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AFTER PRESERVATION: SCHOLARLY FILM ACCESS AND STUDY

Remarks by Donald Crafton, Director
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to

The National Film Preservation Board
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The Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research (WCFTTR) has serviced scholars and students of television, theater, and motion pictures for 35 years. In a nutshell our holdings consist of over 300 collections of film, videotape, stills, manuscripts, and papers from corporations and individuals. To the archival community we are best known for our largest film collection, the United Artist donation, which includes prints of pre-1948 Warner Bros., RKO, and Monogram releases, plus scripts, publicity material, company records and other documents.

We do have other lesser-known but significant materials, for example, 280 Soviet features and shorts produced between 1948 and 1975, and over 100 Hong Kong martial arts features. We are charter members of the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) and associate members of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF).

We actively endorse the preservation policies of those organizations. Yet we are something of an anomaly among international archives, for it is not part of our mission to preserve films in the sense of caring for nitrate prints or supervising their transfer to safety stock. (When collectors inquire about donating, or more typically selling, nitrate, we refer them to the National Center for Film and Video Preservation.) Our mission specifically is to facilitate educational and public access by making our holdings available as freely as our resources and contractual restrictions will permit.

The point I would like the National Film Preservation Board to consider is this: Preservation also means assuring that films will have a permanent place in the intellectual domain. Indeed, I will go so far as to argue that a film is only truly preserved when it has been made available for examination and contemplation by viewers.

The history of the developing interest in early American cinema illustrates my point. The paper print collection at the Library of Congress, the raw materials, had been deposited over a half-century before being restored to projectable form. Even after the first generation of 16mm copies had been made, the films remained inaccessible until the publication of Kemp Niver's catalogues. Equally important, the Library made it possible for individuals and institutions to purchase reasonably priced copies of these films. Around the same time the Museum of Modern Art began restoring, exhibiting, and most importantly, distributing the Biograph films of D. W. Griffith. In the 1970s, pre-1912 American cinema started infiltrating screenings in college film courses, FIAF conferences began inviting scholars to view and write about their recent restorations, and the first books and articles on early American cinema began appearing. The Library began to exhibit actively its restored holdings in its own theater and at international gatherings of historians and archivists. Spirited debates began, often focusing on the accuracy and significance of specific films and on the gender and class constitution of early audiences. Today, early cinema is one of the most important and culturally vibrant areas of film study. Not only have we learned about the development of one of America's key industries, we have learned about how Americans represented themselves and society in the era before World War I. This knowledge was

always potentially available; but the availability of the raw materials of scholarship and the reinforcement of educators and historians brought the material into the arena of ideas.

The lesson is that storing and salvage are only the first half of the preservation circle--a necessary, but not sufficient state. The circle is completed, the film really reaches a state of preservation, when it enters the public sphere of reception, discussion, and critical inquiry. Some films become part of our national memory--a memory canonized by the Board's selection process. Other films will never make it to cable channels or video release, but are nevertheless essential for a complete understanding of the history, theory, and appreciation of the movies. This happens through traditional channels: teaching and publication.

For a moment I would like to ask the members of the Board to imagine themselves as end-users of the films all of us here are trying to preserve. The buildings in which prints are housed are probably barrier-free for physical entry, but are the collections inside barrier-free for research?

Let us construct a wish-list that will enable us to proceed with our work with the least obstacles:

- 1) Let's have ready access to a public database that will enable us to locate preserved prints quickly and accurately. The database should list identifying data, location, and accessibility of holdings. It should be available in major libraries, as well as accessible through Internet or another public computer network.
- 2) Let's hope that archives will have viewing prints available of all their holdings
- 3) We can leave our checkbooks at home, because there will be no screening fees.
- 4) The friendly archivist gives us a choice of viewing format: video or the original medium and gauge.
- 5) The adequately funded and staffed archive has extended hours so that we may get our work done efficiently, working all day and even through lunch if we choose. Since it's open Saturdays, we can save on discount air fare too.
- 6) Since our analysis demands upon close study of films, we can start and stop the print without worrying about time constraints.
- 7) Our editor, publisher, or dissertation director insists on many illustrations, and anyway, they are essential for making our point in the text. The archive allows us to make frame enlargements from the prints ourselves, or to utilize the archive's photographic service, which does the work for us professionally and at a fair price.
- 8) We can publish images from the film prints and reproductions of studio publicity stills without entangling red tape, exorbitant fees, or fear of legal action.
- 9) We can disseminate our scholarship knowing that others will have the same right of access that we did, and can augment our information with new findings, perhaps substantiating our work, perhaps challenging it and leading to debate.

As Sam Cooke sang, "What a wonderful world it would be!"

These two days of hearings have shown that there are massive problems that the preservers of America's film heritage must overcome. But providing access to the preserved films by scholars and historians is another trial. Is the end-user's wish-list just a pipe dream? Some of it perhaps, but not all of it.

There are concerns which can be addressed locally; AMIA provides a forum for discussion and implementation of archive access policies such as user fees and hours of operation. But some changes would require recommendations from the Board. Here are some specific actions that would lower the existing barriers to research.

- 1) Urge full funding of the National Moving Image Database. While detailed NAMID catalogue entries are not necessary for most researchers, something analogous to a Union List of Serials, derived from NAMID, is essential for planning scholarly work. New copyrights should be entered into the NAMID automatically.
- 2) Recommend legislation that would clarify the status of frame enlargements and film stills. Stills that have not been individually copyrighted should be recognized as in the public domain. Frames and stills reproduced in scholarly journals or books (defined as a university-associated press or an initial run of under 10,000 copies) should be considered "fair use."
- 3) Plead with Congress to adequately fund its Library so that your accessioning, cataloguing, and reference-printing can be expanded. Despite the goodwill of producers, responsibility for the care and protection of the public interest ultimately lies with Congress and not with voluntary activities of corporations.
- 4) Remove the ambiguity of print collecting by public institutions by making it legal to buy, or accept for donation or deposit, prints of films 25 years after release, provided they are used for educational and scholarly purposes only.
- 5) Draft legislation that would restore the deductibility of charitable gifts of nitrate films to encourage donations of these materials to public institutions. (Indeed, a tax credit might encourage more donations, helping to move these vital materials from the private to the public sector.)
- 6) Require copyright applicants to deposit an additional reference copy which, after 25 years, can be circulated to other designated institutions for noncommercial public screening and scholarship.

In my own experience as a researcher, in the U. S. I have seen little of the antagonism between archivists and users which does exist in other countries. Our public and private archives are to be commended for their spirit, as well as for their farsighted realization that preservation is in their own interest.

There are some areas though that can be coordinated and improved only by a central agency with legislative authority and public funding. The Library of Congress and this Board are the best possible agents for this change.

To conclude, I urge you not to neglect the issue of scholarly access when you draft your national plan for preservation.

An early film archivist wrote, "to write film history, one must first see the films." This is partially true. The prints must be saved, but the images on them have little value until the film is seen by a receptive viewer. Only then is the film preserved.

The Collections of the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research

The Center's collections of films comprise some 11,000 titles held as 16mm prints and 3,000 as 35mm prints. The largest holdings were donated by the United Artists company, and consist of the libraries acquired by UA in the 1950s for television screenings, principally films released theatrically from the 1920s through the 1940s by Warner Brothers, RKO and Monogram. The Center has 16mm study prints of nearly all these companies' releases from 1931 to 1949, some 1700 features, 1500 live shorts and 300 animated shorts. Also part of the United Artists collection are 35mm negatives and master prints of the television programs shot on film by ZIV TV from 1948 to 1962, some 38 series and 2,000 programs.

Other important collections are the Rzhnevsky Collection of some 200 35mm prints of Soviet films from the 1950's to the 1970's, in many cases the only prints of these titles in the US; the David Shepard Collection of 16mm prints of 180 features and shorts, mostly from the early years of the cinema; the Shirley Clarke collection, including feature-length films and videos, shorts, and outtakes from produced films and experimental work; the Emile De Antonio collection of viewing prints, outtakes, soundtracks and printing elements for his documentary films; the Lionel Rogosin collection; the Doris Chase collection; the Amos Vogel Cinema 16 series; and the Third World Newsreel series.

The Center also has large holdings of related non-film materials: the business papers of United Artists; scripts and publicity material from Warner Brothers; the papers of many individual film personalities; and some 2 million film stills, including the United Artists key books and original negatives, original Warners negatives, and the Daniel Blum collection of film stills (including large numbers originally held by Photoplay magazine).

Preservation

The Center's collections are for the most part study collections, the prints being of films preserved elsewhere held by the Center for viewing by researchers and scholars on flatbed editing tables on our premises, and occasionally loaned out for exhibition. Our only significant preservation collections are the ZIV TV collection (some 3,500 titles), and our collections of work by independent film-makers Shirley Clarke (12 titles), Doris Chase (35 titles) and Emile De Antonio (10 titles). We have no laboratory facilities and a total full-time staff of three, none of whom are technicians. Nor do we have the resources to pay for large-scale out-of-house preservation efforts.

The Center also attempts to maintain good relations with film collectors in our region, and to persuade those who have unique material to donate it or allow it to be copied by preservation archives. On a number of occasions we have acted as a liaison with the National Center for Film and Video Preservation to ensure that a collection at risk is preserved.

Facilities

All the Center's preservation collections, and most of our other collections, are stored in archival-quality cans in vaults which are environmentally controlled, although we are unable to provide temperature and humidity levels as low as are now recommended.

Information and Access

The Center makes its viewing prints available for private study on the six flatbed editing tables in the archive viewing room. Where agreements with donors permit, films are also occasionally loaned for screenings, in Madison and more rarely to other archives in this country and abroad which are members of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF), or to events which are recognised by FIAF.

The only complete record of the Center's viewing copies is a card catalog in the archive. The Center has received grants from the National Center for Film and Video Preservation's NAMID project to catalog the collections in MARC-compatible format as part of a national moving-image database; electronic catalogs of the Rzhnevsky Collection and the Vitaphone shorts collection are currently

undergoing authority checking with NAMID. The grants from NAMID have enabled us to retain the services of a full-time temporary computer cataloger for this project.

Viewing and loans of Center prints are governed by donor agreements in which, in general, copyright remains with the original copyright holder, but the Center is empowered to allow access to the material for study purposes only. Videotape or film copies of the Center's holdings for any other purpose than viewing in the Center are only made with the express written permission of the donor and the copyright holder or their assignees.