From Grain to Pixel

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Published by Amsterdam University Press


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A New Mindset for (Archival) Film in Transition: a Conclusion

Before moving to a concluding note, I will briefly sketch some of the steps that have brought us here.

My investigation of the changes occurring in film technology and practice and their influence on film archives has highlighted that archives are undergoing radical changes in their practices. This is due to the many technological, social and cultural transformations related to the transition to digital and, since such changes are ongoing and it is not clear yet where they will lead, archives have a unique chance to rethink their role and tasks in medias res.

The analysis of the interplay between film archival practice and film and (new) media theory has led me to identify a number of theoretical frameworks and concepts as relevant tools for both archivists and scholars to rethink their roles and to reshape the practice on a theoretical basis. Central to the theoretical discourse is the ontological question around film. For the purposes of defining those debates most relevant for the film archival practice, I have chosen to approach the existing lines of thought in film and new media theory by highlighting a tension between an indexical approach to photographic reproduction (the realistic approach) and an approach that places film’s nature in movement or performance (the mind/film approach). Similarly, the discourse within the film archival field seems to move within the tension between the film as a material artifact and film as a conceptual artifact. In an oversimplification of these tensions, one could say that realism and material artifact are at one extreme and mind/film and conceptual artifact at the other, and that the latter does not recognize an ontological change from analog to digital while the former does. In fact, these extremes create an opposition that is only worthy of noticing because they actually frame a middle ground for reflection and dialogue. This middle ground is the conceptual basis and a starting point for the theorization of archival practice I propose. Within this discursive fram-
ing I have defined four relevant theoretical frameworks, i.e. “film as original,” “film as art,” “film as dispositif,” and “film as state of the art,” which function as the grid upon which a theorization of archival practice can be built. I have also identified three concepts, deriving from new media theory, which define different ways to look at the technological transition to digital when applied to the practice of film archiving. These concepts are convergence/divergence, remediation and simulation and they can all function within the four theoretical frameworks.

My theorization is pragmatic as the frameworks and concepts I propose are instrumental for analyzing the film archival field and the film archival film artifact. On the one hand, it intends to comprise the diverse conceptions of the nature of film already existing in the field, from the indexical to the one I have loosely defined “mind/film,” as well as different assumptions of the nature of the archival film, from those focusing on the material film artifact to those placing emphasis on the conceptual film artifact. On the other hand, it proposes a new way to look at film’s nature, from the perspective of transition. Such an approach is particularly productive in the current transition from analog to digital.

In my snapshot of the archival field I have investigated a number of relevant archives and laboratories to validate my theory in practice. I have shown how frameworks and concepts can be used to analyze archival practice as it reshapes itself throughout the current transition (with a reference period of 1997-2007), by focusing on some of the most important recent film restoration projects as case studies. Also, my frameworks and concepts allow us to identify deeper dynamics and logics at play in today’s archival practice.

Adopting some of the tools offered by the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) theory, I have discussed the cases stressing the social component to the ongoing transition. In this way, a landscape of variations and tensions has arisen where a plurality of approaches and perspectives coexist. The preference by a social group or actor for one or the other framework has a clear consequence for its path with regard to the transition to digital. However, all these frameworks belong to a common theory and are situated in that very middle ground discussed earlier.

In conclusion, in order for my proposal for a new theory of archival practice to be relevant and useful, two things should be recognized: the need for a theory of practice itself and the importance of a new mindset for scholars and archivists.

In my view, transition is the key for both.

As I have suggested from the beginning, transition is the object of this study as well as its framing. Studying a transition from within is especially challenging as everything (artifacts, fields, practices and theoretical tools) is
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in movement, including the observer. However, it also offers great opportunities. First of all, it allows a perspective that is less burdened by the danger of a deterministic approach. As we do not know where the transition is heading, we do not need to concentrate on the outcomes. Actually, as transition is there to last, I have proposed not to think of the transition as a path leading to a precise place, but rather as a site worth exploring in itself, where diverse forces are moving in different directions. Secondly, by addressing the transition in medias res, we can possibly influence its direction. By understanding the changes as they happen and reporting in a timely fashion on the advantages and the shortcomings for archival practice, it is possible to shape the transition next to come. It will perhaps not be possible, and maybe not even desirable, to prevent Kodak from dismantling its film manufacturing business, but it is possible to lobby for digital standards that take into the account film archival needs, as, for instance, digital cinema formats that can properly translate heritage film formats, frame rates and aspect ratios. At the same time, by understanding changes, now it is possible to reshape archival practices so that they can benefit from the new technological tools (e.g. the digital archive) and from changing social dynamics (e.g. the new expectations of the changing users).

This brings us to the importance and the urgency of a theory of practice. The need for a theory of practice is a subject of debate within academic research: is it possible to theorize practice without limiting theory? In line with Henry Jenkins, this is not a choice but rather a necessity as we enter the twenty-first century:

In many parts of the world, cultural scholars have engaged in active intervention in the public debates shaping cultural policy, often working closely with governmental bodies to pursue their interests even where they did not fully agree with the other participants or totally endorse the outcomes achieved. They did so because they knew it was more important to try to influence policy than to remain ideologically or intellectually pure. […] discussions of creative industries need to take center stage as cultural studies enters the 21st century. We need to go into such collaborations and dialogues with our eyes wide open and, to do so, we need more nuanced models of the economic contexts within which culture gets produced and circulated. (Jenkins, 2004: 42)

I subscribe to Jenkins’ call upon scholars for a further engagement with practice. Whereas he refers to media industries, I refer mainly to institutions and funding entities related to film archival practice. In this transitional moment scholars need to “get their hands dirty,” as things change so quickly that, if
they do not, their objects of study will be so radically changed that they will not know them any longer. In turn, archivists, who at times doubt the usefulness of theory when facing everyday problems, need to have a common theory of reference in order to cope with a practice that is changing so quickly and so radically. Such a theory can provide archivists with new means to understand transition at a deeper level and to face questions about their changing role. For instance, while archivists have to make choices on a daily basis about how to handle archival film artifacts between analog and digital, a common digitally informed theory of archival practice offers both a theoretical tool to archivists for their choices and a reference to scholars for critically discussing such choices while they are being taken.

Finally, I would like to come back to the perspective that I have embraced in this work, namely that of privileging transition as a focus of analysis, and how this results in fact in a new mindset. I intend here to call upon a mentality change for film scholars and film archivists that would facilitate further exchange between academic research and archival practice, also in view of the current transition. Transition defines the upcoming change of the present state of things. Discourses, technology and practices are mutating but what lies at the horizon is still uncertain. And this uncertainty can be an inspiration and a guide. I call upon a mindset that acknowledges a theory of film archival practice based upon the idea of film as inherently transitional, rather than on the idea of film destined to transition to digital.

I would also like to point out once again that a theory of practice, as I intend it, does not necessarily lead to ethical guidelines as they are conceived today by the archival community. Although many ethical principles are and will remain largely shared within the archival field, it is important to recognize that they can be based on different theoretical frameworks, and that they may consequently differ. For instance, archives can understand the idea of film original quite differently, spanning from the original material artifact they hold to the concept of the film as it was shown to its original audience, to the concept of the film performance, irreproducible in its original form. Similarly, we are coming to a point where the choice between preserving film-born film as data rather than as film (when and if both practices would not be sustainable) will be legitimate and ethically defensible. It is important to recognize that ethics also need to be placed within the same transitional framing where all other elements of the equations are situated (from archivists to theorists, from conceptual film artifacts to material film artifacts). This is to say that the relevance and usefulness of ethics would be undermined if we did not reconsider it in view of the transitional character of film. Existing ethical principles guiding film restoration practice, like “being true to the original” or “guaranteeing reversibility,” risk becoming meaningless unless we accept
that they can allow different interpretations. From this perspective, I argue that new ethical guidelines need to be more dynamic and open to the coexisting frameworks, in the spirit of a new mindset and of the new theory of archival practice I propose.

The new mindset I invoke calls for a more open approach to film artifacts, which can be material but also virtual. Precisely while film seems to become more virtual because of digitization, its materiality needs to be re-acknowledged. And, in turn, as the materiality of the film artifacts from the past seem to become more and more evident compared to the new virtual artifacts, their virtuality becomes just as important. Scholars and archivists find themselves discovering in film a multiplicity of objects, both material and virtual.

In the new mindset, new questions arise and old ones acquire different meanings. Also, new archival roles (e.g. the digital restorer and the archival information scientist) and new fields of interdisciplinary studies (where film theory meets archival studies, or film aesthetics meets information technology) become relevant.

Some of the new questions concern the changing role of archives as well as the changing character of film and media studies. An example in this regard is the question around the role of the film curator vis-à-vis the rise of publicly accessible digital archives (e.g. the Internet Archive). Has the traditional film archive curator become obsolete? In a participatory culture, should the curator become the voice of a collective entity, embodied by the archive’s users as they participate in creating the archive where uploading equals acquisition and social tagging supersedes fixed metadata as a facilitator of selection? If that is the case, what kind of archive is this collective curator giving shape to? Can old and new curators coexist? These kinds of questions are obviously relevant for archives but they are becoming ever more relevant for film students as new academic programs are being developed with the aim of forming future curators and archivists.

And, retrospectively, the new mindset sheds new light on a century of film history that has created many “archives of absences,” where choices, based on the very frameworks discussed in this work, have led to a partial selection of our film heritage. Today, as digital technology is leading to more expensive restorations of a smaller amount of films and, at the same time, curatorial selection becomes a questioned practice within an ever more participatory culture, the question arises of how we are going to fill the gap between what is archived and what is (at risk of being) lost. A theory of archival practice is an essential precondition for charting this new territory in transition.