Sustaining the Life of Cinema: A Study of Film Archiving Philosophy

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Steven Spielberg's 20th anniversary edition of *ET: Extra Terrestrial* (1982) demonstrated filmmakers' ability to revisit their works when technology permits creative changes unavailable at the time of production. Spielberg opted to enhance the images with computer graphics, making the loveable alien even more "real looking" and closer to his original artistic vision. However, he utilized the new technology for culturally significant revisions as well. The notorious replacement of "walkie-talkies" for guns in the climactic escape scene showed many people that political correctness also has its say (with the aid of technology of course). Case studies such as *E.T.* seem to raise a number of ethical questions pertaining to authority and archiving. For example, if we wanted to store and preserve a master negative of *E.T.*, which version would we save? There are limited resources for preserving films; not everything can be saved. Are these changes only socially acceptable since they come from the original filmmaker? Does having better means to realize an artistic vision make post-release "censorship" permissible?

Consider an example where the circumstances are completely reversed. *Calamity Anne's Trust,* a silent film from 1913, was censored by a local film bureau for obscene images of a man committing suicide. Recently recovered paper prints of the original negatives, however, show us the man hanging from a rope. So, the archivist is faced with a dilemma: to consider the artifact historically and leave the film as is, or to uphold the original artistic will of the filmmakers and include the recovered material, or to somehow hybrid the two. This type of project is called a reconstruction, where uncovered materials are used to create a closer representation of the original text. This leaves room for the archivist's own artistic input as well. For example, they might add a musical soundtrack,

emulating the piano or organ one would have heard in an early 20th century theater. We can see by now that these issues are philosophical at core; in order to decide whether to uphold history or art, one has to ask, “What is a film?” and “Why would we save them?” The following essay seeks to investigate the approaches that individuals and institutions take to answering these questions.

Many film theorists have proposed that a film is a living entity, a concept that resides in a physical medium. Martin Scorsese claimed, “We think of them as living, vital evidence of our existence, and our thoughts, and our dreams, and our emotions. And that’s the way we should think about cinema” (National Film Preservation Foundation). The intangible ideas of movies are only “brought to life” by technology cameras, which embed an image onto film stock. Thus, archiving can be thought of as a practice that seeks to prolong the life of a film. But why exactly do we feel the need to do this? How do we decide which films to save? Do we uphold the authority of the filmmaker, or do we consider the historical and cultural influences on each artifact? The considerations that archival scholars take vary, depending on the timestamp of the film. Contemporary issues, such as digital cloud-computing archives, pose ethical questions far different from treating nitrate prints of the silent film era, for example. In order to understand how philosophy and film archiving are interrelated, I will first, analyze and compare the “codes of ethics” that established archives (FIAF sanctioned archives, museums, and universities). Secondly, I will examine a few individual viewpoints of contemporary directors, scholars, and archival enthusiasts, with specific emphasis on Paolo Usai’s writings. I hope to demonstrate that media archiving is a philosophically delicate practice that is constantly redefined by cultural trends and technological evolution.

In the earliest years of film preservation, the goal was to save unused motion pictures that had already been commercially released. This was, of course, when film stock was made of the highly unstable and flammable nitrocellulose, or nitrate film. A small group of nonprofit and public organizations rallied together under the slogan, "Nitrate Won't Wait!", and began to duplicate decaying nitrate films on to another medium: cellulose acetate, also known as "safety film." However, acetate —the medium used up until modern polyester stock — is also prone to decay through a process referred to as "vinegar syndrome." It wasn't too long until those involved felt it necessary to establish some professional standards, and this is when the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) was formed in 1938. Over time, archival work expanded its definition of preservation from simply copying or duplication, to a variety of tasks, including restoration, conservation, recreation, and reconstruction. In addition, the considerations of film's philosophical "purpose" developed. This would include governmental emphasis on national heritage and non-profit or privately funded movements to store specific cultural or ethnic heritage.

The conception of film as heritage or cultural memory was an important philosophical shift in archiving history. The government's fiscal and regulatory dominance in the archiving community established the perception of film as an art form, moreover as a product of the nation. To further understand how federal funding was being distributed to archives, consider the National Film Preservation Board's *Film Preservation 1993: A Study of the Current State of American Film Preservation*. The major conduit has been the grant program funded through the National Endowment for the Arts and administered by the National Center for Film and Video Preservation at the

American Film Institute. Between 1979 and 1992, 37 institutions received a total of $5.5 million in matching federal grants, stimulating at least double that dollar amount in laboratory copying (Melville & Scott, 1993, volume 1, section 6).

The government's role in archival support is not purely a matter of dollars, however. For example, the National Film Preservation Act of 1988 created the National Film Registry, which stipulated that every year, as many as, 25 films are to be selected by the Librarian of Congress for their "cultural, historic, or aesthetic" significance (Public Law, 1988, p.100-446). This is a rather broad list of criteria, and eventually the film is marked as significant according to the history of the United States. As a result, some individual groups accumulated the ethical reasons to preserve a film. Today, there are archives that serve ethnic and religious heritages. Some examples include the Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archive and Outfest's LGBTQ preservation movement with the UCLA Film &Television Archive. It is interesting to note that after recognizing film's ability to store a shared cultural memory; individual groups have begun to fight for the preservation of their histories. However, it seems perfectly logical that the same film could be stored in different archives with different missions. We can therefore gather that the reasons for preserving a film are imposed on the archive itself.

Paolo Usai, director of the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia and co-founder of the L. Jeffrey Selznick School of Film Preservation at George Eastman House, noted that, in the United States, there were five large film archives established by the late 1970s: George Eastman House, the Library of Congress, the Museum of Modern Art, the UCLA Film and Television Archive, and the National Archives and Records

Administration (Usai, 2003, p. 24). Each of these institutions, though united in a common goal of preservation, is grounded in a certain conception of what film is. We can see this in the archive names alone. MoMA, for example, strove "to establish the medium as a major art form" (MoMa, 2010) with its circulating video library; making sure the public accesses "fine art" with a traveling archive is a unique endeavor that I will mention again further on. University archives, such as the one at UCLA, exists for academic research, and so the artifacts are conceptually converted into sources. Although the archive community has since grown immensely, these institutions are the largest, and have been dominant in shaping other approaches to storing and accessing films. The establishment of FIAF eventually served to regulate their ideas under one philosophical approach.

The FIAF "code of ethics", written in 1997, is an important document for many archives because it lays out a basic set of rights and behaviors to adhere to, the logic of their collective mission. Because that mission has been well received internationally (as globalization sinks in and spreads further), those archives that align themselves with FIAF benefit from a worldwide network of archival information. Archives proven to follow the FIAF code of ethics can efficiently exchange data with each other, generating more-informed conceptions of films and their history. The fundamental tenets of this binding and determinate document are preservation, restoration, and access. Following the code's guidelines, archives such as those mentioned above, are to uphold the material itself along with its integrity.

The code demands the best conditions possible for treating and storing a film. This is widely considered to be lower temperatures and lower humidity. The National

Film Preservation Foundation's website, for example, suggested "a relative humidity (RH) of 20-50 percent . . . with a temperature that is as cold as possible" ("Good Storage Practices," n.d.). Some archives even freeze their films. One stipulation of the code reads, "When restoring material, archives will endeavor only to complete what is incomplete and to remove the accretions of time, wear, and misinformation. They will not seek to change or distort the nature of the original material or the intentions of its creators" (Smither, 2002, section 1.5). As we can note here, and in the rest of the document, FIAF places much importance on the original artistic vision of an artifact. This includes restoration, as mentioned in the passage above, but also projection; the code even calls for the closest representation of the original viewing experience (projection speed and aspect ratio— the frames width). Thus, the stress on artistic integrity has become an integral consideration of ethics for archives around the world.

Another crucial component to address is access. Archives speculate over the proper methods to store and restore a film, but they also determine the amount of public availability to allow for each artifact. Ray Edmondson (2004) has proposed that there are two forms of access, "proactive (initiated by the institution itself) or reactive (initiated by users of the institution)" (Edmondson, 3.2.6.6). I have already mentioned an example of a proactive archive: the Museum of Modern Art's (MoMA) circulating video library. However, reactive is the standard protocol— typically the public accesses media at a sanctioned space in an archive. For this reason, many films remain unviewed. An archived film could be considered useless if it is unavailable for viewing. In 1993, the National Film Preservation Board of the Library of Congress formed a committee aimed at upholding access to films archived by the government. In a statement that they released

entitled *Film Preservation without Access is Pointless*, the committee had written,

> We believe that all films have historical significance and should be preserved, and we support the use of Federal funds for this effort. However, we also believe that with the use of public funds comes the responsibility to make the films available to the public. Upon expiration of copyright, those films whose preservation, cataloguing or storage has been supported in any way by public funds must become available without restriction…Just as a falling tree makes no sound if no one is around to hear it, preserving a film makes no sense if no one is allowed to see it. (CFPA, p.1)

This passage is important for two reasons. First, it acknowledges the public funding that fuels the Library of Congress' archive. Moreover, it introduces a philosophically challenging scenario. If nobody watches a film, what purpose does it serve? It isn't an awakened idea unless someone receives it.

On the other hand, the inevitable degradation of nitrate and acetate film stock poses a finite lifespan on each artifact, of which preservation seeks to extend. The more it is brought out of storage for access, the shorter its life may be. FIAF, though a strong proponent of public access, has necessitated that the material comes first: "Archives will not sacrifice the long-term survival of material in their care in the interests of short-term exploitation. They will deny access rather than expose unique or master material to the risks of projection or viewing if the material is thereby endangered" (Smithers, 2002, p. 1). This is a logical rule that only seeks to keep the artifacts in poor condition, safe. However, the "tree in the woods" analogy is a consistent philosophical argument against this approach.

This discourse surrounding public access continues as technology develops. Obsolescence of formats is an intrinsic property of technological evolution, so archives with emphasis on access (libraries with rental policies, museums, etc.) must consider how to *best* reach the public. Marketing strategies are commonly employed to generate interest in collections. Usai reacts adversely to this tendency, calling it a “tourist itinerary” (Usai, 2003, p.1). In addition, he noted the shockingly low percentage of material actually accessed from archives and the repetition that resulted in scholarly work and the public sphere:

> Less than 5 per cent of all the titles preserved in the average film archive is seen by scholars, and even less is requested by film festivals. Much of the remaining 95 per cent never leaves the shelves of the film vaults after preservation has been completed. Despite all the big talk about constantly rewriting the history of cinema and discussing its canons, we keep showing the same classics over and over again. (Usai*, 2003*, p. 69)

The Internet raises its own laundry list of ethical cogitations. Online media libraries such as *www.archive.org* offer pure public access to culturally and historically significant films that have been digitized and posted on their website. The processes of digitization and digital storage, however, are expensive. There is a high cost for maintaining data and implementing automated systems to manage that data. Steven Puglia noted that “in an unmanaged environment, digital has 1/100 the life expectancy of microfilm (5 years compared to 500)” (Puglia, 2002, p. 147). In many cases, digitization is not a viable option. Services such as *YouTube.com and Veoh.com,* however, could also

be considered massive archives of public material (in theory, but in reality we understand there to be a large amount of copyrighted material as well) for public access.

However, this global platform for exchanging ideas allows for misrepresentation and manipulation. Thus, much of what is posted from earlier generations of media history reflects our own "internet era" historiographically. In *The Death of Cinema*, Usai found this to reflect an "apocalyptic" and terminative point in film history; as the amount of digital data that we gather grows exponentially, our tangible historical data diminishes. He, thus, considered this inevitable encroachment of technology on cinema to have a detrimental effect on our cultural memory. In creating what he called a "Model Image", our imagined perception of the filmic content in its purest form, we ultimately lose our ability to truly grasp that artifact as a product of history.

For Usai, cinema is defined as "the art of decaying moving images" (Usai*, 2005*, p.2). He proposed that above all, we try to consider media artifacts as just those—historical artifacts. Joshua Gonsalves addressed Usai's viewpoint, citing the irreversible changes of reception imposed by technology:

> We have lost the aura of film consolidated by that brief late 50's-to-early 80s period when leaving the house to go see a movie from beginning to end was the order of the day- that is to say, we no longer (un)see films at 24 frames a second. Is a film a film on an iPhone, a computer panel, or a TV? Usai insists that we cannot dismiss this question as an unutterable nostalgia, which is not to say that we can stop the accumulation of data without end. (Gonsalves, p. 7)

This is an important reiteration of Usai's ideology because it points to the ethical

concerns of digitization, reconstruction, and internet archiving. Again, we encounter this philosophical enigma of what a film is, and when it stops to exist as its original "self." Usai and Gonsalves essentially argue that a film loses a piece of its identity the further it strays from its original material and content, and that image data degrades as a result of migration is undeniable. According to Usai, he has claimed, "each photographic generation involves a loss of approximately 15 per cent from the image information of the previous print" (Usai, 2002, p. 47). However, the perspective that an original filmic idea is only stored in a single master artifact seems to conflict with the viewpoints of George Lucas, Steven Spielberg (mentioned in the introduction), and recreation archivists, such as myself.

This introduces the final ethical concern I will address, authority. Most notably, this involves legal considerations for archives, such as copyright ownership. However, questions of authority also apply to instances where technology is used to revisit and manipulate finished works. Archives, such as the Library of Congress, store a range of multimedia artifacts, many of which are legally owned by individuals, studios, and companies. The Library of Congress has thus determined that archives are ethically obligated to work *with* the owner in all restoration work (Fair Use, volume 6, section 2). There are two ways that this becomes ethically complicated: first, if the owner is deceased, and second, if the owner is performing the reconstruction.

Consider the creative work in the *Calamity Anne's Trust* project that challenges me. Creative licensing has ended, and ownership has been returned to the public. However, my team is faced with the challenge of maintaining the original filmmakers'

integrity (as discussed earlier). Our ideas on how to recreate the original viewing experience are to include recovered paper prints of absent scenes, to use digital methods of slowing the projection, to raise the contrast, and to add a soundtrack that emulates theatrical accompaniment of the silent film era. Paolo Usai has posed a list of questions toward these methods that challenges my own viewpoint:

> If the recovery of the missing image matters so much, are we going to measure every single shot in the search for the print with one or two more frames? If these frames are found, are we going to add them to the main print even if the difference in quality will be obtrusive? Is it worth forcing the viewer to become the coroner in charge of a morgue of the moving image? And doesn't the act of collating different prints in order to create a new one deliberately disregard the very history which has brought the print to the state in which it has come down to us? (Usai, 2002, p. 63-64)

The reconstruction of *Calamity Anne's Trust* is a search for "one or two more frames." Usai may believe this is to serve our own sense of completeness; even if it does, I propose that we can understand the context of the entire film more completely with one more frame. The difference in quality, however obtrusive, will be ignored. Still, we are focused on upholding the integrity of the original filmmaker.

Issues of authorship further complicate archival practice when films are revisited or altered, with or without the original author. The most notorious case of these complications is *The Thief and the Cobbler*, an animated film that Richard Williams struggled with for 26 years (production began in 1964). When Williams failed to finish his self-proclaimed masterpiece by a deadline imposed in 1990, he was fired and replaced by a fellow producer. Since the resultant product's release, cinephiles and professionals

have attempted to restore Richard Williams' release, arguing that this is not the version that should be saved and accessed by the public. Garrett Gilchrist even released a fan restoration in 2006, called, "The Recobbled Cut" that uses multiple versions including a bootleg of Williams' work print (Brown, 2006, p. 1). This type of case study demonstrates how public interest can demand preservation work.

However, it is also possible that the filmmaker still has authoritative control and makes a post-release impact on the content and/or future storage of "their" film. We are already familiar with the ethical questions involved with Spielberg's anniversary edition of *E.T.* One final example to consider is the archive of Lucas films. It has recently been rumored that George Lucas intends to, one day, destroy the original master-negative copies of the first *Star Wars* trilogy, and replace them with the technologically "enhanced" version. Although this would meet public outcry, it is legally possible. From this, we can take away that a film can hold individual and selfish values that feed the ego.

This analysis of philosophical dilemmas in film archiving has offered a few conclusions, but more importantly, it has raised a number of questions without a right or wrong answer. I have introduced that films carry a living mark of our existence, and that archiving addresses the vulnerable nature of that impression. I further propose now that our society's affinity for complete narratives has shaped the way we consider these texts. Generally, we view movies as concrete and tangible artifacts that cannot be erased by time or any other force. As this essay has demonstrated, this is a misconception. Films can easily die and they are susceptible to manipulation. Our reactions to this fact reflect our culture and our technology. Faced with the potential expiration of creative works, we

almost react as if our own lives were on the line. The public is forced to argue why film has meaning, and in our subjective responses are connections to greater social structures (of the global internet community, the nation, a culture, etc.).

Thus, I acknowledge that archives can feed these philosophical insights. Institutionally, preservation seeks to maintain the physical media that houses filmic "ideas" for as long as possible. I have indicated that this is usually carried out with the original artists' integrity as a priority (FIAF, *Calamity Anne,* 1913). However, I propose that future scholars take on an in-depth analysis of that very endeavor; surely, the film community's emphasis on *auteur theory* has affected this standpoint. Our discussion of access has exposed that a film can also experience "death" when made unavailable to the public. For Paolo Usai, the exact opposite can occur — too much access can lead to easier manipulation, as seen in online communities like YouTube. I will therefore conclude that the struggle between individual and group identity is a fundamental tenet of our existence, and thus our archival practices. Film is undoubtedly philosophical in nature. In its production, we store our ideas and interpretations of reality. In its preservation, we question impact and meaning, and confront our own resistance to death.

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