A Report on the XIX IAMHIST Conference, Leipzig, Germany

By John C. Tibbetts

When Mephistopheles escorted Faust on a trip to Leipzig, he offered this practical advice:

We’ve but to spread this mantle wide,
And it will bear us through the air.
But upon this daring flight
Take only luggage that is light. . . .

The lack of Mephistopheles’ magic cloak notwithstanding—planes, trains, and automobiles had to suffice—more than 200 IAMHIST conferees from 22 countries arrived in the fabled German city, eager for the sights and sounds and ready for the intellectual challenges of the five-day IAMHIST Congress, July 18-22, 2001.

But there was a bit of confusion concerning the inaugural evening’s festivities. Indeed, it could have been a reprise of a scene from the W.C. Fields classic, The Old-Fashioned Way. You will recall that Fields, as The Great McGonigle, arrives with his theatre troupe in the picturesque town of Bellefontaine to blaring brass bands and cheering crowds. Alas, he quickly learns that the greeting is not intended for him, but for a visiting military dignitary. Similarly, the IAMHIST contingent could be excused for thinking that the milling crowd of thousands gathered at the New Town Hall in Leipzig was celebrating its arrival. And while it was true enough that many Leipzigers and dignitaries were on hand to kick off the Congress, it was also true it had just been announced coincidentally that Leipzig had been chosen by BMW as the site of its newest factory. IAMHIST may have brought many of its members to town, but BMW was promising 10,000 new jobs. Perhaps it is easy to understand why the Lord Mayor of
Leipzig, Dr. Wolfgang Tiefensee, chose to inaugurate the festivities next door instead of greeting the IAMHISTers.

The confusion was quite appropriate, considering that the theme for this year’s IAMHIST Congress was “Changing Identities in Film and Television.”

Meanwhile, on hand to greet the IAMHIST attendees that memorable evening were the American Consul-General, the Honorable Tim Savage, and Leipzig’s Project Manager for Foreign Investors, Wennemar de Weldige. De Weldige summarized Leipzig’s industrial and cultural past. Already famous for eight centuries for its trade fairs, Leipzig had established itself by the middle of the 19th century as the commercial capital of Saxony. Since then, it has customarily been regarded as a city of publishers, banking, insurance companies, and site of one of Europe’s most famous universities. Moreover, Leipzig looms large in the German cultural mystique as a place haunted by the ghosts of Bach, Goethe, and Schiller; and it legitimately can be regarded as the cradle of Romantic music, witness the presence early in the 19th century of Wagner, Mendelssohn, and Robert and Clara Schumann and the establishment of the world-famous Leipzig Conservatory of Music and Gewandhaus Orchestra. The period of 1949-1989 threw Leipzig into the shadow of the German Democratic Republic. But in the winter of 1989 the eyes of the world focused anew on Leipzig, now the flashpoint leading to the (ultimately) peaceful collapse of communist domination over much of Middle and Eastern Europe.

“As you can see,” said Tim Savage, following up de Weldige’s remarks, “Leipzig is continuing on the path it has followed for centuries, embracing arts and industry alike. Not so long ago, after the Change, Leipzig was covered with scaffolding and plastered
with signs that proclaimed, ‘Leipzig kommt’ [“Leipzig Is Coming”]. It took some time but that future is happening now. Not only is BMW bringing more industry to the city, but IAMHIST is helping prepare the way for Leipzig as one of the media centers of the world.”

The Congress opened the next morning with greetings from Dr. Volker Bigl, Rector of the University of Leipzig. Picking up on the theme of the Congress, he noted the University of Leipzig has itself suffered what might be called an “identity crisis.” He related how the alma mater Lipsiensis had been founded at the beginning of the 15th century, and had been originally comprised of four faculties: the Faculty of Arts and the three “higher” faculties, i.e., Theology, Medicine, and Law. Over the centuries the University and its celebrated law school had boasted a roster of illustrious students, including Leibniz, Fichte, Nietzsche, and Goethe. Media research and education in Leipzig was founded as early as 1917 by Karl Buecher, and since then it continued in five different political systems: Kaiserreich, Weimar Republic, the Nazi state, the socialist state, and the federal democratic system today. In 1953, under the GDR, however, the university was forced to change its name to “Karl Marx University.” By 1968, as a result of GDR “reforms,” many of those faculties and academic bodies endowed with substantial decision-making powers had been dissolved. But now, since the Change in 1991, its name has been restored. The University of Leipzig has been undergoing a ten-year restoration of faculties and institutes, and its student population has doubled from 12,000 to 24,000.
The following days saw numerous panels with speakers—most with film and video examples—from 22 countries, including Russia, Latvia, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Australia, Sweden, Denmark, Armenia, the Netherlands, and America. The theme of “changing identities” embraced a wide variety of political, national, ethnic, gender, and media issues. As Pierre Sorlin (Paris, France) noted in a Plenary Session moderated by David Culbert (Baton Rouge, USA), “Images in themselves cannot build identities, but they can help us understand how identities are built.” Accordingly, he examined how Fascist-inspired films and documentaries reveal the extent to which Fascism encouraged rural Italians to adopt a positive personal and social identity. In the same session, David Ellwood (Bologna, Italy) discussed European attitudes toward and conceptions of post-war America in the satiric films of Jacques Tati.

The great diversity of issues concerning national identities can be gleaned from the following sampling of presentations: Dan Leab’s (New York, USA) paper on “America in German Film, 1902-1919” (read by David Ellwood in Dan’s absence); discussions of Cold War images in American cinema by Tom Doherty (Brandeis, USA), Michael Murray (St. Louis, USA), Richard Jewell (USC, USA), and Brian Neve (Bath, UK); questions of “eastern” and “western” styles in the new German cinema by Ruediger Steinmetz (Leipzig, Germany); images of early Cinema Novo by Regina Aggio (Rio de Janeiro); nostalgia for the past in recent Balkan cinema (Ingeborg Bratoeva (Sofia, Bulgaria); television coverage of China’s changing culture by Kevin Latham (London, UK); broadcast coverage of marginalized groups in Nigeria by Onookome Okome (Bayreuth, Germany) and on British television by Tony Marzan (Lancashire, UK); and postmodernist structures in recent Russian films by Marina Drosdova (Moscow, Russia).
Definitions of ethnic identity can be blurred, as many presentations demonstrated. Robert Brent Toplin (Wilmington, USA) discussed the “deracination” of African Americans in American commercial cinema. William H. Foster III (Waterbury, USA) examined images of African Americans in comic books in the work of R. Crumb and Grass Green, rhetorically wondering when and how we can differentiate between satiric and racist images. In the same panel Alexander Russo (Providence, USA) noted the identity transformation of “Cato” from Japanese to Phillippino due to onset of World War II. Richard Howells (Leeds, UK) introduced non-initiates to the dubious talents of one “Ali G,” a faux gangsta rapper (he is a Cambridge-educated Jew whose real name is Sasha Baron Cohen) whose feigned insensitivity to race, drugs, and sex brings controversy, and some outrage to his “Da Ali G Show” on Channel 4 television. He is a “moving target,” said Howells. He is either a white man with a Pakistani name pretending to be black; or, alternately, a white man pretending to be a white man who is pretending to be black. Is Ali G’s ethnic polysemy a contribution to racial understanding, rhetorically asked Howells in conclusion. “At least we are getting better at discussing it. . . . My optimism lies in the public reaction to him. Rather than respond with knee-jerk reactions and predictably entrenched positions, the discussion in all sections of the British media has been essentially intelligent, sophisticated, and constructive.”

Presentations concerning gender identification included Wendy Webster’s (Lancashire, UK) examination of images of active female figures in the “empire” films of
postwar England; Julia Hallam (Liverpool, UK) talked about images of nurses in the
same context; Elzbieta Ostrowska (Lodz, Poland) discussed presentations of female
sexuality in post-1989 Polish cinema; Freda Freiberg (Victoria, Australia) viewed the
impact of American occupation on images of women in Japanese cinema; Leslie M.
DeBauche (Wisconsin, USA) presented international fashion’s influence on the
“American Girl”; and Stefanie Martin (Washington State, Seattle, USA) turned to
independent cinema with a sampling of lesbian films.

Several presentations isolated and examined individual filmmakers whose works
have challenged social, ethnic, political, and gender norms. The work of documentarian
Robert M. Young was surveyed by Nick Cull (Leicester, UK). Here is a filmmaker who,
in Cull’s words, “has frequently transcended borders of identity, addressing issues of
race, class, gender, and handicap that mainstream American film has preferred to avoid.”
Young’s body of work—including the pioneering theatrical features, Nothing But a Man
(1964), a realistic and unsentimental view of the work and family life of an African
American, and Alambrista (1977), a depiction of the plight of undocumented Mexican
migrant workers in the United States—reveals “how one career links a number of
initiatives from the pioneering days of television documentary through to contemporary
independent film.” Cull concluded his presentation with the good news that Alambrista
is shortly to be reissued in a new director’s cut with supporting literature for use in
classrooms. Charles Musser (Yale, USA), co-author of the recent book, Oscar Micheaux
and His Circle, talked about Oscar Micheaux’ special place in the history of independent
American black cinema. As early as 1916, Micheaux’ novels and feature films
challenged the prevailing images of African Americans prevalent in mainstream cinema. Musser went on to screen excerpts from Micheaux’ *Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920), a hitherto “lost” film about racial conflict in America.

Archive presentations constituted an important part of the conference events. A highlight was a program moderated by Christine Whittaker of BBC clips by producer Peter Pagnamenta and of Swedish Institute films by Pelle Snickars (Stockholm, Sweden). Pagnamenta brought rare Nippon newsreels from Japanese film archives spanning the years 1940 to the present, including images from the 1940s of Hirohito, soldiers making rice cakes in Nanking, women working in factories; and from the 1960s to the present of an increasingly industrialized and urbanized Japan. Snickars’ program of Swedish newsreels before 1920 offered fascinating glimpses of the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm and ore miners at work. Both speakers lamented how inadequately documented are much of these archival sources and how much work there is yet to be done. IAMHIST founding pioneer, Stanley Forman, gave a presentation on the “Media Heritage of the GDR” and shared his life story regarding his longstanding interest and involvement in East German film archives. He discussed his experiences working with Ivor Montague, who helped Stanley found a film distribution company that disseminated and popularized Cold War-era films from the GDR. Sharing the podium with Stanley was Wolfgang Klaue, head of the DEFA Foundation in Berlin and the last director of the GDR Staatliches Film Archiv and former FIAF president. He traced the history of the Foundation, whose materials are presently archived in America at the Study Center of Amherst University. Other archivists included Peter Steel, who explained the purpose of
London’s Central Office of Independent Film Archives; Vladimir Opela, who described the workings of the Czech National Archive; English archivist Adrian Wood, a specialist in color preservation, who tracked efforts to salvage material from the former Soviet Union; Kay Gladstone, who traced the history of the Imperial War Museum in London from its World War I origins and related its efforts to collect and annotate outtakes from television commercials; and Stefan Goock of the Saxonian State Film Archive, who presented a selection of semi-professional films of the “Betriebsfilmkollektive” (film groups of the GDR), which examined everyday life in the GDR—providing a view totally different from that of the official DEFA productions.

Inevitably, issues of identity also centered around the nature of the film medium itself. In a panel discussion on Dogma ’95, presided over by Karsten Fledelius, Jens Ulff-Moller (Copenhagen) and Gabriel Giralt (Akron, USA) offered differing positions about the movement. In the spring of 1995 in Copenhagen, Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg nailed their Dogma ’95 principles to the mast. More of a “Vow of Chastity,” it was a pledge to abandon the techniques, subjects, and attitudes of the commercial mainstream American cinema. Some of the tenets, by now familiar, and present to a degree in the Dogma films released thus far (The Idiots, Celebration, Mifune, and The King Is Alive) include: insistence on location shooting, rejection of non-diegetic sound and music, adoption of the hand-held (digital) camera, reliance on natural lighting, avoidance of optical work and filters, etc. While Ulff-Moller insisted that this movement was indeed a wholesale reconsideration of the nature and direction of the industry of the moving image, Giralt countered that it was nothing more than a continuation of several
previous movements in the “liberation” of the cinema, especially with the cinema-verite movement and the nouvelle vague of the late 1950s and 1960s in France and America. In a lively discussion afterward, Nick Cull posed a provocative question: Is the dispute concerning Dogma ’95 and American cinema really a matter of modernism versus conservatism; a new technology versus older technologies; or simply a matter of an opposition between American and European sensibilities and attitudes? Time prohibited further discussion, but the question remains a significant one.

Among the special screening sessions, filmmaker Andreas Voigt screened his Grosse Weite Welt (Wide, Wide World), a film chronicling the lives of Leipzigers from the days of transition between the fall of the GDR until the first years of reunification of Germany, until 1996; Vladimir Khotinenko’s Passion Boulevard (Russia, 1999); the controversial Die Vertriebenen: Hitler’s letzte Opfer (The Expelled: Hitler’s Last Victims, Germany 2001); and Evgeny Tsymbal’s Ordinary Bolshevism (Russia, 2000). And there were programs of Chinese films from the East Asia Institute of Visual Anthropology (introduced by Dr. Barbara Keifenheim of Leipzig), and clips from the work of “Jewish Superstars of Song—Roberta Peters, Barbra Streisand, Bette Midler” (selected by Andrew Ingall of the National Jewish Archive of Broadcasting, New York).

The site of most of the formal sessions was the Zeitgeschichtliches Forum (Museum of Contemporary History), on the Grimmaische Strasse in the center of the city, conveniently located near many shops, restaurants, and outdoor cafes. Street performers were on every corner, and on one memorable evening a full-scale concert was held by a
symphonic band in the square. Everywhere, history was a living presence. Only a few steps away was the Augustusplatz, where Kurt Masur, then conductor of the Gewandhaus Orchestra, participated in some of the first student uprisings in October and November 1989—convocations that, as has been already noted, eventually played a crucial role in the Soviet collapse in Germany. “The Protestant churches had opened their doors to young people to discuss their problems,” Masur has recalled to this writer in a recent interview. “They could talk openly how they wanted to change the life in this country. But we found out that the political leaders feared that from these street musicians might start a political movement. So I made a meeting in the Gewandhaus to offer my help. We invited the street musicians, the Secret Police, and the City Council—just to tell everybody, please keep peace, don’t have confrontations, no force. It was a kind of dress rehearsal for the movement to come. We found out that the young soldiers, the young policemen also felt the same way. No force.” Later, after the Wall came down in Berlin and after the Change, Masur was offered the presidency of the country. “I was not a political leader,” he says, “I just came in at the point where it was starting to become dangerous for the young people. I just happened to be somebody who could be trusted. I was known as an artist and someone who had wanted only peace.”

Meanwhile, music lovers in the IAMHIST ranks found themselves in the thick of music history. Richard Wagner was born there and studied at the University. Gustav Mahler composed his First Symphony there. Several historic sites were located within walking distance of the IAMHIST headquarters—Johann Sebastian Bach’s Thomas Church, Felix Mendelssohn’s Gewandhaus and his last residence (1845-1847), the “Robert Schumann Corner” at the Coffe-Baum and his first residence as a married man
(1840-1844). When Bach took his post in Leipzig in 1723 as Thomas Cantor and “Director musices” (Music Director), responsible for the musical activities at all the municipal churches, particularly the St. Thomas Church, he was a renowned organist but a virtual unknown as a composer. At his death 27 years later, he left behind the bulk of his cantatas, his organ and clavier works, and the celebrated Protestant church works, the Magnificat and the St. John and St. Matthew Passions. He is buried in the churchyard of the Johanneskirche. 26-year old Felix Mendelssohn came to Leipzig in 1835 to take up the directorship of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra (the name designates the clothing hall of the city’s linen merchants, where the orchestra had been playing since 1743). Within a few years he had forged it into the finest orchestra in the world (and established the practice of the conductor standing alone, baton in hand, before the orchestra). One of the premieres under Felix’ baton was the “Spring Symphony” of a young man just on the threshold of his professional composing career. Robert Schumann first came to the city in 1828 at age 18 to study law at the University. Turning instead to music lessons with Friedrich Wieck, for the next decade Schumann established an important music journal, Die Neue Zeitschrift fur Musik, courted and married Wieck’s talented pianist daughter, Clara, and begun his career as a professional composer. More than a few IAMHIST delegates could be seen paying their respects (and lifting a few steins) to Schumann’s memory in the Coffe-Baum, where he and his gang of young hotheads, the Davidsbuendler, had held court.

And of course, there was the famed Auerbach’s Cellar, just a few steps away, fabled location of student roistering in Goethe’s Faust. As a student in Leipzig Goethe had known the tavern’s association with the Faust legend, and in Part One, Scene V he
acknowledged that in some of his most deliciously wicked lines. Accordingly, more than a few IAMHIST delegates slipped down the Auerbach’s steps into its subterranean comforts, lured, like Faust, by Mephisto’s promises—

I wanted to bring you here
Into a jolly atmosphere,
To note how lightly life can slip away. . . .

—and view the dozens of paintings and murals illustrative of Goethe’s infernal masterpiece and partake of some of the finest German cuisine to be found anywhere.

The Bauhaus Trip

A bright Sunday morning, July 22, saw an IAMHIST contingent departing by bus to nearby Dessau, home of the famed Bauhaus. In 1919 architect and visionary Walter Gropius sought to revive in Weimar the spirit of the medieval building guilds—the Bauhuetten, the builders of the great German cathedrals—and bring about a synthesis of architects, artists, and designers. When the original Bauhaus (“House of Building”) was disbanded under pressure of local political reactionaries, Gropius relocated to Dessau in 1926 with a contingent of artists, including Vassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee. In Gropius’ words, the goal was to marry industry with a trained artistic sensibility and create a modern architecture “adapted to our world of machines, radios, and fast motor cars”—a “clear, organic architecture, whose inner logic will be radiant and naked, unencumbered by lying facades and trickeries.” Currently under reconstruction and restoration, the Bauhaus facilities, including the main building, originally erected in 1925-1926, once again convey the clean, rectilinear lines and utilitarian design of Gropius’ original conception. Two English-speaking guides conveyed our group through
the lecture halls, auditoria, and studios of the main building and escorted us a few hundred yards away to the row of “Master’s Houses,” including the virtually intact Klee-Kandinsky residence.

At the conclusion of the Conference Pierre Sorlin noted, “There are, in IAMHIST history, conferences which are considered landmarks and Leipzig will now be one of these great events.” Indeed, Conference host Rudiger Steinmetz, Chair of Media Studies and Media Culture at the Institute of Communications of the University of Leipzig had done IAMHIST proud. His organization, industry, and attention to detail were everywhere in evidence. For the first time in IAMHIST history, the Conference was also carried on the internet, with live streams and download files. The availability of interpreters in Russian, German, and English, was especially welcome (proving to be especially helpful in the case of the Russian language speakers). And 40 new members were enrolled. “Our conference could only be one first step to build bridges between East and West, which must be followed by others,” he declared, envisioning new directions in IAMHIST’s international mission. “I hope that IAMHIST siezes the opportunity to be one of the first associations to build these bridges. The University of Leipzig, our institute and my chair especially will surely keep working on this task.”

The challenges will be many. After more then ten years since the end of the Cold War, Professor Steinmetz notes that we are still far away from the “normal” research and cooperation between East and West needed for such Conferences. More research and travel funds would facilitate attendance. “A cheap airplane ticket costs more than a scholar might earn in months,” he explains. “Despite the present funding by Deutsche
Forschungsgemeinschaft, the Saxonian State, the Consulate General of the United States, the British Council, and the Polish Institute, some colleagues from Latvia still had to travel by bus for 2,000 km and then spend a day lining up for their visa. Political difficulties led to the cancellation of the trip by a few colleagues from Georgia and Macedonia.”

Two publications are planned to chronicle the XIX IAMHIST Congress: a special issue of the *Historical Journal of Radio, Television, and Film* and a book that will focus on its East-West perspective. The next IAMHIST Conference is scheduled for July 16-20, 2003, at the University of Leicester (located just one hour north of London) under the guidance of Nick Cull. The topic is “The History of the Future—the Audio-Visual Story.”

John C. Tibbetts and James M. Welsh