Film Museum Practice and Film Historiography

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Published by Amsterdam University Press

Lameris, Bregt.
Film Museum Practice and Film Historiography: The Case of the Nederlands Filmmuseum (1946-2000).
Amsterdam University Press, 2017.
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PART III
PRESENTATIONS
A film is not just a physical object, an amalgam of celluloid and chemicals, it also consists of fleeting images projected onto a screen. Hence, it is both a fragile material object and an elusive, temporary, performative one. This means that all the elements related to its display, such as its projection and the interior design of the screening room, form a crucial part of the film’s presentation. The screening situation fundamentally affects the meaning an audience creates out of the images that appear before it. As Paolo Cherchi Usai says:

The nature of the light source, the apparatus, the physical structure of the image carrier, and the architectural space in which the event occurs are variables which have the power to determine the quality of visual perception and its patterns. (Cherchi Usai, 2001: 103)

In the context of film museum practice, these elements take on an added complexity. Exhibiting a film in a film museum environment turns it into a museum artefact, an historical object, above all else. In this sense, the way the museum presents a film fundamentally differs from the way it was screened in the past, and this automatically produces quite different meanings.

In order to analyse these issues, film theorist Roger Odin (2002) has introduced what he terms the ‘semio-pragmatic’ approach, explaining that film and television are always subject to a ‘double text production’: one located in the ‘production space’, the other in the ‘reading space’. Odin uses the concept of ‘space’ as it is understood in communications theory – that is, as a combination of determinants that guide the production of meaning. The degree of difference between the determinants in these two spaces changes according to their geographical and/or historical distance; the more they approach each
other in space and time, the more the meanings produced in the production space overlap with those that arise in the space in which the film is read (Odin, 2002: 42). For example, in the case of a British film made in January 1920 and screened at a London premiere in February that year, this overlap would be considerable. However, if the Filmmuseum screened the same film in 2012, the constraints influencing the reading of the film – the production of meaning – during its viewing would differ greatly from those experienced at the time of its production. This applies to the entire collection of silent films in the Filmmuseum archive. These films all predate the establishment of the institute, so there will always be a historical distance between their production and their reading. Film museums also differ radically from the commercial cinemas where most of these silent films were initially screened, and this invariably results in the attribution of very different meanings (Lenk, 2006: 320).

Film museums did not adhere to a general set of standards for their screening-room design and decor or the programming of their films – factors that are of crucial importance to the reading and experience of a film. The essential role of these factors is encapsulated in the concept of the ‘dispositif’ (‘apparatus’). Jean-Louis Baudry introduced the idea of a cinematographic dispositif into film theory in the 1970s in order to analyse the effect of the interior design of screening rooms and cinemas on the way films are perceived and understood. Baudry (1999: 763) uses the term to refer to the formation and positioning of all elements present during the screening. In short, the dispositif refers to the constellation of effects dictated by the specifics of a screening room’s interior design, such as the location of the projector or the screen. In my opinion, this is supplemented by all the other elements that play a role in the performance of a film, such as the programme, the musical accompaniment, and the posters in the lobby. When all these different elements are activated, the cinema-goer is transformed into an ‘ideal’ film spectator (Kessler, 2002b: 106).

Baudry is specifically interested in the ideal spectator of what he believes to be the dominant cinematic institutions, those that screen commercial (Hollywood) films. In film theory, and particularly in semio-pragmatics, institutions are defined as bundles of mandatory forces that induce certain expectations in the spectator before they begin to watch a film. In addition to the commercial Hollywood institutions, there are others that are active in the cinematographic field, such as those involved in film art or education, not to mention film museums (Odin, 1988: 121). Baudry’s main question is how a cinematic institution is able to program a spectator into believing in the fiction presented in the film. As Christian Metz says:
The position of the ‘I’ in the film has nothing to do with an astonishing resemblance between the film and the natural properties of all perception. Rather, this position is created in advance and determined by the institution ([the] equipment of the screening room, the mental dispositif that internalised all this). (Metz, 1980: 69)

Institutional constraints play a particularly important role in inducing a certain mental state in spectators and, as such, in their perception and experience of the film, as well as in the way they produce meaning out of what they see before them. Hence, an analysis of the screening situation is pivotal to an understanding of the particular reading modes in force in a certain place during a certain period (Kessler, 2002b: 106). We should, arguably, be able to discover traces of former dispositifs in a cinema’s physical heritage, because the ideas and beliefs that were prevalent in a particular institution at a particular time on how films should be seen and perceived were materialised in its buildings, screening rooms, and seating arrangements. They provide a concise demonstration of the tastes and beliefs espoused by a specific institution. An analysis of the architecture and interior design of film museums, for example, enables the researcher to draw conclusions about how these institutes tried to influence spectators and turn them into their ideal of a museum audience. This is a crucial element in the history of film museum presentation, which involves the screening of films that were made in (and for) a very different time and place.

How did film museums guide their visitors in their reading of the films they showed? An historical analysis of the exhibition-space interiors, the programmes and their accompanying texts, and all the non-cinematic elements that add up to a film performance enable us to achieve a deeper understanding of how film museum practice produced film spectators, influenced viewing experience, and sometimes even gave museum films a film-historical context.

During the period under investigation (1946-2000), the Filmmuseum’s public area had experienced two dramatic makeovers. For this reason, I start this section with an analysis of the institute’s three different interiors, which entails a further division of the period under examination based on the source materials. As I outlined in the introduction, I began my investigation by dividing film historiography into two periods, according to the distinct change in theoretical perspective evident in the written sources. It seems apposite, therefore, to explore the Filmmuseum’s transformations in appearance to see if the physical changes were reflected in its film historical discourse.