

## **From Grain to Pixel: the Archival Life of Film in Transition.**

Giovanna Fossati

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The technologies that give motion to pictures have a long history based on a vigorous and ever changing present. From motion pictures to moving images, even descriptions of the phenomena we experience are variously described. The pictures are not in motion – it is our cognitive apparatus giving that appearance, due to what Ernest Gombrich has suggested is ‘the sluggishness of our perception’. Moving images however, embrace us, affecting mind, consciousness and emotion, through receptors targeted variously by many filmmakers for over one hundred years.

‘Film’ remains the term for our many contemporary encounters with moving images from cinema to mobile phone. In this volume the focus is on the analogue system of representation, physically moving the filmstrip through camera, printer and projector. Intriguingly presented, the preservation of the back catalogue of feature films and documentaries in collections around the world however, often involves modern digital technologies. The author consummately navigates the complexities of the process of archiving our international motion picture heritage, bringing together, like the filmmakers who generated it, aesthetics and its expression - *tehkne*.

As an academic with the University of Amsterdam and Curator with the Dutch Film Museum the author brings a wealth of knowledge both theoretical and practical.

Consolidated under the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) in 1938, the field is a site of rivalries, jealousies and disagreements which the author negotiates by laying out the principle approaches taken by the archivist and the technician.

She advocates for breaking down the silo mentalities separating the cultural and industrial production bases of the film, video and digital mediums that being 'inherently transitional', do not have a defined teleology. Several frameworks are employed in describing the historical and practice-based issues. The outer shell is the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) theory, which works effectively in this account as most public archives (as opposed to collections), are reliant on public or benefactor funding and are thus subject to the political jostling of the 'relevant social groups'; as Klein and Kleinman (2002) observe this approach can conceal however, where the power to effect decision-making really lies within the matrix. In a series of case studies of selected film archives, film laboratories and European Union funded projects the reader gets an inkling of the dynamics at play, between the archives with historico-cultural agendas and the collections intent on upgrading their back catalogue.

The inner frameworks applied describe dispositions of curators and archives toward a theory of practice in the task with which they are charged: film as 'original' and the complexities of preservation of the acetate artefact; as 'art' and the way in which the filmmakers as auteurs, would wish the film experience to be re-presented using the methods to hand. The pragmatic is applied still further in the film as '*dispositif*', as the emphasis is on the re-telling of the story, whether in the cinema cave or on a bus using the iPhone. Film as 'state of the art' emerges from the latest technological

solution for placing the ideas of the filmmaker, using whatever fragments remain, as close as possible to how the original would have been seen.

The classification of archive acquisitions thus requires considerable ontological research into each artefact with extensive preparation and negotiation before a frame of film is passed to the laboratories. Earlier chapters provide up-to-the-minute surveys of how the technical practice of production and archiving are shifting with the associated problems of establishing standards in the digital field; later in the description of archival practice, the relative stability of analogue material and the re-assertion of photo-chemical techniques are convincingly presented, supported by a number of case-studies recording the retrieval, stabilisation, restoration and re-presentation of some key works from the more recent past, like *Dr Strangelove*.

The changing expectations of audiences are well covered, requiring less the didactic, 'chaperoned' model of presentation and more the interactive negotiation afforded by DVD and website. Perhaps as an indicator of this tendency is the implied expectation of contemporary authors for their readers to use web-search engines to extend their knowledge. There are only a few URLs provided for key sources such as FIAF, which actually lists some 150 member archives around the world. This includes the National Film and Sound Archive in Australia which, by way of meeting the changing expectations flagged by the author, provides detailed information for citizens about how to look after family and private collections, and even permits online downloads of parts of its holdings.

This thorough, well illustrated scholarly volume will be invaluable to all investing time and resources into the viewing, making or preserving of films in analogue or digital form. The theory of archival practice proposed charges public institutions with the responsibilities of negotiating and reflecting the inevitable transitions occurring in the production

and preservation of our motion picture culture.

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