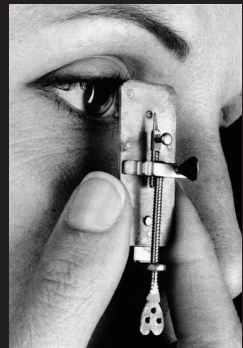


Inside the Medium

Mark-Paul Meyer



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Inside the Medium

Mark-Paul Meyer

In the 1930s the German avant-garde filmmaker Hans Richter made a number of films for the electrical company Philips in Holland. This collaboration was characteristic of the time: a great optimism in the benefits of an industrialised society, in new technologies and inventions, was reflected in the development, during the first decades of the 20th century, of a strong tradition of avant-garde experiments in film and the visual arts. As Philips recognised the potential for bringing technology and the arts together, it asked the internationally renowned avant-garde filmmaker to make films about the inventions it was developing. Not ordinary advertising films, which Philips was already producing – although these were also widely praised, particularly George Pål's innovative animation films. Rather, Richter was to make films that gave an insight into the products Philips manufactured, into how they were made and the way they contributed to a better world.

Van bliksemschicht tot televisie (*Vom Blitz zum Fernsehbild* or *From Lightning to Television*), made in 1936, was the third film Richter made for Philips, after *Europa Radio* (1931) and *Hallo Everybody* (1933). *Van bliksemschicht tot televisie* concerns the role of electricity in everyday life, its potential to produce light and mechanical power, and to reproduce image and sound. Radio, cinema, the invention of sound in cinema and the first cathode ray tubes for the production of televisions were the film's principal topics. From a cinematographic point of view, *Europa Radio* and *Hallo Everybody* were arguably more representative of the experimental tradition in the sense that Richter used all his visual tricks of collage,

montage and double exposure – artistic strategies known from his films *Rennsymphonie* and *Inflation*. Remarkably, however, he had familiarised himself little with the use of sound, and so the soundtracks of these two films were not as elaborate as the image sequences. Although radio sounds were loosely structured into an abstract composition, they were mainly there to illustrate the images, and it was evident that all Richter's creativity went into the imagery of the moving image.

These first two films mainly dealt with the external *effect* of the radio: the meaning of the radio to our daily lives, as an apparatus able to bring the world into our homes. From a weather forecast for Barcelona or a musical performance in London to a speech by Edison or Einstein, radio could bring every corner of Europe into the living room and could play a key role in bringing the nations together. This political or ideological potential certainly became a crucial issue after the Nazis gained power in 1933 and Richter was forced into exile in Switzerland.

In *Van bliksemschicht tot televisie*, however, Richter took a slightly different approach. With a shift from the medium – the radio – to electricity as the main topic of the film, the perspective changed and he took a more technological point of view. The radio was no longer a magic box, where you recorded an event at one end and the radio broadcast it at the other; it was less about the practical functioning of the medium in daily life than the internal workings of the medium itself. *Van bliksemschicht tot televisie* showed what happened in between the two ends – how the sounds of voices



Van bliksemschicht tot televisie (1936)

and musical instruments were translated into electrical waves, transmitted and then transformed into sound again. The film looked inside the radio: radio tubes were key to its workings; they were responsible for the transmission of sounds. It is therefore no surprise that Richter used his experience in double-exposure to demonstrate the workings of a radio tube. The tube is simultaneously filled with the new technology and the actual sounds of the orchestra, visually represented as if the orchestra were inside the tube. We see first the conductor, and later the whole orchestra, inside the radio itself, transmission at work visualised.

After the war, Philips commissioned a number of films from possibly less renowned filmmakers – although Hattum Hoving was a

filmmaker with great creative potential, he left only a small oeuvre of autonomous works as he mainly worked in the service of third parties such as Philips. Many of these films were made in the tradition of *Van bliksemschicht tot televisie*, explaining the workings of an apparatus and Philips' motivation of improving the world with its products. However, in many cases, it was not enough to show how the apparatus worked practically, a further step was necessary when the internal workings of an apparatus could only be described through visual ingenuity. One striking example is to be found in *Interludium electronicum* (1964), where Hoving demonstrates the parallel between the photo-mechanical reproduction of colour and movement and the functioning of the human

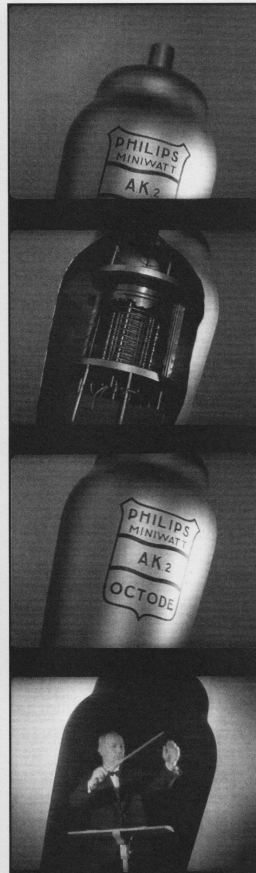
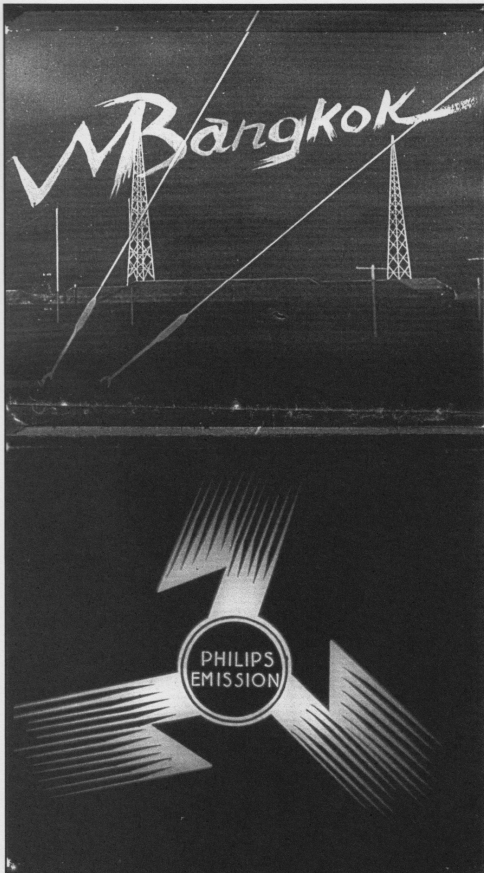


Edited image sequence of frame stills from *Interludium electronicum* (1964)

perception of sound and vision. Essentially, the apparatus works in the same way as the human senses, and Hoving illustrates this in an enlightening sequence. He creates a dance of colours (somewhat reminiscent of Len Lye's 1936 *Rainbow Dance*) to demonstrate the workings of colour film. *Interludium electronicum* demonstrates how technology and perception work, in particular in relation to light, colour and sight. The film contains a fascinating sequence that illustrates how a colour image is a composition of the colours yellow, magenta and cyan – together they are able to create every colour between white and black. The sequence shows how two dancers in black suits, playing with a black ball, are indeed black when the three layers of yellow, cyan and magenta are in perfect

registration. When they are not, however, and there is a kind of delay between the representation of each layer, the black figures and the black ball are torn apart into three shadows of yellow, cyan and magenta. The trick was to suggest an a-synchronicity of colours, a delay in the movement between them, creating a ballet where the three coloured shadows of one person dance with the three coloured shadows of the other.

This sequence was staged on the staircase of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the temple of the avant-garde arts in the centre of Amsterdam. In a sense, this was again metaphorical of Philips' policy of finding a connection between the avant-garde artists and technological innovation.



Frame still and edited image sequence of frame stills from *Van bliksemschicht tot televisie*.

About the Author:

Mark-Paul Meyer is a filmmaker, photographer and curator. He is a senior curator at the EYE Film Institute Netherlands, the curator of the Film Biennale in Amsterdam and a staff member of the MA Preservation and Presentation of the Moving Image at the University of Amsterdam.

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