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Constellations: When Past and Present Collide in Feminist Film History

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1. The history of the history, or *history’s history*

Jane: I suspect that many of us will use the English word “history” this weekend. It’s already in the title of the conference (“Doing Women’s Film History”) as well as in the title of this presentation. While in our discourse this weekend we might resort to straightforward unambiguous usage with a reference to “history departments,” for example, the majority of our uses will most likely draw on a certain doubleness if not ambiguity. The Latin root *historia*, meaning both an “account of real events” and “a fictional narrative,” would appear to license what in English has become a common practice of confusion.

The English vernacular effects a slip every time we say “moving image history” or even “her history.” Why? Quite simply, the vernacular term “history” has come to refer to both the events of the historical past and the narrative of those events, or, the events of the life “she” lived and the story of that life. Since the Italian *storia* favors the latter over the former, one would think that other languages have avoided the problem. But German, French, and English writers have all commented on this ambiguity, from Martin Heidigger to Michel de Certeau to Hayden White. Today we are at a crucial

juncture in the “history” of feminism and film, at a conference where we set an agenda for “doing” something in relation to women and “history” in the cinema century. We want to know whether to think the term “history” as a productive ambiguity (the history of the history) or as a highly ideological conflation, an operation that conceals the fact of the construction of an interpretative narrative.¹

This is a theoretical question of immense importance to our wonderful field for several reasons. First, our constructivist training has taught us to grasp the way narratives function in support of existing power. Second, we have therefore been cautioned against seeing empirical facts as evidence, here, unproblematic evidence of the existence of women working in the first decades. And, as we all know, this is where the written and lived “history” of our branch of feminism gets especially interesting. Because, third, in no other field has the first academic work been founded on an implicit narrative that was later challenged by such a flood of empirical evidence to the contrary. This is a narrative challenged by the recent Alice Guy Blaché retrospective in New York, as well as by evidence that Japanese-American Tsuru Aoki (Sessue Hayakawa’s wife) tried to start a company of players in 1913, that Chinese-American Marion E. Wong produced and directed *Curse of the Quon Gwon* in 1916 and that Mexican-American Beatriz Michelina started the Michelina Film Company in 1917.²

What was that first feminist film narrative? Between the mid-1970s and through the 1980s the American narrative was “there were no women” in the silent film industry. By the early 1990s, however, the new narrative was: “There were more women working in the first decades of the film industry than at any time since.” Why is the difference between these two narratives an issue? It is an issue because we are not satisfied with a

theory of historical revisionism whereby what we call “history” (meaning the events and the narrative of them) is continually being updated and called “history” all over again. We want to know if we are “revising” the events themselves or our versions of these events. Yet, from today’s point of view, what are the events of the past anyway other than what we know of them and how we narrate them? For us, the difference between “no women at all” and “more women than at any other time” is too significant to ignore and deserves more study. But do we explain the difference between these two narratives with a critical theoretical approach or do we address this issue with yet another narration of empirical findings?

Originally, I thought that what we needed was an intellectual history of feminism and film. This history would attempt to understand the 1970s theoretical investment in women’s “absence.” Looking back, we now see that this was a strategic move, one that borrowed Claire Johnston’s famous phrase, the absence of “woman as woman” to justify the development of methods that explained why although women might have been represented, there were still “no women” in cinema. (Doane, Mellencamp, and Williams, 1983, 7, quoting Johnston 1973, 24) This “absence,” as we all know, came to be understood in terms of screen representation, not in terms of women filmmakers. Yet in one of the original formulations, Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams explained feminist film theory as developed out of a theory of absence because there was no tradition of the kind literary scholars could claim. The feminist film critic, they remark, “has reason to be envious” of that tradition (7). We wonder if we should take this statement as evidence that in 1983 leading scholars had no knowledge of the hundreds of women working as writers, directors and producers not only in the silent era

U.S. film industry but in Italy and Germany, in Britain and France as well as in Mexico, Brazil, and Chile, and especially in nations where we thought there could never have been any women as in the case of Egypt (Rahman 2002; Mejiri 2010) ³

In 1983, Doane, Mellencamp, and Williams justify the theoretical work on absence. They conjecture that although we might see Lois Weber and Dorothy Arzner as Jane Austen and George Eliot this move alone would still not constitute a tradition. To whom would these women have themselves “traced” a lineage they ask (7). Today we have a ready answer to their question “To whom would these directors have looked?” As we know today, they would have looked to the prolific writer/director/producer Alice Guy Blaché. But the attempt to compare literary fiction writers and silent cinema directors is telling for another reason. In retrospect we now wonder if it was perhaps a good thing that feminist literary history was never a model for feminism and film. If we had followed the literary model we might have written lots of traditional histories in which we made statements of apparent fact like: “Alice Guy made the first fiction film.” Today we know that however much feminism and film needs to assert this, the statement about the first fiction film is itself a fiction that fabricates a world by narrative means. We access this world by following the story of Gaumont secretary’s making of the *La Fée aux choux/The Cabbage Fairy*, ostensibly in 1900. Since both of us have researched this fortuitous making (as well as the remakings that followed) we know that the historical event still eludes our narratives, just as it eluded Guy’s own narrative which seems to confuse or conflate the several versions she made of this film (Dall’Asta 2009; Gaines 2005).⁴

Thus it is that we know the difficulties involved in making a coherent narrative out of historical events as apparently straightforward as the making of a film about babies hidden in cabbages. But the issue here is that of the degree to which we want to take a metahistorical approach, the method that has scandalized history departments by arguing that narrative history employs fictional devices.

Monica:

Such an approach, in which we try to understand our present practice by considering it in relation to previous accounts can be characterised as metahistorical research, that is, as Jane is calling it, the problem of “a history of history.” As defined by its major theoretician, Hayden White, in an important book in 1973, metahistory stands in meta relation to traditional history, understanding it as a form of narration working to produce a “truth effect” by means of a series of ideologically oriented rhetorical devices. Metahistory is then a critical means used to reveal the never neutral amnesias of traditional historiography and to challenge ostensible objectivity with the charge of “fiction.” But we want to know if this challenge does or does not help in devising a methodology for a different historiographical practice, one that would take us beyond the concept of history writing as yet another fiction with which White has been associated (See Roberts, Jenkins, White) . No doubt there are problems in conceiving history as just another narrative fiction. Some critics, for instance, have remarked on the danger of the history-as-fiction position, a position which can be used to deny such historical atrocities the genocide of Jews in World War II (See Ginzberg 1991; White 1992). According to these critics, if we think of history writing as an arbitrary operation of “emplotment” we

may not be able to distinguish between “false” and “true” discourses, between ideological constructions and reliable accounts. Most importantly, we run the risk of giving the impression that all historical discourse is “made up.” The implications are there for feminism and film history where we cannot risk any accusation of fabrication since there is so much at stake in the position that women in Italy

But how do we know what is and is not a reliable account? We certainly do not want to go back to the old historicist belief in the possibility of a faithful representation of the past. While our critical training has geared us to think of all accounts as “fictions” we may still want to defer to what Marxism has called “the real historical,” that which is independent of or autonomous in relation to all possible fictionalizations. To this end we need to distinguish between what have been traditionally defined as “historical facts,” the concatenation of which has been the methodology essential to traditional historiographical emplotment and the basic material of historical writing, that is, actually existing historical objects. And here we take the surviving 35mm motion picture print as the historical object *par excellence*, especially since it is itself often a narrative object. We wonder here if which is why perhaps early moving images at their inception encouraged historicism in its vision of the story of the events as one with the explanation of why things happened in one way and not another (See White 1973, Ch. 4, 190).

As different from “facts,” which are linguistic entities that do not themselves have any actual physical existence and which traditional historiography deduces from documents and re-presents in narrative form, historical objects are material remnants of the past that survive in the here and now. Historical objects are pieces of materialized past, a phenomenon of displacement in time. We can conceive them as “documents,”

certainly, yet only on the condition that we do not charge them with the ability (so much longed for by historicists) to return us to their original place and to show us “the real story as it happened.” Facts cannot do this. Objects, in contrast, don’t tell stories, but stories can be told with objects. Now, a peculiar characteristic of objects from the past is that they resist the kind of causal concatenation that is typical of traditional historical narration. An object is itself not a fact, and it is the narrative that constructs facts in such a way as to provide linkages between documents. Historical objects, however, can be somewhat resistant. This is because historical objects are “severed” from their original context, removed to another time like unrelated monads (Benjamin 1970). Since the time and space difference between them is incalculable, the historicist faith in filling in by addition, by accumulating facts to breach the gap in an attempt to restore totality with a narrative, is simply wishful thinking. Rather the gap might be seen as productive to the extent that it prompts multiple narratives, no one of which can ever pretend to exhaustiveness. Historical narration might better be conceived as a discourse in the hypothetical mode, might even emerge from the critical interrogation of historical objects. One would then be careful to distinguish between the hypothetical nature of such a narrative and the “truth effect” of all documents from the past.

Note: The term “truth effect” is our perfect compromise since while Monica was committed to the term “truth,” Jane was still not convinced that anything could undeniably be said to be “true.”

2. Becoming Elvira

So this is what our training in women's film historiography has taught us: that the motion picture objects and other physical remnants of the active presence of women in silent cinema are scattered pieces of a puzzle that we can never hope to complete. So, what are we going to do with these objects? Interrogate them, right, but looking for what? A first answer is of course that we are looking for the women behind them. But again, these women do not exist in our time, we know they have existed because they left signs of their work behind them in the form of historical objects but we cannot really meet them, we cannot touch them or talk to them. They are like phantasms to us and we cannot simply conjure them up. So what do we imply when we say that we "find a woman," when in fact what we find is simply a surviving remnant of her work—ideally a motion picture print?

Rather than saying that we "find" her we might better say that we take her signs (as we know, a form of appropriation) – signs found in the historical film object. We then use these signs to evoke an image of her today. This image, as any image of memory, is at the same time past and present: we would not have it if it didn't appear here and now. But at the same time it isn't present in the way that we are. It isn't present the way we are because it "belongs" to the historical past. (Benjamin 1970)

Jane and Monica (speaking in unison): At this point in constructing our paper something strange happened. We could no longer recall who had written what.

Jane: At the beginning I wanted to see what I could do with Monica’s provocative idea of the “beautiful failure” and she started with my question “Are they Us?” But our thinking started to criss-cross (Dall’Asta 2010; Gaines 2009). In addition, we discovered that we were both using the same metaphor of constellation, culled from our readings of Walter Benjamin.⁵ Let me continue in the voice of both of us:

In a way the peculiar present-pastness of the historical motion picture object allows us to create a temporal wedge in our present, something like a vertical line that makes us momentarily coincident with the historical past. As we are undertaking this research we come to align ourselves with the women we study, producing with them what, after Benjamin, we call a “constellation” (1999, 462-63). Forming a constellation with them we locate ourselves (historically, culturally) just at the moment that we “find” them, by appropriating their signs. So another answer to the question of what we “find” when we locate one of these figures is that, yes, we especially discover and really locate ourselves in our historical moment. Who else *would* we find?

Monica: To illustrate with an example, we turn to the recently found figure of Elvira Giallanella, an Italian director and producer who was never mentioned in previous accounts of Italian silent cinema and who suddenly made her way into feminist historiography after the discovery in 2007 of a 35mm print of her 1919 antiwar film *Umanità*, in English, *Humankind* (See Veronisi 2010). We are so pleased to have found her, but we also know at the same time that we haven’t really found her, for what we have now is actually not Giallanella but simply a piece of her work, an object that strikes us with its manifold singularities. Besides being the only film made by Giallanella, it is

also a unique example of a pacifist film shot by a woman in the immediate aftermath of WWI, shot partly against the backdrop of the actual geography of the place where the war had just been fought. Adding to its specialness, *Umanità* does not make use of professional actors and is interpreted by just two children who are shown wandering around a scene of deserted ruins in the company of a gnome, a fantasy figure conjured out of their imaginations. Truly amazing in its portrait of the trauma of war as experienced by children, the film is especially surprising for another reason.

The other reason is this: The very existence of *Umanità* exposes our own inability *to even suppose the possible existence of such an object*: an antiwar film produced and directed by an Italian woman in 1919? A skeptic might ask: Are you kidding? What else are you going to fabricate to demonstrate the existence of women in silent film history? Aren't you using those women to advance the needs of the present? Well yes, of course we need them to advance our cause, but it is also possible to show that the opposite is also true, as we will see in a moment. For now, let me just argue how far in this, as in many other cases, historical reality actually surpasses the imagination, providing us with an object that we wouldn't have been able to even wish into being before we came to know of its existence. Now, today, the historical object exists, but the woman doesn't. Certainly in this regard historical reality provokes imagination, for an image, a possible image, one that is the only possible condition of existence for Giallanella here and now. So we come to the truly paradoxical conclusion that they need us as much as we need them. They need us in order to exist historically, that is, not just as lost figures of the past but as provocative images in and for the present.

This is a complicated challenge that requires the best of our imaginative abilities. Like the historiographies of other “disappeared” groups women’s film historiography has to face the encumbering emptiness that constitutes the substance of the past: an incommensurable void made by all what went unrecorded—the holes and lacunae that surround every small piece of evidence we painstakingly draw out of oblivion. But unlike more traditional approaches, feminist film historiography is well aware that historical knowledge is precisely built upon this nothingness. We know that the holes are the key to its most intimate truth, since they contain both what did happen and what *never* did.⁶ Ours is then the challenge, to quote Giorgio Agamben, of “gaining access to a past that has not been lived through, and therefore that technically cannot be defined as ‘past,’ but that somehow has remained present” (102). These words seem perfect to describe the *present* situation of Elvira Giallanella’s work as well as the past of her post-World War I pacifist desire.

However, as soon as we begin to look for this phantasm of a woman, we confront a the incommensurable void. Only a few scattered pieces of information emerge from the impenetrable emptiness that her life has become: we learn that she started work in the film industry well before the making of *Umanità*, and that as a leading figure of a small company since at least 1913, she started her own independent company just in order to make this film. We learn that she thought of *Umanità* as the first of a planned series of educational features that never materialized after the first title. And finally, we learn that the film was never distributed, never shown, simply never seen in public, that is, until 2007 (Veronisi 2010).⁷

We can then say that although the 35mm film print exists, *Umanità* never came into existence as a work of cinema because it was never publically projected. This, it could be argued, could also be said of the work of other women film and videomakers in the last century. Even contemporary women makers do not always find venues for their work, as we know. This is why the void that is Giallanella's life speaks loudly to and of the actuality of our own lives and the lives of the makers we research. This is why we need Elvira's phantasm to help us to understand the present reality in which we build with them a relation of constellation, effect of what Jane is calling a coincidence between past and present, as we will see next. There are two sides of this question. On the one hand, we can see how the phantasm of Giallanella needs us to bring her work into existence, to find a new anti-war audience for a film that never had one, and therefore to bring to completion what she couldn't during her lifetime. But on the other hand we need her to make sense of the void in our own lives, those experiences of loss, failure, and demise that define the lives of so many women. I know this for certain from my own life. Thus I am arguing that there is no way I can misinterpret the historical significance of *Umanità* for the very simple reason that *I am Elvira Giallanella*. What is more, we both Elvira Giallanella. Because we are Elvira I know beyond a reasonable doubt that all of women's apparent failures experienced in our now constellated lives, may at some point (depending on all of us) come to unexpected fruition, a fruition configured as passion and struggle. Becoming Elvira and striving to have our work recognized today I also see the moments of demise in our own lives in a different perspective. We learn to now watch them *historically*, that is, as powers of the present.

3. Historical Coincidence

Jane: And here, picking up Monica's point about how we watch ourselves historically, I want to stress something that we often forget, and that is this: The present is itself historical. This is why it no longer makes sense to me to think of the intellectual history of our field--that of feminist academics and their discourse--as separate from the history of women who worked inside as well as outside silent era national film industries.

Another way of putting this would be to say that the reasons why *Elvira Gianllanella* and *Umanità* matter are themselves historical, that is, as we make them part of the narrative of feminism and film as well as that of historic anti-war struggles and struggles on behalf of gender equality. We are constellated with women makers then and now in relation to the unfinished business of world feminism.

We realize that so far we have quoted quite a number of men, but in the home stretch of this paper we take our theoretical cues from feminist film and, what is new, from melodrama theory. This is in order to keep the thinking "in the family," so to speak. In originally calling this talk "The Philosophy of Feminist Film History" we signalled that we have taken up again one of the great obsessions of the philosophers of history: the problem of historical time.⁸ And I would add that it was unavoidable.

Here, however, I have been more inspired by Laura Mulvey's comment that "The cinema, refracted through the new technology...suggests a metaphor for reflecting on the difficulty of understanding time and history" (2004, 1292). We are reminded here, following what we now call "screen theorizing," that we can take our theories of historiography from the very technologies we study, which throughout the cinema century claimed to be "time machines" of one sort or another. In this regard, I return to

the “are they us?” question through what I call the melodrama theory of historical time. By historical time I mean what the philosophy of history understands as the “asymmetrical” relation of past to present to future which can never be together, their eternal “never together” status contributing to what is sometimes referenced as the “impossibility” of history, confirming Mulvey’s observation about the “difficulty” of grasping time and history.⁹

Given then the impossibility of history’s history--the perfect correspondence between a history (of) and history (itself) we strive instead for something predicated on the very ambiguity—something like Trouillot’s “overlap,” overlap as in the place where our present telling is coincident with the past event (4). And this alignment, as in melodrama form, is entirely coincidental in the several senses of the meaning of the term and the operation of this narrative device. This is the device that, as you recall, marks the moment in which action fails by a hair or succeeds by a second. Maligned as the most outrageous of the melodrama’s store of devices by the measure of narrative likelihood, the coincidence can work on another scale, that of critical theory. Here it calls attention to an almost impossibility. Events that can never be together are aligned (for us). Here is the always astounding phenomenon of things *not* happening (the way we want them to), then happening *at the same time*, apparently converging then diverging in time. And it is this sometimes merely remarkable, sometimes quite astounding convergence-in-time aspect that we are developing as a way around the “that was then, this is now” thinking of historicism and the pitfalls of “presentism.” Thus it is that I count at least three historical coincidences staged at this conference:

First, we are coincident with them as we dare, as Foucault phrased it, to “conceive of the [historical] Other in the time of our own thought” (Foucault 1972, 12). Monica demonstrates the power of this conceptualization in her theorization of the “beautiful failure” exemplified by Elvira Gianniella, the woman whose past “failure” is reconceived as an “achievement” for the present. Now, after several public screenings to enthusiastic audiences, *Umanità* stands to us for the absolute, overwhelming triumph of Elvira Giallanella’s failure!

Second, in our writing and research we may strive to know and to tell “what really happened,” thus aspiring to the impossibly perfect coincidence of the two meanings of “history”: the events and the story reconstitutes as it links them. And yet it would be a coincidence, as the luckiest of accidents, if our present narrative corresponded in any way with events in the historical past. It is thus to our theoretical advantage that narrative coincidence, known to be rigged, nevertheless produces a remarkable “reality effect.” In sum, the coincidence repeats the two sides of the vernacular term “history”: events beyond our control (in which we cannot now intervene) meet the construction of events perfectly timed (and ordered) to create the effect of the cataclysmic event (with often earth-shattering narrative consequences).

Third, historical coincidence rests on the premise that the historical past is continuously created, even now, even today as we speak. This challenge to the “that was then, this is now” mode sees us not as successors or heiresses to but rather as contemporaries of historical others with whom we now “share” a history—that of women and film, video, and now digital works. Here is where we are constellated with them. The other advantage to this approach to “Doing” is that we are all today involved

in a historical production in which women who dared to make works thought to be “ahead of their time” are found to be “for our time.”

Two final examples of early aspiring women illustrate how their historical coincidence with us produces their artistic and political efforts as highly successful, exquisitely beautiful failures. One thinks of the July 2010 Women and the Silent Screen Conference in Bologna. There, Oussal Mejri screened a streamed clip of the restored version of Bahija Hafez’s *Al-Dahaia/The Victims* (1932). We cannot help but be struck by how the events in Cairo in February, 2011, bring us into alignment with this Egyptian woman director/writer/actress/composer who was renounced by her family because she chose to make motion pictures (Mejri 2010; Rahman 2002).

4. On Becoming Historical Others

More resonant for me and test of Monica’s hypothesis that historical objects can expose our inability to imagine historical Others is the case of an object that came to my attention this very week. An African American woman living in Oklahoma, the daughter of a man freed from slavery in 1859, started writing a screenplay, beginning in 1909. Drusilla Dunjee Huston continued work on “Spirit of the Old South: The Maddened Mob” until 1933 and thus we can conjecture that it is a response to both Thomas Dixon’s 1903 play “The Clansman,” and the work it inspired, D.W. Griffith’s 1915 melodrama, *The Birth of a Nation*. Like Elvira Gianniella’s *Umanità* which, although produced, was never exhibited, Huston’s “Spirit of the Old South and the Maddened Mob” never found its public, but this was because it was not even produced as a film, was never realized in the form for which it was conceived. But, like

Umanità, “The Spirit of the Old South: The Maddened Mob” resonates in and for our moment as a work of protest. But a coincidence returns us to the question of “Are They Us?” and suggests that if we can say that we are Elvira Gianiella we cannot *not* also say that we are Drusilla Huston. Coincidentally, this very week an article appeared in the radical American magazine *The Nation* about the disappearance of the social safety net not only for the poor but for middle class Americans. The article, titled “Are We All Black Americans Now?,” ended by arguing that only by “embracing our collective blackness” could we hope to find the “creativity” to deal with the current economic crisis (10). How could we not be historically aligned with as well as “be”(in a way) this African American woman who dared to write her outrage as a play for the screen? Monica, too, asserts that she is a Black American now—as, in this regard, are all of you.

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Notes

¹ Trouillot, 1995, 2 – 4, is an exception in the way he finds the “what happened” and “that which is said to have happened” as productively “overlapping.”

² For more see the Whitney exhibition catalogue, Joan Simon, ed. *Alice Guy Blaché: Cinema Pioneer* (New Haven: Yale University Press and the Whitney Museum of American Art, 2010); Sara Ross and Yuan Chen, “Tsuru Aoki”; Jenny Lau and Mengquin Xie, “Marion E. Wong”; and Mary Anne Lyons, “Beatriz Michelina,” in Jane Gaines, Radha Vatsal, and Monica Dall’Asta, eds., *Women Film Pioneers Project* (New York: Columbia University Libraries, Center for Digital Research and Scholarship, 2011).

³ See Joanne Hershfield and Patricia Torres St. Martin, “Writing the History of Latin American Women Working in the Silent Film Industry,” Eliana Jara Donoso “Women in Chilean Silent Cinema,” in Gaines, Vatsal, and Dall’Asta, eds.

⁴ Most recently, the unsigned notes for “Alice Guy: Omaggio a Una Pioniera Del Cinema,” the catalogue for Ill Cinema Ritrovato, edition XXV, 59, refer to new research by Maurice Gianati who argues that Guy’s first film was not *Le Fée aux choux/The Cabbage Fairy*, the one-shot extant film now dated 1900, but *Sage-femme de première classe* (1902).

⁵ Benjamin, 1999, 462-63, repeats an almost similar sentence twice on these pages: “It is not that what is past cast its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation” (463).

⁶ Steedman, 2002, 154, is close to this when she says: “So there is a double nothingness in the writing of history and in the analysis of it: it is about something that never did happen in the way it comes to be represented (the happening exists in the telling of the text); and it is made out of materials that aren’t there, in an archive or anywhere else.”

⁷ *Umanità* was restored by the Cineteca Nazionale in Rome and the restoration premiered at the “Non Solo Dive:Pioniere Del Cinema Italiano” Conference, in Bologna, Italy, November, 2007.

⁸ A useful overview is Koselleck.

⁹ The “asymmetry” of past, present, and future, is Danto; On the “impossibility” of history see Steedman,