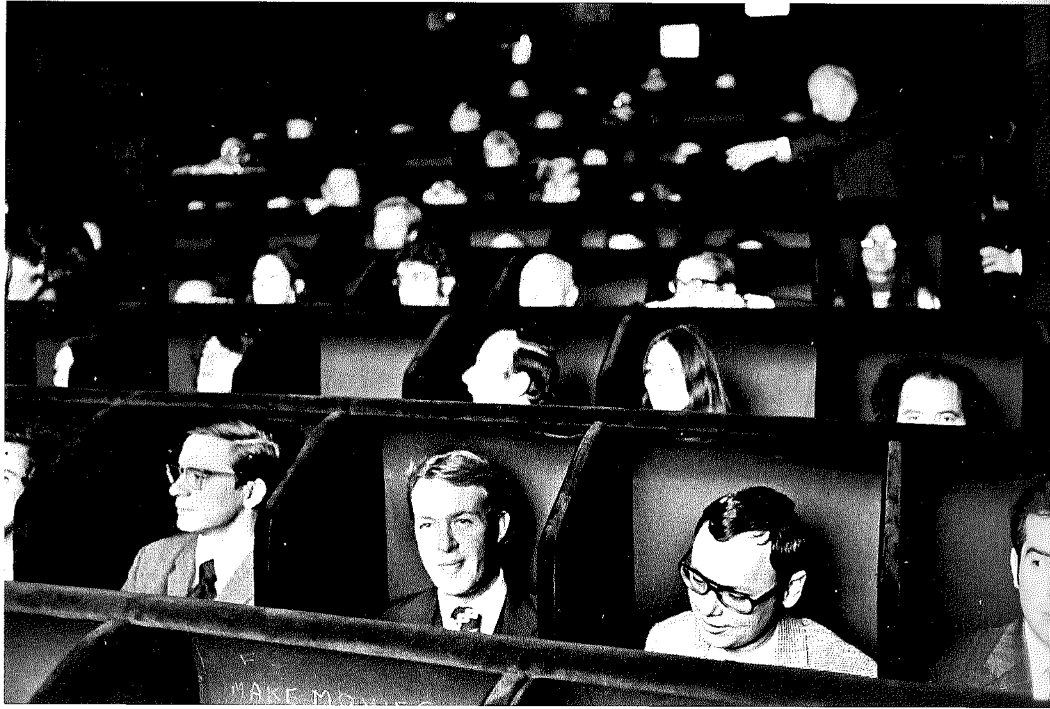

CHAPTER 28

The Invisible Cinema

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THE INVISIBLE CINEMA

The Invisible Cinema was an experimental movie theater designed by an experimental filmmaker. Devised by the Austrian avant-gardist Peter Kubelka, it served as the first place of exhibition for the Anthology Film Archives in New York. Apart from the screen (and some exit signs and aisle lights installed for safety reasons), the auditorium was kept completely in black. Its partitioned, high-winged seats had blinders at the sides and a small hood-like top. The rows were arranged stadium-like, and the viewers had to follow a number of strict behavioral rules. This unusual 90-seat auditorium only existed from 1970 to 1974, but its ideas had an afterlife in other venues such as the Austrian Film Museum.

THEORETICAL FRAMING

Discussing the Invisible Cinema as a specific type of movie theater, this chapter has two goals. First, it describes what the cinema looked like, what the aims of its specific interior design were, and what rules of conduct existed for the audience. Second, it tries to reconstruct in a phenomenological reception study the viewing experience this specific cinema may have enabled for its historical audience. Described by Peter Kubelka as a "viewing machine," the Invisible Cinema apparently caused sensations of floating, drowsiness, and strong absorption among its viewers, but it also gave an unexpected weight to the collectivity of the audience.

THE INVISIBLE CINEMA

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I discuss the Invisible Cinema (IC), a specific historical type of cinema which was characterized by an unusual interior design and strict behavioral rules. The Austrian experimental filmmaker Peter Kubelka, known for his groundbreaking structural films SCHWECHATER (1958) and ARNULF RAINER (1958), devised it in 1970 for the Anthology Film Archives in New York, of which he was one of the co-founders together with Jonas Mekas, P. Adams Sitney, Ken Kelman, and James Broughton.[1] At the Public Theater on 425 Lafayette Street where the Anthology Film Archives was first located, the IC existed for only four years: from 1970 to 1974. When the Anthology Film Archives had to move to its new home in 80 Wooster Street in 1974 for budgetary reasons, the IC was not reconstructed.

This short lifespan could raise doubts about why one should be interested in this movie theater in the first place, also considering that its 90-seat auditorium was fairly small. However, I contend that the IC can be seen as an exemplary media technology for at least two reasons. First, its designer had envisioned it precisely as such: "a viewing machine."[2] Kubelka argued that his movie theater's "revolutionary and controversial design was based upon the notion that like the other machines that a film depends on—cameras, developers, printers, editing machines, and projectors—the room in which one sees a film should also be a machine designed for film viewing."[3] Second, the IC can be regarded as a model media technology because it had an afterlife in other venues.[4] At the Austrian Film Museum in Vienna, which Kubelka co-founded in 1964 and where he worked as one of the directors until 2001, he established the Invisible Cinema No. 2 in 1989. And Alexander Horwath, who had become Kubelka's successor as director of the Austrian Film Museum, initiated a renovation and opened the Invisible Cinema No. 3 in 2003. Another version also existed in the Amerika-Gedenk-Bibliothek in Berlin until January 2014.[5] Cur-

rently, the Whitney Museum in New York is considering reconstructing the original and is in negotiations with Peter Kubelka and Jonas Mekas.[6]

My chapter has two goals. First, I will describe what the IC looked like and what the aims of its specific interior design were but also its rules of conduct for the audience. Second, and more importantly, I want to explore from a phenomenological perspective the viewing experience it enabled. By interpreting quotes from historical sources as well as reminiscences of some of the protagonists of the Anthology Film Archives, I will attempt to provide—or at least *speculate* about—what one could call a phenomenological reception study. The aim is to lend evidence to our intuition that with different types of "viewing machines," we make different types of viewing experiences. As we shall see, when viewers recall their IC experience, they describe sensations of floating, drowsiness, and absorption. Moreover, in contrast to other types of cinema—such as the Nickelodeon, the movie palace, the drive-in theater, the megaplex, to name but a few—the IC resulted in a highly concentrated film experience in which the collectivity of the audience played an unexpected role. In this second part I will therefore also put an emphasis on the audience effect, i.e., the effect that the co-presence of other, mostly anonymous viewers has on one's cinematic experience.[7]

THE INVISIBLE CINEMA CONCEPTION

What is the Invisible Cinema and where does its name come from? Peter Kubelka called his cinema "invisible" because the architecture of the auditorium and its interior design were not supposed to distract. The screen was meant to be the only center of attention: "an ideal cinema should not at all be felt, should not lead its own life, it should practically not be there."[8] No curtain existed in front of the screen, the idea being that all associations with stage theater had to be removed. The lack of a curtain also signalled via the brightly illuminated screen even before the start of the film where viewers had to direct their attention. Kubelka wanted to "make the screen [the viewer's] whole world, by eliminating all aural and visual impressions extraneous to film."[9] As Kubelka put it, the cinema's function was to bring "the filmed message from the author to the beholder with a minimum of loss"; the film should "completely dictate the sensation of space."[10] As a consequence, the ceiling and the walls were covered with black velvet, as were the 90 cinema seats. Black carpeting covered the floor. And the doors were equally painted black. Apart from exit signs and aisle lights installed for safety reasons, everything was dark. Reflections from the auditorium were thus kept to a minimum.[11] As Tom Gunning has pointed out with reference to Siegfried Kracauer's article on "The Cult of Distraction," the IC's strong focus on the screen stands in stark opposition to the distractive potential of other types of cinema: one need only think of the extravagant interior designs of the movie palaces in the 1920s, which in all likeliness lured the audiences' attention to the periphery.[12]

The most unusual feature of the IC was the design of the partitioned, high-winged seats with blinders at the sides and a small hood-like top. These seats with their "shell-like structure" were designed to shield the viewer's upper body and to make it impossible to see one's neighbors to the sides as well as in the front and in the back. This goal was further supported by the elevated, stadium-like construction of the rows. As Vincent Canby put it in a 1970 review of the cinema: "the rake of the auditorium is so steep that when you sit down, you cannot see the people in front of you."[13] But the purpose of these seats was not only to shield the viewers visually, it also served an acoustical function by blocking the sound from sources other than the screen. This implies that the original IC worked only with *monaural* sound: "The Invisible Cinema was meant for the classic one screen, one sound source cinema. By one sound source I mean one source of sound right behind the screen so that the sound comes from the same place as the image," Kubelka writes.[14] Since the seat partitions would block surround sound coming from speakers at the sides or in the back, the IC in the Austrian Film Museum does not contain partitioned seats.[15]

Last but not least, the cinema implemented explicit and implicit behavioral rules. An *explicit* rule was that no one could enter the auditorium once the film had begun.[16] Again, the goal of this attempt in disciplining the audience was to make another significant part of the cinematic experience—namely the co-viewers—invisible. However, the fact that other viewers were *invisible* did not mean that they were *absent* from one's experience, a point I will return to. Among the *implicit* guidelines was a strong discouragement of talking and producing noises: silence was the rule. Kubelka preferred "a structure in which one is in *a community that is not disturbing to others*."[17] But was it indeed quiet during the screening of the film? In an early report, *The New York Times* cited some of the first attendees of the IC, who underlined the cinema's quiet auditorium: "It's a great little theater with all that quiet" and "To me the very silence was something like music itself."[18]

THE INVISIBLE CINEMA EXPERIENCE

What possible experiences did the design and behavioral rules of the IC make possible for the viewer? Methodologically, we enter problematic territory here, because it is notoriously difficult to describe specific historical viewing experiences. Film historian Frank Kessler even speaks of "the unattainable

audience."[19] I will nevertheless try to provide—or at least hypothesize about—what one could call a phenomenological reception study: What specific viewing experience did the IC enable?

Three aspects recur in a number of audience descriptions in the press at the time but also in contemporaneous comments of the Anthology Film Archives' protagonists. (Somewhat ironically, the very cinema that was supposed to remain "invisible" stimulated more comments and reminiscences than a prototypical cinema. Thus it was more conspicuous than intended by Kubelka.)[20] The first one is the "floating sensation": some viewers remember that viewing films in the IC resulted in a detachment from the concrete space of the cinema and caused a sensation of drifting in darkness. Film critic Vincent Canby, for one, noted that "watching a couple of demonstration movies [...] was rather like floating in a vast, benign space, looking at a rectangular-shaped hallucination of almost drug-induced clarity. It is a trip, one of the best that money can buy [...]."[21] A similar sensation comes across in Stan Brakhage's comment: "generally, people really had a sense of drifting in a black space, a black box, and black ahead of you, nothing visible except the screen."[22] This floating sensation may have been amplified by particular films that were shown in the Anthology Film Archives—especially some of the experimental works by Stan Brakhage and Michael Snow or the flicker films by Tony Conrad and Paul Sharits.

But there might also have been a relation to another consequence of the interior design that I would like to call the "drowsing sensation." P. Adams Sitney describes: "When one sat in the enclosed seats, one generated a great deal of heat. If you stood up the room felt like a refrigerator, but as long as you were sitting in that small box it was very hot. It was an extremely soporific problem, one became very drowsy."[23] The sensations of floating and drowsiness could have reinforced each other, resulting in the drug-like experience Canby spoke about—especially *vis-à-vis* a hallucinatory flicker film like Paul Sharits's N:O:T:H:I:N:G (1968).

Moreover, it seems a commonplace assumption—and this is the third recurring aspect in audience descriptions—that the primary goal of the IC was to provide an immersive viewing experience. A similar view is shared by several authorities in the field. Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, for instance, indicate that the IC aimed to "enhance each individual's absorption in the film experience"; Giuliana Bruno points out that the IC ensured a "total perceptual fusion" with the screen; while David A. Cook claims the IC helped "facilitate the viewer's total concentration in complete darkness and isolation."[24] Given the cinema's interior design and rules of conduct as well as Kubelka's expressed intentions, the conclusion that there was an "experience of absorption" seems fair enough.

However, in a next interpretive step, this absorptive experience supposedly results in the viewer's distance to his or her co-viewers and thus leads to an *individualizing* effect. Consequently, Peter Decherney argues: "[Kubelka] designed his 'machine for viewing' to minimize distractions and thus create the most individualized experience possible within the presence of an audience."[25] In her well-known book *Atlas of Emotion*, Giuliana Bruno sheds a rather critical light on this effect. She calls the IC "a modernist sanctuary" that "encapsulated the spectator in his or her view": "Here, one was basically alone in the act of filmic viewing, insulated aurally as well as haptically."[26] No less critical, J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum describe the presentation of films in the IC as "fetishistic": it had only the "solitary film spectator in mind" and was "ostensibly constructed to screen out most social distractions and minimize communal responses."[27] Similarly, Barbara Rose wrote in an early review: "Anthology's purist position [...] presupposes that film is as much an individualistic one-to-one communication from artist to viewer as the high arts of painting and sculpture."[28] But are these claims about an individualizing effect truly convincing?

I believe that we are dealing with a misguided reconstruction of the actual viewing experience here. In contrast, I argue that the IC can be considered the ideal type of the specific *collective* viewing experience that elsewhere I call the "quiet, attentive audience," which enables collective intentions, joint attention, and even joint actions among its members of the audience precisely because it is quiet and attentive.[29] In other words, even in the extreme case of quiet attentive absorption we are dealing with a collective experience—albeit a different type of collectivity. This claim may not be easily accepted. Peter Decherney, for one, finds nothing communal about the IC: "The manifesto's justification—that 'the communal spirit is strongest and most effective in the absence of disturbance of one's neighbor'—is unconvincing if not oxymoronic."[30] So where, then, do I find evidence for my claim that the IC enabled a type of collectivity?

First, the viewers were not as isolated from each other as many commentators would have it. While visual and aural contact was strongly reduced, viewers were able to touch each other. In an Austrian television report from October 13, 1970, Kubelka emphasized that the seats were constructed with openings at the sides to precisely allow people to feel and touch each other: "The sense of touch maintains community, as in earlier times."[31] Thus, Giuliana Bruno's claim that viewers were insulated not only visually but also haptically is not correct. Second, as can be seen in figure 49, the viewers were sitting very close to each other in the "compact, comfortable auditorium," as *The New York Times* author Howard Thompson described it.[32] Even though the spectators did not see each other, the co-presence could be felt due to physical close-