

Traditional Film Projection in a Digital Age

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Open Forum

Apport de l'auteur à l'atelier du 8 juin 2005 de la Commission technique de la FIAF, le texte utilise comme point de départ l'article de José Manuel Costa (dans le *Journal of Film Preservation* de décembre 2004) qui déjà signalait l'étroite relation qui lie désormais l'évolution technologique et la politique des archives du film. Pour Meyer, l'identité des archives du film, voire même leur survie, va devoir beaucoup à l'usage qu'elles vont faire des technologies, anciennes et nouvelles. Mais il faut d'abord faire face à une question préalable : « Qu'est-ce que le film? », « Qu'est-ce que le cinéma? »

Ce débat, en plus d'être crucial, est urgent : les technologies numériques vont bientôt surclasser les technologies analogiques. Tout le paysage va changer. Comment réagiront alors les archives du film? Quelles actions choisiront-elles? Et les archives du film doivent réagir rapidement, sinon elles risquent de devenir de simples fournisseurs de contenu. Ce sont nos politiques d'acquisition, de collection, d'accès et de programmation qui doivent être réévaluées à la lumière de ces changements technologiques. Il y a un enjeu esthétique en cette

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In the *Journal of Film Preservation* of December 2004 José Manuel Costa underlined that the discussion about the identity of film archives will be crucial in the coming years. One of the important aspects of his article is that Costa demonstrates that technology and archive policy have become very strongly interrelated. And indeed, although this is a seminar organized by the Technical Committee of FIAF, the debate we have today is crucial for the future of film archives. The way archives will use old and new technologies will be crucial for their identity, and their ability to survive. But identity is not solely dependent on technology. The fundamental question "what is film?" or "what is cinema?" precedes the technological issues. This basic question is relatively new, arising from the archive situation of today. For many decades there has of course been a certain understanding of what film is, if only because film was made of celluloid, and archive policy was based on the assumption of this certain understanding about what film is. And technology? Technology was something behind the scenes. Of course, you had good prints and bad prints, good duplications and bad duplications. *Quality* was the buzzword in our technical activities – but it was hardly correlated with political choices with regard to an archive's identity.

Urgency

Our discussion today is not only crucial, but urgent, since digital technologies will be dominant over analog technologies within a few years, and then the whole landscape will alter. How will archives act and react?

In recent years, there has been a clear shift in the discussion about photochemical and electronic technologies, and in particular about analog and digital technologies. For a long time these discussions were dominated by normative criteria: photochemical analog film was simply better than anything else. But now that new technologies have overcome their initial shortcomings, the perspective of discussion alters completely, and many like to think that digital technologies will take over completely. Well, they may be right, but it is exactly here where the particular responsibilities of film archives come in. Archives have to react quickly, or they will soon become the victims of the new technologies and become mere suppliers of content. Film archives must not become crypts of celluloid. The new technologies urge archives to review the old concepts of collection policy, preservation, access, and programming. They have to serve the old and the new. They have to respect the past, but also have to stand with one foot in the world of

affaire. Si on se reporte à l'histoire des divers procédés de couleur au cinéma, ne pourrions-nous pas considérer le numérique comme une nouvelle émulsion? Mais cette nouvelle émulsion créera inévitablement un nouveau langage visuel. D'où la question cruciale : «Ne doit-on pas présenter les films dans leur *format* (au sens de caractéristiques esthétiques) d'origine? » *Ossessione* en numérique aura-t-il la même allure? Sera-t-il perçu de la même manière? Et si un grand studio décide de restaurer et de diffuser un film, *Casablanca* par exemple, uniquement sur support numérique... Alors ce sont les archives du film qu'il faudra blâmer pour avoir laissé disparaître chez les spectateurs la capacité d'apprécier les qualités proprement cinématographiques d'une telle œuvre. Dans un musée du cinéma, même si le numérique est la technologie dominante, il faudra pouvoir voir *Ossessione* et *Casablanca* sur film!

Il y a aussi un enjeu éthique. À cause de la nature même du cinéma, la projection sur écran constitue une dimension essentielle dans l'existence d'un film : la projection, c'est la perception. La projection numérique essaie d'imiter la projection cinématographique traditionnelle, mais nous savons tous que les qualités esthétiques propres au cinéma ne peuvent pas être copiées.

Pour l'auteur, il n'y a pas de doute : la nouvelle identité des cinémathèques est muséale. Les archives du film sont des musées qui doivent recréer les conditions de perception et de fréquentation du cinéma telles qu'envisagées à l'origine. Et les archives du film doivent prendre leur rôle de musée au sérieux! Elles doivent intégrer à leur travail les technologies nouvelles tout en prenant grand soin des technologies anciennes.

La projection des films sur grand écran avec l'équipement traditionnel fait partie de la fonction muséale des archives du film, et cette fonction muséale est la base même de leur identité future.

today, and be able to cope with new productions, new demands, new audiences.

It is very encouraging that the FIAF Commission for Programming and Access to Collections has just completed the *Advanced Manual of Film Projection*, which has as one of its objectives to maintain the projection of analog photographic film in a digital environment. I don't see this as just a practical challenge, but as a curatorial obligation of a film museum. I see film archives as the museums of film culture, not as libraries of moving images. I am very sympathetic to the concept of Langlois, cited by José Manuel Costa, which refers to a history of cinema of 300 years. Indeed, there is cinema before 1895, and there will be cinema after 2095. The great advantage that film archives have is that their collections reflect a large part of film history from 1895 up to today, and that these films are a perfect reference of what film is. In the confusing situation of today's world, the film history of the last 110 years is an excellent reference point for film museums to develop new policies without losing their identity, since their identity is rooted in this 110 years of cinematography.

My contribution to this discussion is about ethics and aesthetics, two domains of philosophical reflection that previously may not have been very prevalent in the film archive community, but which have become increasingly important in the last 15 years or so, in particular with regard to preservation practice and the innovation of duplication technologies, both analog and digital.

Aesthetics

Film history is a long sequence of new inventions, new technologies. There have been countless attempts to invent color in film, countless efforts to add sound to film, or to invent different film and projection formats. "Film" as an invariable entity has never existed. And every innovation, every new technology, also brought its own aesthetics, new forms of expression, new forms of addressing the audience, new forms of representation and storytelling. The saturation of certain colors, the grain structure of the emulsion, the contrast range of a particular film stock, etc. – all these characteristics were often consciously used by directors and cinematographers to obtain a certain effect. In this perspective, "Digital" is just a new emulsion. And this new emulsion will also create a new visual language. Here lies the critical factor for film archives. Must films not be presented in the format – i.e., the aesthetic framework – in which they were originally intended? Will the "look and feel" of *Ossessione* not change in digital projection? Of course, in our present time, when audiences are getting used to DVD quality, and digital cinema at home, they probably wouldn't bother to think about digital projection in a film museum. But this is a tendency that we should strongly oppose. In this context, I think it is very serious that some major studios intend to restore and release their films only in a digital format. If *Casablanca* is available in the future only in a digital format, archives are to blame if the cinematographic appreciation of this film disappears.

Note that I'm not saying that digital is taboo. First, the cinema is definitely going digital, and digital-born film production should find a place in film archives. And secondly, digital means can be a valuable

Se trata de un aporte al taller del 8 de junio de 2005 de la Comisión técnica de la FIAF, que toma como punto de partida el texto de José Manuel Costa (véase *Journal of Film Preservation* de diciembre de 2004); se señalaba en él la estrecha relación que vincula actualmente la evolución tecnológica y la política de los archivos de cine. Según Meyer, la identidad e incluso la supervivencia misma de los archivos dependerán en su mayor medida del uso que hagan de las tecnologías, tradicionales y recientes. Antes de ello, es necesario dejar asentadas algunas premisas: «¿Qué es la película?», «¿Qué es el cine?».

El debate, además de ser crucial, se ha vuelto urgente: en poco tiempo, las tecnologías digitales van a superar las tecnologías analógicas. De resultas, el panorama va a cambiar por entero. ¿Cómo se comportarán entonces los archivos de cine? ¿Qué iniciativas tomarán? Es sumamente urgente que los archivos adopten medidas, pues, de lo contrario, corren el riesgo de convertirse en simples proveedores de contenidos. Es indispensable volver a evaluar nuestras políticas de adquisición, colección, acceso y programación a partir de los cambios tecnológicos.

Se juega también en ello una opción estética. Si hiciéramos referencia a los distintos procedimientos de color en el cine, ¿no podríamos considerar lo digital como una nueva emulsión? Y a su vez, la nueva emulsión creará, inevitablemente, un nuevo lenguaje visual; se plantea entonces la pregunta crucial: «¿No tenemos acaso el deber de presentar las películas en su *formato* original, en el sentido de sus características estéticas?»

Ossessione digitalizada, ¿conserva el mismo aspecto?, ¿se percibe de la misma manera? ¿Y si un gran estudio decidiera restaurar una película, como por ejemplo *Casablanca*, exclusivamente en soporte digital...? En ese, caso los archivos de cine serían responsables de que los espectadores perdieran la capacidad de apreciar las cualidades estrictamente cinematográficas de las obras. Aunque predomine la tecnología digital, debería ser posible ver en un museo del cine *Ossessione* y *Casablanca* en película.

instrument in restoration processes. We all know how problematic film duplication is, and we have all been struggling with film stocks that are very different from what we wanted. I know, a digital intermediate process could overcome part of these problems. But I think we should go back to the appreciation of cinema as it was intended as much as possible – this means that in a film museum you should be able to see *Ossessione* and *Casablanca* as film. And moreover, we are not only speaking about “old” films. Films are still being made today, and some directors choose very consciously to use film, sometimes even Super8. It is these films in particular, which are not yet necessarily subject to any imperfect restoration or duplication process, that we want to be able to project as film in 50 years or so. Any other format is just a high-standard form of access, of presenting content.



Ingrid Bergman and Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca* by Michael Curtiz, 1942

Ethics

Cinematic appreciation is strongly related to the ontology of film. “What is Film?” Film is essentially a series of photographs (or animated pictures, if you want) that have a direct reference to the filmed object. And these series of photographs create an illusion of movement in projection. The projection is essential in bringing film to life. It is the projection that constitutes the perception. When film museums and film archives take their task seriously they try to maintain this fundamental condition, which creates the cinematic appreciation of film. Of course “perception” is a difficult topic, and it is evident that digital projection techniques try to emulate traditional projection techniques. This is largely due to the fact that film and photography are considered as the reproducible arts *par excellence*. As I see it, this is

Va en ello también una opción ética. Por la naturaleza misma del cine, la proyección sobre pantalla constituye una dimensión esencial de la existencia de una película: la proyección es la percepción. La proyección digital se esfuerza por imitar la proyección cinematográfica tradicional, pero bien sabemos que las cualidades estéticas propias del cine no pueden ser copiadas.

El autor no tiene dudas: la nueva identidad de las cinematecas es museal. Los archivos de cine son museos y, por lo tanto, tienen que volver a crear las condiciones de percepción y frecuentación del cine según habían sido concebidas en sus orígenes. Los archivos de cine tienen la obligación de asumir seriamente su papel museal, integrando en su trabajo las nuevas tecnologías, conservando con todo esmero, al mismo tiempo, las tecnologías del pasado.

La proyección de películas en la pantalla grande según los medios tradicionales forma parte de la función museal de los archivos de cine y ésta es, en sentido estricto, la base de su identidad futura.



Osessione by Luchino Visconti, 1943

one of the biggest misconceptions of the 20th century. Content is something you can easily duplicate, the narrative of a film may not be dependent on its presentation format, but as soon as the specific aesthetic qualities of a film come into sight, we all know that these are almost impossible to duplicate. This implies that the whole concept of film preservation through duplication is a very problematic one. It seems that it is generally accepted that film restoration is at best a simulation of the original. But in my opinion simulation is already too much water in the wine, and we should be more conscious about what we lose.

Again, the digital intermediate process can be very helpful to get better results, but it will remain different from the original. It is this respect for the original which I consider as one of the most valuable developments in the archive community in recent years, and I would really regret if this gets lost because of pragmatic solutions. For instance, the database of film stocks that Alfonso del Amo is working on is of inestimable importance, because that information is conditional if you want to understand what the specific characteristics of an original are.

In my opinion, the new identity of cinemateques is a museological one, not just presenting content, not just historiographic, not just an institution that describes film history and provides visitors with appropriate illustrations. Film archives are museums that can recreate the perception and the appreciation of cinema as it was intended. I think film archives should take their museological function seriously. They should embrace the new technologies, but also cherish the old

techniques. The prospect of a heritage of 300 years of film history means we should know where it came from, how it originated, what scientific projects caused the invention of photography and film.

The projection of film in a traditional way is part of this museological function, and this museological function is the essence of our future identity. Of course, the cinema of the future also belongs to this identity, but archives should adapt their policies and preserve, collect, and present both photochemical films and digital films, and they must deal with "electronic emulsions" as respectfully as photochemical emulsions. But it is a mistake to replace analog film with its digital duplicate, simply for pragmatic or economical reasons, or the dominance of digital technology. In the film museum of the future, analog and digital will exist side by side. And even when the whole

cinematographic world has become digital, it will be characteristic for a film museum's identity that it is still the place where you can see that masterpiece of the 20th century in analog traditional film projection.