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MOTION PICTURE, BROADCASTING
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(REVISED)

STATEMENT BY L. JEFFREY SELZNICKFOR THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS HEARINGSA. Our Role

The Trustees of the Louis B. Mayer Foundation decided several years ago that one of the two or three principal areas of our future grant making should be concerned with film preservation. We hope that both the name of our Foundation, and as its President, my family name speaks to the legitimacy of our interest in the arena of film preservation and in these hearings. But as a private entity, our role here is rather different from those of the various witnesses who have preceded us. We have no commercial interest; we are not collectors or archivists; nor are we academics or professional restorers. Rather, we are, in a limited scale, a supplier of funds from the private sector for film preservation projects. And we bring some hands-on experience and special knowledge to our intervention.

In compensation for the limitation of our financial means, we hope to use our knowledge, creativity, and our freedom of action to design our own choice of projects to undertake, with a bias towards unconventional and/or challenging projects which are difficult for more institutional interests to undertake. We are also hopeful that our efforts will encourage others in the private sector to underwrite similar activities.

Our current project is an attempt to duplicate original Technicolor by reprinting an original 3-strip camera negative by the dye transfer process. The only remaining dye transfer laboratory facility operating today is in Beijing. The technology and equipment were sold to the Chinese by the Technicolor Corporation in the mid-seventies. To our knowledge this is the first and only such attempt of its kind that has ever been undertaken.

If ultimately successful the importance of this project will impact all the various problems of color film preservation (notably fading) as well as permitting first generation restorations, where original negative exists.

In the course of this experiment, which is still under way, we have encountered a series of problems, many of which are illustrative of issues relevant to these hearings.

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Firstly, before even the problem of standards, there is the problem of terminology: As an example,

- are we "duplicating" or replicating?
- are we conserving, preserving, or restoring - or all three?

The terms are used interchangeably, and yet they can and should mean different things - all of them within the purview of these hearings and your inquiry. Thus a more exacting definition of terms becomes a necessary adjunct of any discussion of standards.

But the failure to agree on "Standards" appears to us, both nationally and internationally to embrace a huge potential for misunderstandings, errors of commission and omission, waste, and duplicative efforts. While FIAF for example has established certain criteria, and while its members may adhere to them; many other interested participants in the film preservation community most assuredly do not. A very serious example of this dichotomy is the issue of what constitutes proper deep protection of original negative?

Truly exacerbated areas of disagreement also concern the terms "original" and "reference print". The meaning of "Original" can vary from "what was in the director's mind" all the way to "what is the oldest copy we can find?" Most serious archivists and preservationists in our opinion would like to settle on a standard of "as originally released (in its country of origin)".

The issue of the "reference print" is more complex. A true "reference print" is certifiably the same as the print as first published, i.e. as first shown to the public. This becomes particularly critical when doing a restoration of a color motion picture. For example, Technicolor had several different "looks" at different periods in its history - particularly during the 3-strip years (1935 - 1951). As fundamental as this might seem to an archivist, to most people a reference print is alas (particularly when talking to a film more than 10 - 15 years old) simply an available copy to view or consult; or an "old" copy. No standard of faithfulness to the original is warranted.

A dye transfer color print is known as an imbibition or an "I.B." print. There is a vast difference between such a print and the modern color print from what is ostensibly the same negative. Yet only the I.B. can be the reference for a Technicolor title; and then it can be disqualified on other grounds, while a color print can never properly be a reference print for a film whose original distribution prints were dye transfer.

As a guide for restorers, a registry of authenticated reference prints is urgently required. "Authentication" is extremely difficult - ideally it is best achieved by documentary evidence of provenance. But even provenance can be a matter of personal experience or memory. Memory, alone, is too unreliable and slippery to be an accurate gauge of color or visual presentation. The "urgency" is because in many instances the numbers of people still alive who are able to authenticate a print by provenance or other physical means, is dwindling precipitously, and irrevocably.

Encouragement for such a registry could be a role for the Library of Congress to play nationally. It can try to reach out to private collectors as well as institutional or public archives; and then interface the resulting data base with an international effort which FIAF should be encouraged to undertake. The suggestion is for a registry only of quality, condition, whereabouts and ownership -- not for central acquisition.

(If the standard of restoration to be met by preservationists is "as originally published", which is the acknowledged world archival standard, then the importance of such a registry is obvious. Take for example GONE WITH THE WIND. As originally presented in 1939 it had the very yellowish and low-contrast look common to Technicolor of the period. That does not resemble the film as presented today. Authentic reference prints are extremely rare today, and a limiting factor in undertaking accurate restorations.

E. Use of Archival Materials

Another thorny problem is the ultimate use of archival materials. Once a film has been "preserved" (protected by producing new preprint masters, etc.) what is to become of original camera negatives or authenticated original reference prints - particularly nitrate elements? Surely the negative materials must be kept for as long as they viably exist against the discovery of still improved preservation media/bases. For example many 3-strip Technicolor negatives were destroyed after making safety interpositives and internegatives. Those safety intermediate materials are now in many cases useless, and because black and white masters from color separations (or better still from the original Technicolor 3-strips) were never made, the titles are lost.

As for positives many archivists are loathe to let the original materials be used - even after "protection" exists. Or they are fearful of permitting the use of nitrate prints. They apparently prefer for the original to crumble to dust in a vault. Correct assessment of the real risks of projecting and/or shipping nitrate are unfortunately little understood by those still dealing with it.

The solution would be the adoption of a standard for "qualified use" of original, archival and/or nitrate materials. This would enable skilled technicians, a limited use of such materials under controlled conditions; with priority being given for use in the replication of the material itself. Without such use, there is no justification for the expense and heroics involved in archiving such prints.

Many countries throughout the world with cinema heritages which pale in comparison to that of the United States have their archival efforts fiscally funded in their national budgets. While that avenue is not realistic in this country, particularly in this time of heightened deficit awareness, we believe that there are fiscal incentives which could be brought to bear by relatively painless tax code provisions; or at least try to remove some of the disincentives which for example we as a private foundation have found in our way.

We should also like to ally ourselves with Ms. Mary Lea Bandy's suggestion that at least one film school offer a course in film preservation and its techniques. It is sorely missing in the academic curricula. What use for myriad film schools to turn out countless historians/critics if what they are interested in no longer exists.

The importance of these hearings is to hear the views of the various constituencies that wish to advance the cause of film preservation. We further believe that we need to make still greater efforts to open the door wider to be able to embrace the private collectors who today represent a body of resources which grows in importance as the supply of original materials diminishes (through all causes). While we debate the process of film preservation, we need to find ways to enlist a wider public support for funding of preservation efforts; and as a form of payback,

encouraging greater efforts in exhibiting the fruits of preservation. And we must find ways to record the knowledge of the various technical disciplines, the collective cumulative experience of skills and systems which are no longer practiced. The archive of human knowledge must receive the care requisite to its survival which is as important as the archive of preserved or original film materials.

L. Jeffrey Selznick
President
The Louis B. Mayer Foundation