Now or Never: Teaching 16mm Archiving and Preservation at Purchase College

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For the past three years, faculty and students in the Cinema and Television Studies program at Purchase College have been working closely with the 16mm film collections on campus. In a class taught in spring of 2022, "Cinema and the Archive," Professor Nathan Holmes introduced students to issues in film preservation and archiving using films from the campus library and the school's BFA film program. After the class finished, this work continued with the founding of The Purchase Film Archive (PFA), a student-led group, headed up by Andi Emberley and Camila Garcia Cabrera, dedicated to preserving and programming 16mm film on campus. These efforts have been gamely supported by Oscar Becher and Lindsay Miller. Becher, trained at the L. Jeffrey Selznick School of Film Preservation and New York University's Moving Image Archiving and Preservation (MIAP) graduate program, and Miller, also a MIAP graduate and a freelance video archivist, are currently archivists at Vinegar Syndrome, a film restoration and distribution company specializing in exploitation, horror, cult, underground, and X-rated films. Together, they have run class workshops, supervised internships for Emberley and Garcia, and been on hand to answer all manner of questions as the archive project has grown.

The 16mm collections at Purchase College reflect its rich history as a public, arts-focused liberal arts school, and include student films, dance films, documentaries, and educational films, among other curiosities. At around three hundred films, the collection is not large—although with donations it is growing quickly—and several films are in advanced states of decay. But with rewinds, a light table, and spreadsheets in hand, students have been able to investigate and document the material aspects of screen media and develop a broader understanding of the roles these films played, both culturally and institutionally. Since its inception, the PFA has screened 16mm

films for film classes, projected older dance films synchronized to the music of Björk for a campus Björk Film Fest, and presented screenings for a visit by renowned underground filmmaker Craig Baldwin. The group is currently involved in a project to digitize a number of student-made 16mm films from the 1980s. The hope is that some could be made available online in order to celebrate and promote the college's film program and its connections to film culture.

Holmes taught "Cinema and the Archive" for the second time in the spring of 2024, this time with Garcia and Emberley as teaching assistants. This iteration of the class featured some adjustments. More emphasis was placed on "useful cinema" (a category that comprises a good majority of recently donated 16mm films), Miller offered an in-depth presentation on video formats (see Figure 2), and students worked in groups on an "Adopt-a-Film" project. This latter project involved inspection and research of an individual film within the collection in order to provide information on its production, distribution, condition, and potential for programming or creative uses.

As the class was wrapping up, Holmes, Garcia, Emberley, Becher, and Miller sat down to discuss how teaching the film archives at Purchase College had evolved over the past two years. They each brought a handful of questions they wanted to ask each other.

OSCAR BECHER: How did this all start? Where did you find the film?

NATHAN HOLMES: At a certain point when I started working at Purchase, another professor, Greg Taylor, screened a film on 16mm for a class I was helping him with. I think it was D.W. Griffith's *The Lonedale Operator* (1911). I knew that he had gotten the film from the campus library so I was curious about what other films they might have. After a little bit of investigation, I got the library to show me the film collection, and I was excited by all the titles that I saw on the shelves. There was Chaplin, Eisenstein, the sorts of things you might see in a film history class, but there were also Maya Deren films, John Berger's 1972 *Ways of Seeing* BBC series, and a number of interesting titles I didn't recognize. I started thinking about what kind of teaching possibilities there might be here, or how we could use this collection in the context of a cinema studies class related to physical media. This was all very much a steep learning curve for me. I have no training in archiving or film preservation, and I struggled to even operate the 16mm projector the first time I wanted to show a film in a class! But I did know what the smell of vinegar meant, and that the storage situation for the films was not ideal, so I put aside considerations about my own qualifications in favour of just seeing what we could do with this material. The class was a way to teach myself film preservation, and I thought that the best thing to do would be to create a scenario that would allow students to see the films the college had, and to explore archiving and preservation issues through them in a sandbox style. So that was the impetus for the first version of the class. There was an existing class on the books called "Cinema and the Archive" that was oriented around film history research methods, mostly with

digital databases and so on. I shifted the focus of the class so that it used 16mm as a case study for media preservation issues in general. Andi and Camila were students in that first version of the class, and I'm wondering if they remember what they thought of everything, or what they expected out of the class.

ANDI EMBERELY: I don't think I was really expecting anything from the class. It was a requirement for our major.

[Laughter]

AE: But talking about the physicality of media and some questions you were asking about whether or not digital storage is as important and secure as many people believe it is, those ideas really intrigued me. But then we got to work with the actual film and got to see how the films in the library were of such wildly varying quality. There were some really great examples of films that we could project, but there were also films like *Ugetsu* (Kenji Mizoguchi, 1953), which was seeping some strange liquid. Seeing the variety of ways that film can deteriorate really inspired me to look more into what I could learn about that, and what I could do about it.

CAMILA GARCIA CABRERA: I also wasn't really expecting anything out of the class as it was a requirement. But as the first class went on, I remember being like, I've never even heard of such a thing in my life! There was a lot of talk about digital storage and questions about where Netflix or other streaming platforms store their movies. There were a lot of philosophical questions about where media is going in the future. And I was very much intrigued by that. And then the whole hands-on thing that Nathan had us do where he split us into two groups was very useful in explaining to us like the steps it takes to create programming and general media awareness out of this media that potentially doesn't work in the way it's supposed to, along with some media that does work. And then it became a thing for me to be like, well, you can do things with things that don't work, which was nice.

NH: The development of the syllabus for the class was really influenced by the book *Scratches and Glitches* by Jurij Meden (2021). It is an insightful (and funny) book about what archiving and curating film looks like in the present. In one of the chapters, Meden discusses how it is as important to preserve film as it is to preserve the audience for film. This idea, that the process of preserving film involves preserving an audience, was something I really wanted to try to put into practice. It made me think, yes, this class should be about learning about film preservation, but it should also have a programming component. It should be about trying to build an audience and a broader understanding around campus about things like physical media. So, over the course of the class there would be a division of labour, and students who wanted to continue doing print inspections, after our training by Oscar, could do so, and other students, called the programming group, would figure out ways to activate the archive and get people outside the class interested in

film on film. With around 22 students to manage, this turned out to be logistically a bit tricky, but the underlying idea of the class is that students get introduced to film materials, preservation, and archiving in the first part of the class, then are able to determine for themselves which aspect of this work they'd want to pursue for the second half of the class. A lot of this was still really theoretical for me, so I was counting on Oscar to be able to guide us through some of the more nitty-gritty stuff, and thankfully he was up for it. I am interested to hear what Oscar made of what we were doing from the outside.

Figure 1: Oscar Becher leads a film handling workshop, 2023.

OB: I think I had heard from our mutual friend Dino Proserpio (multi-hyphenate podcaster, record dealer, and cult film presenter) that you were looking for someone who knew anything about film archiving. I remember that you were using the National Film Preservation Foundation handbook, which provides a lot of very good information about film handling, what to look for when you're working with a film element, and how to be careful about it. But most of all I was excited to visit the class because my favourite thing to do is explain the basics to people who have

seen films and seen cinema, but have never really encountered the archiving and preservation side of film. Seeing an actual film for the first time is really exciting for me. I think getting to actually see what you guys were doing too, actually bringing film out and allowing people to learn about film on film, really won me over because I could tell that there were motivated people in the class, namely Andi and Cam, who were stepping up and showing interest right away. I saw how committed people were to blindly learn how to inspect film, which is a really long, complex process. As you said, there are trained experts in this field, but it's a field which is overrun with imposter syndrome, even for people who have done this for years and are trained in these types of methodologies. I could tell at the beginning there was a little bit of hesitancy, students who would worry about touching the film. That was very interesting to me because you don't know what it is until you touch it; it's innocent until proven guilty. And when we actually finally got to see everybody getting to wind through films, test the shrinkage, see how many splices there were, and then eventually organize an event which was centred around showcasing what all the students found, I was just kind of like, this is a very cool initiative. It doesn't matter if you have a special accreditation as a film archivist, everybody who went through that class now knows more about film archiving than the vast majority of people on the planet. So, I was won over by the whole idea and the execution of the class.

NH: I think a key moment whenever you visit a class, Oscar, is when you bring out all the different film of various gauges and formats and just kind of throw it on the table and invite students to mess around with it. It's an eye-opening moment for students when they get to touch the film and crinkle it up and feel it in their hands (see Figure 1). These are, after all, cinema studies students, who are accustomed to watching films, discussing them, and writing papers about them—touching film isn't ever really considered.

OB: It's something that I don't think anyone ever really expects to do.

NH: When they're invited to handle the film directly, I think there's a turn in the class. Up until that point we've been talking about the loss of so much film, about the volatility of nitrate, the fragility of film as a medium. And now all of a sudden they're touching it, scratching it with paperclips, writing on it.

OB: Yeah, there's a lot that can go wrong when you're handling certain elements, so it's good to have a little caution. But I also like seeing when people realize how film melds with your hand. If you're dealing with polyester versus acetate you can kind of bring that out to other areas. Every field of archival study deals with different materials and each of those materials affect relics of recent and not-so-recent history in their own unique ways. While most people may point to a material and classify it as plastic—an overarching term with little specificity—knowing exactly what that material is and how it will age over time can also teach valuable lessons about

economics, chemistry, and different periods of history. By handling film, even students who have little to no experience or interest in film archiving can bring information they've gleaned into their everyday life, or into their eventual area of specialization, whatever that may be. I'd like to throw the conversation back to Andi and Camila now and ask what they enjoyed about first being students in the class and then subsequently TA-ing it?

AE: My favourite part of the class was . . . well, there were good and bad parts about what I want to say. I was the editor of the report that we were putting together about the overall condition of the library's film collection. It was really a lot of fun to do all those inspections and put together this report and to think about how we're going to frame our argument for preserving these films, and how we're going to try to convince people that this work needs to be continued. Because I realized, doing this, that this work doesn't stop with the report.

NH: Yes, that report you edited at the end of the semester was actually the beginning.

AE: On the other hand, the struggle I think was having two groups dedicated to such different aims, one dedicated to programming and one dedicated to inspection. Those groupings didn't necessarily allow for students to specialize, and we got a lot of people who were just not super interested in what they were doing. It got a little bit difficult to work with them at points. In the current iteration of the class, we've abandoned that approach and we're doing an "Adopt-a-Film" project instead. Students are working in smaller groups to investigate a single film in the collection. They're looking at not only what the content of the film is, but also its condition, and how it circulated. This has made it a little easier for students to figure out what they are interested in. It's made it easier for teasing out what individual students are delighted by.

CG: The difference between being a student in the class and being a TA in the class is that I feel like there is a better recording system now. My favourite thing about archival work is putting the data in a spreadsheet and being all organized about it, like Lindsay over here. I really think that in order for me to be teaching, or at least alongside students teaching this material for the first time, having that really organized spreadsheet system set in place beforehand has been really important. Now when we inspect films for the Adopt-a-Film projects they'll be recorded for future Purchase Film Archive meetings. I really respect Lindsay for having me do spreadsheets during my Vinegar Syndrome internship. There is this very cool thing about digitizing and having a digital component related to something that is so physical, like film. Considering that we're now talking about education, I wanted to ask Lindsay what she thinks the benefits of doing this kind of work are for a more digital generation of students. How do we get students intrigued with the physical stuff as a digital generation?

LINDSAY MILLER: That's a really good question. I know when I was studying video production and podcast production during my undergraduate degree, I found myself getting really hung up on technicalities. We were learning about all the important filmmakers and all the auteurs, but I was sitting there saying to myself: I don't know how a film camera works, I've never shot on film. I just never had those opportunities. So, I think what's really important, especially if you're just interested in filmmaking in general, is understanding how the technology has developed. And yes, it gets very technical and not everyone needs to know how to correctly identify what the original camera negative is, but it's good to understand how a film camera works: film started out like this and then standards were set, it evolved into this, and so on. The other question is how you keep people interested, because when it comes to the digital side of things I think that's actually where the education gets a lot drier. It's a little bit harder to understand and, because it's ones and zeroes, it's not something you can really visualize super well. I know I was having a hard time with this kind of thing when I started learning about digital preservation. I was often like, just *what* are you talking about exactly? What do you mean? So, I think introducing the physical side really helps to understand the process in the long run. It should also be mentioned here that there are a lot of different jobs in archiving. It's not just the film inspection part. It's not just the database entry part. There's a lot of other things you have to deal with—copyright, for example. So the physical side of things exposes people to what there is out there.

Figure 2: Lindsay Miller leads a presentation on video formats, 2024.

AE: I want to piggyback off that with a question for Oscar. You've been making these educational content videos about film and film preservation. I want to know about your inspiration for doing these videos and your target audience. Is it people who might already know about this stuff? Are you trying to be an appealing personality in order to drag more people into the preservation world? What's your M.O.?

OB: That's a good question. I do want as many archivists as possible. I think I have a soft spot for people who are processing archivists. I was always interested in theory and history and research, but I'm always fascinated by the people who get down in the trenches, get down in the dust and the dirt and the mould and try to save as much information as possible. I think archiving is a really dry subject and it's that way for many different reasons. So I do like to make these silly educational videos in order to get people interested in this stuff. It's fascinating to get in the weeds and try to get very granular, literally granular if we're dealing with film, about very specific subclassifications and classifications of things that are obsolete media that no one can find information about. But to be perfectly honest, I always have the same audience in mind. Lindsay and I both work for a for-profit company where funding and resources are acquired through advocacy targeted at specific people. We do preservation and conservation, so we are doing the not-for-profit work of a for-profit company. We often have to advocate for resources from the people who own the company. The very first video was all about vinegar syndrome and how it relates to film cans. At that point I was making a very large bid to purchase an enormous amount of archival film cans, which are very expensive, but which would allow us to finish up cataloguing and inventorying our back stock. However, I had been told no multiple times. The basis of that first script was to remind the owners of the importance of these cans. I wanted to say to them: this is really important, this is part of our mission. My hope was that if we were able to put it out to people who buy Blu-rays and care about the movies, they would also care about the actual resources being allocated toward Lindsay and I's area, which is the film archive. But I'm interested in going back to talk in more depth about where different collections came about at Purchase. Is there one single collection and has there been an active attempt to expand the realm of the film archive?

NH: When the class started, I only understood that there was a single collection, which was the Purchase Library's 16mm collection. That collection is composed mostly of classic art films, as well as educational films and documentaries. A number of these films were labelled CIR, or Center for Instructional Resources, which is a department on campus that no longer exists. There are a lot of dance films in this collection, including films made by Meredith Monk, the Dance Theater of Harlem, and other modern or avant-garde-leaning companies. My inference was always that those films were used within the college's dance conservatory. I subsequently learned that one of the first film professors here, Miriam Arsham, who was friends with Maya Deren, had worked on some of these

films as an editor, including *Night Journey* (1960) with Martha Graham (directed by Deren's ex-husband Alexander Hammid). I imagine that the Deren films we have, like *The Very Eye of Night* (1958) and *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (1945), would have been used in Arsham's classes. But in the process of teaching the class we also found that there were other 16mm collections. There is a Film BFA program at Purchase, and there was a storage room that held a lot of films made by students over the past 30 or so years, including some that won student Academy Awards, and first films by Hal Hartley, Abel Ferrara, Azazel Jacobs, and others that we're still in the process of uncovering. We recently located an incredible student film incorporating gorgeous stop-motion animation, *10,000 Demons* (1985). It was made by Joseph Laudati, a student here in 1985, who went on to work in animation and was featured in the special effects magazine *Cinemagic*. A student currently in the "Cinema and the Archive" class has been in contact with Laudati to learn more about the film, and with luck we'll be able to digitize it.

We've been really fortunate to work with faculty and staff that understand film, and who have the institutional knowledge to say where many of these films came from. Many of the professors in the BFA film program were taught how to make film on film, and there are still projectors, rooms with projection booths, splicers, rewinds, and Steenbecks around. So there's an infrastructure of tools and people that have been really supportive, even if they often don't really know why we're interested in 16mm. But there's an exciting exploratory and discovery dimension to this work that I think really animates students.

One thing that is happening in this iteration of the class that I think has been really useful for students, is that we've been learning more about forms of film that are different from commercial cinema or art cinema. Talking about orphan films, sponsored film and what is called "useful cinema," and home movies has helped them to understand that there's potentially more interesting films in the collection beyond the more recognizable titles like *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) or *The Gold Rush* (Charlie Chaplin, 1925), and how these different kinds of films can be valuable, both historically and aesthetically.

LM: While we're talking about orphan films, industrial films, and things like that, I'd like to ask Andi and Cam something. While working at Vinegar Syndrome during your internship, you came across a lot of porn, didn't you? I'm curious about what your reaction to that was at first. Were you hesitant or apprehensive? Did working with porn change your viewpoints?

CG: Well, I was already interested in sex in film. I was always interested in, like, the morality of it. I was always interested in, like, should we have more of it? Should we have less of it? What does it mean for the story? And I think that working for Vinegar Syndrome and seeing more gruesome stuff than what mainstream cinema usually offers... it was a good turning point in my ideas about it. I honestly was kind of content with it. I just feel like it became normalized, and it was fine. I think that some of the stuff there is questionable, but there's five different warehouses in

that building so of course something's going to be questionable. It's just a matter of what you do with it and how it should be treated. So the internship involved learning about that as well, which is what I really, really appreciated, and walking into the most normal activities, normal jobs I've ever encountered was nice.

AE: I was raised to be sort of prudish and this material is not really my area of interest, but my attitude is: it exists, it's not something to be afraid of, and we're working in a professional environment doing work that needs to be done. That holds precedence over any squeamishness I may have about the content of the films. I think if I were to have my perfect pie-in-the-sky job, it probably wouldn't be porn, but also, I don't really want to work on mainstream material. *It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946) should be preserved, but that's not what I want to do, either. I want to get down in the mud and do things that other people are not going to do, because they still need to happen, and that's sort of how I view it.

OB: Well, can I also say: sex is an enormous concept in cinema, and every single archive is going to have sexually explicit materials in some form or another. The dream scenario is to have people who can see what the researcher in a hundred years is going to want to see, and what the filmmaker in a hundred years is going to want to study. I think that one of the great things about the "Cinema and the Archive" course is what you were able to do within a relatively short span of time, and how Andi and Camila were set up to pursue various trajectories. During their internship, Andi and Camila were exposed to the various genres that exist in every film archive. In the end Andi was able to unearth, and this was confirmed by another researcher, about seventeen or eighteen lost films. Without a person looking at years, titles, edge codes, confirming that these were the best versions of these titles, outside of fragments on VHS, these films would never even be thought of again, let alone seen. In addition to that, Camila went through an entire half of our archive—about 2,500 titles. She added metadata, A-D strip information, fixed label errors, updated database records.

LM: Right, Camila assisted on an audit that we performed last year, on the company's tenth anniversary. A lot of films were acquired over that period and there had been multiple archivists. No one had sat down to take a look at whether or not everything in the database corresponded to what was on the shelves. The audit was necessary since we are moving buildings, but it was also good to do because we were able to correct a lot of simple mistakes made by others.

OB: That's really an enormous amount of work that can get done within the timeframe of a semester. And at the end, Andi and Camila came out of the internship having accomplished a really tangible and important thing that they could show people they'd done. So they learned incredibly quickly, and part of that had to do with passion and genuinely caring about the areas that they wanted to grow into.

AE: Going back to the question about expanding the archive at Purchase. We have already started the process of doing new acquisitions. Nathan introduced us to Tony Spalla, a retired camera operator in Yonkers, New York who once owned a video production company. He has donated films, television shows, some documentary footage, that we're slowly making our way through. We also have a collection donated from a local movie theatre, and those are, again, a lot of documentaries, shorts, things like that. It's all very exciting to get our hands on more film materials, especially because the materials on campus, a lot of them are not projectable. We've already had some real success with projecting the better of the elements from our new acquisitions. But in terms of expansion, space is always an issue. We don't yet have a dedicated space. We only recently actually got a permanent space to perform film inspections that we can access regularly. So, space has been a bit of a struggle, and I wanted to ask Lindsay if she had any thoughts on how digital organization might be able to help us with this problem of being all over the place, physically.

NH: We're drowning in film over here!

LM: I can certainly relate to that. I think that metadata is just so key to archiving in general. It's very, very important to keep track of what you're doing, even if it seems like something very mundane. For example, Oscar and I, whenever someone pulls a print to be scanned or whatever the element is, we'll make a little note in the database: this person took the print out of the archive on this date, etc. That way, if someone's looking for it, we automatically just know where it is and there's not a wild goose chase to go find it. It's really important to keep on top of all that data, as well as figure out a system that really works for you. When you start getting into archival science and things like that, they're going to talk about Dublin Core and MARC records and all the different standards of things. No disrespect to any of those standards, they're all perfectly good standards, but sometimes it just doesn't work for your organization. Luckily, we already had a system in place when I first joined Vinegar Syndrome, so I was really easily able to jump into our database and make changes as we needed. We've made a lot of changes since I started, which was over a year ago. These changes can be really small. Oftentimes, it's just like one single word. I have arguments with myself about tagging certain things and certain subjects all the time, because it's just important to consider the language that you use when describing materials. Also, in terms of organization, you've just got to know where everything is. You've got to have a way of labelling everything. Otherwise, it's just a mess. An archive without any sort of database inventory is not an archive, it's just a mess.

CG: I have some things to say about that. I am also involved with WPSR, the campus radio station, and my work there has also helped me realize that having a database is having an archive. I have interns at the radio station, and our archival

roles were the most popular out of the three roles we offered. We had PR, tech, and archival, and loads of people wanted to sign up for the archival positions—we couldn't accept them all. It made me realize how happy I was that people are not only interested in this thing that seems so new to this campus, but also that there are multiple parts to archiving, especially with a database. For example, I have one person dedicated to the CDs. I have one person dedicated to the vinyl. We even have a student collection that we're starting and it involves researching CDs in the collection that are from students from 2005. And then we have people that are musicians now come in and add to that collection. It does make me realize that all these crates and all this stuff that was in the station for ten years wasn't truly an archive until someone took the time to make a system out of it and have people actually in charge of the various materials.

Figure 3: Camila Garcia Cabrera demonstrates an Eiki projector for a class of three- and four-year-olds, 2025.

NH: You took all that experience that you gained with Lindsay and applied it to a different site and different media. That's fantastic. Jumping off that a little bit, it strikes me that there is a lot of student interest in archiving on campus, in addition to the work that you're doing at the radio station. Purchase has a TV station, for example, that also has an interesting archive of material. I'm wondering, and I guess this is a question for the whole room. Is this normal? I know Purchase can be pretty idiosyncratic. It's always been a very subcultural campus, so I wonder if that makes it a uniquely receptive place for archival activities. But since this conversation is meant for an issue of a journal that is about teaching media archives more generally, I think people would like to know if this could be something that they

could do at their own institution, be it a liberal arts school, a state school, or even a high school. Is there a general turn toward archiving that's happening that other educators could be taking advantage of?

LM: I think newer generations are a little more in touch with the importance of keeping records of things. A lot of people are really getting into journaling and diaries, just like date keeping in general. This is just something I've noticed recently, and I think that is part of it.

CG: I think that a lot of colleges don't realize the history that they have. A big reason that Purchase students are so involved with their history is that they understand that they had and still have an incredibly rich, for example, music scene. This is a really big art school and people love to put their talent everywhere. People like to digitize and record their talents. For example, I just went to a pie-eating contest, and everything was recorded. This contest (put on by Purchase TV) was a *remake* of a contest that they had back in the day because they found it in the archives, which was very interesting. Also, the student centre here, The Stood, has always had great programming, and it's really interesting to hear people who remember the shows there. There's people on the internet being like "I was there when that happened." Then you have people being like, isn't this cool that this event is still a thing? For example, Culture Shock (a spring music festival started in 1993): Destiny's Child played in 1998, Drake played in 2009. That's very fascinating and very enriching for the festival and for the Purchase community as a whole. I think that if a lot of other colleges try their hardest and dip their toe into their history, they would not only appreciate the school that they're going to, but really appreciate the history and try to remake it.

AE: Yes, I think there's a growing interest in histories that lie outside of the mainstream. I remember when we were students in the "Cinema and the Archive" class, we were talking to the TA about something and he mentioned a director that I didn't know. And then he said, "oh, I don't mean to be offensive, but do you like *know* people?" And I did my best not to be offended. But I later realized that that's not really what I'm interested in. I'm not interested in the people, I'm interested in like, why is this film about a library with a kid talking to George Washington Carver here (*Check it Out*, a 1983 educational film about library research)? What's the deal with that? I have a friend at Mount Holyoke, who is very invested in archives and has been for a really long time. And her work is mostly about bringing to light things that enable people to question the popular narratives of history.

NH: One thing that I think is really great about having the Purchase Film Archive as a student-run club is that it means that in addition to archiving being taught as a required class, students are also able to contribute, like Cam said, to a community or a culture of archiving that's occurring across campus. I think that's been really helpful for energizing the class too, because there's now a built-in culture that's

providing an audience and a basis for other kinds of connections to happen. The one *big problem* with this model, if we can call it that, is that Camila and Andi are going to be graduating this year in the spring. I will be there to cheer them on, but we are very conscious of the fact that someone else is going to inherit the club and the film archiving projects. I'm going to be here, still, but I can't do it by myself. This is the perennial problem: students are only here for four years, and then they leave. So, this process of training and introducing is ongoing, which can be interesting, but also frustrating. It can make progress difficult to see.

AE: Definitely, it's a little bittersweet. I've had so much fun doing this stuff for the last two years. I've loved doing the work at Vinegar Syndrome, and I'm excited to think ahead to what my opportunities with this set of skills that I've been building could be. I also love the materials the Purchase Film Archive works with, and I'll be sad to leave it behind. I am fascinated by what we actually have here and what it tells us about the community at Purchase and the larger Westchester community. It's really fascinating to me. Our goal right now is to try to pick these individuals who are showing some interest and convince them, no, this is actually the coolest thing you've ever seen on this campus, and you need to take up this mantle of preservation from me.

NH: For people looking to start a project like this, students or faculty, being evangelical about what you're doing is the best route. I guess that leads naturally into the "where do we go from here?" question, but I also want to know from Oscar and Lindsay, who have both done graduate work in archiving, what they think about teaching film archiving to undergraduates. This is typically part of graduate-level training, so what can film archiving do, or not do, at the undergraduate level?

OB: It makes me think of something that Andi already brought up, about the preconceived notions that people have about studying film. You typically get asked: Are you interested in directors? Are you interested in acting? Are you interested in filmmaking? Are you interested in film history? But I think it's really, really important to get at least a very basic knowledge in film archiving, or just preservation practices as early as humanly possible, even if you're not formally trained in these types of things. I think formal training and graduate preservation programs are absolutely necessary, but I genuinely wish I had a collection to sift through while I was an undergrad. I feel like I spent so much time after graduation trying to figure out why I wasn't fitting into these preconceptions about whether or not it was film history, or filmmaking, or something in between that I was interested in. Also, I was from a fairly new school, where basically we had a DVD collection, and that was it. If you get experience, not even just with film, but learning soft and hard skills with these types of materials, you can bring it into other areas.

Film is one of the most fascinating mediums, because it involves dealing with people, it involves a painterly touch, it involves the idea of writing. It involves

so many different forms of art, and the archiving of it also can be transferred to other things that you do, just either in daily life, or as professional experience. Finally, Lindsay and I deal with really difficult people all the time, and I think archiving is a really good way of learning how to professionally deal with people and with institutions. It's about negotiation and what you're able to do with and within institutions. It's about expanding in the ways that can inspire people, like Camila and Andi and Nathan have been able to do, and it's really about the ability of the single person to convince those who are not totally invested in film or archiving, but need to learn about it in order to see what *we're* passionate about. It's not us-versus-them, it's "how do we get everybody to understand what we think is cool about this stuff?" or at least see it a little bit more like we do.

LM: I think very similarly to you, especially when it comes to, like you said, any kind of archival skill you can easily apply to any sort of job, and I think that's particularly important with filmmaking nowadays, considering that most of it is done digitally. You need to have digital backups! I talk to people all the time, they don't seem to believe this. They're like, it's in the cloud, don't worry about it. Amazon's got it, don't worry about it. And then I just have to say, just let me play a hypothetical with you: this is not a conversation about *if* the digital media fails but *when* it fails, then what do you do? It's not a fun question to ask but these conversations are necessary. Yes, it's tough with costs and things like that, but if you move up in the industry, you're going to see these things happening. So, it's really important to get that kind of exposure as soon as possible, so that way you can kind of integrate it into your everyday life. I also think it's really important to teach students *how* they can use the archive in their work. I know when I was an undergrad, they taught me, you know, oh, this is our library, this is how you search for a book, blah, blah, but they never really explained the special collections that they had there. I don't even know if my college had any film in their archive, but when I was doing video production, I was particularly interested in documentary film, and when you make documentary film, you pull from the archives a lot of the times. Well, then you have to start thinking about copyright, and you have to think about, well, what's fair use in this case? A lot of media law kind of stuff. So it's all really tied together, and, yeah, you don't need to know every single thing, but just having the general awareness, especially of the legalities of things, is always just going to be a bonus, in my opinion.

NH: There was a moment recently in class where we were discussing *Film, Living Record of Our Memory* (Inés Toharia Terán, 2021). The idea of the ephemerality of all these media came up, and I think for a lot of people, not just students, there is an idea that this stuff will just be around forever, and that it doesn't need care or stewardship in any sustained way. One thing you come to realize is that, even with all the care and stewardship that you can give it, this media might still disappear someday because an archive will burn down or will get bombed or, through neglect or lack of resources, fall into disrepair. In a certain sense, archives confront you with

death. There is an existential dimension to this work that goes beyond media and film. You realize that—to use a familiar phrase—everything solid is going to melt into air at some point. So part of this work is about confronting impermanence.

OB: That's a very good and optimistic place to end.

[Laughter]

NH: But maybe this is why I threw caution to the wind with regards to my personal qualifications or training. It was now or never for these films. Tom Gunning, who taught at Purchase, once said that life is a rebellion against death. Maybe that's what film preservation is, too, a revolt against death.

Readers who would like to see the students of the Purchase Film Archive in action can view the short documentary *PFA and Beyond*, made in 2023 by Purchase film student Rebecca Moore, at the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OG-QiXHFudA.

References

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