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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

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Mr. David Francis
Library of Congress
Washington, D.C.

Dear Mr. Francis:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak out on the important subject of access.

In the mid' 1940's I started collecting 35mm films. From the mid 50's until 1975 I operated Standard Film Service-16mm rentals. In 1966 I started Spectra Pictures, we produced films on the history of the motion picture for study purposes. Our multiple award winner "The Man Called Edison" relied heavily on the Libraries paper print collection. In recent years I have produced some documentaries for home video.

My first donation of nitrate was to the Library. With the formation of AFI, I worked through them. I have been told the AFI/Atkinson Collection at the Library of Congress is the 3rd largest from a non-corporate source. Also I have a large number of prints on deposit at The George Eastman House and University of Wisc.

The problem of access has bothered me for some time. I understand copyright and donor restrictions. But some of the deeds of gift I've heard of effectively extend copyright life when the material is locked away. This seems to be in direct contradiction to the intent of public domain in the copyright law.

Most film preservation is funded with money from public or corporate sources from outside the industry. The archives and indirectly the public end up paying because in most cases the copyright owners don't care. (Not commercially viable). Yet they wish to keep it from others. They have the LEGAL right to do so. Do they have the MORAL right?

In a Utopian Society, studios such as RKO or Universal would loose copyrights to motion pictures that were lost due to intentional neglect (RKO-pre-Turner) or wanton destruction. (Universal silents).

Example: In the mid 60's I sent to AFI/LC a Buzz Barton FBO western. TKO had no material or interest in it. But they had the copyright and the expressed desire to destroy any film lest it be enjoyed by a collector. By the time the copyright expires who will be alive who wants to see it, except for a stray researcher or two.

Long before Tony Slides "Nitrate Won't Wait", I wondered WHO films were being preserved for. Surely NOT our generation. A museum is a wonderful place of things of beauty from a dead past. Motion pictures on the other hand can spring to life. At "our" Museum MOMA, most of what goes in becomes a "lost" film.

It should be the purpose of every archive not only to save for the future, but to share what remains of the past.

It is a sad commentary that the the present generation who truly love the silent era, will be denied the opportunity in their lifetime to see what little as survived the ill-treatment by Hollywood.

What is being done to instill interest in upcoming generations? Aside from the occasional Turner or AMC presentations they get exposed to TV or videotapes or poor quality. What a turn off. If they only knew how vibrant those images could be, how those silents could "talk" to you. Maybe it would spark some interest in only a few, but many fires start with a small spark.

My love affair with silents began when I was around 8 years old. But then I was watching nitrate prints in all their toned glory. I wonder if I had been exposed to 8mm first, would there had bee a spark. Looking back the odds aren't good.

The solution to the problem of access, that's a tough one. Obviously while there is passionate interest in old films the actual market is very limited. With low unit sales, smaller distributors that fill the niche markets might be used.

Archives could licence "authorized" releases with a percentage of each sale remitted to the archive in question. Because of video piracy, a home video industry advertising/ education announcement should be required of each distributor to alert the buying public as to the quality a preservation purposes of the authorized releases.

To keep the distributors honest and detect bootlegs, a copyrighted or trade-marked embossed or hologram sticker should be affixed to each tape or box, for authentication and sales count. Not to be overlooked woulf be minumun requirements for a musical score, introductory text, packaging and last but not least picture quality. A "Save The Film" or "Preserve The Past" campaign could raise public awarness and needed cash for preservation.

I have addressed only one aspect of the access subject. The other I wish to briefly address is the loaning of prints for serious film groups.

Eastman House in a turnaround from its policies of years ago is very active. The Library of Congress is carrying on availability, with minor changes, what the AFI started years ago. UCLA is highly visible with their restoration and screening programs touted in true Hollywood fashion. Who knows, someday the others may decide to share their treasures more openly.

In closing, may I reiterate. Where public money is used, the public should have access to the best material possible. The trick is to make it as painless and profitable as possible to the archives.

Thank you.

Sincerely,



Dennis R. Atkinson