

Comments on Video Preservation for the Library of Congress Hearings on the Current State of Television Preservation

The Archive has a small but significant collection of approximately 7500 items on video, of which about half represent original masters of one kind or another. Although the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences is an institution devoted to the cinema, one of the resources we consider most integral to our history is the *Annual Academy Awards Show*. The television presentation of this ceremony has become a central icon of popular culture in this country, and is now an international programming event. The Archive material on the *Show* from 1948 to the present, and in those forty seven years, the Archive holds material in eleven formats, nine of which are video and only two of which are totally obsolete today.

We have hundreds of interviews documenting all aspects of the motion picture industry, many of which feature individuals who are no longer with us. We have a wide range of test material and "behind the scenes" documentation as well as a wealth of ephemeral material (screen tests, coverage of public events and addresses, promotional material, alternate versions, etc.). Although the size of the Archive's video collection is relatively small, and its scope is very narrow, it does contain material which is important to the history of the motion picture industry. And this material, which we continue to acquire or produce, is very often video.

The Academy Film Archive uses video for a significant portion of our research and access functions, and the majority of our video holdings are access copies. Although the Academy has two theaters, the

space limitations and the needs of individual researcher require the use of videotape and videodisc as our primary access format for most of the academic and research community. And we expect to increase our access capabilities by use of interactively addressable digital video.

The Archive has both original documents to preserve, and a large investment in secondary video copies as a support for research and scholarly access. At least ten percent of the Archive collection is presently inaccessible because it exists only in the form of obsolete formats. Significant resources which were generated with public funding are endangered by the deterioration of the video support and by the obsolescence of the equipment used to play the older tapes. In case anyone wants to mention the supposed "eternal life" of optical disc media, I would also note that we have several hundred obsolete laser discs and a number of laser discs which are unplayable due to deterioration of one sort or another. I've outlined this for the Committee because I want to underscore the ubiquitous and indispensable character of video in a contemporary arts and humanities context. The Academy is one of thousands of institutions in the same situation.

The factors of tape and signal instability and equipment obsolescence are the two most well-known problems of videotape preservation, and thus today, there are two key components for a "preservation" program for videotape: proper storage, inspection, sampling and duplication, and commitment to long-term maintenance of video equipment beyond the normal life-span of the product cycle. Television and video preservation faces the same crisis as all data in electronic form. There is no reliable archival storage for material in the electronic domain. It's conceivable that the electronics industry will eventually come up with a stable support and a robust and simple storage format

and cognate equipment, but such a system is currently not available, and from what I can see, it will not be available any time soon. So preservation of video must be defined in ways very different from film preservation. Its processes will be much more contingent and heterogeneous in practice than film preservation, and will continue to evolve in different directions as we attempt to save specific bodies of material vital to the national heritage.

A second part of the problem of preservation of video is that since television and video are changing in so rapidly and in so many ways, the "target" medium of preserved television and video resources (in terms of every aspect of capture, storage, distribution, manipulation and display) is becoming more and more indistinct, more and more "plural". When motion pictures are preserved, they are transferred from one film to another. In the video domain, it's neither practical nor desirable to transfer 2" tape to 2" tape, and most likely today, a 2" transfer goes to a D1 master, which may be ported to a compressed digital file and distributed via the Internet in whole or in part, and at different scales of resolution depending on the end-user application. The nature of digital video, which is quickly and permanently displacing the analog video formats characteristic of the first fifty years of television, allows for and is predicated on the migration of data from format to format. Format independence in the digital system is far more complete than for earlier media, and the number of formats in every step of the chain from creation to end-user expands every year.

Thus, a National Preservation Plan for television and video needs to be specifically and radically oriented to this now dominant characteristic of the media world. I would like to suggest that a national plan should include as integral the necessary provisions for easy dissemination of preserved video in the multimedia universe. Unlike film, which is impractical and

expensive to access individually, video can migrate simply and cheaply throughout the digital universe.

Finally, on a somewhat different level, those of us engaged in the preservation of video need to account in different ways for the specific forms and historical characteristics of the television and video that was created in the last fifty years of the "analog" era. Retention of the original aesthetic qualities of these programs (say that of the NBC color extravaganza of the late 50s and early 60s, or the artists' tapes of the 70s and 80s) is very important to take into account in transferring video material. Television and video today look very different from the earlier forms of the media. I haven't yet heard the issues concerning the specific aesthetics of television or video raised in the context of video preservation, but just as every type of film process and format has a specific aesthetic look, so do the various forms of video. The use of error correction and concealment, DVNR and other "enhancement" procedures in video transfers can make an old videotape look like it was shot this afternoon, which may be perfectly suitable for some applications but is unacceptable in terms of historical analysis. It's my belief that we need to convene a television aesthetics group that will address the technical problems of transferring and preserving specific bodies of video, and this group should designate some standards for the ways older television and video programs as historical resources should be treated in the preservation process.

I'd like to thank the Committee for this opportunity to address some of the issues facing us in the area of television preservation.