
Cut, Paste, Glitch, and Stutter: Remixing Film History

By Katherine Groo

I hope history can realize that its significance is not in universal ideas, like some sort of blossom or fruit, but that its value comes directly from reworking a well-known, perhaps habitual theme, a daily melody, in a stimulating way, elevating it, intensifying it to an inclusive symbol, and thus allowing one to make out in the original theme an entire world of profundity, power, and beauty. [[Friedrich Nietzsche](#), “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life”]

In 2009, Amsterdam’s [EYE Film Institute](#) invited the public to remix twenty-one film fragments from its collection of early Dutch films. The remixes were shared using [Creative Commons](#) licenses, inviting future users to remix the remixes ad infinitum. In 2012, EYE Film launched [CelluloidRemix.nl](#), a website devoted to expanding the collection of EYE film fragments, as well as the participatory practice of remixing. The site allows users to download and upload films, remix this content using EYE’s own online software, and share remixed works through [Open Images](#), a platform developed by the Dutch Institute for Sound and Vision. At the end of November 2009, Paul D. Miller (aka DJ Spooky, That Subliminal Kid) debuted a [remix](#) of Dziga Vertov’s *Kino-Glaz* (1924) and *Kino Pravda* series at the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. That same year, Chandler McWilliams, an independent artist and software designer created [Silent](#), a flickering combination of frames from the canon of silent cinema. The work was automatically generated by custom software that matched the length of each frame to the audio data from the soundtrack. More recently, Scottish electro-acoustic musician [Ross Whyte](#) has joined early archival images with the sounds of audio accidents and mechanical malfunctions. Whyte refers to these works as “glitches” and describes them as “rhythmic events” that reveal the impermanence of both audio and visual artefacts. (1)

This is only the beginning of new beginnings for the origins of the moving image. Hundreds (maybe thousands) of amateur remixes have multiplied alongside these institutional and professional adventures in remix culture. Youtube and Vimeo are bursting with audiovisual experiments in early and orphan film, as well as reassemblages of the silent canon. These remixes mark the contemporary proliferation of digital film archives and video-sharing platforms as numerous film institutes have joined the Netherlands and made significant portions of their collections

digital, streamable, and downloadable. But the remix also raises crucial questions for film historians. What do these revisions do to and for the film object? What kind of histories do they tell (or repeat)? And: where does the remix belong in the archive? For its part, the EYE Film Institute uses its remix platform as a form of community outreach and a promotional tool for its “real” archival content, an approach that both confirms a hierarchy of historical value and inadvertently generates new forms of digital detritus: the orphan offspring of orphaned originals.

In this essay, I take the remix as a starting point for engaging the intersection between film objects, early and silent film historiographies, and contemporary visual culture. I rethink the historical continuities and affinities that have been drawn between old and new media, film history and digital technology. That is, I am not interested in what remixing might share with historical film practices like montage, collage, and bricolage, with modernist modes of fragmentation and *détournement*. I do not read the remix as the genealogical descendent of early twentieth-century film forms or the re-emergence of a cinematic lineage that has been hibernating underground. Rather, I explore what the remix tells us about film objects and film historiography. I argue that the remix is a metahistorical work, a mode of historical expression that is fundamentally *about* film artefacts and historical telling. In taking early and silent film as its raw material, the remix reveals, albeit imperfectly and indirectly, the false analogies and figures that have inhabited these histories for more than three decades. Like the “flâneuse” in Catherine Russell’s parallax historiography, the remix is an “impossible concept” and a hyperbolic counter-model. (2) It enables us to think beyond recuperation and preservation, beyond text and context, beyond physical artefacts and archives. As I will argue, the remix also opens onto the possibility of new film histories and historiographic futures: not the digital annihilation of the celluloid archive, but a reinvigorated theorizing of film history that owes and offers something to the living present.

New Media, Old Theory: The Post-Structural Remix

I imagine that few film historians will be anxious to bring the contemporary digital remix within their disciplinary purview. And with good reason. Remixes are difficult to take seriously. They tell jokes, play tricks, and run in referential circles. They are ugly, stuttering forms that bear the traces of digital reproduction and compression. Their images are pixelated, interlaced, and made by users of all kinds. But perhaps most damning (and worrying) for the film historian and the film-historical project: remixes conceal the contours of their sources—the beginnings, middles, and ends of original objects—as they manipulate these materials into contemporary visual moulds. Indeed, remixes tear historical artefacts apart and sew them back together in motley, unfamiliar, and

seemingly anti-historical ways. By nearly every measure, remixes are bad film objects: copies of copies, deviant simulacra, the kind of derivative visual forms that Plato warns against: “Imitation really consorts with a part of us that is far from reason [...]. Imitation is an inferior thing that consults with another inferior thing to produce inferior offspring.” (3)

Remixes also lack historicity. They are the ephemeral expressions of contemporary popular culture and the dialogical babble of multiple and contradictory historical indexes. At once present tense and not-real time. In his essay “What Comes After Remix?” new media scholar Lev Manovich leaves the question unanswered. He proclaims the twenty-first century “the era of remix” and then stumbles: “I don’t know what comes after remix. But if we now try to develop a better historical and theoretical understanding of the remix era, we will be in a better position to recognize and understand whatever new era will replace it.” (4) For those who are worried about the imprecise reach of the remix, Manovich offers little comfort. The difficulty of envisioning a post-remix era perhaps emerges out of the remix itself, out of its expansive and indefinite boundaries, its voracious appetite for any object or artefact whatever. As a practice, the remix generates (and regenerates), producing a seemingly endless becoming of the new and of the now that extends as far as the eye can see into the future. Kirby Ferguson’s four-part viral video series, [Everything Is a Remix](#), offers a more radical take on the ahistoricity of the remix: it has no beginning and no end; it is the always and already of being, thought, and creativity.

And yet, for all that seems anti-historical or a-temporal in this popular practice, the remix and the discourses that swell to defend what it means and why it matters are haunted by theoretical ghosts. The remix returns us to Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault, to the challenges that they posed against the authority of authorship and the stability of origins. The remix fulfils the promise of the post-modern text, what Barthes describes as “a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash [...], a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.” (5) With the post-structuralists as our guides, the remix no longer shimmers of the new, but as Ferguson suggests, appears familiar and worn, an assemblage of the always and already theorized. Read alongside the claims of Derrida’s *Of Grammatology*, the remix is just another form of writing, no more unstable or destabilizing than the practice of inscription ever was. For, as the French philosopher explains, “there has never been anything but writing; there has never been anything but supplements, substitutional significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references.” (6) And, again, in the closing paragraphs of Foucault’s “What is an Author?”, the contours of remix culture come into view. In this work, however, the effects of remixing are still to come:

I think that, as our society changes, at the very moment when it is in the process of changing, the author function will disappear [...]. All discourses, whatever their status, form, value, and whatever the treatment to which they will be subjected, would then develop in the anonymity of a murmur. [...] We would hear hardly anything but the stirring of an indifference: What difference does it make who is speaking? (7)

For remix theorist Eduardo Navas, it no longer makes a difference. The remix murmurs with the anonymous collective. It is the direct descendent of the polysemous future Foucault imagined. (8) But even those remix advocates who think and write beyond the boundaries of this theoretical lineage do not manage to escape the arguments that the post-structuralists made in defence of the remix before there ever was such a popular practice. In his writing on the remix and copyright reform, Stanford Law Professor and founder of Creative Commons Lawrence Lessig argues that the remix shifts the balance of power from a “RO” (Read Only) culture of professional makers and mass consumers to a hybrid “RW” (Read Write) culture of user-creators. He also argues that this practice produces anonymized, sometimes global communities, bound only by their shared remix practices. (9) In the remix collective, no one asks after the image or image-maker, but only the possibilities and processes of discursive appropriation.

One could say much more about the relationship between post-structuralism, authorship, and contemporary remix communities. More interesting, however, is the way in which the return to these strands in post-structural thought suggests that there are significant historiographic stakes in and for the remix. As Thomas Elsaesser explores in a recent essay, the route from a digital imaginary through post-structuralism encounters crucial metahistorical questions. (10) I would therefore like to retrace this path through the counter-historical threads of post-structural thought before returning to the particularities of film historiography and the productive challenge of the remix. The post-structural rethinking of authorship and writing was, after all, a rethinking of the ontology of origins, artefacts, and historical objects. In the hands of post-structuralists, the foundations of historical practice rupture and give way. The essential tool of historical expression—writing—loses its privileges, its claims to objectivity and neutrality, as it collapses in a series of endless substitutions and equivalences. For post-structuralism, there is no historical writing, just writing, discourse, supplements. Nor is there any such thing as beginnings and ends, tidy lines or continuities. Rather, as Edward Said describes in his meditation on beginnings, “a better image is that of the wanderer, going from place to place for his material, but remaining a man essentially *between* homes.” (11)

The Voice That Speaks Itself: A (Brief) History of Historiography

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault interrogates what he calls “discursive formations” and “rules of formation” or, to recall *Les Mots et les Choses*, groups of things and the word-systems that produce those groups of things. At the centre of the *Archaeology* is a very sceptical claim about language and knowledge in the human sciences (including history, natural history, and ethnography). Foucault argues that language produces the very objects it seems only to represent. Language is not a value-neutral mode of transmission, but always-and-already entangled in a regulating system that it cannot escape, describe, critique, or unravel. Foucault thus collapses the boundaries between language and objects, words and things. Both, he claims, are part of and produced out of discursive systems that bind them together and define their encounter. Foucault encourages us to dispense with “the enigmatic treasure of objects anterior to discourse” and redirect our attention to the body of rules that enable [objects] to form [...] and thus constitute the conditions of their historical appearance.” (12)

In the “Historical *a priori* and the Archive,” Foucault articulates precisely what this means for history. As Elsaesser rightly points out: no origins and no beginnings. But we also lose artefacts, events, and historical knowledge. We can only write histories of discursive formations, of the systems that produce historical events: “Instead of seeing, on the great mythical book of history, lines of words that translate in visible characters thoughts that were formed in some other time and place, we have in the density of discursive practices, systems that establish statements as events [...] and things [...]. They are all these systems of statements (whether events or things) that I propose to call *archive*.” (13) Foucault invites us to forget History. Or, at least, to reframe what we mean when we use the term. The historical *event* joins *words* and *things* in the vast repository of discursive formations. History becomes a “complex volume”: heterogeneous, discontinuous, fragmented by changes and transformations in discourse, in the body of rules that regulate its appearance and representation. It follows, then, that the writing of History—a combination of words, objects, and events—is a *poetic*, creative act like any other discursive practice. For Foucault, the historian’s task unfolds within and upon the archive, at once a system of statements and a heterotopian counter-site. It is the fantastic figure of a boat at sea—not the integrity and fixity of a book or monument—that stands in metaphoric, proximate relation to historical practice. (14)

Foucault is not the origin of history’s epistemological crisis. He belongs to a much broader set of twentieth-century discursive formations, which includes the historiography of Michel de Certeau, Hayden White, and Dominick LaCapra, among others. Together, they extricate historical

studies from the sciences (both natural and social); bring the discipline into contact with developing concerns in the literary humanities; and reconsider both history's formation in the present tense and its obligations to present time. De Certeau is perhaps Foucault's closest ally in historical thinking, insofar as he understands history as a discursive construction and the practice of history as a process of making, forming, and fabulation: "From wastes, papers, vegetables, indeed from glaciers and eternal snows, historians *make something different*: they make history." (15) For his part, LaCapra claims that no one did more "to wake historians from their dogmatic slumber than Hayden White." (16) In "The Burden of History," (1966) a foundational contribution to what would come to be known as the "linguistic" or "discursive" turn in historical studies, White puts pressure on the contingency of historical methodologies, on the one hand, and the fierce insularity of the discipline, on the other. Historical practice, he argues, cobbles together a toolbox from late-nineteenth century positivism and mid-nineteenth-century art and literature, "modes of analysis and expression that have their antiquity alone to commend them." (17) The burden of the contemporary historian is to open up the borders of the field and recognize the methodological impurities that have been there all along. If historical studies acknowledged the experimentations already at the centre of its disciplinary practice, it could begin to experiment more explicitly and radically, while likewise interrogating the experiment as such and making the diverse, multiple forms of historical knowledge visible, legible, and open to critique. No longer beholden to an impossible and objective History, historical studies could embrace manifold and imaginative *histories* as well as a rigorous analysis of its multiple historiographic methods. This approach would "permit the plunder of psychoanalysis, cybernetics, game theory, and the rest [...]. And it would permit historians to conceive of the possibility of using impressionistic, expressionistic, surrealist, and (perhaps) even actionist modes of representation." (18) As a discipline in the mid-twentieth century, history concealed the present tense of historical thought, as well as the dynamic practices that constituted contemporary life. For White, history could no longer remain hermetically sealed against the complex present of its own production and still defend itself as a disciplined endeavour.

If, as LaCapra suggests, White woke the discipline, others would more thoroughly deconstruct it. LaCapra's own work "plunders" literary theory and psychoanalysis in order to interrogate the aleatory, performative, and ambivalent aspects of rhetoric, as well as the extremist positions of historical practice: documentary objectivism and self-reflexive relativism. While he criticizes the rhetorical tropes—metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony—that guide White's intervention and re-structure the discipline, he nevertheless extends White's concern for the

rhetoric that shapes historical expression and the temporality that binds historical thought. LaCapra takes the concept of “transference” (from Freud) as a way of framing (and, in many ways, simply naming) the encounter between past and present, artefact and historian as a necessarily dialogical one. LaCapra understands the historian’s craft as an imprecise and imperfect exchange of voices, “a certain excess in relations between self and other that calls for understanding and representation yet is not fully open to mastery or knowledge.” (19)

In the practice of early and silent film history, we have largely elided the crises and questions that redefine historical studies in the late twentieth century. There is, perhaps, an historical explanation for the blind spot. The study of early film history was developing as historical studies writ large entered this era of upheaval. The origin of early film studies coincides with the first wave of responses to *Of Grammatology* (published in English translation in 1976), as well as the publication of several key post-structural texts that engage explicitly with historiographic concerns. (20) The 1978 International Federation of Film Archives (FIAPF) conference in Brighton, U.K., brought early film scholars and archivists together for the first time and screened an unprecedented number of films from archives around the world. This (now, mythic) meeting nevertheless countered the post-structural discussions of ontology, absence, and difference with visibility and visual plenty. For early film scholars, 1978 marks a year of material abundance, a moment in which the startling void between the Lumière factory and the Griffith studio was filled with nitrate. It is little wonder that the problems of history did not present themselves in the very moment at which so many problems seem to have been solved. In the decades that follow this first encounter, the archival impulse to collect, preserve, and restore early film material defines the methodology of the early film historian. Even as scholars like Richard Abel, Tom Gunning, Charles Musser, Ben Singer (among so many others) explore the fluid movements of film practice from the fairground to the music hall, as well as the complex interactions between film and modernity, both the ontology of film objects and the assumptions underlying film-historical methodology go uninterrogated (when they are not wholly invisible).

In his comprehensive handbook for film historians and archivists-in-training, *Silent Film: An Introduction* (now in its third edition), archivist-historian Paolo Cherchi Usai seemingly disrupts these foundations and takes a radical metaphysical view of the archival object. In his tenth and final “rule” for film historians, he defines the individual film as inherently unstable: “The original version of a film is a multiple object fragmented into a number of different entities equal to the number of surviving copies.” (21) For Usai, every original film is always and already fractured into multiple copies that have been circulated and seen and come to rest

(or deteriorate) in an archive. Usai distinguishes between external and internal histories of film, or the histories of circulation and spectatorship, versus the history of a particular celluloid copy. In several passages, he describes film history as an impossible task and an act of “imagination,” echoing both Foucault and de Certeau. He likewise recalls LaCapra’s concern for the uncertain and excessive exchange between films and film historians. This, too, requires imaginative leaps. However, Usai does not develop the concept of imagination, nor does he propose a new historical method out of his redefinition of the film artefact (as multiple, fractured, imprecise). Rather, “imagination” names a privileged kind of work that can be done, but not explained, taught, defended, or analysed.

For all of film’s scratches, flaws, and multiple, irreconcilable histories, Usai manages to recuperate film and the practice of history beneath a set of incoherent signs: the self-evident and the sacred. He argues, “Whatever archive we have decided to visit or conceptual tool we have adopted, the one thing which should never be questioned is that films are given a chance to speak for themselves.” (22) Usai nevertheless pivots from the film that speaks for itself to an enigmatic form that has nothing to say. Like gods, myths, and foreign bodies, film is a mystery; only the most faithful visionaries can understand it:

There is a gap between the producer of silent motion pictures, the contemporary viewers of these images, and today’s audiences. We may well attempt to fill this gap, but the absences are very deep in the case of silent cinema: too many material and historical variables separate us from it, and our patterns of perception of moving images have remarkably changed in the meantime. Herein lies the challenge of studying silent cinema: both the greatest discipline and a visionary mind are needed in order to bring back to life something which is relatively close to us in time. It is closer than prehistoric art or the music of ancient Egypt, but it can be no less mysterious and elusive. (23)

In the end, Usai’s historiography echoes nineteenth-century travel writing more than twentieth-century historical thought. But it is precisely this anachronistic and theoretically ambiguous approach to film artefacts and historical practice that, more broadly, informs the methodologies and epistemology of film history.

Usai’s handbook poses a set of important historiographic questions that cannot be solved by the autonomous voices of film, nor the visionary mind of the historian-seer. If we are separated from film objects and audiences, what is the dialogical, imaginative work that bridges the gap? If, as Usai suggests, we recognize the inherent “multiplicity of ‘original’

prints,” as well as the internal and external histories of every copy, how, then, do we ever come to know film and what kind of knowledge do we have when we do (or when we do not)? And, finally, if we understand that a film is comprised of multiple copies, each of which is in a state of continual becoming (decayed or restored), what are the burdens of the film historian to trace these changes across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? Which changes matter for history and which do not?

A final historical note. In 2004, *Cinema Journal* gathered a series of essays on the state of historical thinking from a diverse range of film scholars. Taken together, the contributions reconfirm the stability and hermeticism of film history, even as they call for intertextuality and comparative methodologies. With few significant exceptions, the essays hum in a kind of collective agreement about best practices. They portray a discipline without any difficult questions to answer and no significant crises to theorize, analyse, or debate. Among the contributors, only Jane Gaines and Robert Sklar sketch possible lines of flight out of a field that cannot seem to engage the contingency of its own becoming, nor think the dialogism of its historical methodologies. Gaines proposes a feminist historiography that would not only recuperate the histories of women, but also challenge the “classical,” linear narratives that dominate film history and conceal their absence. (24) In his contribution, Sklar describes the experience of attending a conference with film historians in the 1980s; at the time, he noted that these newcomers to historical studies were “whiggish” in their disciplinary confidence and unprepared for the upheavals to come. The film historians “had not yet fully recognized that the practice of historiography is fundamentally dialogical.” (25) Sklar recalls thinking that film history, like any other historical field, would eventually reflect on its own methodologies and encounter a series of metahistorical crises. He predicted that “in several decades’ time emerging film historians would ask new questions about the past and debate new perspectives that were likely to be substantially different from those that scholars of the 1980s had valorized. Film historiography almost certainly would have moved on to territories as yet uncharted.” (26) Those crises and questions never came. While film history has expanded to include the previously excluded (women, racial and ethnic minorities, queer communities), the territory of the discipline has never been deterritorialized (and reformed). He concludes, “What remains lacking is a discourse on metahistoriographic perspectives that might pull together multiple strands and reorient the field.” (27) In what follows, I would like to return to the remix in order to take up the task that Sklar sets for us.

Sunbeam: Signs of Life and Lines of Flight

[Variation on the sunbeam](#) from [Aitor Gametxo](#) on [Vimeo](#).

On April 21, 2011, a twenty-two-year-old Basque film student named Aitor Gametxo uploaded a remix of D.W. Griffith's one-reel *Sunbeam* (1912) to [Vimeo](#). By his own account, Gametxo had watched Griffith's film only once before beginning his "deconstruction of the original work."

(28) Gametxo's [Variation on the Sunbeam](#) divides the screen into six distinct frames (three on the top and three on the bottom) and redistributes Griffith's film across this new cartography. The remix spatializes narrative time as it challenges the frame-by-frame linearity of celluloid, one of the very structures of film that Griffith's narrative techniques made more flexible (not "this" and then "that", but "meanwhile"). In *Variation*, events unfold simultaneously, side-by-side in visible space. Gametxo reveals the internal coherence of Griffith's divided mise-en-scène, as characters travel seamlessly up and down stairs, through doorways, across the cut.

More importantly for our purposes here, the film offers a model for thinking metahistorically. I would like to pose this small visual expression—one example, among many, circulating online—against the origins of film history and the methods of film historiography. I also would like to take this work seriously as an act of "deconstruction" and a metahistorical form of expression. Gametxo's *Variation* offers one possible model of post-structural historiography. It acknowledges the gaps and absences in historical understanding (along with what we already know); foregrounds the contingent and dialogical encounter between historian and artefact; explores the complex materiality of analogue and digital copies; and, most startling, replaces the act of writing with the process of digital remixing. *Variation* moves in two simultaneous and contradictory directions at once: back to the origins of film and the foundations of film historiography and into the digital present where both those origins and foundations get remixed.

By the end of August 2011, *Variation on the Sunbeam* began to attract the attention of cinéphiles, professional scholars, and film historians. It was featured on the [Audiovisualcy](#) group forum at Vimeo, where it attracted the attention of film critic and video essayist Kevin B. Lee. On August 31, Lee posted the video with a brief description at his [Fandor Keyframe](#) website. On September 5, Kristin Thompson shared *Variation* on the blog she writes with David Bordwell, [Observations on Film Art](#). (29) On September 6, Roger Ebert [tweeted](#) about the video with a hat-tip to Thompson and Bordwell. On September 8, Luke McKernan shared the "singularly inventive film" on [The Bioscope](#), a blog dedicated to silent cinema. McKernan wondered why more silent film "deconstructions" could not be found online: "Do the films not interest students and lecturers as much as they might? Do they lack the sense of cool that may

come from deconstructing the cinema of today?" (30) To date, *Variation on the Sunbeam* has been viewed just over 2,000 times. It's not exactly a viral sensation, but neither is Griffith's digitized original with just over 6,000 views on Youtube. When one searches for *Sunbeam* online, both versions appear: Griffith's first; Gametxo's a close second. Had the video gone viral, this visual hierarchy could have easily shifted (and, of course, there's still time).

Among those who posted the video, Thompson offers the most substantive analysis of the relationship between Griffith's *Sunbeam* and Gametxo's *Variation*. Thompson distributes praise where the remix adheres to the original film and the "already-said" of film history. She commends Gametxo's attention to the temporal expressions of intercutting, as well as the way in which the video's six frames faithfully represent the domestic space of the original film. The child's room is always positioned in the upper left corner, the top of the stairs appears in the top centre frame, and the two downstairs rooms are positioned on the left and right bottom frames with the hallway in-between them.

While Thompson applauds what the amateur Gametxo repeats and gets "right," she nevertheless finds "technical disadvantages" in precisely what he distorts, excises, or contributes in excess of the original film. Put another way: Thompson criticizes Gametxo's remix *for being a remix*. Thompson seemingly mistakes the remix for an act of repetition or substitution and reminds us (somewhat redundantly) that the remixed copy fails to replace the original work:

It would be impossible, I think, to entirely follow the story just from seeing *Variation*. The shots are so reduced in size to fit into the grid that small but important gestures and details get lost. [...] The titles are small and difficult to read, and since they pop up simultaneously with the action, it's almost impossible to read them anyway. One cannot tell where the titles originally came in the flow of shots, though one can always check the original film. Another problem is the cropping of the images on all four sides. (31)

There is perhaps little risk of viewers confusing Gametxo with Griffith. The real threat emerges elsewhere and is one that Thompson indirectly announces in her own reading: "What is remarkable is that a 22-year-old film student [...] found a simple, elegant method to demonstrate what we already knew, but with greater precision and vividness than could be done with prose analysis." (32) In this brief passage, Thompson not only frames writing as a form of historiography among other possibilities, but she also nominates Gametxo's video (and perhaps, the "deconstructive"

remix writ large) as one of those possible alternatives. Here, Thompson suggests that film historiography could be otherwise (and, it seems, better). Even more interesting, this small sliver of a statement encourages us to compare the written to the remixed, text to image, and to notice that both approaches stand in a distant, disconnected relationship to historical events and objects. In other words: the remix seems to communicate something about film history *and* film historiography.

I would argue, with Thompson, that Gametxo's remix deviates considerably from Griffith's original *Sunbeam*. But I would also argue, against Thompson, that it is precisely these deviations and departures—the video's imprecise and dialogical play with the original—that make it a valuable work for metahistorical thinking. While *Variation on the Sunbeam* reconstitutes Griffith's narrative forms and visual architectures across its six individual frames, it also rips Griffith's film apart and reshapes the fragments into a series of open and seemingly endless permutations. In the variation, narrative events expand across the frame, unfold simultaneously, and collide with the film's original Biograph titles, always too soon or too late to offer any kind of explanation. Not only does the remix exclude portions of Griffith's *Sunbeam*, but its multiple frames also contain multiple, simultaneous narrative events. With each viewing, new points of contact and comparison emerge. These visual structures offer a variation on Griffith, as well as a metahistorical study of variation itself. The film makes the instability and flexibility of film artefacts visible and integrates the multiple, wandering circuits of reading and interpretation into the experience of spectatorship.

Like all remixes (and, one should note, all histories), *Variation on the Sunbeam* forcefully inscribes the present tense upon the film artefact. The remix demands that we see and read its contemporary time. It is these traces of the new and of the now that perhaps account for what Luke McKernan perceives as “that sense of cool.” Less noted, however, is the complex and inextricable way in which the remix joins past and present. In *Variation*, the materiality of Griffith's familiar mise-en-scène meets the ephemeral nothingness of digital divisions; the rips in a particular celluloid print are joined by digital noise; and the American auteur collides with a young student living in Barcelona. Both Lee and Thompson invited Gametxo to share his motivations and methodology. His response emphasizes a dialogical encounter between past and present, between the contemporary “I” and an altogether different time and place:

I love watching old (and odd) films and thinking about things that are different from the purpose they were created for. We are able

to take some footage, which is temporally and geographically unconnected to us and remodel, or refix, or remix it, giving birth to another work. This is the way I see the found-footage praxis. About this particular film, *The Sunbeam*, [...] this [film] was unknown for me, so that the first watching was crucial. While I was enjoying it, I was wondering what the place where it was shot looked like. I suddenly imagined it as a two-floor house, where the characters cross in some moments. Also the doors were essential to fix one part with another. This was the main idea where I worked on. (33)

Gametxo divides his process into two distinct impulses: thinking against the original object and imagining the past. Both impulses designate an act of creative fashioning, born out of the distance between Gametxo and Griffith, the digital present and film-historical origins. And both impulses underpin all forms of historical expression, whether written or remixed. Gametxo's methodology resonates, however accidentally, with the post-structural historiography that White, De Certeau, and LaCapra envision. What is more, *Variation on the Sunbeam* includes a distinct figure of the gaps that give way to acts of imagination and the boundaries in our own historical understanding. *Variation* inscribes Griffith's *Sunbeam* within a visual tableau of absence and emptiness or, perhaps, digital presence. Gametxo never fills all six frames with visual and/or textual content. Rather, the original is reduced in size and recombined with itself, but always tied to at least one empty frame. In this way, the "already-said" of film history encounters an unmistakable sign of the unknown, unknowable, and the remixed (reimagined) histories to come.

But let us set the "I" and Gametxo himself aside. Or think differently about the production of historical knowledge. I have already placed too much pressure on one remix and perhaps inadvertently produced one new, digital auteur. In *Variation on the Sunbeam*, what so strongly counters our historiographic intuitions is, on the one hand, that the film was made by a student who had only recently begun his study of film and, on the other, that it could have been made without a student, without a human, without a mind for history, with little more than a software program and the internet's digital scraps. One could easily mistake the rhythmic patterns of *Variation* for a variation on Lev Manovich's *Soft(ware) Cinema* and one would be excused for suspecting that Gametxo might just be one of the many uncertain formations of identity (virtual, collective, imagined) that posture and play tricks online. There is nothing about this video that requires extensive training in film history, nor even the intervention of the human hand. And yet, as Thompson claims, it repeats—unknowingly—what we already know. How do we explain this coincidence of knowledge? How do we understand the

historical gifts of the amateur or the automatic? How does the digital remix manage to threaten professional prose with a more “precise” or more “vivid” history? In the end, *Variation* does not improve upon film history. This is the wrong (evaluative) framework. Rather, it returns us to the post-structural shift in historical thought and reminds us of the accidents, imprecisions, and contingencies implicit in every historiography, perched as historical practice always is between different discursive formations (historian and archive, present and past, expression and events). If *Variation* manages to approximate what we already know, it does so using a toolbox of found footage and found methods that it shares with an equally contingent discipline. *Variation* nevertheless communicates more than what we already know (and less of what we do). It repeats some things and not others. It remixes with a difference. This does not exclude the video from film history or historiography, or somehow define it as a technically deficient practice. *Variation* instead productively counters the stability of film historiography with the possibility of manifold and imaginative alternatives, each of which produces new forms of historical knowledge.

The digital remix is a form of film history, but it is also a challenge to the hermeticism of film historiography and a radical point of comparison for metahistorical thought. As a practice, film history remains disconnected from historical studies elsewhere, as well as from the present of its own production. Claims to methodological precision, rigour, and neutrality, as well as a rhetoric of care for film artefacts and film history, have preceded debates about methodology and rhetoric, and elided theories of history and film materiality altogether. In this essay, I have argued that we open the boundaries of the field to both analyse the methodologies we insist could not be otherwise and consider whether we might be missing the meaning of (historical and methodological) differences. If the remix is not an historiographic approach we are willing to take seriously, we need better arguments in defence of the serious methods we have settled upon. In any event, the remix is the future to come, the object of our future histories and historiographic concerns. The debate promises to be worth the effort.

Endnotes:

(1) Ross Whyte, “Perpetual Erosion: Impermanence in Audio-Visual Intermedia” (paper presented at the *INTIME 2011 Symposium*, Coventry University, Coventry, UK, September 24-25, 2011).

(2) Catherine Russell, "Parallax Historiography: The Flâneuse as Cyberfeminist," in *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, eds. Jennifer M. Bean and Diane Negra (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 552-570.

(3) Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1992), 274 [603 a-b].

(4) Lev Manovich, "What Comes After Remix?", accessed 25 April 2012, <http://remixtheory.net/?p=169>.

(5) Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1978), 146.

(6) Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 159.

(7) Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 119-120.

(8) Eduardo Navas, *Remix Theory: The Aesthetics of Sampling* (New York and London: Springer Wien, 2012). Excerpts accessed 25 April 2012, <http://remixtheory.net>.

(9) Lawrence Lessig, *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy* (New York: Penguin Press, 2008), 77.

(10) Thomas Elsaesser, "Early Film History and Multi-Media: An Archaeology of Possible Futures?" in *New Media, Old Media: A History and Theory Reader*, eds., Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Thomas Keenan (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 13-25.

(11) Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intentions and Methods* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), 8.

(12) Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 29.

(13) *Ibid.*, 128.

(14) Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1986), 27.

(15) Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 71.

(16) Dominick LaCapra, "A Poetics of Historiography: Hayden White's *Tropic of Discourse*," in *Rethinking Intellectual History and Reading Texts* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 72.

(17) Hayden White, "The Burden of History," in *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978 [1966]), 43.

(18) *Ibid.*, 47.

(19) LaCapra, *History and Criticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 137-138.

(20) See Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978); Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978).

(21) Paolo Cherchi Usai, *Silent Cinema: An Introduction* (London: BFI, 2010), 160.

(22) *Ibid.*, 166.

(23) *Ibid.*, 166-167.

(24) Jane Gaines, "Film History and the Two Presentsof Feminist Film Theory," *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 1 (Fall 2004), 113-119.

(25) Robert Sklar, "Does Film History Need a Crisis?" *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 1 (Fall 2004), 134.

(26) *Ibid.*

(27) *Ibid.*, 136-137.

(28) Aitor Gametxo, *Variation on the Sunbeam* (21 April 2011). Accessed 12 May 2012, <http://vimeo.com/22696362>.

(29) Kristin Thompson, "A Variation on a Sunbeam: Exploring a Griffith Biograph Film," (5 September 2011). Accessed 12 May 2012. <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2011/09/05/a-variation-on-a-sunbeam-exploring-a-griffith-biograph-film/>

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(31) Thompson, "A Variation on a Sunbeam," (5 September 2011).

(32) *Ibid.*

(33) *Ibid.*

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