

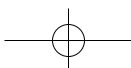
## FILM AS AN ART OBJECT

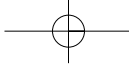
PAOLO CHERCHI USAI

Does the date of February 12, 2109 mean anything to you? It doesn't look like an important one right now; it would barely draw the attention of those citizens of the United States who care about anniversaries and American history. Even fewer people would care about making a trip to the Oakridge Cemetery in Springfield, Illinois, either now or in 2109. What's so special about this date, anyway? And why, of all places, should we go see a cemetery in Illinois? Some background information is needed in order to answer the question. In the summer of 1922, the Rockett-Lincoln Company of Hollywood had announced that a biopic titled "The Life of Abraham Lincoln" was about to go into production, starring Nell Craig, Homer Willits and George A. Billings in the title role. There was nothing remarkable about the press release, except for one extraordinary detail. The producers "had offered to the United States government a copy of their picture... with the proviso that it be kept sealed until the three hundredth anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln, or until February 12, 2109. For the first time in history, and more particularly in the history of the screen, a great art work is deliberately to be handed down to posterity with the purpose of perpetuating an art, a story, an illustrious name and a true picture in living scenes of one of the most crucial periods in the history and the evolution of the race."

The film was supposed to be entrusted to the National Lincoln Memorial Commission for deposit at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, DC. From all available evidence, it wasn't just a publicity stunt. Al Rockett and his brother Ray were so serious about it that they had already devised an alternate plan, "in case any obstacle" would arise "to prevent the acceptance of the film by the United States Government". That's where the Lincoln Monument comes into the picture: if bureaucracy was to become a nuisance, the film would be deposited at the Lincoln Monument in Oakridge Cemetery, where a very special kind of film archive would be built for the sake of posterity. Evidence of the project can be found in an article published in the October 1922 issue of *The American Cinematographer*:

The fifteen reels of film, together with a modern projecting machine, with full instructions [on] how to operate it, will be sealed in a steel vault, specially constructed to preserve the film and machine in perfect working order and with these will be deposited a copy of the working script of the picture and a few copies of the best books on motion picture production and practice. The idea back to this (sic) is that in the one hundred and eighty-six years to lapse between 1923 and 2109, tremendous changes will take place in motion picture production and exhibition and the donors of the Lincoln picture will take every precaution to insure the proper exhibition of their picture in 2109.





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PRESERVE THEN SHOW / DANISH FILM INSTITUTE / SIDE 23

Film experts have expressed the opinion that the film should keep "alive" -- that is, that both the film itself and the emulsion should not in any way deteriorate, but to make sure, the company has put the matter up to Alfred B. Hitchins, director of the Ansco Research Laboratories at Binghamton, New York, one of the greatest film experts in the world, and Dr. Hitchins' judgment will be accepted as final.<sup>1</sup>

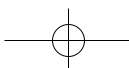
The film referred to by Mr. Hitchins was actually made and released. Phil Rosen directed it, Frances Marion wrote the script. It was premiered in New York on January 21, 1924 under the title "The Dramatic Life of Abraham Lincoln" and then released as *Abraham Lincoln*. Along with a shorter title, the film also became shorter, 11,380 feet in twelve reels. No print of this *Abraham Lincoln*, presented seven years before D.W. Griffith's film by the same title, is known to survive. There's nothing at the Smithsonian Institution, where they don't keep film anyway (the Library of Congress and the National Archives and Records Administration already do so in Washington, D.C. on behalf of the United States government). Perhaps there is a copy of the fifteen-reel, uncut version of the film at Oakridge Cemetery? It is doubtful that the film was a masterpiece; nevertheless, being able to locate it in the time capsule described by *The American Cinematographer* would be an exceptional event in the history of film preservation; and we would certainly leave the film where it is (it was suggested in 1922 that "it would be wise to open up the vault at say twenty-five-year periods and have the acknowledged expert at that particular time make an inspection of the film", so we're not spoiling the grand opening of 2109 after all). The suggestion came from Dr. Hitchins himself, who wrote a long letter describing the recommended course of action to be taken for long-term preservation:

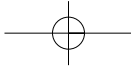
... you must be sure that the celluloid base on which the film has been coated is in absolutely perfect condition, thoroughly cured and at the same time flexible. The reels should be wrapped separately in several layers of absolutely chemically pure paper before placing them in the cans, so that no metal is at any time in actual contact with the film. The photographic processes must also be very carefully carried out. The film must be very thoroughly fixed and washed. The atmospheric conditions that prevail in the vault will also have the same effect upon keeping qualities. Too much moisture will, of course, be dangerous, but on the other hand the vault should not be bone dry.

... I firmly believe, providing every precaution is taken from the photographic processes through to the final packing, that the film will keep in good condition for the period mentioned. It is, of course, impossible to foretell what may happen to the celluloid base.

Supposing the film should happen to be coated in some base which is slightly acid [*sic*], then there is a likelihood of the celluloid base decomposing or breaking up, so that for a thing of national importance, such as you propose, the utmost care should be taken at every stage to insure the most perfect condition of the finished reels.

In storing for so long a period it is necessary that the wrapping paper should



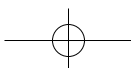


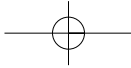
be pure, free from sulphur and other chemicals; that the film should not come in contact with any metal or rubber, particularly vulcanized rubber, and I do not think that any form of adhesive tape or sticker should be used in fastening the paper wrapping.

“With reference to the projector which you also propose to put in the vault, I should think it might be a good idea to use a good celluloid lacquer on all the bright and working parts of the machine. (This lacquer would have to be cleaned off before operating.) Here again this lacquer would have to be free from acid reaction. The books which you propose to put in should really be printed on something a little better than the usual book paper, in fact, they should be printed on all-rag stock, as most of the present-day book papers which contain considerable amounts of sulphite and wood pulp will develop acidity and become reduced almost to a powder in that period of time.

Less than thirty years later, in February 1951, the Eastman Kodak Company announced that its manufacturing plants had discontinued production of nitrate cellulose film, and had begun using triacetate as the only base for photographic motion pictures from then on. Half a century after the event, little has been said or written about the significance of this technological shift for the history of visual culture; compared to the so-called “digital revolution” and its promise of a Brave New World of the moving image, its consequences were barely detectable by the public of the time, and taken for granted by the exhibitors. Nitrate burns, acetate doesn’t: was that the only reason? To what extent did audiences really care about the difference between the two carriers? If they didn’t, how about the preservationists? There were some film archives in 1951, trying to rescue the film heritage from oblivion amidst institutional (and governmental) indifference, but it’s quite hard to find a single instance in their internal correspondence of curatorial mourning, a word of regret, the hint of a doubt that something important was about to be lost forever. Nothing of the sort seems to have happened. The demise of nitrate was nothing but a piece of good news, acknowledged either with relief (no more fires) or with sheer enthusiasm (no more decomposition). It is not surprising that in the year 2000, when a number of nitrate prints from the archives were screened at the National Film Theatre for the annual meeting of the International Federation of Film Archives, the title given to the program was “The Last Nitrate Picture Show”: it probably wasn’t the last one (more events of this kind will probably be organized for a while), but the era of nitrate had been categorized as such because it was evidently over, the only difference between now and then being that there is now a minority of specialists who would openly recognize the extent of the loss, and in 1951 there wasn’t one.

The case of the Oakridge vaults is far from being an isolated occurrence (there are well over a thousand websites dedicated to the dreams and utopias of time capsules all over the world), but the question of whether or not the steel vaults were actually built, and whether or not we should go there, open them and see what’s inside, requires some understanding of our motivations for doing so. Those who conceived the project in 1922 had no doubt that their technology would no longer exist in 2109; what they couldn’t imagine, though, was that colleagues in their field would actually be

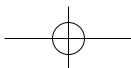


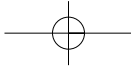


unequivocally pleased by the change. They would have been even more surprised to learn that their successors were about to apply the term “ethics” to a set of archival practices whose criteria are determined by economic variables rather than by moral imperatives.

The “ethics of film restoration” is not only a concept. It is mainly a useful and yet incomplete catchphrase, a formula whose considerable success among archivists and museum curators has contributed to a substantial advancement in the field, both in terms of scholarly output and actual restoration work. The term “ethics” is also a more intimidating way of saying “it’s meaningful”, a very convincing and vaguely threatening argument promoted by specialists in order to persuade non-specialists that restoring films is, indeed, a serious business. While “the importance of film restoration” has few chances to impress the public, “ethics” has a more enduring resonance, and its implications are more difficult to ignore. Being “unethical” in the pursuit of a cultural mission is not a desirable goal; therefore, applying “virtue” to its fulfillment gives any profession an aura of legitimacy, the feeling that its implementation is something more than a routine assignment. Excellence is ethical; mediocrity is dishonest.

In the language of moving image archives and museums, ethical behavior has been defined in a preliminary set of principles: make sure that any decision taken in the preservation process is reversible; in doing so, prevent further deterioration or alteration of the original artifact; keep a detailed record of what has been done; do not destroy the original after the project is complete. What all these precepts have in common is that they apply to only one phase of the business, the alleged “restoration” a moving image (hence its advertising formula, “the ethics of film restoration”); that is, to the culminating point of a process involving a much wider and rather unwelcome spectrum of apparently unethical actions such as *lying, cheating, stealing, and pretending*. When exhibiting the results of our work, we *lie* by implying that what is being projected on a large screen is the “restored” film, thus making audiences believe that the film was originally seen as they see it today; we have now managed to exercise some caution by correcting our claim, and point out that what is being seen comes as close as possible to the film in its original form, without really saying much about what “as close as possible” actually means, and by suggesting that we know what the “original form” was – how the color looked, what the texture of the emulsion was, how a certain light source reflected on a certain kind of screen affected the viewing experience of people who were offered a certain kind of architectural environment – all things that are by and large unknown or inaccessible to us. We are *cheating* for reasons of *force majeure* by preserving a film on a carrier which is different from what it was when the film had first been screened, by contenting ourselves with its reproduction on a film stock where the emulsion looks “more or less” like a more ancient one, its color-sensitive layers produce a chromatic effect which is “more or less” like tinting, toning, or dye-transfer Technicolor, and a variable area soundtrack provides “more or less” the same kind of aural perception granted to spectators who only heard music and spoken words through a variable density playback system. In doing so, we are *stealing* theoretical principles and operating procedures from aesthetic values which belong to completely different and sometimes unrelated



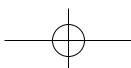


disciplines: envious as we are of what museum practice has accomplished in the fine arts, we borrow their terminology and merge their analytical framework into our own; in the worst case scenario, we simply repeat what we have learned in school and extend to the moving image the specificity of the literary text (hence the pretentious label of “philological reconstruction” frequently applied to film as a reincarnation of the written word), thus reducing the moving image itself to a visual rendition of the printed page, with an ill-concealed disregard for what is lost in such a cavalier translation. Finally, we *pretend* that this rather depressing catalogue of cultural misdemeanors can present itself as a coherent (albeit incomplete) system of thought, the demonstration of how much was accomplished in our field since its inception, only a few decades ago.

Could this massive exercise in collective placebo therapy have been avoided? Strictly speaking, yes. It would have been possible, one hundred years ago, to put aside fresh copies of newly made films and store them in archives from the very beginnings of cinema (this is, after all, exactly what British film pioneer Robert William Paul attempted to do when he offered one of his prints to the curators of the British Museum in 1896). It would also have been possible to acquire new models of the best commercial projectors at the time when they were manufactured (which is what George Eastman did for some time). It would have been possible to maintain accurate records of the chemical formulas used for the production of nitrate film stock and the orthochromatic emulsion commonly utilized before 1922 and still available twenty years later for the blue color separation of the dye-transfer Technicolor (some of these formulas were actually available for many years, but after having kept them secret for fear of corporate espionage, Eastman Kodak didn't keep good records of its invaluable research papers). Finally, it wouldn't have been exceedingly difficult to learn how to adapt projector mechanisms to physiological alterations of the base such as shrinkage and curling. The Institut Lumière in Lyon knows how to reconstruct a Cinématographe camera and developer, and there is no compelling reason why a relatively simple object such as a 35mm projector could not be rebuilt in the same way that an expert craftsman can build a violin according to the same methods applied by 18th century masters. A harpsichord is an infinitely more complex instrument than a Bell & Howell printer, and yet there are many new harpsichords made for the specialized market, but no new projectors constructed after the design of those available in 1930.

All this is theory, of course, and nobody in his or her right mind is so naïve as to think that much of the above will actually become a reality. But this doesn't mean that such things couldn't possibly happen. They didn't, we didn't think about it, and we have now missed almost every single boat we could possibly catch. Do we want to continue to miss all the other boats that are going to pass in front of us? Hopefully not, but we had better hurry. We have focused our attention upon one phase of archival process we call “restoration” (in lack of a more accurate term), and there has been considerable progress on this front, but it is now time to widen our horizon and bring into the picture the context in which “restoration” may have some chance to play a role in the visual memory of the Second Century of cinema.

Here I would like to discuss what is probably the next major challenge for moving



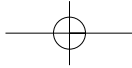
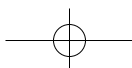
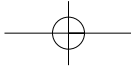


image archives, the forthcoming demise of motion picture stock as an artifact. We do not know when this is going to occur. Some executives are keen to suggest that it should take half a dozen years before this happens; others measure the deadline in decades, either out of skepticism, or by wishful thinking: changing projection equipment on a massive scale costs too much money; the difference in image quality between film and digital still doesn't justify the investment; production companies are reluctant to endorse the principle of satellite distribution on a massive scale because they're afraid of planetary blackouts and regional plagiarism: a projector that breaks means giving back the money to a few hundred people, but how about a world broadcast that goes wrong because of some glitch in the software?

As much as they are pertinent to the future of the moving image as a form of mass entertainment, these doubts are irrelevant to our long-term concerns. We shouldn't feel too reassured by those who tell us that nothing will happen for the next twenty years. Even if it didn't happen in 2021, it will happen sometime. Twenty or thirty years are nothing in the life of a museum, as its clock measures time much more slowly than our biological life. There will be no film eventually, no matter what, and archives will be faced with two options: go with the flow and prepare to accommodate the term "restoration" to another (temporarily) dominant technology, or behave like archives and figure out what can be done during the time that is left to them before the last piece of polyester is run through the mechanisms of an optical projector. There are two possible approaches to this dilemma. The first is more passive, and somehow more plausible given our knowledge of what happened to moving image archives since their inception; the second is extremely ambitious and therefore very unlikely, but no less interesting as a working hypothesis. Both scenarios adopt one of the derogatory terms mentioned above, and turn it into a virtue. Stealing, cheating, lying and pretending have not only brought social, technological and political change; they have also contributed to transform our notions of art, and determined the development of aesthetic endeavors which would not have existed otherwise. Pretending, in particular, is a powerful catalyst of creativity: by entering an uncharted territory *as if* we knew how to explore it, new perspectives emerge, and new ideas can develop out of an established tradition.

As we are so eager to look at the fine arts as something to steal from (some would call it inspiration, or influence), let's now pretend for a moment that a museum's administration regards the moving image as important as painting. Let us also pretend that the extinction of the photomechanical medium is already a matter of fact. Kodak announces that in February 2022, on the seventieth anniversary of the transition from nitrate to acetate, the manufacture of motion picture stock will be discontinued altogether. All cinemas are happily digital, and Hollywood is once again thriving. No more film. No more internegatives, fine grain masters, color separations, projection positives. Nothing. Approximately fifteen billion feet of film are now left in the vaults of non-profit archives, museums, corporate firms, historical societies, laboratories and stock footage companies, and they will never be duplicated on film. Almost immediately, the curators of archives and museums find themselves split between two currents of thought.

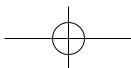




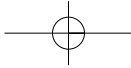
Some (promptly labeled as the right-wing party of the archival community) have already decided that because film is now irreplaceable, no print held by the institution is going to be shown ever again as such, for the sake of long-term preservation. Digital reproductions will be made, and they are from now on all that will be made available to the public. Film festivals will be the first casualties of this deliberation. They will also be the first to protest, but in the meantime half of the archives of the world have already decided that festivals will have to deal with the history of cinema through digital reproductions. No more Borzage in 35mm at San Sebastian, no more touring exhibits of the restored films of Fritz Lang. End of story.

In our "passive" scenario, the other half of the archival world (let's call it, for the sake of symmetry, the "liberal" party) takes a slightly different approach. While digital preservation is being made, they want to do something with the viewing prints created before the demise of film stock. They were called "projection prints" for a reason, right? They were meant to be projected, there are intermediate negatives that were meant to protect the film in the event that a copy was damaged, and they are in fine shape, so let's show them. In the archive itself? Yes, because archives are supposed to know how to better handle them. Loan them to film festivals as well? It depends. Certainly not to the festivals which used to return the prints in a sorry state. After debating which festivals are worth being given the privilege to continue showing photochemical versions of the films of the past (possibly after some attempts to create a Guild of Worthwhile Festivals, an élite of institutions whose reputation is earned through a consistent respect for the artifacts), the archival movement's left-wing party splits into two factions. The so-called extremists will continue to lend their prints to a selected group of public venues, either for political reasons or for genuine trust in the ability of their organizers and technicians to treat the surviving artifacts with maximum care. Meanwhile, the "moderate" faction of the same group adopts a philosophy of film exhibition formulated by the founder of the Royal Film Archive in Brussels, Jacques Ledoux. His mission statement is summarized and reproduced in the letterhead of the institution: the archive preserves films but does not loan them to third parties, which is to say that all the films collected by the institution since 1948 are meant to be exhibited primarily within the premises of the institution itself. This position finds its counterpart in the fine arts community of the late 1970s, at a time when a group of distinguished curators and historians argued against the removal of an artwork from the place where it was originally located. What "originally" means is open to debate: Napoleon stole thousands of paintings from Italy and took them to the Louvre, so in a way they have been removed already from the church or the gallery where they were intended to be permanently exhibited. There is also some inherent limitation in the comparison between moving a sculpture from one museum to another one, and circulating a film print, which was never meant to be exhibited in one place only. A vagrant art by definition, cinema based its *raison d'être* on the principle of an ongoing nomadism of the film print until the end of its commercial life.

Still, the idea that some other professionals, working in another field, had thought many years before that there are some good reasons to leave artworks where they are gives film curators a rationale for adopting the same tactic. So let's say that, from now on, if you want to see the best print of *Hævners Nat* (Christensen, DK, 1916)





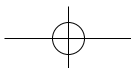


you'll have to go to Copenhagen, more or less as you would do if you wanted to see Leonardo's "Last Supper". A compromise is suggested by a group of members of the International Federation of Film Archives as a sort of ideological bridge between the moderates and the extremists: as FIAF was originally supposed to be a club of institutions trusting each other, a way can be found to let fellow members continue to enjoy what was once their exclusive privilege - being allowed to exhibit prints coming from another archive or museum, at specific conditions and under clearly defined restrictions. Being friends or members of a Mutual Admiration Society is no longer enough: you also have to guarantee that the print dispatched to your archive will be treated exactly in the same way it would be treated in mine, so that there would be no difference between the look of a copy before and after its screening in a different venue.

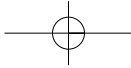
The word "guarantee" is of course loaded with problematic implications, and needs to be qualified. There are a number of criteria by which the physical integrity of a print can be ensured. Again, cheating our colleagues and saying that we have a background in Museum Studies (or, more impressively, in what the French call *Muséographie*) may be of some help. Non-removal theory notwithstanding, museums have been borrowing artworks from each other for centuries, and have come up with a precise set of requirements in order to do so. These requirements are spelled out in a document called a "condition report" - a totally unknown entity for moving image archives, whose managers are aware at best of a one-page document called "inspection sheet", or, at worst, have some subjective memory of what prints are in good shape and what aren't. But in a fine arts museum there are at least two types of condition reports: one dealing with the physical status of the object itself (which is what moving image archives have been doing so far); the other with the technical, environmental and logistical issues surrounding the exhibition of the object outside the museum's premises. Moving image archives have never done this before, but now that film is no longer manufactured it looks as if time is ripe to steal the long-established habit of our colleagues in the more prestigious domain of the fine arts.

The structure of a typical condition report of this kind reflects the various phases of the collaboration between two institutions loaning prints to each other; we will now browse through these documents, so to speak, chronologically rather than structurally, addressing questions in the order in which they arise in the actual museum practice. When an artifact is temporarily moved from one institution to another, the transaction normally takes the form of a contract specifying the terms and conditions for the loan. This practice is unknown or unfamiliar to the majority of moving image archives of the present time, for at least two reasons.

The first is connected to the tradition of the archival community, where exchange of prints screenings has always been decided upon a verbal agreement between the parties or through a fairly straightforward correspondence: a curator or a programmer asks another curator or programmer about the availability of a certain print, and if the print is there the copy is sent to the borrowing venue with no further discussion. On some occasions, the borrowing institution takes the responsibility of clearing copyright when appropriate, but this is a fairly recent procedure, and it is not taken for granted by all non-profit archives, often at their own risk. Things are not so simple in a museum,





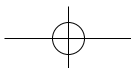


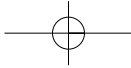
as the parameters of the loan must be spelled out in much greater detail; interestingly enough, the moving image archive is more than reluctant to follow this approach, as if the need of a contract could endanger the curator's authority or undermine the ideological foundations of the Mutual Admiration Society. The fact that most archives do not have staff assigned to perform this specific task is beside the point, although it is often used as an excuse for sidestepping the contractual agreement altogether. A second, more convincing reason for their reluctance is that moving archives don't really care much about contracts when it comes to fellow institutions: there is a promise that a certain print will be shipped back by a certain date, but then who cares if the copy actually comes back a few days after the agreed term?

A contract including the provision that no unauthorized duplication will be made of the borrowed film is perceived as an insult, even though everyone knows that the history of the film archive movement is constellated with illegal copies made in-house (when there is a laboratory or a video duplication machine) or even off-premises, in the period during which the archival print is abandoned to its own fate; besides, who will ever check? Who has the authority to administer sanctions in the event of a breach of the contract? Because they know there can be no such sanctions except for the (unlikely) ostracism from the archival community, contracts are regarded with a mixture of indifference and contempt. However, we are dealing here with a different scenario (remember, film stock is no longer in production). When film was duplicated onto film, few archives would ask the borrower to submit a proof of insurance: if a print was lost, stolen or damaged, the borrowing institution would probably say "sorry", and that was that. In the event of a flagrant error of the borrower, the loaning archive would probably ask to be reimbursed for the cost involved in the creation of another print, which is to say that the insurance cost of an archival loan in the photomechanical age would probably not exceed a few thousand dollars or euros, because that is the cost of replacing the damaged or lost copy. (Never mind that you're using over and over again the preservation negative, which is exactly what you are trying to avoid.)

In the digital age, however, there is no such possibility. It is assumed that the object to be loaned has been previously duplicated in electronic form, so that a lost print would not involve the definitive loss of the film itself. But now that the print is no longer replaceable, what insurance cost are we going to give to it? The insurance for an average painting of the 19th century is several hundred thousand dollars, and a similar course of action would be only logical for the loan of a film that is now as unique as a Picasso or a Cézanne. It is indeed possible that this factor will play a pivotal role in the archive's decision not to move the film from its premises; but this is also beside the point, given the circumstances described here. In our hypothetical framework, the museum has already decided to loan the print, and the borrower is ready to play by the book. Let's just add, as a footnote, that sooner or later all repositories of archival moving images where the film on a photographic carrier has an archival value in itself will be forced to address this rather unpleasant hurdle in the course of their dealings with other organizations.

But this, unfortunately, is only the beginning of our story. Let's assume that a contract has been drafted and agreed upon, and that the insurance value has been established.





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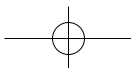
PRESERVE THEN SHOW / DANISH FILM INSTITUTE / SIDE 31

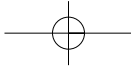
It must also be assumed that the agreement specifies the criteria for the shipment of the artifact from one institution to another. In a fine arts museum, insurance is covered on a so-called "wall-to-wall" basis, meaning that the insurance company will pay for whatever happens to the print from the moment it leaves the premises of the loaning institution to the time when it reaches the borrower, and vice versa. This doesn't mean that the dispatcher just takes the print from the archive as it is; in a museum, a staff member (the preparator) ensures that the print is packed in a way that will minimize the possibility of damage during transportation. As we all know, this is a sore point in the current state of things. A good portion of the damage suffered by the copy during the loan process happens precisely because of the uneven or insufficient care in preparing the print for delivery. In many archives, an inspection report is prepared before the print is sent out: splices are counted and reinforced when necessary, footage is measured, heads and tails are verified; so far, this is the only "condition report" we know of in moving image archives, but what is worth pointing out here is that the very same control procedure should be implemented when the print is returned to the loaning institution. Some institutions do it, some don't, and this is in itself a source of significant concern.

Let's pretend, however, that in the post-photomechanical world this procedure is already in place. The print has been pulled from the refrigerated vaults and has been staged for at least 24 hours in order to minimize the stress deriving from the abrupt change in temperature and humidity, and is now ready to be shipped. Do we still want to deliver it in cardboard boxes? For some reason, the way archival prints are packed today is more or less similar to the way you would pack an object of little or no value. This is because it is taken for granted that the package will be treated quite carelessly during transportation anyway: thrown across hallways, dropped in the runway of an airport, piled up by the door of a projection booth. In some cases, the cardboard box is substituted by a metal container known as a Goldberg (after the name of the manufacturing firm), which offers an only slightly greater degree of protection to the artifact. But the parcel will be treated more or less the same way, if not worse.

At the time when David Francis was curator of the National Film and Television Archive in London, director Stanley Kubrick would often contact the institution in order to borrow a certain print for viewing. Francis fondly remembers that Kubrick would recommend that each reel of the film be given fresh countdown leaders, put into brand new cans, and delivered in pristine Goldberg containers; for him, the attention paid to this phase of delivery was a way to demonstrate respect for the work of the filmmakers. As much as it's very easy to relate Kubrick's request to his legendary perfectionism, we must concede that - as in most cases - his point was well taken.

Professional organizers of exhibitions dedicated to painters, sculptors, photographers and craftsmen designed and adopted many years ago very sophisticated containers or crates for the transportation of their treasures; it's too bad that we had to wait for the end of motion picture stock to recognize the legitimacy of the same need. If it's a projection print or a non-flammable element, come get some more cardboard; if it's nitrate, it will probably be a barrel, probably good enough to satisfy the questionable or bizarre requirements of shipping agencies (one fireproof cardboard

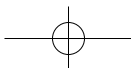


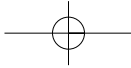


box per reel, safety stickers all over the box, even sealed containers! Every time a plane crashes by accident and someone suggests that the aircraft might have had flammable material in it, regulations become a little more stringent and a little more inane.)

But now, in the digital age, the unique print (as all prints have now become very much unique) is no longer wrapped in newspapers to avoid its bouncing within the can; instead, strips of tiny airbags made of neutral material are put in the cans, and then removed before the print is returned to the vaults. Containers are made of fireproof, waterproof fiberglass that can even float on water, and is resilient to bumps and the roughest treatment you can imagine. It is assumed that the people responsible for such treatment are the shipping agents, who don't know how valuable the film has become. In the photomechanical age, films were shipped by mail, courier, or by one of those commercial (and expensive) carriers known for their rapidity in service. Of course, if *they* lose or damage the print, their financial responsibility is proportional to the insurance you are willing to pay. In the United States and abroad, Federal Express is widely used for film shipping, yet few archives know how to make use of a specialized branch of the company, known as FedEx Custom, specifically designed for the transportation of extremely valuable artifacts. If your institution doesn't have a preservation lab, you now send your film to be preserved somewhere, whether Cinema Arts or Cinetech in the United States, Hendersons in the United Kingdom, Haghefilm, L'Immagine Ritrovata or Studio Cine in continental Europe. Let's imagine that you found the only surviving nitrate of a very rare film. What you do in this case isn't much of a choice, as you really have no choice: you give the nitrate print to a commercial carrier, then wait and hope for the best. There is something illogically perverse in this challenge, often ignored in the name of statistics or past experience (with allegedly reassuring statements such as "FedEx never loses anything", or "it never happened before"), but now that film no longer exists as a commercial entity, sending a film by standard courier should no longer be an option. In a museum, objects of exceptionally high value are hand-carried by a representative of the institution, often by the preparator himself; I don't see how a restored print of *Cabiria* could be safely hand-carried in a suitcase, but maybe two or three people can, and the decision to be in the same aircraft where the print is transported is certainly less arbitrary than giving it to an unknown entity.

So let's assume that the properly staged, thoroughly inspected, adequately crated archival print covered by a substantial insurance value has safely reached the premises of the borrowing institution. Normally, the print is not screened immediately; it arrives a few days or even some weeks before the screening event, and is therefore stored somewhere. Where, exactly? An art object is supposed to be stored in a high-security facility whose keys are held by responsible staff members. The area is climate controlled, very much like the archive's vault itself. In fact, exhibition preparators never open the crates immediately after the object has been dispatched; instead, they let it stay closed for at least one day or two in the climatized room in order to let the object adapt to the new environmental conditions. The same, therefore, will apply to the film. The print won't lay around in the heat of the projection booth; in fact, the



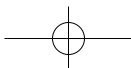


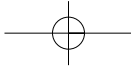
projection booth itself will be climate controlled, although not at the same severe conditions of a vault (it will take time before a projectionist will agree to work with the heavy coat used by vault managers). The conditions of temperature and humidity where the print is kept before the screening will be known and agreed upon by the lending institution, who will also be notified of who has the keys to the vaults and how many guards are in charge of the building's surveillance during the day and at night.

Time will come for the print to be screened. The most secretive area of a moving image archive, where even qualified staff receives a lukewarm welcome at best, the projection booth is also the place where the film print receives a good deal of damage. No matter what is written in the contract, and regardless of what understanding you have reached with your fellow archive, the projectionist will ultimately do whatever is deemed convenient. The list of manipulations suffered by the artifact at this crucial stage of the exhibition process is well known, and goes far beyond the projection of the print on a "platter" system, where all reels are merged together into a single, very large reel in which all heads and tails have been cut off and the last image of one reel has been spliced to the first frame of the following one. No matter how long the leader is, no matter how clearly you write "reel 1" on the strip of blank leader which precedes the film, no matter how clearly the label on the can has been marked, the projectionist will write something else, either on a tape or on the film leader itself, as well as on the can. You can often tell what archive or festival a certain print went to by simply looking at the lid of a container. Cue marks are superimposed on top of each other until they create a puzzling labyrinth of punched circles, lines and crosses with grease pencil (or permanent marker), or even scratches on the film emulsion itself. The projection booth is perhaps the place in the archive where dust and dirt are most tolerated or even taken for granted, and the projectionist is reluctant to bring in a cleaning crew because he or she believes that the machines should not be treated carelessly (which is true) and there is no better cleaning crew than the projectionist themselves (which is not necessarily true).

Is it entirely their fault? No, because curators have basically allowed them to make decisions all by themselves; the authority of a preservationist seems to have clearly defined boundaries in the institution, and the projection booth is normally on the other side of the border. If the film is not shown at the correct aspect ratio, or with lower sound, or at the wrong speed, or with a light source that's too weak, it will be easy for the projectionist to say that things are the way they are because there's no way to do otherwise; the aperture plate has always been that way, the motor won't take a certain speed, the sound level has always been that way as well, and there is no compelling reason why it should be otherwise. To continue in our parallel with the fine arts, it is as if the crew in charge of installing the paintings in a gallery would mark each canvas at the bottom corner, or put on a certain picture frame because that's the kind of frame they have always used.

Seen from this perspective, the condition report employed by fine arts museums seems no less than astonishing to a moving image curator. What kind of light bulb is being used in the gallery where the paintings are exhibited? At what distance from the





object? How strong is the light itself? How are the paintings being hung on the wall? What kind of security system is in place in order to prevent unintentional damage or vandalism? An archivist who receives one or any questions similar to these is likely to take offense, but in a situation where a film cannot be replaced if damaged there will be no other choice than asking the same set of questions. What kind of projectors and rewinders are being used? When were they last inspected, or how often are they being reviewed? What is the light source? At what level is it being kept during projection? When was the last time that worn out light sources were replaced with new ones? When were the mirrors aligned? How old are the lenses? A museum of fine arts normally asks the borrowing venue to provide a plan of the gallery where the works are about to be exhibited; if that's the case, why not ask that photographs of the projection equipment and the auditorium be submitted together with the condition report? A few archives include information or warning sheets in each can; one of them, currently in use by a FIAF archive in North America, reads as follows:

#### **PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING CAREFULLY**

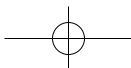
**This is an archival print.**

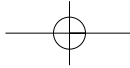
**Your institution is financially responsible for making sure that this film is returned to us in the same condition that you received it.**

*Projection.* This print cannot be projected on platter systems, or on damaged or substandard equipment. If the projector can hold more than 2000ft. (600m.) of film, you cannot mount the print on a single large reel, even if the heads and tails already have splices. If an additional splice is found on this print, you or your institution will pay for the cost of printing a new reel. If you receive this print in damaged condition, or if any damage occurs during projection, you must immediately report it to the archive (...).Your institution is financially responsible for any change of condition or damage to this print that may occur during projection, inspection, handling or shipping.

*Shipping.* This print must be returned via FedEx (tracking should be sent immediately to the archive by fax or e-mail), and insured at the same value that it was insured for when it was shipped to your site. This print must be back in the premises of the archive no later than five working days after the scheduled play date (ten working days for screenings outside the United States). A charge of US \$ 100 will be applied for each day of delay. You are fully responsible for both the prepaid shipping and the custom costs for the return of this print. This print must be returned in the same cans you received, and in the same container. (...) [*Mail and shipping address, telephone, fax and e-mail address follows*]

One has to wonder if a museum conservator would put a similar sheet in the shipping crate of a Renoir painting! To say that this document is ignored by the majority of borrowers is an understatement (it is occasionally used as a "filler" for half-empty cans, and the reverse of the page is sometimes recycled as a label to return the print), but it is only our fault if very little is done in order to take it seriously. It is the projectionist



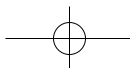


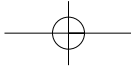
himself or herself who should, in fact, return the print with an inspection report, to be checked against the archive's last condition report once it is returned to the lending organization.

In the photomechanical era, the best you could do when a print was returned with cut leaders, additional cue marks, or in poorly packaged containers was to file a complaint, or - in the worst case scenario - refrain from lending again any print to the institution responsible for the damage. Today, nobody has the guts to ask the borrowing venue to pay for the cost of a new print in the event that heads and leaders are cut; nobody would believe such threat, and in some cases the archive will reply that such a requirement makes no sense, considering that the print already has splices, and is therefore only a matter of opening and closing them again with (allegedly) no further damage to the print. This, too, is no longer possible in the digital era: as it stands, a condition report for a fine arts museum could therefore be translated into a document specially designed for moving image archives. But let's go back to the example we have described before of an object of enormous value, which needs to be hand-carried by a representative of the lending institution. With an unprecedented move, the Filmmuseum Munich has announced that institutions asking for a print of a silent film from its collection will have to pay for the travel, accommodation, per diem and honorarium of a pianist selected by the museum itself. This decision has caused considerable stir in the archival community, but it shouldn't; in fact, it could probably be further developed in another requirement: agreeing to loan a print on the condition that the lending institution will also provide a qualified projectionist who will take responsibility for the proper handling of the print. In other words, if you want a restored film from an archive you'll also have to pay a projectionist to go with it. A decision of this kind would probably cause an immediate uproar in the projection booth, and probably a strike in the institution whose personnel works under the aegis of a trade union. No such protest, however, would be heard in a fine arts museum (where the exhibition preparator works in tandem with the institution's staff), and the exhibition venue of the digital world will have to come to terms with two options: either getting its act together and training its projection crew to act more responsibly, or accepting that someone else, from another institution, will work with the chief projectionist of the borrowing institution and at least be there when the film is exhibited.

It could be argued that talking about the need of a museography of the moving image doesn't make much sense if moving image archives don't actually start behaving like museums. Better do it now, get prepared and set up a rational procedure of this kind, rather than being late and rushing to makeshift solutions when the disappearance of photographic film laboratories will be a *fait accompli*.

As we have been talking about this event as something inevitable, however, it is now time to look at the other, more radical option at our disposal. I have already described it as the most ambitious and the most unlikely of the two, but in a way - like all drastic solutions - this is also the simplest one: asking film manufacturers not to discontinue the production of film stock. If they really want to do it, then let's maintain in operation a facility especially designed for the needs of moving image archives. Such a facility

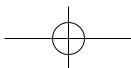




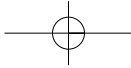
will work exclusively for them in order to let them continue to preserve film on film, and to exhibit it as such without the fear that one damaged print will mean the end of the cinematic experience for future generations of viewers. A proposal of this kind is currently seen with a mixture of skepticism and laughter, but before dismissing it we should acknowledge that there's nothing new in this idea. In his report *Preservation of the Moving Image* of 1974, Ralph N. Sargent has given an extensive report on the creation of a 70mm film stock for the preservation of color film in the form of color separations. The underlying hypothesis of this proposal is sensible: given that a color separation in three strips is likely to result in registration problems because of the different rate of shrinkage of the three film strips, the adoption of a single one was meant to address this drawback in a practical and relatively economic way. Needless to say, nothing happened to the proposal, and the idea itself is virtually forgotten today. What's interesting about it, though, is the fact that it presupposes a certain kind of relationship between moving image archives and film manufacturers that we are no longer used to take into consideration.

Let's then develop this "radical" scenario a bit further. A consortium of moving image archives goes to Eastman Kodak and asks, will you please maintain one of your plants in operation for the benefit of moving image archives? After some careful consideration, Kodak will give the most predictable answer (don't expect them to do it for free: the illusion of a charitable corporate company is one of the many chimeras in the moving image archival community): what is the financial incentive for us, Eastman Kodak executives, to do so? The incentive is the assurance of a minimum guarantee in the amount of film stock requested by archives and museums on an annual basis. Let's take a step further in this exercise in wishful thinking, and assume that archives have already agreed on how much stock they can afford to purchase and have processed in a given year. The next objection, also quite predictable, is: Eastman Kodak can't afford to continue production of all the film stocks you need. We are talking about a wide range of desirable options: black and white duplicate negatives, color intermediate negatives, fine grain masters, black and white and color positive prints to say the least, way too much already. To the archivists' dismay, Eastman Kodak rejects the idea.

In a paper presented at the Collegium of the Giornate del Cinema Muto in 1999, filmmaker Jon Jost has provocatively argued for an alternate proposal. In a nutshell, this is his line of argument: because no film manufacturer will ever agree to maintain the complex facility necessary to create and process such a variety of film stocks we would ideally need, archives could foster the development of one or two basic kinds of film stock, probably not more than one for negatives and one for positives, or even one Universal Film Stock that would somehow work out for both. The main disadvantage of this proposal is obvious, as archives would have to treat black and white and color film on the same stock, with a sensible decrease in their preservation options; however - this is the core of Jon Jost's argument - wouldn't that be better than not having motion picture stock at all? Or, to put it in other words, if you really care about film on film, wouldn't you prefer to do that, rather than just giving up film altogether and not being able to show cinema as we always wanted to? In Jost's opinion,





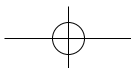


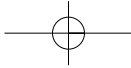
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(...) it might be wiser for archivists collectively to face the imminent realities and do a few things, which may provide an approximation of the ideal form of archiving film. This might mean that, collectively on the global scale, archivists would work with the major film manufactures to establish a single archival stock, intended not for screening or study but strictly to preserve on film the best possible photographic records of those things which are to be saved. (...) The information recorded on such a stock could then be saved in optimal conditions and that information could be interpreted by whatever future replication and exhibition systems come along (...). My point here is economic: to consolidate all archival work into one universal standard in the interest of requiring enough volume to economically justify the interest of Kodak and the other manufacturers. (...) To deal with this reality, I am proposing that archivists sit down with technicians from the film manufacturing companies and say "what would be the ideal stock?". I am certain the technicians and probably the more technically minded archivist could arrive at an ideal. You need an extremely fine grain, wide latitude film with extremely stable chemicals. You want stable chemicals so it lasts and sticks around when you keep it in cool storage. You want fine grain that can match whatever grain you are dealing with. You want it in color because lots of films are in color (...) and color film stock is perfectly capable of holding the necessary information for black and white. You will have the complaint, "but you won't get the same print!". Well you know you are not going to get the same print and in fact you should just start putting out of your mind that you are even thinking about getting prints. (...) So the question is not "would this make a good print?". The question is "is the information on this master material capable of being translated and interpreted into whatever electronic method is available?"<sup>2</sup>

Contrary to what we might expect, it is not too early to think of a course of action of this kind. Film manufacturers are already reducing the number of film stocks available to laboratories. Plants are being downsized, closed or restructured, and some companies are already thinking about converting their activity altogether to another kind of technology. If moving image archives have the intention to take this idea seriously, this is the time to address it. Besides, they have nothing to lose except a little bit of their precious time. Seen from the archive's perspective, there are other compelling reasons to do so. If one really had to make a forecast of what the film experience is going to be fifty years from now, chances are that what we have called the worst case scenario is also going to be the most plausible one. Yes, moving image archives will be the last places on earth where cinema is going to be experienced as such, in the form of a wax museum of the moving image; walking side by side with historians and scholars, our descendants will take their kids to the moving image museum and explain that once upon a time, moving images were created and displayed through cumbersome rolls of plastic, passing through the mechanisms of even more cumbersome machines. But we can also think of a more optimistic outlook: the notion of a moving image museum working in cooperation with others for exhibitions taking place in selected venues, very much like a Jackson Pollock show going from one city





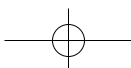
to another, with great fanfare and endless lines of people waiting at the door. Will there ever be a fanfare playing at the door of the moving image archive? Will people ever line up to see how cinema was made, and why our generation has been the last to struggle for its survival? I don't think so. From whatever perspective we look at it, film festivals are in worse shape than anyone else in this uphill battle because they will continue to organize retrospectives at the cost of agreeing to exhibit film in other forms, thus betraying part of the rationale for their existence; moreover, once films are exhibited through other media, there will be nothing special about a screening; people won't need to go to festivals to see them. Hence the idea of going the hard way, convincing the corporate powers that there is still some financial interest in manufacturing film.

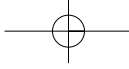
Indeed, it's a long way to go, but long distance is the stuff museums are made of. As far as this hypothesis is concerned, this is barely the beginning of an entirely new challenge, and we don't even know how long it will take before we know whether or not we can succeed, or whether or not it's even worth trying. Is this the "ethics of film preservation (not just restoration)" we were looking for? It looks like less than a system of thought as we would like it to be. But after all, this is what ethics are about: doing something not just because of the immediate advantage this may bring, but because something has to be done for its own sake. We have introduced the concept of "ethics" in moving image preservation through its last step (turning film restoration into an Academy of Vision), and we have hastily concluded that we can now talk about a museography of the moving image. Again, we have been pretending by telling each other that we should have one, and therefore we have it. It's a start. After all the time we spent in discussing who we are, it is good to get down to earth and acknowledge that we had to start somewhere.

And now, ladies and gentlemen, let's go open the Oakridge Vaults.

#### NOTES

1. Silas E. Snyder, "Proposal Made to Entomb Film Until 2109", *The American Cinematographer*, October 1922, pp. 5, 19.
2. Jon Jost, "A Film Stock for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century", in Luca Giuliani (ed.), *The Collegium Papers I* (Saclay: Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2001), pp. 9 - 22.





# PRESERVATION

