



## Exposing the film apparatus: the film archive as a research laboratory

Sarah Dellmann

To cite this article: Sarah Dellmann (2017) Exposing the film apparatus: the film archive as a research laboratory, *Early Popular Visual Culture*, 15:1, 100-101, DOI: [10.1080/17460654.2016.1270458](https://doi.org/10.1080/17460654.2016.1270458)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17460654.2016.1270458>



Published online: 17 Feb 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 43



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Exposing the film apparatus: the film archive as a research laboratory**, edited by Giovanna Fossati and Annie van den Oever, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2016 (Framing Film), 480 pp., €39.90 (paperback) €99.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9789462983168

With the format change from analogue to digital technologies in film production, film distribution and film archiving, many apparatuses now become obsolete in their original context. The essays in this edited volume investigate from archival, curatorial and academic perspectives what new or continued relevance such apparatuses and their related technologies could have for film and media studies, as well as in film archives. Changes to film technologies, so the editors claim, are of great concern for film studies and film archives because cinema and film depend on technology and hardware at every stage – from production to postproduction and projection (15). In their introduction, the editors refer to numerous discussions at the intersections of archive, digitisation and film history and accomplish the task well to mark this wide field, bring out relevant aspects for this edited volume and define cornerstones for following discussions.

The editors suggest a relecture of early theories about film on the – at that time – new medium. This could be helpful to better grasp the disorientation caused by digitisation in the contemporary media landscape (23). After all, the changes brought by digitisation to everyday life shows parallels with the introduction of (media) technologies around 1900 that also restructured social life at the moment of their introduction. From a curatorial perspective, apparatus-based knowledge is considered relevant for film archives in order to (re-)evaluate the meaning and relevance of the artefacts in a collection (16). Furthermore, knowledge about technologies, both analogue and digital, are helpful for scholars to examine if terminology and concepts of the ‘analogue age’ of film studies are still suitable for analysing audio-visual media in the digital age. Evolutions of the meaning, use and function of specialised terms in film theory can then be traced (17f). Against this backdrop, Giovanna Fossati und Annie van den Oever suggest that film scholars rethink the function of apparatus collections in film and media archives. The archive of the obsolete apparatuses could serve as a hands-on research laboratory, where not only ‘lost ideas’ manifest in the apparatus that expressed them but where apparatuses are used for re-enactments and experiments and also preserve ‘lost practices’ and ‘lost media experiences’ for future generations (24ff).

The 29 essays assembled in *Exposing the Film Apparatus* are dedicated to qualitative studies that are explorative rather than synthesising. Each essay begins with a high-quality illustration of the respective apparatus, followed by a short, technical description and a brief characterisation of the perspective through which the apparatus is analysed and interpreted.

With the exception of the essay by Ari Purnama (‘The Video Compact Disc and the Digital Preservation of Indonesian Cinema’), all apparatuses are reconstructed within west-European and north-American contexts. However, within this not further explained regional limitation, contexts and perspectives are presented that otherwise tend to play a side-role in film historiography. Contributions are dedicated to apparatuses in amateur filming (Guy Edmonds, Barbara Turquier, Susan Aasman, Alexandra Schneider, Tom Sloodweg) and post production (Martin Koerber), to film reception contexts outside of the cinema (Roger Odin on watching films on a smartphone, Eef Masson on instructive films in the class room), the inside architecture of cinemas (Julian Hanich), and the work of projectionists (Leenke Ripmeester). Other contributions discuss the material and conceptual consequences of a film practice that results from engaging with new technologies and apparatuses. Frank Kessler and Sabine Lenk assess

the usefulness of the concept of *dispositif* for digital cinema, Rommy Albers and Soeluh van den Berg reflect on changes in the working routines in the film archive brought by integrating relational databases to the management of collections, and Caylin Smith shares experiences using digital forms of presentation in film exhibitions. It should be noted, however, that some essays seem to investigate their phenomenon conceptually, which does not appear to be in line with the formulated aim: does it really make sense to frame a discursive analysis of historical sources that corrects the historiography on the close-up as ‘apparatus’ or ‘technology’ (Jan Holmberg)? Also, Cécile Scémama’s approach to understand a video film as a ‘laboratory’ in which technologies of video and film editing can be analysed, seems to work rather as a metaphor.

This notwithstanding, the collected essays clearly demonstrate that within the quite openly defined research problem, a number of approaches is possible and productive. The resulting heterogeneity is certainly consistent with the formulated aims and should be understood as a first mapping of the research territory. The essays demonstrate what kind of insights are to be gained from engaging with (film) apparatuses and technologies. This approach proves especially productive in those essays that investigate the (former) applications of technology or uses of an apparatus: statements about intended users; aims, promises and affordances of a certain technology; operating of apparatuses and the required level of skills; or the impact of technology on, e.g. filmic aesthetics can then be materially substantiated.

This essay collection, though not explicitly, is also a call to film historians to not restrict themselves to textual analysis at this moment in time. The change from analogue to digital formats as standard in production and distribution not only has consequences for the accessibility of films; it also defines the conditions for future film historiography. Right now, museums are deciding on how to implement digital technologies. These decisions will not only affect which objects will be preserved and digitised, but they will also define how access to collections is provided and, in consequence, which forms of engaging with the data and thus, which research methods will be enabled. Scholars in (historical) film and media studies are well advised to raise their voice in this debate and to give the changes a form that assures an infrastructure for film history beyond predefined canons.

In this light, the essays are more than just case studies; they also prove the potential in engaging with apparatuses and technologies and as such form a strong argument for a *material turn* in the discussion of the questions that are raised through digitisation.

*This is a slightly reworked translation from a (German) review published in MEDIENwissenschaft – Rezensionen – Review (04/2016): 473–475.*

Sarah Dellmann  
Utrecht University

 s.dellmann@uu.nl

© 2017 Sarah Dellmann

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17460654.2016.1270458>

**Silent women: pioneers of cinema**, edited by M. Bridges and C. Robson,  
Twickenham, Aurora Metro Books, 2016, 311 pp., £14.99 (paperback),  
ISBN 978-0-9566329-9-9

A telling testament to the fate of early women filmmakers can be read in the cinema pages of the newspaper *Le Temps* in September 1933, where an elderly Alice Guy-Blaché writes in response to an article claiming that Germaine Dulac was the first French woman director. Guy-Blaché protests, ‘From 1897 to 1907 I was head of production at the Gaumont company, working under me were talented artists such as Feuillade, Jasset etc. ... My name was then Alice Guy.’ She adds