

Merle Kröger

A Plea for Regional Film Culture Work

Since 2007, I have produced five feature-length cinema documentaries. We puzzled together the financing from film subsidies and by entering into co-productions with arte or the Goethe Institute. We were able to make the films however we wanted, a comparatively luxurious way of working in the harsh everyday reality of documentary filmmaking. Our films represent a form of “thinking” documentary that generates questions rather than answering them.

These films are part of Arsenal’s Living Archive. An archive such as this is their artistic home. Yet films are not made just to sit at home on the couch. We work with dedicated distributors in order to bring them to the big screen. This is also only possible with distribution subsidies. Distributing a documentary demands a high degree of professionalism, a passion for social debate and lots of time. Time that may well not be converted into high percentage earnings at the end. Yet at least the film gets a theatrical release.

In 2012, we were faced with a dilemma: we had just completed a film and premiered it at the Berlinale. Many regional art-house cinemas wanted to show the film in their main programs, rather than at 6.00pm as some sort of special screening. The release date was neither during the summer lull nor the university holidays and there was neither a late heat wave nor a sudden drop in temperatures. The film was received positively by all the major newspapers. Yet it flopped. Is it an audience killer when critics talk about “a painful, but important film”? One cinema programmer comforted us by saying, “we’ll show your films even if no one comes. Please keep going.” The audience members that did come to see the film seldom left the cinema auditorium and Q&As before they had come to an end. In these Q&As, we experienced exactly the reason why we make films: the ability to extend the cinematic realm into the social one, the cinema functioning as a “safe” place where ideas can be debated without fear. That doesn’t really work in front of a laptop.

After the cinema debacle, the film is now often shown at various events, usually cooperations between individual cinemas and local groups. These screenings are

frequently sold out and people have to be turned away, even though the same film was shown in the same city previously to empty auditoria.

I can only explain this by using the same old clichés: a society increasingly geared to entertainment, changing visual habits, or the role of cinema in the exploitation of capitalist product. Yet I actually see this confirmation that we need regional film culture work. Not because I want to get more people to see our films – although that would be nice – but because I regard that moment in the cinema auditorium as something important and valuable.

In 2007, I visited and interviewed over 40 cinema programmers across Germany as part of a film curatorial project. I experienced the conditions according to which they put together cinema programs, often enough in their free time or by having to virtually exploit themselves. I think all producers should visit those who show their films, as throws a very different light on things.

My decision to include decentralized, curated film work as an integral part of the Living Archive project in the form of WORLD IN PROGRESS stems from the idea that an archive that provides a home for films also needs a network for them to develop. Otherwise they'll never leave the nest.

World in Progress

Given that the apocalypse expected for the end of 2012 failed to materialize, there would seem to be more than enough reason to think about what is now to become of us. Bringing contemporary social debates to cinemas and uncovering new trends in world film are what the Arsenal cinema in Berlin and the International Forum of New Cinema at the Berlinale have been about for decades now. As part of the "Living Archive – Archive Work as a Contemporary Artistic and Curatorial Practice" project, several film programs and series will be initiated in ten "Kommunal" cinemas across Germany. These publically funded, regional art-house cinemas have played a key role in the German cinema landscape since being founded in the seventies. The first years of Arsenal – Institute for Film and Video Art (formerly Friends of the

German Film Archive), which is celebrating its fiftieth birthday this year, are closely linked to the history of these "Kommunal" cinemas.

WORLD IN PROGRESS is a unique pool of films consisting of over 30 short and feature-length films acquired by arsenal distribution since 2007: films from all over the world, which grapple with life and survival, work, identity and vision with regards to both form and content. All participating cinemas receive financial support for their curatorial work and can loan and screen two feature-length films or short film programs of their choice for free. A shared Internet presence will also be created on the website which will provide information about the progress of the project.

WORLD IN PROGRESS is a platform for local and cultural cinema work in Germany: an homage to art-house cinemas and a form of active support for curated film programs. Rainer Schleßelmann's photographs, which were taken at forty German cinemas and different film initiatives in 2007, can also be put together to form exhibitions without the need for licensing, with the photos able to be purchased at cost price.

WORLD IN PROGRESS is an invitation for active networking to take place between individual event organizers and for exchange to be fostered on both content issues and logistical cooperation, all under the umbrella of the "Living Archive - Archive Work as a Contemporary Artistic and Curatorial Practice" project.

CINEMA QUADRAT

Africa has not just been a subject of interest since the colonialization of the continent, as our cinematic approach to the subject shows.

The return of former African child refugees from East Germany to Namibia has remained largely ignored in recent Germany history, giving a new twist to the subject of migration.

ABSENT PRESENT links together different stories of refugees and flight in much the same way in which director Caroline Kamya's debut film IMANI connects the fates

of three people in their own country, revealing Uganda's class differences and allowing us to take part in a piece of new African cinema which does only not take its cues from Western prototypes.

Cinema Quadrat is happy to be able to show two films from arsenal distribution's unique film pool as a part of the "World in Progress" project.

CINÉMATHEQUE LEIPZIG

Film conceptualizes the past as a sense of the here and now. As a living archive, cinema can in turn transform images of past experiences into future images for contemporary conceptions.

BESPRECHUNG and WONDERFUL TOWN are to be included within the regular program as well as the in-house curated series GRENZEN DES FILMS (THE BOUNDARIES OF FILM), thus allowing both to take on this reflective function as two different perspectives that constitute the present.

CITY 46

The "Kommunal" cinema Bremen/CITY 46 has selected the two films DE ENGEL VAN DOEL and SWEETGRASS as its contribution to the Living Archive project curated by Merle Kröger. The films are united by an extraordinarily systematic exploration of what is often described as progress and each depict pleasingly conservative variants of resistance. Questions of life and survival form the focus here, with the people (and animals respectively) being shown forming an organic part of their living environments.

FILMHAUS NÜRNBERG

The Filmhaus Nürnberg is fortunate enough to have already shown many of the film collected in the WORLD IN PROGRESS pool. As such, we have chosen a feature film and two short film programs all of which have not yet been shown here and whose compelling nature is due both to their social commitment and imagination as well as the experimental nature of their artistic implementations.

OS RESIDENTES

Brazil 2010, 120 min, original version with subtitles, director: Tiago Mata Machado

WORLD IN PROGRESS SHORT FILM PROGRAM 1:

Egypt, traces of a reproduction factory and a Korean science fiction spaceship in Berlin

WORLD IN PROGRESS SHORT FILM PROGRAM 2:

A philosophical tailor in Iran, a Jordanian desert comedy and the construction of the Rietberg Museum in Zurich.

KOKI HANNOVER

The Kommunale Kino Hannover is a “different cinema”.

Since its foundation in 1974, the cinema’s mission has been to show the whole spectrum of German and international filmmaking from beyond the commercial mainstream.

It regards itself as a workshop for independent and innovative contemporary film, for committed, avant-garde, artistic cinema and as a window onto the world of global cinematographies.

The other side to this cinema work is the targeted reflection on and presentation of film history. Since the very beginning, the Koki – much like a film museum - has been dedicated to reappraising individual aspects and eras of film history, whether in thematic cycles or retrospectives.

Promoting public awareness of the fact that film is an entirely distinct form of cultural expression, an art form that necessarily demands its early history to be looked at in retrospect in addition to its more recent tendencies: an absolutely vital task in today’s film and media landscape which can ultimately only be taken on by institutions such as film museums or “Kommunal” cinemas.

This also corresponds to the work of archives. Any place where “the archival” is more than just the administration of a legacy, where it actively intervenes curatorially speaking and makes statements with its selection, is where we see ourselves as partners. And the following adage also applies: “Kommunal” cinemas and archives – a productive and creative partnership!

Our film selection from the WORLD IN PROGRESS pool is an attempt to illustrate in exemplary fashion the many forms in and global reach of contemporary filmmaking: Taiwan, American independents, independent German cinema, fiction, documentary, essays ... life, our work...

KINEMATHEK KARLSRUHE

The curatorial concept for our film work does not just include showing individual films but is also aimed at allowing audiences to make connections, illustrating historical contexts and revealing aesthetic developments. As the Living Archive project is also defined by this sort of programming approach, it is a welcome support for the content work being carried out in a "Kommunal" cinema.

We have decided on the two films UTOPIANS and OS RESIDENTES from the World in Progress program, both of whose protagonists are social outsiders. The two films are characterized by a sense of social awareness. The second also goes on to interrogate the political protest forms of the 1960s and 70s in light of their relevance for the present.

We have for a long time already been presenting works of contemporary American independent cinema, which are characterized by a new realism that extends beyond all thematic and stylistic differences. The film UTOPIANS by director Zbigniew Bzymek is a good example of this tendency, as he finds a unique cinematic form to describe a complex reality.

The second film we selected from the WORLD IN PROGRESS program is the Brazilian production OS RESIDENTES by filmmaker Tiago Mata Machado, which functions as a sort of counterpart for the southern half of the American continent. A film which impresses not least due to its willingness to experiment in formal design.

WEITWINKEL SINGEN

What is the use of films being stuck on the shelf? They certainly can't achieve the sort of things there that they're capable of once they've been seen.

But for this to happen, they have to be shown. As simple as that may sound, it's not always quite as easy and obvious for that to happen. That's why the Arsenal Institute Berlin's Living Archive projects and WORLD IN PROGRESS in particular

are currently so important in this context: they bring the many films in the archives back to life. Important for us cinema programmers, important for audiences, as it is they who are being addressed in the end. As we also want to make “hidden treasures” available to our audiences in free-flowing and productive fashion, we decided to join the project as the smallest of the “Kommunal” cinemas involved. We have chosen two documentaries to be shown at the Weitwinkel cinema in Singen and placed them into relationship with another: DE ENGEL VAN DOEL and SWEETGRASS. Two different documentaries about two seemingly very different sets of places and people whom the filmmakers view with a “documentary” gaze, which are nonetheless connected by something which in turn touches on the medium film itself.

They are both films about things that are vanishing. And that always refers to a process that can also be represented in film. In both the chosen films, we are already aware that the things in question are going to vanish, which thus further hones our view of the films’ “subjects”: the small village of Doel in Belgium and its inhabitants are to make way for a sea harbor, while the ranchers/shepherds in Montana will no longer pass on their profession in its previous form, a place and a form of professional existence that will soon no longer be visible.

While this may be going a bit far, perhaps they can be rescued according to the conditions of the medium of film for a new era of memory.

We have thus called our double program “Films about Vanishing”. And we would like to thank all the people and institutions played a role in making WORLD IN PROGRESS possible.

KOMMUNALES KINO FREIBURG

As part of Merle Kröger’s Living Archive project, we at the Kommunales Kino Freiburg have curated a program of two films from the WORLD IN PROGRESS film pool which provide our audiences with insights on two (artistic) worlds that could not be more different: while SUPER ART MARKET throws light on the contemporary art market, which is characterized by ever more exorbitant prizes and ultimately only revolves around itself, TRAUMFABRIK KABUL focuses on a courageous woman who takes an active role in securing the right of self-

determination for Afghani women by means of her artistic work as a filmmaker, director and actress.

CINE K OLDENBURG

The WORLD IN PROGRESS project's idea of bringing current social debates into the cinema and revealing different currents in world cinema dovetails perfectly with our own understanding of cinema work. All too often our cinema's everyday existence is marked by economic concerns as a result of a lack of public funding. For us, the art of cinema programming thus consists of finding ways of making our own aspirations for the program apparent again and again.

We have therefore chosen two films from the pool as an example of this. The station and harbor district, the area where our cinema is also located, is currently undergoing radical change. Long-term residents and groups, such as the Oldenburg Wagenplatz, are being forced out in favor of expensive apartment complexes. We will thus be asking the residents of the Oldenburg Wagenburg and an occupied house to give an account of their situation following the screening of the film *DE ENGEL VAN DOEL*

New African Cinema is also a traditional focus of our program and we are pleased to be able to present a film from Uganda in the form of *IMANI*.

KINO ACHTEINHALB

As a "Kommunal" cinema, we hold the Arsenal film archive in the highest estimation. It has been a veritable treasure chest for putting together many film series and special events. We are therefore happy that Living Archive is enabling the films in the archive to be presented to the public in new contexts. The curatorial work carried out by the project participants will create new relationships both to and between the films, allowing new interpretations and new discourses to emerge, as the "archive begins to come to life".

With her WORLD IN PROGRESS film pool, Merle Kröger is bringing selected films from the Arsenal archive to the "Kommunal" cinemas. WORLD IN PROGRESS emphasizes the connection between regional film work and Arsenal's archive work: creating a presence for artistically innovative, politically relevant films that go

beyond the cinematic mainstream. This is also our programming goal at Kino achteinhalb (with our name indicating our commitment to this ideal), which is why we are taking part in the project. We have chosen two films that find unusual forms and aesthetic devices to explore the internal lives of their protagonists: LIVERPOOL by Lisandro Alonso and UMDEINLEBEN by Gesine Danckwart. The travails of a lonely sailor in the Tierra del Fuego at the end of the world and the “hip” city life of six women in Germany are stories from near and far, contrasting tales from a global world, a WORLD IN PROGRESS. The idea of putting across ideas to our audiences was also important in our selection of films, which is why we looked for local cooperation partners and found them in the Department for Spanish Studies at the University of the Saarland and the FrauenGenderBibliothek Saar. We have also invited Gesine Danckwart to Saarbrücken to attend the screening of her film so that meetings and discussions can take place. That is a part of Living Archive.