

Bad film histories: ethnography and the early archive

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Bad film histories: Ethnography and the early archive, by Katherine Groo, Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 2019, 364 pp., \$28.00 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-5179-0033-5

In order to determine what constitutes a good film history, it is perhaps necessary to think through the converse: what is a *bad* film history? This is the debate that threads through the various case studies that make up Katherine Groo's *Bad Film Histories*, a book that focuses on the odds and ends of early ethnographic film that litter archives around the world. And while Groo's study of archival practices – from the uses of archives and the way we extract meaning, to how we interpret and catalogue ethnographic films – provides innovative insights, it is the central debate about the methods and approaches of film history that set this book apart and make it a valuable addition to the canon of work on the new film history. Indeed, I would suggest that the introduction is a vital and urgent contribution to the field and, in future years, a necessary text for anyone starting out in new film history methods.

But let's first start with Groo's concept of bad film history, for it is more than just a gimmicky title. It is an essential idea for understanding and interpreting film artifacts and a means of challenging a 'dominant regime of film-historical thought' (7). Groo is not attempting to revise film history, to fill gaps, or to upturn the study of 'good' film history – American studio films, say – but rather to suggest that there is room for a plurality of historiographies that do not 'save or salvage, but instead acknowledges the permanent absences and "powers of the false" that ethnographic film artifacts make possible' (8). The process of film history, and more importantly working with archives and the artifacts they contain, is a contingent and chaotic process, one that will always leave absences of understanding. But bad film history accepts the materiality of archival artifacts and embraces the 'absences, imperfections and discontinuities [...] as crucial concepts and methodological

coordinates rather than obstacles to be overcome or resolved' (9). Groo's thinking is radical and leads me to ask, is the new film history – with its implications that its sophisticated methodological toolkit and empirical focus is good historical practice and leads to a fuller contextual understanding – actually preventing a true holistic perspective of history? Should the new film history embrace the bad film history, with its focus on absence and the materiality of archival artifacts, in order to achieve a 'particularist' approach, what Groo defines as the 'mutual dependence and co-determination' of archival artifacts and methods (8)? These questions are becoming ever more pertinent, particularly in my own work in the burgeoning area of 'shadow cinema' and the study of the unmade, unreleased, and unseen films that exist only in archival form.

What follows in the introduction is an incredible account of the origins and evolution of the new film history, which Groo chiefly suggests came to prominence at the 1978 International Federation of Film Archives conference in Brighton (though, it must be noted that the term itself was used even earlier, at the 1974 edition of the FIAF conference in Montreal). But the driving force of the new film history, and the impact of the 1978 conference, was the ever-growing compulsion to 'collect, preserve, and restore' – the new film history mantra, if you will – early film artifacts (12). While Groo has no issues with the motivations of the new film history's rescue efforts, she takes issue with the implied 'good' approach of the new film historian's emphasis on empirically grounded work. This is a term that is used frequently by new film historians, distinguishing their work as empirical and not empiricist; that their work is valid because it is evidence based, not based on human experience. And that they understand archival artifacts as evidence that is objective. This theory of understanding archival evidence, and the way we perceive it, is where Groo makes a crucial intervention, suggesting that such an approach provides spectatorial power to the 'most privileged (white, male) beholder' (23) – *this* is bad film history. Instead, Groo looks to

the materiality of the archive, to the way objects are catalogued and referenced, often misleadingly.

My reason for focusing so much on Groo's introduction is, as stated above, because of my belief in its absolute importance to film history methodologies, but also because it is essential in understanding the chapters that succeed it. And while the remainder of the book is impressive – though, it is at times quite dense and exhaustive in its case studies, but nevertheless rewarding for the insights and questions raised about the meaning making of archives – it is the introduction that will have longevity in the wider fields of film studies, media studies, archive studies, and history.

Chapter One begins to put Groo's own methodological interventions into practice, with a case study of the Lumière archive (1895-1905) and the Albert Kahn Archives de la Planète (1908-1931). She considers how archives make meaning and how we make meaning from archives. Analysing the images of excursive ethnographic cinema, she suggests these archives resist cataloguing for the images do not conform to modern narrative forms (60-61). Instead, she positions them as marginal archives that refashion the 'concept of the archive' (73). In other words, they cannot be viewed in any dominant canonical film historiographic sense, but rather 'as an alternative constellation of archival instability' (100). In their fragmented nature, with images seemingly making no sense, the archives are inherently 'misshapen' and incomprehensible because 'they include what has been excluded elsewhere' (102) – the 'bits and pieces' that fascinate Groo (2).

Chapter Two continues this application of Groo's theoretical framework. She uses textual analysis to create new meanings about ethnographic films, rather than relying on the stilted catalogue descriptions that accompany them, and which can be misleading, inaccurate and present the archive (and ultimately film history) in the wrong way. Her deep textual analysis focuses on performance and quite often the presence of the human body in the films.

She opens the chapter with an anecdote that illustrates this point, recounting a fragment of film in which a man is dancing, but the footage is blurred. The catalogue entry states that it is ‘unfortunate that the image is blurred’ (106). But does it matter? As Groo points out, the fragment of film already lacked any real coherent meaning and so, ‘one must wonder in the context of this particular film, what would be gained by clarifying the focus of the image? What gets lost in the blur that was not already ambiguous from the start? [...] it suggests that the film could be useful or valuable if only we could see more or better. The curatorial note encourages us to defer our judgment, to keep searching for some other, more meaningful ethnographic evidence’ (106). Similarly, Chapters Three and Four consider the temporal order of archival work and how many early, ethnographic films resist such temporality.

Finally, Chapter Five provides an account of the digitisation of archives and returns to the question of the materiality of artifacts that Groo first raised in the introduction. I was most struck by Groo’s account of the visceral nature of handling film artifacts and the impact this has on their meaning and the viewing experience. She talks of the scratches and tears on film reels that reveal the ‘metahistorical concerns’ of archives. As she concludes, these scratches and tears ‘haunt the materiality of celluloid’ (281) and provide further ways of understanding the history of archival artifacts.

Bad Film Histories is a masterful work of archival study of ethnographic cinema. But more than that, it is a vital, critical and relevant exploration of the meaning of archives and the future of film history. It will prove to be of value to students of film, media and performance studies and I am sure of lasting significance to the wider academic community.

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