

## International Conference

### Histories of Tacit Cinematic Knowledge

Frankfurt am Main and worldwide (September 24–26, 2020)

Organisers: Rebecca Boguska, Guilherme da Silva Machado, Rebecca Puchta, Marin Reljic and Philipp Rödning

2020 has been full of challenges to do things differently. Attending an academic conference in your pyjamas — at least from the waist down — might be one more in a long list of things done for the first time in a year marked by social distancing and restricted travel to avoid the spread of the coronavirus. Moreover, joining the ubiquity of talking heads already present on the internet, scholars had to get used to exposing their ideas in front of a (computer) camera instead of a live audience. This was no different for the participants of the conference *Histories of Tacit Cinematic Knowledge* organized by the Graduate Research Training Program *Configurations of Film* (Goethe University Frankfurt). Given the impossibility of realizing the event in person, as had been planned, the chosen format combined two moments: recorded video presentations were made available online and, a few days later, live discussions took place via Zoom over the course of three days.

The conference brought together different approaches to the concept of ‘tacit cinematic knowledge,’ in order to embrace a variety of templates where the previous experience with film and cinema influence life in unforeseen ways. The three keynote speakers represented the diversity of objects and methodological takes on the topic. Henning Schmidgen (Bauhaus University Weimar) developed his talk *Reconsidering Minor Cinema: René Laloux, Félix Guattari, and the Machinery of Signs* starting from the use of cinematic praxis in the French psychiatric clinic of La Borde in the 1950s. During the Q&A, an interesting discussion about the role of the canon and structures of power in the field of film studies emerged. It became clear that the presented objects — be it the collective artistic practice in the clinic, the genre of animation developed by Laloux, or the legacy of Guattari’s work — could each still be seen as relatively ‘minor’ in terms of recognition, but that this perception is not static. Nothing is immune to canonization, and we were reminded to stay attentive to the way we are producing (and making explicit) knowledge today.

In her presentation *Cinematic Guerrillas in Mao’s China*, Jie Li (Harvard University) talked about the reception of revolutionary cinema in rural China, stressing aspects of the personal exchange of (tacit) knowledge, between on and off-screen guerrilla tactics, while also inviting us to rethink these films and practices in the broader context of Third Cinema. Li’s use of the term ‘guerrilla’

was then discussed by the participants, both in the potential of (counter) revolution or resistance, as well as in a sort of contradiction of the moving image that tends to render the martyrs and heroes of the revolution static.

Motion and stillness were also thematised in a way in Teresa Castro's (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris 3) keynote, entitled *The 1970s Plant Craze and the Cybernetic Paradigm*, in which the examined films presented vegetable beings not as simply motionless but as sentient creatures. The examples brought representations of (more or less) scientific studies that supported the argument that technical mediation, and the tacit knowledge thereof, was indispensable to access plants' intelligence. In the discussion, Castro went even further back in the genealogy of such experiments, as well as pointing to more recent developments, like in animistic currents in cinema today.

In the five panels named, respectively, *Directions*, *Templates*, *Archives*, *Cities* and *Sciences*, an even greater variety of objects were discussed. Tacit cinematic knowledge(s) were central when analysing, for instance, US-election campaign videos, the role of female spectatorship in Malayalam society, fan-made scrapbooks and videos, ultrasound imagery, astronomic representations and industry films advertising skyscrapers or dam constructions<sup>1</sup>. The panellists joined the online audience to answer questions and develop some ideas further, with enough breaks between the sessions to avoid the by now (in)famous 'Zoom fatigue.'

The final discussion saw a debate around the term 'tacit' and its use in the context of the conference's theme. According to the organizers, the idea came from discussions inspired by Eric Ketelaar's article<sup>2</sup> as well as by the concept of 'tacit knowledge', as elaborated earlier by Michael Polanyi.<sup>3</sup> Even if Polanyi's ideas remain somewhat controversial, the acknowledgment of 'tacitness' in relation to the approach to film studies being put forward by the Research Collective proved relevant throughout the conference. As became clear in the final round table, attempting to make the 'invisible' visible, or the 'implicit' explicit, can have an important political role, by bringing other aspects from the peripheries of film studies to the centre of the discussion and challenging our own structures of knowledge and power.

As for the format of the event, the tools deployed were probably more challenging to the speakers and organizers than to the audience, already accustomed to watching videos online and video-chatting with colleagues, friends and family. Our tacit cinematic knowledge certainly contributed to making the experience smoother, and that in the comfort of our own homes. The freedom to watch the video contributions in a self-curated order and the alternance

<sup>1</sup> Full program and video presentations can be found under <[www.tacit-histories.com](http://www.tacit-histories.com)> [accessed December 9, 2020].

<sup>2</sup> Eric Ketelaar, 'Tacit Narratives: The Meanings of Archives', *Archival Science*, 1.2 (June 2001), 131–141.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

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of temporality between recorded presentations and live Q&A sessions were rightfully praised by the participants, adding to the positive feeling of making such a conference not just possible but also enjoyable in a pandemic year. On the other hand, technical limitations and the lack of a real shared space for informal social contact represent undeniable downsides. The unequal availability of material conditions could be felt through some instances of internet connection problems. And personal interactions, as in small talk before a panel or in a coffee break, cannot anymore be taken for granted in their key role for the development of ideas and collaborations. That is why, as soon as the health situation so allows, it would be important to re-establish forms of un-mediated conviviality, even if that means that we will need to get out of our pyjama pants and get used to meeting in person again.

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