Photochemical Pedagogy: Film Preservation Education beyond the Archive

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Over the past few decades, media archival practice has been shaped on one end by formal institutions—from museums and archives to academic programs and university collections—and on the opposite end by artists, filmmakers, and other users specializing in the creative use of moving image media formats. In more recent years, since the establishment of the Association of Moving Image Archivists and the first moving image preservation graduate programs in the 1990s and early 2000s, film laboratories, vendors, exhibitors, and creators working with the photochemical moving image have heeded a call to work with or show works in their original formats to honour artistic intent and support the ongoing preservation of the medium. While film has become overshadowed by hegemonic rhetoric about its status as a "dying format," these communities of creators continue to invest significant time and resources into making and exhibiting work on film. In leading these efforts, artists and filmmakers have generated a wealth of knowledge about the format from their explorations, a knowledge that can be mobilized as part of preservation efforts. Yet what is defined and recognized as "preservation practice" within the institutional context remains limited to conventions sanctioned by professional publications and highly standardized academic coursework. This exclusion of the specialized knowledge, practical skills, and lived experiences of those working outside of the walls of the formal archive further closes our field down to these rich, pragmatic contributions.

In line with this special issue's call for a discussion of the *practical realities* of pedagogy and instruction, I suggest that we look beyond the archivist's notion of preservation as defined in terms of the longevity of physical records and their contents, and that we work to incorporate the knowledge and know-how of people operating at the peripheries of film-related practice. This includes, but is not limited to, filmmakers, projectionists, equipment and laboratory technicians, private and

non-institutional collectors, and other communities whose engagement with film can help us arrive at a more comprehensive definition of contemporary film preservation. Within this call, I discuss a specific area of profession-based applied practices within the field of photochemical film archiving and aim to bring them into contemporary discussions around the future of media archival education, particularly for film.

Archival practice has primarily been concerned with what can be described as a work's "later end," otherwise defined by its entry into its preservation period. To preserve a record, a record must be created. Archivists gather materials, examine their provenance, and with this information in hand, describe and contextualize work to users seeking to gain access to this body of preexisting records and documentation. The professionalization of the field has been solidified by its standardized principles, values, terminology, and concepts; a growing body of literature; and membership-based professional forums, all developed with its best interests in mind.[1] After all, professionalism acts as a point of reference—it sets a standard for who is qualified given the knowledge, training, and specialized skills needed to conduct specific forms of labour. It also establishes a baseline, helping us come together with others of similar aims to pave the way for broader group affinity. Homing in on the nature of "professionalism," Caroline Frick states that the media archivist's move toward professionalization has distanced trained archivists from "mere amateurs, fans or hobbyists," calling our attention to what has been lost in this transition (2018, 25). Who gets to call themselves a film archivist, and why?

General interest in "amateur" culture and outsider forms of training has historically remained pertinent for moving-image archivists, even among the most senior members of the field. While former Museum of Modern Art film archivist and curator Eileen Bowser acknowledges the importance of the professional identity that participation in formal associations such as the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) provided for her, her nod to the "amateur" period is notable:

> You realize that, before my time, there were a lot of amateurs. There was nowhere you went to get an education, and most people, film fans, weren't coming to the field with much technical knowledge. They just came out of love of film. (2000, 25)

Much of this sentiment can be traced back to the lack of established professional bases for moving-image archivists in the 1990s and earlier, given much of the workforce at the time was comprised of individuals who learned both hard and soft skills on the job. Simultaneously, Ray Edmondson's ruminations on film archiving as a profession, published around the same time, outline the foundational ironies of the move toward professional education: film archivists know they can learn a great deal from just doing their jobs—skills no university-based training program or professional course could ever teach (1995, 253). Graduate programs, for example, provide emerging archivists with hard skills in film inspection, handling, and moving-image cataloguing. Soft skills are often necessary to solve problems that do not have

straightforward solutions or answers, but they are harder to develop in the classroom. For instance, collaborating with a film laboratory on colour grading, rescans, and answer printing, as well as evaluating their deliverables, requires an understanding of their professional responsibilities and expectations that is often honed over time. Yet, as Edmondson states, echoing Bowser, archival professionals also value being self-taught, much like home-grown amateur, hobbyist, and enthusiast film practitioners (252).

The film archiving field, as it stands, faces a historically rooted inner conflict between the value of a "professionalized identity" and the importance of contending with its foundations as an autodidactic enterprise. There is an inherent value in the specialization of our labour, and we should therefore pride ourselves in having attained the skills and knowledge necessary to conduct technical tasks, regardless of where or how we acquired them. However, as Edmondson (1995) predicted, a broader recognition of the importance of our work would not come until the field formalized through the establishment of training programs and professional forums and garnered the support of related fields, such as librarianship and museology. A simplified way of phrasing the questions this essay asks is: who else is working with the photochemical moving image but is not often formally recognized as an "archivist," and who do we exclude when we frame our preservation work through formal bodies of training and "professionalization"? There is a broader range of knowledgeable stakeholders involved in the preservation of film and its related technologies than is often acknowledged by contemporary scholarship.

Media archivists' greatest strengths have always been their technical and practical approaches to stabilizing, describing, and providing access to moving-image materials. To execute these processes effectively requires that one enters the field with a developed knowledge of various media formats and their specificities. Archivists today must possess a wide range of skills, from capturing analogue tape formats and performing digital editing to properly winding through film at a workbench. Individuals tasked with the preservation of media must also know how to use the necessary tools and, increasingly, be able to maintain legacy equipment. Portable Eiki and Kodak Pageant 16mm film projectors, which are still in popular use today, for example, were manufactured from the mid-twentieth century onward. These projectors are seeing an operational life far beyond what their manufacturers originally intended, and no new film projector manufacturers have emerged to this date, leaving those interested in maintaining this equipment searching for solutions and substitutes for missing parts, broken components, or half-functioning machines from the last century. The number of small-time film equipment businesses capable of servicing rewinds, projectors, cameras, splicers, and other tools continue to decline over the years as owners of retirement age shut their doors due to their general inability to find someone interested and able to continue to provide their services.

At the same time, preserving a piece of media's original cultural and historical context has always been of great concern to media archivists. Discussing the role of film technologies as integral to understanding media history, film archivist Dino Everett and scholar Marsha Gordon argue for the importance of preserving the prac-

tice of projection, particularly for lesser-known, non-standard small gauge formats and their unique exhibition devices. Since film preservation is "entirely focused on saving the content" and not the "means of making or projecting" it (2021, 142), they worry that projectors being placed in storage as museal objects and archivists being too anxious to risk projecting their films will lead to a "technological amnesia" (147). As they argue, we need to be proactive about exhibiting film on its original equipment to "counteract the erasure of the very aspects of cinema history [archivists] are attempting to preserve" (141), including the practice of projection and the mechanical specificities of various projectors and formats.

Conversations between archivists and practitioners remain rare, and when they do arise, they often flourish in spaces outside of the academic and professionalized archival sphere. For instance, in May 2023, the Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto, a Canadian artist-run film and media arts organization supporting independent filmmakers, hosted "Analogue Resilience: A Film Labs Gathering," a week-long meet-up complete with workshops, trainings, and discussions geared toward organizations and individuals running artist-run film laboratories or involved with other technical and creative endeavours related to photochemical film.[2] I was surprised and enthused to see that, in a space which largely gravitates toward artists and DIY lab enthusiasts working outside of formal institutional or commercially-funded contexts, former Cinémathèque française film archivist and FIAF technical commission head Céline Ruivo brought together a group of archivists, filmmakers, projectionists, lab technicians, and curators—including myself, and many of whom hold a combination of these titles—to present on a panel titled "Archival Film Labs."

For me, the panel represented an opportunity, at long last, to build solidarity between professional film archivists and the larger community engaged with the preservation of photochemical media and its methods, tools, and artist-driven practices, a community that media archival training often fails to engage with or misunderstands. Despite our unique opportunity to better intertwine our fields, I also wondered how relevant the discussion would be for the meet-up's audience. We touched upon topics as broad as access to prints within institutional holdings, which led to a discussion about what constitutes safe archival projection. I mentioned that archivists of my generation, emerging out of graduate programs within the last decade—particularly MLIS programs with students interested in the moving image—have an increasing lack of awareness and understanding of when, why, and how their film holdings can be safely projected in their original formats, echoing the concerns Everett and Gordon raise. These were skills that my experience within the artist-run film lab community had taught me were important, perhaps due to the often one-of-a-kind nature of artist-made film elements made outside of the internegative and workprint production workflow. Nicolas Rey, co-founder of Paris-based artist-run film lab L'Abominable, advocated for his project, filmprojection21.org, a charter bringing together filmmakers, artists, producers, archivists, distributors, programmers, and members of the audience who want to see a future for film projection and the resources needed to sustain the practice. Such initiatives bring the discussion of the creation, exhibition, and preservation of film full circle and point to the many

areas where archivists, filmmakers, lab technicians, and other practitioners and collaborators can learn from each other.[3]

With all this in mind, I want to pose some rhetorical questions for further reflection. If previous discussions in academic circles, emerging out of Edmondson's formative writing, argue that formalized training is essential and should be expanded, why are we as archivists still lacking in our understanding of film projection and exhibition, as Everett and Gordon illustrate?[4] Media archivists need not be fully-trained theatrical projectionists—nor should they be expected to be—but they should be able to thoroughly evaluate and understand when their prints can be safely screened and to what standards, and effectively communicate this information to projectionists and venues. Are the ongoing calls for expansion of media archival curricula not broad enough, or are they too focused on areas outside of historical and more immediate technical concerns? If we are required to constantly repair equipment from previous decades—or centuries—to be able to preserve and access our media in the future, what kinds of technical training for media archival practice should be at the core of our curricula?

Areas for further collaboration, knowledge development, and problem solving for the field can still be established despite the challenges outlined. Archivists and filmmakers as users of photochemical moving-image media have managed to work around this obsolescence of equipment and technology by keeping them in working condition. They often rely on skill-sharing communities and the generation of equipment technicians from their profession's heyday who are still willing to share their advice or offer their niche services as vendors. The "amateur" nature of technological experimentation further honed by the artist-run film lab community can be of great help to film archivists, who are often also working to find solutions to the diminishing availability of resources and technology. Furthermore, understanding the point of creation of works and reconnecting media with its artistic processes provides for a wholistic picture of the archival provenance of the materials archivists steward, allowing archival practice to dive further into the conceptual origins of films and how they were made. Artists, particularly those stemming from an experimental media arts tradition, may often utilize photochemical mediums such as print stocks in unconventional manners that differ from the production standards of the commercial industry. This requires media archivists to understand the technical nature of moving-image technology to properly preserve and describe these works and catalogue them for a broader public.

Adopting a broader definition of "film preservation practice" can help archivists obtain a fuller picture of both the lifecycle of a film print and the ecosystem they themselves are part of. Actors in the field operating within our periphery contribute greater momentum to the moving-image archiving and preservation profession than is often recognized. Looking beyond the knowledge and practices associated with a film's secondary life within the archive—to the practices of film labs, screening venues, and creative communities—may help archivists better understand the material they are charged with caring for. It is only when we cultivate a more universal, integrated outlook on the contributors and stakeholders in the preservation of motion

picture film and its associated traditions that we will be able to establish improved curricula for the changing needs of media archiving.

Notes

[1] Ray Edmondson discusses this in the 2018 special issue of *Synoptique*, "Institutionalizing Moving Image Archival Training: Analyses, Histories, Theories," to which the present issue on "Teaching Media Archives" is responding (2018, 20–21).

[2] Artist-run film laboratory meet-ups have occurred throughout the decades. Before Toronto, the most recent one occurred in Mexico City in 2018, at the Laboratorio Experimental de Cine (LEC).

[3] I was also part of another panel at the same meeting titled "Film Festivals and the Future of Projection," which included projectionists, archivists, programmers, and filmmakers who were part of the artist-run film lab movement.

[4] Fortunately, occasional small gauge projection and projector maintenance workshops at the Association of Moving Image Archivists conferences and elsewhere attempt to remedy this.

References

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