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STATEMENT ON VIDEO AND TELEVISION PRESERVATION

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There is no doubt of the need to establish archival standards for the preservation of video and television images for the benefit of posterity. Yet even this basic, apparently undisputed principle requires at least three qualifications. First, it should be acknowledged that archival precepts have barely found their way into the field of photographic moving image preservation, and the debate on the goals, practices, and philosophies of film archiving is ridden with unresolved questions and inconsistencies. Ray Edmondson, deputy curator of the National Film and Sound Archives of Canberra, Australia, provides a brilliant overview of these issues in his seminal essay Is Film Archiving a Profession?, published in the Autumn 1995 issue of Film History (Vol. VII, 3: 245-255). Video and television preservationists have the advantage of being able to apply progress made in motion picture conservation to their own work; still, all operational and theoretical criteria they choose are far from being universally accepted in the film community.

A second remark concerns the quantitative aspect of the

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objects to be preserved. Interestingly enough, while the motto "preserve everything, restore everything, show everything" is still endorsed by film archivists, the same intent has never been declared by video and television archivists. The reason for this seems simple: there are just too many moving images produced on electronic media, and the goal of preserving them in their entirety is implicitly acknowledged as being utopian. However, it is well worth questioning this discrepancy between the stated aims of film archiving and video and television preservation.

The third observation derives from an a priori feeling of defeat, and concerns the ontological failure of video and television archiving as an element in the comprehensive preservation of our visual heritage. We may be dismayed that over 80% of films produced before 1930 are irretrievably lost, yet this is nothing compared to the percentage of electronic images already lost forever. There is little exaggeration in saying that less than 1% of video and television programs produced during the past five decades in the United States is still extant; more significantly, this percentage decreases even further if video images created worldwide are included. The amount of images made and broadcasted every day around the planet defies estimation; those which find temporary shelter in private, public, or corporate archives are an infinitesimal fragment of the whole. More than ever before, moving images disappear as soon as they come to exist, and we must be fully aware that there is no way to restrain or stop this trend.

This ongoing process of video and television image destruction has revolutionary consequences on the way we perceive our mission as moving image archivists. For the first time in history, we must abandon the idea of providing future generations with a comprehensive knowledge of what was seen in the recent past, as we are dealing with fragments of a patrimony that vanishes upon its emergence. Under these circumstances, the idea of "selectivity" not only raises dramatic questions as to what aesthetic criteria should guide our work, but becomes nearly impossible.

This point is of paramount importance in order to understand that the search for appropriate video and television preservation techniques is as important as the question of the very nature of what we are trying to preserve. On a strictly material level, we are struggling with the illusion that a certain apparatus will put an end to molecular migration in the magnetic tape that carries visual information; yet we know that the life expectancy of every transfer is extremely short, and every duplication entails a relevant loss of information. The would-be "digital revolution" is a placebo solution whose limits will become apparent as soon as we fully realize the impact of ever-changing technologies on our ability to retrieve, store, and access visual information. Even if we assume that there is such a thing as a technological device allowing archivists to accumulate all image information deemed worthy of survival (and we know that this assumption is unrealistic), we do not know to what extent this information will remain usable after several decades. What has often been said

about the relative stability of photographic moving images holds true: film can be "seen" without sophisticated apparatus, and reconstructing most film projection, viewing, and processing machines is a relatively simple affair.

Instead of entering into a frustrating discussion with technicians who assure us that electronic technologies will be equally easy to reproduce (a typical argument of those who claim that there will be no need for controlled storage of nitrate film once the information it contains has been digitalized), we should take a broader approach and address the following question: is video and television preservation a goal in itself, or the last installment in the archival struggle for protection of inherently elusive media? Photographic moving images were originally produced without any intention of their long-term survival; as a matter of fact, their fragility and decay were considered desirable consequences of mass-consumption economics. Video and television products brought this principle one step further with the idea that they are as easy to remake afresh than to preserve, and, consequently, are more frequently neglected and have a much faster rate of decay.

But these images, together with our struggle for their future existence, are nothing but *the last remaining perceptual artifacts which are conceived as objects*. The next step will eliminate the object altogether, and corporate companies are clearly identifying CD-Roms and laserdiscs as final attempts to lure consumers into the belief that possessing them will be equal to possessing, although

temporarily, the images contained therein. In short, we should look at the preservation of video and television images as the final test preceding the time when the current attributes of archivism become obsolete or irrelevant. How are we "preserving" e-mail and world wide web correspondence, literature, and images? By "printing" it, of course. But where is the threshold between what is "seen" on a screen and what is "said" with the written word? and how much knowledge is being brought into existence and deleted before anyone else is able to experience it? An archive of the 21st century might well be a repository for a totally new kind of oral history.