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WHEN THE HISTORY OF MOVIEGOING IS A HISTORY OF MOVIE WATCHING, THEN WHAT ABOUT THE FILMS?

Frank Kessler and Sabine Lenk

It's always rather difficult to make a sweeping statement about the film field, for no one person may ever see it all.

(Anon., 1915: 35)

Serious students may find close to the surface of the movies, eloquent clues to the special hopes and dreams of the people for whom they were made.

(Card, 1966: V)

In this chapter, we would like to address the question to what extent the new cinema history can benefit from looking at individual films, but also how a more film-centered approach can be enriched by integrating a perspective that takes into account its particular contexts of distribution, exhibition, and reception.¹ After a brief look at Tom Gunning's reflections on the role of individual films in film history, we will argue that every film is indeed a distinct product and thus can merit the cinema historian's attention. We will look at three examples from the period before the First World War in order to explore in more detail how the focus on individual films can be made productive for a history of moviegoing, which, after all, is also a history of movie-watching. In all these cases, the issue of the films' popularity and audience appeal – easily to establish in the first one, seemingly contested for the other two examples – will play a central role. So here we are not so much interested in the film as an aesthetic object (even though it can be important to consider it as such), but rather in the various documents that tell the story of when, where, and how it was seen.

Film history, cinema history, and the individual film

When Gunning discussed the role of the individual film in relation to the writing of film history in 1990, his article "Film History and Film Analysis: The Individual Film in the Course of Time" tried first and foremost to build a bridge between the film theory debates (semiotics, psychoanalysis, the so-called "apparatus theory") that had dominated the field of cinema studies throughout the 1970s, and the "historical turn" of the 1980s, when early cinema, in particular, had started to become a major area of investigation for a young generation of

film scholars. The central point he made was that the “analysis of the individual film provides a sort of laboratory for testing the relation between history and theory. It is at the level of the specific film that history and theory converge, setting up the terms of analysis” (Gunning, 1990a: 6). A quarter of a century later, this tension between theory and history seems deeply buried in the past, because film theory has somehow ceased to occupy center stage in scholarly engagement with the medium (Rodowick, 2014), whereas film historical research has moved into a variety of directions, ranging from David Bordwell’s historical poetics (1989: 369–398) to the new cinema history (Maltby, Biltereyst and Meers, 2011), from histories of specific stylistic features and cinematic devices to social, cultural, or economic histories of the various institutions involved in the production, distribution, and exhibition of films.

Five years before Gunning’s essay was published, Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery had already famously declared in their landmark book *Film History: Theory and Practice* that for many research questions in film history there is no need to view or to analyze films:

Films themselves will tell us next to nothing about modes of production, organisation structures, market situations, management decision making, or labour relations, just as close analysis of a bar of soap would reveal little data in the study of the personal hygiene industry,
(Allen and Gomery, 1985: 39)

a fact that is acknowledged also by Gunning (1990a: 6). While one can contest the analogy established here, it is quite clear that one aspect of this observation is indisputably justified: studying films will not help to provide answers to many of the questions that film historians address. Allen and Gomery’s statement encouraged the emergence of a field of research on the cultural and social significance of cinema as a form of entertainment, and cinemagoing as a form of social activity, which has defined itself as “cinema history” (or “new cinema history”). But rather than seeing “film history” as the history of films and “cinema history” as the history of moviegoing (to state things in a somewhat simplifying manner) as two separate entities, or worse, opposed areas of research, one should follow the lead of Richard Maltby, who presents both as complementary perspectives:

New cinema history offers an account that complements and is informed by many aspects of film history, particularly by investigations of global conditions of production, of technical innovation and craft and of the multiple and interconnected organisational structures that characterise the film production industry. To these it adds knowledge of the historical operations of distribution and exhibition businesses worldwide, and of ways in which these interconnected networks of global corporate interests, local franchises and other small businesses have together managed the flow of cinema product around the world’s theatres and non-theatrical venues.

(Maltby, 2011: 9)

So cinema history and film history should be seen as a continuum rather than opposites, with a focus on the institutional aspects that shape the medium, rather than its development as an art form.

Returning to Gunning’s text, we can see that what interests him is an interplay between film theory and film history that can inform the analysis of individual films and thereby both illustrate and elucidate the changing modes of film practice. It is not by accident that he draws upon examples such as Miriam Hansen’s analysis of Edwin S. Porter’s *The Teddy Bears* (1906) (Hansen, 1990: 50–71), or Lea Jacobs’ study on Josef von Sternberg’s *Blonde Venus* (Paramount, 1932) (Jacobs, 1988: 21–31), as both authors aim to show how conflicting forces act upon the films in question and shape their textual form. As Gunning asserts,

What they undertake is more than placing a text into an historical context. (...) An historical analysis of film reveals the complex transaction that takes place between text and context, so that one never simply functions as an allegory of the other, as too often happens in what passes for the social history of film.

(Gunning, 1990a: 14)

So Gunning, too, while staying on the textual side of the field, envisions a film historical practice that does not limit itself to the aesthetic dimension, but looks at the playing out of different modes of addressing the audience in the case of Hansen's work on Porter's film or, in Jacobs' exploration of the production context of von Sternberg's film, the continuous negotiation of censorship constraints. In these cases, the individual film thus functions as an exemplary instance that illuminates larger historical processes.

One point, however, needs to be emphasized: looking at individual films does not in this case automatically mean conducting a formal or a textual analysis. The issue of the relevance of individual films for film history, and even more so for cinema history, reaches far beyond the filmic text. We might note that in both film and cinema history the emphasis often lies with fictional feature film, while other types of "cinema product" tend to be neglected. Another point to mention in passing is that the study of an individual *print* from the period can reveal information about production and postproduction procedures, the organization of labor during the production process, decisions concerning distribution practices, the cultural appropriation of a given film in a specific national, or even local context or censorship practices.

What we have to leave out here is the perspective of the audiences. As we write about the early period, it is extremely rare to find sources documenting the experience of the ordinary cinemagoers. What can be retrieved are statements by writers, journalists, pedagogues, or other members of the so-called "literary intelligentsia," who more often than not had a negative attitude towards the new medium and whose ideas are frequently verdicts rather than testimonies. There have, however, been a number of attempts to conceptualize spectatorship in the early period (see Kessler, 2010: 61–73).

Every film a distinctive product

What distinguishes the film business from other industries is the fact that its product is supposed to be distinctive in every item – not every print, but every film – that is released. Formulaic genre films may resemble each other, but still they must differ sufficiently from each other to serve the producers' and distributors' interests and to satisfy audience demand for variation. The frequent practice of outright plagiarism in the early period (either by duping prints or through the exact reproduction of a well-known movie in the studio) bears witness to the importance accorded to at least some individual titles and to their recognized audience appeal. Exhibitors apparently wanted to show them because they knew of their success, and producers and distributors did not shy away from illegal practices in order to offer these films to their customers.

The distinctiveness of individual titles is visible also on another level: not only are distribution catalogues organized by titles, but they often also distinguish clearly between major and minor productions, and between new titles and the backlist. This practice was continued throughout the studio era in the United States, providing prestige productions with a superior status through their marketing strategies and the extent to which they were advertised and promoted. The film offer was thus ranked by the producers and distributors, who decided how much they wanted to invest in marketing for different films and how they addressed their clients, the exhibitors. In parallel, critics ranked films in accordance with

their own criteria, which were generally aesthetic ones. Further down the line, the box-office results of individual films provided yet another form of ranking that mirrored audience preferences as well as the success of the marketing strategy. The criteria applied may have differed widely, depending on the interests of the groups involved. A film that scored high with the critics may have been of limited interest for the exhibitors. While the following quotation is from the 1960s, it perfectly illustrates the tension between critical appreciation and audience appeal that has existed since the beginnings of film reviewing in the 1910s.

Needless to say, many artistically excellent films do not have a plot with sufficient mass appeal to be commercial hits in every – or even most – general situations in the country. These productions, if their themes are not too sordid, do lend sorely needed prestige to the industry, however.

Despite the polls – which can only help – it still remains the exhibitor's chore to book pictures which he believes will attract his patrons, whose likes and dislikes he makes it his business to fathom. The small-town theatre owner realizes that many of his films will never win a prize from the critics – who usually are more sophisticated than the average movie-goer – that all they will do is please his patrons.

If he sees a picture that suits his customers, and it has earned a few citations which he can publicize, so much the better.

(Anon., 1961: 4)

The same may be said retrospectively and on a more general level about many of the films that have been canonized by film historians interested chiefly in aesthetic questions, a significant number of which may not have had “sufficient mass appeal to be commercial hits,” but did indeed “lend sorely needed prestige to the industry” (anon., 1961: 4).

We argue, therefore, that in order to understand the distinctive value of a given film on the levels of production, distribution, exhibition, and reception, rather than doing a formal or a textual analysis, one would have to refer to paratextual sources and other documents to understand how producers, distributors, or exhibitors positioned that film in the market, how it was presented to the audience, how it was framed as a unique product and as the promise of a specific experience. Distribution catalogues, advertisements, handbills, posters, and other written sources are crucial in this kind of investigation.

In what follows, we would like to discuss three cases that, in different ways, address the question of these films' distinctive qualities. Our first case study concerns a production that became a huge commercial success and is still part of the international canon of cinematographic milestones and masterpieces.

Georges Méliès's *A Trip to the Moon*: a canonical success film

If one were to choose an image that epitomizes the first years of moving pictures, the most obvious candidate might be the rocket hitting the eye of the moon, which has, indeed, been abundantly used on book and DVD covers. The film in which it appears, Georges Méliès's *A Trip to the Moon* (*Voyage dans la lune*, 1902), clearly belongs in the canon of film history. It is seen not only as an early example for the development towards longer narrative films, but also as a typical product of the so-called “cinema of attractions” (Gunning, 1990b: 56–62).² More importantly, from the viewpoint of cinema history, it was a very successful film, widely distributed and shown over a relatively long period of time. According to Richard Abel (1999: 21), it was immensely popular in the United States. The fact that the film also

circulated in numerous illegal dupe copies suggests that its commercial potential was acknowledged and exploited by Méliès's competitors as well. As Abel observes, the film toured for at least another three years all through the United States, but was in fact most often presented as an Edison production (Abel, 2011: 138). In Berlin, according to the advertisements in the *Berliner Zeitung*, where it was announced under its German release title *Die Reise zum Mond*, it was screened throughout the month of January 1903 at the Wintergarten. Both the fact that it ran for several weeks and that its title was used in the advertisement indicate that the film was indeed seen as a special attraction.³

Another document bearing witness to the extraordinary success of *A Trip to the Moon* is a 1902 handbill of the Cirque Féérique Anderson, presenting the show's program (reproduced in Malthête and Mannoni, 2002: 176). In the first part, there are various artists and performers: an aerialist, acrobats, clowns, etc. The show's second half is opened by the magician Anderson himself, followed by musical acrobats, and then the film program consisting of five comedies (*vues comiques*) and *A Trip to the Moon*. Méliès's film is presented as a "*grande féerie en 30 tableaux*" (thus as a "spectacular production") based on Jules Verne's novel. All thirty tableaux are listed with their title. All in all, the information about *A Trip to the Moon* takes up about one third of the surface of the handbill, so it appears as a major, if not the main attraction, more prominent in the publicity than Anderson's act, which one would imagine was supposed to be the actual highpoint of the show.

These sources all point into the same direction: *A Trip to the Moon* was apparently perceived as an exceptional production. It was shown in theaters for a long period of time and it successfully transgressed the norm that only short films were to be shown in variety theaters. It was advertised in ways that went far beyond the attention given to other films at the time, and its prestige seems to have been considerable. Even though, as Abel rightly observes, *A Trip to the Moon* cannot be said to have "single-handedly created a stable market for cinema exhibition and for the 'staged' story film" in the United States, it clearly did have a bigger impact than most other films (Abel, 1999: 21). It was popular with audiences, with the exhibitors, and even with Méliès's competitors, who duped it. What made it so successful? There are several factors, which may have varied slightly from one country to the other. In France, for instance, the reference to Jules Verne may have played a certain role, even if, in spite of an identical title, its narrative bore absolutely no relation to Verne's novel. Anderson's reference to the *féerie*, a popular stage genre at the time, may also have added to its attraction and, in any event, provided a cultural frame of reference for French audiences. In the United States, on the other hand, the attribution of the film to the name of Edison may have added, to some extent at least, to its appeal.

In order to be able to assess the significance of *A Trip to the Moon* for the international film market in 1902 and the following years, one could think of a comparative research project involving scholars from different countries. A similar project has already been organized (Loiperdinger and Jung, 2013) to better understand what made Asta Nielsen an international star; a global project to retrieve documents on Méliès's "blockbuster," to some extent analogous to the one on Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (New Line, 2001, 2002, 2003) initiated by Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs (Barker and Mathijs, 2007; see also Thompson, 2007), would help us learn more about how the film was advertised, and also about early distribution networks (when, where, by whom was it screened), program structures (was it screened independently as in the Wintergarten, or else what place did it occupy in programs at different types of venues), about how long it was screened in the various venues and about later re-releases.

Given the number of newspapers that by now have been digitized as well as other resources that have become available, such a project could indeed be organized. Bringing together data from many different countries, the extent of the film's international distribution

would be made visible, and documents providing information on audience appreciation would likely surface in the process. Even though *A Trip to the Moon* was undoubtedly an exceptional film at the time, an in-depth study of its distribution, exhibition, and reception could yield valuable insights into the landscape of moving pictures at the beginning of the twentieth century. More generally, the possibility of conducting comparative international studies of that kind opens new perspectives for cinema history.

Our *second case study* concerns a film that was conceived as a kind of “cultural blockbuster” in 1913 and later marked down by film historians as a commercial flop and an example of a failed industry strategy to conquer new audiences.

Hit or miss? *Atlantis* (August Blom, Nordisk, 1913)

The 1913 adaptation of German writer Gerhart Hauptmann’s novel *Atlantis*, produced by the Danish Nordisk Films Kompagni and directed by August Blom, was in many respects an exceptional enterprise. With its eight reels, “it was the longest Danish film to date and one of the longest made anywhere in the world” (Mottram, 1988: 156). Consequently, it was an immensely ambitious project, even – most unusually – being announced in the German press several months before the film was released, with reports of its production costing half a million marks (Göktürk, 1994: 73). The fact that the 1912 Nobel Prize Winner in Literature had agreed to a film adaptation of his novel, which had been published that same year, was in itself a remarkable feat and widely used in the film’s advertisements. In Germany, *Atlantis* was promoted as a “Gerhart Hauptmann-Film,” despite the writer not being responsible for the script (Göktürk, 1994: 75). The sinking of the *Titanic* on 15 April 1912 gave the novel an unforeseeable topicality and the film a frame of reference for its most spectacular scene, the shipwreck of the steamer “Atlantis,” which added to its attraction and commercial value. According to *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly*, each of the 15 copies circulating in Germany cost distributors 15,000 marks (anon., 1913: 159). In Germany, the film was linked to the *Autorenfilm* strategy, with film companies trying to secure the collaboration of famous writers and put well-known stage actors in front of the camera (Diederichs, 1990: 101–120; Quaresima, 1990: 101–120). In this respect, *Atlantis* was clearly a production aimed at lending “prestige to the industry,” (anon., 1961: 4) while at the same time hoping to attract large audiences because of Hauptmann’s reputation, the film’s enormous production values and its spectacular shipwreck scene.

In film history, however, *Atlantis* is often recorded as an artistic as well as an economic failure. Leaving aside the former, which depends largely on the aesthetic criteria applied by historians, the latter point is worth exploring, because the film’s lack of success is considered to have had consequences. The French critic Maurice Drouzy speaks of a “failure not only on a financial level ... but also on a psychological one.” According to him, clients from then on no longer bought films “with their eyes closed,” on the basis of Nordisk’s excellent reputation, as they had done before (Drouzy, 1989: 13–14, our translation). Göktürk calls *Atlantis* “a losing bargain” for Nordisk, because in most countries outside Germany it was much less popular (Göktürk, 1994: 81).⁴ Indeed, elsewhere the film was shown in often drastically shortened versions (Drouzy, 1989: 14; anon., 1913: 156). *Atlantis* was conceived by Nordisk as an early type of blockbuster, aimed at international distribution and intended to draw audiences through its combination of high cultural values, spectacular production values, and topical sensationalism. This account of its appeal to audiences, therefore, allows us to draw conclusions about the emergence of a more general film culture in the early 1910s.

The search for contemporary sources undertaken by Helmut H. Diederichs (1986: 114, 165) reveals how the prejudice started, at least in Germany: it was launched by a group of

Kinoreformer (cinema reformers) in 1913/1914, whose statements were uncritically repeated. The German *Kinoreform* movement (ca. 1907–1920) was an amalgamation of several interests, combining different social and political groups of intellectuals (teachers, clergymen, doctors, lawyers, etc.) with various motivations and aims. The “cultural pessimists” among them only saw cinema’s negative sides (moral corruption of the youth, misguiding of aesthetic taste, health hazards in the theaters); the “optimists” saw its potential (in particular as a new teaching tool). With respect to *Atlantis* and other art film productions, the *Kinoreformer* claimed, as Diederichs shows, that the elevated production costs did not lead to artistic achievements, nor did they generate sufficient additional revenues. Looking for similar documents in other countries may reveal other sources from which film historians have derived the prejudice about the “unfortunate” art film adventures of European film companies in the 1910s.⁵

Using newly available source material from Nordisk’s company archive, which has records going back to the early days of Ole Olsen’s activities in film business (the Danish production company has existed since 1906), the Danish researcher Isak Thorsen was able to prove that *Atlantis* was not a “losing bargain,” but on the contrary quite a commercial success for Nordisk. Despite the radical cuts in foreign distribution prints – from its original length of 2,280m to 1,500 m and even 628 m – which obviously had serious effects on the way the story was told, the film earned several times its production costs (Thorsen, 2018: 128–130). This indicates that audiences bought tickets to watch the film in substantial numbers.

This example illustrates the importance of combining perspectives. Looking at *Atlantis* only from an aesthetic point of view, or from the discussions that the film triggered among the cultural elite and which have influenced the views of film historians, it is difficult to assess its importance – whether positive or negative – for Nordisk, and its popularity or lack thereof. Taking into consideration the company’s papers has allowed Thorsen to question the thesis of the film’s commercial failure and its lack of audience appeal. Studying contemporary and later documents can reveal to what extent they give convergent or divergent answers to the same questions such as financial success, aesthetic achievements, commercial innovation, as well as reception as far as relevant documents can be found.

Looking at stardom from another perspective: Sarah Bernhardt

In our final example, we would like to move a step further and show how closely film history and cinema history can be interconnected thanks to the rapidly growing accessibility of paratextual source material, data and films themselves, as a result of the massive digitization efforts around the world in the past decade.

In her study of the films of Sarah Bernhardt, Victoria Duckett (2015) states that traditional film history’s teleological point of view and its search for films showing cinematographic progress (in particular in editing and camera work) blocked the appreciation of Bernhardt’s films. They were considered “filmed theater” and interesting only as historical documents of the star’s acting *on the stage*. Her cinematographic work was seen as a simple extension of her theatrical activity, and she was accused of neither being able to understand the rules of the new technology nor cope with cinema’s potential.

Unlike the circumstances in which Georges Sadoul and other historians wrote about her, today most of Bernhardt’s films are available and can be analyzed as a corpus. Duckett does this with fascinating results. Her contextualizing analysis of five of Bernhardt’s films reveals that in each case the actor used a different approach. In her chronological study she uncovers how the actress evolved in her cinematographic acting, how she adapted cultural elements she thought interesting for her public and how she used film’s potential in her own way.

Duckett's study demonstrates how concentrating on Bernhardt's acting method, her influence on the *mise-en-scène*, her choice of dramas and roles, and the way she interpreted the characters, can also make us understand what these films reveal about film production, cinema audiences and critics between 1900 (*Hamlet*, Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre) and 1917 (*Mothers of France*, *Éclair*) as well as what the actress achieved with her appearances in front of the camera. Duckett provides an example of what James Card (1966) had in mind for the "serious film student" in the epigraph to this chapter.

Sarah Bernhardt's underestimated film work provides a good example of why the analysis of a specific corpus of films can be of the highest interest today, not only in critically questioning a myth and appreciating an actress – once loved by millions of cinemagoers and praised as a film star by the high-brow (theater) critics – for what her work has actually meant for early cinema culture. The enormous volume of studies dedicated to Bernhardt could give the impression that there was nothing left to be said about her. Duckett's painstaking analysis of the corpus of her films shows that this was not at all the case. As Duckett mentions in her book, a worldwide search for documents – again in a similar manner as Martin Loiperdinger and Uli Jung (2013) have undertaken in their systematic collection of documents on the international reception of Asta Nielsen – would reveal how Bernhardt's films were received internationally, and open even more new perspectives.⁶

The example of Duckett's study of Sarah Bernhardt is instructive on three levels at least: firstly, it shows that a combination of case studies and corpus analysis made possible by the digitization of films can yield new insights. Secondly, it demonstrates that an approach centered on the institution of cinema alone will miss important aspects, because moving images are always already part of a larger landscape of entertainment, which makes it necessary to look at the relations that film entertains with other media at a given historical moment, whether those be of the Magic Lantern culture and the broad range of stage performances for early cinema, or later of radio, television, or today's computer games and YouTube clips. These relations play out not only on an aesthetic level, but also institutionally, culturally, and economically. Thirdly, Duckett makes use of hitherto unexplored archival documents such as posters, photos, film footage of Bernhardt's private environment and others, in order to look at Bernhardt's appearance in the films in the context of her public persona as well as her stage presence. This allows Duckett to show that Bernhardt in fact exercised a degree of artistic control over her screen image that was completely tailored for *her* audience, which she had come to know so well in her own theater and touring internationally.

Conclusion

In our three case studies, we have addressed the issue of each films' audience appeal, and how they could function as a gateway to a much larger study of their role in the cinematic landscape of their time, which is itself part of a much broader landscape of media and entertainment. We have suggested lines of research that combine an examination of programming strategies (using advertisements, program brochures, and handbills), distribution networks (analyzing advertisements in the local press or in trade journals), and presentation methods (by studying posters, flyers, photographs of entrances to cinema shows, etc.).

It is not by accident that in all cases, we have invoked the possibilities of collaborative and comparative research, making use of the possibilities that are offered by the digital research environment. The various data collections and digitization initiatives all over the world allow us to bring together a broad range of perspectives. The availability, and even more importantly, the searchability of newspapers, trade journals, and collections of documents

in digital form make it possible to link information from different types of source material, both in the form of close readings and through seeking patterns in a distant reading approach. The digital tools for searching, organizing, and visualizing data can help to develop new research questions and research agendas. The possibilities offered by these various tools will, we think, fundamentally change our way of doing historical research, perhaps in such a way that will result in there no longer being any difference between doing film history and doing cinema history.

The outcry of the *New York Dramatic Mirror's* anonymous critic in 1915 that there were too many films circulating so that it was impossible for him to see them all and “make a sweeping statement about the film field” (anon., 1915: 35) should not keep us from looking for specific cases that will help us to better understand early films themselves, and their role in the history of moviegoing, movie watching, and movie appreciation, especially now that there are so many of them available again in a digital form.

Notes

- 1 This chapter builds upon our lecture at the 2015 HoMER conference in Glasgow entitled “The Individual Film in Cinema History: Does It Matter?” and on ideas we sketched out in Kessler and Lenk (2015: 127–136).
- 2 For a discussion of the relationship between attraction and narration in *A Trip to the Moon*, see Kessler (2011: 115–128).
- 3 Given the fact that this kind of production was often shown during the holidays, it is quite probable that the film’s run in Berlin started even earlier, presumably around Christmas. However, we were unable to consult the issues of December 1902 of the *Berliner Zeitung*, so we cannot confirm this hypothesis.
- 4 See also Thorsen (2017: 128–130) for other authors claiming that *Atlantis* was a commercial failure. Quaresima (1990: 108) states, however, that at least in Berlin, the film must have been quite a success, quoting an article in *Lichtbild-Bühne* mentioning cinemas with more than 1,000 seats being sold out.
- 5 The French journal *1895* dedicated its issue no. 56 (2008) to “Le Film d’art et les films d’art en Europe, 1908–1911,” edited by Alain Carou and Béatrice de Pastre. The articles collected here offer a multi-perspectival look at the phenomenon, even though the individual authors rarely combine approaches. Still, using source material that had not been explored before, the issue succeeds in shedding new light on the French company Le Film d’Art and the films they produced.
- 6 See Loiperdinger and Jung (2013) and the *Importing Asta Nielsen Database* (<http://importing-astanielsen.deutsches-filminstitut.de/> [Accessed 29 November 2018]).

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