

50 Years of INTERFILM

by Julia Helmke, Hannover

The International Church Film Organization INTERFILM will turn 50 in October 2005. Why was it founded and how has it developed? Where did it succeed, where did it encounter difficulties? 50 years is a long time for an international organization which is exclusively honorary and has neither permanent employees nor an office of its own. 50 years is also a long time for the history of the film medium and its role in today's media society. This contribution gives a view inside INTERFILM. It is an organization which always felt connected with WACC and which nevertheless insisted on diversity and autonomy.

Berlin, Cannes, Locarno, Montreal, Karlovy Vary, Riga, Gothenborg, Zlin - there are church film prizes at all of these places (and even some more). These places across Europe and beyond host film festivals to which church juries are invited – for some of these cities, this tradition has existed for over forty years. Usually this takes place no longer according to separate religious denominations, but ecumenically, in alliance with INTERFILM and with the World Catholic Association for Communication SIGNIS (before 2002: OCIC).

It is an open question whether the men – and the few women - from five Western European countries could have dreamed of such a development when they met in 1955 in Paris in order to speak about the challenge that film represents for the Church. As a result of their discussions, they founded the international Protestant organization INTERFILM on the 22nd of October, 1955.

In the initial years they wanted above all one thing: to protect people from bad films and to promote the emergence and distribution of good films. To do so, they hoped for a close relationship with WCC. But the mass and art films did not completely fit into their existing set of tasks such as mission, world responsibility, theology, and the like. The variety of possible approaches to film also quickly became evident: France pursued discussions about well-made commercial films, Germany strengthened its own Protestant film journalism, and the Anglo-Saxons promoted clearly religious productions. The commitment was great, but so was Christian responsibility in relation to film and society: Film is THE mass medium, and cinema attendance has exceeded church service attendance. Thus the questions arose: What can the Church do? How can it act and react? First it wanted to become acquainted with others and exchange ideas, to increase the number of its members and to exert a stronger influence with united forces. That applied both to Church leaders, who often did not exactly know what Church and film had to do with one another, as well as to the film industry and interested Christians.

The number of members grew quickly: in 1956 already, one year after its foundation, INTERFILM had 16 member organizations from Norway to Austria. Church organizations from the United States joined soon thereafter. One of the key figures was John Taylor, a North American artist and photographer who, as Director of Communication Services at WCC, accompanied INTERFILM from the outset and made important contacts. Another important figure was the Swiss man Friedrich Hochstrasse, editor-in-chief of a Protestant television, radio and film journal. He presided over INTERFILM from 1959 to 1970. On the German side, there was a whole set of men who influenced international film work: Film Commissioner Werner

Hess, then Hermann Gerber, or the journalist Dietmar Schmidt. One person sticks out, however: Jan Hes, theologically-interested sociologist who founded, among other things, the Film Center in Hilversum/ Netherlands, and from 1955 on to his death in 1991 untiringly and continuously worked as Secretary-General of INTERFILM.

In 1960, INTERFILM decided to give up the dream of producing its own films or influencing film policies. It decided that this should be done as much as possible by the individual members locally in their own countries. Instead, INTERFILM turned consciously to the appreciation and promotion of current film work. Film was perceived as part of culture and art and supported from this perspective.

After the inauguration of its own INTERFILM prize, the step to participation in International Film Festivals was very small. The first INTERFILM jury prize was awarded at the Berlin Film Festival in 1963. It went to the American comedy "Lilies of the Field" with Sydney Poitier. Not an undisputed decision, but the International Catholic Jury, which had been active at the Berlin Film Festival since 1956, made the same choice. A few years later, this contact was intensified. The atmosphere after the Second Vatican Council promoted the realization that Protestant and Catholic film work agreed in their basic assumptions. In addition, around 1968 an atmosphere emerged that put in question not only the occupation of the Church with film but the Church itself - given this situation, it was good to co-operate. Besides the development of jury work, ecumenical co-operation became one of the most important and steady bedrocks of INTERFILM. The Protestant founding fathers probably would not have dreamed of that either...

In 1969, a further premiere in INTERFILM history took place: the first Protestant jury at the most important Film Festival, a temple of Glamour and Business - Cannes. The jury awarded its prize to "Easy Rider" and proved thereby its impartiality and its feeling for films which move human beings. The first guidelines which INTERFILM set up in 1971 as criteria for film evaluation and prize assignment fit into this well: "for directors of films of high artistic quality [...], which in a special way express a human attitude appropriate to the gospel or which stimulate a discussion of it." These are open criteria which are nevertheless not arbitrary, and neither neglect the respective film as a sign of its times nor the self-understanding of Church jury work.

In 1973 and 1974, further steps lay ahead: the first ecumenical jury in Locarno, and then in Cannes, assembled. It was an experiment which proved satisfactory and which has developed over the years. Today, in Cannes, for example, an honorary group is busy the whole year round spreading the work of the ecumenical jury beyond the Festival. It prepares for this event, makes full use of it, does publicity work and tries to anchor the connection of Church, ecumenicity and film in the context of the local congregation and society. All this means church film work in a secular environment! Through this, INTERFILM learned how important it was to formulate film evaluations in a professional manner and to speak a generally understandable language. Church juries, in part earlier than others, have developed a feeling for film tendencies which are at the margin and which deserve to be given more attention. They discovered films from other continents. They advocated social criticism in film and recognized that the contents of film not only exhibit a proximity to the Biblical message, but can also themselves represent an important inquiry into the

Church and theology. Films were understood as seismographs - the 70's was a turbulent time.

The 80's were also exciting: finally, more films from Central and Eastern Europe came to the Film Festivals. They combined politics and spirituality, realism and poetry in a unique way. The gate to another world, which is neighbouring and nevertheless strange, opens. The director Andrej Tarkowsky ranks among the most frequent prize winners. Many contacts to film creators developed through the prizes. Film and culture were perceived as a means of communication, as an "eye opener".

But INTERFILM was active not only in jury work. It has always given importance to exchange and thematic study regarding church and film as well as society and contemporary history. INTERFILM's work in film studies began already in the 60's. In the beginning, it was carried out together with the Protestant Academy in Arnoldshain near Frankfurt/FRG. Topics included "Art and Morality", "Christ in Film?", "Traces of the Gospel in Film". One of the most influential conferences took place in Bern in 1978: "Social-Critical Elements in Christian Film". Soon an INTERFILM Academy was founded, which, under the direction of Pastor Eckart Bruchner from Germany, worked in many European countries and with many co-operation partners. One emphasis was to arouse the interest of younger people and another was to strengthen the role of women in media. Among other things, E. Bruchner founded the so-called „One Future Prize“ at the Munich Film Festival after the nuclear reactor disaster in Chernobyl in 1986, and led seminars on unknown film countries in order to strengthen consciousness and tolerance.

1980 was not 1955 however: film was no longer the only medium of moving pictures. Television, the first forms of video, and other electronic media had gained more and more influence. INTERFILM tried to open itself up to these currents. Here the contact with WACC continued to grow.

Internal challenges and difficulties must also be mentioned: INTERFILM was poor. Poor in financial means and poor in (wo)manpower – at least for the many projects which were lurking for INTERFILM in the fields of film, ecumenicity, and cultural work. INTERFILM did not completely succeed in separating from the hierarchical structures centered on Western Europe put in place at the beginning, nor did it succeed in becoming a sizable institution on an international level. Nevertheless, INTERFILM held a general assembly in New York in 1979 on which WCC General Secretary Philipp Potter spoke. At the beginning of the 1980's, the organization consisted of different departments (INTERFILM Europe, INTERFILM America, INTERFILM Asia) and had contacts to Africa and the Middle East. However, communication did not always succeed: (film)cultural and religious differences were big.

Nevertheless, INTERFILM also possessed the strength to change and to further develop. A seminar in Colombo/Sri Lanka took place in 1986. The inter-religious topic came into view. Here, as elsewhere, not only the content of a film, but also its aesthetics began to move into the foreground.

By the end of the 1980's things began to thaw behind the iron curtain, and INTERFILM did not remain dormant. Owing to good Catholic contacts, an international ecumenical jury met at the Moscow Film Festival even before the wall fell in 1989. Orthodox jurors likewise participated. Participation in festivals in St.

Petersburg and Kiev followed. INTERFILM also engaged itself especially in East Germany and participated in the Documentary Film Days in Leipzig, and later in the festival in Cottbus focussing on Eastern Europe.

The unexpected death of Jan Hes took place in the middle of this atmosphere of departure. His contribution to INTERFILM cannot be overestimated; his absence left a large gap. He was a driving force, had been the publisher of the INTERFILM journal, and often acted as a communicator and moderator. INTERFILM needed some years in order to rearrange itself. Starting from the middle of the 1990's at the latest, however, a new departure was to be felt within INTERFILM. Contact was looked for once more in WACC. WACC supported INTERFILM in the form of projects. That meant concretely, for example, that the presence of women and people from Central and Eastern Europe was purposely promoted.

In the following, I want to discuss in more detail the emphasis of INTERFILM in the 90's until today.

1. INTERFILM limits itself to Europe, and rediscovers Europe

Under the presidency of Hans Werner Dannowski (1989-2004), it was decided to give up the goal of being an organization acting world-wide and to strengthen instead work in the new and larger Europe. Naturally, this did not mean that no contacts to other continents were maintained, but a clear focus was set. In 1995, a set of conferences began which had Europe and European culture as their topics. First, contact was sought in Northern European countries. The film medium was understood as a mirror of social processes, disclosing strangeness and showing familiarity in a new light. How do films illustrate the social, cultural and religious contexts of these countries and how do these contexts affect the films? The narrative quality of films was thereby emphasized. These impulses were fruitful in Scandinavia: in 2001, the Culture Council of the Evangelical-Lutheran church of Sweden awarded a film prize at the Festival in Goeteborg; one year later, the Danish church followed with its own film prize.

In 1998, the focus turned to the South, to the more strongly Catholic-influenced Mediterranean countries. In the southern-French city of Nîmes, the agenda emphasized the topic of film, theology and culture in a desecrated post-modern world. One year later, a jump to the Northeast followed, to Riga/Latvia. Under the title "Integration and Disintegration", this seminar was clearly political. An explicitly ecumenical perspective was present in a seminar in Mannheim 2001 with the title "(Dis)Regarding the Image", which debated the difference between Protestant and Catholic "afterimages". Among other things, it asked which images are still to be trusted and how a Church-embedded organization like INTERFILM is to position itself with regard to the current approach to images. As provisional last highpoint with regard to this topic, a conference was organized in the Orthodox Academy on Crete/Greece in Autumn 2004 about the Orthodox understanding of images. These have been all path-breaking events. According to the opinion of INTERFILM, Church and culture, ecumenicity and education, politics and spirituality belong together and can question, enrich, and mutually strengthen one another.

2. INTERFILM strongly engages in dialogue with theology and culture

A topic which received strong impulses from Germany among others, but which in the USA and in Anglo-Saxon countries already for a long time has been attended to under the auspice of religious and cultural studies, was the dialogue between film and theology. In the mid-1980's, H.W. Dannowski provocatively asked, in Germany, why the occupation with Church and film had so strongly focussed on social and diaconical aspects, but never got involved with theology or, respectively, theology never with film. The question went along with the observation that the church as an institution to a large extent had lost contact with culture and the arts. This harmed it in a twofold way: on the one hand, what is missing is an ally in a world which to a large extent is globalized, post-modern, and which no longer asks the question of meaning. On the other hand, what is missing is a critical opposite number to hear and understand the world's questions. INTERFILM confronts these questions, which are also methodically and fundamentally discussed. From the mid-1990's onwards, we can thus observe a scholarly and interdisciplinary discourse on theology, religion and film. INTERFILM members write Ph.D. dissertations on topics such as "Redemption in Film" or „The Cinema Meaning-Machine", which meet with far-reaching approval.

3. INTERFILM expands its jury activity

Already starting in 1988, when the Swiss man Hans Hodel was appointed Jury Co-ordinator of INTERFILM, jury work was further professionalized. New juries were added. Contacts with Festival Directorships and with interested local groups in film, media, culture and the Church were intensified. The juries not only should award prizes to films. They should also be able to communicate what their background is, and why they are participating in a film festival. Some ecumenical juries in Eastern Europe, particularly in Russia, could not be continued due to a sensitive political-religious situation. But inquiries came from young film festivals in Central Europe, like in Bratislava or from the Children's Film Festival in Zlin, which gladly welcomed an ecumenical jury. New ground has been covered, and the reactions have been mostly positive. In fact, interest nearly exceeds the capacities of INTERFILM.

A further innovation has been a European film prize, the "European Templeton Film Award". The prize is awarded annually at the Berlin Film Festival in alliance with the Conference of European Churches and the John Templeton Foundation. Since the first time the prize was awarded in 1997, not only has the prize money increased, but also public attention.

INTERFILM becomes 50. Who would have dreamed of that... and what dreams are yet to come? Much has changed, some things have remained the same: fascination for film artwork, passion for an encounter between Church and film in this world. It will be necessary to communicate even more strongly, to find further co-operation partners, and to increase the lastingness of the initiatives and commitment.

About the author: Julia Helmke is Pastor and INTERFILM member. After her ordination, she studied film criticism in Munich. After working in the Ecumenical Office, she taught film and religion in Christian journalism at the University of Erlangen. For her doctoral thesis, she did research on Protestant and ecumenical film jury work between 1948 and 1988. She lives in Hanover where she chairs the "Art and Culture" Department in the House of Church Services.

Translated by Dr. James Slawney, Frankfurt/Main.