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POSTSCRIPT:

A CINEMA OF LIMINALITY

Thomas Ballhausen

*I do dream you
Allow me to believe you are the real me
I see you breathing under water
See you on both sides of a door*

–John Frusciante, “Away and Anywhere”

In 1916, retrospectively regarded as a temporal turning point of the First World War, the reprint of a report from the *Reichenberger Zeitung* is found in the journal *Kinematographische Rundschau*. In the reproduced text, the soldier Hans Kasper von Starken reports of his military-instilled, even military-molded, experiences with the medium of film and the performance context of mobile field cinema. Among other things, the text negotiates the question of whether or not civilians are at all capable of fully experiencing the cinematic art per se. The author finds here reason for doubt, due to the extensive receptive experience:

You must have lain for three weeks in a trench, waded through mud and heard the American ammunition Yankee Doodling. Only then can one come to an accurate understanding of this cinematic achievement. Even the pacifist has no idea what cinema is

.... Become a soldier!—a field-grey soldier. I advise you well, just to learn to see cinema properly. All at once you will be opened up to completely new concepts ... The cinema is for us warriors the only art institution. Therefore we are learning to fully enjoy, nuance and dissect it. Where do we see a well-dressed woman? Only in the cinema. Where do we see merriment, lunacy, humor? In the cinema. Where do we see coquetry, love play, flirtation? In the cinema [...] We see and experience every movement: we haven't had such things put in front of us for such a long time. We are thirsty for it. This is why we can also really take delight in the fun of it and the large lit up eyes. We take the film personally. [...] We will be totally removed from the steady beat of the war machine, we are suddenly in another land, together with people, who don't move in the same gear as we do. That does us well. The cinema is the shore of oblivion for us, and therefore a point of rest. The nerves relax. By purely seeing, one is in a kind of opium dream—yes, one dreams whilst conscious and has no hangover afterwards.¹

The editorial staff of the *Kinematographische Rundschau* were likely pleased with this assessment, which after all has the air of a military-political commissioning of a hotly-contested medium and speaks of the in/as of 1916 more easily traceable exchange between (so-called) fictional and (so-called) documentary examples of Austrian film propaganda.

A productively adapted use of the term “border” is necessary for the comprehension of these at-hand explanations, which are aimed at the First World War and Austrian film history up until 1938. This concerns not only the aforementioned incorporation of documentary-enlightening elements of feature films, or the likewise implied integration of feature film-like episodes in newsreels or special films. The framings of (re-)constructive

1 *Kinematographische Rundschau*, no. 418 (1916): 10.

gestures of boundary should be, in my opinion, significantly more pronounced. That is, through closer observation of the “inner” cinematic phenomenon of blurring borders (for example, the insertion of intertitles or the application of supposedly robust genre definitions), formal conception (for example, the predetermination of patterns of perception through fixed frame or montage), content-related design/standardization (for example, portrayal of gender relations or the natural elements), and subsequent periodization attempts. In order to avoid the threat of arbitrariness, a focus on the construction-impulse of the corporeality of the cinematic and of cinematic physicality should lie within this deliberately short attempt—one which shares, I presume, the mentioned underlying problems. The production of things documentary-related is hereby addressed, which at least with regard to the negotiated source pool is subject to essentially narrative imperatives, but also to aspects such as the fictional foundation of historiographic designs or the (mis-)use of “depots,” which, along with the “border,” presents another case of semantic polymorphism. In order to express the links and splices of a diligent analysis (or rather, reflection) into the period under examination with at least a semblance of communicability (as well as a boundary)—without altogether simultaneously forgetting the tense relationship that is part of the creation of memorable images or the aspiring narrative potential of war—here follows a contextualizing sketch of Austrian film propaganda between 1914 and 1918, comments on the relevant thematic variety of the feature film *The Hands of Orlac* (1925) and concluding (if not hopefully also enlightening) remarks on the “archive” as a model for theorization.

Film History Guidelines

The belligerent parties made use of mass media during the First World War to an until then unprecedented extent. Namely,

propaganda was not transported through one sole primary medium. Rather, its intense utilization was achieved through an existing and namely more interconnected media system. Even the Austrian war press bureau—which had to deal with extensive tasks in a large geographic area—worked with the already existing entwinement of different media, and consequently established an early form of inter-medial, information-oriented warfare. The history of Austrian cinematic war reporting during the First World War can be, as previously noted, divided into two large periods: one phase until around 1916, in which the presentation of technology was of importance, and the time period of the final war years, in which a stronger integration of narrative elements within cinematic propaganda is apparent. Common within the periods is the complex interconnection with other media forms.

The question of the social-political motivated legitimization of violence depiction has been, and is chosen for the most part, as the means to approach this topic exclusively from the side of violence. It is necessary for this approach to point out that the tradition of media pedagogical guidelines can be considered long and not particularly cheerful or even constructively critical. It is an approach that accepts in principle the dubious legitimacy of violence and that perpetuates the myth of state legitimized violence.² In regard to a larger concept, this can also be said of politically motivated propaganda, i.e. for image-specific war reporting and the corresponding presentation environment. This legitimization of militarization and military violence bases its arguments on the historical-political development and the development of national organizational structures. This extensive legitimization also

2 Cf. Burkhard Liebsch, "Gewalt und Legitimität," in *Handbuch der Kulturwissenschaften. Bd. 3: Themen und Tendenzen*, ed. Friedrich Jaeger, Jörn Rüsen, and Jürgen Straub (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2004), 503–520, here: 503.

reached into the field of entertainment, which in times of crisis was just as exposed to state and political exertions of influences as were existing mediums—mediums that were constantly having to redefine their stance with regards to not only their socially public anchorages but also their internal, historical as well as technical, development processes of discussion on entitlement and rights. The aforementioned connection between these two fields will now be illustrated by using the self-trained cinema system and its accompanying media (supposed) experiences as an example. The illustration and portrayal of violence on the basis of its conception and origin was anything but foreign to film as a medium, whose potential as propaganda instrument had already been recognized early. The audience was quite familiar with the theatrical structure of Vaudeville entertainment, exhibition techniques, display modes, and entertainment possibilities of pre-cinematographic time. Therefore, on the basis of this media socialization, the entire entertainment offering could be militarily shaped without a problem. In doing this, the film serves not only the depiction of violence, but also the mould of its typical power structures. If one assumes that the propaganda has been successfully implemented, the cinematic medium, as a contested field, mirrors the planability and orderliness of war. And, therefore, also the inevitable violence which comes with it: “The film [. . .] recasted the catastrophic-chaotic initial occurrence of war into a civilizatory event, and gave it a visually narrative and moral order, which does not occur in war per se. In this way, the war film, in all of its forms, contributes to the always new illusion of planability of war.”³

3 Gerhard Paul, “Krieg und Frieden im 20. Jahrhundert: Historische Skizze und methodologische Überlegungen,” in *Krieg und Militär im Film des 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Bernhard Chiari, Matthias Rogg, and Wolfgang Schmidt (München: Oldenbourg, 2003), 3–76, here: 7.

On a formal level, solutions to two communication problems could already be offered with the new medium of film, even in its infancy: the overcoming of geographic distance to the place of occurrence and the politically effective communicability of time limited conflicts. However, the fabricated forgery of events was more quickly available and often also had a more successful effect on the public than the actual report. The just now mentioned reconstruction of occurrences was quite normal and ranged from feigned battle scenes to reshot earthquakes. Furthermore, the question of usability of material for propaganda purposes was constantly being questioned, in regards to whether these limited representation possibilities on the reality of war actually could and can be reproduced. The alleged approach to the reality of war was and remains, to a great extent, a deception. War reporting and hence its communication is, in the case of party participation in a military conflict, never free of instrumentalization. Quite on the contrary, the chasm of accepted actuality would be in fact widened because of the alleged approach to reality. The tendencies for visualization and simulation are therefore also always orientated to a particular media socialization standing: "Images of modern warriors and war technologies, of death, killing and extermination, stretched over the frame of a canvas or screen, and released for consumption under the general conditions of consumption of reproduced images on a mass scale, will be admitted into a reception-spectrum, which is in itself formed after a long-term process through the media."⁴ The described instrumentalization of the gaze, which will appear later in more focus, is therefore already perceptible in early cinema history and is clearly

4 Bernd Hüppauf, "Kriegsfotographie," in *Der Erste Weltkrieg: Wirkung - Wahrnehmung - Analyse*, ed. Wolfgang Michalka (München: Piper, 1994), 875–909, here: 875.

comprehensible through a changing relationship between world and image. The world was already beginning to be captured by visual portrayals in the early modern era. In the late nineteenth century, this undertaking led finally to the attempt at depicting the world as an image. In the case of war reporting, an increasing overlap of arranged reality through projections (in relation to imagination and cinematography) is the direct consequence and is still even perceivable today: “The analogy of cinema and catastrophe has masked, perhaps even alleviated, our horror, but we can no longer escape this film. More so, every event accelerates the cinematographization of the world. The accurate image in the cinema barely cares about how much reality and falsity is contained within it. In the cinema-world, it seems only logical that onto an image which portrays reality as if it were a cinema dream, a fake image follows, which absolutely seems to be real. It is therefore not simply the image anymore, which will turn into the world (even if the transformation of horror into propaganda is achieved precisely through this). The world becomes its own image.”⁵

Seams and Scars

The moment of image-creation is also central in Robert Wiene’s screen adaptation, *The Hands of Orlac*. In a contemporary critique, which also mirrors the expectations of the film, the plot twist rich story is summarized as follows:

A piano virtuoso is robbed of the use of his hands in a railway disaster. The doctor treating him surgically gives him the hands of an executed robber and murderer. From here, informed by a

5 Georg Seeßlen and Markus Metz, *Krieg der Bilder - Bilder des Krieges: Abhandlung über die Katastrophe und die mediale Wirklichkeit* (Berlin: Ed. Tiamat, 2002), 29.

stranger, the artist fears that he will be driven to crime by the hands of the dead man, and is soon caught up as a suspect in the murder of his own father. It is only now explained that the crime was carried out by a friend of the executed man, who also committed the crime that the innocent man was accused of. The subject has an extremely thrilling exposition and holds tension until the very last scene, executed by an excellently assembled ensemble, with Conrad Veidt at the helm, who presents it in its best light. The directing is firm and careful, especially in the extremely realistic scenes of the railway catastrophe, the presentation tasteful, the plot events effectively underscoring. The photography is in every regard competent. It is a domestic film which matches up to the best foreign productions.⁶

The disruptive shock of the train crash afflicts not only the hands of the pianist, but even more so the mind of this peculiar homecomer. The scene of the crime is staged as a battlefield, which stands at the interface between expressionist horror and psychological thriller. Along these lines, the inner life of the main character is staged as a fissured landscape—a circumstance that begins to yield negative results for the protagonist:

Orlac becomes even more the victim of intrigue than of his own imaginings, so to speak falling prey to his own image, embodied in the film's own expressionistic way, and comes close to his own demise. Whereas Fritz Lang's criminal in the sound motion picture *MABUSE* farewells himself sarcastically from expressionism [...], Orlac distances himself from it in an inner fight to the death. A psychological branch has begun with *The Hands of Orlac*, which above all opens up new opportunities for the actors. Horror will no longer merely be experienced as a possibility for eeriness

6 "Orlac's Hände," *Paimann's Film-Liste: Wochenschrift für Lichtbild-Kritik*, no. 441 (1924): 181.

in image form, but rather also as a subjective sensation within humans.⁷

The shapes spring into motion through a combination of cutting—almost irrespective of straight movement by hand or sideways movement through imaginative space—and segmented parts. The opposite can easily arise from the overlapping security of form and contour. The mutilated and then re-mended bodies are not any more recognizable through form/norm as are the detached limbs and organs. In accordance with the technical cinematic advances of cutting techniques, a corresponding film tradition at a contextual level also developed—one which, along with the deconstruction of form, also demonstrated a constant increase of chaotic conditions.⁸ Not at least because of this, the dramatic (action) prelude of the film results in hysteria, loss of confidence, and crime. In *The Hands of Orlac*, the criminal investigation is finally set against the outbreak of the First World War—a rational mingling of explanation and interpretation that leads to the construction of a happy ending. If we were, however, to travel back to the plot development in a linear manner, we would experience the main character Paul Orlac as a traumatized man. In view of the narrative circumstances, it doesn't seem surprising that Wiene compresses Maurice Renard's figure-rich novel to a harmonious, sparsely populated thriller/melodrama with fewer protagonists, with only one remarkable exception: the train crash. Differing from the quasi-documentary filming from the time of the First World War (which transforms the classic battlefield image of war into that of an empty dead zone), the inter-war period film draws

7 Georg Seeßlen and Fernand Jung, *Horror: Geschichte und Mythologie des Horrorfilms* (Marburg: Schüren, 2006): 116.

8 Cf. Eberhard Nuffer, *Filmschnitt und Schneidetisch: Eine Zeitreise durch die klassische Montagetechnologie* (Potsdam: Polzer, 2002), 51–60.

from the experiences of irreversibly mechanized, revved-up conflict, and transforms them at every level:

There are images of claustrophobic and liminal rooms, of subjectively distorted dimensions, panoramas of emptied, abstract landscapes, images of invasion, aggression and violence. The experience of the battlefield—shock and disorientation—is in conflict with simple narrativization based on cause and effect. That is why many post-war films seem so abrupt, illogical, and confusing. Whereas the war films of around 1930—more than a decade after the end of the war—tried to narrate trauma, the early films of the Weimar Republic radically bring shock and disorientation on a formal level to the forefront. They break up every simple and linear narration and shift the experience of the battlefield, in its divided and violent form, into formally aesthetic questions. These films (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *The Nibelungs*, *Metropolis*, *M*, and many others) are pervaded by images of archetypal scenes, which function as fragments of memory of the bygone war, as traces and compulsively re-occurring elements of a traumatic experience.⁹

In this way, Orlac is caught up in an (aesthetic) minefield of expressionism. Concerning the design of the film, this is not to be understood as a rigid condition, but rather as a constantly changing system of newly arranged components. That is, an expression of an archive-specific aesthetic of horror. This is how *The Hands of Orlac* can and should be assessed as the continuation of “expressionist tradition,”¹⁰ it being the first of many adaptations of

9 Anton Kaes, “Schlachtfelder im Kino und die Krise der Repräsentation,” in *Schlachtfelder: Codierung von Gewalt im medialen Wandel*, ed. Steffen Martus, Marina Münkler, and Werner Röcke (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2003), 118–128, here: 128.

10 Peter Hutchings, *Historical Dictionary of Horror Cinema* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2008), xii.

Renard's original novel and particularly as a "stylish horror thriller."¹¹ One of the constant factors of the film is certainly the body, which becomes the venue of the dialectic dilemma of Having and Being and, if you like, also becomes the discursive battlefield. The accident as paradigmatic framework of modernity clearly shows the significance of the fragility (or to be more precise, vulnerability) of the medialized body and the repercussions of inscription and the use of medical and criminological practices. At this point, the dense discourse of the Archive, the Horror, and the Wounding unite: "The archive is in this way understood a symbolic formation (a collection of signs) and may be so maintained in that it is again and again reproduced in a similar/the same way (repetition), in that it is bounded, it has an outside."¹²

Thinking the Archive

The full leap of establishing the "archive" as hypothesis can only be realized by simultaneously considering potentially ambiguously understood critique—something like the ability to take criticism or the worthiness to be criticized. This mode is accompanied by an expression of this critique. Let us turn back to the supposed end and to the actual beginning of the topic at hand, taking into consideration the ambiguous assumption, borrowing from Heidegger's categories of assumption, i.e. to the expectations, the hypotheses, and the acceptances.¹³ That is, the misunderstanding of film as pure illustration or undisturbed portrayal of so-called reality obscures our view of the cinematic expressions of mediality.

11 Ibid., 336.

12 Ulrike Kadi, "Archiv: Schmerz, Dokument," *texte*, no. 4 (2007): 39–55, here: 40.

13 Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Zollikoner Seminare* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2006), 5ff.

The renewed (or maybe even new) placement of the archive as hypothesis opens our eyes to the, not least of all, material images into which history disintegrates. Deliberately repeated word-for-word, that means: The archive should be applied on the one hand as a trio of institution, collection, and practice, and on the other hand—having recourse to David L. Martin—with regard to the audio-visual source as a discursive troika of collection, body, (also in the sense of a physical makeup of the respective sources), and medial cartography that makes possible a progressive critique of linear-progression historiography.¹⁴ In this regard, the collection can be used to break this down. The analogue film material is also always the starting point, for instance, for the availability on online platforms, restorations, re-use, and possible productive reception. The ordering archive serves as a register of the historiographical and as an option of reflection on how we give sense to a senseless history, and to what degree. This moment of foundation is, however, not to be thought of as a uniquely set and subsequently embraced hermeneutical practice, but rather more as necessity, which is competent—but also skeptical—to incorporate sources again and again (and always new) with readings and contextualizations. Even this is a part of the incessantly cyclical, to-be-communicated work on the archive—as work on the archived. The limiting view of film as illustration and vividness must be additionally opposed to the emphasis of cinematic mediality. An in this way expanded view detaches the particular instances from the entirety of the collection and is conscious not only of its historicity, but also of the present moment. The outlook on the subsequent future (as well as on the film in its variations and adaptations) manifests itself constantly anew as a provocation

14 Cf. David L. Martin, *Curious Visions of Modernity: Enchantment, Magic, and the Sacred* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

to ethical attitudes toward an obligation to be responsible concerning collection and the general public. The intellectual as well as logistic achievement of the archive (or the archivers) allows not only for the questioning of sources, but also for the development of resistances. The horizon of this endeavor is—in all its ambiguity—a critique of the archive itself.¹⁵

15 Cf. Thomas Ballhausen, *Signaturen der Erinnerung: Über die Arbeit am Archiv* (Wien: Edition Atelier, 2015).