

We've all heard many times that we've already lost 50% of the films made before 1950... that our nitrate heritage is turning to powder before our eyes, while budgets and time are running out. This is all true. However, with little mention of our post-50s films, this perpetuates the myth that film preservation is dedicated to our remote past - something that belongs in museums. Further it gives the impression that all of these nitrate films simply decomposed or burned while attempts were being made to archive them. This is untrue. Most of the early films did not survive because of wholesale junking by the studios. There was no thought of ever saving these films. They simply took up needed vault space and were expensive to house. There also seems to be a feeling that we must save it all. Especially today with limited funding, that seems an incredible waste. Like art and the written word, there was as much junk film produced during the first half of the century as is being produced currently. It simply isn't all worth saving.

If our greatest problem were nitrate, then my chosen work in the archival field would be incomparably simple. But it's not. In 1988, while completing work on David Lean's "Lawrence of Arabia," I was asked to look into "Tom Jones," the 1963 Academy Award winning Best Picture - newer than "Lawrence" by only one year. Try as I did, searching vaults worldwide, the best that I could do for friends at Goldwyn, was to come up with a single dye transfer Technicolor print with an Italian soundtrack. It was so worn that it could not be used for duplication.

I spoke with the individual responsible for the protection of the British United Artist releases. He told me that the feeling, when "Tom Jones" was in post-production, was that it wouldn't amount to anything. A judgment call. UA never made b&w master protection separations (seps, also known as YCMs or RGBs) to back up the original negative. Today, a proper print of "Tom Jones" cannot be produced.

Although I don't necessarily have the answers to our preservation problems, I can at least raise or help re-evaluate the questions.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

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MOTION PICTURE, BROADCASTING
AND RECORDED SOUND DIVISION

THE BLACK AND WHITE SEPARATION FOLLIES

Since the early fifties, when three strip Technicolor ceased production, we have been dealing with the Eastman color negative. There's nothing inherently wrong with this material except that it fades. Although Eastman Kodak has done its homework in the last decade, we have lost the original negatives to almost every film of the 50s into the 60s. Films of the 70s now show signs of fading.

"Lawrence," a 1961-2 production, photographed in Eastman color and processed by Technicolor (London) was fortunate. For some reason the work done at that laboratory seems to survive years longer than film processed elsewhere. "Lawrence" was still in good enough shape, although the negative was cracked and falling to pieces, that new color protection materials could be produced. The camera negative on Universal's 1960 "Spartacus" was totally faded; unusable. Nothing could be done to produce any printing material from that element. We worked from black and white separations, the majority of which had been produced defectively. I won't go into the problems that were encountered, but the lesson learned was simple and dramatic.

No one knows what materials can be produced from protection masters unless they've been printed. Not selectively tested or viewed on a Rank, but printed. This should be done before the negatives that they protect are no longer viable printing elements. If the protection is defective and the negatives have gone, nothing further can be done.

The large format films (65/70mm, Technirama, etc.) are in the highest risk group. Since most 70mm prints were made directly from the camera negatives, many are extremely worn. Most large format masters are untested. It's going to be a treat when someone pulls the separation positives on some of the epics. They probably won't register very well and they are generally not backed up by large format color interpositives of recent vintage.

Seps, when produced, were routinely vaulted and forgotten, assuming they would yield beautiful results when needed. We now know that this simply isn't accurate in all cases. Many original negatives still have not been protected.

I'll repeat it in case the point hasn't been made. Every film which is backed up by these materials should be pulled from vaults and printed to see what they yield. Without doing so, we may have no protection for the last forty years of film history. Every film worth saving which has not been backed up must be looked into with immediacy.

REJUVENATION AND SCRATCH REMOVAL

Harris' single hard and fast rule stated unequivocally is "don't rejuvenate original negatives." Don't put chemicals on preservation materials. This will go against everything that you'll hear from those representing rejuvenation or scratch removal vendors. They'll tell you that the panacea for saving our film heritage is coating it with chemicals. There is a problem right now with the original camera negative of a well-known 1968 film. Someone allowed the negative to be chemically treated, then a lab wet-gated the footage. That film is now a solid block. We're trying to ease it apart and remove the coating without the emulsion coming off.

Rejuvenation causes film to shrink, warp and shed its emulsion. Particles of dirt and dust are caught under the coatings and become a part of the picture never envisioned by the director of photography.

QUALITY

The overall quality of preservation work done by some vendors is a joke. What they produce is generally in the "good enough to get us paid" category. Once materials are delivered, they are accepted. This is a reason why we're still playing with nitrate. Although much preservation material was produced before the advent of "wet-gate" printing, and therefore wear was more apparent, there were still materials produced after this process was available which just wasn't done professionally. If someone fifteen or twenty years ago had made decent materials on pictures like "Casablanca," they would look better than they do and they wouldn't have to be constantly redone today. There aren't adequate materials produced on hundreds of films - but there are materials. You can generalize that the more popular the film, the worse shape it's going to be in. Quality is a problem that's been there for decades. Nitrate is preserved once, then again, and then possibly a third time the right way. Original negatives are sometimes pulled for a non-preservation element to be used for a video transfer. This places wear and fade on the negative without accomplishing anything.

One final point on this subject - once materials are preserved properly, that does NOT mean that any of the original nitrate should be junked. I've got to assume that today's technology will be constantly supplanted in the future with new means of creating even higher quality preservation materials. You never want your finest surviving asset to be a dupe, when you can have the luxury of going back to an original element.

If someone asked what I would do if I could control all film preservation for one year, my initial answer would be very simple. "Nothing."

I'd shut it down.

Completely.

Vendors should be checked for quality and accredited to do preservation work, rather than just offering it on rate cards. Preservation work should not be synonymous with lab work. Simply producing a set of separation masters doesn't mean that a film is preserved. Producing a fine grain from a nitrate original doesn't mean that it's preserved. All these materials have to be produced correctly, not just produced, shipped, and billed.

There are too many situations in which the wrong material is produced from the wrong material. This does nothing more than spend preservation dollars for masturbatory or "voodoo" preservation. All this junk has to be stored, placed on databases and occasionally checked. But it will always be junk. Years from now, someone will come along and wonder why it was produced. But the good materials will already be gone.

LOOKS GREAT TO ME!

Some people who work in preservation don't know what a preserved or restored film should look and sound like. This is exacerbated by the fact that few titles have an original print. Without a reference print you have no idea what the intentions of the filmmakers were regarding color, densities, contrast, or even major points like day for night scenes. When a reference print is available, it may not be an approved print. It could well be left over from a re-issue or have survived as a lab reject.

Work is accepted which should be rejected, because those in control are either too lazy or just not knowledgeable enough to know what to do. People with a background in business as well film history, film elements and lab techniques should be running motion picture asset protection programs.

WHAT'S REALLY IN THE CANS

Studios and rental vaults are now placing inventory on computer. Sometimes, as in the case of Universal, people actually open cans, inspect and listen to material. All too often, these inventories are simply perpetuated error. An element is incorrectly listed on a label insecurely attached to a can, then transferred to a card, and then years later from the card to computer, by someone who can't quite decipher the original handwriting. All this with never a look back at the actual materials, especially if they are in another country or vaulted underground. There have been too many occurrences in which I've called someone to see if they have protection on a long version or stereo tracks, only to be told the film was monaural or that there was no long version. It's simply bad record keeping.

If we're really going to take all this seriously, now is probably a good time to begin. If we don't, here's what we can do. Make a list of films produced between 1953 and 1980. Draw a line around 1965. That's the date before which, it's safe to assume, we won't be able to protect anything much longer unless it's already protected. Take a look at the titles, then dismiss every great film that you'd like to share with your children or grandchildren - or possibly just see again. They aren't going to be there when we want them. It's as simple as that. Either we do something now, and do it right, or let's forget it all. It will soon be just so much junk.

ROBERT A. HARRIS

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This memo is offered as an attachment to the statement entitled "Preservation Without Access is Pointless" by The Committee for Film Preservation and Public Access.

As I have added my signature to the above mentioned statement, I am in general agreement with the ideas that it expresses. However, I would like to make the following annotations.

I believe that an agreement or legislation should be created which, although not restricting properly registered titles from going into the public domain at the end of their 75 year term, could lend added protection to studios and independent copyright holders who have donated their original materials to the Library of Congress or other accredited archives.

This added protection would automatically come into play if two things occur.

The owner of the materials would:

- A. Continue to create (at their own expense - not publicly funded) new preservation materials which would guarantee the survival of the works for the future, and;
- B. Continue to keep available in film and or video, top quality copies of the original work.

I would suggest that added protection received by the copyright holder be the continued restriction of public domain use of publicly held preservation materials.

If we allow prime contributed preservation materials to be used freely, the copyright holder would not only have little to gain by continued investment in preservation, but would be damaged by their own activities as donors. If, however, we give something back to the copyright holder for preserving their own material, it could ease the preservation onus on public funds.

I would further suggest that donors be given a window of use, possibly ten or fifteen years after the end of copyright protection, to access their original materials. In the case of the studios, the sheer number of titles to be accessed would prevent them from doing so over a short period of time. This window would remain open for their sole use as long as titles are accessed on a continuing basis.

To take a specific example, MCA / Universal recently accessed materials for their 1930 "Dracula" and 1931 "Frankenstein" among other titles. They produced superb quality restorations on films which are due to go into the public domain in only twelve years. In the face of this preservation activity, it would seem blatantly unfair to make their prime materials available for public domain use because the donor chose to allow them to survive outside of their own auspices.

How could we in good conscience or in good business ethics, take a position which would harm any donor, whose ultimate business might have been better served to junk their nitrate when they originally converted it to safety, rather than allow it to be deposited and preserved?

Access to materials deposited by donor corporations which either no longer exist or are in no way accessed or preserved by their owners on a continuing basis should be given to the public without restriction, provided that normal archival guidelines are followed.

ROBERT A. HARRIS