

I Reframing the Historical Avant-garde – Media, Historiography and Method

[N]o other single factor has influenced the emergence of the new avantgarde art as much as technology, which not only fueled the artists' imagination ..., but penetrated to the core of the work itself. The invasion of the very fabric of the art object by technology and what one may loosely call the technological imagination can best be grasped in artistic practices such as collages, assemblages, montage and photomontage; it finds its ultimate fulfillment in photography and film, art forms which can not only be reproduced, but are in fact designed for mechanical reproducibility.

Andreas Huyssen (1980)¹

Four Layers and Three Frames

The avant-garde has often been conceptualised either as a movement or as a network – both metaphors point to its dynamic and malleable nature. Flow and change are defining characteristics of a phenomenon that had taken up the cause of transforming and revolutionising life and art. The energy thus generated within avant-garde circles did not circulate completely without channels or river beds, the flow did not run from a central summit down an evenly shaped cone in all directions with equal force. The avant-garde formed (semi-)permanent connections and it had nodes through which much of the current was channelled. These networks and nodes can be detected on different levels, which should not be thought of hierarchically, but rather rhizomatically. The layers are not vertically subordinated to one another, but they are horizontally connected in a variety of fashions: overlapping with one another, complementing or contradicting each other or clicking into each other in various manners. None of those layers predetermines the other, but they all influence each other as they are interrelated in a variety of ways. The model of layers and frames attempts to construct a mental map that does not concede privilege to any of these levels.

Even though the tiers are not hierarchically stacked on top of each other, they can be identified and described. The first layer relates to physical, geographical and topological location and movement and is provided by the cities of modernism. My concentration on Berlin, Paris, London, Amsterdam, and Moscow with glances to Brussels, La Sarraz, Magnigotorsk, Stuttgart and some other places reflects the cultural logic of the network of modernist art. Rather than

developing evenly in major cities across Europe, the avant-garde emerged in several places more or less simultaneously. These places subsequently became centres of gravity and attracted energy, activists and followers on an international level. Paris in the 1920s was not only a home to avant-garde filmmakers, activists and theoreticians from all over France, but also from Spain and Italy, from Great Britain and Germany, from Brazil and Romania. Berlin was a similar meeting point for Germans, Austrians and Hungarians, but also for Scandinavians, Russians, as well as for Czech and Polish citizens. When Scotsman John Grierson turned London into a centre of innovative filmmaking in the 1930s, the cast of characters was similarly international, with activists from places as far as the United States, Brazil and New Zealand. At least for a relatively small group of activists the cities that I concentrate on were forming a global network not altogether different from the one that Saskia Sassen has more recently diagnosed for the global financial system that spans across New York, London and Tokyo.² An artist would often move through different milieus that might shift from time to time from one place to another. To give one example: After leaving his hometown of Lund in Sweden, Viking Eggeling first mingled with the cubists in Paris, during World War One he was part of the cosmopolitan artist-intellectual scene in Zurich and Ascona and after the war until his untimely death in 1924 he was part of the emergent German film avant-garde and worked closely with Hans Richter, both in Berlin and at Richter's family home in Forst (Lausitz).³ This »city« level belongs to a general history of the avant-garde and I will not delve too deeply into the social, political, cultural and economic reasons for the attraction of these cities as this would exceed the frame of my study.⁴

At the second level, the channels of transmission and network nodes are provided by institutions: organisations, associations, clubs and various support structures. The ciné-clubs and specialised film theatres, the film societies and audience organisations, the various (inter-)national affiliations and links came into existence with the explicit purpose of making contacts and personal acquaintances more permanent and stable. A cinema specialising in avant-garde film gathers an audience that exceeds the small and necessarily limited circle of friendship and acquaintance. Also located on this level are such industry departments as the Tobis company, which experimented with sound between 1928 and 1930, Grierson's different state-sponsored film units or Ufa's *Kultur-filmabteilung*. These film production institutions did not belong to the avant-garde proper, but existed in close proximity and in constant exchange with it. These efforts amount to an attempt at forming an alternative network different from that of the commercial film industry. In a systemic logic this level helps to stabilise otherwise highly susceptible structures. By having organisations for screening, distribution or production one acquires a higher degree of security in

planning – a film club with regular screenings and annual subscription provides an audience that does not have to be mobilised anew for every screening. I will discuss the networks of audience organisations in detail in chapter three.

The next level could be said to be made up of the events that these semi-permanent networks of the second level created: the screenings and discussions, the meetings and exhibitions – only by achieving a certain regularity on this more fleeting level could one move to the level of a permanent organisation: a ciné-club that does not meet on a regular basis ceases to exist, a specialised cinema that shows conventional fare loses its distinguishing mark in comparison to normal cinemas. Yet again, since the avant-garde by definition constantly had to reinvent itself, it often oscillated between the fleeting and ephemeral event (often guerrilla style) and the stable, but also more staid organisation with its bureaucracy and almost unavoidable conservatism. Also included on the third level are such singular events as the festival in La Sarraz (even though the participants believed it was the beginning of a more stable and ongoing series), the Stuttgart exhibition (which toured different cities, but in retrospect it only amounted to a series of local events) or the music festival in Baden-Baden in the years leading up to the introduction of sound. I will concentrate on these events – fragments of a practice that attempted to achieve regularity and stability, but also constantly broke away from permanence and finality – in chapter four.

The fourth level can be conceptualised as the elements that circulated inside these networks: the lectures and personal appearances, the visits and travels, but also the commissions and films in which certain elements, key players, ideas, and conceptions took shape, fell apart and reconfigured constantly (even though the network is the flow and vice versa – we have to be wary with the notion that there is a network separate from the substance flowing inside the vessels).

These four levels do not necessarily encompass all of the possible interests in the avant-garde. One could, for example, discuss the biography of the key players not in terms of the auteur theory, but as attractors and dynamic structures inter-connecting the different layers. My interest in these semi-successful and unstable attempts at network building, in these rhizomes of the avant-garde is archaeological. When reviewing the events and institutions one can reconstruct how the players involved in the avant-garde conceptualised the development of the movement and intended to sustain it. These four layers will be overlaid and complemented with three frames of reference, one temporal (the historical period under investigation), one geographical (the spatial extension of the layers), and one conceptual (the tools and methods employed in this work).

1.1 The Temporal Frame: Historiography and the Coming of Sound Film

The period of the transition to sound film offers a splendid example of historical overdetermination.

Alan Williams (1992)⁵

The first wave of the cinematic avant-garde emerged in the 1920s and had its peak around 1930. The time period under investigation is thus framed by two World Wars and these two decades are marked in the middle by the introduction of synchronised sound to the cinema. Sound film and the intricate history of its introduction between (roughly) 1927 and 1932 will provide a temporal frame for this study. This media transition has been examined from a variety of perspectives: the technology, the systems of synchronisation and the film industry,⁶ the international traffic of money, know-how and patents,⁷ the shift in Hollywood from silent to sound⁸ and the introduction of sound film in different European countries.⁹ In contrast, the continuities and ruptures of the avant-garde across this historical divide have occupied a marginal place in film history: What was the fate of the film avant-garde during the coming of sound, what were the dominant opinions, how did production, distribution and exhibition react to the technological restructuring? These and other questions will be addressed in the following chapters.

The traditional story of the film avant-garde and the coming of sound is worn-out and staid. It is normally told along these lines: The devastation of World War One was hardly over when young and progressive artists in different parts of Europe challenged traditional norms in a project that evolved into the European film avant-garde in the course of the 1920s. Aesthetically explorative, politically confrontational and internationally minded, this group of creative individuals forged continually closer ties until, all of a sudden, the introduction of sound destroyed cosmopolitanism, aroused nationalism, and brought the hopeful bloom to a sudden end. It is along these lines that the story of the classic avant-garde in film is normally told. Let it suffice to invoke just one example to stand in for countless other text books and historical overviews:

[T]his experimental phase ended with the coming of sound. ... [T]he termination was also informed by the anti-realist agendas common to all the avant-gardes, with sound representing a decisively realist ›supplement‹ to the image. ... The search for cinematic ›specificity‹ was polemical and separatist on the one hand – against theatrical and narrative models – synthesising and hybridising on the other, with models from painting and music.¹⁰

In this brief extract there are a number of unspoken, half-spoken and outspoken assumptions which are at least debatable to me: To start with, sound is seen as intrinsically and by definition a realist supplement to the image (does this imply that the image is non-realist? Or is the image » less realistic « than sound?). Secondly, the film avant-garde is pictured as inherently anti-realist, and ambivalently poised between drawing on other arts and defining itself in contrast to them. Thirdly, the alleged turn to realism is bound up (causally?) with the introduction of sound. The discussion around cinema as an art form, my fourth objection, is limited to an early phase in which abstraction provided the guiding concept whereas the Soviet contribution is absent as well as the emerging documentary after 1930. And the last point of criticism to the standard version concerns the limiting way in which the avant-garde is defined: negatively, as based on experimentation and antagonism to certain concepts of the industry (separation of the film from the life of the spectator, individual reception). Interpreting the introduction of sound as the sole, or at least the main reason for the downfall of the avant-garde implicitly advocates a technological determinism in which a new medium is defined *a priori* in a deterministic fashion as shaped by its technological set-up, not by its social and cultural usage and utility. Sound film is by no means inherently realistic – even if it has often been employed that way.

Traditional accounts retrospectively purify the avant-garde in an act of reductionism that limits its scope to abstract moving shapes and formal experiments, to *cinéma pur* and *absoluter Film*.¹¹ Yet, filmmakers and activists had over the course of the 1920s slowly moved towards hybrid forms in which realist depictions were juxtaposed with unusual perspectives and innovative or conflicting editing patterns. In the traditional view, the influence of the Soviet montage school – which had its breakthrough in Western Europe with the celebrated presentation of Sergei Eisenstein's *BRONENOSEZ » POTEMKIN «* (SU 1925, › Battleship Potemkin ›) in April 1926 in Berlin – is often absent. The Soviet Union as a shorthand for radically different cultural and artistic activities and output in the way it was received outside the Soviet Union – highly selective and idiosyncratic – will form the vanishing point for many of the activities and players discussed here as the communist country offered in the 1920s a very different model of cinema culture and of society at large.¹²

The introduction of sound in the United States was considerably different from the transition in Europe. It has been argued that » sound as sound, as a material and as a set of technical procedures, was inserted into the already constituted system of the classical Hollywood style «¹³. David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson propose in their monumental *Classical Hollywood Cinema* that sound caused little trouble and even less change for an already established system. Unlike in Europe, the production methods and the industrial

balance of power in the US was not fundamentally shaken by the coming of sound. Most certainly, a normative power was inherent in the introduction of sound in both America and Europe, leading to a greater standardisation. Therefore, the coming of sound can be seen as an important step in the shift of control from exhibitors to manufacturers of motion pictures: » The coming of synchronized recorded sound to world cinema essentially completes the mechanization of the medium. And with full mechanization comes the most pervasive, general change brought about by the conversion to sound: increased standardization. «¹⁴ Shooting practices and local exhibition specificities, projection speed and musical accompaniment – all had to yield to the overwhelming power that the introduction of sound carried with it like a gigantic tidal wave. For the avant-garde this meant that it not only had to deal with the new medium of sound cinema, but it moreover had – if it wanted to be more than an alternative aesthetics, but revolutionise the cinema in all its aspects – to take account of a situation that was in turmoil and undergoing a gigantic transformation between 1928 and 1932. It is exactly this time period in which the most fascinating experiments and the most intense efforts at building an alternative network culminated.

1.2 The Geographical Frame: Europe and the Cities of Modernism

The media is vital to the argument that modern nations are imagined communities. But contemporary media activity is also clearly one of the main ways in which transnational cultural connections are established.

Andrew Higson (2000)¹⁵

Besides the temporal frame just sketched, this study also constitutes a spatial field: geographically, it will take » Europe « as its frame of reference. Europe allows me to get away from a reliance on two traditional and narrow frames of reference: the biographical and the national. Employing the framework of » the national « in cinema studies has increasingly been questioned in the past ten to fifteen years. The discourse on the nation and cinema can be roughly divided into three phases.¹⁶ Until well into the 1970s, sometimes as late as the early 1980s, the term » national cinema « has been employed in an unproblematic manner, in accordance with » nation «, » national culture « and all other derivative thereof which were largely considered as givens. Since the 1980s, a body of material has been produced in a second wave dealing with the » national « in film studies in more refined and sophisticated ways. Most studies from the second stage of the discussion dealt with questions of European national cinemas,

especially with England as a focus of interest. In the 1990s, in a third phase, the emphasis has increasingly shifted to » minor «, » marginal « or » subaltern « national cinemas and complicated earlier modernist approaches to European national cinemas, pointing out the necessarily hybrid or multiple character of any national cinema culture. One could also speak of a shift of focus from a classic-realist mode in which representations were taken directly and at face value to a modernist approach complicating matters but firmly from within a European perspective using most often the theories of Benedict Anderson, Anthony Smith and Eric Hobsbawm,¹⁷ while the third phase coincides with the fragmenting trajectories and lines of flights elaborated in post-modern, postcolonial and poststructuralist theories discernible in the work of, amongst many others, Homi Bhabha and Edward Said.¹⁸

No matter how diverse opinions may be, one thing seems to be certain: to talk of a national cinema always constructs an imaginary coherence. The problems involved in this act of boundary drawing have been pointed out in recent work in film studies that took the historical and political studies mentioned above into account.¹⁹ Referring to European cinema is not done with the aim of substituting a » bad « object (the national) with a » good « one (Europe), but it will focus on the practice at a specific historical moment which was characterised by its European scope. The film avant-garde as conceptualised in this study is characterised in the actual and factual exchange of ideas, practitioners, and films. The issue of nation is not central to these questions because the question of why and how the state (as a political and juridical entity) and the nation (as an imagined community) intervened in these exchanges is not pertinent. Rather, I am interested in how the concept » Europe « has been mobilised in different projects and to different aims. The nation-state in various political and organisational forms returns with a vengeance in the 1930s when many avant-garde filmmakers turned to the state for financial and organisational support, although mostly indirectly through government agencies or political parties. In some countries, the nation-state also played a key role in the self-historicising of the avant-garde when offshoots of the movement founded the first film archives and film museums financed by governments.

The pronounced internationalism of the avant-garde movement actually requires a European framework. When Louis Delluc screened *DAS CABINET DES DR. CALIGARI* (GER 1919/20, Robert Wiene, › The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari ‹) at the cinema *Colisée* in Paris on 14 November 1921 it was not only a partisan action in aesthetic terms, but it was first and foremost a political provocation. Just as Fernand Léger had consciously sought the confrontation with the anti-German establishment the year before when he insisted on including German (expressionist) artists in the reopened *Salon des Indépendents*, Delluc's internationalism saw cinema not only as a new emerging art form, but also as a social and political

force with a wide-ranging impact. Under the banner of aesthetic innovation (and officially announced as a benefit screening for the Spanish Red Cross) Del-luc included a film from Germany into a French cinema programme, at that time an enemy whose products were despised and prohibited. Effectively, this event broke the French boycott as the successful reception of *DAS CABINET DES DR. CALIGARI* brought other German films into French cinemas.²⁰ Similarly, when Eisenstein's *POTEMKIN* hit Berlin's screens in early 1926 it was an event that immediately had European repercussions. Seen from the perspective of the avant-garde, the national was a frame to overcome and get rid of.

If the national is the Scylla of studying the film avant-garde, then the biographical is its Charybdis. Biography provides the easiest ready-made frame of reference available for aesthetic study. A biography supplies a clear structure (chronology, organic development, physical coherence) and tends towards isolating works of art from their context in which they were first produced and received. In focusing on stylistic analyses of isolated artefacts one misunderstands the avant-garde, which is striving towards a media concept which has to be grasped in its totality before contemplating isolated elements. My interest therefore focuses on the strategic manoeuvring, the political and social interventions (intra-filmic and, equally important, extra-filmic), the networking and publishing efforts, and the discursive regimes established, modified and rejected. I doubt that the most fruitful way of doing historiographical work in the arts is to put the durable and material work of art above more fleeting and ephemeral activity, to put the seeming consistency of the biography above the more unstable networks and connections. For reasons of convenience, tradition, institutional ramifications and support mechanisms the study of the film avant-garde has focused on either of the two sides – the national or the biographical. I will downplay both structures in the following chapters and instead concentrate on institutions, events, networks and discourses.

While Europe is the geographical frame of this work in a wider sense, the following pages focus on a number of cities as the hubs of activity. This study concentrates on events and institutions in Western Europe with Paris, Berlin, London and Amsterdam as its main centres (marginally other places such as Switzerland and Belgium will also be featured) and the Soviet Union as its vanishing point. Even though comparable activities took place in Lisbon and Prague, in Stockholm and Ljubljana, in Warsaw and Rome, the most influential activities happened around the cities first mentioned – they were the major nodes in the network that made up the European avant-garde of the interwar period. To get an understanding of the interconnected nature of the avant-garde, of its internal functioning and of the wider patterns of emergence it is paramount to reconstruct this core network around which other activities wrapped themselves. Malcolm Bradbury has described these cities of modern-

ism as »generative environments of the new arts, focal points of intellectual community, indeed of intellectual conflict and tension.«²¹ He goes on to argue that these cities were not only cosmopolitan spaces of communication, but also the topic of artistic activity, a metaphor as well as a place. The city was both a cause and an effect of the modern world as much as the avant-garde: both were results of the fundamental social, political, economic, psychic and economical transformations, but both also contributed to them. Bradbury isolates the novel as the quintessential artistic form of the city. While the connection between the city and the novel is certainly crucial, I would contend that the cinema, and especially the city symphony, provides the ultimate metaphor of and for the modern life in the city.

1.3 The Conceptual Frame: Crisis, Archaeology and Systems

A consistently archaeological approach not only has to widen the range of questions deemed relevant, but also to change the starting-point of the questions and to put into doubt one's own historiographic premises; for example by including discontinuities, the so-called dead ends and the possibility of an amazing otherness of the past.

Thomas Elsaesser (2002)²²

The historiographical model employed here testifies to a number of influences. The first theoretical frame was provided by the New Film History that emerged in the 1980s and added methodological rigour to traditionalist, non-theoretical history and fact-finding missions.²³ The move away from the film as text and an increased attention towards the cinema as a social, economic, political and cultural institution is my key influence from the New Film History.²⁴ A second inspiration has been Michel Foucault's conception of history as archaeology and genealogy. The third theorist to be reckoned with is Niklas Luhmann and his version of systems theory, which helped me to rethink the interactions, co-optations and dependencies of the avant-garde within a public media arena. Wherever possible, I have harked back to the writings of the activists from the 1920s and 1930s as many of the tools for the understanding of the film avant-garde have been developed by the people involved in these activities.

In terms of historiography the period of the introduction of sound can be seen as a prime example of a »crisis-model of historiography«²⁵ which involves a triple focus: on indexicality, on economic factors and on political issues. In theoretical and aesthetic terms, the coming of sound resulted in a »crisis of indexi-

cality « – the (representational) film image now had to cope with an addition that was perceived by some observers to heighten realism, yet that also opened up a gap between the visible body on the screen and the audible sound from the loudspeakers. Not only does the film image originate at the back of the architectural space of the cinema while sound comes from behind the screen in front of the spectators, but sight and sound are also inscribed and worked upon with different technological processes on different apparatuses. The simultaneity and synchronicity between image and sound perceived by the spectator is therefore in technological terms an arbitrary relation and was seen as such from the very start. Sound film did not only have aesthetic repercussions, its economic ramifications challenged the existing order of the institution cinema. The gigantic costs involved in wiring production facilities and cinemas in a relatively short time around 1930 caused a gigantic upheaval in economic terms. This economic-institutional crisis was deepened by the first global depression following the US stock market crash of October 1929. The third crisis is cultural and political in nature: The introduction of sound not only brought noise and music to the film, but also language. In the silent era, inter-titles were easy to replace, thus adapting a film for a different market was fairly easy and relatively unproblematic. With sound the different methods of translation all became problematic: subtitles made the otherness of a language omnipresent in visual as well as in aural terms while it was perceived by contemporaries as a step back towards the inter-titles of the silent era that had just been left behind. Dubbing coupled a visible human body with an audible voice not connected to the body, thus destroying the assumed unity of sight and sound that many thought was the main achievement of sound film.²⁶ In some countries (e.g., Czechoslovakia, Italy) this resulted in an extreme, sometimes even violent reaction against dialogue spoken in a foreign language. This triple crisis – of indexicality, the economic-institutional base of the film industry, and the national – highlights problems and contradictions because the ensuing upheaval questioned many elements of the institution cinema.

In my discussions of the contemporary discourses I have been influenced by the concept of archaeology as elaborated by Michel Foucault.²⁷ In a number of studies on prison and surveillance,²⁸ on the organisation of knowledge and the construction of categories,²⁹ on the »invention« of insanity in the age of reason,³⁰ and on the medical gaze,³¹ Foucault has exemplified his historiographical practice on specific objects. He has pioneered a method of understanding specific practices as discourses that perform at least two intimately related functions: these practices as discourses play a central part in the constitution of society and they regulate exclusion and inclusion. For Foucault the acts of discursive demarcation are the basis for analysing how power, language and society interact at specific moments in the creation of specific historical configuration. Fou-

cault's theory is useful in understanding discursive operations as historical practices that are being operated in order to produce hierarchical divisions.

Within media history, the concept of archaeology has gained ground in the last ten years developing its own methodology.³² Wolfgang Ernst has likened the archaeological method to the cold and emotionless gaze of a machine that first and foremost registers without interpreting. He has juxtaposed it to the hermeneutic gaze, which always already sees something else behind every text or object. Whereas hermeneutics attempt to fit everything in an already known horizon of expectation, the aim of media archaeology is »...primarily to describe the artefact in its givenness – in other words: as a datum, as data – i.e., letting it stand as a monument instead of (just as historians tend to operate) transforming it into a document or an illustration of an underlying history. «³³ The method of media archaeology consists first of all of an act of »forgetting« everything that has come after the fact in an attempt to understand a period on its own terms. By going back in time and trying to understand what was meant by a specific practice, by attempting to see historical facts as monuments of a past practice, archaeology tries to reconstruct this practice.

By returning to a specific sub-genre of film studies, the study of early cinema, Thomas Elsaesser has opened a new perspective on today's media. In Elsaesser's archaeology, early cinema functions as a possible blueprint for the restructured field of new media, but also for the possible development of film and media studies into new media studies. The attention given to moments of transitions and change, possibility and utopia has influenced my model. Elsaesser provides a number of parameters and paradigms with an agenda for future research and a renewed media history: The refusal to search for beginnings amounts to a renewal of history, questioning the already-said at the level of existence gives new perspectives on well-known facts, an attention to the dead-ends and failures of media history opens up a space of possible futures that were imaginable at a certain point in time, and a heightened awareness for the absence of evidence as the evidence of a past presence opens history up to a wider perspective.³⁴

Finally, Niklas Luhmann has developed a useful method of conceptualising the relationship of different systems to each other that does not revert to simplistic notions of influence, to folk psychology or to direct cause-effect schemata.³⁵ In his branch of systems theory, a system is characterised by its complete closure to the outside; the basic distinction runs between the system itself and the environment because this distinction creates the system in the first place, it brings it into existence. A system can observe the environment only according to the terms of its own operation: »Self-referential systems do not possess any other way of contact with the environment than self-contact.«³⁶ Thus, the economic system, which operates under the basic distinction of paying or not pay-

ing (having money or not, trading or not) assesses everything according to this code and logic, including those operations that involve entities outside its boundaries. Every system translates outside events into its own frequency because this is the only way that a system is able to understand what is going on in the environment. Thus, communication and interaction are always self-reflexive, necessarily indirect and distorted by the translation from one code to another. Communication that is meaningful in one system might be just white noise when picked up by another. To take the systems theory idea into my field of study: The systemic logic and functioning of the film industry and the avant-garde were separate from each other (even though neither of them achieved full autonomy) and one system was basically not visible to the other system as they worked under different operational premises. For the film industry the avant-garde did not exist as a stable entity because everything outside the industry is perceived as environment; the same holds true vice versa for the avant-garde. Moreover, the industry and the avant-garde were both incapable of understanding the other system according to the basic codes on which they were operating, but translated their operations into their own frequency. These translations of signals and codes make misunderstanding, or rather: distortion and white noise, inevitable.

1.4 The Corpus: Defining the Avant-garde

[The historiography of artistic modernism] has typically formalized the work of early twentieth-century European movements in ways that decontextualize the works and diminish access to their historical significance. For decades the analysis and evaluation of these movements has subjected them to normative procedures that sidestepped political issues and guaranteed their conformity to the separation of art and pointed social purpose This work has been disproportionately aestheticized in such a way that the losses for cultural history exceed the gains for art's formal and craft history.
Stephen C. Foster (1998)³⁷

There is certainly no shortage of books on the film avant-garde: There are histories of film theory which provide ample space for the contribution of the avant-garde³⁸, very detailed historical studies of specific groups which were active in producing, exhibiting, publishing and teaching avant-garde cinema,³⁹ reprints of magazines dealing with avant-garde film⁴⁰ and studies of specific movements,⁴¹ national cinematographies⁴² or *auteurs* of this period,⁴³ not to mention those books that gave a general overview of avant-garde, independent and experimental film.⁴⁴ These studies all have their historical and analytical

use value and if I depart from them it is with a measure of respect for the achievements of those pioneers who came before. Where I intend to diverge from these studies is, very broadly speaking, in the way in which they dissect and isolate a specific person, oeuvre or facet without taking into account or reflecting the *dispositifs*, discourses, networks, systems, levels of self-reference or structuring absences that I consider to be much more crucial shaping factors than the biography or the nation-state. I believe that the works of avant-garde art can only be understood adequately if analysed in its context of production, distribution and consumption, if scrutinised dialectically, and thus brought to another level of generality.

Especially interesting and fascinating are those instances that transgress or blow up conventional categories into which retrospective thinking had squeezed the avant-garde. To give an example: instead of concentrating on Hans Richter as an artist in the conventional sense (producing works that are aesthetically explorative and that can be hermeneutically analysed), he can be rethought as an activist on many different fronts. Richter organised exhibitions, programmed a cinema for an artistic-industrial exhibition and founded film societies, lectured and wrote, published and networked, not to mention the many different film forms in which he worked (advertisement, industrial film, compilation film, experimental short). These fields are disparate in some senses, but they also belong together. They are part of a whole discourse which can only be discerned when practice is taken as seriously as the material results of the work. Other key figures that will feature centrally in this study are Béla Balázs, Germaine Dulac, Sergei Eisenstein, Joris Ivens, László Moholy-Nagy, Walter Ruttmann and Dziga Vertov, to mention only the most famous ones. These agents adhered to an ideal of totality at a time before the functional differentiation of the film industry and after the introduction of sound did away with these conceptions of wholeness.

In analysing the *Dutch Filmliga*, Tom Gunning has argued for a wide perspective in the study of the film avant-garde. Traditional approaches have concentrated on films and theoretical texts in keeping with traditional thinking, which was based on the analysis of texts (herein of course following structuralist terminology in which film counts as a text too). Gunning argues for the inclusion of facets, which are more ephemeral and harder to detect: institutions and programming, distribution, publication and debate.⁴⁵ He argues that films and printed texts in the magazine *Filmliga* form only the most visible trace of a network consisting of a group of people in several Dutch cities meeting in order to watch films and discuss them afterwards. Retrospective analyses very often neglect the social practices because material results (films, books) are much easier to get a hold of and analyse. Moreover, film studies are not well equipped methodologically to deal with social practice because the genealogy in (hermeneuti-

cally inflected) humanities provide an orientation towards audio-visual artefacts or written texts. Furthermore, theory formation is normally considered retrospectively: histories of film theory are written afterwards on the basis of the important canonised texts (mostly from canonised writers). For contemporary observers in the 1920s and 1930s, the situation was much more difficult: For them, film theory, or rather, attempts at theory formation, were much more a process than a result, more a snapshot than a monolith, whereas later critics and historians look at those texts that have for various reasons stood the test of time. What I will attempt here is to give the theorisation some of its procedural nature back. Theory is a process, not a product.

As I have just laid out, the object to be reconstructed in the following pages is not without its vicissitudes. It may start with a simple question that raises complicated problems: Does one speak of avant-garde in the singular or in the plural? The avant-garde as a unified movement perhaps never existed, but a loose structure, which saw itself as belonging together, can be detected. Avant-garde was a common name both as a self-description and also as a name given by others during the period under consideration.⁴⁶ When I examine the activities of the avant-garde I am not primarily interested in the aesthetic style of their films or the underlying philosophy. Therefore, I am not interested in questions such as whether *BALLET MECHANIQUE* (FR 1924, Fernand Léger / Dudley Murphy) is Dada, Surrealist or Constructivist, as this would mean a departure from the archaeological method. The different strands of the avant-garde had very strong personal, intellectual and organisational continuity and categorisation or compartmentalisation was a very unimportant factor at the time. Sometimes, when it is necessary to differentiate Constructivism from Expressionism, I will distinguish different trends, but on the whole the proximity of the different movements is stronger than their differences.

The complete scope of the specific » practice « of the avant-garde is important for a thorough understanding and this will be the focus of my study: In lecturing and writing, the avant-garde formulated some of their ideas (though these texts certainly form no simple description of their ideas and convictions), production, distribution, and exhibition show attempts at putting these ideas into practice. In teaching and in building institutions, we can recognise the attempt of constructing structures that are independent of individual actors and that will be self-sustaining over time. Their activities formed a discourse and they attempted to create a system of their own, yet they never achieved operational closure to the environment in a Luhmannian sense. A concentration on the films alone results in a duplication of the limits of traditional film history because the end product often camouflages the work and negotiations that led to the finished artefact. Examining a film that originates with the avant-garde under

purely aesthetic principles misconceives the movement's ideas about the transformation of film culture.

My turn from the work of art to the network of art, from hermeneutics to discourse and from biography to systems theory does not imply a disregard for the artefacts and their possible resonances in aesthetic analyses which are often exquisite and multi-layered, but I am pursuing a different path of understanding this movement. Every step, be it the making of a film, the founding of a ciné-club or the publication of an article, can be seen as a systemic operation focussed on the survival, nourishment and expansion of the avant-garde. By adopting an archaeological gaze couched in a logic of systems theory I hope to shed new light on well known, forgotten and unknown facets of the network that constituted the European film avant-garde. The practice under examination brought forth works of art that are neither by-products nor objects waiting for exegesis, but elements of a system that I want to reconstruct. In my opinion, many of the activities, filmmaking or not, aimed at creating a *Medienverbund* (media offensive) in an ensemble of different media, an audience capable of growing and a changed production situation working together to create a new art for new statements in a new public sphere.

Ultimately, the avant-garde was as much a symptom of modernity – being unthinkable without the widespread technological, social, political, economic and cultural changes that are united under this banner – as a cause that contributed to the uncertainty that many felt when confronted by a radically transformed environment. The avant-garde itself acted as a half-transparent mirror that on the one hand reflected modernity in all its deeply felt ambivalence, yet on the other hand it also gave an interpretation of the human condition under changed circumstances. Not coincidentally, the city symphony became the most celebrated genre of the avant-garde and something of a fad in the late 1920s as it provided a *mise-en-abyme* and allegory of the conditions that had brought the avant-garde movement into existence. The city viewed through the lens of the technologically most advanced medium focused on contradictions inherent in the avant-garde. The city as an allegory and shorthand of modern life with all its social and economic factors that contributed to it became the most decisive factor in avant-garde activity. The avant-garde with all its critical and affirmative potential is as divided at heart as modernity – while it aimed ultimately at » solving « the problems of modernity, it was itself » part of the problem «. It is only in this dialectical nature that one can understand the avant-garde, its triumphs and defeats which are often to be found in the same instance and which we should rather see in an inclusive » as-well-as « logic instead of in an exclusive » either-or « dichotomy.

This is an archaeological work in the sense that I have gathered a number of well-known and less well-known facts in order to understand the specific prac-

tice of a group at a specific moment in history. I have attempted to let the historical documents talk back as monuments from a distant past on their own terms. By developing a logic out of the practice of the avant-garde I hope to avoid the problematic nature of hermeneutics in which a horizon of expectation puts everything into perspective before the elements are allowed » to speak for themselves «. For my purposes I have gathered, summarised and analysed material that has become available in the last ten to 15 years. As I had to create my own object in the first place, I had to fight with an instability of what I was dealing with. As a result, I have attempted to construct a frame of reference and a number of ideas for the study of the avant-garde cinema between 1919 and 1939 and the transformations of a technological medium. I hope that some of the ideas put forward on the following pages will give rise to renewed attention to the avant-garde and will bring forth novel research and revisionist historiography.

1.5 The Avant-garde as Angel of History: Theses on the Interwar Film Avant-garde

[U]pheavals such as the coming of recorded sound intensify and help direct the progress of trends already in place.

In continental Europe, for example, these included the weakening and fragmentation of the post war avant-garde movements.

Alan Williams (1992)⁴⁷

I will subsequently present four theses that will occupy a central position in one of the four following chapters. Yet, by its dialectical and networked nature, the other three ideas will also simultaneously be present, perhaps less visible and worked out within the text. The co-presence of these four points is also a sign of the interconnected and indivisible nature of the different elements that constitute the avant-garde.

1. In 1929, after the successes of the *Werkbund*-exhibition in Stuttgart and the meeting in La Sarraz,⁴⁸ with a boom in audience organisations and an upsurge in publishing and writing, the avant-garde seemed to be on the verge of a breakthrough to a mass movement. Yet, the opposite was the case: the avant-garde fell apart and petered out. One could formulate the first thesis as: Why did the avant-garde not stay together firmly and build on what had been achieved by 1929? I will argue that a number of aporias riddled the avant-garde and with the introduction of sound film these internal contradictions became increasingly points of conflict. Groups that had been kept together before by a

vague opposition to the commercial feature film or to narrative cinema broke apart. One of the important tasks of the avant-garde was to raise these aporias to the level of consciousness. As the fault lines were being realised, different people took different approaches to these problems and consequently went in different directions. Yet, it was paramount that these issues of in/dependence, abstraction/realism, communism/fascism, and commercialism/elitism were addressed properly and thoroughly. The post-war avant-garde turned to these forerunners, yet in a highly selective fashion: they were looking for heroic and spiritual forefathers in order to build a genealogy justifying their actions. In a way, my four aporias point out one central problem of any alternative political or social movement aimed at change (and thus still valid for the post-war avant-garde): What is the role of art in society and how can culture engender change while operating in an environment that it wants to transform? The aporias of the avant-garde will be the focus of the following chapter and I will illustrate them by a rereading of contemporary debates. Also pertinent to this issue is the question of self-definition, of what avant-garde was meant to be and the self-positioning of the artists.

2. The second thesis aims at restructuring and reconfiguring the history of the European cinema in the interwar period. It is my contention that sound film had a decisive effect on the avant-garde, but that it is insufficient to argue that sound brought about the downfall of the avant-garde. In aesthetic terms, sound film proved to be a welcome addition to the avant-garde as many early sound films were made in a context that was clearly influenced by the avant-garde. Here are some examples of early sound films that belong to a combined history of the avant-garde and the mainstream that put sound to innovative use: *MELODIE DER WELT* (GER 1928/29, Walter Ruttmann, ›Melody of the World‹), *ALLES DREHT SICH, ALLES BEWEGT SICH* (GER 1929, Hans Richter, ›Everything turns, everything moves‹), *SOUS LES TOITS DE PARIS* (FR 1929/30, René Clair, ›Under the roofs of Paris‹), *LE MILLION* (FR 1930, René Clair, ›The Million‹), *DAS LIEB VOM LEBEN* (GER 1930, Alexis Granowsky, ›The Song of life‹), *M* (GER 1930-31, Fritz Lang), *PHILIPS RADIO* (NL 1931, Joris Ivens), *ENTUZIAZM: SINFONIJA DONBASSA* (SU 1930, Dziga Vertov, ›Enthusiasm: Donbass Symphony‹), *KUHLE WAMPE, ODER WEM GEHÖRT DIE WELT* (GER 1932, Slatan Dudow, ›Kuhle Wampe, or to whom belongs the world?‹), *DEZERTIR* (SU 1933, Vsevolod Pudovkin, ›Deserter‹), and the sound films of Oskar Fischinger or Len Lye. One could also point to Richter's work in advertising in Switzerland or the films produced as part of the film department of the Bata shoe company in Zlín (Czechoslovakia).⁴⁹ Besides these films, many of the central figures of the avant-garde had interesting ideas on the employment of sound and did not reject the new technology outright. Some of the reasons for the restructuring and func-