

Film Programming as Archival Research at the University of Leicester

David Christopher

There has been significant interest in film and media archival education among film scholars as of late. However, despite this interest, there has not been a corresponding rise in attention to the practical realities of pedagogy and instruction. Left unchecked, this oversight may stifle efforts to improve educational endeavours in this growing field. Thus, it is timely to explore strategies to activate student interest in archives and media preservation, bridging a gap between film and media education and the archival profession. In this regard, I find the research questions posed by the call for this special issue of *Synoptique* useful for structuring an inquiry into how, exactly, such gaps can be bridged: namely, how do educators actually teach media archives, what strategies and practices have they developed, and what actually happens in the classroom? In the following essay, I discuss a course I teach in the Department of Film Studies at the University of Leicester, HA1115: “Film and Art Installation.” This module was originally conceptualized as an addition to the curriculum for first-year students that could mutually satisfy the department’s previous connection to art history and the mandate to incorporate employability skills training into the curriculum.

In the course, student groups are expected to submit a proposal for some sort of cinematic installation or screening (other than a straight commercial model of exhibition for entertainment and admission receipts) based on an art-historical or social theme. Students then develop and present this event, and, finally, conclude by reflecting on the process of its realization. The module is designed to get students from film studies to work together on a project that will develop a range of skills that are not always addressed in university film courses (like vetting a location and negotiating the terms of its use) but which are nonetheless essential for the kinds of workplaces and careers many of the students will wish to pursue, a “unique selling point” that arts and humanities programs are increasingly required to integrate

into their recruitment marketing. As the module handbook informs students, these skillsets include “team-working, archival investigation, web design, proposal writing, public presentation, and self-reflection.” Cumulatively, these objectives indirectly call for the need for a form of archival research. For this purpose, I broadly take “archive” in the cultural studies sense to mean any collection of related materials from within a specified historical framework. These “archives” could be early twentieth-century Canadian films, 1970s American television commercials, or short-form online videos, for example.

In the three iterations of the module for which I have been responsible, enrolment has fluctuated relatively minimally between twelve students in 2022–23 (resulting in three groups of four students each), eight students in 2023–24 (two groups of four), and eleven students in the 2024–25 module (who were divided unevenly into three groups). The module runs in the second term of the academic year, from January to March, and includes four assessments, each worth 25 percent of the students’ grade, concluding with the event presentations in April (see Figure 1). In this essay, I reflect on the ways in which this module has been successful, but also in need of ongoing adjustments as it attempts to encourage students to undertake archival research. In addition, I proffer some summary notes and reflections on how the reading assigned in the module and integrated into the lecture presentations, taken almost exclusively from Peter Bosma’s *Film Programming: Curating for Cinemas, Festivals, and Archives* (2015), encourages and specifies the ways in which students might engage with different kinds of archival inquiry for their projects.

Weekly Module Outline:

Week	Topic	Reading	Assignment
Week 1:	Module Introduction and Outline, Group Assignment, Meetings Schedule, and Event Planning Template.	Peter Bosma – <i>Film Programming</i>: “Curating Film Archives,” pp. 82-93. - great examples of events	Attend/Participate Groups – Agreement Groups – Meetings Review E.P. Template
Week 2:	Film Art as Event, Event Planning, and Venues. Group Work: Project Proposal and Event Planning Template.	Peter Bosma – <i>Film Programming</i>: “Curating Film Theatres,” pp. 51-67. - venues	Attend/Participate Group Work: Project Proposal and Event Planning Template
Week 3:	Copyright Limitations and Screening Rights – Costs and Budget Planning. Group Work: Project Proposal, Event Planning Template, Budget Plan	Peter Bosma – <i>Film Programming</i>: “The Network of Intermediaries,” pp. 33-50. - copyright / costs	Attend/Participate Group Work: Project Proposal and Website Design
Week 4:	Website Design Plan. Group Work: Project Proposal, Event Planning Template, Budget Plan, Website Design	Peter Bosma – <i>Film Programming</i>: “Curating Film Festivals,” pp. 68-81. - website insights	Attend/Participate Group Work: Project Proposal, Event Planning Template, Website Design
Week 5:	Assignments Outlines and Review, Progress Reports, Group Work.	Peter Bosma – <i>Film Programming</i>: “Conclusion,” pp. 114-121. - summary film as art	Attend/Participate Group Work: Budget Plan and Website
Week 6:	Reading Week	n/a	n/a
Weeks 7 to 10:	Independent Group Work towards Assessments and Event Preparation	Archival materials necessary to properly research, realize, and reflect on your event	due: Week 7 Project Proposal due: Week 10 Project Website
Week 11: (Online Tutorial)	Transferable Skills, Project Log, Review and Progress Check.	Samples: resumes, cover letters, and project logs with reflection on Blackboard	Attend/Participate Project Log Discussion and WorkSheet
As scheduled in April (Weeks 12-15)	Event-Installation: Public Presentation	Review and rehearse your own notes and scripts for the event	Event-Installation: Public Presentation
Week 16:	Individual Project Log and Reflection	Review all readings, notes, logs, and scripts	due: Individual Project Log

GOOD LUCK, AND HAVE FUN!!

Figure 1: The schedule for the course.

As outlined in the handbook for the course, the purpose and function of the module is to give students an opportunity to design, plan, and realize a “Filmic Event” for an installation at one of three vetted locations, which include the University of Leicester’s library installation space, the Attenborough Arts Centre (which is adjacent to the university), and the University Film Theatre. In the past, students were not limited to these university-sponsored venues. We made the decision to limit their choices, however, after student groups in early iterations of the course pursued and vetted a number of commercial spaces in the city only to be met with disappointment that there was no funding available for venue rental fees. This parameter, however, did not evacuate the effort and experience of vetting spaces, as student groups were still required to negotiate properly with the university-sponsored venues for scheduling, facilities, risk management, and more. By significantly diminishing the task of “shopping” for a venue, we also eased the burden and workload to what might be more appropriately expected of first-level students.

Nevertheless, even in its more streamlined form, the module requires, and helps develop, the organizational skills required for the tasks associated with a parsimonious and focused archival investigation. As such, the module is designed to specifically address the following learning outcomes, as described in the module handbook: 1) identify and research relationships between film and art and use this to plan a proposed event, 2) develop numeracy skills through budget planning, 3) demonstrate digital skills by constructing a website, 4) develop and present a project that demonstrates an understanding of the relationship between film and art, and 5) reflect on and articulate motivations for, strengths in, and experiences with developing transferable skills. It is especially through the first and fourth of these that students are encouraged to engage with film and media archives as I have defined them above.

The first assessment that students have in the course is a 1,500-word event proposal, which requires significant research. In their groups, the students write a proposal for a non-profit “Film and Art” event or installation which will be exhibited to the public at one of the available venues at the end of the spring term. By “event” or “installation,” I clarify that the exhibit should contain elements of film (like screenings of films, material related to film history, video clips, documentary fragments, or even animated PowerPoint presentations), but that it is not limited to elements of film; it may also include elements of the visual arts (like art objects of any medium). At this stage, students are informed that they will be evaluated not just on their selections of an interesting theme and appropriate content, but also on the quality of their proposal, the way they market the event on their website, and the realization of the event itself.

Students are recommended to pick a theme first and then select films or other media objects that engage with that theme in different ways. When students begin this brainstorming process, they are encouraged to consider less popular forms of cinematic production, including art-house cinema, television commercials, industrial and educational films, and short-form online video from social media platforms like YouTube, Vine, or TikTok. Herein lies some of the most salient archival research

in which students engage. Students conduct internet searches in which we work together to experiment with keywords or keyword collocations in different search engines. These are considered as relevant in relation to three major categories: journalism (databases), scholarship, and general video. Although in a search engine such as Google, these come up somewhat randomly (and filtered by commercial interests), students are explicitly instructed to consider these categories as a way of organizing and categorizing the relevance of each “hit” to their larger theme or project. These can be further specified by using Google Scholar as a particular search engine, for example, or by filtering responses through the category options afforded by Google in the menu ribbon of the search returns, the first few of which usually include “Images,” “Videos,” and “News.” Wikipedia and IMDb are also usually among the top hits, often listing sources and further resources in their citations, which students are taught to track down.

One successful theme from recent years was modern-day migration in and to Leicester, which was chosen to coincide with the projects and presentations at the Leicester Museum and the Curve Theatre in 2022–23 to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Ugandan Asian exodus. (This theme was somewhat awkwardly mandated for this iteration of the module course by the university bureaucracy to honour an industry partnership in the spirit of fostering employability, but how such a partnership would be realized had not been duly considered.) This one-off departmental partnership with the Curve Theatre returned some very creative student outputs and encouraged some excellent archival research, described below. Other examples of framing ideas provided to students include “effects of the internet,” “childhood memories,” “vengeance and treason,” “marriage and romance,” “journalism and truth,” and “advertising culture” (see Figure 2). To realize a properly diligent and representative survey of any of these thematic categories, students are expected to undertake some form of archival research.

some **theme** examples:

- migration/diaspora in/to Leicester
- effects of the internet
- childhood memories (Bosma - p. 58)
- vengeance and treason (Bosma - p. 58)
- marriage and romance
- fear and/or death
- aging and/or loneliness
- coming-of-age over the years
- genre anniversary: 50 Years of ...
- evolution of gender
- journalism and truth
- time or history in cinematic media
- cinema of ‘disturbance’ / cinema of ‘comfort’ (Bosma p. 63)
- advertising culture

(Group) Event Proposal – 1500 Words (25%):
By “event/installation,” we mean an exhibit that contains elements of film (i.e. screenings of films, material related to film history, video clips, documentary fragments, even animated governpoint presentations) and that might also include elements of the visual arts (i.e. art objects of any medium).

The best way to go about this is to **pick a theme** and choose a selection of films or other media artifacts that engage with this theme in different ways. However, remember that it is not just about picking a good theme and interesting content: you are being judged on the quality of your proposal, the way you market the event on your website, and the realization of the event itself.

Examples of such event projects include:

- a special screening event: introduction / screening – clips or feature / interactive activity – Q&A
- a lecture or presentation with video/cinematic accompaniment
- a charity fundraiser event with video/cinematic accompaniment
- a screening event concerned with identity topics or the exposure of under-represented international films or television episodes
- a social event attached to a film (e.g. Halloween party or a cult-like Rocky Horror Picture Show event)
- a digital art video installation – several screens “in dialogue” with each other
- a video tour of some sort (such as the one that might be developed from the BFI slides for the Attenborough Arts Centre – attached)
- a quiz night screening event activity – e.g. compare two short films (what do they have in common?) / details you may have missed (quiz)

The proposal will include the following sections that will be submitted on the **Event Plan Template**:

- What is your event/installation? How do you imagine its realization? How will the event work? Describe it in detail.
- Why are you running this event? What is the rationale for your event? How does it engage with the theme you are proposing?
- For whom is your event? What audiences might be interested or do you intend to target? What reasons do you have for considering these audiences?
- What resources will you need for the event? Will it require you to secure some sort of funding? How will it fit in with the venue resources available? What is the ideal time and space for it?

SUBMISSION DEADLINE: TBD – EARLY MARCH

Figure 2: Slide from the first lecture with examples of themes for the event proposal.

The assigned reading includes salient sections of Peter Bosma's book that might encourage the kind of archival research that some of these types of events or installations require. In selecting films for an event like this, for instance, Bosma suggests the merit of both popular or mainstream cinema—like blockbuster fantasy films—and more obscure films or videos, which may only be available in select archives or the farthest corners of YouTube. This includes corporate, advertising, and educational films, newsreels, amateur and home movies, and unused recordings like deleted scenes and outtakes. In the reading assigned for the module, Bosma also highlights several typically neglected genres, including cult films, trash films, and underground cinema (2015, 86). Bosma further explains that “we live in a time of transition . . . Digitisation offers a lot of potential possibilities for ‘speciality’ programming, such as cinema on demand, new forms of event cinema, and integration of alternative content” (119). Bosma also notes that interesting encounters can be created between cinema and the other arts, where intermedial projects open spaces for comparison and revelation. “Abstract animation,” for instance, belongs “to a richly filled sub-category that is formed by the overlap between cinema, painting and music” (59). In his discussion of “pop-up cinema screenings,” Bosma also points to the compelling example of the gothic genre and its many historical silent classics (91–92). This specific example inspired a group from the 2023–24 iteration of the module, who loosely took it up with their cinematic survey of vampire films, discussed below. Moreover, the broad methodological suggestions prompted students to consider some of the questions they may need to reflect on in order to pull off a screening like this: How could the proposed screening make creative use of the venue or setting, and how could live elements create a unique experience for an audience that they would not get at home? It also raised some more practical and archive-oriented questions: Which films were included in the historical canon of vampire films, where could these films be accessed, and how or why had they or had they not been deemed valuable enough to be preserved or made available? These kinds of questions become important for all groups to reflect upon.

As part of the module lectures, I also discuss Bosma's more theoretical insights about the types of material that might be chosen, and the reasons motivating their selection. As Bosma explains, in selecting archival material for an event or festival screening, a curator must choose between “exhaustiveness and selection” (2015, 88), keeping in mind the historical, social, educational, entertainment, and economic value of our film heritage (92). Bosma also notes that, if a film program consists solely of newly released films, then the organizer is “not a film curator or programmer but [merely] a scheduler of screenings. A film curator thinks the other way around: he is searching out films for an audience, as many films as possible within the given setting” (51). This latter assertion emphasizes the importance of researching older, sometimes more difficult-to-access films, analyzing them, and exhibiting them to a new audience.

Taking the distinction between “programmer” and mere “scheduler” as a point of departure, the module shifts focus in the second lecture to consider film archives as more capacious than strictly videographic for the ancillary artifacts that

might be used to realize an event or installation. For the kinds of “big events” that Bosma champions, he suggests that a “fringe” program, “with exhibitions, debates, lectures, publications, educational meetings,” and other related events, could contextualize the presentation of an archive collection (2015, 91). He explains that archives also collect “film-related objects, such as posters, devices, documents,” and other supplementary materials (92), which, as I further explain to students, can also comprise part of their installation, in conjunction with or in contrast to the film or video elements the students have selected. For example, one of the two groups from the 2022–23 academic year, focused on modern-day migration, presented a screening of *Minari* (Lee Isaac Chung, 2020), a dramatic narrative film about a Korean family that struggles to settle in the U.S., around which the group framed a discussion on the diasporic émigré experience. After scouring the online archives of several local newspapers, the group decorated the screening space with printouts of newspaper articles from throughout the years that addressed similar difficulties people had experienced in their migration into or out of Leicester. This research project encouraged students to explore a wide range of archival materials that may be directly or indirectly associated with the media objects under scrutiny.

Having conceptualized the theme for the event or installation, and the archival work necessary to facilitate it, the module moves to engage students with more practical activities toward the realization of their event. Each group is required to design a website promoting their event, which should explain both the theme of their event and some of the research and film studies concepts relevant to their project. Students are encouraged to keep the latter point in mind both as they plan the event and design the website. However, most of the training offered in preparation for this assignment has to do with more pragmatic considerations. As the assessment indicates, the website should include 1) an overall description of the event and the rationale for it, 2) reasonable graphic and visual materials to present and promote the event, and 3) the relevant date, location, and ticket acquisition information. As such, the guidance and practice offered within the lectures and through the learning management system are more focused on the technical aspects of web design than the website’s content or the research required to generate it.

However, the realization of the event itself brings the importance of the cumulated archival work into sharp relief. All group members must participate in the presentation of the event to a public audience, a requirement that has perhaps been the strongest motivator for students to engage in extensive research and preparation. Since public participation may vary, students are encouraged to be prepared for both large and small audiences. In the 2023–24 academic year, both groups delivered stellar presentations. One of the two groups chose to do a retrospective of representations of vampires in cinema and television, with a focus on and screening of *Interview with the Vampire* (Neil Jordan, 1994) to mark its thirtieth anniversary. Their pre-screening presentation outlined extensive research surveying the history of cinematic vampire narratives, from their earliest appearances to their most contemporary examples. Another group chose to do a comparative retrospective surveying four decades of adaptations of *Little Women* (George Cukor, 1933; Mervyn LeRoy,

1949; Gillian Armstrong, 1994; Greta Gerwig, 2019). Their presentation examined and contextualized each adaptation within the historical conditions in which it was produced, with special attention on how the different wars in each period informed the films' narratives. By comparing a particular scene that appears in all four films, in which the four sisters reflect on how their mother tries to cope with their father's absence, having been conscripted for the Civil War, the students demonstrated how the concerns of these conflicts across four different periods informed what they framed as feminist considerations in each adaptation.

However, as much as the material realization of the event prompted student motivation to do archival research, the more practical effect of it has had significant shortcomings. While the aforementioned presentations have generally been successful, the fact that there was no time or space in the module to provide any significant training on public speaking and public engagement, for example, compounded by the fact that audience attendance was unpredictable, made the public-facing nature of both the event and website somewhat anxiety-inducing for students. Moreover, the expectation that the students would be available on campus to present their programs after the normal end of the term period in March has posed another challenge. Both these concerns have had a chilling effect on students' ambitions, and they mostly defaulted to thematically motivated single-screening and discussion events, as realized in all three of the examples provided above. This shortcoming of the program design has actually steered students away from more significant archival research projects, as the effort and anxiety inherent to public presentations discouraged students and prompted them to pursue these more conservative, less research-intensive projects.

Earlier iterations of the module, in which connections to more traditional artforms were more strongly foregrounded, had only required students to develop a hypothetical project proposal. In retrospect, I observed that the variety of proposed event or installation ideas had been much broader and more creative, and the hypothetical proposals were far richer in their gestures toward archival research contributions. Due to the excessive work required of first-year students to realize their proposed events, and the way learning about budget planning was problematized by the contradictions emerging between the hypothetical budgets they developed for the events and the lack of an actual budget to realize them, it was decided for the 2024–25 academic year to revert to a version of the module which did not require the realization of events. This may result in a lack of motivation from students to do the research required for the popular cinematic surveys exemplified in the vampire and *Little Women* examples, but it might also have a rebound effect as a more creative breadth of hypothetical events or installations may actually foster the kind of archival research required to realize an appropriate proposal, website, and final reflection.

Thus, in lieu of the requirement to realize the planned events, a new element was added to the website design project that offers students the opportunity to engage in creative media production in lieu of producing their events. Student groups are now required to produce a one- to four-minute promotional video and to embed it on their websites. Advertising is arguably the dominant cinematic mode of this

century, but it is often overlooked in film studies. Indeed, the study of video advertising was absent from the film studies program at the University of Leicester until this new assessment addressed this gap. In the previous two iterations of the module, I had introduced videographic advertising in the second lecture as the possible focus for an event or installation, encouraging students to engage in some form of culture jamming or *détournement* of video advertising (see Figure 3). Unfortunately, due to the chilling effect of having to realize the event described above, this suggestion was not taken up by any of the student groups. The new video production assignment now requires students to research, review, and understand the long history of advertising, whether viewing these commercials strictly as models for making their own promotional video or as media objects that could shape their own proposed event projects.

Peter Bosma – *Film Programming* (2015): “Curating Film Theatres,” pp. 51-67.

“Some options for choosing an artistic criterion as basis for curating a thematic film programme” (p. 56) – **EVENT IDEAS**

• **Advertising Culture – THEME?**



Figure 3: Slide from the second lecture with examples of visual advertising.

The final assessment for the module has historically been labelled a “project log,” but the instructions for it clearly emphasize it as more of a reflection assignment. Each student is required to submit an individual 1,500-word summary of their experiences throughout the process of conceiving, preparing, designing, and working collaboratively on their event, along with a reflection on its realization. This reflection should include summaries of the event, including its conceptualization, planning, and presentation, an explanation of the rationale of the project and its theme, and reflection on what went well and what went poorly, whether the objectives of the event were achieved, what challenges the students faced and what solutions they implemented, and what they learned from the course. As prescribed in the motivations of the module to foster employability, the assessment has primarily

been concerned with what students learned from the process of collaboration and what professional skills they acquired by developing their projects, rather than with how research and access aided their projects. This latter element was articulated more clearly in the 2024–25 requirements for the final submission, a mandate that should better encourage archival research and engagement throughout the module and into the future.

While this module has encouraged students to engage with media archives as part of their research, they have tended not to accept this encouragement. Even the tacit requirement to engage with archives has produced only a minimal effect on their project choices to date; the proposals, while thoughtful in other ways, have been less than fulsome in their exploration and explanation of the connections between history, art, culture, and the cinematic artifacts the students have selected. These shortcomings would be mitigated and the considerations of these aspects of the project better addressed with a stronger emphasis and impetus toward archival materials and research. That is to say that *indirectly* addressing the archives through the tacit necessity of engaging with them does not return the depth of archival engagement that would better inform the scholarly integrity of the events or installations, even if these events are only hypothetical. Especially for first-year students it is necessary to be more explicit and specific about the role of archival research as central to the assessments and intended learning outcomes as well as the specific training necessary to conduct such research.

Thus, for the next iteration of the module, I intend to reformulate and further foreground the presentation of archive suggestions into more explicit directives. In addition, the material for the third week of the module (which is concerned with copyright issues) will be reformulated to prompt students to seek out and evaluate historical and publicly available materials, which are, by nature, less likely to be subject to defensive, commercially motivated copyright prohibitions. From this added emphasis on archives and the training necessary to navigate them, the formerly indirect approach to encouraging archive research will become a more explicit aspect of the project expectations and a direct learning outcome objective of the module. The creative promise of the projects realized to date, and the professional skills associated with them for the purposes of employability with which the module is concerned, will be further fostered by the archival research that both informs the merit and interest of each project and adds another clear professional skillset to those that the module proffers.

References

- Bosma, Peter. 2015. *Film Programming: Curating for Cinemas, Festivals, and Archives*. Wallflower Press.