Film as Art Criticism

Artistic Film Contribution

MODERATION
SABINE MARIA SCHMIDT

STEFAN RÖMER

Fig. 29: Stefan Römer, *ReCoder of Life*, Still, 2018

Moderator Sabine M. Schmidt

Sabine Maria Schmidt

I am very pleased to introduce Stefan Römer as a member of AICA. In 2000, he received one of the very few awards for art critics that exist in Germany, the ADKV-Art Cologne Prize for Art Criticism.

Stefan Römer works with several media as both an artist and theorist. His art history dissertation was published in 2001 under the title »Künstlerische Strategien des Fake – Kritik von Original und Fälschung (Artistic Strategies of the Fake – Critique of Original and Forgery)«, an important topic which he has since been pursuing continuously. He worked as an assistant at the Academy of Media Arts Cologne, as Professor for New Media at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, and since then as a visiting professor at numerous academies. In addition to his visual and musical work, his cinematic work is also important. In 2006, he launched the feature-length film *Conceptual Paradise* and is currently working on the experimental film cycle *ReCoder*, from which we will now see *ReCoder of Life*.[1] After the film, he will explain his concept of criticism.

Sabine Maria Schmidt

The film was premiered in May at the International Short Film Festival Ober-hausen, and we are pleased that we are able to show it here at the conference in the appropriate format. There is a very decisive point in the film when the leading actress Reco asks the question: »What is critique?«

Stefan Römer

Reco then speaks visibly, but you cannot hear what she says. There is a pronoun-ced silence; a gong resounds. This acoustic reduction accentuates the image. With this, I provide a hypothetical response in the film. The faded-in texts read: »critique means« – »recoding reality«.

I would like to make the following comments on the context of the film: The term »populist game« appears in the film. A background for reflection in my film was the theme of ›populism‹, which appears in the title of this conference and which was also the subject of the conference panel with Oliver Marchart and Ana Teixeira Pinto.

The special form of my film is occasionally described as *challenging*, since there are many different text levels. There are, however, also many strong images that form different layers with the texts. But the audience talks mostly about the texts. The reason why I have been working with such text structures, not only in this film but also in per-formances (in some cases since the mid-1980s), is that, in contrast to populism, I am con-cerned with maximising complexity – in other words, not with a simplification of content but rather with an increase of complexity. For I do not want to comply with the cultural dictate that it is always about viewer ratings or click counts that can be achieved with simple content. Beyond that, it is also completely doubtful whether simplification is truly in the interest of the audience. But populism claims that it is.

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1   See: Stefan Römer, *ReCoder of Life*, on: *vimeo*, URL: https://vimeo.com/336762237 [last vistit on 17 November 2020].

I am interested, first and foremost, in a cinematic scenario rather than in a precise transmission of information. For this purpose, the text layers, in addition to the images and sounds, are very important to me. Characteristic for my use of text in film is a quote from the filmmaker and theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha from 1990: »Concepts are no less practical than images or sound«.

I would like to connect this quotation with the film theory of Gilles Deleuze, namely that the work of theory is to be taken just as seriously as the work of the image or the film. Both must be produced or created and are the result of communicative work as practice. This together is the key to my films.

On the question of why I stopped writing art criticism, I would like to say that I simply could no longer afford to spend the time for art criticism as and alongside my own artistic work. The first reason was that the pay was too low; the second reason was that serious criticism was met with a withdrawal of information from the art institutions, which made certain artistic discussions and the work of art criticism more difficult.

Sabine Maria Schmidt

But you understand – rightly so – that your film work is also a form of criticism, and you also introduce a method with the film. Could you explain this a little, in particular the central idea of being able to re-code reality – which implies a previous coding through images, doesn't it?

Fig. 30 a: Stefan Römer, *ReCoder of Life*, Still, 2018

Stefan Römer
　　　　Everything is coded as soon as it is denoted and negotiated by language. The title *ReCoder* is initially used in a historicising way. The reference is the film *Decoder* (1984) – which can be considered an underground film because it is so unknown; with its leading actresses Christiane F., who was known through the book »Zoo Station: The Story of Christiane F.«, and F. M. Einheit, who was the drummer of the band *Einstürzende Neubauten* at the time. The film aims to decode subliminal sound information that is played in hamburger joints as ambient sound. According to the theory formulated by William S. Burroughs in his book »The Electronic Revolution«, the information of the dominant system of government is decoded and processed by the collage-montage technique of the cut-up. The subsequent playing of the sound collage at the place where it was originally recorded is intended to lead to revolts there. Burroughs himself even makes a cameo appearance in my film.
　　　　In addition, I use the term ›recoder‹ to refer to a theoretical paradigm shift. From today's point of view, all the above-mentioned components have changed. Above all, digitisation has changed the relationship between the individual and the code of information. To give a brief indication of this: today I speak more of recoding, because the autonomy for an act of decoding is no longer given unconditionally and without context. In the new media ›ambient‹, we are constantly expected to decode and recode, from which there is hardly any possibility of withdrawal.
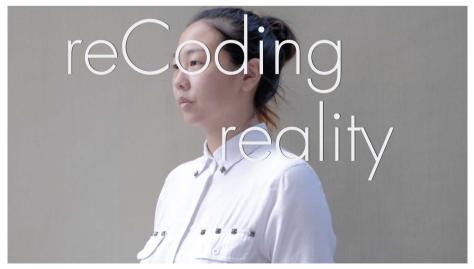

Fig. 30 b: Stefan Römer, *ReCoder of Life*, Still, 2018

Sabine Maria Schmidt

I would like to come back to the images that I already found very coded and conceptually thought through. After all, there is no ›dérive‹ through an Asian metropolis but rather, despite all the apparent randomness, there are still very decidedly interwoven reference systems.

Stefan Römer

I am interested in very precise film settings and layering in the montage of shots, whereby the pans and zooms refer to historical working methods of film. But I am even more interested in the emancipated audience being able to interpret the material I offer as they wish. In doing so, I also try to allow for coincidences. The texts in the film therefore do not have to be read and understood letter by letter. It is rather an offer, like a poem or a novel – or like the documentary photography of a street scene. This is the difference between art and the news, the latter of which should be completely understandable.

My fear is that a great deal is currently being subordinated to economisation, for example by statistically determining and specifying the modes of reception and the duration of reception. One need only think of the pre-announced reading time for digital newspaper articles. It seems to me that there is far too little resistance to this economisation of the whole of life.

Sabine Maria Schmidt

I can only agree with that. You had one more topic you wanted to raise here at the conference, which we discussed last night following the restrictive censorship examples explained by colleagues.

Stefan Römer

My question to the conference participants is: whether this conference would not like to produce a final *communiqué* in support of the situations in Turkey and Hong Kong that were raised yesterday?

Sabine Maria Schmidt

We would in any case like to respond to the appeal for Osman Kavala, raised by our AICA colleagues from Turkey. There is also the Committee for Censorship of AICA International, which reacts very specifically to individual cases. We heard yesterday how complex the situations are and that it is necessary to consider exactly what can be done where without putting colleagues at additional risk. But that should not stop us from undertaking such a *communiqué*.

Translation: Gérard A. Goodrow