

Book Review

Malte Hagener and Yvonne Zimmermann, eds. *How Film Histories Were Made: Materials, Methods, Discourses*. Amsterdam University Press, 2023.

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How Film Histories Were Made: Materials, Methods, Discourses is a self-reflexive anthology of essays that reaches beyond the book's subtitle to develop a sensibility in relation to film history that is inclusive, expansive, and porous. As Trinh T. Minh-ha challenged and moved beyond the premises of ethnographic documentary filmmaking in her 1982 *Reassemblage* to "speak nearby" her subjects, *How Film Histories Were Made* achieves a similar proximity and co-habitation with film histories. The anthology considers the making of film histories as an act that reckons not only with the medium itself but also with historiography and history.

The subsections for the book reflect a range of scales in terms of objects of study and sensibilities of research that reveal the medium of film as an expansive field, hosting at times conflicting temporalities, histories, and communities. These sections include "Models of Film Historiography: Philosophy and Time," which features Jane M. Gaines' "What Next? The Historical Time Theory of Film History," a technology-driven take on Koselleck's theory of historical time (59–84); "Film History in the Making: Processes and Agendas," including Yvonne Zimmermann's close reading of an artist's historiography in "Hans Richter and the 'Struggle for the Film History'" (209–34); "Revisiting Film History: Institutions, Knowledge, and Circulation," featuring Michael Cowan's inclusion of the audience as a phenomenon extending the realm of film historiography in "What Was a Film Society? Towards a New Archaeology of Screen Communities" (315–46); "Rewriting Film History with Images: Audiovisual Forms of Historiography," including Chiara Grizzafi's exploration of film criticism as a historiographic medium in "Audiovisual Film Histories for the Digital Age: From Found Footage Cinema to Online Videographic Criticism" (389–416); and "Into the Digital: New Approaches and Revisions," including Sarah-Mai Dang's

“Representing the Unknown: A Critical Approach to Digital Data Visualizations in the Context of Feminist Film Historiography” (467–94).

The book makes room for multiple cadences, the focuses ranging from geographical in Firat Oruc’s “Historicizing the Gulf Moving Image Archives” (237–62) to temporal in Heide Schlüpmann’s “The Discovery of Early Cinema: The Moment of ‘Silence’” (119–32), and from medium specificity in Volker Pantenburg’s “A Televisual Cinematheque: Film Histories on West German Television” (349–70) to case studies in Benoît Turquety’s “A Film-maker’s Film Histories: Adjacency Historiography and the Art of the Anthology” (189–208). This scope, albeit producing a halting reading experience at times, serves as a proposal in and of itself: the materiality of film as a medium is informed by the political economies from which it emerges, but is not dictated by its context. As such, the production of film histories as a field needs to reach beyond plurality and polyphony to embrace the writing of film histories as an ongoing, active, material, and self-conscious act that contends with conflicting agencies and temporalities.

In “Introduction: Unpacking Film History’s Own Histories Towards an Archaeology of Film Historiography,” Malte Hagener and Yvonne Zimmermann launch their investigation within the framework of a confrontation. By looking at how film histories have come to be the way they are, they seek to reorient toward a consideration of archival research in tandem with contemporary and shifting theoretical considerations of the present (15). While the authors focus on plurality (17), the essays in the volume comprise a statement that transcends the plurality of film histories: film histories are inherently defined by what constitutes a film image, a history, and the material and immaterial connections between the two. Alexandra Schneider and Vinzenz Hediger’s essay, “Tipping the Scales of Film History: A Note on Scalability and Film Historiography,” on whether film histories are scalable, manifests the main inquiry of the introduction. This question, derived from Anna Tsing’s problematizing of scalability as “banishing diversity” (460), encapsulates the inherent problem of any plurality: “the singular, resistant, incomputable” composes film histories (461).

The editors’ use of digital methods to challenge assumptions about film histories as discourse is an exciting premise when potentially extended from film histories to films. Treating film as a medium and as a data point, they rightfully predict that “the digital can act as a catalyst for a methodological turn” (29). This methodological concern, which they stage in the introduction, is reflected in the attempt to bring film histories into the future by constructing different relationships with its past. The attempt to produce narratives while critiquing the very existence of narratives, by actively deconstructing their components through digital tools, helps readers imagine a dethroning of narratives within historiography, embracing the hyper-specificity and hyper-generality unique to the medium.

Thomas Elsaesser’s “The Aporias of Cinema History” is a cornerstone of the book. In this essay, Elsaesser considers the fraught relationships between memory, technology, and human through film while tackling what the medium entails ontologically to hint at the epistemological ramifications and contradictions of film.

Launching his investigation with a look at the term “uncanny ontology” (48), Elsaesser situates moving images to have a unique link to the writing of history as moving images are embedded within life while reaching beyond the limitations of any temporal delineation. As such, while film may have an indexical relationship with the living, moving images also undermine what living can mean by their very existence: moving images are both living and not-living, and as such, histories of film inevitably are haunted by livingness innate to the images’ movement. By then engaging with “operational images,” Elsaesser further situates his consideration of film as a medium that serves functions, operating as an “extension of man,” via Marshall McLuhan (50), to then consider moving images as one rendition of the human interaction with technology, thus positioning film not as a historically specific medium of the last hundred years but a part of the overarching narrative of the post-human. This argument is striking as it liberates the moving image from the boundaries of the medium while also setting aside shifting technologies of film as a defining characteristic. In other words, the understanding of film as prosthetic to the human body (53) helps to reckon with the moving image as a modality, transcending genre, era, and geographic specificity to delve into the moving image as part of the human experience and body. This conceptual shift facilitates the integration of film history with the constant use of moving images in military technologies while ushering in artificial intelligence, as Elsaesser’s essay seems to have anticipated generative AI’s upheaval of what constitutes the soul of the medium: film was never only indexed to the moment, but always “layered” of filmic images (55). He thus proposes to interrupt the “loop of belatedness” (56) by conjuring up Benjamin’s *Jetztzeit* (now-time) to place the future of film not in linear progress from what has been, but as hosting multiple pasts, temporalities, and agencies. Elsaesser’s essay thus encapsulates the re-thinking that the editors proposed in the introduction to ask the “why” of film history through the “how.” Film history and historiography need to address film’s inherent link to both time and a slice of time; it is therefore uniquely positioned to articulate the human as in time and with time.

Benoît Turquety’s “A Film-maker’s Film Histories: Adjacency Historiography and the Art of the Anthology” is a case study of Peter Kubelka’s curating and archival practice within the larger framework of making anthologies. Turquety’s interpretation of programming as a “paratactic form of discourse” (190) interweaves filmmaking and film historicizing as practices that articulate more than a lineage and a gathering. Turquety begins his investigation by analyzing the 1976 exhibition catalogue *Une histoire du cinéma*, which accompanied the film programming of 212 films under the title “Anthology Cinema Presents” (191). Turquety identifies the effort of Peter Kubelka, who curated the exhibition, as representing a history of independent cinema as integrated within the filmmaker’s practice, via P. Adams Sitney (192). Underscoring the timing of this exhibition at the moment when films began to enter the collections of contemporary art institutions, the author locates the historiographic endeavour of “Anthology Cinema Presents” as a continuation of the founding of Anthology Film Archives: the institution’s emphasis on locating “film as an art” and as a “museum” in their launching manifesto serves to place “curation” as

a practice (190). The screenings at Anthology realize curated programming, which comprises time-based programming for a museum practice of archiving and preserving. The founding collection of Anthology Film Archives, *Essential Cinema*, locates a specific number of films as a foundation on which the programming is built. As such, the name of the institution could be interpreted as comprising the subtitle of the book that this essay is included in: the materiality of film is housed in the archives through the discursive tool of anthologizing. Kubelka's 1996 program, *Was ist Film*, featured 63 screenings (195). The filmmaker's reticence to discuss the concepts behind his selection in an interview published in 2013 as well as his insistence that the program is about the experience itself becomes a methodological intervention in the making of film history with Kubelka's statement "The model for my programme is film montage" (196). Treating film as material for his practice, Kubelka thus makes a larger statement about the time-based medium of film, which Turquety interprets within the framework of poetry anthologies. Quoting Jeremy Braddock, the author situates the anthology as bridging ancient knowledges with the beckoning future (199), as Turquety concludes that anthologies, in addition to being (precious) historical objects, are also forms of history writing—montages that write history through adjacency (203–204). Turquety interprets this strategy to allow blank space for future historiographies that can grow rather than revise these existing montage-as-historiographies. Through the figure of Kubelka, the montage-maker, the author opens up anthologizing as a potentially radical, guerrilla tactic (205) that dislocates power from the historian to the maker.

Although Turquety hints at this implication, he does not go into pedagogy too deeply, other than mentioning the pedagogical ramifications of a historical education through time spent with essential cinema. The ramification of his argument for pedagogy deeply resonates in 2025 as montage, kinships, affinities, proximities have material implications in teaching film history. As we no longer have the luxury to be comfortable with the blank spaces left to be filled in by different anthologies, education in film histories needs to be self-anthologized, which I feel is one of the undercurrents of this book. Turquety's essay could be seen as self-reflexive within the self-reflexive, as this anthological book about film history shifts the ground with each essay, confronting the medium of film and the method of historiography with an urgency that feels relevant in the present context when histories and images of histories appear to have dissolved. The essay places the maker as a figure that does more than making. While not unique to filmmaking, the emphasis on the making of history serves to open up film history as a field that self-critiques as a form of making. The self-reflexivity of the essays included in the anthology would vastly benefit from section introductions or a concluding note from the editors that articulate the throughlines, as the necessarily focused analysis of each essay at times forgets the larger questions of the volume. It is possible to assume that the editors allow the essays to speak for themselves, but given the breadth of the topics and methodologies included, more guidance could have benefitted the unity of the book.

The unspoken epilogue of this manifold anthology is Benjaminian: film histories engage with film, which as a medium is of time but not in time. Engaging

materially with a temporality that refuses to sit still is why film historiography has a seemingly fickle temperament. It is why film resonates across time in ways that are unique to it. The commitment of film to time connects this medium to media elsewhere, weaving together temporalities, histories, materialities, calling for a methodology that needs to flicker between the now-time and the not-now-time. Consequently, the epilogue would be about memory and our ongoing efforts to generate intelligence with it. The feat of this volume is in its recognition and admittance of the slippery nature of historiography as a material practice that promises and, at its best, delivers an intervention on time itself.