

Sabine Nessel

THE ARCHEOLOGY OF FILM

Exhibition:

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MATERIAL RESEARCH and Dossiers:

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Setting

Opening up an archive also means moving outside it. It means creating relationships that are not merely restricted to the specific contents of the respective archive but also relate to other contexts. These constantly changing connections implicitly link back to the archive, whose boundaries thus dissolve as a result. This conception of a living archive also has consequences for the understanding of cinematic archeological work. What happens when a film is removed from its cocoon of additional ballast and placed in the spotlight? What is arrived at? What is unearthed? Which film historical details emerge as a result? Which connections (from philosophy via film history to the world of consumerism) are created?

The subject of this archeological film research was the 16-mm copy of the documentary WERNER HERZOG EATS HIS SHOE (Les Blank, USA 1980) stored in the Arsenal archive. The film shows director Werner Herzog cooking and finally eating his desert boots as part of a public performance in an American cinema. Unlike other films thought lost or found, whereby opening rusty film canisters, rescuing film prints from damp cellars or wresting them from the jaws of forgetfulness play a role and thus approximate an archaeological perspective, WERNER HERZOG EATS HIS SHOE is

typical “bonus film”. Rather than ever having been lost, the film’s entire career is based on it being an extra, its primary function in film programs, at the cinema and on the DVD market being that of a footnote. It can to a certain extent be regarded as being lost in the “additional”.

At the same time, the film sheds light on a movement and zeitgeist centered upon the Pacific Film Archive at the University of California. It reflects manifold references to film history, can be read within the context of media criticism and is last but not least representative of a specific documentary film tradition and signature with regards to Les Blank. Revealing this comprehensive, always extendable nexus of (cross-)references and allowing the film to enter the spotlight instead of bemoaning its disappearance into the “additional” or re-evaluating it as a masterpiece was one of the premises of this film archeological work.

Research

With WERNER HERZOG EATS HIS SHOE forming the initial point of connection to the Arsenal archive, our approach consisted of following various different lines of enquiry within a broad-based research process, consciously allowing methodological gaps and ambiguities to emerge, explicitly discussing the possibility of failure and drawing on many different sources regardless of how fleeting or subjective. In line with Michel Foucault’s concept of archeology, contradictions were to be regarded as “neither appearances to overcome, nor secret principles to be uncovered”¹ and the random and arbitrary were to be employed as possible leitmotifs. The findings made as result of this were not intended to serve as the basis for textual analyses but rather to form an open collection of materials at the end of the research process. This process is in no way only intended to uncover inaccessible documents per se but rather to view the different discourses, places and people that flank the film, provide background information and create a suitably wide-ranging set of references. These references arose from different sources during the research process: film historical snapshots alongside philosophical texts and forensic reports, witness statements from the time alongside adverts and

¹ Foucault, Michel (2002): *The Archeology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge. p. 169

YouTube videos. Some of the connections led back into the Arsenal archive – such as via the films of Les Blank – or to the UC Theater in Berkeley, now closed, and the memories of its regular guests. Others brought forth thematic constellations of a more distant or strange nature, such as the journey that the group of settlers comprising the *Donner Party* set out on in the late 19th Century or the dough formations of Daniel Spoerri.

Presentation

The contribution to the exhibition shows neither theses nor results, with the researched materials themselves instead forming the focus. In this way, one piece of research centers on Tom Luddy and Alice Waters, the people involved in the film, as well as the triadic connection between filmmakers Les Blank, Werner Herzog and Errol Morris. Other approaches provoke potential synergies by contrasting the performative act of eating a shoe with impulses from the history of performance or history of art, with certain analogies to so-called Eat Art emerging as a result. The mechanics of Werner Herzog's media grabbing profile are also put in the crosshairs under the heading of "performance". Just as the cooking and eating of the shoe relate to paradigms from performance history, film historical connections can also be found which riff on acts of cannibalism: Charlie Chaplin and Werner Herzog thus collide with such figures as Tom & Jerry and Trey Parker.

The material research and the creation of the dossiers, a selection of which will be presented at the exhibition, was a shared production as part of a seminar at the Freie Universität Berlin. The following students were involved in carrying out the research: Christian Blumberg, Felix von Boehm, Verena Elisabet Eitel, Julia Fertig, Sabrina Firley, Borjana Gakovic, Annika Heller, Silke Hilbers, Lena Raissa Hoffmann, Tamara Höß, Alina Impe, Sarah Kleffner, Sonja Krvavac, Heide Langhammer, Annika Lenz, Ilja Lochmann, Maciej Peplinski, Martin Petrick, Stefan Sabrautzky, Thomas Scherer, Florian Sekula. The individual dossiers belong to these authors. We would like to thank them for making the materials available for the exhibition.