Unknowable Facts and Digital Databases: Reflections on the Women Film Pioneers Project and Women in Film History

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Abstract

Due to the increasing production of digital artifacts, data-driven approaches are gaining more and more importance in the humanities. In order to understand how they affect film and media studies, this article reflects on databases in the context of feminist film historiography. Focusing on the collaborative *Women Film Pioneers Project* (WFPP) (https://wfpp.cdrs.columbia.edu/), it considers the methodological matters when presenting and accessing research results online. One of the biggest challenges for film and media historians today is not only to retrieve and preserve historic sources but also to make both historical records and research outcomes accessible, while taking into account the "unknowability" of history. How can we identify and include the many blind spots when trying to reconstruct the past? In this article, it is made the case that due to their openness and variable use, digital databases, such as the *Women Film Pioneers Project*, seem to be perfectly suited to respond to this challenge.

Introduction

Apart from information science, the term database is used very heterogeneously and as a rather elastic concept. In the broader scholarly discourse, databases mean both collections of data in general and specific technologies and processes of gathering and accessing information in particular, as media studies scholar Marcus Burkhardt observes in his book about the history of databases [Burkhardt 2015, 117]. In this broader sense, digital databases are technically new, but they remain in the long-standing media practice of collecting and administrating information by libraries, museums, archives, encyclopedia, registers among others [Burkhardt 2015, 117]. Databases serve to store, organize, search, query and retrieve information. As it is explained in the UCLA Digital Humanities coursebook, "[d]atabases come in many forms, relational, object-oriented, and so on. Databases can be described by their contents, their function, their structure, their appearance, or other characteristics" [Drucker et al. 2014, 29]. Similarly, English studies scholar Stephen Ramsay points out the various aspects of how we can approach databases. According to him, "the inclusion of certain data (and the attendant exclusion of others), the mapping of relationships among entities, the often collaborative nature of dataset creation, and the eventual visualization of information patterns, all imply a hermeneutics and a set of possible methodologies that are themselves worthy objects for study and reflection" [Ramsay 2004, 177].

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In order to understand how digital technologies affect the production of knowledge in the context of film history, this article discusses the role of digital databases. In doing so, it focuses on the *Women Film Pioneers Project* (*WFPP*).[1] The WFPP is a collaborative website which aggregates digital research and provides archival and bibliographical information on women workers in film industries. Considering the current debates in feminist historiography, one of the biggest challenges for film and media historians concerns the appropriate acknowledgement of the many blind spots – the "unknowability" of history – while making historical records and research results accessible, discoverable and comprehensible. In this article, it is made the case that due to their openness and variable use, digital databases, such as the *Women Film Pioneers Project*, seem to be perfectly suited to respond to this challenge.

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Databases and film and media history

In the field of film and media history, digital databases are often described with respect to the potential opportunities of enhancing research by making sources visible that have been hitherto overlooked. One media studies project which is especially interesting in this context is the online platform *Media History Digital Library* (MHDL),[2] founded by archivist and historian David Pierce and led by media studies scholar Eric Hoyt. The freely accessible database, searchable by means of the platform Lantern, features digitized books and magazines on film, broadcasting, and recorded sound that are no longer protected by copyright or that have been licensed to share.[3] The collections can be used in many ways. For instance, by comparing aggregated data of the MHDL to the JSTOR-Service *Data for Research* (DFR),[4] we can see that canonical film magazines like *Variety* or *Photoplay* are relatively often quoted in contrast to other publications which were also quite popular at those times [Hoyt 2014]. This finding raises the specific question what has made *Variety* so popular among scholars and sparks a discussion about more general issues such as citation politics, bias and other reasons for neglect and marginalization.

Digital databases which store data at a large scale can enable film and media historians to ask new questions or to ask questions differently. They allow for observing trends in a broader context and perhaps discover new conjunctions between sources. For example, with the help of *Project Arclight*,[5] a collaborative data mining and visualization tool initiated by Hoyt and cultural and media studies scholar Charles Acland, we can measure word frequencies in historic trade papers and fan magazines included in the MHDL. It allows us to explore developments in film and media history over a longer period of time. At the same time, the project facilitates direct access to a particular issue we might want to study more closely by providing links to the content in the *Internet Archive*.[6] Thus, the application allows us to zoom in and out while retaining the entities' integrity and historical context.

Databases can also help us to validate, refute or differentiate hypothesis. The online platform *Early Cinema History Online* (ECHO),[7] for instance, provides further evidence that at the beginning of the 20th century, a relatively large number of women in the US-American film industry had worked as scriptwriters [Long 2016, 158–9]. In order to come to this conclusion or rather to affirm existing research, media historian Derek Long, who created this filmographic database, compared the *American Film-Index* credits of 35,000 films which appeared in the US from 1908 to 1920 to the female names gathered in the *Women Film Pioneers Project*.

Digital databases can foster new perspectives and insights. However, while they can enhance research by making historic developments visible on a meta level, they seem unsuited for showing ambiguities, contingencies and contradictions inherent to film history. A subjective, personal approach to the past including speculation and imagination – methods central to feminist historians who strongly oppose the concept of objective history – seems to be rather impossible. There is also the risk of favoring an institutionalized meta history to individual micro stories, as historian Kathryn M. Hunter stresses in her reflections on evidence and silence with regard to digitization [Hunter 2017]. In the context of empirical research, questions around the issues of visibility, absence, and evidence arise with regard to the "discursive power of records and archives," where, according to Hunter, "non-mention was not simply invisibility but erasure" [Hunter 2017, 203]. In view of that notion, how can we document individual contributions in history in the absence of historical documents? Are databases able to account for what may not be known and why it remains unknown?

The "unknowability" of history

It is a truism that the more we come to know about a particular subject, the more we realize how much we do *not* know. When it comes to history, this awareness has become a key issue of feminist debate: How can we identify and include blind spots when trying to reconstruct the past? In what way can we narrate ellipsis and absences while avoiding the pitfall of implicitly promising to grasp the "whole" story once enough information will be gathered? How is it possible to explore unchartered territory when faced with the lack of historical objects?

The discursive formation of knowledge has been a central concern of feminism ever since. In the field of film history, the question of how to reconstruct the past while taking into account the contingent and transformative nature of history has become equally important for scholars (e.g., Gledhill and Knight 2015a) and filmmakers (e.g., Dang and Akkermann

2020). In her book about women in the silent film industries, *Pink-Slipped*, film historian Jane Gaines quotes famous novelist Gertrude Stein wondering about how historians "can write so knowingly about what they cannot have known" (Stein 1993 [1935], quoted in Gaines 2018, p. 1). Being aware of the imaginary and often intimate relationship between the researcher and their subject [Dall'Asta and Gaines 2015], Gaines asks, following Stein: "Is there any other way to 'say' without claiming to know?" [Gaines 2018, 1]. She prompts the fundamental question of how we can narrate past events if we did not happen to be "there." Nowadays, film history, "as both practice and product," can hardly be grasped as a grand, coherent and evolutionary narrative but rather as an aggregation of local "micro histories" based on fragmentary, sometimes contradictory knowledge [Sobchack 2000, 8–9]. Yet, how are we able to "do" history with respect to the "precarious relations" between the present moment and the historical past, the very past that we proceed to make [Gaines 2018, 3]? In short, how can we grasp the "historical conditions of 'unknowability'" [Gaines 2018, 3]?

Until only some time ago, it used to be common knowledge in film studies that women played only a minor part in the early years of filmmaking. "Women's work" was dismissed as menial labor, if at all accounted for, notwithstanding the skills of generations of women which have been essential to the film industry [Hill 2016]. Still today, as pointed out by film and media studies scholars Shelly Stamp, Yvonne Tasker and Gaines at past *Doing Women's Film and Television History Conference* (DWFTHC) in Lancaster in 2018, women's contributions continue to be marginalized in footnotes or text boxes. At the same time, for about three decades now, more and more scholars have begun to explore the achievements of innumerous women in early cinema – not only as actresses before the camera, but also behind the scenes, as cutters, scriptwriters, producers, hand-colorers, operators, and directors among other indispensable occupations (e.g. Bean and Negra 2002). From their research we have learned that women have had a surprisingly significant impact on film production all over the world from the very beginning of film history. Women have worked and collaborated globally, not merely in North America and Europe but also in Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East [Gaines 2009, 926–7]. These unexpected findings have led historians to challenge historiography fundamentally. Concepts such as "authorship," "agency," "director," "narration," "canon," "national cinema," "evidence" and "facts" are thereby critically scrutinized. As books such as *Reclaiming the Archive: Feminism and Film History* [Callahan 2010] and other recent monographs, anthologies and articles show, history and theory are no longer regarded as binary oppositions. Methodological and epistemological questions have become essential for feminist film and media historians. Telling a story differently rather than telling a different story has become a primary goal in the field of feminist film historiography. With the increasing digitization of objects, research outcomes and scholarly media practices, the interest in digital data is growing as well – data that "can be transformed, analyzed, and acted upon computationally" [Schöch 2013].[8] In view of this fact, the question of how to make the multifaceted influence of women visible while accounting for the "unknowability" is gaining particular importance, since digital data adds another methodological and epistemological layer of complexity to the relationship between the researchers and their subject [Schöch 2013].

The Women Film Pioneers Project

The *Women Film Pioneers Project* (WFPP) is probably one of the most well-known online platforms in the field of women in film history.[9] Originally planned in the 1990s to be a multi-volume book set, it was launched in September 2013 by film theorists Gaines, Radha Vatsal, and Monica Dall'Asta as a freely accessible collaborative digital resource. Its goal is to challenge the established "great male pioneers of cinema" by documenting the high influence of women who pursued a variety of professions in the silent film industries. The website serves as a database of women film pioneers worldwide. As of December 2018, it contains 276 career profiles (including images and sometimes film clips) written by scholars, curators, and archivists. The platform facilitates access to Internet sources and aggregates archival and bibliographical information on women workers as well as references for further historical research both online and offline. It features also a couple of overview essays.[10]

Though lots of historical records got irretrievably lost, the project seeks to foreground that "[w]hat we assume never existed is what we invariably find" [Gaines 2020]. As discussed by several feminist film historians, due to the focus on the representation of women in film during the 1970s and 1980s, for a long time it had been difficult to imagine that women had a huge impact on early cinema at a wide range of capacities [Dang 2018]. In order to shift the attention towards what has been unimaginable, the WFPP points to the variety of sources which document women's work.

Instead of focusing on the lack of material, it emphasizes the abundance of material assumed to be non-existent. This approach reminds us that, as film studies scholars Christine Gledhill and Julia Knight have emphasized, "facts" do not tell themselves [Gledhill and Knight 2015b, 3]. Their existence depends on the questions we ask and on narrative conventions, on preservation politics, archival practices and, as I would like to emphasize, aesthetics of access – the various ways in which resources are presented and perceived by the users.

Media scholar Lev Manovich, whose reflections on the relation between database and narration has had a high impact in media and cultural studies, suggests to look at a database from the user's experience in a more general sense. Unlike in information science, where a database is largely known as the organization of data and information, he defines the database as a cultural form of expression that fundamentally shapes our perception of the world in the computer age [Manovich 1999, 81]. Contrary to the narrative which follows a cause-and-effect trajectory, according to Manovich, the database is open-ended and does not represent a certain order. A database represents a potentially growing collection of diverse elements such as texts, videos, images, and hyperlinks, which can be accessed in various ways: via viewing, navigating and searching [Manovich 1999, 82]. Thus, a database offers a great deal of potential ways of meaning-making. ₁₂

On the basis of these distinctions, Manovich imagines a combat between database and narrative, whereby each as a form of expression claims an "exclusive right to make meaning out of the world" [Manovich 1999, 85]. Interestingly, even though Manovich foregrounds the different ontologies, purposes and histories of database and narrative, when reflecting on cinema, the clear-cut distinction between database and narrative begins to dissolve. His analysis of Peter Greenaway's and Dziga Vertov's films reveal that his concern is narration – produced by databases. Praising the specific editing style of the legendary film *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), Manovich ennobles Vertov to be a major "database filmmaker" [Manovich 1999, 95]. It is remarkably though that in fact, it was Vertov's wife, Elizaveta Svilova, who did all the editing, as Manovich mentions on the site. This is only one of many cases where the historiographical narrative of film editing effaces women's work [Pearlman and Heftberger 2018]. ₁₃

Regardless of Manovich's inconsistent and rather metaphorical use of the database and his problematic perception of cinema as a primarily linear medium (as opposed to time-based and spatial), his approach can be fruitfully used for exploring the *Women Film Pioneers Project*. Following Manovich's observations on the database logic with regard to cinema, a database does not necessarily represent an opposing model to narrative but can rather be viewed as a horizon of possibilities for narration in context of digital media technologies [Burkhardt 2015, 141]. Considering the open-endedness and variable use of databases, the WFPP seems to be perfectly suited to facilitate the reconstruction of the past while taking into account the contingencies and contradictions of history. But how exactly does it shape our understanding of the women film pioneers' influence? What kind of usage does it foster? Which questions does the website evoke and which unexpected answers can we find? To what extent does it facilitate narration? ₁₄

As Manovich, in this article, I focus on digital database as a venue of representation and on the possible engagement of the user. Important as it is, I will leave aside the question of what lies beneath the interface, hence the technical aspects of the software which translates the invisible data into perceivable media constellations [Burkhardt 2015, 144]. While Burkhardt rightly emphasizes that databases provide no unconditional openness but are dependent on the underlying management system [Burkhardt 2015, 145], I think that in addition to a technically informed analysis of programs and algorithms we also need to pay attention to the 'content' as well as its digital representation and the users' media practices. ₁₅

The type of data that is collected and the way in which it is presented, effects the potential use of it. Data can be objective but not neutral, databases can serve for research, arguments and interpretation. Organizing data by different categories and metadata, we interpret by ascribing specific meaning to discrete elements which can then serve to support an argument. One could also argue that the creation of data is always already an interpretation because we try to make sense out of the world. And "interpretation invokes narrative to achieve dramatic impact and significance," N. Katherine Hayles contends in her article on narrative and database as "natural symbionts" [Hayles 2007, 1605]. In this sense, the interpretation – and imagination – of relations revealed by database queries are already a form of x meaning-making as part of a narrative [Hayles 2007, 1607]. Following this line of argument, it can reasonably be concluded that a ₁₆

database implies three levels of interpretation/narrative: 1) when producing data, 2) when categorizing data, 3) when organizing and/or linking data. That said, "databases are powerful rhetorical instruments that often pass themselves off as value-neutral observations or records of events, information, or things in the world" [Drucker et al. 2014, 31].

Although digital databases appear to hold complete collections and promise definite knowledge, they are in constant transformation. Yet, in doing so, they do not only grow, as Manovich and others have emphasized, but they can also shrink. Entries can be deleted, accidentally or on purpose, tables be removed, or links be broken. Databases require coherent data and continuous adjustment. By explaining the meaning of relational database model for humanities, however, Ramsay emphasizes the intellectual value also of inadequacies and inconsistencies. While, for example, the "terms we use to describe books in a bookstore (authors, works, publishers) and the relationships among them (published by, created by, published in) posses an apparent stability for which the relational model is ideally suited," the "most exciting database work in humanities computing necessarily launches upon less certain territory." He thereby thinks of uncertain relations expressed by a database, such as "influenced by," "resembles," "is derived from." "If the database allows one to home in on a fact or a relationship quickly," Ramsay notes, "it likewise enables the serendipitous connection to come forth." In this sense, databases hold out "not merely of an increased ability to store and retrieve information about a particular domain but of a critical and methodological self-awareness" [Ramsay 2004, 178].

Figure 1. Screenshot of the WFPP homepage (https://wfpp.cdrs.columbia.edu/), taken January 2019 (for illustrative purposes, the website's format has been adjusted for this article).

The WFPP's homepage offers numerous but limited ways of accessing information (see Figure 1). On top, it features four main pathways which lead to the overview essays, the pioneers' career profiles, a list of resources, and the "about" section. Below, a box presents a list of links which refer to the women's various occupations (producers, directors, co-directors, scenario writers, scenario editors, camera operators, title writers, editors, costume designers, exhibitors, and actresses). It stresses that women did not only work as actresses. Furthermore, there is one selected video embedded (for as of November 2018, a trailer on the recent restoration of *Shoes* (1916) by the leading female Hollywood director-screenwriter Lois Weber). In addition, the homepage highlights one pioneer (for as of November 2018, Brazilian director

Cleo de Verberena). Besides these features, the homepage includes a news section, a newsletter subscription box, and a search field. It also provides information on how to contribute to the project, where to find further resources, and how to cite the website. The footer links to the WFPP social media presentation on Twitter and Facebook. The color scheme of the website encompasses shades of gray and purple. Though the featured video is placed in the center, the homepage does not really prioritize one element to another. Since there is no obvious pre-selection made by the editors, the user has to make their own choice about which path of inquiry to follow.
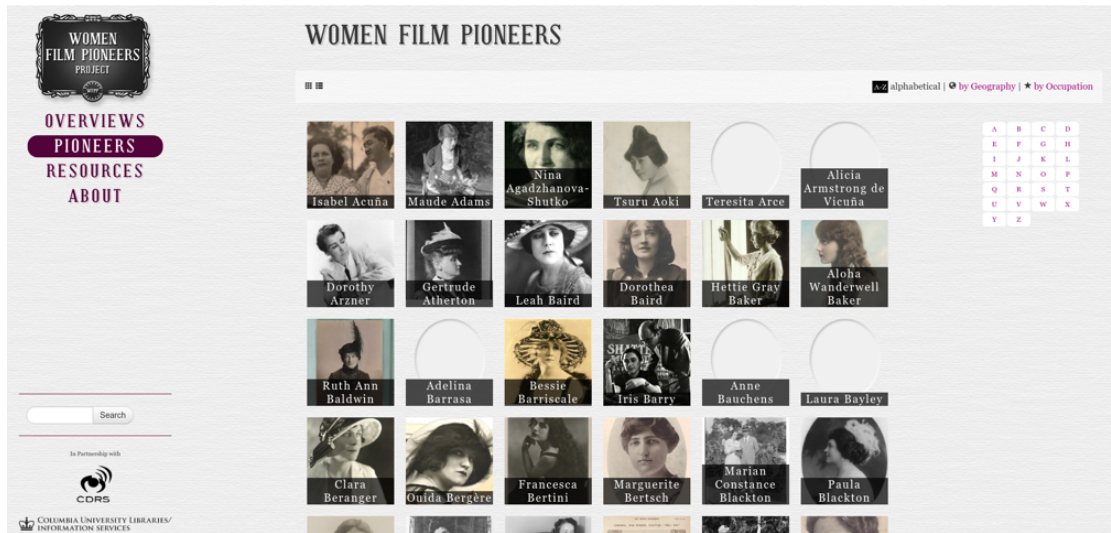

Figure 2. Screenshot of the WFPP subpage "pioneers" (https://wfpp.cdrs.columbia.edu/pioneers/), taken January 2019.

The "occupation" section (accessible at the upper right) references the wide range of women's contribution in the silent-era, whereas the subpage "pioneers" demonstrates the abundance of women workers (see Figure 2). The collection is ordered alphabetically by default but can also be sorted by geography or occupation. Each selection can be viewed both in a tiled format (and thus in a more spacial arrangement) or as a list. Remarkably, the underlying management system does not distinguish between more or less popular pioneers. All the women appear simultaneously at once. Due to their diverse activities in different countries, the women appear repeatedly in multiple lists. For example, Lotte Reiniger (1899-1981) – who has, according to the website's profile, "made over sixty films, of which eleven are considered lost and fifty to have survived" [Guerin and Mebold 2016] – is listed as animator, assistant director, co-director, director, film actress, illustrator, screenwriter, and in the category of special effects. Apparently, she worked in Canada, Germany, Italy, and England. The relatively extensive entry on her work includes screenshots of her silhouette films, images of her activities, and YouTube clips. Moreover, it features a selected bibliography and a large filmography (including her unfinished work) as well as a list of additional sources. A "credit report" at the bottom of the entry describes the context of research for the profile and elaborates on the creation of the archival filmography. [19]

What is interesting with regard to the relational database management system is how the website presents other pioneers related to Lotte Reiniger by occupation or geography. Below the entry follows a couple of lengthy lists of other women who worked as assistant directors, co-directors, directors etc. and also in Canada, Germany, Italy, and/or England. All sections (profile, bibliography, filmography, and relations) can be accessed directly via the sidebar and do not have to be read from top to bottom. Due to the great amount of data and the way it is presented, the website enables us to follow our own path of inquiry scanning for items of interest. The hypertext structure fosters a non-linear reading of the entries which makes it possible to discover unexpected conjunctures between women, occupations and places. Thus the database interface facilitates searching for detailed information on women pioneers as well as making serendipitous discoveries. In this regard, Ramsay is right in noting that databases are "not so much pre-interpretative mechanisms as para-interpretative formations" [Ramsay 2004, 178]. [20]

In the case of the WFPP, the data is structured on a very basic level, which allows for a large number of potential findings. This complies with the editors' goal to primarily foreground the high incidence of transnational women workers [21]

in early cinema without predetermining how to make sense of these facts. One might even argue that the contingent and transformative nature of history is reflected in the arrangement of data and also in each career profile. Different to encyclopedic entries which appear to provide all basic information needed, the profiles reflect upon the very conditions of historiography. The authors explain which historical sources have probably gotten lost and, above all, highlight the wealth of surviving material which has, however, not been retrieved yet, let alone examined.

The website invites users to undertake further research on each woman film pioneer. It lists 623 pioneers who have been "unhistoricized" to this point, followed by a number of occupations which were held by women but have remained generally unacknowledged (such as cashier, interpreter, supervisor) [Gaines et al. 2013b]. Potentially, everyone can contribute to the database. In doing so, authors must follow detailed instructions. Several guidelines and checklists serve to ensure that the entries comply with the website's standards, for example with regard to writing style, citation format, historiographic resources. Each entry has to be consistent in order to provide a collection of highest possible data quality. Valuable knowledge requires reliable data about data sources. This is also important for sharing research with students and colleagues and other people interested. The bigger a collection becomes, the more pitfalls occur, for example misspellings, disparate attributions, or incoherent metadata. From our own personal experience we know how easily digital data can get lost by unsystematic filing or naming, or how it can be even erased unintentionally, sometimes with no chance of restoration. The discussion about the messiness of data, and what might be gained and what be lost when implementing standards, exceeds this article's framework but is more relevant than ever regarding the rapid growth of digital data infrastructures.

Like archives, databases do not store complete collections. They are neither universal nor neutral. Instead, databases reflect personal habits, institutional conventions, intellectual frameworks and hence discursive power structures. The meaning and the structure of a database is inherently connected to the results produced by categorizing and filtering the data contained in it and the nature of its visualizing interface [McGann 2007, 1588]. Thus, while we "celebrate the branching, rooting, rhizomic, proliferating quality of database" we need to also question the choices that have gone into the making of databases [Freedman 2007, 1597] and their front end design. On the one hand, the increasing amount of data available in the Internet enables us to gather information and make meaning out of the world on our own. On the other hand, we become more dependent on guidance, classification and ordering due to the ways in which searches and databases are constructed for us [Freedman 2007, 1597]. For this reason, it is important to critically scrutinize the specific implications of database logics, hence digital representation politics.

In contrast to most databases, the WFPP foregrounds the transformative nature of knowledge production. It highlights gaps and absences while at the same time stressing the abundance of existing yet unexplored material on women's contribution to cinema. Analyzing the WFPP website and its rich collection it becomes clear again what has been pointed out by a number of feminist film historians, the marginalization of women is the result of a variety of factors, which are, however, closely intertwined: the dismissal of women's work as menial labor, insufficient documentation, lack of evidence in addition to lack of imagination due to narrative, aesthetic, and theoretical conventions. "Raw data" cannot serve as an argument but as a valuable starting point for further, context-based analysis. Providing all possible sources along with each entry, as in the case of the WFPP career profiles, it is possible for users to get an idea of what data was left out of a particular narrative – or even in history more general. Ideally, in doing so, users can retrace how "facts" have been produced and perhaps transformed.

In view of these remarks, the WFPP offers the opportunity to counter a meta history and instead foster the acknowledgment of women's contribution to film history by telling individual stories. At the same time, the website demonstrates the broad and multifaceted field of the pioneers' transnational activities. As English studies scholar Ed Folsom notes in his article "Database as Genre: The Epic Transformation of Archives," which has provoked a vigorous debate among scholars, "[d]atabase might initially seem to denigrate detail and demand abstract averaging and universalizing, but in fact the structure of database *is* detail; it is built of particulars" [Folsom 2007, 1574]. With this important observation in mind, in order to discover significant details we need to be open for new patterns and insights. Tools are, as English studies scholar Meredith L. McGill rightly points out in her response to Folsom's article, "limited by financial and physical constraints as well as by the imagination of their creators and users" [McGill 2007, 1595]. Other than in a cause-and-effect narrative, there is less control of meaning-making in a database. It leaves more space for

unpredictability. Against this backdrop, databases can be said to offer a fascinating possibility of knowing and experiencing history in an intellectually stimulating way. However, we must take advantage of this opportunity and tell stories differently by using our imagination.

While the WFPP provides a large amount of information on women in early cinema, its ultimate goal is to stimulate further research on women in film history both online and offline by examining original sources in archival collections. Online databases might help disseminating information beyond institutions and transform the control over the circulation of knowledge, as English studies scholar Peter Stallybrass enthusiastically proclaims [Stallybrass 2007, 1576, 1581]. Through the careful curation of an extensive range of information on resources, such as film print collections, academic papers, video sources, film festivals, cultural organizations, the WFPP website provides an extremely helpful scholarly venue. The aggregated references show that the immediate access to material and information online is a myth. The search for historical sources and evidence used to be a costly, tedious work – and it still is (e.g. Leigh [2015]; McKernan [2015]). But with the help of digital databases, we can open up historiographical research and share information and resources and thereby ease archival workflows and scholarly activities.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that digital technologies can help facilitate easier access to historical source material and research output. Provided that access to a computer and to the Internet is given, knowledge can be disseminated and shared with relatively little effort and at relatively low costs. Nevertheless, we need to keep in mind that inclusion always implies exclusion – both in terms of users and content. Foregrounding certain aspects of the past by selectively digitizing and presenting some information, we inevitably omit other sources and potential discoveries. As we know, archiving means not only preservation and memory but also forgetfulness and amnesia. Deciding on what will be represented means also deciding on what will *not* be represented – and therefore *not* be remembered. This becomes even more significant in light of digitizing artifacts [Zaagsma 2013, 20] and the investment of financial and human resources needed for preservation projects [Heftberger 2014, 57] but also when considering digital infrastructures such as searchable databases.

On the one hand, one could argue, while shifting our research more and more online, the risk of letting offline sources be consigned to oblivion is increasing. Because of the plethora of resources which are immediately available to us on the Internet, we tend to use what is accessible from our desktops. Due to the growing digitization of artifacts some scholars fear that funding organizations might cut their financial support for expensive research trips to archives [Zaagsma 2013, 21–3]. On the other hand, online platforms provide a profound insight into which archives exist in the first place. Databases like the *Women Film Pioneer Project* can be an incitement to the use of analogue as well as digital collections. Furthermore, if someone does not live close to a library, a museum, or other knowledge-management venues and/or is not affiliated with an institution and/or lacks financial means, barrier-free online access to records and studies, without technical, financial, or legal restrictions, is critical for both academic and non-academic research [Pampel and Dallmeier-Tiessen 2014, 214–5].

Since databases, such as the WFPP, often rely on collaborative contributions, they challenge the persistent concept of authorship, understood as a genius solitary achievement. In doing so, they make us reflect on the reputation economy in academia and the regime of intellectual property [Stallybrass 2007, 1583]. Furthermore, databases represent work in process, they are never as "finished" as books. As a dynamic and subjective site of representation they strengthen the argument that there is no such thing as "final facts."

The WFPP editors invite contributions from various authors (which will be peer-reviewed) and allow for "a great deal of variation and creativity in terms of the topics and themes" while at the same time offering suggestions [Gaines et al. 2013c]. In terms of creation and content, the editors work towards an inclusive and diverse film historiography, whereas the potential usage of the website is limited in some aspects such as language and design. The site is entirely in English and therefore can only be accessed by a certain group of users. Multilingual entries would help both to expand the project's outreach and bring in many more, various perspectives. Unlike current web design trends which promote the use of animations, large images, a short introduction video, serif-less fonts, bold typography and other characteristics,

the WFPP website stands out with its rather simple web design. The aggregation of data, information, and knowledge has been clearly the focus of the project so far. In my view, however, engaging the user in an enjoyable manner would very much help to make history accessible while indicating blind spots. While aesthetics is a matter of taste, a stronger focus on user experience can enhance the engagement with a database tremendously. The platform convincingly illustrates that a great deal of women pioneers had played a significant role in the silent-era. Nevertheless, additional features and data visualization techniques, for example GIS (geographic information systems), could help highlighting the many interactions and entangled paths of women in history. The curatorial work which has been put into the project is of great value to feminist film history. The WFPP provides an extensive collection of high quality data to further explore the digital representation of research and data visualization – and much potential for creative experiments toward the unknown. Let us make use of it. It is time for redistributing the narrative wealth, as proclaimed at DWFTHC in Lancaster: for telling many more stories, and first and foremost, telling stories differently. History is not only about the "power of the records" [Hunter 2017, 203] but also of aesthetics and access.

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Notes

[1] https://wfpp.cdrs.columbia.edu/

[2] http://mediahistoryproject.org/

[3] The Media Digital History Library collaborates with the Internet Archive, the Prelinger Archive, MoMA, Margaret Herrick Library, Library of Congress among other institutional partners.

[4] http://dfr.jstor.org

[5] http://projectarclight.org/

[6] https://archive.org/

[7] http://echo.commarts.wisc.edu/

[8] For a broader discussion of what "data" means in the humanities, see, for example, the reflections of Digital Humanities scholar Christof Schöch on "smart data" and "big data" [Schöch 2013]. For a film and media studies perspective, see, for example, Dang 2020.

[9] Another example worth mentioning due to its popularity is the Women's Film & Television History Network UK/Ireland (https://womensfilmandtelevisionhistory.wordpress.com/). Another project, which features digital resources is *SP-ARK* (http://www.sp-ark.org/). *SP-ARK* is the online archive of Sally Potter. It provides a selection of multi-media material related to her films (e.g. annotated scripts, costume designs, and production schedules), just to mention a few.

[10] After I finished the manuscript, the WFPP has been subject to a relaunch. The homepage has been slightly rearranged, and – perhaps the most interesting aspect – a "Projections" section for various forms of reflection has been added. However, no fundamental changes have been made. All my observations in this article relate to an earlier version of the website (status as of November 2018), but I believe most issues raised also apply to the present website.

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