Foreword

Historically speaking, the cinema was a fairground attraction that directly targeted physical pleasures. This direct effect on the body still continues to shape the audience’s cinematic experience today, and attempts have been made over and over to amplify this effect still further. This is especially clear in current blockbusters: even before we are able to decode the films’ sounds and images, they already bring our bodies to tremble.

All the same, the cinema has never done without text: silent film was already accompanied by announcements, film narrators, and subtitles. Until today, the screenplay is considered the textual foundation for film production. And even “pure” cinema cannot do without text: consider Dziga Vertov’s ČELOVEK S KINOAPPARATOM (The Man with the Movie Camera; 1929), which does without script and dialogue, but begins with an explanatory text. In reception, film always develops as a structure that produces text: as a narrative, a decodable artwork, or a field of energy that constantly produces new texts and meanings.

The cinema not only mobilizes various textual and corporeal registers, it also combines them with one another. Film reception in particular proves to be in constant flux between textual production and physical affixation—expressed in tears, laughing, or “goose bumps.” This linkage of textual and corporeal registers also takes place on the screen, when the bodies of the speaking figures are shown in action, and the action is constituted as text.

In early debates on film, the importance of the body was recognized and criticized as a moral danger—but also (more rarely) welcomed as a return of sensuality. Hugo von Hofmannsthal emphasized silent film as a sensual contrast to the abstractions of language. Morally conservative pedagogues in contrast warned against the cinema, precisely because of this proximity to the flesh. This distinction of the film to written culture still lurks about today, as is clearly shown in the discussion of film in school instruction.

In the 1960s, the linguistic turn in the humanities also took hold of the approach to film. In the French and Anglo-American worlds in particular, film into the 1990s was almost exclusively understood as a form of textuality that was to be decoded in reading. These approaches developed in the realm of semiotics, structuralism, and psychoanalysis. In the 1990s, the unease about too narrowly defined textual concepts grew, and the somatic became a central object of research in film and media studies: representations of the body, reception conditions, the link between body and gender, and the specific media character of film, and so on.

Both perspectives on film—the newer approaches to the body and the textual theories developed since the 1960s—have up until now stood
alongside one another, or are conceived as oppositions. This volume does not focus again on the turn to the body that takes place in the 1990s in film and media studies, but rather explores how text and body in film can be thought together.

In the contributions of Thomas Morsch and Sabine Nessel, text and body are introduced as dimensions that have a history in film studies. With the new body discourses in mind, Thomas Morsch concerns himself with an aesthetic of shock, a central moment of film aesthetics that already surfaced in the early cinema and was conceptualized as a cinema of attractions. His example is the film AUDITION (1999; Takashi Miike), which is considered a horror film. In her contribution, Sabine Nessel explores text and body discourses in terms of various cinema theories. Points of reference here include the film semiotics of the French theorist Christian Metz and the approach of the American film sound expert Rick Altman, who conceives of cinema as an event. Her example is a classic from French auteur film, LA MAMAN ET LA PUTAIN (The Mother and the Whore; 1972/73; Jean Eustache).

In his contribution, Domèneç Font chases the body through the history of modern cinema. Using the work of directors such as Tourneur, Bergman, Godard, Fassbinder, Lynch, and Cronenberg, Font dedicates himself to bodies that are caught in disappearance, but can still be seen on the screen: Nosferatu, Caligari, Dracula, Frankenstein. In so doing, he understands the cinema, based on silent film, as a spectral art. Textuality comes into play when a theory of vampirism is taken as a starting point. With this, questions of the identity of the fleeting body become virulent. Wolfgang Beilenhoff’s contribution explores another, expansive body dimension of the Soviet collective body. Exploring BRONENNOSEC POTJOMKIN (Battleship Potemkin; 1925; Sergej Eisenstein), CIRK (Circus; 1936; Grigorij Alexandrov) and KLJATVA (The Pledge; 1946; Michail Ciureli), examples are shown for the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s of the Soviet Union, how the hierarchical linkage of head and body becomes the leading model of a organological conception of the state.

Three theoretical perspectives that mediate between text and the body are developed in the contributions of Winfried Pauleit, Robin Curtis, and Klaus Theweleit. Based on Roland Barthes’ Text “The Third Meaning,” Winfried Pauleit develops approaches to a semiology of the cinema based on bodies. Barthes the theoretician is presented as cinemagoer, surgeon, and detective, who cuts out the still, enlarges it, and thus develops a new concept of the filmic. Robin Curtis explores the question, “How Do We Do Things With Film?”, referring to the philosopher of language J. L. Austin. Like Sabine Nessel, she pursues a shift in the conception of film as text to film as event. Her theoretical reference point lies in Dana Polan, who in the 1980s suggested a new orientation for film studies on the basis of a “performative turn.” Klaus Theweleit describes a
third body that can emerge as an object of reverberation between man and film. His field of reference is the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud, who discovered the unconscious, and the film productions of Georges Méliès, who filmed the unconscious in his early cinema of attractions, which as a fairground spectacle directly addressed the body and dreams of the spectator.

Richard Dyer, Christa Blümlinger, and Gabriele Jutz explore specific aspects of the issue and bring us to Hollywood cinema of the 1930s and 1940s, the films of Fassbinder, and the realm of avant-garde cinema. Richard Dyer explores the representation of song in the Hollywood musical. In doing so, not only does he examine the difference between speaking and singing bodies. Looking at Lena Horne, the political aspect of an African-American singer in the Hollywood film of the 1940s also becomes a central issue. As we know, bodies play a central role in the films of R. W. Fassbinder. Christa Blümlinger explores a formal aspect of these films, the freeze frame. She thus shifts her focus towards specific breaks in the textuality of his films. In Gabriele Jutz, at issue in the term cinéma brut is the theorization of various positions of the film avant-garde. In this film genre, the materiality of film is central, and Jutz seeks out a synthesis of textuality and physicality between the classical positions of “material is” and “material means.”

The volume closes with a contribution on the film editor Bettina Böhler, who was awarded the Ninth Bremen Film Prize in January at the International Bremen Film Conference. In his piece, Michael Klier honors the work of Böhler, who has helped to shape the so-called “Berlin School” of recent German filmmaking. In his comparison of the work of the cutter with the activity of the doctor, Klier touches on the issue of text and body in the cinema from the perspective of film practice.

This collection is being published in two forms in two languages: as a book in German, and an e-book on CD-ROM in English. The English e-book will also include film passages. The audiovisual materials offer an expanded access to the empirical material of the films themselves and provide a foundation for the film and media studies findings presented in the articles. The e-book’s English version will also facilitate international exchange and present individual contributions in their original language, for example the text by Domènec Font in Spanish.

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_Sabine Nessel, Winfried Pauleit_