

In Focus: The 21st Century Archive

edited by Eric Schaefer

Introduction: Twenty-five years ago and more anyone doing research in film and television studies found it necessary—almost obligatory—to visit an archive to gain access to material in order to accomplish his or her goals. The routine of writing letters of inquiry, following up with phone calls, and waiting anxiously to find out if the material you wanted was available, and for permission to access it, was a rite that every scholar—from graduate student to much-published professor—went through. We were humble supplicants waiting for admission at the gates of knowledge. And the relationship between archivists, the keepers of those gates, and scholars was often a tense one. Some archivists took their mission to preserve material to extremes, considering scholars or others who wanted to use it not just a burden but also a potential threat. Many scholars had an equally dim view of archivists, one perhaps unfairly shaped by those who helped define the field in its early years: Iris Barry, constructing an unbreachable canon at Museum of Modern Art; Henri Langois, shambling through the streets of Paris juggling film cans, part visionary, part Mad Hatter; James Card, sucking the last breath from Louise Brooks in Rochester. Or they were simply considered the offshoot of an ascetic tribe of librarians who existed only to peer over their spectacles and “shhhhhhhh” scholarship, by thwarting access.

But historian Roy Rosenzweig reminds us “the split of archivists from historians is a relatively recent one.” He notes that early in the past century “historians saw themselves as having a responsibility for preserving as well as researching the past.”¹ Changes that have occurred over the past two decades have tended to mend that split, at least within the field of film and media studies. Jim Collins observed in 1995, “The emergence of new repositories of information such as the computer network and the living room exemplify the widespread reformulation of what constitutes an archive, and just as importantly, what constitutes an archivist.”² From a vantage point of ten years on, we might also say that computer networks and the living room—the DVD players, the collections of audio and moving image material housed there—have also begun to reformulate what constitutes a historian. Minimally, they have altered the relationship between archivists and historians from one—not always, but often—based on tension, suspicion, and mutual misgivings to one of shared purpose, trust, and cooperation. These and other changes constitute the emergence of something new, something we might term the twenty-first century archive.

The twenty-first century archive is marked by a growing professionalism, coupled with energetic outreach and activism. The Association of Moving Image

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Archivists (AMIA), founded in 1991 and already with more than 750 individual members, has encouraged this through its committees and interest groups, as well as its annual conference. From the start, AMIA leaders and membership have recognized the interdependence of archivists and scholars and have worked to build collaborative relationships. This has come in the form of AMIA conference panels, and more recently with AMIA-sponsored panels at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS), and the creation of AMIA's Academic-Archival Interest Group that has labored to foster dialogue and cooperation between its constituent groups. Perhaps the most potent evidence of this collaboration can be seen in the creation of AMIA's semiannual journal, *The Moving Image*, under founding editor Jan-Christopher Horak in 2001. The journal exemplifies collaboration in that it not only deals with technical issues facing archives, ranging from cataloging to storage, but also explores questions regarding the intersection of historiography and archival practice, and publishes scholarship rooted in archival research.

The spirit of cooperation that is a hallmark of the twenty-first century archive can be seen in other places as well. The "Archival News" column in this journal, developed by Brian Taves, was born out of this desire to promote awareness on the part of scholars of newly accessioned collections, preservation initiatives, and improved finding aids—all with the purpose of encouraging original scholarship. The Orphan Film Symposium and the Northeast Historic Film Summer Film Symposium have become models of joint academic/archival endeavor that bring together archivists, scholars, and artists to recognize and celebrate overlooked aspects of our moving image heritage with screenings, presentations, and discussion.³ Such informal links between academics and archivists present a vital model of "grassroots" collaboration, but they should not substitute for more formal connections between AMIA and SCMS. Those are overdue. Moreover, in my view, all media scholars should be members of AMIA, whether they focus on early cinema or the latest digital delivery systems. This is not only because of the excellent resources the organization makes available but also because of the continuing education it provides into the latest development in moving image access and preservation. Conversely, moving image archivists—or certainly more of them—would be well advised to join SCMS in order to monitor trends in scholarship.⁴

The development of the twenty-first century archive is being aided by the creation of programs designed to train a new generation of moving image archivists. Where once people fell into moving image archiving as much through accident as through design, individuals now have the option of choosing it as a career path. The L. Jeffrey Selznick School of Film Preservation at the George Eastman House established in 1996 was the first moving image preservation program in the United States. The UCLA Moving Image Archive Studies Program and the NYU program in Moving Image Archiving and Preservation followed. Other programs exist in Europe, and many library science schools train their students in aspects of non-print materials to a much greater degree than they did in the past. While some archivists have been equally well known for their scholarship, just as some scholars

have been attuned to archival practice, this new brand of archival education is training a generation of archivists who not only are highly skilled in the science of moving image preservation but also are knowledgeable in film and television history. Indeed, many are historians in their own right, and all appear to be highly sensitive to the needs of moving image scholars and the changing shape of the field.

Just as archivists are becoming more attuned to the needs of scholars, media historians are once again embracing their responsibility for preserving the past. This process has been greatly aided by technology. Prior to the rise of home video, only those who were wealthy enough, eccentric enough, or both could afford to amass a film collection, usually on 16 mm. Now, every media scholar possesses a personal collection of material on tape or DVD that they can reach to on a daily basis for teaching and research. And while these formats may not be “archival,” they have made scholars more sensitive to the issues that archivists face on a routine basis: cataloguing, preservation, and copyright, to name just a few.

Mundane technologies such as the photocopier have allowed scholars to build their own paper archives of documents, and the ever-expanding universe of e-commerce has meant that material ranging from original pressbooks to obscure 16 mm films to long-forgotten journals is available to anyone with a credit card, an eBay account, and a degree of patience. A danger in the development of personal archives is that they may so command the interest of individual researchers that those researchers will take for granted “professional” archives, to the detriment of their scholarship and to the archives. The health and viability of archives, especially smaller, specialized collections, is often related to the amount of use they receive. Scholars should feel a professional obligation to patronize them. Archives also welcome the participation of scholars in conversations about what gets collected, as well as what material receives preservation priority.

Of course, it is digital technology that has had the greatest impact on the twenty-first century archive, with both positive and negative implications. DVDs have become some of the most voracious users of archival material for the ubiquitous supplemental “extras” they offer—miniature archives, if you will—that might include script drafts, storyboards, promotional materials, as well as commentaries from creators and critics that range from the informative to the infuriating. Not only can such materials be of use to scholars and film buffs, they also help make the public aware of the role of archives and the importance of preservation. Computers have made restorations that would have been almost impossible in the past a reality. They have also created new opportunities for access and the promotion of archives through the Internet. Many archives, such as the UCLA Film and Television Archive, have created online searchable databases.⁵ This means that scholars no longer have to write letters and then wait weeks or more for replies regarding the availability of materials. The benefit to the scholar is obvious, but in theory these databases should also relieve archive staff of some of the day-to-day burden of fielding inquiries and provide them with more time to concentrate on other tasks. The development of online archival databases has inspired the creation of a

single electronic portal to a variety of resources: MIC (Moving Image Collections). This ambitious project not only serves as a compendium moving image archives and other institutions that hold film, television, and video, it is creating an integrated online union catalogue of moving images. At present there are 14 participating archives, including the Library of Congress, Academic Film Archive of North America, the Pacific Film Archive, the Walter J. Brown Media Archives and Peabody Awards Collection, CNN, and the UCLA Film and Television Archive.⁶ We can hope that more will contribute their records as MIC matures so that one day it will truly offer “one stop shopping” for those searching for archived moving images.

While digital technologies have defined the twenty-first century archive to a great extent, they have also created a whole new set of preservation challenges. Materials that are “born digital”—whether a digital film, an e-mail, or a word-processed memo—are even more evanescent than the nitrate, which we were told “can’t wait,” in the 1980s. Hardware and software become rapidly outdated, making the materials created with them outmoded as well. It is likely that every person reading this article has some file, some document, created on a now-dated software or hardware system that she or he is no longer able to use. This state of affairs will only become more pressing as material moves to Internet sites such as YouTube. A recent article in the *Los Angeles Times* observed, “Much like global warming, the [digital] archive problem emerged suddenly, its effects remain murky and the brunt of its effect will be felt by future generations. The era we are living in could become a gap in history.”⁷ As individuals we must maintain a constant and time-consuming program of “data migration” if we hope to keep the material accessible, and thus useful. Imagine this task a thousandfold, and we can begin to comprehend the challenge that digital materials pose for even the smallest archive.

Fortunately, the twenty-first century archive is being built in an environment in which public awareness about the importance of archival preservation has increased. This has been fostered by high-profile film restorations and by such efforts as the National Film Registry, the annual selection of 25 “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant films” begun in 1989 by the Librarian of Congress. Still, funding for preservation and restoration remains at a premium. The grants provided by the National Film Preservation Foundation (NFPF), established by Congress in 1996, have made a difference in supporting the preservation of films that “would be unlikely to survive without public support.”⁸ Even with the availability of NFPF funding and other grants, archives still require a trained staff and the time to write grant proposals, and they need to have engaged in sufficient strategic planning to determine which of their holdings are in most need of preservation and combine historic/cultural worth, potential for scholarly interest, and so on. All of this simply highlights the increasingly decisive role archives play in determining how film and television history are written through decisions made about what is collected and preserved, a point that is often overlooked (or at least insufficiently acknowledged) by scholars.

This "In Focus" brings together six of the architects of the twenty-first century archive, individuals who blur the boundaries between archivists, scholars, and activists. Rick Prelinger put "ephemeral" films on the map during the 1980s when most scholars were still focused on the products of the large-scale moving image industries in the United States and other countries. He weighs in on access and copyright, and how, despite advances, these issues continue to hamstring progress in scholarship and archival practice. Karan Sheldon, the cofounder of Northeast Historic Film, one of the leading regional film archives in North America, discusses the emergence of such archives that are increasingly the wellspring of cutting edge scholarship. The awareness of orphan films has transformed moving image archives and historiography in the past decade, and Dan Streible, the spokesman of the orphan movement, surveys this paradigm shift. Margaret Compton of the Walter J. Brown Media Archives and Peabody Awards Collection discusses the unique challenges that face television archives in a period of rapid technological change. Specialized archives increasingly command the attention of scholars, and Lynne Kirste, of the Academy Film Archive, looks at the development of collections devoted to the Lesbian, Gay, Bi, and Transgendered (LGBT) community. Finally, Mike Mashon of the Library of Congress outlines the monumental efforts that the LC is undertaking to store and improve access to its massive collection.

The twenty-first century archive promises to be an exciting and dynamic place. It is a universe that is simultaneously expanding and contracting: expanding, as more material is collected and as outreach increases through the Internet; contracting, as it focuses on more "local" and specialized collections that in the past might have been ignored. It is increasingly professional, and it is marked by a growing cooperation between archivists and scholars who have come to recognize their shared interests and interdependence. Every media studies professional has an investment in the twenty-first century archive because, ultimately, it will shape the field of cinema and media studies for decades to come.

Notes

1. Roy Rosenzweig, "Scarcity or Abundance? Preserving the Past in a Digital Era," *The American Historical Review* 108, no. 3, <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/108.3/rosenzweig.html> (accessed April 25, 2006).
2. Jim Collins, *Architectures of Excess: Cultural Life in the Information Age* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 25.
3. The Orphan Film Symposium was inaugurated in 1999, and the NHF Summer Film Symposium started the following year. Both continue to thrive.
4. AMIA's Web site, accessible at <http://www.amianet.org>, offers a number of useful features for members and nonmembers alike, including links to archives, reports, and other resources. The organization's listserv at <http://www.amianet.org/amial/amial.html> is a valuable forum that provides a space for the exchange of information, ideas, and advice.
5. The UCLA Film and Television Archive databases can be accessed at <http://www.cinema.ucla.edu/access/databases.html>.
6. The main MIC portal is located at <http://mic.loc.gov>.

7. Charles Piller, "Unable to Repeat the Past," *Los Angeles Times*, September 13, 2006, A 1.
8. "About the NFPF," <http://www.filmpreservation.org/> (accessed October 17, 2006).

Archives and Access in the 21st Century



by Rick Prelinger

Some 30 years ago moving image archives began migrating from the fringes of media culture towards the center. For some (but not all) collections, mainstreaming has brought wealth and fame, visibility and allure. Scholarly work built on the archival record is increasing, mass media is redolent with archival images and sounds, and a growing number of "archives fans" regard once-obscure repositories as exciting, relevant, and culturally hip institutions. But while the archival hour may be at hand, the sustainability and survival of archival institutions are far from certain. The reasons are both extrinsic and intrinsic to archives. Many institutions sequester their holdings behind walls of copyright, policy, or indifference, rendering them inaccessible to many. Quick Web searches are replacing deep archival research, and most archival materials are not online. Copyright maximalism, a reluctance to embrace technology, and resistance to providing public access are marginalizing moving image archives at the very moment when they might otherwise be addressing massive new audiences and building new constituencies.

What is it about moving images that problematizes archival practice? How can we turn risks into opportunities in the twenty-first century archives? How can archivists embrace new public roles and put the stereotype of the reclusive, dust-covered repository to rest? And how can scholars, the canonical beneficiaries of archives, help them to reconcile legacy practices and new cultural functions?

While the "classical" moving image archives may have theoretically accepted the indivisibility of its two primary missions, preservation and access, archivists tended to privilege preservation. This was perfectly logical. For moving image archives, access has always been a sticky door. Free and open access was potentially against the law (for certain copyrighted materials) and insupportably expensive (when staffing was short, budgets inadequate, or equipment lacking). Allowing access to formerly private collections contravened contracts (if donor restrictions governed). Many moving image archives held materials covertly, without explicit authorization, again making access to materials risky.

In fact, excepting a few exemplary institutions, access to most moving image collections is still minimal. As many scholars know, archival access requires viewing a film on the premises, using special flatbed editing tables on which fast forward has been disabled, with five days' notice to pull material. Access is often restricted