

Teaching ‘The Film Archive’ at Yale University

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When I arrived at the Yale Film Archive in 2013—then known as the Yale Film Study Center—to take the Archive and Special Collections Manager job, teaching was neither in the position description nor on my mind. In my first year in the position, I set to work getting a handle on the collection, inspecting unidentified film elements, and selecting titles to propose for grant-funded preservation. I designed a database to collect data on our holdings, devised guidelines for access, and began reaching out to partners on campus to collaborate on film-related projects. I gave a lecture about the material history of film to the annual introductory film class and hired an undergraduate student to help as a cataloguing assistant, but otherwise, I did not have extensive interactions with Yale undergraduate or graduate students. I did, however, work closely with faculty members in the Film and Media Studies Program, many of whom had long histories of building the collection and supporting the institution and vested interests in how the film collection was being shaped.

By the end of my first year, I was approached by faculty members Charles Musser and John MacKay, who together encouraged me to consider teaching a graduate course on the film archive. The goals of the course would be to provide students with a stronger background in the material history of film and an opportunity to interact with the archive. Providing such a course would also help to connect the Film and Media Studies Program and the Film Archive more closely. I agreed to propose a syllabus, and it was decided that the first iteration of the course—creatively named FILM 604: “The Film Archive”—would take place in the spring of 2016. At the time, it was also proposed that I teach the course every other year, providing an opportunity for every cohort of graduate students to take the course in one of their first two years in the program.

As I began planning the course, I thought back to my own time as a student at the L. Jeffrey Selznick School of Film Preservation at George Eastman Museum in Rochester, New York. I studied there in 2005–06 and appreciated the multi-pronged approach to teaching film history and the history of film archives. I enjoyed gaining practical experience through the school's rotation system, where students work closely with different departments' staff for a week at a time. While the Yale Film Archive is tiny in comparison to the George Eastman Museum, and I only had a single thirteen-week semester to work with, I modelled my course in part on an abbreviated Selznick School curriculum, augmented with lessons I had learned from my time at the Academy Film Archive in Los Angeles, where I worked for seven years before coming to Yale.

I open the syllabus with the following statement: "The study of film is supported, oftentimes invisibly, by the work of film archives around the world. How do archives acquire, conserve, house, and share films? What aspects of the history of film production and filmmaking have presented challenges to film's long-term viability? How is the rise of digital technology affecting the creation, distribution, and preservation of film?" The course is designed to explore these and many other questions, with the aim of demystifying archives and archival work. I also hope to connect the concrete history of film technology and film archives with the more abstract idea of "films" in all the ways students can access them today, making clear that without archives, there would be no films to study. The scope of the course, which has remained roughly the same through its fifth iteration in the spring of 2024, includes lectures, discussions, written exercises, small creative projects, screenings, and guest lectures from experts in the field. During the first half of the class, students also participate in a practicum that provides them with hands-on experience inspecting, identifying, repairing, and researching their own 16mm short film print.

The first part of the class provides a brief overview of the history of film technology, focusing on film stocks, sound formats, aspect ratios, and colour technologies. Readings include selections from Paolo Cherchi Usai's *Silent Cinema* (2019), various articles from *The Moving Image* and *Journal of Film Preservation*, and chapters from Anthony Slide's *Nitrate Won't Wait* (1992) and the National Film Preservation Foundation's *The Film Preservation Guide* (2004). Next, we investigate film archives, looking at their history, mission, activities, and collection policies. Then, we explore the concepts of conservation, preservation, restoration, and recreation, pairing case study readings with 35mm and 16mm screenings of titles discussed, including *The Emperor Jones* (Dudley Murphy, 1933) and films from the Tyler, Texas Black Film Collection. Students are assigned exercises on film programming, in which they conceive and source materials for a hypothetical film series, and digital issues, for which they select a recent academic article covering the role of digital technology in film preservation and present an analysis to the class. Taking advantage of our proximity to New York City, I also ask each student to research and present a profile of an area repertory cinema. Over the years, I have also invited guest archivists, distributors, and filmmakers, including Oscar Becher of Vinegar Syndrome, John Klacsmann of Anthology Film Archives, Jake Perlin of Cinema Conservancy, and Katie Trainor of

the Museum of Modern Art, to discuss their work preserving and sharing archival film.

Throughout the academic year, the Yale Film Archive presents weekly screenings, all of which I encourage students to attend and some of which I make required screenings for the course. The first required screening is always an archival print from our collection, and students are asked to consciously watch the print rather than the film, paying attention to colour, sound, aspect ratio, material damage, and reel changes. While the prints are always worthy of a public screening, I select them specifically because they are not perfect and bear evidence of a long screening life, so the students have plenty to observe and document.

The heart of the course is the practicum, in which each student selects a single-reel 16mm short film of their choosing, which they source from eBay with a provided budget, and which is then added to the Yale Film Archive collection at the conclusion of the class. While the Yale Film Archive collection holds more than enough un-inspected materials for students to choose from, I prefer to let students wade through the sea of 16mm offerings on eBay: first, so they might seek out a film that fits better within their research interests, and second, because such a search provides a helpful illustration of the wide array of material available on the collectors' market, as well as a sobering illustration of the scourge of colour fading. In order to ensure that the selected films generally fall within our collection policy, I place limits on the types of titles students select. Many prints listed on eBay have qualities or characteristics I specifically prohibit in the assignment, including television shows, sporting events, incomplete prints, prints with colour fading, and items that are advertised as suffering from vinegar syndrome. Despite these restrictions, year after year, every student manages to find something within their fifty-dollar budget, and often considerably more affordable. One student's low-cost title ends up freeing up funding for the splurge necessary to take home another student's pricier film of choice. Within the first week of class, each student provides me with a list of three titles whose auctions are ending soon, and I place the bids necessary to win one print for each student. The Yale Film Archive collection is richer thanks to these student archivist acquisitions, which include an educational film on "stranger danger," Joris Ivens' city symphony *Regen* (1929), documentary shorts produced by the National Film Board of Canada, and a Technicolor industrial film discovered to have been shot by famed cinematographer Jack Cardiff.

Once the print arrives, each student works with me one hour per week outside of class time, learning one-on-one how to inspect, identify, repair, and catalogue their print. They learn how to operate a Steenbeck, thread up a small-gauge scanner, transfer the film, and make frame enlargements. Finally, each student writes film notes and prepares an introduction for their selected film. The project culminates in a screening called "Class Pictures," where each film is screened for the public as part of our "Treasures from the Yale Film Archive" series, with an introduction by the student. The size of the class is limited by the demands of the practicum; because of the extensive time needed outside of the class meetings, I typically limit the course to six or seven fully enrolled students participating in the print project, while additional

students are welcome to audit the course.

With readings, lectures, discussions, assignments, screenings, guests, and the practicum, the course still does not come close to the depth of the Selznick School lectures and hands-on rotations in the various departments of the George Eastman Museum. Nor does it provide enough time for a student to master the techniques and approaches I absorbed while working as a film preservationist at the Academy Film Archive. But it does provide a student—who may never have even touched a film print before embarking on six or more years of graduate work in film studies—the opportunity to learn about the material and technical history of film and gain experience handling film prints. As digital technology permeates all aspects of film production, distribution, and preservation, I value the opportunity to give the next generation of scholars and curators the chance to learn about the work of film preservation and engage with the film object itself.

References

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