

Saving Cinema: The Politics of Preservation. CAROLINE FRICK. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. xiii, 215 p. ISBN 978-0-19-536811-6.

Caroline Frick begins her book, *Saving Cinema: The Politics of Preservation*, with a preface that reads as an a priori apology for what the reader is about to encounter. “For academic readers,” she writes, “the book encourages a further broadening of what is considered ‘film history’ within the United States. From archival readers, I ask the most leeway, license, and perhaps forgiveness” (p. xi). With this statement, Frick makes clear that her analysis of international film preservation efforts will at least be provocative and perhaps even iconoclastic. This is in keeping with Frick’s professional background, which has stretched from working at publicly funded film archives, programming for the cable television channel AMC, and founding the Texas Archive of the Moving Image, an institution that professes an access-first philosophy and experiments with a “new, entrepreneurial approach” to preservation (p. xi).

In *Saving Cinema*, Frick “investigates the emergence and growth of the film preservation movement throughout the twentieth century ... [and] examines the ramifications of this movement upon what constitutes an American film heritage” (p. 5). More specifically, the stated goals of the book are to provide a general overview of the development of the film preservation movement, with particular emphasis on intersections between international, national, and intranational film preservation efforts; to advance a re-evaluation of traditional, preservation-first methods in order to propagate an “access as preservation” philosophy; and to demonstrate that greater investigation of moving image archives provides further research intersections with the wider field of media studies.

Frick does not expend equal effort on her three stated goals, however, and is much more successful in her juxtaposed analysis of national film preservation efforts and what she refers to as “sub-national” efforts, or concurrent movements based on regional models of film preservation, than she is in arguing for a widening of media studies to include archival studies. This analysis of concurrent preservation movements leads to what is referred to in the book’s title: the politics of film preservation. The emphasis on oppositional approaches to and conceptions of film preservation sets *Saving Cinema* apart from other monographs on film preservation, such as Anthony Slide’s *Nitrate Won’t Wait* and Penelope Houston’s *Keepers of the Frame*.¹ Whereas those titles offer informative histories of film preservation based on Great Man Theory readings of the movement (which focus on the efforts of individual figures), Frick questions the very framework of a national film “heritage” that has come to prominence in preservation discourse. For example, she demonstrates that romantic notions of lone trailblazers in the field, such as Henri Langlois of the Cinémathèque Française or Iris Barry of the Museum of Modern Art, do not provide a sufficient framework with which to assess the history of film preservation.

Frick notes that much contemporary film preservation literature “often advocates for film preservation with almost messianic zeal” and treats the role of the film archivist as “quasi-mythological” (p. 9). She further notes that “academics and film archivists alike have relied upon key, common sense assumptions about the value of media preservation [with] the most common refrain [being] that film has inherent value as vital cultural heritage” (p. 9). Frick traces the linguistic emergence of “heritage” as a staple of preservation discourse in the post-war period and points out the central irony of treating corporate product, such as Hollywood blockbusters, as cultural heritage. Furthermore, she contends that the “‘logic’ of cultural heritage ... has tradi-

1 Anthony Slide, *Nitrate Won’t Wait* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 1992); Penelope Houston, *Keepers of the Frame* (London: British Film Institute, 1994).

tionally worked to reify and strengthen ties to a particular level of authority and power, the nation, and thus to legitimize particular players and artifacts in the archival process” (p. 13). Frick thus suggests that the dominant narrative of film preservation (that of quasi-mythological and indomitable personalities forging global film heritage) emerged as a result of the privileging of national or culturally prominent archival institutions by such international institutions as UNESCO and the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAP).

Interestingly, Frick also explores fundamentally different approaches to film preservation among national archives. Whereas many European and North American archives of national prominence have relied upon the “heritage” argument and have thus favoured preservation over access, Central and South American archives have placed more emphasis on the active use of cinema as defence against foreign imperialism. Frick quotes a delegate from the Cinemateca de Cuba at the 1973 FIAP conference, who stated that he “had the impression that [European colleagues] did not fully understand what the cinema meant for Latin American countries. Their films were not museum rarities ... [but] living vehicles of propaganda and decolonization, a medium for culture ... and must therefore be shown as much as possible” (p. 114).

Frick uses this argument to demonstrate the various politics at play in film preservation (such as competing efforts among the Library of Congress, UNESCO, the Museum of Modern Art, the British Film Institute, the Cinémathèque Française, and others to define the parameters of the film preservation movement), which are ignored or underdocumented in other histories of the movement. She also uses it to further one of her stated goals: to promote the idea of access as preservation. This is where Frick is perhaps most iconoclastic. Drawing on her experience with the Texas Archive of the Moving Image (TAMI), she argues that the greater the number of copies in existence the less likely an audiovisual work is to disappear. The *modus operandi* of TAMI is to survey Texas for valuable audiovisual records, create digital copies of them, and return the originals (or original copies) to the owners rather than preserve them at TAMI. Frick cites the work of media libraries, which have been pioneers of the “access as preservation” movement, and embraces the possibilities of social media for crowdsourcing (the solicitation of users’ assistance in the creation of descriptors for online catalogues) and digitization for film preservation. However, she does not acknowledge the instability factor of using digital media as a long-term preservation option or the inherent weaknesses of Web 2.0–style crowdsourcing.

Frick’s argument for “access as preservation” is rooted in the Latin American experience of cinema noted above and is legitimate from that perspective. One cannot help but hope for greater access to and appreciation of our collective audiovisual holdings so that, rather than becoming mere relics, they can thrive as active tools of social and cultural engagement. But Frick does not provide an argument convincing enough to abandon the idea of pre-

serving original media in addition to creating access copies and keeping those in circulation. Digital media has not proven itself worthy of such faith, and if this policy were to gain wide acceptance, the consequences could include a significant loss of holdings owing to digital corruption and other forms of media decay. Without an original or preservation copy to fall back on, the only hope for retaining content would be in trusting that there are enough multi-generational (and therefore lesser-quality) copies in circulation.

Despite this, *Saving Cinema* is an interesting work that provides a unique counter-narrative of film preservation efforts with a skeptical analysis of the use of “heritage” as a motivating factor. Frick raises provocative questions that need to be addressed and which are actually imperative as we approach a critical mass of data loss resulting from decaying audiovisual media.

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