



35mm film frame from a stencil-coloured nitrate print of *Maudite soit la guerre* (1914, directed by Alfred Machin).
© Austrian Film Museum, The Schlemmer Frame Collection

Alexander Horwath:
Dear Tacita,

I am struggling with the mission you gave me. There is certainly no lack of reasons for supporting the continued existence of film. Quite the opposite – and this is my problem: the reasons seem so manifold and obvious that I can't fathom why anyone in their right mind would want to assume that "analogue film is completely replaceable by digital media without any loss." Why should *any* analogue art form be completely replaceable by digital media?

No, I'm not going to take a faux-naïve stance. I do realize that we've become engulfed by the totalitarian dream of a new world-at-our-doorstep. At this doorstep, all sorts of things must first be lost (replaced) in order for their imagined "content" to enter the celestial realm of "losslessness". Analogue tools and artifacts must become "easy to handle" and be rendered as numbers. They must get rid of "themselves" – of their inbuilt material resistance, their unique physical characteristics and the concrete history inscribed in their bodies. Just like the "free flow of capital" has successfully shaken off its ties to the real world economy, the "free flow of content" no longer wants to be chained to the matter from which it was born. Derivative activities abound.

As far as I can see, this dominant fantasy/ideology/religion and its attendant rhetoric can only be countered in our field if we are willing to accept a process that seems unpleasant to many. 1. On a wider, industrial scale, film will go away very soon. 2. For a long while, almost everyone will continue to say “film” when they are actually referring to something else. 3. For a long while, artists who continue to shoot, edit and exhibit film, as well as curators who dedicate themselves to preserving and presenting film/cinema as a working system of objects, machines, and public performances, will be widely denounced as nostalgic, reactionary, elitist. 4. The place of film will be the museum.

The upside is similarly clear to me, and as the word implies it might also involve an uphill battle here or there.

4. The museum is not the worst place to end up, quite the opposite. Even in the most “unthinking” museum, the strange material shape of the artifact reminds visitors of alternative forms of social and cultural organisation and, therefore, that the currently dominant forms and norms are not the only ones imaginable: forms and norms are never “natural”, but historical and man-made. What will be necessary, of course – and this is already slowly happening – is that museums act as responsibly and respectfully towards the film artifact (and the historical system of performing film publicly) as they have done with other types of materials – and as some film museums have been doing for decades.

3. At a point in time where “progressivism” in cultural politics and in the so-called creative industries is no longer tied to any progressive social or political project and almost exclusively to technological advances, bureaucratic discourse and economic greed, the “reactionary” or “elitist” is often the only person still willing to question the status quo and engage with historical and utopian concepts. Today, the expression ‘*You’re history!*’ is meant as an insult, not as a factual statement. Isn’t it essential, therefore, to side with those so insulted in order to keep alive any notion of historicity?

2. As soon as film fully arrives at the museum, it will become (a bit) easier for educators, journalists and media practitioners to update the general lingo – to reconnect the term “film” to its original meaning and to the actual medium. The entertainment industry and the large majority of other moving image practices will, by necessity, move further and further away from what can be contained by “film”, and they will continue to do so. This is not a bad thing.

1. Today, digital is the norm. Film has become an obstacle. Its “obstacular” nature is both its biggest weakness (in the wider world of the economy, media and entertainment) and its biggest strength (on its way to the museum and towards being accepted in society as a uniquely different, historically limited, but enormously influential technology and art form). In order for film’s original strength to be preserved (other influential art practices in history are also being preserved *as such* and not only as digital versions of themselves), all citizens and institutions who care about art, history and democratic alternatives must address film’s current weakness in a hard and clear manner:

The film medium and its technology will not survive if left to their industrial function. Film, as a medium, will have to receive more financial input than will ever be recouped. The difference in monetary terms – public cultural spending – will have to be relatively large, but not nearly as large as the public spending already considered today for the “digitization of our film heritage”. This difference will increasingly be compensated for (and eventually exceeded) by values other than financial, such as social, cultural, educational values and their collateral (status). This has happened with other art forms. It will be necessary, as has been the case with other “obsolete” art forms, to not let the techniques, tools and materials of the art form be discontinued. They will be needed specifically for museum purposes (restoration, duplication, exhibition) and for those artists who choose to keep working with film. Therefore, the most immediate step is to ensure, through public intervention and financing, the continued production of film stocks, printing, editing and projection machinery and the perpetuation of all related professions and systems of training. Museums, film archives and interested filmmakers will have to get the ball rolling and make their sponsors (public and private) aware of the necessities, so that the conversation with the relevant producers of film stock and machinery as well as with the existing laboratories can begin. It should have begun much earlier, of course.

The image I have selected for this page represents one of 2254 film frames gathered and “scissored” by an anonymous man during his childhood, the final years of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1913-1918). This collection came to the Film Museum in 67 small envelopes, most of them self-built with semi-transparent paper. Each of the envelopes contained roughly 35 individual frames ordered according to the collector’s personal poetics. The man depicted in the frame is encircled by various displays and images. He seems to be at a loss. He looks inside himself. It is not clear to me if he should be seen as a pessimist or as an optimist. I also wonder what the sabre is for.

With my warmest regards
Alex