

SCMS ORAL HISTORIES: INTERVIEW WITH GERTRUD KOCH

Robin Curtis: We are here with Gertrude Koch who has been professor of Film Studies at the Freie Universität in Berlin Germany since April 1999. We are here to discuss how you arrived at being a film scholar, what first got you in being involved with film as an object of study?

Gertrud Koch: That is an interesting question, as I didn't start as a film scholar or film student but as a film critic. In my generation in Germany there was not such a thing as film studies so basically I studied philosophy, sociology, education, German literature. So I was immediately confronted with some of the basic texts like Kracauer, Benjamin, Adorno... so I was trained in the Frankfurt School. So for me it was a kind of split-screen so to say, I worked with the theories of the Frankfurt School, that at this time was considered not being very friendly towards film, but I was also working as a film critic. On some level I had a really broad knowledge of film, I had seen a lot of films, I had written about films extensively, so I must say on some level it came together when my film critiques became longer and longer and the news papers didn't want to publish them anymore. So I started to write essays, some of them were very early on translated into English and published first in the *New German Critique*. On some level one can say that I was, let's say preparing my own pass, and film criticism was my tool to open this pass back to the university if you want. But basically I started then to teach film theory in different conditions. First in the Literature Department, then I moved to the American Studies Institute in Frankfurt and they were rather open to accept film as part of the American heritage culture so to say. Even I was not a specialist on American film, not at all. I was much more trained in the let's say art house films of German film history, French film history...so I taught courses on Pasolini and so on, it was a kind of an artistic time. That is how I came back to the university with the topic of film and what also was a lot of different other topics, so I had always more issues so to say.

R.B.: What kind of venues for publication were there aside from the newspaper, because there is a very long tradition of challenging film criticism in Germany, is not the kind of film criticism that goes on say North American newspapers, it's quite a different tradition. How would you describe the divide between the sort texts you wrote and the long texts?

G.K.: It came for me not as a surprise so to say, because I was always also writing in other fields. You have to imagine at this time, when I started to write, so-called scholarly essays, I was focusing on the film theoretical bases of French film theory basically. So I remember one of the first courses I have taught, Christian Metz was not translated neither in English nor in German, few of the students could read French so some of them volunteered to translate small parts of it. So it was this kind of you know more performative things that you really had to appropriate the theories and to adjust it to a kind of environment that was not at all prepared for this. So it was easier with the American and Anglo-American Literature because all you could say well the students had to read. So basically, yes, let's say my bases were the classical film

theories, Balázs, Arnheim, Kracauer, Frankfurt School stuff and the French things, Bazin, *Cahiers du Cinéma*, you know, this was what I read. Also then was upcoming feminist discourses, this was a big challenge because it came together with the foundation of our Journal that was modeled after *Women and Film*, and it was also called women and film in German, *Frauen und Film*. This was a foundation of a filmmaker, Helke Sander, but you know a whole group gathered around it and they came together filmmakers from Berlin and film theorists from Frankfurt. This was a journal we tried to start also with translations, an open discourse about feminist film theory, we worked Frankfurt School topics from social philosophy and gender together with translations of Laura Mulvey, Mary Anne Doane, Kaja Silverman, Anne Friedberg. There was a very close relationship to those groups. I remember when we were speaking about SCMS, that was then called SCS – as the media was not present in the name - there was this kind of group, Miriam Hansen, Heide Schlüppmann, and me, we were the girls from Frankfurt School. So when we put panels together at SCS, I remember once David Bordwell meeting on the ground floor in the lobby and he asked: "so where are you going?" and I said: "well I have to go to my panel, it's about blabla and blabla" and he said: "oh I see it's a Frankfurter with French fries." So this was basically the problematic aspect in it but it was also, let's say accompanied by a whole historical aspect that was brought into play by a scholar, Karsten Witte who also started as a film critic and then went to the university and basically became my predecessor on the Berlin chair for film studies at the Freie University, with whom I did the first seminar on Kracauer - he was at this time editor of Kracauer – so a lot of this intellectual academic milieu was coming to film over the discussion of early cinema. Someone who was an important mediator, so to say, was also Alexander Kluge, who was at the same time a kind of essayist, filmmaker, theoretician, and literature writer, so were all these interests came together. On some level one must say that in my case a lot of these issues were established in this discourse between filmmakers and critics. So it started as a critical discourse. From there, the historical topics, came an interest on early cinema that was represented by Miriam Hansen at the time who was a Doctoral student in Frankfurt University so we worked as students closely together. She was bringing Griffiths as an Americanist and Karsten Witte was bringing German silent film. I as a critic was deeply involved in something like "what's cinema?" so I looked at everything. I traveled to the festivals. I had seen a lot of films at festivals, retrospectives, and so on. So I never focused on a specific periods. Even I also contributed to a book series that was important in bringing film into a level where there was a kind of established publication subject. This was a Zip book series called "Reihe Hanser" published by a very well know series publishing house, Hanser Verlag, in Munich. They opened up what at this time was very costly because there was no thing as DVD copies, so you had to rent the cinema to bring releases and 35mm copies of a live work of a director. We had private screenings. It was all very, very comfortable. Back you had some problems when you were writing about films you had seen maybe twice or three times, not really at the editing table. So when you asked about, lets say, what were the material conditions for this work, the universities were not prepared to have archives or even facilities to project films. So basically what we did when we wrote about films we rented an editing table in the

film archives, it was a very costly thing, and we sat in at the editing table to analyze the films.

R.C.: Even with groups of students?

G.K.: No, this was really private research budget you had to use for this, that means that you had to pay it by yourself. So all this was kind of amateurish and at the same time it was really the breaking pass to go into it. For the students it was a problem because then in the 70's with the development of the video recording machines so sure you would have hundreds of copies from dubbed versions that were programed on TV stations. In the public TV system there were channels so called served programs that were specializing in film retrospectives so you could see hundreds of films on TV.

R.C.: What role did the Kommunale Kinos¹ play? Did they play a role for education in Germany at that time?

G.K.: Yes, definitively these art-house movies they were mostly institutionalized by public money, so they were part of the film museum in Frankfurt and in Munich for example, and they were making really interesting programs. So you have to imagine that when there were retrospectives of Buster Keaton or Feuillade, Franju, you know all kind of really serious stuff, Mizoguchi and so on...when this happened I could write in the newspaper I was working for a whole page, and I could do my own layout with some stills. So this was nice because it meant you could write, let's say a ten-page essay, and present it as a weekend special pages. So it was a kind of embracing situation where the newspaper I worked for was open to film as being a subject of regular criticism. So it was not so strictly divided.

R.C.: Did you raise the issue actually in that fashion of the discrepancy, the distinction so to say, between the status that film enjoyed say in the United States or that it enjoyed in France and the status film enjoyed as a cultural object in Germany? - Which actually I should frame differently because it didn't really enjoy much of the status.

G.K.: I mean it does really go respect with the historical situation and the rupture from 33 where most filmmakers were forced into emigration or where corrupted. So on some level this whole taking over from the Nazis of the film industry and the so-called film culture disregarded film as a serious object of its own rights and autonomy. The anxiety and the mistrust that it would be a kind of tainted medium, with historical stains on it, was very strong. The after 45 the film industry itself was very weak, so it took another one can say 20 years until the so called New German Cinema came back or came forth and therefore film became again a kind of more seriously considered cultural object.

R.C.: So, when did you first have a position that was defined as Film Studies?

¹ Municipal cinemas.

G.K.: This took very, very long. Actually my first was 85 at UC Irvine where I got a visiting professorship. In Germany I was nearby implementing this discipline so it started in the middle of the 80s, when we had the first film departments but it was not really film departments it was basically a kind of...you know you would bring a different etiquette in a bottle and what you collected under this etiquette were basically courses that were taught in lets say German literature, French literature....so it was not instituted by its own. This started pretty late. The first institute for either Film, Theatre and Television studies was a case in...no in Frankfurt it was Film, TV and Sociology, in Bochum where I started with my first chair it was Film, TV, and Theatre studies, in Berlin it was the same, and wherever I came I brought it into the lecture, and so breaking apart. From then on we had kind of film studies with TV studies, but basically it was then film studies. Today most of the institutes transformed themselves like the SCMS into Media Studies.

R.C.: Yes, it's the common trend today. Film Studies has not persisted to the same extent as a label.

G.K.: Yes, it became part of Media Studies

R.C.: To return again to the idea of the community, the people that you mentioned who were your fellow students in Frankfurt ended up along with you belonging to the first generation of film professors in Germany, Karsten Witte, Heide Schlüpmann... I wonder for you, who was educated in a variety of disciplines but not Film Studies to what degree did interdisciplinarity play a part for you. In other words, you had been educated as Philosophy students, Sociology students...where would you locate Film Studies as a discipline?

G.K.: For me it was never really a problem I must say, because the paradigmatic idea of the Frankfurt School was already the integration of disciplines into general theory. So far I could do aesthetic theory and I could try to get into methodologies that would allow me to do this kind of more elaborated analysis of films as aesthetic objects, or as social objects, so you could shift these perspectives on film into one paradigm, what was very interesting. For me it was not so much a big thing, I guess it was much more complicated for those who came from literature departments and they had to work through all these hyphenating things, film and literature, and Brecht and film and so...but in my case it was not really at stake but I always would turn into film theories as being part of philosophy or aesthetic theory.

R.C.: Do you think it is the case that there is greater interdisciplinarity in German film studies today? Perhaps for this reason? Do you think it is the case?

G.K.: Maybe, I am not so sure. When I am looking at the American University system I see that even if it is not so much about interdisciplinarity, when I look at the denominations of the chairs of my colleagues they are mostly part of denominations in different departments. So at some level it is even stranger because they have to

integrate different disciplines in their own social being. I don't know how they do it, but it's on some level I think it's something that's inherent to the sciences at the moment and the humanities. It is not so much about national specialities as it is a broad trend.

R.C.: Can I also return to the 70's and the early 80's and your involvement in *Frauen und Film*. Your involvement perhaps with a little bit more distance to begin with, and then eventually you and Heide Schlüpmann take over the editorship of *Frauen und Film*. What role did activism play for you?

G.K.: I grew up so to say with the so-called student movements. From the student movements, feminism was kind of the breaking path of feminism in the student movement. So, yes, I was involved with these groups but I was not so much in the militant wing, this was much more in Berlin and in Frankfurt it was much more a theoretical thing. So it came at one moment were in Berlin they were no longer interested to continue with the journal because they said, well you know as filmmakers we have different interests and so, we said well we still are interested in gender theory and theories of difference so we want to continue this so if you don't want to do it, we do it. It was a lot of melodrama but it worked.

R.C.: In many ways it represents a constitutional moment for the German Film Studies, the shift from *Frauen und Film* as a journal of people who are activists and filmmakers into the hands of a group of people who are perhaps activists or politically interested but first and foremost scholars or writers...and at that moment there seems to be a basis for films studies, film theory.

G.K.: Yes. One can say that the foundational thing was basically that with *Frauen und Film*, we did this kind of Brecht into the international discourse. So before it was much more doing German film history, you know to do it in historical terms, and to open it into theory proper meant that you became part of an international discourse. So we went to the same conferences. I think this is enormously important when we speak about the implementation of disciplines. Without this kind of international orientation you cannot establish a discipline. I mean science is not a national thing. So far I would say, yes it was a kind of door opener for all of us because it forced us also into these kinds of debates. And it was much more complicated let's say to enter the French cosmos than the American.

R.C.: Exactly that was...would have been the next question...

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R.C.: I just wanted to return to the question of influence. It's clear that the American model of film scholarship was to some extent already in place by the 70's, but also the French one was by that time and in Germany at that time many people spoke French as their foreign language rather than English. How can you describe the relationship to French film studies?

G.K.: I'm not sure if I would really share this assumption. It was not that a lot of people spoke French; it was a very small group. The students at school would learn English as second language and French was very, very rare. But the group who did film theory, and film studies, and film criticism, they were heavily francophone because this was part of the shift in viewing film or looking at film was given through this impact of French film culture. Therefore, you can say that it was coincidence more that those who were interested in French theory were also on some level trained in French. This was pretty much so. You could even say that you got a kind of divide because at the same time you had this coming from the English departments that oriented themselves around American-English departments where film studies were implemented basically, so it was not so different. It was not that they started with autonomous film departments; it mostly began in English literature departments. This development you could see, I mean you had groups who were really doing let's say American films studies programs and there also were the French theorists. On some level in feminism you had this crossing where the theories were basically going back to Lacan and so. So, it was heavily French. Laura Mulvey always told me that when they started in Britain, in London to do feminist film theory they did it all with the French stuff because this was really, I mean, to get the people there in anger. So, on some level it was this kind of option. You opted for the French theories that were seen more radical in terms of feminism, in all kinds political theory and so on.

R.C.: And to what extent was Great Britain a model at that time? Screen theory in particular?

G.K.: Screen theory was already this French influenced paradigm, so I would even say that a lot of this stuff came over *Screen* or over Britain to the US. If you call really to this kind of passes, I think this was the export way, was over Britain. So, yes, for us it was quite open so because the theories were then discussing all kind of frames, and it was not only film studies. The time for film studies I think has to do that they were the first on some level who went through these basic general theories and tried to adjust it to a specific topic like film. So I could see that to some level film studies was building theoretical programs, and this in Germany didn't take place. It was basically the literature departments who did it.

R.C.: Let me finally return to the point you made about the way in which German film departments had been taking on a new name. There are only as far as I know three departments still in existence with the name Film Studies, all the other departments have various permutations of media studies, Medienwissenschaft. How do you view the future of film studies in Germany? Is it contingent on the name or...to what extent it is?

G.K.: My position there is, I try to stay as long with the name as it goes. If you want really to expand in your university, on some level you have to enlarge it, and I think media studies is a model to make it bigger because you can include more. So this is what basically happened when I look back at the institute I founded in Bochum. Frist

we split away from performance studies, then we had film and TV studies, and after I left the prospect, what is a good sign, but they went into media studies collecting different chairs and now it's really big, and they still do film studies. So it is not that it is totally vanished, and it is not overwritten. The name vanished but they still have chairs for film studies.

R.C.: But it raises the question, one that is maybe difficult to follow in translation. What is the relationship of film studies to medienwissenschaft? In other words, not media studies but German medienwissenschaft, German media studies. Are the two compatible or incompatible? To what degree do they live together or go through different ways, because that is part of what is implied by the new naming.

G.K.: Yes, I would say that there are very different trends to shape and re-shape the field and the subjects, so what would be covered by these disciplines. I think one of the newest trends, or not so new anymore, is to bring it to history of science. So we have a huge bunch of people who split from media studies into history of science. So they look at media as technical, scientific tools. This would be part of the general program of doing more history; historicizing the subject and coupling it with the history of science. Then you have the other strata that come from communication studies where you would have those who are dealing with either cultural studies or empirical studies. This usually is very badly integrated into media studies, it remains part of the sociology departments and as sociology is really cut off at many universities so it is a delicate status. I'm not sure if media studies would really absorb it. I don't think so, there is too much problems in it. Then you have to see that the introduction of cultural studies was one way to take media studies and film studies into this frame of cultural studies. The Humboldt University in Berlin for example where Friedrich Kittler, the big German media theorist dealing with a kind of theories and philosophy of technology or techniques, was situated in cultural studies. So far, one has to see that part of this still very small segment in Germany's academic institutions, is also shaped by persons, so you get schools that are shaped around one person. For example Kittler, he really was a founder of the school on some level, and many of the media debates are still following the debates he initiated. So this would be a kind of what is considered as being German media theory, it became a kind of etiquette with some success. The other big let's say new theoretical agent is systems theory, a lot of these new media theorist would come from systems theory... Niklas Luhmann and not so much Parsons. So on some level you can say yes, there are always these kinds of matching files from new basic theories or general theories into these variants of applied sciences so to say.

R.C.: Ok...

G.K.: We have done it.

R.C.: Thanks.

G.K.: You are welcome.