



Film Bild Kunst: Visuelle Ästhetik des vorklassischen Stummfilms

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To cite this article: Lydia Jakobs (2017) Film Bild Kunst: Visuelle Ästhetik des vorklassischen Stummfilms, Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television, 37:1, 138-140, DOI: [10.1080/01439685.2016.1273327](https://doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2016.1273327)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2016.1273327>



Published online: 23 Feb 2017.



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BOOK REVIEW

Film Bild Kunst: Visuelle Ästhetik des vorklassischen Stummfilms

JÖRG SCHWEINITZ, DANIEL WIEGAND (eds), 2016

Marburg, Schüren

pp. 336, illus., €34.00 (paper)

At a little over 300 pages, *Film Bild Kunst* ('Film Image Art') is a handy volume while its 11 contributions provide a wide range of perspectives on the 'visual aesthetics of pre-classical silent cinema'. In their introduction, editors Jörg Schweinitz and Daniel Wiegand argue for a reappraisal and *revaluation* of feature films of the 1910s as sophisticated compositions that both responded to contemporary trends in visual arts and art theory and established a uniquely filmic pictorial style. They state that the contributions and case studies of the anthology subscribe to the principles of transmediality and the *séries culturelles* (André Gaudreault) as authors explore the 'manifold relationships between film and contemporary arts as well as other media-aesthetic phenomena and discourses' (p. 12).

Kristina Köhler's essay is a prime example as she argues that the flowing, fluttering motions of veils and waves (what art historian Aby Warburg has called 'bewegtes Beiwerk') almost accidentally became focal points for a filmic medium fascinated by movements and vibrations, particularly in early dance films like *Dans L'Hellade* (Charles Decroix, 1909) or the feature film *Neptune's Daughter* (Herbert Brenon, 1914). Mattia Lento focuses on 'intermedial diva' (p. 62) Lyda Borelli and the active role the actress's body assumed in the pictorial composition of the filmic image in Italian diva movies of the 1910s. He interprets Borelli's acting and in particular her bodily presence, poses and interactions with set pieces in films like *Ma l'amor mio non muore* (Mario Caserini, 1913) as 'an attempt to transfer elements of other performative media like dance, theatre and opera' (p. 54) to film.

The composition of beautiful images is also at the centre of Daniel Wiegand's treatise on the relation between early cinema and the performance practice of the *tableaux vivants*; famous works of painting and sculpture represented with living persons. Wiegand shows that the aesthetics of motion in the filmic image initially contradicted bourgeois notions of the beautiful ('das Schöne'). The adaptation of *tableaux vivants* and the adoption of their specific production techniques in silent films allowed for an aesthetic arrangement which constrained the 'unruly movement' ('ausuferenden Bewegungsmöglichkeiten', p. 86) but retained the visual attraction of the film image. His essay is complemented by Valentine Robert's case study on realizations of famous paintings in early films, understood as an extension

of historical genre paintings of the nineteenth century. Robert compares the cinematic treatment of Alphonse de Neuville's painting *Les dernières cartouches* (1873) in various French films that set the painting in motion and realize it as a *tableau vivant*. The relation between painting and film is also the subject of Vito Adriaensens's essay. Adriaensens compares the pictorial strategies of genre paintings in bourgeois realism ('Bürgerlicher Realismus') with those of the *films d'art* and melodramas of the 1910s and finds similarities in the narrative structuring through multiple planes and the visual structuring through lighting and set pieces.

Jörg Schweinitz and Evelyn Echle return to the question of how to create beautiful images, understood as a key task of film by early film makers, directors, cameramen and film theoreticians (see p. 178). Schweinitz argues that German feature films of the 1910s and especially melodramas like *Die Liebe der Maria Bonde* (Emerich Hanus, 1917/1918) attempted 'the cinematic adaptation of the principles of pictorial composition' (p. 180) popularized by turn-of-the-century paintings and art theoreticians like Alois Riegl and Heinrich Wölfflin. In her discussion of the Russian film *Sumerki zhenskoi dushi* (Jevgeni Bauer, 1913), Evelyn Echle focuses on the ornament as a special means of aesthetic composition and a feature of the beautiful in film (see p. 206). Echle argues that the ornament as a stylistic device signified the application of bourgeois aesthetic norms to film while at the same time, 'ornament-oriented film images aided the formulation of a genuinely filmic repertoire of artistic expression' (p. 213).

In her intriguing essay, Jelena Rakin studies the addition of colour to early black-and-white films like *Le peintre néo-impressioniste* (Émile Cohl, 1910) as a dramatic and compositional device that did not follow an 'aesthetics of illusion' ('Illusionsästhetik', p. 236). Instead the deliberate handling of colour as a creative device mirrored the presentation principles of colour charts. Rakin shows similarities between the presentation of colours in colour books and catalogues of tinted or toned film material by Eastman Kodak, Agfa and Pathé and the ostentatious presentation of colour in films like the *féeries* of Segundo de Chomón. Frank Kessler explores the various trick shots ('Trickaufnahmen') in films by Georges Méliès and their close relation to the theatrical *féerie*, a stage entertainment that similarly sought to attract large audiences with and formed part of an 'economy of the spectacle' ('Ökonomie des Spektakels', p. 255). Kessler diagnoses a specific mode of address of the trick image that directs the gaze towards a seemingly impossible action and at the same time 'creates a certain distance which allows viewers to recognize the depiction of a trick as a special achievement' (pp. 259–60).

Sarah Dellmann's study of representations of Dutchmen and women in early cinema arguably adopts the broadest scope of the volume. She traces the emergence of familiar stereotypes of Dutchness through a diverse array of nineteenth- and twentieth-century visual media from illustrated books to lithographs and painting, from stereo photographs and illustrated magazines to magic lantern slides to demonstrate that the cliché of the Dutchwoman that circulated in early films was already a 'transmedial phenomenon' ('transmediales Phänomen', p. 287) by the time moving pictures discovered it. In the final contribution, Adrian Gerber discusses the stylistic evolution of non-fictional propaganda films of the First World War with respect to staging and montage. Gerber posits that large productions like the non-fictional Austro-Hungarian film *Die 10. Isonzoschlacht*

(Sascha, 1917) followed a dual aesthetic strategy of visual assault ('Überwältigung', p. 298)—with spectacular and well-composed views of fighting and high production values—and authentication ('Authentisierung', p. 298).

All in all, the surprising number and excellent quality of its illustrations and the wide variety of intermedial reference points for early cinema (from the performance practices of *tableaux vivants* and dance to the visual strategies of genre paintings, colour charts and magic lantern slides) make this anthology a worthwhile addition to any media historian's bookshelf.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2016.1273327>