

## *Preserving the Past on Film: Problems for the Archivist*

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Film is not particularly new, but it is still a recent enough development in archival terms to confront archivists with basic problems not faced in quite the same way before. The problems stem from the nature of the medium itself and from the uses to which the films might be put in the future by historians, film and television producers, and cinema students and researchers. In general, a film archives has three basic functions: to document an art form; to record a mass medium; and to be the repository for motion picture images of real people, events, and places. It is tempting to add a fourth function, that film archives are expected to house visual records for future use by historians, but this activity is really bound up with the three main categories which, of course, are not mutually exclusive. Although most film and television records will fall neatly into one of them, there is no reason why a given document could not be a work of art seen by millions of people which also records real events. An example of such a film is *Triumph of the Will*, sponsored by the Nazi party and released in 1935.

While film has acquired recognition as an art form deserving serious study, the reasons for this are not the same as for photographs. There are films that show only "real" events and people in a manner that would call for the title "Art" to be conferred upon them, as well as abstract films and other experimental works which claim that title in a manner analogous to that in which the aesthetic qualities of photographs are established. But the essential distinction between films and photographs, apart from the obvious fact that films produce the illusion of motion, is that the majority of films produced are fictional accounts. The study of the art of the cinema deals primarily with films which tell a story, and in most cases there is no claim that the story is factually based.

The question then arises why archivists should bother to collect and preserve works of fiction. There are several reasons, some of which are best explained through comparison with other types of records once the point has been made that no one else does the job with a view to permanent preservation. There are private collectors, but in one way or another access to their holdings is restricted. Cinematheques occasionally perform some of the functions of archives, but their usual primary aim of showing their holdings as often and as widely as possible is antithetical to preservation

since film is easily damaged by projection. Other organizations, such as university and school film libraries, collect films, but also for projection rather than preservation.

In the absence of an official repository in Canada analogous to the National Library for the legal deposit of motion pictures, the National Film Archives of the Public Archives of Canada has had to take the initiative in collecting and preserving film. Normally, films are produced, released, lead a more or less profitable commercial life, and then are consigned to the laboratories, basements and closets of the nation. Once a Canadian feature film has completed its usually short commercial run it becomes, quite simply, unavailable. Many such films are retired from service after the printing of no more than two or three distribution copies. Even photographs are not subject to the same attrition rate as motion picture films partly because many galleries do make an effort to collect and display the work of our better known photographers. Examining a photograph does not subject it to the same wear and tear as running a motion picture or a videotape through a viewing machine.

The mere acquisition of a film is usually not adequate because repeated viewing militates against its survival. While it is not within the scope of this article to explore the intricacies of film preservation, the point should be made that a copy of some form must be made for reference requirements, an expense which compounds the already high acquisition costs.<sup>1</sup> Servicing film for archival purposes is an expensive undertaking, so costly that neither of Canada's two largest publicly funded production agencies, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and the National Film Board, were ever given a mandate to preserve the documents they create. While both organizations have made efforts in spite of the lack of funds for activities related to preservation, systematic and accidental losses are still regular occurrences. Consequently, archivists are collecting film, whether works of fiction or not.

The nature of the evolution of film archives partly explains why they hold fiction. Most of the world's film archives have resulted not from an extension of the work usually associated with archives, but rather from an independent effort to gain respectability for the film medium.<sup>2</sup> The major impetus behind the establishment of film archives came in the 1930s from groups whose main interest was the promotion of motion pictures as an art form. While the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) states that its main goal is the preservation of the film as art and historical document, most members have in practice over the years placed a much greater emphasis on the former.

Within this context, the National Film Archives has so far found it very

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1 Several helpful works on this subject are: Herbert Vockmann, *Film Preservation* (London, 1965); Ralph N. Sargent, *Preserving the Moving Image* (Washington, 1974); and Clive Coultass, "Film Preservation: The Archives," in *The Historian and Film*, ed. Paul Smith (New York, 1976).

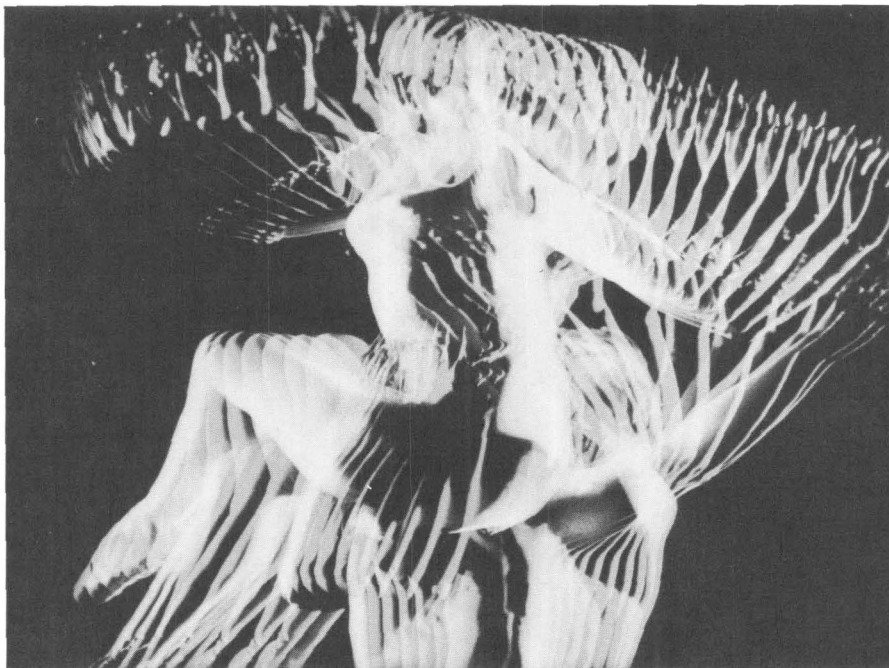
2 For example, the National Film Archive in London, England, exists as a division of the British Film Institute; it did not develop out of the interests of traditionally based archives.



*A frame enlargement from Robert J. Flaherty's 1922 documentary Nanook of the North. Flaherty was born in the United States but lived for several years in the Lake of the Woods region and also spent several years at Upper Canada College. The film was sponsored by Révillon Frères for publicity purposes, but it became instead an artistic landmark of the cinema. (All photographs in this article are from the motion picture stills collection of the National Film Archives, Public Archives of Canada.)*

difficult to devise satisfactory selection criteria for fiction films. Perhaps some standards could be based on factors such as awards won, artistic merit, social impact, National Film Board or Canadian Film Development Corporation participation, or the importance of subject matter to Canadian society in general, but two major considerations throw such criteria into doubt. One is that people are so often wrong in their judgement of contemporary art of any kind; the other is the very small output of Canadian-produced feature films. This latter fact opens the attractive possibility of preserving all Canadian feature productions.

The most difficult problem, then, becomes not selecting from Canadian films, but rather determining what constitutes a Canadian production. Do these include, for example, films starring Florence Lawrence, Mary Pickford or Christopher Plummer, or films directed by Sidney Olcott, Norman Jewison, or Sidney Furie, or produced by Mack Sennett? The list of Canadians working abroad in the film world is extremely long. No one seems to feel that Mavis Gallant should return from France to set her stories in Canada, or that Luis Bunuel's films are not Spanish because of his long absence from Spain. What of the Irishman who came to Canada, became a



*From Pas de Deux (1967), one of Norman McLaren's many works of art on film.*

citizen, and moved to California? Should he have remained eligible for a Governor General's award? Some people complained, but Brian Moore did get the award. Unlike the act of writing, the making of a feature film is rarely a solitary activity. It is a collaborative effort more like the production of an automobile than the writing of a book. The film writer is frequently but one of many contributors and is not usually even considered to be the most important, for this distinction is reserved more often than not for the director. Furthermore, a film could be written and directed by Canadians, star Canadians, but because it was produced in Hollywood, be judged not worthy of archival retention. Thus, determining how much Canadian involvement is required for a film to merit inclusion in the collections of the National Film Archives is not at all straightforward.

In fact, the Archives relies less on such evaluations and analyses than on the complex point system which has been devised by the Department of the Secretary of State to determine eligibility for investors' tax write-offs. For the moment, at least, what is acceptable to Revenue Canada and the Secretary of State is good enough for the Archives. No such selection process can be perfect, however, and "certified Canadian" films produced for American television have recently been received which, while they were shot in Canada with backing from Canadian investors, were written and directed by Americans, starred Americans, and presented stories set in the United States. The existence of international co-productions further clouds the matter, and the National Film Archives is left in the position of failing to



*Donald Sutherland in a scene from M.A.S.H. (1969). Should the archives ignore his work in this and other foreign productions?*



*William S. Hart in O'Malley of the Mounted (1921), one of the hundreds of mounted police movies produced in Hollywood.*

acquire many British, French and American films which reveal a great deal about the careers of some of our better-known actors, writers and directors. Such films are acquired only if they are "made in Canada."

Foreign films depicting Canadian subjects, ranging from *Nanook of the North* to *O'Malley of the Mounted*, represent another problem area. These types of films are listed in Pierre Berton's *Hollywood's Canada*.<sup>3</sup> Although rarely in the art film category, they do provide some understanding of how a mass medium influences popular ideas about a country. If a film about Canada is seen by millions of viewers both in Canada and abroad, surely it makes little difference where the film was made as far as the study of mass communications is concerned, and the work's impact is no less proper subject matter for Canadian scholars.

In almost any acquisition field, an archivist must consider material produced abroad with no obvious relevance to Canada. For film, apart from the fact that commercial considerations alone are likely to determine what will be available to Canadian film students and scholars, there appears at first sight to be no major reason why Canada should play any preservation role. Yet there is no repository for international cinema in Canada analogous to the large collections of foreign books found in our extensive library

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Berton, *Hollywood's Canada* (Toronto, 1975).

systems. Should Canadian film students and scholars have to go abroad to undertake serious work in their chosen discipline? Since research is one of the principal pillars of archives, perhaps the Public Archives of Canada should expand its collection to include foreign films, bringing about obvious economies for researchers.

Acquiring foreign films for research purposes could have incidental benefits in the area of preservation, since accidents of history frequently control the rate of survival of a country's film heritage. There are numerous cases of films repatriated to a country from abroad when war, politics, fires, floods and other unforeseen problems caused serious damage or total loss in the country of origin. Among the many films destroyed by the National Film Board fire of 1967 were some of its best-known documentaries from the *World in Action* and *Canada Carries On* series. Fortunately, more than eighty have since been repatriated from the United States. Had American agencies not seen fit to keep foreign films, a revealing element of the Canadian heritage would have been lost forever.

In the art film category, an important question has been why archives should preserve this type of film at all, whatever the country of origin. In our next category, this question need not be probed because to document film and television as media of mass communication is clearly to maintain



*A shot from Sergei Eisenstein's Strike (1924). Sequences from his historical recreations of revolutionary Russia have been presented in documentary and compilation films as authentic footage.*



*A scene from Canada's first feature film, Evangeline, made in the Annapolis Valley in 1913. This and a few other photographs are all that remain of this lost film.*

records of major forces shaping modern societies. The practice of selecting and preserving these records is perhaps the most difficult task of any film archives. Although it is in this category that popular culture, popular history, propaganda and other manifestations which may emanate from a culture or have an influence upon it are mainly to be found, the volume is large and there are few guidelines or established practices. The reasons for the importance of these films have little to do with any intrinsic merit, but everything to do with their possible influence on large numbers of viewers. Thus any broadcast or film, regardless of its subject matter—from TV game show to political speech—may fit into this category. John Grierson once wrote:

Cinema is, by permission of our queer lop-sided and undisciplined system of society, a very haphazard affair, the effects and achievements of which are almost always dictated by the mind of the profit-monger. To any body of men interested in the better shaping of the world its influence is a serious matter. By romanticising and dramatising the issues of life, even by choosing the issues it will dramatisate, it creates or crystallises the loyalties on which people make their decisions. This, in turn, has a great deal to do with public opinions.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore archivists find themselves in the peculiar position of recommending the preservation of material for which almost no one would claim any

<sup>4</sup> Forsyth Hardy, ed., *Grierson on Documentary* (London, 1946), p. 28



artistic or cultural value simply because a great many people spent a lot of time watching and listening to it.

No doubt much cultural history is founded upon generalizations derived from the conscious and unconscious biases of those who select material for preservation. If, during the next two hundred years, American archivists were to select only the very best of films produced from 1928 to 1960, future generations might well develop as worshipful an attitude toward Hollywood as ours for ancient Athens. The problems of selection and preservation are greatest for television because of the enormous volume of material produced. Existing network criteria for keeping their own material lean heavily toward their most cultured and intellectual efforts, presenting an irony of preservation for future historians attempting to reconstruct our social history, especially in view of the overwhelming amount of mediocrity broadcast to our society. Does it matter that far fewer people saw the television play so carefully preserved than sat transfixed by a vacuous game show which was so callously erased? It might matter a great deal when our period is studied. Should we then preserve vast quantities of our future schlock? Not really, for the present network practice of keeping only a few examples of certain types of series is basically sound. The idea is that if you have seen one Tommy Hunter show, or perhaps two, then you've seen them all. This sort of arbitrary sampling process is, of course, inapplicable to other types of production such as news and public affairs.

Although it has long been assumed that the finest literary works of most countries ought to be available in our libraries, the job of making foreign television productions available to Canadians will be even more difficult than for film in the immediate future. It is simply too expensive to acquire and maintain such records. This is an irony since Canadians are exposed to more American than Canadian programming. A historian in the twenty-first century studying programmes typical of what most English-speaking Canadians were watching during the 1970s would probably have to go to the United States to find out, because Canadian archives would not be able to provide copies of "Happy Days," "Kojak," or "The Gong Show"—a shortcoming many might consider a blessing. The assumption is, of course, that each country is responsible for the preservation of its own television productions. If, however, technological breakthroughs such as those described by Sam Kula in an earlier issue of *Archivaria*<sup>5</sup> were to lead to the development of inexpensive copies of television programmes, it might be unnecessary for archives to take on the task of acquiring foreign television shows. Such programmes would then be within the reach of libraries at costs comparable to book prices, and would be subject to virtually no deterioration through use. But with today's technology, the question remains whether Canadian archives should acquire foreign mass media film and television productions *now*. Without pretending to resolve this critical issue, it may simply be reported that the National Film Archives does not now acquire any foreign television programmes, even though many Canadians are involved in their production as they are with films. Nevertheless,

<sup>5</sup> Sam Kula, "Optical Memories: Archival Storage System of the Future, or More Pie in the Sky?," *Archivaria* 4 (Summer 1977): 43-48.



*Several scenes from the 1927-28 Canadian feature film Carry On Sergeant! were used in the 1942 National Film Board production Those Other Days, which was never released. Many wartime Film Board productions pillaged films from all over the world in a hurried attempt to produce propaganda, which was generally effective.*

some foreign films of this type are acquired, largely because of the impossibility of distinguishing film as mass medium from film as art.

The third category, which includes what might loosely be called "actuality" films or television programmes, covers a wide range of material and raises problems different from those presented in the other two categories. It includes home movies and other shots of people, places and artifacts, as well as aspects of sports, news and political coverage which could also be considered as part of the second category. This type of actuality film presents problems of authentication at the selection stage. With the possible exception of negative retouching, motion pictures are subject to all the techniques of tampering to which photographs are prone,<sup>6</sup> as well as others ranging from sound effects and narration tracks to camera angles, all of which may distort the events being recorded. Although a considerable literature has developed about the possible misuses of film in compilation films, documentaries and newsreels,<sup>7</sup> too much has been made of this capacity for deception. Misuses occur, but film is no more subject to abuse

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Peter Robertson, "More than Meets the Eye," *Archivaria* 2 (Summer 1976): 33-43.

<sup>7</sup> Jay Leyda, *Films Beget Films* (London, 1964).

than any other document. Any historian may misuse manuscript material to suit the thesis of his choice, but this is no fault of the documents themselves, nor does it create problems of authentication for an archivist. A recent article by Clive Coultass,<sup>8</sup> Keeper of the Department of Film at the Imperial War Museum in England, explores the matter of actuality footage and its authentication through the example of a cameraman at the front who subsequently wrote about his wartime experiences and, it appears, claimed to have shot certain events closer to the fighting than he really had been.<sup>9</sup> Although the case is an interesting one, Coultass fails to draw the obvious conclusion from his description of the discovery of the alleged falsification. The most interesting feature of the case is that it was the film itself that led people to doubt the cameraman's account. The film was, to a degree, self-authenticating (or self-falsifying) because it was difficult for the viewers to believe from the evidence of the film itself that the shots were what the cameraman professed. Re-enacted scenes are usually even easier to detect. The National Film Board's *Canada at War* series, released in 1962, contains many shots of re-enacted events intercut with real footage; great powers of observation are not needed to distinguish the former from the latter. Acceptance of the film at face value would require the viewer to believe cameramen had hidden in various strongholds in the midst of enemy forces to await the arrival of the first troops, thus obtaining shots of Allied soldiers breaking down doors and bursting into rooms to shoot German soldiers who had not noticed the presence of cameramen.

In selecting actuality footage, archivists ought to grade material as authentic, re-enactment or, if there is some doubt, "purported" or "possibly." In most instances, there are fewer problems than might be anticipated. The difficulties arise later when producers searching through the archives fail to find a specific shot and substitute a similar shot instead. While archivists may try to discourage such practice, the misuse of resources is not something that can easily be controlled.

One problem we generally do not have in this third category is that of establishing Canadian content. It really does not matter what was the nationality of those involved in making the film or how many Canadian viewers may have seen it. The subject matter of the film alone suffices to determine its relevance to Canada.

When the families of the millions of people who have owned super 8 mm cameras begin to donate or to offer to sell films to repositories, quantity alone will be a serious problem. While we can be fairly flexible now in our criteria for accepting the home movies of those wealthy enough to have owned 16 mm equipment, the volume to come of the super 8 mm, along with the expenses involved in making copies, will force a highly selective approach as well as a more stringent application of the available selection criteria. For example, it does not take many viewings of home movies before an archivist concludes that a long shot of the Rocky Mountains

8 Clive Coultass, "Film as an Historical Source: It's Use and Abuse," *Archives* 8, no. 57 (Spring 1977): 12-19.

9 Such falsification has also been imposed on the photographic record. See Robertson, "More than Meets the Eye."

taken in 1936 looks very much like the same mountains shot in 1978, or that a 1922 beaver is indistinguishable from the beaver of today. Home movies, as well as other actuality films, are most useful when they show persons, places and artifacts of the past that can be dated through means other than statements from memory by the donor. While people generally have no reason to lie about the content and dates of their films, they may make mistakes. In any case, a shot which provides its own internal evidence is of much greater value than one which does not. Most home movies contain at least some shots of datable artifacts such as clothes, cars and airplanes, and these usually permit the dating of other shots since most home movies remain unedited. Technical information about the film stock may also be of use in dating films.

In spite of the various difficulties involved and the potential for subsequent misuse, actuality films are really the easiest to select. Decisions are based on factors such as availability of funds, rarity of material on a subject, importance of the content, and quality of the shooting. Rarely is the person who photographed the material an important consideration. While the volume of amateur material will be a formidable problem, a substantial sample should be preserved as it often shows events in a manner refreshingly uncontrived and revealingly different from that of professional productions. The professionally produced film shows the world in a way which has its own particular detachment from reality. Alfred Hitchcock once said that movies ought to be "life with the dull bits cut out."<sup>10</sup> While this comment was directed at fiction films, it is also applicable to much professionally shot actuality footage. Home movies with the dull bits left in usefully offset the gloss of the professional and will provide certain significant elements to researchers in the future.

The question of the ultimate use of the film and television records preserved in archives is inseparably related to selection. While the use of film by researchers in the disciplines of cinema studies and mass communications probably needs little elaboration, the utility of these records for historians should at least be touched upon here. Much has been written over the years about the importance of film to the study of history. D.W. Griffith wrote in 1921:

Soon after the release of my first war picture, *Hearts of the World*, I received a letter from an eminent historian. I shall always treasure the letter, especially for this paragraph: "History must hereafter be divided into four epochs: the Stone Age, the Bronze Age, the Age of the Printed Page—and the Film Age. In a single picture you have produced a vital human record that embodies the spirit and the soul of the war with deeper reality than all the books combined."<sup>11</sup>

Many similar statements have been made, especially during the early years of the motion picture. A more balanced assessment appears in a recent collection of papers entitled *The Historian and Film*.<sup>12</sup> During the past three

<sup>10</sup> François Truffaut, *Hitchcock* (New York, 1967), p. 71.

<sup>11</sup> D.W. Griffith, "Motion Pictures: The Miracle of Modern Photography," *Mentor* (July 1921): 1.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Smith, ed., *The Historian and Film* (New York, 1976).

years, the National Film Archives has served numerous film and television producers, many students and teachers of cinema, and even one art student who happened to learn that a film shot by the painter who was the subject of his thesis was housed at the archives. Yet, with the exception of one writer of popular history, no historians have been reported on the premises with the intention of doing research using film.

This is an expression of surprise rather than reproach, and presents the opportunity of warning historians who might intend to visit the film archives about problems that could be encountered. In the first place, expectations should not soar as high as those of the unnamed historian who wrote to Griffith. Film is simply another of the many sources of raw data available, but its pervasive influence on society, especially through television, will inevitably require historians to master its peculiar characteristics. What awaits the historian now studying some aspect of labour activities in the twenties who decides to consult contemporary newsreels? If this researcher is looking for newsreel coverage of a strike, he may find a three-minute piece of black-and-white film, badly scratched and with no sound. The viewing machine plays back at twenty-four frames per second instead of sixteen, and the explanatory titles may be marred by errors and omissions. Furthermore, the shooting is selective and fails to show much significant detail. Little will have been added to his knowledge of the period or of the event from this cursory glance, and he may be discouraged from future consultation of films. Yet there are cases where the existence of a visual record could result in changes to historical interpre-



*Lillian Gish and Noel Coward in D. W. Griffith's **Hearts of the World** (1917).*

tations. The most noteworthy example is probably the 8 mm film taken by Abraham Zapruder of the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Although it is unlikely that the official report on the assassination would have been accepted in any case, the film provided evidence which, if accepted as valid, clearly disproves certain explanations of the assassination.

Superficially, the film is no more than a brief, poorly shot home movie. The enlargements of individual frames shown in *Life* magazine do not show anything of great significance and it would have been foolhardy to draw conclusions from their perusal. But film is, after all, a series of individual photographs, and an event of ten seconds duration produces 180 images on 8 mm film. Each of the 152 frames of the Zapruder film has been greatly enlarged and laboriously studied, making it perhaps the most closely examined piece of film in history. Such analysis revealed, among other things, that Kennedy could not have been struck by the fatal bullet from the window Oswald is said to have occupied because the bullet that killed the President is shown to have entered from the opposite side. Whatever the ultimate importance of the Zapruder film in determining how Kennedy was assassinated, the example underlines the historical significance of film. It also serves to point out that films, while they may be limited in what they can show us, may equally be limited by the attention and research brought to bear upon their contents. Film and television producers work within such tight constraints of time and money that they rarely have the time to examine properly the material available to them. Nor do most of them bring to the task the trained approach of the historian. They are interested in using film to create an impression, particularly one which will do well in the ratings. For such reasons, most compilation films and documentaries using historical footage are regarded only as vehicles for presenting popular history rather than as serious historical works. The historian's eye needs to be brought to bear upon existing film records or else they will always be confined within the limits of popular history.

The best means of deciding whether film or television records might be of use to a research project would be to ask what difference the existence of certain filmed records might make to the interpretation. A historian holding that economic factors subsume all historical change might not readily think of examples because film has never been very good at depicting abstract ideas. Someone interested in social history, however, might easily find many useful possibilities. It is important that archivists be aware of these possibilities and the types of film historians require. Otherwise, film archives will continue to collect films and videotapes from only the usual available materials which, because of the nature of the film and television media themselves as well as the commercial uses to which they are put, place an overwhelming emphasis on the great men, disastrous events and pageantry so beloved of cameramen.

Film and television archivists are now fairly conversant with the needs of film scholars and television producers, but there are precious few guiding principles being developed by historians. It would be a pity if serious omissions in archival collections were to develop as a result.