ABSTRACT: “What Happened to the Philosophy of Film History?” is a trick-question title. The article reviews the special issues dedicated to the question of historical narrative, historical methodologies, and the nature of history over past decades, including the Film History issue edited by Paolo Cherchi Usai on “The Philosophy of Film History.” I wonder if we are at the stage where we can begin to look at the implications of the “historical turn” for the field.

KEYWORDS: film theory, philosophy, philosophy of film history, silent cinema, cinema of attractions, cinema, kine-attractography, historical turn

The point of asking “What happened to the philosophy of film history?” is to get Film History readers to scratch their heads. Some may ask themselves if they missed something: was there a short-lived philosophy of film history? Others will rack their brains and conclude that this is a trick question. Still others may think (to themselves) that it is about time we took up this topic while wondering if this is exactly the right terminology. Regular readers of Film History, however, will recall the journal’s eclectic 1994 special issue, “The Philosophy of Film History.”¹ There, in the introduction, editor Paolo Cherchi Usai says that he found among his contributors neither methodological agreement nor definitional consistency. Then, to support his point that the definition of history is always shifting and itself historically shaped, he cites the 1900 edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica: “The word [history] . . . is used in two senses. It may mean either the record of events, or events themselves. . . . It is unfortunate that such a double meaning of the word should have grown up, for it is productive of not a little confusion of thought.”² But “unfortunate” is the encyclopedia’s term, not ours, and here I take Cherchi Usai’s citation as further evidence of something else—not as support for variance in approach, but as confirmation of the double meaning of the term as found in both English and French—history/histoire. For there is something here that the literal-minded encyclopedia cannot
grasp. What an encyclopedia surely cannot fathom is the political function of the ambiguous usage, as I will show.

The ambiguity of history/histoire is also one of the starting points of what is sometimes called the new philosophy of history, and both Jacques Rancière and Hayden White have begun books on the subject with this observation as a way of signaling the difficulties ahead.\(^3\) At least one scholar, however, has made theoretical use of the ambiguity. Where some see double meaning, anthropologist Michel-Rolf Trouillot sees a pair—“what happened” and “that which is said to have happened.”\(^4\) And Trouillot differs from others in another key way. Where he wants to see an “overlap” between historical events and the narrative of them, many theorists of history see a gap.\(^5\) For Trouillot, the overlap is a political necessity—a counter to the way that history effected the European political denial of the successful slave revolt that was the 1791–1804 Haitian Revolution. For us, it is not so different, although a little trickier because we’re dealing with intellectual events.\(^6\) The question as to whether there once was, never was, always has been, or can be a philosophy of film history depends on what we now want to see as having happened or not having happened in our field. Perhaps the argument will succeed if we see an overlap between Trouillot’s historicity of that which is said to have happened and his historicity of what happened, rather than saying that we now need a philosophy of film history.\(^7\)

So first, where have we before seen interest in such questions in the field? Ten years before the Film History issue, Iris put out “Pour un théorie de l’histoire du cinéma/Theory of Cinema History,” dedicated to Michel Foucault in David Rodowick’s introduction. The issue contains Dana Polan’s productive review of Hayden White’s Metahistory, as well as Rick Altman’s early work on representational technologies and Pierre Sorlin’s discussion of the way the concerns of the theorist and the historian diverge.\(^8\) Giuliana Bruno’s contribution on historical narrativization references the “philological” phenomenon that renders history/histoire ambiguous.\(^9\)

In 2004, twenty years after the Iris issue, Sumiko Higashi edited a reconsideration of the “historical turn” for Cinema Journal, in which Charles Musser wonders if we should continue to do “media-specific” histories (i.e., film history), Janet Staiger concurs, and Don Crafton argues that “everyone must acknowledge that there is no boundary between history and theory.”\(^10\) And yet, the special issue has been interpreted as somewhat defensive about “the historical turn.”\(^11\) I would argue that the articles by no means plant the authors on one side or the other of the imaginary divide between history and theory that Annette Kuhn and Jackie Stacey have seen as a “false” division, if nevertheless part of the “intellectual history” of the discipline.\(^12\) Robert Sklar, the very scholar who over a decade earlier criticized the field for mistaking Althusser’s concept of history for
the established discipline, wonders here if film history didn’t need a crisis and suggests that what is needed is the kind of “reorientation” that a “metahistorical perspective” could provide.13

Metahistorical? Yes, this is the approach associated with Hayden White, whose academic following is strategically outside the traditional discipline of history, where his work still meets resistance.14 Although White’s “metahistory” may not be exactly what Sklar meant, there is more than one way of achieving distance on what the historian does, and besides, those in this camp do not always agree on what to call the “meta” approach, either. For some, it is “postmodern history,” for others, “theory of history” and even “history-as-critique.”15 Still others use “philosophy of history” while distancing themselves from the earlier Hegelian tradition. For film studies scholars, reading this work is both strange and familiar: strange, because we may not be able to identify the traditionalists attacked; familiar, because we share an intellectual legacy. Since the “critique of realism” is heir to the “crisis of historicism” that 1970s film theory kept alive, it could be argued that we have been inoculated against the belief in objectivity and thus, for us, the contemporary philosophy of history only preaches to the converted. Vivian Sobchack appears to think that we are the converted when she argues that White’s most important point is already “common knowledge.”16 That is, we already know that the work of narrative history is a literary construction. And yet, are there not ways in which the “new film history” adheres to the traditional discipline?17

But wait, you may say, work after the “historical turn” may take narrative form and still be theoretically informed. If this is the case, then is the new film history closer to White’s “metahistory” or no different from the historian’s disciplinary mainstream described by Keith Jenkins and Alun Munslow as “empiricism plus concepts”?18 Then again, the question may be moot if all narrative histories are seen as “metahistories.”19

If Sobchack is right and we know this critique, then we do not need to be cautioned against the correspondence theory of truth, or reminded that there is no way around “fictioning” accounts of past events whose existence we do not take to be “fictitious.” Thinking about film form has given us a leg up, affording extra insight into the uses of historical narrative, written or technologically encoded. Elizabeth Cowie, for example, can easily make the point that the critique of narrative we apply to documentary film and video theory applies as well to historical writing, where assuming that “after” is the consequence of “before” effectively “dispel[s]” the discontinuity of events.20 Neither do we need to be reminded that, following Roland Barthes, a historical statement of fact has only a linguistic existence.21 We have refused “the history of cinema” as a master narrative and continued to challenge the enshrinement of a single “birth” date.22 But let’s do a test. Let us say that we read the following: “The cinema of attractions was
dominant between 1895 and 1906/07. Do we or do we not mean this linguistic statement as somehow corresponding to spectatorial events that took place in this time period? Yet, how can we take such a statement as approximating a historical phenomenon, knowing what we know of the difficulties of empirical research? For, while titles attributed to Georges Méliès, for instance, may be empirically located, their original spectators cannot be. While we agree that the “cinema of attractions” is a conception, do we agree that the term itself, beginning around 1985, “conceptualized” the phenomenon into being? That is, a contemporary term brought a historical phenomenon into relief, if not into existence.

Questioning factual statements, birth dates, narrative acts, and empirical methodologies, however, gives little indication of the scope of the new philosophy of history. Yet, apropos of “what happened,” we can raise at least one basic philosophy of history question. We can begin by asking whether the past exists only “before now” or whether it also persists into the present. Then, to take up the epistemological companion issue, one could ask: can we know the past as it was? Hayden White has maintained that traditional historians are not concerned with these questions, but rather start with the assumption that there is such a thing as a knowable historical past and proceed from there. Further, he argues that it is not exactly the occurrence of entities in the past, their proven “pastness,” that makes them historical. Rather, it is our own discourse that makes them historical. Here, the contemporary philosophy of history tugs hard at the rug under the empirical research project. Keith Jenkins, who has taken White at his word, even argues that we do not need histories, not even those linked to radical politics. As Jenkins would say, “the past and history float free of each other, they are ages and miles apart,” and since the past has no form (narrative or otherwise) other than that given to it by historians, our only access to the “before now” is through historical writing. First, the historian (through research and writing) constitutes what happened in the historical past using theoretical approaches; then, once that constituted object of study is established, it becomes history. “History,” the object of study, is effectively “brought back” into a form of “imagined re-existence” so that scholars can work on that history using the same theories that brought it into its newly confirmed existence. This is the existence that the historical phenomenon no longer has (as it was) and cannot now have (again), except by means of our reimagination of it. Thus, the only existence history can now have is textual. “Only texts matter historically,” says Jenkins, which would mean that they now count more than “what actually happened.” This would be an idea of history kept alive by our written publications and bibliographic references to one another, or Trouillot’s historicity of what is said to have happened with no necessary overlap with the historicity of what happened. Following Jenkins, then, what we call the “cinema of attractions” from the early part of the last
century would have no existence other than that given to it by scholars who now research and write about the phenomenon. Following this reasoning, the moving “attractions” to which we refer in the realm of what we name “film history” could not exactly be found in the extant “films themselves,” without historians’ having imagined films and their historical spectators in this way. But do we admit to a gap or argue for overlap?

Thinking about the gap between “what happened” and “what was said to have happened,” we are reminded of early moving pictures that purported to reveal what happened, to tell all by showing all—although without really showing much after all. Consider here the comedy subgenre of the early period that foregrounds the assumption of “showallability,” the “What Happened” joke of which there were so many, to name only a few: *What Happened When a Hot Picture Was Taken* (American Mutoscope & Biograph Co., 1898), *What Happened to a Fresh Johnnie* (American Mutoscope & Biograph Co., 1900), *What Happened on Twenty-Third Street, New York City* (camera: Edwin S. Porter, Edison Mfg. Co., 1901), *What Happened to the Inquisitive Janitor* (Pathé Frères, 1902), *What Happened to the Milkman* (Lubin Co., 1903), and *What Happened to a Camera Fiend* (Paley and Steiner, 1904).

One of the great successes of early cinema history writers has been in convincing their readers that significant evidence exists of what happened in the first decade of moving image entertainment. Thus, even while we may be skeptical of narrativized history, there are ways it slips in the back door because of the way in which we make claims. Think, in this regard, of the classic *What Happened in the Tunnel* (1903). One wonders how different the new film history approach is from this short film’s attempt to convince viewers that, although they are not shown and that they therefore did not see what happened in the tunnel, something actually did happen. Although the viewer never sees what happened, the events narrated establish the interracial kiss as having actually happened (fig. 1). Knowing what we know about illusionism, we are well aware of what the historical film writer can do with evidence to create for readers the impression that we, too, can know what happened in the historical past.

The historical “What Happened” film subgenre illustrates evidentiary power in two tenses. It both references past events (or the “what already happened” in its title) and shows in its present “what happened” *as it is happening* again. But here, I neglect the difference between written and image-based expression. Where the “What Happened” film offers visually verifiable evidence of what happened (even when it makes a joke by withholding the what), the historian’s empirically based writing on early moving image devices does not. Does that writing, however, make reference to past film objects and spectatorial events? Yes. Is the written description of events the events themselves? Of course not, although
isn’t it accepted practice for writers to try to achieve and readers to assume at least some correspondence?

The other lesson we can take from *What Happened in the Tunnel* is in how the famous black screen works. I would argue that the film title is coyly misleading because, although it announces that it will show the viewer what happened in the tunnel, the viewer must surmise what happened, since what happened is never shown. The blackness-in-the-tunnel moment—like the gap between the historicity of what happened and the historicity of what was said to have happened—gives us direct evidence of nothing at all. We must infer the missing event from given or available evidence of events before and after. Still, the vast past is much more than the sum of the missing or found pieces of it. The great gap between the two historicities also means that historical excision and eclipse is the norm. More precisely, nonexistence as black as a tunnel is the norm. Consider, too, in this regard, the ascendant and descendent stories of technological development in and around the cinema century. While the sound-on-film narrative was ascendant, the earlier Gaumont Chronophone sound-on-disc did not exist, just as the *actualité* did not exist as a consequence of the first historians’ focus on the fiction film.31 Or, to give another example, my own research shows that,
although legally dubious print duplication, later called “piracy,” was widely practiced in the first decade, the practice was not referenced in the earliest examples of the historicity of what was said to have happened.32 Since historians never wrote about its having happened, it effectively didn’t.

What if we were to ask this same question about the earlier nonexistence (in the historicity of what was said to have happened) of the “cinema of attractions”? Where was that phenomenon before 1985, the year in which scholars began to formulate the new concept of early exhibition events?33 And since the “cinema of attractions” evolved from the question of its spectator, where now are those viewers from the first decade? Tom Gunning has recently reiterated that the “cinema of attractions” is, after all, a “concept.” “Attractions,” as he explains, “captured the potential energy of cinema’s address to the spectator.” The concept may have been inspired by the gag in the chase film, and, yes, derived from terms found in key Eisenstein essays published in the 1920s, but most importantly, it is a “tool for critical analysis.”34

André Gaudreault now picks up the reconsideration from another angle—how to line up the “cinema” in “cinema of attractions” if the historical moment of “attractions” came some years before the appearance of the institution named “cinema.”35 Yet, in his inquiry, he gives us something else to contemplate. He finds in the 1925 Histoire du cinématographe reference to the statement that, around 1907–8, the Paris boulevards were the main place to find “cinématographie-attraction.” Translating “cinématographie-attraction” into English as “kine-attractography,” Gaudreault has a solution to his problem of anachronism. He now argues that, thirty years before Eisenstein, the term attractions had “been on everyone’s lips” in Paris. But here is my issue: Gaudreault’s readers may come away from this discussion impressed by this discovery, perhaps thinking that the author has confirmed a phenomenon, when what he has actually done is given us something ontologically different (although no less astounding). He has excavated a provocative term. As he says, “kine-attractography” is an expression that is capable of “problematizing” the “object of study” since it “corresponds to the idea” that we have come to have of the years in question.36 But the issues he has raised do not go away. Later, in dialogue with editors of the journal 1895, Gaudreault responds to a question that echoes my concerns. Asking about both the term kine-attractography and the historical phenomenon it references, the editors want to know about the “break” between “kine-attractography” and cinema’s institutional phases. Yes, Gaudreault replies, one might object that in the “empirical and ‘historical’ world,” there is “no clean break” between phases. He goes on, but, to our surprise, says, “this is true, but the break I argue belongs to the world of historical understanding and not to the world of historical phenomena themselves.”37 The “world of historical understanding”? This would give us
two worlds, one of which imagines the other—worlds perhaps overlapping, but perhaps not.

Now to return to the point from which I began, with the question of what happened to the philosophy of film history. We might conclude that in the United States there has been sporadic interest, since the special issues cited appeared in 1984, 1994, and 2004, respectively. My skepticism should not imply that, in taking the “historical turn,” we took the wrong turn, but rather that we didn’t ask enough questions about where we were going. Thomas Elsaesser has intimated that the idea of history on which we have relied needs revision, offering such a project as a strategy for questioning the “death of cinema” prognosis with the companion doomsdayism of its devolution into “the digital.” I would add that our ability to produce paradigms powerful enough to conceptualize the technological present and future depends on the concept of history we deploy. Translate this into the degree to which we understand that we make the “world of historical understanding” and therefore our world of early “attractions,” and we have empowered ourselves as theorists and historical archaeologists.

If we follow Gaudreault’s lead and welcome the “historical-theoretical” approach that early cinema has opened up, are we then “continuing” or “returning” to a “philosophy of film history” or doing something else? In some respects, “what happened to the philosophy of film history?” is a trick question. It is neither that such a philosophy was, nor that it has continued to be, although we could certainly try to argue this if we wanted. Here, then, is the trick. By providing the historical evidence of what happened in 1984, 1994, and 2004 to support a case that we need more theory or a “philosophy” of what we do, I call upon the authority of history (as we are wont to do). Then, I suggest that we think critically about all appeals to history, even our own appeal to what we think of as “our history,” because to insist on “what happened before” may be to always risk slipping into the historicism of the Leopold von Ranke school that Walter Benjamin once railed against. In conversation with Ernst Bloch on the Arcades Project, Benjamin says of his historical excavation that it is “comparable, in method, to the process of splitting the atom.” It effectively “liberates the enormous energies of history that are bound up in the ‘once upon a time’ of classical historiography. The history that showed things ‘as they really were’ was the strongest narcotic of the century.” This is, then, not to argue that there “was” or “has been” a philosophy of film history that may have gone by another name in an attempt to justify theoretical approaches. Nor is it to urge that we abandon historical research. It is only to illustrate the kinds of philosophical dilemmas that arise when we try to represent “what happened,” and even when we do nothing more than ask “What happened to it?”
Notes

Thanks to Charles Musser, André Gaudreault, and Vivian Sobchack for early responses to this essay.


4. Michel-Rolf Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 2. Still, he says about the doubleness that “ambiguous and contingent as it is, the boundary between what happened and that which is said to have happened is necessary” (13).

5. Ibid., 22–23.

6. Some would say that this is a question for intellectual history, but Trouillot’s scheme refuses the separation.

7. Ibid., 29.


17. For the early definitions of “New Film History,” see Thomas Elsaesser, “The New Film History,” Sight and Sound 55, no. 4 (1986): 246–51; and Alison Butler, “New Film Histories and the Politics of Location,” Screen 33, no. 4 (1992): 413–26. The terrain is expanded in Thomas Elsaesser, “The New Film History as Media Archaeology,” Cinémus 14, nos. 2–3 (2004): 75–117. There, he argues, following Foucault, that we need to take an archaeological “turn” (104). See also Thomas Elsaesser, “Is Nothing New?: Turn-of-the-Century Epistememes in Film History,” in A Companion to Early Cinema, ed. Gaudreault et al., where he associates “new film history” in the 1980s with the development in which it is “no longer film history but cinema history” that is now undertaken (601). I take from this something other than his concern in the article, which is that, with the “new film history as cinema history” approach that is no longer only the history of films, we are better situated to think about the question of the digital.


23. It is well known that while Charles Musser has argued for seeing an 1895–1897 “novelty period” of attractions, Tom Gunning has held that the time frame is 1895–1906/07. See Charles Musser, “Rethinking Early Cinema: Cinema of Attractions and Narrativity,” Yale Journal of Criticism 7, no. 2 (1994): 216–17; and Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attractions[1]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde,” in Early Cinema: Space/Frame/Narrative, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (London: British Film Institute, 1990), 57. The existence of these two positions, which Elsaesser characterizes in “Is Nothing New?” as a “debate over narrative” (602), supports my point about the difficulties of correspondence.

24. Keith Jenkins, Refiguring History (New York: Routledge, 2003), introduces the phrase and continues to use it in his work (5).

25. White, Figural Realism, 2–3.


28. Ibid., 7.


35. See Edgar Morin, *Cinema, or the Imaginary Man*, trans. Lorraine Mortimer (1956; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), chap. 3, for one of the earliest attempts to separate the invention from the institution.


37. Ibid., 111.


39. Gaudreault, *Film and Attraction*, 13. Odin also thinks study of early film brought about “collaboration between theory and history,” but thinks more nuance is needed, given that the relationship is fraught (“Early Cinema and Film Theory,” 237). Gaudreault also argues that the discovery of early cinema has coincided with a “veritable revolution in the ways we write film history” (*Film and Attraction*, 12). Yet, if there has been a “revolution” in our writing, wouldn’t there be as many writing about that as there are writing about the newly conceptualized historical objects (themselves)?
