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## Statement on Film Preservation for the Library of Congress

Tom Gunning Associate Professor and Acting  
Chairman, Film Program, State University of New York, College at  
Purchase and representative for the Society for Cinema Studies

I am speaking here both as an individual scholar involved in researching and writing the history of American cinema, and as a representative of the Society of Cinema Studies, the professional society for film study in the United States whose more than a thousand members teach and write about the cinema. Although our membership is largely based in the academy (both professors and graduate students), it also includes other serious film researchers and other film study professionals, such as film archivists. I would say that as film professionals, most of whom are involved both in research and in the teaching of film study, we members of SCS are concerned about film preservation at both ends of the chain. For us individual researchers the preservation of our film heritage constitutes the very material of our work. The vast strides that film study has made over the last two or three decades comes directly from the fact that our generation had the opportunity of looking closely at actual prints of films which film historians and theorists of an earlier period often had access to through memories or from printed sources. Clearly we feel the need for preservation most intently, because films are the substance of our work, our

curiosity and, I should add, our passion.

At the other end of the chains comes conveying the results of our research. Those of us involved in teaching are also dedicated to passing on our discoveries and our delight in film to another generation. Most of us came from a generation for whom film viewing was a natural passion shared by most members of society and it hardly seemed a necessity to teach a love and interest in cinema to anyone. But the generation we are now teaching are not as naturally attuned to the film image as we were, and, although they live in a constant environment of visual images, they often seem to be more the victims of these visual assaults than their masters. As professionals involved in film study, I feel we are teaching a form of visual literacy, and although much of this literacy involves contemporary issues, I also feel that a knowledge of the history of film, where it came from and how it developed, is essential for visual education. As teachers we are a sort of medium of the preservation (as well as the critique) of film culture. And for this task we need film preservation not only to provide material for research but also to allow our students to directly experience the texts of our film heritage.

I am therefore adding my voice to those of archivists pleading for the immense importance of preserving our film heritage which for technical reasons is the most fragile of our arts and for commercial reasons one of the most difficult to preserve. But I would also like to add to that central plea that the planning for preservation should also consider the

availability and circulation of films. We need, in other words, not only to preserve films in archives but to increase availability of these films not only to those scholars lucky enough to live in proximity to archives or wealthy enough to make long trips, but also to classrooms across the nation and to students who need to see something of the vast range of our film heritage beyond what is available at the local video store or those films considered commercially profitable in the ever shrinking market of 16mm film rentals. I believe that addressing the availability of films to students and to film scholars for teaching purposes completes the purpose of film preservation, by allowing such films to become a living part of our film heritage. Therefore I would urge that a consideration of film preservation not take place in a vacuum but consider a strategy for intersecting with film education.

As a historian I tend to look to specific events for guidance in understanding the way history functions and I think I have a very strong example for the way issues in film preservation should be approached in the Paper Print Collection of the Library of Congress. It was this extraordinary collection of film that helped revolutionize the study of early cinema in this country and my own book on the early films of D.W. Griffith depended on it enormously. As you are undoubtedly aware this collection was basically an accident, originally established to plug a loophole in the copyright laws before they covered motion pictures and never intended as a means of film preservation. However, in the 1940's Harold Lamarr Walls, a clerk at the Library of Congress, discovered this cache of paper film and

recognized its unique value. The rescuing of this collection and its transfer to 16 mm film not only addressed preserving it, but also provided a means of making it available to scholars and other interested viewers. Since any one can purchase a print of a film from this collection (although unfortunately the cost has increased a great deal in recent years) it has provided not only a tool of research but the core of several university teaching collections on the history of early film, as well as personal collections of scholars, aficionados and filmmakers. The decision to consider how to make these films available is one of the aspects that makes this collection not only valuable but powerful in revising our notions of early film history.

A second aspect of this collection raises another point regarding preservation that I would like to stress. The preservation of the Paper Print Collection was not selective; it included films by great directors like Griffith, Mack Sennett, or Edwin S. Porter, as well as silly comedies by anonymous directors and advertising films. All the various sorts of films preserved in the Paper Print Collection have yielded discoveries about the development of American cinema and its relation to American culture (I am still making discoveries in it). As Patrick Loughney of the Library of Congress has pointed out in his research on the Paper Print Collection, the very variety of the collection appealed to the Librarian of Congress during its discovery, Archibald MacLeish. MacLeish favored creating a film archive which would deal not only with the preservation of film as an aesthetic form but also as a part of America's history,

society and popular culture. I would stress the importance of such collections. This is partly because aesthetic values are always changing and we often discover our strongest art works in categories previously treated with contempt. But beyond this, film is perhaps the most resolutely social of all art forms, involving complex intersections of industry, technology, capital and a range of makers and audiences. Therefore its value, not only for film historians but for historians of culture, becomes particularly intense.

I would stress, then, that film preservation should not be focused only on the preservation of feature films which often receive the greatest comment and attention because they have professional publicists whose job is precisely to make such films highly visible. Film preservation needs to be especially scrupulous in ferreting out and preserving films which were often made with minority audiences in view, ranging from the films of the avant-garde, to those of specific ethnic groups or geographical areas. Preserving the the work of avant-garde film artists, African American, Yiddish, or regional filmmakers in Maine, Florida or Salt Lake City is harder because there was less invested in their distribution or publicity, but for film history they are precious indeed -- and for reasons which we can not always predict in advance. I strongly applaud the movement the Library of Congress has begun to make in this direction in the last few years, showing that our heritage of distinguished films need not be limited to the most familiar and widely recognized titles, but needs to consider those works especially in need of highlighting and preservation because of their neglect and

marginalization within a commercial industry. Film archives have been doing a heroic job in this area and need further support and recognition. And again these films which were always so little distributed, need to be made available for teaching and study.

At the beginning of this month I traveled to the University of Chicago for a screening of the magnificent restoration of D.W. Griffith's masterpiece Intolerance undertaken by the Museum of Modern Art and The Library of Congress. This restored print has been shown five times around the world accompanied by an orchestra score restored and conducted by Gillian Anderson. I have had the good fortune to attend four of those screenings, three in this country and one in Italy. However, at present I can only tell my students about this extraordinary restored version when I project a 16 mm print which I now consider inadequate to Griffith's original conception of the film. The restoration is a magnificent work and I applaud it hardily. But in some sense its preservation will only be complete when it is available to a larger range of viewers. I cannot stress enough the importance of film preservation in the teaching of American culture. And preservation in the broadest sense also means carefully considering strategies for availability.