

International Conference “Histories of Film History: Materials and Methods”, University of Marburg, 13-15 December 2018

Report

Organized by Malte Hagener and Yvonne Zimmermann, the International Conference “Histories of Film History: Materials and Methods” took place at the University of Marburg from 13 to 15 December 2018. Over one hundred guests from all over Germany and abroad, among them senior and younger scholars, PhD students, graduate and undergraduate students came to Marburg to listen to and interact with the presentations given by fifteen international experts in the field of film history and media archaeology. The papers covered various aspects related to materials and methods of film history and historiography. The conference also included a panel discussion on the past, present and future of film history and film and media studies in general that provoked lively debates among the panellists and members of the audience. The contribution by the DFG was reflected in the presence of many international participants, both as presenters, chairs and as audience members. The hFMA-participation could be seen in the strong Hessian contingent with many chairs from Frankfurt and audience members from Gießen, Frankfurt and Offenbach. Finally, the graduate research training group (Graduiertenkolleg) “Configurations of Film” also supported the conference and most of the members were present for the conference.

The starting point for the conference was the observation that film and media – and consequently film and media studies – have been undergoing radical transformations in recent years. The digital turn, networked media and the ‘post-cinematographic era’ have been challenging film and cinema studies. These ongoing transformations do not only question what film *is*, but what film *was*. In other words, they question the history and historiography of film and cinema by forcing us to reconsider what our object of study is. Therefore, it is at this specific moment in time that we argue for a systematic, transnational and intercultural study of the mechanisms and methods of what has been termed ‘film history’. On the one hand, such an examination is necessary to provide a better understanding of the present state of film history. On the other hand, it is also prerequisite to uncover overlooked approaches, discourses and objects that may open up new avenues for further developing the field. We also took the emergence of digital research methods in film and media studies, and in film history in particular, as an incentive to both reconsider established approaches to film history and to explore the past, present and future of digital research methods in the field.

Traditionally, film history has focused on specific questions and methods, most notably on the “holy trinity” of auteur, nation and genre. While such approaches retain their value, the conference aimed for a change of focus in order to revitalize film history in methodological terms. In taking film history as the field to be excavated, the international conference made a significant contribution towards uncovering and mining the complex and contested processes involved in making film and cinema an object of historiography. Contributions from leading scholars in the field of film history and media archaeology examined the institutional, cultural and social grounds for waves and cycles of certain histories and for the decline of others, and provided new insight into the fabrication of film history and the discourses on its theories and methods in the past. In doing so, the conference contributed to a better understanding and critical reconsideration of film history today.

If we specifically addressed the question of methodology, it was also with the aim to move beyond traditional approaches as found in the aforementioned trinity of auteur, nation and genre. To do so, we proposed to investigate actors, objects and discourses. Actors can be actual people, but also institutions that have shaped specific fields by their policy of collecting, by their selection of access, and by their logic of circulation. Objects may be actual film prints that do have specific histories (hand-painted films, circulation copies, donations), but also the contents of a research library or the print run of a specific book. Discourses can be as broad as what constitutes film history in the first place or as narrow as the shifts of meaning a specific term undergoes at specific moments in specific circumstances. This shift of attention that the conference suggested implies a new sense of attention towards the methods and concepts that we use.

With this approach, the conference explored potential methods, materials and tools available to write not one, but many histories of film history. This includes digital methods as well as archival skills, theoretical reflection and creativity in placing documents or anthropological and ethnographic participation. The conference saw itself as part of a larger movement towards integrating archival research and the excavation of material with theoretically ambitious frameworks. While staying aware of film's specificity (in terms of its ontology, topology, social contextualisation and economic development), the conference also addressed the intermedial nature of film history. The kind of film history implied by "Histories of Film History" took film serious in its specificity, but also kept in mind the larger networks of media, infrastructure and publics that shape our media and image culture today. In this sense, the conference was sensitive to recent proposals from media archaeology and the larger history of media.

The conference broke down the study of the "Histories of Film History" into the following eight sections:

Temporality and Historiography, chaired by Michael Cowan (St. Andrews). Speakers included Jane M. Gaines (New York) and Nicholas Baer (Chicago) (for titles of the talks see the program flyer). A screening of material from television archives, introduced by Volker Pantenburg (Berlin), on film history on German television followed this section.

Film History in Action: Other Forms of Writing, chaired by Vinzenz Hediger (Frankfurt). Speakers included Tami Williams (Milwaukee) and Benoit Turquety (Lausanne).

Film History/Politics, chaired by Martin Loiperdinger (Trier). Speakers included Francesco Pitassio (Udine) and Charles R. Acland (Montreal).

Methods – From the Margins to the Center, chaired by Laliv Melamed (Frankfurt). Speakers included Maria Vinogradova (New York University). Catherine Grant (London) could not be present in person, but sent a selection of her latest video essays that were screened and lively discussed by the audience.

Film History beyond US/Europe, chaired by Rembert Hüser (Frankfurt). For reasons of visa problems, Jamal Bahmad (Rabat) could not be present in Marburg in person, but delivered his talk via Skype. The section also included a presentation by Arvind Rajagopal (New York/Abu Dhabi).

Panel discussion: Beyond the New Film History, moderated by Malte Hagener and Yvonne Zimmermann. Participants included Erika Balsom (London), Thomas Elsaesser (Amsterdam/New York) and Jane M. Gaines (New York).

Experiments in/and Film Historiography, chaired by Kalani Michell (Frankfurt). Speakers included Erika Balsom (London) and Eleftheria Thanouli (Thessaloniki).

Digital Tools and Practices, chaired by Sonia Campanini (Frankfurt). Since Alexandra Schneider had to cancel her participation, Thomas Elsaesser (Amsterdam/New York) joined Sarah-Mai Dang (Marburg) on the last panel.

The conference brought together leading scholars in the field and instigated a dialogue between scholars from different generations in order to stimulate transnational reflections on the past, present, and possible future(s) of film and cinema historiography.

The results of the conference will be published in an anthology with Amsterdam University Press, as has already been agreed with Thomas Elsaesser, the series editor for "Film Culture in Transition" who also contributed to the conference. Like the conference, the volume, which will come out in 2020, proposes an exemplary, transnational and culturally diverse approach to the archaeology of film historiography. Rather than attempting a complete mapping, it will look at specific aspects in their symptomatic and exemplary quality while paying specific attention to actors, objects, infrastructures, regions, and times hitherto overlooked. With the historical explorations into the making of film history in the 20th century that this volume presents we suggest a methodological re-visitation of film history from a fresh angle that provides new insights into the theories and practices, the mechanisms and strategies involved in the ongoing process of doing, redoing and undoing film history. As such, the anthology not only engages with the making of film history in the past, but in a self-reflective gesture also draws attention to – and may even question – our own work as film historians.

The book, with many well-known authors, is expected to be widely received in the field of film studies and will make film history more reflexive. The conference and its results will moreover be important to a wider history of media (archaeology), as film was one of the most popular media of the 20th Century and moving images remain a central element of our digital and networked culture of today. The findings of the conference and the anthology will be also of interest for scholars working in the wider field of social and cultural history, in the history of science, as well as within other fields of historical inquiry.

Press coverage: *Oberhessische Presse* announced the conference on 11 December 2018 in a detailed report entitled "Filmgeschichte im Fokus: Marburger Medienwissenschaftler veranstalten Tagung".