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Mobile cinema as an archive in motion: A Wall is a Screen and urban memories

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Hundreds of people following a person with a megaphone through deserted city centres at night. A political demonstration? A secret society? No, this is A Wall is a Screen (AWIAS),[1] a mobile outdoor cinema, cinematic city walk, and pop-up film festival all in one, which – as its name suggests – uses walls of buildings as screens. Short film curators, projectionists, and tour guides at the same time, the members of the AWIAS collective take their audience to six to seven different locations within the city, where a short film (10 minutes max) is screened.[2] These include both historical films from radio or television archives, contemporary short film productions, animation, short fiction, documentaries, and experimental filmmaking. The equipment is carried around on a hand truck: loudspeakers with tripods, a laptop and a beamer, a car battery or generator. Audience numbers usually range between 200 and 300, occasionally even 1,000 or more. The films are screened onto anonymous office buildings or apartment blocks, but also onto more specific sites, such as the Hamburg TV tower, a former slaughterhouse, or a converted cinema.

Mobile cinema has had a long tradition from Soviet agit-trains to today's commercial event cinema. Its non-commercial approach, however, distinguishes it from event cinema or pop-up cinema formats, such as the Secret Cinema[3] brand. While pop-up cinemas tend to screen a film classic in a specific setting, AWIAS presents short films which have not been widely distributed or which have been excavated from the archives. For the filmmakers, AWIAS offers the chance to reach out to new audiences beyond the festival circuit; it is very accessible, since joining is free, participants do not need to register in advance, and they can hop on or off the tour while it is on its way.

Initially a special event of the Hamburg International Short Film Festival[4] in 2003, A Wall is a Screen has emancipated itself from the festival to become an institution in its own right. It has since toured the world, performing in Thailand, Canada, Japan, Sweden, Kosovo, India, Norway, and other places. AWIAS can itself be part of film festivals and other cultural events, such as in collaborations with cultural institutes like the Goethe Institute, or other film festivals, such as Reeperbahn Festival in Hamburg, Festival de Cinema de la Ville de Quebec, Shortwaves Festival Poznan, Glasgow Short Film Festival, Dokufest Prizren, Tampere Film Festival, Tromsø International Film Festival, Upvan Arts Festivals in Thane/Mumbai, or South by Southwest in Texas. AWIAS does not obtain any institutional funding but rather is funded on the basis of singular projects, such as the collaborations mentioned above.

In what ways does AWIAS differ from a film festival? Despite its proximity to Hamburg Short Film Festival, AWIAS does not explicitly invite submissions. For its programmes A Wall is a Screen can draw on its own archive of 900 films, but also has access to the festival's database of 40,000 titles as well as to local archives. Each walk is curated specifically, engaging with the surrounding urban space. AWIAS thus illustrates what Nanna Verhoeff has termed the 'spacecificity of screens'. [5] Each film programme is tailored to the occasion, depending on the city, local conditions, and the walk's theme. Looking at the programming strategies, I argue that AWIAS can be regarded as an intervention into the memory of the city. In this review I will elaborate how AWIAS functions as an intervention into audiovisual memories which I have described as 'the sum of images, sounds and narratives circulating in a specific society at a specific historical moment'. [6] By bringing films back into circulation and by creating intertwining layers of temporality, AWIAS reworks cultural memory in times of gentrification and urban reconstruction.



Fig. 1: A Wall is a Screen / Valokuvaaja: Paavo Pykäläinen, ©Paavo Pykäläinen-Tampere Film Festival.

Spaces: Mapping the city in times of urban reconstruction

Based on the idea that films work differently in public space than in the cinema, AWIAS creates a tension between the short film screened and its geographical surrounding. Specifically chosen for the screen (wall) it is projected onto, the films interact with the building and its neighbouring city space. The sound of the city, its noises, also impact on the selection of the film. In crowded areas, for instance, films with little or no dialogue can be prioritised. The availability of language versions is another factor which determines film selection. Sometimes AWIAS commissions subtitles, sometimes it screens versions without any dialogue at all, especially for screenings in crowded areas. Approximately two months before the walk, members of the collective travel to the city in question scouting suitable locations and checking the area at night. This is necessary because online maps would not provide sufficient information. It is also important for the curators to get an understanding of the area and a feel for its character. This initial step is followed by a bureaucratic procedure during which official approvals are obtained from the authorities. Altogether, research might take up to half a year, sometimes even a whole year.

The idea of AWIAS is to add a new layer of stories to the city, and to have the audience experience their city in a new light. AWIAS engages in a dialogue with architecture by screening films which either highlight earlier uses of buildings or echo graphic features, for instance by screening abstract experimental films. One programming strategy is to select films which are set in an apartment and which are therefore playing with the audience's imagination: what is going on behind these walls? AWIAS also has a double educational purpose in: a) reaching out to audiences which would not attend a cinema screening otherwise, and b) taking audiences to areas of the city which they would usually never visit. Finally, it allows audience members to look at 'their' area from a new perspective by having them discover new urban spaces or by uncovering hidden stories. It revives backyards, subways, and other unknown sites – in short, places which are overlooked in everyday life. AWIAS thus also works as a sociological tool, documenting and pointing at the changes of the city, for instance from deprived areas to gentrified districts. By exploring deserted business districts at night, AWIAS highlights the failures of urban planning which focuses on commercial interests rather than on the people living in the city. During the tour privatised space, devoid of urban populations at night, is temporarily re-collectivised.

AWIAS can be situated in the context of artistic interventions into urban space in Hamburg in the early 2000s. One of the most popular examples is the radio art performance 'radio ballet' (Radioballett) in Hamburg's Central Station,[7] arranged by the arts collective Ligna in 2002.[8] The radio ballet set out to foreground the privatisation of public spaces in the city, and Ligna went on to address these issues in shopping districts and malls. This example shows how cultural interventions are not limited to one medium but work across multimodal platforms, merging live performances, sound, film, and photography, while at the same time carving out the discursive space for the articulation of participatory engagements with the memory and futurity of the city.



Fig. 2: ©Christoph Schweizer.



Fig. 3: ©A Wall is a Screen.

Archival interventions: Reworking memories of the city

The transnational project AWIAS brings film back into circulation, thus intervening into our audiovisual memories. The construction of cultural memories is constantly in flux, never fixed, never limited to one space or one community alone. Archival footage conjures up images of the past from news reports or documentaries, contrasting different historical moments, illuminating changes and continuities. Former cinema buildings now converted to other uses were the topic of a walk in Braunschweig (Germany) in 2011,[9] which offered glimpses into the city's cinema history. In another example, during a tour through Hamburg's Karolinenviertel in 2012,[10] the film screened onto the television tower was a 1960s black and white news report about the construction of the tower. Subsequent stops included a documentary about the slaughterhouse district, projected onto a former slaughterhouse and a television documentary from the early 1970s in the centre of the now gentrified area Karoenviertel, addressing its status as a deprived area characterised by social problems and poverty. A further stop showed a clip from a documentary on the violent eviction of an alternative construction trailer park in 2002. During the trial run some of the local residents started to panic as the film's soundscape recalled the events which happened more than a decade ago.

Documenting the AWIAS tours on the website is a work of memory in itself, as many of the buildings previously used for screenings have since been torn down. Thus, the website has itself become a photographic archive of global city spaces.[11] Even Hamburg Short Film Festival has become a victim of gentrification, having lost its long-term festival hub in an abandoned factory site. Each year the festival site got smaller and smaller as one factory building after another disappeared. At the last festival (2017), AWIAS screened John Smith's short *Blight*[12] (1997), which was made in collaboration with the composer Jocelyn Pook on the occasion of the building to the M11 Link Road in East London. This essay film about the demolition of a residential neighbourhood was screened onto one of the ruins of the former festival area, with the audience standing in the sand, the film images reflecting in the puddles between the wall and the participants. Through curating this film made two decades ago, AWIAS brings different localities and different temporalities together, engaging with the current situation the Short Film Festival, like many others, is facing in gentrified areas: the haunting presence of the past.



Fig. 4: ©Annika Börm.

Conclusion

AWIAS creates a palimpsest of city spaces, layered through different temporalities, but also carves out spaces of accessible cultural practice within privatised city spaces. It repurposes commercialised urban spaces for a non-commercial endeavour. AWIAS points at gentrification processes in areas of urban reconstruction by projecting film images that bring back the past, triggering memories connected to buildings and the surrounding areas. In performing acts of memory on the surfaces of the city, the members of AWIAS act as archivists, memory workers, historians, sociologists, architecture and design critics, flaneurs, urbanists, and cultural theorists.

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- Verhoeff, N. *Mobile screens: The visual regime of navigation*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012.

Notes

- [1] <http://www.awallisascreen.com/index.php?id=awiasidee> (accessed on 23 March 2018).
- [2] My research is based on participatory observation and interviews conducted with members of the collective in Hamburg in March 2018. The six members of the collective – Peter Stein, Sylvia Grom, Peter Haueis, Sabine Horn, Sarah Adam, and Sven Schwarz – are working in film and photography, several of them also being involved in the Short Film Agency Hamburg or the Hamburg International Short Film Festival.
- [3] <https://www.secretcinema.org/>
- [4] <http://festival.shortfilm.com/en/>
- [5] Verhoeff 2012, p. 104.
- [6] Brunow 2015, pp. 6-7.
- [7] <https://vimeo.com/221993144>
- [8] <http://ligna.blogspot.co.uk/> (accessed on 23 March 2018).
- [9] <http://www.awallisascreen.com/index.php?id=3421>
- [10] <http://www.awallisascreen.com/index.php?id=3497>
- [11] <http://www.awallisascreen.com/index.php?id=awiasphotos> (accessed on 23 March 2018).
- [12] <http://johnsmithfilms.com/selected-works/blight/>