

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

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Statement by
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From its inception in 1935, The Museum of Modern Art Film Department has built a film archive comprising more than 12,000 titles, spanning the history of filmmaking from 1893 to films produced in 1992. While the collection is international in scope, the majority of its titles were produced in the United States; the collection principally includes short and feature-length narratives, documentaries, experimental and animation films, acquired from a wide variety of studios, producers, distributors, directors, actors, artists, and others.

The collection is noteworthy for its holdings of film's early history, of the silent era. The Museum acquired all the surviving original negatives of the Edison Company and the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company (which include some 400 short films directed by D. W. Griffith), as well as films of the Vitagraph Company, negatives and prints of Griffith's feature films, and films of Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Harold Lloyd, William S. Hart, and others. These "silent" films, which have proved invaluable for the study of the history and culture of our times, over the years have been made available to scholars, filmmakers, and archives. They require extensive ongoing preservation and proper care.

The Museum's archive, like those at the Library of Congress, George Eastman House, and UCLA, also has acquired film materials from still-active film and television companies, such as its holdings of nearly 400 Fox films (donated by Fox) and the bulk of the David O. Selznick productions (donated by ABC). The companies retain rights governing exhibition, access, and copying. It is important to emphasize that these film materials, which are preserved with funds from government and private sources, are available to the rightsholders, who can, and do, make new film and video printing materials for rerelease, including worldwide telecasting and home video marketing.

Preservation is often thought of as a process whereby great moments of lost footage are cannily reinserted just where the director originally wanted them. Preservation is far more complex: it requires great research and planning to locate and acquire film materials; inspect and analyze their condition; catalog historical and condition data; assemble materials for copying or restoration in labs and supervise the various stages of work; provide proper storage, handling, and access; and make prints for public viewing. That is what preservation is all about.

Storage is a key factor in the preservation effort. Most films in archives today, whether nitrate or acetate, preprint materials or prints, have been deposited therein principally to save donors the cost of long-term storage. Archivists and historians have been grateful to acquire these materials, in order that they may be protected, studied, and seen by future generations, and have often sought, but seldom received, funds from depositors for the care and keeping of the materials. Archives do insist on the right to make preservation materials which will be the property of the archives; depositors may have one-time access to these preservation materials, and of course they retain access to their original donations. Archives take the long view, that the films must be protected; depositors rid themselves of expense and responsibility, but retain access and exploitation rights.

This partnership has resulted in the deposit to four American archives of varying but significant holdings of Columbia, Universal, Warner Bros., RKO, Disney, MGM, and Twentieth Century-Fox materials, among the major studios.

As early as 1936, the Museum and the film companies signed an agreement, whose principal provisions were that the Museum might make prints, at its expense, from any of the negatives held by the companies; that such prints were to be used both within and outside the Museum's walls for strictly educational purposes. The Museum subsequently developed a Circulating Film Library, which distributes films primarily in 16mm to schools, universities, libraries, festivals, and archives. Companies withdrew their prints from the library when commercial distributors started to handle films of the past; expanding in other areas, the library today comprises over 1100 titles of silent American and European films, documentaries, and experimental films, and is a valued resource for film study.

The only American archive to have such a circulating program, the Museum's library serves as an outlet for the distribution of selected films preserved, or produced or acquired, by its own film archive as well as by George Eastman House, National Film Board of Canada, British Film Institute Production Board, American Federation of Arts, and Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. The library is run at a break-even budget and pays royalties to all rightsholders.

The Museum's film archive preserves up to 100 titles each year, first those considered emergencies, and then shorts and features according to a priorities list that must remain fluid, varying with available lab capabilities, staff time, and funding. Funds are sought from many sources: the National Endowment for the Arts has been a steady source, and its support is matched by two endowment funds, by gifts solicited from individual and corporate donors, and by benefits. The New York State Council on the Arts has discontinued its annual grants for preservation, cutting entirely an important source for the state's three film archives.

It is ironic that as public awareness of the importance of preservation has broadened, it has become increasingly difficult to raise funds to support film projects, in part because government and corporate funding has shrunk during the past three years, and in part because almost everyone who has supported film preservation asks the questions: Aren't the studios funding the archives? Aren't they realizing a profit from the rerelease of films on video?

Several film companies have been copying their original materials, either before donating them to archives, or borrowing them back temporarily; as they no longer maintain their own labs, the companies now depend upon the same labs the archives have long supported. Those labs doing archival-quality work have expanded to accommodate increased orders from both archives and companies; the work is, in nearly every instance, customized, necessitating highly skilled staff and often the adaptation or construction of specialized equipment. Lab preservation work simply cannot be rushed, and labs must seek to balance the needs of their customers, the problem of training--and keeping--staff, the upgrading of equipment, and the often widely varying types and levels of copying and reconstruction. As preservation of sound films becomes more and more a priority, sound restoration processes must be developed, and costs of sound restoration are escalating. Archives rarely have sufficient skilled staff to supervise and carry out complex preservation programs. Training is entirely on the job--there are no graduate school courses or trainee or internship programs in film conservation, and both archives and labs are crying out for talented people who will follow a career in conservation. The best are overworked and have little time to train others, and funds are not available to support adequate staffing levels.

Of no less importance is the absolute necessity of providing temperature and humidity-controlled storage environments for the long-term health of film materials, managed by trained staff and outfitted with computerized inventory control systems. The Museum's archive is focusing on this priority at present, which has created substantial funding needs and has burdened staff with heavy workloads in research, planning, and development.

Unlike the film companies, archives never reap a profit from their work, and in fact have sometimes been viewed by the companies as charities. But we do not want to be perceived as being outside the mainstream of the world of film production and distribution: we want films to be preserved so that they may be seen; we want to provide, indeed to improve, access to films by a broad public; we want films to make a profitable return to their makers. What we want most of all is to be partners in this effort, to serve as consultants on issues on which we have expertise: exhibition, restoration, audience development, and distribution.

What I and my colleagues in the archives most enjoy in our work is our collaboration, our partnership with a variety of professionals to realize mutual goals. I would like to see a roster of

collaborative programs established by archives and companies to get the job done. There are two programs in which we currently participate that could serve as models for implementation by companies: the joint Sony\Columbia-archive committee to restore Columbia titles, and the Warhol Foundation-Whitney Museum-Museum of Modern Art project to preserve the films of Andy Warhol.

Michael Schulhof established a committee of senior officers from Sony Entertainment and Columbia Pictures and representatives of three major archives, to jointly oversee a long-term plan to preserve Columbia Pictures productions. Each archive works directly with Columbia staff, and the company covers the cost of lab work and contributes to each archive's staff and research needs. Columbia receives restored original materials and makes new printing materials, to be used for theatrical rerelease and television and video release. All partners learn much from this program, and a substantive body of work is being preserved. It is a model of collaboration for others to follow.

We have recently completed the preservation of On the Waterfront, one of Columbia's most prestigious films. An important aspect of this cooperative undertaking is that for the first time we are working with the studio on a film of the post-nitrate era, more than four decades of filmmaking of which many, many motion pictures need safeguarding, in particular, elements of color and sound. My colleague Peter Williamson has pointed out that no archive is routinely receiving high-quality pre-print material; at best, we are given prints. It would seem to be advantageous for archives to receive pre-print on films before they develop problems requiring extensive preservation and restoration; deposit agreements, as always, would protect rightsholders' interests, and in the long term the care of these films could be less costly.

The Museum has acquired prints and negatives of Andy Warhol's films, a deposit authorized by the artist before his death. The Museum has undertaken not only the preservation of the films, but, at the request of the Warhol Foundation, non-theatrical access to them as well. The Whitney Museum collaborates on research and cataloguing, essential for determining the versions to be restored. Copies of preserved titles are distributed by the Museum's Circulating Library; part of the income earned is used to support the library and other programs in the Department of Film, as is a multi-year grant from the Warhol Foundation. The films' rightsholders have access to the original and the preserved materials, and will develop marketing strategies for the films in theatrical and video distribution.

In these as in other cases, the Department of Film is an active partner in the effort to distribute films in quality condition. This is a task we willingly perform. I will close on a small but not unimportant point: people outside the preservation loop, as it were, voice their concern that archives are duplicating each other's preservation efforts. I am always puzzled by this concern, because it is too rare an occurrence: first, we tell each other,

and the National Endowment for the Arts, what we are preserving, and second, there isn't money to be wasted on duplication. Only in the area of cataloguing historical data, do I believe we have duplicated efforts, for a variety of institutional and technical reasons. But we must put aside this notion about duplication, and support instead our efforts to get to the films that most urgently need care.