

Managing a collection

- issues of selection and transmission

GABRIELLE CLAES

The Royal Film Archive film collection:
47.726 film titles
107.815 film materials:
6300 nitrate materials (4.800 positives
+ 1.500 negatives)
12.080 acetate negative materials
89.435 acetate positive prints
Belgian collection: 8815 titles

Table 1.

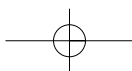
The Royal Film Archive was established in 1938, and we clearly have a “Langlois” inspiration. The founders of our archive were film buffs, and their concern was to collect precious works of film history threatened by destruction, and to show them to a public who shared their passion. Jacques Ledoux, who became by the end of the forties the real driving force of the Belgian film archive, tried to combine the disorderly film passion of Langlois with the concern for rigorous conservation of Ernst Lindgren, founder of the British national archives. For the latter, we know that conservation and preservation of films were more urgent than showing them. But in Brussels the “Langlois” inspiration remained, to the extent that Ledoux refused to make any selection while collecting films. Each film saved from destruction represented a victory on its own, regardless of the quality of the work.

Today we hold in Brussels a total amount of 107.815 different film elements, corresponding to 47.726 titles. This collection increases with an average of 3000 elements per year. To me, these figures evoke an idea of accumulation, of quantity, and it is this notion of *quantity* I would like to bring to attention.

Concretely, what exactly is the reality behind those figures? I do not wish to expand here particularly upon the nature of the materials (negative, positive, black and white, colour, acetate, nitrate etc.), but rather upon the nature of the film works. I have to clarify immediately that it is a collection with a mainly international scope: Belgian film production is modest, and represents less than 20% of the titles we hold (8815 titles out of 47.726).

Which types of films are hidden behind those figures? About half (approximately 25.000 titles) are full-length fiction films. The other half is “the rest”. I intentionally use this vague and somewhat dismissive word of “rest”, because it’s a part which is important in quantity, but which we know very badly, and which we hardly make use of. Of course, an inventory has been made. The titles, the directors, the country and year of their production, the number of prints, their state, duration, and of course the place where they are lodged in our warehouse, all this we know. But the works hidden behind these titles remain practically unknown to us.

The first half, the full-length fiction films, is much more familiar to us, even if the inventories are not detailed, because we can find the titles in the film bibliographies. Of this half of the collection, we know the dominant points; the weak ones, the gaps, and we make constant use of it in the programmes we compose. About 2000 films





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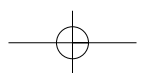
PRESERVE THEN SHOW / DANISH FILM INSTITUTE / SIDE 181

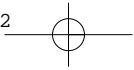


'Ca c'est Bruxelles' (Francis Martin, 1927).



Le mariage du Prince Léopold avec la Princesse Astrid' (anonymous, 1926)





are screened every year in our two theatres in the Film Museum, and we contribute by way of external loans more than 3000 films for Belgian or foreign cultural events.

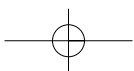
THE “REST”

The “rest” mainly consists of short films: documentaries, educational films, enterprise films, newsreels, animation, trailers, some commercial films etc. We do not have many sources to hold on to, since for a large part bibliographies do not exist, and the required expertise is radically different. Of course not in terms of conservation: these films are preserved in the same locations, mixed with the collection of the full-length fiction films. But certainly in terms of their cataloguing, their restoration and use - where the required criteria refer to other domains of knowledge than the strict film history.

How do we make use of such a collection? How can we show those films? On this level also, the answers are radically different. As already mentioned, our own programmes are based upon the collection of full-length fiction films. Facing the quantity of available films (I remind you that we hold about 25.000 titles), the first task of the programmer is to make a selection. Following the Langlois and Ledoux tradition, we still do not select while collecting, but programming is a selective process by definition. We put in order, classify, make retrospectives, and the same classics come back. In other words; we make use of only a reduced part of the total collection. Presenting some 2000 titles a year, all we do is to read and reread the canonical film history. There is a kind of contradiction here which always puzzles me: Collecting and trying to preserve “everything”, but showing only selective parts of this in some ways aleatory collection.



Stoeten en feestelijkheden'
(anonymous, 1924)





Concerning the other half of the collection - the "rest" - we need other criteria and other systems to make use of them. Another kind of expertise is required, different from the one that the programmers of the cinematheques and other cultural institutions that use our collections usually have.

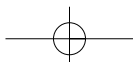
Of course there are other ways to make use of these kinds of films; TV programmes and documentaries based on archive material are actually one of the most evident possibilities ... if we can cross the threshold of copyright. I will not repeat here the unending story, which historically opposes film archivists to rights-holders, but it must be emphasised that among the non-fiction films, there are many works for which we cannot trace the right-holders. In other words: it has become impossible to make use of them. This is one of the most frustrating aspects of our daily work. We receive inquiries from TV-channels looking for images linked to a specific topic, period or event. We sometimes identify corresponding images in our non-fiction collection, and then finally we are not able to resolve the question of copyright. So film archives find themselves in the absurd position, difficult to defend politically, of investing public money in conservation or even restoration of films, which are finally blocked for copyright reasons.

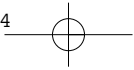
SAVING FROM OBLIVION

But legal blockades are only one of the obstacles to the main issue of transmission. Let us be blunt: today many films (fiction or non-fiction) are not seen because people are not interested in seeing them. In our film archive this is the central issue we are dealing with today. In the first period of our history, it was our main concern to collect



Stoeten en feestelijkheden
(anonymous, 1924)





as many films as possible, trying to save them from destruction and degradation. Today we have to save them from oblivion. This is to me the new mission of the film archives. After the collecting and conservation work, we must focus on keeping the film memory alive. In Brussels, and everywhere in the world, we find the same symptom; more and more films remain unseen. Young people in particular seem to be reluctant to watch “old films”. The term “old films” inherently says a lot about this question.

Who still believes that the theatres of the film archives can take up this challenge on their own? If the “old films” have a future, I think it is no longer in the cinematheques that it will be found. We must reach out to the new audience now turning away from us. We must do so by using their own channels and media. The film archives are all attached to film stock, and we know that despite its weaknesses, it is this film stock which today offers the best conservation guarantees. But the point is to display the cinematographic memory. The ways we have of doing this may be diverse. Why not DVD? Why not thematic TV channels? Why not the Internet? As long as ethical rules are respected there should be no confusion possible with the “real thing”. At the same time, in the shadows of the film archive warehouses, we will conserve the material on film, which remains the best basis for the transfer of old films to today’s media.

ACCUMULATION AND QUALITY - THE ISSUE OF SELECTION

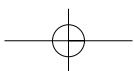
I said I would question the notion of accumulation and quantity. We will have to reconsider fundamentally the non-selective collection of films that has so far dictated our policy.

To conserve *all* films - all the films we have been able to collect through 65 years of work - is an intolerable rule. Intolerable in terms of passive conservation: the nitrate continues to degrade, the acetate is suffering from the vinegar syndrome, the colours are fading. Intolerable in terms of restoration; always too slow and necessarily selective. A selection determined mainly by the chemical state of the films, by priorities given to the national production, by demands of the programmers, and by the rarity of the works. Intolerable also in terms of transmission. How can we escape the arbitrary and restrictive classifications of the film programmes? Between complete tributes and limited “best ofs”, how can we keep alive the memory of cinema?

Faced with this huge material and intellectual film heritage, which does not stop growing, we must tackle the issue of selection. Selecting the materials while better preserving the works, selecting in order to transmit.

Selecting the materials

As Table 1 shows, we hold 107,815 elements for 47,726 titles. This means that we have more than twice as many materials as we have works. As I have already mentioned: less than 20% of our collection concerns a national production scarcely distributed abroad. In other words, more than 80% of our collection consists of non-national works most of which can also be found in the collections of other film archives, in Europe and overseas. Must this overlapping of the collections not be





identified as precisely as possible? It goes without saying that this has to be done on an international level. In the context of the EU, a project for a trans-national register of cinema works is currently being studied. The authors are in favour, while the producers are opposed. If such a register is to come about it will certainly help us in the identification of the rights-holders of the works we have preserved. Would it not be useful to join to it a European (in anticipation of an international) database of the materials, based on the actual inventories of the film archives? This is an enormous task, but it is indispensable if we want to know how many different elements exist of a specific film, where exactly they are kept and which are in the best condition. This database would help to avoid useless restorations and re-restorations, thus enabling the archives to concentrate on the "best existing material" for all the film preservation and restoration efforts, and possibly a future digitisation.

The theatres of the film archives must continue to exist in order to project, in the cinematographic meaning of the word, film history. But other presentation media must complete this archetype. The archives must in the future select and diversify the transmission media in order to better present and keep alive the 'rest' of their holdings, which do not fit programmes of the cinematheques.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, I want to link two apparently separate issues in film archiving: selection and transmission. The selection of the best materials for better conservation - by studying and working out the overlapping parts of the many film archive collections through a central database of our different holdings. And selection in the transmission process - each film work finding its adequate form of presentation in film theatres, art museums or on new media. This way each film work may live and find its optimal form and audience.

