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ARE ALL (ANALOG) FILMS “ORPHANS”?

PAOLO CHERCHI USAI

A Predigital Appraisal

ORPHANS

The subtitle of the first Orphan Film Symposium held at the University of South Carolina in 1999 was “Saving Orphan Films in the Digital Age.” The main title of the conference was actually “Orphans of the Storm,” perhaps in reference to the turmoil then brewing in the moving image archival field, disguised as a tongue-in-cheek reference to D. W. Griffith’s 1922 film. It might have been appropriate to rephrase the subheading as “Saving Orphan Films in the Digital Storm,” and that formula would have worked just as well, given that the storm in question was already building up. Almost a decade has elapsed, and the conference is no longer called “Orphans of the Storm.” Is it because the storm is over? It could be argued that in a way it *is* over, in the sense that digital is now a term of reference rather than a storm; or, to put it differently, the storm has given way to a new audiovisual ecosphere, a new media environment.¹ However, one could also claim that the storm is not over at all, and that the media environment is still far from having reached a new form of stability. Or maybe the word *stability* will no longer be applicable to the audiovisual media; maybe the digital realm will achieve what Trotsky failed to do in relation to his theory of a “permanent revolution.” But then, when did the “orphans” begin to raise their hands and say that there was yet another storm going on? After the demise of early short films? of silent cinema? of nitrate stock? of analog projection? Is the perfect (digital) storm yet to come? I think it would be more accurate to say that we’re about to find ourselves (and the “orphans”) right in the midst of it.

Back in 1999, I was supposing that the term “orphan films” had become prominent after its mention in a 1993 public forum through the initiative of David Francis, at the time of the Los Angeles hearings of the National Film Preservation Plan. I should have known better: film historians should be very careful when it comes to using the word *first* in any scholarly context. Indeed, it turned out that Robert Gitt had referred to “orphan films” in 1992, and it was eventually discovered that an *Industrial Marketing* article of October 1950 had already referred to 16mm industrial sales movies as orphan films, almost half a century before the establishment of a conference dedicated to this topic. Those who attended the South Carolina symposium may also recall that I made an attempt at providing a draft taxonomy for the term “orphan film” and that I proposed a number of mutually compatible definitions, ranging from a film title which is in the public domain, to a film whose parents (the copyright holders) are unknown, or even to a film whose parents (again, the copyright holders) are not aware that their child is alive and well.² Since then, more sophisticated definitions have emerged; some of them have been canonized by public consensus or by the Internet, which now amounts to the same thing. Wikipedia calls orphan film “a motion picture work that has been abandoned by its owner or copyright holder; also, any film that has suffered neglect.” I think it’s a good definition; the second

An early reference to films as orphans appeared in the trade periodical *Industrial Marketing*, October 1950, accompanied by this rudimentary depiction. The original caption read: “Your industrial sales movie may become an ‘orphan’ unless you find the answers to some basic marketing first. You must know about market research, distribution, promotion.” The image was uncovered by Alexander Thimons. Courtesy of the Prelinger Library.

part of the sentence, in particular, has the virtue of recognizing that films can be turned into orphans in more ways than we might expect. For sure, my 1999 index had no ambition to be exhaustive. Besides, with the passing of time, it may well be that another breed of orphans has emerged. And it may be that its population is the largest of all.

Two examples may help to set the scene for the presentation of the new species. The first brings us way back in time, well before the *Industrial Marketing*

article. December 26, 1806, was the day when a Frenchman named Louis de Carmontelle died, “heartbroken to see the invention that had documented an era stacked up once again in the back of his studio.” The quote comes from historian Laurence Chatel de Brancion in a 2007 *New York Times* article entitled “Long Before Video Cameras, a French Artist Brought Motion to His Images.”³ The article says that Carmontelle made “experiments with light and moving images: *rouleaux transparents*, or ‘rolled-up transparent drawings’ . . . between 12 and 19 inches deep and up to 138 feet long.” These drawings were “backlighted with natural daylight, wound between spindles and viewed in a box-like precursor to television, often accompanied by music or narrated by Carmontelle himself.” The article goes on to describe the beauty of these paintings—whose dynamic concept had deep connections with the principles of the panorama and diorama—and

mourns the fact that no one “wanted to invest in Carmontelle’s innovation . . . as an idea to be expanded on.”

The mental image of those gorgeous watercolor paintings, embodying the principle of panoramic movement but eventually tossed in the corner of a studio near the deathbed of an artist, is filled with romantic connotations. It could also become the delight of any orphanologist, and maybe introduce the application of the “orphan” model to the body of works known as “pre-cinema.” Which brings me to the second example. Another “pre-cinematic” image, commonly found in the textbooks where all the precursors of Lumière and Edison are hastily squeezed into a preliminary chapter, was included in the publisher’s catalog blurb promoting Oliver Grau’s book, *MediaArHistories* (2007). According to the catalog listing,

Digital art has become a major contemporary art form, but it has yet to achieve acceptance from mainstream cultural institutions; it is rarely collected, and seldom included in the study of art history or other academic disciplines. In *MediaArHistories*, leading scholars seek to change this. They take a wider view of media art, placing it against the backdrop of art history . . . Contributors trace the evolution of digital art, from thirteenth-century Islamic mechanical devices and eighteenth-century phantasmagoria, magic lanterns, and other multimedia illusions, to Marcel Duchamp’s inventions and 1960s Kinetic and Op Art.⁴

An article on an obscure ancestor of camera movement, a book on digital art: two ends of a very broad historical spectrum.⁵ What do they have in common? Let’s consider again the title of the *New York Times* article about Carmontelle, “Long before Video Cameras.” Before *video* cameras? What about the Celluloid Age? Film cameras? And *cinema*? The piece barely makes a mention of it, while we are pointedly reminded that the technique used for looking at the Carmontelle drawings was a “precursor to television.” By all means, a television set is (or was) “boxlike,” thank you very much, but hadn’t the same panoramic effect been achieved by cinema? The *MediaArHistories* ad begs a similar question. It may well be that digital art has only begun to play a role in mainstream cultural institutions, but there is reason to believe that it is being accepted by academia more promptly and perhaps more enthusiastically than cinema has been in the first one hundred years since its appearance. After all, how many fine arts museums have a cinema program *and* a space for digital art installations? How many departments of art

history have incorporated film in their curricula? Aren’t cinema courses easier to find, say, in the departments of English, languages, international studies, or even rhetoric?

Common sense dictates two predictable answers to these questions. The first is that the article in the *New York Times* has that title because for the majority of readers “video” is more familiar than “cinema;” or, to put it differently, “cinema” is actually identified with the electronic or digital image, as for the same majority—overwhelmingly so in the case of the younger generations—the very notions of film print or film negative (let alone the photochemical process) are no longer familiar concepts.⁶ The next answer, which applies to the *MediaArHistories* case, is that a video installation is “Art” with a capital A, while what we call “cinema” is, whether we like it or not and despite all our claims to the contrary, still seen by the nonspecialist as fundamentally a form of popular mass entertainment. And yet, what we are witnessing here are the specimens of a much wider phenomenon, something which audiovisual archives—especially governmental archives—are directly affected by in their strategies, policies, and operations, down to their very *raison d’être*. In a nutshell, “cinema” as many of us have known it *does not count*, and in a sense it doesn’t exist any more, according to what may be regarded as another manifestation of the much-despised but omnipresent teleological view of history. Historians have recently begun to argue that the term “pre-cinema” is a misnomer, as it implicitly presupposes that “cinema” (or its historically determined “analog” incarnation) is the end of the road, the final milestone in the development of moving image technology; hence their choice of the more accurate but rather cumbersome term, “popular optical culture.” What the *New York Times* article and the *MediaArHistory* ad are telling us is that it is now our turn to be called specialists of a pre-something: that is, historians, archivists—maybe experts—of “pre-digital.” I won’t be surprised if the term becomes common currency in the course of our lifetime.

The ways in which this paradigm shift in the perception of cinema history is manifesting itself in national collecting institutions cannot be reduced to a single all-encompassing formula. The most widespread—and rarely acknowledged—effect of this shift is, paradoxically, that film prints are beginning to be referred to as liabilities rather than valuable objects. I’m referring here to those archival institutions where the motivation for preserving films in their original medium on a systematic basis is beginning to fade, on the basis of the assumption—which is proving painfully correct—that these prints will never be presented in the traditional “photochemical” form. The Sinematek Indonesia has taken this a step further; archive specialist Ray Edmondson often told me that it is selling parts of its collection in order to pay its staff’s salaries. And if we believe

that the Indonesian example is only an extreme case of a non-Western country where public support for film preservation is now at its nadir, we should think of all the film archives where a comprehensive approach to laboratory work for preservation has come to a virtual standstill; the reputable archives in which previously struck film negatives are rarely, if ever, used to make new prints; the archives in which, if you have the misfortune of looking for a famous title and find that it is held in a viewing print that is no longer projectable, you may end up with your only options being either exhibiting another print in a nonstandard format, or showing a video copy—unless, of course, you are patient enough to wait until the film in question becomes available again, but in a different incarnation, that is, as a digital projection file.

From the perspective of a North American audiovisual archive, things don't seem to be as dramatic as I have suggested so far. After all, the Library of Congress has recently inaugurated what many are calling the best archival facility in the world for audiovisual works, the National Audiovisual Conservation Center, in Culpeper, Virginia; another one has been built in Santa Clarita for the UCLA Film & Television Archive. It is worth noting that they both were made possible by collaboration between a governmental or public body and a private benefactor, the outcome of a particular form of cultural sponsorship with no comparable parallels on any other continent. But the rest of the world is not playing the same tune. Since January 1, 2008, the Finnish Film Archive (Suomen Elokuva-Arkisto) has been renamed the National Audiovisual Archive. This means that our colleagues in Helsinki have begun collecting radio and television programs in addition to film, with an increased budget, more staff, and more space for their facility. This is wonderful news in the sense that the Finnish government is now responsible for a broader, unified, national audiovisual collection; after all, it is better to see a film archive expanding to the status of an audiovisual archive rather than annexed to some other organization. On the other hand, an expanded brief for the institution means that the attention of its managers is bound to be divided between different media, with the inevitable tensions (and budgetary reallocations) this might entail.

In Norway, the same consolidation of functions has been implemented in more radical terms. The Norsk Filminstitutt, based in Oslo, has long been identified as a *de facto* national film archive. Then, in 1993, the Norwegian government established a state-of-the-art facility in the small town of Mo i Rana, a few miles south of the Arctic Circle, for the new headquarters of the National Library of Norway, which includes the national collection of moving images and recorded sound. Their original purpose was to be complementary to the Norwegian Film Institute, in that Mo i Rana would essentially be a conservation and preservation center, while the sibling institution in Oslo would act as

the cultural agent for the nation, a “film archive” closer to the traditional model of a programming institution like the Cinémathèque française or the Österreichisches Filmmuseum in Vienna. The two functions were effectively consolidated on April 1, 2008, and Mo i Rana is now the single entry point for all activities connected with most functions of a moving image and recorded sound archive. The Mo i Rana facility is one of the most sophisticated in the world. It is relatively well-funded, and its future has been more or less secured, again by virtue of a holistic approach to a wide range of collections: film, television, radio, digital media, books, newspapers, documents, and artifacts.

Another country in the Northern European area has seen things taking a very different turn. The Svenska Filminstitutet/Cinemateket has also gone through a major restructuring. The Archival Film Collections, which are part of the Swedish Film Institute, are not the only place where moving images are being collected, preserved, and made accessible. Portions of the activities related to the audiovisual heritage are handled by an institution called the National Archive for Recorded Sound and Moving Images, also in Stockholm. So where does the Swedish Film Institute’s archive stand in all this, and what is the reason for the restructuring? The Archival Film Collections and the Library and Documentation section form the Institute’s Film Heritage Department, which is responsible for the collections (films, stills, posters, manuscripts, and so on), but *not* for the exhibition program, still called the Cinemateket, now assigned to a “Screenings Department,” which is also in charge of what’s left of the Swedish Film Institute’s distribution network, educational programs, and international activities for promoting new Swedish films abroad. The reasons for separating an archive’s collections from their public exhibition are a bit hard to fathom. It is true that there are other governmental organizations in Europe where the two functions are somewhat distinct from each other, like the Archives françaises du film in Bois d’Arcy and the Cinémathèque française. True, both entities have their own collections, though Bois d’Arcy is relatively far away from Paris and has film conservation (through legal deposit) as its main agenda, while the Cinémathèque française is centrally located in the French capital and is mainly known for its exhibition programs. But then, the Svenska Filminstitutet’s Archival Film Collections and the Cinemateket are both located in Stockholm, in the same building, with excellent projection facilities.⁷

It would be unfair to pass judgment without information about what’s going on behind the scenes, but some known aspects of the Swedish case are more than enough to give food for thought. First, there’s the fact that the Archival Film Collections are under considerable pressure to make parts of their holdings available on the Internet. No surprise here: the El Dorado of widespread access to archival collections through the

Web is by now common to most national organizations. However, what is peculiar about this instance is that the mandate of the Swedish Film Institute's archive has always been the collection, preservation, and availability of the cinematic experience in its original medium and format (35mm, 16mm, 70mm, and so on); other media are being collected by the National Archive for Recorded Sound and Moving Images. Moreover, there is an arrangement between the two fellow institutions by which electronic and digital copies of films held by the Archival Film Collections are already being made for the National Archive. If one were to take a Machiavellian interpretation of governmental policies, one might suspect that the restructuring is only the first step towards a further merger of functions. The recent merger of the National Archive for Recorded Sound and Moving Image into the National Library of Sweden could either mean that the Archival Film Collections are out of trouble, or that the government's decision is only a first step toward integration.

Throughout the world, national libraries have been the cradles of several national film archives now operating independently; by an ironic twist, they are now showing a new interest in their prodigal children, or are being recognized as the emergency shelters for film archives in distress.

Things have come full circle, so to speak.

But not only does the separation of collections from their exhibition facilitate the merging of an archive with other collections; it is also an ominous sign of collections being interpreted as warehouse storage facilities for "content," at the service and disposal at will of rights-holders and other "clients," where informed curatorial decisions about what should be made available, and under what circumstances, might be endangered. It is also worth noting that the Collection Policy of the Svenska Filminstitutet's Archival Film Collections is not a legally binding document; it has been endorsed by its governing board, but in theory it may be subject to change by the board, with no direct governmental involvement. This obviously puts the archive in a rather vulnerable position. The strength of the Swedish Film Institute archive's Collection Policy (and, for that matter, of any collection policy) lies elsewhere, in the consensus or support provided by those external stakeholders who share the policy's core principles, and—at least in theory—would be ready to make their voice heard loud and clear in the event that an attempt was made to compromise or overturn the criteria formulated in this document. With or without a legislative mandate, a Collection Policy is by far the best strategic tool

an archive can produce in order to protect and promote the spirit in which its functions are implemented. It is fair to say that no film archive worthy of its name can be safe from political or financial interference without a detailed, clearly structured, and widely supported Collection Policy.

The drafting of a new Collection Policy for the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) of Australia in late 2006 was an important factor in promoting the mission of the organization at a difficult moment in its life.

After having been incorporated within the Australian Film Commission in 2003, the NFSA was faced with the parallel challenges of becoming a functional part of an industrial body while maintaining its goal of developing, preserving, and making accessible the national audiovisual collection, and of making sure that the cultural objectives which presided in the birth of the archive in 1984 could be cultivated while maintaining the identity and profile of the NFSA as a collecting institution operating in the national interest. Without a Collection Policy, and without the public support provided by archive stakeholders' groups, this objective admittedly would have been more difficult to achieve. Following the Australian elections of November 24, 2007, the Arts Policy of the new Labor Government called for the establishment of the NFSA as an independent Statutory Authority. The legislation was introduced to the Australian Parliament, and then approved by the Senate on March 13, 2008. Thus, for the first time in its history, the NFSA has been recognized as a distinct collecting body like the National Library or the National Gallery: an institution with its own Board, reporting directly to the Minister for the Arts.⁸

A closer look at the Australian legislation may be of help in understanding the connection between institutional politics and archival practice. Section 6 of the NFSA legislation is dedicated to the goals of the organization: "The functions of the National Film and Sound Archive are to (a) develop, preserve, maintain, promote, and provide access to a national collection of programs and related material; (b) [to] support and promote the collection by others of programs and related material in Australia;" and "(d) [to] support and promote greater understanding and awareness in Australia of programs" (by which the legislation basically means collections of moving images and recorded sound). Further on, in a subsection entitled "Considerations governing the performance of functions," the NFSA legislation says that "in performing its functions, the National Film and Sound Archive [should] (a) place an emphasis on the historical and cultural significance of programs and related material; (b) use every endeavor to make the most advantageous use of the national collection in the national interest; (c) apply the highest curatorial standards; (d) promote the efficient, effective, and ethical use of public resources."

The third provision mentioned above, “apply the highest curatorial standards,” is a direct outcome of the NFSA Collection Policy and of its Charter of Curatorial Values, previously endorsed by the Board of the Australian Film Commission.⁹ By declaring that the NFSA should “place an emphasis on the historical and cultural significance of programs and related material,” the Australian government is stressing the prominent role played by access and outreach at the national and international level among the functions of the NFSA. The access issue is a leitmotif of the Australian legislation, and is common to all collecting organizations funded by governments. There are very good reasons for this, beginning with the fact that a government is keen to demonstrate to its taxpayers that their money has been well spent. In electoral terms, “access” is also an easier ticket to sell than, say, conservation or preservation. What a government generally means by “access” may be summarized in two words: *digitization* and *Internet*. And that’s where things tend to become murky.

For the public servants operating in a governmental department, the distinction between “digital preservation” and “digitization” is too subtle to be noticed, let alone internalized; on the other hand, they are aware that “digitization” means “access,” and are keen to insist that public collecting institutions embrace the digital gospel in the name of wider availability of the national collections. What seems more difficult for the bureaucrat or public opinion to comprehend is that regardless of the amount of money allocated to film and sound archives, there is no such thing as a simple answer to the question of how a national audiovisual collection can be made permanently available to the public by digital means. What’s worse, the obstacles to the dream of the general availability of a national collection are built into the very fabric of the public authorities’ own initiatives. The Dutch government has allocated 154 million euros for the digitization of the Dutch audiovisual collections.¹⁰ The approach taken in the Netherlands translates more or less as follows: Take all this money, do the best you can under the circumstances, and see what happens next. The problem is that while there is a certain degree of consensus over the preferred format for digital audiovisual files, there is no clear idea, let alone agreement, about the mechanism to be put in place for archiving digital files and periodically migrating them—that is to say, a system that doesn’t exclusively rely upon the interests of software manufacturers or media producers.

What the Dutch government believes to have supported with its extraordinary financial effort is a long-term (if not definitive) measure, while it is in fact only the beginning of an adventure into *terra incognita*. And we’re talking about the largest amount of money ever given by a public body for the so-called “digitization” of an entire national collection, an unprecedented move in the audiovisual domain. In Great Britain, the

government awarded 25 million pounds to the UK Film Council in 2007 for the preservation of British film collections,¹¹ a very welcome step which, however, will require an even more substantial follow-up in order to be of some consequence. In the rest of the world, audiovisual archives are dealing with much smaller budgets for digitization, if there are digitization budgets at all. It would be more appropriate to call what the vast majority of audiovisual archives in the world do with their collections "digital bricolage." Or, worse, they are waiting for a definitive answer to the fundamental issue raised through the initiative of the Dutch government, the quest for a permanent digital preservation medium—an answer that just doesn't exist at the present time.

Meanwhile, what better endowed organizations can do is to "digitally preserve" (whatever that means) those works originally produced in electronic media in their original formats, such as 2-inch tape, 1-inch tape, and U-matic, which have already become so obsolete that the chances of preserving them will become close to nil within the next few years or so. But, again, this is not precisely what governments want to hear. Their idea is that once digitization is achieved, the need to handle analog carriers will no longer be a concern. This is familiar territory for moving image archivists, as they know that analog carriers should not only be kept, but also, if possible, remain in use as the witnesses of a century of moving image culture. However, that's not a particularly popular message with governmental agencies. Every two or three years, finance departments come up with the same question, over and over again: Why do you need to keep the analog copies? And with the passage of time, the answers provided by moving image archives are less and less convincing as far as they are concerned, no matter what the archives' collection policies say. From their perspective, the governments acknowledge that moving image archives are themselves pushing the digital agenda through the restoration of works of the distant past in digital form, and through their public availability in non-analog media; so, if moving image archives are so proactive in advocating this *modus operandi*, why do they insist on arguing for the survival of something they no longer believe in?

Aside from collection policies, the strongest argument in favor of the permanence of analog works in a national audiovisual collection appears to be coming from the film industry. It does so perhaps inadvertently, but with a degree of authority and influence which is currently lacking in the so-called "archival movement." In fall 2007 the Science and Technology Council of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) issued a report entitled *The Digital Dilemma: Strategic Issues in Archiving and Accessing Digital Motion Picture Materials*. Its key message may be summarized as follows: The industry is coming to terms with the harsh reality that storing moving images in

digital form presents multiple drawbacks. It has a much higher cost than preserving analog works, and there is no guarantee that the ongoing migration of digital data from one format to the next will be sustainable from either a financial or a conservation standpoint. The report recognizes that “more than 100 years after its introduction, 35mm film is the shining example of a standardized and sustainable format that is widely adopted, globally interoperable, stable, and well understood . . . If we allow the historical phenomenon of technological obsolescence to repeat itself, we are tied either to continuously increasing costs—or worse—the failure to save important assets.”¹²

In short, while the archives are struggling to establish their own digital strategies under severe pressure from their governing bodies, but remain with largely insufficient funds to implement them, the industry is beginning to look in another direction. The AMPAS report also takes the daring step of questioning the value of Digital Cinema Initiatives (DCI), an industry group which was supposed to harness consensus around a given set of parameters for the exhibition of moving images by digital means.

It is interesting and important to note that these standards are based on specifications written not by equipment manufacturers and technology providers, but by a consortium of one segment of the user community: the Hollywood studios. . . . Much input on the specifications was taken from another important user group—the exhibitors—as well as from the equipment manufacturers, but the process was driven by a committed and influential user group. . . . The DCI recommendations and subsequent SMPTE DC28 standards efforts are building consensus around Digital Cinema distribution formats. But the format for the so-called Digital Source Master (DSM), i.e., the digital equivalent of the cut negative, is not standardized, nor is there even agreement on what a DSM is. Digital camera acquisition image formats are not standardized. Digital film scanner output formats are not standardized. Technical innovation and market forces together are still influencing the evolution of various digital formats for Digital Cinema that might one day have to be preserved in a digital archive.¹³

On a political level, the report from the Science and Technology Council of the Academy is a landmark entry in the literature on audiovisual digital archiving. As such, it is also a potentially controversial statement, as it questions—from an industry perspective—the same assumptions on digital technology which the industry itself has formulated and successfully promoted over the past decade. From the standpoint of the archives, the

report comes as mixed blessing. On the one hand, one may already hear the veterans of the archival community read the document, just say "I told you so," and go on with their business. In the meantime, the status of analog or photochemical collections in the archives' vaults has become in itself a matter of contention. A tiny minority of well-funded archives is continuing to preserve as much as possible via photochemical means, in the awareness that this will eventually become impossible; or, to put it differently, this archival elite is preparing to present itself as the last outpost of analog preservation capability, and their labs as the last places on earth where cinema will be preserved and treated on its own terms. But those archives where moving image and recorded sound collections stand side by side are already facing yet another dilemma. In recorded sound, there is no longer a viable analog preservation medium, and all conservation and access materials are produced digitally. There is no more debate in the recorded sound archival community on the issue of the analog vs. the digital experience, as the necessity of the latter is widely considered a *fait accompli*. Conversely, in the family of moving image collecting institutions, the feeling that there is just too much to be preserved is now providing new justification for the claim that maybe archives have acquired too much material and it is now time to revisit their strategies.

A ghost is haunting the moving image archival community: the ghost of deaccessioning, the institutional process of divesting the archive from the responsibility of preserving and making accessible part of its own collections.

"Deaccessioning" is an unfamiliar concept even for scholars who have some familiarity with film archives. Yet a Collection Policy chapter on the disposal of collection items is the litmus test for the cultural integrity of any professional collecting organization. Such a chapter should define the parameters and the assumptions underlying the archive's decision to make part of the holdings redundant with regard to its institutional mission. It should put great emphasis on the responsibility and accountability of the archive's curators and administrators, as it envisages the possibility that a certain film never should have become part of the collection in the first place; that its preservation was once recognized as necessary, but that's no longer the case; or that the material in question is not a valuable archival artifact. A formal deaccessioning policy can also offer an important element of political protection to the curators, as it may prevent external forces from interfering with the cultural mission of the organization. In this sense,

a deaccessioning policy is by all means a double-edged sword, a delicate tool which can be extremely useful or highly detrimental to the archive. This dual potential is generally recognized in a Collection Policy by the fact that in most cases only a Board of Trustees or an equivalent body may authorize a deaccession, and that the curator or the archive manager must provide a detailed written explanation of why the disposal of a certain item or group of items is being proposed. When looking at any Collection Policy, see first of all what the section on deaccessioning has to say; from that section, it is fairly easy to figure out the degree and quality of the institution's commitment to the collection.

The issue of deaccessioning is an eloquent example of where the battle for “orphan films” is likely to be fought in the decades to come. A recent case in point is provided by the heated discussion on the subject within the museum community in Great Britain. The debate is not about the principle of deaccessioning per se—archives and museums have been following this practice for many years—but about deaccessioning as a way to dispose of items which are not currently in demand. In 2008 Britain's Museums Association published a *Disposal Toolkit*, a booklet with instructions to its members on which collection items should be disposed of, and how. The same organization's Web site featuring the text of the Toolkit includes the following declaration from its director, Mark Taylor: “Museums typically collect a thousand times as many *things* as they get rid of. Wonderful collections can become a burden unless they are cleared of unused objects.”¹⁴ Which amounts to saying that if only a minuscule portion of the books in a national library are regularly browsed by its users, the rest could be a candidate for deaccessioning; or, to translate this concept to the world of moving image archives, that non-fiction films, sponsored films, or early cinema could have been deaccessioned long ago because there was not a big enough audience for them.¹⁵

This phenomenon is far from new. Most archives have items in their vaults that have periodically been the objects of close scrutiny as candidates for deaccessioning. Curators of several generations could tell stories of how these “legions of the condemned” have survived through the most amazing predicaments, thanks to tactics ranging from delay to sheer disobedience. One curator of a major national moving image archive responded to the instruction to destroy nitrate films after copying by burning rolls of junk films in their place. Some curators have expatriated from foreign archives thousands of reels of film whose imminent destruction was justified on the basis that they had all been transferred to videotape! A prosaic Australian short produced in 1925, known under the archival title [*Stages Illustrating the Development of Human Erect Postures*], is now safely in the hands of the Indigenous Collections' curatorial staff at the

NFSA of Australia, but there was a time when the possibility of deaccessioning this film with an axe was seriously raised, because of its allegedly offensive portrayal of Aboriginal people.

So, if the *New York Times* implies that between Carmontelle and the video camera there were no other significant developments in the technology of the moving image; if *MediaArtHistories* advocates the legitimacy of digital media as art without recognizing that there's a major piece of unfinished business with cinema; if national film archives are under pressure to digitize their collections and then push the envelope of deaccessioning while digital Hollywood looks back at the virtues of analog media, it could be inferred that there are at least two additional categories of orphan films to be dealt with. The first is the community of films already held by the "orphanage" archive, but which are now being scrutinized as potential candidates for expulsion on the basis of their low adoption value. Because of their subsidiary relation to the digital domain as the primary arena for public access, this community of orphans could then be expanded to *all photochemical film prints*.¹⁶ In a nutshell, all analog cinema is potentially an orphan. It is for this reason that the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) drafted a manifesto in support of the survival of analog collections at its 2008 General Assembly in Paris. Not surprisingly, even the unassuming title of the declaration ("Don't Throw Films Away") has encountered fierce opposition within the digitally-oriented sectors of the Federation's membership.

What can we do to protect this massive population of orphans, in addition to the seemingly obvious (yet contested) determination not to throw them away? Aside from pretending to destroy them by chopping up plastic dummies, or putting them on boats across the ocean before they are recycled as low-cost fuel, one may foresee the imperative of archives taking some other kind of longer-range action. Its premise is the awareness that things have changed dramatically since the inception of national film archives as "generalist" collecting institutions. This may sound like a truism, but it is nevertheless worth recalling that there was a time—not so long ago—when the founders of the archival movement were claiming that collecting institutions should ideally preserve *everything*. The notion that all films should be saved has been quietly superseded by factual evidence, but it is still ingrained in the archives' mentality, so much so that it is still taken for granted, like the aspiration presiding over the current attempts to preserve (and make accessible) the Internet in its entirety. As a result, film archives still have the tendency to collect "everything", sometimes indiscriminately, just for the sake of an undefined posterity. By not asking what posterity may or may not want, are we refraining from our responsibility as curators, administrators, and cultural managers?

One possible response to the imminent verdict on the status of film prints as “orphans” (should they be retained, destroyed, or replaced with clones?) is to seek new terms of engagement with archiving moving images in a public institution.¹⁷ This implies a renewed commitment to cultivate and engage with curatorship, to come to terms with the fact that curatorship makes archives and museums accountable for their choices.¹⁸ Instead of being feared, this accountability should be welcomed and embraced in at least two ways. First, by learning or refining the art of selecting what should become part of a moving image collection. This also means being able to justify curatorial choices in a coherent and persuasive manner, without assuming that the line of reasoning implicit in a given selection may be accepted by those who don’t know the intricacies involved in building and developing a collection. Secondly, curatorial choices should address with equal energy and determination not only which materials should be retained, but also which carriers or formats should represent the moving image work chosen for preservation. To paraphrase, using the current fashion in terminology: we must cope with the curatorial selection of “content,” and the “platforms” on which that content should be retained. This may not be enough to save all the film orphans, but it will at least give us a chance to set the record straight, and make collecting institutions feel responsible for the destiny of their analog collections, instead of being passive witnesses of the verdict. Public archives of recorded sound were never seen by the general public as an obvious source of access; YouTube and the Internet Archive are now the handwriting on the wall in our own field, the signals that moving image archives as we know them today may become equally irrelevant in the not-too-distant future. Here’s a chance to prove that they can still make a difference.

NOTES

This paper is an unabridged and updated version of the keynote speech entitled “The State of State Audiovisual Archives,” delivered at the sixth Orphan Film Symposium, New York University, March 27, 2008.

1. “Face it—the Digital Revolution is over,” Nicholas Negroponte argued a decade ago. “Like air and drinking water, being digital will be noticed only by its absence, not its presence.” Negroponte, “Beyond Digital,” *Wired* 6, no. 12 (Dec. 1998).
2. “What Is an Orphan Film? Definition, Rationale, Controversy,” paper delivered at the symposium “Orphans of the Storm: Saving Orphan Films in the Digital Age,” University of South Carolina, Sept. 23, 1999. For a transcript, see www.sc.edu/filmsymposium/archive/orphans2001/usai.html.
3. Kathryn Shattuck, “Long before Video Cameras, a French Artist Brought Motion to His Images,” *New York Times*, Dec. 27, 2007.

4. Oliver Grau, *MediaArtHistories* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007); MIT Press catalog, Spring 2007, 51.
5. I am grateful to Edith Kramer for having brought my attention to both items.
6. "Film may very well be on its last legs, with digital poised to supplant celluloid in the foreseeable future, probably as definitively as color came to dominate black and white. Whether the audience will give a damn—or so much as notice—remains to be seen." Tom Charity, "The Long View: An Anthology of Defining Moments Looks Back—and Forward," *Moving Image Source*, Web site of the Museum of the Moving Image (www.movingimage.us), posted June 19, 2008.
7. Information about the Finnish, Norwegian, and Swedish institutions taken from these Web sites: National Audiovisual Archive, former Finnish Film Archive (www.sea.fi/english); the National Library of Norway (www.nb.no/english), Norwegian Film Institute (www.nfi.no/index_e.html), and Swedish Film Institute (www.sfi.se/sfi).
8. The NFSA is not the only national audiovisual archive whose fate has taken such a positive turn; a few months earlier, the Thailand National Film Archive was also declared an independent Statutory Authority by the Ministry of Culture in Bangkok.
9. Both documents are available online. See *Collection Policy* (2006), www.nfsa.gov.au/docs/CollectionPolicy.pdf, and Paolo Cherchi Usai, "A Charter of Curatorial Values," *Journal of the National Film and Sound Archive* (Canberra, Australia) 1, no.1 (Spring 2006), 1–10, www.nfsa.gov.au/docs/NFSAJournal_Spring06.pdf.
10. The Dutch project is called "Beelden voor de Toekomst" (Images for the Future), www.beeldenvoordetoeekomst.nl/nl/2/Project.
11. "Government Pledges £25m to Preserve UK's Film Archives," *24 Hour Museum* (Oct. 17, 2007), www.24hourmuseum.org.uk/nwh_gfx_en/ART51464.html.
12. *The Digital Dilemma: Strategic Issues in Archiving and Accessing Digital Motion Picture Materials* (Los Angeles: Science and Technology Council of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 2007), 56. Available at www.oscars.org/council/digital_dilemma.
13. *Digital Dilemma*, 55. See also the Web site of Digital Cinema Initiatives, www.dcinovies.com.
14. "Museums Should Dispose of 'Burden' Objects, Says MA," Museums Association press release (London, Feb. 25, 2008), www.museumsassociation.org/15849&_IXPOS_=manews1.1.
15. *Disposal Toolkit: Guidelines for Museums* (London: Museums Association, 2008), www.museumsassociation.org/asset_arena/text/it/disposal_toolkit.pdf.
16. The debate over the destruction of thousands of viewing prints in the 2008 fire at Universal Studios highlights the misconception that positive film copies can be easily replaced. See Ryan Nakashima (Associated Press), "Universal Studios Fire May Cost Tens of Millions," and Michael Cieply, "No Films Appear Permanently Lost in Fire at Universal Lot," *New York Times*, both June 4, 2008.

17. Rick Prelinger has successfully argued that the current institutional model of audiovisual archiving is being de facto superseded by the Internet. I do acknowledge that nongovernmental collections may be free from some of the obligations and constraints affecting the strategies of public archives; however, there is good reason to argue that the issue of curatorship equally applies to all moving image repositories, regardless of their institutional status and access practices.

18. I have discussed this issue with David Francis, Alexander Horwath, and Michael Loebenstein in *Film Curatorship: Archives, Museums, and the Digital Marketplace* (Vienna: Synema—Gesellschaft für Film und Medien/Österreichisches Filmmuseum, 2008).