

Statement by the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) to the National Preservation Board, in reference to the National Film Preservation Act of 1992, submitted by Dr. Jan-Christopher Horak, President

The Association of Moving Image Archivists was founded in November 1991 in New York by representatives of over eighty American and Canadian film and television archives. Previously grouped loosely together in an *ad hoc* organization, Film Archives Advisory Committee/Television Archives Advisory Committee (FAAC/TAAC), it was felt that the field had matured sufficiently to create a national organization to pursue the interests of its constituents. According to the recently drafted by-laws of the Association, AMIA is a non-profit corporation, chartered under the laws of California, to provide a means for cooperation among individuals concerned with the collection, preservation, exhibition and use of moving image materials, whether chemical or electronic. The objectives of the Association are:

- a.) To provide a regular means of exchanging information, ideas, and assistance in moving image preservation.
- b.) To take responsible positions on archival matters affecting moving images.
- c.) To encourage public awareness of and interest in the preservation, and use of film and video as an important educational, historical, and cultural resource.
- d.) To promote moving image archival activities, especially preservation, through such means as meetings, workshops, publications, and direct assistance.
- e. To promote professional standards and practices for moving image archival materials.
- f. To stimulate and facilitate research on archival matters affecting moving images.

Given these objectives, the Association applauds the efforts of the National Film Preservation Board, Library of Congress, to hold public hearings on the current state of film preservation in

the United States, as a necessary step in implementing the National Film Preservation Act of 1992. The time has come for a truly national moving image preservation policy, one that encourages diversity and difference, commensurate with the many kinds of private and public institutions engaged in film and television preservation, while at the same time coordinating an overall managerial strategy and financial commitment. While the present study does not directly address the issue of television and video preservation, it should be kept in mind that no overall preservation policy can be formulated, without taking electronic moving image media into consideration.

In the past few years, moving image preservation in this country has stumbled from one crisis point to the next, due to a number of factors. 1.) A veritable explosion has occurred in the quantities of moving image materials being archived and in need of preservation. 2) Despite the above, shrinking sources and levels of funding have lead to an aggregate decline in the amounts of film materials actually being preserved. 3.) This situation has been further aggravated by technical developments which have adversely effected the field, such as the "discovery" of the "vinegar syndrome" in materials previously thought to be secure. 4.) The realization that virtually all color film material produced after 1953 on Eastman color and other mono-pack film stocks is subject to serious fading, both in archival positives and negatives - a situation only recently remedied by the introduction of low-fade color negative stocks. 5.) The

inflationary costs of laboratory (200% in ten years) work necessary in film and video preservation have in conjunction with point 1.) and 2.) meant that the amount of moving images actually being preserved keeps shrinking. Thus, it is hoped that these hearings will lead to a formulation of a national film preservation policy, on the one hand, and the opening up of new financial resources for film preservation, on the other.

To understand the ways the project of moving image preservation in the United States has expanded in the last fifteen years, it might be productive to look at the growth of the Association of Moving Image Archivists and its predecessor, FAAC/TAAC. In the 1970s, FAAC, or Archives Advisory Committee (AAC) as it was called then, was constituted of no more than a handful of archivists from the four major, U.S. nitrate-holding, archives (Library of Congress, Museum of Modern Art, UCLA Film & Television Archives, George Eastman House, plus the American Film Institute), all of whom were full members of the Federation Internationale des Archives du Film (FIAF). This core group was joined by a few others: Anthology Film Archives, the Anthropological Film Center (Human Studies Film Archive at the Smithsonian), University of Wisconsin, Cinematheque Quebecoise, and the National Archives of Canada, the latter two Canadian members of FIAF. This committee was responsible for coordinating nitrate film preservation efforts, as funded through the National Endowment of the Arts, as well as discussing other inter-archival problems. In the period 1968-1978, the NEA funnelled

approximately four million dollars to the archives for nitrate conversion, or approximately \$400,000 annually. The vast majority of monies available went towards the preservation of Hollywood originated fiction films, both from the silent and sound period.

In January 1979, the Television Archives Advisory was founded. Its founding members included representatives from the above named FAAC institutions, as well as the following television archives: CBC Canada, CBS News Archive, Museum of Broadcasting, National Archives and Records Service, NBC New Film Library, Public Television Library, J. Walter Thompson Creative Library, Vanderbilt University, University of Georgia, Academy of Television Arts & Sciences. With the expansion of the Committee to include Television archives, its mandate expanded to the discussion of all issues connected with the storage, preservation, and exhibition of electronic moving images. While the committee's mandate expanded, however, the funding mandate of NEA, administered through AFI, remained focused on nitrate preservation.

Through the 1980s, then, FAAC/TAAC continued to grow, as more and more moving image archives were established. The 1987 meeting in New York, hosted by ABC, for example, included no less than thirteen new members, attending for the first time, bringing the total number of organizations to nearly forty. The 1990 FAAC/TAAC Conference, hosted by the Portland Historical Society included representatives from over sixty organizations. As of

December 1992, AMIA has 199 individual members, thirty-six not-for-profit institutional members, and eleven for-profit institutional members.

This development can be attributed to a number of factors:

- 1.) The growth of specialty archives, devoted to particular genres of interests, e.g. the Dance Film Collection at Lincoln Center, or the National Center for Jewish Film at Brandeis University;
- 2.) The donation of numerous, previously privately owned 16mm television news film collections to non-profit institutions, such as the Chicago Historical Society, or the Mississippi Department of Archives and History;
- 3.) The development of regional archives with regional interests, such as the Northeast Historic Film Center (Maine), or the Hawaii Moving Image Preservation Project;
- 4.) The increased interest of film archivists in the studios, e.g. at Universal, Disney, and Sony Entertainment, in networking with their colleagues in public institutions.
- 5.) The expanded role of television and video in our moving image culture, leading to the founding of numerous institutions specifically concerned with electronic images.

This growth in the number of individuals and institutions involved in moving image preservation has radically altered the nature and complexity of the project. A major change has been an increased sensitivity to the kinds of moving image materials worthy and in need of film preservation. As noted, the old FAAC was almost exclusively focussed on the preservation of the best surviving nitrate of American, entertainment, fiction features

and shorts. Through the evolution of AMIA, it has become clear that many other kinds of moving images, often categorized under the heading of ephemeral film, deserve and require attention: avant-garde film and video, documentaries, newsreels, television news, industrial films, animation, advertising films, amateur works, films and video on art, anthropological footage, unedited historical moving images, films and video by and for racial and ethnic minorities, scientific and medical films, travelogues, political action films, educational films, trailers, commercials, etc., etc. Much of this moving image material is only available on nitrate, acetate master positives or obsolete video formats. This incredible diversity in moving image materials reflects the rich and complex traditions of film and television in the United States. Many of these works are of great aesthetic importance within the context of their individual genres, others less so. However, their value as historical records, documenting the social, political, cultural, economic, and psychological lives of Americans in the last century is beyond dispute. An illustration of just how the value of such moving image documents can change is the Zapruder film of the John F. Kennedy assassination. Originally conceived as a simple, amateur record of an event, the film became a scientific document to underscore numerous conspiracy theories, and has now moved into the realm of myth, an icon of one of the most traumatic, mass psychological experiences this nation ever witnessed.

That such films receive exposure is, of course, due in part

to television's insatiable appetite for broadcasting material, especially film and television programming. Such programming demonstrates the growing interest in moving images from the past, and, hopefully, an increased interest in preservation issues. Unfortunately, many of these moving image materials are merely being transferred to video formats which are far from archival, are subject to deterioration at an even more rapid rate than film, and to technological obsolescence, due to the rapid evolution of the video hardware marketplace. It should also be noted that hundreds of millions of television viewers around the globe look to the United States to preserve and make accessible the moving images we originate.

Hopefully, the National Film Preservation Board, and the National Film Registry will one day recognize the rich cultural heritage of our national moving image production, moving beyond its narrow focus on Hollywood fiction features. As it stands, the Board's selection of "culturally, historically, or aesthetically" significant films, is presently limited almost exclusively to mainstream Hollywood fiction film productions, with only a token nod to avant-garde, documentary, and minority film production (three of 25 films in the 1992 selection!). In point of fact, rather than the 12% reflected in the National Registry, the great majority of films produced in this country are not Hollywood entertainment films, but rather the kinds of films listed above, which are the focus of attention for many of AMIA's members. Moreover, many of the films listed in the past

three years have been adequately preserved in the member archives of AMIA (and AMERICAN FIAF archives), making a duplication of preservation efforts at the Library of Congress an unnecessary waste of public funds.

A national registry, however, is only a first step. A national plan for establishing preservation priorities must be established, which takes into account the great diversity of materials, produced in this country. Such a plan must recognize that preservation involves a number of different steps: 1.) Collection and acquisition of film materials from private sources; 2.) Proper storage and archival housing of materials in optimum climate controlled vaults; 3.) Cataloguing of film materials, including physical comparison with other prints of the same title to ascertain best quality original material; 4.) Duplication of nitrate and acetate master positives and negatives to generate master preservation negatives and projection positives. Given the financial strengths of individual institutions, this process will be completed to a more or lesser degree, with certain priorities taking precedence over others.

Coordination of all these preservation activities by a host of public and private institutions is paramount, due to the overwhelming mass of material in need of such care. A national database of moving image materials, once functioning and accessible to all members of the film archives community, will be a primary tool in such a coordination process. While the National Moving Image Database (NAMID) at the National Center for

Film and Video Preservation aspires to such a role, limited funding has so far hampered its capability to achieve such a goal. At present the databases approximately twenty-five archives have been input into the system, but access has been presently restricted at the wishes of some cooperating members. A part of the problem is that the field as a whole has not yet agreed on making MARC the standard for moving image database cataloging. Hopefully, a database system will one day become available to all AMIA members, allowing them to instantly access the collections of all other subscribing members, just as librarians today have such access to the book collections of their colleagues through OCLC.

Finally, the issue of funding must be addressed squarely. At present, the only public funding available to the field is through the National Endowment of the Arts Film Preservation program and through NHPRC. As mentioned above, this program has been in existence for over twenty years. Yet, despite the growth of AMIA and the field, NEA funding has stagnated at 1980 levels. The same monies available at that time, \$355,00 (with another \$145,000 going the American Film Institute to administer the program), is still being divided today between the major nitrate holding archives, and a few other selected archives. The great majority of those funds still go towards the preservation of mainstream Hollywood films. Given present funding levels, and NEA guidelines for film preservation funding, this situation is no expected to change.

It is true that the major American film companies have taken an increased interest in their own holdings - as reflected in their cooperation with AMIA and their own intensifying preservation activity. Thus, such companies as Turner Entertainment (MGM, RKO), Sony Entertainment (Columbia), and the Disney Company have lead the field in the conversion of their own nitrate holdings. At the same time it must be noted that these private companies, responsible to their stockholders, cannot be made responsible for any film for in which they do not have a direct economic interest, i.e. any films for which they do not hold copyright.

Yet the fact remains, that the overwhelming majority of moving image materials in need of preservation in this country are no longer or have never been covered by copyright, i.e. no private individual or corporation can be made responsible for the financing of their preservation. In terms of quantity, we are facing the imminent decomposition of at least 100 to 200 million feet of film and an incalculable amount of video material, orphaned, as it were, by the winds of time. These include: 1.) Silent films made by the major film companies where the copyright has expired; 2.) All those films produced by major film and television companies which were never copyrighted; 3.) All those films produced by smaller film companies, independents, and poverty row studios, which have since gone out of business, and/or their films were not renewed for copyright; 4.) All the newsreels, documentaries, avant-garde productions, animation, and

other ephemeral films, created by a diverse array of film producers which were never copyrighted, and are therefore in the public domain. 5.) The films/videos of living and/or dead film artists who worked independently, outside of the commercial structures of moving image production in this country. Many of these films are literally in the public domain, making them a public concern and a public responsibility.

The funding for the preservation of all these moving images must be an issue for the National Film Preservation Board, and more generally, for the Congress of the United States. All the individual and institutional members of the Association of Moving Image Archivists would be happy to cooperate with any public or private institution to make this preservation effort a reality.

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