specific purpose – is not entirely new, but can be traced back to discussions on the virtue of *Brevitas* in ancient Greek and Roman rhetoric, where it essentially designates a modality to convey meaning in the most

8 Tom Gunning, "'From the Bottom of the Sea': Early Film at the Oberhausen Festival," in *Early Cinema Today: The Art of Programming and Live Performance*, ed. Martin Loiperdinger, KINtop 1 (New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing, 2015), 49.

9 Althaus, Bunzel, and Göttsche, "Ränder, Schwellen, Zwischenräume," ix; translation mine.

10 Angela Haardt, "A Different History. 50 Years of Short Film in Oberhausen," in *Catalogue 50. Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen* (Oberhausen: Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen, 2004), 73.

11 Michael Niehaus, "Kleine Formate. Vorüberlegungen" (Manuscript, November 25, 2017), 16, https://kw.unipaderborn.de/fileadmin/fakultaet/Institute/kunst/Forschung/Kulturen_des_Kleinen/Paper_Niehaus_Kleine_Form.pdf; translation mine.

efficient way without losing any degree of poetic appeal.[12] From Plato and Aristoteles to Cicero and Quintilian, what the rhetoric theorists of antiquity shared was the conviction that brevity is relative in that it is always dependent upon context rather than any sort of absolute value.[13] In *Institutio Oratoria*, his early textbook on the theory and practice of good rhetoric published in approximately 95 BCE, Quintilian defines the virtue of brevity as situated between saying "as much as necessary" and "not more than necessary":

> By 'just what is necessary' I mean not the bare minimum necessary to convey our meaning; for our brevity must not be devoid of elegance, without which it would be merely uncouth: pleasure beguiles the attention, and that which delights us ever seems less long, just as a picturesque and easy journey tires us less for all its length than a difficult short cut through an arid waste. And I would never carry my desire for brevity so far as to refuse admission to details which may contribute to the plausibility of our narrative.[14]

Brevity, for Quintilian and essentially all the scholars writing on the topic of oratory value, has thus always been closely linked to qualitative factors instead of merely being a quantitative limitation. Good narration, in the words of Cicero, should have three qualities, namely it should be brief, clear and plausible ("ut brevis, ut aperta, ut probabilis sit").[15] While "the shorter the better" is to be taken as a general quantitative guideline, the potential maximum brevity of a speech is largely dependent on its relation to intelligibility (or plausibility, in the vocabulary of Quintilian), which is a qualitative concept. Brevity is thus inherently relational in that a speech or a text's absolute duration or length, respectively, stands in due proportion to the complexity of the thought being expressed and the level of literary quality that should accompany it. Discourses of brevity are often rooted in the concept of commensuration, or what classical rhetoric would subsume under *decorum* or *aptum* as the ideal correlation between what is communicated and how it is expressed.[16]

A discursive interplay, and at times a tension, between quantitative and qualitative considerations mark the discourse surrounding the conceptualization of duration as

12 Ancient Greek knows two different words for time, which also carry a rhetorical dimension with them. On the one hand, there is *chronos*, which expresses the measurable duration and sequential passing of time. *Kairos*, on the other hand, refers to a qualitative component as it designates an opportune moment, in the sense of the "right time" for a particular action. *Kairos*, according to US philosopher John E. Smith, "points to [...] the idea of constellations of events yielding results which would not have been possible at other times and under other circumstances." John E. Smith, "Time, Times, and the 'Right Time': 'Chronos' and 'Kairos,'" *The Monist* 53, no. 1 (1969): 2. It is certainly no coincidence that Alexander Kluge's production company, which he founded in 1963 in the aftermath of the demands formulated in the Oberhausen Manifesto, bears the name of KAIROS-FILM. Filmmaking is about luck, Kluge writes. "But the fortunate has two aggregate states: it expresses itself in the MOMENT OR IN THE LARGE CONTEXT [...] This speaks again for the PRINCIPLE OF BREVITY: the net is big, the fish are small." Alexander Kluge, "Kurze Filme, lange Filme. Ein Erfahrungsbericht," in *Kurz und klein: 50 Jahre Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen*, ed. Klaus Behnken (Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen, Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004), 174; translation mine, capital letters in the original.

13 For a more extensive discussion in German on the concept of *Brevitas* in Greek and Roman rhetoric for the context of media studies, see for example Maren Jäger, "Die Kürzemaxime im 21. Jahrhundert vor dem Hintergrund der brevitas-Diskussion in der Antike," in *Kulturen des Kleinen. Mikroformate in Literatur, Kunst und Medien*, ed. Sabiene Autsch, Claudia Öhlschläger, and Leonie Süwolto (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2014), 21–40; Maren Jäger, "Wechselwirkungen von Erzählen und Wissen in kurzen Prosaformen der Frühen Neuzeit am Beispiel des Apophthegmas," in *Kurz & Knapp: zur Mediengeschichte kleiner Formen vom 17. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart.*, ed. Michael Gamper and Ruth Mayer (Bielefeld: transcript, 2017), 23–46; Maren Jäger, "Verkleinerungsregi(m)e antiken Herrschaftswissens: Selektion, Reduktion und brevitas in Lipsius' Politica," in *Verkleinerung. Epistemologie und Literaturgeschichte kleiner Formen*, ed. Maren Jäger, Ethel Matala de Mazza, and Joseph Vogl (Boston: De Gruyter, 2020), 89–108.

14 Quintilian, *Insitutio Oratoria*, trans. H. E. Butler, vol. Book IV, Chapter 2, The Complete Works of Quintilian (Hastings: Delphi Classics, 2015), 47f.

15 Cicero, *De Inventione*, trans. H. M. Hubbell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949), 56.

16 In economic theory, commensuration is a strategy that allows the comparison of the value of different goods: "Commensuration transforms different qualities into a common metric where the difference between things is expressed as magnitude." Wendy Nelson Espeland, "Value-Matters," *Economic and Political Weekly* 36, no. 21 (2001): 1840. The essentially moral and political implications of any process of valorization will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

being brief or short, too. Quantitative factors play a crucial role in determining why a specific short format has emerged or in explaining its prevalence in certain contexts. A large body of theoretical writing on the literary short story, for example, deals with issues of efficiency, both in terms of economical production (the writing process, the use of paper) as well as the actual time of reading. The term "short story" first appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1877 and acts as an "index to the invention of modern fiction and its relationship to changing social, economic and cultural contexts."[17] Commercial factors played a decisive role in the expansion of the short literary form, as "[i]mproved technologies in printing, such as machine-made paper and half-tone illustrations, the repeal of mid-Victorian free-trade duties on paper and changes in copyright law had all conspired to make periodical publishing one of the most accessible and lucrative sectors of the modern economy."[18] With the introduction of rotary presses and machine-made paper, as well as the inclusion of sophisticated illustrations and, by 1882, the addition of photographs, the periodical market rapidly expanded for different audience segments. The production of British journals featuring essays and short stories, for example, increased seven-fold between 1800 and 1860.[19]

Brevity and Efficiency

In addition to matters of efficiency aided by technological improvements, the idiomatic "making a virtue out of necessity" is also intimately connected to the proliferation of the short story. Writing about the literatures of colonial and postcolonial cultures, for example, literary scholar Adrian Hunter points out that economic considerations are one important reason for the short form being inordinately represented in minor literatures: "In cultures with small or non-existent publishing infrastructures, the low-capital, low-circulation literary magazine tends to be the main outlet for new writing. Such magazines, for reasons of space and means of production, invariably favor the short story over longer forms of fiction."[20] Maren Jäger mentions a paper shortage after the end of the Second World War as a reason for the proliferation of what Alfred Polgar has called "the small form" [die kleine Form] in both journalistic as well as literary publications.[21]

There are other media that demonstrate a dominant tendency toward brevity especially in commercial settings, such as advertisement, where according to a study conducted by perceptual psychologists the attention focus of the audience when consuming a television picture rapidly decreases when nothing much changes on the levels of image and sound for more than 30 seconds.[22] The same also applies to the music industry.[23] According to an analysis of the online economy journal *Quartz*, the average length of a popular song on the American standard record chart Billboard Hot 100 fell from 3 minutes 50 seconds to 3 minutes 30 seconds between the years 2013 and 2018.[24] The author speculates that apart from the frequently assumed shortened attention span of media users, for which there is hardly any rigorous evidence, the fact that the consumer is more attuned to selecting or curating her own playlists translates into pressure for musicians to produce easily recognizable, compact and catchy tunes. In

17 Paul March-Russell, *The Short Story: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 1.

18 Adrian Hunter, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story in English* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 6.

19 March-Russell, *The Short Story*, 47.

20 Hunter, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story in English*, 138.

21 Jäger, "Die Kürzemaxime im 21. Jahrhundert," 36.

22 Jäger, 36.

23 See for example Paul Zumthor, "Brevity as Form," ed. Laurence Thiollier Moscato and William Nelles, *Narrative* 24, no. 1 (2016): 73–81.

24 Dan Kopf, "The Economics of Streaming Is Making Songs Shorter," *Quartz*, accessed June 11, 2020, https://qz.com/1519823/is-spotify-making-songs-shorter.

addition, the fact that streaming platforms such as *Spotify* pay artists by the number of klicks a song receives means that there is a financial incentive to create short(er) work, as a wider range of songs on a new release potentially leads to more single clicks.

Especially with regard to digital images circulating online, brevity as a concept is also closely associated with lightweight, highly compressed files and concurrent ease of circulation. In the eponymous edited volume, Pepita Hesselberth and Maria Poulaki proposed "compact cinematics" as the umbrella term for studying a range of forms and practices related to short or compressed (audio)visual artifacts and their modes of circulation in a multimedia environment.[25] The term is meant to cross disciplinary, generic and technological boundaries and the volume accordingly includes contributions on narratological aspects, on archival and curatorial practices, on questions of audience and spectatorship, as well as compression and mobility with regard to technology, to name just a few. To think of compactness not as a "derivate or incomplete or less developed form of cinema," but rather as a theoretical framework that is highly suitable to our current media environment would allow us to rethink " the cinematic in all its dimensions (time, space, agency)," the editors argue, and put forward that the short film is one of the most common manifestations subsumed under the category of compact cinematic forms.[26] *Compactness*, in this approach to the concept, is the result of the interplay between technological aspects such as file compression and heightened mobility and aspects of content regarding narrative and aesthetic choices.

In what could be called the editor's thesis statement, they "posit that format, content, technology, and use are inseparable."[27] It is interesting to note that *format* is the very first term in what could be named the conceptual triangle of their book, but the editors never explicitly clarify what they understand as a format in the context of *compactness*. Throughout the book, however, the "short film format" is used in distinction to the "feature-length format," thus referring to narrative and temporal compression. For a publication focusing on digital media environments, it is surprising that the format is only defined with regard to temporal limits. I would assert that the format of the short film itself must be located at the nexus of a complex interplay of temporal, technological and programmatic features, and that the sole aspect of brevity (i.e. a duration of under 40 minutes, according to Richard Raskin's definition in the same volume) is not sufficient to use format as a *terminus technicus* for the concept of a compact cinematics.[28]

Another approach to better describe and analyze the aesthetic and cultural formation and the impact of small movies is proposed by film scholar Paola Voci in a monograph on Chinese contemporary filmmaking outside of the country's main official channels of production and distribution. Voci introduces the term *lightness*, defined as "as a marker of these movies' small production costs, distribution ambitions, economic impact, limited audiences, quick and volatile circulation, and resistance to being framed into and validated by either market, art, or political discourses."[29] *Lightness* as an analytical concept, then, is a curious amalgam of very heterogeneous aspects of filmmaking, from production via distribution to institutional and discursive frameworks. Interesting in Voci's conceptualization of *lightness* is the point she makes about the refusal to be appropriated by specific institutional or discursive frameworks. "Light films" not only

25 Pepita Hesselberth and Maria Poulaki, eds., *Compact Cinematics: The Moving Image in the Age of Bit-Sized Media* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 2ff.

26 Hesselberth and Poulaki, 3.

27 Hesselberth and Poulaki, 3.

28 Richard Raskin, "On Conflict in Short Film Storytelling," in *Compact Cinematics. The Moving Image in the Age of Bit-Sized Media*, ed. Pepita Hesselberth and Maria Poulaki (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 29.

29 Paola Voci, *China on Video: Small Screen Realities* (London: Routledge, 2012), xx.

challenge their makers to deal with limitations (financial, temporal and in terms of distribution channels and audience attention), but also to experiment with new forms of representation that function as an echo chamber of current cultural and socio-political tendencies. She writes:

> [These films'] *light* nature is explored in its diverse content and formal ramifications, but also in its intrinsic commonality. What smaller-screen realities share is an alternative way of viewing and understanding the world which, even when dealing with social experiences or political issues, focuses on the individual and the personal, rather than on the collective and the public, and privileges a disproving rather than argumentative mode of expression. In my analysis, *lightness* reveals the existence of a creative, humorous, but also socially and politically critical 'China on video.'[30]

Voci acknowledges that based on their heterogeneity, the films she discusses must be compared on a level that comes "after" the works' formal and narrative characteristics. Voci's "light films" do not have much power when considering their low budget, their limited range of distribution, their mostly non-existent revenue and, in Voci's set of examples at least, even their low ambitions in terms of intellectual or artistic impact. Nonetheless, small films are powerful in having "deep meaning in defining an alternative way of seeing and understanding the world."[31]

With a focus on "smaller screens" Voci restricts her analysis to films that are predominately watched on mobile devices, mostly music videos, short animated content, films shot on cell phones or amateur documentary footage. With a focus on films that are intended for exhibition at festivals or in gallery spaces, the highly mobile aspects of "light" movies and their pronounced resistance to being incorporated into a programmatic and consequentially somehow legitimized viewing context is less relevant, as the types of short films to which I pay attention are still meant to be screened in a highly institutionalized context. In spite of that, I would argue that *lightness* is a prolific concept when talking about short films in general, as it includes many of the features that constitute the short film as a format.

30 Voci, 2.

31 Voci, 13.

SPOTLIGHT
Distance Film

Austria 2020, 0’18’’, b & w, no sound

Director, Concept: Siegfried A. Fruhauf
Distribution: sixpackfilm Vienna, https://sixpackfilm.com/en/;
online at https://vimeo.com/401706718

This movie consists of 100 frames.
The length of 100 frames an analog 35mm film is 6.25 feet = 1.91 meters.
Keep other people at this comfortable distance.
COVID-19 is bad! Stay safe!

Film still *Distance Film* (Siegfried A. Fruhauf, 2020)

As mentioned in the section on the *Short Film Festival* in Chapter 1, short films are not as short as they used to be. In the selection of examples I chose to discuss, only two films are shorter than 10 minutes. The one with the briefest duration is Siegfried A. Fruhauf’s *Distance Film*. Created during the early lockdown days of the Covid-19 pandemic, Fruhauf’s ultrashort is conceptually related to his fellow Austrian colleague Philipp Fleischmann’s work, which I will consider in more detail in the section on *Format* later in this chapter.[32] Both films translate space into time with help of the analog film strip as a measuring rod. In the case of Fruhauf’s film, the recommended safety distance of roughly two arm lengths or two meters that should help to prevent or slow the spread of the virus is measured in time: 100 frames of analog 35mm film result in a length of 1.91 meters or 4.1 seconds of film when projected at a speed of 24 frames per second. The four seconds show a measuring tape that gauges the vertical length

32 I take the technical term “ultrashort” from the eponymous research project led by Fred Truniger at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts (2014–2017). Ultrashorts refer to audiovisual moving image forms with a duration of less than 30 seconds. See Elke Rentemeister et al., eds., *Ultrashort reframed* (Luzern: Hochschule Luzern – Design & Kunst, 2015).

of the 100 frames of 35mm film. The 18 seconds of duration of the complete film includes the title sequence and the commentary about the meaning of the work (which also doubles as the film's official synopsis).

In short: Fruhauf's exceptionally brief film serves as a paradigmatic example of the breadth and depth that brevity as a deliberate form of limitation is capable of. In only 18 seconds, a compelling assessment of the future of cinema as a collective experience (currently prohibited at the time of the film's production) is made by using an obsolete technical standard. Metaphorically and hyperbolically, the history of cinema – paradoxically kept alive by a filmmaker of the contemporary avant-garde – saves the future of humanity by translating the time-based medium of digital film back into the physical format of the 35mm film. To gain access to this witty little film, however, a retranslation into the digital virtual space of the internet is needed, where the film is freely available on the director's Vimeo site. Fruhauf's ultrashort goes to show that "very short" and "highly complex" are certainly no contradictions.

Brevity as a Qualitative Measure

Brevity is a quantitative measure when thought of in connection with matters of production and circulation, or of being economical and efficient. However, it can also be conceptualized in qualitative terms when, instead of focusing on absolute length, number or volume, specific modes and manifestations and their poetic affect are put into focus. Impliedly, what is brief or small has been made to be so with a specific purpose in mind; it is the result of a process of "making small," and it is worthwhile to reflect on the gesture that lies behind this process.[33] Is it, for example, an act of reduction, selection, compression or transposition, as the editors of the volume *Verkleinerung* [*miniaturization*] define the four basic operations of making something small?[34] Each of these gestures bears its own distinct aesthetic and epistemological reasons and effects, and comprises long hours of work.[35] The sparse number of articles and monographs that exist on short films usually analyze the fiction genre on the basis of theories of classical narratology, taking their cues from drama studies and emphasizing literary concepts such as unity (of place, time, character), lack of character exposition, experimentation, ambiguity and open endings.[36]

With the decided focus on the short film as a format, however, questions of narrative structure are only superficially relevant. Rather, what is of interest on the level of aes-

33 In literature studies in the German-speaking world, there have been a series of publications on procedures of miniaturization in literature and moving image media in the past few years, see for example Sabiene Autsch, Claudia Öhlschläger, and Leonie Süwolto, eds., *Kulturen des Kleinen. Mikroformate in Literatur, Kunst und Medien* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2014); Michael Gamper and Mayer, *Kurz & Knapp: zur Mediengeschichte kleiner Formen vom 17. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart*; Maren Jäger, Ethel Matala de Mazza, and Joseph Vogl, eds., *Verkleinerung. Epistemologie und Literaturgeschichte kleiner Formen* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2020). For moving images, see for example Hesselberth and Poulaki, *Compact Cinematics*; Sylvie Périneau, ed., *Les formes brèves audiovisuelles : des interludes aux productions web* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2013).

34 Jäger, Matala de Mazza, and Vogl, *Verkleinerung. Epistemologie und Literaturgeschichte kleiner Formen*, 6.

35 To arrive at a result that is brief or short necessitates a work ethics already outlined by Horace in his *Ars Poetica* when he encourages poets to not shy away from the large effort and long duration of "chiseling" out the artwork ("limae labor et mora"). Horace, "Ars Poetica," in *Satires. Epistles. The Art of Poetry*, trans. Henry Rushton Fairclough (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926), 474.

36 See for example Cynthia Felando, *Discovering Short Films: The History and Style of Live-Action Fiction Shorts* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Matthias Brütsch, "The Art of Reduction: Notes on the Dramaturgy of the Short Fiction Film," *Short: The Journal of Small Screen Studies* 1, no. 1 (2008): 1–9; Richard Raskin, *The Art of the Short Fiction Film: A Shot by Shot Study of Nine Modern Classics* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2002).

thetic impact is how the format – "as a form that is supposed to fulfil a certain function" – explores the possibilities and limits of cinematic conventions.[37] Within the scope of this potential and these restrictions, Maren Jäger rightly notes that it is not operations of subtraction, removal or acceleration, but moments of "compression, intensity, [and] epiphany" that are at the core of a qualitative notion of brevity.[38] These tendencies are often discussed with reference to the historical moment of Modernity. In a short text written in 1926, Alfred Polgar, a journalist born in Vienna in 1873, singles out the small form as an expression of and reaction to contemporary times. "Life is too short for long literature, too ephemeral for lingering depiction and contemplation, too psychopathic for psychology, too novelistic for novels, too rapidly decaying into fermentation and decomposition, for it to be preserved at length and broadly in long and broad books."[39] Polgar wrote in the interwar period, when rapid technological changes affected the social structure of society by transforming local communities into global mass audiences, and short forms, both written and audiovisual, met the genuinely modernist demands for an accelerated lifestyle in terms of knowledge production and distribution, as well as the constant feeding of information into new channels of communication. In her article entitled "Early/Post-Cinema: The Short Form, 1900/2000," Ruth Mayer draws parallels between the early 1900s and 2000s and argues that a range of comparable epistemological conditions were at work in these transitional periods marked by "anxieties of alienation especially prominent at the outset of the mass medial age and again at the moment of its digital dissolution."[40] Short forms were, according to the Americanist literary scholar, singularly suited to managing factors such as contingency and acceleration, which are both "made out as formative elements of modernist subjectivities and then again as constitutive factors of the digital age."[41]

Francesco Casetti comes to a similar conclusion about contingency and acceleration being markers of a "contingent spectatorship" with regard to short forms that shaped the audience experience of both early film exhibition as part of a variety program as well as online viewing. Both early and online environments could be described as relocations of cinema, to use Casetti's famous term, with the experience and physical space of spectatorship both outside the traditional theatrical setting.[42] At the beginning of his article, Casetti cites the Italian journalist, novelist and short story writer Giovanni Papini, who in 1907 wrote about the still relatively novel medium of film: "Compared to live theatre—which it partially intends to replace—motion pictures have the advantage of being a shorter event, less tiring and less expensive, and therefore they require less time, less effort and less money."[43] Casetti draws parallels between early pre-theatrical audiences and the "contingent spectatorship" of an online setting, arguing that an "environmental approach" to cinema is able to explain affinities for certain forms at a given moment in time. "Context—whether modern civilization, the media landscape, or urban space—reveals the reasons why the audience leans toward one product instead of another: it discloses the symbolic values that turn out to be most appealing and the

37 Christophe Gelly, Isabelle Le Corff, and Caroline Lardy, eds., "Court métrage: forms, formats, usages," *Mise au Point. Cahiers de l'Association française des enseignants chercheurs en cinéma et audiovisuel.*, no. 11 (2018): 22, translation mine.

38 Jäger, "Die Kürzemaxime im 21. Jahrhundert," 22; translation mine.

39 Alfred Polgar, "Die kleine Form (quasi ein Vorwort)," in *Irrlicht*, ed. Marcel Reich-Ranicki and Ulrich Weinzierl, Alfred Polgar. Kleine Schriften 3 (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2004), 372–73; translation mine.

40 Ruth Mayer, "Early/Post-Cinema: The Short Form, 1900/2000," in *Post-Cinema. Theorizing 21st-Century Film*, ed. Shane Denson and Julia Leyda (Falmer: REFRAME Books, 2016), 618.

41 Mayer, 621.

42 See Francesco Casetti, "The Relocation of Cinema," 2012, https://necsus-ejms.org/the-relocation-of-cinema/.

43 Quoted in Francesco Casetti, "The Contingent Spectator," in *Compact Cinematics: The Moving Image in the Age of Bit-Sized Media*, ed. Pepita Hesselberth and Maria Poulaki (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 95.

type of experience that spectators are looking for."[44] When analyzing short forms, then, it is important to not simply focus on content, but to include considerations regarding context as well.

Brevity and Disruption

The concept of brevity has been studied primarily in Anglo-American literary theory since the advent of Modernity in the late 19th and early 20th century. In recent years, the interest in short, concise and small forms and formats has also been established in media studies discourses. In their edited volume on "short prose," Thomas Althaus, Wolfgang Bunzel and Dirk Göttsche, however, go further back and define three major periods in which the format experienced a particular boom, specifically in the context of German literature. From 1770 to 1850 (between Late Enlightenment and "Vormärz," the time preceding the revolutions in the states of the German Confederation in 1848 and 1849), the short format begins to establish its tenets as a subversive force and a reactive element within a literary system in crisis. The "classical" Modernity between 1880 and 1930 sees the radicalization and culmination of this opposition and radical break with textual traditions, while the third period, from 1960 onward, is dedicated to the stabilization of these innovations.[45]

The affinity between brevity and crisis, between shortness and short-circuit, is pervading. Historically as well as in contemporary times, short stories make up a disproportionate amount of the literary output in colonial and postcolonial cultures.[46] This overlap between the short form and the political-economic phenomenon of (post)colonialism leads to the prevalent adoption of the theoretical framework of "minor literature," as it is proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Kafka: pour une littérature mineure* (1975), to analyze short works in an academic context.[47] For Deleuze and Guattari, minor literature is defined by three characteristics: "deterritorialization of the language, the connection of the individual and the political, the collective arrangement of utterance. Which amounts to this: that 'minor' no longer characterizes certain literatures, but describes the revolutionary conditions of any literature within what we call the great (or established)."[48] A minor literature is not one that speaks from a position outside of the major language, but rather one that is created by a minority within the cultural space of a major language. The fundamental insight regarding these three characteristics is that they all negotiate relations – between revolutionary and established uses of language, between individual and community –, a fact that makes minor literature political in its essence. As elaborated in *Capitalisme et schizophrénie. L'anti-Œdipe* (1972), the terms territorialization, deterritorialization and reterritorialization refer to the codification of a cultural space, the dissolution of these codes and its recreation or recodification, respectively. Minor literature effects a debate about how language as the "means by which the world is constituted" is codified and how it can be subversively reconfigured to open up new ways of thinking, saying, doing things.[49]

44 Casetti, 96.

45 Althaus, Bunzel, and Göttsche, "Ränder, Schwellen, Zwischenräume," xif.

46 Hunter, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story in English*, 138.

47 It should be noted that despite focusing mainly on literature, and on the literary work of Franz Kafka in particular, Deleuze and Guattari also mention other art forms such as expressionist cinema as agents of a "minor" intervention, see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "What Is a Minor Literature?," trans. Robert Brinkley, *Mississippi Review* 11, no. 3 (1983): 25. It would certainly be worthwhile to investigate short films produced as part of the *Third Cinema* movement or the notion of Julio García Espinosa's "imperfect cinema" as "minor" in relation to historical and contemporary Latin American film production.

48 Deleuze and Guattari, 18.

49 Charles Bernstein, *Content's Dream: Essays, 1975–1984* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 61.

Even if the content or ambitions of a writer of minor literature are not directly political, all minor literature is inherently political in the sense that the individual cannot be separated from the community they stem from. The writer becomes a synecdoche for their community, everything they write has "collective value. [...] the conditions are not given for an *individuated utterance* which could be that of some 'master' and could be separated from *collective utterance*."[50] It has to be noted that the juxtaposition between minor and major is not stable, but rather their definition is interminably shifting in a continuous play of deterritorialization and reterritorialization.[51]

In the chapters to follow, I will conceptualize the short film as a "minor" form of cinema that conspicuously exposes and challenges our limits of knowledge and understanding. Based on this association between the short and the disruptive (in the sense of questioning established codes and paradigms of what is deemed to be the "standard"), the short film format can be a fruitful starting ground for thinking about the potential of institutional and hegemonic critique in film art today, of the potency of contemporary political film, and of reconsidering questions of access and circulation.[52] Following Jacques Rancière's notion of "La Politique" as "interrupting the distribution of the sensible [...] [by] modifying the very aesthetic-political field of possibility", I understand the term "political" not in the narrow meaning of politics as pertaining to a particular governmental regime, but rather in the broad sense of originating in a system of hegemonial practices that span all areas of social and cultural life.[53] This is to say that the short film format does not inherently contain the potential for activism or political action instrumentally: the forms and appearances that the short film takes are too expansive and by far too context-dependent. I do, however, want to propose that this potential to be political lies in the short film being a minor form of cinema.

There are a number of excellent historical as well as contemporary introductions that discuss the history and broad cultural entanglements of the short story or short prose text in great detail.[54] Even in early short story criticism and theory, the short format was never only theorized as a shortened, smaller or less important form of the novel as the most important literary form since the 18th century. I would like to only emphasize some points in regard to the theorization of the story which are also pertinent to the short film as a format. H. E. Bates writes about the English author A. E. Coppard, who achieved fame as an influential representative of the short story form, that

50 Deleuze and Guattari, "What Is a Minor Literature?," 17; emphasis in the original.

51 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature: The Components of Expression," trans. Marie Maclean, *New Literary History* 16, no. 3 (1985): 591.

52 Media artist Natalie Bookchin makes a similar argument for one of her films, *Long Story Short* (USA 2016), where she identifies her use "of the ethics of the small in the film: the multiple frames of miniature video fragments that appear on a single screen; the numerous condensed stories, short vignettes, as well as the small- scale production values" as befitting the subject of her artwork. In *Long Story Short*, Bookchin portrays the poor living at the fringes of society, recording the "so-called 'small' voices of ordinary citizens." Natalie Bookchin, "Long Story Short," in *Compact Cinematics: The Moving Image in the Age of Bit-Sized Media*, ed. Pepita Hesselberth and Maria Poulaki (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 64.

53 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), xvi.

54 As already mentioned, see Hunter, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story in English*; March-Russell, *The Short Story*; Thomas Althaus, Wolfgang Bunzel, and Dirk Göttsche, eds., *Kleine Prosa: Theorie und Geschichte Eines Textfeldes Im Literatursystem der Moderne* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2007); Autsch, Öhlschläger, and Süwolto, *Kulturen des Kleinen. Mikroformate in Literatur, Kunst und Medien*; Michael Gamper and Mayer, *Kurz & Knapp: zur Mediengeschichte kleiner Formen vom 17. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart*.

> Mr. A. E. Coppard has long cherished the theory that short story and film are expressions of the same art, the art of telling a story by a series of subtly implied gestures, swift shots, moments of suggestion, an art in which elaboration and above all explanation are superfluous and tedious.[55]

In the same seminal contribution to the theory of the short story, *The Modern Short Story: A Critical Survey* first published in 1941, Bates also cites novelist and short story writer Elizabeth Bowen's observation that the short story and the medium of film are of the same generation and evolve together: "They have affinities – neither is sponsored by a tradition; both are, accordingly, free; both, still, are self-conscious, show a self-imposed discipline and regard for form."[56] Bowen thus suggests that the literary short form can be thought of as an expression of an interest in the possibilities and the exploration of formal invention, in a similar vein as Tom Gunning, among others, was able to establish that the formal language of early film – more focused on the exhibitionist qualities of the medium than on its later subordination to the dominant mode of storytelling in audio-visual art – was not simply a primitive predecessor of the feature-length narrative film.

When Gunning declares that "the history of cinema, generally, has been written and theorized under the hegemony of narrative films," he makes a point that the "cinema of attraction[s]," as the dominant mode of cinema until roughly 1906–07, engages the spectators in a different manner than classical Aristotelian conception of narration would do.[57] Soliciting the audience's attention and reaction to new visual attractions (close-ups or filmic manipulations in the forms of slow or reverse motion, substitution, multiple exposure) and spending very little focus on any form of story or character development, early short films much more directly addressed their viewers than the rather self-contained longer narrative cinema would do at a later stage.[58] This was a matter of prioritization of certain effects and not of an essential opposition to narrative elements. There are parallels between the literary and the cinematic short form of the early 20th century. Hunter mentions how modern short story writers were experimenting with "artful methods of omission, compression, aperture and ellipsis," and he defines "implication, ambiguity, suggestion, dilation and, above all, plotlessness" as the major literary effects that resulted from these techniques.[59] One could add procedures and effects that position the small or short in relation to larger or longer forms, such as compression, intensity, conciseness, omission or discontinuity, the provisional or the absolute, the epiphany, the isolated, the precise, the exact, or the detail. Michael Niehaus names characteristics such as inconspicuous, mobile, fast, variable, withdrawing, manageable, and plural as defining for the short format.[60]

In the introduction to their edited volume entitled *Kurz & Knapp: zur Mediengeschichte kleiner Formen vom 17. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart* (2017) [short and concise: on the media history of small forms from the 17th century to the present], Michael Gamper and Ruth Mayer write that "[s]mall forms suggest accuracy, exactness:

55 H. E. Bates, *The Modern Short Story: A Critical Survey* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1941), 21.

56 Bates, 21.

57 Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 381. Originally published in *Wide Angle* in 1986.

58 On this, see also Chapter 3 "Wie der frühe Film zum Erzählkino wurde" in Thomas Elsaesser, *Filmgeschichte und frühes Kino: Archäologie eines Medienwandels* (München: edition text + kritik, 2002), 69–93.

59 Hunter, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story in English*, 7.

60 Niehaus, "Kleine Formate. Vorüberlegungen."

they pretend to be the last word on the subject. On the other hand, brevity and scarcity also ostentatiously signal incompleteness: short forms reduce and fragment and thus activate dimensions of possibility."[61] Instead of simplicity – of "short and sweet" – there is thus a form of complexity which from the perspective of the audience potentially triggers a tendency – in apparent opposition to making a process shorter and more efficient – toward repetition, to looping, or to multiple viewing as a cultural technique. Slowing down or even completely coming to a standstill and giving attention to a single detail, searching for minute traces in a complex network of social, cultural and economic constraints can express a sort of dissent or even a complete breakdown of established norms.[62] With explicit reference to short films, Johannes Binotto proposes using the metaphor of the "short circuit" to explore the peculiarities of the short form in film. He concludes that "[s]hort circuits do not increase efficiency, they cause breakdowns. And it is precisely in this sense that I would like to understand short film, not necessarily as a film with a short duration, but rather as a short-circuited film – as a film that dismantles the codes of film language by pushing them to their extremes."[63] Unfolding an analogy between Sergei Eisenstein's *Montage of Attractions* and what he would define as the outstanding quality of the short film format, Binotto concludes that the "short-circuited film" [Kurzschlussfilm] breaks down the normalized codes of film language and challenges a bewildered audience to question how meaning is produced in the first place, and how films are to be watched and understood. He speaks of an "explosive potential" that the format carries within it, while others use expressions such as "escalation," which also carries with it the connotation of subversion or transgression.[64]

This points to yet another dimension that must be considered when discussing the effects or brevity, namely the constructive participation on the part of the audience. Several tendencies associated with the short form add to this activation, most of all the common practice to imply rather than to comprehensively explain, which requires a more dynamic, often highly associative thought process on the part of the audience, who are required to be collaborators savvy enough to decipher meaning beyond that which is overtly expressed. What Vladimir Nabokov writes in his *Lectures on Literature*, namely that "[c]uriously enough, one cannot read a book: one can only reread it. A good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader is a rereader" is particularly applicable to the short form in general, for which in many instances the recipient must be willing to invest time into rereading or rewatching a piece.[65]

Poetry and Brevity

At this point I once again want to point out an affinity between poetry and short film by way of the intensification of complexity and formal reduction.[66] In a symposium on the relation between poetry and film held at Anthology Film Archives in 1953 as part of a

61 Michael Gamper and Mayer, *Kurz & Knapp: zur Mediengeschichte kleiner Formen vom 17. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart*, 12, translation mine.

62 Autsch, Öhlschläger and Süwolto quote the work of historian Carlo Ginzburg, whose notion of the "Evidential Paradigm" in social sciences established itself concurrent to the formation of the short story in the late 19th century. With reference to the fields of art history, criminology and psychoanalysis, Ginzburg follows the institutionalization of an epistemology of "tracing" [Spurensuche], which involves a concern with the smallest hints and details in order to figure out the larger picture. Autsch, Öhlschläger, and Süwolto, *Kulturen des Kleinen. Mikroformate in Literatur, Kunst und Medien*, 9f. See also Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013); Sybille Krämer, Werner Kogge, and Gernot Grube, eds., *Spur: Spurenlesen als Orientierungstechnik und Wissenskunst* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007).

63 Binotto, "Instabile Verbindungen: Zur Explosivität kurz(geschlossener) Filme," 3; translation mine.

64 See Binotto, 8f.; Michael Gamper and Mayer, *Kurz & Knapp: zur Mediengeschichte kleiner Formen vom 17. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart*, 10.

65 Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 3.

66 On this subject, also see P. Adams Sitney, *The Cinema of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). Especially the chapter on Andrey Tarkovsky and also the essays on filmmakers from the American avant-garde are highly insightful.

series of events organized by Amos Vogel's film society *Cinema 16*, Maya Deren suggested that "the poetic construct arises from the fact, if you will, that it is a vertical investigation of a situation."[67] Deren differentiates between films that revolve around narration and sequential action – a horizontal development – and "vertical films" more concerned with probing the experience and the emotions connected to particular situations via the person of the filmmaker and, in a next step, the viewer.[68] This vertical construction, which according to Deren is the defining feature of poetry and can also be applied to filmmaking, is centered on few images of such great emotional intensity and significance that they open up a complex set of readings.[69] "Now the short films, to my mind, and they are short because it is difficult to maintain such an intensity for a long period of time," Deren says during the podium discussion, "are comparable to lyric poems and they are completely a vertical or what I would call a poetic construct."[70] The notion of verticality implies a layering of impressions, impulses, and senses (in the polysemic meaning of the word) that warrants a time-consuming archaeological approach on the part of the audience to uncover meaning and highlights their active participation in what Charles Bernstein calls "world generating."[71]

An American poet and scholar, Bernstein is one of the most prominent representatives of the avant-garde poetry movement of the Language Poets. He traces the intricate link between language and thinking in his essay "Thought's Measure" (1986) by discussing a series of poems that contain what he would call a material dimension, where "the text becom[es] viscerally present" to the reader and "'content' and the 'experience of reading' are collapsed onto each other, the content being the experience of reading."[72] Poetry's ambitions, according to Bernstein and his fellow Language Poets, should work toward intransparency and opaqueness to point out how credulously we tend to equate language with fact. "[T]he politics of poetry resides in its capacity to interrupt and reconfigure the perceptual field itself, to lay bare the apparatus and mechanics of sense and world making [...]. Language Poetry, then, is committed to the interruption and redistribution of given possibilities of making sense by way of a restoration of attention to the production of sense itself."[73] There is a structural similarity between Deren's conception of short films as "vertical" configurations that require in-depth engagement with the image and Bernstein's conception of language as a multi-layered structure, which requires the active participation of the reader when engaging with the written word and its tangible, quasi-material aspects instead of privileging the purely referential dimension of language.

In contradictory fashion, then, the pace of the short vertical film or non-referential poem, which one can watch or read within few minutes, is diametrically opposed to the amount of time and conscious effort the viewer or reader has to dedicate to establishing her stance on the significance of this work. Roy Andersson speaks of "complex im-

67 *Poetry and the Film*, Cinema 16 Symposium (New York, 1953), 20'50'', https://www.ubu.com/media/sound/Anthology/Poetry_and_the_Film/POETRY-AND-THE%20FILM_PT1_CINEMA16_AFA_1953.mp3.

68 This conception of horizontal versus vertical construction is highly reminiscent of the syntagmatic versus paradigmatic relations between words and sentences in structural linguistics.

69 Catherine Fowler offers an analysis of selected gallery film examples to highlight how the exhibition of moving images in the art context adds to the sense of Deren's notion of a "vertical investigation of a situation." See Catherine Fowler, "Room for Experiment. Gallery Films and Vertical Time from Maya Deren to Eija-Liisa Ahtila," *Screen* 45, no. 4 (2004): 324–43.

70 *Poetry and the Film*, 24'15''.

71 Bernstein, *Content's Dream*, 71. Bernstein also reflects on the relationship between filmmaking and writing, most prominently in his essay "Words and Pictures," where he writes: "Film, because it is the visual art most dependent on duration, shares a unique kinship with writing. [...] Understanding film provides a method for understanding language, since in its nonlexicality, its grammar of shots and angles, it may contain the essence of the linguistic." (Bernstein, 116.) The term "language" for Bernstein is not reduced to verbal utterances, but includes "all forms of socially exchangeable meaning", that is verbal, visual, physical and sensual elements (Bernstein, 119.).

72 Bernstein, *Content's Dream*, 69.

73 Tom Fisher, "Making Sense: Jacques Rancière and the Language Poets," *Journal of Modern Literature* 36, no. 2 (2013): 162.

ages" in reference to his own style of filmmaking, which both in its short and its feature versions consist of a series of short *tableaux* – continuous shots with a static camera and an arrangement of different actions in the layered depth of the image.[74] Complex images are "(a) artistically difficult to produce, (b) more challenging for the viewer to comprehend, and (c) have a stronger and longer-lasting effect on the audience."[75] The Swedish director deliberately refrains from cutting within a scene and from shooting close-ups in order to foreground the positioning of the protagonists within a certain space and the relationship that develops between them and their environment for the viewers. As a prime example of his definition of a complex image, Andersson mentions the opening *tableau* of his short film *World of Glory* (1991): "Many have said that the beginning of *Härlig är jorden* is the darkest thing they have ever seen and that this darkness is one reason why people dismiss the issue. The complex image is always demanding and provoking."[76] Again, I would posit that there is a structural similarity between Andersson's complex image, which in a paradigmatical gesture piles up various layers of action and information within the image itself, and Deren's concept of the vertical film regarding the active intellectual and emotional participation they require on the part of the spectators.[77]

Shorts and Shortage

An additional factor that should not be underestimated in any discussion of brief, short or small artworks is the fact that they hardly ever stand on their own. Not only the general context of the encounter with a brief work of art is a decisive element, but also the relations generated between the individual stories or poems (usually published in edited volumes or collections) or short films (habitually compiled into programs that approximate the length of a standard feature film). There are numerous ways in which these pieces relate to each other, both in terms of what the person compiling them intended as well as in terms of what the individual members of the audience glean from it. I will consider this point in more detail when I discuss the notion of *Program* as the third anchor of my conceptual triangle.

Brevity thus inherently carries with it the notion of something more:

> The 'short film' implies something else, something longer, something that isn't just 'short.' And you want to know, we all want to know, where the rest of it is, because this is just a short form, an abbreviation, an acronym. When we watch it, the short film, we give ourselves over to the fragment, the gesture, and can't help wondering where the rest is.[78]

This is the conclusion that Mike Hoolboom reaches in his essay "Eight Thoughts on Short Film." With over one hundred films to his name, many of which he has re-edited or "redacted," which is the term used in the biographical note on his website, Hoolboom is

74 For a more detailed discussion of the significance of brevity in the work of Roy Andersson, see Laura Walde, "Brevitas et gravitas. Gedankenskizze zu Kürze und Knappheit bei Roy Andersson," in *Roy Andersson*, ed. Fabienne Liptay (München: edition text + kritik, 2021), 56–65.

75 Julian Hanich, "Komplexe Tiefeninszenierungen. Über die verborgenen Dimensionen im Filmstil Roy Anderssons," in *Filmstil. Perspektivierungen eines Begriffs*, ed. Julian Bluck et al. (München: edition text + kritik, 2016), 311; translation mine.

76 Roy Andersson, "The Complex Image," in *Swedish Film. An Introduction and Reader*, ed. Mariah Larsson and Anders Marklund (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2010), 277.

77 See also the discussion of Beatrice Gibson's *I Hope I'm Loud When I'm Dead* in Chapter 1.

78 Mike Hoolboom, *Plague Years: A Life in Underground Movies*, ed. Steve Reinke (Toronto: YYZ Books, 1998), 155.

one of Canada's most prolific film and video directors.[79] He also has a background in film programming, both as a freelance curator and the artistic director of Images Festival in Toronto in 2000 and 2001. He is a founding member of the *Pleasure Dome* screening collective, which is an artist-run organization dedicated to exhibiting experimental moving-images and fostering publications about these artists. Their curatorial self-conception is built around the wish to promote marginalized moving image works and they specifically mention "short length and small-format work" as part of the roster of peripheral image production on their website.[80] In *Inside the Pleasure Dome. Fringe Film in Canada*, his collection of 25 interviews with fellow fringe filmmakers, Hoolboom explicitly outlines the intimate connection between the brief – and any other deviation from some notion of standard length – and the non-commercial:

> They are, we are, the minor literature of cinema, the poetry, the fringe, the underground. We are every dream a company will never have, every longing that does not lead to success. We are everything without a bar code or a corporate sponsor. The work is too long, too short, too disgusting, too beautiful, too boring, or too self-indulgent to fit in. To belong. To be a part of it all.[81]

The connection between short/brief or small and non-commercially exploitable has grown throughout history. While brevity was still a virtue in antique rhetoric theory and practice, it came to be associated with the notion of shortage against the dominant and ubiquitous obsession with scarcity on the one hand and expansion on the other. Both concepts play an essential role in the capitalist system that emerged in the 18th century and led to large-scale industrial production in the 19th century.[82] The usage of the word "shortage" is roughly concurrent to the first mention of the term "short story" and, according to the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, first appeared in 1868.[83] It is possible that the term became popular as a result of the international economic crisis caused by the American Civil War and the ensuing shortage of cotton.[84]

As a socially constructed quantity, what is expressed by the term "shortage" is always also an ideologically charged concept. Whereas in economic theory formation, essentialist concepts of resources and their scarcity predominate, analysis in cultural studies is primarily interested in the strategic production and positioning of patterns of interpretation regarding scarcity. In their introduction to the book *Economic Anthropology*, Chris Hann and Keith Hart write: "Scarcity is often highly valued for itself, but [...] scarcity is socially constructed rather than given in nature."[85] In 1978, German-Hungarian sociologist Bálint Balla has written an extensive study positing that scarcity is a fundamental agent in human existence. Balla has a decidedly anthropological approach when he writes that "[i]mbalance between needs and the means of their satisfaction is a basic fact of human existence, not only in the material sphere, but also in abstract

79 See "Mike Hoolboom," accessed October 16, 2021, https://mikehoolboom.com/.

80 "Pleasure Dome – Presenting Experimental Media Art Since 1989," accessed October 16, 2021, https://pdome.org/.

81 Mike Hoolboom, *Inside the Pleasure Dome: Fringe Film in Canada* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2001), 3.

82 James Fulcher, *Capitalism: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 18.

83 *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "short story (noun)." Accessed January 12, 2018. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/short%20story.

84 See the *New York Times'* article from 1862 on the effects of the so-called "cotton famine" in England: "The Distress in Lancashire," *The New York Times*, November 26, 1862, https://www.nytimes.com/1862/11/26/archives/the-distress-in-lancashire-terrible-effects-of-the-cotton-famine-in.html.

85 C. M. Hann and Keith Hart, *Economic Anthropology: History, Ethnography, Critique* (Cambridge, Malden: Polity Press, 2011), 6.

realms."[86] Niklas Luhmann, who dedicated a whole chapter on scarcity in his 1988 monograph *Die Wirtschaft der Gesellschaft*, has a different approach to the notion of scarcity or shortage [*Knappheit*, in the German original]. For Luhmann, scarcity is tied to a social perception produced by a self-referential system that needs, as its basis, the differentiation between finite goods which are defined as scarce and others which are not.[87] Scarcity poses a paradoxical social problem because for the people getting access to a scarce product, the scarcity of the good is alleviated, while for everyone else the problem of its scarcity is aggravated.[88] Like brevity, shortage, too, is a relational concept that needs a specific frame of reference to become meaningful.

SPOTLIGHT
Death of the Sound Man

Thailand 2017, 16', color, Thai

Director, Script, Editor: Sorayos Prapapan
Cinematography: Vijaktre Thriapatana
Sound: Chalermrat Kaweewattana, Sorayos Prapapan
Distribution: Minimal Animal, *yossyoss@hotmail.com*;
online at https://vimeo.com/282026386

Two sound designers are creating the sound for a film. In the process, they realize two things: the Thai government never listens to the citizens' voices, and the audience doesn't care about the sound they worked on so hard.

Film still *Death of the Sound Man* (Sorayos Prapapan, 2017)

Of the close affinity between comedy and politics, George Orwell wrote that "[a] thing is funny when – in some way that is not actually offensive or frightening – it upsets the established order. Every joke is a tiny revolution. [...] Whatever destroys dignity, and brings down the mighty from their seats, preferably with a bump, is funny."[89] In

86 Bálint Balla, "Scarcity of Resources and Social Action," *Social Science Information* 21, no. 6 (1982): 901.
87 Niklas Luhmann, *Die Wirtschaft der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), 177ff.
88 Luhmann, 181.
89 George Orwell, *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, ed. P. H Davison (London: Secker & Warburg, 1998), 16.483.

the past decade, Thai filmmaker Sorayos Prapapan has made a name for himself in the short film community as a master of comedy films with a profound political relevance. “Maybe it’s because I’m Thai,” says Prapapan in answer to the question of why he chooses to use humor as a tool to address serious political issues. “We’re really good at making serious issues funny. Partly this is because if we express our political frustrations too loudly and angrily we could get locked up for it.”[90] By putting a spotlight on his 2017 hit film *Death of the Sound Man*, I want to demonstrate how the marginalization of the short film format within the cinematic universe and the cultural industry at large can be turned into an asset. Like the court jester who has a special license for telling unflattering truths even to those in power, Prapapan cleverly combines the peripheral status of the short film with – sometimes crude – humor to make poignant statements about contemporary Thai reality.

Sorayos Prapapan is a director of short films, but he is also a trained sound technician and foley artist, just like the two protagonists in his film. *Death of the Sound Man* observes the daily work of Burt and Nicky, two sound designers in Bangkok. As might be expected, the film starts out with sound only – a weird and farcical slurping noise can be heard for a few seconds before we see its source: Nicky is fellating a Wiener sausage in front of professional sound equipment. Burt is not yet happy with the result and hands Nicky a comically large sausage, thereby establishing early on in the film that a certain licentious type of humor should be expected. This is followed by a series of other comical scenes introducing the audience to the everyday work of sound technicians: recording the sounds of switching on a light, of big noisy refrigerators or underwater gurgling sounds.

The film suddenly takes a first political turn when the two foley artists show their work to the director for whose films they have produced these sounds. The viewers only hear the audio, they never see the images to this film. Burt asks the director for an outstanding tax invoice which he needs to claim a tax refund. “C’mon man,” the director tells him, “you must pay taxes for our nation.” This prompts a discussion between Nicky and Burt about the tax spending habits of their government: “They buy submarines, they build monuments. That’s why I want my tax refund back.” A short moment later they comment on the poor quality of the drinking water. The reason why Prapapan escapes censorship for films that are overtly critical of the government is the little attention that is being paid to short film production. “I have only made short films and they don’t censor short films. You only need to submit your films to the censorship board if you plan to release the film to the general public,” says Prapapan, the general public meaning an official theatrical release.[91]

90 Penelope Bartlett, “Within Earshot: A Conversation with Sorayos Prapapan,” *Criterion.Com* (blog), November 12, 2019, https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/6681-within-earshot-a-conversation-with-sorayos-prapapan.

91 Jeremy Sing, “One Funny Dossier: An Interview with Sorayos Prapapan,” *SINdie – Southeast Asian Cinema* (blog), accessed October 13, 2021, https://www.sindie.sg/2019/11/one-funny-dossier-interview-with.html.

The relative anonymity of a short film, which generally only attracts a limited niche audience at international festivals and is largely ignored by the press, predestines this format for filmmakers working under authoritarian conditions. Naturally, one could argue that the effect is misplaced when, as a short film without a theatrical release, it does not reach the subjects it is concerned with. The same issue holds true for other decidedly activist movements such as the Third Cinema or García Espinosa's notion of an Imperfect Cinema, which appealed to an international cinephile audience rather than to the average Latin American citizen. The difference today, however, is that a successful short film travels for two years as part of an established international (short) film festival circuit, where it typically reaches the diasporic community interested in the cultural output of their respective homelands. *Death of the Sound Man* competed in 69 film festivals all over the world, including its premiere at Venice Film Festival and screenings in Busan, Winterthur, Rotterdam, Clermont-Ferrand and Palm Springs. In addition to that, the film has been part of countless short film programs shown in different contexts. As mentioned above, many short films are uploaded to the internet for free viewing after they have completed their festival run. *Death of the Sound Man* has a staggeringly impressive 159,000 views on Vimeo.[92]

The discussion between Burt and Nicky not only includes the issue of an authoritarian government spending its people's money on non-essentials, they also address the inferior status of sound engineers in film production: "We always have to rush our work, but he [AN: the director] never pays on time," Burt remarks. In the context of the short film format as a minor one, I understand the two sound recordists' grievances as symptomatic of the hierarchies in a capitalist system of production quite generally. Asked why all his films are short and most feature only two characters just talking to each other, Prapapan jokingly answers: "Maybe it is because I am realistic. I am a director, producer and a sound guy and I have only two levelers. So if I keep it at two characters, I don't need to rent more."[93] In a scene in which Burt and Nicky record ambience in a zoo, they debate about why film parlance differentiates between sound effects (noise from objects or natural phenomena) and foley (sound from a living being, according to them). They identify the reason for this very detailed distinction in the Taylorist processes of mainstream cinema studios around the world, where there are specialized units for maximum efficiency in every department.[94] "But in Thailand, you and me have to do everything, from recording dialogues to background sound. And when the film is in cinemas, the audience will make some noise," Burt declares. They both agree that in the end, the audience won't even care about the hard work they put into producing these sounds, because nobody will pay attention.

92 See Sorayos Prapapan, *Death of the Sound Man* (Minimal Animal, 2017), https://vimeo.com/282026386.

93 Sing, "One Funny Dossier."

94 See also the discussion on skilled and unskilled labor with reference to Louis Henderson's *All That Is Solid* labor in Chapter 3.

Film still *Death of the Sound Man* (Sorayos Prapapan, 2017)

The audience's ignorance of the importance of sound in film functions as an allegory of the Thai government's lack of willingness to listen to its citizens. This is made manifest through another series of shots from Burt and Nicky's working day. More ambient sound is recorded, but now the two characters are not part of the shot. All the audience can see for two minutes is footage from three significant places: the square right next to the zoo with an oversized statue of King Rama V, just outside of the zoo's gates, followed by the series of bronze statutes of Thai kings in Rajabhakti Park, which was built after the 2014 coup d'état by the Royal Thai Army, and finally an impression of the scenic Thai landscape that could be used in a tourist brochure.[95] In the last scene, Nicky is waving a Thai flag to add the "flag flapping sound" the director requested earlier on in the film. The Thai flag, however, refuses to produce any sound at all – no matter how hard Nicky moves it up and down, it remains completely silent. In the end, they have to resort to waving the US American flag, which makes an unnaturally loud noise. They accept it with a shrug of the shoulders and get on with their work.

Prapapan's portrayal of a highly underappreciated part of film production doubles as a witty commentary on the day-to-day existence of ordinary Thai citizens under what is de facto a military dictatorship. It can, however, also be analyzed as an allegory of the virtues of the short film format as an agent of dissent. It is the short film's inconspicuousness within the larger playing field of cultural diplomacy that grants it the freedom of speech and the freedom of movement in international circles. Being a non-commercial niche product has, after all, its advantages.

95 In 2020, Prapapan's short film *Prelude to the Moving Zoo* premiered at the International Film Festival Rotterdam. It is a portrait of the last days of Dusit Zoo, a popular spot in Bangkok which emerged out of the private gardens of King Rama V and where Prapapan filmed the zoo scenes of *Death of the Sound Man*. Under the pretext of improving living conditions for the animals, the current King Rama X reclaimed the land (for private purposes) and moved the zoo to a new location two hours outside the capital. The zoo employees were instructed to refrain from making any sort of comment on the move and therefore remained silent in the film.

It's All Relative(ly Short)

A structural gesture of evaluation comes with the use of the terms brief, short or small, which needs to be addressed at length because it is by no means as straightforward as it might appear at first glance. It unites inherently self-contradictory trajectories that are perhaps indicative of contemporary "post-cinematic" moving-image culture in general:

> [...] the hierarchically employed dichotomies that have long guided the study of film—for example, center/periphery (that is, the film culture of urban centers such as Paris, Berlin, and New York vs. the rest of the world), first/second and third cinema, theatrical/non-theatrical, auteur cinema/non-artistic forms and uses of cinema, professional/amateur, and also experimental avant-garde/mainstream cinema—no longer apply to the current state of moving-image culture. [96]

The hermeneutic position of brevity in film is highly variable and cannot be reduced to simple dichotomies, either. On the one hand, falling short of the standard duration for a feature length film means less visibility in commercial contexts of film exhibition.[97] On the other, due to the fact that there is no commercial distribution setting in place which prevents putting films online and making them freely accessible also means that short films reach a potentially immense audience. As both Maya Deren's concept of the vertical film and Roy Andersson's notion of the complex image show, the connection between the duration of a film and its complexity (which consequently warrants a larger amount of time and intellectual energy to be spent on deciphering it) often comes down to a relation of inverse proportionality.

Brevity, like shortage, must always be considered in proportion to something else. It does not have an essence in and of itself, as Godard rightly notes when he writes that "there is no difference in kind between a short film and a feature, only – given the industrial organization of the cinema – in degree."[98] What is brief is shorter than something which, in direct comparison, is longer, larger or taller. "Presumably the most fundamental feature of formats concerns limitation: formats frame and otherwise determine the spatial dimensions and aspect ratios (e. g. 16:9) of inscription surfaces or regulate the volume or temporal dimensions of art forms or media content (think short stories vs. novels, short films vs. feature films, and singles vs. long-playing records)," writes Axel Volmar.[99] My next step in the discussion of the conceptual triangle proposed for this thesis, therefore, is to turn to the technical term *format* and its multiple entanglements in conceptual and theoretical debates in contemporary film, art and media studies.

96 Malte Hagener, Vinzenz Hediger, and Alena Strohmaier, eds., *The State of Post-Cinema: Tracing the Moving Image in the Age of Digital Dissemination* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 3.

97 How dominant the feature film bias is to this day can be shown, for example, by the fact that the competitive strand *Encounters* at Berlinale in 2021 labeled *Rock Bottom Riser* by Fern Silva and *Moon, 66 Questions* by Jacqueline Lentzou to be "debut films" (see www.berlinale.de/en/news-topics/news/detail_64271, accessed March 3, 2021). Both filmmakers have extensive filmographies (which are listed on the directors' profiles on the Berlinale homepage) and have been widely successful on the short film festival circuit for the past decade, garnering awards and recognition for their complex cinematic works. The fact that a first feature film is defined as a "debut" corroborates the notion that short films do not count as full citizens in the state of cinema.

98 Jean Luc Godard, "Take Your Own Tours," in *Godard on Godard: Critical Writings by Jean-Luc Godard*, ed. Jean Narboni and Tom Milne, trans. Tom Milne (New York: Da Capo Press, 1986), 109.

99 Axel Volmar, "Formats as Media of Cooperation," *Media in Action* 1, no. 2 (2017): 20.

Format

On December 28, 1895, Auguste and Louis Lumière exhibited their short film *La sortie des ouvriers de l'usine Lumière* to a paying public at the Grand Café in Paris. Their Cinématographe, a camera that also functioned as a projector, used a 35mm gauge – the same as Edison's Kinetoscope – with round perforations on each side of the film strip, projected at 16 frames per second. Two months earlier than the Lumière's first public screening, on November 1, 1895, two German brothers, Max and Emil Skladanowsky, presented moving images to a paying audience as the closing act of a variety performance at the Wintergarten music hall in Berlin. Their novel Bioscope used 45mm film, which they acquired by splitting 90mm Eastman No. 2 Kodak camera film in half.[100] If asked about the birth of motion pictures, people with a fair understanding of the history of popular culture could in all likelihood cite the Lumière brothers as the founding fathers of cinema. Historiography, of course, is always entangled in a multiplicity of rivalling accounts, conflicting points of departure, and gradual shifts. As much as the "end of cinema" is indeterminable, so is its origin.[101]

Nevertheless, to ask the question of how and why the dominant narrative of the birth of cinema came to exclude the initiating event in Berlin in popular memory is an interesting one. One of the reasons must lie in the fact of the Bioscope's technological inferiority and the ramifications of its use of a film gauge that never attained standardization. Soon after its introduction by William Dickson and Thomas Edison in 1892, 35mm became the standard gauge for both still photography and moving images.[102] Until its replacement by the Digital Cinema Package (DCP) in the early teens of the 21st century, it remained to be the standard for theatrical exhibition – for what we call "cinema" today. Matters of visibility and of access will be a recurring theme throughout this study on short film at the nexus of *brevity, format* and *program*. With the almost instantaneous obsolescence of their technical apparatus and the consequential vanishing of their technical format, the Skladanowsky brothers' films were bound to retreat into obscurity. Films that do not circulate remain unseen, accordingly also untaught, and ultimately only leave behind scattered traces in history.

SPOTLIGHT
Main Hall

Austria 2013, 5'08'', color, no sound
Director, Concept: Philipp Fleischmann
Distribution: Philipp Fleischmann

Designed by Josef Maria Olbrich in 1898, the main exhibition hall of the Vienna Secession is generally regarded as one of the first White Cube Spaces of art history. The myth of the neutral space has a long tradition of being critically examined by the institution itself. Using 19 specially designed cameras, Main Hall adds a purely cinematographic gesture to the space's history by having it look at its own architecture.

100 John Belton, "Historical Paper: The Origins of 35mm Film as a Standard," *SMPTE Journal* 99, no. 8 (1990): 658.

101 For a detailed account of the different histories, milestones and premiers of early cinema and New Film History's rewriting of a grand narrative of evolution that is teleological in character, see Elsaesser, *Filmgeschichte und frühes Kino*.

102 Belton, "Historical Paper: The Origins of 35mm Film as a Standard," 652.

Photograph from the set of *Main Hall* (Philipp Fleischmann, 2013)
© Antoinette Zwirchmayr

The enmeshment of format, institutionalization, visibility and practices of knowledge production is one that Austrian filmmaker Philipp Fleischmann candidly explores in his artistic practice. Questions of industrial standardization and access regulated by institutional requirements play a major role in the work of Fleischmann, whom film critic Michael Sicinski calls a "conceptualist of institutions."[103] His formal idiom is categorically based on analog film material, which not only registers light but also inscriptions of institutionalized power. In his film *Main Hall* (2017), Fleischmann maps the interior of the main exhibition hall of the Secession Building in Vienna, which was built in 1897 and designed by Joseph Maria Olbrich as an architectural manifesto to the movement of artists who had resigned from the

103 Michael Sicinski, "Toronto: Wavelengths Shorts 2019," *Mubi Notebook* (blog), September 7, 2019, https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/toronto-wavelengths-shorts-wls19.

official Association of Austrian Artists on 22 Mai 1897. The term secession has its root in the past participle of the Latin verb *secedere* – to withdraw, separate, revolt. In its original Roman use, it described the temporary migration of commoners from the city in order to pressure the patricians to address their demands or complaints.[104] The strong implication of right and wrong and of hierarchical notions of establishment versus underdog is already present in its historical context and, as is the case with other secessions such as the withdrawal of 11 Southern States from the US Union in 1860, was also intended in the nomenclature chosen by the founders of the Vienna Secession (including Josef Hoffman, Koloman Moser, Otto Wagner and Gustav Klimt). This group of artists and architects took issue with the historical and traditionalist orientation of the official Vienna Academy of the Arts' exhibition policies and they were eager to establish a space of exhibition led by artists for artists. With the Vienna Secession, they founded the world's first artist-run exhibition space dedicated exclusively to contemporary art. The main exhibition hall of the Vienna Secession is generally regarded as one of the first "white cubes" of art history, according to the Seccession's website, but the illusion of a neutral space in art exhibition is consistently and critically questioned and challenged by the institution itself, as might be expected from an exhibition venue which originated in the spirit of defiance and provocation against institutional boundaries.[105]

For *Main Hall,* Fleischmann built a series of 19 especially constructed cameras and positioned them inside the Secession's main exhibition hall in such a way along the walls, the floor, and the ceiling that the entire interior of the space would be captured on strips of 35mm film placed inside of these tailor-made pin-hole cameras. This results in a series of shots that are essentially visual quantifications of space, using 35mm film as measuring tape.[106] Film duration was originally a category of space – length had to be given in meters before a uniform frame rate became possible with the introduction of electric motors replacing hand-cranked projectors. The camera devices in *Main Hall* do not work in the way a regular film camera does, which would have the film strip rolled up inside the camera, unfolding sequentially over a period of time and necessitating the movement of the camera itself through a given space to show the different perspectives of a room. Fleischmann and his crew exposed the entire length of the filmstrips inside these several camera devices simultaneously, with the cameras themselves resembling sculptural objects within the exhibition hall.

All the film strips taken together reconstruct the volume of the room true to scale. The element of time in measuring space, however, was completely passed over in the recording of the film. The exposure which created a photographic image that actually resembles a

104 *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. "secession," accessed October 31, 2021, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/secession.

105 "Exhibition Space Wiener Secession, Vienna, Austria," accessed October 31, 2021, https://www.secession.at/en/gebaeude/exhibition-space/.

106 The Main Hall of the Secession building roughly measures 24.25 meters in length, 5.95 meters in height, and 29 meters in width.

panorama only lasted a moment. There are no "24 frames per second" – the element of time (in the case of *Main Hall* this would be five minutes and eight seconds) only comes back into play once the film runs through the projector at a speed of 24 frames per second, which corresponds to the time of viewing, not the time of recording.[107] The time of recording therefore took only a moment, and approximately 141 meters of film strip.

Fleischmann is strict in only allowing *Main Hall* to be exhibited within the institutions we call cinema and with the use of an analog film projector. His film therefore not only translates architectural space onto film, there is also a transfer of institutions from production to presentation. As I have mentioned, the Vienna Secession is an iconic location that is closely connected to discourses concerning the autonomy of art and the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that define whether a certain artist or artwork is exhibited. In order to show your work in the Secession, you must be a member of the association or be recommended by one. Fleischmann, as a non-member, approached the Secession and requested permission to film the premises – an almost impertinent act in its bypassing of traditional hierarchies and economies surrounding the production and exhibition of art. It is a double intervention on the part of the artist as he transposes a site-specific artwork into a different institutional context – from exhibition hall to cinema – but Fleischmann nonetheless refers to *Main Hall* not as a film, but as an exhibition, complete with a catalog for sale. The frame of reference for *Main Hall* is a series of site-specific solo exhibitions commissioned by the Vienna Secession.

The fact that Fleischmann would only allow the film to be exhibited within a cinema, not a white cube, but that he nonetheless produced an exhibition catalog to go along with these screenings, is a gesture of self-determination with regard to institutional codes. It is also no coincidence that Fleischmann used the more commercial 35mm format instead of the 16mm that is much more commonly associated with artistic practices in experimental filmmaking. This once again underlines the critical juxtaposition between the institutions of art and cinema, which Fleischmann approaches via the act of literally measuring the one with the means of the other. An additional reason why Fleischmann chose to use 35mm film instead of 16mm, which he worked with in other projects such as *Untitled (Generali Foundation Venna)* (2015), *The Invisible Cinema 3* (2017), and *philipp fleischmann 2012/2013* (2012, 2013), is that the establishment of 35mm as the standard gauge, based on the work of William K. Dickson at the Edison Lab, falls within the same period as the founding of the Vienna Secession. The artist thereby constructs a historical dimension in which the medium of film, which he uses as measuring tape, and the architecture of the art institution he is measuring, are connected.

107 In talks and lectures about his own works, Fleischmann consistently mentions the misconception that the unit of the single frame is a part of the filmstrip even before its journey through the standardized, commercial camera. See for example Jordan Cronk, "Philipp Fleischmann," *Film Comment*, October 17, 2019, https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/interview-philipp-fleischmann/.

Short Films and Formats

I began this chapter with a spotlight on Philipp Fleischmann's practice because it offers a gateway into thinking about the overlap between length and format, with its implications of politics, economics, standardization, institutionalization and knowledge production that I am interested in. The technical term *format* has found attraction and interest in film and media studies in recent years as it enables researchers to think through issues and to find specific answers to questions that cannot be raised at the level of medium alone. Most notably, formats address issues of how artworks circulate within specific institutional and infrastructural environments. Meredith McGill, for example, has conclusively demonstrated how the analysis of ballads as a specifically popular form of poetry differs based on whether critical attention is laid on the ballad being a "genre, format, or medium—that is, when they think of the ballad primarily as a text, when they take print format into consideration, and when they broaden their sights to consider the role of print in a larger media ecology."[108] Taking format into consideration, the fact that ballads were just as often printed on cheap broadsides as they were in respectable magazines meant they circulated in a wide range of public and social spaces. Broadsides are large sheets of paper printed only on one side, meaning that these ballads essentially were a highly popular form of poetry that reached large crowds in the form of public posters.[109] At the level of the format, the ballad with its "promiscuous boundary-crossing—between high and low, literary and nonliterary, legitimate and unauthorized publication, art and commerce" raises entirely different issues than it would if the focus of analysis were on genre (that is, on content, hierarchies, discursive conditions) or medium (print or oral tradition).[110]

Axel Volmar, referring to Erhard Schüttpelz, calls formats "paradigmatic *media of cooperation,*" by which he underlies formats' key role in regulating processes within complex cultural techniques and media industries.[111] A key aspect of formatting is supporting restriction as a prerequisite for cooperation: a limited and clearly specified range of technical or infrastructural possibilities enables various actors, both mechanical and human, to work together and avoid the inefficacious chaos of arbitrary procedures.

> Most important, formatting becomes productive because and in so far as its effects are mostly restrictive: formats channel, accelerate, and intensify modes of production and networks of circulation; they create expectability and thus the possibility of new practices, apparatuses, and formats of collecting, comparing, and connecting; and in doing so, they change the way we not only deal with images but also think about ourselves, about who we are, what constitutes our identity, and how individuality can be determined with and through images.[112]

108 Meredith L. McGill, "What Is a Ballad? Reading for Genre, Format, and Medium," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 71, no. 2 (September 1, 2016): 157.

109 McGill, 163.

110 McGill, 168.

111 Volmar, "Formats as Media of Cooperation," 24; emphasis in the original. Volmar references Erhard Schüttpelz, "Infrastructural Media and Public Media," *Media in Action*, 2017, 13–61.

112 Roland Meyer, "Formatting Faces: Standards of Production, Networks of Circulation, and the Operationalization of the Photographic Portrait," in *Format Matters: Standards, Practices, and Politics in Media Cultures*, ed. Marek Jancovic, Axel Volmar, and Alexandra Schneider (Lüneburg: meson press, 2020), 164.

This is the reason why a format cannot be conceptualized outside of questions of technological efficiency, standardization and institutionalization and the ensuing issues of normalization and hegemonic forms of knowledge. "[F]ormat is where economic and technological limitations meet cultural expectations," writes Meredith McGill in reference to publishing, but this conclusion also holds true for other media.[113]

When I conceptualize the short film as a format, I do not emphasize moments where the brevity of the film has an impact on the film's singular aesthetics – formats are never individualized – but rather I am interested in how brevity as a temporal restriction affects the film's behavior in a given medial environment and various constellations. Filmmaker Justin Ascott writes about his use of the short film format:

> As an independent filmmaker I typically work alone like a photographer, using lightweight, compact digital equipment. I make short films of under ten minutes that explore issues relating to urban spaces and places. Short form filmmaking appeals to me because the temporal duration favors narratives that focus on single, defined themes and settings rather than the complexities of feature-length temporal structures, with the associated extensive planning and significant financial resources required. In the timescale needed to complete a single feature film, I am able to produce several short films—which greatly appeals because it allows me to use the medium in a highly iterative, experimental way.[114]

Short films are less expensive to create due to lesser demands on the amount of material and time it takes to finish them and the number of people who are involved in their production. This makes them the primary format for productions realized within an educational context. They require less analog film stock and less computational rendering time, they are fast to upload and download and need less overall bandwidth to stream based on their short duration. Short films circulate more easily throughout alternative distribution channels (festivals, online platforms) and more easily overcome institutional boundaries (between cinema and art) because they can be combined for presentation in multiple ways. The most prominent public platform for the exhibition of short films in a cinematic context (as opposed to short works of moving images presented in the art world) is the festival. In conceptualizing the short film festival as particular cultural format, which I will do in detail in the section on *Program*, I am thus interested in the institutionalizing factors of festivals and in particular in the part they play in practices of knowledge production via the programming and curation of programs.

Format Theory: An Overview

It should be noted that there is a semantic instability to the definition of the term that warrants a conceptual framing – one that every author has to spell out for their work in order to convey to her readers in which tradition the term is used. Digressing at this point with a fragmentary overview of the use of the technical term *format* in media studies, I wish to clarify how I came to conceptually link short films with a bibliographical

113 Meredith L. McGill, "Format," *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 16, no. 4 (2018): 674.

114 Justin Ascott, "Codified Space: Cinematic Recordings of Urban Reality," in *Compact Cinematics: The Moving Image in the Age of Bit-Sized Media*, ed. Pepita Hesselberth and Maria Poulaki (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 199.

term that was originally used to denote paper size and the number of leaves per sheet by printers.[115] It might be too early to speak of a thorough examination of the state of research of format theory, as the amount of scholarly literature is still exponentially growing, but an overview of the use of and approaches to the term in 2020 is offered by an edited volume in English entitled *Format Matters: Standards, Practices, and Politics in Media Cultures*. This publication is the result of a conference held at the Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz in 2017, one of a series of academic symposia dedicated to the epistemological potential of the format in various disciplines in recent years.

In his contribution to this volume, Axel Volmar offers a lay-of-the-land article entitled "Reformatting Media Studies: Toward a Theoretical Framework for Format Studies," asking what the engagement with formats can contribute to contemporary media studies and what methodological and theoretical frameworks must be taken into consideration. Noting the idiosyncratic use of the term in diverse disciplines and in the studies of individual scholars, Volmar proposes a heuristic approach in establishing a taxonomy of the format when he distinguishes between five general types of formats addressing various issues and questions of how media are articulated. Different approaches would prioritize different types of use. These types include a) size-and-shape formats, b) diagrammatic and structural formats, c) encoding and data formats d) metaphorical formats and e) narrative and processual-events formats. What Volmar calls "size-and-shape formats" covers the definition of what is commonly considered a format for professionals working in the media industry: "Originating from book, paper, and picture formats, size-and-shape formats frame and dimension the display and presentation of – usually visual – content by means of limitation, orientation, and alignment."[116] This description of format is related to an act of measurement or aspects of ratio, be they visual, material or temporal.

The etymological root of "gauge," for example, as the technical term used to describe analog film formats such as 35mm, 16mm or 8mm, comes from the Old North French verb *gauger*, meaning to "standardize, calibrate, measure."[117] In this sense, the gauge of a film strip – its format – refers to its width as the point of reference for measurement. Aspect ratio, too – such as the highly popular 1.375:1 "Academy ratio" as the standard for optical sound-on-film, the earlier standard of 4:3 for television or the current high-definition standard 16:9 – are subsumed under the designation of format.

Albeit unorthodox because not a technical limitation, I maintain short film's temporal restriction to be an element of format, in the sense of being a type of measuring, pacing and limiting that effectively shapes the films' perceptual features without turning the format into an aesthetic category in its own right. I have already introduced this idea in the preceding section on *Brevity* as a qualitative, not only quantitative, element of media experience. The affinity between what is small or short and what is formatted – prepared in such a way that it becomes a functional part of something larger – lies in the

115 At the center of my attention are publications in English, with the exception of literary scholar Michael Niehaus' programmatic and concise historical survey of the term at the intersection of media, literature and art studies in *Was ist ein Format?* (2018). For literature in German that has also shaped my thinking about processes of formatting and the conceptualization of formats outside of their merely technical usage, see Jacob Burckhardt, "Format und Bild [1886]," in *Vorträge 1844 – 1887*, ed. Emil Dürr (Basel: Schwabe, 1918), 312–23; Barbara Paul, *FormatWechsel: Kunst, populäre Medien und Gender-Politiken* (Vienna: Sonderzahl-Verlag, 2008); Susanne Müller, "Formatieren," in *Historisches Wörterbuch des Mediengebrauchs*, ed. Heiko Christians, Matthias Bickenbach, and Nikolaus Wegmann (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2014), 253–67; Wolfram Pichler and Ralph Ubl, *Bildtheorie zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2018); Magdalena Nieslony and Yvonne Schweizer, eds., *Format: Politiken der Normierung in den Künsten ab1960*, Kunstgeschichten der Gegenwart, Band 13 (München: Edition Metzel, 2020); Oliver Fahle et al., "Medium | Format. Einleitung in den Schwerpunkt," *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft*, 2020. For a discussion of the original use of *format* as a technical term in book printing, see for example Thomas G. Tanselle, "The Concept of Format," *Studies in Bibliography* 53 (2000): 67–115; Müller, "Formatieren"; McGill, "What Is a Ballad?"; Michael Niehaus, *Was ist ein Format?* (Hannover: Wehrhahn Verlag, 2018).

116 Axel Volmar, "Reformatting Media Studies: Toward a Theoretical Framework for Format Studies," in *Format Matters: Standards, Practices, and Politics in Media Cultures*, ed. Marek Jancovic, Alexandra Schneider, and Axel Volmar (Lüneburg: meson press, 2020), 30.

117 *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "gauge (noun)." Accessed September 5, 2020. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gauge.

interplay between limitation (made to fit) and plurality (as a repeated element, standing in relation to a larger whole).[118]

Volmar labels the second taxonomic category as diagrammatic and structural formats, which he defines as regulating the "spatial, temporal, or logical structures in which content is stored, transmitted, and presented."[119] Layouting written documents would be the most obvious example of formatting in this sense. His third category, encoding and data formats, include both formats "used for displaying numbers, dates, and time" as well as what one classically thinks of as digital formats, such as MP3 for music or MPEG for video. The fourth type of format, metaphorical, refers to the way the term is used primarily in German since the turn of the 20th century to describe a person of stature and influence.[120] Finally, the category that, apart from size-and-shape formats, are most crucial for media studies are narrative and processual-events format. Especially for the discussion of broadcasting programs, both for radio as well as television, formats have become a valuable category to "denote strongly structured events that follow predefined sequences, rules, or schemes."[121] Knut Hickethier notes that when used in the context of television (rather than as a designation for the aspect ratio of film frames), the term format is fundamentally commercially oriented in the sense that formats aim to establish consistent standards to be used as reference points in serial production.[122]

For film studies – as opposed to a more inclusive notion of the objects of analysis in media studies – Haidee Wasson has noted a productive shift away from the generalized description of "cinema" as a medium to a more precise analytic tool rooted in the concept of format. In her landmark essay "Formatting Film Studies," she convincingly argues that the longstanding use of the term medium is too much of an abstraction – "ahistorical, unchanging, and thus rather expansive."[123] For Wasson, format theory offers a prospect of scripting numerous small histories of cinema – a "polyvalent cinema," as she calls it – by focusing on a certain moment of the real encounter between a specific technological articulation and its audience.[124] In her most recent book entitled *Everyday Movies: Portable Film Projectors and the Transformation of American Culture* (2020), she writes the cultural history of the projector – as the main constitutive component of the cinema experience – and with it the history of "a parallel kind of cinema, one that was often linked to display and performance scenarios and embedded in expanded institutional and technological ecosystems not usually included in histories of cinema."[125] Wasson therefore follows the tenet of Jonathan Sterne, whom she also quotes in her article, in encouraging film scholars to focus on a more fine-grained analytical perspective, in that format theory is not only a way of learning about and describing a particular instance of what "cinema" can be, but that in a much more comprehensive way it also challenges how we tackle the theory and historiography of "cinema" in the first place.[126]

118 See Niehaus, "Kleine Formate. Vorüberlegungen."

119 Volmar, "Reformatting Media Studies," 30f.

120 Volmar, 32. While Volmar does not go into more detail on how a technical term used for standardization and repetition would alter its meaning in such a drastic way for figurative use in the German language, literary scholar Michael Niehaus outlines the ironic tone of the term "format" with regard to personality in one of the chapters in his short book on formats in quite some detail, see Niehaus, *Was ist ein Format?*, 18ff.

121 Volmar, "Reformatting Media Studies," 32.

122 Knut Hickethier, "Werk, Genre, Gattung; Format und Programm," in *Film- und Fernsehanalyse*, by Knut Hickethier (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2012), 207.

123 Haidee Wasson, "Formatting Film Studies," *Film Studies* 12, no. 1 (2015): 58.

124 Wasson, 59.

125 Haidee Wasson, "The Quick Search and Slow Scholarship: Researching Film Formats," in *The Arclight Guidebook to Media History and the Digital Humanities*, ed. Charles R. Acland and Eric Hoyt (Sussex: REFRAME Books, 2016), 32.

126 An approach which, it should be noted, certainly has come a long way in the past decade of scholarship, sporting numerous publications that focus on particular histories of cinema(s) and their infrastructure(s).

As specific articulations of encountering films, formats are necessarily imbricated with the social, technological, cultural and political forces at play in a particular setup. Wasson is interested in approaching cinema from the perspective of its viewing conditions. For Wasson, a format "offers an organizational tool to identify the ways that forms of knowledge, manners of doing things, and raw materials come together to create phases of technological coherence."[127] Formats thus have aesthetic, perceptual and economic implications, and while the formats themselves are determined by historical specificity, format theory allows for the writing of a history of cinema that is highly contingent. As I mention throughout the introduction, I would argue that the history of short film remains largely unwritten because of the format's affiliation with an alternative history of viewing film. Short film's affiliation with subpar gauges – mostly 8mm and 16mm – its exhibition practices outside of the movie theatre (at festivals and online), its programmability and adaptability all call for an approach such as Wasson proposes throughout her work, but particularly also in her most recent publication on portable film projectors.[128]

Jonathan Sterne's study on a specific music format, MP3, has gained widespread attention in media study circles. The subtitle of his investigation into the most popular compressed audio file format reads *The Meaning of a Format*, indicating how Sterne wishes to make a case for the necessity of format theory in general (not incidentally, his introductory chapter is then also entitled "Format Theory"). What makes Sterne's definition of format productive for many scholars of different backgrounds and interests is that it is relatively inclusive. Even though his specific example is of a highly protocolized and technical nature – MP3 is written in a specific code and then decoded by a specific script so it can be performed as a piece of audio content – Sterne merely defines that the "format is what specifies the protocols by which a medium will operate. This specification operates as a code – whether in software, policy, or instructions and its processing protocols."[129] Contrary to the mundane usage of the term *format* in film studies in reference to a specific analog gauge or a digital encoding protocol for moving images, Sterne includes any form of standardized or protocolized procedures, such as highly contingent issues of policy or mere procedural instructions, in his discussion of what it entails: "If there were a single imperative of format theory, it would be to focus on the stuff beneath, beyond, and behind the boxes our media come in [...]."[130] With reference to brevity, the practices of reduction and compression as a mode of mediation between "the limits and affordances of an infrastructure" and the way these "limits – technical, perceptual, juridical, cultural—[are] negotiated in a given assemblage of practices, technologies, institutions, and representations" are of special interest when conceptualizing the short film as a format.[131]

Benoît Turquety uses the format as a starting point for linking geopolitical structures to perceptual qualities of media, thereby thinking through and criticizing a naturalized idea of cultural hierarchies in a global media environment from the perspective of a specific film or video format. Using the examples of two case studies – Jean Rouch's failed attempts to capture Mozambique on Super 8 color film and the emergence and success story of the Nollywood production system thanks to the cheap and highly mobile VHS format – Turquety shows the formats' entanglements with geopolitical

127 Wasson, "Formatting Film Studies," 58f.

128 See Haidee Wasson, *Everyday Movies: Portable Film Projectors and the Transformation of American Culture* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2020).

129 Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 8.

130 Sterne, 11.

131 Jonathan Sterne, "Compression. A Loose History," in *Signal Traffic: Critical Studies of Media Infrastructures*, ed. Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 39.

factors, both locally and globally. For his definition of format, he draws on French philosopher Gilbert Simondon's concept of "technical networks," based on the notion that technicity should be thought of as a network inscribed in a topography of social, political and physical relations that have an impact on the status of the technical network. Turquety explicitly states how the turn to formats permits a rethinking of the cinema dispositif, which he considers to be a "closed and implicitly Western conception."[132] For my interest in the short film as a subversive category in the sense of its productive failure to meet the normative duration of the cinema standard, it is Turquety's emphasis on how specific formats control circulation and visibility that are most relevant. Until the digital turn, for example, the standard for theatrical exhibition was 35mm film and any other form of public exhibition could not be called "cinema." Lacking financing and often connected to film schools which, also due to monetary restrictions, mostly used 16mm film stock, short films were relegated to screening environments outside of the commercial network: film clubs, educational environments, private home screenings. Films that play no part in the standardized theatrical distribution system develop the possibility to take a political and aesthetic position marked by a certain idiosyncrasy. "Approaching media in terms of technical networks and their displacements," writes Turquety, "allows us to elaborate on their geopolitical implications. 'Low' formats, for instance, may still appear as 'cheap' or 'poor,' but they may also appear as opportunities for decolonizing and decentralizing film."[133]

Turquety's use of the word "poor" in this context is most likely a reference to Hito Steyerl's seminal text "In Defense of the Poor Image," in which she argues that what she terms "poor images" are the "contemporary Wretched of the Screen," which "testify to the violent dislocation, transferals, and displacement of images – their acceleration and circulation within the vicious cycles of audiovisual capitalism."[134] Steyerl's essay is a programmatic text for my conception of the short film within a hierarchy of formats, and I will refer to her essay again in Chapters 3 and 4. Steyerl's text specifically speaks about digital images and their afterlife outside of the hallowed halls of cinema, but one can argue that this conversion of images to a lower grade has a long historical tradition. The film distributor Castle Films, for example, produced a range of short films on both 8mm and 16mm that were essentially condensed versions of highly popular horror movies released theatrically on 35mm by Universal Studios.[135] These shortened features by uncredited editors – sometimes taking great liberties in reworking the stories, sometimes improving on the originals, sometimes butchering the films beyond recognition – were placed on the market to sell for domestic projection. Castle Films were only ousted from the commercial home distribution market by the advent of the VHS format.[136] Alexandra Schneider refers to these reduction prints as "liminal formats, where liminal is

132 Benoît Turquety, *Medium, Format, Configuration: The Displacements of Film* (Lüneburg: meson press, 2019), 25. It is not possible for me in the scope of this book or my own expertise, for that matter, to explicitly work out both the similarities and the differences between the conceptualizations of the dispositif and the format, which in its more comprehensive definition also includes a film's material components, its modes of circulation, the conditions of reception as well as concrete local cultural, economic, ecological and social practices.

133 Turquety, 52.

134 Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," in *The Wretched of the Screen*, E-Flux Journal (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 32f.

135 I first became aware of this phenomenon when the 20th edition of Internationale Kurzfilmtage Winterthur in 2016 included a program entitled *The Sum of All Fears*, curated by Christoffer Ode Olofsson, which consisted of seven of Castle Film's most impressive reworkings of classics such as *The Wolf Man, The Son of Frankenstein, The Creature from the Black Lagoon, The Mummy* and even Alfred Hitchcock's *Frenzy*. For research on so-called "reduction prints" as a historical form of film distribution from the perspective of format studies that also features a section on Castle Films, see Alexandra Schneider, "Viewer's Digest: Small-Gauge and Reduction Prints as Liminal Compression Formats," in *Format Matters Standards, Practices, and Politics in Media Cultures*, ed. Marek Jancovic, Axel Volmar, and Alexandra Schneider (Lüneburg: meson press, 2020), 129–46.

136 On Castle's position within the distribution ecosystem of postwar Hollywood, see Eric Hoyt, *Hollywood Vault: Film Libraries before Home Video* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 135–137.

used in the sense of being not there yet or transitional, a kind of *format de passage.*"[137] Understanding liminality, as Schneider does in her take on reduction prints with reference to Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, as a gesture emphasizing the breaking up of established hierarchies, as a peripheral existence entering and disturbing a preexisting order, one could argue that the short film as a format inherently entails a liminal dimension. Liminality as a figure of thought will recur in the next section on *Program*, given that film festivals as a cultural format are defined as "liminal spaces" by various commentators.

In sum, the use of specific technical formats, be they highly irregular or simply a subpar version of an analog gauge, is a means of controlling or decentralizing the circulation of images. While artworks with an obscure format often need highly specialized and expensive equipment and as such restrict their potential for dissemination, highly standardized and quasi-ubiquitous technical formats – which today implicitly means digital formats – allow for a much wider range of circulation. Gabriele Jutz's notion of "retrograde technicity" as an alternative film practice is closely related to this observation. Jutz identifies a rejection of technological advances in favor of technical devices and exhibition practices that consciously undermine state-of-the-art possibilities associated with film and cinema. This has nothing to do with a nostalgic impulse, as Jutz notes, but rather with a deliberate play on the possibilities of distribution outside of the industry's codes and regulations, thereby attracting different audiences and permitting more thorough control over the circulation of (analog) films, especially in the digital age.[138] As mentioned above, it is common for many directors to make their short films freely accessible online after a festival run of roughly two years. Also noteworthy, however, is that this practice is highly uncommon for feature films and that it is restricted to directors who emphatically self-define as filmmakers, not as artists, because value generation in the art world is tied to restriction, not greater circulation.

The Format in Art History

The technical term *format* is used differently in the approaches of art historians David Summers or David Joselit. While I agree with Roland Meyer that the broad conceptualization of the format in Summers' and Joselit's approach fails to address what makes the term productive in the first place – its linkage to standardization, institutionalization and repetition – I nonetheless want to point out some aspects of the notion of format in art history that are seminal with regard to how formats can be linked to practices regarding the production and reordering of knowledge, which is a focal point of my thinking about the short film as a format.[139]

In *World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism*, a work of monumental proportions that aims to introduce new methodological approaches for the negotiation of Western art history in relation to universal artistic production, David Summers introduced the term format as a concept to discuss the culturally and contextually specific conditions that mediate between virtual worlds and real spaces: "The encounter of an observer with a virtual space [...] takes place before a culturally specific format – a screen, a polyptych or book, for example – in personal and social space."[140] Even though Summers refers to the material shape of an artwork in this quote, he goes on to analyze the format of a specific canvas regarding the conditions that regulate the work's recep-

137 Schneider, "Viewer's Digest: Small-Gauge and Reduction Prints as Liminal Compression Formats," 131.

138 Gabriele Jutz, "Retrograde Technicity and the Cinematic Avant-Garde: Towards a New Dispositif of Production," *Recherches Sémiotiques* 31, no. 1-2–3 (November 20, 2014): 78.

139 Meyer, "Formatting Faces: Standards of Production, Networks of Circulation, and the Operationalization of the Photographic Portrait," 148.

140 David Summers, *Real Spaces. World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (London: Phaidon Press, 2003), 44.

tion, its status and its circulation. With a shift away from iconographic research, Summers' post-formalist approach allows for the pluralization of (art) histories, a way of thinking of traditions as variations of a shared basic potential and, as a consequence, the critique of the canon as a hegemonic manifestation of art history written by the modern European tradition. Much like the format allows us to answer questions that are more specific than what the more homogeneous concept of the medium as a level of analysis can offer, Summers introduces the format as an entity that accounts for the appearance of a form that cannot be explained either in formal terms or iconographically. He writes,

> What must be omitted – or assumed – in either kind of explanation [formal or iconographic] is the historical significance of the format itself. Formats are culturally specific, and they come into existence, and persist, change, disappear, or are revived for equally specific reasons. At the same time, they are necessarily linked to what I shall introduce shortly as social space, that is, to culturally specific spaces and patterns of behavior, a fairly straightforward definition of context.[141]

Summers thus proposes a contextual method of describing works of art. His definition of the format encompasses all culturally specific conditions of presentation that mediate between artworks and real spaces.

The link between format and space is not one introduced only by Summers; it has obvious overlaps with Swiss art historian Jacob Burckhardt's oft-cited article "Format und Bild" from 1886. Burckhardt understands the format as a boundary that separates the artwork from its surroundings. In his words, the format "protects the art from leaking into the endless. The format is the demarcation of the beautiful from all the rest of the space."[142] Summers does not reference Burckhardt, whose lectures to my knowledge were never translated from German, but they both share a perspective on the format that is set in relation to the surrounding space. Early on in his study, Summers mentions that he prefers the term "spatial arts" to "visual arts," which to him seems to overly emphasize sight and vision as the primary factors in encountering an object of art. Rather, Summers proclaims that exchanging the adjective *visual* with *spatial* "involves a corresponding rise in the importance of the other sensory modes by which spaces and times were (and are) both defined and experienced."[143] The title of his work, *Real Spaces*, points to the primacy of spatial relations, by which he does not simply mean architectural components (this would be only one important factor out of many), but the multilayered and complex interaction of people with their surroundings: with tools, geopolitical conditions, local customs, social relations. Summers contrasts real spaces, "the space we find ourselves sharing with other people and things," with virtual space, the "space represented on a surface, space we 'seem to see'."[144] The term *visual arts*, which refers to what is visible but also to what was envisioned – "the 'vision' at issue is the inner imaginative and formative vision" – is too reductive for Summers, as the question of "what does an artwork mean?" cannot be explained by purely focusing on the perceptible aspects of the artwork and the presumed intention behind it.[145] This

141 Summers, 18.

142 Burckhardt, "Format und Bild [1886]," 315; translation mine.

143 Summers, *Real Spaces. World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism*, 41.

144 Summers, 43.

145 Summers, 41.

would mean that virtual space takes precedence, but the fact is that we always encounter virtual spaces of art in real spaces. Consequently, Summers suggests we should infer the conditions that must have been in place in order to result in a particular work of art and to compare them to other artworks that might have been made based on similar conditions, and to include the complex interrelations of social, personal and virtual spaces in an encounter with the artwork.

This is where the format comes into play as a technical term that defines the relationship between the formal relations of an artwork – its size, shape, material – and real spatial conditions. He writes:

> Considered aesthetically or formally, formats are relatively neutral, most attention being given to relationships inside their limits. But formats are culturally specific, and their comparison and contextualization provide access to basic real spatial cultural differences. Formal relations within the limits of a format may of course be of interest in their own right, but considered as material for history, they always risk dissolution into the subjectivity with which the aesthetic is associated. Formats themselves by contrast are relatively objective, more or less precisely locatable culturally and historically, and define the equally specific and literal context within which other culturally specific changes occur.[146]

In Summers' definition, then, format mediates the encounter of an observer in real space with the virtual space of the artwork. This encounter is historically, culturally and socially specific.

Art historian David Joselit follows a similar train of thought in his definition of the format as a "constellation of links" that establish "rights to action or rights to representation."[147] According to a footnote in *After Art,* this take on the idea of format is essentially congruent with Summers' definition, but even more fundamentally heterogeneous in the types of relationships or associations that exist between the artwork and its surroundings.[148] As mentioned above, Joselit is less interested in the production of images than in what comes "after," namely the conditions and effects of their circulation in heterogeneous networks – hence the title of his 2013 publication, *After Art*.

Joselit's concept of format is supported by metaphors from the field of digital circulation – he speaks of *links, connections, network*, etc. The internet, or more precisely the Web 2.0. with its shift towards user-based, interactive applications and the explosive increase in the number of images and their distribution, serves Joselit as a figure of thought. The links or connections between images, spaces, events, people, institutions and so on, establish a network regulating rights to action or rights to representation. Joselit writes:

146 Summers, 28.

147 David Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 52.

148 Joselit, 105. With a shift in focus on the production and dissemination of images within the framework of digital technologies, Joselit's language is full of metaphors from the digital realm. As Joselit explains, his idea of format is heavily indebted to Bruno Latour's concept of the social as an "assemblage," a term which Latour outlines in *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, first published in 2005 and which itself is of course a continuation of the term as outlined by Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980). Joselit prefers the term format over assemblage because of its clearer semantic proximity to digital practices of data storage, underlining how the practice of formatting is more important than the content itself. Used in this sense, formats are never fixed or preexisting entities within whose boundaries an artist can create her art, but rather the artwork itself is made up of connections – material, social, cultural, contextual – some of which are under the artist's influence, while others are determined by outside forces, such as institutions or an audience's personal encounter with the work. It is the critic's responsibility to decipher the types of connections that emanate from the artwork.

> The patterns of connection such rights configure – their constellation of links – are what I call formats. Simply put a format is a heterogeneous and often provisional structure that channels content. Mediums are subsets of formats – the difference lies solely in scale and flexibility. Mediums are limited and limiting because they call forth singular objects and limited visual practices, such as painting or video. [...] Formats regulate image currencies (image power) by modulating their force, speed, and clarity.[149]

In this view, then, a given format does not translate into the reification of an artwork (in the form of material, size, ratio, code, etc.), instead the format refers to the way the art world organizes itself. In consequence, Joselit locates real instead of only metaphorical power in art (image power), as the formats it can assume are shaped by multivalent connections between various stakeholders that, among other examples in Joselit's book, have an effect on "the self-image of entire nations, the transformation of neighborhoods and cities, and the fashioning of diplomatic identities that art is capable of accomplishing."[150] The longer excerpt quoted above mentions two aspects that make this conceptualization of the format highly constructive with regard to the short film as a format: *scalability* and *currency*.

Formats according to Joselit are scalable – they can cover everything from the intimate encounter between a work of art and an individual, to the global mass circulation of images via festivals, as part of the catalog of a major distributor or on a freely accessible online platform. A second aspect of Joselit's take on the format that I regard as crucial is its political dimension. Joselit uses the term *currency*, which as a designation implies a system governed by dynamics of exchange and the hierarchical determination of value relations. As formats regulate currency, they therefore control the relations of power and dependence in which a given cultural formation is situated. As formats regulate the speed of circulation and the retrievability of images, they also significantly determine their "currency."

The trouble that arises with Joselit's broad definition of format is that the elements of standardization and compliance with a predetermined set of procedures are lacking. Joselit has met with criticism both from art historians, who disapprove of his omission of material substance and its relation to content, as well as from media theorists, who regret the absence of regimented repetition in Joselit's application of the term to eminently heterogeneous, in themselves highly unique relations within networks.[151] This criticism is valid and cannot be refuted by adding yet another take on the definition of the format, but still it can be defused by pointing out that Joselit's epistemological interest essentially just targets very different issues. *After Art*, at least in parts, reads like a leftist manifesto for fairer or at any rate more democratic access to images and the currencies, which are not exclusively monetary, that they represent. With the author's epistemological bias made manifest like this, I am not sure the claims of the book can be invalidated on the grounds of the type of "mythologizing" that Joselit supposedly does with regard to the power he grants the contemporary global circulation of art.[152]

149 Joselit, 52f.

150 Joselit, 93.

151 See for example Nieslony and Schweizer, *Format: Politiken der Normierung*, 23f.; Christian Janecke, "Das verblassende Format," in *Format. Politiken der Normierung in den Künsten ab 1960.*, ed. Magdalena Nieslony and Yvonne Schweizer (München: Edition Metzel, 2020), 70–83; Meyer, "Formatting Faces: Standards of Production, Networks of Circulation, and the Operationalization of the Photographic Portrait," 147f.

152 Nieslony and Schweizer, *Format: Politiken der Normierung*, 23.

Joselit's conception locates the central importance of a format in the communicative and negotiative actions between technological, material, institutional and political aspects of an artwork, almost completely disregarding the relations between an artwork's spatial dimension and its contents that the traditional definition of the format in art theory would certainly include. Yet he offers a seminal contribution to one aspect of media culture that can be conceptualized via the notion of format: circulation. The conditions of circulation for artworks are largely dependent on the technical and cultural specificities of their formats. The three paradigms of cultural circulation Joselit sets forth are intimately connected to their formats and they offer a framework for analyzing the highly politicized issues of ownership, commodification and value which, much like the scope of the format itself – irrespective of the conceptual approach to this term – inherently includes the negotiation of norms based on exclusion and inclusion of certain parameters.

The question whether the various definitions assigned to the format, some broader and some more restrictive, make it conceptually useful for film, media and art studies or whether the term is meaningless based on its semantic indeterminacy is a legitimate one. Must it refer to a technical protocol (a digital code, a film gauge), a programmatic vessel (a television or radio series), or simply any form of nodal point that mediates between technical infrastructures and social practices of production, performance and use? Film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum argues that the paradigmatic shifts in film exhibition and reception over the past 20 years "should be engendering new terms, and new kinds of analysis, evaluation, and measurement, not to mention new kinds of political and social formations [...]. We're stuck with vocabularies and patterns of thinking that are still tied to the ways we were watching movies half a century ago."[153] Taking Rosenbaum's statement to heart, I would argue that the introduction of the term format, in its different handlings and usages, can be read as a response to an impetus in film and media studies and art history regarding the awareness of the various exhibition practices of film as an art form outside of their historically institutionalized environments. To burden the format with the mammoth task of supporting a whole theory of its own might be missing the mark, but it does not follow from this that the term becomes conceptually useless.

What this short and by no means exhaustive overview of some of the current debates on the notion of format in media studies and art history shows is, quite simply, that the concept is used as a tool to substantiate a writer's epistemological interest. I deliberately use the word tool here, with a nod to Michel Foucault's quote about his books being "tool-boxes" through which readers can rummage and take what they need for their own work, and with an emphasis on the poetic quality – in the sense of a gesture of uncovering – of the format as a concept which *does* something instead of simply *is*.[154]

153 Jonathan Rosenbaum, "End or Beginning: The New Cinephilia," in *Screen Dynamics. Mapping the Borders of Cinema*, ed. Gertrud Koch, Volker Pantenburg, and Simon Rothöhler (Vienna: Österreichisches Filmmuseum. SYNEMA – Gesellschaft für Film und Medien, 2012), 38.

154 "Je voudrais que mes livres soient une sorte de tool-box dans lequel les autres puissant aller fouiller pour y trouver un outil avec lequel ils pourraient faire ce que bon leur semble, dans leur domaine." Michel Foucault, *Dits et Écrits. 1954–1988*, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1994), 523.

Program

In 2019, the program strand *Person in Focus* of the 23rd edition of Internationale Kurzfilmtage Winterthur was dedicated to James N. Kienitz Wilkins, a filmmaker who first attracted the attention of the international short film scene and art world in 2014 and 2015 with his so-called "Andre Trilogy," consisting of *Special Features* (2014), *TEST-ER* (2015) and *B-Roll with Andre* (2015). In all three films, Kienitz Wilkins works with re-enacted interview scenes and uses footage he purchased online in order to try and capture an image, figuratively speaking, of Andre, this ominous figure whom the viewer never gets to see directly on camera. The films were shot on successively higher resolution digital formats (first BetaSP, then MiniDV, finally HD) or purchased as footage of the same quality on Amazon or eBay. The reason for the technical progress in the selection of the shooting format becomes evident in the last short film of the trilogy: *B-Roll with Andre* centers on the idea of a pure, unfiltered and unbiased representation, which the narrator links to the highest degree of image resolution.[155] The accomplishments of the latest technology, according to the character Andre, who is of African-American descent in this film, promise the surpassing of limitations set by a human frame of reference, one that is inherently determined by hegemonic power structures. In these short films, the director examines and questions the prevailing production conditions of the film industry, in which the short film is often not even considered due to its marginal economic status. Kienitz Wilkins examines cinematic representation and its relation to power and "truth" in all of his works. Often highly simplistic on the visual level, his films take on a performative character through their strong focus on spoken language. Kienitz Wilkins is a witty conceptualist who mainly uses words, and only few images that have witnessed several changes in technical format, to explore issues surrounding issues of value and valuation, the relationship between knowledge, representation and branding, money and consumer culture, as well as technology and image circulation in digital networks.

As part of this small retrospective of his short films in Winterthur, Kienitz Wilkins asked the festival to include Morgan Fisher's *Standard Gauge* (1984) to be shown alongside his own film *This Action Lies* (2018), a work I will discuss in detail in Chapter 3. Kienitz Wilkins discovered *Standard Gauge* after completing work on *Indefinite Pitch*, a film he considers to be a sister piece to *This Action Lies.*[156] He says about Fisher's film that it has a "pre-generational affinity" with his own work and heavily influenced his thinking on issues of format and industry standards.[157] *Indefinite Pitch* consists of a series of still images of the Androscoggin river taken in the filmmaker's home state of Maine. Kienitz Wilkins as the film's narrator muses about the power of digital film formats to produce a temporal dimension via the framerate of 24 frames per second, even in the absence of actual motion. The narrator tells us:

> Funny thing about still images – still images in movies, that is – is that they're still moving. [...] I mean, if this movie was projected on film, you'd see a flicker, and you'd be aware of its latent *aliveness*. But with the digital projection, everything is immobile, you know. But there's still a framerate. Data is still flowing ... but it doesn't reveal itself. It's a framerate without motion. Just exists

155 For an insightful discussion on the narrative of equating technological progress with higher degrees of verisimilitude – and a counter position to this narrative – see Sterne, "Compression. A Loose History," 31f.

156 See Mary Helena Clark, "Interview with James N. Kienitz Wilkins," *Bomb Magazine*, August 21, 2019.

157 Email from James N. Kienitz Wilkins to the author, April 11, 2019.

> so the computer knows what it is: that it's a movie. That it isn't dead. 24 frames per second no one sees. No, actually 23.98 frames if you're watching this in HD, but everyone says 24. It's easier to say 24. It's close enough. Saying 24 reminds of us film. We pretend it's 24. It reminds of us of all that's passed. Actually, if you're watching this in a movie theater, there's a chance it's been converted to 24. Shifted. For the DCP. That means 'Digital Cinema Package.' That's what they show movies on nowadays. In theaters. It's the new standard. Data streams. These DCPs run at 24 frames per second. Again: to mimic film.[158]

In the rather classical fashion of the established filmmaking avant-garde, Kienitz Wilkins as the character who is narrating the film is thinking about the materiality of cinema and its relation to (fake) time at a moment in history when the standard industry format for film production has actually become immaterial. Today's protocol consists of a series of digital images embedded in a coding system based on JPEG 2000 image compression technology, which was adopted as the standard for digital cinema in 2004.[159]

Film still *Indefinite Pitch* (James N. Kienitz Wilkins, 2016)

Kienitz Wilkins stands in the tradition of a meta-cinema interested in issues of conceptual form and material format, which has Morgan Fisher as one of its most accomplished representatives. Fisher's films explore cinema's technical apparatus and physical material and the conditions that feed into processes of industry standardization. *Standard Gauge* opens with a short recapitulation of the history and development of 35mm as the "standard gauge" in cinema production. The film shows Fisher handling a series of 35mm film frames gleaned from various sources. The productive irony of Fisher's film is twofold. Firstly, it is shot on the subpar, non-industry standard format of 16mm, the preferred gauge in the experimental and amateur section due to its cost effectiveness and easier handling. "In terms of avant-garde film practice, the use of 16mm must be seen as a gesture of consciously undermining the technical standards of

158 Original voice-over transcript provided by James N. Kienitz Wilkins.

159 Charles S Swartz, *Understanding Digital Cinema: A Professional Handbook* (Amsterdam, Boston: Focal Press, 2005), 147.

cinema," writes Fabienne Liptay on how to use 16mm as a political tool.[160] Secondly, Fisher has decided to forgo the quintessentially medium-specific process of editing in *Standard Gauge*, instead choosing to continuously shoot a whole reel of 16mm film. The duration of his one-shot film is determined by the maximum length of a 16mm film reel, which is actually much longer than what 35mm as the preferred and therefore impliedly better option is able to offer.[161]

Neither Fisher nor Kienitz Wilkins stand in opposition to the commercial film industry, from which they take inspiration. They are, however, also not firmly lodged in a tradition of an avant-garde or clearly art-centered approach to filmmaking with their specific interest in what are essentially commercial procedures of filmmaking.[162] Both filmmakers, born 41 years apart, use the standards of the Hollywood industry as a source of inspiration and a sounding board to think, via the handling of analog and digital film formats, about the network of technological, political, economic and ideological dependencies that the production of film is enmeshed in.

Film still *Standard Gauge* (Morgan Fisher, 1984)

I open the section about the *Program* as the third anchor of my conceptual triangle with this anecdote about James N. Kienitz Wilkins' wish to be screened alongside Morgan Fisher to point to the inherently relational character of short films and the potentially political implications of compiling films into programs. Due to its brevity, the short film is nearly always part of a program.[163] Its dependence on a screening context is an im-

160 Fabienne Liptay, "Wie Formate politisch gebrauchen? Zu den 16mm-Filmen von Artur Zmijewski," in *Format: Politiken der Normierung in den Künsten ab 1960*, ed. Yvonne Schweizer and Magdalena Nieslony (München: Edition Metzel, 2020), 124; translation mine.

161 See Morgan Fisher in Constanze Ruhm et al., eds., *Fate of alien modes* (Vienna: Secession, 2003), 57.

162 For a discussion of Morgan Fisher's relation to the film industry and his cinephile tendencies, see Federico Windhausen, "The Parenthesis and the Standard. On a Film by Morgan Fisher," in *Cinephilia. Movies, Love and Memory*, ed. Malte Hagener and Marijke de Valck (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005).

163 The same, of course, holds true for theatrical exhibition until the 1960s. A relatively early scholarly publication dealing with the notion of the program and its imbrications with institutions, technologies, audiences, artistic and aesthetic contexts, etc. was published by Frank Kessler, Sabine Lenk, and Martin Loiperdinger, eds., *Kinematographen-Programme*, KINtop 11 (Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 2002).

portant issue that calls for an understanding of the practices involved in film exhibition, one that is especially tailored to the context of the short film festival and its expansion into and interrelations with other screening contexts (the gallery, the cinema, the internet). A particular focus in this section on *Program* will be on the activities *curating* and *programming*, which I will define as the two central practices for finding, selecting, presenting and thus valorizing a given work in the larger context of the program.[164] The guiding directive of this section consists in asking how the film festival, as an institution of cultural exhibition, can be conceptualized as a format, and how issues of duration (or brevity) and circulation are imbricated with curatorial decisions.

Of Curators and Programmers

The curator and the programmer are central actors in the contemporary context of film exhibition and I wish to delineate the ways in which practices of curating and programming are intimately connected to the short film festival as a cultural format. Although these terms come from different fields of discourse (museology, information technology and television studies), they do not so much characterize two different and distinct professional practices as they show to what extent the understanding of these practices is changing due to the blurring of institutional boundaries that has been increasing since the 1990s. I would argue that the short film festival, which has been the main public platform for exhibiting short film, has from its inception taken on a hybrid position, fusing different knowledge traditions and discourses – independent and commercial cinema, experimental film and exhibition, niche and mass entertainment, underground and highbrow culture. The short film festival is the ideal platform for conceptualizing curation and programming and their relevance with regard to answering questions raised at the level of the format, as, in the words of Stefanie Schulte Strathaus, "[s]ort film programs enable making the process that forms the basis of curating visible."[165] The process at the basis of curation is epistemological in nature, and the contemporary and persistent interest in curation is a reflection of a time, or a zeitgeist, steeped in an epistemological crisis.[166] While this crisis is not surmountable as such, I argue that the concept of the format nonetheless offers productive impulses to think through it.

In the previous section on the conceptualization of the term *format*, I outlined David Joselit's take on the format as an aggregate for various types of relations that determine an artwork's standing and circulatory reach. Although he does not specifically mention the term format in his latest publication *Heritage and Debt. Art in Globalization* (2020), I would argue that the conceptual merit of the format as an analytical tool becomes evident in the way Joselit thinks about the aesthetic politics of contemporary art practices since the 1980s and 1990s, and in his claim that these practices negotiate between multiple definitions of what is deemed traditional and what modern. Rather than

164 This chapter is informed by my Master's Thesis (unpublished), "Curating and/or Programming: An Attempt at Conceptualization in the Context of the Short Film Festival" (University of Zurich, 2015). Small sections are taken directly from this source.

165 Stefanie Schulte Strathaus, "Showing Different Films Differently: Cinema as a Result of Cinematic Thinking," *The Moving Image: The Journal of the Association of Moving Image Archivists* 4, no. 1 (2004): 4.

166 The bibliography of academic research into curation from various disciplines (art history, philosophy, art education) has grown exponentially in the past 10 years. The most prominent titles include Hans Ulrich Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating* (Zürich: JRP Ringier, 2011); Paul O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* (Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 2012); Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International ICI, 2012); Jean-Paul Martinon, ed., *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013); David Balzer, *Curationism: How Curating Took over the Art World and Everything Else* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2014); Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson, eds., *Curating Research* (London, Amsterdam: Open Editions, de Appel, 2015); Paul O'Neill, Mick Wilson, and Lucy Steeds, eds., *The Curatorial Conundrum: What to Study? What to Research? What to Practice?* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016); Sue Spaid, *The Philosophy of Curatorial Practice: The Work and the External World* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020). See also the independent international journal *OnCurating* (www.oncurating.org), edited by Dorothee Richter and Ronald Kolb.

reducing the complex interplay between modernism and tradition into a simple binary of Western modernity versus non-Western traditional art, Joselit proposes that artistic practices scattered around the globe, which do not form part of the Eurocentric canon of art history, enact a resistance to what he calls "the violence of synchronization," that is "the compulsory requirement, through Westernized forms of modernization, for non-Western artists to accommodate themselves to Euro-American aesthetic values, rendering indigenous traditions dormant or local histories interrupted. Reanimations of heritage represent an aesthetic and political response to this coercive synchronization."[167] This synchronization is intimately connected to hierarchies of knowledge, which in turn are deeply imbricated with institutions of knowledge production such as the museum, where the curator as the guardian of cultural artifacts reigns supreme.

The use of the designation "curator" and the verb "to curate" goes back to the Roman Empire, where curators were government employees in charge of various tasks pertaining to the public sector.[168] The Latin verb "curare" literally translates as "to take care of." According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the use of the designation "curator" dates back to the mid-17th century: in Late Middle English, it denoted an ecclesiastical pastor or the guardian of a minor. With the establishment and institutionalization of the museum in the 18th century, the curator appeared as the first specifically museal profession.[169] As with government employees or ecclesiastical pastors, for a long time the curators of a museum were mainly in charge of preserving the objects placed in their custody, thereby keeping them from harm. Only from the mid 19th century onwards did they begin to redefine their roles as custodians and to broaden their range of activity by reaching out to the public more directly.

Martin Scorsese's essay on "the lost magic of cinema" published in Harper's Magazine in March 2021 (after a year of closed cinemas due to the Covid pandemic which, as he sees it, essentially demeaned cinema into mere content) emphasizes this bond between care and communication: "Curating isn't undemocratic or 'elitist,' a term that is now used so often that it's become meaningless. It's an act of generosity—you're sharing what you love and what has inspired you."[170] Scorsese imbues curating with an emotional quality here that goes beyond material considerations of preservation or the transfer of specific knowledge.

This function of the curator as caretaker and educator is often referred to as the PRC model (preservation, research, communication) in contemporary museological literature.[171] The third letter in this acronym – C for communication – constitutes the most tangible function of contemporary museums today and arguably prepared the ground for the development of the curator as we know her now: the figure who frames a particular object and relays knowledge about it. In the wake of the conceptualist movement of the 1960s, the curator was established as a paradoxical figure who, on the one hand, is a functionary who protects the value and conveys the meaning of artifacts deemed to have high cultural merit, and on the other the curator became an auteur in her own right. Paul O'Neill speaks of this shift from caretaker to creative agent who "participates in the production of cultural value" as the "curatorial turn."[172]

167 David Joselit, *Heritage and Debt: Art in Globalization* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020), 151.

168 Balzer, *Curationism: How Curating Took over the Art World and Everything Else*, 30.

169 *Oxford Learner's Dictionary*, s.v. "curator (noun)." Accessed October 6, 2017. https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/curator.

170 Martin Scorsese, "Il Maestro. Federico Fellini and the Lost Magic of Cinema," *Harper's Magazine*, March 2021, https://harpers.org/archive/2021/03/il-maestro-federico-fellini-martin-scorsese/.

171 André Desvallées and François Mairesse, eds., *Key Concepts of Museology* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010), 68.

172 Paul O'Neill, "The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse," in *The Biennial Reader*, ed. Elena Filipovic, Marieke Van Hal, and Solvig Øvstebø (Bergen: Bergen Kunsthall, 2007), 243.

The contemporary understanding of the persona of the auteur-curator is strongly connected to the Swiss curator Harald Szeemann, who became famous in the 1960s through his exhibitions at the Kunsthalle Bern, most notably for "Live in Your Head. When Attitude Becomes Form" in 1969 – an exhibition of conceptual art that turned the museum into a giant artists' studio and made Szeeman just as famous as the artists he exhibited.[173] It is at this time that the apotheosis of the figure of the curator and the age of "curationism" set in, a word play on creationism proposed by David Balzer.[174] The power structure that such a divine genealogy suggests is of course highly problematic, but it also points to the potential for political intervention in uncovering such hierarchies. In *Heritage and Debt*, Joselit dedicates a whole chapter to "Curated Cultures," a reference to Gerardo Mosquera's claim that there are cultures that curate and cultures that are curated, by which he means that even though the global circulation of art has ushered in the promise of a "trans-territorial world of multi-cultural dialogue," in truth the epistemic power remains in the major art metropolises of the global North.[175] While these centers (the curating cultures) now almost by default include art from peripheral regions around the world, the organization of knowledge pertaining to these artworks persists in being Eurocentric, therefore maintaining an epistemic hierarchy that essentially turns all non-Western cultural achievements into "curated cultures."[176]

There is a conceptual overlap between curated cultures and minor ones in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari, given that both negotiate the perpetuation and subversion of cultural codes in a continuous cycle of (re)interpretation: "The desire to evade interpretation is not a desire to be against interpretation, to negate it. To do so, after all, would be to continue to exist in its terms. The desire is rather to affirm an alternative which is simultaneously uninterpretable," writes Robert Brinkley about minor literature.[177] If art can have a political function, then its task must lie in making the claims on diverse ways of knowing and the hierarchical relationship between dominant and marginalized knowledges visible.

Curating and Programming as Epistemological Practices

If the curatorial essentially consists in the selection, presentation and interpretation of artworks, it becomes an episteme in itself, Joselit argues, and therefore is a key player in the "struggle over cognitive justice."[178] Joselit takes the expression "cognitive justice" from Boaventura de Sousa Santos, summarizing that the Portuguese sociologist defines cognitive justice as an acknowledgement that there is an "abyssal line" between hegemonic forms of expertise, "whose most powerful forms are Western science and law," and other forms of knowledge that tend to be characterized as alternative or traditional.[179] If, as Joselit claims, "art's progressive politics must lie in the claims it makes

173 See O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)*, 53; Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating*, 80f.; Vinzenz Hediger, "Ich bin zutiefst davon überzeugt: Der Film ist ein Akt, der sich in einem bestimmten Zeitraum abspielt, und damit ein performativer Akt. Gespräch mit Alexander Horwath," in *Orte filmischen Wissens. Filmkultur und Filmvermittlung im Zeitalter digitaler Netzwerke*, ed. Gudrun Sommer, Oliver Fahle, and Vinzenz Hediger (Marburg: Schüren, 2011), 143. In *The Philosophy of Curatorial Practice*, author Sue Spaid notes how Szeemann's "Attitudes" was in fact not the first, but the ninth exhibition to exhibit site specific art for which the curator worked in close collaboration with the artist, thereby becoming a quasi-artist himself. By implication, she is thereby bringing attention to the fact that the knowledge of the history of curating, just as any other disciplinary field, is itself framed by a particularized hegemonic knowledge that continually foregrounds exhibitions and curators from the Western canon. See Spaid, *The Philosophy of Curatorial Practice*, 8.

174 Balzer, *Curationism: How Curating Took over the Art World and Everything Else*, 8.

175 Gerardo Mosquera, "Some Problems in Transcultural Curating," in *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, ed. Jean Fisher (London: Kala Press in association with the Institute of International Visual Arts, 1994), 133. The title of Paul O'Neill's widely read *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* also directly references Mosquera's article.

176 Mosquera, 133.

177 Robert Brinkley in the editor's notes to Deleuze and Guattari, "What Is a Minor Literature?," 13f.

178 Joselit, *Heritage and Debt*, 160.

179 Joselit, 83.

for the power and validity of diverse and formerly marginalized ways of knowing," then this essentially amounts to an intervention into world-generating, to use Bernstein's words here once again, via a curatorial function.[180]

The essential function of the curatorial and its political potential, it has to be noted, is a contested one, as opinions differ on where exactly the political dimension of art must lie – in the content, in the format, or in the configuration. Irit Rogoff, who in cooperation with Jean-Paul Martinon has created a PhD program entitled *Curatorial/Knowledge* at Goldsmiths University of London, speaks of an "expanding field" to address the epistemological crisis that contemporary curatorial practice is confronted with. Rather than simply acknowledging the fact that knowledge-production is plural and then practicing a sort of additive model of curating, Rogoff's understanding of the curatorial as an expanding field, lodged between various disciplinary discourses, is based in the realization that the curatorial is a performance of knowledge rather than an illustration of it. In Rogoff's words,

> perhaps the necessary links between collectivity, infrastructure and contemporaneity within our expanding field of art are not performances of resistant engagement, but the ability to locate alternate points of departure, alternate archives, alternate circulations and alternate imaginaries. And it is the curatorial that has the capacity to bring these together, working simultaneously in several modalities, kidnapping knowledges and sensibilities and insights and melding them into an instantiation of our contemporary conditions.[181]

It is the curatorial function, not the art itself or its format, that could bring about moments of cognitive justice.

Why, then, are there two designations for the practice of compiling films into a program in the technical jargon of film exhibition? While many professionals working in the festival industry as well as scholars use programming/programmer synonymous to curating/curator, others do not use them interchangeably, but also do not explicitly spell out where they draw the line between the two practices.[182] Ian White for example, in his very insightful *Theme Program* at Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen in 2007 and the subsequent publication called *Kinomuseum. Towards an Artists' Cinema* (2007) apparently makes a distinction between the terms when he says that programs are "today as often curated as programmed," but he gives no further explanation as to where the differentiation between a curated and programmed program would lie.[183] In *Film Programming: Curating for Cinemas, Festivals, Archives*, Peter Bosma explicitly states that he chose film curator instead of programmer to designate the person compiling the programs, as the curator's connotation with sophisticated museal knowledge is more appropriate for the complex tasks involved in compiling programs.[184] To Bosma, programming suggests a focus on the mere scheduling of screenings and is thus not suitable as a designation

180 Joselit, 226.

181 Irit Rogoff, "The Expanded Field," in *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, ed. Jean-Paul Martinon (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 48.

182 See for example Mark Haslam, "Vision, Authority, Context: Cornerstones of Curation and Programming," *The Moving Image: The Journal of the Association of Moving Image Archivist* 4, no. 1 (2004): 48–59; Schulte Strathaus, "Showing Different Films Differently: Cinema as a Result of Cinematic Thinking"; Marijke de Valck, *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia*, Film Culture in Transition (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007); Dina Iordanova, ed., *The Film Festival Reader*, Films Need Festivals, Festivals Need Films (St Andrews: St Andrews Film Studies, 2013).

183 Ian White, ed., *Kinomuseum: Towards an Artists' Cinema* (Köln: König, 2008), 23.

184 Peter Bosma, *Film Programming: Curating for Cinemas, Festivals, Archives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 14.

for a cultural practice that essentially shapes our access to and understanding of the medium of film.

It seems that many scholars differentiate the terms by virtue of the complexity and epistemological impulse they represent. Paolo Cherchi Usai and Alexander Horwath are eager to redefine the terms "curator" and "film programmer" within the context of the archival or museal film institution, as for them the difference between the two lies in an interventionist versus a conformist approach: by producing publications, new prints of films and by organizing screenings, curators are willing to take risks in order to find a public for a part of their collection that is not yet sufficiently recognized. The film programmer, on the other hand, simply takes "established knowledge, including the cultural imperative and the financial targets" and recycles well-established and popular artifacts from their own archive and from other institutions.[185]

In a short lecture on "Film Curation as Montage," Laura Mulvey asked how film programming turned into film curating and what this change of vocabulary might potentially signify. In agreement with one of the conclusions I reached for my Master's Thesis in 2015, Mulvey too suggests that the use of these two terms amounts to a statement about the convergence of institutional contexts, namely the introduction of film into "legitimizing institutions in the early 1930s, with the main example being the museum of Modern Art in New York and the British Film Institute."[186] Unlike pictures hung in a museum, films have to be programmed at specific times and locations in order to be exhibited. Mulvey declares that this type of early film programming followed a rather traditional approach (focusing on canonized national cinema, prized directors, specific genres, etc.).[187] Curating as a complex and conceptual practice of exhibiting film emerged, Mulvey argues, with the screenings Henri Langlois organized in the 1950s as the director of the Cinémathèque française. She establishes a simile between curating and the cinematic practice of montage: "Langlois was completely disorganized and disordered, but what he did was out of this disorder and apparently arbitrarily throwing films together, he created a dialogue or even a kind of dialectical relationship with very unexpected movies, which started, in that sense, to talk to each other in an unexpected way and then also say something unexpected to the spectator."[188] For Mulvey, curating operates on a logic of difference that relates films to each other without necessarily positing them into a strictly dialectical configuration. In this way, Mulvey's notion of curating as montage is maybe more related to "soft montage" as Harun Farocki conceptualized it for his own films and installation work than to classical Soviet montage theory. Within the art spaces with its multi-channel installative setups or when creating a single-channel version of a work that shows both or several images in one frame, soft montage allows for "more trial, less assertion. Equivocality can be attained with the simplest means."[189] Farocki thus appreciates the explorative and democratic impulse behind soft montage.

The notion that programming or curating strategies incorporate techniques of montage to propose a thesis concerning the status of filmic works is discussed elsewhere, too. In her analysis of early programming strategies of film museums and national

185 Paolo Cherchi Usai et al., eds., *Film Curatorship: Archives, Museums, and the Digital Marketplace* (Vienna, Pordenone: Österreichisches Filmmuseum: SYNEMA-Gesellschaft für Film und Medien; Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2008), 44f.

186 Laura Mulvey, "Film Curating as Montage," Lecture, 2015, 4'35'', https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yUvK_8aLg8Q.

187 This conception overlaps with Marijke de Valck's periodization of film festival programming, which I outlined in the section on *The Short Film Festival*. De Valck calls the period from 1932 (when the Venice Film Festival held its first edition) and 1968 (when Henri Langlois was dismissed as director of the Cinémathèque, which caused the termination of the festival in Cannes as a protest on the part of the film industry) "Before Programming As We Know It." See de Valck, *Film Festivals*, 27.

188 Mulvey, "Film Curating as Montage," 6'53''.

189 Harun Farocki, "Cross Influence/Soft Montage," in *Harun Farocki: Against What? Against Whom?*, ed. Antje Ehmann and Kodwo Eshun, trans. Cynthia Beatt (London: Koenig Books, 2009), 73.

archives, Bregt Lameris coins the label "contrast programming" to describe the juxtaposition of films that the archival institution would deem "primitive" with others that they see as part of the canon or what they would consider as "art."[190] In a way these programming strategies reflected contemporary concerns in film discourse about establishing a timeline of maturation between early and contemporary film, and of differentiating between film as art and film as entertainment by way of direct contrast. Programming then becomes both theory and historiography. Looking at programming strategies of the avant-garde, Malte Hagener concludes that "the confrontational nature of the avant-garde attractions was less an effect of the single film than of the confrontation between different films, an external montage instead of an internal one. Effectively, the exhibition wing of the avant-garde advanced – implicitly in the programs – its own idea of what was specific about the medium: a syncretist form as exemplified by the attractionist combination of films."[191] Placing films that appear to be in conflict with each other in the "external montage" of the program provokes the audience to engage with the films in a highly conscious way and in a manner that is incompatible with the strategies of commercial cinemas aimed at entertainment and distraction.[192]

The Ethics of Film Programming

When thinking about short film exhibition, the research into historical programming practices of early film that has been conducted over the past two decades is highly insightful.[193] In their introduction to the thematic strand entitled *From the Deep: The Great Experiment 1898–1918*, curated for Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen in 2010, curators Mariann Lewinksy and Eric de Kuyper speak of a "veritable art of program design" that the skillful and highly informed combination of short films entails.[194] This holds true for early film just as much as for contemporary short film programming. Tom Gunning wrote a splendid review of these programs of early films, in which he also observes on the general status of the short format as being dominated by the feature-length film which, for the past hundred years, has "controlled cultural attitudes towards what films do, formally and structurally."[195] The outsider's position that short films continue to hold in the public's conception of cinema and regarding scholar's interests in the form can mostly be attributed to this imbalance of power between the feature film, which in its long duration reinforces the idea of film being a narrative medium modeled on the Aristotelean drama, and the short film that has never attined the same level of cultural prestige (at least in cinema dicourse) as the singular, stand-alone feature attraction.

190 Bregt Lameris, *Film Museum Practice and Film Historiography: The Case of the Nederlands Filmmuseum (1946–2000)* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 159.

191 Malte Hagener, "Programming Attractions: Avant-Garde Exhibition Practice in the 1920s and 1930s," in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Strauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 270.

192 The Austrian curation collective *Diskollektiv*, founded in Vienna in 2015, came up with a contemporary version of this strategy with the concept of "trouble features," their designation for a double feature screening of two films that show both overlaps but, more importantly, also ruptures in terms of content, aesthetics, ideological orientation or approach to genre. They curate these "trouble features" at irregular intervals for festivals, institutions or self-organized film screenings. See "Trouble Features," Diskollektiv, accessed October 16, 2021, http://www.diskollektiv.com/projekte/filmkuratierung/.

193 See for example Malte Hagener, *Moving Forward, Looking Back: The European Avant-Garde and the Invention of Film Culture, 1919–1939* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007); Heike Klippel, ed., *"The Art of Programming": Film, Programm und Kontext* (Münster: Lit, 2008); Andrea Haller, "Das Kinoprogramm. Zur Genese und frühen Praxis einer Aufführungsform," in *"The Art of Programming": Film, Programm und Kontext*, ed. Heike Klippel (Münster: Lit, 2008); Martin Loiperdinger, ed., *Early Cinema Today: The Art of Programming and Live Performance*, KINtop 1 (New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing, 2015); Lameris, *Film Museum Practice and Film Historiography*.1919-1939} (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007.

194 Mariann Lewinsky and Eric de Kuyper, "From the Deep: The Great Experiment 1898–1918," in *Katalog 56. Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen* (Oberhausen: Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen, 2010), 85.

195 Gunning, "'From the Bottom of the Sea': Early Film at the Oberhausen Festival," 49.

Film historian and curator Andrea Haller repeatedly emphasizes that rather than the quality of an individual film, the composition of the overall program was the decisive factor in the contemporary evaluation of early film.[196] Haller underlines the fact that when it comes to understanding the impact of early films, awareness of the presentational framework and the performance context are essential. I would argue that the same holds true even today for the analysis of any short film program, and especially so for the examination of competition programs. Just as historical film programs do, the competition programs at short film festivals make a statement on the part of the programmers about the quality and the cultural value of the latest productions. Much like the early spectacles, contemporary short film programs are in a position to react quickly to new trends and comment on current social and political developments.

Returning to contemporary festival programming, Roya Rastegar takes recourse to publication vocabulary when she posits that programming for film festivals consists of a two-stage process of editorial and curatorial aspects.[197] While the editorial part is rather mechanical in the sense that it consists of sifting out the few films to be taken into serious consideration for selection out of the vast number of submissions, the curatorial part is highly strategical in nature: "With the thousands of films made every year, festival programmers are the ones who identify groundswells of filmmaking styles and storytelling practices by shining a light on representative films in the festival line-up."[198] There is an ethical dimension to this, according to Rastegar, who assigns the task of assuring a homogeneous selection of positions regarding various communities (ethnicity, race, gender, LGBTQ+) to the programmer. "The absence of [films made by people historically marginalized in the film industry], however, is not a reflection of the lack of their production, but a limitation imposed by notions of taste and aesthetics operating within the curatorial process."[199] It is the curator's task to guarantee the right to representation of these various communities.[200]

Concerning independent curators and programmers who are not tied to an institution or do not necessarily need to focus on archival material, Laura U. Marks makes a distinction between the two terms based on their institutional affiliation. For Marks, curating refers to the thematic organization of self-contained programs that are independent of an established venue. Curated programs advance a singular thesis and are not placed in a series of comparable programs that together appraise the development of particular movements, trends, or historical moments in film practice. "Curating," Marks writes, "is driven by a subjective agenda."[201] Programming, on the other hand, she defines "as ongoing exhibition, such as for festivals or regular series in galleries and other venues. Audiences rely on these venues as places where they can see what's new in a particular medium, genre, or identity category."[202] According to Marks, who is not only a film scholar but also a festival curator and thus seems to adopt this use of termi-

196 Haller, "Das Kinoprogramm. Zur Genese und frühen Praxis einer Aufführungsform," 24; Martin Loiperdinger and Andrea Haller, "Stimulating the Audience: Early Cinema's Short Film Programme Format 1906 to 1912," in *Early Cinema Today: The Art of Programming and Live Performance*, ed. Martin Loiperdinger, KINtop 1 (New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing, 2015), 9.

197 Roya Rastegar, "Seeing Differently: The Curatorial Potential of Film Festival Programming," in *Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice*, ed. Marijke de Valck, Brendan Kredell, and Skadi Loist (London, New York: Routledge, 2016), 182.

198 Rastegar, 183.

199 Rastegar, 183.

200 On the connection between affluence in Western societies and the social implications of selection processes, see Dorothea von Hantelmann, "Affluence and Choice. The Social Significance of the Curatorial," in *Cultures of the Curatorial*, ed. Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schafaff, and Thomas Weski (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 42–51.

201 Laura U. Marks, "The Ethical Presenter: Or How to Have Good Arguments over Dinner," *The Moving Image: The Journal of the Association of Moving Image Archivists* 4, no. 1 (2004): 36.

202 Marks, 36. French film critic and film historian Jean-Michel Frodon also notes that programming as a tool for valorization and the building of trust in a programmer's seal of approval through selection needs the longevity and regularity of an institutional setting. Jean-Michel Frodon, "The Cinema Planet," in *The Film Festival Reader*, ed. Dina Iordanova (St. Andrews: St. Andrews University Press, 2013), 207.

nology from her own professional experience, programming refers to the attention placed on contemporary work that has been newly released and warrants consideration in a specific institutional setting. In the context of the film festival, this principally relates to the competition sections that usually accept submissions with production dates from the current and the last year. Marks summarizes:

> Individuals and committees at these venues preview work broadly, in principle exhaustively, in the given area and choose what to show. Although individual personalities determine festival programming to some extent (...), festival programming is supposed to be relatively objective. In short, programming is a reflection on the state of the field and thus has its own ethics of responsibility to artists and audiences.[203]

Her reflection on programming as an institutionalized practice moves programming into a closer proximity with cultural formats such as the festival or the art biennial. Marks' mentioning of ethics and responsibility both toward the audience and the filmmakers is something that Lars Henrik Gass, long-time director of Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen, also remarks upon in the distinction he makes between "curator," a designation he notoriously expresses grievance over, and "compiler of film." The films in competition make up a heterogeneous compilation: they are not yet part of a pre-established discourse belonging to a particular system of values, as by definition they can only enter this discourse once they have been selected and initiated into the system. The curator, on the other hand, "primarily offers a promise of intimacy, to provide a work with a suitable space, and secondarily they offer a value proposition, in which the work will receive the space it duly deserves. Basically, this is a symbolic piece of business entered into by the curator, the films and the artists, which must avoid uncalculated risk."[204] Avoiding such a symbolic contract means that a film must first and foremost speak for itself, that is to defend its place as a quality piece of work in direct comparison with other films put on the same level. "A compiler of films becomes invisible behind the films, the program itself becomes anonymous; a curator attracts visibility above the program, which becomes personified, so to speak, precisely because it is his creation," he writes.[205] It seems that both Marks and Gass consider it possible that the program, if it is the result of a practice of programming and not of curating, exhibits less signs of institutional and personal entanglements. But what exactly is the nexus between programming and formatting?

The Format and the Program

In *Was ist ein Format?*, literary scholar Michael Niehaus dedicated a whole chapter to the close link between the format and the program. While both terms are most prominently used in relation to each other when talking about programming for television (where a format is a specific type of program), Niehaus mentions other types of media where programming is a key practice in conveying the medium's content, and cinema is one of them:

203 Marks, "The Ethical Presenter: Or How to Have Good Arguments over Dinner," 36.

204 Lars Henrik Gass, "Compiling a Selection of Films Is Not an Artistic Strategy, It Brings Such a Strategy to Light," *OnCurating* 23, no. The Future of Short Film (2014): 27.

205 Gass, 26.

> As a medium, film per se knows no programming and no formats (apart, of course, from purely technical limitations such as the length of a film reel or, on another level, the picture's aspect ratio). But a film can be part of a programming strategy as soon as it is screened. A movie theater, for example, has a program. Nowadays this usually merely means scheduling the different screenings. Therefore, the length of the film plays a decisive role with regard to its 'format-ness' (which is most noticeable when a film exceeds a standard length [i. e. longer than 120 minutes], meaning that the normal program schedule has to be adjusted).[206]

As technical terms, program and programming have hardly ever been systematically defined, but they are nonetheless regularly used in various contexts, from political programs to self-improvement (for example diet programs) to leisure activities. Film and media historian Joachim Paech writes in the introduction to the monograph on this term and its many facets: "Gleaned from the world of 19th century theater, the term wandered into the time-based mass media of the early 20th century and has come to describe the code structure of digital media in the middle of the 20th century."[207] Knut Hickethier maintains that theories on "programming" were only developed in the 1970s and 1980s after the massive increase in the number of television sets in the homes of the general population – that is, long after the practice of making programs, for example in the form of variety shows, came into existence. Hickethier summarizes the general theoretical definition of "programming" as follows:

> Programming thus means "putting into a program" and refers to the creation of a temporal sequence that, first of all, makes sense with regard to the artifacts (i. e. gripping, thematically coherent etc.); secondly, it is geared towards the users' expectations and habits; thirdly, it matches the intentions of the producers and communicators.[208]

To reformulate Hickethier's statement: A program is an orderly, by no means arbitrary sequence of selected material that intends to communicate a specific message to its audience. It is this selective, communicative aspect that distinguishes a "programmed" media practice from one without a program: for example, the video platform YouTube is currently a non-programmatic medium. Film and media scholar Heike Klippel identifies the same characteristics in *The Art of Programming*, but adds one important aspect: besides sequentiality and the integration into a communicative process, the meaning of a program is connected to its "presentness": Contrary to museums or gallery exhibitions, which are also geared toward a communicative process with an audience within a certain space, the program in film, television or radio follows a strict temporal and spatial sequence which cannot be influenced by the viewer.[209]

206 Niehaus, *Was ist ein Format?*, 66; translation mine.

207 Dieter Mersch and Joachim Paech, eds., *Programm(e)* (Medienwissenschaftliches Symposium der DFG, Zürich, Berlin: diaphanes, 2014), 17; translation mine.

208 Knut Hickethier, "Das Programm als kulturelle Präsentationsform der Mediengesellschaft," in *Programm(e)*, ed. Joachim Paech and Dieter Mersch (Zürich, Berlin: diaphanes, 2014), 22; translation mine. In the same volume, see also Rainer Leschke, "Programm als mediale Form," in *Programm(e)*, ed. Dieter Mersch and Joachim Paech (Zürich, Berlin: diaphanes, 2014), 65–92.

209 Klippel, *The art of programming*, 8.

For some, such as Lars Henrik Gass, cinema as a cultural practice is bound to what he terms "the compulsion to perceive," a form of constraint which, according to him, fundamentally differentiates cinema from moving images exhibited in galleries or museums: "What art has never understood about cinema is the *compulsion to perceive*, irrespective of the audience – each member of which has their own individual education, inclinations and intentions – watching the film. Film imposes the perception of *something different* and a reference to time through its *setting, which has its own duration*."[210] In his article about short films as short-circuited films, Johannes Binotto raises the question whether the explosiveness of their undermining of established cinematic codes is retainable in a context of online viewing, where the viewer shapes the viewing experience and where difficult, code-breaking or subversive content can be eclipsed by the click of the mouse.[211] What is at stake here, then, is the question of short film's efficacy when it is taken out of a contained programmatic context (for example as part of a curated program at a festival) and into a more user-based, interactive environment (i.e., online). When Irit Rogoff speaks of an "expanding field" of curation, she reminds us that the audience, who moves outside of institutions and makes use of a multiplicity of infrastructures, has to be included in and reflected on as part of the curatorial process.[212]

Compulsion and Resistance in Curatorial Strategies

It is striking how similar Gass' vocabulary (the *compulsion* to perceive) is to Tony Bennett's pioneering work on exhibitions, which is closely modeled on Foucault's writings on the carceral archipelago, based on the fact that Bennett notes how the establishment of these two institutional forces roughly coincides: the inauguration of the Great Exhibition in London in 1851 produced the prototype for this exhibition format only a decade after the opening of Pentonville as the model prison in 1842.[213] The Great Exhibition, in turn, is often discussed as the blueprint for the festival as a cultural format.[214] Bennett notes how museums and galleries played a key part in the formation of modern democratic states in their function as educative institutions. The notion of "presentness" or Gass' insistence on a public setting for film viewing are remarkably close to Bennett's definition of the institutions comprising what he terms "the exhibitionary complex," concluding that these institutions "were involved in the transfer of objects and bodies from the enclosed and private domains in which they had previously been displayed (but to a restricted public) into progressively more open and public arenas [...]."[215] The exhibitionary complex and the disciplinary measures of surveillance have parallel yet reversed orientations. Institutions such as the museum, Bennett writes,

> sought not to map the social body in order to know the populace by rendering it visible to power. Instead, through the provision of object lessons in power – the power to command and arrange things and bodies for

210 Lars Henrik Gass, *Film and Art after Cinema*, trans. Laura Walde (Zagreb: Multimedijalni institut, 2019), 106f. Mieke Bal makes a similar observation when writing about the exhibition practices of her project *Madame B* (co-created with Michelle Williams Gamaker, 2014) and the difficulties of getting it shown in a festival context, noting that the difference between a "gallery short" and a "theatre short" is based on the conditions of exhibition, not on questions of form or length. Mieke Bal, "Always Too Long: My Short-Film Experience," *Empedocles: European Journal for the Philosophy of Communication* 5, no. 1 (January 1, 2015): 14.

211 Binotto, "Instabile Verbindungen: Zur Explosivität kurz(geschlossener) Filme," 9.

212 Rogoff, "The Expanded Field," 41–48.

213 Tony Bennett, "The Exhibitionary Complex," *New Formations* 4 (1988): 74.

214 See for example Verena Teissl, *Kulturveranstaltung Festival: Formate, Entstehung und Potenziale*, (Bielefeld: transcript, 2013), 27f.; Hagener, *Moving Forward, Looking Back*, 137f.

215 Bennett, "The Exhibitionary Complex," 74.

> public display – they sought to allow the people, and *en masse* rather than individually, to know rather than be known, to become the subjects rather than the objects of knowledge.[216]

As subjects of knowledge, viewers gain agency.[217] Again, this points to the epistemological force of the curatorial, and New Museology as a branch of academia has indeed conceptualized traditional museums as "a space of violence, economy, discipline and policing."[218] It was Gayatri Spivak who originally shaped the idea of "epistemic violence," which is conceptually linked to Foucault's episteme and power-knowledge systems, when she examines with what type of "voice-consciousness" the subaltern, as a colonized population who is denied access to social, political and epistemological power, can make itself heard in a counter-hegemonic practice.[219] The reciprocity between coming to an understanding of one's own position through learned knowledge and acquiring agency is intricate, and some approaches define the festival as the principal space to navigate this complex interchange.[220]

The space of the festival is conceptualized as a "liminal space," a space of "in-betweenness" or as a "third space" and a "social space."[221] The "third space" of the festival designates a forum influenced both by art discourse and cinematic discourse. On the one hand, the traditional distinction between art and cinema is gradually becoming harder to maintain (or has already been overcome). On the other hand, we live in a moment in which the historical visibility of the non-commercial moving image is in danger of being subsumed under an art historical discourse, especially when it comes to the marked presence of short moving image works in the spaces of galleries and museums of modern art, while short films in film theoretical discourse are at best marginally discussed. The encounter between the singular film and its programmatic context, the confrontation of the audience with the curators' proposed episteme, and the immediate reaction of this audience with both the individual films and the whole program makes the festival a prime site for reflecting on the crisis of the curatorial episteme, as the audience "participates in shaping the program by questioning it. And this is an immediate experience that one rarely finds in criticism or reviews. A festival is a much more discursive space than a gallery."[222] The direct equation of audience participation and the potential for political intervention is flawed insofar as it is overly simplistic if the type of relation this exchange between audience and the presented film

216 Bennett, 76.

217 For a discussion of curatorial practices from the viewpoint of audience reception and spectator agency, see Spaid, *The Philosophy of Curatorial Practice*.

218 Nora Sternfeld, "Being Able to Do Something," in *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, ed. Jean-Paul Martinon (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 146.

219 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcrof, Gareth Griffiths, and Allen Tiffin (London, New York: Routledge, 1995), 27.

220 For a discussion of the interrelationship between power, knowledge and participation in the context of the museum and the library as sites of knowledge production, see Katharina Hoins and Felicitas von Mallinckrodt, eds., *Macht. Wissen. Teilhabe: Sammlungsinstitutionen im 21. Jahrhundert* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2015).

221 See, respectively, Schulte Strathaus, "Showing Different Films Differently: Cinema as a Result of Cinematic Thinking"; Bettina Steinbrügge, "Modes of Curatorial Practice: Moving Between Art, Cinema and Performance" (Keynote Lecture for The Shape of Things, the symposium of 4th Auckland Triennial, Auckland, May 22, 2010), https://aucklandtriennial.com/static/archive/2010/events/pdf/bettinasteinbrugge.pdf; Tara Judah, "After and Without Film, But With Presence: The 60th International Film Festival Oberhausen," *Senses of Cinema*, no. 41 (2014), http://senses- ofcinema.com/2014/festival-reports/after-and-without-film-but-with-presence-the-60th- international-film-festival-oberhausen/.

222 Steinbrügge, "Modes of Curatorial Practice," 3.

or the overall institutional setting of its exhibition are not further specified.[223] It is here that David Joselit's classification of the links in a network that, according to his conceptualization of the term, constitute the format of an artwork, comes in handy. He categorizes these types of relations on different levels of scale: work to citizen, community to institution, institution to state, state to globe.[224] Although they never exist completely independently from each other, Joselit gives an example of each of these types of connection and then goes on to explain how they function in combination. These four types of links are the basic units for currencies of image power and delineate the dynamics of the production and exchange of cultural, social and political value and dominance at play within these institutional settings. On a superordinate level of analysis not between the artwork and its network of links, but of the constituent factors of the exhibition as a reflection of socioeconomic parameters, art historian Dorothea von Hantelmann uses the term "cultural format" to explain different modalities of address between cultural artifacts and the audience.[225]

SPOTLIGHT
The Beast

South Africa 2016, 19'52'', color, Zulu & English

Directors, Script: Samantha Nell, Michael Wahrmann
Cinematography: Nicholas Turvey
Editing: Henion Han
Sound: Zamo Mkhize
Distribution: Samantha Nell, https://www.samanthanell.com/

An ordinary day at a Zulu cultural village. Shaka, their star performer, expresses his frustrations to his co-workers as he sits on display for tourists. Eventually, his protest reaches Shakespearian proportions.

223 This is the critique Claire Bishop famously expressed about Nicolas Bourriaud's theory of relational art as inherently political and emancipatory based on the interactive elements between viewer and artwork, as opposed to a passive contemplation of an art object: "Bourriaud wants to equate aesthetic judgment with an ethicopolitical judgment of the relationships produced by a work of art. But how do we measure or compare these relationships? The *quality* of the relationships in 'relational aesthetics' are never examined or called into question. [...] all relations that permit 'dialogue' are automatically assumed to be democratic and therefore good. But what does 'democracy' really mean in this context? If relational art produces human relations, then the next logical question to ask is what *types* of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?" Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (2004): 65.

224 Joselit, *After Art*, 59.

225 See the section on *The Short Film Festival* in Chapter 1.

Film still *The Beast* (Samantha Nell, Michael Wahrmann, 2016)

Just like the only other comedy in the selection of short films I discuss in the scope of this study (Sorayos Prapapan's *Death of the Sound Man*), *The Beast* is also an overtly political and critical work. South African director Samantha Nell and her Brazilian co-director Michael Wahrmann explore and cleverly dismantle the tourist experience and the clichéd representations of "authentic Africa" in a Disney-like Zulu village. The transgression that renders the film both upsetting and amusing is revealed in the final punchline, when it becomes clear that not the film's protagonists, but the audience itself is the subject of the film.

The Beast consists of four main long shots where the camera stands in for the tourist observer, giving the film a documentary feel. Interspersed are short impressions of the artificial landscape of the village. The film follows an actor whose job it is to impersonate the great historical Zulu king Shaka in a tourist Zulu village named Shakaland in South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal province. Shaka is only the name of his role, we never learn the actor's, that is the character's, given name. The actor's identity, this might suggest, is of no importance as he functions only as a representation of Africanness – in the guise of the legendary Zulu warrior king – in the context of this fake village for tourists. Shaka's status on the spectrum of fiction and reality is undetermined: In the first scene, he is portrayed as a leader; people come to him for advice and address him with respect. These gestures of reverence, however, clash with his own actions in the scene: Shaka is a bookmaker who takes his co-workers' money in the open locker room before their shifts at the tourist park start. History and myth become mixed with present-day reality; the tourist fiction is not clearly distinguishable from authentic everyday life.

In the second scene, Shaka and his girlfriend Thando sit around the fire in a traditional Zulu hut. Their conversation, which centers on Shaka's frustration with his current job and the fact that he can only ever audition for Black characters such as Othello, is repeatedly interrupted by the flashing lights of cameras offscreen. Like animals – *beasts* – in a zoo, the real-life daily conversations and struggles of the actor-protagonists are merely the background for the entertainment of sightseers. The two actors mechanically smile whenever

they become aware of being photographed, but their conversation goes on uninterrupted and broaches the powerful and sensitive topic of cultural colonialism. “It’s every actor’s dream to perform just one [of Shakespeare’s monologues],” Shaka says. To which Thando replies: “Shaka, we have such a rich culture. A nation without poets does not win wars.” Thando implies that as long as the differentiation into minor and major forms of cultural output exist and the minority subscribes to this imbalance of value and power, true emancipation will not be possible.

The third scene shows two cringeworthy interactions between the actors standing outside of a hut and tourists not simply asking them for photographs, but also giving them directions as to how they should pose. This contradicts the statement of an older actor who joins Shaka and Thando in this scene, saying that he got lucky to be allowed to play Othello in his early years. “Now we’re free,” he adds, “you can play whomever you want.” Of course, the economic and social reality of present day South Africa paints a different picture. For a living wage, Shaka lets himself be patronized by white tourists. When directors Samantha Nell and Michael Wahrmann arrived at Shakaland, where they were both tourists too, the main idea for their short film was born as an instant reaction to this setting. “How does the tourist culture represent and continue the human zoo and why are we fine with it? That was kind of the big question. It’s a space that made us both just so uncomfortable,” Nell says in an interview.[226] The key challenge for this project, then, was in addressing and criticizing a gaze that they themselves, as directors, and we, as audience, are complicit in.

The fourth and climactic long shot makes explicit how the two directors chose to handle this difficult task. We witness a performance of great intensity when Shaka decides to step out of character and, instead of reciting some traditional address of the Zulu king, delivers the most famous monologue of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*. With the words of Shylock, the Jewish moneylender, Shaka denounces the inequality of a two-class society in which some citizens do not have the same rights as others. While the first part of the monologue is delivered in Zulu and therefore not understandable to the tourists (only to the film’s audience who can read the subtitles), for the most well-known and dramatic part of the speech Shaka switches into English:

226 Samantha Nell, Interview with Samantha Nell, South Africa Factory Quinzaine des Réalisateurs, May 15, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7DFB6S_fOug.

> If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you offend us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we shall resemble you in that. If a Jew offends a Christian, what is his answer? Revenge. If a Christian offends a Jew, what should his punishment be by Christian example? Revenge.[227]

Christians and Jews, of course, can here be replaced by white tourists and Black natives. The other performers join Shaka in chanting for "revenge." They close in on the camera and, suddenly looking directly at it, therefore at us, the final line is spoken: "The evil you teach me will be difficult to execute, but in the end, I will better my instructor." Does this imply that emancipation is only possible through a reversal of roles? This might then mean, in the context of South Africa, that another edition of apartheid would be the future. I argue, however, that the last scene of the film suggests another possible outcome.

Film still *The Beast* (Samantha Nell, Michael Wahrmann, 2016)

For the last shot of the film, the camera switches its position to reveal the tourist audience, their mouths gaping wide open, clutching to their camera phones in disbelief. "It makes you conscious of the idea of looking, of being forced to look, not being able to look away and then at the end of the film the reversal of that, when the camera turns around and looks at you," says Nell.[228] I read *The Beast*, then, as a film that puts a spotlight on an imbalance of power between the ones who look and the ones who are looked at. By calling attention to the audience's, that is our, problematic relationship to a culture that is "curated" for the context of a cultural theme park, the film by Samantha Nell and Michael Wahrmann deauthorizes the tourist gaze and re-authorizes an emancipated approach to Zulu heritage told from a local perspective.

227 William Shakespeare, "The Merchant of Venice," in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, and Andrew Gurr (New York, London: Norton, 2008), 1147.

228 Nell, Interview with Samantha Nell.

CHAPTER 3

For What It's Worth

Curatorial Statement

The two films combined in this program are very different on a formal level. James N. Kienitz Wilkins' *This Action Lies* was filmed on three reels of 16mm film and went through several changes in technical format. All the viewers see in this 32-minute film, heavy with voice-over comment from a narrator who identifies himself as James N. Kienitz Wilkins, is steaming coffee in a Styrofoam cup. Louis Henderson's *All That Is Solid* works with online found footage and recycled material from a previous film, casting a highly complex trajectory between colonial gold mining in Ghana and the contemporary recycling of precious metals found in the electronic waste of consumers from the Global North. There is no voice-over narration, only a note, typed into Google Translate as if by magic, that serves as a vague reading instruction for the audience.

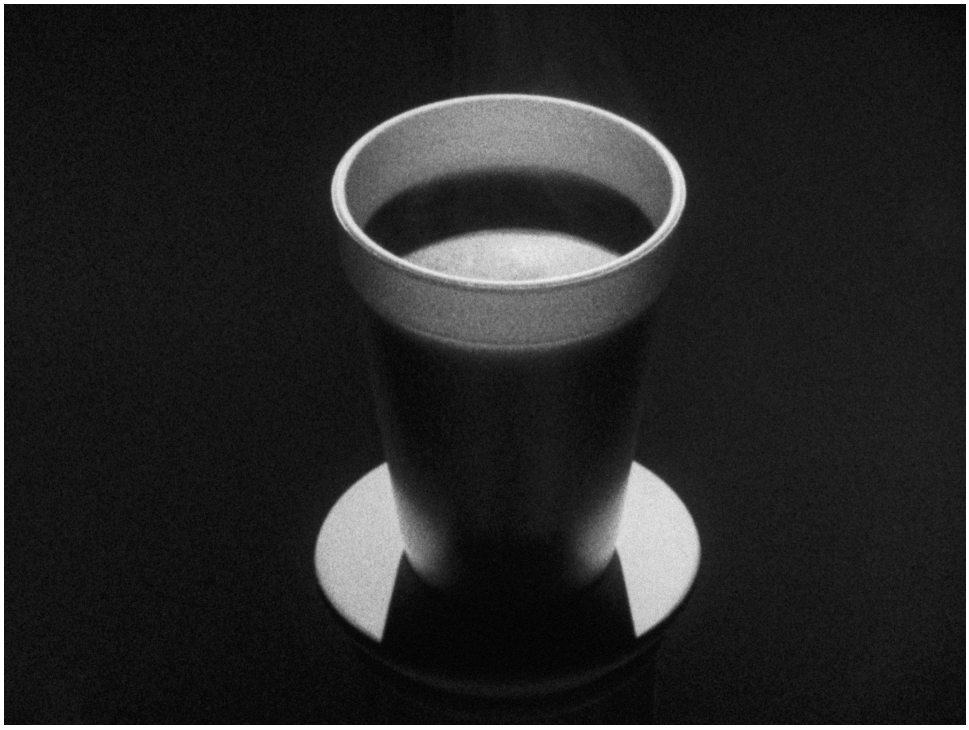
The title of the program, *For What It's Worth*, is a reference to both these films' concern with questions of how knowledge is generated and considerations of the hierarchical nature of education. While the first film, visually simple, approaches this topic via a musing monologue on the meaning of the term *observation*, the latter takes the superimposition and image-in-image technique from different sources as a visual trope advancing the idea of a de-hierarchization of different positions of knowledge.

Given its peripheral, hybrid position in the cinematic universe and in film studies, *For What It's Worth* proposes that the short film format is ideally suited to reflect on the epistemological status of moving images and their entanglements with issues of monetary and ethical value.

This Action Lies
USA/Switzerland 2018, 32'45'', b & w, English

Director/Cinematography/Editor/Cast: James N. Kienitz Wilkins
Sound: Eugene Wasserman
Production/Distribution: Automatic Moving Co., www.automaticmoving.com

There is no such thing as a Styrofoam™ cup.

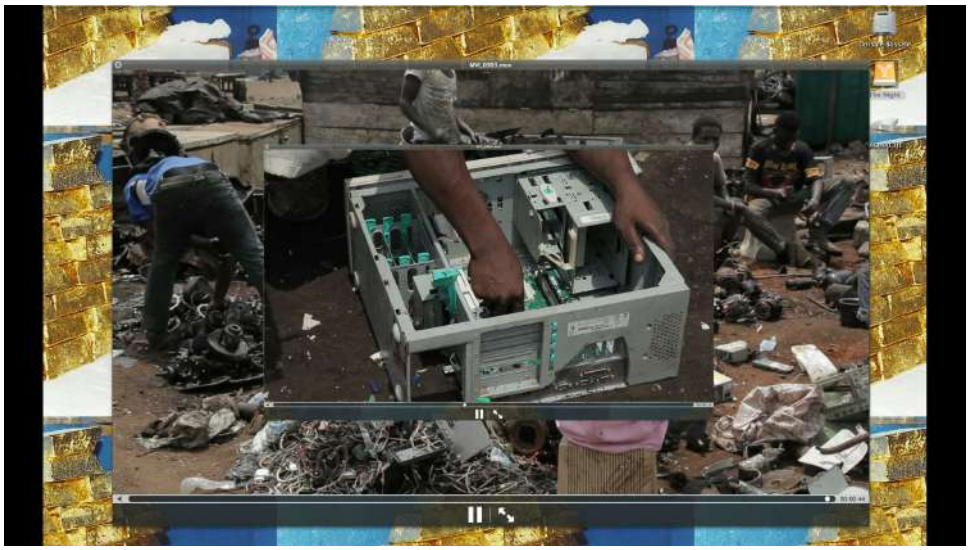


Film still *This Action Lies* (James N. Kienitz Wilkins, 2018)

All That Is Solid
United Kingdom/Ghana 2014, 15'30'', color, English/French

Director/Cinematography/Editor: Louis Henderson
Sound: Joseph Munday
Distribution: Video Data Bank, www.vdb.org

A study of e-recycling and neo-colonial mining, filmed in illegal gold mines and on the digital dumping ground of Agbogbloshie in the megacity of Accra, Ghana. The film dispels the capitalist myth of the immateriality of modern technology, revealing the earthly origins of the cloud.



Film still *All That Is Solid* (Louis Henderson, 2014)

Short Film Value(s)

To think about the manifold ways in which short films challenge standardized notions of value is a yielding endeavor. When paying the ticket price for a film screening, for example, you expect to get your money's worth of minutes in content. As detailed in the section on *Brevity*, shortness is a relational term: a short film is shorter than another type of film, implying that it falls short of the historically dominant norm of the full-length feature film. Only several short films taken together make up a complete program, whose length usually imitates the duration of a feature film between 90 and 120 minutes, which in turn established itself as a long-lasting hegemonic norm after the end of World War I to follow the cultural model of theatrical performance.[1] Valorization, in this case, is directly connected to length.

In the section on *Brevity*, I mentioned Corinna Müller's interesting attempt to divide film history into historical phases based on the formal category of the average lengths of film between 1895 and 1918. She argues that duration is not simply a banal external feature of film form, but a formative element when it comes to a range of film historical phenomena such as the organizing principles and production methods of the early film industry, the sociocultural appraisal of the new medium, exhibition and programming practices, the audience's reception of the films and their narrative setup.[2] In Müller's chronology, three periods of ultra-short films (*Kürzestfilme*) and short films (between 1895 and 1918) are followed by the fourth phase of full-length films, which resulted in an immediate hierarchical subordination of short films to feature-length films. It was only with the feature length film that the young medium of cinema was embraced as an independent form of art – a paradoxical statement given that this acceptance is directly tied to the emulation of the bourgeois theater culture.[3] As a program consisting of only two films with a combined running time of merely 48 minutes, *For What It's Worth* does not play by the rules of this game. It is easily conceivable that audiences would refuse to pay the full price of a ticket for less than half of the content usually provided for this amount of money, unless the screening is accompanied by a talk with the filmmakers or experts who offer contextual information on the program's subject.

It bears a certain irony that a format as economical and industrious as the short film lacks commercial value. To speak of a "short film industry" is a running joke among professionals – filmmakers, programmers, curators – in a sector marked by precarious employment conditions and persistent lack of funding. Short films are produced outside of unionized frameworks, often self-funded and rarely capable of generating any monetary revenue. While it is customary, for example, for festivals to pay screening fees for feature films running in their competitions, short film festivals tend to only remunerate films screened out of competition. One explanation for this lies yet again in the brevity of the films and the resulting large number of works a short film festival needs to compile into programs. Even though screening fees for short films are significantly lower than for their feature counterparts, the payment of in-competition fees is financially not viable given the large number of films.

Another reason might be found in the historical development of the short film festival format. Other than major festivals such as the ones in Venice, Berlin or Cannes, whose establishment was closely connected to commercial and geopolitical agendas

1 Corinna Müller, "Variationen des Kinoprogramms. Filmform und Filmgeschichte," in *Die Modellierung Des Kinofilms. Zur Geschichte Des Kinoprogramms Zwischen Kurzfilm Und Langfilm 1905/06-1918*, ed. Corinna Müller and Harro Segeberg, Mediengeschichte des Films, Band 2 (München: Wilhelm Fink, 1998), 45.

2 Müller, 44.

3 Müller, 74.

(see the case studies on these festivals by Marijke de Valck), short film festivals emerged from educational incentives and private interests.[4] Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen, which according to official festival historiography is considered to be the world's oldest short film festival, was founded in 1954 by Hilmar Hoffmann under the name of "Westdeutsche Kulturfilmtage." At the time, Hoffmann was the director of the Volkshochschule Oberhausen, an institute for adult education. The first edition of Westdeutsche Kulturfilmtage was organized under the patronage of the city of Oberhausen and the State Association of Adult Education Centers of Nordrhein-Westfalen.[5] If education and access to culture were not the primary driving force behind the conception of a festival, then it was usually the pure joy and enthusiasm of amateur cinephiles who wanted a film festival of their own in their small cities. Many short film festivals, like Clermont Ferrand or Internationale Kurzfilmtage Winterthur, were founded by such groups of film enthusiasts. In the case of Winterthur, it was a literal "Bieridee" (a crazy idea that seems reasonable if you are inebriated enough) that got the ball rolling.[6]

In order to classify them as part of the film *industry*, short films would have to be a marketable good. While this might apply to the arts sector, where a film can be traded at galleries and art fairs, there is no economic value for short films apart from a small income from licensing broadcasting rights to television buyers and winning prize money in competitions at festivals.[7] Both forms of revenue are reserved for the lucky few. Let me mention one example: One of the most successful Swiss short films of the past few years, Lasse Linder's *All Cats Are Grey in the Dark* (2019), played 109 festivals worldwide, which generated an income of roughly 2,000 Euros in screening fees from festivals.[8] As a favorite of both juries and audiences, the film made an extraordinary 25,000 to 30,000 Euros in prize money (winning, among others, the award for best short film at Toronto International Film Festival and Tampere Film Festival, the audience award at Uppsala International Short Film Festival and the European Film Award 2020 for best European short film). It was bought by the *New York Times* for their online *Op-Docs* section, an online platform for international nonfiction short films presented by the prestigious newspaper.[9] The paper paid a lump sum of 4,000 US dollars for the rights to show the film online non-exclusively, but in perpetuity. Astonishingly, the contract also includes the rights to a first-buy option in case of a spin-off which, in the case of *All Cats are Grey in the Dark* is indeed a possibility, as the filmmaker is currently working on a feature-length version. For Wouter Jansen, founder and director of the internationally successful festival distribution company *Square Eyes*, a short film is "doing very well" if it generates a revenue of 10,000 of 15,000 Euros in total over the course of its festival run.[10]

In Europe, short films are largely subsidized with public funds or, like elsewhere in the world, privately financed. On these grounds it is not surprising that the format is still

4 Marijke de Valck, *Film Festivals: From European Geopolitics to Global Cinephilia*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007).

5 See Wilhelm Roth, "Die schwierigen Nachbarn. Ein Festival und seine Mythen," in *Kurz und klein: 50 Jahre Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen*, ed. Klaus Behnken (Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen, Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004), 9.

6 See "History – 1997," Internationale Kurzfilmtage Winterthur, accessed October 12, 2021, https://www.kurzfilmtage.ch/EN/About/History#1997.

7 ARTE is the most potent buyer with 400 to 600 Euros per minute and contracts stipulating that ARTE owns the exclusive rights for television broadcasting in the first year and, within a two-year period, can show the film three times and as part of its online platform for the duration of a month. Many other broadcasters go as low as 20 Euros per minute. This information was given to me by distributor Wouter Jansen from *Square Eyes* during a Zoom call on June 18, 2021.

8 All numbers were kindly given to me by the film's festival distributor, Wouter Jansen from *Square Eyes*, during a Zoom call on June 18, 2021.

9 See "All Cats Are Gray in the Dark," The New York Times, September 8, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/100000007304962/all-cats-are-gray-in-the-dark.html.

10 This information was given to me by Wouter Jansen during a Zoom call on June 18, 2021.

generally regarded as a field for practice: it is cheaper to produce than a feature-length film, but it is far too expensive to live off. Short films are not economic, but certainly economical in the way they prudently manage time both on the producers' and the receivers' end. While digital recording has made the thrifty handling of expensive film stock largely obsolete – unless the filmmaker takes the conscious decision to use an analog format, as in the case of one of the films in this program – and the widespread availability of broadband internet, at least in the Global North, sets no limitations on processing power, a self-imposed brevity is a constitutive factor less in the production than for the aesthetic and political impact of short film making.

For *This Action Lies*, Kienitz Wilkins shot three reels of 16mm film (transferred to various formats and finally screened as a digital high-res file) that show nothing but a cup of steaming coffee. His voice-over reflections focus on the artist as an economic subject trying to make a living in free-market capitalism. He is one of many contemporary moving image artists who effortlessly move between the spaces of contemporary art and the international short film festival circuit, which have such different, if not opposing, approaches to generating value by managing the public's access to art. While the economic foundation of cinema, at least in its more commercial manifestation, is based on multiplication and widespread dissemination, the art market creates value through scarcity and restricted, heavily controlled accessibility. The principal locus of value generation, as Erika Balsom notes throughout her study on the distribution models of experimental cinema and moving images in art, is the negotiating field between circulation and restriction, reproducibility and rarity, and the rearticulation of the concept of authenticity with regard to the moving image.[11]

British filmmaker Louis Henderson's short film about an e-waste dump in Ghana questions the human, economic and ecological costs of the digital image by debunking the myth of the immateriality and constant availability associated with cloud computing. In *All That Is Solid*, a film which is not freely available online but can be rented through VDB Chicago and LUX London, the complex relationships between content and aesthetics, technology, ethics and politics is made visible. Since the early 2000s, with the advent of Web 2.0 with its shift towards user-based applications, the short film has been experiencing an unparalleled increase in recognition. Brevity and digital networks thus share an affinity.[12] Their analysis partakes not primarily in an aesthetic, but also a technical, ethical, political and environmental debate, as many recent studies in the fields of *Media Ecology* or *Critical Infrastructure Studies* pointed out.[13] In what follows, I will discuss the two films of this proposed program in more detail, focusing on the ways in which they address value, both as a numerical quantity and a relative measure of utility or significance, on an epistemological level.[14]

11 See Erika Balsom, *After Uniqueness a History of Film and Video Art in Circulation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

12 See Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

13 See, for example, Nadia Bozak, *The Cinematic Footprint Lights, Camera, Natural Resources* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012); Jennifer Gabrys, *Digital Rubbish: A Natural History of Electronics*, Digital Culture Books (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013); Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski, eds., *Signal Traffic: Critical Studies of Media Infrastructures* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015); Sean Cubitt, *Finite Media: Environmental Implications of Digital Technologies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017); Sean Cubitt, "The Ethics of Repair: Reanimating the Archive," in *Compact Cinematics: The Moving Image in the Age of Bit-Sized Media*, ed. Pepita Hesselberth and Maria Poulaki (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 57–63; Sy Taffel, *Digital Media Ecologies: Entanglements of Content, Code and Hardware* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019).

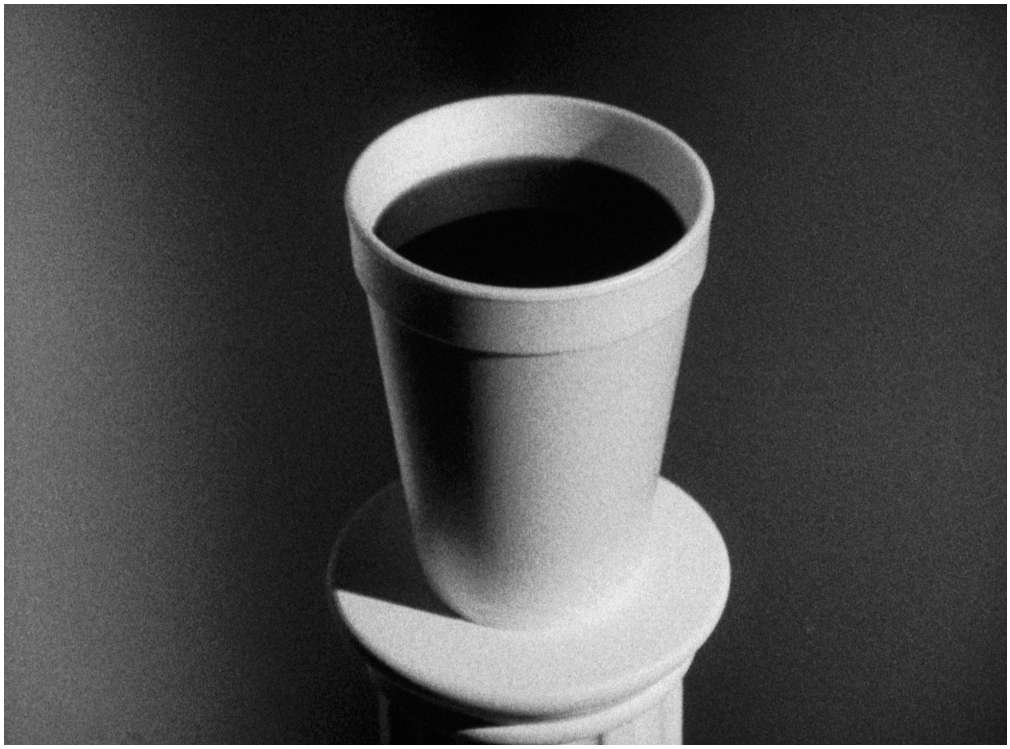
14 Some ideas in the discussions of these two films were developed as part of my essays "Do You Buy It? Notions of Value in James N. Kienitz Wilkins' *This Action Lies*" in *Taking Measures. Usages of Formats in Film and Video Art* edited by Fabienne Liptay [forthcoming] and "Kurz, schwer, digital. Louis Hendersons *All That Is Solid*" in *Bild | Kanäle. Zur Theorie und Ästhetik vernetzter Medienkultur*, edited by Olga Moskatova and Laura Katharina Mücke [forthcoming]. Small sections of this chapter are identical to these texts.

This Action Lies

> I'm making an apology. Yes, I'm making an apology. This is an apology. I don't see any other way around it. I've been backed into a corner, really, and it seems I've offended some through my actions. Or my lack of action. I think that's it. Or my lack of commitment … to tradition. Is it a crime to be uncultured? No, no, wait, hold on. I'm getting ahead of myself …[15]

The verb in the somewhat cryptic title of *This Action Lies* does not refer to the act of deceiving (lying as speaking an untruth), but rather to the Old French legalese expression "c'est action gist," the verb stemming from the French "gésir" (*to lie* as in *to be located in*). "This action lies," then, is used to refer to the principal activity that provides sufficient grounds to proceed in legal prosecution – that is, to take action. The English term "gist," as the essence or the main point of an argument, is derived from this phrase. "With roots in photography, a movie is an appearance plus movement. That's its essential action," is the narrator's answer to the question of what a movie is. This question is relevant at the beginning of the film because it directly relates to the main concerns of the film: What can you learn about an object when staring at it, observing it, intently? In this 32-minute monologue-heavy film, all that the viewer sees is a Styrofoam medium cup with the model number 14J16 made by the Dart Container Corporation and filled with hot coffee, its steam slowly evaporating. On the 10 minutes of material each of the three reels of 16mm film contains, the cup is filmed from another perspective. Or rather, it seems as if the cup were filmed from three different perspectives, but the only parameter that actually changes is the direction of the only light source in the room, whereas the camera itself remains stationary.

15 Original voice-over transcript provided by James N. Kienitz Wilkins.



Film still *This Action Lies* (James N. Kienitz Wilkins, 2018)

"I'm making an apology," says the narrator's voice, who identifies himself as James N. Kienitz Wilkins, in the opening line of *This Action Lies*. Throughout the film, it's unclear to for the viewer where the character James N. Kienitz Wilkins begins and James N. Kienitz Wilkins the filmmaker ends. Their identities cannot be interchangeable, but the choice of voice-over narration in different grammatical persons stirs constant uncertainty. Choosing *This Action Lies* as part of a program that explores questions of value(s), with the plural form referring to both economic as well as moral and ethical principles, my line of argument proposes that this ambivalence is productive insofar as it encourages the reading of the film as an invitation to thinking about, and rejecting in the process of it, hierarchies in the production of knowledge.[16] The continuous visual and grammatical shifts from first person to second person and third person, respectively, give the film a "schizoid quality" that draws our attention to the friction involved in the encounter of different epistemes and the production of definitions.[17]

An apology, as literature-savvy viewers of this film might know, does not only refer to an acknowledgment of regret or failure, but also denotes an autobiographical genre of writing going back to the Platonic Socratic dialogues.[18] An ἀπολογία (apologia) outlines the framework of an author's viewpoint and defends her way of thinking. The title of this program, *For What It's Worth*, is inspired by Kienitz Wilkins' apology: "For what it's worth" is an addendum of sorts when, after having offered one's opinion, one is not exactly sure that said statement was useful or pertinent to the topic. The narrator's

16 In the essay "Do You Buy It? Notions of Value in James N. Kienitz Wilkins' *This Action Lies*" I discuss in detail the ways in which the film invites a reflection on value in the more economic meaning of the term. I argue that in *This Action Lies*, Kienitz Wilkins negotiates the continuum between artistic integrity and capitalist commerce conceptually by way of a quasi-archeological use of language and of technical formats. See Laura Walde, "Do You Buy It? Notions of Value in James N. Kienitz Wilkins' This Action Lies," in *Taking Measures. Usages of Formats in Film and Video Art*, ed. Fabienne Liptay, Laura Walde, and Carla Gabrí (Zurich: Scheidegger & Spiess, forthcoming).

17 Mary Helena Clark, "Interview with James N. Kienitz Wilkins," *Bomb Magazine*, August 21, 2019.

18 Toward the end of the film, the narrator actually points out this meaning of the word: "And how could he apologize when an apology, at its purest, is a speech in one's own defense? Socrates died because he refused to apologize. Or rather, he apologized properly, and for that, was condemned."

question to the audience – "Is it a crime to be uncultured?" – expresses an uncertainty about the status and value of the speaker's intellect and education. Naturally, given the voice-over's eloquence and witty wordplay and the narrator's apparent knowledge of literary terms like "apology," the question must be considered as purely rhetorical. Kienitz Wilkins, as the narrator, is selling himself short here.

The English language makes a connection between knowledge and monetary power, as idiomatic phrases such as "buying into something" (believing in it) or "selling yourself short" in the sense of underappreciating the abilities of a person prominently show. Kienitz Wilkins is a graduate of The Cooper Union's School of Art in New York, therefore intellectual and artistic awareness are part of his *constant capital* as a highly trained and specialized worker in the field of art production.[19] The straightforward link between "shortness" and a reduction in value goes back to the early 17th century and the cunning schemes of a Dutch businessman, Isaac Le Maire, to undermine the stock exchange value of the Dutch East India Company's shares.[20] *Shorting* or *short-selling* is a technical trading term to denote a financial strategy that involves selling borrowed assets (shares or bonds) of which one expects a decline in value. The investor will receive a higher price for the selling of these assets on the market than what she will later pay for these same assets to the broker she borrowed them from in the first place. The term "short" is in this case identical to "lack" (see the section on shortage in the section on *Brevity*), as the investor is in a position of deficit vis-a-vis the broker from whom she borrowed the assets.

It is my premise for this program that the short film particularly enables a reflection on how cinema acts as an agent in producing knowledge because of its peripheral and minor position within film culture. Kienitz Wilkins' narrator, in pretending to be an *ingénu*, is foregrounding his position of an outsider that, as Alexandra Schneider and Vinzenz Hediger have conclusively argued in an essay on canon formation in networked media culture, is an epistemologically favorable research position.[21] In film historiography, before the advent of digital copies that can be played by individuals at a moment of their own choosing, knowledge about films was connected to selection and canonization: what was worth exhibiting in the movie theater, time and again, was worth knowing about. This discourse reaches back to the times when the legitimization of film as an art form was approached by the collection protocols of institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art in the mid-1930s or Kubelka's "Essential Cinema Series" for the New York Anthology Archive in the 1970s.[22]

In the age of digital networks, "the power of cultivating tradition – and thus the production of new knowledge about film – is dispersed throughout the manifold ways of

19 Using Marx's terminology, Diedrich Diederichsen posits that an artist's brand belongs to *constant capital*, the fixed asset of educational background, reputation and success that new productive output – the artist's *variable capital* – is built upon. See Diedrich Diederichsen, *On (Surplus) Value in Art* (Rotterdam: Witte de With, 2008), 35–37. The artist, not merely artworks, through branding becomes a commodity, which is especially compelling in the case of conceptual or performance art designed to resist the commodification of art. On the artistic critique of the commodity form that engenders new forms of commodity itself, see John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade* (London; New York: Verso, 2007); Diane Elson, ed., *Value: The Representation of Labour in Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2015); Isabelle Graw, "The Value of the Art Commodity. Twelve Theses on Human Labor, Mimetic Desire, and Aliveness," *ARQ* 97 (2017): 132.

20 For an overview of the sinister history of short-selling, see Arturo Bris, William N. Goetzmann, and Ning Zhu, "Efficiency and the Bear: Short Sales and Markets around the World," *The Journal of Finance* 62, no. 3 (2007): 1029–79.

21 See Alexandra Schneider and Vinzenz Hediger, "Vom Kanon zum Netzwerk. Hindi-Filme und Gebrauchsfilme als Gegenstände des Wissens einer post-kinematografischen Filmkultur," in *Orte filmischen Wissens. Filmkultur und Filmvermittlung im Zeitalter digitaler Netzwerke*, ed. Gudrun Sommer, Oliver Fahle, and Vinzenz Hediger (Marburg: Schüren, 2011), 153.

22 See Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Benoît Turquety, "Der Künstler, die Anthologie, die Pädagogik. Peter Kubelka und der Kanon des Essential Cinema," in *Orte filmischen Wissens. Filmkultur und Filmvermittlung im Zeitalter digitaler Netzwerke*, ed. Gudrun Sommer, Oliver Fahle, and Vinzenz Hediger (Marburg: Schüren, 2011), 109–21.

circulation, and, at least in this respect, the canon has entered a crisis."[23] Remember the narrator's words at the beginning of the film: "It seems I've offended some through my actions. Or my lack of action. I think that's it. Or my lack of commitment … to tradition." This lack of commitment to tradition, which also implies to canon, might well refer to the film's status as a hybrid between festival and gallery film, and certainly to its status as a film that was never intended for theatrical release. With the *non*-theatrical becoming the standard in an exhibition practice that does not circulate in canons, but rather in networked structures, the meta-discourse on what one should include or exclude in the production of new knowledge within a given field of research enters the discussion on a systemic level.[24] Short film's exclusion from theatrical spaces since the 1960s explains its blatant absence in film studies, but, as Schneider and Hediger argue with reference to Derrida, the frictions produced when incorporating marginalized objects and fitting them into an established body of knowledge is what keeps the subject from becoming irrelevant or boring.[25]

"Is it a crime to be uncultured?", asks the narrator in the opening lines of *This Action Lies*. The term "uncultured" will feature two more times over the course of this film. The question of what one can learn when watching something intensely – say, an ordinary disposable coffee cup – in a certain moving image format is a recurrent theme that features in several of Kienitz Wilkins' films.[26] It is also a very prominent topic in *This Action Lies*, where the narrator repeatedly plays with the dual meaning of the verb "to observe," both in the sense of noticing (and learning) as well as complying (and not questioning):

> what is a movie? I like the term "movie" because it gets at something essential. The way I see it: movies move. How and why and made of what, I don't care so much. With roots in photography, a movie is an appearance plus movement. That's its essential action. It's a process, I guess, that moves forward in time. I mean, even if I play a movie backwards, it's just moving forward in a different way. As in life, if I want to engage a movie, I have to do it, with it, in time. Movies appear to do something. Anyway, whatever, this is just my opinion. But what really gets me … I mean, annoys the hell out of me … is when people say movies are supposed to *do* something other than just *appearing* to do it. That movies are supposed to *respect* certain *laws*. Yes, laws. I use that word on purpose. Show not tell, right? Observe, right? A bunch of opinions.[27]

23 Schneider and Hediger, "Vom Kanon zum Netzwerk. Hindi-Filme und Gebrauchsfilme als Gegenstände des Wissens einer post-kinematografischen Filmkultur," 144; translation mine.

24 See Schneider and Hediger, 155.

25 See Schneider and Hediger, 151.

26 The play with formats and questions of representation and valuation links most of Kienitz Wilkins' work. The *Andre Trilogy* (consisting of *Special Features* (2014), *Tester* (2015) and *B-Roll with Andre* (2015)) uses successively higher resolution digital formats (first BetaSP, then MiniDV, finally HD) to correlate the idea of an evolution towards an unbiased representation to the highest possible degree of image resolution. In *Indefinite Pitch* (2016), a film consisting only of still images, the film's narrator muses about the power of digital film formats (particularly the theatrical standard that changed from 35mm to DCP) to produce a temporal dimension via the framerate of 24 frames per second even in the absence of actual motion. His medium-length film *Mediums* (2017), also shot on 16mm, consist only of medium shots. The nexus of representation (particularly with regard to race), cinema, labor and capitalism is most explicitly addressed in *Common Carrier* (2018), a feature film that almost consistently uses the superimposition of different images as a visual trope for the anxiety over economic survival and acknowledgement of artistic value.

27 I take the liberty of quoting the voice-over text at length at several moments in this chapter, using them as a primary source. *This Action Lies* could be said to deprioritize the image while heavily relying on spoken narration, which renders the spoken textual elements all the more essential. Original voice-over transcript provided by James N. Kienitz Wilkins on June 6, 2019. James N. Kienitz Wilkins, "This Action Lies – Voice-Over Script," 2018; emphasis in the original.

It is telling that Kienitz Wilkins addresses his choice of the more vernacular term "movie" – instead of film – in this early section of *This Action Lies*, as it points to the unstable material and local determination of the moving image – to the "how and why and made of what," as the narrator calls it in the quote above – in the age of media immanence, to use Malte Hagener's term.[28] The fact that films are no longer bound to a certain real space (the cinema) and a certain time and duration (the screening), but rather float freely in a digital realm, played, stopped, rewound according to the inclinations of their audience, and that they constantly cross the institutional boundaries between entertainment, commerce and art, changes the approaches we can take to conceptualize film as an epistemological object. Both *This Action Lies* as well as Louis Henderson's *All That Is Solid* reflect on the tension resulting from a coexistence of the film's heavy materiality (film stock, electronic hardware) and its immateriality and variability in digital circulation. In the case of *This Action Lies*, the narrator introduces a direct connection between the film's technical format and its economic value, but also between the format and the ontological status of "the movie":

> OK. Here's a secret. What if you found out this movie is more expensive than it looks. Like, a more expensive medium like 35mm film. [...] What if it was not only shot on 16mm film, then edited and finished digitally, as most movies are these days, but was additionally transferred to 35mm, then transferred *back* again to digital. Which is what you see now. Would you be impressed? So this digital movie contains all the history, the process, whatever. But a process that doesn't add clarity, no, to the contrary: what's shot has been shot. [...] Once again, you probably think this is trivial stuff. That there's no real stakes in this setup. But you've gotta look closer, because if a 35mm print exists, then that's an object to sell. A single, one-of-a-kind version on 35mm film, finished and complete and integrally connected to all that's come to pass. Yet a version totally unavailable, beyond your grasp, something completely unique and rooted in space and time, and utterly immaterial for the same reasons. It's a stand-in. Or maybe this movie is the stand-in? In any case, *this* movie is not *that* movie, at least according to the grounds of the grain: No, *that* movie might as well be locked somewhere in a room that can only be imagined, to be screened … and fully observed … by a person who is not you.[29]

In this quote, the narrator questions whether the physical status of the film has anything to do with its commercial value, as the "film as object" reintroduces a notion of exclusivity that is marketable.[30] When *This Action Lies* was exhibited in the Spike Island Gallery in Bristol, two sealed 35mm film canisters were presented alongside the digital projection of the film, "subtly poking fun at the value and authenticity of analogue film

28 Malte Hagener, "Wo ist Film (heute)? Film/Kino im Zeitalter der Medienimmanenz," in *Orte filmischen Wissens. Filmkultur und Filmvermittlung im Zeitalter digitaler Netzwerke*, ed. Gudrun Sommer, Oliver Fahle, and Vinzenz Hediger (Marburg: Schüren, 2011), 45–59.

29 Original voice-over transcript provided by James N. Kienitz Wilkins.

30 For further notes on the cultural value of obsolete formats, editioning or archival collections, see for example Thomas Elsaesser, "Media Archaeology as the Poetics of Obsolescence," in *At the Borders of (Film) History: Temporality, Archaeology, Theories*, ed. Giuseppe Fidotta, Alberto Beltrame, and Andrea Mariani (Udine: Forum, 2015), 103–16; Balsom, *After Uniqueness*; Giovanna Fossati, *From Grain to Pixel: The Archival Life of Film in Transition* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019).

as a medium, creating a disconnect between the experience of watching film and its materiality."[31] The discussion of the technical format in this quote is, however, not only connected to industrial standards and their commercial impact, but also to a reflection on meaning. How a film is experienced relates to what one can know about it when it appears to us in different formats and instances, but also vice versa; there is a response mechanism between format, both in its technical and cultural meaning, and the dimensions in which a moving image work becomes knowable. As media scholar and curator Gabriel Menotti summarizes it with regard to film cultural in general: "The circulation across many different apparatus, practices, and sites affects not only films' cultural meaning and value. Circulation also entails contingent feedback processes which eventually crystallize as technical standards and ways of doing, shaping the cinematographic work's common physical format."[32]

Like Kienitz Wilkins, Menotti advocates for the use of the term *movie* instead of film to prevent the unprofitable association with a fixed material object, arguing that speaking of movies "for marketing purposes has produced a degree of discursive emptiness that will come in handy for our epistemic manipulation."[33] Menotti's approach to film studies outlined in *Movie Circuits. Curatorial Approaches to Cinema Technology* is determined by the perspectives of what he calls the mediators, the people who present movies and foster their circulation. Apart from projectionists and archivists, it is curators and programmers that come most readily to mind when thinking about the mediators of film culture. It is they, Menotti argues, who shape what can potentially be regarded as knowledge about film culture: "the first thing that should be done is to reclaim cinema as an epistemic playing field. Not only the *concept* of cinema, but all of its sites, practices, apparatus, functionaries, and objects. In summary, *all of its circuit*."[34] I see this very much at play in the short films of James N. Kienitz Wilkins and, on a more general level, in the format of the short film itself. When Menotti writes that "[m]ovies are thus shown to be not forms that circulate, but rather forms resulting from circulation," he points out the performative and pragmatist aspects of knowledge about film.[35] *This Action Lies* is a particularly strong example of a film that generates and, at the same time, deconstructs knowledge through film. "You really think that if you stare at something long enough, it'll reveal its secrets? Its history, its motivations, its fundamental interiority? You really think something's gonna give up its reality just because you got a staring problem? Think about it."[36] What can be learned when looking at the coffee cup of *This Action Lies* intently, for 32 minutes? Will the spectator realize that it is not the camera's position vis-à-vis the cup that changes, but only the source of light? Will she understand that what appears to be a three-point lighting setup is in fact really coming from only one light source? The film's narrator points out how the conditions of viewing impact the production of knowledge:

> You've been asked to look at some evidence—in this case, a cup. And cups don't exist in a void. Where's the cup located? You could use more grounding. So here's a thought experiment. Imagine an impossible room. A room hermetically sealed from you. It doesn't have to be

31 "James N. Kienitz Wilkins. This Action Lies," Spike Island, accessed November 3, 2020, https://www.spikeisland.org.uk/programme/exhibitions/james-n-kienitz-wilkins.

32 Gabriel Menotti, *Movie Circuits: Curatorial Approaches to Cinema Technology* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 18f.

33 Menotti, 25.

34 Menotti, 24; emphasis in the original.

35 Menotti, 25.

36 Original voice-over transcript provided by James N. Kienitz Wilkins.

> a vacuum, no, there can be sounds. And smells. And temperature. Let's say 60 degrees Fahrenheit. But a room that's impossible to inhabit, and thus to observe. Can you see it? No door. No windows. No ins and outs. And no fourth wall, absolutely no fourth wall. Three walls. Equilateral. To understand the layout of the room, you'd have to be lodged in the walls. Like a cockroach. Or a dirty little mouse. Scurrying from wall to wall. Or maybe you'd be the walls, like the pinhole of a camera obscura, projecting yourself—your biased, deficient perspective—into the chamber, at once part of the world and set apart from it.[37]

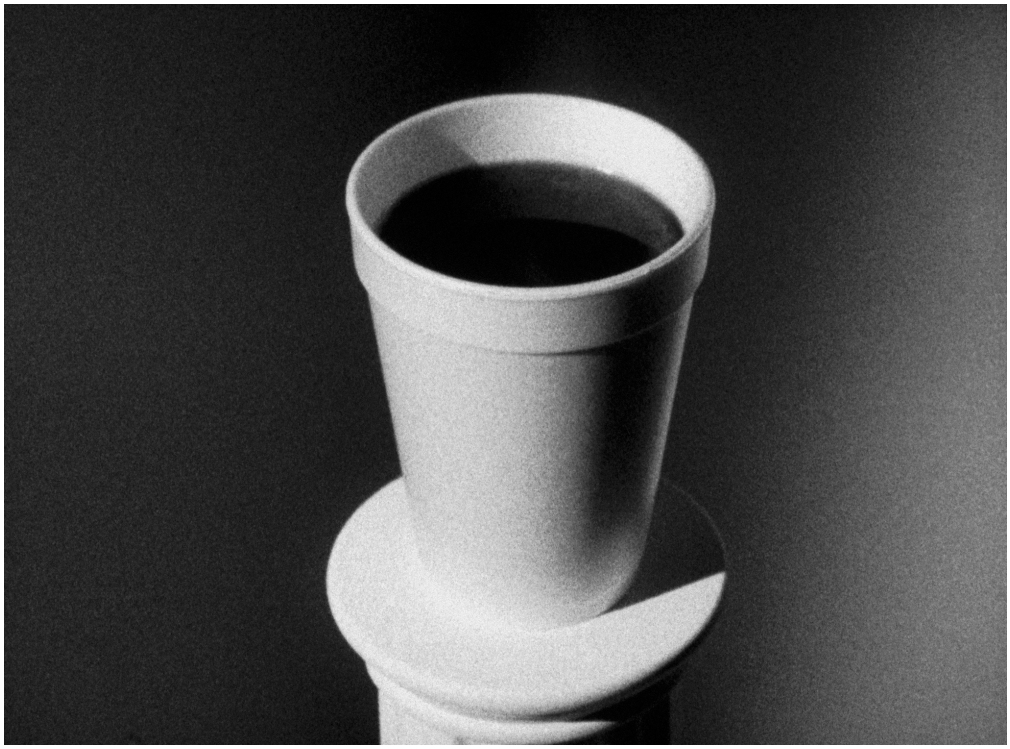
What the narrator describes is an "impossible room," a room that cannot be observed in reality, but appears to exist in the film.[38] Kienitz Wilkins built two drywall panels meeting in a 60-degree angle; the Styrofoam cup was placed on a round pedestal in front of this corner, at the center of this imaginary three-wall room.[39] As mentioned above, at the beginning of the movie the narrator says: "But what really gets me … I mean, annoys the hell out of me … is when people say movies are supposed to *do* something other than just *appearing* to do it. That movies are supposed to *respect* certain *laws*."[40] The narrator here seems to encourage a deconstructive approach over a Platonic approach to moving images: What matters is not (stable) essence, but (contingent) appearance.

37 Original voice-over transcript provided by James N. Kienitz Wilkins.

38 As a sidenote for further exploration, I want to mention Donna Haraway's seminal essay on "situated knowledges" in answer to the problems posed by both objectivity, burdened by hierarchical and hegemonic power structures, and relativism, which denies the possibility of authorization by renouncing any claims to objectivity, thereby making any discussion about the social, ethical and political implications of knowledge positions futile. Haraway emphasizes, and reclaims, the role of *vision* in epistemology, that is, the practice of seeing. Instead of a "conquering gaze from nowhere," (581) what she also calls a "god trick" (581), Haraway securely fastens vision to the body, which is always local, contextualized, and complex. "I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. […] I am arguing for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity." Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 589.

39 Kienitz Wilkins describes the technical setup of the film in an interview with Clark, "Interview with James N. Kienitz Wilkins."

40 Original voice-over transcript provided by James N. Kienitz Wilkins; emphasis in the original.



Film still *This Action Lies* (James N. Kienitz Wilkins, 2018)

What, then, can be learned by observing the appearance of a simple cup of coffee for 32 minutes – a short film by definition, but what seems to be a very long film for those spectators not able or willing to engage in this particular brainteaser? I want to suggest that the film encourages us to be emancipated spectators the way French philosopher Jacques Rancière conceptualizes the term. The interrelation between watching and learning, between mediation and understanding, and between knowing and complying is of paramount interest to Rancière and preoccupies him throughout his large body of writing in some form or other. The subject is explicitly addressed in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* and *The Emancipated Spectator*. In the former, Rancière criticizes the traditional hierarchy of knowledge in pedagogy and science, namely that there is a gap between the teacher's advanced knowledge and the student's humbler capabilities that are to be overcome by the teacher's explications, by recounting the story of Joseph Jacotot and his method of "intellectual emancipation."

In 1818, the French scholar, who lived in exile and was granted a position at the University of Leuven, faced the challenge of teaching students who had no mastery over French, while he himself had no knowledge of the local Flemish language. According to Rancière's report, Jacotot had the ingenious idea to use a bilingual edition of the didactical novel *Les aventures de Télémaque, fils d'Ulysse* as a basis for the students to learn French by comparison to the Flemish text only. Without being offered any explanation of French spelling or grammar, the students taught themselves a new language, both passively and in active use, by observation and comparison.[41] Emancipation, for Jacotot/Rancière, denotes learning independent from the intelligence of a master; the intelligence is purely the student's own, only the instruction – the will – to learn is coming from the teacher: "We will call the known and maintained difference of the two relations – the act of an intelligence obeying only itself even while the will obeys another

41 Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 1–4.

will – *emancipation*."[42] Based on this parable of Belgian students learning to read and speak French from a novel, Rancière – in recounting the story of Jacotot – argues for the axiomatic equality of intelligence by emancipation. This holds true not only on the level of education. Jacotot's venture for intellectual emancipation takes the encounter between teacher and student as its example, but emancipation happens whenever and wherever a space for self-improvement is cleared:

> The duty of Joseph Jacotot's disciples is thus simple. They must announce to everyone, *in all places and all circumstances*, the news, the practice: one can teach what one doesn't know. A poor and ignorant father can thus begin educating his children: something must be learned and all the rest related to it, on this principle: everyone is of equal intelligence.[43]

For a poor and uneducated worker, emancipation comes in the form of claiming the right for their children to do mental work instead of only manual labor. Emancipation consists in claiming the right to spend time on contemplation and observation as educational work outside of an institutionalized, hierarchical framework. An equality of intelligence brought about by intellectual emancipation is meant to break the hierarchy, and the ensuing inequality, between the bourgeoise and the laboring classes by eliminating the pedagogic dimension in education. Aesthetic contemplation – say, looking at a cup of coffee filmed on 16mm and contemplating the traces embedded in the images through processes of translating the picture to various formats – is an important act of emancipation in that is requires the mental work of observing, comparing, and understanding.

In *The Emancipated Spectator*, Rancière translates the relationship between schoolmaster and pupil to the discussion of art, more precisely to the status of the audience confronted with any sort of artistic spectacle and concludes that "[i]ntellectual emancipation is the verification of the equality of intelligence. This does not signify the equal value of all manifestations of intelligence, but the self-quality of intelligence in all its manifestations."[44] Equality of intelligence, then, refers to a non-hierarchical and not necessarily sequential path of knowledge production: The schoolmaster in the title of Rancière's book about the pedagogical adventures of professor Jacotot is ignorant not because he is lacking in knowledge, but because he does not need to take up a leading position to guide his students towards his own state of knowledge; there is no distance between states of knowledge to be overcome. Rather, the educator "orders [his pupils] to venture into the forest of things and signs, to say what they have seen and what they think of what they have seen, to verify it and have it verified."[45] For Rancière, then, observing – in the meaning of registering or noticing, and then expressing what one has observed in one's own words – is associated with acquiring knowledge, while observing – in the sense of fulfilling or complying with a predefined set of instructions – is linked with stultification (the opposite of emancipation in the vocabulary of Joseph Jacotot).[46]

42 Rancière, 13; emphasis in the original.

43 Rancière, 101; my emphasis.

44 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2021), 10.

45 Rancière, 11.

46 Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 13.

The narrator in *This Action Lies*, after all, argues in a similar way when he remarks on the interrelationship between observing and respecting:

> When it comes to movies, everyone talks about observation as it relates to *looking*. The objective act of looking. But it's more about *respecting*: to watch, heed, guard, comply. That's the subtext. The act of looking as an act of respect. So it follows that disrespect is the opposite of observation. And when a movie is respectful, we call it a documentary. And when it is disrespectful, we respectfully call it a fiction. But what I don't understand is why a movie should be concerned with respect or disrespect. At least at the granular stage of creation. I'm talking about following rules. Making something to make someone feel better. I'm not against making people feel better, but why do movies have to shoulder the burden?[47]

Rather than being mere entertainment or serving an educative purpose, movies should not trouble themselves with being anything other or more than what the audience can make of them, the narrator suggest in the quote above. Stultification is nothing else than subscribing to the endless cycle of a hierarchical nature of education – "the schoolmaster is not only the one who possesses the knowledge unknown by the ignoramus. He is also the one who knows how to make it an object of knowledge, at what point and in accordance with what protocol," writes Rancière.[48] Without emancipation, this cycle cannot be broken. Knowledge through emancipation, one could pointedly say, means disrespecting the rules.

Is *This Action Lies*, with its impossible room and fake perspective, thus *actually lying* to us? The generic distinction between fiction and documentary which Kienitz Wilkins' narrator mentions in the quote above – a distinction based on observing as respecting – might be discussed in terms of the friction that persists – especially for the ordinary audience member, perhaps less so for media scholars – in the differentiation between fiction and documentary. This, as Bill Nichols influentially conceptualized it, cannot be reduced to the latter being a mere reflection – an objective observation – of an exterior reality. Both genres are semiotic systems and it is "only by examining *how* a series of sounds and images signify that we can begin to rescue documentary from the anti-theoretical, ideologically complicit argument that documentary-equals-reality, and that the screen is a window rather than a reflecting surface."[49] Given its exhibition history in galleries and at festivals, where the determination of genres is less common, and the fact that most critical attention for *This Action Lies* comes from the art sector, the film is rarely discussed as a documentary. It could, however, easily be categorized as an amalgam of mostly the *reflexive* and, on the narratorial level, the *performative* mode with a hint of *poetic*, in Nichols' taxonomy of documentary types, where "the processes of negotiation between filmmaker and viewer becomes the focus of attention," and the challenges regarding notions of realism, representation and reality come to the fore.[50] All three of these modes, albeit using different techniques, deal with reflecting on, at times also proactively offering, alternative positions of knowledge and the ways these positions come to be in the first place. "At its best," Nichols writes, "reflexive documen-

47 Original voice-over transcript provided by James N. Kienitz Wilkins; emphasis in the original.

48 Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 8.

49 Bill Nichols, "Documentary Theory and Practice," *Screen* 17, no. 4 (December 1, 1976): 35; emphasis in the original.

50 Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 125.

tary prods the viewer to a heightened form of consciousness about her relation to a documentary and what it represents."[51] The goal, then, is not so much to provide the viewer with new knowledge about a subject, but to stimulate inquiry into how knowledge through observation is generated in the first place. This, Nichols notes, means that reflexive documentaries have both a formal and a political dimension. On the formal level, reflexive documentaries challenge the audience's presumptions about the documentary form itself. From a political perspective, reflexive documentaries challenge the audience's presumptions about how the world functions.[52]

The narrator in *This Action Lies*, speaking in third person to perhaps signal a distance between different positions of knowledge for the filmmaker and the narrator,[53] directly addresses this emancipated process of learning by observing and comparing:

> He wondered aloud if he could learn about this cup by staring at it. Staring at it extremely hard from different perspectives. He already knew a few things: it was styrofoam. It was a medium cup, model number 14J16, sixteen ounce "flush fill" made by the Dart Container Corporation. The same used by Dunkin' for its medium hot coffees. This much was known. But what else could be discovered? He scratched his head. He wasn't a scientist. He wasn't an academic. He was just a doofus who happened to be alive when the internet was invented. It was his refuge. He knew he couldn't trust the internet but alas, beyond the act of looking, it was his pedestal to knowledge.

Neither the narrator's current state of knowledge – as a self-titled stupid person, a doofus – nor the intelligence of the internet is to be trusted. However, as the narrator rightly notes, this does not matter in the context of an emancipated education. Beyond starting at a cup containing coffee, the internet is the medium that delivers the narrator more elements to compare his current state of knowledge to; it provides further pieces of information in a puzzle of references. In an interview, Kienitz Wilkins talks about how the internet is a "self-educational tool, which is not just about the history of cinema and its techniques and tools, but also about words and language."[54] Kienitz Wilkins' films are not conceivable without the internet, yet they retain a strong sense of the material and institutional limitations and possibilities of the medium of film, which is why Nick Pinkerton concludes that Wilkins' films "have a common provenance in internet archaeology, [but are also] rooted in the avantgarde film tradition."[55] Louis Henderson, who like Kienitz Wilkins was born in 1983, uses the internet in a similar manner as both a tool for research and a material archive of footage to use. I will come back to this point when discussing *All That Is Solid* in more detail.

51 Nichols, 128.

52 Nichols, 128.

53 In a re-reading of another seminal treatise on the nature of education, namely Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Émile, or on Education*, Vinzenz Hediger discusses the utopian condition of a child growing up completely untouched by the influence of moving image media. The author also offers some general insights into the conceptual history of the term *Bildung* (education) in the German context, where it signifies more than simply schooling, but includes the development of a subject into an individual and a citizen. "Education," Hediger then maintains, "lives from a tension between an actual ego and a target-ego." Vinzenz Hediger, "Der Traum vom medienfreien Kind," in *Orte filmischen Wissens. Filmkultur und Filmvermittlung im Zeitalter digitaler Netzwerke*, ed. Gudrun Sommer, Oliver Fahle, and Vinzenz Hediger (Marburg: Schüren, 2011), 84; translation mine. I read the constant shift in grammatical person in the narratorial voice of *This Action Lies* very much as an expression of this educational tension between egos.

54 Dan Sullivan, "NYFF Interview: James N. Kienitz Wilkins," *Film Comment*, June 10, 2016, https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/nyff-interview-james-n-kienitz-wilkins/.

55 Nick Pinkerton, "American Landscape," *Frieze*, March 22, 2017, https://frieze.com/article/american-landscape.

Watching *This Action Lies*, then, even for the uncultured, is an act of education, teaching both knowledge about film and knowledge through film.[56] In this vein, Rancière, as a philosopher and critic, but not a film historian or theorist, advocates for the legitimacy of the amateur, the movie buff watching an endless series of films, in navigating the adventures of cinema. "Amateurism is also a theoretical and political position, one that sidelines the authority of specialists by re-examining the way the frontiers of their domains are drawn at the points where experience and knowledge intersect."[57] When theory and politics are connected to experience and knowledge, then politics, understood in its broadest sense as encompassing all hegemonic practices in social and cultural life, always also has an aesthetic dimension.

Fundamentally, for Rancière politics "revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time."[58] Narration, then, is in itself a political act, as it is an action not aimed at explanation, but an invitation to the audience – the narrator's equals – to engage in a dialogue with the narrator's words. Rancière, quoting Jacotot, describes this as a form of poetics when he writes that "[t]he virtue of our intelligence is less in knowing than in doing. 'Knowing is nothing, *doing* is everything.' But this doing is fundamentally an act of communication. [...] In the act of speaking, man doesn't transmit his knowledge, he makes poetry; he translates and invites others to do the same. He communicates as an *artisan*: as a person who handles words like tools."[59] From Greek *poiesis* – doing, making –, the poetic is an action, one that is always potentially resistant; it does not observe, but nonetheless comes from observation. Using words as tools, Rancière in this early work prepares the ground for connecting his political ideals and the workers' emancipation with artistic practices, as they are not in themselves fundamentally different. Knowledge acquisition through emancipation works via a medium (a story, a book, a film) rather than via a social structure that presupposes an incontestable hierarchy.

It should be noted, however, that there is a complication to this equation of emancipation through observation and comparison only, one without the guiding force of a teacher who authorizes certain types of thinking and of knowledge. It leads to an impasse which David Joselit has thoughtfully addressed in an essay on contemporary fake news culture which for him is essentially defined by a "crisis of authorization."[60] From the blind faith in political and scholarly authority that marked much of history before the mid-20th century, the balance of power has now shifted to the authorization of scattered singular communities. Joselit ties this paradigm shift in parallel to the emergence of modernist art and its culmination in the 1960s, stating that it "might even be possible to define modernism as an agonism of de-authorization whose agonizing endgame is unfolding before us in our world of fake news."[61] The problem with emancipation, then, is that in its most extreme version it no longer recognizes any form of common sense

56 Cinematic or filmic knowledge, the editors of *Orte filmischen Wissens. Filmkultur und Filmvermittlung im Zeitalter digitaler Netzwerke* [Spaces of Cinematic Knowledge. Film Culture and Film Education in the Age of Digital Networks] suggest, includes three types of knowledge: "knowledge about film, knowledge through film, and film-shaped knowledge" Vinzenz Hediger, Gudrun Sommer, and Oliver Fahle, "Einleitung. Filmisches Wissen, die Frage des Ortes und das Pensum der Bildung," in *Orte filmischen Wissens. Filmkultur und Filmvermittlung im Zeitalter digitaler Netzwerke*, ed. Gudrun Sommer, Oliver Fahle, and Vinzenz Hediger (Marburg: Schüren, 2011), 13; translation mine. Based on this distinction between different types of filmic knowledge, I would argue that *This Action Lies* produces film-shaped knowledge in its epistemological reflection on the production of knowledge through observation, format changes, and circulation between different institutional contexts.

57 Jacques Rancière, *The Intervals of Cinema*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 2014), 7.

58 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 8.

59 Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 65; emphasis in the original.

60 David Joselit, "Virus as Metaphor," *October* 172 (May 2020): 159. I will revisit this essay in Chapter 4.

61 Joselit, 160; emphasis in the original.

conformity, but only radical collective individualism instead. And as Joselit rightly notes, "communal forms of authorization are by no means limited to progressive political positions," – such as the Black Lives Matter movement or Greta Thunberg's persistent campaign for addressing the climate crisis – they can be appropriated by any social, political, ethnical, religious or identarian group.

This complication can never be fully resolved. Joselit calls out artists and art critics to "*reauthorize* information (including images)," but I contend that this is a process rather than a solution.[62] As vital as it is to become aware of this ambiguity and the mechanisms of *de-authorization* and *reauthorization*, it must remain a constant process of negotiation. I want to read this as a vital component of a poetic force of theory, too, that is, of an unveiling of a tense confrontation between different forces.

This, I want to suggest, brings us back full circle to Alexander Kluge's notion of the poetic as political and emancipatory versus the theoretical as explanatory and hierarchical. In the tension between authority and emancipation, only the poetic potential of art can express the ambiguities of this antagonism without subscribing to either one of these systems. Kluge's notion of the poetic is fundamentally narrative, too: "Like a force of water, narrative expression finds its way. [...] These powers become engaged as motors of progress – in an attitude of self-consciousness."[63] For James N. Kienitz Wilkins' artistic practice, narration is key: he regularly deprioritizes the image by heavily trusting in spoken storytelling. "I rely on text to understand the world. I approach things, especially images, with skepticism. Not cynicism. When I'm told a shot does this or evokes that—says who? Where are we starting from?"[64] In what Dan Sullivan rightly calls a Duchampian gesture – the cup as the readymade – Kienitz Wilkins' dense voice-over narration can be read as an echo of the R. Mutt signature on the urinal.[65] Kienitz Wilkins here insists on narrative as the major principle in framing a discourse about what constitutes knowledge in, about and through film. In the other film of this fictitious program, which I have entitled *For What It's Worth*, namely Louis Henderson's *All That Is Solid*, the audience experiences a film addressing similar epistemological doubts, but whose formal expression is diametrically opposed to the visually simple, narratively dense structure of *This Action Lies*.

All That Is Solid

> This is a film that takes place, // *C'est un film qui se déroule,* in between a hard place, // *entre un endroit dur,* a hard drive, // *un disque dur,* and an imaginary, // *et un imaginaire,* a soft space // *un espace doux* – the cloud that holds my data, // *le nuage qui contient mes données,* and in the soft grey matter, // *et dans la matière grise douce,* contained within the head. // *contenue dans la tète.*[66]

An Apple desktop functions as the platform to gather textual material, images and videos from different sources. The audience is presented with the online search activity of the unnamed protagonist who never speaks. As an audience, we read along when texts

62 Joselit, 161; emphasis in the original.

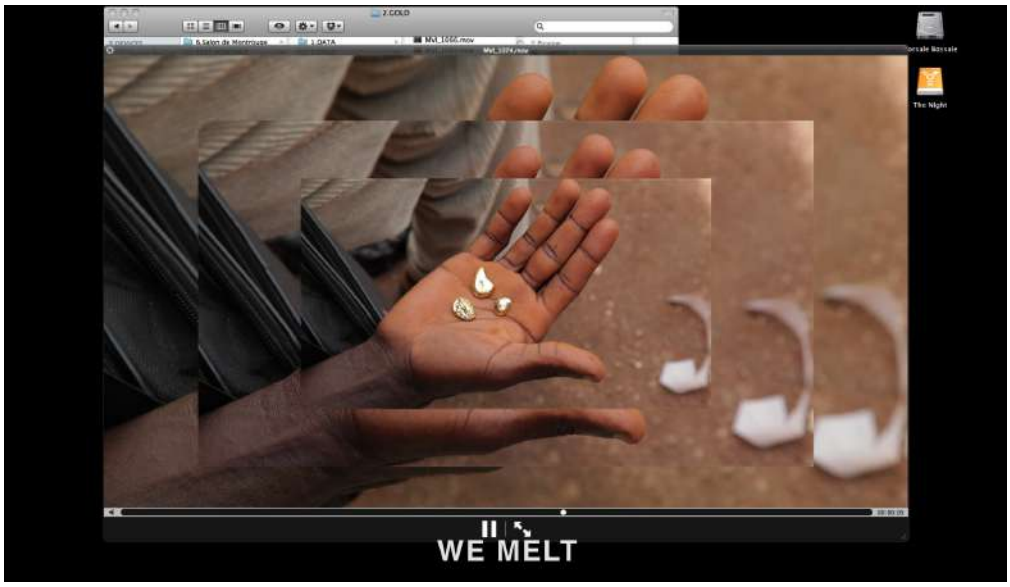
63 Alexander Kluge, "The Poetic Power of Theory," trans. Leslie A. Adelson, *New German Critique* 47, no. 1 (February 1, 2020): 10.

64 Clark, "Interview with James N. Kienitz Wilkins."

65 Sullivan, "NYFF Interview: James N. Kienitz Wilkins."

66 From Louis Henderson, *All That Is Solid* (Video Data Bank, 2014).

are reinterpreted on Google Translate or when the protagonist scrolls through Wikipedia entries on the history of the Gold Coast and Ghana, on the extraction of gold and the physical properties of the aggregate state called "solid." We watch extracts of a film on the Colonial Film History website, we see exotic images and tourist photos from Ghana on Google Images and roam through a server farm via depictions on Google Street View. The protagonist plays short video sequences, which Louis Henderson shot on site in Ghana for his previous film *Lettres du voyant* (2013), located on an external hard disk. What these short sequences show are, on the one hand, the different stages of mining, smelting and trading of gold and, on the other hand, the workers of Agbogbloshie, Africa's largest electric waste dump located in Ghana's capital Accra. Young men rhythmically break open electronic equipment and melt cables to extract precious metals hidden within electronic devices. These short film sequences are often arranged in a visual picture-in-picture arrangement, with multiple Quicktime player windows open simultaneously.



Film still *All That Is Solid* (Louis Henderson, 2014)

As mentioned above, layering or superimposing various images is an important formal strategy for Henderson, one that is "supposed to offer an understanding of a certain depth to an image, that underneath an image there might be another kind of reality existing at the same time, even if it's not in the same space."[67] The third type of material Henderson uses in his film are quotes from unnamed sources wandering across the screen. For an audience well-acquainted with this prominent literature within the field, the two texts can be identified as quotes from Hito Steyerl's "Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?" (2013) and Benjamin H. Bratton's "The Black Stack" (2014), both published on e-flux.com.[68] The titles, authors and sources, however, are not mentioned in the film itself (not even in the credits). The appropriation of intellectual property, which makes free circulation online so temptingly effortless, runs contradictory to the privatization of goods on which capitalism as a global social order is based. Among these goods, increasingly privatized, are knowledge and education. Again, Hito Steyerl – an

67 Leo Goldsmith, "Louis Henderson with Leo Goldsmith," *The Brooklyn Rail*, In Conversation, July 2016.

68 See Hito Steyerl, "Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead? - Journal #49 November 2013 - e-Flux," accessed October 12, 2021, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/49/60004/too-much-world-is-the-internet-dead/; Benjamin H. Bratton, "The Black Stack - Journal #53 March 2014 - e-Flux," accessed October 12, 2021, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/53/59883/the-black-stack/.

artist and scholar whom Louis Henderson mentions as an inspiration – comes to mind.[69] In her essay "In Defense of the Poor Image," Steyerl identifies a decidedly subversive potential in the free use and circulation of images outside of officially recognized and commercially exploitable channels. Echoing the English title of Frantz Fanon's anti-colonialist manifesto *The Wretched of the Earth* [*Les Damnés de la Terre*] (1961), Steyerl writes: "Poor images are the contemporary wretched of the screen, the debris of audio-visual production, the trash that washes up on the digital economies' shores."[70] The status of images and films that circulate more easily due to their high degree of compression, as well as their brevity, is thus paradoxical: on the one hand, they are potentially valuable due to their easy availability and wide reach of costumers. On the other hand, these images pay for their high degree of visibility with a loss of exclusivity and quality.

"This is a film that takes place, in between a hard place, a hard drive, and an imaginary, a soft space, the cloud that holds my data, and in the soft grey matter, contained within the head." This programmatic declaration at the beginning of the film not only establishes the locations of the action – the hard drive of the computer and the virtual space of the internet – but also offers a reading instruction for the audience: this film will not primarily follow a predetermined narrative, it demands a thought process that must take place in the grey matter of the viewer's brain. Thinking by observing is required. A few minutes later, the folder structure of the hard disk entitled "The Night" becomes visible. In it, a folder called "Soft Montage" will capture the eye of an attentive audience. The material played in the film is located within this folder, which also contains three subfolders entitled "1. Data" and "2. Gold," respectively, while one folder remains unnamed, simply carrying the number 3. "Soft Montage" is an obvious reference to Harun Farocki's eponymous concept, which refers to the simultaneity of images within a multi-channel installation or even within a film.[71] "Soft Montage" is Farocki's term for a line of reasoning, or a way of thinking, that does not pit images against each other, instead relating them to each other. "This idea of not saying 'A or B,' but 'A and B' is somehow important to my own conception of soft montage," Farocki says.[72] "Soft montage" allows for reflection without fixed conclusions – "more trial, less assertion. Equivocality can be attained with the simplest means" – and thus also a privileging of equality and de-hierarchization over the type of confrontational montage propagated by Soviet montage theory.[73]

Equality and de-hierarchization are keywords in the artistic and research practice of Louis Henderson, who comes from a family of archeologists. As he recounts in an extensive interview with his American distributor Video Data Bank, both his maternal grandparents were archeologist specialized in North and West African history. Their work took a decidedly critical stance toward the essentially colonial agenda underlying classical archaeology: "In [my grandfather's] mind, that was a political objective, which was to continue as an archaeologist but to do it in the sense that you're not just looting from a country and taking it to museums in Berlin, for example. This was a conscious

69 Louis Henderson, Louis Henderson: An Interview, interview by Abina Manning, Video, 2015, 20'00'', https://www.vdb.org/titles/louis-henderson-interview.

70 Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," in *The Wretched of the Screen*, E-Flux Journal (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 32.

71 Henderson explicitly mentions the importance of Farocki's critical media-archaeological practice to his own work, see Goldsmith, "Louis Henderson with Leo Goldsmith."

72 Ednei de Genaro, Hermano Callou, and Harun Farocki, "Keep the Horizon Open: An Interview with Harun Farocki," *Senses of Cinema*, 2016, https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2016/feature-articles/harun-farocki-interview/.

73 Harun Farocki, "Cross Influence/Soft Montage," in *Harun Farocki: Against What? Against Whom?*, ed. Antje Ehmann and Kodwo Eshun, trans. Cynthia Beatt (London: Koenig Books, 2009), 73.

stance."[74] One way of ensuring that their archeological work would not reinforce the hierarchies between curator – the Caucasian scholar – and the curated culture, to transfer Gerardo Mosquera's term to their archaeological ventures, was by way of pedagogy. Henderson's grandparents trained local scientists and worked exclusively with them on excavation sites.[75] Here, education and collaboration are posited as cornerstones of emancipation from the colonial project of classical archaeology.

Henderson himself repeatedly describes his method of working as archaeological in the sense that he takes pre-existing material as a starting point for thinking about a contemporary political situation and its imbrication with technology and colonialism in his films.[76] Following Gilles Deleuze, who in *Cinema 2. The Time-Image* refers to the recalcitrant landscapes in a series of films by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet as "stratigraphic," Henderson also uses the archaeological term stratigraphy (the analysis of depositional layers to determine the age of archaeological finds) to describe his practice.[77] "For me archaeology is the founding principle behind all my work. [...] This idea of stratigraphy, of layering, is super important for me, as a philosophical concept but also as a formal method."[78] In the roughly fifteen and a half minutes of *All That Is Solid*, poetic layering thus has a visual dimension in the form of the superimposition of various images as well as an epistemological one.

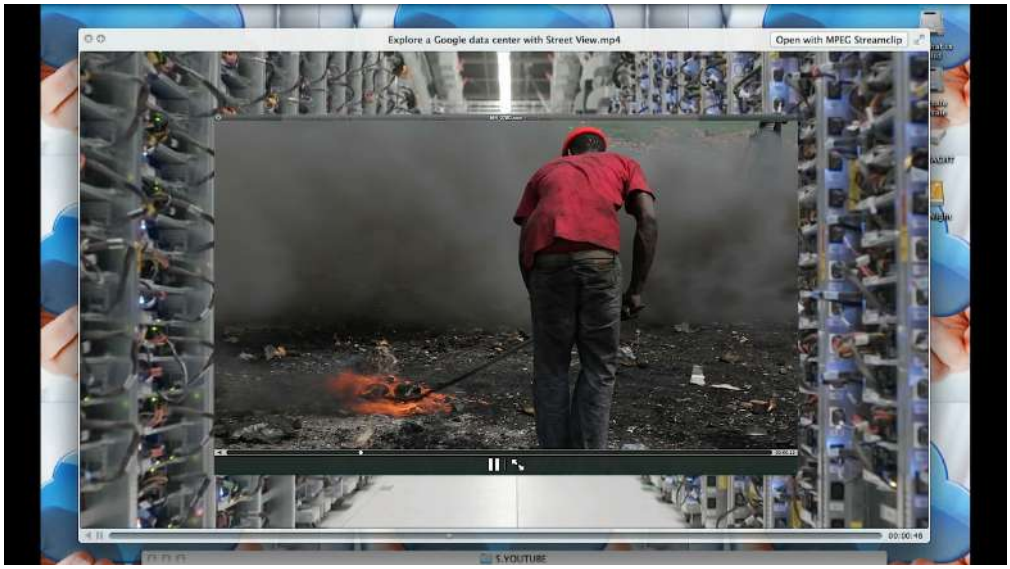
74 Henderson, Louis Henderson: An Interview, 26'25''.

75 Henderson, 23'55' and 25'00''.

76 For example, *Lettres du voyant* (2013), Henderson's second-year school project at the French post-graduate art and audiovisual research center Le Fresnoy and the direct predecessor of *All That Is Solid*, explores the nexus between spirituality, technology and colonialism in Ghana. *Black Code/Code Noir* (2015) traces a continuation of the so-called *Code Noir* (originally a decree written by Louis XIV to regulate slavery in the French colonies, later also the name used to refer to the laws controlling the behavior of African American slaves in the United States) and the digital codes (algorithms) of big data analysis to police – and violently regulate – the lives of African American citizens in contemporary USA. *The Sea Is History* (2016) is based on a poem by St. Lucian poet and Nobel Prize winner Derek Walcott (whose title is featured in *All That Is Solid,* too) and also engages in a critique of European colonial history. Different to most of his other films, the material for *The Sea Is History* was filmed on location during a residency in the Dominican Republic and Haiti, but engaged with "found material" in the sense that Henderson records and appropriates imagery found on site. *Sunstone* (2018), a collaboration with Portuguese artist and filmmaker Filipa César, explores the nexus between optics, technical advances, military power and knowledge by documenting the production and exhibition of Fresnel lenses (typically used in lighthouses and other navigational devices). Using images produced in different technical formats – 16mm analog film, desktop videos, 3D CGI and satellite imagery – the film traces the trajectory of technical advancements in optics and its enmeshment with observation and control. The feature film *Ouvertures* (2019) is a collaboration with the Haitian performance collective "The Living and the Dead Ensemble" and the French producer, author and curator Olivier Marboeuf. The collective rehearses scenes from the play *Monsieur Toussaint* by Edouard Glissant about the last days of François-Dominique Toussaint Louverture. Issues surrounding colonialism and slavery, revolution and trauma, racism and displacement are discussed in reference to the life of this prominent Haitian revolutionary figure.

77 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2. The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 243–45.

78 Henderson, Louis Henderson: An Interview, 28'55'' and 30'20''.



Film still *All That Is Solid* (Louis Henderson, 2014)

In fact, the film offers such an abundance of image and text material appearing on screen simultaneously that this must be read as an implicit invitation to view the film multiple times – making it a short film whose viewing time, paradoxically, is longer than its actual duration. This type of repeated viewing is certainly possible when watching a film in the form of a digital file on a personal computer or online. With a short click of the mouse, we can pause the image; by moving the cursor we can jump back in time and thwart the linear, progressive flow of the film. However, *All That Is Solid*, which is still successfully shown internationally in galleries and at film festivals, is distributed by both Video Data Bank in Chicago and the London distributor LUX, meaning that it is not freely available online. This creates deliberate friction for most people, who must watch the film continuously without being able to influence their viewing situation.

With this spatial metaphor of uncovering what lies beyond the immediate visibility of the top visual layer, one cannot but be reminded of Maya Deren's concept of the vertical image. As mentioned in the section on *Brevity*, Deren suggests that both poetry and poetical film follow a vertical model: "the poetic construct arises from the fact, if you will, that it is a vertical investigation of a situation."[79] Deren distinguishes between films with a narrative logic – a horizontal development – and so-called "vertical films" that explore a moment of great emotional or intellectual intensity, going into depth. In her opinion, these vertical films must necessarily be of a short duration, because it is not possible to sustain this intensity over a longer period of time.

Several indications exist for an affinity between Louis Henderson's short films and the art of poetry. Not only does Henderson reference poems in his films – most prominently "The Sea Is History" by Derek Walcott, which is quoted in *All That Is Solid* and serves as the title of one of Henderson's later films, too – but he also mentions the influence of Friedrich Schlegel's fragmentary short writings and the Romantic poet's influence in producing a theory for a progressive universal poetry. The fragmentary is of interest to Louis Henderson because it forms the way we think; however it is also a form that thinks, to paraphrase Godard once more. Henderson translates Schlegel's fragmentary poetic form of writing into the medium of film to convey the tension that is inherent in the complexity of critical thinking:

79 *Poetry and the Film*, Cinema 16 Symposium (New York, 1953), 20'50'', https://www.ubu.com/media/sound/Anthology/Poetry_and_the_Film/POETRY-AND-THE%20FILM_PT1_CINEMA16_AFA_1953.mp3.

> the fragment holds its own negation within itself. This fragment alludes to a whole that it does not have. It holds what it does not have. For him [Schlegel] that was a sort of critical attitude an artist can take when producing a work. I was trying to relate to that in *All That Is Solid*, trying to think how *All That Is Solid* can show something that might negate its own position. How can it go against itself? That's how the film becomes something that not only speaks about computers and the internet as a philosophical problem to be approached, but also an ethical problem to be approached, but then makes the viewer very aware of the fact that the entire film, obviously, is made with a computer, an Apple computer, because you see the Apple Mac operating system. But then at the same time it's criticizing Steve Jobs. I don't think I get away with anything there.[80]

As mentioned in the section on *Brevity*, I suggest that this circular effect is characteristic for brief forms in general: "[s]mall forms suggest accuracy, exactness: they pretend to be the last word on the subject. On the other hand, brevity and scarcity also ostentatiously signal incompleteness: short forms reduce and fragment and thus activate dimensions of possibility."[81] *All That Is Solid* is not trying to resolve the tension that arises from its own critical stance, that is, the fact that it is implicated in the very destructive capitalist cycle of neo-colonial waste management it ostensibly judges. This, Henderson suggests, is what makes the film not only challenging on a political, but also on an ethical and, I would suggest, on an epistemological level, too.

In the epilogue to her dissertation project on documentary forms in the art world, Hito Steyerl remarks how the essay form today is a contemporary reflection of our postindustrial work environment, marked out by extreme levels of flexibility, mobility and individuality. She, too, postulates that the "form corresponding to this [postindustrial environment] is small and broken, it argues monadically and exemplarily, it pulls together what does not belong together."[82] Much like the fragment holds its own negation, the essay as a "confrontative compilation of various materials, sources and excerpts" does not disguise its own moments of shortage, that is, the fact that it is constantly disturbed, cut off and disrupted.[83] The precarious work environment, particularly associated with the production of short film, finds a formal correspondence in the fragmentary and essayistic approach to filmmaking. Given this highly self-reflexive gesture – the gathering of materials from vastly different sources, the truncated arguments, the unfinished, fragmentary inputs – the new knowledge such a film generates differs in what the audience can learn from a more traditional documentary framework. It makes these films potentially highly educative without being pedagogical.

Henderson's practice belongs to what now falls under the collective term of "video essay," a format that has become popular in short films over the past ten to fifteen years. This type of short filmmaking is the paradigmatic example of a Godardian "forme qui pense," as the generation of new knowledge, and the reflection on how such learning is produced in the first place, is part of the film's structure.

80 Henderson, Louis Henderson: An Interview, 36'20''.

81 Michael Gamper and Ruth Mayer, eds., *Kurz & Knapp: zur Mediengeschichte kleiner Formen vom 17. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2017), 12; translation mine.

82 Hito Steyerl, *Die Farbe der Wahrheit: Dokumentarismen im Kunstfeld* (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2008), 140; translation mine.

83 Steyerl, 140; translation mine.

Johannes Binotto, who leads a research project on videographic practices entitled *Video Essay // Futures of Audiovisual Research and Teaching*, summarizes it as follows: "What all video essays have in common [...] is that they appropriate other people's multimedia material and don't just show it as an illustration, but rather want to turn it into an argument. Video essays, one could say, not only let the sources speak, they also want to demonstrate how they analyze their own content."[84] This type of self-analysis requires a level of abstraction that inherently warrants a distance between the creative entities – we might call them the curators – and the material that is curated. It is a distance that cannot easily be overcome, but one which must be questioned continuously. One of the doctoral students involved in the project, Chloé Galibert-Laîné, uses Robert Kozinets' concept of "netnography" as an ethnographic research practice that exclusively happens online. Galibert-Laîné maintains that the filmmakers who appropriate online content from communities they do not belong to ("be it because of their age, their gender, their ethnicity, or simply their personal preferences in terms of online media practices") engage in a form of "othering."[85] She seeks to trace how the filmmakers' aesthetic strategies reflect on this distance and how they engage their audience in a critical questioning of this process. According to Galibert-Laîné's abstract for her PhD project on "Netnographic Experiments in Contemporary Cinema," she will also include *All That Is Solid* in her research corpus.[86]

Louis Henderson is manifestly aware how issues of agency and hierarchy play into the production of his own films. Possibly following his grandparents' lead, his answer to whether he, as a British Caucasian filmmaker educated in some of the leading art schools in Europe, can make films that take a political stance is yes, by way of collaborative action:

> It's a very interesting conversation to be had, the questions around ideas of legitimacy. Who's legitimate or not to make works about what. It also comes down to the question of the economy of information. There is a certain economy of subjects. Questions of colonialism and otherness have become quite cool, quite interesting. [...] So people start to say: Well, what are you doing with that? Are you just trying to further your career or are you really trying to make a political statement about that? This for me now gets back to the fact that the way forwards within this way of working is to start to figure out real collaborations with people. The time has really come to stop making films about people, but to make films with people.[87]

This conscious effort to reduce the degree of speaking "about" people rather than "speaking nearby" them, in the words of Vietnamese filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha, to reduce the distance between portrayer and portrayed, between archeologist and artifacts, between curator and curated, follows the notion of emancipation proposed by Joseph Jacotot as it is recounted in Jacques Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*.[88] Much like the ignorant schoolmaster, who in her knowledge of ignorance is equal to her

84 Johannes Binotto, "Videoessays: Zeigen als Intervention," *Geschichte der Gegenwart*, no. 14.3.2021 (2021), https://geschichtedergegenwart.ch/videoessays-zeigen-als-intervention/; translation mine.

85 See "Netnographic Cinema," Chloé Galibert-Laîné, accessed October 12, 2021, https://www.chloegalibertlaine.com/netnographic-cinema.

86 See "Netnographic Cinema."

87 Henderson, Louis Henderson: An Interview, 65'00''.

88 Nancy N. Chen, "'Speaking Nearby': A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-Ha," *Visual Anthropology Review* 8, no. 1 (1992): 87.

pupils, the divide between filmmaker and subject is overcome in collaborative action. In her introduction to the English translation of Rancière's book, literary scholar Kristin Ross specifically mentions how this "fable or parable" of axiomatic equality is transferrable to the social order of a capitalist society: "For hasn't the pedagogical fiction of our own time been cast on a global scale? Never will the student catch up with the teacher; never will the 'developing' nations catch up with the enlightened nations. Are even the critiques of 'dependency theory' free of pedagogical rhetoric in their discussions of the Third World?"[89]

Like for *This Action Lies*, there is a compelling ambivalence to Henderson's essay film and the notion of emancipation in the Rancièrian meaning, too, but in this case it is rather connected to the question of the value of work in art, both ethically and economically. The video essayist is a lone worker, one who does highly skilled work (both analytical and technical) to produce an artwork that does not rely on any other form of labor. The production of their technological devices, however, is highly dependent on post-Fordist principles and a large roster of unskilled laborers. The same holds true for the protocols on the movie sets of industrial cinema production. The type of short film that *All That Is Solid* – and other essayistic forms – represents is, in that sense, highly monolithic and authoritarian in its authorship.

This ambivalence, however, might be based on a misleading differentiation between productive and artistic labor in the work of artists instead of reading an artwork as a dialectical site where continuous processes of skilling, deskilling and reskilling occur. I take the notion of *deskilled* and *re-skilled* work from John Roberts, who argues that the deskilling of artistic labor since the advent of Conceptual Art in the 1970s (the move away from artisanal techniques toward intellectual labor) should not be put on equal terms with the deskilling of labor in post-Fordist modes of production, as it concomitantly results in a reskilling in terms of immaterial and conceptual labor. He brilliantly demonstrates how critical agency alongside the notion of authorship can be reintroduced to art by discussing the relationship between productive labor (labor that produces capital in Marx's terminology) and "aesthetic thinking" as a form of labor that is qualitatively different to productive labor, but inserts itself into its negative space. "The use of new technologies in production and the entertainment industry are grounded in their alienated conditions of development and reproduction; in avant-garde art, however, these same technologies are able to establish new modes of interaction and self-identity," he writes.[90] The metaphor of the "hand" is integral to both productive and artistic labor, as

89 Kristin Ross and Jacques Rancière, "Translator's Introduction," in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster. Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), xx.

90 Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form*, 204f.

> [t]he negative totipotentiality [AN: or multifunctionality] of the hand in productive labor opens up the technical division of labor to the emergent totipotentiality of the hand in artistic labor. The general deskilling of labor under capitalism conceals its opposite (emergent totipotentiality) at the point where all 'skill' is suspended. Because labor-power can be withdrawn from the labor process and the value-form threatened from within, labor, in its very alienated and diminished form, it also the negation of value. At the point where the proletariat's refusal of labor is made generalizable the latent totipotentiality of the hand opens up the blocked subjectivity of productive labor on a universally transformative basis. Artistic labor is able to release its subjectivity into this space.[91]

In other words, artistic emancipation is grounded in the intrusion of "artistic subjectivity" into the deskilled, repetitive and target-oriented productive labor (its negative totipotentiality) whose structure inherently holds the key to resistance against the mindless addition of capital (the refusal of labor).

To reformulate a statement by Roberts about the notion of author and authorship in art, we could ask "How is it possible to think in terms of the critique of authority and defend the authority of the artist?" [92] Louis Henderson today addresses this question by fostering collaborative artistic practice and collective authorship. For Henderson, the only way to overcome this problematic ambivalence – between the filmmaker as an authority and their subject, between the curator and the curated – is to invest in finding new forms of collaboration and image making, which includes the toppling of the essentially Western canon of philosophical traditions behind our approaches to both anthropology and cinema.

Henderson is informed by Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's work with Amerindian people to understand his own subject and answer the question of what "anthropologists owe, conceptually, to the people they study."[93] Viveiros de Castro, himself heavily influenced by the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, maintains that the most interesting inputs to anthropological theory come from the narratives and myths of the people – the objects of study – themselves. Instead of applying Western scientific theories to explain the habits of Amerindian culture, Viveiros de Castro instead is guided by Amerindian thought to understand, and question, his own practice. "Anthropology is ready to fully assume its new mission of being the theory/practice of the permanent decolonization of thought," he writes.[94] This epistemological endeavor is, for Viveiros de Castro, inherently political, and it is what Louis Henderson wishes to translate into his filmmaking practice: the question of how the distance between subject and object can be overcome in collaborative action that results in new ways of thinking.[95] There is a conceptual proximity between Gerardo Mosequera's concept of "curated cultures," which lack epistemic power, and Viveiros de Castro's more generalized appeal to overcome the structural hierarchies in the production of scientific knowledge in anthropology.[96]

91 Roberts, 96f.

92 In the original: "How is it possible to think in terms of the critique of the author and defend the authorship of the artist?" Roberts, 113.

93 Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics: For a Post-Structural Anthropology*, trans. Peter Skafish (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2014), 39.

94 Viveiros de Castro, 40.

95 "The question of *Anti-Narcissus* is thus epistemological, meaning political," he writes. Viveiros de Castro, 40.

96 See the discussion in Chapter 2 in the section on *Program*.

Formally divergent to *This Action Lies,* but similar in that both films are interested in exploring questions of knowledge and value, *All That Is Solid* is a reflection on the human, economic, and environmental costs of digital images, including the hierarchies ingrained in their production and consumption. Henderson's short film debunks the myth surrounding the immateriality of the digital. Cloud computing services became established in the early 2010s as networks of internet-based resources (servers and applications) that enable the circulation of digital data between different end devices. Like Kienitz Wilkins, Henderson is very much a filmmaker of the internet generation whose first step in researching a new topic is doing an internet deep search. For Henderson, the internet as a "sort of vast online archive" follows a much more democratic impulse than institutional archives that cannot be accessed easily or equally by everyone.[97] Circulation and access as well as their colonial implications are two major themes of *All That Is Solid*, as Henderson himself says about his film:

> *All That Is Solid* looks into the history of Ghana, the fact that it was a British colony that had been mined for gold. We then focus on these scenes with these young Ghanaian men, who are essentially mining for gold within computers. That led me to this idea that of course we can also be mining for gold within the internet. Mining for gold, it just means capitalism, it just means making capital. That led me to this idea that [...] the corporations that [...] continue to develop cloud computing, this is a form, perhaps, of neo-colonialism that might take place within cyberspace. I tried to make a movement from the mining of gold within the country of Ghana as a colonial project all the way through to the burning of these computers, this contemporary mining for gold [...].[98]

Mining for gold is used as a metonymy for capitalism, whose history is conjoined with the development of colonialism in *All That is Solid*, whose title refers to the famous quote taken from the Communist Manifesto that draws eerie parallels between Marx's eloquent description of the bourgeois era and the metaphorical dimension of the digital cloud. Henderson literally transfers the allegory of "solids melting into air" to this capitalist order of production, whose equally creative and destructive potential manifests itself on all levels of society, to the digital age and the data cloud, the "hard disk in the sky," as Steve Jobs jokingly called it when he presented the iCloud at Apple's Worldwide Developer Conference in 2011.[99] When Marx and Engels maintain that the "bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society" they point to the sociopolitical dimension of the commodity cycle in their historical material conception of history:

> Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air,

97 Henderson, Louis Henderson: An Interview, 33'00''.

98 Henderson, 33'30''.

99 See "CNET News: Steve Jobs Introduces ICloud," June 6, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_C1TZIT-qQ.

> all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.[100]

Marx's attitude toward the thoroughly ingenious achievements of the modern bourgeoisie is as ambivalent as the tension between the liberatory and emancipatory aspirations of cloud computing and its regulatory and resource-heavy downside.[101] The capitalist principle that everything bourgeois society creates must be disassembled, reshaped, replaced again in a constant cycle applies to the cloud as well.

Film still *All That Is Solid* (Louis Henderson, 2014)

The "digital cloud" is more than just a technical infrastructure, it is a metaphor for a social phenomenon that reflects the sociopolitical fantasies of the Global North: "'the cloud' not only condenses a wide multiplicity of network forms and clouds into a single vision that encompasses all networks, it also reflects a universalist world view that tracked closely with American political ideals as they developed through the 1950s on: that the cloud would stand in for a 'free' Internet and liberal civil society," writes media scholar and poet Tung-Hui Hu.[102] Such a universalist view of the world glorifies the idea of free access to information. Not only is cloud computing dependent on an infrastructure consisting of transcontinental and transatlantic fiber optic cables and server farms controlled by private companies and state-owned networks, but also the fact that search algorithms react to the big data gathered about a particular user means that internet knowledge is narcissistic knowledge, to borrow Boris Groys' characterization of online expertise: "The nonselective character of the internet is thus an illusion. Its actual functioning is based on the unstated rules of selection, according to which users select only what they already know or are already familiar with."[103]

100 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Communist Manifesto (Chapter 1)," accessed October 12, 2021, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.htm#007.

101 For a more detailed discussion of this point, see the chapter on Marx in Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London, New York: Verso, 2010).

102 Tung-Hui Hu, *A Prehistory of the Cloud* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), xxi.

103 Boris Groys, "Migration as New Universalism," in *What about Activism?*, ed. Steven Henry Madoff (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2019), 133.

Moreover, the internet as an archive the way Louis Henderson and other contemporary found footage filmmakers use it is not as immaterial and timeless as it might seem on first glance. Digital media, writes Sean Cubitt, are "finite media" too, as there are simply not enough of the precious materials needed to produce the electronic equipment to the degree in which users of the Global North use them to access digital data.[104] Social equality regarding the access to an archive might be more pronounced in an online setting, but the notion of a truly democratic and sustainable reservoir of knowledge residing in the cloud is a fallacy.

Both films in this program are small with regard to what they focus on: a coffee cup, and a desktop, respectively. They both use very little resources, they are homemade and a one-person job in production, but nonetheless highly versatile when it comes to their exhibition contexts. They both feature such a complex network of references and a densely layered interplay between visual content and spoken thoughts that they warrant multiple viewings. *Small is Beautiful* is the title of a widely read non-fiction book by E. F. Schumacher, an economist and statistician who in 1973 argued that modern capitalism is unsustainable both regarding our natural environment and humans' health in general. The book's subtitle, *A Study of Economics as if People Mattered*, points to the human cost of large-scale globalized production: "crime, drug addiction, vandalism, mental breakdown, rebellion, and so forth."[105] Schumacher wrote an emphatic, quixotic manifesto for a smaller and thus more easily manageable production of goods that factors in the limited pool of natural resources and humans being emotionally and socially overwhelmed with the quantity and vastness of global operations. Schumacher's concern is economic and environmental, but also, as the title might suggest, aesthetic. For Schumacher, "the organic, the gentle, the non-violent, the elegant and the beautiful" are connected to a new kind of wisdom, as "there is wisdom in smallness if only on account of the smallness and patchiness of human knowledge, which relies on experiment far more than on understanding."[106] To strive toward smallness and the limited use of resources, then, is also an epistemological endeavor.

Neither *This Action Lies* nor *All That Is Solid* directly references Schumacher's book, but there is a spiritual connection between all three of them in that they connect questions of technological efficiency, standardization and institutionalization and the ensuing issues of normalization and hegemonic forms of knowledge, as I hope to have shown by discussing both films individually.

104 Cubitt, *Finite Media*, 5.

105 Ernst Friedrich Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as If People Mattered* (London: Vintage Books, 1993), 8.

106 Schumacher, 20 and 22.

CHAPTER 4

Foreign Images

Curatorial Statement

Migration is the defining social movement of our time. And the movements that constitute migration are manifold: it refers to the relocation from one place to another; it also signals cultural displacement and the different temporalities that come with it. Migration, in its contemporary iconic dimension, consists in an endless series of visual documents that circulate on web-based networks: between migrants and their families back home, between the media and its consumers, between border patrols and governmental agencies. The images themselves might perform a series of format migrations in the process of their transmission. Last but not least, the movement of migration is also emotional: the harrowing stories and haunting images of refugees can move us. Migration, then, must not simply be addressed thematically, but can also be conceptualized across technologies and institutions.

Randa Maroufi's *Bab Sebta* evokes a complex relationship between stasis and movement, alerting us to the truth that mobility is not accessible to all people equally. Stefan Kruse Jørgensen's *The Migrating Image* is a visual essay tracing the path of migrants through the imagery produced by and about them. Nina Fischer's and Maroan el Sani's *Freedom of Movement* brings motion into the static grand architecture of Rome's EUR district by letting migrants reclaim a space across history. Finally, Mati Diop's *Atlantiques* focuses on the story of Serigne, a young man who wishes to leave Dakar. Rather than telling a story about a dislocation in space, Diop's short film addresses the temporal displacement of the migrant experience.

Despite showing different movements through time and space, the four films in this selection are conceptually linked through their focus on challenging the straightforward equation between representation and reality, between index and meaning. Despite what the genre specifications for these films might claim, within the scope of this compilation all of them should be approached as experimental documentaries.

Bab Sebta
France, Morocco 2019, 19', color, Spanish & Arabic

Director/Script: Randa Maroufi
Cinematography: Luca Coassin
Editing: Ismael Joffroy Chandoutis, Randa Maroufi
Sound: Mohamed Bounouar, Léonore Mercier
Cast: The smugglers of Bab Sebta
Distribution: Shortcuts Distribution, http://shortcuts.pro/bab-sebta/

Bab Sebta is a series of reconstructions of situations observed in Ceuta, a Spanish enclave on Moroccan soil. It is the scene of – more or less legal – cross-border exchanges of all kinds. Thousands of people work there every day.

Film still *Bab Sebta* (Randa Maroufi, 2019)

The Migrating Image
Denmark 2018, 28', color, English

Director/Script/Editing: Stefan Kruse Jørgensen
Cinematography: Images and videos taken from online sources
Distribution: Stefan Kruse Jørgensen, https://stefankruse.dk/;
online at https://vimeo.com/245224472

By following a fictional group of refugees across Europe, the film questions the overproduction of images surrounding real-life tragedies and deaths. Where do all these images of refugees come from? How do they reshape the geography of Europe?

Film still *The Migrating Image* (Stefan Kruse Jørgensen, 2018)

Freedom of Movement
Germany 2018, 30', color, English

Director/Script/Editing: Nina Fischer, Maroan el Sani
Cinematography: Johannes Praus, Maroan el Sani
Distribution: Nina Fischer & Maroan el Sani, https://www.fischerelsani.net/

Freedom of Movement evokes the 1960 Olympic marathon in Rome, when Ethiopian runner Abebe Bikila won the first gold medal of the African continent, running barefoot, and becoming a legend and a symbol of the Africa that was freeing itself from colonialism. Fischer & el Sani recontextualize this story amidst Rome's controversial rationalist architecture, showing a new race with refugees and immigrants staking a claim to their freedom of movement.

Film still *Freedom of Movement* (Nina Fischer, Maroan el Sani, 2018)

Atlantiques
France, Senegal 2009, 15', Wolof

Director/Script/Cinematography: Mati Diop
Editing: Nicolas Milteau
Distribution: Le Fresnoy – Studio national des arts contemporains, distribution@lefresnoy.net, https://www.lefresnoy.net/en

At night, around a fire camp, Serigne, a young man from Dakar, confides his stowaway odyssey to his two friends.

Film still *Atlantiques* (Mati Diop, 2009)

Crossing Borders – In-Betweenness

> It is also because the foreigner –
> the naïf, it will be said,
> he who is not yet informed –
> persists in the curiosity of his gaze,
> displaces his angle of vision,
> reworks the first way of putting together words and
> images, undoes the certainties of place,
> and thereby reawakens the power present in each
> of us to become a foreigner on the map of places
> and paths generally known as reality.[1]

The foreigner – as a traveler, a migrant, a newcomer, a tourist, an illegal alien – serves as a metaphor for the ideal spectator in this quote taken from the introduction of Jacques Rancière's *Short Voyages to the Land of the People*. This collection of short, densely poetic essays is not solely concerned with travelogues in the narrow sense of the genre. Rather, these texts often present quotidian encounters between "travelers" – poets and historians, politicians and characters in films – and ordinary people or moments to illuminate how significance and interpretation are tied directly to an idea of reality derived from the conceptual framework of these voyagers. The experience of foreignness, then, results from moments where this framework is unable to provide the means of making sense of a confrontation between what is known and what is seemingly "other."

If your frame of experience determines what you think, then the question of how and through whom you can experience something new is of great consequence. Rancière's concern with literature, cinema, or artistic activities in general is rooted in this nexus between *politics* and *aesthetics*. *Aesthetics* is not limited to perceiving the formal features of a work of art, but is concerned with how it structures the viewers' relationship to the world they perceive through its prism: "Aesthetics refers to a specific regime for identifying and reflecting on the arts: a mode of articulation between ways of doing and making, their corresponding forms of visibility, and possible ways of thinking about their relationships."[2] The great opportunity that travel offers for the voyager/spectator open to embracing the experience of foreignness is an intervention into the *distribution of the sensible*, a concept referring to the implicit, contingent laws governing rights to participation in a community by establishing how experience can be mediated and knowledge constituted.

Giorgio Agamben considers the refugee to be the "central figure of our political history."[3] The foreigner, the refugee, the migrant, the tourist, the traveler: without a doubt, these terms cannot be used as synonyms, but they are politically charged through the ubiquitous presence of the image material they produce and which we encounter on a daily basis on our social media channels and the domestic and international sections

1 Jacques Rancière, *Short Voyages to the Land of the People* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 3.

2 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 4. Variously translated as the "partition," "division," "sharing," or "distribution of the sensible." As I mainly refer to Gabriel Rockhill's translation entitled *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible* (Bloomsbury 2013 [2004]) of Rancière's original *Le Partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique* (La Fabrique-Éditions, 2000), I will consistently refer to it as "distribution of the sensible," too.

3 Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 21.

of news outlets.[4] This material includes pictures and films about them, but also produced by them: "Migration nowadays is eminently iconic," writes filmmaker and anthropologist Steffen Köhn.[5] In addition, the images themselves are migratory: circulating globally in digital form,[6] and crossing institutional boundaries between the cinema, the museum, a cell phone screen and the international art biennial.[7] Moreover, they are also moving in the affective sense of the word: after all, moving images can deeply move us.[8]

Movies, James N. Kienitz Wilkins' narrator tells us in *This Action Lies*, are "an appearance plus movement." There is therefore, at the most basic level of temporal and spatial movement, a conceptual linkage between film and migration.[9] In her book on post-migrant German cinema, curator and scholar for media culture Nanna Heidenreich contends that films dealing with topics related to migration do not simply depict narratives of and about migration, but constitute a perspective – an angle of vision – of migration itself. She writes that

> [i]f one takes migration seriously as a social and political movement, as a movement that fundamentally reconfigures the political, and if one understands migration not as something to be depicted but as an event, then this also opens up a different perspective for the issue of the relationship between art or cinema and political struggles. This perspective – the perspective of migration – *is already in the picture*. However, it is necessary to perceive it and activate it aesthetically and politically.[10]

My thesis for this chapter is that the short film format itself is representative of the migratory experience. Attributes such as marginalized, fast moving and swiftly circulating, of crossing borders and of strongly heterogeneous aesthetic character and poetic, heteroglossic voice are attached to it (see Chapters 1 and 2). Essence and narration are aligned – the short films are what they unfold.

Although the filmmakers take very different approaches, all four films discussed in detail below activate this migratory perspective. Each of the short films headed under the programmatic title *Foreign Images* are films that do not merely present images, but

4 "The fundamental visualness [Bildhaftigkeit] of social states and processes necessitates the study of the techniques and practices that lead to this visuality of the social – that shape it and make it tangible," Tom Holert writes regarding the reason why the discipline of Visual Culture is a worthwhile area of research. Migration as one of the defining social processes of our era must be addressed via the imagery it produces. Tom Holert, "Kulturwissenschaft/Visual Culture," ed. Klaus Sachs-Hombach (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005), 234; translation mine.

5 Steffen Köhn, *Mediating Mobility: Visual Anthropology in the Age of Migration* (London: Wallflower Press, 2016), 4.

6 On this aspect of migration as circulation, see for example, David Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); T. J Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

7 For an excellent, varied introduction to this aspect, see for example the selection of historical and contemporary essays by prominent scholars, curators and artists in Tanya Leighton, ed., *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader* (London, New York: Tate Publishing, 2008).

8 This is a quality of moving images that Mieke Bal considers as a defining feature of "migratory aesthetics." See Mieke Bal, "Migratory Aesthetics: Double Movement," *EXIT*, 2008; Mieke Bal, "Documenting What? Auto-Theory and Migratory Aesthetics," in *A Companion to Contemporary Documentary Film*, ed. Alexandra Juhasz and Alisa Lebow (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 124–44.

9 A series of excellent edited volumes and monographs were published in the wake of the 2015 migration "crisis" from media studies and visual anthropology. See, for example, Köhn, *Mediating Mobility*; Nilgün Bayraktar, *Mobility and Migration in Film and Moving-Image Art: Cinema beyond Europe* (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017); Marina Gržinić, Aneta Stojnić, and Miško Šuvaković, eds., *Regimes of Invisibility in Contemporary Art, Theory and Culture: Image, Racialization, History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Ömer Alkin, *Die visuelle Kultur der Migration: Geschichte, Ästhetik und Polyzentrierung des Migrationskinos* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2019). Earlier publications include Alan Grossman and Áine O'Brien, eds., *Projecting Migration: Transcultural Documentary Practice* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007); Daniela Berghahn and Claudia Sternberg, *European Cinema in Motion Migrant and Diasporic Film in Contemporary Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Bettina Dennerlein and Elke Frietsch, *Identitäten in Bewegung: Migration im Film* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2011).

10 Nanna Heidenreich, *V/Erkennungsdienste, das Kino und die Perspektive der Migration* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2015), 322; emphasis in the original, translation mine.

curiously "persist in their own gaze," to reformulate Rancière's quote from above, in that the filmmakers all demonstrate a desire to reflect on the origins, the status and the trajectories of the images they present to us. As will become apparent in the discussions of the individual films, at times it seems impossible to make sense of these images. They consist of different voices and cross real, imaginary and institutional borders. They remain foreign, constantly on the move, persistently escaping fixed meaning in their constant flux. In the etymological sense of the Latin word, they are "incomprehensible": they are that which cannot to be seized. Films, in this perspective, become migratory themselves.[11]

In the previous chapters, I have described the poetics of the short film format as an enquiry into relations of dominance, subordination and resistance to hegemonic norms on various levels (of production, distribution, analysis). "The migrant," T. J. Demos maintains, "names the potentiality of becoming other, of opacity as a politics of imperceptibility, and defines an increasingly occupied site of resistance, autonomy, and politicization."[12] The "migrant image," the art historian writes in his eponymous book, is one that is "globally circulating and politically affective."[13] Considered as a minor form of cinema, the political potential of the short film lies in its refusal to be categorized into established historical, theoretical or generic frameworks and in its paradoxical status as being both invisible (as a niche form within the cinematic universe) and an everywhere occurrence on our screens (globally circulating, often free of charge). For the discussion of the four films in this chapter, I want to suggest a linkage between the concerns of my notion of a poetics of the short film format (as outlined in the first part of this study) and migration.

On the level of content or subject, all four films portray migrants. But what are the other traces of dislocation they directly or indirectly address? The fraught status of documentary practices in a world of excessive image circulation is a central concern for all of them. They expertly navigate the border between fiction and documentary. Migrating between the two modes means less crossing from one side to the other than outright refusing to pick a side in the first place. For Rancière, the documentary is a "genre of fiction," as "the real difference between them isn't that the documentary sides with the real against the inventions of fiction, it's just that the documentary instead of treating the real as an effect to be produced, treats it as a fact to be understood."[14] In other words, while a fiction film is constrained by having to build a coherent diegetic world, the documentary is in a privileged position insofar as it can take recourse to any type of material to build an argument, "a fact to be understood," in Rancière's words. In his essay on the mutual interference of documentary and avant-garde practices in their constitutive years in the 1920 and early 1930, Bill Nichols also suggests that the documentary mode has its origins less in photography's indexical quality, but rather in the "explosive power of avant-garde practices [which] subverts and shatters the coherence, stability, and naturalness of the dominant world of realist representation."[15] Documentary as a discrete rhetorical genre is not conceivable without arranging, rearranging and rejecting meaningful elements into a particular narrative.

11 Mieke Bal, in reference to the link between video as a highly versatile consumer format and migration as a form of (social) movement, speaks of a "migratory aesthetics." For Bal, the migratory aesthetics of contemporary art – not reduced to mediums of moving images such as video and film – refer to the perceptible traces (visible, tactile, sensual) of migration in contemporary culture, which she discusses alongside the concepts of movement, time, memory and contact. See Mieke Bal, "Lost in Space, Lost in the Library," in *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices Between Migration and Art-Making*, ed. Sam Durrant and Catherine M. Lord (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2007), 23–36; Bal, "Migratory Aesthetics: Double Movement," 151ff.

12 Demos, *The Migrant Image*, 246.

13 Demos, 245.

14 Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables*, trans. Emiliano Battista (London; New York: Berg, 2006), 157 and 158.

15 Bill Nichols, "Documentary Film and the Modernist Avant-Garde," *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 4 (2001): 592.

Ostensibly belonging to different cinematic genres (according to the catalogues of film festivals where they have been screened), the linkage between *Bab Sebta* (experimental), *The Migrating Image* (documentary), *Freedom of Movement* (experimental, artists' film) and *Atlantiques* (documentary, but the filmmaker prefers the designation "epic tale" [récit épique]) consists in their treatment of images as both real and man-made, as maps to the world as well as mirror-images of that same world.

For Hito Steyerl, not only the status of the documentary image itself, but also the status of theory about documentary images is uncertain or "blurry."[16] For her, the relevance of documentary images lies exactly in these blurry zones, in a meandering form between truth and doubt. She explains that, taken to their respective extremes, both the position of the naïve "realists" who believe that there is such a concept as an objective reality to be caught in a technical image, as well as the position of the constructivists who argue that reality is a construction dictated by the powerful and, potentially, inherently relative, are dangerous. Doubt about images' relation to truth and reality is essential, because it means these concepts remain flexible. "This doubt," she writes, "is not a flaw that must be concealed shamefacedly, but rather the main characteristic of contemporary documentary images. In our era of general uncertainty, we can say one thing about them with certainty: we always already doubt whether they are true."[17]

Destabilizing the ontological status of documentary images as representations of reality and reinforcing the representative power of the fictitious image in addressing contemporary political issues is an undertaking all four films in this selection subscribe to. Indeed, most critics who write about migration and migratory aesthetics in moving images cannot help but draw a connection between a skepticism over the status of documentary images and the excessive circulation and constant availability of images that accompany the contemporary migrant crisis.[18] For instance, the subtitle of Demos' previously mentioned collection of case studies on moving image artists exploring and challenging the militarization of borders, the uneven distribution of wealth, mobilization and access to infrastructures in our contemporary globalized world reads *The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis*. Demos' examples subvert traditional documentary practices with poetic approaches, creating "sites where the unknowable and the potential coincide," thus also blending documentary images with a fictional approach to create alternatives to the representational status quo.[19]

I will treat all four shorts in this selection as experimental documentaries. The conceptual parallels between migration and the documentary and experimental approaches to filmmaking are inevitable through their intimate connection to the notion of representation. A notion that is disturbed either by geographical and cultural displacement (migration) or "uncertainty," to use Steyerl's term here, about our understanding of documentary reality. In her monograph on what she terms "intercultural cinema," meaning cinema by filmmakers who are caught between a native minor culture and a (politically as well as cinematically) dominant Western culture, Laura U. Marks asserts that "[q]uestions of form cannot be separated from the political conditions in which these works were produced."[20] It is impossible to isolate aesthetic from political concerns in

16 Hito Steyerl, *Die Farbe der Wahrheit: Dokumentarismen im Kunstfeld* (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2008), 8 translation mine. In the German original of "Die dokumentarische Unschärferelation. Was ist Dokumentarismus?", Steyerl speaks of "Unschärfe" [blurriness]. While parts of this text – the first chapter of Steyerl's dissertation monograph *Die Farbe der Wahrheit* – are translated as the essay "Documentary Uncertainty," I will give my own rendition of the original text, as some parts of the chapter I quote from are not translated in the English essay.

17 Steyerl, 9 translation mine.

18 In curatorial studies and art history, this is often referred to as the "documentary turn" in contemporary art of the past two decades.

19 Demos, *The Migrant Image*, 29.

20 Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 10.

migrants' cinema because through experimental approaches to filmmaking, these directors negotiate the experience of "living between two or more cultural regimes of knowledge [...]. The violent disjunctions in space and time that characterize diasporan experience – the physical effects of exile, immigration, and displacement – also, I will argue, cause a disjunction in notions of truth."[21] Marks takes a phenomenological approach in her book that explores the tactile dimensions of visual images – what she calls "haptic visuality" – and their epistemological significance, positing that difficult experimental works appeal to bodily senses for the construction of meaning.

A critique of ocularcentrism as an essentially Western ideology of the objectification of knowledge is part of the experimental structure of many intercultural films, evoking the presumption that a large part of migratory experience and knowledge is not visualizable.[22] Not all of the filmmakers I will discuss in this chapter have a migration background.[23] Nonetheless, I believe Marks' observation holds true not only for intercultural cinema (which, as she rightly observes, is often brief owing to the difficult circumstances of production), but also for the short film format per se when conceptualized as minor cinema and as a format that easily crosses the historically much more rigid institutional boundary between cinema and art.[24] If this is the case, then the political legacy of the format and its aesthetics cannot be considered separately.

Such questions of what can be made visible and, according to an ocularcentric perspective, therefore knowable, not only play into the discourses surrounding experimental configurations, but also are true for the documentary status of the image, too. The political emphasis of organizing knowledge is relevant for all films in this chapter, but most conspicuously so for *The Migrating Image* and *Freedom of Movement*, which follow what could be called a "curatorial mode of culture" in the words of David Joselit, who acknowledges the current dominance of curatorial practices to be a result of "globalization – as evidenced by the worldwide fracturing of nation-states, the proliferation of ethnic conflicts, massive forced and voluntary migrations across the globe, and the rise of thriving diaspora cultures everywhere."[25] For Joselit, as I have outlined in the previous chapter on knowledge economies in *For What It's Worth*, it is the ethical duty of intellectuals – critics, curators – to authorize "politically engaged historical narratives" while de-authorizing toxic forms of knowledge and institutional structures.[26]

One of the strategies Joselit proposes is indeed linked to the curatorial mode of culture. Instead of fastening an ahistorical, stable meaning to works of art, Joselit suggests that we must engage in a discussion about what they can mean within a specific exhibition context, in "historically specific moments of the work's 'life'."[27] As an example, Joselit considers how the constellation of Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* from 1907 and African American female artist Faith Ringgold's *American People Series #20: Die* from 1967 (which explicitly references another painting by Picasso, namely *Guernica* from 1937) were controversially exhibited in New York's Museum of Modern Art. He concludes that

21 Marks, 1.

22 Marks, 57 and 133.

23 Randa Maroufi was born in Morocco, but today lives and works in France. Mati Diop was born in France to a Senegalese father (she is the niece of acclaimed Senegalese director Djibril Diop Mambéty) and a French mother.

24 Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 17.

25 David Joselit, *Heritage and Debt: Art in Globalization* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020), 163.

26 David Joselit, "Virus as Metaphor," *October* 172 (May 2020): 162.

27 Joselit, 162.

> [t]he choice to hang these two paintings together was certainly anachronistic, and perhaps it was condescending, but it led to a lot of salutary debate because it straightforwardly and explicitly sought to authorize Faith Ringgold's work, as that of an African-American woman, as an icon equal to Picasso's.[28]

For short films, the juxtaposition of different works in ever new constellations is part of their exhibition format. Whether "curated" or "programmed," the relevance and effect of a short work depends as much on its own quality as it does on the selection and combination of other works.

Boris Groys draws a connection between curatorial strategies and the figure of the migrant, too. For him, "relevant curatorial practices reproduce contemporary processes of migration: here the images begin to migrate across the lines of cultural divisions and emerge in places where they were unexpected and maybe even unwanted."[29] The migrant introduces images, perspectives, knowledges that might surpass the current understanding of those she encounters. Because, Groys asks, "why should we see only what we already want to see?"[30] The imposition of foreignness, the moment of doubt regarding the status and meaning of an image, is why migration is always, and curation is at its best, politically relevant.

Bab Sebta

There is a foreignness attached to the experience of watching Randa Maroufi's *Bab Sebta*. Two camera perspectives, bird's eye and eye level long shots, capture seemingly endless queues of cars and people waiting.[31] Children play, some men sleep on the floor, women pack and rearrange consumer goods of all types into colorful bundles which they fasten to their backs. The space in which these people are located consists of grey walls and a grey floor. The white markings on the floor, reminiscent of Lars von Trier's cartographic scenery in *Dogville* (2003), and the voice-over comments explain to the viewer that the film takes place in the border zone between Morocco and Spain. "Bab" is the Arabic word for "door," "Sebta" the Arabic name of the Spanish enclave Ceuta, located on Moroccan soil and bordering the Mediterranean Sea. The literal translation of *Bab Sebta*, then, is "door to Ceuta." We tend to think of the passing from one territory to the other as the crossing of borderlines, but what Maroufi's film visualizes is that the idea of a clear-cut demarcation between one state and the other is merely a cultural fantasy, one that only works for tourist snapshots taken at the equator (another such imaginary line) or within the European Schengen area (where borders no longer exist for European citizens).[32] Rather than lines, borders have turned into zones, "border*lands*, large transitory spaces in which particular places are transformed into provisionary waiting zones," Steffen Köhn writes.[33] A heavily regulated space, borders

28 Joselit, 162.

29 Boris Groys, "Migration as New Universalism," in *What about Activism?*, ed. Steven Henry Madoff (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2019), 135f.

30 Groys, 135.

31 I variously use terms such as border crossers, migrants, travelers to write about the protagonists of the film. None of the designations fit all of them, but instead of consistently choosing a neutral expression, these different names are also meant to highlight the unstable semantic position of these protagonists. T. J. Demos uses the term "mobile lives," however with a much more decided focus on the politically and economically dispossessed aspect of such existences (Demos, *The Migrant Image*, 245.). The people portrayed in *Bab Sebta* come from highly diverse backgrounds and while the political facet is certainly important, I would argue it is too reductive given the complex lives of the protagonists to limit the analysis to merely the "problematic" aspects of border crossings.

32 For details of the shifts in security, migration, and trade policies, see for example Bayraktar, *Mobility and Migration*, 3f.

33 Köhn, *Mediating Mobility*, 96; emphasis in the original.

are no longer simply crossed, but traversed. As is the case in any border area, filming and photographing is not allowed. This information is written out on the floor: "PROHIBIDO HACER FOTOS O GRABAR VIDEO." It must by now be evident for the viewer that this cannot be the actual Ceuta border, but that this is a re-enactment of the daily routines of people who legally (albeit often carrying illegal contraband) cross the frontier into the European economic zone.

It is hard to express in words what exactly provokes the sense that this is a foreign, a surreal space, apart from the fact that the maps on the floor and the arrangement of the people is artificial. Certainly, the heterotopian qualities of borders accentuate the sense of unease one feels when watching these images. In his study on the works of filmmakers with a migrant background, whose modes of production, cinematic styles and modes of distribution are "accented" compared to the baseline established by the commercial film industry, Hamid Naficy calls borders "portal places" and notes how they regularly feature as a significant space in journey narratives.[34] In the case of *Bab Sebta*, there is an uncanniness to the visual depiction of this portal whose origin only the highly trained, analytical eye will be able identify. The bird's eye shots, taken at a height of seven meters from the ground, a perspective which Maroufi herself labels as a "zenith point of view," imply a detached, analytical gaze in the service of monitoring and regulating anonymous, faceless people's movements across borders.[35] The long shots, on the level of the protagonists taken from a distance of two meters away, convey the impression of a more involved, therefore also more human(e), view on individual people. The camera seems to record these frontier commuters in a steadfast, smooth and slow motion; not once does it pause and remain anchored to a specific spot. While the crossers are caught in endless queues, waiting for hours for the line to move on, the camera has the freedom to move on relentlessly. Or does it?

The artificiality of *Bab Sebta*'s images, and the unique genius of the film, is tied to the camera's actual immobility and the fact that all movement is added in post-production via digital compositing. Maroufi regularly explains the process in interviews and Q&A sessions after screenings, but the fact that the movement in the film is generated not by changing the physical position of the camera, but by manipulating the images with editing software, is never mentioned in the paratexts accompanying the film. Before engaging in a conversation with the director, the audience usually does not know about this technical feature of the film. On the surface, the viewers are presented with one continuous long take – a mode of recording which is far more common in short films than in features for organizational reasons.

Let us remember that in *This Action Lies*, James N. Kienitz Wilkins created the illusion of different camera positions by manipulating the source of light on the cup of coffee he placed on a pedestal. In *Bab Sebta*, Randa Maroufi filmed various constellations of people in a large industrial hall – actually a former mortadella factory located approximately 1.5 hours outside of Ceuta – in the same technical setup and combined these *tableaux* shots in post-production, simulating a movement of the camera through compositing and virtual camera movement added in post-production. The lighting situation stays the same throughout the film and the depth perception is slightly off whenever the transition from one shot to the next involves an overlap of objects and people. This invests the film with an uncanniness that prompts the viewer to look even closer, to try to see beyond what is readily visible at the surface.

34 Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 238.

35 Randa Maroufi, Q&A after screening of Bab Septa as part of the conference Migrant Belongings 2021, YouTube, April 21, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k6dANUL7UR0.

The idea for *Bab Sebta* was created during a stay at the Trankat Art Residency in Tetouan, located an hour south of Ceuta. Maroufi used the three weeks of the residency to go back and forth between Morocco and Ceuta by foot and by car, observing the people and establishing relationships with some of the women. In an interview, she summarizes her impression of Ceuta as a territory where "[t]here is a loss of reference points, a madness of space. My wish is to reinscribe [in a filmic medium] the particular tension felt on this small territory that separates Africa from Europe."[36] This madness of space is evoked through the manipulation of space and movement, an option only the filmic representation, but not the filmic subjects themselves can use. The clash between the protagonists' immobility – waiting for the customs inspectors to let them cross the border – and the camera's – our perspective's – fake movement is deeply unsettling.

Film still *Bab Sebta* (Randa Maroufi, 2019)

I have referred to the scenes the director filmed with her protagonists as *tableaux*. The distinguishing feature of this style, originally associated with the arts of theater and painting, is its aesthetics of space rather than time: instead of the narrative unfolding within a scene over time, what carries meaning is the visual composition of the image, shot from one fixed perspective.[37] In all of Maroufi's works (short film, photography, and installation) to date, particular spaces or territories are the starting point for an investigation of socio-political concerns that unfold within that particular location. In *La grande Safae* (2014), a film inspired by the director's family home, the house of a Moroccan family serves as the microcosm to explore questions of identity. The short film portrays the domestic servant known as "the great Safae," a transvestite whose real sex remained unknown to his/her employers.

In *Le park* (2015) a public park in Casablanca provides more scenery for a narrative; this urban, abandoned amusement park, is an active agent in enabling the encounters between the youths who gather there in groups. With a Steadicam on his shoulders,

36 Randa Maroufi, Entretien at FID Marseille, interview by Fabienne Morris, 2019, https://www.randamaroufi.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Bab_Sebta-R-Maroufi050619.pdf; translation mine.

37 For the protagonists of *Bab Sebta*, waiting for hours on end stuck in the same location, time seems indeed suspended from their lives. In her film, Maroufi conceptually collapses Henri Bergson's well-known distinction between *time* [*temps*] and *duration* [*durée*]. The French philosopher famously postulated that humans' perception of time is twofold: On the one hand, *time* refers to the entity that can be objectively measured (that is, counted) through the intermediary of movement in space: it is an artificial addition of homogenous states lodged in separate positions in space. Movement, as a trajectory from one physical point to another over the course of a specific interval, is then a category of both time and space. *Duration*, on the other hand, refers to a subjective experience of a continuum of past, present, and future: it is an intensity rather than an entity. "[S]trictly speaking," Bergson maintains, "[duration] is not a quantity, and as soon as we try to measure it, we unwittingly replace it by space." Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will. An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness.*, trans. F. L. Pogson (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1950), 106.

cameraman Luca Coassin raced through the scenes with different sets of characters, who, motionless themselves, seem to be frozen in time. The speed of the framerate in the final version is heavily reduced, turning 30 seconds of filmed footage into 3 minutes of film.[38] The scenes' slow pace allows the viewer to pay attention to details in the pictures, pointing out how we often tend to narrativize essentially motionless snapshots into an arch of action that it not given in the images themselves. For Maroufi, the slowness of the film is a way of critiquing the often superficial treatment and the narrativizing of images on social media that can now even be used as evidence in legal actions.[39]

In *Stand-by Office* (2017) Maroufi turns the titular office environment into a character through which our perception of that particular dominant social space is shaped. Her latest work, *Barbès – Les intruses* (2019), places an all-female cast in metropolitan scenes usually dominated by men, thereby subtly subverting the viewers' expectations of how public spaces are constituted.

What is at stake if the movement of migrants is halted in *Bab Sebta*, that is, if the bodies themselves remain immobile, but the camera feigns movement through the manipulation of a fixed perspective into a meandering one? In interviews, the director herself calls her film "an artistic experimentation that questions the limit of representation."[40] The focus lies not in the depiction of a real space or the construction of a narrative, but on the habitual gestures – often repetitive – that determine the travelers' everyday existence. This repetitive, performative and procedural dimension of movements across borders is also remarked upon by Camilla Fojas when she proposes her concept of "borderveillance," writing that "[e]ach time a checkpoint or port of entry is traversed, travelers perform the same ritualized security practices, exposing their bodies and possessions to review and responding to similar questions about their person."[41] These border crossers are not migrants in the common sense of the word – they do not look for a better life elsewhere permanently, but continually go back and forth between territories to make a living in a globalized capitalist setting. Antithetical to the fetish for productivity in capitalist societies (where time equals money), these border crossers and smugglers are caught waiting inside this spatial oddity for most of their day.[42] In the director's statement, Maroufi describes her project as follows:

> This geographical setting gives rise to a particular experience of time: a kind of cyclical route, seemingly without end, back and forth between the edges of Moroccan territory and the so-called khzayenes (huge border warehouses/commodities shops) of Ceuta. The dynamics of movement, the aesthetics of the passing through, the characteristic situations of waiting and the redundancy of gestures struck me from the start. It is this experience of observation from a distance that lies at the origin of the project.[43]

38 "WePresent | Randa Maroufi's Slow-Moving Films Are More than Meets the Eye," accessed October 12, 2021.

39 Loïc Le Gall, "Randa Maroufi, l'atelier itinérant," *Bruise Magazine*, January 4, 2018, https://www.randamaroufi.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Bruise-Magazine.pdf.

40 Randa Maroufi, Interview at Glasgow Short Film Festival, interview by Heather Bradshaw, August 19, 2020, https://glasgowshort.org/latest/community/interview-randa-maroufi-director-of-bab-sebta.

41 Camilla Fojas, *Border Optics: Surveillance Cultures on the US-Mexico Frontier* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), 15.

42 On the connection between the imposition of industrial time discipline and capitalism, see E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism," *Past & Present*, no. 38 (1967): 56–97. On the entanglements between time management, migration and late capitalism, see Pauline Gardiner Barber and Winnie Lem, eds., *Migration, Temporality, and Capitalism: Entangled Mobilities across Global Spaces* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

43 Randa Maroufi, "Bab Sebta Press Kit" (Shortcuts Distribution, 2019), http://shortcuts.pro/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Bab-Sebta-Press-Kit-2019-VA-.pdf.

Our sense of time and space, distance and direction are overturned in the fake movements of *Bab Sebta*, which adds to the uncanny experience of the film. *Bab Sebta*, in this regard, refuses to make "sens," which in French has a triple meaning of "sense" denoting both sensory faculties as well as critical judgment, but also means "direction" or "orientation."[44]

"Migration," Mieke Bal writes, "is also the experience of time – as multiple, heterogeneous. The time of haste and waiting, the time of movement and stagnation; [...] The different aspects of temporality are an important site where the aesthetic and the migratory intersect: heterogeneous time, slowing down, the past cut off from the present, and the need for active acts of looking in actuality."[45] In *Bab Sebta*, Maroufi visualizes the experience of a migrant temporality within the images of the film themselves, requiring her audience to "actively look" and question the reality of the movement within them.

It is first and foremost on the visual – the looking – level that a sense of "documentary uncertainty" emerges, but the film's audio track reinforces doubts about the status of the account we are witnessing: who exactly is speaking to us in this film? Is it a witness' first-person report, or a fictitious narrative of what the filmmaker imagines the everyday routines of customs officials and smugglers to be? The voice-over commentaries, both in Spanish and Arabic, cannot be identified. In the case of the female Spanish voice, not even her "side" of the border can be conclusively determined – is she a customs officer or a smuggler? The first impression, given that she speaks a distinctively Castilian Spanish, is that she works for the Spanish government. In the first part of the film, she explains the basic functioning of this place, stating matter-of-factly that the Ceuta border "is known for smuggling. Thousands of people work here every day."

Film still *Bab Sebta* (Randa Maroufi, 2019)

The Spanish voice knows about numbers and statistics, not about personal destinies and experiences. For this reason, the "zenith point of view" at the beginning of the film is accompanied by the Spanish voice, while the frontal shots are associated with the

44 Jacques Rancière has repeatedly commented on the concurrence of sensual experience and interpretation, see for example Jacques Rancière and Peter Engelmann, *Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge, Medford: Polity Press, 2019), 65f.; Rancière, *Film Fables*, 117f.

45 Bal, "Migratory Aesthetics: Double Movement," 156.

personal stories of the smugglers in Arabic. "Documentary records often serve the interests of the state – to identify, to recognize, to know, to control," writes Ursula Biemann. "Accordingly, photography, positioned within ever-new and expanding surveillance systems, operates as judicial and forensic evidence."[46] We are given cold facts about the economic part of the border traffic: a majority of the trafficked goods originates in China, making the turnover of an estimated 1500 million Euros per year, "the equivalent of Spain's exports to Australia." However, to really understand the system, the Spanish voice remarks shortly before the perspective changes from zenith to frontal, "we have to go to the bottom."

With the change of perspective comes a change of language: different Arabic voices, both male and female, recount moments from their days. Maroufi wrote these testimonies, which are read by members of her family, based on an interview between a customs officer and a smuggler she found on YouTube and the stories of her own relatives who worked at the border in Melilla, another Spanish enclave on Moroccan soil.[47] Now we learn about waiting times, specific goods that are carried, the treatment of the smugglers by the Guardia Civil, the physical dangers of smuggling. Not all the statements make immediate sense to the viewer, because it is unclear who and what they are referring to exactly; the individual narratives are disjointed, they begin in medias res and end as abruptly as they begin.

In the last four minutes of the film, the perspective changes back to zenith. While the first statement is still in Arabic, spoken by a customs' officer like Maroufi's father was (to whom the film is dedicated in the credits), the last commentaries are once again spoken by the Spanish female voice. Only now it is unclear whether she really works for the border control or is a smuggler herself: "Once I was checked here," she says, while the camera seems to go higher and higher, exposing a cartographic view of the whole artificial border area. "They stopped me to know what I was drawing." And then the same voice replies in Arabic: "What do you want me to tell you?"

The film itself will not resolve these inconsistencies regarding the identities of the voice-over narrators. In question-and-answer sessions following the film's presentations at festivals and in interviews, Maroufi explains that she closely worked with two women smugglers she met at the border, who functioned as recruiting and casting directors, as intermediaries between the film crew and the cast. All the people we can see in the film are actual smugglers who work at the border of Ceuta, who wear their own clothes and handle the products they move on a daily basis. In this sense, these are documentary images, but this fact is by no means evident from the visual material. Rather, it has to be explained to the audience. In the context of my work as a festival curator, I came to call such films "catalogue films," because the paratextual information – gleaned from catalogue texts or Q&A sessions – adds to the complexity and also the enjoyment of the film itself.

Maroufi works with these smugglers and not simply "about" them, producing in a documentary mode of "a heterogeneous first-person-plural, where tasks are divided but collaboration replaces objectification."[48] Just as the border zone is a liminal space, the structure of *Bab Sebta* itself creates the ambiguous in-between-state characteristic of liminality.[49] As the first work in a selection of films concerned with the experience

46 Ursula Biemann, "Videogeographies," in *A Companion to Contemporary Documentary Film*, ed. Alexandra Juhasz and Alisa Lebow (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 96.

47 Maroufi, Q&A Bab Septa.

48 Bal, "Documenting What? Auto-Theory and Migratory Aesthetics," 131. See also the comments on collaboration in the discussion of Louis Henderson's *All That Is Solid* in Chapter 3.

49 See Victor W. Turner, "Liminality and Communitas," in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 94–113.

of migration, Randa Maroufi's film sets the tone: it alerts the audience to the complexity of the situation and the contended status of the documentary image when it comes to visualizing a social mass phenomenon.

The Migrating Image

Following Maroufi's heterogeneous and highly artificial film, Stefan Kruse Jørgensen's *The Migrating Image* is applied theory, so to speak; a video essay that investigates the images that make up our collective imagination of "migration," the overall thematic link of this chapter. The film opens with a quote by philosopher Vilém Flusser from his *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*: "Human beings forget they created the images in order to orientate themselves in the world. Since they are no longer able to decode them, their lives become a function of their own images: Imagination has turned into hallucination."[50] Imagination, for Flusser, is the human ability to turn the abstraction of the image (as a two-dimensional surface that represents a scene that exists in four-dimensional space and in time) into "connotative (ambiguous) complexes of symbols" that can be decoded.[51] For Flusser, images ideally have the function of a map: they make present and, via decoding of the image itself, comprehensible what is not immediately accessible. However, he warns of the perils of treating technical images as objective "screens" or "windows" rather than as symbols to be decoded.[52] If viewers cease to understand images as abstract concepts and take them as a representation of an external reality (what Flusser calls "idolatry"), a circular interaction between image, viewer, and reality emerges, in that our understanding of reality becomes a function of the image itself.[53] Flusser's quote at the beginning of *The Migrating Image* is programmatic for all four films in this selection, as it points out the symbolic status of images and problematizes their authority as guides to a different, maybe even foreign reality. The uncertainty about the status of the images always remains.

The footage for *The Migrating Image* was exclusively found online: on various social media channels, the official websites of Frontex (the European border and coast guard agency) and Copernicus (the European Union's earth observation program), on stock image sites, websites of news agencies, or on governmental and private YouTube channels.[54] Not only the images themselves need to be decoded, but the ways they have been researched and found must as well. In the previous chapter, I have discredited the glorified myth of free access to information as a hoax in reference to Louis Henderson's *All That Is Solid*, which exposes the heavy material dimension of infrastructures for the circulation of digital content.[55] With its focus on (obstructed) mobility on the level of subject, Kruse Jørgensen's found-online-footage film debunks the myth of a neutral internet without regulations regarding access to information access on a systematic

50 Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 10.

51 Flusser, 8.

52 Flusser, 10 and 15. Flusser makes a clear distinction between technical and man-made (traditional) images, for which, according to him, the symbolic dimension is more readily apparent because of the human element in the production (see 15f.).

53 In this aspect, Flusser's principle does not correspond to Jean Baudrillard's notion of the "simulacra," at least in its most pronounced or "pure" form, for which the distinction between original and copy, or between reality and image, is meaningless, as it has "no relation to any reality whatsoever […]." Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 6.

54 In contrast to Louis Henderson's highly artistic use of appropriated online footage in *All That Is Solid*, all sources for this film are listed in the credit sequence, emphasizing the analytical and educational framework in which *The Migrating Image* sets itself. Kruse Jørgensen says that he "claim[s] the right to take the footage out of its context and analytically talk about it and try to create a language around how we consume media." Stefan Kruse Jørgensen, Interview at Go Short, Nijmegen, YouTube, May 27, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uBtkYE1IKPM.

55 The questions raised by the different approaches to found online footage between *All That Is Solid* and *The Migrating Image* would benefit from a more detailed direct comparison than I can provide here. That the former uses material that is publicly accessible on the internet, but is subsequently not freely available online and also does not credit its sources, while the latter can be accessed on the filmmaker's Vimeo channel and credits is sources is discussed in the individual analyses of the films, but not in relation to each other.

level, too. It does so by carefully unearthing as many different visual aspects of the migration journey as possible through diligent research on freely accessible platforms.

It is perhaps not surprising to learn that Kruse Jørgensen has a background in design rather than film; indeed, *The Migrating Image* marks his debut as a filmmaker. He received a Master's Degree in Visual Culture & Identity from the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts School of Design, a program that fosters research into the visual conditions of socio-political developments.[56] For a first-time filmmaker like Kruse Jørgensen, the short film format offers the freedom of experimentation and the compact, manageable work process he is equipped to deal with at this stage in his professional development.[57] He is, at this moment, still more a researcher and compiler of (moving) pictures than a filmmaker who produces his own images. The authority behind this visual journey in *The Migrating Image* – the authority to show how migration is visually constituted in the first place – does not reside within the individual images and film scenes themselves. It is instead an effect of the research, the selection, and the combination of this material.

In *The Migrating Image*, this authority is personified through an unnamed male voice-over commentator who could, given the young voice and its slightly Nordic accent in English pronunciation, easily be taken for the director's own voice by the audience. While straightforwardly equating a voice-over with the director's viewpoint and/or voice is often an oversimplified and reductive reading on the part of the audience, in the case of this film it is actually correct, as Kruse Jørgensen mentions in an interview: "The voiceover became a way to put myself inside the film without filming myself. I wrote and spoke the voice since I also wanted to [...] put a more personal print on the film. In the end I liked how the monotone and, to my ear, sad or indifferent voice, plays up against the wave of impersonal images on the screen."[58] The highly personal stance that enters through the filmmaker curating and directly commenting on the material he chose to present echoes the subject of the film – migration as represented through moving images – on an affective level, too. "For those who perceive these movements, the people called migrants constitute, we could say, a moving image. Like video, they form images that move. The task of the filmmaker is to actualize, also, the connotative meaning of the verb, as in (emotional) moving," writes Mieke Bal.[59] Kruse Jørgensen succeeds in activating this affective dimension through research, selection, compilation and communication rather than the production of new images.

It is worth recalling the PRC model – preservation, research, communication – as a curatorial strategy in museology from the section on *Program* in Chapter 2.[60] While preservation is not a highly relevant category outside of an institutional framework, the processes of research and communication are essential components of this approach to filmmaking. Kruse Jørgensen uploaded his film to Vimeo toward the end of April 2020, two months into the first round of lockdowns in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. For him, it made sense to make the film publicly available after it had had its run of major festivals for two years, especially given the major worldwide disruption in mobility.[61]

As mentioned above, Boris Groys identifies a link between the digital circulation of images, the political mission of (relevant) curatorial strategies and migration as a defin-

56 "Visual Culture and Identity MA - Royal Danish Academy – Architecture, Design and Conservation," ArtsThread, accessed October 16, 2021, https://www.artsthread.com/schools/theroyaldanishacademyoffineartskadk-visualcultureandidentityma/.

57 Stefan Kruse Jørgensen, Tea Time with The Migrating Image, December 2, 2019, https://www.clermont-filmfest.org/en/tea-time-with-the-migrating-image/.

58 Kruse Jørgensen.

59 Bal, "Documenting What? Auto-Theory and Migratory Aesthetics," 132.

60 See André Desvallées and François Mairesse, eds., *Key Concepts of Museology* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010), 68f.

61 Email to the author, August 3, 2021. For the full list of festival selections, see Stefan Kruse Jørgensen, s.v. "The Migrating Image," accessed June 2, 2021, https://stefankruse.dk/THE-MIGRATINGE-IMAGE.

ing social movement of our time: "Museum exhibitions are interesting and relevant when they select their content from different fragments of public space as well as from different fragments of the internet and social media. In this sense, relevant curatorial practices reproduce contemporary processes of migration [...]."[62] In order to select and combine digital content in an interesting and relevant way, Groys reminds his readers that they have to overcome the narcissist tendencies of the medium and look beyond what is readily presented to them because it is what they are looking for in the first place. Groys' formulation of the internet as a "mirror of our specific interests and desires" that needs challenging is reminiscent of Flusser's characterization of the digital image that is potentially seen as window onto an unmediated reality instead of as an abstract image to be decoded.[63] Both media philosophers speak out in favor of dealing with images the way in which the Rancièrian traveler mentioned at the very beginning of this chapter does – not yet informed, persisting in the curiosity of her gaze, displacing her angle of vision. For the director, the modus operandi of overcoming the internet's narcissistic tendencies was a key element in the production of the film. To surpass the "formatted knowledge" of the algorithms by unearthing material on the internet where he would usually not look for it, Kruse Jørgensen explains in an interview, was the most difficult challenge in making the film.[64]

How, then, might a film become a map instead of being a mirror? There is certainly a didactic approach to the structure of *The Migrating Image*, and Kruse Jørgensen indeed hopes that it will have an afterlife in educational frameworks, for example as an object of study in courses that teach media literacy.[65] After the Flusser quote and before the viewer sees an actual first image, an intertitle explains the epistemological interest guiding the creation of the film:

> In the summer of 2015, Europe experienced the highest influx of refugees since the [S]econd [W]orld [W]ar. This is often referred to as the refugee crisis. This film is not concerned with explaining this event. Rather, it seeks to explore and understand the technical images around it.

The film is then divided into seven chapters, each marked by a title of white font on black background and each critically examining one type of image that the migrant journey actively produces.

Chapter 1: Planning the Escape. The Smugglers

The voice-over narrator clarifies at the beginning that "the production of images begins before the migration takes place." A selection of smugglers' social media profiles pops up on the desktop of the narrator, who analyses the images chosen as profile pictures, establishing ships, flags, local passports and collages of tourist imagery as the most commonly used icons for advertising their services. The narrator analyses the affective qualities of the images: "The visual representation of the western world, and the freedom that comes with it, is jolly, naïve and carefree." Status updates by smugglers pop up, accompanied by the well-known chime that announces the arrival of a new message on an iPhone. The constant soft clacking of a computer keyboard evokes the idea of a

62 Groys, "Migration as New Universalism," 135f.

63 Groys, 132f.

64 Kruse Jørgensen, Interview at Go Short.

65 Kruse Jørgensen.

live screen recording, as if the narrator himself were interacting directly with these smugglers. The filmmaker is careful to blur the faces of people and of group names who could be identified on these social media profiles; he is not in the business of profiling. The first sentence spoken by him in this opening chapter – "They are no longer citizens. They are migrants" – are reminiscent of Hannah Arendt's description of the condition of statelessness in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, particularly in the ninth chapter "The Decline of the Nation-Sate and the End of the Rights of Man," in which she discusses the paradoxical entanglement between the "Rights of Man" and the nation state.[66] To acknowledge the precarity of a migrant's position as a non-citizen and to visualize her existence over the course of a 29-minute film is to politicize her as figure. At the level of sound, the active typewriting and the constantly audible messenger sounds (of various apps and platforms over the course of the film) also suggest a level of involvement that goes beyond the mere *looking* at images. Rather, it implies that something is *done* with and to these images.

Chapter *2: On the Mediterranean Sea. The EU & FRONTEX*
The second chapter presents official imagery provided by the three satellites currently orbiting the Earth, as well as data provided by sensors (air and sea-borne) that the Copernicus' border surveillance in partnership with FRONTEX is able to register. These images are not made by cameras ("no camera has yet reached their boat") and are therefore not easily readable for an untrained eye. They demonstrate a level of abstraction that requires a skilled viewer who knows, for example, that the "migrants are red and green dots." Easily decipherable and impressive to the general, non-trained viewer are the stunning "artistic impressions" of the satellites themselves and the images and videos (free to use for editorial broadcasts) provided by the "audio-visual department of the European Union." In a split screen of four windows, we see a changing selection of short video sequences which the narrator analyses regarding their content as well as their formal features, that is the camera and editing techniques they make use of. The split screen is a recurrent feature of *The Migrating Image*, not surprisingly so, as it is a technique reflective of the mobility, ubiquitousness and platform-agnosticism of contemporary moving images. In the words of Malte Hagener, "[t]he split screen has a specific graphical composition that predestines it for the display of mediality. It shows two (or more) spaces that are visibly distinct, yet presented in direct proximity within the image. It therefore mirrors the paradoxical configuration so typical of media: (spatial or temporal) distance is overcome through technological means [...]."[67] Everything is thoroughly mediatized: the migrants, at this point on their hazardous journey, are merely specks on a satellite image. The people able to decode these pixels are themselves put into a visual narrative supposed to convey the importance of their task in securing the borders of Europe.

66 "The Rights of Man, after all, had been defined as 'inalienable' because they were supposed to be independent of all governments; but it turned out that the moment human beings lacked their own government and had to fall back upon their minimum rights, no authority was left to protect them and no institution was willing to guarantee them." Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Penguin Classics, 2017), 381. The first chapter entitled "Migrant In/visibility" of Steffen Köhn's book discusses Arendt's writings and their influence on theorizing migration in visual anthropology in detail.

67 Malte Hagener, "Divided, Together, Apart. How Split Screen Became Our Everyday Reality," in *Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes toward an Inventory*, ed. Philipp Dominik Keidl et al. (Lüneburg: meson press, 2020), 34f.

Film still *The Migrating Image* (Stefan Kruse Jørgensen, 2018)

Chapter 3: First Encounter with Authorities. The Marine Military and the Coast Guard. Once the migrants actually step onto a boat and leave the coast for open European waters, they are "no longer in a blind spot." Camera images can be taken of them; instead of anonymous pixels, they are now identifiable people. The images are provided by a highly sophisticated military camera, complete with GPS location tags and radar information – images as forensic evidence.[68] The Italian Coast Guard's and Navy's videos are branded with their logo, making sure these images cannot be used without proper reference to the producers and copyright-holders. What we see is an overcrowded boat in distress, toppling over. It seems overtly cynical to "privatize" this horrid moment. The following split screens, all with footage taken by the "Marina Militare," the Italian Navy, and the Italian Coast Guard, suggest a Big Brother scenario through the simultaneity of videos that are most likely completely unrelated. The impression is that no vessel goes undetected, that eyes and helping hands are everywhere. Then the footage switches to images taken by GoPro cameras mounted on the helmets of the operations' task force. "This way every inch of the operation is documented." This, as the narrators goes on to explain, both serves the protection of the team against future claims of liability and "create[s] powerful emotional material that exists on the YouTube channel of the Italian Coast Guard." Kruse Jørgensen chooses to linger on these images of proximity, the scenes of rescue taking place between whoever gives the audience a literal perspective of things through the camera mounted on his helmet and the exhausted Sub-Saharan African migrant floating in the open sea. Signaling a change in perspective, these emotionally charged videos are followed by material in vertical format, shot on cell phones by survivors. Here, identification is key: each and every exhausted, smiling face must be diligently photographed as proof for their families back home that the passage was successful. This chapter of the film ends with a self-made promotional video by the Romanian Border Police, complete with overly emotionalized, sensationalist intertitles in capital letters and triumphant orchestral music reminiscent of a Hollywood superhero score.[69] The narrator does not even bother to comment on this absurdity.

68 On documenting and combining aesthetic conditions and forensic evidence, see the work of "Forensic Oceanography" initiated by Charles Heller and Lorenzo Pezzani. "Forensic Oceanography," Forensic Architecture, accessed October 12, 2021, https://forensic-architecture.org/category/forensic-oceanography. See also Richard Mosse and Giorgio Agamben, *Incoming* (London: Mack, 2017).

69 The text reads "over 1800 souls in overcrowded rubber boats on the edge of survival, hundreds of women and children, running away from the terror of war, in search of a better life, rescued from the sea, by Romanian Border Police."

Chapter 4: Reaching the Shore. The Volunteer

The narrator clicks through photos on the website Shutterstock, a provider of stock footage for editorial – that is, non-commercial – use. The volunteers use their cameras to document unjust or illegal action toward the migrants. They "are ready to help [the refugees] with their hands and their cameras," the narrator says. Hands and camera – doing and documenting – again suggests an involvement that goes beyond merely looking. While these images are all photographs, they are "moving" in the sense of one aspect of Mieke Bal's migratory aesthetics. It is not surprising that almost all of these photographs show children. This genre of image, targeted at eliciting an emotional response, works contrary to the forensic imagery of the previous chapter. It is a type of image that came to quintessentially represent the migrant crisis in the collective imagination. "While information content, pragmatism and usefulness constituted the value of documentary images in the public sphere of the nation state, the intensity and rapid usability of documentary images are the condition of their circulation in global image worlds," writes Steyerl.[70] The affective quality of these images are the basis for their power and currency as a resource.[71]

Chapter 5: Stuck at the Border. The Photojournalist

The selected material now switches from an unprofessional to a professional framework. We are presented a photo reportage by Danish photojournalist Asger Ladefoged, shot in a warehouse in Belgrade where refugees are kept in place, unable to move on toward the countries of the European Union.[72] The quality and effect of the material is more aesthetically striking now, often dark and brooding, the photographer seemingly intent on underlining the dreariness of the refugees' existence rather than simply documenting, in plain visibility, their daily lives. The voice-over narrator indeed points out the artificiality of the pictures when he says that "the photojournalist works within a framework that refers to analogue darkroom editing." This commentary, however, accompanies a recording of a computer screen on which the photos we have just seen published on the newspaper's website are shown as icons displayed in the Adobe Photoshop software, a hand popping in and out of the frame in an explanatory gesture. It is presumably the hand of the photojournalist demonstrating his process to the filmmaker. The material has thus clearly not been manipulated in an analog darkroom. The narrator adds that "a certain ethical codex of what is acceptable to do in editing seems to be established among the photojournalists," from which one could potentially infer that what is deemed "acceptable" is what was already possible in analog manipulation, such as dodging (withholding exposure to lighten the image) and burning (increasing exposure to darken the image). "The faces have been lit up to enhance the intention of the photojournalist," the narrator comments on one of the photographs, noting that it does not look unrealistic because of it. Given the "uncertain" status of the documentary image, however, do questions regarding the "realism" of images and the processes of manipulation they undergo in the process of publication remain relevant?

70 Steyerl, *Die Farbe der Wahrheit*, 13; translation mine.

71 On the use of the term "currency" in relation to image circulation and the paradigms of *migrant*, *native* and *documented* objects of art, see Joselit, *After Art*, 2–15.

72 The article was published in the Danish daily national newspaper *Berlingske* on February 4, 2017. The photographer is Asger Ladefoged. Ole Damkjær, "Tusindevis Af Flygtninge Og Migranter Er Strandet i Grækenland Og På Balkan," accessed October 12, 2021, https://www.berlingske.dk/internationalt/tusindevis-af-flygtninge-og-migranter-er-strandet-i-graekenland-og-paa-balkan.

Chapter 6: Walking North. The Big Media.
Drone cameras document the border crossing between Slovenia and Hungary. "But who is in control of them? And why are they interested in creating aerial images just now?" the narrator asks. The same long line of migrants walking across fields and along train tracks is shown from different angles on Sunday of October 25, 2015. The variety of the shots prompts the narrator to conclude that different drones must have been in the air. Once again, split screen is the chosen technique for a game of compare and contrast on how the material is staged in different ways by various news outlets. At times the footage is used pragmatically, at times emotionally (underlined with dramatic music), at times with heightened intensity (increasing the magnetism of the images by heavy additional color grading). The nine screens are shown for two whole minutes without the narrator further commenting on the context of what is displayed.

Film still *The Migrating Image* (Stefan Kruse Jørgensen, 2018)

Chapter 7: Reaching the Destination. The Local Eyes
The migrants are filmed by the local population on their cell phones. While this type of documentation is often intended as a friendly and welcoming act, it is not distinguishable from a hostile gesture meant to incriminate and denounce the new arrivals. One of the underlying questions that runs through the whole film is most directly addressed in this last chapter. If an excessive production of images makes up the refugee crisis, then who owns the images of this tragedy, which is equally collective (social) and private? A hospitable local woman hands out sandwiches to the refugees, but a migrant woman is clearly uncomfortable being filmed, she crosses her arms and waves her hand in a plight for the person behind the camera to stop filming. Her only exit strategy, however, is to walk out of the picture and into invisibility.

The Migrating Image is an analytical video essay, openly commenting on and asking questions about the visual material surrounding the migrant and refugee crisis of the past decade. It is a very literal take on the notion that "images format migration, they make a constituent contribution to the migration regime and thus to how migration is negotiated socially, politically, legally and by the police," as Nanna Heidenreich sum-

marizes it.[73] By analyzing the format of these images, this type of essayistic approach encourages a meta-analysis of the same type: What material has the filmmaker chosen to represent and how is it arranged? What curatorial strategies are found behind this juxtaposition of different materials and their commentary?

The Migrating Image is a fiction film made with documentary images. "[T]he task of a political aesthetics today," Swiss video artist and video essayist Ursula Biemann maintains, "is not to capture an image that best symbolizes our times; rather than positing the ultimate image, the task is to intervene effectively in current flows of representation, their narratives and framing devices. In some instances, the accepted story needs to be undone and we should not get anxious about reassembling it into another story too soon."[74] One of the inspirations for Kruse Jørgensen was John Smith's short film *The Girl Chewing Gum* (1976).[75] In this classic short work, a voice-over narrator – a director – seems to issue instructions to passers-by at a street corner, giving the impression that he controls the scene unfolding before our eyes. The longer the film goes on, the more absurd these instructions become. Finally, it becomes clear that rather than directing the scene, the voice-over is simply narrating what is unfolding before him. While Smith – a short filmmaker, an avant-garde artist – is openly mocking the self-importance of cinema's grand auteurs and mainstream cinema's closely monitored diegetic worlds, on a more fundamental level he is also challenging the conventions of representation and description – assembling documentary footage into his own story, so to speak.

Kruse Jørgensen is not a cynical filmmaker. He points to the narrativization and fictionalization of documentary images in the service of state and media outlets, but he does not simply reject the power of the documentary based on its potential use as a rhetorical tool. Rather, in examining these images by using classical approaches from film analysis, *The Migrating Image* suggests that there is a deeper understanding to be uncovered – and alternatives to be imagined – when looking at pictures closely and critically.

Freedom of Movement

Many filmmakers working in the short film format frequently cross the institutional boundaries that have become ever more permeable since the 1990s, between art, design and cinema – James N. Kienitz Wilkins, Louis Henderson, Randa Maroufi and Stefan Kruse Jørgensen have been examples so far. In most cases, however, these works are primarily festival films and only secondarily gallery exhibits in the form of single channel "video" installations. While the conditions of watching and experiencing the films greatly differ within these two image-regimes, the actual content and form of the film is identical. *Freedom of Movement* by Berlin-based artist duo Nina Fischer and Maroan el Sani is the only film in the selection which originated from a three-channel installation (in 2017) and was reworked into a short film version (in 2018).

Freedom of Movement, the movie, premiered at the International Film Festival Rotterdam in 2019, where it not only won one of three Ammodo Tiger Short Competition awards, the main prize of the short film competition, but was also nominated as a can-

73 Heidenreich, *V/Erkennungsdienste*, 314; translation mine.

74 Biemann, "Videogeographies," 99.

75 Email conversation with the author, July 14, 2021. On the reading list during the production of *The Migrating Image* were Vilém Flusser's *Toward a Philosophy of Photography*, John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, Hito Steyerl's *The Wretched of the Screen* and Jan Van Torn's *Design Delights*. Other inspiration was given by Harun Farocki's work, especially *War at a Distance* and the *Parallel*-cycle, both dealing with computer generated imagery and the challenge to the claim of objective photographic evidence.

didate for the European Short Film Award 2019.[76] As an installation, it was originally commissioned and co-produced by MAXXI Museum of the 21st Century in Rome, but also funded by the galleries Galerie Eigen+Art Leipzig/Berlin and Galleria Marie-Laure Fleisch Rome/Brussels as well as the Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg, which is the main governmental funding agency for film projects in Germany's capital. The links between the art world and the international festival circuit are so manifold and complex that it is at times difficult to allocate a work to one industry and discourse or the other. They share a network of sources for funding, of people assisting in the production process, of spaces for exhibition and a target audience interested in artists' films. That the designations *curator* and *programmer* are often used interchangeably is indicative of this circumstance.

From the vantage points of art history, curation and film studies, theory building on the relationship – be that one of emancipation, fusion or cannibalism – between moving images in a traditional cinema or festival context and the spaces of modern art has gained much attention and importance in the past two decades.[77] The art world's fascination with moving images is, as Erika Balsom notes in her study, not to a small degree a result of the increased mobility and circulation of moving images after the advent of digitization. She discusses this phenomenon under the keyword of "convergence" and its dialectical relationship to medium specificity.[78] The art world's preoccupation with the moving image is also propelled by the massive proliferation of moving images outside the classical theatrical space, first and foremost the World Wide Web (the principal playground for short films outside of the institutionalized festival sphere).

In the case of *Freedom of Movement*, a self-conscious complexity is added to the film's subject matter through its adaptability to move across different image-regimes. The title of this work refers to the 13th article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which asserts that "[e]veryone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state."[79] With global scale migration being one of the foremost political and social challenges of our time, the film considers different types of movement affiliated with relocation and the reclaiming of certain spaces. Unlike the space of *Bab Sebta*, which is transitory and unstable, space in *Freedom of Movement* is monumental in the literal and metaphorical sense of the word: The imposing architecture of Rome's EUR district is both a testament to the hubris of the Fascist era and a perpetual reminder of Italy's colonial past. The fixity and stasis of this architecture are juxtaposed to the fluid movements of bodies, both of the subjects portrayed in the film as well as of the audience wandering through the installation.

Presented as a three-channel installation, it invites the audience to move between the three free-standing screens, choosing where to look and for how long, allowing "an experience that extends from the linear towards collage, comparison, simultaneity, re-

76 There are several stages a film by a European director must pass for it to become eligible to win a European Short Film Award, which is handed out by the European Film Academy. First, it must run in the competition of one of the 25 European festivals associated with the EFA short film award. The respective juries will then select one film to receive a nomination for the award. Out of the 25 films that have been selected for this distinction, the participating festivals will vote to determine a shortlist of five films. Finally, the members of the European Film Academy can vote for the final winner out of these five candidates.

77 See Volker Pantenburg, "Black Box/White Cube. Kino und zeitgenössische Kunst," in *Handbuch Filmtheorie*, ed. Bernhard Groß and Thomas Morsch (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2016), 13f. See also Chrissie Iles, *Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art, 1964-1977* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2001); Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Leighton, *Art and the Moving Image*; Maeve Connolly, *The Place of Artists' Cinema: Space, Site and Screen* (Bristol: Intellect, 2009); Raymond Bellour, *La querelle des dispositifs: cinéma, installations, expositions* (Paris: P.O.L, 2012); Juliane Rebentisch, *Aesthetics of Installation Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012); Erika Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013).

78 Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*, passim.

79 United Nations, "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," United Nations (United Nations), accessed October 16, 2021, https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights.

inforcement and opposition," as Catherine Fowler describes the main features of gallery films.[80] Time, too, becomes negotiable, as the indication of duration for the work on the artists' website makes apparent:

> 3 channel video installation, HD, 9:45 min, 2017
> Short film, HD, 29:50 min, 2018[81]

As mentioned in the first part of this study, Austrian filmmaker Philipp Fleischmann, in *Main Hall*, translates the space of an art institution into cinematic time: 24.25 meters in length, 5.95 meters in height, and 29 meters in width turn into five minutes and eight seconds of 35mm film in projection. In the case of *Freedom of Movement*, duration is directly linked to the institutional space of its exhibition. As an installation, when perceiving all three parts simultaneously, it is briefer than as a (short) film, for which the three parts are rearranged into a linear order. The question remains, however, whether this specification of duration is not rather misleading. Or asked differently: Have you really "seen" a three-channel work in its entirety if you only witness one run-through of the installation? Does the complexity and high density of references and details of this artwork, which I shall discuss in more detail shortly, not require its audience to engage with it in multiple viewings, thus turning the category of time – like that of movement in the gallery space – into an individualized measure for each spectator? In that case, giving indications as to the duration of the work would turn out to be a moot point.

Not only fixed duration, but chronological time, too, reappears with the relocation into the cinematic space. The original setup of the installation has all three parts running simultaneously, the screens arranged in the room in such a way as to suggest a loose order of sequence, which, interestingly, dissents from the fixed order chosen for the film.[82] The film version evokes the sense of a diachronic examination of place and movement within a particular district of Rome. The first 10 minutes recall the historical triumph of Ethiopian marathon runner Abebe Bikila, who in 1960 became the first African gold medalist at the Olympic Games in Rome. The second installment re-enacts Bikila's run through the city, linking his achievement to the contemporary situation of stranded African migrants in Italy. The third part of the film lends itself to be read in a future tense: African teenagers in colorful shirts reclaim the steps of the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, "the most iconographical representation of the relationship between the Fascist dictatorship and modern Italian architecture," and reinterpret words spoken by Mussolini himself in an empowering gesture to include themselves as citizens into European society.[83] In the installation view, time is jumbled, with the original footage of Abebe Bikila's Olympic race coming last and the re-enactment of the historical marathon opening the arrangement.[84]

80 Catherine Fowler, "Room for Experiment. Gallery Films and Vertical Time from Maya Deren to Eija-Liisa Ahtila," *Screen* 45, no. 4 (2004): 329.

81 "Freedom of Movement," Nina Fischer & Maroan el Sani, accessed October 12, 2021, http://www.fischerelsani.net/film/installations/freedom-of-movement/.

82 A short excerpt of the original installation setup at MAXXI National Museum in Rome (March 11 through April 17, 2017) can be seen on the artists' Vimeo channel. "Freedom of Movement (Exhibition at Maxxi Museum, Rome 2017) on Vimeo," accessed October 12, 2021, https://vimeo.com/209705708.

83 Alberto Zambenedetti, "Filming in Stone: Palazzo Della Civiltà Italiana and Fascist Signification in Cinema," *Annali d'Italianistica* 28, no. Capital City: Rome 1870-2010 (2010): 199.

84 "On the first screen, an African runner inscribes once again episodes and architectural scenarios of the historical marathon into the streets of Rome. On the second, a choir of African refugee teenagers moves across the spaces of the 'Colosseo Quadrato' at EUR and step on its roof to perform a song about their own identity and that of the country now hosting them. On the third screen, sequences of a contemporary night run are superimposed with footage of the 1960's marathon and intertwined with archive material of the construction of the EUR and Foro Italico." Nina Fischer and Maroan El Sani, "Mini Guide Freedom of Movement" (MAXXI - Museo nazionale delle arti del XXI secolo, Roma, 2017), 3, https://www.maxxi.art/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/FreedomOfMovement_Booklet.pdf.

The film's close connection to locale and architecture, its "tracing [of] the interwoven stories built from stone and ingrained into the urban fabric," to use Christina Werner's poetic description, is established even before the first image is presented.[85] The film's title is graphically arranged into a shape reminiscent of the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, one of the main protagonists of the film and colloquially referred to as the "Colosseo Quadrato" for its distinct rectangular design. The Palazzo functions as the centerpiece of the EUR district, the planned site of the World's Fair in 1942, which was cancelled due to the war. In the words of the film's narrator, both the EUR (an acronym for Esposizione Universale Roma) and Italy's colonial ventures were "attempts to reinvent the Roman Empire. A rewriting, resculpting, and redefining of history. EUR brought together Italy's past and future. One ahistorical, rehistoricized space, still unfamiliar today." In the film, the confrontation with this strange space, seemingly fallen out of time, ensues by replaying, recreating and, ultimately, reclaiming the migrants' position within its architecture.

The first 10 minutes of the film show historical footage of Bikila's run, of the unveiling of the obelisk of Aksum in Rome in 1937, looted by Mussolini's soldiers from Ethiopia, and the construction of the EUR district.[86] This footage is projected onto a white board held in the hands of an African man – presumably the narrator. This voice-over in English is spoken by a male voice with an African accent, who reflects on the symbolic power of these images, noting that their political reading has no direct reference in the profilmic event. "In 1960, when Ethiopian runner Abebe Bikila ran his first Olympic marathon in Rome, just 25 years after Italy's invasion of Ethiopia under Mussolini's rule, the world was already assigning a political narrative to the scene. Which is to say, it was quite easy to read that particular competition through the lens of race, power and nationalism." The use of the optical term "lens" here is significant; it signals a link between visuality and representation, between seeing and knowing – a problematic epistemological bias toward vision as the primary sense for making meaning.

"In fact, for many it seemed a kind of postcolonial reckoning or, dependent on your perspective, a threat to the old order," the narrator concludes. The recurrent use of the word *seem* in many of the short films in this study is indicative of the unstable relation between event and interpretation, between seeing and knowing. In *The Migrating Image*, which I previously described as a quasi-exercise in visual analysis, "seem(ing)" is the "most oft-quoted word. And the way things seem inevitably depends on the way they are seen."[87] Evidently, this reflection on the apprehension of images and the relational properties of their indexicality is also one of the main concerns in James N. Kienitz Wilkins' *This Action Lies*, which I discussed in the previous chapter.

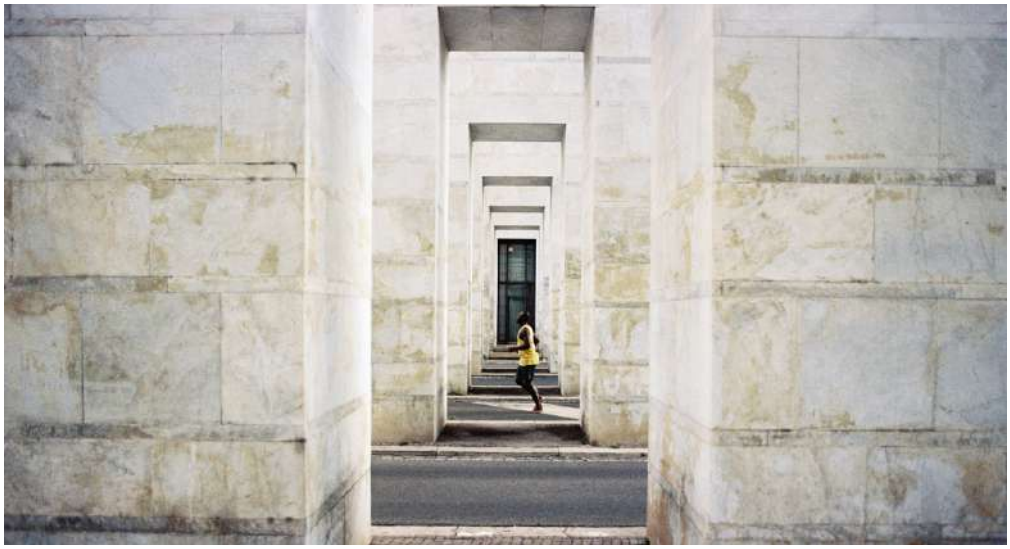
The night run superimposed on the original marathon footage as well as the narrator's playful turning of the white board in his hand enhances the impression of this being a performance, not a static and unsentimental summary of facts. This is reinforced through the mantra-like repetition of the phrase "I replay, I replay, I replay the footage of Abebe Bikila," spoken five times within these first ten minutes of the film. Does the meaning of the footage change with every reiteration? Or is it rather that its signification adds up, layer upon layer, with every repetition of the images, becoming ever more per-

85 Christina Werner, "Freedom of Movement – A Momentary Flight," *Roots & Routes. Research on Visual Cultures* (blog), accessed March 6, 2020, https://www.roots-routes.org/freedom-of-movement-and-impero-dei-segni-by-nina-fischer-and-maroan-el-sani/.

86 The obelisk was dismantled in 2003 and repatriated over the course of several years. It was reinstalled and unveiled as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2008. See "Mission Accomplished: Aksum Obelisk Successfully Reinstalled," UNESCO World Heritage Centre, accessed October 12, 2021, http://whc.unesco.org/en/news/456/. On the cultural, social and political implications of restitution and the reinvention of European collections of historical art and artifacts, see Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr, *Zurückgeben: über die Restitution afrikanischer Kulturgüter*, trans. Daniel Fastner (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2019); Joselit, *Heritage and Debt*.

87 Irene Praga, "Unveiling the European Border Regime: Review of Stefan Kruse's The Migrating Image," *Routed Magazine* (blog), April 18, 2020, https://www.routedmagazine.com/the-migrating-image-review.

manent in its meaning? Is this re-enactment a response to cultural trauma, or is the narrator's repetition a symptom of the trauma itself?



Film still *Freedom of Movement* (Nina Fischer, Maroan el Sani, 2018)

While the reading of Bikila's feat ultimately is personal, bound to the I/eye of the narrator, the reasons and tragedies of migration as a social phenomenon of our time are recounted in the first-person plural, making it a collective experience: "We run towards food, health, sanity, safety. We run away from danger. We run towards opportunity, resources, chances. Oftentimes leaving home, a common language, love, culture and emotional resources behind." The running of the migrants and of the barefoot Bikila himself – their bodies agile, vulnerable and ephemeral – is opposed to the massive, immobile rationalist architecture of this new urban district, which had meant to serve as the blueprint for rebuilding Addis Ababa as the capital of Italy's colonial expansion. "While Bikila's race was not a protest per se, to see him running along the ancient Roman road with its monuments and spoils of war, offers up a beautiful contrast to imperial obsessions with preservation and greatness." Signaling a circular notion of time, the heavy use of active verbs with the prefix "re" – replay, reuse, recycle – suggest the possibility of reinvention and adaptation in lieu of conservation and immutability. "How should we use this place today? Reuse, reduce, recycle it?" the narrator asks. Positions and places become relative and relational.

An answer to the narrator's question is given in the second and third installments of the film (in the installation, this would amount to diverting our attention to the second screen). We see the gentle blue of the Mediterranean Sea, evoked by the narrator as the watery tomb of thousands upon thousands of refugees in the first part of the film. For the lucky ones who make it to the shores alive, however, the sea is merely passage – a space to be crossed. A metallic thermal blanket, a heavily mediatized icon of the international refugee crisis, briefly floats through the scene. In an installation setting, it needs a highly present, attentive spectator to notice this detail.

Then the feet – no shoes – of an African man become visible, walking out of the water unto the land, where he quickly starts to run. His bib carries the number 11, like Bikila's. This, then, is a contemporary *re-enactment* of Bikila's extraordinary achievement. The runner effortlessly jumps over a little wooden fence and runs across field and along ancient Roman roads. The handheld camera is as mobile as the runner, following him closely. With the runner's heavy rhythmical breathing dominating the audio track, a sense of documentary closeness is evoked in these scenes. After approximately 3.5

minutes, he reaches the city, the cadenced "thud" of his bare feet on the asphalt now replace his breathing as the scene's metronome. In a perfectly symmetrical shot, the runner sprints toward the Museo Della Civiltà Romana. In a cinema context, this scene can easily be read as a nod to Rocky Balboa's famous climb of the Philadelphia Museum of Art's majestic stairs in *Rocky* (1976).

Going past an obelisk-like statue spelling "Mussolini" in Roman letters on one of its sides, the camera follows the runner's gaze. In the first part of the film, the narrator explains how the ancient obelisk of Aksum was a signal for Abebe Bikila to launch into the final sprint exactly two kilometers before the finish line. In this second installment, the sculpture serves as a different kind of reminder, one that perhaps marks a continuation of history and underlines the notion that what has passed is not simply gone. While other countries' coming to terms with their Fascist history often included a complete removal of any visible evidence to their authoritarian leaders, Italy's handling of its Blackshirt past is much more casual. Both practical and aesthetical reasons prevented the introduction of laws to ban every sort of Fascist apologism in public space, and the general population is hardly paying attention to it.[88]

At last, the runner sprints on a football field, comes to a halt and catches his breath. The camera slowly circles around him, once again prominently displaying the number 11 on his back. A rustling sound announces a team of football players in thermal blankets who run past the protagonist. When the film is seen in a cinematic setting, and if the audience pays attention to the credits, they will note that these people belong to the football club "Liberi Nantes," a volunteer-based amateur football association promoting social inclusion through sports activities. The team's name references another migrant, namely Virgil's Aeneas. While Virgil speaks of "rari nantes," the "rare [as in few and far between] swimmers" who make it to the shores alive after a storm unleashed by the goddess Juno wrecked their vessel, the club altered the adjective into "liberi" – "swimmers *free* to navigate in the waters of the Mediterranean and to escape wars, persecutions and dramatic humanitarian situations."[89]

The camera closes in on them, follows them, loses itself in the noise and wave-like texture of the metallic blankets that the group of refugees holds like parachutes or superhero capes, a gesture that claims their right to rewrite their own narratives of survival not as a tragedy, but a success story. The runner himself remains upright, unmoving, with his arms tightly to his sides. The camera moves toward him, capturing a close-up of his face, which individualizes him for a moment. A thermal blanket, left behind and no longer needed, glides across the sand of the playing field. Fade to black.

Fade up from black, we see a frontal view of the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, the Colosseo Quadrato. The inscription on all four sides on top of the building reads: "un popolo di poeti, di artisti, die eroi, di santi, di pensatori, di scienzati, di navigatori, di trasmigratori." The quote is taken from Mussolini's speech from October 2, 1935, in which he defends Italy's aggressions against Ethiopia in an address to the United Nations. While the exact meaning of "trasmigratori" is not clear, the quote is commonly translated as "a nation of poets, of artists, of heroes, of saints, of thinkers, of scientists, of navigators, of migrators."[90]

88 See for example Ruth Ben-Ghiat, "Why Are So Many Fascist Monuments Still Standing in Italy?," *The New Yorker*, October 5, 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/why-are-so-many-fascist-monuments-still-standing-in-italy?utm_source=NYR_REG_GATE.

89 *Aeneid* Book I, Line 118 and "Chi Siamo," Liberi Nantes, accessed October 12, 2021, https://www.liberinantes.org/en/chi-siamo/.

90 It is presumed to be a reference to the achievements of Italo Balbo – heir apparent to Mussolini – in developing the Italian Air Force or his efforts in attracting Italian citizens to relocate to Libya, where he was governor. See Pier Giorgio Massaretti, "La ri-fondazione della Libia balbiana (1933-1939). Il poderoso racconto fotografico dei 'Ventimila'" (VI Convegno Internazionale di Stud, Naples, 2014), https://e-pub.uni-weimar.de/opus4/frontdoor/deliver/index/docId/3223/file/la-ri-fondazione-della-libia-balbiana-1933-1939_pdfa.pdf.

A group of African teenagers in colorful shirts runs up the large stairs. The image has an artificial look to it, with the pristinely white budling against the dark blue sky, symmetrically enclosed by the same pseudo-Roman statues. Again, one cannot help but think of another immigrant, one with Italian roots fighting his way up to success in the United States: Rocky Balboa, and the actor who portrays him, Silvester Stallone. Italians too, the history of cinema teaches us, write successful stories of migration.

Film still *Freedom of Movement* (Nina Fischer, Maroan el Sani, 2018)

The youths walk round and round the building, talking and laughing, later breaking into rhythmical clapping and chanting, cheering each other on with their names. Once arrived at the top of the building, they begin vocalizing as a choir. They reappropriate and reinvent the building's slogan, Mussolini's speech, by changing a tiny detail with the powerful addition of "noi veniamo" at the very beginning: "*We come* from a nation of poets, of artists, of heroes, of saints, of thinkers, of scientists, of navigators, of migrators." Having been stripped of citizenship as migrants and refugees, the teenagers claim a new nationhood by including themselves into Mussolini's speech.

Again, the camera is often close to the singers' faces; as spectators in the cinema, we have time to study them, see them as individual people rather than a number in crisis statistics. Then again, this personalized view of the teens is contrasted and subverted by aerial shots. The camera, now mounted on a drone, recedes from the choir standing on top of the building. They become colorful dots on the large white building. Drone shots, a major image genre of migration visuality, typically "promise omnipotence and clairvoyance by capturing information about threats and enabling forecasting and prediction within a region deemed an abyss of knowledge and the unconscious of the nation," writes Camilla Fojas about border regions.[91] The singing youths in brightly colored t-shirts would hardly qualify as a threat; instead, they are highly visible and their singing radiates a welcoming, friendly attitude.

91 Fojas, *Border Optics*, 64.

Film still *Freedom of Movement* (Nina Fischer, Maroan el Sani, 2018)

The ending cuts to a new type of image, one that is non-photographic. The last two minutes of the film consist in a game-style 3D animation rendition of the area, with the puzzling difference that all the buildings have the shape of the Palazzo. Again, as in the second installment of the film, the audio track is composed of the rhythmical thud of naked feet on asphalt and the heavy breathing of a runner, whose perspective we as spectators must now adopt. It seems the time of day is dusk and the direction of the runner is unclear, given that all the buildings and streets look alike in this maze-like structure. The steps become slower, then stop. Fade to black.

In *Die Farbe der Wahrheit* [*The Color of Truth*], Hito Steyerl devotes a chapter to the epistemological, metaphorical and also deeply ideological facets of the spaces dedicated to art and cinema, respectively. Quoting Adolf Loos' (one of the founders of the Vienna Secession) and Le Corbusier's obsession with white walls in architecture, she summarizes that "the message is clear and not too surprising: bare white walls are good, they signify progress, modernity, development, fulfillment; dark colored or 'tattooed' walls, on the other hand, represent humanity's regress into primitivism, criminality, waste, inefficiency and animality."[92] The historical debate – Steyerl writes in 2008 – about critics' general unease regarding the black box's intrusion into the white hallowed halls of modern art is led using similar vocabulary to Loos' and Le Corbusier's writings about whiteness, purity and modernity. Steyerl notes that apart from "culturally conservative scenarios of apocalypse" relating to the inclusion of moving images in the exhibition room – spoken from both the perspectives of art critics and cinema fundamentalists – the actual integration of moving images into the gallery space is complex and not reducible to simple dichotomies (of black versus white, of movement versus stasis, or of compulsion versus flexibility).[93] Steyerl takes William Kentridge's installation "Black Box/ Chambre Noire" (2005) as an example to explain how artworks themselves can reflect on their position as films within the spaces of art and notes how the South African artist's use of documents – mounted on the walls of the exhibition space, and also brought to life in the animation sequences shown intermittently – exposes the problematic link between the presumed "objectivity" of military bureaucracy and the Colonial gaze.[94]

92 Steyerl, *Die Farbe der Wahrheit*, 101; translation mine.

93 Steyerl, 106; translation mine.

94 See Steyerl, 110.

Both a gallery and a festival film, the whiteness of Rome's EUR and the Blackness of the protagonists in *Freedom of Movement* can be read an allegory of the complex history of the white cube and the black box, too. The Black migrants claim their space on the roof of the Palazzo della Civiltà Italiana, literally a white cube of (Fascist) civilization. In view of the deep-rooted national, patriarchal and colonial histories of many great museums and art spaces, the questioning of inclusion and representation must come to the fore in any exhibition context.[95] The artists' use of historical source material, its re-enactment and recombination can then also be interpreted as a curatorial gesture in itself: It authorizes the migrants' presence in a foreign space and allows them a freedom of movement they do not possess outside of the moving image.

Atlantiques

Mati Diop's experimental documentary short film *Atlantiques* (2009) loosely serves as a starting point for the feature fiction film with which the French-Senegalese director would write history a decade later: *Atlantics* (2019) [the original French title is in the singular form, *Atlantique*] became the first film by a female director of African heritage to compete in the official selection of the Cannes Film Festival.

Atlantiques was produced during Diop's training at the post-graduate art and audiovisual research center Le Fresnoy. It centers on three friends, Serigne, Cheikh and Alpha, who gather around a fire in the dark of the night in Dakar, the peninsular capital of Senegal. Serigne recounts the story of his failed attempt to reach Spain by boat. The night scenes are interspersed with images that belong to the major themes of Serigne's narrative – family and the sea. The two "family scenes" – in the credits they are referred to as "the mother" and "the sister" – feature direct addresses to the audience. The family members do not speak but are acknowledged as part of this male-narrated story through their glances at the camera. The images related to the sea could be described as "haptic images" the way Laura U. Marks conceptualized them as a characteristic trait of intercultural cinema: images that privilege surface and texture over information. At first, it is hard to identify what these images, in close-up and at times with a blurred focus, represent.

I speculate that it is due to these "haptic images" as well as the non-linear timeline of the film that *Atlantiques* leaves audiences at a loss as to whether it is really a documentary. Often, the film's documentary status is modified by an attribute like "experimental" or "avant-garde."[96] On the school's distribution form, it states that the film is a "documentary, but preferably use the term 'epic tale' whenever possible."[97] As a genre, the epic is defined by its poetic and refined language. It recites a valiant hero's perilous journey and their conquering of countless challenges. By calling her short film an epic tale, Diop elevates her protagonist Serigne to the ranks of Odysseus and Aeneas.

95 See, for example, the exhibition publication by Maria Lind and Cecilia Widenheim, eds., *Migration: Traces in an Art Collection* (Malmö: Malmö Konstmuseum, 2020). The same, of course, holds true for film festivals and their policies regarding the selection and exhibition of films from the Global South and East and their efforts for securing gender parity.

96 See for example Michael Sicinski, "'You Don't Have a Home Until You Leave': Mati Diop's Short Films," *Criterion.com*, February 26, 2020, https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/6838--you-don-t-have-a-home-until-you-leave-mati-diop-s-short-films.

97 "Documentaire mais privilégier le terme 'récit épique' quand c'est possible." The distribution form was sent to the author by the school's distribution agent Natalia Trebik via email on July 26, 2021.

Film still *Atlantiques* (Mati Diop, 2009)

Her filmic language is expressed in images shot on a mobile, handy DVCam and distributed on digital video formats, not in the sophisticated, meticulous images a 35mm camera and projection could have offered.[98] The light sensitivity of DVCam is not ideal for making Black skin visible in the night; some of the shots in the scene around the campfire are so dark that the figures of the three men are barely discernible.[99] This adds to the feeling that as viewers, we are privileged to witness this intimate moment between friends, but on a visual level this meeting must remain clandestine and impenetrable for outsiders like us. For Diop herself, it is essential that her film should not be generalized as simply a film about migration, but that Serigne as an individual with migration experience remains central. In an article about her work, a journalist writes that

> [a] description of the original *Atlantiques* as being about a young man's journey from Senegal to Spain is rebutted, 'because if it was that it would be very general. It's not me doing a short film about migration; it's a film into which a boy tells his own experience of crossing [the sea] to his two close friends and me.' Neither should the short be referred to as a documentary. 'I call it a short film. Some people need to put a very strict frontier between documentary and fiction. I just don't consider cinema this way. I make films. I tell stories.'[100]

Nonetheless, on a larger scale the story of Serigne recounts the phenomenon of West-African boat migration, also called "migrations piroguières" in French for the type

98 According to the school's distribution agent, Natalia Trebik, 35mm would have been an option (email to the author, July 26, 2021). The feature *Atlantics* was shot on two digital cameras, Red Epic 5K for daytime scenes and a Panasonic Varicam35 4K chosen for its high sensitivity to shoot night scenes with African protagonists in the unlit streets of Dakar. See Chris O'Falt, "Cannes Cinematography Survey: Here's the Cameras and Lenses Used to Shoot 54 Films," *Indiwire.Com* (blog), May 14, 2019, https://www.indiewire.com/2019/05/cannes-2019-cameras-lenses-cinematography-survey--1202139519/; Claire Mathon, "Claire Mathon, AFC, Discusses Her Work on Mati Diop's Film 'Atlantics,'" *AFC* (blog), May 21, 2019, https://www.afcinema.com/Claire-Mathon-AFC-discusses-her-work-on-Mati-Diop-s-film-Atlantique.html?lang=fr.

99 For a discussion of the political implications of formats in the context of African filmmaking, see Benoît Turquety, *Medium, Format, Configuration: The Displacements of Film* (Lüneburg: meson press, 2019).

100 Rachel Aroesti, "Atlantics Director Mati Diop: 'As a Mixed-Race Girl, There's a Visible and Invisible Side of You'," *The Guardian*, November 9, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/nov/09/atlantics-director-mati-diop-as-a-mixed-race-girl-theres-always-a-visible-and-invisible-side-of-you.

of boat these migrants typically use. A *pirogue* is a narrow wooden canoe that has been used for centuries by local fishermen. With the bilateral agreements between Spain and Morocco in force since 2005 and the externalization of EU border controls to the Maghreb states to retain Southern migrants on the continent, the alternate and highly dangerous Atlantic migratory routes from West Africa to the Canary Islands became highly frequented between 2005 and 2008 (when the Spanish government started supporting local patrol boats to prevent pirogues from leaving the shores in the first place).[101] The film itself, however, does not show this dangerous crossing; the protagonists remain firmly in the same place around the campfire.

While migration as a relocation from one place to the other is only narrated as part of Serigne's speech, the migrant experience of time becomes a formal feature of the film itself. "Migrants often live simultaneously in many temporal worlds but cannot reduce them to one: the past of the motherland, a present that is often precarious, and an uncertain future," writes Steffen Köhn.[102] In *Atlantiques*, the timeline appears to be jumbled when after a first scene around the campfire, the next one takes place on a cemetery in broad daylight. We are told that Serigne died on December 23, 2008, lost in the sea after having begun his journey two days earlier. A sorrowful young man looks at the many tombstones, a young woman – the sister – looks at the camera with a sad expression. After this short insert, Serigne once again sits around the campfire. The talk revolves around death now.

The images related to the sea – shots of the Atlantic Ocean, the Fresnel lens of a lighthouse – are impossible to place within a timeframe and difficult to decipher on the visual level. The film opens with a voice-over monologue, spoken by an unidentified male narrator. He tells us about his encounter with the mysterious "Siram, waves as high as buildings." It is the story of a shipwreck, but the three shots that accompany his tale are not illustrative. It begins with a largely dark image, in which only a whitish and rotating plate is visible and a flickering dance of light beams across its surface. After one minute, a close up shows that this plate is powered by a gearwheel. There is no contextual information as to the origins or the relevance of this shot with regard to the narrator's tale. Only at the very end of the film, it will become clear that what we see at the beginning of the film is part of the rotating mechanism of a lighthouse. Next, we see a middle-aged woman in a medium shot, seemingly waiting for something or someone, with other women surrounding her. At last, an image of the sea, which fully fills the screen. Dimly discernible, a boat crosses from left to right in the lower part of the image while the film's title, *Atlantiques*, becomes visible in the bottom left corner.

Regarding the plural form of her title, Diop says that the "Atlantic Ocean is a very haunted place for the global Black community, from the West Indies and the United States to Africa. It's a very charged place, and that's why I put an 's' to the title of my film [...]. [I]t was a way to talk about actual migration, but also to touch on other ghost stories through the story of that crossing. The ocean is both political and mythical."[103] This quote is in reference to her feature film version, but it holds true for the short predecessor, too. The plural of the title, I want to suggest, is an expression of how meaning and experience are never only reducible to one concept, but rather are highly personal and dependent on the vantage point.

101 For insight into the history and medial representation of Senegalese boat migrations, see Stefano degli Uberti, "Victims of Their Fantasies or Heroes for a Day?: Media Representations, Local History and Daily Narratives on Boat Migrations from Senegal," *Cahiers d'études Africaines*, no. 213–214 (June 30, 2014): 81–113.

102 Köhn, *Mediating Mobility*, 109.

103 Carlos Aguilar, "A Language Possessed and Reconquered: Mati Diop on Atlantics," *RogerEbert.Com* (blog), November 14, 2019, https://www.rogerebert.com/interviews/a-language-possessed-and-reconquered-mati-diop-on-atlantics.

Film still *Atlantiques* (Mati Diop, 2009)

After having realized the importance of the lighthouse in *Atlantiques*, I could not help but be reminded of Virginia Woolf's experimentations in recording the mental processes of her characters in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) some 82 years before Diop's film takes place in Senegal. A quintessentially Modernist writer, her concern with the "production of new representations of cognition, of new ways of seeing and knowing the world" translates into a deep skepticism of the tendency of traditional narratives to follow a fundamentally linear pattern of cause-and-effect, in the words of Maggie Humm.[104] Woolf's text, too, is suffused with images of fluidity and with vocabulary relating to the semantic field of water.

In *To the Lighthouse*, the boundaries between present and past become permeable. In line with Henri Bergson's conception of *la durée*, Woolf's characters grasp their present situation and their pasts only by viewing them through the lens of memories.[105] "Perception," Bergson writes, "is never a mere contact of the mind with the object present; it is impregnated with memory-images which complete it as they interpret it."[106] Following Bergson's notion of the flux of time, she situates her characters' awareness at the permeable, fluid boundary between past and present, the subjective and the objective. In *To the Lighthouse*, the sea therefore is not only a symbol for the "fluidity of life," but also this fluidity is a narrative principle inherent in the text itself. [107] Fixed definitions give way to dynamic, relational sense(s). I detect correlations between Modernism as a reaction to a modernity which "has not fostered [...] profitable self-knowledge, [...] [which] has not provided meaning to the world" and the visual experiments meant to translate the "emergent knowledge conditions of intercultural experience."[108] They both rely on aesthetic and narrative strategies that undermine traditionally fixed categories of time, consciousness and identity.

Water – the element that epitomizes the concept of fluidity – is regularly used as a motif that not only signals journey between continents, but also functions as an analogy of

104 Maggie Humm, *Modernist Women and Visual Cultures: Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, Photography, and Cinema* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 2.

105 In the feature, Diop focuses entirely on the story of the women who are left behind by their men. The film ends on the protagonist Ada's realization that the past and the future are not necessarily linear. Looking in the mirror at herself, which doubles as a direct address to the audience, she boldly claims her identity: "There are memories that are like prophecies. This night will stay with me and remind me of who I am; it will teach me who I will be. Ada, to whom the future belongs. I am Ada."

106 Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2004), 170.

107 Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, ed. Stella McNichol (London: Penguin, 2000), 173.

108 Peter Childs, *Modernism* (London, New York: Routledge, 2000), 17; Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 10.

the protagonists' experience of migrant reality as discontinuous and erratic. So, too, in *Atlantiques*, when the final conversation between Serigne and his friends in the film refers to the sea's different qualities as both liberating and dangerous, depending on your point of view: "Look at the sea. It doesn't stop anywhere. Nowhere," says Serigne. To which Alpha responds: "But it doesn't have branches. You can't hold on anywhere." The tree metaphor succeeds in making the migrant experience if not comprehensible, then at least tangible.

The lighthouse itself is a complex symbol not reducible to a stable meaning. The last scene of the film shows different shots of a Fresnel lens, which are commonly used in lighthouses. Again, the viewers need a moment to recognize what it is exactly that they see, as the first impressions of the lens are shot in extreme close-ups, which makes it impossible to know what is being shown. Instead of offering more detailed information about the represented object, the close-up is used to create confusion. Western privileging of the optical is rendered pointless in these images.[109] Only with the last shot does it become clear, thanks to a small strip of window at the left of the image contrasted against the rotating movement of the headlights, that this must be a part of a lighthouse. In retrospect, then, the first confusing images of the film can also be understood to form a part of the same rotating mechanism.

In Woolf's novel, the trope of the lighthouse has a double function. On the one hand, it categorically denies that meaning is possible at all, given that it signifies something different to each of the characters and even changes its meaning for individual characters over the course of the novel. "So that was the Lighthouse, was it?," asks protagonist James Ramsay toward the end of the book. "No, the other was also the Lighthouse. For nothing was simply one thing."[110] On the other hand, the lighthouse serves as a motif for the unattainability of the characters' plans, desires and ambitions. Although it is a visual point of focus for all the characters, there is always a reason why a journey to the lighthouse is not possible. In *Atlantiques*, too, the symbolism of the lighthouse is ambiguous. In the context of a migration story, it stands for both guidance and protection from the perils of the sea as well as for the danger of detection by the authorities. For Diop, the lighthouse brings back a sensual memory of lying in her aunt's bedroom where she slept alongside her cousins on family trips to Senegal. "The room would go dark and then the light would come, and then it would go dark again, and so on. That's one of my most indelible childhood memories," she says.[111]

Atlantiques, then, is less concerned with migration as a change of place than with migration as an alteration of the way memory and time are experienced and meaningful for migrants. "Already in this short film, Diop reveals her approach to different temporalities, designating an experience of something analogous to time-sickness—a disorientation in relation to time rather than space," writes Dora Budor.[112] In this respect the film's video format becomes highly significant. In the words of Mieke Bal,

109 As mentioned above, Laura U. Marks identifies a critique of Western ocularcentrism as a reason why many intercultural filmmakers complicate visuality in their works and links this to prominent critiques from the field of ethnography, which deplore the objectification and specularization of non-Western cultures by traditional ethnographic film and photography (Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 10.). A similar criticism is wagered at the objectification of time in anthropological discourse. In his canonical text on the subject, Johannes Fabian outlines how linear, progressive time is an ideological, oppressive construct of Western cultures that denies the object of study an existence in the same timeframe as the researcher's, what he calls a "*denial of coevalness*. By that I mean *a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse*." Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 31; emphasis in the original. The main criticism is that the researched culture becomes fixed and stable in anthropological discourse and in the Western concept of time, which links progress and movement to evolution, this is tantamount to an objectification of a primitive Other.

110 Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 202.

111 Aguilar, "Mati Diop on Atlantics."

112 Dora Budor, "Oceanic Time-Lag: On Mati Diop's 'Atlantics,'" Mousse Magazine, January 12, 2020, https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/mati-diop-dora-budor-2020/.

> Video is the medium of our time, available to many, and put to many uses. It is also the medium of time; of time contrived, manipulated, and offered in different, multi-layered ways. Migration is the situation of our time. Although there has never been a world without migration, suddenly it seems as if the whole world is on the move, but not as in mass tourism.[113]

Migration, as Bal says, is definitely not a new phenomenon, and the volatile nature of time in the migrant experience, which parallels the altered and complex time of the video format, is emphasized by the use of quotes from different epochs. In the credit sequence, the survivors' stories [*récits des rescapés*] are attributed to Yoro Fall (2009) and "Corréard and Savigny of the shipwreck of the Medusa (1816)". It is not further specified who Yoro Fall is and where his text was published, but the audience can ascribe the first voice-over to this source.

The Corréard and Savigny quotes appear between the second campfire session and the images of the Fresnel lighthouse lens that close the film. French engineer and geographer Alexandre Corréard and the ship's surgeon Henri Savigny were on board the frigate "Méduse" on its way to Senegal in 1816. They were two of the few survivors of the shipwreck, which became immortalized in an iconic oil painting by Théodore Géricault, *Le radeau de la Méduse* from 1818/19. The use of Corréard's and Savigny's words links the historical nautical failures of the colonial rulers to the contemporary fates of African migrants trying to reach European shores every year. The shipwreck of the Medusa went down in history for the brutality, including cannibalism, with which the members of the crew tried to ensure their survival on the small, overcrowded raft.

Serigne, in the first scene around the campfire, makes his own desperation known. The reasons for his departure are clearly stated: only the privileged few have jobs, and there is no food on the table. "Working for my family gives me courage," Serigne says. He is one of the lucky ones who survived the dangerous crossing in a small, overcrowded *pirogue*, but he is also one of the many unlucky ones who are returned to Senegal by the authorities. His friends insist that they would not let him get aboard a *pirogue* again, but he is adamant that he would do it over and over, risking his own life with every crossing. "Do you know why?" he asks. "There's nothing here but dust."

In interviews, Diop regularly underlines how essential it is for her films to have a political dimension. *Atlantiques* is a prime example of a political film not only because of its subject (economic migration and its ramifications), but also its emphatic intervention into the *distribution of the sensible*, too. "The question of decolonizing the language of cinema, I couldn't be more concerned by that question. For me, it's a question that is at the center of every image I create, but not necessarily on a conscious level; it's just a permanent tension within me," Diop says in an interview about her feature *Atlantics*.[114] By transferring the migration story of a young Senegalese no-name as an epic quest of transhistorical importance is a claim on the equality of African stories and also an ironic comment on the length of traditional epics. Brief forms, Diop's film might suggest, are equally capable of creating documentary or narrative depth and expressiveness as their feature film counterparts.

All of the four short films that I have discussed in some detail have very distinct approaches to the subject of migration but are connected in their challenging of the

113 Bal, "Migratory Aesthetics: Double Movement," 154.

114 Aguilar, "Mati Diop on Atlantics."

temporal and spatial formations through which meaning in moving images is created. Also, they confront migration not only as a thematic subject, but are also themselves expressive of the migratory experience. They cross over from the spaces of the festival to the gallery, from the cinema to the museum. They amalgamate a variety of different sources and voices without synthesizing them into one particular experience. These films also gain additional meaning and relevance in combination and contrast with each other in the scope of a program. The main exhibition format of the short film, then – the curated program – further accentuates the paradox moment of heterogeneity and collectivity incorporated in the notion of migration in the different facets I outlined over the course of my introductory thoughts to this chapter.

Conclusion: For a Poetics of the Short Film Format

> My liege, and madam, to expostulate
> What majesty should be, what duty is,
> What day is day, night night, and time is time,
> Were nothing but to waste night, day, and time;
> Therefore, since brevity is the soul of wit,
> And tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes,
> I will be brief. Your noble son is mad ...[1]

Film length has had no impact on the deliberation of an ontological concept of the medium in early film theory. With the exception of narrative considerations, a film's duration is irrelevant with regard to the major factors affecting film form in the formalist tradition. In one of the only book-length analyses of short films from a film studies perspective that exists even today, film scholar Cynthia Felando rightly notes that "including so many different kinds of filmmaking practice, many of which are also relevant to feature-length films, complicates the development of systemic critical and analytical methods that are germane to each or all of the categories."[2] It is thus perhaps not surprising how little academic literature can be found on the subject of brevity in film. "Indeed," Felando goes on to write, "the scholarly neglect of shorts may reflect the tendency to include such disparate practices in the general category, thus making it unproductive and, perhaps, meaningless."[3] In a nutshell, then: an attempt at a contribution to a "theory of the short film" might well be called madness of some sort. To expand on Polonius' tautology of "day is day, night night, and time is time" which I use as an epitaph to my conclusion, film is, and must always remain, film.

To analyze a short film using the tools of classical film analysis will not yield any results that would differ from the study of a film of a longer duration. A film, as a work of art, is exactly as short or long as it needs to be to make its mark in the world. "Shorts are cinema, they were in its birth, and so to make exceptional claims beyond that ancestry and based solely on running time, is perhaps ludicrous," write Eileen Elsey and Andrew Kelly in the introduction to their guide to short filmmaking in the digital age.[4] "Short" is a relational term and as such has no fixed definition in and of itself; it is in want of a determined categorical status.

1 William Shakespeare, "The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark," in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, and Andrew Gurr (New York, London: Norton, 2008), 1721; Act 2, Scene 2, Lines 86-93.

2 Cynthia Felando, *Discovering Short Films: The History and Style of Live-Action Fiction Shorts* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 11f.

3 Felando, 11f.

4 Eileen Elsey and Andrew Kelly, *In Short: A Guide to Short Film-Making in the Digital Age* (London: BFI, 2002), ix.

Thus if brevity is indeed the soul of wit, one would have to conclude promptly that to analyze the short film as a homogeneous concept is highly ineffectual. Nevertheless, it is of course a little more complex than that. I have proposed a way to reconsider the short film as a worthwhile and original, a witty object of analysis in film theory and expanded on the subject of the short film at quite some length (while running the risk of having made a fool of myself as poor Polonius did in his various wrong judgments and his faulty rhetoric). Throughout this study, I have argued that to think of short films not as films that are simply less than 30 minutes long, but as a specific kind of short format, opens up new approaches to, at long last, consider and discuss short films in terms of an insightful epistemological endeavor.

In the previous chapters, which dealt with both conceptual positions of the short film as a format as well as specific examples of short films set in a programmatic context, I have compiled and collected thoughts, ideas and impressions – both my own and many others' – to argue for a poetics of *the short film format*. "Short film [...] demands a performative definition, with a social component inherent in the necessity of its continuous reframing that refuses a fixed meaning," claims Christoph Schulz in the 50th anniversary publication of Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen.[5] A performative definition implies also a situational, contextual definition. How, then, might one conceive of ways to form a concept of the short film that transcends the singular example and allows us to think through the many important larger issues connected to short, brief or small forms?

The *poetics of the short film format* proposed in this study, understood as an unveiling of meaning that considers cultural, institutional, economic and epistemological contexts, is firmly lodged within the conceptual triangle of *brevity – format – program*. The fundamental parameters to be subsumed under the concept of the short film as a format are its formal limitation to a maximum duration of 30 minutes and, consequently, its conscious undermining of a historically contingent, but long-lasting dominant duration of film upwards of 90 minutes.

It is productive to speak of the short film as a format when emphasizing the efficiency of its production context and the institutional dimensions that most shape its exhibition practices as part of a program. The short film becomes a format through limitation, expressed in the form of brevity, geared toward efficiency; it is produced faster, uses less material as well as less time in post-production. This also means it is distributed through different channels, faster and more cost-efficient. It is for this reason that the short film has become the principal format in film schools and prospers in an online environment.

Regarding the term *format*, the conflict between the approaches of more technically oriented media studies focusing on aspects of standardization versus the approach of art history more interested in the relational aspects and the unique manifestation of an artwork is not resolved, or, rather, I should say it is irresolvable. In the introduction to *Format Matters,* the editors write that "formats can [...] be regarded as specific sets of designed and negotiated features and functions that determine the aesthetic configurations of a medium, produce and reflect diverse relations of cooperation, and refer to different domains of application and models of monetization."[6] These various approaches to describe technical, cultural, even social phenomena coalesce in the evolution of the concept of what we call *format* and its dynamic alignment within different cultural, aesthetic, technological and political contexts.

5 Christoph Schulz, "Wieder keine Poetik des Kurzfilms – wider eine Poetik des Kurzfilms," in *Kurz und klein: 50 Jahre Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen*, ed. Klaus Behnken (Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen, Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004), 163; translation mine.

6 Marek Jancovic, Axel Volmar, and Alexandra Schneider, eds., *Format Matters Standards, Practices, and Politics in Media Cultures* (Lüneburg: meson press, 2020), 7.

The short film is generally more focused on a singular event or the exploration of a specific idea rather than detailed, complex narrative development. Not unlike the case with the episodes of a series, however, the conclusion that short films also demand less of their audience's time might be considered a fallacy: as a result of its durational restriction, the short film is often combined with other short works and compiled into programs. Rare is the instance when a short film is viewed as a singular artwork on its own, without other works accompanying it within the scope of a program at a festival or as part of an exhibition in dialogue with other films.

The festival becomes a cultural format when processes of value creation and cultural legitimization are institutionalized and part of the festival's self-conception. In this vein, formats are related to practices of visibility and accessibility, of knowledge production and canon formation. Short film is an especially interesting field in which to study these activities, then, because it operates below the radar of an institutionalized academic setting. Not even the relatively young branch of *film festival studies* has as of yet taken great notice of the short film and its exhibition contexts.

Opening Ceremony of Internationale Kurzfilmtage Winterthur, 2016.
© Eduard Meltzer/ IKFTW

It is impossible to think about film in a programmatic context, as a format, without considering the institutional settings that feed into its exhibition. Neither the format nor the program is autopoietic, they cannot generate themselves. Rather, there has to be a guiding force, a person or an institution, behind it. In the context of the short film, which has long lost its place in the system of theatrical distribution, it is mostly the festival that introduces a programming element. Within this exhibition format, it is the curator and the programmer who are responsible for the selection and presentation of films coming from a collection of available material. "[T]he curatorial is an embattled term that cannot be singularized or totalized and [it] is perfectly OK to live and work with such a warring term," writes Jean-Paul Martinon in the introduction to his edited volume on the philosopy of curating.[7] Instead of referring to the martial associations of an

7 Jean-Paul Martinon, ed., *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating* (London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 4.

"embattled term," one could also speak of the curatorial as a poetic term, going back to the first chapter of this study and Alexander Kluge's notion of the poetic force of theory.

My approach to a *poetics* of the short film format is strongly indebted to the writings of Kluge, not only in subject but also in form. The declaration "the poetic is called collecting" ("das Poetische heisst Sammeln") has turned into a mantra of his: it is an assertion he repeatedly makes in interviews and also reads as the subtitle of the closing story about the last weeks in the life of German poet and dramatist Heiner Müller in Kluge's 2,000 page, two-volume literary magnus opus *Chronik der Gefühle.*[8] Kluge's numerous writings on the poetics of the museum in recent years demonstrate a conceptual proximity to the critiques of the curatorial and museal episteme I have outlined in the section on *Program*, which broadly speaking are all derived from Foucault's notion of disciplinary power. However, in a paradoxical manner that undermines the authoritarian facets of any sort of taxonomy, Kluge also grants the collecting and ordering of objects, inputs and experiences a creative and generative force that links him to Walter Benjamin's passionate account of being a collector of books who discovers whole universes in his stockpile, reading the fates and futures of his objects like a physiognomist reads faces.[9]

Kluge's own artistic practice is fundamentally related to this idea of collecting as narration and the program, as well as the curatorial moment embedded within it, are an essential concept in Kluge's oeuvre, where it is connected with the small or short units that define his mode of production in such a fundamental way.[10] In his aptly titled *Toward Fewer Images*, Philipp Ekardt dedicates a chapter to "short forms" and "small units" in the work of Alexander Kluge, compellingly outlining the nexus between montage, *Zusammenhang* (context), and brevity in Kluge's work and concluding that

> [m]ontage in Kluge's work, then, is not just the technique for the construction of *Zusammenhang per se*. For Kluge, montage needs to rely on short forms in order to keep the constructed context variable. Many short forms can combine into more and more varied series, are easier to transpose, and thus easier to employ for the purposes of alteration and rescription, than larger forms.[11]

As I have shown by way of the conceptual triangle of *brevity – format – program*, I would proclaim this point to be true for the short form in general. If understanding is dependent on context and the constructed context is variable, then the short film refuses to enact the sort of "epistemic violence" that results when an interpretation becomes hegemonic, or when conflicting knowledges are "synchronized," to use David Joselit's term. "The elementary form of film consists of short lengths. Whoever feels secure in this elementary form can also develop overlong structures based on these short form without their individuality, their particularity, the rhythm, or the montage being

8 Alexander Kluge, "Heiner Müller und das Projekt Quellwasser. Das Poetische heisst Sammeln," in *Chronik der Gefühle*, vol. II (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004), 1008–10.

9 Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library. A Talk about Book Collecting," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 60f.

10 Miriam Hansen's analysis of Kluge's concept of the public sphere and his recourse to early cinema and its configuration of spectatorship is also a highly interesting read when thinking about the connection of short forms and the constellational production of knowledge. Miriam Hansen, "Reinventing the Nickelodeon: Notes on Kluge and Early Cinema," in *Alexander Kluge: Raw Materials for the Imagination*, ed. Tara Forrest (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011).

11 Philipp Ekardt, *Toward Fewer Images: The Work of Alexander Kluge* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018), 312.

suppressed by the length of the overall context," writes Kluge.[12] Ekardt concludes that Kluge's recourse to "short lengths" or small units – by which he means both a short form (duration) and a minimal production crew – is an essential precondition for a "critique of finalized forms: the small units'/short forms' velocity, their internal modulability, but also their potential for context alteration, prevent his production from crystalizing into a limited number of set, i.e., "final," products."[13]

Two other patrons to guide my approach throughout this study much more substantially than it might appear, based on the number of direct quotes, are Jacques Rancière and Hito Steyerl. Their writings on the politics of aesthetics, to use the title of one of Rancière's most famous publications, have influenced my way of reasoning on a very essential level in the course of committing these words to paper. One the French philosopher's most essential and well-known tenets is that politics, understood in its broad sense as encompassing all hegemonic practices in social and cultural life, always has an aesthetic dimension: Fundamentally, politics "revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time."[14] Despite not allocating film – or any other individual instantiation of art, for that matter – an inherently political potential, Rancière maintains that the production of art is a political act in the sense that through the arrangement of images and sounds the viewer is prompted to clear a space for a response and thoughts that prompt her to partake on equal terms in public discourse.

The artwork itself, as well as Rancière's own critical interventions, are "neither obviously nor directly political," Paul Bowman summarizes, but rather they are "gauged as an intervention into precise disciplinary sites – the sites of the production and partition of the sensible, perceptible and intelligible."[15] His concept of *the distribution of the sensible* (*le partage du sensible*) refers to the implicit and contingent laws governing rights to participation in a community by establishing how experience can be mediated and knowledge constituted. Rancière notes how in French and German, and one could add in English, too, the roots for the meaning of "sensible" (*sens, Sinn, sense*, respectively) denote both what is sensually perceivable and its meaning or interpretation.[16] In consequence, epistemological adventures must by default be of a political nature. And for Rancière, true politics only exists within democracy, "because politics begins precisely when the people whom one assumes are not made for it to start taking care of the community's concerns, making decisions, explaining and showing that they can do it, that they have the ability to do it."[17]

As with Kluge, Rancière's and Steyerl's styles of writing had as much an effect on me as the content of their words. The essayistic form of this study itself, then, is reflective of my interest in knowledge production and it mirrors some of the essential properties of the short film as a format. "Also characteristic of essayistic forms," Steyerl writes, "the kind of confrontational compilation of different materials, sources, and excerpts that can still be astonishingly provocative may reflect the functional form of global

12 Alexander Kluge, "Kurze Filme, lange Filme. Ein Erfahrungsbericht," in *Kurz und klein: 50 Jahre Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen*, ed. Klaus Behnken (Internationale Kurzfilmtage Oberhausen, Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004), 172; translation mine.

13 Ekardt, *Toward Fewer Images*, 310.

14 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 8.

15 Paul Bowman, "Rancière and the Disciplines: An Introduction to Rancière before Film Studies," in *Rancière and Film*, ed. Paul Bowman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 7.

16 Jacques Rancière and Peter Engelmann, *Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge, Medford: Polity Press, 2019), 65.

17 Rancière and Engelmann, 19.

modes of production that chain together geographically fragmented and dispersed fragments of material and labor in ways that are as flexible as they are inventive."[18] Steyerl's commentary on the essayistic form derives a questioning attitude, a positively critical stance from the juxtaposition of different inputs that are, in themselves, a fragmentary piece of the whole puzzle. The essayistic form, in its brevity and fragmentation, is itself politically meaningful as a reflection and critique of contemporary modes of economic production. Following this central trope, I construed the brevity of the short film format, that is its intentional failure to meet the standard duration set by the normative feature length of the theatrical film, as a challenging and unruly gesture. Similar to critics' theoretical writings on the literary short story, a potential connection between the discourses and practices associated with the semantic field of the short and the breakdown of certain normative rules can be made for the short film format, too.

A discussion of the short film as format, then, must necessarily revisit the question of how we think about a non-dogmatic politics of cinema. I consider it necessary to consistently explore the epistemological and political potential of small or short formats, however fraught this discussion of the political dimension of film being held in contemporary film and media theory is. In an insightful collection of essays on Godard, Wiseman, Benning and Costa as directors who work on the "margins of cinema," Volker Pantenburg rejects the designation "political" on account of the "formulaic nature of this term and the rather unhelpful confusion about what is 'political' in political cinema."[19] Pantenburg's objections are understandable given the ideological slant these analyses are quick to take. However, I find that taking recourse to a political vocabulary as a sort of guideline for developing a conceptual lexis to talk about the short film as a format has allowed me to sidestep the pitfalls of what Sylvia Harvey called "political modernism" in film theory in the guise of a "dream of uniting or relating semiotic and ideological analysis, together with a desire on the part of some practitioners to combine a radical aesthetic practice with radical social effects."[20] If I speak of the format as political, as a – to use the words of David Joselit –"heterogeneous and often provisional structure that channels content" that "regulates[s] image currencies (image power) by modulating their force, speed, and clarity," then in the decidedly Rancièrian sense of a conflict about what can be made visible and sayable, and how the conflict underlying these processes is negotiated.[21]

The final word on the subject of the short film will not ever, cannot ever be spoken. There can be no "one" history of the short film, nor can there be a unified theory. Why then, go through all this trouble and string together so many long and complicated words? Because brevity is indeed the soul of wit, and in thinking about brevity long and hard, an excellent opportunity to delve into an epistemological adventure about the production and nature of intellect and power of reasoning presents itself to us. Over the many years of researching short films and exploring how brevity impacts their production, distribution and exhibition, an interest in both epistemic and epistemological processes crystallized. Not only the short films themselves became objects of scrutiny, but the protocols and conventions of engaging with and studying them became a major and, I think, highly productive focus of interest.

18 Hito Steyerl, *Die Farbe der Wahrheit: Dokumentarismen im Kunstfeld* (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2008), 140; translation mine.

19 Volker Pantenburg, *Ränder des Kinos: Godard – Wiseman – Benning - Costa* (Köln: König, 2010), 11; translation mine.

20 Sylvia Harvey, "Whose Brecht? Memories for the Eighties," *Screen* 23, no. 1 (1982): 48.

21 David Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 52f.

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